

The Unwanted Answer

“I don’t believe it.”

He did actually, and he read the open file on his desk with a sense of breathlessness, a sense of resigned astonishment at the extensive consequences arising in the wake of a series of apparently unconnected events.

Lydia reached over from her side of his desk and flipped the file to the pertinent section.

“The Army...”

“Is the one that screwed this up in the first place,” he said, stabbing a finger at the report stapled to the right side of the file. “Track down the top Medical Examiners and Forensic experts in the country. Verify that the Army hasn’t screwed this up *again*.” At her nod, he sighed. “Quietly please, Lydia.”

He needed to figure out how best to handle this bit of not surprising but out-of-the-blue information

“How many is that?” Marella said, leaning over the back of the couch, hands resting gently on his shoulders. “Five?”

Briggs tossed the latest coroner’s report onto the stack on the table in front of him. “Six actually. I’m not going to be able to keep this under wraps forever. Sooner or later, someone at DOD who understands the implications of this is going to catch up on his inbox and raise a stink about Airwolf. And then the Committee will have my ass for not acting on it.”

She walked around the couch and sat down next to him, reached for the file and paged it through it slowly. “Isn’t Gilmore the ME who did the forensic identifications...”

“On the repatriated POWs,” he said. “Yeah, that’s him. I wanted the top experts in the country.”

“Well, you got them, and they’re all saying that it’s a positive identification.” She closed the folder and put it back on the stack. “What are you going to do?”

He sagged against the back of the couch and leaned his head against her shoulder. With the long hours she was working at the hospital finishing up her last year of medical

school and the scant hours where they could spend any time together, he should have left this for the morning, for the office.

“Tell him. I can’t bury this and even if I could....”

He’d thought about it. He’d spent a not inconsequential portion of the last three weeks considering options, examining each and discarding them.

“Honey, did you really believe that St. John Hawke was still alive? After all this time?”

“No.” He shook his head slowly. “I just thought he’d remain one of the twenty-five hundred unaccounted for soldiers from that war: MIA or KIA, body not recovered. That we’d never really know.”

And never really want to know. Stringfellow Hawke would spend the rest of his life searching for any scrap or shadow of a hint of what had happened to his brother and the Firm would continue to use Hawke’s desperate hunt to keep him flying Airwolf and taking on missions that few others could do, in a helicopter very few others could fly.

This changed everything.

Lydia flew him up to Hawke’s cabin but stayed near the helicopter, at his request. He would have preferred Marella to accompany him on this task but she was technically on leave from the Firm and was working an orthopedics rotation this month.

Hawke seemed edgy, anxious, as though he suspected the purpose of Briggs’ trip. He moved around inside the cabin as if he could dispel whatever fluctuating emotions drove him.

Briggs sat at the bar, rested his briefcase atop it, and his left leg on another stool. There was no way Hawke could fail to recognize the body language.

Hawke moved behind the bar, offered wine, which Briggs declined. Frankly, wine wasn’t going to be strong enough, even at eleven o’clock in the morning.

“You have a job for me.”

Briggs shook his head. “No.” He rifled his mustache with a forefinger deliberately, trying to provide the cues that would tell Hawke to prepare himself, even at a subconscious level. “I have answers for you.”

He opened the briefcase and removed a slender file, tossed it on the bar.

“In late 1970, US Army Graves Registration processed the body of a soldier identified as Private Matthew Renart. Renart was 4th Infantry Division, stationed and killed at Ah Khe when a C-130 ran out of runway.”

He waited for Hawke to page through the file.

“Three months ago, a man carrying identification including a US passport in the name of Scott Mitchell was arrested in Bangkok and charged with narcotics trafficking. Bangkok police and Thai National Security Services ran his fingerprints and sent them on to Interpol and various US law enforcement and intelligence agencies. Those fingerprints were a match for the ones in the DOD records for Private Renart.”

Hawke looked up, forehead furrowed, the question written all over his expression.

“Since Renart’s body had been returned to his family in Indiana and buried in their local parish cemetery, this presented the DOD with something of a quandary. Army CID and a Chaplain met with Renart’s parents, showed them the booking photos of Scott Mitchell and they identified him as the son they’d buried sixteen years ago. Renart’s parents have since hired an attorney to represent the man who has used the name of Scott Mitchell and three other known aliases that we know of. They also authorized the Army to exhume the remains that were buried under Private Renart’s name.”

Hawke’s eyes widened and then narrowed as he picked up the file again, flipping until he found the US Army picture of Matthew Renart at eighteen years of age: brown haired, brown-eyed, six feet, one inch tall with an athlete’s broad shoulders.

“No,” he whispered to the file.

“The body that was identified as Renart had severe burns and was not recognizable. It was presumed at the time that caused by the C-130 crash. Graves Registration used his dog tags for identification and as the body conformed with his height and general body structure, dressed him in a clean uniform from his bunk and shipped him home.”

“No,” Hawke said, and this time it wasn’t a whisper but a defiant growl and he wasn’t looking at the file, he was glaring at Briggs.

Briggs sighed and extracted another, fatter file and handed it to Hawke, holding his gaze and trying to convey his reluctance and his acknowledgement that this wasn’t what Hawke wanted to hear, wasn’t what Briggs wanted to say.

“The Army exhumed the remains and identified them using dental records, something that Graves Registration didn’t do in 1970. If Renart ever gets out of a Bangkok jail, the Army will charge him with desertion and a long list of other crimes. Apparently, he was under investigation by Army CID for narcotics trafficking and they were moving in to arrest him around the time of the C-130 crash in 1970. CID is still investigating the Graves Registration team that processed the body but it appears that the primary suspect

was dishonorably discharged in 1970 and has disappeared off the radar. His records indicate a drug problem and CID suspects that Renart may have been his supplier.”

“No,” Hawke said firmly, insistently.

Briggs sighed. “Yeah, I didn’t want to believe any of this either.” He reached over and opened the file that sat unopened on the bar in front of Hawke. “So I had the exhumed remains examined by the top Medical Examiners and Forensics experts in the country. Six of them, including Garret Gilmore.” He saw the flash of recognition on Hawke’s face. “They used St. John’s dental records and his medical records, both Army and civilian, as reference and they didn’t have names or history, just the files with the names and dates blanked out and the bones that were exhumed.”

“No.” This time Hawke’s voice broke a little and he walked away, towards the fireplace, towards the framed photo in the center of the mantle, the position of honor: a photograph of a happy looking pair of brothers dressed in olive drab and grinning at the photographer.

“Renart is refusing to talk to Army CID so the rest is somewhat speculative. Around the same time as the C-130 crash, Graves Registration Intake records indicate that they received the remains of four soldiers, the outcome of a firefight at a village where the Viet Cong had been suspected of holding US POWs. The Army is still digging through records for the official report from that action but they haven’t found it yet. What we believe is that St. John was being held at that village, possibly with other POWs, en route to one of the main POW camps. Whether he was killed during the firefight isn’t clear, but his body was recovered with those of three others, who were soldiers from the company that assaulted the village, and were brought back to Ah Khe Graves Registration.”

He paused and watched Hawke, who stood frozen in front of the fireplace, staring at the photograph in his hands as if Briggs wasn’t even in the room.

“We suspect that Renart leveraged his connection with the corporal in Graves Registration to switch the dog tags so that Renart could avoid arrest and disappear without anyone looking for him. He’s spent the last sixteen years moving heroin out of the Golden Triangle into Australia and New Zealand under a variety of names.”

Hawke finally looked up. “I don’t believe you.” He waved a hand at the two folders on the bar. “Or any of those reports.”

”I didn’t expect you to,” Briggs said, with a heartfelt sigh. “Hell, I didn’t want to believe it either, but six experts who have no stake in this except their reputations have identified the body that’s been buried outside of Ft. Wayne for the last sixteen years as St. John Hawke.”

“According to you,” Hawke said, eyes narrowed.

Briggs sat up, reminding himself that he'd anticipated this reaction and that his personal feelings were irrelevant, even if the amount of hostility in Hawke's voice was worming its way under his skin. There was enough anger in those three words to send Tet skittering up the stairs to hide under Hawke's bed. He tapped the fat file resting on the bar.

"That's why I brought the records and the reports from the Medical Examiners," he said quietly, trying to infuse a sense of resigned calm into the cabin. "I can arrange for you to have the remains examined by any doctor in the United States." He shrugged. "Hell, any doctor in the world, of your choosing. The dental records came from the US Army and from the dentist you and St. John both used, the one you still use."

"Sure. Assuming *those* records haven't been tampered with," Hawke spat.

Denial, Briggs reminded himself, was a natural reaction as was an instinctive response to defend, to reassure, something he deliberately repressed. Instead he closed his briefcase, leaving the file folders on the bar, and stood.

"You asked me to find St. John," he said quietly. "Or to bring his body home. I had him transferred to a Los Angeles funeral home which is as close to home as I can arrange." He reached inside his jacket breast pocket and extracted a business card, laying it atop the fatter file. "The name, address and contact information are on this card."

He was halfway to the door before Hawke moved, rapidly, instinctually, like a predator. Despite knowing Hawke, knowing how exactly dangerous Hawke could be, despite having used Hawke's skills to his own advantage on more occasions than he could count, Briggs wasn't prepared. He turned to face the man rushing at him and Hawke wrapped one hand around his throat and used his forward momentum to pin Briggs against the dining room table.

"Why?" Hawke demanded in a voice as filled with pain as it was anger.

Briggs fought against the panic that clawed at him as he struggled for air. Pulling it into his nose and his mouth only served to emphasize that it wasn't getting to his lungs. Bent awkwardly back over the table and trapped between two of the dining room chairs, he had little leverage and though he could have hit Hawke in any one of a dozen key pressure points, he didn't want to fight him, didn't want to hurt a man who was already in almost unbearable pain.

"Why now?" Hawke insisted.

He'd staged the meeting on Hawke's home turf so that Hawke would have a psychological advantage as he was presented with an answer he might think he was prepared to hear but never really wanted. He'd arranged for Hawke to have the privacy he needed to handle the news, to absorb the details. In retrospect, it was too much privacy. It had been a mistake not to include Dominic Santini, who could more easily tap into and

express the emotion, the grief that Hawke was suppressing, that he was channeling into rage. Dominic could have acted as guide for Hawke's turbulent emotions or at least shared in the unfathomable chasm of heartbreak. Not to mention that Dominic would have pulled Hawke off him.

Briggs still didn't want to fight Hawke but his vision was starting to gray and he had to do something before Hawke, in his rage and grief went too far. He let himself go completely limp, let his head loll against the table. Hawke's grip almost instantly relaxed and the tone of his voice changed, anger segueing to alarm. Briggs' head jerked as the flat of Hawke's palm connected with his cheekbone, jarring him into full awareness.

"Michael, damn it, *breathe*."

He coughed, a fit of painful gasps to draw breath competing with the soreness of his swollen throat. Hands grabbed him under his armpits and moved him bodily into one of the dining room chairs. Dizzy, he leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees, head between them.

"Here," Hawke said, voice gruff with embarrassment. "Drink some water."

The thought of trying to do more than simply breathe sent a shudder through him and he shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I didn't..." Hawke trailed off.

Briggs shook his head again, partly because he didn't want to hear it, mostly because he was annoyed at himself for mishandling the situation: too much focus on providing context and back-story and not enough anticipating and managing Hawke's reaction. They spent so much time talking *around* the subject of St. John that he'd underestimated just what a tinderbox it still was.

"I'm fine," he said, and he winced when he heard his own voice. There was no way he was going to be able to go back to the office today and not have someone notice. That would just open up Pandora's box. He'd kept this information from the Zeus and the Committee for the last four weeks and he wanted to continue handling it without their interference.

Hawke swore under his breath and wandered away into the kitchen, opening cabinets. Briggs loosened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt collar and then ran a hand around his neck, probing gently. He gritted his teeth. There would be bruises and those bruises would demand explanations.

"I don't have any honey," Hawke called from the kitchen and then walked back around the strip of counter that served as a breakfast bar, hands in his back pockets and the stiffness of his walk broadcasting a sheepish embarrassment. "For your throat."

Briggs nodded. He noticed that Hawke was keeping his distance, a self-imposed order of protection.

“Why now?” Hawke asked again, though his voice sounded broken as if the sadness was starting to leak through and press back the anger.

“Renart’s arrest,” Briggs said, choosing as few words as possible to convey his meaning. It *hurt* to talk.

“Which was when?”

Briggs made a face. Trust Hawke to go straight to the core questions.

“Two months ago.”

“Two *months*...”

He could almost hear the gears grinding in Hawke’s brain so Briggs shook his head.

“So how long have you known about this?”

“A month.” Briggs glared up at Hawke. “Experts,” he said, assuming Hawke could figure out without a long explanation that it took time to arrange for the top forensics experts in the country to analyze the remains and produce their reports.

Hawke walked away, towards the windows at the front of cabin from which he could stare out onto the lake. He stood there silently, long enough that Briggs started to think that water sounded like a good idea. The glass was still sitting on the dining table and he took a cautious sip, swallowed painfully, and then another, already feeling a lot better than he’d expected.

“You’re sure?” Hawke asked in defeated tones, still facing the lake.

Briggs nodded and then sighed, knowing Hawke wasn’t looking at him, knowing Hawke was finally starting to think through everything he’d said.

“Yeah,” he said, hoping that Hawke could hear through the rasp the regret he felt. Hawke knowing St. John’s fate was better than the limbo of eternal wondering but right now it didn’t feel that way. He felt as if he’d sucked all of the hope from Hawke. “I am sorry, Hawke.”

“Yeah.”

He and Hawke were on opposite ends of the temperamental and ethical spectrums but in some things they were alike. Hawke wouldn’t allow himself to grieve, not with Briggs there.

He fixed his shirt collar and tie, though he didn't tighten it quite as much as usual, and then stood, found the briefcase he'd dropped when he'd hit the table and started for the door again. He tried to think of something else to say, something that wasn't so blatantly inadequate, something that wasn't intrusive. He stopped when he reached the door, hand on the doorknob and waited for some sign that Hawke realized that he was leaving.

"You didn't mention Airwolf," Hawke said, finally.

"No," Briggs said. "I didn't."

Mentioning Airwolf would be a distraction or worse: a reason for Hawke to distrust the experts' analyses, to distrust Briggs' motivation, a reason for him to reject the reality that his brother really, truly had died half a lifetime ago and that all his years of searching were in vain. Better to never mention it. Better to let the man grieve his brother without wondering if was yet another trick to recover the damn helicopter.

He nodded to Hawke and walked out the door.

He had time for a quick stop at Santini Air before returning to the planning and scheming necessary to keep Airwolf in Hawke's hands – and indirectly under Briggs' control -- as long as possible, as long as he could convince the Committee that it was most effective exactly where it was now.

Finis

Prompt: Michael gets definite evidence that St. John is dead