

BALLOON

ALTITUDE

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Curse of the Travel Bug Vol. 1

Curse of the Travel Bug Vol. 2

By the Book

FACTS

In 1927, Hawthorne Gray set a high-altitude record on his first balloon flight by reaching 29,000 feet. On his second flight, he ascended to an impressive 42,000 feet, but the record was not officially recognised because he had to abandon the balloon by parachute to save his life. Undeterred, Gray attempted the feat again, successfully reaching 42,000 feet once more on his third flight. Tragically, he ran out of oxygen during the descent, lost consciousness due to hypoxia, and was later found dead in a tree.

In 1934, Americans William Kepner, Albert Stevens, and Orvil Anderson reached 60,000 feet and were the first ever humans to report seeing the Earth's curvature with their own eyes. They were compelled to parachute to reach safety when their hydrogen balloon exploded mid-flight.

In 1956, US Navy Lieutenant Commanders Malcolm Ross and Lee Lewis set a new record by flying to an altitude of 76,000 feet. Then, in October the following year, they surpassed their own achievement, reaching 85,700 feet.

In 1960, Joe Kittinger achieved remarkable fame by setting two new records: flying a balloon to the highest altitude and then performing the highest ever parachute jump from 102,800 feet; the first person to jump from the stratosphere, cementing his place in history. These astounding records, however, stood for

only six years.

Lieutenant Commander Malcolm Ross embarked on another space balloon adventure in 1961, accompanied by Lieutenant Commander Vic Prather. They launched from the deck of an American aircraft carrier, soaring to a record-breaking height of 113,740 feet.

Kittinger's 1960 skydiving record was shattered in 1966 when Nicholas Piantanida, an amateur parachute jumper, skydived from a crewed balloon at 123,500 feet. His record would stand for the next forty-six years.

Austrian skydiver, Felix Baumgartner, jumped from a helium balloon in 2012 as part of the Red Bull Stratos Project. He set two world records that day: jumping from just over 128,000 feet and reaching an estimated top speed of 843.6 miles per hour, exceeding the speed of sound.

Two years later, in 2014, Alan Eustice from Google smashed Baumgartner's altitude record when he jumped from a space balloon at 135,908 feet, more than one mile higher. However, reaching a maximum speed of 822 miles per hour, he did not break Baumgartner's fastest skydive record.

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CHRISTOPHER KEITH

ONE

It was supposed to be the peak of his career, a day of jubilation and recognition. Many years of hard work, sleepless nights, and relentless perseverance had led him to this point. It would've heralded as a revolutionary step forward, propelling humanity into a new era of tourism.

Yet, in a devastating twist, it had all gone catastrophically wrong, and hundreds of thousands of people, if not millions, had just lost their lives.

In a guarded crouch amid scattered debris, Will put his fist to the floor as the dust dispersed and settled around him. His spacesuit, forty-five kilos of engineering brilliance, had been custom-made using a complex system of equipment and layers designed to keep him warm, comfortable, and safe from cosmic threats. But his breathing was rapid, and he had to focus on slowing it. Panic was more taxing than physical exertion and

would drain his oxygen tanks. The more he allowed his pulse to quicken and his mind to race, the less time he would live.

He rose cautiously and switched on the EVA headlamps mounted on the sides of his helmet. The twin lights speared through the dust and smoke as he swung his head around the office, observing the carnage. Damaged computer hardware and a tangled nest of cables and wires littered the floor. He looked up towards the steel beams hanging precariously above him. The roof had been ripped off, revealing a rust-coloured sky filled with thick, black smoke that had turned daytime into night.

Without warning, the unstable floor gave way, and Will dropped like a brick, surfing concrete for three storeys when it came tumbling and crashing down to the ground in a deluge of debris.

As the dust resettled and his heart resumed a steady beat, he wiped his visor and looked down to find himself swinging six feet above the floor, his legs treading the air. His parachute was hopelessly snagged on a twisted steel strut above, leaving him suspended as he was still strapped into the harness. His red nylon canopy was now a ragged, torn mess, smeared with soot, dust, and grime. Against the dark orange sky, it looked almost camouflaged, leaving the Fable Sky insignia obscured and indecipherable.

The frayed edges of the canopy fluttered weakly in the noxious breeze, and the buckled steel strut groaned under the strain. He twisted himself to assess his surroundings from his trapped position. The office was a scene of broken furniture, shattered glass, chunks of concrete, and electronic devices scattered like discarded toys. On his left, through the smoke and dust, he saw the jagged remains of walls with fires burning

stubbornly nearby, acutely aware they could spread towards him.

The parachute's quick-release buckles were supposed to be his salvation, but one was jammed tight, leaving him stuck like a moth caught in a spider's web. Panic briefly flirted with his consciousness, but his focus remained on the problem. One of the many facets of his training. After all he had been through that day, this was no time to surrender himself.

He spotted a shard of glass within reach, embedded in a pile of rubble. As more smoke poured in through gaping holes in the wall, choking the office and reducing visibility to one metre, he stretched his arm to its fullest extent but struggled to grip the piece of glass with his gloved hand. The suit, designed for the vacuum of space, was a cumbersome burden on Earth, testing his patience and precision.

Ariane's words from earlier that day played in his mind: "Have you ever tried tying shoelaces while wearing boxing gloves?"

Fumbling and finally clutching the glass shard between his thumb and first finger, he used the sharp edge as a makeshift knife and sawed through the harness strap, his arm aching and his breathing heavy in his helmet. Passing the glass through the thick webbing required painstaking effort, but finally, with a frayed snap, the strap split in half, and he fell the remaining distance, landing awkwardly on top of the debris. Pain rippled through his weaker leg and hip, but he pushed himself upright, ignoring the pain. The immediate danger of hanging strapped to his parachute with fires burning in proximity was over, but the threat was far from that. He was still inside a building that could topple at any moment, and whatever hazards awaited outside the building's ruin.

Needing a moment to catch his breath, he leaned heavily against a damaged metal cabinet. The sound of his breathing echoed loudly inside his helmet, a constant reminder of his dwindling oxygen supply. He almost gagged but managed to avoid throwing up. It was not as though he could flip his visor unless he wanted a slow, agonising death, so his options were to keep his stomach contents down or bathe his visor and put up with the trapped stench.

He had to keep moving, had to find a way out of this death trap and locate his crewmates. Despite the pain in his leg and hip, intensified by the crash-landing and heavy suit weighing him down, he crossed the room through the thickening smoke. Glass fragments and plaster crunched beneath his boots as he approached the next room, its double doors hanging off their hinges. Beyond them, a collapsed wall formed a steep incline. He paused to assess his options, realising the slope was his only escape route. The brief stop brought him the half-moment he needed to compose himself.

He climbed the slope carefully, but the loose rubble shifted underfoot, dislodging fragments of brick and concrete that clattered noisily as they tumbled down the incline.

At the summit, the full extent of the town's devastation unfolded before him. Out-of-control fires blazed, turning the sky into a hellish orange-and-black panorama. Most buildings were reduced to skeletal remains, their doorways and blown-out windows spewing toxic smoke into the already darkened sky.

On the fringe of the town, fires raced through woodland, leaping from tree to tree. They would burn for hours, days, perhaps even weeks. This morning, none of this would have seemed possible. How had it turned out like this? Dazed by

the unreality of it all, the horror too awful to grasp, he clenched his teeth so hard his jaw ached.

He glanced upward again, hoping for signs of his crew in the disturbed sky. "This is Will. Do you copy? Where are you? Did you make it back safely?"

His voice, raw with emotion, cut through the static. The silence that followed was deafening, interrupted only by the sound of his breathing.

"Jefferson, it's Will. Do you copy?" He waited, desperate to hear a familiar voice. "Donavon? Lloyd? Peta? Ariane? Can anyone hear me? Do you copy?"

His message went unanswered.

"Listen, I'm in a town. I don't know where. I don't even know if it's still England. The damage here is catastrophic. I hope you can hear me. I'm going to try to head to the edge of town."

Scanning the scene again, left to right, right to left, above, then ahead, he saw no signs of life. No one crawled out of the ruins. The death toll would take months to tally up and would shock the world.

Where was his crew? Their radio silence sent another wave of dread through him.

Were they even alive?

Jefferson would know from the flat or fluctuating bio-signs on his monitor.

If he was still alive himself.

Checking the readouts on his solar-rechargeable computer built into his wrist, he noted the time was two minutes past three. His oxygen had dropped to ninety-four per cent, giving him less than eight hours to find his crewmates, find shelter, and find hope within this nightmare.

Drawing a steadying breath, he moved forward, battling against the frightening realisation that what should have been a moment of triumph had become a day of unimaginable terror.

TWO

Earlier that day...

The lighthouse stood proudly at the precipice of a sheer cliff overlooking the vast, tumultuous Celtic Sea, a sentinel against the harsh elements and treacherous waters below. It first lit in 1837 and had become automated one hundred and fifty years later. But major advances in satellite technology meant ships were less likely to get lost or caught in stormy weather because they relied on VHF radio *and* hi-tech navigation for guidance, making the whole lighthouse concept redundant in the modern world.

Located in St. Ives, Cornwall, it was one of the oldest lighthouses in the country, a monument to maritime history, and the tallest within the region, rising an impressive forty-four metres into the sky. Despite its rich, historical significance, the

lighthouse was often described as architecturally unremarkable, even ugly by some locals. The white exterior with a navy-blue band around its middle was heavily marked by weather-beaten, utilitarian concrete, showing signs of the relentless assault by decades of salt-laden winds and rain. The cylindrical tower lacked the ornate embellishments or picturesque charm found in other lighthouses of its time. Instead, it stood as a sombre, stoic figure, its austere appearance and single-minded purpose to guide and warn mariners with its elevated light source and distinctive daymark.

At the top, the lantern room housed a powerful beacon, which, in its heyday, could be seen from miles away, piercing through the thick fog and violent storms that frequently lashed the Cornish coast. The lantern room, encased in protective glass and crowned with a functional dome, was accessible via a narrow, spiral staircase that wound its way up from the watch room below.

The base of the lighthouse was solid and broad, anchored firmly to the rocky ground of the cliff with an entrance defined by an arched doorway. Nearby, remnants of the old keeper's house and auxiliary buildings could still be found, their stone walls and slate roofs crumbling under the weight of time and neglect. While considered an eyesore by modern architectural standards, the lighthouse had fulfilled its mission with untiring dedication. It had saved countless lives by guiding ships safely around the jagged peninsular, warning them of the dangerous rocks hidden beneath the waves. Its lamps, with a decent range of twenty-two nautical miles, occulting every nine seconds, had provided a modicum of safety for maritime pilots along the South West Peninsula, proving consistent reliability in nature's tumult.

Owned by Jefferson's family for several generations, the lighthouse now served as his heirloom and a tourist icon to the rest of the country since its decommission. While no longer providing navigational aid to mariners, it had been repurposed to offer navigational support to Fable Sky, the world's largest helium balloon, tethered to the cliff just two hundred metres away, ready for its inaugural launch into space a few hours from now.

Jefferson had amassed a hefty fortune out of his property management and an impressive investment portfolio. Instead of investing in overdue lighthouse maintenance, he had sold off his assets and poured all his money into the balloon project, converting the watch room into a flight control room and the basement into a preparation hub for the crew. For the most part, its anatomy was kept in its original condition. The interior walls were cylindrical bare brick and the wooden floorboards and window frames had never been replaced.

While the flight control room was compact, fitting snugly into its rounded space, Jefferson cherished the solitude and autonomy it offered. This small sanctuary was his domain, a place where he could immerse himself in his work without anyone overseeing his every move. The walls were lined with state-of-the-art tech, giving the room an almost futuristic feel. Dominating the space was a long, curved desk, its surface a tangle of technology and high-definition screens that displayed complex data visualisations and lit up the room, casting a bluish glow that blended with natural light streaming through the surrounding row of windows. Various Ethernet and power cables snaked across the floor, connecting computers to the navigational instruments that communicated directly with the balloon. As the core of Jefferson's operation, these computers

were well-equipped with the latest meteorological forecasting software. Capable of processing vast amounts of data in real time, they provided critical information on wind patterns, temperature variations, and atmospheric pressure. Algorithms crunched high-value numbers at lightning speed, generating forecasts both detailed and reliable, essential for navigating the balloon safely and efficiently and ensuring it stayed on course through the turbulent skies.

Todd's terminal on the opposite side of the room was far smaller, less personalised, and certainly messier, covered in all manner of computer hardware and an empty coke can that had been partially crushed. A series of sleek panels were filled with tiny lights, indicating the flow of data between the control room and the balloon's on board systems.

Despite the room's technical assembly, personal touches reflected Jefferson's character. Photos of family and friends were pinned to a corkboard along with old postcards from the places he had visited. Two potted plants in full bloom sat on the windowsill, adding a touch of green to the otherwise metallic and digital environment.

The flight control room would oversee the journey to the edge of space—a kind of mission control base. And Jefferson, once head keeper of the lighthouse, responsible for entering the names of passing ships in the logbook, repainting all the wooden structures, and keeping the area clean right down to the coastline, was now the flight director. He handled all the administration, from IT to book-keeping. Should the flight succeed, he anticipated it would kick-start space tourism and replace the heavy losses incurred from owning an obsolete lighthouse. That money would feed back into its upkeep and replenish his retirement savings.

Plain and simple business strategy.

Inside the lighthouse tower, dressed in his freshly dry-cleaned suit, a blue so dark it seemed black, the fifty-five-year-old stared at the screens, deep in thought. He'd always been a reliable sleeper, but in recent weeks, with the launch growing nearer, he had not slept well, some nights staring out of his bedroom window until dawn crawled across the glass. Reading before bed, cups of herbal tea, and soothing meditation apps hadn't helped. Last night, he had managed no sleep at all.

Jefferson's day had begun at three in the morning in total darkness. By half four, he had showered and dressed in his best suit to show respect for the occasion and was sitting inside his Range Rover, towing the gondola from a garage up to the cliff, where two helium trucks, gleaming under the first rays of the sun, had arrived and positioned themselves strategically round the deflated zero-pressure helium balloon to begin inflation. The trucks, each adorned with safety warnings and complex piping systems, were the lifeblood of this operation, carrying the precious gas that would give life to the enormous balloon.

The envelope, an engineering marvel, lay spread out on the ground, an enormous, shimmering fabric that seemed almost ethereal in the morning light. The engineers and technicians in high-visibility vests and hard hats moved with choreographed perfection between the helium trucks and the balloon.

Thick hoses connected the helium trucks to the balloon's intake valves, and the atmosphere was filled with the low hum of the trucks' engines and occasional hiss of gas being carefully released. The process of inflating a helium balloon of this size required attention to detail. Technicians monitored pressure gauges and flow meters so the helium entered the balloon at the correct rate to avoid any mishaps.

With the helium now flowing, the balloon slowly came to life, rising and swelling, its translucent skin catching the light and reflecting a spectrum of colours. The transformation was gradual but mesmerising, a nod to the power of the helium and the design ingenuity. The entire operation was overseen by a senior engineer who stood slightly away from all the activity, clipboard in hand. She communicated via a radio, coordinating the team and ensuring every step was executed flawlessly.

Jefferson's eyes never left the balloon for the entire hour, watching nervously for an indication of trouble as the massive structure took shape, towering above the ground and planting an upside-down pear-shaped shadow. This marvel of modern aeronautical engineering was designed to reach stratospheric heights, where it would collect valuable data from the upper regions of the atmosphere.

With the inflation process completed, final checks were made with the engineers inspecting the balloon for any signs of leaks or stress points while Jefferson retreated to the flight control room. Despite his fatigue, he looked his best, his short, grey hair neatly held in place with spray and his moustache and goatee neatly clipped and shaped. A demon for details and a prodigious capacity for hard work, Jefferson had everything organised perfectly, and was ready to send the zero-pressure helium balloon on its mission.

THREE

At half past six, Todd came bounding up the steep and narrow wooden staircase, flanked by sturdy railings polished smooth by years of use. He pushed open the heavy, wooden door that led into flight control room, arriving breathless and sweating.

Todd was both Jefferson's nephew and his subordinate, a fresh-faced young man with foppish gold hair in a ponytail and a left earlobe punctured with a series of black studs at regular intervals. Genetics had screwed him in two ways, giving him the acne of a teenager and the build of a twelve-year-old.

"Someone needs to get themselves in shape," said Jefferson.

"How old are you?"

Todd bent over, puffing and panting, and looked up at his uncle. "Twenty-two."

"Your grandfather used to run up those steps in his sixties without breaking a sweat."

“He must have been... bionic... or something.”

“If they tire you that much, why not take the lift? That’s why it was installed. So everyone in the family could come up and enjoy the view.”

“That old thing?” He inhaled a deep breath and pointed in the general direction of the lift, which stopped one floor below. “It scares the crap... out of me.”

“Why?”

“It makes funny noises.”

Jefferson shook his head and folded his arms. “*You’re* the one who makes funny noises.”

Todd leaned out of the window for some fresh air, staring across the clifftop. Jefferson joined him, resting his elbows against the frame. The pre-dawn sky was streaked in orange and mauve shades with the sun teasing the horizon. It lit up a small flotilla of boats just off the coast, ready to witness the launch. Fable Sky, basking in the orange dawn, swayed gently against its ropes. The helium trucks had already gone and had been replaced by the technicians, who conducted final checks.

Taller than the Eiffel Tower, perched at 1,300 feet, the zero-pressure balloon dwarfed the lighthouse. The measured helium blob pumped into the ultra-thin polyethylene material, twenty microns thick, had accumulated at its crown, vertically stretching the balloon in the shape of an inverted teardrop. At high altitude, the helium would expand, filling it to roughly 3,000,000 cubic feet.

The balloon had already attracted the public’s attention, drawing curious onlookers from nearby towns and villages. A few families, amateur photographers, and tourists had staked out temporary spots, eagerly awaiting the imminent spectacle. Kids pointed excitedly at the balloon standing as the centre-

piece, and adults murmured in admiration and curiosity. News vans from local media outlets were parked along the perimeter, their logos brightly emblazoned on the sides, confirming the media interest in this morning's flight. Reporters bustled about, preparing their segments, and setting up equipment, ready to broadcast the event. Even a local radio station had set up a temporary booth, broadcasting live updates and interviewing visitors who shared their thoughts and their excitement about the event. The atmosphere was festive, with a few food trucks and vendors setting up shop, selling hot drinks, snacks, and souvenirs to the gathering crowd, carrying with it the hopes and aspirations of everyone who had gathered to witness this extraordinary event.

"You said there would be huge crowds this morning," said Todd, wiping his sweaty brow with the back of his hand. "I'm counting less than one hundred people down there. Where is everyone?"

"I expected a lot more by now."

"Maybe they'll turn up in time for launch."

Jefferson glanced at the time. "That's less than two hours away."

Todd spotted three technicians circling the balloon. They climbed aboard the red gondola, which resembled a circular raft, measuring three by three metres with a seating capacity of six. Made from the highest-grade aluminium, the seats featured engineered foam and fabric, making them more robust. Equally spaced around the open deck, wide enough to accommodate spacesuit-wearing individuals, they came with swivelling and reclining capabilities, allowing passengers to adjust their views. Securely mounted on the frame sitting above the gondola was a high-gain antenna, while special reflective tape affixed to the

envelope ensured it was easily detectable by commercial planes on radar.

The technicians secured spare oxygen tanks with a bungee net inside a hexagonal storage cage, positioned centrally among the six recliner seats, providing easy access from all sides. The cage also housed the solar wing camera and Akroid balloon, critical elements of their mission that were tied down firmly by the bungee nets and straps. One of the technicians activated the batteries, providing the essential power for the balloon's electronic systems, vital for maintaining its technology during the flight. A second technician approached the main control panel with a complex array of switches, dials, and readouts that formed the technological heart of the balloon. She flipped a series of power switches, activating the electronics.

With the power now flowing steadily, the first technician ran diagnostics on the transponder's signal output, a critical component responsible for sending and receiving signals that would allow the ground team to track the balloon's position and status in real time.

Off in the distance, Todd spotted a line of military trucks speeding along the country lane, their rugged, camouflaged exteriors blending with the verdant countryside. The convoy moved quickly, their engines roaring as they sped along the winding road, leaving behind a cloud of smoke that hung in the air. As the trucks raced to the horizon, they seemed almost to disappear into the sunrise, so Todd turned from the window and faced his uncle, now back at his computer. "What do you want me to do?"

Before taking on the Fable Sky project, Jefferson had spent twenty-five years at the Met Office, specialising in atmospheric and oceanic administration that served civil aviation and the

shipping industry. Todd, on the other hand, was gifted with computers. In fact, he was knowledgeable about engines and most technology, expert at sniffing out issues and doggedly resourceful in his ways to repair them, though there were some power tools with which he should never be trusted. He had inherited his technical prowess from his father, Jefferson's brother, a self-taught mechanic and IT specialist. But Todd's lack of expertise in deciphering complex meteorological charts and navigating sophisticated software used to predict weather patterns limited the scope of his duties, so he was assigned to more straightforward, less demanding roles.

“Why don't you go downstairs and check on the crew, see if they need anything?”

“I just came from there.”

Jefferson wheeled his chair back, stood, and took off his suit jacket. “How are they doing?”

Todd tightened his ponytail. “Tense doesn't even begin to describe it.”

FOUR

Underneath the lighthouse was the basement, nicknamed the white room, where the Fable Sky crew prepared for what the local media had once dubbed: *A giant leap for space tourism.*

With its white tile flooring, white sandstone walls, and the multiple spotlights dotted across the ceiling, it was a changing room cum storage space cum strategy hub. The circular room was divided into two hemispheres by a row of concrete pillars supporting the ceiling, wide enough for someone to stand behind and not be seen, with a wooden bench curving around one side of the cylindrical walls, lined with clothes hooks.

The white room had recently been cleaned, and everything gleamed with a sanitary sparkle, leaving a disinfectant odour in the air that masked the smell of salt, oil, and mildew. An open stepladder stood beneath a spotlight hanging out of the socket by its wires, still awaiting repair after the electrician had left to

deal with a sudden home emergency two days ago and hadn't yet returned.

Dressed in a shirt, tie, blazer jacket, and dark skinny jeans that accentuated his long legs and trendy plimsolls, Will sat down on the bench, nervously tapping his feet and checking his watch every few minutes. His laptop was still on, so he switched it off, folded down the top, and slipped it inside its case. He opened the newspaper to continue a political story he'd started earlier that morning, a distraction from his nerves.

Eye witness accounts from Spanish naval ships and a US submarine confirmed the uranium on board the North Korean naval ship heading towards Yemen was indeed bomb-grade, enriched uranium, contradicting vehement denials from both the North Korean military and government. The Spanish naval ships, part of an international coalition monitoring maritime activity in the region, reported suspicious behaviour and the unusual configuration of the vessel. Meanwhile, the US submarine, covertly tracking the ship's movements, provided detailed surveillance and analysis, confirming the nature of the cargo.

Reading the paragraph twice without absorbing a word, he discarded the newspaper and stared up at the domed ceiling, wondering how many people had arrived to see the balloon. Anthony, his son, had promised to attend. Had he kept his promise?

Will strolled over to the toilets on the other side of the room, passing the brick-lined containment block that fed water into the two cubicles. Anxious and excited in equal measures, he relieved himself for the fifth time that morning. As founder of the Fable Sky mission to the edge of space, he was under considerable pressure. Not once had he declared himself the captain because he held the title of flight operator. Yet, it was clear everyone viewed him as the de facto captain, seeing him

as both an inspirational and well-respected leader. Despite this perception, he doubted whether he truly lived up to this esteemed mantle. He didn't like being regarded as the captain because he valued the collaborative nature of their mission. To him, leadership was a shared responsibility, and he believed every member of the crew played a crucial role in their success. Elevating one person above others undermined this collective effort and piled undue pressure on him. Moreover, he was uncomfortable with the spotlight and preferred to work quietly behind the scenes, focusing solely on his specific tasks without the added weight of being the key figurehead. He respected the expertise and contributions of colleagues and recognising their efforts equally was fundamental to maintaining morale and a cooperative environment.

Opening the bathroom cabinet, he found an assortment of pills for common ailments, including heartburn. His stomach was hideously writhing with nerves, with acid reflux rising in his chest, so he chewed an antacid tablet.

Back in the changing area, Will saw two technicians had just arrived to conduct spot checks on their spacesuits and life support equipment, ensuring all the seals were airtight, the communication systems were fully functional, and the mobility joints operated smoothly. They also checked the integrity of the life support systems, confirming the oxygen supply, carbon dioxide scrubbers, and temperature controls worked perfectly. These checks were critical to the safety and success of their mission, as any malfunction in their spacesuits or life support equipment could pose a serious risk to the crew in the harsh environment of space. Their detailed assessments and rigorous testing protocols provided an additional layer of security and confidence for the crew prior to launch.

Peta sauntered across the room, carrying a Nora Roberts novel the size of a cinderblock with a bookmark poking out of the pages. She showed no trace of nerves. The thirty-one-year-old was petite with the tightly packed muscle of a runner and an athletic build that moved with fluid, casual grace. Without its customary patina of thick foundation and powder, her baby face looked even younger than usual.

“Where’s Donavon?” asked Will.

Peta shrugged as she sat on the bench. “My cousin’s never been good at timekeeping. You know that.”

Ariane was on her knees repacking her grey duffle bag on the floor. Finally satisfied, she pulled its drawstring tight. “Why don’t you call him?”

“He tends not to answer his phone, and then never calls back. What about Lloyd? Where’s he?”

Ariane stood, hanging her bag over the hook above the bench. “Lloyd went out for another cigarette.”

“He knows we launch in ninety minutes, right?”

Peta lowered her book, peering over the rim of her reading glasses. “I still can’t believe you let a chain-smoker join the crew.”

“Lloyd designed the balloon. It was a condition.”

“Let’s hope his lungs survive the atmospheric pressures, then.”

“That’s what the spacesuits are for. Speaking of which, we should start changing into them.”

Ariane gave Will a playful salute. “Yes, boss.”

Peta shook her head at Ariane and drew back her lips to bare gritted teeth. “Brave. He doesn’t like being called that.”

Ariane’s eyebrows went up. “What’s wrong with being the boss?”

Will put his hands in his pockets. "Let's just be clear here," he said with a slight smirk, "I'm not the only one in charge. Jefferson is the flight director, and Donavon is chief navigator. We all call the shots. I just despise the word *boss*, that's all. It... how can I put it? It insinuates superiority and arrogance. Now, make me a cup of tea!" His smirk morphed into a smile.

Ariane tipped her head to one side questioningly, and Will saw the gold hoops in her ears with a backdrop of such straight, dark hair. But he was far more interested in her eyes, the green that blurred in the faintest hint of blue. By eye and skin colour alone, she looked Mediterranean.

Will turned and knocked his shin on the stepladder, not hard but enough for his skin to shine red.

Peta laughed. "Way to not act like the boss, *boss*."

Will looked at his feet, blushing under his hipster beard, and laughed. Bringing his eyes back towards the girls, he said, "Start getting changed! There, that *bosy* enough for you?"

He glanced at his watch for probably the umpteenth time that morning. 06:33. The launch was scheduled for 08:00.

The pressure on the crew, especially Will, was immense. He knew the stakes. Aside from the obvious, the consequences of failure would be two-fold. One, that they had failed to reach the stratosphere. Two, that they would not try something like this again. It was expensive, time-consuming, and fraught with danger. In life, if you missed that one chance, that one defining moment, it could be lost for all time.

FIVE

Stored inside a large locker fitted with toughened glass and a solid lock were five custom-fit, British-made spacesuits, each one modelled on those worn by Air Force pilots flying high-altitude missions. Name badges were sewn into the upper arms of each suit. Tailored to build, Will and Ariane had both got standard-sized suits. Donavon, likewise, while both Lloyd and Peta had required smaller fits. The full assembly incorporated several layers, including its polyester structural restraints with folded and pleated joints and the anti-abrasion outer layers. A beige liquid-cooling ventilation garment – a one-piece mesh suit made of spandex with zippered front entry – would be worn beneath the spacesuit.

Bolted to the front of the spacesuits were the primary life support packs, incorporating the air-cooling ventilation fans, batteries, a pair of fitted oxygen tanks, and the extravehicular

communicators. These components ensured steady air supply, temperature control, and enabled the crew to communicate effectively during their missions. It also had a carbon dioxide removal feature, four and a half kilos of cooling water, and various warning systems.

Will opened a steel door and entered the walk-in, climate-controlled vault at the back of the white room to check the thermostat. The air inside was cool and crisp, maintaining the perfect conditions for the sensitive equipment stored within. Dominating the compact space was a large compressor tank, an imposing piece of machinery designed to refill the crew's oxygen tanks multiple times over. Its metallic surface gleamed beneath the overhead light. Along the side wall, three reserve oxygen tanks were stowed on a sturdy rack, each one ready to be deployed at a moment's notice. The hum of the compressor provided a steady noise in the background, underscoring the importance of this high-tech vault in ensuring the crew's safety and mission preparedness. Will checked the readings on the thermostat, confirming the room remained optimally cooled for the storage and maintenance of these essential supplies.

"You're anxious," said Ariane, standing off his shoulder and speaking in her mild Illinoisan accent.

Will spun around. "Yes, I am, a little. You? How are you feeling?"

"I'm a NASA research pilot. I guess pioneer flights are in my blood."

"You're used to flying untested aircraft to the stratosphere. Do you still get nervous?"

"The fear of God is the foundation of wisdom."

To drive that message home, understand the risks, and accept them, he had to think about his own possible demise in

granular detail. Not only of death itself but the effects on his family, friends, and the ballooning community.

Will rechecked the time on his old diver's watch, a gift from his father, once a scuba-diving enthusiast who had used the watch for thirty-odd years during more than eight hundred dives, including some of the world's most famous shipwrecks. The markers and hands had faded over time, but its black face had hardly aged and remained vivid.

07:00 had arrived.

Will returned to the changing area to find only two of his four crew members, Peta and Ariane, resting on the bench. "I'm going upstairs to look for Lloyd and Donavon. Seriously, you two should start getting changed."

He stepped out into the small foyer between the main door and the lift. Even on this bright, sunny day, the foyer was dark and gloomy, the single bulb with a dome-shaped cover lacking sufficient brightness. He pressed the button and waited a full two minutes for the lift's arrival, checking his watch once more. He ran his hand over his head, shaved almost to the skin, and smoothed his beard.

The lift doors rolled open, and Will stepped forward onto the ugliest maroon-and-green-patterned carpet. The upper half of the lift consisted of mirrors, their edges rusted and surfaces pocked with age. Almost half-a-century old, the frail lift had once malfunctioned at the midway point of the lighthouse with Will inside, slowing and bouncing to a stop and leaving him trapped for an hour. That was seven months ago, but it still bothered him.

Scraping and squeaking on its rusty runners, Will barely detected whether the lift carried him up or down until the sudden shudder announced its arrival at lobby level.

Will found Lloyd and Donavon talking and smoking in front of Lloyd's retro duck-egg-blue camper with *Greenpeace* and *Save the Whale* stickers all over the windows.

Parked beside Lloyd's old van was Donavon's motorcycle, enhanced with a few not-quite-legal speed modifications. His helmet hung on one handle grip; his backpack hung from the other.

Two local girls half Donovan's age walked by arm in arm, heading towards the balloon a short distance away. The taller and slimmer of the two wore purple hot pants and a tight top, her friend a more conservative yellow skirt that stopped above her knees.

Donavon whistled, tilted his head, and ran his eyes down their legs.

The girl in hot pants turned and smiled.

Donavon slapped Lloyd hard on his back, knocking him forward. "You see that? Still got it!"

"We need to get a move on," said Will, tapping his watch, distracted by the balloon dominating the skyline behind them, a striking and otherworldly sight against the backdrop of clear, blue sky. Its vast, silvery surface shimmered in the sunlight, creating a dazzling spectacle that drew the eye. The balloon's unique shape and the way it caught the light made it look like a floating diamond suspended on a long, delicate piece of string. Designed to ascend to the edge of space, it hovered gracefully above with impressive size and grandeur, capturing the imagination of all who saw it. Its gentle sway added to the surreal beauty of the scene, emphasising both its fragility and strength.

Lloyd trampled his cigarette with his heel and wiped his hands on his T-shirt. "Coming."

Donavon, wearing dark jeans and a tucked-in white shirt with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows, continued to smoke, even though he was a self-proclaimed non-smoker and a gym fanatic. As he took his last drag, he casually exhaled the smoke through his nose and flicked the remaining cigarette away.

Hiking his backpack onto his broad shoulder, he walked slowly towards Will. “What are we waiting for?”