

**LEE**

**#1**

**NEW YORK TIMES  
BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR**

**CHILD**

**A JACK  
REACHER  
SHORT STORY**

**NOT  
A DRILL**

# NOT A DRILL

A Jack Reacher Short Story

Lee Child



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*Not a Drill* 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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One thing leads to another, and in Jack Reacher's case, one warm and aimless August day, a hitched ride in an empty lumber truck led to East Millinocket in Maine, which led in turn to a decent mid-morning

meal in a roadside restaurant near the highway, which led to a halting two-wary-guys conversation with the man at the next table, which led to an offered ride further north, to a place called Island Falls. The unspoken but clearly implied cost of the ride was the price of the guy's coffee and pie, but the



establishment was cheap, and Reacher had money in his pocket, and as always he had no particular place to be, so he accepted.

One thing leads to another.

The guy's car turned out to be a softly-sprung old Chevrolet, lacy with rust, and Island Falls turned out to be a pleasant little place on a lake, way in the

north, where Maine sticks out like a thumb up Canada's ass, with Quebec to the left and New Brunswick to the right. But most of all Island Falls was pretty close to the north end of I-95. Which was tempting. Reacher had a collector's instinct when it came to places. He knew the south end of I-95 pretty well. More than

nineteen hundred miles away, just past downtown Miami. He had been there many times. But he had never seen the north end.

He had no particular place to be.

One thing leads to another.

Getting out of Island Falls was easy enough. He had a cup of coffee in a hut next to a kayak rental

slip, and stood in the buggy warmth of the lake shore and took in the view, and then he turned his back on it all and walked out of town the same way the old Chevy had driven in, back to the highway cloverleaf. He set up on the on-ramp heading north, and waited. Not long, he figured. It was August, it was warm, it

was vacation country. The mood was amiable. It was daylight. He was clean. His clothes were only two days old, and his shave was only three. Ideal conditions, overall.

And sure enough, less than ten minutes later an old-model Jeep SUV with New Brunswick plates slowed and stopped. There was a woman at the wheel,

and a man next to her, in the passenger seat. They looked to be somewhere in their mid-thirties, clearly outdoor types, ruffled by the wind and tanned by the sun. Heading home, no doubt, after an active vacation. Maybe they had been kayaking. Or camping. Or both. The load space in the rear of the truck was piled up

with stuff.

The guy in the passenger seat let his window down, and the woman craned over for a look, too. The guy said, “We’re only going to Fredericton, which isn’t far, I’m afraid. Any good to you?”

Reacher said, “Is that in Canada?”

“Sure is.”

Reacher said, “Then

that's perfect. All I want is to get to the border, and then back again.”

“Got something against Canada?”

“My passport expired.”

The guy nodded. Gone were the days when a person could just stroll in and out of neighboring countries. Then the guy said, “But there's nothing much to see between here



and there. Nothing much to see through the fence, either. You'd be better off staying where you are, surely."

Reacher said, "I want to see the end of the road."

The guy said, "That sounds heavy."

The woman said, "We think of it as the beginning of the road."

"Good point," Reacher

said.

The guy said, “Hop in the back.” He craned around in his seat and batted stray items aside. Reacher opened the door and slid in and used his hip to finish the job. He closed the door and the woman hit the gas and they took off, cruising easy through the last thirty-some miles of America.

The last exit was for a town called Houlton. Or the first exit, Reacher supposed, from the Canadian point of view. Then came a mile or so of hinterland, and a little queuing traffic, and barriers and booths and official signs. Reacher stayed in the Jeep until the

last car's length, and then he said his thanks and his goodbyes and he slipped out, and he stepped ahead and put his foot on the last inch of blacktop, directly under the barrier pole.

The end of the road.

One thing leads to another.

He looped back and crossed to the southbound lanes and set up again

thirty yards from the barriers. He wanted to give incoming drivers plenty of time to see him, but not enough time to be already going too fast to stop. Once again he anticipated no kind of a lengthy delay. August, daylight, sunshine, vacation country, warmhearted and relaxed Canadian drivers full of generosity and goodwill.

Ten minutes max, he thought, maybe closer to five, and it wasn't outside the bounds of possibility that the first car through would be the one.

It wasn't. But the second car was. Which was more of a minivan, really. But not the kind of thing a soccer mom would be proud of. It was old and grimy, and somewhat

battered. Light blue, maybe, when it left the factory, but now colorless, almost, faded by sun and salt. There was a young man at the wheel, and a young woman beside him in the front, and another young woman in the back. The van had New Brunswick plates, and it was trailing a puff of oil smoke, after pulling away

from the customs post.

But Reacher had ridden in worse vehicles.

It slowed and stopped alongside him. The passenger window was already down. The woman in the front said, “We’re headed for Naismith.”

Which was a place Reacher had never heard of. He said, “I’m not sure where that is.”



The guy at the wheel leaned across and said, “The Allagash, man. About an hour west of Route 11. After going north for a bit. It’s a little town. Where you get on the wilderness trail through the forest. It’s a really cool place.”

Reacher said, “North of here?”

The guy said, “Beautiful country, man. You should

see those woods. Really primeval. Step off the path, and you could be the first human ever to set foot. I mean, literally. Ten thousand years of undisturbed nature. Since the last Ice Age.”

Reacher said nothing.

The guy said, “Get it while you can, my friend. It won’t be there forever. Climate change is going to

take it all down.”

No particular place to be.

Reacher said, “OK, sure, thanks.”

One thing leads to another.

He looped around the rear of the van and the girl in the back slid the door on a rusty track and he climbed in. Behind him in the load space were two

big backpacks and one hard-shell suitcase. The seat was some kind of nylon cloth gone greasy with age. He got settled and slid the door closed and the van moved off, puffing smoke again, from the effort.

“Thanks,” Reacher said, for the second time.

The trio introduced themselves. The girl in the

back was Helen, and the girl in the front was Suzanne, and the driver was Henry. Henry and Suzanne were a couple. They ran a bicycle store in a place called Moncton. Helen was their friend. The plan was Henry and Suzanne would walk the wilderness trail north from Naismith, to a place called Cripps, which would take

four days. Helen would be waiting there with the van to meet them, having spent the same four days doing something else, maybe antiquing in Presque Isle and Caribou.

“I don’t like the woods,” she said, as if she felt an explanation was required.

“Why not?” Reacher asked, because he felt a response was expected.

“Too creepy,” she said.  
“Too dark. Too full of bugs.”

They puttered onward past Houlton, and then Henry turned off on 212, which soon joined Route 11 going north, which was a pretty road. Saddleback Mountain was ahead on the right, and on the left was an endless expanse of woods and lakes. The trees

were green, and the water glittered, and the sky was blue. Beautiful country, just like Henry had promised.

“I don’t like the woods,” Helen said again.

She was in her late twenties, Reacher guessed. Maybe thirty, tops. She was paler than her friends, and sleeker, and more cared for. Indoor, more



than outdoor. Urban, rather than rural. Like her luggage. She was a hard-shell suitcase, not a backpack. Henry and Suzanne were stockier, and tousled, and wind-burned. But not older. Maybe they had all been college friends together, still a threesome more than five but less than ten years after graduation.

Henry said, “The woods are actually awesome, Helen.”

He said it kindly, full of enthusiasm. No hint of confrontation or scolding. Just a guy who loved the woods, unable to understand why his friend didn't. He seemed genuinely intrigued by the possibility that he could walk where no other

human had ever trod, in all of history. Reacher asked where they were all from originally, and it turned out that Henry and Suzanne were from the suburbs, of Toronto and Vancouver respectively, and it was Helen who was the real country girl, from what she called the trackless wastes of northern Ontario province.

In which case he figured she was entitled to her opinion. She had earned it, presumably.

Then they asked where he was from, and his bio filled the next few miles. The Marine family, always moving, the dozen elementary schools, the dozen high schools, then West Point, then the U.S. Army, the military police,

always moving all over again, some of the same countries, some new, never in one place long enough to notice. Then the drawdown, and the discharge, and the wandering. The hitched rides, the walking, the motels. The aimlessness. No particular place to be. Henry thought it was all very cool, Suzanne less so,

Reacher thought, and he figured Helen didn't think it was cool at all.

They slowed and turned left onto a narrow rural two-lane that speared straight west through the trees. There was a rusted enamel sign that said *Naismith 40 miles*. It was possible the road had once had shoulders, but they were long overgrown with

underbrush and broadleaf trees that reached forty feet tall. In places their branches met overhead, so that for hundreds of yards at a time it was like driving through a green tunnel. Reacher watched out the windows, left and right. Either side he could see not more than five or six feet into the vegetation. He wondered how much

more primeval woods  
could get. Brambles and  
brush were tangled thigh  
high, and the air looked  
dank and still. The ground  
looked soft and springy,  
densely matted with leaf  
litter, damp and fecund.  
The blacktop ribbon ahead  
had turned gray with age,  
and the heat it was  
holding made the air  
above it thick with tiny



insects. After five miles the windshield was soupy with slime, from a million separate impacts.

Reacher asked, “Have you been here before?”

“Once,” Henry said. “We walked south to Center Mountain. Which was boring, man. I like to stay below the tree line. I guess I’m a forest dweller.”

“Are there animals in

there?”

“Bears for sure. Plenty of small stuff, obviously. But the underbrush never gets eaten, so there’s no deer. Which is interesting as to why. Predation, most likely. But by what? Mountain lions, maybe. Or wolves, but no one ever sees them or hears them. But there’s something in there, that’s for sure.”

“You sleep in a tent?”

“Pup tent,” he said. “No biggie. Double-bag your food, wash around your mouth in a stream, and there’s nothing for the critters to smell. Bears like to eat, but if you don’t lay out a picnic for them they’ll leave you alone. But you know all this, right? I mean, doesn’t the army train everywhere? I

thought you got sent out in every kind of terrain.”

“Not in a forest like this,” Reacher said. “Can’t move through it, certainly can’t move vehicles through it, can’t shoot through it. Clearing it with napalm and explosives would take forever. So we’d have to maneuver around it. Best kind of natural barrier there is.”

They drove on, over a surface that got progressively worse. The encroaching brush had nibbled out fist-sized bites of blacktop on both sides, and then tree roots had punched out deeper holes, and the winter freezes had elongated the cracks, and the state's fixes had been infrequent and hasty. The old van's suspension

creaked and pattered. Overhead the green tunnels became more or less continuous. In places leafy vines hung down and whipped the roof.

Then exactly an hour after leaving Route 11 there was a cleared length of shoulder with a board sign on it, which had words burned into it with a hot poker: *Welcome to*

*Naismith, the Gateway to the Wilderness.* Which Reacher felt was about an hour too late. He felt that particular threshold had been passed long ago.

Henry slowed the van and the road curved to the left and came out in a clearing about the size of a football stadium. Dead ahead was a lake shaped like a crooked finger, first

pointing north and then curling east. The road became a kind of Main Street leading straight to the shore. At the far end was a kayak pier, and left and right were low wooden buildings, with vacation cabins near the water, and a general store and a diner and small residences further from it. There were side streets



made of the same battered gray blacktop. Naismith, Maine. A miniature town, in the middle of nowhere.

Suzanne said, “I’m hungry.”

“I’ll buy lunch,” Reacher said. “That’s the least I can do.”

Henry parked the van in front of the diner and shut down the motor. The world went silent. They all

climbed out, and they all stood and stretched. The air was somewhere halfway between fresh and heavy, the tang of the lake water mixed with the smell of the trees, and there was no sound beyond a subliminal drone from a billion tiny insect wings. There was no wind, no rustling leaves, no lapping waves. Just hot

stillness.

The diner was all wood, inside and out, rough stained boards worn shiny in places by hands and elbows and shoulders. There were pies in glass cases and eight square tables draped in red checkered tablecloths. The waitress was a flinty woman of about sixty, wearing a pair of men's

eyeglasses and carpet slippers. Two tables were occupied, both by people who looked more like Henry and Suzanne than Helen. The waitress pointed to an empty table and went to get menus and glasses of water.

The food was the same as Reacher had eaten in a thousand other diners, but it was adequate, and the

coffee was fresh and strong, so he was happy. As were the others, not that they were paying much attention to what they were eating and drinking. They were talking amongst themselves, running through their plans. Which sounded straightforward enough. They were all going to spend the night in

pre-booked cabins, and at first light Henry and Suzanne were going to set out walking, and Helen was going to drive back to Route 11 and look for whatever she could find. Four days later they were all going to meet again at the far end of the trail. Simple as that.

Reacher paid the check, said his goodbyes, and left

them there. He didn't expect to see them again.

\* \* \*

From the diner he strolled down to the kayak pier and walked out to the end of it, and stood with his toes above open water. The lake was a bright blue spear pointing north and

then turning east into the distance, more than ten miles long, probably, but not more than a couple hundred yards across at its widest bulge. Overhead was a vast high bowl of summer sky, completely cloudless, unmarked except for wispy contrails eight miles up, from transatlantic jet planes heading to and from



Europe, in and out of Boston and New York and Washington, D.C. Great Circle routes, way up over Canada and Greenland, and then dropping down again to London and Paris and Rome. Straight lines on a spherical planet, but not on a flat paper map.

At ground level the forest crowded in on both sides of the lake,

unbroken, a continuous green canopy covering everything that wasn't liquid. There were hundreds and hundreds of square miles of it. Ten thousand years of undisturbed nature, Henry had said, which was exactly what it looked like. The earth had warmed, the glaciers had retreated, seeds had blown in, rain

had fallen, and a hundred generations of trees had grown and died and grown again. Elsewhere on the giant continent people had cut them down to clear fields for farming, or for lumber to build houses, or to burn in stoves and steam locomotives, but some parts had been left alone, and maybe always would be. You could be

the first human ever to set foot, Henry had said, and Reacher had no doubt he was right.

He walked back past the vacation cabins, which were all quiet. People were out and about in other places, clearly, doing whatever it was they were there to do. He found a turn to the left, which was basically north, where

there was a hundred-yard side street, which he followed, and at the end of it he found a wooden arch, lashed together from bark-stripped trunks stained dark brown, like a ceremonial thing. A literal gateway to the wilderness. Beyond it the trail started. It ran straight for twenty yards, all beaten flat by booted feet, and then it

turned a corner and disappeared. Next stop, the town called Cripps, four days away.

He stepped under the arch and stood still on the first yard of the trail. Then he moved forward, twenty paces, to the first turn. He took it and walked onward, another twenty paces, another twenty yards, and stopped again.

The trail was about four feet wide. Either side the forest crowded in. The trunks were spiked with dead branches all the way to the canopy far overhead. The trees had grown tall and straight, racing for the light. They were two or three feet apart in some places, and more or less touching in others. Some were ancient

and mature, all gnarled and burlled and a yard across, and some were younger and slimmer and paler, exploiting the gaps, like opportunistic weeds. Below chest height the undergrowth was dense and tangled, a mess of dark-leaved thorny runners snaking among dry and brittle twigs. The air was still and completely silent.



The light was green and dim. He turned a full circle. He was forty yards from the ceremonial arch, but he felt like he was a million miles from anywhere.

He walked on, another twenty paces. Nothing changed. The path wandered left and right a little. He guessed some kind of parks authority

kept the underbrush trimmed back, and left it to passing feet to crush new seedlings. He guessed without that kind of human intervention the trail would close up in a year or two. Three, tops. It would become impassable. Reclaimed by nature. He guessed wider bulges had been hacked out here and there, for campsites. For

the pup tents. Near streams, maybe. There was nowhere else to sleep the night.

He stood for a minute more, in the green filtered light and the eerie silence. Then he turned around and walked back to Naismith's token Main Street, and he followed it out the way they had driven in, to the board sign

on the shoulder, with the welcome. But there was no traffic leaving town, and after a moment's reflection he realized there wouldn't be, not until the next morning. Presumably the check-out time for the vacation cabins was eleven or noon, which meant that day's exodus was already over. The diner and the general store would need

occasional deliveries, but the odds were long that a returning truck would be passing by anytime soon. He stood in the heavy silence a minute longer, for no real reason other than he was enjoying it, and then he retraced his steps, through the town toward the lake.



The vacation cabins were laid out haphazardly, like a handful of dice thrown down. Reacher figured the location furthest from the water would be the least desirable, and sure enough found it was being used as some kind of a resident manager's accommodations, with a front room done up as an office, with one of its

window panes converted to an opening hutch, which had a shelf behind it with a little brass bell and a ballpoint pen on a chain. He rang the bell and a long moment later an old guy stepped up, slowly, like he had arthritis. Yes, he had vacancies. The overnight charge was a modest sum. Reacher paid cash and signed his name

with the pen on the chain, and got a key in return, to what turned out to be a tiny wooden house that smelled hot and moldy. Not a prime position, but it had a partial sideways view of the lake. The rest of the view was all trees, inevitably. There was a bed and two chairs, and a bathroom and kitchen facilities, and a short shelf



with creased and battered paperback books on it. Outside in back there was a small deck with two folding chairs slung with faded and sun-rotted fabric. Reacher spent the rest of the afternoon in one of them, with his feet up on the other, reading a book from the shelf, warm, alone, relaxed, as happy as he could remember being.

He woke at seven in the morning but lay in bed a whole extra hour, stretched out like a starfish, to let the walkers and the boaters get through the diner ahead of him. He figured they would be looking for an early start. He wasn't. He figured about ten o'clock

would be optimum, to catch the first wave of departures. A ride back to Route 11 was all he needed. To I-95 would be a bonus, and Bangor or Portland or anyplace further south would be the icing on the cake. He figured he would head to New York next. Yankees tickets would be easy to get. The dog days of

summer, folks out of town, plenty of space in the high seats in the sun.

He showered and dressed and packed, which consisted of folding his toothbrush and putting it in his pocket. He saw the maid on her way between two other cabins, and told her his was vacant and ready for her. She looked like she could have been

the waitress's sister, from the diner, and probably was. He walked on, thinking about coffee, and pancakes, and a corner table in a quiet empty room, and maybe someone's abandoned newspaper to read.

He didn't get the quiet empty room.

Henry and Suzanne were in there, with about nine

other people, all milling about, all talking in a tense and agitated fashion, like a scene in a movie where folks find out the mining company has poisoned their water. They all turned to look at him as he stepped inside. He said, “What’s up?”

Henry said, “They closed the trail.”

“Who did?”

“The cops. State, I think. They strung tape across the entrance.”

“When?”

“In the night.”

“Why?”

“No one knows.”

“They won’t tell us,” Suzanne said. “We’ve been calling all morning. All they’ll say is the trail is closed until further notice.”

Another guy said, “It’s closed at Cripps, too. We started that end last year. I still have the motel number. Same situation. Tape between the trees.”

Reacher said, “It’s a four-day walk, right? There must be a bunch of people still in there. Maybe something happened.”

“Then why won’t they



tell us?”

Reacher said nothing. Not his problem. All he wanted was pancakes. And coffee, more urgently. He looked for the waitress, and caught her eye, and found an empty table.

Henry followed him straight to it. “Can they do that?”

Reacher said, “Do what?”

“Close the trail like that.”

“They just did.”

“Is it legal?”

“How would I know?”

“You were a cop.”

“I was a military cop. I wasn't a park ranger.”

“It's a public resource.”

“I'm sure there's a good reason. Maybe someone got eaten by a bear.”

One by one the whole

disgruntled group came over and gathered around. Eleven people standing up, Reacher sitting down. The guy who still had the number for the Cripps motel asked, “How do you know that?”

Reacher said, “Know what?”

“That someone got attacked by a bear.”

“I said maybe. Like a

joke.”

“Bear attacks aren’t very funny.”

A guy said, “Maybe it’s just a drill.”

“What kind of drill?”

“Like a rehearsal. For a medical emergency, maybe. For the first responders.”

“Then why would they say until further notice? Why wouldn’t they say

until lunchtime today, or some such?”

Another guy asked, “Who should we call?”

Suzanne said, “They’re not telling us anything.”

“We could try the governor’s office.”

Another woman said, “Like he’s going to tell us anything, if the others aren’t.”

“It can’t be bears.”

“Then what is it?”

“I don’t know.”

Suzanne looked at Reacher and said, “What should we do?”

Reacher said, “Go for a walk someplace else.”

“We can’t. We’re stuck here. Helen’s got the van.”

“She left already?”

“She didn’t want to eat breakfast here.”

“Can’t you call her?”

“No bars.”

“Bars aren’t open yet.”

“I mean no cell phone coverage here. We can’t call her. We tried, from the payphone in the store. She’s off the network somewhere.”

“So go kayaking instead. That’s probably just as much fun.”

Henry said, “I don’t want to go kayaking. I

want to walk the trail.”

\* \* \*

Eventually the small crowd wandered away again, out through the door to the parking lot, still mumbling and grumbling, and the waitress came by to take Reacher's order. He ate and drank in silence, and



he got the check, and he paid in cash. He asked the waitress, “Does the trail get closed a lot?”

She said, “It never happened before.”

“Did you see who did it?”

She shook her head. “I was asleep.”

“Where’s the nearest state police barracks?”

“The kayak owner says

it was soldiers.”

“Does he?”

She nodded. “He says he saw them.”

“In the middle of the night?”

She nodded again. “He lives nearest the arch. They woke him up.”

Reacher put an extra dollar on her tip and walked out to the street. He turned right and took a

step in the direction of out of town, but then he stopped and went back and found the hundred-yard side street that led to the trail.

Henry and Suzanne were right there at the arch. Just the two of them. They had their backpacks on. The arch had tape tied across it, three lengths, one knee high, one waist

high, and one chest high, all two-inch plastic ribbon, blue and white, twisted on itself in places, saying *Police Line Do Not Cross*.

Henry said, "See?"

Reacher said, "I believed you the first time."

"So what do you think?"

"I think the trail is closed."

Henry turned away and stared at the tape, like he

could make it  
dematerialize by  
willpower alone. Reacher  
walked back to Main  
Street, and onward out of  
town, to the welcome  
board on the shoulder. Ten  
minutes, he thought.  
Maybe less. He figured  
that morning's exodus  
would be brisker than  
normal.

But the first vehicle he saw was coming, not going. Into town, not out. And it was a military vehicle. A Humvee, to be precise, painted up in black and green camouflage. It roared past, all thrashing gears and whining tires. It took the curve and disappeared.

Four guys in it, hard men, all in the new Army Combat Uniform.

Reacher waited. A minute later a car came driving out of town, but it was full. Two in the front, two in the back. No room for a hitchhiker, especially one as large as Reacher. He recognized people he had seen in the diner, disconsolate and

complaining, boots on and ready, backpacks piled in the corner, no place to go.

He waited.

Next up was another Humvee, heading in, not out. Roaring engine, thrashing drive train, howling tires, four guys wearing ACUs. Reacher watched it around the corner and even at a distance he heard it slow,



and change gear, and speed up again. A right hand turn, he thought, and he would have bet the few bucks in his pocket it was heading for the wooden arch.

He stared after it, thinking.

Then another car came driving out of town. A sedan. Two people. An empty back seat. The

driver was the guy who still had the number for the motel in Cripps. He slowed and stopped and the woman next to him buzzed her window down. She asked, “Where are you headed?”

Reacher said nothing.

She said, “We’re going back to Boston.”

Which would have been great. Three hours from

New York. Multiple routes. Lots of traffic. But Reacher said, “I’m sorry, but I changed my mind. I’m going to stay here.”

The woman shrugged and the car took off without him.

\* \* \*

He walked back to the

cabin rental office and rang the bell. His cabin was still available. He paid for another night, and got the same key in return. Then he headed for the arch, a hundred yards along the side street, and when he got there he found the two Humvees and their eight occupants. The Humvees were parked side by side, noses out,

blocking the whole width of the road. Their occupants already had their boots on the ground. They were all armed with M16s. They were setting up an exclusion zone. Reacher knew the signs. Two squads, four hours on, four hours off. Military police, for sure. Reacher knew those signs, too. Not the National Guard, either.

Regular U.S. Army. Not a drill. No one was going to get past them.

There was no sign of Henry or Suzanne.

Reacher said,  
“Sergeant?”

One of the grunts turned around. Chevrons on the tab in the center of his chest. Twenty years younger than Reacher, at least. A whole different

generation. The military police has no secret handshake. No magic word. And no real inclination to shoot the breeze with some ancient geezer, no matter who he might claim to have been, one day long ago, way back when.

The sergeant said, “Sir, you need to step back ten yards.”

Reacher said, “That would be a hell of a long step, wouldn’t it?”

Two PFCs were hauling sawhorses out of a Humvee. A-shaped ends, and planks to fit between, marked *No Entry*.

Reacher said, “I’m guessing your orders are to keep people out of the woods. Which is fine with me. Knock yourselves out.



But close observation of the terrain will reveal the woods start where the woods start, not a Humvee's length plus ten yards down the street."

The sergeant said, "Who are you?"

"I'm a guy who once read the Constitution."

"This whole place is woods."

"So I noticed."

“So back off now.”

“Unit?”

“345th MP.”

“Name?”

“Cain. Spelled C, A, I, N,  
with no *E*.”

“You got a brother?”

“Like I haven’t heard  
that one before.”

Reacher nodded. He  
said, “Carry on the good  
work, sergeant,” and he  
turned and walked away.

He went back to the cabin rental office, and rang the bell again. The old guy stepped up, creakily, and Reacher asked him, “Are my friends still here? The people I came in with? Henry something and Suzanne something?”

“They checked out early this morning.”

“They didn’t come back again?”

“They’re gone, mister.”

Reacher nodded, and headed for his hut, where he spent the next four hours on the back deck, sitting in one lawn chair, his feet up on the other, watching the sky. It was another beautiful day, and he saw nothing except bright blue emptiness, and

wispy contrails arching  
way overhead, eight miles  
up.

\* \* \*

In the early afternoon he  
headed to the diner for a  
late lunch. He was the  
only customer. The town  
felt deserted. No trail, no  
business. The waitress

didn't look happy. Not just about the lack of revenue. She was on the wall phone, listening to someone, concern on her face. A tale of woe, clearly. She hung up after a long minute and walked over to Reacher's table.

She said, "They're sending search parties south from Cripps. For the walkers. They're grabbing

them and hustling them out. Real fast.”

Reacher said,  
“Soldiers?”

She nodded. “Lots of them.”

“Weird.”

“That’s not the worst of it. They’re holding them for questioning afterward. They want to know if they saw anything.”

“Soldiers are doing that,

too?”

“Men in suits. My friend thinks they’re the FBI.”

“Who’s your friend?”

“She works at the motel in Cripps.”

“What are people supposed to have seen?”

“All we have is rumors. A bear gone rogue, maybe. A man-eater. Packs of wild coyotes, mountain lions, bigfoot monsters. Or some



vicious murderer escaped from the penitentiary. Or wolves. Or vampires.”

“You believe in vampires?”

“I watch the television, same as anyone else.”

“It’s not vampires,” Reacher said.

“There’s something in those woods, mister.”



Reacher ate a tuna melt and drank coffee and water, and then he headed back to the arch for a second look. The sawhorses were in place, ten yards upstream of the parked Humvees. Four grunts were standing easy, weapons shouldered. A show of force. *No entry.* Not a drill. Pleasant duty, overall, given the season.

Winter would have been much worse.

Reacher walked back to town. Just as he hit Main Street the colorless minivan came around the corner. Helen was at the wheel. She pulled over next to him and buzzed her window down.

She said, "Have you seen Henry and Suzanne?"

He said, "Not since

breakfast time.”

“People say the trail is closed.”

“It is.”

“So I came to pick them up.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Where are they?”

“I think Henry is a hard man to dissuade.”

“They went anyway?”

“That’s my guess.”

“After it was closed?”

“There was a brief window of opportunity. After the tape went up, before the soldiers arrived.”

“I heard about the soldiers.”

“What else have you heard?”

“There’s something bad in the woods.”

“Vampires, maybe,”  
Reacher said.

“This isn’t funny. I heard it might be escaped prisoners or rogue military units. Something very dangerous. Everyone is talking. It’s on the local AM station. There are anchors in Cripps already.”

“You want a cup of coffee?”

\* \* \*

Helen parked in front of the diner, and they went in together, to the same table Reacher had used before. The waitress brought coffee, and then hustled away and got on the wall phone again. To her friend in Cripps, presumably. For updates, and gossip, and rumor.

Helen said, “Henry is an idiot.”

“He likes the woods,” Reacher said. “Can’t blame him for that.”

“But there’s something in there now, obviously.”

“I guess there is.”

“Which he must have known. It’s not brain surgery. He’s an idiot, but he’s not an *idiot*. But he went in anyway. And dragged Suzanne in with him. He is an idiot. Both



sorts.”

“Suzanne could have said no.”

“Actually, she’s just as bad. No impulse control. I heard they have search parties moving south from Cripps.”

Reacher nodded. “I heard that, too. Straight from the horse’s mouth. Or slightly secondhand, I suppose. Our waitress has

a friend up there.”

“What are they searching for?”

“People like Henry and Suzanne. They’re getting them out and asking questions about what they saw.”

“But they’ll miss Henry and Suzanne. Won’t they? It’s inevitable. They’re expecting a three-day pipeline. They’ll stop when

they get all the people who started out yesterday morning. Henry and Suzanne will be twenty-four hours behind them. They'll leave them in there. With whatever else is in there. This is not good."

"It's a big woods."

"The thing could be roaming and hunting. Or if it's escaped prisoners

they'll stick close to the trail anyway. They would have to. Henry and Suzanne will be in there alone with them."

Reacher said, "It's not escaped prisoners."

"How do you know?"

"I went to see the soldiers at the arch. They're military police, like I was. But technically what they're doing isn't

entirely kosher. The military can't perform civilian law enforcement duties. There are all kinds of rules about that. But their sergeant told me his unit number with no hesitation at all. And then he told me his name, just as fast. He even spelled it out for me. *Cain*, with no *e*."

"What does all that

mean?”

“It means he’s not afraid of anything. So he can get right in my face. Which means he has a solid gold get-out-of-jail-free card. Which must be urgent orders from somewhere very high up. From an unimpeachable source. As in, if some citizen like me makes a fuss, I’m going to get crushed by the

machine. He's going to get a medal. Which makes this a national security issue. It's showing all the signs. And people escaped from the penitentiary isn't national security. That's a state affair."

Helen was quiet for a second.

Then she said, "A national security issue could be a rogue military

unit. Or a band of terrorists. Or escaped prisoners from Homeland Security. Or some kind of mutant has gotten free. Like a genetic experiment. Or someone else's genetic experiment, *set* free. On purpose. Maybe this is an attack. And they're right there in it."

"It's none of the above," Reacher said.



“How do you know?”

“Because I sat in a chair all morning and watched the sky.”

“Which told you what?”

“No circling spotter planes, no drones, no helicopters. If they were hunting a warm-blooded creature or creatures, they’d have been up there all day with heat-seeking cameras. And air-to-

ground radar, and whatever other fancy things they have now.”

“So what do you think they’re looking for?”

“They aren’t looking. I told you that. No aerial surveillance.”

“Then what aren’t they looking for?”

“Something with no heat signature, and too small to show up on radar.”

“Which would be what?”

“I have no idea.”

“But something they don’t want us to see, obviously. Something we can’t know about.”

“Evidently.”

“It could be a cold-blooded creature. Like a snake.”

“Or a vampire. Are they cold-blooded?”

“This isn’t funny. But OK, maybe it’s not a creature at all. Maybe it’s a piece of secret equipment. Inert, somehow.”

“Possibly.”

“How did it get in there?”

“That’s a great question,” Reacher said. “I think it must have fallen off an airplane.”

They got refills of coffee, and Helen worried away at the problem in her mind, and eventually she said, “This is very bad indeed.”

Reacher said, “Not really. Henry and Suzanne don’t have much to fear from a piece of inert equipment. It’s not going to jump up and bite them

in the ass.”

“But it is. That’s exactly what it’s going to do. Figuratively speaking. They’re in the woods illegally, twenty-four hours behind anyone else. That looks secretive. Like their job is to find the thing and smuggle it out. Suppose it’s a bomb or a missile? That happens, right? Bombs and missiles fall off

airplanes.                      Accidentally. Sometimes, right? I read it in a book. But more likely deliberately. Like it's one big conspiracy. What do we do if Henry and Suzanne are taken to be the designated retrieval party? It wouldn't take much imagination. They sneak in through the tape, they're all alone in a deserted twenty-four-hour

time window, their job is to grab the missile ahead of your government, and pass it on down the chain, until one day an airliner comes down at JFK and it's 9/11 all over again."

"Henry and Suzanne are hikers. Wilderness enthusiasts. It's the summer vacation. They're Canadians, for God's sake."

"What does that mean?"



“Nicest people in the world. Almost as good as being Swiss.”

“But whatever, they’ll check them out.”

“Names and numbers, in a couple of databases. Nearest thing to doing nothing at all.”

“Suzanne has a history.”

Reacher said, “What kind?”

“She’s a lovely person.

You have to understand that. She has sympathy for everybody.”

“Is that a problem?”

Helen said, “Of course it is. Because *everybody* means everybody. Plain English. Which means if you focus the spotlight one particular way, you can see sympathies going where your country doesn't want them to go.

Out of context and more than balanced by other things elsewhere and not at all fair, but facts are facts.”

Reacher said nothing.

Helen said, “And she’s very passionate politically. And very active.”

“How active is very active?”

“It’s what she does. Like a job. Henry runs the bike

shop on his own most of the time.”

“So she’s in more than a couple of databases. A couple hundred, at least.”

“Red-flagged in most of them, probably. I mean, she’s not Che Guevara or Chairman Mao, but computer memory is very cheap these days, and they have to fill it up with something. She’s in the top

million, I'm sure. And I'm equally sure they have preprogrammed responses ready. The screens will light up like a Christmas tree and she'll be hauled off to Egypt or Syria. She'll be in the system. They might let her come home in a year or so, all weird and slightly off. If she lives through it."

Reacher said, "It might

not be a missile. It might be some boring black box full of coded data. Maybe it fell off a satellite, not an airplane. No possible use to anyone else. Which makes the idea of a retrieval party insane to them. They're not going to be chasing shadows. If they see Henry and Suzanne coming around the corner, dressed like

hikers, walking like hikers, and sounding like hikers, then they're going to call them hikers. They're going to give them a drink of water and send them on their way."

"You can't be sure of that."

"It's one of a number of possibilities."

"What are all the others?"

“I guess some of them could come uncomfortably close to the kind of thing you’re worried about.”

“How many of them?”

“Practically all of them, really. Bottom line is she’s a foreign national with a history in the middle of a national-security lockdown.”

Helen said, “We have to go get them out.”



Resistance was futile. Reacher knew that right away. He was a realistic man. A Stoic, in the original meaning of the name. A guy who accepted circumstances for what they were, and didn't seek to change them. He asked, "How fast do they walk?"

Helen said, "Not very.

They're communing, not commuting. They're stepping off the path and making footprints in the virgin earth. They're looking at everything. They're listening to the birds and the wind in the trees. We should be able to catch up to them."

"Better to get ahead of them."

"How?"

They started in the diner's kitchen, where the bewildered day guy gave up two machete-like weapons. Cleavers, possibly, for cutting meat. Then they hustled down to the kayak dock and rented a slim two-place vessel. It was bright orange in color. It had waterproof fabric

around the seat holes. To tie around the rower's waist, Reacher figured. Like wearing the boat like a pair of pants. To stop water getting in. Which he thought was overkill, on a fine day in August, on an inland body of water about as placid as a millpond.

Reacher took the back seat. It was a tight fit. Helen looked better, in the

front. The rental guy let go of a rope and they paddled away, chaotic at first, then getting better. Much better. All about building up a rhythm. Long, steady, propulsive strokes. Like swimming. But faster than swimming. Faster than walking, too. Certainly faster than communing, and putting prints in the virgin earth, and listening

to birds. Maybe twice as fast. Maybe more. Which was good. The lake turned like a crooked come-on finger, which gave them a natural outflanking maneuver, at first running parallel to the trail, and then cutting up and in, all the way to the far end of the finger, right to where the nail would be, which would be as near the trail

as they could hope to get. Because after the turn the lake dug into the woods, just like Maine itself dug into Canada. Like a blade. Like a knife wound. The far tip might dump them just a couple hundred yards from the path itself. A quarter mile, maximum. The primeval part of the forest was not wide at that location. Because of the

water. Like a bay. Like a river estuary.

They paddled on. Not a sprint. A middle-distance race. The mile, maybe. Black-and-white film of skinny gentlemen pounding around cinder tracks. Baggy white shirts. Grimaces. Digging in. Enduring. The machetes were between Reacher's feet. They slid backward



and forward, backward  
and forward, with the  
pulse of every stroke.

\* \* \*

The far tip of the finger  
was a rocky V tight up  
against tree trunks. Which  
made it easy to steady the  
ship prior to getting out.  
There were handholds

everywhere. But it made it hard to move more than a foot ashore. It was all about squeezing through, leading with one shoulder, leading with the other, being careful with the trailing foot, like crossing a crowded room at a party, except with statues instead of people, all of them as solid as iron. And not in candlelight, but in a

strange green glow, from the bright sun behind a billion still and silent leaves.

And any wider clearing was no real bonus, either, because they were all tangled with vines and brambles, which to some extent could be blundered through, but nine times out of ten the machetes were needed in the last

yard or two, to release ankles all snarled up and fresh out of momentum.

Reacher asked, “You OK?”

Helen answered, “In what way?”

“You don’t like the woods.”

“You want to take three wild-ass guesses as to why? As in, right now this minute?”

They pressed on, Reacher leading, making a big hole in the vegetation, Helen coming through it close behind, both of them making prints where maybe no human had ever walked before. And then they sensed rather than saw the trail up ahead, a slit, a discontinuity, an absence. A hole in the woodland sounds. A

change in the sky. A seam in the canopy. And then they came upon it, stepping over gnarled trunks bent like knees, turning, squeezing, and finally falling out on what was literally the beaten track. The air above it was damp and still, and noticeably cool.

Helen said, “So are we ahead of them?”

“I think so,” Reacher said. “For sure, if they’re sightseeing. Maybe not, if something spooked them and they hustled. But I’m pretty sure we made it. And when it comes to speculation, I’m a very cautious man.”

“So we wait here?”

“The most efficient use of our time would be to move and meet them head

on. By definition we'd turn them around closer to Naismith than here."

"We might be walking away from them."

"Life's a gamble, I guess."

"It was a spooky situation from the start. Maybe they were hustling all the way. Just to be able to say they'd done the miles. They could have



passed here thirty minutes ago.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t hustle. They seemed really into this stuff. I think they’re strolling slow, stopping all the time, looking at this and that. All on their own. It’s just them and the forest. I say they’re thirty minutes in front of us.”

“You’ve done this kind

of thing before, right?”

“From time to time.”

“Did you get them right?”

“Some of them.”

She took a breath and said, “OK, we’ll hope to meet them head on. And if we don’t, I’m going to call you some very un-Canadian names. Some with several syllables.”

“Sticks and stones,”

Reacher said.

“I’ll go first,” she said.

\* \* \*

The trail was much easier underfoot, and it was a straight shot, with no twisting or dodging, which meant they could pay a little attention to things more than a foot and a

half away. Of which there were many. And which in the end slowed them down more than the tripwire brambles. Because there was a lot to look at. *Primeval* was the right word. Not necessarily Reacher's thing, but he couldn't deny some sense of primitive connection. It could have been that a hundred generations of his

ancestors had lived in the woods. They had to live somewhere. The trees were spotty with lichen and smooth with light green moss, and they bent and twisted and jostled for light and space, and the gloomy shapes they made seemed to talk, just faintly, like a distant hum. *Perfect ambush location ahead and left, so take care. Two*

*defensive positions ahead and right, so plan to use the first, with the second to fall back on if necessary. A hundred generations, and by definition all of them survived.*

They walked on, through cool air, like cellar air, still and damp and undisturbed. The trail itself was soft and springy, a dark, leaf-rich loam. Like

carpet.

No hikers up ahead.

Not in the first five minutes, or the first ten. Which made each new minute more and more likely. Two couples on exactly opposite vectors, one moving fast, one moving slow, fifteen minutes already gone. The window in which the encounter would have to

take place was getting smaller and smaller. If it was going to happen, it was going to happen soon.

It didn't.

Not in the next five minutes, or the next ten. Which was getting arithmetically difficult. It was hard to imagine Henry and Suzanne could be slow enough to make the big numbers work. Unless they



had chickened out and turned around, straight back to Naismith. Second thoughts, maybe, and an honorable retreat. They might have stepped out behind Sergeant Cain at the exact same moment Reacher and Helen had paddled away from the kayak dock.

No way of knowing.  
No hikers up ahead.

Helen said, “Reacher, you blew it.”

He said, “Start with the polysyllabic examples. I’m always interested.”

She said, “Maybe something already happened to them.”

“But what? There are no search parties coming north out of Naismith. No other hikers. The missing equipment is not jumping

up and biting them in the ass. Not actually. You can say so later, figuratively, but so far nothing much can have happened to them.”

“Then where are they?”

“They must be static. Maybe they pitched their tent already. Maybe they found the perfect spot.”

“I think they hustled and we missed them. I think

we came in behind them.  
You blew the call.”

“Life’s a gamble,”  
Reacher said again.

\* \* \*

They moved on, speeding  
up a little, ignoring the  
sylvan glades to their left  
and right, every one of  
them a separate curiosity,

like a room in a museum. There was a new breeze high above them, and the canopy was rustling, and tree limbs were clicking and groaning. Small furtive animals made darting sounds in the underbrush. Insects hung in tight clouds, to be avoided if possible, or batted through if not.

Then the trail jinked

right and left around a huge mossy bole four feet wide, and up ahead in the gloom they saw two bright objects stacked side by side on the forest floor. Red and orange and yellow, nylon, straps and buckles.

Backpacks.

“Theirs,” Helen said.

Reacher nodded at her side. He had seen the

backpacks before, most recently at the wilderness arch that morning, hoisted into place and ready to go. They walked on and stopped next to the luggage. It was not abandoned. Both packs were set upright, leaning one on the other. They had been carefully placed.

“They stepped off the trail,” Reacher said. “A

little side excursion. No point hauling bags through the brush.”

“When?” Helen said.

“Recently, I hope. Which would mean they’re close by.”

Behind the click and the hum of the living woods there was nothing but silence all around. No gasps, no calls, no feet ripping through the



tangled undergrowth.

Nothing.

Helen said, “Should we shout?”

Reacher said, “Not too loud.”

“Henry? Suzanne?” She said their names like a fierce stage whisper, louder than talking, but far from yelling, with an anxious questioning cadence rising on the ends.

No response.

“Suzanne? Henry?”

No response.

She said, “They can’t be far away, surely.”

Reacher studied the brush to the left and the right. Logic said if they had stepped off the trail, they would have done so near their bags. No sense in stacking the packs and then choosing an exit point

a hundred yards away. So Reacher knew where to start looking. But he was no kind of an expert tracker. Not out in the wilds. Not like the movies, where the guy squats down on his haunches and ponders a moment and says, *They passed this way three hours ago, and the woman has a blister on her ankle.*

But there were broken shoots and torn leaves in one location. Easy enough to imagine a planted foot, and the sweep of a short, cautious stride, and the next foot, and a second person following behind, leading with one shoulder, then leading with the other, squeezing through the gaps.

Helen said, “Should we

try it?”

Reacher said, “Call their names again.”

“Henry? Suzanne?  
Where are you?”

No response. No echo off the trees.

Reacher pushed his way into the brush, scanning ahead, looking for disturbances, for kicked twigs, for sap oozing from crushed stalks. It was an

inexact process. In most places there was no obvious new direction to follow. He was forced to stop every few yards, and examine a whole arc ahead of him, and choose the least-worst possibility from among a number of equally plausible angles. He figured rabbits and other small animals could sweep blades of grass aside

just as easily as a brushing foot, but only human weight could break anything thicker than a pencil, so he based his guesses on the presence or absence of bright new wood on the inside faces of busted twigs. On and on, like an algorithm, yes and no and no and yes.

Deeper into the woods.

Every ten yards they

stopped and listened, the backs of their brains filtering out the normal sounds and scanning for the abnormal. But hearing nothing, not on the first stop, or the second, or the third, but the fourth time around Reacher felt he could sense held breath nearby, a tense human vibe, which the ancient part of his mind



interpreted as either predator or prey, and therefore of interest either way. A hundred generations, and they all survived. Then he heard a tiny sound halfway between a wheezing click and a whirring crunch, all spiky with tiny squeaks and whistles and mechanical resonances, and bathed in faint but

cavernous echo. Like a Nikon camera, but not really. An electronic imitation, reedy and insubstantial.

A cell phone, taking a picture.

And another.

Reacher pushed on, stepping high to keep clear of vines, squeezing through gaps, and then suddenly seeing Henry and

Suzanne, standing  
shoulder to shoulder not  
ten feet from him, looking  
down, taking cell phone  
snaps of the thing on the  
ground in front of them.  
*No heat signature, and too  
small to show up on radar.*  
That was for damn sure.

\* \* \*

It was a dead human, a man, small, dark-skinned, lean and ascetic, in old orange prison garb. He was on his back, and the angle of his neck and his limbs made no kind of anatomical sense. He looked soft inside, almost liquid, as if his bones were smashed and his organs crushed.

Reacher said, “He fell

out of an airplane. Not off an airplane, exactly. Out through the door. Way high up. So he blacks out because he has no oxygen, or maybe the sudden cold gives him a heart attack right then and there, but either way he falls like a rag doll, and he smashes through the canopy, and he hits the forest floor, where he's DOA for sure.

The canopy bounces back, so there's nothing to see from above, and he's cooling fast, down to ambient temperature, so the infrared can't find him, and as far as radar is concerned, he looks exactly like a tree root or a little pile of broken branches."

Suzanne said, "I hope he had the heart attack from

the cold.”

Reacher said, “The question is, did he jump or was he pushed?”

“He jumped.”

“Who is he?”

“He’s a Canadian citizen. He was supposed to come down in Toronto. But he missed.”

“And who are you?”

“Just another Canadian citizen.”

“Who are the pictures for?”

“His family.”

“Who is he?” Reacher asked again.

“I see both sides,” Suzanne said. “I would do anything to stop another attack. But it’s getting insane now. They fly these guys from Guantánamo to Egypt and Syria, where they get a good working



over, and after a while the ones who survive have to come back, because the Egyptians and the Syrians can't have them hanging about forever, but you don't want them back, because what are you going to do with them? Guantánamo is always full, and you can't just say never mind and let them go, because they've all got

stories to tell.”

“So what do they do with them? And tell me how you know.”

“There’s a network, for people of conscience. Way down in the dark web. Certain facts are established. Your ground crews bypassed a couple of failsafes, and made it possible to open the airplane door during

flight. At very low speeds, and very low altitudes, mostly over the far north Atlantic, in the radar shadows, where they would come down low and slow, and open the hatch. That's what they do with them. Problem solved."

"So?"

"So word gets around, and this guy knows he's either going to die under

torture or get thrown out of the plane on the way home. There's no happy ending here. So he decides to jump out the door on the outward flight. To take them by surprise. Somewhere over Toronto. To make a statement. A sympathetic foreign press, a chance to apply some external pressure."

Reacher nodded. *Like a*

*thumb up Canada's ass.*  
Toronto wasn't very far away. He said, "What went wrong?"

"Not very much. They have access to information and experts of every kind. They knew the route, which never changes, and they knew the timing. It's just a question of counting the minutes in your head, and then going for it.

Which I guess can't ever be totally accurate. Although he trained for months. And a gust of headwind counts for a lot, I suppose. Small errors multiply."

"Who are the pictures for?" Reacher asked again.

"His family. There's nothing else to be done. None of this exists on paper. The denials would be instant and convincing.

They'd say the photos were faked. Low green light, a little grainy. Foreign radicals with a bike shop. The whole thing wouldn't last a day."

"Would it have lasted longer in Toronto?"

"They thought so. Cities and suburbs are different. There are lots of witnesses, and cops, and TV. Things don't go away so easily.

They thought it could be a watershed moment.”

“You seem to know a lot about how they think.”

“I try to learn how everyone thinks. It’s the key to understanding. Not that this was some innocent sweetheart. He was a thug straight from the Middle Ages. He was a vicious killer. I was glad he was jumping out of the



plane. But he had already told them what he knew. And they were sending him anyway. Just out of habit. It's insane now."

"How did you know where to look?"

"Postgame analysis from the experts."

"Why you?"

"We were closest."

"Out of how many choices?"

“Many.”

“Including Helen?”

Helen said, “Of course.”

Henry said, “It was her idea to pick you up and bring you along. At least that way we get an American witness. You’ve seen it now. You can’t un-see it.”

Reacher said, “We need to get back to Naismith.”

But they didn't make it far. Not as a group. They retraced their steps. It was easy to follow Reacher's blundering trail in reverse. Then thirty yards short of the path he heard noises ahead, and he saw a blink of movement through the trunks. He held out his hand in warning, and

Suzanne and Helen and Henry froze behind him. He crept on without them, leaning rather than moving, straining forward, peering ahead.

Four guys in ACUs. One of which was Sergeant Cain. They were all staring at the backpacks. Carefully placed. One leaning on the other.

Reacher eased back, and

they all four ducked their heads together, and he whispered, “Stay in the woods another hundred yards. Loop around. Hit the trail south of them, and then leg it. Jump in the van and head straight for home. Best of luck all the way. Don’t come back again.”

They all shook hands, and the three of them

moved off, and Reacher waited. He gave them three minutes, and then he moved toward the four soldiers, as noisily as possible, brushing things and snapping things at every opportunity. They heard him ten yards out, and they turned as one, and their M16s came up, and Reacher heard four quiet snicks as four fire

selectors were turned up a notch. Clean precise sounds, hard and real, not like the phony photo shutter.

He said, “Long guns are a poor choice in the woods, Sergeant Cain. You can aim all you want, but there’s always going to be a tree in the way. That’s your first mistake. Let’s hope it’s also your last.”

Cain called back, “Are those people with you?”

“Which people?”

“The infiltrators.”

“They were hikers, from Canada. I haven’t seen them since this morning.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Let it go, sergeant. Play it smart. There are no medals in this one. By tomorrow morning it won’t have happened at



all.”

“They might have seen evidence of a covert operation.”

“They saw what they were supposed to see.”

Cain said, “What does that mean?”

“Like a magician on stage,” Reacher said. “A big showy flourish with the left hand, attracting all the attention, while the

right hand does the real work. There are activists in the world, Sergeant Cain. We can't wish them away. They're always looking for something to piss and moan about. So we give them something. A big showy flourish with the left hand. Something to get all agitated about. But not too agitated, because after all who really gives a shit

about vicious killers  
straight out of the Middle  
Ages? Meanwhile, the  
right hand does the  
important stuff  
undisturbed. Classic  
misdirection.”

“Who are you?”

“I was an MP once. I  
was your boss’s boss’s  
boss. And my brother did a  
spell in Military  
Intelligence. I met some of

his people. Some sly minds there, sergeant. There was an old guy called O'Day. A buck gets ten this scheme is one of his. Think about it. Hundreds of people, a secret website, all kinds of planning and scheming. It's an energy sink. Like a sponge. It keeps them where we can see them."

No answer.

"Let it go, sergeant,"

Reacher said again. “Play your part, which is to look sinister next to your Humvees. No one’s going to thank you if you screw up your lines. These things are very carefully orchestrated.”

Then Reacher stepped back and shut up, and let Cain’s career caution do his work for him. After a minute Cain gave the word

and all four of them formed up and jogged back the way they had come. Reacher followed five minutes behind them, but he took the precaution of looping the last hundred yards through the brush, and coming out on a parallel street. Two minutes later he was back at the welcome board, waiting for a ride out of

town.

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# Chapter 1

**Eight days ago my life was an up and down affair. Some of it good. Some of it not so good. Most of it uneventful. Long slow periods of nothing much,**

with occasional bursts of something. Like the army itself. Which is how they found me. You can leave the army, but the army doesn't leave you. Not always. Not completely.

They started looking two days after some guy took a shot at the president of France. I saw it in the paper. A long-range attempt with a rifle. In

Paris. Nothing to do with me. I was six thousand miles away, in California, with a girl I met on a bus. She wanted to be an actor. I didn't. So after forty-eight hours in LA she went one way and I went the other. Back on the bus, first to San Francisco for a couple of days, and then to Portland, Oregon, for three more, and then onward to

Seattle. Which took me close to Fort Lewis, where two women in uniform got out of the bus. They left an *Army Times* behind, one day old, right there on the seat across the aisle.

The *Army Times* is a strange old paper. It started up before World War Two and is still going strong, every week, full of yesterday's news and

sundry how-to articles, like the headline staring up at me right then: *New Rules! Changes for Badges and Insignia! Plus Four More Uniform Changes on the Way!* Legend has it the news is yesterday's because it's copied secondhand from old AP summaries, but if you read the words sideways you sometimes hear a real



sardonic tone between the lines. The editorials are occasionally brave. The obituaries are occasionally interesting.

Which was my sole reason for picking up the paper. Sometimes people die and you're happy about it. Or not. Either way you need to know. But I never found out. Because on the way to the

obituaries I found the personal ads. Which as always were mostly veterans looking for other veterans. Dozens of ads, all the same.

Including one with my name in it.

Right there, center of the page, a boxed column inch, five words printed bold: *Jack Reacher call Rick Shoemaker.*

Which had to be Tom O'Day's work. Which later on made me feel a little lame. Not that O'Day wasn't a smart guy. He had to be. He had survived a long time. A very long time. He had been around forever. Twenty years ago he already looked a hundred. A tall, thin, gaunt, cadaverous man, who moved like he might

collapse at any moment,  
like a broken stepladder.  
He was no one's idea of an  
army general. More like a  
professor. Or an  
anthropologist. Certainly  
his thinking had been  
sound. *Reacher stays under  
the radar, which means  
buses and trains and waiting  
rooms and diners, which,  
coincidentally or not, are the  
natural economic habitat for*

*enlisted men and women, who buy the Army Times ahead of any other publication in the PX, and who can be relied upon to spread the paper around, like birds spread seeds from berries.*

And he could rely on me to pick up the paper. Somewhere. Sooner or later. Eventually. Because I needed to know. You can

leave the army, but the army doesn't leave you. Not completely. As a means of communication, as a way of making contact, from what he knew, and from what he could guess, then maybe he would think ten or twelve consecutive weeks of personal ads might generate a small but realistic chance of success.

But it worked the first time out. One day after the paper was printed. Which is why I felt lame later on.

I was predictable.

Rick Shoemaker was Tom O'Day's boy. Probably his second in command by now. Easy enough to ignore. But I owed Shoemaker a favor. Which O'Day knew about, obviously. Which was why

he put Shoemaker's name  
in his ad.

And which was why I  
would have to answer it.

Predictable.

**Seattle was dry**  
when I got out of the bus.  
And warm. And wired, in  
the sense that coffee was  
being consumed in  
prodigious quantities,



which made it my kind of town, and in the sense that wifi hotspots and handheld devices were everywhere, which didn't, and which made old-fashioned street-corner pay phones hard to find. But there was one down by the fish market, so I stood in the salt breeze and the smell of the sea, and I dialed a toll-free number at the Pentagon.

Not a number you'll find in the phone book. A number learned by heart long ago. A special line, for emergencies only. You don't always have a quarter in your pocket.

The operator answered and I asked for Shoemaker and I got transferred, maybe elsewhere in the building, or the country, or the world, and after a

bunch of clicks and hisses and some long minutes of dead air Shoemaker came on the line and said, “Yes?”

“This is Jack Reacher,” I said.

“Where are you?”

“Don’t you have all kinds of automatic machines to tell you that?”

“Yes,” he said. “You’re in Seattle, on a pay phone

down by the fish market. But we prefer it when people volunteer the information themselves. We find that makes the subsequent conversation go better. Because they're already cooperating. They're invested."

"In what?"

"In the conversation."

"Are we having a conversation?"

“Not really. What do you see directly ahead?”

I looked.

“A street,” I said.

“Left?”

“Places to buy fish.”

“Right?”

“A coffee shop across the light.”

“Name?”

I told him.

He said, “Go in there and wait.”

“For what?”

“For about thirty minutes,” he said, and hung up.

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# About the Author

**LEE CHILD** is the author of eighteen *New York Times* bestselling Jack Reacher thrillers, nine of which have reached the #1 position. All have been optioned for major motion

pictures; the first, *Jack Reacher*, was based on *One Shot*. Foreign rights in the Reacher series have sold in almost a hundred territories. A native of England and a former television director, Lee Child lives in New York City.

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LEE CHILD is available for select readings and lectures. To inquire about a possible appearance, please contact the Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau at 212-572-2013 or [speakers@penguinrandomh](mailto:speakers@penguinrandomh)