

Chapter 1



G*rrrrr—whoooosh!*

Fire roared out of the steel burners and gushed into the hot air balloon, forcing it to lurch upward. As the inferno pounded its fury into the balloon above them, the basket holding Jenny and Cole hovered six inches off the ground. The wicker basket creaked and cracked, straining against the ropes anchoring it to the earth.

If the siblings didn't do something quickly, the basket might break loose from the ropes, and they'd be launched miles into the sky! If that happened, they'd be doomed for sure. There was no way they could survive up there in the bitter cold and lack of oxygen. And if that didn't kill them, they'd be suffocated by their hatred for each other.

Jenny turned to Cole and shrieked, "What did you do? Turn it off!"

"Can't!" yelled Cole at the top of his lungs. Blood oozed from a cut on his left temple. His lips moved as if he were still speaking, but the sound of raging flames drowned out the nine-year-old's voice.



Five minutes earlier, Mr. Weber, the gray-haired pilot of the hot air balloon, had instructed the siblings to climb into the wicker basket. Jenny stumbled as she climbed over the railing of the tall basket wall, but Mr. Weber quickly saved her from falling by reaching out a calloused hand and steadying her as she climbed the rest of the way in. Jenny had been a little nervous about the flight. But that nervousness evaporated when she realized that there would be an experienced pilot at the controls.

The colorful balloon billowed like an enormous blimp above their heads. Jenny stared up at the kaleidoscope of color, her excitement swelling for this once-in-a-lifetime adventure. She sure was glad they'd met the pilot last week at the Labor Day Lift Off Balloon Festival. Jenny smiled just thinking about how perfect it had been that she and her family were able to help out the pilot when his crew hadn't shown up. And now, the siblings were being rewarded with their very own balloon ride! Within the next few minutes, they'd launch and float away into the morning sky.

"Thanks, Mr. Weber," Jenny said, her voice bubbling with excitement. "I've always dreamed of flying in a real hot air balloon!"

Mr. Weber looked up from pressing buttons on an electronic gadget attached to the basket's frame. He slipped a rusty screwdriver into the pocket of his denim overalls and smiled. Decades of hard work had etched

deep wrinkles into his skin, but his grandpa-like face still radiated a warm playfulness. “You’re mighty welcome, young lady,” he said in a Southern drawl. “Glad to have you aboard.”

After programming the electronic device, Mr. Weber glanced at the propane tanks, then patted his pockets. Finally, he began rummaging through a leather pouch attached to the basket’s wall. His relaxed grin drooped low. “Uh, guess I forgot my wrench back at the truck.” He scratched his gray beard while looking around. “Must’ve forgotten my coffee too. Can’t be takin’ off without that,” he said with a chuckle. “Y’all stay here. Be right back.” He heaved his aging body awkwardly out of the basket.

As Mr. Weber trudged toward his pickup truck about two hundred feet away, Cole climbed onto the top railing of the balloon’s basket. He wobbled from side to side while making goofy faces, pretending to lose his balance.

“Get down,” Jenny scolded, glaring at him. Being four years older than her brother, she felt responsible to tell him everything he did wrong in life. “Or else,” she continued, “Mr. Weber won’t take you up in the balloon.”

“Can’t make me,” Cole spat back, his voice teasing. “I can do whatever I want.” He stuck his tongue out at Jenny, then added, “You’re not my boss!”

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes. Turning her back to him, she glanced at her cellphone. 7:22 a.m.

Daylight had inched its way over the horizon less than an hour ago. The sun’s orange glow had already begun

warming the chilly air. And even though Mr. Weber's ranch lay about twenty miles east of Colorado Springs, Jenny could still see the rugged outline of Pikes Peak off in the distance, beyond the city.

Jenny was sweating after all the work it had taken to set up the balloon. She unzipped her purple puffer vest and was about to take it off and toss it on the floor, but then decided not to. The basket's plywood floor had clumps of dirt scattered on it from her and Cole's shoes, and she didn't want to get the vest dirty since it was fairly new.

A breeze rustled Cole's straw-colored hair. The draft wasn't strong, but the seventy-foot balloon was a huge target for it. The balloon towered over them, swaying from side to side.

Jenny stared out at Mom, Dad, and Mrs. Weber, who were all trying to keep the balloon steady by pulling on and fighting with the crown line. That's what Mr. Weber had called the long rope that draped down from the top of the balloon to the ground.

With Mom and Dad distracted, Cole pulled back the sleeves of his blue sweater. His eyebrows narrowed, and a mischievous grin twisted his lips as he glanced at Jenny to make sure that she wasn't watching. Then he reached toward the support beams that arched above his head. The beams held the twin burners that turned propane fuel into a gushing fireball when ignited by the pilot. The heat from these flames provided the lift that pushed the hot air balloon into the sky.

Cole choked back a laugh, then made a face at Jenny, who still had her back turned to him. With one last silent taunt, he jumped up to grab onto the beam. But as he gripped the beam and jerked his legs upward to hang upside down like a circus acrobat to scare his sister, his shoe slammed into the ignition switch at the base of the burners. At that exact moment, a sharp cracking sound, like an empty soda can being stomped on, splintered the air.

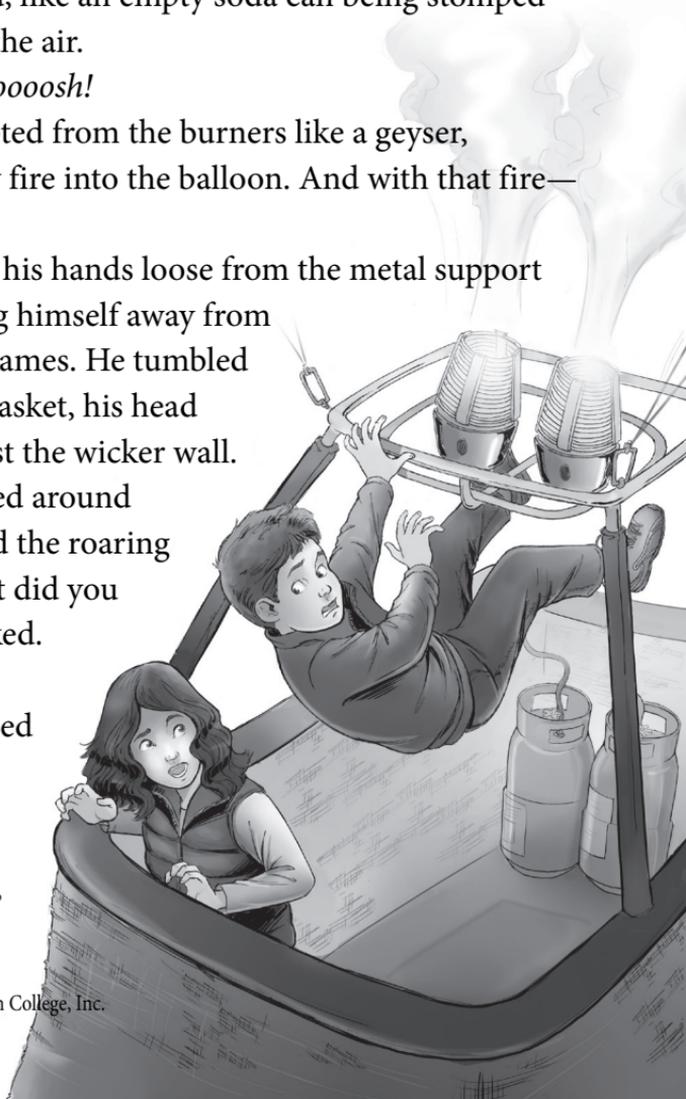
Grrrrr—whooooosh!

Flames erupted from the burners like a geyser, shooting angry fire into the balloon. And with that fire—blistering heat!

Cole ripped his hands loose from the metal support beam and flung himself away from the ferocious flames. He tumbled back into the basket, his head scraping against the wicker wall.

Jenny whirled around when she heard the roaring burners. “What did you do?” she shrieked. “Turn it off!”

Cole scooped into a sitting position in the corner of the basket. “Can’t!”



He tried to say more but was distracted by the dizziness blurring his vision. He shook his head, but his eyes were still foggy and unfocused. That's when Jenny noticed the stream of blood oozing from a cut on his left temple.

Jenny scrambled toward a control gauge attached to the support frame. The cellphone-sized gadget displayed a bunch of digital numbers and symbols. It looked incredibly complicated. Wanting the inferno to stop, Jenny frantically pressed all the buttons. But nothing calmed the raging burners.

Meanwhile, the balloon towered above their heads, a patchwork of vibrant reds, yellows, greens, purples, and blues. The nylon fabric heaved upward with energy, ready to escape the clutches of earth—ready to soar to freedom.

The balloon's suspension cables, attached to the burner frame, tugged fiercely at the passenger basket below. In response, the wicker basket—just slightly larger than their dining room table at home—creaked and cracked.

The basket hovered and quivered inches above the prairie grass. Several ropes secured the basket to a metal spike that Mr. Weber had pounded into the ground. These ropes, along with the crown line that Jenny's parents and Mrs. Weber were still clinging to, were the only things left anchoring the balloon in place.

The twin burners continued spewing a firestorm of fury into the belly of the billowing beast. As lava-like heat blazed down on Jenny, all she could think about was how to escape from being roasted like a marshmallow.

Chapter 2



Cole staggered to his feet, but terror seemed to have taken over his body. His bugged-out eyes darted back and forth, searching for a way to stop the flaming furnace. Jenny was still screaming at him, commanding him to shut it off.

“I’m trying!” he yelled. But the panic in his voice told her that he had no idea what to do. He couldn’t seem to find the *Off* switch. Cole’s face flushed red. His hands twitched as if ready for action but still unsure what to do. Then, his eyes locked on several ropes attached to the basket’s frame. Without hesitation, he yanked hard on the end of each rope.

With a rugged jolt, the knotted ropes pulled away from the metal spike that had anchored the balloon to the ground. Now free, the hot air balloon leaped upward into the sky. Jenny felt as if the ground were plunging away beneath her.

“Help!” Jenny and Cole screamed in unison. “Help us!” The siblings peered over the top edge of the basket, their fingers gripping the leather railing for dear life.



As soon as Mr. Weber heard the burners ignite, he jerked up from digging through the toolbox in the back of his pickup truck. Seeing the danger, he sprang away from the truck and darted back toward the balloon.

Mr. Weber had only taken a few steps when his foot slid into a sandy hole. His knee twisted inward, and he tumbled to the ground with a hard *thud*. He clutched his knee, wincing in pain, but almost as quickly shuffled back to his feet. As he limped frantically toward the basket that now rose into the air, a gust of wind pushed the balloon away from him.

He was too late.

If Mr. Weber hadn't fallen, he could've grabbed the basket or at least one of the short guide ropes that dangled beneath it.

If only . . .

. . . but it wasn't meant to be.



While all this was going on, Mom, Dad, and Mrs. Weber had been battling with the crown line. They knew something awful had happened but didn't dare let go of the rope. They yanked hard, trying to keep the balloon steady, to keep it chained to the ground. But the billowing beast couldn't be tamed.

When the balloon jerked upward, the crown line threw Mom and Mrs. Weber off balance. As they tumbled to the ground, the rope slipped out of their hands.

But Dad held on tight. When the balloon lurched into the sky, the momentum swept him off his feet. Still clinging to the rope, he swung toward the basket, then away from it.

“Keith!” Mom shrieked as she watched Dad dangle from the end of the rope.

About ten feet above the ground, the rope slipped through his hands. He dropped back to the earth and amazingly, landed squarely on both feet.

Mom rushed to his side and gripped his arm tightly as they watched their children soar toward the heavens. Astonishment, shock, and terror flashed in their eyes as they traced the path of the runaway balloon.

And in that moment, Jenny knew that she and Cole were in trouble. Serious trouble.

“We’ve gotta jump,” Cole blurted.

But they were already higher than a four-story building and rocketing upward at an alarming speed.

With every passing second, the earth shrank smaller. With every passing second, Jenny’s fears grew monstrously bigger.