

AWAKENED FROM THE PAST. FIGHTING FOR A FUTURE.

THE UNFROZEN FEW

BOOK ONE:
WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

A speculative mystery by five-time
Lambda Literary Award finalist

RANDY BOYD

CRYOGENIC CATASTROPHE

1980s AIDS PATIENTS PRESUMED DEAD

Long ago, the world left them behind.
Yet unbeknownst even to the biotech firm that froze them, they survived—only to awaken in present-day America.

Now hidden in a secret facility by that same firm, they struggle to make sense of the modern world—and to live with each other.

At the center is Dr. Nathan Black, a 30-year-old black gay man and the estranged son of the notorious family of black mad scientists behind the firm.

As Nathan tries to uncover the truth about “the catastrophe,” he clashes with the new head of the family’s biotech empire—his stepmother Dr. Brenda Black, a villainess in heels with her own secrets and agenda.

Surviving the freeze was easy. Now comes the fallout.

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**BOOK ONE:
WELCOME TO THE FUTURE**

A speculative mystery by Randy Boyd,
author of *Uprising*, *The Devil Inside*, and *Bridge Across the Ocean*.

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WELCOME TO THE FUTURE

by
Randy Boyd

WEST BEACH BOOKS

The Unfrozen Few, Book One: Welcome to the Future
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For Bronny

THE UNFROZEN FEW
BOOK ONE: WELCOME TO THE FUTURE
by
Randy Boyd

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“Yeah... and there’s this new thing that can kill ya.”

1

Emergence

Gasping. Nathan Black gasped, lungs caught between inhaling and exhaling, mind screaming: *You're in a coffin!*

Coughing. His core spasmed. Limbs twitched. *Breathe*, he ordered himself. Breathing. Reflexively, his hand reached up and touched—

Not a coffin. A cryo-chamber. Its glass cover slid back as sensors detected movement. He calmed, took a deep breath, wondered: *Who will I see first? What year is it?*

But no one was there. No family. No medical team. And no light. Only faint green gaslight from his chamber, dimming as the frozen formula evaporated into the oxygen-rich room.

“Big brother?” he called out. No response. “Hello? Can anyone hear me?”

He sat up, peered into the darkness, then hesitated before stepping out. His black thermos-suit was intact. Had it been a safe vessel?

“Of course.” He stood, half amazed, half proud. “But ...?”

Where were the scientists in lab coats, ready to help him rejoin the living? The room felt vacant—except for the glow of green gas from other cryo-chambers. Ten of them. All unopened.

He moved through the dark, searching for a door or light switch. A voice stopped him.

“I can't move,” said a young man. Sounded black, like Nathan.

“One second,” Nathan said. “Trying to shed more light—”

“Am I dead?”

“Just the opposite. You’ve been reborn.”

“What are you doing?” the man asked, panic rising.

“Looking for a way out,” Nathan said, running his hands along the wall. “A door, a call button, anything.”

“Why is it so dark?”

“The gas is the only light,” Nathan said.

The man’s breathing quickened. “Are you sure I’m not dead?”

“The unopened chambers,” Nathan said. “You see their green glow?”

“Affirmative.”

“Then you’re not dead.”

“Oh God!” the man cried. “But *he’s* still dead!”

“Who? Hold on,” Nathan said. “Others must be waking up too. Before we lose the light, I need to figure out what the hell is going on.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will.” Nathan approached the man’s chamber and took his hand. “You’re alive. See? Now breathe.”

The man’s face morphed from confusion to wonder. “It worked? Miraculously?”

Nathan squinted at the name tag on his thermos-suit. “Well, Darius,” he said, “if you mean freezing us in time—yes. But—”

“What year is it, Doctor ...?”

“Yes, I am, but—”

“You’re dressed like me,” Darius said. “Am I cured of G.R.I.D.? Sorry—AIDS? I don’t feel cured. More like still dying ... and not just of a shattered heart.”

“Yes, I’m a doctor,” Nathan said, resuming his search. “But also a patient, like you.”

“Why can’t I move?”

“You can,” Nathan said. “Wait ... I need the glow from the nine unopened chambers.”

“Oh, indeed I can move.” Darius sat up, looked around. “But I only count six chambers still glowing.”

“I saw my glow vanish before my eyes,” said a Latina’s voice.

“Who else is awake?” Nathan asked, hands skimming the walls.

“I need medical attention,” said an older white man.

"I'm a doctor. One second," Nathan said, scanning the dimming columns of light.

"My skin," the man groaned. "It's on fire."

"Swanky?" said a young black woman. "Swanky, where are you?"

"Can someone count how many are awake?" Nathan asked, still hunting for an exit.

"Can somebody page Dr. Frankie Black?" the black woman added.

"I ain't moving," the Latina said, "not till I know I'm not dreaming."

"How long were we frozen?" the white man asked.

"Where's the mad doctor in charge of freezing us?" the black woman asked.

"In fact," said Darius, "where-forth are both mad doctors? I most definitely don't feel cured."

"Didn't someone say they're a doctor?" the Latina asked.

"Yes, and I'm trying to find the exit," Nathan said.

"He black?" the black woman asked. "And his name is Dr. Black?"

"Yes and yes. Name's Nathan."

"Hello?" said a younger white man. "Do I have permission to exit this bio-cryo-whatever-chamber?"

"Definitely feverish," the older white man said. "My skin is red hot!"

Nathan hurried to the man's chamber and checked his forehead. "You're fine," he said, looking at the name on his thermos-suit. "Raymond."

"But am I cured of AIDS?" Raymond asked. "How come I still feel my creepy, KS-like sores under this getup?"

"What say we solve some bigger-picture items first," Nathan said, returning to the wall.

"Where the hell are we?" the Latina asked.

"Still near LA," the black woman guessed. "Right?"

"What year is it?" the younger white man asked. "My guess: 1995."

"This better not be some snake-oil scam," Raymond muttered.

"Would a scam have kept us alive?" Nathan banged on the wall, then exhaled. "We're probably still in Duranga Valley. On the Black Ops Medical compound. Granted, we weren't supposed to wake up like this."

"In the dark," the younger white man said. "Literally."

"We're supposed to go through some program," the Latina said.

"Emergence," Darius offered. "To re-adapt in a safe place with staff, guidance, and counselors."

"Found it!" Nathan said.

"The guidance and counselors?" Darius asked.

“An opening.” Nathan traced a square indentation on the wall. “I knew there had to be a way out.”

“And the cure!” the younger white man said.

“As far as I’m concerned, it’s all about the cure,” the black woman said.

“Oh, I’m living for the God-blessed cure!” the Latina said.

“So,” Darius said, “going out on a limb here: we were all frozen because we had AIDS.”

“No need to stay in the dark about that,” the black woman said.

“I need help pushing this open,” Nathan called out.

“Coming,” Raymond said. “Just smile so I can see you—kidding.”

“Only four chambers still glowing,” Darius noted. “Whoever you are, welcome.”

“Don’t be a stranger, stranger,” said the younger white man. “Come out, come out, whoever you are.”

“Better still,” the black woman quipped, “lay low till somebody pay they light bill.”

“Help me push,” Nathan said as Raymond joined him. “Everyone else, stand back.”

“Most of us haven’t dared to leave our chambers,” Darius said. “Myself included.”

“Stay that way for now,” Nathan said.

“They said they’d wake us when there was a cure,” the younger white man said. “We’re awake. Ergo, there’s a cure ... right?”

“Could be our chambers just ran out of formula,” Nathan said, pressing his shoulder into the wall.

“Somebody should be here to tell us,” Raymond said, pushing alongside him.

“Doing my best to find out why they’re not,” Nathan said, straining. The wall gave way.

“We did it!” Raymond raised his hand. “High five, brother!”

Nathan ignored him. “I’m going in.”

“What’s happening? We can’t see,” the Latina said.

“Only three chambers still glowing,” said the black woman.

“The black doc,” Raymond reported, “he’s climbing through some cubby-hole in the wall.”

“A ladder!” Nathan announced, gripping wooden rungs. “They must be nearby.”

“Who?” Raymond asked.

“The mad scientists who saved our lives.” Nathan climbed upward, feeling for another panel. “I think I know this place ... one of the old underground labs.”

“He says we’re under a lab,” Raymond relayed. “You expect us to climb up there?”

“Help is on the way,” Nathan said, descending. “The sooner I get moving—”

“You’re abandoning us?” the Latina asked, edging toward the exit.

“Listen, Doc,” Raymond said. “One: my skin feels like the sun. Two: who the fuck are you?”

Nathan felt his forehead. “Still no fever.”

“My breathing,” the younger white man said. “Pretty short ... maybe ... pneumocystis pneumonia.”

“He needs a hospital!” the black woman shouted—igniting a flurry of voices:

“Are we all still dying?” “Where’s the cure?” “What about the doctors who froze us?” “I’m just as scared as before!”

“Quiet!” Nathan commanded. “Some of you seem fine. Others need attention. I’ll do what I can, but I could use some help.”

“Help how?” Darius asked.

Nathan scanned the room. Only three green columns of light remained. “Anyone willing and able, climb up here with me. Help find a light switch.”

With that, he disappeared through the cubbyhole.

* * *

Nathan felt his way around what instinct told him was an underground lab, guided only by the faint green glow from below. From the same direction: the chaotic voices of the other patients, at least one of them climbing through the cubbyhole to join him.

“Find a light switch,” he said, inching his way forward. “Any—every—*ouch!*”

“You okay?” asked the black woman.

“Just ran into—” His hands skimmed a smooth wooden edge. “A desk. And a boxy ... Apple computer ... a cord! Feeling for an outlet.”

“Maybe we can figure out the year,” said Darius, the young black man, climbing into the lab.

“Is there a phone?” asked the Latina, who followed. “Call 9-1-1.”

“No phone,” said Nathan.

“Maybe they don’t use light switches or phones in the future,” said the black woman.

"I know computers. Maybe I can help," Darius said.

"How far in the future are we?" the Latina wondered. "Far enough that science fought AIDS and won?"

"Perchance it's the '90s," Darius said. "With any luck, AIDS is a relic of the past."

"Good!" said a new voice—another black man, this one with an African accent. "Ain't nobody cured my ass yet. Wiped out from climbing up here."

"Yes!" said Nathan. "Found an outlet!"

"Everyone else, keep looking for a light switch," the black woman said.

"Here's something on the floor," the Latina said. "A candle!"

"So were we unfrozen to be cured?" Darius asked. "Or cured, then unfrozen?"

"Who cares?" the Latina said. "It's gotta be the future. Found another candle!"

"Come on, Jesus, show us the light," the black woman said. "Yo' girl Shanice can't wait to know I ain't gone die of no AIDS."

"Who'd have dreamed a cryogenic coma was the way to survive the 'gay plague'?" Darius said.

"Black Ops—that's who," Nathan said proudly.

"Where the hell is Black Ops now?" asked Raymond, the older white man now entering the lab.

"Plugged in!" Nathan said from under the desk. "Can someone turn it on?"

"I found seven candles," said the Latina, her hope rising. "I'm gonna live. If my friends could ..."

"If my friends didn't all die," Raymond muttered. "And if I could find a damned light switch!"

"Matches!" said Shanice. "Stepped on a box of 'em."

"Light these candles!" said the Latina.

"Come on," said Darius, fussing with the computer. "Boot up and tell us the year."

"It's after 1987," said Shanice, repeatedly striking but failing to ignite a matchstick. "That's when my ass was frozen."

"1983 for me," said Darius. "Still not booting up."

"Maybe it's too old," Nathan said.

"Because we're too far into the future?" the Latina asked.

"I was frozen in '89," Raymond said. "On the fourth anniversary of Rock Hudson's death."

"The actor?" Darius said. "Died of AIDS?"

“That was the height of the AIDS panic, dude,” Raymond said.

“When he got it, the world freaked the fuck out,” Shanice said.

“Four years later, I had a choice,” Raymond added. “Go out like Rock, or be the last one frozen. There’s got to be a light switch! And a damned cure!”

“I ended up being the last,” Nathan said. “1990.”

“These matches are ancient,” Shanice said. “Hard as hell to fire up.”

“I don’t feel like a new person,” the African man said.

“Can’t wait to be a new woman,” the Latina said. “Lemme try a match.”

“Yes! Found a switch!” Raymond said. “Shit! Doesn’t work.”

“Perhaps this place is powerless,” Darius said. “And therefore, so are we.”

“Trying another outlet,” Nathan said.

“Gimme another match,” the Latina demanded.

“Another switch!” Raymond said. “Shit! Doesn’t work either!”

“What if it’s the 21st century?” Darius said. “Say, 2001?”

“Computer on yet?” Nathan asked.

“Afraid not,” Darius replied.

“Yes!” Shanice said, her face flickering in light. “Got a match to work!”

“Light this,” said the Latina, handing her a candle. “Hell, light ’em all.”

“Everyone, come get one,” Shanice said.

Moments later, six figures in matching thermos-suits stood around a desk in an otherwise empty lab, each holding a lit candle.

“Two-thousand and one?” Shanice said. “What if revelations already came and went?”

“As in Judgment Day?” the Latina asked. The name on her thermos-suit: Gina. “That might explain our predicament.”

“Thought I’d be frozen five years, tops,” Raymond said. “Not till the end of time.”

“It’s not the end of time,” said Nathan.

“You don’t know that,” Shanice said.

“It’s the future,” Raymond said. “We’re gonna be cured, am I right?”

“If the last of us was frozen in 1990,” Darius said, “it could be as recent as 1991.”

“Science didn’t conquer AIDS that fast,” Nathan said.

“What if it’s way later?” Gina asked, her voice trembling. “My Nana ... she can’t still be ... but my baby sister, she should still ...”

“There’s gotta be a cure, right, brothers?” Raymond moved toward Nathan and Darius. “After all these years ...”

“More likely,” Nathan said, “AIDS is manageable now.”

“The future,” said the African man. The name on his thermos-suit: Azizi. “The world must be like *Star Wars* by now!”

“I don’t feel so good,” Shanice said, hand on her stomach. “Where’s Dr. Frankie Black?”

“Check the drawers,” Nathan told Darius before joining Shanice.

“My skin’s still fucked up,” Raymond said. “My immune system must be, too.”

“So this is the scenario where we’re unfrozen, *then* cured,” said Darius, rifling through drawers. “Not the other way around? Desk’s empty.”

“AIDS doc gave me six months,” Azizi said. “That mean I got six months now?”

They all paused.

“There *has* to be a cure,” Shanice said. “If revelations ain’t happened.”

“I feel cured.” Gina stretched. “Like, really.”

“Could be euphoria,” Nathan. “A potential side effect.”

“Where’s the medical team they promised?” Raymond asked.

“Coming soon, no doubt,” Nathan said.

“You don’t know that, either,” Raymond shot back.

“I need to see my mom,” said a white adolescent boy. The sight of him sitting by the cubbyhole stunned everyone but Raymond.

“Don’t you want to stand up—” Shanice checked his thermos-suit name tag. “Connor?”

“More than you know,” Connor said. “Where’s my wheelchair?”

“Ah, sweetie,” Gina said. “Was it hard getting up here?”

“We had help,” Connor and Raymond said together.

“From who?” Shanice asked.

Raymond and Connor exchanged uneasy glances.

“Still downstairs,” Raymond finally said.

“They okay?” Nathan asked.

“Yes,” said Raymond, as Connor said, “No.”

“Which is it?” said Shanice.

“Had a little trouble,” Connor said. “In the dark.”

“The light’s almost gone,” Gina said, pointing to the cubbyhole.

“What kind of trouble?” Nathan pressed.

“The kind a medical team should handle,” Raymond said. “Where are the two black doctors who started this cryogenic conundrum?”

“Don’t you mean triumph?” Nathan said.

“Viola, honey, you up here?” said a mature white woman, her red hair just peeking through the hole. Darius stepped forward to help her climb out.

“What is she wearing?” Gina murmured.

“Don’t you mean, *who* is she wearing?” Raymond quipped.

“She’s wearing a dress,” Azizi said flatly. “A red one over her cryo-suit.”

“*Duh!*” Raymond said. “You ever watch the Oscars? She’s red-carpet ready.”

“Who does she think she is,” Shanice said, “a princess?”

“Is Viola here?” the woman asked. The name tag on her dress: Amanda.

“Who’s Viola?” Darius asked.

“Who’s Viola wearing?” Azizi said, triggering laughter and causing Amanda to look down in shame.

“Help ... climb this ladder,” begged a young white man, crawling in. “For ... sake ... how ... make it ... never ... this weak. Even after ... bad trip.”

“Here, honey, you got this,” said Gina, helping him up. “I’m Gina.”

“Gina, honey, I’m Jesse,” he said, nodding at his name tag.

“Jesse needs a hospital,” Gina said. “He’s the one who might have pneumonia.”

“You’re beautiful and smart,” Jesse said.

“Thanks, sweetie,” Gina replied.

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Jesse added. “The curly-haired, kinda doofus-looking guy—he’s more my type. Where is he, anyway?”

“Right behind you,” said a voice from the cubbyhole. “Doofus here,” the man added, climbing up. The name on his thermos-suit: Gilbert. He brushed past Jesse. “I need medical attention too. More than the twinkie who called me a doofus.”

“Jesse,” said Jesse.

“More than Jesse, the twinkie who called me a doofus,” said Gilbert.

“A cute doofus,” Jesse said.

“Go fuck yourself,” said Gilbert.

“Guys,” said Raymond, “can you do this dance later? We’ve got bigger problems.”

“That’s ten of us,” Darius said. “But only seven candles.”

“And they’re burning down,” Gina said.

“Only one chamber’s still lit,” said Connor, eyeing Raymond.

“The beautiful Asian man,” Jesse said, eyeing Connor and Raymond.

“His green light was all we had,” Gilbert added.

“Why won’t this door open?” Shanice pulled at the knob. “And where’s Dr. Frankie?”

"You," Raymond said, moving toward the door, "the black doctor—"

"The name is Dr. Black," said Nathan, checking Jesse's pulse.

"Dr. Black," Raymond echoed. "Wait, like Dr. Black-Black?"

"Related to the Dr. Frankie Black who froze us?" Shanice asked.

"Why do I still feel like I'm dying of PCP?" Jesse groaned.

"Emergency?" Raymond scoffed, banging on the door. "More like emergency! Hello? Anybody home?"

"Just break it down!" Shanice snapped.

"I know martial arts," Gina said. "Let me kick it in."

"I'm no martial artist, but I'm in," Darius said.

"There's a better way," Nathan said, stepping forward. "I don't know why there's no welcome committee, but panicking won't help."

"How do you suggest we let the world know we're unfrozen?" Raymond said.

"And in need of the cure?" Gina said.

Before Nathan could answer, Jesse began coughing. Darius rushed to him, so Nathan turned back to the door.

"By unlocking it first."

"Shit," said Shanice. "Knew that. Just panicked."

"We're all panicked," Gilbert muttered.

"Understandable," Nathan said. "But if we bust it down, people might think we're unfrozen franken-monsters."

No one laughed, but the sound of the latch turning brought audible relief. Nathan smiled, then frowned at what lay beyond: an empty hallway.

"There's still a world out there, right?" Raymond asked.

Before anyone could answer, Shanice and Gina darted out to explore. Raymond followed.

"Come on, folks," Nathan said. "We are not the last souls on the planet."

"Just the only ones put on metaphorical ice in the 1980s," Darius said, "thanks to something not-so-ironically named Project I.C.E."

"Right." Nathan headed for the room below to check on the lone unfrozen patient.

"What can I do to help?" asked Amanda, the raven-haired white woman wearing a red gown over her thermos-suit. "Might as well put my hot second in nursing school to good use."

Nathan allowed himself a mild laugh. "Check on him," he said, pointing to Gilbert. "And him," he added, nodding to Jesse.

"Yes, doctor," Amanda said, smiling as she stepped away. Nathan smiled

back, then scanned the shell-shocked patients wandering around the candlelit lab.

“Where did you go wrong?” he asked aloud.

“Where did who go wrong?” Darius asked, appearing beside him.

Nathan hesitated. “We survived the unfreezing process. Can you believe it?”

“Sounds like you had doubts,” Darius said.

Nathan began to reply, but a commotion near the door pulled their attention. The patients who had ventured out—Shanice, Gina, and Raymond—had returned and rounded up the others: Azizi, Connor, Jesse, Gilbert, and Amanda. By the time Nathan and Darius joined them, the message was clear: the building was as empty as the hallway.

“Empty rooms, labs, offices,” said Shanice, fear creeping in.

“Frozen in time,” Raymond murmured.

“Every window and door is boarded up,” said Gina, catching her breath.

“What ain’t boarded up is blocked off,” Shanice said.

“What now, Dr. Black?” Raymond asked. “This building’s abandoned, just like us!”

Their grim reality triggered a barrage of voices.

“A giant medical company?” “Where’s Dr. Frankie?” “I want my mom!” “Scared as hell right now!” “I froze myself for this?” “I need a fix!” “More of God’s wrath?” “People replaced by robots?” “Where’s the robots?”

“Everyone, please!” Nathan pleaded.

“Some welcome back,” Connor muttered, slumped on the floor.

“We’re shit out of luck,” Gilbert said. “No Emergence. No electricity. No doctors.”

“Except a black doctor named Black,” Raymond said, “just like the ones who ran the company.”

“That’s right,” Nathan said. “Not only am I a patient, I’m part of the family behind Black Ops.”

“Related how?” “Where’s the company now?” “Where’s Dr. Frankie Black and Dr. Fletcher?” “What the hell?” “Should’ve never trusted a bunch of black doctors!”

“We don’t have time for this,” Nathan said, glancing into the hallway. “What matters is, I know where we are.”

“Do tell,” Gina said.

“We’re on company grounds,” Nathan said. “Help isn’t far, one way or another.”

“Then let’s go get it,” Raymond said. “Let’s confront whoever ditched us!”

“Oh, I’m all for slicing off their nuts,” Gilbert said.

Several patients coalesced into a vigilante mob.

“No,” Gina said, soft at first, then louder: “We can’t!”

“She’s right,” Nathan said.

“What if this is the only safe place left?” Shanice asked.

“Who knows what the hell is out there?” Gina said.

“What happens when the candles burn out?” Connor asked.

“We only got three matches left,” Shanice said.

“That buys us time, but how much?” Amanda asked.

“Go out there looking like a fool?” Azizi said, gesturing to his thermos-suit.

“I can,” Nathan said. “I’ll go for help.”

“What if you don’t come back?” Raymond asked.

“I’m coming back,” Nathan said. “Come hell or high water.”

“And if you don’t?” Raymond asked.

Nathan hesitated. “I’ll show Darius how to get out of the barrack—that’s where we are. You remember the barrack.”

“Near the front of the compound,” Amanda said. “It’s where we came to survive.”

“This is an underground lab beneath that building, which dates back decades,” Nathan said.

“Like us,” Gina said. “Maybe.”

“What if this barrack is forgotten, just like us?” Jesse asked.

“Not possible,” Nathan said. “My family’s been doing business on this compound for generations. The family home is nearby. While I’m gone, try to look on the bright side.”

“They got wheelchairs in the future?” Connor asked.

“We survived being frozen and unfrozen,” Nathan said. “And we are not forgotten.”

“How can you be so sure?” Connor asked.

“Because, kid,” Nathan said, “the people behind Black Operations and Medical Services—the company’s original name—they’re my flesh and blood. Dr. Frankie Black, your doctor—our doctor—he’s my brother. And trust me: my brother would never abandon me. Or us.”

BOLO for a black man in a wetsuit

“Out into the world he goes.” “What if he don’t come back?” “We’re alive. Be grateful!” “Alive for how long?” “I swear I’m still dying.”

With one lit candle, Nathan traveled down the underground hallway, muting the fears behind him.

“This is the only way to ensure our safety,” he said, mostly to himself.

“Meanwhile,” Darius said, moving alongside him, “how long before the virus wages war on our unfrozen bodies? And what if, quite possibly, we step outside this barrack and it’s *Boy in the Plastic Bubble* syndrome?”

“Boy in who?”

“The TV movie,” Darius said. “John Travolta played a teenager with no immune system, had to live in a bubble.”

“Your point?”

“Are our immune systems ready for the modern world? Especially yours—first one stepping into it?”

“The alternative is what?” Nathan said, reaching a stairwell door.

“So you know this place,” Darius said as they climbed. “Not just from being a guinea pig for cryogenic and AIDS research?”

“The lab’s definitely underground, part of the barrack.”

Darius paused. “How in the loop were you with our doctors—your brother, Dr. Frankie Black, and Dr. Fletcher? And with your family’s company?”

“Is that what the older white guy whispered to you? Get the 4-1-1 on me?”

“I can visualize the grilling upon my return.”

“It’s complicated,” Nathan said. They reached another hallway, where boarded-up windows let in slivers of sunlight. “Good. You and the others can wait here without worrying about candles.”

“A relief to all, no doubt. So ... you and your brother, head of Project I.C.E., were you close?”

“Yes, Frankie and I are tight,” Nathan said, leading them down the hall. “And yes, I once worked for Black Ops.”

“Until you were frozen?”

“Not quite.”

“Something happened?”

“The usual,” Nathan said. “When your family finds out you’re a practicing homosexual.”

“You were fired? Rejected?”

“Not my brother, never,” Nathan said. “Pops, however, had trouble on both counts.”

“Sorry,” said Darius. “My family thinks I died accidentally driving my car off a cliff, something I staged before going on I.C.E. in ’83.”

“You were frozen early. And young. You look barely out of your teens.”

“Twenty-six,” Darius said. “But I’ve always looked young. Point of fact, people used to say I had a face that could get away with murder.”

“Why?”

“Why can I get away with murder?”

“No. Why were you frozen in ’83?”

“To do just that—get away with murder.” Darius paused. Nathan studied him. “So, Doc, if you disappear on us, just know—I’ll hunt you down and kill you too.”

Nathan eyed him, then calmly pointed to another stairwell. “This way.”

They climbed in silence, reached another hallway—also lit by boarded-up windows.

“Ground level,” Nathan said.

Darius stopped, then blurted, “They say I killed my lover Daniel!”

“Uh ... are ... did you ...”

“He begged me to end his life.” Darius leaned against the wall. “Correction:

Daniel begged me to put him out of his misery. Seventy-five pounds of agony. Covered in lesions. Barely breathing. They called it G.R.I.D.”

“Gay Related Immune Disorder.”

“Daniel died in 1982, before he ever heard the term AIDS.”

“I’m sorry but—”

“You don’t understand,” Darius said, choking back tears. “Daniel was a wrestler—skimpy shorts, tank tops. He wasted away to half his body weight. Esteemed doctors wouldn’t touch him. Nurses barely looked at him. He was ready to surrender, but I still feel the pain. Like it happened yesterday.”

Nathan placed a hand on his shoulder. “You’ve got to calm—”

“We vowed to submit ourselves to I.C.E. together,” Darius said. “But his decline was too fast. By the time we decided, he was too sick to qualify—your brother said so. That’s when Daniel ordered me to save myself.”

“So he’d be overjoyed to know you made it. To the future.”

“I don’t feel futuristic.” Darius collapsed, sobbing. “Feels like I just smothered him with that hospital pillow. I did it for him, but I feel like telling his parents: go ahead, charge me.”

“Get up.” Nathan pulled him to his feet. “We’re almost there.” They moved toward the front door. “His parents wanted you charged?”

“If convicted, they got the insurance money,” Darius said, more calm now. “They disowned him but not his blood money. Went straight to the police. ‘He murdered our son and committed fraud.’ Prejudiced white folk who never spoke to me. So I pushed my car off Mulholland and disappeared ... So you see, Dr. Black—”

“Call me Nathan.”

“You see, Nathan,” Darius said, “I can’t just pop up in the future. What if I still have a murder rap hanging over my head?”

“Could be ancient history,” Nathan said.

“Still,” said Darius. “I have a hunch being a black man and a suspect is still akin to being between the proverbial rock and a hard place in this country. No matter the year.”

“One step at a time,” Nathan said. They reached the front door. “The others can’t see you like this. They need calm. Confidence.”

“Noted. You do realize our lives are in your hands.”

“Well aware.” Nathan gave his best attempt at a confident smile. “See you soon.”

As the door closed behind him, sunlight flooded his eyes. He blinked hard, then was stunned by what he saw: the once-mighty Black Ops compound, owned

by his family for generations, now lay abandoned and lifeless. The buildings: boarded up. The grounds: buried in piles of dirt and debris.

“Frankie, what happened?” asked Nathan, standing before the four-story main office building.

A large sign on the door read *Condemned*. Beneath it, a smaller note:

*Black Ops Medical is moving to our brand-new location!
Visit us at 28902 Duranga Valley Road starting January 17, 2018.*

“2018,” he said in disbelief. “Or later. The company’s still alive.”

Like us, he thought, glancing toward the barrack.

From his slight perch on a hill, he surveyed his hometown: Duranga Valley, a secluded hamlet hidden among Southern California’s mountain ranges. It had grown since 1990, and the company’s new offices were too far to walk. But the family home wasn’t.

Except ... he was a black man wearing what looked like a surfer’s wetsuit. And his family had a fraught history with local law enforcement. Sometimes the DVPD was in their pocket, other times, not so much. He imagined a police radio crackling:

Be on the lookout for a black man in a wetsuit walking away from an abandoned medical park ...

Still, he pressed on toward Duranga Valley Road. The surge of energy from his awakening was gone, replaced by hunger and disorientation. By the time he hit the sidewalk, the journey felt like a fever dream.

Be on the lookout for a black man standing on a modern boulevard, wearing a wetsuit, looking for a payphone ...

His senses glitched between memory and reality. The boulevard buzzed with stores, restaurants, businesses, cars—and endless people. Voices, engines, horns, music. An overwhelming cacophony.

Be on the lookout for a black man overwhelmed by the future, walking miles in a daze ...

His mind jumbled past and present: old signage warped into new, Walkmans morphed into flat black handheld devices that everyone possessed. Phones? Radios? Cameras? People stared at the screens like tiny portals to another universe.

Be on the lookout for a black man who holds the fate of ten other people in his hands ...

The crowd swarmed, eyeing him, stepping away, whispering.

“Homeless freak.” “Said he hadn’t eaten in decades.” “What’s he on?” “Asked about the year.” “Phone booths?” “Why’s he covering his ears?”

He didn’t recall covering his ears or speaking, yet voices answered questions he hadn’t asked.

Be on the lookout for a black man in a wetsuit rummaging through a trash can, then scarfing down half a burger and cold fries ...

He was supposed to be on a nutrient-rich gel, reviving his cells. Instead, his body felt weak and out of sync. Could he make it home? He had to, even if he’d exiled himself from it years ago.

Be on the lookout for a black man stumbling toward the old money enclave of Duranga Village ...

Short of breath, he wondered if he was having a panic attack. He wasn’t prone to them, but if ever there was a time. He tried calming himself by recalling the last thing he remembered before going under.

“This is gonna work, little bro,” Frankie had said, hovering over the cryochamber.

“So, like Schwarzenegger ... I’ll be back,” Nathan replied, fading away.

“And we’ll shock the shit outta Pops,” Frankie said. “Show him all the lives I saved.”

“Including his son, no longer dying of AIDS.”

A roaring truck yanked Nathan back to the present. He stood before Blaisdale, the estate named eons ago by Franklin Black II.

“The punk is back,” he said aloud, eyeing the main house. Before slipping through his favorite gap in the bushes, he issued one last BOLO alert:

Be on the lookout for a black man in a wetsuit about to kick somebody’s ass.

* * *

“Out into the world he goes,” Raymond said, standing in the doorway of the underground lab.

“What if they ain’t coming back?” Shanice asked.

“We’re alive. Be grateful,” Gina said.

“Alive for how long?” Connor asked.

“I swear I’m still dying,” Azizi said.

“Who knows how long we’ve been frozen,” Jesse said.

“Why wasn’t there a guard to page somebody for help?” Raymond asked.

“Where’s whoever stored our chambers in that chamber down below?” Amanda said.

“Fucking stored in a chamber of chambers,” Connor muttered.

“Why did Frankie hide us there?” Shanice asked.

“Why do you call Dr. Black Frankie?” Gina asked.

“Why assume *Frankie* stored us in the fucking chamber of chambers?” Gilbert said.

“Maybe he left the candles and matches,” Shanice said. “Or was that God?”

“Why didn’t God just turn on the fucking lights?” Connor said.

“Or not give us fucking AIDS?” Raymond said. “And me bad skin.”

“Now is not the time for that,” Gina said.

“Not the time for wondering what the fuck?” Gilbert said. “I disagree.”

“How much time we got?” Azizi asked.

“It’s time for a fix,” Jesse said, “in more ways than one.”

“There’s hope!” said Darius, rushing into the lab.

“At least *he* came back,” Raymond said.

“Hope’s on the way,” Darius said, catching his breath. “Sure as the sunlight filtering through the upper floors.”

“Sunlight!” Shanice tapped her head. “I knew I forgot to tell y’all something.”

* * *

“What’d I miss?” Darius asked as they reached the first floor hallway.

“Just Raymond complaining,” Gina said, basking in the sunlight spilling through the glass front doors. “Wondering why there wasn’t a guard on duty to page somebody.”

“Duty to page?” Darius said. “I don’t understand.”

“Page somebody,” Raymond said, scanning the parking lot.

“Page them?” Darius asked.

“With a pager,” Raymond said.

“What’s a pager?” Darius asked.

“You from the stone age?” asked Connor, sitting on the floor.

“I’m from 1983,” Darius said.

“The pager is this little black box,” Shanice demonstrated with her fingers. “Somebody pages you, then you gotta find a payphone—”

“Enough about pagers!” Raymond snapped. “Someone needs to save us.”

“I believe Nathan will return with good news,” Darius said.

“Save us regardless,” Raymond said. “Especially if no Dr. Black comes back.”

“Maybe he’ll abandon us, too,” Connor said. “Then nobody’s bringing me a wheelchair.”

“Dr. Frankie Black wouldn’t abandon—” Shanice stopped herself. “Us.”

“Face it,” Gilbert said. “We were desperate guinea pigs for two mad scientists. They had no idea if we’d survive.”

“Could you say that with any more disdain?” Darius asked.

“I can try,” Gilbert said.

“Dr. Fletcher and Dr. Black did this to save us,” Gina said. “Saved me after the military threw me away like trash.”

“We’re awake,” Shanice said. “There has to be a cure. That was the deal.”

“Frozen until curable,” Jesse said. “Or when AIDS is manageable.”

“Fuck manageable,” Gilbert said, banging the wall. “They promised me a magic bullet!”

“To wipe out the plague killing all the fags,” Raymond said.

“And prostitutes,” said Shanice, indicating herself.

“Don’t forget the druggies,” Jesse said. “Especially us faggy ones.”

“All of us,” Gilbert said. “Our gerbil butts are unfrozen. Where’s our fucking magic bullet?”

“Thought you said we were guinea pigs,” Connor said. “They’re two different animals.”

“Whatever fucking works for you, kid,” Gilbert said.

“Don’t call me a kid,” Connor said. “Nerd.”

“Fuck you, kid!” said Gilbert.

“Temper, temper,” said Gina.

“Fuck you, too!” said Gilbert.

“Right back at ya,” Gina said.

“Where is Nathan Black?” Amanda asked. “He’s taking forever.”

“It’s been a few minutes,” Raymond said.

“Feels like hours, cooped up with all of you,” Amanda said.

“Calm down, princess in a dress,” Raymond shot back.

“Well, fuck you, too, redneck!” said Amanda.

“Both of you, shut the fuck up!” Connor said.

“Boy, the kid’s got a foul mouth,” Raymond said.

“Don’t call me a kid,” Connor said.

“That’s what you are!” Raymond said.

“Guys,” Darius said. “We’re weak and confused. Like when you’re starving and find yourself in a very bad mood.”

“Any euphoria I felt is gone,” Gina said.

“We should’ve had food by now,” Shanice said.

“I’m going to get mine,” Jesse said, heading for the front door. “I’m outta here.”

“You can’t,” Raymond said, holding him back. “Trust me, buddy. I’m older.”

“Don’t *buddy* me,” Jesse said, shoving him aside.

“I might buddy up,” Gilbert said. “With you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jesse asked, moving closer. “Wanna find a connection to make a connection?”

“What?” Gilbert asked.

“To get high,” Jesse said. “And I don’t mean pot.”

“You might be fun,” Gilbert sized him up. “In the right circumstances.”

“Let’s go,” Jesse said.

“Rich boy?” Gilbert asked.

“If my old man’s alive,” Jesse said. “What say we find out?”

“Not now,” Gilbert said. “These ain’t the right circumstances.”

“Why not?” Jesse asked.

“Not a druggie, for one,” Gilbert said. “Plus, I’m sticking around to see what the black doctor’s wealthy, mad-scientist family has to offer.”

“Last chance,” Jesse said. When Gilbert didn’t budge, he added, “Anybody else?”

“Where are you going?” Connor asked.

“You don’t even know what year it is,” Shanice said.

“This whole thing feels like a nightmare,” Jesse said. “May as well hit the streets, find the one thing that blots out my nightmares.”

“What a cute fool,” Raymond said, watching Jesse walk out the front door. “I’d do him, and he’d probably do me, if I wasn’t middle-aged. Am I still middle-aged?”

Azizi slumped on the floor beside Connor. “I got no energy.”

“We’ve got to hold on, people,” Gina said.

“What about the guy downstairs?” Connor asked.

“What about him?” said Raymond, glancing at Gilbert.

“He’s still in the chamber of chambers,” Connor said. “Maybe he’s awake now.”

“Anyone brave enough to check?” Amanda asked.

“I ain’t going back down there,” Shanice said.

“A lesbian like you, scared?” Amanda said.

“I’m not a lesbian, bitch,” said Shanice.

“What’s wrong with being a lesbian, bitch?” Gina asked.

“Nothing, I guess,” Shanice said. “If you ain’t bathed in the blood of Jesus.” Gina scoffed. “I believe in God, and I’m a lesbian. Oh, and I ain’t never been a prostitute.”

“What’s wrong with being a prostitute?” Shanice asked. “Forget it.”

“I’ve never been either of those things,” Amanda said. “Still, I got it.”

“Does that make you a better AIDS victim?” Gina asked.

“Is that why you wearing that uppity gown?” Shanice said.

“To hell with both of you,” said Amanda.

“None of us are victims,” Darius said. “We’re victors.”

“Then where’s the welcoming committee?” Raymond asked.

“The world ain’t never welcomed me,” Azizi said.

“Last time I saw the world,” Connor said, “my mom, my two brothers, and me were being run out of town for having AIDS.”

“Last week I was alive,” said Raymond, “I saw my 78th friend die of the deadly disease.”

“Last days I was alive,” Gilbert said, “I went AWOL on my hardcore AIDS activist group, choosing self-preservation through this crazy-ass, sci-fi-like experiment.”

“Last day I was alive,” said Amanda, wiping away tears, “I told my one remaining friend: it’s not goodbye, it’s see you later.”

“Is that who you were hoping to see, princess?” Shanice asked.

“What?” Amanda said, using her dress to dry her face.

“Where’s Viola? Where’s Viola?” said Shanice, mocking Amanda’s frantic query.

“Who’s Viola?” Gina asked. “Was she in charge of waking our asses up?”

“If she was, Viola should be fired,” Raymond said.

“Shut up,” said Amanda.

“Where in the world is Viola?” Azizi asked, apparently sincere.

“And why are you wearing that dress?” Shanice asked. “We didn’t get to choose no dress.”

“Fuck you all,” Amanda said, plopping down beside Connor.

“They’re just freaking out,” Connor said, trying to calm her.

“Didn’t you hear the doctor?” said Amanda. “He’s related to the Blacks. They practically own this town.”

“A black, mad scientist family that’s been around here for generations,” Darius said.

“The proper-talking brother is right,” Shanice said. “They ain’t gone leave us hanging.”

“Every empire falls,” Raymond said. “Maybe the Black dynasty’s gone.”

“The redneck has a point,” said Amanda, rubbing her forehead.

“Takes one to know one, your highness,” Raymond said.

“Think positive,” Darius said. “Take a walk on the proverbial sunny side of the street.”

“Is that where Viola is?” Shanice asked.

“Shut up about Viola,” Connor said, motioning toward Amanda. “You’re upsetting her.”

“Can’t you see I’m upset, too?” Shanice said, holding her stomach. “Where’s Dr. Black, I mean, Frankie?”

“*Frankie’s* not here,” Connor said. “Do you see me making fun of you for asking?”

“Frankie Black is our doctor,” Gilbert said. “Who cares about Viola?”

“I care about Viola!” Amanda said.

“Then tell us who the fuck Viola is!” Gilbert said.

Amanda glared at the group, then sighed. “It might not matter if someone rescues us, because if we stay in this barrack one more minute, we’re liable to kill each other and save them the trouble.”