

## TRUBY CENTRAL

‘Margarita?’

Addison accepted the chilled coupe glass. She turned to face the open French window. Truby’s home looked out over a windswept sound on the western side of Cozumel. The crash of ocean waves on a coral beach was audible from inside.

As they’d flown in to land in Truby’s front yard, it had become obvious that he’d chosen to live in isolation. On this coast was precious little but nature. The beaches were too wild, the sea too unpredictable. The entire population of Cozumel seemed to have clustered around the sheltered eastern coast, turned their backs to the open ocean.

This was hurricane country.

She sipped, enjoying the sharp tang of fresh lime and the heady vapour of the tequila. Truby certainly knew how to mix a cocktail. She watched him attend to his other guests. He’d used the time they’d taken to freshen up to whip up a fresh batch of shrimp *ceviche*, and was offering it around in small round ceramic bowls, all neatly hand-painted in distinct, multicolour designs. He’d asked one of the three domestic servants that hovered discretely, to start up the wood-fired barbeque. Another domestic, a young woman dressed in a neat blue-and-grey uniform, was seasoning steaks, chicken breasts and salmon fillets in the open-plan kitchen.

Caroline joined her at the window. The moon had risen. In three-quarter waxing gibbous phase, it lit a section of black sea like a searchlight. For a moment they both enjoyed the view of silhouetted palms trees bending in the wind.

‘You were very quick to accept Jason’s offer,’ Caroline observed.

Addison didn’t reply. It wasn’t easy to put in words the philosophy that had driven her since she’d quit the US Air Force. Or rather it was easy – a single word would do it. But it wasn’t easy to explain. Especially not to someone who’d never fought in a battle.

*Opportunism.*

‘And what about you, Ceecee?’

‘Ben’s desperate for me to get involved. Well, you saw that.’

‘Truby has a point – you’d be good for Gemini Force.’

Caroline gave a gracious smile. ‘Perhaps so.’

‘But you’re not feelin’ it?’

'I do 'feel it'. On the other hand, Addison, I also feel quite badly out of my depth.'

'It *would* be a lot to learn. But someone like you'd enjoy that.'

'There's still rather a lot to do with Carrington International. They're prosecuting some of the directors. I'll probably have to appear as a witness.'

'Damn, Ceecee. That's rough.'

'You can see why Gemini Force rather has its appeal.'

'But you got doubts?'

'I have. And just between us, I'm a little nervous.'

Addison squinted. It didn't seem possible. 'You?'

Across the room from them, Ben had clearly managed to persuade Truby to let him choose the music on the sound system. He'd plugged his own MP3 player into the amplifier and was playing the latest album by Rock Snakes of Mars. Tim was listening too, chatting to Ben with obvious enthusiasm.

Ben looked as though he were in heaven, talking to the young pilot. Toru and Paul had stayed behind on GF1, where they would be joined later by three more members of the crew. It was a shame to miss out on the chance to meet all the people she'd be working with. At least Truby had promised that his daughter Julia and Lola Reyes, the junior medic, would be joining them at the villa.

'We don't party much at GF1,' he'd told them. 'We save that for Truby Central.'

Their music wasn't really to Addison's taste, she preferred country music. Since watching them play in the Sky-High Hotel, however, Truby himself seemed to enjoy them. Either that or else he was indulging the son of the woman whose agreement he seemed so badly to want.

Addison didn't like herself for the thought she was having about Truby's intentions towards Caroline. She wished that she could believe he was solely motivated by a genuine regard for Caroline's ability.

She didn't doubt Caroline, not in the slightest. The woman might have taken a sixteen-year career break to play a rich man's wife. But from what Addison has seen on the Sky-High and in training for the Caroliners, her instincts were still razor-sharp; her fitness exemplary and her judgement, so far, seemed good.

Truby couldn't know all of that. He was going on way less information. Addison knew that Caroline suspected the same thing: Truby had his sights on more than Caroline's expertise. Oh he was waiting; he was giving the new widow her bereavement

space. Whatever he was, Truby seemed to like playing by the rules – at least above the table.

Something told Addison that Truby also did a fair bit of under-the-table work. You didn't get hold of uranium or plutonium without bending or even breaking some rules.

The air began to shudder with the sound of a second helicopter. It was flying in from the east. As it flew over the house, the windows trembled. Truby strolled over to stand beside Caroline.

'Impact-resistant glass,' he said. He'd picked up on the way Addison was staring at the windows. 'It's laminated. The whole house is set up to stand a hurricane. It's the only way to feel safe. Especially on this side of the island.'

'Why didn't you just buy a house on the other side? You know; the one with all the great beaches?'

'For one thing, I don't much like beaches. I never got the hang of all that doing *nothing*.'

Truby was using his charm to deflect questions, Addison noticed. Whatever his reason for being on this side of the island, he wasn't going to talk about it.

Through the window they watched a second Sikorsky S-76 landing on the generous front lawn, a space as large as two basketball courts and covered in the kind of glassy, scrub grass that you got on Caribbean golf courts. Like the heli in which they'd flown with Truby, it was painted white with narrow stripes in powder blue along its flank. No distinctive markings; an out-of-the-box craft.

Truby didn't want people recognising him, she realised. No wonder she'd failed to find any reference to Gemini Force on the Internet, something she'd discreetly tried on her smartphone, the moment she'd got into the guest room in Truby's villa.

He intended Gemini Force to be a secret. Was that even possible? Addison couldn't help thinking that the instant one of their aircraft turned up on a rescue mission, the world would start talking.

Toru had showed her his flight jacket, the last part of a muted uniform that consisted only of Scarpa boots, Gore-Tex cargo-pant-style salopettes, and plain T-shirts. The jacket was fitted, down and Gore-Tex, anthracite-coloured. The jacket was decorated only by an embroidered logo in red, white and blue: Gemini Force and the number of each member's station.

Those badges were a statement, Addison believed. They were going to provoke questions. Who or what was behind Gemini Force?

Two young women were jogging towards the villa, heads lowered as the helicopter blades whirred to a halt over them. One was possibly latin or maybe African-American. The second woman was white and fair-haired and looked older by at least a decade. The younger woman was slender and had a very slight build, like a teenager. Addison wondered if she was one of those girls, like dancers, who look fragile but you'd get them on a sparring mat and they'd turn into steel wire, all muscle and sinewy skill.

'Everyone, meet Julia Bencke and Doctor Lola Reyes. Julia's from Brazil, she used to work at Embraer. Lola finished top of her year at Harvard Med.'

Ben and Tim had joined them in time to hear this introduction. The kid was doing his best to act all grown-up and sophisticated, gel in his hair and the cuffs of a crisp, white linen shirt turned over twice. But even he couldn't hide his schoolboy enthusiasm for a pretty girl. Especially one who looked barely older than him.

'Harvard Med, wow,' Ben sighed. 'You must be like, completely brilliant!'

'The whole team is brilliant,' Truby said, a steely note in his voice. 'Every last one of them. That's why I wanted them for Gemini Force.'

Ben seemed crestfallen at these words. Addison felt a tug of pity for him, but just for a few seconds. She'd long ago stopped feeling sorry for people who didn't make the cut. If anything, the grade should be tougher. There were people who just weren't suited to certain roles. Like she for the Air Force. She'd confused a love for the technology of flight and an addiction to adrenaline as a good reason to sign up. Addison loved her country and was prepared to fight to protect it. But these days, that wasn't enough. War was a complicated business. She should never have gotten involved.

Rescue, on the other hand, seemed to have a purity to it that wouldn't be complicated by other means and ends.

Or so Addison hoped. She crossed her fingers that night, sent up a prayer.

*Whatever Truby's reason for keeping Gemini Force a secret - let it be sound.*