

Conderton, sixty-three

It was nearly night. The trees were dark shapes on the side of the road. I put my head against the car window and watched them fly past.

‘Here comes another sign, Dad!’ My little brother, Riley, bounced up and down on the car seat beside me. ‘What does it say?’

‘Conderton, sixty-three,’ I heard my father say. And through the window I saw the sign flash past.

‘Sixty-three kilometres,’ said Riley. ‘What speed are you doing, Dad?’

‘I’m doing eighty kilometres an hour.’

Riley flopped back against the seat and my head bumped against the window. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘You’re doing eighty kilometres an hour and it’s sixty-three kilometres to Conderton. So we’ll be there...’

I turned to look at him.

‘...in forty-seven and a quarter minutes!’ he finished.

Dad looked at Mum.

‘Right!’ she said.

‘Good boy,’ said Dad.

I turned back to the window.

Was it right? I didn’t know. My brother is only eight years old but he’s clever. My father’s clever too. And my mother. But I’m not. I’m no good at school. I’m no good at sport. No good at music or dancing. I do like drawing – but I’m no good at it.

Mum says not to panic. *Donna, you just haven’t found your talent yet*, she says. But I am panicking. Maybe I don’t have

a talent. Maybe I'll never have a talent. My friend Shelley wants to be a teacher. She's good with little children. My other friend Nina wants to be a police officer. She loves riding so she wants to work with police horses.

'Hey, Donna!' Riley hit me on the arm. 'Look at this.'

I didn't turn to him. I watched the trees flash past.

'Oh, forget it,' said Riley and he flopped back in his seat.

'Are you okay, Donna?' asked Mum.

'Yeah,' I said.

Some days I am sad. All day. Mum knows this. I was sad that day.

'We're nearly there,' said Dad. 'It's going to be a really great weekend.'

Mum has told Dad about my sad days. Dad's answer to any problem is to go out and *do* things. Dad runs. He swims. He rides his bike. He plays football. So what was his answer to my problem?

'There's another sign!' said Riley.

It flashed past my eyes.

'It had a picture of a balloon on it, Donna. Did you see it?'

'Yes,' I said quietly.

Dad's answer to my problem was to go up in a balloon.

'I can't wait to go up in the balloon,' said Riley. 'It's going to be great. Are we staying in a hotel, Mum?'

'No, love, we're staying in a big house with all the other people.'

I sat up. 'Other people?'

'Yes, love. We're not the only people going in the balloon this weekend. There'll be other people too.'

'I'm sleeping with Dad,' said Riley.

'Maybe,' said Mum. 'We'll see.'

I looked out of the window again. The sky was dark now.

‘Conderton,’ said Dad suddenly. ‘Here we are. Now, where do we go?’

‘Jessup Road,’ answered Mum. ‘It’s the second road on the right past the church.’

We went past some houses and shops and an old hotel.

‘There’s the church,’ said Mum.

Dad turned the car into Jessup Road.

‘There it is!’ said Riley. He pointed to a house with a sign at the front. It said *BLUE SKY BALLOONS – Get Carried Away*.

Dad stopped the car and looked at the house. ‘The lights are on,’ he said. ‘Come on, everybody.’

We got out of the car and walked to the front door. It was open.

‘I can hear voices,’ said Riley. ‘Come on.’

Mum, Dad and I followed Riley through the house.

‘Hey, look,’ said Riley. He pointed into a bedroom. ‘Bunk beds! I’m having the top bunk!’

‘People are already in there,’ I said. ‘Look – their bags are there.’

‘Where are *we* going to sleep?’ Riley asked Mum.

‘We’ll see,’ she said. ‘Come on.’

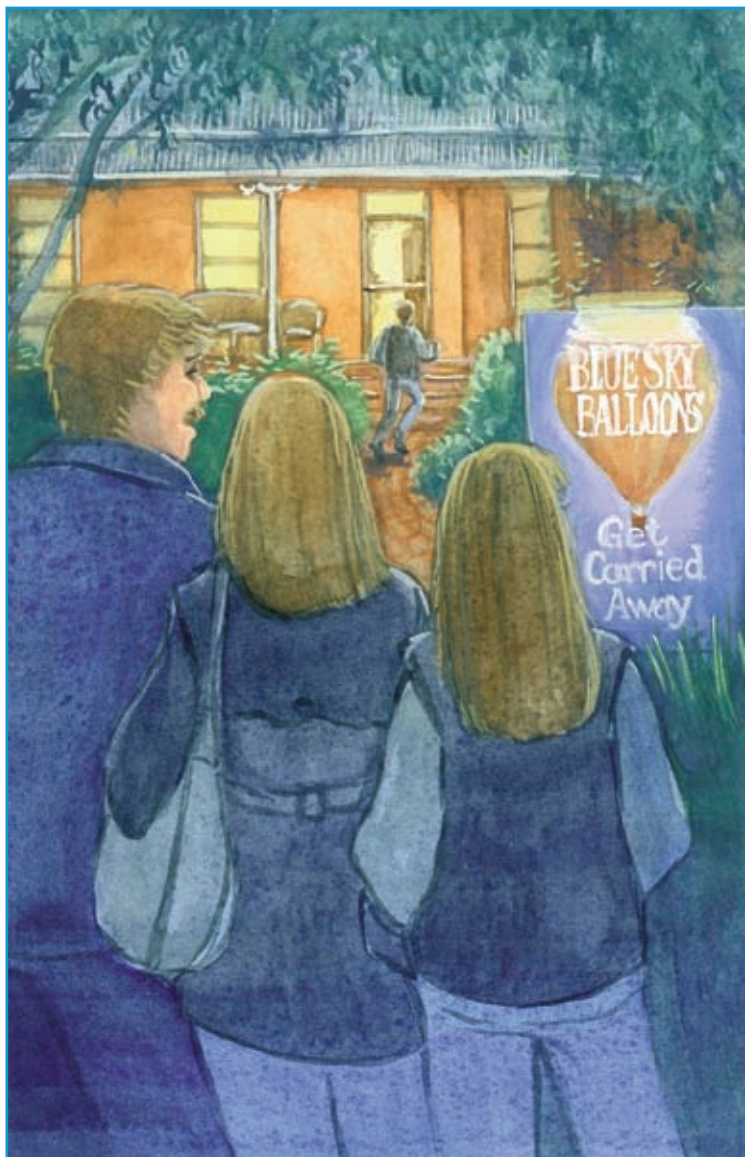
The voices were louder and suddenly we were in a large, bright kitchen. Five or six people sat at a long table and there were two women on the other side of the room. The voices stopped.

‘Hello,’ said Dad.

A man got up from the table and said, ‘Thank heavens. Another man!’

He was the only man in the room. The women laughed.

He shook Dad’s hand. ‘Brian Richardson’s my name.’ He pointed at a woman and a pretty girl at the table. ‘And this is my wife, Patsy, and my daughter, Katie.’



Katie jumped up from the table and shook Dad's hand too. And Mum's. And Riley's, and mine. She smiled a big, bright smile.

'It's nice to meet you. I'm sixteen,' she said to me. 'How old are you?'

'Fifteen,' I said.

'Oh,' she said. She smiled at me and sat down again.

A woman with grey hair came over to us. 'I'm Erica Thornton,' she said. 'And the other ladies and I are friends from the Cavendish Tennis Club.'

'I'm Molly Mason,' said one woman.

'Lyn Porter,' said another one.

'I'm Kay Hudson.'

'And I'm Judy Cook.'

'We'll never remember all the names!' laughed Mum. 'I'm Helen Grant.'

'And I'm Ben,' said Dad. 'And that's Donna and Riley.'

'Where's the balloon, Dad?' asked Riley.

Everyone laughed.

'The balloon pilot was here earlier,' said Mr Richardson. He looked at his watch and said to Riley, 'He'll be back in fifteen minutes, young man. Then he'll tell us about our first ascent in the balloon.'

'So, can we find our beds now, Mum?' said Riley.

'Okay,' said Mum. 'Okay.'

We went and got our bags from the car. Riley ran back into the house. I followed, and looked into one of the rooms.

'You can't go in there,' said a voice behind me. 'That's our room.' It was Katie.

'Oh, sorry,' I said.

She pointed at another room. 'That one's empty. You can sleep in there. It's not very big.' She smiled at me. 'But you

have to arrive early to get the best room, don't you?'

I heard Dad's voice. 'Have you found a room, Donna?'

'This one's empty, Dad,' I called.

I went into the room and put my bag on a top bunk and sat on the bottom bunk. Dad came in, and Mum and Riley followed him. Riley saw my bag on the top bunk and quickly went to the bed on the other side of the room.

'I'm having the top bunk of this bed,' he said. He pointed to the bottom bunk. 'Dad, you can sleep here.'

Mum put her bag down and looked at me. 'Are you okay, Donna?' she said.

'Yeah,' I said.

'Hello.' There was a young man at the door. 'Are you the Grants?'

'Yes,' said Dad.

'Great. I'm Ross. I'm your pilot for this weekend.'

'Really?' said Riley. 'You're not very old, are you?'

'Riley! Ssh,' said Mum.

Ross just laughed. 'Can you come into the kitchen?' he said. 'I just want to talk to everyone.'

'Oh, okay,' said Mum and we followed Ross back to the kitchen. Everyone was there.

'Okay, everyone. Welcome to Blue Sky Balloons,' said Ross. 'We are going to have a great time this weekend. We have three ascents in the balloon – one tomorrow morning at dawn, one at dusk and a third ascent at dawn on Sunday morning. The balloon basket will only carry five people and the pilot. That's me.' He smiled at Katie. 'So, I'll take the first five people up. Then we'll land and they'll get out of the basket and the second five will get in and I'll take them up. We'll land again and the third five will get in and I'll take them up. Often we have fifteen people here, but there are



only twelve this weekend. So, some people can have two rides.'

Katie smiled her bright smile at him.

'Okay, I'll leave you now,' he said and walked over to the door. Then he turned back to us. 'One more thing – go to sleep early tonight. Tomorrow morning you have to get up at four o'clock.' He smiled. 'I'll see you then.'