

I

APRIL

The trick would be to slip in the side door and get the box up the back stairs without making a sound. The house was two hundred years old and you could hardly take a step without a flurry of creaks and groans. Abbey Straw eased the back door shut and tiptoed across the carpeted hallway to the landing. She could hear her father pattering around the kitchen, Red Sox game low on the radio.

Her arms hugging the box, she set her foot on the first step, eased down her weight, then the next step, and the next. She skipped the fourth step—it shrieked like a banshee—and put her weight on the fifth, the sixth, the seventh. . . . And just as she thought she was home free, the step let out a crack like a gunshot, followed by a long, dying groan.

Damn.

“Abbey, what’s in the box?”

Her father stood in the doorway of the kitchen, still wearing his orange rubber boots, his checked shirt stained with diesel fuel and lobster bait. His windburned brow was creased with suspicion.

“A telescope.”

“A telescope? How much did it cost?”

“I bought it with my own money.”

“Great,” he said, his gravelly voice tense, “if you never want to go back to college and stay a waitress the rest of your life, blow your paycheck on telescopes.”

“Maybe I want to be an astronomer.”

“Do you know how much I spent on your college education?”

She turned and continued up the stairs. “You mention it only five times a day.”

“When are you going to pull yourself together?”

She slammed the door and stood for a moment in her tiny bedroom, breathing hard. With one arm she swept the bedcover free of stuffed animals, set the box down on the bed. She flopped on the bed next to the box. Why had she been adopted by white people in Maine, the whitest state in the union, in a town where everyone was white? Hadn't there been a black hedge-fund manager somewhere looking for kids? “And where do *you* come from?” people would ask her, as if she'd recently arrived from Harlem—or Kenya.

She rolled over in bed, gazing at the box. Sliding out her cell phone, she dialed. “Jackie?” she whispered. “Meet me down at the wharf at nine. I got a surprise.”

Fifteen minutes later, cradling the telescope, Abbey cracked the bedroom door and listened. Her father was moving about the kitchen, washing the dishes that she was supposed to have washed that morning. The game was still on, turned up, Dave Goucher's obnoxious voice barking out of the cheap radio. By the sound of her father's occasional swearing she figured it must be a Sox–Yankees game. Good, he'd be distracted. She crept down the stairs, stepping gingerly, trying not to creak the old pine boards, slipped past the open kitchen door and in a moment was out and into the street.

Balancing the tripod over her shoulder, she darted past the Anchor Inn toward the town wharf. The harbor was as calm as a millpond, a great sheet of black water stretching to the dim silhouette of Louds Island, the boats lined up by the tide like white ghosts. The peppercan buoy marking the channel at the mouth of the narrow harbor blinked its light, blink, blink, blink. Above, the heavens swirled with phosphorescence.

She angled across the parking lot, past the lobster co-op, and headed onto the wharf. The strong smell of herring bait and seaweed drifted on the damp night air from a stack of old lobster traps at one end of the pier. The lobster joint hadn't opened yet for the summer season and the outdoor picnic tables were still turned up and chained to the railings. Back up the hill she could see the lights of the town and the steeple of the Methodist Church, a black spire against the Milky Way.

“Hey.” Jackie stepped out of the shadows, the red glow of a joint bobbing in the dark. “What's that?”

“A telescope.” Abbey took the joint and inhaled sharply, with a crackle of burning seeds. She exhaled and handed it back.

“A telescope?” asked Jackie. “What for?”

“What else is there to do around here but look at the stars?”

Jackie grunted. “How much was it?”

“Seven hundred bucks. Got it on eBay, a Celestron six-inch Cassegrain, automatic tracking, a camera and everything.”

A low whistle. “You must be getting some good tips over at the Landing.”

“They love me over there. I couldn’t get bigger tips if I was giving out blow jobs.”

Jackie burst out laughing, wheezing smoke and coughing. She passed the joint back and Abbey took another long hit.

“Randy’s getting out of Maine State,” said Jackie, lowering her voice.

“Oh God. Randy can sit on a lobster buoy and rotate five times.”

Jackie muffled a laugh.

“What a night,” Abbey said, staring at the immense bowl of stars. “Let’s take some pictures.”

“In the dark?”

Abbey looked over to see if she was kidding, but there was no wry smile on those lips. She felt a wave of affection for her dim, lovable friend. “Believe it or not,” Abbey said, “telescopes work better in the dark.”

“Right. That was stupid.” Jackie knocked on her own head. “Hello?”

They walked out to the end of the pier. Abbey set up the tripod, making sure it was anchored on the wood planking. She could see Orion hanging low in the sky and aimed the telescope in that direction. Using the computer starfinder attached to the telescope, she punched in a preset location. With a whirring of worm-gears, the telescope slewed around to point at a patch at the bottom of Orion’s sword.

“What’re we going to look at?”

“The Andromeda Galaxy.”

Abbey peered into the eyepiece and the galaxy sprang into view, a glowing maelstrom of five hundred billion stars. She felt her throat constricting with the thought of the immensity of it, and her own smallness.

“Lemme see,” said Jackie, sweeping back her long, unruly hair.

Abbey stepped back and silently offered her the eyepiece. Jackie fitted her eye to it. "How far away is it?"

"Two and a quarter million light-years."

Jackie stared for a while in silence, then stood up. "Think there's life out there?"

"Of course."

Abbey adjusted the telescope, zooming out, increasing its field of view, until most of Orion's sword was visible. Andromeda had shrunk into a little fuzz-ball. She pressed the cable release and heard the faint click as the shutter opened. It would be a twenty-minute time exposure.

A faint breeze came from the ocean, clanking the rigging of a fishing boat, and all the boats in the harbor swung in unison. It felt like the first breath of a storm, despite the dead calm. An invisible loon called from the water and was answered by another one, far away.

"Time for another doobie." Jackie began rolling a joint, licked it, and put it in her mouth. A click and flare of the lighter illuminated her face, her pale, freckled skin, green Irish eyes, and black hair.

Abbey saw the sudden light before she saw the thing itself. It came from behind the church, the harbor instantly as bright as day; it streaked across the sky in utter silence, like a ghost, and then an immense sonic boom shook the pier, followed by a blast-furnace roar as the thing blazed over the ocean at incredible speed, disappearing behind Louds Island. There was a final flash of light followed by a cannonade of thunder, rolling away over the ocean distances into silence.

Behind her, up in the town, dogs began barking hysterically.

"What the *fuck*?" Jackie said.

Abbey could see the whole town coming out of their houses and gathering in the streets. "Get rid of the pot," she hissed.

The road up the hill was filling with people, jabbering away, voices raised in excitement and alarm. They began moving down toward the piers, flashlights flickering, arms pointing skyward. This was the biggest thing that had happened in Round Pond, Maine, since a stray cannonball went through the roof of the Congregational Church in the War of 1812.

Suddenly Abbey remembered her telescope. The shutter was open and still taking a picture. With a trembling hand she found the shutter release

and clicked it off. A moment later the image popped up on the telescope's small LCD screen.

"Oh my God." The thing had streaked through the center of the image, a brilliant slash of white among a scattering of stars.

"It ruined your picture," said Jackie, peering over her shoulder.

"Are you kidding? It *made* the picture!"

2

The next morning, Abbey shoved through the door of the Cupboard Café with a stack of newspapers under her arm. The cheerful log-cabin diner with its checkered curtains and marble tables was almost empty, but she found Jackie sitting in her usual place in the corner, drinking coffee. A damp morning fog pressed against the windowpanes.

She hustled over and slapped *The New York Times* down on the table, exposing the front-page article below the fold.

Meteor Lights up Maine Coast

Portland, Maine—At 9:44 p.m. a large meteor streaked across the skies of Maine, creating one of the most brilliant meteor displays seen over New England in decades. Witnesses from as far as Boston and Nova Scotia reported seeing the spectacular fireball. Residents of Midcoast Maine heard sonic booms.

Data from a meteoroid tracking system at the University of Maine, Orono, indicated that the meteor was several times brighter than the full moon and may have weighed as much as fifty tons when it entered the Earth's atmosphere. The single track reported by witnesses suggests the meteorite was of the iron-nickel type, as those are the least likely to break up in flight, rather than the more common stony-iron or chondritic type. Its speed, tracking scientists estimated, was 48 kilometers per second or about 100,000 miles per hour—thirty times faster than a typical rifle bullet.

Dr. Stephen Chikering, professor of planetary geology at Boston University, said: "This isn't a typical fireball. It's the

brightest and biggest meteor seen on the East Coast in decades. The trajectory took it out to sea, where it landed in the ocean.”

He also explained that its journey through the atmosphere would have vaporized most of its mass. The final object that struck the ocean, he said, probably weighed less than a hundred pounds.

Abbey broke off and grinned at Jackie. “You read that? *It landed in the ocean*. That’s what all the papers are saying.” She settled back and crossed her arms, enjoying Jackie’s wondering look.

“Okay,” said Jackie, “I can see you’ve got something on your mind.”

Abbey lowered her voice. “*We’re going to be rich.*”

Jackie rolled her eyes theatrically. “I’ve heard that before.”

“This time I’m not kidding.” Abbey looked around. She slid a piece of paper out of her pocket and unfolded it on the table.

“What’s that?”

“It’s the data printout of GoMOOS Weather Buoy 44032, between 4:40 and 5:40 GMT. That’s the instrument buoy out beyond Weber Sunken Ledge.”

Jackie stared at it, crunching her freckled brow. “I know it.”

“Look at the wave heights. Dead calm. No change.”

“So?”

“A hundred-pound meteorite slams into the ocean at a hundred thousand miles an hour and doesn’t make waves?”

Jackie shrugged. “So if it didn’t land in the ocean, where did it land?”

Abbey leaned forward, clasped her hands, her voice dropping to a hiss, her face flushing with triumph. “On an *island*.”

“So?”

“So, we borrow my father’s boat, search those islands, and get that meteorite.”

“Borrow? You mean steal. Your father would never let you *borrow* his boat.”

“Borrow, steal, expropriate, whatever.”

Jackie’s face darkened. “Please, not another wild-goose chase. Remember when we went looking for Dixie Bull’s treasure? And how we got in trouble digging in the Indian mounds?”

“We were just kids then.”

“There are dozens of islands out there in Muscongus Bay, tens of thousands of acres to cover. You’d never search them all.”

“We don’t have to. Because I’ve got *this*.” She pulled out the photograph of the meteor and laid it on top of a chart of Muscongus Bay. “With the photo, you can extrapolate a line to the horizon and then draw a second line from that point to where the photo was taken. The meteorite must have landed somewhere along that second line.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Abbey pushed the chart toward her. “There’s the line.” Her finger stabbed a line she had penciled across the chart. “Look. It intersects just *five* islands.”

The waitress approached with two enormous pecan sticky buns. Abbey quickly covered up the chart and photograph and sat back with a smile. “Hey, thanks.”

When the waitress had gone, Abbey uncovered the chart. “That’s it. The meteorite is on one of these islands.” Her finger thumped on each one in turn as she named it: “Louds, Marsh, Ripp, Egg Rock, and Shark. We could search them in less than a week.”

“When? Now?”

“We have to wait til the end of May, when my father’ll be out of town.”

Jackie crossed her arms. “What the hell we gonna do with a meteorite?”

“Sell it.”

Jackie stared. “It’s worth something?”

“Quarter million, half a million. That’s all.”

“You’re shitting me.”

Abbey shook her head. “I checked prices on eBay, talked to a meteorite dealer.”

Jackie leaned back, a grin slowly spreading over her freckled face. “I’m in.”