

The
COFFIN DANCER

Jeffery
DEAVER

H
HODDER

Copyright © 1998 by Jeffery Deaver

First published in the United States of America in 1998 by Simon & Schuster

First published in Great Britain in 1998 by Hodder & Stoughton

A division of Hodder Headline

This Hodder paperback edition 2006

The right of Jeffery Deaver to be identified as the Author
of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A Hodder paperback

27

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 340 71251 1

ISBN 0 340 71251 1

Typeset in Fairfield Light by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

To the memory of my grandmother Ethel May Rider

I

TOO MANY WAYS TO DIE

No hawk can be a pet. There is no sentimentality. In a way, it is the psychiatrist's art. One is matching one's mind against another mind with deadly reason and interest.

THE GOSHAWK, T. H. WHITE

Chapter ONE

When Edward Carney said good-bye to his wife, Percey, he never thought it would be the last time he'd see her.

He climbed into his car, which was parked in a precious space on East Eighty-first Street in Manhattan, and pulled into traffic. Carney, an observant man by nature, noticed a black van parked near their town house. A van with mud-flecked, mirrored windows. He glanced at the battered vehicle and recognized the West Virginia plates, realizing he'd seen the van on the street several times in the past few days. But then the traffic in front of him sped up. He caught the end of the yellow light and forgot the van completely. He was soon on the FDR Drive, cruising north.

Twenty minutes later he juggled the car phone and called his wife. He was troubled when she didn't answer. Percey'd been scheduled to make the flight with him – they'd flipped a coin last night for the left-hand seat and she'd won, then given him one of her trademark victory grins. But then she'd wakened at 3 A.M. with a blinding migraine, which had stayed with her all day. After a few phone calls they'd found a substitute copilot and Percey'd taken a Fiorinal and gone back to bed.

A migraine was the only malady that would ground her.

Lanky Edward Carney, forty-five years old and still wearing a military hairstyle, cocked his head as he listened to the phone ringing miles away. Their answering machine clicked on and he returned the phone to the cradle, mildly concerned.

He kept the car at exactly sixty miles per hour, centered perfectly in the right lane; like most pilots he was conservative behind the wheel. He trusted other airmen but thought most drivers were crazy.

In the office of Hudson Air Charters, on the grounds of Mamaroneck Regional Airport, in Westchester, a cake awaited. Prim and assembled Sally Anne, smelling like the perfume department at Macy's, had baked it herself to commemorate the company's new contract. Wearing the ugly rhinestone biplane brooch her grandchildren had given her last Christmas, she scanned the room to make sure each of the dozen or so employees had a piece of devil's food sized just right for them. Ed Carney ate a few bites of cake and talked about tonight's flight with Ron Talbot, whose massive belly suggested he loved cake, though he survived mostly on cigarettes and coffee. Talbot wore the dual hats of operations and business manager and he worried out loud if the shipment would be on time, if the fuel usage for the flight had been calculated correctly, if they'd priced the job right. Carney handed him the remains of his cake and told him to relax.

He thought again about Percey and stepped away into his office, picked up the phone.

Still no answer at their town house.

Now concern became worry. People with children and people with their own business always pick up a ringing phone. He slapped the receiver down, thought about calling a neighbor to check up on her. But then the large white truck pulled up in front of the hangar next to the office and it was time to go to work.

Talbot gave Carney a dozen documents to sign just as young Tim Randolph arrived, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and narrow black tie. Tim referred to himself as a ‘copilot’ and Carney liked that. ‘First officers’ were company people, airline creations, and while Carney respected any man who was competent in the right-hand seat, pretension put him off.

Tall, brunette Lauren, Talbot’s assistant, had worn her lucky dress, whose blue color matched the hue of the Hudson Air logo – a silhouette of a falcon flying over a gridded globe. She leaned close to Carney and whispered, ‘It’s going to be okay now, won’t it?’

‘It’ll be fine,’ he assured her. They embraced for a moment. Sally Anne hugged him too and offered him some cake for the flight. He demurred. Ed Carney wanted to be gone. Away from the sentiment, away from the festivities. Away from the ground.

And soon he was. Sailing three miles above the earth, piloting a Lear 35A, the finest private jet ever made, clear of markings or insignia except for its *N* registration number, polished silver, sleek as a pike.

They flew toward a stunning sunset – a perfect orange disk easing into big, rambunctious clouds, pink and purple, leaking bolts of sunlight.

Only dawn was as beautiful. And only thunderstorms more spectacular.

It was 723 miles to O’Hare and they covered that distance in less than two hours. Air Traffic Control’s Chicago Center politely asked them to descend to fourteen thousand feet, then handed them off to Chicago Approach Control.

Tim made the call. ‘Chicago Approach. Lear Four Niner *Charlie Juliet* with you at one four thousand.’

‘Evening, Niner *Charlie Juliet*,’ said yet another placid air traffic controller. ‘Descend and maintain eight thousand. Chicago altimeter thirty point one one. Expect vectors to twenty-seven L.’

'Roger, Chicago. Niner *Charlie Juliet* out of fourteen for eight.'

O'Hare is the busiest airport in the world and ATC put them in a holding pattern out over the western suburbs of the city, where they'd circle, awaiting their turn to land.

Ten minutes later the pleasant, staticky voice requested, 'Niner *Charlie Juliet*, heading zero nine zero over the numbers downwind for twenty-seven L.'

'Zero nine zero. Niner *Charlie Juliet*,' Tim responded.

Carney glanced up at the bright points of constellations in the stunning gunmetal sky and thought, Look, Percey, it's all the stars of evening . . .

And with that he had what was the only unprofessional urge of perhaps his entire career. His concern for Percey arose like a fever. He needed desperately to speak to her.

'Take the aircraft,' he said to Tim.

'Roger,' the young man responded, hands going unquestioningly to the yoke.

Air Traffic Control crackled, 'Niner *Charlie Juliet*, descend to four thousand. Maintain heading.'

'Roger, Chicago,' Tim said. 'Niner *Charlie Juliet* out of eight for four.'

Carney changed the frequency of his radio to make a unicom call. Tim glanced at him. 'Calling the Company,' Carney explained. When he got Talbot he asked to be patched through the telephone to his home.

As he waited, Carney and Tim went through the litany of the pre-landing check.

'Flaps approach . . . twenty degrees.'

'Twenty, twenty, green,' Carney responded.

'Speed check.'

'One hundred eighty knots.'

As Tim spoke into his mike – 'Chicago, Niner *Charlie Juliet*, crossing the numbers; through five for four' – Carney

heard the phone start to ring in their Manhattan town house seven hundred miles away.

Come on, Percey. Pick up! Where *are* you?

Please . . .

ATC said, 'Niner *Charlie Juliet*, reduce speed to one eight zero. Contact tower. Good evening.'

'Roger, Chicago. One eight zero knots. Evening.'

Three rings.

Where the hell is she? What's wrong?

The knot in his gut grew tighter.

The turbofan sang, a grinding sound. Hydraulics moaned. Static crackled in Carney's headset.

Tim sang out, 'Flaps thirty. Gear down.'

'Flaps, thirty, thirty, green. Gear down. Three green.'

And then, at last – in his earphone – a sharp click.

His wife's voice saying, 'Hello?'

He laughed out loud in relief.

Carney started to speak but, before he could, the aircraft gave a huge jolt – so vicious that in a fraction of a second the force of the explosion ripped the bulky headset from his ears and the men were flung forward into the control panel. Shrapnel and sparks exploded around them.

Stunned, Carney instinctively grabbed the unresponsive yoke with his left hand; he no longer had a right one. He turned toward Tim just as the man's bloody, rag-doll body disappeared out of the gaping hole in the side of the fuselage.

'Oh, God. No, no . . .'

Then the entire cockpit broke away from the disintegrating plane and rose into the air, leaving the fuselage and wings and engines of the Lear behind, engulfed in a ball of gassy fire.

'Oh, Percey,' he whispered, 'Percey . . .'

Though there was no longer a microphone to speak into.

Chapter TWO

Big as asteroids, bone yellow.

The grains of sand glowed on the computer screen. The man was sitting forward, neck aching, eyes in a hard squint – from concentration, not from any flaw in vision.

In the distance, thunder. The early morning sky was yellow and green and a storm was due at any moment. This had been the wettest spring on record.

Grains of sand . . .

‘Enlarge,’ he commanded, and dutifully the image on the computer doubled in size.

Strange, he thought.

‘Cursor down . . . stop.’

Leaning forward again, straining, studying the screen.

Sand, Lincoln Rhyme reflected, is a criminalist’s delight: bits of rock, sometimes mixed with other material, ranging from .05 to 2 millimeters (larger than that is gravel, smaller is silt). It adheres to a perp’s clothing like sticky paint and conveniently leaps off at crime scenes and hideouts to link murderer and murdered. It also can tell a great deal about where a suspect has been. Opaque sand means he’s been in the desert. Clear means beaches. Hornblende means Canada.

Obsidian, Hawaii. Quartz and opaque igneous rock, New England. Smooth gray magnetite, the western Great Lakes.

But where this particular sand had come from, Rhyme didn't have a clue. Most of the sand in the New York area was quartz and feldspar. Rocky on Long Island Sound, dusty on the Atlantic, muddy on the Hudson. But this was white, glistening, ragged, mixed with tiny red spheres. And what are those rings? White stone rings like microscopic slices of calamari. He'd never seen anything like this.

The puzzle had kept Rhyme up till 4 A.M. He'd just sent a sample of the sand to a colleague at the FBI's crime lab in Washington. He'd had it shipped off with great reluctance – Lincoln Rhyme hated someone else answering his own questions.

Motion at the window beside his bed. He glanced toward it. His neighbors – two compact peregrine falcons – were awake and about to go hunting. Pigeons beware, Rhyme thought. Then he cocked his head, muttering, 'Damn,' though he was referring not to his frustration at identifying this uncooperative evidence but at the impending interruption.

Urgent footsteps were on the stairs. Thom had let visitors in and Rhyme didn't want visitors. He glanced toward the hallway angrily. 'Oh, not now, for God's sake.'

But they didn't hear, of course, and wouldn't have paused even if they had.

Two of them . . .

One was heavy. One not.

A fast knock on the open door and they entered.

'Lincoln.'

Rhyme grunted.

Lon Sellitto was a detective first grade, NYPD, and the one responsible for the giant steps. Padding along beside him was his slimmer, younger partner, Jerry Banks, spiffy in his pork gray suit of fine plaid. He'd doused his cowlick with

spray – Rhyme could smell propane, isobutane, and vinyl acetate – but the charming spike still stuck up like Dagwood’s.

The rotund man looked around the second-floor bedroom, which measured twenty by twenty. Not a picture on the wall. ‘What’s different, Linc? About the place?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Oh, hey, I know – it’s clean,’ Banks said, then stopped abruptly as he ran into his faux pas.

‘Clean, sure,’ said Thom, immaculate in ironed tan slacks, white shirt, and the flowery tie that Rhyme thought was pointlessly gaudy though he himself had bought it, mail order, for the young man. The aide had been with Rhyme for several years now – and though he’d been fired by Rhyme twice, and quit once, the criminalist had rehired the unflappable nurse/assistant an equal number of times. Thom knew enough about quadriplegia to be a doctor and had learned enough forensics from Lincoln Rhyme to be a detective. But he was content to be what the insurance company called a ‘care-giver,’ though both Rhyme and Thom disparaged the term. Rhyme called him, variously, his ‘mother hen’ or ‘nemesis’, both of which delighted the aide no end. He now maneuvered around the visitors. ‘He didn’t like it but I hired Molly Maids and got the place scrubbed down. Practically needed to be fumigated. He wouldn’t talk to me for a whole day afterwards.’

‘It didn’t need to be cleaned. I can’t find anything.’

‘But then he doesn’t *have* to find anything, does he?’ Thom countered. ‘That’s what *I’m* for.’

No mood for banter. ‘Well?’ Rhyme cast his handsome face toward Sellitto. ‘What?’

‘Got a case. Thought you might wanta help.’

‘I’m busy.’

‘What’s all that?’ Banks asked, motioning toward a new computer sitting beside Rhyme’s bed.

'Oh,' Thom said with infuriating cheer, 'he's state-of-the-art now. Show them, Lincoln. Show them.'

'I don't *want* to show them.'

More thunder but not a drop of rain. Nature, as often, was teasing today.

Thom persisted. 'Show them how it works.'

'Don't want to.'

'He's just embarrassed.'

'Thom,' Rhyme muttered.

But the young aide was as oblivious to threats as he was to recrimination. He tugged his hideous, or stylish, silk tie. 'I don't know why he's behaving this way. He seemed very proud of the whole setup the other day.'

'Did not.'

Thom continued. 'That box there' – he pointed to a beige contraption – 'that goes to the computer.'

'Whoa, two hundred megahertz?' Banks asked, nodding at the computer. To escape Rhyme's scowl he'd grabbed the question like an owl snagging a frog.

'Yep,' Thom said.

But Lincoln Rhyme was not interested in computers. At the moment Lincoln Rhyme was interested only in microscopic rings of sculpted calamari and the sand they nestled in.

Thom continued. 'The microphone goes into the computer. Whatever he says, the computer recognizes. It took the thing a while to learn his voice. He mumbled a lot.'

In truth Rhyme was quite pleased with the system – the lightning-fast computer, a specially made ECU box – environmental control unit – and voice-recognition software. Merely by speaking he could command the cursor to do whatever a person using a mouse and keyboard could do. And he could dictate too. Now, with words, he could turn the heat up or down and the lights on or off, play the stereo or TV, write on his word processor, make phone calls, and send faxes.

‘He can even write music,’ Thom said to the visitors. ‘He tells the computer what notes to mark down on the staff.’

‘Now that’s useful,’ Rhyme said sourly. ‘Music.’

For a C4 quad – Rhyme’s injury was at the fourth cervical vertebra – nodding was easy. He could also shrug, though not as dismissingly as he’d have liked. His other circus trick was moving his left ring finger a few millimeters in any direction he chose. That had been his entire physical repertoire for the past several years; composing a sonata for the violin was probably not in the offing.

‘He can play games too,’ Thom said.

‘I hate games. I don’t play games.’

Sellitto, who reminded Rhyme of a large unmade bed, gazed at the computer and seemed unimpressed. ‘Lincoln,’ he began gravely. ‘There’s a task-forced case. Us ’n’ the feds. Ran into a problem last night.’

‘Ran into a brick wall,’ Banks ventured to say.

‘We thought . . . well, *I* thought you’d want to help us out on this one.’

Want to help them out?

‘I’m working on something now,’ Rhyme explained. ‘For Perkins, in fact.’ Thomas Perkins, special agent in charge of the Manhattan office of the FBI. ‘One of Fred Dellray’s boys is missing.’

Special Agent Fred Dellray, a longtime veteran with the Bureau, was a handler for most of the Manhattan office’s undercover agents. Dellray himself had been one of the Bureau’s top undercover ops. He’d earned commendations from the director himself for infiltrating everything from Harlem drug lords’ headquarters to black militant organizations. One of Dellray’s agents, Tony Panelli, had gone missing a few days earlier.

‘Perkins told us,’ Banks said. ‘Pretty weird.’

Rhyme rolled his eyes at the unartful phrase. Though he

couldn't dispute it. The agent had disappeared from his car across from the Federal Building in downtown Manhattan around 9 P.M. The streets weren't crowded but they weren't deserted either. The engine of the Bureau's Crown Victoria was running, the door open. There was no blood, no gunshot residue, no scuff marks indicating struggle. No witnesses – at least no witnesses willing to talk.

Pretty weird indeed.

Perkins had a fine crime scene unit at his disposal, including the Bureau's Physical Evidence Response Team. But it had been Rhyme who'd set up PERT and it was Rhyme whom Dellray had asked to work the scene of the disappearance. The crime scene officer who worked as Rhyme's partner had spent hours at Panelli's car and had come away with no unidentified fingerprints, ten bags of meaningless trace evidence, and – the only possible lead – a few dozen grains of this very odd sand.

The grains that now glowed on his computer screen, as smooth and huge as heavenly bodies.

Sellitto continued. 'Perkins's gonna put other people on the Panelli case, Lincoln, if you'll help us. Anyway, I think you'll want this one.'

That verb again – *want*. What was this all about?

Rhyme and Sellitto had worked together on major homicide investigations some years ago. Hard cases – and public cases. He knew Sellitto as well as he knew any cop. Rhyme generally distrusted his own ability to read people (his ex-wife, Blaine, had said – often, and heatedly – that Rhyme could spot a shell casing a mile away and miss a human being standing in front of him), but he could see now that Sellitto was holding back.

'Okay, Lon. What is it? Tell me.'

Sellitto nodded toward Banks.

'Phillip Hansen,' the young detective said significantly, lifting a puny eyebrow.

Rhyme knew the name only from newspaper articles. Hansen – a large, hard-living businessman originally from Tampa, Florida – owned a wholesale company in Armonk, New York. It was remarkably successful and he'd become a multimillionaire thanks to it. Hansen had a good deal for an entrepreneur. He never had to look for customers, never advertised, never had receivables problems. In fact, if there was any downside to PH Distributors, Inc., it was that the federal government and New York State were expending great energy to shut it down and throw its president in jail. Because the product Hansen's company sold was not, as he claimed, secondhand military surplus vehicles but weaponry, more often than not stolen from military bases or imported illegally. Earlier in the year two army privates had been killed when a truck-load of small arms was hijacked near the George Washington Bridge on its way to New Jersey. Hansen was behind it – a fact the U.S. attorney and the New York attorney general knew but couldn't prove.

'Perkins and us're hammering together a case,' Sellitto said. 'Working with the army CID. But it's been a bitch.'

'And nobody ever dimes him,' said Banks. 'Ever.'

Rhyme supposed that, no, no one would dare snitch on a man like Hansen. The young detective continued. 'But finally, last week, we got a break. See, Hansen's a pilot. His company's got warehouses at Mamaroneck Airport – that one near White Plains? A judge issued paper to check 'em out. Naturally we didn't find anything. But then last week, it's midnight? The airport's closed but there're some people there, working late. They see a guy fitting Hansen's description drive out to this private plane, load some big duffel bags into it, and take off. Unauthorized. No flight plan, just takes off. Comes back forty minutes later, lands, gets back into his car, and burns rubber out of there. No duffel bags. The witnesses give the registration number to the

FAA. Turns out it's Hansen's private plane, not his company's.'

Rhyme said, 'So he knew you were getting close and he wanted to ditch something linking him to the killings.' He was beginning to see why they wanted him. Some seeds of interest here. 'Air Traffic Control track him?'

'LaGuardia had him for a while. Straight out over Long Island Sound. Then he dropped below radar for ten minutes or so.'

'And you drew a line to see how far he could get over the Sound. There're divers out?'

'Right. Now, we knew that soon as Hansen heard we had the three witnesses he was gonna rabbit. So we managed to put him away till Monday. Federal Detention.'

Rhyme laughed. 'You got a judge to buy probable cause on that?'

'Yeah, with the risk of flight,' Sellitto said. 'And some bullshit FAA violations and reckless endangerment thrown in. No flight plan, flying below FAA minimums.'

'What'd Mister Hansen say?'

'He knows the drill. Not a word to the arrestings, not a word to the prosecutors. Lawyer denies everything and's preparing suit for wrongful arrest, yadda, yadda, yadda . . . So if we find the fucking bags we go to the grand jury on Monday and, bang, he's away.'

'Provided,' Rhyme pointed out, 'there's anything incriminating in the bags.'

'Oh, there's something incriminating.'

'How do you know?'

'Because Hansen's scared. He's hired somebody to kill the witnesses. He's already got one of 'em. Blew up his plane last night outside of Chicago.'

And, Rhyme thought, they want me to find the duffel bags . . . Fascinating questions were now floating into his

mind. Was it possible to place the plane at a particular location over the water because of a certain type of precipitation or saline deposit or insect found crushed on the leading edge of the wing? Could one calculate the time of death of an insect? What about salt concentrations and pollutants in the water? Flying that low to the water, would the engines or wings pick up algae and deposit it on the fuselage or tail?

'I'll need some maps of the Sound,' Rhyme began. 'Engineering drawings of his plane—'

'Uhm, Lincoln, that's not why we're here,' Sellitto said.

'Not to find the bags,' Banks added.

'No? Then?' Rhyme tossed an irritating tickle of black hair off his forehead and frowned the young man down.

Sellitto's eyes again scanned the beige ECU box. The wires that sprouted from it were dull red and yellow and black and lay curled on the floor like sunning snakes.

'We want you to help us find the killer. The guy Hansen hired. Stop him before he gets the other two wits.'

'And?' For Rhyme saw that Sellitto still had not mentioned what he was holding in reserve.

With a glance out the window the detective said, 'Looks like it's the Dancer, Lincoln.'

'The Coffin Dancer?'

Sellitto looked back and nodded.

'You're sure?'

'We heard he'd done a job in D.C. a few weeks ago. Killed a congressional aide mixed up in arms deals. We got pen registers and found calls from a pay phone outside Hansen's house to the hotel where the Dancer was staying. It's gotta be him, Lincoln.'

On the screen the grains of sand, big as asteroids, smooth as a woman's shoulders, lost their grip on Rhyme's interest.

'Well,' he said softly, 'that's a problem now, isn't it?'

Chapter THREE

She remembered:

Last night, the cricket chirp of the phone intruding on the drizzle outside their bedroom window.

She'd looked at it contemptuously as if NYNEX were responsible for the nausea and the suffocating pain in her head, the strobe lights flashing behind her eyelids.

Finally she'd rolled to her feet and snagged the receiver on the fourth ring.

'Hello?'

Answered by the empty-pipe echo of a unicom radio-to-phone patch.

Then a voice. Perhaps.

A laugh. Perhaps.

A huge roar. A click. Silence.

No dial tone. Just silence, shrouded by the crashing waves in her ears.

Hello? Hello? . . .

She'd hung up the phone and returned to the couch, watched the evening rain, watched the dogwood bend and straighten in the spring storm's breeze. She'd fallen asleep again. Until the phone rang again a half hour later with the

news about Lear Niner *Charlie Juliet* going down on approach and carrying her husband and young Tim Randolph to their deaths.

Now, on this gray morning, Percey Rachael Clay knew that the mysterious phone call last night had been from her husband. Ron Talbot – the one who'd courageously called to deliver the news of the crash – had explained he'd patched a call through to her at around the time the Lear had exploded.

Ed's laugh . . .

Hello? Hello?

Percey uncorked her flask, took a sip. She thought of the windy day years ago when she and Ed had flown a pontoon equipped Cessna 180 to Red Lake, Ontario, setting down with about six ounces of fuel left in the tank, and celebrated their arrival by downing a bottle of label-less Canadian whiskey, which turned out to give them both the most dire hangovers of their lives. The thought brought tears to her eyes now, as the pain had then.

'Come on, Perce, enough of that, okay?' said the man sitting on the living room couch. 'Please.' He pointed to the flask.

'Oh, right,' her gravelly voice responded with controlled sarcasm. 'Sure.' And she took another sip. Felt like a cigarette but resisted. 'What the hell was he doing calling me on final?' she asked.

'Maybe he was worried about you,' Brit Hale suggested. 'Your migraine.'

Like Percey, Hale hadn't slept last night. Talbot had called him too with the news of the crash and he'd driven down from his Bronxville apartment to be with Percey. He'd stayed with her all night, helped her make the calls that had to be made. It was Hale, not Percey, who'd delivered the news to her own parents in Richmond.

'He had no business doing that, Brit. A call on final.'

‘That had nothing to do with what happened,’ Hale said gently.

‘I know,’ she said.

They’d known each other for years. Hale had been one of Hudson Air’s first pilots and had worked for free for the first four months until his savings ran out and he had to approach Percey reluctantly with a request for some salary. He never knew that she’d paid it out of her own savings, for the company didn’t turn a profit for a year after incorporation. Hale resembled a lean, stern schoolteacher. In reality he was easygoing – the perfect antidote to Percey – and a droll practical joker who’d been known to roll a plane into inverted flight if his passengers were particularly rude and unruly and keep it there until they calmed down. Hale often took the right seat to Percey’s left and was her favorite copilot in the world. ‘Privilege to fly with you, ma’am,’ he’d say, offering his imperfect Elvis Presley impersonation. ‘Thank you very much.’

The pain behind her eyes was nearly gone now. Percey had lost friends – to crashes mostly – and she knew that psychic loss was an anesthetic to physical pain.

So was whiskey.

Another hit from the flask. ‘Hell, Brit.’ She slumped into the couch beside him. ‘Oh, hell.’

Hale slipped his strong arm around her. She dropped her head, covered with dark curls, to his shoulder. ‘Be okay, babe,’ he said. ‘Promise. What can I do?’

She shook her head. It was an answerless question.

A sparse mouthful of bourbon, then she looked at the clock. Nine A.M. Ed’s mother would be here any minute. Friends, relatives . . . There was the memorial service to plan . . .

So much to do.

‘I’ve got to call Ron,’ she said. ‘We’ve got to do something. The Company . . .’

In airlines and charters the word ‘company’ didn’t mean

the same as in any other business. The Company, cap C, was an entity, a living thing. It was spoken of with reverence or frustration or pride. Sometimes with sorrow. Ed's death had inflicted a wound in many lives, the Company's included, and the injury could very well be lethal.

So much to do . . .

But Percey Clay, the woman who never panicked, the woman who'd calmly controlled deadly Dutch rolls, the nemesis of Lear 23s, who'd recovered from graveyard spirals that would have sent many seasoned pilots into spins, now sat paralyzed on the couch. Odd, she thought, as if from a different dimension, I can't move. She actually looked at her hands and feet to see if they were bone white and bloodless.

Oh, Ed . . .

And Tim Randolph too, of course. As good a copilot as you'd ever find, and good first officers were rare. She pictured his young, round face, like a younger Ed's. Grinning inexplicably. Alert and obedient but firm – giving no-nonsense orders, even to Percey herself, when he had command of the aircraft.

'You need some coffee,' Hale announced, heading for the kitchen. 'I'll getcha a whipped double mochaccino latte with steamed skim.'

One of their private jokes was about sissy coffees. Real pilots, they both felt, drink only Maxwell House or Folgers.

Today, though, Hale, bless his heart, wasn't really talking about coffee. He meant: Lay off the booze. Percey took the hint. She corked the flask and dropped it on the table with a loud clink. 'Okay, okay.' She rose and paced through the living room. She caught sight of herself in the mirror. The pug face. Black hair in tight, stubborn curls. In her tormented adolescence, during a moment of despair, she'd given herself a crew cut. That'll show 'em. Though all this act of defiance did was to give the chamin' girls of the Lee School in Richmond even more ammunition against her. Percey had a slight figure

and marbles of black eyes that her mother repeatedly said were her finest quality. Meaning her only quality. And a quality that men, of course, didn't give a shit about.

Dark lines under those eyes today and hopeless matte skin – smoker's skin, she remembered from the years she went through two packs of Marlboros a day. The earring holes in her lobes had long ago grown closed.

A look out the window, past the trees, into the street in front of the town house. She caught sight of the traffic and something tugged at her mind. Something unsettling.

What? What is it?

The feeling vanished, pushed away by the ringing of the doorbell.

Percey opened the door and found two burly police officers in the entryway.

'Mrs Clay?'

'Yes.'

'NYPD.' Showing IDs. 'We're here to keep an eye on you until we get to the bottom of what happened to your husband.'

'Come in,' she said. 'Brit Hale's here too.'

'Mr Hale?' one of the cops said, nodding. 'He's here? Good. We sent a couple of Westchester County troopers to his place too.'

And it was then that she looked past one of the cops, into the street, and the elusive thought popped into her mind.

Stepping around the policemen onto the front stoop.

'We'd rather you stayed inside, Mrs Clay . . .'

Staring at the street. What was it?

Then she understood.

'There's something you should know,' she said to the officers. 'A black van.'

'A . . . ?'

'A black van. There was this black van.'

One of the officers took out a notebook. 'You better tell me about it.'

'Wait,' Rhyme said.

Lon Sellitto paused in his narration.

Rhyme now heard another set of footsteps approaching, neither heavy nor light. He knew whose they were. This was not deduction. He'd heard this particular pattern many times.

Amelia Sachs's beautiful face, surrounded by her long red hair, crested the stairs, and Rhyme saw her hesitate for a moment, then continue into the room. She was in full navy blue patrol uniform, minus only the cap and tie. She carried a Jefferson Market shopping bag.

Jerry Banks flashed her a smile. His crush was adoring and obvious and only moderately inappropriate – not many patrol officers have a history of a Madison Avenue modeling career behind them, as did tall Amelia Sachs. But the gaze, like the attraction, was not reciprocated, and the young man, a pretty boy himself despite the badly shaved face and cowlick, seemed resigned to carrying his torch a bit longer.

'Hi, Jerry,' she said. To Sellitto she gave another nod and a deferential 'sir'. (He was a detective lieutenant and a legend in Homicide. Sachs had cop genes in her and had been taught over the dinner table as well as in the academy to respect elders.)

'You look tired,' Sellitto commented.

'Didn't sleep,' she said. 'Looking for sand.' She pulled a dozen Baggies out of the shopping bag. 'I've been out collecting exemplars.'

'Good,' Rhyme said. 'But that's old news. We've been reassigned.'

'Reassigned?'

'Somebody's come to town. And we have to catch him.'

'Who?'

'A killer,' Sellitto said.

'Pro?' Sachs asked. 'OC?'

'Professional, yes,' Rhyme said. 'No OC connection that we know about.' Organized crime was the largest purveyor of for-hire killers in the country.

'He's freelance,' Rhyme explained. 'We call him the Coffin Dancer.'

She lifted an eyebrow, red from worrying with a fingernail. 'Why?'

'Only one victim's ever got close to him and lived long enough to give us any details. He's got – or had, at least – a tattoo on his upper arm: the Grim Reaper dancing with a woman in front of a coffin.'

'Well, *that's* something to put in the "Distinguishing Marks" box on an incident report,' she said wryly. 'What else you know about him?'

'White male, probably in his thirties. That's it.'

'You traced the tattoo?' Sachs asked.

'Of course,' Rhyme responded dryly. 'To the ends of the earth.' He meant this literally. No police department in any major city around the world could find any history of a tattoo like his.

'Excuse me, gentlemen and lady,' Thom said. 'Work to do.' Conversation came to a halt while the young man went through the motions of rotating his boss. This helped clear his lungs. To quadriplegics certain parts of their body become personified; they develop special relationships with them. After his spine was shattered while searching a crime scene some years ago Rhyme's arms and legs had become his cruelest enemies and he'd spent desperate energy trying to force them to do what he wanted. But they'd won, no contest, and stayed as still as wood. Then he'd confronted the racking spasms that shook his body unmercifully. He'd tried to force them to stop. Eventually they had – on their own, it seemed. Rhyme

couldn't exactly claim victory though he did accept their surrender. Then he'd turned to lesser challenges and had taken on his lungs. Finally, after a year of rehab, he weaned himself off the ventilator. Out came the trachea tube and he could breathe on his own. It was his only victory against his body and he harbored a dark superstition that the lungs were biding their time to get even. He figured he'd die of pneumonia or emphysema in a year or two.

Lincoln Rhyme didn't necessarily mind the idea of dying. But there were too many ways to die; he was determined not to go unpleasantly.

Sachs asked, 'Any leads? LKA?'

'Last known was down in the D.C. area,' Sellitto said in his Brooklyn drawl. 'That's it. Nothin' else. Oh, we hear about him some. Dellray more'n us, with all his skels and CIs, you know. The Dancer, he's like he's ten different people. Ear jobs, facial implants, silicon. Adds scars, removes scars. Gains weight, loses weight. Once he skinned this corpse – took some guy's hands off and wore 'em like gloves to fool CS about the prints.'

'Not me, though,' Rhyme reminded. 'I wasn't fooled.'

Though I still didn't get him, he reflected bitterly.

'He plans everything,' the detective continued. 'Sets up diversions then moves in. Does the job. And he fucking cleans up afterwards real efficient.' Sellitto stopped talking, looking strangely uneasy for a man who hunts killers for a living.

Eyes out the window, Rhyme didn't acknowledge his ex-partner's reticence. He merely continued the story. 'That case – with the skinned hands – was the Dancer's most recent job in New York. Five, six years ago. He was hired by one Wall Street investment banker to kill his partner. Did the job nice and clean. My CS team got to the scene and started to walk the grid. One of them lifted a wad of paper out of the trash can. It set off a load of PETN. About eight ounces, gas

enhanced. Both techs were killed and virtually every clue was destroyed.'

'I'm sorry,' Sachs said. There was an awkward silence between them. She'd been his apprentice and his partner for more than a year – and had become his friend too. Had even spent the night here sometimes, sleeping on the couch or even, as chaste as a sibling, in Rhyme's half-ton Clinatron bed. But the talk was mostly forensic, with Rhyme's lulling her to sleep with tales of stalking serial killers and brilliant cat burglars. They generally steered clear of personal issues. Now she offered nothing more than 'It must have been hard.'

Rhyme deflected the taut sympathy with a shake of his head. He stared at the empty wall. For a time there'd been art posters taped up around the room. They were long gone but his eyes played a game of connect-the-dots with the bits of tape still stuck there. A lopsided star was the shape they traced, while within him somewhere, deep, Rhyme felt an empty despair, replaying the horrid crime scene of the explosion, seeing the burnt, shattered bodies of his officers.

Sachs asked, 'The guy who hired him, he was willing to dime the Dancer?'

'Was willing to, sure. But there wasn't much he could say. He delivered cash to a drop box with written instructions. No electronic transfers, no account numbers. They never met in person.' Rhyme inhaled deeply. 'But the worst part was that the banker who'd paid for the hit changed his mind. He lost his nerve. But he had no way to get in touch with the Dancer. It didn't matter anyway. The Dancer's told him right up front: "Recall is not an option."'

Sellitto briefed Sachs about the case against Phillip Hansen, the witnesses who'd seen his plane make its midnight run, and the bomb last night.

'Who are the other wits?' she asked.

'Percey Clay, the wife of this Carney guy killed last night

in the plane. She's the president of their company, Hudson Air Charters. Her husband was VP. The other wit's Britton Hale. He's a pilot works for them. I sent baby-sitters to keep an eye on 'em both.'

Rhyme said, 'I've called Mel Cooper in. He'll be working the lab downstairs. The Hansen case is task-forced so we're getting Fred Dellray to represent the feds. He'll have agents for us if we need them and's clearing one of U.S. Marshal's wit-protection safe houses for the Clay woman and Hale.'

Lincoln Rhyme's opulent memory intruded momentarily and he lost track of what Sellitto was saying. An image of the office where the Dancer had left the bomb five years ago came to mind again.

Remembering: The trash can, blown open like a black rose. The smell of the explosive – the choking chemical scent, nothing at all like wood-fire smoke. The silky alligatoring on the charred wood. The seared bodies of his techs, drawn into the pugilistic attitude by the flames.

He was saved from this horrid reverie by the buzz of the fax machine. Jerry Banks snagged the first sheet. 'Crime scene report from the crash,' he announced.

Rhyme's head snapped toward the machine eagerly. 'Time to go to work, boys and girls!'

Wash 'em. Wash 'em off.

Soldier, are those hands clean?

Sir, they're getting there, sir.

The solid man, in his mid-thirties, stood in the washroom of a coffee shop on Lexington Avenue, lost in his task.

Scrub, scrub, scrub . . .

He paused and looked out the men's room door. Nobody seemed interested that he'd been in here for nearly ten minutes.

Back to scrubbing.

Stephen Kall examined his cuticles and big red knuckles. Lookin' clean, lookin' clean. No worms. Not a single one. He'd been feeling fine as he moved the black van off the street and parked it deep in an underground garage. Stephen had taken what tools he needed from the back of the vehicle and climbed the ramp, slipping out onto the busy street. He'd worked in New York several times before but he could never get used to all the people, a thousand people on this block alone.

Makes me feel cringey.

Makes me feel *wormy*.

And so he stopped here in the men's room for a little scrub.

Soldier, aren't you through with that yet? You've got two targets left to eliminate.

Sir, almost, sir. Have to remove the risk of any trace evidence prior to proceeding with the operation, sir.

Oh, for the luvva Christ . . .

The hot water pouring over his hands. Scrubbing with a brush he carried with him in a plastic Baggie. Squirting the pink soap from the dispenser. And scrubbing some more.

Finally he examined the ruddy hands and dried them under the hot air of the blower. No towels, no telltale fibers.

No worms either.

Stephen wore camouflage today, though not military olive drab or Desert Storm beige. He was in jeans, Reeboks, a work shirt, a gray windbreaker speckled with paint drips. On his belt was his cell phone and a large tape measure. He looked like any other contractor in Manhattan and was wearing this outfit today because no one would think twice about a workman wearing cloth gloves on a spring day.

Walking outside.

Still lots of people. But his hands were clean and he wasn't cringey anymore.

He paused at the corner and looked down the street at the building that had been the Husband's and Wife's town house but was the Wife's alone now because the Husband had been neatly blown into a million small pieces over the Land of Lincoln.

So, two witnesses were still alive and they both had to be dead before the grand jury convened on Monday. He glanced at his bulky stainless-steel watch. It was nine-thirty Saturday morning.

Soldier, is that enough time to get them both?

Sir, I may not get them both now but I still have nearly forty-eight hours, sir. That is more than sufficient time to locate and neutralize both targets, sir.

But, Soldier, do you mind challenges?

Sir, I *live for* challenges, sir.

There was a single squad car in front of the town house. Which he'd expected.

All right, we have a known kill zone in front of the house, an unknown one inside . . .

He looked up and down the street, then started along the sidewalk, his scrubbed hands tingling. The backpack weighed close to sixty pounds but he hardly felt it. Crew-cut Stephen was mostly muscle.

As he walked he pictured himself as a local. Anonymous. He didn't think of himself as Stephen or as Mr Kall or Todd Johnson or Stan Bledsoe or any of the dozens of other aliases he'd used over the past ten years. His real name was like a rusty gym set in the backyard, something you were aware of but didn't really see.

He turned suddenly and stepped into the doorway of the building opposite the Wife's town house. Stephen pushed open the front door and looked out at the large glass windows across the street, partially obscured by a flowering dogwood tree. He put on a pair of expensive yellow-tinted shooting

glasses and the glare from the window vanished. He could see figures moving around inside. One cop . . . no, two cops. A man with his back to the window. Maybe the Friend, the other witness he'd been hired to kill. And . . . yes! There was the Wife. Short. Homely. Boyish. She was wearing a white blouse. It made a good target.

She stepped out of view.

Stephen bent down and unzipped his backpack.