



ANDROMEDA BOND IN TROUBLE DEEP

The stunning sequel to Brainjack

BRIAN FALKNER

Andromeda Bond

In

Trouble Deep

For Annie
My hero, always

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BOOK ONE

LAND

SPACE ELEVATOR

COUNTERWEIGHT

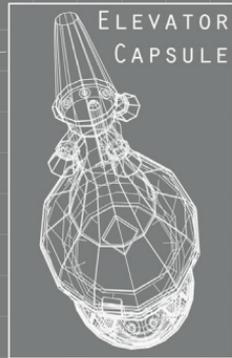


CARBON NANOTUBE CABLE
(ROTATES WITH EARTH)

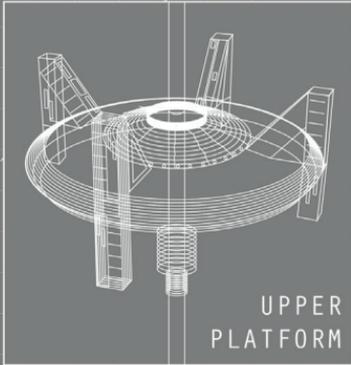
CENTRE OF MASS

UPPER PLATFORM

GEOSTATIONARY ORBIT ALTITUDE



ELEVATOR CAPSULE



UPPER PLATFORM

SPACE PORT
(AT EQUATOR)

SOUTH POLE



PROLOGUE

Hardly anybody in Colorado Springs noticed the blackout, or what happened after the lights went out. It occurred at precisely 2:30 AM, so most people were sound asleep and completely oblivious to anything that occurred outside their bedroom windows.

It wasn't just the lights that went out. The blackout affected power, internet, phones, radios, in fact pretty much anything electronic. For a period of time the city of Colorado Springs, at the foot of the great Rocky Mountains, was thrust into the digital dark ages.

During that time remarkable events occurred. Life-changing, world-shaking events. But despite being so remarkable, they went totally un-remarked upon. There was no tweeting, whatsapping, discording, posting, instagramming, snapchatting, tiktoking or even good old-fashioned text messaging. Which was, of course, the whole point.

Not everyone was asleep when it happened. Many people worked during the night. Hospital staff, airport workers, security guards, taxi drivers, and gas station attendants to name just a few. These people certainly noticed the blackout, but nobody attached any special significance to it.

Bill Heslop, for example, a security guard at an industrial estate, was on duty at the time. He had finished his hourly rounds with time to spare so had

parked on a side-road and just dozed off into a rather amusing dream in which he won a large amount of money on the lottery when all the lights around him suddenly sputtered and went out. It jolted him awake, quite disappointed to find out that it had only been a dream.

Concerned about the blackout, he decided to do another round of the estate, but his car would not start. The vehicle's security system had locked him out. He was trying to fix it by fiddling at random with all the buttons on the dashboard and so didn't notice when the dark shape flew, low and silent, directly above his head.

Sixteen-year-old Clementine Jasper, of Elk Path, was also awake. Clementine, an olive-skinned girl with a rather whimsical fashion sense, was lying in bed texting her boyfriend, who was not replying as they had broken up the previous week. Her curtains were open, and she would probably have seen something quite interesting if only her eyes hadn't been glued to her phone. Her last five texts had not gone through and she was convinced her ex had finally blocked her.

The radar scanners at the nearby army base of Fort Carson would definitely have detected it but they too were all offline. Major Elias Cornfield, the acting commandant of the base, was quite convinced that the blackout was the forerunner of an attack by the United Koreans; the Russians; or possibly even the Canadians

(who had been acting the part of Mr Nice Guy for far too long in his opinion). He would have notified everybody all the way up to the White House if only he could have, but all his possible lines of communication were out of action.

So nobody heard the silenced rotors of the sleek, black helicopter or watched it descend slowly into the small and unremarkable cul-de-sac. Nobody saw the tall man who emerged, walking to the front door of the small and unremarkable house.

If they had, they would have seen the woman who stepped out and hugged the man, sadly, desperately. She was in her late twenties, although looked much older. She was thin, almost painfully so, and moved carefully as if movements caused her pain. She must have been ill because she wore a nasal cannula, a thin oxygen tube that ran from her nose down to a metal canister strapped to her side.

“Is it true?” the woman asked.

She was staring at the helicopter as if hoping someone else would emerge.

“I’m so sorry,” the tall man hugged her again, allowing her to sob on his shoulder for a moment, before pulling back and saying, “We must hurry.”

“Is there any choice? Any other option?” the woman asked, wiping at her eyes.

He shook his head. “This is the only way.” There was a long awkward pause then he asked, “Is Eve ready?”

The woman nodded. She turned to go back inside the house, but the man stopped her with a feather light touch on her arm and gestured behind him where the rotors of the black helicopter were slowly, silently turning.

“I’ll do it. You get on board.”

She hesitated for only a moment then began to walk towards the waiting aircraft, not looking back.

It was at that moment that the disaster occurred, although in a very long-delayed reaction, it would take many years before the effects would be felt. Eight-year-old Abigail (Abi) Delgado woke up.

Abi lived in the house opposite. She was tall for her age, with long, dark hair that had never been cut in her life. She usually wore it in pigtails, but her mom had brushed it out before bed so now it fell like a long soft curtain around her shoulders.

This night, for no reason at all, she got out of bed and padded across to her window, peering through a gap in the blinds. She saw the black helicopter sitting in the middle of their road and watched for a moment as the woman walked towards it.

She saw a man emerge from the house a moment later with a child, a girl, about three years old and barely awake. He carried her in one arm, holding a large suitcase in his other hand. Her head was on his shoulder, one arm curled around his neck, her eyes blinking with sleep.

It was clear from the embrace that the little girl had deep affection for the tall man. From the dampness of his eyes, and the warmth of his slight smile, the feeling was mutual.

The man returned to the house twice more, each time carrying suitcases. After the last trip, the black door of the black helicopter slid smoothly closed and the black rotors began to pick up speed.

Abi watched it leave incuriously, just a black dot against the black sky, then went back to bed. When she woke the next morning, she would be quite convinced that it was just a slightly odd dream. However, nine years later she would bring the memory to mind with timing that that was quite spectacularly awful.

The helicopter headed to the east, but as soon as it was high enough to be out of sight of any watchers on the ground it wheeled back around to the west.

The flight did not take long. The helicopter was as fast as it was stealthy. It flew high and swiftly over the snow-covered ridges of the Rocky Mountains. On the western side of the Rockies it avoided as many towns as it could. It skirted around the city of Nuevo Vegas where lights shone brightly, strangely so. Streetlights blazed, casinos lit up like Christmas trees and electronic billboards flared much more brightly than usual, completely ruining the night vision of the many desperate gamblers and dogged merrymakers still roaming the streets at that early hour.

When the helicopter finally landed it was on a high, remote and deserted road. It dropped silently down close to a large black SUV in the parking lot of a scenic overlook with a breath-taking view of a large city spread out like a glowing tapestry below.

The man carried the girl, now sound asleep, from the helicopter and buckled her into a child safety seat in the back of the car. He hesitated, then kissed her softly on the forehead before closing the door. He ferried the suitcases to the rear of the vehicle then handed the keys to the woman.

She seemed unsteady and he offered her his arm, although she did not take it. She breathed in deeply through her nose, closing her eyes and making an adjustment to the oxygen tube at her belt.

“Are you sure this is the only way?” she asked.

“He was sure,” the man said. “He planned for this a long time ago.”

“But everything seems fine,” she protested.

The man bowed his head. After a moment he took her into his arms and hugged her for the third time that night. “A great storm is coming,” he said.

“The Disruptor,” she said softly.

He nodded. “This is the only way to keep you safe. To keep her safe.”

“When will I see you again?”

The man said nothing. He let go, stepped back, and looked at her without expression until she lowered her eyes.

He moved to the window of the vehicle and stared through the dark glass at the sleeping girl. Tears formed silently in the corners of his eyes and began to run down his cheeks. He did not wipe them away.

“Goodbye, Eve.” He raised his hand to his lips and blew her a kiss. “She’ll need a new name.”

“Yes, I was thinking about – ”

“Better that I don’t know,” he said, never taking his eyes off the girl.

ANDROMEDA AND THE SPIDER MAN

The wind is savage.

I shape my body to it, feeling its power, embracing its brutality, turning something raw and feral into a rapturous, aerial ballet. The slightest movement of a hand is enough to send me spinning. An arch of my back and subtle angling of my limbs and I loop the loop. I am a bird soaring freely in a summer sky. I am a bird caged by the hardened glass walls of the tunnel.

I zoom almost to the upper vents before swooping down in a spiralling dive, flipping upright just before the face-plate of my helmet smashes into the lower grille, then sinking to land softly on my feet, hands by my sides, my body as straight as a shaft of light.

A small group of foreign tourists in the viewing lounge applauds enthusiastically. I can see it but not hear it through the thick glass and the rushing of the air. I give them a wave and a small bow.

“Finished being a show off,” Sebastián asks, his voice a tinny squawk in the earpieces of my helmet.

“Finished being a grumpasaurus?” I ask in return.

“Finals are in two weeks,” Sebastián says. “Maybe I’ll get myself a dancer who takes the whole thing more seriously.”

“You won’t,” I say mildly, springing back into the air and performing an inverted pirouette.

“Because?”

“Because nobody can fly like I can.”

Sebastián has no real answer to that.

“It’s not flying it’s falling,” he says.

Sebastián is my coach, and a full-time instructor at the indoor skydiving centre. A tall Chilean, in his early twenties, with intense blue eyes and a ragged mop of hair, his own passion is wingsuit gliding. That, he always says, is real flying, and I always refrain from pointing out that it is still falling, just a little more slowly.

“Nobody can fall like I can,” I say.

“You could fall even better if you took it more seriously.”

“I could put on a clown nose and tell knock knock jokes and still fall better than anyone else you know,” I say.

He laughs.

“What first?” I ask.

“Base poses,” Sebastián says. “Then the spiderdance.”

“Do we have to do the bases?” I pout.

“Do you want to get to the Worlds?”

I sigh, leap into the air, and run quickly through the basic bodyflight poses, starting with the dragonfly variations, and ending with the more difficult of the ninja styles.

“Mostly good,” Sebastián’s voice comes in my earpiece as I finish. “Legs were not steady in the scorpion though, give me that one again.”

I twist my body back into the scorpion position, face down, arms out, legs curled backwards over my head like the sting of a scorpion.

“Better,” Sebastián says. “Work on it. You don’t want to give away silly points in the finals. Okay, Spiderdance, start right on the drums this time. If you miss that first beat it throws out the whole routine.”

I coast to the middle of the tube and invert, head down, held stationary in mid-air by the rushing air. My knees are wide, the soles of my feet pressed together, my hands clutching an imaginary strand of web, the classic ‘hanging Spiderman’ pose.

The music begins, not the cheesy theme from the old TV show, but the pumping Aerosmith version from the first movie. I am motionless during the opening sirens and the heavy guitar lick until the first drumbeats. In an instant I am moving, flicking my wrists as if shooting out webs, swinging on those imaginary strands to the walls. I know it is the wind moving me, but I can almost see those strands of web. Just like Spiderman I jump, vault, roll, crawl and pounce, all perfectly in time with the pounding music.

I finish with a drop into the classic Spiderman crouch, one leg bent, the other extended, one hand lightly touching the ground, my other arm stretched out behind me.

The tourists are on their feet now, applauding wildly but inaudibly.

“She likes you today,” Sebastián says. She is the wind. This is Sebastián’s way. When I give a particularly good performance he gives credit to the wind, not to me.

“Still a lot to work on,” Sebastián continues. “Run through it one more time, then come out and we’ll go through the videos.”

I, Andromeda Bond, Skydancer, Dragon Princess, terror of the Shaven Warlords, wait for the school bus at the stop outside the Smithfield Shopping Centre.

My heart is still popping from the adrenaline rush of the tunnel. My feet are tapping to the Aerosmith song still stuck in my head.

The same group of tourists that applauded so enthusiastically in the viewing lounge approach along the footpath. A father, mother, two kids and grandma. They seem disappointed that the shops are not open yet. This is Queensland. Shops don’t open till ten. I wonder why they are up so early. Perhaps they have just arrived in the country and are operating in a different time zone.

They are all wearing the same shoes, even Grandma, trailing slightly behind. The latest Nike smart-shoes, top of the range.

I don’t own smart-shoes. I don’t own Nikes. I once had a tattered pair of Reeboks that mum bought at an op shop. I adored them and wore them long after they

fell apart. Now I wear K-Mart sneakers. That is all we can afford.

I smile up at the tourists as they pass and one, a boy of about ten, looks at me without recognition then quickly looks away. The rest do not even glance in my direction. Why would they? The lithe, sleek, gravity-defying creature from the wind tunnel is gone, and in her place is just a gangly, slightly geeky twelve-year-old girl with braces and sandy-coloured hair in a short ponytail.

Nothing to see here. Move along.

My feet haven't stopped tapping though, and my heart is still popping. At that moment my stomach gives a little gurgle, reminding me that in all the rush to get to training I forgot to have breakfast.

I pop and tap and gurgle, in the distance I think I hear the bus and at that moment I notice the man with the spiderweb tattoo.

He is skulking in an alleyway behind me and I wouldn't have seen him at all if not for the shiny chrome-plated fender of a classic American convertible that is illegally parked just before the bus stop. A dinosaur of a car from the 1950s or '60s, it looks twice as long as most modern cars, protruding out of its parking space over the thick yellow line that marks the bus zone. It is red, with huge fins at the rear and a silver stripe shooting like an arrow down its side. The

large front fender is clean and polished and makes an excellent mirror.

I watch the reflection of the man watching me. My toes stop their tapping. My stomach stops its gurgling. My heart continues popping, but nervously now. The spiderweb tattoo covers most of his face. One strand stretches an inky line down to a tattoo of a spider, large and black with a jagged yellow stripe on its back, crawling on his neck.

I look nervously up the road in the direction the bus will come. I can hear its rumble but I cannot see it. It is not the sound of an actual engine, the bus is electric and silent, but it is the law that all school buses have to broadcast noise – for safety reasons. I think that is kind of quaint and a bit silly. If they have to make a noise, couldn't it be something more interesting, like music, or babies laughing, or that 'wakka wakka' sound from the old PacMan game? Then I worry why I am worrying about this when I have more worrying things to worry about.

The bus appears around the corner. It signals and slows. I stand, losing sight of the man behind me in the polished fender, but feeling confident that he will do nothing in front of the security guard.

I pick up my schoolbag, the old-fashioned, over your shoulder kind, and step onto the bus, drawing a sigh of relief when the door closes behind me.

I nod to the guard, whose eyes flick to me without expression. He is tall and strong with a taser on one hip. His hair is buzz-cut. He looks ex-military. I don't usually take much notice of the guards, but today I do. He occupies the front seat but doesn't drive. The bus does that. His name is Bradley according to his name badge. He is new.

I look down the long aisle of the bus and my heart sinks. The bus is almost full. The only spare seat is right at the back. The last place I want to sit.

I look in despair at the guard who stares indifferently at me and points to the 'No Standing' sign.

I sigh and take a step towards the dragon's den; the heart of darkness; the lair of the red witch.

The front seats are filled with juniors. Some of them look at me, some of them even smile, being too young to understand the complexities of middle school society.

I reach the year sevens, who all look away as I approach, finding interesting things outside the window or under their fingernails to occupy their attention.

From the long back seat, the red witch herself, Michaela Langstrom, is watching. Michaela is a pretty, confident, charming redhead with vibrant, emerald eyes – and no glasses or braces – who is without question the most popular girl in year seven and who

collects friends like other people collect stamps or Star Wars Lego sets. Her two current best friends, Madison and Rhapsody, sit with her. All three have their schoolbags on the seats next to them, saving the seats for other cool kids. Certainly not for geeky girls with braces.

“Danger, danger, Nerd approaching,” Michaela says in a robotic voice, loud enough for the whole bus to hear. Her friends giggle behind their hands. I wonder if Michaela gets the irony of paraphrasing an old science fiction show to call someone a nerd. I doubt it.

Michaela is not a nice person. She is not even close to being a nice person. I doubt she shares more than ten percent of her DNA with a nice person. A nice person would not play nasty pranks on people, video it, and put the video on her socials, but that is Michaela’s favourite pastime.

Her favourite person to prank is me. Once she somehow got the combination to my locker and put a glitter bomb inside. I spent the rest of that day sparkling like a Christmas tree. It took a week to get it all out of my hair. That video went viral.

Another time, in the school cafeteria, on a day when the queues were especially long, Michaela sniffed some pepper up her nose which made her sneeze, all over my lunch tray. I sighed, scraped my tray into the scraps bin and went to the back of the queue.

I would like to think that such mean tricks would show everyone what a cruel and horrible person Michaela is but it doesn't work that way. The videos somehow make Michaela seem cool and daring while making me a laughing stock and even less popular than I was before. Which is slightly less popular than a slug in a salad.

With no choice but to sit right in front of my mortal enemy, I steel myself and march up the aisle to the spare seat, next to a chubby boy named Elvis who smells and is almost as unpopular as me. He stares out of the window as I sit down. Even he doesn't want to debase himself by acknowledging my existence.

"Don't be fooled by her appearance," Michaela says behind me. "She may appear to be socially retarded and weird, but in reality... she is so much worse than that."

My fingers tighten on the straps of my schoolbag in my lap, but I ignore her.

Next it is Rhapsody's turn, a one-two punch with Madison. "That's a nice wig, Andromeda, what's it made of?"

"Her mum's chest hair," Madison says.

I fume. It is one thing to insult me, it is another to insult my mother, even if they don't know how sick she is. Despite my best intentions, despite knowing what the result will be, I turn.

Nobody thinks you're funny," I say.

“You’re right,” Michaela agrees. “But my fifteen thousand followers think you are!”

I am about to retort but a glance at the other girls reveals that both Rhapsody and Madison are filming me.

I turn and slump back down in my seat, wishing I had controlled my temper. This is only going to make matters worse.

Already bored with me, Michaela starts chattering with her friends about why Frannie has not given a rose to Thomas on Real Bachelorettes of New York; the new track that Milkwagon has just dropped on Spotify; and whether or not our handsome new InfoTech teacher has a girlfriend.

By the time we get to school I have completely forgotten the man with the spiderweb tattoo.

School is worse than usual. Michaela does the sneezing trick again, not once, not twice, but three times, in the cafeteria at lunchtime, while her friends stand by and film it. The third time I lose my patience and throw the tray of spag bol at her. It goes all over Michaela’s hair and her face and down her uniform and earns me a detention after school, while all Michaela gets is a lot of fuss, and ‘oh dear’ and ‘don’t worry’, while the school nurse finds her a new uniform from the stores and takes her soiled clothes to the school laundry.

There will be phone calls home to Mum tonight.

I'll spend detention doing my maths homework so it won't be a total waste, but it means I will miss Judo practice so I text my sensei to apologise, hiding my ancient Nokia dumbphone under the desk because I don't want anyone to see it. My phone makes and receives calls and texts, but that is it. No internet, no Instagram, no nothing.

The worst thing about having no socials is that I don't get to see all the nasty stuff that Michaela and her friends post about me. Or maybe that's the best thing.

Because of the detention I have to catch the public bus home at 4:30. I take a seat near the back and duck down behind the seat when I see Michaela get on, wearing her netball uniform, pulling her wheelie schoolbag behind her.

I cower and fume and think of all the nasty things I would like to do to Michaela, most of which would probably get me expelled or arrested.

To be really honest I don't care about that. Expulsion would mean a new school, and a new school would mean a chance to start again, without all the baggage. But expulsion (or arrest) would also draw attention, and one thing Mum has pressed onto me over and over again, ever since I was old enough to understand, was not to do anything to attract attention.

Whenever I asked why, I was given the universal Mum answer. 'Because'.

But today I don't want to put up with it any longer. Michaela is a bully. I want to take a stand. I want to be true to myself. I want to rage against injustice. To light the fires of freedom and sing a song of angry men or whatever.

Or maybe it's just low blood sugar levels. I haven't eaten yet today.

Michaela stands as the bus slows. I duck down below the seat-back again until the bus comes to a halt then exit via the rear door.

The streets here are wide and bright and adorned with trees, shrubs and colourful flowerbeds. This is an affluent suburb. Arty shops and trendy cafes are surrounded by luxury apartment buildings and multi-million-dollar houses with infinity pools and beach views.

I have no plan. Should I confront Michaela, now that her friends are not around to video it? What good could that possibly do?

Perhaps I could put dog crap in her letterbox. If I can find any. This is one of those suburbs where the owners pick up their doggie doos in little plastic bags and put them in special poo-bins. (In my neighbourhood they are more likely to put them in a paper bag and set it on fire on your doorstep.)

I almost give up at this point, but something won't let me, so I follow Michaela up the road away from the bus stop. She is engrossed in something on her phone and doesn't look behind her.

We turn from the main road into a quiet side street. The dignified atmosphere of the mature, elegant houses and mature, leafy trees is only slightly spoiled by the line of green and blue garbage bins lined up down the curb. It is bin day, obviously. The bins, of course, look sparkling clean.

I stay back, slipping from tree to tree. Whatever excuse I might have come up with for being on the main road will not work in this street. I don't belong here.

If not for the man with the spiderweb tattoo I might have thought nothing of the dusty panel van that slows to a crawl a few metres behind Michaela. It could just be a delivery driver searching for an address, a tradesman looking for a park. But the spider man has put my senses on high alert.

If those senses were whispering to me when the van slowed, they start screaming when the van speeds up briefly then pulls to the curb twenty metres in front of Michaela.

Michaela doesn't notice, her head is down, eyes still glued to her phone, one hand on the handle of her schoolbag which trundles along smoothly behind.

I begin to speed up, to narrow the gap between me and Michaela. I am too slow, it is too far. As Michaela draws up alongside the van, the side door slides open and a man in greasy, grey overalls leaps out. I am almost expecting the spiderweb man, but this man looks nothing like him. He is in his twenties, thin, long-haired, eyes deep-set, a scraggly beard mostly covered by a medical face-mask. He has not seen me yet. His focus is on Michaela.

She instinctively alters her path to avoid him, only now taking her eyes from her phone to look up at him. He grabs at her. Her arm jerks up to ward off his clutching hands. The phone flies out of her grasp, hitting the side of the van then landing in the road with a crunch.

He has her now, one hand over her mouth, muffling her screams, the other twisting her arm up around her back, immobilising her as he drags her backwards into the open side door of the van.

“Hey!” I shout, dropping my schoolbag and sprinting forward. “Hey!”

I do not run towards the man intending to be a hero. I am not a hero. I simply expect him to shy off when he knows that he has been seen. I expect him to leave Michaela alone and jump back in his van, disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

Yeah. Nah.

Doesn't happen like that.

The man looks around, loosening his grip on Michaela who manages to pull free, collapsing onto the grassy verge, scrabbling back away on her hands and feet. He looks from her to me. From prime fillet to chuck steak.

He goes for the chuck steak. Maybe he has poor taste, or maybe I'm just closer. He takes two quick steps then reaches out for me.

I spin sideways so that his hands clutch only empty air and stick out a foot, tripping him. He staggers forward, arms flailing, and face-plants into one of the garbage bins, knocking it over, spilling the contents out over the footpath.

He is back on his feet almost instantly, his surgical mask gone.

Fear is forgotten. I don't know why. Adrenaline perhaps. Years of Judo training that focuses my mind. Or maybe there just isn't time to be afraid.

I settle into a Kenka-Yotsu stance, and wait, projecting confidence. This is important. My opponent should wonder why I am not afraid of him.

The man growls, a savage sound. He starts to move towards me. I try for the foot trip again but he is expecting it and grabs me by the upper arms as I try to spin, pulling me towards him. I resist as strongly as I can then switch direction suddenly towards him. Even as he is reacting to the abrupt shift in his balance, I

sweep his front leg with my foot. He goes down hard on his back, letting go of me as he tries to save himself.

He is slower getting back to his feet this time and I hope that he will give up now, but I seem to have infuriated him. He is going to try again, I can sense it.

I back away. I have a plan but I need some space. Some distance between us. He runs at me. Good. I need momentum. I want to use it against him.

I am still backing away when he reaches me and this time I roll onto my back, pulling him on top of me, my leg perfectly straight, my foot in his belly. He lets out an oomph as all the air is expelled from his lungs. In training they call this a tomoe-nage, or stomach throw. I am still rolling, allowing his weight to carry him forward as I toss him through the air.

He lands face first in a pile of rancid garbage that has spilled from the bin. He gets up dripping, a slice of cucumber stuck to his cheek.

I step towards him and say, "You have maggots in your beard."

It's not actually true but it seems to freak him out. He backs away, wiping at his beard, then staggers to the van which finally takes off with a screech of tyres and a cloud of smoke from its exhaust.

I am shaking with adrenaline, and something else, I don't know what. Victory maybe.

I turn to see Michaela still sitting, wide-eyed, stunned, on the sidewalk, she has scrambled back as far

as one of the trees and is sitting with her back against it.

“Are you girls alright?” a voice asks from the other side of the road.

I look up to see an elderly lady peering out of a second story window.

“We’re okay, thanks,” I call back, then vomit into the gutter. Not much comes out. My stomach was pretty much empty. I wait, and retch another couple of times, until things start to settle down. I look up to see the lady looking shocked. I guess this isn’t the sort of neighbourhood where people vomit in gutters.

“We’re fine,” I call out again, and wave cheerfully up at her.

I think we’re fine. I’m still shaking but I don’t think I’m hurt.

“Police,” Michaela calls.

“Already on their way,” the lady says, holding up her phone as evidence. She stays in the window, watching. Nosey parker.

I go to retrieve my schoolbag and pick up Michaela’s on the way back. I sit on the grass next to Michaela. There is a long, deep silence between us. Not meaningful, but neither meaningless. I have no words that seem suitable and Michaela seems too shocked to speak.

After a while she finds her voice. “Thank you, um, Andy, Andromeda.”

“You’re welcome.” Dumb thing to say. Just can’t think of anything else. Should have had some kind of an action hero wisecrack tucked away just for such an occasion.

“I mean really,” she says. “Sincerely. I don’t know what would have happened if you hadn’t been here. That was pretty cool, that kung fu stuff.”

“Judo, actually,” I say. This seems important for some reason.

“I didn’t know you knew Judo.”

“I go three days a week.”

“Ever use it before?”

“Outside of the dojo? No.”

“I am lucky you were here,” she says and buries her face in her hands for a moment. When she lifts her head again, she asks, “So why were you here?”

“Missed my stop.”

She sees through that in an instant.

“Your stop is after mine. You were following me. Why? Were you going to follow me home and beat me up with your karate?”

“Judo. And no. But I was seriously considering putting a dog turd in your letterbox.”

Michaela laughs, prettily. She must be feeling better. “I probably deserve that,” she says.

“I’ll wait with you,” I say. “In case he comes back.”

“He won’t, but thank you again,” Michaela says in a small voice. “I don’t know what to say. I’ve always been such a skunk to you and you’ve just saved my life.”

“Do me one favour. Leave me out of it. I was never here, okay?”

“You sure? You were a hero. It’d be all over twitter. If he hadn’t knocked the phone out of my hand I could have had your whole fight on TikTok.”

“The very last thing I want,” I say.

“I’ll pretend I understand that,” Michaela says.

I live on a different planet to her. To not want to be a star on social media. That’s there’s some crazy talk.

“I’m really sorry about the way I treat you at school,” she says.

“You should be.”

“But you know I’m going to keep doing it.”

“I know,” I say. I don’t really expect Michaela to stop being horrible over something as trivial as saving her life.

“I’ll stop sneezing in your food though. I promise.”

“Well, that’s a win, then,” I say. “I’ll stop throwing it at you.”

“But other than that, don’t expect any special treatment from me.”

“I won’t.”

“It’s my reputation at stake,” Michaela sounds almost embarrassed. “It’s not easy being number one.”

Everybody wants to topple you. If I am seen to go easy on you, that would drag me down.”

“Couldn’t have that now could we,” I say.

Michaela looks suitably embarrassed.

“Here,” she says suddenly. She crawls over to the curb, not yet trusting her shaky legs. She fishes her almost new, slightly cracked iPhone out of the gutter and holds it out to me with two fingers. I think there is a little of my vomit on one corner.

“Here what?” I ask, suddenly suspicious. I make no move to take the phone.

“You have this. It’s only a bit cracked, and it’s still a thousand times better than that old dumbphone of yours.”

“My Nokia does all I need it to,” I say as if I love the old piece of crap.

“Yeah, and that’s what everybody says who doesn’t have a real phone,” Michaela says.

“Don’t you want to ring your mum first?” I ask.

She makes a face. “No. The cops can do that for me.”

She wipes the screen on the manicured grass, slides the SIM out, then I watch as she opens the settings and erases the phone, restoring it to factory defaults. She hands it out to me again.

“It’s yours,” she says. “You know you want it.”

And I do want it. It is a phone I never even dreamed of owning. It has a brilliant camera and takes videos

and has voice recognition and GPS maps and a thousand things I can't even think of right now.

"I can't," I say.

"You can," Michaela insists. "I'll tell mum the kidnapper guy stole it. She'll just buy me a new one and claim it on insurance. And they've just bought out a new model, so I'll get that. Win win."

"You're not going to tell the police I took it?" I say. "Then film them arresting me and put that on TikTok?"

"Not a bad idea," Michaela smiles. "And you have no reason to trust me, but no. I won't do that. The phone is yours. Consider it a thank you, or an apology for every time I'm mean to you from now on."

"Okay, um, thanks," I say. I hear a distant siren. "I'm going to get out of here now before the police arrive. I was never here, right?"

"Right."

On my way back to the bus stop I see two police cars turn into the street, lights flashing, sirens wailing. I also see a long, red, classic American convertible cruise slowly past the end of the street, although I cannot see the driver.