



BETH M. HOWARD

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## On a wing and a prayer

I am not suicidal by nature, but when my fiancé postponed our wedding, I decided it was time to take a leap of a different kind: skydiving. I had toyed with the idea for several years—but what better time than now, when I really needed a new perspective on life? I set out for the Perris Valley Sky Diving School, the

videotape on jumping and landing, I numbly signed a stack of intimidating waivers (“If you are killed...”), then wandered over to the school facility where the marketing director took me under her wing. “We’ve never had a student fatality at Perris,” she assured me, scanning my worried face. When I told her what had prompted me to jump, she smiled kindly, as if she had heard it all before. “Skydiving can be a good thing when your life is out of balance,” she said. “It can make all of your problems seem small.”

She introduced me to sky pilot Brett Breon, a fit-looking man in his early 30s with a scruffy beard, long hair and gentle eyes.

Sometimes a little air time is all it takes to get back on terra firma. **By Beth M. Howard**

world’s biggest and busiest jump school, located in sprawling desert country about an hour and a half east of Los Angeles.

After watching a 10-minute

I instantly trusted him, which was a good thing considering we’d be sharing the same chute, jumping tandem. Even so, I was more than a little relieved when he told me that all tandems are required to have an automatic activation device—a computer box on the reserve parachute which opens the chute if they’re still falling at a high rate of speed at a lower altitude. (Translation: They passed out before having a chance to open the chute.) No matter what happened up there, the chute would open on its



own and we'd land alive (even if not with both feet on the ground).

During the half hour of hands-on instruction, Brett walked me through the jump routine and grilled me with questions designed to identify those who were *too* scared. "Are you afraid of heights?" he asked. "Sure you're up for this?"

I pulled on my jumpsuit, padded leather helmet, altimeter and goggles and followed him outside. The walk to the waiting airplane was like a death march. I was so numb with fear that I felt oddly detached, like a robot.

Aboard the plane, 12 others, all experienced jumpers, sat on metal benches lining either side of the fuselage and exchanged pleasantries while I sat frozen in my seat, wondering what had ever possessed me to do something this reckless for love.

As the plane climbed to 12,500 feet, I peered through the open door and watched the ground recede. "Just breathe," I told myself as the drop zone (the designated landing area) shrank from football-field size to a tiny patch of grass.

Brett, who was wearing our parachute, attached himself snugly to my back with four metal clips and a few straps of nylon webbing. Then he scooted me toward the door like a mother duck and shoved me out. What a shock to be airborne, what terror—and no way to turn back. Racing toward the ground at 120 mph, my hyperventilating subsided just enough for me to hear the wind screaming in my ears, the cold air pushing the skin back on my face during the very long 50-second free fall. When the altimeter read 5,000 feet, Brett reached around my side and yanked the rip cord. The opening chute jerked us to a near halt, decelerating us to a tame 10 mph. We floated gently for five more minutes toward the drop zone and a small crowd of spectators. "Good landing!" they cried as our feet gently hit earth.

As I drove back to Los Angeles, I realized that skydiving was the perfect metaphor for my relationship. My fiancé and I had dived into a romance at 120 mph. Postponing the wedding was simply an opening of the chute, a deceleration to 10 mph, a chance to

**HOW TO LEARN** To find a certified skydiving school in your area, call the United States Parachuting Association at (800) 371-USPA.

A tandem jump costs about \$185.

catch our breaths. Now I can only hope for a soft landing of a different kind. ■

**Beth M. Howard**, a freelance writer in Santa Monica, California, is very thankful to have her feet back on the ground.