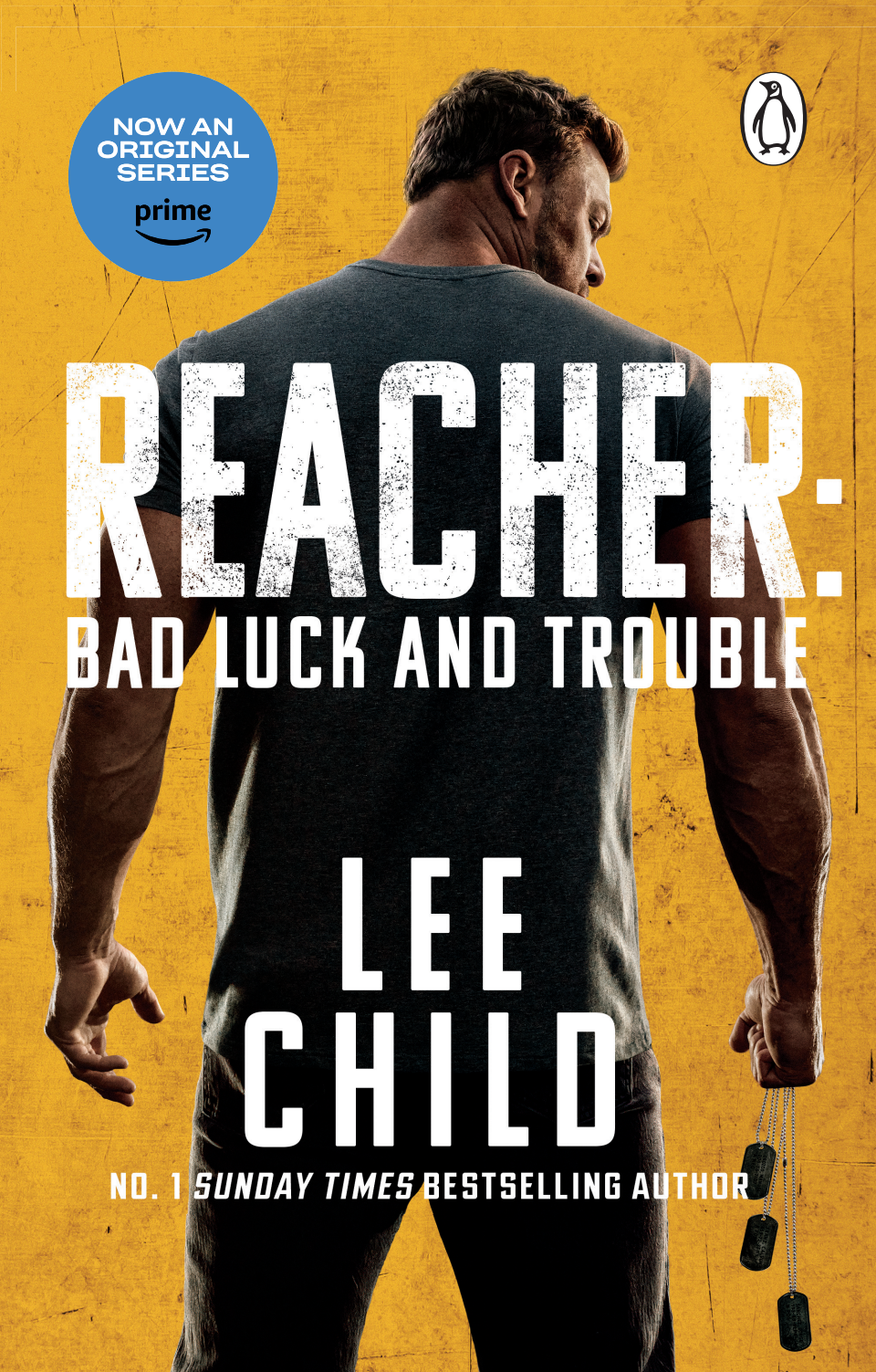

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Lee Child is one of the world's leading thriller writers. He was born in Coventry, raised in Birmingham, and now lives in New York. It is said one of his novels featuring his hero Jack Reacher is sold somewhere in the world every nine seconds. His 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.

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For the real
Frances L. Neagley

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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 man was called Calvin Franz and the helicopter was a Bell 222. Franz had two broken legs, so he had to be loaded on board strapped to a stretcher. Not a difficult manoeuvre. The Bell was a roomy aircraft, twin-engined, designed for corporate travel and police departments, with space for seven passengers. The rear doors were as big as a panel van's and they opened wide. The middle row of seats had been removed. There was plenty of room for Franz on the floor.

The helicopter was idling. Two men were carrying the stretcher. They ducked low under the rotor wash and hurried, one backward, one forward. When they reached the open door the guy who had been walking backward got one handle up on the sill and ducked away. The other guy stepped forward and shoved hard and slid the stretcher all the way inside. Franz was awake and hurting. He cried out and jerked around a little, but not much, because the straps across his chest and thighs were buckled tight. The two men climbed in after him and got in their seats behind the missing row and slammed the doors.

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Then they waited.

The pilot waited.

A third man came out a grey door and walked across the concrete. He bent low under the rotor and held a hand flat on his chest to stop his necktie whipping in the wind. The gesture made him look like a guilty man proclaiming his innocence. He tracked around the Bell's long nose and got in the forward seat, next to the pilot.

'Go,' he said, and then he bent his head to concentrate on his harness buckle.

The pilot goosed the turbines and the lazy *whop-whop* of the idling blade slid up the scale to an urgent centripetal *whip-whip-whip* and then disappeared behind the treble blast of the exhaust. The Bell lifted straight off the ground, drifted left a little, rotated slightly, and then retracted its wheels and climbed a thousand feet. Then it dipped its nose and hammered north, high and fast. Below it roads and science parks and small factories and neat isolated suburban communities slid past. Brick walls and metal siding blazed red in the late sun. Tiny emerald lawns and turquoise swimming pools winked in the last of the light.

The man in the forward seat said, 'You know where we're going?'

The pilot nodded and said nothing.

The Bell clattered onward, turning east of north, climbing a little higher, heading for darkness. It crossed a highway far below, a river of white lights crawling west and red lights crawling east. A minute north of the highway the last developed acres gave way to low hills, barren and

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scrubby and uninhabited. They glowed orange on the slopes that faced the setting sun and showed dull tan in the valleys and the shadows. Then the low hills gave way in turn to small rounded mountains. The Bell sped on, rising and falling, following the contours below. The man in the forward seat twisted around and looked down at Franz on the floor behind him. Smiled briefly and said, 'Twenty more minutes, maybe.'

Franz didn't reply. He was in too much pain.

The Bell was rated for a 161-mph cruise, so twenty more minutes took it almost fifty-four miles, beyond the mountains, well out over the empty desert. The pilot flared the nose and slowed a little. The man in the forward seat pressed his forehead against the window and stared down into the darkness.

'Where are we?' he asked.

The pilot said, 'Where we were before.'

'Exactly?'

'Roughly.'

'What's below us now?'

'Sand.'

'Height?'

'Three thousand feet.'

'What's the air like up here?'

'Still. A few thermals, but no wind.'

'Safe?'

'Aeronautically.'

'So let's do it.'

The pilot slowed more and turned and came to a stationary hover, three thousand feet above the desert floor. The man in the forward seat twisted

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around again and signalled to the two guys way in back. Both unlocked their safety harnesses. One crouched forward, avoiding Franz's feet, and held his loose harness tight in one hand and unlatched the door with the other. The pilot was half turned in his own seat, watching, and he tilted the Bell a little so the door fell all the way open under its own weight. Then he brought the craft level again and put it into a slow clockwise rotation so that motion and air pressure held the door wide. The second guy from the rear crouched near Franz's head and jacked the stretcher upward to a forty-five-degree slope. The first guy jammed his shoe against the free end of the stretcher rail to stop the whole thing sliding across the floor. The second guy jerked like a weightlifter and brought the stretcher almost vertical. Franz sagged down against the straps. He was a big guy, and heavy. And determined. His legs were useless but his upper body was powerful and straining hard. His head was snapping from side to side.

The first guy took out a gravity knife and popped the blade. Used it to saw through the strap around Franz's thighs. Then he paused a beat and sliced the strap around Franz's chest. One quick motion. At the exact same time the second guy jerked the stretcher fully upright. Franz took an involuntary step forward. Onto his broken right leg. He screamed once, briefly, and then took a second instinctive step. Onto his broken left leg. His arms flailed and he collapsed forward and his upper body momentum levered him over the locked pivot of his immobile hips and took him straight out through the open door,

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into the noisy darkness, into the gale-force rotor wash, into the night.

Three thousand feet above the desert floor.

For a moment there was silence. Even the engine noise seemed to fade. Then the pilot reversed the Bell's rotation and rocked the other way and the door slammed neatly shut. The turbines spun up again and the rotor bit the air and the nose dropped.

The two guys clambered back to their seats.

The man in front said, 'Let's go home now.'

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TWO

Seventeen days later Jack Reacher was in Portland, Oregon, short of money. In Portland, because he had to be somewhere and the bus he had ridden two days previously had stopped there. Short of money, because he had met an assistant district attorney called Samantha in a cop bar, and had twice bought her dinner before twice spending the night at her place. Now she had gone to work and he was walking away from her house, nine o'clock in the morning, heading back to the downtown bus depot, hair still wet from her shower, sated, relaxed, destination as yet unclear, with a very thin wad of bills in his pocket.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 had changed Reacher's life in two practical ways. Firstly, in addition to his folding toothbrush he now carried his passport with him. Too many things in the new era required photo ID, including most forms of travel. Reacher was a drifter, not a hermit, restless, not dysfunctional, and so he had yielded gracefully.

And secondly, he had changed his banking

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methods. For many years after leaving the army he had operated a system whereby he would call his bank in Virginia and ask for a Western Union wire transfer to wherever he happened to be. But new worries about terrorist financing had pretty much killed telephone banking. So Reacher had gotten an ATM card. He carried it inside his passport and used 8197 as his PIN. He considered himself a man of very few talents but some varied abilities, most of which were physical and related to his abnormal size and strength, but one of which was always knowing what time it was without looking, and another of which was some kind of a junior-idiot-savant facility with arithmetic. Hence 8197. He liked 97 because it was the largest two-digit prime number, and he loved 81 because it was absolutely the only number out of all the literally infinite possibilities whose square root was also the sum of its digits. Square root of 81 was nine, and eight and one made nine. No other non-trivial number in the cosmos had that kind of sweet symmetry. Perfect.

His arithmetic awareness and his inherent cynicism about financial institutions always compelled him to check his balance every time he withdrew cash. He always remembered to deduct the ATM fees and every quarter he remembered to add in the bank's paltry interest payment. And despite his suspicions, he had never been ripped off. Every time his balance came up exactly as he predicted. He had never been surprised or dismayed.

Until that morning in Portland, where he was surprised, but not exactly dismayed. Because his

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balance was more than a thousand dollars bigger than it should have been.

Exactly one thousand and thirty dollars bigger, according to Reacher's own blind calculation. A mistake, obviously. By the bank. A deposit into the wrong account. A mistake that would be rectified. He wouldn't be keeping the money. He was an optimist, but not a fool. He pressed another button and requested something called a mini-statement. A slip of thin paper came out of a slot. It had faint grey printing on it, listing the last five transactions against his account. Three of them were ATM cash withdrawals that he remembered clearly. One of them was the bank's most recent interest payment. The last was a deposit in the sum of one thousand and thirty dollars, made three days previously. So there it was. The slip of paper was too narrow to have separate staggered columns for debits and credits, so the deposit was noted inside parentheses to indicate its positive nature: (1030.00).

One thousand and thirty dollars.

1030.

Not inherently an interesting number, but Reacher stared at it for a minute. Not prime, obviously. No even number greater than two could be prime. Square root? Clearly just a hair more than 32. Cube root? A hair less than 10.1. Factors? Not many, but they included 5 and 206 along with the obvious 10 and 103 and the even more basic 2 and 515.

So, 1030.

A thousand and thirty.

A mistake.

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Maybe.

Or, maybe not a mistake.

Reacher took fifty dollars from the machine and dug in his pocket for change and went in search of a pay phone.

He found a phone inside the bus depot. He dialled his bank's number from memory. Nine forty in the West, twelve forty in the East. Lunchtime in Virginia, but someone should be there.

And someone was. Not someone Reacher had ever spoken to before, but she sounded competent. Maybe a back-office manager hauled out to cover for the meal period. She gave her name, but Reacher didn't catch it. Then she went into a long rehearsed introduction designed to make him feel like a valued customer. He waited it out and told her about the deposit. She was amazed that a customer would call about a bank error in his own favour.

'Might not be an error,' Reacher said.

'Were you expecting the deposit?' she asked.

'No.'

'Do third parties frequently make deposits into your account?'

'No.'

'It's likely to be an error, then. Don't you think?'

'I need to know who made the deposit.'

'May I ask why?'

'That would take some time to explain.'

'I would need to know,' the woman said. 'There are confidentiality issues otherwise. If the bank's error exposes one customer's affairs to

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another, we could be in breach of all kinds of rules and regulations and ethical practices.'

'It might be a message,' Reacher said.

'A message?'

'From the past.'

'I don't understand.'

'Back in the day I was a military policeman,' Reacher said. 'Military police radio transmissions are coded. If a military policeman needs urgent assistance from a colleague he calls in a ten-thirty radio code. See what I'm saying?'

'No, not really.'

Reacher said, 'I'm thinking that if I don't know the person who made the deposit, then it's a thousand and thirty bucks' worth of a mistake. But if I do know the person, it might be a call for help.'

'I still don't understand.'

'Look at how it's written. It might be a ten-thirty radio code, not a thousand and thirty dollars. Look at it on paper.'

'Wouldn't this person just have called you on the phone?'

'I don't have a phone.'

'An e-mail, then? Or a telegram. Or even a letter.'

'I don't have addresses for any of those things.'

'So how do we contact you, usually?'

'You don't.'

'A credit into your bank would be a very odd way of communicating.'

'It might be the only way.'

'A very difficult way. Someone would have to trace your account.'

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‘That’s my point,’ Reacher said. ‘It would take a smart and resourceful person to do it. And if a smart and resourceful person needs to ask for help, there’s big trouble somewhere.’

‘It would be expensive, too. Someone would be out more than a thousand dollars.’

‘Exactly. The person would have to be smart and resourceful and desperate.’

Silence on the phone. Then: ‘Can’t you just make a list of who it might be and try them all?’

‘I worked with a lot of smart people. Most of them a very long time ago. It would take me weeks to track them all down. Then it might be too late. And I don’t have a phone, anyway.’

More silence. Except for the patter of a keyboard.

Reacher said, ‘You’re looking, aren’t you?’

The woman said, ‘I really shouldn’t be doing this.’

‘I won’t rat you out.’

The phone went quiet. The keyboard patter stopped. Reacher knew she had the name right there in front of her on a screen.

‘Tell me,’ he said.

‘I can’t just tell you. You’ll have to help me out.’

‘How?’

‘Give me clues. So I don’t have to come right out with it.’

‘What kind of clues?’

She asked, ‘Well, would it be a man or a woman?’

Reacher smiled, briefly. The answer was right there in the question itself. It was a woman. Had

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to be. A smart, resourceful woman, capable of imagination and lateral thinking. A woman who knew about his compulsion to add and subtract.

'Let me guess,' Reacher said. 'The deposit was made in Chicago.'

'Yes, by personal cheque through a Chicago bank.'

'Neagley,' Reacher said.

'That's the name we have,' the woman said. 'Frances L. Neagley.'

'Then forget we ever had this conversation,' Reacher said. 'It wasn't a bank error.'

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THREE

Reacher had served thirteen years in the army, all of them in the military police. He had known Frances Neagley for ten of those years and had worked with her from time to time for seven of them. He had been an officer, a second lieutenant, then a lieutenant, a captain, a major, then a loss of rank back to captain, then a major again. Neagley had steadfastly refused promotion beyond sergeant. She wouldn't consider Officer Candidate School. Reacher didn't really know why. There was a lot he didn't know about her, despite their ten-year association.

But there was a lot he did know about her. She was smart and resourceful and thorough. And very tough. And strangely uninhibited. Not in terms of personal relationships. She avoided personal relationships. She was intensely private and resisted any kind of closeness, physical or emotional. Her lack of inhibition was professional. If she felt something was right or necessary, then she was uncompromising. Nothing stood in her way, not politics or practicality or politeness or even what a civilian might call the law. At one point Reacher

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had recruited her to a special investigations unit. She had been a big part of it for two crucial years. Most people put its occasional spectacular successes down to Reacher's leadership, but Reacher himself put them down to her presence. She impressed him, deeply. Sometimes even came close to scaring him.

If she was calling for urgent assistance, it wasn't because she had lost her car keys.

She worked for a private security provider in Chicago. He knew that. At least she had done four years ago, which was the last time he had come into contact with her. She had left the army a year later than he had and gone into business with someone she knew. As a partner, he guessed, not an employee.

He dug back in his pocket and came out with more quarters. Dialled long distance information. Asked for Chicago. Gave the company name, as he remembered it. The human operator disappeared and a robot voice came on the line with a number. Reacher broke the connection and redialled. A receptionist responded and Reacher asked for Frances Neagley. He was answered politely and put on hold. Altogether his impression was of a larger operation than he had imagined. He had pictured a single room, a grimy window, maybe two battered desks, bulging file cabinets. But the receptionist's measured voice and the telephone clicks and the quiet hold music spoke of a much bigger place. Maybe two floors, cool white corridors, wall art, an internal phone directory.

A man's voice came on the line: 'Frances Neagley's office.'

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Reacher asked, ‘Is she there?’

‘May I know who’s calling?’

‘Jack Reacher.’

‘Good. Thank you for getting in touch.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Ms Neagley’s assistant.’

‘She has an assistant?’

‘Indeed.’

‘Is she there?’

‘She’s en route to Los Angeles. In the air right now, I think.’

‘Is there a message for me?’

‘She wants to see you as soon as possible.’

‘In Chicago?’

‘She’ll be in LA a few days at least. I think you should go there.’

‘What’s this all about?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Not work related?’

‘Can’t be. She’d have started a file. Discussed it here. She wouldn’t be reaching out to strangers.’

‘I’m not a stranger. I’ve known her longer than you have.’

‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware of that.’

‘Where is she staying in LA?’

‘I don’t know that either.’

‘So how am I supposed to find her?’

‘She said you’d be able to track her down.’

Reacher asked, ‘What is this, some kind of a test?’

‘She said if you can’t find her, she doesn’t want you.’

‘Is she OK?’

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‘She’s worried about something. But she didn’t tell me what.’

Reacher kept the receiver at his ear and turned away from the wall. The metal phone cord wrapped around his chest. He glanced at the idling buses and the departures board. He asked, ‘Who else is she reaching out to?’

The guy said, ‘There’s a list of names. You’re the first to get back to her.’

‘Will she call you when she lands?’

‘Probably.’

‘Tell her I’m on my way.’

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FOUR

Reacher took a shuttle from the bus depot to the Portland airport and bought a one-way ticket on United to LAX. He used his passport for ID and his ATM card as a debit card. The one-way walk-up fare was outrageous. Alaska Airlines would have been cheaper, but Reacher hated Alaska Airlines. They put a scripture card on their meal trays. Ruined his appetite.

Airport security was easy for Reacher. His carry-on baggage amounted to precisely none at all. He had no belt, no keys, no cell phone, no watch. All he had to do was dump his loose change in a plastic tray and take off his shoes and walk through the X-ray hoop. Thirty seconds, beginning to end. Then he was on his way to the gate, coins back in his pocket, shoes back on his feet, Neagley on his mind.

Not work related. Therefore, private business. But as far as he was aware she had no private business. No private life. She never had. She would have everyday trivia, he guessed, and everyday problems. Like anyone. But he couldn't conceive of her needing help with any of that

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kind of stuff. A noisy neighbour? Any sane man would sell his stereo after one short conversation with Frances Neagley. Or give it away to charity. Drug dealers on her corner? They would end up as a line item on an inside page of the morning newspaper, corpses found in an alley, multiple knife wounds, no suspects at this time. A stalker? A groper on the L-train? Reacher shuddered. Neagley hated to be touched. He didn't really know why. But anything except brief accidental contact with her would earn a guy a broken arm. Maybe two broken arms.

So what was her problem?

The past, he guessed, which meant the army.

A list of names? Maybe chickens were coming home to roost. The army seemed like a long time ago to Reacher. A different era, a different world. Different rules. Maybe someone was applying today's standards to yesterday's situations, and complaining about something. Maybe a long-delayed internal inquiry had started up. Reacher's special investigations unit had cut a lot of corners and busted a lot of heads. Someone, maybe Neagley herself, had come up with a catchphrase: You *do not mess* with the special investigators. It had been repeated endlessly, as a promise, and a warning. Deadpan, and deadly serious.

Now maybe someone *was* messing with the special investigators. Maybe subpoenas and indictments were flying around. But in that case why would Neagley compromise him? He was as close to untraceable as a human being in America could get. Wouldn't she just play dumb and leave him be?

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He shook his head and gave it up and got on the plane.

He used the flight time figuring out where in LA she would hole up. Back in the day it had been part of his job to find people, and he had been pretty good at it. Success depended on empathy. Think like them, feel like them. See what they see. Put yourself in their shoes. *Be* them.

Easier with AWOL soldiers, of course. Their aimlessness gave their decisions a special kind of purity. And they were heading away from something, not toward something. Often they would adopt a kind of unconscious geographic symbolism. If their route into a city was from the east, they would hole up on the west. They would want to put mass between themselves and their pursuers. Reacher would spend an hour with a map and a bus schedule and the Yellow Pages and often he would predict the exact block he would find them on. The exact motel.

Tougher with Neagley, because she was heading *for* something. Her private business, and he didn't know where or what it was. So, first principles. What did he know about her? What would be the determining factor? Well, she was cheap. Not because she was poor or a miser, but because she didn't see the point in spending a buck on something she didn't need. And she didn't need much. She didn't need turn-down service or a mint on the pillow. She didn't need room service or tomorrow's weather forecast. She didn't need fluffy robes and complimentary slippers heat-sealed in cellophane. All she needed

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was a bed and a door that locked. And crowds, and shadows, and the kind of anonymous low-rent transient neighbourhoods where bartenders and desk clerks had short memories.

So, scratch downtown. Not Beverly Hills, either.

So where? Where in the vastness of LA would she be comfortable?

There were twenty-one thousand miles of surface streets to choose from.

Reacher asked himself, Where would *I* go?

Hollywood, he answered. A little ways south and east of the good stuff. The wrong stretch of Sunset.

That's where I would go, he thought.

And that's where she'll be.

The plane landed at LAX a little late, well after lunch. There had been no meal service on board and Reacher was hungry. Samantha the Portland prosecutor had served him coffee and a bran muffin for breakfast, but that seemed like a long time ago.

He didn't stop to eat. Just headed out to the taxi line and got a Korean guy in a yellow Toyota minivan who wanted to talk about boxing. Reacher knew nothing about boxing and cared less. The sport's obvious artificiality turned him off. Padded gloves and above-the-belt rules had no place in his world. And he didn't like talking. So he just sat quiet in the back and let the guy ramble on. He watched the hot brown afternoon light through the window. Palm trees, movie billboards, light grey traffic lanes striped with

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endless twin tracks of rubber. And cars, rivers of cars, floods of cars. He saw a new Rolls-Royce and an old Citroën DS, both black. A blood-red MGA and a pastel blue '57 Thunderbird, both open. A yellow 1960 Corvette nose to tail with a green 2007 model. He figured if you watched LA traffic long enough you would see one of every automobile ever manufactured.

The driver took the 101 north and exited a block from Sunset. Reacher got out on the off-ramp and paid the fare. Hiked south and turned left and faced east. He knew Sunset had a dense knot of cheap places right there, both sides of the boulevard, covering about three-quarters of a mile. The air was Southern California warm and smelled of dust and gasoline fumes. He stood still. He had a potential mile-and-a-half walk ahead of him, down and back, and a dozen motel desks to canvass. An hour-long task, maybe more. He was hungry. He could see a Denny's sign ahead and on the right. A chain diner. He decided to eat first and work later.

He walked past parked cars and vacant lots boxed in by hurricane fencing. Stepped over trash and softball-sized tumbleweeds. Recrossed the 101 on a long bridge. Entered the Denny's lot by cutting across a grass shoulder and the drive-through lane. Walked past a long line of windows.

Saw Frances Neagley inside, sitting alone in a booth.

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FIVE

Reacher stood for a moment in the parking lot and watched Neagley through the window. She hadn't changed much in the four years since he had last seen her. She had to be nearer forty than thirty now, but it wasn't showing. Her hair was still long and dark and shiny. Her eyes were still dark and alive. She was still slim and lithe. Still spending serious time in the gym. That was clear. She was wearing a tight white T-shirt with tiny cap sleeves and it would have taken an electron microscope to find any body fat on her arms. Or anyplace else.

She was a little tan, which looked good with her colouring. Her nails were done. Her T-shirt looked like a quality item. Overall she looked richer than he remembered her. Comfortable, at home in her world, successful, accustomed to the civilian life. For a moment he felt awkward about his own cheap clothes and his scuffed shoes and his bad barbershop haircut. Like she was making it, and he wasn't. Then the pleasure of seeing an old friend swamped the thought and he walked on through the lot to the door. Went in and

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stepped past the *Please Wait To Be Seated* sign and slid straight into her booth. She looked up at him across the table and smiled.

'Hello,' she said.

'To you too,' he said.

'Want lunch?'

'That was my plan.'

'So let's order, now you're finally here.'

He said, 'You sound like you were waiting for me.'

'I was. And you're about on time.'

'Am I?'

Neagley smiled again. 'You called my office guy from Portland, Oregon. He saw the caller ID. Traced it to a pay phone at the bus depot. We figured you'd head straight for the airport. Then I figured you'd take United. You must hate Alaskan. Then a cab ride here. Your ETA was easy enough to predict.'

'You knew I would come here? To this diner?'

'Like you taught me, back in the day.'

'I didn't teach you anything.'

'You did,' Neagley said. 'Remember? Think like them, *be* them. So I was being you, being me. You'd figure I'd head for Hollywood. You'd start right here on Sunset. But there's no meal on United from Portland, so I figured you'd be hungry and want to eat first. There are a couple of possible places on the block but this one has the biggest sign and you're no gourmet. So I decided to meet you here.'

'Meet me here? I thought I was tracking you.'

'You were. And I was tracking you, tracking me.'

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'*Are* you staying here? In Hollywood?'

She shook her head. 'Beverly Hills. The Wilshire.'

'So you came out here just to scoop me up?'

'I got here ten minutes ago.'

'The Beverly Wilshire? You've changed.'

'Not really. It's the world that has changed. Cheap motels don't do it for me any more. I need e-mail and the internet and FedEx service now. Business centres and concierges.'

'You make me feel old-fashioned.'

'You're improving. You use ATMs now.'

'That was a good move. The bank balance message.'

'You taught me well.'

'I didn't teach you anything.'

'Like hell.'

'But it was an extravagant move,' Reacher said. 'Ten dollars and thirty cents would have worked just as well. Maybe even better, with the period between the ten and the thirty.'

Neagley said, 'I thought you might need the air fare.'

Reacher said nothing.

'I found your account, obviously,' Neagley said. 'Wasn't too much more trouble to hack in and take a look. You're not rich.'

'I don't want to be rich.'

'I know. But I didn't want you to have to respond to my ten-thirty on your own dime. That wouldn't have been fair.'

Reacher shrugged and let it go. Truth was, he wasn't rich. Truth was, he was almost poor. His savings had eroded to the point where he was

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starting to think about how to boost them back up again. Maybe a couple of months of casual labour were in his future. Or some other kind of a score. The waitress came over with menus. Neagley ordered without looking, a cheeseburger and a soda. Reacher matched her for speed, tuna melt and hot coffee. The waitress retrieved the menus and went away.

Reacher said, 'So are you going to tell me what your ten-thirty was for exactly?'

Neagley answered him by leaning down and pulling a black three-ring binder out of a tote bag on the floor. She passed it across the table. It was a copy of an autopsy report.

'Calvin Franz is dead,' she said. 'I think someone threw him out of an airplane.'

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SIX

The past, which meant the army. Calvin Franz had been an MP and Reacher's exact contemporary and pretty much his equal all the way through his thirteen years of service. They had met here and there in the way that brother officers often tended to, rubbing shoulders in different parts of the world for a day or two at a time, consulting on the phone, crossing paths when two or more investigations had tangled or collided. Then they had done a serious spell together in Panama. Quality time. It had been very short but very intense, and they had seen things in each other that left them feeling more like real brothers than brother officers. After Reacher had been rehabilitated from his temporary demotion disgrace and given the special investigations operation to build, Franz's name had been near the top of his personnel wish list. They had spent the next two years together in a real unit-within-a-unit hothouse. They had become fast friends. Then as often happened in the army new orders had come in and the special operation had been disbanded and Reacher had never seen Franz again.

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Until that moment, in an autopsy photograph punched into a three-ring binder laid flat on a sticky laminate table in a cheap diner.

In life Franz had been smaller than Reacher but bigger than most other people. Maybe six-three and two-ten. Powerful upper body, low waist, short legs. Primitive, in a way. Like a caveman. But overall he had been reasonably handsome. He had been calm, resolute, capable, relaxing to be around. His manner had tended to reassure people.

He looked awful in the autopsy photograph. He was laid out flat and naked on a stainless tray and the camera's flash had bleached his skin pale green.

Awful.

But then, dead people often looked pretty bad.

Reacher asked, 'How did you get this?'

Neagley said, 'I can usually get things.'

Reacher said nothing in reply to that and turned the page. Started in on the dense mass of technical information. The corpse had been measured at six feet three inches in length and weighed a hundred and ninety pounds. Cause of death was given as multiple organ failure due to massive impact trauma. Both legs were broken. Ribs were cracked. The bloodstream was flooded with free histamines. The body was severely dehydrated and the stomach held nothing but mucus. There was evidence of rapid recent weight loss and no evidence of recent food consumption. Trace evidence from the recovered clothing was unexceptional, apart from unexplained ferrous oxide powder ground into both trouser legs, low

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down, on the shins, below the knee and above the ankle.

Reacher asked, 'Where was he found?'

Neagley said, 'In the desert about fifty miles north and east of here. Hard sand, small rocks, a hundred yards off the shoulder of a road. No footprints coming or going.'

The waitress brought the food. Reacher paused as she unloaded her tray and then started his sandwich, left-handed, to keep his right grease-free for turning the autopsy pages.

Neagley said, 'Two deputies in a car saw buzzards circling. Went to check. Hiked out there. They said it was like he had fallen out of the sky. The pathologist agrees.'

Reacher nodded. He was reading the doctor's conclusion, which was that a free fall from maybe three thousand feet onto hard sand could have produced the right amount of impact and caused the internal injuries observed, if Franz had happened to land flat on his back, which was aerodynamically possible if he had been alive and flailing his arms during the fall. A dead weight would have fallen on its head.

Neagley said, 'They made the ID through his fingerprints.'

Reacher asked, 'How did you find out?'

'His wife called me. Three days ago. Seems he kept all our names in his book. A special page. His buddies, from back in the day. I was the only one she could find.'

'I didn't know he was married.'

'It was recent. They have a kid, four years old.'

'Was he working?'

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Neagley nodded. ‘He set up as a private eye. A one-man band. Originally, some strategic advice for corporations. But now mostly background checks. Database stuff. You know how thorough he was.’

‘Where?’

‘Here in LA.’

‘Did all of you set up as private eyes?’

‘Most of us, I think.’

‘Except me.’

‘It was the only marketable skill we had.’

‘What did Franz’s wife want you to do?’

‘Nothing. She was just telling me.’

‘She doesn’t want answers?’

‘The cops are on it. LA County sheriffs, actually. Where he was found is technically part of LA County. Outside of the LAPD’s jurisdiction, so it’s down to a couple of local deputies. They’re working on the airplane thing. They figure it was maybe flying west out of Vegas. That kind of thing has happened to them before.’

Reacher said, ‘It wasn’t an airplane.’

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, ‘An airplane has a stall speed of what? A hundred miles an hour? Eighty? He’d have come out the door horizontal into the slipstream. He’d have smashed against the wing or the tail. We’d see perimortem injuries.’

‘He had two broken legs.’

‘How long does it take to free-fall three thousand feet?’

‘Twenty seconds?’

‘His blood was full of free histamines. That’s a massive pain reaction. Twenty seconds between

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injury and death wouldn't have even gotten it started.'

'So?'

'The broken legs were old. Two, three days minimum. Maybe more. You know what ferrous oxide is?'

'Rust,' Neagley said. 'On iron.'

Reacher nodded. 'Someone broke his legs with an iron bar. Probably one at a time. Probably tied him to a post. Aimed for his shins. Hard enough to break the bone and grind rust particles into the weave of his pants. Must have hurt like hell.'

Neagley said nothing.

'And they starved him,' Reacher said. 'Didn't let him drink. He was twenty pounds underweight. He was a prisoner, two or three days. Maybe more. They were torturing him.'

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, 'It was a helicopter. Probably at night. Stationary hover, three thousand feet up. Out the door and straight down.' Then he closed his eyes and pictured his old friend, tumbling, twenty seconds in the dark, cartwheeling, flailing, not knowing where the ground was. Not knowing exactly when he would hit. Two shattered legs trailing painfully behind him.

'Therefore it probably wasn't coming from Vegas,' he said. He opened his eyes. 'The round trip would be out of range for most helicopters. It was probably coming north and east out of LA. The deputies are barking up the wrong tree.'

Neagley sat quiet.

'Coyote food,' Reacher said. 'The perfect disposal method. No tracks. The airflow during the

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fall strips away hairs and fibres. No forensics at all. Which is why they threw him out alive. They could have shot him first, but they didn't even want to risk ballistics evidence.'

Reacher was quiet for a long moment. Then he closed the black binder and reversed it and pushed it back across the table.

'But you know all this anyway,' he said. 'Don't you? You can read. You're testing me again. Seeing if my brain still works.'

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, 'You're playing me like a violin.'

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher asked, 'Why did you bring me here?'

'Like you said, the deputies are barking up the wrong tree.'

'So?'

'You have to do something.'

'I will do something. Believe it. There are dead men walking, as of right now. You don't throw my friends out of helicopters and live to tell the tale.'

Neagley said, 'No, I want you to do something else.'

'Like what?'

'I want you to put the old unit back together.'

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SEVEN

The old unit. It had been a typical U.S. Army invention. About three years after the need for it had become blindingly obvious to everyone else the Pentagon had started to think about it. After another year of committees and meetings the suits and the brass had signed off on the idea. It had been dumped on someone's desk and a mad panic had started to get it going. Orders had been drawn up. Obviously no sane CO had wanted to touch it with a stick, so a new unit had been carved out of the 110th MP. Success was desirable but failure had to be deniable, so they went looking for a competent pariah to command it.

Reacher had been the obvious choice.

They thought his reward was promotion back to major again, but the real satisfaction for him was the chance to do something properly for once. His way. They had given him a free hand in personnel selection. He had enjoyed that. He had figured that a special investigations unit needed the best the army had to offer, and he had figured he knew who and where they were. He had

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wanted a small unit, for speed and flexibility, and no clerical support, to prevent leaks. He had figured they could do their own paperwork, or not, as they deemed necessary. In the end he had settled on eight names in addition to his own: Tony Swan, Jorge Sanchez, Calvin Franz, Frances Neagley, Stanley Lowrey, Manuel Orozco, David O'Donnell, and Karla Dixon. Dixon and Neagley were the only women and Neagley was the only NCO. The others were all officers. O'Donnell and Lowrey were captains and the rest were all majors, which was totally screwed up in terms of a coherent chain of command, but Reacher didn't care. He knew that nine people working closely would operate laterally rather than vertically, which in the event was exactly what happened. The unit had organized itself like a small-market baseball team enjoying an unlikely pennant run: talented journeymen working together, no stars, no egos, mutually supportive, and above all ruthlessly and relentlessly effective.

Reacher said, 'That was all a long time ago.'

'We have to do something,' Neagley said. 'All of us. Collectively. You *do not mess* with the special investigators. Remember that?'

'That was just a slogan.'

'No, it was true. We depended on it.'

'For morale, that was all. It was just bravado. It was whistling in the dark.'

'It was more than that. We had each other's backs.'

'Then.'

'And now and always. It's a karma thing. Someone killed Franz, and we can't just let it go.

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How would you feel if it was you, and the rest of us didn't react?'

'If it was me, I wouldn't feel anything. I'd be dead.'

'You know what I mean.'

Reacher closed his eyes again and the picture came back: Calvin Franz tumbling and cartwheeling through the darkness. Maybe screaming. Or maybe not. His old friend. 'I can handle it. Or you and I together. But we can't go back to how it was. That never works.'

'We have to go back.'

Reacher opened his eyes. 'Why?'

'Because the others are entitled to participate. They earned that right over two hard years. We can't just take it away from them unilaterally. They would resent that. It would be wrong.'

'And?'

'We need them, Reacher. Because Franz was good. Very good. As good as me, as good as you. And yet someone broke his legs and threw him out of a helicopter. I think we're going to need all the help we can get with this. So we need to find the others.'

Reacher looked at her. Heard her office guy's voice in his head: *There's a list of names. You're the first to get back to her*. He said, 'The others should have been a lot easier to find than me.'

Neagley nodded.

'I can't raise any of them,' she said.

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EIGHT

A list of names. Nine names. Nine people. Reacher knew where three of them were, specifically or generically. Himself and Neagley, specifically, in a Denny's on West Sunset in Hollywood. And Franz, generically, in a morgue somewhere else.

'What do you know about the other six?' he asked.

'Five,' Neagley said. 'Stan Lowrey is dead.'

'When?'

'Years ago. Car wreck in Montana. The other guy was drunk.'

'I didn't know that.'

'Shit happens.'

'That's for damn sure,' Reacher said. 'I liked Stan.'

'Me too,' Neagley said.

'So where are the others?'

'Tony Swan is assistant director of corporate security for a defence manufacturer here in Southern California somewhere.'

'Which one?'

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'I'm not sure. A start-up. Something new. He's only been there about a year.'

Reacher nodded. He had liked Tony Swan, too. A short, wide man. Almost cubic in shape. Affable, good-humoured, intelligent.

Neagley said, 'Orozco and Sanchez are out in Vegas. They run a security business together, casinos and hotels, on contract.'

Reacher nodded again. He had heard that Jorge Sanchez had left the army around the same time he had, a little frustrated and embittered. He had heard that Manuel Orozco had been planning to stay in, but overall it wasn't a huge surprise to find that he had changed his mind. Both men were mavericks, lean, fast, leathery, impatient with bullshit.

Neagley said, 'Dave O'Donnell is in D.C. Plain-vanilla private detective. Plenty of work for him there.'

'I guess there would be,' Reacher said. O'Donnell had been the meticulous one. He had done the whole unit's paperwork, pretty much single-handed. He had looked like an Ivy League gentleman, but he had always carried a switch-blade in one pocket and brass knuckles in the other. A useful guy to have around.

Neagley said, 'Karla Dixon is in New York. Forensic accounting. She understands money, apparently.'

'She always understood numbers,' Reacher said. 'I remember that.' Reacher and Dixon had spent the occasional hour trying to prove or disprove various famous mathematical theorems. A hopeless task, given that they were both rank

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amateurs, but it had passed some time. Dixon was dark and very pretty and comparatively small, a happy woman who thought the worst of people, but inevitably she had been proved right nine times out of ten.

Reacher asked, 'How do you know so much about them?'

'I keep track,' Neagley said. 'I'm interested.'

'Why can't you raise them?'

'I don't know. I put calls out, but nobody's answering.'

'So is this an attack on all of us collectively?'

'Can't be,' Neagley said. 'I'm at least as visible as Dixon or O'Donnell and nobody has come after me.'

'Yet.'

'Maybe.'

'You called the others the same day you put the money in my bank?'

Neagley nodded.

'It's only been three days,' Reacher said. 'Maybe they're all busy.'

'So what do you want to do? Wait for them?'

'I want to forget all about them. You and I can stand up for Franz. Just the two of us.'

'It would be better to have the old unit back together. We were a good team. You were the best leader the army ever had.'

Reacher said nothing.

'What?' Neagley said. 'What are you thinking?'

'I'm thinking that if I wanted to rewrite history I'd start a lot farther back than that.'

Neagley folded her hands together and rested

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them on the black binder. Slim fingers, brown skin, painted nails, tendons and sinew.

'One question,' she said. 'Suppose I had gotten ahold of the others. Suppose I hadn't bothered to try that thing with your bank. Suppose you found out years from now that Franz had been murdered and the six of us had just gone ahead and fixed it without you. How would you feel then?'

Reacher shrugged. Paused a beat.

'Bad, I guess,' he said. 'Cheated, maybe. Left out.'

Neagley said nothing.

Reacher said, 'OK, we'll try to find the others. But we won't wait forever.'

Neagley had a rental car in the lot. She paid the diner check and led Reacher outside. The car was a red Mustang convertible. They climbed in together and Neagley hit a button and dropped the top. She took a pair of sunglasses from the dash and put them on. Backed out of her slot and turned south off Sunset at the next light. Headed for Beverly Hills. Reacher sat quiet beside her and squinted in the afternoon sun.

Inside a tan Ford Crown Victoria thirty yards west of the restaurant a man called Thomas Brant watched them go. He used his cell phone and called his boss, a man named Curtis Mauney. Mauney didn't answer, so Brant left a voice mail.

He said, 'She just picked the first one of them up.'

* * *

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Parked five cars behind Brant's Crown Victoria was a dark blue Chrysler sedan containing a man in a dark blue suit. He too watched the red Mustang disappear into the haze, and he too used a cell phone.

He said, 'She just picked the first one of them up. I don't know which one it is. Big guy, looks like a bum.'

Then he listened to his boss's reply, and pictured him smoothing his necktie over the front of his shirt, one-handed, while he held the phone with the other.

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NINE

Like its name suggested the Beverly Wilshire hotel was on Wilshire Boulevard, in the heart of Beverly Hills, directly opposite the mouth of Rodeo Drive. It was made up of two large limestone buildings, one behind the other, one old and ornate, the other new and plain. They were separated by a valet lane that ran parallel to the boulevard. Neagley nosed the Mustang into it and stopped close to a knot of black Town Cars and Reacher said, 'I can't afford to stay here.'

'I already booked your room.'

'Booked it or paid for it?'

'It's on my card.'

'I won't be able to pay you back.'

'Get over it.'

'This place has got to be hundreds a night.'

'I'll let it slide for now. Maybe we'll take some spoils of war down the track.'

'If the bad guys are rich.'

'They are,' Neagley said. 'They have to be. How else would they afford their own helicopter?'

She left the key in and the motor running and

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opened the heavy red door and slid out. Reacher did the same thing on his side. A guy ran up and gave Neagley a valet stub. She took it and tracked around the hood of the car and took the steps up to the back of the hotel's main lobby. Reacher followed. Watched her move. She floated, like she was weightless. She ghosted through a crowded dog-leg corridor and came out in a reception area the size and shape of a baronial hall. There was a check-in desk, a bell desk, a concierge desk, all separate. There were pale velvet armchairs with beautifully dressed guests in them.

Reacher said, 'I look like a bum in here.'

'Or like a billionaire. Nowadays you can't tell.'

She led him to the counter and checked him in. She had reserved his room under the name Thomas Shannon, who had been Stevie Ray Vaughan's giant bass player back in the day, and one of Reacher's favourites. He smiled. He liked to avoid paper trails, whenever possible. He always had. Pure reflex. He turned to Neagley and nodded his thanks and asked, 'What are you calling yourself here?'

'My real name,' she said. 'I don't do that stuff any more. Too complicated now.'

The clerk handed over a key card and Reacher put it in his shirt pocket. He turned away from the desk and faced the room. Stone, dim chandeliers, thick carpet, flowers in huge glass vases. Perfumed air.

'Let's make a start,' he said.

They started in Neagley's room, which was actually a two-room suite. The living room

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portion was tall and square and stately and had been done up in blues and golds. It could have been a room in Buckingham Palace. There was a desk in the window with two laptop computers on it. Next to the laptops was an empty cell phone cradle and next to that was an open spiral-bound notebook, new, letter sized, the kind of thing a high-school student might buy in September. Last in line was a thin stack of printed papers. Forms. Five of them. Five names, five addresses, five telephone numbers. The old unit, less two dead and two already present.

Reacher said, 'Tell me about Stan Lowrey.'

'Not much to tell. He quit the army, moved to Montana, got hit by a truck.'

'Life's a bitch and then you die.'

'Tell me about it.'

'What was he doing in Montana?'

'Raising sheep. Churning butter.'

'Alone?'

'There was a girlfriend.'

'She still there?'

'Probably. They had a lot of acres.'

'Why sheep? Why butter?'

'No call for private eyes in Montana. And Montana was where the girlfriend was.'

Reacher nodded. At first glance Stan Lowrey had not been an obvious candidate for a rural fantasy. He had been a big-boned black guy from some scruffy factory town in Western Pennsylvania, smart as a whip and hard as a railroad tie. Dark alleys and pool halls had seemed to be his natural habitat. But somewhere in his DNA there had been a clear link with the

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earth. Reacher wasn't surprised he had become a farmer. He could picture him, in a raggedy old barn coat, knee-high in prairie grass, under a huge blue sky, cold but happy.

'Why can't we raise the others?' he asked.

'I don't know,' Neagley said.

'What was Franz working on?'

'Nobody seems to have that information.'

'Didn't the new wife say anything?'

'She isn't new. They were married five years.'

'She's new to me,' Reacher said.

'I couldn't interrogate her, exactly. She was on the phone, telling me her husband was dead. And maybe she doesn't know anyway.'

'We're going to have to go ask her. She's the obvious starting point here.'

'After we try the others again,' Neagley said.

Reacher picked up the five sheets of printed paper and gave three to Neagley and kept two for himself. She used her cell phone and he used a room phone on a credenza. They started dialling. His numbers were for Dixon and O'Donnell. Karla and Dave, the East Coast residents, New York and D.C. Neither one of them answered. He got their business office machines instead, and heard their long-forgotten voices. He left the same message for both of them: 'This is Jack Reacher with a ten-thirty from Frances Neagley at the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in Los Angeles, California. Get off your ass and call her back.' Then he hung up and turned to where Neagley was pacing and leaving the same kind of message for Tony Swan.

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‘Don’t you have home numbers for them?’ he asked.

‘They’re all unlisted. Which is only to be expected. Mine is, too. My guy in Chicago is working on it. But it’s not easy these days. Phone company computers have gotten a lot more secure.’

‘They must be carrying cell phones,’ he said. ‘Doesn’t everyone now?’

‘I don’t have those numbers either.’

‘But wherever they are they can call in and check their office voice mail remotely, can’t they?’

‘Easily.’

‘So why haven’t they? In three whole days?’

‘I don’t know,’ Neagley said.

‘Swan must have a secretary. He’s an assistant director of something. He must have a whole staff.’

‘All they’re saying is that he’s temporarily out of the office.’

‘Let me try.’ He took Swan’s number from her and hit nine for a line. Dialled. Heard the connection go through, heard Swan’s phone ringing on the other end.

And ringing, and ringing.

‘No answer,’ he said.

‘Someone answered a minute ago,’ Neagley said. ‘It’s his direct line.’

No answer. He held the phone at his ear and listened to the patient electronic purr. Ten times, fifteen, twenty. Thirty. He hung up. Checked the number and tried again. Same result.

‘Weird,’ he said. ‘Where the hell is he?’

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He checked the paper again. Name and number. The address line was blank.

'Where is this place?' he asked.

'I'm not sure.'

'Does it have a name?'

'New Age Defense Systems. That's how they've been answering.'

'What kind of a name is that for a weapons manufacturer? Like they kill you with kindness? They play pan pipe music until you save them the trouble and slit your wrists?' He dialled information. Information told him there was no listing for New Age Defense Systems anywhere in the United States. He hung up.

'Can corporations be unlisted too?' he asked.

Neagley said, 'I guess so. In the defence business, certainly. And they're new.'

'We have to find them. They must have a physical plant somewhere. At least an office, so Uncle Sam can send them cheques.'

'OK, we'll add that to the list. After the visit to Mrs Franz.'

'No, before,' Reacher said. 'Offices close. Widows are always around.'

So Neagley called her guy in Chicago and told him to track down a physical address for New Age Defense Systems. From the half of the conversation Reacher could hear it seemed like the best way to proceed was to hack into FedEx's computer. Or UPS's, or DHL's. Everyone received packages, and couriers needed street addresses. They couldn't use Post Office boxes. They had to hand stuff across the transom to actual people and get signatures in return.

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‘Get cell phone numbers too,’ Reacher called. ‘For the others.’

Neagley covered the phone. ‘He’s been on that for three days. It isn’t easy.’ Then she hung up and walked to the window. Looked out and down at the people parking cars.

‘So now we wait,’ she said.

They waited less than twenty minutes and then one of Neagley’s laptops pinged to announce an e-mail incoming from Chicago.

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TEN

The e-mail from Neagley's guy in Chicago contained New Age's address, courtesy of UPS. Or actually, two addresses. One in Colorado, one in East LA.

'Makes sense,' she said. 'Distributed manufacture. Safer that way. In case of attack.'

'Bullshit,' Reacher said. 'It's about two lots of senators. Two lots of pork. Republicans up there, Democrats down here, they get their snouts in the trough both ways around.'

'Swan wouldn't have gone there if that was all they were into.'

Reacher nodded. 'Maybe not.'

Neagley opened a map and they checked the East LA address. It was out past Echo Park, past Dodger Stadium, somewhere in the no man's land between South Pasadena and East LA proper.

'That's a long way,' Neagley said. 'It could take forever. Rush hour has started.'

'Already?'

'Rush hour in LA started thirty years ago. It'll finish when the oil runs out. Or the oxygen. But whatever, we won't make it over there before

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