



**She's been waiting for him since she was a girl. Is tonight the night he will finally come?**

# STARS

It was the sound, the deep throbbing hum that woke Kate up from her dreamless semi-drugged sleep. She let her eyes flutter open, they took a while to focus; what she saw were parallel bands of yellow-white light, stark against the dark ceiling. The humming sounds softened to a purr, like an engine ticking over, and the bands of light shifted, moving down the room through the small gaps in the curtains. Kate sighed and closed her eyes again, but found that she couldn't settle. Old age played havoc with sleep - it either withheld it, or forced it on you when you least wanted it. And since she'd gone on drugs to help with the pain, it had an even more disorientating power over her.

After accepting that she wasn't going to be able to get back to sleep, Kate allowed herself to wonder what was causing the lights and the noise. It was the first time in many months she had thought about the world beyond her bed at all; it had become her second skin, a cushioned life-boat on her slow and confusing descent into illness. Any kind of movement had the potential to hurt now, so even the smallest - bending a knee, raising her arm - had to be planned out with military precision.

Cautiously she turned her head towards the clock on her bedside table. 2.50am the hologram projection said, six long hours till her carer came to change her, wash her and do her physio. A sense of desperation and loneliness rolled over her like a wave. She took an involuntary sharp gasping breath as if she was in danger of being drowned by it.

'Kate!' She heard a voice, whispered but clear, from outside.

Her next breath froze in her chest, it wasn't possible, it couldn't be, not after all this time.

'Kate, come here!' The voice repeated, more urgently this time.

'I...' Her voice cracked before she could get the words out. *It can't be, it just can't be!* She swallowed hard.

'I'm here, come on Kate, I can't wait much longer!'

It was in this room, this very room, seventy years ago that she had first fantasised about him coming to rescue her from her miserable, constrained teenage existence. And now, after all these years...'I...I'm coming.' She gripped the duvet hard with her right hand, bent her left knee so the sole of her foot was flat on the mattress and pulled herself on to her right side. She had expected nauseating pain, had her teeth gritted against the likelihood of it, but to her huge relief and surprise it didn't come. Almost blithely she went from her side to sitting upright on the bed, swung her legs over the side with a small 'Ha!' of triumph.

It was a hot summer, and the floorboards were warm under her bare feet. She walked cautiously but painlessly to the window and reached out towards the curtains; she stopped, her hands were trembling. For the first time in years she noticed how old her hands looked, the liver-spot mottling, veins standing out under her skin like bent twigs. She nearly went back to bed, but something stopped her. It felt so good to be upright again, maybe she had been given a second chance, maybe against all the odds she was in remission. Either way, she had to know, she had to know if it was *him* waiting outside the window.

She pulled the curtain apart a fraction, pressed her eye to the gap and looked down into the dark street. She gasped. It *was* him, just as she had imagined all those years ago: compact, handsome, alert, and standing just below her window! Behind him his X-Wing spacecraft filled the street, the steam from its hydraulics billowing from its underbelly. The far-side wing had narrowly missed a street-lamp, its tip was parallel with the neighbour's bedroom window – landing-light blinking. The hull of the ship was streaked with dirt and the scars of laser-cannon blasts.

She pressed her hand against the glass of the window. 'Luke!'

He was holding his helmet against his side and gestured impatiently with his free arm. 'Yes, it's me Kate, now *come on!*' He looked nervously up and down the street. 'We haven't got much time, they'll be waking up soon.'

She nodded mutely and pointed downwards to signify that she would meet him outside the front door. He smiled broadly and waved.

She turned from the window, her hand over her mouth. This was it, it was really happening. For months after seeing the last of the original Star Wars films when she was fourteen she had imagined this moment. Her mum and dad had just split up, she was a late developer and left behind by her friends who already had bras and boyfriends. In Luke Skywalker she had seen someone for whom these things were mere trivia – he had a universe to save. And there was a beauty about his face, and damage too – as if he had been broken up and put back together again.

Each time, all those years ago, when she had imagined him coming for her, she had wondered if she really would be able to leave everything behind and fly away with him. It had made her realise that perhaps she *did* still love her mum and dad, despite their seeming destruction of everything she had held dear; perhaps after all she *could* wait for her body to start to make the long journey towards womanhood.

And now, how easy would it be now? She'd worked as hard at being a good wife as she could, but neither of her marriages had stuck. She'd put her children first all her life and been a lively and involved

grandmother; but then the ravenous wolf of cancer, a disease that even by 2053 they hadn't managed to completely eradicate, had finally sunk its teeth into her. For five years now it had been slowly and painfully ripping her away from her family, she had felt herself a little more adrift each day; numbed and exhausted by pain and the effort involved in staying alive. But now, as she paused by her bedroom door and tightened her dressing-gown around her, she saw the faces of all those that she loved and that loved her, and they were smiling.

She trotted down the stairs as if she was a young woman, her hair coming loose and falling down around her shoulders. When she opened the front-door Luke rushed up to her and held her and she buried her face in his neck, pushed her fingers into his thick dark-blond hair.

He pulled himself away from her and took her hand. 'Come on Kate, it's time to go now.' She smiled and followed him, let him lead her up the entry ramp and into the ship's cockpit. It was cramped and strangely old-fashioned looking. The flight seats were made of scuffed brown-leather, the dashboard screens curved at the sides, their displays showing diagrams in green LCD. It was nothing like the commercial spacecraft of the present – all sleek white and high-resolution touch screens. It was an antique, just like her.

Luke gestured for her to sit down in the passenger seat beside him. She smiled and settled herself into it, clicked the aviator-style safety belt into place in her lap.

'So where do you want to go?'

She smiled and gestured with her index finger. 'Up.'

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They gather round her, some standing, some perching on the edge. The kids play around the periphery of the room, occasionally radiating towards the bed to take a peek.

A sad looking woman sits down and takes hold of Kate's hand. 'Do you think her breathing has settled down a bit Paul?'

'Maybe, it's hard to tell.'

'Do you think she can see us?'

He sighs. "I don't know Em, she could be aware of everything, or maybe she's already gone?'

'Oh God!' The woman begins to sob, one of the children appears by her side, looks up at her. 'Is Nanna going to die Mummy?'

She scoops up the little girl and puts her on her lap, smooths her hair back from her face. 'Yes, I think so Molly. But she's very old and she's had a good life.' The girl climbs off her mum's lap and onto the bed. 'Molly, don't do that, you might –'

'It's all right Em, let her go, she can't do any harm, she just wants to say goodbye.'

The little girl crawls along the side of the bed until she is just below the pillow. She reaches out and touches her grandmother's pale cheek, leans in and looks intently into the old lady's dilated eyes. She turns and tugs at her Mother's hand. 'Mummy, look...Nanna's got stars inside her!'

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