

Second Son - Lee Child

CHAPTER ONE

On a hot August Thursday in 1974, an old man in Paris did something he had never done before: he woke up in the morning, but he didn't get out of bed. He couldn't. His name was Laurent Moutier, and he had felt pretty bad for ten days and really lousy for seven. His arms and legs felt thin and weak and his chest felt like it was full of setting concrete. He knew what was happening. He had been a furniture repairman by trade, and he had become what customers sometimes brought him: a wormy old heirloom weakened and rotted beyond hope. There was no single thing wrong with him. Everything was failing all at once. Nothing to be done. Inevitable. So he lay patient and wheezing and waited for his housekeeper.

She came in at ten o'clock and showed no great shock or surprise. Most of her clients were old, and they came and went with regularity. She called the doctor, and at one point, clearly in answer to a question about his age, Moutier heard her say "Ninety," in a resigned yet satisfied way, a way that spoke volumes, as if it was a whole paragraph in one word. It reminded him of standing in his workshop, breathing dust and glue and varnish, looking at some abject crumbly cabinet and saying, "Well now, let's see," when really his mind had already moved on to getting rid of it.

A house call was arranged for later in the day, but then as if to confirm the unspoken diagnosis the housekeeper asked Moutier for his address book, so she could call his immediate family. Moutier had an address book but no immediate family beyond his only daughter Josephine, but even so she filled most of the book by herself, because she moved a lot. Page after page was full of crossed-out box numbers and long strange foreign phone numbers. The housekeeper dialed the last of them and heard the whine and echo of great distances, and then she heard a voice speaking English, a language she couldn't understand, so she hung up again. Moutier saw her dither for a moment, but then as if to confirm the diagnosis once again, she left in search of the retired schoolteacher two floors below, a soft old man who Moutier usually dismissed as practically a cretin, but then, how good did a linguist need to be to translate *ton père va mourir* into your dad is going to die?

The housekeeper came back with the schoolteacher, both of them pink and flushed from the stairs, and the guy dialed the same long number over again, and asked to speak to Josephine Moutier.

"No, Reacher, you idiot," Moutier said, in a voice that should have been a roar, but in fact came out as a breathy tubercular plea. "Her married name is Reacher. They won't know who Josephine Moutier is."

The schoolteacher apologized and corrected himself and asked for Josephine Reacher. He listened for a moment and covered the receiver with his palm and looked at Moutier and asked, "What's her husband's name? Your son-in-law?"

"Stan," Moutier said, "Not Stanley, either. Just Stan. Stan is on his birth certificate. I saw it. He's Captain Stan Reacher, of the United States Marine Corps."

The schoolteacher relayed that information and listened again. Then he hung up. He turned and said, "They just left. Really just days ago, apparently. The whole family. Captain Reacher has been posted elsewhere."

CHAPTER TWO

The retired schoolteacher in Paris had been talking to a duty lieutenant at the Navy base on Guam in the Pacific, where Stan Reacher had been deployed for three months as Marine Corps liaison. That pleasant posting had come to an end and he had been sent to Okinawa. His family had followed three days later, on a passenger plane via Manila, his wife Josephine and his two sons, fifteen-year-old Joe and thirteen-year-old Jack. Josephine Reacher was a bright, spirited, energetic woman, at forty-four still curious about the world and happy to be seeing so much of it, still tolerant of the ceaseless moves and the poor accommodations. Joe Reacher at fifteen was already almost full grown, already well over six feet and well over two hundred pounds, a giant next to his mother, but still quiet and studious, still very much Clark Kent, not Superman. Jack Reacher at thirteen looked like an engineer's napkin sketch for something even bigger and even more ambitious, his huge bony frame like the scaffolding around a major construction

project. Six more inches and a final eighty pounds of beef would finish the job, and they were all on their way. He had big hands and watchful eyes. He was quiet like his brother, but not studious. Unlike his brother he was always called by his last name only. No one knew why, but the family was Stan and Josie, Joe and Reacher, and it always had been.

Stan met his family off the plane at the Futenma air station and they took a taxi to a bungalow he had found half a mile from the beach. It was hot and still inside and it fronted on a narrow concrete street with ditches either side. The street was dead straight and lined with small houses set close together, and at the end of it was a blue patch of ocean. By that point the family had lived in maybe forty different places, and the move-in routine was second nature. The boys found the second bedroom and it was up to them to decide whether it needed cleaning. If so, they cleaned it themselves, and if not, they didn't. In this case, as usual, Joe found something to worry about, and Reacher found nothing. So he left Joe to it, and he headed for the kitchen, where first he got a drink of water, and then he got the bad news.



CHAPTER THREE

Reacher's parents were side by side at the kitchen counter, studying a letter his mother had carried all the way from Guam. Reacher had seen the envelope. It was something to do with the education system. His mother said, "You and Joe have to take a test before you start school here."

Reacher said, "Why?"

"Placement," his father said. "They need to know how well you're doing."

"Tell them we're doing fine. Tell them thanks, but no thanks."

"For what?"

"I'm happy where I am. I don't need to skip a grade. I'm sure Joe feels the same."

"You think this is about skipping a grade?"

"Isn't it?"

"No," his father said. "It's about holding you back a grade."

"Why would they do that?"

"New policy," his mother said. "You've had very fragmented schooling. They need to check you're ready to advance."

"They never did that before."

"That's why it's called a new policy. As opposed to an old policy."

"They want Joe to take a test? To prove he's ready for the next grade? He'll freak out."

"He'll do OK. He's good with tests."

"That's not the point, mom. You know what he's like. He'll be insulted. So he'll make himself score a hundred percent. Or a hundred and ten. He'll drive himself nuts."

"Nobody can score a hundred and ten percent. It's not possible."

"Exactly. His head will explode."

"What about you?"

"Me? I'll be OK."

"Will you try hard?"

"What's the pass mark?"

"Fifty percent, probably."

"Then I'll aim for fifty-one. No point wasting effort. When is it?"

"Three days from now. Before the semester starts."

"Terrific," Reacher said. "What kind of an education system doesn't know the meaning of a simple word like vacation?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Reacher went out to the concrete street and looked at the patch of ocean in the distance up ahead. The East China Sea, not the Pacific. The Pacific lay in the other direction. Okinawa was one of the Ryuku Islands, and the Ryuku Islands separated the two bodies of water.

There were maybe forty homes between Reacher and the water on the left hand side of the street, and another forty on the right. He figured the homes closer to him and further from the sea would be off-post housing for Marine families, and the homes further from him and nearer the water would be locally owned, by Japanese families who lived there full-time. He knew how real estate worked. Just steps to the beach. People competed for places like that, and generally the military let the locals have the best stuff. The DoD always worried about friction. Especially on Okinawa. The air station was right in the center of Genowan, which was a fair-sized city. Every time a transport plane took off, the schools had to stop teaching for a minute or two, because of the noise.

He turned his back on the East China Sea and walked inland, past identical little houses, across a four-way junction, into a perfect rectilinear matrix of yet more identical houses. They had been built quick and cheap, but they were in good order. They were meticulously maintained. He saw small doll-like local ladies on some of the porches. He nodded to them politely, but they all looked away. He saw noloal Japanese kids. Maybe they were in school already. Maybe their semester had already started. He turned back and a hundred yards later found Joe out on the streets, looking for him.

Joe said, "Did they tell you about the test?"



Reacher nodded. "No big deal."

"We have to pass."

"Obviously we'll pass."

"No, I mean we have to really pass this thing. We have to crush it. We have to knock it out of the park."

"Why?"

"They're trying to humiliate us, Reacher."

"Us? They don't even know us."

"People like us. Thousands of us. We have to humiliate them back. We have to make them embarrassed they even thought of this idea. We have to piss all over their stupid test."

"I'm sure we will. How hard can it be?"

Joe said, "It's a new policy, so it might be a new kind of test. There might be all kinds of new things in it."

"Like what?"

"I have no idea. There could be anything."

"Well, I'll do my best with it."

"How's your general knowledge?"

"I know that Mickey Mantle hit .303 ten years ago. And .285 fifteen years ago. And .300 twenty years ago. Which averages out to .296, which is remarkably close to his overall career average of .298, which has to mean something."

"They're not going to ask about Mickey Mantle."

"Who, then?"

Joe said, "We need to know. And we have a right to know. We need to go up to that school and ask what's in this thing."

Reacher said, "You can't do that with tests. That's kind of opposite to the point of tests, don't you think?"

"We're at least entitled to know what part or parts of which curriculum is being tested here."

"It'll be reading and writing, adding and subtracting. Maybe some dividing if we're lucky. You know the drill. Don't worry about it."

"It's an insult."

Reacher said nothing.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Reacher brothers walked back together, across the four-way junction, and into the long concrete street. Their new place was ahead and on the left. In the distance the sliver of sea glowed pale blue in the sun. There was a hint of white sand. Maybe palm trees. Between their place and the sea there were kids out on the street. All boys. Americans, black and white, maybe two dozen of them. Marine families. Neighbors. They were clustered outside their own places, at the cheap end of the street, a thousand steps from the beach.

Reacher said, "Let's go take a look at the East China Sea."

Joe said, "I've seen it before. So have you."

"We could be freezing our butts off in Korea all winter."

"We were just on Guam. How much beach does a person need?"

"As much as a person can get."

"We have a test in three days."

“Exactly. So we don’t have to worry about it today.”

Joe sighed and they walked on, past their own place, toward the sliver of blue. Ahead of them the other kids saw them coming. They got up off curbstones and stepped over ditches and kicked and scuffed their way to the middle of the road. They formed up in a loose arrowhead, facing front, arms folded, chests out, more than twenty guys, some of them as young as ten, some of them a year or two older than Joe.

Welcome to the neighborhood.

The point man was a thick-necked bruiser of about sixteen. He was smaller than Joe, but bigger than Reacher. He was wearing a Corps T-shirt and a ragged pair of khaki pants. He had fat hands, with knuckles that dipped in, not stuck out. He was fifteen feet away, just waiting.

Joe said quietly, “There are too many of them.”

Reacher said nothing.

Joe said, “Don’t start anything. I mean it. We’ll deal with this later, if we have to.”

Reacher smiled. “You mean after the test?”

“You need to get serious about that test.”

They walked on. Forty different places. Forty different welcomes to forty different neighborhoods. Except that the welcomes had not been different. They had all been the same. Tribalism, testosterone, hierarchies, all kinds of crazy instincts. Tests of a different kind.

Joe and Reacher stopped six feet from the bruiser and waited. The guy had a boil on his neck. And he smelled pretty bad. He said, “You’re the new kids.”

Joe said, “How did you figure that out?”

“You weren’t here yesterday.”

“Outstanding deduction. You ever thought of a career with the FBI?”

The bruiser didn’t answer that. Reacher smiled. He figured he could land a left hook right on the boil. Which would hurt like hell, probably.

The bruiser said, “You going to the beach?”

Joe said, “Is there a beach?”

“You know there’s a beach.”

“And you know where we’re going.”

“This is a toll road.”

Joe said, “What?”

“You heard. You have to pay the toll.”

“What’s the toll?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” the bruiser said. “When I see what you’ve got, I’ll know what to take.”

Joe didn't answer.

The guy said, "Understand?"

Joe said, "Not even a little bit."

"That's because you're a retard. You two are the retard kids. We heard all about you. They're making you take the retard test, because you're retards."

Reacher said, "Joe, now that's an insult."

The big guy said, "So the little retard talks, does he?"

Joe said, "You seen that new statue in the square in Luzon?"

"What about it?"

"The last kid who picked a fight with my brother is buried in the pedestal."

The guy looked at Reacher and said, "That doesn't sound very nice. Are you a psycho retard?"

Reacher said, "What's that?"

"Like a psychopath."

"You mean do I think I'm right to do what I do and feel no remorse afterward?"

"I guess."

Reacher said, "Then yes, I'm pretty much a psychopath."

Silence, except for a distant motorbike. Then two motorbikes. Then three. Distant, but approaching. The big kid's gaze jumped to the four-way junction at the top of the street. Behind him the arrowhead formation broke up. Kids wandered back to the curbs and their front yards. A bike slowed and turned into the street and pattered slowly along. On it was a Marine in BDUs. No helmet. An NCO, back from the base, his watch finished. He was followed by two more, one of them on a big Harley. Disciplinarian dads, coming home.

The big kid with the boil said, "We'll finish this another time."

Joe said, "Be careful what you wish for."

Reacher said nothing.

CHAPTER SIX

Stan Reacher was a quiet man by nature, and he was quieter than ever at breakfast on the fourth morning of his new command, which was turning out to be a tough gig. Back in the States the presidency had changed hands a little prematurely, and the Joint Chiefs had scrambled to present the new guy with a full range of options for his review. Standard practice. The start of every new administration was the same. There were plans for every imaginable theoretical contingency, and they had all been dusted off. Vietnam was effectively over, Korea was a stalemate, Japan was an ally, the Soviet Union was the same as ever, so China was the new focus. There had been a lot of public hoo-hah about detente, but equally there had been a lot of private planning for war. The

Chinese were going to have to be beaten sooner or later, and Stan Reacher was going to have to play his part. He had been told so on his second morning.

He had been given command of four rifle companies and he had been handed a top-secret file defining their mission, which was to act as the tip of an immense spear that would land just north of Hangzhou and then punch through clockwise to isolate Shanghai. Tough duty. Casualty estimates were frightening. But ultimately a little pessimistic, in Stan's opinion. He had met his men and he had been impressed. On Okinawa it was always hard to avoid mental comparisons with the ghosts of the freak Marine generation that had been there thirty years before, but the current crop was good. Real good. They all shared Stan's personal allegiance to the famous old saying: War is not about dying for your country. It's about making the other guy die for his. For the infantry it all came down to simple arithmetic. If you could inflict two casualties for every one you took, you were ahead. If you could inflict five, you were winning. Eight or ten, the prize was in the bag. And Stan felt his guys could do eight or ten, easy.

But China's population was immense. And fanatical. They would keep on coming. Men, and then boys. Women too, probably. Boys no older than his own sons. Women like his wife. He watched them eat, and imagined husbands and fathers a thousand miles away doing the same thing. A Communist army would draft a kid Joe's age without a second thought. Reacher's age, even, especially a big kid like that. And then the women. And then the girls. Not that Stan was either sentimental or conflicted. He would put a round through anyone's head and sleep like a baby. But these were strange times. That was for damn sure. Having kids made you think about the future, but being a combat Marine made the

future a theory, not a fact.

He had no real plans for his sons. He wasn't that kind of a father. But he assumed they would stay military. What else did they know? In which case Joe's brains would keep him safe. Not that there weren't plenty of smart guys on the front lines. But Joe wasn't a fighter. He was like a rifle built without a firing pin. He was all there physically, but there was no trigger in his head. He was like a nuclear launch console instead, full of are-you-really-sure failsafes and interlocks and sequenced buttons. He thought too much. He did it quickly, for sure, but any kind of delay or hesitation was fatal at the start of a fight. Even a split second. So privately Stan figured Joe would end up in Intelligence, and he figured he would do a pretty good job there.

His second son was a whole different can of worms. The kid was going to be huge. He was going to be an eighth of a ton of muscle. Which was a frightening prospect. The kid had come home bruised and bloodied plenty of times, but as far as Stan knew he hadn't actually lost a fight since he was about five years old. Maybe he had never lost a fight. He had no trigger either, but not in the same way as his big brother. Joe was permanently set to safe, and Reacher was permanently jammed wide open on full auto. When he was grown, he was going to be unstoppable. A force of nature. A nightmare for somebody. Not that he ever started anything. His mother had trained him early and well. Josie was smart about things like that. She had seen the danger coming. So she had taught him never, ever, ever to start trouble, but that it was perfectly OK to react if someone else started it first. Which was a sight to see. The smart money brings a gun to a knife fight. Reacher brought a hydrogen bomb.

But the kid could think, too. He wasn't academic like Joe, but he was practical. His IQ was probably about the same, but it was a get-the-job-done type of street smart IQ, not any kind of for-the-sake-of-it cerebral indulgence. Reacher liked facts, for sure, and information too, but not theory. He was a real-world character. Stan had no idea what the future held for the guy. No idea at all, except he was going to be too big to fit inside a tank or an airplane cockpit. So it was going to have to be something else.

But anyway, the future was still far off, for both of them. They were still kids. They were still just his fair-haired boys. Stan knew that right then Joe's horizons stretched no further than the start of the new semester, and Reacher's stretched no further than a fourth cup of coffee for breakfast. Which the kid got up and poured, right on cue. And also right on cue Joe said, "I'm going to walk up to the school today and ask them about this test."

"Negative on that," Stan said.

"Why not?"

"Two reasons. First, never let them see you sweat. Second, I put in a requisition form yesterday and I'm expecting a delivery today."

"Of what?"

"A telephone."

"Mom will be here."

"I won't," Josie said. "I have errands to run."

"All day?"

"Probably. I have to find a store cheap enough to feed you the eight pounds of protein you seem to need at every meal. Then I have to go have lunch with the other mothers at the Officers' Club, which will probably tie me up all afternoon, if Okinawa is still the same as it was last time we were here, which it probably is."

"Reacher can wait home for the telephone," Joe said. "He doesn't need a babysitter."

"That's beside the point," Stan said. "Go swimming, go play ball, go chase girls, but don't go ask about the test. Just do your best when it rolls around."

CHAPTER SEVEN

At that moment it was very late in the previous evening in Paris, and the retired schoolteacher was back on the phone with the Navy station on Guam. Laurent Moutier's housekeeper had whispered to him that they really ought to try to get hold of the old man's daughter. But the schoolteacher was getting nowhere. The duty lieutenant on Guam had no personal insight into the Pentagon's plans for China, but Stan Reacher's new posting was classified as secret, so no foreign citizen was going to hear a thing about it. Not from the Navy. No sir. No way, no how.

Moutier heard the audible half of the back-and-forth from his bed. He could understand English a little. Enough to get by, and just enough to hear things between the lines. He knew exactly how the military worked. Like practically every other twentieth-century male human in Europe he had been

in the service. He was already thirty years old when World War One broke out, but he volunteered immediately and survived all four years, Verdun and the Somme included, and he came out the other end with a chestful of medals and no scars longer than his middle finger, which was statistically the same thing as completely unscathed. On his day of demobilization a lugubrious one-armed, one-eyed brigadier wished him well and then added, apropos of nothing, “Mark my words, Moutier, a great war leaves a country with three armies: an army of cripples, an army of mourners, and an army of thieves.”

And Moutier found all three immediately, on his return to Paris. There were mourners everywhere. Mothers, wives, fiancées, sisters, old men. Someone said that if you gave every dead soldier a one-page obituary, just one lousy page to list all his hopes and dreams, then the resulting pile of paper would still stand taller than the Eiffel Tower itself.

Thieves were everywhere, some solo, some in mobs or gangs, some with a political tint. And Moutier saw cripples all day long, some in the natural course of events, but many more at work, because his furniture repair operation had been commandeered by the government and told to make wooden legs for the next ten years. Which Moutier did, out of parts of tables bought up cheap from bankrupt restaurants. It was entirely possible there were veterans in Paris stumping around on the same furniture they had once dined off.

The ten-year government contract expired a week before the Wall Street Crash, and the next ten years were hard, except that he met the woman who quickly became his wife, a beauty foolish enough to take on a battered forty-five-year-old wreck like him. And a year later they had their only child, a mop-haired girl they called Josephine, who had grown up and married a Marine from New Hampshire in America, and who was currently completely uncontactable, despite the vast array of technological innovations Moutier had witnessed in his lifetime, many of them invented by the Americans themselves.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Stan Reacher pulled his field cap low and walked away to work. A minute later Josie headed out shopping, with a big bag and a thin purse. Reacher sat on the curb, waiting for the kid with the boil to come out to play. Joe stayed inside. But not for long. Thirty minutes later he came out with combed hair and a jacket. He said, “I’m going to take a walk.”

“To the school?” Reacher asked.

“Least said, soonest mended.”

“They’re not humiliating you. You’re humiliating yourself. How does scoring a hundred percent make you feel good when you already asked what the questions were?”

“It’s a matter of principle.”

“Not my principle,” Reacher said. “My principle is they set these things so average people can pass them, which gives me enough of a chance that I don’t feel I have to get my panties in a wad beforehand.”

“You want people to think you’re average?”

“I don’t care what people think.”

“You know you have to wait here for the delivery, right?”

“I’ll be here,” Reacher said. “Unless the fat smelly kid comes out with so many friends I end up in the hospital.”

“Nobody’s coming out with anybody. They all went to a ballgame. This morning, in a bus. I saw them. They’ll be gone all day.”

CHAPTER NINE

The telephone delivery arrived while Reacher was eating lunch. He had made himself a cheese sandwich and a pot of coffee and was halfway through both when the delivery guy knocked on the door. The guy unpacked the box himself and handed Reacher the phone. He said he had to keep the box. Apparently there was a shortage of boxes on the island.

The phone was a weird instrument. It was like no phone Reacher had seen before. He put it on the countertop next to the remains of his sandwich and looked at it from all angles. It was definitely foreign, and probably about thirty years old. From some beaten nation’s wartime warehouses, then. Mountains of stuff had been inherited. A hundred thousand typewriters here, a hundred thousand binoculars

there. A hundred thousand telephones, rewired and reissued. At the right time, too. Turning tents and Quonset huts all over the world into permanent brick and stone buildings must have put a lot of pressure on a lot of people. Why wait for Bell Labs or GE when you can just back up a truck to a warehouse in Frankfurt?

Reacher found the jack on the kitchen wall and plugged in the phone and checked for dial tone. It was there. So he left the phone on the countertop and headed out to the beach.

CHAPTER TEN

It was a great beach. Better than most Reacher had seen. He took off his shirt and his shoes and took a long swim in warm blue water, and then he closed his eyes and lay in the sun until he was dry again. He opened his eyes and saw nothing but white-out and glare from the sky. Then he blinked and turned his head and saw he was not alone. Fifteen feet away a girl was lying on a towel. She was in a one-piece bathing suit. She was maybe thirteen or fourteen. Not all grown up, but not a kid either. She had beads of water on her skin and her hair was slick and heavy.

Reacher stood up, all crusted with sand. He had no towel. He used his shirt to brush himself off, and then he shook it out and put it on. The girl turned her head and asked, “Where do you live?”

Reacher pointed.

“Up the street,” he said.

“Would you let me walk back with you?”

“Sure. Why?”

“In case those boys are there.”

“They’re not. They’re gone all day.”

“They might come back early.”

“Did they give you that toll road crap?”

She nodded. “I wouldn’t pay.”

“What did they want?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

Reacher said nothing.

The girl asked, “What’s your name?”

Reacher said, “Reacher.”

“Mine’s Helen.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Helen.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Since yesterday,” Reacher said. “You?”

“A week or so.”

“Are you staying long?”

“Looks like it. You?”

“I’m not sure,” Reacher said.

The girl stood up and shook out her towel. She was a slender thing, small but long-legged. She had nail polish on her toes. They walked off the sand together and into the long concrete street. It was deserted up ahead. Reacher asked, “Where’s your house?”

Helen said, “On the left, near the top.”

“Mine’s on the right. We’re practically neighbors.” Reacher walked her all the way, but her mom was home by then, so he wasn’t asked in. Helen smiled sweetly and said thanks and Reacher crossed the street to his own place, where he found hot still air and nobody home. So he just sat on the stoop and whiled away the time. Two hours later the three Marine NCOs came home on their motorbikes, followed by two more, then two more in cars. Thirty minutes after that a regular American school bus rolled in from the ballgame, and a crowd of neighborhood kids spilled out and went inside their homes with nothing more than hard stares in Reacher’s direction. Reacher stared back just as hard, but he didn’t move. Partly because he hadn’t seen his target. Which was strange. He looked all around, once, twice, and by the time the diesel smoke cleared he was certain: the fat smelly kid with the boil had not been on the bus.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Eventually Joe came home, silent and preoccupied and uncommunicative. He didn’t say where he had been. He didn’t say anything. He just headed for the kitchen, washed his hands, checked the new phone for dial tone, and then went to take a shower, which was unusual for Joe at that time of day. Next in, surprisingly, was their father, also silent and preoccupied and uncommunicative. He

got a glass of water, checked the phone for dial tone, and holed up in the living room. Last in was their mother, struggling under the weight of packages and a bouquet of flowers the women's welcoming committee had produced at lunch. Reacher took the packages from her and carried them to the kitchen. She saw the new phone on the countertop and brightened a little. She never felt good until she had checked in with her dad and made sure he had her latest contact information. France was seven hours behind Japan, which made it mid-morning there, which was a good time for a chat, so she dialed the long number and listened to it ring.

She got the housekeeper, of course, and a minute later the hot little house on Okinawa was in an uproar.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Stan Reacher got straight on the new phone to his company clerk, who leaned on a guy, who leaned on another guy, like dominoes, and within thirty minutes Josie had a seat on the last civilian flight of the evening to Tokyo, and within forty she had an onward connection to Paris.

Reacher asked, "Do you want company?"

His mother said, "Of course I would like it. And I know your grandpa Moutier would love to see you again. But I could be there a couple of weeks. More, perhaps. And you have a test to take, and then school to start."

"They'll understand. I don't mind missing a couple of weeks. And I could take the test when I get back. Or maybe they'll forget all about it."

His father said, "Your mother means we can't afford it, son. Plane tickets are expensive."

And so were taxicabs, but two hours later they took one to the airport. An old Japanese guy showed up in a big boxy Datsun, and Stan got in the front, and Josie and the boys crowded together in the back. Josie had a small bag. Joe was clean from the shower, but his hair was no longer combed. It was back to its usual tousled mess. Reacher was still salty and sandy from the beach. No one said much of anything. Reacher remembered his grandfather pretty well. He had met him three times. He had a closet full of artificial limbs. Apparently the heirs of deceased veterans were still officially obliged to return the prostheses to the manufacturer, for adjustment and eventual reissue. Part of the deal, from back in the day. Grandpa Moutier said every year or so another one would show up at his door. Sometimes two or three a year. Some of them were made from table legs.

They got out at the airport. It was dark and the air was going cold. Josie hugged Stan, and kissed him, and she hugged Joe, and kissed him, and she hugged Reacher, and kissed him, and then she pulled him aside and whispered a long urgent sentence in his ear. Then she went on alone to the check-in line.

Stan and the boys went up a long outside staircase to the observation deck. There was a JAL 707 waiting on the tarmac, spotlit and whining and ringed with attendant vehicles. It had stairs rolled up to its forward door, and its engines were turning slowly. Beyond the runway was a nighttime view of the whole southern half of the island. Their long concretestreet lay indistinguishable in the distance, miles away to the south and the west. There were ten thousand small fires burning in the

neighborhood. Backyard bonfires, each one flickering bright at its base and sending thin plumes of smoke high in the air.

“Trash night,” Stan said. Reacher nodded. Every island he had ever been on had a garbage problem. Regulated once-a-week burning was the usual solution, for everything, including leftover food. Traditional, in every culture. The word bonfire came from bone fire. General knowledge. He had seen a small wire incinerator behind the hot little house.

“We missed it for this week,” Stan said. “I wish we’d known.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Joe said. “We don’t really have any trash yet.”

They waited, all three of them, leaning forward, elbows on a rail, and then Josie came out below them, one of about thirty passengers. She walked across the tarmac and turned at the bottom of the stairs and waved. Then she climbed up and into the plane, and she was lost to sight.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Stan and the boys watched the takeoff, watched the jet bank and climb, watched its tiny lights disappear, waited until its shattering noise was gone, and then they clattered down the long staircase three abreast. They walked home, which was Stan’s usual habit when Josie wasn’t involved and the distance was less than eight miles. Two hours’ quick march. Nothing at all, to a Marine, and cheaper than the bus. He was a child of the Depression, not that his family’s flinty New England parsimony would have been markedly different even in a time of plenty. Waste not, want not, make do and mend, don’t make an exhibition of yourself. His own father had stopped buying new clothes at the age of forty, feeling that what he owned by that point would outlast him, and to gamble otherwise would be reckless extravagance.

The bonfires were almost out when they arrived at their street. Layers of

smoke hung in the air, and there was the smell of ash and scorched meat, even inside the hot little house. They went straight to bed under thin sheets, and ten minutes later all was silent.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Reacher slept badly, first dreaming about his grandfather, the ferocious old Frenchman somehow limbless and equipped with four table legs, moving and rearing like a piece of mobile furniture. Then he was woken in the early hours by something stealthy in the back yard, a cat or a rodent or some other kind of scavenger, and then again much later when the new phone rang twice. Too soon for his mother to have arrived in Paris, too late for a report of a fatal accident en route to Tokyo. Something else, obviously, so he ignored it both times. Joe got up at that point, so Reacher took advantage of the solitude and rolled over and slept on, until after nine o’clock, which was late for him.

He found his father and his brother in the kitchen, both of them silent and strained to a degree he found excessive. No question that grandpa Moutier was a nice old guy, but any ninety-year-old was by definition limited in the life expectancy department. No big surprise. The guy had to croak sometime. No one lives forever. And he had already beaten the odds. The guy was already about twenty years old when the Wright brothers flew, for God’s sake.

Reacher made his own coffee, because he liked it stronger than the rest of his family. He made toast, poured cereal, ate and drank, and still no one had spoken to him. Eventually he asked, "What's up?"

His father's gaze dipped and swiveled and traversed like an artillery piece, and came to rest on a point on the tabletop, about a foot in front of Reacher's plate. He said, "The phone this morning."

"Not mom, right?"

"No, not that."

"Then what?"

"We're in trouble."

"What, all of us?"

"Me and Joe."

Reacher asked, "Why? What happened?"

But at that point the doorbell rang, so there was no answer. Neither Joe or his father looked like moving, so Reacher got up and headed for the hallway. It was the same delivery guy as the day before. He went through the same ritual. He unpacked a box and retained it and handed Reacher a heavy spool of electric cable. There must have been a hundred yards of it. The spool was the size of a car tire. The cable was for domestic wiring, like Romex, heavy and stiff, sheathed in gray plastic. The spool had a wire cutter attached to it by a short chain.

Reacher left it on the hallway floor and headed back to the kitchen. He asked, "Why do we need electric cable?"

"We don't," his father said. "I ordered boots."

"Well, you didn't get them. You got a spool of wire."

His father blew a sigh of frustration. "Then someone made a mistake, didn't they?"

Joe said nothing, which was very unusual. Normally in that kind of a situation he would immediately launch a series of speculative analyses, asking about the nature and format of the order codes, pointing out that numbers can be easily transposed, thinking out loud about how QWERTY keyboards put alphabetically remote letters side by side, and therefore how clumsy typists are always a quarter-inch away from an inadvertent jump from, say, footwear to hardware. He had that kind of a brain. Everything needed an explanation. But he said nothing. He just sat there, completely mute.

"What's up?" Reacher said again, in the silence.

"Nothing for you to worry about," his father said.

"It will be unless you two lighten up. Which I guess you're not going to anytime soon, judging by the look of you."

"I lost a code book," his father said.

"A code book for what?"

“For an operation I might have to lead.”

“China?”

“How did you know that?”

“Where else is left?”

“It’s theoretical right now,” his father said. “Just an option. But there are plans, of course. And it will be very embarrassing if they leak. We’re supposed to be getting along with China now.”

“Is there enough in the code book to make sense to anyone?”

“Easily. Real names plus code equivalents for two separate cities, plus squads and divisions. A smart analyst could piece together where we’re going, what we’re going to do, and how many of us are coming.”

“How big of a book is it?”

“It’s a regular three-ring binder.”

“Who had it last?” Reacher asked.

“Some planner,” his father said. “But it’s my responsibility.”

“When did you know it was lost?”

“Last night. The call this morning was a negative result for the search I ordered.”

“Not good,” Reacher said. “But why is Joe involved?”

“He isn’t. That’s a separate issue. That was the other call this morning. Another three-ring binder, unbelievably. The test answers are missing. Up at the school. And Joe went there yesterday.”

“I didn’t even see the answer book,” Joe said. “I certainly didn’t take it away with me.”

Reacher asked, “So what exactly did you do up there?”

“Nothing, in the end. I got as far as the principal’s office and I told the secretary I wanted to talk to the guy about the test. Then I thought better of it and left.”

“Where was the answer book?”

“On the principal’s desk, apparently. But I never got that far.”

“You were gone a long time.”

“I took a walk.”

“Around the school?”

“Partly. And other places.”

“Were you in the building across the lunch hour?”

Joe nodded.

“And that’s the problem,” he said. “That’s when they think I took it.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“It’s an honor violation, obviously. I could be excluded for a semester. Maybe the whole year. And then they’ll hold me back a grade, which will be two grades by then. You and I could end up in the same class.”

“You could do my homework,” Reacher said.

“This is not funny.”

“Don’t worry about it. We’ll have moved on by the end of the semester anyway.”

“Maybe not,” their father said. “Not if I’m in the brig or busted back to private and painting curbstones for the rest of my career. We all could be stuck on Okinawa forever.”

And at that point the phone rang again. Their father answered. It was their mother on the line, from Paris, France. Their father forced a bright tone into his voice, and he talked and listened, and then he hung up and relayed the news that their mother had arrived safely, and that old man Moutier wasn’t expected to live more than a couple of days, and that their mother was sad about it.

Reacher said, “I’m going to the beach.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Reacher stepped out through the door and glanced toward the sea. The street was empty. No kids. He took a snap decision and detoured to the other side and knocked on Helen’s door. The girl he had met the day before. She opened up and saw who it was and crowded out next to him on the stoop and pulled the door all the way closed behind her. Like she was keeping him secret. Like she was embarrassed by him. She picked up on his feeling and shook her head.

“My dad is sleeping,” she said. “That’s all. He sat up and worked all night. And now he’s not feeling so hot. He just flaked, an hour ago.”

Reacher said, “You want to go swimming?”

She glanced down the street, saw no one was there, and said, “Sure. Give me five minutes, OK?” She crept back inside and Reacher turned and watched the street, half hoping that the kid with the boil would come out, and half hoping he wouldn’t. He didn’t. Then Helen came out again, in a bathing suit under a sundress. She had a towel. They walked down the street together, keeping pace, a foot apart, talking about where they’d lived and the places they’d seen. Helen had moved a lot, but not as much as Reacher. Her dad was a rear echelon guy, not a combat Marine, and his postings tended to be longer and more stable.

The morning water was colder than it had been the afternoon before, so they got out after ten minutes or so. Helen let Reacher use her towel, and then they lay on it together in the sun, now just inches apart. She asked him, “Have you ever kissed a girl?”

“Yes,” he said. “Twice.”

“The same girl two times or two girls once each?”

“Two girls more than once each.”

“A lot?”

“Maybe four times each.”

“Where?”

“On the mouth.”

“No, where? In the movies, or what?”

“One in the movies, one in a park.”

“With tongues?”

“Yes.”

She asked, “Are you good at it?”

He said, “I don’t know.”

“Will you show me how? I’ve never done it.”

So he leaned up on an elbow and kissed her on the mouth. Her lips were small and mobile, and her tongue was cool and wet. They kept it going for fifteen or twenty seconds, and then they broke apart.

He asked, “Did you like it?”

She said, “Kind of.”

“Was I good at it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have anything to compare it with.”

“Well, you were better than the other two I kissed,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said, but he didn’t know what she was thanking him for. The compliment or the trial run, he wasn’t sure.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Reacher and Helen walked back together, and they almost made it home. They got within twenty yards of their destination, and then the kid with the boil stepped out of his yard and took up a position in the middle of the road. He was wearing the same Corps T-shirt and the same pair of ragged pants. And he was alone, for the time being.

Reacher felt Helen go quiet beside him. She stopped walking and Reacher stopped a pace ahead of her. The big kid was six feet away. The three of them were like the corners of a thin sloping triangle. Reacher said, “Stay there, Helen. I know you could kick this guy’s ass all by yourself, but there’s no reason why both of us should be exposed to the smell.”

The big kid just smiled.

He said, “You’ve been to the beach.”

Reacher said, “And we thought Einstein was smart.”

“How many times have you been?”

“You can’t count that high.”

“Are you trying to make me mad?”

Reacher was, of course. For his age he had always been a freakishly big kid, right from birth. His mother claimed he had been the biggest baby anyone had ever seen, although she had a well-known taste for the dramatic, so Reacher tended to discount that information. But even so, big or not, he had always fought two or three classes up. Sometimes more. With the result that one on one, ninety-nine percent of the time, he had been the small kid. So he had learned to fight like a small kid. All things being equal, size usually wins. But not always, otherwise the heavyweight championship of the world would be decided on the scale, not in the ring. Sometimes, if the small guy is faster and smarter, he can get a result. And one way of being smarter is to make the other guy dumber, which you can do by inducing a rage. An opponent’s red mist is the smaller guy’s best friend. So yes, Reacher was trying to make the smelly kid mad.

But the smelly kid wasn’t falling for it. He was just standing there, taking it, tense but controlled. His feet were well placed, and his shoulders were bunched. His fists were ready to come up. Reacher took one pace forward, into the miasma of halitosis and body odor. Rule one with a guy like that: don’t let him bite you. You could get an infection. Rule two: watch his eyes. If they stayed up, he was going to swing. If they dropped down, he was going to kick.

The guy’s eyes stayed up. He said, “There’s a girl here. You’re going to get your butt kicked in front of a girl. You won’t be able to show your face. You’ll be the neighborhood retard pussy. Maybe I’ll charge the toll every time you come out of your house. Maybe I’ll expand the zone all over the island. Maybe I’ll charge a double toll. From you and your retard brother.”

Rule three with a guy like that: upset the choreography. Don’t wait, don’t back off, don’t be the challenger, don’t be the underdog, don’t think defensively.

In other words, rule four: hit him first.

And not with a predictable little left jab, either.

Because rule five: there are no rules on the back streets of Okinawa.

Reacher snapped a vicious straight right into the guy’s face and caught him square on the cheek.

That got his attention.

The guy rocked back and shook his head and popped a straight right of his own, which Reacher had expected and was ready for. He leaned left and let the fat fist buzz past his ear. Smarter and faster. Then the guy was all tangled up in the follow-through and could do nothing but step back and crouch and start over. Which he got well into doing.

Until he heard the sound of a motorbike. Which was like the bell at the end of a round to him. Like Pavlov’s dog. He hesitated for a fatal split second.

Reacher hesitated too. But for a shorter time. Purely because of geometry. He was facing up the street, toward the four-way junction. His eyes flicked up and he saw a bike heading north to south, keeping straight on the main road, passing by, not turning in. He processed that information and

deleted it even before the bike was gone, just as soon as its speed and position had made a turn impossible. Whereupon his gaze came straight back to his opponent.

Who was at a geometric disadvantage. He was facing down the street, toward the sea. He had nothing to go on but sound. And the sound was loud and diffuse. Not specific. No spatial cues. Just an echoing roar. So like every other animal on earth with better sight than hearing, the guy yielded to a basic instinct. He started to turn his head to look behind him. Irresistible. Then a split second later the auditory input went unambiguous when the roar got trapped behind buildings, and the guy came to his conclusion and stopped his move and started to turn his head back again.

But by then it was far too late. By then Reacher's left hook was halfway through its travel. It was scything in, hard and fast, every sinew and rosy muscle in his greyhound's frame unspooling in perfect coordination, with just one aim in sight: to land that big left fist on the guy's neck.

Total success. The blow landed right on the boil, crushing it, crushing flesh, compressing bone, and the guy went down like he had run full speed into a clothesline. His legs came out from under him and he thumped more or less horizontally on the concrete, just sprawling, tangled and stunned like a pratfall stunt in a silent movie.

Next obvious move was for Reacher to start kicking him in the head, but he had an audience with feminine sensibilities, so he resisted the temptation. The big guy got his face off the floor and he looked nowhere in particular and said, "That was a sucker punch."

Reacher nodded. "But you know what they say. Only suckers get sucker punched."

"We're going to finish this."

Reacher looked down. "Looks kind of finished already."

"Dream on, you little punk."

"Take an eight count," Reacher said. "I'll be back."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Reacher hustled Helen up to her house and then he jogged across the street to his own. He went in the door and ran through to the kitchen and found his father in there, alone.

"Where's Joe?" Reacher asked.

"Taking a long walk," his father said.

Reacher stepped out to the back yard. It was a square concrete space, empty except for an old patio table and four chairs, and the empty incinerator. The incinerator was about the size of a big round garbage can. It was made of diagonal steel mesh. It was up on little legs. It was faintly gray with old ash, but it had been emptied and cleaned after its last use. In fact the whole yard had been swept. Marine families. Always meticulous.

Reacher headed back to the hallway. He crouched over the spool of electric cable and unwound six feet of wire and snipped it off with the cutters.

His father asked, "What are you doing?"

"You know what I'm doing, dad," Reacher said. "I'm doing what you intended me to do. You didn't order boots. You ordered exactly what arrived. Last night, after the code book went missing. You thought the news would leak and Joe and I would get picked on as a result. You couldn't bring us Ka-Bar knives or knuckledusters, so you thought of the next best thing."

He started to wind the heavy wire around his fist, wrapping one turn after another, the way a boxer binds his hands. He pressed the malleable metal and plastic flat and snug.

His father asked, "So has the news leaked?"

"No," Reacher said. "This is a previous engagement."

His father ducked his head out the door and looked down the street. He said, "Can you take that guy?"

"Does the Pope sleep in the woods?"

"He has a friend with him."

"The more the merrier."

"There are other kids watching."

"There always are."

Reacher started wrapping his other hand.

His father said, "Stay calm, son. Don't do too much damage. I don't want this family to go three for three this week, as far as getting in trouble is concerned."

"He won't rat me out."

"I know that. I'm talking about a manslaughter charge."

"Don't worry, dad," Reacher said. "It won't go that far."

"Make sure it doesn't."

"But I'm afraid it will have to go a certain distance. A little farther than normal."

"What are you talking about, son?"

"I'm afraid this time I'm going to have to break some bones."

"Why?"

"Mom told me to. In a way."

"What?"

"At the airport," Reacher said. "She took me aside, remember? She told me she figures this place is driving you and Joe crazy. She told me I had to keep an eye on you and him both. She said it's up to me."

"Your mother said that? We can look after ourselves."

"Yeah? How's that working out so far?"

“But this kid has nothing to do with anything.”

“I think he does,” Reacher said.

“Since when? Did he say something?”

“No,” Reacher said. “But there are other senses apart from hearing. There’s smell, for instance.”

And then he jammed his bulbous gray fists in his pockets and stepped out to the street again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thirty yards away there was a horseshoe gaggle of maybe ten kids. The audience. They were shifting from foot to foot and vibrating with anticipation. About ten yards closer than that the smelly kid was waiting, with a sidekick in attendance. The smelly kid was on the right, and the sidekick was on the left. The sidekick was about Reacher’s own height, but thick in the shoulders and chest, like a wrestler, and he had a face like a wanted poster, flat and hard and mean. Those shoulders and that face were about ninety percent of the guy’s armory, Reacher figured. The guy was the type that got left alone solely because of his appearance. So probably he didn’t get much practice, and maybe he even believed his own bullshit. So maybe he wasn’t really much of a brawler.

Only one way to find out.

Reacher came in at a fast walk, his hands still in his pockets, on a wide curving trajectory, heading for the sidekick, not slowing at all, not even in the last few strides, the way a glad-handing politician approaches, the way a manic church minister walks up to a person, as if delivering an eager and effusive welcome was his only aim in life. The sidekick got caught up in the body language. He got confused by long social training. His hand even came halfway up, ready to shake.

Without breaking stride Reacher head-butted him full in the face. Left, right, bang. A perfect ten, for style and content, and power and precision. The guy went over backward and before he was a quarter of the way to the floor Reacher was turning toward the smelly kid and his wrapped hands were coming up out of his pockets.

In the movies they would have faced off, long and tense and static, like the OK Corral, with taunts and muttered threats, hands away from their sides, up on their toes, maybe circling, narrowed eyes on narrowed eyes, building the suspense. But Reacher didn’t live in the movies. He lived in the real world. Without even a split second’s pause he crashed his left fist into the smelly guy’s side, a vicious low blow, the second beat in a fast rhythmic one-two shuffle, where the one had been the head butt. His fist must have weighed north of six pounds at that point, and he put everything he had into it, and the result was that whatever the smelly kid was going to do next, he was going to do it with three busted ribs, which put him at an instant disadvantage, because busted ribs hurt like hell, and any kind of violent physical activity makes them hurt worse. Some folks with busted ribs can’t even bear to sneeze.

In the event the smelly kid didn’t do much of anything with his busted ribs. He just doubled over like a wounded buffalo. So Reacher crowded in and launched a low clubbing right and bust some more ribs on the other side. Easy enough. The heavy cable wrap made his hands like wrecking balls. The only problem was that people don’t always go to the hospital for busted ribs. Especially not Marine families. They just tape them up and gut it out. And Reacher needed the guy in a hospital

cot, with his whole concerned family all around him. At least for one evening. So he dragged the guy's left arm out from its midsection clutch, clamping the guy's wrist in his own left hand, clumsy because of the wire, and he twisted it through a 180 turn, so the palm was up and the soft side of the elbow was down, and then he smashed his own right fist clean through the joint and the guy howled and screamed and fell to his knees and Reacher put him out of his misery with an uppercut under the jaw.

Game over.

Reacher looked left to right around the silent semicircle of spectators and said, "Next?"

No one moved.

Reacher said, "Anyone?"

No one moved.

"OK," Reacher said. "Let's all get it straight. From now on, it is what it is."

And then he turned and walked

back to his house.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Reacher's father was waiting in the hallway, a little pale around the eyes. Reacher started unwrapping his hands, and he asked, "Who are you working with on this code book thing?"

His father said, "An Intelligence guy and two MPs."

"Would you call them and ask them to come over?"

"Why?"

"All part of the plan. Like mom told me."

"They should come here?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Right now would be good." Reacher saw he had the word Georgia stamped backward across one of his knuckles. Must have been where the wire was manufactured. Raised lettering on the insulation. A place he had never been.

His father made the call to the base and Reacher watched the street from a window. He figured with a bit of luck the timing would be perfect. And it was, more or less. Twenty minutes later a staff car pulled up and three men in uniform got out. And immediately an ambulance turned into the street behind them and maneuvered around their parked vehicle and headed on down to the smelly kid's house. The medics loaded the kid on board, and his mother and what looked like a younger brother rode along as passengers. Reacher figured the kid's father would head straight for the hospital, on his motorbike, at the end of his watch. Or earlier, depending on what the doctors said.

The Intelligence guy was a major, and the MPs were Warrant Officers. All three of them were in BDUs. All three of them were still standing in the hallway. All three of them had the same expression on their faces: why are we here?

Reacher said, "That kid they just took away? You need to go search his house. Which is now empty, by the way. It's ready and waiting for you."

The three guys looked at each other. Reacher watched their faces. Clearly none of them had any real desire to nail a good Marine like Stan Reacher. Clearly all of them wanted a happy ending. They were prepared to clutch at straws. They were prepared to go the extra mile, even if that involved taking their cues from some weird thirteen-year-old kid.

One of the MPs asked, "What are we looking for?"

"You'll know it when you see it," Reacher said. "Eleven inches long, one inch wide, gray in color."

The three guys stepped out to the street, and Reacher and his father sat down to wait.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It was a reasonably short wait, as Reacher had privately predicted. The smelly kid had demonstrated a degree of animal cunning, but he was no kind of a criminal mastermind. That was for damn sure. The three men came back less than ten minutes later with a metal object that had been burned in a fire. It was ashy gray as a result. It was a once-bright alloy fillet eleven inches long and one inch wide, slightly curved across its shorter dimension, with three round appendages spaced along its length.

It was what is left when you burn a regular three-ring binder.

No stiff covers, no pages, no contents, just scorched metal.

Reacher asked, "Where did you find it?"

One of the MPs said, "Under a bed in the second bedroom. The boys' room."

No kind of a criminal mastermind.

The major from Intelligence asked, "Is it the code book?"

Reacher shook his head.

"No," he said. "It's the test answers from the school."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"So why call us?"

"This has to be handled by the Corps. Not by the school. You need to go up to the hospital and talk to the kid and his father together. You need to get a confession. Then you need to tell the school. What you do to the kid after that is your business. A warning will do it, probably. He won't trouble us again anyway."

"What exactly happened here?"

“It was my brother’s fault,” Reacher said. “In a way, anyway. The kid from down the street started hazing us, and Joe stepped up and did really well. Smart mouth, fast answers, the whole nine yards. It was a great performance. Plus, Joe is huge. Gentle as a lamb, but the kid didn’t know that, obviously. So he decided to duck the physical route, in terms of revenge. He decided to go another way. He figured out that Joe was uptight about the test. Maybe he had heard us talking. But anyway, he followed Joe up to the school yesterday and stole the answers. To discredit him.”

“Can you prove that?”

“Circumstantially,” Reacher said. “The kid didn’t go to the ballgame. He wasn’t on the bus. So he was in town all day. And Joe washed his hands and took a shower when he got back. Which is unusual for Joe, in the afternoon. He must have felt dirty. And my guess is he felt dirty because he had been smelling that kid’s stink all day, from behind him and around corners.”

“Very circumstantial,” the major said.

“Ask the kid,” Reacher said. “Lean on him, in front of his dad.”

“Then what happened?”

“The kid made up a scenario where Joe memorized the answers and then burned the book. Which would be plausible, for a guy who wanted to cheat on a test. And it was trash night, which was convenient. The plan was the kid would burn the book in his own back yard, and then sneak into ours during the night and dump the metal part in our incinerator, among our ashes, so the evidence would be right there. But we had no ashes. We missed trash night. We had to be up at the airport instead. So the kid had to abort the plan. He just snuck away again. And I heard him. Early hours of the morning. I thought it was a cat or a rat.”

“Any trace evidence?”

“You might find footprints out there,” Reacher said. “The yard was swept at some point, but there’s always dust. Especially after trash night.”

The MPs went away and took a look at the yard, and then they came back with quizzical expressions on their faces, as if to say, the kid could be right.

The Intelligence major got a look on his own face, like I can’t believe I’m about to say this to a thirteen-year-old, and then he asked, “Do you know where the code book is too?”

“No,” Reacher said. “Not for sure. But I could make a pretty good guess.”

“Where?”

“Help my brother out with the school, and then we’ll talk.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The three Marines came back ninety minutes later. One of the MPs said, “You bust that kid up pretty good, didn’t you?”

“He’ll live,” Reacher said.

The other MP said, “He confessed. It went down like you figured. How did you know?”

“Logic,” Reacher said. “I knew Joe wouldn’t have done it, so clearly someone else did. It was just a question of who. And how, and why.”

The Intelligence major said, “We squared things away with the school. Your brother is in the clear.” Then the guy smiled. He said, “But there’s one unfortunate consequence.”

“Which is what?”

“They don’t have the answers anymore, so the test has been canceled.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Every silver lining has a cloud.”

“Did you see the questions?”

The major nodded. “Reading, writing, adding, subtracting. Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“No general knowledge?”

“No.”

“No baseball?”

“Not even a hint.”

“No statistics?”

“Percentages, maybe, in the math section. Odds and probabilities, that sort of thing.”

“Which are important,” Reacher said. “As in, what are the odds of a Marine officer losing a code book?”

“Low.”

“What are the odds of a good Marine officer like my dad losing a code book?”

“Lower still.”

“So the probability is the book isn’t lost at all. The probability is there’s another explanation. Therefore time spent chasing the notion it’s lost is time wasted. Time spent on other avenues would be more fruitful.”

“What other avenues?”

“When did President Ford take over from President Nixon?”

“Ten days ago.”

“Which must have been when the Joint Chiefs started dusting off all the options. And I’m guessing the only real live one is China. Which is why we got the transfer here. But we’re the combat phase. So a little earlier than us the planners must have been brought in. A week or so ago, maybe. They must have been told to nail everything down double quick. Which is a lot of work, right?”

“Always.”

“And what’s the last phase of that work?”

“Revising the code books to match the updated plans.”

“What’s the deadline?”

“Theoretically we have to be ready to go at midnight tonight, should the president order it.”

“So maybe somewhere there’s a guy who worked on the codes all through the night. A rear echelon guy who got here about a week ago.”

“I’m sure there is. But we already checked all over the base. That’s the first thing we did.”

“Maybe he worked off post.”

“That would be unauthorized.”

“But it happens.”

“I know. But even if it did in this case, he would have been back on the base hours ago, and the book would have been back in the safe hours ago.”

“Suppose he wore himself out and fell asleep? Suppose he hasn’t gotten up yet? Suppose the code book is still on his kitchen table?”

“Where?”

“Across the street,” Reacher said. “Knock on the door and ask for Helen.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Joe got back from his long walk an hour later and he and his brother and his father headed for the beach and took a swim. The water was warm, the sand was white, and the palms were swaying. They loitered and strolled until the sun dipped low, and then they headed home to the hot little house at the top of the concrete street, where an hour later the new phone rang again and Josie told them that her father had died. Old Laurent Moutier was gone, at the age of ninety, taking with him like everyone does a lifetime of unknown private hopes and dreams and fears and experiences, and leaving behind him like most people do a thin trace of himself in his living descendants. He had never had a clear idea of what would become of his beautiful mop-haired daughter and his two handsome grandsons, nor did he really want one, but like every other twentieth-century male human in Europe he hoped they would live lives of peace, prosperity, and plenty, while simultaneously knowing they almost certainly wouldn’t. So he hoped they would bear their burdens with grace and good humor, and he was comforted in his final moments by the knowledge that so far they always had, and probably always would.

Read on for an excerpt from Lee Child’s

The Affair

Chapter 1

The Pentagon is the world’s largest office building, six and a half million square feet, thirty thousand people, more than seventeen miles of corridors, but it was built with just three street doors, each one of them opening into a guarded pedestrian lobby. I chose the southeast option, the main concourse entrance, the one nearest the Metro and the bus station, because it was

the busiest and the most popular with civilian workers, and I wanted plenty of civilian workers around, preferably a whole long unending stream of them, for insurance purposes, mostly against getting shot on sight. Arrests go bad all the time, sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose, so I wanted witnesses. I wanted independent eyeballs on me, at least at the beginning. I remember the date, of course. It was Tuesday, the eleventh of March, 1997, and it was the last day I walked into that place as a legal employee of the people who built it.

A long time ago.

The eleventh of March 1997 was also by chance exactly four and a half years before the world changed, on that other future Tuesday, and so like a lot of things in the old days the security at the main concourse entrance was serious without being hysterical. Not that I invited hysteria. Not from a distance. I was wearing my Class A uniform, all of it clean, pressed, polished, and spit-shined, all of it covered with thirteen years' worth of medal ribbons, badges, insignia, and citations. I was thirty-six years old, standing tall and walking ramrod straight, a totally squared away U.S. Army Military Police major in every respect, except that my hair was too long and I hadn't shaved for five days.

Back then Pentagon security was run by the Defense Protective Service, and from forty yards I saw ten of their guys in the lobby, which I thought was far too many, which made me wonder whether they were all theirs or whether some of them were actually ours, working undercover, waiting for me. Most of our skilled work is done by Warrant Officers, and they do a lot of it by pretending to be someone else. They impersonate colonels and generals and enlisted men, and anyone else they need to, and they're good at it. All in a day's work for them to throw on DPS uniforms and wait for their target. From thirty yards I didn't recognize any of them, but then, the army is a very big institution, and they would have chosen men I had never met before.

I walked on, part of a broad wash of people heading across the concourse to the doors, some men and women in uniform, either Class As like my own or the old woodland-pattern BDUs we had back then, and some men and women obviously military but out of uniform, in suits or work clothes, and some obvious civilians, some of each category carrying bags or briefcases or packages, all of each category slowing and sidestepping and shuffling as the broad wash of people narrowed to a tight arrowhead and then narrowed further still to lonely single file or collegial two-by-two, as folks got ready to stream inside. I lined up with them, on my own, single file, behind a woman with pale unworn hands and ahead of a guy in a suit that had gone shiny at the elbows. Civilians, both of them, desk workers, probably analysts of some kind, which was exactly what I wanted. Independent eyeballs. It was close to noon. There was sun in the sky and the March air had a little warmth in it. Spring, in Virginia. Across the river the cherry trees were about to wake up. The famous blossom was about to break out. All over the innocent nation airline tickets and SLR cameras lay on hall tables, ready for sightseeing trips to the capital.

I waited in line. Way ahead of me the DPS guys were doing what security guys do. Four of them were occupied with specific tasks, two manning an inquiry counter and two checking official badge holders and then waving them through an open turnstile. Two were standing directly behind the glass inside the doors, looking out, heads high, eyes front, scanning the approaching crowd. Four were hanging back in the shadows behind the turnstiles, just clumped together, shooting the shit. All ten were armed.

It was the four behind the turnstiles that worried me. No question that back in 1997 the [Department](#) of Defense was seriously puffed up and overmanned in relation to the threats we faced then, but even so it was unusual to see four on-duty guys with absolutely nothing to do. Most commands at least made their surplus personnel look busy. But these four had no obvious role. I stretched up tall and peered ahead and tried to get a look at their shoes. You can learn a lot from shoes. Undercover disguises often don't get that far, especially in a uniformed environment. The DPS was basically a beat cop role, so to the extent that a choice was [available](#), DPS guys would go for cop shoes, big comfortable things appropriate for walking and standing all day. Undercover MP Warrant Officers might use their own shoes, which would be subtly different.

But I couldn't see their shoes. It was too dark inside, and too far away.

The line shuffled along, at a decent pre-9/11 [clip](#). No sullen impatience, no frustration, no fear. Just old-style routine. The woman in front of me was wearing perfume. I could smell it coming off the nape of her neck. I [liked](#) it. The two guys behind the glass noticed me about ten yards out. Their gaze moved off the woman and onto me. It rested on me a beat longer than it needed to, and then it moved on to the guy behind.

Then it came back. Both men looked me over quite openly, up and down, side to side, four or five seconds, and then I shuffled forward and their attention moved behind me again. They didn't say anything to each other. Didn't say anything to anyone else, either. No warnings, no alerts. Two possible [interpretations](#). One, best case, I was just a guy they hadn't seen before. Or maybe I stood out because I was bigger and taller than anyone within a hundred yards. Or because I was wearing a major's gold oak leaves and ribbons for some heavy-duty medals, including a Silver Star, like a real poster boy, but because of the hair and the beard I also looked like a real caveman, which visual dissonance might have been enough reason for the long second glance, just purely out of interest. Sentry duty can be boring, and unusual sights are always welcome.

Or two, worst case, they were merely confirming to themselves that some expected event had indeed happened, and that all was going according to plan. Like they had prepared and studied photographs and were saying to themselves: OK, he's here, right on time, so now we just wait two more minutes until he steps inside, and then we take him down.

Because I was expected, and I was right on time. I had a twelve o'clock appointment and matters to discuss with a particular colonel in a third-floor office in the C ring, and I was certain I would never get there. To walk head-on into a hard arrest was a pretty blunt tactic, but sometimes if you want to know for sure whether the stove is hot, the only way to find out is to touch it.

The guy ahead of the woman ahead of me stepped inside

the [doors](#) and held up a badge that was attached to his neck by a lanyard. He was waved onward. The woman in front of me moved and then stopped short, because right at that moment the two DPS [watchers](#) chose to come out from behind the glass. The woman

paused in place and let them squeeze out in front of her, against the pressing flow. Then she resumed her progress and stepped inside, and the two guys stopped and stood exactly where she had been, three feet in front of me, but facing in the opposite direction, toward me, not away from me.

They were blocking the door. They were looking right at me. I was pretty sure they were genuine DPS personnel. They were wearing cop shoes, and their uniforms had eased and stretched and molded themselves to their [individual](#) physiques over a long period of time. These were not disguises, snatched from a locker and put on for the first time that morning. I looked beyond the two guys, inside, at their four partners who were doing nothing, and I tried to judge the fit of their clothes, by way of [comparison](#). It was hard to tell.

In front of me the guy on my right said, "Sir, may we help you?"

I asked, "With what?"

"Where are you headed today?"

"Do I need to tell you that?"

"No sir, absolutely not," the guy said. "But we could speed you along a little, if you like."

Probably via an inconspicuous door into a small [locked](#) room, I thought. I figured they had civilian witnesses on their mind too, the same way I did. I said, "I'm happy to wait my turn. I'm almost there, anyway."

The two guys said nothing in reply to that. Stalemate. Amateur hour. To try to start the arrest outside was dumb. I could push and shove and turn and run and be lost in the crowd in the blink of an eye. And they wouldn't shoot. Not outside. There were too many people on the concourse. Too much collateral damage. This was 1997, remember. March eleventh. Four and a half years before the new rules. Much better to wait until I was inside the lobby. The two stooges could close the doors behind me and form up shoulder to shoulder in front of them while I was getting the bad news at the desk. At that point theoretically I could turn back and fight my way past them again, but it would take me a second or two, and in that second or two the four guys with nothing to do could shoot me in the back about a thousand times.

And if I charged forward they could shoot me in the front. And where would I go anyway? To escape into the Pentagon was no kind of a good idea. The world's largest office building. Thirty thousand people. Five floors. Two basements. Seventeen miles of corridors. There are ten radial [hallways](#) between the rings, and they say a person can make it between any two random points inside a maximum seven minutes, which was presumably calculated with reference to the army's official quick-march pace of [four miles](#) an hour, which meant if I was running hard I could be anywhere within about three minutes. But where? I could find a [broom closet](#) and steal bag lunches and hold out a day or two, but that would be all. Or I could take hostages and try to argue my case, but I had never seen that kind of thing succeed.

So I waited.

The DPS guy in front of me on my right said, “Sir, you be sure and have a nice day now,” and then he moved past me, and his partner moved past me on my other side, both of them just strolling slow, two guys [happy to be](#) out in the air, patrolling, varying their viewpoint. Maybe not so dumb after all. They were doing their [jobs](#) and following their plan. They had tried to decoy me into a small locked room, but they had failed, no harm, no foul, so now they were turning the page straight to plan B. They would wait until I was inside and the doors were closed, and then they would jump into [crowd control](#) mode, dispersing the incoming people, keeping them safe in case shots had to be fired inside. I assumed the lobby glass was supposed to be bulletproof, but the smart money never bets on the DoD having gotten exactly what it paid for.

The door was right in front of me. It was [open](#). I took a breath and stepped into the lobby. Sometimes if you want to know for sure whether the stove is hot, the only way to find out is to touch it.