

LEE CHILD

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THE ENEMY

A NOVEL



A JACK REACHER NOVEL

THE
ENEMY

LEE CHILD

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THE ENEMY

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Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Dedication

Other Books by This Author

About the Author

Excerpt from The Midnight Line

one

As serious as a heart attack. Maybe those were Ken Kramer's last words, like a final explosion of panic in his mind as he stopped breathing and dropped into the abyss. He was out of line, in every way there was, and he knew it. He was where he shouldn't have been, with someone he shouldn't have been with, carrying something he should have kept in a safer place. But he was getting away with it. He was playing and winning. He was on top of his game. He was probably smiling. Until the sudden thump deep inside his chest betrayed him. Then everything turned around. Success became instant catastrophe. He had no time to put anything right.

Nobody knows what a fatal heart attack feels like. There are no survivors to tell us. Medics talk about necrosis, and clots, and oxygen starvation, and occluded blood vessels. They predict rapid useless cardiac fluttering, or else nothing at all. They use words like *infarction* and *fibrillation*, but those terms mean nothing to us. *You just drop dead* is what they should say. Ken Kramer certainly did. He just dropped dead, and he took his secrets with him, and the trouble he left behind nearly killed me too.

I was alone in a borrowed office. There was a clock on the wall. It had no second hand. Just an hour hand, and a minute hand. It was electric. It didn't tick. It was completely silent, like the room. I was watching the minute hand, intently. It wasn't moving.

I waited.

It moved. It jumped ahead six degrees. Its motion was mechanical and damped and precise. It bounced once and quivered a little and came to rest.

A minute.

One down, one to go.

Sixty more seconds.

I kept on watching. The clock stayed still for a long, long time. Then the hand jumped again. Another six degrees, another minute, straight-up midnight, and 1989 was 1990.

I pushed my chair back and stood up behind the desk. The phone rang. I figured it was someone calling to wish me a happy new year. But it wasn't. It was a civilian cop calling because he had a dead soldier in a motel thirty miles off-post.

"I need the Military Police duty officer," he said.

I sat down again, behind the desk.

"You got him," I said.

"We've got one of yours, dead."

"One of mine?"

"A soldier," he said.

"Where?"

"Motel, in town."

"Dead how?" I asked.

"Heart attack, most likely," the guy said.

I paused. Turned the page on the army-issue calendar on the desk, from December 31st to January 1st.

"Nothing suspicious?" I said.

"Don't see anything."

"You seen heart attacks before?"

"Lots of them."

"OK," I said. "Call post headquarters."

I gave him the number.

"Happy New Year," I said.

"You don't need to come out?" he said.

"No," I said. I put the phone down. I didn't need to go out. The army is a big institution, a little bigger than Detroit, a little smaller than Dallas, and just as unsentimental as either place. Current active strength is 930,000 men and women, and they are as representative of the general American population as you can get. Death rate in America is around 865 people per 100,000 population per year, and in the absence of sustained combat soldiers don't die any faster or slower than regular people. On the whole they are younger and fitter than the population at large, but they smoke more and drink more and eat worse and stress harder and do all kinds of dangerous things in training. So their life expectancy comes out about average. Soldiers die at the same speed as everyone else. Do the math with the death rate versus current strength, and you have twenty-two dead soldiers every single day of every single year, accidents, suicides, heart disease, cancer, stroke, lung disease, liver failure, kidney failure. Like dead citizens in Detroit, or Dallas. So I didn't need to go out. I'm a cop, not a mortician.

The clock moved. The hand jumped and bounced and settled. Three minutes past midnight. The phone rang again. It was someone calling to wish me a happy new year. It was the sergeant in the office outside of mine.

“Happy New Year,” she said to me.

“You too,” I said. “You couldn’t stand up and put your head in the door?”

“You couldn’t put yours *out* the door?”

“I was on the phone.”

“Who was it?”

“Nobody,” I said. “Just some grunt didn’t make it to the new decade.”

“You want coffee?”

“Sure,” I said. “Why not?”

I put the phone down again. At that point I had been in more than six years, and army coffee was one of the things that made me happy to stay in. It was the best in the world, no question. So were the sergeants. This one was a mountain woman from north Georgia. I had known her two days. She lived off-post in a trailer park somewhere in the North Carolina Badlands. She had a baby son. She had told me all about him. I had heard nothing about a husband. She was all bone and sinew and she was as hard as woodpecker lips, but she liked me. I could tell, because she brought me coffee. They don’t like you, they don’t bring you coffee. They knife you in the back instead. My door opened and she came in, carrying two mugs, one for her and one for me.

“Happy New Year,” I said to her.

She put the coffee down on my desk, both mugs.

“Will it be?” she said.

“Don’t see why not,” I said.

“The Berlin Wall is halfway down. They showed it on the television. They were having a big party over there.”

“I’m glad someone was, somewhere.”

“Lots of people. Big crowds. All singing and dancing.”

“I didn’t see the news.”

“This all was six hours ago. The time difference.”

“They’re probably still at it.”

“They had sledgehammers.”

“They’re allowed. Their half is a free city. We spent forty-five years keeping it that way.”

“Pretty soon we won’t have an enemy anymore.”

I tried the coffee. Hot, black, the best in the world.

“We won,” I said. “Isn’t that supposed to be a good thing?”

“Not if you depend on Uncle Sam’s paycheck.”

She was dressed like me in standard woodland camouflage battledress uniform. Her sleeves were neatly rolled. Her MP brassard was exactly horizontal. I figured she had it safety-pinned in back where nobody could see. Her boots were gleaming.

“You got any desert camos?” I asked her.

“Never been to the desert,” she said.

“They changed the pattern. They put big brown splotches on it. Five years’ research. Infantry guys are calling it chocolate chip. It’s not a good pattern. They’ll have to change it back. But it’ll take them another five years to figure that out.”

“So?”

“If it takes them five years to revise a camo pattern, your kid will be through college before they figure out force reduction. So don’t worry about it.”

“OK,” she said, not believing me. “You think he’s good for college?”

“I never met him.”

She said nothing.

“The army hates change,” I said. “And we’ll always have enemies.”

She said nothing. My phone rang again. She leaned forward and answered it for me. Listened for about eleven seconds and handed me the receiver.

“Colonel Garber, sir,” she said. “He’s in D.C.”

She took her mug and left the room. Colonel Garber was ultimately my boss, and although he was a pleasant human being it was unlikely he was calling eight minutes into New Year’s Day simply to be social. That wasn’t his style. Some brass does that stuff. They come over all cheery on the big holidays, like they’re really just one of the boys. But Leon Garber wouldn’t have dreamed of trying that, with anyone, and least of all with me. Even if he had known I was going to be there.

“Reacher here,” I said.

There was a long pause.

“I thought you were in Panama,” Leon Garber said.

“I got orders,” I said.

“From Panama to Fort Bird? Why?”

“Not my place to ask.”

“When was this?”

“Two days ago.”

“That’s a kick in the teeth,” he said. “Isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Panama was probably more exciting.”

"It was OK," I said.

"And they got you working duty officer on New Year's Eve already?"

"I volunteered," I said. "I'm trying to make people like me."

"That's a hopeless task," he said.

"A sergeant just brought me coffee."

There was another pause. "Someone just call you about a dead soldier in a motel?" he asked.

"Eight minutes ago," I said. "I shuffled it off to headquarters."

"And they shuffled it off to someone else and I just got pulled out of a party to hear all about it."

"Why?"

"Because the dead soldier in question is a two-star general."

The phone went quiet.

"I didn't think to ask," I said.

The phone stayed quiet.

"Generals are mortal," I said. "Same as anyone else."

No reply.

"There was nothing suspicious," I said. "He croaked, is all. Heart attack. Probably had gout. I didn't see a reason to get excited."

"It's a question of dignity," Garber said. "We can't leave a two-star lying around belly-up in public without reacting. We need a presence."

"And that would be me?"

"I'd prefer someone else. But you're probably the highest-ranking sober MP in the world tonight. So yes, it would be you."

"It'll take me an hour to get there."

"He's not going anywhere. He's dead. And they haven't found a sober medical examiner yet."

"OK," I said.

"Be respectful," Garber said.

"OK," I said again.

"And be polite. Off-post, we're in their hands. It's a civilian jurisdiction."

"I'm familiar with civilians. I met one, once."

"But control the situation," he said. "You know, if it needs controlling."

"He probably died in bed," I said. "Like people do."

"Call me," he said. "If you need to."

"Was it a good party?"

"Excellent. My daughter is visiting."

He clicked off and I called the civilian dispatcher back and got the name and the address of the motel. Then I left my coffee on my desk and told my sergeant what was up and headed back to my quarters to change. I figured a *presence* required Class A greens, not woodland-pattern BDUs.

I took a Humvee from the MP motor pool and was logged out through the main gate. I found the motel inside fifty minutes. It was thirty miles due north of Fort Bird through dark undistinguished North Carolina countryside that was equal parts strip malls and scrubby forest and what I figured were dormant sweet potato fields. It was all new to me. I had never served there before. The roads were very quiet. Everyone was still inside, partying. I hoped I would be back at Bird before they all came out and started driving home. Although I really liked the Humvee's chances, head-on against a civilian ride.

The motel was part of a knot of low commercial structures clustered in the darkness near a big highway interchange. There was a truck stop as a centerpiece. It had a greasy spoon that was open on the holidays and a gas station big enough to take eighteen-wheelers. There was a no-name cinder-block lounge bar with lots of neon and no windows. It had an *Exotic Dancers* sign lit up in pink and a parking lot the size of a football field. There were diesel spills and rainbow puddles all over it. I could hear loud music coming out of the bar. There were cars parked three-deep all around it. The whole area was glowing sulfurous yellow from the streetlights. The night air was cold and full of fog. The motel itself was directly across the street from the gas station. It was a run-down swaybacked affair about twenty rooms long. It had a lot of peeling paint. It looked empty. There was an office at the left-hand end with a token vehicle porch and a buzzing Coke machine.

First question: Why would a two-star general use a place like this? I was pretty sure there wouldn't have been a DoD inquiry if he had checked into a Holiday Inn.

There were two town police cruisers parked at careless angles outside the motel's last-but-one room. There was a small plain sedan sandwiched between them. It was cold and misted over. It was a base-model Ford, red, four cylinder. It had skinny tires and plastic hubcaps. A rental, for sure. I put the Humvee next to the right-hand police cruiser and slid out into the chill. I heard the music from across the street, louder. The last-but-one room's lights were off and its door was open. I figured the cops were trying to keep the interior temperature low. Trying to stop the old guy from getting too ripe. I was anxious to take a look at him. I was pretty sure I had never seen a dead general before.

Three cops stayed in their cars and one got out to meet me. He was wearing tan uniform pants and a short leather jacket zipped to his chin. No hat. The jacket had badges pinned to it that told me his name was Stockton and his rank was deputy chief. He was gray, about fifty. He was medium height and a little soft and heavy but the way he was reading the badges on my coat told me he was probably a veteran, like a lot of cops are.

“Major,” he said, as a greeting.

I nodded. A veteran, for sure. A major gets a little gold-colored oak leaf on the epaulette, one inch across, one on each side. This guy was looking upward and sideways at mine, which wasn’t the clearest angle of view. But he knew what they were. So he was familiar with rank designations. And I recognized his voice. He was the guy who had called me, at five seconds past midnight.

“I’m Rick Stockton,” he said. “Deputy Chief.”

He was calm. He had seen heart attacks before.

“I’m Jack Reacher. MP duty officer tonight.”

He recognized my voice in turn. Smiled.

“You decided to come out,” he said. “After all.”

“You didn’t tell me the DOA was a two-star.”

“Well, he is.”

“I’ve never seen a dead general,” I said.

“Not many people have,” he said, and the way he said it made me think he had been an enlisted man.

“Army?” I asked.

“Marine Corps,” he said. “First sergeant.”

“My old man was a Marine,” I said. I always make that point, talking to Marines. It gives me some kind of genetic legitimacy. Stops them from thinking of me as a pure army dogface. But I keep it vague. I don’t tell them my old man had made captain. Enlisted men and officers don’t automatically see eye to eye.

“Humvee,” Stockton said.

He was looking at my ride.

“You like it?” he asked.

I nodded. *Humvee* was everyone’s best attempt at saying HMMWV, which stands for *High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle*, which about says it all. Like the army generally, what you’re told is what you get.

“It works as advertised,” I said.

“Kind of wide,” he said. “I wouldn’t like to drive it in a city.”

“You’d have tanks in front of you,” I said. “They’d be clearing the way. I think that would be the basic plan.”

The music from the bar thudded on. Stockton said nothing.

“Let’s look at the dead guy,” I said to him.

He led the way inside. Flicked a switch that lit up the interior hallway. Then another that lit up the whole room. I saw a standard motel layout. A yard-wide lobby with a closet on the left and a bathroom on the right. Then a twelve-by-twenty rectangle with a built-in counter the same depth as the closet, and a queen bed the same depth as the bathroom. Low ceiling. A wide window at the far end, draped, with an integrated heater-cooler unit built through the wall underneath it. Most of the things in the room were tired and shabby and colored brown. The whole place looked dim and damp and miserable.

There was a dead man on the bed.

He was naked, facedown. He was white, maybe pushing sixty, quite tall. He was built like a fading pro athlete. Like a coach. He still had decent muscle, but he was growing love handles the way old guys do, however fit they are. He had pale hairless legs. He had old scars. He had wiry gray hair buzzed close to his scalp and cracked weathered skin on the back of his neck. He was a type. Any hundred people could have looked at him and all hundred would have said *army officer*, for sure.

“He was found like this?” I asked.

“Yes,” Stockton said.

Second question: How? A guy takes a room for the night, he expects privacy until the maid comes in the next morning, at the very least.

“How?” I said.

“How what?”

“How was he found? Did he call 911?”

“No.”

“So how?”

“You’ll see.”

I paused. I didn’t see anything yet.

“Did you roll him over?” I said.

“Yes. Then we rolled him back.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

“Be my guest.”

I stepped to the bed and slipped my left hand under the dead guy’s armpit and rolled him over. He was cold and a little stiff. Rigor was just setting in. I got him settled flat on his back and saw four things. First, his skin had a distinctive gray pallor. Second, shock and pain were

frozen on his face. Third, he had grabbed his left arm with his right hand, up near the bicep. And fourth, he was wearing a condom. His blood pressure had collapsed long ago and his erection had disappeared and the condom was hanging off, mostly empty, like a translucent flap of pale skin. He had died before reaching orgasm. That was clear.

“Heart attack,” Stockton said, behind me.

I nodded. The gray skin was a good indicator. So was the evidence of shock and surprise and sudden pain in his upper left arm.

“Massive,” I said.

“But before or after penetration?” Stockton said, with a smile in his voice.

I looked at the pillow area. The bed was still completely made. The dead guy was on top of the counterpane and the counterpane was still tight over the pillows. But there was a head-shaped dent, and there were rucks where elbows and heels had scrabbled and pushed lower down.

“She was underneath him when it happened,” I said. “That’s for sure. She had to wrestle her way out.”

“Hell of a way for a man to go.”

“I can think of worse ways.”

Stockton just smiled at me.

“What?” I said.

He didn’t answer.

“No sign of the woman?” I said.

“Hide nor hair,” he said. “She ran for it.”

“The desk guy see her?”

Stockton just smiled again.

I looked at him. Then I understood. *A low-rent dive near a highway interchange with a truck stop and a strip bar, thirty miles north of a military base.*

“She was a hooker,” I said. “That’s how he was found. The desk guy knew her. Saw her running out way too soon. Got curious as to why and came in here to check.”

Stockton nodded. “He called us right away. The lady in question was long gone by then, of course. And he’s denying she was ever here in the first place. He’s pretending this isn’t that kind of an establishment.”

“Your department had business here before?”

“Time to time,” he said. “It *is* that kind of an establishment, believe me.”

Control the situation, Garber had said.

“Heart attack, right?” I said. “Nothing more.”

“Probably,” Stockton said. “But we’ll need an autopsy to know for sure.”

The room was quiet. I could hear nothing except radio traffic from the cop cars outside, and music from the bar across the street. I turned back to the bed. Looked at the dead guy's face. I didn't know him. I looked at his hands. He had a West Point ring on his right and a wedding band on his left, wide, old, probably nine carat. His dog tags were hidden under his right arm, where he had reached across to grab his left bicep. I lifted the arm with difficulty and pulled the tags out. He had rubber silencers on them. I raised them until the chain went tight against his neck. His name was Kramer and he was a Catholic and his blood group was O.

"We could do the autopsy for you," I said. "Up at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center."

"Out of state?"

"He's a general."

"You want to hush it up."

I nodded. "Sure I do. Wouldn't you?"

"Probably," he said.

I let go of the dog tags and moved away from the bed and checked the nightstands and the built-in counter. Nothing there. There was no phone in the room. A place like this, I figured there would be a pay phone in the office. I moved past Stockton and checked the bathroom. There was a privately purchased black leather Dopp kit next to the sink, zipped closed. It had the initials *KRK* embossed on it. I opened it up and found a toothbrush and a razor and travel-sized tubes of toothpaste and shaving soap. Nothing else. No medications. No heart prescription. No pack of condoms.

I checked the closet. There was a Class A uniform in there, neatly squared away on three separate hangers, with the pants folded on the bar of the first and the coat next to it on the second and the shirt on a third. The tie was still inside the shirt collar. Centered above the hangers on the shelf was a field grade officer's service cap. Gold braid all over it. On one side of the cap was a folded white undershirt and on the other side was a pair of folded white boxers.

There were two shoes side by side on the closet floor next to a faded green canvas suit carrier which was propped neatly against the back wall. The shoes were gleaming black and had socks rolled tight inside them. The suit carrier was a privately purchased item and had battered leather reinforcements at the stress points. It wasn't very full.

"You'd get the results," I said. "Our pathologist would give you a copy of the report with nothing added and nothing deleted. You see anything you're not happy about, we could put the ball right back in your court, no questions asked."

Stockton said nothing, but I wasn't feeling any hostility coming off him. Some town cops are OK. A big base like Bird puts a lot of ripples into the surrounding civilian world. Therefore MPs spend a lot of time with their civilian counterparts, and sometimes it's a pain in the ass,

and sometimes it isn't. I had a feeling Stockton wasn't going to be a huge problem. He was relaxed. Bottom line, he seemed a little lazy to me, and lazy people are always happy to pass their burdens on to someone else.

"How much?" I said.

"How much what?"

"How much would a whore cost here?"

"Twenty bucks would do it," he said. "There's nothing very exotic available in this neck of the woods."

"And the room?"

"Fifteen, probably."

I rolled the corpse back onto its front. Wasn't easy. It weighed two hundred pounds, at least.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"About what?"

"About Walter Reed doing the autopsy."

There was silence for a moment. Stockton looked at the wall.

"That might be acceptable," he said.

There was a knock at the open door. One of the cops from the cars.

"Medical examiner just called in," he said. "He can't get here for another two hours at least. It's New Year's Eve."

I smiled. *Acceptable* was about to change to *highly desirable*. Two hours from now Stockton would need to be somewhere else. A whole bunch of parties would be breaking up and the roads would be mayhem. Two hours from now he would be begging me to haul the old guy away. I said nothing and the cop went back to wait in his car and Stockton moved all the way into the room and stood facing the draped window with his back to the corpse. I took the hanger with the uniform coat on it and lifted it out of the closet and hung it on the bathroom door frame where the hallway light fell on it.

Looking at a Class A coat is like reading a book or sitting next to a guy in a bar and hearing his whole life story. This one was the right size for the body on the bed and it had *Kramer* on the nameplate, which matched the dog tags. It had a Purple Heart ribbon with two bronze oak leaf clusters to denote a second and third award of the medal, which matched the scars. It had two silver stars on the epaulettes, which confirmed he was a major general. The branch insignia on the lapels denoted Armor and the shoulder patch was from XII Corps. Apart from that there were a bunch of unit awards and a whole salad bowl of medal ribbons dating way back through Vietnam and Korea, some of which he had probably earned the hard way, and some of which he probably hadn't. Some of them were foreign awards, whose display was authorized but not compulsory. It was a very full coat, relatively old, well cared for, standard-

issue, not privately tailored. Taken as a whole it told me he was professionally vain, but not personally vain.

I went through the pockets. They were all empty, except for a key to the rental car. It was attached to a keyring in the shape of a figure 1, which was made out of clear plastic and contained a slip of paper with *Hertz* printed in yellow at the top and a license-plate number written by hand in black ballpoint underneath.

There was no wallet. No loose change.

I put the coat back in the closet and checked the pants. Nothing in the pockets. I checked the shoes. Nothing in them except the socks. I checked the hat. Nothing hidden underneath it. I lifted the suit carrier out and opened it on the floor. It contained a battledress uniform and an M43 field cap. A change of socks and underwear and a pair of shined combat boots, plain black leather. There was an empty compartment that I figured was for the Dopp kit. Nothing else. Nothing at all. I closed it up and put it back. Squatted down and looked under the bed. Saw nothing.

“Anything we should worry about?” Stockton asked.

I stood up. Shook my head.

“No,” I lied.

“Then you can have him,” he said. “But I get a copy of the report.”

“Agreed,” I said.

“Happy New Year,” he said.

He walked out to his car and I headed for my Humvee. I called in a 10-5 *ambulance requested* and told my sergeant to have it accompanied by a squad of two who could list and pack all Kramer’s personal property and bring it back to my office. Then I sat there in the driver’s seat and waited until Stockton’s guys were all gone. I watched them accelerate away into the fog and then I went back inside the room and took the rental key from Kramer’s jacket. Came back out and used it to unlock the Ford.

There was nothing in it except the stink of upholstery cleaner and carbonless copies of the rental agreement. Kramer had picked the car up at one thirty-two that afternoon at Dulles Airport near Washington D.C. He had used a private American Express card and received a discount rate. The start-of-rental mileage was 13,215. Now the odometer was showing 13,513, which according to my arithmetic meant he had driven 298 miles, which was about right for a straight-line trip between there and here.

I put the paper in my pocket and relocked the car. Checked the trunk. It was completely empty.

I put the key in my pocket with the rental paper and headed across the street to the bar. The music got louder with every step I took. Ten yards away I could smell beer fumes and cigarette

smoke from the ventilators. I threaded through parked vehicles and found the door. It was a stout wooden item and it was closed against the cold. I pulled it open and was hit in the face by a wall of sound and a blast of hot thick air. The place was heaving. I could see five hundred people and black-painted walls and purple spotlights and mirrorballs. I could see a pole dancer on a stage in back. She was on all fours and naked except for a white cowboy hat. She was crawling around, picking up dollar bills.

There was a big guy in a black T-shirt behind a register inside the door. His face was in deep shadow. The edge of a dim spotlight beam showed me he had a chest the size of an oil drum. The music was deafening and the crowd was packed shoulder to shoulder and wall to wall. I backed out and let the door swing shut. Stood still for a moment in the cold air and then walked away and crossed the street and headed for the motel office.

It was a dismal place. It was lit with fluorescent tubes that gave the air a greenish cast and it was noisy from the Coke machine parked at its door. It had a pay phone on the wall and worn linoleum on the floor and a waist-high counter boxed in with the sort of fake wood paneling people use in their basements. The clerk sat on a high stool behind it. He was a white guy of about twenty with long unwashed hair and a weak chin.

“Happy New Year,” I said.

He didn’t reply.

“You take anything out of the dead guy’s room?” I asked.

He shook his head. “No.”

“Tell me again.”

“I didn’t take anything.”

I nodded. I believed him.

“OK,” I said. “When did he check in?”

“I don’t know. I came on at ten. He was already here.”

I nodded again. Kramer was in the rental lot at Dulles at one thirty-two and he hadn’t driven enough miles to do much of anything except come straight here, in which case he was checking in around seven-thirty. Maybe eight-thirty, if he stopped for dinner somewhere. Maybe nine, if he was an exceptionally cautious driver.

“Did he use the pay phone at all?”

“It’s busted.”

“So how did he get hold of the hooker?”

“What hooker?”

“The hooker he was poking when he died.”

“No hookers here.”

“Did he go over and get her from the lounge bar?”

“He was way the hell down the row. I didn’t see what he did.”

“You got a driver’s license?”

The guy paused. “Why?”

“Simple question,” I said. “Either you do or you don’t.”

“I got a license,” he said.

“Show me,” I said.

I was bigger than his Coke machine and all covered in badges and ribbons and he did what he was told, like most skinny twenty-year-olds do when I use that tone. He eased his butt up off the stool and reached back and came out with a wallet from his hip pocket. Flipped it open. His DL was behind a milky plastic window. It had his photograph on it, and his name, and his address.

“OK,” I said. “Now I know where you live. I’ll be back later with some questions. If I don’t find you here I’ll come and find you at home.”

He said nothing to me. I turned away and pushed out through the door and went back to my Humvee to wait.

Forty minutes later a military meat wagon and another Humvee showed up. I told my guys to grab everything including the rental car but didn’t wait around to watch them do it. I headed back to base instead. I logged in and got back to my borrowed office and told my sergeant to get me Garber on the phone. I waited at my desk for the call to come through. It took less than two minutes.

“What’s the story?” he asked.

“His name was Kramer,” I said.

“I know that,” Garber said. “I spoke to the police dispatcher after I spoke to you. What happened to him?”

“Heart attack,” I said. “During consensual sex with a prostitute. In the kind of motel a fastidious cockroach would take pains to avoid.”

There was a long silence.

“Shit,” Garber said. “He was married.”

“Yes, I saw his wedding band. And his West Point ring.”

“Class of Fifty-two,” Garber said. “I checked.”

The phone went quiet.

“Shit,” he said again. “Why do smart people pull stupid stunts like this?”

I didn’t answer, because I didn’t know.

“We’ll need to be discreet,” Garber said.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “The cover-up is already started. The locals let me send him to Walter Reed.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s good.” Then he paused. “From the beginning, OK?”

“He was wearing XII Corps patches,” I said. “Means he was based in Germany. He flew into Dulles yesterday. From Frankfurt, probably. Civilian flight, for sure, because he was wearing Class As, hoping for an upgrade. He would have worn BDUs on a military flight. He rented a cheap car and drove two hundred ninety-eight miles and checked into a fifteen-dollar motel room and picked up a twenty-dollar hooker.”

“I know about the flight,” Garber said. “I called XII Corps and spoke with his staff. I told them he was dead.”

“When?”

“After I got off the phone with the dispatcher.”

“You tell them how or where he was dead?”

“I said a probable heart attack, nothing more, no details, no location, which is starting to look like a very good decision now.”

“What about the flight?” I said.

“American Airlines, yesterday, Frankfurt to Dulles, arrived thirteen hundred hours, with an onward connection nine hundred hours today, Washington National to LAX. He was going to an Armored Branch conference at Fort Irwin. He was an Armored commander in Europe. An important one. Outside chance of making Vice-Chief of Staff in a couple of years. It’s Armored’s turn next, for Vice-Chief. Current guy is infantry, and they like to rotate. So he stood a chance. But it ain’t going to happen for him now, is it?”

“Probably not,” I said. “Being dead and all.”

Garber didn’t answer that.

“How long was he over here for?” I said.

“He was due back in Germany inside a week.”

“What’s his full name?”

“Kenneth Robert Kramer.”

“I bet you know his date of birth,” I said. “And where he was born.”

“So?”

“And his flight numbers and his seat assignments. And what the government paid for the tickets. And whether or not he requested a vegetarian meal. And what exact room Irwin VOQ was planning on putting him in.”

“What’s your point?”

“My point is, why don’t I know all that stuff too?”

“Why would you?” Garber said. “I’ve been working the phones and you’ve been poking around in a motel.”

“You know what?” I said. “Every time I go anywhere I’ve got a wad of airplane tickets and travel warrants and reservations and if I’m flying in from overseas I’ve got a passport. And if I’m going to a conference I’ve got a briefcase full of all kinds of other crap to carry them in.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying there were things missing from the motel room. Tickets, reservations, passport, itinerary. Collectively, the kind of things a person would carry in a briefcase.”

Garber didn’t respond.

“He had a suit carrier,” I said. “Green canvas, brown leather bindings. A buck gets ten he had a briefcase to match. His wife probably chose them both. Probably got them mail-order from L.L.Bean. Maybe for Christmas, ten years ago.”

“And the briefcase wasn’t there?”

“He probably kept his wallet in it too, when he was wearing Class As. As many medal ribbons as this guy had, it makes the inside pocket tight.”

“So?”

“I think the hooker saw where he put his wallet after he paid her. Then they got down to business, and he croaked, and she saw a little extra profit for herself. I think she stole his briefcase.”

Garber was quiet for a moment.

“Is this going to be a problem?” he asked.

“Depends what else was in the briefcase,” I said.