

CHAPTER 2

(1996)

Haley's Comet shuddered slightly as the landing gear locked into place.

This was going to be a bitch, George Ashton knew. With visibility at less than an eighth of a mile almost all the way down to the deck, the glowing instruments in the darkened cabin of the Beechcraft King Air C90A were all he could see. Outside the cabin windows was a formless void: no light, no indication of movement, nothing.

George twisted his head back towards the passenger section. "Sir, you'd better fasten your seatbelt, we're on final approach." His boss, Jack Haley, huddled in the small pool of light from a single reading lamp, looking over the proposal he'd received earlier that day.

Haley looked up over his half-glasses as he reached down to buckle the belt. "Not much visibility out there tonight, is there?"

"A little murky, but just routine," George lied. The lights of the city began to filter through the clouds, and he glanced at his altimeter: one thousand feet. Hoping that the instruments were more truthful than he'd just been, and that the tower was paying attention, George held to the southeasterly heading, aiming for the 5,100 foot strip of concrete known as runway fifteen of Detroit City Airport. Landing in a metropol-

itan airport made a night-time approach in the soup doubly hazardous.

Trying to keep the glide path and localizer needles centered, the pilot eased back on the throttles and added a touch more flap as the twin turbo-prop began to break through the overcast just over Seven Mile. A little to the west, he could see a steady stream of the northbound traffic on the Chrysler freeway, the remnants of rush hour commuters hurrying home.

The threshold of the runway appeared just ahead. George glanced down. Two hundred feet at 110 knots. His palms moistened slightly as the plane continued to descend. The runway was approaching rapidly now.

One final check of the landing gear position indicator...a belly landing would be hard on a corporate pilot's career, as well as on his plane. Everything was okay. Speed dropping to one hundred, altitude fifty feet. He chopped the power and pulled back on the yoke to begin the flare. *Haley's Comet* hesitated and bounced slightly on the pavement, and then it finally quit flying and began the long rollout.

Twenty minutes later, George was washing his face in the terminal men's room. It had been a long day. He'd left the house at 4:30 a.m. and made the hour commute from northern Oakland County into the city. By the time he'd arrived, Jack Haley was already waiting in the tiny office the company rented in the hanger near where *Haley's Comet* was kept. Didn't the man ever sleep? They were scheduled to leave for St. Louis at 6:30. Haley had already initiated the fueling process, which was an irritating usurpation of George's duty—and the sort of thing Haley did to let people know they were late.

The two-and-a-half hour flight to St. Louis had been uneventful. After seeing to the refueling and checking the weather for the return trip, George had taken a taxi to sight-see and shop for some badly needed clothes. He'd returned to the airport for the scheduled 4:00 p.m. flight, only to find a message from Haley that he wouldn't be at the airport until 6:00. That was a concern, because the weather was closing in and he didn't look forward to getting home late. Fortunately, Haley had made it in time for a 6:15 takeoff.

Three hours later, George was about to head for the parking lot and the long drive home when Ed Scripps, the night security guard, poked his head in the door. "Oh, there you are," he said.

"What's up, Ed?"

"Guy out here says he's looking for you."

"What?"

"Guy's been waiting since 6:30. I guess that's when you were due in."

"Who is he?"

Ed shrugged. "Didn't catch his name. Big guy...late forties, maybe." He thought for a moment longer. "Thin hair, slicked back." He mimed, pushing back his own thinning hair. "He's what you might call a sharp dresser."

"Thanks." George absently wiped his hands, wondering who the hell would be waiting for him. His first impulse was to slip out the back door; he was tired and not up to dealing with anybody—friend or foe. But he figured a dodge wouldn't be a particularly mature thing to do. If it were bad news, it wouldn't go away, and if it were good—it just might.

He went to the commuter passenger waiting area and looked around. At first he didn't see anyone matching the description Ed gave, but then he noticed someone standing by the window, obscured by shadows. If the man hadn't spoken first, George would have never recognized him

"Hey, Little Wing! Finally got to fly, eh?"

The voice was unforgettable: Brady Keyes.

For a moment, George felt a strong impulse to pretend Brady had the wrong guy. He fought it down and crossed the short distance between them, then grabbed the other man by the shoulders. "Holy shit, Brady! Is that really you?"

"Who'd you think it was, man? The frigging Pope?"

"Well, it's not like I run into people I haven't seen for over twenty years everyday."

"Well you have today, partner. And it's about time. Has it really been twenty years?"

It seemed more like a lifetime. George stared into Brady's eyes. He'd almost forgotten how intense those eyes were. Al-

most, but not quite. "I can't believe this. Where the hell have you been?"

"Hey, aren't you glad to see me, man?"

George realized that he was peering at Brady as if he were studying some kind of biology specimen. He released Brady's shoulders, grabbed his hand and pumped it furiously. "God-damnit, you look great! Come on, I think the bar's still open... let's grab a beer."

"That's more like it, Little Wing. Buy your old comrade a drink."

George stifled a shudder as he led the way to the airport lounge. No one had called him Little Wing since Brady disappeared. Not that the nickname, derived from a favorite Hendrix song, offended him; it was the implied intimacy that left him uneasy. Seeing Brady again after all these years made him realize that here was a man who had never really known him, nor really cared to.