



**A Complete Book-Length Tale of Daredevil Adventure  
The Case of the Phantom Prototype  
by  
Eric Nylund**

*Gentleman Pirate Fighter **Paladin Blake** Stumbles Into A Web Of Deceit, Treachery And Death! What Begins As A Simple Job—Flying A New Lockheed Prototype To A Secret Testing Facility—Turns Into A Thrilling Contest Of Daring And Skill Between Air Ace Blake...And A Mysterious And Implacable Foe!*

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# A Word From The Editor

Today, we know Paladin Blake as a tough-as-nails captain of industry, a fearless fighter ace dedicated to ridding our skies of the scourge of aerial crime. He is known as a force for good in a world growing increasingly dangerous and dark.

Today, we know Paladin Blake as a millionaire, a playboy adventurer who has inspired countless comic strips, radio programs, and even a Hollywood feature film.

Today, he is a *hero*—as evidenced by the mountains of dimes that millions of our children mail in to join “Paladin’s Sky Knights” and receive their tin decoder rings.

But who was he yesterday?

Before the success, the wealth, and the respect and admiration, before Blake Aviation Security became the symbol of law and order in the skies, Paladin Blake was a down-on-his-luck pilot, desperate to save his business.

It was July, 1932, and Paladin Blake was thrust into an adventure laden with deception, treachery and danger at every turn! Join us now as *Spicy Air Tales* proudly presents this newly edited and revised special edition of the thrilling “Case of the Phantom Prototype!”

—Nero MacLeon

Senior Editor, *Air Action Weekly Press*

Manhattan, 1938



# Chapter One

## Bourbon and Red Ink

**P**aladin Blake took a bottle of bourbon from his desk drawer. He grabbed two glasses from the water cooler, set them on his blotter, then opened the bottle. This was the ritual he performed after every assignment.

No ritual, though, was going to save Blake Aviation Security from bankruptcy.

Sunlight and fresh air streamed through his office window. Paladin watched the sun set behind the Santa Monica pier. The view was costing him a bundle in overhead. He lowered the blinds.

With a steady hand, he poured the twelve-year-old bourbon into the glasses. He set one by the photograph of his father. "Here you go, you old bootlegger."

In the picture, his father sat on the wing of his plane, a pistol in one hand. In the other hand, the elder Blake held a bottle identical to the one on Paladin's desk.

"And here's to coming home alive."

This last assignment had been a peach. Only one of his planes had been shot down. Pretty good, considering Blake Aviation Security had put five pirates into the drink delivering silver bullion to Hawaii. The payoff had been considerable.

For every success, however, there were two assignments that lost money because of hospital bills, repairs, maintenance for his fleet of a dozen aircraft, and checks sent to his pilots' widows. Paladin was pouring money into his company by the bucketful.



He pulled out the company ledger and sighed. Red ink tattooed its pages.

Paladin cradled his glass of bourbon, warming it until he could smell the smoky aroma. He clinked the glass to his father's. "Don't worry, Dad. No matter what it takes, I'll get every last of one of them for you. Even if it means doing it by myself."

He poured the two glasses back into the bottle, then put it away. The ritual was over.

Running Blake Aviation Security hadn't always been like this. Every day, though, it was getting harder. There were more pirates in the air, and, as improbable as it seemed, they were becoming bolder. From Maine to Hollywood to Alaska—it was like the skies were heating to a boil.

Paladin stared at the bleeding ledger. There *had* to be a way to squeeze a profit from these numbers.

The intercom buzzed. "Mr. Blake?" his secretary asked. "There's a Mr. Justin to see you."

"Tell him to make an appointment."

"Mr. Justin?" she repeated. "...Representing the Lockheed Corporation?"

Paladin lost his place in the columns and rows. "You said 'Lockheed'?"

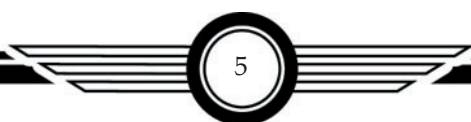
"Yes."

A corporation like Lockheed could mean, for once, a fat profit margin. The boost in prestige couldn't hurt Blake Aviation Security, either. It could lead to other corporate clients. Real money. Maybe enough to finally get his company off the ground.

But he was getting ahead of himself. He didn't know what Lockheed wanted. "Send Mr. Justin in."

Paladin quickly slipped on his suspenders, tucked in his shirt, and ran his fingers through his hair. He stood and slammed the ledger shut.

The office door opened. A man paused in the doorway. He was seven feet tall if he was an inch, and he had to turn his wide shoulders just to clear the doorframe. Paladin had never seen a size sixty-four Italian-cut suit before—enough navy blue wool to make a tent. The color of his





gray silk tie matched his pointed beard. Bushy brows arched over his blue eyes.

"Paladin Blake?" There was a richness to his voice, a slight Slavic accent. "I am Peter Justin." He extended a hand that engulfed Paladin's as they shook.

"What can Blake Aviation do for you?" He gestured to a padded chair.

Justin gracefully sat. "Lockheed has business for you, Mr. Blake. Security business."

"Good," Paladin said. "Great." He slowly sank into his chair, then added, "But Lockheed has it's own security. Why use us?"

"I am well aware of Lockheed's security resources. I am in charge of them." Justin reached into his coat and removed a sterling cigarette case, opened it, and offered one to Paladin.

"No thanks," Paladin said.

Justin took a cigarette for himself. "Lockheed requires an outsider for this particular assignment, an outsider with an impeccable record and a reputation for discretion. In short: we need you, Mr. Blake."

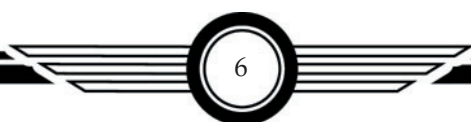
"I see," Paladin said, not really seeing anything, but managing to sound nonchalant. "Tell me about it."

"A simple matter," Justin replied and rolled his unlit cigarette between his fingers. "Two months ago, parts for a new aircraft disappeared from our Pasadena facility. Last week, the blue-prints disappeared from our vault—then reappeared. We are concerned a prototype that has been recently constructed will be next to vanish. So we want *you* to fly this prototype."

Paladin held up his hand. "I'm no test pilot. I'm a good combat pilot, but you need—"

"There is no testing involved. All we require from you is to deliver the plane to our secure base in the Mojave Desert." He fished into his coat pocket again, this time retrieving a slender notebook and gold fountain pen.

"You see," Justin said, leaning forward, "we cannot afford to trust anyone at Pasadena. The mechanics, engineers, even our test pilots could have been responsible for the previous thefts."



This completed prototype will be a tempting target."

"I didn't know Lockheed had an airfield in the Mojave Desert."

"Few do," Justin replied. "Which is another reason to employ someone with your reputation for discretion." He opened his notebook and scrawled on it. He tore off a sheet and pushed it across the desk. "The first half of our payment to Blake Aviation Security."

Paladin scrutinized the note. It was a Lockheed corporate check drawing on assets from the First Bank of Hollywood. There was a line of zeroes neatly arranged after the first number in the amount box.

After a moment, Justin cleared his throat. "Mr. Blake? I trust the amount is adequate?"

Paladin's mouth was suddenly dry. "Yes. Adequate." He swallowed and got his bearings. "For this kind of money, though, I assume you expect trouble?"

"No. I expect this will buy Lockheed a decided lack of trouble."

Paladin looked again at the number on the check. It was too good to be true—especially for a quick run over the San Bernardino Mountains. Or maybe there was no catch. Maybe this is exactly what he needed: a juicy contract.

Even if there was a catch, Justin was playing his cards close to his vest. If Blake Aviation Security didn't take the job, Justin could find a dozen other outfits to take his money.

"I assure you, Mr. Justin, Blake Aviation Security can handle any trouble."

"Excellent." Justin stood and smoothed his suit. "I knew we could do business. Meet me at five o'clock on the Pasadena airfield."

"My team and I will be there."

Justin crinkled his bushy eyebrows. "You misunderstood me, Mr. Blake." He set his still-unlit cigarette in the ashtray. "You—and you alone—are required. At the last minute, you will replace our test pilot on tomorrow's scheduled flight. Additional planes will only draw unwanted attention."

Cloak-and-dagger operations weren't exactly Paladin's style. He preferred force to stealth.



Preferably the force of a heavily armed squadron of his best fighter pilots.

"Okay," Paladin said. "It's your show. I'll be there like you want. Alone."

"I shall make the arrangements." Justin shook Paladin's hand again, then turned and closed the door behind him so softly that Paladin didn't hear it click shut.

Paladin's eye fell upon the unlit cigarette Justin had left in the ashtray. It was one of those black European deals, expensive and hard to get.

Big money or not, something didn't sit right. Lockheed wouldn't dole out this kind of cash unless they thought they'd get a good return on their investment. And why, if Justin couldn't trust his people, was he trusting Blake Aviation Security? Paladin knew his outfit was small potatoes.

He picked up the phone and dialed. It rang six times before someone answered.

"Dash? Get out of bed. I *know* you just got off a deadline. Look, I need a favor, some information. Find Jimmy the Rap and meet me at the Club Gorgeio, say ten o'clock? Good."

Paladin hung up then buzzed his secretary. "Dust off my tuxedo. I've got business tonight."

Out of the corner of his eye, Paladin spied the picture of his father. It looked like the old bootlegger was laughing at him.



The Club Gorgeio was packed with wall-to-wall tuxedos, slinky sequined evening gowns, and waitresses circulating with trays of cocktails. A haze of smoke gave the air a velvet texture. The band played "Hop Off."

Paladin, Dashiell, and Jimmy the Rap sat at a secluded corner table. Paladin told them about his visit this afternoon.

"I dropped by the First Bank of Hollywood," Paladin said. "Got a friend to run the check's serial numbers. They verified Justin's signature. It's legit."

Dashiell tapped out a cigarette and lit up. "I don't like it, Paladin." He puffed once. "It doesn't add up."





Dashiell wore a La Blanca tuxedo, the same label as Paladin, only he managed to make it look like a million bucks. It hadn't a crease or a speck of dust on it. His hair was slicked back, and his pencil thin mustache was perfectly trimmed.

At the opposite end of the fashion spectrum was Jimmy the Rap. Jimmy fidgeted, uncomfortable and out of place in his two-bit tweed suit and crumpled tie. He finished his second drink in a single gulp.

"Doesn't add up how?" Paladin asked.

Two years ago, Dashiell had been a stringer for *Air Action Weekly*—a starving writer working under a pseudonym, in desperate need of money until his "serious" projects started to pay off. Paladin put him to work checking the backgrounds of his clients and the competition, since Dashiell had a flair for research...and a nose for treachery. Later, when he hit it big with book deals and movie screenplays, suddenly everyone was his friend, from mobsters to studio executives to starlets. His good fortune, though, was Paladin's. Just as Dashiell had used Paladin's real-life escapades for his fiction, Paladin now used Dashiell's connections and smarts as a writer to solve real mysteries.

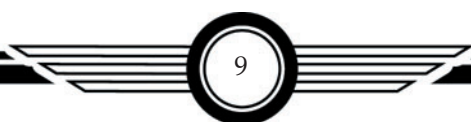
"It doesn't add up," Dashiell said, "because Mr. Peter Justin, a.k.a. Piotr 'Neyasvy' Pushkarev, is an ace pilot."

"I never heard of him," Paladin replied.

"You wouldn't have." Dashiell tapped the ashes off his cigarette. "He was a hero of the Russian revolution. That is, a hero, if you were a White Russian. His family escaped to Alaska, but not before the Reds got some of them. He made a name for himself up there before Lockheed hired him...or so I've heard." Dashiell waved his cigarette in a flamboyant gesture. "You're a pilot, Paladin. Maybe you can tell me why someone like that would give up his prize aircraft?"

"He wouldn't," Paladin muttered.

Dashiell turned to Jimmy. "What about these stolen parts? What's the word on the street?"







Jimmy slid out of his chair and took a step toward the exit.

Paladin set a hand on Jimmy the Rap's shoulder, pushing him back into his seat.

The "Rap" part of Jimmy's name came from two stints in prison. In both cases, he could have spilled his guts and walked away clean. The fact that he refused to rat out his former associates had earned him the reputation of being a man who kept his mouth shut. It made him a valuable middleman to the shadier businessmen of Hollywood.

Jimmy walked a tightrope, though. One word from Dashiell to Jimmy's parole officer and he'd be off the streets until his hair was gray. One slip-up with his employers, and he'd be off the streets permanently.

Paladin pressed a twenty into Jimmy's sweaty palm. "The parts?"

Jimmy's gaze darted around the room, then settled on Paladin. "These ain't no spark plugs that got taken. Were talking engine blocks, a spare fuselage, and some sorta aerobrake."

"So who bought them?" Dashiell asked.

Paladin slid his untouched scotch to Jimmy.

Jimmy downed it. "That's the strange thing," he said. "The guys with the brains to fence something that big—Icepick Marvin, The Weston Brothers—they've all taken vacations...real sudden-like."

"That doesn't make sense," Paladin said.

"Unfortunately, it does," Dashiell replied. "Someone big engineered these thefts from Lockheed. It stands to reason someone just as big wants to purchase the items. Someone big enough to make Jimmy's nastier associates think twice about getting involved."

"So what do you suggest?" Paladin asked.

"I'm going up to Santa Barbara for the weekend. You, my dear Paladin, are in way over your head. I suggest you tag along and take a vacation, too."

"I know I'm in over my head," Paladin whispered. "Way over. But if Blake Aviation Security



is ever going to be more than a small time operation, I've got to get in that deep." He stood.

"Thanks for the information and the advice, Dashiell. You'll have to excuse me, though. I've got to plane to fly in the morning."



# Chapter Two

## A Wing and A Prayer

**T**he sun wasn't up yet. Paladin Blake fumbled in the dark until his hands found his bag and parachute in the aerotaxi's trunk.

The driver craned his head out the window. "You need a hand, buddy?"

"Got it," Paladin said. He slung his chute over his shoulder then paid the driver.

"Lots of flyboys showing up here," the driver said. "They all bring their chutes. Don't Lockheed have the bucks to spring for you guys?"

"Sure they do," Paladin said. "But when there's nothing between you and the ground except a mile of air, would you trust someone else to pack your silk?"

"Point taken," the driver said. He started to roll up his window.

"Wait." Paladin passed the driver a dollar tip. "When did a lot of pilots show up here?"

"A week ago." The taxi driver pocketed the dollar. "Maybe a dozen. All flyboys...either that or parachute salesmen."

"Thanks," Paladin replied. He marched to the security shack at the eastern gate.

Pilots with their own chutes meant independent operators. Why was Peter Justin hiring more outsiders? Was he rotating his test pilots regularly because he didn't trust anyone? Paladin filed that under "miscellaneous curiosities." He'd ask later.

The guard inside the shack tracked Paladin's approach with an unwavering glare.



"John Smith to see Mr. Justin," Blake said, using the phony name Justin had insisted on. John Smith—real original.

"You're expected." The guard made a check on his clipboard. He lifted the barricade and waved Paladin thorough. The guard then handed him a brass key. "Pilot's lockers are—" he pointed to the nearest hangar "—there."

Paladin stole a glance at the clipboard. The only thing written on the page was his phony name.

"Got it," Paladin said and started toward the hangar.

Through the slowly dissipating fog, Paladin saw a dozen other hangars, and in the distance, the gray outlines of two zeppelin aerodromes. A hundred planes were precisely parked on the tarmac: every make of bomber and fighter, even a fleet of autogyros. There were no people, though. Sure, it was five o'clock in the morning, but there should be mechanics or guards...*someone*. The place was a ghost town.

Paladin entered the hangar. On the other side of a row of gleaming P2 Warhawks was a building, presumably the pilot's locker room.

"Hello?"

Only an echo answered.

It wasn't too late to accept Dashiell's offer: a weekend of starlets and sailing in Santa Barbara. But that wouldn't bring in the cash he needed to save Blake Aviation Security.

No. This setup may be getting weirder by the second, but Paladin couldn't afford to lose the job. He chalked up his growing unease to preflight jitters.

Paladin walked into the changing room. There were showers and rows of large lockers with benches. He examined the brass key the guard had given him. Stamped on it was "A303." He found locker A303 and opened it. Inside hung a flight suit and a fur-lined jacket; there were gloves, helmet, goggles, a steel lunch box, and a new parachute. The flight suit had a Lockheed logo embroidered on the back, and the name, "Johnny," stitched on the right front pocket.



Paladin slipped into the suit, jacket, and gloves. They were a perfect fit.

"Mr. Blake?"

Peter Justin stood in the doorway—or rather, his body *filled* the doorway. He wore a gray suit, green tie, and he looked crisp and fresh. "If you could don the helmet as well, in case anyone spots us?"

Paladin put on the helmet and goggles.

"Our time is limited," Justin said, "so please follow me." He turned and briskly walked away.

Paladin picked up his bag, the lunch pail, and his own parachute, kicked the locker shut, then trotted after the big Russian.

He caught up to Justin on the tarmac. "I admire your thoroughness," Paladin said. "No one here but the one guard at the gate. The prearranged equipment. Like clockwork. If I didn't know better, I'd say you had the fix in on the fog, too, just to keep everything under wraps."

"I also took the liberty to pack you a lunch." Justin said without pause in his gigantic stride. "A thermos of coffee and two sandwiches, one jelly and peanut butter, and one liverwurst. I was unsure which you preferred." He pointed into the fog. "There she is."

Paladin squinted, and saw a plane's silhouette...at least the wing of a plane.

No. It was *all* wing. It resembled a Ravenscroft Coyote, but instead of a single pusher engine, it had two props mounted on the leading edge. The cockpit was a bubble in the center of the craft, and twin .30-caliber guns were mounted underneath. There were control flaps along the wing, but it lacked anything that resembled a rudder.

"You can't be serious," Paladin said. "It'll spin out of control."

"I assure you, Mr. Blake, it will not. The controls are sensitive, but they function quite well. Rolls-Royce developed the concept, but they never pursued the design. We recently purchased their patent."

Paladin walked around the plane. Something else was wrong. He stepped back and figured



it out. The proportions were out of kilter. The plane had huge engines, a tiny fuselage, and limited control surfaces. It was all power. Maneuvering wouldn't be difficult; it would be impossible.

"Has this thing even *flown* before?"

Justin laughed. "Many times. It is safe." He crinkled his bushy brows together. "Assuming the pilot is sufficiently skilled. You are not having second thoughts, are you?"

Paladin had been having third, fourth, and fifth thoughts about this job since he met Peter Justin. "No," he said. "No second thoughts."

"My ground crew inspected her last night. I have personally double-checked their assessment."

Paladin climbed onto the wing and slid back the canopy. Inside, wires spilled out of empty sockets where some of the gauges had been ripped out. Sections of the floor were exposed, revealing the guns and struts of the landing gear.

"Someone hasn't finished putting this thing together."

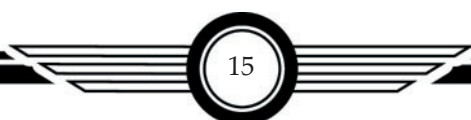
"It is a *working* prototype, Mr. Blake, not a finished product. Certain amenities have been overlooked. The plane, however, is eminently airworthy. Now" —he removed a map from his pocket— "if you could give me your attention."

Paladin stowed his gear in the cockpit and climbed down.

Justin unfolded a map of southern Hollywood. "I have traced your route. You will cross the mountains here." He smoothed his thumb over a red line on the paper. "If you experience problems, you are to immediately land at the Palmdale airstrip, or if you drift farther east, at Palm Springs. As a last resort there is the dry lakebed." He circled a large region outlined in yellow. "If you experience any difficulties, call for help on the channel marked 'B.' We will abandon the secrecy of this mission and send a squadron to retrieve you."

Paladin followed the route. It ended in the middle of nowhere. "And Lockheed's secure facility is here?"

"Yes. You will receive the balance of your fee upon landing. Is this acceptable?"





"Sure." Paladin frowned. "No, not quite acceptable. Can I ask you a personal question, Mr. Justin?"

Justin glanced at his watch. "A quick one."

"I've always made it a point to know my clients, I mean, know who they *really* are. Your real name, for example, is Piotr Pushkarev. You fought in the Russian Revolution on the side of the Whites and earned the nickname 'Neyasvy,' which, I believe means 'invincible.' When the battle spilled into Alaska, you were there, too. You're an ace pilot. A hero."

Justin locked eyes with Paladin. He didn't smile to hide his unease, nor was there even a raised eyebrow betraying his shock. "And your question?"

"Why the fake identity? You have every reason not to trust anyone with your prototype. But why am I flying it? Why aren't you?"

"Your information is impressive, Mr. Blake, but you are incorrect on one point. My name *is* Peter Justin. I have had it legally changed. As for not trusting anyone else, I do not. I am forced by circumstances to trust you. You see, my skills" —his gaze dropped to the ground— "It is not easy, when one reaches a certain age. My reflexes, my eyesight...they are not what they once were. I am still a patriot, and I still serve in my own way, but I cannot risk that which I have been hired to protect to prove that I am something I am not."

It took a big man to admit that. Would Paladin be as smart when he started to lose his edge? He hoped so. There were no old fighter pilots.

"I'm sorry I asked," Paladin said.

"If you knew my reputation and walked into this blindly, it would mean you are a fool. I am glad to see you are not." Justin glanced again at his watch. "Now, if there are no further questions, we must get you into the air."

"Sure."

Paladin climbed into the cockpit. The seat was rock hard and his long legs didn't fit. He





managed to adjust it until he was merely uncomfortable.

He fired up the engines. They coughed and sputtered and caught. Despite Justin's assurances about the plane's condition, they sounded out of tune.

Justin circled behind the plane, climbed the wing, and leaned into the cockpit. "You have already been cleared with the tower. The runway is yours, Mr. Blake. Good flying." He gave Paladin a thumbs-up, then slid the canopy over his head. It closed with a solid click.

Paladin returned the thumbs-up and waited for Justin to climb off before easing the plane out onto the tarmac. Blue lights winked down the runway. The fog was still thick, restricting visibility to two hundred feet...not the best take-off conditions.

Paladin clicked on the transceiver and called in a radio check. The tower confirmed and told him he had the runway to himself.

He eased the throttle forward. The flying wing accelerated quickly. Paladin let her build speed a moment, then pulled back. The plane soared into the air—teetered and almost flipped into a roll.

Justin wasn't kidding when he said the controls were sensitive. He'd have to be more careful.

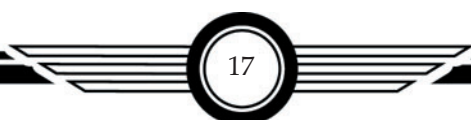
Paladin held his angle and climbed. The altimeter said four hundred feet. He glanced down at the grid of Pasadena streets, the orange groves, and the foothills ahead. He judged his altitude to be over two thousand. The oil pressure gauge pulsed up and down. His RPM read zero.

"'Certain amenities have been overlooked,' huh?" Paladin muttered. He tapped the fuel gauge. It read full but he wasn't sure if he believed it.

This wasn't going to work. No instruments he could trust and a plane only half-assembled? How was he going to spend Lockheed's money if he crashed? He should turn back now while he had the chance.

Paladin pushed the left rudder pedal. The plane banked so sharply that the hull groaned and his harness cut into his shoulders.

This plane moved like nothing he had ever flown. He wasn't sure how it was maneuvering,





but it was as agile as a dragonfly. He continued the turn then rolled the flying wing, the maneuver crushing him into his seat.

That was almost fun. Maybe he could fly this thing, after all.

Paladin pushed the throttle to three-quarters power. The wing jumped forward. He nosed her over the San Bernardino Mountains, admired the snow on Mount Baldy, then dropped altitude and skimmed over the tree tops

This little flying wing was growing on him. The controls were twitchy, though; every nudge jinked the plane.

He crossed the summit and the Mojave Desert stretched out beneath him, flat and gray painted with yellow duststorm streaks far in the distance. He aimed for the Saddleback Buttes. From there, according to Justin's flight plan, he'd head due east into the middle of nowhere.

So far, smooth sailing.

Paladin reached back for the lunch pail—and spotted planes on his six. A pack of Grumman Avengers.

He'd been an idiot. He'd been busy enjoying the ride, and had forgotten that this *wasn't* a ride. It was a job. A job he might have just botched.

He squinted. Five of them. No registration numbers. That meant pirates. But there were also no symbols or crests or markings of any kind. He'd never seen a pirate *not* decorate his plane. So who were they?

He wagged the flying wing to indicate he was friendly.

They fired. Bullet holes stitched his port wing.

"So much for trying to be neighborly," Blake growled, nosing his plane into a dive.

Paladin skimmed along the slope of the mountain, then pulled up hard. He pushed the throttle to maximum, rolled upside-down, then over, and straightened, emerging behind his attackers.

Before they could scatter, he lined up a shot and fired the prototype's guns.

Fire belched from his .30-caliber cannons. He peppered the tail of one of the Avengers,



destroying the rudder.

Paladin whooped, pleased with his marksmanship.

Both of his guns jammed.

"What the—?" He squeezed the trigger again. Nothing.

The loss of his plane's guns made the firefight far too one-sided for Paladin's liking. He grabbed the radio: "Mayday, Mayday. Lockheed special flight encountering pirates. Mayday, Mayday."

There was no response. Not even static.

*All right, he thought. I can't fight or get help. Maybe I can outrun them.*

Paladin peeled off and headed straight into the sun.

"Come on," he whispered to the plane. "Faster!"

The Avengers turned to match his new heading, but he was putting some distance between his attackers and his ship. Good. He had a chance.

Bullets riddled the back of the flying wing. A rocket whistled past him; a second impacted near the port engine. There was a shower of sparks and shrapnel. The motor sputtered and stalled.

Paladin knew when he was beat. He checked his parachute to make sure it was strapped on tight.

"I'm sorry, Justin," he murmured, "but it looks like I've just lost your plane."

Another volley of bullets tattooed the flying wing.

Paladin pulled on the canopy's release. With luck, he wouldn't be shot by raiders on the way down.

The canopy didn't budge. He pulled harder, with all his strength. No dice.

He was stuck inside.



# Chapter Three

## In The Crosshairs

**P**aladin was a dead man if he didn't get out of this flying coffin. His plane spiraled out of control—sky and clouds and yellow earth whirled around the cockpit.

He yanked again on the canopy's latch but it was wrenched tight. He needed a crowbar, a screwdriver...or a gun. He did have a gun, a Colt .45 automatic he had packed in his bag.

He twisted in the seat, quickly rummaging through the tangles of wire and fuel lines where he had set his bag. It wasn't there. He searched the floor and spotted the bag. It had fallen through the exposed sections of the unfinished cockpit. The bag's strap was snared on the strut of his landing gear, three feet beneath him. If he were a contortionist, he might be able to reach through and get it; otherwise, that three feet that might as well be three miles.

There was no choice. He was trapped inside. He had to get the plane running.

He flipped the kill switch for the port engine, reset it, and pushed the starter. The engine coughed smoke and wept oil across the wing. He pushed the starter a second time, a third. Flame shot out of the casing as the motor roared to life.

Paladin laughed—half elated, half panicked.

He pushed the throttle to full and pulled back on the yoke. He had to gain some altitude.

The flying wing groaned and shuddered. Paladin closed his eyes and willed his craft to hold together, willed the plane to climb. He opened his eyes and saw his spiral



descent had straightened.

Paladin sighed. That was a lucky break. The port engine, though, wouldn't run for long. He had to find a—

Bullets riveted across his starboard wing. Magnesium rounds sizzled into the metal...too close to the fuel tank for comfort.

His attackers were still on his tail.

Paladin quickly weighed his options. It was five against one. If his attackers didn't shoot his flying wing into confetti, then his engine would seize up. In either case, with the canopy jammed, he had a one-way express ticket straight down. There had to be a way out of this mess, a way to open the canopy.

There was. Maybe. Paladin stared at the smoldering bullet holes. He'd had some wild ideas before; this one qualified as downright nuts.

He eased up on the throttle and allowed the lead Avenger catch up to him. He had to give them a better shot.

Thirty-caliber bullets peppered the fuselage. Paladin jerked left. The line of bullet holes curved right—off the flying wing, completely missing him.

The yoke bucked under his hands, fighting his control. It was nearly impossible to hold the plane steady as shot up as it was, but Paladin had to if he was going to pull this off. He loosened his grip and forced himself to relax, preparing to react to the plane's erratic pitching and yawing.

He heard another burst from the Avenger's guns, felt staccato impacts as bullets stitched across the starboard wing. He jinked the plane to the right. Slugs ripped into the fuselage—just where he had hoped—across the canopy.

Shrapnel blasted into the cockpit. Paladin screamed as red-hot metal tore through his shoulder and blood spattered across the clear canopy dome.

He huddled over in pain and slammed the yoke forward. The flying wing dove. The ground



was only a thousand feet away.

Paladin made a feeble attempt to pull back—then stopped, startled by what sounded like a locomotive slamming into the plane. The port engine seized. Pistons and rods ripped through the casing, and bolts zinged off the nose. Exploding scrap metal shredded half the wing.

The only flying possible with this plane now was the kind you did with a halo.

He glanced at the canopy latch. Between the Avenger's .30-caliber bullets and the engine detonating, it had made Swiss cheese out of the lever and track. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the ground rushing up; maybe six hundred feet left. He unbuckled his seatbelt and pulled on the latch.

It moved, but not enough to open.

He swiveled in his seat, ripping through the tangle of wires and hydraulic lines around his feet. He kicked at the latch—once, twice. The canopy ripped open with a rush of wind. Paladin tumbled out of the cockpit.

There was a blur of blue skies, smears of cirrostratus, a flash of the desert floor rapidly approaching...so close he saw spiny Joshua trees and a jackrabbit bounding for cover.

Paladin wrapped his fingers around the rip cord and pulled—rope and silk unraveled and caught the air. His body snapped like a whip and his harness bit into his injured shoulder. He hit the ground. His legs crumpled; he rolled, tangling himself in rope and fabric, sticks and sand.

He lay there, dazed and wrapped in blood-flecked white silk. He wondered if he were still alive. There was grit and blood in his mouth. His shoulder felt on fire and twisted out of joint. His bones ached, too. He had to be alive; you couldn't feel this lousy if you were dead.

Paladin unbuckled his parachute and wriggled out from under the silk. The sun was a hand-breadth above the horizon, but the desert was already hot. His head was ringing. Or was that just the crickets buzzing their high-pitched song? A dry wind kicked up and pelted his flight suit with sand.

He smelled smoke, turned and saw the source: a serpentine column of flame and soot emanating from the flying wing's crash site.



"Sorry Justin. I blew it."

It wasn't only Justin he had failed. He'd lose Blake Aviation Security over this fiasco. He should have radioed for help the second he saw those Avengers. He shouldn't have tried to outmaneuver them, shouldn't have allowed his plane—correction: *Lockheed's* plane—to get shot out from under him. It was his fault.

Overhead, he heard the unmistakable drone of the Avengers' Feldman sixteen-valve engines. One of the Avengers trailed smoke. Paladin must have gotten more than a piece of his tail rudder.

They circled like buzzards. One peeled off, his wingmate followed, then another two dove in graceful arcs...arcs which lined them up perfectly for strafing runs.

Paladin half ran, half limped for the nearest twiggy creosote bush. He crouched in the improbable cover of its shadow and watched as the Avengers leveled off at fifty feet and fired.

Bullets carved lines in the sand.

He flinched, fully expecting the rows of magnesium rounds to rip him apart. But they weren't shooting at him. Instead, they hit the wreckage of the flying wing.

The four Avengers circled, made another run, this time dropping bombs. The bombs detonated, sending a shower of silver sparks into the air. They made another low-altitude pass, then climbed, apparently satisfied with their destructive handiwork.

Paladin stood and shook the sand out of his helmet. It didn't make sense.

He understood the ambush. Justin's "airtight" security obviously wasn't. Someone at Lockheed had gotten wind of his plan and knew exactly where and when to nab the prototype. But they hadn't even tried to take it intact.

Paladin walked toward the wreckage. His knees wobbled but held.

The flying wing—the twisted bits of black steel that were left—no longer resembled a plane. It looked like someone had taken a can opener to it. The stench of melting rubber and burning aviation fuel forced him back. There would be no salvaging the





radio or his bag of gear. The cockpit was a charred crater. If he hadn't jumped when he did, there would have only been pieces of him left for the scorpions.

He examined his shoulder, gingerly peeling back the tattered flight suit. The wound was deep but cleanly cauterized about the edges. Nothing life-threatening...but it still hurt like hell.

Paladin clenched his fists, then uncoiled them and exhaled. He'd get even with those Avengers. But who were they?

They could be the same thieves stealing from Lockheed. They'd gone to a lot of trouble to get a few parts and the prototype's blueprints; yet, they had wasted a chance to get their hands on the real thing. Did destroying the prototype make their parts more valuable?

If they weren't the Lockheed thieves—if they were, for instance, Lockheed's corporate competition—then that would explain the lack of pirate insignia on the Avengers. It wouldn't explain, though, why they hadn't been eager to get a look at the flying wing. Destroying it only set Lockheed back a few months while they built a new one.

There were too many missing pieces to this puzzle.

Paladin scanned the skies and spotted the Avengers. They were flyspecks in the distance now, seemingly hovering on the northern horizon, dwindling into the distance.

With them dwindled his chances for filling in those missing pieces.

Paladin turned and walked south. There should be a road along the base of the San Bernardino Mountains. If not, he'd have to head for the pass. That was at least a day's walk.

He looked back, shielded his eyes. The Avengers were flecks of dust, one trailing a thread of smoke. They were still on northern bearing.

North? What was north? Lockheed's secret facility was northeast. Palmdale was to the west. Palm Springs was east. Those Avengers should be heading back to civilization, not away from it. They had a range of six hundred miles, so they could be headed anywhere. Not the one Paladin had shot, though. It had a bad rudder and engine problems. He shouldn't be flying into the



middle of the desert.

Paladin looked back at the mountains. That way was Pasadena, and explaining to Justin how he had turned his ultra-secret prototype flying wing into a heap of scrap metal. Lockheed would take over the investigation into the ambush. It would be the end of Blake Aviation Security.

He turned north. That way was wherever those Avengers were headed. It was a walk into the middle of nowhere. It would be a heck of a lot more trouble than it was worth. He might die of thirst, blood loss or a rattlesnake bite. But it could lead to some answers.

Paladin took a deep breath then started marching deeper into the desert.

"I should have listened to Dashiell and gone to Santa Barbara."



It was almost dawn. A band of navy blue wavered on the horizon. Another half-hour and the sun would turn this ice locker back into an oven.

It had been a day since Paladin had walked onto Lockheed's Pasadena airfield and flew Justin's little plane. Twenty-four hours, most of them spent staggering under a sweltering sun, thinking every step of the way about what a long shot he was chasing.

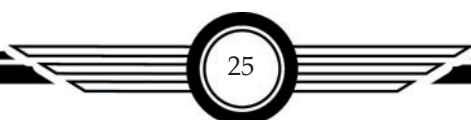
He must have hit his head harder than he realized when he bailed out. No one in their right mind would have gone after those Avengers on foot.

Paladin stopped. He resisted the urge to lick his cracked lips. One day without water was bad enough. He had at least another day going back the way he came.

How far could that shot-up Avenger have gotten? Apparently further than he could on foot. He scanned the sky like he had a thousand times before. He'd seen plenty of ravens and bats but not a single plane. This time was no different.

He turned and started back. He only took three steps before he halted dead in his tracks.

There was a faint drone. It revved up and down; it was an unmistakable noise. It was the





sixteen-valve Feldman engine of a Grumman E-1 Avenger.

Paladin spun, trying to zero in on the sound.

There. Just over the rocky hills to the north, the silhouette of a plane dove, soared, circled, then disappeared.

He ran toward the closest slope. The predawn light warmed the ledges and outcroppings, turning them red and amber. As the sun peeked over the horizon, Paladin scrambled to the top and overlooked a canyon full of shadows.

Pale yellow lights traced a runway down the center of this canyon. There were a dozen tents, a fleet of twenty Avengers, and an old water tower that had been converted into a radio shack. On the opposite side of the ravine sat a moored zeppelin.

Paladin stared for a full minute. Someone had done a lot of planning and spent a fistful of cash to set this base up. He squinted and saw mechanics and pilots on the runway, moving briskly and only pausing to salute one another.

A military base? Paladin was willing to bet Blake Aviation's last dollar it didn't belong to Hollywood's militia. He remembered Jimmy the Rap's story about how all the aircraft fences in Hollywood were muscled out of town. Who else but another nation could do that?

Sunlight illuminated the side of the zeppelin. It was smooth, metallic gray, and bore no insignia. It had gun turrets on each engine nacelle, a rack on the undercarriage for bombs and rockets, and two bays for launching aircraft. This thing was a war machine.

A crane next to the zeppelin moved; its neck extended and cables whined as it pulled something off the ground. A dozen men clustered about the object. Whatever it was, they were aligning it to fit into the port bay.

There were getting ready for action. A firefight? Or were they moving out?



Paladin waited and watched as the shadows evaporated from the canyon. His heart skipped a beat, then pounded in his throat. They weren't loading just any plane. It was the flying wing.

The same plane Paladin had crash-landed and seen incinerated.





# Chapter Four

## Ghosts In The Sand

**W**hat the hell is going on here?" Paladin Blake muttered.

Blake watched the crane lift the aircraft. The little flying wing had the same oversized engines, the same bubble canopy, and the same smooth rudderless design. To his eye it was identical to the plane he flew from the Lockheed facility in Pasadena...the same plane that had been shot out from under him in a sneak attack.

Maybe the Lockheed thieves had built their own plane from stolen parts. No, that didn't figure. Jimmy the Rap said they had taken some big-ticket items—but nothing near enough to construct an entire aircraft.

The sun broke free of the horizon. Paladin's shadow was a hundred feet long and spilled over the edge of the canyon.

He was being a dope. If he could see the mechanics and pilots on the airstrip, then they'd be able to see his silhouette up on the ridge.

He dropped, crawled to the edge, and peered over. No one seemed to have noticed. In fact, they looked too busy down there to notice anyone up here. Men dug up runway lights. Mechanics in coveralls worked on the engines of the Avengers. A dozen people loaded crates into the zeppelin.

They were breaking camp.



It was a stroke of luck for Paladin—rotten luck. He silently cursed himself for not thinking ahead. Sure, he'd found the thugs that had shot him down...only he hadn't figured out what to do when he caught up with them. If he left now to get help, there wouldn't even be footprints left in the sand when he returned.

Whatever he was going to do, he had to do it soon. He had to do it alone.

He needed an inconspicuous way to get a closer look. The canyon walls, however, were vertical. Quickly surveying the scene, he spotted a branching ravine with slopes that a determined person could slide down. Better yet, this side passage twisted out of the sight from the main camp.

There was just one problem, though: the ravine wasn't empty. One man marched into the gully, while another wandered out and waved a greeting to his buddy.

If Paladin's luck changed, he might time it just right so no one saw him crashing their party. He moved along the ridge of the canyon, half-crouching, until he came to the edge of the branching channel. He then understood what the attraction was in the ravine: in the shadow of a rocky ledge sat an outhouse.

Through the crescent-moon slit Paladin spied someone moving. He'd have to move fast.

Paladin stepped off the edge and slid down the gravel slope. A cloud of dust trailed behind him. He ran to the outhouse.

The man inside must have heard him. "Cool yer heels, buddy," he yelled through the door. "Wait yer turn!"

Paladin thought of himself as a fair person. If he knocked someone down, he waited for them to get to their feet before taking another swing. Not this time. He'd left all pretenses of chivalry a day's walk away—when five planes had shot him out of the sky.

He flung open the door and caught the mechanic with his pants down. Paladin threw a left hook and a right uppercut.



The mechanic grunted in pain and collapsed against the wall, unconscious.

Paladin cast a glance up the ravine. No one there. He dragged the unconscious mechanic from the outhouse, far enough out of sight in case anyone came looking.

He took the man's coveralls and cap, hog-tied him with his belt, then gagged him with his own dirty socks. The restraints wouldn't hold forever; Paladin hoped that they would hold long enough for him to find out what was going on here.

The mechanic's greasy blue coveralls were two sizes too big. Paladin stuffed it with his flight jacket then tucked his hair under the cap. If anyone got too close to this lousy disguise, they'd see through it in a heartbeat.

He took a deep breath, steeled his nerve, and walked out of the ravine.

Men scurried about the airstrip—all of them moving faster than Paladin had seen ten minutes ago. They struck tents and lowered radio gear from the water tower. Two mechanics worked on each of the Avengers. Ground crews loaded belts of ammunition and slung rockets on hardpoints under the fighters' wings.

The Avenger pilots were clustered by the edge of the runway, chewing on cigars, and shuffling nervously. They kept glancing at the sky like someone was about to drop a bomb on them.

Paladin tried to look like he had someplace important to get to, then marched across the field, passing as close as he dared to the pilots. He recognized the Neanderthal eyebrows of "Dogface" Dougan, the vivid flame tattoos covering the arms of Lady Kali, and the thick glasses of "Crosseye" Malone—notorious mercenaries who would shoot down anything or anyone as long as there was enough money in it for them.

He averted his gaze before they saw him. These weren't the kind of people you stared at unless you wanted to start a fight. These also weren't the kind of people especially noted for their brains.

So who was pulling the strings around here?





Paladin continued past the pilots, then paused and knelt, pretending to tie his shoelace. He needed time to think. Maybe time to figure out a way to steal one of those Avengers. If he could get to Lockheed's base before these goons disappeared, he might be able to return with—

A shadow fell across his face.

"You!"

Paladin got to his feet and slowly turned...ready to go down swinging if he'd been found out.

A middle-aged man in a linen suit and Panama straw hat regarded Paladin with mild disgust. His skin was as pallid as his white jacket. He wore kid gloves and sported a monocle that magnified his right eye so it looked like it bulged out of its socket. There wasn't a grain of sand on him.

Standing next to the pale man was a woman. She wore a smart black-and-white striped skirt, black vest, and matching pillbox hat. She shaded herself with a lace parasol. Paladin had to force himself not to stare at her fall of black silken hair or into her deep blue eyes. She was movie-star material.

"Take this" —the pale man gestured to a steamer truck sitting next to a flattened tent— "to my stateroom. Immediately. And take care not to jostle it."

Paladin followed the man's gaze to the zeppelin. "Sure."

The pale man narrowed his eyes to slits. "What did you say?"

If this was a military operation, then Paladin had just given the wrong reply. He quickly corrected himself. "I mean, yes sir." He saluted. "Right away, sir!"

The pale man turned and strode toward the pilots. The woman examined Paladin a moment, then she too left.

If he were going to remain inconspicuous, he'd have to follow that order. At least he had a clue what the guy in charge looked like.

The steamer truck was made of soft leather, with brass-reinforced corners and three silver stars embossed on the lid. Paladin picked it up and balanced it on his good shoulder. He glanced back. The pale man seemed to be giving instruction to the pilots. They nodded and laughed.



Paladin trudged toward the war zeppelin. He fought the urge to duck as he neared the gun turrets mounted on the engine nacelles. Facing that much firepower was bad enough inside a cockpit, racing by at two hundred miles per hour...but to stare it down face-to-face gave him the creeps.

He climbed the stairs to the gondola and got a glance at the bridge—dials, gauges, and a table overflowing with navigation charts he would have loved to look at. The bridge was also full of armed guards.

He continued down a hallway into what might have once been the dining section. Fifty-caliber machine guns were mounted where the best window tables would have been on a passenger liner. Crates of ammunition were neatly stacked alongside the guns. Paladin kept his head low and walked past crews cleaning and oiling the weapons. He entered another passage at the end of the galley.

There were bunkrooms and a storage room full of boxes and sacks. One door had a placard with three silver stars hung on the handle. Paladin knocked, waited, then eased it open.

He slipped inside. No one was here. He dropped the trunk, then closed and locked the door behind him.

The room had a picture window with bulletproof steel shutters. There was a rolltop desk bolted to the floor, and two chaise lounges upholstered with silver silk. Gilt-framed landscapes and portraits adored the walls; they seemed vaguely familiar, like Paladin had seen them before in a museum. There was a case full of books: Nietzsche, nineteenth-century history texts, and the latest scientific journals.

Paladin had almost overlooked the most important feature of this parlor, a fully stocked wet bar. He rummaged through the bottles and found a seltzer dispenser. He filled three glasses and quaffed the fizzling liquid. He ate an entire can of Spanish peanuts, then a jar of maraschino cherries, drank the rest of the seltzer, and caught his breath.

He almost felt human again. He tried to stretch his wounded shoulder, but it was too swollen



and stiff. He touched it and winced. Not a good sign.

He'd been running on adrenaline ever since his crash. Now that he finally had a chance to slow down, he was struck with a sense of just how much danger he was in. If they found him, there'd be a little impromptu firing squad organized for his benefit. He had to get off his zep-pelin and as far away from here as he could.

On the other hand, if he wanted to find out who was behind the Lockheed thefts, this might be his only opportunity.

Five minutes. He'd give himself that long to find something, then he'd scam and take his chances in the desert.

Paladin jimmied the lock on the steamer truck. The scent of expensive perfume wafted from inside. There were skirts and blouses with French labels and a dozen pairs of high heels. Paladin was no fashion expert, but the stuff looked like it had cost a bundle. He dug deeper and found a hatbox. Inside was a nickel-plated .38 pistol...and a grenade.

He couldn't picture either the pale man or his lady friend packing this kind of heat. They both looked so genteel. Still, nothing about this case had been as simple as it appeared on the surface. Why should they be any different?

Paladin slipped the pistol and grenade in his pocket.

Next, he forced the rolltop cover of the desk. There was the usual stuff: stationary, envelopes, a gold fountain pen, and a pack of unopened cigarettes. There was also a key.

He took the key—it might come in handy if he found a locked door on his way out. He grabbed the smokes, too.

He started to roll down the desk top when a flash caught his attention. Sitting in a velvet box was a signet ring with a jade stone. Carved in relief was an eagle with talons extended around a star. He pocketed the ring, too.

Sure, it was stealing. Blake Aviation had always gone out of its way to conduct business on



the up-and-up, but this was different. There was more at stake than his reputation or playing it fair...even more at stake, he realized, than Lockheed's prototype. Another nation was conducting secret military operations in Hollywood. That was an act of war.

Paladin suddenly didn't want to be here, clues or not. He moved toward the door, but his knees buckled and his stomach sank. He caught himself, sitting on one of the lounges.

Outside he heard thunder...only this thunder didn't fade. It was the roar of the zeppelin's engines. And it wasn't his legs that had given out; the zeppelin had suddenly lurched.

They were taking off.

# Chapter Five

## No Graceful Exit

**P**aladin felt the acceleration in his gut—like he was moving up on an express elevator. He got to his feet and lurched to the window. The zeppelin had cleared the canyon walls; its shadow rippled along the desert crags below.

He gripped the steel shutters and rattled them. No luck. They were welded to the frame. Even if he found something to pry them off, he was already a hundred feet off the ground and climbing.

Unless he sprouted wings, he was stuck on this airbag.

And with his luck, the guard he had knocked out before sneaking aboard would be found soon. There'd be a quick radio call to the zeppelin, a search, and when they found Paladin, they'd shove him out the nearest exit. He'd take the longest step of his life.

He couldn't sit around and wait to be discovered. He had to find a place to hide.

Paladin left the parlor and locked the door behind him. Retracing his steps, he went back to the shooting gallery. The drone of the engines reverberated through the open windows. The dozen .50-caliber guns were loaded and ready for action. The men standing next to them looked just as ready, scanning the skies for trouble. No one noticed him.

Paladin swayed and steadied himself against an aluminum brace. Squares of light and shadow stretched and angled across the long room as the zeppelin turned north.



There was a door or two in the corridor between here and the bridge. Paladin tried to look casual as he strode to the opposite side of the galley. There had to be was a place where he could—

Halfway across the room, he stopped dead.

The pale, authoritative man and his stunning escort stepped onto the galley. The gunners stood and saluted.

The pale man brushed the lapel of his linen suit and casually looked over the room. He wandered to the nearest window, ran his white-gloved fingers over the frame and inspected their cleanliness. Satisfied, he removed his monocle and admired the expansive view of desert and cloudless horizons.

His female companion leaned over a machine gun, brushed the fall of dark hair from her face, and examined its ammunition belt. She straightened her pillbox hat then spoke to the soldier manning the weapon. He nodded and quickly left. She turned and scrutinized each gun along the left-hand side of the room, idly twirling her closed lace parasol...until she noticed Paladin. Her eyes locked with his and she froze.

There was something familiar about the slight upturn of her nose, and eyes that could have been chiseled from icebergs. Sure, Paladin had just seen her on the runway, but he now realized that they had crossed paths somewhere else. He couldn't quite put his finger on when.

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a tiny "o".

While Paladin hadn't figured out where he knew her from, she had apparently remembered where she had seen *him* before. He dropped his eyes to the deck, did an about-face, and headed back the way he came, trying to appear as nonchalant as possible.

It took all his nerve not to look back or break into a run. Paladin was sure every guard on the zeppelin was after him. He'd never hear them coming over the roar of the engines.

He stopped at the door to the parlor and risked a quick glance over his shoulder. The pale man and woman were still there, but neither one was looking his way. Paladin exhaled and



regained his composure.

One thing was for sure: he couldn't go back. The woman had either recognized him and not said anything, or she had written off his familiar resemblance as a coincidence. Paladin wished he remembered how he knew her, and if she might help out of this jam. That was a long shot, though. She seemed awfully close to the pale man in charge.

He continued down the hall past a bunkroom full of men engrossed in a game of poker—past a kitchen with glistening copper pots and the aroma of roasting turkey—past a storage closet crammed with crates—but nothing that looked like a good hiding place.

Paladin looked back down the hallway and spotted the pale man and woman walking toward their room. When they saw their opened steamer truck and ransacked rolltop desk, they'd quickly realize who was responsible.

He figured he had thirty seconds.

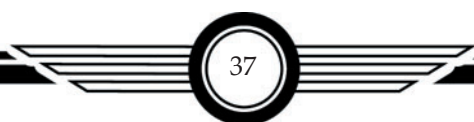
The hall ended in a double set of swing doors. Paladin pushed through.

He found himself in the launch bay, a cavernous room with the skeleton of the zeppelin's beam-and-girder superstructure exposed. Paladin saw a control room perched thirty feet overhead.

There was a fleet of Grumman Avengers, hanging like Christmas ornaments on tracks. At first glance, it looked like a standard launch bay in a military zep. When the zeppelin was high enough those planes could roll off their tracks, through the open bay doors in the floor, and the zeppelin would have an instant squadron to defend against pirates, or in this case, Hollywood's militia.

This launch system, though, was different than any Paladin had seen. The planes rotated on a universal joint. They pointed toward bays where mechanics checked engines and hydraulics, loaded rockets and belts of ammunition—all made easier because they could be worked on from any angle. It was a brainy set up.

Paladin stopped admiring the engineering and did a double take. The Lockheed prototype dangled directly over his head.







He stepped around it to get a better look. This close, he saw it was very different from the plane he had crashed yesterday. This one had a mirror polish on its steel skin; the engines were larger and smoothly melded into the frame; the bubble canopy was a recessed cycloptic eye. The plane looked slick and seamless, a far cry from the half-finished, temperamental craft that he had flown out of Pasadena.

"So where the hell did this one come from?" he muttered to himself. No time to figure it out. Paladin was beginning to attract curious looks from the guards and mechanics here.

He glanced to the prototype, to the three guards starting toward him, then took a gamble—maybe his only way to make a not-so-graceful exit.

Paladin steeled his nerve and took a deep breath. "Hey!" he yelled across the hangar to the guards. "We got a problem."

For once, his bad luck was a blessing. Alarm bells jangled throughout the hangar. The guards broke into a run, reaching for their pistols. The mechanics followed, brandishing wrenches, crowbars, and other makeshift weapons.

"Quick," Paladin said. "They need help on the bridge. Hurry!"

The men pushed their way through the double doors. No one looked twice at Paladin.

He spied a wrench on the floor, grabbed it, and jammed it through the door handles. That bought him maybe another fifteen seconds. He rolled a wheeled ladder under the flying wing.

A man in the control room banged on the window. He waved his arms to get Paladin's attention. When Paladin ignored him, the man got on the radio.

*No turning back now,* Paladin thought. *Everybody on this zep is gonna know I'm here.*

Paladin scrambled up the ladder and climbed into the prototype's cockpit. This definitely wasn't the same plane he'd flown. The seat was soft padded leather, almost obscenely comfortable in comparison to the spartan interior of "his" prototype. The instrument panel was burnished brass and teak with a Rolls-Royce precision floating horizon, a Swiss Gersbeck altim-



eter, and a Rothschild Blackhawk RPM gauge/speedometer. There were also a few dials and switches that Paladin didn't recognize.

He found the manual docking release and pulled. There was a click and the plane slowly began to roll forward on its track, toward the hole in the zeppelin's belly.

The prototype jerked to a halt. Paladin cracked his head on the instrument panel. The flying wing swung back and forth.

The guy in the control room had his hand on a lever and a smug look on his face.

Paladin could have killed that creep—if he had had the spare time. He squinted and found the cause of his problems: a spring-loaded clamp three feet from the rail's end. There was no way the flying wing could roll off. No way for him to escape.

He heard banging and voices. Paladin turned and saw the double doors jostle and the jammed wrench begin to shake loose.

He drew the nickel-plated .38 pistol he had swiped from the steamer trunk...then recalled he had more firepower. He pulled out the grenade he had found with the gun.

But one grenade wouldn't stop the army on the other side of those doors, unless—Paladin turned and examined the rail—he found a better use for the thing.

He set down his gun and pocketed the grenade. He clambered out of the cockpit and balanced on the teetering wing.

Paladin grasped the rail overhead. His wounded shoulder blossomed with fire and something inside tore. He gritted his teeth, and pulled himself, hand over hand, to the locking clamp. Hanging by his right arm, he retrieved the grenade, pulled the pin with his teeth, then jammed it into the clamp.

He swung himself once, twice, dropped back onto the wing, and rolled into the cockpit—covering his head and bracing for the blast.

It sounded like a cannon going off in his ears. Shrapnel zinged off the canopy and the steel



skin of the flying wing. He shook his head to clear his ringing ears and risked a glance at the damage. The spring-loaded clamp and rail had blown clean off.

Paladin's streak of bad luck still held, however. The clamp was gone, but the track had twisted into a slight upturn. The plane wouldn't roll off...not unless someone got out and gave it one heck of a push.

The double doors burst open. The three guards he had sent on a wild goose chase rushed in with their sidearms drawn. They weren't alone, either—the poker players in the bunkroom were on their heels, as were a half dozen gunners from the galley. Even the pale man was there, monocle gleaming and a Thompson submachine gun in hand.

And they were all looking for him.

Paladin crouched lower in the cockpit. His dogfighting instincts made him want to reach for the yoke and pull it back—dodge, try an Immelman, and somehow shake these jokers off his six. But this was no dogfight.

Paladin glanced at the pistol in his hand, and briefly considered a frontal assault. Maybe the element of surprise would buy him enough time to get clear, get out of the hangar, maybe find a parachute—

That would be crazy.

His eyes fell to the rubberized grip and trigger on the yoke, the glimmerings of a plan forming.

No. Crazy was trying to hold off an army with a peashooter, especially when you were sitting on two .30-caliber cannons. He could use the plane's guns. But he'd have to turn the thing around first.

He pressed the port and starboard starters. The engines turned over and roared to life, growling like metallic tigers. Paladin inched the port throttle forward. The differential in power to the engines started to spin the flying wing on the universal joint, rotating it to face the guards.

They raised their weapons; Paladin saw the blur of whirling props reflected in their wide eyes.

One of them fired. A bullet pinged off a propeller blade.

Paladin squeezed the trigger. The plane's nose was pointed too high for him to hit anyone, but that didn't stop him from unloading a few hundred rounds over their heads.

The men scattered like rats, hitting the deck and crawling for cover.

It wasn't the smartest thing he'd ever done. As the plane turned, Paladin spotted barrels of aviation fuel and racks of high-explosive rockets. If he kept shooting, they'd all go out in a blaze of glory.

The pale man set down his Tommy gun and stood. He held up his white-gloved hands and shouted at Paladin.

A truce? Paladin couldn't hear what he was trying to say over the drone of his engines. He eased the port throttle back a bit to kill his spin. The flying wing rolled to a low spot on the track as the engines slowed.

In his peripheral vision he saw some of the guards flanking him.

"Want to play hardball, huh?" he said. "Well, I can play that game, too."

He gripped the trigger and readied himself. The slight rocking of the flying wing was going to make this a tricky shot.

Paladin froze. The plane was rocking like someone had given it a good push...and wasn't that exactly what he had said he needed? A good push to get out of this jam?

He revved the starboard engine, turning the plane back to its original facing.

He narrowed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The twin .30-caliber machine guns stitched the deck, sent a flurry of sparks flying, and riddled aviation fuel barrels with holes. Amber liquid gushed and ignited into a river of fire.

The pale man dove into the hallway.

Paladin let the flying wing turn until its nose pointed toward the open bay doors in the zeppelin's undercarriage.

He pushed both throttles full open. The plane accelerated, gained momentum, up the track,



then off the twisted, upturned end with a wrenching squeal.

An explosion surrounded the cockpit with flame and smoke and thunder—and the flying wing plunged through the launch bay door, hurtling toward the earth.



# Chapter Six

## The Big Fall

**C**yc wind tore through the open cockpit as the flying wing dropped from the belly of the zeppelin. Veils of smoke and steam parted before the windshield.

Paladin had misjudged how high the zep was. There were only a few hundred feet between him and the desert floor.

He instinctively pulled back on the yoke—then quickly stopped himself. That was wrong. Instead, he pushed the yoke forward and nosed the flying wing into a dive.

The problem was air speed...or rather, a lack of it.

This was a mistake almost everyone made on their first freefall launch. A pilot's training taught him to want to pull up to gain altitude, but no plane could fly without the speed to produce sufficient lift.

Sure, his engines were at full throttle, the RPM gauge was pegged, but technically the plane was still starting from a dead stop.

Paladin gripped the yoke with his sweaty hands. His gaze flicked to the altimeter as it rapidly ticked off the distance to the ground. Needles of wind blurred his vision as he spared a quick glance at the air speed gauge. Almost.

Below him were sandy waves, washed against outcroppings of red rock. He could see dots of sage and creosote, and spiny yucca drawing so close that Paladin could see their columns of



white flowers blooming. He was running out of room.

The plane's airspeed was a hair under what he needed. It had to be enough.

He pulled back on the control stick with all his strength, ignoring his instincts which screamed that no plane, no matter *how* advanced, could pull out of a full dive at this speed.

The airframe creaked and pinged from the increasing stress. Paladin was crushed into the padded seat and blood drained from his head and hands. His peripheral vision swirled and dimmed as his body fought to compensate for the tremendous punishment being inflicted upon it.

He pulled back harder, bracing with shuddering legs. There was only a pinpoint in the center of his vision now; the only thing visible was the ground rushing to meet him. The thunder of the engines dopplered into a faint drone. The pulse in his neck strained and struggled to pump blood. He felt like he was drowning.

Paladin waited for the end. It would, at least, be quick—slamming face-first at a hundred miles per hour into the earth...

...only the end was taking its sweet time getting to him.

Paladin's pinpoint of vision swelled open; half of it was sand and sage, half of it was turquoise sky.

He shook his head, trying to recover from the near blackout. His hands had gone limp and rested gently on the controls.

There was a scrape and clatter along the undercarriage and a grinding buzz through the blades of the props.

With a start, he realized that the altimeter read a hair above zero. Paladin peered outside. The plane skimmed five feet above the ground—cruising at two hundred miles per hour. Propwash kicked up a cloud of dust and sand as the prototype rocketed by, clearcutting sagebrush and yucca as he flew past.

He eased the yoke back with a light, precise touch, then quickly nudged the controls to evade



a rock that otherwise would have bisected the flying wing.

Paladin pulled back and climbed fifty feet. He exhaled, realizing that he'd been holding his breath.

"Thanks," he said, smoothing his hand along the brushed brass and teak instrument panel. "I owe you one."

Paladin, though, wasn't quite ready to throw a victory party. He looked over his shoulder. The zeppelin billowed black smoke, and fire puffed from her launch bay. She was still in one piece, more or less. Too bad. She had to be filled with helium, not hydrogen. Otherwise she would have gone up like gasoline-doused tissue paper.

Aircraft buzzed around the wounded zep like flies. For an instant, Paladin wasn't so sure that he'd damaged the zep's launch bay.

"Nuts," he muttered.

He'd forgotten about the squadron of Grumman Avengers that had been parked on the airstrip—the same Avengers that had shot him down once already.

They, however, had not forgotten him. They dove.

The usual tactics didn't apply here. Normally whoever had the higher altitude in a dogfight had the advantage. But these Avengers had to dive low just to catch up to the flying wing. If Paladin tried to climb they'd be all over him. So whatever was going to happen it was going to be low. Belly-grinding low.

"Come and get me, you bastards."

The Avengers couldn't line up for a shot unless they were diving straight toward him. He pushed the yoke forward, hugged the sandy hills and raced past rocks and trees—not giving them a static target. If they wanted a shot at him they'd have to come down and play in the dirt, where the agile flying wing might have an advantage over the more cumbersome Avengers.

Paladin glanced backwards. Four planes were falling fast after him. Two more were staying





high, presumably acting as spotters and radioing his position back to their friends.

A stream of magnesium bullets blazed over his head and a smoky trail of a rocket appeared, detonating against a rocky outcropping just a few feet from his nose.

They wanted him all right. Bad enough to risk their necks getting as close to the ground as he was. Good.

He looked back. A pair of the Avengers slowly dropped behind him; they almost had him lined up in their sights.

"A little closer," he whispered. "Come on...just a little more."

Paladin firewalled the throttle, and pulled back on the yoke, accelerating and rising ten feet before the Avenger on his six could blast him to confetti.

He rolled the plane upside-down and killed his throttle.

The Avengers roared *under* him, a blur of props and metal; he caught a glimpse of Lady Kali and the flaming tattoos on her arms—so close he could almost reach out and touch them.

Paladin continued the roll and righted the flying wing, dropping neatly behind his would-be pursuers.

His finger tightened on the trigger, spraying gunfire at the nearest Avenger.

The Avenger on his port tried to bank. Its wingtip grazed the sand, sending the plane into a deadly cartwheel. The Avenger disintegrated into flame and smoke. Shrapnel clattered off his canopy.

Paladin blasted through the debris and kept firing. Bullets peppered the tail of the remaining Avenger.

Lady Kali pulled up, climbed a hundred feet, and kept going. She and the other Avengers banked and headed back toward the zep.

Paladin pulled back on the yoke. He'd finish what they started.

No. There were too many Avengers waiting up there...and he'd already pushed his luck past the breaking point.



He eased the flying wing to the safe altitude of thirty feet and headed northwest.

"You're going home, little friend," Paladin told the plane. Lockheed's secret airfield was no more than fifty miles along his current heading.

He glanced once more over his shoulder. The zep still trailed smoke, though the oily black clouds had softened into pale white wisps. She was gaining altitude, heading north. Maybe he hadn't crippled her after all. He'd bet those machine guns he'd seen on the observation deck were still working, too. Paladin was glad he was putting distance between him and that monster.

*This isn't over*, Paladin thought. Not by a long shot. He'd find some way to even the score.

He banked the flying wing around a rocky hill, reveling in the craft's responsiveness and agility. Maneuvering the plane was like sliding across silk. Paladin heard the starboard engine throttle back and the port rev faster as he turned. When he leveled out, the engines returned to their normal synchronized purr. He marveled at the engineering.

Paladin poured on the speed, blasting over desert dunes and gravel rivers that fanned into alluvial patterns on a dried lake. This was the perfect location for a flight research facility. Just one big flat surface—all runway.

Upon the horizon, wavering in the rising heat, he spotted the rippling outline of a control tower.

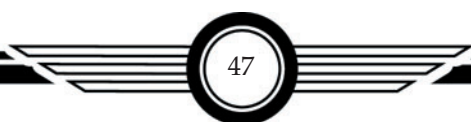
This had to be the place, but Paladin didn't know which radio frequency to use. "Won't they be surprised to see me?"

He deployed the landing gear and circled once. There were a dozen aircraft lined up in neat rows, and three hangars...as well as .50-caliber machine gun nests next to them. Looked like they took their privacy seriously around here. Maybe "surprising" them wasn't such a good thing.

Paladin glided down the runway, touched down, and coasted to a stop next to the first hangar.

A dozen men ran out from the control tower: mechanics, gentlemen in dark suits, and even the Hollywood police in their pressed blue uniforms.

Paladin climbed out of the cockpit and slid off the wing. "Hello, boys." He waved at them.





"No need to roll out the red carpet. Just doing my job."

The men exchanged confused looks, then one of the cops reached for Paladin's hand.

Paladin mirrored the gesture, thinking they'd shake.

Handcuffs snapped around his wrist.

"Mr. Blake," the officer said. "You're under arrest."



"We checked out your story, Mr. Blake."

The young Lockheed official sat on the edge of the table and leaned closer to Paladin. He was near enough for Paladin to get an eyeful of the large dimple in his prominent chin. The reek of expensive cologne was overpowering.

"And your story doesn't check out."

Paladin sat with his hands still cuffed and resting on the tabletop. He would have punched this joker's lights out if he thought he could get away with it. But he couldn't. They had locked him in a room with Mr. Expensive Cologne and an older gentleman, neither identifying themselves, but both radiating authority. For the last two hours Mr. Cologne had asked the same questions about what had happened, and Paladin had told him the same story.

The older man wore a tweed suit with leather elbow patches. He nodded as Paladin explained about the pale man and the second prototype, but otherwise kept quiet and watched the show.

This room was on the second floor of the control tower. There was one window covered by thick curtains. The cinder block walls dampened the sound so much that Paladin thought his ears would bleed from the silence between their questions and his answers.

As far as he knew, they could be the only people still at this facility. He hadn't heard or seen anyone since the Hollywood police escorted him inside

"What do you mean my story doesn't check out?" Paladin demanded. "There was an air



base. And there had to be something left of that Avenger that crashed between here and there.”

“No.” Mr. Cologne got up, grabbed a pitcher of water and poured himself a tall glass. He drank it without offering Paladin a drop. “You want to know what I think, though?”

How could a search team have missed that Avenger? Sure the desert was a big place, but from the air, the smoldering wreckage should be obvious. Even to a clown like Mr. Cologne.

“I don’t care what you think,” Paladin replied.

“I think,” Mr. Cologne continued as if he hadn’t heard Paladin, “that you flew our plane to Hughes’ Burbank airfield. They took photographs and had their people go over our new engines, then you concocted this fantastic cover story and flew the plane here. How much did they pay you, Mr. Blake?”

“You think I faked this hole in my shoulder?” Paladin’s face flushed. He rose of his chair. “Or the sand in the cockpit? You think I faked the shrapnel scars across the plane’s wings?”

“Yes, Mr. Blake, I think you would endure almost anything for the right amount of money.” Mr. Cologne raised his eyebrows in obvious disgust. “We have a complete file on you.”

Paladin wondered how much they really knew. If they had all the dirt on him, why did Justin hire him?

“What about the second prototype? Peter Justin sent me out in one plane and I came back in another. How do you explain that?”

“Mr. Justin is presently on his way here to verify that the plane you brought is indeed not the one you were given,” the older man said. “We will pick up that line of investigation when he arrives.”

Paladin eased back into his seat. At least Justin could back up part of his story.

He was about to tell them how much better the pale man’s prototype flew, but decided to keep his mouth shut. So far, telling the entire truth had gotten him nowhere fast.

And where exactly was this question-and-answer party going? Lockheed was a big corpo-



ration. They apparently had the Hollywood police in their pocket, too—at least the cops that weren't in the pocket of Hughes Aviation—since they were here and looking the other way while Mr. Cologne conducted his interrogation.

There had been no mention about criminal charges and due process appeared to be right out the window. If things didn't go right, Paladin might just disappear. If the desert was big enough to hide a busted-up Avenger, how hard would it be to hide one inconvenient pilot?

The older man cleared his throat. "Please," he said to his companion, "give Mr. Blake a glass of water."

Mr. Cologne sighed, shook his head, but nonetheless poured a glass and set it down on the table.

Paladin grabbed it with both hands and quaffed it down.

"Do you smoke?" the older gentleman inquired.

Paladin's eyes fell to the items they had removed from his pockets and scattered on the table. There were the items he had "liberated" from the zeppelin: a brass key, a signet ring with a jade stone, and a pack of cigarettes he swiped from the pale man's parlor. Paladin licked his lips. It had been years since he'd had a smoke, but this might be as good a time as any to start again.

"Yeah," he whispered. "A smoke would be great."

Mr. Cologne tore the cellophane off the cigarettes. He tapped one out, handed it to Paladin, then flipped his lighter open.

The cigarette was wrapped in black paper—one of those expensive European jobs that had been impossible to get in North America since the market had crashed.

Paladin brought the cigarette close to the flame. He stared at it as it smoldered, and his mind raced as he struggled to come to grips with recent events.

Something sparked, a brief flicker of intuition. He rapidly pieced together the clues: the battle zeppelin, the unmarked Avengers, the pale man, and these cigarettes...

There were a few blank spots to fill in, but the entire two-day ordeal now made sense in a



twisted sort of way.

Paladin looked up. "Give me twenty-four hours and two phone calls," he said, "and I guarantee I can answer all your questions."

