

DAN'S STORY: by Mary Pat Avery © 1994

4-9-94

I talked to Rita Layne for the first time today. There were tears. The pain is still so raw. I know now that time is just a conversation, because the crash for her, the loss of her son, happened only yesterday.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"How can you be okay?" she asked, still unable to explain the inexplicable. Her voice was soft, searching, still so baffled.

Later, I said, ". . . James was such an incredible person."

And she interjected, quite brightly, "Oh he is an incredible person."

"Yes, he is," I said.

I told Rita a bit of what I am about - that my purpose is to convey through the film medium aspects of our world that are inspirational and beautiful. I told her how I hadn't known James at all, until after the crash, and then I got to see this incredible person through the eyes of his friends, through Danny, and through the memorial videotapes, and how seeing what he had done with his life in 21 years inspired me, woke me up.

"Rita," I said, "James still has so much more to share with this world, and if I can play a part in that, I'd be very honored."

I am to call Rita at 5am Monday morning (so it'll be after 8:00 their time). And although she is willing, she said, "I don't know how I can help you - because I don't know if you can put into words the love that was between those two, Dan and James, and between the three of us; the circle of love. . ."

That pretty much said it all. And that is what this story is all about. I don't know if I'll be able to capture the true power and essence and scope of their love, either. All I can do is try. They had said that skydiving couldn't be described in words; so I set out and wrote that poem. Here, I have a similar task. Capture the spirit and scope of a love so strong and powerful and all-encompassing, that perhaps words can never properly define it. But this is the task before me.

You know, Dan has said himself that his quest for the world meet medal goes far beyond the medal itself. It's about the journey there, and what they meet along the way. It's about the experiences they share. I'll do well to remember that.

This is not a story about a guy trying to get a medal. Only on the very tippy top surface is that what it's about. Plunge into the depths of the sky, and walk with me on this journey of discovery. This is a story of a deep and profound love, though unpretentious, and unassuming. That is the underpinning of this whole story, and above all else, is what must come through.

I had actually heard about Dan before I met him. My friend Alison, who was doing a 4-way team with Erik, Roger and Jen, talked of this coach they had hired for their team. His name was Dan something-or-other, but he was known by everyone as Dan B.C. He was a great coach, known around the world in the upper skydiving ranks. But Perris had hired him

to coach everyone, even intermediate teams, and Alison said he made a huge difference in the quality of their skydives. They were improving far better and faster than they could ever have dreamed. More than just technique, they said Dan emphasized positive thinking, and visualization. Now that peaked my interest. I was very much into the "power of your subconscious mind". Hmmmm. Who was this guy?

Before I even met Dan, I was intimidated by him. I was a video person - a new one at that, and Alison said Dan was really harsh on cameramen - to make sure they have a nice, steep angle on the formation. In fact, Dan has asked their team to get rid of Chris, their current cameraman, because he wasn't steep enough. I went and checked out some of these dives. How bad could they be? I popped them in the VCR, and personally, they looked fine to me. Get steeper than that?

Dan's own cameraman, Richard, was phenomenal at his craft. He was right overhead, close, had flawless exits. He was this renegade-looking guy, who wore a fedora/cowboy hat that completely fit his Australian accent, and apparently he now set the standard for what 4-way video should be.

Alison said Dan was sexy. No, that he had sex-appeal, and she liked him. It wasn't that he had these really great looks, either. There was just something about him, and Alison said there was a lot of magnetism there. I wondered how Erik took that, being that he was her boyfriend and all. But Alison said it didn't matter anyway because Dan had a girlfriend. That figures. And this girlfriend, Kristi, was cute and sweet and thin and perfect, and I immediately hated her because of that.

Perris is a big enough drop zone that you can go on about your business and never deal with people you don't want to. Alison introduced me to Dan one day. He was polite, but quiet. I had nothing to say, and the last thing he could possibly care about was talking to me. This champion skydiving coach.

So that was that. This new phenomena at the drop zone. I have to say, though, after having been away for a couple of months, I noticed a definite alteration in the atmosphere around the DZ. It was lighter, more connected. Call me crazy, but I swear, people were smiling more, and more related. Maybe I was imagining it. . . But I didn't think so.

I didn't really get to know Dan until the crash. Actually, that's when I met Kristi, too, and Shelby. Sitting around the hospital waiting room, talking to a lot of people. You get to know someone through the eyes and actions and presence of his friends. But wait! That's getting way ahead of myself. Let me tell you about this incredible person, who was not at all what I imagined. Well here - it's a pretty interesting story.

DAN'S STORY

A loud "thump" from the second floor made Mim Chenfeld look up from the bills she was filing through. "Danny?" No answer. She ignored it and continued on. Then "thump!", right above her. It sounded like it was coming from Danny's room. Her five-year-old was a burst of energy, and come to think of it, it had been very quiet up there. Mim backed her

chair away from the desk and went upstairs. Another loud "thump" made her rush a little more with concern. "Danny!".

His door was closed. She reached for the door handle. "Danny-", and opened it just in time to see her son catapult off the top bunk of his bunkbed, holding a blanket over his head, and land "bam!" on the floor.

"What are you doing?!" his mother demanded. He looked up from underneath the blanket, a look of innocence that can't be feigned at that age.

"I'm a parachute!" he exclaimed.

A parachutist. Of course. Now why didn't Mim realize that?

"A parachute?"

"Mmm hmm-" Danny had a sparkle in his eye.

Then Mim remembered. They had just been to the local airshow the Saturday before. Her kids had loved it, but Danny in particular had been spellbound with fascination with everything. The jets, the helicopters, and apparently just as much by the skydivers who had jumped in, smoke on foot, and landed smack on the "x". It had been impressive.

"Well Danny, that's great that you want to be a parachutist, but I don't think it's such a good idea to parachute off your bunkbed."

"Why not?"

"Because - a blanket isn't a parachute, Danny. You have to wait to grow up and use the proper equipment. You could hurt yourself doing it this way." Was she actually trying to reason with a five-year-old?

"Mom, it works!" Danny was exasperated with her. Couldn't she see that it was working just fine?

"Danny - no more. Now go on outside and play." She was stern. Danny looked crestfallen. With a last look up at his bunkbed, he reluctantly shuffled out the door. Mim smiled to herself. But she had no way of knowing that a seed had been planted quite firmly into her little son's head.

Another day, Danny stepped over to the sill and looked down at the grass two stories below. His six-year-old reasoning told him, 'there, that should do it!' He'd try it when he got home from school.

Walking home that day, he and his brother passed an ambulance by the curbside of one of the apartment buildings on their way home. Getting closer, Cliff asked some questions about what had happened.

"Some kid fell out the window."

"Is he okay?" Cliff asked

The kind young paramedic looked gently at Cliff.

"Well, son, we're doing all we can for him."

The paramedic didn't want to be the one to tell us the little boy had died. It wasn't until they got home, and heard their mom talking to a neighbor about it. Danny gulped. Maybe he'd scrap his parachute idea out the second floor. Didn't sound so good. But all through school, he set his sights on the day he could jump out of an airplane.

In high school, Danny developed a love for acting. He was pretty active in all school activities; yearbook editor, choir, and then after classes, he'd go out with the bad boys and smoke a doobie. His real love, though, was those school plays. He usually got the lead.

He never lost his love for the sky, though, and he never forgot his dream of making a parachute jump. Just one jump. He tried to get his mom to sign a release for him to do it at

age 16, but she'd have nothing of it. Mim believed in supporting her kids' passions, but that only went so far.

Danny went to school at Ohio State University, majoring in - theatre. He joined the local theatre group, and immediately tried out for the fall campus production. Soon, he had a feeling that maybe a theatre major wasn't his thing. He couldn't relate to the theatre 'geeks', as he called them.

Finally the day arrived. His eighteenth birthday. He had one thing on his mind. That skydive.

The day dawned to a beautiful sunny springtime morning. The time had come. The day to do that thing he'd been dreaming of ever since he was a child. He had tried to get his college buddies to go with him, but no one would! They all had excuses; time to do homework, time to clean the refrigerator. No matter. Dan didn't care. He was going.

He went for a skydive that day, and his life was altered. He had found his new love. He knew he'd be in this sport for a long time.

Needless to say, school took kind of a back seat to this newfound activity. However, he always kept his principal in tact. Never would he get below a C - no matter what. Of course, he would try for better, but that was his absolute bottom.

Every free moment Dan headed out to the DZ to learn all he could about jumping. He progressed rapidly. He had a natural talent for skydiving, and coupled with the time and effort he put into it, he was a boy wonder in the sky.

Soon, Dan heard of another skydiving place, just a little further south than the DZ at which he was jumping. The caliber of jumpers was a little better there. So Dan headed down to check out Xenia, and he had found his new home. One day Dan became friends with Rita and David Layne. Rita worked at the manifest desk, and David was an instructor. Their eight-year-old son James was the "DZ kid". Dan had no idea of the profound relationship he would grow to have with that little kid. He would have laughed at the idea early on.

One of the contending championship 4-way teams was based at this Xenia drop zone. They picked up the young talent of Dan as an alternate. He didn't National Dan as an alternate. It was on the few training dives with these team members that hooked Dan into 4-way competition. With 4-way, you had to be fast, smooth, clean, and completely in sync with the other three members. Every second of the skydive was crucial, because even the slightest hesitation could cost the team a point within the allotted 35 second time limit. And no one wanted to be the slowest.

Dan learned the utter frustration from dives that did not go well, people were slow and sluggish, or mentally "brain locked", forgetting what formation was next in the sequence. But he also had a taste of the complete high with every team member moving, together, fast, smooth, focused, concentrated. He knew of an energy like no other.

He determined then and there that some day he would have his own team, and not only win the Nationals, but go on to win the World Championships. That goal was to shape his life for the next fifteen years.

The drop zone owner marveled at Dan's passion for the. Actually, many have the passion, but few have the natural ability that Dan exhibited. He had the mental focus necessary, and was able to be one step ahead in each skydive. He was extraordinary. The owner knew Dan was in college, and therefore money was tight, so he stepped in.

“Danny, why don’t you come work for me on the weekends?” he asked one day. “I could use some help packing parachutes, getting gear together for students. Teach ya how to fly, too. Ya interested?”

Was he interested?! Fund his jumps, and learn to fly? “Oh, man, Jeff, I’d love to. You’re on.”

Danny worked his tail off to fit in the skydives. He packed parachutes all night long so he could jump in the morning. Sleep wasn’t a priority. Jumping, and learning how to be a pilot, was.

At the university, Dan quickly figured out that theatre major was not going to work for him. He just did not fit in with this crowd. Finally, after discussing it with his guidance counselor, he made the switch. Not really knowing what else to pick, he opted for aero flight technologies. He’d love to fly jets for a job. That could be fun.

Graduation day came. Dan still was not sure what to do. He was not sure what to do in terms of his career. But one of his strongest beliefs was in creating options from which to choose. So, just for the heck of it, he applied to the Air Force.

But the biggest surprise came from Jeff. He approached Dan on a Saturday night, after all the students had left for the day. Rita was off in another room filing papers away.

“What you fixin’ to do with your life, Danny boy?”

“Don’t know yet. I just found out I got accepted to the Air Force though. Pretty good deal.”

"That what you want?"

Dan shrugged.

Jeff continued, “Before you rush into anything, I’ve got a proposition for you.”

Now Dan was never one to get unduly pre-maturely excited about anything, without knowing exactly what was involved. So even though his interest was piqued, he answered coolly while continuing to pack. “And what might that be?”

“I’ve been thinking of selling the place. And I couldn’t think of anyone who would make a better DZ owner than you. It could be a great opportunity to work in your 4-way team.”

Danny didn’t know what to say.

Jeff queried, “What do you think? Interested?”

“Well, yeah. I just had never considered it before. Let me think about it for a few days.”

“Sure, sure, take all the time you want. No rush. But you’re a terrific guy, Dan. People really take to you. You’d have no lack of business, that’s for sure.”

Time for some soul searching. Here he had a fantastic offer from the Air Force. He could be flying some incredible planes. Solid work. He tried to picture himself in each job, and he knew that

“So, I’d buy the business outright?” Dan wanted to get clear on this.

“Yeah, everything. I’d still retain rights to the land, and you can run the DZ for as long as you like.

Dan when home and talked it over with his parents. His mother, bless her heart, always had an open mind. Mim spoke from deep in her heart, her accent thick with her Jewish heritage.

“Danny, my boy, I don’t care what it is that you choose to do. All I care about is that, whatever that is, you do it to the best of your ability. You do it with a passion. Be the best you can be at it. That’s all.”

Dan hugged his mom, loving her for her open mind. His father felt the same.

Dan he had to ultimately listen to his heart.

Okay, he said to himself. Now if I’m working for the Air Force, flying jets, what am I going to be thinking about all day long, and wishing where I was? The answer became very clear. “I’d wish I was skydiving.” That clinched it.

Howard had a different story when the actual contract was in front of him.

“Danny, you’re nuts if you sign this contract.”

Dan’s brother Cliff, who happened to be an attorney, was also there.

“There’s no clause in here guaranteeing after he’s paid off in nine years, that he can still run the drop zone there.”

“I tried to tell him, Dad.

“He told me I could.” Dan was losing his patience.

“Danny, you’ve got to get it in writing. That’s called ‘business smarts’.”

Dan didn’t like the way he emphasized ‘smarts’.

Howard, looking over the document in front of him on the desk, continued, “And it doesn’t mention anything about the hangar.”

“No, but Jeff told me I could still use it.”

“Dan, you’ve got to get it in writing.”

“Dad, Cliff, look. I appreciate you guys playing devil’s advocate, really. But you don’t understand. I trust this guy like a father.”

Cliff chimed in, in a sing-songy voice, almost under his breath. “Mis-taaake.” Dan shot an ice-pick glance at him.

Howard looked at Cliff, then back at Dan. “I have to agree with him, Dan. From a business standpoint, this document has too many loopholes.”

Dan sighed. They just didn’t know Jeff. And they didn’t understand the camaraderie of skydivers. He was bummed, but he knew he was right in trusting Jeff. Look at all he had done for Dan over the years.

“All right, thanks, Dad.” Dan left, and Howard watched after him with concern. He knew Dan was going to stick to his own plan. Howard sighed. He just didn’t want to see his son get the shaft.

CHAPTER 6

Dan was completely happy with his decision. And running the drop zone was an exciting time for him. He was happy that Rita and David Layne both were going to stay. They said there was never any question of doing anything but.

Dan hired their son James, now twelve, to mow the grass fields, and also taught him how to pack Dan’s parachute. James was a bright, happy kid. And oh, did he want to skydive. He could hardly wait until the day he could.

Dan discussed the idea of taking James.

Each year, Dan would train with, and take a 4-way team to Nationals. And each year he moved up in the ranks. Undaunted, he never lost sight of his goal. With firm resolve,

he'd set out looking three others just as hungry as he was to win the gold at Nationals. That was the first step. Then, to win it on an "on" year at the world meet, which was only held bi-annually.

The blue van slowly ambled up the windy gravel drive. Dan peered at all the familiar sites, his excitement increasing with each moment. Eloy, Arizona was a long way from Ohio, but this was the hub of his dream. This was the site of the U.S. National Skydiving Championships. Dan loved skydiving like no other. One jump years ago led to the discovery of what soon became his greatest passion.

Eloy was a small town, if you could even call it that. Skydiving Arizona was nothing more than a hangar and numerous trailers of all shapes and sizes, inhabited by the "regulars". But right now, the DZ was a hub of activity. People were milling about. A huge sign over the hangar read "Welcome to Eloy, Home of the 1982 U.S. National Skydiving Championships." Cars pulled into the huge parking lot next to a grassy area dotted with small pup tents of all colors, shapes and sizes. Some people were just setting up, coolers and sleeping bags waiting to be thrust inside. A concession truck over by the hangar door was doing fine business.

Pulling off the main road, Dan drove onto the long, winding dirt road leading up to this scene. Driving in past the parking lot, he pulled up to one of the bunkhouses that were used as team rooms during this time. Shutting the engine, Dan jumped out of the driver's seat, closing the door. He stood for a long moment, just soaking in the scene. His face carried a look of serene confidence. His eyes, an iridescent blue, were lit with the light of one who loves life. When asked to describe his most striking feature, those eyes were the first thing people would mention. There was something about them; windows to a good-hearted soul who knows what he wants and has the tenacity to pursue it.

Walking to the back of the van, Dan opened the door and pulled out his rig. He threw it over his shoulder and headed into the hubbub.

Inside the hangar was a hub of activity. Most of the attention was focused on four large television monitors hanging from the center of the ceiling. On each set was the skydiving competition 4-way team currently in the air. As they progressed to each formation, a little counter in the lower left corner of each screen counted upward, one point for each formation correctly done.

At a nearby table, three judges watched small monitors in front of them with hawks' eyes. Intently, they watched for a missing grip, a hand in the wrong place, a member of the team breaking to the next formation before all his team members were in place on the previous one. Any one of these "no-no's" would be a bust, and a cause for losing many points.

Danny walked over to the door leading to the office. Time to fill out the paperwork and waivers. Minutes later, his teammates from Ohio came through the door. They greeted each other, unable to hide their excitement and nervousness at being here. The US Nationals. Completing the paperwork and paying the registration fee, each took his gear to another table just outside the door. This was the mandatory "gear check". A woman in her forties greeted them warmly.

"Hello there. Welcome to Skydive Arizona."

"Thanks."

“Packing data cards, please.”

Each teammate opened up the top flap on the back of his parachute rig and pulled out a little card. It was mandatory regulation in sport-parachuting for the reserve parachute to be re-packed by a licensed rigger every four months. The rigger then put his own seal on the reserve. This meant the reserve was “in date” for the next four months, until time for the next inspection and repack of the reserve. If it was over the four month limit, the skydiver could not use that gear. Fortunately, Dan and his team had planned for this and all had gotten their re-packs done within the past month, so were well within the limit.

They gathered up their gear, and readied for the competition.

Outside, numerous spectators gathered in the hot Arizona sun, peering skyward. The competition skydivers jumped from an altitude of 10,500', and the spectators could hear the engine of the plane overhead. Danny knew that if you listened really closely, you could pick up the change in the pitch of the engine when it cut back the throttle at exit time. Peering upward, they could just make out the tiny dot of the latest team leaving the plane. Watching this way, you really couldn't see much of them in freefall, so many would turn their eyes again to the big screen set-up near the landing area.

As the skydivers reached 2,500 feet, they could now easily be seen turning and “tracking” away from the center. Even with this small number of people, there was a starburst effect; much more pronounced on larger formation jumps, but interesting nevertheless. A strange “whoosh” blasted through the sky as each parachute opened. In a second, the sky was dotted with colorful rectangular shapes. If the team had a sponsorship, they often had matching canopies.

Before long, a team dressed in formidable all-black jumpsuits, trimmed with gold grippers, appeared on the screen. More than the other teams before, this one commanded the attention of all the spectators. These were the Golden Knights, the professional Army team who jumped all year-round. They were usually the ones to beat.

Dan didn't know it, but this was to be the first competition where his name would start to become known nationally. He was captain of his fairly green team from Ohio. No one ever gave the Golden Knights a run for their money. How could you? Against a team that practiced all year long, with the government subsidizing every jump? But this year, the weekend team from Ohio was soon to come out of obscurity.

CHAPTER 4

THE 1982 COMPETITION

The day started early - 5:30am. Dan roused himself out of bed and shook each of his teammates awake. Grumbling and wiping the tiredness from their eyes, they started to get ready for the big day.

They met in the hangar at 6am. The sun was just barely coming up over the horizon. The air was crisp and cool in morning desert fashion. Conversations were intermittent, voices subdued. Len lead them through their routine of stretches. Slowly, carefully, they went through the various muscle groups of their bodies.

Towards the end of the hour, more and more people were showing up as the dropzone came awake. People at the tents were folding up their blankets, wresting from the comfortable cocoon. A voice over the loudspeaker shattered the stillness once and for all.

“Teams #1, 2, and 3, you’re on a 15-min. call.” With that announcement, several teams hurriedly left the hangar to ready for the first competition jump of the day.

Throughout the day, team after team vaulted from the Twin Otter airplane. People watched from the grandstands, looking skywards, pointing up, talking to each other.

On the big screen in the hangar, eyes were glued as people counted each consecutive point.

Some teams were slow, out of sync, a little sluggish. The die-hard fans of those particular teams, mostly people from their hometowns, were usually the only ones paying full attention to these jumps. Others were chit-chatting, checking out the latest gear, girls in clusters talking about that one particular guy on that one particular team that they thought was “oh so cute!”. The announcer’s voice would announce the score at the end of the dive, there would be polite, sparse applause.

With the Golden Knights, everything changed. When their team was announced as being the next to jump, people stopped what they were doing, attention suddenly riveted on what was happening ten thousand feet high.

The Army’s Golden Knights might as well have been Darth Vader in skydiving uniforms. They inspired that much fear in competitors and that much awe from the spectators. Competitive jumping was what these men did for a living while enlisted. And it showed.

They left the plane, and all motion seemed to stop on the dropzone. The team turned their points fast and smooth, like a well-oiled machine. Len watched in awe, wondering how in the world they could move so quickly with such confidence. They were pushing the envelope. The energy rose as the clock ticked down, and people watched the points, counting aloud.

“Thirteen, Fourteen, Fifteen! Fifteen points! A new world record!” The crowd cheered in wild applause. Dan shook his head and smiled in awe. Rather than fear, it only drove the desire in him to push his own standards. He would love to skydive like that.

“Team six from Ohio, you’re on a fifteen minute call.” The announcement induced a burst of adrenaline as Dan and his teammates geared up for their jump.

Thirty minutes later, once in the sky, things had settled down in the hangar. People were back to milling around again, attention diverted from the main screen.

Dan’s team jumped, and the clock started ticking the points. Fast and strong, they started going through the dive. A little slower than the Knights, but smooth enough to draw the attention of many of the spectators. Heads turned in curiosity. No one recognized this team, but to anyone who knew anything about competitive jumping, this team had something special. There was a new wave of amazement as the points added on.

“Eleven, twelve, thirteen!” The announcement reverberated through the hangar. There is a steady wash of applause.

Dan's team comes in to land, and the spectators out there greeted them with additional applause. No other team had even come close to the Knights on that jump. None, that is, except this unknown team from Ohio captained by a guy with a funny last name.

((((CONTINUE HERE!!!! - 3-9-98)

Driving home, singing happily to his favorite driving tunes, Dan playfully swung the silver medal hanging from his rearview mirror. There was nothing better than a good road cruise, of that Dan was sure. The sun shining brightly, the wind roaring out the open window, music blasting away. And the view of the majestic clouds before him was breathtaking. Giant marshmallow castles with the sun streaking through them were works of art that no painting could ever do justice.

The Nationals that year knew about Dan B.C. They finished a mere four points behind the champions. This was unheard of by a first-year competition team. Dan and his team had even tied the Knights on a couple of rounds. This led many to ask the question, "what if Dan's team had trained full-time, like the Knights?" What then? For the first time in years, it became apparent that the Knights *could* be beaten. They weren't so infallible after all. And every team went back to its home drop zone that year set on engineering dives in new and faster ways, as Dan had done this year. Dan was unaware of the fervor he had created. They had just been skydiving their best, having fun. Experimenting with new and different transitions just for curiosity sake. But the new stakes had been injected into the competition scene.

After stopping on the country highway roadside for a few hours of sleep, Dan awoke to a glorious sunrise, and headed on the last leg, pulling into the gravel drive at Xenia in the late afternoon.

James, who had been up early packing student rigs, saw the familiar sight of the blue van and immediately jumped up. He ran to the door of the old house sticking his head in only briefly. "He's here!" He slammed the door shut as he ran out toward where the van was parked and just shutting off its motor. Dan was just stepping out as James ran up.

"Danny!"

"Hey, James." Dan and James met with both hands raised for a loud-slamming 'high-ten', the common hello for these two friends.

"Let's see it--" James looked on eagerly as Dan pulled forth the silver medal. James admired it with shining eyes. Then he added with childish certainty, "Man, if you'd had *me* on the team you'd have won the Gold."

Dan couldn't hold in his laughter at this enthusiasm. "I don't doubt that, James."

"Then you'd better take me on my first jump."

"You don't waste any time, do you?"

"You said we could when you got back from Nationals."

James looked on expectantly. Dan eyed him, pulled his duffle from the back, and ignored the question for the moment.

"So how'd it go while I was gone?"

A little miffed that he was being put off again, James nevertheless followed Danny's lead. "Great. Twelve people in the first jump course last Saturday. Three repetitives and four tandems."

They walked towards the building as something odd about the place hit Dan. He looked around quizzically.

“It’s dead here today. Where is everyone?”

James nonchalantly threw out, “Oh, Davis had a boogie this weekend. Almost everyone went from here.”

“I thought it was next weekend.”

“They moved it last minute.”

By now they had climbed the stairs and Dan was just in the door when--

“Surprise!” The room was packed wall to wall with all of the Xenia jumpers. Dan gave James a look. James was laughing at his successful snow job. An enormous sign over the far wall said, “Congratulations, Danny. One more step to the Gold!”

There was a grand raucous as people were laughing, talking to Dan, crowding around to see the shiny silver medal. Music started playing as people flowed outside once again. Dan looked over at Rita, James’ mother and Dan’s good friend, behind manifest. Rita was Dan’s right-hand person here, and helped to keep everything running smoothly. She was indispensable. Right now, she smiled with a twinkling eye and blew Dan a kiss. He winked back at her. She was so proud of him. This had been quite a feat, and he deserved every bit of attention. Dan was a popular friend to the many jumpers. They loved to celebrate any time, but they were especially happy to celebrate his success.

At dusk, Dan was outside putting the planes to bed, talking to Rita as he tied them down. The party was still going strong inside, the music blasting loudly away.

“Rita, I want to talk to you about something.”

Rita didn’t hesitate. In her fairly soft-spoken, Scottish accent, she said, “He asked again.”

Dan’s silence acknowledged her guess.

Rita sighed. They’d been talking about this for such a long time. They kept trying to put it off and put it off, but there was only so long they could feasibly hold back a young colt. Dan had James doing everything he could think of. No one knew parachutes more thoroughly than James by now. After packing hundreds of canopies, washing planes, cleaning manifest, James knew more than most of the veteran jumpers. But the legal age was sixteen with parental consent. They both knew this, and they both knew that the USPA tended to look the other way in the cases of “drop zone kids”.

“He wants it bad, right now.” Dan cinched down the last tie and turned to face her.

“He’s just so young!” Rita had been vacillating on this one for a long time.

Dan spoke very quietly. “He’s going to be very good.”

Rita thought on this for long moment. She never trusted anyone more implicitly than she trusted Dan. He would never take even the slightest risk. And she knew from working there the the sport was safe. Especially with Dan. But Rita was not a jumper herself, and her mother’s instincts were telling her to hold on to her baby, not to let him go. But the other part in her told her he was ready to spread his wings. James had been paying his dues with Danny and his teams for a long time. How could she deny him the one thing he’d been preparing so diligently for? Willingly, sometimes impatiently, taking on every task Dan set before him in the mean time. A few months ago when she had said okay for after Nationals, Nationals had seemed so far off. And James had let it drop so that quite frankly, she had forgotten all about it.

“You think one is going to tide him over for a while?”

Now it was Dan’s turn to be silent for a moment. He didn’t want to tell her, ‘no, Rita. One is *not* going to tide him over. It’s going to be the start of living a dream for James.’ Dan had seen the hunger in James’ eyes. That kid wanted to fly, and badly. It reminded Dan much of himself in his first days of jumping. It was a hunger that could only be realized through learning the art of flight. A jumper was continually honing his skills. Even after thousands of jumps, there was still finesse work a flyer could do. In skydiving there was never any “getting there”. It was a continual journey to fly with more precision, speed. And after one jump Dan knew James would be hot to embark on this journey. But for now all he said was, “Let’s just see how it goes after the first one.”

After her silence once again, Dan said, “Look Rita. I’ve never seen anyone more ready and with a better attitude than James. But you’re his mother, and it’s entirely up to you.”

He looked expectantly at Rita, waiting for her decision.

The next morning, the door banged behind Dan and James exiting the building.

“Yee ha! We’re goin’!”

James was bouncing with excitement. Dan smiled down at him, happy to share what he loved most with his “little brother”. They were geared up for a ‘tandem jump’. Over his jumpsuit Dan wore a special double-sized parachute, with a double-sized reserve, on his back. James, wearing a jumpsuit tailored to his tiny stature, wore only a harness, made of what James called “seatbelt material”. Introduced several years earlier on a trial basis, the tandem jump had proven for many to be their ticket to become willing to hurl themselves out of a perfectly good airplane. Many felt safer because they weren’t responsible for themselves in the sky. For Dan, it was the perfect way to introduce James safely to this new playground.

Dan remembered back to his own first jump on his eighteenth birthday. Of course, he had dreamt of parachuting ever since he was five years old and would jump with a blanket from the top bunk of his bunkbeds. And when his eighteenth birthday hit, he drove himself out to the skydiving center close to the university where he had been attending, with the goal of making ‘just one jump’. That’s all he wanted. Just to try it and say he’d done it. Little did he realize it would be an experience that would change the focus and direction of his entire life. So he laughed inside, telling Rita they were taking James for ‘just one jump’. But then, you never really knew. Sure enough, people had proven themselves unpredictable up until the moment out the door of the airplane. You never really could tell. Often the people Dan had thought would most hate it ended up loving it, and vice versa.

Dan looked down at James again. Well, they’d know for certain in about a half-hour. Woody had not at all agreed with this decision.

“I don’t know how you can judge if a fourteen year-old kid is ready,” he said angrily. “I don’t think it’s a good idea at all.”

Dan listened, and not with feigned politeness, but took in what Woody said and then stuck to his decision. “I think he is, Woody. A gut feeling.” Woody just shook his head in exasperation at his friend and teammate. He trusted Dan and knew Dan wouldn’t make any

stupid decisions, but this time he thought Dan was not making the best of determinations. But Dan was the owner. Woody had simply walked away, but Dan held firm. He knew. He knew the ingredients that separated the heads-up jumpers from the flails. James was a special kid. Fairly quiet, reserved, polite, and intelligent as all hell. There was something about him. And Dan felt completely confident.

As they walked to the Cessna, followed by their cameraman, Phil, the Xenia jumpers who were there on that weekday morning smiled widely, throwing words of encouragement and confidence to James, smiling, giving him a 'thumbs up'. He grinned back, fully excited and fully confident.-----

Rita's enthusiasm had waned. "I don't know, Danny. What do you think?"

Dan said, "He's only 14. USPA, the FAA and every lawyer in the country all say James can't jump till he's sixteen. He wants it bad right now. You're his mom - I'm leaving it up to you."

James piped up. "Come on, come on, please. It's just a tandem. It'll be cake."

Rita sighed and looked at her son. This is the moment of truth for every mother. The protective mom-instinct said absolutely not, no way. But the eagerness on his face. The pleading look, the enthusiasm. He had been around skydivers and skydiving for four years now. He had been packing Dan's parachute for two years now. After all, this was only a tandem.

She looked at Dan. He'd been a great friend over these years. She'd seen him literally come up through the skydiving ranks. There was no one who was more safe in the air, and she could think of no one she'd rather have her son go up with. It would be something special for them both to share. She knew Dan had a deep affection for James. More than once she'd heard him call James "Little Bro."

Sighing, she said, "Dan, you sure it's safe for him?"

Dan said quietly, "Safe as it gets, just illegal."

Rita looked at them both. Dan patiently waiting. James, that look of pleading still in his eyes. Rita could tell James was doing his best to concentrate the right answer into her thoughts. She shook her head slowly.

CHAPTER 8

"Yee haa! We're goin'!" James shouted with glee. The door to the building slammed shut as Dan and James walked out, Dan with a double sized tandem rig on his back, James, with his own jumpsuit and goggles. James was jumping with excitement. The enthusiasm was contagious. Dan smiled down at his 'little bro.' James was just a great kid, and Dan was proud to be taking him on his first jump.

They climbed into the little Cessna. Craig, who was flying, was beaming as well. Soon they were airborne, rising to altitude. James stood on his knees looking out the front window, eager and excited. Dan watched him, happy to share what he loves most with his little bro.

"Okay, James. You got it all?" They were nearing altitude, and it was almost time to hook everything up.

James looked back and confidently said, "Arch, scream and smile as we dive out. Two practice ripcord pulls, keep track of our altitude, and pull for real at 5,000 feet."

"That'll do it." Dan was impressed with James' sharpness and attitude. Even though a person speaks with bravado and confidence on the ground, and even in the plane, you are never quite sure until out the door exactly how someone is going to react. Some people are predictable, and others, well, you just can't always tell. So far, James seemed okay.

Soon it was time to hook up the harness. The cameraman moved to the back of the plane to cinch up his own gear. Dan placed James in front of him, both kneeling in the small plane. As Dan hooked first the upper latches, then the lower ones by the hips, it was hard to read James' face. There was the expected look of fear of the unknown, but there was a certain calmness about his countenance, so that it was excitement and anticipation, more than dread.

Dan checked to make sure James could read the altimeter on his chest strap. Dan looked at Craig, who winked back.

"Okay, Dan," the pilot called out.

"You all set, James?"

"Ready!"

Reaching over, they opened the door. The roar of the wind rushed into the plane. Dan peered out to spot, James harnessed in front of him, looking out at the gaping expanse before him. Dan pointed out the DZ far below. At 10,000 feet, it was a tiny dot. James nodded that he saw it. Dan gave instructions to the pilot.

"Five right! Okay. Another five. Cut!" The engine cut back as Dan backed up for the cameraman to get out on the strut. James looked at the camera and gave a wave as Dan inched up to the door's edge.

"Okay! Ready! Set! Go!"

On go, they dove forward out of the plane. James did a beautiful arch, which helped them to stable out quickly. As the cameraman flew up in front, James was smiling and waving at the camera. A total ham. He proceeded to do his two practice ripcord touches. Dan was impressed with his ease in the air. James was having a ball, but Dan thought it couldn't beat his own joy at that moment. His little bro on a skydive!

Usually, when people are relaxed, are busy geeking the camera, it's almost a guarantee that they completely forget about the ripcord. But not James. At 5,000 ft., as planned, he signaled and pulled the ripcord.

Under the canopy, the roar of freefall had become a serene, tranquil quiet. Except for James roar of excitement.

"Wa-hooo! How'd I do, Danny?" He was beaming from his first taste of flight.

Dan smiled broadly at him. "Mark my word, James. You and I are gonna win the World Championships some day."

Grabbing the toggles, Dan gave James his first lesson on steering the canopy. Together, they would pull down on the left toggle, and swing out in a giant sweeping motion. James squealed with excitement. From their vantage point, Dan pointed out James' school, and then his mother down below, waiting by the wind sock, their target.

The cameraman landed first, taking off his helmet and first, quickly taking off his helmet to capture their landing. Dan aimed directly for him, and together, they came in for a flawless, standup landing. James was dancing around with excitement as Dan unhooked him. They high-fived as Rita came running up.

She gave James a bear hug, smiling. She didn't have to ask if he liked it. The joy on James' face said it all.

"Mom, it was the best! I want to go solo! When can I go solo?" James was beside himself.

Rita looked at Dan, who was gathering up the lines from the parachute. They shared a look that they both knew this would happen.

"He's a natural," was all Dan said.

Rita looked at her son again, at his exuberance, his excitement. She knew it was only a matter of time. Looking at Dan, she nodded. Mother to coach. It was in his hands now. She hugged James again, and smiling, looked upward at that wonderful, crazy, magical world that caught some people in its clutches, and once having them, never let go. This was definitely the case with her young son. His eyes were still sparkling.

Dan spoke, "All right, James. Wait til after Nationals are over, in a couple of weeks. Then we'll start. As he heaved the parachute over his shoulder, Dan said"

CHAPTER 9

Dan returned from Nationals, capturing the bronze medal for the second year in a row. Upon his return, they kept according to plan and started James' training. Never before had Dan seen such a natural skydiver, and this kid's voice hadn't even changed yet! At fourteen, he hadn't hit puberty yet, so he was still pretty small. Dan got the smallest parachute rig available for him, and it fit James like a glove.

James progressed so fast that it seemed he couldn't be stopped. Dan was excited, because he knew he had a champion in the making. If only James would hurry up and grow up!

James truly was a natural. He skydived with grace and ease, and was always so full of joy! He was serious and focused on the 4-way dives, but on fun loads, he was the first to find the camera, waving and smiling. Normally skydivers would get a good reprimand from others on the dive, for taking their eyes off the formation, but no one could call James on anything. He never missed a beat, and was usually ahead of everyone else on the dive.

At age 16, James took on the task of becoming a certified jumpmaster and instructor. He took the Accelerated Freefall course, a course that was likened by many to a stressful, dreaded experience.

USPA would harrass Dan about letting James jump at such an early age, but Dan knew it was only token disapproval. It was pretty common for "drop zone kids" to jump much earlier than the legal age, so when they came knocking on Dan's door, he let the officials say their peace, then leave. And it would blow over.

worse than even some war experiences. The pressure was mental, and for 10 days, the AFF coursemasters did all they could to chip away at the attitudes and demeanors of the candidates. There was usually no doubt that the people in the course had the flying skills; the test came down to how would they react in pressure situations.

James passed with flying colors. He became the youngest jumpmaster to get his rating. At this time, Dan had hired a young, 22-year-old pilot that he had met on a trip to the Florida nationals to come up and fly at his DZ on his summer break from school. His name was Mike Traad. People would come to do a first jump, and balk when they saw a 24-year-

old owner, with a 16-year-old jump instructor, and a pilot who was 22. Dan would reassure them, and ask that they please give them a chance before they make any judgments. Sure enough, the people always left as satisfied customers.

Midway through that year, Dan first read "Illusions". It cemented some ideas he had always held close to his heart, especially the notion that true happiness comes when you follow your life's passion, doing what you want to do, rather than what looks good, or will impress, friends, family and society.

"Yep, that's pretty much me," Dan thought. When the day was right, he'd have James read it too. Dan was cultivating him from the very start. James was unbelievably quick and light doing 4-way.

"Man, I can't wait to get you on a team someday," Dan would tell him. The days passed quickly. In many ways it seemed that life couldn't be better.

Chapter 10

Six years into his ownership of the DZ, Dan could no longer ignore the warning signs. Several incidents over the past three years with Jeff, the land-owner, his old mentor, brought Dan to a point where his trust in him was completely damaged. This was not the Jeff of six years ago, and it worried Dan. He kept thinking about the end of the nine years. He talked about it with Rita one day.

"Man, when I started this thing, I had absolutely no doubts whatsoever that Jeff would let us continue running the operation when it's all paid off."

Rita listened, contemplating deeply. "Will he put it in writing?"

"No, that's what has me worried," Dan countered. "He said I have to trust him."

"And you don't think he'll hold true to his word?"

"Rita, look at what he did with the hangar. Said we could use that no problem and then he goes and stores grain in it! Look at what he did when the police came because of that pilot who flew through here without our permission and the cops were asking if I was involved. He wouldn't back me up as a character witness!"

"Yeah, that was very strange."

Dan looked down at the skydiving gloves in his hands. He shook his head. "Rita, I just keep pouring money into this thing and there's nothing that says he won't close us down when the payments are finished."

Rita had never seen Dan so futile and frustrated before.

"What are you going to do?"

CHAPTER 11

"But where will you go?" James was near tears. Packing up the blue van, Dan heaved the last of six tandem rigs into the back.

"Takin' a nice long vacation. Clear my head. Sort out what I want to do next."

"I still don't see why you can't stay."

"I told you, James, it's a no-win situation." Dan lifted in his duffle bag as he talked. James was distraught.

"Well I don't know what to do! I can't keep working here after he treated you like this. But it's all I know."

Dan stopped, touched by his little bro's loyalty. He looked directly at James, and spoke quietly.

"Look - James. You do what you need to do. The most important thing is for you to keep jumping. See-" Dan looked off at the peaceful sunset sky. "I don't regret working here, I just regret buying the place. This is a great place to work. Jeff was a great guy to work for. This is a great way for you to keep jumping. You can get your pilot's license too."

"But we'll never get to do that team we always talk about."

Dan laughed. "What?! You kidding? James, you're not even out of school yet. We've got plenty of time. Don't you worry about that. That's definitely in the plan."

James looked skeptical, but more relieved.

Dan paused a second before reaching into his bag inside the van. He shuffled through it as James watched. Finally he found what he was looking for, pulled it out and handed it to James.

"Here. Read this. It's what we're all about."

James looked at the small paperback in his hands.

"Illusions - "

Dan took the book back and leafed through before finding the page he was looking for. "Here - "

James took it and read, "You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it come true. You may have to work for it, however."

Dan smiled. "See? Just don't lose the desire and things'll work out"

James was still very down. "I hope so - "

With energy, Dan said, "Well I know so!" At James' look, he said, "Trust me. It'll come together as long as we want it. I don't know how, I don't know when, but it'll work." Dan paused before - "In the meantime, keep flyin' high."

In the silence of the evening, Dan moved forward. They embraced in a long, heartfelt hug. Dan spoke softly in James' ear. "I love you, Man. You're always my Little Bro."

"I love you too, Danny."

They pulled away and Dan put both hands up for a two-handed high-five. Together they clasped hands and held it, just for a moment, before Dan gently pushed James away, walked around to the driver's side and climbed in. James watched tearfully as Dan pulled away. Inside the van Dan looked back in the rearview mirror. His tears, up til now held back with as much as he could muster, now flowed freely.. Shortly he shook his head and grabbed a kleenex from the dash. He was nearing the end of the gravel drive when he heard another voice call his name.

"Dan!" Mikey was running across the field and came up breathlessly. "I just wanted to say good-bye again. "

"Thanks, Mikey. So what's up with you? You goin' back to school in Florida?"

"Yeah - gotta get that Doctor's degree that pop is so pushy for."

Dan shook his head. "Mikey, you gotta do what you want. Forget your dad. He's got his own life to live."

Mike was rueful. "Yeah - It's not that easy though."

"I know, I know. Just take care of yourself."

"Yeah, you too." Mike was strangely fidgety.

"And Dan - " Mike looked tentative about what he was about to say.

"Yeah?"

"Umm - I just wanted to say - to ask - if you do a team again, would you consider having me on it?" He looked at Dan now, like a kid asking for something he wanted for a long time. Mike had three hundred jumps, compared to the thousands that most national competitors have. Dan knew what it took for him to ask that question. He may have been a spoiled rich kid, but he had the heart of a lamb, and a great attitude. Those were the ingredients with which Dan worked best.

"Mikey - when I do a team, I will definitely keep you in mind."

Looking greatly relieved, Mike said, "You would? Oh, thanks B.C. I'd really like that." He tried to mask his exuberance at this news.

Dan smiled. "No problem. Listen, Mikey, I have a favor to ask."

"Sure, anything."

"I had to give Jeff one of my Cessna's, along with the other tandem rigs, to get out of the contract. I don't trust him leaving the other Cessna around here. I want you to fly it to Florida and keep it there with you when you go."

"Sure - I don't see any problem with that."

"Great. Thanks."

Mikey grinned his big, easy-going grin. "You bet."

Dan shifted his car into gear again. "See ya around, Mikey." He pulled away once again.

"You know it!" Mike called after him.

Six years of the most incredible time of his life had just ended in a nightmare that he thought would never be possible. Heading down the road, he had absolutely no idea what the future would hold.

CHAPTER 12

Driving along the highway, Dan's spirits lifted considerably. He always loved driving along, jamming to tunes, the sun streaming through the car window. This was always one of his favorite times. The troubles of yesterday seemed but a phantom's whisper in his head. He tried not to think about it, because that just produced a sick feeling in his stomach that he knew wasn't going to help him out in the least. What to do, what to do?

He knew first off, he was overdue for a visit to his sister in Illinois. After that, he would take a couple of weeks, travel west, see the country in a nice leisurely fashion, and sort out his life. He ruminated over his options. It was pretty futile for him to be angry about what he lost to Jeff. There was nothing he could do about it. He had to dwell on what he had. Six tandem rigs. Hmmmm. Enough to start his own business at another dropzone. That really didn't turn him on though. What about getting a pilot job somewhere? Naah. . .

The warm spring breeze buffeted through the open window of the van. This trusty van! Why, it had been with him for the six years of his driving career, and it was still going strong. It was his cherished buddy, who was with him through thick and thin. And now, as they ventured truly into the unknown, breezing along the highway, Dan felt a special contentment just being in this moment.

After the visit to his sister, he made one last stop to an old friend, a kindly old mentor named Trevor. Trevor was a former skydiving champion himself. Now he owned a business that allowed him to work a few days, then fly up to his house on an island in Seattle.

After his visit (elaborat later), he stepped into his van. Something ancy was stirring again. Trevor was right.

Dan sat there, thinking. He stared straight ahead. No motor. No music. Silence. The sun, sinking lower in the Western sky streamed through the front window. For no reason at all his gaze fell downward onto his duffle. In the front pocket, through the partially opened zipper, Dan could see a few of his favorite books. For no reason at all, he absently bent down and pulled out the little blue paperback. "Illusions." His mind, the anger dissipated, at least for the moment, was at peace. Just - there. Dan leafed through the pages and arbitrarily stopped halfway. The words on the page were the very words he had given James to read. "You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it come true. You may have to work for it, however."

Trevor's voice again rang through his head. "What do you want to do more than anything in the world?"

His mind raced to each and every declaration that kept him, year after year, searching for the right players, assembling teams.

He read the words again. "You may have to work for it, however."

Dan loved the competition. He loved the comraderie with fellow-competitors over the years.

He knew that more than anything in the world he wanted to win the Nationals and go to the World Meet as the US team. He knew he had what it took. The right ingredients just hadn't come along yet.

He sat up, eyes bright, on fire. He had nowhere, and everywhere, to go. He had no idea how it would possibly come together. But he knew if he followed his heart, it would happen. Turning the key in the ignition, the van burst to life. He knew now exactly where he was going. He was headed west. The more he ruminated about this, the more the spark burst within him. With an eagerness and impatience he hadn't felt in a long time, he set out, his sights targeted.

CHAPTER 14

Jammin' along to the tunes, it was all so right, so happy, so free. Here he was right in the middle of his skydiving career; this isn't something you put off for years until there's a better time. The time is now. And he knew the way it worked. If you want to be the best, you go to where the best are. And in the skydiving world, barring the Army's Golden Knights, that was Florida and California. Both were internationally-known training centers, mainly because of the excellent weather there. Contending champs from around the world trained there throughout the year. But for Dan, there really was no contest. Florida was out. If anyone asked, he would tell them it was because he hated the humidity. But secretly, he thought there were some real attitudes at that DZ. Perris had its share of attitudes, but he knew a couple more people out that way, and they were a little more affable. He knew a lot of the teams were set. But there was one, the Gumby's, who were known for perennially coming in fourth. They'd been doing well at Nationals, but they definitely needed - well - something. And, he thought confidently, I could be that something. It could be a total win-win situation. So onward he went.

There was a DZ in Coolidge Arizona, too. Smaller place, although he didn't know much about it. Might as well check it out on the way. Stop there, do a few jumps. Then head on.

His intention was to take time, see the western states. But a few rest-stops and thirty-six hours later, he pulled into a long gravelly road. The sign said, "Welcome to Coolidge Skydiving Center."

Tired, grungy, yet with an energy at having arrived at this tiny desert dropzone, Dan hopped out of the van. It felt good to stretch his legs. This was a small dropzone with the main building farther down the path. He looked around for a second. Didn't know what to expect, although this pretty much fit the bill for your standard-fair, little dropzones. Desolate. No, just quiet. There were a few people standing around, and Dan was greeted as he walked carrying his gear into the manifest area.

"Welcome!" came a friendly greeting from across the counter. "First time here?" The man smiled warmly.

Dan smiled wryly. "First time." He signed the paperwork which was so familiar to him. "Where can I get a shower? Just came a long way."

"Right around the corner there," the man said, pointing over across the room. "And my name's Jake. If I can help you out with anything, just let me know."

"Thanks Jake. I'm Dan. The only thing I'll need is some people to jump with."

"Oh, there's people around today. There's a load up right now."

"Great."

"What's your experience level?" Jake asked.

"I was on the team that took the bronze at Nationals last year," Dan said. No airs. Just matter of fact.

But that impressed Jake. "Really! Well, then you'll definitely have no problem."

Dan went off to get his bag out of the car. A half an hour, a shower and shave later, he felt human again. When he walked through the building this time, there were others around. Out the door people were packing away, getting ready to go up again. Dan put his shower stuff into the back. As he gathered up his gear, he looked around. He liked the feel of this place. Good vibes. And the cactus were amazing to look at. Standing easily a story high, they were tall, prickly giants. Would hurt to land on one of those. Awfully pretty, though. Dan took a deep breath of the fresh Arizona air, looked up at the deep blue sky, and slowly exhaled. He was feeling remarkably good, considering how little sleep he was working on.

Back in manifest, Jake was talking to a tall man, mid-twenties, with black hair. Dan went to put his gear against the wall, and looking up, saw the man striding over. He had a easy gait; seemed like a likeable guy.

"Hi! You looking to get on a load?"

"You read my mind." Dan was itching to get in the air already.

"You do any four-way?"

Dan paused. "Some-"

"I got three; we're looking for a fourth," the jumper said.

Dan smiled. "Put me on."

As they walked out to the plane, the jumper introduced himself. "I'm Jim. Glad to have you visit."

"Glad to be here," Dan returned. "I've always had a soft spot for the desert. Always thought it had a special magic to it."

"This place definitely does," Jim said. "'Specially in April when the cactus are in full bloom."

Some jumpers are very particular about who they jump with, their level. Not Dan. When he wasn't training, he didn't care who it was, as long as they were safe, he would go with anyone. He wasn't expecting much of this four-way dive. A jump was a jump, and each was an opportunity to fly in the sky, to sail on the wind. And it was typical for any four people, jumping together for the first time, to have some problems. It takes a while for new jumpers to get used to each other's fall rate. So Dan was pleasantly surprised, and very charged up, when the jump went extremely well. He was impressed. He knew their experience level was relatively low, but they were very relaxed, and flew tight and clean.

Landing, Dan was charged up by the dive. He could tell by everyone's smiles that they were too.

"Great dive, guys!" he called over. Marc, a German guy with a thick German accent, spoke up.

"Ya - you too!"

"You guys going up again?" Dan asked.

"Soon as we pack," Jim said. "You up for it?"

"You bet!"

That afternoon, they did four jumps together. Each one steadily improved. Dan was impressed.

At the end of the day, he stood next to Jim while they packed. As they conversed, Dan took a real liking to Jim. They were chatting along when Jim mentioned the things that caught Dan's ears.

"Yeah," he said, "We want to do a team and take it to nationals that year. But we need a fourth."

Dan couldn't believe his ears. "You're looking for a fourth?"

Jim looked at him. "Yeah. You ever thought about doing a team?"

"I've been competing there myself for the past six years. My team, Fusion, took the bronze last year."

Jim was dumbfounded. He knew this guy had been good, but he had no idea he came with credentials.

"Did you really?!" He was clearly amazed. And a little flustered. But only for a moment. "You going again with them?"

"As a matter of fact, no. I was actually heading west to try and find three other guys who were crazy enough to live on a DZ, sell everything they want, and get married to three other guys for a year."

"Join ours!" Jake was excited. This guy would really cement and already good team.

Dan thought a second. He still couldn't believe this proposal was coming to him. He knew he had pushed the drive to get here so fast for a reason. But he didn't want to commit until all options were checked out.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'm got some people I have to see in Perris. If you guys are serious, plan on meeting back here in two weeks, ready to jump." I'll call you from there.

Jim was lit up. "Okay. We'll be ready."

As Dan got into his car, he looked around him again. The tall cacti standing proudly, yet as gentle giants, against the cloudless blue sky. Peaceful. Dan was still amazed that this proposition had come up. "That's how it works, he thought. 'You put out your wish, and things fall into place.' The amazing thing to him was that Jim said he also was leaving town. He wouldn't be here for a week or so. Dan would never have met him had he come one day later. Shaking his head, he climbed into his old friend, his van. Dan's had two criteria for

team members: a) that they have a great attitude and sense of humor and b) that they have the potential to be great flyers. He would take a rookie with the right ingredients over a hot-headed veteran with thousands of jumps any day. With those basic ingredients, Dan knew he could mold him, teach him. All things being equal, however, he'd go with the people with experience. In his mind as he headed west once again, it was up to the Gumby's. Either way, Dan was back on track for his dream. As he cruised happily along the highway again, music playing, (his favorite Steve Winwood tape) he floated on air.

CHAPTER 15: THE FOURCE

Perris Valley, California - the skydiving mecca of the world. National and international teams, drawn by the hot, sunny weather and the fairly modern facilities, came here to train year-round.

Perris Valley was huge. And Perris through the years had been home to some National and World championship teams from the U.S.A. Mirror Image and Coors were two top teams. Great guys, but the mindset at the time was not to share "team secrets" with anyone. They would engineer their skydives, studying it angle by angle, point by point, through each formation of a particular sequence. And I mean study. One guy who was an engineer by trade worked out formulas on his laptop computer. Always in search of ways to increase the speed and efficiency of getting from point to point, hoping to get more in the allotted 50 seconds of a competition jump. The point is, no one ever shared their secrets. The dives were practiced and talked about behind closed doors. The idea of coaching a competitor team was unheard of. It wasn't that anyone maliciously advocated this concept. In fact, in most sports it is probably the status quo. "Don't tell anyone how you're doing it or you might lose your edge."

The other aspect is that very few teams competed in the National Skydiving Championships, or "the Nationals" as they were endearingly referred to. Sure, weekend jumpers would compete for fun in smaller local competitions, but to even show up as a competing team at Nationals was an intimidating prospect. In fact, many dreamed of it, but that's where it stopped. With all the secretiveness, many top competitors were often labeled as jerks, undriendly, arrogant. Standoffish. They couldn't talk to the "common folk."

Dan B.C. was to change all that. He would bring an entirely new philosophy and mindset to the DZ. He altered the landscape of competition jumping at Perris Valley, and at subsequent dropzones where he took up residence for any length of time.

The landscape of jumpers at Perris was that it had been the home of world-class competitors, but most of the jumpers were weekend "fun jumpers". Men and women who worked regular Monday through Friday jobs, always with their eyes towards the weekend. Yearning to fulfill their passion once again, forget their daily troubles and go out of the relaxed, beautiful, laid-back atmosphere of the DZ, and get their "knees in the breeze".

In 1992, the Nationals contender out of Perris was a team known as "the Gumbies". Their name pretty much says it all. Dan had met the Gumby's three years ago at Nationals. They were a crazy, kind of raunchy bunch, but they were so affable you had to love them. They were jokers. Pranksters. Always cutting up. They had definite talent, but they perennially came in fourth place. Not bad by any means. You might never be sure who the

medal winners were going to be on any given year, but there was one thing you could pretty much count on – the Gumbies would be fourth. Dan knew he could make a difference with them and pull them into the medal ring. It would be a dicey proposition though because, as far as he knew, they they already had a solid four. “But,” he thought to himself happily, “things can change.” It was worth a shot.

So it was with this possibility in mind that he ventured into the enormous parking lot that led to the Perris Valley dropzone; the place that would become home to the realization of his dreams, and also to his worst nightmares.

NEW CHAPTER: PERRIS:

The size of the place never ceased to amaze Dan, who was still used to his small Xenia DZ. The Coolidge DZ reminded him of that. But here, there were tons of people everywhere. People loading up a 21-seat twin otter (his cessnas typically carried four or five a load). There were people out on a well-manicured grass lawn packing their chutes. People stood in line at the manifest window, which looked like a ticket-booth window. Students walked with instructors from behind the large pool area. Cameraman and camerawomen stood over helmets, changing tapes, checking ringsights. So much activity!

As Dan walked along the packing tables, he spotted them. Down on the ground they spun around on mechanics creepers, practicing their next formation. They came out of it and stopped, laughing their raucous laughter. Dan's friend Ken spotted him first.

"Hey! Look what the cat dragged in!" He was already leaping on his feet coming to meet Dan, who was matching his grin ear to ear. The others jumped up, coming to greet their old friend and competitor. "Hey, B.C.!" "Hi, B.C.!" "You're a long way from Ohio, aren't you?"

"Hey, guys!"

"You out here on vacation?" Ken asked.

"Well, actually, I'm kind of on a permanent vacation." The subject was getting less and less sore with Dan.

"You're not running that DZ anymore?" Pete was surprised.

"No - things weren't working out. I sold it back to the owner." That was it. Not one word complaining that he had gotten the shaft. Just stated, simple and straight. That was Dan's way.

"So what, did you drive all the way from Ohio?" Ken asked.

"Not only did I drive," Dan replied, "but I think I made it in record time. Thirty six hours to Coolidge, Arizona."

They laughed. "You might make the books for that one."

Dan clapped his hands together. "So, how does someone get on a 4-way around here?"

"Why don't you jump with us today? We've got five anyway. We'll just rotate six instead." Ahh. Music to Dan's ears.

"That'd be great," he said. "I'll go get my gear out of the van." He turned around, his walk shifting into a slight jog.

"We'll put you on the next load," Joe called after him. "Thirty minute call."

In the air that day, they did six dives, the hottest ones without a doubt were the ones Dan was on. He was undoubtedly one of the best skydivers around. His ability to communicate his ideas clearly made him a great coach.

The sun was setting behind the buildings. The sky was a particularly beautiful shade of purples, burnt orange and pink. A gorgeous sky. Dan stood by the manifest window talking to his old friend Tom. Tom's fiancée had jilted him shortly after Tom's father had killed himself. It hadn't been an easy year for him. But Dan was glad to see that he had bounced back pretty well, seemed in good spirits.

Dan's glance kept falling on the Gumby's team trailer. The door was open, and Dan could see them talking. He wondered how they'd take his proposal. "Make it a six-man team, and the best four jump." Made all the sense in the world to him. He thought they'd go for it for sure. They wanted to win, too, and they had to know there was some ingredient missing. Four years now they'd had that team. The light streamed out of the trailer door, into the dusk. Shortly, they filed out of the trailer. Tom said his goodbye to Dan just as the Gumby's came up. Jim spoke first.

"Dan, we decided it'd set up for some bad vibes. We'd love to had you, but, it's just not the right time."

Dan was genuinely surprised. "Really!"

"Yeah - " Dan could tell Ken and Pete didn't agree. But they kept silent.

"We could really make something happen. You guys have got the talent. You just need some honing."

"I know - we know. It's just - somebody's gonna get the shaft, and - we don't want that."

Dan nodded. Then - "You sure?"

"Danny, it breaks our hearts, but this is the fateful path we have chosen," this from Jed, the team prankster.

"All right you guys. But I'm telling you, I'm gonna win the gold this year. There are three rookies waiting in Coolidge, and they're hot for it too. And we're gonna kick your butt at Nationals." He spoke playfully, and smiled with that twinkle in his eye, but he was serious.

Ken laughed out loud at this. "B.C., I don't care who you are, you're not going to win Nationals with three rookies."

Dan, still with a trace of smile, looked him in the eye.

CHAPTER: THE FOURCE

When Dan arrive back in Arizona, two of the three guys were there, eager to do the team. The fourth had dropped out. Dan was dismayed only for a moment. "We'll find a fourth then."

"But who? We've. . ." Dan cut Jim off.

"Leave that to me. You guys just go and take care of things. Be here in 2 weeks, ready to go at it full time."

Dan was on the phone fast. There was no doubt who would round out this team perfectly.

"James."

"Dan!"

"Hey Little Bro! How'd you like to do a 4-way team with me here in Arizona. We're goin' for the Nationals."

James groaned. "Dan, I *can't*. I've got to finish highschool."

School. Dan had completely forgotten. It always got in the way. Dan bristled at the inconvenience, but then let it slide off. He sighed.

“OK, James. But hurry up and graduate so we can do a team!”

Next call was to Mikey Traad.

Mikey’s surprise at hearing from Dan was evident in his voice. “Hey Dan, where are you?”

“I’m in Arizona, and it’s been amazing. Found two guys who want to go to Nationals. We’re all selling everything we’ve got, and we’re gonna go for it.”

Mikey laughed. This was vintage Dan. “Who’s the fourth?”

“What are you doing for the next eight months?”

“Dan, are you kidding?!”

“You told me to call you if I ever needed someone to do a team. This would be that call.”

Mikey had to absorb the news. Dan B.C. was calling *him* to do a team. This was big. But then reality seeped in.

“I want to but I’m in school right now.”

Those damned schools! Dan shook his head. “Mikey, can you put it off for a year? We’re goin’ for the Nationals and we’re going to win.”

Mikey was torn. He had dreamed of this opportunity to be on a team with Dan. Not just because Dan was good, but because of who Dan was. His attitude, his sense of humor, coupled with his drive – he brought a lot more to the table than just being a great jumper. Mikey knew that if anyone could make dreams come true it was Dan.

“When do we start?”

Dan smiled.

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- RESUMING AS OF 4-6-99.

Six am came way too early. Dan rolled over and stretched before a sudden burst of energy overcame him and he leapt from the bed. He threw on his running shoes and sweats and headed out into the dawning desert.

The desert bloomed the most awe-inspiring colors. One would expect the desert to be dry and barren, the but morning spring Arizona desert was anything but. Little flowers bloomed from the giant plants. Creatures crawled within the dirt floor of the desert. Dan ran amidst the giant green cacti. Some of these monoliths were 15-20 feet in height. He’d never seen any that huge before, and marveled at their immense size. In springtime they’d loom into the most gorgeous flowers. But now, even as that was dormant, the giant prickly vegetation carried an austere beauty all their own.

In the video room the team gathered to watch a video of their stiffest competition: Deland Vertical Speed.

“Those guys are fantastic.” Barry was in awe.

“That’s why they always win,” replied Randy, his eyes riveted to the screen.

Dan chimed in. “The Golden Knights are just as good.”

“They’re unbeatable,” Mikey said.

“Wrong.” Dan clicked off the video and turned squarely to face them. “We can beat them.”

“You think we can be better than that by June?” Barry asked doubtfully.

“I wouldn’t be standing here if I didn’t.”

“What’s it gonna take?” Randy asked.

Dan was about to launch into what became known as his standard “pact” speech. “A lot. We’d have to eat, sleep, and breath skydiving. Full-time training, no distractions. No partying, no girlfriends.” He paused here to measure the effect of that last statement. So far, no dissention. He continued. “We live at the drop zone and jump every day. Anything less than that gets you third place at best. And I don’t need another bronze medal.”

The words would have been funny if the truth of them didn’t ring loud and clear. As it was, no one laughed.

“Sign me up.” Randy was the first.

“I’m all over this,” said Mikey.

They all looked towards Barry. He looked from one to the other before splitting into a half-grin. “What the hell. I’m in.”

Dan spoke up. There’s only one detail left. Six months off work and a thousand jumps is an expensive proposition. We’re looking at \$20,000 each. Until everyone’s got the cash up front, it ain’t happenin’.

\$20,000. That didn’t sound so bad. Mikey gulped. Yes, on second thought, it sounded bad, very bad. This would take some quick thinking.

Randy merely set his entire house out for one giant garage sale. Some of the items weren’t so shabby; scuba gear, a television, stereo, skis. Even his furniture brought in some extra bucks.

At the grayhound bus station, Dan bought a one-way ticket to Xenia, Ohio. He had a plan.

Mikey was shocked when his mother announced that Dad would be visiting. His father never visited him. This couldn't be good. As it turned out, it was merely another of his pressure tactics.

"It's what you should do. What you're going to do." Mr. Martin was pretty intimidating when he had a point to make. "If you do what you want, you'll end up playing that guitar on a street corner hoping someone throws you their spare change."

Mikey sighed. "There might be other options."

"Such as?"

"I don't know. I'd like to take a semester off. Have time alone to think things out."

Mr. Martin sneered. "I suppose you need to find yourself. Maybe go to the top of a mountain and meditate on it."

Mikey just stared at his dad. He would never get it. Mr. Martin continued.

"Let me sum up your options. One, finish your degree, go to law school, drive a Corvette, have all your expenses paid plus \$500 a week. Two, take time off, play your guitar, drive an old Volkswagon and fend for yourself because there won't be one dime coming from home."

He paused for effect before continuing gruffly. "I'm sure when you really examine the options, law school will sound pretty damn good."

Mikey looked at his papers sullenly. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Life is short, Mike. You'll be out of school and I'll be paying you big money before you know it. Then you can have, and do, anything you want. But something tells me that by then you'll be thanking me."

In his own smug manner, Mr. Martin turned and walked out of the room, but not before giving a pointed glance towards Mikey. When the door shut, Mikey continued to seethe until he could no longer stand it. With a mighty heave he threw the book he was working on at the opposite wall, just as his roommate came out of the doorway next to it.

Bill looked at the wall, and then down at the book. "Oh, another festive visit with your Dad."

"You know, just because he pays for school, gives me an allowance and buys me a Corvette, he thinks he can run my life."

Bill pondered this a moment before he answered, "Sounds reasonable enough to me."

Mikey scrunched his face. "What gets me more is that he knows I'm so damned dependent on his money that I wouldn't dare risk losing it."

“Well, at least you know where you can get the twenty grand.”

Mikey didn't look so excited. “Wrong. He doesn't even know I jump.”

Now it was Bill's turn to look dumbfounded. “He doesn't know you skydive?”

“Nope.”

Bill whistled. “Okay, looks like you might need to find another plan.”

Mikey looked glum. Restless, his despondent gaze eventually settled on the front window. The red Corvette sat in the driveway. He brightened up as the idea hit him.

OHIO:

They didn't even see Dan steal across the lawn. With shrewd timing this would be clockwork.

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They trained for the next five months. Dan always said that being on a team was like being in a marriage. And then some! Each of their personalities came out with vigor. Mikey was the young, wild “brat” of the bunch. Hotse was on the other end of the spectrum; serious, almost stoic. He had very little patience for Mikey's antics and humor. But those two were alright. Dan managed to work with them. He could keep them from each other's throats long enough to make some real progress.

But Jeff was a different story. His attitude was very non-committal. By the time Dan realized what he had, he would have preferred to switch Jeff out with a skydiver who showed even an inkling of enthusiasm. But at a certain point, it's too late.

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- The day dawned like any other. April 22, 1992. A typical Wednesday. The birds chirped playfully in the slight morning dew.

The team raced around on their creepers, intensely focused on the moves of this next dive. Richard stood next to the video room door shooting the breeze with one of the guys from the Danish team. After a third round on the creepers, Airmoves halted.

“We're gonna change everything today,” Dan announced. “Today we're turning up the speed. Keep it clean and smooth, while we go as fast as we can.”

“Yee-haa!” James couldn't contain his excitement. He'd been waiting impatiently for this. “Let's see if these old boys can keep up, Troy.”

“You're on boy!” Tom retorted.

From across the creeper pad came the loudspeaker announcement. “Poppa Victor Two, you're on a 10-minute call. Ten minutes for Poppa Victor Two. That's Airmoves, The Danes, Tandem Mitchell and student, Tandem Fatino with a student, and an AFF. Please gear up and head out to the loading area in five minutes.”

“Okay, let’s gear up,” Dan said to the others as he hopped off his creeper. The other jumped up after him, laughing and making cracks.

Richard hoisted his rig over one shoulder and bent to pick up his helmet. As he lifted it off the ground, the pin holding the chinstrap snapped. In a deft move, Richard barely managed to catch the helmet before it dropped to the ground. He studied the damage.

“Damn!” It was a matter of simply replacing a rivet, but it definitely was not jumpable as it was. He couldn’t let the team down. He ran over to his teammates.

“Hey, my helmet just broke. I’ll see if I can get someone to fill in on this next jump. That should give me time enough to fix it.”

“No worries, Mate,” Dan assured him.

Richard trotted to the student area where he was relieved to find Dave Clark just finishing up a pack job. Dave loved to film Airmoves. It was an honor, and he had always offered his services to the team if Richard couldn’t.

“Dave! What are you doing right now. Can you jump?”

Dave looked a little confused. “I- - well—yeah I’ve got a little time before my next student jump.”

“Can you film Airmoves right now? My helmet just broke and I’ve gotta go fix it before the next jump.”

Dave was excitement and nerves all at once. “Oh man, yeah! Got you covered Richard!”

“They’re on about a five minute call. Can you make it?”

“On my way,” Dave sprung up, throwing the rig on his back as he stood up and headed to the video trailer for his camera.

“I should be back by the next jump. Shouldn’t take me an hour.”

“Take as much time as you want. I’ll film them all day if you like!” He ran off toward the plane.