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Side Effects May Include Time Travel

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Creative Writing

by

Dorothy L. Cady

Edmond, Oklahoma

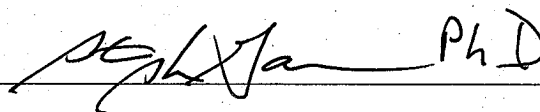
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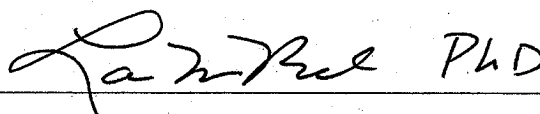
A THESIS

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By  Ph.D

Stephen Garrison, Ph.D., Chair

 Ph.D

Laura Bolf-Beliveau, Ph.D., Member

 Ph.D

Matt Hollrah, Ph.D., Member

ABSTRACT OF THESIS
University of Central Oklahoma
Edmond, OK

NAME: Dorothy L. Cady
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DIRECTOR OF THESIS: Stephen Garrison, Ph.D.
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ABSTRACT:

Alexi Anna Mackey is a thirteen-year-old with all the problems of growing up: her little brother, Mikey, annoys her as often as not; she's a little clumsy, which makes her chosen sport of pole-vaulting a bit challenging; and she struggles daily to overcome a mostly-invisible disability—dyslexia. When Alexi's mother disappears, two mysterious strangers recruit her to help rescue Mrs. Mackey from time-traveling kidnappers. Besides her personal struggles, all that Alexi will have to overcome in order to rescue her mother is her tag-along brother, a prairie tent revival, an evil preacher and his henchmen, a bank robber, a fire, a flood, her recruiters whose faith in her is doubtful, and, oh yes, time traveling back to pre-statehood Oklahoma.

This historical fantasy novel provides middle grade readers with a look at early life in Oklahoma, and encourages them to overcome their own life's challenges no matter how difficult or impossible they may seem. It also introduces readers to Oklahoma's diversity of cultures while working to avoid stereotyping and cultural insensitivity. To encourage learning, particularly of Oklahomans and their history, some of the characters and actions in this novel are based on historical persons and events from pre-statehood Oklahoma. Finally, to further interest readers in the people, places, events, and setting included in this story, the novel also provides a chapter that shares additional information about many of these items, and gives other resources for the reader's independent research. For the teacher of Oklahoma history, a website accompanies this book, and it provides lesson plans and other teacher resources to accompany *Side Effects May Include Time Travel*.

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December 3, 1899

Dear Reader,

I know it's somewhat weird to find a letter actually glued into the front of a journal, but I couldn't take the chance that the two might be separated. I hope you understand and will go ahead and read my letter, but before you read my journal, I need you to promise me one thing. Even if it means you have to risk your life, you must swear that you will get my journal to one of my family members, or to Tomai Jordan. He's practically part of the family anyway. My Grandma lives at four zero five northwest Fifteenth Street in Oklahoma City. Hers is the one address I know will never change. With a family like mine, there's no telling where they will be at any given time. Tomai, on the other hand, lives in Oklahoma City, not far from my grandma's house. I don't know which house is his, though, and since I have no way of knowing when you found my journal, I am going to give you some information that may help you to keep your promise and find my family.

My dad works as a technology trainer and technician. He's often traveling for his paying job, and of course, he helps Mom out now and then. My mother is a college

professor, and with her list of degrees, she can teach at any university she wants to, but her cover is Oklahoma. Anyway, the institution my mom loves the most is the University of Central Oklahoma. It also is one of her alma maters. She teaches English, history, and eighteenth-century literature there, so the university may be one place for you to look.

Though what you are about to read in my journal may seem strange to you, I assure you that I was just like most thirteen-year-old girls on that Halloween night. My little brother, Mikey, annoyed me most of the time, especially when he gave me probability statistics. I had a best friend, Judy, until she moved away with her family the previous summer. I've always been kind-of bookish. Still am. I love to learn new things, but the only sport I ever have been even a little good at is pole-vaulting.

Since I was very little, I've been a bit awkward and often clumsy. When I was seven I was diagnosed as being dyslexic and given treatment to help me overcome accompanying reading challenges and my lisp, but not all the effects of dyslexia can be trained out of you. Having dyslexia is not like having a bad cold—you don't get over it—but you do learn to live with and overcome its constant challenges, as long as you don't give up. That's why I learned to pole-vault. I may not be great at it, but it is fun and it doesn't require a lot of running. For right now, though, the most important thing you should know about me is that I love to write and tell stories—I get that from my Grandma—hence this journal. It tells my story, as any good journal should, and though you may find it hard to believe, I promise I wouldn't lie to you about something as important as my mom's kidnapping.

There is one more thing I need to mention. I can time travel. Any questions?

Alexi Anna Mackey

1 - My Thirteenth All Hallows Eve

I didn't hear the phone when it rang, but I sure heard my mom when she hollered first at Grandma to let her know she was leaving, and then at me to follow her.

"No worries, Helen. I'm sure the children will be angels," Grandma yelled back.

Mom was rushing out the front door while wiggling into her coat—not an easy thing to do when you're wearing a fairy princess costume, which, if you ask me, is a stupid one for any adult to wear. She was holding her cell phone with one hand; with the other, she was fishing her car keys out of her favorite purse—it looked like a miniature backpack and its fabric was overlapping images of colorful puppies, each with red eyes. Another dumb choice for a forty-year-old woman—puppy dogs with red eyes. Really? It would be perfect for me, though. I love dogs, but she wouldn't let Mikey and me have one, or let me borrow that purse.

I followed her to the car, the cold wind churning her instructions into little more than what you could hear through a tin-can-and-string telephone. But still, I caught bits of what she was saying.

"You know . . . means a lot to her . . . city's biggest fundraiser . . . watch the boys . . . hide the matches . . . just a broken leg . . . home tomorrow . . . don't worry."

Almost running down Grandma's sidewalk to keep up with Mom, I stepped on every single crack, especially the ones I was trying to avoid. I was holding onto the ankle-length brown skirt that was the best part of my early-twentieth-century school-teacher costume because it didn't scratch my neck the way the fitted white blouse did, nor, like the high-top shoes, require fifteen minutes of lacing to get them to stay on. If I hadn't held onto the skirt, I would have landed face down on the sidewalk. The swirling

leaves of gold and red would have been stuck in my frizzy brown hair, although, as I think about it now, that might have improved my costume. The worst would have been the icy bits of Oklahoma red dirt that covered the sidewalk; they would have scratched my face and hands.

Mom hurried down the walkway and opened the garage door. I caught up to her and was able to hear the rest of her instructions held onto the skirt in full sentences.

“Tell your grandmother that I will call tomorrow to let her know when I will be home.” She slid behind the wheel of the Kluge—that’s what I named Mom’s 1987 Cadillac Brougham because of its puke green color, missing rear seat, and the duct tape and wire clothes hangers that held the passenger door on and the muffler almost off the ground. At least it runs, most of the time. From what I heard of Mom’s phone conversation with the hospital, I bet Dad’s new Prius got crunched in the accident and will end up as landfill in the dump.

“I’m sorry to put this all on you, Alexi,” she was saying when my brain started paying attention to her again. “But you are thirteen, and you keep telling me you are almost an adult. Now here’s your chance to prove it. Keep a very close eye on Mikey. You know how much trouble he can get into by himself let alone when Tomai comes over.” She pumped the gas pedal twice. “Those boys are just too much for your grandmother, and besides, she has enough work to do tonight.” She stuck the key in the ignition and turned it. The Kluge squeaked and gurgled and coughed once, but then settled into a clunking whirl.

She stared at me. I figured she was waiting for me to say something, but all I could think of was, “I can do this.” Big blunder. I should have begged her not to go.

Maybe I could have said, “Dad will be fine, Mom. He just needs a night or two in the hospital to heal. He can do that without you. You should stay here with us. After all, it’s your mom’s Halloween party. Heck, I don’t even like Halloween parties, and you know how clumsy I am. What if I break Grandma’s pumpkin punch bowl or Mikey sets her straw bales on fire again this year?” But, I didn’t. Instead, I waved goodbye as she backed out of the garage. When she was out of sight, I pulled the garage door down and hurried back to the house. Mom had remembered to grab her coat before coming outside, but I hadn’t thought that far ahead.

The moment I closed the front door behind me, I knew the boys were already up to something because they weren’t making any noise. I could hear the clanking of baking dishes and squeaks from the old hinges on Grandma’s oven door. I guessed she was preparing to bake another batch of turtle toes—Grandma’s Halloween name for ghost-white cheese stuffed into pieces of hot dog then wrapped in green-colored bread dough. I could barely hear even those sounds, though, over the music Grandma was playing. “Bad Moon Rising” by John Fogerty, her favorite tune for Halloween, was screaming away on her antique cassette player. It was loud enough that I had to cover my ears while I walked across the oak floor of the front room to the kitchen at the back of the house. She’d apparently turned up the volume loud enough to hear it in the kitchen. I once asked her why she played that song each Halloween. Do you know what she told me?

“Because it’s to my liking.”

Well, duh.

“Grandma,” I shouted, hoping she’d hear me the first time.

She was bending over the oven with her back to me. Her fluorescent green apron hung to the top of her ankle-high, multi-colored Vans. The right shoelace was untied, again. Once I had asked her why she wore skater shoes that were too big for her and that she couldn't keep tied. I wasn't trying to be rude, but I was worried she might trip and fall. She told me that some Grandma's keep their emergency money in a hanky inside their blouse, but she thought that was too personal. "Who wants some stranger pickpocketing in your private parts? I prefer to walk on my egg money. Foils them thieves and cushions my feet."

"Grandma," I shouted again. "Have you seen the boys?"

No response. I stepped closer. Her hair, bathtub white, hung down her back in a braid almost as long as she was tall. Not that she's very tall at just over four feet, but if her height bothers her, you wouldn't know it. Anytime someone mentions it, she laughs, puts her hands on her generous hips, and says, "These make up for my stature. I may not be able to look a handsome man in the eye, but I can knock him over with a quick swish."

"What? Come closer, dear. I can't hear you."

No surprise. Grandma's hearing had gone bad years ago. As long as she didn't also have to deal with a lot of background noise and she was looking straight at you when you spoke, she could half-read, half-hear what you said. I stepped up beside her to repeat my question into her right ear, the one in which she could hear the best.

Another big mistake.

She stood up and turned in my direction just as I was leaning down toward her. She was taking a batch of turtle toes out of the oven, holding the tray with her wrinkled hands wrapped inside Halloween-themed oven gloves. Yep. My eighty-year-old

grandmother socked me right in the eye with the back of her hand. I guess it could have been worse. She might have dumped the tray full of hot turtle toes on me with their melted cheese squeezing out of the hot dogs and their brown-green dough wraps keeping the whole mess from coming apart. I guess the oven gloves she was wearing buffered the blow to her hands. “Oops. Sorry,” was all she said. She didn’t even drop the tray. I wasn’t that coordinated; I fell straight down on my—

“Hey, Sis. Smooth move. Looks like I showed up just in time.”

I turned my head fast enough to throw a dirty look at Mikey before his and Tomai’s snickering became laughing. It worked. Or, maybe they shut up because Grandma burbled out a loud, throat-clearing sound right after I glared at them, and then told them to help me get up. Of course, I couldn’t let two ten-year-old boys drag me across the kitchen floor while pretending to help me, and then go around telling all the people they know about it. I’d be mortified. That’s what they would have done, too.

I thought Grandma changed her mind about having them help me get up. However, it’s more likely she forgot that she’d told them to do it. One second later, with me still sitting on the floor, she held out the tray to them and offered the boys some hot turtle toes—Tomai’s favorite snack food.

Mikey doesn’t have a favorite. He’ll eat almost anything, which explains why he’s about twenty pounds heavier than he should be for his size and age. None of his weight comes from his hair, though. Mikey is bald. Mom likes to tell people how he had a full head of curly, tar-colored hair when he was born, but that it all fell out before he turned one and it’s been like that ever since. He doesn’t even have stubble up there. The doctor said Mikey has Alopecia Areata, an autoimmune disorder that makes the hair

follicles shrink until they are too small to hold hair. Sometimes hair grows back, but Mikey's never has. The doctor isn't worried though. He says that Mikey is otherwise healthy and normal, but I doubt the normal part.

The boys gobbled down their snack and started to leave the kitchen.

Grandma stopped them. "There's more where those came from if you pull that chain on my cuckoo clock for me. I don't want it to wind down during the party. Oh, and flip up that bar on the side there; I want it to sound off loud and clear."

"It's only eighteen percent down, Grandma," Mikey said. "Statistically, you shouldn't need to wind it until you are ready for bed."

Grandma and Tomai ignored Mikey's comment. They were used to his constant statistical analysis of everything. Tomai tugged the chain until the weight was back to the top and lifted the switch that turned on the cuckoo bird mechanism and sound. "This thing's kind of cool," Tomai said. "Someday I'm going to get me one and take it apart. Maybe I'll turn it into a time machine."

"Awesome," Mikey said. He grabbed turtle toes with one hand, and fist-bumped Tomai with the other. "We could go trick or treating anytime we want."

The boys took off while I climbed up from the floor and touched my left eye. Just in time, I saw Grandma turn back toward the oven with the hot tray. I ducked. When I stood back up, she was staring at me.

"Look at that face. My. My. You're not very agile, are you? Did you get that shiner at the pole-vaulting meet today? Does it hurt? Want an aspirin?"

"No, Grandma. Are you trying to kill me?" I knew she wasn't really. She'd just forgotten for the thousandth time that when I was three I'd tried to swallow a pink quartz

stone that I'd thought was a piece of hard candy. I almost choked to death. "You know I'm not allowed to swallow pills."

"Piffle. Stuff and nonsense. You're not three years old anymore."

"Track was last Friday, Grandma. They cut me from the team two weeks ago. Remember?"

O.K. I knocked off the bar at its lowest height in practice that week. Twice. What? I swear someone greased the pole. My hands slid when I jumped, resulting in my not getting enough height. That's all. Could've happened to anybody, right? But it didn't. Things like that only happen to me.

"I was not great at sports either. Guess you can't help taking after me."

I love my Grandma and all that stuff, but I hate having anyone remind me that I take after her, especially her. She is old, deaf, clumsy, and, well, covered with wrinkles and dark splotches. Maybe I should scratch out that part. No. That's how I felt then. If you ever read this though, Grandma, I want you to know I've since learned that taking after you isn't that bad.

Anyway, I hurried upstairs to my room to see what damage Grandma had done to my eye. Mikey and Tomai stood at the oversized mirror in my bathroom fishing through my makeup that they'd dumped all over the counter. "What do you two think you're doing?"

"It's for our disguises," Mikey said.

"Camouflage for Mikey's bald head," Tomai said, and then gave Mikey a shove.

"Not with my makeup you aren't."

"We can't go trick-or-treating without looking gross," Mikey said.

“If you wanted a costume, you should have thought about that earlier. Besides, Mom said you couldn’t go out until she came back.” A little white lie just to help ensure Mikey didn’t get into any trouble. “You have to stay here and help Grandma until then. Now get out of my room. Stay out of trouble, too. No, wait. I have a better idea.”

I grabbed Mikey’s and Tomai’s shirts. “I have a job for you.” I pulled them over to the window and raised the blind. “While I finish putting on my costume, you two stay there and watch for the women who are coming from church to help Grandma. They should be here soon. And don’t move.”

I slid into the shoes Grandma had loaned to me. They looked brand new. I couldn’t imagine where she bought them, and she wouldn’t say, but they were perfect; they made my nineteen-hundreds-teacher costume look real. The pointed toes were brown leather, and the rest of the ankle-high shoe was black. They had low heels, for which I was grateful. If they’d been much higher, I’m sure I couldn’t have stood or walked in them without falling down multiple times. They were a bit too big. I took them off and put on a second pair of socks. I wound the laces back and forth through the reinforced holes and tied them at the top.

“Where’s Mom? Mikey asked. “I’m going to tell her you’re being bossy.”

“We’ll talk about Mom later. Just do what I told you.” I pinned between the two top buttons of my high-necked, white blouse the brooch that Grandma also had loaned to me. It looked like the carved silhouette of a young girl, and it was in the most beautiful color I’d ever seen. Lapis lazuli Grandma had called it. It was a deep blue color speckled with gold throughout.

I went into the bathroom and traced the swollen and purpling circle around my eye with face makeup. It helped a little, and Mom wouldn't be here to see that I was wearing it. She hadn't worn makeup and saw no reason that I should, but she grew up when no young girl wore makeup. She knows nothing about growing up nowadays.

"Alexi. Mikey. I need some help down here." Grandma's voice hurled up the wooden staircase and landed in my bedroom sounding like she was right next to me. Grandma had told me she'd learned to do that when she was a child. All she had to do was stand on that second step from the bottom, face the stained glass window of two girls in pink dresses dancing in green grass that was on the landing between the two floors, and shout. She figured her voice bounded off the window and flew up the second set of stairs straight into the room at the very top. She used to share that room with her sister when they were growing up. Now I stay in that room when we visit Grandma. I tried it once, shouting up the stairway like that, but I don't know whether it worked. I couldn't be in the room and on the stairs at the same time, and I wasn't going to ask Mikey to help me test it. If I had, I'm sure he'd have found some way to use it to pull a trick on me. Someday, I planned to shout down from my room and see whether I could make Mikey think I was downstairs.

"Coming," I shouted back. "You two go down and help Grandma," I said. Mikey and Tomai ran from my room. "Tell her I'll be right there," I shouted after them. "And go straight to the kitchen. No fooling around. I mean it."

I walked to the window and started to lower the blind, but stopped when I glanced down at the ground. Someone was standing there staring up at me. My heart thumped once like my body had last summer when I fell out of the old black oak tree in Grandma's

front yard. I jumped back from the window and let go of the blinds. They slammed closed. I hurried downstairs after the boys, and was glad to be back in the kitchen with Grandma. The heat from the oven and the ordinariness of the boys shoving each other while they raced back and forth to take Grandma's food to the front room made me shrug off the stranger. Now I know that I shouldn't have, of course, but then, I decided he was just an early arriver for the party. I forgot about him. If I'd told Grandma about him right then, however, maybe things would be different. It's too late now, though. As Grandma would say, "No reason to cry over spilled milk when you can lick it up." She's a bit strange like that, and it doesn't matter whether or not it's Halloween.

The doorbell rang and Grandma asked me to go answer it. When I opened the door, wet wind blew in along with the five women from Grandma's church who came each year to help with the party. I recalled the stranger and was afraid to look outside before I closed the door, but I couldn't help myself. Relieved when I didn't see that man out there, I went back into the kitchen to check on the boys. Mikey and Tomai were gone. "Where are they now?" I asked Grandma.

"Where's who?"

"The boys, Grandma. Where did they go? Mom said I have to keep an eye on them. She doesn't want them to get into trouble or be in your way."

"They were underfoot; I gave them a couple of grocery bags and told them they could go trick-or-treating."

"Grandmother." Great. Just great. I didn't want to chase them down, especially after not seeing that man out front. He could be anywhere now. Mom would kill me if she found out they were knocking on stranger's doors instead of helping with the party.

It was almost dark out, but that wouldn't matter to Mikey. He was just as likely as not to run out into the street in front of a car while chasing Tomai. Those two boys thought that lawn wrestling and skateboarding were their destiny, and they practiced both as often as Houdini must have practiced lock picking. The only thing they liked better was paintball, which Mom no longer let them do around the house since Dad had to repaint the back of the garage because they had been using it for target practice.

I put on my coat and headed out through the kitchen door. I hoped they'd chosen to go away from the busy street out front and into the neighborhood instead. When I rounded the corner of the house to head toward the front, I stopped. The same man I'd seen from my window was standing there. He wore a dark brown, derby style hat with a feather sticking out of the hatband. The hat's rim hid his eyes, but I could see one of his wrinkled hands. It held tight to the wide lapel of his double-breasted coat, keeping it snug around his neck against the wind. His other hand rested in his coat pocket. A sharp, musky smell blew at me when he moved. I took a step back, and then I noticed that he was standing by the doors that go down into Grandma's fruit-cellar-slash-tornado-shelter.

"I wouldn't run if I were you. Your brother and his friend wouldn't appreciate it." He put one foot on the shelter doors. "Probably neither would your mother." He bent down and yanked on a padlock that held the doors closed. He didn't take his eyes off me. He stood and showed me his gloved hand.

I could barely tell what was in it. If Grandma's porch light hadn't been on, I don't think I would have seen the key at all. Uninvited storm clouds blocked out the scant bit of light from the quarter moon. A weird feeling cramped my neck muscles and made me shiver when I realized that Grandma would not lock those doors. I don't think she even

owned a padlock. She was like that. She'd let the entire neighborhood and congregation cram in down there if she thought they were in danger. Then she'd go back up into the kitchen and bake bread for them all. Honest. She did that back during the awful May 20 tornado outbreak in 2013.

When the tornado siren sounded, a big bunch of her neighbors showed up, and while they stayed in the cellar, Grandma went upstairs and popped into the oven a couple of cookie sheets full of ready-made biscuits. When my Mom asked her why she had done such a crazy thing, she told her it was because she didn't have enough time to bake bread. Fortunate for all of us, especially Grandma, the tornado skipped right over her place. Other neighborhoods weren't that lucky.

"Who are you? What do you want?" I tried to hold my voice steady, but I don't think I succeeded.

"Ah, well, that's the question, isn't it? However, that doesn't matter. I'm here to make you a deal." He stuck the key down into something he had been clutching inside his coat. "I'll give this to you," he said, now holding it out by its strap and letting it dangle there in the wind. "But you'll have to do something for me in return."

It took a minute, but then I could see the little puppy dog faces with their red eyes. "Mom's purse. What are you doing with it? Where did you get it?"

"Perhaps you should be asking where to find its owner."

His voice sounded like mine had when I'd tried to swallow that pebble of pink quartz that I thought was candy. Only his rock seemed to bounce around in his vocal cords when he talked. He didn't need to have it popped out of his throat by his dad.

I was struggling to figure out what was going on. My mind felt as though the fog from Grandma's dry-ice machine had crept into my brain. Mom went to the hospital . . . the boys are out tricking people for candy . . . they probably took Grandma's toilet paper with them . . . this man's wearing a costume.

"Let me help you," he said. "See, your father's just fine. He's probably well on his way to Tulsa for Monday's business meeting. Your mother, on the other hand is, well, let's just say she's a guest, and she won't be coming home unless you help her."

"Help her? How? What have you done with her?"

Two muted banging sounds came from the shelter. I looked down at the doors and watched as they bounced once, twice, each time accompanied by that sound. Without the man's foot resting on them, the doors bounced, but they stayed shut. I heard Mikey yell my name. When I looked up, the man was gone.

I rushed toward the cellar and almost tripped over . . . Mom's purse. I scrambled to pick it up and pull out the key. My hand brushed against something in the bag that I felt too frantic to worry about right then. My hand shook. Mikey and Tomai were both now pounding on the doors and hollering.

"Let us out of here, Alexi."

"I'm going to tell your Mom."

"Come on, Sis . . . please."

I knelt down, unlocked the padlock, and pulled it free.

Mikey and Tomai slammed the doors opened and knocked me down rushing up the steps and toward the front sidewalk. "Nice try," Mikey hollered back at me. "But we're still going trick-or-treating. Grandma said we could." Then they ran down the

sidewalk. They were quick. By the time the two of them reached the street and turned the corner, I was still too stunned to yell at them. Not that it would've done any good. Mikey doesn't listen to me.

I stood up and brushed off damp leaves and specs of dirt from my skirt. I considered circling around Grandma's house to the next street, and then back up and over to catch the boys near Tomai's house, but since Grandma needed my help and she'd given them permission to go out, I decided not to go. Still holding Mom's purse, I walked around the side of the house to the back porch. I needed the light in order to look inside the bag. I pulled out the piece of paper I had felt. It crinkled when I unfolded it and nearly blew out of my hand. I laughed out loud feeling both relief and anger when I saw what was on it. The note, its words obviously clipped from an old newspaper, looked like a typical Mikey joke. Tomai probably knew all about it, too. He would have gone along with it because they've been best friends since kindergarten.

I decided the only way to make sure my little brother's practical joke failed was to pretend that I hadn't seen his note. He'd fret over his failed trick. I had learned through experience that, unless Mikey's practical jokes put someone in danger, the best way to discourage him was to ignore him. It also was my best way of getting even, but ignoring him wasn't easy.

One Halloween he helped Grandma to make candied apples and he dipped a special one for me. I think I'd have killed him if I could have caught him, and if Mom hadn't stopped me.

"You're O.K. You didn't swallow any of the onion. He's just having some harmless fun. It's only a phase."

Yeah, right Mom. I should have yelled at her. I'm sure he thought it would be even funnier because raw onions make me vomit. It's not as if he didn't know. Sorry. Sometimes I get a bit sidetracked.

I stuck the paper into my coat pocket and went inside. I hung Mom's purse on one of the hooks by the back door. No way was I letting Mikey get the best of me this time. Of course, now I realize how dumb all of my reactions were. Then, though, I felt numb, and the more I thought about it, the more displaced I felt from all the freaky stuff going on. Maybe it was because it was Halloween, but that didn't answer my questions. How could Mikey have trapped him and Tomai in Grandma's shelter with a padlock on the outside of the doors? Where did that man get Mom's purse? Had Mikey given it to him? I saw her carrying it when she left. Maybe it wasn't just because it was the best time of year to pull pranks. Mom let's Mikey get away with everything. I think I suspected that she somehow was in on it all, and that Mikey only asked me where she was to make me think he didn't know she'd left. It was kind of a relief because, if it was a Mikey joke, then that meant Dad was still on his way to Tulsa, and Mom would be home any minute now. I figured Mikey had already called her and told her the coast was clear. All of that was a lot easier to accept and believe than was that Mom had been . . . kidnapped.

The screen door slammed shut behind me. I jumped and turned around, but nobody was there. I guessed that I hadn't closed it tightly when I came in. The wind must have blown it back open and shut. I pulled it tight, and then stepped into the warm kitchen, breathing in the mixed smells of bread, cheese, and hot dogs. My thoughts were not really on the party or on eating. All I could think about was Mikey and Tomai out there, somewhere, getting into trouble for which I was sure I'd be to blame once Mom

came back, even if she was in on the joke. If it were Mikey trying to catch me, he'd probably use something like the Pythagorean Theorem to figure out exactly where I'd be, and then take a shortcut to find me. But I'm not a math or statistics whiz like him. Besides, what could I do about it now? No way could I catch up with them. Mikey might be chubby, but he can run a lot faster than me. I guess I can admit now that he's sort of the reason I took up pole vaulting.

I tried out for the track team last year, along with my best friend, Judy. That was, of course, before she abandoned me and moved away with her family last summer. Mom and Mikey came down to watch. I was the last one to run the 400-meter sprint. I wasn't surprised that I didn't do very well. I never have liked to run. Mikey decided to show me what I was doing wrong. He ran the distance in half my time. I was so embarrassed.

When Mikey returned to the starting line, he said, "You have a better statistical chance of succeeding at jumping than you do of running the sprint in a winning time."

Great. It's not bad enough that I have to listen to Mom telling me how smart Mikey is, but now I have to put up with Mikey showing me how smart he thinks he is.

That was when Judy came up with the bright idea that we should be pole-vaulters instead of runners. I don't know how I let her talk me into it. I pretty much suck at pole vaulting, too, but it is kind-of fun.

Back to Halloween night. I should have been more worried about that strange man, but it was Halloween after all, so I pushed the thought of him out of my mind. I had work to do. I grabbed the punch bowl that was sitting on the kitchen table. Grandma had filled it with something slimy looking and green, and the fog from the dry ice she'd dropped into it was creeping over the edges and across my hands and arms. It felt like

spiders were ballroom dancing on me. I hurried into the front room, trying not to spill the punch on the floors that my Mom had polished for Grandma's party, and set the bowl down on the table by the fireplace. It was almost overwhelming to watch those five women bustling around the front room while Grandma stood in the very center leaning on her cane and giving them directions. Those women were busy hanging paper pumpkins around the front windows, setting out black paper plates and cups and plastic silverware, and putting serving utensils on the trays and trays full of food that Grandma had spent the day baking.

“What next, Grandma?” I asked.

“Stay by the front door and collect the tickets as people arrive. No ticket, no entry. Unless they have cash. We'll take that, too. We're hoping to collect enough to send six missionaries overseas this year instead of five. Now do not let anyone cheat you,” she said, and then Grandma waved at one of the churchwomen across the room who was frantically gesturing at her. “I have to help her,” she said. “You go along now and mind the door.” She scurried off as quickly as her age would let her move, her cane tapping the floor with every other step.

I walked over to the main entryway, opened the box Grandma had set up on a small table there to hold the retrieved tickets, and unlocked the front door. This was the first time Grandma had trusted me to do this for her. It was a big responsibility. This house had been in Grandma's family generations before Mikey and I came along. Sure, Grandma had lived other places, but she moved back to this house after her mother died. She once told me that parties here are a tradition her family's been carrying out in this house since it was built in 1903. “Grandma Anna loved to hold parties, and since this

three-story house has plenty of room for guests, and its late-Victorian chateau architecture attracted the notice of each towns person who was anyone, she held a lot of them. She wasn't too high and mighty or thought herself too good for the regular homesteaders, though. True, she loved to show off the hand-painted canvas walls, the lavish fixtures, and the stained glass windows. She especially liked to look at that one of the two little girls on the staircase landing, and she liked to share its beauty. She loved helping others even more, though. She held many fundraisers in her old house. She did a great deal of good for others that way, and I'm carrying on her tradition."

The All Hallows Eve party was my grandmother's idea though. She started it probably twenty years ago when the priest gave an, as she put it, "rip-roaring good sermon about the need to do our part to help spread the word in Bolivia." This annual event has become the biggest one for paying for those missionaries.

As I pulled my hand away from unlocking the front door, it flew open. Water spritzed my face. A woman dressed to look like a cat hurried in and closed the door behind her, grabbing her black tail in time to pull it free of the door. Her eyes were dandelion yellow, and I swear the pupils were black slits. Her whiskers really seemed to be growing out of her cheeks, and her little black nose looked damp. Of course, a light drizzle was coming down by then, which could explain her nose. Pinned to the shoulder of the long-sleeve black leotard that covered all of her body was a brooch shaped like a cat. I thought that was overkill for her costume. Mom's years of manner lessons held firm. "May I have your ticket, please?"

"I don't have a ticket. I'm not staying for the party. By the way, neither should you. You'll need to save your energy." She reached down and grabbed my wrist,

squeezing it and forcing my hand open. She turned it palm up, and set an azure-blue capsule the size and shape of a kidney bean in my hand. It shimmered in a way I imagined my Great-Great-Grandpa James' glass eye did. Mikey once told me Grandma kept it polished and stored in a box in her bedroom. I wasn't brave enough to go look for it, but if it exists, I'm sure it shines. Grandma wouldn't have it any other way.

Cat Woman—that's what I had decided to call her, but I didn't want to be rude; I kept that to myself. She must have seen the expression on my face and assumed I thought it wouldn't work or something.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's much more powerful than its size would indicate."

I wasn't sure what to do or say. This prank seemed too crazy even for Mikey and Tomai. I mean, I didn't doubt they wanted to get back at me for making them stand at the window and not letting them use my makeup, which I hoped Mikey wouldn't think to tell Mom about, but I had no idea how they had talked two adults into helping them.

Cat Woman curled my fingers down over the pill. "Now, take it exactly at midnight, or heaven knows what'll become of you. Oh, and drink milk with it, not water, or you might throw it right back up. Show me the note?"

"Note? Milk?" My head was starting to ache.

"I see," the woman said, her voice now more stern than frantic. "You don't believe. Well, I guess that's no surprise. Have you tried to call your mom, yet?"

"No. Why? I mean, she'll be home any minute, I'm sure." I didn't really know why I felt as though I had to tell this weird woman all of this. It was none of her business. Besides, I didn't have a strange feeling I usually get when something is really wrong.

“You think that, do you? Listen here you sassy little child,” she said, wagging her finger at me.

I looked down at the floor, and, no kidding, watched her tail swishing back and forth the way a real cat’s does when it’s angry. It had a dust bunny caught in it, and despite this stranger lecturing at me as if I were a child, all I could focus on was that little piece of fuzzy lint that seemed to be teasing Cat Woman’s tail.

“Wrong choice . . . too self-absorbed . . . not too bright, either . . . maybe the boy. At least he might know what a vision is . . . fine . . . I still think you’re wrong.”

Her sudden change in voice cracked my trance. I looked back at her face. She was talking to . . . the air. “Who are you talking to?”

“It’s none of your bees’ hive.”

“You mean beeswax.”

“I most certainly do not, young lady. I mean what I said. I would have thought that your grandmother at least would have taught you that it is impolite to correct your elders. Now, let’s get down to business. Where’s the note?”

“What note?”

“The one Jonas gave to you.”

“Who’s Jonas?”

Cat Woman sighed and put her hands on her hips the way Grandma does, only this woman’s hips didn’t have all that extra width. She took a step closer. “Are you going to make me search you? I know he gave it to you inside your mother’s purse. Now do you know which note I’m talking about?”

I hadn't taken off my coat when I came in from out back. I slipped my hand into my pocket and pulled out the piece of paper I thought was one of Mikey's pranks. I held it out to the woman.

"That's not for me," she said. "It's for you. Read it with great care. There's more than meets the eye in it. For your mother's sake, make sure you don't lose it or leave it behind. He'll likely demand to see it." She turned and opened the door. The mist was more of a fine sprinkle now, and it was dark outside. I couldn't see Cat Woman as she walked out into it. I reached over to switch on Grandma's porch light, but it was already set to on. I flicked it once or twice, but nothing happened. Cat Woman was almost invisible in the dark until she turned around to face me. "Midnight. No sooner, no later, or the trajectory may be off. Your mom is depending on you."

"But—"

"No buts. That's impolite and quite ineffective. Excuses don't get the job done. Just do exactly what the note says, or many more people besides your Mom may suffer the consequences." She pulled the door shut behind her.

Thunder hit hard enough that it shook the front window. I took a step back from the door, but then I reached out and opened it again. Cat Woman was gone, and the porch light was on. It was all strange, more even than the man who locked the boys in the cellar and gave me Mom's purse. Weirder than the sudden winter-like weather. Odder than Grandma's choice of Halloween music that was still blaring. None of that was as unexplainable though, as what happened next. The small blue capsule that I still held in my other hand because I was half-afraid to set it down started to glow, yet it didn't feel even a little bit warm. Then it began throbbing in perfect time with my own heartbeat,

which I could feel pounding in my chest. You'd have thought it was all wacky, too, if you'd been there.

I closed the door, but three seconds later a swarm of people began ringing the bell and knocking. I slipped the pill into my pocket, and opened and closed the door and the ticket box for the next hour, too busy to think about what had just happened. Grandma finally came out and told me she thought that most attendees should be here by now, and that I may go trick-or-treating if I wanted to.

As if. Thirteen-year-old girls don't go begging for sweets. Besides, it wouldn't have been any fun without Judy.

I went up to my room instead and took off my coat. I put the unread note and the pill on my nightstand. They stared at me for a long time. O.K. Maybe I stared at them, but it felt like they were waiting for me to do something, even daring me to do it. I picked up my cell phone and called Mom.

Her phone kept ringing until it went to voicemail. I dialed again, and again, and again then hit the redial key several times. Her phone must be on; it has to be on. When it went to voicemail about the tenth time I dialed, I decided to leave a message. Between Dad's car accident, the phone call she had received, and her phone log showing that I had called a bunch of times already, I decided she had enough worries. I didn't want to freak her out. I opted for a simple message. "Mom . . . no panic . . . uh . . . I just called to see how you and Dad are doing." I wanted to ask her if anything bad had happened to her, like had she been kidnapped, but I obviously could not leave her that kind of message. I settled for ending it with, "Please call me soon."

I stretched out on my bed, unfolded the note, and then wished I hadn't read it.

2 - After Midnight

When I woke up, I felt as though I'd taken a nap in Grandma's chest freezer, which I had, taken a nap I mean, but not in the freezer. I guess it was the note. I've heard that a person can get scared enough that their mind just quits and goes to sleep. Maybe that's what happened to me. Who knows? The important thing is that I remembered Mikey. What will happen if he hasn't come home yet? What will I do if someone has taken him, too? I opened my bedroom door expecting to hear party music, but the house was quiet except for the cuckoo clock, and I could barely hear it. I noticed that Grandma's bedroom door was closed, and figured she must be asleep. After all, she's almost ancient.

I padded down the hall and slipped into Mikey's bedroom. "You'd better be here or you'll be very, very sorry," I whispered. I closed the door behind me and flipped on the light. He and Tomai were asleep, which I found hard to believe. Their bunk beds, littered with candy and wrappers, confirmed for me that they'd dug through their haul and gobbled down their favorites.

"Mikey. Mikey." I shook his shoulder and whispered his name at him until he finally woke up and rubbed his eyes.

"Jeez, Alexi. What do you want? Leave me alone." He pulled the covers up over his head.

"Mikey. It's super important. I think Mom . . . well . . . might be . . . missing."

"Missing? He uncovered his face and sat up. What do you mean, missing?"

"Come on. Get up and come to my room. We can't talk in here or we'll wake up Tomai."

Tomai, of course, sat up. "I'm not sleeping," he said. "I'm just having a little trouble keeping my eyes open. Wasup?"

"Quit, Tomai. You know your mom doesn't want you using that street slang."

The boys followed me to my room. I closed the door and made them both sit on the end of my bed. "Tell me straight out. No lies. What happened in Grandma's cellar tonight?"

The boys looked at each other and back at me. "Nothing," Tomai said. "It was all cool. I believed him when he said he saw it."

"Saw what, Mikey?"

The boys looked at each other again then Mikey said, "A black cat. That's all. Grandma's cellar doors were already open. Really. I promise. The cat walked down inside because it wanted to. I wasn't going to keep it. I know Mom won't let us have pets. We just followed it."

Mikey looked as though he was holding back on me. I went over and sat beside him on the bed. "It's O.K. You can tell me the truth." I had decided that if mean-sister wasn't working, maybe nice-sister might. I put my arm around him, but he shrugged it off. I stood up. Back to mean-sister. "Give me the full details or I'll tell Mom how much candy you ate tonight. You know she'll give you ipecac syrup."

Mikey scrunched his face. Mom hadn't given him that since he'd swallowed a whole mud pie when he was five. She'd caught him chewing the last bite and rushed him inside. Mom and Dad made him throw it all up. That's what ipecac syrup does; it makes you barf. I'm not sure they were as worried about the dirt hurting him, as they were about him eating something else more dangerous at some other time just because he thought it

looked tasty. I think they wanted to give him a good reason not to do that sort of thing ever again.

“You have to promise you won’t tell Mom,” Mikey said.

I glanced at the clock.

11:27 p.m.

“I promise,” I said, although I was getting a little worried that I might not be able to tell Mom anything ever again.

“We followed the cat down into the cellar. When we made it to the bottom of the steps, this little old woman was standing in there. Tomai screamed.”

“Not me, man. I don’t do stuff like that. Must’ve been you.”

“No way. It was you.”

“Stop it. Just tell me what happened.”

“Well, once we saw that woman dressed in a cat costume, we figured we’d seen her not a real cat. She told us that Grandma had sent her down there to get some goodies for the party. We offered to help her because she couldn’t seem to find anything.”

“Yeah,” Tomai added. “She was pretty weird, couldn’t even remember what she was looking for. She asked us to wait there while she went and checked with Grandma because she might need our help, but then she never came back.”

Mikey yawned.

Tomai yawned.

She must have been my cat woman, I thought, but I didn’t want to say it aloud. I looked at the clock.

11:29 p.m.

I knew I'd have to hurry the boys. I didn't have time to think about Cat Woman.

"When she didn't come back, you two tried to leave, but you couldn't get out, right?"

"You should know. You're the one who locked us in," Tomai said.

"I did not. But we'll forget about that for now."

"Mikey, did Mom give you her doggie purse tonight before she left?"

"What would I want with a girl's purse? Come on, Tomai. Let's go see if we have any good candy left."

"No, wait. I have one more question." I reached over and grabbed the note from my nightstand. The pill caught my attention. It appeared to be throbbing the way a star seems to pulse in the night sky. I figured it was just my imagination. I shoved the note in Mikey's face. "Did you do this? Tell me the truth or I'll give you ipecac right now."

He stuck his tongue out at me, but then he unfolded the note. The paper made the same crackling sound it had when I'd opened it. I watched his eyes move over each pasted word in the note, and then he asked, "What blue pill? Wait. Where's Mom?" He jumped up. If I hadn't caught him, I'm sure he'd have run through the house screaming for her and woken up Grandma.

"Stop. You won't find her. She's not here, and neither is Dad. You know he's gone to Tulsa for a business meeting. Mom went out because . . . well . . . this phone call." That was all the detail I was willing to give him right now. "Please sit down and be quiet. I need your help."

"Can I see the note?" Tomai asked. I gave it to him and he read it aloud. "If you want to see your Mom again, swallow the blue pill at midnight tonight, or she will not make it home. You only have this one chance to help her now."

He handed it back to me. “Weird”

“Totally,” Mikey said.

I thought about the man in the derby and the Cat Woman. They seemed to be working very hard to get me to swallow that blue pill. Maybe they kidnapped Mom. I looked at the note again, then picked up my cell phone and tried Mom’s number. While her phone rang, I stared at the pill still sitting on my nightstand. Voicemail. I looked at the clock.

11:47 p.m.

I watched as the second hand clicked, clicked, and clicked again, each sound thumping my brain like fast train wheels over a track. I felt colder and more scared than I’d ever felt before. I had no idea what to do.

“Hey, did you notice that?”

Tomai’s voice shook me out of my mental paralysis, probably because he had a voice like a little girl with a sore throat. It didn’t match his big ears that stuck out from his head, his bulbous jaw, or his square-cut, curly black hair offset by straight-line eyebrows, all of which Grandma said he inherited from his dad. I looked over at him. He was pointing at the note.

“Some of the letters are underlined. They don’t do that to the type in newspapers when they print them. Do they?”

“No. They don’t,” I said. I studied the note. “Mikey, get a pen and some paper out of my desk drawer and write down each letter as I say them. h – e – l – p – m – e – h – e – l – e – n.”

Mikey brought the paper back to the bed. Tomai snatched it from him. "It's cool. I got this. I'm good at brain games." He slashed a line after the P and before the second H. "Your mom's name is Helen, isn't it? Look at this. Maybe she snuck the underlines in to let you know she's really in trouble."

"Why do you have to take that funny looking pill to help Mom?" Mikey asked. "How could that help, anyway?"

"I don't know." I looked at the clock.

11:52 p.m.

"Well, that's just a stupid thing to ask you to do. We all know you nearly choked and died. Mom won't let you even try to swallow a pill. If someone wants you to suck down that one, then that someone must be trying to kill you. You can't take it. No way. Try Mom again. Wake up Grandma. Call the police."

"Whoa," Tomai said. "That's sweet."

Mikey socked him in the arm.

"No, man. Not that kind of sweet." Tomai rubbed his arm, and then pointed at my nightstand. "Look"

The blue pill seemed to be growing smaller.

"Why's it doing that?" Mikey asked, but I couldn't answer.

I glanced at the clock again.

11:54 p.m.

Hot pain was rising up from my stomach, and a stinging wave of tightness pinched my chest. I wasn't trying to hold my breath, but I couldn't let it go either.

"It's fine," Mikey said. Then he whacked me on the back.

“Ouch. What did you do that for?”

“It stopped your panic attack didn’t it?”

He was right. I did feel better.

11:55 p.m.

Five minutes to decide what to do. The pill seemed to be getting smaller but glowing brighter until it almost hurt to look at it. I think I was a little scared to take it. But I was more worried that it would disappear completely, and wondered if that was why the Cat Woman had told me to take it exactly at midnight. “Come on,” I said. Holding the note and grabbing the pill and my cell phone, I rushed down the stairs, through the living room, and back to the kitchen. The boys hurried after me. “Milk. Mikey, milk. Quick. Get me some.”

I watched him yank open the refrigerator, and then pour and hand a glass of milk to me. I was almost ready.

“Tomai, take this,” I said, and then handed him my cell phone. I opened my hand and looked at the pill. Smaller, little more than the size of a baby pea. “I can do this.”

“No,” Mikey said. “You can’t.”

“I’ll be just fine,” I told him. “If I choke, you can do the Heimlich maneuver, and Tomai can call 911. Besides. Look how small it is now.” It was only about as big as a drop of water, now.

Grandma’s clock cuckooed one time, and then another.

I could see Mikey’s lips trembling, and for a moment, I thought he was going to cry. “Don’t,” he said. “Please.”

Cuckoo.

Tomai punched three keys on my phone, and then positioned his thumb to press the dial button. He nodded at me. “Ready.”

Cuckoo.

I pinched the pill between my fingers and held on tight.

Cuckoo.

I sat down and leaned my head back, steadying myself against the kitchen table.

Cuckoo.

That’s how I felt—a bit cuckoo. But I had to do this. There was no time left, and this really could be my only chance to save Mom. Besides, I couldn’t possibly choke on something that small. Right?

Cuckoo.

I hoped I wouldn’t drop it. I might not ever find it again.

Cuckoo.

It’s so tiny now. I can swallow it, I thought, and brought the pill up to my mouth, glass of milk in my other hand.

Cuckoo.

“Get a swallow of milk first,” Tomai said, “but then just hold it in your mouth, lean back, and drop it in. It’s easy. I do it all the time with M&M’s, and I can swallow a whole handful of them all at once.”

Cuckoo.

I put some milk in my mouth and resumed my position.

Cuckoo.

I felt Mikey’s hand grab my wrist and heard him yell, “Stop.”

I let go of the pill. It popped and fizzed like a firecracker sliding down my throat. My vision narrowed and the room grew darker, the air heavier until I could not see or feel anything. I didn't hear the last cuckoo.

3 - Fly-Away

At first, I didn't realize *when* I was. My head felt like a storm cloud and the rest of me . . . well, it hurt. I tried to scream to make the pain and darkness let go of me, but it was hard enough just to breathe. My lungs felt like they'd collapsed trying to use up the last ounce of fresh air that could be sucked in through a red-dirt milkshake. Then those feelings just stopped. Instead, I was in a fly-away, my body pushing off the pole, rotating with natural grace until I faced the bar, and then gliding down and landing face up in the middle of the pit. That feeling also went away fast. Truth? I was a bit disappointed. The fly-away, when I can do it right, is even better than eating Grandma's five-layer, chocolate-coconut-upside-down cake, my absolute favorite dessert ever.

As my brain came back to being normal me, I sat up. My legs felt weak and a bit shaky, and the back of my eyes ached. I'd expected a lot worse, like blood-and-grey-matter-splattered-all-over-Grandma's-house worse. At least I was still sitting in a chair in her kitchen. Everything was a little off, though, weird even. I thought I was hallucinating from that pill, or maybe that I was having one of those super strange dreams that seemed almost like an out-of-body experience. I'd had one of those when I was seven or eight. When I told Mom what I'd dreamed, she said that I had a special talent I probably got from her because she does the same thing when she is very stressed, and she wouldn't be at all surprised if at least some of what I dreamed turns out one day to be true. The strangest thing is that something very much like what happened in my dream actually happened to my friend, Judy, the year before she moved to Oklahoma.

It was the first dream about flying that I'd ever had. In it, I was coming home from school, and three girls followed me down a narrow alley, which was weird since I

lived in the country in my dream. They circled me and started calling me names. The biggest girl struck out at me and knocked most of the schoolbooks out of my hands. All I had left to protect myself with was my math book. I hugged it to my chest. The second girl started talking about messing me up. I don't remember what the third girl was doing or saying, but I knew I was going to die right there in that dirty alley. Then something awesome happened. I bent my knees just a little, and jumped. I took off like Superman, straight up into the air. The astonished look on the faces of the bullies made me brave. I buzzed them like a bald-faced hornet when its nest is disturbed. When you're having a dream like this and you are the hornet, you are glad that you're a bald-faced hornet because they are aggressive, and they can and will sting repeatedly.

Apparently, I wasn't trying to sting these girls, however. I think it was because I was a flying-human and not really a hornet. Instead, I was diving down into the alley and picking up trashcan lids, the round metal kind, and dropping them on the biggest and meanest of the bullies. Then I scooped down to collect my schoolbooks, and started throwing them like Ninja stars at the second-biggest bully. I threw the math book first. I guess I wasn't too intimidated by the littlest thug, though, because by the time I had vanquished the second one, I couldn't even see the third girl in my dream.

I hope you don't get the wrong idea. I'm not some evil teenager who gets a kick out of going around hurting people or animals. Just the opposite. I love all creatures—I've seen *Free Willy* three times and *Jaws* at least eight. If Mom and Dad would let Mikey and me have a dog, I would name her Miss Pequeña Pero Peta—little dog for the ethical treatment of angels. In case you couldn't guess, bullies really make me mad, like-

a-ten-on-the-Richter-scale mad, but I love the way flying makes me feel. I ask you, what could be better than flying and smiting bullies all at the same time?

Now I had bigger problems to deal with than just bullies, and I had to work hard to focus. I made myself look around. The white oven in which Grandma had baked turtle toes wasn't there. Instead, there was a black cast iron stove. I probably noticed it first because I could smell the coffee bubbling in the metal pot on it. I love the smell of coffee even though Mom won't let me drink it. Baskets of okra—Yuk—and potatoes—better—lined the counter, and bunches of flowers and garlic hung from the ceiling. The whole room smelled like a coffee/pine needle/garlic witch's brew, but still, the smell made my stomach growl. I hadn't realized I was hungry until I saw a bowl of red apples at the far end of the kitchen counter. Once I could see for sure that Mikey hadn't made caramel apples out of them, I stood up to get one, but tripped on something at my feet and fell down. It was, Mikey, of course.

"Mikey. Are you alright?" I shook him until he woke up and sat up. He rubbed his head.

"No. What did you do to me?"

I offered to help him up, but he pulled away from me. "My head feels like you squeezed it in Dad's vice the way you promised to do when I put baking soda in the ketchup bottle. You sure looked then like a colorized version of one of the zombies in *Night of the Living Dead*. Not the girl without her clothes on, though. She's even grosser than you are."

If Mikey and I had been born twins, maybe we'd both dress in the Tommy Hawks T-shirts Mikey loves. We'd probably both eat our pizza slices rolled up with chocolates

inside. We might even share our homework assignments, each doing half. Perhaps we'd sneak downstairs together on weeknights to watch horror movies after Mom and Dad fell asleep, and take turns watching out for them to make sure they didn't get up and catch us. Yes, maybe after seeing that his head had a bump on it, I'd have felt relief, if he weren't so skilled at making me mad. Instead, I yelled at him. "What in the world did you do this time?"

"Me? You're the one that took that stupid pill. I was just trying to stop you." He rubbed his head again and looked at the edge of the table as if he thought it had conspired with me against him. "Besides, it was a waste of time. Nothing happened and I don't see Mom anywhere. Do you?"

He was right. It did feel as though nothing had really happened. I hollered for Mom.

"Hey, wait a minute," Mikey said. "How come it's light outside?"

Mikey's answer came from behind us at the back door. My first thought was that Grandma must have forgotten to lock it before she went to bed.

"It's sunny because it's morning, of course. Get up off that floor. That's disgraceful. It's no way for a young lady to behave."

Her voice was almost familiar, but it took me a minute to remember where I'd last heard it . . . Cat Woman. The thought creased my brain the way Zots candy does my mouth. If you've not ever eaten it, trust me when I say you don't want to. It's sweet until you bite into it, and then mouth-twisting sour. I felt my face pucker, but I refused to let it show to that tart old woman. I pushed myself up from the floor, realizing that I was still

wearing my costume from the party. I had to re-button two of the buttons that ran the full length of my tree-bark-brown skirt. Mikey didn't move.

The woman, minus the cat costume, looked almost normal. She was about my height, but she had her hair wound into a dark braid that she'd piled on top of her head. A pencil stuck in it seemed to be the only thing holding it in place. Her eyes didn't have slits in them, but they were golden colored. I glanced down to see if she had a tail, which she did not. I felt a little disappointed and a bit embarrassed because I think she noticed I was looking.

She stood in the kitchen doorway holding a stack of unfolded white linens embroidered with green roses, their color nearly matching that of Mikey's face when she spoke again. "You are not supposed to be here, young man."

Her stare went from Mikey's face to mine. I remembered the swish, flick, swat of her tail and shuddered. I'm not sure why. We weren't doing anything wrong. In fact, I should be asking her what she's doing in our kitchen, and telling her she might want to leave before Grandma wakes up and catches her burglarizing the linens.

One year, one of the helpful women from church had had her hands full carrying food trays into the front room for the Halloween party, so she'd stuck one of the serving scoops into her pocket and forgotten it was there. When the party was over and the woman started to leave, Grandma saw the spoon. She grabbed it away from the woman, shook it in her face, and told her she'd better make sure she went to confession on Friday. I think Grandma went that same day, too, just to make sure the woman showed up.

Ordinary Woman stepped over to the table and dropped the pile of linens on it. She looked down at Mikey. He seemed to be trying to hide from her. “Get up now and fold these. Make sure you smooth out all of the wrinkles.”

Mikey stood up and started folding a tablecloth. I was surprised. He only does what he’s told to do the first time when it’s Grandma telling him.

“Since you chose, unwisely I might add, to bring your little brother with you to 1907, he can at least make himself useful.”

“I didn’t bring him anywhere. He came downstairs by . . . wait, 1907? It can’t be.” For a second, I was sure Ordinary Woman was going to reach out and choke me. Instead, she grabbed her skirt with both hands and squeezed tight; I thought she’d break a finger.

“Of course you’d say that. A child like you does not think past the end of her nose. Did you not listen at all to what Jonas told you? What did you think was going to happen when you swallowed the time capsule—your mother would just appear?”

“I—uh—that man didn’t—”

“At least you didn’t bring the other child, too.”

“Tomai? Where is he? What have you done with him?” Mikey stopped folding what looked like a pillowcase and threw it on the table. “Give him back to me. Give Mom back, too. Right now.”

She shook her head at Mikey, and then glowered at me. “That young man is of no use to you here. Bringing your brother through time means trouble for all of us. You’ve jeopardized the whole mission. If my board members find out, they will hold me responsible, but I’m sure that makes no matter to you.”

Before I could say anything, she turned toward Mikey. Her expression softened for a moment.

Mikey stuck his tongue out at her. “Don’t bully my sister. She’s nicer than you any day.”

I couldn’t decide whether that was the bravest or the dumbest thing he’d ever done. I almost felt proud of my little brother for sticking up for me. Then he looked at me and said, “You’re a sissy. You shouldn’t take that from her.” Mikey has a way of turning my warm feelings for him into charred ice cubes. I wish there were a Mikey immunization. I’d be willing to be poked with a needle for that.

“When you have something to say to me, young man, you will first say excuse me Mrs. Weather, and then, only after I acknowledge you, will you speak to me. As for that filthy thing you cannot keep in your mouth, you may well get away with that kind of behavior in your time, but here you likely will get a switch taken to your backside.”

Her voice was steady, not angry-sounding, but it made me feel like a stupid child, the same way I’d felt when I was seven and the speech therapist, Sister Merle, at St. Christopher’s pointed out that I wouldn’t be able to get rid of my lisp if I didn’t stop fooling around and be serious about practicing. Of course, she’d given me a piece of chocolate at the end of each session to ensure my cooperation at the next one. I didn’t think Mrs. Weather would be giving us candy, but I was surprised that she otherwise seemed immune to Mikey’s tongue.

She turned her back to him and said to me, “Well, there’s only one thing to be done about it now. When Jason gets here, he’ll have to shoot him.”

4 - Prairie Chickens

I figured this had to be a delusion, hallucination, or freaky dream instead of what it seemed to be right now—a murder in waiting. I hoped that the nausea and slight trembling I felt were from Mikey and Tomai trying to shake me awake. The coffee smell? Probably Mikey planning to pour it down my throat if I didn't snap out of this. Of course, Cat Woman had to be stuck in my head; she gave me the creeps. Why wouldn't I dream about her? The more I tried to rationalize the situation, though, the more real it seemed. I could feel the heat from the stove at my back, and hear the clock cuckoo once to signal the half-hour. What I couldn't figure out, however, was that clicking noise, getting closer, coming from somewhere behind me? I turned toward the sound. The kitchen door opened and a warm breeze and the tart smell of fresh-tilled dirt hurried in through it like a long-time friend who is anxious to see you.

I miss my best friend.

The stranger scraped his boots against the threshold, and then ducked his head and stepped inside. The dark coat was gone, replaced by a plaid shirt with its sleeves rolled up above the elbows revealing thick biceps. His skin was tan, his hands thick, and his jeans dusty. However, his hat was the same as I'd seen on the stranger at the Halloween party—a brown derby with a feather in its band. "Thought we might need this," he said, and then he set a hunting rifle on the counter.

I took a quick step back and bumped into the table. Mikey dropped what he was folding and hurried over to stand next to me.

The man held up a couple of prairie chickens, which I recognized only because we'd been talking about them in class this past week. "Those are a protected species in Oklahoma. You can't go around shooting them," I said.

The man laughed, his voice a rumbling growl, and then he winked at me. They won't be until 1990."

Won't be. That echoed in my mind. Could this really be only 1907? Why would he say that? This must be some kind of conspiracy. I'm not good at keeping my thoughts to myself. I think I must have a wire with a faulty on/off switch that runs directly from my brain to my mouth. Even when another part of my brain cautions me to watch what I say, the warning usually comes too late. My thoughts spit out like sparks from a train's brakes. "When is it?" I asked.

"A little after six," Jonas said.

"No. What's the date, exactly I mean?"

"Thursday, July twenty-fifth, nineteen ot seven."

"It can't be." I swung around in a circle trying to take in the full meaning of Jonas' words, comparing this kitchen to Grandma's. Black cast iron stove, not white ceramic. Metal coffee pot sitting on it, not a Keurig on the counter. Baskets of okra, which Grandma knows both Mikey and I hate. Instead of smooth walls painted pastel yellow, these had wallpaper with little green roses on them, and the print looked new. It wasn't yellowed like the swatch Grandma once showed to me. When her parents updated the kitchen, she'd told me they'd saved a piece of the wallpaper and put it in the family photo album along with pictures of the kitchen and her grandma cooking at a black stove—oh my gosh, this is the same one that's in her picture. I realized the kitchen chairs

were different from Grandma's, too. These were ornate wooden ones with carvings across the back. Grandma's set was a nineteen-fifties-style metal with yellow vinyl seat cushions and a matching, narrow back. I looked out the kitchen window to the rear yard. Grandma's two pecan trees were only a few feet tall, and their trunks small enough that I was sure I could wrap one hand around them and touch my fingers together. I couldn't touch my fingers together on Grandma's tree now, even when I wrapped both of my arms around its trunk.

“But it is nineteen-hundred and seven. I would have warned you, told you what was to come, but you were a lot more trouble than I had expected. I could see our encounter going from bad to worse so fast that I decided to drop your mom's purse for you and leave.”

Mrs. Weather waved at the sink. “Put those birds in there before they drip all over my clean floor, and for heaven's sake, Jonas, don't argue with the child. You obviously didn't prepare her properly. She's as ignorant as a soup stone.”

Mikey lurched at the woman. I was sure he would've climbed right over the table if I hadn't stopped him. “You can't get away with saying that about my sister. You—you're just an old witch.”

I pulled Mikey close to me and held him until he stopped struggling and his reddened face cooled a little.

“Maybe you're right, young man,” Mrs. Weather said. “Perhaps I am feeling the effects of our work. I admit my manners have been a tad amiss, but if someone had done their job properly the first time, we wouldn't be in this mess now.”

“Does that mean you aren't going to shoot me?” Mikey asked, looking at Jonas.

“Shoot you?” Jonas cocked his head and scrunched his eyebrows. He looked at Mrs. Weather and back at Mikey. “Ah. Yes. Shoot you. Well, that’s not exactly what Mrs. Weather meant. Besides, I’m in no hurry to be rid of you.” He walked to the table, pulled out a chair, and sat down near Mikey. He took off his hat and set it on the table. He picked it up again, flicked at and stroked the feather on it, and then added, “You may be of some use to your sister.”

Mrs. Weather picked up the last sheet Mikey had folded. She turned it over in her hands, grabbed the corner, and shook it out. “If this is an example of how useful he is, we would be wasting our time with him. Besides, two at once—has never been done before.”

“We have never trained one this young, either. Don’t worry, Mrs. Weather,” Jonas said, but he was looking at Mikey. “The boy’s quite bright, and you’ve already seen how protective he is of his sister. He might give us the edge we need.”

Mrs. Weather stopped refolding the sheet. She dumped it on the table and gave Jonas the same look my mom gives me when she is about to ground me for life. “Or get them both killed,” she said. “Then where will we be?”

Mikey tugged on my sleeve until I leaned down toward him. “Do you think they shot Tomai?”

“Nobody has shot anyone, and nobody is going to shoot anyone. Look, why don’t you two sit down? Mrs. Weather will go put away this stuff,” he said, fanning his hand over the linens as if he thought that would make them and Mrs. Weather disappear. I guess it worked; she left without argument.

I wasn’t too sure I wanted to sit at a table with him as if we were long-time friends. After all, he kidnapped my mother and locked my brother in Grandma’s shelter.

It was O.K. with Mikey, though. He didn't even wait for me to sit down. He pulled out the wooden chair closest to him—its feet scraping the floor and squealing the way Mikey does when I tickle him—and sat down, firing questions at the man.

“Who are you? Why are you in Grandma's kitchen? Where's my mom? Why does that snarly woman want to shoot me? What was that weird blue pill my sister swallowed? Where's my best friend? How come you—”

“Whoa. Your tongue's wilder than the wind on the prairie, young man. Don't fret. I'll answer all of your questions, but we only have seventy-two hours to set everything right. Now listen and don't interrupt me.”

You know that eerie feeling on the back of your neck you get when you think someone is watching you. Well, that's not the sensation I had; mine felt more like a horde of angry tarantulas migrating right across my back because I was standing in their way.

“Sit.” Jonas said. “Mrs. Weather is right about one thing. We're taking on a great challenge here, and you two have to learn fast the things you need to know if our plan is going to have any chance of success.”

“Why should we help you?” Mikey asked. “I mean, other than I don't want you to shoot me.”

Jonas picked up his derby from the table and put it on his head. He took it off again and ran his fingers around its rim. “What do you notice about my hat?”

“The feather,” I said.

“It's round?” Mikey said.

“Both true, but I was thinking more about its shape and composition. It's round, yes, and it does have a feather, but more important is that it's multi-dimensional, like

time. I can run my fingers around the rim of my hat, or use the palm of my hand to smooth out its fine texture.” As he spoke, Jonas manipulated his hat to demonstrate his words. “I can slide my hand over the top and have it end up on the other side, or slip it inside and feel it from a whole different perspective. Outside it’s convex, but inside it’s concave.”

“Huh?” Mikey said.

“I’m sure I mentioned not interrupting me. You’ll understand soon enough. As I was saying, there’s a lot about this hat that makes it special, and there’s a great deal about time that makes it special, too. Most people don’t even think about time beyond wishing they had more of it. We do, though, Mrs. Weather and me. That’s our job—time. We are sort of its caretakers.” He put his hat down on the table in front of him.

“How can you take care of time?” Mikey couldn’t keep quiet for more than five seconds, six at the most. “It’s not like you own it or anything. Time just is. It takes care of itself.”

“I’m sure that’s what they teach you in school, Mikey, but that’s not the entire truth. I understand why people want to believe that is the case, though. If people knew the truth about time, it’s likely someone would find a way to destroy it. We take care of time the same way a jeweler might fix a broken watch or reset a loose stone. When time is somehow broken, we have to fix it. That’s where you two come in.”

The tarantulas had moved on, but now it felt like wet rope had been wrapped around my chest and it was shrinking as it dried. I couldn’t stop staring at Jonas, and it seemed as though the on/off switch in my brain was stuck in the off position.

Jonas slammed his hand down on his hat and smashed the top of it.

“That was great. Do it again,” Mikey said, laughing.

“Where is my mother, and how does all of this help her?”

“Give me just two more minutes,” Jonas said, “and then I think you’ll understand.” He picked up his hat and punched it from the inside. It looked a little better, but it was still pretty bent up. “Each of you needs to grab the hat on the rim and hold it up right there for me.”

Mikey and I looked at each other. I think Mikey was beginning to feel a little suspicious, too.

“It’s all good. I promise. Now grab it,” Jonas said.

Just then, Mrs. Weather walked into the kitchen from the living room, and went straight to the stove without looking at us. She pulled the pot off the burner, and the hissing I’d thought was in my head stopped. “Looks like the coffee’s ready. Shall I pour you a cup?”

“I can get it for myself. Besides, I need something else, too. Keep holding that hat,” he said, but he let go of it and stood up. He crossed the room to the other side. I watched him open an upper cupboard and take down four tin cups. Then he pulled out a drawer. It looked to me like he had palmed something, but I couldn’t see what it was. That worried me. It could be a knife. Perhaps he wasn’t going to shoot Mikey after all, but he didn’t say he wouldn’t stab him.

Jonas brought the four cups to the table and began pouring steaming coffee into each one. “Anyone else besides Mrs. Weather want coffee?”

“We’re not allowed,” I said. We still sat there holding the hat between us. Jonas returned to his seat and grabbed onto the hat, too. “Now, shift your hands around until all

three of us are holding it with almost equal spacing between our hands.” We did what he asked, although I was beginning to wonder if he was planning a bunny-rabbit-in-the-hat trick. Then he pulled something out of his shirt pocket and jabbed it through the top of his hat. I realized I was right. He had taken a kitchen knife from the drawer.

“Well, look at that,” he said. “It’s a perfect hole right in the middle.”

“Jeez, you ruined your hat, Jonas. Now what are you going to wear?”

“No big deal, Mikey. It takes just a quick slip to get another one. Besides, that’s not important right now. Keep your eyes on the hole.” Jonas shoved his finger through the hole in his hat then moved it to let us see the outside of his hat. “Now, what do you see, Mikey?”

“The top of the hat and your finger.”

“Alexi?”

“The inside of the hat, plus some of your finger and all of your hand,”

“Excellent,” Jonas said turning to look at Mrs. Weather. “See. They’re getting it.”

She didn’t even look at Jonas. Instead, she opened the white box that looked a bit like a refrigerator and took out a glass jar with milk in it. She set it on the table then brought over a small bowl decorated with green roses. It had a little lid on it. She pulled it off and stuck a small spoon into the white granules.

“Thank you,” Jonas said, and then looked back at us. “If we think of my derby as representing time,” he said, and then pulled his finger out of the hole, “what do the hole and my finger represent?”

I won’t tell you that my blood boiled, or my face was on fire, or even that my ears turned red. Those sayings are too clichéd to write in my journal. I will tell you,

however, that I thought about picking up that knife Jonas had laid on the table then making him confess that he'd kidnapped our mom and that he and Mrs. Weather planned all of this to give them more time. I didn't do it though, and that is why you owe me and should keep your promise to get my journal to Tomai. Well, that and a few other things you'll find out about soon enough.

Throughout Jonas' demonstration, Mrs. Weather had ignored all of us. Perhaps she'd seen it too many times to care. Maybe for her, it was similar to the way it was for Mikey and me by the end of last summer. Dad knew he was going to have to be gone on business trips most of the time. He chose to bribe us into behaving and helping Mom. He bought the Double Park Season Tickets to Frontier City and White Water Bay for both of us, plus bus passes, which meant we could go without having to beg Mom for a ride. We went to the water park one time, but to the amusement park most days. We rode our three favorite rides: the Tomahawk, which feels a lot like doing a fly-away at about eighty feet in the air, much higher than my twelve-foot maximum; the Silver Bullet, which makes you happy and scared at the same time the way any really good roller coaster does; and the Bumper Boats. They were Mikey's idea. I felt sorry for him because Tomai's parents couldn't afford to let him come with us. Mikey missed seeing him to go to the park with me. Riding the bumper boats with Mikey made him less of a grumpy pain later because he could work off some of his little-boy energy by power smashing into other boats. I guess I also liked riding in them because it wasn't as hot on the water as it was on the other rides.

“I’ve got it,” Mikey said. “You’ve punched a hole through time and now you’re on two different sides of it.” He let go of the hat and grabbed a cup of coffee. “Can I have cream and lots of sugar?”

Jonas dropped the hat and applauded.

“You cannot have coffee,” I said. “You’re too young, and Mom wouldn’t like it.”

“Mom’s not here.” Mikey stuck his tongue out at me. “Jonas will let me have some, won’t you?”

“One cup of coffee won’t hurt him,” Jonas said. “Be careful, though. It’s hot.”

“No.” I stood up and grabbed Mikey by the arm. “Come on.” I turned to Jonas and Mrs. Weather. “I bet you think we’re as dumb as those prairie chickens in the sink, and that we’ll fall for anything you tell us. Well, we’re not. I did what you said I had to do to save my mom. I took that awful pill, and you haven’t said one word about her. You’re just jerking us around, and we’ve had enough. I wasted the whole night when I should have called the police and my dad then at least they could be looking for her. Grandma should be up by now, too, but she isn’t. What did you do—tie and gag her to prevent her from calling the police on you?” I yanked Mikey away from the table. “We’re going to find someone who’ll really help us. It sure isn’t these two. Let’s go.”

I pulled Mikey along behind me and headed toward the front door. “And don’t try to stop us—or—or—you’ll be sorry, that’s all.”

Jonas started after us, but Mrs. Weather must have stopped him. I heard her say, “That’s not necessary. They’ll find out soon enough.”

Now, I thought, would be a good time for Mikey to stick out his tongue at both of them, but he didn’t.

As I hurried us toward the door, I barely noticed that the main room off to my right in which Grandma had held her Halloween party now burst with light that sparkled through ceiling-high windows hung with white lace curtains. Grandma's windows were covered with a gold embroidered cloth that she said reduced sun fade on her furniture. If it hadn't thrown sparkles of reflected sunlight at me, I'm sure I wouldn't have noticed the chandelier hanging from the room's ceiling with its crystal drops dangling like frozen water. Grandma's house only still held the medallion in the ceiling. She hadn't mentioned a chandelier. If I hadn't been breathing heavy, I wouldn't have noticed the smell of fresh roses. If I hadn't been in such a rush to leave, perhaps I would have realized that everything I could see, from the table in the kitchen to the sofa in the front room, looked as new and fresh as it did in the pictures of Grandma's house from her childhood. I could sense that something wasn't right, but I wasn't going to stop to find out what it was.

Mikey seemed to sense my panic. Even after I let go of his arm, he followed me to the door. My hands were shaking when I jerked it open.

I didn't know it then, but for the second time in twenty-four hours, I was about to wish I'd made a different choice.

5 - Bull-Nosed Brother

We hurried out the front door, across the wooden porch, and down the two steps onto the walkway. Our feet crunched on the gravel, but I didn't have time to think about the fact that Grandma's sidewalk was made from cement, not loose pebbles.

"Race you to the end," Mikey said. He took off without waiting for me.

I was tempted to run after him; I wanted to get away from the house before those two weirdoes changed their minds and came after us. Running, as you know, is not my strongest skill, and the ankle-length skirt of my stupid Halloween costume didn't make it any easier. I did try though, but gave up after a few steps. Mikey had already reached the end of the walkway when I heard the front door open behind me, and Mrs. Weather yell, "No." I turned to look at her. She had her face hidden in her hands. A second later, Jonas rushed past her and started running at me.

"Run, Mikey," I yelled. I knew I couldn't get away, but Mikey might be able to if I could give him a good head start. In three running leaps, Jonas had caught up to me, and he didn't look like he was going to stop. I did the one thing I could think of; I tackled him. If Mrs. Weather hadn't been hiding her eyes, I think that woman would have laughed aloud at me. My body had no momentum and even less weight. I barely interrupted his stride, but it was enough to make him slip on the loose gravel. We both went down. I hit my head on his elbow hard enough for it to hurt. He thudded against the ground, rolled, and stood up. I wondered if he'd had gymnastics training. Then he was off after Mikey again.

Jonas was too late.

The sounds were horrible even before I realized what had happened—wooden wheels skidding on dirt, horses neighing in anger or pain, a man yelling, and Mikey’s scream. That was the worst.

I jumped up and rushed down Grandma’s sidewalk. It’s long, yes, probably fifty-foot-long, but it seemed endless. By the time I reached the street, Jonas had already picked up Mikey and was carrying him back toward the house.

Mikey’s right ankle didn’t look quite right. His face and Tommy Hawks t-shirt were covered with dirt, and the right knee of his jeans was torn. Jonas didn’t even look at me. He strode right past followed by another man who I guessed must have been driving the carriage that hit Mikey. “Didn’t know he was there . . . darted out . . . can’t see round those bushes,” he was saying.

“He’ll be fine, Tyee. Go check on the horses then bring the rig around back and come inside,” Jonas said.

This Tyee hurried back the way he had come. I watched him because he’d just run over my brother; I didn’t trust him. His weathered expression made him look mean. His nose was straight except for a small bump near its bridge that looked like it had been broken at least once. He wore clean jeans like Jonas’s, but his seemed more worn. His bright blue shirt was too tight to button around his weight-lifters neck. He was taller than Jonas was, and he looked as though he could lift a wagon and change the wheel at the same time. His boots made his walk noiseless. A black felt hat hid his eyes but not the straight black hair cut just below his ears.

I followed Jonas into the house no longer thinking about the dirt street, or the horses and carriage, or the man called Tyee who had hurt my brother. All I could think of

was that I had been the one who'd told Mikey to run. I had dragged him out of the house. It was my idea that he could give me Heimlich if I choked on the blue pill, the one that somehow managed to send us both back in time to 1907. Yes, I was finally beginning to believe that we had traveled back in time, and all of this was my fault.

Jonas carried Mikey to the kitchen and set him in a chair. Mrs. Weather hurried off and back again with a leather wrap that she unrolled on the table. It held several brown glass bottles, a tin with white powder in it, and some cloths. She pulled a large bowl out of the cupboard and put some water in it. She grabbed a spoon from the drawer then set both on the table. She dumped the powder into the water and stirred.

Mikey winced as Jonas slid his pant leg up out of the way. I was surprised he wasn't crying or screaming. He sat there, barely moving, watching the scurrying that was going on around him. He didn't look at me until I spoke to him. "I'm so sorry, Mikey. I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

"Don't cry, Sis. It doesn't hurt too much. Besides, you should have seen me. I head butted the horse just the way that shark did. I knocked myself out of the way, mostly."

Mom and Dad always tried to give us what they called life-enriching experiences. You know what those are—places they take you to because they want to go, and they tell you it will be great, you'll have a wonderful time, and occasionally you do. When Mikey was eight, they took us to the Oklahoma Aquarium in Jenks. Mikey liked it, especially the sharks. When it was time to look at the rest of the exhibits there, he refused to leave. Dad stayed with him and Mom and I walked through the other areas by ourselves—mother/daughter bonding time she called it. It was O.K. I liked the seahorses and one eel,

too. It put on a light show just for me. At least that's what I thought until Mom told me they do that when they search for food. I should have known it wasn't showing off to get my attention. Later that night, Dad told us about Mikey's shark adventure.

For the first half-hour, Dad had said, Mikey stood in the middle of the walk-through tunnel right beneath the dome and watched the sharks swimming overhead. Dad said he couldn't blame Mikey; it was peaceful there with blue and gray water reflecting the dim light in the tunnel, and living creatures swimming in circles around it. Dad swore that one particular shark took as much interest in Mikey as he took in it. When it swam overhead, they could see its white belly and the dark tips of its fins. As it came down and whirled back and forth along the wall of the glass tunnel, its gray back was evident. The weirdest part was that it kept swimming right up to the glass and bumping its blunt nose against it. It didn't stop until Mikey walked over to it. They stared at each other for a moment, Mikey nodded his head, and then the shark swam away. When Dad asked Mikey what that was all about, he told him they were just talking.

One of the employees had watched the Mikey-shark encounter and came up to Dad afterward. He told Dad that no bull shark in the tank had ever done anything like that before. They will head-butt prey before they attack it, and they are resolute predators, but that was the only time he knew of that one had ever head-butted the glass.

I guess that's where Mikey got the idea. Poor horse.

Jonas felt Mikey's ankle and said, "I hope it's just a sprain, but it could be broken. I'm going to put a plaster on it."

He washed Mikey's ankle. Mrs. Weather dipped cloth strips into the bowl of white water, and then slid each one between two fingers to squeeze out the extra liquid.

She handed them to Jonas one at a time. He wrapped each around Mikey's ankle overlapping them as he went until Mikey's heel and ankle were well wrapped. "That should do it," he said, and then he stood up.

Mrs. Weather carried the bowl out back and sloshed the water away from the house. When she returned, she washed and dried the bowl then put it back in the cupboard. I guess she's a bit of a clean freak. Mrs. Weather dried her hands on the white apron she wore, and gave me a look that was a cross between I feel sorry for you and your brain must be on permanent vacation. "Are you quite satisfied with yourself? It's not bad enough that you can't follow one simple set of instructions. No. You show up with your brother in tow. Then instead of listening to what we are trying to tell you, you decide to run away from your responsibilities. The injury to your brother, not to mention Tyee's horses, is your doing."

The back door opened and Tyee stepped inside. He took off his hat and held it in his hands. "I hope the child is not badly injured," he said. He shuffled his feet as if wiping them on a rug that wasn't there. "The boy startled the horses when he ran out in front of them. I pulled them up, but—"

"It is not your fault, Tyee," Mrs. Weather said. She looked at me and added, "You were just doing—wait." She turned back toward Tyee. "Why are you here?"

"Is he the one?" Tyee asked, nodding toward Mikey. "Because we're in plenty of trouble if he is."

"No. He's our backup," Jonas said, not turning to look at Tyee. He stood up from where he had been kneeling to apply the plaster to Mikey's ankle. "He will be strong as an ox in a few days. It should not set back our plans by much. Does it hurt, young man?"

he asked Mikey. “Mrs. Weather has a few things in that bag for pain that she can give to you, but the only one I’d recommend is the aspirin. Most of the elixirs have ingredients that are illegal in your time, and probably would be in ours, too, if the doctors here knew any better.”

I watched Mikey. His cheeks no longer looked pink and healthy; they were pale, and his eyes were shiny. He stared at Jonas, but I don’t think he was seeing him.

“Put the boy to bed, Jonas,” Mrs. Weather said. “Tuck him in tight to keep him warm. He will be fine in a little while.”

Jonas started to leave the room carrying Mikey who wasn’t complaining at all.

“I’ll go with him.” I turned to leave, but Jonas shook his head. I stopped.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back,” he said.

“Sit, young lady.” Mrs. Weather pointed at the chair Mikey had vacated.

I sat.

“Are your horses injured, Tyee?” Mrs. Weather tucked a loose strand of black hair behind her ear. Her expression was pained and sympathetic until she looked at me.

“They fair better than the boy.” Tyee scratched the back of his neck and shifted from one foot to another.

“And your family? Are they well?”

Tyee looked at me then back at Mrs. Weather and nodded.

“Then why have you come? You are not supposed to be here for another week.”

“I have an important message that cannot wait,” Tyee said.

“Then sit for heaven’s sake. Jonas will be back in a moment, and then you can tell all of us. Perhaps what you have to say will impart a little common sense into this impulsive child.”

Tyee pulled out a chair and sat down, his hat still dangling in his hands. I noticed he also had a feather in his hat, but his wasn’t red. His looked real, like an Eagle’s feather. He looked at me with eyes as dark as his hair. “Is she the one then?” he said, turning his face toward Mrs. Weather.

“Yes, unfortunately.” Mrs. Weather pulled out a match that must have been six inches long. It was the biggest match I’d ever seen. She lifted a round cover from the stove, stuck in a few small pieces of chopped wood, struck the match, and stuck it down inside the hole. When she was satisfied that the wood was again burning, she asked, “Coffee, Jonas? I’ll make some more if you want it.”

Jonas strolled back into the kitchen without Mikey and sat down. “You know I’m up for some of your wicked black brew.” He picked up his hat and poked his finger through the hole again, pulled it out, and then put the derby back on his head. All the time he was looking at me. “He’s asleep,” he said. “You don’t have to worry.”

Except for Mrs. Weather scurrying around the kitchen, and the coffee starting to bubble and spit as it boiled on the stove, the room was quiet for a few minutes.

“Do we have anything to worry about?” Mrs. Weather asked. She set a tin cup of black coffee in front of Tyee, and then poured one for Jonas and another for her. She removed her apron and hung it on a hook by the stove, and then sat down with us. “Or can we go ahead with our original plans, which, I might remind someone, did not include that young man to begin with?”

I stewed in my own guilt. Nothing these people had to say mattered to me anymore. I couldn't change what I'd done to Mikey, and I had no idea what to do or say. I just sat there.

Tyee set his hat on the table and with both hands around the cup of coffee that Mrs. Weather had poured for him, he sipped at it. "I see you have been giving her lessons," he said, nodding at Jonas. "How many of those brown derbies have you ruined now poking holes in our universe?"

"Our universe is all a mess and about to get worse, and I doubt she will be of any help at all," Mrs. Weather said. "Shoot her back. Shoot them both back. We'd be better off taking care of this without them."

"She is staying in our time until she has done what we brought her here to do, which would be a great deal easier for all of us if you would stop scaring her half to death with your talk of shooting her and her brother." Jonas gulped the last swallow of coffee from his cup and slammed it down on the table. "Tell her what shooting means."

Mrs. Weather cleared her throat. "Well, I certainly didn't mean to imply . . . I was only . . . you see . . . it is technically—"

"Forget it. I will explain. That is what we call it when you travel through time—shooting. Your brother must have touched you just as you shot. Mrs. Weather was suggesting that we send him back to his own time, not that we use bullets on him. Do you understand?"

"The term," I said, "but not how this relates to my mom's kidnapping and what I'm supposed to do to save her."

"Exactly what we tell you," Mrs. Weather said.

I looked at her and realized she didn't scare me anymore. I'd completely forgotten about her weird cat costume. Now she looked just like any other older woman. Though I do respect my elders, her age didn't mean she could get away with acting like, as Mikey said, a witch. I was about to tell her that when Tyee spoke up.

"How soon will she be ready? The news I have is not good."

"We have not started her testing let alone her training," Jonas said.

"Then we will not succeed and must abandon our quest. The preacher is telling his faithful that he must be moving on sooner than he planned. He claims there are other flocks far away that are in greater need of his holy word than are the good people here."

Mrs. Weather choked on the coffee she was sipping. "What? When is he leaving?"

"Two days he is promising. No more."

They all stared at me like my whole face were a giant zit, and Mrs. Weather looked like she wanted to pop it.

"Then you must take Alexi there now, Tyee," Jonas said.

"Wait. Take me where? I'm not going anywhere except to find my mom, and I'm certainly not leaving Mikey here with her."

Jonas nodded, his expression as serious looking as Mrs. Weather's puckered mouth. "I understand how you feel. This is sudden and we've had no time to prepare you. The best we can do now is to give you as much information as we can. What we don't have time to explain, Tyee will tell you on the way."

"This is a very bad idea." Mrs. Weather stood up from the table. "You know I can override your decision. I agreed to let you take charge of this mission because you and

her mother have been friends for a very long time, but I'm still in charge here, and it is my opinion that we should do it ourselves. I'm quite skilled at changing my appearance to deceive people. It could work. It should work." Mrs. Weather looked at me, and though you might not believe it, I swear her pupils narrowed into slits.

"He will be suspicious of any adult that tries to get too near him now. You know that, Meri." Jonas reached out and patted Mrs. Weather's hand. "He's running away because he knows we will be coming for him. He won't trust anyone he doesn't already know. But he will want to see her once he knows she's Mrs. Mackey's daughter. She is the only one who can get close enough to find out where he is keeping Helen. It has to be her."

Tyee stood up and settled his hat on his head. "It was polite of you to ask about my horses, Mrs. Weather. Perhaps you would accompany me to the barn to check on them."

Mrs. Weather gave Jonas and Tyee the same look Mom gives Mikey and me when she thinks we might be lying to her. Of course, I've learned not to blink, look away, or say "What?" like Mikey does. That's the biggest giveaway. I could tell Tyee wasn't fooling Mrs. Weather either, but she left with him.

"I'm not going with him," I said once they were outside. "You can't make me."

"Of course I cannot. I wouldn't try to force you to do anything you did not want to do."

That wasn't exactly true, I thought. You're the one who gave me that pill and said I had to take it to save my Mom and Mikey and, oh, yeah Tomai, too.

“The decision is up to you. It is only right that you know what is at stake before you decide, though. That preacher and I have had, let us say, dealings in the past.” Jonas leaned back in his chair and crossed his hands behind his head. His eyes narrowed as if he were thinking about something or someone. He settled his chair again and continued.

“While most of the men of the cloth that I know are good men, true devotees whose whole purpose in life is to help others and spread the gospel, this preacher is not one of them. He perverts the gospel to suit his purposes; you would be wise to see him for what he is—a fake, self-absorbed and evil—not a genuine representative of the faith. This preacher has his own agenda. I did not know how he intended to carry it out until yesterday, though. I am sorry that he chose to involve your mother. I expected he would choose me out of plain spite. But he did not, and that’s why Mrs. Weather and I came for you.”

“My mother? How can she have anything to do with this, Jonas?”

“Yes, well, when you reached age eighteen, your mother would have told you all about it. You then would have been tested. If you had passed, the choice whether to join us or not would have been yours to make. It means dedicated training for weeks just to teach you the most important things you need to know, and then there is the oath of secrecy and an internship before you would be allowed to go on your first assignment with your mentor. Once the board agreed you were ready, then you would be able to go on a mission by yourself, and then others, if Mrs. Weather approved of your actions and behavior on that first mission. Even then, though, your work would be monitored for at least another year.”

“That sounds worse than trying to become a doctor.”

Jonas laughed. “In some ways, it might well be. At least you’d be in one place and one time if you studied to be a doctor. That’s not the case for us time police. I’m sure you understand when I saw that we could not take the chance a new recruit might make a mistake we could not correct. If a doctor makes a mistake, it likely will affect several people. If a time cop makes a mistake, it could impact the entire world.”

I felt like someone had thrown a fruit slushie in my face and it was jumbling my thoughts—training, oath, mission—all words that meant nothing to me. I wiped my palms on my skirt and shifted in the chair.

“I know this is a lot for you to take in all at once, but I was not lying to you when I told you that your mom needed your help,” Jonas said.

This was the second time today I’d felt my throat squeeze almost closed. I could not speak.

“All of the evidence points to this preacher as being the one who kidnapped your mother.”

I jumped up from my seat. “Where is he?”

“Whoa. There is much more you need to know. Please, sit back down.”

I crossed my arms and stood there. “After you tell me everything. Maybe.”

“Suit yourself.” He stood up and walked to the stove with his cup, shook the coffee pot, and when it made no sound, he set both in the sink. “I have had enough anyway,” he said.

“Is my mom safe?” I asked. “Tell me that first.”

“The preacher needs her. He can’t accomplish his goal without her help; so I think she’s safe enough for now.”

“What was that pill you made me take, and how come it glowed and shrunk?”

“Yes. That little blue pill is a bit tougher to explain. Perhaps if you knew where it came from—” Jonas rubbed his chin and leaned back against the sink. “Back in 1859, a man named Lewis Ross was trying to sink a deep well on his land to pump and evaporate the water in order to collect the salt. Instead of water, he struck oil. The pressure release pushed out the oil until it finally stopped about a year later. After the last of the ground dried, a layer of shimmering blue dust covered the earth where the oil pool had been. One of the early homesteaders came across it while looking for his missing calf, and decided it was pretty enough that his wife might like it. He scooped it up and took it home to her. She sifted it out of the dirt and kept it in a carved wooden box on her fireplace hearth until one day a traveling show came to their town. Stories say the wife was mesmerized by all of the elixirs the fancy salesman showed her. She thought that maybe he’d be interested in buying the blue dust her husband had found, and they needed the money. She chose to sell it to him. Stories about strange hallucinations and lost time followed the traveling show after that.”

“So, people ate the dust?”

“Or accidentally breathed it in, yes.”

“But, if people figures out what it did, how could there be any left now? I mean, that was almost fifty years ago.”

”You are quite right. Let me finish my story. I think you’ll understand then. Years before Mr. Ross struck oil on his land, the Chickasaw agent for that region—a bit of an entrepreneur himself—had heard about the oil springs in Oklahoma that were said to cure everything from Rheumatism to dropsy. He’d visited them once and noticed the blue

shimmer on the water. He didn't think any more about it until one day the traveling show came to his town, and he saw the salesman's blue elixir. He bought a bottle and planned to send it back East for testing. Since he had a bad hip that caused him a great deal of pain, he decided to try a sip of it first. He was bright enough to know what happened to him, and willing to believe he'd traveled through time to the future and back again."

I sat down. Jonas did, too. His story was unsettling and hard to believe, but not any more than was the fact that I now sat at Grandma's table before this even was her kitchen. Or that her pair of pecan trees in the backyard were still babies. Or that Mikey was upstairs with an injured ankle that he received from running out in front of a horse-drawn buggy. "You mean that blue stuff really does make people travel through time?"

"Time travel dust puked from the ground," Mike said, and then he hopped into the kitchen and sat down in a chair. "Cosmic vomitus. That's what I'll call it. Is that what Alexi swallowed?"

"What are you doing up, young man?" Jonas said. "That ankle needs to be immobilized while it heals."

"It's nothing. I've done worse falling off my skateboard. Why'd you put this cast on it anyway? Skip it. Can you get it off? It feels like s—"

"Mikey. Watch your mouth," I said before he could finish his sentence. Lord, I thought, I sound like my mother already.

"I was only going to say it feels like soap tastes. Tell us the rest of the story."

"I wasn't exactly telling your sister a story, but she does need to understand what she will be volunteering for. The agent I was talking about, well, he was away from home when two men came to his house and killed his wife. Common thieves they were, and

they had not meant to kill her, but that did not matter to the agent. He grieved for days until he realized he might be able to do something about it. He used the elixir to travel back in time to try to save his wife.”

Jonas rubbed the back of his neck and stretched.

“Well, did he?” Mikey asked. “Go back in time and save his wife?”

“The records about what happened are sealed. Not one person on the board will talk about it either, so we do not know for sure whether or not he was able to go back in time, but we suspect he may have succeeded, but with calamitous consequences. The best I can tell you is that no mention of his wife exists after the date of her death. In fact, nothing now exists in historical records about the discovery of the blue dust either, only about the discovery of oil. Some of us suspect that the incident with the agent is the reason that the original board of time-travelers was formed.

“You mean, you think that the agent violated the Grandfather paradox of time travel?”

“You surprise me, Alexi. Where did you learn about the Grandfather paradox?”

“I like science fiction. Why’s that such a surprise?”

“She’s wrong, anyway,” Mikey said. “It has to be more like the Novikov self-consistency principle. That’s a more sound theory of time travel since it’s based on mathematics.”

Jonas laughed. “You really do have your hands full with this little man, don’t you Alexi? For a couple of youngsters who did not even know their parents were time-travel agents until today, you have a pretty good idea of what this all means.”

Mikey rubbed his hand over the top of his head and shrugged his shoulders.

“Let us see how true that is, Mikey. If the Novikov self-consistency principle is in effect here, what does that mean for the blue dust?” Jonas asked.

“Well,” Mikey said, “I guess it means that just because someone found it that doesn’t mean it will always be there. Once it became possible to travel in time using the blue dust, anyone that had it could travel back in time to when it was found, and take the dust so that no one else ever finds it. The fact that someone uses the blue dust to go back in time to find the blue dust means that everything is changed slightly—it becomes a causal loop. Given enough tries, you might be able to completely eliminate the time travel dust, but even that’s questionable since each time you travel back, something would be different.”

“Nicely done. Are you sure you are only ten years old?” Jonas leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. A squeak of a smile slid up one side of his lips. I think he was impressed with Mikey’s answer, but I thought Mikey’s answer was nonsense. “Yes. Causal loop,” Jonas said.

Mikey smiled. “See, Sis. I know what I’m talking about. Even Jonas agrees.”

Jonas held up his hand to stop me from replying. “Not needed,” he said. “Mikey, if someone succeeded at taking all of the blue dust about the same time it was discovered, what would happen to us, the time travelers?”

You know how sometimes you can look straight at someone’s eyes and realize they don’t even see you? That’s what Mikey looked like for a moment. He didn’t move at all, not even a twitch or a blink. Then he looked at each of us. “Probably,” he said, “none of us would even exist. We certainly would not be here talking about this. Or perhaps we would exist, but not in any way that we now live.”

“Excellent analysis. You can see why it is so important that our group does exist then, can’t you? And, hopefully, you also can understand why we cannot let the preacher get his hands on enough pills to implement his plans.”

“Mikey might get it,” I said. “But I’m confused.”

“It’s simple, Sis. I guess the preacher and the time-travelers group are in a battle to control the dust. I figure that whoever wins that battle will control time and become the only person who gets to manipulate it. Right, Jonas?”

“That’s it exactly, Mikey. The preacher, like you, has a strong interest in math. I do not pretend to know how he worked out that six trips through time would give him mastery of the time travel dust and effectively wipe out our group leaving no one to repair the damage he does to the timeline and to individual historical events, but he seems to believe it. That alone makes it critical for us to stop him before we do not even know that he has succeeded with his plan.”

“Won’t the dust just disappear on him like the pills do if he can’t use them in time?” I asked. “I mean, that could stop him from succeeding, couldn’t it?”

“Good question, Alexi. After the incident with the agent, our scientists developed a chemical they mix with the blue dust that turns it into a pill and makes it shrink and disappear after a few hours. The untreated dust is what the preacher is after. That, if you will excuse the pun, has no time limit on it.”

“What does he want with our mom?” I asked. “It makes no sense.”

“You’re doing it again,” Mikey said.

He was right. I was tapping my foot on the floor. “Leave me alone. I can’t help it.”

“Doesn’t it make sense? Think about it for a minute. Have you two ever seen any pictures of your mom when she was a child?”

I shook my head. “But that’s no big deal. She said her pictures were all lost in a fire before she even met Dad.”

“Does she ever leave you with anyone for a few days, like maybe your Grandmother?”

“Sure,” Mikey said. “We’ve stayed at Grandma’s lots of time.”

“And where is your dad when your mom is gone.”

“Usually on a business trip,” I said. “He has to travel a lot.”

“Yeah.” Mikey laughed. “He keeps—”

“—the world running.” We both finished the sentence. “Our dad trains people to use and repair optical comparators . . . shadow graphs. They project an image of something, which then can be replicated. Or something like that. He has to travel the world for his work. He goes wherever they need him.”

“Exactly,” Jonas said. “That’s also like what your mother does. Instead of repairing machines that project images, though, she repairs time. And your mother and father, like the rest of us, had to develop a solid cover and a whole separate life to keep their real one a secret.”

“We are their real life,” I said. Now I was getting angry. I slammed my hand on the table. It wasn’t my best decision; it stung, but I wasn’t going to let that show. “Not you and certainly not some stupid secret society.”

“What do you mean, cover?” Mikey asked. He didn’t look at me or react to my outburst, but then, he’d seen a lot of them. “The secret-spy-like-James-Bond kind?”

He is very frustrating.

“I guess you could say that. We are all volunteers, which means we can quit when we want to, but we must stop after we reach age forty. Some people have tried to go longer, but most of the time it has not ended well.”

Jonas coughed and he didn't cover his mouth. Yuk.

“I know this is difficult to understand and to believe, but you must realize that your mom loves her family and her job. They aren't mutually exclusive to her.” He laughed. There was no pebble-stuck-in-throat sound to it, though. It was warm and normal, like Dad's laugh. “I cannot tell you, Alexi, how many times your mom told me she could not wait until you were old enough to go with her on Take Your Child to Work Day. The work your mom and dad do is very important to everyone everywhere. They both know it. Like the other time travelers, she has access to the pills that the preacher needs in order to carry out his plan. But she has something else he needs, too. She has the ability to—”

Tyee came running through the kitchen door; Mrs. Weather followed a couple moments behind him. “We have to go now,” he said. “My cousin just left. He told me the preacher is taking down his tent. He will be gone before the sun sets.”

6 - My Moriarty

The best part about being rushed into a decision is that you don't have enough time for your stomach to squeeze the common sense out of your brain, for your hands to tremble, or for your mind to work out the approach you should take: logical or emotional. Wait. Maybe that last one is the worst part. Anyway, it's like a flash flood that sweeps you away and all you can do is ride along with it and pray that you live through it. Once you do, however, then you want to analyze what happened and figure out how to keep it from happening to you ever again.

Sherlock Holmes was a bit like that. He could see clues that were invisible to most, and even almost caught his arch nemesis in several stories. Sometimes, Sherlock—blinded by his own sense of infallibility—found he was doing the exact thing Moriarty, his archenemy, wanted him to do. Moriarty had conned him.

Even though I wasn't totally convinced Mikey and I weren't also being conned, I have to admit that I was worried about Mikey being right and the preacher succeeding at his plan. Either way, my mom was still missing and I believed the preacher was to blame. So, since I'm not very good at planning, I left all of that up to Jonas, Mrs. Weather, and Tye. After the three of them finished discussing what to do and drank a whole other pot of coffee, Mrs. Weather packed food for us in a real picnic basket with handles, and Tye brushed and watered his horses.

"You cannot go looking like that," Mrs. Weather said as she led me by the elbow up the stairs to the third floor through what looked like a nursery with all of the dolls and toys that lined the shelves, and into the back room. It was laid out and furnished like a studio apartment; it had everything you could need except a kitchen. Although much less

ornate than the rest of the house's furnishings, the room felt comfortable with its delicate blue walls, curved ceiling, and the archway that led to a small alcove. It held a double bed with a patchwork quilt of squares in bright colors and patterns. I didn't know they had such vibrant fabrics back then, hence my choice of such a drab color of costume.

Mrs. Weather pulled something out of the dresser, and then opened a hidden door that revealed a closet. Though it seemed like it, I guess it wasn't really a secret door, but it did blend in with the wooden paneling so well that I hadn't notice it. Looking at it, you wouldn't suspect it was there. She pulled out a blouse and skirt and set them on the bed. They didn't look much different from the costume that I still had on, although the skirt at least was soft pink instead of brown, and it closed with two fabric loops on one side rather than a row of buttons up the front. "Put everything on. You must be properly dressed." She turned her back to me to give me some privacy while I changed.

"Mrs. Weather, will the preacher really be able to destroy everything as it exists now?" I pulled off my dirty brown skirt and looked at the underclothes, the white blouse, and the pink skirt she had laid out for me. The two side button loops looked a little stiff, but I thought I could manage to get them buttoned.

"Unfortunately, it is quite possible."

"But how do you know for sure? Maybe nothing bad will happen even if he does succeed in getting the pills."

Mrs. Weather was quiet for a moment. She still stood with her back to me. Finally, she said, "What do you think the world would be like now if Hitler had not committed suicide in his bunker, but had instead managed to escape and fought on, maybe eventually even winning the war?"

I hated even to think about that possibility. “If he’d won, I guess all of us would be living under Nazi rule.”

“And there would not be a single living Jew in the world. What color is your hair?”

That seemed like a strange question, but I was beginning to understand where she was going with it. “Brown,” I said.

“Hitler’s idea of a perfect Arian nation meant blond hair and blue eyes. Where would you fit in that ideal?”

“I guess I wouldn’t,” I whispered.

“Your brother’s friend, Tomai, he is black is he not?”

“Yes, but what does that matter?”

“If General Robert E. Lee had succeeded against Union Gen. George G. Meade’s troops at the Battle of Gettysburg, do you think Tomai would be free to attend the same school as your brother, or even be allowed to be his friend?”

“Are you saying that a time-traveler had something to do with that, too?”

Mrs. Weather did not answer. I took that as a yes.

I removed my dirty blouse and slipped on the camisole followed by the starched and ironed white blouse Mrs. Weather had provided. My hands felt stiff and a little sore as I tried to button it, but I wasn’t sure why they seemed not to want to cooperate. “How does the preacher even know about the pills or the blue dust? Is he a time traveler, too?”

I heard Mrs. Weather grunt and snort at the same time, kind of the way a trained pig might when it’s rooting out its favorite food—wild mushrooms. “He tried,” she said. “It did not take long for the board to figure out that he was not suited for the work. If they

had listened to me the first time, however, they never would have started his training, and we would not have to be dealing with him now.”

I finished the last button on the high collar; the starched fabric grated against my neck and made the room feel too warm. I decided to unbutton the collar once we left and Mrs. Weather wouldn't be there to lecture me about her idea of being a properly dressed young lady. “But, if he can time-travel, why doesn't he just go back and collect the dust before anyone even discovers it's there?”

“He tried that once and almost succeeded. Now we have time-travelers guarding that place and time. No matter how early he arrives, we have someone there already.”

“What about the blue shiny water? Could he use that?”

“The board already tried. Its composition is different, perhaps because it is dissolved into the spring's waters. If a person soaks in it long enough, they do eventually heal of their ailments, and sometimes they even experience hallucinations, but they do not actually time travel.”

“What if you—“

“No, you cannot dry it out and use it the same way you use the powder. It simply does not work like that.”

I removed Grandma's cameo brooch from my dirty blouse, sat down at the dressing table to look in the mirror, and pinned it on my right shoulder. The collar was too tight to put it up on my neck. I stood again and faced Mrs. Weather. “O.K. I'm dressed.”

She turned around and looked me up and down. “Better.” She said.

“May I ask you one other question?”

Mrs. Weather nodded, and then shooed me to the dressing table chair to sit down. She picked up the silver-backed brush with bore bristles that matched the hand mirror sitting there. I knew what the brush was made from because Grandma has one just like it. “You can travel through time, too, right?”

“I could once.” She sounded a little sad when she said that, but then her voice returned to its same stiff tone.

”But you’re too old now, aren’t you?” I didn’t mean to insult her; it just burst out. I told you my brain-to-mouth control was unreliable.

You can imagine how the rest of my makeover went after that. She tamed my frizzy brown hair into compliance; it felt as though she was using a whip and chair. She then piled it up on my head in a bun that was tight enough that it made my brain ache. I kept quiet; it wasn’t as though she was going to show me any sympathy. She pointed out the ceramic water pitcher and bowl that sat on a stand next to the bed. Green roses were splayed around it. Doesn’t this woman like anything besides green roses? She handed me a cleaning cloth that enclosed a cake of soap about twice as thick as any Mom had ever bought for us. It smelled like lard and lavender, and it felt as though it would sand smooth rather than wash the dirt off my face.

“Your old shoes will have to do,” she said. “I doubt we have anything that will fit you, and they don’t look too out of place. Give them to me and I will clean them up for you.”

She was gone for only a minute, but the shoes did look a little better when she brought them back. She handed them to me and said, “Now hurry and finish getting ready then come straight downstairs.” She closed the door behind her. I could hear the heels of

her shoes clicking on the wooden steps as she retreated down the stairs. Mikey was still in the kitchen when I came down.

“Hey Sis. You look like a real young lady.” I’m not sure he meant it because he snickered when he said it.

“She is a young lady,” Mrs. Weather said, “even if her manners don’t reflect it.”

I wanted to be mad at her for that comment, but I couldn’t. Maybe it was because I felt and looked more like an adult in clean clothes, or perhaps it was because she was at least a little bit right. Besides, I still had questions I wanted her to answer. I cleared my throat and said in the most mature voice I could manage, “Please accept my apology, Mrs. Weather. We have been much too much trouble for you.”

Mrs. Weather dropped the tin cup she was drying and turned to stare at me. It felt like she was trying to give me a spinal tap only without Rob Perry’s special medical device. Still, I gave her my salesperson smile—a touch of teeth showing, not too much curve on my lips, and eyes wide open—that makes me appear to be innocent no matter how guilty I am. “If you can travel through time, you can go to any time that you want. Why do you live in 1907? Why don’t you live in 2014, 3000, or some other year?”

“This year is a special one in Oklahoma’s history; it is the year of great progress—a time when the Indian Nation and the Oklahoma Territory finally come together to be one strong land, to become part of this country, and to have a say in how it is run. Each day presents a new and interesting challenge, yet I don’t have to use an outhouse or light oil lamps to see to work in the evening. I also don’t have to concern myself with possible radiation from electronics all around me, and I can sit on the front porch and talk to my neighbors without being gassed by car exhaust. If you listen,

especially in the summer and just as the sun sets, you can hear the prairie winds sweeping the plains and breathe in the sweet smell of ripening summer wheat.”

Wow. Guess I hit a soft spot. I think Mrs. Weather would have gone on if Jonas and Tyee hadn't come in from out back just then. Both men stopped before even wiping their feet or closing the door and gaped at me. It made me feel giddy and embarrassed at the same time.

“What in the world are you two staring at? Haven't you ever seen a proper young lady?” Mrs. Weather nudged them toward the table. She brushed past and grabbed her apron from the hook. She tied it with deliberation in back, “because,” as she later told me, “I was fixin' to get those prairie chickens cleaned, and I did not want to make a mess of my clothes.” She lifted the first bird by its two ankles and carried it to the cast iron stove. “I will admit that chicken plucking and laundry day are the two things that are not better in 1907.” She dunked the fat little fowl into the pot of water that was bubbling on the stove. A puff of steam spread up and out and made the kitchen smell like singed hair and dirty wet socks. “If I could still travel, I would shoot for 2041 with my laundry in hand. It would be done in no time with the wash-dry-press-fold machines they have built right into the wall of each home in that year.” She swung the now scalded, dripping creature back to the sink and began plucking out its feathers. “I guess my great-great-granddaughter would be happy enough to see me now and again.”

“I will take you there anytime you would like,” Tyee said.

“A generous offer from a man who knows it would likely mean permanent disfiguration for me.”

“The only other assistance I can offer you then would be to go in your place. I would be happy to do that. I could give your great-great-granddaughter your best wishes.”

“If I even hear that you are thinking about—”

“Mrs. Weather. This is not the time. Tyee and I have everything prepared for the ride except for the food.”

“Is there food?” Mikey asked. “I’m starved. That chicken smells great.”

Despite my brother’s skewed sense of smell and the disgusting odor of wet feathers and old coffee that lingered in the kitchen, my stomach growled.

“I made up sandwiches for each of you. You will have to eat on the way. If you arrive after the preacher leaves, you may not get to Mrs. Mackey in time.” Mrs. Weather scrunched her eyebrows together. I think I was the only one who figured out that she had just made a tiny joke, though it was lame. I wondered whether she’d said it by accident.

The next few minutes were a mad rush, like a river after a hundred-year storm.

“You’ll take Mikey back to our time, right? You promised.”

Tyee helped me up into the carriage, and then came around and stepped in.

“Yes, I will do what Tyee tells me,” I replied to the question Jonas had not asked aloud.

Jonas snugged the picnic basket and a stack of extra blankets onto the floor behind the seat while Tyee spread a quilt made from bright squares of flowery fabric across my lap to keep the red dust off my clothes.

Mrs. Weather must have thought I couldn't remember anything because she was popping questions at me like little information bullets she hoped would embed themselves in my brain.

“Got it—just give her the blue pill before it shrinks into nothing then we will both shoot out of there easy peasy.”

“Do I have the pill? Of course. It's in the little bag you gave to me.”

“That little bag is called a pochette. It is the perfect thing for a young woman like you. If you did not carry one these days, you would stand out from the crowd. I gave you the smallest one that I have hoping you can keep it in your pocket. Is it there?”

“Yes.”

“Show it to me.” I pulled the pochette out of my skirt and handed it to her. She opened it, looked inside, and closed it again. “Very well. Do not let it out of your sight.” Mrs. Weather then turned to Tyee. “As usual, I put something special in the basket for Ahawe. Now off with you two.”

Jonas shook Tyee's hand. “We are depending on you.”

Tyee nodded, and then clucked and snapped the reins. The horse and surrey in which we now sat took off at a trot, but as soon as we cleared the last turn, it leaped into a wild run. Initially I wondered why we'd switched from his two horses and carriage to a cute little black surrey with a single horse, but she was light and fast. I figured it out. Time—my Moriarty.

When the horse slowed to a gentle trot, I asked the one question I knew always drove my dad nuts. “Are we there yet?” I wasn't trying to be Miss Smartypants, although

Dad usually thought I was. The sterner Dad became about it, the harder Mom would laugh.

“Are we there yet?”

“Don’t even start.”

Giggle.

“How much longer?” That was Mikey’s Mr. Smarty pants question, although he liked to change it to something else now and then.

“Not you, too.”

Chuckle.

“Seriously, Dad. I’m tired of sitting in the car. When will we get there?”

“You can see the clock and you know how to subtract. Figure it out.”

Laugh.

“Dad?” It was Mikey’s turn, but that was as long as Mom could hold it in. Once she started with that donkey-snorting laugh of hers, none of us could help ourselves. We hooted and chortled until, if our voices had been bubbles, we’d have been scrubbed clean.

Now that I didn’t have to duck my face against the blowing dirt, I began to feel the warmth of the sun and hear the rolling, cackling song of a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. It’s my favorite bird. The methodic, rhythmic clapping of the horse’s hoofs on the dirt made me feel a little sleepy. I decided to talk to Tyee. I really had no idea what to say to him beyond discussing the plan, and I didn’t want to think about that right now, so I settled for something simple. “She’s beautiful.” The horse seemed to know I was talking about her. She gave a little cricket-like nicker and tossed her head. Her tail flicked and

swished across her back, brushing against her chestnut-colored coat that glistened a little red in the sun “Have you owned her long?”

“Ahawe? No. I do not own her.

“Oh. I just assumed—I mean—” I stopped speaking. This wasn’t going the way I’d expected. I shifted on the hard seat and tucked my hands under my skirt.

“I am not a horse thief, if that is what you think,” Tyee said. “I found Ahawe when she was a small colt. Her leg was caught in a prairie dog hole. I dug the dirt out from around her foot and freed her. We travel together because she chooses to.”

“That’s kind of sweet.” As soon as I said it, I knew Tyee either would laugh at me or be insulted, but he didn’t laugh nor seem to be mad at me. He just nodded his head, and then gave the reins a gentle shake. In response, Ahawe lifted her nose and snorted into the breeze, but did not hurry her pace. “She goes at her own speed, too. I can encourage her, but she is the one who chooses. She chose to take us today. I think she likes you.”

It felt nice to think that Ahawe liked me, but the seat felt hard. I stuffed more skirt beneath me to try to pad the ride. I closed my eyes and let the morning sun warm my face, and could almost feel Tyee looking at me. I drew in a deep breath, and then coughed it out from a stiff poke in my back.

“Jeez, Alexi. I didn’t think you’d get that choked up to see me.” Mikey sat upright in the second seat, and laughed, probably at the look on my face. I planned to make sure he wasn’t laughing for long.

“How stupid can you be?” I yelled at him.

Mikey stuck his tongue out at me, and then sulked back on the bench. “I was only doing what I was told to do. I’m not stupid.” I felt him kick the back of my seat, but chose to ignore him.

“We have to take him back, Tyee. He can’t come with us.”

“No time,” Tyee said.

“Wait. What? Who told you to come with us?”

“I’m not telling you. I’m mad at you.” Mikey crossed his arms and stared straight ahead, acting as though he couldn’t see or hear me.

“You’re being ridiculous. Nobody told you to sneak into the back and hide until we were too far out to take you back.” When he only stared at me, I turned back to Tyee. “He couldn’t have gotten in here without someone helping him. Did you know about this?”

“If I’d called you stupid,” Mikey said, “you’d have made me eat dirt before you’d speak to me again.”

“O.K. Fine. I apologize. You’re not stupid.”

“Jonas.”

“What about him?”

“Jonas told me I had to come and look after you.”

“But, Mrs. Weather and Jonas both said you had to stay there to heal, and then they were going to shoot you back to our time. I don’t understand. What happened?”

“How should I know? While you and Mrs. Weather were upstairs, Jonas asked me how my ankle felt. I told him it was fine. He asked if I thought I could walk on it without the plaster. I told him, of course I can. The plaster was still damp, so he cut it and peeled

it off. Then he took me to his room, and he had to dig deep, but he found one of his shirts from when he was young and gave it to me.”

“His taste hasn’t changed much,” I said. “At least this plaid is brown instead of red.”

“Look what else he gave me?” Mikey bent down and pulled something up from the floor of the surrey. He slipped the derby onto his head. It sat much lower on Mikey’s head than it had on Jonas’s; it covered Mikey’s ears and his forehead. “He was afraid I’d get my bald head sunburned. He wouldn’t give me the feather, though. He said he’d need it for his next derby, and that I had to earn my own.”

“Well, I declare.” Now I’m starting to sound like my grandmother.

“He gave me something else, too.” Mikey bent down and brought up a yellow straw hat with a pink ribbon on it that matched the skirt I was wearing. “Jonas said Mrs. Weather wouldn’t miss it. She hates straw hats and only keeps that one buried at the back of her closet to take it out when her niece comes to visit since she’s the one who gave it to her. Watch the pin on the side there,” he said as he handed it to me. “I already stuck myself.” He licked his finger.

As I settled it on my head, Ahawe must have decided she was rested enough. She took off at high speed again. The hat blew right off and landed in Mikey’s lap. Stupid hat.

“I’m not going to wear it,” he said.

“Very funny. Give it here.” I took the hat back and resettled it. I pulled the spike-like pin out from the side and stuck it crosswise through the straw and my hair bun that Mrs. Weather ensured wouldn’t ever come down. Just to be safe, as long as Ahawe was moving fast enough to flap the edges of the straw, I kept one hand on it.

After another ten minutes, the horse slowed to a prance, her hair glistening with sweat in the late morning sun. Stocks and stocks of golden wheat stood on one side of the almost road—I called it that because it was just a bunch of wagon wheel tracks that had trampled that part of someone’s farmland. On the right side of our path, the ground was covered in large clumps of grass with seed heads that branched out in three directions. I guessed the owner of this land hadn’t had time to plant that section yet. Now that we’d slowed down and I didn’t have to worry about bugs smashing into my teeth or committing suicide in my mouth, I could speak again. “We’re almost there, aren’t we? What are we going to do about Mikey?”

Tyee looked at me, lowered his head, and shrugged his shoulders. “That is up to you and Mikey. Jonas thought you would figure it out.”

“Hey. How come that grass is blue?” Mikey stood up and held onto the back of my seat. Even at Ahawe’s slow pace, the large wooden wheels of our surrey bounced me around each time one of them dropped into a dip or bumped over a dirt clod.

He was right. I hadn’t noticed it at first, but the main stem on the tall clumps of prairie grass had a definite blue-greenish sort of color. There were smaller stems of grass mixed in among the tall ones, too. They had feathery flowers that made them look like they’d be happy to fly away in the wind, along with my hat.

“That is Bluestem grass,” Tyee said. “The Big Bluestem can grow as tall as a man if the land is blessed with enough rain. These grasses were forage for the buffalo and now feed the settlers’ cattle. When settlers first moved to Oklahoma, most only knew how to build their homes from wood, but as you can see, trees are not plentiful on these plains. Settlers soon realized they too would have to learn to use what the land provided. Tribal

members taught them to cut the prairie grass into strips and stack them with their roots to the sun. These homes they call soddies.”

“Cosmic vomitus. Sod houses. What other great stuff do you have in 1907?”

Mikey asked.

“Lots of hardy, strong people live here in Oklahoma. Some of them, like Jonas and Mrs. Weather are wonderful people. I think it is the main reason Mrs. Weather chose to live in this state and in this time.”

“What about you, Tyee?” I asked. “Were you born here?”

“No. My tribe, the Chinook, live in the north. I am here now because, like your parents and Mrs. Weather, I must choose a place and time for my cover when I have to stop traveling. Oklahoma has many tribes, so I feel at home here; I can walk freely among all without worry that I might stand out. Yet because my tribe is not from here, I cannot be found through my tribe. It keeps everyone safe.”

“But why would you have to hide anyway?” Mikey asked. “Did you do something really awful?”

Tyee laughed, his voice deep and rumbling, but it sounded like a playful storm cloud chasing a dust devil across the prairie. “Let me ask you a question, Mikey. I know you have friends, but do you know anyone that you do not like?”

“Sure. I don’t like those boys who threw water balloons at me last year or that girl at school who thought I had pulled her hair when it really was Tomai who did it. Plus I don’t like mean people.”

“And is there anyone who does not like you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Probably. I think Dustan Roberts doesn’t like me. But I don’t know why. I never did anything to him.”

“I am sure that you gave him no reason to not like you. But some people are unhappy, so they find a reason not to like other people. The reason can be as simple as you accidentally having stepped on their toe, and you may not even have known that you did. For those people, that is reason enough to want to hurt you. It is not right, but sometimes you cannot change their mind no matter what you say or do. In that case, the best you can do is to stay away from them. We time travelers run into many people like that over the years of trips we take and the things we have to do to protect time. Some of those people want to hurt us for something they think we may have done to them. Once we can no longer travel, we need a place and time where none of those people would think to look for us, and an established different kind of life to act as our cover. Do you understand?”

“Sure. Hey, how much longer until we get there?”

I didn’t hear the conversation Mikey and Tyee had after that because I was intent on figuring out how to rescue Mom, keep Mikey from getting into trouble, and planning a way to get my little brother back to 2014 with us. That meant I also wasn’t paying much attention to anything else going on around me. Until it pulled alongside our surrey, I hadn’t even noticed the horse and buggy that had been slowly catching up to us.

“Good morning, Tyee. Fine day for a ride to a tent revival, is it not?” The young woman held the horse’s reins level above her plain skirt, her white gloves still clean. Her hat hung off her shoulders behind her back secured by a knot made from its yellow ribbons. She was leaning forward to see around the man who sat on the seat next to her. I

could tell by her suntan and position in the driver's seat that she didn't believe young women needed hats or men for protection. I watched her smile at Tyee. I knew that look—honeyed and blameless with a touch of dragon's breath beneath it—the one that few boys could turn away from. I hadn't mastered it yet, but I had convinced Mom to show me how to do it, and I'd been practicing in front of my mirror.

“Tyee touched his hat. Thank you for coming on such short notice, Miss Serene. Tom. I was not sure my cousin would get my message to you in time.”

“Lucky we were home when he arrived. Miss Serene and I were just leaving to pick up my uncle. He is due to arrive by train . . .” Tom pulled out of his vest pocket a golden watch on a chain, popped it open and looked at it, and then snapped it shut and returned it to his pocket. “about now.”

“My apologies for interrupting your plans.”

“Could not be helped. Our neighbor agreed to go meet him in our stead. Besides, he will be staying with us long enough for a good visit. He is to be meeting with Mr. C. G. Jones, the particulars of which he explained he was not free to share as of yet, but he does not have a firm date set. He expects to be with us for a week, maybe longer, and he says that besides his meeting, his only pressing duty back in Guthrie will not demand his attention until early November. A few more hours of waiting to see him will not be a hardship on anyone.”

“Please give my best to your uncle Durant.”

Tom nodded. “Who might the boy be?”

“This is young Mikey. He is Miss Alexi's brother. And this is Miss Alexi Mackey.”

“Look at that,” Mikey shouted. He stood up in the surrey again. This time he was pointing straight ahead. We could all see the somewhat white tent pitched among the grass, with the buggies, wagons, animals, people, and one black car all standing near it.

“Please, Mikey, sit back down,” Tyee said.

“We will meet you there, Tyee,” Miss Serene said. She snapped the reins and in a few moments, Ahawe was trotting into the dust Miss Serene’s horse and buggy were kicking up behind them. It made me cough.

Tyee mumbled something I couldn’t really hear, but it almost sounded like an accepted challenge. He tightened his grip on the reins. “Hold on you two.” When the dust drifted away from us, he gave the leather straps a gentle snap. I was sure Ahawe could barely feel it, but she jumped as if she’d just been pointed toward and set free in a field of sweet but forbidden grass. The surrey jolted and bounced more than Mom’s Kluge did when it had a flat tire, but Tyee held on to the reins. I was startled at how quick Ahawe was; we had nearly caught up to Miss Serene’s carriage by the time it reached the tent.

Ahawe again slowed but kept walking right past the fabric flaps that were tied back to serve as the tent’s entrance. Without any instruction from Tyee, she kept on going until she had pulled us around to the back of the tent. It was a good thing Ahawe seemed to know what to do because the look on Tyee’s expression made me think that he didn’t.

When Tyee stepped down and came over to help us out, he stared at Mikey as if he were trying to stare down a rattlesnake. “Jonas does not want you jumping around or putting too much pressure on your ankle,” Tyee said, “and I agree. No running unless you have to. Do you understand?”

“Sure,” Mikey said. “Be a good little boy.”

“I do not think you are hearing me. None of us can know what will happen next. If you reinjure your ankle and cannot move fast enough when the time comes, you could be left behind.”

“I get it.” Mikey picked up a stone he’d been squiggling into the dirt with his shoe, and pitched it side-handed at the tent. It whopped when it hit and left a splat of red mud the size of a paint ball. I know what that looks like because one of our family outings had been to a paintball park.

Mom and Dad had rented equipment for us and bought five-hundred paintballs to share. Mikey thought it would be fun to play boys against the girls for the first game. Since Mikey picked the teams, I choose the field. It had a great name—Middle Earth. I was a little disappointed that it didn’t have any Hobbit houses, but it did have rock walls, fallen trees, and thick bushes, all of which I could hide behind preventing Mikey from axing me. That was the theory anyway. What I didn’t know that first time I played was that you needed to be able to run very fast because, once you are hit, you’re out until the next game starts. I think I shot maybe a dozen paintballs each game. I’m such a great long-distance runner, not.

I hoped running wouldn’t be necessary for Mikey or me. You know how in horror movies when a group of people are trying to get away from something terrifying that wants to smash, or stab, or eat them, and there’s one person who falls behind? Yeah. That would be me, and Mikey would be the one saying, “She didn’t make it.”

Tyee covered Ahawe with a blanket, his muscles flexing and relaxing as he tugged it up and over her back. He rubbed her ears and whispered to her. Ahawe turned

her head and nuzzled her friend, who stopped and took something from his pocket.

“Mikey. There’s a knife in the bottom of that lunch basket. Will you get it for me?”

Mikey found a small knife under the folded tablecloth at the bottom of the basket. He handed it to Tyee, who sliced off a piece of the apple he held, and then offered it open-palm to Ahawe. She sniffed and snorted at it then curled her lip back and lifted the piece of apple from Tyee’s hand.

Tom came hurrying around the backside of the tent to where we stood. “Miss Serena has already been inside.” He took a couple of deep breaths. “She says the preacher should be out any moment, but the two men who usually help him are not out there.”

“Unusual. Maybe he has them guarding Mrs. Mackey somewhere,” Tyee said.

“That was her thought, too. She told me to say she was going to work her way up the left side of the tent to see whether she could sneak to the back without being noticed. She wants one of us to try to get in from the other side, and the other to see if there is any way into or out of the tent besides that front entrance.”

“I can do that,” Mikey said.

“That is brave of you to offer,” Tyee said, “and if there is another way in, I’m sure you could find it. But I need you to stay here and look after Ahawe until we can see whether or not your mom is even being held here.”

“The preacher’s no fool,” Tom said. “If his two men aren’t here at all, they could be holding her anywhere.”

“Can’t you just tie up Ahawe?” Mikey asked.

“I do not need to do that,” Tyee said. “She will wait for me to return, if nobody comes and drives her off, or worse, thinks she would make a nice addition to their

homestead. All kinds of people come to these revivals. Tying her up will not stop someone from taking her. If we do not find your mom here, we will need Ahawe to get us to where they are keeping her. If we do find her here, then I will need yours and Ahawe's help. We will have to be the ones that give your sister and your mom enough time to shoot. We don't know how long the—what did you call it Mikey?"

"Cosmic vomitus?"

"Yes. We cannot predict how long the cosmic vomitus will take to work. Sometimes you swallow it and shoot within a few seconds; sometimes it takes several minutes."

"I'm going with you, though, right Tyee?" I asked.

"Of course. You have a task of your own that you must perform while Tom, Miss Serene, and I look for your mom."

"But, I thought I had to find her."

"You have to get her safely home. We will find her. But in order for us to do that, we need you to distract the preacher."

"How do I do that?"

"While Tom and I sneak in, you will walk right in through the front. Attract attention to yourself, but do not be too obvious. You just want him to see you. We suspect he knows exactly who you are, and he is just greedy enough to think he can use you to convince your mom to do what he asks. Once he sees you have come, I doubt he will let you out of his sight."

"You mean I'm the bait?"

Tom smiled at me. “That sounds bad doesn’t it? Let’s just say that you’re the lure. Bait sometimes gets taken, and that is not what we had in mind.”

7 - One True Believer

Tom and Tyee walked with me to the front of the tent. There were dozens of people moving in and out, even more standing around in little clicks talking and laughing. I plugged my nose. I think I may have stepped too close to some donkey poop. Gross.

“Are you ready?” Tyee asked.

Strange that this should come to my mind right then, but I started thinking about Dad and fishing. Dad once told me that some call fishing a sport, others call it an art. Personally, baiting hooks with living creatures is what grosses me out, but still, Dad decided to teach Mikey and me how to fly-fish. He told us that we can do this kind of fishing anywhere—the ocean, creeks, lakes, even on our front lawn. We didn’t believe that last part either until he told us that he thought fly-fishing was less about what you were trying to catch than it was about the way you did it. One Sunday when he didn’t have to be out of town for the weekend, he took us out front and taught us to cast and reel—fly-fishing at its most basic.

“When I fish, I prefer fresh water fish, like trout and bass,” Dad had said. “I have a few friends though who go for saltwater fishing. One of them won’t keep anything that weighs less than a hundred pounds. He likes to catch the big saltwater fish—marlin and tarpons. One day, he caught a shark, the biggest he’d ever seen. It took three other men to help him haul it into the boat. When they got it in and cut it open, they found a human arm inside. Do you know what it held in the palm of its hand?”

We took turns guessing at everything from a diamond ring to an atomic bomb.

“No. No. Wrong again. Seems I’ll just have to tell you. It was a blue kidney bean with magic powers. When my friend opened the hand, the bean started to glow until it

burst like a huge sparkler. Later that night when my friend was at home, he told me that he noticed all of the stars in the sky were now aligned into constellations, something he had not seen before.”

When we asked Dad how something that small could do something that big, he said that it is not the size of the object that matters, but what bursts from its heart.”

I was bursting to find my mom, and if that meant I had to deal with this preacher, then I was going to sparkle. I smoothed my skirt with my hands the same way I'd seen Mrs. Weather straighten out hers, and then wiggled my hat to make sure it was tight. I took a big breath and pulled my shoulders back.

Tom touched my elbow. “Stay here until we are inside then the rest is up to you.”

All of a sudden, I felt afraid. “Wait. I can't do this,” I said. “I don't want to do this.” My heart was banging against my chest as if it were trying to jump out and run away. My hands and face tingled, and I started to feel dizzy. I closed my eyes because I didn't want to see everything spinning around me. “Maybe I should go look for my mom, and you two can distract the preacher. You said he'd recognize you. Right, Tyee? Maybe you could scare him into letting Mom go. Tyee? Tom?”

When I opened my eyes, I could not see either of them. I looked at the entrance to the tent, and then glanced at the crowd. I saw men and women dressed in their Sunday best, as Grandma called it. Other men had on work bibs and well-worn straw hats. Most of the women wore fitted blouses of white, blue, or brown and skirts that either matched to perfection or stood out in garish contrast. A pack of small children, barelegged and shoeless, yelled and chased past me. One of them almost knocked me over. I figured Tyee and Tom had found their way inside by now and were busy searching for Mom. I

remembered the fear on my mom's face when we rushed out to the Kluge together, and her telling me to keep Mikey out of trouble. I hadn't done a good job of that to date, and now I was failing at helping to find and rescue her. Mom was depending on me. Mikey, Tyee, and Tom were depending on me. To hell with this, I thought. Sorry about the swear word, Mom.

I headed for the tent trying to sway my hips back and forth like a runway model. Those women get lots of attention, but not me. One woman did look at me funny; she probably thought I had a bee in my skirt. I guess I blended in too well. As I passed through the crowd, I attracted little more than polite stares. I was trying but still failing. I had to step up my game. A group of men dressed in dark suits and white shirts that fit a bit too snug around their bellies was standing near the tent entrance. Two of them took turns slapping each other on the back, while a third burst out in laughter now and then for no apparent reason. I thought the other two men might end up in a fight if someone didn't do something. They were attracting attention not only from five equally well-dressed women standing in a group of their own away from the men, but also from most people going in and out of the tent. Adults act lame sometimes.

When Grandma says, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," Dad adds, "unless you also brought a very long straw." Then he'd wink at my grandma, and they'd both laugh.

"Lame, Dad," I told him one time.

"People like attention and they need to laugh," he said. "If you can give someone both," and then here's the corny part, "you'll have them eating out of the palm of your hand like a hungry hippo."

I put on the same salesperson smile I'd used with Mrs. Weather, and walked right up to the men. "Excuse me, gentlemen. It looks as though people are fixin' to mosey off and I've just arrived. This is my first time at such an excitin' event, and I have no idea where I should go or what I should do. I was wondering whether one of you kind souls might be willing to give me a little tour and perhaps help me to find the best place to sit."

Oh, yes. I was on a roll, even if my sweet but fake accent did sound more southern than Oklahoman. All five of the men ushered me inside. I laughed as loud as I could anytime they laughed, and did my best to encourage the men to make a big fuss about showing me around and finding helpless me the right place to sit. There was no way the preacher wouldn't notice me now.

This band of boisterous men eventually steered me up the right side and to a seat along the tent's outer wall. It seemed to me a bit isolated from the rest of the preacher's faithful since there were many recently vacated seats and put-up chairs. Dry straw snapped underfoot now and then, but most of it had been crushed flat by the traffic, meaning it was no longer slippery or springy. My entourage moved too fast; I could do little more than hold on and try to step where they stepped to keep from falling over one of them. Although this section of the tent was almost empty, the musky smell of too many bodies crammed into this sun-heated canvas still lingered.

When I was seated and the men could no longer ignore the many dirty looks given to them by their wives who were now standing at the tent entrance, my crowd of well-wishers wandered off. I sat almost alone. This should be obvious enough, I thought. The only problem was that I couldn't yet see the preacher.

“Amen and praise Our Lord.” His voice was deep, and though it was hidden behind a layer of canvas that hung like a sheet behind the podium, it boomed through the tent. When the preacher stepped out to greet his followers, his arms raised, his dark suit draped in wide ribbons of circus-colored fabrics, the applause and shouts from the crowd filled the tent. The noise traveled through me like the energy wave of a nuclear explosion. It made my ears hurt.

“Thank you my faithful followers. As you know, I have been called away to serve sinners in greater need even than those of you here today. It will be a long and hard trip to where I am bound, but I will be thinking about each of you and your generosity and how your donations helped to sustain me along my way. Now as my sisters in the front row down here walk among you with their baskets, be proud of all the good you are doing. Think of the souls I will redeem in His name because you shared your bounty with me.”

I watched as six women stood up. Two of them walked over to stand next to the preacher, taking positions beside him like Bishops on a chessboard. Dad tried once to teach me how to play chess. I did O.K. for a while, but I kept mixing up the names of the pieces and which direction they could move. I think Dad became bored playing with a non-challenger. After that, I pretty much watched him and Mikey play.

The other four women had baskets in their hands. They started weaving through the crowd sweeping money into them the way the Zamboni shaves off the top layer of ice on the skating rink Mikey and Tomai go to because it's not too far from Grandma's house—in one smooth and quick motion. The preacher pretended not to notice the basket-passers as he read from the Bible, though I could tell he was watching the collection.

“Today I read from First John, two ten to three ten. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. Amen.”

“Amen.”

“Are you a believer in miracles?” the preacher yelled. He pointed at the crowd with both hands, slowly swinging them from one side to the other. “Do you trust that God can open the universe to his faithful? No, you say. Ah, but I have seen it and accepted his gift with a disciple’s heart.” He slapped his hand onto his chest and bowed his head. “But I grieve for those who do not believe in a God of miracles. These, I say, these are the true sinners—those who doubt his glory and his vengeance. They who deny his righteous gift to his faithful, who seek to keep it only for their own glory, these are the true sheep that have lost their way.”

“No. No. No.” The crowd sounded like a string of firecrackers.

I thought I saw Tyee in his black hat slip behind a corner of the white canvas divider.

“I know. I know.” The preacher held up his hands as if to quiet the crowd, but his voice grew stronger, louder, and more determined sounding. He quickened his pace.

“Some of these are good people, and I’m not saying otherwise. Even good people make wrong choices, though, and it is only right that they suffer the consequences of their actions. Can I get a halleluiah?”

I looked at the people around me. They were staring at the preacher, their faces glowing with reflected light from the tent's almost opaque canvas, each chanting halleluiah, halleluiah, halleluiah.

“You have seen the glory and the power of Our Lord right here in His humble house. You have watched as I passed the healing of Jesus through my hands. You have known the sick of heart and seen them healed, and the cripple stand and walk. May I get an Amen?”

“Amen. Amen. Amen.”

I think that was the first time a four-lettered word ever made me swallow hard.

“Thank you. Thank you. I believe those of you here today, whether you be Methodist, Pentecostal, or Baptist, be ye father, brother, mother . . . or daughter . . . I believe you have come to help the sinner see the error of her ways.” The preacher had to yell those last few words to be heard over the crowd's shouts of “Praise the Lord” and “Amen Brother.”

Now the preacher was looking right at me. The tent felt as though it was growing smaller, hotter, and angrier around me. The fine hairs on my arms stood up like bowling pins. Great. I finally had his attention, but Tyee hadn't said how long I'd have to keep it.

“Please my children sit and rest. Our task is hard and our journey long. We must build our strength of body to match our conviction of heart and mind if we are to succeed. Now my faithful search your soul for a sign from the Holy One; there is only one true one amongst you today who can answer Our Lord's call.”

The quiet was almost as stifling as the heat and the earlier crowd noise. I shifted on the hard wooden seat and flicked a piece of straw off my skirt.

“Be there one true believer, one perfect faithful here today that will step forth to help me show the sinner the error of her ways?”

Hands went up everywhere in the tent. There were more raised than not; some people, especially the young girls, were waving both of their hands in the air.

“Be it you?” He pointed at a curly-haired blonde girl on the far side of the crowd. What I could see of her reminded me a little of my best friend. “Has Our Lord chosen you?” The preacher came down from the podium and wound through the crowd until he reached the far side. He put his hand on the blonde girl’s forehead and turned his face upward. “Be it this one, Lord?” Even the tent seemed to be holding its breath until finally the preacher said, “No. I think not. You do not evidence the peace of His Holiness in your soul.”

He was right about that. When he pointed at her, she started jumping up and down, hands over her mouth as if she’d just won the American Renaissance National Pageant in the Miss category. I submitted my application once when I was Mikey’s age. As soon as Mom found out that Dad had given me a check to enroll, she went right to the bank and stopped payment on it. Then she gave both of us her women-are-not-objects-and-should-not-be-treated-like-one-even-if-it-is-for-a-good-cause lecture.

The preacher pointed toward a group of men at the far end of the tent who were just now coming inside. “Or hath Our Great and Powerful Lord chosen one of you?” The men split fast, half hurrying off to one side and the rest going the other way until the preacher was left pointing at the vacant tent opening.

“Be there one true believer, one perfect faithful here today that will step forth and help me show the sinner the error of her ways?” The preacher turned in one quick swing

and faced me. “Why is it that many of you commit the sin of presumption believing that you are the one?” He bellowed like a mouse deer. “She who is chosen must have a pure soul, be without sin, and hold no reason beyond the motive of love—a love as deep as that of Our Lord’s sacrifice, as gentle as that of the love of a mother for her child.”

I looked around me, as did the rest of the crowd. Only this time, not one person held a hand in the air. Even the women who had been carrying the baskets as they pilfered through the crowd had stopped to follow the preacher’s gaze.

A creepy, panicky feeling swept over me. I felt as if someone had pulled the plug on hell and my fingers were slipping off the inner edge of the only thing keeping me from sliding into it—the toilet bowl. Now I was sure he was looking at me, as were most of the people sitting in the tent.

“Be you the one Our Lord has singled out to do His good works?” The preacher was pointing and walking my direction. Men, women, and children stepped out of his way, some even folding up empty chairs around them to ensure his path was unencumbered. I felt the way the middle circle in a paper target might feel as it watched a steel-tipped arrow flying toward it. And I was just as unable to move out of the way.

I wanted to turn to the woman next to me to say, “Go out there. He’s talking to you.” Unfortunately, my escorts had been so meticulous about selecting where I should sit that my only immediate neighbors were me, myself, and this thirteen-year-old-girl name Alexi who was hiding inside the clothes of a nineteenth-century schoolteacher. I touched the cameo pin on my blouse.

If Grandma needed Mikey or me to do something for her that we really didn’t want to do, like sweep out the spider-mice-sometimes-hornet-infested attic, she would

say, “There’s nothing to it. Just go do it.” Then she’d add, “If my old knees would let me, I would climb right up there with you,” followed by big a grin and, “Put your heart into it.” Of course, she also had a plate of warm butter pecan cookies waiting for us when we were finished—that and a box of baking soda in case of spider or bee attack.

I kind of hope you think that what I did next was the bravest thing any girl could have done. But, it wasn’t. I did what I had to do. What else could I do? I had seen only a flash of Tyee during the preacher’s sermon, and hadn’t seen Serene or Tom at all. Had they found Mom, yet? I was clueless about that, but I did know I had one important job to do—give my friends enough time to find my mom. If I bowed out and ran now, where would my mom be? There was nothing to it. I just had to do it. I stood to make sure the preacher and everyone else could see me, and then wiped my damp palms on my skirt.

8 - Knights of the Crazy Realm

At first, you want to be noticed by everyone, but then you are sorry that you have been noticed by the crowd. The sudden fear can make your brain flip through some funny thoughts. I began to think about how hard it is to be thirteen in my year, let alone how hard it must have been for teens in the early nineteen hundreds. In some ways, being thirteen is like being recruited by a cult or a gang. While you're miserable—hating the zits on your face, being mad at your best friend because she has a crush on the same boy you like, or having the popular girls ignore you even when you know they can't possibly not see you—all the people around you seem happy. You want happy.

You ask your parents if you can go on a date with the new boy at school; they ask you for his genealogy and references, and when you provide them, they aren't even astonished. Their answer is still, "No. We don't want you talking to him. Is he even Protestant—or Roman Catholic or Muslim or Jewish or Atheist or fill-in-the-blank depending on your affiliation?"

Sometimes your mom or your dad or your legal guardian act like a saint. They take you places you can't wait to go, like shopping for school clothes, but then, even if you manage to ditch them while you look, they insist on approval rights before they will pay for what you want. "They're just jeans, Mom. Yes, you're right. They do cost two-hundred-plus dollars, and they hug my hips and give me a booty boost look in back that I know will get that cute-new-boy-at-school attention I want. But, Mom, all the girls are wearing them."

You don't want to look like a dork, nerd, geek, Goth, preacher's daughter, goodie-two-shoes, or any other non-popular student at school, least of all like your mother, sister,

or worse, your brother. Just because you can fit into their clothes, doesn't mean you should.

Then one day along comes this seemingly perfect person. He/she is charismatic, powerful—all of the followers look up to him/her—and the people hanging around all seem serene and peaceful, usually laughing, agreeing with what they are told by this natural born leader. They see your unhappiness and invite you to become part of their family. They accept you with open arms, seemingly not noticing your zits or lisp or slow response to stimuli. They invite you to something fun—a joy meeting, a sing-in, a chain-yourself-to-a-tree/bulldozer/explosive-plant's-gate protest. When you ask whether the latter might be a bit dangerous, you are shamed by the followers for questioning their leader's ability to make sound judgments regarding what is good for his followers. Your new friends lay guilt on you, which is kind-of what your mom does when you forget to pick up your room.

“Now I will have to do it,” your mom says when your room isn't clean enough to suit her. “But it will make me late for work. My boss will probably dock my pay, but don't worry. Your grandmother doesn't really need her heart medicine.”

So, you go back and pick up your room, but you miss the bus and have to walk the five miles to school, and then you are rewarded with detention for your third tardy to first period class. After detention, your peers invite you to hang beneath the bleachers, or by the local grocery store, or even more gauche, in the girl's bathroom. “Try it. This is good stuff, man.”

Once when I was complaining about how hard it was to be me, my mom told me something she thought would help me to feel better. “Even though it might not feel like it

now,” she said, I want you to know that you will survive being twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and all of the other years that you have ahead of you.” I believed her, but then she probably didn’t know that I would someday go rushing into the tent of a traveling preacher when he’s holding a revival, and end up being captured by his lay-helper goons.

Once the preacher dismissed his flock and the tent started to empty, the preacher’s knights-of-the-crazy-realm grabbed and half dragged me to the back of the tent. They pushed me in front of the preacher and stepped back. He stopped adjusting one of the drab blankets that hung along the inside of the walls seemingly to block some of the harsh light. He turned to face me. “You can save us both a great deal of trouble if you just give it to me now.”

His robe and clownish shoulder drapes were gone. He wore a button up white shirt with a black cravat and black pants. He was ordinary looking, if you didn’t count his hair that was paler than his skin and a lightning-bolt shaped scar on his right cheek. I wondered what could have made that z-shaped scar until I realized I was staring at him. I looked around the room instead.

I hoped to see my mom hidden away somewhere, maybe in one of the four coffin-sized steamer trunks that stood along the side with their flat top lids open. She wasn’t. All they held was loose, dry grass. I wondered what fragile items he needed to pack that required that kind of padding. A stack of clothes piled next to the trunks looked dirty and greasy. A child-sized chair, one wooden leg missing, partly stood beside the clothes, but it leaned against the trunks. I realized that Tyee’s cousin had been right—the preacher was planning to leave after that last service, and in here at least, there was no place for him to hide my mom. I’d come all this way for nothing. If she were here, I could break

away from the preacher long enough. All I needed was a few seconds alone with her to swallow the pill and hold on tight. But she wasn't here. My only hope now was that my friends had found and freed her

The preacher grabbed my shoulders and jerked me toward him. "I'm not going to ask nicely next time." His hands were searching me as he spoke. "Where are you hiding it?"

I slapped his face. I don't think he expected it because he let go of me. I had seen that move in a dozen movies. It often didn't work out too well for the girl, but at least he didn't hit me back. Instead, he grabbed my face between his hands and pushed me to my knees.

"Perhaps I will take you with me, unless you tell me where you have hidden it; pretty young girls have more than one purpose."

"Ouch. That hurts. Stop it." I struggled and pounded on his wrists with my fists, but it did no good. He held on tight. I bit down on my lip to keep from crying.

"I have important work to do child, and I weary of your game. "Where . . . is . . . it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Let me go. Let me go."

He released my head and stepped back to look at me. He waved at his knight girls who rushed to him like banqueting mosquitos. "Did you search her?"

They glanced at each other, and then one said, "We did not find anything."

"Get her up then go. Leave us alone."

They grabbed my arms and stood me upright like I was a broken Barbie doll, and then turned and left. I couldn't blame them. The preacher was nastier than bug repellent. I

shook the dust and straw from my skirt. At least I couldn't see or smell donkey deposits in this part of the tent. I rubbed my sore jaw. "Are you even a real preacher?"

"When it suits my purpose."

His stare made my skin prickle. Not even kidding. I wanted to punch him and run away, but he was at least two feet taller than I was, maybe more. He was stronger, too; his vice-like grip on my face had immobilized me, and since running is never my first option, I kicked him in the shin.

His face twitched once right before he grabbed my hat and yanked it off my head. The giant pin holding it in place did a fly-away and smacked against the blanket he'd been straightening earlier. Now both my scalp and face felt raw. He flipped my hat over and studied the inside of it. He peeked between the weave in spots, lifted the pink ribbon, and rolled the ends of it in his fingers. I didn't know what he hoped to find, but he was being tenacious—one of Grandma's favorite words that can mean anything from "I love you, but you're driving me nuts," to "look at that little boy dog tailgating that girl dog."

I rubbed my head where the pin had once held on my hat. "Do that again and I will—"

"What? What will you do you useless sinner?" He threw my hat. Like the pin, it whapped and dropped in front of the hanging blanket—the same one the preacher had straightened earlier. What is it with that blanket?

He saw me staring at it. "Well, if you will not give it to me when I am being reasonable about your stubbornness, perhaps you will reconsider after you see the gift I have for you." He turned and yanked the blanket away from the wall.

Two huge men in dark suits stood shoulder-to-shoulder but with their backs to me. They turned around and looked at the preacher. He nodded at them, and they stepped aside. I saw what they had been hiding behind the blanket: Serene, Tom, and Tyee, each gagged with a piece of the preacher's circus fabric. They sat on wooden chairs with their backs to each other; their hands and feet bound with ropes. I didn't see Mom.

I took a single step toward them. The preacher grabbed my wrist. "Let me go you animal." I bit his hand. He slapped me. This time I cried. I couldn't help it. I felt like Job in the Old Testament—crumpled over and covered with sores—abandoned. It must be the environment. Mom stopped reading Bible stories to me years ago. When I quit struggling, he let go of me.

The preacher looked at his captives then back at me. "I repeat. What will you do? Kill a man of the cloth in front of his most fervent followers?" He grinned showing his jaundiced teeth, and then spit chewing tobacco at my feet.

I jumped back and the black wad splatted into the straw. That was totally gross. I dry-heaved.

He laughed the way a pack of rabid wolves might if their felled buffalo tried to spit at them. "Surprised that I have your friends? You should not be. It was a simple plan, and you made it almost too easy. I suppose I should thank you for that."

"Me? I wouldn't do anything to help you. You're . . . delusional."

"I prefer to think of myself as being clever at serving Our Lord. Perhaps a bit devious, if you must, but I have no delusions, at least not about His plan for me. You time travelers are all predictable. Each carries a return-trip pill hidden in your clothes. I now have the return pills those three were carrying." He rubbed his chin. "Where is yours?"

He gave me that examination look again. Mom says the feeling it gives her when she gets one is like a bad dream—the one where you show up to school and realize you’ve forgotten to put on your pants.

I didn’t mean to, but I touched my skirt pocket.

Tyee shook his head at me. He tried to kick free of his ropes, but only managed to rock the chair he was tied to until it fell over against Tom.

“Ah, that is where you are hiding it.” The preacher grabbed my arm and twisted it behind my back. I couldn’t pull away. “Women . . . useless as a two-legged Coonhound pup. Searched you already, did they?” He stuck his other hand into my pocket and pulled out the pochette Mrs. Weather had given to me. He held it above his head as if he was trying to see through it then shoved me away from him.

“You found what you want, now let us go. We haven’t done anything to you.”

“Secundum opera eorum, et secundum ad retributionem indignationis hostibus suis, et vicissitudinem inimicis suis. According to their deeds, accordingly he will repay, fury to his adversaries, recompense to his enemies—Isaiah fifty-nine eighteen.”

How can he be that charming in front of a tent full of believers, recite scripture in Latin, and still be such a jerk?

The preacher ripped open the bag and reached inside.

I looked at Tyee. He had turned his face toward Tom’s shoulder and was rubbing the gag against it. I figured it must be painful to have your mouth tied up like that, which reminded me that my face, and my scalp, and now my shoulder and arm all hurt. The preacher’s grunts and vulgar outbursts drew my attention back to him.

Now he was turning Mrs. Weather's property inside out and shaking it. Nothing happened. No pill fell out. He tore the bag apart as if it were made of tissue paper and threw each piece down after he scrutinized it. When he found nothing in the last shred of fabric, he heaved it, too, and then ground it into the straw and dirt with his boot.

Even with the blankets on the wall, the room seemed to be getting brighter and hotter. Sweat gullies formed down my sides and the small of my back. The preacher didn't seem to notice the increasing heat.

"Three trips . . . six pills. That's all I need. I have theirs," he pointed at my three friends, "the one that Jonas foolishly gave to me, and your mother's. I will have yours, too." He shook his fist at me.

"Wait. You have my mom's pill? Where is she? What did you do with her?"

"That doesn't matter now. I am not greedy or selfish. All I do I do for His glory." He grabbed my chin and pulled my face to his. "But you, daughter of the devil herself, sinner of sinners, snake in the garden, you keep me from my destiny. You have tried my patience to the end of the earth, and now you force my hand. If you will not give it to me willingly, then I shall give you to them."

We both looked over at the two men standing guard over Tyee and the others. They started toward me.

"Take her." The preacher shoved me at them. I stepped in a hole and fell face forward, but caught myself on both hands. In sixth grade, our P.E. class had a substitute one day—a gymnastics teacher. She taught us how to fake a fall by putting our hands flat out in front of us and bending our elbows as we hit the ground to absorb the shock. This adult woman could execute a perfect stop-drop-roll-over. I figured this might work for

real falls, too, and since one of my greatest skills is my ability to ferret out the only hole in an area the size of a football field and step in it, I practiced stop and drop daily for a month. Sometimes, I could roll. Once I even rolled over onto my knees and stood up. This time, it would have been better if I hadn't rolled, though. I was wrong about no donkey nuggets being inside the tent.

The preacher's hit men reached down to pull me up, but stopped.

"Fire. Fire." Tyee, still tied to the chair, had wriggled the gag off his mouth.

The preacher, his thugs, Tyee, Tom, Serene, and I stared at the flames that had burned a large hole in the tent's side through which the smoke escaped. A piece of the burning canvas dropped onto the clothes pile. It exploded and set on fire the dry grass in the steamer trunk closest to it. The grass acted like a wick trail; the fire spread further up the canvas, to the other steamer trunks, and out across the straw on the ground. It was headed right at me.

"Take her, now," the preacher yelled. "It's time to go."

"No. Stop. I won't go with you. My friends. You have to help them." I struggled and kicked at the two men who dangled me over the ground between them as if they were carrying a stinky bag of trash. I was coughing from the smoke by the time we reached the tent opening. "You . . . can't . . . leave them . . . Mikey."

"What's she jabbering about?" the preacher asked as his bouncers dragged me into their covered wagon and bound my hands.

"That little boy we found out back."

"Ah," the preacher said.

I tried to jump out of the back of the wagon to help my friends. One of the goons pulled me back and forced me to sit on the bench between him and his partner. As one of the men tied my hands, I stared out the wagon at the tent. Billows of thick, dark clouds engulfed it. Flames roared up and licked at the drafts of escaping smoke. Tentacles of fire oozed away from its center, rolling through the dry grass like the creature from *The Blob*, consuming the Bluegrass and anything else on the ground that would burn. I listened for screams that I did not want to hear. I was relieved that the breathy roar of the super-heated air and the cracking of dry tinder fueling the fire as it advanced across the prairie were the only things I heard behind us. The preacher didn't have to whip his horses to get them moving. The fire now drove the wind and the smoke to serve its purpose, and the moment the horses caught its scent, they bolted. They were as terrified by the fire as I was, just not for the same reason.

9 - Plagues, Beasts, and Closet Monsters

I was numb, barely noticing that I was bouncing on the wooden seat or that the henchmen on either side of me were holding my arms even though they had tied my hands. If they had not, I would have jumped from the wagon the first chance I had. I could not believe that my new friends and my little brother—Mikey, oh Mikey—might have perished in the tent fire. I refused to believe it though I had watched the tent be swallowed by flames, and seen the ash rise into the air along with the smoke. It couldn't be true. No. Mikey was safe; he had to be safe. He wasn't in the tent. He was outside taking care of Tyee's horse. But how could I doubt that Tyee and Tom and Serene were gone? The smoke was so thick as they dragged me from the tent that I could not see the three of them tied up back there, though I tried to imagine them escaping at the last minute, getting free and running out of the tent. I never saw them do it, though, and for what must have been an hour, I could only sit in silence, dragged out to who knows where by these three thugs, thinking about what had just happened.

The preacher pulled up the horses. He climbed down and walked to the back of the wagon. I heard his footsteps, but I didn't want to look at his murderous face. I kept my stare to the rough-hewn planks of the wagon's floorboards. If I didn't have to look at him, maybe I could convince myself that the terror of the whole day was no more than a bad dread. At worst, maybe it was a premonition, and I still could change the outcome. I chose to imagine that Mikey was back at Grandma's and out trick-or-treating with Tomai, to see Grandma and Mom in the kitchen cleaning up after the party and waiting for Dad's call to let us know he had arrived safe at his Tulsa hotel. The whole car-crash thing was a hoax—someone's idea of a funny Halloween prank that Mom wouldn't fall for to begin

with. I hadn't needed to go looking for her back in 1907 Oklahoma. I didn't meet Mrs. Weather, Jonas, Selene, Tom, Tyee, or Ahawe. They all still existed in safety right now in my skewed thoughts, and that was how I wanted it. I refused to believe any of them were dead or missing. I dipped my head to my shoulder to wipe away my tears. Maybe the preacher's men thought I could no longer run because they let go of my arms. I hid my face in my hands. Maybe if I could not see these men or the preacher it wouldn't be real. Maybe when I open my eyes again, the fake preacher and his two henchmen will be memory dust, and I will be holding a broom. That's what I hoped. That's what I had to believe. Mom hadn't been in the tent, and Mikey had been outside of it. There was still hope, if only I could help them.

“Get her out here.”

Thug number one and thug number two dragged me down from the wagon, my hands still tied in front of me.

“We will set up camp here. Well, what are you waiting for—a miracle?”

Once the preacher's sycophants left us alone, he grabbed the bun on my head and twisted it like a soda cap. I suppose it hurt, but I still felt numb, so I hardly noticed until I realized that I now faced the direction he wanted me to look—the place where the tent once stood. All that remained to be seen from this distance was a cloud of scorched air, like a marshmallow left too long over the fire. He let go of my hair. I didn't know how far we'd come, but the sun was setting.

We stood there for some time; we were staring back toward the last place I saw my friends and Mikey. “See that?” The preacher pointed at the pulsing pink glow on the horizon. I hadn't noticed it before. “It's a prairie fire, and you caused it. You brought this plague upon us, yet you do not suffer the consequences. He has smote your conspirators

instead. They and others have paid the price for your stubborn foolishness. Your defiance of His will has cost settlers their homes, farmers their crops, and mothers their loved ones. You are an example of the depravity of His children, yet he has spared you. Why? The Lord has His reasons I do not doubt, and he will reveal them to me in good time. Then you will not escape His judgment. You must repent. You will repent and beg Our Lord's forgiveness. Only then might He give you a chance to redeem your wicked soul and make amends."

Between my sobbing and the preacher's lecture, I couldn't say anything. If this wasn't all a nightmare, then I had let my friends die. I may have killed my brother, too. I didn't see him in the tent, but those bullies said they found Mikey out back. I hadn't started the fire, but I couldn't help thinking that if I hadn't been in the back of the tent at that exact time, maybe there wouldn't have been a fire. I almost hoped some random piece of tornado debris would fall from the sky and smite me.

"You must repent. Perhaps it is to me to teach you how."

A gust of wind slapped me in the face, and I don't know why, but it made me think of *Airplane!*—that comedy. You know how one of the passengers freaked out, and even the nun stood in line, brass knuckles ready, to help bring the woman back to her senses? The wind felt a little like that—mind clearing. I dried my eyes on my sleeve and looked up at the preacher. "O.K. It's all my fault. No, please, don't even think about taking any of the blame. You want me to atone for my sins, fine. I will tell you where to find another pill, but first you have to answer two questions, and I'll know if you're lying to me. We time travelers have other special powers, you know." Yes. That last part was a white lie of my own, but I hoped he wouldn't want to risk deceiving me, just in case.

“Speak.”

“Is my brother still alive?”

“That little boy in the surrey out back of the tent?” The preacher was thinking about his answer. I could tell. “I’m not certain. I told my companions that he needed to be taken care of. They told me they had, but then, those lay women also said they had searched you.”

I thought I saw a twinkle in his eyes, but more likely, it was only a reflection from the glowing fire.

“Did Jonas really help you? Did he give you one of those pills?”

I hate it when someone laughs at me. Most of the time, it makes me earthquake mad, but only about a three-point-two mad like the common quakes we started feeling more often when the gas companies turned up the fracking in Oklahoma. Not that I believe they are at fault any more than I think it’s my fault when people laugh at me, but still—

“Are you done?”

The preacher stopped laughing, glanced toward the prairie fire’s glow, and then back down at me. “That means the pill still exists. Since it was not in your possession, I figured you hid it somewhere in the tent. I would have had my helpers look there next, but the fire interrupted my plans. I gave the pill up for lost.”

“Since we’re telling the truth,” I said, being careful not to look him in the eyes, “it’s possible that it fell on the ground when I was sitting in the crowd.”

“Then you are of no use to me. I have to wonder why the Lord spared you.”

“I can get another one, though.”

The preacher bent over to put his face closer to mine, probably looking for a sign that I was lying.

I looked down and twisted the toe of my grandma's shoe into the dirt. What the heck. They already had grass, ash, and probably a little bit of donkey pie on them. "I'll need a good story about what happened to the other one they gave to me when I ask for another. That means I need to know the truth about Jonas."

"Hmmm. Perhaps this is Our Lord showing you the way to your salvation."

I couldn't believe it. He was falling for it.

Assailant number one and number two returned and dropped their loads of sticks and brush onto the grass in front of the preacher.

"Are you planning to set the wagon on fire? No? Then take these over there." He pointed into the near darkness several feet from the wagon. "And clear the ground first."

The preacher turned back toward me. I guess he felt he should explain. "The Lord has chosen to withhold the rain from us this summer; the grass is its own tinder." He snapped his attention back to his workers. "No not you." Mugger number two was picking up the remaining materials he had scrounged. "You unhitch the horses to let them graze. Then get the shotgun out of the wagon. A fire will be of little use to us if we don't have something to cook over it. Yes, I know it's almost dark. When do you think the edible night creatures come out from hiding to hunt their own meal?"

When the preacher's attention was again on me, I gave him my sweetest smile and said in my Okie-southern-whatever mash of an accent, "Uh, since we're being honest with each other, I have to admit that you're too strong and too big for me to fight. I

couldn't possibly do you any harm. Would you maybe take these ropes off my hands? They do hurt me."

I guess it was too much. He stiffened up and glared at me. Still, I held out my hands toward him. "Will you at least loosen them a little? They are rubbing my wrists raw. You don't want me to have to explain where the red marks came from, do you? It would make Mrs. Weather very suspicious."

Either he agreed that rope burns on my wrist would reduce his chance of getting the final pill he needed for his collection, or he hadn't thought about Mrs. Weather being a time traveler, too. Shoot. Brain . . . mouth . . . short circuit. I hope I hadn't cooked her beans. I say it like that to make my dad laugh. It's my cross between Grandma's spilled-the-beans saying, and Mom's cooked-the-geese saying. Sometimes I swap it up and say goosed the spill instead.

The preacher untied the ropes, and then re-wrapped and re-knotted them. At least it hurt a little less, and I now could move my fingers. They began to tingle as the blood flow improved.

"Why did you agree to come here to 1907 with Jonas?" the preacher asked. "Was it to rescue your mother?"

"Yes. But I didn't exactly come with Jonas."

Amicus meus, inimicus inimici mei, I thought. Mom had insisted on teaching some Latin to me when I was young, which turned out to be entirely unfair. Mikey didn't have to learn it. Dad told Mom that Mikey should learn a different language—one that had a practical application in today's world. Unlike me, they let Mikey choose his torture. He went with Mandarin Chinese. I think his friend, Tomai, suggested it because none of the

schools in our area taught it. I guess Mikey thought that meant he wouldn't have to learn it. Pretty much, he was right.

Sometimes it rots being the oldest child. You're their guinea pig, the one your folks use in order to learn all of the parenting skills that don't work. Still, I felt kind-of vindicated. I deliberately forgot all of the Latin she taught me except for this one phrase because Captain Kirk had used it in one of the Star Trek movies, only he said it in English. Roughly translated, it means the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

"He tricked me into taking that pill," I said. What's one more little white lie? I'm probably doomed already for everything else I've managed to mess up.

"I see. No telling who you can trust."

We both watched as a flicker of flame appeared at the spot where the preacher had sent his first missionary. The man was on his knees with his face almost in the ring he'd cleared on the ground for the fire. As the only light now came from the gibbous moon, the prairie fire too far away to be of any help, shadows made the man look like a squatting camel. He'll probably have as much trouble getting off the ground as one, too, I thought. Good. The more time I'll have the better.

The more I thought about it, the more determined I became to go back to the tent and find Mikey. I refused to believe he was dead. As for my friends, I simply wasn't going to think about them until I found Mikey. Mikey was all by himself, but those three adults had each other. True or not, I decided that they must have figured out how to survive the fire. Maybe they rolled out and away when the fabric behind them burned. I couldn't let myself believe anything else. "You were going to tell me what happened with Jonas," I said.

He gave me a wary eye, but it didn't bother me. I once asked my grandmother what a wary eye looked like, but she couldn't describe it. Instead, she scrunched up her face a bit and got real close to mine with her right eye open as wide as her sagging eyelids would let her. I must have looked at her funny about then because she straightened back up and said, "Just go with it."

"It was Jonas' idea, taking your mom."

I wanted to yell at the preacher. No way did Jonas kidnap Mom. Why would he have come and told me about it if he had done it? I didn't holler at him, though. The preacher had a point. Jonas did know all about the phone call, and he was the one who told me the preacher had kidnapped my mom. Was it a plant, a way for Jonas to throw me off his track? I felt a flicker of anger, but I wasn't sure whether it was at the preacher or at Jonas.

"Do you know where she is? My mom?"

The preacher ignored my question. He also didn't seem to notice that I had closed my fingers together tight enough that it must have looked as though I were trying to strangle someone. "You see, it appears the board had received an anonymous tip that led them to believe Mrs. Mackey had gone rogue. It didn't hurt any that the last operative she worked with turned up floating in the river."

"Are you saying my mom killed someone?"

"Of course not, dear child." He patted my head as if he thought I was his obedient dog.

If my hands hadn't still been tied together, I'd have given him one of Grandma's hands-on-hips-you-are-in-big-trouble looks right before I kicked him in the knee.

“Where is my mom? I demand you tell me if you want me to get the pill for you.”

“Calm down. You’ll startle the horses. Let me finish. The board sent Jonas and another agent to retrieve your mother. It seems that other agent left the needed two pills behind when changing into something more appropriate for an All Hallows Eve party. Jonas gave his emergency backup pill to the agent, and then used one of his others to shoot both of them. It was Jonas’ idea to let the agent keep the extra pill in the event that only one of them could get close enough to your mom to shoot her back.”

“Jonas and another agent? You mean there were two kidnappers?”

He folded his hands in front of his face and touched his fingers to his lips. I couldn’t tell whether he was thinking or praying.

“You could say that. Jonas almost managed to catch up with your mom in the kitchen, but he could not take the chance that your grandmother might recognized him. Then you ran out to the car with her. It seems someone had called her, something about your dad and an auto accident.”

“That’s right. Mom drove off and that’s the last time we heard from her. How did they find her after she left the house? I mean, she could have been going anywhere?”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways, but there was no mystery here. The other agent was hiding in the car.” The preacher put his hand on my shoulder. “Are the ropes a bit more comfortable now? If not, perhaps I can loosen them a little more.”

Ah. Mean preacher, nice preacher. I knew that game. “They are still a bit tight.” I held up my hands to him. “Loosening them a bit more would be great. Thanks.”

He tugged on the ropes here and there, but I didn’t think he was trying to make them looser. “That should help,” he said.

I knew I would be risking a repeat of the mean-preacher personality by asking my next question, but what was he going to do? Tie me up and kidnap me? “Were you the other agent?”

“I can see why you might think that since I have your mother’s pill. Hmm.” He stared at the stars then down at crony number one who still struggled to start a fire.

Pole-vaulters powder their hands a second time. That’s hesitation. The coach looks at you and says he’s saving the best for last, and then he chooses someone else to play. That’s lying. Your best friend looks at anything except you, changes the subject, and then finally tells you she didn’t mean to fall in love with the boy that you like. That’s hesitation and lying. The preacher was doing both, too. I guessed he hadn’t thought this story through before he began telling it to me. He must’ve thought I’d forgotten about his rant on needing all of those pills to do Our Lord’s work.

“Well, Jonas asked me to bring these pills back to the board.”

He was pathetic at telling lies. “I see. Why would he do that?”

The preacher put his hands behind his head and leaned back against the wagon—a classic I’m-relaxed-you-have-to-believe-me move. “Who can you trust if not a preacher?”

I stared at the egotistical snake pretending to be a holy man. “You mean that all you want to do is get one more pill in order to return all of them to the board?”

“Exactly. I’m not really a bad man. I was just . . . worried . . . that’s it, worried . . . because . . . I did not know whether I could trust you. You are your mother’s daughter after all, and she is quite uncontrollable.”

He was right about my mom. She wouldn't have trusted him. For a man who pretends to not have been one of my mother's kidnappers, he seemed to know a lot about what happened to her. "I was wondering," I said, "if you could have come to Grandma's All Hallows Eve party, what costume would you have worn?"

He laughed. "Now that is a change of subject, yet I believe I will go along with it. What's wrong with dressing like a preacher?"

Shoot. That didn't work out as planned. I tried again. "Because you can't come as yourself to Grandma's Halloween party, you'd be . . . violating her rules. How about a dog? Would you come as a dog?"

"Unclean animals." The preacher spit on the ground.

"But, there are dogs in the Bible, aren't there?"

"For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have enclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet. Psalms twenty-two sixteen. Yes. There are dogs in the Bible, but as I said, they are unclean animals."

"But, if you had come as a dog, you'd have been in big trouble when Mrs. Weather saw you."

In pole vaulting, you get three shots at clearing the bar. The preacher had his chance. He could have wanted to know why he would have been in big trouble. He could have asked, "Who is Mrs. Weather?" Or, he could have ignored my question, especially since he'd already answered the two I said I had for him. I held my breath.

The preacher dropped his hands from the back of his head and stood up. He waved at his follower. "The fire is fine. Go help with the horses and make sure they are tied up tight once they are done grazing. I do not want them running off tonight. It is a

long way to Tulsa, and Starkey wouldn't like it if we were late." He leaned against the wagon again. "They too are unclean animals. No better than dogs."

He might have meant the horses or his two goons, but I knew he didn't. He knew Mrs. Weather had dressed as a cat for the party, and that meant he had to have been there. Now I knew the truth, and it was time for me to do something about it.

Forget what storybooks tell you; it isn't like the snap of a twig or the pop of an exploding light bulb. It's more like dropping your mom's cell phone into the toilet, or putting dry ice into your grandma's pumpkin bowl right after it comes out of the hot dishwasher. It feels like waiting for the Jenga explosion you know you can't stop. I squeezed my rope-wrapped hands into one giant fist and swung them like a baseball bat. "Smite this," I yelled.

The preacher fell to his knees. He gurgled out curse words I can't repeat, not that I stuck around to hear all of them. I grabbed the front of my skirt and ran as if bats were chasing me out of you know where. It was too dark for me to see the ground well, which also meant I couldn't see the preacher's two gofers. I could see the dark outline of trees in the distance though. I had to do it; I ran straight at them and covered a good distance before I fell the first time. I rubbed my right knee, stood up, and power limped until I could run again. I had to reach the trees; they were my only chance to hide from the preacher's goonies.

I heard a soft, thumping, hudda-hum, hudda-hump, hudda-hum coming from behind me. I lifted my skirt again and ran as fast as I could. My legs burned. My lungs ached. A horse snorted and neighed. The sound seemed distant, but the night was too dark for me to be sure. The trees were the only place to hide. I had to reach them.

The ground softened, but I couldn't stop. I wouldn't stop. I pushed harder. The trees must be close. I heard running water. The North Canadian River? I hoped. It runs near Grandma's house. I know where it goes—back toward the tent, toward Mikey. Ahawe is fast and she wasn't tied up. Maybe he managed to get away. I prayed. If I could reach the river before—

My left toe caught on something solid, and my foot slipped free of my shoe. I splatted face first into the mud among several fallen saplings. I pushed myself over and sat up. The horse came at me appearing out of the darkness. I must have scared it as much as it did me; it slid sideways and toppled over dumping its rider on the ground a few feet away. He rolled like tumbleweed then stopped. He didn't move, but the horse struggled to get up; it flailed, kicked, and whinnied until it could stand, all the time flinging mud everywhere, especially on me. I was happy the horse seemed uninjured.

I crawled up to the fallen tree that had stopped my flight. As I pulled myself against it, a piece broke off. It smelled and felt like damp sawdust. Something scuttled across my hand. I slapped it off then covered my mouth to stop my scream. I hoped the darkness and the log would be enough camouflage to hide me. I felt bad that I hadn't let Mikey and Tomai use my makeup. More hoof beats. Two sets this time, and almost here. I reached over the log, but I couldn't wiggle my shoe free. I pushed some dead leaves around it. The shoe would have to wait; the riders had arrived. I hunched down behind the log and closed my eyes. Maybe, if I couldn't see them, they'd just go away. It worked against closet monsters when I was little.

“Incompetent dolt. Get him back on his horse.”

I peeked over the log; I knew it wouldn't be long until they spotted me.

Dolt number two climbed down and shook dolt number one who then roused and wobbled, but did manage to walk to his horse and climb on.

The preacher reined his horse into a half-circle, looking over my head, scanning for me I was sure. Here I hid, right in front of him, yet it didn't seem to dawn on him to look straight down. I thought that maybe, when your eyes are turned up like your nose, you can't see what's right at your feet. I was grateful, but still, I scrunched back down, making almost no noise. I hadn't fooled the preacher's horse, though. I heard it sniff and splutter at the ground in front of the log. Leaves rustled and blew up and settled around me. What do I do if his snort uncovers my shoe?

"You are no better than those two," I heard the preacher say. "Take a little pride in yourself."

My shoe didn't matter now. He'd seen me. Why should I be surprised? I don't think I ever won a single game of hide-and-seek when I was a child; I was even worse at it than running. I didn't feel like being dragged through the mud now, though. I decided to stand up in placid surrender, but when I looked up, I saw that the preacher and his two goonies were not even facing my direction.

"Stop it," the preacher yelled, and adjusted his position on his horses' back. "You've been fed. Quit squirming."

When I realized he'd been talking to the horse not me, I ducked.

"When I catch that little monster, I'll pay her back for my . . . discomfort. You two go that way; I'll head downstream. She may be bright enough to figure out that the river will take her right into town. We do not want that. And keep quiet." He yelled even louder than before. "If she made it this far and hears you coming, she'll have enough time

to hide. I don't care what you think. If you two hadn't let her mother get away to begin with, we could have disposed of that child a long time ago. She has the luck of Satan."

He snapped his whip and howled like a wounded buffalo when his horse jumped.

Until I could no longer hear the horses and riders, I kept still, but I couldn't stop my mind's rushing thoughts. He had kidnapped my Mom. He doesn't have her now, though. She escaped. If he still needs me, then he doesn't have Mikey, either.

At least standing up with my hands bound in front of me while covered in mud was easier than untying my shoe and putting it back on. It squished as I stepped into it; I was glad my left foot, not my right, had caught on the log. I wondered if I would end up with a bruise between my two biggest toes.

Now I really had to double back and search for Mikey. Ahawe is fast, and Tyee left her untied. I pictured Mikey snapping her reins, Ahawe bolting out of there, and Mikey almost jolting off the seat. I didn't know how I would find him; he could be anywhere by now. Going back to the tent was my best chance, though. I knew it. I can find him. I'll find Mom too. I won't stop until I do. Satan's luck, huh? That preacher had better hope not.

10 - Plant and Take-Off

When I was nine or ten, I had my first dream about flying. I was coming home from school, and three girls followed me down a narrow alley, which was weird since I lived in the country at the time. They circled me and started calling me names. The biggest girl struck out at me and knocked most of the schoolbooks out of my hands. All I had left to protect myself with was my math book. I hugged it to my chest. The second girl started talking about messing me up. I don't remember what the third girl was doing or saying, but I knew I was going to die right there in that dirty alley. Then something wonderful happened. I bent my knees just a little and jumped. I took off like Superman, straight up into the air. The astonished look on the faces of the bullies made me brave. I buzzed them like a bald-faced hornet when its nest is disturbed. When you're having a dream like this and you are the hornet, you are glad that you're a bald-faced hornet because they are aggressive, and they can and will sting repeatedly.

Apparently, I wasn't trying to sting these girls, however. I think it was because I was a flying-human not really a hornet. Instead, I was diving down into the alley and picking up trashcan lids, the round metal kind, and dropping them on the biggest and meanest of the bullies. After she ran away, I scooped down to collect my schoolbooks, and started throwing them like Ninja stars at the second-biggest bully. I threw the math book first. I guess I wasn't too intimidated by the littlest thug, though, because by the time I had vanquished the second one, I couldn't even see the third girl in my dream.

For several days after that dream, I wondered whether I was just some evil kid who gets a kick out of going around hurting people or animals, but decided that I'm not. I love all creatures—I've seen *Free Willy* three times and *Jaws* at least eight. If Mom and

Dad would let Mikey and me have a dog, I would name her Miss. Pequeña Pero Peta—you know, little dog for the ethical treatment of angels. It's just that bullies really make me mad, like-a-ten-on-the-Richter-scale mad, but I love the way flying makes me feel, and nothing felt better than to be able to fly and smite bullies all at the same time, even if it was a dream.

That bully of a preacher was responsible for everything bad that had happened to me, Mikey, my mom, and my friends, and now I was Richter-scale mad. I also was tired of being trussed up as if I were a criminal. My wrists hurt. My knee was bleeding. I was covered in mud. All of it was that preacher's fault. He kidnapped my mom, and if I were willing to admit they might be dead, then he had murdered my friends, too. And even though Mikey must have run away, that preacher tried to kill my ten-year-old brother—a child. Once he stole another pill, I'm sure the preacher planned to do away with me, too. Someone, me, I had to do something about him. He couldn't be allowed to get away with any of this.

In the near dark, I saw the outline of a rotting limb on the log and kicked at it with my foot until it broke off, leaving a point on the end. I raised my wrists over it and wiggled my hands down until I managed to get the point into the knot the preacher had tied. It took a few minutes of pulling down and sliding my arms back and forth to open the knot large enough to get my teeth into it, but I did. Pulling first on one side of the rope with my teeth then the other, taking turns on each side, back and forth, I finally untied the knot.

The rope burn on my wrists and my skinned knee stung. The mud clung to my clothes like sleeping bats on a branch, and on my skin, it felt like a drying beauty mask. It

didn't smell like one, though. I needed a bath and cold water to drink. I realized that I hadn't had anything to eat or drink since Mrs. Weather's picnic basket sandwiches. My stomach growled and my tongue felt dry. Between the muddy ground and the sloshing sounds of flowing water, I knew it couldn't be too far to the river.

In my year, this part of the North Canadian River was renamed the Oklahoma River. The voters passed a special sales tax initiative to install three dams along the seven-mile stretch and build paths on the north and south banks. If he didn't have to be away on business, Dad would take Mikey and Tomai down there to skateboard when we visited Grandma. Sometimes I would go, too, and Dad and I would walk along the river and talk about things like what he should get Mom for her birthday, or Judy's family moving away, or some of the weirder, more interesting business trips he'd taken. Mom usually stayed home with Grandma and helped her in the garden or sat on the porch rocking and drinking lemonade. I wish I had a cold glass of lemonade now.

I walked toward the sound of moving water. The ground became softer until the mud crested my ankle-high shoes. I felt bad that I now had ruined Grandma's shoes. I found another log and sat down on it. I didn't know what a mud bath would do to the little blue pill. I took off my right shoe and knee-high hose—part of what a proper young woman wears in 1907 according to Mrs. Weather. I fished the pill out from between my two largest toes. It felt smaller than when I had first hidden it there. I didn't know what time it was, but I knew what would happen to the pill at midnight. I had to find Mikey and Mom by then.

Just before Mrs. Weather left the room to clean my shoes, she had told me that all professional travelers have a secret place they use to hide their return-trip pill, and

another one for their emergency pill. Of course, she was giving only one pill to me, but I still had trouble deciding where to hide it. I asked her for suggestions. She told me that no time traveler ever tells anyone where his or her secret hiding spot is, “Because then it wouldn’t be a secret, would it?”

While she was gone, I tried out several places on my body to hide the pill. I stuffed it into my hair bun, but decided that if it came undone, I might lose the pill. Guess it was a good idea that I didn’t settle on the first thought I had. I then wondered whether I could hide it in my ear. Hundreds of kids each year end up having to have a stuck foreign object pried from their ear or nose, but I was more worried that it might shrink and fall down into my ear canal. I figured nobody except my parents or a doctor would look under a bandage on someone’s arm because they might see something too gross, but then I remembered that self-adhesive bandages weren’t invented until 1920. Belly button? Nope. It’s an outie. Chest? Sadly, I had nothing to hold it in place. Finally, I decided that since I wore flip-flops most of the time during the summer, I probably wouldn’t even notice it if I stuck it between my toes. The sock and shoe would ensure that it stayed in place. That’s where I’d hidden it when Mrs. Weather returned with my shoes. I thought it was either weird or clever of her—I wasn’t sure which—to pretend that it was inside the purse she had loaned to me when I left with Tyee—excuse me—when Tyee and I left with Mikey hiding in the back of the surrey.

At the time, I hadn’t thought about my shoes getting wet. The one thing that had worried me then was what my feet might do to the pill. We are talking about putting something into my mouth that had been tucked in my foot for hours. Could that be more disgusting? I decided I’d just have to deal with that when the time came. Maybe I could

give it to Mom to swallow. Parents get used to the gross things their children do. She had changed the tar-like diaper deposits of Mikey and me when we were newborn babies, cleaned up projectile vomit on several occasions, and frequently wiped Mikey's blood off his skateboard and my blood from just about everything else. How could she possibly mind a stinky shoe smell?

The pill seemed unaltered except for its slight size reduction. Now what could I do with it? Since I had ruled out earlier several other hiding spots, I had no choice but to go with the obvious. I took off the pantaloons I was wearing and tore the lace from the bottom of one of the legs. To make sure it didn't look too suspicious if . . . well, you know . . . if someone decided to frisk me for it, I tore the lace off the bottom of the other leg, too. I took the first piece of lace and wrapped the pill in it. Then I took the cameo pin off my blouse, rubbed off as much of the mud as I could, unbuttoned two of the buttons, and slid the lace inside my blouse. I pinned the cameo back on the outside of my blouse making sure it held the lace-wrapped pill in place. Since the preacher no longer thought I had a pill, I doubted he'd search me, if he caught me again, which I was not going to let him do.

In my time, the Oklahoma River now consists of lake-like ponds surrounded by expanses of greenery and bronze artwork. It is deep enough and clean enough to swim in, although there are restrictions against doing that, at least in some places. As I trekked through the mud to the river's edge, I imagined stripping to my underclothes and cannonballing into the water. Although the water-tumbling-over-rocks sound I had targeted in my race to the trees had not been a lie, the river was only a few inches deep here. If I were still in the twenty-first century, the sandbars would have been great for

sunbathing. Now they were just another sign of the drought the preacher had told me about. Oh, and the bubbling-brook sound came from about fifteen feet upstream where a slight drop in the river's path had the water falling onto one large rock that sat smack beneath the flow. That sound had made me think of Tom Sawyer, which then helped me to plan my escape. I decided that I would collect several fallen saplings, bind them together with the rope I'd removed from my wrists, and make a quasi-raft. I planned to float beneath it where the preacher and his horse-mounted trolls could not see me, as I breathed through a reed I had stuck between the bindings to hold it in place. I figured there had to be a reed that I could use somewhere around here. After I washed the mud from my face, soaked my wrists in the tepid water, scrubbed my knee, and finally scooped handfuls of liquid into my mouth, I started following the edge of the river looking for a usable reed and a log. Once I had everything I needed to build the almost-raft, I expected to be back to the field where I'd left Mikey in no more than an hour, assuming, of course, that there was a field left after the fire.

My back was stiff from bending over. Standing, I stretched and looked at the night sky. Hundreds of thousands of stars were sprinkled across it like white bread flour on Grandma's cutting board. One cluster to the right caught my attention. It was bright, too bright to be stars, though, and it sat low toward the horizon. I squinted at it. The closeness of the prairie fire startled me. I couldn't believe it had come this far already. It was moving and dancing, swaying back and forth. It took my eyes a moment to adjust and my mind a second to realize that what I was seeing was not stars and not the prairie fire. It was someone on horseback carrying a flaming torch, its glow encircling both rider

and beast while lighting their way. I struggled to remember. The preacher had ridden that direction, his two goons the other. This had to be the preacher, and he was closing fast.

I was terrified and angry at the same time—a four point zero angry. To have to hide from him again now meant I could lose all chance of getting to Mikey and finding Mom before the pill shrunk to nothing and disappeared. What should I do? If he caught me, I wouldn't see Mikey again anyway. I had to think of something.

My idea was wild, crazy. I doubted it would even work. I told myself I should turn and run, hide. That worked last time. So, I ran, but not into the cover of the bushes. Instead, I sprinted back toward the miniature waterfall with the rock beneath it. I would only get one shot, and that was if I could even lift it over my head. The fire-man-beast was getting closer. I was going to do something I hadn't done before, at least not on purpose. It helped to think of him as a non-person. I was chanting to myself inside my head—I can do this. I can do this. That's when my right foot caught on something I hadn't seen in the dark, and, oh yes, I slid across the mud, hands outstretched in front of me. When I stopped, I was grasping a fallen sapling.

I held it to help me stand up, and then realized it was about the same length and thickness as the pole I used to practice vaulting. I ran my hands up and down it. Most of the bark was gone, and while not smooth everywhere, I could slide my hands over the wood without getting slivers. I figured it must have tumbled down the river during a rainier time, and had been scoured almost smooth during its journey. It wouldn't have a manufactured sail piece, of course, but it was thicker in the middle than on either end. I planted one end in the ground and tried to bend it, but it was too stiff. That's O.K. Stiff would work better for what I had in mind. What will happen if I break my legs trying this

stunt? Then the preacher will have to carry you all the way back to the wagon. It would serve him right. But, what if—

I no longer had time to argue with myself. Either I had to decide to do this right now, or come up with another plan. I held the pole with both hands, wondering if I could handle the weight—twenty-five or maybe more pounds more than I weigh I guessed. One thing you need in a pole is weight greater than your own. Besides, my weight plus thirty pounds was about the maximum I could handle.

For the second time today, I could hear and feel the rhythmic, vibrating, pounding hoofs of a horse. I had to ignore the oncoming rider and find the right place to plant my pole. That would not be easy in this mud, but I had an idea. I hurried back to the log I had tripped over—the second one, not the first. This one is bigger than the other log and is closer to the water, and it's partially embedded in the dirt. I tried to rock it free, but it wouldn't move. That was just what I needed. The ground in front of it wouldn't exactly be a reinforced trapezoidal indentation, but it would have to do.

I picked up the pole and paced off twenty running steps from the front of the log. That should be about right. I balanced the pole on my shoulder to adjust my grip, positioning one hand over and one hand under at what I judged should be the right distance from the top of the pole. I'd have to time this just right. This sapling would have almost no bend, and I needed deep penetration if I was going to get across the water. I raised my grip height to compensate.

I squared my shoulders to adjust for the weight of the pole, and raised the front of it closer to vertical. As I closed in on my take-off point, I would drop the tip toward the ground. I waited. I watched. The rider was close now. You can do this, I told myself.

Remember, people used ordinary poles to jump across the marshy Fens back in the late eighteen hundreds. If they can do it, you can do it. Besides, admit it, you love to pole vault. Wait . . . just a few more seconds. I wish I had powder for my hands. Now. Go Now. I sprinted, knees up high, running the best that I could in a long skirt. You should have thought of that sooner. Maybe my other plan was better—the one where I swing the pole at him instead. It's too late for that now.

The pole bounced as I ran with it. You get used to that, too. Here it comes—three, two, one. I planted the end of the pole in the spot in front of the log that I'd had to substitute for a real box, and then jumped with my trail leg, keeping it stiff. I extended my arms, the right one above my head and the left vertical to the pole. I rose and swung my trail leg up. If I were lucky, the preacher would be my pit, softening my landing and knocking him off the horse at the same time. If I really did have Satan's luck, the preacher would be stunned long enough for me to mount his horse and ride like mad toward the field where the tent once stood. My skirt snagged on something, maybe a piece of broken branch on the sapling. I felt the pole shift on the soft ground, and lean left. Instead of rowing, extending, turning, and flying-away, I dropped into the river like an injured bird, and landed in a small pool of water just deep enough to cushion my fall. Hold onto the pole. Let it help you. That's what my coach told us to do to keep from breaking our necks by landing headfirst on the box. I had listened to him, but when the pole started to lean, I did the worst thing I could do. I freaked out and let go. The fall knocked the wind out of me. As far as I could tell, though, I had no broken body parts, and I hadn't landed on my head and ruptured vertebrae. Falls straight down into the box have killed pole-vaulters, even experienced ones. I could have hit the log, but I didn't. I

watched the pole straighten and wobble there for a moment, and then fall forward without me. Not even the pole hit the rider, but it did hit his horse's rump. She reared and dumped the evil man on the ground. Close enough, I thought, and struggled to climb to my feet. My skirt was soaked and heavy. The horse bolted through the shallow water. I couldn't believe it. The beast was running right for me. No. It was running straight at me. I tried to move out of its way, but my shoes were stuck in the mud. I collapsed into the river and crossed my arms over my head. The last thing I heard before my ears filled with mucky liquid were three shrill whistles like that of an eagle's call.

I sat straight up in the water like a wooden doll with its puppeteer yanking on its strings. The horse must have bounded over me at the last second because I was alive. I spluttered and gasped for air. Two strong hands yanked me from the water and stood me up. They squeezed my limbs and felt down my back and neck.

"Stop that. You know I don't have one anymore." I tried to pull away to keep the preacher from finding it.

"You're O.K. then? Not injured?"

Like he really cared beyond keeping me alive long enough to get his sixth pill. I'd fix him. I wouldn't answer. He could just worry.

He grabbed my face and pulled my right eyelid open with his thumb.

A lot of good that would do him. How much could he tell in this darkness. I couldn't even see him, just feel his rough hands. I felt dizzy. Lack of food maybe. Or that pain in my cheek may be the reason.

"Look at me." He shook my shoulders.

I tried to raise my head, but it still seemed to be floating in the water. I felt the preacher trying to lift me, but my shoes were being stubborn. They would not pull free from the river's mud. I'd landed feet first and embedded them a little more than ankle deep. I could feel the mud as high as my shins. He untied my shoes then pulled me up and out. He dump me face first across the horse's back, and then climbed up behind me. I felt the horse shift, and then I was bouncing. The wind against my wet clothes made me shiver. I tried to rub the spot on my cheek that hurt, but I couldn't lift my hand, I couldn't see my hand. I couldn't see anything.

11 - Secret of Time

Even through my closed eyelids, it was bright, too bright. The ache in my head felt the way Mom described her migraines. It was as if pieces of razor blades were battling for domination of my eye socket territory. All of the warriors were losing, including me. I didn't want to open my eyes, to see his ugly z-scared, fruit-leather-rough face staring down at me. If he thought I was still sleeping, maybe the preacher would go away, at least until I could gather and recycle those eyeball fighters into something more useful, like a clear thought.

He touched my cheek and I started. I didn't want to react. I might not have if I'd known he was going to do that. His touch wasn't the rough stroke I'd expected. It felt like one of Grandma's dusting rags against my skin; it was damp and cool. It patted my cheek, and then migrated to my forehead and stayed. It found a new home among the frizz of brown hair that I could feel stuck to my face. My ears registered a noise, and my brain told me it was a door closing. A few seconds later, the sound repeated. I needed to stay very still to keep the battling blades from severing my eyeballs. Maybe that's what had happened to Great-Great-Grandpa James. Did they make glass eyes for girls? Go away I thought. Go away and leave me alone. Maybe tomorrow I can fight back.

It was a familiar sensation, but I couldn't quite identify it. Slow, soft, like that time Mikey put a nightcrawler on my arm when Mom and Dad took us fishing at Lake Ten-Killer. Mikey. I could feel the tears overflowing my eyes. I'd lost him. I couldn't help him. I couldn't hide him behind me the way I'd done last summer when someone in a passing car thought it would be fun to throw water balloons at a nine-year-old playing in his front yard.

“Of course they didn’t hit me,” Mikey had said afterward. “You are three point seven inches taller than I am, and you kept us angled at forty-five degrees to the incoming rounds, which means there was only a twelve percent chance that any of the balloons would get past you.”

I ended up soaked. Mikey had been right, though. I’d protected my little brother then, but I couldn’t even help myself right now. There’s that sensation again. I tried to swat it away.

“Jeez, Sis. You used to like me to wake you up like that.”

“Mikey. Mikey?”

“Sure. Who’d you expect?”

I tried to sit up to hug him. Armed warriors banged around in my head like rocks in a dryer. No fabric softener sheets, either. I closed my eyes against the avalanche of pain and explosive sounds.

“I told you to stay out of here. She is not up to having visitors yet, especially one as rambunctious as you are. Go help Jonas with . . . something, anything. Now.”

Mrs. Weather? I heard the door close again then a spoon rattle in a bowl and smelled boiled chicken. I opened my eyes a little. “Mrs. Weather? Did the preacher get you, too?”

“No child. The preacher is gone. Jonas found you at the river.”

“Jonas? But I thought—”

“Shush. Don’t worry about it now. Can you open your eyes? I have something for you.”

I looked at Mrs. Weather. The worry lines on her face seemed deeper than before. I closed my eyes again. “My head hurts,” I said.

“I know. Then we will do this with your eyes closed, but you’ll have to sit up some. I don’t want to drown you.”

With my eyes still shut, I put my elbows on the bed beside me then pushed, slowly, carefully, trying to keep the whirling blades confined to the middle of my head. I felt Mrs. Weather tuck extra pillows behind my back. “Can you close the drapes?”

After a moment, a shadow covered my eyelids and hung there. My head hurt a little less, the pain now a nine point seven instead of a nine point nine.

“Hold out your hand.”

I felt a glass being pressed into my palm and wrapped my fingers around it.

“Now the other one, palm up this time.”

I complied. Two pills dropped into it.

“You found my shoes. I thought the pill would be gone.” Wait, I moved the pill to inside my blouse, and I only had one to begin with. I heard the door open and footsteps click across the room toward me. Nobody said anything. I figured it was Mikey again, and Mrs. Weather was probably frowning at him.

“They’re just aspirin, child. Now swallow them. They’ll help with your headache.”

Again, I did as I was told. Mrs. Weather may sound and act mean, but I now realized that’s all it was—an act. She’d cleaned my shoes for me before I left with Tye. She seemed to be caring for Mikey now, and she definitely was looking after me. What horrid old witch does things like that? “Thank you,” I said.

She cleared her throat. “Yes, well, I have some chicken soup for you. Are you up to eating?”

When I said I could, she had me open my mouth. She shoveled in spoon after spoon of tiny pieces of chicken, carrots, and who knows what else. It all floated in a warm chicken broth that smelled like fresh sage, rosemary, and of course, chicken. Finishing the soup was a slow process, but it slid down my throat like melted fairy dust. By the time I had eaten all of it, the battle for the eye-socket realm was nearly over, and the light now tolerable. I opened my eyes.

Mrs. Weather was smiling. That worried me a little.

“Wicked shiner,” Mikey said. He ran across the room and jumped up on the bed next to me, bouncing, bouncing, and more bouncing. “I like this one better than the first one, though. It’s not as green.”

Figures I’d get another face-redesigning smack. Seems I accumulate bruises the way most teens do pimples. I touched the bump on my cheek and wished right away that I hadn’t.

“The swelling will go down in a day or two. The doctor does not think your cheekbone is broken. He said it is likely only a bruise. Stop that jumping, young man.”

“Yes. Stop it before you break Mrs. Weather’s bed.”

“Mom.” Mikey jumped up and ran over to her, wrapping his arms around her.

“Mom? You’re safe? You’re safe. How? I mean, I can’t tell you how glad I am to see you,” I said.

She stood by the door with Mikey clinging to her, and she laughed. “I’m fine, and it’s all good now, Alexi, thanks to you and your brother.”

“Me? But, I didn’t—”

“Yes you did my brave daughter. You did much more than you can imagine. You risked your own life to try to save me. You did all that you could to protect your brother.” Mom stroked Mikey’s baldhead. “And best of all, you and Mikey made it back safe.”

“I don’t understand. The preacher kidnapped you, but here you are. How did you get away? Why did he kidnap you anyway? Is Dad alright?”

“Well, that’s a pile of questions. Let’s start with your dad. He is fine. He never was in any danger. He did not have a car accident. That phone call was designed to get me out of the house, but I thought it meant they had captured your father. I was going to Tulsa to find out what really happened. After I backed out of the driveway, and once you had gone back inside, one of the preacher’s henchmen who had been hiding in my car forced me to drive to your school’s parking lot. He met up with the other man, swallowed one of the time-travel pills, and grabbed ahold of me to take me with them. Unfortunate for them, they picked the wrong time-traveler to mug.”

“So, you really are a time-traveler, not just a professor?”

“Yes. And so is your father. We met when both of us were on separate missions but to the same time and place. There’s a lot more to your father than you know, but we can talk about that later. Right now, let me try to answer the questions you have already asked me. The board was aware of a rumor that someone was looking to buy several time-travel capsules, but no one knew for sure who, when, or why. We had to wait until someone made a move to steal the pills, and once they did, we had a plan in place to capture the thieves. The problem was that we needed to trap the person who had masterminded this plot, not just the thugs who were making the grab. That meant even

though we didn't know when they might make a move, or from which of us they might try to steal the capsules, whomever it turned out to be had to go along with it. They chose to take me, not your Dad, as I had suspected when I received that phone call. Those two men are not too bright, however. Once we shot to the preacher's tent, I knew exactly who the culprit was, and that was all I needed to know. It was then my job to get the information back to the board so they could make their move. Thus, while those two dopes were busy searching me for my return and emergency pills, I managed to swallow my emergency pill. They found the return pill, though, and they got away with it, but only that one. The big problem came in the implementation of the rest of the plan."

Mikey let go of Mom and looked up at her. "Of course. Statistically, no plan is perfect. Something usually works out different from what was planned. It wasn't your fault, Mom."

Mom laughed and kissed the top of Mikey's head. "Thank you, Mikey. And you are right. Something always goes wrong with any plan, but that doesn't mean the problem can't be overcome."

"What happened with your plan, Mom?" I asked.

"In a way, you did. But it wasn't your fault."

"I did? But, I just wanted to help you."

"I know, dear. The thing is that everything happened before we expected it to, so Jonas thought the best thing to do was to get you involved. Mrs. Weather, on the other hand, wasn't quite so sure about it." Mom nodded at Mrs. Weather, who then straightened her posture a bit. "As it turned out, I was able to complete my mission and

return here to let the board know what was going on, but not before Jonas and Mrs. Weather had recruited you, and, accidentally, Mikey.”

“Why didn’t they just contact Dad?” Mikey asked.

“He was already on another mission. We can’t just pop in and out of time to deliver messages. No, they had to leave your father out of this one.”

“So, by trying to save you, I made things worse?” I asked.

“Alexi’s good at making things go wrong,” Mikey said.

“I am not. Shut up.”

“Alexi, that’s no way to speak to your little brother. Besides, you have to admit he’s a little bit right, but in this case, he is right in a good way. Your job as a thirteen-year-old is to figure out how to get through life, grow up, and become a productive adult. Thirteen years of experience is not enough to be able to make sure everything works to your plan. Heck, not everything works to my plan, and I am a bit older than you are.”

Mom looked at Mrs. Weather who nodded at her, and then Mom looked back at me. “Mrs. Weather and Jonas figured that if the preacher thought you too were a time traveler, and that there was a chance he could collect pills from a young, innocent girl, they could set up a trap to catch him in the act of stealing time-travel pills, and free me at the same time. You were never to be in any danger, but you are a very strong-willed young lady, and they hadn’t counted on that.”

She was right, and I knew it. I threw the covers back. I wanted to run to her and hug her.

“Oh, no you will not,” Mrs. Weather said. She put her hand on my shoulder and pulled the blankets back up over me. “You have to rest, and you need some ice for that bulbous cheek of yours.”

I touched it again. Ouch. Stop doing that to yourself. “Please don’t keep reminding me,” I said. “It hurts too much.”

Mrs. Weather gave me a funny look. “Yes. Some memories can be more painful than others.”

That’s what that was? Mrs. Weather was trying to make a joke. It wasn’t very funny, but her expression was. I laughed. It hurt. I laughed some more. It hurt some more. Mikey laughed and jumped back on the bed. Mom did her donkey-snort, and that made even Mrs. Weather join in.

Jonas came into the room. “Forgive my interruption.” He took a big breath and looked at me. “How are you feeling?”

“She is feeling just fine,” Mom said. “Aren’t you?” She came over, sat on the bed next to me, and took my hands in hers.

“That is good to hear. I apologize for interrupting the family reunion, but we need to talk. It’s quite important.”

“Oh. O.K.” Mom stroked my not hurt cheek and smiled at me. “You’ll excuse us, won’t you, Alexi?”

“Of course she will. Alexi is well enough to look after herself for a few minutes.” Mrs. Weather waved Mom and Jonas out of the room and followed them. Mikey tried to go too, but Mrs. Weather shook her finger at him. “This conversation will not be for your

ears. Stay here and keep your sister company. I am certain she has a great many questions for you.”

When she closed the door behind them, Mikey began jumping on the bed as if it were a trampoline, the springs squeaking with each bounce. “I like it here. I can go outside and play all I want. Mrs. Weather says I don’t have to worry about anybody around here throwing water balloons at children.”

“Please stop jumping. I’m still a little dizzy.”

One more bounce, and this time he landed on his seat instead of his feet. “Sorry.”

“Mrs. Weather is right. I do have a few questions. What happened at the tent? How did you get away?”

“From those two ogres? That was easy. They can’t run for nothing. And they’re just as bad at seeing things right under their noses. I ran around the side of the tent, went in, and hid behind one of the open flaps. They never saw me.

“I’m glad you escaped from the fire.” I reached over to give him a hug and he shrugged me away. “What was that about?”

“Promise you won’t tell Mom?”

“Tell her what?”

“I’m sorry Alexi. If I hadn’t started that fire, the preacher wouldn’t have dragged you off and you wouldn’t have been hurt.”

“You started the fire? But . . . oh, Mikey . . . Tyee, Serene, Tom . . . it’ll be O.K. You didn’t mean to. Nobody will blame you.”

“But, I did start it on purpose. I had to.”

“Why? How?”

“I remembered the apple knife Mrs. Weather put in the picnic basket. I went back for it and found a candle and a single match in the bottom of the basket, too. It was a long one. I had seen Mrs. Weather use one like it to relight the fire in the stove. I figured that if I set some of the grass on fire inside the back of the tent where the preacher was holding you, he might be so busy putting it out, I could sneak in and help you get away.

“How did you even know I was in there?”

“Like that’s hard. You’re louder than Grandma’s music when you’re mad.”

I put my hand on Mikey’s shoulder. “You could’ve gotten hurt. That was a very dangerous thing to do.”

“Yeah. It didn’t work out the way I planned. I didn’t know there were oily rags in there. I wasn’t trying to burn down the tent.”

Something wasn’t right. Mikey seemed too happy. I know he liked Tyee even if he didn’t know Tom and Serene. He should feel bad about this. “You know that it wasn’t just me, the preacher, and his two men in that tent, right?”

“Sure. I heard Tyee yell fire.”

“Then you know what happened to him and his friends?”

“You bet. He told me on the way back.”

“Wait. He told you?”

“Well, duh. I cut them free. What did you think; I left them to burn up? Thanks a lot, Alexi.” He slid off the bed and headed for the door, glancing back at me as he pulled it open. “Sometimes you’re so mean.”

“Wait Mikey. Please don’t leave. It’s just that, well, all this time, I thought they were dead. I thought you were . . . thought it, thought everything was my fault. I’m sorry. And I’m so glad I was wrong. You really are a hero.”

He stood there in the open doorway and didn’t even turn around to look at me.

“I— ”

“Shh.”

“What? You don’t have to be rude to me. I said I was sorry.”

“Quiet.” Mikey whispered. “I can hear them. They must be at the bottom of the stairs.”

I pulled back the quilt and slipped out of bed. I steadied myself and started to walk toward Mikey, but caught my toe on the nightgown. It was several sizes too big and it dragged on the floor. I hiked it up and went to the door. I could tell they were trying to whisper, but their voices carried up to the top of the stairs and straight into the bedroom. Mikey and I stood there looking back and forth at each other and out toward their voices, but without saying anything.

“Tyee looked everywhere, Mrs. Weather. They simply were not there.”

“Is he sure he was looking in the right place, Jonas?”

“When I returned with Alexi, I told him exactly where to look. His cousin told me Tyee found the pole she used and my horse’s prints crossing the water. If anyone can be certain of finding the right location, it is Tyee. He fishes that river all season.”

“I still can’t believe my little girl hoped to pole-vault out of there.”

“I wondered what she was trying to do, but if she hadn’t done something, I would have ridden right past her. All of us thought the preacher still had her.”

“I didn’t know it was Jonas,” I whispered to Mikey. “I thought it was the preacher coming after me.”

“What were you trying to do?” Mikey whispered back.

“I know it seems kind of dumb, but I thought that if I could knock him off the horse, I could steal it and go find you.”

“You thought I needed to be rescued?” Mikey laughed in a whisper. “I can take care of myself, you know. I’m not nine anymore.”

“Well excuse me for caring.”

He elbowed me then gave me his oops-I-shouldn’t-have-done-that expression.

“I’m O.K.” I whispered. “It’s my other side that hurts.”

He smiled and gave me a quick hug.

“We cannot let that traitor get the sixth pill,” Mrs. Weather said.

I slapped my hand to my chest where the cameo had been. “Mikey. Where are my clothes?”

Mrs. Weather took them to wash them. You were a stinky, muddy mess.

“Was my cameo pin still on my blouse?”

“How should I know? It’s not as if I care what girls wear. Besides, they wouldn’t let me in to see you until you woke up.”

I hurried over to the dresser and began searching for it. She must know better than to put it in the laundry, even though it was filthy. I’ll bet she took it off me, cleaned it, and put it away. If she did, she would have found the pill in the lace, unless it had dissolved by then. They have to be here somewhere. She wouldn’t take Grandma’s pin, would she? I pulled open the first drawer in the dresser.

“Come back, Alexi. I think they’re planning something.”

I hurried back to the door.

“Yes, Mrs. Weather. I know the consequences. If he finds the emergency pill you hid under the padding in her shoe, he will have the sixth one that he needs to travel to any time he chooses and wherever he chooses. He could cause unreparable damage to history, maybe even to time itself. Does that about sum it up?”

“We have to set this right,” Mom said. “Tyee and I can go after him.”

“It’s too late for that,” Jonas said. “Tyee is already following him, Tyee’s cousin told us when he rode back to update us. Besides, I doubt you could catch up and find him in time. He has too big of a head start. We have to wait until we hear from Tyee again.”

“There is one other possibility,” Mrs. Weather said.

“Well, don’t keep it to yourself. If I cannot go with Tyee, maybe I can make your plan work. What do you have in mind?”

“Perhaps you can, Mrs. Mackey. You are the most skilled of all of us at shooting to an exact place and time.”

“Concentration is one of my stronger skills.”

“If we knew where he was going to be and when, and you went properly armed, there might be a chance to stop him.”

“Steal from the robber? Bold plan, Mrs. Weather.” Jonas sounded impressed.

“It’s a useless plan. We do not know the where.”

“Mikey. Did you hear what Mrs. Weather said?”

“Yeah. She’s going to steal something from a robber. Do you think it’s a bunch of money? Maybe he’s a bank robber.”

“No, Mikey. Not that. She said that Mom is the best of all of them at shooting to a specific place and time. Do you know what that means?”

“Mom takes those pills?”

“Mikey, not only is she a time-traveler, but she’s skilled at it. Maybe all she has to do is concentrate hard enough and she can end up where and when she wants to. I didn’t know anyone could control time travel. If she can do it, maybe I can. Why didn’t I figure that out sooner. Sometimes, I’m so slow.”

“No you aren’t. I didn’t know either.”

“You can be nice when you want to, for a brother I mean.” I rubbed his baldhead.

“Quit that. You’ll give me a shiner.”

“Shut the door, Mikey. Do it quietly. I need your help.” I went over to the dresser and began searching drawers. “Help me. I must find it.”

“Find what?”

“I wrapped the pill Mrs. Weather gave to me in a piece of lace and pinned it inside my blouse using Grandma’s cameo. Help me look for it. You check the nightstand; I’ll look in the dresser.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I have a plan.”

The top dresser drawer held gloves and belts, but no pins or any loose piece of lace. I slid the drawer closed and opened the second one. It had three identical blouses, each made of stiff white cotton with soft lace down the front and on the edge of the long barrel cuffs. I pitied Mrs. Weather. The blouses were pretty and they looked a lot like my costume blouse, but mine had been made of a permanent-press fabric. Mrs. Weather must

have spent hours ironing these to make them crisp and put creases like those into them. Besides, I had worn one of them and I know how uncomfortable they are. The last drawer held white cotton bloomers that had three strips of white lace around the bottom of each leg. Mrs. Weather sure likes white. I remembered tearing the lace off the pair Mrs. Weather loaned to me. I felt bad that I'd damaged them. I lifted the two pairs sitting in the drawer and looked beneath them.

“Did you find anything?” Mikey asked.

“Bloomers, blouses, gloves, but not Grandma's cameo. Did you?”

“Just a bible and this little box.” Mikey held up what looked like a round tin of shiny silver. It was the width around of a half dollar coin and about three inches tall.

“Look. It has a hinge on the lid.” He pulled it open before I could say no don't, it's not yours, it isn't polite to snoop, or anything else I wouldn't have said because snooping was exactly what I was doing. The difference is that I was looking for something that already belonged to me. Secretly, I was glad he did it. “Is that it?”

“It's my cameo.”

“You mean Grandma's cameo.”

“Yes. Grandma's cameo. The lace is here too.” I took the box from Mikey. I lifted the cameo and the lace still attached to it out of the box and set them both on the table. I wasn't too hopeful that the pill would be there. The one Jonas had given to me on what seemed a long time ago, Halloween night at Grandma's party, had almost disappeared by the time I had swallowed it. Now it was mid-morning. I pressed my finger into the lace hoping I could feel the pill. It didn't matter how many times I tried, though. It wasn't there.

Mikey snatched the box from my hand. “You could say thank you, you know. You keep telling me to.”

“Thank you, Mikey, but I’m afraid this isn’t going to help. It’s not here.”

“What’s not here?”

“The pill. It’s missing.”

“But what do you need it for anyway?”

I must have lost it. No, wait. Maybe not.” I crossed the room to the closet door and opened it up. Yes. That skirt will do. I pulled a brown skirt from the hanger and set it on the bed. It looked a great deal like the one I had worn for my costume, but it had only two buttons on the side instead of a row of buttons down the front. “Have you seen any shoes around here?”

“None that will fit your big feet, but I know where to look.” Mikey sat down on his hands and knees next to the bed and pulled out a plain pair of black shoes. Each had a strap across the top with a silver buckle on it, very little heel, and a shiny finish. “Will this work?” He set them on the bed next to the skirt.

“Perfect, if they fit.” I went to the dresser and pulled out a white blouse, a pair of bloomers, and a camisole. “How did you know to look under the bed for shoes?”

“You didn’t find any in the drawers or see some in the closet. There are none sitting around on the floor. The bed was the only other place to look. Statistically, I figured I had a sixty-seven-point-nine percent chance of finding shoes under the bed. Besides, that’s where you keep yours.”

“Turn your back. I need to get dressed. Wait. Go stand by the door and keep listening to Mrs. Weather, Jonas, and Mom. Don’t let them catch you, but don’t be peaking in here while I’m changing, either.”

Mikey turned his back and stepped over to the door. He opened it a little and listened.

“What are they saying, now?”

“Nothing. I don’t hear them. They must have moved.”

“Then I’d better hurry because they could be back up here any minute. I have to be gone before then.”

“Gone? Where? You can’t leave.”

I fastened the skirt then slid my feet into the shoes. They were a tad too big, but they’d have to do. No princess-and-the-pea bumps in the bottom. I had been hoping I’d find a pill in the shoes, but no. That would be too simple and straightforward for me. As Grandma would say, “What lessons can you learn from life, if all you do is always right?” She loved writing poetry, or at least trying to rhyme words.

“No. No. No.” Mikey was almost shouting. I knew his face and ears were turning red. They do when he is mad. He stomped his foot, though it didn’t make too much noise on the carpet in the bedroom. “We found Mom. I just want us all to go home, now.”

“So do I, Mikey, but I can’t, not until I set things right. If the preacher has the sixth pill because he took it from the shoe I left behind, then whatever damage he does to history will be my fault. You have to understand. I made this mess, and I can’t leave it to someone else to clean up. It’s my responsibility, just the same way that you were, and the same way I was supposed to rescue Mom. I didn’t get either of those right; you’re alive

because you took care of yourself and Mom's here because she freed herself. Can't you see? Didn't you hear Jonas?" I tucked the white blouse I was borrowing from Mrs. Weather into the brown skirt I also was borrowing from her. "If I want to be treated like an adult, then I have to take responsibility for my own actions."

"But you didn't know Mrs. Weather put the pill in your shoe. That can't be your fault."

"That doesn't matter. If Mrs. Weather had thought I could be trusted to do things the right way, she would have told me about it. She didn't; I don't blame her. I made one mistake after another beginning with putting you in danger by bringing you along with me. That stops now."

Mikey crossed his arms and stared at me, anger reflecting as red creases in his forehead.

"Please, Mikey. Don't be mad at me. This is something I have to do." When he didn't move, I again began searching. This time I looked behind a picture hanging on the wall. Nothing. I stood on my tiptoes and tried to stare down the back of the dresser thinking there could be an envelope or something taped there, but there wasn't. If Mrs. Weather is part of the board, I thought, she has to have some of those pills somewhere.

"Mom." Mikey yelled out the bedroom door.

I rushed over and shut it. "Fine, Mikey," I said. "I give up," I knew I'd have to convince Mikey I'd changed my mind or he'd tell Mom, and I was sure she'd be on his side.

I walked back to the dresser and pinned Grandma's cameo to my blouse. "I might as well finish dressing," I told Mikey. I'm not going back home without Grandma's

cameo.” I glanced in the dresser mirror to make sure that it hung straight. Grandma’s brooch was clean and shiny again, but my hair had suffered from its mud bath. Curly strands of brown frizz stuck out everywhere like pieces of Grandma’s rag mop. “Looks like everything’s back to normal. So, Mikey, how do I look?”

He pushed his back up against the door. “I won’t let you out of here.”

Seems my act hadn’t convinced him that I’d changed my mind, but at least he’d stopped yelling for Mom. I started toward him. “I know where and when the preacher is going. I can stop him, if I only can find my pill. Please, Mikey. Help me.”

“No. You can’t go. I won’t let you.” He threw the silver box at me. I hadn’t realized he had picked it up and carried it to the door with him.

I ducked just in time, or it would have hit me in the nose. The box smashed against the wall and popped apart into two pieces like a broken Rubik’s cube. Little kidney beans spilled out from its bottom. Little blue kidney beans. “You did it Mikey. Look.”

“You weren’t supposed to duck. I wanted to hit you . . . make you go back to bed. You can’t go running off.”

“You are the most frustrating yet remarkable brother, Mikey. Come here. Look.” I bent over and started picking up the little pills. “There’s dozens of them. Mrs. Weather is like a hoarder or something.”

“Not a hoarder. Alexi. You don’t get it, do you? Mom told me Mrs. Weather is on the board; she’s the boss of it. And this house, Grandma’s house, it’s their headquarters.” Mikey shook his head at me then kicked the little tin. The pills that didn’t roll away from

me he covered with his feet to keep me from getting them. “You can’t have them. You aren’t going anywhere. Mrs. Weather and Jonas can catch the preacher.”

I could see that I was not about to talk him out of his mood. “O.K. Mikey,” I said. “I understand. You win.” I stood up. “Give me a hug, will you?”

He grabbed me and squeezed.

I hugged him back and slipped one of Mrs. Weather’s pills into my mouth. “I think I will rest for a little now. I sat down on the edge of the bed and started to take my shoes off. “Would you please go see if Mom is coming back upstairs? I should tell her what I know about where the preacher was planning to go. I can do that much anyway.”

“Sure.” Mikey ran to the door and opened it. I could hear his footsteps as he rumbled down the stairs. They sounded like a military drum roll.

I retied my shoe and started to think about how hard it could be to find someone named Starkey in Tulsa, Oklahoma, especially when I’d have an entire day to search before the preacher arrived. I knew that’s where and when I had to be. I kept that in my mind, doing my best not to think about any other place or any other time. If Mom really could pinpoint where she wanted to be, then I was certain I could do it, too.

Tulsa . . . Oklahoma . . . 1907.

Concentrating on it was the only way I could think of that might let me direct my travel. It isn’t like there’s an app for your cell phone. Being able to dial in a where and a when would be great, though.

Nineteen-o-seven . . . before . . . preacher.

If I could get there ahead of him, I could warn this Starkey person. Maybe Starkey would help me steal the pills from the preacher. It wasn't as if I could walk up to the preacher and demand that he give them to me.

Before . . . preacher . . . July twenty-four . . . nineteen . . . zero seven

When it started, I thought I'd had a relapse or maybe that the horse Jonas had been riding had grazed my face when it jumped over me and had given me a concussion. The room began to spin. It hadn't done that the first time I had taken one of those pills. That time I just blacked out and woke up later. This time, I was dizzy. I wondered whether this pill was somehow different. It didn't matter, though, as long as it took me exactly to where I needed to go. Before preacher . . . July twenty-four . . . Tulsa . . . Oklahoma . . . before—

I felt myself shoot, as if I had jumped off a building. There was a sensation of dropping, but no breeze and no sound. My insides tightened, and I struggled to breathe. Then there was nothing but darkness.

12 - Sunflower Sadness

I shook my head to clear it. I could hear thunder roaring around me, getting closer, not stopping. There was no flashing, though. Shouldn't there be lightning? With this much thunder, there should be lightning. I could hear screaming. Was that me? Why was I screaming? My body shook and trembled. I jerked and my feet lifted from the ground. I was flying sideways, and then up, then splat. I hit something solid, caught my breath, and then crumpled. A horse reared. Its hooves landed beside me. Dark boots and a long yellow skirt danced around me like a giant sunflower.

I recalled reading that like pecans, blueberries, and cranberries, sunflowers are one of the few plants grown around the world that are native to America. People gathered them to use for oil, and ground them with grains to make bread. Eventually, they cultivated and bred them giving us giant sunflowers that produce big seeds. I know Grandma uses them in some of her breads.

Dad loves sunflower seeds. Grandma saves a spot at the back of her garden each spring to grow enough for him to last most of the year. Dad likes to eat the raw, unroasted ones. He takes them with him when he goes fishing, and shares them with the birds. Then besides eating his fill of them and spitting the shells on the ground, he also pushes a few untouched ones into the dirt. He says he believes in helping nature, sharing the bounty, and looking after each other. He's like Johnny Appleseed populating the country, but he's Mr. Sunflower seed. I wish all people believed and acted the way my dad does.

I was standing again. The roaring was fading and voices were speaking to me.

“Are you injured?”

“No, I’m not hurt. I’m fine.” As my senses returned, I realized I could still feel the three kidney-shaped pills clutched in my hand. They and the one I swallowed were all I had managed to pick up before Mikey kicked away the round tin-like box with its secret compartment.

“. . . close. A good thing I was just mounting—”

“What?” I looked up.”

The man frowning down at me with his black eyes and bushy eyebrows that almost met in the middle smoothed back his straight black hair. He wasn’t as tall as my Dad—six feet, a little less maybe—but for a moment, I’d thought that’s who it was. As his curved nose and weather-beaten skin came into focus though, I realized this man was almost scary to look at.

“How did you not see me coming? Were you trying to kill yourself?”

“I will take care of her, Henry. You go see to your horse.”

I watched as he took the reins and led his horse down from the wooden sidewalk that I hadn’t realized I was standing on until I looked down. He started walking the horse in circles, watching how it moved. I looked at the woman whose yellow dress I’d thought was the flower petals of a sunflower.

“What is it, child? What is bad enough that you would want to kill yourself?”

“I didn’t—wait, you think—honest, it was just an accident.”

“No young lady I know would walk in front of a horse bus bolting down the road and expect anyone to believe it was an accident.”

“I was just disoriented, a little dizzy, that’s all. I didn’t know where I was for a moment.”

“Then my apologies to you for making such an assumption. I should have realized right away that you are ill. This heat is bad enough to make even me swoon. What a sight you are. Your hair has come undone, and your blouse has a tear in it.”

She wiped at my cheek the way Mom still does when she thinks I have something on it that shouldn't be there. At least this woman didn't lick her thumb first. “How is your horse, Henry?”

“Well enough.” He slapped the horse on its shoulder. “Nothing we cannot fix with a few oats and an attentive brushing. Right girl?”

“Then come help this young lady into the bus. We are taking her home. She looked at me. “Unless you have someplace around here you would prefer to go?”

“Uh, no. I just dropped into town. But really, that's not necessary. I'm fine. You see, I'm here looking for someone.”

“You are? All by yourself?” Her expression changed from sympathetic to suspicious.

“Yes. I haven't met the person, though. I think . . . we might be related.” It wasn't exactly a lie. Since I didn't know Starkey, maybe we could be sort-of related. I'm no better at telling a lie than the preacher, but I am creative at solving problems.

Last summer Mikey had wanted to camp out back, but it was so hot out that Mom wouldn't let him. I took the window air conditioner we had in the attic and duct taped the bottom couple of inches of a cardboard box to the front of it. I cut a hole in the center of the box then fastened one end of a scrap piece of dryer hose to the hole. I set the air conditioner on a board so the exhaust port would be outside the tent, and put the other

end of the hose in through the tent's zipper door. Mikey had cold air in his tent, and I had a whole weekend of peace and quiet in the house.

"Then I likely know the person you are looking for," the sunflower woman said.

"I know most of the families that live around here. Who is it?"

Now might be a good a time to start looking for this Starkey person. The sooner the better I thought since I only have one day to figure out a plan and get Starkey to help me with it. "I only know the one name. "Starkey," I said.

"Mister or misses Starkey?"

I assumed it was a man, but I didn't know. "Mister, I think."

"Well, I do know the Starkey family. We can find out soon enough who it is you are specifically looking for. You think you might be related to him, you say? Why don't we get you cleaned up some first, then we can talk about this Starkey. I can stitch the sleeve on your blouse for you. I bet a cold glass of lemonade and a biscuit would make you feel much better, too. Henry, give us a hand up, please."

It seemed they weren't going to give me much say in it, and since it might be easier than I thought to find Starkey if this couple helped me, I decided to go along with them. We didn't have far to go, just a few buildings down.

"Well, here we are," Mrs. Sunflower said.

Henry helped us out of the horse bus.

I don't know what I was expecting—a little white cottage with lace curtains, and a bistro table with two chairs outside perhaps. I was not imagining a two-story building in the middle of town with a staircase up the outside of it, and a millinery shop downstairs.

"This is your place?"

“Certainly.”

Henry put an arm around his wife’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze. “Hattie is quite the talented milliner,” he said. We were just coming back from delivering one of her hats when you stepped into the road.”

Hattie makes hats. You have to be kidding me.

“Stop. Now you are embarrassing me. Wait until you see the inside of our home,” she said to me. “Henry is quite a handy man at building furniture.”

She stopped before her storefront and pointed toward the display in the front window. “See? He built these stands for me to let people see my work through the window. He thought it would bring more customers inside.”

I was looking at the hats, though, not the hat poles. The one I noticed the most was purple because it was one of our two school colors. Hattie Sunflower must have noticed that I was looking at it. “Maybe I’ll let you try it on later.”

Yeah, right. You wouldn’t catch me dead wearing that thing, especially at school. I already have enough problems trying to stay as invisible as possible from Mary Jane and her followers. I didn’t want to give them any reason to pick on me, especially now that Judy was gone. Mary Jane can snap out a smart-mouthed comment faster than a frog can tongue a fly.

“We should go upstairs now, though, and get you cleaned up and perhaps give you a cold drink. Then we can talk about that person you said you are looking to find.”

“I will go take care of the horse. You two ladies do what you need to do.” Henry Sunflower shut the door behind him. I could hear his boots go down the stairs outside.

Sunflower Hattie gave me a nightshirt to wear while she stitched up the sleeve on my blouse. I drank a glass of lemonade and ate one of her biscuits. They were almost as good as Grandma's biscuits. When she finished, I put the blouse back on, and then she brushed my hair and pinned it up. I scrubbed the dirt from my face, and sat down at the table with her.

"You are quite a pretty child when you are all cleaned up," Hattie said.

There's that word again. Why can't people just get it right? I am thirteen. I'm not a child. I can live with them calling me a young lady, but I haven't been a child or a kid for years now.

"Shall we talk about your relative? What makes you think that you might be related to the Starkey family?"

That might have been a bad brain-to-mouth decision on my part. I really was no better at making up lies than was the preacher. You can remember the truth; it's the lies that are easy to forget, Grandma often says, so I usually try to tell the truth. There is a difference between a white lie told for an important reason, and all other lies on the face of the earth, however. But I didn't really know why I had lied to Mrs. Sunflower, so I decided to tell her about the preacher, especially the parts where he kidnapped me and how I escaped. I didn't tell her about the pole-vaulting. She wouldn't have believed me even if she did know that it was an Olympic sport. I didn't tell her about Mikey, or Tyee, or Mrs. Weather, or Jonas, or anyone else either. I told her about Mom; I wanted her to know I had one and that it wasn't necessary to adopt me or something. I definitely didn't say anything about time traveling. I was sure she'd call the men in white coats on me, if

they had people who did that back in 1907. I was waiting for her to say something when the door opened and Mr. Starkey came back in.

“Horse is put up for now. How are you two getting along?”

“Splendidly,” Mrs. Sunflower said. She stood up from the table. “Coffee, Henry?”

“Thank you, dear. I think I will.” He wiped his feet and hung his hat and leather gloves by the door.

It was the weirdest thing. I hadn’t even noticed he’d been wearing a hat before. He was when he came back from taking care of his horse, though, and this hat had a red feather in it.

“We have just been discussing this child’s most interesting experiences,” Hattie said as she set his coffee on the table.

Henry sat down with us and picked up his cup. He poured some onto his saucer, blew on the black liquid, and then slurped it up. Mrs. Weather poured a cup for her too, and sat back down with us. She didn’t dump her coffee into the saucer, though. She dipped a spoon in it and blew on that. It felt as though I was being given a nineteenth-century etiquette lesson.

When you blow on a boiling liquid like that in cold weather, you can see steam coming from the cup. It was much too warm in here for that now. My skin was beginning to feel damp beneath Mrs. Weather’s long-sleeved white blouse.

“Is it women’s sewing circle talk, or is there something I should know?”

“Oh, you will want to hear this. Can I get you another glass of lemonade, Alexi? It is Alexi, right?”

“Yes, please, but how did you—I mean, thank you.” I decided it might be better not to ask just yet how she knew my name.

When she sat back down, she nodded at her husband. “Alexi, let me introduce you to Mr. Starkey. Henry S. Starkey, this is Alexi Mackey. I believe she’s the young lady you’ve been waiting for.”

“You mean he’s the man I’ve been looking for. Don’t worry. I say things backward a lot of times, too.” Wait. Hold on. Starkey. Can’t be the same. Just a coincidence.

“Well, this is quite interesting. I am very glad we happened upon you. Would you mind waiting here for just a moment while Mrs. Starkey and I have a discussion about . . . her store? I noticed a small problem with it when I was on my way up, and I think she should also have a look at it right away. We will return in just a minute. You go ahead and finish your lemonade.”

I didn’t seem to have much say in the matter, but I really did need to know whether he was willing to help me. Still, they’d been nice to me, and since I’d found the Starkey’s right away, I’d have time to ask them to help me to trap and catch the preacher. The one problem I still had to solve now was how to get the pills away from the preacher without anyone else finding out the truth about what was really going on.

I finished my lemonade and took my cup to the sink. Maybe I should tell them about the pills. I felt in my skirt pocket and counted with my fingers . . . one, two, three. All there, but not hidden at all. Mrs. Weather will be furious when she finds out I took them. Mom will be angry, too, but I know what to say to her. Worst I’ll get is probably two weeks of hard-core detention—no Internet, no television, and no cell phone. What I

wouldn't give to have my cell phone right now. No, that's not an invitation to you, Satan, just in case you're thinking I'm willing to barter my soul.

How did these settlers live without cell phones? The bigger question for me was how come mine didn't come with me when I shot back in time? I'd had it in my hand when I took the pill. Maybe techy gadgets can't time travel. No, wait. I wasn't holding it. I'd handed it to Tomai in case he had to call for help. It wouldn't have mattered if I'd had it with me. No cell towers, no technology. In fact, it probably would have gotten me into even more trouble if the preacher had found it when he searched me.

Excuse me. I get rather self-absorbed sometimes. You may have noticed that. It's not that I like myself that much. It's just that I have to think aloud, but if I do, people look at me like I'm a freakazoid. I figured out how to talk with myself, but inside my brain. O.K. That sounds totally weird, too. But it's not. Mom says that I'm an audio, visual, and kinesthetic learner, which means I'm basically three monkeys—I have to see, hear, and do to really learn something. That's what I was doing right then as I carried my lemonade cup to the sink—working through things in my brain, following my thoughts as they ran like a flooded river, thinking my way from topic to topic as if my mind were skiing on crossing spaghetti strands. That's when I saw it there on the counter.

It looked identical to Mrs. Weather's pillbox. This one wasn't open, however, but it was silver and the latch looked the same. I listened for returning footsteps on the stairs. I didn't hear anything. I touched the box then pulled my hand back.

Now, this is snooping. You have no reason to go looking inside Mrs. Starkey's box. She hasn't stolen from you, and if anything, she's been very nice to you.

I know that, but it looks exactly like Mrs. Weather's box. I can't see a single difference.

These are probably common around here. It's a coincidence. I bet it doesn't even have a secret compartment.

Arguing with myself still hadn't convinced me. I looked over at the door. Nothing. I picked up the box and released the tiny latch. I held my breath and lifted the lid. It was empty inside.

Really, Alexi? You didn't think you'd find anything in here, did you?

Hold on. This is only the part I can see. What about the part that's hidden?

You don't even know how to open it without breaking it like Mikey did Mrs. Weather's box.

I'll shake it. If there are pills inside, I'll hear them, right? I shook it. No rattle, no tinkle, no noise at all.

See. I told you.

I was a little disappointed, but I felt relieved, too. I set the box back where I found it. The door burst open. Why hadn't I heard them coming back?

Mrs. Starkey came in first. She was wearing the purple hat that I'd seen in her store window. It had a directional shine to it, like velvet, and three peacock feathers banded to the side with a turquoise colored ribbon. The ends of each feather stuck off the back of the hat. They bounced and swayed as she walked. I couldn't imagine where she could have gotten Peacock feathers around here.

I had seen peacocks at the Oklahoma Zoo, of course, but I hadn't thought they existed in Oklahoma in the nineteen hundreds. My art teacher once told us that some

Byzantine and Romanesque paintings had peacock feathers in them to symbolize pride. I hate it when nonsensical little facts like that pop up in my brain for no good reason. I hadn't seen any peacocks running around here, though.

Mrs. Starkey was not smiling anymore. "What are you doing in my kitchen?"

"Just—I picked up my cup and showed it to her—putting this in the sink. My mom says it's polite to clean up after yourself, especially when you are visiting someone else's home."

She coughed and then covered her mouth. Her husband put his hands on her waist and moved her aside, then spoke to me. "We brought someone to see you," he said, and then he stepped to the side. He had to. The door wasn't wide enough for two men, especially when one of them was the preacher.

13 - The Final Proof

For a moment, I couldn't believe the preacher was standing there—Satan's luck incarnate. The Starkeys had betrayed me. Why had I thought I could trust them? I pushed myself as far back into the corner of the kitchen as I could and searched for something, anything to use to protect myself. There must be a knife set here somewhere. Maybe they keep their knives in a drawer. I pulled one open, then another, but found nothing useful.

I never took my eyes off the preacher, who was now crossing the room toward me, his long leather coat and black hat making him look as evil as I know him to be. He didn't say a word, and he didn't seem to be rushing. Maybe he was being cautious. I'd gotten away from him once, and I bet he'd limped for quite a while afterward. Still, I had to find some kind of a weapon. I saw a cast iron skillet on top of the stove and picked it up. It was heavy; I'm not sure I could have held it above my head if I hadn't been terrified.

He came at me fast once he saw what I was reaching for. I swung. I missed. The skillet's weight pulled me halfway around until my back was to the preacher. He grabbed me from behind with his arm around my waist, and snatched the pan from my hand. If only I could have hit him just once, I might have had a chance. Mrs. Starkey was now sitting at the table; I might get past her before she could grab me. Mr. Starkey's not a real big man, so I thought that even if he caught me, I might be able to wiggle out of his hold. Maybe I could have pushed my way past Starkey without him catching me. That was the best plan my brain could come up with as I stood there trying to kick the preacher and struggling to get free.

I heard the preacher toss the pan back onto the stove. He grabbed a handful of my hair with his now free hand, but he didn't yank it out of my head. I was half expecting him to, though. "Stop struggling or I swear I will pay you back right now for your little stunt out there on the prairie." He didn't sound angry, but he was yelling.

He turned me around until I faced the Starkeys. Both of them were sitting at the table now. Mrs. Starkey's face reminded me of blanched turnips. She didn't look much like a sunflower anymore. Mr. Starkey took a sip of what remained of his coffee. "Where are they?"

"In my pocket just where I showed you" the preacher said. "Where is my money?"

Mr. Starkey laughed. "I put it on deposit for you at the bank." He pulled out of his pocket a piece of paper and set it on the table. "That is all you will need to pick it up. The banker is expecting you." He laughed again. "This is the first deposit I have ever made at a bank. I am known mostly for my withdrawal talents." Starkey lifted himself up from his chair like a rattlesnake balancing prey in his throat. "Now, I want my delivery."

"Where's the case?"

"Right next to you." Mr. Starkey laughed. "Seems you were too preoccupied to notice it."

The preacher looked at the silver box on the counter. "Pick it up," he told me and nudged me close enough to reach it.

I lifted it from the counter.

"Release the latch, but not all the way."

I slid the latch a little to the left. Righty-tighty, lefty-loosey.

“Turn it over.”

I turned it over.

“Slam it on the counter.”

“What?”

“Do as I told you. Slam it on the counter with the top facing down.”

I slammed it and felt a little nudge under my hand. When I let go of it, the bottom of the box sprung open.

“Take this.” He handed me a tiny round tin. It was silver all over except for the top, which was inlaid with square pieces of pink abalone shell. This one didn’t have a clasp on it, and it was less than an inch deep. I doubted it had a secret compartment.

“When I tell you to, you’re going to push that button on the side of my tin. The lid will pop open. Then you are going to dump the pills into Mrs. Starkey’s container, and close it immediately. Air exposure makes them break down faster. Be quick. I do not want any degradation in the quality of my product.”

“Do it now.”

I pressed the button and the pink lid popped open. I poured the six pills into Mrs. Starkey’s pillbox then pushed its lid closed, but not before I noticed that these pills were not blue or kidney shaped; they were white and round, like aspirin. “But—”

The preacher yanked my hair and I yelled. He pulled harder. I yelled some more. I tried again to kick him, but mostly I just spun around the handful of my hair the preacher held.

“Shut her up,” Mr. Starkey said. “We cannot afford to have well-intentioned neighbors dropping by to check on all the noise.”

Mrs. Starkey sat there with her face in her hands. She couldn't even look at me. I was beginning to think that none of this was her idea. "Mrs. Starkey," I said. "Help me."

She didn't look up, but the preacher took my arm and bent it up behind my back. Then he leaned forward and almost shouted, "Shut up or I'll break it."

"Please, please stop. I'll be quiet. I promise."

Mr. Starkey nodded at the preacher. "Better. Toss it here."

The preacher let go of my arm and picked up the silver box. He threw it overhand at Mr. Starkey, who snatched it out of the air. I could hear the pills rattling inside.

"Go get ready, Hattie. We are leaving now," Mr. Starkey said.

Mrs. Starkey stood up and walked toward the back, away from me, away from all of us, and closed the door behind her. She never looked at me.

"Now, what to do about her," Mr. Starkey said.

"She's just extra baggage now."

Mr. Starkey looked at me. "That is too bad. She is almost pretty. How much do you charge to take the trash out?"

"No extra charge, at least not for this bag. We have a little unfinished business."

"Then I will leave the details to you. Wait five minutes after Hattie and I leave, and then you'll be able to go to the bank and get your money. If you like, you can leave her tied up in one of our fine dining chairs while you are conducting your banking business. I have a rope down in Hattie's shop. I will get it for you.

Mr. Starkey was down and back before his wife came out of the back room.

"Sit down," the preacher said. "Make it easier on yourself. I'd rather not have to blacken your other eye for you, at least not yet."

He tied me to the chair. He did a little better job this time than when he tied my hands before. I doubted I could wriggle out of this while he was at the bank.

“I know you promised, but I have to make sure.” He took a sweaty neckerchief off his throat and tied it around my mouth. I think I prefer the donkey poop smell.

Mrs. Starkey came out of the bedroom. The purple hat was gone, but she carried a hatbox along with a purse and a coat. She had changed into a black skirt and pale blue blouse, and now wore a straw bonnet tied beneath her chin with a ribbon that matched her blouse. Traveling clothes, I thought. She didn’t even look at me as she walked out the door. I wondered if it was because she didn’t care what was going to happen to me, or if she just couldn’t stand to know. Either way didn’t matter because she wasn’t going to do anything to help me. It was up to me, but I had no idea what I could do this time.

The preacher stood at the top of the stairs until I heard the Starkey’s footsteps fade and their horse trot away, the wheels and seat squeaking as it went. I kept hoping Mrs. Starkey would change her mind and come running up the stairs yelling, “You can’t do it. She’s just a child. Make her promise to go home and not do anything like this again.” Soon I couldn’t hear the wheels anymore either.

The preacher stepped back inside long enough to look at the ropes holding my hands. He straightened his back and said, “I’m going to the bank. Don’t go anywhere.”

He was gone only a few minutes, and though I’d tried to wiggle out of the ropes, they wouldn’t loosen at all. I could hear the preacher bounding up the outside steps. He must have been taking them two at a time. He stepped inside, closed the door behind him, set the lock, and then pulled the hat off his head and carefully set it on the table. “What am I going to do about you? Do you have any idea how much trouble you have caused

me? You're just like your mother—tenacious does not begin to describe it. So, you figured if you beat me here you could . . . what? Stop me from selling the pills? Well, you wasted your time. I am amazed that you didn't shoot yourself head first into the side of Cavanal Hill, or drop yourself into the mounds of bat guano at the entrance to the Selman cave. Seems you have a little of your mother's talents." He pulled out a chair and sat down across from me.

I yelled at him, for all the good it did me since I still had his scarf in my mouth.

"If you promise to be reasonable and not shout anymore, I'll take that off."

I nodded.

He pulled the scarf from my mouth. "Now, let's discuss this like calm adults. You already know that I didn't really give the time-travel pills to Starkey. You must be wondering why."

"Probably because you're a cheat on top of being a thief."

He looked at me for a minute. "Perhaps, but you see I needed both money and the pills to finish my plan. Bribing people does not come cheap. Who better to steal from than a bank robber? It's almost poetic justice, do you not agree?"

I didn't answer him. It seemed to make him angry. He slammed his chair back, stood, and began walking. I watched as this evil and loony man paced back and forth across the room with his hands behind his back. He stopped right in front of me and slammed his fist on the table.

"I will make you a deal. I will let you live, and I might even take you back to your own time when this is all over, if you will do something for me."

There was no way I was going to help him do anything, but I thought it might not be such a good idea to actually say that, so instead I said, “What do you want from me?”

“Your help getting me to exactly the day, time, and place I want to go. That’s all. Then I will let you go.”

“But you don’t really need me to do that. You have the pills. You can do it yourself.”

“For someone like your mother who has a natural talent for hitting the time and location exactly, or for people who have been time-traveling as long as Jonas and Mrs. Weather have, sure, it’s simple enough. But I have neither that natural skill nor the experience. Since you are so much like your mother, I am better off having you along.”

“What’s to keep you from killing me as soon as I help you get to where and when you want to go.”

“Smart. What if I give you my word? You can trust me. I am a real preacher. Besides, if we do not leave together in the next couple of minutes, I will have to go without you. You will be left here to face the Starkeys when they come back. Make no mistake. They will come back when they discover what I really put into their pillbox, and you alone will face Henry’s anger.”

I struggled to get free of the ropes, but knew I couldn’t do it on my own. “O.K.” I said. “But only one trip. After that, you let me go.”

The preacher reached around behind me.

Not sure what he was going to do, I shrunk into the chair the best I could.

He pulled at the rope until it came loose and set my hands free.

I jumped up, grabbed the gag he had stuffed into my mouth, and threw it at him. I could still feel the dry fabric scratching at my tongue, making my taste buds want to curl and hurl. “What were you thinking? Do you know how many germs there are on something like that?” My brain-to-mouth switch was wide open, again. Go ahead. Make him even angrier. How many times can he do away with you before he gets rid of you? I slapped my hand over my mouth.

He laughed. The preacher was laughing at me. He’s going to snuff me out, but not until he gets a good laugh. I didn’t know what to do or say. This was how my life was going to end. Was he planning to laugh me to death, maybe make me pop a blood vessel to my brain from anger?

I sat back down. I realized that his laughing at me wasn’t even important now. He’d given fake pills to Starkey, a bank robber, by Starkey’s own admission. Even if the preacher didn’t kill me, Starkey would. And now I had just agreed to help the preacher complete his plan, to make it all happen—the start of the end of time. I had no way of knowing what would happen then—chaos came to mind. I’m sure the pills the preacher gave to Starkey were little more than aspirin. What was Starkey planning to do with them, anyway? Travel forward in time and rob the richest bank? What good would that do him? He couldn’t bring U.S. Treasury Notes back to 1907. They wouldn’t be worth anything here. Maybe he was going to travel back in time. He could set himself up to discover gold or oil. He’d certainly know where to look, and this is Oklahoma, after all. What I couldn’t figure out is how any of these things might result in the kind of history or time disasters that Mrs. Weather, Jonas, and my Mom had been discussing. Then I

realized that Starkey wasn't the one who was going to destroy time; it was the preacher. He still had the real pills, and I had just agreed to help him.

“Alexi? I see. That is how this is going to work. You plan to ignore me because you do not like what I have to say. I am not trained to handle teenage girls any more than I am to time-travel, but I succeeded at that.”

He was right. I had stopped listening to him at some time during his lecture, and then tuned back in for the last line or two. I didn't do that sort of thing on purpose; it just happened. I guess I perfected that skill when Mom used to lecture me. She eventually figured out it was useless and quit trying, but this man was scary, mean, and capable of anything. Yet, I still tuned him out. Sometimes that ability can come in very handy. I wished I knew exactly how I did it so that I could do it on purpose when needed. Maybe it's like the mystic who can sleep on a bed of nails without getting any puncture holes. Of course, Mikey would explain it as just a matter of pressure, force divided by area, or something like that. Then I'm sure he'd also tell me the statistical likelihood that I'd be skewered from end to end if I tried it.

“Look at me, Alexi. I am not going to hurt you. I keep my promises, and we made a deal.”

I looked at him, but I didn't trust him. I moved my hands into my lap then slowly slid my right one over to my skirt pocket. It was hard to keep my shoulder from moving. That would be too obvious, and he might figure out what I was trying to do. I know. I'll distract him. I fidgeted in my chair, rocking side-to-side. I probably looked like a baby to him, but it worked. I was able to slip one of the pills out of my pocket. I hadn't yet figured out how I was going to get it to my mouth without him seeing me do it. If I

couldn't though, all he had to do was grab me, and then wherever I went, he'd be right there. If I couldn't do it without him seeing me, then I decided I'd have to shoot back to my own time and try to land right into the middle of the police station where I'd scream that he was trying to kidnap me. I wonder how many officers they have at the police station that's just down the road from Grandma's house.

"Here. Even your mom knows that I keep my word. I took this from her, but I promised to give it back once I reached my goal. You can give it to her after you help me." He reached into his coat pocket and held his hand out to me. "This is my final piece of proof for you that I will keep my word."

The preacher put Mom's wedding band into my palm. The ring was made of yellow gold, except that it had a single stripe of white gold in the center all the way around it. Dad had it hand-crafted just for her, something about joining circles of time and life, and then had an almost matching one made for him. It had one big difference. His was white gold with a single stripe of yellow gold in the center all the way around it. This was definitely Mom's ring.

"You're not a preacher and you can't be trusted."

He laughed. "Oh, yes. I am a preacher, just not the bad man you think I am. It's the time travelers who stop things from happening the way they are meant to that are the evil ones. People like Jonas, Mrs. Weather, and even your mother and father are the evil ones. Did you know that Hitler should have won World War II, but they changed the outcome of the war? Who said any of the people on the Titanic should have lived? All I want to do is stop their infernal interference. You could almost call me the good guy."

I had to let that information soak into my brain. “You think you’re protecting the natural order of time?”

“You could call it that. Yes. Besides, I am the one appointed to keep others from interfering with His plans. You do believe in Our Lord, don’t you?”

“I always have,” I said.

“Then you should be on my side, helping me stop people like your parents from their misguided interference. In some ways, those time travelers are worse than the criminals who black market the pills, like the Starkeys do, or even those who swallow the time capsules.” He raised his eyebrows at me. “Buyers only want to change one thing that will make them rich or, like you, save someone that they love. People like the Starkeys though, they sell the pills on the black market, and they aren’t discriminatory about who they sell them to.”

I was amazed. The preacher actually believes he’s a good guy. What an ego. But maybe I can use that to my advantage. “Did my coming after you change the original plan?”

He laughed again. I really wished he’d stop doing that. “That’s all possible, but now I’m giving you a chance to set things right. We have to leave before Henry decides to check on what I sold to him. For him it will be shoot-on-sight, and he won’t care who he hits, as long as he thinks he will get those pills from me.

“But how can there be a black market for those pills? Doesn’t the board keep careful control over them?”

“You are right. The board does everything they can to monitor those pills. Production, distribution, and destruction are all closely regulated and supervised. The

pills themselves have been designed to disintegrate after twelve hours of exposure to air or light, potentially preventing lost or unused ones from getting into the wrong hands. That does not mean it cannot ever happen, however. You are a perfect example. You have one in your hand right now.”

I was surprised that he knew.

The preacher held out his hand as if he expected me to cooperate. “Give it to me.”

I heard wheels rumbling through the dirt and a horse snorting.

The preacher lifted his head and turned his ear toward the sound. “We are out of time. I knew it would not be long before he decided to check his delivery. I had hoped it would take him a little longer, though. Listen and listen fast. We have to shoot out of here before they get in.” The preacher grabbed my hand and wrenched it open, taking the pill from it. I will swallow the pill, but you will guide this trip. We are going to where the blue dust was found, but one day before it was discovered. That’s all it will take for me to find the guardian the board has set and bribe him to look the other way. With both of us thinking about arriving one day before the discovery, we can’t miss. Understand?”

I understood, but cooperating with him was the last thing I planned on doing.

He dropped the pill into his mouth and swallowed it. He stood up and pulled me with him into the back room. He closed the door. “Help me,” he said. Together we pushed the four-poster, log bed across the room until one of its heavy wooden legs pressed against the door.

“That should buy us a minute or two.” He pulled me to the far side of the room, and pushed my back into the corner. He wrapped both arms around me. He had his back to the door. “Now, think only about arriving one day before the blue dust was discovered.

If we miss, I'll know that you did it on purpose, or you don't have your mother's talent. In either case, I won't need you at all. You know what that means don't you?"

"Yes." I knew it meant my death. What I didn't know was the exact day or even the month when the blue dust was found. I only knew the year. If I traveled with him, I also knew the best I could hope for was a quick death.

"Keep quiet and think only about the blue dust."

The preacher was holding me so tight I could barely breathe. I tried to wiggle away, but he wouldn't let go. I only had one chance. "I think I'm going to throw up," I said. I made fake dry heave noises with my mouth aimed directly at his face.

"Good Lord girl." He released his bear hug on me, stepped back, and grabbed my right arm. Bad decision. I didn't think he knew I had two other pills, but if he did, I guess he thought I was right handed.

I slipped my left hand into my pocket, pulled out a pill, and dry heaved again. This time though, I bent over and slipped the pill into my mouth. His pill had a head start on mine, so I had to do something else to make sure I controlled where we went. Even though he was still holding my hand, I wondered if it was possible to go to two different places since we'd each taken a pill. If I traveled somewhere else, though, how could I stop him from destroying my timeline?

Starkey was pounding, yelling, and kicking to get in. He would be through the door any second. I bit down repeatedly on the pill. It felt like chewing a dirt clod, smelled like camphor, and tasted like Vaseline. I had to force back a real dry heave. If only I had some water to wash it down, I thought. Water. Water. Lots of water. My sight spiked and narrowed then returned to normal. Visions pulsed in and out of my mind. I didn't know

how it could be possible, but I was watching the preacher as if from a distance, and much earlier in time. I saw him swearing at his henchmen for letting my Mom get away, and then watched as he put the pill that he'd taken from her into the lining of his hat. I could see the five other blue kidney-bean-shaped pills tucked into the hat's interior sweatband. That vision flashed away and another replaced it. I looked down at the four of us in the Starkey's house. Mrs. Starkey sat passively at the table, her head in her hands. I think she was crying. Mr. Starkey was attacking the bedroom door like a ravenous dog; he leaped against it repeatedly. I saw him draw his gun and shoot at the handle—once, twice—while the Preacher cowered in the corner of the room, holding me there. That's when I realized what I had to do, what I could do.

“You hid the pills in the lining of your hat, didn't you?” I accused the preacher.

He seemed startled, confused. I could tell I was right. For a second, he let go of my hand and started to reach toward his hat. I was quicker. I snatched it from his head and dropped to my knees, making it hard for the preacher to hold onto me, and tucked the hat against my stomach so he couldn't get it back. If you had been trapped by an evil man who is so much stronger and bigger than you are, what would you have done?

I told myself now. Go now. Then I heard two shots. I closed my eyes and fell, tumbling into darkness.

14 - Random Waves

When I opened my eyes again, I felt as though I was bobbing around in water, swirling and rushing past flat land. I wondered if I was having another vision, but I knew that I wasn't. I had told myself to go, but I hadn't had time to tell myself to go home, to be specific about the when and the where, and my last thought had been for a drink of water to swallow the blue dust from my throat. No, I hadn't been exact, but I had succeeded at stealing the pills from the preacher and getting myself away from him. I would have been proud of myself if my clothing wasn't soaked and the weight of the wet skirt hadn't been sucking me under. I held my breath, kicking and struggling to reach the surface, but it pulled on me. I couldn't swim with the preacher's hat in my hand, though I tried until my skirt snagged on something. It spun me face down. I kicked, but I couldn't get free. Red water surrounded me. I was forced to let go of the hat to use my hands. I yanked and yanked at my skirt until it tore free. I popped through the water's surface, spit salty red muck out of my mouth, and coughed then breathed. You're fine. It's just water, I told myself. The hat was gone, but I had spoiled the preacher's plans. Even Mrs. Weather would have to be proud of me for that.

Something smacked into my back, and then rolled over me, pushing my head again under the water. I reached out, flailing, almost hoping to find the preacher's hand. Maybe he'd help me. He needed me, right? I kicked up and my head cleared the surface. I gulped air. I was still floating and rushing along with the water, but it seemed to be a little calmer. It was hard to tell though because the light was gone. My eyes adjusted and I could see holes in the darkness above my head. Small beams of daylight streamed through them. I dipped and bounced inside what looked as though it once was the roof of

someone's house. I wrapped my arm around one of its trusses and held on, resting inside this temporary buffer.

The water moved faster. The part of the roof behind me lifted. I let go. It flipped and tumbled over my head. Something hit my leg and cut into it. The water pushed faster. I rushed after the roof of the house, just another battered piece of debris in the river. I paddled and kicked, but the more I struggled, the more tangled my legs became in my skirt. I tried to swim to shore, but the water pushed me further out toward the middle of the river—Satan really hates me, or maybe he just hates water.

My hands, legs, everything on me ached; I knew I couldn't hold on much longer. Think Alexi. Think. Breathe. Think. That's it. The skirt. Pole-vaulting. I reached down and felt for my waist. Only two of them. I can do this.

My fingers were cold and stiff. The water tried to push my hand away. It rolled me onto my side and dunked my face in it as if to remind me I had no say over what it chose to do with me. I took a deep breath, held it, and let the water wash at me. I sank, the water rolling me like a burrito inside my skirt. My legs were now trapped and impeded. I couldn't kick. I sank further, hit the bottom, and slid across the mud. I slammed against a tree that seemed stuck, impervious to the torture the river was throwing against it. Fallen trees—my new best friends.

My lungs burned. I wanted to gulp air. To trick my body into thinking I was going to breathe for it, I let out a little air and watched the bubbles to see which way they went. I grabbed a branch and worked myself around to the tree's leeward side. The biggest force of the water flowed around me now, diverted by the vast size of the trunk. I pulled myself up it until I sucked air again. I took huge breaths, filling my lungs with all of the

moist air I could get. I rested for a dozen deep breaths, but I knew I couldn't stay there. It was only a matter of time until something smashed into and rolled the tree. Even if it held stubborn to the river's bed, I might not be able to hold on to it.

With one hand, I reached up and grabbed one of the tree's lower branches. With the other, I struggled to free the top button on my skirt. My fingers felt waterlogged and fat, but I managed to unbutton it. One more and I'd be free of that death shroud. The second one popped off from my pulling on it, and became just another part of everything being washed away in this mad frenzy.

I wiggled out of my skirt, holding onto it as tight as I could. There were two more pills in the pocket, and I needed to get them out before I let go of it. Something in the raging water caught at the fabric and tore it from my hand. I clung to the tree hoping I wouldn't be swept away with it, and watched the swirl of brown cloth disappear beneath the muddy waters.

Climb. You have to get up and out of the water, see where you are, and make a plan. I reached for a small branch higher up. It broke off in my hand. I found another. This one held. My legs free, I felt around for something to put my foot on. Another small branch; I prayed it would hold. I stepped. It was solid enough to hold my weight. One branch at a time, I climbed. The wind conspired with the water, trying to pull me off the tree. My whole body shivered in random waves. When one shiver stopped, I climbed a little higher then held on until the next one passed. A thick branch ran crosswise toward the shore, just above my head now. It was out of the water, suffering only an occasional splash. I hoped I could reach it. Another shiver, another branch. Just a little further. Hold on. There's nothing to it. You can do it. My arms trembled with fatigue. I noticed a

trickle of red running from a cut in my leg. My eyes burned. My hands stung. I swung my leg over the side branch then wrapped my arms around the trunk.

I don't know how long I clung there, pressing my hand against the cut in my leg to stem the bleeding. It grew dark outside, though. Stars sparkled through what was left of the tree's canopy. I screamed for help until my lungs hurt and my throat was hoarse. I prayed. The only answer was thunder and lightning far off in the same direction that the water still flowed beneath my feet. I stopped shivering, even though I was soaked. That can't be a good thing. I remembered a PBS special I once watched that discussed hypothermia. I had been thirsty, but now, surrounded by all this water, I felt nauseous. I felt almost too tired to hold on to the tree anymore, and my brain felt foggy, the way it does when I wake up in the middle of a bad dream. I guess hypothermia can do that to you . . . make you dream, I mean. Or maybe, could it be I was having a vision?

“Geez, Alexi. Sometimes you're mean.”

“There's nothing to it. Just go do it.”

Spiders in my hair and on my pecan cookies.

The preacher is holding me down. Cat woman is stuffing a raw okra pod into my mouth. Starkey is laughing while he pulls the lining from the preacher's hat.

“Wait. Take a swallow of milk first,” Tomai says.

I'm face down in the mud and sinking, like in quicksand. Red eyes in a bright yellow sunflower stare at me, just watching. They refuse to help me, grow legs, and just walk away.

Mom, Jonas, Mrs. Weather are dressed in witch costumes. They are chanting over me. Dad yanks me free. Now I'm riding in his Prius. It rumbles, hums, and something bumps into it. The engine must be sputtering, quitting, but electric hybrids don't sputter, do they? None of it makes any sense, and I can't stop it or change its direction.

Now I'm in Grandma's oak tree, trying to hold on. I'm very tired. I know I must not let go, but I've forgotten what it is I must hold onto. I'm sorry Grandma. Did I break your tree? I am crying too hard. I have soaked my clothes, but the fall didn't hurt. It was as if someone had lowered me gently to the ground—a rocking, swaying ground of voices and hands that now cover me with warm blankets and promises that I will be fine. I'm still not shivering, but my brain is flashing and floating again, the way it did when I saw the preacher hide the pills he'd stolen. He practically admitted that I was right when he reached for his hat. Oh, no. I couldn't hold onto his hat. Now Starkey might get the pills after all. I have to warn my mom and dad. I force myself to think, think about where I am and how I got here. Why is my brain doing this to me—giving me a vision? Think. The pill . . . I chewed not swallowed it whole. Are visions a side effect of chewing them? That must be it, I think, and then I can see Grandma's kitchen, though I'm sure I have not opened my eyes.

It's dry and warm in here, and it smells like chocolate and coconut. Grandma's table sits six people, but she only owns four dining chairs. For this size crowd, she pulled chairs in from other rooms: her brown computer chair on wheels, her white wicker chair that reminds her of summer even when it's freezing outside, and a single folding chair she bought at a yard sale because it almost had that fifties look. I wipe my hand across its

red upholstered vinyl with the big white stripe on its back. It doesn't look too bad with her mustard yellow table and four chairs, I think. At least it also has metal legs.

Mom, Dad, Mikey, Grandma, Mrs. Weather, and Tyee are all sitting around the table. There's an empty chair, too, but I don't know who is missing. Tomai? Sure, Tomai. Must be. Who else?

For a moment, nobody says a word, and then Mom pats Mikey's hand. "I know, Mikey. We all do."

"Do what? Let me in on the secret."

"I brought two. You'll have to hold onto the second one for Alexi," Tyee says.

"Feathers? Thank you, Tyee. They're great."

"They are more than that, Mikey. Those are eagle feather. It is a great bird, the Creator's messenger, the most spiritually evolved of all animals and birds. They ride on the wind currents, flying with grace and speed. If you find an eagle's feather, you have been given a blessing. They are courageous creatures. If you are given one of their feathers, it is because you have been courageous. I honor you and your sister's bravery with the gift of these eagle feathers. You both have earned the right to wear them."

"Hey. I want my own. Mikey will just ruin it if you let him keep it for me," I say. But I don't hear my own voice.

Mom looks my way, but she reaches over and holds Mikey's hand.

"I told her not to go. I tried to keep the pills from her. I'm sorry I ever found them."

"It's alright, Mikey," Mrs. Weather says. "She is a very strong-willed child, just like her mother. I doubt that anything you could have done would have stopped her."

I thought Mom was looking at me, and she looked as though she was trying not to cry. But she couldn't have been looking at me. This is a vision, my vision, and I knew I wasn't there physically, couldn't really be there. But, somehow, I also knew I was watching what was going on back home. I knew this was more than a dream, and it must have been the result of the pills. I wondered if anything like this had ever happened to any other time traveler.

"Alexi doesn't know how to turn off her mind, either," Mom said. "It runs a mile a minute."

Grandma set her five-layer, chocolate-coconut-upside-down cake on the table. She began cutting slices with her green plastic salad knife. I remembered that Grandma didn't think it was particularly superior to any of her other knives for cutting cake, but it did scoop better afterwards. "Her mouth runs pretty fast, too, sometimes," she said.

"Hey. That's not a nice thing to say about me, Grandma."

Grandma sat down at the table. She smiled that little crooked-mouth devious grin of hers that she gets when she's thinking about something special. "I like its gentle murmur / I love its fluent flow / I like to wind my mouth up / And I love to hear it go."

"Where did you read that piece of poetry? Tyee asked.

"I didn't read it," Grandma said. "I wrote it just for her."

She stared toward me, as if she could see me, but I knew she couldn't.

"I think it would be appropriate to toast my granddaughter, our youngest time-traveler. She stopped the preacher, and for that she is a real hero."

"Wow. I didn't know I was a hero. I thought I was going to be in trouble for stealing some of Mrs. Weather's pills, and then losing two of them."

The adults raised their glasses of milk and clanked them together over the middle of the table. “To Alexi,” they said together.

“Time Rookie Extraordinaire,” Jonas added.

I think I’m blushing. I wonder whether you actually can blush during a vision.

“Hey. What about me? I helped, too,” Mikey said.

Even I couldn’t resist Mikey’s pouty chubby cheeks that looked as round and smooth as his bald head. I would have raised my glass to my brother, too, if I’d had one.

“To Mikey,” Jonas said, and then they clinked their glass together again. Mikey gulped down his milk then turned his glass over and set it on the table. “They do that in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.”

“Yes, but that’s a drinking competition not a cenotaph,” Dad said.

“Who cares? I’m going to do this each night for Alexi. Besides, it’s fun.”

They looked at each other, each gulped down their milk, and then they turned their glasses upside down next to Mikey’s.

“Grandma,” Mikey said, “you’d better buy a lot more glasses. We can’t use these again because we’d have to turn them upright. That would ruin it all. They should stay right here until Alexi—”

Grandma’s doorbell rang. It startled me.

Mikey jumped up. “I’ll get it.” He ran from the room, and was back in a few seconds with Tomai trailing behind him.

Mom gave both boys a hug. “Tomai, I would like to introduce you to our very special friends.”

“Hey, I know you,” Tomai said, looking at Mrs. Weather. “You’re the woman we found in the storm shelter on Halloween.”

“I am honored that you remember me.”

“This is a family meeting,” Mom said, looking at Tomai. We have invited you hear tonight because we have many things to tell you that you are going to find hard to believe. I am glad you can stay the night.”

Tomai sat down at the table and helped himself to a big slice of Grandma’s cake.

Grandma stood and cleared the empty dessert plates from the table, except for Tomai’s, of course. He was still eating, shoveling it in and finishing it faster than Grandma could get to the sink with the other dishes.

“What happened after you and your sister vanished, poofed like Aladdin’s genie?” Tomai asked between cramming bites into his mouth. He didn’t bother using the fork.

“You won’t believe it,” Mikey said. “First we were—”

“Mikey, how about you two boys go up to your room. Dad left a little surprise from his trip up there for you, which you only get to keep if there’s no talking with Tomai tonight about any of this. You and I need to discuss it first. Tomorrow, we will tell him all about it. Agreed?”

Mikey nodded and tugged on Tomai’s shirt. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Tomai grabbed the last bite of his cake, shoved it into his mouth, and jumped up to follow Mikey. Then he did something quite weird. He stopped in front of Grandma’s cuckoo clock and pulled the door open. He turned back toward Grandma and said, “I hope you don’t mind. I don’t know why I did that. I just felt like I had to.”

“It’s alright,” Grandma said. “I love to look at the clock’s mechanism, too. Of course, I haven’t done it in many years, but you are welcome to look at it anytime you want. Just be gentle with it. It’s been in my family almost since the day this home was built. It was a gift from a German family back in 1907 when Oklahoma was granted statehood. This family didn’t want to live in a settled area; they decided to move further west. They couldn’t take that large clock with them, so they gave it to my family on the promise that we would keep it forever.”

“Thanks,” Tomai said. The two boys then were out of sight and up the stairs before Grandma could add Tomai’s plate to the stack of dirty dishes in the sink.

Dad reached across the table and held Mom’s hand. She had her wedding band on again. I was glad she had it back, but wondered how it got to her. “I don’t know how we are going to get Mikey to keep her disappearance a secret,” he said.

Mom started to cry. Dad put his arms around her. “We’ll find her, Helen. I promise you. She’s only lost in time. She’s not gone forever.”

“Have faith,” Jonas said. “Mikey’s young yet, but we will train him. He will help us find her. He knows her far better than do any of us, and he thinks like a youngster.

“He is quite bright,” Dad said. “And the rest, well, do not worry. We’ll figure it out. After all, thanks to Alexie, we have time on our side.”

Grandma sat down at the table again just as her cuckoo bird popped out on his perch and sang its sweet tone. It almost felt like a New Year’s Eve party. Together—though I knew I hadn’t really returned home and was instead having a vision, flying free of my hypothermic body before I was rescued and revived—we counted down the seconds.

Cuckoo.

“Twelve.” I wonder how many generations of our family have been time travelers. I hadn’t heard any stories. Or had I? Dad often told us about some of his strange trips, only I thought he was talking about his business trips. Maybe, if I can remember them and figure out where he might be and when, I can get myself there, too. Then he’ll know where I am and I can really go home.

Cuckoo.

“Eleven.” Maybe Mikey and I will be famous, but not like Henry Starr, bank-robber famous. More like Sacagawea or President Roosevelt famous. We young adults can do plenty of good in the world, if the adults will let us.

Cuckoo.

“Ten.” Hey, I hadn’t thought about that before. If I’d known my parents were time-travelers, maybe I could have taken one pill a day and skipped right through school. I’d be there enough to learn what I needed and wanted to know, but I wouldn’t have to sit in on any of the more boring classes.

Cuckoo.

“Nine.” O.K. That plan probably needs a little work, but Mikey can tell me the statistical likelihood of success, and Tomai can help me figure out how to make it work.

Cuckoo.

“Eight.” I bet they decided to let Tomai in on the secret because he was there when Mikey and I disappeared. Like Grandma says, it’s easier to remember the truth.

Cuckoo.

“Seven.” Besides, Tomai is kind-of street smart. Maybe he can help Mikey learn to defend himself now that I’m not there to do it. Water balloons aren’t the only thing a fat, bald-headed little boy is going to have thrown at him during his life.

Cuckoo.

“Six.” I wish I could have a piece of Grandma’s cake and a glass of milk right now. I’m so thirsty and hungry.

Cuckoo.

“Five.” Just as well that I can’t eat Grandma’s cake. It’ll give me ten giant zits, and all right on the front of my face.

Cuckoo.

“Four.” It’s hard being thirteen. People won’t take you seriously. It feels like you can’t do anything right, most of the time anyway, and sometimes it feels like people don’t even know you are there.

Cuckoo.

“Three.”

Cuckoo.

“Two.” Why didn’t you bring your paper and pen to the table, Grandma? Shouldn’t you start planning for next year’s All Hallows Eve party? You usually do.

Cuckoo.

“One.” Life in the Mackey house is going to be quite different from now on. I hope I make it back soon to see what it will be like.

Dear Reader:

Since you have now finished reading my journal, it's most likely I haven't found my way back home, yet. That's O.K. Oklahoma's not that bad in 1897. Yes, I missed my mark. I intended to go home, but after chewing that pill, all I could think of was getting a drink of water to wash it down. Hence, when the pill started working, I hadn't even had enough time to think about my home, so instead I was dropped into the Guthrie flood. Still, my vision showed that I had stopped the preacher, and that is what mattered. I would prefer to be home now, of course, but the next couple of decades in Oklahoma will be great ones, and in the end, Oklahoma will achieve statehood and become a wonderful place to live. That's no small feat for the peoples of a rugged, open, raw land occupied by diverse cultures that have clashed many times. I doubt my life will be too bad, if I have to live it all out here. After all, I pretty much know what's coming and can prepare for it.

For weeks after I was rescued from that tree, I searched for my skirt and even for the preacher's hat. I prayed that if I found one of them, it would still hold at least one pill, and that it would be intact enough to take me back home. Eventually, I had no choice but to give up and stop looking, though. The family that took me in and treated me as if I had been born to them deserved my help and attention. Since I already have more schooling than many of the adults in town, even at my age, I am useful as a teacher.

I've already lived here for two years now. That's how long it took me to write my journal, and to figure out where to hide it in order for it to make it into the future. As you've discovered, I put it into Grandma's cuckoo clock. I have decided that, knowing Tomai's interest in Grandma's cuckoo clock, and knowing that the clock has been in

Grandma's family since, well, forever, the clock is really my best hiding place. But I had to ensure it would not be found until after my thirteenth Halloween, so I gave my journal a front and a back cover that matches the wood in the clock, and then fitted the journal into the bottom of the clock case. I hoped it would look as though there was nothing in there. Someday, I suspected, the wood would rot or the clock case would need repair, and if I were lucky, it would be found then. But you know that by now. For all I know, Tomai may have found my journal and be reading this right now, but if not, I am asking you to keep the promise you made before you chose to read my journal.

I hope my family and friends can rescue me, but in the meantime, I'm not leaving it completely up to them. That's why I need your help. See, what you choose to do next will decide my fate. I pray that, now that you understand everything that is at stake, you will find my family and give this journal to them.

Until then, I will do what I can to help myself and others survive the disasters—like the 1897 Guthrie flood from which I was lucky enough to be rescued—move forward with my life, and wait. To my neighbors and friends here, and to the family who took me in, I am that schoolteacher whose clothing I dressed in on my thirteenth All Hallows Eve party that is yet to come. To you, I hope, I am a promise you will keep, and an inspiration for you to do what you can to help others. If my journal encourages you to do both of those things, then I will have done much more than I ever thought possible.

I believe in you, and so, as Grandma says, "There's nothing to it. Just go do it."

Alexi Anna Mackey

Author's Note

How could I write a postscript to this story and just leave it at that? Not only am I a writer, but also a long-time educator, and a firm believer in life-long learning.

Therefore, in case you are interested in some of the things I, as the author of this book, have learned while writing about Alexi Anna Mackey's time travels, I thought perhaps you'd like to know a little more about those things and how you can find additional interesting information. To make it easier for you to locate a topic about which you are interested, I've arranged the material that follows in alphabetical order by topic instead of trying to present it in the same order in which it is mentioned in the story.

As you look through the following, you might notice that many of the websites I point out to you are Wikipedia sites, which usually are not considered appropriate if you are doing research for a school paper. Still, they do have interesting information that is fun to read. As an educator, though, I'd be remiss not to mention that you should choose a dot edu (.edu) or a dot gov (.gov) website, or another website that provides official information (such as a news or historical site) when you are looking online for more official information.

One more thing. If you'd like to see what else I have provided for you in the way of interesting information related to *Side Effects May Include Time Travel*, please visit my personal website at www.dorothycady.com. Enjoy!

Banking in Early Oklahoma

By the end of May 1889, there were several banks in Oklahoma City. Of course, it wasn't banking the way we think about and do it now. There were no ATMs or drive through lanes, and when robbers made forced withdrawals, there was no FDIC insurance to pay back those who lost all of their money. The National Banking Act and territorial legislation wouldn't apply to banking in Oklahoma until several years after the land run of April 1889. Then in 1893 and again in 1907, nationwide panic started bank runs across the country that finally forced legislators to do something to protect depositors. Oklahoma was the first state to tax its banks and use the money it collected to create the Bank Guarantee System that would pay people back if a bank closed its doors.

Bull Sharks

Bull sharks have broad, blunt noses and are among the top three most dangerous sharks in the world. They like warm waters, just like we humans do, but one of the scariest things about them is that they are one of only two shark species that can live in salt water and fresh water. They've been found in the Mississippi River as far inland as Illinois. The Oklahoma Aquarium, which is located on the Arkansas River in Jenks, Oklahoma, has the largest number of bull sharks in the country, and the largest bull shark in captivity. If you haven't been to the Jenks Aquarium, it's a fascinating experience. You might want to check it out. You can visit their website at <http://www.okaquarium.org/about-us/exhibits/> to learn about all of the special exhibits they have. You can learn more about bull sharks at http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sharks/FS_bullshark.htm. In addition, if you are looking for a little fun with sharks, HowStuffWorks has an online shark quiz you can take at <http://animals.howstuffworks.com/fish/sharks/shark-quiz.htm>.

Clothing in Early Oklahoma

A pochette is a handbag from the early nineteen-hundreds. Check out this webpage: <http://ezinearticles.com/?Handbags-in-The-1900s&id=8436905>. Heck, like Mrs. Starkey was a milliner, you might want to take up fashion design and sewing and come up with some of your own pochettes (or hats).

Covered Wagons

The covered wagon was as significant of an advancement in travel and thus to the settling of the west as was the invention of the cell phone to communication. Imagine walking hundreds of miles across the rugged lands of America that were fraught with danger all the way—wild animals, starvation, disease, exposure, natural disasters, and perils of the human kind. The covered wagon made it possible for entire families to travel together, to carry both provisions and possessions, and to have at least some shelter from other perils. It may be fair to say that, without the covered wagon, American expansion might not have been possible, certainly not in the relatively few years that it took for settlers from the east to migrate to the west coast of our nation. Learn more about the value of the covered wagon at <http://www.apstudynotes.org/us-history/topics/the-transportation-revolution/>.

Doctor Rob Perry

It's fun to live in a state whose residents have contributed much to the world. Rob Perry is an Oklahoma medical doctor and inventor who has received FDA approval for one of his medical device patents, and it took the FDA only fourteen days to issue their findings. Another of his medical devices is for use with spinal taps. Learn more about Mr. Perry at <http://www.i2e.org/blog/the-ultimate-garage-inventor>, and also at the following:

<http://newsok.com/bio-matters-oklahoma-physician-with-inventive-nature-entertains-ambitious-goal/article /5339233/?page=2>.

Dyslexia

According to Ronald B. Davis of dyslexia.com, individuals who are dyslexic have more to deal with than just a reading disability. While reading struggles can be overcome with treatment and training, dyslexics also exhibit a variety of other difficulties as well, and because not all dyslexics have the same struggles, diagnosing dyslexia beyond reading challenges can be difficult. As a result, educators and researchers have concentrated on helping those with identifiable symptoms, particularly reading and speech difficulties.

When I was young, I was diagnosed with dyslexia. My parents, family doctor, and school therapist helped me learn to read, overcome my lisp with speech therapy, and lessen some of my other symptoms by teaching me to try repeatedly until I succeeded. Some common signs of dyslexia include: being easily distracted by sounds, having difficulty putting thoughts into words, leaving sentences incomplete, being clumsy and uncoordinated, as well as having difficulties with fine or gross motor skills and tasks (beyond those difficulties considered normal for any given age). Other symptoms may include being poor at ball or team sports, being prone to motion sickness, confusing left/right and over/under, and much more. Visit www.dyslexia.com to learn more.

Giant Sunflowers

Giant sunflowers are cool. Not only do they dominate the landscape where they grow, but looking at a field of them makes me think of one of my favorite old-time science fiction/fantasy book, *The Day of the Triffids*, by John Linden. (They also made

two movie versions of that book, and I like them both.) If you would like to learn about sunflowers, here are two websites: <http://www.kuriositas.com/2011/08/strange-history-of-sunflower.html> and <http://sunnysunflowers.wordpress.com/2008/10/31/a-brief-history-of-sunflowers/>.

Green Grow the Lilacs

When Mrs. Weather tells Alexi why she stays in 1907 instead of living in some other, more advanced time, she indirectly and deliberately references lyrics from *Oklahoma!*, which was produced as a musical by composer Richard Rodgers and librettist Oscar Hammerstein II. The musical is based on Lynn Riggs' 1931 play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*. You can read more about it at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oklahoma!> You also can learn more about the author, Lynn Riggs, at <http://www.okfriends.net/riggs.html>. In addition, if you want to read the original play, you can do so online at Google books. Go to books.google.com, and then search for *Green Grow the Lilacs* and choose the preview option.

Guthrie's 1897 Flood

Alexi, of course, had no idea at the time that she had shot right into the Guthrie flood of 1897 until she was rescued. Perhaps she should have checked out information about the dangers of floodwaters, and learned more about them while she could. One of the best websites for that information may well be this one: <http://www.gendisasters.com/ok/>. Of course, that isn't the only website you should check. The USGS has a flood database for Oklahoma that you can view it at: <http://54.221.221.214/dbflood/>.

Just because you live in the twenty-first century doesn't mean you should take flooding for granted. Even now, driving around our state, you can still see signs that

remind you not to drive into floodwaters. There's a very good reason for that. FEMA says that flooding is responsible for more deaths annually than any other natural disaster. It takes only six inches of rushing water to sweep an adult off his feet, and that small amount will reach the bottom of most cars causing them to lose traction and control. Another six inches and the car will float away. Twelve more, a total of two feet, will wash away pickups and SUVs. You can learn more about floods and flood safety at: <http://www.fema.gov/news-release/2013/06/28/turn-around-dont-drownr-0#>.

Halloween

All Hallows Eve is the ritualistic name for Halloween. There's more to it than just costumes, toilet-papering houses, and visiting neighbors to collect candy, though. It began as a pre-Christian Celtic festival, a day during which the Celtic peoples believed that the ghosts of the dead and the living could mingle together. Do you want more information? Check out this webpage: <http://www.loc.gov/folklife/halloween.html>.

Henry Overholser Mansion

Alexi's grandmother's house is based on the Henry Overholser mansion in Oklahoma City. Henry Overholser had it built in 1904, and it is a beautiful representation of early Oklahoma life. Its furnishings have been maintained, and you can take a tour of the home. If you have not already been there, you may want to go. You also can visit the Historical Society's website for more information about the Overholser mansion at <http://www.overholsermansion.org/>.

Horse-Drawn Busses

Horse-drawn busses existed in the early nineteen hundreds. In Tulsa, a man named Henry White, who used to manage a stagecoach line, opened the city's first taxi

service that consisted in part of horse-drawn busses. If you like driving and think you may someday want to be a cab driver, you might find the following website interesting to visit. <http://www.lhaasdav.com/learningcenter/sometulsahistory.html>.

Medicine in Early Oklahoma

When Mikey injured his ankle, aspirin was the only thing in the medicine chest back then that would have been safe for him to take. Many of the elixirs in those days contained powdered heroin and other addictive substances. You may enjoy learning more about medicine of those days by visiting different web pages. For a start you might enjoy going to <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/1900house/house/bathroom/medicine.html> and <http://www.druglibrary.org/olsen/dpf/whitebread02.html>.

Native American Tribal Information and Beliefs

Tyee is a member of the Chinook tribe, which is not one of the five recognized tribes in Oklahoma. Tyee, however, like Alexi, is out of his normal world. His tribe is primarily found in Washington State. Here are a couple of Chinook tribe websites that might interest you: http://www.bigorrin.org/chinook_kids.htm and <http://www.ydli.org/bcother/chinook.htm>. By the way, Ambassador Chris Stevens is a member of the Chinook tribe. If you don't know who he is, you might want to find out.

Many of the Creator's gifts hold great significance for Native Americans, including feathers. It's quite important for us to understand and respect the beliefs of other cultures, especially Native American beliefs. After all, we share this great state with many different tribes. In the 2000 census, Oklahoma was second only to Alaska in the percentage of its population that was Native American and Alaskan Native. At these websites, you can learn a little more about the significance of feathers to Native

Americans, but please don't stop there. You have much more to learn about our neighbors and friends, and you might want to start by checking out: <http://www.native-net.org/na/native-american-feathers.html>, and http://www.webpanda.com/There/uot_some_animals_used_by_native_amer.htm.

At the time of Oklahoma's settlement, Native Americans did not hold the same property beliefs held by the U. S. government and the settlers. While it was a reasonable assumption for someone living in our time to think that Ahawe was Tyee's property given that such a belief likely fits our cultural beliefs, Native Americans did not believe in owning animals or land. One of the best things you can do to understand others and become someone who holds no prejudices is to learn about other people's cultures. Here is just one website to get you started, but I warn you, doing so is not a single day or a one-website task. You'll want to spend some time on this research, and the following website makes gathering this information interesting enough for you to want to do so. Check out: http://cantonasylumforinsaneindians.com/history_blog/tag/native-american-property-beliefs.

If you are interested in reading Native American stories written by a tribe member, you can't go wrong reading any of Joseph Bruchac's novels for young adults. I particularly recommend *The Heart of a Chief*, *The Journal of Jessie Smoke*, *Sacajawea*, *The Winter People*, *Children of the Longhouse*, and *Bowman's Store: A Journey to Myself*. I think you will enjoy them all. Joseph Bruchac is a member of the Abenaki tribe, and has won multiple awards for his various works.

Oklahoma Bank Robbers

Henry Starr is a famous Oklahoma bank robber. Some say he robbed more banks in his career than any of the other bank robbers you may have heard of, like Bonnie and Clyde. Henry Starr was the inspiration for Mr. and Mrs. Starkey in my story. If you secretly suspected that, then you already know something about Oklahoma's history. Of course, Henry Starr never had an encounter with Alexi Anna Mackey in real life, but imagine what might have happened if he had. Did you know that Henry Starr once was held in the Chandler, Oklahoma jail? I didn't until I started researching him for this book. I mention that now because my family had a homestead just outside of Chandler for a few years when we first moved to Oklahoma. I happen to have a fond place in my heart for Chandler. The Oklahoma Historical Society has information available about Henry Starr, Should you be interested in learning more about this infamous bank robber, visit www.okhistory.org and search for Henry Starr.

Oklahoma History

The best website I know of for learning more about Oklahoma history is the Oklahoma Historical Societies' site at <http://www.okhistory.org/>. There also are several books that you may enjoy reading, many of which were useful to me in my research of Oklahoma history. The one I found most helpful was written by Angie Debo—an American historian who has written hundreds of articles and multiple books related to Native Americans and Oklahoma. Ms. Debo's *Prairie City* is a wonderful, educated look at early Oklahoma history, and fun to read.

Oklahoma's State Bird

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is Oklahoma's official state bird; it was adopted by our state legislature in 1951. Because of its unique tail feathers, poachers are its biggest threat. Learn more about the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher at the following website, and then keep an eye out for these birds wherever you go: <http://www.birdsofoklahoma.net/State%20bird.htm>.

Okra

Personally, I am not a big okra fan when it comes to its texture, but like many people, I enjoy most foods when they are fried, and that includes okra. Until I researched okra for this book, however, I didn't know just how wonderful this plant really is. For one thing, okra doesn't mind Oklahoma's clay soil, and the entire plant, not just the pods, is edible. How great is that? Visit <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okra> and the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service at www.oces.okstate.edu to learn more about okra.

Optical Comparators

Optical comparators are machines that can accurately project an image of a part or piece of equipment that make it possible to detect tiny deviations in manufacture. These machines became quite important during the Second World War. The original optical comparator was invented in Vermont in 1919 by James Hartness of the Jones and Lamson Machine Company, now known as J&L Metrology, Inc. Mr. Harness originally called his invention the shadow graph, because his machine could project the shadow of an object onto a screen, which then could be measured. While Alexi's father traveled to train others to work on optical comparators, my father actually worked for Jones and Lamson as a technician for many years, and traveled often in order to do his job.

In some ways, they remind me of time travel because they reflect life in order to duplicate it. While I know we can't duplicate time, I think it's helpful to be able to see it for what it really is—a reflection of who we are based on from where and when we have come and to where we go. Who knows? Maybe one day you'll want to work with these or other types of machines. Learn more about optical comparators and the J&L company at <http://www.jlmetrology.com/about.html> and <http://www.qualitydigest.com/may02/html/optcomp.html>.

Paintball

Playing paintball is fun. My family and I never went paintballing together as a family, but our son loved to play the game. He visited a local paintball location, but since we did not live near Manning, Oklahoma, he never had the chance to visit the one that Alexi and Mikey went to. I have no doubt my son and his friends would have loved Thundermoon Paintball Park in Manning, Oklahoma, however, which is the one described in this story. If you want more information about it, visit their website at <http://www.thundermoonpaintballpark.com/>.

Pole Vaulting

Pole vaulting is a popular Olympic sport around the world. It takes physical strength and the development of technical skill, not to mention a lot of practice. The *fly-away* is a pole vaulting term that refers to the part of the vault in which the pole-vaulter pushes off from the pole and releases it making the pole fall away from instead of toward the bar and mats. There are many great Youtube videos that show pole-vaulters doing their fly-away, as well as lots of reading material online. If you search Youtube, you

might want to look for Olympic pole-vaulting videos, some of which include interviews with the gold medal winners.

I learned what I needed to know about pole vaulting for inclusion in this book through research. I wish I could tell you that I was a pole-vaulter when I was younger, but it wasn't an option where I went to school. Instead, I enjoyed playing ping-pong and croquette. You might want to read more about pole vaulting, however, and maybe even check at your own school to see whether they teach pole-vaulting.

The history of pole vaulting is quite interesting. Here are two websites with information you might be interested in reading: <http://www.iaaf.org/news/news/pole-vault-introduction> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pole_vault. Also try these websites for more information: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fens, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pole_vaulting_LOC_det.4a15081.jpg, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fierljeppen_de_natsprong.jpg.

Prairie Chickens

Did you know that prairie chickens can fly? I didn't until I was researching this book and read a story about the first prairie chicken hunting trip a young man took with his father many years ago. His dad gave him the shotgun and told him he had to shoot up in the air and get one while it was flying. The boy raised the gun to his shoulder and shot and shot and shot, but not one of those chickens fell to the ground. Apparently, there is a right way to shoot a flying prairie chicken, and what I'll tell you is that, if you want to be successful in anything you want to do, you should learn to aim for only one thing at a time, and that is especially true of flying prairie chickens. You can read the same story I read at this website: <http://rogerfields.com/how-to-hunt-prairie-chickens/>.

Prairie Grasses

There are different varieties of prairie grasses that grow in Oklahoma. It can be fun and you can impress your friends if, when hanging out with them in the summer you could say, “Hey look what I found, friends. It’s—whatever you learned from the information on this website: <http://www.okprairie.com/Grasses.htm>.

Pythagorean Theorem

The Pythagorean Theorem is a math formula that can come in handy when trying to figure out things like the distance from one point to another. If Alexi had known how to calculate it and had the ability to take a few measurements when she was trying to knock the preacher off his horse, her pole might not have stuck and sent her flying into the water. Turns out it was just as well for her, though, but that shouldn’t stop you from learning about this theory. Here’s a webpage with information about the Pythagorean Theorem that you might find helpful. http://www.mathwarehouse.com/algebra/distance_formula/index.php.

Saint Christopher

St. Christopher is the saint of travelers. When you are as out of your element as Alexi is, who wouldn’t need a saint or at least a guardian angel looking out for them? Besides, July 25 is St. Christopher’s Memorial/Feast Day, which I thought was an appropriate date for Alexi’s first time-travel experience. In case you think you could use a little help from the saint of travel, you can read more about St. Christopher by visiting the following web page: <http://www.catholic-saints.info/patron-saints/saint-of-travel.htm>.

Sherlock Holmes and Moriarty

Sherlock Holmes was a famous detective who used forensics to solve mysteries and answer everyday questions in the stories written by the Scottish author and physician Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Moriarty, Sherlock's rival was brilliant, even by Sherlock's admission. He also was devious, ruthless, and of course, evil. If you love a good mystery, you might enjoy those Sherlock Holmes books to read by the fireplace when the winter keeps you inside. Since the first Sherlock Holmes story was published in 1887, you can find several to choose from. By the way, did you know that the University of Central Oklahoma, Helen Mackey's alma mater, has a great forensic science department? Maybe you aren't interested in learning to repair optical comparators, but you might want to become a forensic scientist. I bet Sherlock would be proud of you if you did.

Sod Houses (Soddies)

Many Oklahoma settlers had to build a sod home for shelter. Sod is the one thing that was more than plentiful on the Oklahoma prairie—wood and trees, not so much. Our lives have been spent in traditional housing—traditional now anyway—and so we haven't experienced life in a half-underground sod house known as a soddie. You'll be able to imagine what it was like if you take the opportunity to tour one. The only original Oklahoma soddie still available to the public is in Aline. The Oklahoma Sod House Museum in Aline, Oklahoma is worth a visit. When you go there, try to imagine yourself living in a sod house. Besides indoor plumbing, what else does your home now have that soddies could not provide to early settlers? If you can't visit Aline, you can at least learn about the Aline soddie from their website at: <http://www.okisbeautiful.com/ok3/sod-house-museum-aline-oklahoma.html>.

Statehood

Alexi's first trip back into time landed her and Mikey into 1907 Oklahoma, which was one of the most historically important years for our state because it was the year Oklahoma gained statehood. Oklahoma, most of the land of which was acquired through the Louisiana Purchase, became the 46th state to join the union. Although the house originally included New Mexico and Arizona lands along with Oklahoma as a single state, that was too controversial, so the Senate eventually amended the bill to drop the two other states from Oklahoma's statehood. You also may know that early proposals were put forth for separate statehood for the Indian Territories and Oklahoma. There are many books and websites providing information about statehood, but one in particular that lets you look at some of the original legal documents related to statehood can be found at <http://www.archives.gov/legislative/features/oklahoma/>.

Tarantulas

Tarantulas really do migrate. It is both mesmerizing and terrifying to watch them. I once saw a huge herd of migrating tarantulas. My husband and I were driving across a stretch of the Mojave Desert when we noticed a great black mass moving slowly across the highway several miles in front of us. Not a cloud in the sky, we could not figure out what was causing the shadow on the highway. As we approached, the shadow seemed to be vibrating. That is about the same time we came close enough to realize what we were looking at. My husband stopped the car, and we stepped out and watched the tarantulas from a very safe distance. There were thousands of them. It was shivery to see, but wonderful at the same time. Did you know that, in some countries, especially after severe drought, a horde of migrating tarantulas strip cattle and other animals to the bone in an

effort to survive. Yuk. Most tarantulas don't bite humans, however. Hence, some boys like to keep them as pets. Do tarantulas in Oklahoma migrate? Good question. Find out for yourself at <http://www.newson6.com/story/15506901/september-is-oklahomas-tarantula-migration-time>.

The American Renaissance National Pageant

The American Renaissance National Pageant states that it is a platform-based pageant designed for females of “varied ages and backgrounds” active in their communities, families, and careers. I have never been in a pageant and know little more about them than what I read and hear. However, I do believe in organizations that seek to benefit and help women and children. ARNP's 2013 charity was Sistercare, a South Carolina nonprofit that provides services and advocates for abused women and their children. To learn more about Sistercare, visit their website at <http://sistercare.com/>. And yes, I know that Sistercare is not an Oklahoma organization, but Oklahoma does have its own organizations designed to help others, some for women especially. If you are interested in learning more about domestic abuse, you can visit websites such as the Oklahoma Coalition Against Domestic Violence & Sexual Assault at <http://ocadvsa.org/>, the Sexual Violence Prevention in Oklahoma page of the Oklahoma State Department of Health at: http://www.ok.gov/health/Disease,_Prevention,_Preparedness/Injury_Prevention_Service/Sexual_Violence_Prevention/. If you do not live in Oklahoma, then a web search will provide you with other local resources.

The Marriage of Miss Indian Territory to Mr. Oklahoma

The Honorable William A. Durant and Mr. C. G. Jones held important duties in the November 7, 1907 symbolic marriage of Miss Indian Territory to Mr. Oklahoma.

Learn more about these men and the symbolic marriage performed when Oklahoma gained statehood at <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/chronicles/v035/v035p255.pdf>.

Weather, Floods, and Tornadoes

Floods and tornadoes occur in Oklahoma, of course, but they are not limited to our state. They also are two of the disasters most often reported on, but they are not the only disasters that disrupt and sometimes end life. Hailstorms, lightning, straight-line winds, and even extreme heat or cold also can be deadly. To learn more about the dangers of weather, look at the National Severe Storms Laboratory website at the following website. <http://www.nssl.noaa.gov/education/svrwx101/>. You can read about the May 20, 2013 Oklahoma tornado and watch videos provided by NewsOK at this web address: <http://newsok.com/ongoing/may-20-tornadoes>. And to learn more about the 1897 Guthrie, Oklahoma flood, visit the GenDisasters site at: <http://www.gendisasters.com/data1/ok/floods/guthrie-floodapr1897.htm>. Of course, you also can do an Internet search to find out more about disasters, severe weather, and related information even if you don't live in Oklahoma.

Afterword for Teachers

As this book is intended to encourage an interest in history and independent research, I have put together a website to accompany this book. When students visit it, they will find all of the links I mentioned in *Side Effects May Include Time Travel*, and much more. When teachers visit it, they will find that it contains resources for their use in conjunction with this book as assigned reading. Resources found at the website include lesson plans, web links, and much more. Readers and teachers both can access the accompanying materials from the author's website: www.dorothycady.com.