

# No Man's Land

By Cody Goodfellow

Sure, I probably should have noticed something was off about her before I let her onto my plane, but I'm not going to lie to you about what you know to be true. How the hell is a guy supposed to tell if a dyke is *really* dangerous?

She was built tight and wound up tighter. With her butch bleached crewcut and black cat tattoos, we could tell right away what she was, but we didn't miss anything we might've caught if she was a man. And we didn't pick on her either, but I remember thinking first time I saw her; *damn, what a waste...*

She was on edge, but who isn't just before jumping out of an airplane for the first time? Maybe she seemed a little more angry than nervous, and maybe she did crack a couple ugly jokes about her ex-wife, but any guy who'd been married would just nod and chuckle. At least she was one of those dykes who try to be one of the guys, instead of just hating them. My own ex had vanished off the face of the earth with all my shit while I was away overseas, so I could certainly relate. But I've always believed you have to let shit like that go or it'll eat you alive.

On the ground, she showed off some strap-on brass balls, bitching about going tandem with an instructor. A lot of guys have a problem with skydiving with another dude strapped to their back. Looks a bit fruity in the videos: your big king-of-the-world moment, and there's a human pair of training wheels on your back, looking for all the world like he's plowing your fudge while you conquer the wild blue yonder.

I guess a dyke would only have extra problems with the dude strapped to her junk, but Debbie was our only female instructor, and she was out with a broken ankle from rock climbing. It might've helped if she knew that her instructor, Chad, actually was gay. But our insurance wouldn't let us throw novices out alone, and we couldn't afford those fancy altimeter-activated backup chutes.

All the three-hour training the customers sat through was just ready to get them to step out the door of the plane. Once they did that, they were just baggage. They'd have to try pretty hard to fuck it up.

As the jumpmaster on the flight, maybe I should have noticed something, but I had my own baggage to deal with—eight novice jumpers and their instructors, six photographers and Big Sweaty Ed, a former Navy cook who lost a hundred pounds so he could do this crazy stunt for his fortieth. Chad definitely should have picked up on the little hints, like the vest stuffed with explosives under her baggy nylon suit, or the other surprises stashed on her hot little person, before we took off.

Her name was Charlie. Charlene on her driver's license.

All this was going through my mind instead of what to do next when this dyke put a knife to Chad's throat. She'd just refused to jump, and I sent the rest of the group out quick before her cold feet could spook the whole flight. I wasn't much help, but at least I stayed out of the way.

Chad tried to wrestle her out the door. He got slammed into the bulkhead and stabbed in the groin for his trouble.

Charlie took out a Walther 9mm and a GPS unit and snapped off some coordinates, said we'd fucking well better be over the target in two minutes or she'd

shoot Barry, the pilot. Then she screamed something about going to “plant a flag in no-man’s land.”

Our landing pad is a postage stamp of grass in sunny Otay Mesa, just a belch and an *adios* from the Mexican border. Right then, I figured Charlie was a fugitive trying to flee the country. I didn’t recognize her, but I lost the TV in the divorce.

Ed had either sweated through both our suits, or pissed himself. I got unbuckled from him and tried to stop the bleeding in Chad’s thigh, but it was as pointless as it was humiliating. The wound was too high to tie off, the femoral artery spiked practically under his junk. As soon as he passed out, I got Ed to compress the wound.

“Why?” I screamed at the hijacker.

“She has this needling voice that makes you hate the sound of your own name, you know?” Unzipping the jumpsuit to her navel, she scratched under a tactical vest with enough dynamite packed into it to put the plane in orbit, and a web of little wires plugged into sensors taped to her tits. “Bitch made me feel like it was my fault she was fucking my brother. And y’know what else? She’s suing me for alimony.”

She slipped back to the open door and stuck her head into the slipstream. Chad hung off her like a leaky scarecrow.

We’d gone about six miles dead east along the border, where auto wrecking yards and cactus patches were the softest things to land on. Our big prop plane was pushing two hundred knots at five thousand feet when we reached our destination.

Charlie shot the pilot. Barry’s brains obscured the windshield like a spray-on sunset. The plane tilted drunkenly downward. Then she put two more through the instrument panel. And one in my head.

I didn’t take this job to become a hero. I *hate* responsibility. Hate people even more. I took the job because I love skydiving, and this was the only sensible way to feed my addiction.

I flopped on the deck and played dead for a while after I knew the bullet had glanced off my helmet. I still hate wearing the fucking things.

Charlie kicked Ed out of the way and jumped out with a dying man strapped to her back.

Ed climbed me like a ladder, blubbering, “Jumpmaster Jim, can you fly? You gotta fly the plane, we gotta—“

“We gotta jump,” I told him.

I flipped him around and buckled him into our harness. It was easier than digging out one of the emergency chutes, which we may or may not have packed that morning (and which was totally Chad’s job. Just saying.)

The second we jumped out of the plane, I put it all together.

We were less than a mile from the border, but escape was never part of the evil bitch’s plan. A mile directly below us lay the exercise yard of Las Perdidas Women’s Correctional Facility. Us locals called it the Skank Tank.

The tan bungalows and the prefab fortress cellblocks looked like shoeboxes and the little ants in blue denim and hazard orange smocks milling around the yard numbered in the hundreds. I remember thinking right then, that her ex-wife must’ve been a real cunt.

If I was naturally a bitter person, I could understand it. My ex had divided our property and left my share in my truck, out in front of my mother’s place. My clothes,

my CD's and my dog were all sitting on the seat in hundred and five-degree heat. Even the CD's still smelled like dead dog.

Charlie was only a few hundred feet below us. Chad's flailing body pancaked them, dragging them sideways on the updrafts. I tried to steer Ed nose-down into the wind to angle away from them, but Charlie must've really been playing dumb in the training. She barrel-rolled so she was looking up at us. Blood ripped off Chad's body, flew up at us in a fine mist.

She cracked off three shots at us. Ed stopped two of them. He screamed something about his kids, but damned if I could hear it. (If you're up there, Ed, thanks, buddy!)

She turned over and tried to reload. I figured it was her or me. Ed was a dead sled, and I rode him down the ripping wind right into the she-devil's gut.

Charlie lost her gun. I slammed Ed's helmet into the bridge of her nose, kicked her in the junk and broke my big toe. Chad came to and got an arm around her throat. Suddenly finding herself the meat in an ass-whipping sandwich, Charlie got her knife out and stabbed Ed, trying to get at me. (Thanks again, buddy.)

Two thousand feet had come and gone, and my altimeter was burning a hole in my head. Chad grappled with Charlie like a de-clawed kitten. She stabbed his hands. I let the wind sweep my legs up under her chin and clocked her hard enough to break three more toes, but she let go of the knife. It stayed where she left it in Chad's face. Clinging to Charlie's flapping jumpsuit, I ripped her cord.

Charlie and her baggage immediately shot upwards as their chute blew, clipping me and sending me spinning.

Chad's corpse shot up like a bottle rocket under his red and orange parachute, but Charlie came tumbling out of her unbuckled harness and screamed past me, howling "*Nova!*" and slashing with her knife.

I pulled my own chute, and Ed and I proceeded down to the earth in a lazy, graceful spiral that I wanted never to end, especially when I saw Charlie's touchdown.

She hit the unpaved gravel yard just like Wile E. Coyote, making a perfect doughnut of dust with her impact. The orange-clad inmates, now the size of Barbie dolls with ugly tattoos, flocked across the yard to surround the body. Husky bull-dyke matrons ran after them, clipping them with clubs and riot guns.

I shouted at them to get back, but I was still four hundred feet up, and I realized right about then, that Ed had finally let me down. My wind was wheezing out a hole in my ribs.

The bomb didn't go off. Big Sweaty Ed and I were not showered with chunks of nominally female body parts and Hiv-positive blood. At the time, I thought this was good news.

There was a big crowd waiting for us when we touched the ground. And not a looker in the bunch. Loco chicas with black tattoo tears, toothless tweaker hillbilly whores and sister soldiers with their teeth filed to cannibal points crowded us towards the puddle where Charlie had landed.

"Hello, ladies!" I wheezed, looking for the nearest matron. I couldn't find one. I tried to tell them how we'd just save their lives, but no luck there, either. Rocks and curses came flying so fast and furious, I couldn't stop half of them with Ed's body.

A butch but fit lady con with cropped hair dyed fire engine red knelt beside the crater and picked up a big piece of Charlie's skull. A ghastly tattoo around her neck in spidery Gothic script said NO MAN'S LAND. "Wow, Charlene," she said, and tossed the fragment into the crater. "Nice try."

Nova turned to leave when the shorter, chubbier girl on her arm looked right at me. "Jimmy?"

With the bleach-blond crewcut, the piercings and the cobweb tattoo on her neck, I almost didn't recognize her. But the moment I heard her voice caterwauling my name, I knew what to do.

They came down on me like a wave of boiling period blood, but they couldn't stop me. I jumped into the crater and tore open Charlie's vest.

In the movies, the hero just has to rip the wires out of the big bomb at two seconds to zero to defuse it. In the movies, the hero never has to start the bomb ticking again. I was never going to be the hero of this story.

But I'm not the guy who ended up paying alimony for the rest of his life, either.

*Career welfare cheat Cody Goodfellow has written three novels with splatterpunk godfather John Skipp, and three by himself. His short fiction has appeared in Black Static, Cemetery Dance, Crimewave and Creepy. As far as his ex-wife and his surgically implanted tracking device know, he lives in Los Angeles.*