



Jessie

COASTAL CHRONICLES BOOK 2

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CHAPTER ONE

Rocket Launch

January 31, 1961

Jessie Cole raced out into the bright sunlight, heedless of the chill in the air. The other kids in his class flocked to the monkey bars or swings, a dozen or so started a game of kickball, but Jessie made his way to the edge of the schoolyard, to a spot where he had a clear view of the beach and the land to the south. The Air Force station had been launching rockets more often the past few months and Eugene Cole had come home the previous night grousing about another launch scheduled for the following afternoon.

“Why don’t you like the rockets, Pop?” Jessie had asked over dinner.

“They’re loud and cause traffic to snarl up,” Eugene mumbled in between swigs from his glass of water.

“But don’t you want to know what it’s like out in space?”

“If we were meant to fly, we’d have been given wings.” Eugene snorted. “I’m sure that monkey they’re sending up wishes he could talk his way out of it.”

When his father gave him a stern look, Jessie knew to drop the subject. Now he craned his neck, anxious for a glimpse of the missile, unsure when it was even scheduled for lift off. If there’s a chimp onboard that must mean they think they are ready to send up a man, he thought. He bounced on the balls of his feet, raising one hand to shade his eyes from the sun and wishing his brothers could be there too.

Since the announcement of the Mercury 7 astronauts in April of 1959, Jessie had been obsessed with becoming an astronaut himself. He saved every penny and bought as many issues of LIFE as he could afford, scarfing up every detail printed about these new

pioneers. He'd decided he liked Gus Grissom the best. He had kind eyes, unlike those of his father.

A low rumble rolled across the fields and Jessie's eyes scanned the sky for the sleek white machine. It rose above the trees, as the noise grew louder, vibrating Jessie's bones. He heard some of the kids on the playground shout but didn't take his eyes off the rocket until it disappeared, leaving behind a trail of smoke that was already dissipating in the breeze.

"Come on, children, recess is over, back inside," called his fair-haired teacher.

Jessie lingered a moment longer, silently agreeing with the murmurs of discontent from his classmates. Almost two years had passed since the astronauts had been named. It seemed like an eternity to Jessie, but he hoped this mission meant a man would be taking the pilot seat soon. The Russians had been first to launch a satellite into space, but Jessie was sure America would be the first to get a man there. He saluted the now empty sky before dragging himself away, back into the classroom.

After school, Jessie couldn't wait to find his brothers and tell them about the launch. He found the three of them waiting at the end of the long dirt road, already in an animated discussion about the size of the fish Max had caught over the weekend.

"I told you it was fifteen inches," Max insisted, glowering at Ricky.

Ricky shook his head, thick brown hair flopping into his eyes. "No way, it weren't more than ten."

Sam rolled his eyes as Jessie approached and Jessie smiled. Sam's tall, lanky figure was only half an inch shorter than Max but he never used his size to his own advantage. Jessie didn't understand why Sam so meekly followed Max at times, for he could be a real bully, mostly at school, but with his own brothers sometimes as well. Nine-year-old Jessie had been in his fair share of scraps with Max, and even had a few scars to prove it.

“I thought it was closer to twenty inches myself,” Jessie interjected, causing Ricky to turn and look at him in disbelief.

“Why are you always siding with him?”

Jessie gave his brother a playful punch. “Because it’s so much fun.” Even though Ricky was a year older than Jessie, he was more like the baby of the family. Sometimes Jessie wondered if there was something wrong with him that made him act the way he did.

“Did you hear about the launch?” Jessie said, changing the subject as the boys started walking home.

Max kicked a stone out of his way. “Dumb teacher wouldn’t even let us go to the window to look for it.”

“I didn’t hear any explosions so I guess it went well.” Sam smiled.

Sam was the practical one of the group. Jessie didn’t understand how Sam could spend so much time studying when there was so much more to explore around them. Jessie believed in learning from doing.

Jessie nodded. “Lucky monkey getting to go into space. Seems like a waste. It’s not like he will come back and tell them anything.”

“On the contrary, he will tell the doctors and scientists quite a bit.” Sam’s brow wrinkled up and he scratched behind his ear. “I’m sure they have him rigged up with all types of devices to monitor things like his heart rate.”

Jessie thought about this, letting the idea roll around in his brain. “You mean a monkey’s heart rate is just like ours?”

“I don’t know exactly,” Sam admitted. “They are the animal most similar to us, so the test results can probably give the doctors a pretty good idea what the effects of launch will be on a human.”

“Yeah, yeah, smarty pants, enough of that,” Max broke in. “When are we going hunting again?”

Jessie grinned. “Anytime is fine with me. Why don’t we skip school tomorrow?”

“You know mom wouldn’t like that.” Sam shot him a disapproving look.

Jessie shrugged. “It’s not like I’m learning anything important.”

Sam just shook his head.

The boys arrived home ten minutes later, dusty and thirsty. They poured tall glasses of water and sat outside on the sagging front porch listening to the chatter of scrub jays and terns. When their glasses were empty and the sun had almost disappeared behind the house, Max rose.

“We should get cleaned up before Pop gets home.” Max brushed sand off his pants and headed into the house.

CHAPTER TWO

Set Back

April 25, 1961

Jessie stood at the edge of the playground with two other boys, anxious for the next space launch. Recess would be over any minute. There would be no time for a hold in the countdown. Two weeks earlier the Russians had announced the successful launch of Yuri Gagarin into space. Once again the Americans had been left behind but today's launch would hopefully be the last before America put their own man into space.

Jessie held his breath as the rocket appeared above the trees. Then it happened. The plume of white smoke erupted into a fiery ball, debris flying in all directions. Jessie didn't wait for the teacher's frantic call to take shelter in the school. He shook his head and turned his back on the carnage. At the door, the teacher gently laid a hand on his shoulder and gave him a sympathetic look. Any other day and Jessie might have resented it, but he knew, today, it had nothing to do with his father and the reputation he'd developed for himself the past couple of years.

When school was out, Jessie dragged his feet along the familiar path home. He kept walking when he came upon his brothers, his head down, watching the sand shift beneath his worn-out sneakers.

"I heard the explosion." Max draped an arm over Jessie's shoulders. "Sorry."

Jessie nodded.

“Maybe we should go out to the beach, see if we can find any pieces,” Ricky suggested.

The thought turned Jessie’s stomach, but then he stopped. “That’s not a bad idea. I’d like to have something to remember we at least tried to get to space.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Sam said. “We’ll get there, it’s just going to take time.”

Jessie knew Sam was trying to be encouraging, and so attempted a smile of thanks before shifting course across the large field of scrub grass.

The boys spread out when they reached the beach. The tide was low but turning. Jessie took the section closest to the water, knowing the rising tide would cover it in another hour. The salty tang of sea spray filled his nostrils and he inhaled, while his eyes and ears locked away every detail of the sand and surf.

He saw a flash of light ten feet ahead and quickened his pace, keeping his eyes on the spot. The ocean foamed up, then slowly retreated. Jessie squatted down to find a silver and black triangle, partially buried in the sand. Another wave rushed toward him, splashing over his feet and soaking the bottom of his shorts. He held onto the metal afraid the undertow would pull it out to sea. When the water receded, Jessie pulled the debris free of the remaining sand. It was five inches tall and three wide. Turning it over in his hands he noted scorch marks and part of what he thought might be the letter U or A from the USA painted on the side of the rocket.

“Guys,” he waved to his brothers.

Max arrived first. “What’d you find?”

Jessie handed him the piece of metal.

“Cool.” Ricky joined them and reached for the newfound treasure.

“Good job, Jess.” Sam clapped his brother on the back. “I didn’t think we’d find anything that big.”

Jessie reached for the metal and traced the rough edges. “You don’t think they will give up do you?”

Sam shook his head. "Since the Russians have gotten into space already, I don’t see how we can give up now."

"I hope they don't." Jessie tore his gaze away from his find and looked at his brothers. "I want to be an astronaut."

Max laughed. "You can't be an astronaut."

"Why not?"

"Cause you gotta have money to be an astronaut. You don't think Shepard and Grissom and all those other guys are dirt poor do you?"

"Maybe they're not dirt poor, but they aren't filthy rich. They were chosen because they were in the military and had good records."

"So you gonna enlist when you turn eighteen? We'll probably still be in that dag gum Vietnam and you'll go and get yourself killed the first day in the jungle."

"Nuh-huh. I know how to take care of myself. I hide from you in the woods all the time." Jessie balled his hands into fists and planted his feet.

Sam stepped between them. "Cool it, Max. If Jessie wants to be an astronaut, then maybe he can be. Lots of things are changing."

Max snorted. "Yeah, and I could be President."

"If that happens, then I'm moving to Mexico," Ricky quipped.

Jessie laughed and unclenched his fists. Yet again Sam had brokered peace without anyone coming to blows. Maybe Sam was the one who would become President.

Sam stepped back. "Let's head home."

"Did you hear Mom and Pop got another letter from the government yesterday?"

Max asked as they walked along the hard packed sand.

"About what?" Jessie asked, turning up the beach, shuffling through the soft sand to a well-worn path across the dunes. Thick saw palmettos, sea grapes, and sea oats grew on either side of the path, slowly thinning as the boys moved farther from the beach.

"About buying our land. They want to expand the missile complex more. They've been buying up all the land around here." Max swatted at a dragonfly buzzing around his head.

"But they already have so much land, what do they need more for?" Jessie ducked under the wispy needles of an Australian Pine tree, his brothers close behind.

"How'm I supposed to know? I didn't see the letter, I just heard them arguing about it after we went to bed. Mom wants to take their offer, but Pop doesn't want to move."

"I don't want to move either," Ricky agreed. "I like being close to the beach and huntin' in the woods."

"I don't think we have much choice. Sounded like the government letter said we take the offer or they'll just take the land away from us."

"They can't do that," Jessie cried. "We've lived here forever."

"Not forever, you moron," Max sneered. "Mom and Pop only moved here during the war, when Pop got assigned to the Banana River Naval Air Station."

"Still, that's practically forever." Jessie let his fingers run through the thin pine needles as they emerged from the copse of trees into a clearing.

"There are families that have lived here since the 1800s and they're being bought out too. I don't think the government is going to consider our twenty years here are more important," Sam replied.

Jessie rolled his eyes. Leave it to Sam to know the history of the island.

"But they can't just take our land," Jessie insisted.

"Yes, they can, it's called eminent domain. If they can prove to the court that private property is needed for public use and fair compensation has been offered, the court will likely rule in favor of the government."

"But this isn't public use," Ricky interjected.

"Yes and no." Sam leaned forward, obviously warming to the subject. "A public park isn't being created, but the research being conducted and the satellites being launched are for the public good. Plus, the government will probably be able to make a pretty good case for public safety. Think about how close this piece of the rocket landed to our house. The government can use this incident and the others before as evidence of danger to the people still living on this end of the island."

"All right, professor, we get it, but it still doesn't mean I want to move," Ricky interrupted.

Up ahead, Jessie could see the orange grove that bordered their land, and glanced back over his shoulder. He couldn't see the beach through the trees, but it had taken less than five minutes to stroll home. Sam was right. This one had been a little too close for comfort.

CHAPTER THREE

A-Okay

May 5, 1961

The call of a blue jay screeched through the open window, jarring Jessie from a dream. He rolled onto his side, rubbed his eyes, and pushed up on his elbow to look out the window. The sun hadn't risen above the orange trees yet so he guessed it was about six. Spotting the offender on a limb not forty feet from the window, he wished he had his shotgun nearby.

"Jessie, you awake?" Ricky whispered from the upper bunk.

"Yeah," Jessie muttered, pushing the thin sheet back and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Ricky dropped down from the bunk above, his eyes glittering.

"You think they'll really launch that Alan Shepard into space today?"

Jessie nodded, his own excitement growing. How had he forgotten today was the big day? He tugged on a pair of faded red shorts and a t-shirt, its neckline frayed from his nervous habit of chewing on it. Ricky wore similarly faded blue shorts and a t-shirt that had once been white, but was now an aging dirty grey.

"You know Mama isn't going to let us up on the roof today," Ricky said.

"That's why we got to get to the tree house." Jessie poked his head out the door and listened for any indication that his parents were awake, but the house was quiet. He took a tentative step toward the bedroom shared by Max and Sam. Its door swung open and the

boys emerged, each boasting a huge grin. Jessie put a finger to his lips before they could make any noise and tiptoed down the short hall to the kitchen.

When he reached the front door, he turned the knob slowly, his heart stopping when the hinges gave a loud squeak. The three other boys raced out past him, as he stood frozen, waiting for the bellowing call of his father. After a minute that seemed like hours, the house remained silent and so Jessie too stepped outside, pulling the door closed as gently as he could behind him.

His brothers had already disappeared into the woods across from the house and Jessie quickly cleared the small yard and moved expertly through the dense underbrush and trees with barely a sound. In less than five minutes he plopped down next to Ricky in the tree house.

Max and Sam had built it two years before, collecting old boards and even a window from various abandoned buildings and miscellaneous junk tossed into the woods long ago. Built in one of the tallest trees on the edge of the forest, before the vegetation petered out into small scrub palmettos and marsh grasses, one side of the tree house was completely open, providing a clear view of the launch pad.

"How long you think we'll have to wait for the launch?" Ricky asked, fidgeting with an old conch shell.

"Hard to say since they're always delayed," Max replied, "but I managed to sneak Pop's transistor radio out last night." With a sly smile, Max pulled an old rag off the radio, dialed in to the local news station and turned the volume so they would be able to hear the launch countdown.

"I'm hungry," Ricky complained.

Sam smiled and emptied his pockets, producing four oranges, some boiled peanuts, and ten pieces of bubble gum. Max nodded then turned out his own pockets to reveal two apples, more boiled peanuts, and five candy bars.

Ricky eagerly reached for one of the candy bars, but Max swatted his hand away. "Those are for later. Have an orange."

Ricky frowned, but did as he was told. Sam handed an orange to each of his brothers before poking a hole in the top of his own and squeezing its sweet juice into his mouth. Jessie inhaled the aroma before puncturing his own fruit. When they had sucked them dry, the boys pulled the oranges apart and chewed on the tender meat.

The hum of an engine in the distance drew their attention. Max leaned out of the tree house and spotted a plane circling the launch pad. He knew, even at this distance, that it was an UH-19, patrolling the area to make sure no unexpected air traffic interfered with the launch.

The minutes ticked on agonizingly slowly as the boys watched the sun climb higher in the sky. They tossed their orange peels to the ground below and lay on their stomachs to watch a pair of squirrels scurry across the pine needles to investigate. After pawing at the peels and turning them over several times, the squirrels lost interest.

"Mama and Daddy were arguing again last night," Ricky said, breaking the quiet spell. Jessie rolled onto his back and sat up.

"I heard the government offered ten thousand dollars for our land," Ricky added. "That's a bunch of money. How can Daddy say no?"

"He's just stubborn," Max growled.

"He doesn't want to give up the still," Jessie grumbled, feeling his stomach tighten. "Then he'd have to buy his hooch and we certainly couldn't afford that, even with ten thousand dollars."

"You shouldn't talk about him that way." Sam gave Max and Jessie a stern look. "We don't know the whole story, so we don't have any right to judge the decisions he makes."

Max snorted. "What more do we need to know? The government letters only went out a couple months ago and already six families are gone. They're taking the money and moving on while that's still an option. Pop thinks he can be the last man standing and hold onto our land, which is right smack in the middle of the area the government plans to take over. He is a fool and we'll all end up paying for that before this is over."

Jessie listened to his brother's rant and quietly nodded in agreement. The family had suffered more than their fair share due to their father's drunkenness. Jessie tried to remember how many times he had been with his mother at the general store and seen other women's pitying looks directed their way. Mama had always smiled at them and exchanged pleasant words, but when she was behind closed doors he heard her cry.

Sam shook his head. "We don't know our land is in the middle of the area they want. It may only be on the edge, maybe they don't even need it."

"Look out there, Sam," Max said. "The launch site is ten miles away. Any plans to expand the program are gonna need this land."

Jessie looked across the expanse stretching between the tree house and the launch pad. He could make out a wild boar rooting in the dirt and a large hawk gliding smoothly in a circle. He knew there were deer bedded down for the day somewhere in the woods, along with the bobcats and panthers that still stalked the island.

For hundreds of years, Merritt Island had been a paradise for hunters and fishermen. The idea that all this land would be cleared and the animals pushed out angered him, but at the same time, the idea of a growing program of space exploration made his pulse race with excitement. Why couldn't the two things he loved so passionately exist together?

“Sixty seconds and counting.” The voice of the radio announcer cut into Jessie’s thoughts.

“T-minus thirty seconds.”

Jessie stood up, his gaze zooming in on the tower.

“Three-two-one-zero-and ignition. Liftoff at thirty-four minutes after the hour.”

A nearby hawk gave a loud screech, turned out of its whirling pattern and flapped its wings in a furious flight away from the launch site.

"Look!" Jessie pointed toward the tower and his brothers all watched as a puff of smoke shot from the rocket.

The tall, needle-nosed rocket pushed off the ground, taking Jessie’s gaze with it as the sleek Redstone climbed higher and higher.

Max turned up the volume of the radio and they all listened to the report as the rocket broke free of the earth's atmosphere.

“*Freedom 7* reports the mission is A-Okay. Three point five g achieved and cabin pressure holding fine.”

Jessie bent his head down and rolled the edge of his t-shirt into his mouth, chewing on the fabric.

“Flight trajectory is still A-Okay, the pilot is in good voice communication with Mercury control.”

“I wish we could hear Shepard talking to control,” Jessie muttered around the t-shirt. He closed his eyes, listening to the reporter sharing Alan Shepard’s observations about the beautiful view and the cloud cover over three to four tenths of the east coast, up to Cape Hatteras.

“I can’t believe he can see the whole coast,” Ricky breathed in awe.

“The mission is now six minutes and forty seconds old. Astronaut Alan B. Shepard is still talking to us, working like a test pilot, reporting facts, figures, reporting procedures in the precise engineering manner of a test pilot,” the reporter spoke in a calm tone. “*Freedom 7* is beginning to roll into re-entry attitude.”

“You think we will see it coming back down?” Ricky leaned out of the tree house, his eyes searching the horizon.

“No way.” Max swatted Ricky on the back of the head.

“The *Mercury* space craft is beginning to re-enter the earth’s atmosphere.”

Jessie glanced at his watch, surprised that less than fifteen minutes had passed.

“The main parachute has deployed and the *Mercury* spacecraft *Freedom 7* is now descending on its main parachute. The aircraft carrier *Lake Champlain* has reported visual contact with the capsule.”

"That's it?" Jessie asked in disbelief. "That's what all the fuss was about? Fifteen stinking minutes?" With a disgusted shake of his head he climbed down from the tree house and stalked off.

Jessie ran through the marsh grass, its rough edges tearing at his exposed legs, stopping only when he reached the edge of a creek. He glowered at the launch pad, its metal beams reflecting the morning sun. What was the point being an astronaut if you were back on earth so soon? He wanted to go out and explore space, to see what lay beyond the blue

sky he saw every day. How far away were the sun, the moon, and the stars? Could they be reached in a day? He bent down, found a large stick and hurled it toward the tower. He knew it would never reach it, but it made him feel better all the same.

"I don't know what Mama is so worried about. This program will never need all this land if they can't get a man in space for more than a few minutes." Jessie looked around at the trees he knew so well. He'd grown up in this forest and had no doubt he'd live here forever.