A

REACHER

THRILLER

LEE CHILD

THE WORLD'S NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

AND ANDREW CHILD



IN TOO DEEP

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The Midnight Line
Past Tense
Blue Moon
The Sentinel
Better Off Dead
No Plan B
The Secret
In Too Deep

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For more information see www.jackreacher.com

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:
Driver's licence; credit cards; federal benefits; tax returns; dependants

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and
Andrew Child



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For Richard Pine – ten years and counting . . .

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ONE

The pain hit first, then the sound followed, the way lightning beats thunder in a storm.

The pain was in Jack Reacher's right wrist. It was sharp and sudden and hot, and it was more than strong enough to eclipse the dull throbbing ache that filled his head. The sound was a single, round, lingering note. Metal on metal. Distinct, but inconsequential next to the ringing in his ears.

The pain and the sound came after he tried to move his arm. That was all Reacher knew. He had been asleep – no, somewhere deeper and darker than sleep – and when he floated to the surface he was rocked by waves of dizziness. He was lying on his back. Not in a bed. Not on the ground. On something smooth and artificial. And cold. The chill was seeping through his shirt and into his shoulder blades and down his spine. A sharp ridge was cutting into his calves. His head felt like it was being crushed against the hard surface. So he had drawn his right elbow back, ready to lever himself

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up. Or he had tried to. And it wasn't just the discomfort that had stopped him. Something was fastened around his wrist, preventing it from moving more than a couple of inches. Something cinched in tight. It bit into his skin, but that wasn't what hurt the most. It was one of the bones in his forearm. Maybe more than one. Some kind of major damage had been done beneath the skin. That was clear.

Reacher tried to move his left arm. There was no pain, but that wrist was also restrained by something sharp. So was his left ankle. So was his right. He couldn't see what he was attached to, or what he was bound with, because there was no light. Not the slightest glimmer. The space he was in was completely dark. There was no noise, now that the metallic *clink* had died away. And no movement of the air. Reacher had no idea where he was. No idea how he had gotten there. But someone must have brought him. And shackled him. And whoever had done those things was going to rue the day. That was for damn sure.

The same time Reacher was slipping back into oblivion a man was standing at the side of the road, five miles away to the north, watching for smoke or flames. He had used plenty of names over the years but at that moment he was calling himself *Ivan Vidic*. He was heavyset and a little stooped, which made him look shorter than the six feet two he claimed on his driver's licence, and his bald head was all sharp angles and ridges, like it had been carved from stone by someone

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without much skill. His car was parked by the second of a set of three switchbacks. It was a notorious spot for accidents. The turns were sharp and close together and poorly lit. The road was separated from a steep drop by a wide shoulder and a rusty safety rail and the camber coming off the apex of the first bend was way out of whack. Something to do with ancient geological deposits deteriorating and undermining the layers of bedrock deep down, way below the surface. Nothing that couldn't be fixed, given the right amount of money. But money was scarce in those parts so the local Department of Roads and Bridges had just thrown up a couple of warning signs. They didn't help to keep vehicles from crashing, but the county lawyers said they might keep the department from getting sued in the aftermath.

An SUV had crashed there, a little earlier that day. A Lincoln Navigator. It had left the road, clipped a tree, rolled three times, and come to rest back on its wheels. Its roof was caved in. Its bonnet was dented. Its doors were bent and twisted and all its windows were starred and opaque. Vidic had watched the accident unfold. He'd had no alternative because he had been following, driving fast and sticking close behind. He had mashed his brakes the moment the Lincoln lost control and had skidded to a stop while the other vehicle was still moving. Then he had jumped out and crept closer to the wreck, sniffing the air for gasoline fumes and straining his ears for any hint of fuel dripping from a fractured line or cracked tank.

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The Lincoln had wound up in bad shape, but its driver had come out even worse. He was dead. His neck was broken. There was no doubt about that. Vidic had smiled when he saw what had happened. It wasn't the outcome he'd expected. But it was one he could use. More than that, it was like the answer to a prayer. An echo from his childhood floated into his head: *God helps those who help themselves*. His grin grew wider, then he turned his attention to the passenger. At first Vidic thought the guy was bound for the morgue, too, but when he checked he felt a pulse. So he adjusted his diagnosis: the guy just had a concussion and a broken wrist, judging by the sharp edge of the bone he could see jutting out beneath his skin. The guy's size had saved him. He looked huge. Comfortably six feet five, even slumped against the door. Easily 250 pounds. And all bone and muscle. No fat.

Vidic had called a couple of guys for help and while he waited for them to arrive he had hauled the driver and the passenger out of the wreckage. That wasn't easy. The driver's head was flopping around all over the place and his body was slack and soft and difficult to grip. The passenger was worse because of his size and shape. His arms were bigger than the driver's legs. His wrists were too broad for Vidic to wrap his fingers around. Vidic was out of breath and sweating despite the cool air when he heard wheels on the asphalt behind him, and he only just had time to finish rifling through the passenger's pockets and transferring the few possessions he found there to his own.

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The new guys had shown up in a Ford pickup truck, which turned out to be a practical choice. There was no way they'd have been able to manhandle the passenger's unconscious body onto the back seat of a regular car. He was too big. Too awkward. They wouldn't have had enough room to manoeuvre. So the three of them heaved him up onto the load bed and tossed the driver's corpse in next to him.

The guy who had been driving the pickup was called *Darren Fletcher.* He was a couple of inches taller than Vidic but slimmer and maybe twenty pounds lighter. He slammed the tailgate into place then turned to Vidic and said, 'You saw it happen?'

Vidic nodded.

'When you called and said it was Gibson's Lincoln I was hoping you were wrong.'

'Have you ever known me to be wrong?'

Fletcher grunted and said, 'Walk me through it.'

Vidic shrugged. 'Gibson was driving pretty slow. Pretty careful. I caught up to him by chance. I was heading back to base. Guess he was, too. He kept going the same speed for maybe a mile. His usual Steady Eddy self. Then he must have seen my car. Seen it, but not realized it was mine because all of a sudden he tried to lose me. He hit the gas, but at exactly the wrong time.' Vidic nodded at the wrecked vehicle. 'As you can see. Exhibit A.'

'Did you flash your lights? Honk your horn? Make it look like you were up for a race?'

'No. Why would I? I'm not sixteen.'

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‘So why did he try to lose you? Or whoever he thought you were?’

Vidic shrugged again. ‘Paranoia is my guess. It’s in the air. It started when O’Connell died and it’s been worse since Bowery disappeared.’

Fletcher was silent for a moment, then he said, ‘The big guy who was riding with Gibson. Who is he?’

‘No idea.’

‘He doesn’t have ID?’

‘No.’

‘Any luggage? A backpack, at least?’

‘Just this.’ Vidic took a pistol from his waistband and handed it to Fletcher. ‘A Glock 17. The FBI’s weapon of choice. Make of that what you will.’

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TWO

Fletcher and the other guy had taken off in the Ford and left Vidic to deal with the Lincoln. He had checked the glove box and the trunk for anything containing personal information then turned his attention to the driver's seat. He had been ready to clean up any blood that had been spilled, but there wasn't any. Gibson's skin must not have been pierced in the accident. Or at least not while his heart was still beating. Vidic had smiled. That made his next task easier. He glanced across to the passenger side and noted the position on the doorframe where the impact with the big guy's head had left a bloodstain. He took a knife from his pocket, made a nick on the pad of his left thumb and squeezed a few drops of blood onto the frame of the driver's door in a corresponding spot, only around three inches lower. He grabbed the steering wheel. The gearshift. He adjusted the rearview mirror. Prodded a bunch of climate control and entertainment

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system buttons. He took a cellphone from his pocket, double-checked that it was the right one, and jammed it down the side of the seat. Then he put his foot on the brake and turned the key. Nothing happened. Some kind of safety system must have shut off the ignition when the vehicle hit the tree. And isolated the fuel supply, with any luck, Vidic thought. He used his knife to pry off the cover from the gearshift release, selected Neutral, then opened the door and jumped down. He climbed into his own car, fired it up, pulled in behind the Lincoln and gave it a gentle nudge. It rolled a couple of yards and ground to a halt. Vidic leaned a little harder on the gas. The Lincoln rolled faster. It kept going this time and picked up more speed. Enough to help it bust through the safety rail and disappear into the darkness on the other side.

Vidic had stopped his car and hurried to the gap the Lincoln had made in the rail. He could see the vehicle fifty feet below, on its roof, three wheels still turning. He had stood and watched. There was no explosion. No sign of fire. He waited twenty minutes, to be sure. Then his remaining cellphone began to ring. The call was from a number he recognized. He hit the answer button and said, 'Hey, Paris. What's up?'

A woman's voice came on the line. It was low and curt and a little shaky around the edges. She said, 'Is it true? Gibson's dead?'

'He is. Yes. Another one bit the dust.'

'It was an accident?'

Vidic didn't answer.

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Paris said, ‘I heard he crashed his car. Broke his neck.’

‘You heard right.’

‘You saw it happen?’

‘The whole thing.’

‘Someone was with him?’

‘A stranger.’

‘What kind of stranger?’

‘Just some nobody hitching a ride. Nothing to worry about.’

‘You sure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Because I can’t help thinking – Bowery disappears then a mystery guy shows up and just happens to hitch a ride with one of our crew?’

‘Sometimes coincidences happen.’

‘Maybe. Or maybe Bowery grew a conscience. Ratted us out.’

‘He didn’t rat us out. That’s not his style.’

‘Then where is he?’

‘He stiffed us, is my guess. Made the exchange and ran off with the cash.’

‘Why would he do that? It’s pocket change next to what we’ve got coming. He knows what’s at stake. He’d be nuts to run now. Unless he knows there won’t be another payday. And how would he know that? Unless he made sure of it?’

‘Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t have ratted us out. He doesn’t have anything on us.’

‘He knows about the report.’

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'He doesn't have a copy.'

'He doesn't need a copy. He knows what it's about. Broadly speaking. He knows where I got it. Either one of those things would be enough to get every agent in the lower forty-eight crawling up our asses before we could blink.'

'All right. Take a breath. Trust me. What happened to Gibson had nothing to do with Bowery. And nothing to do with the stranger.'

'What *happened to* Gibson? So it wasn't an accident.'

Vidic didn't respond.

'Gibson was a good driver. He knew that road. He wouldn't just crash his car for no reason. So the crash wasn't an accident, was it? Tell me straight.'

'It was. And it wasn't.'

'That's your idea of *straight*?'

'Listen. I found something out about Gibson. Earlier today.'

'Found out what?'

'I can't say. Not on the phone. But it has implications.'

'What kind of implications?'

'First and foremost, we need to shift up our timetable.'

'By how much?'

'We have forty-eight hours, maximum. Then we need to be gone. Like we never existed.'

'That's not possible.'

'It is. Grab what you need from the house. Just the essentials. Not so much as to be suspicious. We have the one physical job to take care of. Then we can cash in on the report later.'

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‘The job’s not happening for five days. It can’t. We have to wait for the final delivery.’

‘No. We have to take what’s there now. Eighty per cent of something is better than a hundred per cent of nothing. I’ll talk to Fletcher. Get him to move up the schedule.’

‘And if he won’t?’

‘We’ll walk.’

‘I don’t want to walk. I set the job up. Found the opportunity. I’m invested.’

‘I get that. But, end of the day, that job’s a luxury. It’s not make or break. We have to stay focused. Think about the future. Our new lives. Not what we’re leaving behind.’

Paris didn’t reply.

‘That just leaves one loose end.’ Vidic glanced down at the wrecked Lincoln. He thought about the two men he’d dragged out of it. Gibson. And the giant stranger. One dead. One alive. For now, anyway. He raised the phone back to his ear and said, ‘I’m going to need a bunch of phosphorus. Can you bring some to the house?’

‘I can try. How much?’

‘Enough to burn a body. Completely. Prints. Teeth. DNA. The full nine yards.’

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THREE

Reacher was again woken by a sound. A door opening, this time. His eyes were closed but he could sense light. Fairly dim. Then much brighter. He heard footsteps approaching. One set. They came close, then stopped. Reacher opened his eyes, slowly, against the glare. The dizziness had receded a little but everything looked pale and washed-out, like a watercolour made by a beginner who didn't throw enough paint into the mix. A man was standing by Reacher's side. He was wearing jeans and a grey T-shirt. He was slim, like a runner, and maybe six feet four. His fists were clenched and Reacher thought he looked angry, maybe even scared, but was trying to hide it.

The man said, 'I'm Darren Fletcher. Who are you?'

Reacher ignored him. If they'd searched him, Fletcher would already know his name. And if Fletcher hadn't searched him, he wasn't worth wasting breath on. Reacher concentrated on his surroundings instead.

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He saw that the restraints on his wrists and ankles were handcuffs, and that he was secured to a rectangular steel table. The floor was covered with white tiles and the walls were lined with steel shelves. The place was some kind of food storage or preparation area, Reacher figured. Then he turned back to Fletcher because the thought of food was making him feel sick.

'This silent act? It isn't helping you,' Fletcher said. 'You need to understand how serious this situation is. A man is dead. He was my friend. So you need to tell me who you are. You need to explain why you were in his car. And what made him go crazy and smash into a tree.'

Reacher couldn't remember anything about a car or a crash or a dead man but he figured that wouldn't make for a strong negotiating position, so he said, 'Release these cuffs. Then I'll tell you.'

Fletcher shook his head. 'Convince me you had nothing to do with my friend's death. Then I'll unlock the cuffs.'

Reacher said nothing.

'Not smart. I can make you tell me, if you don't start talking.'

Reacher said, 'Can you? Because I can only see one of you.'

'You don't want to test me. Believe me. So be sensible. Convince me.'

'Then you'll release me?'

Fletcher nodded.

'You have the key?'

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‘Of course.’

‘Show it to me.’

‘No.’ Fletcher paused for a moment. ‘Why?’

‘To demonstrate good faith. Prove you can keep your word.’

Fletcher sighed and pulled a small silver key out of his pocket. ‘Satisfied?’

‘One more thing. Release my left hand.’

‘Talk first.’

‘Here’s the problem. My left wrist is broken. I can feel it swelling. It’s getting constricted by the cuff. That can be serious. The damage could be done by the time we’ve talked. I could lose my hand.’

Fletcher didn’t respond, but he didn’t put the key away.

‘Come on. Release one broken limb. What am I going to do with it? My three good ones will still be secure and you have the only key. Release it, and I’ll talk.’

Fletcher hesitated for another moment. A broken wrist had been mentioned at the scene of the accident. He remembered that. But he was a cautious man. He switched the key to his left hand, took the Glock that Vidic had given him from his waistband and stepped forward, gun raised, finger on the trigger.

Fletcher said, ‘Try anything and I’ll shoot you with your own gun.’

Reacher had no idea why Fletcher thought the gun was his but he had no time to waste on questions. So he just said, ‘I get the picture.’

Fletcher kept the gun lined up on Reacher’s face.

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He leaned down. Inserted the key into the cuff around Reacher's left wrist. Worked the lock. The cuff sprang open. It swung down, empty, and clanged against the table leg. Fletcher straightened up. The gun was still in his right hand. The key was still in his left. Reacher struggled to focus on either. The dizziness was building again and the images were threatening to split into two. Reacher willed his vision to stay clear then whipped up his hand and caught the Glock by its barrel. He forced it up and to the side. Then he jammed it back. The move was sharp and vicious and Reacher kept it going until the gun was horizontal and the muzzle was pointing at Fletcher's chest. Fletcher's finger was trapped by the trigger guard. It was bent backwards, all the way to its limit. Reacher pushed harder. Fletcher's knuckle joint gave way. Cartilage tore. Tendons ripped. Fletcher screamed and let go of the grip. Reacher let the gun fall and dragged his hand across Fletcher's body. He caught Fletcher's left wrist. Pulled until Fletcher's hand was above his chest, then started to squeeze. Hard. Fletcher screamed again. Reacher increased the pressure. He could feel bones and ligaments begin to twist and crack. Fletcher screamed louder. And dropped the key.

The key hit Reacher's chest and bounced straight back up. It was spinning and sparkling and arcing away to the side. Reacher couldn't follow its flight. His vision was too blurred. He pictured it skittling off the shiny surface of the table and rattling down onto the floor tiles. In which case it might as well land in Australia for all the good it would do him. But then

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he felt something. It was like a butterfly landing on his right bicep. He still couldn't see what it was, but Fletcher stretched for it with his damaged hand. Reacher twitched his arm and felt something hard and cold slide down against his side. Fletcher tried to pull away. He scrabbled at the back of his waistband. A second gun was tucked in there. A Sig Sauer. He got it free, but he couldn't hold on to it. His broken finger wouldn't bend. Reacher heard the gun rattle onto the floor. He let go of Fletcher's hand and grabbed his neck instead. He found his Adam's apple. Shifted his thumb down and to the side. Did the same with his middle finger. Then jammed both into the flesh of Fletcher's neck and pinched them together, crushing his carotid arteries. Fletcher howled and grabbed Reacher's wrist with his good hand. He pulled and heaved and scratched and gouged with his nails, but Reacher just increased the pressure. He held it for five seconds. Six. Fletcher kept on struggling. Seven seconds passed and Fletcher's energy started to fade. Eight seconds, and that was all Fletcher could take. His brain was out of oxygen. He slumped forward. Reacher pulled his arm aside and Fletcher collapsed face-first onto Reacher's chest.

Reacher gave himself a moment for his heart rate to subside, hoping the hammering in his head would die down with it, then he slammed his fist into Fletcher's temple and let his unconscious body slide onto the floor. He retrieved the key from where it was wedged against his side. Eased himself into a semi-sitting

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position. Paused to fight a sudden wave of nausea and dizziness, then got to work on the cuff on his right wrist. He moved slowly to avoid jarring the damaged bones. He released his right ankle. His left. Then he swung his legs around to the side and stood uncertainly on the floor.

Reacher was wearing his only pair of shoes. He had bought them years earlier, in England. They were quality items. Expensive. Solid and sturdy right out of the box, and the leather had only gotten harder with time and weather and uncompromising use. Now the toe caps were like steel. Reacher turned and kicked Fletcher in the head. Partly to make sure Fletcher wouldn't regain consciousness any time soon. And partly because he was pissed about his wrist. And being dragged to this place against his will. And the whole business with the handcuffs.

Reacher searched Fletcher's pockets using just his left hand. He came across a set of keys, which he took in case they would aid his escape. And to cause Fletcher extra inconvenience down the line. Next he found a wallet, which he also took. He figured he would check it for ID or credit cards later, when he could see better. Then he retrieved the two fallen guns, crept to the doorway, and peered out. It led to a kitchen. It was large and was kitted out with all kinds of appliances and machines Reacher didn't recognize. He was no expert but he figured it was the kind of place that would belong to a big private house rather than a restaurant or a hotel. Either way, there were no people around,

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which was what mattered. Reacher could see another door in the corner, diagonally opposite. He started toward it. Made it halfway across the space, then the door opened. Reacher had the Glock in his left hand. He raised it. A man stepped into the room. He was heavy and stooped and he had a strange, angular head.

The man paused for a moment, then said, 'Reacher? No need for the gun. I'm here to help.'

Reacher didn't lower the gun. He said, 'Who are you?'

The man said, 'A friend. I saved you from the car wreck.'

'How do you know my name?'

'I found your things. Kept them safe. So the others wouldn't get them. I have them right here.' The guy gestured to his pocket. 'Do you want them back?'

Reacher nodded. 'Do nothing stupid.'

The guy pulled out Reacher's expired passport, his ATM card, some banknotes, and a folding toothbrush. 'You travel light, huh?'

Reacher said, 'Put them on the floor. Then step back.'

'No time,' the guy said. 'We've got to hurry. The man in the car with you? Who died? You remember him?'

'No,' Reacher said.

'Well, that's awkward. Because he was an FBI agent. Now he's dead all hell's going to break loose. There'll be cops swarming everywhere. Hordes of agents, too, just as soon as they can get here. Every last one of them looking for somebody to carry the can for their buddy's death. And if you can't account for yourself, that *someone* is going to be you.'

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FOUR

The guy with the angular head turned and ducked back out through the door, then reappeared a moment later when he realized that Reacher wasn't following. He threw up his arms in an exaggerated shrug and said, 'Why aren't you moving? Don't you get it? We need to leave.'

Reacher stayed where he was. He tucked the gun in his waistband, took his things back from the guy, then said, 'What is this place?'

'That's your question? Right now? Are you crazy? You should be asking, *What's the quickest way out of here?* And, *Please, Ivan, can you save my ass again? Can you give me a ride to someplace where I won't get thrown in jail?*'

'Ivan?'

'Ivan Vidic. My name. Now come on. Move it.'

'I'm not going anywhere. Nor are you.'

'How hard did you hit your head? The police are coming.'

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‘Let them come. I’ve done nothing wrong.’

‘How do you know? You can’t remember anything. And have you seen yourself in the mirror lately? Do you think the police will look at you and assume you’re some kind of choirboy?’

Reacher said nothing.

Vidic closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. ‘OK. I get it. You wake up in a strange place. You don’t know how you got here. You want answers. I can give them to you but this is—’

‘I know how I got here,’ Reacher said. ‘Someone brought me. Darren Fletcher. I doubt he was working alone. So I want to know who else is involved. I want to know what is going on here.’

‘How do you know about Fletcher?’

‘We met.’

‘You did? When? Where?’

‘Just now. In there.’ Reacher gestured toward the door he had emerged from.

‘He let you out of the cuffs?’ Vidic strode across to the door and peered into the room on the other side. ‘Why would he—’ Vidic spotted Fletcher’s inert body lying slumped on the floor. He turned and backed away. ‘Wait. Did you kill him? Is he dead?’

Reacher shrugged. ‘He was breathing when I left him.’

‘OK. That’s good. I guess. Did you guys talk at all? Before you beat on him?’

‘No. That’s why I’m asking you. Who else is involved? I want names. I want locations.’

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Vidic took a deep breath. ‘Look, now I really get it. You’re pissed. You want payback. *More* payback, I guess, now that I’ve seen what you did to Fletcher. I respect that. But let me ask you something. How much does your lawyer get paid?’

‘I don’t have a lawyer.’

‘That’s what I figured. But Fletcher? And his buddies? They do have lawyers. Ones who get paid five hundred an hour. Maybe more. Which means that if you’re still here when the police show up and you all get thrown in the cells, Fletcher and the others will be on the street again before the public defender has even found out he has a new client. Then they’ll disappear. You’ll never catch up with them. If you stay here it’ll be like you’re choosing to let them get away. But if you come with me I’ll help you. I’ll tell you everything. The only thing I need you to do is come with me. Now.’

Reacher figured Vidic had a point. He’d gotten tangled up with the police in the past. More than once. Nothing had ever stuck, but getting cut loose always took time. More than it should. And wasting time was not going to help him get what he wanted. So he said, ‘Fine. Just do me one favour.’

‘What?’

‘Drop the Good Samaritan act.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘You’re not trying to help me. You’re trying to save your own ass.’

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Reacher followed Vidic into a kind of entrance hall. It was a large space. Octagonal, with a tiled floor; leaded windows either side of a heavy, studded oak front door; a crystal chandelier; wood panels on the walls; a bunch of oil paintings of outdoor scenes; and a staircase that divided three-quarters of the way up and branched off in two separate directions. Reacher expected Vidic to make for the obvious exit but when they reached the foot of the stairs he peeled away and headed for a smaller, plain door on the far side. He was moving fast and he placed his feet carefully to avoid making a noise. Reacher was slower and less discreet.

'Hey!' Vidic spun around. His voice was a low hiss. 'Quiet!'

Reacher said, 'Why?'

'So no one will hear us.' Vidic spoke slowly and stressed each word, like he was dealing with a child.

'No one, like who?'

'Well, for one, if Fletcher's here, you can bet Kane won't be far away.'

'Who's Kane?'

'Fletcher's buddy. His right-hand man. Acts like his bodyguard. A psychotic Neanderthal scumbag, essentially. Not someone you want to cross paths with.'

'Sounds like exactly who I want to cross paths with.' Reacher raised his voice. 'Kane? Can you hear me? Get your ass down here.'

Vidic stretched up and tried to put his hand over Reacher's mouth. 'What the hell are you doing?'

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Reacher pushed Vidic away. ‘Saving time.’ He raised his voice another notch. ‘Kane? This guy says you’re a scumbag. Is that true? I kind of think it is.’

Vidic sank down until he was sitting on the third step and covered his head with his hands. ‘Will you stop? You’re going to get us both killed.’

‘Kane!’

There was still no reaction. No angry voice. No heavy steps approaching from some other part of the building.

Reacher turned to Vidic and said, ‘Seems like you’re wrong. This Kane guy isn’t here. So where else could he be?’

Vidic straightened up. ‘Why do you care? This isn’t your mess to clean up. I’m giving you a way out. Why won’t you take it?’

‘Because I have a rule.’

‘A rule? What are you talking about?’

‘People leave me alone, I leave them alone.’

‘And if they don’t?’

‘I don’t.’

‘You know that bringing you here, this whole thing, it was Fletcher’s idea, right? I didn’t know what he was going to do. I was just trying to save your life. I thought that wreck you were trapped in was going up in flames.’

‘Kane. Where is he? And everyone else who’s tied up in this.’

‘You’re never letting this go, are you?’

‘Now you get it.’

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‘OK. Give me a moment. I need to think.’ Vidic’s focus shifted to some distant, imaginary horizon and his eyes darted from side to side for a few seconds like a chess player planning his next moves. Then his gaze snapped back to Reacher’s face and he said, ‘Come with me. I have an idea.’

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FIVE

Reacher expected that the door Vidic pushed through would lead to some kind of concealed exit, but it just opened onto another room. A small one. Not much bigger than a generous closet. The air inside it was stale. It was heavy with cheap aftershave and a hint of second-hand cigar smoke. A blackout blind was pulled across its window so the only light in the place came from a computer monitor on a battered metal desk that was shoved against the wall. The monitor looked bigger than normal, Reacher thought. More like a modest TV screen. Its display was divided into rectangles. There were three rows of four. Each of the images showed part of a building. Nine were interior shots. Three were exterior. Nothing was moving in any of them. There was no sign of any people. No one to capture and interrogate. Reacher was disappointed.

Vidic leaned down and fiddled with the computer's mouse until the display rearranged itself. Ten of the

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rectangles disappeared. The remaining pair expanded until together they filled the screen. Both showed an external view. The one on the left covered a white Jeep sitting on a curved gravel driveway that was hemmed in by tall bushes with large pale leaves. The one on the right showed a formal garden. Reacher assumed it would have been immaculate at one time, but now the various plants were running wild with neglect.

Vidic gestured to an office chair near the desk. One arm was missing and its mesh seat was saggy and loose. He said, 'Want to sit?'

Reacher shook his head.

'Smart choice.' Vidic kept his gaze on the screen. 'So you were right. I am trying to save my own ass. I can't have you anywhere near Fletcher or Kane. It's too big of a risk. If they find out I helped you, or if they figure it out, I'm dead meat. But there's something else you need to know.' Vidic lowered his voice to a whisper. 'I'm going to disappear. Very soon.'

'Why would I care?'

'Because when I do it won't matter what you tell Fletcher. It won't matter what conclusions he jumps to. So here's the deal. You sit tight for twenty-four hours. Forty-eight, tops. Then I'll give you Fletcher and Kane on a plate. With a cherry on top. They have a job planned. A big one. Not far from here. They're going to have to bring it forward now that we know the Feds are breathing down their necks. I'll find out when. Give you the address. You can catch them in the act. Deal with them yourself. Take the proceeds. Or

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not. Call the cops if you prefer. Lead the Feds there. Whatever you want to do. I won't care because I'll be in the wind. Nothing will be able to blow back on me.'

Reacher nodded his head slowly, like he was considering a complex problem from every conceivable angle. 'So it costs me a day or two, but I get Fletcher. And you get away.'

'I get away. And maybe one other thing.'

'Which is?'

'Fletcher has a stash of cash. I know where it is. I figured there was nothing I could do about it. No way to get my hands on it before I go. Not on my own. But together we could take it.'

'Where is it?'

'Not far away. I could take you there. Then give you a ride afterward. Anywhere you want to go. Within reason.'

'How do we get it?'

'It's in a safe. A . . . the model doesn't matter. The point is, the lock's impossible to pick. Pretty much. Maybe three people in the world could do it and neither of us is one of them. The door, the top, the sides, they're all too strong and too thick to cut or drill or blow a hole in with explosives. But it does have a weakness. The back. It's thinner. Thin enough to make it vulnerable to a shaped charge. The manufacturer was looking to save weight, I guess. Or money. I don't know. They figured they could get away with it because the safe is supposed to be attached to the wall and the floor. No one should ever be able to get to the back.'

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‘But?’

‘The safe isn’t bolted down. Fletcher bought it cheap from someplace and just had it shoved against the wall. I can’t move it. I’ve tried. It’s too heavy. But Kane moved it. He installed it. And if Kane can move it, you can move it. Don’t you think?’

Reacher looked at his wrist. He tried to flex it. A jolt of pain shot up his arm and down to his fingers. ‘How much is in it?’

‘Two point two million.’

‘Split how?’

‘Seventy/thirty.’

‘In my favour?’

‘Nice try.’

Reacher didn’t reply.

‘Sixty/forty. Sixty to me.’

Reacher said nothing.

‘OK. Split fifty/fifty. What do you say?’

‘Normally I’d say you were crazy.’

Vidic spread his arms out wide. ‘Does this look normal?’

‘So what’s the plan?’

‘I take you somewhere safe. Get you squared away, out of sight. Bring in a guy I know, a medic, who you can trust. He’ll take care of your wrist. Then I’ll get you some food. Some books, magazines, movies, whatever you want to pass the time until we need to move.’

‘That could work. But I still need the full nine on Fletcher. And whatever kind of operation he’s got going on.’

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‘I’ll give you chapter and verse. But not here, OK?’ Vidic pointed at the screen. ‘We’ve pushed our luck far enough. The cops are bound to show up anytime now.’

Reacher nodded and took a step toward the door, but Vidic didn’t follow right away. He leaned down, took hold of the mouse, and started fiddling with it again. The screen switched back to its original twelve rectangles. Vidic selected the image of the driveway and then a box appeared, demanding a password. Vidic hit a bunch of keys – four letters, eight numbers, then four more letters – and the screen filled with tiny versions of the same scene. Each had a time and a date under it. Vidic selected the most recent, did something else with the mouse, and a cartoon trash can appeared. He did another thing and the mini picture vanished.

‘People say you can’t erase history.’ Vidic turned and flashed a smile. ‘Maybe that was true before we had computers.’

Vidic took out his phone and tapped away at its screen for a moment. Reacher couldn’t focus well enough to see exactly what he was doing. Vidic caught his eye and said, ‘Don’t worry. Just sending a message to the medic.’ Then he moved the pointer to the top of the screen and a list of options appeared. He picked *Engage Privacy Mode* and selected *Fifteen Minutes.* ‘Now I was never here,’ he said. ‘And we can leave together without being seen.’

Reacher said, ‘What about the kitchen? And the hallway? There are cameras there, too, right?’

‘Right. But the internal ones only record when the

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system is armed, and the system is only armed when no one is here. The external cameras are live all the time, in case anyone comes snooping around. Unless they're paused, like they are now, for another few minutes. So don't worry. We can go and there'll be no trace.'

Vidic locked the heavy front door behind them and ushered Reacher over to the Jeep. It had protective mesh cages fixed over its rear lights, and a wide bull bar covering the whole of the front. Its bodywork was gleaming white but its bonnet was finished with some kind of matte black coating. Reacher had seen vehicles set up that way before. In the desert. So that the sun wouldn't reflect off the shiny paint and dazzle the driver. He was no expert but judging by the tyres he guessed the Jeep had never been anywhere more challenging than a parking lot. He shrugged to himself. He was never going to understand car people.

Vidic drove fast but he had the vehicle well under control. The road was twisty and rough, with trees on both sides. They were tall and close together with few branches within reach of the ground. All the action was up high where the leaves had to compete for the sunlight. The air in the Jeep was set low and the stereo was playing acoustic rock uncomfortably loud until Vidic switched it off and said, 'The place we were just in was built in the seventies by a guy named Arthur Grumann. He was a real estate developer from Manhattan. Crime was bad in the city back then, I guess, so he figured rich folk could be lured down here to the

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Ozarks, where it was safe and beautiful. He completed half a dozen mansions. All are within a couple of miles of one another. They did OK at first. The idea didn't stick in the long term, though. By the two thousands people could hardly give the places away. We got ours for a song in '09, after the crash. Turned it into our studio.'

'You're musicians?'

'Artists. Started out with four of us. Paris, Bowery, O'Connell, and Gibson. I joined later. Paris is great with computers so she handled the payments, that kind of thing. O'Connell dealt with the logistics. Art isn't easy to transport. You need special crates, things like that. They just did copies at first. Legitimate stuff. For collectors, mainly. People who don't want the real thing on their walls while they're on vacation or when they're having family with young kids to visit. But that morphed over time. They did a forgery for a gallery owner they met. Then they did a couple more. Then a lot more, until that was all they were doing.'

'Enough to get the Feds on your case?'

'Not at all. They were discreet. And careful who they sold to. There were no real victims. The buyers were all crooks themselves. No. The problems started when Fletcher came on board. He wanted contacts in the art world. But not so he could sell to them. So he could steal from them. He was aggressive. Pushed us in a whole new direction. Got us involved in disputes. Violence. O'Connell got killed. So did some old dude. A retired cop working security at a place they hit. That's

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when he brought in Kane, as muscle. Now Bowery's gone missing and Gibson turned out to be a Fed. What a fiasco. It's not the organization I joined. Not even close. You can see why I'm jumping ship.'

'You joined, when?'

'I kind of replaced O'Connell. So around the same time Kane joined. Only I'm not crazy and I'm not beholden to Fletcher. You can see why I'm leaving. It's not safe anymore.'

'You're sure Gibson was a Fed? Those guys generally don't advertise.'

'I'm sure.'

'How come?'

'Kind of a fluke, I guess. He always used to disappear for a few hours, one day a week. I didn't think much about it, at first. But when Bowery disappeared, I don't know, I got suspicious. So when I saw Gibson sneaking off today, I followed him. He went to a motel just off a highway exit. A big place with a gas station and a diner. I saw him go to one of the motel rooms. He knocked on the door, kind of in a funky rhythm, then went in. I caught sight of a woman, waiting inside. I was relieved at first. I thought he was there to see a hooker. But I crept up close and listened at the door. It felt a bit dirty but I needed to be sure. And that's when I heard her say it.'

'What?'

'Albatross.'

'Like the bird?'

'Right. Albatross.'

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