

## MARINEVILLE

'No one died. Catastrophe averted!' A smile as proud as if she'd been his own daughter. 'You did it, my dear Countess.'

The hotel manager wouldn't let up. Already skilled in a superior level of obsequiousness when it came to dealing with any member of the Carrington family, he was clearly overcome at having discovered a new chamber of his heart as yet unfilled with admiration for Caroline Carrington. Mr. Drake Mukherjee was an Anglo-Indian man of immaculate grooming and manners.

Caroline found herself staring in wonder at his fingernails as he talked. His manicure was easily as good as hers. She glanced at her own hands. In fact, Mukherjee's manicure was better. Before climbing holidays she'd normally trim nails and file them down to optimal length for tying and untying knots. Since the Himalayas, they'd already grown. Today, two had broken.

'So you see, dear madam, regrettably, we're going to have to postpone the performance of the Rock Snakes of Mars.'

Caroline tried to focus on what he was saying. 'The band?'

'Yes. Security has been all over the hotel. You know what it's like. One thing out of order and they suspect terrorism. Even here, we're touched by the sinister hand of the jihadis.'

There was a melodramatic gleam in his eye. Under better circumstances, Caroline might have found it amusing. Now it merely irritated her. She badly wanted a gin and tonic, and for her husband to materialise and take all these stupidly dull meetings out of her hands.

*If there's one thing I'm going to find hard to forgive, Casper, it's that you left me alone with your business empire.*

To her left, in a tone of amusement, she heard a man say, 'What, no Rock Snakes of Mars? Now that's disappointing. I was kinda looking forward to it.'

Looking up, Caroline recognised Jason Truby. He stood to one side, politely, as though anxious not to intrude. With a silent, grateful smile, she shifted slightly on the sofa. If this bluff American could get rid of the hotel manager's detailed questioning about every aspect of the revised opening ceremony, it would be worth putting up with his attention.

Mukherjee, however, was trained within an inch of his life in the hospitality trade. He sprang to his feet, insisting that madam permit him to bring a tray of tea and almond cookies – or would sir prefer something stronger?

‘Madam would prefer a gin and tonic,’ Caroline said, ‘And Mister Truby . . .?’

He flashed his Forbes-magazine cover smile. ‘I’ll have what the lady’s having.’

The hotel manager whisked himself away.

Truby smiled again, this time a little awkwardly. In his eyes too, there was unalloyed admiration. ‘That was quite a thing.’

‘I know. That Addison Nicole Dyer is quite the daredevil. Probably the most impressive air stunt I’ve ever seen.’

‘True. But I was talking about you.’

‘Oh, I wouldn’t get too carried away.’

‘You saved at least one man’s life.’

‘And almost killed my son.’

‘Hey,’ he said, gently. ‘Your kid did fine. Coulda happened to anyone.’

Watching this stranger’s sudden and genuine concern, Caroline felt tears stinging the back of her eyes. For a second she could hardly breathe. Truby didn’t miss a beat, offered her spotless white cotton handkerchief from the breast pocket of his jacket.

‘You seemed to know what you were doing, up there.’

‘I worked in rescue when I was younger. In the Alps.’

‘You haven’t lost it.’

Caroline felt brittle, just then. If she mentioned how she’d failed to rescue Casper, she might snap. ‘I’m rusty.’

‘Not too much. Your instincts are superb. Trust me on this; I have a little experience in these things.’

‘In rescue . . .?’

Truby smiled, but didn’t elaborate. He seemed suddenly to change the subject, with a gesture at the hotel manager, who was now fussing around the enormous, circular marble-topped reception desk. ‘This is your life now, is it?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

‘The Carrington empire. That’s going to keep some ticking over.’

‘Indeed.’

‘If you ever need any advice, I’d be more than happy to . . .’

‘Correct me if I’m wrong, Mister Truby, but isn’t your business to do with software, computers, that sort of thing?’

‘Both of those, actually.’

‘And what do you know about the hospitality business?’

A charming grin. ‘I stay in a lot of hotels.’

Caroline returned the grin. ‘I appreciate the offer.’

‘All big businesses are the same, you know. Software, computer chips, potato chips, hotel rooms. When it comes down to it there’s no real difference. We all have the same kind of problems.’

‘I don’t imagine I’ll be staying too long in this game.’

‘You’re thinking of selling?’

‘Not until just now, to be honest. Obviously it’s an option. I’ll trust you to keep that to yourself.’

He nodded, thoughtfully. ‘Well, all right. Let me know though, won’t you? I may know a buyer.’

‘You?’

‘Not me – I like to keep a fairly close eye on my business and I’m already stretched pretty thin.’

As silently as he’d disappeared, Mukherjee reappeared with a crystal tray inlaid with silver, on which were two tall glasses filled with gin, ice and lemon, and two open bottles of Fever Tree Indian tonic water. There was also a small bowl of Japanese rice crackers.

The hotel manager left amidst murmured pleasantries.

‘Can I ask you a question?’ Truby took a sip, hesitating before he continued. ‘It’s a little personal. Don’t answer if you prefer not to.’

‘Now I’m intrigued.’

‘Why did you let your boy go up there with you?’

‘I thought he’d be useful.’

‘Is he that good? I mean, usually.’

‘Ben is an excellent climber. I’ve never seen him show any fear of heights. His rope-work is outstanding.’

‘You were surprised when he fell?’

‘He hasn’t made a slip like that before.’

‘A hotel isn’t the same as a mountain. The breezes up there don’t get sheltered by other mountains, for one thing.’

‘Airman Dyer said much the same thing.’

‘You must have known that before you let him out there.’

Caroline’s eyes narrowed. ‘What are you implying?’

‘It’s just . . . not how I’d expect most people to behave when they’d just lost someone in a climbing accident.’

She felt herself grow cold, hostile. ‘I rarely behave like ‘most people’.’

He smiled. ‘Neither do I. That’s what interested me.’

‘Are you trying to say we’re similar? Two of a kind?’ a slightly cynical smile touched her lips. She knew perfectly well where that conversation was intended to lead.

‘Yes.’ His olive-green eyes stared directly into hers. ‘That’s exactly what I’m saying. But not for the reasons you seem to think.’

‘I ‘seem to think’?’ She pursed her lips. ‘Quite a presumption.’

His gaze managed to be warm as well as challenging. For the second time since they’d met, Caroline found herself affronted at the brazen nature of his approach. Her lawyer had warned her shortly after Casper’s death. *You’re a wealthy widow now. Vultures will descend.*

She’d hardly have put Jason Truby into that camp. Some desperate member of Middle-Europe’s impoverished aristocracy, yes – she could see that. Castles didn’t maintain themselves, after all and not everyone’s family seat was close enough to the ski resorts to entice tourists.

But Truby? He had apparently had money to burn on financing a trip to a passing asteroid. The Carrington fortune would be spare change to him.

Relieved, Caroline noticed Ben strolling towards them. He was wearing a black tuxedo with a cream-white dinner jacket, already dressed for the gala dinner later that night. She beamed at him. There was still just enough of the boy in his features to

inspire a deep, protective tenderness when she saw his smile. The same dimple she'd noticed since his first tentative, baby-grin.

Beside him, Addison Nicole Dyer was barely recognisable from the slight, jump-suited figure who'd plunged from the airplane. She wore a taupe and black sleeveless chiffon dress – a Diane von Furstenberg, at a guess – paired with strappy heels. Long, mahogany-coloured hair was pulled back with a golden comb. She couldn't have been much more than twenty-five years old.

Caroline couldn't help but admire the young woman's physical condition. Every visible muscle was toned to perfection. Not the body of a dancer or performer, but still the hardened look of someone who worked out for a few hours a day. She herself had been that way, once. It seemed like a previous lifetime.

A girl of Addison's formidable talent and bravery was wasted in the entertainment business. Caroline wondered why she'd abandoned a military career.

Truby stood, reached for Addison's right hand. Gallantly, he raised her fingers to his lips. 'Our hero. You saved the day.'

Addison grinned, chewing gum. 'Uh-uh. No how, no way.' She pointed at Caroline. 'This lady. She's the one.'

'I think you're both pretty incredible. What do you say, Ben? What need is there for guys to protect a girl when you've got a couple of ladies like this?'

Ben snorted. He reached for the Japanese crackers. 'Bit sexist, mate. Girls don't need blokes to protect them. I think we proved that up there.'

Truby laughed, with a glance at Caroline. 'Take it easy, buddy. Everyone needs rescuing, at least once in their life. It wasn't for a couple of NASA geeks, I'd be dead. Those boys were feeding me info about my suit the whole time, on the Gemini mission. They noticed before I did that the suit had a leak.'

Ben's interest was suddenly piqued. 'Yeah. What really happened up there? It never really made sense. You went into a cave and disappeared for . . . what was it, like, two hours? What did you find in there? The Prometheus?' He turned with a grin at Addison, then Caroline, obviously expecting some kind of recognition of his joke.

'I got stuck,' Truby said. 'And my suit got a little ripped. That's all.' But suddenly his tone had changed. He didn't seem to want to be drawn on the subject. 'Look, since the Rock Snakes aren't going to be playing until eleven, what say the four of us head up to Marineville? I'm sure with your mom's connections we could get a table right by the aquarium, get some late lunch while we stare at the fish. There's a neat little jazz combo that play in there, round about now. How about it?'

Caroline saw at once that any answer other than *yes* would have been a profound disappointment to both Ben and Addison. With barely disguised reluctance, she rose to her feet.

‘Well, I guess we all have to eat.’

