A

JACK REACHER

THRILLER

LEE CHILD

THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

AND ANDREW CHILD



BETTER OFF DEAD

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'One of the many great things about Jack Reacher is that he's **larger than life** while remaining **relatable** and **believable**'
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'There's **only one** Jack Reacher. Accept no substitutes'
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'It's no wonder Jack Reacher is everyone's **favourite rebel hero**'
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'One of the **truly memorable** tough-guy heroes in recent fiction'
JEFFERY DEAVER

'Gives new meaning to what a **page-turner** should be'
MICHAEL CONNELLY

'Jack Reacher is **today's James Bond**, a thriller hero we can't get enough of'
KEN FOLLETT

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Lee Child is one of the world's leading thriller writers. He was born in Coventry, raised in Birmingham, and now lives in England's Lake District. It is said one of his novels featuring his hero Jack Reacher is sold somewhere in the world every nine seconds. His books consistently achieve the number-one slot on bestseller lists around the world and have sold over one hundred million copies. Lee is the recipient of many awards, including Author of the Year at the 2019 British Book Awards. He was appointed CBE in the 2019 Queen's Birthday Honours.

Andrew Child is a British thriller novelist. Under the name Andrew Grant, he is the author of nine acclaimed thrillers. Since 2020, he has collaborated with his brother, Lee Child, continuing the legacy of one of the world's most iconic thriller heroes. He lives on a wildlife preserve in Wyoming with his wife, the novelist Tasha Alexander.

The Jack Reacher series

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ONE SHOT
THE HARD WAY
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61 HOURS
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THE AFFAIR
A WANTED MAN
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IN TOO DEEP
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BETTER OFF DEAD

Lee Child
and
Andrew Child



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For Jane and Tasha

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Jack Reacher: CV

NAME:
Jack Reacher (no middle name)

BORN:
29 October

LAST KNOWN ADDRESS:
Unknown

EDUCATION:
US Army base schools
in Europe and the Far East;
West Point Military Academy

LANGUAGES:
Fluent English and French
passable Spanish

HEIGHT:
6 feet 5 inches/1.95 metres

SIZE:
50 inch / 127 cm chest,
3XLT coat, 37 inch / 95 cm
inside leg

EYES:
Blue

DISTINGUISHING MARKS:
Scar on corner of left eye,
Scar on upper lip

SPECIAL SKILLS:
Small -arms expert, **outstanding**
on all man-portable weaponry
and **hand-to-hand combat**

SERVICE:
US Military Police, thirteen years; first CO of the 110th Division; demoted from Major to Captain after six years; mustered out with rank of Major after seven

SERVICE AWARDS:
Top row: **Silver Star**, **Defense Superior** Service Medal
Legion of Merit
Middle row: Soldier's Medal, Bronze Star, **Purple Heart**
Bottom row: 'Junk awards'

FAMILY:
Mother: Josephine Moutier Reacher, French national
Father: Career US Marine, served in Korea and Vietnam
Brother: Joe, five years in US Military Intelligence, Treasury Dept

MOST TRUSTED CONTACT:
Frances Neagley: ex-colleague, 110th Division

WHAT HE DOESN'T HAVE:
Drivers licence; credit cards; federal benefits; tax returns; dependents

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ONE

The stranger got into position under the streetlight at eleven p.m., as agreed.

The light had been easy to find, just like he'd been told it would be. It was the only one in the compound that was still working, all the way at the far end, six feet shy of the jagged metal fence that separated the United States from Mexico.

He was alone. And unarmed.

As agreed.

The car showed up at 11:02. It kept to the centre of the space between the parallel rows of lock-up garages. They were made of metal, too. Roofs warped by the sun. Walls scoured by the sand. Five on the right. Four on the left. And the remains of one more lying torn and corroded ten feet to the side, like something had exploded inside it years ago.

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The car's lights were on bright, making it hard to recognize the make and model. And impossible to see inside. It continued until it was fifteen feet away then braked to a stop, rocking on its worn springs and settling into a low cloud of sandy dust. Then its front doors opened. Both of them. And two men climbed out.

Not as agreed.

Both the car's back doors opened. Two more men climbed out.

Definitely not as agreed.

The four men paused and sized the stranger up. They'd been told to expect someone big and this guy sure fit the bill. He was six feet five. Two hundred and fifty pounds. Chest like a gun safe and hands like backhoe buckets. And scruffy. His hair was coarse and unkempt. He hadn't shaved for days. His clothes looked cheap and ill-fitting, except for his shoes. Somewhere between a hobo and a Neanderthal. Not someone who was going to be missed.

The driver stepped forward. He was a couple of inches shorter than the stranger, and a good fifty pounds lighter. He was wearing black jeans and a black sleeveless T-shirt. He had on black combat-style boots. His head was shaved, but his face was hidden by a full beard. The other guys followed, lining up alongside him.

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‘The money?’ the driver said.

The stranger patted the back pocket of his jeans.

‘Good.’ The driver nodded towards the car. ‘Back seat. Get in.’

‘Why?’

‘So I can take you to Michael.’

‘That wasn’t the deal.’

‘Sure it was.’

The stranger shook his head. ‘The deal was, you tell me where Michael is.’

‘Tell you. Show you. What’s the difference?’

The stranger said nothing.

‘Come on. What are you waiting for? Give me the money and get in the car.’

‘I make a deal, I stick to it. You want the money, tell me where Michael is.’

The driver shrugged. ‘The deal’s changed. Take it or leave it.’

‘I’ll leave it.’

‘Enough of this.’ The driver reached behind his back and took a pistol from his waistband. ‘Cut the crap. Get in the car.’

‘You were never going to take me to Michael.’

‘No shit, Sherlock.’

‘You were going to take me to someone else. Someone who has questions for me.’

‘No more talking. Get in the car.’

‘Which means you can’t shoot me.’

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‘Which means I can’t kill you. Yet. I can still shoot you.’

The stranger said, ‘Can you?’

A witness would have said the stranger hardly moved at all but somehow in a split second he had closed the gap between them and had his hand on the driver’s wrist. Which he pulled up, like a proud fisherman hauling something from the sea. He forced the guy’s arm way above his head. Hoisted it so high the guy was raised up on his tiptoes. Then he drove his left fist into the guy’s side. Hard. The kind of punch that would normally knock a man down. And keep him down. Only the driver didn’t fall. He couldn’t. He was suspended by his arm. His feet slid back. The gun fell from his fingers. His shoulder dislocated. Tendons stretched. Ribs shattered. It was a grotesque cascade of injuries. Each one debilitating in its own right. But in the moment he hardly noticed any of them. Because his entire upper body was convulsing in agony. Searing bolts of pain shot through him, all stemming from one place. A spot just below his armpit where a dense tangle of nerves and lymph nodes nestled beneath the skin. The exact spot that had just been crushed by the stranger’s massive knuckles.

The stranger retrieved the driver’s fallen gun and carried him over to the hood of the car. He laid

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him back, squealing and gasping and writhing on the dull paintwork, then turned to the other three guys and said, 'You should walk away. Now. While you have the chance.'

The guy at the centre of the trio stepped forward. He was about the same height as the driver. Maybe a little broader. He had hair, cropped short. No beard. Three chunky silver chains around his neck. And a nasty sneer on his face. 'You got lucky once. That won't happen again. Now get in the car before we hurt you.'

The stranger said, 'Really? Again?'

But he didn't move. He saw the three guys swap furtive glances. He figured that if they were smart, they'd opt for a tactical retreat. Or if they were proficient, they'd attack together. But first they'd work one of them around to the rear. He could pretend to check on the injured driver. Or to give up and get in the car. Or even to run away. The other two could create a distraction. Then, when he was in place, they'd all rush in at once. A simultaneous assault from three directions. One of the guys was certain to take some damage. Probably two. But the third might have a chance. An opening might present itself. If someone had the skill to exploit it.

They weren't smart. And they weren't proficient. They didn't withdraw. And no one tried to circle around. Instead, the centre guy took another step

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forward, alone. He dropped into some kind of generic martial arts stance. Let out a high-pitched wail. Feinted a jab to the stranger's face. Then launched a reverse punch to the solar plexus. The stranger brushed it aside with the back of his left hand and punched the guy's bicep with his right, his middle knuckle extended. The guy shrieked and jumped back, his axillary nerve overloaded and his arm temporarily useless.

'You should walk away,' the stranger said. 'Before you hurt yourself.'

The guy sprang forward. He made no attempt at disguise this time. He just twisted into a wild roundhouse punch with his good arm. The stranger leaned back. The guy's fist sailed past. The stranger watched it go then drove his knuckle into the meat of the guy's tricep. Both his arms were now out of action.

'Walk away,' the stranger said. 'While you still can.'

The guy lunged. His right leg rose. His thigh first, then his foot, pivoting at the knee. Going for maximum power. Aiming for the stranger's groin. But not getting close. Because the stranger countered with a kick of his own. A sneaky one. Straight and low. Directly into the guy's shin. Just as it reached maximum speed. Bone against toecap. The stranger's shoes. The only thing about him that wasn't scruffy. Bought in London years ago. Layer upon layer of leather and

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polish and glue. Seasoned by time. Hardened by the elements. And now as solid as steel.

The guy's ankle cracked. He screamed and shied away. He lost his balance and couldn't regain it without the use of his arms. His foot touched the ground. The fractured ends of the bone connected. They grated together. Pain ripped through his leg. It burned along every nerve. Way more than his system could handle. He remained upright for another half second, already unconscious. Then he toppled on to his back and lay there, as still as a fallen tree.

The remaining two guys turned and made for the car. They kept going past its front doors. Past its rear doors. All the way around the back. The trunk lid popped open. One of the guys dropped out of sight. The shorter one. Then he reappeared. He was holding something in each hand. Like a pair of baseball bats, only longer. And thicker and squarer at one end. Pickaxe handles. Effective tools, in the right hands. He passed one to the taller guy and the pair strode back, stopping about four feet away.

'Say we break your legs?' The taller guy licked his lips. 'You could still answer questions. But you'd never walk again. Not without a cane. So stop dicking us around. Get in the car. Let's go.'

The stranger saw no need to give them another warning. He'd been clear with them from the start.

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And they were the ones who'd chosen to up the ante.

The shorter guy made as if to swing, but checked. Then the taller guy took over. He did swing. He put all his weight into it. Which was bad technique. A serious mistake with that kind of weapon. All the stranger had to do was take a step back. The heavy hunk of wood whistled past his midriff. It continued relentlessly through its arc. There was too much momentum for the guy to stop it. And both his hands were clinging to the handle. Which left his head exposed. And his torso. And his knees. A whole menu of tempting targets, all available, all totally unguarded. Any other day the stranger could have taken his pick. But on this occasion he had no time. The taller guy got off the hook. His buddy bailed him out. By jabbing at the stranger's gut, using the axe handle like a spear. He went short, aiming to get the stranger's attention. He jabbed a second time, hoping to back the stranger off. Then he lunged. It was the money shot. Or it would have been, if he hadn't paused a beat too long. Set his feet a fraction too firm. So that when he thrust, the stranger knew it was coming. He moved to the side. Grabbed the axe handle at its mid-point. And pulled. Hard. The guy was dragged forward a yard before he realized what was happening. He let go. But by then it was too late. His

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fate was sealed. The stranger whipped the captured axe handle over and around and brought it scything down, square on to the top of the guy's head. His eyes rolled back. His knees buckled and he wilted, slumping limp and lifeless at the stranger's feet. He wouldn't be getting up anytime soon. That was for sure.

The taller guy glanced down. Saw the shape his buddy was in. And swung his axe handle back the opposite way. Aiming for the stranger's head. He swung harder than before. Wanting revenge. Hoping to survive. And he missed. Again. He left himself vulnerable. Again. But this time something else saved him. The fact that he was the last of his crew left standing. The only available source of information. He now had strategic value. Which gave him the chance to swing again. He took it, and the stranger parried. The guy kept going, chopping left and right, left and right, like a crazed lumberjack. He managed a dozen more strokes at full speed, then he ran out of gas.

'Screw this.' The guy dropped the axe handle. Reached behind him. And pulled out his gun. 'Screw answering questions. Screw taking you alive.'

The guy took two steps back. He should have taken three. He hadn't accounted for the length of the stranger's arms.

'Let's not be hasty.' The stranger flicked out with

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his axe handle and sent the gun flying. Then he stepped closer and grabbed the guy by the neck. 'Maybe we will take that drive. Turns out I have some questions of my own. You can—'

'Stop.' It was a female voice. Confident. Commanding. Coming from the shadows near the right-hand row of garages. Someone new was on the scene. The stranger had arrived at eight p.m., three hours early, and searched every inch of the compound. He was certain no one had been hiding, then.

'Let him go.' A silhouette broke free from the darkness. A woman's. She was around five ten. Slim. Limping slightly. Her arms were out in front and there was the squat outline of a matte-black pistol in her hands. 'Step away.'

The stranger didn't move. He didn't relax his grip.

The woman hesitated. The other guy was between her and the stranger. Not an ideal position. But he was six inches shorter. And slightly to the side. That did leave her a target. An area on the stranger's chest. A rectangle. It was maybe six inches by ten. That was big enough, she figured. And it was more or less in the right position. She took a breath in. Exhaled gently. And pulled the trigger.

The stranger fell back. He landed with his arms spread wide, one knee raised, and his head turned

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so that he was facing the border fence. He was completely still. His shirt was ragged and torn. His entire chest was slick and slimy and red. But there was no arterial spray. No sign of a heartbeat.

No sign of life at all.

The tidy, manicured area people now called *The Plaza* had once been a sprawling grove of trees. Black walnuts. They'd grown, undisturbed, for centuries. Then in the 1870s a trader took to resting his mules in their shade on his treks back and forth to California. He liked the spot, so he built a shack there. And when he grew too old to rattle across the continent he sold his beasts and he stayed.

Other people followed suit. The shanty became a village. The village became a town. The town split in two like a cell, multiplying greedily. Both halves flourished. One to the south. One to the north. There were many more years of steady growth. Then stagnation. Then decline. Slow and grim and unstoppable. Until an unexpected shot in the arm was delivered, in the late 1930s. An army of surveyors showed up. Then labourers. Builders. Engineers. Even some artists and sculptors. All sent by the Works Progress Administration.

No one local knew why those two towns had been chosen. Some said it was a mistake. A bureaucrat misreading a file note and dispatching the

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resources to the wrong place. Others figured that someone in DC must have owed the mayor a favour. But whatever the reason, no one objected. Not with all the new roads that were being laid. New bridges being built. And all kinds of buildings rising up. The project went on for years. And it left a permanent mark. The towns' traditional adobe arches became a little more square. The stucco exteriors a little more uniform. The layout of the streets a little more regimented. And the amenities a lot more generous. The area gained schools. Municipal offices. Fire houses. A police station. A courthouse. A museum. And a medical centre.

The population had dwindled again over the decades since the government money dried up. Some of the facilities became obsolete. Some were sold off. Others demolished. But the medical centre was still the main source of health care for miles around. It contained a doctor's office. A pharmacy. A clinic, with a couple of dozen beds. A paediatric suite, with places for parents to stay with their sick kids. And thanks to the largesse of those New Deal planners, even a morgue. It was tucked away in the basement. And it was where Dr Houllier was working, the next morning.

Dr Houllier was seventy-two years old. He had served the town his whole life. Once, he was part of

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a team. Now, he was the only physician left. He was responsible for everything from delivering babies to treating colds to diagnosing cancer. And for dealing with the deceased. Which was the reason for that day's early start. He'd been on duty since the small hours. Since he'd received the call about a shooting on the outskirts of town. It was the kind of thing that would attract attention. He knew that from experience. He was expecting a visit. Soon. And he needed to be ready.

There was a computer on the desk, but it was switched off. Dr Houllier preferred to write his notes longhand. He remembered things better that way. And he had a format. One he'd developed himself. It wasn't fancy, but it worked. It was better than anything those Silicon Valley whizz-kids had ever tried to foist on him. And more importantly in that particular situation, it left no electronic trace for anyone to ever recover. Dr Houllier sat down, picked up the Mont Blanc his father had bought him when he graduated medical school, and started to record the results of his night's work.

There was no knock. No greeting. No courtesy at all. The door just opened and a man came in. The same one as usual. Early forties, tight curly hair, tan linen suit. *Perky*, Dr Houllier privately called

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him, because of the bouncy way the guy walked. He didn't know his real name. He didn't want to know.

The guy started at the far end of the room. The cold-storage area. The *meat locker*, as Dr Houllier thought of it, after decades of dealing with its contents. There was a line of five steel doors. The guy approached, examined each handle in turn, but didn't touch any of them. He never did. He moved on to the autopsy table in the centre. Crossed to the line of steel trolleys against the far wall, near the autoclave. Then he approached the desk.

'Phone.' He held out his hand.

Dr Houllier passed the guy his cell. The guy checked to make sure it wasn't recording, slipped it into his pants pocket and turned to the door. 'Clear,' he said.

Another man walked in. *Mantis*, Dr Houllier called him, because whenever he looked at the guy, with his long skinny limbs, angular torso and bulging eyes, he couldn't help but think of the insect. The large triangular burn scar on the guy's cheek and the way his three missing fingers made his right hand look like a claw added to the effect. Although Dr Houllier did know this guy's real name. Waad Dendoncker. Everyone in town knew it, even if they'd never met him.

A third man followed Dendoncker in. He looked

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a little like *Perky*, but with straighter hair and a darker suit. And with such an anonymous face and bland way of moving that Dr Houllier had never been inspired to find him a nickname.

Dendoncker stopped in the centre of the room. His pale hair was almost invisible in the harsh light. He turned through 360 degrees, slowly, scanning the space around him. Then he turned to Dr Houllier.

'Show me,' he said.

Dr Houllier crossed the room. He checked his watch, then worked the lever that opened the centre door of the meat locker. He pulled out the sliding rack, revealing a body covered by a sheet. It was tall. Almost as long as the tray it lay on. And broad. The shoulders only just fit through the opening. Dr Houllier pulled the sheet, slowly, revealing the head. It was a man's. Its hair was messy. The face was craggy and pale, and the eyes were taped shut.

'Move.' Dendoncker shoved Dr Houllier aside. He pulled the sheet off and dropped it on the floor. The body was naked. If Michelangelo's *David* was made to embody masculine beauty, this guy could have been another in the series. But at the opposite end of the spectrum. There was nothing elegant. Nothing delicate. This one was all about power and brutality. Pure and simple.

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‘That’s what killed him?’ Dendoncker pointed to a wound on the guy’s chest. It was slightly raised. Its edges were rough and ragged and they were turning brown.

‘Well, he didn’t die of sloth.’ Dr Houllier glanced at his watch. ‘I can guarantee that.’

‘He’d been shot before.’ Dendoncker pointed at a set of scars on the other side of the guy’s chest. ‘And there’s *that*.’

‘The scar on his abdomen?’ Dr Houllier glanced down. ‘Like some kind of sea creature. He must have been stabbed at some point.’

‘That’s no knife wound. That’s something else altogether.’

‘Like what?’

‘Doesn’t matter. What else do we know about him?’

‘Not much.’ Dr Houllier snatched up the sheet and spread it loosely over the body, including its head.

Dendoncker pulled the sheet off again and dropped it back on the floor. He wasn’t done staring at the biggest of the dead guy’s scars.

‘I spoke to the sheriff.’ Dr Houllier moved away, towards his desk. ‘Sounds like the guy was a drifter. He had a room at the Border Inn. He’d paid through next weekend, in cash, but he had no belongings there. And he’d registered under a

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false address. One East 161st Street, the Bronx, New York.'

'How do you know that's false?'

'Because I've been there. It's another way of saying *Yankee Stadium*. And the guy used a false name, too. He signed the register as John Smith.'

'Smith? Could be his real name.'

Dr Houllier shook his head. He took a Ziploc bag from the top drawer of his desk and handed it to Dendoncker. 'See for yourself. This was in his pocket.'

Dendoncker popped the seal and fished out a passport. It was crumpled and worn. He turned to the second page. Personal information. 'This has expired.'

'Doesn't matter. The ID's still valid. And look at the photo. It's old, but it's a match.'

'OK. Let's see. Name: Reacher. Jack, none. Nationality: United States of America. Place of birth: Berlin, West Germany. Interesting.' Dendoncker looked back at the body on the rack. At the scar on its abdomen. 'Maybe he wasn't looking for Michael. Maybe he was looking for me. It's a good job that crazy bitch killed him after all.' Dendoncker turned away and tossed the passport in the trash can next to Dr Houllier's desk. 'Observations?'

Dr Houllier held out one of his special forms. The one he'd just finished filling in. Dendoncker read

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each comment twice then crumpled the paper and dropped it into the trash on top of the passport.

'Burn those.' He turned to the two guys he arrived with. 'Get rid of the body. Dump it in the usual place.'

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TWO

I first encountered the woman with the limp two days earlier. We met on a road outside the town with the dimly lit compound and the medical centre where Dr Houllier worked. The whole area was deserted. I was on foot. She was in a Jeep. It looked like it was ex-military. Old. Maybe Vietnam War era. Its stencilled markings were too faded to read. Its olive-drab paintwork was caked and crusted with pale dust. It had no roof. No doors. Its windshield was folded forward, but not latched. The racks and straps for holding fuel cans and tools were empty and slack. The tread on its tyres was worn way below the recommended minimum. Its motor wasn't running. Its spare wheel was missing. Not the kind of thing anyone would call a well-maintained vehicle.

The sun was high in the sky. I guess a thermometer would have said it was a little over eighty, but

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the lack of shade made it feel much hotter. Sweat was trickling down my back. The wind was picking up and grit was stinging my face. Walking hadn't been part of my plan when I woke up that morning. But plans change. And not always for the better. It looked like the woman's plans had taken an unwelcome turn as well. A fair chunk of the Jeep's remaining rubber was now streaked across the faded blacktop from where she'd skidded. She'd gone right off the road and ploughed into the trunk of a tree. A stunted, twisted, ugly thing with hardly any leaves. It wasn't going to win any prizes for appearance. That was for sure. But it was clearly resilient. It was the only thing growing taller than knee height for miles in either direction. If the driver had lost control at any other point she would have wound up in the rough scrub on either side of the road. Probably been able to reverse right back out. The landscape looked like a bunch of giants had shoved their hands under a coarse green blanket and stretched their fingers wide.

How the woman had hit that exact spot was a mystery. Maybe the sun had blinded her. Maybe an animal had run out, or a bird had swooped down. It was unlikely that another vehicle had been involved. Maybe she was depressed and had done it on purpose. But whatever had caused her accident, that was a problem for another time.

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The woman was slumped over the steering wheel. Her left arm was stretched forward across the flattened windshield. Her hand was open like she was reaching out to the tree for help. Her right arm was folded into her abdomen. She was facing down, into the footwell. She was completely inert. There was no sign of bleeding. No sign of any other injuries, which was good. But there was also no sound of breathing. I figured I should check for a pulse or some other indication she was alive so I stepped in close to the side of the Jeep. I reached for her neck, slowly and gently. I brushed her hair aside and homed in on her carotid. Then she sat up. Fast. She twisted around to face me. Used her left hand to bat my arm away. And her right to point a pistol at my gut.

She waited a beat, presumably to make sure I wasn't about to freak out. She wanted my full attention. That was clear. Then she said, 'Move back. One step only.' Her voice was firm but calm, with no hint of panic or doubt.

I moved back. One step. I made it a large one. And I realized why she'd been looking down through the steering wheel at the floor of the vehicle. There was a piece of mirror wedged between the gas pedal and the transmission tunnel. She must have cut it to the right size and positioned it to give an early warning of anyone who approached her.

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‘Where’s your buddy?’ She glanced left and right.

‘There’s no one else,’ I said. ‘Just me.’

Her eyes darted across to the rear-view mirror. It was angled so she could spot anyone sneaking up behind her. ‘They only sent one guy? Really?’

She sounded half offended, half disappointed. I was starting to like her.

‘No one sent me.’

‘Don’t lie.’ She jabbed the gun forward for emphasis. ‘Anyway, it doesn’t matter. One of you or a whole squad? You get the same deal. Tell me where Michael is. Tell me now. And tell me the truth, or I’ll shoot you in the stomach and leave you here to die.’

‘I would love to tell you.’ I held my hands up, palms out. ‘But there’s a problem. I can’t. I don’t know who Michael is.’

‘Don’t . . .’ She paused and glanced around again. ‘Wait. Where’s your car?’

‘I don’t have a car.’

‘Don’t get smart. Your Jeep, then. Your motorcycle. Whatever mode of transport you used to get here.’

‘I walked here.’

‘Bullshit.’

‘Did you hear an engine just now? Any kind of mechanical sound?’

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'OK,' she said after a long moment. 'You walked. From where? And why?'

'Slow down.' I tried to make my voice sound friendly and unthreatening. 'Let's think this through. I could recount my day to you, minute by minute. In other circumstances, I'd be happy to. But right now, are my travel arrangements that important? Maybe a better question would be, am I the person you were waiting for? The person with information about Michael?'

She didn't answer.

'Because if I'm not, and the real guy shows up with me still here, your whole crashed car routine is never going to fly.'

She still didn't respond.

'Is there some law that says only people you want to ambush can use this road? Is it off limits to everyone else?'

I saw her glance at her watch.

'Look at me. I'm on my own. I'm on foot. I'm unarmed. Is that what you were expecting? Does it make sense to you?'

Her head moved an inch to the left and her eyes narrowed a fraction. A moment later I caught it, too. There was a sound. In the distance. A vehicle engine. Rough. Ragged. And moving closer.

'Decision time,' I said.

She stayed silent. The engine note grew louder.

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‘Think about Michael,’ I said. ‘I don’t know where he is. But if whoever’s coming does, and you keep me here, you’ll lose your chance. You’ll never find out.’

She didn’t speak. The engine note grew louder still. Then she gestured towards the other side of the road. ‘Over there. Quick. Ten yards up there’s a ditch. At an angle. Like a stream bed. It’s dried out. Get in it. Keep your head down. Stay still. Don’t make a sound. Don’t alert them. Don’t do anything to screw this up. Because if you do . . .’

‘Don’t worry.’ I was already moving. ‘I get the picture.’

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THREE

The ditch was right where she said it would be. I found it, no problem. I got there before the approaching vehicle was in sight. The stream bed was dry. I figured it could provide adequate cover. But the bigger issue was whether to hide at all. Or to leave.

I looked over at the Jeep. The woman was back in position, slumped across the steering wheel. Her head was turned away from me. I was out of range of her mirror. I was pretty sure she wouldn't be able to see me. But even if she did spot me I doubted she would risk taking a shot. She wouldn't want to alert whoever was coming for her.

Leaving was the sensible option. There was no doubt about that. But there was a problem. I had questions. A whole bunch of them. Like who was this woman? Who was Michael? Who was coming

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after her? And would she really shoot someone in the stomach and leave them to die?

I checked the road. Saw a speck in the distance, shrouded in dust. I figured I still had time so I picked up a rock from the floor of the ditch. It was about the size of a cinderblock. I positioned it on the lip, between me and the Jeep. I found another, a little narrower and flatter. Rested it at an angle against the first one so that there was a triangular gap between them. A small one. Just the right size for me to squint through with one eye. High school physics at work. The sight line opened up away from me like I was looking through an invisible cone. It gave me a clear view of the Jeep and the area around it. But the angle narrowed correspondingly in reverse so no one at that distance would be able to spot me watching them.

The approaching vehicle emerged from its cloud. It was another Jeep. Also ex-military. It was making steady progress. Slow and unhurried. Then, when it was close to the spot where I'd been when I noticed the skid marks, it slewed a little to the side and stopped. There were two men in it. A driver and a passenger. Both were wearing khaki T-shirts. They had khaki baseball caps and mirrored sunglasses. Some kind of an urgent conversation broke out between them. There was a whole lot of gesticulating and pointing towards the tree. That told me

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they hadn't expected anyone to be in place before them. Or that they hadn't expected anyone with a matching vehicle, which suggested they were from the same outfit. Or that they hadn't expected either thing. I thought maybe they'd call the new development in. Ask for updated orders. Or if they were smart, withdraw altogether. But they did neither. They started moving again, faster than before, then pulled in next to the driver's side of the woman's Jeep.

'Unbelievable.' The passenger jumped down and stood between the two vehicles. I could see the grip of a pistol protruding from the waistband of his cargo pants. It was knurled and worn. 'Her?'

The driver looped around and joined him. He put his hands on his hips. He also had a gun. 'Shit. Dendoncker's going to be pissed.'

'Not our problem.' The passenger took hold of his pistol. 'Come on. Let's do it.'

'Is she still alive?' The driver scratched his temple.

'I hope so.' The passenger stepped forward. 'We deserve a little fun.' He reached for the side of the woman's neck with his free hand. 'Ever done it with a gimp? I haven't. Always wondered what it would be like.'

The driver crowded in closer. 'I—'

The woman sat up. She twisted to the side. Raised

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her gun. And shot the passenger in the face. The top of his skull was obliterated. One moment it was there. The next it was a hint of pink mist drifting in the surrounding air. His empty cap fluttered to the ground. His body folded over backward. One arm was still stretched out and it swung around and slapped the driver on the thigh as he fell. His neck clattered into the open doorway of his Jeep.

The driver went for his gun. He grabbed it, right-handed. He started to pull it clear of his waistband. Got it about three quarters of the way out. Then he tried to bring it to bear. The move was premature. It was a sloppy mistake. The barrel was still trapped by his belt. His hand slipped off the grip. The weapon was left hanging loose and unbalanced. It pivoted around and fell. He tried to catch it. And missed. He leaned down, started to scratch around frantically in the dirt, then saw the woman's gun. Its muzzle was moving. Zeroing in on his face. He stopped himself. Jumped back. Dived for cover behind the woman's Jeep. Crawled forward a couple of yards until he reached the road then scrambled to his feet. He started to run. The woman swivelled around in her seat. She took a breath. Aimed. Then she pulled the trigger. The bullet must have come within an inch of removing the guy's right ear. He flung himself down to the left and rolled over twice. The woman climbed out of the

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Jeep. She moved around to its rear. That was the first time I noticed she favoured her left leg. She waited for the guy to get back on his feet then fired again. This time the bullet almost took off his left ear. He threw himself down the opposite way and started to wriggle along on the ground like a snake.

'Stop.' The woman sounded like she was running short of patience.

The guy continued to crawl.

'The next bullet won't miss,' she said. 'But it won't kill you, either. It'll sever your spine.'

The guy rolled on to his back, as if that would protect him. He threw a couple of kicks like he was trying to swim. The effort was futile. It stirred up plenty of dust but only bought him a few more inches. His arms and legs went limp. His head flopped back against the ground. He closed his eyes. He lay there for a moment, breathing deeply. Then he sat up and held his hands out in front like he was warding off some kind of invisible demon.

'Let's talk about this.' His voice was shrill and shaky. 'It doesn't have to be this way. My partner. I'll pin it on him. I'll tell the boss he set the whole thing up. We got here, no one else showed, he pulled his gun on me – 'cause he was the traitor all along – but I was faster. We've got the body. That's proof, right? What else do we need?'

'Get up.'

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'It'll work. I can sell it. I promise. Just don't kill me. Please.'

'Get up.'

'You don't understand. I had—'

The woman raised her gun. 'Get up or I'll blow *your* leg off. See how *you* like being called *gimp*.'

'No, please!' The guy scrambled to his feet.

'Move back.'

The guy took a step. A small one.

'Further.'

He took another step. That left him out of range if he was dumb enough to try his luck with a punch or a kick. He stopped with his ankles pressed together and his arms clamped tight by his sides. It was a weird position. He reminded me of a dancer I saw busking on the street in Boston, years ago.

'Good. Now. You want me to let you live?'

'Oh yes.' His head bobbed up and down like a novelty doll's. 'I do.'

'All right. I'm prepared to do that. But you have to do one thing for me first.'

'Anything.' The guy kept on nodding. 'Whatever you want. Name it.'

'Tell me where Michael is.'

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FOUR

The guy's head stopped moving. He didn't speak. His legs were still together. His arms were still by his sides. His posture still looked awkward.

'Tell me where I can find Michael. If you don't, I will kill you. But not quickly, like your friend. No. Not like that at all.'

The guy didn't respond.

'Have you ever seen anyone get shot in the stomach?' The woman made a show of taking aim at the guy's abdomen. 'How long they take to die? The agony they're in, the entire time?'

'No.' The guy shook his head. 'Don't do that. I'll tell you.'

Then I realized why the guy looked strange. It was his hands, still pressed against his sides. One was open. His left. But his right was clenched. His

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wrist was bent back. He was holding something and trying to conceal the fact. I wanted to shout a warning, but I couldn't. Breaking the woman's concentration right at that moment wasn't going to help her.

'Well?' A sharp edge had crept into her voice.

'So, Michael's whereabouts. OK. It's kind of complicated, but he's—'

The guy's right arm snapped up. His fingers opened and a swirl of sandy grit flew right at the woman's face. She reacted fast. Her left hand came up in front of her eyes and she pivoted away on her good leg. She dodged the worst of the cloud. But not the guy himself. He launched himself forward, swatted her arm aside, and slammed his shoulder into her chest. He was only a couple of inches taller than her but must have been at least eighty pounds heavier. The impact sent her reeling. Her feet couldn't keep up and she tumbled over backward. She was still holding the gun. She tried to raise it but he followed in and stamped on her wrist. She clung on. He pressed his foot down harder. And harder still until she shrieked with frustration and let go of the weapon. He kicked it away then stepped across her body, one foot either side, and stood there looming over her.

'Well now, *gimp*. I'd say the boot's on the other foot, but that would be cruel, as you only have one.'

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The woman lay still. I stood up. The guy had his back to me. He was less than fifteen yards away.

'My friend had a plan for you.' The guy started to fumble with the front of his pants. 'A kind of dying wish. I figure I should see it through. Once for him. Once for me. Maybe more, if I like it.'

I climbed out of the trench.

'Then I'll kill you.' The guy pulled his belt clear and tossed it away to the side. 'Maybe I'll shoot *you* in the stomach. See how long it takes *you* to die.'

I started down the slope.

'It could take hours.' The guy started to unbutton his fly. 'All night, even. Dendoncker won't care. And he won't care what condition you wind up in. Just as long as you're dead when I hand you over.'

I forced myself to slow down. I didn't want to make a sound on the loose gravel.

The woman shifted her position a little then stretched her arms out on both sides. 'So you know about my foot. Gold star to you for observation. But do you know much about titanium?'

The guy's hands stopped moving.

I reached the blacktop on the far side of the road.

'It's a very interesting metal.' The woman braced her palms against the ground. 'It's very strong. Very light. And very hard.'

The woman whipped her right leg up, bent it at

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the knee, and drove her prosthetic foot towards the guy's groin. It connected. Front and centre. Full power. No mistake. Nothing held back. The guy screamed and gasped and pitched forward. He landed face down in the dirt. She rolled to the side and only just avoided getting crushed. She rolled a couple more times and retrieved her gun. Then she used both arms to lever herself up off the ground.

I stopped where I was, halfway across the blacktop, one foot either side of the faded yellow line.

The guy rolled on to his side and curled into a ball. He was whimpering like a whipped dog.

'One last chance.' The woman raised the gun. 'Michael. Where is he?'

'Michael's history, you idiot.' The guy was breathing hard. 'Forget about him.'

'He's history? What do you mean?'

'What do you think I mean? Dendoncker takes some poor schmuck in for interrogation, then … Want me to draw a diagram?'

'No need for a diagram.' Her voice was suddenly flat. 'But I do need to be sure.'

'He was a dead man the moment he started swapping secret notes.' The guy raised his head. 'You know about Dendoncker. He's the most paranoid guy on the planet. He was bound to find out.'

'Who killed him? You?'

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'No. I swear.'

'Then who?'

'I thought it was going to be us. Dendoncker told us to be ready as soon as he was done with his questions. We dropped everything. No one lasts very long when Dendoncker goes to work on them. You know that. So we were good to go. Then he told us we weren't needed after all.'

'Why not? What changed?'

'I don't know. I wasn't there. Maybe Michael was too slow with his answers. Or too smart with his mouth. Or just had a weak heart. Anyway, Dendoncker stood us down. Then this morning he sent us for you.'

The woman was quiet for a moment. Then she said, 'Michael's body. Where is it?'

'Usual place, I guess. If there was enough of it left.'

The woman's shoulders sagged a little. She lowered the gun. The guy curled back up. He reached for his ankle. Slowly and smoothly. He slid something out of his boot. Rolled on to his front. A second later he was on his feet. The sun glinted off whatever he had in his right hand. A blade. It was short and broad. He launched himself forward. His arm was high. He was swinging, horizontally. Trying to slash the woman's forehead. He wanted her eyes to fill with blood. So she couldn't see. Couldn't aim.

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She leaned back, bending sharply at the waist. Just far enough. He missed. He switched the knife to his other hand. Shaped up for another try.

This time she didn't hesitate. She just pulled the trigger. The guy went over backward. He dropped the knife, screamed, and clutched his gut with both hands. A dark stain spread across the fabric. She'd hit him in the stomach. Exactly like she'd threatened to. She stepped in close. She stood and looked down at him. Thirty seconds crawled past. No doubt the longest half minute of the guy's life. He was writhing and moaning and trying to stem the stream of blood with his palms and his fingers. She took a step back. Then she raised the gun. Lined it up on his head. And pulled the trigger. Again.

Some of my questions had been answered, at least. But now I had another one on my mind. Something much more urgent. The woman had just killed two people. I had watched her do it. I was the only witness. I needed to know what she was going to do about that. Her actions could be classed as self-defence, for sure. She had a solid case. I wouldn't argue against it. But she had no way of knowing that. Relying on a stranger's support was a gamble. And any trial she faced would come with its own risks. The skill of the lawyers. The disposition of the jurors. And she would inevitably spend

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months in jail before seeing the inside of a courtroom. An unappealing prospect in itself. And a dangerous one. Jails don't generally boost the life expectancy of anyone who gets locked up in them.

I stepped forward. There was no point going back. A couple of extra yards between us wasn't going to make any difference. The gun she was holding was a Glock 17. One of the most reliable pistols in the world. It had a misfire rate of around one in ten thousand. Great odds from her side of the trigger. Not so good from mine. The magazine held seventeen rounds. She had fired five shots, to my knowledge. There was no reason to assume she hadn't started out with a full load. So she would have twelve bullets left. There was no way she would need even a quarter of that number. She was an excellent markswoman. She had demonstrated that. And she had shown no hesitation when a violent solution was called for. The two guys who were now on the ground had found that out the hard way.

I took another step. Then my new question was answered, too. And not in a way I expected. The woman nodded to me. She turned. Walked back to her Jeep. Leaned against its rear. Shrugged her shoulders. Sighed. Raised her gun. And pressed its muzzle against her temple.

'Stop.' I hurried towards her. 'You don't have to do that.'

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She looked at me with wide, clear eyes. ‘Oh yes. I do.’

‘No. You did what—’

‘Get back.’ She held up her free hand, palm out. ‘Unless you want to wind up covered in blood and brains. I’ll give you three seconds. Then I’m going to pull the trigger.’

I believed her. I couldn’t see any way to stop her. All I could think to do was ask, ‘Why?’

She looked at me like the answer was so self-evident it was barely worth the energy it would take to respond. Then she said, ‘Because I lost my job. I disgraced myself. I put innocent people in harm’s way. And I got my brother killed. I have nothing left to live for. I’d be better off dead.’

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