

I spread the old tartan blanket across the lawn. Ella burst out into the garden first, hair wild, pyjamas splattered with spaghetti sauce, and clutching a small jar she held up like treasure.

‘Mum, look! Stardust!’

Annie followed, neat as a librarian, holding the small notebook she had insisted on bringing to the sleepover. They were both six, but sometimes it felt as though Annie was years older. She sighed, as if she was sick and tired of Ella’s silliness. ‘It’s only charcoal ash, Aunty,’ she said as she approached me. ‘She picked it up from the barbecue we had this afternoon.’

Ella flopped onto the blanket and pointed at the sky. ‘Mum, look. The first fairies are beginning to glow.’

‘Those are stars, Ella. There are no fairies,’ Annie said, shaking her head. She sat beside me and opened her notebook. ‘Did you know, Aunty, stars are big balls of burning gases?’

‘Is that right?’ I said, pulling a warm blanket over the pair of them.

Ella tipped her head back. ‘There are so many tonight.’

Annie did not look up from her notebook. ‘The human eye can see approximately two thousand five hundred to three thousand stars at once,’ she said in a matter-of-fact voice. ‘But the Milky Way has hundreds of billions.’

Ella blinked. ‘Billions is more than thousands, right?’

‘Yes,’ Annie said, glancing up. ‘A thousand thousand make a million. A thousand million make a billion.’ She tapped her pencil against the page as if confirming the maths. ‘So yes. Much more.’

Ella pointed up. ‘That one looks huge.’

‘It only looks huge because it’s closer. Most stars are the same size as the sun. But they are all very far away, so they look tiny.’ She paused, looked at Ella, then added, ‘Also, that one is not a star. It’s Venus.’

Ella frowned. ‘How do you know?’

‘It’s not twinkling. Stars twinkle. Planets do not. Everyone knows that.’

Ella shrugged and started shaking her jar of stardust.

‘Did you know, Ella, that people used stars for navigation in the olden days?’

‘Like... ten years ago?’ Ella asked, still shaking her jar with delight.

‘No. Like when our mums were little. They didn’t have phones then,’ Annie said, matter-of-factly.

I rolled my eyes at that. Sometimes she said the most brilliant things, and then sometimes this. Just how old did she think my sister and I were.

They settled into the blanket, on their backs, watching the sky, when a sudden streak of light tore across it. Annie bolted upright.

‘What was that?’

All day she had been so certain, so full of answers. Now her round brown eyes were wide with wonder. I could have told her the truth, her mind would have comprehended that it was a tiny piece of space rock burning up as it rushes through Earth’s atmosphere.

But instead, I said, ‘That’s a wishing star.’