

You Couldn't Make it Up

It had all the elements of a fairy-tale romance. The prince, or in Ella's case, Joe – the handsome son of the Chairman of Capital Motors - had fallen for the lowly little 'temp', working at their London branch, and whisked her away to live with him in the Bahamas, where pleasures could be plucked like pomegranates from the trees. But, as she lay in her shady hammock, rocking to the seductive beat of the sea and the percussive purring of the cicadas, her purple-tipped fingernails drummed a different rhythm against the taut material, causing her diamond engagement ring to flash fire and her cradle to twitch and quiver with irritation.

Joe was a wonderful man but having to share him with Capital Motors left her with empty days. She had blisters from exploring the island, from shopping in the bazaars and chic arcades of Nassau. She was worn out from golf and tennis lessons and her head ached from trying to learn bridge. Bitchy coffee mornings and tittle-tattle tea parties, hosted by other ex-pat WAGs, were not her idea of 'la dolce vita'; a nasty death, rather. She had tried to talk to Joe about it - how about if she took a job of some sort? - but he had looked so hurt she had dropped the subject.

So, she pottered about the house, reading and dreaming, texting home, working out in the gym, watching Instagram, phoning friends in London, swimming in the pool, plucking her eyebrows, waxing her legs and sneaking in a bit of gardening or housework on the servants' day off.

When Chrissie had written to say that she had wangled a six week trip to New Providence as part of her Marine Biology Course, Ella had been giddy with hope. Her 'bestie' would be bound to liven things up. But it turned out that diving for sea-urchins was a full-time undertaking. Ella and Joe were able to show her the sights in the evenings and at weekends, but Ella was left to play solitaire during the week.

So much promise and so little to do. Perhaps she'd take herself down to the beach, collect some shells to decorate yet another gift box, or some seaweed to press for another useless piece of artwork. Or not. She downed her drink quickly and the ice cubes rattled.

Because, of course, she found herself drawn to the jetty. The boat was in and Chrissie was there, helping to unload the dead body of a six-foot barracuda, one of the few 'fringe benefits' of the culling business. Sea-urchins were parasites, damaging the coral carapace that protected the islands' inner flesh and draining their life-blood, the tourist trade. Barracudas, by contrast, added a piquant touch of danger to the holiday fare, and they were good to eat.

'Oh good, I've caught you!' They were just about to cast off.

'Cinders! Why aren't you at home tending the hearth?'

'Thought you could use some help.'

'Really!'

'Oh, come on, Chrissie. I know you're meant to be properly qualified but I'm just as good a swimmer as you are, any day.'

'Mmm,' Chrissie looked doubtful. Ella knew she was taking in the perfectly tousled hair, the immaculate nails, the supple, even tan, and trying to equate the decorative bimbo, dangling her long legs over the jetty, with the tough cookie who'd whacked and gouged her way up the hockey field, won bronze and silver Duke of Edinburgh Awards, who'd climbed Ben Nevis, Snowdon and Coniston Old Man, in between 'temping' her way through drama school. '

'It's a lot deeper than you're used to, and there are any number of these little charmers about.'

'They're not man-eaters, Chrissie.'

'Not normally, but they have excellent eyesight and in murky waters they have been known to mistake the glint of a knife for the silver of fish scales. We don't wear jewellery for that reason.'

'I know, Joe told me all about barracudas,' she said, removing her earrings and stowing them in her beach bag.

'And your ring...'

'Oh, I never take it off, Chris. I couldn't leave it on the sand with my beach things. You never know who might be walking by.... I have these for swimming,' she said, donning a pair of thin gloves.

Chrissie made a face of disbelief.

'Really, it's ok,' she continued. 'Don't worry. I do it every day.'

The other divers, all students like Chrissie, raised no objection to the boat's new passenger as she wriggled prettily into a spare wet-suit. The girls watched, fascinated, as she struggled gamely with the straps of the oxygen cylinders and the men rushed to help her.

'Here, put these on,' grinned Chrissie, handing her the nose-clip and the all-in-one head gear essential for diving. Ella pulled the cap of straps down over her long, spun-sugar hair, switched the head lamp on and off, and fitted the goggles over her eyes. 'Wow,' laughed Chrissie, 'From princess to frog with one tap of my wand!'

The engine cut out and the boat became just another piece of flotsam on the tossing currents at the edge of the reef. Ella watched as the anchor fell through the clear water to grasp an outcrop of coral far below.

They flipped backwards and there was a moment of exquisite sensation when the warm water folded over their ears with a clattering of bubbles. Then there was heavy silence. Ella pulled away from the surface, where the light was bluey-bright, and struck down for the shadows, the cooler depths, following her friend's flippering feet. They seemed to have been swimming almost vertically for a long time, descending the towering wall of coral to its foundations, when, at last, Chrissie stopped diving and began to move, hand over hand, inspecting the crevices of white rock, her head-lamp showing her the way.

Reflected light illuminated this eerie world where brilliant fish flitted among a skeletal hedgerow like gaudy birds. Chrissie signaled for Ella to follow as she glided through sculptured arches and caves hunting her spiny prey. As the knife point struck home, so the pink, filigreed rock appeared to erupt in a glittering explosion of jewel-bright scavengers.

Ella was mesmerized. The little fish flickered against her body and between her fingers and she fancied herself a creature of myth, a mermaid or a Nyad, born of the sea. Her long hair streamed behind her like pale sea-weed. Chrissie had plaited hers but Ella preferred her head to be as free as the cap of crossing straps allowed. Her supple body moved easily as she swirled to lever off another urchin and deposit it in the net at her waist. Her hair floated upwards and she danced her head from side to side enjoying the swirl of movement. But, when she tried to swim on, she was suddenly jerked backwards - caught by her hair which had tangled on a twig of coral. 'Ouch!' She reached up to free the wild strand but, with the movement more hair became entangled in the crusty growth and, as it stretched, the strap of her headgear was forced further up her skull. Further and further, as though invisible hands were prising it off.

Her hands were working feverishly now, her knife blindly slashing the water to find hair to cut free. She couldn't feel through the wretched gloves. The cylinders on her back clanged and clattered on the harsh coral surface and bony slivers splintered and snapped. The left glove ripped. She dared not cry out as her teeth were clenched around the mouthpiece through which she breathed. Pinioned against the rock-face like some sacrificial princess, she was helpless - her continuing story hingeing on her being rescued. Chrissie was working below her, too absorbed to look up. Somehow, Ella had to get her attention. Hanging by her hair alone, she struggled to cut the net of sea-urchins, hoping Chrissie might notice them tumbling past her ears. Treading water frantically, she shook the net but the current pulled on her body and the tug on her scalp was excruciating. Quickly, she resumed her hold on the rock. And watched the urchins also following the current away from Chrissie. As a last resort, she dropped her knife but Chrissie turned her head away at the critical moment.

Oh God. What else was there? She forced herself to think.

Her flippers! She steadied herself against the rock and brought her heels together; but the rubber grips were skin-tight, and her heels slid smoothly past each other. It was useless. She was going to die! And now the goggles came loose as the straps rode up her skull and away but she

squeezed her eyes shut against the sudden pressure of seawater and she wasn't able to see where her head gear went. Sobs of fear fought against losing the nose-clip and mouthpiece, too. Desperately she cast around for something else to throw at her friend. Flippers. She could try and kick her flippers off.

She tried dragging her heel upwards against the coral behind her. Her back ached as she arched to accommodate the metal tanks. The abrasion ripped the skin from her heel, brine stung the wound but she continued to scrape flesh from bone, doggedly, until she felt the rubber catch and hold and the foot ease free. A sharp kick sent the flipper away and she opened her eyes to see it spiralling down.

Chrissie was beside her in a moment. Her eyes, through her goggles, were wide with fear. She tugged cruelly at Ella's hair and pointed upwards.

A shadow on the surface - a barracuda! Maybe it had seen the gleam of her knife flashing in the light from her lamp. Ella's throat ached with the scream to which she dared not give voice. Her body convulsed with terror and she lashed out desperately. What could she possibly do? Her brain shrieked as she felt the sickening rip of skin and hair-roots tearing free. Pain flooded her mind but still her teeth gripped the life-determining mouthpiece.

Now her friend was sawing at Ella's hair with her knife even as the fish homed in on its kill. Suddenly, her head sprang away from the rock and, as she felt strong arms lifting her away and up, forever up, searing pain shot through her... Someone jammed the breathing tube back between her teeth as she lost consciousness.

Much later, Ella lay weeping weakly in her fiancé's arms, her elegant head wrapped in a turban of bandages, the pretty purple-tipped fingers of her right hand curled in silent mourning for their fellow on the left, now roving the seas in the belly of a fish. Her glove had torn to reveal her engagement ring in all its sparkling glory and the barracuda had seen it as a shoal of fish.

Joe offered a reward for the return of the diamond ring, which is how Luca, a poor Bahamian fisherman, made his fortune, but that really is a fairy story.

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