

# A Bucket of Stars

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**TRUE FACT :**

*One teaspoon of a neutron star weighs more than all humans on earth combined.*

**I** lay on my back under a lion.

And a bull and a goat too. And over in the southwest edge of the sky — I'm looking at you, Orion — a hunter was brandishing a sword of hydrogen, helium, and dust. A big bear and a small bear shimmered above — that's Ursa Major and Ursa Minor for anyone out there who speaks Constellation.

It was a glorious night as we floated on a bed of cool water beneath the sparkling sky. A muggy breeze tickled the birch trees that circled the water hole. We drifted in darkness on the pond, safely hidden from the abandoned estate house in the distance.

I'd seen better night skies and I'd seen worse. I mean, I'd definitely trade Sirius for Jupiter any day of the week, but you can't be greedy when it comes to

planets. You take what you can get, which is never that much if you live close to a city. Those bright lights are like gigantic leaf blowers that blast the stars right out of the sky.

My older brother, Kyle, was the reason I'd snuck onto the abandoned estate that night. I wasn't really a rule-breaker, but it didn't take *that* much convincing to get me there. I guess I'm easy that way — you can basically buy me for the price of a single constellation.

Time stopped as we floated in silence. It wasn't a bad night sky, really. I'd rate it four million out of five million stars. But it still didn't compare to lying on a sandy beach under the magic of the Milky Way back when Dad still took us camping.

As I drifted under the moonlight, Kyle flipped onto his stomach and slowly treaded water in lazy arcs. He turned to me and flicked water on my face.

"*Hoc fateri*, Noah," Kyle said. "*Hoc loco est mirabile.*" Which is Latin for "This place is amazing."

"*Sed illud proprietatem,*" I said. Latin for "Are you nuts? We're trespassing, you always break rules, and I'm kind of nervous that you're going to get us killed."

Okay, maybe it wasn't. I mean, except for the part about us trespassing.

"The sky doesn't belong to anyone," Kyle said. At fifteen, he was two years older than me, and a million times more sure of his place in the universe.

"But this property does."

"You worry too much," he said as he studied the

sky. "And look — I *gave* you the Big Dipper tonight."

"Thanks a lot, buddy." I splashed water on him. "It was *mine* already."

He rolled his eyes and pushed a wave of water at me with the ball of his hand. "I'm going to dunk you, doofus."

"I'm going to jump you, shmoofus," I said, returning a current of water.

Pond war!

Kyle and I excel at war. We'll fight with anything: bubbles, melons, furniture, and even garbage, as long as we keep it under Dad's radar. Right now, water was our weapon of choice, and Kyle and I shoved gallons of it at each other, dunking and splashing and kicking and thrashing.

But all of a sudden, Kyle went still.

I stared at him. *What's the matter?*

His eyes were wide. He placed a finger to his lips and looked toward the house. "Someone's there," he whispered.

I shrank back into the water, my heart racing. "You said nobody lives there!"

Kyle shrugged. "Yeah, maybe not."

I kicked his leg under the water.

He shook his head and shot me a warning look. I followed his gaze to the side of the house, where the moon dropped a pale spotlight on an older man. He stood next to a pink Volkswagen Beetle that looked like it hadn't budged since the 1960s. His white hair fell

to his thin shoulders, and he was wearing khaki pants and a Hawaiian shirt.

A Hawaiian shirt. How threatening is that, right?

Extremely threatening, actually.

He was wielding a shotgun.

I gripped Kyle's arm under the water.

The man surveyed the forest through the gun's scope, turning slowly in a circle. Then he raised the shotgun and pointed it at the night sky, right at Polaris, like he was going to take out the North Star with a single shot.

Bile rose in my stomach.

He racked the gun and pulled the trigger.



**TRUE FACT:**

*There are over one hundred billion stars in our galaxy and two hundred billion galaxies in the universe.*

The forest protested the shotgun blast with a chorus of flapping and chattering. I could feel the water turn to ice around my body.

Kyle whispered, "We have to get out of here!"

My eyes widened. "But he'll see us."

There was no way I was getting out of that pond. I held my ground — or water, as the case may be.

"Are you crazy?" Kyle said. "We're dead ducks!"

Images of ducks assaulted my mind. I mean, I'm not opposed to ducks or anything — I just didn't want to be one. Specifically, a *dead* one. I followed Kyle, paddling to the edge of the water hole and crouching at the surface.

The man was surveying the forest, his shotgun again at the ready. Satisfied that nobody was in the pond,

he finally stomped around the corner and disappeared behind the house.

Kyle cocked his head toward the driveway. "Now!"

I nodded and tailed him as he pulled himself out of the pond. Dripping water, we crawled over a carpet of twigs and pine cones to the edge of the forest and the massive willow tree where we'd hidden our clothing and bikes.

I swiped away ants and dirt as I jammed on my clothes with trembling hands. Kyle was only a few feet away from me, but the thick canopy of branches hugging the sides of the driveway swallowed him in darkness.

And then I remembered.

My binoculars.

Actually, my father's binoculars.

I *had* to get them. I was hopping on my feet, pulling on my shoes, when Kyle materialized next to me, his lips drawn in a tight line.

I made C-shaped hands in front of my eyes. Binoculars.

He frantically jabbed his thumbs against the sides of his pointer fingers. Gun.

"But he's in the back of the house," I whispered.

His eyes flashed. "For *now*."

I glanced at the binoculars, nestled in a patch of grass a foot from the pond. They were so close. I only needed a couple of seconds to grab them.

Okay, so I know you're thinking I'm nuts. The guy

had a shotgun, and he wasn't afraid to use it. But the binoculars were Dad's, and he was crazy about them. Well, to be precise, he was crazy about them back when he still had the ability to get crazy about things.

Those binoculars, they had a *camera* in them. And if you were lucky enough to catch sight of a meteor shower or a nebula, you could capture the image and take it home with you, like you got to keep a piece of the sky.

I knew that Kyle was furious with me. But for the record, *he* was the one who'd convinced me to sneak into this pond. I sometimes wondered if even Kyle couldn't understand how opposite we were. With our lanky frames, auburn hair, and blue eyes, we looked alike on the outside, but that was where the similarities ended.

We'd only moved to Queensport in early August, and in a few weeks, we were both going to start new schools — Kyle in tenth grade, me in eighth. But here's the difference between us: by the end of the first day of school, Kyle would be surrounded by a circle of buddies and a whole lot of admiring girls. And me?

Well, I'll always have my stars.

With my heart thumping, I dropped to my knees. There was no sign of the old man, so I sucked in a deep breath, scrambled to the pond, and scooped up the binoculars. But then my eyes flitted to the house, and I felt my stomach drop.