

Chapter 1

On the surface, the scene was unremarkable: a steel-gray lake surrounded by green pines. The late afternoon sky was deep blue and filled with little white clouds that looked like puffs of slowly drifting cotton. At the southern edge of the lake there stood a log cabin. This cabin was old but still sturdy and the shingle roof was slightly gray and covered in a deep drift of red pine needles. In front of the cabin there was a small floating boat dock with a low railing of varnished pine. And at the railing, standing on the boat dock, there was a man.

This man was tall and thin, dressed for fall weather in a sky-blue, zip-up sweater and loose, gray woolen slacks. Below the slacks he wore blue canvas slip-on sneakers with a band of white rubber at the sole. He had a thick crop of dark wavy hair, cut short at the sides. But apart from the pipe that jutted from his thin mouth, his face could not be seen because of the very large pair of high-powered binoculars that he held to his eyes, anxiously scanning the surface of the lake.

Any casual observer would imagine that this man was an idle holiday maker – spending a quiet weekend at his cabin in the pines; or perhaps, because of the way that he was dressed, the viewer of this placid scene would conclude that the man was an academic, an English professor who was getting away from it all to write the Great American Novel.

But any observer who thought *these* things would be quite mistaken. But it would hardly be his fault that he was mistaken. For how could anyone be expected to know that this man was in fact a brilliant scientist and inventor; and that he was anxiously scanning the calm, riffling surface of the lake with ever-increasing alarm, waiting for any sign of his latest invention: a small, experimental submarine: an experimental submarine that was piloted by two young girls.

Yes, far below the tranquil, mirror-like calm of the surface of Meteor Lake, in the midnight-blue depths just above the lake bottom, at this very moment, Nancy Blonde and Nancy Black were sitting in the cramped interior of a small, white experimental bathysphere. The craft was egg-shaped, with small fins at the sides, a boxlike rudder at the rear and in front a curved viewing window of special plastic. Behind the viewing window the two eighteen-year-olds could be dimly seen, sitting side-by-side, their large blue eyes and pale, delicate skin feebly illuminated by the single sodium vapor light of the cabin. In the grainy yellow light their blue eyes looked gray. They looked gloomily out through the thick front window of the submarine. The only sound was of their quiet breathing and the whirring of the electric motor that drove the sub's propellers.

“I don't see anything, do you?” said Nancy Blonde irritably to her twin sister.

“No... can't see anything in this murk...” said Nancy Black.

The motor whirred. The small white sub moved slowly on.

Suddenly, out of the corner of her eye, Nancy Blonde caught sight of what the girls were looking for: a slowly flashing blue strobe light that served as a beacon. She touched her sister's leg.

“There! You see it?!”

“Must be about a hundred yards off...” said Nancy Black. “Hard to tell in all this slime...”

Her blonde sister slowly turned the wheel and the small submarine began whirring forward with the floating beacon now dead-ahead, flashing eerily in the darkness near the lake bottom.

Suddenly, as the two girls made toward the beacon, Nancy Black, who was sitting on the right, noticed that her right side was suddenly very cold. She reached over and touched her shoulder and found that her baby-blue woolen sweater was damp. She began feeling the hull of the submarine with her slender fingers. The hull was dripping with icy-cold water.

The dark-haired girl ran her fingers quickly up and down the hull until she found the source of the water. There was a small drizzle flickering in through a leak in one of the welded metal seams.

“Hey, Nan...” Nancy Black called out matter-of-factly, “sub’s leaking.”

“*What?!?*”

“The sub. It’s uhh... sprung a leak.”

Nancy Blonde leaned over and her twin guided her hand to the place where she had felt the icy water coming through. When the flaxen-haired teen withdrew her hand it was disconcertingly cold and wet. Her pretty face took on a determined scowl. “We’ve got to surface,” she said. “We’ve got to surface *now!*”

“But what about the beacon?”

“*Hang* the beacon! We’ve got to get *this* thing back to the surface before that seam ruptures completely and drowns us *both!*”

“You mean...”

“It’s very likely that the leak will rapidly get worse. If we don’t get to the surface soon,” she concluded grimly, “we may never make it at all.”

Nancy Black threw up her hands. “Oh that is just *great!*”

Nancy Blonde set her jaw and crinkled the side of her red mouth. She pulled back on the wheel hard and the small sub began to ascend. The two girls found themselves leaning backward as the egg-shaped bathysphere angled up through the murky water. The progress was slow. Agonizingly slow.

“We’re too heavy,” Nancy Black said nervously, “Something’s weighing us down!”

Her sister was suddenly very calm. In moments of great peril, and the twins had known many of them, a wind of deep stillness seemed to blow from some unseen place; and Nancy Blonde settled down inside herself and began to think very clearly. She visualized a blueprint of the experimental sub in her mind and began scrutinizing it as the girls continued their frustratingly gradual ascent and Nancy Black pressed her fingers against the leak, trying to hold back the increasing flow of transparent, deathly-cold water. The water began to spurt around her pale fingers.

“Uhh... *Nan?!?*”

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“Think! *Think!*” Nancy Blonde commanded herself. But just as she said this, the seam ruptured further and a sudden geyser of frigid water shot into the cabin, drenching the two girls. They screamed in visceral loathing as the painfully-cold water hit their skin.

“We’ve got to get out of here!” yelled Nancy Black over the roar of rushing water.

“I know!” Nancy Blonde pulled back desperately on the wheel. If she could only get the sub a little higher... But then the seam ruptured completely and the cabin rapidly began filling with the icy flood. The two sisters looked at each other by the dim yellow cabin light with horror in their eyes.

Then the light went out.

Displaying great presence of mind, Nancy Black unclipped the small waterproof pencil flashlight from her gray skirt and clicked it on with her thumb. The submarine filled with quavering, watery light.

“Quick!” yelled Nancy Blonde over the roaring flood. “The hatch! We’ll have to swim for it!”

Nancy Black put the pencil flashlight in her teeth and the two girls dove for the back of the sub where the small circular hatch was located. In that cramped space, there was only room for one girl. Her sister got there first and put her hands to the wheel and turned with all her strength. But the wheel wouldn’t budge. It was solidly stuck.

“Let me in there!” yelled Nancy Black over the rushing, freezing-cold water that was now up to their waists, drenching their tights and short woolen skirts. Nancy Blonde realized that her sister, by far the stronger of the two, would have a better chance of opening the hatch. She writhed out of the small, cramped space and Nancy Black took her place. And as she did so, both girls experienced a terrifying, sickening sensation: the sub, increasingly heavy with water, was rapidly descending into the black depths of Meteor Lake.

Nancy Black handed the flashlight to her sister and took hold of the wheel with a determined, savage look on her face. Her hair was pasted in black tendrils to her pale forehead by the frigid raging flood. She grasped the wheel firmly and with a wild cry she heaved at it with all her strength. For Nancy Black was much stronger than her sister. She was much stronger than most boys. Much stronger even than most men.

There was no reason for her animal strength that anyone could see. It was just there, like her jet-black hair was there. It had just happened somehow. And though Nancy Blonde and Nancy Black were identical twins, they differed in certain ways that baffled every doctor who had ever known them. They were truly identical. They looked exactly alike – except for the inexplicable fact of certain small but crucial differences. Both girls had perfectly-straight, thick, lustrous hair. But Nancy Blonde had hair that was the color of pale gold, whereas her sister had hair that was the color of a crow’s wing.

And Nancy Blonde was possessed of a brilliant scientific mind; whereas Nancy Black, though very intelligent in her own way, was, in matters of mathematics and computation, no match for her genius sister. Just as Nancy Blonde was physically no match for her unnaturally-strong twin.

These inequalities had been worked out between the girls when they were children. Nancy Blonde would easily beat her sister at chess; then, just as she was beginning to gloat, she would find herself lifted up into the air and pinned against the living room wall by the iron strength of one of her raven-haired sister's hands. And it was at about *this* time that their parents began to see there was something different, something unusual, something not quite normal about their twin girls. Because at the time the sisters were only two years old.

Nancy Black felt the wheel in her hands begin to budge. The water was almost up to their necks.

Her sister said breathlessly, "Nancy, do *hurry!*"

And Nancy Black took a deep breath and heaved at the wheel again. The veins stood out on her slender neck. She screamed with fury, through clenched teeth...

And suddenly the wheel came free. And the hatch blew inward with science-fiction speed, almost knocking the girls' heads in with the force of all that terrible, howling water savagely rushing into the small, doomed sub.

The water surged in so fast, with such cold rage that it seemed to the girls that there were two instants: in one, Nancy Black was heaving at the hatch with all her very considerable might and the hatch was beginning to falter and give way. This was a girl who could bend iron bars.

In the next instant, the hatch had blown open and the dark submarine where they crouched was completely filled with frigid, dark water, which seemed to roar into the open hatch door with such fury that it took no time at all. The hatch blew open and the water was upon them.

The shock and the force of that cold, cold water pouring in on them nearly took away the girls' breath. It was their first impulse to scream as the frigid water hit them. But they did not scream. By sheer force of will, each of the twins held her breath in her lungs, clenching her teeth with wild determination as every cell in her body cried out in rage and pain. But the twins' minds did not falter. And their minds did not give way. Because they knew from experience of many grim situations that if their resolve weakened for even an instant, they were done for. They would be dead; trapped inside a sinking, doomed experimental submarine in the murk and slime at the bottom of Meteor Lake.

The girls found themselves with only one lungful each of precious air, in almost total darkness, in freezing water, in a rapidly-sinking tiny sub. And, as often happened when they found themselves in dire circumstances, the twins began to communicate telepathically.

It wasn't a matter of words. An idea would come into the mind of one of the girls, just as though she had thought of it herself. But then she would look at her twin and she could see in her sister's eyes that she was thinking the same thought. This had happened so many times while the girls were little that they had come to take it for granted, assuming everyone could do the same. And it was only when they had gone to school and come to know other children that they realized other people couldn't do it, not in the way they could.

Nancy Blonde still held the pencil flash. She suddenly thought that her sister should go first out of the hatch and that she would light the way. And then, when her sister had got clear, she

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would hand her the pencil flashlight and then swim out herself. And when she looked, her dark twin was already nodding her agreement. So Nancy Blonde held the small beam steady while her sister swam out. Then she handed up the flashlight and found her own way free.

But then, just as Nancy Blonde was working her way out of the hatch, just as she was halfway through, the sub let out a large bubble of its last remaining air and sharply changed its angle, grabbing and cruelly twisting her hips. The sub began to sink rapidly. With Nancy Blonde caught in the hatch door the sub was sinking fast into the inky blackness at the bottom of Meteor Lake.

Nancy Black grabbed her sister's pale flailing hand and swam upward at the same time, kicking her legs with terrific strength, battling the sinking sub for her sister's life.

Nancy Blonde felt a white sheet of pain flash through her as her arm was nearly dislocated by the terrible force of her sister's strength and her hips were wrenched horribly by the narrow hatch door. This time she couldn't help herself.

She screamed.

And with that scream, she let out all of her remaining air.