

**COVER  
NOT FINAL**

# While We Run

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**Karen Healey**

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WHILE

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WHILE

by Karen Healey



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY  
New York Boston

WE

RUN

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For Kieran Hartley York,  
who gives me hope for the future.  
And for Willow, who fights for it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Sanguinante

They always wanted me to sing “Here Comes the Sun.”

It used to be one of my favorite Beatles songs. The lyrics capture so simply the longing for light. The singer talks about the lonely winter, the ice that hasn’t melted in a long time, but he repeats over and over that the sun is coming soon.

In 1969, over a hundred and fifty years ago, George Harrison was having a hard winter. He’d been arrested, he’d had his tonsils removed, and he was being forced to comply with the corporate demands of the Beatles’ record company. He’d even temporarily quit the band.

Then, one winter’s day, he walked around a friend’s backyard with an acoustic guitar and wrote “Here Comes the Sun.”

It’s supposed to be a love song, and I know the audiences heard it as one. But to me it’s not about romance. If anything, it’s a dedication to hope, to the fragile, delicate possibility of things getting better before the long winter swallows us all.

Once, I sang “Here Comes the Sun” for Tegan Oglietti. She died in 2027, a hundred years ago, and was cryonically preserved, only to be revived in our time. She was the first person who’d returned to life from the long winter of death. She chose that song to sing to our classmates, and when her voice cracked and faded, I sang it with her.

She says she loved me for that, so maybe I’m wrong about the lack of romance. But I know I’m right about the hope.

Six months after I first sang that song for Tegan, I sang it for a number of well-dressed people gathered in a hotel ballroom in Brisbane, Australia. The people I was singing to wanted me to give them hope. Earth was overcrowded, overpolluted, and fast running out of resources. The oceans were beginning to die, and humanity on Earth would go with them. But my audience wanted to buy a second chance, on another world. Cryonics offered them that chance—cryonics and the gigantic starship currently being constructed in orbit. If the revival process could be perfected, these fortunate ones could escape the dying world and sleep while the starship traveled to its distant destination. They could wake, centuries later, to a new sun.

I finished embellishing the final notes as the backing track died away and raised my hands to acknowledge the applause. In the last six months, I’d performed for all kinds of people, but this was my most common audience: wealthy Australians who wanted to secure their places on that ship. Body mods were popular in Australia, but here there were very few flashing lights set into teeth or heat-reactive tattoos flashing slogans. Instead, there was a lot of subtle surgery designed to disguise the signs of aging.

“Hello,” I said, pitching my voice over the applause. “Thank you all for coming!”

They applauded again, but their eyes widened as the wall behind me lit up. The main attraction, and she wasn't even here in the flesh.

"I'm Abdi Taalib," I said. "And this is Tegan Oglietti."

Tegan's face swam into view on the wall.

She looked beautiful and composed, and though it was night for us in Brisbane, sunlight cast crisp shadows on her fine-featured face. Tegan was actually in Japan, the final stop on her two-month world tour before she came home.

"Hi, Abdi," she said, and blew me a kiss. I caught it, smiling, and pressed my palm to my heart. "And hello to you," she went on, beaming at the gathered people. "Let me tell you a story."

The audience settled down.

"Over a hundred years ago, I died," she began, and I had to concentrate on looking interested. I knew the rest of the story by heart—I'd witnessed most of it and knew just how much of this retelling was actually true. But I had to look alert and nod as Tegan told the rapt crowd how she'd been shot dead in a tragic error, a sniper's mistaken target, in 2027. She'd been revived by the Australian army in 2128, the first—and so far only—successful revival from cryonic suspension. When she'd foolishly run from her government protectors, she—and I—had been kidnapped by the Inheritors of the Earth, religious zealots who wanted to deny her the right to her second life. Those zealots had filled her head with lies. They'd used a government secret to confuse her: The Australian government had been at work on the starship, getting it ready to send sleeping settlers to a bright new land. The Inheritors told her that the refugees who crowded Australia's borders had been imprisoned and frozen, slave labor for this new world.

The audience shifted uncomfortably, but Tegan continued, describing how the Inheritors considered giving people new life to be blasphemy. They'd planned to destroy the ship and destroy second chances forever. And the signal for that destruction was to be—

"—the suicide of Tegan Oglietti," Tegan said.

The crowd knew this story. The whole world knew this story. But they still gasped, right on cue.

Tegan went on to tell how we had escaped from the Inheritors. She'd thought that the army and government were exploiting those refugees and that exposing their plans could save thousands. So she'd told her story, in a livecast viewed by millions all over the world. Everyone had known about the refugees then. Everyone had known about the starship. And the Australian government had been besieged by angry voters wanting to know the truth.

"But here's what I didn't know," Tegan said. "The refugees were volunteers, not prisoners. Those poor people were driven to Australia by war and hunger and thirst. It's a sad fact that we can't care for them here; Australia simply doesn't have the resources."

Keeping my face from showing what I really thought about that particular line had taken a lot of practice. But I'd been drilled, and now I drew my mouth down at the corners and nodded solemnly.

"The refugees weren't coerced," Tegan went on. "They agreed to cryosuspension, and they agreed to keep it secret, for fear of sabotage. A fear that was well founded,

thanks to those extremists from the Inheritors of the Earth. Fortunately, the starship was protected. And over the last six months, piece by piece, it's been taken into space and reconstructed."

"On a new planet, these refugees can care for themselves," I broke in. "As a citizen of a poor African nation, I can tell you that people from less wealthy countries want to contribute to the project however they can—in this case, with their labor. They want to build their new home."

Tegan nodded. "A new home to become everyone's home," she said. "Isn't that amazing?"

The crowd agreed that it was.

Someone stepped into the background of the 'cast and bent over Tegan's shoulder. It was her handler, Lat.

The skin along my spine tightened. I propped my smile up again and hoped the tension didn't show.

"I have to go," Tegan told us all. "But I'll be back in Australia soon! Abdi and I are hosting the President's Ball in a few days. Won't that be fun?"

"I'm looking forward to it with all my heart," I told her, and returned the blown kiss. She laughed, her voice light as a feather, her dark eyes sparkling with barely tempered joy, and caught the kiss in her hand.

As the 'cast faded out, she pressed her palm to her lips.

Δ ] Ω

The moment I stepped off the stage, my handler appeared.

"Abdi, that was great!" Her eyes were shining with suppressed amusement.

I ignored it as best I could. "Thank you, Diane."

"You simply must come and meet some people," she said, and I was introduced to my first target for the evening, an elderly woman whose name I promptly forgot.

"That was a wonderful story," she said.

"Thank you."

"My grandnephew tried to tell me that the thirdie refugees were being forced onto the ship, but I said don't be silly, Callum. I wish he'd come tonight." She leaned in close to confide, "I think he's a bit crushie for you."

Diane laughed. "Oh, everyone falls for Abdi. The serious boys always get the interest, don't they?"

"You're a very good-looking young man. And your voice! No wonder Callum's all abuzz. But these Save Tegan people he's fixy with don't seem very nice."

My interest spiked. "He's socializing with people who... do they claim to speak for Tegan, ma'am?"

"Oh, it's that group they've been fussing about on the 'casts." She waved a beringed hand. "Troublemakers, you know."

I hadn't had access to unfiltered news for six months. I didn't know, and with Diane watching me, I didn't dare ask.

"They think Tegan's in some kind of trouble with the government," the nameless woman said. "Ridiculous. Look at you both, so healthy and beautiful. It's lovely that

you could spare the time to meet us here. When do you go home?" She meant Melbourne—not my real home, a terra-cotta house in Djibouti City.

"The day after tomorrow," Diane said, her smile glittering like knives. "Abdi has loved visiting Queensland, though."

"It's very beautiful," my mouth said. "It reminds me a little of Djibouti, with the beaches."

"I thought Djibouti was a desert," the nameless woman said. Her tone was sharper. The people at these parties didn't like being wrong or uncertain. And it was harder to get money out of them when they were.

"A coastal desert," I told her. "The Red Sea and Gulf of Aden are full of life. There are thousands of species in the water." The space under my ribs was expanding with homesickness. I wanted very badly to go down to the Red Sea again, to strap on a snorkel and float, peaceful in warm salt water. My younger sister, Sahra, would be there, but she wouldn't bug me, too entranced by the movements of fish. She wanted to be a marine biologist, which would mean a lot of study abroad. My mother was reluctant to let her last baby go, but my money was on Sahra. She was stubborn, my little sister. Like Tegan.

The nameless woman was looking at me. If her face had been able to wrinkle with concern, I think it would have.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

I rose out of that empty space and met her eyes with baffled good cheer. "Of course."

Diane touched her EarRing with her second finger; a signal to me, not a response to any call someone had made. "I'm afraid we have to move on," she said, and I summoned an apologetic smile before we turned away.

"Less talk about Djibouti, more about the refugee camps," Diane said, as we moved out of earshot. "Lots of positive statements. Hit the talking points. How the camps are fine as a short-term solution, but refugees are embracing the long-term opportunities the Ark Project has provided."

I stumbled. Diane adjusted beautifully, her grace turning the misstep into a pause, a carefully choreographed beat in a dance. But her eyes stared into mine, measuring.

"I don't know if I can do that convincingly," I said. There was a trace of fear clouding my voice, like a drop of ink in a still pool.

Diane leaned in, close enough that I could feel her breath on my cheek. "Of course you can, Abdi. You're very good at being convincing. Why do you think we sent you to the camps? Why do you think you're here?"

*Because I'm African, I thought. Because I'm a thirdie. You want me to tell these people that the refugees want this, that what the Australian government is doing to people who come here out of fear and desperation is just and noble. And you want me to persuade the refugees they should file into their cryopods as docilely as sheep into a pen.*

I thought it very deep down and let none of the thought show on my face.

Diane straightened the line of my somber green shirt, long fingers dancing down the lapels. I stayed still, a small creature playing dead in the presence of a predator. "You can tell them everything we need you to if you try. You're here because these are serious people. You're good at being serious, Abdi."

The people here didn't look serious. One of the men a few feet from me was loudly discussing, in great detail, a horse he'd just bought and who he intended to beat with it. If Australia allowed migration, the money he'd spent on that horse could have been loaned to the people in the camps, setting up a family in a business they could maintain. If he'd been willing to make the money a gift, not a loan, it could have contributed to another medical center or paid for training someone to contribute to Australia's need for skilled technicians.

But he'd stood there and nodded as Tegan told them that Australia *didn't have resources*.

"I can be serious," I said, holding her gaze. I wasn't allowed to break eye contact.

"Serious and convincing," Diane said, and the back of my neck exploded.

The pain coursed down my spine, every nerve in my body flaring red-hot. My skin felt as if I were rolling in broken glass. My scalp tightened over my skull like an iron band, and my mouth flooded with the taste of copper. I made a high, sharp sound, then forced my teeth to clench.

Making noise in public had to be punished.

From the outside, I must have looked a little unwell, perhaps momentarily dizzy. Faces turned toward me, then politely away.

Diane laid her free hand on my wrist, her face composed in concern. Her other hand was hidden in the folds of her outfit, clutching the implant controller, and that was the one I watched.

It felt like eternity. It always did. Realistically, though, it was only a few seconds that I suffered, while Diane touched me and smiled, her hidden hand drawing pain from me until I thought my bones would burst through my skin. When she finally turned off the controller, I almost collapsed with relief, locking my knees at the last second.

"There we go," Diane murmured, and stroked my sweating palm as if she were soothing a fretting pet. "Do you think you can talk about the camps for me now?"

"Yes, Diane," I said, and hated myself.

"And if they mention Save Tegan, you brush it off. They're malcontents who have no idea what they're talking about, understand?"

"Yes, Diane."

"Good boy," she said, and pointed me at the next target, her fingers stroking at my shuddering pulse. "Fetch."

## CHAPTER TWO

### Tremolo

I got through the rest of the night without further incidents. The morning was spent in rehearsal, the afternoon in what Diane called “nap time.”

I didn’t sleep. I stared at the ceiling and counted the tiles in my hotel room—six vertical, four horizontal—and wondered, clinically, when the horror might end.

It was hard to believe everything had begun with something as simple as a song at my cousin’s wedding. The bride’s family was from Somalia, and I’d been showing off a little—there were some nice-looking girls I hadn’t seen before. My brother could impress them with his shoulders, but I had to rely on my voice, and I was making it do a lot of work for me that day.

I didn’t get anywhere with the girls, but the firster who caught it on camera was certainly impressed. Her ’cast (imaginatively titled “Local Boy Sings!!!”) hit the tubes at just the right moment; whatever alchemical formula makes instant celebrity kicked in, and I was suddenly famous.

It was funny, how quickly it blew up. At home, my flute lessons and singing were only hobbies. My family was proud of me, in their way, but they made it clear that it was my studies that I was supposed to concentrate on, my brain that was going to earn my place in history. Music was a part of me but only a small part. But to firsters, my voice was all they knew of me. My singing was everything.

Barely an hour after the ’cast hit the tubes, the first offers came. I ignored the interview requests and politely refused the recording contracts. No, I wouldn’t record an album. No, I wouldn’t open for their band on tour. It was very flattering, but I needed to concentrate on my schoolwork.

Then the scholarship offers came. Ifrah and Halim, my older siblings, stopped teasing me for having a big head, and my little sister, Sahra, stopped whining that she could sing, *too*, and no one had ’cast *her*. My parents stopped being serenely amused about the whole situation. School offers—*that* was serious business.

At the top of the pile was an invitation from the prestigious Elisabeth Murdoch Academy. It came with a near guarantee of one of the rare student visas to cover my time in high school and university. In Melbourne, Australia, where almost no outsiders were permitted to go.

Most of the other schools, I could have gotten into on my own merits. But Australia was forbidden territory and attractive because of it. And my mother didn’t underestimate the glamorous effect that returning from an impossible-to-reach world power could have on my political ambitions at home.

I could vividly remember our final discussion about it. In the inner courtyard, in the cool of the evening, Hooyo had folded her hands in her lap and looked at me, warm

eyes unblinking.

“It will be difficult,” she said. “Australia is prejudiced.”

“But there are benefits, too.”

“Yes. Your father and I agree that this must be your choice. Whether you stay or go, Abdi, it’s your decision.”

I had decided.

And now I was here, under circumstances more *difficult* than either of us could have imagined.

“Time to get up, lazybones,” Diane said, and tossed me tonight’s outfit. “Put on your smiling face!”

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Another night, another party. I smiled until my cheeks ached. I talked about the camps, just like Diane wanted. I said things like *amazing opportunity* and *best possible solution* and the next time someone mentioned this Save Tegan movement, I dismissed it as being disgruntled political dissidents with an ax to grind. I smiled at these people, and I told them all about what wonderful work the Ark Project was doing.

And I deliberately forgot their names.

As I passed from one group to the next, Diane nodded at me. I felt the warmth of her approval and immediately afterward was disgusted by myself. I hated Diane, but for my own safety, I needed her to like me. And because I usually liked the people I wanted to like me, my own emotions seemed determined to mess me up. The inside of my head felt like a viscous ball of melted tar.

“You’ve been doing well, Abdi,” she murmured. “We’ve noticed a marked improvement in your conduct. It’s been two months since your last major incident.”

The last major incident had involved me trying to communicate with Tegan by tapping a message on her hand as we sang in Adelaide. I’d only wanted to know if she’d been eating enough; she’d looked dangerously thin that evening. I’d also wanted a warning, if I could get one. The first time she’d gone on a hunger strike hadn’t been pleasant for me, and the second time had been horrific.

But Tegan hadn’t been defiant. She just hadn’t been hungry. On the train back to Melbourne after the benefit she reported that I’d tried to communicate outside approved channels, in a voice as flat and dead as her eyes.

And after they punished her right in front of me, she’d looked up from the floor, directly into my eyes, and said, *This is your fault*.

They’d praised Tegan. They’d said she was *adapting well*. She’d become a perfect puppet, and I couldn’t tell if it was a role she was playing to fool them, or if she’d broken under the unbearable pressure, or some unstable mixture of the two. Either way, she’d betrayed me, and it burned.

I’d decided that if it were pretense, I had better pretend, too.

So while Tegan was on her international tour, traveling around the world to talk about the Ark Project and the *AUS Resolution* and find rich sponsors who wanted to give the Living Dead Girl lots of money, I had also become the perfect guest of the Australian government. I’d dressed, eaten, and spoken exactly as I was told. I hated it,

but there were benefits. No nights of being forced to watch Tegan cry because I'd stolen a guard's computer and tried to get blueprints of our prison and they took it out on her. No daylong stints of being woken every time I began to drift off to sleep because Tegan was fasting again.

Nowadays, Diane didn't use the implant controller that often. Her suspicions, I thought, had been lowered. I kept telling myself that if I could just keep being good, my chance to escape would come.

It was so easy to give in and do what I was told. It scared me so much, how easy it was.

"Next we have a very special dinner party," Diane said. "You're the guest of honor of the guest of honor, and I want you on your very best behavior. And tomorrow morning, we'll call your parents." She twinkled at someone across the room, waving coyly. I wasn't fooled; I knew exactly how deadly she was. Her formal lavender culottes and blouse floated around her lean brown frame, and she looked clean and stylish, but I knew that elegant, billowing fabric concealed at least three weapons beside the implant controller: a bolt-gun, a sonic pistol, and a buzz-whip were standard for her, and I'd be surprised if she didn't have a couple of thin knives, too. She liked showing me the knives. "Abdi, I must say I'm growing tired of calling your mother and father every week. Persistent, aren't they?"

"They only want to know that I'm all right."

"Of course they do. And that's what you'll tell them."

"Yes, Diane."

"Good boy."

My empty stomach churned, but long practice kept my face smooth.

"Not long now," Diane said, and stroked my shoulder. "And then you can have something to eat."



The very special dinner party was hosted by Valda Simons, Australia's most notoriously untouchable criminal. Where there were extortion, racketeering, illegal arms dealing, cybercrime, and human trafficking, there was Mrs. Simons, taking a cut and ruling the roost, her smile as tight as her short blond curls.

And here she was now, shaking my hand, nodding at Diane, and ushering me into the hotel's private dining room, where a table had been laid out in black and gold, crystal glasses shining in the soft candlelight.

Candles were greatly looked down upon in Australia, where burning things was considered a savage Earth-killing practice for thirties, but like so many things, it was different for the wealthy. Besides, if you were Valda Simons and didn't balk at ordering murder or kidnapping, you probably didn't have many qualms over a few candles.

"I'm so glad you could make it, Abdi," Valda said gently. She didn't sound like a ruthless crime lord. Her hand was soft and manicured, her aging face sweet. But her blue eyes were cold. I couldn't see anything of the person behind them. "Ruby is very much looking forward to meeting you—ah, there she is now."

I looked across the length of the room to see a young woman make her entrance and instantly knew that the dining room's decor had been chosen to set her off.

She was stunning.

Her golden skin—actually golden, the result of an expensive skin mod that bonded light reflecting particles into the top layer of the epidermis—glowed, and her short, spiky hair was a deep, rich red. The long black trousers and matching vest were really the background for the piece of art that was her body. She had a black cord tied around her upper arm with long dangling ends, a fashion trend I'd seen on some of the younger people in my audiences. As she moved closer, I saw the red stones embedded in the loose ends glitter. Rubies, of course.

Valda smiled. I thought it might have been genuine pleasure. "Ruby, darling. Meet our special guest."

"Abdi Taalib," Ruby said, her voice smoky, her accent indeterminate. She reached for my shirt lapel, but I caught her hand before she could touch me, bowing over it.

"Enchanted, madame," I said, and wondered where her accent was from. After nearly three decades of the No Migrant policy, I was usually the only person in the room with an accent out of the norm. Ruby's accent must be as contrived as the rest of her.

"Madame? No. Call me Ruby." Her gaze drifted down my tailored suit and back up to meet my eyes, deliberately slow. "Call me anything you like."

Aware of Diane's eyes on me, I flirted back. "It's a delight to meet you, Ruby. It's clear why you were named for a treasure."

"Oh, stop," she said in a laughing way that meant *please keep going*, and moved a little closer.

"We're on a schedule," Valda said, her tone mild, but Ruby snapped to attention.

"Of course, Mother. Abdi, come sit with me. I want to hear everything about you."

I glanced at Diane, who inclined her head. There was a smirk hovering around the corners of her mouth, and I braced myself for whatever horrors the evening might hold. When Diane was this happy, I was usually about to become very sad.



It was a select group—five couples, including Ruby and me, who were seated at the head of the table. Valda flew solo at the foot, Mr. Simons having died in a regrettable incident over twenty years ago when he'd tried to lead a coup against his wife's interests.

The food was excellent, the conversation trivial. Ruby might have pretended to want to know about me, and while my presence was clearly a coup for her, she was much more interested in herself. I sat through story after story about snubs she'd received and personal victories she could gloat over—this fashion show she hadn't been invited to, that social event she'd kept a rival from.

It wasn't so bad, really. I'd been trained to handle this kind of mindless small talk since I was very small, when my mother first decided on me as the natural heir to her political ambitions. My older sister, Ifrah, was too outspoken, and my brother, Halim, couldn't master the ability to feign interest. They went into engineering and medicine

instead. But I'd loved the "pretend game" my mother played with me from when I was four. Hooyo would say outrageous things, and I had to keep a straight face. Or she would tell me two truths and a lie, and I had to pick the lie from her facial expression—or entirely from her tone, with my eyes closed, straining to pick up the minutiae of inflection. She started taking me to political functions when I was seven. It's amazing, what people will say in front of a quiet child.

Ifrah grumbled that I was my mother's favorite, and Halim rolled his eyes whenever she praised me, but it wasn't my fault I had the skills they didn't.

Unusually, Diane wasn't signaling me to keep talking, which meant that the Special Australian Defence Unit must have already gotten the money they wanted from the Simons women. My presence was their reward. I was an ornament for the occasion.

"Here, Abdi," Ruby said, and speared a lump of something in a creamy sauce with her golden fork. "Open wide!"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Pink handfish!" she said triumphantly. "Cooked to a special recipe."

My family never ate fish. At home, it was considered a disgusting animal, which only the most desperate people would touch. But I couldn't let my revulsion show for a second. As Ruby maneuvered the cold lump into my mouth, I closed my lips around the fork and smiled, swallowing hard.

"Delicious," I said, making my accent stronger. I knew what Ruby wanted to see. The exotic thirdie, suitably civilized, but provokingly different.

"Yes, you are," Ruby said, and wiped a smear of sauce off my lower lip. Her touch lingered possessively, and my gaze jumped to Diane, who was calmly standing at the other end of the room.

Diane only left me alone with people who were rich when they wanted something from me. Sometimes it was an assurance that I was fine and had really changed my mind about the Ark Project. More often, it was sex. Sex sold ideas as much as it ever had products.

Of course, SADU would never take the risk of letting me move out of their hands and into a secluded area, no matter how much they wanted my would-be seducer's money. But the tease of thinking that it might be a possibility had managed to get extra sponsorship out of quite a few people who were curious to try out the government's famous thirdie. I was willing to bet that Ruby Simons was in that category.

Diane was smirking again. The fish settled in my stomach, the cold lump growing there.

Valda Simons stood up, and everyone quieted immediately. I couldn't deny the woman had presence. "I'm delighted you could all be here, to meet our special guest," she said, and I acknowledged the light murmur of agreement by lifting my water glass. "And I have to eat a little bit of crow. You see, when Nathan Cox first told me about the Ark Project, I was dubious. 'Nathan,' I said, 'this might be all right for thirdies who need someplace to go, but you're never going to get real Australians as paying passengers on that ship. It's too much of a risk.'" She laughed, and the guests laughed with her.

I laughed with them, burning inside. So the president of Australia was on first-name terms with Australia's biggest crook. Well, I wasn't naive—my mother's campaigns had donations from people whose hands weren't clean, either. But Cox's confidence in

future elections suddenly made more sense.

I'd been to the camps that held the people Valda dismissed as "thirdies who need someplace to go." The children there had lined up with their parents to sign the forms volunteering them for cryonic suspension and indentured labor, far, far away. I'd smiled for the bumblecams and cracked jokes in French and Arabic and Somali and nodded solemnly as carefully selected and meticulously coached refugees had made their statements to the gathered media about being grateful for an amazing opportunity, about reaching for the distant stars.

There had been a group of teenagers hanging around, staring at the SADU uniforms my escorts wore. The kids muttered to themselves, then began to talk more loudly. When they started to shout, the camp guards took over and SADU ushered the journalists out.

But I'd seen what had happened next: the blood, the broken teeth. Nothing deadly—but enough to show those kids what happened when you tried to disrupt the story the government wanted to tell.

My head was pounding. Valda had said something else about the starship, about her arguments against it, and I'd missed it. Now she shook her head mockingly. "Nathan just looked at me and said, 'Valda, my dear, you're not thinking of the future.' He was right! I'm an old fuddy-duddy, but our young people are the brave ones, the pioneers. And I'm very pleased to be able to tell you that my beloved daughter, my darling Ruby, is one of them."

The guests gasped. Ruby stood up, her black cord dangling gracefully. "That's right!" she said. "Welcome to my going-away party! I undergo cryonic suspension tomorrow morning."

I gasped, and the other guests gasped with me—a massive inhalation that could have been funny if it weren't for the seriousness of situation. Ruby Simons was choosing to die?

There was real emotion in Valda's eyes as she looked down the table at her daughter. "I love you, darling. I'm going to miss you more than I can say. And I admire you more than you can imagine."

The guests broke into applause. I clapped with them, but my mind was whirring. Most of the wealthy benefactors of the Ark Project who'd gotten themselves frozen had been ill or old. Ruby Simons didn't seem to be sick. And she looked about twenty-five, which was far too young to be worried about anything that might destroy brain function before her doubtlessly well-drilled cryo team could spring into action.

Ruby waited for silence. "I love you too, Mother," she said, and then with an elaborate sweep of her hand, "but I have to claim the future! Tomorrow is the day before my thirtieth birthday. I'll go to sleep and wake up somewhere wonderful, and I'll be ready to take on the world. And I won't be old and boring." The guests, some of whom were fairly old themselves, laughed politely at that. Ruby's teeth glittered at me. "Will I see you there, Abdi?"

The guests gasped again.

In a world built on slave labor? The thought was appalling.

"We'll have to see," I teased.

She laughed and kissed my cheek as she sat down, her painted lips moist against my face. Dinner became noisier after that, as people came up to congratulate Ruby and

admire her bravery. Valda watched her daughter with sad eyes. Once, Ruby hugged her and I thought both of them would have shed tears, if it wouldn't have spoiled their careful eye makeup.

Abandoned, I took a moment to have my water glass refilled and drifted closer to the balcony wall, open to the warm night air. I could see city lights outside, a long way down.

A shiver of pain ran down my spine in warning, and I stopped six feet away. Diane wasn't going to let me get that close to any kind of freedom.

When I turned around, meaning to rejoin the party, Ruby was there.

"Running away?" she asked.

"From you? Never."

She smiled, moving even closer to me, and brushed her hand down my arm. My skin crawled at the cool stroke of her long fingers, but I made myself sway toward her. "So, Tegan's away," she said. "How long has she been on this international tour?"

It was the first time she'd mentioned Tegan all evening. I should have noticed that earlier. Usually, all anyone wanted to talk about was the Living Dead Girl. Now the resentful note in Ruby's voice set off all my warning bells.

"She's been gone two months."

"Two whole months! You must really miss your lady love." Ruby paused. "Unless you don't love her anymore?"

"Tegan and I are very good friends," I said, giving the rote response that had been drilled into me. "But we prefer to keep our private lives private." I looked up at her from under my lashes, putting a promise into my eyes.

"Really?" Ruby said. "I'm fond of privacy myself. Shall we go and find some?"

That was usually the moment Diane would turn up again with an apology for the interruption. She'd stay with me until Ruby left frustrated. But Diane was loitering by a couple some distance away.

"Abdi," Ruby whispered. She draped herself artistically over my shoulder. Her breath was warm on my ear. "I want to show you something. Let's get out of here."

Diane could hear everything. I knew she could. Why wasn't she stopping this?

The realization was a blow to the head, leaving me sick and dizzy, a low throb at the base of my skull. She'd told me to be nice to Ruby. Diane wanted me to be *very* nice to her. After all, what was the risk? Ruby was going to die tomorrow, to sink selfishly into her icy chamber, waiting for the dawn of a new world to thaw her out. Ruby wouldn't risk her future on the word of a handsome boy, whatever he told her about what was really going on. But she might make a final donation for the chance to bed him.

*Please*, I thought, staring across the room, willing Diane to hear me and rescue me at last. *Please don't do this to me, too.*

Ruby followed my gaze, and her tone sharpened. "Why are you looking at her?"

Diane turned away.

My tongue was thick, moving like a sluggish snake in my dry mouth. I made a noise that couldn't be mistaken for words, while I groped for self-control. I couldn't say an outright no to this woman. I couldn't even be unpleasant in the hope that she'd reject me.

"We could dance," I suggested, my stomach flopping around like a dying fish. I

summoned a smile that strove to be playful.

Ruby smiled in return, taking the gesture as compliance. “There’s no music,” she said. “We can dance in my hotel suite.” Which was no doubt being monitored by SADU. They’d be recording everything. Did Ruby know? Did she even care?

But I could think of no escape. Even the balcony behind me was too far away. Perhaps inspiration would strike on the way to her rooms.

In the elevator, Ruby leaned against me. She’d drunk a lot of the wine during dinner, but I didn’t think she was that intoxicated. “I’m going to miss my mother,” she said.

“I miss mine,” I said, unable to keep the sadness from my voice.

“But I won’t miss anything else,” she continued, blithely ignoring me. “All these boring people, these boring parties... I want something new, Abdi. I want an adventure.”

And that was what I was to her—an adventure, not a person. As we slipped out of the elevator and into the penthouse suite, her hand slipped under the hem of my shirt, stroking up the plane of my belly. I stared into that beautiful, blank face and wondered if it might not be so bad.

I saw the white bed over her shoulder, lush and soft.

No. No matter what it cost me, no matter what it cost Tegan when I didn’t comply, I couldn’t do it.

I caught Ruby’s wrist. “No,” I said simply.

She blinked. “What?” I was guessing people didn’t say no to Ruby Simons. “Is this about Tegan? She’ll never know. You can keep your little girlfriend; I’ll be gone tomorrow. I thought you wanted to have some fun.”

My mouth wasn’t working properly again. “No. I can’t do it.”

Ruby leaned in and kissed me.

I shuddered, a full-body rejection that I couldn’t disguise, and pushed her away from me, almost violent in my disgust.

“Hey!” she said. “I don’t like that. They told me you’d be *nice*.”

And that was it. The dams that kept my anger curbed burst, and rage flushed through my body, hot and roiling.

If I was going to be punished anyway...

My fingers bit into the soft flesh of Ruby’s arm. “Don’t go,” I said.

She stared at me, right on the edge of panic. “What?”

“Don’t freeze yourself! Don’t board the starship. You’ll be profiting off slave labor, making money out of human misery. Don’t do it, Ruby!”

“But I’ll get *old*,” she said.

The former Abdi could have found an argument to persuade her. Appealed to her vanity in some way, made her think about the fame she’d acquire if she tried to stop the *Resolution* and find a better solution for the dying world. But all I had now was fury and despair, and I was clumsy with it. The last two months work, of making Diane think I was being good, of trying to lower her suspicions and curb my rebelliousness, had just been utterly wasted.

Only my mother’s training could save me now. I was reaching for the answer, grasping for any rhetorical strategy I could muster, when Diane activated the implant and my world exploded into pain.

I hit the floor, the taste of my own blood sharp in my mouth as I writhed. Ruby screamed for help, even as she knelt by me.

“It’ll be okay,” she was saying, hands frantically patting at my cheeks. “What’s wrong, Abdi? Stop it! Stop it now! Somebody help him!”

“Holy crap!” an unfamiliar voice said, and then there were shiny shoes around me as hotel staff and SADU security surrounded me, calm voices soothing Ruby’s distress.

The last thing I saw was lavender silk and Diane’s angry eyes before my nervous system overloaded with the agony. I passed out on Ruby Simons’s pretty, pretty carpet.