

*Hardships often prepare ordinary
people for an extraordinary destiny...*
Narnia

Sometimes the end is really the beginning...

I'm walking home with a small wooden box in my arms, asking myself what would happen if I shared it with the world? I know things would change forever, but how? It could bring us all together, or just as easily tear the world apart. And it would be because of me, whatever did happen.

A car honks and it startles me. I turn to see Mrs. Miller. She's the old snoop who lives down the street. I realize I'm dead-stop-standing in the middle of the road. I step aside. She pulls up next to me. I tuck the box under one arm and give a little wave to her, hoping it's enough and she won't stop. I don't have time for this.

But she stops anyway and rolls down her window. Always nosey. "Melanie, sweetheart, are you all right? You looked like a statue standing there."

"Yes, Mrs. Miller. I've just been thinking about a bunch of stuff, that's all." I smile at her. "I'm fine."

"Good. And your mother, is *she* fine, also? I hear she's not doing well and I don't see her anymore."

My mother had become an alcoholic, and pretty much a recluse, but it wasn't exactly something I needed to discuss with the always prying Mrs. Miller. I pasted an even broader and hopefully reassuring smile on my face, stretching it out way beyond the limits of how I felt.

"Yes, she's fine. Thank you for asking."

She nodded, maybe believing me, maybe not. I knew she wasn't done though, because she hadn't given her always sound advice yet. Something I rarely managed to avoid with her.

She looked me over. "Melanie. How can you wear these kinds of things, as pretty as you are? You really must outgrow sleeveless t-shirts and, well, whatever those things are on your feet."

I looked down. "Converse high-tops," I told her. "They're what I always wear."

"Yes, well." She smacked her overly-red, wrinkled lips. "You're what, around fifteen now, isn't that right?"

"You are spot-on, Mrs. Miller."

She must have caught the intended sarcasm in my voice, because she gave me the hairy eyeball and smacked her lips again. "I don't understand this tomboy thing of yours, Melanie. Young ladies just don't dress like that. Like a *boy*. Especially someone as pretty as you."

She seemed to be stuck on the 'pretty as you are' thing, as if that was everything that mattered in the world—a woman's beauty.

I tried not to throw darts as I stared back at her. "Duly noted, Mrs. Miller. Always sound advice."

She nodded again, apparently content in redirecting my lifestyle, rolled up her window, and continued along the road to pull into her driveway a couple of houses down. I watched her go, concentrating on trying to get my blood to ebb from a hard boil down to a slow simmer. I know I shouldn't let her push my buttons like that, but it's something she has done ever since I moved here last year.

I needed to cool down and refocus. Then I giggled a little, picturing the look on her face had I shown her what's in this box. I mean, I'm still trying to wrap my head around it myself.

Here's the deal: I have proof intelligent life exists on another planet.

I know, *right?*

But, it's true. I'm talking about real—out of this world, hold it in your hands, see it, touch it, feel it—proof. I look down at this innocent wooden box my father made for me, and know there is an entire universe of discovery within it. *How do I deal with that?*

And it hits me; I'm not ready to take on the tidal wave of responsibility that would come my way by sharing this stuff with the world.

I have no idea if Frankie has been thinking the same things or not. He's my boyfriend. We just spent over an hour in his room looking at this stuff—debris from a crashed alien spaceship. Yeah, I still can't believe it myself. Pieces from a *real* alien spaceship.

I'm about halfway home and look up at the blue sky expecting to see a UFO, you know, in case they want this stuff back. But the sky is clear as a bell, not even a saucer-shaped cloud. No ball lightning, swamp gas, or weather balloons, which by-the-way, has been Blue Book's explanation for *every* UFO sighting. But I'm holding stuff from an alien spaceship right in my hands. I feel like I'm in a *Twilight Zone* episode or something. One where you're on a train riding through the countryside, everything in its normal and proper place, then the train suddenly jumps the tracks and heads down a different, unknown path. You look back at the last glint of light from those familiar rails and know nothing will ever be the same.

The closer I get to home, the more I realize my train *has* jumped the tracks. Things won't ever be the same. *How could they be?* But nothing has really been the same since Dad died. Mom couldn't handle it and has pretty much gone off the deep end. Maybe I have, too.

It all started twenty years ago when Dad snuck this material away from a spaceship that crashed near Roswell, New Mexico back in 1947. He managed to keep it secret all this time, but a little over a year ago our government found out he had it and word leaked out.

Not long after that he was dead.

Mom and I thought it was a car accident, but he really died at the hands of a Russian agent who wanted the alien material. The Soviet Union knew our government had the spaceship and weren't about to get left behind in our technological dust, so went after my dad's stuff.

But he died rather than give it up to them. That's how important it was to him...and now to me. They tortured him and faked the accident to cover it up, running his car off a hillside to smash in a big jumble of burning metal at the bottom of a ravine. I try not to dwell on what happened, but it never leaves my mind for long. How could it?

Today, with the help of my friends, I found the debris in my dad's backpack buried under the back deck of my old house, where he had kept it hidden all this time. We almost didn't make it. The Russian agent who had killed my dad kidnapped us. But we got away and he was captured.

When I got home, I decided to switch the debris over to this box so I could take it to Frankie's where we planned to check it out. That's when I found a letter from my dad in the backpack. Holding that letter was suddenly like having him here with me again. We were so close, and had

been ever since he took me to my first baseball game where I fell in love with the sights and sounds and hot dogs.

After a while I told him I didn't want to just watch though, I wanted to play. And not only that, I wanted to pitch. I think at first he thought it might just be a fad; a quick wish and then I'd move on to something else. But it wasn't. He saw it in how hard I studied the games at the park and on television when we watched together. I soon learned to call out the pitch even before he had it figured out.

He could see it in my eyes and he knew. When I got older he bought me a baseball mitt, and in the early evenings before dusk, just as the sun settled low, when no one else would be around and dew had started to settle on the grass, he would take me to a ball field next to our house where he taught me how to pitch. He knew pitching because he had played in college. His eyes would light up as he taught me the stance and how to hold the ball. He told me I was a natural. Eventually he showed me how to throw a really mean curveball, which wasn't easy. I could tell Dad loved it.

One night, after it got too dark to throw anymore, we settled on the grass next to each other, just taking in the quiet.

We were in our own thoughts when Dad suddenly said, "You know who Sandy Koufax is, right?"

I looked over at him. He had a huge smile on his face and a sparkle to his eyes. "Sure. One of the best pitchers ever. Plays for the Dodgers, and a lefty."

"Just like you." He put his arm around me and pulled me into his side. He studied the infield and then looked down at me. "I think you can throw just as good a curveball as Koufax."

That was about the best thing anyone could have said to me. I wrapped my arms round him and gave him the biggest hug ever—a hug I wanted to last forever, and can still feel now.

In 1963 the Dodgers made it to the World Series and Koufax helped sweep the Yankees. Dad and I were glued to the television the whole time and celebrated the win by going to the local A&W drive-in for huge root beer floats. He died not long after that. Then I thought about last year when the Dodgers won the Series again. I didn't watch. How could I? Not without Dad.

I looked down at the box in my hands and studied the lid. I helped to make it a little, but not much. I was only eight at the time. It was right around when he gave me the baseball glove. I remember being in the garage, at the workbench, standing on a stool so I could help. He handed me a brush and guided my hand over the lid to paint a sweeping flower petal across the top of it. Together, we painted flower patterns on the lid and the sides. I can still remember the vibrant, tangy smell of the paint.

Now, looking down at the box in my arms, it made me miss him all that much more.

I came out of my thoughts to find myself staring at my front door. But I wouldn't be going inside. Not yet. I needed to do something first. I headed into the woods, thinking back to just a little over an hour ago, when I first walked into Frankie's room and dumped this debris out on his desk...

I opened the sliding glass door in Frankie's carport. His bedroom sat just on the other side of a small rec-room. The door to his room was partially open. He must have heard me because he peaked out and then opened it for me.

Beanie stood next to him, the third part of our little triangle which made up The Three Musketeers. That's what we called ourselves after we saw the movie at the Lake Theater. All for one and one for all.

Beanie looked at the box in my hands. "What's that and where's the backpack?"

I walked into the bedroom and Frankie closed the door behind me.

"I didn't think it would be a good idea to carry Dad's backpack down the street, so I put everything in here."

Frankie pointed to his desk. He had already turned on a gooseneck lamp. I put the box under it and the lamp cast a circle of light on the box, highlighting it in the dark of the room. The only other light filtered in from a small window high on the far wall.

Frankie looked at me. I must have had some sort of funny expression because he turned me to face him and studied me for a moment. "Hey, are you okay?"

I didn't want to make eye contact, so I stared down at the box. I worried he might read my thoughts—my dad's letter still affecting me. But I couldn't get myself to share it with Frankie and Beanie right now. It was too personal, so I simply said, "Yeah, why?"

He pulled my chin up so he could see my eyes. "I don't know, I guess you just look a little upset or something."

I put on a good poker face. "You must be imagining things. I'm fine."

He shrugged. "If you say so," and looked at the wooden box. It was painted just like the box Frankie had seen my dad's backpack hidden in. "Your dad made this one too?"

I traced my fingers across the flower pattern on the lid, the raised edges of the paint strokes just barely perceptible. "Yeah, he wanted me to have one for my room. It's a hope box."

"Well, I *hope* we can look at the debris now," Beanie said. He put a 45 on the record player and set the needle on it. The song "Cool Jerk" came across the speaker.

"Not again, Beanie! How often do we need to hear that song?" I asked.

"Hey, it hit number seven on Billboard and is ranked as one of the top '66 songs. All the with-it stations have it in first rotation and are spinning it like crazy. It's popular, and besides, I like it. I'm not playing it any more than they are."

I frowned at him, opened the box and carefully tilted it over so the debris slid out onto the desk. There wasn't much of it. My dad could only take what he could fit in the satchel he had with him when he was at the crash site. But what I saw as I switched it over looked pretty amazing. I put the box on the floor and sat in the chair. Beanie and Frankie scooted in to kneel on either side of me.

"Where's the gadget Tom told us about?" Frankie asked.

"It wasn't in the pack. I've been trying to figure out why. At first, I was thinking Dad might have been worried about putting it outside in the buried box. You know, because it might take a long time to be found and he didn't want it exposed to the elements."

"That makes sense," Frankie said.

"Yeah, but then I thought, he may also have wanted it in a really safe place, just in case. Remember when Tom told us my dad didn't want this to fall into the wrong hands? Maybe that's why it's not here."

Tom was my dad's friend. He helped Dad sneak the crash debris out of the Roswell site back in 1947. They had kept it a secret ever since. He had also been the one to save us from the Russian agent.

"Oh, that makes even more sense," he agreed.

"Either way," Beanie said, "that's a real bummer. I *so* wanted to see that thing."

“There’s nothing we can do about it now,” Frankie said. “Let’s check out what *is* here.”

There were small bits and pieces of debris from the spaceship: some foil-like material in various shapes and sizes; a couple of struts which looked like little I-beams with squiggles of some sort on them; a few strands of quartz-like material; a couple of oval pieces of clear, flexible plastic-looking stuff; and a bunch of little flat rectangle things that had very small metallic lines on them.

I picked up some of the foil material and held it out in the palm of my hand. When Frankie and I were going through my dad’s boxes of stuff this morning looking for clues, I remembered this trick my dad had shown me. I was only about seven at the time and had completely forgotten about it until earlier today. “Beanie, I want to show you something.”

“Okay.”

“See how smooth it is and not a wrinkle on it? Put out your hand.” He did. I laid the foil on his palm. “Now crumple it up and drop it onto the desk.” He wadded it up, making a tight fist, and then dropped it on the desk. It sat for a second in a crumpled wad and then slowly unfolded, flowing back into its original form without a wrinkle showing.

I looked over to Frankie. “See, just like I remembered.”

“Wow, that’s really neat!” Beanie said.

Frankie picked up the biggest piece. It was paper thin and very light. He tried to tear it, but it was impossible. He took a pair of scissors out of his desk and tried to cut it, putting as much force on the scissor handles as he could. The blades just slid back off the edge. There wasn’t even a scratch on the foil. “This stuff is really strong.”

“This is way beyond any metal I’ve ever seen,” I added, “if that’s what it even is.”

Beanie put down his foil and went over to the record player. In just a few seconds “California Dreaming” by The Mommas and the Pappas filled the room.

He came back to the desk and knelt next to me again. “I need to concentrate and I can’t do it without a little background music.” He picked up one of the quartz-like filament strands. At one end, there was a thicker tube a little bigger than a piece of cooked spaghetti. About halfway to the other end, the tube split into a dozen tiny strands. “Look at this tubing. See how flexible it is?” He twisted and turned the tubing into different shapes. He looked at the large end. “This isn’t a tube at all. It’s solid, and looks like glass. He moved it around under the light from the gooseneck lamp to see it better. When he pointed the large end to the light bulb, a pattern of different colored dots appeared on the desk’s surface.

Frankie tapped me on the shoulder. “Did you see that?”

I looked up at Beanie. “Do that again. Point the big end at the light.”

Beanie held it near the bulb. The dozen small ends all glowed, but each was a different color.

“See that,” I said, “how the light is broken out into different colors for each small strand?” I grabbed one and looked into the end. I squinted at the bright blue light coming from it.

Frankie looked over at me. “Mel, remember what Major Burnham said? He thinks it was used to transmit information. It could replace wires. Imagine what that would mean. I can see how this stuff is wanted by all those countries.”

“Ya think?” Beanie kidded.

Major Burnham was with the Air Force and had been trying to get this debris back ever since he found out my dad had taken it from the Roswell crash twenty years ago. He was desperate to get it so the Air Force could keep their cover-up. I figured out he was also the one who caused the leak that killed my dad. He told us about reverse engineering this stuff while interrogating us

at the police station. He didn't want it to fall into the wrong hands. My attitude. His were the wrong hands.

Frankie picked up the strut from the desk. "Look at these markings. They look like characters of some sort."

I leaned against him to get a better look. "They're like hieroglyphics."

"Like what?" Beanie asked.

"Hieroglyphics...symbols that represent words or meanings." I took the strut from Frankie so I could look at the symbols better. It was super lightweight. "Dad studied them as part of his work on ancient civilizations." I examined the markings. When I moved the strut around, the writing changed color slightly under the lamplight, going through different shades of purple. I looked up at Beanie and Frankie. "I think we are looking at alien writing."

We all stared at the markings along the inside of the I-beam.

"What do you think it says?" Frankie asked.

"Take me to your leader," Beanie said in a robot-like voice.

Frankie reached across me and hit him on the shoulder.

I ignored them. "Do you guys realize we are looking at a written language from another world? Gives me goosebumps just thinking about it. There actually is intelligent life out there."

"Why don't they just come forward?" Frankie asked. "You know, land on the White House lawn or something."

"Oh, I'm sure that would go over big," Beanie said. "We'd probably just blow them out of the air before they even got close."

I had already given this some thought because of my dad's letter. He didn't think we could deal with such a mind-blowing event. "Beanie's right. I bet they don't think we're ready yet. Mankind wouldn't be able to handle it." I paused for a moment. "Maybe someday we will."

Beanie picked up the small, rectangular wafer from the debris pile. "So, what's this?" He looked at it under the light, studying it. The wafer was really thin and made from some sort of plastic-looking material. He turned it over in his hand. Both sides had very small metallic-looking lines on their surfaces in intricate patterns. The lines originated at different points on the wafer, and then spread out parallel to each other until they ended at other points where more lines came in to meet them. One of the edges had a thin slot along it, like it could be plugged into something.

"What do you think it is?" Frankie asked.

"No idea," I answered. "It looks like some sort of component from the ship, maybe used to help run it."

I picked up a piece of the clear looking plastic material and studied it, moving it around to look at it from different angles. It was really flexible and shaped in an oval. I held it up to my eye and looked around the room. Even though the lamp shined on the desk, the rest of the room was pretty dark. "Guys, you have to check this out. Grab a piece of this." When they each had a piece of the material, I reached over and turned out the lamp. Now, it was pitch black, with only a trace of light filtering in from the small window high on the wall in the back of the bedroom. "Can you see anything?" I asked.

"Just barely," Frankie said.

"Now hold it up to your eye like you saw me do."

They did and I heard their oohs and ahhs, because they could suddenly see the whole room. Not like daylight, but more like seeing things at the first light of dawn. I looked through mine

again and could easily make out shapes, but couldn't see small details. And everything had an orangish tint to it.

"Wow, that's really cool!" Beanie said. He had moved across the room and was now looking back at us. "I can see you guys when I look through this, but when I take it away, I can't see you at all."

"How do you think it works?" Frankie asked.

"It must somehow collect whatever light is in the room and enhance it," I said, "but how it does that, who knows."

Frankie turned the gooseneck lamp on again. "Imagine what our military could do with this ability if they could figure out how to make it work."

"No wonder they want to get this debris," I added.

"And the Russians," Beanie said. "I'm sure what this stuff can do has leaked out to them, just like everything else. No wonder they would be willing to kill us for it."

We studied the debris a while longer, inspecting each piece and discussing what it might do. We all agreed the debris was much more advanced than anything we had ever seen.

Frankie looked at the clock. "Wow, we've been playing with this stuff for over an hour."

I didn't even realize it had been so long. I stood and grabbed the box from the floor, knowing I'd be in big trouble when I got home. "I'd better put it away. Mom almost didn't let me come over so I have to get back."

I walked into the woods and buried the box in a spot behind my house where I would be the only one who could find it. Now I stood at the bottom of my driveway waiting for the boys. Before I left, I cut a deal with Frankie and Beanie. I would hide the debris and they wouldn't know where. Frankie battled with me over my plan. He didn't like it, but it didn't matter. I had made my mind up. A big part of why could still be seen in the trickle of dried blood on his neck from earlier today when the Russian agent had held a knife to it. We barely escaped with our lives, and I wasn't going to put Frankie and Beanie in a situation like that again. I told them to give me fifteen minutes and then meet me in my driveway.

I knew my mom would be pissed when I walked in the door. I thought it would go better if they were with me. I'd been gone all day and she didn't know where, and then I turned right around and left again, telling her I needed to take something over to Frankie.

"Drop it off and come right back," she had told me when I left. I got this funny feeling I shouldn't have left, a premonition kind of thing, but I did anyway and had been gone way too long. But we needed to check this stuff out as soon as we could, thus the rendezvous at Frankie's.

Beanie and Frankie rounded the corner of the hedge. Frankie gave me a look. "Fifteen minutes, huh?"

I smiled. "Well, it didn't take that long after all."

We walked up the driveway to the front door. I opened it and turned to them. "You guys wait in the living room while I check in with my mom."

They walked in and Frankie was suddenly knocked to the ground with Beanie forcibly thrown on top of him. I raced to them sprawled across the floor, not understanding what had happened. Frankie put his hand to the back of his head, then took it away. A smudge of blood covered his fingers. "Someone hit me."

I turned and screamed as the front door slammed shut. It was Mike, the Russian agent we had left tied up in a horse stall a few hours ago; the same one who had held the knife to Frankie's throat. The police were supposed to have picked him up. Obviously, that never happened. Dried blood ran across his face in grotesque, dark red lines. He gave me a repulsive grin and pointed his gun at me, a deadly silencer attached to the barrel. "Nice move on the keys, but still not smart enough to check the car for weapons."

He had used a knife when he captured us. We never thought to look for a gun. A gun? My mom! "Oh, my God, my mom." I jumped to my feet and confronted Mike. "Where's my mom?"

"In the kitchen, all nicely trussed up on a chair. She's been very well-mannered while waiting for you. Pretty much let me have the run of the place."

I raced into the kitchen to find Mom bound to a chair by the breakfast table, her hands tied together behind its back and her ankles to the legs. A rag was firmly knotted around her mouth, saturated with her saliva. Her eyes bulged at the sight of me. She tried to talk through the rag.

I fell to my knees by the chair and wrapped my arms around her. "Mom, Mom! Are you alright? Has he hurt you?"

Mom shook her head, her eyes wide with terror. She was worried about me, scared about what Mike would do. How long had she been like this? It must have been a while. Her eyes were bloodshot and she seemed really disoriented. It must have been most of the time I was at Frankie's. My heart dropped at the thought.

She looked over my shoulder to the archway between the kitchen and living room. I followed her eyes to see Mike leaning against the side of the arch, slowly patting the gun against his thigh.

I jumped up, ran over to him and screamed, "Untie her!" I beat against his chest.

He pushed me back and I slammed into the breakfast table.

"No, I don't think so. She's my insurance that you will do exactly what I say."

The boys had followed me. They helped me up from where I had landed on the floor.

Mike motioned to all of us with the gun. "Get back in the living room. I need to keep an eye on the street."

"What about my mom?"

"She'll be fine right where she is." He smiled. "Like I said...insurance."

He stepped out of the archway and poked Frankie with the barrel of the gun. "Move."

We backed into the living room. He gestured for us to sit on the couch and walked to the far side of the room. I couldn't believe I had once thought he was our friend. He told us he was a new teacher at our high school. He faked us out pretty good. I even called him to come get us when we were trapped earlier today and needed a ride. The whole time he was a Russian spy after the debris.

I sat on the couch and Frankie did the same. He reached back to touch his head. When he took his fingers away, I could see blood on them. I put my hand on the spot and felt a big lump.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered. "He smacked me pretty good when I walked in."

Beanie sat down on the other side of me.

Mike stood by the row of windows and gave the street a quick sweep with his eyes. "So, who hit me and should I be expecting a visit from him again?"

"No," Frankie answered, "he's gone."

He was talking about Tom, my dad's friend. We were trapped in a horse stall at the Hunt Club when Tom saved us. Mike had kidnapped us, but Tom followed us there. We almost bought it

right there and then but Tom snuck up behind Mike and knocked him out with a shovel. He saved us, or at least we thought he had.

Mike walked over to Frankie. He slapped him across the side of his face with the back of his hand, grabbed his hair, jerked his head back and shoved the barrel of the gun into the cavity of his throat.

Frankie winced from the pain. He leaned down into Frankie's face and shouted, "I'm not fooling around here. Have you got that?" He looked over to me. "Is he telling the truth?"

I was too shocked to answer right away, so he slapped Frankie again.

He let go of him and pointed the gun at me. "You want me to torture your mother instead? Is that what it will take?"

"It's true," I pleaded. I could feel tears forming in my eyes. "Please don't hurt my mom."

"Where is the backpack? I've searched the house, and it's not here."

"Hidden," Frankie quickly answered. He wanted to draw Mike's attention away from me.

Mike shifted over to Frankie again and shoved him back against the couch. He pressed his hand into Frankie's chest and leaned into him. Frankie gasped for a breath. Mike pointed the gun at Frankie's face. "Then get it."

I had to distract Mike. "He doesn't know where it is! I'm the only one who does."

He turned to me, but kept the gun at Frankie's head. "Then you go get it."

Beanie jumped up from the couch in defiance. "We're not letting Russia get this stuff. She isn't going to turn it over to you!"

Mike stood and pointed the gun at Beanie. "We have a volunteer to be the first victim." He lowered the barrel to Beanie's leg and fired.

I screamed.

Beanie stared in shock at the hole in his pant leg, and then slumped to the floor by the couch. "Ahgggg...he shot me. He shot me!"

Frankie jumped to his side and tore the fabric open. I raced around to the other side to see if I could help. The bullet hit Beanie just above the knee. Red oozed from the hole in his pant leg. Blood pumped from the wound. Frankie felt around to the back of Beanie's leg to find where the bullet had come out. He pressed his hands over the wounds, trying to stop the bleeding. I could see blood seeping between his fingers.

Beanie cringed from the pain. He tried to sit up so he could see the wound. "Am I going to die?" He was already turning white.

I pushed him back down. "Lie down, Beanie. Try to stay calm."

Beanie's eyes rolled back under their lids.

I glared at Mike. "Why'd you shoot him? He doesn't know where the debris is!"

I watched Mike quickly walk over to the windows, looking to see if anyone could have heard the shot or my scream. Satisfied he was safe, he turned back to us. "Because I'm tired that you think this is a game. I'm not into killing kids, but I will if I have to. I want that material from the spaceship and I don't have time for a discussion about it. Your friend has about twenty minutes before he bleeds to death. Does that help in your decision? If not, your mother will be next. We can watch the two of them die together...slowly."

"No! I'll go get it." I looked over at Frankie. "Can you stop the bleeding?"

"I'm trying," he whispered, maybe hoping Beanie wouldn't hear, "but I think he's right. You'd better hurry."

I ran out the front door, around the corner of the house, and stopped. I had to think, and I didn't have much time. What do I do? And then it came to me. It was a big gamble, but I had to take it.

A few minutes later I raced back to the house. I could see Mike at the window watching for my return. I burst through the door, breathing heavily. I stood there for a moment, trying to catch my breath.

Beanie raised his head and then lowered it again. "Frankie, I'm cold."

"Just take it easy, Beanie. Mel is back with the debris. We'll get an ambulance. You're going to be all right." Frankie looked at me. It was obvious he couldn't stop the bleeding, no matter how hard he tried. I doubted what he just told Beanie was true.

Then Frankie saw what I held and gave me a puzzled look. I had the backpack, not the wooden box with the debris. I ignored him. I didn't want Mike to know something was up. I backed up against the half wall of the dining area at the farthest end of the room from Mike. I leaned against it, and held the backpack out with my right hand, my left behind me. "We give you this and you're gone, right? You won't hurt anyone else?"

"That's right. Once you give me the pack, I have no reason to. Bring it here."

"I'm not coming anywhere near you." I tossed the pack across the room to the far wall.

Frankie watched it land and then turned to me.

I shifted my stance, watching Mike.

Frankie could see my hand behind my back. He knew I was a really good lefthanded pitcher. He had witnessed my pitching enough to know my pitching stance.

Mike kept the gun pointed at me while he walked over to the pack. He kneeled to get it, his focus never leaving me.

Frankie figured out what I was about to do. He looked at me, then back at Mike. He knew he needed to distract Mike, to get him to look away from me.

"Hey batter, batter, batter, hey batter," Frankie called.

Mike looked in his direction. It was all I needed.

He quickly figured something was up and raised the gun at me—just as the rock clobbered him between the eyes. It was a good pitch, my fastball, with a solid release. It knocked Mike backward.

"Nice throw, Mel!" Frankie shouted. It was obvious he couldn't believe I took the chance, but it worked.

I jumped on Mike, rage overtaking me.

"Get his gun!" Frankie called.

I slid it to him and screamed at Mike, hitting him over and over again.

Frankie couldn't leave Beanie. He yelled, "Stop, Mel! You've got to tie him up. Get something to tie him up."

I couldn't stop, though. I let my fists fly, one after the other—big roundhouses pounding at his face.

The front door burst open and three men in police uniforms raced into the room, guns drawn. They pulled me off of Mike. One of them shouted, "We have control, Sir."

Major Burnham walked into the room. "Get the medics in here."

One of the policemen called out on a radio.

I used the distraction to pick up the pack and back into the hallway, where I dropped it around the corner out of sight.

But who were these policemen? Not our local officers, that's for sure. I didn't recognize any of them. Then I figured out they were Major Burnham's men dressed-up like police officers.

Major Burnham looked over at Mike moaning on the floor and just now coming to his senses. "Secure that man and get him out of here."

They handcuffed Mike and dragged him to his feet. A trickle of blood ran down the side of his nose from a spot in the middle of his forehead. His cheeks were puffy and red from my punches. He glared back at me as they took him out the door.

The major leaned down to study Beanie's wounds and then checked his eyes. He patted Frankie on the back. "He'll make it."

I could see Frankie cringe at his touch.

The medics hurried into the room. Frankie moved aside to let them work on Beanie's wounds. They took his vital signs.

I grabbed the soldier still there and pulled him toward the kitchen. "Help me. My mom is tied up in here." He took a knife from his belt, cut her loose, and then helped me get her to the living room and onto the couch. Her eyes were glazed over and had no focus. She was obviously in shock. I brushed the hair from her face.

The medics brought in a gurney and put Beanie on it. One of them prepared an IV. Frankie kneeled next to Beanie when they were done. I scooted in close to his side. Beanie's eyes were closed, and it looked like he might be unconscious.

I leaned into Frankie. "Is he going to be all right?"

I could see the deep concern on his face. "I sure hope so."

The paramedic said, "We've stabilized him and stopped the bleeding. At this point I think he has a pretty good chance, but we have to get him to the hospital. He's lost a lot of blood."

I leaned down and gave Beanie a kiss on the forehead. He opened his eyes a little.

"See you soon, cannonball," I said and gave him the biggest smile I could muster.

Frankie wiped his bloody hand on his shirt, grabbed Beanie's and squeezed it. "Hang in there, Beanie. We wouldn't be the Musketeers without you."

We stood aside as the medics lifted him up and carried him out.

I looked at the major. "How did you get an ambulance here so fast?"

The major signaled for the last soldier to leave. "That will be all." He watched him go and then studied me. "We've been watching your place ever since you moved in. I decided to have it bugged, and it looks like it paid off in dividends."

Frankie and I shared surprised looks. Tom had been right. He told us the government might have the phones tapped and the place bugged.

The major continued, "When we got the anonymous call about a man tied up at the Hunt Club, we investigated. He was gone, but we found his car and based on what we discovered in it, knew he was the Soviet agent we've been looking for."

He leaned in so his face was close to ours. "We had a good idea how he came to be that way, considering the proximity to your house, so we figured he would come here." He stood back and looked at me as if he might be able to find an answer in my eyes. My smug look revealed nothing. I despised this man. I would never see my dad again because of him. He huffed and walked over to the windows to look outside. "That proved to be the case, so we set up our surveillance operation."

"That doesn't explain the ambulance," I pointed out. "You knew Beanie was shot. You let him bleed while you sat outside."

He turned to face us. “We knew the agent was in here. We needed a position of advantage to take him down without endangering all of you.”

“He shot Beanie! You don’t think that was *enough* danger to act on?” I burned with the thought that just came to me. “You were waiting until I got the backpack. That’s what you were doing. You knew Mike would force me to get it.”

The major’s eyes shifted to divert my question. He twitched slightly before regaining his composure. “We needed to recover that pack. You know how important it is to our government.”

Frankie stepped forward. “Important enough to let our friend die?”

“I had an ambulance waiting nearby. As soon as the agent left with the pack, we could take him down and bring in the ambulance.”

I walked to the hall and grabbed the backpack. I held it out in front of me. “This what you want?” I threw it at him. He dodged sideways, managing to catch it before it hit him. “Here, take it if it’s so important to you.”

Frankie looked at me. “Mel, what are you doing?”

“All it’s ever done is bring harm to my family and friends. I want this over with.”

The major patted the backpack, satisfied in his win. “Now it will be.” He set the pack on the table under the windows and opened it, looking inside. His expression changed from satisfaction to puzzlement. “What’s this?” He pulled out pieces of old rubber material, balsawood sticks and aluminum-looking foil. It certainly wasn’t the material we had studied in Frankie’s basement.

I looked at him, placing a blank expression on my face. “It’s the debris you wanted.”

He gave me a cold stare. “These are nothing but fragments from an old weather balloon.”

I let my look change to one of disbelief. “Really? We’ve never seen one before, or debris from a spaceship for that matter, so how would we know the difference?” I went over and sat down next to my mom and held her hand. “Anyway, that’s what was in the pack when we found it. I don’t know what else you want. I guess if a weather balloon could fool your trained intelligence officer back in Roswell, then it could fool us.”

“Where is the real material?”

“You think I switched it? What you have in your hands is what we found. It’s not like I ran down to the department store and picked up an old weather balloon or something just to fool you?” I looked at my mom and stroked her hair. It made me mad that the major had been a part of making her this way. I turned back to him. “You know, maybe your informant was wrong about my dad having debris from the spaceship, especially after so many years. His information was probably about as reliable as the Air Force’s ability to keep a secret.”

Major Burnham shoved the pieces back in the pack and threw it on the couch next to me. “This isn’t over, Miss Simpson. We’re going to keep an eye on you.” He walked to the door.

“Fine, but it’ll be a big waste of time.” I stomped over and opened the door for the major. “Do us a favor. Don’t forget to tell your *intelligence* center what was in the pack. That way it will leak out and we won’t be bothered by spies anymore. It’s the least you should do, considering what you’ve already done to my family.”

The major stiffened at my accusation, then walked out. I slammed the door behind him and went back to take care of my mom.

Frankie, Beanie and I stood at the top of the steps leading down to the lake. Beanie had been recovering in the hospital for the last week. We’d visited him several times but there were always parents around, so this would be the first time we could really talk.

A cast covered Beanie's leg from above his ankle to his upper thigh. We had to help him down the stairs because he was still figuring out how to use his crutches. I was on one side and Frankie on the other. I looked down to see we had the place all to ourselves. Maybe because it was overcast and the weather wasn't the best. School would be starting soon, and that was no doubt another distraction keeping others from coming down here.

"You're lucky the bullet just grazed the bone and didn't break it," Frankie said.

We reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm supposed to have the cast off in a couple of weeks, but it will be a while before I can go swimming again."

Beanie managed to get to the picnic table on his own and sat down on the bench seat. Frankie took the crutches from him and laid them across the top of the table. I sat next to Beanie, and Frankie plopped down next to me.

I put my arm around Frankie's shoulder, and fingered the medal hanging by a blue ribbon around his neck with my other hand, inspecting it. "I can still see the look on Captain Thornton's face when he presented these medals to us at City Hall."

"Yeah, he seemed to be so happy about it," Beanie added.

We were the only ones who knew what really happened that day at my house. Well, other than Major Burnham and my mom. The major came up with a cockeyed story that a dangerous fugitive from justice had invaded my home and tied my mother up. And we, The Three Musketeers, had captured him and saved her, all with Beanie getting shot in the process.

The major set this up to make us out as town heroes. He wanted the press to think this was one of the FBI's Most Wanted with a big bounty on his head. Which meant we would get a big pile of cash for capturing him. But it was all really just a bribe to keep us quiet. He didn't want anyone to know what really happened. I doubt his allowing a Russian spy to run loose in the community shooting up kids would have helped his career much. But I was fine with that because it would get him out of my life. I'd planned to keep the debris hidden anyway, so no problem there.

Beanie and Frankie insisted that after everything my family had gone through, my mom and I should get most of the reward money. I fought them on this, but lost. Frankie didn't take any money at all. Instead, with a cunning only Frankie could come up with, he worked out a deal with Major Burnham. He pointed out that a really hot Cherry Red '65 Ford Mustang just happened to be sitting around with nowhere to go. Mike wouldn't be needing it anymore since he'd be in jail, and Frankie could give it a really nice home. Sure, he wouldn't be able to drive it for a while, but it looked pretty cool sitting in his driveway.

Still, I insisted Beanie should get some of the money. I finally won out, but we never got the chance to ask him what he would do with it.

Frankie and I talked about the whole thing and decided Major Burnham did all this more out of need for a cover story rather than a guilty conscience. The *Oswego Review* had a big article about it and the mayor set up a huge presentation at City Hall. Lots of people showed up for the ceremony. I guess something like this was a big deal in such a small town. Go figure.

Captain Thornton had no idea what really happened that day. Frankie said he thought what got the captain's goat the most was the fact he didn't get the glory himself for whatever did happen.

Frankie and Beanie's parents were sure proud though. My mom couldn't come. She's hardly been out of her room since this all happened. I probably have to take care of her now. I guess I

should be happy Frankie and Beanie gave us most of the money. I'm just now figuring out we will need it.

I could tell that Beanie's popularity at school would go ballistic though. After all, he's a hero with a gunshot wound? I mean, really? The girls will go crazy. That all became pretty obvious when a huge pack of them showed up at the presentation, every one of them tossing Beanie their googly-eyes and giving him their best poses while he received his medal.

"Okay, you guys," Beanie said, "I've been really out of touch, so fill me in on the whole weather balloon deal."

Frankie and I had already covered this.

"We will," Frankie said, "but only after you tell us what you are going to do with your share of the money."

Beanie unlatched the transistor radio from his belt and tuned it to his favorite station. Herman's Hermits' "Can't You Hear My Heartbeat" came from the speaker. He gave us a big smile. "That's what I'm going to do. Become a DJ or a band manager, or something like that. I'm going to save my money until I find the right groove."

"The right groove," Frankie said. "I guess it's just in your blood." He laughed and looked down at Beanie's leg. "Or at least, what's left of it."

"Okay," Beanie said. "Now give me the details."

I took a deep breath and told him. "When I first got home with the pack, I opened it. I really wanted to do this alone anyway because it was my dad's and there may have been something personal in it. Well, I was right. He left a letter." I pulled it out of my back pocket, unfolded it and read it to Beanie:

"Mel Belle..."

I looked up from the letter. "That's what he called me. Always said I could be the 'Belle of the Ball' if I wanted." I continued.

"Mel Belle,

I guess if you are reading this then I am no longer with you. I know my death will be hard on you and your mother. But I also know you have the strength to help her through it, and that gives me some comfort as I write this letter.

I buried the pack in your toy box because I knew you would be the only one able to figure out the clue to where it was hidden. You have always been a smart, resilient girl, so by now you must know why I died, perhaps even how, and that the reason is in this backpack.

I believe I am being watched. I don't know if it is our government or some other, but in either case, they should not get this material. It wouldn't be good for the United States if our enemies recovered it because the material is such a technological goldmine. On the other hand, our country already has the spaceship, so their only interest would be to quash the last bit of evidence that could expose their cover-up. And no, I don't think it should be released to the public either. Believe it or not, I agree with our government, that we as a civilization are not yet ready for this kind of revelation. One day the time will be right to share with the world what took place near Roswell in 1947. That is why it

is important to keep the evidence, if at all possible. It is the only proof the crash really happened.

If they do think I have some of the spaceship material, these governments and their agents will never stop trying to get it. Not long after the crash, when the cover-up story came out, I went back into the desert to a place where I had seen an old Air Force weather balloon on a previous expedition. At the bottom of this backpack are some of the remnants from that balloon. If things become dangerous for you and your mom, and they think you have the material, give them the pieces from the weather balloon. Let them think this is what I had all along. They may believe it. Hopefully, it will at least throw them off enough so they leave you alone. But I don't want you and your mother in danger. If the weather balloon doesn't work, turn over the material. Nothing is more important than the safety of the two women I love.

Mel Belle, you are a very special girl. Work hard at school. You have amazing physical and intellectual talents. Develop them to their fullest. You will need them when you are grown. There are things yet to be done, and if you are reading this letter, then it seems you will be the only one able to continue what I could not finish.

I know this all sounds very cryptic, but one day, when you are older and wiser, you will understand. Mel Belle, I love you and your mother very much. I miss you both already.

Love,

Dad"

Beanie had this amazing look of awe on his face. "What does he mean? It sounds like some sort of quest. Does it have something to do with the device that's missing?"

I folded the letter and put it back in my pocket. "Frankie and I have been discussing it. We think so. It must be hidden somewhere safe."

"And from what we can figure out from the letter," Frankie added, "he feels she's too young right now to handle whatever it is and whatever needs to be done."

"Wow! I wonder what that is," Beanie said.

"Well, I figure that somehow, when I get older, he has it worked out to get the device to me. And then I will be able to find out what he was doing and what he needs me to do."

"How old do you need to be?" Beanie asked.

A good question. "Well, I don't know. I guess it would be sometime after I get out of college. That's a long ways away, so there's not much I can do about it now."

"There's one other thing I've been wanting to know," Beanie said. "Why did you take the chance with Mike? Your throw could have missed."

"He had already shot you and threatened to kill us," I answered. "I guess I was pretty sure he would finish us off. I just didn't think there was any way he would leave us alive and take the chance that we could notify the police. And even if he had, he would have tied us up so we

couldn't run to the neighbors." I looked over at Beanie. "If he did that, it would have meant a death penalty for you for sure."

We looked out at the water thinking about that, and how close it came to being true.

Frankie gave me a big kiss. "You saved our lives."

"Yeah, and now you are both indebted to me for life. Don't worry, I'll think of lots of ways you guys will be able to make it up to me." I raised my eyebrows and threw them a devious little smile.

"What ever happened with the UFO landing out by Stafford Road?" Beanie asked. "Was it real?"

Frankie and I looked at each other. We had completely forgotten about it.

Frankie finally answered. "We don't know. They couldn't disprove it as a hoax. A UFO actually could have landed there."

I thought about the possibility. Could it have had anything to do with us?

Beanie hummed the theme from *The Twilight Zone*, and then said in his best Rod Serling voice, "You're traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound, but of mind..." He couldn't finish. We all broke up laughing.

When we stopped, Frankie held his hand out in front of me, palm down. I looked over at him and placed my hand on top of his. Beanie did the same.

"Three Musketeers," he said. "All for one..."

We joined in, "...and one for all!"

"So, what do we do now?" Beanie asked. "We have two more weeks until school starts. After all this, it's going to get pretty boring around here."

"No clue," Frankie said. "Maybe just hang, after everything we've been through." He put his arm around me and we leaned back against the table. Then we all fell silent, looking out at the lake, waves dimpling the water, each of us in our own thoughts.

I guess I figured that would be the end of it,
at least until I graduated from college...
but it wasn't.

Eight Months Later

Free Energy

I'm standing outside the classroom for freshman history, staring at the door. I want to go in, but I haven't been able to get my legs to move. I guess I'm a little hesitant. Things didn't go very well yesterday in there.

All semester, history has rarely been an adventure with Mr. Wolcott. He's a giant stuffed shirt. But yesterday was an exception. It got a little heated. Not as much for him as for me. I wanted to do better today, but didn't have high hopes. We would be talking about Marconi and I already knew where this would go if I didn't control myself. A couple of boys pushed by me to get inside and gave me the look for blocking their way. I took a big breath and walked in.

The desks were arranged in a semi-circle facing Mr. Wolcott and a couple of blackboards at the front of the room. Two aisles ran toward the front, separating the desks into three groups. I had to walk down one aisle and halfway up the other to get to my desk. A couple of girls locked eyes on me as I passed by. I think they had a pretty good idea of what might be coming. I ignored them and sat at my desk next to Frankie's. He was scribbling in his notebook, working on some sort of anti-Vietnam war cartoon. It was his thing these days.

He looked up from his drawing. "Hey, Mel. How'd biology go?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure I have human anatomy down, so I didn't really need a refresher. What do these teachers think anyway, we're sixth-graders or something?"

"I know. I bet there are some students here who could teach them a thing or two."

I smiled. "No doubt."

Mr. Wolcott stood at the chalkboard, about to start class. Rumor was he would retire soon, which I totally believed since he looked like he had experienced most of the centuries he taught. His clothing supported the theory with his tweed jacket, sweater vest, and bowtie right out of last century.

If you want to picture his lecture style, think of a fly buzzing around your head you can never swat away, and it keeps droning on and on—sometimes louder, sometimes quieter, sometimes close, sometimes farther away. On and on and on.

Having this class with Frankie turned out to be pretty cool though, because he's helping me get through it. Last month we saw *Plague of the Zombies* at the Lake Theater in one of its Horror-Saturday Film Fests. Looking around the classroom, most of the students wore that same look. If there was a ground zero for zombies, freshman history would be it, and Mr. Wolcott the endemic source.

I usually like history, but this semester covered early twentieth-century inventions and inventors—and boy, can history get it screwed up. I had to wonder how our history books were so far off from the truth sometimes? Whenever Mr. Wolcott told one of their lies, I could hardly sit still. He had been talking about Thomas Edison, who invented the light bulb, which was right, but also said he brought electricity to every home, which was way wrong. I got into it with Mr. Wolcott yesterday and it turned out to be an idiot move on my part. I mean, who ever wins a

pitched battle with a teacher, right? But one good thing came out of it, because for the first time all semester, Mr. Wolcott showed even the narrowest hint of passion in his work. Thank God, he is human.

So, here's the thing: Nikola Tesla should have received credit for the electricity we use, not Edison. Now I'm sitting here this afternoon, and it's the same with Marconi and the wireless telegraph. I want to let it go, but can already tell I'm not going to.

Frankie must have noticed my tensing up. "Mel," he whispered, "you're looking like you did yesterday. What's the deal?"

I ignored him. I was too focused on Mr. Wolcott standing at the blackboard in front of the class, writing out Marconi's name in big, loopy characters, each letter grating on me. He turned to the class. "Guglielmo Marconi received the Nobel Prize in 1909 for inventing the wireless telegraph."

I couldn't stand it any longer and shot my hand up.

Frankie nudged me. "Mel, probably not a good idea."

I frantically waved my arm, but Mr. Wolcott ignored it.

"His invention eventually revolutionized radio and wireless communication—"

I jumped from my seat. "Sorry, Mr. Wolcott, that's not right. He didn't."

Mr. Wolcott shrugged, set his chalk on the blackboard tray, and turned to me. "What now, Miss Simpson?"

It showed in his voice and on his face. He wasn't happy with me, but I plodded on. "Nicola Tesla was the actual inventor of wireless radio communication."

I felt Frankie looking at me, no doubt trying to figure out what I was up to, but I stayed focused on Mr. Wolcott.

"Not Tesla again, Miss Simpson. We just did battle over this with Edison."

I held my ground. "Facts are facts, even if they are not in our textbooks. The DC electricity Edison developed deteriorated quickly and would barely even work in the big cities. Communities like Lake Oswego would still be using candles and kerosene if we had been stuck with Edison's system. But Tesla developed ways to use alternating current, AC, which could travel miles before needing a boost. And that's why we're not sitting here in the dark today."

"Which has *what* to do with radio technology?" Mr. Wolcott asked.

A few giggles came from the students. I looked around to see everyone waiting for what would happen next. "Well, Marconi studied under Tesla. He used Tesla's ideas, basically stealing them and calling them his own. Even back in 1900 Tesla could see that one day we would be able to speak to people on the other side of the world, and even be able to see them. And he thought we could do this using a device that could fit in our pockets." The giggles grew to loud snickers.

"We will not be getting into this Tesla hyperbole again, Miss Simpson, especially when what you say is quite ridiculous. We will follow the textbooks in this class, which I might add, were written by more accomplished historians than you, and perhaps less susceptible to wildish ideas." Now the snickers became subdued laughter.

Again, I ignored them. "Even the Supreme Court ruled Marconi infringed on Tesla's patents." I reached into my bag, took out my textbook, and tossed it onto my desk. It landed with a loud slap that reverberated off the walls. I wanted to make a statement, but not quite that big of one. It set me back a little, but I recovered and plodded on. "Maybe these old textbooks were written before that happened. We should get new ones."

Everyone broke out laughing. Not what I wanted, but I was way too into this to stop now. I stood my ground. “Tesla also should have gotten the Nobel Prize, not Marconi.”

Mr. Wolcott stared at me for a moment, a frown forming in the area between his big, bushy eyebrows. Maybe I had gone too far, even if everything I said was true. I held my head high, still feeling defiant, but it wasn't quite the same defiance I felt a moment ago. Inside, I knew I shouldn't press it. I had enough going on.

“We are done with this rather tempestuous string-of-thought, Miss Simpson. Now sit down.” He returned to the blackboard.

“No!” I couldn't help it. Maybe it was a case of self-destruction, but I couldn't let it go. I heard murmurs from the classroom.

He turned to glare at me. “What did you say?”

“No,” I said again, but this time a little softer. I shifted my weight as if suddenly on unsteady ground. “Tesla deserves recognition for what he did for us. If we had paid attention to his genius, we would have free energy right now. We wouldn't need gas for cars, or planes, or have to pay a dime for any form of energy.”

The students broke into outright laughter again.

It made me mad they couldn't see his vision. I looked around the classroom. “That's okay, go ahead and laugh. You're all a bunch of ditwads, anyway. They laughed at Tesla, too.” I pointed to the lights above our heads. “But you all need to understand one thing—you sit here bathed in the very glow of his brilliance!”

“Stop. Now. Miss Simpson! I am done with your disruptions. Please leave this classroom immediately and report to the principal's office.” He opened a drawer on his desk and dug out a hall pass. He scribbled something on it and held it out, motioning for me to come take it.

I stomped up to him and grabbed it out of his hand, turning to see everyone staring at me and laughing. I needed to settle myself. I closed my eyes for a moment. When I opened them again, most of the students were still snickering at me. I glared at them; my piercing stare emblazoned onto each of their faces, one-by-one, until they felt so uncomfortable they finally stopped. When the room became quiet, I walked over and grabbed my bag and books. I glanced down at Frankie to see a questioning look on his face. I leaned toward him. “I hate bureaucrats!” I wheeled around and walked between the rows of desks to the door and strutted out of the classroom doing everything I could to keep my dignity intact.

On Display

School had ended, and there I sat in the principal's office, still waiting to see him. Mrs. Darby, Principal Drake's secretary, would look up once in a while from whatever she pretended to be doing at her desk to give me a reassuring look. I guess she felt that was her role in this little play unfolding before the sea of students just outside.

A long row of half-high windows ran the length of the office, which overlooked the hallway near the main entrance to the school. My chair sat against one of the windows with my back to it. Everyone going by could see me. I might as well have been on display in a storefront window at Meier & Frank's in downtown Portland. I could hear students racing past the office in their hurry to escape prison. More than once, someone made me jump when they slapped the glass right behind me.

A small group of girls from my history class stopped when they saw me and chanted "We want free energy! We want free energy!" It was Madison Albright and her demonic friends. I'd tried to stay under Madison's radar all year. It hadn't taken long to figure out she could make someone's life miserable if she wanted to, and had a proverbial string of scalps to prove it. I guess I just blew that hope. I really didn't need this.

The door to Principal Drake's office opened. Mr. Wolcott and Principal Drake stepped out talking in low tones. I couldn't hear what they were saying. They both looked over to me. Principal Drake said, "I'll be with you in a moment, Miss Simpson." He shook Mr. Wolcott's hand and went back into his office.

Mr. Wolcott stood there for a moment and stared at me. If he was trying to make me uncomfortable, I wasn't buying into it. He finally walked over and leaned down close to my face. "You are a very bright girl, Miss Simpson. You know it and I know it. What—you think I don't realize these textbooks are antiquated? They may as well be clay tablets written in Sumerian for how out-of-date they are." His hot breath sprayed my face as he spoke. It smelled of centuries. "But they are what I am required to work with, and I must follow the State curriculum. So, it is a burden we both share, Miss Simpson. I only ask you one favor—don't *ever* show me up in class again. Do you understand?"

I was surprised by what he said. It wasn't even close to what I thought he would say.

I nodded. "Yes, I understand. I'm sorry I made a scene in class."

He seemed satisfied and stood. "I wish you luck on whatever path it is you appear to be wandering, Miss Simpson, rocky that it may be. But be careful. Footing can be unstable on rocky ground, and tenuous at best." He opened the door and walked out.

Principal Drake looked to be about finished with his "What are we going to do with you?" speech. I think it had been about ten minutes, but it felt like hours. I sat in a chair on the other side of his desk and played with a ring on my finger. His speech wasn't as bad as I heard they could be. Maybe it was because Principal Drake had an idea of what I faced at home, so felt sorry for me. I could only hope. I didn't want my mom to have to deal with this.

He sat forward in his chair. "Miss Simpson. I am not going to contact your mother about this." *Relief.* "But you must stop disrupting class. We work as a group here at Lake Oswego

High.” He intertwined his fingers and held them out to me in demonstration. “All together as a team. We don’t condone those who want to hack out their own path. Do you understand me?”

I stiffened at his words. “I guess so.” But I couldn’t help myself. “So, what you are saying is independent thought is not encouraged here.”

Principal Drake sat back and sighed. Everything around him cried out conformity. I doubted if he ever had an original thought in his life.

“Look, Miss Simpson, I don’t understand what is going on with you, but you need to get that chip off your shoulder.”

I looked up from studying my ring. I wanted to say, “That isn’t a chip, it’s the weight of the whole world,” but I didn’t. What I said was, “So be it.” *So be it?* Where did that come from?

The principal got up from his chair in a way that had ‘I give up’ written all over it and motioned me toward his office door. We walked through the empty secretary’s area. He opened the door to the hallway, gave me one last look, and held it open for me. I walked out without saying a word.

Frankie had been waiting for me, leaning against the wall across from the principal’s Office. “Mel?”

I glanced at him, but wasn’t in the mood to talk right now. And I certainly wasn’t interested in explaining anything, even if I could. I headed toward the school exit.

Principal Drake’s voice sounded out behind me when he saw Frankie standing there. “Can’t you control her?”

“Me?” I heard Frankie blurt. “How is that *my* job?”

I pushed the door open and stormed out, hearing Principal Drake’s condescending voice behind me. “Well, it sure has to be someone’s, and everyone knows her mother is incapable of it.”