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Written by

M G Harris

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SKY-HIGH

The air was very clear that day, unusually free of the dry sand that often swept up from the surrounding desert.

Ben Carrington turned to catch a covert glimpse of the press photographers. They were packed in tight behind the velvet rope, straining for a good shot of his mother. In the blinding sunlight you couldn't tell, but behind her owl-like black sunglasses, Countess Caroline Brandis-Carrington was pale with anxiety.

Tragic widow gazes at her dead husband's final work.

That's the story the press would be looking for.

Ben lowered his camcorder. He placed a protective hand on his mother's shoulder. It was what his father would have done. Now it was Ben's turn. After all, he was sixteen years old; old enough to join the army and marry. Certainly old enough to be the one to comfort Caroline.

Every few seconds his mother's stare moved nervously along the sleek, vertiginous contours of the Carrington Sky-High Hotel. Ben was reluctant to follow her gaze. Maybe it was the blinding light of the sun. Or maybe it was the memory of watching someone fall.

It shouldn't be like this. Dad should be here, Ben thought.

The Sky-High had been Casper Carrington's grandest

project. It measured three hundred and two metres in height. It towered almost one hundred metres above the next highest building in Abu Dhabi. Globally, it was in the top ten.

Last week in the Himalayas, Ben's father had fallen a mere third of the hotel's height, but it had been enough to compress his torso and legs into the same space.

Instant death.

Caroline hadn't wanted Ben to see his father's body, but Ben had insisted. 'I'm not letting you do this alone.'

Now, under the Sky-High, Ben watched a sad smile touch his mother's lips. 'It had to be this one,' she murmured. 'As if we haven't all had enough of heights.'

Ben knew exactly what she meant and, after what had happened to his father, he'd understand if she didn't want him to climb, ever again. But every true climber knew at least one person who'd fallen to their death. No exceptions.

'The air display should be starting any minute,' was all he said. 'Try to look suitably awed. It was Dad's idea, after all.'

He had to shout the last few words. Three Aermacchi MB-339As roared across the sky. They trailed smoke in blue, yellow and black: the corporate colours of Carrington International. The colours foamed, lurid against the pale, clear sky of the desert.

A bemused voice behind them cut in. 'The air display was Carrington's idea? How very flamboyant of him!'

Ben tore his attention away from the sky for a

moment. He glanced at the man who'd addressed them: tall, slim but not slight, with a thick head of silver-grey hair and a rugged face that Ben supposed was pretty handsome for an older guy. There was something terribly familiar about him.

He stuck out a hand. 'Hi. I'm Benedict Carrington.'

The silver-haired man returned his handshake. 'Good to know you, Benedict. I knew your father, slightly. This air display …' he glanced up, '… inspiring stuff. And brave of you to continue, in the circumstances.'

Caroline turned to the man. 'And you are?' she said, rather abruptly.

'Sorry, ma'am.' He gave a charming smile and offered his hand. 'My name's Jason Truby. And I didn't mean to suggest anything untoward. Truth is, I'm filled with admiration. It must have taken a lot of guts to show up today.'

Caroline seemed a little flustered. To Ben's surprise, instead of refuting his suggestion she said, 'Yes. Yes, I'm afraid it did.'

Ben continued to stare at the newcomer. That face. He knew it. Where from? Then it hit him. 'You're Jason Truby! From Trubycom! He went to *space*, Mum. Actual space!'

The display team made another pass, louder this time. They drew three intersecting lines with their smoke as they narrowly missed each other, a hundred metres above the pinnacle of the Sky-High.

Caroline inclined her head, briefly. 'You're an astronaut?'

'Yeah – the Gemini Mission!' Ben was awed. 'Trubycom funded it, didn't they? You landed on that asteroid, *1036 Ganymed*.'

'It was a while ago,' Truby said, modestly. 'And I'm no astronaut, that's for sure. Just between us, I was kind of feeble up there. Those guys from NASA took good care of me, but thanks for remembering, son.'

'I read loads of interviews with you,' Ben continued, 'when I was a kid.'

'How did you know my husband?' Caroline asked. She lifted her gaze once again towards the contrails in the sky.

'I tripped the right level on the rewards system. At Black Diamond, you get to meet the boss himself.'

'You're Black Diamond?' Ben said. 'Wow! There's only, like, a dozen of those.'

'All I can tell you is that your old man knew how to fix one heck of a good Manhattan.'

'That's right.' Caroline's attention swung back to Truby. 'He did. I taught him.'

Truby murmured, 'Lucky ol' Carrington.'

'It was a fair trade. He taught me a lot, too.'

But there was nothing he could teach you about climbing, Ben reflected. If only his father could have acknowledged that Caroline, with her Alpine childhood and brief mountain-rescue career, was, by a considerable distance, his superior when it came to mountaineering,

he might have listened to her last week in the Himalayas and he'd almost certainly still be alive.

'So tell me, Mr Jason Truby. What is a telecoms tycoon and part-time astronaut doing at the opening of my husband's finest hotel?'

Truby put both hands in the pockets of his light-grey suit. He shrugged. 'Well, Mrs Carrington …'

'It's *Countess*, actually. Since we're being formal.' The faint traces of his mother's Austrian accent were emphasised, Ben noted.

'Oh, I wasn't aware that Carrington was a count.'

Humourlessly, his mother smiled. 'He wasn't. But my father was.'

'Countess, then, and I hope you'll forgive this old Yank for a *faux pas*. I just happened to be in town for the superconductor conference. Thought I'd come along for the spectacle. It's terrible, what happened to Carrington. My sincere condolences.'

The air was once again shattered as the three Aermacchi screamed into formation above them.

'How pretty,' Caroline commented. 'They're forming a heart.'

Truby, however, visibly tensed, like a man hearing a burglar in his house. 'The blue pilot seems a little off.'

There was a deeper rumble, the throaty rumble of a passenger jet. Ben swivelled around, looking for the source of the sound. In the western corner of the sky he spotted it: a huge aeroplane – possibly an Airbus

A-380 – was tilting into a descending turn about three kilometres away. He watched as it adjusted its trajectory.

'That plane …' Ben muttered.

'It's going into a holding pattern,' Truby said. 'The airport must be busy.'

Ben watched, a cold dread slowly building inside his chest. 'But it's passing right over the air-display team.'

'The passengers will have a wonderful view,' Caroline remarked. She seemed distant again, disengaged. Ben glanced from her to Truby. Truby looked deadly serious now. He barely moved.

'Mum … that plane's big enough to interfere with the air currents.'

'Darling, it's nowhere near them.'

'Benedict's right,' Truby said. 'The manoeuvres those pilots are doing – there's no room for error. Even the slightest alteration in the air currents can throw them off.'

'So why did the air-traffic controller let the other plane get this close?' Caroline asked.

'I don't know,' admitted Truby. 'Let's just hope they know what they're doing.'

Ben hunted for the three pilots in the sky. They'd split and were turning vertical loops at one-twenty-degree angles from each other. He felt his breath catch like a lump in his throat. Truby was right. The blue pilot was about a second behind the rest.

ROPE

In a crowd, fear travels faster than any other emotion. Truby was the first to point out that something was wrong but, seconds later, the murmurs started.

You could taste the anxiety in the air. All eyes were on the sky. Then the stray Aermacchi was flying off at a tangent, its right engine trailing black smoke. The pilot was bailing. He fell flat, plummeted like a plank dragging a tangle of blue parachute silk.

A voice called out, 'His parachute hasn't opened properly!'

'Why doesn't he pull the cutaway?' yelled another.

'What the heck is *going on* over there?'

The crowd of paparazzi moved as one. Their giant lenses aimed at the sky like anti-aircraft weapons. Now the photographers saw it too – a second pilot zooming headfirst through the air, arms outstretched, straight as an arrow.

Sheer insanity.

The pilots collided. Together, they fell. The second pilot's canopy opened.

Shutters clicked. There were gasps of awe. But Ben only really noticed one thing: the hotel's lightning rod.

They're going to get caught.

When it happened there was a collective sigh. Now what?

Caroline's hand found Ben's. Without a word, she took his camcorder. She trained it on the hanging parachutists. He watched her zoom in as close as possible. The tiny screen suddenly encapsulated the struggle. Two people literally hanging by a thread.

He murmured, 'They're going to fall.'

Another voice in the crowd said, 'No. That parachute's caught up pretty good. They'll be OK. The firemen will get them.'

Jason Truby looked intently at Ben's mother. 'What does the boss say?'

That's right, Ben thought. *Mum's the boss of Carrington, now.* This would all land at her feet.

He lowered his gaze. Suddenly the act of looking up gave him vertigo. When he did, he wasn't sure if he saw the hotel of glass and concrete scraping the sky, or the jagged, snow-capped peaks from which his father had fallen a week earlier. He glanced at Caroline and felt sure he recognised the same painful memory in her expression.

The cry went round: 'Someone's called the fire services!'

Ben said, 'They're only fifteen metres off the edge of the summit-pyramid. Any mountain-rescue crew could get them, no problem.'

Caroline studied the zoomed-in image. Her voice trembled a little. 'I don't think they have very long.'

'Why not?' Truby asked.

Caroline glanced at him but instead of replying she made an abrupt turn. One second later, she was running for the hotel's lobby.

Truby stared at Ben, puzzled. 'Where'd she go?'

Ben frowned in thought. Then his eyes widened as he realised. 'You are *not* serious. Mum!' He chased after Caroline, whose white-linen-clad figure had already disappeared into the cool marble lobby of the interior.

He finally caught up with his mother on the fifth floor. She was slamming the door of their suite as she left. In her right hand was the rucksack she'd used during their climbing week in the Himalayas.

Ben's heart pounded, hard.

She can't be serious.

When she saw him, Caroline didn't slow down. Rapidly, she strode to the elevator and punched the 'UP' button.

'You are *not* . . .' Ben started.

But she looked at him, exasperated. 'Did you even hear the fire services? As if those poor people have the luxury of time.'

'Will you listen for a minute?'

'Ben – that second pilot risked her life. Did you see? There wasn't anything wrong with her plane. Now she's the only thing that's keeping the other one from falling. You must know I can't just stand by and watch.'

Ben paused, confused for a second. 'The girl pilot jumped? How d'you know it was her?'

'I recognised her plane. She risked her life for her partner. We can't let them die.'

The elevator door opened. They stepped inside.

Caroline began to pull her flowing linen shirt over her head. Ben turned to face the wall, watching the floor numbers increase as the elevator soared towards the summit.

Caroline dressed quickly in green soft-shell climbing shorts with a belt, rock shoes and the white vest she'd worn beneath her day clothes. She began fastening a metal ascender, Prusik cord and micropulley to her rope, and a shunt and a stop to her belt. She fixed a loose loop of climbing rope to her belt and attached tools to a carabiner near her right hip.

Ben watched in silence. Any second now the elevator doors would open. Then it would begin. His mother would walk into a life-changing situation. Their entire future would be up for grabs.

He knew better than to plead with Caroline Brandis-Carrington. He knew why she was doing this. He doubted that anything he said would change her mind. It was what she'd done for five years in her twenties, before her marriage to Casper: mountain rescue.

Last week, Caroline might have saved his father.

If he'd held on for even three minutes longer…

Ben took a deep breath. Quietly he said, 'What can I do to help?'

Caroline glanced up in surprise. She smiled. 'OK. Good.'

The roof exit was guarded with dramatic signs that said, in Arabic and English, NO EXIT: EXTREME DANGER OF FALLING. Ignoring them, she climbed the flight of steps that led up to the sliding glass door.

Ben stood on the bottom step for a second. He watched his mother rope herself to the chunky, D-shaped metal door handle on the underside of the ceiling hatch. Then she moved out of sight. He followed, up the stairs.

Ben poked his head through the opening. The view was enough to still his breathing. The sky burned white from the dazzle of the sun. Beyond the concrete oasis of the city, a grey desert stretched across the horizon. To the south, over Hodariyat Island and towards the deep blue of the Persian Gulf, he saw a column of black smoke rising: the burning debris of the crashed display aircraft.

He could just see the two parachutists, dangling about twenty metres across and up from the door.

Caroline was standing less than two metres away. She handed Ben a spare loop of rope and a climbing belt. 'Fasten yourself to this door. Don't come out until you're fixed up.'

He nodded. So, there was going to be no argument about whether he participated, just action. *Good*.

Ben removed his jacket, folded it once and placed it on the carpeted floor. Then he knotted one end of the rope to the door handle, just as his mother had done. With practised fingers he fastened the climbing belt around his waist and threaded the narrow spool of rope

through the stop that was attached to the belt. If the worst happened, the stop would hold him.

Warily, Ben stepped onto the ledge. His mother was already ten metres along. She'd flung her rope and its anchor at the base of the lightning rod and he could see the anchor gripped between two metal bars. Caroline was testing her weight on the rope. Ben swallowed. He forced himself to glance down. Softly, he swore and hurriedly looked back up.

The first pilot lay cradled in the arms of the second, the woman who'd jumped out of the display plane to catch him. Ben guessed he had to be unconscious. He didn't envy that guy the shock he'd get if he opened his eyes any time soon. But when he looked closely at the second pilot, his pulse began to race. His mother was right – they were almost out of time. The second pilot's expression was strained, eyes wide, and she altered her grip on her partner every few seconds, as though her arms were tiring.

Caroline leaned back on the rope, hard, opening up a V-shaped section of the city below between her body and the slope of the glass. Ben was transfixed. The reality was beginning to hit him: if this went badly, he'd end up an orphan, twice bereaved within a fortnight.

She was climbing the glassy slope now, using the ascender against a Prusik hitch and micropulley. Ben's eyes went to the two dangling pilots. He could just see the closed eyes of the first, unconscious one. Behind, the smaller second pilot's eyes were desperate and pleading.

'I'll get into position to catch her,' he called to Caroline, who simply nodded, focused on her own progress up the slope.

Ben edged further out onto the ledge, which was about a metre wide. There was no guard rail, nothing to stop him falling if he slipped. The drop was almost unfathomable. Yet he'd calmly faced similar heights in the Himalayas.

It's all in the prep. I know my belt and rope are good, he told himself.

Trapped climbers tended to be least vocal when they were closest to death. The female pilot had to be approaching the end of her energy reserves. The guy she was holding onto was at least thirty kilos heavier than her. Ben guessed that, by now, she was barely holding on to her team-mate.

Caroline was within two metres of the suspended pilots. He watched them exchange words. Over the next minute she fastened a harness and a second rope around the unconscious pilot. Now the man was tethered both to the metallic base of the lightning rod and to the handle of the roof exit.

At least if the unconscious pilot fell now, the worst thing that could happen to him – if his heart didn't give up the ghost – was that he'd dangle between two ropes until someone hauled him in. Nothing too catastrophic.

But, on the other hand, now a third person was roped to that door handle. Ben stole another look at it. It

looked sturdy enough to hold a person. He wasn't sure about three. Better hope they wouldn't put it to the test.

His mother buckled slightly as the second pilot's weight was transferred to her. She leaned her weight against the unconscious pilot and the slope. Slowly, she began to descend, with the roped-up pilot slung partially over her left shoulder.

Ben tugged on his own rope. It felt well-secured. He edged out until he was directly beneath his mother. He could hear her gasping with the effort of her descent.

'How are you doing?' she called down to him.

Ben turned his back on the gaping fall, braced his feet against the edges of the ledge and looked up. 'Go for it!'

Caroline lowered the unconscious pilot. Ben put his hands out to catch the man as he came within reach.

Then it happened. The pilot began to regain consciousness. He opened his eyes. What he saw must have sent a shockwave through his entire body because he snapped straight and instantly became a rigid, unwieldy rod.

The force of the jolt made a length of the rope slip through Caroline's fingers. The next thing Ben knew, the pilot was heading straight at him, fast.

Hands outstretched, Ben managed to block the man's fall, but the sudden weight was too much. Balanced on the edge of the skyscraper, Ben's feet slipped from under him and he went over, sliding down the side with a sickening squeal of rubber against glass.

Ben clutched the edge with his left hand, pressing

hard against the pilot's back with his right and forcing the man back onto the ledge.

But the fingers of his left hand began to falter.

He heard Caroline yell, 'Let go Ben, I've got him!'

Gratefully, Ben removed his right hand and scrambled to get a solid grip on the edge of the building.

To his horror, he realised he couldn't.

The smooth surface of the building began to slide beneath his fingers. His right hand flapped uselessly in the wind. The only thing he could grab onto was the pilot. So he did – and immediately felt the man's body begin to slide off the edge. Heard his mother scream out, 'Ben!'

She couldn't take his weight as well as the pilot's. Ben knew if he didn't let go he'd pull them all over the edge.

I'm on a rope. It has to be me.

Ben unclenched his fingers.

Too distracted to yell, he fell in total silence.