

Marissa Bea

## Donny and Michelle

IT WAS DECEMBER, AND THEY FLEW above the pillowy clouds. Twelve-thousand feet would be just high enough. The skies were unusually blue and bright, as if the planet was forgiving the human race for all its transgressions, allowing one last beautiful morning to awe at the only place they had ever called home. They sat in the cockpit in silence, Donny focusing his hardest on keeping them in the air, even though the ride was as smooth as he'd ever experienced. Michelle's eyes melted over him, and she smiled, her joyful memories leaving a prickly sensation on the top of her skin.

He had been flying since he was fourteen. His grandfather had told him that flying would get him "in" with "the ladies." As a love-drunk teenager, that had been appealing to Donny. He had flown private charters for celebrities, tours for rich families, and did a brief stint ferrying unmarked packages around the country. He still didn't know what had been in those boxes. Michelle always said it was probably dolls filled with various illegal sundries. She loved that he was an adventurer and possibly a criminal.

They had met twenty years prior, when she accidentally sat on his blanket at a meteor shower event, thinking it belonged to her friends, and she never left. They found out that they were both on the list to send average people on a one-way trip to Mars, but once the meteor was discovered, NASA had canceled the program. But most of life went on as usual; humanity demanded consistency (or possibly willful denial). Every other Saturday they would wake up and make their way to the planetarium to sit alongside students and families and listen to the stories of the heavens. They donated to space exploration societies and attended panel discussions about the likelihood of bacterial life on Europa and Ganymede. They never missed an eclipse.

When the final days arrived, everyone in their families carried out their respective, separate plans. They had spent a year saying all their goodbyes to each other. Michelle's sister and her husband drove off into the desert. Her parents loved watching soccer, so they turned on recorded reruns of great games and planned to scream profanities at the referees. Donny's children and grandchildren all sat together with their partners at a long wooden table that had been carved from an ancient tree, celebrating the life they had been granted with a full feast, wine, and music.

Donny timed their take off to the second. NASA had made it known exactly what day and time the meteor would hit, and they knew they wouldn't be the only ones in the air that day. Hundreds of other planes were soaring the local skies, speckling the blue like confetti, people inside preparing for their final moments. Pockmarks of love in flight.

The roar of the engines rang in their ears as they looked into each other's eyes and smiled. The love no longer needed to be spoken. It could be seen in every crease, every spot, felt with every year behind them. Donny had watched Michelle's hair match his gray over time, her blue eyes growing lighter and softer, while his had deepened to the darkest brown.

Their foreheads came together for a brief moment before they clasped hands and tilted sideways from the plane out into nothingness. Their fingers held fast, their knuckles like steel, gravity pulling them infinitely closer to the earth and each other. Their free fall paused as the shockwave passed, lifting them back up toward the atmosphere. The blooming fireball in the distance seemed to move in slow motion, its dark base a pedestal for the ombré of reds and oranges leading up to the yellow and white pinnacle. The bright light that snuffs one adventure only to begin another. They could feel the warmth arriving.

Michelle spun her back to Donny, fitting his cheek next to hers, and they embraced one last time before their vapor was returned to the stars they both loved so well. ■