

I THE FINAL CHAPTER

Present Day Switzerland

The view from her window was marred by a slight grime muting any vibrant color with a brown and greyish haze. With her room on the ground floor, the majestic panorama she had always imagined was non-existent. What she'd longed for was a room 18 stories high with a breath-taking view of the Alps, their peaks coated with a snowy frosting. The added benefit of a high floor was that nothing obscured the view, not even surrounding trees, most notably the towering Swiss pine with cones dotted around its branches like brown ornaments. She'd read how these trees were the silent heroes of steep terrain, their solid root structure minimizing the chance of avalanches or soil erosion.

She struggled to sit up in bed, her breathing labored and unsteady. At times, she felt her heart race dramatically. Everything was out of whack. She slid her fingers through her thinning hair where clumps had fallen out leaving bare patches. A few Swiss pines might stop further erosion on her head, she thought, semi-amused at the absurd idea.

Straining to see out the window, she muttered "What a God-awful view."

A matronly woman, stocky and humorless, entered, pushing a meal cart. "Miss Carlisle," she said. "This is the meal you requested. Push the call button if there's anything else you need."

In a voice weak and strained, Carly replied "Thank you. You can call me Carly. It makes me feel younger."

The woman gave an agreeable nod. "Carly Carlisle," she said. "Very alliterative."

Leaving the cart behind, she left the room with the door partly ajar.

Hearing her full name amused Carly. Yes, it was alliterative but annoyingly so. Over the years, she'd often noticed other people with similarly repetitive names – Sam Samuels, Rob Robertson, Carolyn Carroll, Ann Andrews, Eddie Edwards. What's with that, she wondered. Did parents do it with a mischievous gleam or did they find it poetic? Who knew and who really cared, she thought. There were more important concerns than that.

She observed the clock on the wall. The true measure of time. What a strange place to have one. She remembered seeing clocks at school. But nowadays everyone checked the time on their phones. In Las Vegas, they practically banned clocks in casinos as they didn't want patrons to ever know what time it was, otherwise, they might leave when it got too late. A wise tactic. But here in her room was a clock with a short black hour hand, a longer black minute hand and, sweeping by them continually, a red second hand. Totally unnecessary. Who on earth needed to know the exact second unless they were an astronaut or a doctor. She certainly didn't need to know. Time was a fascinating concept, captured so well by man to mark off one's existence. It was said that when you were younger, time moved slowly. And when you got older, it flew by, the years ticking away until one's ticker came to a complete stop.

Reflecting on her life, Carly remembered times where life felt endless. She suffered so much, longing for a single healthy day. She had accepted the fact that the end was near. She grinned, remembering the

time she saw an older man with a long white beard carrying a placard that said just those words 'The End is Near'. She had wanted to ask him how he knew but figured he was probably a religious zealot or just a plain kook. Or worse, maybe he was right.

Thinking about life, she wondered how many decades a person needed to exist to feel completely fulfilled? Did they need to go through a whole bucket list to get to that place? She'd put together a bucket list as retirees did. For Carly, she'd always wanted to visit Antarctica. The very idea of being at the bottom of the world intrigued her. There was something soothing and solemn about it. Likewise, the same applied to parachuting. The idea of free falling 120 miles per hour gave her a rush of excitement, to witness the landscape below with its toy-like trees, cars and buildings. She once read that President Bush, the elder one, had parachuted successfully at age 90. Yep. The big 9-0. No fear of dying there. But with her declining health she had no chance of completing her bucket list except for kicking the bucket.

Death used to be scary, short-changing her of the things she wanted to achieve. She now accepted the fact that none of it mattered at all. What mattered was accepting her fate and leaving this world with few regrets.

Crinkling her nose, she looked at the food cart. They'd brought her everything she'd asked for except an artichoke. Out of season. But there was a small skirt steak, mashed potatoes, cooked carrots and a slice of seven-layer dark chocolate cake. This was her ideal meal but something she hadn't been able to eat for quite a while now. Her severe gastrointestinal problems allowed her to consume very few foods, primarily organic and low in histamines. Eating had become a chore, a minefield replete with heavy risk. One false move and her stomach bloated like a balloon, rashes broke out all over her body and her mind became engulfed in a disorienting brain fog. She stared at the tray of food. Would it kill her to eat it? Probably. But if she was going to die anyway, what difference would it make? Well, the pain would be unbearable. She knew that all too well.

She felt weaker today than yesterday. Unable to eat, there was very little for her to do in these waning moments. Death, now accepted, was something she strangely welcomed. It marked an end of pain and suffering and hopelessness.

She heard a rap on the door. That familiar refrain – knock knockknockknockknock knock knock. The door slowly opened. Expect the unexpected, so they say. In this case, they were right as she was totally unprepared for what was about to happen.

II LIFE TRULY BEGINS

Nine Years Earlier Summer Pennsylvania

"You scared?" he asked, sidling uncomfortably close, his snarky voice intimating he knew she was unnerved. He was 16, a good four years older than her.

As she stared out over the treetops of the heavily wooded area, she ignored his question, responding simply "Gotta love the view."

"We don't have all day," he persisted. "If you're too scared, let someone else go."

Of course, she was scared. That was to be expected. Even championship athletes registered a level of fear and rush of adrenalin before a big challenge. And here she was, 40 feet off the ground, a height paralyzing for many. But she would never admit to being afraid for doing so would play right into his belief that girls weren't up to the same challenges as boys.

"I'm not scared," she replied with a slight waver in her voice. "I'm just—"

"Visualizing," he snapped. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Weak excuse. C'mon Carly. Everybody's waiting."

She glanced below where two dozen fellow skateboarders were visible. About half stared up, two with iPhones aimed to capture her descent. Fear was a funny thing. Especially fear of heights. If you're standing five feet above the ground and you aren't scared, at what point does that change? Six feet? Ten? Twenty? Or not at all. Carly's fear didn't emanate from the height. Heights never fazed her. For most of her life, she embraced high altitudes. When diving off a 10-meter board, she displayed no sign of fear except for the worry of a headache if she landed wrong. When she scaled the steep face of a granite incline, she glanced down, nonchalant that there was nothing but air between her and the ground. Today, Carly's fear wasn't about the height but the possibility of a very visible and humiliating spill in front of other boarders, primarily those boys who doubted her abilities.

Carly had been skateboarding for seven years, more than half her life, and she was quite talented. But good was a relative term. At this camp, everyone was good. Most had taken up the sport when young and those from the West Coast actively skateboarded year-round. Carly took it up on a whim at five years old. Most girls found their niche in soccer, field hockey, basketball, tennis or softball. Certainly not skateboarding. But being slight of frame and "petite" -- a word she rightly despised as it didn't denote her strength and determination, she took up skateboarding and practiced like a fiend. Did she ever.

"I'm getting tired of waiting," the boy said, shaking his long brown hair from his face. A helmet dangled from his left hand while his skateboard lay perched on its back a foot away.

“Don’t rush her, Derek!” shouted a counselor from below. Derek was far from the best skateboarder at the camp. But what he lacked in skill, he more than made up in confidence. His ego was so inflated he felt superior to everyone around him, even the best of the best boarders.

What Carly faced was a sheer drop off what was called the “Mega Ramp”. It rose 40 feet off the ground with a 75-degree incline that curved back up into a quarter pipe. The massive structure was about 18 feet wide, its surface a well-polished hardwood like the floor of a gymnasium.

For protection Carly wore a black Bern helmet as well as knee and elbow pads. A robotic look, sure, but hey, this wasn’t a fashion show. That gear provided some protection. Of course, the best protection of all was to not try this precarious feat.

Breathing slowly through her nose, Carly filled her lungs with air as a quiet calm set in. Her ears tuned out all noise as her focus intensified. She went through her mental checklist – bend knees, tuck chin, keep arms tight yet balanced, anticipate anticipate anticipate what lay ahead and, of course, stick the landing after she caught air.

Okay, girl, just do it, she thought. With her body turned and her board tipped just over the lip of the ramp, she pushed off or at least tried to do so smoothly. Somehow her board went off unevenly. As she struggled to correct it, she was unable to get down low enough to maintain her balance. With arms flailing, she tumbled down, the hardwood burning her arm from the friction, her helmet bumping on the wood, unable to guarantee a concussion-free attempt.

As she finally slid to a stop, she lay there, motionless, uncertain whether to spring up or remain still for sympathy. She compromised, trying to rise to her feet. Two counselors popped onto the ramp to help her off. Feeling a mix of disappointment and pain, she wanted to cry but held it in. Skateboarders don’t cry. Period.

No one gathered around her. Seeing that she was still alive, they went back to what they were doing. But protocol dictated that she be taken to the infirmary. It wasn’t optional. One counselor, his blonde hair ponytailed back, walked along side as she did the walk of shame past the other boarders, her skateboard tucked under her arm.

Behind her, she heard someone yell up to Derek.

“Just go, Derek!”

Derek responded with characteristic sarcasm. “I’m about to go. But that’s a hard act to follow.”

He laughed at his own line. No one else did.

In the infirmary, Carly took a seat. The counselor remained standing and asked, “Do you want me to wait with you?”

She shrugged her shoulders. Conflicted, the counselor wanted to leave but felt an obligation to stay.

Seated across the room was a girl with long jet-black hair and a tan as smooth as silk. Carly had seen her several times before but not skateboarding.

“What happened to you?” the girl asked.

Carly hesitated.

“Did you fall on your ass?” the girl persisted, being playful not mean.

How obnoxious, thought Carly, wanting to ignore her but also wanting to respond and make her feel bad.

“I fell going off the mega ramp,” said Carly.

“What’s that?” the girl responded.

Was she serious, Carly wondered. How could you be at this camp, a place renowned for its skateboarding, and not know what the mega ramp was. It towered above everything else.

“The only mega thing I know is Mega Millions,” the girl continued. “But nobody ever wins that. Besides, you have to be 18 to play.”

The counselor couldn’t resist explaining what the mega ramp was, describing it as an awesome 40-foot-tall structure, like a giant slide, that you skateboard down at your peril. It’s high adrenaline. And the BMX bikers use it, too. The girl, though, seemed unimpressed.

“You’re not a skateboarder, are you?” the counselor asked.

“I tried it once,” she said. “Not sure if that makes me a skateboarder.”

“It doesn’t,” said Carly, now annoyed.

“What are you here for?” the counselor asked.

“A severely sprained ankle,” she said, pointing down at her leg, the ankle wrapped tightly in a tan Ace bandage. “Again. Waiting now for crutches.”

“Doing what? Gymnastics?”

The camp itself had a mix of activities. Besides skateboarding, there was biking (BMX dirt biking and mountain biking), scooters, snowboarding (yes, even in the summer), gymnastics and cheerleading. There also was a digital media program, done completely indoors, that catered to nerds and non-athletes. Skateboarders particularly looked down on the gymnasts and cheerleaders.

“Cheerleading,” she replied. “I know. You’re surprised. Probably thought I did BMX.”

Carly thought nothing of the kind and really didn’t want to be seen conversing with a cheerleader. Just not cool. In her mind and those of her fellow boarders, cheerleaders were the lowest of the low. While some may argue that skateboarding wasn’t a legitimate sport, cheerleading most certainly wasn’t. At that moment, a nurse emerged, her white shoes squeaking as she walked.

“Carly Carlisle? The doctor is ready to see you now,” she said, holding a clipboard.

The counselor stood up, eager to return to his duties at the mega ramp. “Good luck Carly. You’re in good hands.”

The nurse took Carly’s blood pressure, temperature, height and weight then aimed a light at both her eyes to see if her pupils dilated. A doctor came in, silver-haired and near the end of his career, suffering from some form of mild palsy as his hands and voice trembled involuntarily.

Clearing his throat, he asked “Let me go through a range of symptoms and let me know with a shake or a nod if these apply to you.”

She nodded.

“Headaches? Nausea? Vomiting? Loss of concentration? Slurred speech? Ringing in your ears? Blurry vision? Fatigue?”

She shook her head to each one of those.

He looked into her eyes, re-checking her pupils.

“Well, I don’t see any immediate signs of a concussion. Just watch for any of the signs I mentioned. If any of them occur, come back here.”

“When can I resume skateboarding?” Carly asked.

“I leave that to your discretion,” he replied, not wanting to restrict her with an arbitrary time as her health seemed good.

Carly returned to the waiting room where the girl with the sprained ankle remained.

“Are you okay?” she asked Carly who remained quiet. “Okay good, glad to hear that. What’s your name?”

Carly didn’t respond, having no desire to disclose her name to a cheerleader. There was an unwritten rule that skateboarders didn’t talk to cheerleaders. Ever. Too uncool. And the last thing Carly wanted would be to walk around camp with some fellow boarders and be greeted with a perky hello or a smiley wave from this or any cheerleader for that matter.

“If you tell me your name, I promise not to do anything with it,” the girl replied. “My name is Ally. If I lost my sight, I’d be Blind Alley.”

Carly was unamused.

“You do have a name, don’t you?” Ally persisted. “I heard the nurse say something like ‘Carly Carly?’”

Silence.

Ally cleared her throat. “If you don’t want to confirm your name, can I ask how old you are?”

More silence.

“I’m guessing you’re under 50,” said Ally, knowing full well that Carly was 13 or 14.

“What about your height or weight or width or depth?”

Carly walked towards the door.

“Bye,” said Ally. “It’s been almost nice talking to you. Might have been particularly memorable if you’d said something, anything.”

Carly contemplated turning around and yelling at her. Instead, she shook her head and left as the nurse re-emerged holding a pair of wood crutches.

That night, all campers attended a campfire down by a lake on the property. The camp maintained a tradition of three campfires a week, weather permitting. While all campers were required to attend, if given the choice, most would have preferred to sit in their cabins playing videogames. Skateboarders, BMX bikers, gymnasts, cheerleaders and the like—all hung out in their specific cliques. Carly’s head

started to throb from her fall. She sat uncomfortably on a fallen tree that had been crafted into a makeshift bench. Swarms of mosquitoes preyed on her neck and arms as she swatted them away. The only way to escape was to get closer to the fire as the hot smokey air kept them at bay.

There was no formal entertainment. Everything appeared haphazard. One head counselor ran through a list of activities for the next two days, including some indoor options in the event of rain. Then, another got up and played “Michael Row the Boat Ashore” on guitar with vocal accompaniment from another counselor, giving new meaning to cringe worthy.

The fire continued to crackle, with an occasional loud burst from pine sap followed by a plume of smoke. All around was the evening song of crickets like a symphony of jingling bells.

Derek stood a few feet from Carly when he glanced over with a devilish smile. She stared back, her eyes watery from the smoke in the air. Then he gave an obnoxious shrug of his shoulders, silently saying “maybe you don’t have what it takes,” and walked away, leaving Carly angry and yet helpless, her best option being to ignore him.

On the other side of the fire, a group of cheerleader campers took out sharpened sticks and harpooned marshmallows which they roasted in the yellowy-orange flames. Ally was among them, hobbling up on crutches. Someone handed her a stick with a marshmallow on the end. She held it over the fire before getting distracted by the sight of Carly on the other side. Catching Carly’s eye, she smiled and gave her a thumbs up with her free hand. Not feeling overly friendly, in fact, feeling quite annoyed, Carly sneered back. Ally couldn’t understand why she was acting so hostile as she’d been nothing but friendly. Suddenly, Carly started to laugh which at first confused Ally until she saw the reason why. Ally’s marshmallow was ablaze and had become a fiery ball of charcoal.

A counselor in a Red Sox cap got everyone’s attention and proceeded to tell a ghost story, one that wasn’t particularly scary. In fact, it sounded like the plot of a slasher film. But being out in the dark, where you couldn’t see much around, added to the scare factor.

Someone nudged Carly. It was Renfro, a fellow skateboarder. She didn’t know him well as he was quiet and often engaged in videogames on his iPhone.

“Hey there,” he said, his eyes nervously darting about. “It’s Carly, right?”

She nodded.

“I’m Renfro. Can you hang back? I got something to discuss with you.”

Carly agreed to remain, curious to know what this kid wanted. She saw little downside as he appeared harmless in his tortoise shell eyeglasses.

“It won’t take long,” he said, pointing. “I’ll wait over there.”

As the campfire dwindled down so did the evening. Campers started to head up the hill to their cabins. With fewer people around, the sound of crickets dominated the air.

Carly spotted Renfro leaning against a tree and walked over.

“What’s up?” she asked.

He surveyed the area and, feeling secure no one was eavesdropping, leaned forward and quietly asked, “Are you friends with Derek?”

Derek? Really? Derek had no friends. “No,” came her simple reply.

Nodding, he replied, “Good.”

“Is that all you wanted to ask me?” said Carly.

“Nobody likes Derek,” he said. “He’s really full of himself.”

“Someone told me his whole family was messed up,” said Carly.

Smiling, Renfro replied “Oh yeah. I heard that. He’s from a broken home. Several of the boarders I know are from broken homes. It’s one thing being an asshole. But it’s a whole other thing when you’re mean and hostile and an asshole.”

Renfro fumbled for his iPhone, tapping rapidly until a video came up. Holding the phone close to his chest, he asked, “The other day when you fell on the big ramp, do you remember much about that?”

“Some.”

“Do you feel you were pushed?”

Reflecting on that day, she vividly remembered how she lost control at the top--after being pushed. Derek was the only one near her. And while she didn’t witness him doing anything, he’s the only one who could have. Turning to Renfro, she gave a slow nod.

With a crooked grin, he held his phone so she could see the screen. On it was a video of Derek at the top of the mega ramp, seeming to push Carly. As she watched, it was clear Derek had disrupted her balance.

“I had a very good angle when I shot this,” said Renfro.

She agreed, swatting away some annoying mosquitoes.

“What I want to do is show this to the tribunal,” he said, gauging her interest.

The tribunal, composed of three senior camp counselors, met periodically to discuss new policies and procedures as well as to decide any disciplinary actions to be taken for anyone violating the rules. Clearly, pushing someone at the top of the mega ramp would be a major violation leading to instant expulsion.

“If the tribunal sees this, Derek will be expelled,” he said. “Permanently. And you’ll be everyone’s hero.”

“Me?!”

He nodded.

“Why me?”

Leaning in, he said “Because you’ll tell the tribunal you were deliberately pushed. And if he tries to deny it, the video will support you.”

“Can’t you just show the video?” she asked, suggesting a different option.

Renfro tried to hit a nerve and said, “Don’t tell me you secretly like Derek.”

She vigorously shook her head as she didn’t really know nor care about Derek. But she was well aware that many disliked him for his arrogance, feeling of superiority and cut-throat competitiveness.

Hesitant, she said. "I just need to think about this a little."

Disappointed, Renfro shrugged his shoulders. "How much time do you need?"

"A few days," she said.

"This is your big chance to see justice done."

"Uh huh."

She swatted the air by her face, thinking two embers from the fire had drifted near her eyes. As she regained her focus, amidst the smoky air, she saw it was, instead, a pair of fireflies.

"Later," said Renfro, tucking his phone into his back pocket and walking up the hill.

The next evening a counselor unexpectedly approached Carly and summoned her to a meeting. She felt totally in the dark. Had she done something wrong, she wondered? Maybe they want to ban her from going down the mega ramp again – something she felt determined to do again. She entered the camp's main office, passed through a front room with a fireplace and antlers on the wall and went to a small conference room with uncomfortable metal folding chairs. As she took a seat, she heard the door close. Facing her behind a conference room table were three counselors, making up the tribunal she'd often heard about. Unlike the scary tribunal in *The Hunger Games*, this was a primitive amateur hour session.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked, her voice a pitch higher than usual.

The head counselor, Fred, seated in the middle, shook his head. To his left was a female counselor named Robin and to his right a male counselor named Phil, all in their early twenties.

Rubbing his mustache, Fred gathered his thoughts and said, "It's come to our attention that there's been some unprovoked and inexcusable behavior by one of your fellow campers."

Carly nervously scratched her head.

"Do you know Derek Sloan?" he asked.

Carly now realized what this was all about. "I know who he is," she replied.

"We've had some complaints about him over time. Mainly about his attitude. Aggressive and mean. He's one of a handful of campers here on full or partial scholarships. Based on need. He's on a full one. All we expect in return is gratitude. Gratitude shown through actions. Following the rules. Getting along. Being civil. If someone can't abide by those simple rules, they don't deserve to be here. Period. Exclamation mark."

Carly felt queasy, knowing full well where this was going.

Fred gestured to the counselor to his right. "Phil, would you show her the video we have?" Phil stood up and walked over to Carly, his iPhone extended. He had the video cued up and held his phone a foot away from her face so she could clearly see it. Carly watched Derek at the top of the big ramp edging so close it caused her to lose her balance. This was clearly Renfro's video.

Carly took a deep breath as Phil returned to his seat.

"A video is worth a thousand words, but right now we just need one word from you to punish him," said Fred. "Do you recall being pushed by Derek?"

Carly felt caught off guard because she had told Renfro she needed time to think about how she wanted to handle this situation. She never agreed to testify against Derek. It's not that she wanted to protect Derek but more that she had no interest in drawing unnecessary attention to herself. Blending in was her preference. And while Derek had few, if any, friends, she didn't want her name on his enemies list.

Clearing her throat, she said, "I don't really remember."

Fred curled his brow, confused. "You don't really remember feeling someone nudge or push you from behind? There appears to be a person standing awfully close to you and his arm seems to have pushed you in the back."

She shook her head.

Fred exhaled his disappointment. "Okay, then, well, um, and the video we showed you doesn't make you feel differently?"

Again, she shook her head.

"Hmmm, well then, I guess that's all there is to discuss. You're free to go."

Carly couldn't get out of there quick enough.

Outside the building, it had started to get dark. Finding a bench to sit on, she spotted a shadowy figure walking towards the main office. Keeping her head lowered, she could make out Derek's face. Fortunately, he didn't see her as he stepped inside. Going to the side of the building, she peeked through the window and saw Derek nodding to the tribunal. Soon, he turned around and walked out. Hustling back to the bench, she saw him emerge from the cabin, sporting a big smile as he ambled down the walkway. Without a doubt, her lack of testimony let him off the hook.

When word reached Renfro that Derek lived to see another day, he was angry and disappointed and directed it all at Carly when he ran into her in the dining hall the next morning.

"You know, I'm disappointed in you," he snarled. "Everyone is. You gave him another life. And why? People don't change, you know. He's going to do more mean things and you're the one who will now be responsible for that."

Carly didn't appreciate being attacked, let alone at such an early hour. "I told you I needed more time to think about it," she replied. "But you went ahead anyway."

"Well, I guess you can always pretend that you would have succeeded at the mega ramp if you weren't pushed," he said sarcastically. "You can thank him for that. The truth is you never should have been allowed to try it."

"Well, I'm trying it again this afternoon," she smiled, suddenly making that decision. She hadn't planned on doing it, but now it was a matter of pride.

"Ha," Renfro replied. "Maybe your boyfriend will bail you out again. I have nothing more to say to you. Ever."

"Good," she said, carrying her tray to a table. "I'll hold you to that."

Back in her cabin, she busied herself, rearranging her clean and dirty clothes which inevitably got mixed together. Her brain churned, unable to stop dwelling on the mega ramp. Grabbing her skateboard, she headed over.

Along the way she walked past Ally who, hobbling along on crutches, gave her an exaggerated smile, one that downright annoyed Carly, prompting her to say, "What are you smiling at?"

"Just a friendly gesture," she said. "Called a smile."

"Well, don't smile at me anymore. It annoys me."

"Oh. I'll try not to."

"I'd rather we didn't talk," added Carly.

Ally rocked back and forth on her crutches. "I was just about to say you're probably wondering what happened to me."

"I'm not wondering at all."

"Well, for what it's worth, I come in peace."

"Whatever," said Carly, walking away.

As she reached the mega ramp, it was as intimidating as ever; even more so since her big fall. She knew how much it hurt when she landed wrong on her hip, shoulder or head despite wearing padding and a helmet. She watched several boarders attempt the mega ramp and witnessed some dramatic falls but nothing bone-shattering. Two older campers, both assistant counselors, made solid landings, their balance intact, arms outstretched, eliciting whistles and applause.

To calm herself, Carly started breathing in and out, but did so too fast, hyperventilating in the process. She began again, this time taking slow deep breaths and long exhales. After several minutes, she felt calm enough to head towards the stairway to the big ramp, passing Renfro, Derek and several others without saying a word nor making any eye contact.

She marched up the stairs as one might scale the gallows. Once on top, she scanned the scenery, appreciating this bird's eye view of the world. There was no one standing behind her waiting to go so she took her time. Her focus was soon interrupted by a familiar voice, shouting "We don't have all day." It was Derek, of course. Standing below, he continued his annoying ways, and she wisely ignored him.

Placing her board on the rim, she surveyed the ramp, taking time to envision her course until she felt the right level of comfort. Methodically, she hopped on the board, tilted it down and zoomed off. This time she maintained her balance from the start. As she reached the bottom of the ramp, it curved upward, sending her sailing into the air. Instinctually, she did a 360, spinning her body completely around, all the while knowing her whereabouts while staying balanced and landing smoothly, knees bent, arms stretched bird-like.

Those who watched this feat gave her a big shout out. Safely jumping off her board and flipping it into her grasp, she passed Renfro, a big smile on her face.

Renfro couldn't refrain from praising her performance. "I know I swore I'd never talk to you again but that was really rad," he said. "Had to say that. Now, I'm going back to not talking to you ever again."

“Thanks, Renfro,” she said, her board tucked under her arm.

Three more boarders high fived her as she walked past. “Awesome,” one said. “And by that, I mean, I saw you crash the other day. And to get back out there so soon and do what you did is awesome.”

As she got ready to sit for a breather, she saw Derek eyeing her, a big smirk on his face. She should have testified against him, she thought. What an annoying person. As he headed straight towards her, there was no way of avoiding him unless she reversed course.

“Hey,” he said. “Carly, right? You aced that. Great lift, balance, landing. And for your age, impressive.”

Completely caught by surprise, she never expected a kind word from him.

“Just one thing,” he said, tossing back his long hair. “I’d quit while you’re ahead. You got lucky and won’t be able to do that again in your lifetime. I’m just saying, I’d call it a day.”

Carly had no intention of trying it again. At least, not until now. Maybe, just maybe, she might try another day. But Derek’s comments provoked her. She couldn’t help herself and blurted out “Well, funny you say that cause I was just about to go again. Stick around. Maybe you’ll learn something.”

Why on earth did she say that, she thought. Yes, he had gotten under her skin, but that wasn’t a reason to act so fast. Pride cometh before the fall. Amen.

Carly watched two gifted boarders head down the ramp – one successful and the other not. But the second one bailed out in time, sliding sideways with no physical harm done.

Derek walked back to Carly and said, “You’re not going to go again.”

Without responding, Carly headed up the stairs to the mega ramp. Before she knew it, she was staring down the ramp, next in line. A dozen boarders below looked up, surprised to see her back there so soon. A quick inhale through her nose, holding her breath one moment then exhaling, she pushed off and began her descent. But she made one big foolish mistake. As she took off, she glanced to the side to see if Derek was watching her. That split second decision, with her body not low enough, caused her to lose her balance. Disoriented, she flew off the ramp on a sharp angle landing on her arm and twisting an ankle as she tumbled to a stop, a pile of pads and flesh. She was in too much of a state of shock to cry. The initial pain came from humiliation but after several minutes she could feel a throbbing in her neck, arm and ankle.

She remembered hearing voices, lots of them, as people circled around and came to her aid. Lying motionless except for some rapid breathing, she tried lifting her head before passing out.

A medic on staff arrived on the scene with an assistant wheeling along a stretcher. After cautiously moving her head, making sure she hadn’t fractured her back or neck, the medic and his assistant, with help from two counselors, lifted her onto the stretcher. As she was wheeled off, the campers went right back to the mega ramp as though nothing bad had transpired.

In the infirmary, Carly lay in bed with eyes closed. Her body temperature rose, causing her to have a fever dream. Totally nightmarish. She went off a large ski jump without skis and her feet were dangling in the air. She tried flapping her arms like a bird but nothing worked. She kept falling, faster and faster. Streaming past her was an odd mix of things – black cats with claws unfurled, a cheerleader’s red and white pom pom, a broomstick, an acoustic guitar which bounced off her head, several skateboards, a

shark chomping its jaws and, perhaps worst of all, Derek who was pointing at her and laughing hysterically.

She woke up in a sweat, unable to shake those images. Hyperventilating with her heart pounding, she looked around, completely lost. Where was she? This room wasn't familiar. She soon realized she was in a hospital bed, propped up slightly with an IV in her arm. Her left leg was in a cast as was her right forearm. Not good at all, she thought correctly.

A nurse entered to take her temperature and check her blood pressure. As she left, a doctor of Iranian descent with bushy black eyebrows and a solid head of hair, introduced himself as Dr. Hanifnejad. In a voice, low and calm, he said, "So, you had a quite a fall."

"Did you see it?" she asked, realizing what a stupid question that was.

He shook his head then broke the bad news that she wouldn't be skateboarding anytime soon.

She gazed down at her leg, acknowledging as much, wondering how long it would take for her to heal. He suggested keeping the casts on six weeks and then prescribed physical therapy to rebuild the atrophied muscles. He tried to be encouraging, saying that her youth would help play a positive role in a quick recovery.

When he asked if she was in a good deal of pain, she pondered the question and said, "Just the pain that comes from ruining the rest of my summer."

Entering the room was a female counselor named Agnes. Campers often referred to her as Agnes of God although Carly didn't quite understand why, except perhaps because she wore a cross. Carly never understood the whole cross thing. Jesus died on the cross. Why would you want to commemorate that image? If he were hanged instead, would people be wearing a small noose on a chain?

Carrying a clipboard, Agnes pointed out that Carly had already paid for two more weeks of camp and gave her the option of returning home or staying on. Returning home meant a rebate. Staying on meant the only non-physical activity the camp offered was a video editing program of which five students were currently enrolled. Knowing she didn't want to go home, she opted for the video program, thinking maybe this was all meant to be and she could be on her way to becoming the next Steven Spielberg.

For the next two days, Carly went into mope mode. After contacting her parents to tell them her situation, she received their blessing to remain at camp. An easy blessing as what parent wants their kid home early from camp. That could certainly ruin a parent's summer.

Quite agile, Carly mastered her crutches in short order although her chafed underarms limited her mobility. When it came time to start the video editing program, she was escorted there by the counselor running it. A seemingly soft-spoken twenty something kid named Norm who happened to be the camp owner's son. Norm had nerd written all over him, squirrely looking with thick glasses, disheveled hair and a sweatshirt which he wore even in the dead of summer. A walking cliché for nerd-dom.

When they got to the video-editing cabin, Carly saw the room doubled as a custodial storage space as there were mops, brooms, pails and detergents stored all around and a whiff of ammonia in the air. She saw five campers focused intensely on computer screens as they edited videos. Norm explained how the program worked, pointing out the computer stations where the editing would occur.

"But I can do all this on my iPhone," said Carly, rolling her eyes.

“iPhones are pretty amazing,” said Norm, his eyes darting around, nervously. “But you’ll be able to do even more here. For starters you’ll need to decide your subject matter. Focus on the power of nature with an edited look at life around the lake. You’ll shoot some videos down there. Once you have those, you’ll edit them using special techniques and effects.”

Gesturing towards her crutches, Carly said “How am I supposed to shoot video when I can barely move around?”

“I’ll help you with that part,” he said, sweetly.

“Whatever,” she said, half-bored.

“I’ll try to get you images that capture the world around the lake from frogs and turtles to flowing water and maybe some water striders dancing along it,” he suggested.

“Water striders?”

Cheerful, he said, “Yeah. Those bugs that skim across the surface of the water. They’re also referred to as Jesus bugs.” That made sense. Walk on water and you can usurp Jesus’s name.

He suggested she rest on a couch in the adjacent room while he headed down to the lake for an hour of filming. While waiting, she dozed off, only awakening when he loudly returned to download the newly shot videos to one of the computers for editing.

Beckoning her over, he suggested softly, “When you’re editing, try to tell a story. For the first effort, I’m going to let you learn on your own. Trial and error. And remember, there’s no truly wrong way to do things. It’s just that some edited pieces flow better than others.”

Hobbling over from another computer station came Ally. “Hey, it’s my long-lost friend,” Ally exclaimed.

Carly stared directly at her, hoping to will her away.

“Looks like we’re both destined for a summer of videos,” Ally said.

Carly turned to look at her screen where a video of a frog appeared.

“I never would have guessed you to be a frog person,” said Ally.

As much as Carly wanted to totally ignore her, she found it impossible. “Just because there’s a frog on my screen, doesn’t mean I like them. If I had a picture of a rat, it wouldn’t mean I like rats.”

“I think rats are cool,” said Ally, wanting to make small talk, a none-too-easy thing to do with Carly.

“They’re amazing survivors. You want to know what my project’s on?”

Not a breath of a response.

“Well, I’ll tell you then,” she said. “It’s about cooking. I’ve got videos taken in the kitchen with the chefs making meals.”

No response.

“Norm’s going to review my work later today or maybe tomorrow,” she added. “He went over stuff the other four did.” She gestured to them, all buried in their computer screens. “Now he’s got them working on a new project.”

Norm wandered over. "Ally, you want me to review your project?" he asked, his voice kind and undemanding.

"Sure," she said, hobbling over to her computer screen. Carly pretended to be pre-occupied at her computer, but she couldn't help but listen to the feedback Ally was about to get.

Before taking a seat, Norm asked and she confirmed that she kept it under three minutes. He then stared intently at the screen without saying a word. Several minutes passed. He scratched his head, then scrunched his nose as though he smelt something bad.

"You focused on food," he said.

"Well, yes," she said. "At your suggestion."

"Do you like food?" he asked, sotto voce.

"Sometimes. When I'm hungry."

"Well, this video is crap," he said. "Totally unappetizing. The images of food are awful."

Ally's eyebrows rose. "But you took those images."

"You didn't have to use them," he said. "If I had filmed a large pile of horse manure, would you have included that in your video?"

She shook her head.

"You should have asked for different footage to use," he said. "And your edits are sloppy. Sloppy, sloppy, sloppy. There's nothing compelling about this at all. It doesn't move me in the least. In fact, it makes me never want to eat food again. Is that what you meant to do?! If so, maybe you should run a diet center."

"No. That wasn't the objective."

"Well, at least you have an excuse," he said.

"Huh?" she wondered.

"You're disabled. Physically. Maybe mentally. Who knows."

This sweet nerdy guy, compensated for being the camp owner's son by displaying a surprisingly mean assaultive style. Carly planned to put extra effort into her piece to avoid this kind of criticism.

"That's it for today everyone," Norm announced. "You're all dismissed. Carly, you can stay longer to finish your project. I'll review yours in the morning. And after that, we'll move onto the next assignment."

After Norm walked out of the room, Carly looked over at Ally who appeared totally defeated.

"Are you okay?" Carly asked.

"I think so," she said. "I had a cheerleader coach who was almost as brutal as him."

"You want to go get something to—" Carly took a long pause, before saying "Eat?"

Ally hesitated, then laughed hysterically.

The next day, Carly arrived early to finish her video, using a lot of footage of water bugs moving about. She even reversed some footage, so the bugs went backwards. On occasion, she cut to a frog croaking in place, seeming to watch the action. Her video was nothing clever or special but given the subject matter, she felt pleased with what she was able to accomplish.

Norm walked in, nursing a cup of steaming hot milk. He took a slow swig, blowing on it before each sip. He checked to see if Carly was ready to show her video, suggesting he could critique it before the others arrived.

Wanting to get it over with, Carly played her video as Norm watched silently. After it finished, he said, "Have you heard the expression A for effort?"

She nodded.

"What about A for awful?" he asked. "Why choose to do a nature video when you obviously have no interest in it whatsoever? If you burned down a whole forest, that would show more interest in nature than this atrocity."

"You suggested I do nature," she said.

Shaking his head, Norm said, "Don't put the blame on me."

He pounded his fist on the table, startling her. "Do you have an obsession about bugs?"

She shook her head.

"It sure seems like it," he said. "Half this video is showing water bugs. I guess frogs and turtles don't cut it for you."

"They're in there," she said.

"This video stinks! Like a swamp! How appropriate. The stench is so bad it makes me never want to visit a pond again the rest of my life."

At this moment, Ally wandered in and leaned against the wall, not wanting to bring any unnecessary attention.

"Have you heard the expression 'two minds are better than one?'" Norm asked.

Carly acknowledged she had.

"Well, you and your partner may prove that to be a fallacy when I match you up for the next assignment."

"My partner?" asked Carly, confused.

Norm pointed to Ally.

"Oh, but of course," said Carly, then muttering under her breath, "What else could I expect as I descend further into hell."

When the four other students came in, Norm clapped his hands, getting everyone's attention. He paired them off into three teams. The new assignment was to take two different interests and merge them together into one video. As an incentive, he promised the winning team would get two \$100 Starbucks gift cards, noting that for those who didn't like coffee, they could use the gift cards for tea or scones.

To pair up the teams, he tapped their shoulders, announcing teams 1,2 and 3. While she knew he was matching her with Ally, Carly raised a small protest about it.

“This is going to be disastrous because this girl and I have nothing in common,” said Carly.

Norm smirked and said “I don’t think it could be as bad as your frog fest. Or should I say your water bug Waterloo.”

Carly and Ally briefly discussed the two topics they would tackle. Predictably, Ally chose cheerleading while Carly picked skateboarding.

Norm once more offered to shoot footage for them but this time they declined. Instead, because they each had been disabled, they were able to ask fellow campers to help shoot cheerleading and skateboarding footage for them.

A day later, with their unedited footage downloaded, they sat before a computer monitor and began editing. The two other pairs worked quietly and collegially, accepting one another’s suggestions and offering praise for decisions made. Carly and Ally were a different story altogether as their working style was loud and abrasive. For the first two hours, they issued a steady stream of insults at one another.

“That’s an idiotic edit.”

“A fool could see that doesn’t work.”

“Numbskull at work.”

“What’s your problem? Do you have a brain tumor?”

“Have you ever cut anything before? Besides a fart?”

“Funny. If farts had brains, you’d be a fart with a brain.”

“Why don’t you go shake your pom poms somewhere else.”

“Yeah, well the only hard thing about skateboarding is your head and concrete.”

What began as combative eventually became playful, as they got each other to laugh. After two hours, they made good progress editing the video, intercutting between cheerleading and skateboarding. Like building a puzzle, it all came together. They turned to one another and started to giggle. The giggles progressed to the point where they both couldn’t stop laughing. The genius of their approach was first contrasting the virtually all male skateboarding with the all-female cheerleading. As the action for the skateboarding began, a skateboarder shot down a ramp. As he achieved lift, they cut to a cheerleader being tossed high in the air. As the cheerleader headed back to earth, they cut to the skateboarder making a clean landing. Tying it all to a hip-hop soundtrack, their video employed slo-mo and reverse action.

Norm returned, coffee in hand, prodding them to finish up. Saying he would evaluate all the efforts tomorrow. He probably needed a full night to conjure up enough insults to say.

As Carly and Ally left, Carly said. “Man, that guy is the master of insults.”

“You’re not bad yourself, board bitch” said Ally.”

“And you’re not bad either, butt face,” said Carly.

The two hobbled off on their crutches like war veterans.

Back in her room, Carly couldn't help laughing about the whole experience. While Ally would never be a friend of hers as they had little in common, she was certainly entertaining. And Carly held a grudging respect for the way Ally playfully insulted her back.

With her appetite building, Carly got ready for dinner. There were three certainties about dinners at camp. First, the dining hall always had the cloying aroma of Crisco oil except in the mornings when it smelled of ammonia from the newly mopped floor. Second, the place was loud, almost rumbling, with its hard floor and ceiling, clanking of silverware and plates, loud incessant chatter and no padding anywhere to reduce noise. Third, campers only sat with those from their sports. One would never ever see a skateboarder at the same table as a cheerleader.

As Carly entered, she passed Ally on her way to get food. Although they each caught a glimpse of the other, they walked past without blinking an eye, as though total strangers, taking seats with their fellow cheerleaders or skateboarders. Neither sat with the four people in their video program.

The following day, they reconvened at their video editing station and picked up where they left off, two schoolgirls laughing at the impending negative review from Norm.

Norm asked who wanted to go first and, to Ally and Carly's relief, two guys raised their hands. Norm walked over to their computer screen, clapped his hands, then rubbed them together as if about to eat a rump roast.

Staring at the screen, he displayed no emotion as he watched a video of a camp bonfire intercut with someone lighting candles in a dining room. It was, well, lacking.

"I've seen some of your other work," he said. "What happened here? You seem to have gone for an A. 'A' for awful. This is as boring as watching a fly crawl up a wall. I didn't know that fire could be so lame. And you used very few special effects. Okay, moving on."

The next pair to present was a girl and a guy, both with reddish hair, one possible reason why they were matched together. He focused on fishing while her contribution involved swimming, something she'd competed in for years. The intercutting moved fluidly from a guy fishing to a girl swimming. But the payoff at the end was corny. The guy had hooked the girl on his line. A chyron appeared saying "Catch of the Day."

Norm tilted his head and looked at them askance. "Okay. This is an improvement from the other video I just saw. Your edits were fine. However, I saw so many missed opportunities where you could have made this much much better. Split screens. Underwater footage. Different lenses, like a fisheye would have been appropriate. Some chroma key. Anyway, an average piece of work. It didn't hook me."

He went to Ally and Carly.

"We set out to make something that you would absolutely hate," said Carly.

Ally's eyebrows rose.

Norm scratched his head. "How so?"

"Do you care for cheerleading?" Carly asked.

"No, but ---"

“What about skateboarding? Your dad owns this camp. Do you skateboard?”

He shook his head.

“So, you’re not into cheerleading or skateboarding?”

“Correct.”

“And that’s our whole project – skateboarding and cheerleading. Designed to annoy you.”

“Perhaps. But I’m looking at it from a purely editing perspective. Let’s see what you got.”

Norm sat in front of their monitor. As the video progressed, he uttered not a single word – no insults or comments. When finished, he stood and collected his thoughts.

“As you stated, I just do not care for skateboarding or cheerleading. Never have and never will.”

“Told ya,” said Carly.

“You did, yes,” said Norm. “But this video intrigued me about both. It’s brilliantly done. The way you intercut two very different sports and propelled it along with your quick edits was tantalizing. You had so many edits and yet it moved as fluid as water. In the four years I’ve been doing this program, this is the singular best video I’ve seen. So, guess you’re not always right since you thought I’d hate it.”

Carly and Ally stood slack-jawed, half-expecting him to say “Just kidding. Your video stunk. It sucked big time. Worst I’ve ever seen.” But he didn’t. No, his response was just the opposite. He honestly liked it and gave them a gentle pat on the back as he presented them each with \$100 Starbucks gift cards. Carly playfully bit the card as one would to authenticate gold. They left the building, giggling together.

“Well, that sure was a surprise,” said Ally. “I sure didn’t expect that, especially how you taunted him at the beginning.”

Carly smiled, all knowing. “Reverse psychology,” she said.

Ally gave a thoughtful nod. “Brilliant.”

“But truth be told,” said Carly, high-fiving Ally. “We nailed it.”

While Ally and Carly wouldn’t admit as much, they had a similar sense of humor, often on the same wavelength in much of their thinking and what humored them. They worked well together during their remaining time at camp. But when it was all over, neither exchanged contact info. They left camp with nary a good-bye or good luck, their relationship destined for the dustbin of arbitrary past encounters. Perhaps each was aware of the distance between them, with Ally in Virginia and Carly in Connecticut. 500 miles apart. A good nine-hour drive. They each knew it was unlikely they’d see each other again and therefore why prolong a friendship via Facebook. As Carly boarded the bus home, she felt an itchy rash on her head and neck that lasted the whole ride back. She wrote it off to stress, familiar with the hives and psoriasis her father experienced when stressed out. Heredity sucked, she thought.