6 – FIRST JUMP JITTERS

May 13, 1972, is a day I will always remember. I was fourteen years and six days old and it was the first time that I jumped out of an airplane. It's an oddly specific age, but when you're about to step into open air at a few thousand feet details like that suddenly feel important. The airplane was a Cessna 206, small enough that on that day it felt less like an aircraft and more like a lawn mower that had wandered too far off the ground.

Also making their first jumps that day alongside me were my brother Donnie, who was fifteen and pretending not to care; my uncle Steve, also fifteen, who absolutely did care; and my

uncle-by-marriage Don, twenty-six, who was old enough to know better and still climbed aboard anyway. Running the show was my Uncle Charlie, our jumpmaster, who had more than five hundred jumps to his name and carried that fact the way other men carried car keys or pocket change.

Charlie had been running a jump school on a rural farm for several years by then. It was the kind of place where guys and gals showed up in old cars, motorcycles, vans and trucks for weekends full of camaraderie and fellowship. Parachutes were packed on the ground in front of picnic tables that hosted spectators and crew alike. My brother, uncles and I spent most summer weekends there, hanging around like it was the only place in the world worth being, which, at the time, it probably was.

My grandmother sometimes came along. She didn't jump, didn't pack parachutes, and didn't pretend to understand any of it. She just liked being there for a few hours, sitting in the shade, occasionally selling homemade sandwiches and lemonade to whoever happened to be hungry or brave enough to eat right before stepping out of an airplane.

On jump days, Charlie drove his Toyota Land Cruiser out to the drop zone. Today Grandma rode shotgun, and in the back seat Donnie, Steve, and I were wedged together like loose cargo. The Land Cruiser rumbled along the dirt roads working a number on our backsides, making the ride feel longer than it actually was.

Just before we pulled up, Grandma reached into a bag she had brought with her and pulled out a sun dress. She held it up for inspection, letting it unfold slowly, deliberately, like she was revealing a card in a magic trick. Then she turned around in her seat and said that today we were all going to make our first jump. She had heard our big talk for years now, she explained,

and she was tired of it. Anyone who chickened out, anyone at all, would be wearing that dress for the rest of the day.

She wasn't smiling. We believed her.

By the time we pulled in, the drop zone was already alive in that loose, unorganized way it always was. A few cars scattered near the edge of the field, parachutes laid out like enormous, obedient bedsheets, and people standing around talking. Somewhere nearby, an engine coughed and then settled into a steady, reassuring growl that didn't feel reassuring at all.

Grandma tucked the dress back into her bag but left the idea of it hanging in the air. That was enough. From that point on, nobody mentioned fear. As for me, I was nervous. Not panicked, not frozen, just aware, in a new and unwelcome way, that gravity was real and had been undefeated for quite some time.

We joked. We bragged. We checked each other's gear with exaggerated seriousness. Suddenly Donnie and Steve knew everything and I knew nothing. Don was his usual self; cool and collected, at least outwardly so.

Charlie, meanwhile, moved through it all like a man mowing his lawn. Calm. Methodical. Completely unimpressed by the fact that four first timers were about to trust their lives to fabric, cords, and his instructions. He had the voice of someone who had said the same things hundreds of times and expected instructions to be followed exactly once it mattered.

I remember trying to act casually while quietly taking inventory of my body, checking for loose parts. Arms: attached. Legs: working. Brain: actively questioning my judgment. The truth was, I was scared, but not enough to back out, and certainly not enough to explain to my grandmother why I was suddenly interested in floral patterns and shoulder straps.

Our load wasn't the first of the day. It wasn't even close. We were somewhere around the fourth or fifth, for which I was secretly grateful. That meant we had time, time to watch other people go up and come back down, time to convince ourselves that this was a perfectly reasonable thing humans did on purpose.

Even though I was trembling inside, I was also looking forward to after. To that moment when it would be over and I could say it out loud: I was a jumper now. Not just another kid hanging around the drop zone, not just somebody packing chutes or fetching gear or listening to stories. A real jumper. Someone who had stepped out of an airplane and lived to talk about it. That mattered more than I expected it to.

Uncle Charlie's presence helped. He was one of the most respected people there, easily among the most experienced in a

loose group of twenty or twenty-five regulars who jumped there. Nobody questioned Charlie. Nobody rushed him. When he spoke, people listened, not because he was loud or intimidating, but because he had done this hundreds of times and never once seemed impressed with himself for it.

Watching earlier loads go up, I paid attention to everything. How the jumpers moved. How they joked right up until the last second. How calm they looked when they landed and made their way to the repacking area, parachutes over their shoulders, acting like they hadn't just fallen out of the sky on purpose. Each landing chipped away at the fear a little and replaced it with something else… impatience.

By the time our turn came, I was still scared. But now it was mixed with something stronger. Determination, I just wanted my turn.

When it came time to load the plane, the joking thinned out. The Cessna sat there looking smaller than it had from a distance, like it might have shrunk while we weren't watching. We climbed in, one by one, ducking our heads, settling onto the floor, knees tucked in close.

As the engine wound up and the plane began to roll, I remember thinking, not for the first time but with new urgency, that fourteen years and six days suddenly felt very, very young.

I had taken that ride many times before. Plenty of times, actually. I'd gone up in the Cessna to take Polaroids of first-time students, snap the picture on the ground before boarding, snap another as they exited the plane, then sell them the pair for five dollars when they got back down. Proof they'd done the thing. Proof they'd survived.

Because of that, the ride should have felt familiar. It didn't.

This time it seemed longer. Much longer. The steady drone of the engine, loud through the removed side door of the sturdy 206 settled into my bones instead of fading into the background.

The open doorway let in wind and noise and just enough outside air to remind me that there was nothing solid between us and the ground except intention and nylon.

My mind drifted backward, replaying the training I'd helped give so many times before. I ran it like a checklist, silently quizzing myself. Jump out face first. Arms and legs spread eagle. Count to three regularly, not too fast. Then you'll feel the upward pull as the static line goes tight and releases the main. I could almost hear myself saying it to someone else.

Once you settle down, look up. Check the canopy. Fully open? Good. Find the steering toggles. Grip them firmly. Look down. Find the field. Find the big orange X marking the landing zone. Remember the ground spotter. He'll walk the perimeter of the X like the hands of a clock. Whichever side he's on, pull the appropriate toggle to face the same way.

I ran through it again… and again… Remember!

The strange thing was that I knew all of this. I'd taught it. I watched it work dozens of times. But knowing something in theory and betting your own fourteen-year-and-six-day-old body are two very different experiences.

As the plane climbed, knees tucked, backs pressed close, I wasn't thinking about whether the system worked. I was thinking about whether I would remember everything when it mattered.

We didn't all jump at once. Instead, we made four separate passes on jump run at twenty-eight hundred feet, each one peeling a little more courage off the pile.

Donnie went first.

He exited on the first pass with nice form, maybe a touch head-down, but close to perfect. He disappeared, the static line snapped tight, and a moment later there he was, hanging under a clean, open canopy. That helped.

The second pass was Steve's turn.

He didn't hesitate. He just kind of tipped forward and fell into a textbook face-down, spread-eagle position like he'd been doing it for years. Another good opening. Another safe landing in progress. Two for two.

Then came the third pass.

My turn.

I scooted toward the door on my backside, inch by inch, and somewhere in those last few feet the fear finally caught up with

me. It rose up fast, right into my throat, my heart was pounding like a rock-and-roll drum solo that had lost its tempo. Until that moment, I hadn't known a fear of heights. Apparently, I'd just been waiting for a proper introduction. It looked like a very long way down!

Charlie helped guide me into position, swinging my legs out into open air. He checked the static line, firmly attached to the floor hook, then put his strong hand on my shoulder. Just a squeeze. Not dramatic. Not rushed. Enough to say, "I've got you."

He leaned his head out into the wind, his big mustache whipping in the propwash as he called corrections to the pilot.

"FIVE RIGHT" "STEADY" "ALRIGHT CUT!"

Then a tap on my back, and I was out.

The sensation was unreal and hard to describe, except to say that it was exhilarating. It wasn't like I had imagined, and it definitely wasn't like the movies. Even though it was only a few seconds of falling, it felt much longer, time stretched out in a way I didn't know was possible. The wind rushed past me, loud and fast, while everything else seemed to slow down. I didn't feel the hyper-sensitivity I'd expected, no panic, no overload. Instead, I felt strangely detached, not just from the earth, but from my own body.

As I tilted my head way back into what I believed was a fantastic arch, I caught sight of the rear of the plane moving away. For a brief, floating moment, I could see Charlie leaning halfway out the door, as if he might jump after me. It seemed odd and confusing to me. I would find out later why he took that posture.

Then it hit.

The opening shock was far harder than I had expected. It yanked me back into the world with authority, swinging me in a quick pendulum motion and snapping my attention straight back into my body. Gravity made itself known again.

And there I was, almost three thousand feet above the ground, suspended beneath a beautiful orange and white parachute. Floating through a warm, flawless blue sky. The fear was gone. In its place was something quieter and better, relief, awe, and the realization that I was no longer falling. I felt free and unencumbered, like I was flying on my own.

Because I was light, about a hundred and thirty pounds, my ride lasted longer than most. I didn't mind in the slightest. The sudden fear of heights I'd felt just before jumping had vanished completely, replaced by something close to enchantment.

The view was spectacular. I could see for what seemed like forever. Farmland stretched out in every direction, broken by long, winding roads that disappeared into the horizon like the fading fence lines in a Bob Ross painting. Off to the east, shimmering faintly in the distance, I'm pretty sure that I could make out the distant edge of that wide expanse of water marking the boundary between Lake Huron and the Detroit River, Lake St. Clair.

I was so absorbed in it all that I forgot something important; to look for the ground spotter. When I finally remembered and looked down, it was immediately clear that I was nowhere near where I was supposed to be. The big orange X was not beneath me, not even close. Off to one side, the spotter was waving his arms wildly, trying to get my attention. When I finally acknowledged him by waving both arms over my head in what I hoped looked intentional, he visibly relaxed.

From that point on he guided me in like a landing signal officer on an aircraft carrier, moving with calm precision, indicating direction, correcting my drift. I followed his cues, pulling the toggles as instructed, lining myself up with the field.

Somehow, despite my earlier sightseeing detour, I touched down in a near-perfect landing about mid-field. I didn't land on my feet, but my training had kicked back in and I executed a flawless PLF, Parachute Landing Fall.

Donnie and Steve ran out to meet me, and the three of us shared that kind of enthusiasm that only exists when you've just done something slightly reckless and lived to tell about it. They helped me gather my chute and walked me back toward the packing area, where I was greeted with cheers, pats on the back, and firm, manly handshakes, exactly the same reception each of them had received just minutes earlier. Uncle Don got the same treatment when he landed too.

When Charlie touched down we all huddled together for a few moments of critique, reflection, and congratulations. He pulled out our new logbooks and made the first official entries, the ink somehow making it all feel real.

Mine read something like: "Nice jump. Work on your arch." What I hadn't realized while I was floating under my beautiful orange and white canopy was that instead of diving out face first, I had exited feet first. Not dramatically. Not obviously wrong. Just enough that it looked like I was hopping off a stool, expecting to land on my feet.

Charlie explained it calmly. My parachute had passed very close between my right arm and leg. Even though I was technically spread eagle, I'd been standing almost straight up in the air. He told me that if I didn't correct that posture, it could cause a serious problem.

He was right.

Five jumps later, that same bad habit caused a serious malfunction, one that forced me to cut away my main chute and ride my reserve to the ground.

But that came later.

On that day, May 13th, 1972, at fourteen years and six days old, surrounded by my brother, my uncles, and a sun dress that mercifully remained folded in my grandmother's bag, this young man conquered fear.

I was a jumper now.