



Echoes of the Past

by Deb Walsh

The call had come in last night: Meet me at the Cafe Madeleine for lunch. Paul Blaisdell had taken the call in his study, careful not to let Annie hear. He hadn't wanted to hear, either.

Now he sat at a table for two in the posh restaurant, a hand-printed menu in his hands, waiting for Vince Crawford to show up. It was already noon, and this wasn't one of those days when he had time for a leisurely lunch.

Years of training allowed him to submerge the impatience that screamed through him. To the waiter who set down his glass of water, he appeared calm, unhurried, he knew. But inside ... inside he was furious.

At ten past, Vince finally came through the door, looking improbably young and virile for his age; he was two years Blaisdell's senior, but he had the tanned, taut skin of a man much younger. His impeccably-cut suit betrayed no hint of middle-age spread, no paunch to declare the years that hung so lightly on his tall, tight frame. He waved from the door, an easy smile gracing his lips, but Blaisdell could see that the smile failed to reach those surprisingly brilliant blue eyes. Blaisdell was surprised to discover just how much he didn't like this man, with whom he'd worked, off and on, for years.

"Good to see you, Paul," Crawford offered his hand in greeting. "You're looking well — fully recovered?" he asked as he seated himself across from the police captain.

Paul Blaisdell nodded tersely in reply, glancing at the menu in his hands. His whole body telegraphed tension, a tension he knew this man would be able to read.

"Relax, Paul," admonished his luncheon companion. "I'm not in town to con you into another mission. Not this time, anyway."

Blaisdell smiled tightly, a bitter chuckle escaping his lips. "Then what is it?" he demanded. "You never invite me to lunch without a full agenda."

"I like the company," Crawford answered easily. "I always have. Our business doesn't allow for much socializing, though, does it?" He snapped the linen napkin out and laid it daintily in his lap as he spoke. His movements spoke of a fluid confidence, a man sure of his place in the world, and his mastery over it.

"Our business," Blaisdell repeated with a snort. "I walked away from that business almost 20 years ago, Vince. But you guys keep yanking me back."

"You're too good an operative to waste on inner city crime, Paul. You're one of the best, and you know it. The Agency took a big hit when you left."

Laying his menu down on the table with exaggerated care, Blaisdell turned to face Vince Crawford. "Look, Vince, you're not telling me anything new. Including why you called this meet. I've got a full calendar this afternoon, including a meeting with the Mayor at 1:15. Why don't you just cut to the chase so I can get on with my life, all right?"

Vince smiled enigmatically, glanced down at his menu, and tossed it aside. "Let's order first, shall we?"

Fuming, Blaisdell nodded, signalling for the waiter to come over. He and Crawford placed their orders; he wasn't surprised that Crawford's order included a rather large drink. He contented himself with a soda water, for once remembering Annie's warnings about cholesterol. The way his blood pressure felt right now, any advantage was welcome.

When the salad course was at last served, Crawford spoke again. "I've been hearing good reports on that son of yours — Peter, isn't it? Caine. Don't know why you never adopted the boy."

"Peter didn't want to give up his father's name, and I don't blame him. And we learned that his natural father's alive, Vince. He showed up a little over a year ago."



"Yes. I'd heard about him, too — in fact, I've been hearing rumors about him for years. Funny you never did, too."

Blaisdell set down his fork carefully, turning toward Crawford. "You knew Caine was alive? You knew my son's father was alive and you never told me?" he ground out icily.

Crawford shrugged, the elegant drape of his suitcoat barely shifting with the movement. "Figured you knew. Look, Paul, they were only rumors. Who credits rumors about some kung fu superhero, huh?"

"You don't know the half of it," Blaisdell commented with a faint smile, picking up his fork again.

"Is his son as good as he is?" Crawford asked conversationally.

"As good in what way?" Paul replied suspiciously.

"The kung fu stuff. Oh, I've heard he's good in a fight, good in a tight spot — he really pulled off that cocaine operation last year. The DEA boys were impressed despite themselves. And the Li Sung job? That was good work. The pair of them got us in where no one else had succeeded before. Took a lot of artillery off the streets when Li Sung went down. And," he added, spearing a lettuce leaf with his fork, "I hear he's done rather well on some other covert operations — hooked up with Steadman and Rykker. Taking down those mercenaries. Rescuing the Dalai Lama? The boy's got the knack, Paul. Must be the way you raised him."

Blaisdell placed his fork next to his plate again and leaned back in his chair, every muscle in his body taut and ready to break. His hands gripped the edge of the table, knotting the linen tablecloth. "No."

"You know we're always on the lookout for fresh talent, Paul," Vince continued as though Blaisdell hadn't spoken. "Some find us. Some we find on our own. Recruit them. From all I hear, he's a natural."

"I said, no."

"He's over the age of consent, Paul. He can make his own decisions"

"Not on this. He's a cop, Vince, a good cop. He makes a difference. He's not an operative. He doesn't have what it takes."

"Is that a pro talking, or a father?"

"Both. He's straight, he's not ... twisted, Vince. He's way too honest to make it with the Agency. They'll eat him alive."

"Like they did you?" Vince challenged with a smile. "As I recall, you were young and enthusiastic once, Paul. Hell, we all were. It's a job that needs doing. We're not getting any younger, Paul - we need to bring new blood into the Agency. We need people like Peter."

Blaisdell sighed heavily. "No."

"I don't need your permission to talk to him, Paul. I wanted to discuss it with you as a courtesy —"

"No, Vince. I still have influence, you know. I can kill it if you push it. He doesn't meet the profile. He doesn't have the killer instinct." Blaisdell's gaze became distant as he added in a near-whisper, "He's too alive, too caring, to be like us."

Crawford's expression grew serious as he watched Blaisdell's face harden with bitterness. "You really hate it, don't you?"

"I hate what it's done to me, to my family," Blaisdell agreed, licking his lips. "I won't watch it destroy my son, too."

"Is that what it's done? Destroyed you?"

Blaisdell turned slowly toward Crawford, his craggy face looking older, ashen. "It would have. Would you sacrifice your own son to the same fate?"

Crawford held Blaisdell's gaze for a moment, his own eyes widening at what he saw in those haunted eyes. At last, he looked away, his face reddening.



"I didn't think so. Maybe there's still some hope left for you, after all, Vince," Paul said, turning back to his salad.

"The world's changing, Paul. The rules of the game aren't what you and I knew in the old days," Vince told him defensively.

"Only the masters have changed, Vince. The stakes are higher, maybe. But the game hasn't changed."

"Maybe," Crawford conceded in a low voice.

"No one wins. Certainly not the players. And the game keeps going. I don't want to see Peter reach our age and have to look back on what I can see."

"That's always been your problem, Paul — you never let it go."

Blaisdell paused, his fork midway between the plate and his mouth. He shook his head, eyebrow arched toward Crawford meaningfully. "It's never let me go." He brought the fork to his mouth and shoved its contents into his mouth, chewing deliberately.

"Score one for you," Crawford allowed. "All right, I'll back off on Peter. But I'm going to keep my eye on him. You could be right about him. But if you're not ..."

"I'm right. You wouldn't know how to handle him. Hell, there are days when I don't, and I've known him since he was 15. There's something inside him, something ..." Blaisdell shook his head. "No, I'm right."

"Okay," Crawford capitulated, although his voice promised only a temporary retrenchment.

Vince Crawford picked up the tab, as usual, and was tossing his napkin onto the table when Paul Blaisdell looked up toward the door. Peter stood there, speaking with the maitre 'd. Then he glanced in Paul's direction, and a grin lit his face as he waved. Paul looked over to Crawford and said, "My ride's here. Take care of yourself, Vince." He extended his hand to the other man, who glanced at it for a heartbeat before taking it firmly.

"You, too, Paul. Say hello to Annie for me. And Kermit — I hear he's working with you now."

"Our resident computer wizard. I think he's finally found his niche."

"That makes me nervous, Paul. Kermit's one in a million."

Blaisdell smiled at that, and got up to go. He met Peter at the door, clapping his foster son on the shoulder.

"Frank told me you were here — figured you might want a ride to the Mayor's," Peter informed him.

Glancing back to the table where Vince Crawford still sat, staring absently at the floral arrangement in the middle of the table, Peter added curiously, "Who's that? Old friend?"

"No one you need to know," Paul replied. "Let's go."