

Project Resurrection

by
Karen Duvall

CHAPTER 1

October 3, 2013, -- Angakok, Alaska

Benny Sams watched one of four white-suited figures adjust a video camera mounted on a tripod, training it on the thawed corpse. The dead man's skin, tinged an ashen shade of blue, glistened as though made of wax.

The stark white walls of the reanimation room were a constant reminder of the Arctic cold outside. They shone like ice and eerily reflected colored lights from med-revivatory units positioned within the room. The ceiling overheads had been dimmed to reduce risk of damage to the cryonic's optic nerves once he was revived. Benny knew how delicate regenerated nerves could be. Once resurrected, every cell in this man's body would be more fragile than a newborn's.

Benny stared down at his cloth-covered feet. He absently reached up to scratch the stubble on his scalp, but encountered the slick plastic of his hood instead. While scanning the sterile room, he glanced toward the observation room window and noticed the group of stoic psychologists with digital note pads in hand, their laser styluses poised to scribble whatever came to mind. LaNaya Seville wasn't among them. Benny had expected to see her eager young face, her body rigid with anticipation for the miracle about to unfold. He could think of no one else more anxious than LaNaya to witness what they both considered an abomination. So where the hell was she?

The Project's founder, Dr. Terrance Labriola, hovered over the dead patient, concentration rucking his pale forehead below a widow's peak of iron gray. The doctor's son Kenneth, also a physician, made animated gestures while speaking to his father in muted tones. Med techs Steve Ivan and Nancy Ti busily entered formulas and coding information into the med-revivatory computers. The click and whir of medical machinery echoed against the walls with staccato precision.

"Benny!" barked a familiar voice.

Benny gave a start and turned to peer inside the masked hood beside him. Kenneth's thin, arrogant face stared back, hazel eyes hard with contempt. "Position yourself by the Osmotic Minipump and the oscillator controls." The young doctor pointed a plastic-gloved finger at the body rocking rhythmically from head to toe.

Annoyed by the order, Benny reluctantly did as he was told. No one had to tell him how to do his job. He approached the round metal frame that kept the lifeless patient rotating in a constant 180 arc, then adjusted the oscillator to reduce the cryonic's level of tilt.

He studied the digital dial on the pump, intending to increase its output if signaled, but for now all he could do was wait. He'd been waiting two years for this moment, a historical moment, a moment he might regret for the rest of his life.

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Reanimating the dead was an unnatural act of defiance against nature, yet Benny had eagerly competed for placement on the Project's medical team. He even received the highest score on the program's entrance exam for registered nurses. But what choice did he have? Project Resurrection promised him a full medical school scholarship once his contract was up; he lacked the funds to pay for that education himself. He'd end up paying for it with compromise, becoming a hypocrite to his own beliefs. Once he became a doctor, Benny vowed to prevent such heresies as the very project responsible for helping him reach his goal.

"Snap out of it, Benny." Kenneth elbowed him smartly in the ribs. "Stay alert! You don't see anyone else standing around with their thumbs up their butts." He nudged Benny toward the oscillator. "Be a good nurse and keep your eye on the readouts. These machines have been running nonstop for the past three months. We can't have them quitting on us now."

Benny edged closer to the oscillator, averting his eyes from the figure at its center. The top of the Osmotic Minipump, its height and width the size of a two drawer file cabinet, blinked at him with tiny green and white lights as it forced cell-reviving chemicals and biopathic stimulators through the patient's veins. He pulled out a sliding keyboard from within the unit's center and set the regulation mode to auto. Through the course of the procedure, he would monitor the machine and regulate its output manually if necessary.

"Body temperature?" Kenneth asked Benny.

"Eighty-seven point six and rising."

"Blood pressure?"

Benny scowled and the young doctor smiled ruefully at him. "That was a joke. Lighten up."

A flush of anger prickled the back of Benny's neck. Kenneth acted as though Project Resurrection was conceived by him and not Terrance Labriola, his genius father. The arrogant bastard. Benny's jaw tensed. All hail to Dr. Kenneth Labriola as he shakes a fist at God while attempting to wake the dead.

Benny dared a peek at the corpse and stepped back in surprise. The skin no longer looked blue. It had turned pale pink, making the dead man appear almost healthy -- as though he might only be asleep. Benny knew to expect this transformation, but actually seeing it was unnerving. He glanced at the others; no one behaved as though they'd even noticed.

"Hey, Benny," Kenneth said, stepping so close their masks almost touched. "You look like you've just seen a ghost." He chuckled and turned away. Benny clenched his fists.

"Kenneth," Terrance said, his voice stern. "We're about to begin. Take your position at the patient's head. Mr. Sams, turn off the oscillator."

The room became unnaturally still with the oscillator's motor stopped. The units and pumps droned on, their hum even and unbroken. Benny joined his teammates, who swarmed around the patient's naked body, adding diagnostic electrodes to areas not already covered with the wire-stemmed patches of silver tape.

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Clear plastic tubes pierced the skin at every critical point of anatomy: heart, liver, kidney, lungs, brain. The man's shaved head reminded Benny of Medusa, the hollow ribbons of plastic like writhing snakes around his scalp. Warmed blood pulsed through most of the tubes, regeneration fluids through the others.

Terrance grabbed the octagonal paddles from a photon-defibrillator cart, then greased them with conductor jelly. "This is it, everyone. This man's body has been renewing itself for weeks, his idle heart unable to pump blood through a brain now healthy with regenerated tissue. That heart is about to start. And so is this man's life!" He rubbed the paddles together. "Clear!"

The team appeared frozen with anticipation. Terrance sucked in an audible breath and brought the paddles down flat against the patient's chest and left rib cage. "Clear!" he yelled again, and the room crackled with the violent sound of photon-kinetic shock.

The body twitched.

Three rows of straight green lines on the med-revatory monitors broke for an instant. The team stood statue-still, waiting for the machine to recharge. The paddles zapped their target once more. Two blips erupted onto the screens, each about a half-second apart. The patient lay still, lifeless.

The mask of Terrance's hood turned gray from the steam of his breath. He hesitated and glared at the defibrillator, as if to mentally accelerate its recharge. "Clear!" Terrance returned the paddles to the man's chest.

This time the body nearly leapt from the table. The monitors went wild with bouncing green light.

"What the hell is that?" Nancy Ti stared down at the body, her brows furrowed behind the clear mask of her hood.

"I don't know." Steve Ivan pointed at the patient's midsection. "Where did that come from? It wasn't there when we started."

Benny saw it, too; a perfect round welt just above the navel, like someone had pelted the body with a handball. He glanced at the dead man's face and watched the once-frozen features of death contort into a grimace. The eyes opened wide. The lips curled back in a silent scream.

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October 3, 2013, -- Toledo, Ohio

Tony trotted down the narrow driveway, his body hunched over the basketball that thumped between his palm and the frigid cement.

"Shoot!"

Unfazed by Jake's taunting, Tony spun around with his back to the hoop and dribbled the ball in place. Despite the cold autumn air, sweat trickled down his forehead, drops of it stinging his eyes and blurring his vision. Jake pressed close to him, his hot breath blasting against Tony's neck as they scuffled their way to the garage and the basket above it.

Jake leaned in closer. "You're stalling, man." Spittle flew with his words, wetting the side of Tony's face. Tony risked a sly peek at his friend, then winced at the cool, mischievous eyes staring back.

Jake slapped the ball away. He let it bounce against his knees, then his hand while dribbling it on to victory. "Ha!" He leapt up and slammed the ball through the hoop.

"Twenty-two to four." Jake grabbed the ball before it could roll into the scraggly branches of a dying juniper hedge. "Best two out of three?"

Tony breathed out puffs of white clouds while panting his refusal. "Nah. What's the point? You'll win anyway."

"Ah, come on. We're just warming up." Jake batted the ball at him, then quickly snatched it back. "The exercise is good for you."

Tony shook his head and trudged over to a smooth patch of dead lawn beside the porch steps of Jake's house. He plopped down and hugged his knees, rocking back and forth to warm himself against the chilly afternoon air.

He snuffled through air filter plugs in his nose and lifted watery eyes to the gray-green haze above. Tony squinted and wiped his face, then glanced at his hands to see if there was blood on them. He should have worn his goggles today. The smog became so bad at times, like now, that he thought his eyes might bleed. He spread his fingers and noticed streaks of brown running across his knuckles. Not blood, just grime from junk that drifted through the thick Toledo air like plankton in the sea.

He lay in the dry grass and watched Jake dodge back and forth beneath the hoop, the ball in constant motion. His friend's sinewy limbs stretched as he leaped, and Tony noticed the rippled muscles on his friend's back where his shirt hiked up. Slim and fit, Jake made an unconscious mockery of Tony's fat, flabby body.

Tony ran his hand through a forelock of hair, using his sweat to slick it back. He smelled his fingers and grimaced, the pungent odor a mixture of perspiration and something like burnt rubber.

"Finish your homework?" Jake asked before lunging toward the hoop for another lay-up.

"I'll do it in the morning during access period. I got plenty of time."

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"You'll catch shit from Spence if it's late."

"Who cares." Tony plucked blades of dead grass between thumb and forefinger. "It's our last year and I'm cruisin'."

Jake stopped his merciless pounding on the ball and stood, hands on hips, staring down at Tony. "If you don't ace Philosophy, you can forget about getting Spence's referral to the Tech Academy. He's serious about this essay." He trotted back toward the hoop.

"What'd you write?" Tony called out.

Jake threw him a withering look before launching another perfect dunk. "Once a dead body, always a dead body."

"How do you know for sure? They could do it, Jake. Reanimate all those corpsicles stacked up in Labriola's deep freeze for the last thirty years."

"Ain't gonna happen," Jake said.

Tony considered the ethics of immortality, the question Dr. Spence had assigned his philosophy students to ponder. The idea for this assignment sprang from the latest news sweeping the country: the impending revival of thirty-year-old corpses who, before they died, had dreamed the dream of living forever. At some time today -- perhaps it had already happened -- the first cryonic zombie would be zapped to life in the twenty-first century. Project Resurrection. Tony had followed updates about the Project for months. He would give anything to be in Angakok, Alaska right now to witness the event.

"Do you believe in Heaven, Tony?"

"I don't know. I mean, I want to believe in it. If it exists, it's where I wanna go when I die." Only Tony didn't believe and never would. Too bad Jake couldn't share his agnostic views.

"If someone brought you back from Heaven years after you died, how do you think you'd feel?"

"There's no proof we go anywhere after we die." Tony sprawled his plump body across the dead lawn. "It's nice to imagine some great beyond where angels play harps and your spirit lazes around on clouds all day. But who's to say death isn't like drifting into a dreamless sleep that lasts forever?"

Jake peered at him through a lock of black hair that hung over one eye. His expression was sympathetic, as though he felt sorry for Tony and his bleak perception of the afterlife. This made Tony think about his dead parents, who'd been gone five years now -- completely gone, forever. If their bodies had been frozen instead of buried, he could look forward to meeting up with them again someday. Only it would be in this world, during his lifetime. Not in some fantasy afterlife.

"Hey, Jake. I gotta go."

"Already?" Jake dribbled the ball again, bouncing it down the driveway. He ventured as far from the hoop as he could get without going into the street. "Betcha five I can make it from here."

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Tony stood and brushed grass from the back of his sweat pants. He felt sticky and just wanted to go home and take a shower. Thinking about his parents had depressed him. "A sucker bet. You never miss."

Jake laughed and slouched over the bouncing ball. The foul air was cold and still, carrying no sound but the pat-pat-pat of inflated rubber against pavement. He scowled with concentration as he stared down the driveway, eyes fixed on the loop of bent metal above the garage.

Bored now, Tony turned from him to focus on the awaiting basket. Seconds passed. Jake never took this long to send the ball flying, the hoop attracting it like a magnet.

"Any day now," Tony said, the hairs on the back of his neck starting to prickle. Something was wrong. "Come on and make the shot so I can --" He glanced over his shoulder and saw his friend clutching the ball to his chest. An expression of pain and surprise distorted Jake's face. "Hey, Jake! You okay?"

The ball slipped from Jake's hands. It bounced mildly in place a few times before rolling down the driveway and into the street. When Jake didn't move to go after it, Tony sprinted toward him, an odd sense of panic tightening his chest.

"I'm so hot," Jake said, sounding breathless, his knees still bent as if ready to launch his free-throw. He grabbed at the front of his sweatshirt with both hands. "I-I-I'm being sucked out of my body. I can feel it, Tony. Something's p-p-pulling me, pulling, pull..."