

One

Free-fall

Brenna's new plan for their life would change everything, if only her uncle would agree to it. She saw his silver sports car pull into the high school pick-up lane and started whispering, "Say yes, say yes, say yes."

Bobbi, standing beside her, stopped talking to her other friends and said, "What?" in her most annoyed you're-interrupting-me tone.

"Sorry I can't offer you a ride, Bobbi. We're celebrating," Brenna said, stepping into the car.

As they pulled away from the school, Brenna watched in the rear-view mirror as Bobbi's mother drove up. She was nice, in a limited sort of way, and Brenna had learned loud and clear what the limits were way back in fifth grade. Douglas had assured her things would change as everyone matured. Brenna often wondered whether maturing meant your perspectives became broader, or if your preconceived opinions just got deeper. It might be useful to ask an adult in your life that question. She looked over at her uncle, considering. Not today. A question like that could make him go vague, which she hated. She needed an alert and attentive Uncle Douglas to hear her brilliant plan for their life.

"Was that a fond farewell with Bobbi on the last day of school?" he asked, with half a smile.

"She's tipped me onto the friend list."

"What does she want?"

"Me to be a counselor at Camp Green Link with her."

"Are you going to?"

"I told her I'd let her know tomorrow."

"How will one more day change your first impression?"

"I thought I should run the plan past my dear Uncle Douglas, since he's so highly opinionated about my life."

"But so accommodating to your every wish."

"Yes, he is. And so handsome and clever that he should have found himself a wife by now."

"Don't start. I'm on my lunch hour. How about Free Fall on the corner by my office?"

"With the ambience of a pogo stick in a thunder storm."

"But their sushi is good."

“Okay, let’s do Free Fall, but I’ll always hate the name. I mean, who in their right mind would choose that name for a restaurant situated in the middle of the financial district of a world capital?”

“Sort of like the title “A Boy Named Sue” for a cowboy tune. Johnny Cash made a fortune on that song and I suspect the Free Fall turns a healthy profit.”

“A dangerously uncool name in America’s saloons.” The song was one of her uncle’s favorites from some prehistoric era. Sometimes on a road trip she’d find it on a golden oldies station and he’d always sing along. He was singing it now in a furry baritone, the words drifting away into the air.

“Where did you learn it?”

Maybe it was the gentle breeze wafting around his neck. Maybe it was the liberating effect of the sunshine of May on his face after a long, dark winter in a big city. Maybe it was a way to leap the chasm. Whatever it was, he said, “My dad used to sing it to us.”

Every nerve in Brenna’s body went on alert. Her uncle would never talk about his family. Ever since she had come to live with Douglas she had questioned, prodded, coerced, cajoled, stormed, sulked, pleaded, and begged—all at varying levels of sophistication depending on whether she was five or fifteen—but as soon as she began, he’d go blank. Vacant. His mind would leave the room. Yet here he was, actually volunteering what his father’s favorite song was.

Brenna knew she was pressing her luck, but despite the thumping of her heart she managed to ask the next question rather smoothly. “Where did your dad grow up?”

“The West.”

Brenna had filed away every bit of information about her relatives ever since the day her mother deposited her on her uncle’s door step, a sign around her four-year-old shoulders, a small suitcase on the pavement beside her, and clutching a worn teddy bear in both arms. Today’s item might not seem much to a casual observer, but Douglas had just admitted to having a father who had a favorite cowboy song and had sung it to a plural number of children. Of course, that could mean Douglas and his sister, Brenna’s mother. But it didn’t rule out other siblings, aunts and uncles. Cousins!

Douglas skirted traffic that had double-parked illegally in front of the restaurant. Apparently her uncle’s brief lapse into nostalgia was over. “Give it up,” she said. “There’s never on-street parking at noon. Why not use your reserved stall?”

“What?” he asked absently, but nosed the convertible into the correct lane, as though entering the parking complex was a brand new concept and not an action he did on a daily basis.

Brenna thought this was strange behavior. “Which explains why you were circling the block instead of automatically entering your stall at the bank?” Her uncle was preoccupied, halfway between vague and angry, which was an unusual mix for him. He didn’t usually do the angry bit. But she couldn’t quite identify what was going on in his middle-aged mind.

His voice hoarse with tension, he said, “As soon as I park in the corporate slot, I have to be the corporate man. I have to think corporate! Eat corporate! Sleep corporate! Die corporate, if they tell me to!” His knuckles whitened with an intense grip on the steering wheel and the big vein bulged in the side of his neck.

Down the elevator and onto the street, Brenna weighed Douglas’s anger and wondered at the short transition from singing the dumb cowboy song to being an angry international investment banker. They slid onto stools at the chrome bar and Brenna glanced from wall to wall, checking the iconic photos of freefalling humans. A motorcyclist flinging himself across 14 buses, a lean and long ski jumper in an Olympic uniform, a couple embracing in the free fall before their parachutes opened, and her favorite—a cliff diver from Acapulco at night with a torch in each fist.

The décor of the restaurant was engineered to look like various kinds of metal, even if it was really plain old plastic. Weirdest of all, the music was an eclectic mix of every possible taste in the world. They played European symphonies, golden oldies, indie rock, Broadway tunes, Italian street songs, reggae, Strauss waltzes, gangsta rap, Chinese folk instruments, Native American drumming, hard rock, German lieder, all mixed together. If you stayed long enough, you got an earful of every cultural group in the world. It was dislocating.

Brenna studied the menu hand-written on white boards between the over-sized photos. “It’s impossible to position yourself with any accuracy in this place.”

“How does anybody figure out how to position himself in this world? We’re all inaccurate all of the time.”

“But you know exactly where you are at a burger place, or at the bagel stand, or at a fish and chip shop. At Free Fall you don’t even know what country you’re in because the music is in 41 languages. The menu changes absolutely every day, so you can’t come in and order *the usual*. Nothing is ever usual here.”

They sat in silence, as they tasted their crab bisque. “The photos are meant to be so enticing,” Brenna went on. “Like jumping out of a plane into a free fall toward earth at 120 mph is something we all want to do.”

“But you don’t?” Douglas asked.

“I object that I’m supposed to want to when I walk in here. The truth of a free fall is smashed bones and a brain turned to jelly.”

“Only if your parachute doesn’t open.”

“That’s my point.”

“Maybe Free Fall is a metaphoric reminder to the banking district to protect the hopes of all people everywhere.”

“Does anybody but you get it?”

“Well, I am quite remarkable,” he said, and laughed dismissively.

“I’m trying to wrap my mind around a banking district sensitive to metaphor.”

“We’re immersed in irony all day long. Why not salt it with a little metaphor?”

Douglas ate his lunch with the same intensity he would have used on the corporate earnings statement and Brenna decided now might not be the best time to open up a whole new set of plans. She liked meeting him for lunch at any place he suggested, even the Free Fall, and didn’t want that to change.

Since they never engaged each other in chitchat, his silence over lunch today evoked no sense of foreboding.