

FREEFALL

WHEN SKYDIVING IS IN YOUR BLOOD, IT'S HARD TO KEEP YOUR FEET ON THE GROUND.

SUMMER

TRACY BARRETT



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Published by Charlesbridge
85 Main Street
Watertown, MA 02472
(617) 926-0329
www.charlesbridge.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Barrett, Tracy, 1955- author.

Title: Freefall summer / Tracy Barrett.

Description: Watertown, MA : Charlesbridge, [2018] | Summary: When she was six years-old Carys “Clancy” Edwards’s mother died in a skydiving accident and in the ten years since her father has refused to even let her think about skydiving, despite the fact that it is his business--but Clancy is now sixteen and she is beginning to think that it is time to break out of the protective cocoon her father has woven around her.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017003933 (print) | LCCN 2017021900 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781632896414 (ebook) | ISBN 9781580898010 (reinforced for library use)

Subjects: LCSH: Skydiving—Juvenile fiction. | Fathers and daughters—Juvenile fiction.

| Single-parent families—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Skydiving—Fiction. | Fathers and daughters—Fiction. | Single-parent families—Fiction. | LCGFT: Bildungsromans.

Classification: LCC PZ7.B275355 (ebook) | LCC PZ7.B275355 My 2018 (print) |

DDC 813.54 [Fic] —dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017003933>

Printed in the United States of America
(hc) 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Display type set in Breakfast Burrito by David Kerkhoff

Text type set in Adobe Caslon Pro

Printed by Berryville Graphics in Berryville, Virginia, USA

Color separations by Coral Graphic Services, Inc. in Hicksville, New York, USA

Production supervision by Brian G. Walker

Designed by Sarah Richards Taylor

For Greg, of course
—T. B.

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Whuffo: Someone who hasn't made a skydive (yet), especially a spectator. Supposedly derives from "What for do you jump out of a perfectly good airplane?"

—*The Whuffo's Guide to Skydiving*

1

When my dad likes a woman, he always invites her over to dinner for Beef Stroganoff, and I have to be there. "It's better to let her see how it really is around here," he says, including the fact that he has a sixteen-year-old daughter. It's okay if my boyfriend, Theo, or one of my friends, even Cory with the tattoos circling his neck, comes over too. Dad says that if she can't see past Cory's tattoos, she's too close-minded for him. That kind of thing is why my friends say my dad is cool. They'd think he was cool even if tattoos bothered him, though. Most of them are awestruck by him, and the fact that he makes their parents a bit nervous doesn't hurt.

After dinner my dad puts on a “family video.” It starts with a four-year-old girl—me—at the drop zone, wearing a pink jumpsuit and a backpack that my dad modified to look like a parachute container. I’m wearing little military-looking jump boots, like skydivers used to wear. Most of the time my dad’s date says something like, “Aw, she’s so cute!” And I was. I had a saddle of freckles over my nose, and my pigtails were so blond they were almost white, not whatever color my hair is now—something between blond and light brown. Anyway, four-year-old me swaggers around like I own the place. The camera shakes because my mom, who’s filming, is trying not to laugh.

First-jump students stand silently at the fence watching canopies open and jumpers land. They know that soon they’ll be on board the Caravan, then they’ll climb to altitude and, one by one, they’ll jump out attached to my dad or one of the instructors who work for him (who will keep them stable and open the canopy and make sure they land in the right place, not hung up in a tree or sizzling on power lines). Then, one by one, they’ll land and shout “Woo-hoo!” and say that it was awesome and swear they’re coming back the next weekend. And then they’ll drive home and never make another jump.

I’ve seen the video so many times I feel like I remember that day. I strut up and down the line looking at the first-jumpers. Two girls ask me my name and how old I am, trying to pretend they aren’t terrified. I ignore them and go up to the guy who looks the palest, the most like he’s about to throw up, and I stare at him until he’s obviously

uncomfortable. Then I ask in as spooky a voice as I can squeak out, “*Can you smell it?*”

The guy looks confused. “I don’t smell anything.”

I tilt my head and sniff. I ask a little louder, “Can you smell it?” The camera shakes again, and you hear a snort escape from my mom.

Someone finally says, “Smell what?”

Then I say, “Death!” I stomp my foot like I’m squashing a bug and shout, “WHOMP!”

I’m always curious how my dad’s date will react to that. Usually, she giggles nervously. Sometimes she says something like, “Goodness!”

And my dad says, “I have no idea who taught her that. Not good for business.” He sounds serious, but you can hear that he thinks it’s funny.

But I know. I know who taught me that. And my dad does too; I remember when he got mad at my mom and told her she was scaring off customers.

After the “WHOMP!” the first part of the video ends because my mom cracked up so hard, she had to stop filming. The second part shows my dad doing formations in the air with his team the year they won the nationals, and then a world-record attempt he was in. That formation funneled right before the last person closed, but it was really pretty anyway.

Last comes a TV news report about my mom’s team doing a demo jump into a rock concert at the university in Springfield. My mom’s canopy opens with line twists, so she cuts away really low and goes back into freefall a heartbeat before

her reserve opens. The crowd loves it. They scream while the reporter shouts about how my mom was mere seconds away from death and how they had all witnessed a miracle.

That's where the news report ends, but whoever sent it to my dad gave us the uncut version, which makes the reporter look really stupid. The guy asks my mom what she was thinking as she "plummeted to earth," and she says, "I was worrying I'd broken a fingernail." (She was messing with him—my mom's fingernails were as short as mine.) She takes her helmet off, and her short blond hair is plastered to her head with sweat, but even so, she is so beautiful that it's hard to look at her. The reporter keeps trying to get her to open up about how her life must have flashed before her eyes, and she finally says in this really condescending way, "Look, buddy, it happens. It's part of skydiving. You don't wet your pants every time someone runs a red light or cuts you off on the freeway, do you? Jumping is a lot safer than driving and a hell of a lot safer than keeping skydivers talking instead of letting them use their backstage passes. So run along." Then she actually pats him on the head and leaves him standing there with a red face, looking like he wants to cry.

Then Dad always pops the DVD out, and here's where the test comes in: each date gets a grade based on the first thing she says. He tells me her grade after she leaves. I've given up telling him that it's ridiculous to judge someone based on this one thing. My dad says that if a woman isn't okay with him being a jumper, there's not much point in seeing her again. Seeing how much time he spends at the drop zone, I guess that's reasonable. Kind of.

Most times, his date says he's crazy to jump. That earns her a D. He tells her he appreciates her honesty and doesn't try to convince her that skydiving is actually a lot safer than most people think. If he likes everything else about her, he might call her again. But he usually doesn't.

If she says, "I don't see why you'd jump out of a perfectly good airplane," which every single whuffo says to every single skydiver like it's the most original and witty thing they've ever heard, he'll find some excuse to end the date early. He won't even bother to give her one of the standard jumper responses ("Because the door was open" or "You've obviously never seen a jump plane"). That "perfectly good airplane" line gives her an F, and he'll never call her again.

If his date says something like, "That looks really cool," she passes with a B. She doesn't have to say that she's always wanted to jump—he has lots of whuffo friends, not to mention a daughter he hopes will be a permanent whuffo, and he'd be fine with a whuffo girlfriend as long as she doesn't mind that he spends every weekend at the DZ. But he doesn't like gonna-jumpers who talk about it and never do it, so if she does say she's always wanted to skydive, he tells her great, he'll put her out the next Saturday. If she backs out, her grade drops to a C. If she actually jumps, her grade goes up to an A, even if she hates it and says she'll never do it again. "At least she tried," he says on the rare occasions when this happens.

One thing that isn't on my dad's video is a shaky, over-exposed recording that lasts less than two minutes. I don't think he's ever seen it—he's not too good with computers.

One day I searched “jenna clancy last jump” on YouTube, and there it was. At first I couldn’t watch it all the way through, but after a few tries I made it to the end. Then I slammed my computer lid shut, thinking in some weird way that I was trapping the video in there, and didn’t go online again for days.

Every few months I get an itchy, anxious feeling, and I know I have to see it again. I wait until my dad’s out of the house. He doesn’t bother me when I’m in my room with the door closed, but somehow I would feel uncomfortable if I watched it with him around.

First, I always check how many views it’s gotten. I don’t read the comments—not after the first time, when people said things that I wished I hadn’t seen about chicks skydiving and about how deep a crater she must have made.

Anyway, the recording starts with the four members of my mom’s competition team exiting the plane. At first they’re just little dots. They grow a bit larger, and you can see that they’re practicing the routine for the nationals. The sky is so bright behind them that you can hardly see them joining into a star and then a donut and then more formations, so fast and precise it doesn’t look like real people but like computer animation. It’s beautiful, but it doesn’t last long, because jumpers only get about a minute of freefall. They break apart and pull. One, two, three hot-pink canopies blossom against the blue Missouri sky.

My mom’s best friend, Angie, is recording from the ground. She was on the demo team but wasn’t great at formation skydiving, so another teammate, named Michelle,

took her place for formation, which didn't leave Angie much to do while the competition team was practicing. On the video she talks to someone you can't see, identifying who's who by how they fly their canopies. "There's Patsy . . . and Louisa . . . and Michelle." She doesn't sound worried at first as she says, "Now where's Jenna?" She sweeps the camera around and stops at a black dot against the brilliant blue that I know is my mom, but her canopy isn't open. Instead, there's a lumpy, misshapen thing flapping behind her.

"That's Jenna." Uncertainty and tension creep into Angie's voice. "She's—I can't tell—it looks like—it's a bag lock." And that's what it is; the canopy is stuck partway out of its container. My mom flips over on her back. This should pull the canopy out, but it doesn't. Then she flips again so she's belly-down and stable, but the canopy hasn't budged. Angie starts calling, "Oh God, Jenna, cut it away! Cut away, Jenna!" Another voice nearby yells the same thing, and even though my mom is obviously too far away to hear them, that's exactly what she does, as though she's following their instructions. She pulls the cutaway handle to release the risers from her rig, and for a second it looks like everything will be okay, but the main canopy doesn't fly away like it should. It remains hung up, half in the bag and half out of it. My mom tries to clear it, but she doesn't have much time, and then the automatic activation device on her reserve canopy deploys. But just at that moment the main canopy finally works itself free, and the reserve flies right up into it and catches its lines, tangling the two of them together.

The two canopies wrap up into a long, swirling

streamer—the pink main and the white reserve twisted together like some gigantic, deadly candy cane—and my mom is spinning under it. She's so low that you can see her twirling as she jerks and tugs on the lines to free the reserve from the mess of the main. Angie's screaming and she must be running, because everything gets bumpy and shaky. Then she drops the camera, and all you can see is grass, and all you can hear is screaming and crying.

And then it ends.

Dirt dive: A rehearsal of a formation skydive on the ground. Jumpers walk through the formations to troubleshoot and to practice.

—*The Whuffo's Guide to Skydiving*

2

My dad had been seeing Elise for a few weeks before she came over for Stroganoff night. I had met her before and she seemed nice enough, but I knew better than to get to know one of my dad's dates and maybe start to like her until after the video test. She was nice-enough looking too. Her brown hair was long and kind of wild, despite the combs and things she used in an attempt to tame it. I could tell it was colored but it looked pretty natural, and she was a little overweight (not like my mom, who had been thin, like me). To be fair, my mom was only twenty-six when she died, and maybe by now she would have put on some weight too.

Anyway, Elise was easy to talk to at dinner and was

even kind of funny, and she passed the video test afterward. Nothing about a “perfectly good airplane” crossed her lips. When she said she’d like to make a jump, her grade stood at a provisional B. *Just saying you’re going to jump is like doing a dirt dive*, I thought. *You can do fine when nothing’s at stake, but you never know what will happen until you’re actually standing in the door of the plane.*

I wondered if Elise would actually do it and wind up with an A. It had been a while since my dad had seen a woman more than a few times, at least as far as I knew.

She did show up at the drop zone the next Saturday. My dad offered to put her out on a static line. Elise asked what that was. He told her it was like what soldiers use, where they’re attached to a cord that pulls the parachute open right after they exit. She said, “No, thanks. I don’t want to go out that door by myself!” I wasn’t surprised; none of the Stroganoff ladies have ever accepted the static-line offer, which I think would get them an A+.

He didn’t try to convince her, even though he always says that making a jump while tethered to someone else takes half the fun out of it. All he said was, “That’s fine. I’ll send you out with Leon.”

We were in the hangar, which is made of corrugated metal and gets really, really hot in the summer and freezing cold in the winter. I was in the back of the cavernous space, packing student rigs. I had been packing ever since I turned sixteen the spring before, which was okay as long as a certified rigger was around to supervise me. My dad paid me five dollars per standard pack job, ten dollars for a tandem rig.

Sometimes fun jumpers would pay me to pack for them, and they almost always gave me a tip on top of the packing fee, mostly because I'd known a lot of them since I was born.

I glanced at my dad as he strapped Elise into a harness. She didn't giggle or say anything stupid while he adjusted the chest straps. She said "Ow" once, but that was okay; he had to know if he'd gotten it too tight. When she was all rigged up, Dad took her into the office, where Cynthia was working the manifest, to get her on a load. Elise came back alone and stood in the doorway of the hangar, looking nervous. I shoved the canopy I was working on into its container and stowed the lines.

I earn less than some other packers because I'm always extra careful, and that makes me slow. Sometimes a jumper new to Skydive Knoxville—my dad's DZ—will tease me about it, asking if I'm crocheting or something. Someone always pulls them aside, and when I see them again I know by the way they avoid my eye that they've just learned about my mom. A part of me is relieved that they won't say anything more about it, a part of me is pissed that everybody has to know my private business, and a part of me wishes that for once, someone would ask me about it.

Leon came in and got Elise, and they went out to the plane. I didn't go out to watch. Sometimes I got twinges of resentment or envy when one of my dad's dates made a jump. If just once he would have said, "You know, Clancy, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe you could handle it. Why don't I put you out on your eighteenth birthday?" Instead, he encouraged women he hardly knew to make a jump.

Some of the regulars were packing in the hangar or hanging around waiting for the stream of students to die down. One group was dirt diving outside the door. The jumpers I knew came to say hi or waved at me when they arrived. Ripstop, the old, gray DZ cat, rubbed against my ankles. I bent down and scratched him between his raggedy ears. He purred. I picked him up and nuzzled him until he'd had enough and squirmed out of my grasp.

"I know how you feel, buddy," I said to him as he stalked away with his tail in the air, its tip twitching. At a certain point, you need your space.

Since Dad was running two planes, I kept busy. I listened to music, but I still heard the first plane take off. Pretty soon another engine revved, and then the first plane landed, and another group headed out. The jumpers from the first load came back into the hangar, whooping and laughing, so I had a new pile of rigs to pack. I stopped and stretched whenever I could, but my back was still getting sore from the way I had to stay bent over. I glanced at the clock and grimaced. I'd only been working an hour, even though it felt like all day.

Elise's load landed, and my dad came out of the office and stood in the doorway of the hangar. He grinned as she trotted up and threw her arms around him. "That was so much *fun!*" she almost shouted. "I was hardly scared at all." Her curly brown hair had escaped from its elastic, and her smile nearly split her face in two. She kept talking while he undid the straps and pulled the harness off her. Lots of students babble out of relief that the jump is done, but

Elise looked more excited than relieved, like she had really enjoyed it.

Elise called to me, “I bet you can’t *wait* until you’re old enough to do this!”

The smile left my dad’s face, and he looked like someone had punched him in the stomach. Before I could come up with one of my stock answers, Elise’s eyes widened and she covered her open mouth with one hand. “Oh, honey, I’m so sorry! I totally forgot . . .”

Totally forgot that your mother died right out there, only a few hundred yards from where I landed safe and sound five minutes ago. Totally forgot that you were here that day.

“It’s okay,” I said, falsely cheery. I didn’t want her to feel bad that she had forgotten—adrenaline will do that to you. Plus, it’s not like people avoided talking about jumping around me, which would be impossible at the DZ, anyway. *Don’t say anything*, I silently begged my dad, but of course he had to “set the record straight,” as he put it.

“Clancy isn’t going to jump. She’s not so good at thinking on her feet.” He glanced at me, but I turned back to the packing table so he wouldn’t see my face, which I felt growing hot. “Jumping isn’t the right sport for her. If she had to make a decision in a hurry . . .” He shook his head without finishing.

“Dad . . .” I swallowed the whiny tone. *I should just let it go*, I thought. When I turned eighteen it wouldn’t be up to him. I’d be legal, and if I wanted to skydive and hang glide and bungee jump and get a tattoo, I’d do it. Maybe all of them on the same day.

I didn't say that, of course. I didn't want him passing out on the floor or sending me to a boarding school with bars on the windows, so I said as reasonably as I could, "You always say that, but when I ask you for examples of 'poor decision-making skills'"—I made air quotes with my fingers—"you can't ever give me any. If you—" I saw Elise trying to slip away from this family squabble, and I stopped. I bent back over the lines I was untangling so my dad wouldn't see my face. I knew he wasn't the only clueless parent in the world, but surely he'd know how humiliating it was to have Elise be a witness to how he treated me like a ditz.

"We'll talk about this another time," my dad said.

"Yeah, right," I muttered. I knew we wouldn't.

Rippy hopped up on the table and batted at the lines. I pushed him away and worked without speaking until I was sure my dad and Elise were gone.

I closed the last pack and glanced out the door. From the looks of the wind sock, it might get too breezy for students soon, maybe even for the fun jumpers. It was the weekend before the start of summer school at Clemens, and the college students had a whole summer's worth of money in their pockets and no homework to do yet. I hoped my dad would be able to put out at least one more load. That would mean four, maybe five, pack jobs, just from student rigs. Every dollar I earned went into my savings so that I could eventually go away to college. There's nothing wrong with Clemens, but it was practically in my backyard, and I knew my dad would always find some excuse to drop in, even if he let me live in a dorm.

“And I’ll become an archaeologist and go on digs in some country where no one’s ever heard of skydiving,” I grumbled to myself. Ha. Like such a country existed. I’d probably be in the rain forest digging up an arrowhead that proved that Amazonian Indians actually came from Scotland when some guy in a rig would land in front of me and say, “Aren’t you Dave Edwards’s kid?”

Cynthia’s voice came crackling into the hangar, telling everyone that we were on a weather hold and only fun jumpers could go up—no students. The load that was already up landed, and the students trickled into the hangar. Rigs piled up next to me. The students trickled out again, laughing and talking, and then one of them turned back and called into the hangar, “Which one of you guys is Clancy?”

I suppressed a groan as I straightened up and looked at the student standing in the doorway. Right behind him stood Noel, who made a jack-o’-lantern grin at me behind the guy’s back. He always thought it was funny to let people think I was a man.

“Clancy?” the guy asked. He looked at Buddy, who shook his head. He turned to Mad Jack, who shrugged.

I put the student out of his misery by raising my hand. “Here.”

He looked at me warily, like he thought he would be providing the punch line to a joke. “I mean the Clancy who packed my parachute,” he explained. “I want to thank him for saving my life.” He sounded hyped up on adrenaline, and his ears were probably still stopped up, which would explain why he was so loud.

“I’m the Clancy who packed your parachute,” I said. “And you’re welcome.”

Noel tossed his rig onto the pile and picked up his regular gear to join the group of fun jumpers that was forming outside the door. When I glanced up to find Noel’s tandem rig, the student was still there. “Sorry.” He sounded like he meant it. “It just didn’t occur to me—I mean, I never thought—”

“It’s okay. I know there aren’t many girls called Clancy. It’s really my middle name. And Noel likes doing that. He thinks he’s a comedian.” The guy looked sheepish and even blushed a little. “I’m a good packer even though I’m a girl, if that’s what’s bothering you. I know what I’m doing. I don’t make parachutes or repair them or anything—I just pack them, and it’s legal, even though—”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s legal. And I’m sure you know what you’re doing—it opened and everything.”

He looked nice when he smiled. I noticed that he wasn’t much taller than me, if at all, and had light brown hair and kind of gold-colored eyes. Long eyelashes. A nice face with a cleft chin. I realized I was staring and started on Noel’s pack.

Leon came in with a rig dangling from his hand, and the student stuck out his hand at him. “Thanks again,” he said. “It was awesome.”

“You got the wrong guy.” Leon tossed his rig next to the table and went out, leaving the student staring after him.

“That was Leon,” I told him. “You jumped with Noel.”

“But that guy looks just like—”

“Leon and Noel are identical twins,” I said. “At least they look identical—same height, same receding hairline, same

potbelly, same everything else. But actually, they're totally different. Leon's right-handed; Noel's a lefty. Leon is quiet; Noel never shuts up. Leon's gay; Noel's straight."

"Wow! It's kind of like they're mirror images, like their names."

I nodded. "They even part their hair on opposite sides. Their mom promised her father she'd name her first son Leon after him. Then when she had twins she named the first one Leon and the second one Noel so they'd both have his name, kind of."

"Good thing her dad wasn't named Bob."

It took me a moment to get it, and then I laughed. "Or Otto!"

"Or Pip. Or Asa."

"Asa?"

He shrugged. "It's a name." Then he blushed again. "My name's Denny. Dennis Rider, really, but nobody calls me Dennis except my grandmother."

"If you had a twin, the two of you would be Dennis Sinned," I said.

He smiled. "Never thought of that. Can't do much with Clancy, though—Clancy . . ." He wrote the letters in the air and acted like he was reading it. "Ycnaic."

"Sounds Klingon," I said. "My dad sometimes calls me C.C. That would work backwards. My real first name is easier than Clancy, though. Backwards, it's Syrac."

"Your real name is Carys?"

"It's Welsh, after my dad's mother," I said. "No one ever knows how to pronounce it, so when I started kindergarten,

I told the teacher my name was Clancy. It was easier.” That wasn’t really true. I had still been Carys in kindergarten. It was in first grade that I changed it. And it wasn’t because nobody could pronounce it. Lots of kids had names that made substitute teachers stumble, and they didn’t switch to their middle names. No, it was because Clancy was my mom’s last name, and I had practically nothing of hers left to me, just a few pictures. Her rings and the pearl necklace her grandmother had given her were technically mine, but they were in a safe-deposit box at the bank. My dad or Angie did something with the rig and costumes she had worn for demo jumps. I figured that since I had nothing else of hers, I could at least have her name.

The last student load landed, and the whoops and hollers started again, and the pile of rigs next to me grew. Denny’s phone rang. He glanced at the screen and broke into a grin as he answered it. “F-bomb!”

F-bomb?

He hunched over his phone and turned away. “It was awesome! I can’t wait till we do it together. You’ll love it.” He waved his free hand at me and walked out. I went back to my packing, and when I looked up again, he was sitting cross-legged against the wall, still talking. His face was shining, and even at that distance it looked like he had tears in his eyes.

Denny glanced up as though he felt me staring and smiled again. I quickly went back to my work, ignoring the little flutter in my belly, and the next time I looked toward the wall, he was gone.

I finally finished packing, and I was reading my *National Geographic* in the beanbag chair when my phone beeped. Theo wanted to know if the weather was as bad at the DZ as it was in town. I felt a twinge of guilt that I hadn't even thought about him all day, or at least ever since I'd met Denny. That didn't mean anything, I told myself. It was just that it was a nice change having someone to talk to at the DZ. It made the time pass.

I looked out the hangar door, which was wide enough to allow a small aircraft to wheel in, and saw that the sky was gray. A piece of trash went skittering across the landing area, and I wondered how high the wind was. I hoisted myself up stiffly. How long had I been sitting there? It was hard to wrench my mind away from the ancient Aztecs and Incas I'd been reading about and focus on twenty-first century Missouri.

In the office Cynthia was yawning and playing solitaire on the computer. She brightened when she saw me. "Tell Dave we need to close down," she said. "He won't listen to me."

"Where is he?"

She jerked her head in the direction of the lounge, behind the office.

I hesitated. "Is Elise with him?" I didn't want to interrupt anything.

She nodded. "Bunch of other people too." So that was okay.

In the lounge my dad sat on the saggy couch, with Elise next to him—not plastered against him, but being cozy. Leon and Noel were in armchairs, and Louisa and Patsy

sat on folding chairs. A newish jumper named Zach, who had just come off student status, sat on the floor, teasing Ripstop with a length of cord.

They were telling shoulda-died stories. Skydivers never get tired of them. Louisa was in the middle of her best story, which I had heard zillions of times, about one day in the '90s when she'd been riding her motorcycle to a DZ in Arizona. She wore her rig on her back while she drove along the highway, and she locked it down so it wouldn't deploy by accident while she was on the road, which would probably be fatal. She got to the DZ just as a load was going up. She ran to the plane, forgetting about the condition of her rig, and when the plane turned on jump run, another jumper offered to give her a pin check.

"What's that?" Elise asked.

"Something jumpers used to do back in the day, when they jumped rounds and Para-Commanders," Zach said dismissively.

Elise looked blankly at Zach. "Old-style rigs," he explained. "They—"

"A pin check is something *some* jumpers still do," my dad broke in. "Including everyone at this DZ, on every load." He looked around to make sure they got his point, and then answered Elise. "The rig is on your back, which means you can't check yourself one last time to make sure everything is in place, so someone else on the load checks for you, and you do the same for them." He glared at Zach, who looked down at Ripstop as though the beaten-up old tomcat was suddenly interesting.

“Anyway,” Louisa said hastily, “sure enough, the other jumper saw that both my main and my reserve were locked down. The main never would have opened, and by the time I could have managed to unlock the reserve, it probably would have been too late.”

“Wow.” Zach shook his head. “You packed yourself a double malfunction.”

Everyone digested that thought in silence. Even Rippy stopped playing with the string dangling from Zach’s fingers and looked serious.

Angie says that after my mom died, it was a long time before anyone told shoulda-died stories around my dad, but it turned out he still liked hearing them and even telling them himself. I don’t know why. Maybe it was because they’re a reminder that a skydiving accident doesn’t always have to end in death.

3

FACT: By far the primary cause of death and injury in skydiving is skydiver error, not equipment failure.

—*The Whuffo's Guide to Skydiving*

Elise caught sight of me in the doorway. She smiled and slid over, patting the cushion next to her. I shook my head. “I just need to talk to my dad.”

Then everyone looked at me, and I wished I had told Cynthia that if she wanted to close up, she should be the one to ask my dad, not me. Too late now, and anyway, I would love to be home early enough on a Saturday to be able to do something with Theo.

“What is it, C.C.?” my dad asked.

“The wind isn’t dropping and clouds are moving in.”

Zach groaned. “My one day off this week!” He had

shown up at the DZ a few times in hospital scrubs, but whether he was a brain surgeon or an orderly or something in between, I didn't know.

"Let's see if it clears," my dad said. "The weather people don't know everything."

"Dad."

"Just another hour."

"Oh, take her home," Noel said. "Back to that boyfriend."

"He's working," my dad said.

"No, he's not," I said. "Or he won't be for long. It's really cloudy in town, and they're going to close the pool." Theo hadn't exactly said that, but it was probably true.

In the end my dad said we'd wait until four o'clock and see. By then it was obvious that jumping was over for the day. Elise said good-bye to me and went outside with my dad, and in a minute her car pulled up to the parking lot exit. I watched as she turned onto the road and drove away. I wondered if she'd come back the next weekend. She was nice enough, and she wasn't trying to be a mother to me.

Leon and Noel were going to spend the night in their tents behind the hangar and hope for better weather on Sunday, and the rest of the jumpers loaded up their cars and left. Then my dad did some paperwork while I straightened out Cynthia's files, which were always a mess. I knew that if I nagged him, it wouldn't do anything except give him an excuse to lecture me, which would slow us down even more. We finally left just after five.

I'd gotten up before dawn since my dad likes to be on-site for the first load, so I slept most of the way back. It would be

great to get home before the sun set, for a change. My dad would have preferred to stay over Saturday night in the trailer we kept at the DZ, but even he could see how unfair it was to make me hang out at the DZ all weekend. When I was younger I used to go to summer camp—first for two weeks, then for a month, then for most of the summer—until I aged out. While I was away my dad would move to the DZ. Until I turned twelve or thirteen, it didn't bother me that I spent my weekends at the DZ, with a lot of adults. But once I was old enough to have friends and a life of my own, I complained about staying there all weekend and seeing my friends only in school. My dad was reluctant to leave me with a babysitter, even Angie's daughter, Leanne.

Now that I was sixteen and obviously too old for a sitter, even according to my dad, people offered to drive me home when they were done jumping on Saturday and then bring me back again to the DZ on Sunday morning. But my dad still wouldn't let me stay in the house overnight by myself. That meant we had to get up really early on Sunday too, but at least I could go out on Saturday night.

I woke up when we were a few blocks from home and texted Theo. He didn't answer. As we pulled up to the house, I saw why: he was already on the porch, sitting on a step. His dark hair still glistened with pool water in the gray light coming from the cloudy sky, and his lean swimmer's build looked especially good when he was stretched out like that.

He came down to the car to help me out. I'd given up telling him that I didn't need help, and I let him open the door and offer me his hand, as though I was too fragile

to struggle out of the seat by myself. Saint Theodore the Protector. I stifled a sigh of exasperation. Better to pick your battles, Angie always told me, and this wasn't very important. Plus, Theo liked being protective.

The air had cooled since we'd left the DZ, and a fresh breeze stirred my hair. Theo gave me a quick kiss, his chin stubble scraping my skin. I smiled up at him. He looked so good. In the dim light, his brown eyes were almost black, and I wished I could trace his jawline with my finger without my dad seeing.

My dad came around the car. "Anything in the trunk, sir?" Theo asked. He'd moved to Missouri from Birmingham, Alabama, the previous summer, but he still had a drawl that my best friend, Julia, said was the sexiest thing she'd ever heard.

"Nope." Dad shook Theo's hand. "We'll be going back first thing in the morning, so I left things there."

He wouldn't let me tease Theo for always shaking hands, for opening the door for me, or for the "sir" and "ma'am." He said it was refreshing to see a seventeen-year-old act like a gentleman. I knew he meant "refreshing as a boyfriend for my daughter" because he liked neck-tattoo Cory as just a friend for me, and he preferred adventurous girlfriends for himself. He also liked how Theo did man-stuff with him, such as when the refrigerator quit and the two of them fixed it together. If I offered to help, they'd act like it was cute and tell me they could handle it.

"Would it be all right if I took Clancy out to dinner tonight?" Theo asked him.

“Fine with me,” he said.

“Um, fine with me too,” I said pointedly. They both looked at me like they were surprised I could talk. I was kind of surprised too. I usually didn’t say anything if they decided things for me, if I didn’t care about whatever it was. If I did care, I’d probably say something after we weren’t around my dad. Divide and conquer, after all. But I guess I was still irritated by the way my dad had spoken for me when Elise had said something about me making a jump, so I went on, “Isn’t anybody going to ask whether I want to go out to dinner tonight?”

“There’s nothing to eat in the house,” Dad said at the same time that Theo said, “You always want to go out to dinner!” This was true. Aside from Beef Stroganoff, neither Dad nor I could really cook.

“Well, maybe I don’t feel well tonight, or maybe I have other plans.”

“You don’t feel well?” my dad asked. “What’s the matter?”

“I feel fine,” I said. “But what if I didn’t?”

“So what plans do you have?” Theo asked. “You didn’t say any—”

“I didn’t say I had something else to do. I just asked, what if I did? What if I was doing something with Julia?” I stopped. I didn’t want to fight with him.

My dad and Theo glanced at each other and then at me. My dad looked amused; Theo looked baffled.

“Oh, whatever.” I gave up. “Sure. Give me ten minutes to shower. Where do you want to go?”

Where Theo wanted to go was Manuelito’s, a Mexican

place near our school. He made a point of asking me if that was okay and I said it was. As I headed into the house, my dad said to Theo, “Women,” and Theo laughed. I knew my dad was teasing me, but it was still irritating.

Theo was watching the news with my dad when I came back. He stood up. “Don’t worry, sir,” he told my dad. “I’ll get her back early.”

“Have fun.” My dad got up too and disappeared into the back of the house. The light in the kitchen went on, and I briefly wondered what he’d find to eat. Maybe I’d bring him back a taco.

Manuelito’s was packed, and at first I didn’t think we’d find a place to sit. Then Julia waved at me from a booth in the back. Her boyfriend, Justin, sat across from her. I nudged Theo and pointed.

“Oh, there they are!” he said.

“You knew they’d be here?”

He steered me past the game room and through the close-packed tables. “When you told me you were on your way home, I asked Justin to save us some seats. I figured you’d be craving flautas.”

“Yay, rain!” Julia said as I slid into the booth next to her. Theo sat down across from me. “Yay, wind!” She put her arm around my shoulders and squeezed. She was so much shorter than me that she had to reach up, and her soft hair tickled my nose. “We can actually hang out together for more than five minutes, and on a Saturday!”

“There’s nothing special about Saturdays for me,” Theo pointed out. “I still have to go to work tomorrow.”

“But not until the afternoon,” Justin said. “I have to get up almost as early as Clancy.” Justin had worked for his father’s landscaping company every summer since he was a little kid, and weekends were busy for them, but the pool where Theo worked didn’t open until lunchtime on Sunday.

“If the weather gets better, I’m going rock climbing in the morning,” Theo said. “Have to get in shape for the summer. The club has planned some really good trips to the mountains.” He flexed his arms as though already imagining scaling a cliff, and the muscles on his upper arms rippled.

“Did you hear about that job at the miniature golf place?” I asked Julia.

“Yup, they want me to come back part-time and work with the little kids.” Julia was crazy about kids, and they were crazy about her. She volunteered at a day care for underprivileged kids during the school year, and I had helped her put on a play with them over the winter.

“So, mostly weekends?” She nodded and we high-fived. I worked mostly on weekends too, and this meant we’d have time to get together during the week.

“I can do my homework at the DZ,” I said. “The class I’m taking is self-paced—”

Justin interrupted me. “You’re going to summer school? What, a 4.0 isn’t enough for you?” He always tried to make me feel bad for doing well in school, like I was some kind of pathetic geek. I guess he was kidding, like Julia always said, but I didn’t find it amusing, and sometimes I just wanted him to talk normally instead of always trying to be funny.

I didn't say so because it would surely lead to, "Oh, poor Clancy, did I hurt your widdle feelings?"

I explained, trying to keep an overly patient kindergarten-teacher tone out of my voice, "It's just an online class. AP Art History. If I get the AP credit, I'll be able to start off with upper-level art history courses in college. I want to graduate in three years, and that'll be hard with a double major, so I'll need all the APs I can get."

Theo leaned across the table. "My nerdy girlfriend." He kissed the top of my head. "I saw your light reading for the DZ that you left in the car. Come on, *National Geographic*?"

"I like that stuff about the Incas and the Aztecs. It's interesting, and it's something I should know about if I'm going to be an archaeologist."

"Missouri Jones doesn't have the same ring to it as Indiana Jones, though," Julia chimed in.

"Which were the ones that did human sacrifices—the Aztecs or the Incas?" Justin asked.

"Both." I waited, knowing that he'd follow this up with something he thought was funny, but that I probably wouldn't.

Sure enough, he held his menu up to his face and peeked over its top at the waiter making the rounds. "Do you think he's Aztec or Inca? Better be careful what you order. You don't know where those sacrificed humans wind up."

"Justin!" Julia glared at him. "That's so racist!"

"Oh, come on," Justin said. "No way he could hear."

"Well, I heard you," Julia snapped. Justin was so clueless. Julia's mom is Dominican, not Mexican, but still, what a jerk.

He managed to get her to forgive him by the time the waiter brought us all large Cokes and we ordered our usuals. Julia poked me in the ribs, and I looked down to see that she was holding out a small bottle of amber liquid to me under the table—rum, I guessed. She nodded at my Coke. Obviously, she meant for me to pour some of the rum into it. I shook my head.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “Live a little. Celebrate the beginning of summer break. You’re almost a junior.”

“You know how my dad is,” I said. “He always pretends he’s just kissing me good night when really, he’s smelling my breath for alcohol.” She grimaced sympathetically and started to pass the bottle to Theo, but on an impulse I grabbed it from her, surprising myself as much as Julia. *What had gotten into me today?* Maybe I was tired of being predictable.

“Changed my mind,” I whispered as I poured no more than a tablespoon of rum into my glass. *I’m not driving*, I reminded myself. *It’s okay.*

“Well, will you look at that,” Julia said.

Justin glanced down. He whistled under his breath. “Clancy Edwards, you are finally growing up.”

I didn’t answer as I handed Theo the bottle under the table. “What are you doing?” he asked in a low voice, giving the bottle back to Justin without taking any. He was Mr. Designated Driver. “Won’t your dad—”

I was already regretting what I had done but tried to shrug it off. “I fear not the wrath of my sire.” I waved a chip grandiosely in the air. “I’ll just be sure to eat enough guacamole so my garlic breath covers it up.”

The Coke tasted barely different, especially after the splash of rum was diluted with a refill, and the food was good, as always. Julia was even chattier than usual, which was also good, because I didn't feel like talking. That's what usually happened. When Julia and I were ten and first saw a yin-yang symbol, with the black shape and the white shape curling around each other and fitting together perfectly, we knew that was us. We were total opposites in most ways, but we fit together. She shook me out of my routine, and I reined in her craziness. It seemed that whenever she didn't want to talk, I did, and the other way around. Her mom always said that Julia would never open a book if it wasn't for me studying so much, and my dad liked how Julia would drag me out to movies and things when I'd been alone in my room for too long. We still drew the yin-yang symbol on each other's notebooks in school.

The guys didn't seem to notice how quiet I was, and as soon as they had wolfed down their enchiladas and chiles rellenos, they got up to play pinball.

Julia sucked the last of her Coke out of the glass. "So what's the matter?" she asked.

I shrugged and looked across the room to where Justin and Theo were battling it out. "Just tired, I guess." I didn't want to tell her that Theo was getting on my nerves, not after I had been obsessed with him since the first day of tenth grade, when he was newly arrived from Alabama. I got so excited when he finally asked me out in January that I nearly fainted. Half the girls in our class had a crush on him, yet he chose me. I still couldn't believe it sometimes.

Julia would think I was crazy if I suddenly said that Theo's never-ending attention was getting old. For her, the more attention, the better. Besides, it was probably just that I'd been in a weird mood ever since I'd been at the DZ. Ever since I'd met Denny.

"Maybe you can stay home tomorrow," Julia suggested. "Tell your dad you're sick."

I sighed and twisted my paper napkin around and around. "No, I need the money. The weather's supposed to be better tomorrow, and there'll be lots of students. Besides, if I don't go, my dad'll stay home, and then I'll feel guilty. And I can't go to Angie's, so my dad would have to find someone to stay with me." Angie had left for New Mexico in a hurry a few weeks earlier when her son-in-law had walked out on her daughter, Leanne—my former babysitter—and their twins. Angie was going to take care of the grandkids until her son-in-law either came back or paid enough child support to pay for day care. Angie's son, Jackson, had just come home after finishing his freshman year of college and was watching the house.

"This is getting ridiculous," Julia said. "You're sixteen. You don't need a babysitter."

"Ha! It's not a babysitter he thinks I need. He doesn't think I need someone to make me dinner and keep me from falling down the stairs. It's a chaperone he wants."

"But Theo's working all day!"

"He's not worried about the daytime—it's after Theo gets off work." I twirled the paper wrapper from my straw and sighed. "My dad must have been really wild and crazy

when he was our age, because he keeps saying, ‘I know what teenagers are like.’” I made my voice dark and growly, and Julia laughed. “He says that without a mother’s influence, I need more supervision than other girls my age.”

Julia was still laughing. “*You* need supervision? You need less supervision than anyone I know! You’ve never even broken curfew.”

“Yes, I have—” I protested, but she wagged a finger at me.

“Five minutes late on Halloween when you’re in high school doesn’t count. You have the cutest boyfriend at Hawkins High, and you’re still a virgin. You don’t drink, even though you could totally get away with it. You don’t smoke, you’re a straight-A student, you leave the room when someone even lights up a joint—”

“Secondhand smoke. My dad could whip out a drug-testing kit any minute.”

“Oh, you know he’d never do that!”

I took a sip of Coke to untie the sudden knot in my throat. When I could speak, I said, “Jules, I can’t do anything risky. You know that. It would kill him if something happened to me. It took him forever to get over my mom. I mean, he still hasn’t gotten over her—he never talks about her or anything—but it took him forever to stop being a zombie.”

“I know,” she said. “But your dad’s a big boy. You don’t need to take care of him.” It was an old argument, and I knew she didn’t expect me to answer. She knew what I’d say anyway—that both of her parents were alive, even if they were divorced, and that although her dad lived in Vermont

and she hardly ever saw him, it was totally different. She couldn't understand what it was like to have her mom die. She didn't know what it was like to see her dad with a wound that everyone thought was scarred over but that sometimes opened. I'd do anything to keep from reopening it myself.

"Anyway," she went on, "maybe he'll marry one of those women he keeps going out with, and he'll lighten up on you some."

"Maybe." I didn't feel hopeful.

We sat without speaking again, her head on my shoulder and my cheek on her hair, until the guys came back.

Justin looked us up and down. "Everything okay?"

"Just girl talk." Julia straightened up. "Where do you guys want to go now?" She squeezed my hand and withdrew it.

"I got up at five o'clock this morning," I said, "and I have to get up at five tomorrow morning. I'm too tired to be any fun. I just want to go home and watch something stupid on TV and go to bed. You guys go on without me. Theo can take me home, and then go do whatever you two wind up doing."

Julia protested, but I could see that Justin thought it was a great idea. I gave Jules a hug and said good-bye to Justin, and Theo and I walked back to his car, our fingers entwined.

"So why the booze?" he asked.

"I don't know. Just wanted to see what the big deal was, I guess." But what I had really wanted was to see what it felt like to not always be a good girl, to do something that

would upset my dad if he knew about it. I just had to make sure he never did know about it.

Even though it was June, the air was cool after the rain, and Theo's hand felt nice and warm. I matched my stride to his, and he kissed the top of my head again and then my cheek. We stopped walking, and I turned to him. He held my face in both his hands and kissed me, gently and sweetly at first, and then, as I pressed myself into him, harder and more eagerly. His hand moved to my back and slid up under my T-shirt.

"Get a room!" Justin called from his car window as he and Julia took off, and Theo jumped back as though someone had hit him.

"Justin can be such a jerk." He sounded embarrassed.

"You speak sooth," I said. "He's a rank and arrant knave."

He chuckled and put his arm around me. "Well, I don't know that he's that bad. Jerk, maybe sometimes. 'Rank and arrant,' whatever that means—I don't know."

I rolled my eyes in theatrical disagreement, which made Theo laugh again.

"Come on," he said. "I'll take you home."

4

FACT: Since the 1970s, skydiving has recorded fewer casualties every decade, even though the number of people participating in the sport and the number of jumps have increased every decade.

—*The Whuffo's Guide to Skydiving*

My dad was dozing in his recliner with the TV on. I stood for a minute and watched him. He must have been exhausted. I wished he'd just go to bed when I was late coming home. My dad always said he wasn't waiting up for me, but that he got interested in a movie or couldn't sleep or got up to make a snack, but I noticed he never fell asleep in the recliner when I stayed home.

I switched the TV off. "Dad," I said. He grunted. "Dad, I'm home. Going to bed now." I started to go past him to get to my room, but he woke up enough to say, "Give your

old dad a good-night kiss.” I bent over to kiss his cheek, holding my breath.

“Garlic much?” He waved a hand in front of his face. He didn’t say anything about me coming back early. He probably figured that Theo was being thoughtful by bringing me home before curfew, knowing that I had to get up early. I’d once heard him tell one of the Stroganoff ladies, “Theo takes such good care of her,” like I was a puppy.

The next morning my dad had to call me three times before I dragged myself out of bed. The sun wasn’t up yet, so the grass was damp and a bit of a chill still hung in the air. I lay down on the backseat as soon as I got in the car and wrapped myself in the afghan after fastening the seat belt, which I knew Dad would check. I pretended to fall asleep so I wouldn’t have to talk if he got chatty. Pretty soon I did doze off, and I woke up only when we arrived at Skydive Knoxton.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. The sky was turning from dawn orange to summer blue, and everything sparkled after the rain. I glanced at my reflection in the side mirror of the car. My eyes were red and puffy, and I was wearing the same T-shirt I had slept in. My hair is so thick that it had still been damp from my shower when I went to bed the night before, and now it poked out in all directions. When I ran my tongue over my teeth, I could tell that my hasty toothbrushing that morning had already worn off. No makeup, of course. The students would be so nervous and the regular jumpers would be so focused on what they were doing that no one would have noticed if I’d walked naked

through the hangar. And there was no point in making the effort anyway, I had told myself, since I'd be folding canopies, stowing lines, and closing containers all day. The work was dusty, and even though it was only June, the metal roof of the hangar would turn the place into an oven by noon.

Why did I even look in the mirror then? *Denny might come back today*, something in me said.

"So what?" I said out loud, but I couldn't squelch the hope that he'd be there.

I hauled myself out of the car and picked up my book, even though with the beautiful weather, we'd probably have so many students that I'd be too busy to read. Mentally, I added up how much money I was likely to earn. If I thought about the weather and money, I wouldn't think about Denny. The only reason I was thinking about him at all was because he was fun to talk to, I told myself.

In the office, Cynthia was passing out forms to four students, three guys and a girl. No Denny. The realization brought a sour feeling of disappointment, followed immediately by guilt that I was disappointed. *You're overreacting, Carys Clancy*, I told myself firmly. No more late nights before work—I got emotional too easily when I didn't sleep enough. That explained my mood.

Today wouldn't be nearly as interesting. The first-jumpers looked like they'd been up all night partying. They had probably gone out to fortify themselves the night before and had gotten so wired they couldn't sleep. Cynthia rattled off what they had to sign and what pages they had to initial, and the four of them settled down with papers and

clipboards. There was the usual nervous joking, and when my dad came in they stood up and crowded around him. That's the way it always was. Cynthia is cute and little, with strawberry blonde hair and big green eyes, and although lots of male students and some female ones flirt with her, they always seem to think she won't give them the right information. *Just let them see her skydive*, I thought, picturing how ferociously she swoops into a landing, always standing it up. She looks like an angel with her powder-blue canopy settling behind her. But my dad is big, and more importantly, he's male, so jump students always act like cubs pawing at the big-maned lion for attention and reassurance.

"Much safer than hang gliding," he said in answer to a question I hadn't heard. "Safer than downhill skiing. Think about it. When you're jumping there are only two variables: the person jumping and the equipment. I only hire instructors who've made at least twenty tandem jumps. And our equipment exceeds all of USPA's requirements."

"USPA?" asked a skinny guy wearing a Clemens T-shirt.

"United States Parachute Association," Dad said. "Anyway, compare skydiving to downhill skiing. When you're skiing you have those same two variables: the person and the equipment, just like in jumping. But there are other things that can go wrong on the ski slopes. You're surrounded by skiers who might not know what they're doing, but when you're doing a jump you know that the other jumpers around you are experts. Plus, there are trees and cliffs and slick spots on a ski slope. None of that in the sky."

He laid a hand on the guy's shoulder and looked into his

eyes. I knew that look. It was tough and warm at the same time, unlike the way he looked at me, like he was sure I was about to break. He trusted a stranger, someone he'd never seen before, someone whose name he didn't even know, to make a good jump, but not me.

As though echoing my thought, my dad said to the guy, "Trust me. You'll have the time of your life."

And, as always, the student looked about six shades less pale and even stood up a little straighter. He picked up his pen and initialed all the paragraphs that said he understood the risk of injury or fatality, and that he wouldn't sue anybody if he wound up paralyzed or dead.

I loaded my coffee with extra milk powder and sugar since it would have to be my breakfast until I took a mid-morning break at the café next to the airport. I waved at Leon and Noel, who were just coming in, and squeezed past the students and out the door to the hangar. I didn't have anything to pack yet, so I settled on my beanbag chair and opened my textbook. I always felt more comfortable if I already knew the basics of the topic before classes started.

For some reason the art of the Cycladic islands wasn't as appealing as I had thought it would be. My mind wandered away from a theory of what the Cycladic people's religion might have been like, and when someone paused in the door of the hangar, casting a long shadow across the floor, I felt my heart lift a little with the hope that it was Denny.

It wasn't, just someone looking for my dad.

There was no reason for him to be there, I told myself as I tried to concentrate on my reading. Skydive Knoxton had

a higher rate of repeat business than most DZs, but it was still only around ten percent, compared with the average of five percent, and college students were rarely among the few who came back.

And why should I care one way or the other?

So it was almost spooky when I was leafing through an ancient book of my dad's called *United We Fall*, and a quiet voice behind me said, "Hey."

I nearly dropped the book. Of course it was Denny. "What are you doing here?" I asked before I could stop myself from sounding rude.

"Came back for another jump." He looked as awkward as I felt.

"Cynthia's checking in a bunch of first-timers," I said. "You'll probably be on the load after them."

"Thanks. I'll sign up when she's done. What are you reading?"

I looked down. "This?" I stuck some pages back in the book after they fluttered to the floor. "It's about formation skydiving. Or RW. Relative work. You know, when jumpers in freefall make formations with each other."

"I meant that one actually." He pointed to the art history book.

"Oh, this is for a class I'm taking this summer. It's a prerequisite for some upper-level classes."

"What's your major?"

I answered, "I'm planning to double in anthro and art history," and then I realized he must think I was a college student.

“I’m starting at Clemens next fall,” he said before I could correct his wrong impression. “I just got here. I’m doing an internship in Springfield this summer.”

So that was why he’d been texting so much yesterday: a summer apart from a girlfriend back home. “What in?” I asked.

“Psychology. Mostly I’ll be cleaning out monkey cages. Do you have any idea how bad monkey poop smells?” I shook my head. “Well, I won’t go into it, but I’m not thrilled about smelling it all summer.”

“Do they do anything mean to the monkeys?”

“Hope not. I don’t really know yet. I just got here on Friday, and they gave me a tour and said to come back on Monday.”

“Are you living on campus?”

“No, in an apartment. It’s right near the college, though. I can walk to the lab.”

“Are you pre-med?”

“I’m thinking psych. What about you? Why the double major?”

“It’s for archaeology. I should probably minor in something like history or geology.”

“Cool. Archaeology would be amazing. Don’t you have to go to school for like years before you can do it?”

“Probably no longer than for becoming a psychologist,” I pointed out.

“I’m not for sure going to be a psychologist. That’s why I’m doing the internship, to see if I like it. So have you gone on any digs or anything?”

“No.” I stopped before telling him I was probably too young. It wasn’t any of his business how old I was.

“I bet there’s a dig around here someplace,” he said. “Maybe they have internships too. You could find out whether you like being in the bottom of a trench in the middle of the summer.” That had always been the only unappealing part of archaeology to me. I figured there had to be digs in places that didn’t get as hot as Missouri. It was a school field trip to ruins of ancient Native American mounds in Charleston, Missouri, that had gotten me thinking about archaeology in the first place.

“It would probably be really hot,” I admitted. “But just think of all the amazing things left to discover. I was thinking of underwater archaeology, actually.”

“Cool,” Denny said again. “You scuba dive?”

Again I had to say no. I felt like a little kid who said I wanted to be an astronaut when I grew up without having any idea what astronauts did, like you could show up at NASA one day and get put into a rocket ship. Before I could change the subject, he asked me another question.

“And don’t archaeologists usually find just little pieces of pots and things anyway, not marble statues and gold jewelry and whole temples like in *National Geographic*?”

I couldn’t help sounding exasperated that he was shooting down my Indiana Jones fantasies. “Okay, so maybe they do, but somebody has to find the statues and temples and jewelry. Why not me?”

“Why not you?” he agreed, and he smiled. He had a great smile that crinkled up the skin around his eyes. It

almost made me stop being annoyed at the way he was interrogating me. Everyone else said that archaeology was great and I'd be a terrific archaeologist. Nobody asked about the details like this, and it made me uncomfortable to be questioned so closely by a stranger.

Do I wish now, knowing everything that happened next, that I'd told him I was in high school and was only sixteen? Everything would have been different. Most people would say that everything would have been better.

And maybe it would. But even so, if I had it all to do over again, I know I'd let him go on thinking I was a college student and eighteen years old. Because even with what happened, there's nothing that I would trade for that summer.