

# Drop Dead Zone

**M.E. Troy**

The lyrics to *American Pie* tumbled through my head: *This will be the day that I die.*

I sat on the floor of the Cessna, knees to chest, bound in a webbed harness that clamped the blood flow below my crotch and squashed my boobs like a medieval breast band. My insides churned like chem lab beakers.

How did I manage to get myself into this situation? In a word: adrenaline. Not enough in the detecting business.

Besides the pilot, whose name I didn't know, the others in the plane were Art Sorel, the jumpmaster, Tori Reber, my parachute instructor, and a cameraman I knew only as Justin. Justin was along to record the jump. My first.

"How are you feeling?" asked Tori.

"Scared," I said.

"You should be," said Art. "It's normal"

"So how many jumps before I get over it?"

"Only a madman like Art ever gets over it," said Tori.

Art pounded his chest. "Tarzan no fear."

"I wish you had a little fear," said Tori.

"I used to, Darling, before you started packing for me. Now, I get a

perfect parachute every time."

"And you don't do anymore low pulls," she said.

"Nope," he said, and I thought I detected, even above the throb of the engine, a note of sadness. "Your love has made a cautious man of me."

"It sounds like you two are an item," I said.

"Ten months today," said Tori. "Hey, Artie love, let's do a lip dock after Val pulls. Justin, can get it on tape. You don't mind, do you Val?"

"What's a lip dock?" I asked.

"This," said Tori. She pulled Art to her and kissed him full on the mouth. They were both breathing hard when they separated. "It's even better at 120 miles per hour," she said.

"Wow!" said Art. "I could ride that kiss to the ground. Bet you break it off first, Babe."

"No games," said Tori. "We break off together."

"Hey, Ken and Barbie," said Justin. "Break off high enough your auto cutters don't fire and cause an entanglement."

The auto cutter was a life saver, a fail-safe, the goal line stand against oblivion. I had one on my harness. So did Art and Tori. Justin didn't. If I was still falling at 1,800 feet, the auto cutter would open my reserve parachute. Just to reassure myself, I stole a quick look at the device. The indicator said, "jump."

"Two thousand, no lower," said Tori.

"Will that be high enough?" I asked. "Doesn't it fire at 1,800?"

Tori favored me with a smile. "Yours does, because you need the



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altitude. We'll have an 800 foot cushion." She turned to Art. "2K, loverboy. Okay?"

Art nodded. He looked at his altimeter. "12,500," he said. "We're on jump run."

Oh, God! My heart dove to the pit of my stomach. All the talk about lip docking had distracted me from the climb to altitude.

"Are you ready to skydive?" asked Tori.

My brain screamed, "No!" but my mouth, as it has so often, betrayed me. "Yes," I said.

"Follow me out the door," said Art. He swung the door up. A rush of white noise, wind and cold assaulted my senses. The ground was a blur. The distance from the door to the step over the wheel looked as wide as a canyon. Somehow I crossed it, hung onto the strut with Art on one side and Tori on the other. I checked with each of them and stepped off.

Wind stung my face. Sight, sound and time ran together. Flying like corn flakes in a blender. Art made a circle with thumb and index finger in front of my face. Check altitude! "11,000," I called first to Art and then to Tori. They grinned back like maniacs. Gave me hand signals. Arch! Legs out! Relax! *Yeah, right!* 7,000 feet. Justin dropped into view like a marionette. "I love this," I shouted to the camera. "I love you guys."

5,500. Time to go. Again, fear sluiced to my brain. From this point I was on my own. I looked, found the handle and pulled. The parachute snapped me back, yanked at my torso.

The wind noise cleared. I was vertical, swinging slowly below the most beautiful, square rainbow I'd ever seen. Blue, pink, orange and yellow. The only sound was the soft flapping of the parachute.

I detached my steering lines and made a turn as I'd been instructed. Looking between my feet, I spotted the others below -- two small paper dolls head to head, legs splayed and another one nearby, turned 90 degrees. They had to be 2,000 feet below by now. As I watched, a flower seemed to spring out of the back of the detached doll and blossom into a colorful rectangle. The other two continued to fall before something emerged from the back of one of them. Then my canopy flew me out of range. I made another turn, scanning the area again, and spotted the third paper doll, just before it pulled a long streamer of lines and fabric into the earth.

I got down as fast as I could, telling myself all the way that what I saw wasn't so. Justin met me and helped me gather up my chute. He steered me away from the part of the field where the crowd was gathering.

"Art burned in," he said. "You don't want to see."

Tori maintained a stoic attitude through the funeral and, later, at the drop zone where a group of jumpers gathered to make commemorative jumps. When the last jumper landed, the drop zone owner declared the bar open. I took a beer and sipped it out of politeness, but, in truth, I had never felt more out of



place among all the veterans.

I was making for the door when I heard my name called. Justin caught up to me, his jumpsuit unzipped to the waist, beer in hand.

“You leaving?” he asked.

“Yeah. Thought I’d find Tori and say good-bye.”

“No, stick around. There’s plenty of beer still.”

“I don’t belong here, Justin.”

“Because you only made one jump or because you were on the last load with him?”

“Both. The latter, mostly.”

“Yeah, that’s tough,” he said.

“Don’t let it get you. Hear about Tori? She almost lost it a couple times. Blamed herself because she packed his chute.”

“My God! Do people think . . .” I couldn’t finish the thought. The implication was too enormous.

“Not anybody who knew them,” said Justin. “Tori watched him like they were married. The two of them would be in the hangar, she’d have her eyes on him the whole time.”

“A little jealousy?” I asked.

“Oh yeah! More than a little.

Girls come in for instruction, especially the fine ones, Tori took them. You think it was luck of the draw she was your instructor and not Art?”

I didn’t know. Had never given it any thought.

Justin went on. “More than jealousy. Tori really cared for him. He was her precious possession. Any load he went on, if she wasn’t on it, she was out there watching until he landed. She’s who bought those auto cutters for them. Art only wore it because she insisted.”

“And she packed his chutes for him, too?”

“Hey, I wish she’d do mine. I’d ride any chute she packed. Nothing wrong with the one she did for Art. The FAA inspector said it was packed properly.”

“What do you think went wrong, Justin?”

“Art’s parachute didn’t open completely,” he said. “The pilot chute was still stowed in the pouch at the bottom of his pack when they found him.”

I knew the basics of how parachutes work. The pilot chute is the little parachute that comes out first when the skydiver throws it or pulls the rip cord. It catches the wind and pulls the main parachute out. A matter of simple mechanics, it works the same on the back of a skydiver or the back of a dragster. What I didn’t understand was how the main parachute could come out if the pilot chute didn’t. I asked Justin.

He said, “Art must have reached for his pilot chute, but accidentally grabbed a handful of the bridle that attaches it to the main. When the bridle came free, it created enough drag to pull the main canopy out, but the main couldn’t open completely with the pilot chute still in place. It’s called a horsehoe because that’s what it looks like with both ends of the parachute in the pack.”

“Wasn’t there anything he could do?”

“He could have freed the pilot chute, but the damn auto cutter fired and opened his reserve. Since his main chute was partially open, the two chutes tangled. Never catch me with one of



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those auto cutter units.”

“I thought they save lives.”

“If you believe statistics,” he said. “Just like air bags. But, you get the wrong combination of error and monumental bad luck and you end up a statistic like Art. Me, I don’t intend to make an error.” He took a swallow of beer and hurled the empty at a trash can. Missed. “I need another beer. You, too. Let me get you one.”

I didn’t want another one, but I had a few more questions for Justin. He led the way through the hangar to the ice tub, fished out two beers and opened both. He handed me one.

“How could Art miss the pilot chute?” I asked. I remembered my own training; look for the handle, reach, pull.

Justin shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he realized he was low on altitude and panicked. His rig, he can’t see the handle.”

“But he was experienced with the rig, wasn’t he?”

“Three or four hundred jumps,” he said.

“So grabbing the handle was almost automatic for him. How low was he?”

“I waved off above 2,000. They were still together. Which reminds me, I owe you a video.”

“Keep it. I know the ending.”

“Good sequence of Tori and Art kissing,” he said. “Maybe Tori wants it.”

Just then we heard shouting from outside the hangar.

“Murderer!”

“Liar!”

“You killed him.”

“I didn’t.”

The first voice I didn’t know, but the second was Tori’s. I hurried to the sound with Justin right behind.

Tori faced another skydiver. From the color of his face, he was both angry and drunk. He pointed the neck of a bottle at her while she shrank back.

“I say you murdered him. Art would never use that thing without you nagging him.”

“It was for safety,” said Tori, trembling and swollen-faced.

“Crap! Art was a skydog. He didn’t need your damn safety.”

The drunk advanced on her again. I stepped between them, put my arms around Tori.

“Stay out of this,” said the skydiver.

“Leave her alone,” I said. “Justin!”

He grabbed the skydiver’s arm and pulled him back. “Leave it, Eric,” he said. Other people gathered, drawn by the commotion.

“The auto cutter killed him,” shouted Eric. “She made him wear it. She murdered the skydog.”

“No!” said Tori. “It was an accident.”

“We know, Tori,” I said. “He’s drunk, forget him.” Behind us, Justin and some others had taken Tori’s accuser to a far part of the hangar. I led Tori to a bench. Sat her down. Her eyes were red, her face wet from tears. Her body shook. She buried her head on my shoulder.

“I didn’t kill him, Val,” she said. “It was his stupid fault. I warned him about pulling low, remember? But he did anyway. Too low to recover.”

Between bouts of sobbing, Tori



gave me her version of the accident. It differed little from Justin's except for what happened after Justin pulled. At 2,000 they were still falling, locked in a kiss. She was aware of the altitude and aware that Justin had left. They broke off as planned, a little bit below 2,000, and Tori tracked away. She waved off, and threw out her pilot chute, expecting Art would do the same. The opening of her chute pulled her up and that was the last she saw of Art.

"I bought us those auto cutters," she said. "It was like giving him a ring. My vow to care for him. My gift of life. I never meant for it to kill him."

Tori had no interest in going back to the hangar. I drove her home.

Roosevelt Yinn was a private detective whose stock in trade was sleaze. He ran an agency called Check Mate, doing background checks on prospective spouses, hence the name. He was not above tailing suspected cheaters or even arranging a honey trap to test the partner's firewall against temptation. Rosie boasted that no one yet had failed to take his bait. "Quality product," he said.

I crossed paths with Rosie in the bar of the Sheraton, a week after Art's accident. I was off the job, nursing a Margarita. Rosie plopped a camera bag on the table and sat down with a soda and lime. He was on the job.

"How's business?" I asked. "Wrecked any good relationships lately?"

"Val, babe, you hurt me," he said. "I don't wreck relationships. They fall

apart, they're rotten to begin with. Does a termite inspector wreck houses?"

"Sometimes a termite inspector finds a solid foundation, Rosie."

"My point, exactly. You think there aren't good people in the world? Here's a case, in fact I think you know the guy, the parachutist got killed last week. Tragic story."

"Art Sorel?"

"The same. Couple, three months ago, his girlfriend, fiancée, she says, but she's not wearing a ring --"

"Tori Reber."

"Right. She comes to me and wants him tailed, thinks he's stepping out on her. Between you and me, this girl isn't giving him much space. I can see why he might want to sample the air someplace else. But I'm not passing judgment. I tail the guy for awhile and lo and behold he's doing the bedroom boogie with another woman. It's a regular thing. I got dates, times. I got audio, video, still pictures."

"Enough to keep you entertained for hours?"

"Nothing I haven't seen before. Now listen, here comes the heart-warming part. I produce the stuff for my client. These pictures are so hot, they're burning through the envelope. Gotta don the asbestos mittens to handle 'em."

"How many mittens did you wear out?"

"Val, I can't believe what comes outa your pretty mouth. I'm trying to be inspirational here. The woman, my client, pays the fee and doesn't even peek at them. She knows all about it she says. Her guy told her the whole story. He's been to Promise Redeemers and



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came back a changed man. All's square between them. He's sorry and she's forgiving. Val, tell me that's not a beautiful story. After all that, the guy dies. A story like that belongs on that channel for women. You know any screenwriters?"

"Tori believed that Promise Redeemers crock?"

"Hey, why not?"

"Rosie, it's the same old guy thing. Tori's an intelligent woman. She wouldn't fall for that anymore than any other woman would. Look, a guy lies to her, cheats on her, breaks a vow he makes to her in intimacy, and maybe repeats publicly to her family or even on an altar. You think he'll do something sacred in front of an old football coach in a stadium with a bunch of other cheaters?"

"It could happen," said Rosie.

"But you, I want you should think about an exorcist. There's an ugly cynic inside your girlie head. You don't belong in this business with that attitude."

"Who was the woman Art was seeing?"

"I can't tell you. That's privileged."

"Rosie, you know those pictures of Teri Hatcher? I'll bet her attorneys would love to know who put them on the internet."

"Got a pencil?" said Rosie.

**H**er name was Megan Costigan. It took me a day to track her down and half an hour to confirm what I believed and what Tori had learned: No man was ever transformed by praying on

Astroturf. The last time Megan had seen Art was the morning of the jump when he left her apartment. What I did learn from Megan Costigan was that she had changed her phone number four times in the last three months because of harassing phone calls. They came at all hours of the day and night. Always the same: No one there when Meagan picked up. She suspected Tori, but had no proof. The calls stopped after Art's death.

I knew Tori only as a competent, but demanding parachute instructor with a little bit of a wild side. Now I had a new picture of her: jealous, possessive, obsessed, possibly vindictive. She'd made no threats on Megan, but it frightened me to think what might have happened if the triangle had continued. In hindsight it appeared that Art's death, though tragic, kept the situation from getting out of hand.

The detective in me thought it may have already gotten out of hand. I squashed that thought. It would only confirm the ugly cynic Rosie had seen in me.

Four days later, Friday night, no date, nothing appealing in the video store, I remembered the jump video. Rosie's cynic would stay quiet no longer. A visit to the drop zone's web site got me Justin's last name and phone number. Yes, he still had the video. He had not given it to Tori.

"**G**ood body position," said Justin. "Very stable."

I was watching myself fall from the sky, going through the same

emotions as on the jump -- *deja* adrenaline rush all over again. On the video, Art and Tori clung to either side of me, stabilizing me and giving me signals. Art stuck two fingers in front of my face. Legs out! Tori did something with her harness, but her body position kept us from seeing what it was.

“Good video,” I said. Justin’s camera work was so clear I could read the altimeter on Art’s chest strap. “Coming up on five-five.” An instant later, I signaled that we were at 5,500 feet and pulled the rip cord. The parachute yanked me out of the frame.

Tori and Art each did a backflip and flew back into the frame, Art on the left and Tori on the right. Their faces came together and they reprised the kiss in the plane, but deeper, more passionate, with arms outstretched and lips the only contact. Art glanced towards the camera. He gave a little wave, glanced at the altimeter on Tori’s wrist and back to the kiss.

“What a stud,” said Justin. “Checks altitude while tongue wrestling.”

Tori reached towards Art’s pack just as the camera jerked.

“So long, I’m outa here,” said Justin. Art and Tori disappeared from the frame. The camera panned up to watch Justin’s chute open.

“That’s it!” I said, stopping the video. I pressed the reverse button. Justin looked at me oddly. “How long did it take your chute to open?” We timed it together. Three seconds from the camera’s jerk to the open canopy. “Fall rate’s 1000 feet every six seconds, right?” Justin nodded. “When I looked

down, I saw your canopy open before Tori’s started to open.”

“So if I pulled at 2,000, she pulled at 1,500.”

“But wait,” I said. I arranged three pencils on my coffee table as I remembered seeing the skydivers from above. One at the twelve o’clock position, one at six o’clock, and the third at three o’clock. “This is you,” I said pointing to the three o’clock pencil. “Tori is on the right.”

“And Art’s on the left,” said Justin.

“That’s the one I saw start to open,” I said. “Tori lied about opening first.”

“Lousy form,” said Tori.

“You have so much adrenaline, you’re kicking like a baby.”

We were at the drop zone. It was early Saturday morning and Tori was geared up for a jump. The plane was waiting outside the hangar. Justin had set up the video in the office.

“Oh,” said Tori, when we got to the kiss in the air. Her hand flew to her mouth and she choked back a sob. “I don’t want to watch this.”

“You have to,” I said. “What are you doing at this point?” Justin paused the tape where Tori’s hand moved forward. “Did you grab his bridle?”

“What are you getting at?”

“I’m wondering if Art really missed the pilot chute, or if you pulled his bridle out.”

Tori’s face drained of color. “No! Not you too, Val. You think I killed him?”



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“You lied to me, Tori. You said you opened first, but you didn’t. This is you, this is Art. I was above you and I saw Art’s chute come out of the container. You were still together. You told me you had tracked away.”

Her expression hardened. “You don’t know what you saw. You were overdosing on adrenaline. You know what that does to you? It overloads your senses. You’re lucky you remember the color of your parachute.”

“Did you cause the horseshoe? Did you wait until you were too low for him to recover from the problem?”

“I loved him. Why would I kill him?”

“Megan Costigan. You knew Art was sleeping with her. You had a detective follow them. Art said they were through, but you didn’t believe him and you were right. He was making a fool of you. You couldn’t stand it. You tried to frighten Megan with phone calls and when that didn’t work, you killed Art.”

Tori put her hands over her ears. “Stop it,” she yelled. “He was mine. I looked out for him. Megan didn’t.”

“You bought the auto cutters,” I said. “Was that part of the plan, or was it just convenient that he had one when you decided to kill him?”

“I’m not hearing this,” she said. “Justin, do you believe her?”

“I’m not sure,” said Justin.

“Did you see me pull the bridle?”

“No.”

“See?” she screamed at me. “You don’t have any proof it wasn’t an accident. You imagined something in the air. You have no witnesses. There’s

nothing on tape.”

“Tori,” I said. “Why didn’t your auto cutter fire? You were as low as Art. You ran an awful risk of having two canopies out. Or did you turn it off? Is that what you were doing at the top of the dive when you fooled with your harness?”

“I don’t understand something,” said Justin. “Art was aware of his altitude. We saw him check it. Why did he wait so long to pull?”

“I’m not listening to any more of this,” said Tori. “The plane is waiting.” She picked up her helmet, turned towards the door. Justin stopped her.

“You’re already at five hundred,” he said, pointing to the altimeter on her chest. “Your altimeter reads high.”

I grabbed Tori’s arm, twisted it to see the wrist altimeter. It, too, showed 500. “Big mistake, Tori. You forgot to recalibrate your altimeters after the jump. Art didn’t know he was in trouble because he was reading your altimeter. He thought he had an extra 500 feet.”

“Bitch!” said Tori. She swung the helmet hard into my face. It caught me off guard and knocked me on my back. Justin pulled me to my feet, but Tori was already out the door.

“Let her go,” he said. He produced a handkerchief and wiped blood from my nose and mouth. I could feel my lip swelling.

We watched the Cessna lift off.

“You were right about her,” said Justin. “I didn’t believe it until I saw the altimeter. That iced it.”

“But we can’t prove it.” I said. “Where do you think she’ll go?”

“Nowhere. Jumping’s her life,



but after it gets around that she may have murdered her partner, she'll never find anybody to jump with."

Some other skydivers joined us to watch. The Cessna climbed a couple thousand feet, leveled off and turned to pass over the field. One of the skydivers had binoculars. "Door's open," he said. "Jumper out."

Tori didn't throw a pilot chute. If she had her auto cutter, it was turned off. No canopy opened. She was at terminal velocity when she hit the ground a few yards from where Art had burned in.

"Points for accuracy," said Justin.

THE END

Your comments on this story are welcome. You can reach M. E. Troy by email: [metroy@tamu.edu](mailto:metroy@tamu.edu)