

JORDAN SONNENBLICK

STEPPING



OFF



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I. The Pause Button

Have you ever wished that life came with a pause button? I've wished it over and over again, and I know exactly when I would freeze everything: late in the afternoon on Saturday, May 18, 2019.

It was hot. Sunny. I was standing in bright orange swimming shorts and my favorite old black Converse All Stars on top of the concrete vehicle barrier that ran along the edge of the Ledgesdale Bridge, looking down at the dark, shadowed waters of the lake forty feet below, trying to work up the nerve to jump.

When you jump off the Ledgesdale Bridge, the sneakers are necessary so you don't break your feet.

I was between two girls, halfway in love with both of them at the same time. Chloe Conti was holding my right hand loosely, her thin fingers dry against mine. Ava Green was squeezing my left hand in a death grip, her round fingers slick with sunscreen. "Don't let go of me," Ava hissed. The sun was coming through the chain-link fence over her shoulder, and it was so bright that I couldn't really make out her features. She was just a flash of white teeth and a

golden halo of long hair above a bubblegum-pink swimsuit and the smooth skin of a hip against my leg.

“Never,” I said.

We were all leaning back against the fence. The links were burning into my back. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe slowly, in through my nose, out through my mouth—just like my asthma doctor always said to do when I was feeling panicky about my breathing. Or, you know, about jumping off something really high and drowning. As soon as I inhaled, the coconut scent of Chloe’s lotion and the flowery smell that always came off Ava’s hair almost overwhelmed me.

Chloe squeezed my hand with birdlike gentleness, and I turned to her. She was staring right at me, which did not make me less lightheaded. I could see the soft, haunting gray around her pupils. I looked down, because sometimes making eye contact with Chloe was too much for me to handle, even when we weren’t balanced on an alarmingly narrow ledge.

That was the thing about being with Chloe and Ava that summer: I’d never been so happy, so nervous, so uncomfortable, so miserable, and so *thrilled* before—all at the same time. Being with them was hot sauce and honey on my tongue.

My calves were starting to get shaky, so I knew we couldn’t just stand there much longer. Plus, the police might come. But I didn’t quite have the guts or the leadership or

whatever it would require to get us to take that one big step forward. It was Chloe who finally said, “So, guys, are we doing this or what?”

Well, I sure wasn’t going to look like a chicken in front of my two best friends. Who were also my two crushes. “Oh, we’re doing it,” I said. “If the birthday girl is ready?”

For some reason, it was a Tall Pines Landing tradition—a highly illegal tradition—to climb out onto the middle of the Ledge Dale Bridge and jump into the water as a sixteenth-birthday rite of passage. I was already sixteen, and so was Chloe. Our birthdays were in the winter, but it was Ava’s actual birthday weekend, so this was officially the birthday jump for all of us. We had come up with the idea of a triple jump years ago, probably when we were around eleven, lying on the ratty old mattresses on the floor of Ava’s treehouse. We’d had five years to think about this moment, but it hadn’t totally sunk into my head how scary it would be until now.

Ava’s grip, which had already been bone-crushing, cranked up another notch. I was pretty sure I felt a knuckle in my pinkie crack. “I’m ready,” she said. “Kinda.”

“So, do we just, like, count down?” I asked.

“I guess so,” Ava replied. “But from a high number, okay?”

“Are we talking five? Ten? Twenty?” I felt my voice crack on that last syllable, which I was pretty sure hadn’t happened since I was thirteen.

“No,” Chloe said, “we count down from three, like this: three . . . two . . . one . . . go!”

My knees bent, and I almost involuntarily started to spring forward. Chloe and Ava both yanked me back against the fence, hard.

“That was just a practice countdown, Superman,” Chloe said.

“I knew that,” I replied weakly.

Chloe let go of my hand for a second, put the back of her hand against my chest, and gently pushed me against the fence. “Just breathe for a second, okay?” she said. Then she shouted, “Hey, Jake, are there any boats coming?”

Oh, that’s right, I realized. My older sister and her boyfriend were down on the rocks on one side below. Nobody ever jumped off this bridge without an audience, because if you didn’t have spotters, you might just land on the deck of somebody’s sailboat.

“You’re good!” Jake yelled. “By the way, I’m totally filming this, so try to make it cinematic, okay?”

Perfect, I thought.

Chloe took my hand again. “All right, kids. Remember what everyone always says: Bend both knees. Jump off with both feet at once. Don’t tense up. Keep your body straight up and down in the air. Legs together. Let go of each other when we hit the water so everybody’s hands are free for swimming. Then swim straight up toward the light. Got it?”

I wanted to throw up. I wanted to cry. I wanted to forget this whole thing.

“You’re still clear!” Jake shouted.

Ugh, I thought. It’s gonna be a long summer if we don’t go through with this.

“You good, Ava?” I asked. Ava relaxed her death grip for an instant, only to clamp down even harder.

“Never better,” she gritted out through clenched teeth.

“Count it, Chloe,” I said.

I forced myself to look straight ahead into the air as Chloe, the girl of half my dreams, said, “Three . . . two . . . one . . . GO!”

I felt Chloe’s and Ava’s hands drop down and swing back a bit, then forward. My knees almost buckled, but they held as I swung my arms with theirs and took the leap.

For that one perfect second, maybe a second and a half, we were flying.