

# AIRWOLF PHOENIX

PART ONE OF THE "ULTRAWOLF" TRILOGY



WRITTEN BY  
**D. D. DRAKE**

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It was calm and sunny at Van Nuys, a perfect afternoon for flying, but a combination of circumstances had left all three Santini Air pilots grounded at the hangar. Owner Dominic Santini was working on the red, white and blue Jet Ranger that had long been the company's trademark. His protégé Stringfellow Hawke was tinkering with the aging Stearman in preparation for a photo shoot, while Caitlin's student had been a last minute no-show, leaving her the designated tool chaser for both of the men.

Santini glanced up just as the long white limo rolled to a stop in front of the hangar. "Oh great, if it isn't the poster boy for bleach abuse," he muttered, making sure his voice was just loud enough to be overheard by the white-suited figure emerging from the back of the luxury automobile.

"Good afternoon to you, too, Dominic," the charismatic deputy director of the Firm answered as he limped across the hangar toward them, silver-handled cane tapping a cadence against the cement floor. Michael Coldsmith Briggs the 3rd - more commonly known throughout the espionage underground as Archangel - was long accustomed to Santini's quips about his wardrobe, and he refused to rise to the bait. Briggs acknowledged Hawke and Caitlin O'Shannessy with a nod.

Hawke had just found a section of fabric that needed replacing on the vintage bi-wing plane. Coupled with the events of the last few weeks, it had left him in an even more sour mood than usual. He didn't feel up to yet another verbal fencing match with the agent. "So, what do you want this time, Michael?" He drifted over to lean against the Jet Ranger. Returning the socket wrench she held to the tool box, Caitlin wiped her greasy hands on the tattered remains of a shop rag and joined them.

"I thought you'd appreciate an update on Tess Dixon," Archangel offered mildly, recognizing the younger man's ill humor and cutting straight to the point of his visit.

Hawke's attitude changed immediately. Tess was a former lover, one who had gotten in way over her head with the wrong men. Only Hawke and Airwolf had saved her, especially after one of Archangel's trusted assistants had turned out to be a traitor. "How is she?"

"Your friend is doing well. Her testimony is going to put some very influential people in prison for a good many years." Briggs paused, knowing Hawke wouldn't want to hear what followed, wishing he didn't have to say it. "She'll be placed into the witness protection program, given a new identity and relocated." Michael appeared to take a sudden interest in the oil stains on the hanger floor.

It was what Hawke had expected. She would be safe, but he'd never see her again. "Tess will be taken care of?"

"Of course."

The pilot sighed, mentally adding Dixon to the long list of people who, for one reason or another, had disappeared from his life. Unlike most, at least she was still alive. "What about Vivian?"

"She won't be going anywhere for at least the next fifteen to twenty years," Michael scowled. The reference to his former assistant reminded Archangel of the other reason he had come. He reached into an inside pocket of the immaculate, finely tailored white jacket. "If any of you can use these, you're welcome to them."

Dom eyed the slips of paper suspiciously. "What are they?"

"Two tickets to Friday night's performance of the Russian Ballet."

Archangel knew they were some of the most sought after tickets in town. He had certainly pulled enough strings to get them.

"Ballet tickets?" Santini questioned, more suspicious than ever. "What in the world are you doing with those?"

"Actually, I picked them up for Vivian a few weeks ago." It wasn't the complete truth, but he wasn't about to tell Dominic the rest of the story. "It doesn't appear she'll be needing them."

Despite the agent's evasion, Hawke correctly surmised who the second ticket had been for. "You've got to start hanging around with a better class of women, Michael," he remarked dryly, with only the barest hint of a smile.

Archangel ignored the jab. "If no one is interested...?" He hadn't expected them to jump at the tickets, but considering what Vivian's betrayal had nearly cost them, it seemed the least he could offer.

"Seriously, Michael, the BALLET?" Santini laughed. "Guys in leotards twirling around on their toes? That's not my idea of entertainment. Now make it a good Italian opera..." He started humming something that sounded vaguely like it might have been from Verdi.

"Actually, I think it might be interesting," Caitlin suggested, speaking up for the first time. She'd been away when Dom and Hawke had gone to pick up Dixon and still didn't know quite what had happened, only that it had left Hawke lonely and upset. "For that matter, you could use a little culture yourself, Dom."

"Culture, smulcher," the older man growled. "Talk to culture boy over there, he's the one with all those fancy paintings. Maybe you can get him to take you to the ballet." Santini gestured toward Hawke, already suspecting the true intent behind Cait's sudden interest in the fine arts.

Hawke shook his head. "Sorry, leave me out of this. I'm working Friday night, remember?" He knew precisely what Cait was planning, and was glad he already had an easy excuse. However... An idea crossed his mind, and

he chuckled to himself. "Michael, they're your tickets, why don't you take Caitlin?"

For a moment, Dom wondered if his friend had lost his mind, then he realized the comic potential of the situation. "Yeah, Michael, you're even more cultured than String. I'm sure you could give Caitlin quite an education." He paused a long second, then grinned suggestively. "About the ballet, I mean."

Caitlin winced. This was most definitely not working out the way she'd intended. Hawke's late night filming job had totally slipped her mind. Hesitating, she chanced a glance at Archangel. He looked almost as uncomfortable as she felt. Simply put, on some level Michael still intimidated her, just a little. It wasn't his position, it wasn't his obvious wealth, and she certainly wasn't afraid of him; he was just so... intense. She would never forget their initial meeting, the mission into East Germany to rescue him. It had been the first time String and Dom admitted to her that the supersonic helicopter actually existed. At the time, she hadn't understood half of what was going on. Looking back in retrospect, she had some idea of the drugs and torture Michael had been subjected to and the horror he must have felt when he learned his former lover had betrayed him. The agent had impressed her then, but now, he invoked a certain amount of awe.

A few feet away, Archangel tried to read Cait's expression. Hawke had, as usual, managed to stick him in the middle of an untenable situation. He didn't want to push Cait into accepting an invitation she was uncomfortable with, after all, it was blatantly obvious that she had wanted Hawke to accompany her. On the other hand, if he came up with some excuse and refused, she might take it the wrong way, as some sort of suggestion he felt she was beneath him. Complicating matters, Michael had to admit that he felt a certain attraction to her. When Cait had first arrived at Santini Air, she'd been horribly naive. Airwolf and the situations it had drawn them all into had changed that. Caitlin had grown, blossoming into someone he respected. As she matured, he found her increasingly appealing.

Cait glanced at him again. He still appeared uncertain, and she started to make up some excuse as to why she wasn't available after all. Then her thoughts drifted back to Ken Sawyer and the time bomb that her supposed boyfriend had wired to her. While Hawke and Santini had dealt with Sawyer, Michael had come to her rescue. He had stayed until it was over and she was safe, even though he'd had every reason to leave the bomb to the experts and get himself out of there. Somehow, it didn't seem quite fair to let the two pilots get the best of him over something like this. She made her decision. "Michael, I know you must have a busy schedule, but if you're free, I'd be happy to go with you."

He appeared relieved, perhaps a bit pleased. "I've got to be on a plane to Washington Saturday morning, but Friday night is clear. Why don't I check on dinner reservations, then call you here tomorrow?"

"Sounds fine to me, Michael." She glanced at Dom, and noted that he seemed considerably less jovial. It served him right. Hawke, on the other hand, was trying to hide a grin. Cait began to wonder just why he was finding the situation so amusing.

"Until tomorrow, then." Archangel checked his watch. "Well, I'm afraid I need to finish some paperwork. Caitlin, gentlemen." he excused himself, and turned back to the limo.

Hawke waited until the long white car had departed, then started to chuckle. Cait was already annoyed, and finally let it show. "Just what is so damn funny?" she demanded.

He grinned. "I sure hope you own something white."

Despite Caitlin's best intentions, she found herself wearing white that Friday evening as she waited for Briggs. She had tried on most of the dresses in the closet, but somehow, nothing else felt quite right. Finally, muttering to herself about becoming an angel so early in life, she'd put on the white dress that she had been carefully avoiding. Almost impetuously, Cait pulled a black jacket on over it, wondering why she was so nervous about the upcoming evening.

Michael picked her up promptly at seven, not commenting on her choice of clothing. They made small talk as he drove the white Mercedes toward the restaurant at speeds considerably above the legal limit, and she noted that while he was a fast driver, he was also a smooth one. Once downtown, Archangel found a spot in the parking garage, and they walked the half block to the French restaurant where he had made reservations.

"I've never heard of this place," Cait told him after they'd been seated, taking in the decor. The walls were painted as a mural, looking out on the Eiffel tower. It would be easy to pretend they were in France.

"The food here is excellent, so is the wine. The next best thing to dinner in Paris."

She started to examine the menu as he checked the wine list. "Maybe just a bit too much like Paris. This is in French."

"Sorry, Caitlin, I forgot about that." It had been years since he'd been a regular at Le Peasant. "I know they have English menus." Archangel started to signal the waiter.

She was feeling particularly adventurous. Perhaps it was the company she was keeping. "No, don't bother. I wouldn't know half the dishes anyhow. Why don't you just order for me?"

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure. Just no frog's legs," she grinned. There was a limit to her adventurousness.

He chuckled, scanning the menu. "Don't worry, I won't eat them, either. How do you feel about Chicken Cordon Bleu?"

Caitlin had expected him to choose something more exotic. She wondered whether he tempering his tastes in deference to her. "That's fine."

The waiter returned and he ordered in what Cait suspected was perfect French. "So, you've been to Paris?" she asked, when the waiter had left.

"Actually, I lived there for awhile, but it was almost thirty years ago." Briggs sipped his wine, continuing. "I guess you could say I come from a long line of public servants. My father was - is - a career diplomat. I saw a great deal of the world before I was eighteen."

"It must have been exciting."

"In some ways, I suppose it was. I met people and had experiences I never would have had otherwise." He stared into the wine glass, recalling a few of the distant, fading memories of his youth. "Skiing the Alps, wandering through the Egyptian pyramids... Opportunities most people never have. I did both before I was twelve."

She could read between the lines, sensing a deep, hidden sadness. "But bouncing around the globe isn't much of a way to grow up, is it?"

Caitlin was, Briggs decided, entirely too perceptive. "Not really," he admitted. "Every time I learned the language and made friends, my father would be transferred again." As she'd guessed, it had been a lonely existence, and probably explained why even now there were few people he was close to. He shrugged. "On the other hand, it wasn't all bad. My mother felt sorry for me and gave me virtually anything I wanted. Toys, horses, private schooling, lessons in anything that caught my interest..." Michael smiled, "I think I may have been just a bit spoiled."

She laughed, trying to imagine him as a child. "I'll bet. Just how many languages do you speak, anyhow?"

"Ah, let's see. I'm fluent in French, German, Russian. There are about half a dozen others I can make myself understood in." Their food arrived, and he waited until their server had gone. "I've never let on, but I know enough Italian to catch most of Santini's insults." He grinned.

"The languages, was that how you ended up..." she started to mention the Firm, but thought better of it in the crowded restaurant, "...in your current line of work?"

"That was part of it." His knowledge of languages had always been an asset. He shifted the topic. "What about you? How did you end up here?"

"Well," she began, "I guess you must know how I found Santini Air?"

Briggs nodded. Hawke had told him how he rescued the 'flying meter maid' from the corrupt county sheriff, and about her nationwide hunt for a

pilot with the unlikely name of Stringfellow Hawke. "But I'm not so sure how you ended up with the Texas Highway Patrol in the first place."

"Well, my daddy learned to fly in the military. When he came home and went back to running the farm, he took up crop-dusting on a part time basis. He taught me, despite my momma's wishes. My reward for getting good grades was usually time in the airplane, maybe that's why I ended up winning a college scholarship. Momma wanted me to be a teacher, that's what I studied for. If things had turned out differently, I guess that's what I'd be doing now. But, the summer I finished college, daddy got sick. That was when my cousin told me about a job flying the radar plane for the Texas police. It sure paid better than teaching, even if momma didn't think too much of it, and they let me get my helicopter license. I think you know most of the rest." She was suddenly a little embarrassed. Cait knew that she had a tendency to pour out her heart to anyone who'd listen, and she hoped she wasn't boring Michael too badly with her family history.

"We're more alike than you might guess, Cait," Briggs admitted, surprising her. He was suddenly serious. "My parents - I should say my father - never agreed with the career choices that I made, either."

"If my momma had her way, I'd be back in Texas, married to Fred Smith, teaching third grade and raising a dozen kids." Cait wondered why she was telling him this, and why he seemed to care. Was it something in his espionage training that let him look interested in her silly family problems? Whether he really was interested or just pretending, Michael was certainly nothing of the ogre that String and Dom usually made him out to be.

"Fred Smith?" His question brought her back to their discussion.

"The boy next door. He runs the feed store now. My mother tried for years to fix us up together." Caitlin pouted. "Fred wasn't interested."

Whoever he was, Fred Smith was an idiot, Michael decided. Cait deserved far better than she'd gotten in the romance department. "I can't quite picture you running a feed store. Or teaching school." Archangel admitted, picking at his chicken.

"Neither can I." She matched his smile. "So what did your folks have planned for you?"

"Diplomatic corps. If I'd followed the path my father had laid out for me, by now I'd be the ambassador to some God forsaken third world country." For a moment, he considered telling her the rest of it, of just how much they did share. No. It was still too raw, too fresh. Those few short minutes in the middle of the desert had taken away everything he'd fought his father for over two decades earlier. He corralled those thoughts back into their own dark corner, forcing a light reply. "I guess the third world will just have to get along without me."

"You see your parents often?" Cait asked, curious.

He shook his head. "My father and I haven't spoken since I was in college, we were barely civil even then." Michael well remembered the arguments, the continual conflict that had eventually led to his final rebellion. The only thing they had ever shared was dogged stubbornness and the unshakable conviction each held that he was the one in the right. It had cost them any chance at a relationship they might ever have had. "As for my mother, well, it's just easier for everyone if I stay away."

"Siblings?"

"No, an only child." Michael Coldsmith Briggs the 2nd had wanted a son to carry on the name, once he achieved that, he had lost all interest in further offspring. Instead, he turned his energies toward making that son into a perfect copy of himself. He hadn't succeeded.

Cait began to realize just how lonely and isolated Michael's youth had been. Perhaps it was why he was one of the few people who could begin to understand Hawke. They weren't so terribly different, in the long run. While the circumstances varied widely, they were both lonely, both alone. String, though, at least had Dom. She wondered who Michael had. Cait knew she was prying, asking questions that were far too personal, but he didn't seem to mind. It almost seemed he wanted to talk, or perhaps he just appreciated having someone willing to listen. "You were never close to anyone?"

"Actually, there's been two. The first was my uncle on my mother's side. I never really knew him until I came back stateside for college. Unfortunately he was killed in an automobile accident shortly before I graduated. In those few years, he came to mean a great deal to me." Stephan Randall had been the one who had supported his decision to leave Harvard and abandon his political science major. He'd also supported Michael both emotionally and financially after his father had disowned him. "It was during that same time frame that I met the Admiral."

"Admiral Bower?" The eccentric elderly gentleman was the only member of the committee who could be counted on to invariably back Michael. She should have guessed that their relationship was more than professional.

Archangel nodded. "In some ways, the Admiral is the closest thing to a real father I've ever had. He's the one who brought me into the business." The conversation was straying too close to dangerous ground again, and looking for an excuse to change the topic, he glanced at his watch. Nine twenty-eight. That couldn't be right. He looked again. Nine twenty-nine. They'd been talking for nearly two hours? It didn't seem possible. He smiled sheepishly. "Ah, Cait, I think we're late for the ballet."

She looked at her own watch. "Heavens, you're right, we are! How'd it get to be half past nine?" Caitlin examined the table, the remains of their dinner. When she stopped to think about it, she did remember the waiter

bringing coffee and later refilling their cups. At least once, possibly twice. "I guess maybe we did lose track of time."

"We could make it by intermission," Michael offered.

Cait could tell he didn't really care about the ballet any more than she did. It was a shame to waste the tickets, but... "As Dominic would say, guys in leotards dancing on their toes. Would you mind terribly if we passed?"

"Not at all." He seemed somewhat relieved. "But I do suppose we should be going."

She nodded, noticing how the earlier crowd had thinned. He paid their bill and held her jacket as she slipped it on, then led her out to find the car.

They were laughing as they left the restaurant, the discussion having turned to one of Santini's old tales. Archangel knew he should take her home, but was a little surprised to find how much he was enjoying this evening. "Would you like to go somewhere and continue our conversation?"

Caitlin stopped abruptly and turned toward him, an impish grin on her face. She was no longer quite so intimidated by the deputy director and couldn't resist teasing him. Her eyes flashed with amusement. "I don't know if I should. Michael, you do have a bit of a reputation."

He paused to consider that. The reputation had always been an exaggeration, but in recent years, it couldn't have been much further from the truth. Not that he hadn't enjoyed the occasional date, but that was all any of them had been, dinner or a show and nothing more. The events of the last few years had left far too many scars, both physical and emotional, and he wasn't ready to bare either his body or his soul to a woman. Not yet.

Pushing back those thoughts, he matched her smile. "If you can't trust an angel, who can you trust? What do you say? Are you game?"

"I'm game. What do you have in mind?" She asked lightly, as he led her back to his car.

"You'll see." Archangel drove to an all night coffee shop, but it wasn't their final destination, he stopped only to pick up two cups of coffee. They went down a series of back roads, soon reaching an area Caitlin knew she should recognize, but couldn't quite place.

"Where are we?"

"You'll know in a minute." Michael grinned, somewhat amused that Cait hadn't already figured out where they were. He turned another corner, and she did know. They were on the back side of the airport, atop a small rise that afforded a fantastic view of the runways. From here, the runway lights arrayed before them seemed almost like Christmas. He pulled the car over and shut off the engine.

"It's beautiful here," Caitlin exclaimed. "I don't think I've never seen it from this angle before." It was, she decided, an interesting place to talk. Perhaps the angel in white wasn't quite so angelic? Before she could

wonder further about his intentions, he'd settled back into his seat, and the only move he made toward her was to pass her coffee.

There was so much she didn't know about him. Dom and String would seldom answer questions about this enigmatic man, she wondered if they even knew the answers themselves. One thing in particular she'd often wondered about. Impulsively, she turned toward him. "Michael, what happened to you?" As soon as the words left her lips, she wished she had never asked. Cait could feel him tense beside her.

He sipped his coffee before answering, giving himself time to find words that would answer her question without opening the doors further to any more old wounds. "I guess you could say I was bitten by a wolf."

It was obvious that no animal had attacked him, but she took it as an indication that he didn't want to discuss the subject. Just as she started to change it, she realized what he meant. Bitten by a wolf. Airwolf. That revelation brought a further horrible thought. While she respected his desire not to talk about it, she had to know. "Oh no. Please tell me String didn't...?" There was no need for her to finish the question.

The possibility that she might blame Stringfellow Hawke had never occurred to him. "No, not Hawke." Michael stared past the cup he held between his hands, remembering another cup of coffee. Coffee and bagels with salmon flavored cream cheese, early on a bright October morning in the baked Californian desert. "A man named Charles Henry Moffet, at a place called Devil's Anvil, almost two and a half years ago. Someday I'll tell you about it." Maybe someday, he told himself, but not tonight.

She was content to leave it at that, relieved to know Hawke wasn't involved. Cursing herself for ever bringing up the subject, she wondered how she could regain the lost mood.

Briggs beat her to it, turning his thoughts to a more pleasant topic. "Lots of stars out tonight." He observed, looking at the sky.

"It's supposed to be nice tomorrow, you should have good weather for your trip."

Damn, he'd totally forgotten about Washington and the plane he had to catch shortly after dawn. It was getting horribly late. "Cait, I..." he hesitated, not sure how she'd react to what he wanted to say.

She heard the hesitation, and she could guess what was coming. The brush off. It had been a lovely evening, but now it was over.

"Cait," he continued, "I enjoyed tonight, more than I've enjoyed anything in a long time." He stroked his mustache, stalling, before finally looking over at her. "I'd like to do this again."

The statement caught Caitlin off guard. It wasn't what she'd expected. As she digested that, he added, "I know Hawke and Santini won't think much of it, and if you'd rather not, then I certainly understand..." He also

understood all too well that there were other reasons she might prefer not to become involved with a beat up spy almost twenty years her senior.

Impulsively, Cait cut him off. "I'd like that. Very much." String's little joke hadn't quite turned out the way he'd planned. She sighed. Stringfellow was going to be a problem. Dominic would be even more difficult. "Michael, I'd love to see you again, but do you think we could do it quietly? Without the guys knowing? They're going to make our lives miserable if they find out."

He started to laugh, and for a moment she wondered if she'd been wrong about him. Seeing her expression, he started to explain. "Cait, I'm not laughing at you. Fact is, I'd been thinking much the same thing myself, I just didn't want to be the one to suggest it. For now, at least, there's certainly no reason for them to know."

The impish smile was back. "Think you can keep a secret?"

"Oh, I've kept one or two in my day." He returned her smile. "How about you?"

"I always did want to be an actress."

Archangel sighed reluctantly. "I guess we'd better get going." He started the car, and turned around, heading towards Cait's apartment. "What about tonight?"

"Tonight?"

"What do we tell them about tonight? You know they'll ask, and the first rule of the espionage business is to always keep your alibis straight." He grinned his amusement.

"That we couldn't stand each other's company?"

"Keep in mind that we've still got to work together," he reminded her.

"We better not layer it too thick."

Caitlin thought for a moment. "Why don't we tell them something they'll be ready to believe? We simply had a horribly boring evening." Her eyes sparkled. "After all, we have nothing in common."

Nothing in common. Caitlin couldn't know how far that was from the truth. Again, for one quick moment, he considered telling her everything. No, that was a different lifetime, a past he still wasn't ready to talk about. Not even with someone like Cait. "You know they'll be looking for details."

"I fell asleep during the ballet," she offered.

"Despite the application of my elbow to your ribs," he chuckled. "By the way, you snore."

"I do not!" She snapped playfully. "But you tried to drag me to a sushi bar. Raw fish, of all things!"

He warmed to the game. "And you wanted to stop for nachos and chili at some tex-mex place with a mechanical bull."

Caitlin had a sudden image of him on a mechanical bull, white suit and all. It brought on a fit of laughter which she finally contained, turning more serious. "You know, this sneaking around could be a little difficult."

"Why's that?" He already suspected what she was driving at.

"You are just a bit... conspicuous." It was putting the problem mildly.

"Me? You mean the rest of the world doesn't dress like this?" Briggs laughed. "I'll see what I can do about something a little more subdued." He reached across the seat, gently taking her hand. "When can I see you again?"

"When are you coming back from Washington?"

Archangel dreaded committee meetings, and now he really wished he could skip this one. "Sunday, but not until late, I'm afraid. What are you doing Monday night?"

"Oh, Monday I've got a reunion of my college sorority. Dom is letting me off early and I don't know what time I'll be home. How about Tuesday?"

"Tuesday." He slipped a card from his pocket. "That's my private line, call and let me know what time you're getting off work." They had arrived back at her apartment, and he pulled the car into a parking spot in front of the building. Shutting the engine off, he got out and opened her door for her, then walked her to her doorway.

"Come in for one more cup of coffee?" Cait asked, unlocking the door.

"I'd love to, but I've got to be on a plane in..." he glanced at his watch and was shocked to find it was well past 1 am. "...about 5 hours." Oh well, with luck he could sleep on the way to Washington. "Caitlin, thank you."

"Thank you. It was a lovely evening, Michael."

He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll talk to you Tuesday."

"Good night." Archangel waited until she had closed the door behind her. Moments later, driving back through the dark streets toward his ranch, he reflected on the evening. It hadn't been anything like what he had expected, but then, neither had Caitlin. Somehow, in just a few hours, she had drawn him out more than anyone had in years. Like it or not, it was going to be an interesting spring.

"I'm ok, guys, really! I mean it!" It was at least the twentieth time Cait had repeated the insistence that night. "Now you two go home and get some sleep. You've got that big Paramount stunt sequence in the morning and I already feel bad enough about you giving me the day off."

"You're sure you're going to be all right here alone?" Hawke glanced around Cait's apartment. "You know, we could stay here with you tonight."

It was a tempting offer, but no. She told herself it would be unfair to Dom and String. It had been a rough day for them as well, and they needed a good night's sleep almost as much as she did.

Things had started well enough. This year's sorority reunion luncheon was held on the Queen Elizabeth, and most of her old classmates had attended. Somehow, it had all gone horribly wrong. What began as a kidnapping for ransom of her friend Barbara had deteriorated into a hostage situation, with all of them endangered. Luckily, it had ended with none of the girls being hurt, thanks to Stringfellow Hawke - and Michael.

"It's ok, now go home. You're going to need to be sharp tomorrow." Cait herded String and Dom toward the door. It felt oddly like trying to drive cattle, except that the cattle didn't usually stand there and argue with you.

"You're sure Cait?" Santini had stood a protective guard over her all through the police debriefing. Actually, he had been a bit too protective. She had desperately wanted to slip away to spend a few minutes alone with Michael, but it Dom had made it impossible.

"I'm positive. Now go!" She was almost pushing the older man.

"Please? I'm a big girl now, remember?"

"Ok, ok, we're going." Hawke agreed. "You've got Dom's number, and I'm going to bunk at the hangar tonight. If you need anything, you'll call one of us, right?"

"Yes, I'll call. I promise." She got the door open and the two men half way through it.

"I guess we'll talk to you tomorrow, then, Cait. You take it easy." Dom worked his way out with reluctance. "G'night, kid."

They finally started down the walk, and Caitlin closed the door behind them with a mixture of relief and reluctance. The guys did need their sleep, but despite her protests, she wasn't really thrilled with the idea of being alone.

Standing there in the suddenly silent apartment, the terror of the day caught up with her with a rush. She had spent the day being strong for her classmates, but now that the crisis was over, the fear and terror she'd fought to deny found her and left her shaking. Caitlin leaned against the door, fighting the urge to call her friends back and tell them she'd changed her mind.

The doorbell rang. Cait let out a sigh of relief. One of them had forgotten something, probably as an excuse to return. Right now, she didn't care. She'd gratefully accept their company, even if it did make her look like a silly fool. She threw the door open, only to realize abruptly that the dim silhouette holding the pizza box was neither String nor Dominic.

Cait sagged with disappointment. "I'm sorry, I didn't order pizza."

"That's good, because the box is empty." The familiar voice made her take a second look at the delivery man.

"Michael?" For a moment she still wasn't totally sure. The ever-present cane was nowhere in sight. Denims, dark jacket with the collar turned up,

Raiders baseball cap - it was all so completely at odds with the striking white-suited agent she'd left at police headquarters only hours earlier. The only clue was the glasses, a pair of mirrored wraparounds that were totally out of place at eleven pm.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" He grinned as she stood there staring at him in amazement.

Cait moved to one side to let him pass, still stunned by the change in his appearance. If not for the distinctive limp, he could have walked right past her without her ever recognizing him. "You just missed Hawke and Santini."

"I know. I've been parked across the street waiting for over an hour. I was beginning to think they'd never leave." Again he flashed the smile. "I had to be sure you were all right." Michael closed the door behind him and dropped the empty box onto the counter. His arms slid around her, pulling her close. "Cait, you're trembling."

She felt wonderfully safe in his embrace. "I guess I'm just a little shaky."

"More than a little, I think." He freed himself from her enough to guide her to the sofa, and she sat down beside him, burying her face against his shoulder as he held her again.

Unconsciously, his long fingers stroked her hair. "Oh Cait, when Hawke told me you were on that ship..." He had seldom come so close to panic. To risk losing her so soon, after just one evening together. It had taken every shred of Michael's willpower to keep from betraying their secret and going crashing in after her himself.

"I knew you were out there. When he asked to talk to a Fed, I knew..." Cait drew a deep breath, and it turned into a sob. "Damn. I feel so stupid, Michael. I've been in so many situations that were so much worse, and yet here I am bawling like a baby."

He offered her his handkerchief and gently kissed her forehead. "It's not stupid, Cait, it's to be expected. Sure, you've been in worse, but then you were expecting it. You knew what you were getting into, and you could psych yourself up for it. This was different, your reunion wasn't supposed to turn into a war zone. There's no way to prepare for something like that."

She pulled back from him a bit, regarding him with the hint of a smile. "Terrorist psychology 101, humm? They teach you that at the Firm?"

"Something like that," He answered, his hands still resting on hers. "I've been there myself, Cait. I've had a few situations that suddenly went sour on me, too." At least she'd stopped trembling.

Caitlin wished she could read whatever emotions were hidden behind those mirrored sunglasses. She leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being here. Being so wise." She held his hands in her own.

He chuckled. "Wise? Now you're making me feel old." He teased her, trying anything he could think of to get her to open up. It was what she needed most now. If he let her dwell on what had happened, it would overwhelm her.

"You're never going to get old, you don't have the personality for it." For a moment, the impish grin he was already coming to know flashed. She happened to glance down, and realized with a start she was still wearing the same clothes she'd worn that afternoon. "Lord, I'm filthy!" Cait suspected that the hanger that she and her friends had been dragged through had last been cleaned during the ice age.

"Tell you what, why don't you go take a nice hot shower and put on something comfortable?" He realized how she might take that. "Maybe some old sweatpants, a flannel nightshirt, fluffy robe?" Michael grinned. "That sort of comfortable. Whatever feels warm and familiar."

"You really are determined to see me at my worst, aren't you?" Cait returned his smile.

"I sincerely doubt if you have a 'worst'. You'd look good in anything."

She ran her hand down the front of his jacket. "You certainly do. 'Subdued' indeed!"

"So, you really believed I was the delivery boy, humm?" He slipped the jacket off and tossed it on the back of the chair, revealing a white dress shirt beneath. She chuckled and he grinned. "Surely you don't expect me to change my entire wardrobe over night, now do you?" The Raiders cap joined the jacket. "Why don't you go take that shower, and I'll take a look around your kitchen, if you don't mind?"

"Sure, go ahead. I am going to go get cleaned up." Cait stood, hesitated. "You'll be here, won't you?"

He rose and gave her a quick embrace, lips brushing her cheek. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good." She gave him one last smile. "I'll be right back."

Cait stepped out of the bathroom twenty minutes later, toweling her still damp hair, wearing her most comfortable cotton nightshirt. "Michael?" she called, wondering at the odd noise she was hearing.

"In here," he answered from the kitchen.

She joined him and found the sound was coming from the popcorn popper. "Popcorn?" Cait asked, an eyebrow hiked inquisitively.

"With extra butter. And hot chocolate to go with it." As Briggs shut the machine off, she saw that he'd replaced the mirrored glasses with the half-darkened ones that were even more of a trademark than the white suits. "I thought you deserved a treat," he added.

"Sounds good to me." She picked at the popcorn. "How would you feel about some cheese on this?"

"I couldn't find any," Michael admitted.

"Ice box." Cait opened the door of the refrigerator and looked around in the back. "Here it is." She dusted the bowl with grated Parmesan, then tasted it again. "Perfect. That's what it needed."

He'd finished heating the hot chocolate. "Marshmallows?"

She shook her head. "How about whipped cream instead?"

"Even better." He waited while she squirted the cream onto both cups. "Want to take this into the living room?"

"Of course."

"Bring the popcorn." He followed her into the living room, and they sat on the sofa. She nestled tight against his shoulder, still not entirely past the days events. "How's the chocolate?" Michael asked as she tasted it.

"Decadent. And spiked, I think. Just what did you put in here?" The impish smile returned full force.

He winked at her, sparkle gleaming in his blue eye. "I can't tell you that. Top secret, need to know basis and all that. You know how that is." Briggs paused to take another handful of popcorn. "But I will say, it's a good thing you're not driving."

"You're drinking it, too," Cait observed.

"Well then, I guess it's good that I'm not driving, either, isn't it?"

"Michael, I..."

"Don't worry, Cait. I'm staying right here on this sofa. Nothing more than that. I just don't want you to be alone tonight." His arm draped gently around her shoulders.

His intentions hadn't been her concern. She realized that she wouldn't have protested if he'd had other plans. "Michael, you don't have to do that. I am feeling a lot better than I was."

"I do need to. For myself, if not for you. Besides, I'm on my second cup." Another wink. "I'm afraid I sort of started without you. I'm not going anywhere." He glanced at his empty cup. "Well, nowhere except after a refill, that is."

"Mine's empty, too," Cait noted with a bit of amazement, and handed the mug to him as he rose and headed for the kitchen. "Don't forget the whipped cream." As he made more chocolate, she flipped on the radio, finding a station playing soft, mellow rock. Already exhausted by the kidnapping, Caitlin was starting to feel the effects of whatever alcohol he'd laced the drink with. "So, do you always invite yourself to spend the night with strange women?" She asked playfully as he returned.

"Only the beautiful ones." Michael returned with the filled cups and resumed his seat beside her, picking at the popcorn. "And I wouldn't call you strange. Just a bit intoxicated."

"Now I wonder how that could have happened?" She grinned, sipping the chocolate. "So go ahead already."

"Go ahead with what?"

"Don't you try to tell me that you haven't been eying my coffee table." Cait teased. "Go ahead and put your feet up. Kick your shoes off if you want. It's ok, I've always got my feet on the furniture." As if to illustrate her point, she leaned further against him and pulled her feet up onto the sofa behind her.

"Well, if you don't mind." It felt good to stretch. He'd been on his feet most of the day, and his left leg was reminding him of it. "How are you feeling?"

"Ok, I think. Tired." She admitted.

"Want me to put you to bed? I promise, I'll be right here."

Cait shook her head. "No, I'd rather stay here with you. I don't really want to be alone."

Michael turned a little so his back was against the end of the sofa, then eased her into his lap. He pulled the afghan down from the back of the couch to cover her. "How's that? Comfortable?"

"Ummm. Nice. What about you?"

"I'm fine." His fingers found the back of her neck, gently rubbing the tension from her shoulders. "Feel good?"

"Wonderful," she murmured groggily. Michael was so tender, so caring. A corner of her mind wondered absently what she'd ever seen in Hawke.

Fifteen minutes later, Cait was sound asleep.

Late May 1986

Caitlin brushed her hair back from her face, wishing that she'd worn a hat or at least a headband. While she loved the classic convertible Jaguar, the wind made a horrible jumble of her hair.

"Want me to put the top up?"

Cait glanced over at the driver, his expression hidden behind the mirrored sunglasses he wore when they were in public together. Involuntarily, she smiled. On some level, Caitlin still found it amusing that the dapper agent could transform so smoothly into the man sitting beside her. Denims, a light blue cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the neck open, cowboy boots. He would have looked more at home in a western than in a spy flick. "No, it's great, just so long as you don't mind my messy hair."

It was the start of the long Memorial Day weekend, and Cait intended to enjoy every second of the three day break that Dom had allowed her. Michael had picked her up early and they had driven down the coast, spending the morning browsing antique shops. Antiques were one interest they shared, although neither was a serious collector. Lunch had been a picnic of fried chicken served on a blanket in the park, afterwards they'd

watched a group of kids playing Frisbee, rescuing the occasional errant disc that flew in their direction.

Now, the sun was dropping lower in the sky as he pulled into his own long driveway. It was a familiar route; she had been to the ranch many times before. Since their first date over three months earlier, they had seen each other at least twice a week, often cooking for one another at either his ranch or her apartment. The agent was a good cook, and she was looking forward to dinner. Earlier he had told her that Rosa, his Mexican born housekeeper, had given him a new recipe to try.

He opened the car door for her, a courtesy she wasn't accustomed to from most of the men she'd dated. Once they were both inside, he disappeared for a moment. When he returned, he had exchanged the sunglasses for the more familiar half-darkened ones. He turned the stereo on and let her set the table while he cooked their dinner.

They chatted amicably over the meal; she told him about her new flying student, and he described a polo pony he had debated purchasing. It was the easy sort of conversation two people fell into when they knew each other well and were comfortable with one another. After they finished dining, Caitlin insisted that he let her help clean up.

As Cait put the last of the silverware into the dishwasher, she felt his hands on her hips. She turned, closing the washer, and he slipped his arms around her waist. "So, you enjoyed dinner?" Briggs asked, kissing her cheek.

"It was delicious." Caitlin kissed him on the lips, inhaling the fragrance of his cologne. There was an exotic scent to it, something between spice and musk. "Umm. So are you."

He returned the kiss, holding it for a long minute before abruptly relaxing the embrace. "Well, I guess it's getting late. I better get you home."

It wasn't the first time he had backed away. Cait wasn't sure of his reasons. Age difference or not, he certainly didn't seem like the type who would be so old-fashioned. Her mind flashed back to Maria. Cait well remembered how strongly the East German's death had affected him. He had watched Maria die twice, first as someone who was seemingly killed trying to save him, and again, knowing that she had only used him. Could that be the basis for Michael's reluctance to take the relationship further?

Caitlin decided she wouldn't be put off quite so easily. She kept her arms wrapped tightly around him and held her mouth close to his ear. Her words were soft, but there was no mistaking her meaning. "Michael, I don't want to go home."

As the words left her lips, he froze, becoming a silent, unmoving statue. Mentally, Cait kicked herself. Whatever his reasons were, he wasn't ready for this. She had pushed too hard. Now she'd lost everything. "I'm sorry. I

shouldn't have said that. I just thought you wanted..." Desperately, Caitlin tried to put things back to where they had been.

"Shhhh," Briggs finally responded, tightening his hold on her as he buried his face in her hair. "Cait, don't you ever think for a second that I don't want you." There was such longing in his voice that it almost tore her apart to hear it.

"Then why...?"

"Because you deserve better. I never should have let this go on for so long. You should be with someone closer to your own age, someone..." He didn't continue his thought.

Cait could guess at what he had started to say. She brought her hand to his temple and ran it gently down the side of his face, brushing the frame of his glasses. "Is it because of this?"

He didn't answer, instead releasing her and turning away. Before he did, she saw the sorrow etched on his face. She shook her head almost imperceptibly. "It doesn't matter, Michael."

"Of course it matters." Briggs still had his back turned, and he seemed to be speaking as much to himself as to her. "You deserve someone young, strong, handsome... intact. Someone as fit and athletic as you are. You don't need some damned old cripple..."

"No!" Caitlin had circled to face him, and now she grabbed his hands, forcing him to focus on her. "Don't you EVER use that word. Don't you even think it."

"It's what I am, Cait."

"No." She lifted his hands to her lips, kissed them. "It's not what you are. You're a hell of a lot more than that. Michael, there's nothing wrong with you, not in any way that matters. Let me prove that to you. Please. Let me stay with you tonight."

There was a long hesitation. Finally, he reached out and took her chin, gently tipping her head up so he could look into her eyes. "Are you sure, Caitlin? Is this really what you want?"

"I'm sure."

Whatever he saw in her eyes convinced him. Releasing her jaw, he pulled her close, drawing her into a long embrace. "Wait here for a minute." Letting go at last, he limped across the dining room, switching off the lights and returning with the candle that had decorated the table. Holding the candle in one hand, he took hers in the other, leading her into the dark bedroom. Michael placed the votive on the bureau, where it cast a faint, flickering glow. The candlelight left most of the room in shadows, but it was enough for her to find his arms. They embraced, his lips parting as they joined hers. Moving on, his mustache tickled it's way along her neck, and he pulled her down to sit on the bed beside him.

Caitlin woke slowly, only gradually processing the knowledge that the previous evening had been reality and not some marvelous dream. The bright sunlight streaming through the windows finally shook the last of the cobwebs, and she raised her head, looking for a clock.

"Morning, Cait. How'd you sleep?"

She wondered how she could have known him for so long without ever realizing what a sexy voice he had. "Like a baby," she purred. Not that either of them had gotten very much sleep. "And how are you this morning?"

"Exhausted," Michael chuckled as she disentangled herself from his arms and rolled over to look up at him. It came as no surprise that he was already had on the half-darkened glasses, but she hadn't expected him to also be wearing a robe.

"You've been up?"

"I made coffee a little while ago. Believe me, I'm not fit to be around until I've got some caffeine into my system." Sliding up to rest his back against the headboard, he retrieved a second robe from the top of the nightstand. "This is going to be way too big for you, but you can put it on if you'd like."

Cait took the garment from him, stepping out of bed and wrapping the robe around her, tying the belt before she returned to sit beside him. The white satin felt smooth and vaguely erotic against her bare skin. "That coffee smells wonderful," she hinted, sniffing appreciatively.

"It does, doesn't it?" He slipped out of bed, grinning. "I'll be back. Don't go anywhere."

As Briggs went to fix their coffee, Caitlin took the opportunity to look around the room. Like the rest of the house, it was dark, heavily masculine, a sharp contrast to the wardrobe he had so long been associated with. Paneling covered the lower part of the walls, above it a dark hunter green wallpaper that was reflected in the curtains and the sheets that covered the oversized bed. There was a small television, functional furniture, and a branch of the stereo system that piped music throughout the house. It was a room that suited his personality, and she found it felt incredibly comfortable to her as well.

He returned with two cups, handing her one before sliding back into the bed beside her. "So, what do you think?"

She knew exactly what he meant, but it was so much fun to tease him that she couldn't resist. "Of the coffee?" Her eyes flashed with amusement as she sipped from the steaming mug.

Briggs laughed. "Of last night."

"Strong, tasty, and almost too hot to handle."

"You mean the coffee?" he asked, playing along with the game.

Caitlin grinned. "That, too." Playfully, she set her cup down and pulled him towards her. As he rolled across the bed, she suddenly drew in her breath. "My God..." Caitlin bit her lip, cutting off her words.

Michael's robe had pulled open as he moved, revealing the jagged marks gouged deep into his left thigh. "I'm sorry, Cait. Not very pretty, is it?" The bitterness was evident in his voice as he reached down to readjust the fabric.

She caught his hand. "No, don't. You don't have to do that." She brought his hand to her lips as she forced her eyes away from the terrible scars. "It's ok."

"I should have at least warned you. I never meant for you to find out like this." Michael looked away, visibly fighting his own emotions.

Cait understood now his reluctance to sleep with her. This was what he had been hiding, why they had made love by candlelight, the reason he had put on the robe before she woke. He hadn't wanted her to see the scars. She wanted to tell him it wasn't that bad, but they both would have recognized that as a lie. His leg was horribly mutilated, almost as if someone had taken a chain saw to it.

She wasn't sure how to reach him, only that she knew she had to try. Gently, she put her arm around him, easing closer until her head rested on his shoulder. "Michael, I have a cousin, about my age. We grew up together, back in Texas. When Evie was twelve, her baby brother got hold of a cigarette lighter and caught the house on fire. He had already gotten out, but she didn't know it. She went back in to look for him. Evie got burned really bad, she almost died. Afterwards, she was still my cousin. I still looked at her the same way, I still felt the same way about her. That fire didn't change that." Cait raised her head to kiss his cheek. "No matter how bad they are, a few scars don't change the way I feel about you, either." She searched his face for some sign that she was getting through to him. "Am I making any sense?"

"Yeah, probably more than I am."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Briggs turned toward her, his face a mask hiding the feelings buried beneath, his voice carefully neutral. "Cait, what do you see when you look in the mirror?"

Caitlin considered the question. "I don't know. Myself I guess. The five pounds that I'd like to lose, too many freckles." She could guess where he was headed. What he saw reflected in the mirror was far worse than freckles or a few extra pounds. Her voice dropped to a whisper, sensing how difficult this must be for him. "What do you see, Michael?"

He slowly stroked his mustache. For a long moment, he was back at Red Star with Moffet hovering outside, having just completed the demonstration

run. Staring into Airwolf's chain guns and missile launchers with the dawning realization that the man before him was insane. "I see myself as I was... before. And I see everything that I lost."

It suddenly dawned on her what was odd about the house. "Is that why there are so few mirrors around here? You got rid of them?"

"In a manner of speaking." He had never admitted it to anyone before, had seldom even allowed himself to think about it. "One night I... well, I guess you could say I lost it. I went through the house smashing every mirror I could find." It had been the night Hawke returned after stealing Airwolf. Gabrielle was gone, and Moffet's death hadn't even begun to pay for his sins. The pain and guilt had been almost unbearable, and he had already downed most of the bottle of Scotch when he caught his reflection in the mirror. At seven years apiece, how many decades of bad luck had that rampage cost him? Rosa had found him the next morning, collapsed in a corner of the bathroom, the fury and rage that had driven him since he'd signed himself out of the Firm's private hospital finally spent. The housekeeper had bandaged his hands and cleaned up the blood and broken glass, never mentioning the incident in the years since.

Cait turned to look at him, trying to imagine what it must have taken to push Michael over the edge. He was a man who usually kept himself under such tight rein, the idea of something shattering that control was almost terrifying. Her hand found his again, squeezing it tenderly. "Do you have any idea at all what I see when I look at you?"

"No. Tell me."

"All right, but first, let me tell you what I don't see. I don't see the scars, or the limp, or those glasses. I don't see any age difference. What I DO see is a very handsome, sensual, sensitive man. A man of fierce loyalties who would willingly move heaven and earth to protect his friends or his country. A man who enjoys the same things I do, with a great sense of humor and a wonderful smile," Cait paused, seeking the right words. "Someone that I am very much attracted to."

He shook his head wistfully. "You should have known me three years ago."

Cait smiled, biting her lip, the impish pixie once again. "I'm not so sure I would have liked you back then. I never did care for men who were stuck on themselves."

She was probably right. Despite himself, he laughed. "Touché."

Caitlin's arm was still around him, and she drew him close, holding him. She glanced down. He had pulled the robe back over his leg. Her hand brushed the satin. "May I?"

"If you want." He forced himself to watch as she pulled the fabric back, exposing the scars. They covered most of his thigh, jagged tears where the

metal had ripped through his leg, oddly smooth patches that were the result of skin grafts, long surgical tracks that extended almost from his knee to his hip. Even now, the sight made his stomach churn.

"The Lady did this?" Cait asked. While she was fully aware of Airwolf's capabilities, the idea of the pristine helicopter wreaking such havoc on someone she cared about was almost unthinkable.

"Moffet did it. If I blamed Airwolf for the acts of her creator, I would have let the Marines destroy her in Libya." He couldn't deny that the thought had occurred to him more than once.

As if touching a piece of fragile china, Cait's fingertips traced the worst of the scars. It had always been obvious that he had some sort of injury to his leg, but she had never for a moment suspected that it might be this serious. The marks were too deep, he had to be in constant pain. "Michael, I can't believe I dragged you into taking me dancing. Why didn't you say something?"

That elicited a faint smile, and he finally turned towards her. "The way I remember it, going dancing was my idea, not yours." It had been his idea, and it had been well worth the hours he'd spent soaking in the hot tub afterwards. "Besides, it's not as bad as it looks."

"Yeah, right, and the Pope isn't Catholic." Her eyes met his, and she found herself wondering just what was hidden behind the blackened left lens of his glasses. He'd left them on while they made love, even in the near total darkness. More scars that he felt the need to hide? There was a certain temptation to reach for them, to find out if he'd stop her. No. She had gained enough for one morning. For now, she would let him keep some of his secrets. There would be time enough to reveal the rest later, when he was ready. Instead, she slid her hand inside of his robe, running it along his ribs, feeling the muscles that lay beneath the tight skin. Michael appeared to be of average build, but he was deceptively rugged. Caitlin was beginning to realize that wasn't his only strength. She took one last look at his battered leg. "That has to be terribly painful."

He shrugged. In the years since Red Star, life had become a compromise, a careful balance between his desires and the price he was willing to pay to fill them. "It hurts, but I'm not going to stop it from hurting unless I spend the rest of my life laying in bed. Cait, I'm not willing to live like that. There are things that were taken from me that I have no control over, but I'll be damned if I'm about to let that bastard have anything else." Again, the faint smile that hid as much as it revealed. "I don't give a damn how much my leg aches, I'm not going to let Moffet keep me from dancing with the woman I love."

Michael realized what he'd said. Love. It was a sudden revelation, something that had been building since that very first dinner, perhaps since

their first meeting, but it was something that he'd never put into words or admitted to himself. He had long accepted that he was attracted to Caitlin and enjoyed her company, but now he recognized that it was far more than that. Their lips met and his fingers raked her fiery hair. They separated, and he breathed the words into her ear. "Cait, I do love you."

She had been waiting for weeks to hear him say it, knowing her own feelings but fearing to voice them. "Well, it's about time you figured that out," she taunted. "I love you too, Michael." Her searching fingers found the belt of his robe, began picking desperately at the knot. Finally, it loosened and the robe slipped open. "Make love to me."

"No." He pulled her closer, grinning, every bit as capable of teasing as she was. "I think it's your turn to make love to me."

Carefully keeping her weight off his leg, Cait straddled him, running her hands across his chest. She felt him stir beneath her. As he reached for her, he moaned, his voice husky with desire. "Umm... Caitlin, you're going to kill me..."

**Early November 1986**

Cait breezed into the office with the fury of a tropical storm, her wake scattering some of the scribbled notes that littered Santini's desk. "Hey, easy!" Dom protested, catching one slip of paper as it skittered off the desk and floated toward the trash. "You know, if you'd get here on time once in awhile, you wouldn't be in such a mad rush."

"Sorry, Dom. I got caught in traffic." She grabbed the daily planner out of the top drawer of her desk and flipped to the current date. "Oh damn, I DO have a student this morning."

"When are you going to take those down to the agency?" Santini demanded, ignoring her flustered urgency and gesturing toward the cardboard boxes piled in front of his desk. "I'm getting too damn old to be climbing over all this junk, you know."

In what Caitlin had later decided was a moment of sheer insanity, she'd volunteered to help coordinate the local homeless shelter's holiday collection. Santini Air had been one of the drop-off points, and they had accumulated several large boxes worth of donations. As they were filled, the cartons had been pushed into the office where they were now taking up far too much space, incurring Santini's wrath every time he tripped over one of them. "Dom, I'll get rid of the boxes at lunch time, I promise, but I've got a student. I've got to go, NOW!" She tossed the planner back onto the desk and turned toward the office door.

Hawke had listened to the conversation from the hanger, and now appeared in the doorway, cutting her off. "Give me your keys."

"What?" For one fleeting moment, she thought he wanted helicopter keys, that Hawke was suggesting that he teach the lesson for her. Knowing how much he abhorred student pilots, Cait couldn't imagine him making such an offer.

"Car keys. Give me your car keys," he repeated, holding out his hand. "I'll put the boxes in your car for you while you're gone, you can drop them off later." Hawke knew she'd been promising to deliver the cartons for days, and packing them into her car might actually get her moving. More to the point, it would get the stuff out of their way.

"Oh, here." She rummaged through her pockets, finally producing the keys to the aging Mustang. "I'll be back around eleven thirty, I'll take them down to the shelter then. Thanks, String!" Hawke watched, shaking his head, as she blew out of the office much as she'd entered.

"If she takes on one more little public service project, I'm going to strangle her," Santini complained, looking up from the paperwork he was still trying to sort out. "Especially if it involves filling up my office!"

Absently, Hawke juggled the keys. He knew that despite Dom's gruff exterior, a good number of the items filling the offending boxes had come from Santini himself. "Dom, you know what an old softy you are, especially when it comes to kids."

The older man nodded. String's words were particularly true now, with Le underfoot for the last few months. While it had happened under unfortunate circumstances, with the death of the child's maternal aunt in early spring, Hawke had gained a nephew. No - Santini corrected himself - not a nephew. A son. After the Firm's genetic testing had proven Le Van Hawke to be Sinjin's child, Archangel had twisted a few arms and pushed through the adoption papers. Le had been good for String, and String had in turn been good for Le. Raising a child was a new experience for Hawke, and one that increasingly brought him out of his self-imposed isolation. He'd even consented to built an addition onto the cabin for the boy. Dom only wished that Le had more of an aptitude for flying. While he was young and things might yet change, it appeared he'd inherited none of the natural ability String and Sinjin had shared with their father. Le might someday make a competent pilot, but Santini doubted he'd ever be of the class it took to fly stunt work - or Airwolf. However, Le did know computers. As he sorted through the scattered notes for the dozenth time, Santini began to reconsider the boy's repeated offer to help him computerize the office.

Finally, Santini opened the top drawer of the timeworn desk and scrapped the notes into it. "Later!" he announced, slamming the drawer shut. "I've got to go over to Pete's and pick up that tail rotor. I should be back in an hour." As he started to circle the desk, he stubbed a toe on one of the boxes. Hawke started to chuckle, and Dom responded with a short curse in Italian. "You're going to get these out of here, right, String?" It was almost a plea.

"They're on their way, Dom." As Santini left, Hawke grabbed a roll of tape and started sealing the first of the cartons.

When Santini returned, he was surprised to find Hawke sitting behind his desk, seemingly deep in thought, rather than working on the Jet Ranger as he expected. He started to make a quip about whether String was 'on the clock', but held his tongue when he saw the expression on the younger pilot's face. Hawke definitely had something on his mind. "What's up?" Dom asked, pulling up a chair.

Hawke reached down behind his seat. "What's this look like to you?"

Santini examined the object String placed on top of the desk. "That looks like Archangel's cane. Where'd you...?" Briggs was virtually never without the cane, and if it had appeared without him, then the suggestion was that someone or something had separated it by force. While Archangel wasn't exactly one of his favorite people, Dom didn't like what that implied.

"It is Michael's." Hawke leaned back in the chair, subconsciously not wanting to be too close to Dominic as he continued. "I found it in the back of Caitlin's car."

"Cait's car?" That didn't make any sense. Why would a kidnapper leave...? Not a kidnapper then. Santini quickly ran through a dozen possibilities, all of which seemed unlikely. Finally, he settled on the only explanation that made any sense at all. "Damn it, Hawke, she's working for him. I knew we should have packed her back to Texas in the beginning!"

"I don't think so, Dom." Hawke toyed with the cane, rolling it back and forth across the desk top. "Have you noticed anything unusual about Cait lately?"

Dom stopped to consider that. "Well, she's been dressing better, but hell, if she's picking up two paychecks, she can damn well afford to!"

"It's not just clothes, Dom. She's been wearing makeup, polishing her nails, having her hair done. Not to mention how distracted she's been. How many times have I heard you giving her hell about being late? I seem to remember Cait acting the same way on a couple of other occasions."

"Yeah, when she was seeing some... No, String, don't you even suggest that! Cait and Michael? I don't believe it. Even she has better sense than to get involved with him." Santini shook his head, trying to dispel the nagging doubt he was starting to feel in his gut.

"Stranger things have happened."

"When? Those two have nothing in common..." Santini stopped suddenly, trying to remember just where he'd heard those words before.

"Precisely. That's exactly what they both said months ago, after we tricked them into going to the ballet together." Hawke hoped that his friend wouldn't remember just who had instigated that particular outing.

"After you tricked them, you mean," Santini corrected. "So now what?"

"We find out the truth." He checked his watch. "Cait should be back in another fifteen minutes or so." String knew that even if they were right, she probably wouldn't admit it. "Dom, let me handle this, please?"

Reluctantly, the older man agreed, wondering just what they'd do if it turned out that Hawke was right, and that Cait was seeing the agent.

When Caitlin returned from the flying lesson, she found Dom and String working on the tail rotor Santini had picked up that morning. "Need some help, guys?" she offered, looking over String's shoulder.

"Oh, Cait, you're back. I've got to ask you something." String did his best to sound nonchalant, as he handed her keys back to her. "Come in here for a minute." She followed him into the office and waited as Hawke reached down behind Dom's desk. "When I put those boxes in your car, I found this in the trunk." He again produced the cane. "I was wondering how it got there. It's Michael's isn't it?"

As Santini watched from the doorway, Caitlin turned several interesting shades of red. "Um, ah, yeah, it is. Um, didn't I tell you about running into him at LAX last night? I was running so late this morning I guess I forgot all about it. Anyhow, I'd gone out there to pick up my ticket to fly home for Thanksgiving, and who do I run into but Michael? I gave him a ride back to Knightsbridge. He must have left the cane in the trunk when he got his luggage out." Behind her back, Santini rolled his eyes heavenward.

"Oh, that explains it, then." Hawke nodded. "I wonder where his limo was?"

"I think he said Marella had a flat or something. Probably got horribly dirty changing it." Caitlin seemed relieved that he appeared to accept the story.

"Either one of them change a tire? I don't think so, not in this lifetime. That's what road service is for." String grinned. He hung the cane on the coat rack next to Santini's desk. "I've got to go out to Thousand Oaks tomorrow anyhow, I'll drop it off. Knowing Michael, he doesn't remember where he left it and he's got half his angels out searching." He shrugged, dropping the issue. "Hey, how about doing me a favor?"

"Sure, String, what do you need?"

"Would you go over this for me?" He handed her the maintenance log from one of the helicopters. "It's not coming out right, there's a math error there somewhere, and I just can't find it. Dom needs me to give him a hand with that tail rotor."

"No problem, I'll find it." She acted almost eager to get rid of him. "You go help Dom."

Hawke had no more than closed the office door behind him when Santini attacked. "You call THAT finding out what she's up to?" the older man whispered.

String hushed him, and beckoned for Dom to follow as he crossed the hanger. He gestured toward the extension phone. "If I'm right, she's already called him." Hawke put his hand on the phone. "Now quiet," he warned. Gently lifting the receiver, he held it so they could both hear.

"...Michael, you left your cane in my car." Cait's voice floated from the telephone.

"Yeah, I noticed after you left. No problem, I'll get it tonight."

"There is a problem, Hawke found it!"

A long pause. "What happened?"

"I told him that I ran into you at the airport last night and gave you a lift back to headquarters, that you must have left it behind."

"Did he buy it?"

"I think so. He said he was going to be out that way tomorrow, and would drop it off. I wanted to warn you in case he got it into his head to call you about it in the meantime."

"Ok, thanks for the warning. At any rate, I'm leaving early today, so unless he calls soon he's not going to catch me. Are we still on for later?"

"Of course we are." Her voice softened. "I should be done here about four thirty or so, how about meeting me at my apartment around five?"

Hawke had heard enough. He spoke into the receiver. "I've got a better idea, Michael. Why don't you meet her right here?"

"String? Oh, damn! I forgot about the extension!" he heard Cait exclaim.

"Hawke?" Michael's voice was even.

"Yeah. I think we need to have a little talk."

"Hawke, if you and Santini have a problem with my relationship with Caitlin, you take it up with me. Leave her out of it. I'll be there in an hour and I'll tell you whatever you want to know."

"We'll be waiting." String hung up the phone, and Dominic followed him toward the office. Caitlin was opening the door as they arrived.

"That was a dirty trick!" she protested, eyes flashing with anger.

"Well, maybe this time you'd like to tell us the truth. What's going on with you and Michael?" Hawke settled himself on the edge of Dom's desk, arms folded in front of him. Santini claimed the chair behind his desk as Cait paced before hers.

"Ok, String, you want the truth? I'm seeing him."

"Caitlin, have you lost your mind?" Santini shook his head. "Archangel, of all people."

She turned on the attack. "So what's wrong with Michael? Yeah, I know you don't like him. Sorry Dom, but he's not some monster just because he works for the Firm."

"How long has this been going on?" Hawke asked, reserving comment.

"Since February." She finally sat down behind her desk. "The night you roped me into going to the ballet with him. Actually, we never did make it to the ballet."

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Santini snorted.

"It wasn't like THAT!" Caitlin insisted. "We talked and we lost track of time. That's all."

"And he never laid a hand on you?" Dom didn't believe it.

"He kissed me goodnight. On the cheek. Period." She desperately wanted to explain, to make them see what he was really like. "Remember my fraternity reunion?"

"You think either of us will ever forget?" Hawke remembered it all too well, the scene he'd found when he finally reached Caitlin. The botched kidnapping that had ended with one brother killing another out of some twisted sort of love and fear.

Cait's voice dropped. "That night, after you two left, Michael showed up." She could still see him standing there at her door, 'incognito'. "He stayed with me, spent the night sleeping on my sofa because he didn't want me to be alone." Caitlin doubted that she could ever explain just how much that had meant to her. "That's the kind of guy he really is."

String considered it. "How much have you two been seeing of each other? Is this just an occasional date, or are you two 'going steady'?"

"Going steady? That makes it sound like we're a couple of teenagers." Cait pouted, folding her arms across her chest. "We're not kids, String, neither one of us. Not by a long shot." She returned to his question. "In the beginning, we'd see each other a couple times a week. Dinner, a movie. Now, it's almost every night, unless one of us is tied up working. Sometimes it's no more than watching television, walking the beach, riding horseback... It doesn't matter what we're doing. He's very easy to be with, Hawke."

The younger pilot turned toward her. "One question. Do you love him?" "Yes, I do."

Santini shook his head. She was hooked, all right. A sudden thought occurred to him. "What about the Lady?"

"Airwolf? What about her?"

"Have you told him where she is?"

"No! Of course not." The question bordered on insult. "Dom, I wouldn't do that, and you know it. And Michael wouldn't ask, he's not like that."

Dominic had his own opinion of just what Archangel was like, but he kept it to himself. Hawke took the opportunity to interrupt. "Cait, I want you to take those boxes down to the shelter."

"What, NOW?"

"Yeah, now. I want to talk to Michael alone."

"Hawke, I won't have you attacking him!" Cait protested.

"I won't attack him," Hawke promised. "I just want to see what he has to say for himself. Now go." He urged her toward the door, and she reluctantly departed.

"Well, String, you were right," Dom admitted as soon as she was gone. "Now what are we going to do about it?"

"See what he has to say." Hawke checked his watch. "Michael should be here any minute."

"Are you going to deck him, or am I?"

"No one is decking anyone, not yet, at any rate."

Santini rubbed at his knuckles. "Speak for yourself," he muttered under his breath. As much as he ribbed Caitlin, he thought of her as he might a daughter. For any number of reasons, Michael wasn't someone he'd want any child of his involved with. He couldn't see how String could be so calm about it.

Hawke interrupted his thoughts. "Come on, Dom, maybe we can get the seal off that rotor before Michael gets here." He shepherded Santini back to the workbench.

They had just finished taking the rotor apart when Hawke's sensitive hearing picked up the sound of an approaching car. He looked up, then motioned to Santini. "Take a look at that."

The car just pulling to a stop outside the hanger was a silver Jaguar, an older two-seat model. Santini might not have taken a second glance at the driver who emerged from it had it not been for the half darkened glasses and the limp that became evident as Michael moved toward them.

"Been doing some shopping, I see." Hawke took in the dark pants and sweater.

Michael ignored the comment, scanning the interior of the hanger.

"Where's Cait?"

Hawke's lower lip curled into just the trace of a smile. "The homeless shelter."

"WHAT?"

"I sent her down there to drop off some of those donations she's been collecting." Hawke's thumb gestured toward the remaining half-empty box. "I thought it might be better if she wasn't around while we talked. We haven't thrown her out. Not so far." He sighed. "Come on in the office." Hawke made sure he positioned himself between Archangel and Dominic, as it was obvious Santini could barely keep his temper in check.

"What's going on with you and Caitlin?" Dom demanded as they sat down.

Michael adjusted his glasses, an unconscious habit that tended to manifest itself when he was trying to postpone the inevitable. "I suppose you could say we're dating."

"Since February?" Hawke asked.

"Yes." He didn't volunteer any more.

Dom folded his arms, his displeasure evident. "Are you sleeping with her?"

"That's none of your business, Santini," Michael snapped, glaring at Dominic.

"That's what I thought," the Italian growled. Archangel's reaction had confirmed his suspicions. "I..."

Hawke cut him off. "Michael, are you in love with her?" The question silenced the older man.

There was a long moment before Michael answered. When he finally spoke, his voice was so low it was barely audible. "I love Cait more than I've ever loved anyone in my life, Hawke."

The young pilot nodded his understanding. He heard the car pulling up outside, and knew it had to be Caitlin. "Your girl's back. You'd better go prove to her that we haven't skinned you alive." He motioned toward the hanger.

"That's it?" Dominic demanded of Hawke, incredulous. "That's all you're going to do?"

"Not quite." Hawke turned toward Michael, standing nose to nose with him. "Just one thing. If you ever hurt her, I will tear your head off. You do understand that?"

Archangel nodded. "I wouldn't expect any less."

"Good." Hawke sat back down on the edge of the desk.

Briggs started to go, and found Santini blocking his path. "Michael, you're not good enough for Caitlin," the older man observed, daring the agent to deny it.

He met Dom's gaze unflinchingly. "I know. That's exactly what I told her."

Surprised by the uncharacteristic answer, Santini let him pass. Briggs had just stepped out into the hanger when Hawke's call stopped him. "Hey Michael, forget something?" Hawke tossed the cane to him, and he easily caught it.

Hesitating, Archangel hefted the cane, twirled it. It had been a long time since he had actually needed it's support; carrying the silver-handled walking stick was essentially no more than force of habit. As much as he hated to admit it, perhaps Sara Lebow had been right. On some level, maybe he was looking for sympathy. While he was with Cait, he usually left the cane in the car. Somehow, like the white suits, it wasn't a part of his relationship with Caitlin. Instead, it only represented a chapter of his life that he was ready to close the door on. Impulsively, he lobbed it into the collection box. "Hell with it, someone else needs the damn thing more than I do."

He met Caitlin halfway across the hanger, the worried look on her face replaced with one of relief when she saw him. "Is everything all right?" she asked, not sure if she should let her guard down.

"They're not particularly happy, but..." He kissed her, well aware that they had an audience. "I guess they'll just have to get used to it."

Hawke and Santini watched from across the hanger, Dominic snorting. "Lord..."

"Might as well get used to it, Dom." Unknowingly, Hawke echoed Archangel's words.

"It won't last. She's just going to be hurt again," Santini predicted.

"I don't think so. Michael loves her."

Santini snorted again. "I doubt if he even knows what love is."

Hawke glanced at his friend and slowly shook his head. "Dom, you weren't there when Michael and I went in after that brainwashing serum." Caitlin and Santini had been flying Airwolf, and hadn't witnessed Archangel's reaction when his old flame had turned up alive. "You didn't see what it did to him when I killed Maria." Hawke knew that if he hadn't fired, Michael would have stood there while she shot them both.

Santini looked at him oddly. "So you're giving him Cait to make up for Maria?"

"You know better, Dom, but is it such a bad thing that they found each other? Who else is there for either of them?"

Dominic considered it. He had always wanted to see Caitlin with String, but as time passed, that seemed less and less likely. If anything, String looked at her as a sister. The last few men Cait had become involved with had all ended up trying to kill her, their real interest in a different 'Lady'. As much as Santini disliked and distrusted the man, he had to admit that perhaps Briggs wasn't quite as evil as he liked to pretend. Maybe Michael and Caitlin did have a chance, he mused, even if it WAS all the result of String's practical joke.

**Spring 1996**

**Mid March 1996**

Someone was screaming. He focused on the sound, fighting to clear his head. The heavy acrid smoke choked his lungs, tightening the vice around his chest. Another thunderclap, more breaking glass, another wave of heat. The screaming stopped. A deep red haze covered everything, growing progressively darker. He tried to rise and a wave of agony shot through his leg. As he fell back, he heard a soft moan from beneath him. Calling her name brought no answer. He groped blindly, found her throat, finally felt the weak pulse. No, she would not die here, not like this. Not because of him. Reaching down, he grabbed a handful of fabric, found it soaked. Thick sticky wetness. Blood. Hers or his own? It didn't matter, the increasing heat told him the fires were getting closer. They had to move. Now. Slowly, he began dragging the still form through the darkness, away from the source of the heat. Somewhere, somehow, he thought he heard laughter...

Briggs woke abruptly and sat up, gasping, damp with sweat. Over a dozen years had passed and he could still hear Moffet's laughter. Even now, he wasn't sure if it had been real or only a creation of his own mind. He forced himself to concentrate on the present, on his surroundings. The clear, fresh air of Eagle Lake. The rough hewn logs of the cabin, Le's room, which Hawke had so graciously let them use. The faint aroma of perfume from the woman beside him.

The sound of his ragged breathing awakened Cait. She put her arm around him and held him, gently rubbing at his back. "Are you ok, Michael?" The moon was almost full and enough light filtered through the windows for her to see the pain etched on his face. "Talk to me, love." After so many years she already knew the answer, but Caitlin had inherited her father's Irish stubbornness.

Michael shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I'm all right, Cait, go back to sleep." The sharp burning in his leg slowly subsided to the dull ache he'd long ago learned to live with. He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "You two need your rest."

As if to agree with him, the baby picked that moment to give her a sharp kick. "Owww!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"Cait?"

"Your son has awfully long legs!" she complained.

His son, he mused. It was almost enough to let him forget the nightmares. Almost, but not quite. He could still feel the smoke searing his lungs, the heat... He kissed her once more. "Caitlin, I'm sorry, I've got to get some air."

She knew the drill. He'd spend an hour out in the cold burying the ghosts, then he'd come back to bed. With luck, he might fall asleep a little before dawn. Cait nodded reluctantly. "Do what you have to do, Michael, just don't stay out there long, it's too cold."

He slipped out of bed, into slippers and a robe. Putting on his glasses, he picked up a quilt and wrapped it around him, then opened the door to the porch. "I'm fine, Cait. Go back to sleep. Please?" With that, he slipped out into the night.

For a few minutes Caitlin tried to do as he'd asked, but she was far too wound up. To make things worse, at eight and a half months pregnant, she wasn't particularly comfortable to begin with. She glanced at the clock. It was just before two. Perhaps a cup of lemon tea. Rising, she went into the kitchen and put water on to boil. As she waited, she looked out the window. Michael sat at the far end of the dock, silhouetted by the moonlight reflecting off the lake. Through ten years and perhaps a hundred nightmares, she still couldn't find a way to comfort him.

"You two have a spat?"

Cait spun, startled. Lost in her thoughts, she hadn't heard the footsteps behind her. "String, what are you doing up?"

"Checking to make sure my house guest hadn't gone into labor. I heard voices, and I thought..."

"I've got another two weeks yet!" she protested.

"You didn't answer my question," Hawke observed.

"What? Oh, no, we didn't have a spat, as you put it."

"So what's up?" He gestured toward the silhouetted figure on the dock. "Don't tell me the father-to-be is finally getting jittery?" Somehow, Hawke doubted that. This was, after all, the committee chairman who'd managed to schedule world events around Lamaze classes for the better part of the last nine months.

Cait cast another glance out the window. "How about some tea?"

"Sure." Hawke let her lead him to the kitchen. She poured the boiling water into two cups, and they sat at the table. "So?"

Over the years, she'd put together parts of the puzzle. Moffet had designed Airwolf, stolen it, and flown it to Libya. He had killed Gabrielle, String's lover. In turn, Hawke had killed him and taken Airwolf back. Somewhere in the middle, Michael had lost the sight in his left eye and gained a permanent limp. And the nightmares.

Cait pushed the tea bag around on her saucer, uncertain whether it was fair to Hawke to stir up his own memories. She glanced at him. He sipped his tea, waiting for her answer. "What do you know about some place called Devil's Anvil?"

Hawke almost choked on the tea. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but it certainly wasn't that. What had Michael told her? More to the point, what had he left out? "It's off to the northeast, out in the middle of the desert. Red Star, the Firm's old test range, was located out there," he answered carefully.

Her eyes turned toward the lake, the unseen figure she knew was still out there in the darkness. "What happened, String?"

"Michael never told you?"

"A few bits and pieces, but for the most part, he won't talk about it."

Hawke wondered if he should tell her. It wasn't really his story to tell, and he didn't know all of it. Most of what he did know had come from Gabrielle. He saw the worry that lined Cait's face. Maybe it would be better that she knew. As bad as the truth was, perhaps not knowing was worse. "Airwolf was undergoing final testing when Moffet stole it. On the way out, he dumped half her arsenal into the control center."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I don't think anyone knows for sure. There were rumors of some history between him and a senator who was there. Supposedly they'd crossed paths on an earlier project." Hawke had always suspected that there was something more, but Gabrielle hadn't elaborated.

"Michael and Marella were among the survivors," Cait prodded.

"No. They were the survivors," Hawke corrected, "and they both almost died. Actually, Michael did. Twice. Once on the way to the hospital, again on the operating table. Marella was in a coma for weeks."

"Good Lord." Cait glanced toward the lake again. "No wonder he won't talk about it."

"It didn't end there. The first few weeks, they thought he might lose his sight entirely. His leg, too. Then he ended up with pneumonia from the smoke he'd inhaled. Gabrielle told me the only thing that kept him alive was sheer bullheadedness." Hawke shrugged, gesturing. "Three months later, he walked through that door."

Cait shook her head. She knew it had been bad, but... "No wonder he has nightmares."

So that was why Michael was out in the cold staring at the lake. "Want me to try talking to him?"

"No sense in it. When he's ready, he'll be back." She changed the subject abruptly. "Thank you, String."

"For what?"

"For telling me. For letting us stay here until I have the baby. For being the only one who didn't give me a hard time over marrying him in the first place."

He grinned. "If I had, he wouldn't have asked me to be the best man at your wedding." Hawke would remember that wedding for a long time. It might have been a little less memorable if the honeymoon hadn't been interrupted by an overnight flight to Iran in the Lady.

Looking back, he realized it had been the first time the three of them had flown Airwolf without Dom. Carl Barron had died of a heart attack a month and a half earlier, and, as he'd claimed he would, had left Santini a large chunk of Barron Industries in his will. Dom had barely been able to make the wedding before flying back to corporate headquarters. Hawke still remembered Cait's amazement when she found that despite Dominic's reservations regarding her choice of a mate, her wedding present had been half-interest in Santini Air. Then again, Hawke reflected, he'd been almost as surprised when Dom gave him the other half of the business. "Did Dom say when he'd be back?"

"He said the shareholders meetings were scheduled to run through today and tomorrow. Um, make that yesterday and today," Cait corrected herself. Hawke had been out fishing when Santini called from Vegas, and with the toll charges mounting, he'd told her to tell String that they'd chat when he got back. It amused her that even now, Dominic still worried about his phone bill. Old habits died hard.

Hawke nodded. He would be relieved when Dom returned. Hawke, Michael and Marella had been quietly pulling shifts, making sure someone was with Cait. While she certainly wasn't old by any means, being over thirty five put her pregnancy into the 'elevated risk' category. Combining that with her usual tendency to push herself too hard meant they all worried about her. Once Dom got back, it would be considerably easier to find excuses for someone to stay with her at the cabin.

The ringing of the phone interrupted his thoughts. Alarmed, Cait glanced up at the clock. It was still only two fifteen. Calls in the middle of the night generally indicated trouble of one sort or another. Most of the time, they tended to involve Airwolf.

Hawke crossed the open area to the bar and picked up the phone. "Hawke here." He listened for a minute. "I'll get him." Covering the receiver, he nodded toward the lake. "It's Marella."

Cait went to the door and opened it, calling to her husband. A moment later, he took the phone from Hawke, still wrapped in the quilt. Hawke returned to the table, pouring himself another cup of tea. He suspected it would be a long night.

Fifteen minutes later, Archangel joined them in the kitchen. He'd already changed into a sweater and denims. Even at this hour, the denims were starched. While the white suits and cane had disappeared the day his relationship with Cait was discovered, Michael still had his own unique sense

of style. The agent started a pot of coffee and leaned back against the sink, arms folded, before he spoke. "Well, Hawke, feel like doing a little flying?"

"Where to?" String was guessing Iraq, maybe Bosnia.

"China."

"China?" That got Hawke's attention. "I didn't know there was anything hot going on over there?"

"There isn't. Not officially, at least." Archangel checked the progress of the coffee, then seated himself at the table. "There's a doomsday cult based near Peking which is strongly rumored to have deep ties into the Chinese military. We've received reports that they're working on a new biological weapon. A genetically engineered form of the Ebola virus. Something even more deadly and more easily spread than the original."

"My God!" Cait whispered. "Why would anyone...?"

"As I said, a doomsday cult. If it ever begins to make sense to the rest of us, then I will start to worry. At any rate, we've known of their existence for some time. Now, we've finally got someone willing to give us proof."

Hawke would always be the skeptic. "What's it costing us?"

Archangel shrugged, getting up to fix his coffee. "Several million dollars worth of diamonds. Considerably less than the information is worth, I assure you."

"So you want me to fly the Lady to China and swap some diamonds for... what... documents? A test tube?"

"No," he sat back down, sipping the coffee. "I'll be the one swapping the documents." He could see both Cait and Hawke starting to protest. "It has to be that way. Hawke, you don't have the background on this and I don't have the time to brief you. There's certain information that we need, and if it's not there, then the papers are useless. I know what I'm looking for, all you need to do is get me in there and back out again."

Caitlin shook her head. "Michael, I really don't like this." He hadn't done much field work as deputy director, and she had assumed that after finally taking over the chairman's position he'd do even less. Unfortunately, Briggs still had a hands-on style, and it didn't always work out that way.

"I don't like it either, believe me. I want to be here with you." Archangel reached over and squeezed her hand. "I promise, this won't take long, Cait."

"So what's the schedule?" Hawke asked, rising to put his cup in the sink.

"Marella will be here in a few minutes with the diamonds. She'll stay here with Caitlin until we get back. You can drop me at the ranch, fetch the Lady, then swing back by and pick me up." He knew without asking that Hawke still wasn't about to let him near Airwolf's lair. "We're tight on time, we need to be there and gone before dawn."

"What about refueling?"

"There'll be a tanker waiting, Marella's already set it up."

"Why don't I go with you two? I'd feel a whole lot better about it," Cait suggested.

"No!" Both men answered in unison.

"Cait, I don't want my son being born in China," Michael teased her gently, trying to take her mind off her worries, "or over the Pacific, for that matter."

"And nobody is having any children in my helicopter," Hawke added.

"Your helicopter?" Michael asked, giving Hawke a quick half-grin.

Hawke's plans for a retort were interrupted by the sound of rotor blades. A few minutes later, Marella entered, acknowledging them and handing her superior a small velvet bag. He examined the stones while Hawke changed into his flight suit. "They're what he requested?" Archangel asked.

She nodded. "Three million dollars worth of uncut stones, sir. Virtually untraceable."

"Good." He moved toward Caitlin, and she rose and kissed him, giving him a hug she was reluctant to release. "I want you get some sleep, now, please?"

"I'll try." She agreed. "Michael, be careful." Cait kissed him once more, then whispered into his ear. He grinned and whispered back, and she finally released him. She looked over at the other man. "String, take care of him for me."

"You know I will." Hawke patted her on the shoulder. "Come on, Michael, we've got to go."

With one last glance at Caitlin, the agent followed Hawke out the door.

Archangel leaned against the fence post, scanning the dark night sky. Nestled into a hidden canyon, the Briggs ranch was an ideal spot to bring the Lady in, and over the years his horses had grudgingly become accustomed to the noisy intruder that sometimes visited their pasture. Michael checked his watch again, impatient and eager for the warmth of the cockpit. He tugged at the sleeves of the flight suit, wishing the arms were a bit longer. It was time, perhaps, to stop borrowing from Hawke and see about having a flight suit made that actually fit him.

Since his marriage eight years earlier, Michael had increasingly found himself behind Airwolf's engineering console. Dominic Santini remained Hawke's preferred co-pilot and the two of them had no trouble flying the Lady alone, but with his other commitments, Santini was often unavailable. In Dom's absence Cait moved into the left seat and frequently Hawke invited Michael to join them. Caitlin lacked the vast wealth of experience that both Hawke and Santini had; a spare pair of hands on the engineering board freed her to concentrate on the aircraft.

It certainly wasn't as if he had anything better to do. Archangel shook his head, considering the situation he found himself in. It had taken four years to track down the source of the funds the Firm had used to build Airwolf II behind his back, four years and the help of Hawke's adopted son, Le. Even at the tender age of sixteen, the boy had been better with computers than the so called experts at the Firm - and had helped Michael hack his way into Zeus's private files. What Briggs had found there had not been totally unexpected. The then director of the Firm had laundered government money through a number of illegal enterprises, not the least of which were drug rings, arms sales and brothels. What did come as a surprise was that virtually the entire committee was equally dirty.

Archangel and his long time friend the Admiral had been the only two committee members to survive the ensuing investigation. The Admiral had chosen to retire and Michael found himself in charge of the clandestine government agency. Within a few months, he understood why the Admiral had opted for retirement. It was an incredibly powerful position, but it was also highly political. Worse, it was boring as hell.

Michael had spent most of his first twenty years with the Firm in the field, darting around the globe on a moment's notice, all too often dodging bullets. Despite his physical limitations, there was a part of him that still craved that sort of life. Instead, he spent his days attending meetings and entertaining senators. He had done many of the same things as deputy director, but not as a steady diet. Now, it seemed that was all there was. Except Cait and Airwolf. Either of the 'ladies' could certainly relieve boredom.

He heard the banshee wail before he saw her, the dark helicopter running with no lights as she descended into the canyon. Michael was climbing through the door almost before Airwolf landed. He slid into the rear seat and started scanning the instruments even as he pulled on the helmet and tightened the belts. "Everything's green, Hawke."

"Good enough, Michael. We're out of here." The pilot gained altitude, and engaged the turbos. "Suppression mode on?"

Briggs flipped switches on the control surface before him. "You've got it."

Hawke settled into his seat, blasting down the narrow winding canyons at just under the speed of sound. They would be over the ocean within minutes, once clear of the coast, they could go to full power. Archangel busied himself with running a systems check, keeping his attention on the computer. As much as he hated to admit it, skimming the deck at high speed didn't agree with his stomach, and he kept himself distracted from the lights flashing by below. The feeling would subside once they were over the water and the lack of reference points took away the perception of speed.

It was only a matter of minutes before they were offshore, and Hawke called for full turbos. Michael slammed the levers forward, and Airwolf surged ahead. "So, Marella has our tanker waiting?"

Archangel tapped a few commands into his keyboard. "Coordinates are locked into the guidance system." He had no doubt that the refueling tanker would be exactly where it was supposed to be. Technically, Marella had taken over his old job as deputy director when he moved up, but she was still his incredibly competent right hand. His assistant had changed little over the years, still clinging to the unofficial all-white dress code that had once earmarked his department despite his own abandonment of it. Michael chuckled to himself, remembering the whispered analysis of his preference in clothing that had long occupied the office staff. Cait and Marella were the only ones who knew the truth, that it was simply a habit he'd picked up decades earlier. He had originally started wearing the immaculate three piece suits to irritate his father, after the older man had ordained that the worn cords he preferred were unacceptable apparel for someone of his station.

"It's going to be awhile before we pick up that tanker, you might want to get some sleep." Hawke offered, switching on the autopilot and then pulling off his helmet, exchanging it for a radio headset. Over the years they'd found the headsets were far more comfortable for long flights and were more than sufficient when they didn't need the tactical advantages the helmets afforded. He poured coffee from the thermos beside him, then offered the bottle to Michael.

"Not now, thanks." Archangel declined the coffee, pondering Hawke's offer of sleep. He and Cait had been talking when Marella called. Michael wondered what they'd been so seriously discussing. Had Caitlin told Stringfellow about the dreams? Not that it really mattered, nightmares were one thing Hawke would understand. The pilot certainly had enough of his own. More than once Michael had heard him fighting some imagined enemy in his sleep, crying out for his lost brother. The demons Hawke lived with were far worse than any that haunted him.

It would be a long round trip for one pilot, without either Dom or Cait to back Hawke up. Maybe it would be wise to get some rest now, then at least one of them would be alert for the return trip. Assuming that he COULD sleep without the nightmares returning. He pushed the seat back as far as it would go, stretching his legs. "I think maybe I will take you up on that nap. Let me know when we get close to our contact."

"I will." Hawke relaxed, or came as close to relaxing as he could at well above the speed of sound. Even though the autopilot flew flawlessly, at that speed, they could close far too quickly on the unexpected. The coffee was strong and hot, and he let it cool a bit before he drank it, watching the faint

ripple on the surface of the liquid that was the only indication of their movement. The Lady might be a dozen years old, but she was still one hell of a ship. Satisfied, he downed the coffee, noting with amusement that Michael was lightly snoring.

Searching for something to occupy his mind, Hawke considered how his relationship with the agent had changed over the years. They had, in the beginning, been as much adversaries as allies. Over the years, there had developed a cautious friendship. He still didn't trust Michael, not totally. Not enough to reveal the location of Airwolf's lair. They were, however, a lot closer than they had been. Michael's relationship with Cait had helped that, as had Le. Despite maturing into an intelligent young man, Le still called him "Uncle Mike". Hawke grinned to himself. Maybe someday he'd tell the boy how much his 'uncle' loathed being called Mike.

Hawke found himself wishing his son was there, rather than off at graduate school. Archangel had gotten Le into one of the finest colleges in the country. Despite Hawke's misgivings, Briggs had insisted on footing the bill for the boy's first four years of higher education. Payment, he claimed, for helping to dispose of Zeus. The agent would have paid for graduate school as well if Dom hadn't insisted that it was his turn. Michael definitely did have his moments, most importantly, he treated Cait well. Briggs had been nothing short of elated when Caitlin had learned she was expecting. Hawke suspected that Michael would make an excellent father.

Time passed quickly, and the refueling went without a hitch. As they neared the Chinese coast, Archangel filled Hawke in on the details of the mission. They would set Airwolf down in a hidden clearing near a run down industrial area on the outskirts of Beijing. Their contact would meet them in an abandoned warehouse half a mile from the clearing, and exchange the packet of diamonds for the documents proving the existence of the altered Ebola virus, naming those responsible. Back to the helicopter and out the way they'd come in, low and fast beneath the radar, hidden under the cover of darkness. If all went according to plan, no one would ever even know they'd been there. Hawke hoped it would be that simple.

"Coast coming up." Michael announced needlessly, keying commands into the radar. "No air traffic in our immediate area."

"Good, let me know if anything gets close." The flight plan Marella had given them should keep them away from the major traffic lanes, but anything was possible. Hawke turned off the autopilot and regained control of the helicopter. "Ok, cut the speed."

They dropped below mach, not wanting a sonic boom to announce their presence. Archangel busied himself with the control panels again, more than willing to pass up the view. The clearing was right where their contact had said it would be, and Hawke descended into it, shutting the rotor down

as soon as Michael had confirmed the screens were still clear. They stepped from the helicopter, and Hawke keyed the lock, not particularly happy about leaving the Lady in the open, but knowing they'd be gone before dawn. He pulled a compass from his pocket, and gestured to the west. "Let's go."

They found the warehouse with little effort, a decaying wooden building with a metal roof that appeared close to collapse. Hawke ducked toward it, automatic drawn, with Michael close behind and similarly armed. Motioning Michael to cover him, he cracked the door. Inside, a faint greenish light dimly illuminated what might once have been the office. A shadowy figure sat atop a surviving bench, his back propped against the wall, a cigarette dangling from his lips, unspeaking. Hawke beckoned Michael inside. "Friend of yours?" he murmured as Archangel passed him.

Michael ignored Hawke, instead asking a quick question in broken Chinese. The contact bobbed his head, grinding the cigarette out against the top of the already filthy bench. "You are the one called Archangel?" he asked, in heavily accented English. He was a small man, perhaps in his early forties, his face hidden in shadows behind the brim of his hat and a long goatee.

"I am. You have the files we spoke about?" Michael holstered the weapon he carried. Hawke remained on alert, but lowered the 9mm to his side.

"I have." The man hopped from the bench and reached down behind it for a heavy leather briefcase, handing it to Michael. "This is what you asked for."

The agent opened the case, flipped through the folders inside, scanning some of the documents. "Jesus." he muttered, shaking his head. Finally he looked up. "It's as we agreed." Closing the briefcase, Archangel pulled the packet of gems from his pocket. "I think you'll find these equally satisfactory."

Their contact dumped some of the diamonds from the cloth bag into his hand, examining them closely before dropping them back into their pouch. "Very good. As they say in your country, it has been a pleasure doing business. If you ever need anything else, do not hesitate to call." He glanced toward the door. "We should not leave together."

Michael nodded. "Agreed. Go, we'll wait."

With a slight bow, the darkly dressed informant slipped out the door and into the night, leaving Hawke and Archangel alone. "So far, so good." Michael checked his watch. "We'll give him five minutes."

Hawke didn't like waiting, something still didn't feel quite right. The building creaked, and somewhere a branch scrapped against the roof.

Briggs drew his weapon as String cracked the door, looking out to scan the area. All appeared quiet. "Must have been the wind." The pilot suggested, although he wasn't quite satisfied with the explanation. Pacing impatiently, he examined the light stick that gave the area its dull greenish glow. It was similar to those he'd used while camping. Continuing his pacing, he returned to the door.

"Five minutes. Let's get out of here." Michael finally announced, picking up the case.

"About time." Hawke pulled the door open enough to look out. Nothing had changed. He gestured for Archangel to follow him, and stepped out of the warehouse. Staying close to the side of the long building, they started toward the far end, closest to the woods.

Hawke's superior hearing caught a faint click, the sound of metal on metal, somewhere above and behind him. He started to turn, throwing his left arm up to protect himself from whatever was coming. "Michael, watch...!" He never finished the warning, as a razor sharp blade bit deep into his hand, followed a moment later by a heavy mass landing on top of him.

The uncompleted cry gave Archangel a chance to react, and he swung the case around and upwards. It took the brunt of the impact as the second of the two men who had been waiting on the roof landed almost on top of him. Despite String's warning, the assailant still knocked Briggs into the wall of the warehouse, stunning him. Luckily, it had also dazed the figure that had leapt on him, and the second aggressor crouched on the ground, regaining his bearings just long enough for Michael to bring the case up, warding off another blow.

The shadow that had attacked Hawke was now facing him, moonlight glinting off the attacker's long knife as he circled, sizing up his opponent. In the initial skirmish, Stringfellow had lost the automatic, and now he resorted to his martial arts training. A quick roundhouse kick connected with the enemy's ribs, but brought only a loud grunt and some shouted words of Chinese. Circling again, Hawke's assailant flicked out with the knife, catching the pilot's upper arm.

As the other figure charged him, Archangel finally had a chance to aim his Luger, and his attacker went down with a soft pop from the silenced weapon. He turned on Hawke's opponent, but String moved between them and he didn't dare fire. Michael ducked behind the pilot, trying to get a clear shot.

Hawke finally spotted his automatic and dove for it. He rolled as he hit the ground, the blade of the knife just missing him. The weapon came up, and Hawke fired repeatedly, the impact of the bullets throwing the assailant

backwards. As String sat on the ground, regaining his breath, Archangel examined the bodies. "They're both dead. You ok?"

The pilot struggled to his feet, swaying slightly. "No."

Michael spun, bodies forgotten. Even in the pale moonlight he could see the blood running down Hawke's left arm, leaving a trail of dark splotches where it dripped on the sandy soil. "Damn!" After a quick check to be sure they had no more opposition, he shoved his weapon into his belt, maintaining a grip on the case with one hand while he supported Hawke with the other. "Back in here where I can get a look at that." He pulled Hawke into the warehouse.

Once inside the building, Michael threw down the briefcase and examined Hawke's injuries. The slice across his upper arm was bleeding heavily, but it was the cut deep into String's left palm that worried Briggs the most. Archangel was sure he saw bone beneath the blood. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wrapped it tightly around the injured hand, slowing the flow of blood. "Here." Hawke gave him a second cloth, and Michael secured that one around the arm wound. "We were set up!" the pilot cursed.

"I don't think so." The agent finished binding the cut. "I don't know much Chinese, but I heard the word for heroin. I've got a feeling we stumbled into the middle of someone's drug deal."

Hawke snorted. "Just our luck."

"Can you make it back to Airwolf?" Michael asked, turning his attention from the pilot for a moment, pulling the documents from the battered briefcase and tucking them inside his flight suit.

"Yeah." Stringfellow tentatively tried to flex his hand, bringing a spasm of pain and renewed bleeding. "Michael, this isn't going to work. I can't fly like this."

"Damn it, Hawke, keep your hand still." Archangel readjusted the makeshift bandage, tightening it. "We'll deal with one problem at a time. First let's get you back to the Lady where there's a decent first aid kit." Michael drew his weapon and checked the door. "Now stay close, and DON'T move that hand."

They crept back through the woods, Hawke moving awkwardly with the wounds to his hand and arm. Finally, they reached Airwolf. Archangel helped String into the back, grabbing the medical supplies. In a few minutes, both gashes had been wrapped and taped, the bleeding almost stopped. "Better?"

Hawke nodded, fighting the lightheadedness the movement brought on. He had lost a considerable amount of blood and it was affecting him more than he cared to admit. "Hell, Michael, it's better but I still can't fly the Lady with my hand wrapped like this." Hawke wondered if Marella could get Dom

to China, and whether they could somehow hide Airwolf until he arrived. When dawn came, the helicopter would be a sitting duck, and the sky was already growing lighter.

As Hawke searched for options, Briggs slid from the back of the ship. "I can."

"You can what?"

"Fly Airwolf. I'm getting us out of here." Archangel's voice dropped as he climbed into the pilot's seat. "I hope," he whispered under his breath, reaching for the helmet Hawke had left on the co-pilot's seat.

Hawke snorted, convinced that this time the agent had truly lost his mind. "It can't be done, Michael. A helicopter isn't a Piper Cub. You don't just get into a chopper and fly it, no matter how much time you've spent riding around in one." Even in an airplane, it would be next to impossible.

Michael turned in his seat, surprise evident on his face. "Well I'll be damned. Caitlin was right. You don't know, do you?" He turned his attention toward the helmet, adjusting it before pulling it on.

"Know what?" Hawke struggled into the second helmet, working with just his right hand, wondering why Archangel was so determined to kill them both.

"Hawke, I was eight years old the first time I flew a plane, fourteen when I first flew a chopper. I used to be a pretty decent pilot, up until..." An edge of bitterness crept into his voice. "...until Moffet made sure I'd never pass another flight physical." He reached for the belts. "Can you handle the engineering panel?"

"Yeah, I think so." Hawke propped up his injured hand, made sure he could reach the controls he'd need. Could Michael really pull this off? "Have you flown at all since?"

"Not on the books."

Someone had been letting the agent take the controls. "Cait or Marella?"

Archangel grinned. "Caitlin, and if Dominic finds out, he'll strangle both of us." Briggs adjusted the belts one final time. He paused. "Hawke, I can't keep her down under radar, not at any sort of decent speed. If I try it I'm going to stuff the Lady into a hillside." From the tone of his voice, it was obvious it was an admission he didn't enjoy making.

"Ok." It wasn't what String wanted to hear, but at least Michael had some idea of his limits. "Take her to twenty thousand feet, and run like hell for the coast." Hawke knew the odds were strong that they'd run into resistance. Dawn was starting to break, and they would show up from the ground as well as on radar. "Michael, let me warn you, Airwolf doesn't handle like a Jet Ranger. The controls are going to feel sluggish until you get some speed and altitude."

"I know. And she kicks like an irate mule when you engage the turbos." Hidden behind the helmet, the agent allowed himself a thin smile.

Hawke found himself at a momentary loss for words. He finally found his voice. "You've flown her? Don't tell me Cait let you...?" String couldn't quite believe that Caitlin would have gone behind his back and allowed the agent near Airwolf.

"No, don't blame Cait. She had nothing to do with it. I'm afraid it's been over a dozen years since I've flown the Lady." Archangel reached forward, hands gently caressing the controls like a long lost love. In some ways, that was precisely what the helicopter was, despite the fact she had once almost killed him. "Well, let's see how much I remember." A long sigh, and one last swipe of sweaty palms on his flight suit. He took a firm grip on the controls. Gingerly, the helicopter eased off the ground.

Hawke shook his head. Who the hell had taught the agent to fly Airwolf? A dozen years? Moffet? If they survived the next half hour, Michael was going to have a lot of explaining to do. "Easy on the cyclic, bring her up nose up. Easy... easy... Good. You've got her." He said as little as possible, letting Archangel concentrate getting the Lady into the air.

"Twenty thousand feet," Michael announced, as Hawke saw the numbers flash on his own panel. "Let's get the Hell out of here." He banked Airwolf around tightly and headed toward the coast. "What about the turbos?"

"Think you can hold her?" The agent had done an admirable job so far, if he thought he could control the turbos, Hawke was willing to let him try.

"There's only one way to find out." Archangel knew that every second they spent over China was another chance for them to be spotted. He tried to sound more confident than he felt. "On a three count?"

"Ok. Three... two.... one... turbos." The Lady shuddered as they ignited, but Michael caught her, keeping her pointed toward the coast. "Doing good." Hawke began to think they might actually make it back to international airspace.

A sudden beep attracted his attention back to the computer screen in front of him. "Damn it. Michael, we've got company." Awkwardly, he typed in the commands to identify the bogies. "MIGs. Three of them. Twelve o'clock and closing."

The curse coming from the front of the cockpit wasn't encouraging. "Hawke, I'm not a combat pilot, I never was. You call the shots, I'll do the best I can."

There was no easy way to dispose of three MIGs, not when the planes were between them and their objective. Hawke desperately wished either Dom or Cait was flying. He knew what they were capable of, but Michael was a total unknown. Hawke could only go on instinct. Over the years he'd found that anything Briggs did, he did well. Hopefully, that included flying.

"Take her up, hard climb." It might work, if Michael was a good enough pilot to pull it off. "At sixty thousand feet, snap the nose over and dive."

Archangel worked the controls and the Lady shot skyward. "What's your plan?"

"When we get down to ten thousand, you pull out of the dive. I cut the turbos, re-engage the rotors, and drop the ADF pod. It should put you right on top of them." At least, Hawke hoped Michael could pull her out. He watched the altitude meter climb. "Lower your helmet visor, let the automatic targeting system lock onto the MIGs."

The visor clicked as it snapped into place. Hawke would have dealt with the planes manually, but he knew that was far past Archangel's abilities. With the automatic targeting, all Briggs would have to worry about was flying the aircraft and pulling the trigger. "Coming up on sixty."

"Ok, over the top." The Lady swung around, suddenly dropping like a stone. "Good." That was the easy part. "She'll fight you when you pull her up." Hawke warned.

Archangel nodded tensely. "I know. Call me off altitudes."

"Fifty thousand... forty... thirty five... thirty... twenty five... twenty... fifteen... that's it." Hawke braced himself against the console as the g-forces took hold, pushing him into his seat. In his weakened state, it brought a quick wash of dizziness.

Michael fought the helicopter as it tried to continue its downward plunge, the wolf howling her loudest with the unexpected change of direction. Finally, he felt the controls begin to respond. "Kill turbos."

Forcing himself to concentrate, Hawke responded, hitting the switches to cut the turbos and re-engaging the rotors seconds later as their speed dropped. The Lady shook, this violent treatment at the very limits of her design specs. The ADF pod dropped into place with a satisfying thump. "You've got weapons."

"And I've got MIGs." After the series of movements, they had emerged where String had predicted, almost on top of the enemy planes. Michael selected the nearest fighter, locked on, and thumbed the fire button. A slight thud as the missile fired, and a moment later, the plane exploded into a huge fireball. "One down." He swung after the second, locking it into the targeting computer. He fired again, catching this plane in the wing. The pilot ejected as Archangel scanned the sky, searching for the third MIG. "Damn it! Where the hell is he, Hawke?"

"On our ass, and he just fired two heat seekers." Hawke quickly hit buttons. "I'm popping sunbursts." He paused, waiting to see the results on his screen. "Hey, we got them both!" For once, the ultra-hot magnesium flares had done their job. That didn't solve the problem of the remaining plane. "Ever do a loop?"

"Not flying a helicopter." But then, how many people had?

"Works the same way, and it should put you right behind him."

"Let's give it a try." The Lady looped up and over easily. Michael hit the trigger one final time, and seconds later the remaining plane exploded, raining flaming bits down into the river below.

Hawke sagged back into the seat, breathing deeply. "Scope's clean, and we're almost over the coast. All their bases are behind us, I don't think they can get to us here." He'd let them both catch their breath before he suggested going back to the turbos.

"That was... interesting." Michael chuckled, joking to relieve the tension as he raised the visor on the helmet. "Remind me you deserve a raise." He wasn't about to admit it to Hawke, but it had been far more than just interesting. Fighting the MIGs had been an exhilarating combination of fear and excitement, a rush of emotion that felt like it might last for days. For the first time over a decade, he didn't notice the pain in his leg.

"You don't pay me." Hawke reminded him lightly. At best, he and Dom got reimbursed for accumulated costs. He'd never asked for or been offered any sort of wages for flying Airwolf.

"Maybe I should." Then again, Michael wondered, what payment could ever equal the pure thrill of flying the Lady?

"Ready for the turbos?"

Briggs nodded. "Yeah, the sooner we're out of here, the better."

Hawke re-fired the secondaries, and they shot ahead. Once well clear of the coast Michael turned on the autopilot, slipped off his helmet, and poured some of the coffee he'd been offered earlier. He'd finished half of it when the younger man finally spoke. "I think you've got some explaining to do."

"I guess I do at that." Archangel admitted. "So... where do you want me to start?" It wasn't a conversation he was looking forward to, but perhaps it was one that was long overdue.

"Why didn't you ever tell me you were a pilot?" It seemed as good a beginning as any.

Michael sighed. "I thought you knew. Hell, for that matter, I thought I did tell you once."

Hawke searched his memory. "When?"

"Shortly after you took Airwolf. When Bruck grabbed Santini to get to the Lady. And me." He doubted if Hawke remembered the conversation as clearly as he did. "When you asked me to fly with you, I told you that you had yourself a co-pilot."

It came back to String with a rush. "And I said 'engineer'." Hawke considered his unfortunate choice of words. Given the situation, he knew now just how final that must have sounded to a man who already doubted his own abilities. "Michael, you've got to believe, I thought it was a figure of

speech, I never guessed..." In retrospect, the truth should have been obvious. The agent had known the controls far too well to have never been in Airwolf before. Hawke wanted to kick himself. If he hadn't been so preoccupied with worry about Dom, his response might have been far different.

For Archangel, it had been a difficult time. Only months after Red Star, Michael had been in far rougher shape than he'd been willing to admit, still wearing a brace on his shattered leg and dreading every step. Bruck had used it as an excuse to go after his position, trying to force him into taking early retirement on medical grounds, claiming the agent was no longer capable of doing his job. At the time, Briggs had privately questioned whether Bruck might be right. Only years later had he learned the situation actually had little to do with his injuries, that Zeus had been secretly directing Bruck's power play, having long wanted his nemesis off the committee. At the Chairman's urging, Bruck had downed Santini in Mexico, the lure to force Hawke into a waiting trap. Warning String hadn't discouraged him, but he had agreed to take Michael. As engineer.

Looking back, it was easy to see why Hawke hadn't known about his flying exploits. The two men had not known each other well, and during the comparatively short time String was part of the official Airwolf program, Michael had been busy with the project, with little time for personal recreation. Most of his flying had been strictly business, most often with him in the cabin entertaining some VIP or working on paperwork, not in the pilot's seat.

How could Stringfellow Hawke have guessed that his flip comment would be taken as an affirmation that there was no such creature as a one-eyed pilot? Archangel shook his head. "It was a long time ago, Hawke. You couldn't have known."

The younger man tried to put himself into Michael's shoes. What would it be like to be told you could never fly again, to have a part of your life ripped away in an instant? What would his life be like if someone took away the Lady, took away even the stunt flying jobs he did for Santini Air? He glanced down at his hand. What if they couldn't repair the damage? He might already be in Michael's shoes. The thought hit him like a punch in the stomach, and for the first time he truly understood. The idea of a future without the Lady - without even Santini Air - was a terrifying one. It must have been equally horrible for Michael.

Briggs seemed to read both his mind and his emotions. The agent's voice was unusually soft. "You'll be all right, String. You can move your fingers, that means the main nerves are intact. The rest can be fixed."

"Thanks." For some reason, the reassurance carried more weight coming from Michael than it would from anyone else. Hawke desperately

needed something to think about besides his own situation. "So you told Cait?"

Archangel shook his head slightly. "No, she found out by accident, if you believe her version of it. When Caitlin first moved in, she went rummaging around in the attic. She claimed afterwards that she was looking for empty boxes. While she was up there, she found my log book and some old flying trophies."

Knowing Caitlin, she had suspected something and was snooping. It sounded like Michael knew it, too. "Packed in the attic?"

"Actually, I'd asked Rosa to take them to the dump. It was her idea to pack them away." It was a past Michael hadn't wanted reminders of. Flying had been too important to him, losing it had left too big a void in his life. When he found out the housekeeper had disobeyed him, he'd almost fired her. Confronted, Rosa insisted that some day, he'd want the mementos back. Perhaps she was right, but it hadn't happened yet. The trophies remained packed away in the attic. "At any rate, Cait asked me about the things she found. So I finally told her."

"And she took you out flying?"

"Not immediately." Caitlin was too perceptive for that. If she'd done it then, he would have questioned her motives and refused. "It was about a week later, she said she had some parts to fly up to Denver, asked me to go along to keep her company. Once we were out over the open desert, Cait gave me some story about needing to check the radios. She asked me to take the controls for a couple minutes." He grinned, remembering. Caitlin had given him back a piece of his soul. "Before long I realized there were no parts bound for Denver or any problems with the radios. She told me it was time that I found out, one way or the other. Next thing I knew, we were practicing landings."

"How'd you do?"

"It took awhile," he replied candidly. "Cait must have bailed me out a dozen times, and for a long time every landing felt like I was reaching out with my toes trying to find the ground." After the first few aborted attempts, Michael had been ready to throw in the towel, but Caitlin insisted. Gradually, he had found ways to compensate, but even now Briggs knew he was still learning. "Nine years, and it's still not easy."

Hawke was sure it wasn't. Depth perception was such a large part of flying that he couldn't imagine doing without it. "So, how did you end up flying the Lady?"

Michael took a deep breath, slowly exhaled. It was a story he dreaded telling, one too tightly woven into Hawke's nightmares as well as his own. "After you walked out of the Airwolf program, I went to Moffet and insisted that we bring in another pilot."

"You never did trust him, did you?" Hawke hadn't, it was part of the reason he'd quit, despite the incredible black wolf he'd been entrusted to fly.

"No." If only Michael hadn't trusted Airwolf's designer as far as he had. "He refused to bring in any more outsiders, claimed that you'd been nothing but a security risk. He suggested training Marella."

"You said no."

"I had a bad feeling about it." There was always something about the way Moffet looked at women, the way a coyote might look at a cut of raw meat. Unfortunately, time had proven Michael's instincts to be correct. "I told him he could break me in instead." He snorted, shaking his head. "Little did I know I ended up playing right into his hands."

"How so?"

Michael paused, searching for a way to explain. Finally, he answered with a question of his own. "Hawke, if the committee had come to you and asked you to go after Airwolf, would you have done it?"

"I would have told them to go to hell." While his relationship with Archangel at the time had been little more than cordial, it had been far more civil than his dealings with Zeus and the other members of the committee.

"Precisely. Both directly and indirectly, I was the only one who was a threat to Moffet's plans, and he knew it. Thirty seven good people died because I was a fool."

The control tower staff at Red Star. Hawke had always suspected there was more to the story than what Gabrielle had told him, now he knew the truth. Archangel has been Moffet's real target; he must have considered Senator Dietz an added bonus. Michael had carried the guilt of those deaths on his shoulders for over a dozen years. Hawke knew that sort of guilt well, he had left enough friends behind in Nam. Friends and a brother. As much as he wanted to say something, he knew there were no words he could offer that would ease Michael's mind, no more than anyone could ease his own. "Who else knows you can fly the Lady?"

"No one."

"Not even Marella? Or Cait?"

"I never told Cait, I don't think she even suspects it. As for Marella, well, call me chicken. I never had the courage to tell her that I robbed her of a chance to fly Airwolf." Michael stared out across the water, lost in his own past. "The only ones who knew were Moffet's crew, a couple of the control center technicians, and later, Gabrielle. All dead."

For a moment, Hawke wondered why Michael would have told Gabrielle. Then he understood. "If I'd refused, you planned to go after Moffet yourself." It was a statement, not a question, and Michael didn't bother to answer. Hawke remembered the condition the agent had been in when he'd shown up at the cabin. "You wouldn't have made it."

Michael shrugged. At the time, it hadn't really mattered to him, the need for revenge had burned brighter and hotter than any survival instinct. That wasn't something he particularly wanted to discuss. It was time to change the topic, but the one he was about to bring up wasn't much more appealing. "Hawke, we're getting low on fuel." He tugged the helmet back on, returning to the business of flying the helicopter.

Hawke had been considering that, and hadn't found a way around the inevitable. "I know, we're going to have to pick up Marella's tanker."

It wasn't something the agent was looking forward to. "What about aircraft carriers? Anything down there we could land on?"

He'd already checked that possibility. "We've got a carrier in the area, but with twenty foot seas, you're going to be better off with the tanker." At least the plane would only be moving in one direction. "Ever do an in-flight refueling before?"

"No." Michael desperately wished there was some way around the refueling. Years before, he had won awards for precision flying, but he'd done it with both eyes focused on the target. Silently, he decided that he'd give the pickup one attempt. If it didn't work, he'd try for the carrier; there was no sense in endangering the tanker crew any more than he had to. Under other circumstances Briggs might have considered ditching the Lady into the ocean, but the papers he carried were too important. Ditching would have to be held as a final option.

"There's a first time for everything. You'll do fine, just do exactly what I tell you." Hawke tried to sound confident. In many ways, it would be a bigger test of the agent's flying skills than the MIGs had been, and Michael would need all the confidence he could get. "I'll take care of communications, that will give you one thing less to deal with. We should be within range in about fifteen minutes."

As predicted, it was a quarter of an hour later when they spotted the tanker. They closed gently on the plane, tucking in just behind and below it. "Ok, Michael, doing good. Bring her up a little... little more... another foot... good. Now forward, increase power... EASY... that's it. Up just a tad. Got it! Hold her there." The pumps came on, and the fuel flowed into the nearly empty tanks of the helicopter. After a few long minutes they broke the connection and peeled away toward the California coast. Archangel breathed one long sigh of relief.

"That was some damn sweet flying, Michael." Hawke didn't give many compliments, but this one was more than deserved.

The agent nodded. "I couldn't have done it without your help."

"You must have been one hell of a pilot." When Hawke started to consider all the factors that had been working against them, he began to realize that Michael still was.

"I guess I was fairly good at it. Whatever I lacked in talent, I made up for with desire." For thirty years, flying had meant everything to him. Until it was taken away. With an effort, Michael shook off those memories. He had a wife he loved dearly, a child on the way. Caitlin took him up in virtually every aircraft at her disposal. Now, he'd been given one last chance at the controls of the most incredible helicopter ever built. That was enough. It had to be.

"Hawke, we should be able to reach Marella from here. I want you to radio in and tell her I'm taking you straight to Winterhaven..."

The younger man cut him off. "Like hell you are. Not in the Lady."

Michael reconsidered. Landing Airwolf at the Firm's private hospital would create a great many problems for both Hawke and himself. "All right. Marella can meet us at the ranch and take you to Winterhaven in Angel One. I'm going to ask her to have Jess Savage stand by."

"Who's Savage?"

Normally, Hawke would have put up a fight about any medical care, never mind the Firm's facility. The fact that he didn't told Michael more about how the younger man was feeling than questioning ever would have elicited. During the dogfight and refueling, pure adrenaline and nerve had kept him going. Now, his words were beginning to slur, responses coming slower. Blood loss and shock were starting to take a toll, and the lack of sleep couldn't be helping. "Doctor Jessica Savage. She's probably the best orthopedic surgeon in the country."

"Let me guess, she's one of your angels?" As horrible as he felt, Hawke couldn't resist a bit of ribbing.

Michael hesitated before he replied. As difficult as the woman could be, Savage would always have a gold star in his book. "I guess you could call her a personal angel, Hawke. The rest of the Firm's surgeons were ready to cut my leg off. Jess was the only one who thought there was a chance of rebuilding it. If it wasn't for her I wouldn't be walking."

"Sorry, I..."

"No need to apologize. The good doctor and I have something of a... unique... relationship." Briggs grinned. Hawke would meet her soon enough. For once, Michael almost felt sorry for Stringfellow.

Hawke had been tuning the radio. "No answer on the cabin frequency." That was unexpected, and worrisome. "Try Angel One."

A moment later, Marella's voice came through the headphones. "Hawke, is that you?"

"Archangel here." He took over the radio. "Why aren't you at the cabin?"

"Because your wife just decided to go into labor, sir."

"Cait? How is she? How far apart are the contractions?"

"She's fine, the contractions have just started. I just thought I should get her down to Winterhaven now as a precaution." Marella sounded somewhat amused by his concern.

Michael relaxed a bit. Cait was in good hands, Marella had been one course away from a medical degree when he had finally relented and brought her into the intelligence business. "Actually, Caitlin's not the only one headed for Winterhaven. I want you to have Jess waiting."

"Jess Savage? Is anything wrong, sir?"

Marella was trying not to say too much, and Michael correctly assumed that Cait could hear her end of the conversation. "Hawke got himself sliced up a little. I don't think it's too bad, but we better bring her in, just in case. Can you drop Caitlin off, then meet us at my place? I don't want this helicopter near the hospital."

"What's your ETA to the ranch?" Archangel's long time assistant asked.

"Probably a little over an hour."

"That will give me plenty of time to get Cait settled and contact Jess."

Michael grinned. "Don't you let her have that baby without me, Marella. I'll be there as soon as I can." He wondered if Hawke could wring any more speed out of the turbos.

"Don't worry, sir. I'll be waiting for you."

"Archangel out." He flipped the switch cutting off the radio. "Well Hawke, I guess I'm going to be a father." Michael waited, not getting the flippant response he expected. "Hawke?" Again no response. Worried, Archangel quickly checked the biological monitors and was relieved to find the pilot was only dozing. Hell, Hawke certainly deserved the rest. Effectively, Michael was alone with the aircraft, and he realized that it was for the first and probably last time. A wistful smile crossed his lips. For this one moment, he had everything. As he flew toward the coast, he couldn't help but notice how the sunlight turned the ocean to a sea of gold.

Unknowingly, Marella paced not far from the spot where her superior had waited hours before. She was concerned for Hawke, but more so for Archangel. Her relationship with Michael went back a quarter of a century, and for all those years he had treated her well. He had, in fact, saved her life more than once. The first time she'd been a frightened thirteen year old girl, the victim of a bigoted prejudice she didn't understand. The second time they had both been casualties of a more defined evil. Although she remembered very little of it, she knew Briggs had shielded her with his own body at Red Star - at a horrible cost to himself. For that act, if nothing else, he would have her unquestioned loyalty until the day she died.

The sun was bright and unseasonably warm, and after a few minutes she returned to the Firm's helicopter to shed her jacket, folding the crisp white

cotton and laying it carefully in the luggage compartment. Marella had never been particular about her clothes until Michael's unusual sense of style had rubbed off on her. It had been partly a matter of contrast, white simply looked good on her, accenting her coffee hued skin. It had also been psychological. In a world as dirty as the one the Firm operated in, the purity of her garments had served as a mental buffer against the sometimes vile requirements of the job. Good guys, as she had once told Hawke, wore white.

The sound of rotor blades approaching from the distance caught her attention, and she turned to watch as the sleek charcoal helicopter appeared from over a hilltop, descending hesitantly into the valley. Even as she watched Airwolf settle to the ground, Marella started to jog toward the aircraft, knowing that she wasn't seeing one of Hawke's precise landings. Her suspicions were confirmed as the helicopter powered down and the door swung open.

Archangel climbed down from behind the controls, shouting to be heard as she approached. "Give me a hand with Hawke." Marella hurried to his side as he popped the hatch on the other side of the aircraft, giving them access to the rear of the helicopter. "Cait ok?" Michael asked, as she joined him.

"She's doing fine. The contractions are very mild, she won't have the baby for hours yet," Marella assured him, her attention already on the younger man's injuries. "How's Hawke?"

"He lost quite a bit of blood, and I think he's going into shock. He's been semi-conscious since I talked to you."

"I'm all right, just help me out of here," Hawke mumbled, trying unsuccessfully to get to his feet.

"Easy, String, we've got you," Michael warned, as Marella climbed in beside him and helped to ease the pilot into a sitting position in the doorway.

"Take care of the Lady." With a determined effort, Hawke propped himself up, motioning toward the other side of the helicopter. "Get the camo netting and cover her up at least."

Archangel considered it, finally nodded. There were enough trees and brush surrounding the ranch that the camouflage would blend in, giving Airwolf some cover. It wasn't an ideal situation, but he didn't want to take the time to hide the helicopter more thoroughly, not with Hawke's injuries and Caitlin waiting. In any case, he didn't expect the Lady to be there long. Marella returned with the netting, and he helped her hang it over the aircraft. Finished, they returned to the barely conscious pilot. Michael wrapped one of Hawke's arms around his neck, motioning Marella to take the other side.

"I can walk," Hawke protested weakly.

"Sure you can, but we're going to help you anyhow." Marella's medical training told her that the younger man was definitely in shock, and needed to get to a doctor as soon as possible. With Archangel's help and Hawke's feeble attempts, they reached Angel One and pulled Hawke into the back, laying him down across the seats and securing the belts. Michael slid into the co-pilot's seat as she fired the helicopter and headed toward Winterhaven.

Once they were safely airborne, Marella glanced over at her superior, saying nothing. He caught her look. "Marella, I..." Michael hesitated. He really didn't want to ask her to lie for him.

She smiled slightly, amused and a bit touched by his hesitancy. "Don't worry, sir. I never saw a thing. I never saw Airwolf here, and I certainly never saw you flying her."

He sighed with relief. Trust Marella to understand. "Thank you."

"What about Dom and Cait? You're never going to convince either of them that Hawke flew with his hand cut up like that."

Michael nodded. "I know. I doubt if Hawke would keep it from them, anyhow." He wasn't even sure that he wanted to keep it a secret. While Washington might throw the book at him if they ever found out, there was a certain renegade part of his soul that wanted to dance on the rooftops and tell anyone who would listen about how he had shot down three enemy jets.

Marella was silent for some time. "I didn't know you were flying again. When I came back from leave, your trophies, certificates... everything was gone. I assumed you'd already tried..."

"You're not the only one who made assumptions, Marella. I made too many of my own. Doesn't matter, it's all in the past."

Curiosity got the best of her. "It's not the first time you've flown Airwolf, is it?"

He glanced over in surprise. "You knew?"

"I always wondered," Marella admitted.

Briggs nodded. He should have known that he could never put anything over on his assistant. "I have to admit, I was Moffet's second choice. I was afraid you'd resent it if you knew I'd denied you a chance at her."

Marella shook her head. "Resent the fact you protected me from that animal? Never." Even without Moffet, the two of them went back too far and she had seen too much of the horror he'd survived for her to ever resent anything he did. "So what's she like?"

Despite himself, he grinned. "There's nothing quite like her. Airwolf is one of a kind, I don't know of anything to compare her with." In over a dozen years, it hadn't changed. In his life he'd flown many aircraft, both airplanes and helicopters, but nothing came even close to equaling the feeling of awe

the Lady left him with. He had, with time, almost forgotten that feeling. Now, it was all too fresh.

It was time to get on with business, Michael warned himself. He unzipped the front of his flight suit and pulled out the files he'd recovered from the informant. "Marella, once you drop Hawke and I off at Winterhaven, I need you to take these to Washington. They have to be on the President's desk as soon as possible."

"So you got what you went after?"

"And more. It's worse than we thought."

"Worse?" She didn't see how things could have been worse than the scenario they'd envisioned.

"They have the virus ready to go, Marella. And they're working on a global distribution system."

She let out a sharp breath. Even the Firm hadn't known they were that close, or that insane. "How much longer?"

"Within two weeks, they would have been close enough that it wouldn't have mattered." Infecting a few population centers would have been more than enough. From there the disease would have spread like wildfire. With difficulty, Michael put aside the images of what would have resulted. The White House was already in contact with the Chinese government, they were only waiting for the names and proof before they moved in. The threat was over. This time.

Hawke recognized the smell even before he opened his eyes. A faint medicinal odor, not quite masked by artificial pine fragrance. It always seemed to permeate the air at Winterhaven. He raised his head, fought off the dizziness that provoked. His eyes caught the figure napping in a chair beside the bed. "Dom? Dom, you awake?"

The older man roused himself, pushing up the bill of his ever present cap. "I am now." He looked over at his friend. "How you feeling, String?"

Hawke laid back against the pillow. "I've been better." The momentary disorientation started to clear, and he remembered why he was at Winterhaven. He jerked upright, and was relieved to find his left hand heavily bandaged but apparently intact. "What about my hand, Dom?"

With Hawke's sudden movement, Santini had jumped to his feet, now he gently guided String back against the pillows. "Easy, easy, kid. Michael's hot shot doctor says you're going to be just fine." He snapped his fingers. "That reminds me, Archangel said for me to call him when you woke up." Santini reached for the bedside phone.

Satisfied for the moment to rest, Hawke started to put together the rest of his memories of the flight back. "Did Cait have the baby? They both ok?"

"Yep, while you were in surgery. Seven pounds, two ounces. Mother and son are both fine." Dominic hushed Hawke and spoke into the phone. "He's awake." He hung up the phone and sat down. "String, what the heck happened? Archangel called and told me to drop everything and get to Winterhaven as fast as I could. When I got here, they had you in operating on your hand and Michael was with Cait."

A sudden look of panic crossed Hawke's face. "Where's the Lady?"

"Home where she belongs. When I finally did talk to Michael, he told me she was at the ranch, and I should take her back to the lair and put her away. As soon as I was sure you were going to be ok, that's exactly what I did."

"Good." Hawke relaxed visibly. The Lady was safe, his hand would heal, Cait and the baby were ok. Everything else would work itself into place.

"The thing I don't understand, String - the Lady was covered with blood, it must have been yours - but it was all in the back. Was Cait flying?" Dom couldn't picture either String or Michael letting her fly, but if there'd been some accident at the cabin... but then why would they be in Airwolf and not the Jet Ranger? And why was Airwolf left at Michael's ranch? No matter how he added it up, it didn't make any sense.

"No, Marella and Cait were at the cabin. Michael and I took a quick trip to China after some documents. Unfortunately, it seems the spot our Chinese contact picked for our meeting was also popular among drug dealers." Hawke glanced down toward his hand.

"China!" Dom started to ask what could have been so important in China, then stopped, realizing that the explanation still didn't make any sense. "String, how did you fly with your hand cut like that?"

"I didn't."

"Then who the hell did?" In his mind, Santini quickly cycled through the short list of pilots who'd ever flown the Lady. Doc Gifford was still in South America. The others were dead. Dom wondered who he was overlooking.

"Why don't you ask him?" Hawke gestured toward the door, as Archangel opened it and stepped into the room.

"Ask me what?" Michael had heard enough of the conversation as he entered to guess what they'd been discussing, but feigned ignorance. Explaining what had transpired to Santini was going to be an interesting adventure of it's own.

Dominic caught the silent exchange that passed between the two men and wondered at their sudden camaraderie. Something had changed between String and Michael since he'd left for Vegas. He turned to face Archangel. "Who flew Airwolf back from China?"

Michael stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned his shoulder against the doorway, taking the weight off his left leg. "I did," he answered, the smug grin finally winning out over his efforts to hide it.

"Yeah, like hell you did!" Santini turned back to Hawke. "So what really happened, String?"

Hawke's smile almost matched Michael's. "As the man says, he flew the Lady home." He turned his attention to the agent. "I guess congratulations are in order. For any number of reasons. You did one heck of a job... what, yesterday? And I hear you've got yourself a son." He extended his uninjured hand, and Archangel stepped forward and shook it.

"Thanks."

Dominic wasn't satisfied and he turned back to Hawke. "No, you're NOT telling me that Michael really flew Airwolf?"

String chuckled. "Yeah, he did. Don't worry, Dom, I have a feeling he'll be more than happy to tell you about it some time. Repeatedly." Hawke winked at Archangel, remembering how many times Michael had been subjected to some of Santini's oft repeated war stories. "And don't forget to ask him about the MIGs."

"MIGs? What MIGs? You ran into MIGs?" Santini looked incredulously from Hawke to Briggs and back again.

"Just a little minor opposition. There were only three of them." Somehow, Michael managed to keep a straight face.

Santini glared at the agent. "I'll deal with you later. I'll also be checking the Lady over. Carefully." Dom still wasn't quite sure he believed that the agent had flown Airwolf, regardless of what either of them told him.

At that moment, an older, short, heavysset woman in white came through the doorway. "So what the bloody hell is going on in here, a party?" she demanded, scarcely pausing her tirade to take a breath before she continued. "Government facility or not, this is a hospital, you know."

Michael grinned openly. "Stringfellow Hawke, let me introduce Doctor Jessica Savage, probably the best orthopedic surgeon in the free world. It's good to see you, too, Jess."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." The woman took a moment to glare at Archangel. "Well, if it isn't my number one problem patient." The doctor sighed, tapping her foot against the floor. Finally she turned to Hawke, gesturing toward the agent with a flip of her head. "He a friend of yours?"

"Something like that," Hawke admitted.

She snorted. "Lovely. I hope you follow orders better than he does." Savage glanced at Hawke's chart. "You're going to have one heck of a lifeline, young man, but you were lucky. With a little therapy, your hand will be fine. We'll keep you here for a couple of days to get your blood count back up and make sure there's no infection, the rest can be handled

outpatient." She looked up, and seemed surprised to see that Michael and Dominic were still there. "I thought I suggested breaking up this little party?" Her attention turned to Santini. "Didn't you promise me you'd go get some rest just as soon as your friend woke up?"

"Yes ma'am, I believe I did. I'll be going now." The usually unflappable Dominic knew better than to argue with her. "String, as the Doc says, I promised. I guess I'll talk to you after we both get some rest." He hastily excused himself.

"And you..." She folded her arms across her chest, squaring her shoulders and drawing herself up to her full height. Even at just over five feet tall, her presence made her an imposing figure. "You have been blowing off appointments for the last year and a half. You are going directly to my office. Now march!" Savage pointed at the door.

"Jess, I need fifteen minutes with him. Please." Michael tried his most charming smile.

"Five." She wasn't charmed, but it appeared she was accustomed to bargaining with the agent.

"Make it ten."

"Ten, and then you're in my office. Right?"

Michael sighed. "If you insist."

"I'm counting." She turned her attention toward Stringfellow. "Mr. Hawke, I will be in to see you a bit later." Savage made a point of checking her watch as she walked out the door.

Hawke raised one eyebrow. "So that's your angel, humm?"

The agent shrugged. "Jess is good, Hawke, although I will admit that her bedside manner leaves something to be desired." He grinned. "Besides, her bark is worse than her bite."

"I hope so, for your sake and mine. So what is it you wanted to talk to me about?" Hawke knew there was something pressing on the older man's mind.

Michael hesitated, adjusting his glasses. "We need to discuss the Lady."

"Go on." The pilot had a feeling he wouldn't like what Archangel was about to say.

"She's getting old, Hawke. A dozen years ago, she was far beyond anything in the sky, but things have changed since then. Stealth technology, guidance systems, sensors, computers - we've come a long way in a very short time. Airwolf may have been state of the art when she was built but in business we're in, today, she's close to being obsolete." He hadn't truly realized just how close until he'd been behind her controls.

"Damn you, Michael! You fly her, and now you want to retire her?" Hawke was furious, barely keeping his voice under control.

Archangel chuckled. "Who said anything about retirement? I was thinking more along the lines of a complete retrofit. All of the latest toys and technology."

That caught Hawke by surprise. He hesitated. "Wait a minute. Where are you planning to get the funds for all this? You're usually bitching about the fuel bills."

Michael stroked his mustache. "I shouldn't really be telling you this, but, those files I brought back? They had plans to release that virus, Hawke. Soon. They could have killed everyone on this planet, and there would have been no way to stop them. Even the Chinese government had no clear idea of who was involved. We gave them the documents, and the situation has been... resolved. At any rate, Washington is rather grateful to us. Right now, Airwolf has a blank check, and I've got access to every bit of classified hardware in the Firm's arsenal." He glanced at his watch. "At least consider it, Hawke. I've got to go before Attila the Hun comes looking for me. I'll try to make it back in to see you tonight." Michael gave him one more glance as he stepped out the door. "Think about it."

It was early that afternoon when the door to Hawke's private room swung open. "Hi, String, you feel like some company?"

"Sure, Cait, come on in. Just watch out for Dr. Jeckle." Hawke warned, shutting off the television. He had been sitting up in bed watching the news. As he'd anticipated, there had been nothing said about a doomsday cult. The only hint of any problem was a brief mention of some upper level Chinese military personnel being killed in an automobile accident.

She shook her head, coming into his room and sitting in the chair Dom had vacated earlier. "We won't be seeing Dr. Savage for awhile. She just dragged Michael into surgery."

Hawke straightened. "Anything wrong?"

"Oh, he's fine." Cait sounded more annoyed than worried. "Apparently there are a couple screws that have worked their way out of the bone in his leg. The way I hear it, they were supposed to have been removed two years ago, and he's been putting it off." Caitlin sighed. "Of course, it's something he never bothered to mention to me."

"So that's what the good doctor was so ticked with him about." Hawke chuckled. Avoiding some relatively minor medical procedure didn't sound at all out of character for the agent. For that matter, in Michael's shoes he probably would have done the same thing himself. "You know, even if he is a little on the stubborn side, that's quite a guy you've got there."

"Yeah, I know." Her voice softened.

"So where's little Michael Coldsmith Briggs the fourth?" he teased.

"Sleeping, but it's a good thing his father isn't around to hear you call him that," Cait suggested.

"Don't tell me the lineage ends here?" Hawke was marginally surprised.

"Actually, think Michael would like to change his own name." She wasn't sure how to explain. "His father disowned him."

That did surprise Hawke. "Why?"

"I guess they never did get along. From what Michael has told me, they were too far apart on too many issues. I get the feeling that Briggs senior tried very hard to keep his son under his thumb, and that Michael was having none of it. I think the final straw was when my future husband abandoned Harvard and political science for a degree in aeronautical engineering."

"Aeronautical engineering? So that's how he ended up in charge of the Airwolf project." Hawke had always wondered if it were purely politics, or if there was more to it.

"Flying was what brought him into the Firm in the first place. Michael had intended to join the military as soon as he graduated from college."

String figured the dates in his head. "Chances are he would have ended up in Nam."

"I know." She was well aware of the number of pilots who had been lost during the war. It was unsettling to realize how close her husband had come to being involved almost at the beginning of the conflict. "As fate would have it, a few weeks before graduation, he met the Admiral at an air show. The Admiral talked him out of the Air Force, convinced him there were other ways to serve his country. The day he graduated, Michael became his private pilot. Not long afterwards, they needed someone to fly into East Germany to pull out an agent, someone who spoke fluent German. Michael was the only one available." Cait shrugged. "After that, they kept him pretty busy."

It occurred to Hawke that Cait and Michael had similar backgrounds. "His father disowned him, your mother nearly disowned you. For more or less the same reason."

"I know." She picked at a hangnail. "I think that's what brought us together. We come from such different worlds, but we had parents trying to run our lives. There was something else, too, even though I didn't know it until much later. Flying meant the world to both of us."

Hawke let that pass without comment. "So what are you naming Junior?"

"Randall James Briggs. After Michael's maternal uncle and my father. We're planning to call him 'R.J.'"

"R.J. Briggs. Well, I suppose it's better than Stringfellow Hawke," he grinned, "marginally."

"String!" Cait protested halfheartedly, knowing he was kidding her. "That's mean."

He changed the topic. "How much flying have you done with your husband?"

Caitlin looked a bit sheepish, half expecting Hawke's wraith. "You mean how much has he done while he's been with me? A lot, String. Just about any time the two of us have been alone together, he's been flying. It's a damn shame they won't give him a waiver."

"He's tried?" The possibility hadn't occurred to him.

"He told me he made some 'discreet inquiries' a long time ago. They wouldn't even talk to him about it. I figure it's because he's government, that they don't want it to look like they're breaking the rules for one of their own." Her opinion was obvious.

Hawke considered it. "You honestly think they should?"

"You were with him in Airwolf, what do YOU think?" Caitlin returned her attention to the hangnail. "String, I've taken him up in every aircraft I could get my hands on, even the Stearman. As much as I hate to admit it, the simple truth is that he's a better pilot than I am."

"I wish you'd told me a long time ago."

"Michael was convinced you knew. I think that we were both afraid that if I said anything, you wouldn't let me take him up anymore." She shrugged. "Well, what's done is done, I guess. I do know one thing, though."

"What's that?"

"Flying was everything to him, String. When he lost his license, I think it nearly destroyed him." Cait understood the attraction, she felt it herself, although not as strongly as the two men did. "The fact that it was Airwolf that bit him only made it that much worse. He loved her; even now, I know he still does."

He nodded. "Yeah, I could see that much myself." It showed in the way he held the controls, the undercurrent in his voice when he talked about the Lady.

Caitlin interrupted his thoughts. "Well, I suppose I'd better go see if R. J. is awake yet, and find out how my husband is making out with Doctor Jeckle."

"Don't you dare tell her I called her that." Hawke grinned. "I'd like to get out of here alive."

"Would I do that?" Cait returned the grin. "You take care of yourself and do what the doctor orders. After all, she ought to have at least one obedient patient. I'll see you tomorrow before I go home."

"You take it easy, Caitlin, and next time bring R. J. with you. I want to meet this kid."

"I'll do that String. Talk to you later." She waved as she let herself out the door.

It was close to eleven pm that night when Hawke's door opened again. Archangel quietly stuck his head into the room, searching for movement from the figure on the bed. "Still awake, Hawke?" He whispered, not wanting to disturb the pilot if he was already asleep.

The younger man propped himself up on one elbow. "Yeah, come on in."

Michael entered slowly, maneuvering carefully on unfamiliar crutches as Hawke watched with obvious amusement. String took in the unlikely image of Briggs, usually so nattily dressed, now wearing a hospital gown and robe. "I thought you assured me that Jess didn't bite?"

The agent glared at him, easing himself into a bedside chair and propping his leg up. "It's all your fault, Hawke. If you hadn't gotten in the way of that machete, I could have avoided her for another couple of years." Briggs shifted, searching for a comfortable position. "A hell of a lot of aggravation for two damn bits of metal." He finally settled, grimacing. "Christ, I hate this place."

"I always did figure that you had a couple screws loose." Hawke grinned, taking some slight comfort in the realization Michael didn't enjoy the scenery at Winterhaven any more than he did. "On the other hand, it might be nice to quit setting off metal detectors, don't you think?"

Michael raised an eyebrow, refusing to rise to the bait and instead only responding to Hawke's second statement. "I wouldn't know. The screws don't really matter when there's still an eighteen inch titanium rod tied into my femur."

It sobered the pilot. "I didn't realize..."

Archangel waved off the apology. For someone who traveled through as many airports and secured areas as he did, tripping metal detectors was inconvenient, but at least his government identification kept anyone from suggesting a strip search. "How are you feeling?"

"Better than I was, that's for sure. Savage tells me I'll be flying again in a month." He looked over at Briggs. "Michael, can I trust her to play it straight with me?" Despite the doctor's assurances, there was still a nagging fear that the damage might be worse than anyone was telling him.

"Jess?" The agent gave a short, humorless laugh. "Yeah, you can believe what she tells you." He reached up to stroke his mustache. The Firm's medical facility brought back too many memories. "She promised me that if I wanted it badly enough, I could walk out of here in three months. She also told me it would be the hardest thing I'd ever do in my life. She was right on both counts." Briggs looked over at Hawke. "If Jess says that

you'll be back in the air in a month, you will be." A long buried memory surfaced, and he chuckled. "Just do as she tells you."

String couldn't resist baiting him. "You mean like her favorite 'problem patient'?" He considered the gown. "Are you even supposed to be out of bed?"

"Probably not," Archangel admitted, shrugging. "This is minor, Hawke, mostly just stitches. If the muscles in my leg weren't so torn up to begin with I wouldn't even be using these," he added, motioning toward the crutches. He shook his head, remembering. "This isn't like the last time around, that's for sure. Although I have to admit, I tried sneaking out of bed then, too."

"You got caught?" Hawke asked.

"In a manner of speaking. About the time I got my feet on the floor, I passed out." Only now with the passage of time could he begin to see the humor in it. "Jess had a fit, told me if I tried it again she'd put me in restraints."

It brought a chuckle from the pilot. "What happened?"

Michael chewed his lip sheepishly. "The second time I actually managed to stand up before I collapsed."

"Did the good doctor carry out her threat?"

Briggs laughed. "Jess doesn't threaten; you might want to keep that in mind. She promptly tied me down for the night." His expression sobered. "The next morning she told me that if I was that determined to get back on my feet, she'd send me down to physical therapy." He snorted. "By the time the morning was over I wished to hell that they'd let me pass out." Michael gestured toward String's hand. "Say hello to all my old buddies in PT for me, will you? You're going to have fun down there."

"Yeah." Although he knew he had a few long weeks ahead of him, Hawke realized again just how lucky he was. He didn't want to think about how things could have turned out, especially when he had such a harsh reminder sitting right in front of him. "Speaking of Savage, you could have warned me about her. When you said she was one of your angels, I expected something a little different."

Michael grinned. "It could be worse. For awhile, Gabrielle had me convinced Jess was a beautiful tall blond who moonlighted as a model. Let's just say I was rather disappointed when they finally took the bandages off my eyes." With a start, he remembered who he was talking to and the love Hawke had shared with the young agent Moffet had killed in Libya. "Sorry, Hawke, I didn't mean to bring up Gabrielle."

"You cared about her, too, didn't you?" It was a sudden revelation.

"Not in the way you did." The agent stroked his mustache, unsure of how to describe his relationship with the woman Hawke had loved. "After

Red Star, the first few weeks I was barely conscious, doped half out of my mind. They weren't sure I'd live, I wasn't sure I wanted to." He sighed. There were few pleasant memories from those weeks. "Looking back, I don't know when she slept, if she ever did. Every time I came out of it, Gabrielle was there." He could still hear her voice, quietly preaching revenge. Revenge was a horrible thing to live for, but at the time, it had been the only thing he had left. She had used it, used him, letting his own guilt and anger build into an obsession. Looking back, he understood all too well why she had done it, and what it had cost her. "She kept me alive, Hawke."

String nodded. It wasn't difficult to picture her at Michael's bedside. "She was a very special human being."

"I know, and I treated her horribly. I was bitter as hell and I took most of it out on her." He wasn't proud of it, and the admission didn't come easily. "I will always regret that." Briggs had desperately wanted to find a way to make it up to her, but Moffet had ended any chance of that.

"I think Gabrielle understood. She never told me any of the details, but I know she had a great deal of respect for you."

The agent nodded. If Hawke could forgive him, then perhaps Gabrielle would have. It was as close as he could ever come to absolution. With an effort, he brought his thoughts into the present. "I didn't come here to talk about the past."

"Airwolf." Hawke suggested.

"Airwolf. Have you considered my offer?"

"I have. There's something I want to ask you first." Looking down at his bandaged hand, Hawke continued. "You've been trying to get the Lady away from me for a dozen years. Yesterday, you had her. You gave her back, Michael. Why?"

Archangel met Hawke's gaze. "What makes you think I couldn't have taken Airwolf any time I wanted her?"

The younger man nodded his understanding. He had never really been sure one way or the other. "So, you do know where the lair is."

"You want me to give you the coordinates?" Briggs leaned back into the chair, trying to take some of the weight off his leg. "After your little episode with that program Moffet left behind in the Lady's computers, I decided we'd better find her in case that bastard had any other surprises for us. We had a pretty good idea of the general area, and as it happened, Marella and I got lucky. Ended up only taking us a few hours of actual searching to find your little stovepipe."

"You haven't answered the rest of it. Why didn't you keep her?"

"What did I tell you when you came back from Libya? If the Firm recovered Airwolf, Washington would take her away from us. For the

moment, that may have changed a little, but having the Lady officially in our hands would still cause all sorts of intra-agency problems." The Pentagon would want her for military exercises, the DEA for drug enforcement. It might take a while, but in the end he suspected the leader of some senate committee would end up using her as his private executive helicopter.

"We're all better off if she's with you, Hawke."

"Your reasons aren't purely professional, are they?" Hawke asked, abruptly realizing that Briggs had other motives.

"No." Michael made an obvious gesture of adjusting his glasses. "Given past history, I'd rather have Airwolf in the hands of someone I trust. Can you blame me?" Not expecting a reply, he continued. "Well, I've answered your questions. Let's talk about that retrofit."

"You really have a blank check?" Hawke asked skeptically. "No strings attached?" Knowing how Firm politics usually played, he found it difficult to believe it could be so easy.

"Only that our current agreement continues. You fly for us, we look for your brother." In his own mind, the agent knew full well that it was a meaningless search. He suspected Hawke did as well. If Stringfellow's older brother was still alive, he would have turned up long ago. St. John Hawke had disappeared as completely as if he'd never existed, his body swallowed by the Vietnamese jungle. As promised, the Firm continued to check information coming out of that area on the off chance something might show up, but there had been nothing even remotely relevant for years.

"Who does the work? I don't want a bunch of military flunkies crawling all over the Lady." It was bad enough that Michael and Marella knew where she was.

"Neither do I. We keep the operation in-house. You, Cait, Dom, Marella and myself. For that matter, Le will be on vacation soon. I've got a hunch that we could get him to help install the new computers."

Hawke wasn't quite convinced. "You really think there's enough new technology out there to make it worthwhile? I haven't heard of anything Airwolf can't get along without."

Archangel laughed. "You're not supposed to hear about such things, Hawke. If you did, there'd be a dozen of my security experts looking for new jobs. For now, suffice to say that there have been some truly amazing advances within the last decade."

The pilot hesitated, considering the offer. He loved the Lady the way she was, but even he had to admit she'd accumulated a great many hours of flight time since he'd taken her. With Dom's mechanical support and the Firm's spare parts, they'd kept her flying, but sooner or later the main systems would start to wear out. "Ok, Michael. When do we start?"

Briggs grinned. "I've already got the new equipment on order."

"You knew I'd say yes, did you?" Hawke wasn't sure he liked being so predictable.

"No, but I wasn't going to give them a chance to cancel that check."

The pilot chuckled, then turned serious. "There's something else we need to discuss, Michael."

"I'm listening."

Hawke seemed suddenly intent on studying the sheets. "I found out something yesterday. I found out I'm not indestructible." Before Briggs could respond, he continued. "Dom is over seventy, and now Cait has a baby to take care of. I think it's time to train another pilot on Airwolf."

The agent nodded. "Probably a wise idea, all things considered. How about Marella?" She was a top notch pilot, and he trusted her implicitly.

"No." He shook his head. "Actually, I have someone in mind."

"Your friend Doc Gifford? Or Le?" Michael knew the young man had flown with Hawke a couple times.

"Last I heard, Gifford was in Central America, and as much as I wish otherwise, Le's far from being the sort of pilot Airwolf deserves." Hawke met Archangel's single blue eye. "The Lady deserves nothing less than the best, Michael. I want you to fly her with me."

There was a long pause before Archangel answered. Finally he spoke, his voice low and filled with a pain that had nothing to do with his aching leg. "I can't do it, Hawke."

"Why not?"

Anger crept into his voice. "Isn't that pretty damned obvious?"

Hawke ignored the anger. "No, it isn't. Michael, you jumped into an aircraft you hadn't flown in a dozen years, brought down three enemy planes, and did your first mid-air refueling. I'd say you more than earned a shot at the co-pilot's seat."

"If I could have kept her down under the radar where she belonged, we never would have run into those MIGs in the first place."

"You can learn to do it."

"I can't, Hawke. I've tried," Michael admitted. "More than once."

"When?"

"A hundred times over the last decade. Remember Winchester's simulator? Do you have any idea how many hours I've spent in that thing? I can't do it, Hawke. I drop down into the canyons and I'm lucky to keep her off the walls for ten seconds."

Stringfellow sighed. "What did I tell you when he built it? It's not Airwolf, it doesn't quite respond like Airwolf. You certainly don't get the feedback from it that you get with the real thing. Hell, I'm surprised that you can fly it at all."

Michael shook his head. "They won't even let me have a license for a single engine airplane and you think I'm qualified to fly a supersonic helicopter?"

"You get caught in what essentially is a stolen billion dollar government bird and the status of your pilot's license is going to be the least of your problems," the younger man joked. "That's certainly never kept you out of her yet."

"It's more than that, Hawke. My stomach starts doing somersaults the minute you go down on the deck." Michael admitted. "I was sick as a dog every time Moffet took me up."

"So was everyone else who ever flew with him, myself included." It was something Hawke would have preferred to forget. "Moffet was a sadist. He knew exactly what buttons to push, and the sicker you got, the better he liked it." Hawke shrugged. "You've done ok when you've been flying with me."

"Believe it or not, green isn't my natural color."

"Hell, I've turned Dom green a time or two, that doesn't mean much. At any rate, as long as you're doing the flying, you won't get sick. Your stomach didn't bother you when you were after those MIGs, did it?"

"No," Briggs allowed, "I guess it didn't." He'd been far too busy to notice how he felt.

Hawke changed tactics. "Michael, if it's a matter of the g-forces, just say so."

"What do you mean?"

"The crew takes a beating when Airwolf is flown near her limits, and I know it bothers your leg. I can hear it in your voice every time I hit the turbos. If you accept my offer, you're going to be spending a lot of time in the Lady. If that's something you don't feel up to doing I certainly understand."

Briggs hadn't known that String had caught his reaction to the physical stresses the helicopter generated. "When have I ever turned down a chance to fly with you?" He shook his head. "It's not that bad." That was a trade-off he'd gladly make any day.

"So what IS holding you back?" Hawke touched the bandages circling his left hand. "I've never been as terrified as I was when I realized this could be the end of my flying career. It felt like that knife had cut straight into my gut. If it had come down to that, I would have done anything, ANYTHING, to get back into the air. I'm offering you that chance, Michael. If flying and Airwolf mean as much to you as I think they do, then why aren't you taking it? What are you so afraid of?"

It took time for the agent to answer. He stared at the wall, either unwilling or unable to meet Stringfellow's eyes. "I don't know. Failure,

perhaps? What if I try it and find out I can't do it? What happens then, Hawke? I don't know if I can take that chance."

Hawke digested that. "What if another dozen years pass, and then you find out that you could have flown her? Isn't that worse? One way or another, you've got to find out now, Michael."

Archangel hesitated, considering all the possibilities. Some of the newly available technology would help him. The new heads up displays and voice controls. The GPR imaging system. It might be enough. He turned toward the pilot and nodded. "All right."

"You're saying you'll do it?" Hawke wasn't sure of his meaning.

"On one condition."

"Which is?"

"That we're both honest about this. If it isn't working I walk away and you bring someone else in."

"Agreed," Hawke glanced down at his hand, and then at Michael's leg, "although it doesn't look like either of us will be doing any flying for awhile."

The agent grinned. "I'll be all right in a couple of days." He motioned toward the crutches. "When I get home tomorrow, those will be in the trash."

"Don't push it, Michael," Hawke warned, "flying the Lady is going to be damn hard work."

Archangel nodded. The g-forces Airwolf generated did bother him more than he was willing to admit, and thinking about it reminded him of how badly his leg was currently throbbing. The painkillers Jess had given him had almost worn off. "Hawke, I'm going to get out of here, I think we both need our sleep." He struggled to his feet, taking most of his weight on the crutches.

Hawke waited until the agent had made his way to the door. "Michael?"

Archangel answered without turning. "Yeah?"

"Welcome to the wolf pack." Stringfellow grinned.

Michael opened the door and looked back over his shoulder. He still sounded more than a little skeptical. "Don't rush it, Hawke. I'm not quite a pack member yet."

**Fall 1996**

**Early September 1996**

Despite the warmth of the early fall sun outside, there was still the usual chill deep within the natural rock formation that shielded Airwolf's lair. A pair of kerosene heaters kept the temperature tolerable, but Archangel found that he regretted leaving his sweater in the Jeep.

The agent was wedged beneath the Lady's engineering console, searching for the source of a problem with the new missile guidance system. "Dom, connector B-27, what wires have we got going into that?"

In the front of the helicopter, Santini had schematics spread across his lap and the co-pilot's seat, with another stack piled on the floor. "Hang on, let me find it." Dom rummaged through the diagrams until he found the information he wanted. "Here it is. Should be black, red, blue, orange."

Michael traced the wires. "Where's that orange wire supposed to go?"

The older man followed it on the drawing. "Pin five, connector S-3. That's on the weapons board."

As he twisted to check the wire, Briggs whacked his elbow against the edge of the panel. "Ouch, damn it." He paused for a moment to rub at the bruise.

"How many times have I got to remind you to keep your head down?" Dom chuckled. Despite his amusement, Santini actually felt some sympathy for the agent. He'd been back there enough times himself to know just how tight the quarters were.

"Sorry to disappoint you, it was only my elbow this time." Once again, Michael found himself wishing they'd accepted Le's offer to delay his return to college until the retrofit was complete. With the young man's schooling in computers and electronics, Le would have made short work of these last few gremlins. Briggs returned his attention to the wire he was tracing. "That's it, this connector is loose. You said pin five?"

"Pin five, connector S-3," Santini confirmed.

Archangel plugged the connector in properly. "Fire up the screens and see what we've got now."

Powering the equipment, Dominic ran a system check. "That did it." While Santini wasn't quite ready to admit it to anyone else, he'd found Briggs to be more than competent as both a mechanic and an electrician. With String running things at the hanger and Cait busy with R. J., Dom had often found himself working with Michael. Over the months, the level of respect between the two men had grown, as had the bare beginnings of a cautious, wary friendship. "What's now?"

Undecided whether to suggest a break or continue with the next item on the list, Michael was a bit relieved to have the decision made for him.

"We've got company coming." He carefully slid out from under the console.

A second later, Santini also heard the chopper. "Now who the heck is that?" They both knew that String was working and Cait was home with the baby.

Michael listened a moment longer. "Angel One. Must be Marella. I wonder what brings her out here on her day off?"

"Maybe she decided to take pity on the old men and give us a hand," Dom suggested hopefully. While Marella had already proven that she didn't mind getting her hands dirty, it wasn't like her to show up unexpectedly.

"Old men? Speak for yourself, Santini!" Michael tossed the retort back lightly, but he had a hunch that there was more behind Marella's visit than a sudden desire to assist them. He carefully straightened his leg, shaking off the stiffness that had settled in while he worked in the cramped enclosure. Gingerly, he climbed into the engineer's seat and stretched, loosening knotted muscles.

Outside, Angel One had landed. As Michael predicted, Marella soon appeared from the hidden passage that led out to the desert. "Doesn't look like you came to work," Santini observed, noting her all white garments.

She ignored the Italian, instead reaching through the open door of the helicopter to hand Archangel a thick manila envelope. "Sir, I thought you'd want to see this as soon as possible."

Her severe expression told Michael that it was something serious.

"What's up?" he asked, as he opened the envelope.

"It's the 747 out of San Francisco that went down yesterday."

He tugged the file from the torn package. "A bomb? They know who was responsible?"

Marella bit her lip. "It wasn't a bomb, sir. It was the MXJ-1."

He looked up at her sharply, the documents in his hand momentarily forgotten. "MXJ? That project was abandoned!"

"So we were told. The reports from military intelligence were not quite accurate. It now appears that the project survived it's own death. They've re-dubbed her the Phoenix." Marella's frown suggested her thoughts regarding the Firm's sister agency.

Santini could contain his curiosity no longer. "What the hell is this MX Phoenix, or whatever it is you're calling it? This thing some new kind of explosive or what?"

Archangel raised his hand, a gestured plea for Santini's silence, his attention focused on the file he was scanning. "Dom, give me a minute." Finally, the agent finished flipping through the documents. "Those fools!" he muttered, jamming the papers back into the remains of the envelope.

"The 'fools' paid for their mistake, sir," Marella reminded him.

"So did several hundred civilians." Michael's anger was barely contained. He hesitated, stroking his mustache as he considered his next move. After a moment, he looked up. "Dom, call Hawke. Tell him we've got a problem, we're going to need the Lady. Find out how he wants to handle it."

"Michael, she's not ready!" Santini protested. "We've still got a dozen systems that haven't been tested!"

"I know it, Dom, and I don't like it any more than you do. Believe me, we haven't got a choice on this." The tone of his voice confirmed his words. "Please, get hold of String while I go over some details with Marella."

Against his better judgment, Dominic slipped from the cockpit. To get a clear connection on the cellular phone, he stepped out through the tunnel and stood beside Angel One. Still shaking his head, he punched in the number for the hanger.

"Santini Air, Hawke speaking," came the prompt reply.

"String, it's me. Hit the scrambler."

A moment passed. "What is it, Dom?"

"Michael wanted me to call you. Marella just showed up here with a bunch of papers and now he's madder than hell. Whatever is going on has to do with that plane National Airlines lost yesterday, and something called Phoenix. He says that we're going to need Airwolf, and told me to find out what you wanted to do."

"Ok." At the other end of the line, Hawke hesitated. "Cait's already at the ranch, we might as well meet there. Should take me about an hour. Bring the Lady."

"Will do." Santini started to terminate the connection.

"Dom?"

"Yeah, String?"

"Let Michael fly her."

Dominic winced. "String, I'd really rather not." Despite his newly found respect for Briggs, Santini still didn't like the idea of the agent flying Airwolf. He had been conspicuously absent every time Michael went up for a 'flying lesson'. Up until now, Hawke hadn't pushed the point.

"Dom, I'd prefer that you did." He hung up before the older man had a chance to reply.

Muttering to himself, Santini returned to the lair.

As Dominic entered the cavern, Michael had just finished briefing Marella. "Where are we meeting Hawke?" the agent asked.

"At the ranch in an hour," Dom answered, stowing the stack of schematics the agent handed him.

Archangel nodded to Marella. "Ok, we'll see you at the ranch, then. You have the list?"

"I'm on it, sir." She disappeared down the passageway, and they soon heard Angel One taking off.

Santini tossed a flight suit to Archangel, and both changed in silence. Dressed, Briggs started to climb into the rear seat of Airwolf's cockpit. Dom stopped him. "Up front, Michael. You're flying."

The agent cocked an eyebrow at Santini, but didn't question the order as he swung into the co-pilot's seat. Easing the helmet on over his glasses, he did a thorough preflight, pausing before he cranked the rotors. He looked over at Dominic. "Ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Dom mumbled. He'd scrutinized every move Briggs made as he checked the aircraft, hoping Michael would make some slight mistake that he could pounce on and use as an excuse to deny String's request. Michael had been annoyingly flawless. "Now, go easy, and don't forget that little ledge that sticks out a hundred feet up on the south side. It's easy to miss, and I don't want to be touching up the Lady's paint."

Archangel knew that Santini questioned his flying ability, he'd overheard the older man arguing with Hawke about it more than once. He turned to Dom, keeping his voice level. "I don't have to do this. If you'd rather fly her yourself, just say so. I'll understand."

That was exactly what Dominic wanted, but he knew how String would react when he found out about it. Dom closed his eyes and murmured a quick prayer. He took a deep breath, then exhaled. "No, you take her, just be careful."

Slowly, Archangel eased Airwolf out of the lair, keeping the helicopter precisely centered within the confines of the thin vertical corridor. Michael still wasn't comfortable performing the maneuver on his own, preferring instead to rely on the newly installed navigational aids, but for the last few weeks Hawke had insisted. Finally, he reached the top of the natural opening and hovered there, glancing at Dominic. "Want to get out and check the paint?" Michael asked, finally allowing a touch of annoyance to creep into his voice. Briggs was far angrier than he appeared, but most of his ire was directed at Washington, rather than at Dom. He could almost sympathize with the elder pilot's questions about his abilities. He still had more than enough doubts of his own.

Santini let out a long sigh of relief, feeling the tension release from his shoulders. The tricky part was over. From here, it would be smooth level flying. "Just get us to the ranch."

Briggs tapped a control on the side of his helmet, dropping the visor. "On our way." Simultaneously, he mashed the turbo button and slammed Airwolf into a dive.

"What the hell?" Caught totally off guard, Dominic scrambled for the controls. Before he could reach them, they'd leveled off scant feet above the desert, blasting over the barren terrain at well over Mach one. Furious and frightened half out of his wits by the unexpected maneuver, Dom let loose with a long string of Italian curses.

Hidden behind the concealing helmet visor, Michael grinned. Santini's reaction was almost enough to make him forget the news Marella had delivered. He translated Dominic's Italian easily. "Dom, while the current state of my sanity might be in doubt, I can assure you that my parents WERE married when I was born."

Santini fought for and slowly regained some of his composure. Finally, he looked over at the agent. "All right, Michael. You've proven your point and you've terrified half of the wildlife in this desert. Now could we have some altitude? And slow down? Please?"

Archangel was happy to comply, cutting the turbos and letting Airwolf drift to a respectable altitude before raising the helmet visor. While the Ground Proximity Radar imaging system and associated heads-up display that it projected on his visor negated his lack of depth perception and made nap of the earth flying relatively simple, it did little to ease the effects on his protesting stomach.

Miles away above the Briggs ranch, the Santini Air chopper banked over the house, circling once before descending to land in an empty corral. Caitlin was waiting at the door as Stringfellow Hawke approached. "Hi String, what brings you up here?"

"Dom and Michael are on their way with the Lady. Sounds like we've got a mission coming." He followed her into the house.

They were interrupted by a wailing cry. "Shame on you, you woke R. J.," she teased. "Time for his bottle, anyhow. Would you put some coffee on while I feed him?"

"Sure," Hawke agreed, heading for the kitchen as she went to tend the baby. He started the coffee perking, then wandered out to the den. It had been some time since he'd visited the ranch, and the trophies lining the mantle immediately caught his attention. He moved closer and began to examine them in detail.

"I went out shopping one afternoon. When I came back, those had appeared," Cait offered, as she returned carrying her son.

Hawke noted that the largest of the trophies was from the national helicopter championship. "Impressive." He knew just how strong the competition was at the championship level.

"There are at least a dozen more in the attic."

Stringfellow nodded. "I can't say it surprises me much." Other than Dom and his brother, Michael was easily the best pilot he'd ever flown with. "The only thing your husband lacks is confidence." Hawke turned his back on the awards. "So, where's that nephew of mine? Come here and say hello to your Uncle String." He reached out and took R. J. from Cait, cradling the child gently.

Caitlin glanced toward the mantle, letting her eyes linger momentarily on the highly polished awards. "String, I haven't had a chance to thank you."

"For what?"

"For whatever happened between you and Michael in China. He's... different. I'm not sure I can describe it. The night we came home from Winterhaven, he told me about Moffet and Red Star. All of it. He's finally made some sort of peace with it, I think. There haven't been any nightmares since."

Hawke shook his head. "I'm not sure I had anything to do with that."

"Then who?"

"Try thanking the Lady." String cocked his head, listening. "That sounds like them coming now."

Airwolf set down softly beside the Santini helicopter, her rotor blades slowly drifting to rest. A few minutes later, Santini and Briggs entered. Hawke noted that Dom looked a bit pale and cast a questioning look at Michael.

Archangel shrugged. "I was playing with the GPR," he explained, with the barest hint of a smile.

Hawke snorted. Michael wouldn't have jerked Dominic's chain unless he'd been provoked. He wondered idly just what his mentor had done.

At Cait's request, Dom helped her with the coffee and soon they were all settled in the den, the adults sipping coffee while R.J. sucked on a bottle. "What's going on, Michael?" Hawke asked, voicing the question they were all considering.

"Yesterday, American National flight 455 out of San Francisco crashed into the Pacific shortly after takeoff. The press is speculating that it was a bomb. It wasn't. It was shot down by Phoenix." Archangel opened the envelope Marella had given him, flipping through the documents until he found the picture he was looking for. He dropped it on the coffee table.

The other three bent to examine the grainy photograph. Cait was the first to speak. "It looks like Airwolf with a camouflage paint job." she suggested, unsure of exactly what she was looking at.

"No." Hawke pointed, examining the blurry helicopter more closely. "It's close, but look here. The nose is different, it slopes back faster, and I'm guessing the tail is a little longer." The pilot looked up at Michael abruptly,

scowling his displeasure. "Let me guess, the Firm managed to lose another helicopter?"

Briggs shook his head. "Not this time. Phoenix isn't ours. She's Soviet, or at least she was." Michael stood, began pacing as he explained. "Somewhere along the line, the Soviets got a good look at Airwolf. My guess is that it was while Moffet had her in Libya. Working from that, and their own technology, they tried to build their own version. They had just about finished the airframe when the empire started to crumble and the funds dried up." He hesitated, choosing his words. "Military intelligence had an operative inside the project. That contact assured us that Phoenix had been abandoned, the equipment earmarked for it transferred to other programs. Unfortunately, the operative was wrong. As happened with much of the Soviet military technology, Phoenix was sold to the highest bidder." Archangel stopped pacing, turning to face the others.

Hawke felt a tight knot begin to form in his stomach. "No, Michael. Don't say it. Please don't say it."

The agent nodded, confirming Stringfellow's fears. "John Bradford Horn."

"Mama mia. Horn couldn't get Airwolf, so he decided to get the next best thing." Santini shook his head, holding the photograph up to get a better look at it. "He shot down a commercial airliner? Why?"

The agent resumed pacing. "Horn contacted Washington last week. He made demands, and explained that if those demands weren't met, he would take down a passenger jet." The anger in Archangel's voice was obvious as he continued. "The Pentagon thought they could contain the situation. They sent in a pair of stealth bombers to take out his compound -- and Phoenix. Unfortunately, they didn't know about the laser system guarding Horn's airspace. The bombers were cut to ribbons before they were close enough to deliver their payloads. Less than twelve hours later, 455 dropped off the radar screens."

"My God!" Dominic had dealt with Horn enough times to know how ruthless the man could be, but he still couldn't understand how anyone could involve civilians. He considered the information they'd been given. "If this is being handled by the Pentagon, how'd you find out about it?"

"This morning, the military decided that they weren't quite prepared to deal with Horn's fortress. They decided to dump it in our laps." There was, Michael knew, more to the story than that. The usual intra-agency conflicts had only intensified after the Ebola incident, especially after the Firm's budget was more than doubled at the expense of military intelligence. Rivalry was at an all time high, and sometimes it was more important where the credit or blame fell than whether a mission was a success or failure.

Under other circumstances, the Firm would have been brought in at once to deal with a renegade like Horn. Now...

"So we fly in with the Lady and blow up Phoenix?" Hawke knew it couldn't be that simple.

"It's not going to be that easy," Archangel confirmed as he dropped into a chair, rifling through the file again. "There's no way to get near the place by air with those lasers operational, and you can be sure that Horn will be waiting for Airwolf, too." If he managed to destroy the Lady, John Bradford Horn would have the only supersonic helicopter in existence, and would virtually control the skies.

"You're talking about a ground assault?" Hawke cocked an eyebrow. It wasn't their area of expertise.

"Precisely. We have to get inside and disable the lasers, at the very least. If we can take Phoenix out at the same time, then that's even better." Michael passed around a handful of maps and more spy satellite photographs. "Horn has installed himself on a small island in the North Pacific, not far from the Russian coast. He's excavated an underground compound deep into the natural bedrock, including this." The agent handed one particular photo to Hawke.

The pilot took a long look at the picture. "Horn built himself a Lair?"

Briggs nodded. "That's the other reason why it has to be a ground assault. Even without the lasers, it would be very difficult to hit Phoenix from above. The entrance is even narrower than the one leading to Airwolf's Lair, barely half the size of the Lady's parking lot."

Caitlin looked up from the diagram she was studying. "Michael, why us? If this is a ground assault, then why not the Marines, or the Navy Seals? Surely they're better equipped for that sort of operation."

The agent stroked his mustache. "We haven't got the time, Cait. It would take far too long to get them briefed and into position. You see, at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon, Horn takes out another plane."

"Can't they just give him what he wants? Pay the ransom and buy some time?" Caitlin asked.

Archangel looked up at her. "He's not demanding money. Horn is asking for the President's resignation. For starters."

"You've got to be kid..." Dominic exclaimed, then stopped abruptly, considering what Horn would do with that sort of power. "Jesus. He is insane."

"Precisely," Briggs agreed, "we have to destroy Phoenix before he can do any more damage. That's why we need Airwolf to get us in there fast and undetected."

Hawke was examining some of the maps. "Michael, why not just wait for them to take off, then blow Phoenix out of the sky?"

Michael dug through the pile and retrieved the picture of the helicopter. "Because we're not sure of her capabilities. As designed by the Soviets, she would have been close to an even match for Airwolf. It appears that Horn has made some changes to the original specs. She's probably faster than the Lady, and may well have her out gunned. I really don't want to see you go head to head with her, Hawke, not if there's any other way."

"So what are you planning?" String suspected he wouldn't like the answer.

Archangel unfolded a larger sketch of the compound. He noticed Hawke's inquisitive look. "It was provided to us by the gentleman who supervised the excavation. The important thing to remember is that this work goes back over a year. Horn could have made changes to the layout or had additional work done since then."

"Great."

Briggs ignored the pilot's sarcasm. "There's a secluded area here, on the other side of this rise. The hill will block Horn's radar, as well as line of sight. Airwolf will drop us off on the beach, then retreat to this neighboring island. It's only about a five minute flight."

Hawke nodded. "How do we get inside?"

Archangel pointed again. "Air shaft. It should deposit us not far from the control room."

"An air shaft?" Stringfellow glared at the agent. "Funny, I don't remember signing on as a commando."

Michael returned the look, the suggestion of a grin creasing his mustache. "What's the matter, String, afraid of a little workout?"

Hawke snorted. "I'll manage."

"Good." Briggs returned to the drawing and began to trace a route. "This corridor leads to the control room, this one takes us to Phoenix." He glanced up at Hawke. "You have experience with plastic explosives?"

"It's been awhile."

"I'll bring you up to speed on the flight out. We'll plant timed charges in the areas here, here and here," Michael gestured, "structurally, those are the weakest points of the excavation. We'll also plant one on Phoenix. With any luck at all, it will bring the whole complex down. Questions?"

String took a close look at the drawing. He pointed at a heavily blackened line that appeared in several locations. "What's this?"

"What you might call blast doors. In the event of an attack, heavy doors slam shut over the entrances to the fortress. They're quite a piece of engineering. I'm not sure even Airwolf could shoot her way through them."

Hawke scowled. As much as he didn't like the idea of depending on the air shaft, it looked like the only viable way in or out. "So what about our equipment?"

"Marella should be joining us any time now," the agent replied, checking his watch.

"Refueling?"

"We've got a stop set up in Alaska," Archangel confirmed. Hawke seemed satisfied with that, so he moved on. "Cait?"

Caitlin shook her head. "I don't like it, but I don't see that we have any choice."

"Dom? Questions?"

Santini paused a long second before he answered. "Yeah. Just one. What time do I feed R. J.?"

Michael thought he'd misunderstood. "What time do you do what?"

"Feed your son," Dominic replied as he finished his coffee. "Someone's got to take care of my little nephew while the rest of you are off saving the world."

"There's room for four in Airwolf," Hawke reminded him gently.

With a hint of sadness, Santini shook his head. "No. Not this trip. It's time, String. Cait can handle dropping you two off."

"Dom," Briggs began, looking decidedly uncomfortable, "I don't want to push you out of Airwolf, that's not what I was trying to do..."

The older man cut him off. "I know that, Michael, and before you say it, I know you were using the new imaging system."

"I can't fly like that without it," the agent admitted.

"Maybe. The problem is, I can't fly like that with it." Dom shrugged, trying to keep the emotion out of his voice. "My vision may still be twenty-twenty, but the reflexes aren't what they used to be. The GPR system and all the heads-up displays in the world won't help with that." He let out a deep sigh, almost relieved now that his decision was finally made. "Baby-sitting, on the other hand, now that's something I can still handle, if you'll allow me to."

Archangel had intended to leave the child with Rosa and started to explain that to Santini, but a quick look from Hawke cut him off. He nodded. "You can take R. J. any time, I hope you know that."

"I'll pack up his food and diapers for you." Caitlin volunteered, excusing herself quickly. Cait didn't want the men to see the tears that had started to well at the corners of her eyes. Over the years, Santini had become something of a foster father to her. Despite his recent absences, Dom had always been a part of the Airwolf crew, and somehow, it had seemed that he always would be. While she knew that he was right, watching him walk away was one of the hardest things she'd ever done.

Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the approaching Firm helicopter. Marella arriving, Cait knew. She pushed her thoughts

concerning Dominic and her own concerns about leaving her child to one side. For now, there was a more pressing problem. Phoenix.

Hidden by the pre-dawn darkness, Airwolf descended to deposit her human cargo on the secluded beach and then retreated quickly back into the night. Hawke scanned the area carefully, growing accustomed to the unearthly greenish glow that his night vision goggles imparted on the scene. Satisfied, he picked up the pack at his feet and hung the strap over his shoulder. "Coming?"

"Right behind you." The agent had finished securing his own gear and followed as Hawke moved into the trees. Beneath the canopy of branches even the goggles were of limited use. Stringfellow slowed, picking his way carefully, unwilling to reveal their position by showing a light.

A few minutes later they emerged into a clearing and the pilot paused at it's edge, taking the opportunity to check his compass. He started to make a comment to Michael regarding their position, then realized Briggs had stepped back behind a pine. String chuckled. "Don't you know you were supposed to do that before we..." Something shiny reflected in the dim light as Archangel stowed it into the knapsack he carried. Hawke caught only a glimpse of the object, but he knew what it was. A hypodermic syringe. "Michael, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Briggs stepped from behind the tree as he zipped the satchel. "Making sure I don't slow you down."

There was fury in Hawke's low voice. "Damn it, I don't need you drugged! Especially not while you're handling explosives."

Michael was just as angry. "Do you really think I'm that stupid, Hawke? It's Zyllocaine, a wonderful little drug the Firm developed years ago. Purely a local pain blocker, similar in many respects to Novocain but without the numbness." He glared at the pilot. "I know what I'm doing."

Hawke knew that if the drug was as good as it sounded, it would be in common use. "So what's the catch?"

"In a couple hours when it starts to wear off, I'll pay for it." Briggs shrugged. "By then this will be over. In the meantime, I intend to be able to move on this leg." Despite the darkness, he could still see the skeptical look on Stringfellow's face. "It's not the first time I've used it, Hawke, and it probably won't be the last."

When he thought about it, Hawke could remember several occasions when the agent had been considerably faster on his feet than he should have been. String shook his head. He still didn't like the idea, but... "Come on, this way."

They moved quickly through the woods, pausing several times to check their position. Finally, Archangel spotted their objective. "Over there," he whispered, pointing.

The air shaft was a rough passage cut into the rock, sloping downward at perhaps a forty five degree angle. The opening was secured by a heavy iron grate, with an equally heavy lock. "Explosives?" Hawke asked quietly.

"Too much noise. Let's try this first." The agent slipped a small case from his pocket, and it opened to reveal a set of fine tools. He picked one and inserted it into the lock, maneuvering it delicately within the keyhole.

"You pick locks?" For some reason, String found that moderately surprising.

"Shhh!" Michael hushed him, continuing to work on the lock. After a moment, there was a click, and he pulled the hasp open, grinning. "You'd be surprised at the things the Firm teaches their field agents," he explained. "It's nice to know I haven't lost my touch."

Much to their relief, the grate opened silently. Kneeling, they examined the shaft below. It was about three feet in diameter, and too steep to descend easily. Hawke checked the strength of the hinge where the grate was attached, then secured their ropes around it. "That should hold."

Michael clipped onto the line, looping the remainder over his shoulder where he could play it out as he descended. "I'll go first." The agent began a cautious descent, pausing to gesture toward the grate. "Pull that shut behind you."

Hawke nodded, giving Archangel a minutes head start before following. Picking his way down the shaft, Hawke mentally reviewed the final briefing Briggs had provided as Cait flew Airwolf towards the island. Horn's compound would eventually house hundreds of soldiers, but fortunately, it appeared that now he had perhaps only thirty or so men. The first goal was the control room, where they would disable the lasers that protected the airspace above the island. That much was imperative. If the rest of their mission failed, at least it would provide an opening for Airwolf - or military bombers. Hawke hoped it wouldn't come to that.

After dealing with the lasers, they would plant the timed charges. String took a quick glance at his watch. Five twenty-seven. The charges were set for half past six. They would need to move fast, but that was how they'd planned it. Michael had pointed out the locations for the charges on the construction drawings. Blowing certain rooms and walls should bring the entire complex crashing down like a house of cards. The last charge would be planted on Phoenix herself. It would be the most difficult objective, undoubtedly the helicopter would be heavily guarded.

Hawke felt a touch on his leg, and carefully descended the final few feet to stand beside Archangel at the end of the passage. It had been enlarged

here, and the opening was blocked by another grate and a large, slowly turning fan. Broken light filtered in from the room beyond, and the two men removed their goggles. Hawke examined the fan assembly. It was hinged as a part of the grate, and could easily be swung open. This one wasn't locked. Peering through the blades, String could make out one lab coated technician sitting at a console of some sort. From his position, it appeared he might be dozing. Hawke drew his silenced automatic, then pushed slowly at the grate.

There was a bit of noise as it opened, but the worker slept through it. Stepping quickly into the room, Hawke aimed and fired. The technician barely moved, only sliding a bit lower in his seat.

Crossing the room, Michael checked the body. Satisfied, he turned his attention to the control panel. "Looks like air filtration and power supply."

"Think we should leave them in the dark?"

The agent considered it. "No, if we do, they'll know that we're here. I'd rather keep the element of surprise for as long as we can." He glanced down at the body. "Let's get him out of sight."

Hawke dragged the limp form behind a bank of electronic equipment while Briggs stood watch. With luck, if anyone entered, the body would not be immediately noticed. Weapon in hand, Michael cracked the door, listening for footsteps before opening it further to scan the dim hallway. Seeing no one, he beckoned Hawke to follow. The corridor was poorly lit, either the lights had been turned down for the night or Horn was cutting costs. Either way, the gloom was an advantage, allowing them to remain partially concealed by the shadows.

At the first intersection, they turned to the left, Michael setting a quick pace as they searched for the weapons control room. Hawke noted how easily Briggs moved. Whatever it was, the injection he'd taken had obviously had the desired effect. String jerked his attention back to the business at hand as Archangel stopped, dropping to a crouch beside a heavy, unmarked door. "This should be it," he whispered.

Hawke took a similar position on the other side of the doorway. He edged the door open a crack, getting a good look at the interior before gently closing it. "Control room," he confirmed. "I see at least three of them, there might be more. Looks like they've all got their backs turned." He suspected that the thick rock walls were close to soundproof, but he kept his voice down regardless, not taking any chances.

Michael nodded. "On my signal. Shoot anything that moves." He wrapped his hand around the doorknob. "Ready? Now!" Jerking the door open, he burst through the doorway half a second behind Hawke, dropping to the floor and firing. In a matter of seconds, it was over. Briggs climbed to his feet, sighing once as he took in the carnage. It wasn't the way he liked to

run an operation, but in this case, it was the only answer. He started to examine the equipment.

"Should I move the bodies?" Hawke asked, after making sure all of Horn's people were dead.

"No sense in it, anyone takes one look at this mess, they'll know they've got an intruder." Michael had located a promising panel and began ripping wires loose. Once satisfied with the wiring, he pulled his weapon and fired into the computer several times, producing a satisfying crackle of sparks and a thin curl of smoke. Across the equipment, various lights went out and a few red ones came on. "There. At best, it will take weeks to fix." It went unsaid that if they succeeded with the remainder of their task, Horn's people would have only a matter of minutes, not weeks. He ducked behind the main computer console and produced the first of the plastic explosive charges, carefully taping it to a support beam as Hawke kept watch. "Done. Let's go."

They moved back out into the corridor, starting toward the next site where they planned to plant explosives. Fifty feet down the hallway, they stopped simultaneously, both hearing the unmistakable sound of voices approaching from around the next corner. Briggs motioned toward a doorway they had just passed and they bolted for it, the door swinging shut behind them as the two soldiers came into sight.

It was pitch black in the tiny room they'd entered, but the odor of cleaning solvents suggested to Hawke that it was some sort of supply closet. As Michael flipped on the tiny flashlight he carried, Hawke's suspicions were confirmed. They were surrounded by mops and buckets. He hoped that the two men passing outside weren't janitors. Leaning against the door and listening carefully, he could hear faint fragments of voices. It sounded as if they'd paused so one of the men could sneak a cigarette before proceeding to their destination. Impatiently, Hawke waited for them to move on. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the voices faded completely. He nodded silently to Michael, who turned the light off and cracked the door. The men were gone.

Hawke started to move off down the corridor again, when Briggs stopped him. "We're running late." Michael gestured toward his watch. The encounter had cost them valuable minutes, the second charge should already have been planted. "Let's split up. You take the barracks, I'll take the fuel tanks."

Stringfellow didn't like the idea, but he couldn't think of a better one. Further, he knew he couldn't set the charges as fast as the more experienced agent. "Ok, when you finish, join me, we'll decide how we're going to attack the lair."

"Will do." Briggs hesitated. "Be careful, String."

"Yeah, you too, Michael." With that, Hawke headed toward the barracks, while Archangel turned the corner toward the tanks.

As he continued down the corridor, String hoped that Briggs was right, that the dormitory style barracks weren't yet in use. Eventually, they'd house much of Horn's private army, but based on satellite thermal scans, they currently appeared cold and empty. The skeleton staff now manning the facility was instead staying in the more comfortable rooms that would eventually become 'officer's quarters'.

Hawke's luck held, and he met no opposition as he hurried through the dank hallways, weapon drawn. Finally he reached the door Michael had marked on the map. Steeling himself for whatever waited inside, he edged the door open to find darkness. Ducking inside, he paused to listen for anything that might suggest he wasn't alone. The only sound he heard was his own pounding heartbeat. He let himself relax just a bit, and found the light switch located next to the door. As his eyes adjusted to the sudden brightness, he looked around.

He found rows of empty lockers and linen-less bunks. Briggs had guessed right, the barracks were currently unused. Hawke studied the area, debating exactly where to place the explosives. He decided on a spot along one of the side walls, where it would be somewhat hidden by a row of lockers. Crossing the room, he tucked the automatic into his waistband, and pulled the charge from his backpack, kneeling behind a bunk to install it.

Hawke wasn't particularly comfortable handling the explosives. While the Firm might have trained Michael in such matters, even when String was officially working for them he had been only a test pilot, deemed unlikely to need such knowledge. Removing the charge from its carrier, he set it down gently against the wall, reaching back into his bag for the tape to secure it.

"Well, well. What have we here?" The voice that startled Hawke was hauntingly familiar. He turned to find its source.

"Easy!" The voice warned. "Keep your hands where I can see them."

Still on his knees, String brought his empty hands into view. Slowly, he completed his turn and looked up into the face of his captor. It had been a quarter of a century, but there was no doubt in Stringfellow's mind. His eyes confirmed what his ears had told him. "Sinjin."

The older brother snorted. The Luger he held never wavered. "It's been a long time since anyone's called me that."

"What are you doing here, Sinjin?" In some corner of his mind, Hawke already knew the answer.

"I think that should be my question, little brother. I work for John Horn. This is his island. You're the trespasser here. So you tell me, what brings you sneaking into my quarters?"

"Your quarters?" String couldn't help but scan the empty room.

"I like my privacy." With a toss of his head, St. John indicated a single made-up bunk in the far corner of the room that Stringfellow had failed to notice. Sinjin refocused his attention on his brother. "You haven't answered my question. Not that you really need to. I know you're working for the Firm, and I know what you're here for."

The younger Hawke was close to tears. Desperately, he prayed that Saint John didn't know who Horn was, what he was capable of. "Sinjin, your boss shot down a civilian plane!"

"No he didn't." There was something terribly sinister in the elder brother's short laugh that cut into String like a knife. "Unfortunately, Horn's not much of a pilot. He was only riding shotgun. I was the one doing the flying."

"No." It was barely a whisper. "No. You wouldn't. You couldn't. Sinjin, there were kids on that flight..." His voice trailed off completely in disbelief and horror.

Sinjin Hawke shook his head in what might have been sadness. "You never did understand, did you? You always wanted to believe that I was some sort of hero, that I saw the world the way you saw it. Good and evil, black and white. Sorry, String. I don't see it that way. I never did. I see the world colored in shades of green."

"Green?"

"It's the color of money, little brother. And Horn pays me very well."

String felt suddenly ill, his stomach rolling. He looked down for a moment, fighting to regain his equilibrium. Taking a deep breath, he raised his head again, forcing himself to meet his brother's eyes. "What happened to you in Nam? What did they do to you to make you like... this?" Somewhere behind Sinjin, Stringfellow caught a flash of brightness, light from the corridor reflecting onto the wall as the door opened and quickly closed again. There was no alarm, no one rushing to St. John's assistance. Michael. It had to be Michael.

"Do to me?" Saint John asked. "Oh, you mean when I was 'captured'?" He waited for a shallow nod from his brother. "I never was captured. Mace and I had been waiting for an opportunity to cut and run, and your 'rescue mission' provided a perfect one. We'd been planning it for months, just waiting for the right chance. When you took off, we got the hell out of there. Swapped dog tags with a couple of corpses." Again, the laughter. "Just my luck that the stiff with my tags was never found."

Out of the corner of his eye, String caught movement, a dark figure slipping closer. As much as he didn't want to hear the words Sinjin was saying, he knew he had to keep him talking and occupied. "You went to those lengths to go AWOL?"

"AWOL? I suppose you could call it that. We stayed in Nam for a couple years. You see, there were people over there who were paying a lot better than Uncle Sam."

"Running drugs?"

"Drugs. Weapons. Women. Black market." He shrugged. "Didn't matter. We did whatever paid the best. I even flew for the North a couple of times." Sinjin glared at his younger brother. "Oh, come on, String. You knew I was playing outside the rules. You didn't really believe I won all that money playing poker, did you?"

From behind an empty locker only feet from Saint John, Briggs listened to the exchange, wondering if somehow this 'Sinjin' might be another of Horn's hoaxes. It seemed increasingly unlikely. The pieces of the story fit far too well. With an almost dazed fascination, he continued to listen.

"It's what I wanted to believe. You were always so good at poker..." His words trailed off. "Damn it, why didn't you tell me you were alive?" String's voice was heavy with pain. "I thought you were dead, or worse. Me, Dom, Le... Hell, do you even know that you have a son?"

"Probably more than one. I never was too careful about protection." The elder Hawke raised an eyebrow. "I thought you knew I was still around. You saw me once."

"When?" String demanded.

"HX1. Not long before you killed Mace." Something in the way Sinjin held the Luger suddenly became more threatening. "Like you killed Vidor." He hesitated. "This has to end here, String. I can't let you kill any more of my friends."

Michael's grip tightened on the automatic, dreading what he was about to do, knowing what it would do to Stringfellow Hawke. Desperately, he searched for some other way. Might St. John surrender if he knew he was out numbered? Without pausing to think of the consequences, Briggs stepped out from behind the locker. "Saint John, it's over."

Startled, Sinjin spun, firing as he turned. Michael dove for the floor, rolling behind the slight cover of a bunk. An instant later came the low pop of a second muffled shot. It was followed by silence.

Archangel had hit the floor awkwardly and harder than he intended. It took him a moment to regain his breath. Gasping, he raised his head carefully above the thin mattress, surveying the scene. String stood above the crumpled form of his brother, the automatic hanging loosely from his fingers. Tears poured down his cheeks. Abruptly, he raised his head, wiping his face with the back of his sleeve. "Michael?"

The agent climbed gingerly to his feet, keeping his arm pressed tight against the pain in his side. "Yeah. I'm all right." He crossed to stand beside his friend. "Are you?"

String knelt, his fingers lightly touching the side of his brother's neck, searching for a pulse he knew he wouldn't find. "He's dead."

"I'm sorry, String." He reached for Hawke's shoulder and in doing so, caught a glimpse of his watch. Six thirteen. "Shit! Hawke, we've got to get out of here." Briggs pulled the pilot to his feet, ignoring protesting ribs. Stringfellow stared at him, uncomprehending. "The charges, Hawke, in seventeen minutes, this place is going to go up like a box of matches!"

Hawke finally nodded in understanding. "I never finished...." Still dazed by events, he started to return to the half-planted explosive.

"No." Archangel quickly considered the alternatives. There was no way they had time to set the remaining charges and still make it back through the air shaft. On the other hand, Horn surely had another pilot, and Hawke was in no condition to take on Phoenix. Briggs made the only decision he could. "String, get back to Airwolf. I'll finish here, then head out the south entrance. You can land and pick me up there." It would be tight. If nothing went wrong, he'd make it out in time.

The pilot shook his head. "Let me plant the charges, you go after Airwolf."

"Hawke, we don't have time to argue. I can set the explosives faster, and you're the better pilot. If we missed any of those lasers, or if Phoenix gets into the air, I'm going to need you in the Lady." Beyond that, given the state of String's emotions, Michael had no intention of leaving the younger man there alone. Briggs shoved Hawke roughly in the direction of the door. "Go!"

With one last look at his fallen brother, Hawke finally turned and ran out the door. Michael sighed in relief, then turned his attention to the charge String had left behind.

Hawke pounded through the halls, heedless of any opposition he might encounter, horribly aware of the passing seconds. The only thing that mattered was reaching Airwolf. He forced himself to concentrate on that, knowing that if he didn't, he'd be of no use to himself or anyone else. Breathing hard, he reached the air filtration center and charged into the air shaft, throwing himself at one of the ropes that led to the surface. He clawed his way up it, shoving the grate open as he reached the top.

It was barely dawn, but the sky had lightened enough for him to make his way through the trees without stopping to put on the night vision goggles. As he cleared the last of the forest, Hawke found Airwolf waiting for him, hovering over the beach. Cait had been scanning for heat sources and had picked up his trail as he approached. She landed beside him, throwing open the door in terror. "Where's Michael?"

"Move!" Hawke yelled, scrambling into the pilot's seat as she climbed into the back. He checked the time as he yanked on the controls, not waiting to pull on his helmet. Six twenty-four. "We've got to pick him up!" String bellowed over the howl of the engines as the helicopter rose.

"Where is he? Is he all right?" Caitlin shouted, frantic with worry, her eyes locked onto the timer readout that kept ticking closer to zero.

"Planting the last of the charges. He's coming out the south entrance."

Cait's nails gouged into her palms in horror as she realized her husband was still inside the complex. "You LEFT him in there? String, no..." The turbos drowned out the rest of her words.

Briggs finished setting the charge Hawke had abandoned in the barracks and moved out into the hallway. He checked his watch. Six seventeen. Thirteen minutes. Enough time to plant the final charge and still make it to the exit, if nothing went wrong and Phoenix wasn't heavily guarded. He started jogging toward the underground hanger, keeping to the side of the corridor.

Suddenly, hidden loudspeakers came to life, blaring out an alarm. It's wail echoed loudly down the corridors. In the distance, something heavy fell with a solid thud. Michael stumbled to a halt. He knew the source of the thud. It had come from the blast doors that automatically closed in an attack to lock the facility tight against outside forces. With the doors closed, there was no way out other than the air shaft, and Briggs knew he didn't have the time to reach it.

Defeated, Archangel let himself sag against the side of the corridor. His ribs ached, and he was totally drained, both physically and emotionally. As he leaned back against the wall, his hand came to rest on the satchel he still carried. It contained the last of the charges. Damn it, if this was where it ended, at least he would try to take Phoenix with him. Michael struggled back to his feet, knowing the guards around the helicopter would be doubled, desperately considering possible ways to get past them. Something clicked in his mind. There just might be one chance. Gathering the shredded remains of his strength, he turned and jogged back the way he'd come.

In a small secluded room at the other end of the complex, the insistent alarm roused the lone figure that resided there. Immediately awake, he reached for a radio that waited beside the bed. "Status?" he demanded, putting the microphone to his lips.

Listening for a moment as he pulled on his shoes, he finally interrupted the voice speaking into his ear. "What happened to your guards?" Not waiting for an answer, he continued, his barely contained anger evident in

his voice. "Find the intruders and kill them." With that he tossed the receiver onto the bed, rising to shove a bureau to one side. Moving the piece of furniture revealed a roughly cut doorway, and he tapped in an access code to open the electronic lock.

Stepping through the opening, John Bradford Horn entered a roughly cut tunnel that was unmarked on any of any of the Firm's diagrams. Ducking his head, he hurried down the low passageway.

As they arced over the complex, Hawke managed to free a hand from the controls long enough to pull on a headset. While it lacked the heads-up display and other features of the helmets, at least it would allow him to communicate with Cait without shouting. Small arms fire bounced ineffectually off the Lady's skin, and almost unconsciously, he raked the chain guns across it's source. Six twenty-six. He brought Airwolf down low over the southern entrance to Horn's compound, only to be confronted by the sealed doors.

"Where is he?" Caitlin's voice was loud in his ears. "You said he'd be here!"

"No, damn it, no!" Hawke whispered. They had to find him, to somehow blast Briggs an exit. "Cait, thermal scan. See if you spot anyone."

Her fingers desperately tapped out the commands on the engineering keyboard. "String, I've got people running all over down there. I can't pick him out."

There had to be some way of identifying the agent. A flash of memory came back, something Michael had mentioned in passing months earlier. Hawke had no idea if it would work, but it was all they had. "Titanium. Cross check a search for titanium with the thermal scan."

"Titanium?" Even as she asked, she started the search. It would take time for the computer to cross-reference the scans. Time they didn't have.

"He said something once about setting off metal detectors. Titanium rod in his leg." Stringfellow glanced at his watch again. Six twenty-eight. Even if the scans were sensitive enough and they found Michael, they still had to get him out. Hawke knew it was taking too long. Silently, he cursed the agent. Why had he let Briggs stay behind? The unexpected encounter with Sinjin had trashed his judgment and possibly his sanity. Under other circumstances, he would have dragged Michael out with him or stayed behind himself.

Sinjin. His brother. Brother or not, how could he have not seen the truth of what Sinjin was? The clues had been there all along, but he had so stubbornly refused to see them. Now, it would cost a friend his life. A friend. Hawke could finally admit that now. Michael was a friend, perhaps the best friend String had ever had. If Briggs somehow managed to survive this, the

relationship between them was going to change. Hawke would make sure of that.

Six thirty. A blast of light and sound from below broke into Hawke's revelry. The first of the charges detonated, followed moments later by a second. A horrible scream came through the headset he wore, loud enough that it would have brought water to his eyes, but the tears were already there. Caitlin screamed again as more of the complex exploded, the rock falling in upon itself. Flames erupted, spilling out of the ruins, and there was a rapid series of loud explosions. The fuel tanks. It took away any last hope Hawke might have held. There would be no survivors. String forced his eyes away from the destruction, and as he looked up he caught movement off to his right.

Even as the rock tumbled around it, the helicopter slowly emerged from the mouth of the lair, rising into the rays of the dawning sun. Back lit by the morning sky and the fire below, the camouflage disappeared, and it was like looking into a mirror. It could have been Airwolf hanging there, suspended. Instead it was Phoenix, rising like it's namesake from the ashes, slowly turning to face them.

Horn. Silently, Hawke prayed it was Horn behind the helicopter's controls. He would pay for his crimes, for what he had done to Michael, to the airliner. He would pay for what Sinjin had become. Stringfellow's voice was a whisper. "Cait, give me a Hellfire."

Bent over the engineer's console, sobbing softly, she neither saw Phoenix nor heard Hawke's request. He repeated it, louder, and on his third attempt, he finally broke through to her. She looked up and saw the helicopter hovering before them. Slowly, she straightened, then reached over and tapped the button with little enthusiasm. "Hellfire." With something of a start, she realized the search program was still running. It no longer mattered. Cait had no desire to find whatever might be left of her husband's remains. She would remember him as he had been, not as a burned, crushed corpse. She began to type in the command sequence to abort the search.

Struggling to see through his tears, Hawke turned Airwolf to face Phoenix. This was for Michael. Phoenix was a well-armed target, but it would be a clean kill. His thumb caressed the trigger and began to slowly squeeze down on it.

"String, NO!" Suddenly, Caitlin was on top of him, tearing at his arms and shoulders, screaming almost incoherently.

He fought to keep the Lady under control. "What the hell?" he bellowed, trying to get away from the wild woman who'd launched herself at him while still holding Phoenix in his gun sights.

"...damn Russian radios... Hawke, can you read me?" The voice that came over the radio was so unexpected that Stringfellow almost let go of the controls.

"MICHAEL?"

"Yeah. Who else were you expecting?"

"Michael, where the hell are you?" Hawke took one more look at the ruins below him. There was no way...

"Where do you think I am? I'm right in front of you." The agent's chuckle was clear, even over the radio.

Hawke stared at Phoenix, slowly understanding. "Damn it, Michael, I just came half a second from blowing you out of the sky."

It was a moment before Archangel responded, and when he did, he was considerably more subdued. "Well, for once I'm glad you weren't any faster."

Unwilling to take any chances, Caitlin flipped switches to disarm the missile. She had finally regained her composure enough to speak. "Are you all right?"

"Nothing a long soak in the hot tub and a good bottle of brandy won't fix." Briggs paused. "Hawke, how about we put these birds down somewhere for a few minutes? Right now I'd really like to see my wife."

"You've got it, Michael. I'll follow you to the other side of the island."

"Good enough. Talk to you on the ground."

Hawke watched as Briggs carefully turned Phoenix, then tucked in behind her. He glanced over his shoulder. "Cait, how'd you know?"

Her voice was still shaky. "The scanner. Just as I was about to shut it down, it locked onto Phoenix."

String shook his head. It had been a spur of the moment idea, and he'd doubted whether it would even work. "I'd better not hear him complain about setting off metal detectors again."

"Thank God you thought of it," Cait replied, relief obvious in her voice.

Hawke followed the camouflaged helicopter down onto the beach, settling beside it. Caitlin was out the door before they'd even landed, racing across the sand. He watched as Briggs opened the door and stepped out of Phoenix, sweeping Cait into a long embrace. They held each other for a time, and Stringfellow looked away, busying himself with keeping a check of the Lady's radar screens.

"String?" Cait appeared at his side a few minutes later. "Michael asked me to cover the radar here while you took a look at Phoenix."

He nodded. "Ok, I'll be back in a few." He quickly crossed the distance to where Archangel stood, leaning against the second helicopter. Hawke slowed as he approached, suddenly unsure of what to say. "Michael, I... um..." He couldn't find the words.

The agent recognized Hawke's discomfort. Like String, he was the product of a past that made it difficult to express his feelings, especially feelings of friendship. It was time for both of them to start tearing down some walls. Grinning, Briggs held out his hand. Hawke moved to shake it, and Michael pulled him into an unexpected bear hug. "I know," he echoed the pilot's unspoken thoughts. "It's damn good to see you, too."

"You ok?" String asked, once the older man had released him.

"A bruised rib or two." Michael shrugged. "I've survived worse." It was enough to be uncomfortable, nothing more. "What about you? Are you all right?"

Hawke paused, then nodded slowly. "I'm ok."

The haunted look had left String's eyes, but Briggs saw that there was still a deep sadness there. "You're sure?"

"Yeah." Hawke met Archangel's gaze. "I think a part of me suspected for a long time. Sinjin never was the brother I wanted him to be, I just refused to see it." He shook his head, remembering. "There was a bunch of pilots who were into the black market. Sinjin, Mace, Vidor, a handful of others. I heard about it, but they kept it away from me, and I never let myself believe it might go further than that. When Mace came back from the dead, and Vidor turned up with Sinjin's bracelet... damn it, I should have known. Michael, I blackmailed you and the Firm into years of searching for someone who never really existed outside of my own mind. I'm sorry."

Briggs searched for words that would comfort Hawke, but found few. "That's not important. I know it doesn't help, but I wish things could have turned out differently."

"You gave him every chance, Michael. We both did." Hawke glanced down, noticing for the first time that the flight suit Briggs wore was olive drab, rather than gray. "Why didn't you tell me what you were planning?"

"Planning?" Michael stared at the pilot in confusion. "You think I PLANNED that?" He shook his head in denial. "When those blast doors closed, I knew there was no way out. I just wanted to get to Phoenix to plant that last charge. Figured the only way I'd get past the guards was if... well, if they thought I was Saint John. I went back and raided his locker for a flight suit and helmet. Somehow, they fell for it. I'd started to set the explosives when I realized she wasn't locked."

"So you decided that you'd take her instead?"

"Honestly?" Briggs sighed. "I didn't think I had a chance in hell of getting Phoenix out of there. But... It was the only game in town, and I've already had one building dropped on my head. I guess I figured that one way or another it would be better than a repeat of Red Star."

Hawke grinned. "How many times have I told you that you don't need that imaging system?"

"Maybe you've got a point." Michael admitted, returning the younger man's grin and leaning back against the helicopter. As he shifted his weight he suddenly grimaced in pain, almost stumbling.

"Hey, easy!" String caught Archangel's shoulder, supporting him. "I think you did more than bruise a couple ribs."

Briggs shook his head, biting his lip. "It's not my ribs. I knew this was coming; it's the down side of that shot I took. I'll be fine, I just need to get off my feet." His leg was becoming increasingly painful. The expected cramps were starting to set in as the medication wore off, but he was determined to downplay it. Nevertheless, he didn't protest as Hawke helped him climb back into the helicopter. Settled, he turned to study String's expression. "Are you really sure that you're all right?"

"Yeah. I am now."

Michael accepted what he saw in Stringfellow's face. "In that case, I'd like to borrow your co-pilot."

"Humm?"

"This damn thing is labeled in Russian, and I'm afraid mine is more than a little rusty. It would make it a hell of a lot easier if Cait flew while I translated. Besides," he admitted reluctantly, as he carefully massaged his leg, "in another half an hour, I'm not going to feel much like flying anything."

Hawke nodded. "Cait's all yours." He hesitated. "What are you going to do with Phoenix?"

It was a question Briggs hadn't had time to consider. "I don't know yet, String. I really don't know. But I'd appreciate it if you would lay low for a few days and stay away from the Firm until I figure it out. You think Dom would mind baby-sitting for an extra day or two?"

"You mean 'Uncle' Dom? He'd love the chance to spend some time with R. J., and you know it."

"That's what I thought. Tell you what, Cait and I will meet you at the cabin Friday at noon." It would give them three days. Long enough to explore some options.

Hawke started to turn back toward Airwolf, then hesitated. "Michael, can I ask you for a favor?"

"Certainly."

"Don't say anything about Sinjin yet. If you want Airwolf back, you can have her, but give me some time to decide how to tell Dom and Le."

"Did I say anything about wanting Airwolf back?" Michael gave him a quick grin. "We'll talk about that later." The agent sobered. "I'll keep quiet about Saint John. It's not my place to tell anyone where we found him. You've got my word on that. Meanwhile, you take care of yourself and we'll see you Friday, String."

Hawke had begun to walk away, but he looked back at Briggs. "Since when did you start calling me String?"

"Don't you think it's about time?" the agent asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"Yeah." The pilot nodded, the ghost of a smile crossing his face. "I guess maybe it is."

Halfway between the still-burning remains of the underground fortress and the nearest neighboring island, a rubber boat bobbed on the waves, its motor carrying it away from the destruction. On board, its lone occupant looked up as he heard the distinctive wail of the supersonic helicopter. In the dim morning light, its dark shape and white belly were unmistakable. Airwolf. Horn had started to look away when he heard another, similarly pitched sound. Phoenix. Somehow, she had survived the collapse of his empire.

John Bradford Horn watched the two silhouettes as they passed almost overhead and flew off to the north. Phoenix was HIS, bought, paid for and assembled. Once again, Stringfellow Hawke and his friends had interfered with Horn's own well laid plans. Hawke would pay for that interference, and Horn would have his helicopter back. It was only a matter of time.

Dom jumped as the clock struck, sounding unusually loud against the quiet backdrop of the crackling fire. Santini glanced at the offending timepiece again, as he had done every five minutes for the last two hours. "They're late, String," he announced unnecessarily. "They should have been here an hour ago."

Hawke crossed to the fireplace, absently kneeling to rearrange the logs with an antique poker. It wasn't a particularly cold day and the fire made it almost uncomfortably warm, but he needed something to occupy his hands. "I'm sure they were just delayed. They'll be here." Stringfellow hoped his voice held more conviction than he felt.

"You're positive Michael didn't say anything about what he was going to do or where they were headed?" It was at least the dozenth time Dominic had asked the question.

"I don't think he knew himself."

Santini began to pace in front of the bar. "I don't like it, String. From what you told me, he even admitted his Russian was lacking. What if they crashed, or accidentally set off some self-destruct mechanism or something?"

"Let's give it some time before we..." Hawke paused, listening. "That sounds like Angel One."

Dom waited at the door as the brilliant white helicopter touched down, disgorging its two passengers onto the dock before lifting off again. "It's Cait and Michael. They're ok, thank God." Santini let out his breath in relief.

String was standing at the bar as Briggs entered with Caitlin a half step behind him. The agent was limping heavily, exhaustion obvious in the way he carried himself. Cait looked almost as tired as he did. As he poured a glass of wine, Hawke noted the agent's choice of clothing. The stark white three-piece suit was reminiscent of those that had made up the bulk of Michael's wardrobe a decade earlier. String raised an eyebrow. "I thought you'd given up on playing the white knight?"

Archangel didn't bother to reply as he dropped heavily into a chair, gratefully accepting the drink Stringfellow handed him. Briggs leaned back, relaxing into the cushions, wearily propping his legs on the coffee table. "Thanks."

"Cait?" Hawke gestured toward a second glass.

"No thanks. What I really could use is a cup of coffee. Is there any made?" she asked, collapsing onto the sofa. "Where's R.J.? Is my little darling ok?"

"R.J.'s fine, he's sleeping. I put him down for his nap just before you got here." Dominic started the coffee brewing. "That will be ready in a few minutes." He turned accusingly to Michael. "You're late."

"I know," the agent admitted. "It couldn't be helped. I had a breakfast meeting at the White House."

That explained the white suit. "Where's Phoenix?" Hawke asked.

Briggs looked up, surprise seemingly registering on his face. "You should know the answer to that one better than I do. She's at the bottom of the Pacific, right where you left her."

"Say again?" String demanded, rising from his bar stool.

"Surely you're not telling me that you don't remember shooting her down?"

Hawke stared at Archangel, comprehension dawning. "You gave her to the Firm, didn't you?"

The look Briggs gave him in return was one of pure innocence. "The firm? What firm are you referring to?"

"What firm?" Anger building, String advanced toward the agent. "Why you bastard! You cut me off, didn't you? Now that the Firm has Phoenix, they figure they don't need Airwolf any more. So you just hung me and the Lady out to dry!" It figured. Just when he was starting to see Michael as a friend. Somewhere behind him, Dominic started to chuckle.

"I'm really not sure what you're talking about, String." The agent appeared completely baffled. "The only firm I work for is Santini Air."

"Like hell you do!" Hawke exploded. He was vaguely aware of Santini's laughter.

"Michael's telling the truth, String. I hired him this morning," Caitlin offered, the hint of a smile curling the corners of her lips.

"I own half of Santini Air, and you can't hire anyone without my authorization," Hawke turned abruptly back to the agent, "and you'd better believe I'm sure as hell not letting you hire this backstabber!" Behind him, Dom roared. Stringfellow spun to face the older man, his anger finding a new focus. "Just what is so damn funny?"

Dominic was almost doubled over with laughter, and fought to regain his control. Slowly, he circled to stand beside Briggs, appearing to study him for several moments. Abruptly, much to String's surprise, he reached out and grabbed Archangel's hand, shaking it. Santini started grinning from ear to ear. "Hell, Michael, I never thought you had it in you." Dom swatted Briggs once on the shoulder then turned back to Hawke, again chuckling. "String, don't you get it? He told everyone that you shot Phoenix down, then he kept her for himself. He STOLE Phoenix!"

Stringfellow stood silently, staring at the agent, true understanding finally coming to him. "Well I'll be damned. You did steal her, didn't you?"

Briggs winced, frowning. "Please, gentlemen. The concept of theft has such negative connotations." A wide grin creased his face. "I'd really prefer to think I 'liberated' her."

Something about the terribly earnest way he said it struck a chord with Hawke, and in moments, the four of them were all laughing. Before they could recover, they were interrupted by a wailing cry from the other room. "Looks like your boy is awake," Santini observed, retrieving a bottle from the refrigerator, "and he certainly doesn't have much of a sense of humor."

Caitlin joined him. "Let me help you, Dom. You don't know how much I've missed him. Right now even his crying sounds wonderful." She accompanied Santini as he went to tend the baby.

Michael also longed to spend time with his son, but there were things that needed to be settled with Stringfellow Hawke first. This was a golden opportunity that might not be soon repeated. He glanced over at the fireplace. "A little warm for a fire, isn't it?"

"Probably," String admitted.

Briggs pulled himself stiffly to his feet. "Come on, let's go out and get some air." It would give them a chance to talk in private.

"Refill first?" Hawke noticed the empty glass.

"Thanks." Together, the two men stepped out onto the porch. Michael eased himself onto the porch swing, while Hawke took up a position leaning against the railing, his back to the lake.

"So. You've got Phoenix hidden somewhere. What did you do with her, Michael?"

"You think I'm going to tell you, after all the things you called me?" Briggs couldn't quite keep the amusement off his face. He fully intended to tell Hawke where he'd stashed Horn's helicopter, but not until he had let the younger man spend some time stewing about it.

The pilot took the words more seriously than Briggs had intended them. "I can't say as how I blame you. I really should know by now that you're someone I can trust."

Michael sobered. "No. That was my fault. After everything that's happened lately, I shouldn't have led you on. Not about that. I fully intend to show you where Phoenix is hidden, and I want to break you in on her." He leaned back, carefully stretching. His leg ached horribly, and his ribs were still sore. Maybe he had cracked one or two after all. Taking another sip of wine, he sighed. "It's going to be a few days, String. Right now, I'm beat." For the moment, all he really wanted was to go home and soak in the hot tub, then crawl into bed and sleep for a week.

Hawke remembered the difficulty he and Dom had encountered when they'd first brought Airwolf home from Libya, carefully evading the Firm's detection. The trip back with Phoenix couldn't have been any easier. No wonder the agent was exhausted. He examined Briggs in closer detail, his eyes finally coming to rest on the hand holding the wine glass. Traces of something dark showed beneath Michael's usually impeccable nails. Black paint. Hawke chuckled. "You painted her." Now Airwolf did have a twin.

Michael shrugged, not particularly surprised that String had figured it out. "Not a very neat job, but enough that she'd pass at a distance. As soon as things settle down, we'll do a professional job of it."

"So I take it you told the Firm that I shot Phoenix down?"

"I didn't think you'd mind."

Hawke looked down at his feet. "Well, I guess you've got yourself a pair of helicopters now, Michael."

"How so?"

"I promised to give you back Airwolf when the Firm found Sinjin."

The older man stared thoughtfully at his glass. "First of all, unless you've told Dom," he paused, waiting for Hawke to confirm that he hadn't, "the two of us are the only ones who know about Saint John. Second, in any case, you wouldn't be turning Airwolf over to me. As I said, I no longer work for the Firm."

Stringfellow looked up sharply. "I thought you were joking. They fired you?"

"Not likely. I quit." Briggs sipped the wine. "That's what I was doing at the White House this morning."

"Why?"

Michael let out a long breath. "Officially? Because of the way this entire situation was bungled. If the Firm had been called in from the beginning, we might have saved that plane. Politics, String. Nothing but politics. Someone has to send the Washington bureaucrats a wake up call." His resignation and the events that led up to it would create a minor shock wave, the ripples of which would be felt throughout the intelligence community. In some small way, it might change things. For a few days, at least.

There was more to it than that. Hawke knew it. "Unofficially?"

"String, what happened..." He searched for the words. "What happened back there... it reminded me of my own mortality. I'm not getting any younger. Whatever time I have left on this earth, I'm not about to spend it entertaining senators and begging for appropriations. I'm going to spend it where I want to be, doing something that I want to be doing."

Stringfellow realized what Michael was driving at. "Cait was serious about hiring you, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was. If you don't object."

Hawke hesitated. "You know I can't let you fly, at least not on the books."

Briggs nodded. "I know that. I also know that you two are running Santini Air into the ground. Unfortunately, neither of you have half of Dom's business sense." He shrugged, grinning. "And if it comes down to it, I think even Santini will attest that I'm a decent mechanic."

"Well, I suppose we could put you on the payroll." Hawke matched Michael's grin. "Of course turning a wrench at Santini Air won't pay you a quarter of what you were making at the Firm."

"Guess I'll have to get rid of the hired help." Briggs chuckled, then turned serious. "Actually, I've been thinking about that for awhile now. Selling the ranch, finding something smaller. Rosa's been talking retirement for the last year, and I know we'll never find another one like her. Without good help, the place is too much for Cait and I to deal with, as often as we're away."

"What about your horses?"

"My polo ponies?" Michael corrected automatically. "Actually, I have an old acquaintance who's been trying to buy them off me for some time now. I haven't ridden half a dozen times in the last six months. I think it's time to move on."

"What's wrong, getting old?" Hawke teased.

Briggs considered it, idly stroking his mustache "I've played polo since I was in my teens, but back then it was only a hobby. It didn't become an obsession until after Red Star. There were too many other things in my life."

"Flying?"

"Well, I was a pretty good skier, too, and I got into tennis quite heavily for awhile. But mostly it was flying." He shrugged. "I guess I don't need polo any more. I've found my first love again."

Stringfellow turned to stare off across the lake. It was several minutes before he spoke. "Most of the land up here belongs to the government, protected wilderness conservation land. I own this place, and that one clear patch off towards the north, that's mine, too." He gestured up the beach. "I always planned to give it to Sinjin, when I found him." Hawke turned back to meet Michael's gaze. "It's quiet up here, peaceful. Clean air, clean water. It would be a good place for someone to build a house, raise kids." He paused. "You know, I've been thinking it might be nice to have neighbors."

"String, I'm not asking..." Briggs hoped that Hawke hadn't misconstrued his comments about selling the ranch.

"I know you're not. I'm offering."

"You're just looking for someone to help you chop wood." Michael kidded as he considered the idea. The lake was beautiful, especially at this time of year. As Hawke said, it would be an ideal place to raise R. J. "I'll have to talk it over with Cait."

"Take your time. My offer isn't going anywhere." Hawke grinned, gesturing toward a stack of wood waiting to be split. "Neither are those logs."

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of. Thanks, I think." Briggs hesitated, hating to bring up what had to be a painful topic. "String, what about Saint John? What are you going to tell Dom and Le?"

Hawke shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe nothing. I'm certainly not going to tell them the truth."

"I'm not sure that's fair." Michael held up a hand to cut off String's protest. "I think that Dom has long assumed that Saint John was dead. Le's another matter. He's still clinging to the hope that somewhere, your brother is still alive. Is it fair to leave him in limbo like that?"

"You think it's better to tell him what his father was?"

"Did I say that? Hear me out. What if Marella produced a corpse and evidence that Saint John died in Vietnam, decades ago?"

Hawke considered it. "I think it would solve a lot of problems. Can it be done?"

"It can be arranged. Just say the word."

"What about Airwolf? What happens to her once Sinjin is officially dead?"

"That's the other reason I was at the White House. I spoke with the President about Airwolf, and about you. He feels that over the last decade you've proven both your loyalty and your worth to this country. In short, as long as you continue to fly missions of national interest for the United States,

our government won't try to take her away from you. Regardless of the status of your brother. You've earned her, String. She's yours."

"Why do I have the feeling there's a catch?"

"Only a small one." Michael's amusement was obvious. "While I'm no longer actually working for Uncle Sam, I've been asked to keep an eye on you. The White House wants to be sure you don't suddenly decide to go renegade."

"Wonderful. Cait gives you a job, and I move you in next door. Talk about playing into their hands..." Hawke chuckled. "So just who am I supposed to be working for, you or the President?"

"You'll continue to work for the Firm. Marella is taking over as the head of the committee, you'll report to her. Is that acceptable to you?"

"I don't have a problem with working for Marella." Hawke abruptly changed the topic. "What's she like, Michael?"

"Marella?" the older man asked, puzzled.

"No," String laughed, "I mean Phoenix. You've flown both, how does she compare with the Lady?"

Briggs considered the question. "I'm not sure I can really compare them. While they're similar in appearance, beneath the surface they're two totally unique aircraft. They were built by different people for entirely different missions. I haven't begun to find her limits yet, but it feels like Phoenix has a higher top end. I'd bet she can pull Mach 2 without even breaking a sweat. Beyond that, there's a greater weapons capacity. On the flip side, she lacks much of the stealth and surveillance technology the Lady has, and she's not quite as maneuverable. To put it another way, Airwolf is finesse. Phoenix is brute force." He stroked his mustache absently. "All in all, I think the two of them working together could take on an army."

"Working together? You mean 'together' as in 'flying formation'?" Hawke raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. Something like that. Assuming of course that you're willing to accept the idea of having a wingman." Briggs wasn't so sure that Hawke would be.

Stringfellow thought about it. He had been a lone eagle for so long, the concept of having someone backing him up in the air seemed almost alien. The last pilot that he'd flown formation with had been... No. He wouldn't let his mind go there. It was long past time he began to trust Michael as a friend. He already did trust him as a pilot. "I suppose it might be nice to have some backup once in awhile."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

Something occurred to Hawke. "Michael, you said you met with the President this morning. Did you tell him you had Phoenix?"

"No."

"You're saying you lied to the President?" The admission surprised him.

"Not exactly. I just told him the Phoenix was no longer a threat to national security. I didn't elaborate." Briggs shrugged. "Do you have any idea how many times I've been called to testify in front of congressional committees? It's an occupational hazard you learn to live with when you work for an agency like the Firm. One learns early on that there are many creative ways to phrase the truth." He finished the last of his wine. "Other than the four of us here, only Marella knows."

Hawke shook his head. "Not quite."

"What do you mean?" Perhaps String had called Le?

"Horn."

"You think he survived?" Briggs asked. He'd been too busy to give much thought to their quarry.

"I know he did. Horn's no fool, he knew we'd come after Phoenix. He's the kind who always has a backup plan, one designed to assure his own survival. Right now he's in hiding somewhere, licking his wounds and totaling up his losses." String studied the mountains, some level of his subconscious half expecting to find the billionaire closing in on them. "We haven't seen the last of John Bradford Horn, and God help you when he figures out you've got his helicopter."

Briggs sighed deeply. As much as he hated to admit it, he knew Hawke was right. It seemed like no matter how well things were going, life was never simple. "I'll be waiting for him."

String turned, his eyes meeting Archangel's. "No. Not you. We're in this together, Michael. When the time comes, we'll both be waiting."

By local standards, the aging house might have been considered a mansion. To John Bradford Horn, it was a hovel, but it was just barely adequate for his purposes. Horn pushed the chair back from his desk as Kevin Peters, his trusted assistant, entered the room. Despite having showered and changed, the scent of death still clung to the man. Horn ignored it. "What did you find?"

Peters dropped heavily into the chair, taking liberties with his boss that few others would have dared. "The remains of Johnny Hawkings."

Johnny Hawkings. That had been the name the man gave when he went to work for Horn. His employer had soon come to know his true name, St. John Hawke. "You're certain it was him?"

"I'm certain."

That answered Horn's first question. From the moment he had watched Phoenix fly over his head, he had questioned St. John's loyalty, suspecting that the man's brother might have lured him away. That wasn't the case,

which lead to the second question. If St. John wasn't flying Phoenix, then who was? "What about the surveillance videos?"

From the case he carried, Peters produced a videotape and passed it across the desk. "This is the only tape that was sufficiently intact."

"Is there anything on it?" Horn slid the tape into a machine beside the desk, keying a button on the remote to turn on the television.

"Not as much as either of us would like. The camera was located somewhere to the rear and the side of the helicopter. You can see a figure in a flight suit approach Phoenix and enter her."

"A recognizable figure?" Horn began to run the tape ahead.

"The individual is wearing a flight suit and helmet with the visor lowered. You'll see for yourself in a moment, Sir."

As Peters suggested, Horn concentrated his attention on the display. The would-be pilot crossed the makeshift hangar and climbed into the helicopter's cockpit, leaving only a corner of his or her helmet visible. A hand reached up, apparently flipping open the visor, but the angle was such that the face was hidden from view. A few short seconds later, the tape ended. "That's where the power was cut as the first explosions took place." Peters explained.

Horn rewound the tape, then played it again, searching for clues. The figure was too tall to be Caitlin, too thin for Santini. Might Hawke himself have been flying her? He ran the tape again, then rewound. In his own mind, he was convinced the answer was there. Frame by frame, he clicked slowly through the recording. Suddenly, his eye caught on something that didn't quite register. He played it over, this time pausing as he found the frame he wanted.

This frame caught the pilot in the act of opening the visor. Horn looked closer, finally seeing what his subconscious had already spotted. There was a faint reflection in the front windscreen of the helicopter. Light bounced wildly, but there was one unmistakable mirror image. It was the reflection of a pair of glasses. Highly unusual glasses. Horn looked up at Peters, his already tight expression hardening even further. "I know who has Phoenix. Get me everything you can on Michael Coldsmith Briggs the third."

Over a thousand miles away, high above a deserted stretch of the Pacific, two sleek charcoal helicopters circled in a mock dogfight. Testing one another. Learning. Waiting.

**1997**

**Early May 1997**

The white Mercedes pulled to a stop before the open doors of the Santini Air hanger, and the driver paused to check her hair before stepping from the car. Marella's smartly tailored suit matched the automobile, as did the bag she hung over her shoulder. Briskly, she stepped into the comparative gloom of the hanger.

She was met by a pair of long legs extending from beneath the belly of a helicopter. "Well, Mr. Hawke, don't tell me I've actually caught you working?" She carefully kept all but the barest trace of sarcasm out of her voice.

The garage creeper rolled forward, and the bemused face of Michael Goldsmith Briggs appeared. "String's out flying."

"I'm sorry Sir, I thought you were Hawke," she apologized, embarrassed. The scuffed sneakers and worn denims weren't something she would ever have associated with the former agent.

Sitting up, he propped his elbows on his knees. "Marella, a long time ago I asked you to stop calling me Sir. As I recall, you told me that you'd been brought up to address your superiors that way." A wide grin split his face. "You don't work for me any more, remember?"

She couldn't resist giving him a smile in return. "Yes, Sir.... I mean, Michael."

"Good." He pulled himself to his feet with a grace that denied both his fifty-odd years and the long ago damage to his left leg. "You know, the more that I think about it, a case could be made that I'm now working for you. I guess I need to start calling you Ma'am."

"No. Please." Marella really didn't mind his teasing, the history between them dated back over far too many years. She was, however, a bit perplexed by it. "You're certainly in a good mood today."

Leaning against the helicopter, he shrugged, hiding a grin behind his hand as he slowly stroked his mustache. "Was bound to happen sooner or later, wasn't it?"

"I suppose so," she allowed, still suspicious. "So where are Cait and R.J.?"

"Cait's up with a student, R.J.'s in day care." He motioned toward the office. "Come on, I've got a pot of coffee on."

She followed him toward the office. "Day care? I must say, that surprises me. I didn't think you'd ever let that little boy out of your sight."

Again, the shrug. "Originally, it was Caitlin's idea, but she made some good points. Living where we do, R.J.'s not going to have much chance to

socialize with other children. At least this will give him the opportunity to spend some time with kids his own age." Michael knew too well just how lonely it could be growing up isolated and alone. His son would have a real childhood, something far different than one he'd had. "It's one of the best day cares in the country; state of the art teaching methods, top security."

"You're worried about kidnapping." It was more of a statement than a question.

He gave her a sideways glance. "Given the situation, wouldn't you be?"

Marella stepped into the office, noting how little it had changed in the years she'd been visiting Santini Air. The place was tidier now than she had ever seen it, and a state of the art computer rested on top of the desk Michael gestured toward. "Pull up a chair. I'll get the coffee."

She watched him as he poured the coffee, then crossed to the desk to hand her a cup. He appeared somehow younger than she remembered, and far more relaxed. Content. Even the ever-present limp seemed less pronounced. "So, I take it retirement is agreeing with you?"

He laughed as he dropped into the chair, leaning back to perch his legs on a well worn corner of the desk. "Retirement? I'll have you know, I haven't worked this hard in thirty years." He rubbed absently at a spot of dark grease on the back of one of his knuckles.

Her smile matched his. "Well, it doesn't appear to be doing you much harm."

"I think I'll survive."

She hesitated for a long moment, then turned more serious. "Is this really enough? Don't you miss the business?"

Michael sipped at his coffee, considering his answer. "I miss a lot of things, Marella. Given the choice, I'd rather that String was working on the Ranger and I was flying that charter to Vegas, but... This still beats wining and dining Congress." His grin returned. "Speaking of which, how are you making out with Senator Adamson?"

Marella almost choked on her coffee. "Don't even bring up that pompous windbag. If he starts hacking away at the Firm's budget one more time, I may just follow you into retirement."

"Well," he reminded her, "Phoenix could use a co-pilot. If you're looking for a little adventure, the offer is still on the table."

She shook her head. "I wish I could take you up on it. They've just kept me too busy to even consider the possibility." Marella dearly wanted a chance to fly either one of the supersonic helicopters, but since she'd moved into Archangel's old seat as the head of the committee, official business had occupied so much of her time that there had been no opportunity for even a test flight. From her new perspective, she found it nothing short of astonishing that Michael had managed to accomplish so much while he'd

been with the Firm. "I still don't know where you ever found the time to train on Airwolf."

"There's a lot to be said for having a capable, trustworthy assistant." While he referred to Marella, he had in fact maintained a string of them. All women, all beautiful. It had contributed a great deal to his own mystique within the Firm. The reality had been considerably less risqué than the rumors suggested. Briggs had long recognized that others tended to underestimate such women, denying them the positions they deserved. Simply by treating them as equals, Michael had won the loyalty of some of the best and brightest agents in the business.

Marella smiled, one of the few people privy to the secret behind his elite group of operatives. "I suppose there is. I don't suppose you'd consider coming back to the Firm and taking the job?"

He shook his head, laughing. "Not on your life."

"I thought you'd say that. So, it appears you've been keeping yourself busy?"

He sighed, trying to remember just when he had last spoken with Marella and what he had told her. "You know we've moved into the new house? There's still quite a bit of trim work to finish, but String's been helping me with it."

"You two are still getting along, then?" She hadn't been sure how long the newfound friendship between them would last.

"Most of the time." He chuckled. "Although I am getting just a little tired of chopping wood." It had been a standing joke between the two men since String had first suggested that the Briggs family move to the secluded mountain lake. Despite it, they worked well together. "I flew up to Aspen with him a few weeks ago. Took a group up there skiing." He looked over to gauge Marella's reaction. "I made a couple passes down the mountain myself."

He wasn't disappointed as her eyebrow rose. "You went skiing?" Marella was well aware that he had once been an avid skier, but that had been before the events at Devil's Anvil had shattered his leg. To the best of her knowledge, he hadn't been near a pair of skis since. "How was it?"

Michael let out a deep sigh. "It was incredible. Hell, you know how long it's been. First run I took it easy, went down one of the intermediate slopes. Second was pure double diamond. Good to know I could still do it after so many years." He could guess at her unasked question. "Yeah, I felt it for a week, and it's not something I'd want to do on a regular basis, but it was worth it. If all goes well, I'm going to take Cait out to Vail for a weekend sometime early next winter."

She chewed her lip, checking his expression. "You're pushing yourself pretty hard."

"Maybe." He considered that. She was right, he had been pushing, demanding more from himself than he had at any time since Red Star. Skiing, long hikes through the woods that surrounded the lake; they were things he never would have considered before he left the Firm. His leg ached like hell much of the time, but he was becoming accustomed to that. Easing the pain was less important to him than the freedom to do as he chose.

"Why now? As you said yourself, it's been years."

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Something about being here, living in this world again. I want my life back, Marella. I want what I had before Moffet..." Michael shook his head. "Enough. I'm sure you're not here to listen to me rant about that bastard." Long fingers smoothed his mustache. "So tell me, is this purely a personal visit, or are you here on business?"

Marella hesitated. "Officially? It's personal."

"But?"

"Unofficially, I wanted to give you a warning. Firm intelligence suggests that our old friend Horn is putting together a squad of the best mercenaries in the business. No real word on his plans, but it's a safe bet that one of those plans would be to recover certain missing merchandise."

"Humm." Briggs thought for a moment, silently sizing up the woman across from him. Abruptly, he swung his feet to the floor and leaned forward to switch on the computer. "Let's see what we've got." As the machine powered up, he typed in several commands.

Intrigued, Marella rose and circled to stand behind his chair. A screen came up that she recognized. "You're into the Firm's files!" she exclaimed incredulously. "Didn't they lock you out when you resigned?"

He grinned as he accessed the confidential files on John Bradford Horn. "As a matter of fact, they did."

"Then what are you doing in the Firm's computer?"

Michael turned to look up at her. "Marella, they shut my section down twice, and the second time they sent the Zebra squad after me. I decided then that I was going to take some precautions to keep it from ever happening again."

"Oh, I can certainly understand why, but how?"

"I had..." He paused, unwilling to name Le Van Hawke even though she would undoubtedly guess. "Well, let's say I had a friend cut a back door into the system. Just in case I ever needed it." Michael returned his attention to the screen. "Here we go." He examined the list of mercenaries that had been linked with Horn and found he recognized many of the names. "Quite an impressive group he's putting together."

"Precisely," Marella agreed. "Now look at the number of specialists. Pilots, demolitions, ground combat... He's got something big planned."

"Certainly looks like it. Unless of course it's all just to throw us off the scent," Michael reminded.

"If so, it's going to be one heck of a diversion."

"Still, I wouldn't completely rule it out. I wouldn't rule anything out, not when talking about Horn." He closed the files and shut the computer down. "I just have this gut feeling that he's going to hit us when and where we least expect it." Michael sighed. "At any rate, it looks like our vacation is just about over."

**Early July 1997**

Stringfellow Hawke's gaze swept the horizon, squinting slightly into the late afternoon sun. Scanning the sky had become almost automatic. Over the months, he had often caught Briggs doing the same thing. He chuckled silently to himself. Paranoia, perhaps. But in this case, it was justifiable paranoia.

Somewhere out there, Horn was waiting, crouching in the grass like a tiger about to pounce on his prey. Michael regularly pulled the fragmented reports of Horn's movements from the Firm's computers, and the two pilots spent hours pouring over them, trying to guess at their adversary's next move. It wasn't easy. John Bradford Horn had created a thick wall of smoke around himself, concealing his true agenda. One day he was quietly backing the overthrow of a minor African democracy, a week later his well-trained goon squad was busy robbing banks. Scattered reports from intelligence agents around the world had recently placed him in Vietnam, Australia and South America. Every time they got a lead and tried to close in, he'd slip away as if he were no more substantial than mist.

"String, are you going to give me a hand with these?"

Hawke turned from where he stood at the edge of the newly built deck to find Caitlin balancing a pair of over-sized bowls that had once been filled with salad. "Oh, sure, let me get that." He took one of the containers from her and grabbed a couple of bags of chips with the other hand, letting her open the door into the house.

In the kitchen, Hawke found Cait had already started stowing the leftovers in the refrigerator. He made enough room to set the bowl he carried down on the kitchen table. "So where did Michael disappear to? I notice he took off as soon as there was work to do."

"Hey, who spent all day tending the grill?" Cait defended her husband, even though she knew String was only teasing. "He said he had to go into town and pick something up."

Surveying the dishes still remaining on the table and Caitlin's packed ice box, Hawke snorted. "I hope he's not bringing back more food!"

"You and me both. There's still enough here to feed an army! You'd better believe I'm sending some of this home with you." It had been the first real "event" they'd held at the new Briggs residence. Billed as a Fourth of July cookout, the gathering had turned into more of a housewarming. It had been an eclectic group, with half a dozen people from the Firm, more from Van Nuys, and even a couple of Michael's old polo playing friends. Now, the party had broken up, and most of the guests had gone home. While String

helped her clean up, Dominic kept R.J. amused and out from under their feet.

"Where should I put these?" Hawke asked, indicating a stack of paper plates and napkins.

"Over in that cupboard is fine," Caitlin gestured with a nod of her head. As she did, she heard the crunch of tires on gravel. "Michael's back."

"Good, he can give me a hand moving that picnic table." Hawke didn't look up as the door opened behind him.

"Hi, Dad."

String spun at the unexpected voice. "Le? I thought you were interning this summer?"

"I am." The handsome young man crossed the room to give his adoptive father a hug. "Turns out that my boss and Uncle Mike are old friends. He got me sprung for the weekend, and I hopped a flight home."

Hawke looked over his son's shoulder at the former agent who stood leaning against the doorway, grinning. "Thanks, Michael."

Briggs nodded a reply to String as Le released his father and said his hellos to the others. The boy was back a few minutes later, hungrily eying the dishes still arrayed on the table.

"Just grab a plate and dig in, there's still plenty to eat," Cait suggested, motioning toward the dishes. "We've got chicken, meatballs, salad... you name it."

"Well, I guess I could use a little snack," Le answered, grinning as he piled the offered plate with an assortment of foods. He pulled a chair up to the table.

His father knew from long experience that Le would savor his meal. Although Le seldom talked much about the years spent with his mother and later his aunt in Vietnam, Hawke suspected that they must have been lean ones. Even now, over a decade later, there was still a bit of awe in his eyes every time he walked into a supermarket. He decided to let Le finish eating before they talked. "Michael, how about helping me moving that picnic table back?"

"Sure." He followed Hawke out onto the deck as Caitlin put away the last of the dishes. Together, the two men moved the table back to its usual spot where it was shaded by several trees.

Work for the moment finished, String leaned on the railing, again letting his eyes roam the horizon. The sky had darkened enough for several stars to become visible. He glanced over at Michael, who was standing beside him, similarly posed. "I want you to know I appreciate having Le home for the weekend. I don't know how you pulled it off, but I'm glad you did."

Briggs shrugged. "I know how I'd feel if it was my son who was three thousand miles away."

Hawke nodded. He could sense how protective Briggs was of R.J. Undoubtedly, some of it traced back to Horn and the unspoken threat that hung over their heads. It probably didn't help that the boy was an only child. "So... when are you and Cait going to have another baby?"

Michael shook his head slightly. "As much as I'd like a whole house full, I don't think it will happen, String. You only get so many miracles in one life. I think I've just about used up my quota."

The younger man chuckled. "You're not that old, Michael. There's plenty of time for you two to have more children."

Briggs looked up. "It's not a matter of age, I'm afraid. I take it Cait didn't tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"When Caitlin and I first married, we intended to have kids. After a year and a half... I went and had some tests done. They traced it back to the drugs Kruger and company gave me in Germany. The odds that I would ever father a child were pretty slim, maybe a hundred to one." Michael ran his long fingers across his mustache. "You see, R.J. really was a miracle. The chances of beating the odds twice are almost non-existent."

"Ever consider adopting?"

"We talked about it. Actually, Cait and I talked about a lot of possibilities. At one point I think I even suggested asking you about being a donor. In the end, we decided that if it was meant to be, it would happen, if not... well, it wouldn't. So much time passed, I don't know which one of us was more surprised when she found out she was expecting."

"I can imagine." Now it was clear why Michael had doted on Cait while she was pregnant, and why he was so protective of his son.

The men's conversation was interrupted as the others came out onto the deck. "Hey, guys, how about some music?" Caitlin suggested.

"What do you think, Le? Feel like a jam session?" his father asked.

"Sure."

A short time later, they were gathered on the deck, String with his cello, Le picking a guitar, and Michael playing his recently acquired keyboard. While Briggs had endured years of lessons in his youth, decades had passed since he'd had the leisure or inclination to sit down at a piano. After leaving the Firm and finding some time on his hands, the keyboard had been a spur of the moment purchase. He was somewhat surprised by how much he remembered.

The entertainment began with a few popular songs, and moved on through the classics. Finally, Le called a break and went into the house. He returned wearing swim trunks. "Anyone else up for a swim?" he asked, dropping a towel across the railing.

Hawke was usually an avid swimmer, but this time he declined. "Not tonight, Le. I've been stuffing myself all day. At this point, I'm not even sure I'd float."

"Party looper!" the boy retorted, laughing, as he stepped off the side of the dock into the water. He surfaced a moment later. "How about you, Aunt Cait? Uncle Dom, maybe?" Le called, beckoning them to join him.

"And let you dunk me again? No way," Caitlin laughed, as Santini shook his head, waving off the boy's request.

Briggs rose and crossed to the railing, where he stood watching Le tread water. Undaunted by the other's refusals, the younger Hawke searched for another target. "Uncle Mike, what about you? Do you swim?"

Michael chuckled, walking out onto the dock. "I used to." He knelt and tested the water with his hand. "This is like ice. Doesn't the lake ever warm up?"

"Not really," String answered. "I'm not sure if it's fed by underground springs or if it's just because so much of it is shaded. It's not so bad once you jump in and get accustomed to it."

"Yeah, except for the icicles hanging off your toes," Briggs joked. He excused himself and went inside.

Caitlin raised an eyebrow in surprise a few minutes later as her husband re-emerged from the house. He was wearing a pair of bathing trunks, a black cloth eye patch taking the place of his usual glasses. As long as she'd known him, Cait had never even seen him wear shorts in public, much less bathing trunks. Michael made no attempt to hide the scars on his leg as he strolled down to the water.

Le had been practicing his breast stroke, but broke off to tread water again. "Coming in?"

In answer, Briggs dove off the end of the dock, disappearing below the water. Cait was just starting to worry when he resurfaced, right behind Le. Catching the boy totally off guard, Michael tugged him momentarily beneath the water. Both came up laughing. "That was for the last time you got Caitlin," Briggs explained, remembering the last time Le had been home on vacation. "Damn, this water is cold!"

"Wimp!" Le teased.

Knifing below the surface, Briggs grabbed the boy by the shoulder and again pulled him under. Surfacing, he retreated out of reach before Le had a chance to return the favor. "And THAT was for calling me a wimp!" Michael grinned.

From where he sat on the deck, the elder Hawke watched the exchange with amusement. While Le might have been on the college swim team, Briggs was doing a decent job of holding his own. Of course, Le wasn't really trying too hard. Just as he did Cait and Dominic, Le considered

Michael to be part of his extended family. String realized with something of a start that he felt much the same way himself.

Once more, unconsciously, Hawke scanned the sky. Silently, he wished that the worst fate any of the had to worry about was being dunked.

Many miles away, at the home of a rather well-to-do friend, John Bradford Horn was also swimming. One difference was that the pool Horn lapped was heated. Like the rest of the house, it was also attended by a number of servants. One of those servants now brought Horn a telephone, quietly receding once Horn had picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" he demanded, holding the phone to one ear as he towed himself dry with the other hand.

"We have secured the vehicle as per your instructions," the voice on the other end of the line answered, over a low static that suggested the call might be international in nature.

"Any problems?"

"Minor. Nothing that can't wait until my return."

"The components?"

"Packed for shipment."

For once, Horn was pleased. They were one giant step closer to the retrieval of his property, and to the final destruction of Stringfellow Hawke and his friends. "Very good. I'll see you soon." Horn hung up the phone. Glancing at the pool, he decided against returning to it. Perhaps a massage instead. Yes, he decided, a... massage. He deposited the towel across the back of a chair, and went searching for the girl his host had earlier suggested.

**Early September 1997**

Santini knew that Caitlin and R.J. were in Texas visiting with her mother, and with the strained relationship he had long had with Briggs, he felt more than a little uncomfortable as he approached the newly finished house. Despite that, he rapped quietly on the door, half hoping that he wouldn't get an answer. "Who is it?" Michael's voice came from somewhere inside.

"Dominic."

"Door's open."

Dom entered, scuffing his feet self-consciously on the mat. The house was beautiful, all glass and wood, wide windows looking out over the lake. He had been there before, for Cait's housewarming party, but it was the first time he'd taken the opportunity to check out the view. He was duly impressed with what he saw. One thing he didn't see, however, was the former agent. "Michael?"

"In the master bath. Come give me a hand."

That caught him by surprise. "Say what?"

Michael appeared, leaning out into the hallway from a room beyond. He was chuckling as he brushed sawdust from his clothing. "Dom, I'm putting up molding. Now get in here and make yourself useful."

"Oh!" Santini joined Briggs, examining the mess in the small room. Various pieces of molding were scattered around, as were an assortment of tools. Dom pulled off his ever present cap and ran his fingers through what remained of his hair before putting the cap back into place. "Do you have any idea at all what you're doing?"

"Honestly? Not really," Michael admitted. "A carpenter I'm not. I've got a feeling I cut some of the angles wrong."

Dom found a tape and started measuring the pieces. "I hate to tell you this, but you cut them all wrong. Got any more of this trim?"

"They've got a whole load of it at the lumber yard," Michael looked at his watch, "which is going to close before I can get there." He shrugged, dusting off his hands. "I had plans to get this finished before Cait got back tomorrow, but, I guess I've done enough damage for one day. At least I got the baseboards down." Briggs cast a nervous glance at Santini. "I DID get those right?"

"Yeah, that much looks good. You were ok until you got into the compound angles." Dom couldn't resist a jab. "I thought you were an engineer? You should be able to figure these angles in your sleep."

"Blueprints are a little different than miter boxes," Michael grinned, "and it's a lot easier to erase your mistakes when they're in pencil." Briggs

stowed the tools back into a tool box and stacked the pieces of molding in a pile. "At least I can burn the evidence in the fireplace." He leaned against the doorway. "So, what do you think of the house?"

"Nice," Dom admitted, "although come next winter it's going to be a bear to heat." He took a second look around the bathroom. "That's one heck of a bathtub. Thing's big enough to sleep in."

"I know. I've done it on a couple of occasions."

Abruptly, Santini realized just why Briggs had such an impressive tub. "Damn. Michael, I'm sorry, I didn't think." Dom had lived with intermittent back problems ever since the Stearman stunt had gone wrong and he'd flown the antique aircraft into the wrong side of the barn's 'balsa wood' roof. When his back acted up, one of the few things that helped was heat, preferably a long hot soak. Although Briggs seldom complained, Dominic had seen the scars on the agent's leg. He knew that Michael's problems had to be far worse than his own. "Hell, sometimes I forget..."

"So do I," Briggs smiled ruefully, "that's when I find myself spending the night in the tub." He eyed Santini, considering. Ever since Dom had learned that Michael could fly Airwolf and that he had known her hidden location for years, the relationship between them had gradually become less antagonistic. He and Dominic might not be the best of friends, but they were far from being the combatants they once were. It was a trend Michael wanted to see continue. "You feel like a beer? I think there's some in the refrigerator."

Dominic debated his answer for only a moment. "Sure, why not?" A few minutes later, they were both settled into comfortable chairs in the living room, nursing their brews. Michael clicked on the television and flipped channels until he found a baseball game, but left the sound turned low.

"So, what brings you up the mountain? Cait ask you to stop in and make sure I hadn't done any serious damage to her house?"

"Actually, I was looking for String, but he doesn't seem to be around. I was wondering if you knew where he'd taken off to?" Santini checked the label on the beer. He didn't recognize the brand, it was some micro-brewery he'd never heard of. Normally, he didn't care for the specialty beers, but this wasn't bad.

"I saw him heading out into the trees early this morning. Going hiking, I guess. He had a knapsack with him, so it's a good bet he'll be gone most of the day." It wasn't out of character for Hawke. Michael had accompanied him on a few of his shorter, easier jaunts, and it was obvious that String was intimately familiar with the woods.

"I figured as much. He does it every year. I'd just hoped..."

"Every year?" Michael didn't make the connection.

"Today is Sinjin's birthday."

"Oh, of course. You're right, it just never occurred to me." Briggs had thought little about Stringfellow's older brother since the previous November, when they had buried his remains not far from Hawke's cabin. The body had been found and returned to the States by the Vietnamese government. With Marella's help, matters had been expedited, and Hawke was given the chance to finally lay his brother to rest. It had been a small gathering; String, Dom, Le, Cait, and Michael. Of the group, only two knew the truth, that the casket was empty and St. John Hawke's remains were actually entombed beneath a ton of rocks on a tiny island off the coast of Russia. "What was he like, Dom?"

"Sinjin?" Santini hesitated, mulling over his answer. "He was nothing like his brother, that's for sure."

"How so?"

"From the beginning, Sinjin was always the one who was in trouble. Nothing big, mind you, just a lot of little things. Shoplifting. Fights. Gambling. Drinking. He got a girl pregnant his last year in high school, but she miscarried. All things considered, I guess that ended up being for the best." The older man paused, searching for words. "I always blamed it on him losing his folks, and I cut him more slack than I should have. Every time he got into trouble, I'd slap his hand and tell him not to do it again, but he always did. Even so, String worshiped him, he never really saw the things Sinjin did. Maybe that's why I never pushed it." Dom shook his head sadly. "I never thought it would go so far."

Briggs turned his head to stare at Santini. "You know, don't you?"

Dominic nodded. "I know. String talks in his sleep, sometimes, when he's got things on his mind. For a few nights after he came back from that island... he said enough that I put the pieces together." He took a long swallow of the beer. "I'm sorry it ended like that, but you did what you had to do, Michael. I'm glad that String accepts that."

Michael looked at the older man in confusion. "I don't think I understand."

"I'm sure String realizes you had no choice but to kill Sinjin."

"I didn't..." Briggs cut himself off, but it was too late.

"Oh." Santini had watched Stringfellow thrash in his sleep, calling out his brother's name and pleading with Saint John to abandon Horn. He knew from String's wails that Sinjin had died, and he had assumed it was at the hands of the agent. The other possibility had been too horrible to even contemplate. "I just figured you... I'm sorry."

"Not as sorry as I am. I should have taken the shot when I had it. I tried to get St. John to surrender, but all I did was force his hand -- his and String's."

Dom shook his head. "No, you did the right thing. I was never quite sure why he didn't blame you, regardless of how it happened. Now it makes sense. String wouldn't have fired unless there was absolutely no other choice, but if you'd been the one to do it, deep inside I doubt if he would ever have been sure of that. I don't know if he would have ever forgiven you."

Michael leaned back into his chair, sighing. "I wish you'd told me about St. John from the beginning." If he had known what String's brother was, he might have looked in the right places. Perhaps they could have found him before it was too late. Maybe somehow things would have ended differently.

"I thought about it. I guess I figured Sinjin was dead anyhow, and he might as well die a hero. Besides, I didn't trust you back then," Santini admitted reluctantly, "I was afraid you'd use the truth against String."

Briggs couldn't help being just a bit amused. "So you're saying that you do trust me now?"

"Now, did I say that?" The older man's mood brightened as he responded to the former agent's verbal fencing. "Do you really think I'd trust someone who can't even hammer a nail in straight?"

"I don't know. Would you?" The tone of Michael's question was light, but beneath that lightness it was a serious question, and it was obvious he wanted a serious answer.

Dom sobered just a bit. "Yeah, I guess I would. You've been a real friend to String, and you've been damn good to Cait." He shook his head. "You know, Caitlin's like a daughter to me, and I tend to look at her as a father would. When I first found out you two were seeing each other, I wanted nothing more than to wring your neck. Probably would have if String hadn't stopped me. I was convinced she was going to end up getting hurt. For once, I'm glad I was wrong."

The once director of the Firm looked over at the older man and chuckled. "You're not the only one who's glad you were wrong. I think I would have wrung my own neck if I'd ever done anything to hurt her."

Santini suddenly became serious, staring past the bottle he held. "I want you to take care of her after I'm gone. String, too."

"Gone? Where are you planning on going?" Michael wasn't quite sure if he read the other man's meaning.

"Where we all go sooner or later." Dom looked over at Briggs, cutting off the protest the other man was about to make. "I'm not getting any younger, Michael. That's a fact. One of these days, I'm going to get paged to the big hangar in the sky." He picked absently at a chipped fingernail. "Can't say, though, that I'm much looking forward to it."

Briggs stroked his mustache slowly, thoughtfully, as if trying to decide. Some internal decision finally made, he spoke softly, "I don't know, Dom. I stopped worrying about death a long time ago."

"Not knowing what comes after... this, it doesn't bother you?"

Michael didn't answer, instead rising from his chair to head for the kitchen, shaking off the stiffness that had settled in after the morning spent working on his knees in the bathroom. He returned with two more beers, handing one to Santini and taking a swallow from the second as he stood before the windows, looking out over the lake. "It's not exactly the unknown. I've been dead twice, Dom. I stopped breathing, my heart stopped..." His voice tapered off.

"That's not quite what I meant..."

Briggs took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Images from the past came flooding to the forefront of his mind. "The last thing I remember is laying there, choking, almost blind. Knowing that somehow I had to get out, that the control center was burning..." He had no memory of dragging Marella's unconscious form out of the ruins, or of tightening the belt around his thigh as a makeshift tourniquet. All in all, he was grateful for that, neither was anything he particularly wanted to remember. "Suddenly I was floating, looking down, watching the EMT's try to get my heart started." There was so much blood. It was everywhere, soaking his clothing, dripping down off the stretcher. "I found myself speeding down a long tunnel, toward a brilliant white light. My uncle Stephan was there, telling me I had to go back. Telling me that it wasn't my time yet." The EMTs had been successful, his heart had restarted. "It happened again while I was in surgery." The second time, he saw what was left of his leg; not much more than fragments of bone tied together by an erector set of screws and titanium, muscles and skin torn and shredded by the metal that had ripped through him. There were shards of glass in his eyes, and his lungs were filled with thick toxic smoke. He had known even then what was ahead of him if he survived, and knowing, he had been ready to walk down that tunnel into the light. Again, his mother's younger brother had sent him back.

Dom shifted uncomfortably. While he couldn't see the pictures burned into Michael's memory, he could guess at them. "Michael, I don't want to offend you, but I've never put much stock in all that mumbo-jumbo."

"Neither have I." He turned to face Santini. "Since then, I've done some reading on the subject and I've found that my experience isn't unusual, but I still don't have an explanation for what I saw. Maybe it's just something your mind does right before it shuts itself off. All I know is that while I don't ever want to leave Cait and R.J., death itself is something I no longer fear."

"Does String know about any of this?" Dom wondered what the pragmatic Hawke might think of Michael's visions.

"No." Briggs shook his head. "The only one I've ever told was Cait, and that wasn't until last year. I didn't think it would look very good on my psych evaluation."

"So why did you decide to tell me?"

"I'm not sure," Michael answered honestly. "Maybe I thought you needed to hear it, maybe I needed to tell someone about it." He grinned, crossing to return to his chair. "Of course, it might just be that I don't have to pass psych screenings at Santini Air."

Dominic nodded. While he had his doubts about whether there was anything supernatural behind such experiences, he appreciated the trust that Briggs had shown in sharing it with him. Given their history it couldn't have been easy, never mind the memories it must have triggered. Sometimes he wondered if Michael had really changed that much over the decade and a half he'd known him, or if he had simply misjudged the man from the beginning. "At any rate, thanks. If nothing else, it's something to think about."

Briggs nodded his head in recognition of the gratitude. He paused, considering his next words. "Dom, I'd like to ask a favor of you. I know it's asking a lot... if you're not comfortable with it, it's perfectly all right..."

"What is it?"

"I'd like to have you fly me up to San Francisco in your Ranger a week from Friday."

"Hell, that's no big deal, but why me? Do String and Cait both have plans? For that matter, wouldn't a commercial flight be faster?" Dom didn't mind the request, but it didn't make much sense to him.

"Well, before you agree, there's a little more to it than that." Michael sighed. "I think I'd better start at the beginning...."

**Mid September 1997**

It was a beautiful late-summer day, the scattered cotton-candy clouds drifting slowly in the still air. Hawke had cooked lunch for both Dominic and his 'neighbors', and now conversation had turned to an upcoming stunt sequence in which Stringfellow would fly Santini Air's aging Stearman beneath a bridge. Their discussion was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone. String picked it up on the second ring. "Hawke." He listened for a moment. "Yeah, he's here." Hawke passed the receiver to Briggs. "Marella."

Michael took it from him. "What's up, Marella?" There was a pause, and then he asked, "The Embassy? Why would he..." Suddenly the former agent went pale. "Oh Lord."

The others exchanged questioning glances, most of them directed toward Caitlin. She shook her head, no more certain of what was going on than her friends were. Cait turned her attention to her husband as he spoke into the phone. "Thanks, Marella, I'll be waiting." Michael dropped the receiver back into its cradle.

"Trouble?" Hawke asked, from where he had perched on one of the worn bar stools.

It was almost a full minute before Briggs answered. "String, I need to borrow Airwolf."

That piqued the pilot's interest. "What's wrong with Phoenix?"

"Nothing, but I'm going to need the Lady's sensors." He let out one long sigh. "Horn has finally surfaced. His little army just attacked our embassy in Peru. They took the ambassador and his wife as hostages."

"Peru?" Santini scoffed. "That's the best target he could come up with?"

Michael looked up, realizing that none of them understood the significance of Horn's actions any more than he had at first. "Dom, the United States ambassador to Peru is one Michael Coldsmith Briggs, the Second. My father."

"Your FATHER?" Santini was incredulous. "Hell, I didn't know you HAD a father." Abruptly, Dom realized how ridiculous that statement must sound. "I mean, I never knew your folks were even alive. I've never heard you mention any of them, they weren't at the wedding..."

"We haven't spoken in years. That's why it never occurred to me that they might be in danger." Briggs left the explanation at that. "However, that doesn't mean that I intend to leave them in Horn's care." He turned his attention back to Hawke. "That's where Airwolf and her sensors come in. Horn has a base hidden somewhere in the Andes. Given the rugged terrain,

the first problem will be finding it." He gestured toward the phone.

"Marella's bringing maps and satellite surveillance photos."

Stringfellow kept his voice level. "You know it's a trap, Michael."

"Of course it's a trap!" Archangel snapped.

"That's why I'm not giving you the Lady."

"String!" Cait exploded.

"...I'm not giving you the Lady," Hawke continued, ignoring her, "because I'll be flying Airwolf, and you're going to be backing me up in Phoenix."

"String, this isn't your fight."

"As I told you a long time ago, Michael, we're in this together." Hawke shrugged. "Besides, if Horn gets hold of one of those helicopters, you know who Marella will have to send after it. I'd just as soon avoid that battle, if I can."

Hesitating, Briggs finally nodded. "Thanks, String."

"Don't thank me until we pull this off," the younger man cautioned. "You said Marella's on her way?"

"She'll be here within the hour."

"Ok, that will give us some time to plan strategy. To start with, what do we know about Horn's arsenal?" It was ground they'd all covered before, but Hawke wanted to make sure they overlooked nothing.

"MIGs. At least half a dozen of them, maybe more. Rockets. Missiles. Fifty of the toughest mercenaries that money can buy. Not to mention God only knows what else." Caitlin offered, eager to show she'd done her homework.

Dominic shook his head. "Yeah, but they won't use the planes, at least not at first. Horn wants at least one of the Ladies for himself, and preferably not in pieces." Santini looked across at Briggs. "Any chance Horn's got himself a Leech?"

The question took the former director by surprise. At Zeus's tacit direction, Bruck had turned the Firm's own gas-filled missiles against Airwolf in Mexico and had nearly succeeded in forcing her down. Might Horn have access to the same technology? Michael considered the possibility. "The Leech was experimental, they were never produced in quantity. What few remained were destroyed..." Suddenly, a random bit of information he had picked up from the Firm's computers registered. "Damn. He just might have something worse."

"What could be worse?" Santini asked.

Michael stroked his mustache, deep in thought. "The Soviets were working on a missile capable of carrying an EMP charge when the empire started to crumble. We never heard anything more about it, but..."

"EMP?" Hawke asked.

"Electro Magnetic Pulse."

"I thought that had something to do with nukes?" Dom asked. "Don't tell me Horn has got himself an atom bomb?"

"No, I doubt that. The warhead the Soviets were working on was designed to have an effect similar to what a bomb would produce, but far less powerful. You could think of it as an incredibly powerful lightning bolt, doing the same sort of damage that lightning might do, but on a larger scale. Instead of exploding on impact, the proximity-fused warhead would deliver an electro magnetic burst that would knock out the target's electronics. Computers, communications..."

"In short, you'd crash," String suggested.

"Possibly. A good pilot might make it down in one piece, depending on just how strong the charge was and whether it took out all of the systems. Of course, if you wanted the aircraft intact, the better alternative would be to use it against a stationary target on or just above the ground. It would take days of rewiring before you could get back into the air." Briggs scowled. "If the weapons exist, and if Horn has access to them... Well, I hope I'm wrong."

"This is more than a hunch, isn't it?" Usually Michael was the one who would get restless and start pacing, but this time it was Hawke who rose.

"A truck load of electronic parts was stolen from one of our military suppliers about two months ago. Before he died from his injuries, a guard tentatively ID'd the man who shot him as one of Horn's minions. When I looked through the list of what was missing, it didn't mean anything to me." Briggs looked over at Dom. "When you mentioned the Leech, that's when it clicked. Among the things taken were a batch of very powerful capacitors. If I were trying to design an EMP weapon, that's where I'd start."

Stringfellow stopped his pacing, folding his arms across his chest. "Ok. Assume you've got the weapon. Your target is sitting on the ground. Where do you launch the EMP from? Ground? Air? How large would this missile be, anyhow?"

"Not large. You could probably launch it like a SAM, from a shoulder launcher. That would be the easiest way. Relatively accurate, and you wouldn't risk having the EMP accidentally trigger and affect your own aircraft." Briggs looked up at his friend. "Remember, String, I'm guessing. I could easily be wrong. It wouldn't be the first time Horn surprised me." He laughed, a short sound with little humor to it. "Hell, I expected him to go after R.J.! Not once did I ever think that he might..." He shook his head.

Caitlin knew enough about the relationship between Michael and his parents to guess at the mixed emotions he was feeling. "Michael, we all thought he'd try something with R.J. No one could have predicted that he'd kidnap your folks." She gave him what was meant to be a reassuring smile. "We'll just go in there and have them back before you know it."

He looked over at her and shook his head. "Not this time, Cait. I don't want you anywhere near this."

It was an argument she thought had been settled back when they first began dating. "No. We worked this out a long time ago, Michael. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

Her husband wouldn't quite meet her eyes. "Cait, that was before you had a child, and besides, there was never a situation like this. This is a trap, we all know it. It's far too dangerous."

Fire burned in Caitlin's eyes. "Randall James is your child, too, you know. I'll be damned if he's going to grow up without a father just because you insist on being stubborn and noble. You're going to need all the help you can get on this one. That means we're both going in, and we're both coming back." Quick temper eased by her outburst, she sat down beside him on the couch and squeezed his hand, understanding his fears but feeling her own. "Besides, if you leave me here, I'll be crazy with worry by the time you get back."

Briggs finally met her eyes, and studied the emotions he saw there before he nodded. "All right. But I want you to fly with String, not me. He's going to need you on the sensors." He didn't add that he still had more confidence in Hawke's skills than in his own. Briggs also didn't tell Cait that if it came down to it, he would sacrifice himself and Phoenix to protect her.

"You're right, he will." As much as she would have preferred to fly with Michael, he was right, Hawke would need her. "String, once we locate Horn's base, then what?"

Hawke considered the mountainous terrain of the Andes. "If it's possible, I'll set Airwolf down long enough to jump out. You keep the blades turning and away from any of those EMP missiles while I find the Ambassador and his wife." He looked over at Briggs. "Michael, what kind of condition are your parents in? They've got to be... what...? Well into their seventies, at least."

"My father is close to eighty, but the last I heard, he still runs five miles a day. As far as I know, mother is also in remarkably good shape." He allowed a thin smile to quirk the corner of his mustache. "We've always had strong genes on both sides of the family."

"That will make it easier. Michael, you're going to provide air support. Keep them away from Airwolf while she's on the ground."

"String, I should be the one to go in there. This is my responsibility."

Hawke shook his head. "I want you in the air, Michael. Phoenix has more firepower than Airwolf, and we may need every bit of it. Besides," his eyes flicked to the older man's leg, "I can move faster than you can."

Grudgingly, Michael agreed. "Yeah. You're right, much as I hate to admit it."

Their discussion was interrupted by the sound of an approaching helicopter. A few moments later, the gleaming white chopper known as Angel One dipped into view, settling down on the dock with its usual precision. As soon as the rotor blades had settled to a stop, Marella joined them, bringing with her a thick silver briefcase.

They nodded greetings, and Hawke poured the agent a coffee. Caitlin crossed to the playpen to check on R.J. while Marella pulled files from the over-sized case. As Cait returned, they all found seats.

"These are the latest satellite photos, sir." Marella unconsciously reverted to the formal address as she handed a stack of photos to her former employer.

"Thank you." Distracted, he didn't notice the honorific. "Any more news?"

"We've gotten a more complete report from the embassy. It sounds like Horn's people were in and out so fast the staff hardly realized what was happening."

Briggs hated to ask the question. "Fatalities?"

"No, only a few minor injuries."

"Thank God for that." Too many layers of guilt already rested heavily on Michael's shoulders, he was relieved to find that yet another hadn't been added. "What has the Firm got on Horn's base of operations?"

Marella slid closer, so she could reach the enlarged photos. "Now that we know Horn is in Peru, we've been doing some checking. His people have been seen in Moyobamba, that's here." One slim finger pointed. "Infrared has detected several strong heat sources in the mountains," again she pointed, "here, here and here. It's likely that one of them is the base. We suspect he's got his aircraft here, somewhere on the edge of the desert."

"Won't take long to scramble them at that distance." Hawke observed, standing to look over Michael's shoulder.

"Probably ten minutes, maybe fifteen, if we're lucky," Briggs observed. It wasn't much time.

"It will have to be long enough." Stringfellow picked up several of the photographs and rifled them. He glanced over at Briggs. "If you're right about the EMPs, we'll have less time than that."

Marella looked up, startled, and Michael nodded. "I'm afraid so, Marella. It looks like Horn may have the devices the Soviets were working on."

"Wonderful." She considered that piece of information. "In that case, I would suggest taking backup radios. They'll be harder to knock out."

Michael nodded. "Good idea." While a strong enough burst could take them out as well, battery powered auxiliary radios would have some protection by virtue of not being tied into the ship's systems. There were

portables stashed at the lair that they could wire into the helmets. "Have you set up fuel stops yet?"

"Taken care of." She handed the former director a pair of CD-rom disks. "Flight plans, fueling points, every scrap of information we have on Horn and on the area."

"Thanks, Marella. We'll go over it on our way to South America." Briggs stood and crossed to where R.J. still played quietly with his stuffed animals, oblivious to the planning of his elders. Michael scooped the boy up, holding him close. "What do you say, R.J.? Feel like spending some time with your Uncle Dom?"

Santini shook his head. "Not this time, Michael. You're going to have to find another baby-sitter."

"You have other plans?" Dom's refusal came as a surprise to Briggs. Santini had always spent every moment he could with the child, treating him as if he were Dom's own grandson.

"You could say that." Dominic rose from the over-stuffed chair. "I'm going with you."

Michael grinned. "I thought you quit flying mach-plus helicopters?"

"I'm not flying!" Dom quickly clarified. "I just think that having someone along to run the weapons systems might come in handy before this is all over and done." He hesitated. "Assuming of course that you don't mind having me along?"

Even given the situation, Briggs couldn't resist ribbing Santini. "You know, I can remember a time not very long ago when you didn't want any part of flying with me, and that wasn't even a combat situation."

Dominic looked appropriately contrite. "Yeah, well, I admit when I'm wrong. I guess I ought to know by now that you can fly a helicopter. Hell, for that matter, if even the F..."

Michael cut him off with a glare, and Santini quickly bit his tongue. The others had been too preoccupied with examining the photos and charts to pay attention to the exchange. "If you'd like, I can take R.J. until you get back," Marella offered, as she once again turned her attention to her old mentor.

"Are you sure?" Cait asked. "We could call Rosa." Marella had never struck Caitlin as the motherly type, and the idea of leaving R.J. with the agent left her just a little nervous.

"I'm sure."

As if to reassure Cait, Marella took R.J. from his father's arms, and the boy giggled happily. "M'ella?"

"Yeah, Auntie M'ella is going to take care of you for a little while. We get along great, don't we?" She turned her attention from the child back to his parents. "Besides, it will give me a great excuse to spend some time up

here at the Lake. I haven't had much of a chance to get away lately, and I could really use the fresh air."

Hawke had been looking on. "If that's settled, we'd better get going. Are we all set here?"

Reluctantly, Cait nodded her agreement. She gave R.J. one last hug. "Mommy will see you again real soon, sweetheart. You be good for Marella, ok?" Caitlin gestured toward her own house, visible through the window. "Everything you'll need is right there handy. Diaper bag, formula, toys. If you have any problems at all, just call Rosa, the number is right on the phone, all right? And you've still got a set of keys?"

"We'll be fine, Caitlin," Marella assured her. "It's the rest of you that need to be careful."

Airwolf blasted through the valley, weaving between the rugged peaks. "Nothing yet, String," Caitlin called from the copilots seat, anticipating Hawke's question as she surveyed the scanners. "According to Marella's coordinates that heat source should be dead ahead."

"Roger," Hawke answered, keeping his eyes on the terrain. The first location they had checked had turned out to be nothing more than a camp of archaeologists, but he had a feeling that this second site might be their objective. As he swung the Lady around another outcropping, he suddenly found himself facing a pair of Huey's, armed gunmen hanging from the doors of each.

Cait was still intent on her monitors. "String! That's it..." Looking up, she realized that he already was turning to fire on the first of the helicopters. Before he could ask, she reached for the weaponry controls. "You've got chain guns and missiles."

With a quick blip of the trigger, the first of the enemy choppers dissolved into a rain of fire. Hawke pulled the stick over, turning his attention to the second. It lasted only a moment longer before joining it's mate, falling back to earth. String keyed the microphone, "Michael, come on down. We found them." He hesitated for a moment. The Huey's had been a far too easy target. They had been waiting on the perimeter of Horn's camp for only one reason, to report Airwolf's arrival. He thumbed the transmit button again. "They know we're here."

"On our way," Archangel answered quickly.

Hawke knew that Phoenix was plunging down from where she had waited at the upper edge of the atmosphere. Unwilling to wait for the second helicopter's arrival, he flew forward, eyes searching the small grouping of scattered buildings below. Men in combat uniforms poured from several of the shelters, and small arms fire bounced ineffectively off Airwolf's armored skin. He watched carefully for any sign of someone carrying something

more substantial than a mere machine gun, particularly any weapon that might fire the EMP charge that Briggs had described. "Cait, any ideas on the hostages?"

"Best bet is that long building to the left. Looks like bars on the windows. An even half dozen people inside."

"Ok, that's where we're headed, then." As he approached the ground, Hawke swung the Lady around, letting the downdraft of air from her rotors send any stray commandos diving for cover. "Take her, Cait." As soon as Caitlin had the controls, he released his, one hand instinctively checking his automatic as he opened the cockpit door. "Don't let them near you." With that, he jumped out of the doorway, slamming the door shut behind him. He ducked, scrambling for cover as Airwolf lifted off, gaining just enough altitude to allow Cait room to maneuver.

Rising quickly to his feet, he dashed for the building's doorway, automatic in hand. He snapped off one shot at a dim figure peering from around a corner of the building, driving the shadow back. The door was locked, and he delivered a sharp kick to the decaying frame, snapping brittle wood. He dove through the opening, expecting the hail of bullets that rang over his head. Even as he rolled, he brought the weapon up, firing at the source of the shots. A cry of pain and a loud thump echoed down the hallway. One down.

Outside, Caitlin had her hands full, picking off soldiers with the chain guns. She wanted to use the heavier weaponry, but didn't dare, uncertain of the exact location of the prisoners. Even above Airwolf's own wail, she could hear the scream of turbos as Phoenix dropped in beside her, covering Airwolf's flanks.

"Need some help?" Michael's voice came over the radio.

"Always glad to have it," she replied, spinning the Lady to pick off another enemy.

Phoenix took out a few commandos of her own as Dominic watched the radar scope. "String had better hurry, things are going to get crowded around here fast."

A second soldier appeared from behind the limp body of the first, firing at Hawke. His shot missed, and he didn't have time for another as Stringfellow crashed into him, the pilot's shoulder catching his opponent's chin and slamming him backwards. He crumpled into a pile. Two down.

Automatic held tightly in a two-handed grip, Hawke surveyed the long hallway. The building had perhaps once been some sort of barracks or dormitory. Doors branched off on either side, and he carefully tried one at random. Empty. The next room was the same. He stopped to listen, and

barely heard faint voices coming from one of the rooms at the other end of the hallway. Moving as rapidly as silence would allow, he sprinted the length of the hall, slowing as he approached the source of the sounds. With the competing noise from the helicopters and gunfire outside, it was hard to pinpoint which room they came from. He picked the most likely, and slowly cracked open the door. Bingo.

There was a worn wooden table in the room, a number of chairs scattered around it. A man and woman occupied two of them, their backs turned so Hawke couldn't see their faces, but the two guards pacing the room suggested that they were String's quarry. Taking a deep breath, Hawke aimed carefully. He would have to take out both guards before they had a chance to react. He squeezed the trigger.

There was a flurry of motion. The guard Stringfellow had targeted fell, but before Hawke could turn the automatic the other sentry went down as well, victim of a flying tackle that knocked his rifle from his hands. String leapt into the room, kicking the fallen weapon away as he spun to cover the guard. The action was unnecessary. The guard was unconscious, a deep gash evidence of where he had hit his head as he fell. Hawke reached out a hand to help the older man to his feet, but he was already rising.

"Ambassador Briggs?" Even before he asked, String knew the answer. Except for the pure white hair, the father was a perfect likeness of his son.

"Yes." The ambassador ran his hands down his jacket, smoothing the worst of the wrinkles. "And you are?"

"Stringfellow Hawke. I'm here to get the two of you out." Hawke glanced over at the ambassador's wife. She was tall and aristocratic like her husband, and at the moment, she held a heavy ashtray as if she intended to use it as a club. Despite the situation, String allowed himself a wry smile. There was certainly no shortage of spunk in that family.

The elder Briggs relieved the fallen guard of his handgun, the ambassador then opening his jacket to shove the weapon into his waistband. "You've got transportation?"

"Choppers."

The older man nodded. "Airwolf?"

The question caught Hawke by surprise. He began to wonder just how much Ambassador Briggs knew. "Yeah."

"Good." He motioned for his wife. She dropped the ashtray back onto the table and joined them. "Lead the way, Mr. Hawke."

Hawke paused in the doorway, checking to be sure the hall was clear before gesturing for the couple to follow him. He moved quickly down the passageway, knowing Horn's MIGs would be upon them in minutes, concentration divided between getting safely out of the corridor and the

sounds of the battle raging outside. A glance back confirmed that Michael's mother was only a step behind him, the ambassador bringing up the rear.

Caitlin saw them as they exited the building. She quickly brought Airwolf down and landed, throwing open her door just as they reached her. Hawke shoved Michael's father past Cait into the rear of the aircraft, and Briggs pulled his wife in behind him. Caitlin slammed the door shut as Hawke ducked around the front of the helicopter to reach the other side.

"Hawke!" String had started to climb into the pilot's seat when the low shout reached him, carrying even over the noise of the engines and the sporadic gunfire. Stringfellow looked back and saw the figure that had emerged from behind the corner of the structure, the man now pointing the rifle at him. Once again, cosmetic surgery had changed the face, but Hawke had no doubt who it was. Horn. In his arrogance, Horn wanted to be sure String knew who it was who killed him. The man smiled, and shouted again. "Say good bye, Stringfellow Hawke."

A single shot rang out, and the solitary form crumpled to the ground, neatly pierced by a bullet to the head. It took Hawke a moment to realize where the gunshot had originated from, then he turned.

The ambassador leaned over the back of String's seat, reaching out of the aircraft's doorway. The automatic he had taken from the guard was clenched tightly in his hand. Hawke nodded to him. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." The elderly man settled back into his seat, stowing the weapon.

String swung into the cockpit, pulling on his helmet and fastening the belts as Caitlin lifted off. He was just reaching forward to take the controls when Airwolf suddenly rocked as something exploded near her. The instrument panel went dark and the helicopter bucked, fighting him. Finally, he regained control. He switched to the backup radio. "Phoenix, can you read me?"

"Got you, String. What happened?" Dom's voice answered.

"We've been hit. Instruments are out."

"Can you keep her in the air?" Michael asked.

"I think so, but we've lost radar, I don't know what else."

"Those MIGs are almost on top of us. Get the hell out of here, we'll try to keep them off you."

"Roger, Michael." Hawke brought Airwolf up to altitude and said a silent prayer that the main systems were still functional. "Give me turbos, Cait."

She slammed the levers forward and they surged ahead. Hawke caressed the controls gently. They felt stiff, the usual power assists gone. The Lady would still fly, but she lacked her usual maneuverability.

Above, a pair of MIGs had engaged Phoenix, and Michael kicked her up and over in a loop to slide in behind them. He started to flip down his visor and engage the automatic targeting system, then thought better of it. The targeting would take too long to lock on the enemy planes, time they didn't have. Instead, he lined the helicopter's nose up with the first jet and pulled the trigger, raking the aircraft with the chain guns. The plane exploded into a ball of flames.

The second MIG fired on Phoenix, twin missiles streaking toward the chopper. "Heat seekers on our six," Santini called from the engineering console.

"Sunbursts, Dom." Briggs threw Phoenix around, trying to break the MIG's target lock while bringing the plane into his own gun sights.

Dominic hit the button to drop the flares. Sensing the nearer target, the missiles converged on the sunbursts. They followed the sparklers into the ground, exploding in a hail of smoke and gravel. "Got 'em." Dom's relief was short lived as he checked the radar scope. "Two more planes closing. Looks like one of them's after String."

Michael had gained position on the MIG which had fired at them. "Give me a Hellfire."

"You've got it."

Briggs thumbed the trigger, then started for the second pair of MIGs, not waiting to watch the impact that lit up the sky.

"Three o'clock, Michael." Santini's voice came over the intercom. He knew they'd be of little use to Hawke until they finished their own opponent.

"I see him."

Phoenix dipped and swung to the new heading with an abruptness that left Dominic wondering where his stomach was. He was once again grateful that they had gone over every bolt and connector of the Soviet-built helicopter after Briggs had recovered it. Even knowing how rugged Phoenix was, Santini shuddered to think of the abuse she was taking.

As if reading Dom's concerns, Michael spared him a quick glance as they closed on the MIG. "How's she holding up?"

"Board's green." Dominic didn't bother to mention that he felt a bit green himself.

"Good. Hang on." With that, Briggs put Phoenix into a dive, leveling out just before she clipped the treetops. As the MIG flashed over them, he pulled the nose skyward, firing another missile. It caught the plane just behind the wings, and the aircraft dissolved into a rain of fire. "Where's the other one?"

"Chasing Hawke." Santini checked the radar again. The plane was closing too fast on Airwolf, the Lady couldn't be at full strength. He keyed the transmitter. "String, you've got a MIG on your butt. Get out of here."

"Dom, this is all she's got. It's all I can do to hold her now."

"Michael...!" Dom pleaded.

"We're not in range yet." Briggs answered, wringing all the speed he could from Phoenix.

Santini was still watching his scope. "String, watch it, he's got a lock on you!"

Hawke turned Airwolf sharply, trying to shake her pursuer. It didn't work, but the new trajectory would bring them back closer to Phoenix. "Cait, can you get the weapons working? Guns? Anything?"

She had ripped off one panel and was half-way beneath it. "I'm trying, String! Everything is shorted out."

There was a loud blast somewhere to their rear. Dom's desperate voice came over the radio. "We got him, but it's too late, he launched heat seekers!"

"Cait, try the sunbursts!"

"Nothing!" She mashed at the button repeatedly, as if the failure was something mechanical that she could jar loose.

"String, cut your turbos. We'll pull them off you."

"No, Michael!" Hawke realized what Briggs was planning. Phoenix would skim between Airwolf and the missiles, with the Lady's turbos stilled, Phoenix would provide a hotter and more appealing target. At this range and distance, it would be suicide.

"Do it, damn it!"

Fighting every fiber of his being, String killed the turbos. He felt Airwolf shake as Phoenix blasted past, scant yards behind her. Helplessly, he watched as the missiles closed on their new target.

Inside Phoenix, Dom reached for the control. "Launching sunbursts."

Briggs knew it wouldn't work, the missiles were too close to bite on the alternate target. "No time. Give me a Copperhead."

Unsure what Michael was planning, Santini didn't hesitate. "You got it!"

The lip of the ridge exploded into fire, just as Phoenix crossed it, diving. The missiles impacted, and what was left of the ridge became a fireball. Hawke heard Caitlin's gasp from beside him, but he couldn't look away, his eyes riveted on the smoking, smoldering scene. Slowly, a dark shadow became apparent through the smoke, a hovering helicopter rising from behind the shattered remains of the mountain crest. For a moment, String couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Michael, Dom?"

"How's it going, String?" Despite his levity, Santini sounded a little shaky. "Things look good from here, the scope is clear."

"What did you... how'd you get away from those missiles?"

It was Michael who answered. "I blew the top off the mountain just as we dropped down the far side. We were close enough that their trajectory pulled the heat seekers down into the explosion."

The crisis past, Hawke wasn't above baiting the former agent. "Hell, I don't remember teaching you that move."

Briggs's answer was more subdued. "You didn't. Damn thing is, that's the only trick I ever learned from Moffet."

"Are you two all right?" Caitlin interrupted, less concerned with how Michael had escaped that with the fact he had.

"We'll be fine, once I have a cold one and a change of underwear," Santini joked, rapidly coming back to form.

Michael cut in. "How are your passengers doing?"

In the heat of battle, String had almost forgotten the ambassador and his wife. There hadn't been a chance to tie the other headsets into the secondary radio system, and it left the couple cut off from their communications. Hawke signaled Cait to take the controls, then pulled off his helmet, twisting in his seat. "How you doing back there?" he called, raising his voice to be heard over the ragged sound of the wounded aircraft.

"We're fine," the ambassador answered, despite the fact they both looked a bit rattled. "Is everything all right?"

"MIGs are gone, we'll have you home before you know it. Relax and enjoy the scenery."

The elder Briggs nodded his understanding, the noise level making communication difficult. Hawke turned back toward the controls and pulled on his helmet. "They're ok, Michael, but I think they'll be glad to get out of here."

"I believe that." Michael hesitated. "Do they know I'm here?"

"No. I can tell them if you want." String started to take the helmet off again.

"Don't. We'll sort it out when we get back to the Lair." There was a brief pause before Briggs continued. "How's the Lady holding up, can you make it to your fueling pickup?"

"Hell, why not? She's gotten us this far." Hawke knew that once they got home, there would be several weeks of rewiring ahead of them, but that didn't matter now.

"Roger that. We'll tail you at a distance, just to be sure."

"Sounds good, Michael. We'll see you at the Lair."

Airwolf descended carefully down the narrow natural opening into its hidden hangar. With a sigh of relief, Hawke shut down the systems. The Lady wouldn't be going on any more missions until she'd had a complete

overhaul. As the rotor blades coasted to a stop, he turned to check on his passengers. The ambassador and his wife had dozed most of the way back; he couldn't blame them, undoubtedly they'd had little rest as Horn's captives. Caitlin helped the two from the rear of the aircraft, and both spent a moment blinking away the last vestiges of sleep.

The older woman motioned Cait aside. "Excuse me for asking, dear, but is there some place I could freshen up a bit?"

"Oh, of course." Caitlin wished she had suggested it herself. "It's not much, but come, let me show you." She led the way toward a small makeshift shelter on the far side of the cavern.

The ambassador turned to Hawke. "I'd like to thank you. I believe that my wife and I owe you our lives."

String considered that. "Well, I could say the same, but at any rate, I'm not the one you should be thanking. I don't know if you realize it, but there at the end, those missiles were locked on us." Hawke looked up at Phoenix, which was descending to land beside Airwolf even as he spoke. He gestured toward the second helicopter. "There's the one you need to thank."

Hawke and the elder Briggs stood waiting, watching. It was a close fit, but the pilots had learned months before that with careful positioning they could land both aircraft within the Lair. Phoenix touched down gently, and her blades slowly came to a rest. The pilot swung from the cockpit, still wearing his helmet, the dark visor lowered. He limped toward the others, stopping just over an arm's length away. After a short hesitation, Michael reached up and removed the helmet, easing it carefully over his glasses. He nodded slightly at the older man, a grudging acknowledgment. "Hello, Father."

The elder Briggs showed no surprise and little other emotion. "Michael. You saved our lives up there. I thank you." He paused for a moment, searching for words. "I also owe you an apology. For too long, I believed that all of the world's problems could be settled by negotiation, by a row of diplomats on either side of a table. You always thought differently, insisting that there were some things that couldn't be peacefully settled. Over the years, I've learned I was wrong, that sometimes things can only be ended by force. I was reminded rather sharply of that again today." Remembering, he reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew the automatic, handing it to Hawke. "What I'm trying to say... Everything you wanted to be, everything that you eventually became... in many ways it was diametrically opposed to what I believed in." He smiled a faint, rueful smile. "You never were a diplomat, but I should have accepted that." The smile became even fainter. "I doubt if it means much to you, but nevertheless, I want you to know something. While I may not always agree with you or your methods, I am proud of you. I'm proud of what you've accomplished, and of what you've

overcome. You've grown into a man anyone should be honored to call son. I just wish I'd realized that in time."

Michael met his father's eyes, holding them. He seemed about to speak, but waited, as Cait and his mother returned. The older woman suddenly stopped, staring as if she had seen a ghost. "Michael?"

"None other," he answered softly.

She rushed up to him, giving him one long, unrestrained hug before finally backing off to look at him more closely. Her gaze locked on the half-darkened glasses. "Michael, heavens, you've been hurt!"

He shook his head, shrugging. "It was a long time ago. It's nothing that matters any more." As he said the words, he realized that they were almost the truth. Michael reached out to take Caitlin's hand. "Mother, there's someone I want you to meet. This is Caitlin O'Shannessy Briggs. My wife."

"You're married?" It was obvious it had come as a surprise to her.

"I'm married," he confirmed, grinning, "and you have a grandson. Randall James Briggs. R.J. He's just over a year old."

"A grandson? A grandson and a wedding, oh Michael, we've missed so much." She embraced him again, tears welling in her eyes.

Holding his mother carefully in his arms, he looked past her to where his father stood with Hawke. Santini had finished shutting Phoenix down, and had come up behind them. He nodded almost imperceptibly. Michael could guess what he was thinking. The younger Briggs knew that he had a chance. It was one that String would never have, could never have. For better or worse, it was an opportunity that he had to make the best of. Michael looked up and met his father's gaze. "Maybe it's not too late." The barest hint of a smile appeared. "Maybe it's time we all tried a little diplomacy."

**Late September 1997**

Stringfellow Hawke scrubbed the towel over his still damp hair one final time. Satisfied, he tossed the cloth onto the edge of the sink and stalked out into the office to put on the coffee, glancing once at the dark shape that loomed large in the shadows of the dimly lit hanger. Now that Airwolf was legally in his possession, he could openly bring the Lady into Santini Air for repairs. While it was a vast improvement over working in the primitive conditions of the lair, he didn't feel comfortable leaving the helicopter alone and unprotected, despite her safeguards. Spending the night on a bunk in the office had been purely a precaution, but it was one that gave him a sense of security.

String heard the car pull up outside, recognizing the sound of the powerful engine. He grinned to himself, sooner or later he'd have to get on Michael's case about buying something more practical than the Mercedes. The door opened just as the coffee finished perking and Cait strolled in with R.J. balanced on her hip. Her husband was a step or two behind, carrying a thick handful of mail.

"Morning, String," Caitlin called, pausing to flip on the hanger lights as she entered. As always, Cait was almost annoyingly wide awake. She put her son down in his playpen, cooing to him as she dangled a toy truck that almost immediately caught his attention.

Michael was a bit more subdued, an early riser by years of habit rather than by his own nature. He dropped the stack of mail he carried onto his desk and headed for the coffee pot, downing the first few swallows before acknowledging Hawke with anything more than a nod. Finally he turned, gesturing toward the pot. "Not too bad, for a change."

Filling his own mug, String dropped into the chair in front of Michael's desk. "How'd it go last night?"

The former agent refilled his cup, then leaned back against the worn table. A week earlier, before returning them to Washington for debriefing, Briggs had set a date for dinner with his parents. The not-so-eagerly anticipated day had arrived, and Michael and Cait had spent the previous evening entertaining the elderly couple at the lake. "About as well as could be expected, I guess."

"Are they headed back to Peru?"

"No. After everything that's happened, the ambassador decided it was time to retire. They're staying here in the States."

"Is that good or bad?"

Briggs shrugged. He sipped at his coffee. "My father and I went out on the deck and talked for a long time. We're never going to agree on a lot of things, we're far too different, but I think we've both come to accept that. At least we're trying to. In diplomatic terms, I suppose you could say we'd signed a non-aggression treaty." The last was said with the hint of a grin.

"Your mother is a lovely lady," Cait added, looking over at her husband. The two women had spent much of the evening talking and had hit it off from the beginning.

"The problem was never with her, we always got along well. Things just got to the point where I felt it was easier for everyone if I wasn't around. Now, looking back, I know that wasn't fair. My mother is a large part of the reason why I'm giving this a chance." Briggs settled behind the desk and began to sift through the stack of mail he'd collected on his way into the office. "At any rate, R.J. is going to know his grandparents, and they're going to have the chance..." Abruptly, he paused at one particular envelope, tossing the rest of the pile onto the desk. Taking a letter opener from the drawer, he slit the envelope open and tugged out the papers it held.

Hawke noticed his sudden interest. "What's that?"

Michael read for a moment before he looked up, only the barest trace of a smile twitching at his mustache. "String, I know we've talked about bringing in someone to help film that bridge sequence next month. How you would feel about hiring another full-time pilot instead?"

"Don't tell me Marella's decided to quit the firm?" Hawke's eyebrow rose questioningly.

In answer, the former agent reached quietly across the desk, handing Stringfellow the papers he held. Intrigued, Caitlin rose from her chair to look over String's shoulder. Hawke scanned the documents, then met Michael's gaze. "Is this what I think it is?"

"Yeah," Archangel nodded, his voice low and almost reverent, "it's a second class medical certificate." He finally allowed himself to show some of the emotion he'd been holding back, slamming his fist down on the desktop in celebration and grinning from ear to ear. "They gave me my waiver, String. I'm legal again."

Cait stared at him, unbelieving. "But... you told me you'd tried... that they wouldn't even consider it... how?"

Briggs stroked his mustache. "Not long after Red Star, I went to some acquaintances from the FAA and asked whether it was possible. They told me to forget it, that I'd never fly again." He had accepted the pronouncement without question. Their words had only confirmed his own fears. "What I didn't know was that my 'friends' were on Zeus's payroll, and I was told exactly what he wanted me to hear." Michael could see the unasked question in Cait's eyes. "Zeus wanted me grounded, it made me

less of a threat to him. For one thing, it wasn't nearly as easy to just grab a plane and make an unscheduled appearance in Washington." He shrugged, able now to admit what he would have denied even a few months earlier. "There was more to it than that. Truth is, losing my license knocked the wind out of my sails. It never should have taken me as long as it did to find out how he pulled off the funding for Redwolf. If I'd been on top of things, I would have nailed him to the wall in a matter of months. Zeus knew it, that's why he made sure they clipped my wings."

String gestured at the papers. "So how did you get this?"

"Working here for the last year, flying the Lady... it all combined to stir up a lot of old memories." Beyond just stirring memories, Airwolf had given him back his confidence. He knew he COULD do it, if only they would let him. "Having Phoenix made it bearable, but... I had to try."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Cait asked. Coming around the desk, she leaned over to give him a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek.

He returned the kiss. "Once I started doing some research, I learned that a waiver was possible, that my sight wasn't an automatic disqualifier. That was when I found out why they'd turned me down a dozen years ago. What I didn't know was whether my old enemies still had enough pull to keep me out of the cockpit. Until I was sure, I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up, including my own," Briggs admitted. "The only one who knew was Dominic."

"Dom?" Caitlin sounded just a bit annoyed. "You wouldn't tell us, but you told him?"

"I had to. I needed to borrow his chopper," Michael admitted sheepishly. Even telling Dominic had been difficult, it had kindled too many dreams that he had fully expected to be extinguished. "You remember that 'debriefing' I went to in San Francisco three weeks ago? I'm afraid I lied. It had nothing to do with the Firm, it was actually the first date I could get with an FAA examiner. Dom flew me up in his Jet Ranger and let me use it for the check ride. I was told then that I'd passed, but..." Only now with the certificate safely in his hand could he truly allow himself to believe it. He looked over at String. "So what do you think, can Santini Air use another chopper jockey?"

Hawke matched Michael's grin. "Well, I suppose we could find a little work around here for a decent pilot. There's that job for Universal Studios coming up, and we've got a bunch of charters scheduled." String paused, looking the older man over, considering. "There's just one problem."

"What's that?"

String chewed his lip, reluctant to broach what he knew to be a sensitive topic. "Michael, I know how good you are, everyone who's ever flown with you does. But the customers don't. Those glasses of yours aren't exactly reassuring. Would you consider some sunglasses or something...?"

Cait looked up from where she'd been studying the FAA paperwork, curious to see how her husband would react. She watched as he rose from his chair and crossed the office to stare out through the window across the hanger floor, his hands buried in his pockets and his back turned to them.

"You do have a point." Briggs stood there for several minutes, quietly looking out at the aircraft arrayed before him in various states of repair. His gaze settled on Airwolf. She was toothless for the moment, the wiring for her weapons systems stripped and waiting for replacement. The Lady had taken so much from him. Now, in her own way, she had given it back. Finally, Michael reached up and slowly removed his glasses. "What do you think, is this any better?" he asked, turning toward Hawke.

String told himself that he wasn't going to stare, but as Michael faced him, he did stare. For a quick moment he glanced toward Caitlin. She shrugged, obviously not surprised. "I don't get it," Stringfellow admitted, looking back into Archangel's blue eyes. Both of them. "I thought... well, I don't know exactly what I thought, but..."

Michael carefully folded the half-darkened glasses and dropped them onto his desk. "It's artificial, of course. Done by one of the best in the business." Briggs spoke with a certain flat detachment, as if he were talking about something done to a stranger, rather than to himself. "A pretty good job, don't you think?"

String took a second look. "Hell, I'd never suspect..." He considered the timing. "The way things have been around here lately, when did you ever have the time to...?" Hawke still wasn't sure how his friend had squeezed in the FAA check ride, never mind anything else.

"It was years ago."

"Before we started dating," Caitlin offered.

"You knew?" String turned his attention to her.

"Not until the first time I snuck into the shower with him," she admitted.

"I still don't understand, Michael. All these years...?" He gestured toward where the glasses lay on the desk.

That was the question Briggs had been dreading, because it was one he didn't really have an answer for. At least, not an answer that would make any sense to anyone but himself. "I don't know, precisely, and I'm not at all sure I can even begin to explain it. I may have looked normal... whole... but... I guess you could say I never felt whole. There was always something missing. Until now." He glanced over toward the envelope Cait still held. "Now, it's finally over. I've got my life back."

It WAS over. He prayed that Moffet would rot in hell forever for Gabrielle's death and the other destruction he had caused, but for Michael, their private war was ended. His damaged leg would always be a reminder of the events at Red Star, but he had come to accept that. While the pain

was a constant companion, he no longer allowed it to prevent him from doing anything he truly wanted to do. It was an ache that was offset by the love he found with Cait, by the very existence of his son, and now by the respect of a father who had forsaken him long ago. It was more than a fair trade. \*Sorry, Moffet. I win.\*

"You do know that you're not quite legal yet." Hawke's words interrupted Michael's thoughts. "Considering how many years it's been since you've officially logged any hours, you're going to have to fly a review and get a flight instructor to sign off on your log book."

Pulling his mind from the past, Briggs glanced over at Caitlin with a smile. "Somehow, I don't think that finding a willing instructor will be too much of a problem."

Oblivious to the older man's intentions, String slid from where he was perched on the edge of his desk. "Well, we haven't got anything scheduled for a few hours, and I think the Lady can wait until this afternoon. Cait, would you mind pulling guard duty while Michael and I go take care of that little technicality?"

Briggs met his wife's eyes, torn. Caitlin had been the one who'd first put him back at the controls of a helicopter. If she hadn't taken that chance, he would still be sitting behind a desk at the Firm. He wanted to share this victory with her. Despite that, on the other hand there was a certain nagging desire to fly with Hawke, this time as a true equal.

Cait could read the mixed emotions playing across his face. She grinned, gesturing toward the doorway. "Go. Have fun. R.J. and I will take care of Airwolf." As much as she might enjoy this, she knew that String could challenge Michael in ways she never could. Her husband deserved no less.

He nodded his gratitude. "Thanks." He reached into one of the bottom drawers of his desk, pushing some papers aside to grab the logbook he'd secreted there the day after his check ride. Giving Cait another quick kiss, he followed Hawke to the office door. "Now about that bridge sequence..."

"Think you can handle one of the cameras?" String asked, their voices receding as they headed out through the hanger.

"I've got a better idea. I'll take the Stearman under the bridge, you fly camera."

"Like hell you will! Michael, I think we'd better get something straight right now. I'm the number one pilot around here, I always have been, I always will be..."

Cait watched their retreating backs, listening to them until they were out of earshot. She chuckled, the good-natured bickering reminding her of nothing more than two children. No, Caitlin corrected herself, it was more than that. The truth was, they sounded more like brothers with a bad case of

sibling rivalry. Still grinning, she started to sort through the paperwork on her desk. One thing was for certain - from this day forward, Santini Air would never be the same.

**THE END**