I SURVIVED

THE ERUPTION OF MOUNT ST. HELENS, 1980

by Lauren Tarshis
illustrated by Scott Dawson

Scholastic Inc.
For you girls
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MOUNT ST. HELENS, WASHINGTON STATE

For more than 100 years, Mount St. Helens had been quiet, a beautiful mountain surrounded by forests. Hikers climbed its winding trails. Skiers raced down its snowy slopes. Children splashed in its crystal clear lakes.

Except this peaceful mountain was not a mountain.

It was a dangerous volcano, a deadly cone filled
with molten rock and poisonous gases. And soon it would explode with the power of ten million tons of dynamite.

In the minutes before the eruption, eleven-year-old Jessie Marlowe and her best friends Eddie and Sam were in a forest near St. Helens. The day was warm and bright, the sky brilliant blue. St. Helens rose up over them, its perfect triangle peak sparkling with snow.

And then,

*Kaboom!*

Suddenly, Jess was in the middle of the deadliest volcanic eruption in American history.

She watched in horror as the sky turned pitch-black. A blizzard of ash poured down, swirling up her nose and making it almost impossible to breathe. Hot rocks pelted her like bullets shooting down from the sky.

Then, *whoosh*, a blast of wind exploded out of the mountain, a white-hot mix of ash and gas and shards of rock. It raced down the mountain at jet speeds, burning everything in its path. The heat hit Jess and the boys, knocking them down.
Jess felt as though she would burst into flames. Every breath was like inhaling fire.

But the terror was just beginning.

The eruption had shattered the mountain, and now a fifty-mile-wide avalanche of rock and mud and melted ice was taking aim at the valley below. It grew larger by the second. It snatched up trees and boulders. It tore away bridges and swept away houses.

It would destroy everything — and everyone — in its path.
“Skeleton Woman is not real,” Jess said.
“She’s totally made up,” Sam agreed.
“Can we please stop talking about Skeleton Woman?” said Eddie, Sam’s twin brother. “You’re giving me the creeps.”
It was Sunday morning, and Jess and the Rowan twins were riding in the back of a red
Ford pickup truck. Mr. Rowan, the twins’ dad, was up front, singing loudly along to his favorite disco song.

They were about twenty miles from their hometown of Cedar, Washington, rumbling along a winding highway. The road was lined with trees, a forever stretch of forest and rolling hills.

They were heading to the Rowans’ fishing cabin, which was on Loomis Lake, up closer to Mount St. Helens. It wasn’t fishing season quite yet. But Mr. Rowan wanted to get the cabin ready. He was happy to have Jess and the twins tagging along for the day.

Looking across at the twins, Jess saw two matching buzz-cut heads, four identical green eyes, and about ten thousand freckles. When they were little, Jess would have done anything to look more like them. She’d blown out her birthday candles with a wish for green eyes instead of brown. She’d even drawn Magic Marker freckles onto her pale skin.

But Jess had outgrown that. And anyway, the twins weren’t so exactly alike. Eddie was quiet
and serious. Sam never shut up and he had a fearless streak that sometimes got all three of them into big trouble.

Like today, for example.

Mr. Rowan didn’t know the real reason that Jess and the boys wanted to get up to the mountain: Skeleton Woman.

She was an evil woman from a scary old story, kind of like the witch from Hansel and Gretel, but worse, because she supposedly lived around here. She had wild white hair and coal-black eyes and rusted metal claws instead of fingers.

According to the old legend, she lurked in the dark forests that covered the slopes of St. Helens, the mountain that rose up over this whole valley. She wandered through the woods, searching for children, whose bones she used to make her magic powders.

It was just a creepy story, the kind you told while you were roasting marshmallows or huddled together at a slumber party. But some of the kids in their school actually believed Skeleton Woman was real.
One girl, Missy Samuels, swore Skeleton Woman lived in a broken-down shack in the woods near Loomis Lake.

“That whole part of the forest is cursed,” Missy had said, flicking one of her curls. It had been last Wednesday, and they were on the blacktop at school. Eddie had been impatiently bouncing a red rubber ball. Usually they played kickball at recess, but Missy wouldn’t stop yakking about Skeleton Woman.

Jess used to be good pals with Missy. But that was about a million years ago, before Missy’s dad got an important new job at the lumber company. Now Missy lived in the biggest house in Cedar — the only big house in Cedar.

“Skeleton Woman is in those woods,” Missy went on. “My dad says some of his workers saw her. And now they refuse to step foot in that part of the forest.”

“That’s not true,” Jess said.

“They saw her, Jess!” Missy insisted. “Her clothes were covered with blood!”

“It’s just a dumb story,” Eddie scoffed.
“If you’re so sure, maybe you should go to the shack yourselves,” Missy said.
This was starting to sound like a dare.
“Fine,” Sam blurted out. “We’ll go.”
Jess and Eddie had shared a look that meant
*Please tape Sam’s mouth shut now!*
Too late.
“Fine,” Missy said. “You better bring a camera, because I’ll need proof.”
Within minutes, she’d blabbed to everyone, making it sound like a big joke — with Jess and the twins as the punch line.
So of course they couldn’t back out.
Which is why they were here, on this cold morning, sitting in the back of the red pickup.
“But what if she’s actually there?” Eddie asked.
“Then Jess will take her picture,” Sam said.
Jess gripped her backpack, where she’d put Dad’s camera. She felt a pang of guilt. The camera had been Dad’s prized possession, and Jess knew that Mom wouldn’t want Jess taking it into the woods. But Jess would be extra careful. She’d even wrapped it in a plastic bag, in case it rained.
“How will I take her picture?” Jess asked.

“Mrs. Skeleton Woman,” Sam said in a high voice, “say cheese!”

Eddie leaned forward and bared his teeth like a skeleton.

“Cheese!” he growled. A glob of egg glistened on one of his teeth.

They all burst out laughing, and Jess’s honking giggle mixed with the twins’ loud snorts. It took them all a few minutes to calm down.

Eddie’s face got serious again.

“You guys aren’t scared, are you?” he asked.

“Nah,” Sam said.

“No way,” Jess lied.

Of course they were scared. Who knew what they would find in that shack? Even if they didn’t find Skeleton Woman and her bones, there could be a bear, or a thousand rats. Jess shuddered.

But fear was better than other feelings, wasn’t it?

Like missing her dad, who died in a car accident two years ago.

Or worrying about Mom, who seemed so lonely and worked way too hard.
Those sad thoughts were always flickering at the edges of Jess’s mind.
So it was good to have other things to think about, like an evil old witch with smoldering black eyes.