



CHAPTER 1

Snowmageddon *Heathrow Airport, Greater London*

If my journey across America taught me anything, it's that I'm no hero. I worry too much for one thing.

And so spending the day before the flight watching *Top Ten Plane Crashes* on YouTube wasn't the *best* idea. And, being driven to Heathrow through the gloom, I could've done without Amy, my sister, miming explosions and mouthing booms of fiery air.

On the M4, in order to stop worrying about the plane breaking apart over the Atlantic or imagining the view of the endless sea roaring up to my window, I tried reigniting my excitement about what waited for me in America:

FORTUNE AND GLORY.

(For real and for sure. 100 per cent. No sweat.)



Background: I'm not saying I'm mad about Marvel but here are the facts. I'm fourteen and I've got a Spider-Man bedspread. (Not many people know this.) My walls are covered in Spider-Man posters and the password to all my accounts is PeterParker62. I'd probably get a Spider-Man tattoo, something subtle on my shoulder, if I didn't know for a fact that Dad would laser it off himself, Cyclops-style, as soon as he found out.

I'm not one of those obsessives, though, so don't judge me. Part of the problem is that I live in Somerset, where, according to Google, the last exciting thing happened in 1998.

What I'm trying to do here is help you understand the mind-blowing excitement experienced when I received an email from Marvel Studios saying I (me, Jacob Clark) had won the chance to be an extra in a new movie shooting in Hollywood, *and*, wait for it, with all my flights and accommodation paid for.

There was a worrying moment when I thought Mum and Dad wouldn't let me go, like with the Year Seven Adventure Weekend after Mum had read about sheep ticks, but as soon as the local newspaper rang to ask if they could report my success they were sold. We FaceTimed the grandparents and everything.

‘My son in a film,’ Dad said more than once in a weird tone of voice I hadn’t often heard.

This wasn’t all my birthdays and Christmases coming at once but everybody’s birthdays and Christmases for the rest of eternity.

The worry, aside from my plane maybe crashing, was that I didn’t know *which* superhero the film would be about. Supposedly it was all top secret. Twitter didn’t have a clue. Amy kept saying it’d be ‘Idiot Boy’ but the joke was on her because there’s no superhero called that.

Inside the terminal, a huge screen, listing destinations I’d only heard of in Geography, said my flight to Chicago was on time and leaving from Gate B41. Dad reckoned I’d not been booked on a direct flight to LA because that would have made the ticket more expensive. (He’d not left the country since the disastrous Calais ‘booze cruise’ all the way back when I was in primary school – a fact he was weirdly proud of.)

We headed straight for security because there’d been a crash near Swindon, which left no time for messing about. Dad handed over my suitcase. It was pink and had, in glittery white writing, the word PRINCESS across its front. Back home, pulling the bag from the attic and coughing only slightly from the dust, Mum had said there

was no reason why boys couldn't have pink suitcases and it was perfectly fine and, anyway, there'd be no losing it.

'It's 2020, Jacob,' she'd said, and although she was right I didn't know what the year had to do with anything.

She'd also said the Princess was exactly the right size; it could hold all my clothes and still qualify as 'carry-on'. Proper travellers never bothered putting their bags in the hold these days supposedly.

'It's the internet for you,' said Mum.

(She used the internet to explain a lot of things.)

Dad shook my hand and pulled me in for a hug. He ruffled my hair, instructing me to stay safe. Mum had her puppy eyes when she squeezed me and said she was missing her little soldier already.

As she released me she handed over what I thought was a note with emergency numbers and instructions about what to do if I ripped my jeans etc. She closed her hand over mine and put a finger to her lips. As I shifted the paper to my pockets I saw it was American money – a bill with '100' in the top corner. My imagination exploded with fireworks of possibility. How much Marvel merch would that buy?

(Answer: not much. But it didn't matter because the studio was also giving me spending money.)



Mum read from her phone a list of things I shouldn't do:

1. Lose my passport.
2. Miss the plane.
3. Agree to carry things for strangers, especially friendly men with beards.
4. Eat or drink (American) things if I wasn't sure what they were.
5. Loiter.
6. Flush the plane toilet without the seat being down.
7. Forget to exercise my legs and get deep vein thrombosis.
8. Allow myself to be distracted when leaving the plane.
9. Lose the instructions about the connecting flight.
10. Miss the connecting flight.

'Understood,' I said. 'Thanks, Mum.'

'Do you want me to write them down for you? I'll write them down.'

I told Mum that it was fine and she didn't need to write them down.

'What was number five, then?' asked Amy, suddenly present.

‘Loiter?’ I asked.

Mum beamed. Dad nodded. Amy yawned.

‘And make sure you ring as soon as you land,’ they said in stereo.

I crossed my heart and hoped to die, which I instantly regretted.

It was Amy’s turn to say goodbye.

She chewed gum and Mum told her to take her earphones out, for heaven’s sake.

‘Hope you don’t crash,’ she said, smiling.

‘Amy!’ said Dad.

‘What?’ She shrugged. ‘I do. What’s wrong with that? It’d be bad to say I *wanted* him to crash.’ She narrowed her eyes. ‘Have you seen the weather in Chicago, by the way? It looks intense.’

Suddenly her phone was in her hand and she was holding its blinding screen to my face. I couldn’t take in the detail before Mum had fussed it away but what I *did* read was a single word: Snowmageddon.

Not ‘Paradise’ or ‘Perfect Landing Weather’.

No.

Snowmageddon.

‘Is that even a word?’ I asked.

‘Ignore your sister,’ said Mum as my chest buzzed

with anxiety bees. She brushed my fringe from my forehead. 'I can't believe I'm putting my little boy on a plane. On his own.' She turned to Dad. 'Why don't we all buy a ticket? We could put it on the credit card. When was the last time we had a holiday? What about *my* wellbeing?'

She looked around frantically for someone she could buy a ticket from.

'Remember Calais,' said Dad to Mum, before turning his Dad-stare on me. 'Don't miss your connecting flight. You hear? Don't. Miss. Your. Connecting. Flight. I don't want to have to drive to Chicago to rescue you.' I frowned. Amy yawned again. 'You know what I mean.'

I didn't. But I *did* know that I wasn't a kid and that everything would be 100 per cent fine.

'I'm not a kid,' I said, sounding about as convincing as a nativity play. 'Everything will be a thousand per cent fine.'

'Just make sure you stay safe!' said Mum, her smile looking like it had been branded on to her face. 'Speak to a police officer if you get lost.'

'And don't miss that connecting flight!' added Dad.