

CHOPPER

‘What do you think?’

‘Thing is - I’ve never bought a helicopter before.’

Addison put a hand out to touch the flawless red finish of the bubble-shaped heli. It looked as fragile as an egg. She’d feel nervous flying through a cloud in something so delicate.

‘The R22 is the fastest in its weight class.’ The salesman was giving them the sober, knowledgeable treatment. He probably assumed he was dealing with a couple of rich ladies who wanted to add some speed to their shopping trips.

‘It’s terribly pretty,’ agreed Caroline. ‘But it doesn’t look big enough. Addison?’

‘Looks like a Christmas tree decoration,’ Addison replying, chewing her gum, thoughtfully. ‘From the Robinson range, I wouldn’t look at anything smaller than the forty-four.’

‘We have an R44, also. One careful owner.’

‘Selling it, why?’

‘Trading up to the R66.’

‘Then show us one of those. If it wasn’t good enough for your ‘careful owner’, it won’t be enough helicopter for me.’

‘Can I ask what you’ll be using the helicopter for, Madame?’

An enigmatic smile. ‘You can *ask* . . .’

Leaning forward, Addison whispered ‘Did I mention I haven’t flown a heli for over a year?’

Caroline barely acknowledged the comment, merely stepped a little closer to the salesman. ‘I’m going to need some modifications, customisations.’

‘Ma’am, it’s a total refurbishment service. We can paint it pink, if that’s your pleasure.’

Addison arched an eyebrow at Caroline. Surely not?

‘Pink? What fun. But I’m more of an orange girl, myself. Make that a lovely, zesty orange.’

Addison was still absorbing this when Caroline leant in and murmured, ‘And matching orange ski suits and climbing gear. It’ll be marvellous! Just picture it – some poor soul hanging on for dear life. They’ll see us coming from miles off. Can you imagine how cheering that would be?’

‘Whatever, lady. It’s your dough. I’m just gonna drive the getaway.’

The followed the salesman along the line of parked helicopters until they reached a row of three R66s, all painted white. As he opened the doors to demonstrate the interior, Caroline turned to Addison. ‘Actually, about that; I think it might be an idea for you and I to go on some training climbs. I think everyone in the team should be at least competent on the mountain. You might need to park the heli and get out and help.’

Addison stared back at her. ‘I didn’t plan on winding up on the end of some damn rope again.’

‘You came down off the Sky-High like it was a metre off the ground. That’s a rare thing. The climbing part, I can teach. The nerves of steel, you have to be born with.’

‘You ever think it’s the opposite?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You ever think people who can do all this daredevil crap, it’s not ‘cause we *got* something special . . . but because we’re missing something? Some kind of good-sense thing which tells you to keep the hell away from situations like that?’

‘Ah – you’re asking if we have a screw loose?’ Caroline grimaced as she stepped into the helicopter.

‘Exactly.’

Caroline responded with a sharp, rather tight smile. ‘I prefer to think of it as *Carpe diem*, my dear.’

Later back in Caroline’s ancestral home of Schloss Bach, Addison watched in silent admiration as the fortysomething widow bustled around, talking to builders who were renovating the mansion. It had clearly seen far better days. She, Ben and Caroline were temporarily housed in a wing that had been modernised; wood-fired rooms now heated by the modern miracle of central heating on a thermostat. After the sleek modernity of the Carrington Sky-High, with its individualised, wristband-controlled locks, entertainment and even climate systems, this felt a little like travelling back to the 1980s.

‘How long ago did your father pass away?’

‘In January. Believe it or not we’ve only just gotten started on the repairs. Poor Papa, he didn’t have much money. And he’d never take Casper’s.’

‘They didn’t get along?’

Caroline eyed Addison firmly. ‘I don’t talk about things like that.’

Addison shrugged, her loose-fitting sweater shucked around her shoulders. ‘Hey, whatever. My pa never likes my boyfriends, neither.’

‘How did he feel about you quitting the Air Force?’

‘It didn’t make him very happy.’

‘But eventually he understood?’

‘Nah. Can’t say’s he did.’

‘Casper was just the opposite, you know. About Ben. The boy’s desperate to leave school, to join the British Army. Has been since he was fourteen. But Casper refused. In fact he put it in his will. Ben’s to stay in full-time education until he’s twenty-one. Or he inherits nothing.’

‘So the kid joins up when he’s twenty-one. If he still wants to.’

‘Maybe.’ Caroline gave a wan smile. ‘But school doesn’t suit everyone.’

‘Ain’t that the truth.’

‘Perhaps you could talk to him?’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, Addison. You must have some old war stories. Something to put him off joining up.’

Addison’s face clouded. ‘I got stories, but I prefer not to remember. Anyhow, it’d make no difference.’

‘Believe me, you could only improve upon what he’s been listening to. Every interview with those Windsor princes, for example.’

‘Sure - those boys are hard core. You can’t blame a kid for wanting to take after them.’

‘If he heard something honest, direct.’

‘Something scary?’

‘Exactly.’

Addison shook her head, with a reluctant smile. ‘You don’t get it, Countess Caroline.’

‘Call me ‘Ceecee’. Most people do.’

‘*Scary* is only gonna fire the kid up even more. A boy like Ben, what he craves is adventure. Danger. Despite what he tells himself about wanting to defend his country, what fascinates him is violence, killing, death. Deep down he wants to know – if it came down to the test, would be able to handle it? I know, a mom don’t wanna hear that. But it’s true.

‘Now; some kids like that, they go one way – video games. Most of them grow out of it. Others, they like get into the insides of folks, study medicine; surgery and whatnot. And just a few, they get all those impulses mixed up with protection. With saving folks. They think about the people they love, they imagine bad guys trying to hurt them, kill them. That gets their blood up. They get this fierce instinct to protect their loved ones. When they hear that in the military, you’re gonna do that, protect your friends, your family, your country - they believe it. There’s nothin’ I can tell a boy with that stuff in his head. He has to see it for himself. He has to live it, taste it, feel it.’ Addison shook her head slightly, remembering. ‘Then, maybe. Maybe he’ll see things different. Maybe no. But this isn’t a telling-thing, Ceecee. This is a *feeling*.’

Caroline gazed uneasily at Addison. It was clearly not something she’d expected to hear. ‘He’s got to see . . . violence? Yes. Yes, I imagine you’re right. Is that what made you leave?’

Addison paused. She clamped her jaw tight around her gum. ‘That’s not something *I* like to talk about.’

‘But Addison my dear, if we’re going to work together, I need to know why you left the Air Force.’

It was true, and Addison had been dreading the question. The Aguilas display team management had asked it too. They hadn’t been the type to make value judgements either. Yet still, she hated to answer it.

‘People like me aren’t supposed to get into the military. They supposed to be all kind of tests to find people like me out, early on. Well, what can I tell you? The tests failed.’

‘What were they supposed to find out?’

‘Ma’am, I like a fair fight. And that’s not how we roll, in a war. We like to stack things high in our favour.’

Caroline nodded. ‘That makes sense. Even in a war, one prefers not to suffer casualties. So it wasn’t that you saw something dreadful?’

‘Did I see my buddies maimed, killed? No. In the Air Force, you can be lucky. If it happens, it happens somewhere far away, usually in the air. Army is different. Army, you see the kills up close.’

‘And that would be *Ben*.’

‘If his heart’s really set to it, Ceecee, I can think of only one other way.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A better offer?’

Caroline gave a slight, doubtful nod. ‘He’s not as excited about joining the Caroliners as I’d hoped.’

‘It could be different after his first rescue.’ Addison hesitated. It was probably too early to joke about the near-fall that had almost lost Caroline a son within a week of a husband. Yet to her, the thought of Ben dangling from top of the Sky-High had already acquired a certain gallows humour.

But a joke wasn’t necessary – Caroline obviously saw the same danger. Her mouth taut with resolve, she murmured, ‘Until he’s a *lot* better on a rope, Ben’s going nowhere but back to school.’