

Dead Air  
&  
Double Dares

An Elmwood Confidential Cozy Mystery

**Janis Thornton**

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# 1

“Hold on, Miss Cropper! We’re gonna crash!”

*I knew it!* Ever since my friends dared me to add “fly in a powered parachute” to my bucket list, I had known “Hold on, Miss Cropper! We’re gonna crash!” would be the last words I’d ever hear.

My young friend, Clip Parker, was piloting the floating two-seater cart—which looked more like a dune buggy dangling from an inflatable pool raft than a federally approved aircraft—hundreds of feet above the Elm County countryside with me seated behind him. We’d been enjoying the view for a half-hour without incident until some bird-brained, directionally impaired waterfowl snuck up behind us, flapped loosey-goosey into the aircraft’s propeller, and burst into a kaleidoscope of shredded feathers and shards of red. Bye-bye birdie. A second later, the cart’s engine choked on a glob of the organic fallout, coughed once, and died.

I lurched forward, wrapped my arms around Clip, and dug my knuckles into his burly chest for dear life. The kid was good, but he was no Sully Sullenberger. Not every pilot whose jet plane tangles with a flock of geese has the wherewithal to crash land on the Hudson River and watch his passengers walk away unscathed.

Cruising at thirty miles an hour generated a noisy wind that would have made conversation impossible if not for the two-way radio wired into our helmets. I had forgotten about the sensitive, audio connection, and possibly could have busted Clip's eardrums when I screamed, "We're gonna *what?*"

"Hold on," he shouted back. "I'm bringing her down."

Without a motor to keep the propeller spinning, our lives literally depended on the rainbow-colored parachute to keep us airborne. I'm sure it was the altitude causing my split-second lapse into hysterical clarity, when I started to think that gliding through the crisp, spring air was not a totally unpleasant sensation. For a moment, I flashed back to a childhood dream I once had where I was soaring with the eagles. I felt like shouting, "*Whee!*"—and would have if I hadn't been about to die.

As we approached Elmwood from our lofty vantage, the city looked like a crocheted doily. Unfortunately, it lacked a single landing spot as smooth and soft as the meadow we had taken off from in the northern part of the county.

"Where are we going to set it down?" I yelled.

Clip pointed toward the southeast. "Over there," he said, steering the cart's nose in that direction.

I was confused. "Over there" was the courthouse steeple. Surely, we weren't going to land anywhere near there. Several blocks beyond the courthouse was the local radio station's five hundred-foot-tall transmission tower, and past it was the cemetery. I had no idea what Clip was referring to.

I have always taken pride in my ability to keep myself grounded—both feet firmly planted with my head bobbing some six feet above them. But I'll admit I was

intrigued when Clip, my mechanic, who was a genius at tinkering with combustion engines, invited me for a ride on his new toy.

I mentioned it to the girls when we all met for a Tuesday night burger. They thought a ride in a powered parachute would make a great feature story for the *Elmwood Gazette*, my hometown newspaper. I've been the *Gazette's* editor for just under a decade. But still, I hesitated. They assured me I would be fine, that Clip is a sensible young man, and he wouldn't invite me to do something dangerous.

I sat for a moment while my common sense battled with my adventurous nature. Then my pals brought out the big guns ... they double dared me.

Which is why I called Clip and left the message, "Sure, I'd love to go up in your powered parachute." From then on, every time the phone rang, I feared it would be Clip calling to tell me weather conditions were perfect for our flight. The ideal conditions finally arrived early that morning. Memorial Day. How appropriate.

"Wait! Where are we landing?" I asked Clip again.

Below us, the neighborhoods, streets, treetops, automobile traffic, people—and even cats and dogs—were growing increasingly larger. I was beginning to think we had shifted into free-fall.

As if that weren't alarming enough, we were on a collision course for the courthouse lawn, where approximately five hundred men, women, and children had congregated for the Memorial Day ceremony, complete with the community band and the American Legion firing squad.

"We're going to die, aren't we?" I gasped.

In the crowd below, people had begun to notice us and our flimsy craft. They

grinned and waved. They yelled “Helloooo,” which attracted the attention of others around them, who also joined in.

I stared at the innocent bystanders. “How many will we take with us?”

“Crystal,” he said, addressing me by my first name, which meant I must have really ticked him off, “you’re going to have to trust me.”

That was the last thing he said before the stampede. By this point, nearly everyone was waving and cheering at us. Then they realized that if they didn’t get out of our way, the funny-looking flying machine was going to mow them down like spring grass.

Panic took hold all at once, and the screaming crowd parted like the Red Sea, unwittingly clearing a perfect landing strip on the courthouse lawn. Clip gently touched down on the grass, and the cart taxied to a graceful stop with both of us in one piece. We were alive and unscathed.

I threw my arms around Clip and shouted, “*Whee!*”

Sully Sullenberger, eat your heart out!

# # #

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