

## Chapter 1 — Arrival

We had no idea at the time that in just a few hours our lives would change forever. But that is the truth, and this is how it happened.

It was a Friday in June. We were just getting into the summer break of 1966 in the little town of Lake Oswego, the torture of homework well out of our thoughts. I could feel the Oregon sun beat down on us while my best friend Beanie and I sat on the grass trying to figure out one more way to harass Howie Howard. So, how could I not goof with a guy who has a name like that? I mean, it reminded me of the comic book, *Richie Rich*. I hated that kid and that comic. He was just too righteous for a kid with that much money. Same thing with H. H. He just asked for it all the time. What a jerk—thought he was God’s gift, you know?

We were hanging out on the lawn next to the hedge between my house and the vacant one next door, close to where it ended at our road. This spot has always been the place where such devious plans are made.

I looked up at Beanie from a deep focus on the grass beneath me, as if that was where the next great plan would reveal itself. “I’m drawing a blank. I mean, what else is there left to do? We need to come up with something really awesome this time.”

“Yeah,” Beanie added, rubbing a newly formed zit on the side of his nose, “and the fact that we’ve pulled about four-hundred and fifty-thousand other pranks on Howie doesn’t help. We’re running out of ideas, well, good ones anyway.”

“Wait a minute; I think I’ve got something.” I leaned toward Beanie to share my plan. He liked the basics of it, so we huddled together to work out the details.

We were so deep into our plan, it wasn't until the moving truck had already pulled into the driveway next door and three brutally offensive men got out to unload it, that Beanie and I looked up from what was developing to be the ultimate Howie Howard prank to see what was going on.

Once we realized what was happening on the other side of the hedge, we knew this was something big so we dropped the Howie plan for now and took up positions. Strategy had to be struck. Our set-up was perfect. I took up a spot well worn into the hedge near the corner of my house, a successfully proven strategic position for hasty retreats, and Beanie stayed down by the road, thinking himself more the risk-taker. We each held an Army surplus walkie-talkie purchased a year ago through one sweaty summer of mowing lawns.

I suppose if the walkie-talkies had worked right, they never would have been at the surplus store to begin with, or way too expensive for us to afford. Most people would have given up, but we spent good money to get them and through long hours of use, we came to feel they worked perfectly as we were able to recognize at least every third word.

The movers shuffled in and out of the house in a rhythmic pattern that blended magically with their swearing. The first items off the truck were odd boxes and wrapped items that didn't really tell us anything about the possible occupants. We sat anxiously waiting to read the first recognizable clue as to who the new intruders would be.

“Beanie, do you read me? Position One to Position Two, come in.” At the other end this probably sounded something like “Beanie...you...meh? pos...own...to...two...me...in.”

Without hesitation and with complete understanding, he replied in the affirmative.

“Let's hold our positions,” I advised.

“Ten-four,” Beanie answered, “awaiting more reconnaissance to form a plan.”

We watched and we waited, but what finally appeared from that huge yellow truck was totally unexpected. Here we were, all primed to see the junk of a normal, everyday family with the usual allotment of a father, a mother, two kids, a dog, and maybe even a cat. What we expected were bicycles, a barbecue and lawn furniture. What came out of that truck was altogether different—women's things! Hundreds and thousands of things that were completely, unmistakably, and undeniably fluffy, frilly women's things. And not just the standard frilly like you might think of with a regular mother's influence either like, say for instance, pink carpeted toilet seat covers. These were classy and sophisticated goods, and just about everything the movers took into the house was pure white.

“Beanie, are you seeing what I'm seeing?”

“Affirmative, Kemosabe. Very interesting.”

This was all pretty much overwhelming to Beanie and me, but the clincher was when they carried in the bed. What a bed! Of course, it was all in pieces when they carried it in, but I had no problem putting together in my head just how it would look in the bedroom. It was the biggest bed I had ever seen and took all three men just to carry in each individual mattress. When they unloaded the headboard and footboard, it was easy to see the corner posts would nearly reach to the ceiling. Next, they carried in a big white canopy trimmed in white lace and I couldn't help but imagine what it would be like to lie on that huge bed, looking up at that canopy.

*Wait a minute, what am I thinking?* I quickly wiped the smile off my face and looked over at Beanie to see if he had noticed, but he was glued to that small world between the rear of the truck and the front of the house—a funny little smile on *his* face.

Then, just as quickly as they arrived, the men got into the truck and drove away. Beanie and I sat motionless for a minute. Slowly it dawned on me that we had been totally captivated for the better part of the last two hours by staring at, well, how else could I put it—at the dainty adornments of the female persuasion. Stuff that only a year ago would have made us retch in disgust, had just entranced us at an equal level to sitting in baseline seats during the fourth game of the '65 World Series with Sandy Koufax on the mound when he took down those despicable Minnesota Twins for the last and final count. I tried to ignore both the thought and the feeling.

“Beanie, what do you think? Should we check it out?”

“Ten-four,” Beanie replied. “You go around back and I'll cut across the front. We'll meet at the far corner.”

But just as Beanie was relaying this through the walkie-talkies, a white Thunderbird sports car pulled into the driveway. We receded deep into the security of the hedge until leaves stuck out our ears.

The driver's door opened and from below the door emerged a beautiful pair of legs. When the woman stood from the car, I could see that the legs were simply the point guard for a body that quickly placed them in a more minor role.

Then the passenger door opened and out stepped a girl. My heart pounded. I had never seen anything like her. She looked to be our age. Blonde hair—the kind that makes you think of a sunny day when everything is right in the world—hung down the curve of her back in great flowing waves. Any second now I thought she would look over to find the source of the resounding thump, thump, thump. I was amazed blood vessels could stand such pressure.

Regaining my cool I popped my head over the top of the hedge just enough to get a better look as she walked from the car to the house. She was dressed in tomboy threads—faded blue jeans with the cuffs turned up, well-worn high-top Converse sneakers, and a sleeveless t-shirt—but even so, each step was art in execution. I studied her from head to foot. Somehow she had a confidence in her walk that both interested and intimidated me at the same time. I could hardly breathe just looking at her.

It was all so overwhelming it took a moment to notice the slight turn of her head. I quickly ducked and looked between the leaves to see if she saw me. I felt relief as she continued to the house, apparently without notice of our surveillance. Then it was over. She had gone inside.

Beanie and I reacted simultaneously. We raced for the center of the hedge.

“Wow, man, did you see her, did you see?” Beanie asked, as if to convince himself that she really existed.

“Isn’t she something,” I added. “I’ve never seen anything like her. I mean, not even in my dreams.”

“I’m in love,” Beanie crooned, acting faint.

“Hey, hang on a second. What makes you think she’s God’s gift to you?”

“What?” Beanie looked at me as if he had just gotten back from vacation. “Wait a minute! I saw her first.”

“I can’t believe that even dressed like a boy she looked so good.”

Beanie stared at me with his patented ‘huh’ expression. “What are you talking about? She was wearing a dress.”

“A dress? You mean the *mom*? I’m talking about the girl!”

“What girl?” Beanie asked, again with the patented look. “I’m talking about the woman.”

“You didn’t see her?”

“Who?”

Just then we heard a grunt. Maybe it was a clearing of the throat or even an utterance of disgust. Whatever it was, we both swung around to see the girl standing behind us.

“What are you two *perves* doing gawking at my mom?”

We both froze: deer in her headlights.

I couldn’t believe how pretty she looked, even with a scowl on her face. Her arms were wrapped across her chest, which I couldn’t help notice not only existed, but seemed to be working on a reputation.

I looked over to Beanie for support but could see few resources existed there. I turned back to the girl. “I wasn’t looking at your mom. I was looking at, I mean, well, Beanie, he was looking at...he was—”

“I saw who you were checking out.”

I couldn’t divert my eyes from hers, but swore I could hear her foot tapping, even though we were standing on grass.

“So, what are your names?”

“Why?” I asked, worried.

“So I can report you to the police.”

Beanie and I looked at each other. The alarmed expression on our faces must have been obvious.

“I’m just kidding. What, you think you’re the *first* boys I’ve ever caught gawking at my mom?”

It was our turn to tap the grass with our feet.

“My name is Franklin.” I nodded toward my accomplice. “This here’s Beanie. I live there.” A hand flew clumsily from my side in the general direction of my house.

“*Franklin?* You actually go by Franklin? What, you into self-persecution or something?”

“I go by Frankie.”

“I’m not sure that’s any better. I think I’ll stick with *Perv*. I’m Melanie, but you can call me Mel.” Her frown broke to a smile and I melted.

## Chapter 2 — King

Over the next month the three of us became good friends. Beanie got over her mother. I got to lie on the four-poster bed and look up at that canopy. Yes, it was Mel's and no, we didn't do it. And, although I could feel there was something more than friendship between Mel and me, nothing had happened yet to prove it. Summer wore on, but with a much more exciting influence than either Beanie or I could ever have imagined.

We called ourselves The Three Musketeers; partly because the movie had just shown at the Lake Theater a week earlier and we all wanted to be Gene Kelly's D'Artagnan, including Mel; partly because we became inseparable that summer—all for one and one for all—but mostly because 3 Musketeers bars were Beanie's favorite candy, always having one to share with us. So the expression, like the candy, stuck to the roofs of our mouths.

July passed and our adventures carried into August. We had just come through nearly a week of rain so were now down at the lake celebrating the Oregon sun.

We were at the neighborhood easement, as it was called. It sat below the bridge over Springbrook Creek on the edge of Oswego Lake with a couple of docks for boats and one for swimming, and had nice grassy areas where we could lay out in the sun. It was a great place to just hang out.

Beanie had his new transistor radio with him and was dialing in KGW so we could listen to some tunes. "The reception on this thing is really awesome. Much better than my last one. And the sound isn't as tinny as the old one either."

The radio dialed in and a disc jockey came on. "...and you are listening to the Super 62 KGW, the place to go to hear the latest happenings in music. This is Kenny B spinning the platters for you. Now, here is a brand-new song hot out of the jacket by the Monkeys, *Last Train to Clarksville...*"

The song started playing and Beanie said, "Man, I've been waiting to hear this. I heard it was great."

"Beanie, you think all songs are great. I'm into music and all, but not even close to how much you are hooked on it."

"Yeah," Mel agreed, "it's a good thing that radio has a strap for your wrist because you would get a cramp in your hand as much as you carry that thing around with you."

"Funny, Mel. Who knows, maybe someday I'll be the one on the radio spinning the discs."

"That, I can believe," I added.

"Speaking of which, have you guys seen the new Beatles album that came out? *Yesterday and Today*? The cover is really something."

"No," Mel answered.

"Me either," I added.

"They are all in white smocks sitting on stools. The big deal is they have chunks of meat draped all over them, and even more than that, there are decapitated and naked dolls on them, but the dolls are pulled apart, so a head is sitting on Paul's lap, and a headless doll is leaning over his shoulder with George behind it.

"That just sounds really weird," Mel said.

“I was reading in my Billboard magazine about it. They think it is a protest against the Vietnam War. You know, with all the innocent people and kids getting killed.”

“And with all the protests going on,” I added, “lots of musicians are showing they are against the war.”

“Well,” Beanie continued, “there is also a group of us who think it’s really that they are protesting how this album got butchered when released. The Beatles haven’t liked how Capitol Records has been cherry-picking the songs that go on albums released here in the States. When they do an album, they plan out how the songs will go on it, so don’t like having their work cut all up. This album has songs from three different albums they had released back in England.”

“Ya know, Beanie,” I said, “I really do think you’ll make it as a DJ someday.”

“Until then,” Beanie said, “I’ll just focus on being professional at cannonballs.” He jumped up and ran to the edge of the dock, then turned to us. “You see, it all has to do with style. Tuck the legs and hold them with your arms.” He jumped, demonstrating in mid-air, and then landed in a big splash.

While he was underwater I added, “I think mass could also have something to do with it.”

Mel giggled, “Maybe just a little bit.”

Coming to the surface Beanie spit out some water. “See, it’s easy. Bet that was my best one ever.”

Mel yelled back, “Man, that was perfect, knocked an airplane out of the sky at twenty-thousand feet.”

She sat on a towel next to mine laughing at Beanie as he floundered in the water doing underwater handstands. Normally Beanie and I wouldn’t ever consider a *girl* as a friend, but Mel was just different—almost like a guy. I smiled at the thought because it seemed so ridiculous every time I snuck a peek at her in that two-piece swimsuit. She really was something.

Mel turned out to be the risk-taker in the group. Her mom hated Mel’s tomboy style and tried to make up for it with all the girly stuff around the house. But what her mom apparently couldn’t see, though completely obvious to me, was that even when Mel wore blue jeans with a hole in the knee and had a smudge of dirt on her nose, there was a beautiful girl under it all.

I was sure Mel liked me more than just as a friend because sometimes when walking our hands would touch, or when contact was appropriate while playing a game or for whatever reason, that contact lasted just a bit longer than what might normally be expected. And there were the looks, often catching each other in a fleeting side glance. I tried to figure out how to go about kissing her. I’d kissed a girl once, but that was more because of a dare from my friends than because I wanted to. I knew this kiss would be different...*way* different. Isn’t there a manual for such things? I mean, I got the whole deal about ‘the birds and the bees’, but this seemed kind of like knowing how to tear down an automobile engine and put it back together, yet never having anyone quite explain how to start the car.

Mel could see I was off in the ozone. “A penny for your thoughts.”

I snapped out of it, blushing a little bit. “Oh, it would cost you a whole lot more than that to find out what I was thinking.”

We sat and watched as Beanie continued to do underwater somersaults and handstands in the water.

“Mel, are you okay? I mean about losing your dad?” Beanie and I had found out not long after we met Mel that she had lost her dad in a car accident. I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to lose my father like that. She seemed a lot stronger at handling it than I would have been.

She looked over at me, I think a little startled by the question. It was then I realized I had kind of blurted this out from left field, not even sure why it came out myself.

“I really miss him,” she finally said, “but it’s been over a year now, so I’ve gotten through the toughest part.”

“I hope you don’t think I’m prying or something. I just care about you and want to know you are okay.”

Mel gave a little smile, then leaned over and kissed me on the cheek, doubling my heartbeat in less than a second. “That’s really sweet, Frankie. I just wish it hadn’t hit my mom so hard. She’s still having a really tough time.”

I could see she was wrapped up in her thoughts. She was quiet for a moment, then looked over to me and said, “I’m trying to figure out what to do. I was hoping the move here would change things, but I’m not seeing much improvement.”

She stood up. “Come on, this is too nice a day to be thinking of things like that. Let’s take advantage of the sun before it disappears. I’m going to beat you at king-of-the-raft.”

She yanked me to my feet and raced for the end of the dock. I followed and we hit the water about the same time. Beanie heard the call and swam for the raft. It sat out in the middle of our inlet and was about ten feet square, made of two-by-fours over empty fifty-five-gallon drums lashed under each of the four corners.

For some reason, mostly unfathomable, I seemed to be pretty good at staying king, which simply meant that I could throw or push the other two off the raft to be the only one left standing. And for a different reason, completely fathomable, it always took longer to get Mel off the raft than it did Beanie, even though he probably outweighed her by at least a couple-hundred Musketeers bars.

But this time Mel definitely wanted to be king. She was up on the raft in a second, and as I tried to climb up she waited just until I gained my footing and then pushed me back into the water. Beanie was next to me and she pushed him down each time he tried to get up. It was easy pickings jumping back and forth between us.

“Come on, Mel, at least let me stand up,” I pleaded.

“I have, *Perv*. Quit making excuses. You know the rules.”

“Rules? There are rules? *What* rules?” I asked as I tried to pull myself onto the raft.

“*My* rules!” she shouted, pushing my head back into the water.

Beanie and I went under the raft to form a strategy. There was just enough space under it to breathe while treading water.

“Beanie, what do you think? We can’t let her keep winning.”

“I know you guys are under there,” Mel shouted. “Come on out. Chicken! Bawk, bawk, bawk, bawk. Chicken boys!”

Beanie answered me, spitting water, “We’ve got to do something. I’ll go to this end and you go to the other. We’ll both climb up at the same time.”

“Good idea. Ready, go!”

We dove underwater in opposite directions. When we surfaced, we could see Mel in the middle, checking all sides, knowing what was coming. She ran to me, but as she was pushing me back down Beanie grabbed her from behind and pulled her off. I clawed my way up and we both got hold of her. Mel fought hard but finally shouted, “I give, I give,” and we all fell into the lake. The three of us came up for air together.

Beanie swam toward shore while yelling back to us, “Last one to the dock is a rotten egg!”

I started to follow but caught Mel out of the corner of my eye in one of her side glances. When I stopped, she grabbed her nose, submerged and swam under the raft. I looked at Beanie already halfway to the dock, then followed Mel and surfaced next to her.

Treading water under the raft was a mystical experience. It's like a whole different world. Sunlight filtered through the gaps between the boards lighting the water underneath to an emerald green. The effect was eerie and beautiful all at the same time.

"What's the deal, Mel? You probably could've caught him."

She didn't answer, but just looked at me.

Self-consciousness took over. "You okay?"

She leaned toward me, put her hand behind my head, pulled me in and kissed me. Just as suddenly she moved back and smiled.

All I could do was stare at her. Definitely not the reaction she expected.

The smile disappeared. "Perv!"

She splashed water in my face and dove out from under the raft. I wiped the water from my eyes and tried to absorb what had just happened, still tasting the softness of her lips.



## Chapter 3 — Hoaxes

Over a week had gone by since *the kiss* and neither one of us had made mention of it. Now we were in the Lake Theater watching the movie, *War of the Worlds*. I always wanted to thank whoever invented the idea of bringing these old movies to our theater on Saturday afternoons: a good movie—usually sci-fi or swashbuckler—a bag of popcorn, and a candy bar (3 Musketeers for Beanie, of course), and it didn't even clean out our allowance.

When the movie first started and the lights went low, Mel and I seemed to touch hands more often than normal. During some of the scarier parts we actually held hands, and the feel of her grip as it tightened during the more frightening scenes sent goosebumps racing through my body.

We were now just at the part of the movie where Dr. Forrester and Sylvia had crash-landed a light plane trying to get away from the Martian spaceships and thought they were safe in a farmhouse they found, but a Martian meteor crashed into it. They were trapped, with alien spaceships all around them.

Then Sylvia sees an actual Martian scurry by a window and says, "Something moved out there."

Mel grabbed my arm and held on tight.

Dr. Forrester looks and says, "There's nothing out there now."

But as they try to get out, one of the UFO's camera eyes, on a long articulating arm, comes down through a hole in the roof and Sylvia turns around to see it looking directly at her. She screams, "Look Out!" and Dr. Forrester takes an ax he was using and chops the eye off the arm. Then, when you think the scariest part is over, a Martian comes into the house and puts a three-fingered hand on Sylvia's shoulder when she doesn't know it is even there. Wow! What a great movie.

But that's not all. Later in the movie, as a last, desperate resort, they drop an Atom Bomb on the aliens. But it doesn't even faze them, so it looks like humanity is done for.

But the best part of the whole movie was Mel holding onto me tighter than she ever has and not just my hand, but was wrapped all around my arm. And, maybe, I was holding onto her just as tight, which didn't bother me in the least.

The movie just kept getting better from there, especially when Dr. Forrester and Sylvia got separated and he had to find her, all while the Martians destroyed the city, building by building, and she could have been in any one of them!

When the movie was over, we had to sit in our seats for a moment just to get back to reality. After all, the human race had almost become extinct!

Finally, we shuffled out of the theater and took in the fresh air outside, standing under the marquee.

Beanie said, "It's kind of creepy, don't you think?"

"What do you mean?" Mel asked.

"When the movie began, they were standing under the theater sign, just like we are now. Then they saw the meteor fall to earth. That's how it started."

We all looked up, relieved to see nothing but blue sky and clouds above. Normally the idea of seeing a spaceship would be cool, but in *War of the Worlds* the Martians pretty much destroyed the earth, so our perspective in this regard was momentarily askew.

"You're always so dramatic," Mel told Beanie.

“I thought the special effects were really neat,” I said, “especially for a movie made back in 1953.”

“Oh, the movie was okay, but why do they always have to make the woman freak out and scream?” Mel pointed out. “I mean, Sylvia had a Master’s Degree and was a teacher, but whenever things got tough, all she could do was scream and fall into the arms of Dr. Forrester. Why can’t the woman be the hero for once? I sure wouldn’t act that way.”

“I think Frankie would just as soon faint into your arms,” Beanie swooned. He fell into my arms and fluttered his eyes at me.

I pushed him away. “Flake off, Beanie. You’re such a weirdo.”

“Do you think there really are aliens on Mars like in the movie?” Beanie asked Mel.

She gave him a sour look. “You know, Beanie, ‘War of the Worlds’ *is* just a movie. Do you sleep through *all* your classes?”

He looked at her as if it was a real question. “No, just some of them.”

“Mars doesn’t have any life,” I told him. “Aliens would probably come from some other galaxy.”

We walked across the street to the Rexall drugstore for our ritual after-the-movie ice cream sundae. I reached over and touched Mel’s hand. She wrapped hers around mine and I felt a jolt go up my arm. It was an amazing feeling and I wanted it to last forever. I looked over at her and wondered if she was thinking the same thing. She smiled at me, but I couldn’t tell for sure. Why would she? She’s so beautiful and who am I? Do all guys question themselves in these situations? I sure was. But, why? Should I feel inadequate, or unworthy just because someone so special and beautiful is interested in me? I quickly glanced down at my feet, embarrassed that she might know what was going through my head. *Come on dummy, she kissed you under the raft and is holding your hand.* I had to get out of this line of thought.

“Do you think UFOs really exist?” I asked as we walked into the drugstore and headed to the back where the soda counter was.

She didn’t say anything at first. I don’t know if she had read my mind or not.

We sat down at the counter. She finally answered, “How couldn’t they? I mean, there have been so many sightings of them lately.”

We each ordered hot fudge sundaes. What else is there to order when at a Rexall soda counter? When they arrived, we dug in with our spoons and savored the hot and cold.

Finally, Mel said, “Did you hear about the UFO sighting at Exeter? I just saw an interview on The Merv Griffin Show with the guy that wrote a book about it. It’s called *Incident at Exeter*. Sounds like it’s really stirring things up.”

I was focused on my hot fudge, glad that the self-doubt had passed. “Do you think they have it at the library yet?” I looked over to her, “I’ll check it out if they do.”

She smiled at me. “That would be great.”

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We arranged a meeting two days later under the bridge at the easement. I had called Mel and Beanie to tell them it had been at the library and I had the book.

I was already waiting there, sitting Indian style near some canoes by the bridge support. A stairway led down to the area. I looked up to see Mel and Beanie coming down the steps.

When they got to me Beanie looked at the books I was holding in my lap. “Did you get it?”

“Yeah, they had it. I also found this other one called ‘The Interrupted Journey’. I’ve only had a quick look through them, but man, some weird stuff went on with these sightings.”

“Like what?” Beanie asked, sitting down near me. Mel sat down so as to form a little triangle.

“Well, in ‘Incident at Exeter’ I guess they chased a spaceship all over the state, and you know what?” I stopped in mid-sentence to build the delivery.

“What, *what?*” they asked in unison.

“...the guys chasing it were cops!”

“Cops,” Beanie said, realizing what that meant, “*they* aren’t going to lie.”

“Beanie’s right,” Mel agreed. “Policemen wouldn’t make something up like that. It must be true. UFOs really do exist.”

“That’s only part of it,” I added. “You’ve got to check out this other book!” Again I paused for effect.

“Come on,” Beanie groaned, “enough with the dramatic pauses. Clue us in.”

“Well, this book,” I held up *The Interrupted Journey*, “is about a man and wife that were coming back from vacation. Barney and Betty Hill. He’s a Negro and she’s white.” I showed them the picture of the couple in the book.

Mel and Beanie practically knocked me over trying to get a good look at the picture.

“Wow, they sure are,” Beanie said. “I didn’t know that, well, that a Negro could marry a white woman.”

Mel looked frustrated. “Beanie, you are so out of it. Of course they can. It’s just that some white people don’t like the idea.” Mel studied the picture again. “Boy, besides the difference in race, they sure look like a normal couple to me.”

“They don’t look like the kind of people who would make something up like this to get in the limelight anyway,” I added.

“So, what happened?” Beanie asked.

“Well,” I scrunched in closer to them, “somehow they arrived home two hours later than it should have took. And get this, they couldn’t remember what happened to the two hours.”

“You mean they were abducted,” Mel reasoned.

“Just keep it in check, will you? I’m not there yet. The Hills both noticed that when they got home and looked at the wall clock it was much later than they expected. Thinking the clock was wrong, they looked at their wristwatches. Both of them had stopped working!”

“Just like in the movie we saw!” Beanie said.

“Yeah, and what’s even weirder is when they eventually talked to this guy that knows about radioactivity, he said to put a compass near the car and see if it would do anything strange.”

“They used a compass in the movie too,” Mel pointed out quietly.

“The Hills had one. So Betty took it out to the car and at first nothing happened, but then she noticed some shiny circles on the trunk. When she put the compass on one of them it went all sorts of haywire!”

This really got Mel and Beanie going.

“So, *were* they abducted?” Beanie asked, unable to contain himself.

“Well, the Hills tried to forget about it, you know, just put it out of their minds. But it wouldn’t go away. Betty was having nightmares of really weird things happening. They eventually decided to go to a hypnotist, but not one like you see at the carnival. This guy was some sort of doctor. Anyway, that’s when things really came out. I guess the doctor tape-recorded them. Look, it’s all here in the book.” I opened it to the middle where I had it marked and showed them the transcript

of one of Betty's sessions. I read a little of this. They were taken into the flying saucer and all sorts of experiments were done on them.

"Experiments. Like what?" Beanie asked.

"I guess they stuck a needle in her navel and did other kinds of experiments."

Mel let out a little shiver at that one.

"Well," Beanie said, "they wouldn't want to waste the trip without getting some good samples to take back with them."

"But, that's not all. There is this map."

I turned to the page I had marked.

Mel and Beanie leaned into me to get a good look at the map.

I continued, "Under hypnosis it came out that Betty was talking with the leader aboard the spaceship and asked him where they were from. He showed her a map. She was telling the doctor about it and said she wasn't good at drawing, but thought she could do a sketch of it." I pointed to the lines between the planets on the drawing. "She said she was told by the leader that the heavier lines marked regular trade routes."

"Like, between planets?" Beanie asked.

"I guess. I mean, you can see it right here."

"Wow!" Beanie exclaimed.

"And these broken lines are expeditions to other planets."

"Like to Earth, maybe," Mel said.

"Yeah, like to Earth," Beanie agreed, "and a little visit with the Hills for some experiments."

We all sat silent for a moment thinking about that.

"Anyway, I can't wait to read the rest."

Mel looked at me. "You know, I just don't get it."

"What do you mean?"

"How the things in these books can happen, especially to people like the Hills—"

"Don't forget the cops," Beanie cut in.

"...or to policemen," Mel continued, "and yet the government still denies that UFOs even exist."

"Wow, wouldn't it be neat if we spotted a UFO right here in Lake Oswego?" Beanie said. "I mean, I wouldn't want to get too close to one, but it would really be something else to actually see one!"

"That would sure stir up this sleepy little town," Mel said.

We all sat in silence, thinking about what it would be like. I could tell Mel's mind was clicking away.

Her eyes suddenly lit up. "Maybe we should come up with our own little UFO."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Yeah, clue us in." Beanie added.

"You know how they are always saying these sightings are hoaxes."

"They're just covering up the truth," Beanie said.

"Probably in a lot of cases, but I'm sure some of them are hoaxes." She sat silent for a moment. "You ever hear about the UFO crash that happened near a place called Roswell? That's in New Mexico."

I searched my mind but came up blank. "No, I don't think so."

Judging by the expression Beanie had, or rather lack of it, he was in the same boat.

“Well, after our talk at the drugstore, I did a little research myself. I remember my dad having some articles about the crash. He was kind of into all this before he died.”

I looked over at her. “Your dad was into the whole UFO thing, too?”

Yeah,” she continued. “Well, he was really interested in the Roswell deal, anyway. I think because he was going to school near there when the crash happened.

“So, where are you going with this?” I asked.

“Well, I went through some of his stuff Mom keeps in the garage—she just can’t part with it—anyway, the crash was covered by the local paper. Check this out.”

She pulled some clippings from the back pocket of her jeans. They were yellow and old. She unfolded them and handed one clipping to me and another to Beanie.

I looked at mine. It was from the *Roswell Daily Record*, dated Tuesday, July 8, 1947. It had a big headline that read: “RAAF Captures Flying Saucer on Ranch in Roswell Region”. I read the first few paragraphs. It said the base intelligence officer, a Major J. A. Marcel of the 509th Bombardment group at Roswell Army Air Field, announced that the Field had come into possession of a flying saucer at a ranch in the Roswell vicinity.

Mel pointed to my clipping. “I read some other stuff my dad had collected about this flying saucer. It had crashed in the desert, and this army major went to the site and brought back all sorts of debris, none of it looking anything like it could be of earthly origin.” Then she grabbed the clipping from Beanie’s hands. “The very next day this article came out in the same paper.”

I read the headline: “Gen. Ramsey Empties Roswell Saucer”.

“The same day as the first story came out this General Ramsey put together a hasty press conference and said that the first report was mistaken and this material was from a weather balloon that crashed. In other words, there was no UFO. Kind of funny how quickly they changed their story.”

“It does sound kind of like the fix was in,” Beanie added. “How is this Marcel guy going to mistake a weather balloon for debris from a UFO?”

“I know,” Mel said. She looked at Beanie and then to me. “I think they switched it on him. They had to cover up their original statement. I think the hoax, in this case, was on the public. I also think that’s what my dad thought.”

I could see Mel’s eyes twitching back and forth.

“So where are you headed with all this?” I asked. Beanie and I had learned that whenever she got this look she was working on a really good idea.

“I have a plan.” She put her hand in the middle of our group, palm down. “Three Musketeers. Are you in?”

Even though I had no idea what her plan was, you don’t question the code of the Musketeers. I put my hand on top of hers. “I’m in.”

Beanie added his on top of mine. “Me too.”

“Frankie, watch the weather report tonight on the news. I’ll be busy getting ready and won’t be able to. Shouldn’t rain, but see if there will be any wind. Beanie, you just make sure you show up. I’m going to need you too. Meet me back here tonight, right after dark. You all okay with that?”

Beanie and I nodded.

She put her other hand on top of ours. “All for one...”

Beanie and I joined in, “...and one for all!”

She looked up at us and we immediately knew this was going to be good.

## Chapter 4 — Evening

It was hard waiting for dusk. What could Mel be up to?

The local news came on at six-thirty. My dad always watched it, so I knew there would be no problem with having to fight over the TV to make sure I saw the weather report.

Mom was finishing up getting dinner ready and it smelled like the dreaded tuna-noodle casserole. She was always trying some kind of dish from one of those magazines of hers where you just pretty much dump everything into a glass pan, toss it in the oven and, voila, out comes a meal fit for kings.

*Yeah, right.* I have no idea why she had such an obsession with tuna when it came to these single-dish recipes. But if there were ever a mother on the face of this planet or, when I think about it, any other planet, that felt she needed to be the expert on every possible variation of a single ingredient in a dish, it was my mother and a can of Bumble Bee tuna; purchased with double coupons, of course.

“Franklin, dinner’s ready,” Mom called. “George, come sit down.”

She placed the target of my despair on a hot pad in the middle of the dining room table. As if this form of torture wasn’t enough, a bowl piled high with Brussels sprouts sat next to it.

*Sure, put me on the rack, crank it hard and then, to top it off, stick bamboo slivers under my fingernails.*

I sat at the table and noticed the opposite chair empty. “Mom, where’s Suzie?”

“She’s eating over at Belinda’s tonight.”

“Figures.” My little sister may be twelve, but she was born with an uncanny ability to anticipate the less than favorable meal plans and always, and I mean *always*, figured out a way to avoid them.

On casserole nights I just played with my food, pushing it around the plate until I could actually identify something worthy of eating. In most cases, as with tonight, I failed miserably at the task, finally giving in, holding my nose closed so I didn’t have to add smell to the taste as it went down. I guess the positive in it all was I could close my nose without using my fingers. This really impressed the gang down at the lake, though I never divulged how and why I learned to do this.

I had a lot of respect for my dad. He worked hard, took care of the family, and never gave any indication of closing his nose on casserole nights. There he was at the head of the table wolfing down the stuff like it actually tasted good.

“What have you been up to today?” Mom asked.

“Went swimming with Beanie and Mel down at the lake.”

“It was a nice day for it,” my dad added between bites.

“I sure like that Melanie,” my mom said. “She’s a nice girl. I just wish she wouldn’t dress like a boy.”

*Mothers must conspire together on such matters.*

“I like the way she dresses,” I said, and left it at that.

We finished dinner and Mom started clearing the table. “Franklin, give me a hand with these dishes.”

Not only did Suzie get out of tuna-noodle torture night, but also the dishes, which were usually her job.

“Sure.” I looked up at the wall clock. It was nearly six-thirty. At least we should be done by the time the weather report came on.

I picked up some dishes from the table, holding the bowl of Brussels sprouts at arms’ length while walking to the kitchen. Mom washed and I dried. Every so often I looked at the clock on the stove tick away a few more minutes.

If I remembered right, the weather usually came on after the big stories of the day. This was somewhere around ten minutes into the news. It would be close, but there were only a few more dishes to get done.

“Franklin, there aren’t many Brussels sprouts left so you might as well scrape the rest into the trash.”

I opened the door under the sink to see the trash container nearly overflowing. I pushed the few remaining sprouts on the heap, happy to get rid of them, but the last one rolled off the top and hit the floor.

Mom saw it fall, looked down at the container and said, “Oh, you better take that out to the trash can.”

“Mom, I’ve got something I have to do. Can it wait?”

“No. It will only take a minute, so do it now.”

I looked at the clock again and then out to the TV. It looked like the weather would be coming up next.

I grabbed the container and ran for the stairs. The trashcan was down in the carport. I raced down the stairwell, out the sliding glass door, and over to the trashcan. A few of the sprouts fell as I ran. *Boy, they just don’t give up.* I backtracked to pick them up, threw open the lid, dumped the trash, slammed the lid back onto the can, raced back into the house and up the stairs.

Dad was sprawled on the couch so I jumped into the chair next to him. I looked at the television. The weather guy was on so I listened intently.

“...so it looks like we have a storm that will be coming in toward the end of the week.”

The image cut to the main anchor, “And now for the latest in sports. Andy, how are those Portland Beavers doing?”

My heart dropped when I realized I had missed it.

I looked over to my dad. “What did the weather guy say?”

“Huh?” Dad was absorbed in the report from the sports guy.

“What did he say?”

“Who?”

“The weather guy. What’s it going to be like tonight?”

Dad looked over at me. “Why are you so interested in the weather?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just kind of curious.”

I’d missed it. I trudged downstairs to my bedroom and spent the rest of the evening wondering what Mel was up to and how the weather had anything to do with it. In late August it doesn’t get dark until around nine o’clock, so it was a long wait. Finally, I went up to the living room, announced I was going to bed, headed back downstairs, snuck out the basement door and down to the lake.

Mel called to me from under the bridge as I got to the bottom of the easement steps. Beanie wasn’t there yet. She had a flashlight and was kneeling on the ground, going over some things lying there.

In the beam from her flashlight I could see birthday candles, some plastic straws, masking tape, and a pile of clear plastic of some sort.

“What’s all this? We having a birthday party?”

“Funny, *Perv*,” she answered, looking up at me with a big smile, “It’s our UFO.”

“How is this a UFO?” I asked, kneeling next to her.

“We have to build it first.”

“Okay...I still don’t see it.”

“It’s simple. Here.” She handed me some straws. “We need to put these together. Take one and scrunch the side of the tip in so it fits inside the opening of another straw.” She showed me how to do it. “Then add another straw to the end of that one so we have one long straw. We need three long straws made out of three straws each.”

Mel had two done by the time I finished mine. Then she took the straws and fanned them out from the center so they were like the spokes of a wagon wheel with a total of six points sticking out.

“Here, hold it just like that.”

I held the straws while Mel took the tape and wrapped them together in the middle where they all met.

She checked her work to make sure it would hold, and then laid it on the ground.

Next, she picked up a long candle I hadn’t noticed. “I’m going to light this candle and drip wax on the straws at points along them. When I tell you, you need to take one of these birthday candles and stick it in the wax while it’s still soft and hold it there until it hardens. Make sure the candles stay upright.”

We did this until we had twelve candles securely set on the spokes.

Mel looked up to the steps. “Where is that Beanie anyway? We need to get moving.”

“Oh, he probably ran into a little trouble getting out of the house. I’m sure he’ll be here. He wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

“Well, in the meantime, help me with one of these canoes.”

Mel headed over to the canoes stacked near the bridge support.

“What are we going to do?”

“Borrow one. We need to go out to the middle of the lake.”

I looked at her like she was kidding. “We’re what?”

“Come on” she said, setting the flashlight on the ground so it shined on an aluminum canoe. It was upside down on a set of sawhorses.

Mel walked to one end. “You take the other end. Let’s flip it over and get it down from here.”

I grabbed the other end. We wrestled the canoe toward the ground, but it was long and awkward. We lost control as we turned it. The canoe dropped with a crash. Mel ran over and flipped off the flashlight. We both looked around.

A moment later we heard footsteps coming down the stairs.



## Chapter 5 — Incident

A flashlight flipped on and swung in an arc across the stairs and then around the easement. We jumped behind the canoe. We couldn't see who it was as the flashlight swung our direction and captured the canoe in its beam. We held our breath.

"Hey, you guys. That you down here?"

"Beanie, you S.O.B, don't scare us like that!" I whispered.

"Quit swinging that flashlight around," Mel warned him. "You want someone to see us?"

"You're sure making a lot of noise, you know. I could hear it halfway up the street."

Mel stepped out from behind the canoe. "Well, if you would've been here on time and helped us get this thing down, we probably wouldn't have dropped it!" She turned on her flashlight and shined it at Beanie.

Mel and I both broke out laughing, then caught ourselves and tried to stifle the sound with our hands.

I looked Beanie over from head to toe. "What are those? Your *pajamas*?"

I could hear Mel behind me still trying to contain her laughter.

"Stop it, you guys. Mom makes me put them on before bed and then comes in to check on me. I had to wear them. Anyway, by the time she finished checking on me it was so late I didn't have time to change. I hurried as fast as I could."

"But, really, Beanie," Mel snickered, "*Porky Pig*?"

Her flashlight focused on Beanie's chest. The Warner Brothers logo filled the beam with Porky Pig smiling and waving from the center of it just like at the end of one of their cartoons.

"Th-th-th-th-that's all, folks!" I couldn't help saying it.

"Ah, come on, Frankie, give me a break. My Superman 'jamas were dirty. This is all I had." Then Beanie looked down and spotted the spoke of candles on the ground. "Wow, what's that? We having a party?"

Mel walked over, picked it up and held it out for Beanie to see. "This, Mr. Porky Pig, is the silent, but highly efficient power source for our UFO."

Beanie frowned at first and then smiled—a dim light apparently turning on in his head. He reached out to touch one of the spokes. "That's cherry. So, how does it work?"

"Best way to demonstrate is to show you. Let's get this canoe in the water."

Together we worked the canoe over the rock wall and down to the edge of the inlet, then lowered it into the water. We managed to get it all done without making too much noise or falling in.

Mel went back to the sawhorses and returned with two paddles. "You guys ever paddle a canoe before?"

We both nodded, but I added, "It was only once, when we got to borrow one for a little while."

"Well, let's be careful because they are really tippy." She handed a paddle to Beanie. "Here, you get in front and, Frankie, you're in back. Paddle us out while I get the UFO ready."

I noticed the bowline trailing onto the grass. "Beanie, make sure you secure that line. I don't want you getting all tangled up in it."

Beanie curled it up and set it in the bow of the canoe.

We got in, pushed off the wall and started paddling.

Mel turned off the flashlight. She sat so she was facing towards me.

Once my eyes adjusted, I could see her in the silvery moonlight, which only now appeared from the trees as we moved out past the raft and into open water. The moon was almost full and she looked eerily beautiful in the cold, blue light.

I felt a slight breeze across my face.

Mel felt it too. "What about that weather report? What did it say about the wind?"

I sat quiet for a moment, my paddle making the only sound, and then told her softly, "I missed it. I had to take out the garbage and when I got back it was over. I tried to hurry." It really hurt to disappoint her.

"That's okay." She gave me a smile. "Half the time they don't even tell you about the wind. It's like that isn't one of the aspects of weather in their eyes."

We paddled out past the raft and kept on going. Oswego Lake isn't real big, being only half a mile wide and three miles long. Our swimming easement was about center between the two ends. The lake was manmade and sat in a depression between hills on both sides. The hills were covered by trees, but we could see the lights of houses that lined the banks all around, and up into the surrounding hills.

Before we knew it we were out near the middle. The moon made it light enough to see without a flashlight, but not light enough that someone could spot our canoe.

"Frankie, help hold this bag out of the way while I light the candles."

Mel had been getting the UFO ready as Beanie and I were moving into position. The plastic was a dry cleaner's bag, and she had taped the spokes into position inside the opening so the spoke setup was about four inches up the inside the bag. The flap at the bottom would keep the hot air in. Real genius.

I looked around to see if anyone else was on the lake. "It looks all clear, but Beanie, keep an eye out for the Lake Patrol or any other boats that may be out. I won't be able to do it while I'm helping Mel." The police had a boat they used on the lake. We certainly didn't want to run into them just now.

"Will do," Beanie answered.

Mel lit the long candle first, and then carefully inserted it into the bag to light the birthday candles.

I tried to hold the bag at just the right angle to make it easy for her, but at the same time keep from melting the plastic. The bag began to puff up and take on a peculiar glow.

Mel worked diligently. "These candles will put off enough heat to make the bag rise. Not only that, but the bag will light up and glow like no flying saucer you've ever seen."

Of course, we had never seen a flying saucer, but her point was well taken.

She lit the last birthday candle and blew out the starter candle. She grabbed the UFO by the center of the spokes and held it high in the air at arms-length for a moment.

The bag swelled with hot air and radiated a glow that was definitely of UFO quality. She let it go. It rose slowly at first and then gained speed.

"Oh, man, that's bitchin'." This, from Beanie, who only now saw it for the first time since he was turned away from us.

"Mel, you've outdone yourself," I added. "It looks so real!"

"It's even better than I thought it would be. Look at it glow. Do you think anyone will see it?"

The UFO was now above our canoe about forty feet and rising rapidly.

"How could they miss it?" I answered.

It was Beanie who gave the first indication our plan was about to take a very bad turn. "Hey, guys, look!"

At first I turned toward the city side of the lake, but saw nothing so I looked in the other direction. When you grow up on a lake you know how to read it. Around the canoe the water's surface was like glass, but off in the distance I could see chop on the water. That meant wind! And it wasn't a slight breeze either. It was moving toward us at a fairly quick pace and coming across the lake at an angle I didn't like.

"Mel, the wind's coming up. Beanie, let's get this canoe turned around and head back to shore."

We paddled recklessly because neither of us had much experience with canoes. Instead of getting turned around, all we managed was to work our way farther out.

"Beanie, hold on. Let me get it turned around."

I back-paddled on one side and the canoe tip slowly turned toward shore. Just as we were facing the easement, the wind hit us.

"Mel, keep an eye on that UFO. Come on, Beanie, let's high-tail-it for the bank."

The wind came in at an angle that helped drive us toward shore. We battled to keep the canoe pointed at our easement because the wind also wanted to push us down the bank. We turned the nose upwind to correct our approach, but the wind kept trying to knock it back.

"Oh, God, no!" It was the tone of Mel's voice more than the words that sent a chill through me.

I looked in the direction of the UFO to see it suddenly burst into flames just as it hit the upper part of a big fir tree. There's nothing like melting plastic and pine needles to get a good fire going.

We stopped and stared for a second, the wind only an afterthought to what was happening about a hundred yards down the lakeshore. I could tell it was old lady Crowley's tree, easily identified because it had two tops, rumored to have been caused by a lightning bolt a long time ago.

"M-m-man, we'd better get out of here. I d-d-don't want to g-get caught," Beanie shouted. He had just done a perfect imitation of Porky Pig, but none of us were in the mood to laugh.

We paddled frantically toward shore. I looked over at Mrs. Crowley's place every few seconds to see a towering blaze light up the sky.

The first rule of canoeing was never lean to one side, particularly with the wind blowing from the other, but we were too distracted to remember such valuable information. One moment we were dry and scared, and the next we were in the lake—wet, cold, and terrified.

I reached for Mel who was bobbing like a cork in front of me. "You all right?"

"I think so," she said, spitting out lake water. "I might have hurt my wrist a little when we tipped."

I pulled her over to the canoe which, to my surprise, floated. "Hold on. I'm swimming up to the front." I tried to get a decent swim stroke, what with sneakers on and an air bubble in the back of my shirt. "Beanie, you okay?"

"This is great. Boy, are we in trouble!"

"Just take it easy. You got the rope?"

"Yeah, it's right here."

"Give me the end. I'm going for the raft. It may be long enough so I can get up and pull the canoe in."

Luckily during all of our efforts paddling we had managed to keep the canoe pointed in the right direction. It had tipped over just outside the easement.

I looked over Beanie's shoulder, "Mel, make sure to hold on."

The sound of sirens faintly appeared over the flailing of the wind and waves. I took the line and put it between my teeth, tasting the bitterness of the rope and our situation. I did a breaststroke to the raft. There was just enough line to climb up and pull Mel and Beanie in. I helped them up.

We righted the canoe, getting as much water out as possible and were ready to get back in again when a fire truck rushed across Springbrook Bridge. We had been so involved in saving ourselves, we hadn't noticed the sirens growing closer.

I looked at Mel and Beanie huddled on the dock, shaking like wet puppies. I put my arms around their shoulders. "This is my fault. I should have gotten that wind report."

Mel looked at me with a half-smile, water dripping from her chin. "We don't even know if it would have been on the news, and if it was, they probably would have gotten it wrong and said it was going to be calm as can be."

"Thanks for trying to make me feel better, anyway." I leaned in and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Well, let's put this canoe away and try not to get caught sneaking back to our bedrooms. You can bet it'll be pretty crazy on the street when we get up there."

"We'll know more tomorrow," Mel said.

Another fire truck and a police car raced across the bridge, their sirens blaring. I looked up to see red lights strobe across the trees above us.

"We'll know a lot more tomorrow," Beanie added, watching the fire truck disappear from the bridge, "like how long we have to live."