

UP AND AWAY

by

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Ooh this is fantastic. Charlotte wriggled her toes in front of the jets of the spa bath, then sank down, submerging her body in the soothing warmth for one final luxurious time.

They had arrived at the resort just in time for lunch. The smorgasbord looked delicious but Simon had recently remarked that she was 'porking up a bit' so she hadn't eaten much. Just as well, for as soon as they returned to their luxurious cabin, to unpack as she thought, he had picked her up and carried her to the king size bed, where they had spent the rest of the afternoon. It had been so romantic and just perfect as it always was with him. Well, except for a couple of things he wanted that she hadn't enjoyed quite so much. But yes, basically wonderful. Now here she was, reclining in this enormous tub perched, al fresco, on the balcony. To her right the endless tree clad hills undulated to the horizon. Ahead, setting sunlight glinted on ocean. The well know saying about the world being her oyster sprang to mind.

She could see Simon now, behind the glass doors, staring at his phone. He had declined the offer to join her. 'A quick shower for me, and then give me just an hour to work my love.'

He was smiling. Maybe it was the memories or their afternoon activities, but she knew him well enough now to realise it was more likely his shares had risen in value, or his

cryptocurrency or whatever it was he traded in. She felt relieved and happy, it should keep him in a good mood for the whole evening. This special evening.

One hour was too long to be apart. Leaping from the bath, she grabbed the enormous soft towel and rubbed herself down quickly. Then donning the luxurious robe provided, sauntered towards him, teasingly opening the robe just a little. He pressed the screen and snapped his phone shut, still smiling, but now just for her. She sank down on his lap, put her arm around his neck and pressed her face against his.

She nearly ended up on the ground as he jumped up hurriedly. Oh no! She'd done the wrong thing again. Of course, she was too damp, how stupid. But he was still smiling, nothing to worry about. He kissed her quickly.

'Off to the bedroom for you, my darling, perhaps dry off just a little more, then put on your slinkiest dress your sexiest perfume. Make yourself even more beautiful. It's nearly time for our special dinner.'

They sat opposite each other at the candle-lit table, holding hands and sipping the, 'genuine top of the range' French champagne, that Simon had ordered. The waiter brought the menu and whipped their napkins onto their laps with an extravagant gesture. She could hardly endure these preliminaries, such was her excitement. This was the anniversary of their first date. They had been together for one whole year, blissfully in love. He could only have brought her here, to this very expensive resort, for one reason.

The waiter departed and the moment she had been waiting for arrived.

'I've something to show you darling. Close your eyes.'

He reached into the brown satchel that he always carried. She squeezed her eyes shut, she could hardly breathe. Many perfect diamonds? Or just one enormous stone?

‘Ok, open now.’

She looked down. Momentarily nonplussed, her eyes flickering over the immaculate white table cloth. *Where was the tastefully wrapped little box from the expensive jeweller?* All that lay in front of her was a small pile of papers.

‘I wanted to make this weekend very special darling,’ he lifted her chin and stared into her eyes, ‘it’s our first anniversary after all. What do you think of this?’

‘What a tease you are,’ she smiled up at him. *So like him to think of ways to prolong this memorable moment. He had brought her here because this was where he wanted to have their wedding reception. These must be the glossy brochures advertising all the prices and options. The ring would be next. Would he drop to his knees before the whole room, while everyone around them smiled, clapped, and took photos to post on social media?*

She was still smiling as she looked down at the first page. It revealed images of people. Not gathered in a marquee surrounded by large floral arrangements, but suspended from unnecessarily flimsy parachutes, surrounded by sky. Gradually her smile morphed into a frown. *How could this relate in any possible way to their wedding?*

‘Well they’re nice pictures, good photography, but...’ she finally muttered lamely.

‘That’s going to be us tomorrow darling. First we have a safety talk, then we sign a waiver and up we go. We have to fly tandem with an instructor I’m afraid, so it won’t be quite just us two alone in the void, but we can launch and stay together. Imagine staring into each other’s eyes as we float effortlessly above the wide world. So romantic.’

Charlotte wiped her clammy hands on her napkin as her face contorted. She opened and closed her mouth a few times while thoughts ricocheted around her brain. She knew what she had to say but she very much didn't want to say it. Finally, in a small voice, 'It won't be as romantic as you think because I will certainly wet myself, if not worse. Plus ending up as a pulpy mess on the ground when we crash because the instructor won't be able to control my hysteria. Don't you remember when I've woken up shaking, because of the nightmare about that time my friends tried to make me climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge? I'm absolutely terrified of heights.'

'Well yes, I suppose, but that was them, this is me. It was just a dream. This is quite safe, they assured me. It will cure you of one of your silly foibles. Do it for me.'

'I can't, I want to do it for you but I simply can't.'

'But it cost a fortune. This whole weekend cost a fortune.'

'Look, I'll pay you back, I'll do anything else, just not this. I'll come to watch as you soar in the blue above me, of course. Our eyes can meet then.'

Simon's pursed his lips together and frowned. She had seen that look before, a little hard knot suddenly developed in her stomach. For the longest time he said nothing as he stared at her, the muscles in his face working. Then he sighed and looked down at his phone. 'Is that the time? You stay and eat, I'm not hungry now and it's later than I thought, I need to get up very early.'

He picked up the brochures. Thank goodness, she had escaped punishment. Then he squared them together neatly, hesitated a moment and slapped them back down on the

table in front of her. 'I'll be too far above you for our eyes to meet, you silly cow,' he hissed. Then he pushed back his chair, threw his napkin on the floor, and left.

She looked around her. Still the quiet hum of conversation. People bent over their food, lovers leaning to each other, their glasses raised, fingers intertwined. It was alright. Nobody had noticed anything.

Darkness, what going on? The smell of instant coffee - sounds of Simon bashing about ineffectually in the little kitchenette. She felt groggy and tired and, although she tried to repress it, there was no doubt about a slight feeling of nausea. Thoughts of the previous evening slowly began to trickle back into her brain. Her solitary drinking session in the restaurant bar. Fumbling about in the darkness, swearing, trying to fit the plastic door opening card into the ridiculously small slot provided.

That's right. That nice man who had been sitting alone at the table next to them had come passed on the way to his cabin and offered to help. The card had slid in straight away when he tried. How embarrassing. He did have a small torch. Maybe she should have taken a torch, but she was almost certain that they had left the outside light on.

Simon was going sky-diving, she remembered that. No paragliding, that's right. She'd better try and get up, he was her fiancé after all. Or perhaps not? Not yet anyway. He hadn't proposed. Why had she been so certain that he would? Still this obviously meant a lot to him, he usually didn't get out of bed until about eight. Certainly never in the dark. She would have to try and drag herself up and support him. It was the least she could do. She'd let him down. No wonder he'd been cross.

She couldn't face coffee but two cups of weak tea and a shower and she found the strength to get into the car beside him. The heroic effort seemed to have been in vain, the atmosphere noticeably frosty, as they drove in silence to the paragliding launch site. On arrival he pushed open the door without a word and marched over to where the instructor was waiting. He had left the keys with her. Maybe that was a good sign?

The air on the cliff top was deliciously fresh. Almost as if it had been specially created to heal the hung over spirit. It was an exquisite still, blue morning. The sun rising, glorious over the ocean. As the minutes passed time and beauty, not to mention possible rehydration, started to combine to make her feel more herself, the faint remaining nausea beginning to dissipate.

She half made a resolution. They wouldn't both be going back to Simon's place. He was certain to dump her back at her house. He had done it before when she displeased him, and she had cried and moped around. This time would be different. She had lots of novels that she had bought and not touched since she had met him. This time she would put on her most comfortable sloppy clothes, open a bottle of wine. No, perhaps not wine - a nice cup of Earl Grey - sit in her favourite chair, and read. There, she felt better already.

'Are you here as a supporter too? There's no way that I could do it I'm afraid.' A voice, interrupting her idyllic reverie.

She turned her head, almost annoyed, and noticed a man standing next to her. It was him, the man from the night before who had helped her.

'I'm absolutely terrified of heights', he went on, 'My partner said some rather harsh things to me yesterday evening. "Gutless sook" was the best of them.' He chuckled. 'Well,

she has a point, I'm not the bravest person in the world. But we've been together three years and she's always wanted to go paragliding, so I agreed to try to do it. But in the end I had to admit that I really just couldn't.

I didn't realise that it would upset her so much, but she said that she didn't want to speak to me ever again, then she got on the phone and ordered room service for one. We'd paid a deposit for the restaurant table as you know, so I thought I'd better go there and eat. I saw your husband leave suddenly and you in the bar later. None of my business, of course, although I couldn't help worrying about you a just a little.

Anyway, here we are. All's well. Of course I still came out to watch Susan fly, it meant so much to her. She still hasn't spoken to me today, but there's hope as we are driving back home together, of course. See there she is, and your husband too. They seem to be airborne already.'

'He's not my husband.'

'Well partner then. I'm a bit old fashioned. I always say 'husband' just in case people get offended.'

'I'd never thought of myself as a coward before, but maybe I am. I just can't handle heights. I'm a self sufficient woman in most ways but I pay someone to come in and change the light bulbs.'

'I sympathise completely. People just don't understand do they? I'm David by the way.'

'Charlotte.'

She looked down and dug the toe of her boot into the soil. 'It's not that I don't like the outdoors, bushwalking, swimming, stuff like that. I'd love to go paragliding if I could.'

There was no reply, and, after a few seconds she glanced up. She felt embarrassed at her confession and probably he did too. She had said too much. Simon had told her off many times for 'raving on' as it put it, when they were out at parties. But he wasn't here, he would never know. She felt strangely drawn to this man, he had a pleasant face. Not handsome like Simon, but kind. Yes, a kind face. Brown eyes which crinkled up when he smiled. He was smiling now.

'I suppose it's a bit presumptuous of me,' he said, 'but, if you like bush walking I'm in a group north of Sydney. "The Kur-in-gai chasers" we call ourselves. That's where we walk, Kur-in-gai Chase. They're a nice crowd. We go every second weekend unless the weather is really terrible. Susan doesn't come, she thinks they are boring. It's just social, we never tackle really hard stuff. If you live in Sydney perhaps you'd like to come along sometime?'

'That is very kind of you,' said Charlotte, looking up once more into those brown eyes. How sweet he was to use a word like "presumptuous." She used to use words like that once, but Simon and his friends made fun of her, so she had stopped. She tended to be wary of making arrangements with strangers, Simon wouldn't be happy. But what harm could there be in a communal bush walk. Maybe this man really was boring and cowardly, but in his presence she suddenly felt something seep into her being that she really hadn't felt for a whole year and didn't realise that she had missed. She could hardly describe it, but it felt wonderful. Relaxation maybe, an atmosphere of tolerance, perhaps? Just the beginnings of tranquillity?

She was smiling now as she ferreted down in her pack. No phone. Oh well. She pulled out a pen and one of the brochures from the night before. She hadn't liked to leave them on the table. Crumpled and defaced with blotches from the champagne, spilt from trembling hands as she had finished off the bottle.

'I think that I might enjoy your bush walking group very much. I must have left my phone in the cabin, but I'll write my number down for you on the back of this.'