

*The Galacteran Legacy: Book One*

*Galaxy Watch*

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*Chapter One – Discovery*

Nicole Sky wasn't having a good day.

“Record-breaking highs reaching into the hundreds have been documented worldwide—”

*Yeah, thanks for the update; hadn't noticed that.*

“—and this rapid rise has sent global warming advocates swarming over Congress to demand immediate legislation.”

*Sure, but nix the 'immediate' bit.*

“More on that at the top of the hour. Rachel, back to you.”

Nicole threateningly brandished the remote. *More breaking news, Rachel?*

“Thanks, Jerry. In other news, highly unusual comet activity has been detected close to Earth.”

*Wow. Bright rocks in sky. Better call up Area 51.*

“Abnormal satellite readings around the globe have fueled further controversy. Several days ago, a slight drop in the planetary gravitational pull—”

The television snapped off. Nicole flung down the remote control and tucked a strand of chestnut-brown hair behind one ear. “That's right,” she drawled. “It's the end of the world as we know it.” More seriously, she added, “End of my world, anyway.”

It was hot. Dead hot. This was the global warming to the max, and it had hit the town like a fireball. Somewhere in the distance, a siren wailed pitifully. Temperatures were skyrocketing. Sunlight filtering through smoke from burning forests had dyed the world red.

Nicole's parents weren't helping. She could hear them now, roaring at each other in the kitchen. The argument went something like this:

"Honey," her mom said, "the plants outside are brown."

"You read the papers!" came her dad's voice. "We're on the Monday, Wednesday, Friday watering schedule. It's Tuesday."

"But I can't *stand* to watch them die."

"Then sit."

"Honey!"

"You asking for jail time?"

"A fine at worst!"

"The way things are now? It's jail time *and* a fine at best! So get over your plants!"

And it went on. And on. And on. Until finally Nicole couldn't stand it. Instead of screaming about the stupid water, they could be calling someone to fix the AC that hadn't worked in two days—forty-eight hours of stifling heat in their airless trap of a home. But since, to her best knowledge, they weren't planning on fixing that any time soon, she decided that outside couldn't be much worse than in.

"Mom, I'm going out!" Nicole yelled as she stormed to the front door. In sweaty frustration she snatched a thin jacket from the coat rack to screen her head from the blazing sun.

Outside wasn't better, but it also wasn't worse. The yellowed battlefields of dried grass and crinkled leaves that lined the cul-de-sac were terribly ugly, as were the drooping trees. The sudden heat wave had devastated the whole city. But at least it wasn't nearly as bad here as in some of the towns out west. Fires weren't rampant here, for a start. *Good old East Coast*, thought Nicole grimly.

She hadn't stepped off the porch before a helicopter roared overhead, a tiny dot on its way to disaster. Sweat was already soaking her clothing, so she decided to find some shade. Half jogging, half walking, Nicole passed a beet-red bald man guzzling a sports drink and holding a large ice-cream bar. He stared at her accusingly, as if the weather was all her fault.

"So how come you're out? Day's a nightmare." He took a bite of the ice cream and licked some melted chocolate off his sausage-like fingers. "Maybe all them tree-hugging vegetarians were right. Them and that global warming guy."

"Yeah. Too late, though," Nicole mumbled, quickly walking away.

She checked by her best friends' houses. Danny was on vacation, she remembered too late. To Anchorage, Alaska, to visit some relatives. Lucky him. Lex was gone too, off on some horse-riding competition, as usual. Lex sure did love horses. But just thinking of riding in a thick uniform with the blazing sun beating down made Nicole sweat.

Taking a shortcut around a neighbor's house, she stumbled out close to a forest. "*Forest*," she thought, tacking on quotation marks. The thing that lay spread before her was not a wild, untamed, breathtaking forest but a poor, ragged excuse for a woodland where campers dragged their complaining little brats to sleep under the stars, or whatever. If one was into that kind of thing. And Nicole wasn't. Getting eaten alive by millions of pesky insects, lying in a sweltering sleeping bag, trying to sleep with screechy animal sounds in her ears—not so high on her to-do list. Comfort was top priority. Past that, file in it her inbox and she'd get back to you. Maybe.

Nicole tottered to the shade of a giant oak at the edge of the forest to rest. She'd been out a whole ten minutes. Ten minutes too long. Throwing down the jacket, she sat against a twisted root and kicked at the dirt. Nicole hated heat because it made her grumpy and angry. Actually, a

lot of things made her that way, but heat was close to the top of the list. *At least the shade is helping*, she thought. Sort of, anyway.

Rubbing her back against the root, Nicole listened to the sounds of the forest. Birds twittered overhead. The gentle rustling of leaves filled the air. There was a squirrel, scratching up a tree trunk. And that noise . . . that last one . . .

There was something wrong with the sound. It was a low, eerie creak in the trees. Nicole whirled around, throwing up a flurry of leaf litter, but the forest before her was empty. And, suddenly, strangely quiet.

Something swooped down from the trees. She scrambled to her feet, but it turned out to be just a bird. It settled on a low branch and watched her with wide, curious eyes. Nicole sank back to the ground, but her attention was fixed on the strange creature. It was a very large and ugly bird with grey, wrinkled skin. A few ragged red feathers stuck out in odd places.

“Well, you’re a miserable sight,” Nicole snickered.

The bird suddenly hopped down from the branch and pecked about frantically in the leaves. It dug aside pebbles and scratched madly through dirt. Nicole leaned closer. For some odd reason, she was intrigued by the hideous creature. She reached out to touch it, but then, all of a sudden, the bird glanced up sharply and cocked its head. It soared skyward, settled onto a high branch, and chirped roughly. A single dull feather floated down and came to rest at the base of a nearby tree.

Then it sat silently upon its perch, watching. Waiting.

Nicole stood slowly, wondering why the air suddenly felt cooler than it had in days. She shrugged into her jacket and thought about going back; the edge of the forest was only a few feet

away. But the feather was tempting, and at last she took a tentative step towards it. The bird's gaze followed her. Nicole knelt next to the feather and picked it up.

Then she noticed what lay beside it.

Tossing the feather aside, she gasped at what lay half-covered by a pile of brittle leaves. The small, bright object glittered even in the forest shadows. Nicole eagerly snatched it up and rubbed what looked like a golden pocket watch against her shirt. Grinning, she leaned back against the tree and examined the strange watch more closely as online auction sites flashed through her head. *Finally! Something exciting!*

Fingering the long chain hanging from the watch, she wondered who had lost such a treasure. There was a single word inscribed on the front and four lines of text on the back in a language she'd never seen. It was double-hinged so both covers could be opened.

Nicole's fingers probed along the sides of the pocket watch. There were two tiny buttons and a larger one. She pressed the latter.

The front cover snapped open. Instead of a clock face, a ring of sixteen faintly glowing blue buttons greeted her. Each button displayed a word in a strange language different from that on the outside of the watch. Nicole's mouth dropped open in amazement. Curiosity lifted her fingers to the buttons.

Logic instantly sprang in her defense. *Drop it. Drop it now. Drop it and run.* But Nicole couldn't. It was as if the watch was glued to her hand. It was too tempting. She couldn't let go. After a second of hesitation, she pressed one of the blue buttons.

A flash of electricity sparked through the air. The bolt split and formed a solid ring around her. Nicole screamed, but the tremendous roar of the spinning light silenced her cry. She tried to get up and run, but she seemed to be rooted to the ground. Shielding her face, she could

only wait and look on in terror as the ring expanded into an arching vortex. Faster and faster it swirled until the entire oak was lit with an unearthly blue glow.

Just as quickly as it had appeared, the vortex vanished. With it went Nicole. Now nothing was left where she had been moments before, not even a scratch in the earth.

Far overhead, the ugly bird preened its feathers, chirped, and soared into the sky, disappearing in a flash of white light.