

*Dharma is when you walk on the  
path of your soul's purpose*

Mrs. Crowley  
The tarot card reading

*When the World Stops Spinning*

It's like a bad movie, playing over and over again in my head, and I can't stop it:

I walk out the door and down my driveway, fixated on the flashing lights.  
Soon I break into a jog. Then a full-on run toward the dead-end of Springbrook Court.  
I need to get there.

I look up at where the railroad tracks cross Lakeview to see a police car, its lights flashing,  
drive across the tracks toward — *toward what?*

Katch is right behind me. She tries to keep pace.

I cut up and over a small hillside trail, and through the blackberry brambles where the path  
gets narrow.

Thorns tear at my arms, legs, and face, but I don't care, hardly noticing as they leave  
bloodied scratches all over my body.

I need to get up there.

"Mel?" Katch calls after me. She is way behind now, but the word hangs like a huge question  
mark.

"It could be her!" I shout, not turning around. It hits me as I say it.

*What if it's true? What if it is my mom?*

One of the police cars has blocked off the road at an angle just past the tracks and is directing  
cars to turn around.

I'm up on the tracks now and running as fast as I can. I'm in flip-flops and one flies off my  
foot, but I keep running, the sharp rocks between the railroad ties jamming into the soft  
underbelly of my foot.

A policeman on the road holds his hands out to stop me.

"You can't go back there! It's a bad accident. We can't have anyone interfere."

I duck under his arms and keep running.

I come over a small rise and around a slight bend in the road.

A guardrail follows it on my left.

On the other side of the guardrail, a steep ravine descends sixty feet to Springbrook Creek  
below.

A large truck sits angled in the middle of the road. Its front end smashed and the radiator  
billowing puffy clouds of steam.

Beyond it, a fire truck appears. Just arrived. Firemen jump off and hurry in my direction.

A man stands next to the damaged truck, holding a white rag to his head, blood on it.

I see Captain Thornton talking to him, his back to me. The man looks in my direction, which causes Captain Thornton to turn.

It's me, of course, he sees ...

... running with one flip-flop on my foot, in cut-off jeans, and a bright orange psychedelic swim top. A ridiculous sight ...

... running toward a gap in the guardrail ...

... the size of a car.

A huge, open wound of pristine, beech-colored wood is exposed on a thick tree trunk surrounded by ivy. Smaller trees are snapped off or smashed over.

I lean into the ravine just as Captain Thornton grabs me.

"Melanie. Don't," he says; he pleads.

Something is down there. I see splashes of white in the creek.

Somehow it is quiet enough I can hear the sound of water bubbling over pebbles; a simple and beautiful sound.

The undergrowth is thick, but I make out a crumpled, white wreck at the bottom of the creek bed. And through a hole in the foliage, I see a small, round window. A window found on only one type of car.

Something starts deep down inside and rumbles out of my throat. A sound I have never heard or knew I could make.

"Nooooo!"

I wrestle away from Captain Thornton.

He grabs me again as I throw myself at the ravine.

Firemen appear next to me. They set up ropes, secure them to the guardrail, and work their way down.

I hear howling: a mournful, animalistic sound from far away ...

... but I am making it.

Katch throws her arms around me.

I focus on her.

She holds me tightly, crying.

I see my flip-flop gripped in her hand; the bottom toward my face.

There is a piece of tar stuck on it;

the shape reminding me of Italy.

It is the last thing I remember.

I close my eyes

crumple to the ground

howl at life, "No, no, no ..." again, again, again

and the numbness of it all turns to darkness

## Awakening

I woke up slowly, groggily, and opened my eyes to a strange ceiling. It started to spin. I closed my eyes to make it stop. The room smelled ... *hospitally*. I moaned a little and tried to sit up. Bad idea. I flopped back down.

"Now, honey, you just lay there and take your time. You've been asleep for a while."

It sounded like Mrs. Fletcher's voice. What's she doing here, and where am I? Was I hurt? I didn't feel hurt. Not bad anyway, that I could tell.

I lifted my head and opened one eye, but just a little. I could see Mrs. Fletcher sitting on a chair next to—*my bed*? She was holding my hand. Light streamed in through a window. Everything in the room looked whitish. I laid back and closed my eyes. I could hear the sound of traffic outside, like in a city.

"Where am I? What happened?"

"Oh goodness, honey. You don't remember, do you?" There was a tone to her voice, like she was unexpectedly put in a place she didn't want to be.

"No, I—"

Then suddenly I did. I shot upright. Mrs. Fletcher jumped with a start.

"Mom! Where is my mom?" I tried to get out of bed.

Mrs. Fletcher held me back. "Now, you stop that, Melanie. You lay back down."

I pushed her away and yanked a tube and some wires off my arm so I could get up.

A man and woman in hospital clothes ran into the room and forced me back onto the bed. I fought them. I wanted to get up. I wanted to find Mom. Something happened to her. I couldn't put it together, but I knew that much. She needed me. I kicked and swung my fists at these people.

"Let me up! Let me up!" *Why were they stopping me?*

"Melanie, calm down. Please try to calm down," the woman pleaded.

It just made me fight harder. I managed to get a foot under her and kicked her away. She flew into some equipment and sent it rolling across the room.

The man pushed me back onto the bed and threw his body across me, holding me down. His white doctor's coat fluttered over my face. He had one arm pinned, but with the other I pushed the coat away from my eyes and struggled to get out from under him. I reached for his head, got my hand under his chin and shoved as hard as I could. It bent his neck back at a sharp angle. I thrashed around, but he kept me pinned so I dug my fingernails deep into his flesh. The woman yanked my arm away and forced it against the bed. She held it down, her back to me. I felt a sharp prick—a needle.

“We’re giving her a sedative,” the man seemed to be telling someone. “She’s still in acute emotional shock.”

Then I heard Mrs. Fletcher’s voice float across the room. “Oh, thank you, Doctor! Bless you.”

## *A Different Place and Time*

I am sitting on the floor of a room. At least I think it's a room. Everything is in a soft white glow. There are no corners, but it isn't round either. It's endless. No furniture or fixtures, lamps or points of light. But it is well-lit, as if the illumination is coming from everywhere at once and nowhere at all. The only solid thing I'm sure of is the floor beneath, and the boy across from me.

"Hi, Melanie," he says. Like he knows me. He seems to be about nine years old.

I am looking up at him even though we are both sitting on the floor. He is bigger than me, which doesn't make sense because I am fifteen years old.

He glances down at my right hand. "How is it?" he asks.

I look at my hand and see it is tiny—the hand of a baby girl, maybe around the age of four. That's why he's so big. I am only four. I look at it again. Nothing seems wrong with it. I give him a funny look. I don't know what he's talking about. And then I ask myself, how can I be thinking like this if I am only four years old?

He takes my hand and studies it. "It was burned really bad and not healing well. They didn't like how it looked." He smiles and glances off to the side, to some movement over there I can't quite see. "So, they fixed it. Not a bad job, huh?"

I don't know what he means by fixed my hand. I look up at him. He looks down at me. His green eyes shine under a tuft of dark, thick hair. He talks like he is older than nine. I wonder who he is.

"They wanted us to meet as long as you are here," he says, "because they don't know if it is me or if it is you."

I tell him I don't understand.

He gets up and pulls me to my feet and then up off the floor. I fly in the air for a moment—a feather floating in his arms—before he sets me softly back on the ground.

"You will," he says, then leans down and kisses my forehead. He smiles a big, friendly smile. I realize it's a very familiar smile for some reason. He turns around and walks away, disappearing into the white.

## A Bit Wobbly

"Melanie? Do you hear me?"

I opened my eyes. It's Captain Thornton. Sitting on the edge of my bed. In street clothes, not his uniform. "Captain Thornton?"

"I'm George today, okay?"

I could hardly keep my eyes open. "Why do I feel so— weird?"

"They gave you a sedative, to calm you down. Apparently, you tried to take out half the hospital staff earlier this morning." He smiled at his little joke.

"I did?" Things were a blur. I kind of remembered something.

"Melanie, can you understand me okay?"

I looked at him. He somehow didn't seem as big and imposing in street clothes. More like a big, huggable bear. "Yeah, I think so."

"The medicine is making you a little groggy." He paused for a second; I think to make sure I understood. "Do you remember anything about yesterday?"

I tried to pull my thoughts together. My mind felt like it was wading through waist-deep syrup. A man in a white coat stood behind George. There were little red wound marks in a line along the side of his face. I remembered digging my fingernails into his jawline. I had drawn blood! *Why did I do that?*

I looked at George. "Where am I?"

"You're in a room at Physicians and Surgeons Hospital in Portland."

"I'm in a hospital? Why?"

"What do you remember?"

Some things were coming back—little flashes of scenes, like movie outtakes on a cutting room floor. "Sirens...my mom. A truck. Her car. A gap in—"

I sat up quickly. "She was in an accident. Where is she?" I frantically looked around the room as if she would be standing there.

George put his hand on my shoulder to get my attention. "She is here, in the hospital."

"What?" I focused on him. "I want to see her."

"Not just yet. You need to listen to me, okay?" He had a real solemn look to him.

"Is she dead?" I had to ask, but didn't want to know the answer.

"No. She's hurt really bad, though."

I nodded.

"She's under intensive care here at the hospital."

I tried to get up. "I need to see her."

"Slow down. You can't just yet."

This wasn't making sense. "If she is the one hurt, then why am I in a hospital bed?"

"You've been here since the accident yesterday. You were in shock. You passed out, and were, well...having trouble. They gave you something to help you relax and felt it best to keep you for observation overnight. Thus, the room and the bed."

I still felt shaky, but my senses were coming back. "I want to get up now."

George looked at the doctor, who nodded. "I think she will be all right."

"Okay," George said. "Mrs. Fletcher brought you some clothes. They're in the closet. I'll wait for you outside." He left the room.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed to get up. Now that they were out from under the sheets, I could see scratches all across my legs, and all over my arms as well. Splotches of dried blood had formed where the scratches were the deepest. The thorns on the blackberry vines. I remembered running through them, and seeing my mom's car at the bottom of the ravine. *Oh, God, my mom.*

The doctor helped me out of bed. I was a bit wobbly.

"Melanie, I'm Doctor Carlson. I'm going to wait for you here while you get ready."

I nodded, and asked, "Did I do that to you?" looking up at his face. The marks looked even worse closer up.

"Yes. You are quite strong."

"Sorry, I guess I didn't know what I was doing."

He smiled. "Don't worry, I'll heal. Are you okay to walk by yourself?"

I nodded again.

He took the clothes from the closet and handed them to me.

I carried them into the small bathroom. Once in there I looked in the mirror. There were scratches across my face as well. I sure did a job on myself. I washed up as best I could and dressed. I opened the door to see the doctor still standing by the bed.

"Melanie, I'm one of the doctors attending to your mother. If you are up to it, I would like to fill you in on her condition. Is that all right with you?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Good." He pointed to a couple of chairs in the corner of the room where we could sit. I went over and took one of them. He sat in the other.

He settled in and paused for a moment as he studied me. Maybe to make sure I was ready for this. "Your mother is seriously hurt. She has multiple fractures and a possible spinal injury. We spent most of last night in surgery setting the worst of the breaks and stabilizing her until we can diagnose the spinal injury better. Of greater concern—the accident resulted in a serious head injury. She is suffering from cerebral edema, which is a swelling of the brain. We had to open her cranium to release the pressure. Once the swelling subsides, we will be able to better diagnose her condition."

I sat there, dazed by what he told me—multiple fractures, spinal injury, swollen brain. I looked at him, wanting to get some sort of understanding. "Will she die?"

"We are doing everything we can to keep that from happening. But you need to understand this is a serious situation. She is still quite unstable."

I nodded, staring off into space to think.

"Melanie, do you have any relatives we can contact?"

I looked at the doctor. "No, my mom was an only child. I may have a grandmother, but I've never met her. She might have died. Mom wouldn't talk about her much. And as far as other relatives, there isn't anyone I know of. She just wasn't close to any other family. So, if there are relatives, I'm not even sure how to reach them."

"Don't worry about it. The police are pretty good at figuring those things out. They will try to locate someone. But as her closest relative, even though you are a minor, it could mean you will need to act as her power of attorney. Do you understand what that entails?"

"No."

"You will be responsible for making any decisions regarding her care here at the hospital. Are you up to doing that?"

I nodded again. I seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.



## The Decision

A nurse escorted me down a hallway and onto an elevator. We went up one floor to where they had my mom. We walked to a waiting room area. Mrs. Fletcher, George, and Katch were there. When Katch saw me, she jumped up from her chair, raced over, and threw her arms around me.

She burst into tears. "Mel. Oh my God. I've been so worried about you." Her chest heaved with each gasp of breath. I grabbed her tight and cried with her. We rocked each other back and forth—one big puddle of tears in the middle of the waiting room.

Mrs. Fletcher came over and pulled me to her bosom. I put my head down on her shoulder and cried. She was the closest thing I had to my mom right then. She stroked my hair. "It's going to be all right, honey. God will take care of everything."

She walked me over to a chair and I sat down. There was a box of Kleenex on the table. I took one and dabbed at my eyes.

"Have any of you seen my mother?" I asked.

"No. Only family is allowed," George said. "But we've been here all night. We wanted to be here for both you and your mom."

"Thanks." I got up and walked over to the nurse's station. A young nurse looked up from a chart when she saw me coming.

"I'm Melanie Simpson. My mother, Gloria Simpson, is in one of your rooms. Can I see her?"

She gave me a smile; one of reassurance. They probably trained her to give that specific smile. "It's up to the doctor, dear."

"Doctor Carlson?" I asked.

"No, the attending physician is Doctor Hanson. He's our neuro trauma specialist. It would be up to him."

"Can I please see him?" I asked.

"I'll try to reach him." She smiled again, and then picked up the phone to make the call.

I walked back to the chair.

We sat in silence. I don't think anyone wanted to say anything that might bring back the memory of what happened yesterday. Yesterday afternoon. What was it, early afternoon of the next day now? Wow, I had been out of it for a while. I guess I must have gone pretty crazy. There's that word again. *Crazy*. I don't like that word.

Things were slowly coming back to me. I could remember most of what happened. I definitely recalled seeing my mom's car at the bottom of the ravine in Springbrook Creek. Now that I think about it, it was probably a good thing I blacked out. The firemen were getting ready

to climb down to her. I don't think I could have handled standing there while they pried the car apart to get her out and then dragged her up the ravine strapped to a stretcher.

Over an hour had gone by before the doctor showed up. The nurse pointed me out to him.

He walked over. "Miss Simpson?"

I nodded.

"You are Melanie Simpson, Gloria Simpson's daughter, is that correct?"

I nodded again. "Can I see my mother?"

"Yes. I think that would be all right, but only for a few minutes." He sat down on a chair opposite us. "I'm sorry I took so long in coming to see you. I needed to be sure of our options before I did. Your mother is stabilized, but still in a bad condition. However, it could help to have her know you are here—to talk to her and hold her hand."

I nodded.

"There are some things I would like you to understand first. As I said, we have stabilized your mother as best we can. But I believe she needs to have surgery, and soon. It is her greatest chance for survival. As Doctor Carlson shared with you, she suffered a rather traumatic head injury during the crash. Fragments of glass and wood are lodged in the left side of her parietal lobe. We hoped the swelling would have gone down by now, but inflammation due to the fragments are preventing that, and if the swelling doesn't subside, we will lose her."

I couldn't follow his words. It was like living a scene from General Hospital, my mom's favorite soap opera. It had been a ritual last summer to pop popcorn, grab sodas, and snuggle together on the couch, waiting to see what would happen next. It was one of the few things we did to hold our world together when everything wanted to tear it apart. It had been a real mess when the town got into a frenzy over our fake UFO hoax, thinking Mrs. Crowley had been abducted by aliens. And then there was the real UFO landing near Stafford Road that freaked all of us out. We still don't know what that was all about. But my mom's little tirade at the town hall meeting certainly didn't help, and ended up being what tipped her over the edge. Everyone thought she was crazy.

So, almost every day we watched the soap opera together, and because of it, I had seen way too many moments like this on the show, where the doctor sits someone down and has to tell them about a life-or-death situation—only now it's real, and it's about my mom.

"Melanie?"

It was the doctor. I had drifted. I tried to concentrate again. I looked up at him. "I'm sorry, Doctor Hanson. What were you saying?"

"I know it's hard to wrap your head around all of this." He paused for a moment, focusing on me, like trying to see this through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl who was possibly about to lose her only remaining parent. "I was saying, I feel her best chance is to have the fragments removed. Even under perfect conditions, this would be a touchy operation with quite a bit of risk. I wish we could wait until we reach one of your relatives, but that isn't possible. Now, I know Doctor Carlson spoke to you about being your mother's power of attorney, but this is a bit more serious and we don't have much time. According to Oregon law, and since you are not an adult, the next in line for making such a decision would be Captain Thornton and Mrs. Fletcher, as adult friends of the family."

I nodded as I looked over at them. They both seemed as confounded as I was by this situation.

"I spoke to them earlier about her condition and our options before you got here. They agreed that if I felt it necessary to proceed with the operation, then we should do so. However, we also felt it would be better to know your thoughts, even though law does not allow you to have a say in it."

I focused on a few threads coming loose in the carpet at my feet. Little strands snagged by something unexpectedly, yanked from the tucked-in comfort of their home, now dangling precariously in thin air. Alone and exposed.

I didn't really want to be involved. Funny how we teenagers feel we are so much smarter than adults, but right now I just want to be a kid and leave decisions like this to them. I finally looked up at the doctor and nodded. "Okay...I guess."

"We can't wait any longer to see if the swelling goes down on its own. I recommend we operate now to remove the pieces. I'm going to have them prepare the operating room."

I looked to Mrs. Fletcher and Captain Thornton. "Are you sure?"

Mrs. Fletcher patted me on the hand. I could see she was a big pot of emotions ready to spill over. But she was holding it together for me. "It is the right decision, as guided by God's hand, whatever the outcome."

"Melanie. We can't tell you what to think," George added. "We just believe it is the best way to go."

I turned to Katch. She grabbed a Kleenex, wiped at her eyes, and nodded. She leaned over and hugged me. I held her while I wondered if it was the right thing to do. What would Mom want?

I looked at the doctor. "You feel her best chance is the operation?"

"Just giving it to you straight. She is teetering on the edge. I think it is our best chance to save her."

I stared at nothing in particular, my thoughts swishing around in my head. I nodded, mostly to myself. Only this time it wasn't just a simple motion, but one that could decide life or death. I looked at the doctor and told him, "Okay. I think we should go ahead."

He stood up. "I'll take you to her."

We walked down a long hall to an area where the walls and doors facing the nurses' station were glass. I think it was so they could see into the rooms because these patients were in such bad shape. The doctor stopped at one of the rooms. A chart sat in a holder attached to the wall. It had 'Simpson' written on it.

The doctor took the chart out and flipped through some pages. He put it back and turned to me. "I want you to be prepared for what you will see. She has quite a few bruises and broken bones from the crash, so lots of casts and splints, and she is pretty cut up. There is tubing coming out of her mouth and nose. And we have drain tubes coming from her head. The cranial opening is covered, but it is still a lot to take in." He focused in on me. "Are you okay to do this?"

I nodded.

He nodded too, giving me a reassuring smile as he opened the door. "Hold her hand. Talk to her. Positive thoughts."

I walked into the room and watched the doctor close the door behind me. I turned to my mom and just about lost it when I saw her, but held it back because I knew now was not the time. She was practically in a full body cast. Her face was bruised and cut up, just like the doctor had warned me about. A row of stitches zigzagged above one eye. A thick clear tube ran into her mouth, and probably down her throat. I think it helped her breathe. I could hear a machine to the side doing something like that—breathing for her. A drape covered one side of her head, with two small tubes running out from under it. A reddish liquid gurgled in the tubes.

I sat on the edge of the bed, took her hand in mine and stroked it with my other hand. “Hi, Mom. Kind of got yourself into a pickle here, didn’t you?”

She used to say this to me all the time when I was young and got into trouble. I paused for a second. Her hand felt warm and moist. A rhythmic squishing noise came from the breathing machine. Another machine on the far side of the bed beeped once in a while. I didn’t know what to say to her. What *do* you say to your mother when she’s in this condition and you may never see her again? I stopped. I couldn’t let myself think that way.

“We’re going to get you fixed up, Mom. Promise me you will fight hard. There are a lot of things we still need to do together, okay?” I raised her hand to my lips and kissed it. I held it against my chest. I wanted her to feel my heart beating, because I could feel it thumping hard inside. I wanted her to know I was here, alive, and that she should come back to me.

“Remember when we lived over by Berkley Park and Dad was teaching me to pitch? What was I? About eight, I think. You got so upset. You wanted me to play with the dolls and tea set you gave me for my birthday. But I put them in my toy box, and picked up the glove and ball from Dad.” I stopped for a moment, remembering a time when things were so much easier and simpler. “Well, I want you to know you never lost your little girl. I liked baseball, but it couldn’t compare to being your daughter. I know I probably didn’t show it enough, but I appreciated how much you loved me. It was obvious by how hard you worked to get me out of my Converse sneakers and sleeveless t-shirts, and into saddle shoes and aproned dresses. But it didn’t matter what I wore. I have always been your little girl, and have always loved you, no matter how much I fought all the fluff and frills.”

I kept talking to her. I reminded her about things we had done in the past—funny things and adventures together as a family. And how I looked forward to more of the same with her.

The nurse came in and quietly told me, “We are ready for her.” She stepped back out.

I stood and leaned down to a spot on her cheekbone, the only place not covered in bruises, bandages, or stitches. I kissed her, letting my lips linger for a moment. I wanted to remember the feel of her skin and her warmth. A tear rolled down my cheek and into my mouth. It tasted bitter.

I kept hold of her hand, not wanting to let go. “I love you, Mom. Try your hardest to come back to me. I need you.” But I had to let go. I let her fingers slowly slip from my hand, then I hurried from the room, not wanting her to hear me break down and cry. Katch stood outside the door. I fell into her arms.