

BUBBLES UNBOUND... ... AN EXCERPT

“IT’S FOR YOU, BUBBLES,” Sandy announced, pushing the mute button on the portable phone. “Some nutcase. Sounds frantic.”

A frantic nutcase sounded a lot better right now than finishing the perm on Mrs. Sinkler. Mrs. Sinkler was on a serious fishing expedition to find out who my mother was dating at the senior center. It’s a competitive game, being a widow. Even Mama’s been known to cruise by funerals, looking to pick up fresh meat. If LuLu had someone on the hook, Mrs. Sinkler wanted to know who it was and what bait she used.

“Did I mention that your mother’s bought a bikini?” Mrs. Sinkler called after me as I skipped over to get the phone. “Do you think it might be Carl Johnson? He’s not bad, even if he’s got only one eye.”

I shuddered at the thought of Mama making it with a one-eyed geezer and punched the mute button. “Bubbles Yablonsky.”

“Bubbles! We got an emergency.” It was Mr. Salvo and Sandy was right. He sounded more hyper than an overbred poodle at the vet. “I got a jumper and no staff. Can you cover?”

“Excuse me?”

He took a deep breath. “Got a guy ten blocks from your hair salon on the Fahy Bridge about to jump. Came across the scanner a few minutes ago. Being a Friday evening, I’ve got no reporters to send. They’re either out on assignment, on vacation or taking an early weekend at the shore.”

I couldn’t blame them. It was the first week in August and, although late in the day, still a muggy eighty-nine degrees. I’d be at the shore, too, if I could afford it. The Lehigh Valley is no place to swelter in the dog days of summer.

“What do you want me to do, Mr. Salvo?”

Mrs. Sinkler was beginning to take out the pink-papered rollers herself.

“Just the basics, but be alert. I heard the cops talking. It’s a father of three. Schoolteacher. Lots of human interest. Page one definitely if he jumps.”

Mr. Salvo made it sound like more a hope than a possibility. I scanned the day planner on which Sandy had scrawled down appointments in various colors of ink. After Mrs. Sinkler, Susan Saladunas came in at six-thirty. Late because she runs a fish market with her husband and Friday is their busiest day. Sandy would take her. I was free to knock off after Mrs. Sinkler.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught Sandy waving her hands. “Go!” she mouthed. “This could be the big break.”

Anyway, Mrs. Sinkler was down to the last paper. “I’ll do it,” I said.

“Great. A friend of mine from New York is staying with me for the weekend and happens to be an AP photographer. I managed to talk him

into shooting this as a favor. You can meet him at the opposite side of the bridge by the city center since they got this side—“

“Uh, Mr. Salvo?” I interrupted. “I got a bit of a problem. No car.”

“In the shop?”

I didn’t want to admit that the Camaro was parked in my neighbor’s garage with a glove compartment full of bright yellow parking tickets. I’d forgotten about them until I received a kindly letter in the mail reminding me that if I didn’t pay \$145 to the City of Lehigh I’d be put on the boot list. That sum seemed a little unfair, so I threw away the letter and occasionally hid my car on private property. I’ve racked up so many tickets, the meter maids carry around pictures of my license plate in their wallets.

“It’s just out of commission.”

“Okay, I’ll have Stiletto pick you up.”

“Who?”

“The photographer and, uhm, that’s another thing, Yablonsky. About Stiletto. He’s kind of . . .”

I began rummaging around the desk drawer for a good pen and a decent tablet. “Kind of what? Gruff? Mean? Crude?”

“Wow. I can tell you got a good impression of men. No, it’s more like . . . You ever hear of the story of Ulysses and the sirens on the rocks?”

I rolled my eyes. Nerdy bookworms. Not what I need when I’m trying to take care of a client and get my sorry carcass over to a bridge jumper. “Sounds vaguely familiar.”

“Well, that’s what it’s like for women with Stiletto. At least, from what I’ve observed.”

Mrs. Sinkler had removed all the rollers and was sitting with a bright pink cloud of papers in her lap. Her toe was tapping on the footrest expectantly.

“Can we get to the point, Mr. Salvo? My client . . .”

“Just bind yourself to the mast, Yablonsky, when you’re around Stiletto. Okay? Keep yourself bound no matter what.”

I muttered a quick good-bye and hung up the phone. If anyone needed a trip to the shore, it was Mr. Salvo. Obviously the heat had cooked his brain.

“You going out on a story, Bubbles?” Mrs. Sinkler asked as I combed out her dyed ash-blond curls. What woman is born a natural ash blonde? No woman. Especially not sixty-two-year-old women like Mrs. Sinkler. I filled her in about the jumper, grateful, at least, that we had moved the conversation off Mama’s erratic behavior.

“Maybe you’ll see Mickey. He’s working today from three to midnight.” When Mrs. Sinkler wasn’t analyzing the sexual affairs of her peers, she was boasting about her police officer son, Mickey.

I threw the comb in a drawer and shut it with my hip. “It’s amazing that you’ve memorized his work schedule like that.”

“Oh, I haven’t. He calls me every morning at eight on the spot and lets

me know where he'll be. Calls me before bedtime, too, unless it's late."

Sandy flashed me a knowing look. Mama's boy. "Hey, Bubbles,' Sandy said. "I got a dress hanging in the back if you want to wear it."

Why would I want to do that? I thought. I checked the reflection of myself spraying Mrs. Sinkler's hair with a heavy coat of Final Net. My golden blond hair was piled on my head under a bright pink chiffon kerchief, which coordinated nicely with the magenta halter top and black spandex hot pants. What was the problem?

"You think I oughta change?"

Before Sandy could answer, we heard the crunch of gravel on the street and three long honks. Sandy pried open the Venetian blinds with two fingers and peeked outside.

"Is someone coming to pick you up?"

I removed the plastic cape from around Mrs. Sinkler's neck and brushed her off. "Yeah, the photographer. Is that him?"

"They say anything about him being George Clooney's twin brother?"

I gulped. Mrs. Sinkler hopped out of the chair like a bunny and flew to the window, yanking up the blinds.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God," she whispered, crossing herself. "To be twenty-two again."

Honk. Honk. Honk.

I opened the bottom drawer of my vanity and removed my purse, putting a tablet and pen inside. "He might be good looking, but he sure is rude," I said, yanking open the door. "Whatever happened to the days when men picked girls up at the door?"

Sandy grabbed me by the arm. "Remember, Bubbles. Remember how you are when it comes to sex," she warned. "Keep your knees locked."

I shook her hand off. "Geez, Sandy, I'm not nineteen."

Boy, the respect I get. Sure, I was careless about sex when I was a teenager — letting Dan knock me up at age seventeen being a case in point. How I ever allowed myself to get pinned to a Lehigh University fraternity floor by a dorky freshman with two beer cans strapped to either side of his head is a mystery I'll never solve. At least I got Jane in the deal. Besides, that was a long time ago. I was in high school then. Now I'm thirty-four, more mature. Sophisticated. I know what I want and I'm willing to hold out for it. I am woman, hear me . . .

The door to the House of Beauty slammed behind me and I stopped still. A tanned man who appeared to be in his mid-thirties sat in the driver's side of a black Jeep, top down, with white New York State license plates. His brown hair was longish, but not too long, and his tanned face was creased in all the right places, like he just finished a tough day in the sun rounding up cattle on a ranch. I couldn't tell what color his eyes were because they were masked by a pair of very dark, very expensive Ray Bans.

Sandy's warning to keep my knees locked suddenly seemed inadequate. What I needed was a dead bolt. Preferably one without a key.

Enough about the face. The body, or what I could see of it, was what really caught my attention. Specifically, biceps that strained his gray T-shirt and a broad pair of shoulders that begged for a massage.

Either he had worked very hard on perfecting this image, in which case I would have to slap him around a bit, or he came by it naturally, thereby requiring me to jump him on the spot. Both ways were trouble.

“You Yablanko?” he asked.

“Yablonsky,” I corrected.

“Goddamn! It’s hot,” he said, turning the key and starting up the Jeep. “Let’s get going. I need some breeze.”

I was about to give him a lecture on the importance of etiquette, like ringing a doorbell, opening a car door, et cetera, et cetera, but thought better of it. Why waste my energy on that now? This guy was a project. A long term project, I could tell. Months, if not years.

As soon as I was in the car, Stiletto stepped on the gas and we headed up Fourth Street. A canvas camera bag, frayed at the edges, lay on the floor, crowding my feet. I gently kicked it aside.

“Watch that!” He pointed to the bag. “There’s eleven thousand dollars’ worth of equipment in there. Uh, what’d you say your name is?”

“Bubbles,” I said.

Stiletto held his hand up to his right ear. “What? I’m kinda hard of hearing after the shelling in Bosnia.”

I leaned toward his ear and shouted. “Bubbles. Bubbles Yablonsky.”

“Jesus Christ, woman! I’m not stone-deaf.” He gave his head a violent shake. “My name’s Steve Stiletto. Like the knife.”

“Or like the heel,” I said, adding quickly, “You were in Bosnia?”

“Yeah, three years. For the Associated Press.” He shifted into third and we took the corner on two wheels, headed in the wrong direction.

“Mr. Salvo said they blocked off that end of the bridge, so we should go over the Hill to Hill Bridge and approach from the city center side,” I yelled, out of sensitivity for that auditory problem of his.

Stiletto ignored me and kept on going.

“Didn’t you hear me?” I screamed.

“I heard you. This is a shortcut.”

I thought of those New York license plates. “Listen, I’ve lived in this town my whole life,” I said, “and I know my way around the South Side.”

“Woowee. You steel-town girls think you’re so tough, don’t you? Know it all. Seen it all. Done it all. By the way, you always dress that way on the job?”

I quickly assessed my hot pants. “You got a complaint?”

Stiletto grinned and did one of those furtive, up-and-down glances men pull when they’re trying to evaluate a woman’s breasts. “Not exactly a complaint,” he said. “More like a curiosity.”

Aha! Stiletto was one of those men who thought I dressed this way for men. Well, if that was the case, then he was sadly mistaken. I dressed this way for me. It’s a medical fact that my body won’t accept cotton or

wool, or drab colors for that matter. They make me itchy and depressed. I don't feel comfortable in anything that's not tight or stretchy or short. And if Stiletto — or any other man — doesn't like it, then he can jolly well keep his mind on baseball.

"You better treat me with respect," I warned. "We hairdressers own four-hundred-dollar scissors that can cut off a person's lips."

"Ouch," he said.

We zoomed down Fourth Street past a line of aluminum-sided white houses, the Elks Club Local 549, a pool hall, St. Sylvester's Church and rectory, Our Lady of Redemption, a pizza parlor and two red lights. Stiletto took a sharp right and then a left onto Third Street, which was lined on one side by Lehigh Steel hidden behind mammoth black iron gates. He went one block and turned into a steel employees' parking lot, shifting the Jeep into neutral and pulling up the brake.

"What're you doing?" I asked as he hopped out and talked to a guard in a little booth. The guard nodded and Stiletto shook his hand. Then Stiletto got back in the Jeep and we zipped across a parking lot filled with American-made cars. We headed toward the back of a warehouse.

"Are you crazy? Do you have any idea where you're going? I mean, you're not even from around here."

"I'm from around here, all right," he said as we drove down a narrow road that ran between a line of rust-red warehouses and the railroad track, which paralleled the Lehigh River. "I grew up in this town."

I studied him again. I'd never seen Steve Stiletto in my life, and I knew practically everyone in Lehigh.

"Where'd you go to high school?" I must admit I'm not as familiar with people who went to Freedom High School, being a downtown Liberty High girl myself.

"Moravian Academy, then Andover, Exeter. Got kicked out of there, finally, thank God. Took me long enough."

I'd never heard of Andover and Exeter. "Those in Allentown?"

Stiletto leaned over and patted my knee. "You're cute, Bubbles."

I frowned.

We left the line of warehouses and loading docks and arrived at the point where the railroad tracks disappear under the Philip J. Fahy Bridge. Even from this vantage point, we could see that the bridge above us had been evacuated except for several white police cruisers, ambulances and flashing blue lights.

The wind was picking up and black clouds were gathering in the sky. There'd been a thunderstorm every evening since this heat wave began. You'd expect the rain to cool things off, but it only made the humidity worse and sleeping sticky.

Stiletto pulled the Jeep next to the railroad tracks and killed the engine. He leaned under me and yanked out the camera bag.

"Let's go," he said, getting out. I followed him and brought the strap of my purse over my head so that it crossed my body. I had the feeling that

whatever Stiletto had in mind, it was going to require sneaking, climbing and sweating.

“What I suggest,” he said, zipping open the camera bag, “is that we take the footbridge to Jefferson Park and the stairs up to the bridge. The cops will never let us get close to the jumper otherwise.”

Jefferson Park is a small island in the middle of the Lehigh River. Back in the 1950s when people were clean and wholesome, city officials decided to put a tennis court on the island and steps up to the bridge. It was a nice idea until drug dealers coopted it for their business twenty years later. To cut down on crime, the island’s been closed to the public since the Reagan administration.

“Can you manage in those heels?” Stiletto asked.

I examined my feet, on which were strapped a pair of high-heeled black plastic sandals. “I could cross the Sahara in these heels.”

“Not like you weren’t warned.”

Stiletto led the way, taking long strides over the railroad tracks and down the gravel bank to the Lehigh River. From there we walked across a crumbling cement footbridge to the park, which was inconveniently barricaded by a six-foot-high chain-link fence. The grass was overgrown, and the netless red clay tennis courts were covered with weeds, broken brown glass and faded soda cans. Stiletto strolled along the side of the fence until he came to a hole some juvenile delinquent had cut for no good reason. I tripped after him, my heels sinking into the ground along the way.

We crossed the tennis courts and stood at the foot of metal stairs leading to the Fahy. With the traffic detoured, it was eerily silent. The bridge loomed huge and high, supported by massive steel beams around which fluttered a few gray pigeons.

“My best shot’s probably going to be right there,” he said, pointing to a beam that ran crosswise, from the top of the stairs underneath the bridge. “If I can crawl to the end of that beam, I’ll probably be right below the action. Which is a lot better than shooting a picture of some cops standing around waiting for a guy to jump.”

“Where are all the other reporters?”

Stiletto screwed a lens onto the camera. “Unless they did what we’re going to do, they’re killing time at the police barricades at the end of the bridge. Not my style, honeybunch.”

I glanced at him, at the beam and then at him again. “What do you mean, what *we’re* going to do?” I did not fancy the idea of hanging my derriere one hundred feet over water.

“You should climb the stairs and try your luck on the bridge. The cops won’t let you get within twenty feet of the guy, but if you keep your mouth shut, they might let you stay. Seeing as you’re braless.” Stiletto pushed down his Ray-Bans and winked at me.

I folded my arms across my chest. “Maybe the cops have a point,” I offered. “You know, with it being a prospective suicide and . . .”

But Stiletto was already stealthily climbing to the top. Even in this nerve-racking situation, I couldn't help noticing how nicely his perfectly worn jeans stretched across his trim behind and outlined the muscles of his thighs. Thank you, God, I whispered, for giving me such charming co-workers.

Now, the question was whether I was going to be half as courageous as Stiletto. I needed a big break, and I was never going to get it if I stuck to greyhounds and spelling bees. I slipped off my high-heeled sandals, stuck them in my purse and grabbed the stair railings. Those heels never would have made it over the steel mesh.

In no time, Stiletto was at the beam. He turned, gave me a wave and tucked his head. I saw him put down one hand and then a knee and crawl into the shadows under the bridge. His camera hung from a strap around his neck. I had to turn away. Him dangling like that over the water made my palms sweat.

I got to the top of the stairs and glanced down. Below me the trash-strewn tennis courts were the size of coasters. Above me I could hear a scanner squawking from a police cruiser right near where I was standing.

I took a deep breath. There was no thrill for me in the prospect of arriving, unannounced and unwelcome, at some high-tension suicide scene patrolled by cops and firemen. Stiletto was pushing me too hard. He might be used to Bosnia and creeping behind enemy lines, but I was new to this hard-news reporting shtick. Why couldn't I wait for word at the police barricades like all the other reporters? Why did I have to stick my neck out like this?

It crossed my mind to defy Stiletto, climb down the stairs and do what was right and proper. Then I thought of the thirty-five-thousand-dollar salary and the big break and what Jane would say if I told her that I had enough guts to crash a police scene in order to get a story. She'd be floored.

I closed my eyes and popped my head over the top of the stairs.

"Stop right there!" a voice barked. "Don't take another step."

I opened my eyes and nearly fell backward to my death. Staring me in the face was Mickey Sinkler and the black barrel of a police pistol.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, put that gun away, Mickey!" I scolded. "I just finished a perm on your mother five minutes ago. What would she say if she could see you pointing a gun at me?"

Mickey Sinkler stared at me like I was Godzilla in drag, which was ridiculous since Mickey and I had gone through William Penn Elementary together. Back in first grade he used to entertain the girls by snorting green Jell-O up his nose in the cafeteria. Now he was a police detective with five kids. I'd heard it all from his mother. He hadn't changed much in the interim. Still had the stringbean body and the satellite dishes for ears.

"Bubbles?" Mickey squinted, putting the gun back in his hip holster. "Bubbles Yablonsky? What in Sam Crow are you doing here?"

I squeezed around the bridge railing and stepped behind the cruiser, safely hidden from the other cops. I leaned down and slipped my sandals back on. Mickey's jaw hung open; since he was a congenital mouth breather, that was to be expected.

"I'm doing a story for the *News-Times*," I whispered. Mickey shook his head. "You got to be kidding. Aren't you still a hairdresser down at Sandy's place?"

"We prefer the term stylist. Anyway, I've been freelancing for months. Don't you read the paper?"

"Sure, the sports section. So, where's Lawless? He usually covers these things."

Lawless was the *News-Times* veteran cop reporter. From what I understood, the cops loved him like one of their own, although in the newsroom he had the reputation for being chronically lazy.

I peered around the hood of the cruiser, trying to get a better view of the jumper, who was standing at the edge of the bridge opposite us. "Beats me where Lawless is," I said. "Who's the jumper?"

Mickey, apparently sufficiently recovered from the shock of seeing me, mere hairdresser, at a police-scene, said, "You're not going to believe it. Remember Mr. Dudko from eleventh-grade physics? It's him."

"No way! Mr. D?" I stuck my neck out for a closer look. I couldn't make out much. A squat man with a balding head wearing a short-sleeved baby blue polyester dress shirt. When he turned briefly, I spotted the outline of a pocket protector in his upper left-hand pocket. That was Mr. Dudko, all right.

A woman with gray hair in a bun, thick horn-rim glasses and a long brown skirt was earnestly talking to him over the edge of the bridge railing.

"Who's the frump?" I asked.

"A psychologist," Mickey answered; scratching one of his oversize ears. "Not having much luck, though. I think Dudko is really gonna do it. The school board told him today they were buying out his contract 'cause his students' test scores were the pits. He's been crying about his thirty-year career wasted, or some such crap."

That was hogwash. Sure, I didn't learn anything in Mr. Dudko's class, either. Nobody did. That didn't make him a bad teacher. Physics is just a bad subject. Irrelevant to everyday life.

What Mr. Dudko needed was an Oprah-style pep talk. A shot of good old-fashioned self-esteem. "Hey, Mr. D!" I shouted, waving my hand. "Over here."

"Cripes, Bubbles!" Mickey said under his breath. "You'll get hauled out."

Mr. D turned in my direction. The late afternoon sun glinted off his trademark steel-frame glasses.

"Who's she?" the psychologist demanded loudly.

I cupped my hands to my mouth. "It's me. Bubbles Yablonsky."

Two cops in dark blue uniforms started walking up the bridge to get me, their faces set in deep scowls.

“Don’t you remember? Bubbles the gum chewer.”

Mickey grabbed me by the elbow and led me around the cruiser. I thought for sure Mr. D would remember me. Every day at the door to his physics class he’d hold out his palm and ask me to deposit the Juicy Fruit. We kind of had a bond, albeit a wet, sticky bond.

I must have been mistaken because Mr. Dudko took up a conversation with the psychologist instead.

Now I was being led down the bridge by Mickey and the two cops. Well, I’d taken a chance. At least I’d tried.

“Stop!” It was the psychologist. “He wants to talk to her.”

My heart did a little quickstep. The cops mumbled something and turned me around. I *click, click, clicked* in my high-heeled black sandals back up the bridge.

When I got to where Mr. Dudko was standing I was blown away. The late afternoon sun lit up the Lehigh River below us and turned the steel factories on the left bank a coppery red. To the right, the storm clouds billowed black and threatening. Directly ahead, the old Hill to Hill Bridge with its salt-and-peppershaker towers connected the South Side to the historic section of Lehigh.

I’d never stood at the edge of the Fahy Bridge on a summer evening before a storm. The city should run tour buses.

“Wow,” I exclaimed. “The view up here is terrific.” “Oh, for Pete’s sake,” said the psychologist.

“Come over here, Bubbles,” said Mr. Dudko in a shaky voice.

I tiptoed closer.

He looked like the same old Mr. D. His comb-over was a little grayer and, seeing as he was preparing to off himself, it made sense that the sweat stains in his armpits were a little larger. All in all, the same old Captain Physics from high school. Passed me with a D minus, God bless him.

“I mean closer, come on.” Mr. Dudko waved me nearer. “Stand next to me.”

“Careful,” the psychologist whispered. She brushed a strand of gray hair away from her face. “He’s experiencing an episodic depression compounded by anxiety disorder and sublimated acrophobia.”

“Huh?”

“He wants to kill himself, but he’s also afraid of heights.”

I wasn’t a fan of heights, either. Stepladders give me chills. Yet, I thought of all those reporters back at the barricades wishing they were standing in my place right now. Talk about exclusive, whoo boy. Mr. Salvo was going to freak when he heard about me at the edge of the bridge, one-on-one with the jumper.

The cop in charge said it would be okay for me to join Mr. Dudko as long as I had a harness on. I handed my purse to the psychologist and a

fireman had me step into what I can best describe as a big blue vinyl diaper. He threaded a nylon rope around my waist and over my shoulders. It was incredibly itchy and confining.

"Gotcha nice and secure," the fireman said.

The psychologist gave me one last piece of advice: "Whatever you do, try not to erode his deteriorating male-centered ego process."

"Don't worry," I said, lifting my leg over the railing. "I've had lots of experience with deteriorating male-centered egos."

I stood side to side with Mr. D on about three feet of a cement ledge. I hoped I wouldn't wee in my shorts. My palms began to tingle and, suddenly, I wished I was back at the barricades with all the other reporters, big break or no big break.

"Look down, Bubbles," Mr. Dudko ordered, pointing a quivering hand toward the river.

"No thanks." I kept my eyes straight ahead, like a good little acrophobic soldier. There was quite a wind, and I put a hand on the railing behind me to keep steady. "Come on. I'll jump if you don't."

Not fair, I thought. I took a deep breath and looked down. Below us the water rippled in tiny waves, and I could hear it lashing against the banks. I tried not to think about what might happen if I sneezed or if Mr. D accidentally tripped me.

"Let me guess, Bubbles, you're what, maybe one hundred fifteen pounds?"

"Not bad, Mr. D, one twenty-two to be exact. Remember, I'm pretty tall."

Mr. Dudko nodded. "Okay. One hundred twenty-two. And I'm, regretfully, one hundred seventy. Remember, I'm short."

He smiled weakly at me.

"So," he continued, "let's say we were to fall at the same time . . ."

I put my hand to my chest. "Oh, please, Mr. D, I got a teenage daughter at home and—"

He put his hand on my shoulder. "Calm down, Yablonsky. This isn't an experiment, this is theory. Anyway, let's say we were to fall at the exact same time. Bubbles, who would hit the water first?"

I pondered this. Was it a trick question? "Why, you would, Mr. D. You're fatter."

"That's it!" he yelled, pinching his nose and bending his knees.

"No wait!" I begged. "Give me another one."

He lifted his fingers from his nose. "Okay. This is a tougher, question. But if a former student like you can answer it, I'll know I wasn't a total failure as a teacher, right?"

"Right, Mr. D."

"Now, we just learned that heavy or light things fall at the same speed, correct, Bubbles?"

Is that what we learned? I shrugged. "I guess so."

"So, at what rate do they fall?"

“You want numbers?” I hate numbers.

“There’s only one number,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “And it’s a constant.”

The psychologist whispered something behind me. “I heard that,” Mr. Dudko accused. “No cheating or the test is over.”

Let me tell you, I’ve never thought so hard. I ran over all the numbers I knew. Bake a cake at 350 degrees. Normal temperature is 98.6. My Lotto numbers: 12-11-5-25-3-16. The last is my daughter Jane’s age. Double that and . . .”

It came like a flash. “Is it thirty-two feet per second?” Mr. Dudko’s jaw dropped open. “Almost right, per . . .”

“Second!” I screamed. “It’s thirty-two feet per second per second. I can’t believe I knew that.”

The psychologist let out a “Whew!” behind me.

Mr. Dudko did a kind of two-step and grabbed me by the shoulders. His upper lip was lined with beads of sweat.

“Yablonsky,” he said gruffly, staring into my eyes so intently I saw my face in the reflection of his glasses, “I remember the year you were in my class. You’d file your nails or gaze out the window while I tried in vain to teach you morons Newton’s theory of gravity or the curve of a trajectory. And when you and the rest of your classmates consistently flunked those tests, I thought, Give it up, Dudko, you’ve got no talent. You’re just a dud of an educator.”

Tears were beginning to well under his glasses and roll down his face. “Well, today, I almost did give it up. For good. But today, I was shown that even you, Bubbles Yablonsky, airhead of the first order, managed to learn something in my class. Today you saved my life.”

I decided now was not the time to tell Mr. D that, actually, I learned this coefficient at the Two Guys community college. Semester number sixteen: Physics for Physician’s Assistants.

He took a hand off my shoulder and wiped away the tears. The breeze from the approaching storm was picking up, blowing his comb-over to the wrong side of his head. It hung down in one greasy strip. When was he going to agree to get back on the bridge and go home?

“I’m so grateful, I could kiss you.” Mr. D pursed his lips and aimed for my face.

For a moment I forgot where I was — on a three-foot ledge one hundred feet over the Lehigh River. So when Mr. Dudko said that, the thought of being kissed by my *physics teacher* so grossed me out that . . . I kind of gave him a teeny, tiny push.

“Aaagh!” he yelled, eyes wide open, mouth like an *O*, face a mask of panic. He teetered back a little, then forward.

I put my arms out and grabbed him. “Don’t . . . I screamed as he fell backward. For a minute there I had him. He held on to me so tightly that I worried he would rip my arms out of their sockets. Then, out of nowhere, came a tremendous gust of wind, and before we knew what

happened, Mr. D was over the edge.
Taking me with him.

SAMPLE

SAMPLE