

THE CAROLINERS

The walls glowed, luminous orbs floating gently, bouncing upwards towards sunlight. Caroline watched the images on an array of high-definition TV screens, a mug of café latte clutched against her chest. She leaned against one of the dozen high-backed chairs that were tucked neatly into place around the circular, highly varnished cherry-wood table, waiting for Truby to close all the three open doors. Her fingers traced the lighter beech of the inlaid carving at each place on the table.

The twelve signs of the zodiac.

‘Astrology? Are you superstitious?’ she asked, as Truby completed his task. With the final door closed, the lighting automatically switched from bright, flat luminescence to a dimmed background with a circle of muted overhead ceiling lights.

He turned to her in surprise. ‘Not a bit. Are you?’

She sipped her coffee, studying him. ‘Perhaps.’ With a tip of her head, she indicated the carving at her fingertips. Four simple strokes of blond wood within the darker cherry. ‘The symbol for Gemini. This is where you sit?’

Truby came closer, placed a hand on the back of the chair against which she was leaning. He gazed at her, intently. ‘Usually.’

Caroline backed off a little, enough to let him pull out the chair.

‘Take a seat, Countess.’

She did as he suggested. He began to smile, pulled out an adjacent chair, turned it to face her.

‘This is our conference room.’

‘Twelve places. That’s all of you?’

‘Not exactly. We’re a little light.’

‘And you think that . . . Addison . . . and I . . .?’

‘You’d both be perfect. I need a pilot. We have Toru, Julia, Paul and Tim. But we’ve had something of a reshuffle, recently. To be frank, we had a fatality.’

Caroline’s gentle smile fell away. ‘Oh. I’m very sorry. How long ago?’

‘Five months. The team’s been training hard since then, to restructure. Gary Lincoln – the boy who died – he was our lead pilot. So Toru’s stepped up. And I need

someone *really* good to replace Gary. Addison's experience would make her pretty much the ideal candidate.'

'How did he die?'

Truby grimaced. 'It was an accident.' It was obviously not something on which he wanted to dwell. He seemed to trip forwards in his speech, urging them on to the real reason he'd invited her to the base. 'Caroline . . . Ceecee . . . I know this probably seems rushed. But last week, not two hundred kilometres from here, a tropical storm blew a cruise liner off course. It wound up in shallow waters on a reef. The rescue services, by the time they got to them, found hundreds of survivors in the water. They'd clustered together. They were surrounded by sharks. They managed to get them out, but sixty people died from shark bites.'

'Yes . . . I heard something about it.'

'Gemini Force was meant to be ready, months ago. If we'd been ready, those lives might have been saved. But what happened with Gary . . .'

'You lost your nerve.'

He nodded, gravely. 'I paid for all this, Ceecee, I commissioned the aircraft and I recruit the staff. But I'm not a natural to head up for this kind of mission. Frankly, I'm too old.'

Caroline watched his gaze move to her eyes in some kind of automatic, hopeful response. Yes, it was there, just as she'd suspected. He wanted her to deny it. But she wouldn't. If Truby was telling the truth, if the incredible things she'd only begun to witness at the base were all he claimed, then he'd already achieved the impossible. Leading it, however, was the job for a younger person.

'Not too old to inspire.'

'No, but to lead? I'm a businessman, Ceecee. This is something different, you know that.'

'Jason, what are you suggesting? Me?'

'Why not?'

Caroline laughed. 'Ridiculous.'

'I'd like to buy the Caroliners.'

'There's nothing left to buy – the helicopter is going back. I paid off Jurgen and Dieter. It's just Addison, me, Ben and Rigel.'

'Who's Rigel?'

His bafflement was surprisingly attractive, a chink in an otherwise flawless barrier of charm and confidence.

She smiled and began to stand. 'It's been fascinating, Jason.'

'Wait, wait. Why won't you even think about it?'

'You've clearly got me confused with someone with an entirely different skill set. Jason! Honestly – did you grasp the scope of what we were hoping to achieve, with the Caroliners? Compared to all this, it was a neighbourhood watch.'

He spoke firmly. 'It's a more transferrable skill than you might believe. Training can achieve most of it. What can't be trained or taught is attitude and aptitude.'

Caroline opened her mouth to reply. Then she stopped. She'd said something very similar to Addison, only the other day. Now Truby was using the same line on her. The difference was, he was talking about an operation that to Caroline, had more in common with the military.

'I'm not saying I want you to take over right away. Just to help me. You're a natural, effortless leader, Ceecee.'

'Jason, quite seriously, I'd be a liability.'

'Let me be the judge of that.'

'What about Ben?'

He smiled then, a knowing, almost secretive smile. As though he thought he'd already won. But there was no air of triumph, nor conquest. Just a subtle delight, and gratitude. It was impossible not to like him, she realised. Impossible to separate his desires from hers. Because the truth was, from the minute she'd caught the first glimpse of Truby, she'd been drawn to him. Despite the fact that Casper was so recently dead. Or perhaps because of it.

There were very few men like Casper Carrington, in Caroline's experience. That mixture of brilliant ambition and actual competence. Or so she'd believed. Yet now, she was beginning to question that. Casper had lied to her, lied to his board about his plans, and about money.

How much else of Casper's life had been a fraud? Had he lied about other things? He didn't listen, she knew that much. If Casper had listened to her, he'd be alive today.

The way Truby had looked at her that first day at the Sky-High – it had given her chills. Now she realised what he thought he saw: the final piece of a jigsaw. Something to be acquired at all costs.

‘Ben would be extremely welcome here. In fact another member of our team, Michael Dietz, his daughter Jasmine spends a lot of time here. She’s around the same age as Ben. We could hire them a tutor.’

‘Ben is to finish his schooling at Kenton College,’ she declared. ‘That’s what his father wanted.’

‘As you wish, Ceecee. It’s just an offer. What about Addison?’

‘The Aguilas display team fired her, so I don’t imagine she has anywhere to go.’

‘I’d really prefer it if she wanted to join.’

‘Why wouldn’t she?’

Truby shrugged. ‘Why don’t *you*?’

‘Ah. I didn’t say that.’

He paused for a second, regarding her thoughtfully. Then; ‘They really fired her?’

‘Two planes, they lost. I think they’d rather have paid off the other pilot’s family.’

‘Addison is bold. That’s for sure.’

‘What about you; can you afford to lose an aircraft or two?’

‘She won’t do that again.’

Caroline arched an eyebrow. ‘You’re so certain?’

He did seem certain, entirely so. ‘There are things you don’t do twice. And anyway, the vehicle I have in mind for Addison isn’t one you jump out of.’

‘Interesting.’

They were both smiling now, she because she admired his persistence and Truby, presumably, because he thought he was close to wrapping this up.

She was right; Truby leaned forward now, going for the kill. ‘Let me buy the Caroliners. I’ll give you a good price. You, Addison and all the equipment you invested in. We don’t need the heli, we already have three. But all the other kit.’

‘You’re serious.’

‘I don’t have time to joke about things like this.’

She frowned as a thought occurred. ‘Was it really just chance that we met in Abu Dhabi?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘You weren’t stalking me?’

‘I wasn’t stalking you.’

Then it hit her. She stared. ‘You were scouting for a pilot.’

‘I was at a semiconductor conference, like I told you.’

‘Was it Addison you wanted? Or one of the others?’

Suddenly Truby grinned. He sat back against the soft, puce-coloured upholstery of the wooden chair. ‘All right. You got me. Yakov Milstein was an excellent prospect. I thought he’d make a fine leader. Until I saw Addison.’

‘I saw her first.’

‘That you did. And when I saw the two of you in action, I found myself dreaming up a whole different scenario.’

Caroline stalled. The enormity of what she was contemplating was beginning to hit her. Yet she could sense that somewhere in their conversation, she’d crossed the line. It wasn’t even clear to her when it had happened. Truby would probably know the exact moment. If he was as good at getting his way as she imagined, he’d even know how much longer before she said ‘yes’.

‘Do you always get what you want?’

To Caroline’s surprise, Truby shook his head. ‘That’s not how it is, not at all.’

‘Then, how?’

‘The trick, Caroline, is to know what you need. And to focus on that.’