

Today

One

I had no idea what woke me up early, until I caught a whiff of my own breath. Then my tooth began to ache and I thought it could be that. But it could also have been a premonition of *sleepus interruptus*, because no sooner did my eyes overcome the crust gluing them together than the doorbell chimed, and then chimed again. I got to it on the fourth intonation when whoever was on the other side of the door decided a bar of ‘Greensleeves’ didn’t perhaps convey the proper desired authority and began underlining the urgency with their fist.

‘Vin, c’mon, man. I know you’re in there,’ said Major Arlen Wayne, solving the day’s first mystery – namely, who was making all the god-damn noise assaulting my alcohol-poisoned grey matter. Arlen was practically my only friend left on the planet – when my ex-wife moved out, she took most of them with her. Arlen and I had been out on the town drinking, celebrating my divorce coming through as well as the conviction for murder handed down on a case I’d been working on. Arlen knew I was ‘in there’ on account of him being the person who brought me home the previous night. I think.

I opened the door to a sliver of light and he pushed his way in. ‘Go away,’ I said as Arlen threw back the curtains and let in the day. I’m not

a morning person. I've been known to punch people for waking me before a reasonable hour, which varies according to the time I went to sleep the night before and the condition I was in when my head hit the pillow.

My name is Vincent Cooper, Major Vin Cooper, Special Agent in the United States Air Force Office of Special Investigations – the OSI. I work major crime. Homicides, mainly. I'm thirty-four, look twenty-eight, so I tell myself, and occasionally act eighteen, so my ex says.

I shuffled past Arlen, keeping to the protection of the shadows, and lay down on my bed, burying my head under the pillow.

'C'mon, Vin,' he said.

'You already said that,' I told him, my voice muffled by the pillow.

'The big cheese wants you in her office. Now. So get your shit together. And I'd bring my passport if I were you.'

'Am I going somewhere?'

'Germany, I think.'

That earned a raised eyebrow.

The big cheese is the AFOSI's second-in-command. She's one tough old boot, a major general. Her name is Winifred Gruyere, which explains why we call her the big cheese. But not, of course, to her face. She's probably the most terrifying person I've ever met: short, built like a Buick, eyes that don't blink and large pores that remind me of the way a pancake goes when it's cooking. She's fifty-five, I think (it's hard to tell – she could be a hundred and fifty), and is the real power running OSI rather than the four-star general who spends most of his time on the golf course getting his handicap below embarrassing. 'What's it about?' I asked, taking the pillow off my head.

Arlen replaced my phone's handset back on the cradle. 'When you turn your cell phone on, you're going to have a few heated messages on it. You know it's against the rules to turn it off.'

I shrugged. 'Battery ran low.' That wasn't true. The real reason was that I hate the damn things.

'What about your pager?'

'It got wet.'

Arlen shook his head and changed the subject. ‘You heard of a General Scott?’

‘No. Should I have?’

‘He was the CO of Ramstein Air Base in Germany. A four-star heavy hitter, married to the daughter of the Vice President of our fair land.’

Like most people, I’m a bit slow on the uptake after a night on the suds, but I’m not stupid. ‘I’m assuming the past tense you’re using is significant.’

‘Yeah. Did you get who he was married to?’

‘I got it.’ Ramstein AB is a vast NATO facility in Germany, shared by a bunch of other air forces. But US forces have by far the biggest presence there. Pretty much everything going to Europe and to the Middle East transits through Ramstein. It’s a giant military hub. ‘Do you know how he was killed?’ I asked as I shuffled into the bathroom for a shower.

‘The wings fell off his glider.’

‘Ouch,’ I said, a shiver running the full length of my spine and into my legs. I am not good with flying.

I had moved here to the town of Brandywine, in Maryland, when Brenda and I decided life would be better all round if we no longer shared each other’s. That’s because we’d hit the wall. My issues revolved around the fact that I didn’t see the wall coming. And just maybe that was a big part of our problem: even when I was home, I wasn’t. The reality of our marriage was staring me in the face, only I never took the time to open my eyes.

Anyway, where was I? Yeah, Brandywine, somewhere south of DC. It sounded like my kind of town before I moved here, given my situation, and indeed they do have one or two good bars. The reality is, though, that it’s more of a family town stuck in the middle of five-acre lots with developers licking their chops at the prospect of making the place completely faceless. A lot of air-force people live here, renting. On the weekends, dads throw balls to their kids in the parks while moms lay

out rugs, setting up picnics. I felt like the place was rubbing my marital failure in my face and I was thinking I might have to move.

Those Disney scenes were in full swing as Arlen and I drove past, this being a Saturday morning. Winter was fast becoming a memory. It was mid May, and warm. The sun was out and the sky was a pale blue, softened by haze floating down from DC. But I wasn't really there, 'in the moment', as my ex-wife would have said. My brain was trying to pick through the information passed on by Arlen, though not with much success, it must be said. It's hard to concentrate when you have a headache that'd knock down a buffalo fighting it out with a toothache for supremacy.

Arlen piloted the Chrysler onto Route Five and accelerated into the traffic heading generally north towards Bolling Air Force Base, where OSI is headquartered. We drove through the rural landscape. People used to grow tobacco here until the government persuaded them it would be far better if they just accepted a handout. These days a lot of folks still left on the land farm old car wrecks and broken-down washing machines, herds of which collect in their front yards. I was thinking about this as I either dozed off or suffered a mild brain seizure, because the fifteen miles to the base seemed to pass in a matter of seconds. The brief sleep did me some good, though, and the handful of Tylenols I swallowed before leaving home were well and truly on top of things at last, having corralled the buffalo and knocked the barbs off the toothache. I was almost feeling positive, 'seizing the day', as my ex would have said. A meaty case would be good for me, take my mind off said ex, and I silently thanked General Scott for going and getting himself killed.

OSI, or AFOSI if you want to be anal about it, has a command structure which sits outside the usual operational framework of the USAF. That is to say, we're autonomous. Our buck stops at the desk of the Inspector General, Office of the Secretary of the Air Force, rather than the commanding officer of a particular base or region, or even the

Secretary of Defense. We exist because, like any large organisation, the USAF has its share of rotten apples, people who murder, rape, embezzle, rob, traffic in drugs and/or sex, commit fraud, arson and so on. To say OSI is a busy little outfit is an understatement. And, just like any internal-affairs unit operating within an organisation, we're not particularly popular with the arms we oversee. We're a negative force, as Brenda used to tell me, always looking for the bad in people rather than the good. Well, *daahh* is just about all you can say to that pearl of wisdom. We don't exist to hand out gold stars to hall monitors. According to Brenda, the OSI is high on destructive energy. Or something. Brenda went off the deep end, lost her marbles, call it what you will, the minute she began to walk down the endless path of personal development. She never said it, but I wouldn't have been at all surprised if she believed any and all evil could be expunged if it could just be seated in a room with an aromatherapy burner heating up the right combination of oils.

Okay, I'm getting myself worked up again. The truth is, I'm not sure whether it was entirely thoughts of my former spouse that were to blame for my demeanour, or that toothache of mine already having managed to find a way back through the Tylenol barrier.

Arlen stopped at the guard post at the southern entrance to the base as a pair of F-16s in close formation ripped past low overhead. He got our credentials inspected by a bored non-com armed with a loaded M16, while I tried to get in touch with Mr Happy hiding somewhere deep within. You're a single guy again, I said to myself. That's got to be worth a smile, don't it?

Two

‘Come on in,’ said Major General Winifred Gruyere when I appeared in the doorway. I did as I was asked. I stood at attention in front of her desk for some time, waiting for a further sign that she acknowledged my presence. In fairness, I don’t think this was some kind of tactic. She was sifting through files on her desk, like a seagull pecking amongst food scraps it suddenly realises are cigarette butts – with initial interest followed by distaste.

I saw my name and number on one of those cigarette butts. Eventually the general picked it out and opened it. I gathered she had been going over the service records of a number of fellow special agents. Without looking up, she ran through a summary. ‘Special Agent Vin Cooper, rank of major. You read law at NYU, graduated, and entered the service as a second lieutenant. You put in for the CCTs, the combat air-controller squadron, where you trained with SEALs, Marine Force Recon, etcetera. You saw action in Kosovo and received the Purple Heart.’

At this point, and for the first time, Gruyere lifted her eyes above the half-moons of her spectacles and locked them on to mine. She was trying to imagine whether the soldier standing in front of her was the same person she was reading about.

'I've read the citation your CO put in,' she said. 'You should have received the Bronze Star.'

I felt like saying thank you, but didn't, and continued to keep my eyes levelled on the bookshelf behind her.

'You then transferred to OSI. In Afghanistan you took down a drugs racket. A local senior politician had been killed by a car bomb and it looked like a strike by the Taliban. You proved otherwise, that it was an operation mounted by a group of US soldiers bent on eliminating the competition. You were shot and wounded and received a second Purple Heart. I see you also survived a nasty helo crash on that one. Seems you're a hard man to kill, Major.'

'Yes, ma'am,' I said, giving her the response I thought she was looking for.

'Next came the episode of the brigadier general.' Gruyere shook her head. 'Now, that was a sorry shit piece of business.'

I agreed, and it was still reasonably fresh in my mind. The asshole beat his gay lover's head to jam because he caught him in an embrace with someone who turned out to be the young man's half-brother.

'So what the fuck's gone wrong, Major? Seems to me you're not the man you were.'

Swearing just sounds plain odd when it comes from the mouth of a woman old enough to be your grandma. 'I don't know, ma'am,' I said.

'That much is obvious, Special Agent.'

The general was possibly referring to the charge of assault against my name. The man on whose face my knuckles played the anvil chorus happened to be a full bird colonel, which never goes down well on one's record, even if the charges were eventually dropped because there were, as they say, extenuating circumstances. I caught the colonel in question in *fellatio delicto* with my wife and, I'm sorry, but rank does not extend to those privileges.

'Separation and divorce are never easy, soldier,' Gruyere said, breaking in on my trip down memory lane. She shook her head and continued. 'Aside from the assault, says here you've been arrested three times in the past year for drunk and disorderly behaviour.'

I'd forgotten about those items, possibly because, as the record said, I was drunk at the time. And I was sure it was only twice, but I kept that to myself.

'I'll let you in on my problem, Major. I need an investigator, a very good investigator. A year ago I'd have said you were that man, but, going through this,' she motioned at the file on the desk in front of her as if it were kitchen waste, 'I've got serious doubts. The trouble is, someone upstairs likes you. But I've got a feeling that, with you, we're scraping the bottom of the barrel and pulling you up.' She glared at me over her glasses. 'Yeah, that's what it feels like to me.'

I continued to look at the bookshelf behind her. What friends upstairs? I wondered. As far as I knew, Arlen was it in the friends department and he wasn't so much upstairs as sideways in the room down the hall.

'At ease, Special Agent, and take a seat. Give me a reason to believe. Talk to me.'

I did as I was told and sat in the chair beside me. 'General, I'll be straight up with you. I've had a hell of a year. Sounds like you've got the broad sweep of it there in front of you, but maybe not the details. My divorce came through yesterday and that closes the book on a few chapters I'd like to forget were ever written.'

'Major, cut the folksy shit and just reassure me you're the man for the job.'

General officers, it seems to me, can occasionally be capricious, uncaring of the fates of mere mortals, and, although I knew why I'd been summoned, I thought it best to play dumb. I can be good at that. 'What job, ma'am?'

'If you don't know why you're here, then you're not half the investigator your record says you are. Or were.' The general tilted her head to one side and looked at me as if I were a puzzle with several pieces squeezed into the wrong holes. 'Dismiss.'

Gruyere then began shuffling papers. I'd played it badly. If getting me on the case was Plan A, I'd just managed to convince her to go with Plan B.

I cleared my throat. ‘Ma’am, General Abraham Scott, a seriously connected four-star commanding US forces in Europe, stationed at Ramstein Air Base, has been killed in a glider crash. USAF maintenance personnel looked after the aircraft.’

‘Well, so much for security,’ Gruyere muttered to herself. ‘Who brought you in?’

‘Major Arlen Wayne, General.’

‘Did he tell you about Scott?’

‘No, ma’am. Caught it on CNN.’ That was a lie, of course, but an easy one for her to swallow.

‘CNN! I might have known they’d get onto it eventually.’

Gruyere pursed her lips. She went back to shuffling her papers and said, ‘Well, Major, you seem to have been given the overview. There are additional details from the crash-investigation team’s preliminary findings, as well as a summary report from OSI there on the ground. I don’t have to tell you what a shit-storm this has caused in the Pentagon, General Scott’s connections by marriage notwithstanding. COMAIRNORTH – General Scott’s command – is an important cog in the defence of the United States, as well as Europe. I don’t care what else you’ve got on your plate, and, frankly, drop it no matter what it is. Consider yourself reassigned.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘You will be the SAC on this one.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘There’s a C-21 departing for Ramstein in ninety minutes. You’ll be on it. And, Special Agent, you’ll report directly and *only* to me. Is that clear?’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Gruyere leaned forwards and placed a couple of the other folders she’d been reading on the desk. ‘You’ll be liaising with the author of the preliminary investigation, Special Agent Anna Masters. Dismiss.’

I didn’t move as fast as I was expected to.

Gruyere sighed. ‘Something on your mind, Special Agent?’

‘Ma’am, I was hoping to see a dentist this morning.’ The Tylenol had worn off completely and I felt like I was chewing razorblades.

‘They’ve got dentists in Germany too. Can’t it wait till then?’ Gruyere was getting impatient.

I shoved the tip of my tongue into the hole once filled with amalgam. It was huge and bottomless, like you could drop a stone into it and not hear it strike the floor. But the pressure applied by my tongue helped. Maybe I could get by with a double dose of those painkillers. ‘Yes, ma’am.’

Gruyere’s body language told me I’d answered correctly. ‘Don’t blow this one, Vin. It’s either the biggest case of your career, or the last.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Oh, and Special Agent?’

‘Yes, ma’am?’

‘For the third and final time, dismiss.’

I walked back into the sunshine. So I was to be SAC on this one – special agent in charge. If someone was needed to take the fall, it would be me who’d get the push. I should’ve been an acrobat.

Three

As I said, I'm not good with flying. Not any more. Not since Afghanistan. But they're into it with a passion in the USAF, as you might expect. The C-21 waiting on the apron at Andrews AFB, Washington DC, was a small austere aircraft full of naked aluminium, basically a Learjet without the executive leather. It was like riding inside an empty high-speed can of Coca-Cola. Thoughts of ploughing into the Atlantic halfway to Europe gave me something to think about and took my mind off the tooth. While the plane was being fuelled, I read through the reports handed over by General Gruyere. They were dry reading, especially the chief crash-investigator's assessment on the remains of the weapon that killed the general – his privately owned sailplane. Dry it may have been but it still caused me to break a sweat.

I wondered what Special Agent Masters was like. If her debrief was anything to go by, she was the unemotional, unimaginative type. I was struck by the feeling that no one seemed to *know* General Scott. But then, general officers are, as a rule, remote characters to those below them in rank – the burden of command and so on.

The C-21's pilot, a lieutenant colonel, told me it was time to board and my stomach did a purl and dropped a stitch. I took a Stilnox

sleeping pill, downing it with some water from the cooler. With luck I'd be asleep before he punched the starter button. I walked to the plane and was shown a seat. To take my mind off the impending take-off, I read through General Abraham Scott's record. It was impressive. There was lots to read about flying. Skyraider pilot in Vietnam – two tours. A stint in the Pentagon. Back to flying duties after converting to fast jets. Grenada followed. He then took command of a wing of F4 Phantoms. Next was a tour of the US Embassy in Moscow just before the fall of communism. To follow he assisted in the development of fighter tactics for the USAF's new fighter, the F-16 Falcon. It went on like this, each step a few more rungs up the ladder. Back to the Pentagon. Brussels came afterwards – his first NATO gig. He put in some time as Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Force, then it was off to Ramstein. The guy was being seriously groomed. I wondered whether his marriage to the VP's daughter had anything to do with this confident rise through the ranks.

I glanced out the small porthole window. We were still on the ground, delayed.

Scott was fifty-five years of age, or would have been. Pretty young to be where he was. He had one child – a sergeant in the marines, deceased. I rummaged through the folder until I found the general's photograph. He was wearing his dress blues, cap off. The left side of his jacket looked like a painter's drop sheet, it held so many different coloured ribbons. The photo made Scott appear like a waxwork in Madame Tussaud's, but then, don't all these publicity shots? The smile on his face was forced, like it was going to evaporate an instant after the flash went off. A crease between his dark eyebrows suggested his more natural mien was a frown, even if it was only one of concentration. He looked somewhat like Gregory Peck's not-so-good-looking brother – the same sort of tanned skin with salt-and-pepper colouring. Actually, looking at photos of people who've died violently always creeps me out a little. Maybe it's the smile. You know they've got nothing to smile about now.

I returned the photo to the folder and slotted it back into my bag. Or

at least I think that's what I did because, almost immediately after, I must have fallen asleep. I dreamed about Special Agent Anna Masters for some reason. I pictured her as looking a lot like Gruyere, although not as attractive. Brenda was in there too, I think, although how exactly I fail to recall. As the aircraft slipped into its descent, the change in motion, engine pitch and so on brought me awake with a start. I was gripping the seat with my fingernails digging into the upholstery. I'm well aware this seems odd behaviour for an air-force officer.

We taxied to a refuelling point on the ground at some Royal Air Force base in England, and deplaned while the C-21 was juiced for the final leg. It turned into a four-hour layover while the pilots waited for another passenger, an RAF squadron leader returning to Ramstein. It was dark, cold and wet with wind blowing the rain horizontal under the tarmac lights. I hoped Germany was more welcoming. I'd never been there but my grandfather had. I remembered him saying that it was not a very friendly place, and that people had shot at him and his tank often. But that was a long time ago.

The run to Ramstein, which is apparently situated in the heart of the Rhineland, wherever that is, took another few hours. Stilnox tucked me in again and I slept – this time dreamlessly – and woke with the co-pilot, a young lieutenant, giving my shoulder a shake.

'Sir . . . sir, we're here.'

'Wha . . . ?'

Relieved to be alive after so long in the air, I ducked to fit through the C-21's door and took in my new surroundings. It was early morning. The sun was up but there were balls of grey cloud in the vicinity. It was cold, around forty-five degrees. The place smelt of rain and burnt JP-4 jet fuel. Even at this hour there was a lot of jet noise: planes starting up and shutting down, planes taxiing, planes taking off and landing. The vast apron was a parking lot of USAF C-130 transport planes, more than thirty in all, some painted low-vis grey, others in dark green or desert camouflage. There was a row of Polish F-16 Vipers, as well as a flight of

four Vietnam War–vintage F-4 Phantoms operated by the Turkish Air Force. With the exception of these old clunkers, I could have been scoping any air-force base anywhere in the world. There was nothing in the least unique about it, nothing particularly ‘German’ about the place and certainly there were no cheery ‘Welcome to Deutschland!’ banners strung up anywhere. And, thankfully, there didn’t appear to be any tanks running around getting shot at or otherwise.

Suspended in the air over the control tower were the arches of two enormous, crisply defined rainbows, glowing in the morning light. They served as the welcoming committee until a Humvee squealed to a stop nearby. The driver’s door swung open and a woman pushed herself out from behind the steering wheel. ‘Special Agent Cooper? Special Agent Masters,’ she said over the ambient jet noise. Masters saluted and I returned it. ‘How was your flight?’

‘Great,’ I said.

‘Great,’ she replied. I had the impression I could have said, ‘Like sticking my head in a bucket of octopus shit’ and she still would’ve said great.

‘I’ll take you to your quarters. I tried to find you accommodation on the base but couldn’t. It’s all booked solid. I thought it would be best if you were in the thick of things.’ She shrugged. ‘You got luggage?’

I reached back into the C-21 and pulled out my bag. It wasn’t a big bag and there wasn’t much in it.

‘I hope you’ve got thermals in there,’ Masters observed. ‘It gets pretty cold around here.’

So, I’d just met the woman and already she was thinking about my underwear. Once upon a time I would have grabbed that thought and run with it, but my ego had taken a pounding during the separation and divorce, and so I let it go without comment. Masters was nothing like I imagined her, at least to look at. That she wasn’t a clone of Gruyere in itself was a relief, given we’d be spending a fair bit of time together on this investigation. She was tall, around five-eleven, with chocolate-coloured hair pulled back in a regulation bun. With heels, we’d be eyeball to eyeball. Hers, by the way, were unusual – a smoky

green at the outer edges and a gold-flecked blue that deepened in colour around the pupil. They were extraordinary eyes, the kind you see in mascara ads in women's magazines. And no doubt Masters knew it. I had a stab at her weight. Being a cop, I'm pretty good at guessing, but I had no idea what her range was because she was wearing a loose-fitting, blue USAF battle dress uniform with a bulky green jacket over the top that was maybe a size or two too big. She had good cheekbones – pronounced – and a few small freckles scattered across the bridge of her small nose. The freckles together with her accent pegged her as Californian. She had an attractive face, except that it was completely devoid of pleasure or happiness. At least, to be seeing me. And, if that wasn't the case and I was imagining the bored hostility aimed right at me, then maybe, in words Brenda might have used, I really did need to do something about re-empowering my self-esteem.

'Lieutenant General Wolfgang von Koeppen is a neat freak. You might like to take a shower and use a razor before you meet with him,' she said bluntly.

'Yeah, thanks.' While I didn't know Masters, the disapproval on her face I'd seen plenty of times before. It was the 'you look like shit' expression. I tried not to let it affect our relationship right off the bat.

'I've scheduled the meeting for 0915. Once I take you to your quarters, you'll have half an hour to freshen up. The general is keen to meet with you.'

Masters manoeuvred the Humvee through a set of low office buildings and turned towards a nest of houses that could have been designed by an unimaginative child – a door with a window set low on either side, and a simple gable roof over the top. The colour scheme was uniformly grey. The Ritz-Carlton, it wasn't.

'That's the on-base accommodation I couldn't get you into,' she said.

'My luck's improving, then,' I replied.

We reached an intersection and Masters turned left, into a large parking lot. 'We have to change vehicles,' she said.

That made sense. Being so wide, the Humvee was not road-friendly, especially if the road narrowed and meandered through a town.

Masters pulled up beside a purple mid-sized Mercedes-Benz. ‘That’s mine,’ she said, with a vague hint of pride, gesturing at the vehicle. ‘You can pick Mercedes up here for a song.’

We got out of the Humvee and into the Merc. It was a nice car inside – smelt of leather and wood. ‘It looks new,’ I said.

‘Actually, it’s fifteen years old,’ she replied. ‘It was a promotional car for a local instant printer. The colour made it hard to sell. I got it cheap.’

I can do small talk with the best of them, but, for molar reasons, my heart wasn’t in it. ‘Before we go much further, do I have time to see a dentist?’

‘No,’ said Masters without missing a beat, pulling out of the parking lot and joining the queue exiting the base via the security gate. ‘Why?’

‘Toothache.’

‘Aside from the fact that we’ve got to get you cleaned up before you meet with the general, it’s 0730. Dentistry’s a nine-to-five gig. I’ve got some Tylenols in the glove box if you need them.’

‘No thanks,’ I said. Given the number I’d eaten over the past twenty-four hours, I was vaguely concerned about my liver. I folded my arms and buried my tongue in the hole. The cold was finding its way through my cheek and into my tooth, or what was left of it. The pain was making me short-tempered, and I’m usually such a lovely, placid soul.

‘I’ve got you a room in K-town. It’s small, but it’s clean.’

‘K-town?’

‘Kaiserslautern. Everyone calls it K-town. Back in 1955, it was the biggest community of US citizens outside of America. At the moment, there are around forty-five thousand Americans living there. We’ve got American football, American hotdogs, American cinemas, American-style shopping malls —’

‘America,’ I said. ‘Don’t leave home without it.’

Masters responded with cool silence.

My new, temporary partner was young and possessed a perfect set of teeth. Her bio, thoughtfully included in my briefing notes, said she was

twenty-six, and held the rank of major. Twenty-six was too young to be a major. Masters was either very good at her job, or very good *on* the job. She came across as efficient, officious, and no doubt had several volumes of air-force articles surgically inserted up her ass for twenty-four hour reference.

I turned my attention to the world zipping by. The countryside was flat and rural, a bit like the area around Brandywine, only the German landscape was neater, more orderly, almost manicured. The small, immaculate farms were separated by stands of towering chocolate-box pines. Intermittent showers sprinkled from fluffy, toy-like clouds pasted against a pale-blue watercolour sky and I counted one, two, three, four rainbows this time. The street signs we passed bore long, unpronounceable names for towns and cities up ahead, and any moment I expected to see a gingerbread house and maybe a witch chasing two kids around it on her broom. But then I saw a sign with the familiar golden butt that told me I was only four kilometres away from the world's favourite hamburger, and I felt less like I'd been hijacked by a Grimm's fairytale.

K-town, Kaiserslautern, seemed to appear out of nowhere. The run in through the outskirts of the town was devoid of the usual three-mile strip of auto body repairers and retailers and the endless parade of fast-food restaurants selling more or less the same stack of pancakes. This was America done the way the US military likes it, probably not that far from how Germany likes it: anal.

We drove through the town, past American-style malls. There were joggers everywhere wearing Nike, Russell Athletic and Everlast. All the street signs were in English. The only clue that I wasn't in some American town, maybe somewhere north on the east coast, were all the Mercedes running around – even Mercedes cabs. K-town was bigger than I expected, not that I had spent much time speculating on its dimensions.

We skirted the city centre, which had the usual collection of mid-

sized glass office towers, and drove through an area populated by huge US-military warehouses. I tried to think about where to get this investigation started but couldn't. I needed a shower and a handful of something with codeine in it. Eventually, Masters slowed. We turned into a tree-lined street and began looking for a place to park. 'This is it,' she said, pulling against the kerb.

I got out and grabbed my bag from the back seat. Masters crossed the road and walked up to a sign that said, 'Pensione Freedom. US servicemen serviced with a smile'. I wondered how many US servicemen had been amused by the quaint, unintentional turn of phrase. I followed the major, and took the flight of four stairs up into the foyer. The place smelt of disinfectant and sausage, a not entirely unpleasant combination. A tall square-shaped frau with blonde hair turning to grey at the roots came through a door behind the counter. Her shoulders were broad and barely cleared the door jamb. She was not particularly pleased to see us, or even displeased. Indifferent, I'd say, nailed her attitude. If she were ever asked to describe me, I don't think she'd be able to. That suited me fine. If I were anonymous, I could come and go as I pleased, unobserved, no questions asked.

'*Morgen,*' said Masters. 'There should be a booking under the name of Cooper.'

The frau consulted her PC screen and said, '*Ja.*' She slid a card across the counter with all my details already filled in. 'Sign, *bitte,*' she said. I did as asked and received a key in return, along with half a dozen of the pensione's business cards.

'No smoking in zer rooms. Vee haff detectors. Room 303, level zree, turn right,' the frau said with sausage breath, nodding at the narrow fifties-style lift opposite the counter.

'I'm going to get a coffee down the road,' said Masters. 'Oh, before I forget, you'll need these.' She handed me a large envelope. 'Your common access card – your CAC – will get you in and out of Ramstein. You'll find a cell phone and pager in there too, as well as a swipe card to get you into OSI on the base. See you in, say, twenty.' She turned and walked out before I could offer an alternate plan. The receptionist had

slipped away too, gone back to her bratwurst. I was alone in the foyer with a bag that contained four pairs of underwear and socks, a spare shirt and a toothbrush I was too afraid to use. To be honest, I don't like being told what to do, which might be an odd thing for someone in the military to say. But I especially don't like it when I'm being ordered around by an officer of the same rank. So I walked out.

Okay, I needed a shower, but what I needed more than anything else was that dentist, or at least some serious painkillers. Deodorant would've been good, too, and some mouthwash. I was thinking that maybe I could rinse my teeth clean. I also needed a rental. It occurred to me that General Scott's second-in-command wasn't the person I should interview first. That honour went to the chief crash investigator. And I also wanted to talk to the person everyone was concerned about, not, it seemed, because her husband had been killed, but because of who her father was.

I found a tourist office and took a map of K-town. I asked the woman behind the counter for the nearest tooth doctor and was told that he didn't open till 0900, confirming what Masters had said. That was still half an hour away. I found a chemist and bought the strongest analgesic available without a prescription.

Next stop, Hertz. I rented a Mercedes – what else? – and a map of the Rhineland-Palatinate, the province I found myself in. By the time I got back behind the wheel, the painkillers were working – mercifully – and I found myself able to at last concentrate on the job.

I drove back down the highway, retracing my steps to Ramstein, fumbling with Masters' report, holding it against the steering wheel as I read. Two miles beyond Kaiserslautern's city limit, the pager beeped. 'Where are you?' it said. I turned it off. A handful of seconds later, the cell began ringing. I was about to turn that off too, but decided to see what was up.

'Major, what are you doing?' said the voice on the other end.

'Driving. Do they do it on the left side of the road here, or the right?'

'What?'

'I'm on the road to Ramstein, which I know sounds like a song title or an old Bob Hope movie but —'

‘Special Agent Cooper, we agreed that you were going to meet me in the foyer.’

‘No, *you* agreed on that, but I’m not sure who with. Hey, I hired a Mercedes, like yours only newer. I think I prefer Chevrolet.’ I can be infuriating, especially when I want to be, and this was one of those times. It was obvious that Masters didn’t want me here, probably because she thought she was more than capable. She was treating me like I was a pain in the ass, and I objected to that because she didn’t even know me. And, apart from these interpersonal observations, as far as I could see from her report, her investigation had gotten precisely nowhere. It was all typed out neat and tidy and all her verbs were conjugated correctly but the whole was utterly devoid of any imagination or intuition. She didn’t get it. Scott had been killed, but the big question on everyone’s lips was whether someone had helped him along, even though no one was prepared to even voice that option, except for Gruyere, and her only admission on that point was the fact that she’d sent me here. Masters had asked questions and people had answered them but she didn’t appear to have questioned the answers.

‘You’ve got a meeting with Lieutenant General von Koeppen in fifteen minutes,’ Masters said. I could hear her labouring to keep herself under control.

‘But I haven’t had a shower or a shave and I’m still wearing yesterday’s non-thermal underwear.’

Silence.

I wondered whether she was the type who uses silence as a weapon to keep her partner in line. Not my kind of woman. ‘Okay, then,’ I said, keeping it light and cheery. ‘I’ll catch up with you later.’ I didn’t wait for an answer. I ended the call and turned off the cell. That was against the rules, of course. In this business, people get nervous if they can’t contact you 24/7. I opened the glove box and threw the cell in, closing the hatch after it.

A short time later, I turned off the highway and into the security post. The guard scanned my CAC card with a portable gizmo and checked that I looked as handsome in real life as I did in the photo.

Satisfied, he then said, ‘Thank you, sir,’ and waved me through. Before moving off, I asked for directions to Hangar B3. Ramstein, as I said, is a huge facility and the soldier had to go back inside and consult a map. He returned moments later with a Xerox of the base layout. A line drawn in blue Biro meandered across the page to the hangar.

Ten minutes later, I pulled up outside my destination. B3 was at least the size of two, possibly three, football fields. It was *so* big, it was impossible to tell how big. I walked to a side door feeling dwarfed by the structure. Huge overhead lights illuminated the interior. There were several C-5 Galaxies parked inside – transport planes roughly the size of 747s. I stopped an airman and asked for further directions. He pointed down the far corner of the hangar.

I eventually found what I was looking for, an area sealed off by walls of plastic and tape. Signs warned that this was a restricted area and that access was for authorised personnel only. I did what any investigator worth his pay would do and figured the signs weren’t talking to me. I parted the plastic and looked inside. On the floor were the remains of what I assumed was General Scott’s glider – pretty much every little piece – laid out for examination. The plane had hit the ground with such force that it appeared to have literally exploded. At least a dozen personnel were picking through these remains, cataloguing them. It was a mammoth task. There weren’t many whole sections left intact.

I made my way to what would have been the cockpit. There was a lot of dried blood inside. That figured. The human body is really just a big bag of water and when it hits the ground at over one hundred and fifty miles per hour, it bursts.

‘You right there, mate?’ said a voice behind me. The man wore the uniform of a Royal Air Force squadron leader, except his accent was about as English as mine. He was Australian. I’d come to recognise the accent after a stint in Afghanistan, where their Special Forces, the Special Air Service, were deployed. Those boys were smart and very tough. I owed my life to half a dozen of them.

‘Special Agent Vin Cooper,’ I said, flashing him my OSI creds.

‘Wayne Roach.’

I recognised the name. Roach was heading the crash team investigating the wreckage. He was looking for cause. His was the signature on the report I’d read.

‘OSI. Not the local branch, I take it?’ he asked.

‘Flew in this morning.’

‘You working with that Masters chick on this?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Lucky man. She’s a spunkrat. Young to be a major, too. Rumour has it she can suck start an F-16.’

That gave me an interesting perspective on Masters. She had a reputation. Also, this guy thought her meteoric rise through the ranks had something to do with qualities other than those for which officers usually received promotion. I didn’t add to the conversation, which might have made the squadron leader nervous. Parts of the services are, in some ways, even more PC than private enterprises and he must have thought better of continuing.

Instead he cleared his throat and said, ‘You read the preliminary?’

I nodded. ‘You’ve had a couple more days with this since you and your team did the initial write-up. Got anything to add?’

‘Yeah, as a matter of fact.’

I followed the squadron leader to a bench covered with various items of metal and fibreglass. He was short and bald and the crotch of his pants appeared to get sucked up his butt as he walked, springing off his toes with each step. His uniform was a size too small for his frame, which didn’t help. Maybe he was getting fat and didn’t realise it or couldn’t accept it.

Hanging on the wall behind the bench was a large photograph of the smiling, relaxed General Scott standing next to his sailplane. The aircraft’s wingspan was a tad under sixty feet. The nose where the pilot sat was small and bulbous, with a large Perspex bubble canopy. Now, only shards of the glider remained, slightly more than what remained of the general, according to Masters’ report. I ran my eyes over the individual pieces spread out across the floor and found it difficult to

imagine that this was the aircraft in the picture. Roach picked up an aluminium bracket.

‘I can tell you now that General Scott’s plane was sabotaged.’ He held up a piece of metal. ‘Check this out.’

Sabotage meant murder. I didn’t bat an eyelid at the news, though once the folks Stateside heard that, the shit would definitely fly. ‘What is it?’ I asked.

‘The wings of the glider slide off and on to make transporting it from field to field possible. That makes this part crucial. It’s the bracket that clamps the main wing spar to the fuselage.’ Roach pulled the clamp apart and the top section split into two separate pieces across a fine, ragged crack. ‘That’s not supposed to happen, by the way,’ he said. ‘This is 7075 – aircraft-grade aluminium alloy. It’s light and, as you might expect, extremely strong. At least, it’s supposed to be.’

Roach passed me a black-and-white photo of something. ‘What’s this?’ I asked.

‘A photo,’ he said, being a wise ass. ‘Well, actually, it’s called a macrograph – makes it easy to see the metal’s crystal structure. This is what 7075 should look like.’ He passed me another black-and-white print. ‘Compare them.’ He then went off to rummage for something on the workbench crowded with various unidentifiable bits of metal and fibreglass.

I put the two prints side by side. On one, the crystals were big; on the other, they were small. Easy to see the difference, sure, but I still didn’t know squat.

Roach wandered back over. He registered the frown on my face. ‘Basic metallurgy lesson number one: when the crystals are small, the metal is good and strong. The bigger those crystals get, the weaker the metal becomes. Milled non-ferrous metals like aluminium don’t take kindly to stress. They have almost zero elasticity. Put too much stress on them and they don’t bend or deform, they just crack. *Pah-ting*,’ he said, musically.

‘Do you mind putting it together for me like I was a five-year-old, Squadron Leader?’ I asked. I didn’t have a big reserve of patience. I was

still on DC time and feeling light-headed because of it, but it also could have been all the codeine I'd consumed on an empty stomach.

Roach swapped the photos for a couple of bits of aluminium he'd recovered from his bench. 'We've duplicated what we believe happened to the failed clamp that held on the general's wings. We heated and cooled it rapidly a couple of dozen times. Doing that to a metal – just about any metal – changes its crystal structure, making it weaker. The 7075 in your left hand failed at one-tenth the load of the 7075 in your right. Take a closer look.'

I did as I was asked and examined the metals. On the outside, they appeared identical. In cross-section where they'd cracked, though, one piece had broken clean while the other had a porous honeycomb appearance.

'Nothing like this could happen by accident?' I asked. I knew the answer to that before I put the question, but I've found it sometimes pays to ask the obvious.

'No bloody way,' the squadron leader said, shaking his head. 'Someone got to the general's plane, removed the clamp and then went to work on it, or exchanged it for this one, knowing full well what the consequences of that would be.'

'Don't stop now, Squadron Leader. You've got a captive audience here. What happened when that clamp failed?'

'You read about it in the report,' he said.

'I've read an eyewitness account. Tell me in your own words what you think happened.'

He shrugged. 'On the morning of the crash, the general and another pilot were chasing thermals, maybe ten miles from the base. The weather was good and the conditions were ideal for soaring. The general, like the pilot in the other plane, was climbing to around twelve thousand feet and then doing aerobatics – loops, rolls and spins – down to around five thousand feet. They'd apparently done that twice – gone up and then come down – before the general's day flew into the crapper. When he reached altitude for the third time, he put the glider into a flat spin. I reckon the clamp was probably already broken by then, but it's impossible to say. According to the witness, the right-hand wing on the general's plane appeared to fold. The airflow ripped it

clean away a second or two later as what was left of the aircraft began a spiral dive.

‘It dove like that, spinning, for several thousand feet before the g-forces pulled the other wing off. Within moments, gravity accelerated the wreckage to around two hundred and fifty miles per hour. General Scott would’ve had plenty of time to contemplate his end before it came. From the clamp letting go to impact took around thirty seconds. That’s a lot of time for your life to flash before your eyes.’ Roach paused, appearing to ponder the existential nature of that observation. Maybe he could just picture the scene of the man trapped inside his fibreglass coffin heading for the ground. I certainly could. Roach snapped out of it and cleared his throat. ‘The tail broke off at about two thousand feet of altitude. The nose of the aircraft hit the base of a tree, which is why so little of it was left intact. Not much of the tree left, either. The general’s remains – what they could find, at any rate – were scooped into buckets with a ladle. Shooting the bugger with a 12 gauge at close range wouldn’t have been nearly as effective, or messy. Not a great way to get your card punched.’ Roach paused for another moment of consideration before asking, ‘Anything else, Special Agent?’

‘Yes,’ I managed to say. The saliva glands in my mouth were working overtime and my skin was clammy. I knew what was coming. I made it to a basin against the wall before my stomach let go. I’d be lying if I said my reaction to Roach’s re-creation had nothing to do with my own experiences in the air. The Australian had just brought it all back – the fear, the helplessness, the feeling in your guts when the hard floor beneath drops away revealing an abyss. And you just . . . fall . . . My stomach heaved again.

‘You okay, mate?’

‘Yeah, I’m on one of those weird fad diets,’ I said. I cupped my hands under the water and splashed my face.

Roach continued, ‘I didn’t know him – the general – but, for what it’s worth, those who did, say he was a pretty cool CO. A workaholic, apparently. First in, last out.’ That phrase struck a chord with me. *First in, last out* – the motto of the combat air controllers, the lunatic squadron of which I was once a member.

‘How long would it have taken the clamp to fail?’ I asked, wiping my face on a hand towel.

‘Yeah, well, I guess that’s the problem – from your point of view, anyway,’ Roach observed. ‘Pinpointing when the clamp was tampered with would be a guess. Could’ve been a couple of days ago; could’ve been months.’

Given the number of people at Ramstein and the fact that anyone could have had access to the glider, that potentially gave me roughly forty thousand suspects. In other words, I had a trail to the murderer that was as dead as the victim. ‘Doesn’t anyone kill with a 9mm any more, preferably with their prints all over it?’

‘Pardon?’

‘Never mind. Just thinking aloud.’ I didn’t bother asking him if he knew why Scott had been killed, or by whom. Coming up with answers to those questions was why OSI pays me so much money. Yeah, right. I cleared my throat and asked the tough question. ‘What about the people who maintained the general’s plane? You got a signed maintenance schedule anywhere?’

Roach smiled and snorted at the same time. ‘Take your pick from over two thousand engineering personnel – Americans, Dutch, English, German, French. The general didn’t have a crew chief on his plane. If he needed something done, he’d just ask someone to do it. The reality is that just about everyone and anyone on this base had access. And, as for a maintenance schedule, this was a glider, not a military aircraft – or even a powered private plane. It’s really no more than a snag sheet.’

‘Great.’

‘Yeah, well . . . ’ said the Australian, fiddling with the clamp.

Okay, so my list of suspects had shrunk from forty thousand to two thousand, but it might as well have been a million. I had one dead general, one sabotaged plane, no maintenance schedule and no leads. I comforted myself with the knowledge that killing a general is a big deal. Someone on this base had to know *something*. I just had to find that person. ‘So, the glider pilot who witnessed the crash,’ I asked. I

glanced at my notebook. His name was Captain Reinoud Aleveldt, Royal Netherlands Air Force. 'You got anything more from him?'

'No,' said Roach.

'How about a number for him here on the base?'

Roach nodded and walked over to the phone on the wall. On a bench beside it was a base directory, a book the size and thickness of the average thriller novel. Another reminder of the size of Ramstein.

'How long have you been here, Squadron Leader?'

'Coming up for six weeks now. Why do you ask?'

'Because if there was someone wandering around here, someone who wasn't NATO, you haven't been here long enough to know whether they were out of place.'

'Yeah, but bases like this . . . ' he shook his head, ' . . . with people coming and going all the time, wearing different uniforms, speaking different languages, you've got Buckley's chance of keeping tabs on people. You just assume if they've got through the front gate, or come in on an aircraft, they're okay. If you didn't operate on that assumption, you'd never get your job done.'

I wondered who 'Buckley' was and assumed he was probably one very unlucky guy. I also thought about the security check I'd experienced at the front gate. It was pretty thorough, though hardly a retina scan. I had to show my CAC card, the identity card issued to every serving member of US forces, and my name was probably also on some kind of database. As far as the CAC card went, an intruder would need to steal one and have a vague similarity to the photo on it. The reality was that, for a determined adversary, it wouldn't have been impossible to slip through the net, certainly not for one with a premeditated plan to kill the base's commander.

'Anything else, Special Agent?' asked the Australian, butting in on my speculation.

'Yeah, can you recommend a good dentist?'

'Wouldn't get anything done here, mate. These blokes are butchers. You need an Aussie dentist – best in the world.'

I nodded. Australia was a long way to go to get a tooth filled. I was

hoping I'd find one a bit closer, but I wasn't having much luck on that front. 'Thanks for your time,' I said.

'The full revised report is in the process of being written up. Should have it done by this evening.'

'Send a copy to me care of OSI here,' I said. 'We're in the phone book.' At least, I assumed OSI was in it.

'No worries, mate,' he said as I turned and walked out. So, Scott had been murdered. This had suddenly become a very serious deal, no matter who his old lady's daddy was. Generals generally do not get murdered for the reasons the rest of us do. In fact, when you're a general and you get killed violently by persons unknown, the motive that leads to that kind of demise could possibly have implications for national security. That's what I was thinking as I walked towards the hangar's exit, a rectangle of bright light in a section of dark corrugated wall.

As I stepped outside I noted that it was still cold, although the sun was doing its best to rectify that situation. The clouds and rainbows had gone, chased away by a breeze that went straight through my BDU as if I wasn't wearing one. Three C-130s taxied past, making a hell of a racket. Beyond was the distant roar of a fast jet accelerating down one of the runways in full afterburner. I flipped open my pad and checked the copious notes I'd made interviewing Squadron Leader Roach. They amounted to one solitary line on the page, the name and phone number of the Dutch Air Force captain. I wondered if he'd be able to make things any clearer for me, but I could definitely pass on a repeat of the account of Scott plunging to his death from twelve thousand feet.

The screech of tyres caught my attention and lifted my eyes from the notebook. It was a purple Mercedes. Little puffs of dust and burnt rubber boiled around the tyres as they shuddered, locked up solid. The door flew open and Masters jumped out. 'What the hell do you think you're doing?' she demanded to know as she stomped towards me, hands jammed deep in the pockets of her jacket.

'Investigating an assassination,' I said, which had the gratifying effect of stopping her dead in her tracks.

Four

Special Agent Masters drove. She ground her jaw, the small pencil-like muscles flexing. ‘I’d appreciate it if you wouldn’t just disappear off on your own. I don’t know whether you realise this, Special Agent, but we are not fucking play-acting around here. People like General von Koeppen have things to do. You see them when *they’re* ready, not when it fits into *your* schedule.’

I listened to this lecture and wondered whether I should bite. She was reminding me of my ex – not the words so much as the moral certainty that she was right and that I was a moron. ‘Stop the car.’

‘What?’

‘I said stop the fucking car.’ I reached across her and pulled on the hand brake. The Mercedes skidded sideways to a stop.

‘Let’s get a couple of ground rules straight,’ I said as the car rocked on its suspension with the weight transference. ‘I don’t know what organisation you belong to but I’m basically a cop. I don’t care about rank or privilege when I’m on a case. Also, I don’t answer to you or the CO here. I promise you, my boss back home is a lot scarier than both of you combined.’

Masters folded her arms and shot a glance of pure poison at me.

‘Before I saw von Koeppen,’ I continued, ‘I wanted to know what