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Children Are Our Last Hope

First Three Chapters

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Prologue

The spot was no longer white.

Betty knew it before her eye had fully reached the eyepiece. Something had changed. At the outer edge of Saturn's rings, the light that had haunted her for days was pulsing. First white, then yellow, then red. Colors flowed slowly into one another, as though something out there were breathing.

The little observatory behind the house was silent. Moonlight fell through the open roof onto the wooden walls, the star chart and the crooked step Lilly had built for her. Her parents were asleep inside the house. Lilly was asleep too. Betty had gone out alone, although she knew exactly what her sister would have said.

She should have waited.

But now Saturn hung in the eyepiece, distant and perfect, and the spot seemed to have been waiting for her.

Betty turned the focus wheel carefully. The image sharpened. The rings emerged, delicate as pencil lines. The spot remained in the same place. There was something urgent in its steady pulse. Betty caught herself counting the intervals, as if they might tell her how much time she had left. For what, she could not have said.

The red light on the wall flickered. For a moment, the air smelled of a thunderstorm, even though there was not a single cloud above Beatty. Betty lifted her head. The hut was empty. All she could hear was the quiet hum of the tracking drive.

When she looked through the telescope again, a new color appeared between white and red.

Blue.

Betty held her breath.

The light swelled. Slowly at first, then so quickly that she tried to pull away. Her hands would not obey her. Her fingers rested on the cold metal, her right eye pressed to the eyepiece. She tried to blink. She could not.

Patterns formed deep inside her eye. Lines joined, dissolved and rearranged themselves. Betty recognized none of the shapes. Yet she had the unsettling feeling that they wanted something from her.

Or were already searching for something inside her.

Her heart hammered against her ribs. She wanted to call for Lilly, but no sound came. The blue glow grew brighter until Saturn, its rings and even the darkness beyond them disappeared.

Then came the pain.

Brief, hot and directly behind her right eye.

The light went out.

Betty stumbled away from the telescope. The open night sky spun above her. She saw the Moon, the edge of the observatory roof and, for a fraction of a second, something blue moving among the stars.

Then everything went black.

Several weeks earlier

Beatty

It was summer in Nevada, one of those summers when the sun beat down mercilessly before the morning was over. By noon, the thermometer read forty-five degrees Celsius in the shade. The air hung motionless above the dusty roads and low wooden houses. Dogs lay beneath porches, lizards vanished between hot stones, and anyone who did not need to go outside stayed indoors. Every child knew the desert became dangerous the moment you underestimated it.

People lived here anyway, in Beatty, a small town on the edge of Death Valley. It had one main street, a school, a gas station, a few shops and a night sky that looked as if someone had torn the universe open. This was where Betty lived with her family.

Betty was twelve years old. Because of the heat, she usually wore her blonde hair in a ponytail, and she saw no reason why being two years older should give her sister Lilly any special privileges. Lilly was quieter and watched things for longer. Betty asked the questions; Lilly drew the answers. Perhaps that was why they were not only sisters but best friends.

When they were not at school, they played behind the family's small house, about three hundred meters from the main road at the edge of town. Like many houses in Beatty, it was built of wood and clearly showing its age. Paint had peeled away in places, the porch creaked, and strong winds made the windows sing in their frames. But it was home.

Their father, Tom, kept the old wooden house alive with his own hands. Jane worked just as hard as he did, but the money only just covered their expenses. Gasoline, food and electricity kept getting more expensive. Every unexpected repair meant cutting back somewhere else.

One evening, Betty heard her father speaking through the thin wall.

“We can't go on like this.”

“What else are we supposed to do?” Jane answered quietly. “We’re both working two jobs already.”

The girls did not mention it the next morning. Children know when adults are trying to keep their worries away from them. Sometimes they pretend not to notice, just to let the adults keep trying. The news had sounded the same for months: economic crisis, rising prices, fires, droughts and floods. Scientists warned that heat and water shortages could make whole regions uninhabitable. Perhaps Beatty would be one of them one day.

Betty and Lilly knew the headlines and heard the worry in their parents’ voices. Even so, their own world still consisted of school, friends, drawings, animals in the garden and the secrets of nature.

And that nature began directly behind their house.

The sisters were used to spending a few hours alone after school because Tom and Jane had to work until evening. They did their homework—most of the time—found something to eat and went out into the garden. Because of the intense heat, Tom had stretched a large canvas awning over part of it. Beneath it, the temperature was bearable even during the day, as long as they drank enough water and did not move around too wildly.

Betty and Lilly knew a surprising amount about the plants and animals around them. They knew which lizards were harmless, where it was better not to put your hand and why you should never get too close to a rattlesnake. Whenever they found something they did not recognize, they searched for it online at once.

It became a constant competition. Whoever discovered something first wanted to be the first to identify it too, then surprise the other with a new fact.

“That isn’t an ordinary ant,” Betty said once, holding out a photograph on her phone.

Lilly bent over the screen. “Yes, it is.”

“No. Look at its head.”

“You only want to win.”

“I’m going to win.”

Five minutes later, Betty turned out to be right. Afterwards, Lilly claimed she had known all along and had only been testing her.

Tom and Jane were proud of their bright, curious girls. Whenever they had time, they took them outdoors. Tom loved it when Betty and Lilly asked questions. Even when he did not know the answer, he behaved as if every answer could be found if you only looked closely enough.

To encourage their curiosity, Tom had given Betty a microscope for her eighth birthday. Lilly received a telescope for her tenth—a telescope that Tom had really bought for himself.

To the girls, they were not toys. They were gateways.

The microscope led Betty into a tiny world that existed in dust, water, leaves and even on her own fingers. A world invisible to the naked eye, yet full of life.

The telescope carried Lilly outward to planets, star clusters and galaxies, far beyond little Beatty. With those two gifts, the sisters could explore the small world of their home and, at the same time, a world so vast that no human being could comprehend it.

Beatty lay between two extremes. On one side began Death Valley, a glowing sea of stone, sand and salt. Tom liked to claim that the town was home to eight hundred and eighty people, two thousand rattlesnakes, twenty thousand lizards, millions of insects, two donkeys and forty-two dogs. Betty did not know whether the numbers were true. But they sounded like Beatty.

The other extreme appeared after sunset. There was almost no light pollution on the edge of town. While artificial light swallowed most of the stars above cities, the Milky Way stretched across this sky like a bright river.

Some stars, Tom had explained, might have gone out long ago even though their light was still reaching Earth.

“So we’re looking at something that might not even exist anymore?” Betty had asked.

Tom nodded. “Sometimes the sky is like a memory.”

Lilly wrote the sentence in her sketchbook. And perhaps it was this very darkness that allowed two girls from Beatty to see something no one else was ever meant to see.

The Telescope

Tom had spent almost twenty-five hundred dollars on the astronomical equipment. For his family, it was a great deal of money, money that might be needed for the roof, the old Ford or the next bill. But to him, the telescope was more than a piece of equipment. It was an old dream.

As a child, Tom had often lain outside and looked up at the sky. He had wanted to become an astronomer, but in his family everyone had to be fed before there was room for dreams. So he learned to pay bills and repair engines instead.

He wanted to give his daughters something larger than the heat and their parents' worries. That was why he invested some of their savings in a small observatory behind the garden.

At first, Jane had been anything but pleased.

"Tom," she had said when he told her about his plan, "we can't just spend that much money."

She had not shouted. Jane rarely shouted. Her voice merely grew quieter when she was truly worried. And that evening, it had been very quiet.

Tom had sat at the kitchen table with both hands wrapped around a cup of coffee that had long since gone cold.

"I know," he said.

"Then tell me why."

He was silent for a long time. Insects chirped outside. Somewhere, a dog barked. Muffled giggling drifted from the girls' room, although both of them should have been asleep.

"Because they need something that belongs to them," Tom finally said. "Something bigger than all this."

Jane looked at him. The tiredness remained in her face, but a small smile appeared around her mouth.

“And you don’t need it a little bit too?” she asked.

Tom smiled faintly. “Maybe.”

Of course he needed it too. Jane knew that. She had known her husband long enough to recognize the moments when the boy he had once been woke inside him again. The boy who had wanted to become an astronomer and had learned instead to pay bills, repair engines and get used to days when the temperature reached fifty degrees.

Later, when she saw the happiness her husband and children found in watching the night sky, her doubts did not disappear completely. But they became smaller. Sometimes Jane stood in the open back door in the evening, looking toward the little hut and listening to her family’s muted voices. Then she smiled, even though she knew what it had all cost.

The telescope Tom had “given” Lilly stood far beyond the garden in a small wooden hut.

That hut was Tom’s pride and joy.

For months, he had collected leftover pieces of timber from a lumber yard in the next town. He stacked beams and planks behind the house until he had enough material. Then he built the hut over a weekend.

It was not large. Just big enough for one adult and two children, provided no one waved their arms too enthusiastically. On hot days, the wood smelled of resin and dust. On the cool nights that rarely came in summer, it creaked softly, as if the hut were talking to the sky.

The roof could be opened at the press of a button.

To Betty, it was a small miracle every time. One press, and the ceiling above them opened. First a crack, then a strip of black, then the whole sky. The hut became a room without a roof, a tiny observation post on the edge of the universe.

Everything inside had its place. A large star chart hung on one wall. Beneath it was a shelf of equipment: eyepieces, small screw caps, cleaning cloths, notebooks, batteries, cables, a flashlight and things whose names Betty sometimes forgot, although Lilly knew every one of them.

There were two lights.

An ordinary light from a plain bulb. And a red light like the ones used aboard submarines.

Tom had explained that red light interfered less with the eye's adaptation to darkness. When you looked into the dark for a long time at night, your eyes became more sensitive. Suddenly you could see stars that had been invisible before. If you switched on a white light, it all vanished, and you had to wait a long time for your eyes to become ready again.

That was why the red light mattered.

Beneath its faint glow, they could change equipment, check settings, study drawings or search the shelf without ruining their night vision.

A computer-controlled mount compensated for the Earth's rotation and kept the chosen object in view. The hand controller allowed the girls to select planets, nebulae or galaxies; a GPS module automatically supplied the time and location.

"Satellites help you find stars," Tom had said once. "That's crazy, right?"

Betty now took it for granted. To her, the observatory meant the red light, the chart, the soft hum of machinery and the little step she needed to reach the eyepiece.

The step had been a project of its own. Lilly and Jane built it together after Betty complained that tall people always acted as if you could simply grow by waiting long enough. It was made of wood, sturdy and slightly crooked, with little stars painted along one side. Lilly had drawn the stars. Betty insisted that one of them had to be Saturn, even though Lilly explained that Saturn was not a star.

“Then it’s a Saturn star,” Betty said.

Lilly gave up.

So that the sisters did not have to keep changing eyepieces for different observations and magnifications, Tom also installed a rotating eyepiece holder. With a simple turn, they could use five different eyepieces. To Betty, that too was a kind of magic. A click, a turn—and suddenly the Moon was closer, Saturn larger, or a star cluster wider and brighter.

At low magnification, they could look deep into a field of stars. They usually chose a stronger eyepiece for the Moon and planets. Bright patches on the Moon became crater rims, and dark marks turned into deep shadows. Jupiter revealed bands of clouds, with its brightest moons standing beside it. The most powerful equipment could even magnify up to eight hundred times, although the image usually lost more sharpness than it gained in size.

Lilly liked observing Saturn best. She could stare at the rings for a long time and still find it astonishing that a planet could truly look like that.

The telescope was always ready. As soon as night fell and the sky was clear, the sisters could begin their observations. Beatty had many clear nights. Sometimes it seemed as if the desert had swallowed every cloud before it reached the town.

For a twelve- and a fourteen-year-old, however, there was one limit no telescope and no spirit of discovery could overcome.

Tiredness. And school.

Long observing sessions were therefore restricted to weekends, school vacations or winter. In winter, darkness came early. Betty and Lilly could spend hours outside and still get enough sleep to prevent Jane from giving them that look at the breakfast table the next morning—the one that said, I told you so.

Now, in summer, they mostly had only the weekends.

But that made the nights more precious.

The longer Betty thought about it, the more the little hut seemed like a secret place. During the day, it was only a simple wooden structure behind the garden. Slightly crooked, slightly dusty, almost unremarkable from the outside.

At night, the roof opened and they looked past the wooden walls into the sky. Here they could discover something that no one at school would know about the next morning. Neither of them had any idea how far such a discovery would take them.