



*The Old Lady
and the Alien*



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PROLOGUE

The night sky looked like spilled diamonds and the moon, a huge quartz marble just waiting to blast its way right through the middle of all those gems. The light they shed was enough to make it easy for a darkly dressed man to navigate his way along the vacant ski trails of Snow Bowl tucked among Flagstaff, Arizona's sacred San Francisco Peaks. He had been hiking for several hours through newly excavated land filled with huge lengths of pipe that would soon carry reclaimed water up the mountain to make snow for the resort when Mother Nature couldn't. Kneeling down, the man buried his hands in a small blanket of pine needles separating the ugly pipes. He uttered a guttural moan of sadness and anger disrupting the night's solitude.

Just then a tiny spot of light moved rapidly into view from the western edge of the sky. It caught the man's eye, and he watched it quickly grow larger as it approached the peaks. Other people far below him saw it too; each pondering what it might be. A comet perhaps or an asteroid? How about the space station or, farfetched as it might be . . . a UFO? That last choice was what Kate Sullivan hoped it would be as she watched the white ball race across the Arizona sky. Wasn't it about time others in the universe made themselves known? It didn't matter what they looked like really; we just couldn't be the only ones out here!

In moments, whatever-it-was looking big enough to be the moon's little sister disappeared among the peaks. Kate waited, holding her breath, expecting the worst. But nothing happened. There was no explosion; nothing remained but the clear night sky.

The man far above her on Mt. Humphreys held his breath too while huddling fearfully among the pines. He watched transfixed as the rapidly approaching fire ball silently moved to within 700 feet above of him before levitating like a volatile Christmas tree ornament. It cast an eye-piercing shaft of white light down to the ground. This was too much for the man. He scrambled to his feet and took off down the hill. However, he was too slow to escape the pulsing light. It caught up with him, illuminating his way through the trees and onto a well-traveled trail. Then, as fast as it had come, the hovering fireball pulled in its beam of light and vanished.

In that second, the huge, silent UFO—for, indeed, that's what it was—disappeared within a Harry Potter-like 'cloak of invisibility' and quickly moved to a lower mountain range. It hovered quietly for some minutes hundreds of feet above the ground, searching for other human life forms. When none were detected, a much smaller disk-shaped object the color of pale moonlight emerged from the UFO's underbelly. Moments later, it landed gently in a clearing that still carried scars from a controlled burn gone rogue many years before. The air around the disk vibrated gently. Animals that had run for cover as the thing descended slowly poked their heads out in curiosity. The noticeable

vibration felt good, not menacing. It was like a gentle massage that you could feel inside and out. Little animal eyes watched tentatively as the disk changed colors. It went from a pale, translucent moonlight shade to a solid, cool gray. The air settled. The massage stopped. An opening appeared on the underside of the object. A contained light about the size of a large duffle bag slowly drifted down and settled itself on the ground.

After a few moments of silence, with nothing threatening coming from the bag of light, a small Albino Mule deer—an extremely rare genetic variant of her sister breed— inched forward out of the shadows on delicate brown hoofs. She sniffed the air. Nothing off-putting was there, so she moved closer. Her erect, big ears honed in on the light like sensitive antennae fine tuning for better reception. It would seem that the light and deer were at a standoff, each sizing up the other waiting for something to happen. And then it did. The light began to fold in on itself then push out like a curious amoeba. The deer nervously scampered back into the shadows. Soon the light solidified into a form. Its spindle legs moved tentatively over the ground and its big ears aimed directly into the shadows where the small deer had disappeared. The two looked at each other as if into an invisible mirror. They matched in every way. It was the light's first form on earth. It was heavy now in the flesh of a deer.

Morning came a little later than usual for Kate Sullivan. Last night's unexplained visual phenomenon had taken a toll on her sleep. Disturbing dreams kept her tossing fitfully in a tangle of bed sheets. The first was about a tropic resort facing an inland channel choked with slithering sea creatures just waiting to grab her should she accidentally step into the warm water. Then there was the plane that plunged out of massive storm-filled clouds above the resort. Kate watched as it banked at a sickening angle and then broke apart falling into the sea just yards down the beach. That one jarred her awake in a panic, keeping sleep away until 4:30.

It was almost 8:00 when Kate slowly made her way downstairs into a tidy kitchen that was small yet open with angled half-wall counters dividing it from a larger, wood-floored living room. She went straight to the coffee pot to prepare a carafe of her favorite Kona blend before turning on the radio hoping to hear some details about last night's incredible fire ball sighting. (Surely the local station would have some kind of explanation.)

Circling impatiently at her feet, yowling for breakfast was Mimi, Kate's ample-bellied, soul mate cat. This late start to morning was totally unacceptable to her and she felt obliged to let Kate know. But soon the yowling turned to purrs as Mimi watched Kate spoon her favorite seafood delight into the little blue-gray ceramic bowl that had her name etched in the clay. Kate put the bowl on Mimi's mat, gave her a loving scratch behind the ears, then poured herself a cup of coffee and sat at the kitchen table listening to the news:

"Local police throughout Arizona, Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico have been inundated with 911 calls reporting last night's sighting of what appeared to be a huge ball of light that disappeared near Mt. Humphreys north of Flagstaff. Those who witnessed the event said that it could not have been a meteor. And rather than a fireball, they described it as an incredibly bright object that grew larger as it streaked closer to the San Francisco Peaks. Interestingly, Lowell Observatory astronomers told us that their telescope was focused on a very small area of the southern night sky, and therefore were unable to venture a guess as to what the phenomenon might be. The Albuquerque Air Route Traffic Control Center tracked the object on radar as the ground crew at Flagstaff's Pulliam Airport watched it travel toward the San Francisco Peaks. They felt sure the object's trajectory would send it crashing into the mountains. However, seconds before that happened, the object disappeared from both sight and radar. Public and private search crews are now combing the pine forest for some kind of tangible evidence of whatever was seen last night."

Well, well, well, thought Kate. *How nice they're not passing it off as swamp gas or an errant weather balloon.* She opened her front door and retrieved the morning paper.

Pictured on the front page was a grainy photo of the suspicious flying object shooting across the night sky. It was half the size of a full moon – really quite impressive and thought-provoking when one realized how close Flagstaff was to Winslow's Meteor Crater and the devastation that could have happened if last night's thing had crashed to earth. "We wouldn't be having those thoughts had that happened now, would we?" Kate chuckled.

She read the article quickly but found no new information. *With all the people searching the forests around Mt. Humphreys, someone was bound to discover something sooner rather than later,* thought Kate. *That is, if the thing had landed.*

The pull of gravity upon the alien's new 'body' was quite painful at first. But it was prepared and as night wore on, it forced itself to move, bending and stretching, pushing itself through air that felt like a smothering viscous fluid. Gradually, familiarity took hold; soon the space visitor was enjoying its ability to run and jump among the pines joined by its little earth twin that was joyfully trying to keep up with its new-found friend.

The rest of the newspaper offered more disturbing news than Kate wanted to read, so she attacked the latest Sudoku puzzle in the back of the sports section while eating blueberries, oatmeal, and a toasted English muffin slathered with reduced fat, super chunk peanut butter.

The morning was lovely – perfect for a walk around Mt. Eldon's Fat Man's Loop, or even farther up the hill if her knees and energy allowed. So, that was the plan. Bless retirement! Bless her health at 70+ years! Life in Kate's neck of the woods could not, in this precious moment, be better.

The alien felt warm sun on its back and found the scent of the pine trees a tangible presence. So different from its own planet was this 'Earth'—so heavy with myriad types of matter. Its vibrations were so much slower yet acute in a dull sort of way. Life – how incredibly unique it is from one space dimension to another.

A noise interrupted the alien's thoughts. It turned to see what it was and as it did its little twin hurriedly ran into the woods. The alien could feel the deer's fear and thought it too might be better off running while in this present life form; something stopped it. From out of the forest stepped another life form, one on two legs. It was human. It picked its way carefully along the forest floor alone and unafraid. It radiated a far more complicated energy than the four-legged animal form the alien had assumed. This one exuded many thoughts and feelings in all directions away from its core. This is what the alien had come for. After all the preparation and watching of this planet's life forms over the centuries, the time to interact with its most sophisticated species had arrived.

Kate picked her way slowly among the pines. It had been a while since she had ventured along this trail. Memories of past knee strain came to mind and caused her to focus intently on the challenge of the climb. It would be wonderful if she made it to the top again. If she didn't, that would be all right, too. But for the moment, her body was working just fine with an assist from her blackthorn walking stick.

She had just taken several steps into a clearing along what had been a rather pine-crowded trail when she stopped dead in her tracks. There in front of her stood the most beautiful Albino Mule deer she had ever seen. In fact, it was the only one she had ever seen. Astounding!

It stood as quiet and still as a statue, looking at her with the most beautiful deep brown, probing eyes. Kate didn't move a muscle. She even found herself holding her breath for fear an exhale would cause the glorious creature to run away into the safe, hidden corners of the forest. But that didn't last long, and soon she released a noticeable sigh and began breathing again. The deer tilted its head slightly to the side looking almost like a dog. Kate couldn't help herself and laughed out loud.

The alien didn't quite know what to make of this. But it certainly didn't feel threatened, as the human carried no weapon except a stick of some sort. So it took a step closer and focused its thoughts directly into the rush of emotions coming from the human. This time it was the human who cocked its head.

Kate didn't know what to think. Her mind felt invaded by something bigger and stronger than she. She felt stuck in a powerful mental quicksand, unable to move or understand what held her fast. It was one of the most unusual experiences she had ever had – not so much scary, but more overwhelmingly foreign.

The alien waited for some kind of response. When nothing but mental confusion came back, it quickly realized that the human could not understand its stream of concentrated thought. The bandwidth of comprehension, if you will, was inaccessible to the human, so the alien quickly ceased its silent barrage and tried something less overpowering and invasive in order to make a connection.

As quickly as it had overtaken Kate, the mental quicksand let her go, freeing her thoughts to move again. Trying to make sense of it all, Kate watched in amazement as the deer slowly stepped closer and closer to her, its rich brown eyes never once leaving hers.

Soon, it was only inches away. Kate couldn't help herself and quietly said, "Who are you...*what* are you?"

The deer stopped. It stood quietly looking at Kate, then stretched out its head and began sniffing Kate's shirt, going from her open collar to the two zippered pockets on her shirt front. One of those pockets contained a granola bar.

Now, that was communication Kate could understand. She carefully unzipped the pocket and took out the granola bar. Slowly tearing away the paper wrapper, she pulled out the food and offered it to the deer. The animal stretched out its nose and sniffed the bar before pushing it back toward Kate.

"What's going on here?" She said. Not knowing what else to do, Kate bit off a piece of the bar, chewed for a moment, and then offered the rest to the deer. Its eyes moved slowly between Kate and the granola bar. Seconds later it very carefully took the food in its mouth. It chewed slowly at first, then more deliberately. Kate watched in amusement.

"Did you think I was going to poison you?" She said. The deer's jaw stopped in mid-chew. "I could never; I *would* never do such a thing," she continued. "I'd just as soon take poison myself before I'd hurt anything as beautiful and intelli..." Kate's voice broke off leaving the unfinished sentence hanging between them.

This human knows. How quickly it has happened.

"You are much more than a beautiful Albino Mule deer." Kate said. Her bright, excited eyes probed the animal's face watching intently for any indication that it understood.

"Although I would be thrilled with just that," she continued quietly.

They are not all like this being; of that I am sure. How to continue?

Kate looked around and saw a large rock to sit on. She stepped toward it sending the deer back stepping until its rump banged into an old Alligator juniper. The deer anxiously whipped its head around not knowing what or who had blocked its way. Kate laughed. "Not to worry. That old juniper won't hurt you either."

Kate sat down on the rock. She and the deer looked intently at each other. The silence flowed between them like a gentle ocean surge. Finally, Kate began to talk.

"Here I am talking to a deer. It's crazy, but I can't help it. But who the heck cares. It's just us, and I want this to be true. Please!"

The alien listened.

"Last night something crossed through our sky. It was bright and exciting. It disappeared somewhere in these mountains. Was that you?" She questioned. "Are you from another planet, a different universe...another dimension? Is string theory true? Can matter be in two places at once? Why have you come? Is it to destroy us? Although, believe me, we're already doing a really good job of that ourselves. Have you been here before? Why Flagstaff and not Washington, D.C.?"

Her questions tumbled out accelerating with each new topic. Finally she stopped, presumably to grab a breath; the deer just looked at her. "So, what's it all about, Alfie?" She queried and then began laughing at the absurdity of what she had just said.

It was time to communicate in greater depth with this planet's people. The alien was tired of the gentle Mule deer's body. Another transformation had to begin. If this human couldn't accept what was about to happen, then the alien would have to choose another.

The air between Kate and the deer began to vibrate. It made the hairs on the nape of Kate's neck stand up. The deer's body began to glow, blossoming into an incredibly warm, bright undulating light. Form disappeared. Only pure white light remained, moving like an amoeba stretching out in one direction and then another. Kate was rooted to the ground, held fast by what felt like magnetic ties that only allowed her to breathe.

Gradually, an embryo of whatever began to develop within the crucible of light. It fed on the photons and grew rapidly in both definition and strength. Minutes passed. The vehicle the alien was assuming was far more complicated than that of the Mule deer. Kate watched in fascination.

Soon the form's physical size absorbed all the light. What remained left Kate speechless. The alien had taken on a human form. Balancing carefully on its two feet, the alien opened and closed its hands, flexed its arms, and touched

its face marveling at how incredibly different this 'vehicle' felt than that of the little Mule deer. It looked at Kate, waiting.

"Amazing; are you thoroughly me?" Kate said to the alien who had transformed itself into her twin from the top of its head down to the scuffed and broken-in hiking boots Kate always wore out on the trail.

"Please tell me you don't have my mind because that really WOULD be weird." Kate added as an aside.

The alien spoke hesitantly in a rather breathy voice. "Your mind's thoughts are yours. My being and thoughts are mine. We can share."

Kate was exhilarated. All her life she had believed in the existence of civilizations on other worlds, in other universes. And now, here it was! "How do we share?" She said. The alien was silent.

"You tried to communicate with me earlier, didn't you, when you were in the deer's body?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I felt it. But I couldn't understand anything. It was so powerful. Is my mind not advanced enough for your thoughts? Am I on a different wavelength?"

A different wavelength ... yes, that made sense to the alien. "You are correct. Our thoughts move differently."

"Is it possible for us to—match movements, or is talking out loud the only way to communicate?"

"I am unsure."

Just as Kate was about to pursue the mind movement thing, she heard footsteps and light conversation in the distance. The alien didn't know what to do, and at first, neither did Kate. After all, this space person looked exactly like her. What would these people think?

So what, thought Kate. *It didn't matter*. She would think of something, anything to keep this connection going.

"It's all right," Kate said. "Those are just hikers like me out for a walk. We'll let them pass by, okay?" The alien nodded, but still looked rather uncertain.

Two college-aged kids came around the bend. The surprised look in their eyes at seeing Kate and her twin prompted Kate to jokingly call out. "Don't let my sister mess with you. She does this dress up thing every so often just to aggravate me."

The hikers smiled at Kate and the alien as they passed by. "Boy, you sure fooled me," one of them chuckled. "For a minute there I thought I'd gone cross-eyed."

"Well, you made her day. She's always out to shock at least one person before the outfit comes off. Have a good walk!" Kate exclaimed while waving good-bye. The alien mimicked her movement.

"You might want to change how you look to avoid that kind of reaction. Or...will you be leaving soon?" Kate said, hoping the answer to that question would be no.

The alien looked at Kate intently. "I would like to stay. I would like to talk with you."

Kate hadn't realized that she'd been holding her breath again. It came out in a relieved exhale. "I'd like that very much..." She hesitated. "But why me? Why not some planetary expert, some government official? I'm just an old lady."

"Why *not* you? You knew who I was and were not afraid."

Kate smiled. "Well, maybe age has its merits." She looked around. "Shall we stay here or can you come to my home? It's just down the mountain. Can you do that? Can you leave here?"

"Yes," the alien replied. Kate led the way hoping they wouldn't meet anyone else along the trail. When they got to the trailhead, Kate walked them to her little red car. "Do you know what this is?" She asked.

"Yes. You have so many of them on your planet."

"Ah, that we do. But mine is special. It doesn't fill the air with dirt. Get in."

She opened the passenger door and waited until the alien settled into the front seat. She closed the door and quickly went around to the driver's side, slipped in, and fastened her safety belt. "Do you have these in your—craft?"

Mimicking Kate, the alien snapped its own belt into place. "No. These are not necessary."

Kate pushed the start button. There was no engine noise only dashboard lights and a little run of music. "It's electric!" she said proudly. "No gasoline. No pollutants. I love it."

"Electric," the alien whispered as it put its hands on the dashboard. Immediately, it connected with the vehicle's energy and could feel the power waiting for release.

"May I go?" Kate asked tentatively realizing how 'at one' with her car the alien had become.

Her question acted like a light switch disconnecting the energy between car and alien. It pulled its hands from the dashboard. "Yes, go."

It took only ten minutes to reach Kate's house. Once inside, they faced yet another challenge—Mimi. The cat came running into the living room with her ample underbelly waving from side to side. When she saw the two Kates, her four paws jammed to the floor bringing her to a skidding halt. She looked from one to the other.

"Yours?" The alien said.

Hearing that voice cleared up Mimi's confusion. She immediately went over to the real Kate and pushed against her leg. Kate reached down and picked her up nuzzling her head and giving a loving scratch around her ears. "Yes. This is my cat Mimi. She's my best friend."

"But she is not human," replied the alien.

"True, but animals like Mimi often make much better friends than humans. Would you like to pet her? She must be wondering why I decided to bring home another me. Just put your hand out close to her paws."

The alien did what it was told. Kate moved in closer bringing Mimi within sniffing distance. In seconds, the air filled with a gentle vibration like the one the Mule deer had experienced. Mimi reached out a paw then another, touching the alien's extended hand. Then, without any hesitation, she jumped from Kate's arms into the arms of the alien.

"Well, I'll be!" said Kate. "She's never done that before with anyone. That vibration of yours must make her feel safe."

"It is a sharing between us," the alien said as it gently stroked Mimi who, by now, was purring quite loudly.

"She's talking to you." Kate chuckled. "Can you understand her?"

"Yes. All life talks with all life. When that talk is safe, as you say, all is balanced. Can you understand?"

"Yes, I believe so." Kate replied.

The alien put Mimi down on the floor. The little cat sauntered off to one of her favorite chairs, jumped up, and curled into a comfortable ball to watch and wait for whatever would happen next.

That is how their time together began – the old lady and the alien. There was so much Kate wanted to know, but she found talking to 'herself' disconcerting. She asked the alien if it would please choose another form.

"What kind?" It wanted to know. "A male, perhaps? Would that make it easier to communicate?" Kate's reply was immediate.

"No, I'd rather you be female. It's... more balanced for me."

The two began looking through several magazines on the coffee table, but Kate quickly realized that this was a ridiculous waste of valuable time. (And God only knows what the alien thought!)

"I'm so sorry; I can't believe I'm wasting your time doing this. Please let me take you anywhere you'd like, so you can talk with someone less... troublesome than I.

She got up and was about to head for the garage when the alien extended a hand and touched her arm. Its mind reached out as well. The two connected, but this time, without the disordered barrage of emotion. Kate didn't think; she just was.

Seconds later, light gathered around the alien like a halo as a third transformation began. Kate and Mimi watched.

The metamorphosis was more rapid this time. Kate's twin disappeared. In its place stood a woman with penetrating blue eyes and a quiet intelligence that so often comes with age and maturity. Kate gasped involuntarily. Tears welled up before she could stop them.

"You have become very emotional," said the alien. Why? Is this form not good?"

Not good? Thought Kate, pulling herself together and blotting tears away with her sleeve. How do you explain to a visitor from another planet, universe, or *wherever* that seeing this new form had turned her knees to jelly and caused heart palpitations the like of which she hadn't felt in decades? *What do I say?* Thought Kate. Being gay is certainly not a topic of discussion she planned on having in this first or any alien encounter.

"I saw a picture in your mind. I made it older," said the alien. "I can do something different."

"No, no, that's all right," Kate answered quickly. "It just took me by surprise, you going into my thoughts and all."

"You were open. This human is someone you know."

All of a sudden, Kate felt exhausted. She had to sit before she collapsed. Thankfully, there was a stool to her right and she sank on to it with a thud.

"It was a long, long time ago. We were friends. Do you understand friends?" She asked. The alien didn't respond. "We cared about each other and then she left. Funny, I don't know why I thought of her just then. But seeing you become an older her just surprised me; that's all." Kate's eyes glazed for just a moment then refocused. "It's okay. May we talk now?"

In the time it took them to walk into the living room and sit facing each other, Kate suddenly felt overwhelmed and terribly inadequate. She wasn't a great physicist or top government official. She was just 70-something Kate quietly living out the remainder of her life in Flagstaff, Arizona. Why her? Why here and now when there was a whole world of curious, far more intelligent humans from which to choose?

"It was my choice. You and here are safe," said the alien. Kate nearly fell off the sofa. She hadn't said a word.

"Will I ever have to speak again?" She said, trying to find her way through this unusual situation.

"It is...regular talk for me."

"Of course, it is. I'm sorry; I'll just have to get used to it. I only wish I could do it back, to make it easier for you, I mean."

"Sometime," said the alien, making Kate feel that she had been extended an invitation. "Maybe you will."

The first question Kate asked – out loud – was about life in the universe. What was it like and how long had they been visiting Earth?

"Life is everywhere, within your stars and away, many universes, different dimensions, and different forms. What is important is that all life is connected, no matter how close or far away." Kate felt like a sponge taking all this in. She wanted more and more.

"Your earth has been visited for a long time," the alien went on. "Many who have come are those you call 'the Grays.'"

"I've read about them and seen pictures." Kate interjected. "Their visits have scared many Earth people; those who have been taken away by them, and those who have had things done to their bodies and minds. Why have they done these things? Why are they here?"

"To survive, to mix, to live on," said the alien. Kate grew fearful. She couldn't stop the images in her mind of planetary destruction.

"It is not like that," the alien said quietly. "We are not that kind of life. We try only to find balance without elimination and destruction."

Kate's cell phone rang just as she was about to respond to this latest mind read. She just looked at it, then back to the alien.

"Answer. Someone wants you," said the alien.

Kate hesitated then reached for the phone. "Yes?" She said in a gravelly voice. "No, I'm fine ... just, ah, preoccupied. I was, but something's come up. I don't think—" Out of the corner of her eye, Kate saw the alien shaking its head. She covered the phone and whispered. "It's a friend. We were planning to go to a meeting of our city council."

"I would like to go," said the alien.

"Really?!" Was the surprised response. The alien nodded. Kate returned to the phone. "Ellie, I'll go with you after all. Do you mind if I bring a new friend? Great. We'll meet you there a little before 7:00." Kate ended the call.

"I don't know how interesting this will be for you. The biggest issue being talked about tonight is whether or not we should allow reclaimed water to be used to make artificial snow at our local ski resort." The alien just looked at her. "Does that make any sense? It sounds pretty insignificant to me in relation to your advanced intelligence and technology."

The alien thought for a moment. "This issue is not as simple as it sounds; correct?"

"Exactly." Kate replied. "There are many facets to it...health, economic, spiritual."

"Spiritual?" the alien queried.

Kate did her best to explain. "In this part of our country, in what we call the American Southwest, there are four large mountain ranges. They can be seen from many miles away. One of those four is known locally as the San Francisco Peaks. You landed among them. It's on the San Francisco Peaks where our city's ski resort is located. Skiing, by the way, is very popular all over our planet. People slide down snow-covered mountains using boards of wood or fiberglass attached to their feet. Anyway, there are quite a few people in this town, especially among the Native Americans, who believe that using these mountains for skiing and making artificial snow is wrong."

The alien raised an eyebrow. Sensing a question, Kate explained.

"Native Americans have lived on these mountains long before we white people came. They and others in Flagstaff believe that the Peaks are sacred, and that they hold special significance and great power. They provide some of Flagstaff's

water and offer a tremendous diversity of plant and animal life. Are you with me so far?" asked Kate. The alien nodded.

But there are other people in town who want to make more money for themselves and the city by using reclaimed water to make snow on the Peaks when there isn't enough naturally to keep the Snow Bowl ski area open for as long as they'd like. Not enough snow means fewer skiers and that equals much less money for the resort owners and the city.

"What is reclaimed water?" asked the alien.

Explaining all this was far more challenging and exhausting than Kate ever anticipated. How much talk was too much or too little for someone whose intelligence has brought it to earth from light years or possibly dimensions away? Kate felt more inadequate with each new idea she tried to express.

"Please go on. I find what you are saying very interesting. It is helpful for me," quietly spoke the alien.

Kate shook her head and laughed. "You did it again! The alien smiled back at her, far more relaxed in its new physical body as their conversation progressed.

"Tell me about reclaimed water. I will listen very hard to your spoken words."

"Hum," Kate thought out loud, then slowly offered her hand to the alien. She didn't know how it would feel if they touched or if this was totally against 'alien protocol,' but she did it anyway. At first, the alien wasn't quite sure what Kate wanted, then decided to copy her gesture. Kate stepped closer and took the alien's hand. It felt warm, warmer than normal, and young, even though the body before her looked as old as Kate's. Mimi watched the two intently.

Kate led them both, hand in hand, into the kitchen. At the sink, she let go and turned on the faucet. Water spewed out, splashing against the stainless steel sides of the deep rectangular bowl.

"This is filtered, clean water. It makes up about 60% of our human bodies. Without it, we can't survive. But I'm sure you already knew this." The alien nodded.

"Reclaimed water is old, already used; it's wastewater that has gone through a treatment process that makes it good enough to irrigate parks or sports fields. The water treatment people say it's safe for plants and human contact, but not for drinking." Kate fell silent hoping this explanation sufficed. The alien looked to be deep in thought. In that moment, Kate had a clear image or more of a feeling, really, about money.

"Money plays an extremely important role on our planet, Diana—" Kate stopped abruptly realizing what she had just said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"You have named me in this form, yes? Diana. I like the name." The alien paused. "And you looked inside." Kate couldn't stop the blush that rushed to her cheeks.

"I did; didn't I?"

The alien—now Diana—just looked at Kate. She was a good choice.

Kate and Diana drove into town to attend the city council meeting. As they walked into a very crowded council chamber, Kate's friend Ellie came rushing up. "Hey you!" She said as she threw her arms around Kate and gave her a big hug. "I'm so glad you decided to come. This is going to be one heck of a meeting. Just look at the turnout!" People were rushing to get seats.

It was clear there wouldn't be enough for everyone. Kate snagged three in the back row just vacated by an exasperated mother and her two crying young children. The three sat down. Ellie looked from Kate to Diana noticing how quickly absorbed the two had become studying the crowd.

Interesting, thought Ellie. *This new friend of Kate's was quite a looker.*

How transparent human thought can be. Diana turned to Ellie. "I am Diana," she said with a little half smile and a piercing blue-eyed gaze that startled Ellie more than just a little.

"Oh, jeez," said Kate, pivoting quickly in her chair. "I am so sorry! Manners right out the window. Ellie this is Diana, ah, O'Donnell. She's come for a visit...surprised the heck out of me this morning. We haven't seen each other since high school."

"But I thought you said she was a new friend?" Ellie queried.

"Well, she is – in a way. I mean, meeting her again after all these years – out of the blue – so to speak! It's like we're getting to know each other all over again." The words tumbled out rather awkwardly.

"Okay—?" Said Ellie more confused than certain. Diana could feel the woman trying to grab at thoughts that lay just beyond her reach. Then awareness struck. Ellie couldn't stop herself. "Oh, my God, Kate, she isn't...!"

"Enough!" Said Kate loud enough for the people sitting in front of them to turn and stare at the verbal commotion.

"Sorry about that." Kate said quickly. "I didn't mean to disturb you. Seems I had more oomph behind that than I'd planned." The folks smiled at her, took one more look at all three women, and then turned back in their seats. Kate took Ellie's elbow firmly and pulled her close. "No more about this. Diana's NOT who you think. Let's just focus on why we came here, all right?" A chagrined Ellie nodded, smiled an apology to Diana, and settled in for the upcoming meeting. But that didn't stop her from thinking more about this stranger.

Conversations ping ponged back and forth throughout the evening. Some speakers came armed with statistics stating how benign reclaimed water was to those who might drink it, and how wonderful it was that Flagstaff could grow its revenue in such a healthy way. Others spoke from the opposite point of view stating that the discovery of 'compounds of emerging concern' in our reclaimed water required further study—compounds such as pharmaceuticals, endocrine disrupters, and other trace amounts of materials that pass through treatment processes and filters.

And there were those who asked why money and commercial development always seemed to carry far more weight in the decision making process than respect and honor for those who hold the San Francisco Peaks so sacred. In other words, why can't some lands just be left untouched, to be cherished and protected?

Diana listened carefully to everyone who spoke. She noted attendees' verbal and non-verbal responses. One fellow in particular caught her eye. Although relatively young, as humans go, he hunched over almost burying himself in his clothes like an arthritic old man. He kept folding and unfolding a piece of paper. Each time a citizen spoke who was in favor of snow making using reclaimed water; he became more and more agitated.

Diana tried slipping into the current of his mind, but found it a swirl of anger, fear, and unintelligible words. She watched as he moved slowly to the speaker's microphone. He looked to be waging a battle against an invisible force far stronger than he was, but still he continued taking one painful step after another. Finally he reached the end of the queue; only one person was in front of him. He shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other, folding and unfolding his piece of paper.

The speaker at the microphone finished his comments and returned to his seat. The person next in line approached for her turn. But before she could speak, one of the council members interrupted saying that, unfortunately, they had run out of discussion time. He thanked everyone for sharing their valuable input, and went on to say what a long and arduous road it had been bringing them to this evening's vote. The council realized what a challenge it faced dealing with this volatile issue and promised the audience it would weigh all information carefully to decide a future best for Flagstaff.

Diana leaned over to Kate and whispered, "What will happen if their vote doesn't please most of the people?"

"There will be more legal appeals, delays, and emotional upset," replied Kate. "So often our legal system evokes far more heartache than progress. Look at the rest of our world, Diana. You've seen it for centuries. There's been so much war, greed, fear, ignorance, and fighting for power. When in God's name – or whatever you believe in – will we move beyond all that?!" Diana was about to respond, when the fellow she had been watching angrily balled up his piece of paper, jammed it into his pocket, and pushed his way into the crowd letting his thoughts flash out in a vicious rush.

Kate saw Diana stumble backwards as if she had been hit in the face. Kate grabbed her arm to steady her. The two looked at each other. But before anything could be said, the council spokesperson announced that a vote had been reached.

It felt like a collective holding of breath throughout the chamber. The final tally was read: four to three. Four council members voted to use reclaimed water while further studies were made; three members voted to depend solely

on Nature to provide snow until those studies could definitively prove reclaimed water was non-threatening to both land and people.

The place erupted in a cacophony of chatter. The deluge of anger Diana felt moments earlier was so palpable again, that she quickly found its source. The man's face was the embodiment of fury and frustration. His fists pummeled his thighs. In seconds, he turned on his heel and began pushing his way through the crowd to the nearest exit. Even though it definitely wasn't in her 'contact' protocol, Diana decided to follow the man having seen such violent emotion negatively play itself out time and time again on this planet.

The alien was no longer merely a long-distance observer of our beautiful blue planet. It had allowed its immersion into planet life to delve far more deeply than originally planned. Disappearing back into the universe, leaving Earth's humans to continue their self-destructive battles was no longer personally possible, even if balance within the universe's many dimensions had not yet been affected so badly that intervention was still a choice and not a necessity.

"What just happened?" Kate said. There was no time to explain. Diana placed her hands on either side of Kate's face. It was electric. A spectrum of color and warmth filled the old woman's mind. Images flowed past like a movie in fast forward – from the first moment Diana had seen the man on Mount Humphreys to his furious, abrupt departure from the council chambers. Only seconds had passed. There were no words, but Kate understood. Diana turned to go.

"Let me come with you," Kate said. "I might be able to help."

None of this went unnoticed. Ellie had been watching Kate and her 'old friend' with great fascination. They left her then, no explanation or good-bye, and in seconds they were lost in the crowd.

Summer nights in Flagstaff can often turn deliciously cool; the sun's warmth having been secreted away among the rocks and pine trees until the morning. But Kate took no notice. She could only feel warmth and connection throughout her body as Diana pulled her out into the night. She felt lighter, too, less confined, whatever that meant. No matter, it was a feeling she didn't want to end.

Nevertheless, it did. Diana released Kate's hand. The angry man was just up the street. He had stopped on a dimly lit corner to make a phone call. Diana motioned Kate into the shadows. The two stood quietly focusing their full attention on the man.

Kate knew Diana was intercepting the man's thoughts, and wished with every fiber of her being that she could do the same. *Oh, to open mind's doors; break down its walls; clear the surrounding air of all disruptions, and become thought!* As that last wish flew from her mind, she felt Diana pull her close. Her

breath was deep, and calm, and sweet. Her hands settled firmly on either side of Kate's face. The images began immediately with sound to add even greater clarity.

The angry man was telling a friend what just happened at the council meeting. Both were furious. Payback was essential for this terrible injustice was what came out of their string of profanity and emotion. Their plans for Snow Bowl had to be carried out. The angry man told his friend to call Sam and Ken and meet him tomorrow at 2:00 p.m. at their usual place on the mountain. Kate could see only trees and a narrow trail. There wasn't enough perspective to identify the location any further. But Diana knew and that was enough. The angry man ended the call and scuttled off into the night like a poisonous spider seeking refuge until the next lethal attack.

Diana slowly took her hands away from Kate's face pulling the talking images with them. All that remained was the night chill. "What are we going to do? Shall we follow him?" whispered Kate anxiously.

"We will do nothing," said Diana.

"But I know they're up to no good. If we could stop them now— "

"We must wait," interrupted Diana. "Learning is so often a slow and difficult process. Tomorrow will be soon enough." She reached out for Kate's hand. "Come. There is much talking for us to do." Kate sighed deeply, relinquishing all debate willingly just to feel Diana's hand in hers.

How long had it been since she'd held a woman's hand – alien OR human? How long since she'd felt that heart and belly churning? *This was ridiculous*, thought Kate. *What did the Bible say? 'For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.' Something like that. The time for these kinds of feelings has passed! If only she/it didn't look so much like Diana!*

The two walked slowly back to Kate's little electric car. Before they'd even reached the doors, the lights started blinking signaling waiting power. Kate had done nothing to initiate this. It was Diana.

"Do you want to drive?" asked Kate rhetorically.

Diana jumped at the chance. "Oh, yes!"

"Wait a minute. I didn't really think – I mean, it's not like your regular transportation," blurted Kate. But seeing the shadow of disappointment sweep across Diana's face then disappear in less than a heartbeat, Kate back pedaled like an expert five year old on a Big Wheel. "I'm sorry." She said.

"It is all right. I understand. And you are right; it is not like my regular transportation," said Diana quietly.

"Which I would love to see one day," smiled Kate. "Here." She gave Diana the key fob, even though you didn't need a key to drive the car. "She's all yours."

Joy warmed Diana's face. She took the fob. Immediately, the doors not only unlocked but opened, as well. The two climbed in. Kate sat in the passenger seat quietly watching Diana run her hands very slowly over the dashboard, steering wheel, hand brake, and shifter knob. It was as if the car was giving

Diana a quick operational tutorial. Marvelous! After a moment, Diana pushed the start button and inched them away from the curb.

Her driving was flawless – as if she had been doing it for years, and not once did she ask directions. A homing pigeon couldn't have done better. "How –?" Was all Kate could manage when Diana pulled into the garage and came to a stop.

"We'll talk," was Diana's reply.

The two settled in. Hours of conversation slipped by effortlessly. Kate had so many questions, questions about life on other planets, alien abductions, worm holes, space travel, the validity of quantum physics, branes, string theory, teleportation. Her hunger to know was fathomless. Diana commented briefly on some of her questions and went into greater detail on others.

Everything Kate heard was beyond remarkable. It was brilliant, awesome, humbling, and frightening in its magnitude. If only she were an Albert Einstein or Steven Hawking! Yet, if she were, these moments would be different, and Kate didn't want them to be anything but what they were and how they made her feel.

However, what affected her most deeply was when Diana said, "We have been observing your planet for many centuries. We have been listening to your growing tidal wave of voices pushing its way into the 'outer worlds'. We have been watching your evolution – so much of it good, nurturing, and positive. Yet, there is also so much anger, greed, and power seeking that grow from fear instead of trust. It is great immaturity among great good."

"You are such a young and driven civilization," continued Diana. "The wars your people have spawned now threaten to destroy your planet. You have gone from primitive weapons to devastating chemicals and the potential for nuclear annihilation. Your planet is suffering because of your physical, emotional, and mental indulgences. What must be remembered, Kate, is that all the universe, seen and unseen, is ONE. Sickness and chaos manifesting in one part of that whole cannot help but negatively affect the rest. That is why I and others have come to pursue contact in your planetary dimension, to better understand and possibly influence the direction your dissonant world is going."

Diana stopped talking. Her silence ran headlong into Kate's fear. The two were at a standstill until Diana took Kate's hands in hers. "We're not the enemy, Kate. We are not like so many of your moving picture stories. Yes, we are older and more technologically advanced. But we are not here to destroy you and take over your earth. What we DO want is your health, to help your people move from fear into trust and balance."

Tears trickled down Kate's face. Seconds stretched into a minute, then, finally, Kate said, "I've dreamed of hearing this kind of talk all my life, and I've always believed in it even though I hadn't even heard it until now. But I'm nobody, Diana. I'm old. You've made contact with the wrong human. I haven't the mind to comprehend even a fraction of what you've just told me, nor the

power to do anything about it. You need to be with much more knowledgeable and influential people on our planet. I cannot help you.”

The alien marveled at this human being. How different they all were, some so open and good while others were just steps above prehistoric.

Kate’s two-hundred year old rosewood and walnut Seth Thomas mantle clock pushed out a steady stream of ticks that filled the silence between them.

“You are wrong,” said Diana. “Your understanding is far greater than you realize.”

What happened next caused little Mimi to voice a concerned meow. Diana pulled Kate gently to her feet. As she did so, a glow began at her chest and slowly brightened into an enveloping light. There was no heat just pure, beautiful, brilliant white light. What would happen when it reached their hands? Kate had no idea, but she couldn’t let go, didn’t want to let go. If it was to be her end, then so be it. She trusted this alien.

Diana’s face was the last to dissolve into light. Her eyes never left Kate’s. The old woman took a full, deep breath relinquishing herself to the brightness as it swallowed her hands, then enveloped her body in a glorious spectrum of photons.

The heaviness of earth dropped away; matter became light; light became consciousness, and Kate became part of it all. Time was no longer a measurement between a beginning and an end. It became a singularity, complete unto itself. All became NOW and Kate instantaneously slipped beyond the narrow confines of human perception into a vastly greater and humbling revelation of being. It was as if the curtain between universal truth and humans’ limited perception drawn from the five senses was swept aside for an instant between heart beats, and all *Existence* – both visible and invisible – was revealed to Kate simply and lovingly. Oh, to remain here forever!

Then it was over. Kate’s moment of revelation ended, and she was rapidly returned to her earth dimension where its weight and slowness brought tears to her soul.

Slowly, she opened her eyes. She felt like a stranger in her own home. Diana released her hands. There were no words between them.

Out from behind the sofa, Mimi padded tentatively toward the two. The air tingled her whiskers. She wanted to feel Kate’s hands on her head, behind her ears, and down her back, but couldn’t move any closer. It was like there was an invisible wall keeping her from the one person she had always trusted. She mewed softly.

Kate and Diana turned to her. That was all it took to dissolve the invisible barrier. Mimi took a flying leap toward Kate who snagged her out of midair. The two nudged and snuggled for several minutes, then Kate put Mimi into Diana’s arms. The little cat felt totally safe. It was a three musketeer moment – the cat, the alien, and the old lady linked in some crazy, off-the-wall way.

Evening had long passed; night was well under way. Diana told Kate she had to return to her spacecraft before they saw the angry man and his friends tomorrow afternoon. Kate asked if she could come.

"You need rest. The day has been long and you've just been through—"

"Please," interrupted Kate. "I don't feel the least bit tired. And after what I've just been through, I feel—how can I describe it—less confined and so much more than I was before. Can you understand? Did you know this would happen?"

The alien looked sad and uncertain. "I'm sorry. I did not think what the consequences might be. I never meant to hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me, Diana; you only helped me see more clearly. Please don't regret what you did. I certainly don't!"

"But I am not certain what it might have done to your body."

"Nothing but good; look at me." Kate took Diana's hands in hers. "I'm back in this old physical body again, none the worse for wear." However, there was a difference. Diana could feel a change in the woman's energy; she could detect a slight glow to Kate's skin. Mimi could see it, too, but she wasn't afraid. What was done was done. There was no taking it back.

Diana let go of Kate's hands. "Come."

They traveled in Kate's little electric car and then by foot. It would have been so much faster to change density, but Diana wasn't about to do that again. The moon guided their way up the uneven mountain trail. Kate followed Diana drawing upon this new invigoration that felt so good.

Finally, Diana stopped. "We are here."

Kate saw nothing. "Either I'm selectively blind or that's the best camouflage ever," laughed Kate, not caring either way really, because it was just so exciting to be here. With that, Diana raised her hands and set them upon the starry night sky. In seconds, a form appeared. It was a smooth, gray wedge hovering just above the ground. Kate estimated its size to be about 50 feet long, 15 feet tall, and 25 feet in diameter.

An opening suddenly appeared. Diana stepped up and disappeared into the craft. Kate followed finding herself in an empty room. There were no streamlined chairs, flight console, or walls of electronics, just the glow from the inner walls. Funny though, it still felt full to Kate, like everything Diana needed was right there at her fingertips.

Diana walked to the far wall opposite the door, reached out and began touching various places on its surface. Kate neither heard nor saw anything, but sensed that Diana was engaged in some kind of intense communication. "Are they upset with you?" She interrupted. "I hope not."

Diana's hands left the wall, and she turned to Kate. "Not so much upset," she said, pausing to find the right word. "More like surprised, I believe. Come." Diana indicated the space beside her. Kate took the few steps that separated them.

"Put your hands here," pointed Diana, showing Kate exactly where she wanted her to touch the wall. Kate did and immediately felt a surge of very warm, powerful energy that held her fast like a magnet.

"Don't resist," said Diana. "They're just learning about you."

Kate closed her eyes and opened her mind to the energy. She pictured herself relaxed and at ease with Mimi in her lap. Both of them were looking intently into the unknown.

The whole process took only a moment before Kate's hands were released and Diana's took their place picking up on her earlier conversation. It seemed less agitated this time, but still very focused. Kate hoped this meant whoever was on the other end of this communication was more accepting now of Diana's choice of involvement here on earth.

The wall's pale light dimmed. Diana turned away and motioned for Kate to follow her out of the craft. As soon as they set foot on the ground, the floating wedge disappeared leaving nothing more than its memory and a tingling of residual energy on Kate's skin.

It was late. Neither Kate nor the alien spoke during their trip back to the house. It had been such an amazing day for both of them that the lack of conversation seemed perfectly justified.

"Would you care to stay the night?" ventured Kate, as Mimi purred her way between and around Kate's legs happy to have her and that other one back home again. "I...ah...have a guest room for visitors." Before Diana could reply, Kate thought how silly that invitation sounded and she started to laugh. Diana gave Kate that dog-like, cocked-head look, which made the old lady laugh even more.

"Are you all right?" asked Diana. "I don't understand."

That sobered Kate right up. "I am so sorry. It was wrong of me to laugh, but what I just asked you struck me so funny all of a sudden—inviting you to stay the night in a guest room for visitors."

"Why is that funny?" asked Diana.

"Well, I've had lots of people stay with me over the years, but they've never come from as far away as you have. I mean, you really ARE a visitor—from out of this world!"

Diana thought about this for a moment, and then gave Kate a slow, little smile. It was so reminiscent of the young Diana of years ago that it brought tears to Kate's eyes.

"Now, I understand," said the alien. "Please show me this room for visitors."

The two went upstairs. Kate flicked the light on in the guest room. "Here we are—guest room and connecting bath. Everything a visiting alien could possibly want. Shall I see you in the morning? I make a great cup of coffee."

"I shall see you, but this coffee I am not sure of." Kate laughed and was about to shut the door when Diana stopped her. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course," said Kate, turning back into the room and slipping into a chair beside the bed.

"Would you tell me more about the Diana friend of yours whose image I have taken?"

The question didn't really surprise Kate. Prior to their dimensional shift, she felt exposed and vulnerable every time the alien read her thoughts. Now, when that happened, this new transparency between them made those moments much more acceptable, almost desirable.

Amazing, thought Kate, letting her mind drift a bit before answering the alien, *how carefully we humans work every day of our lives doling out just enough of ourselves to establish an identity in this world. Then we expend even more energy protecting that identity from all those outside forces that try to dominate and control us. Dear Lord, we are such infants in this universe!*

"I find your thoughts very interesting," said Diana. Kate laughed. "Then why don't you just delve right in and answer your own question?"

"You must take me with you in some kind of order," said the alien. "Speaking will help you." And so Kate began.

"We met in junior high school during 9th grade when we were around 15 years old. She came in late to P.E. class – that's physical education—exercise, sports, things like that. I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. She had long, dark black hair pulled back in a French twist, rich, brown eyes, and an incredible smile. She was wearing a white pleated skirt and a short-sleeved navy blue sweater." Kate paused. "Can you see her?"

"Yes," nodded the alien.

"We became good friends. I'd often walk home with her after school and have dinner with the family. Some weekends, we'd spend the night at each other's houses. We'd talk about everything. She also wrote me the most beautiful letters. Most of the times they were about how strict her mother was and how she missed me when she had to stay home studying and practicing the piano. I'd read and re-read those letters until the folds almost tore.

Then, one Saturday, she was spending the night at my house. We'd had a great time watching some television, then playing a card game called gin rummy. By ten o'clock we were off to bed. I had an old mahogany four-poster that I'd helped my dad refinish. It was beautiful.

We turned out the lights and lay back looking at the moonlight shining through the bedroom window. It fell across her face and seemed to nestle in the waves of her long black hair. She was so beautiful I could barely breathe. After a moment, she asked me if I knew how to spoon. I said, "No, what is it?" She told me her mother had taught her years ago when she was a little girl. "Teach me," I said.

She had me lie on my side facing away from her with my knees bent. In a second, she moved right up behind me molding her body against mine. Her arm came around and pulled me even closer. I could smell her perfume and feel

the warmth of her body pressed against mine. I'd never felt anything so good in my life. "Can you see?"

"Yes," nodded the alien.

"I could have stayed like that all night," Kate whispered.

The alien watched intently. "Then Diana whispered in my ear, "Nice, huh, especially when it's an ice-cold winter night. Do it to me."

"She pulled away and turned on her side. The space left between us hurt, if that's even possible, so I moved quickly to fill it, and I molded her body to mine. Warm and whole again; that's what it felt like. She took my hands and wrapped them around her body until they felt the soft skin of her breasts hidden within her nightgown. Talk about feelings! An electric rush of excitement hit me. Without thinking of the consequences, I whispered in her ear, "I think we like each other, really *like* each other."

"And that was it. She left my house the next morning and our close friendship was over. She didn't call; she stopped writing; she avoided me at school; she basically stopped us. I was devastated. It was the worst pain I'd ever felt. My heart was broken, and I was only fifteen, for God's sake!"

Kate dragged her focus back from that past and looked at the alien. "You see, Diana, I loved her. I loved her with all my being."

Kate knew there was much more to explain about being homosexual, about the sexuality spectrum she felt we all staked our place upon. And then there were the questions she wanted to ask Diana, like is love universal for all sentient beings? And if so, is it really the glue that holds everything seen and unseen together? But none of this came out nor did Diana say anything. Maybe the mind reading wasn't working, or maybe she shouldn't have shared this kind of intimacy with the alien.

Kate sighed. Suddenly, every cell in her body wanted nothing more than to collapse in bed and curl up beside little Mimi. "Good-night, Diana. I'll see you in the morning."

Kate woke up early feeling more rested than she had in years. The night had been a total blackout, no dreams, just a deep, stress less void. She guessed it happened because her mind and body could take only so much input and stimulation before having to recoup. And heaven knows, all that happened yesterday was much more stimulation than any old person might normally expect. It certainly was beyond anything Kate had expected, but, interestingly, not more than she could handle. Moreover, she wanted more. Amazing how that felt, thought Kate, as she stroked Mimi's head while waiting for the sun to march through her bedroom window.

Diana was standing at the sliding glass door looking out past the deck to the trees in the backyard when Kate and Mimi came downstairs. "It is quiet here." The alien said without turning around.

Kate didn't answer. Rather, she just stood at the foot of the stairs feeling the calm between them. Then, after a moment, she replied. "Yes, it is most of the time. I love it that way."

"And those trees, you love them, too," continued Diana.

"Yes," nodded Kate. "They remind me of when I was a little girl."

"Was that here?" asked Diana.

"Oh, no," Kate said as she walked into the kitchen to feed Mimi and start the coffee. "It was many miles east of here in a place called Pennsylvania. My parents moved us there when I turned 12 years old."

Diana stepped away from the door and sat down at the kitchen counter. She watched Kate start the coffee and open a can of cat food. "Want to feed her?" asked Kate.

Diana took the dish held out to her and leaned over to caress the chunky cat from head to tail. Mimi arched her back, then pushed her head into Diana's pant leg. Kate watched the two thinking what a seamless, uncomplicated relationship they had – almost a Zen thing between alien and animal, pure and uncomplicated. Diana put the dish on the floor and smiled as Mimi buried her tongue in the moist food and began eating.

Sitting back down at the counter, Diana continued her inquiry. "Why are you here now?"

Why these rather mundane questions, thought Kate. How about the angry man and today's meeting?

"I would like to know more about you. There is time for the angry man," said Diana.

Kate raised an eyebrow. This nonverbal communication was definitely tricky. She hoped she would soon be able to do it better, like Mimi.

"All right, I'll tell you more, but first try this. Watch though, it's hot." Kate handed Diana a steaming cup of black coffee. The alien sniffed the liquid before carefully taking a sip.

"So this is coffee," said Diana.

"What do you think?" queried Kate, and then did her best to tap into the alien's thoughts. What came through wasn't a simple answer. She put her cup aside and sat next to Diana. "What does that mean? Your thoughts go far deeper than coffee, Diana."

"You are learning quickly, Kate. "I am glad."

"Well, maybe that's because I'm old and don't have much time to waste," Kate said, trying to be humorous, but, in truth, was extremely serious.

"What you call old on this physical plane is far different than on mine," said the alien.

Kate was both confused and fascinated. "Could you explain?" she asked.

"The form you have evolved into on this planet vibrates far more slowly than our more cerebral forms."

"Wait," interrupted Kate. "Cerebral forms? You mean you have no physical body?"

"Form eventually becomes a choice, Kate, the alien replied. It has taken my universe millennia to move from the denser vibrations of the physical plane into a vastly more accelerated state of quantum light and thought." Kate leaned back against the counter. This conversation felt like a chapter from a Ray Bradbury novel, but then she remembered something she had read years ago in a theosophical book by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. It made perfect sense then and now it fit perfectly with what she had just heard, so she thought it out to Diana. And the alien heard.

"Yes," whispered Diana taking hold of Kate's hands. "She was correct. Matter *is* spirit in its densest vibration. You think you are old because your physical form is affected by all the dynamic forces influencing this planet – gravity, magnetism, axial rotation, but with thought there is no age."

Kate was thrilled. "I understand!" She exclaimed. "I may not have a fraction of the intelligence others on this planet might have, but I understand what you've said, and I believe it. I think I always have. Thank you!" She squeezed Diana's hands. Energy rushed between them. Experiencing this emotional contact at such a slow molecular level was new and somewhat disconcerting to the alien. Before she could stop it, a concentrated burst of photons streamed into Kate's hands starting a second dimensional shift.

Kate felt the warmth and tingle of vibrational acceleration and immediately focused all of her thoughts and energy on assisting their transition into that realm of quantum awareness. However, almost as soon as it began, the shift stopped.

The alien wouldn't allow it. Another rapid fluctuation in Kate's physical being might bring about other alterations not as benign as her slight skin glow and enhanced energy level. It should never have happened in the first place. This visitation was meant to be brief. No physical contact, just surface involvement, then a detached assessment of one human's reaction to a non-threatening other-world interaction. Well, so much for that.

Mimi's rather plaintive meow broke the connection between Kate and Diana. Their hands released and immediately all was calm in the kitchen again.

Outside, though, there was something quite different going on. Kate's friend Ellie had dropped by for a visit. Before knocking on the front door, she took a peek through one of the side windows. She saw Kate take Diana's hands. Instantly, their grasp disappeared into the brightest light Ellie had ever seen – so bright, she had to shield her eyes and step away from the window. When she looked back again, there was no bright light and the women no longer held hands.

Then something else happened. Kate and the woman simultaneously turned their eyes to the side window where Ellie was peeking. It startled her so that she pulled away, lost her balance for an instant, and slid a few feet on the

loose rock ground cover. By the time she regained her footing, Kate and Diana had walked out the front door and were heading around the side of the house.

"Ellie, why the peeping Tom act? Coming through the front door is so much easier," said Kate, as she and the alien approached an obviously 'Oh, jeez, I'm busted!' Ellie. The woman felt ridiculous having been caught in such a compromising position. What could she say?

"Ah ... I don't know what got into me. What a stupid thing to do! An old lady acting like a sneaky middle schooler. Can you both forgive me?" She said in a rush.

"Why don't you come inside," smiled Kate. "Have a cup of coffee with us." Ellie followed them hoping this embarrassing moment would quickly be forgotten.

The seemingly cordial group sat at the kitchen table with coffee in hand. "So, why the early visit?" Kate said.

"Well..." The hesitation was slight, but Kate and the alien tuned right in to it. "We haven't had morning coffee in a long time, and I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd drop in rather than call. I mean, how often do I call anyway?" Ellie forced an off-hand kind of chuckle then rushed on. "And besides, I was interested in finding out how you felt about last night's meeting because, well, we really didn't get much talk time afterwards, did we?" Ellie took a breath and sipped her coffee hoping this explanation would suffice.

Before Kate replied, she looked at Diana. She had an idea and hoped the alien would go along with it. A simple, silent yes came back. "Ellie, I'm glad you stopped by. I've been feeling very uncomfortable about what happened last night, about getting so upset with you. I owe you an apology." This took Ellie totally by surprise. She hadn't expected Kate to say anything like that. "You asked me if Diana was the person I knew way back in junior high." Ellie's eyes grew noticeably rounder. "Well...she is."

"Oh, Kate!" blurted Ellie before she could stop herself. She knew the whole painful story and had slogged through a litany of emotions with her friend time and time again over the years.

"It's all right, El," said Kate. "Diana's come all this way, so we could finally talk about it. It's made such a difference for me—"

"For us," interrupted Diana. Kate looked surprised. She hadn't expected the alien to say anything. "We both have had pain, Ellie, pain from fear for me. It was time to put all that away," said Diana. "It makes the present so much freer."

The alien's words bore directly into Kate.

"Oh, you two!" Ellie exploded, scattering Kate's thoughts like bowling pins. "It's better now, right? Have you dealt with all the demons? I can't tell you how relieved I am to hear this!" Ellie felt as if a terrible life sentence of misery had just been commuted for her friend, that all the decades of anguish and unanswered questions might finally be resolved.

"It's all so new and, honestly, overwhelming, Ellie. I think we need to let it settle for a while. Does that make sense?" Kate answered.

"Absolutely! I'm just so grateful you'd even tell me about it. I know how important this is." Ellie spontaneously reached for Diana and pulled her into a bear hug. "All these years! Thank you, thank you for doing this! I just want you both to feel resolution and...and peace."

Poor Diana, ham-strung with arms clamped firmly to her sides, wasn't quite sure how to extricate herself when Kate came to the rescue. She broke Ellie's emotional clutch with "Okay, that's it. You're going to scare the poor woman, Ellie! Let's call it a morning. I don't know how much more emotional talk I can take." As she spoke, Kate propelled Diana back to the kitchen counter, and slid over what was now her rather cold cup of coffee. The alien sent a mental *Thank you*.

"Sorry, sorry!" declared Ellie. "I know I go overboard sometimes."

"Sometimes! How about most of the time?!" said Kate.

"Now, wait a minute, that's not fair!" defended Ellie. Kate let out a sarcastic sniff and shook her head.

"Okay, okay, I won't argue the point; but can I ask just one more thing?" This didn't sound good. Kate looked at Diana.

"What is it, Ellie?" said Diana.

"You two were talking when I looked in the window. Then, all of a sudden, there was this light between you. I mean, I've never seen anything so bright in my life. I had to turn away. But when I looked again, it was gone. What the heck was it?"

Kate had no words. Ellie looked curiously from one to the other. Diana broke the silence. "It was this, Ellie." She took off a bracelet from her right wrist and held it out for Ellie to examine. It appeared to be made of ultra-smooth, silver metal. When Ellie took it in her hands, it felt practically weightless. Kate moved in to get a closer look. Etched down the middle were five symbols – not so much geometric shapes, but more like unrecognizable letters from some foreign language.

"I think what you saw, Ellie, was the sun's reflection off this surface. It is so pure that any light, no matter how dim or bright, will be reflected at a much greater photonic intensity."

"I beg your pardon," wavered Ellie.

Kate jumped in. "Ah...Diana's a physicist, El. She slips into technical jargon a lot. It threw me, too, at first. I think what she's saying is that light is made up of tiny particles called photons. The more of them you have the greater the intensity of light. I'm guessing her bracelet's polished metal helped to increase that intensity. Yes, Diana?" Kate looked at the alien hoping for support. What came back loud and clear in her mind was *You are a most interesting human, Kate*.

Just as quickly, Kate shot back *That's fine, but I need a little help here!*

This mental exchange took only a second, but still gave Ellie enough time to wonder what the heck was going on between these two.

"Kate has explained the phenomenon quite well, Ellie. I am sorry for confusing you," Diana said quickly, retrieving her bracelet. "I hope that answers your question."

Talk about a confusing exchange! Ellie chalked it up to the two of them just having gone through an emotional re-connection, so she backed off.

"Yeah, I think that does it. I'm still confused as hell, but that's not surprising," said Ellie, walking to the front door. "Thanks for the coffee I never finished. I'll just leave gracefully. Maybe we can meet again, Diana." Then out she went. The door snicked shut.

The alien reflected for a quantum moment on all that had just happened. It realized how deeply humans entangle thought and emotion within their physical existence, and then constantly struggle to free themselves from its complexities. It also realized that, if not careful, an alien of light and mind might get caught up in the gravity of that struggle. Therefore, greater care must be taken to re-establish proper distance and perspective before unintended consequences evolve.

In comparison, Kate felt like a marathon runner on steroids. So much had happened to her in so little time. She didn't want the experiences to stop. She just wanted to be able to keep pace with whatever came next.

The two o'clock meeting between the angry man and his buddies was fast approaching. Kate had no idea where they planned to meet on Mt. Humphreys, but Diana knew. And did she already know what was going to happen? And if she knew, what was she going to do about it? And if she did anything about it, would Kate be allowed to participate? These questions bounced around Kate's mind as she changed into hiking clothes. "Stop and be." She said to herself. "These questions already have answers. Try looking beyond the physical."

In the bathroom, she brushed her teeth, and then grabbed some SPF 30 cream for her face. As she applied a dab of the white stuff, she did a slight double-take. Something was different. It was still the same old face, but ... well, maybe not quite the same. Her fingers probed around her eyes and mouth and down her throat. Lines she had finally begun to accept as a part of growing old gracefully weren't quite so noticeable, and those neck 'ropes' she hated so much hadn't disappeared entirely, but certainly seemed less 'ropy.'

Stepping back from the mirror, she closed her eyes and took a deep, calming breath. When she looked back at her reflection, she saw something she had missed earlier. It was barely noticeable, but there just the same – a faint, off-white glow to her skin. "Oh!" caught in Kate's throat.

The alien knew instantly when Kate discovered the subtle physical changes in her body. However, as quickly as it knew, it knew nothing more. This human was adapting quickly to mental communication. Initially, thoughts colored by emotion spewed forth uncontrollably. Now, they were being refined, and then transmitted more by choice than reaction. And what of the alien? Coming from an advanced civilization did not guarantee immunity against the vagaries and unique dynamics that were possible in an encounter with less evolved life. Thus, taking on the vibrational weight of human form was affecting the alien more than it calculated during its meticulous preparation for this planetary visit.

Diana was waiting in the living room when Kate came downstairs. She knew they had little time for discussion before they had to leave. However, the physical changes Kate just discovered needed to be acknowledged.

"Kate—" began the alien, but Kate interrupted.

"Did you plan on giving me such a gift, Diana? I think not, but you have." The alien said nothing. "In my mind, there has been no error in judgment on your part, and, if I have any say in the matter, we will experience other dimensional shifts. Our time is *now*, for whatever reason. You chose me, Diana. We're in this together until...until we're not. You are the teacher and I am a willing and very grateful student. I accept these changes and any others that might happen, especially if they get rid of more wrinkles. And, by the way, this skin glow is sort of attractive, don't you think?" She stopped for a breath hoping her attempt at humor might take the edge off this one-sided conversation. The alien just looked at her. "Okay," went on Kate. She could never bear 'dead air' in a conversation. "That's what I needed to say. Now, it's your turn, if you choose. Otherwise, we need to be heading up the mountain."

Diana chose silence over conversation. She walked to the garage where Kate's little red car had already been started and the doors opened. Diana slipped behind the wheel and waited while Kate buckled herself into the passenger seat.

Seconds later, they backed down the driveway. As Diana headed north toward the mountains, Kate saw the words *I chose well* etched clearly in her mind as if she were watching a news flash on television. There was no need for further discussion. Human and alien had taken yet another step in their unusual relationship.

Gusts of summer wind pushed around the afternoon sun as Diana drove the electric car silently up the hill toward Snow Bowl. They pulled into the lower parking lot, locked the car, and made their way to a trailhead Kate hadn't hiked since all the snow-making construction began several years ago. Diana took the lead and in no time they were swallowed into the forest like tiny bits of food among toothy boulders.

Diana walked with an easy stride. Kate followed a few paces behind.

"Have we time for a question or two?" asked Kate as they passed through shadows and sunlight patches along the trail.

"Mind or voice," replied Diana.

"Well..." hesitated Kate. "I'd like mind, but I can't guarantee how well how I'll do."

The alien paused along the trail and turned to Kate. "You do far more mind talk than you realize. Release your concern. Enjoy the freedom and energy pure thought allows." Kate liked the sound of that, and so their conversation began.

Are we earth humans the least mature of all the life forms you've observed? thought Kate.

No, quickly came the reply.

Do the others go to war and fight to control each other as much as we do? It worries me terribly to think that all the anger, fear, and violence on our planet may be an inevitable, enduring way of life that is inherent to our species rather than just a phase we must go through in order to evolve our consciousness.

Unforced quiet lay between them. Kate waited a moment, and then continued. She had nothing to lose.

The older I get the less involved and serious I feel about most people and their everyday lives. I suppose that's normal with older people – a pulling away from one form in preparation for another. Yes? Still more silence.

You are the opportunity of my lifetime, Diana. Whatever knowledge you are willing to share with me will be of immeasurable help in my own evolution.

Without breaking stride, Diana filled Kate's mind. *Survival is paramount to all species. Your humankind has freedom of choice as to how that happens, as do those in other universes. Don't allow your mind to give ever more power to the negativity that seems to overwhelm your planet's daily life and behavior. For every act of cruelty there are multiple goodnesses.*

Kate smiled. Her mind shot back, *goodnesses. What a great word. I pray these goodnesses will be strong enough to restore health to this beautiful, struggling planet before it's too late.*

Before more thoughts could be shared, Diana held up her hand stopping their hike. Just ahead a voice punched through the low-hanging branches of an oak tree. "Sammy, Ken! Where the fuck are you?"

Diana took Kate's hand and quickly led her soundlessly off the path and behind a huge boulder lodged behind five or six weathered pines. Unseen, they watched two men appear and meet up with their buddy. "Hold your balls, Mic, we're right here! Jeez!"

"Look," said the obvious organizer of the group, "if we're going to do this thing, it better be now. Those ski bastards are pushing ahead like crazy to get all their snow making crap ready before that shitty council can back down on its decision."

"So let's get the fuck going! Let's wipe the mother-fucker off our

mountain!" said either Sammy or Ken. "We have the gas and torches hid over there in the bushes."

The two ran a short distance off the path and retrieved the arsenal they'd lugged up the hill. When the booty lay at their feet, all three men got even more excited. Finally, after they had suffering months of emotional pain and anguish, their plans for revenge were just minutes away from being realized.

Oh, my God, raced through Kate's mind. *They're going to destroy Snow Bowl!*

And all of your Flagstaff, shot back Diana, *if they are not stopped.*

"But how?! What do we do?" Kate yelled out loud, totally forgetting mind talk and how close the men were to their hiding place. Within a nanosecond, all three men whipped around simultaneously to face the disembodied voice. The man called Mic pointed to the boulder. "Get 'em!" He screamed, racing around one side while Sammy and Ken charged around the other making escape impossible.

On the other side of the boulder, the men ran smack into – nothing. No people, just pine trees. "What the hell?" spat Mic. "Where the fuck did they go?!" Whoever they were, they had to be stopped. No one could know what he was about to do!

The men raced from tree to tree, expecting any second to expose the spies. They had to be there! No one could just disappear like that.

But that's just what happened, with a little help from Diana's metal wrist band. The alien and Kate were just feet from their pursuers cloaked by an electronic wave that mirrored back everything in their immediate environment providing a shield of invisibility. All they had to do was keep moving just beyond the men's reach. But after a few moments of this evasive dance, Diana suddenly stopped the two of them and waited for the inevitable.

Practically simultaneously, Mic, Sammy, and Ken smacked right into the wave and were hurled to the ground in a tangled pile. Immediately, Diana pushed Kate behind her and dissolved the shield.

The men quickly untangled themselves and scrambled to their feet. All five – men, Kate, and alien – looked at each other. Then Kate felt the air begin to vibrate. No one moved. Diana's form started to glow rooting everyone to the ground like ancient oak trees.

Although Kate couldn't move, her mind raced faster than a freight train. Whatever was about to happen, she didn't want it to end with Diana going away.

Out of the growing warmth and brightness came a voice. "You know who I am, don't you, Mic."

Mic's body went cold. "Oh, my God!" he whispered, more terrified than he'd ever been in his life. His buddies looked at him in total shock. Finally, Sammy croaked "What the fuck, Mic! What's going on? Who the hell – *what* the hell is that?!"

"Tell them, Mic. Tell them what happened the other night when you were up on this mountain."

The terrified man lost it. His pupils turned to pin pricks and his body began to convulse. "Shut up!" he screamed. "Leave me alone! You don't know fuck about what's going on here! Just go back where you came from and leave us alone!" He ran frantically toward the light waving his fists above his head, but was tossed to the ground like an insignificant, weightless piece of forest discard.

"I know what you intend to do, Mic—"

"Somebody has to stop them!" interrupted Mic jumping to his feet. "The Peaks are sacred. Those bastards don't care anything about that. It's just money they want! It's always the money! Our People, our heritage mean nothing to them! It's gonna stop NOW!" Mic turned to Sammy and Ken. "Start it!" The three men charged over to their load of goods and hurriedly began splashing gasoline all over the dried forest floor.

A tendril of light shot out from the alien glow. It surrounded the men like a lasso, freezing them in their tracks. Diana's voice shook the air around them. "Look at what you'll do to this place that is so revered by your people!" In seconds, the forest filled with projected images as if on a giant movie screen. Mic, Ken, and Sam watched themselves starting the fire they had waited so long to ignite. They saw the flames lap and lick at the dry woods like water-starved dogs rapidly creating a maelstrom of destructive heat that raced from one tree to the next. Soon, the flames grew even more powerful and created a life beyond anything the men had planned. Air currents swarmed like locusts shifting the fire storm away from Snow Bowl and pushing it down the mountain toward Flagstaff.

In seconds, the three men saw their hometown viciously consumed – leaving no more than bones of buildings in the aftermath of their anger.

"Bullshit!" screamed Mic as the images of devastation disintegrated into the benign afternoon light. "You can't stop us with your pretend pictures. We have this all planned and nothing like that could ever happen!"

Out from behind his back Mic pulled a gun that had been tucked in his belt. He fired a stream of bullets into the glowing light, then turned to his buddies and yelled, "Start the bastard!"

The glow that had been Diana collapsed like a deflated balloon leaving her again in human form. On the ground behind her lay Kate – her face contorted into a deeply wrinkled scribble of disbelief. Blood seeped rapidly into the ground around her from the multiple bullet wounds torn into her body. "No!" yelled the alien rushing to Kate's side.

By then Ken and Sam had ignited the fire just down the path and around an outcropping of boulders. Mic looked at the two old women on the ground completely confused as to what had just happened. Who did he shoot?! Where was the alien?! Who was this other person? But there was no time to figure it out. Mic could hear the flames hungrily grabbing hold of the mountain. He swung viciously at the woman on her knees sending her sprawling. The bracelet on her wrist flashed in the sunlight. He tore it off her wrist as she struggled to

catch her breath, then took off running down the path. Diana struggled back to Kate's side and took the old woman's face in her hands. Their eyes locked for barely a second before Kate lost consciousness. The air around the two shivered in waves of heat that quickly morphed into a great ball of bluish white light that swallowed the two.

Watching all this, camouflaged among the pines just a short distance away, was the only mountain animal that hadn't run for its life down hidden trails that promised survival. Even though every cell in its body urged it to escape the young tendrils of smoke beginning to snake their way slowly along the forest floor, the Albino Mule deer stood rooted in the shadows, unable to look away from the pulsing bag of light as it spewed out heated smudges of color. Then, as quickly as it had come, the light disappeared leaving the two human figures lying on the ground.

Neither of them moved for what felt like forever, but the deer didn't know that. It only watched and waited in a bubble of *now* even as flames began maturing around them growing from tendrils into strong swirls of heat and destruction.

Then Kate inhaled a lungful of smoke that made her cough violently and jump to her feet like a frog trying to escape a pot of water coming to a boil. She looked around quickly grabbing at memories of having been shot and thinking that this was how she would end her life. But then there was Diana looking into her eyes and holding what felt like her soul before darkness filled her mind.

"Diana! Oh my God!" Kate looked at the ground from which she had just sprung and there was the alien stretched out limp and pale. Kate dropped to her side and quickly scooped up what felt like a lifeless body. "Dear God, Diana, *please!*" She choked. "You can't go like this!" The deer watched. The air swirled warmer around them.

Then, as if a reset button had been pressed, Diana opened her eyes. She felt Kate's tears on her face and the human's emotions course into her mind. "Kate, I am too weak in this body. You must get to my vehicle for help.

"I'm not leaving you here!"

"No, your city will be lost. My kind can help." A wave of weakness silenced Diana's voice forcing her to continue in mind talk. *Remember, Kate, ending this body only changes its energy form. My kind will know when that happens and feel me through you.*

No! Shot back Kate. You gave my life back with most of yours. I can't let that happen. I'll carry you. We'll find the ship together. And with that, Kate effortlessly lifted the alien to its feet surprising herself how easy it was. Tell me the way. But there was no response. Diana had lost consciousness.

With the fire growing steadily around them, there was no time to waste. Kate and the alien had to move now or escape would be impossible. But which way to go? At a loss, Kate shifted Diana to her back and took off down the trail the three fire starters had taken moments ago. *Please, Diana, please! You have*

to help me! She pushed the words into Diana's mind hoping to reach wherever she was. Silence.

Close behind the Mule deer followed.

Kate's body surged with strength – a muscle power she had never experienced in all the years she'd lived on this planet. She knew as long as her heart kept beating, she could carry this life on her back anywhere. But she needed guidance. Then, through the silence a whisper came. *Find the men. I will help when you do.* Kate felt a wave of relief. They were connected. That's all she needed.

Heat from the nearby flames grabbed at Kate's legs as she pushed herself faster along the trail with Diana held firmly on her back. From a short distance, the two looked like Quasimodo scrambling over rocks and forest undergrowth that challenged their every step. Then, as they rounded a sharp corner, Kate heard a faint jumble of words. The men. "Diana, we've found them; they're just ahead," she whispered.

Circle around and come up to them from the other side of the trail. Lower me to the ground just before we reach them, came the alien's thoughts.

Kate immediately veered off the trail and into the trees. She made her way out and around as quickly and quietly as possible hoping her best judgment would take them just enough ahead to come face to face with the men. As she drew closer, she could hear them arguing.

"What the fuck, Mic! Which way do we go now? The damn fire was supposed to take off toward Snow Bowl. You said if we started it here it couldn't go anywhere but up!"

"Shut up! Shut the fuck up!" Mic tore back. "Give me a second to think. I know this will work!" Ken and Sam looked from Mic to the fire spilling rapidly down the trail toward them.

"I sure as hell hope you're right!" Sam yelled.

"It's got to!" said Mic. "The trail where we started the fire is in a small valley and should create a shoot that pulls the flames right up the hill like a freight train. It'll turn; I know it will!"

"It won't, Mic," said the alien's calmly. "I showed you what would happen. It wasn't a lie." The men whipped around to see the two old ladies in front of them. "Holy shit!" rumbled Ken.

Diana stepped away from Kate. "Listen to me. You have very little time. You cannot outrun the flames. I can save you." The men couldn't believe what they were seeing or hearing. "Give me the arm band you took, Mic. Let me use it to save you."

Mic's hand went up to his shirt pocket. He felt the band snugged at the bottom.

"Give it to her for chrissake!" yelled Ken.

But instead Mic took out his gun that was tucked in the back of his pants and aimed it at the alien. "No! You tell me what to do with it."

"It won't work that way, Mic," said Diana.

The next few seconds were a blur as Ken tackled Mic at his knees sending both to the ground along with the gun that fired its last bullet into Sam's shoulder. The young man screamed in agony. Ken grabbed the band out of Mic's shirt and threw it at the alien. "Do it! For crissake, DO IT!" he screamed.

Diana snatched up the band, put it on her arm, and aimed it at the three men scattered on the ground. Immediately a focused beam of silver shot out. As it neared the men, a transparent bubble grew from its tip like a glass blower's creation encircling the three. "Stay inside the shield until the flames pass. If you leave its walls before the danger has gone, you will not be able to reenter. Do you understand?"

Cradling Sam in his arms, Ken wildly nodded his head. Mic said nothing while struggling to his feet. His eyes were filled with vitriol so black the alien could feel its destructive energy right through the shield. But there was no time to deal with that. A wave of weakness was about to take her down. Before her knees could buckle, Kate's arms hoisted her up and held her close. *I have you; tell me where to go*, thought Kate. Again...silence.

The fire's heat forced Kate to move them farther down the trail even though she knew instinctively it wasn't the right direction for them to be going. Then, just as Kate was about to veer off to left and into a gully, from behind a small scrub oak sprang the Mule deer. The small creature was so scared and helpless thought Kate. How many Albino Mule Deer might there be in this forest? My God, could it be that very same one? Was its escape crossing their path in this moment of happenstance or ...?!

Kate sent out the first thought that came into her mind. *Help us. Show me the way.* The animal stopped right in front of her – its eyes darted nervously from the approaching fire to the alien on Kate's back. This was no accident. *Hurry, little one, hurry! I can follow.* The deer gave the couple one more look then took off. And Kate, squeezing Diana's legs more tightly around her, wasted no time in following the animal.

All the while this animal-human-alien communication was taking place, the fire Ken and Sam had started minutes before had metamorphosed into a wild and untamable animal of its own, caring for nothing and no one except the forest food providing it greater and greater strength.

Mic and his buddies watched the three disappear into the smoky shadows of the pines. Ken still held Sammy in his arms as the fire grew taller around them. Would this bubble of *whatever* really protect them? None questioned this more than Mic. His anger toward the alien sledge hammered his mind. "It was probably that *thing* that caused the fire to change course!" he said to himself. And now he and his guys were right in its way sitting like idiots in some kind of transparent alien snot for all they knew just waiting to die. "Well, fuck that!" he shouted and turned to Ken and Sam. "This is a bunch of bullshit! We're sitting ducks just waiting to be cremated. That thing, whatever it is, has fucked up all our plans. I say we make a run for it!"

"Are you crazy!" shouted Ken. "Didn't you hear what she said? We can't outrun this fire. We'll die out there! And Sammy's in no condition to crawl let alone run. Jeez, Mic, get a grip! Look how close those flames are and we can't even feel the heat. I say we stay right here until it blows over like she said. Hell, for all we know, Flag fire service is already getting this thing under control."

Mic looked at the two men huddled at his feet. Weak and pathetic, he thought. They'd made up their minds to trust some war-of-the-worlds alien with their lives. Well, not him! "I'm out of here," he yelled. "You fuckers can fry, but not me. I know these peaks. They're my home. I'll find a way out and laugh myself silly when the fire changes direction and destroys Snow Bowl just like I said it would!" And with that, he punched through the shield and took off at a gallop. That was the last Ken and Sam ever saw of him.

Meanwhile, Kate's eyes wept from the swirling smoke that enveloped them like a dirty gray glove. But she never lost sight of the bounding little deer as it made its way through the fiery forest.

Even with Diana pressed firmly against her back, Kate ran almost effortlessly among the trees. Each stride only strengthened her vow to reach the alien ship no matter what. That is if the deer really knew where it was going.

The more she thought about it, the more this whole experience felt like a sci-fi novel where reality easily gave way to the suspension of disbelief. Would it have been like this if she had been younger? Had age been an unsuspected gift allowing her to participate in these events without sarcasm or dismissal? Who knew for sure? What *was* certain is that Kate was now in a moment more real and fulfilling than any she had ever experienced.

On they ran with the fire in pursuit like a dog gone mad with rabies. Every few minutes the deer would glance back just to make sure the human was keeping up. And even though she was, both Kate and the deer knew the fire would soon outpace them. Something had to be done NOW!

What would Diana do? Thought Kate. *She would...she would protect us; that's what she would do! Just like—!* "Stop!" she yelled, skidding to a halt just in time to prevent a tumble over the deer. She lowered Diana carefully to the ground and slipped the silver bracelet from the alien's arm onto her own. This was their only way out or through this maelstrom. If only she could make it work!

Kate looked at the etchings on the bracelet. She took Diana's hand in hers then did what seemed the most natural and proper thing to do. She closed her eyes and opened her mind letting it reach into that universal place of pure and complete thought Diana had shared with her. Once there, she visualized the three of them safe under a shield of protection knowing the fire would soon pass over leaving them unharmed and ready to move on.

The bracelet grew warm in her palm as the flames began drinking in the last of their precious oxygen. Kate felt a slight squeeze from Diana's hand. She

returned the touch, closed her eyes, and gently rubbed the now glowing etchings on the bracelet.

Boundaries had rearranged themselves when she opened her eyes. The air was cool around them, but the rest of their world was engulfed in a raging fire trying to destroy the vulnerable bodies huddled within it. No one moved.

Finally, like a furious, out-of-control bully, the flames gave up the struggle to destroy what couldn't be reached and moved on looking for easier victims.

Kate felt Diana looking at her; the alien's energy was still weak, but steady. *Thank you*, Kate thought quietly. *It was you—*

"We haven't much time before your city is destroyed," spoke the alien. "My ship is close; I moved it before we began today. The little one knows." Their connection was strong. The deer pushed its head against the alien's side, ready to do whatever it could to preserve their bond.

Diana moved slowly to her knees and, with Kate's help, onto her feet. Kate slipped the silver bracelet she had been wearing and slipped it on Diana's wrist. "We're ready," Kate said, putting a supportive arm around Diana's waist.

The Mule deer leaped through the translucent shield and took off through the smoldering ashes of burnt forest rubble. Kate and the alien followed. As they rounded a bend, there on the ground curled in the last effort to protect itself from certain death was the charred body of Mic. Just for a moment, the deer, alien, and human stopped in their tracks questioning the fate of the other two men so bound and determined to assist this helpless man destroy something in the name of misguided justice. But swirling winds of ash and cinders soon prompted them to move on as the fire raced down the hill before them.

Flagstaff, Sedona, and Prescott rushed every available fire fighter to what was now being called the Humphreys/Agassi fire. It had taken on a destructive life of its own far more quickly than any of the professionals had anticipated, and it was advancing toward the developed outskirts of Flagstaff faster than chemical and water dumps could rein it in. Thermal gusts had turned into angry, fiery tornadoes that were snaking back and forth along the dry mountain sides consuming everything in their paths. It was a nightmare happening in broad daylight leaving this little jewel of a town, this first of its kind 'Night Sky City' fearing for survival.

Yet through the growing panic, unknown to any of the townspeople below, Kate and the alien kept following the Mule deer through what felt like miles of the smoking, hot embers of forest remains. *How close?* Thought Kate. *We've got to be close.*

Then, as the deer rounded a pile of ancient boulders that looked like massive, giant mushrooms pushed through the smoldering black earth, there it was, a huge, silver disk just ahead – waiting for them. Kate was beyond thrilled. She released Diana, making sure the alien was steady on her feet, and then collapsed to her knees in front of the Mule deer. She reached out and gently

scratched the animal's big, quivering ears. "Thank you," she whispered. The animal looked from her to the alien. It was clear who deserved thanks.

Kate rose and stood before Diana. She took the alien's warm face in her hands, letting her fingers gently graze the many soot-filled lines around Diana's eyes and mouth. The two came from different worlds in universes light years apart and yet here they were in a pocket of time and space together. Kate kissed the alien.

Warmth, soft, good, electric, joined, new, right were just a few of the words adequately describing that kiss, and then it was over. Alien and human separated. Lips and minds slowly pulled apart like a warm piece of gently stretched caramel becoming thinner and thinner until the last atoms in the middle reluctantly let go.

Immediately, the air around the silver disk began vibrating, surrounding itself with mirage-like ripples. The Mule deer scampered behind Kate and Diana unsure of what the thing might do next, but then hesitantly followed them as they walked toward the ship. As they got closer, a slit in the silver skin appeared. All waited until it grew wide enough to enter. Only the alien and human disappeared inside. The deer stayed out sensing safety in the ship's shadow.

Inside the ship, the alien immediately initiated contact. Kate wanted to participate, but felt completely shut out as if she were a child exiled from adult conversation.

Seconds passed. Time was so precious. Kate couldn't wait any longer. She put her hands on the wall beside Diana and was immediately engulfed in a cascade of noise that must have been communication, but felt more like an electronic tsunami so strong it almost knocked her off her feet. But she held her ground. She needed help and would do anything to get it. But how? After all, who was she in this alien civilization's scheme of things? She was no one of influence, just a tiny spark of life on a planet filled with countless wars and injustice. She felt such frustration.

But then her mind stopped its helpless ruminating and jumped into action. *Listen to me!* She mentally yelled. *It happened; an alien landed; we met. If it wasn't what you wanted, you should have stopped the visit then, but you didn't. And now, we've made an investment in each other. Isn't that what the greater whole is about – each being part of each other, being a part of it all? And if that's true and you're really here to maintain balance and not to assume power over our planet as so many humans are trying to do, then help me ... help me save a tiny part of my planet's beauty!*

Kate's mind went still. All was quiet, including the rush of alien communication that had been so overwhelming moments earlier.

Diana turned away from the wall. She looked at Kate with what might be described as alien amazement – if there is such a thing. "What?!" said Kate. "I thought how I felt. I had to do something!"

"You did," said the alien, looking up to the ship's ceiling. Kate's eye's followed and saw the dome turn from solid to transparent, exposing a swirling smoke and fire-filled sky. The few clouds still visible rapidly began growing into ominous gray-black cumulous mountains of energy, as if someone had pressed the fast-forward button on a storm watch video. Kate was mesmerized.

In seconds, huge veins of lightning exploded from within the clouds, followed by claps of thunder so loud and heavy you'd think the sky would collapse under their weight. And then the rain came. It fell in thick, drenching blankets that smothered the fire within minutes. Seconds afterward, Kate watched the dark clouds rapidly disintegrate until nothing was left but a few fragments of gray. How the aliens made it happen didn't matter to Kate; the only thing that did was getting out of that ship to make sure her city was safe.

When Kate's feet touched the ground, it was still warm but soggy and benign now that the flames were gone. She quickly scanned the mountain side. The ponderosa, oak, and juniper trees had taken a horrible beating, but still showed signs of life. The forest floor lay black and bare, purged of all the dried debris built up over the years. But what of the animals, especially the little Mule deer that had been her lifeline back to the ship? Kate prayed that it and so many others had survived.

As if in answer to that thought, the precious little animal scampered out from under the ship's shadow. Its back was streaked with dirt and soot, and its large brown eyes were filled with uncertainty. It headed toward Kate, and then saw the alien step down from the ship. Their connection was indelible. Diana walked over and knelt before the animal. What communication they shared was closed to Kate, but there was no question how joined they were. Watching them made Kate yearn for Mimi. That friendship was as indelible to Kate as the alien's was with the deer – one she understood and respected far more deeply than many she had experienced with humans over the years.

Only a moment passed before Diana and the deer looked up to see their friend watching them. Tears cut narrow rivers through the dirt on her cheeks, and she quickly muffled a sob as she gave them an apologetic shrug for intruding within their personal space.

Three weeks had passed since the Humphreys/Agassi fire and still opinions flew hard and heavy and questions remained unanswered as to what or who had started the blaze, how vicious and uncontrolled it had become so quickly, and how close the city had come to destruction. But the biggest discussions centered around what brought on the lifesaving thunderstorm. Meteorologists and climatologists had a field day. Even conspiracy addicts jumped in with their terrorist hypotheses and other-world theories. And all the while, Kate Sullivan sat at home with Mimi knowing the truth but telling no one.

That day when the aliens chose to intervene and end the fire, it was done with the proviso that Diana leave immediately. The visit had been

compromised in ways never anticipated. Those in charge determined her remaining would provoke damaging consequences that might undermine future visits. And so it ended right there among the rain-soaked ashes. The alien craft ascended; its shape dissolved into the background of burnt forest and late afternoon sky like a chameleon escaping into a bigger, more familiar place.

EPILOGUE

Gifts come in all shapes and sizes. For Kate, it was an alien visit that awakened her consciousness to the knowledge that the universe is a living presence of which she and all are a part. That understanding brought her great joy and support as the years went by. Her good health prevailed; aging seemed to have passed her by or, at least, made its mark far more slowly than with others in her life. Her little Mimi stayed by her side for an additional 15 years. Their good-bye was peaceful and loving yet, in truth, it tore Kate's heart apart. The same was true when she no longer caught regular glimpses of the little Albino Mule deer that for eight years after their soul-sharing experience would silently appear in familiar places along the mountain trails that Kate religiously hiked throughout the seasons.

Then, some twenty-three years after the fire, Kate knew it was time to go back to the place where she had last seen Diana. It was a trip she had wanted to make many times, but circumstances had intervened in unexpected ways, always keeping her on the periphery of that journey...until now.

The hike challenged the old woman, but her steps never faltered even though remnants of fire damaged earth were almost completely gone, leaving a far different forest trail than the one she had remembered running along that frightful day.

As she reached the site, her mind slipped back into memory. All she had experienced with the alien began arranging itself into crisp, bright images heavy with substance. They had shared so much in so little time. It was a gift unlike anything Kate ever imagined she would be given in this lifetime. It had lifted her being from its densest physical parts to its highest spiritual consciousness. It had changed her in such remarkable ways, yet often left her feeling displaced.

She never shared what had happened to her with any of the few friends she had. And now, even if she wanted to tell them, she couldn't for infirmities of old age had snatched them away while her good health prevailed.

But none of that mattered now, for Kate was standing on the mountainside where an alien miracle had taken place, and she had been a part of it all, and that was enough.

Then a warm vibration filled the air. Kate closed her eyes and felt its peace wash over her. Finally, it was time to go.

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