

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LEE CHILD

A JACK  
REACHER  
STORY

DEEP DOWN



# Praise for #1 bestselling author Lee Child and his Reacher series

“Lee Child [is] the current poster-boy of American crime fiction.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“Jack Reacher is a tough guy’s tough guy.” —*Santa Monica Mirror*

“Like his hero Jack Reacher, Lee Child seems to make no wrong steps.” —Associated Press

“Jack Reacher is one of the best thriller characters at work today.” —*Newsweek*

“Reacher is Marlowe’s literary descendant, and a 21st-century knight—only tougher.” —  
*Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

“Child has long been one of the best contemporary thriller writers.” —The Daily Beast

“That this Reacher is so effortlessly larger than life is evidence of how intense the overall series has become.” —Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

“No one kicks butt as entertainingly as Reacher.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

## Praise for *THE AFFAIR*

“The novel fans have been waiting for.” —*USA Today*

“As usual, plenty of eggs get broken in spectacular style on the way to making a Reacher omelet. Child’s mastery of high-octane plotting remains remarkable, as does his ability to inject what, in other hands, might have been cartoon characters with all the sinews that power human beings.”  
—*Booklist* (starred review)

“He is the best in the business and this only solidifies that truth.” —*RT Book Reviews*

“Exciting and suspenseful, with deceit and cover-ups, violence, and sex, this is another great entry in Child’s compelling series. Reacher’s many fans can only hope there will be many more. Highly recommended for anyone who likes intelligent, well-written, tense thrillers.” —*Library Journal* (starred review)

## Praise for *WORTH DYING FOR*

“At times here, he channels Hemingway, which makes a certain sense, since Reacher is nothing if not a chiseled Hemingway hero without the self-pity. He still channels the tough-guy prose as well as anybody alive.... This series is as good as pop fiction gets.” —*The Miami Herald*

“A master craftsman of action thrillers. More than just compulsively readable, Mr. Child’s work shows a perfectly-fashioned understanding of his protagonist, dogged and moralistic. Reacher

may get old some time, but he's sure not showing any signs of it."— *The Wall Street Journal*

"Don't pick up the latest Jack Reacher novel if you don't have some time on your hands, because *Worth Dying For* is difficult to put down.... Child manages to get an amazing amount of suspense into the novel." —Associated Press

### **Praise for *61 HOURS***

"Child's writing is superb. Not only is this thriller believable, but the descriptions of the blizzard will make readers want to hug their furnaces. Fast paced and exciting, this is highly recommended for thriller fans." —*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Child keeps his foot hard on the throttle.... As always, Child delivers enough juicy details about the landscape, the characters, and Reacher's idiosyncrasies to give the story texture and lower our pulse rates, if only momentarily.... This is Child in top form, but isn't he always?" —*Booklist* (starred review)

"Jack Reacher is much more like the heir to the Op and Marlowe than Spenser ever was.... Reacher is as appealingly misanthropic as ever." —*Esquire*

### **Praise for *GONE TOMORROW***

"Hold on tight. This is No. 13 in Lee Child's action-packed series starring ex-military cop/pit bull Jack Reacher, and it may be the best.... This novel will give you whiplash as you rabidly turn pages, packed with layers of intrigue, murder, deceit and mystery." —*USA Today*

"Thriller fans like books that start on the first page. This newest page-turner from Lee Child starts with the first sentence.... Child really is that good at heroic suspense writing." —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Child is famous for his can't-catch-your-breath openings, and *Gone Tomorrow* features one of his most provocative ... edgy, nerve-wracking and thoroughly engrossing, *Gone Tomorrow* is so insanely fast-paced that it's simply over too soon." —*The Miami Herald*

### **Praise for *NOTHING TO LOSE***

"Electrifying ... utterly addictive ... dazzles. Not for nothing has the cover art of his recent books depicted a bull's-eye." —*The New York Times*

"Explosive and nearly impossible to put down." —*People*, "Sizzling Summer Reads"

"Child's hard-boiled meal ticket shows no signs of drying up anytime soon. Thank goodness." —*Entertainment Weekly* (A-)

### **Praise for *BAD LUCK AND TROUBLE***

"Electrifying ... A top-tier Reacher book." —Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

“As always, the action is intense, the pace unrelenting, and the violence unforgiving. Child remains the reigning master at combining breakneck yet brilliantly constructed plotting with characters who continually surprise us with their depth.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“Perhaps there are action-lit writers more recognizable than Child, but the bet is that none of them will turn in a tighter-plotted, richer-peopled, faster-paced page-turner this year.” —*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

### **Praise for *THE HARD WAY***

“The best thriller writer of the moment.” —*The New York Times*

“Jack Reacher, the tough-minded hero of a series of best-selling noir thrillers, has all the elements that have made this genre so popular among men for decades. He travels the country dispensing his own form of justice, often violently and without remorse.... Reacher is doing something surprising: winning the hearts of many women readers.” —*The Wall Street Journal*

### **Praise for *ONE SHOT***

“Ranks in the first tier ... Before it’s all, vividly, over, one feels confident that Reacher—smart, rootless, and brave—will not only get his man but make him suffer.” —*The New Yorker*

**By Lee Child**

Killing Floor

Die Trying

Tripwire

Running Blind

Echo Burning

Without Fail

Persuader

The Enemy

One Shot

The Hard Way

Bad Luck and Trouble

Nothing to Lose

Gone Tomorrow

61 Hours

Worth Dying For

Second Son (short story)

The Affair

Deep Down (short story)

*Deep Down* is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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Reacher's designated handler told him it wasn't going to be easy. There were going to be difficulties. Numerous and various. A real challenge. The guy had no kind of a bedside manner. Normally handlers started with the good news.

*Maybe there isn't any*, Reacher thought.

The handler was an Intelligence colonel named Cornelius Christopher, but that was the only thing wrong with him. He looked like a decent guy. Despite the fancy name he seemed to have turned out fairly plain and pragmatic. Reacher would have liked him, except he had never met him before. Going undercover with a handler you never met before led to inefficiency. Or worse.

Christopher asked, "How much did they tell you yesterday?"

Reacher said, "I was in Frankfurt yesterday. Which is in Germany. No one told me anything. Except to get on a plane to Dulles, and then report to this office."

"I see," Christopher said.

"What should they have told me?"

"You really know nothing about this?"

"Some local trouble with staff officers."

"So they did tell you something."

"No one told me anything. But I'm an investigator. I do this stuff for a living. And some things are fairly obvious. I'm a relatively new guy who has so far been posted almost exclusively overseas. Therefore I'm almost certainly unknown to the kind of staff officer who doesn't get out much."

"Out of where?"

"The Beltway, for instance. Call it a two-mile radius from this very office. Maybe they also have a fishing cottage on a lake somewhere. But that's not the kind of place I'm likely to have been."

"You're not very happy, are you?"

"I've had more promising days."

"What's your problem?"

"When does this thing start?"

"This afternoon."

"Well, that's my problem, right there. I've got a handler I never met before and a situation I know nothing about."

"Scared?"

"It's bad workmanship. It's shoddy and confused. It shows no pride. Because you guys are always the same. There's a clue in the title, remember?"

"What title?"

"Your title. Military Intelligence. Ideally both of those words should mean something to you. But surely at least one of them does. One at a time, if you wish. On alternate days, if you want."

"Feel free to give me your honest opinion."

Reacher said, "So what do I need to know?"



And at that same minute a car backed out of a driveway, in a distant location, slowly, a front-wheel-drive car, with a yelp as the tires turned. Not the shriek of speed. The opposite. A suburban sound, rubber on a tanned blacktop driveway, like the smell of the sprinkler on the summer air.

Then the car paused and the driver selected a forward gear and the car rolled south, gently over the speed bumps that the driver himself had argued should be put in, for the safety of the children.

Then the car turned a little west, toward the highway, ready to join the mighty flow toward the capital.

\*

Colonel Cornelius Christopher sat forward and made a space on his desk, paired hands coming together back to back, and then sweeping apart, pushing clutter aside. The move was emphatic. But purely metaphorical. There was nothing on the desk. No clutter. A good man-manager, Reacher thought. *He let me have my say, and now we're moving right along.*

Christopher said, "There's no danger. It's going to be all talking."

Reacher said, "Talking about what?"

"You were right, it's about staff officers. There are four of them. One of them is bad. They're all political liaison people. To the House and the Senate. They practically live there. You know the type. Going places, fast track, better not to get in their way."

"Specifically?"

"The army is asking for a new sniper rifle. We're giving evidence to some new pre-committee. Begging, basically. Our legislative overseers. In fact, not even really. They sent senior staffers instead. We're not even talking to elected officials."

"Now you don't sound very happy."

"I'm not here to be happy. The liaison officers are sitting in on these hearings, obviously. And one of them is leaking. Design criteria, load, range, size, shape, weight and budget."

"Leaking to who?"

"A likely bidder located overseas, we assume. A foreign manufacturer, in other words. Someone that wants the business. Someone that likes a rigged game."

"Is the business worth it? How many sniper rifles do we buy? And how much do we pay for them?"

"It's the implied endorsement. They can sell copies for five grand each to the freak market. The price of a decent used car. As many as they want. Like selling crack."

"Who else is at these hearings?"

"There's our four liaison and the four staffers we're pitching to, plus our procurement guy and the Marine procurement guy, plus a Ranger sniper and a Marine sniper for color commentary."

"The Marines are involved?"

"In a minority way. They didn't bring their own liaison, for instance. But it's definitely a joint project. No other way of doing a thing like this."

"So why wouldn't it be the Marines leaking? Their procurement guy or their sniper? Why assume it's our guys?"

"The leaks are via a fax machine inside the Capitol Building. Which is where our liaison guys have their offices."

"How certain are you of that?"

"Completely."

“Could be the staffers. They’re in the Capitol Building, presumably.”

“Different phone network. Our legislative overseers are on some new super-duper thing. Our offices are still steam-powered.”

“OK,” Reacher said. “So it’s one of our guys.”

“I’m afraid so,” Christopher said.

“Motive?”

“Money,” Christopher said. “Got to be. I can’t see anyone forming a deep ideological attachment to a European firearms manufacturer. Can you? And money is always a factor for officers like these. They’re mixing with corporate lawyers and lobbyists all the time. Easy to feel like the poor relation.”

“Can’t we just watch their fax machine?”

“Not inside the Capitol Building. Our legislative overseers don’t like surveillance. Too many unintended consequences.”

“Are they sending to an overseas fax number?”

“No, it’s a local number. But these guys hire local people. As agents and lobbyists.”

“So my job is what?”

“To find out which one of our guys is the bad apple. By talking to them.”

“Where?”

“In the committee, at first. The Ranger sniper has been recalled. Personal reasons. You’re going to take his place.”

“As what?”

“Another Ranger sniper.”

“With a real Marine sniper in the room? I’ll be asked for opinions. He’ll nail me in a second.”

“So be Delta Force, not Rangers. Be mysterious. Don’t say anything. Be all weird and silent. Grow a beard.”

“Before this afternoon?”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ve seen your file. You know which end of a rifle is which. We have confidence in you.”

“Thank you.”

“There’s one other thing.”

“Which is?”

“Our liaison guys are not guys. They’re women.”

“All of them?”

“All four.”

“Does that make a difference?”

“I sincerely hope so. Some of the talking is going to have to be social. That’s easier with women. You can do it one on one. Men always want to drink in groups.”

“So I’m here to take women to bars, and ask them what they want to drink, and by the way are they leaking military secrets overseas? Is that the idea?”

“You’ll have to be more subtle than that. But yes, it’s a kind of interrogation. That’s all. Which you’re supposed to be good at. You’re supposed to do this stuff for a living.”

“In which case why not arrest them all and interrogate them properly?”

“Because three of the four are innocent. Where there’s smoke there’s fire, and so on. Their careers would be hurt.”

“That never stopped you before.”

“We never had fast track people before. Not like this. Going places. We wouldn’t cripple them all.

One of them would survive, and she'd get her revenge."

Reacher said, "I'm just trying to establish the rules of engagement."

"Anything that wouldn't get thrown out of court for blatant illegality."

"Blatant?"

"Flashing red with a siren. That kind of blatant."

"That bad?"

"We can't tolerate this kind of thing. Not with a foreign manufacturer. We have politicians to please, and they have donors to protect. American donors."

"Who like a rigged game."

"There's two different kinds of rigged. Our kind, and their kind."

"Understood," Reacher said.

"There's no danger," Christopher said again. "It's all just talking."

"So what are the difficulties? What's not going to be easy?"

"That's complicated," Christopher said.

\*

The front-wheel-drive car joined the traffic stream on the highway. It became just one of thousands, all heading the same way, all fast and focused and linear and metallic, like giant rounds fired from giant chain gun barrels somewhere far behind them. Which was a mental image the driver liked very much. He was a bullet, implacable and relentless, singular in his purpose. He was heading for his target. His aim was true.

Across the barrier no one was heading in the other direction. The morning flow was all one way, high speed and crowded, toward the distant city.

\*

Christopher did the thing with his hands again, clearing metaphorical clutter off his desk, and out of the conversation. Ready for a new topic. The difficulties. He said, "It's a speed issue. We have to be quick. And at the same time we have to keep things normal for the Marine Corps. We can't let them suspect we have a leak. So we can't stop talking, or they'll guess. But we can't let much more stuff go overseas. So you can't waste time."

Reacher said, "What, this is going to be like speed dating?"

"You're new in town, so why wouldn't you?"

"I would," Reacher said. "Believe me. It would be like a dream come true. But it takes two to tango. And I'm a realistic guy. On a good day I could get a woman to look at me. Maybe. But four women all at once is not very likely."

Christopher nodded.

"That's the complication," he said. "That's the difficulty we were worrying about. Plus, these women are scary. West Pointers, off-the-charts IQs. Fast track. Going places. You can imagine."

"I don't have to imagine. I was at West Point."

"We know. We checked. You didn't overlap with any of them."

"Are any of them married?"

"No, fortunately. Fast track women don't get married. Not until the time is right."

"Any serious relationships?"

“Same answer.”

“Are they older or younger than me?”

“Older. Twenty-nine and thirty.”

“Then that’s another negative. Most women date older men. And what rank am I going to be?”

“You’re going in as a sergeant. Most snipers are.”

“Women like that don’t want enlisted men.”

Christopher nodded again. “I said at the beginning this wasn’t going to be easy. But think logically. You might not need to go through all four. You might hit lucky the very first time. Or the second. And you might just know anyway. We have to assume the guilty one will resist any kind of contact. It could be that three say yes and one says no. In which case she’s the one.”

“They’ll all resist contact. They’ll all say no.”

“Maybe one slightly more emphatically than the others.”

“I’m not sure I could tell the difference. It always feels about the same to me. My social antennae must not be very well developed.”

“We don’t see another way of doing this.”

Reacher nodded.

He asked, “Did you get me a uniform?”

“We got you a suit.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re going to be a Ranger. Or Delta. And they like to show up in civvies. It makes them feel like secret agents.”

“It won’t fit.”

“The suit? It’ll fit. Your height and weight are in your file. It was easy. It was like ordering anything. Except bigger.”

“Have you got bios on these women?”

“Detailed,” Christopher said. “Plus transcripts of everything said at the hearings so far. You should probably read those first. The way they talk will tell you more than the bios.”

\*

Five miles west, across the Potomac River, a thirty-year-old woman belted a fanny pack low on her hips and moved it around until it was comfortable, in its accustomed position. Then she bent forward and flipped her hair back and slid a toweling band in place, easing it back, and back, until it was seated just right. Then she kicked the hallway baseboard for luck, left toes, right toes, and then she opened her door and stepped out and ran in place for a moment, just gently, warming up, loosening, getting ready, facing it down.

Five miles.

Thirty minutes.

Possible.

It would depend on the lights, fundamentally. If more than half of the crosswalks were green, she would make it. Fifty-one percent. That was all she needed. Less than that, she wouldn’t. Simple arithmetic. A fact of life. No disgrace.

Except it was. Failure was always a disgrace.

She took a breath, and another, and she hit her watch, and she ran down her path, and left onto the sidewalk, and she settled in for the first unbroken stretch. Long, easy strides, relaxed but pushing just

a little, breathing well, moving well, her hair swinging behind her in a perfect circular rhythmic pattern, symmetrical, like a metronome.

The first crosswalk was green.

Reacher started with the transcripts. The pre-committee hearings. There were records of two separate sessions, the first two weeks ago, and the second one week ago. Hence the rush. The third session was due.

The transcripts were exactly what transcripts should be. Every vocal sound uttered in the room had been transcribed onto paper. Every *um* and *er* and *you know*, every false start, every repetition, every unfinished sentence, every stutter and stammer, every hopeless tangle and broken train of thought. Reading the pages was almost like hearing the voices. But not quite. There was a semi-real quality. Speech never hit paper just right, however good the transcriber.

The first to speak was one of the Senate staffers. Reacher could picture the guy. Not young. Disrespectful to send a kid, unless the kid was a hotshot, and hotshots didn't get sent to waste time listening for sixteen hours before saying no to the army. So it would be an older guy, solid and substantial and been-there-forever, but a clear B-lister all the same, because A-listers didn't get sent to waste time listening for sixteen hours before saying no to the army, either.

This particular example of a senior B-lister sounded puffed-up and bossy. He started out by making himself chairman of the board. He just announced it. No one objected. Not that Reacher expected anyone to. Presumably the guy had a dynamic of his own going on with the other staffers, and why would the army or the jarheads care which one of the assholes did what? So the guy went ahead and formally recited the purpose of the meeting, which he said was to examine available courses of action in the light of the perceived requirement for a new infantry weapon, namely a sniper rifle.

Reacher didn't like that sentence at all. Because of the word *perceived*. Clearly that was how the argument was going to go. *You don't really need this. Yes, we do. Why?* Which was the big bureaucratic elephant trap, right there. The on-the-ground snipers would drift the wrong way. Had they ever missed a shot because of inferior equipment? Hell no, sir, we *never* miss our shots. Hell, we can use *anything*. Hell, we could make our own damn sniper rifles out of your granddaddy's old varmint gun and a length of rainwater gutter and a roll of goddamned *duct tape*.

*Sir.*

And the procurement officers would drift too far the other way, until they started sounding like gun nuts or NRA members writing a letter to Santa Claus. So it was a ritual dance. There was no way of winning. It was 1986 and it was all about planes and missiles and computers and laser-guided integrated systems. Firearms were boring. They were going to lose. But not after their wet-dream sniper rifle specification leaked overseas. The foreign manufacturer could gear up ahead of the next attempt. Or go right ahead and build the thing and sell it to the Soviets.

Reacher turned the pages, and it went pretty much as he had guessed it would. The puffed-up bossy guy asked why they needed the new rifle, and no one answered. The bossy guy asked them to pretend he was an idiot and knew nothing about the subject. Not a big ask, Reacher thought. Then the army procurement guy spoke up and the typist must have nearly worn out his *m* key: *Um. Erm. Umm.* (Pause) *I'm ... I'm ... I'm ...*

The bossy guy said they could come back to that. Then he asked what exactly they were looking for, and things got back on solid ground with long back-and-forths about what qualities a sniper rifle needed. Cold shot accuracy was head of the list, of course. Often a sniper gets just one chance, which by definition will be out of a cold barrel. It has to hit. So the barrel is all about perfectly uniform

internal dimensions, and heavy match-grade steel, with the right twist, and maybe some fluting for stiffness and reduced weight, the whole thing properly bedded into the stock, which shouldn't swell or shrink depending on the weather, or be too heavy to carry twenty miles. And so on.

The liaison women spoke often and at length. The first up was identified by the initials *C.R.* She said, "This is extremely high-tech metalwork we're talking about here. And we'll need groundbreaking optics. Maybe we could incorporate laser range finding. This could be very exciting. It could be a great research opportunity for somebody."

A smart woman. Whole sentences. And good sentences. She was trying to make it radical, not boring, and she was hinting at big dollars getting spent in someone's district, which would be an IOU any senator would be happy to tuck away in his vest pocket. A good tactical approach.

But it didn't work. The chairman of the board asked, "Who's going to pay for all that?"

At which point the transcriber had written: *Pause.*

Reacher switched to the bio stack and found that *C.R.* was Christine Richardson. From Orange County, California. Private prep school, private high school, West Point. She was thirty years old and already a lieutenant colonel. Fast track, and the political shop was a greased rail anyway. Nice work, if you could get it.

\*

The thirty-year-old woman with the fanny pack and the headband made it through three crosswalks on green and got held up at the next three on red. The seventh turned green before she got there, but it was choked with walkers, and they were slow to get going, so she got hung up behind them, running in place for two whole seconds, then pushing through, dodging left, dodging right, refusing to cut away diagonally, because then the distance would be less than the full five miles, which would be cheating, and she never cheated. At least not with running. She made it through the crowd to the opposite corner, and she turned right, and she logged the junction in her mind as half-red and half-green, which seemed fair to her, and which meant so far she was running exactly fifty-fifty, three and a half green, three and a half red, which was not a catastrophe, but which was not great either, because she liked to bank plenty of greens well before she got closer to the center, where things were always stickier.

She ran on, another unbroken stretch, her strides still long and easy, still relaxed, but pushing now just a little more, picking up the pace, still breathing well, still moving well, her hair still swinging behind her in its perfect pattern, still symmetrical, still like a metronome.

The next crosswalk was red.

\*

The man in the car got snarled up in traffic where 270 approached the Beltway. Inevitable, and expected. Orderly deceleration by all concerned, the flow hanging together, still like the thousand-round burst from the distant chain gun, but fully subsonic now, slow and fat and stealthy in the air. 355 to Wisconsin Avenue would be jammed, so he decided to stay on until 16th Street, east of Rock Creek Park. It wouldn't be a racetrack, but it would be better. And it would drop him down all the way to Scott Circle, and then Mass Ave ran all the way to the Capitol.

He was a bullet, and he was still on target.

\*

From the other side of the office Cornelius Christopher said, "OK, library hour is over. Go get your suit now. You can take the documents with you, but not out of the building."

The supply office was two floors down, not exactly full of exploding fountain pens or cameras concealed in buttonhole flowers, but full of distantly related stuff, and certainly full of all the items needed to turn an honest man into a fake. The suit was well chosen. Not remotely expensive or up to date, but not tacky, either. Some kind of gray sharkskin weave, probably some man-made fiber in there, or a lot, wide lapels like five years ago. Exactly what an enlisted man would wear to a bank interview or a bail hearing. It was artfully creased here and there, from years in an imaginary closet, and there was even room dust on the collar. It looked like it was going to fit, except the arms and the shoulders. Reacher's file figures showed six-five and two-fifty, and he was reasonably in proportion, like a regular guy enlarged, except for arms as long as a gorilla's, and shoulders like basketballs stuffed in a sack.

There was a button-down shirt that was going to be way too small in the neck, but that was OK, because soldiers in suits were supposed to look awkward and uncomfortable. The shirt was blue and there was a red tie with it, with small blue crests on it. It could have come from a rifle club somewhere. It was a good choice. The undershirt and the boxers were standard white PX items which was fine, because Reacher had never heard of anyone buying that kind of stuff anywhere else. There was a pair of black PX socks, and a pair of black dress-uniform shoes. They looked to be the right size.

The supply guy said, "Try it all on. If there's a problem, we can do some alterations. If not, you should keep it on. Get used to it, and wear it in some. You'd already be on a bus or a plane by now, if you were really coming in from somewhere."

The shirtsleeves ended up half-staff, and the neck couldn't get close to buttoning, but the effect was OK. Every sergeant in civvies Reacher had ever seen wrenched his tie loose after about ten minutes. The suit coat was tight across the shoulders, and the sleeves stopped short of the knobs on the side of his wrists. He stood back and checked a mirror.

Perfect. A sergeant's salary was embarrassingly close to the poverty line. And sergeants didn't read *GQ*. Not usually. The whole ensemble looked exactly like a hundred dollars grudgingly spent at the outlet mall ahead of a sister-in-law's second wedding.

The supply guy said, "Keep it on. It'll do."

Reacher was supposed to supply his own pocket junk, so next up was ID. It had his real name and his photograph on it, but a master sergeant's rank, and an infantry unit sufficiently generic to be plausible for a guy deployed with Special Forces, shooting individuals one at a time from a mile away.

"How do I communicate with the colonel?" Reacher asked.

"Try the telephone," the supply guy said.

"Sometimes hard to find a phone in a hurry."

"There's no danger," the supply guy said. "It's all just talking."

\*

The woman with the fanny pack and the headband crossed the Potomac on the Francis Scott Key Bridge, high above the water, running hard, die straight, through the hot swampy air, a glorious unbroken sprint, heading for Georgetown but not planning to get there. She was going to turn right on M Street, which became Pennsylvania Avenue, all the way to Washington Circle, and then New

Hampshire Avenue to Dupont Circle, and then Mass Ave the rest of the way to the Capitol itself.

A crazy route, geographically, but any other option was either less or more than five miles, and five miles was what she ran. To the inch. Anyone else would have used her car's odometer, on a quiet Sunday morning, but she had bought a surveyor's wheel, a big yellow thing on a stick, and she had walked with it four separate times before she came up with eight thousand eight hundred yards exactly, and not a single step less or more. Precision was important.

She ran on. By that point she could feel a wide sweat stripe all the way down her back, and her throat was starting to burn. Pollution, hanging over the sluggish river, a visible cloud. But she dug in and pushed on, long, long strides, fast cadence, arms pumping. Her headband was soaked. But she was ahead of schedule. Just. Many variables to come, but she had a chance of making it. Five miles in thirty minutes. Eight thousand eight hundred yards in one thousand eight hundred seconds. Fourteen and two-thirds feet a second. Not an international distance, so there was no world record. No national record, no Olympic record. But the greats might have done it in twenty-four minutes. So thirty was acceptable. For her, with traffic, and lights, and office workers in the way.

She pushed on, breathing hard, still moving well, right up there in the zone.

\*

The traffic on 16th Street was stop-start heavy, frustration on every block, past Juniper Street, and Iris, and Hemlock, and Holly, and Geranium, and Floral. Then past Walter Reed, with the park green and serene on the right. The driver was no longer a bullet. He was shrapnel at best, subject to aerodynamic forces, jinking right and left between the lanes to win some fractional advantage on the dead-straight road. A Southern town, built for horses and buggies, perspiring gentlemen in hats and vests flicking mosquitoes away, now sclerotic with jammed vehicles, superheated air shimmering above their hoods, expensive paint winking in the sun.

He still had a long way to go. He was going to be late.

\*

Reacher walked the corridors until he smelled an office with a coffee machine going. He ducked in and helped himself to a cup, practicing a sergeant's manner, on the surface quiet and deferential, with ramrod competence showing underneath. But the office was empty, so his acting was wasted, and the coffee was burnt and stewed. But he took it with him anyway, in one hand, the sheaf of documents in the other, all the way back to Cornelius Christopher's office.

Christopher said, "You look the part."

Reacher said, "Do I?"

"Your file says you're pretty good with a long gun."

"I do my best."

"You could have been a real sniper."

"Too much waiting around. Too much mud. The best snipers are always country boys."

"And you're a city boy?"

"I'm a nowhere boy. I grew up on Marine bases."

"Yet you joined the army?"

"I'm naturally contrary."

"Did you finish your reading?"



“Not yet.”

“We checked for financial irregularities,” Christopher said. “Or financial excesses, I suppose. But they’re all living within their means. Appropriate accommodations, four-cylinder cars, good clothes but small wardrobes, modest jewelry, no vacations, not that they’d take a vacation anyway. Not fast track people. Not if they want to be Chief of Staff one day. Or a defense industry lobbyist.”

Reacher put the thirty-year-old Lieutenant Colonel Christine Richardson to the bottom of the pile and started in on the second of the women, twenty-nine years old and a mere major, name of Briony Walker, the daughter of a retired naval officer, brought up mostly in Seattle and San Diego, public elementary school, public high school, valedictorian, West Point.

Christopher said, “I hope it’s not her.”

Reacher said, “Why?”

“The naval connection.”

“You like the navy?”

“Not much, but it’s still a military family.”

The third candidate was another thirty-year-old light colonel, this one called Darwen DeWitt, and right there Reacher knew she wasn’t the product of a military family. Not with a name like that. In fact she was the daughter of a Houston businessman who owned about a hundred dent-repair franchises. Private education all the way, softball star, West Point.

The fourth was Alice Vaz, age thirty, lieutenant colonel, granddaughter of another lieutenant colonel, except this one had been called Mikhail Vasilyevich and he had been a lieutenant colonel in the Red Army. A Soviet. His son, Alice’s father, had gotten out of Hungary just in time, with a pregnant wife, and Alice had been born in the United States. A citizen. California, public elementary, public high, West Point.

“Notice anything definitive?” Christopher asked.

Reacher said, “Their names are perfectly alphabetical. Alice, Briony, Christine, and Darwen.”

“OK, apart from that.”

“Two of them are rich girls. What does that do to your money motive?”

“Maybe taking money is a habit with rich people. Maybe that’s how they get rich in the first place. Did you notice anything else?”

“No.”

“Neither did we.”

\*

The woman with the fanny pack and the headband was on New Hampshire Avenue, gunning hard up the rise, the hubbub of Dupont Circle already visible in the haze ahead. She was up two greens on the crosswalks and she could see it already, reaching the Capitol steps, slamming her hand on her wrist to stop the watch, gasping for air, once, twice, bent over, hands on knees, then raising her head, then bringing her arm up slowly, and blinking the sweat from her eyes and focusing on the pale LCD readout and seeing the magic numbers: twenty-nine something.

She could do it.

She hammered on, striding short because of the gradient, really breathing, really hurting, but still moving well.

The man in the car was still on 16th Street. He had the air on high, but even so he could feel sweat or

his back. Vinyl upholstery, and a four-cylinder motor with no power to spare for a big compressor. He was just past Harvard Street, getting to where young and rent-strapped aides were forced to live. No cars for them. They were walking to work, right alongside him, about the same speed.

He watched one, a girl, in pantyhose despite the heat, the nylon scissoring fast, ugly white athletic sneakers on her feet, with tube socks, her dress shoes no doubt in the big bag she was carrying, along with briefing papers and position papers and talking points, maybe with a makeup kit, hoping against hope everyone else would be busy and she would get to go on the television news for a comment.

There were male versions too, dressed out of a Brooks Brothers sale, heads high, striding out. Every block brought more of them, twos and threes, until both sidewalks were full of them, all heading the same way, power walking, almost an army, an unstoppable force, clean-living and idealistic young people setting out to do good for their country.

They were going to get to work before him. The traffic was awful.

\*

The transcript showed that the second pre-committee hearing had picked up more or less exactly where the first had left off, solidly on the safe grounds of technical discussions, about minutiae like actions and stocks and bedding and triggers and scopes. It was as if a collective but unspoken agreement had been reached, to avoid unpleasant issues, and to run out the clock with the kind of things shooters liked to talk about.

The four liaison women poked and prodded and drew the men out endlessly, going over things again and again, refining details until Reacher could practically see the new weapon in his mind's eye. Three of them were doing it just to keep the ball rolling, and the fourth was lapping it all up, no doubt picturing her contact in a foreign boardroom reading her fax, unable to believe the precision of the specification he was being handed.

Who was the fourth?

Christine Richardson and Darwen DeWitt did most of the talking. The transcript looked like a movie screenplay where C.R. and D.D. were the big stars. They each got plenty of ink. But their approaches were different. Richardson was rah-rah for the army, every question and every point laying a kind of guilt trip on the politicians for not rushing to make the world a safer place. DeWitt showed more concern for the Congressional point of view. She was almost a fifth skeptic. Devil's advocate, maybe, or perhaps her sympathies genuinely lay elsewhere. Perhaps her Houston dent-repair upbringing had made her a fiscal conservative. But wherever she was coming from, she laid bare the details of the secret spec as much as anyone.

Briony Walker and Alice Vaz said less. Walker was all about accuracy. The naval family. She wanted the rifle to be like the guns on her daddy's ships, artillery instruments, infallible when properly aimed. And she was weirdly interested in the end results. She asked about head shots and chest shots, about how it felt to wait while the bullet flew, about what they saw through the scope afterward. The effect was almost pornographic.

Alice Vaz asked mostly wider questions. The others debated rifle stocks made of composite materials, which wouldn't shrink or swell no matter the conditions, and she asked about the conditions. Where in the world was this rifle likely to go? How hot? How cold? How high? How wet? She didn't get clear answers, and after a spell she gave up. There were no A.V. attributions in the last twenty pages of the transcript.

Christopher asked, "Gut feeling?"

Reacher said, "Just from this?"

"Why not?"

"Then I would say it's Christine Richardson. She sounds like the prime mover. She wants everything spelled out every which way. No secrets with that woman."

"I could say she's trying to sell it. I could say she thinks the political guys will find that stuff interesting."

"No, she knows they don't. But she keeps on talking anyway. She won't let them leave anything vague or unspecified. Why is that?"

"Maybe she has OCD."

"What's that?"

"Obsessive compulsive disorder. Like alphabetizing your underwear."

"How do you alphabetize underwear?"

"Figure of speech."

"So you're happy with Richardson?"

"No," Christopher said. "We think it's her too. From the externalities in the transcripts, at least. The issue is going to be proving it."

\*

The woman with the fanny pack and the headband was on Mass Ave, approaching Scott Circle, and the man in the car was on 16th Street, approaching Scott Circle. Their average speeds for the last many minutes had been more or less identical, at ten miles an hour, her progress steady and resolute and relentless, his frustratingly stop-start-fast-fast-slow. She was pushing hard, ready for an iconic athletic breakthrough, desperate for it, and he was agitated about the time, anxious about being late, wishing he could have parked and taken the Metro without getting back at the end of the day to find all his wheels had been stolen.

It happened like this: she was on the left-hand sidewalk, on Mass Ave, and he was at right angles to her, in 16th Street's extreme right lane, wanting to come off into the circle. She was looking straight ahead, watching the traffic, watching the upcoming crosswalk lights, trying to time it, suddenly convinced that if she got held up there her bid was over. He was looking beyond the three cars ahead, to the far left, diametrically away from her, watching the traffic coming into the circle, which would have prior right of way. He was looking for an upcoming gap, trying to time it, hoping to roll up to the line and squirt on through, one unbroken move.

She sprinted, hard, hard, hard, and he moved up, craning left, looking for the gap that would be his, seeing half a gap, rolling, rolling, the cars ahead of him clearing, the gap tightening, not really a gap at all, but his last chance, so he went for it, hitting the gas, wrenching the wheel, smashing into her as she sprinted into the space she had been sure would remain, because surely no driver would try to use it.

She went up in the air and down on his windshield rail, impossibly loud metallic thumps and crashes, and he braked hard and she spun on the shiny roof and clattered over the inclined tailgate and landed head first on the blacktop.

\*

Reacher butted all the paperwork into a neat stack and put it back on Christopher's desk. Christopher

said, "Almost time to get down to business. Do you know the committee room number?"

Reacher said, "Yes."

"Do you know where it is?"

"No."

"Good. I'm not going to tell you. I want you wandering around like a little lost country boy. I want everything about this thing to be realistic from the get-go."

"Nothing about this thing is realistic. And nothing about this thing is going to work."

"Look on the bright side. You might get lucky. One of them might be into rough trade. All on the army's dime, too."

Reacher said nothing. He used the door on F Street and turned right and left onto New Jersey Avenue, and then the Capitol Building was right there in front of him, half a mile ahead, big and white and shining in the sun. He looped around into the plaza and went up the steps. A Capitol cop looked at his ID and gave him a barrage of directions so confusing that Reacher knew he would need a couple of refreshers along the way. Which he got, first from another guard, and then from a page.

The designated committee room had an impressive door made from polished mahogany; and inside, it had an impressive table made from the same wood. Around the table were seated four people. One was the transcriber. He was in shirtsleeves and had a court-reporter machine in front of him. The other three were clearly the army procurement officer, and the Marine Corps procurement officer, and the Marine sniper. The two officers were in uniform, and the sniper was in a cheap suit. Probably a Recon Marine. A Delta wannabe. The officers shook hands, and the sniper gave a millimetric nod, which Reacher returned, equally briefly, which for two alleged snipers was effusive, and for a dogface and a jarhead meeting for the first time was practically like rolling around on the floor in an ecstatic bear hug.

There was no one else in the room. No political staffers, none of the liaison women. The clock in Reacher's head said the meeting was due to start inside a minute. The clock on the wall was a minute fast, so the meeting was already underway, according to Capitol time. But nothing was happening. No one seemed to care. The Marine sniper was mute, and the procurement guys were clearly as happy to waste time sitting quiet as to waste it talking up a storm about a lost cause.

The clock ticked. No one spoke. The jarhead stared into space, infinitely still. The officers moved in their chairs and got comfortable. Reacher copied the jarhead.

Then eventually the staffers came in, followed by three women in army Class A uniform. Three women, not four. *Class A uniform, female officer, the nameplate is adjusted to individual figure differences and centered horizontally on the right side between one and two inches above the top button of the coat.* Reacher scanned the black plastic rectangles. DeWitt, Vaz, and Walker were there. Richardson was not. A and B and D were present, but C was missing. No Christine.

The four staffers looked a little upset, and the three women looked very unhappy. They all sat down, in what were clearly their accustomed places, leaving one chair empty, and the guy at the head of the table said, "Gentlemen, I'm afraid we have some very upsetting news. Earlier today Colonel Richardson was struck by a car as she was running to work. At Scott Circle."

Reacher's first thought was: *Running? Why? Was she late?* But then he understood. Jogging, fitness, shower and dress at the office. He had seen people do that.

The guy at the head of the table said, "The driver of the car is a postal worker from the Capitol mail room. Eyewitness accounts suggest risks were taken by both parties."

The army procurement officer asked, "But how is she? How's Christine?"

The guy at the head of the table said, "She died at the scene."

Silence in the room.

The guy said, "Head trauma. From when she hit the windshield rail, or from when she finally fell to the ground."

Silence. No sound in the room, except the patter of the transcriber's machine, as he caught up with what had been said. Then even he went quiet.

The guy at the head of the table said, "Accordingly, I suggest we close down this process and resume it at a more suitable time."

The army procurement officer asked, "When?"

"Let's schedule it for the next round of budget discussions."

"When are those?"

"A year or so."

Silence.

Then Briony Walker said, "No, sir. We have a duty to fulfill. The process must be completed. Colonel Richardson would have wanted it no other way."

No answer.

Walker said, "The army deserves to have its case made properly and its needs and requirements placed in the record. People would quickly forget our reason for abandoning this process. They would assume we had not been truly interested. So I propose we complete our mission by making certain every detail and every parameter have been adequately clarified and accurately recorded. Then at least our legislators will know exactly what they are approving. Or rejecting, as the case may be."

The guy at the head of the table said, "Does anyone wish to speak against the proposal?"

No answer.

"Very well," the guy said. "We will do as Major Walker suggests, and spend the rest of the day going over everything one more time. Just in case there's something we missed."

\*

And go over it they did. Reacher recognized the sequence of individual discussions from the transcripts. They started at the beginning and worked their way through. Most items were simply reiterated and reconfirmed, but there were some lingering live debates. Briony Walker was all out for bolt action. The naval family. The accuracy issue. A bolt action was operated manually, as gently as you liked, so the gun stayed still afterward, with no microscopic tremors running through it. On the other hand a semi-automatic action was operated by gunpowder explosions, and was absolutely guaranteed to put tremors into the gun afterward. Perhaps for a critical length of time.

"How long?" one of the staffers asked.

"Would be critical?" Walker asked back.

"No, how long do these tremors last?"

"Some fractions of a second, possibly."

"How big are they?"

"Certainly big enough to hurt accuracy at a thousand yards or more."

The staffer looked across the table and said, "Gentlemen?"

The army procurement guy looked at his Marine counterpart, who looked at his sniper, who stared into space. Then everyone looked at Reacher.

Reacher said, "What was the first item you discussed?"

The staffer said, "Cold shot accuracy."

"Which is important why?"

"Because a sniper will often get just one opportunity."

"With a bullet that was chambered when?"

"I think we heard testimony that it can have been several hours previously. Long waits seem to be part of the job."

"Which means any tremors will have disappeared long ago. You could chamber the round with a hammer. If you assume the money shots are always going to be singles, and widely spaced, possibly by hours or even days, then the action doesn't matter."

"So you'd accept a semi-automatic sniper rifle?"

"No, sir," Reacher said. "Major Walker is correct. Possibly the money shots won't always be the first shots. And accuracy is always worth pursuing wherever possible. And bolt actions are rugged, reliable, simple, and easy to maintain. They're also cheap."

So then came a debate about which bolt action was best. The classic Remington had fans in the room, but so did Winchester and Sako and Ruger. And at that point Alice Vaz started up with more of her big-picture questions. She said, "The way to understand our requirements, for not only actions but also stocks and bedding, it seems to me, is to understand where and how this rifle will actually be used. At what altitude? At what barometric pressures? In what extremes of temperature and humidity? What new environments might it face?"

So to shut her up the army procurement guy ran through just about everything in the War Plans locker. No names and no specific details, of course, but all the meteorological implications. High altitude plus freezing mist, extreme dry heat with sand infiltration, rain forest humidity and high ambient temperature, in snow many degrees below zero, in downpours, and so on.

Then one of the staffers insisted that the steel for the barrel had to be domestic. Which was not a huge problem. Then another insisted that the optics had to be domestic too. Which was a bigger problem. Reacher watched the women seated opposite. Darwen DeWitt wasn't saying much. Which was a surprise after her star turns the first two times out. She was a little more than medium height, and still lithe, like the teenage softball star she had been. She was dark-haired and pale-skinned, with features more likely to be called strong than pretty, but she was spared from being plain by mobile and expressive eyes. They were dark, and they moved constantly but slowly, and they blazed with intelligence and some kind of inner fire. Maybe she was burning off surplus IQ, to stop her head from exploding.

Briony Walker was the navy daughter, and she looked it, neat and controlled and severe, except for an unruly head of hair, untamed even by what looked like a recent and enthusiastic haircut. She too had an animated face, and she too had a lot going on behind her eyes.

Alice Vaz was the best looking. Reacher didn't know the word. *Elfin*, maybe? *Gamine*? Probably somewhere in between. She had darker skin than the other two, and a cap of short dark hair, and the kind of eyes that switch between a twinkle and a death ray in, well, the blink of an eye. She was smaller than the other two, and slight, in a European kind of way, and maybe smarter, too. Ultimately she was controlling the conversation, by hemming it in with questions too boring to answer. She was making the others focus.

The meeting dragged on. Reacher made no further contributions beyond an occasional grunt of assent. Eventually conversation dried up and the guy at the head of the table asked if everyone agreed the army's needs and requirements were now properly in the record. All hands went up. The guy repeated the question, this time personally to and directly at Briony Walker, possibly a courtesy,

possibly out of spite, her own words fed back to her. But Walker took no offense. She just agreed, yes, she was completely satisfied.

Whereupon the four staffers stood up and left the room, hustling and bustling and without a word, as if to take time out to say goodbye would hopelessly overburden their busy schedules. The women stood up, but the next out of the room was the army procurement guy, who just clapped his Marine buddy on the shoulder and disappeared. Whereupon the Marine clapped his NCO on the shoulder and they walked out together, leaving just Reacher and the women in the room.

\*

But it didn't stay that way for long. The women were already in a huddle. Not exactly leaning in, face to face, a tight little triangle, shoulder to shoulder, touching each other, like regular women. But maybe the West Point version. They drifted in lockstep to the door, there was a polite glance from Alice Vaz, and then they were gone.

Reacher stayed where he was. No big rush. Nothing he could have done about it. Maybe there were guys who could have pulled it off. *Hey, I'm sorry about your dead buddy that I never met, but can I separate you from your grieving pals and take you out and buy you a drink?* Reacher was not one of those guys.

But the women weren't going anywhere. He was sure of that.

He got up and stepped out and saw them where the corridor widened into a lobby. They were still together in their tight huddle. Not going anywhere. Just talking. Lots of social rules. They would end up in a bar, for sure, but not yet.

Reacher drifted back to a bank of pay phones and dialed. He leaned on the wall. He saw Briony Walker glance at him, then glance away. Just the out-of-towner making a call. Maybe to his local buddies, telling them he's done for the day, asking them where the action is at night.

Christopher said, "Yes?"

Reacher said, "Did you hear about Christine Richardson?"

"Yes, we did."

"So it's going to be a little harder now."

"It might be over now. If Richardson was the leak all along."

"Suppose she wasn't?"

"Then it might be easier, not harder. With the other three. Emotion helps. Loose lips sink ships."

"It wasn't a fun afternoon. Romance is on no one's mind. They're talking to each other. There's no way into a conversation like that."

"Exploit any opportunity you can."

"You're not in the Capitol, but you're monitoring their fax line, right?"

"Correct."

"Including tonight?"

"Of course. What do you know?"

"It's not DeWitt."

"How do you know?"

"She was upset. She's thirty years old and she never had anyone die before."

"It's natural to be upset."

"But if she had a secret agenda she'd have gotten over it. To do her work. But she didn't. She hardly said a word. She sat there like the whole thing had no purpose. Which was absolutely the

appropriate reaction for anyone without an agenda of her own.”

“Had either of the other two gotten over it?”

“Alice Vaz was all over it. Briony Walker likewise. And Walker made a real big fuss about going through it all one more time. With every detail stated for the record.”

“So she could check if she missed anything in her last two faxes?”

“That’s a possible interpretation.”

“What did Vaz do?”

“Same thing she did in the transcripts. Big geography. She should quit and run a travel agency.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know yet. Just monitor that fax line for me.”

\*

Reacher hung up the phone. The women were still in the lobby, still talking, still not going anywhere. He set off toward them, just strolling, like a man with an hour to kill, like a stranger in town drawn toward the only faces he knew. Plan A was to keep the pretense going, maybe getting into the group via Briony Walker’s interest in gunshot wounds. Maybe she was a sniper groupie. He could offer some opinions. Head shot or chest shot? *Well, ma’am, I favor the throat shot. If you hit it just right you can make their heads come off.*

Plan B was to abandon the pretense and come clean as an MP captain undercover for MI, and see where that road led. Which might be all the way home. If he made out Richardson had been the prime suspect, then whoever worked hardest to reinforce that conclusion would be the guilty one. If no one worked hard, then Richardson had been the guilty one all along.

He strolled on.

Plan A or Plan B?

They made the decision for him.

They handed it to him on a plate.

They were civilized women, and reflexively polite in the way that military people always are. He was heading close to them. He wasn’t going to pass by on the other side. So he had to be acknowledged. Briony Walker looked straight at him, but Darwen DeWitt was the first to speak. She said, “We weren’t introduced. I guess it wasn’t that kind of an afternoon.”

“No, ma’am,” Reacher said. “I guess it wasn’t.” He said his name. He saw each of the three file it away in her memory.

He said, “I was sorry to hear about Colonel Richardson.”

DeWitt nodded. “It was a shock.”

“Did you know her well?”

“We all came up together. We expected to carry on together.”

“Brother officers,” Reacher said. “Or sisters, I guess.”

“We all felt that way.”

Reacher nodded. They could all afford to feel that way. No rivalry. Not yet. They faced no significant bottleneck until the leap from Brigadier General to Major General. From one star to two. Then a little rivalry might bite.

Briony Walker said, “It must have happened to you, sergeant. You must have lost people.”

“Ma’am, one or two.”

“And what do you do on days like that?”



“Well, ma’am, typically we would go to a bar and toast their journey. Usually starts out quiet, and ends up happy. Which is important. For the good of the unit.”

Alice Vaz said, “What unit?”

“I’m not at liberty to say, ma’am.”

“What bar?”

“Whatever is close at hand.”

DeWitt said, “The Hyatt is a block away.”

\*

They walked over to the Hyatt. But not exactly together. Not a foursome. More accurately a threesome and a singleton in a loose association, held together only by Reacher playing dumb enough to miss the hints he should get lost. The women were too polite to make it more explicit. But even so the walk was excruciatingly embarrassing. Out of the grounds, across Constitution, onto New Jersey Avenue, across Louisiana and D Street, and then they were there, at the Hyatt’s door. Reacher stepped up promptly and held it open. Because immediate action was required, right there, right then. Indecisive loitering on the sidewalk would have led to heavier hints.

They shuffled past him, first Vaz, then DeWitt, and finally Walker. Reacher fell in behind them. They found the bar. Not the kind of place Reacher was used to. For one thing, there was no bar. Not as such. Just low tables, low chairs, and waiter service. It was a lounge.

Walker looked at Reacher and asked, “What should we drink?”

Reacher said, “Pitchers of beer, but I doubt if they have those here.”

A waiter came and the women ordered white wine spritzers. It was summer. Reacher ordered hot coffee, black, no sweeteners required. He preferred not to clutter a table with jugs and bowls and spoons. The women murmured among themselves, a trio, with occasional guilty glances at him, unable to get rid of him, unable to be rude to him.

He asked, “Do those meetings usually go like that? Apart from the thing with Colonel Richardson, I mean.”

Vaz said, “Your first?”

Reacher said, “And hopefully my last, ma’am.”

Walker said, “No, it was worth it. It was a good at-bat. They can’t say no to everything. So we just made it fractionally more likely they’ll say yes to something else, sometime soon.”

“You like your job?”

“Do you like yours, sergeant?”

“Yes, ma’am, most of the time.”

“I could give the same answer.”

The waiter brought the drinks, and the women returned to their three-way private conversation. Reacher’s coffee was in a wide, shallow cup, and there wasn’t much of it. He was a couple of mouthfuls away from the next awkward moment. They hadn’t gotten rid of him leaving the Capitol, and they hadn’t gotten rid of him entering the hotel. The end of the first round of drinks was their next obvious opportunity. All it would take was an order: *Sergeant, you’re dismissed*. No way of fighting that, not even under Plan B. *Captain, you’re dismissed* worked just as well, when said by majors and lieutenant colonels.

\*

But it was Darwen DeWitt who left after the first round of drinks. She was still not talking much, and she clearly wasn't enjoying herself. She was finding no catharsis. She said she had work to do, and she got up. There were no hugs. Just tight nods and brave smiles and meaningful glances, and then she was gone. Vaz and Walker looked at Reacher, and Reacher looked right back at Walker and Vaz. No one spoke. Then the waiter came back right on cue, and Vaz and Walker ordered more spritzers, and Reacher ordered more coffee.

The second spritzer loosened Walker up a little. She asked Reacher what he felt when he pulled the trigger on a live human being. Reacher quoted a guy he knew. He said recoil against his shoulder. Walker asked what was the longest kill he had ever made. Truth was about eleven feet, at that stage, because he was a cop, but he said six hundred yards, because he was supposed to be a sniper. She asked with what. Truth was a Beretta M9, but he said an M21, an ART II scope, and a 7.62 NATC round.

Alice Vaz asked, "Where was this?"

Reacher said, "Ma'am, I'm not at liberty to say."

"Which sounds like a Special Forces scenario."

"I guess it does."

"Six hundred yards is fairly close range for you guys."

"Practically point blank, ma'am."

"Black bag for CIA, or legitimate, for us?"

"Ma'am, I'm not at liberty to say."

And those twin denials seemed to create some credibility. Both women gradually abandoned their defensive body language. Not that it was replaced by personal interest. It was replaced by professional interest, which came across in a poignant way. Neither woman had a realistic hope in her lifetime of becoming a battlefield commander. Both were forced to take a different route. But both seemed to look across the divide with concern. In an ideal world they would be fighting. In which case they would want the best available weapons. No question about that. In which case simple ethics demanded the best available weapons for those currently doing the fighting in the less than perfect world. Simple justice. And simple preparedness, too. Their sisters might never get there, but their daughters would one day.

Walker asked Reacher his private opinion about the rifle design. Were there things that should be added? Taken away? Reacher said, "Ma'am, I think they got it about right," partly because that was the kind of thing a sergeant would say to an officer, and partly because it was true. Walker seemed happy with the answer.

Then both Walker and Vaz got up to use the restroom. Reacher could have used a pit stop too, but he didn't want to follow directly behind them. That would have been too weird, right after the walk from the Capitol. So he waited. He saw Vaz use a pay phone on her way. There was a line of them in wooden hutches on the lounge's back wall. Vaz used the center phone. Walker didn't wait for her. She went on ahead. Vaz spoke for less than ten seconds and then hung up and continued on her way to the restroom.

\*

Walker never came back from the restroom. Vaz sat down alone and unconcerned and said Walker had gone back to the office. She had used the D Street door. She had a lot to do. And did Reacher want another drink?

Reacher and Vaz, alone together. Walker, on her own, on the loose.

Reacher said, "You buying?"

Vaz said, "Sure."

Reacher said, "Then yes."

"Then follow me," Vaz said. "I know a better place than this."

\*

The better place was tucked in close to the tracks out the back of Union Station. It was better in the sense it had an actual bar. It was worse in every other way. In particular it was in a lousy neighborhood, full of ugly brick and ramshackle buildings, with dark streets and all kinds of alleyways and yards all over the place, with more wires overhead than trees. The bar itself felt like a waterfront establishment, mysteriously landlocked, low and wide and made a warren by subdivision into many different room-sized areas. Reacher sat with his back to a corner, where he could see both front and rear doors at once. Vaz sat next to him, not close, but not faraway, either. She looked good. Better than she had a right to. Class A uniform, female officer, was generally no kind of a flattering outfit. It was essentially tubular. Maybe Vaz's was tailored. It had to be. The jacket was waisted. It went in and out properly. The skirt was tight. And a little short. Just a fraction, but detectable by the human eye unaided.

Vaz said, "I hope not to be in this shop much longer."

"Where next?"

"War Plans, I hope."

"Do they cash this shop's checks?"

"You mean, can I take my credits with me? Absolutely. Politics and War Plans? They're practically the same thing."

"So when?"

"As soon as possible."

"But you're worried this business with Colonel Richardson will slow things down. No one likes a fuss, right? And the shop is understaffed now. Maybe they can't let you go."

"You're pretty smart, for a sergeant."

"Rank has nothing to do with being smart, ma'am."

"Tell me about yourself."

"You first."

"Nothing to tell," Vaz said. "California girl, West Point cadet, first I wanted to see the world, and then I wanted to control it. You?"

"Marine Corps boy, West Point cadet, first I wanted to see the world, and then I wanted to survive it."

"I don't remember many West Point cadets who became sergeants afterward."

"Some did. From time to time. In a way."

"I see."

"Do you?"

"You're an undercover operator," Vaz said. "I always knew the day would come."

"When what?"

"When you finally figured it out. As in, your procurement office is riddled with corruption, and has been for years. As in, you don't need a new sniper rifle. You know that. But those guys have already

sold stock in the new model. Maybe the money is already spent. So they have to make it happen. Any way they can. I mean, did you hear some of the arguments they were making?"

"Where is their office?"

"Who? Procurement is a big department."

"The guy I saw today, for instance."

"His office is in the Capitol Building."

"With a fax machine?"

"Of course."

"Did any of the others know this?"

"In the political shop? We all did. Why do you think Walker made them go through the whole thing again today? Because she wanted to generate a third fax."

"Why?"

"An extra piece of evidence for you. We knew you'd catch up with it eventually."

"Why didn't one of you drop a dime before?"

"Not our place."

"You mean the cost-benefit ratio wasn't right. One of you would have to step up, and it's conceivable she could lose. Because anything can happen in a military court. In which case she's out of the running right from that moment. Because she was once on the losing side. You couldn't risk that kind of mistake. Not having come so far."

"The running for what?"

"For whatever it is you all plan to be."

"For a spell we thought the previous sniper could be the undercover guy. The one you replaced. Like entrapment. He was letting the officer push him to want more and more. But in the end we thought he was just a sniper. So we'd have nailed you for the real undercover guy in about a minute, except no one was really paying attention this afternoon."

"Because of Richardson? What did she think was happening?"

"The same as we all did. Procurement is a swamp and you'd notice sooner or later."

"What is it you plan to be?"

"Respected. Perhaps within a closed community, but by someone."

"Has your life lacked respect so far?"

"You have no idea," Vaz said. She turned toward him, moving on the bench, her knees coming close to his, dark nylon over dark skin. She said, "I'm proceeding on the assumption that I can trust my impression that you're younger than me. And in a branch with much less generous and accelerated promotion. And that therefore I outrank you."

"I'm a captain," Reacher said. "Ma'am."

"Therefore if our chains of command were in any way related, it would be inappropriate for us to have a close relationship. Therefore the question is, are our chains of command in any way related?"

"I think they're about as far apart as chains of command can be."

"Wait there," she said. "I'll be right back."

And she got up and threaded her way through the cluttered space, heading for the restroom corridor in back. Five minutes, minimum, Reacher thought. He followed her as far as a pay phone on the wall. The phone was a scratched old item and the wall behind it was dark with smoke and grime.

He dialed, and said his name.

Cornelius Christopher said, "Yes?"

Reacher said, "I'm done."

“What does that mean? You’re quitting?”

“No, it means the job is done.”

“What do you know?”

“Walker must be back at the Capitol by now. Any faxes yet?”

“No.”

“You were wrong. No one is leaking to a foreign firearms manufacturer. No one ever was. Why would anyone need to? Everyone knows what a good sniper rifle should be. It’s self-explanatory. It’s obvious. The basic principles have been understood for a century. No one needs to gather secret intelligence. Because they already know.”

“So what’s the story?”

“I’m waiting for the final proof. I should have it in five minutes or less.”

“Proof of what?”

“It’s Alice Vaz,” Reacher said. “Think about the transcripts. Her big-picture questions. She asked a couple more this afternoon. She wanted it spelled out exactly where this new rifle will be used. She asked what new environments it might face.”

“So?”

“She was trying to get into War Plans through the back door. And the procurement guy fell for it. No details, but he gave plenty of weather clues. Anyone could reverse-engineer our entire slate of global intentions from what he said.”

“Like what?”

“He said high altitude plus freezing mist.”

“Afghanistan,” Christopher said. “We’re going to have to go there sooner or later.”

“And extreme dry heat with sand infiltration.”

“The Middle East. Iraq, most likely.”

“And rain forest humidity and high ambient temperature.”

“South America. Colombia, and so on. The drug wars.”

“And in snow many degrees below zero.”

“If we have to go to the Soviet Union.”

“You see? She got a summary of all our future plans from the guy. Exactly the kind of oblique data that enemy intelligence analysts love.”

“Are you sure?”

“I gave her two seconds to react and she came up with blaming procurement for being corrupt. It was almost plausible. She’s very smart.”

“Which enemy? Which foreign intelligence?”

“The Soviets, of course. A local fax number, probably in their embassy.”

“She’s their asset?”

“In a big, big way. Think about it. She’s on the fast track. She’s going right to the top. Which is what? The Joint Chiefs, at least. But maybe more. A woman like this could be President of the United States.”

“But how did they recruit her? And when?”

“Probably before she was born. Her granddaddy was some big Red Army hero. So maybe her daddy wasn’t a real refugee. Maybe the KGB shuffled him to Hungary so he could get out and look like a dissident. Whereupon his daughter could be born an American and become a real deep down sleeper. She was probably groomed for the fast track from birth. These people play a long game.”

“That’s a lot of assumptions.”

“The proof will be here in about three minutes. Or not.”

“But why risk wasting a super-high-value asset on this? Because if you’re right, then this is useful, but it’s not life-changing. This is not the hydrogen bomb.”

“I think this was kind of accidental. I think it came up in the normal course of her duties. But she couldn’t resist phoning it in. Habit, or a sense of obligation. If she’s a true believer.”

“What’s the proof you’re getting in five minutes? Or is it three?”

“It’s two minutes now, probably,” Reacher said. “She made a brief call from the Hyatt hotel. Think about it. She’s a huge asset. Maybe their biggest ever. She’s headed all the way to the top. Which could be anywhere. And right now she’s stopping in War Plans next, which is a real big prize in itself. So she has to be protected. Like no one has ever been protected before. And she was suspicious of me somehow. Maybe routine paranoia. I was new. I was hanging around. So she called for help. She told the embassy’s wet boys where I’d be, and when. And then she lured me into the trap. Right now I’m supposed to believe I’m about to get in her pants.”

“Soviet wet boys are coming for you?”

“One minute now, probably. I’m about to be a mugging gone wrong. I’m going to be found dead on a street corner.”

“Where are you?”

“In the badlands behind Union Station.”

“I can’t get anyone there in less than a minute.”

“I didn’t expect you would.”

“Are you going to be OK?”

“That depends on how many they send.”

“Can you arrest Vaz before they get there?”

“She’s long gone. I’m sure she went straight out the bathroom window. You’ll have to pick her up. She’ll be heading for her office.”

Then a man stepped in through the bar’s rear door.

“Got to go,” Reacher said. “It’s starting.”

\*

Reacher hung up the phone. The guy at the rear door was compact and hard-edged, dressed in black, moving easily. He looked vaguely similar to Vaz in terms of ethnic background. But he was a decade older. Nothing in his hands. Not yet. Not inside a public bar. Reacher guessed the point of the guy coming in the back was to chase him out the front, where the main force would be gathered. Easier to set up a mugging gone wrong on a public street, rather than in a private yard in back of a bar. Because it wasn’t a great street. Not a great neighborhood. Broken lighting, plenty of shadows, plenty of doorways, passersby habituated by instinct and long experience to look away and say nothing.

The guy was scanning the room. Vaz had spent very little time on the phone. Very few words. Probably not more than *big guy, very tall, gray suit*. Reacher felt the guy’s eyes on him. He practically heard the check marks. *Big guy, right there. Very tall, no question. Gray suit, here’s our boy*. The guy started away from the door.

Reacher started toward it.

A wise man asked, what’s the best time to plant a tree? A wise man answered, fifty years ago. As in, what’s the best time to make a decision? A wise man answers, five seconds before the first punch is thrown.

The guy in black weighed maybe one-ninety, and he was doing about two miles an hour. Reacher weighed two-fifty, and he was doing about three miles an hour. Therefore closing speed was five miles an hour, and impact, should it happen, would involve some multiple of four hundred forty pounds a square inch.

Impact did happen.

But not at five miles an hour. Closing speed was dramatically increased by a sudden drive off Reacher's back foot and the vicious clubbing swing of his elbow. Which therefore connected with a real big multiple of their combined bodyweights. Reacher caught the guy on the perfect cheekbone-nose-cheekbone line and the cracking and splintering was clearly audible over the wooden thud of feet on the floor. The guy went down like a motorcycle rider hitting a clothesline. Reacher walked on by and stepped out the back door.

Nobody or somebody?

That was the only question. And there is no bigger difference than nothing or something. Had they posted all of the main force at the front? Or had they left a lone guy as back-up?

They had left a guy. Dark hair, dark eyes, thicker coat than his pal. Smart as a whip, probably, but any human given instructions is at a disadvantage. *Your target is a big guy, very tall, gray suit*. And however smart you are, however quick, that lethal one, two, three question-and-answer drumbeat occupies precious mental milliseconds, at least *big guy check, very tall check, gray suit check*, like that, and the problem comes when the big guy in the gray suit occupies those same precious milliseconds by walking straight toward you and breaking your skull with his elbow.

Reacher walked on, to where an arch led from the yard to the alley.

\*

The alley was wide enough for two horses and a beer cart axle. At the right-hand end was an arch to another private yard. At the left-hand end was the street. Reacher's shoes were quiet. Class A uniform shoes. Therefore man-made soles. No one wanted leather welts. More to polish. Reacher stopped short of the street and put his back against the left-hand wall. In a movie there would be a busted shard of mirror at his feet. He could edge it out and check the view. But he wasn't in a movie. So he inched around, and peered out, one eye.

Thirty feet away. Four guys. Therefore a total of six dispatched. Six wet boys in a foreign embassy. Permanently. For her. *Like no one has ever been protected before. A woman like this could be President of the United States*. They had two cars parked on the far side of the street. Diplomatic plates. Probably never paid their parking fines. The guys were in a rough arc near the bar's door, their backs to Reacher, just standing there semi-animated, like guys sometimes do for a spell, outside a bar.

There was no busted shard of mirror, but there was a broken quarter brick, about the size of a baseball. In no way reflective, but the need for a mirror was past. Reacher picked it up, and stepped out to the street, and turned left.

\*

Thirty feet was ten paces, and Reacher kept a steady speed through the first five of them, and then he wound up and threw the brick fragment at the nearer car and accelerated hard so that the brick shattered the rear windshield and the four heads snapped toward the sound and Reacher's elbow hit

the first of those heads all in a tight little one-two-three sequence, less than a second beginning to end.

The first guy went down, obviously, vertically beneath Reacher's scything follow-through, and then Reacher spun back off the bounce and drove the same elbow backward into the next guy's head. Which left two guys still on their feet, one close, one inconveniently distant, so Reacher feinted toward the farther one and then pivoted back and head-butted the nearer one, like he was trying to drive a fencepost into dry baked earth with his head. Which left one still on his feet, which the guy put to good use by running for it.

Reacher let him go. There were things Reacher didn't like to do. Running was one of them.

Twenty-four hours later Reacher was back in Frankfurt, where he stayed for a week, before moving on to Korea for a regular tour. Neither he nor anyone in the world heard anything more about Alice Vaz. He had no idea whether his analysis had been right or wrong, close or wildly inaccurate. But a month after his arrival in Seoul he heard he was being considered for a medal. The Legion of Merit to be specific, and for no discernible reason, other than what might be gleaned from the notes in the manual: *Awarded for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the United States.*



## About the Author

Lee Child is the author of seventeen Jack Reacher thrillers, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *Persuader*, *The Enemy*, *One Shot*, and *The Hard Way*, and the #1 bestsellers *The Affair*, *Worth Dying For*, *61 Hours*, *Gone Tomorrow*, *Bad Luck and Trouble*, and *Nothing to Lose*, as well as the short stories “Second Son” and “Deep Down.” His debut, *Killing Floor*, won both the Anthony and the Barry awards for Best First Mystery, and *The Enemy* won both the Barry and Nero awards for Best Novel. Foreign rights in the Reacher series have sold in more than forty territories. All titles have been optioned for major motion pictures, and *Jack Reacher*, based on the novel *One Shot* and starring Tom Cruise, will be released in December 2012. A native of England and a former television director, Child lives in New York City, where he is at work on his next thriller, *Never Go Back*.

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The eyewitness said he didn't actually see it happen. But how else could it have gone down? Not long after midnight a man in a green winter coat had gone into a small concrete bunker through its only door. Two men in black suits had followed him in. There had been a short pause. The two men in the black suits had come out again.

The man in the green winter coat had not come out again.

The two men in the black suits had walked thirty brisk feet and climbed into a bright red car. Fire-engine red, the eyewitness called it. Vivid red. Fairly new. A regular four-door sedan, the eyewitness thought. Or maybe a five-door. Or a three-door. But definitely not a two-door coupe. A Toyota, the eyewitness thought. Or maybe a Honda. Or a Hyundai. Maybe a Kia.

But whichever, the two men in the black suits had driven away in it.

There was still no sign of the man in the green winter coat.

Then blood had pooled out from under the concrete bunker's door.

The eyewitness had called 911.

The county sheriff had shown up and gotten the story. He was good at hustling folk along while looking patient. It was one of his many talents. Eventually the eyewitness had finished up. Then the county sheriff had thought for a long moment. He was in a part of the nation where in every direction there were hundreds of square miles of emptiness just over the dark horizon. Where roads were long lonely ribbons.

He was in roadblock country.

So he had called the highway patrol, and then he had ordered up the helicopter from the state capital. He had put out an urgent APB on a bright red import carrying two men in black suits.

Jack Reacher rode for ninety miles and ninety minutes with a woman in a dirty gray van, and then he saw bright vapor lights up ahead at the highway cloverleaf, with big green signs pointing west and east. The woman slowed the van, and stopped, and Reacher got out and thanked her and waved her away. She used the first ramp, west toward Denver and Salt Lake City, and he walked under the bridge and set up on the eastbound ramp, one foot on the shoulder and one in the traffic lane, and he stuck out his thumb and smiled and tried to look friendly.

Which was not easy. Reacher was a big man, six feet five inches tall, heavily built, and that night as always he looked a little ragged and unkempt. Lonely drivers wanted pleasant and unthreatening company, and Reacher knew from long experience that visually he was no one's first choice of companion. Too intimidating. And right then he was further handicapped by a freshly broken nose. He had patched the injury with a length of silver duct tape, which he knew must make him look even more grotesque. He knew the tape must be shining and glittering in the yellow light. But he felt the tape was helping him medically, so he decided to keep it in place for the first hour. If he didn't get a ride inside sixty minutes, he would consider peeling it off.

He didn't get a ride inside sixty minutes. Traffic was light. Nebraska, at night, in the wintertime. The cloverleaf he was at was the only significant interchange for miles around, but even so whole minutes passed with no action at all. Up on the bridge the through traffic was fairly steady, but few people seemed keen to join it. In the first hour only forty vehicles showed up to turn east. Cars, trucks, SUVs, different makes, different models, different colors. Thirty of them blew past without ever slowing. Ten drivers checked him out and then looked away and accelerated onward.

Not unusual. Hitchhiking had been getting harder for years.

Time to shorten the odds.

He turned away and used a splintered thumbnail to pick at the edge of the duct tape on his face. He got half an inch of it loose and gripped that makeshift tab between the pad of his thumb and his forefinger. Two schools of thought. One went for the fast rip. The other advocated a slow peel. An illusory choice, Reacher thought. The pain was the same either way. So he split the difference and opted for a fast peel. No big deal on his cheek. A different story across his nose. Cuts reopened, the swelling lifted and moved, the fracture itself clicked and ground.

No big deal on the other cheek.

He rolled the bloodied tape into a cylinder and stuck it in his pocket. He spat on his fingers and wiped his face. He heard a helicopter a thousand feet overhead and saw a high-power searchlight beam stabbing down through the darkness, resting here, resting there, moving on. He turned back and put one foot in the traffic lane again and stuck out his thumb. The helicopter hung around for a spell and then lost interest and hammered away west until its noise died back to nothing. Traffic heading cross-country on the bridge stayed sparse but steady. Feeder traffic heading north and south on the county road got thinner. But almost all of it turned one way or the other onto the highway. Almost none of it continued straight on. Reacher remained optimistic.

The night was cold, which helped his face. Numbness dulled the ache. A pickup truck with Kansas plates came out of the south and turned east and slowed to a roll. The driver was a rangy black guy bundled into a thick coat. Maybe his heater wasn't working. He eyeballed Reacher long and hard. He almost stopped. But he didn't. He looked away and drove on by.

Reacher had money in his pocket. If he could get to Lincoln or Omaha he could get a bus. But he couldn't get to Lincoln or Omaha. Not without a ride. He took to tucking his right hand under his left arm between cars, to stop it from freezing. He stamped his feet. His breath pooled around his head like a cloud. A highway patrol cruiser blew by with lights but no siren. Two cops inside. They didn't even glance Reacher's way. Their focus was up ahead. Some kind of an incident, maybe.

Two more cars almost stopped. One out of the south, and one out of the north, minutes apart. They both slowed, stumbled, stuttered, eyeballed, and then picked up speed and drove on by. *Getting closer*, Reacher thought. *It's coming*. Maybe the late hour was helping. People were more compassionate at midnight than midday. And night driving already felt a little out of the ordinary. Picking up a random stranger wasn't such a big leap.

He hoped.

Another driver took a good long look, but kept on going.

And another.

Reacher spat on his palms and slicked his hair into place.

He kept the smile on his face.

He remained optimistic.

And then finally, after a total of ninety-three minutes on the ramp, a car stopped for him.

The car stopped thirty feet upstream of him. It had a local plate, and was a reasonable size, and American, and dark in color. A Chevrolet, Reacher thought, probably dark blue, or gray, or black. It was hard to tell, in the vapor light. Dark metallics were always anonymous at night.

There were three people in the car. Two men in the front, and a woman in the back. The two men were twisted around in their seats, like there was a big three-way discussion going on. Like a democracy. *Should we pick this guy up or not?* Which suggested to Reacher that the three people didn't know one another very well. Such decisions among good friends were usually instinctive. These three were business colleagues, maybe, a team of equals, thrown together for the duration, exaggeratedly respectful of one another's positions, especially the outnumbered woman's.

Reacher saw the woman nod, and he lip-read her *yes*, and the men turned back and faced front again, and the car rolled forward. It stopped again with the front passenger's window alongside Reacher's hip. The glass came down. Reacher bent at the waist and felt warmth on his face. This car's heater was working just fine. That was for damn sure.

The guy in the front passenger seat asked, "Where are you headed tonight, sir?"

Reacher had been a cop in the army for thirteen years, and then for almost as long had lived on his wits, and he had survived both phases of his life by being appropriately cautious and by staying alert. All five senses, all the time. Deciding whether or not to take an offered ride depended mostly on smell. Could he smell beer? Weed? Bourbon? But right then he could smell nothing at all. His nose had just been broken. His nasal passages were clogged with blood and swellings. Maybe his septum was permanently deviated. It felt entirely possible he would never smell anything ever again.

Touch was not an option in that situation, either. Nor was taste. He would learn nothing by groping around like a blind man, or by licking things. Which left sight and sound. He heard neutral tones from the front passenger, no marked regional accent, an educated cadence, an air of authority and executive experience. On all three of them he saw soft uncalled hands, unmuscle frames, neat hair, no tans. Indoor people. Office folk. Not at the top of the tree, but a long way from the bottom. They each looked somewhere in their middle forties, perhaps halfway through their lives, but more than halfway through their careers. Like lieutenant colonels, maybe, in army terms. Solid achievers, but not superstars.

Each of them had on black pants and a blue denim shirt. Like uniforms. The shirts looked cheap and new, still creased from the wrapper. A team-building exercise, Reacher figured. Some kind of corporate bullshit. Fly a bunch of middle-ranking executives out from their regional offices, get them together in the wilderness, give them shirts, set them tasks. Maybe all the hoo-hah was making them feel a little bit adventurous, which was why they were picking him up. And maybe there would be candid mutual critiquing afterward, which was why they had labored through the big three-way democratic discussion. Teams needed teamwork, and teamwork needed consensus, and consensus needed to be unforced, and gender issues were always sensitive. In fact Reacher was a little surprised the woman wasn't riding in front, or driving. Although driving might have been seen as a subservient role, for the only woman in a trio. Like fetching coffee.

A minefield.

“I’m heading east,” Reacher said.

“Into Iowa?” the front passenger asked.

“Through Iowa,” Reacher said. “All the way to Virginia.”

“Hop in,” the guy said. “We’ll get you some of the way there.”

The woman was sitting behind the front passenger, so Reacher tracked around the trunk and got in on the driver’s side. He settled on the rear bench and closed the door. The woman nodded to him a little shyly. A little cautiously, maybe. Perhaps because of his busted nose. Maybe the sight upset her.

The guy at the wheel checked his mirror and took off up the ramp.