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Taken By The Wind

By Antonia Morton

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The hot air balloon, uninflated as yet, lies crumpled on the snowy field in a vast expanse of multi-coloured nylon. The big wicker basket, attached to the flattened canopy by several lines, sits tipped over on its side.

Then two men from the ground crew haul the balloon's mouth open, and turn on giant electric fans. As air blasts in, the immense mass slowly begins to swell.

Once the air pressure inside is enough to hold the canopy mouth open unaided, the crew turn off the fans and turn on the propane burner. With a roar and a lick of flame, it starts pumping superheated air into the shell.

Within minutes the entire contraption, tethered by a line to the pickup truck, lurches upright, struggling to its feet like a newborn calf. It's an awesome sight: the big Corel balloon is a soaring 80-foot high expanse of yellow and orange, pink and red, green and blue – a 250,000-cubic-foot advertisement for WordPerfect.

While the burner roars and the canopy bobs in the wind, ten passengers climb into Skyview's well-padded basket with varying degrees of trepidation and difficulty. ("There *is* no elegant way to get into a balloon," crew member Maureen reassures them, lending a helping hand.)

By now the balloon is dancing in place, impatient to be off. Even throwing all their weight on the guy ropes, the ground crew are being dragged about like puppets. Only the rope tied to the truck's bumper holds the straining structure on the ground.

"That's enough!" the pilot calls, and unshackles that line to the truck.

With a roar of flame from the burner, the balloon lifts off. No longer earthbound, it magically changes its element, becoming a creature of the air.

It slips those surly bonds of earth with surprising speed: in seconds it's twenty feet up, then fifty, then a hundred. As the air and wind take it, the balloon sails noiselessly, effortlessly and with impressive speed up into the cold blue sky.

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Ottawa is a balloon-happy town. With three or four outfits offering rides daily during the summer months, it's common to look up in early morning or late afternoon and see three or four gaily coloured globes floating majestically across the sky, powered by the invisible winds of the upper altitudes.

Come the fall, though, several companies close up shop until the warm weather returns. That's a pity, says Carlos Craston, one of Skyview's pilots, because winter ballooning has a charm all of its own.

"I love winter flying, it's one of my favourite times of the year," he says. "Every season is different: in the summer it's all green, in the fall there's the colours of the leaves, and in winter the ground is just a huge tapestry of white. It's fantastic – everything looks very clean from the sky, white and shining."

About a third of Skyview's flights take place in winter, Craston estimates, and most are during Ottawa's Winterlude festival. But he wants to see cold-weather ballooning increase in popularity. "People tend to think of ballooning as a summer activity," he says. "We're trying to bring out the hardy Canadian in everyone!"

In fact, though, you don't have to be particularly hardy for winter ballooning. As Craston points out, hot-air balloons fly *with* the wind – "So no matter how fast you go, there's no wind chill. You're actually colder standing on the ground, waiting for your flight, than you are when you get up."

As well, he adds, winter flying isn't confined to those early-morning/late afternoon time slots, necessary to avoid the thermal winds that form during the heat of summer days. Because the snow on the ground prevents them forming, it's possible to fly all day in fine winter weather.

Because a balloon is at the mercy of wind and weather, every flight is different – but the one constant is the spectacular view. Most of us are used to only seeing landscapes from the air in brief snatched glimpses through the tiny window of an airplane. But here the view is panoramic, 360 degrees around, and low enough to recognize your house as you go over it.

The scenery is beautiful, crystalline and shining in the sunshine, and the city lies spread out like an animated map. The sun is so warm, and the flight so tranquil, that it's surprising to see how fast the ground below slips by: in our mechanical age, we associate speed with noise and wind.

The passengers' necks and shoulders are kept toasty by the intermittent flare of the powerful burner, jetting its 20 million BTU of heat up into the canopy. (A barbecue, by comparison, only puts out about 30,000 BTUs.) For the extra comfort of passengers, there are thermoses of Bailey's and hot coffee – Skyview's adaptation, for the Canadian winter, of the traditional glass of champagne. (Ballooning was, after all, invented by the French, who know how to celebrate novel experiences properly.)

Eventually, the pilot takes the balloon down towards the grassy field where the van, forewarned by radio, stands waiting for it. Coming down, the basket brushes through a stand of fir trees; and passengers reach out, laughing, to grab cones from the topmost branches.

Some might be apprehensive: the waiver they signed warned that landings can be rough, with the wind sometimes dragging the balloon on its side for several yards.

But this landing, like the take-off, is a study in calmness. The balloon descends with perfect dignity, foot by foot, until at last the basket gently kisses the turf and settles onto the grass as lightly as a gull onto water.

Awkwardly and reluctantly, the passengers clamber out. (Maureen, reappearing from the van, says cheerfully, "There's no graceful way to get *out* of a balloon, either.") Solid ground feels strange to them, and markedly anticlimactic, after an hour and a half spent soaring with the wind.
