

The Bus

“Look Tess, the bus is still there!”

Gracie’s sister quickly turned into the first row of the Scotts Valley Transit Center, and screeching to a stop, she started yelling like a crazed cheerleader, “Go, go, go, go.”

Feeling frazzled and harried, Gracie began running toward the terminal.

“Wait, don’t go, please, stop!” She trotted after the slowly moving bus, which seemed to be jerking, as if the driver didn’t know how to change gears. She continued to shout until hearing the reassuring screech of the brakes and the familiar hiss of the doors.

"Sorry," the bus driver said, "I'm still getting the hang of this thing."

Gracie looked up, nearly choking at the sight of him. His oversized head, with its hairy bulbous nose and huge ears, only accentuated the beady little eyes, which continued shifting from side to side.

With a quick intake of breath, she stammered “You’re v-very kind for stopping, thank you.” Forcing herself to smile, she flashed her bus pass.

“Is something wrong?” he asked as she clambered aboard.

“No, no,” she blurted out, unable to tear her eyes away from the horror of his face. “I’m okay, just a little rushed.”

Dropping heavily into the seat behind the driver, she let out a huge sigh, realizing she’d never make it to Seadrift by 10 o’clock. She took out her cell phone and tried calling Johanna. But the call went straight to her voicemail. Then she remembered that Johanna never answered when she was doing volunteer work.

As she was putting her cell phone away she sensed that the guy across from her was staring. When she stared back, the coward quickly looked away. Expecting him to be ugly and obnoxious, she was surprised to find him interesting, in a severe way, with his white skin and jet-black hair. As Gracie continued looking at him, he slowly turned his head, his eyes locking into hers, causing her to shudder at the unearthly smile frozen on his face, detached, devoid of feeling. She grabbed her bag and pretended to be busily engaged in searching for something inside.

"I think I know you," she heard him say in a deep, attractive voice.

Continuing to rummage through her bag she pretended not to hear him.

"No, no, I don't know you," he added, shaking his head, "but I've seen you... you're one of those college students from that Sentinel article, the one about a group called Campus Volunteers of America, right?"

Being so fascinated by the contrast between the sound of his voice and the way he looked, Gracie barely heard his question.

"Miss..?"

"Uh, I'm sorry. What was that?"

"The article, the one about CVA, wasn't that you?"

"I don't think so."

"But I remember seeing a picture of you." He paused, staring at her, his handsome face warm and engaging now. "You're even more beautiful in person, do you know that?"

She laughed uncomfortably. "Uh, yeah, thanks." His speech didn't match the way he looked at all, with his Mohawk style haircut, black leather jacket, black jeans, and dark blue

tennis shoes. He sounded as smooth as a movie actor. And the more he talked, the more Gracie felt his deep voice sinking in, breaking down her resistance.

"... and you go to hospitals and health clinics and nursing homes, feeding the homeless, helping the needy," he continued as if arguing the case for her sainthood.

"You're very kind, but I'm really not that..."

"I'd wager you're going to help somebody right now, isn't that right?"

"I'm going to Seadrift."

"Seadrift?"

"Yeah, it's an old folks home over on 17th."

"I knew you were on some kind of mission of mercy."

"Right, you're just trying to be funny now." She laughed softly.

"No I'm not. Besides, your uniform gives you away."

She thought the light blue uniform made her look like a blond nurse in a cheap porn movie.

"There's nothing for you to be ashamed of, you know," he said softly as if he knew what she was thinking. "What do you do in a place like that anyway?"

"Oh we just try to help out where we can, visiting the residents, talking with them. My friend Johanna even sings to them, she's pretty good on the guitar and..."

"So you and your friend do it together?"

"Sometimes... Like today we're going to visit the ex-mayor."

"You've never met him before?" Gracie was confused by the look of consternation on the young man's face as he stared at her.

"Well I was supposed to meet him last week but I never made it over to Seadrift."

He suddenly frowned, shaking his head slowly. "You need to change your plans then."

"What? Change my plans? Are you serious?"

"That place is dangerous, the people are all sick and demented... You need to change your plans."

"Why are you telling me this?" Gracie asked, puzzled.

"Because I like you. I know, I know, we just met. But it's true, I like you. Can't you go someplace else?"

"No I can't. I've been going to Seadrift for a couple of months now and I don't think it's very nice to say the people are sick and demented."

"Sorry, but it's true, and the mayor is the worst."

"You must be thinking of somebody else," Gracie said, "Johanna never mentioned that about him."

"That's probably because she only just met him."

"And how do you know him so well?"

He paused, his eyes cast down, a look of sadness darkening his features. "He's my dad."

"Your dad? Really?"

"Yes, that's how I know him so well. And that's why I'm warning you to steer clear of him."

He came over and sat next to her. Taking her hand in his, his eyes moist and glistening.

"Don't get me wrong, I love my dad, I really do, but he's been causing a lot of problems recently and I wouldn't want to see you get too involved with him."

Gracie was amazed that she was suddenly sitting on the bus holding hands with someone who had been a complete stranger only minutes before. And yet there was something about him that made it seem alright, natural and inevitable. He felt like a soul mate.

"Maybe Johanna and I can help your dad," she said soothingly. "Johanna is the sweetest person in the world and if anybody can make him feel better, it's her. Why don't you come with me? I bet he'd love to see you."

"No, I can't, it makes me sad to see him like he is now."

Gracie patted his hand. "I'm so sorry, that must be really hard."

Suddenly he let go of her hand. "Tell him he needs to pack up and come home now." He shot the words out angrily, his sudden mood change seeming bizarre in the extreme.

Gracie laughed nervously. "You're joking, right? He just checked into Seadrift."

But instead of responding, the stranger cocked his head slightly, his attention seeming to be captured by something else. Then his face altered completely, becoming expressionless, his eyes staring past her. Gracie could tell it was zombie time again.

"Why did you make me say that?" he muttered, continuing to stare right through her.

"Say what?" she asked, confused.

"No... I'm not listening to you anymore," he hissed. His eyes were completely out of focus now, rolling up, about to disappear into the top of his skull. "I'm leaving you."

"Are you alright?" she asked in alarm.

"What?" he exclaimed, as if he were being dragged back into the world from someplace else.

"It looked like you were getting sick or something."

"Sorry."

“Should we call a doctor?”

“No, no, I’m fine.”

“Are you sure? You could be having a seizure.”

“It’s just a condition I have, it’s under control. I’m all yours now. I hope I haven’t upset you.”

But it was upsetting, he obviously had some kind of mental problem. He could even be dangerous. Standing up, Gracie quickly said, “Okay, driver, I’ll get off at the next stop, thanks.”

The guy in black was quietly staring at her, his face marked by a look of complete disappointment. "Can't you stay a little longer? I have more to tell you."

"Sorry, I need to go, Seadrift's just around the corner."

"Okay, but you better tell dad that Krause knows where he is." He looked at her and winked as if he had just shared some kind of secret with her.

"Krause...?"

"Krause, that's right."

“Your name is Krause?”

"Not me, you idiot, I'm Jake. Krause is my boss."

The driver laughed, deep and hollow, bringing the bus to a jerky stop.

Quickly stepping off the bus, Gracie was glad to be getting away and out into the fresh air. *What the hell was that all about?* she wondered as she watched the bus slowly disappear down the street.

And then, checking the time on her phone, she bolted. “Shit, I’m totally late. Johanna will have a fit!”

The Mayor

Gracie bounded up the front steps of Seadrift, flying through the glass entry doors, veering to the right, racing down the corridor, bobbing, weaving, barely managing to avoid the wheel chairs, equipment, and disoriented residents cluttering the hallway, and finally banging into the reception desk with a loud thump as she came to a screeching stop. Startled by Gracie's sudden arrival, the lady behind the desk let out a muffled scream, her pile of badly dyed blond hair collapsing unceremoniously, making her look like a lopsided overweight mannequin. Gracie stood panting in front of her.

"What are you doing?" the fat lady yelled, standing up to meet her adversary. "You nearly gave me a goddamned heart attack!" Her scowl, pinching a once pretty face, gave the impression of someone perpetually dissatisfied. Bits of food were clinging to her blouse, intercepted by, and prominently resting on her huge breasts.

"Sorry, but I'm late," Gracie gasped. "Can you tell me where mister Diamond is staying?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Don't you remember? I've been coming here every weekend. My name is Grace Sheffield, with CVA." Gracie stared at the receptionist's name-tag, which read, Elizabeth McConnell, RN. Betty the Bitch, that's what Johanna called her.

Rolling her eyes, Betty muttered, “Why do these people always show up on my shift?” She sat down very slowly and picked up the visitors' list. “Well, Grace Sheffield, if you ever come running in here like that again, I’ll make sure you never come back, you understand?” She shoved the clipboard at Gracie. “Here, sign in on the next empty line, but you need to be out of here by lunchtime – that’s twelve sharp. Got it?”

“Jesus, why are you so mad all the time? Whenever I come in here, you treat me like I killed your dog or something.” As soon as the words left her mouth, Gracie knew it was a mistake. She did that a lot, shooting off her mouth without thinking about the consequences.

Leaning forward like a cat about to spring, Betty asked very quietly. “What did you just say to me?”

Gracie sighed. “Never mind, I’ll try to tone it down from now on.”

“You better do more than try,” she said dismissively. “Here, put on this id badge. He’s in room 18 – down the hall and to the right. And don’t run!”

Proceeding down the hallway, sickened by the sour smell and depressing atmosphere of Seadrift, she knew she had to get out of CVA somehow. *That guy was right, this place isn't where I want to spend my Saturday mornings*, she thought, resolving then and there to tell Johanna that she’d had enough. And that would be hard, Johanna would blow a gasket, it might even end their friendship.

Opening the door to room 18 as quietly as she could, Gracie slipped inside. She cleared her throat to let Johanna know that she was there.

Looking up, Johanna glared. “It's about time you showed up.”

“I'm sorry, I tried to get here on time, honest.”

"Ah, Miss Sheffield," the mayor exclaimed, greeting her as if a famous celebrity had just walked into his room. "You're the only one I haven't officially met but I've heard so much about you." And then, addressing Johanna he said: "It's just like you said, she looks exactly like Scarlett Johanssen."

"Now you're being silly," Gracie said.

"No I'm not. Oh if you could only see what I see."

An endless network of wrinkles etched the mayor's upturned smiling face, the pale flesh full of dark liver spots, his hair consisting of a few thin silver wisps desperately clinging to the top of his head. In spite of his ancient exterior, his handsome features were still discernible in the ruins, and his voice had a youthful quality, animating him as he spoke.

"Come close." He patted the bed, beckoning her as if she were his favorite grandchild. She approached awkwardly and as soon as she was close enough he grabbed her hand, his touch warm and gentle. "Thank you so much for being here," he said, shaking her hand rapidly. "You're the one who's going to make this work."

"Sure, I'll do whatever I can." She had no idea what he was talking about and his look, so full of expectation, made her feel uncomfortable.

Sighing, he let go of her hand. "Now, we need to get on with this before I die in this wretched place." He began coughing violently.

Johanna moved in front of Gracie, gently guiding the old man back on to his pillows. "Now, Mr. Diamond let's not start in about dying again. You know that Dr. Patel told you to stop doing that." She looked at Gracie. "The mayor really wants to go home," Johanna smiled indulgently, "so we need to help him get better right away, isn't that right, Mr. Diamond?"

"That's right, I need to leave before I croak."

Johanna patted him. "You're not dying."

"Of course I'm dying; everybody in here is dying. That's what you do in places like this – you live a little while and then you die, right? I never wanted to come here in the first place but I had to. This old age is unrelenting. What's important now is that I give you your stones right away."

Gracie thought that she must have heard him wrong: "Did he say 'our stones'?"

"Okay," Johanna intervened, tapping the mayor gently, "let's not get into the business about the stones either. I think we could use a little music. Will you get my guitar over there, Gracie?"

"Please don't patronize me. I'm not some senile idiot needing to be coddled like a child. Asher should be here by now."

Looking at Johanna, Gracie fumed, "Did he say Asher, Johanna? Is there something you're not telling me?"

The mayor quickly responded. "Don't worry, Asher will do fine. I have three stones and I've decided to entrust them to the three of you. You need to work together as a team."

Gracie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Asher was the last guy in the world she wanted to be working with at Seadrift. During their training he was constantly making lame jokes and acting like an idiot. "What's this about Asher, Johanna? I thought it was just you and me today."

Plumping up one of his pillows, Johanna said matter-of-factly, "Sorry, Mr. Diamond, but Asher's not scheduled today. Gracie and I will take good care of you though." She helped him lean forward, putting the pillow behind him.

But the mayor was insistent. "I told him to come and he said he would. Will you just go find him, please? Call him up if you must. It has to be all of you."

Johanna sighed, motioning toward the door with her head. "Alright," she said, keeping her eyes on Gracie. "We'll see if we can find Asher, okay? C'mon, Gracie." She ushered Gracie out the door, closing it behind her.

Johanna locked her arm in Gracie's, guiding her down the hall, away from the room and back toward the reception desk. "He's acting very strange isn't he?" she whispered. Gracie could feel the strength in Johanna's grip. Tall and black and beautiful, Johanna's physical strength matched her emotional strength, a veritable rock of good sense and compassion. Johanna continued whispering as they made their way down the hall. "I swear to you he seemed alright last week, but today he just keeps going off on these tangents. Who knows? Maybe they're prescribing too many drugs for him."

Stopping in the middle of the hallway, Gracie yanked her arm away. "That does it!"

"What's the matter with you?"

"I hate this place!" she hissed. "And why did you ever have to get us mixed up with that old man anyway? I should have listened to the guy on the bus."

"What guy on the bus?"

"There was a guy on the bus who warned me that the mayor had gone off the deep end. And he would know, he was his son for God's sake."

"His son? I didn't know he had a son."

"That doesn't matter, does it? The point is that crazy man is saying Asher has to help us take care of him. Who does he think he is anyway, ordering us around like that?"

"Don't be mean, Gracie. Anyway, forget about Asher, he's not scheduled until tomorrow."

“I don’t care. I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I want to leave.”

"You just got here."

"I want to quit."

After dropping that bomb, Gracie braced herself for the worst as she watched Johanna quickly take one of the chairs that lined the hallway. As soon as Gracie sat down beside her Johanna spoke in an angry whisper. “You can’t quit, you promised you’d help me.”

“Okay then, if you want me to keep helping you we need to find somebody else. This guy is too depressing.”

Johanna didn't say anything. Slowly shaking her head, looking down at the floor, she was the picture of resignation.

“Well, don’t you think he’s depressing?” Gracie pressed her.

Johanna turned, looking straight into Gracie’s eyes. “Promise you won’t get mad?”

“I hate it when people say that.”

“Too bad... ‘cause I’m gonna say it anyway. Sometimes I think you’re the most selfish person I know. You’re always late, no matter what it is, you’re always late. That’s the first thing. And that’s a sure sign of being totally self-centered. But even worse than that is your attitude about volunteering. Volunteering is important to me, that’s why I’m the campus rep for CVA. But you don’t even care, do you?”

Gracie shrugged. “I guess I’m just not as good as you, Johanna.”

“Are you being sarcastic?”

“No, I’m serious. You have a real heart for this volunteering stuff, I don’t. I have a hard enough time paying my bills and staying in school. You’d be better off without me anyway.”

Johanna could tell that this wasn't just some fabricated excuse for quitting, Gracie didn't operate that way. "Don't say that, it's not true, I depend on you," she assured her.

"Right..."

"I do, you and I complement one another." She felt bad for attacking her best friend. Gracie had a lot to teach Johanna about being perfectly honest and spontaneous. Unlike her, Gracie went with her feelings and didn't second guess herself. Johanna put on a good act of being in charge, cool, calm, and collected, but she knew it was done to cover up some of her insecurities. It was her way of keeping the wolf at bay. She reached over and touched Gracie's hand. “Please, Gracie, stay with this a little longer. It'll get better, I promise. We’re a team, remember?”

“Some team. All we do is argue.”

“Well that's what best friends do, it makes them grow closer. We argue because we care about each other, right?”

“Yeah, maybe. I guess I'm a little stressed out by being forced to take the bus all over the place.”

“Yeah, I know, but you'll be getting your license back next week and things will be a lot easier.”

“I still think we should find somebody else to call on this morning, Johanna. There must be...” Out of the corner of her eye, Gracie caught Asher striding up the hall toward them, his CVA shirt and tie making him look like a Mormon missionary doing field work. “Oh God, it’s him. Damn it, Johanna, I thought you said he wasn’t coming in this morning.”

Looking down the hall at Asher, Johanna frowned. “He isn’t supposed to, he must have misread the schedule.”

Asher came straight at them, proceeding to talk in a hushed tone of voice. “Sorry I’m late. Are we all ready to go?” He sat down next to Johanna, leaning into her with that dumb look on his face, smiling conspiratorially for no reason.

“What are you doing here, Asher?” Johanna said, her voice seething with anger.

"That's not much of a greeting," he said, leaning back in his chair.

"I didn't schedule you today, you can't just come down here whenever you want."

“The mayor's taking us somewhere, isn't he? That's what he told me yesterday.”

Gracie grumbled, “Stop trying to be funny, Asher. The old man is obviously very sick.”

“Yeah,” Johanna said, “you need to be a little more sensitive.”

“I am sensitive. And I don't think he's sick. Gracie says it like he belongs in a psychiatric ward instead of an old folks’ home.”

Gracie and Johanna sat, unresponsive, not even looking at him as he continued, hoping he would get up and go away. “The only reason he’s here is because somebody is trying to hurt him. At least I think that's what he told me.” The words fell with a thud, followed by silence. With his bizarre sense of humor, it was always hard to tell when Asher was being serious.

Johanna looked up and glared at him. “You really think this is funny, don’t you?”

“Well, kind of.”

“I thought so.”

“Yeah, but I swear, he told me somebody was out to get him. People shoot politicians all the time, right? That’s not so farfetched.”

“He’s certifiably paranoid, Asher,” Johanna said wearily, “and that’s not funny, it’s sad.”

Asher smiled. He was good-looking; there was no doubt about that, with his curly black hair and his crooked smile. But something about him was messed up, probably the result of smoking too much dope when he was a kid being moved around from one foster home to another. It was actually quite amazing that he had been admitted into UCSC, given his personal history, which wasn't pretty.

He continued smiling and talking. "Okay, you're right, Johanna. He is kind of eccentric. Too bad though."

"What's too bad?" Johanna shot back.

"Too bad he isn't taking us with him. You should have heard what the old guy was telling me yesterday."

Gracie could see the smoke coming out of Johanna's ears, her eyes shooting daggers at Asher, but he plowed ahead anyway, his absolute recklessness causing Gracie to marvel.

"He told me that he chose the three of us for some kind of special job, he said that we were blessed. You know, like "blesséd are the meek". He laughed.

Johanna exploded. "Alright, Asher, that's it. You need to get out of CVA today. I don't want you making fun of our clients anymore."

"You can't fire me, if I don't get these community service hours I'll have to pay my fines. I'd probably be kicked out of school."

"Too bad."

"Hold on, I didn't do anything. I was just being nice, listening to him talk, that's all. Isn't that what we're supposed to do? So when he said he wanted to take us on this trip he has planned I said 'sounds good to me'."

"You don't get it do you, Asher? He's old and he's getting homesick, the poor guy."

“It's not just that, Johanna.” Gracie sputtered. “He has Alzheimer's or dementia, or some other kind of serious mental problem. Isn't that obvious?”

With a look of sudden determination Johanna slapped her hands on the arms of her chair and stood up. “Alright! I've had enough of this. C'mon Gracie, let's go get my guitar. We can visit somebody else.”

“It's about time.” Gracie stood up.

“What about me, Johanna?” Asher asked, following behind the two of them as they headed down the hall.

“You're not scheduled today. So go home.”

“I'm not going home after coming all the way down here. Besides he said he wanted to give me something. We're allowed to accept gifts, right?”

“Don't get too excited, Asher,” Gracie said, turning around, walking backwards, taunting him. “I think he wants to give you a rock. It's just what you deserve.” She laughed.

“A rock?”

“He's crazy, Asher.”

The Deep Freeze

The minute she opened the door to Room 18 Johanna knew something was wrong. A blast of cold air hit her in the face. It was like stepping into one of those cold storage facilities in Watsonville.

“Hey, what’s going on in here?” she yelled, running over to check the thermostat.

The mayor lay motionless, his paper-thin skin frozen on his face like a skeletal mask, his labored breath loud and raspy.

“Somebody turned the air conditioning on full blast,” Johanna grumbled, violently moving the little arm. “Hurry up, Gracie, go get some help.”

But as Gracie headed toward the door, the mayor stopped her in her tracks. “No, don’t let anybody else in this room,” he shouted out, his voice surprisingly powerful. “Come over here.”

As if stunned by the old man’s sudden outburst, nobody moved. “I said come over here – all of you. I need to talk to you now.” He was on his back, looking up at the ceiling.

They quickly assembled around him like mourners at a wake. Gracie’s heart was thumping away in her chest. She’d never seen anybody die before.

“Mayor, what should we do then?” Johanna asked, taking the old man’s icy hand in hers.

The mayor spoke very slowly without looking at them. “He’s trying to force me to leave. It nearly got me.”

“What nearly got you?”

“The tulpa, but I absorbed it for now.” He attempted to smile, his demeanor taking on the look of a grinning corpse. With agonizing effort, he motioned toward the tiny nightstand next to his bed. “In... the... drawer... there...”

“Do you have some medicine in here?” Johanna asked, jerking the drawer open.

“The best medicine in the world... get the pouch.”

Johanna held up a colorfully embroidered leather bag. "You mean this?"

The mayor's eyes fluttered. "Hurry, we need to do this before he sends more of them."

"Who?"

"Krause. Now please... Just dump them on the bed."

Johanna loosed the leather thong on the bag, shaking the contents on to the bed. Four beautiful green crystals tumbled out, sparkling magnificently against the white sheets. It was the strangest color of green that she had ever seen, the little oval shaped stones changing hue, vibrating as if alive. Unable to tear her eyes away from the mysterious objects, Johanna stood staring at what looked like some kind of script engraved in the glassy surface.

"This growing old is horrible," the old man wheezed, "I hope I never have to do it again." He paused, taking a deep breath, exhausted by the simple act of speaking. Then, with great effort, he lifted his arm as if reaching for the ceiling above him and whispered, "Selah". In a bewildering flash of movement, one of the stones shot from the sheet, through the air, right up into the old man's hand.

Asher leaned forward, staring at the other three stones. He slowly reached toward them and another one jumped off the sheet, forcing him to catch it. Looking down at the gem in his palm, he whispered breathlessly: "What are these, magnets of some sort?"

The old man answered him in a hoarse whisper. "Mani stones."

"Mani stones? What's a mani stone?"

"Now take the other two. It mustn't get hold of these."

"It?" Asher repeated the word, looking at Johanna and raising his eyebrows.

Johanna shook her head. "There's no way we're taking any of your personal belongings, mayor Diamond. It's against the rules. Give it back to him, Asher."

Feeling sorry for the old man, Gracie whispered, "He's only trying to be generous, Johanna, lighten up a little." She reached out, meaning to pick up one of the stones, but as she did so one of them flew into her hand. It was extraordinarily light, almost weightless, and surprisingly warm to the touch. She sensed that it was pulsing, like a tiny beating heart encased in glass.

"Take yours, Johanna," Asher said solemnly.

"This isn't right," she said in a faltering voice, slowly shaking her head.

"Just take it," Asher repeated, pushing her hand toward the bed.

"Go ahead," Gracie whispered. "We'll return them later."

And then, to Johanna's amazement, the last one floated into the air, insistently bumping against her hand until she opened it, the stone popping into her palm like a bird settling into its nest.

Meanwhile, the mayor had begun chanting, or praying in a foreign language, his lips moving very rapidly. As he continued doing this, his body relaxed, settling into the bed, appearing to be letting go of a heavy weight. After several moments, he opened his eyes, now clear and bright, the eyes of a younger, healthier person, in the face of an old man. "Sorry, but I need to get out of this decaying heap," he whispered apologetically. "No matter what happens, keep those stones safe. Understand?"

The room was absolutely still, only the old man's labored breathing filling the silence, his efforts reminiscent of a fish out of water, desperately attempting to gulp in the air around it. "P-pull the sheet over my head," he gasped. "You don't want to see this."

Johanna gently touched the top of his head. "I'm afraid you..."

"Please," the mayor breathed out, his lips barely moving. "Just lift it over my head."

Johanna reluctantly lifted the sheet, covering the old man's silent, impassive face.

The moment she did this, the door burst open with Betty the Bitch standing on the threshold. "Alright, it's nearly twelve o'clock..." she stopped as soon as she saw them gathered around the bed. Putting her hand to her mouth, she gasped, "My God! What's going on in here?" She ran toward them. "This place is like a refrigerator." Looking at the bed, she roared, "Is he dead?"

No response.

"Get away from him right now!" She shooed the three of them away from the bed, pressing the red call button dangling from the headboard, and continuing to rant. "You don't just cover them up if they die."

Within moments, the doctor rushed into the room. "What happened?" she asked, running toward the old man's bed.

"They just went and covered him up, Dr. Patel. They probably froze him to death." Betty glowered at Gracie. "I knew it when you came running in that front door. Nothing but trouble, I said to myself, and now look what you've done."

"We didn't do anything," Gracie yelled at her.

"Is this some kind of joke?" The doctor stood next to the mayor's empty bed with the sheet raised, the sheet being rigid, like a plastic mold, a mold with the distinct outline of the mayor's body still visible. "Where is he? And what did you do to this sheet?"

Johanna stammered, "B-but he was here just a second ago, we..."

"Don't be ridiculous!" the doctor shouted. "Betty, close the door and see if you can get the heat back on." Dr Patel took out her cell phone. "Bill? I want you to lock down until further notice... Yes, lock it down... we have a missing patient. You know what Mayor Diamond looks

like, don't you? Good... you need to find him right away. He might be in one of the bathroom stalls. Bring him to room 18." Turning around, she motioned for Gracie and her friends to sit down. "You three have some serious explaining to do."