

THE AIR DISPLAY

A mosquito was on the windscreen; squashed flat, traces of its last blood meal smeared across the corpse. Addison Nicole Dyer's eyes flickered in momentary annoyance. She was used to higher standards. A US Air Force engineer would have been ashamed to leave a craft in that state for a pilot.

Welcome to the world of entertainment.

Even if it was a pretty antique model, the airplane itself had seemed to be in pretty good nick, at first. On closer inspection it became obvious that the only really prime aspect was the paint job.

From a distance, the body of the craft gleamed its tricolour stripes; the famous markings of the *Aguilas* display team. Inside however, the Aermacchi-MB339A had clearly seen action. Nothing too ruinous, merely shabby; on the other hand, not quite what Addison had been led to believe when she'd been hired.

Not that it really mattered. The job paid well enough, she still got to fly, and there were no innocent families and kids on the ground who might take the hit of a badly-directed bomb.

She'd joined the USAF with the idea of air-to-air combat. That was Addison's idea of a fair fight; one highly-trained flying gun against another. But lately the other side didn't so much have flying guns as hand-held anti-aircraft rockets. They liked to place them in villages packed with innocent civilians, knowing how reluctant the US forces were to fire back. It wasn't sportsmanlike of either side, really.

All things of which Addison had been entirely aware, before she left for her tour of duty in Afghanistan. Yet somehow the reality had bitten far harder than she'd expected.

'You'll try to blame your training,' her CO had told her, that last day. 'I've seen it before, kids like you. But you had your chance, Dyer, a chance that cost twenty other candidates theirs. *You* did this; it wasn't in you before. I had you pegged for better.'

'It's this war,' she tried to say. 'What are we doing here? What have we really achieved?'

No-one knew how hard it had been for Addison to leave. It wasn't something she'd dared to talk about. But the entire process, from first doubt to final flight, had been well over a year. A year of wondering, every day.

Until she'd realised that an action without conviction was always too slow. In the air, a millisecond too late was all it took. More times than she dared to admit, that

millisecond came close to costing Addison her life. When it was a fellow airman's life that she almost fried, she quit.

She checked her plane's altitude, and the positions of her two team mates. The captain was just a nose ahead, to her right. Further along was the second member of the team. Both were much older than she, in their thirties and forties. The younger of the two, their captain, was an Israeli; Yakov. With his trim physique, piercing steel-grey eyes and fair hair, Yakov was the poster-boy of the team. He looked like a film star, one of those gritty action-hero types, but with the scars of genuine experience. The second was Shay, a Persian. They'd both spent most of their careers in the air, flying on opposing sides.

The difference was that Yakov hadn't been on the losing side of a war. He had the unshakeable confidence of someone who never learned experienced defeat. Whereas Shay had been captured, imprisoned and tortured by the Iraqi Republican Guard. He didn't talk about it, but once she'd learned that about him, much about his stillness made sense.

Yakov was the one who'd trained Addison, but it was Shay's quiet words of advice, uttered sometimes before, sometimes after a display, that stuck in her mind. Things that could only come from someone who truly understood the cost of failure.

Yakov gave the signal. Addison checked through her windscreen for a visual confirmation. They began the routine. Their three MB-339As scorched the air, ripped lines across the sky. They intersected just above the pinnacle of the Carrington Sky-High Hotel, separated by just a few metres. From below, the distance would appear negligible.

In an even, controlled voice, Yakov murmured, 'Smoke 'em, baby.' Addison flipped a switch to release a trail of yellow-gold smoke from the craft.

Yakov began the countdown. On the count of four, the trio pulled their aircraft into ninety-degree turns and shot up into the sky. Seconds later, Addison and Yakov traced an outline - two halves of a black-and-gold heart.

A few minutes into the routine, Addison sensed a sudden upward drag. Adrenaline spiked through her. She reacted instantly; corrected the flight path. She made a rapid systems check. What had caused the disturbance? Through the transparent bubble of the cockpit she cast her gaze left, right, above. There it was - a bloated sky-monster: the Airbus A-380.

It had just flown overhead and loomed, fat and lazy, effortlessly coasting. Yakov was swearing, blistering the microphone with rage. Who'd steered that overblown balloon-animal into their display arena? Shay suggested they hold off the next manoeuvre until the passenger jet had passed. Yakov uttered a snort of derision: we'll see *who* gets out of *whose* airspace.

Addison blinked. Behind the visor of her helmet, her eyes felt suddenly dry and hard. A moment earlier, any one of the three could have slammed into the Airbus. Across the radio she heard Yakov's volley of curses words, speaking directly to the air traffic controller. His tone was not promising: *keep that fat slob away from my team.*

Shay's voice joined the mix. 'Listen to me. I think . . .'

The backs of Addison's hands seemed to prickle. Something about Shay's tone was very wrong. It wasn't just anger. There was something else.

Fear.

Addison glanced up. The air above was empty. Shay was supposed to be on top of the stack by now. The radar showed her plane neatly above Yakov's. Shay was out of line: behind.

Above the tenor roar of her own craft's engines, she could just hear the lower, throaty tremor of the passenger jet. It was behind them, approaching fast. Through her arms and legs she felt the wobble of her craft. The air around her trembled. Across the radio, she heard Shay's voice. A sharp, crescendo yell.

'I've got a . . . Abort manoeuvre! Position one!'

She pulled her craft out of formation, turned and headed for 'five o'clock'. Addison's fingers darted across the avionics, checking and correcting. But she never reached her five.

Shay's Aermacchi was shooting towards her, around a hundred metres higher. She saw a body fall. The empty plane zipped past, high above, headed for the Persian Gulf.

A blue parachute opened. She could see at a glance – something was wrong. The 'chute hadn't caught the updraft. At the edge of her vision she could see the terrestrial focus of his trajectory: Shay was shooting directly at the Sky-High Hotel.

Her next motions seemed automatic. Addison was dimly aware of a distant mechanism within her, operating the controls of her craft. What she was about to attempt seemed unthinkable. Yet she knew it could be done. Only she could do it. And it had to be now.

With an abrupt movement of her wrist, she rolled the aircraft. Ahead, the needlepoint pinnacle of the Sky-High approached. She opened the cockpit. For a second she felt herself hanging, gripped only by her seat harness. Her eyes locked onto Shay's tumbling form. He'd almost levelled with her, now.

This much distance.

A belt unbuckled.

This much speed.

She fell. Her body, a human bullet, fired towards the top of the highest building in Abu Dhabi. Her mind – a calculator of incomprehensible speed. Computing, adjusting.

The drag factor. The angle of descent.

The air roared past, ruffling the fabric of her flight suit. It seemed to take an age to catch up to Shay. But it was only two seconds. Her arms were outstretched. Ready, waiting.

Their bodies slammed together in mid-air. She twisted, grabbed at him as she flew past. Their helmets knocked, hard. For a brief second, she saw Shay's eyes.

He was out cold.

She managed to link her hands around his legs. She clambered up his body. Then she was behind Shay, had him firmly gripped around the chest.

Addison pulled her ripcord.

The parachute opened - a golden silk canopy. There was sudden deceleration. Stone and glass rushed up to meet them. Their legs dangled in emptiness. Her fingers tightened around Shay's chest. His body was limp, helpless.

She blinked; another calculation. They were falling fast, but were just far enough from the ground. They could still make it. But bones would break.

A black metal lightning rod shot by, to their left. It was the top of the Carrington Sky-High. Addison held onto Shay.

Any second now. Any second now they'd begin to float.

There was an abrupt, violent drag at her back. The falling stopped. She felt herself yanked sideways and clung to Shay. Their bodies tore through the air.

They crashed, bounced heavily against the toughened glass slope of the hotel's pinnacle. Addison realised her eyes were tightly shut. She opened them slowly. Her breath came slowly at first. Two deep gulps, then rapid, pounding breaths.

She and Shay were suspended, about twenty metres from the summit of the skyscraper, about fifteen metres from the base of the glass pyramid that topped the Carrington Sky-High.

Shay's body in front of hers, facing out. Her hands were linked around his chest, holding him under his arms. Addison could already feel the sun-baked glass warming her back through her *Aguilas* flight suit. She leaned her head back and gazed up. The glare of the sun dazzled, even through the tint of her helmet's visor.

Above, the lightning rod was wrapped in crumpled layers of Addison's yellow canopy. The parachute that should have saved her and Shay had caught them; suspended them almost three hundred metres above the ground.

Somewhere in the distance, she heard two explosions, separated by seconds. The two abandoned Aermacchis had come down; Shay's in the open sea, her own in the water beyond Hodariyat Island. Two aircraft lost. If Shay died she'd have lost hers for nothing.

Trapped between an unconscious Shay and the glass slope, Addison realised there was nothing she could do. The ridge at the base of the summit's pyramid was barely a metre across. If she let him go, he'd bounce, he'd roll off the edge. A fall was certain death.

Three hundred metres. Inside an airplane, a trivial height. With an open parachute above her, three hundred metres would have meant mere seconds to landfall. Yet without the protection of either, it was a hideous, heart-freezing distance from the ground. Now, instead of flashing past as normal, that yawning distance simply remained.

Addison sensed it stretching beneath her feet, the void; a motionless world.