

SKYJACKED

PAUL GRIFFIN

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JAY

One month later, the last Friday of August, 9:55 a.m.

Mountain Time (MT)

Crabbe's Fork, south-central Idaho

Their sneakers were Nike custom jobs and New Balance. His were knockoffs from Payless. But here they were, all together, the five of them, in the middle of Crabbe's Fork National Forest, standing at the edge of a cliff. Jay hung back a bit as Cassie squatted to check the slackline that spanned the canyon.

It wasn't that the Hartwell kids weren't nice—they were. Okay, Tim had been a little cold to him once or twice, but Cassie, Brandon, and especially Emily were all right. Emily had pretty much adopted Jay at the welcome session for new transfer students last month. She'd invited him on this trip to Idaho with Cassie and her friends.

“One last summer blast,” she’d said it would be, before the start of sophomore year.

His mother forced him to go. Didn’t he want to make new friends? Not really. He just couldn’t see how he’d have much in common with these kids who’d been going to Hartwell since kindergarten. Their parents had gone there too.

The Hartwell Academy English Department had put a bunch of F. Scott Fitzgerald stories on the summer reading list. All these dandies in tuxedos, mansions on the beach. Jay delivered store circulars and lived in city-owned housing. Did he really need to know about the so-called troubles of privileged white folks in the 1920s? But there was one thing good old F. Scott wrote that made a lot of sense. *“Let me tell you about the very rich. They are different from you and me. They possess and enjoy early, and it does something to them.”* Understanding these people was a constant challenge. Like, for instance, why was Cassie staring down into the valley floor with an unsettling grin?

“How far a fall do you think that is, Timbo?” Cassie said.

Timbo was six four, two fifty easy, already a starter on the varsity football team, nose guard, at fifteen years old. He dropped a rock over the edge of the cliff and counted, “One, two, three, four, five,” before the echo of the *click-click-crack* made it up the cliff. “I’ll tell you exactly how far down that is,” he said. “It’s exactly *far*.”

“Well done, Tim,” Emily said, patting his very wide back.

“It’s a half mile anyway,” Brandon said.

“Then I better not fall,” Cassie said. She hopped onto the slackline and danced like a ballerina. She wore a safety cuff on her ankle, but still.

“Casserole, it’s official: You’re insane,” Emily said. “Really, you have to pirouette? Cass, what are you doing? Don’t!”

“Cassie, no!” Tim said.

She unclipped her safety cuff and cartwheeled in slow motion along the slackline.

“Cass, I’m gonna kill you!” The words weren’t out of Emily’s mouth when Cassie slipped.

She just barely grabbed the line with both hands. She looked down, seemingly more fascinated than terrified. “You guys, this is so beautiful. I’m floating.”

Maybe that’s what she said. Jay couldn’t be sure with all the screaming Tim and Emily were doing. His pulse rate must have doubled, he was pretty sure, the blood whooshing against his eardrums, or was that the very strong wind?

Brandon grabbed the line and made his way, hand over hand, toward Cassie. “No, Brand,” Cassie said. “Go back! I’m fine!”

She wasn’t anywhere near fine. Her grip broke, and now she was hanging on with one hand. Just four fingers on the line now . . . three . . . and then she fell.

Brandon snatched her wrist. He hung upside down from the slackline by his legs. He’d been smart enough to wear a safety cuff,

but Jay didn't think it would be able to bear his weight and Cassie's if Brandon's legs slipped from the line. And they did.

Now they both hung by Brandon's cuff string. It looked like a string anyway, practically fishing wire in Jay's eyes, not that he'd ever been fishing. That would change soon, once he and the others hiked down into the river filled with jags of granite to retrieve Cassie's body, or what would be left of it. Brandon wouldn't be able to maintain his grip on her for much longer. His arm was starting to shake.

"Brand, let go!" Cassie said. She tried to peel his hand from hers.

It was definite now: Money made you stupid. Jay Rhee from Flushing, Queens, was not going down with these crazy rich kids from the Upper East Side. But then why was he moving toward the edge of the cliff, toward the slackline?

Cassie's sweaty hand slipped through Brandon's, and she fell.



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BRANDON

9:58 a.m. MT

Crabbe's Fork, Idaho

The digital display morphed to 9:59. That would be the time of death.

Brandon's wristwatch glowed in the foreground as he hung upside down from the slackline and watched Cassie become small, smaller, shrinking in less than a second to a blue dot in her jeans and cobalt-colored shirt—and then a burst of red.

The parachute exploded from the low-profile backpack she'd been wearing.

Brandon heard Emily curse Cassie for being a lunatic. Tim, always Cassie's cheerleader, howled his approval. Brandon felt both

ways: He was angry with Cassie and admired her at the same time. He understood why she had a habit of daring fate.

It was just how she was wired.

Brandon's father had been the same way. He'd told Brandon that sometimes you had to do the things that scared you. If you died in that pursuit, so be it, just as long as you died with a pure heart. Mr. Singh had been ranked one of the top trauma surgeons in New York when he volunteered for a tour of duty with Doctors Without Borders—a mission advertised as extremely dangerous. He was at work on a patient, the death report said, when a friendly fire airstrike mistakenly blew up the mobile hospital on the Iraq-Syria border.

Cassie's chute was a paraglider. She steered it dangerously close to the sharp-edged rubble that lined the canyon wall.

Cassie liked to tease Death a little too much, Brandon thought, but what could he do to change that? They'd been friends too long for him not to know she was on a mission of her own: to live each moment like it could be the last. Maybe it wasn't such a bad way to live.

Cassie was about to crash into the rocks when she veered toward the water and a gentle waist-high landing.

They met up with Cassie two hours later along the riverbank. Emily kept proclaiming how furious she was with Cassie—for five

minutes. Trying to stay mad at Cassie Ando was impossible. Her smile was ridiculous, huge and a little lopsided with a dimple in her left cheek, and before you knew it you were grinning too.

The hike back to camp was noisy with everybody gabbing away—everybody except the new kid, Jay. Brandon liked him and his quiet way. He patted Jay’s shoulder. Jay flinched.

“How you doing after Cass’s little joke back there?” Brandon said.

“Some joke.”

“Seriously, Cassafras, I’ll never stop being mad at you,” Emily said.

“I apologized how many times now, Em? And *you’re* gonna hold a grudge? Not likely.”

“You could have killed Brandon and Jay.”

“Notice how she omits me,” Tim said. “Friends, I know who I am, and no way was I going out there on that slackline, not even if my mom was dangling. All I have to do is live to twenty-two, and my trust fund opens wide.”

“My hero,” Em said.

Brandon understood where Tim was coming from. He didn’t admire Tim’s taking the easy way out, but taking insane risks was, well, insane.

Jay’s phone rang.

“So much for getting back to nature,” Emily said. “The phone companies even have the so-called remote areas of the parks

covered, lest we miss any Snaps of somebody making herself look like a cat.”

“It’s my mom,” Jay said. He fell back to talk with her. They’d checked in with each other twice a day since the beginning of the trip. With Jay away, Mrs. Rhee’d had to walk home alone from her health aid shift that ended at midnight.

Brandon wondered what that would be like, having to stay up late to walk your mom home and then waking up at five to deliver store circulars before school.

Cassie nudged Brandon to give Jay some privacy.

“I probably would’ve snapped the slackline anyway,” Tim said. He was laughing.

“It isn’t funny,” Em said. She hung back to wait for Jay.