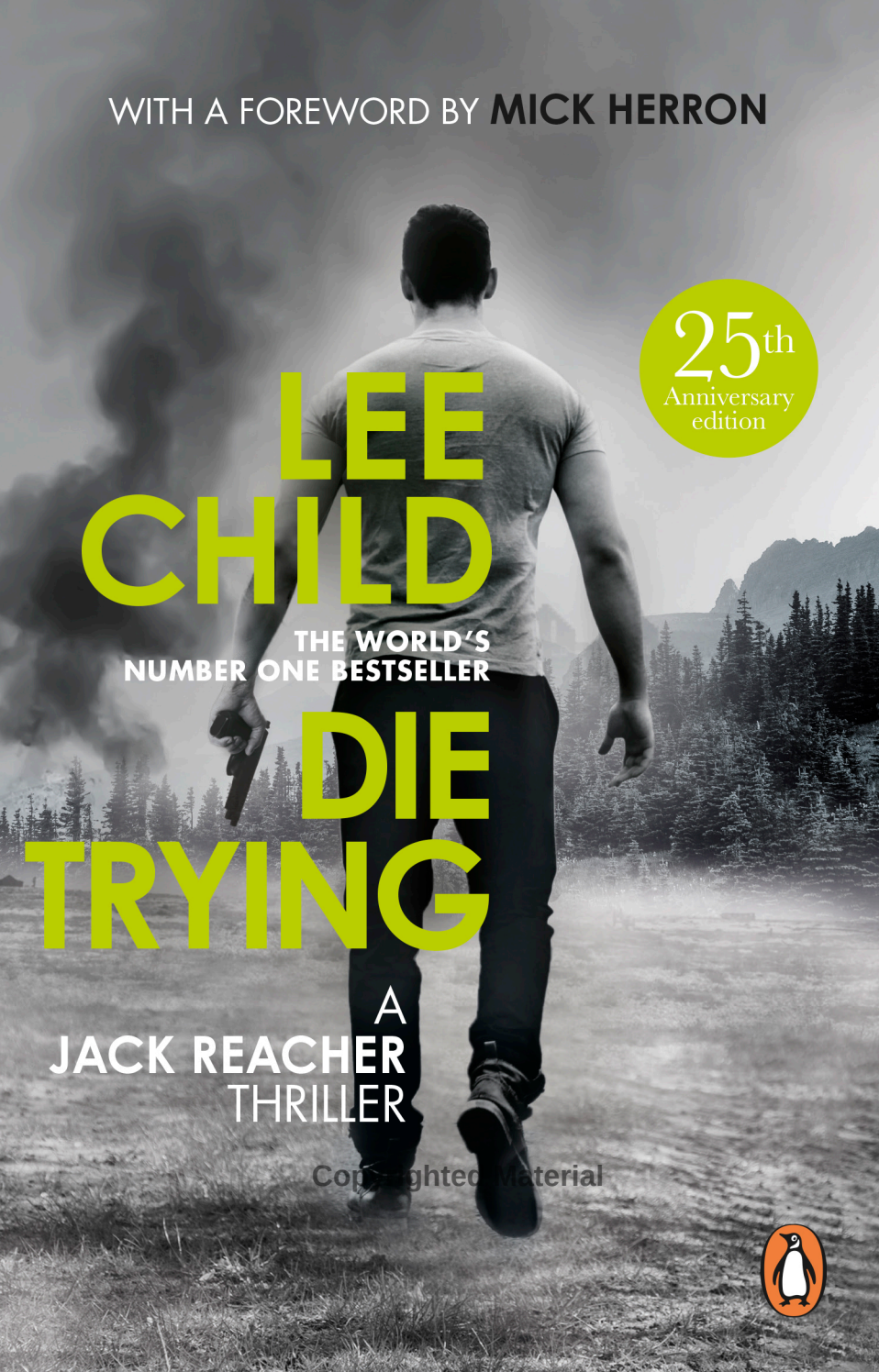

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25th Anniversary edition
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KEN FOLLETT

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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.

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If I listed all the ways she helps me, this dedication would be longer than the book itself. So I'll just say: to my wife Jane, with a lot of thanks.

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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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Foreword by Mick Herron

Over the course of a long reading life, it's not always easy to recall the circumstances of an individual find, but I remember my first copy of *Die Trying*: I bought it at a jumble sale in Burford, Oxfordshire. It wasn't my first Lee Child – I'd read *The Visitor*, at that time his most recent publication, and subsequently *Tripwire* – but I wasn't yet an addict. I could have stopped at any time. I didn't have a problem; I was just buying a book. I'd take it home, add it to the pile, and read it when I got round to it. Which, as it happens, was later that same day. By the following evening I'd finished it, and somewhere in between I'd accepted that yes, I was in fact an addict, and from then on, after catching up with the debut novel, *Killing Floor*, I made a practice of scarfing up the latest Lee Child as soon as I could lay hands on it. Thankfully, they arrived with great regularity. Because Child, like his creation Jack Reacher, is nothing if not reliable, something the vast readership he has acquired in the twenty-five years since *Die Trying* appeared has cause to be thankful for.

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Alongside that readership has come no small measure of critical acclaim. My copy of one of the later novels, *61 Hours*, for example – a US edition – has a cover quote from the *LA Times* dubbing its author 'the current poster-boy of American crime fiction,' and this, while not inaccurate, neatly captures one of the paradoxes of Child's work. Yes, he writes American crime fiction, but does so without being American himself. And the America he writes about is always real, even when it isn't. Many of the novels are set in actual places, towns and cities that Child goes to some lengths to portray accurately: book in hand, you could find your way round them without a map. Others take place in imaginary towns that are described in no less detail. And all are viewed through the eyes of Reacher, who's capable of stepping off a train in a town that's new to him instantly knowing where the best diner will be, which bars will have good live blues, and where the local gangsters will hang out – deductions based on sound logic and the application of experience. Which is one of the first things you notice about Reacher: that he never stops thinking. He can weigh a street scene in a moment, and is always calculating, whether figuring out square roots, identifying prime numbers, or – as happens in the first few pages of *Die Trying* – working out when the right moment to act is, when two guys with nine-millimetre automatics have arrived out of nowhere:

> 'Twenty yards behind him was a solid mass of hurrying people at a crosswalk. A couple of stray bullets would find a couple of targets. No doubt about that. No doubt at all. That was the problem behind him. The problem beside him was the unknown woman.

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> Her capabilities were an unknown quantity. She had some kind of a bad leg. She would be slow to react. Slow to move. He wasn't prepared to go into combat. Not in that environment, and not with that partner.'

The summing up of a situation is second nature to him: Reacher always sees the angles, always reads the details, and these are always relayed to the reader. Take those nine-millimetre automatics – anyone might notice that these guys are carrying guns; Reacher can deliver a potted history of the model in question. 'It was a Glock 17 . . . He had evaluated the prototype for his unit.' But while that kind of close analysis would become wearisome if it was limited to weaponry, or technology, or just generally guy-stuff, Reacher brings the same level of attention to everything around him, including people. Because this is one of the other paradoxes of Child's work: he's writing tough-guy fiction all right – they don't come any tougher than Reacher – but that's not the character's defining characteristic. He's not simply observant; he's emotionally intelligent, with an uncanny ability to read people as swiftly as he reads streets. So when he finds himself hustled into the back of a van with a total stranger, it's only a matter of minutes before he's explaining how he already knows she's a government agent of some sort, 'new in the job, still fairly dedicated'. These aren't guesses. They're statements of fact based on the available evidence. But you have to be Reacher to see that evidence for what it is.

And you have to be Lee Child to make this look easy. Inventing a Jack Reacher is a tricky business, as witness the dozens of imitators who've tried to do just that in the last quarter century. Writing American,

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too, is more than just acquiring the vocabulary – note the use of 'crosswalk' in the quoted section above – it's subsuming your whole imagination into the task. It's learning to think like you grew up there. 'When you're waiting for something to happen, you close your body down like a beach house in winter.' That's not a simile a writer from the British Midlands might be expected to reach for. But then, Child has always brought all his attention to bear on the task in hand, much as Reacher does, working out precisely what the situation requires, and supplying the necessary expertise. 'I think entertainment is fundamentally a two-way street,' he's said in interview. 'It's a transaction. The audience wants something, and the author supplies it. That's how it works.' And as with any contract, there's give and take involved. The reader has to grant the author some leeway; allow for one detail that allows everything else to fall into place. What we grant in *Die Trying* is Reacher being where he is when he is – that he's passing a dry-cleaners as Holly Johnson is emerging, and is thus on hand to become caught up in her story: the kidnappers that are waiting to abduct her grab him too. Once we accept that, everything that follows falls into place, the inevitable consequences, one after the other, of Reacher being in this situation. In another world, he passes the dry-cleaners a few moments earlier, walks by without becoming involved, and *Die Trying* becomes one of those other Reacher novels Child has joked about; the ones in which there are no bad guys and Reacher does nothing. 'But they don't publish those ones. They're too boring.'

A Reacher novel without bad guys would have a hole in it, that's for sure. Much has been written about the appeal of a no-strings hero; the man who can rock

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up anywhere, find trouble, deal with it and move on. But among the other joys of a Reacher novel are the adversaries he comes across. Child is the best creator of villains since Ian Fleming, and if some of the more memorable had yet to appear at the time of *Die Trying* – my own favourite is Plato in *61 Hours*, five feet one in elevator shoes, and more than capable of cutting enemies down to his size – the chief villain here is a doozy. Beau Borken is six feet tall, maybe four hundred pounds, has tiny colourless eyes, wet red lips in a white round face, and is squeezed into an immaculate black uniform. More to the point, the key to his character is delivered in six words: 'He liked it when they ran.' You can say a lot with a short sentence, or you can if you're Lee Child. 'He liked it when they ran.' That tells you all you need know about Beau Borken, and having read it, you're already relishing the comeuppance that Reacher will deliver.

When, in order to write this, I started rereading *Die Trying* – at least my second reread, possibly my third – I started taking notes. That stopped pretty swiftly: my last was the observation that Holly Johnson shares her name, coincidentally or not, with the lead singer of Frankie Goes to Hollywood, a detail I haven't found room to include here. And after that, I was just a reader again, because this is what happens when you step inside a Lee Child novel: you forget where you are, and what you're supposed to be doing, and surrender to the ride. Because who am I kidding? I was a Child addict before picking up that copy of *Die Trying* in Burford; I was an addict the moment I first encountered his work, and in this I'm far from alone. There are a lot of us about – literally millions. You can spot us in tube trains, looking up from our books, momentarily

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confused as we realize we've missed our stop and have no idea where we are. Then shrugging and returning to our pages, because the bigger truth is, with Lee Child, you always know where you are. That's for sure. That's for *damn* sure.

Mick Herron

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ONE

NATHAN RUBIN DIED BECAUSE HE GOT BRAVE. Not the sustained kind of thing which wins you a medal in a war, but the split-second kind of blurting outrage which gets you killed on the street.

He left home early, as he always did, six days a week, fifty weeks a year. A cautious breakfast, appropriate to a short, round man aiming to stay in shape through his forties. A long walk down the carpeted corridors of a lakeside house, appropriate to a man who earned a thousand dollars on each of those three hundred days he worked. A thumb on the button of the garage door-opener and a twist of the wrist to start the silent engine of his expensive, imported sedan. A CD into the player, a backward sweep into his gravel driveway, a dab on the brake, a snick of the selector, a nudge on the gas, and the last short drive of his life was under way. Six forty-nine in the morning, Monday.

The only light on his route to work was green,

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which was the proximate cause of his death. It meant that as he pulled into his secluded slot behind his professional building the prelude ahead of Bach's B minor fugue still had thirty-eight seconds left to run. He sat and heard it out until the last organ blast echoed to silence, which meant that as he got out of his car the three men were near enough for him to interpret some kind of intention in their approach. So he glanced at them. They looked away and altered course, three men in step, like dancers or soldiers. He turned toward his building. Started walking. But then he stopped. And looked back. The three men were at his car. Trying the doors.

'Hey!' he called.

It was the short universal sound of surprise, anger, challenge. The sort of instinctive sound an earnest, naive citizen makes when something should not be happening. The sort of instinctive sound which gets an earnest, naive citizen killed. He found himself heading straight back to his car. He was outnumbered three to one but he was in the right, which swelled him up and gave him confidence. He strode back and felt outraged and fit and commanding.

But those were illusory feelings. A soft, suburban guy like him was never going to be in command of a situation like that. His fitness was just health-club tone. It counted for nothing. His tight abdominals ruptured under the first savage blow. His face jerked forward and down and hard knuckles pulped his lips and smashed his teeth. He was caught by rough hands and knotted arms and held upright like he weighed nothing at all. His keys were snatched from his grasp and he was hit a crashing blow on the ear. His mouth filled with blood. He was dropped onto

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the blacktop and heavy boots smashed into his back. Then his gut. Then his head. He blacked out like a television set in a thunderstorm. The world just disappeared in front of him. It collapsed into a thin hot line and sputtered away to nothing.

So he died, because for a split-second he got brave. But not then. He died much later, after the split-second of bravery had faded into long hours of wretched gasping fear, and after the long hours of fear had exploded into long minutes of insane screaming panic.

Jack Reacher stayed alive, because he got cautious. He got cautious because he heard an echo from his past. He had a lot of past, and the echo was from the worst part of it.

He had served thirteen years in the army, and the only time he was wounded it wasn't with a bullet. It was with a fragment of a Marine sergeant's jawbone. Reacher had been stationed in Beirut, in the US compound out by the airport. The compound was truck-bombed. Reacher was standing at the gate. The Marine sergeant was standing a hundred yards nearer the explosion. The jawbone fragment was the only piece left of the guy. It hit Reacher a hundred yards away and went tumbling through his gut like a bullet. The army surgeon who patched Reacher up told him afterward he was lucky. He told him a real bullet in the gut would have felt much worse. That was the echo Reacher was hearing. And he was paying a whole lot of attention to it, because thirteen years later he was standing there with a handgun pointing straight at his stomach. From a range of about an inch and a half.

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The handgun was a nine-millimetre automatic. It was brand new. It was oiled. It was held low, lined up right on his old scar. The guy holding it looked more or less like he knew what he was doing. The safety mechanism was released. There was no visible tremor in the muzzle. No tension. The trigger finger was ready to go to work. Reacher could see that. He was concentrating hard on that trigger finger.

He was standing next to a woman. He was holding her arm. He had never seen her before. She was staring at an identical nine-millimetre pointed at her own gut. Her guy was more tensed up than his. Her guy looked uneasy. He looked worried. His gun was trembling with tension. His fingernails were chewed. A nervous, jumpy guy. The four of them were standing there on the street, three of them still like statues and the fourth hopping slightly from foot to foot.

They were in Chicago. Centre of the city, a busy sidewalk, a Monday, last day of June. Broad daylight, bright summer sunshine. The whole situation had materialized in a split second. It had happened in a way which couldn't have been choreographed in a million years. Reacher had been walking down the street, going nowhere, not fast, not slow. He had been about to pass the exit door of a storefront dry-cleaner's. The door had opened up in his face and an old metal walking cane had clattered out on the sidewalk right in front of him. He'd glanced up to see a woman in the doorway. She was about to drop an armful of nine dry-cleaning bags. She was some way short of thirty, expensively dressed, dark, attractive, self-assured. She had some kind of a bad leg. Some kind of an injury. Reacher could see from her

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awkward posture it was causing her pain. She'd thrown him a would-you-mind look and he'd thrown her a no-problem look and scooped up the metal cane. He'd taken the nine bags from her with one hand and given her the cane with the other. He'd flicked the bags up over his shoulder and felt the nine wire hangers bite into his finger. She had planted the cane on the sidewalk and eased her forearm into the curved-metal clip. He had offered his hand. She had paused. Then she had nodded in an embarrassed fashion and he had taken her arm and waited a beat, feeling helpful but awkward. Then they had turned together to move away. Reacher had figured he would maybe stroll a few steps with her until she was steady on her feet. Then he would let her arm go and hand back her garments. But he'd turned straight into the two guys with the nine-millimetre automatics.

The four of them stood there, face to face in pairs. Like four people eating together in a tight booth in a diner. The two guys with the guns were white, well fed, vaguely military, vaguely alike. Medium height, short brown hair. Big hands, muscular. Big, obvious faces, bland pink features. Tense expressions, hard eyes. The nervous guy was smaller, like he burned up his energy worrying. They both wore checked shirts and poplin windbreakers. They stood there, pressed together. Reacher was a lot taller than the other three. He could see all around them, over their heads. He stood there, surprised, with the woman's dry-cleaning slung over his shoulder. The woman was leaning on her crutch, just staring, silent. The two men were pointing the guns. Close in. Reacher felt they'd all been standing like that for a long time. But

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he knew that feeling was deceptive. It probably hadn't been more than a second and a half.

The guy opposite Reacher seemed to be the leader. The bigger one. The calmer one. He looked between Reacher and the woman and jerked his automatic's barrel toward the kerb.

'In the car, bitch,' the guy said. 'And you, asshole.' He spoke urgently, but quietly. With authority. Not much of an accent. Maybe from California, Reacher thought. There was a sedan at the kerb. It had been waiting there for them. A big car, black, expensive. The driver was leaning across behind the front passenger seat. He was stretching over to pop the rear door. The guy opposite Reacher motioned with the gun again. Reacher didn't move. He glanced left and right. He figured he had about another second and a half to make some kind of an assessment. The two guys with the nine-millimetre automatics didn't worry him too much. He was one-handed, because of the dry-cleaning, but he figured the two guys would go down without too much of a problem. The problems lay beside him and behind him. He stared up into the dry-cleaner's window and used it like a mirror. Twenty yards behind him was a solid mass of hurrying people at a crosswalk. A couple of stray bullets would find a couple of targets. No doubt about that. No doubt at all. That was the problem behind him. The problem beside him was the unknown woman. Her capabilities were an unknown quantity. She had some kind of a bad leg. She would be slow to react. Slow to move. He wasn't prepared to go into combat. Not in that environment, and not with that partner.

The guy with the Californian accent reached up and grabbed Reacher's wrist where it was pinned

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against his collar by the weight of the nine clean garments hanging down his back. He used it to pull him toward the car. His trigger finger still looked ready to go to work. Reacher was watching it, corner of his eye. He let the woman's arm go. Stepped over to the car. Threw the bags into the rear seat and climbed in after them. The woman was pushed in behind him. Then the jumpy guy crowded in on them and slammed the door. The leader got in front on the right. Slammed the door. The driver nudged the selector and the car moved smoothly and quietly away down the street.

The woman was gasping in pain and Reacher figured she had the jumpy guy's gun jammed in her ribs. The leader was twisted around in the front seat with his gun hand resting against the thick leather headrest. The gun was pointing straight at Reacher's chest. It was a Glock 17. Reacher knew all about that weapon. He had evaluated the prototype for his unit. That had been his assignment during his light-duty convalescence after the Beirut wound. The Glock was a tough little weapon. Seven and a half inches long from firing pin to muzzle tip. Long enough to make it accurate. Reacher had hit thumbtack heads at seventy-five feet with it. And it fired a decent projectile. It delivered quarter-ounce bullets at nearly eight hundred miles an hour. Seventeen rounds to a magazine, hence the name. And it was light. For all its power, it weighed under two pounds. The important parts were steel. The rest of it was plastic. Black polycarbonate, like an expensive camera. A fine piece of craftsmanship.

But he hadn't liked it much. Not for the specialized

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requirements of his unit. He'd recommended rejection. He'd supported the Beretta 92F instead. The Beretta was also a nine-millimetre, a half-pound heavier, an inch longer, two fewer rounds in the magazine. But it had about 10 per cent more stopping power than the Glock. That was important to him. And it wasn't plastic. The Beretta had been Reacher's choice. His unit commander had agreed. He had circulated Reacher's paper and the army as a whole had backed his recommendation. The same week they promoted him and pinned on his Silver Star and his Purple Heart, they ordered Berettas even though the Beretta was more expensive and NATO was crazy for the Glock and Reacher had been just about a lone voice and was not long out of West Point. Then he had been assigned elsewhere and served all around the world and hadn't really seen a Glock 17 since. Until now. Twelve years later he was getting a pretty damn good second look at one.

He switched his attention away from the gun and took another look at the guy holding it. He had a decent tan which whitened near his hairline. A recent haircut. The driver had a big shiny brow, thinning hair swept back, pink and vivid features, the smirk that pig-ugly guys use when they think they're handsome. Same cheap chainstore shirt, same windbreaker. Same corn-fed bulk. Same in-charge confidence, edged around with a slight breathlessness. Three guys, all of them maybe thirty or thirty-five, one leader, one solid follower, one jumpy follower. All of them tense but rehearsed, racing through some kind of a mission. A puzzle. Reacher glanced past the steady Glock into the leader's eyes. But the guy shook his head.

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'No talking, asshole,' he said. 'Start talking, I'll shoot you. That's a damn promise. Keep quiet, you could be OK.'

Reacher believed him. The guy's eyes were hard and his mouth was a tight line. So he said nothing. Then the car slowed and pulled onto a lumpy concrete forecourt. It headed around behind an abandoned industrial building. They had driven south. Reacher figured they were now maybe five miles south of the Loop. The driver eased the big sedan to a stop with the rear door lined up with the back of a small panel truck. The truck was standing alone on the empty lot. It was a Ford Econoline, dirty white, not old, but well used. There had been some kind of writing on the side. It had been painted over with fresh white paint which didn't exactly match the bodywork. Reacher scanned around. The lot was full of trash. He saw a paint can discarded near the truck. A brush. There was nobody in sight. The place was deserted. If he was going to make some kind of a move, this was the right time to make it, and the right location. But the guy in front smiled a thin smile and leaned right over into the back of the car. Caught Reacher's collar with his left hand and ground the tip of the Glock's muzzle into Reacher's ear with his right.

'Sit still, asshole,' the guy said.

The driver got out of the car and skipped around the hood. Pulled a new set of keys from his pocket and opened up the rear doors of the truck. Reacher sat still. Jamming a gun into a person's ear is not necessarily a smart move. If the person suddenly jerks his head around toward it, the gun comes out. It rolls around the person's forehead. Then even a

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quick trigger-finger won't do much damage. It might blow a hole in the person's ear, just the outside flap, and it's sure to shatter the person's eardrum. But those are not fatal wounds. Reacher spent a second weighing those odds. Then the jumpy guy dragged the woman out of the car and hustled her straight into the back of the truck. She hopped and limped across the short distance. Straight out of one door and in through the other. Reacher watched her, corner of his eye. Her guy took her pocketbook from her and tossed it back into the car. It fell at Reacher's feet. It thumped heavily on the thick carpet. A big pocketbook, expensive leather, something heavy in it. Something metal. Only one metal thing women carry could make a heavy thump like that. He glanced across at her, suddenly interested.

She was sprawled in the back of the truck. Impeded by her leg. Then the leader in the front pulled Reacher along the leather seat and passed him on to the jumpy guy. As soon as one Glock was out of his ear, the other was jammed into his side. He was dragged over the rough ground. Across to the rear of the truck. He was pushed inside with the woman. The jumpy guy covered them both with the trembling Glock while the leader reached into the car and pulled out the woman's metal crutch. He walked over and tossed it into the truck. It clanged and boomed on the metal siding. He left her dry-cleaning in the back of the sedan with her handbag. Then he pulled a set of handcuffs from the pocket of his jacket. He caught the woman's right wrist and cuffed it with half the handcuff. Pulled her roughly sideways and caught Reacher's left wrist. Snapped the other half of the cuff onto it. Shook the cuff to check it was secure.

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Slammed the truck's left rear door. Reacher saw the driver emptying plastic bottles into the sedan. He caught the pale colour and the strong smell of gasoline. One bottle into the back seat, one into the front. Then the leader swung the truck's right rear door shut. Last thing Reacher saw before darkness enveloped him was the driver, pulling a matchbook from his pocket.

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TWO

ONE THOUSAND SEVEN HUNDRED AND TWO miles from Chicago by road, guest quarters were being prepared. They took the form of a single room. The room was following an unconventional design, specified by a thorough man after a great deal of careful thought. The design called for several unusual features.

The quarters were designed for a specific purpose, and for a specific guest. The nature of the purpose and the identity of the guest had dictated the unusual features. The construction was concentrated on the second floor of an existing building. A corner room had been selected. It had a series of large windows on the two outside walls. They faced south and east. The glass had been smashed out and replaced by heavy plywood sheeting nailed to the remaining windowframes. The plywood was painted white on the outside, to match the building's siding. On the inside, the plywood was left unfinished.

The corner room's ceiling was torn out. It was an

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old building, and the ceiling had been made of heavy plaster. It had been pulled down in a shower of choking dust. The room was now open to the rafters. The interior walling was torn off. The walls had been panelled in old pine, worn smooth with age and polish. That was all gone. The framing of the building and the heavy old tarpaper behind the exterior siding was exposed. The floorboards were pulled up. The dusty ceiling of the room below was visible under the heavy joists. The room was just a shell.

The old plaster from the ceiling and the boards from the walls and the floor had been thrown out through the windows before they were covered over with the plywood. The two men who had done the demolition work had shovelled all that debris into a large pile, and they had backed their truck up to the pile ready to cart the trash away. They were very anxious to leave the place looking neat and tidy. This was the first time they had worked for this particular employer, and there had been hints of more work to come. And looking around, they could see that there was plenty more needed doing. All in all, an optimistic situation. New contracts were hard to find, and this particular employer had shown no concern over price. The two men felt that to make a good first impression was very much in their long-term interest. They were hard at work loading their truck with every last plaster fragment when the employer himself stopped by.

'All done?' he asked.

The employer was a huge guy, freakishly bloated, with a high voice and two nickel-sized red spots burning on his pale cheeks. He moved lightly and quietly, like a guy a quarter his size. The overall

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effect was a guy people looked away from and answered quickly.

'Just clearing up,' the first guy said to him. 'Where do we dump this stuff?'

'I'll show you,' the employer said. 'You'll need to make two trips. Bring those boards separately, right?'

The second guy nodded. The floorboards were eighteen inches wide, from back when lumbermen had the pick of any tree they wanted. No way would they fit into the flatbed with the rest of the junk. They finished loading the plaster and their employer squeezed into their truck with them. He was such a big guy, it made for a tight fit. He pointed beyond the old building.

'Drive north,' he said, 'about a mile.'

The road led them straight out of town and then wound upward through some steep bends. The employer pointed to a place.

'In there,' he said, 'all the way in back, OK?'

He strolled away quietly and the two guys unloaded their truck. Drove it back south and heaved the old pine boards in. Followed the winding bends again and unloaded. They carried the boards inside and stacked them neatly. All the way in back of the dark space. Then the employer stepped out of the shadows. He had been waiting for them. He had something in his hand.

'We're all done,' the first guy said.

The employer nodded.

'You sure are,' he said.

His hand came up. He was holding a gun. A dull black automatic. He shot the first guy in the head. The crash of the bullet was deafening. Blood and bone and brain sprayed everywhere. The second guy

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froze in terror. Then he ran. He launched himself sideways in a desperate sprint for cover. The employer smiled. He liked it when they ran. He dropped his huge arm to a shallow angle. Fired and put a bullet through the back of the guy's knee. Smiled again. Now it was better. He liked it when they ran, but he liked it better when they were squirming on the floor. He stood and listened to the guy's yelping for a long moment. Then he strolled over quietly and took careful aim. Put a bullet through the other knee. He watched for a while, then he tired of the game. Shrugged and put a final bullet through the guy's head. Then he laid the gun on the ground and rolled the two bodies over and over until they were stacked neatly in line with the old floorboards.

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THREE

THEY HAD BEEN ON THE ROAD AN HOUR AND thirty-three minutes. Some urban crawling, then an acceleration to a steady cruise. Maybe sixty miles covered. But in the noisy darkness inside the panel truck Reacher had no idea which direction those sixty miles were taking him.

He was handcuffed to the young woman with the bad leg and within the first few minutes of their forced acquaintance they had worked out how to get as comfortable as they were ever going to get. They had crabbed around inside the truck until they were sitting sideways on the floor, legs straight out, propped against the big wheel well on the right, braced against the motion. The woman sat against the rear side and Reacher sat on the forward side. Their cuffed wrists lay together on the flat top of the metal bulge like they were lovers idling their time away in a café.

At first they hadn't spoken. They'd just sat for a long time in stunned silence. The immediate

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problem was the heat. It was the middle of the last day of June in the Midwest. They were shut into an enclosed metal space. There was no ventilation. Reacher figured the rush of air over the outside of the truck's body must be cooling it to an extent, but nowhere near enough.

He just sat there in the gloom and used the hot dead time thinking and planning like he was trained to do. Staying calm, staying relaxed, staying ready, not burning his energy away with useless speculation. Assessing and evaluating. The three guys had shown a measure of efficiency. No great talent, no real finesse, but no significant mistakes. The jumpy guy with the second Glock was the weakest component of the team, but the leader had covered for him pretty well. An efficient threesome. Not at all the worst he'd ever seen. But, at that point, he wasn't worrying. He'd been in worse situations and survived them. Much worse situations, and more than once. So he wasn't worrying yet.

Then he noticed something. He noticed that the woman wasn't worrying yet either. She was calm too. She was just sitting there, swaying, cuffed to his wrist, thinking and planning like maybe she was trained to do, as well. He glanced across at her in the gloom and saw her looking steadily at him. A quizzical stare, calm, in control, faintly superior, faintly disapproving. The confidence of youth. She met his gaze. Held it for a long moment. Then she stuck out her cuffed right hand, which jarred his left wrist, but it was an encouraging gesture. He reached around and shook her hand and they smiled brief ironic smiles together at their mutual formality.

'Holly Johnson,' she said.

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She was assessing him carefully. He could see her eyes travelling around his face. Then they flicked down to his clothing and back up to his face. She smiled again, briefly, like she had decided he merited some kind of courtesy.

'Nice to meet you,' she said.

He looked back at her. Looked at her face. She was a very good-looking woman. Maybe twenty-six, twenty-seven. He looked at her clothes. A line from an old song ran through his head: hundred dollar dresses, that I ain't paid for yet. He waited for the next line, but it didn't come. So he smiled back at her and nodded.

'Jack Reacher,' he said. 'Pleasure's all mine, Holly, believe me.'

It was difficult to speak, because the truck was cruising noisily. The sound of the engine was fighting with the roar from the road. Reacher would have been happy to sit quiet for a while, but Holly wasn't.

'I need to get rid of you,' she said.

A confident woman, well in control of herself. He made no reply. Just glanced at her and glanced away. The next line was: cold, cold-blooded woman. A dying fall, a sad poignant line. An old Memphis Slim song. But the line was not right for her. Not right at all. This was not a cold-blooded woman. He glanced over again and shrugged at her. She was staring at him. Impatient with his silence.

'You understand exactly what's happening?' she asked him.

He watched her face. Watched her eyes. She was staring straight at him. Astonishment on her face. She thought she was stuck in there with an idiot. She thought he didn't understand exactly what was happening.

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‘It’s pretty clear, right?’ he said. ‘From the evidence?’

‘What evidence?’ she said. ‘It was all over in a split second.’

‘Exactly,’ he said. ‘That’s all the evidence I need, right? Tells me more or less what I need to know.’

He stopped talking and started resting again. Next opportunity to get away would be the next time the truck stopped. Could be some hours away. He felt he could be in for a long day. Felt he should be prepared to conserve his resources.

‘So what do you need to know?’ the woman said.

Her eyes were steady on his.

‘You’ve been kidnapped,’ he said. ‘I’m here by accident.’

She was still looking at him. Still confident. Still thinking. Still not sure whether or not she was cuffed to an idiot.

‘It’s pretty clear, right?’ he said again. ‘It wasn’t me they were after.’

She made no reply. Just arched a fine eyebrow.

‘Nobody knew I was going to be there,’ he said. ‘I didn’t even know I was going to be there. Until I got there. But it was a well planned operation. Must have taken time to set up. Based on surveillance, right? Three guys, one in the car, two on the street. The car was parked exactly level. They had no idea where I was going to be. But obviously they knew for sure where you were going to be. So don’t be looking at me like I’m the idiot here. You’re the one made the big mistake.’

‘Mistake?’ the woman said.

‘You’re too regular in your habits,’ Reacher said. ‘They studied your movements, maybe two or three

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weeks, and you walked right into their arms. They weren't expecting anybody else to be there. That's clear, right? They only brought one set of handcuffs.'

He raised his wrist, which raised hers too, to make his point. The woman went quiet for a long moment. She was revising her opinion of him. Reacher rocked with the motion of the vehicle and smiled.

'And you should know better,' he said. 'You're a government agent of some sort, right? DEA, CIA, FBI, something like that, maybe a Chicago PD detective? New in the job, still fairly dedicated. And fairly wealthy. So somebody is either looking for a ransom, or you've already become a potential problem to somebody, even though you're new, and either way you should have taken more care of yourself.'

She looked across at him. Nodded, eyes wide in the gloom. Impressed.

'Evidence?' she asked.

He smiled at her again.

'Couple of things,' he said. 'Your dry-cleaning. My guess is every Monday lunchbreak you take last week's clothes in to get them cleaned and you pick up this week's clothes to wear. That means you must have about fifteen or twenty outfits. Looking at that thing you got on, you're not a cheap dresser. Call it four hundred bucks an outfit, you've got maybe eight grand tied up in things to wear. That's what I call moderately wealthy, and that's what I call too regular in your habits.'

She nodded slowly.

'OK,' she said. 'Why am I a government agent?'

'Easy enough,' he said. 'You had a Glock 17 shoved at you, you were bundled into a car, you

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were thrown in a truck, handcuffed to a complete stranger and you've got no idea where the hell they're taking you, or why. Any normal person would be falling apart over all that, screaming the place down. But not you. You're sitting there quite calmly, which suggests some kind of training, maybe some kind of familiarity with upsetting or dangerous situations. And maybe some kind of sure knowledge there'll be a bunch of people looking to get you back soon as they can.'

He stopped and she nodded for him to continue.

'Also, you had a gun in your bag,' he said. 'Something fairly heavy, maybe a .38, long barrel. If it was a private weapon, a dresser like you would choose something dainty, like a snub .22. But it was a big revolver, so you were issued with it. So you're some kind of an agent, maybe a cop.'

The woman nodded again, slowly.

'Why am I new in the job?' she asked.

'Your age,' Reacher said. 'What are you? Twenty-six?'

'Twenty-seven,' she said.

'That's young for a detective,' he said. 'College, a few years in uniform? Young for the FBI, DEA, CIA, too. So whatever you are, you're new at it.'

She shrugged.

'OK,' she said. 'Why am I fairly dedicated?'

Reacher pointed, left-handed, rattling their shared handcuff.

'Your injury,' he said. 'You're back to work after some kind of an accident, before you're really recovered. You're still using that crutch for your bad leg. Most people in your position would be staying home and drawing sick pay.'

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She smiled.

'I could be handicapped,' she said. 'Could have been born this way.'

Reacher shook his head in the gloom.

'That's a hospital crutch,' he said. 'They loaned it to you, short term, until you're over your injury. If it was a permanent thing, you'd have bought your own crutch. Probably you'd have bought a dozen. Sprayed them all different to match all your expensive outfits.'

She laughed. It was a pleasant sound above the drone and boom of the truck's engine and the roar of the road.

'Pretty good, Jack Reacher,' she said. 'I'm an FBI special agent. Since last fall. I just ripped up my cruciate ligaments playing soccer.'

'You play soccer?' Reacher said. 'Good for you, Holly Johnson. What kind of an FBI agent since last fall?'

She was quiet for a beat.

'Just an agent,' she said. 'One of many at the Chicago office.'

Reacher shook his head.

'Not just an agent,' he said. 'An agent who's doing something to somebody who maybe wants to retaliate. So who are you doing something to?'

She shook her head back at him.

'I can't discuss that,' she said. 'Not with civilians.'

He nodded. He was comfortable with that.

'OK,' he said.

'Any agent makes enemies,' she said.

'Naturally,' he replied.

'Me as much as anybody,' she said.

He glanced across at her. It was a curious remark. Defensive. The remark of a woman trained and

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eager and ready to go, but chained to a desk since last fall.

'Financial section?' he guessed.

She shook her head.

'I can't discuss it,' she said again.

'But you already made enemies,' he said.

She gave him a half-smile which died fast. Then she went quiet. She looked calm, but Reacher could feel in her wrist that she was worried for the first time. But she was hanging in there. And she was wrong.

'They're not out to kill you,' he said. 'They could have killed you in that waste ground. Why haul you away in this damn truck? And there's your crutch, too.'

'What about my crutch?' she said.

'Doesn't make any sense,' he said. 'Why would they toss your crutch in here if they're going to kill you? You're a hostage, Holly, that's what you are. You sure you don't know these guys? Never saw them before?'

'Never,' she said. 'I don't know who the hell they are, or what the hell they want from me.'

He stared at her. She sounded way too definite. She knew more than she was telling him. They went quiet in the noise. Rocked and bounced with the movement of the truck. Reacher stared into the gloom. He could feel Holly making decisions, next to him. She turned sideways again.

'I need to get you out of here,' she said again.

He glanced at her. Glanced away and grinned.

'Suits me, Holly,' he said. 'Sooner the better.'

'When will somebody miss you?' she asked.

That was a question he would have preferred not to answer. But she was looking hard at him, waiting. So he thought about it, and he told her the truth.

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'Never,' he said.

'Why not?' she asked. 'Who are you, Reacher?'

He looked across at her and shrugged.

'Nobody,' he said.

She carried on looking at him, quizzically. Maybe irritated.

'OK, what kind of nobody?' she asked.

He heard Memphis Slim in his head: got me working in a steel mill.

'I'm a doorman,' he said. 'At a club in Chicago.'

'Which club?' she asked.

'A blues place on the South Side,' he said. 'You probably don't know it.'

She looked at him and shook her head.

'A doorman?' she said. 'You're playing this pretty cool for a doorman.'

'Doormen deal with a lot of weird situations,' he said.

She looked like she wasn't convinced and he put his face down near his wristwatch to check the time. Two-thirty in the afternoon.

'And how long before somebody misses you?' he asked.

She looked at her own watch and made a face.

'Quite a while,' she said. 'I've got a case conference starting at five o'clock this afternoon. Nothing before then. Two and a half hours before anybody even knows I'm gone.'

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FOUR

RIGHT INSIDE THE SHELL OF THE SECOND-floor room, a second shell was taking shape. It was being built from brand-new softwood two-by-fours, nailed together in the conventional way, looking like a new room growing right there inside the old room. But the new room was going to be about a foot smaller in every dimension than the old room had been. A foot shorter in length, a foot narrower in width, and a foot shorter in height.

The new floor joists were going to be raised a foot off the old joists with twelve-inch lengths of the new softwood. The new lengths looked like a forest of short stilts, ready to hold the new floor up. More short lengths were ready to hold the new framing a foot away from the old framing all the way around the sides and the ends. The new framing had the bright yellowness of new wood. It gleamed against the smoky honey colour of the old framing. The old framing looked like an ancient skeleton which was suddenly growing a new skeleton right inside itself.

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Three men were building the new shell. They were stepping from joist to joist with practised skill. They looked like men who had built things before. And they were working fast. Their contract demanded they finish on time. The employer had been explicit about it. Some kind of a rush job. The three carpenters were not complaining about that. The employer had accepted their first bid. It had been an inflated bid, with a large horse-trading margin built in. But the guy had not eaten into that margin. He had not negotiated at all. He had just nodded and told them to start work as soon as the wrecking crew had finished. Work was hard to find, and employers who accepted your first price were even harder to find. So the three men were happy to work hard, work fast, and work late. They were anxious to make a good first impression. Looking around, they could see the potential for a lot more employment.

So they were giving it their best shot. They ran up and down the stairs with tools and fresh lumber. They worked by eye, marking cut-lines in the wood with their thumbnails, using their nail guns and their saws until they ran hot. But they paused frequently to measure the gap between the old framing and the new. The employer had made it clear that dimension was critical. The old framing was six inches deep. The new framing was four. The gap was twelve inches.

'Six and four and twelve,' one guy said. 'Twenty-two inches total.'

'OK?' the second guy asked the crew chief.

'Ideal,' the crew chief said. 'Exactly what he told us.'

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FIVE

Holly Johnson's five o'clock case conference was allocated to the Chicago FBI office's third-floor meeting room. This was a large room, better than forty feet by twenty, and it was more or less filled by a long polished table flanked by thirty chairs, fifteen on each side. The chairs were substantial and leather and the table was made of fine hardwood, but any tendency for the place to look like a corporate boardroom was defused by the scruffy government wallcovering and the cheap carpet. There were ninety square yards of carpet on the floor and the whole ninety together had probably cost less than just one of the chairs.

Five o'clock in the summer, the afternoon sun streamed in through the wall of windows and gave the people arriving in the room a choice. If they sat facing the windows, they got the sun in their eyes and squinted through the meeting and ended up with a blinding headache. And the sun overpowered the air conditioning, so if they sat backs to the windows,

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they got heated up to a point where it got uncomfortable and they started worrying about whether their deodorant was still OK at five o'clock in the afternoon. A tough choice, but the top option was to avoid the headache and take the risk of heating up. So the early attenders took the seats on the window side.

First into the room was the FBI lawyer with special responsibility for financial crime. He stood for a moment and made a judgement about the likely duration of the meeting. Maybe forty-five minutes, he thought, knowing Holly, so he turned and tried to assess which seat might get the benefit of the shade from the slim pillar splitting the wall of windows into two. The bar of shadow was lying to the left of the third chair in the row, and he knew it would inch toward the head of the table as time passed. So he spilled his pile of folders onto the table in front of the second chair and shrugged his jacket off and claimed the place by dropping it onto the chair. Then he turned again and strolled to the credenza at the end of the room for a cup of coffee from the filter machine.

Next in were two agents working on cases that might be tied in to the mess that Holly Johnson was dealing with. They nodded to the lawyer and saw the place he'd claimed. They knew there was no point in choosing between the other fourteen chairs by the window. They were all going to get equally hot. So they just dumped their portfolios at the nearest two places and lined up for coffee.

'She not here yet?' one of them said to the lawyer.

'Haven't seen her all day,' the lawyer said.

'Your loss, right?' the other guy said.

Holly Johnson was a new agent, but talented, and that was making her popular. In the past the Bureau

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would have taken no pleasure at all in busting the sort of businessmen that Holly was employed to chase down, but times had changed and the Chicago office had gotten quite a taste for it. The businessmen now looked like scumbags, not solid citizens, and the agents were sick and tired of looking at them as they rode the commuter trains home. The agents would be getting off the train miles before the bankers and the stockbrokers were anywhere near their expensive suburbs. They would be thinking about second mortgages and even second jobs, and they'd be thinking about the years of private-detective work they were going to have to put in to boost up the mean government pension. And the executives would be sitting there with smug smiles. So when one or two of them started to take a fall, the Bureau was happy enough about it. When the ones and twos turned into tens and twenties, and then hundreds, it became a blood sport.

The only drawback was that it was hard work. Probably more difficult to nail than anything else. That was where Holly Johnson's arrival had made things easier. She had the talent. She could look at a balance sheet and just know if anything was wrong with it. It was like she could smell it. She'd sit at her desk and look at the papers, cock her head slightly to one side, and think. Sometimes she'd think for hours, but when she stopped thinking, she'd know what the hell was going on. Then she'd explain it all in the case conference. She'd make it all sound easy and logical, like there was no way anybody could be in any kind of doubt about it. She was a woman who made progress. She was a woman who made her fellow agents feel better on those commuter trains at night. That's what was making her popular.

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Fourth person into the third-floor meeting room was the agent assigned to help Holly out with the fetching and carrying until she recovered from her soccer injury. His name was Milosevic. A slight frame, a slight West Coast accent. Less than forty, casually dressed in expensive designer khaki, gold at his neck and on his wrist. He was also a new arrival, recently transferred in to the Chicago office, because that was where the Bureau found it needed its financial people. He joined the line for coffee and looked around the room.

'She's late?' he said.

The lawyer shrugged at him and Milosevic shrugged back. He liked Holly Johnson. He had worked with her five weeks, since the accident on the soccer field, and he had enjoyed every minute of it.

'She's not usually late for anything,' he said.

Fifth person in was Brogan, Holly's section head. Irish, from Boston via California. The young side of middle age. Dark hair, red Irish face. A tough guy, handsomely dressed in an expensive silk jacket, ambitious. He'd come to Chicago the same time as Milosevic, and he was pissed it wasn't New York. He was looking for the advancement he was sure he deserved. There was a theory that Holly's arrival in his section was enhancing his chances of getting it.

'She not here yet?' he said.

The other four shrugged at him.

'I'll kick her ass,' Brogan said.

Holly had been a stock analyst on Wall Street before applying to join the FBI. Nobody was clear why she'd made the change. She had some kind of exalted connections, and some kind of an illustrious

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father, and the easy guess was she wanted to impress him somehow. Nobody knew for sure whether the old guy was impressed or not, but the feeling was he damn well ought to be. Holly had been one of ten thousand applicants in her year, and she'd passed right at the top of the four hundred who made it. She'd creamed the recruitment criteria. The Bureau had been looking for college graduates in law or accountancy, or else graduates in flimsier disciplines who'd then worked somewhere for three years at least. Holly had qualified in every way. She had an accountancy degree from Yale, and a Master's from Harvard, and three years on Wall Street on top of all that. She'd blitzed the intelligence tests and the aptitude assessments. She'd charmed the three serving agents who'd grilled her at her main interview.

She'd sailed through the background checks, which was understandable on account of her connections, and she'd been sent to the FBI Academy at Quantico. Then she'd really started to get serious. She was fit and strong, she learned to shoot, she murdered the leadership reaction course, she scored outstanding in the simulated shootouts in Hogan's Alley. But her major success was her attitude. She did two things at once. First she bought into the whole Bureau ethic in the biggest way possible. It was totally clear to everybody that here was a woman who was going to live and die for the FBI. But second, she did it in a way which avoided the slightest trace of bullshit. She tinged her attitude with a gentle mocking humour which saved people from hating her. It made them love her instead. There was no doubt the Bureau had signed a major

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new asset. They sent her to Chicago and sat back to reap the benefits.

Last into the third-floor conference room was a bunch of men who came in together. Thirteen agents and the agent-in-charge, McGrath. The thirteen agents were clustered around their boss, who was conducting a sort of rolling policy review as he walked. The thirteen agents were hanging onto every word. McGrath had every advantage in the book. He was a man who'd been to the top, and then come back down again into the field. He'd spent three years in the Hoover Building as an assistant director of the FBI, and then he'd applied for a demotion and a pay cut to take him back to a Field Office. The decision had cost him ten thousand dollars a year in income, but it had bought him back his sanity, and it had bought him undying respect and blind affection from the agents he worked with.

An agent-in-charge in a Field Office like Chicago is like the captain on a great warship. Theoretically there are people above him, but they're all a couple of thousand miles away in Washington. They're theoretical. The agent-in-charge is real. He runs his command like the hand of God. That's how the Chicago office looked at McGrath. He did nothing to undermine the feeling. He was remote, but he was approachable. He was private, but he made his people feel he'd do anything at all for them. He was a short, stocky man, burning with energy, the sort of tireless guy who radiates total confidence. The sort of guy who makes a crew better just by leading it. His first name was Paul, but he was called Mack, like the truck.

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He let his thirteen agents sit down, ten of them backs to the window and three of them with the sun in their eyes. Then he hauled a chair around and stuck it at the head of the table ready for Holly. He walked down to the other end and hauled another chair around for himself. Sat sideways on to the sun. Started getting worried.

'Where is she?' he said. 'Brogan?'

The section head shrugged, palms up.

'She should be here, far as I know,' he said.

'She leave a message with anybody?' McGrath asked. 'Milosevic?'

Milosevic and the other fifteen agents and the Bureau lawyer all shrugged and shook their heads. McGrath started worrying more. People have a pattern, a rhythm, like a behavioural fingerprint. Holly was only a minute or two late, but that was so far from normal that it was setting the bells ringing. In eight months he had never known her be late. It had never happened. Other people could be five minutes late into the meeting room and it would seem normal. Because of their pattern. But not Holly. At three minutes past five in the afternoon, McGrath stared at her empty chair and knew there was a problem. He stood up again in the quiet room and walked to the credenza on the opposite wall. There was a phone next to the coffee machine. He picked it up and dialled his office.

'Holly Johnson call in?' he asked his secretary.

'No, Mack,' she said.

So he dabbed the cradle and dialled the reception counter, two floors below.

'Any messages from Holly Johnson?' he asked the agent at the door.

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'No, chief,' the agent said. 'Haven't seen her.'

He hit the button again and called the main switchboard.

'Holly Johnson call in?' he asked.

'No, sir,' the switchboard operator said.

He held the phone and gestured for pen and paper. Then he spoke to the switchboard again.

'Give me her pager number,' he said. 'And her cellphone, will you?'

The earpiece crackled and he scrawled down the numbers. Cut the switchboard off and dialled Holly's pager. Just got a long low tone telling him the pager was switched off. Then he tried the cellphone number. He got an electronic bleep and a recorded message of a woman telling him the phone he was dialling was unreachable. He hung up and looked around the room. It was ten after five, Monday afternoon.

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SIX

Six-thirty on Reacher's watch, the motion inside the truck changed. Six hours and four minutes they'd cruised steadily, maybe fifty-five or sixty miles an hour, while the heat peaked and fell away. He'd sat, hot and rocking and bouncing in the dark with the wheel well between him and Holly Johnson, ticking off the distance against a map inside his head. He figured they'd been taken maybe three hundred and ninety miles. But he didn't know which direction they were headed. If they were going east, they would be right through Indiana and just about out of Ohio by now, maybe just entering Pennsylvania or West Virginia. South, they would be out of Illinois, into Missouri or Kentucky, maybe even into Tennessee if he'd underestimated their speed. West, they'd be hauling their way across Iowa. They might have looped around the bottom of the lake and headed north up through Michigan. Or straight out northwest, in which case they could be up near Minneapolis.

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But they'd gotten somewhere, because the truck was slowing. Then there was a lurch to the right, like a pull off a highway. There was gear noise and thumping over broken pavement. Cornering forces slammed them around. Holly's crutch slid and rattled side to side across the ridged metal floor. The truck whined up grades and down slopes, paused at invisible road junctions, accelerated, braked hard, turned a tight left, and then drove slowly down a straight lumpy surface for a quarter hour.

'Farming country somewhere,' Reacher said.

'Obviously,' Holly said. 'But where?'

Reacher just shrugged at her in the gloom. The truck slowed almost to a stop and turned a tight right. The road surface got worse. The truck bounced forward maybe a hundred and fifty yards and stopped. There was the sound of the passenger door opening up in front. The engine was still running. The passenger door slammed shut. Reacher heard a big door opening and the truck moved slowly forward. The engine noise boomed against metal walls. Reacher heard the door noise again and the engine noise echoed louder. Then it shut down and died away into stillness.

'We're in some sort of a barn,' Reacher said. 'With the door closed.'

Holly nodded impatiently.

'I know that,' she said. 'A cow barn. I can smell it.'

Reacher could hear muffled conversation outside the truck. Footsteps walking around to the rear doors. A key going into the lock. The handle turning. A blinding flood of light as the door opened. Reacher blinked against the sudden electric brightness and

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stared out across Holly at three men, two Glocks and a shotgun.

'Out,' the leader said.

They struggled out, handcuffed together. Not easy. They were stiff and sore and cramped from bracing themselves against the wheel well for six solid hours. Holly's knee had gone altogether. Reacher started back for her crutch.

'Leave it there, asshole,' the leader said.

The guy sounded tired and irritable. Reacher gave him a steady look and shrugged. Holly stiffened and tried her weight on her leg. Gasped in pain and gave it up. Glanced impersonally at Reacher like he was some kind of a tree and stretched around with her free left hand to hold on tight around his neck. It was the only way she could stay upright.

'Excuse me, please,' she muttered.

The leader gestured with his Glock over to his left. They were in a large cow barn. No cows, but they hadn't been long absent, judging by the odour. The truck was parked in a wide central aisle. Either side were cow stalls, roomy, made up from galvanized-steel piping efficiently welded together. Reacher twisted and held Holly's waist and the two of them hopped and staggered over to the stall the guy with the Glock was pointing at. Holly seized a railing and held on, embarrassed.

'Excuse me,' she muttered again.

Reacher nodded and waited. The driver with the shotgun covered them and the leader walked away. He heaved the big door open and stepped through. Reacher caught a glimpse of darkening sky. Cloudy. No clue at all to their location.

The leader was gone five minutes. There was silence in the barn. The other two guys stood still,

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weapons out and ready. The jumpy guy with the Glock was staring at Reacher's face. The driver with the shotgun was staring at Holly's breasts. Smiling a half-smile. Nobody spoke. Then the leader stepped back in. He was carrying a second pair of handcuffs and two lengths of heavy chain.

'You're making a big mistake here,' Holly said to him. 'I'm an FBI agent.'

'I know that, bitch,' the guy said. 'Now be quiet.'

'You're committing a serious crime,' Holly said.

'I know that, bitch,' the guy said again. 'And I told you to be quiet. Another word out of you, I'll shoot this guy in the head. Then you can spend the night with a corpse chained to your wrist, OK?'

He waited until she nodded silently. Then the driver with the shotgun took up position behind them and the leader unlocked their cuff and freed their wrists. He looped one of the chains around the stall railing and locked the ends into the spare half of the cuff dangling from Reacher's left arm. Pulled it and rattled it to check it was secure. Then he dragged Holly two stalls away and used the new cuffs and the second length of chain to lock her to the railing, twenty feet from Reacher. Her knee gave way and she fell heavily with a gasp of pain onto the dirty straw. The leader ignored her. Just walked back to where Reacher was chained up. Stood right in front of him.

'So who the hell are you, asshole?' he said.

Reacher didn't reply. He knew the keys to both cuffs were in this guy's pocket. He knew it would take him about a second and a half to snap his neck with the loop of chain hanging off his wrist. But the other two guys were out of reach. One Glock, one shotgun, too far away to grab before he'd unlocked

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himself, too near to get a chance to do that. He was dealing with a reasonably efficient set of opponents. So he just shrugged and looked at the straw at his feet. It was clogged with dung.

'I asked you a damn question,' the guy said.

Reacher looked at him. In the corner of his eye he saw the jumpy guy ratchet his Glock upward a degree or two.

'I asked you a question, asshole,' the leader said again, quietly.

The jumpy guy's Glock was jutting forward. Then it was straight out, shoulder-high. Aimed right at Reacher's head. The muzzle was trembling through a small jerky circle, but probably not trembling enough to make the guy miss. Not from that sort of a close distance. Reacher looked from one guy to the other. The guy with the shotgun tore his attention away from Holly's breasts. He raised the weapon to his hip. Pointed it in Reacher's direction. It was an Ithaca 37. Twelve-bore. The five-shot version with the pistol grip and no shoulder stock. The guy racked a round into the chamber. The crunch-crunch of the mechanism was loud in the barn. It echoed off the metal walls. Died into silence. Reacher saw the trigger move through the first eighth-inch of its short travel.

'Name?' the leader asked.

The shotgun trigger tightened another eighth. If it fired on that trajectory, Reacher was going to lose both his legs and most of his stomach.

'Name?' the leader asked for the second time.

It was a twelve-bore, wouldn't kill him outright, but he'd bleed to death in the dirty straw. Femoral artery gone, about a minute, maybe a minute and a

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half. In those circumstances, no real reason to make a big deal out of giving this guy a name.

'Jack Reacher,' he said.

The leader nodded in satisfaction, like he'd achieved a victory.

'You know this bitch?' he asked.

Reacher glanced across at Holly.

'Better than I know some people,' he said. 'I just spent six hours handcuffed to her.'

'You some kind of a wiseguy, asshole?' the leader asked.

Reacher shook his head.

'Innocent passer-by,' he said. 'I never saw her before.'

'You with the Bureau?' the guy asked.

Reacher shook his head again.

'I'm a doorman,' he said. 'Club back in Chicago.'

'You sure, asshole?' the guy said.

Reacher nodded.

'I'm sure,' he said. 'I'm a wise enough guy that I can recall what I do for a living, one day to the next.'

There was silence for a long moment. Tension. Then the jumpy guy with the Glock came out of his shooting stance. The driver with the shotgun swung his weapon down toward the straw on the floor. He turned his head and went back to staring at Holly's breasts. The leader nodded at Reacher.

'OK, asshole,' he said. 'You behave yourself, you stay alive for now. Same for the bitch. Nothing's going to happen to anybody. Not just yet.'

The three men regrouped in the centre aisle and walked out of the barn. Before they locked the door, Reacher saw the sky again, briefly. Darker. Still

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cloudy. No stars. No clues. He tested the chain. It was securely fastened to the handcuff at one end and the railing at the other. Maybe seven feet long. He could hear Holly doing the same experiment. Tightening her chain and scoping out the radius it gave her to move through.

'Would you mind looking away?' she called across.

'Why?' he called back.

There was a short silence. Then a sigh. Part embarrassed, part exasperated.

'Do you really need to ask?' she called. 'We were in that truck six hours, and it didn't have a bathroom, did it?'

'You going in the next stall?' he asked.

'Obviously,' she said.

'OK,' he said. 'You go right and I'll go left. I won't look if you won't.'

The three men came back to the barn within an hour with food. Some kind of a beef stew in a metal mess tin, one for each of them. Mostly rare steak chunks and a lot of hard carrots. Whoever these guys were, cooking was not their major talent. Reacher was clear on that. They handed out an enamel mug of weak coffee, one for each of them. Then they got in the truck. Started it up and backed it out of the barn. Turned the bright lights off. Reacher caught a glimpse of dim emptiness outside. Then they pulled the big door shut and locked it. Left their prisoners in the dark and the quiet.

'Gas station,' Holly called from twenty feet away. 'They're filling up for the rest of the ride. Can't do it with us inside. They figure we'd be banging on the side and shouting out for help.'

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Reacher nodded and finished his coffee. Sucked the fork from the stew clean. Bent one of the prongs right out and put a little kink into the end with pressure from his thumbnail. It made a little hook. He used it to pick the lock on his handcuff. Took him eighteen seconds, beginning to end. He dropped the cuff and the chain in the straw and walked over to Holly. Bent down and unlocked her wrist. Twelve seconds. Helped her to her feet.

'Doorman, right?' she said.

'Right,' he said. 'Let's take a look around.'

'I can't walk,' she said. 'My crutch is in the damn truck.'

Reacher nodded. She stayed in her stall, clinging to the railing. He scouted around the big empty barn. It was a sturdy metal structure, built throughout with the same flecked, galvanized metal as the stall railings. The big door was locked from the outside. Probably a steel bar padlocked into place. No problem if he could get at the padlock, but he was inside and the padlock was outside.

The walls met the floor with a right-angle flange bolted firmly into the concrete. The walls themselves were horizontal metal panels maybe thirty feet long, maybe four feet tall. They were joined together with more right-angle flanges bolted together. Each flange gave a lip about six inches deep. Like a giant stepladder with the treads four feet apart.

He climbed the wall, hauling himself quickly upward, flange to flange, four feet at a time. The way out of the barn was right there at the top of the wall, seven sections up, twenty-eight feet off the ground. There was a ventilation slot between the top of the wall and the overhanging slope of the metal

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roof. About eighteen inches high. A person could roll horizontally through the gap like an old-fashioned high-jumper, hang down outside and drop twenty feet to the ground below.

He could do that, but Holly Johnson couldn't. She couldn't even walk over to the wall. She couldn't climb it and she sure as hell couldn't hang down outside and drop twenty feet onto a set of wrecked cruciate ligaments.

'Get going,' she called up to him. 'Get out of here, right now.'

He ignored her and peered out through the slot into the darkness. The overhanging eaves gave him a low horizon. Empty country as far as the eye could see. He climbed down and went up the other three walls in turn. The second side gave out onto country just as empty as the first. The third had a view of a farmhouse. White shingles. Lights in two windows. The fourth side of the barn looked straight up the farm track. About a hundred and fifty yards to a featureless road. Emptiness beyond. In the far distance, a single set of headlight beams. Flicking and bouncing. Widely spaced. Growing larger. Getting nearer. The truck, coming back.

'Can you see where we are?' Holly called up to him.

'No idea,' Reacher called back. 'Farming country somewhere. Could be anywhere. Where do they have cows like this? And fields and stuff?'

'Is it hilly out there?' Holly called. 'Or flat?'

'Can't tell,' Reacher said. 'Too dark. Maybe a little hilly.'

'Could be Pennsylvania,' Holly said. 'They have hills and cows there.'

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Reacher climbed down the fourth wall and walked back to her stall.

'Get out of here, for Christ's sake,' she said to him. 'Raise the alarm.'

He shook his head. He heard the diesel slowing to turn into the track.

'That may not be the best option,' he said.

She stared at him.

'Who the hell gave you an option?' she said. 'I'm ordering you. You're a civilian and I'm FBI and I'm ordering you to get yourself to safety right now.'

Reacher just shrugged and stood there.

'I'm ordering you, OK?' Holly said again. 'You going to obey me?'

Reacher shook his head again.

'No,' he said.

She glared at him. Then the truck was back. They heard the roar of the diesel and the groan of the springs on the rough track outside. Reacher locked Holly's cuff and ran back to his stall. They heard the truck door slam and footsteps on the concrete. Reacher chained his wrist to the railing and bent the fork back into shape. When the barn door opened and the light came on, he was sitting quietly on the straw.

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