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The Stories (Non-Fiction)

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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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For everyone who has stood with
Reacher through his first thirty adventures . . .

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ONE

Nathan Gilmour knew things that other people did not.

People, like his coworkers at the Port Administration in Baltimore.

Things, like the fact that the recent death of one of those coworkers was not an accident, despite what the police report said. It was not an accident, and the man who had died was not the intended victim. Gilmour himself was.

Gilmour knew that he was the one who should have paid with his life. There was no doubt about it. And if he stayed where he was and kept on following his orders, the killers would realize they'd screwed up, too. They would correct their mistake. There was no doubt about that, either. So Gilmour was left with no choice. He had to pull the plug.

Gilmour was sitting alone in the cramped office. The only other desk was lost under a heap of bouquets of flowers. Most of them were beginning to wilt. The

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air was heavy with their scent. *Their stench*, Gilmour thought. The stench of death. He began to breathe through his mouth and twisted his chair sideways to avoid the view out the window. He didn't need to see the roof of the sagging white tent. It had been put up over the center of the spot where the shipping container had hit the ground after it fell from its crane. Or was dropped. The investigators were gone but the stain on the concrete was going to be there for months. Office gossip said the guy who had been crushed by the container wound up as flat as a piece of paper. Gilmour had known the guy for five months. He had shared his workspace with him. Had come to like him. And ultimately had gotten him killed. He shivered and pulled a phone out of his pocket. A very basic one. He flipped it open and keyed in a message.

911. Need to meet.

Gilmour entered a number. He hit Send. Noted the time – a minute after eleven in the morning – and settled in to wait for a reply. There was no way he was going to get any work done that day. Or any other day, in that place. Or in any other place, if his gambit failed.

The same time Nathan Gilmour was sending his text, Jack Reacher was stepping into a coffee shop. It was a large place, bright and busy, just a stone's throw from Gilmour's dockside office. Inside, it had exposed-brick walls, oak floors, and three parallel rows of ornate iron pillars holding up the ceiling. An old warehouse,

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Reacher guessed. Solid. Built to endure. The kind of place that had outlasted the industry it had been designed to serve and was now onto its second lease on life. Reacher imagined that the upper floors would be converted into chic apartments as the neighborhood got gentrified, if they hadn't been already.

Reacher stood in line at the counter, ordered his coffee – black, no sugar – paid, and carried the mug to a small round table in the corner. Someone had left a newspaper, but that wasn't why Reacher chose it. He settled there because it gave him a view of the whole room. He squeezed in behind the table and lowered himself onto the wooden chair. It wasn't built for someone his size – six foot five, two hundred fifty pounds – and it wasn't comfortable, but Reacher didn't mind. He wasn't planning to stay long. He had arrived in the city that morning on a Greyhound bus and would be leaving the same way either late that night or early the next day. He was there to catch a band he liked that was playing at a benefit for veterans. It was going to be an evening show, in the open air, it was late October, and Reacher didn't have a coat. Buying one was next on his to-do list. He figured he would take a refill of coffee or two – maybe three – then when the quantity of caffeine in his system was restored to a satisfactory level he would move on.

The coffee shop was three-quarters full. A handful of the other customers were also on their own. Two of them were reading books. The others were tapping

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away on laptops. Six people were crowded around a table for four in the center of the space. The rest of the tables were taken by couples. Most of the couples were focused on each other, or on their phones, but Reacher saw that two pairs had a different dynamic. One duo couldn't keep their eyes off the entrance. The man had a beard, neatly trimmed. The woman had black hair pulled back in a French braid. They were both smartly dressed, like they were there for some kind of special occasion, and the expressions on their faces flip-flopped between anxiety and excitement. The final couple was watching them. They were older. Maybe in their late seventies. They looked pale and gray and hunched. Their clothes were worn and shabby and there was just a single mug between them on the table.

Reacher finished his coffee, wriggled free of his table, and strolled to the counter. He got his first refill and as he turned back another person walked into the shop. A man, maybe in his mid-forties, dressed in a suit and carrying a briefcase. The smart couple that had been watching the entrance got halfway to their feet, the beginning of a smile taking hold on their faces. Then something about the newcomer's expression hit them. Their smiles died a sudden death. They sunk back down onto their chairs. The man's shoulders slumped. The newcomer joined them at their table and for a moment no one spoke. Then the man with the beard straightened up. He stuck out his chin and said, 'If it's bad news, tell us. Don't leave us hanging.'

Reacher stayed back by the cluster of flasks at the

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end of the counter and made like he was considering adding cream to his coffee. He wanted to hear how the conversation unfolded.

The new guy said, 'You have to remember what I told you. The futures market is like a violent storm over the ocean. An investment is like a ship trying to sail across that ocean. You've got high winds to take into account. Treacherous currents. Unpredictable tides. You can run aground. Get holed on the rocks. Hit delays. Maybe even sink.'

Reacher saw the old shabby guy shake his head and push his chair back like he was ready to stand up. The woman who was with him put her hand on his arm, stopping him.

The man with the beard said, 'You told us you knew how to navigate all that storm stuff. You told us you were the best. That you could turn a profit inside twenty-four hours. Maybe even double our money.'

The new guy said, 'True. I did say that.'

'So what are you telling us now? You lost our money?'

'I didn't *lose* it.'

'What, then?'

'I didn't double it.'

'So there's some left?'

'Some?' The guy grinned. 'You could say that. Because I didn't double it. I tripled it.'

The man with the beard was silent for a long moment, then said, 'Tripled? That would make . . .'

The new guy picked up his briefcase, set it on his

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lap, worked the locks, then upended it over the table. Bundles of banknotes cascaded out. Fifteen of them. One knocked over a cup. Two tumbled onto the floor. He said, 'Fifteen thousand dollars in less than a day. And that's after my commission. Like I told you, I am the best.'

Reacher saw the shabby couple lock eyes for a second. Some kind of silent understanding passed between them. They each nodded, very gently. They straightened up a little. Leaned slightly forward.

The man with the beard stared at the money. His jaw sagged open. The woman who was with him shrieked and threw her arms around him so hard they almost fell off their chairs. They yelled. They whooped. They high-fived. Everyone in the place was staring at them but they showed no sign of caring. The new guy smiled. He turned his briefcase the right way up and closed it. He got to his feet and was halfway to the door before the man with the beard noticed he was moving.

The man said, 'Wait. You're leaving?'

'Why not? My work is done. Enjoy your profit.'

'No. Your work's not done.' He started to gather up the bundles of cash. 'Take this back. Invest it for us. All of it. Just like last night.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm certain.'

'I can't promise to triple it again.'

'But you could double it?'

The new guy returned to the table. 'It's possible.'

Reacher went back to his table and watched the

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man with the beard gather up the bundles of money. The man retrieved the two that had fallen, righted the tipped-over cup, shook the new guy's hand, then put his arm around the woman's shoulder and went with her toward the door. They were almost skipping. The new guy set his briefcase down, opened it, and stacked the money inside. He closed it again, locked it, and turned to leave.

The shabby man heaved himself to his feet. He held up his hand, then gestured like he wanted the new guy to join him and the woman at their table. The guy looked around for a moment as if he thought the man must be beckoning to someone else, shrugged, then approached. The men spoke for a moment, then both sat down. Reacher couldn't hear their conversation. He didn't need to. He could see what was going on. And he knew what was going to happen next. Two minutes later the shabby man slid a skinny hand into his jacket pocket and pulled out some money of his own. Two bundles of banknotes. Thicker than the ones that had poured out of the briefcase a few minutes before. Maybe five thousand dollars in each one. Ten thousand total. Probably all the old couple could scrape together.

For ten minutes after he sent his text, Nathan Gilmour sat with the phone clutched in his hand. It didn't beep. It didn't buzz. Gilmour tossed it onto his desk. It slid across the shiny surface and came to rest next to his keyboard. It looked like the computer mouse's baby brother. Gilmour stared at it. That beat the view out the

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window or the sight of the dying flowers, but it wasn't satisfying. The phone still didn't beep. It still didn't buzz. After twenty minutes Gilmour picked it back up. He flipped it open and checked the screen, as if a reply could have sneaked in without him noticing. The display was blank. Gilmour felt a flash of anger, like the phone was conspiring against him. Like it was deliberately blocking any incoming response. He was filled with the urge to hurl it against the wall, wait for the remains to fall, then stomp whatever survived into tiny pieces. He was still fighting the rage when the phone lit up. The message he was waiting for had arrived. It said, *Noon today*. It gave an address, which Gilmour knew was not far away. Probably a restaurant or a café, he figured, because the message finished with, *Look for a man sitting alone. He'll be the biggest guy in the place*.

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TWO

The guy in the coffee shop took out a large manila envelope, slid the two new bundles of cash inside, loaded it into his briefcase, shook hands with the old man and his wife, and made for the door. Reacher drained his coffee and followed. The guy crossed the street, continued past another repurposed warehouse – this one with a couple of clothing stores on the first floor – then dodged into an alleyway. Reacher stopped short and listened. He heard a car door slam and an engine cough into life. He stepped forward and saw a Toyota Camry twenty feet away. It was silver. Not the latest version, Reacher thought, although he couldn't be sure. He wasn't much of a car guy.

Nathan Gilmour closed the phone, slipped it into his pocket, and took a moment to run the logistics in his head. He would need maybe fifteen minutes to get to the rendezvous. Walking would be best. And when he got there he would need time to find a vantage point

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and figure out how and where to deliver his message. It would be tight but he could do it. He took a pad of paper out of his desk drawer and reached for a pen.

Reacher moved toward the car in the alley. The guy who'd had the briefcase was behind the wheel. The couple with the smart clothes who had supposedly made a killing in the futures market were in the back. The man still had his beard but the woman's hair was no longer black and it was no longer long. It was cut in a tight blond bob. The car began to roll forward. Reacher moved to block its path. The driver hit the brakes. He honked the horn. Reacher stepped closer. The car began to move again. The driver's foot hovered over the gas pedal. He thought about flooring it but running over some nosy stranger wasn't part of the plan. It would attract attention. Unless the guy was about to attack, in which case there would be some kind of justification. But no guarantee of success. The stranger was enormous. He looked like a walking bank vault. His hands were like hams. His arms were bigger than some people's legs. The driver wasn't sure if the car would be drivable after colliding with a guy his size. There could be major damage and the airbags were bound to be triggered. So he played it safe and went with another blast of the horn.

Reacher was thinking along the same lines, only without doing anything that would cause much damage to himself. He took another step and drove the ball of his right foot into the center of the car's radiator grille.

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He wasn't certain about the mechanism – he wasn't much of a car guy after all – but he knew that airbags were designed to deploy in the event of an accident, and he figured that a head-on collision must be a pretty common kind. There had to be a sensor to detect a crash like that. He didn't know exactly where it would be so he went for power over precision. It worked. The interior of the car was instantly filled with a bunch of billowing white balloons. Reacher spun away toward the driver's side. The car slowed and stopped and the airbags deflated almost as quickly as they'd appeared. Reacher grabbed the handle and hauled open the driver's door. He leaned in and took the key out of the ignition. The remnants of some kind of explosive hung in the air. Presumably what had caused the airbags to inflate so rapidly. It bit into Reacher's nose and mouth but he ignored the sensation, grabbed the driver by the front of his shirt, and pulled him out, too. The guy's clothes were coated with fine, silvery, slippery dust. He looked a little dazed from the experience. Reacher kicked the door closed, spun the guy around, and told him to step back and lean with his hands against the roof. The guy paused, too stunned to move, then did as he was instructed.

Reacher opened the rear door and hauled out the man with the beard. His body was limp and floppy at first but when Reacher let him go he didn't fall to the ground. He turned and as he moved he retrieved a blade from his sock with his right hand, then straightened, legs braced, anger contorting his face.

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Reacher gestured toward the knife and said, 'Drop it.'

The man flicked his wrist to the left, then the right, holding the blade vertically, trying to reflect light into Reacher's eyes.

Reacher said, 'I have a rule. Pull a knife on me, I break your arm. Drop it now, I'll make an exception.'

The man lunged at Reacher's face but stopped short and pulled back. He said, 'That was a warning. Turn around, run, or I'm going to cut your heart out.'

The driver straightened up and started to turn away from the car. Reacher stretched out his left arm, cupped the back of the guy's head with his hand, and launched it forward like a basketball. The bridge of the guy's nose slammed into the top of the doorframe. His head bounced off the metal and he fell straight back onto the asphalt, eyes rolled up, blood pouring from both nostrils.

Reacher turned back to the man with the beard. He said, 'You're assuming I have a heart.'

The man shuffled closer and lunged again, this time going for Reacher's body. Reacher crossed his arms just above the wrists, his left under his right, and drove forward, catching the man's forearm between the edge of his hands, pushing the blade down and out of harm's way. The man tried to pull away but he was too slow. Reacher slid his left hand out and down and grabbed the man's wrist. He twisted it back, locking the man's elbow. Then he twisted a little farther.

The man yelped with pain. 'Stop!' He let go of the knife. 'I've dropped it. I've dropped it.'

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Reacher said, 'Too late.' He kept the tension on the man's arm with his left hand and brought his right fist down like a hammer just below the elbow. Both bones shattered and the man passed out from the pain before a scream could cross his lips. Reacher dumped his unconscious body on top of the first guy's and crouched to look into the back of the car. The woman was still in there, but she wasn't sitting. She was standing in the rear footwell and leaning over the passenger seat, scrabbling to get hold of the briefcase.

Reacher said, 'Leave it. Get out. This side.'

The woman hooked a finger through the briefcase handle, hauled it up, and slumped back in her seat. Then she shifted her grip and swung the case around between her and Reacher like a shield.

Reacher said, 'Out.'

The woman didn't move.

'You don't try to hurt me, I won't hurt you. But if I have to drag you out of there, all bets are off.'

The woman stretched toward the door handle on the far side of the car.

'Make me chase you and you'll regret it.'

The woman's hand kept moving.

'Think you can outrun me? Maybe you're right. But can you outrun a car?' Reacher held up the key he'd taken from the ignition a minute earlier.

The woman pulled her hand away and scooted slowly to Reacher's side of the back seat. She didn't lower the briefcase. She said, 'What do you want?'

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Reacher said, 'The old couple you took money from in the coffee shop. Who are they?'

The woman shrugged. 'Don't know. Just some dumb-ass losers.'

'How much did they give you?'

'Ten grand.'

'When did you promise to hand over their profit?'

'Tomorrow. Same time. Same place.'

'Only you won't be there. There won't be a profit. And the old folks will lose their life savings.'

'No shit, Sherlock.'

'Give me the briefcase.'

The woman pulled the case tight to her chest. 'No.'

Reacher gestured to the two men lying immobile on the ground. 'Want to join them?'

The woman didn't answer.

'Does conning seniors come with health insurance? I hear that a long stay in the hospital is expensive.'

'Fine.' The woman tossed the briefcase onto the ground. 'But if anyone's looking at a hospital stay, it's you. The guy we work for, you can't just rip him off. There'll be consequences.'

'The guy you work for? Who is that?'

The woman was silent for a moment. 'I'm not saying his name.'

'No matter. Because I'm not ripping him off. The money's not his. It belongs to those old folks. I'm going to return it to them.'

'You're not serious.'

'Watch me.'

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'Why would you do that when you could keep it?'

'If you need to ask, you won't understand. Now go. Tell your boss what happened here. Then make sure I never see any of you again.'

The same time Reacher was leaving the alley, Harvey Jones was climbing out of a cab. He was moving slowly, and that was not just because of his size. Jones was six feet seven and weighed three hundred pounds. He was feeling demoralized by the phone call he'd received a half hour earlier. The call offering him the job he was on his way to now. Jones was an actor. At least he wanted to be an actor. But whether it was his height or his weight – actors are mostly tiny, for some reason he could never understand – or a lack of good scripts, he could never land a decent role. The only work he could get was playing an enforcer and putting the fear of God into assorted lowlifes for a local *businessman*. A guy he'd met through another resting actor after his latest agent dumped him. He told himself he was doing a good deed. The threat of a beating is better than the real thing, morally speaking. Making the performance believable took skill. And at least it paid well. He did have to eat after all.

The old couple was still at the same table when Reacher got back to the coffee shop, but they were looking a lot less gray. They were sitting straighter in their seats, laughing and giggling and holding hands, and there were two drinks in front of them. Tall conical glasses

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full of foamy milk with horizontal stripes of espresso shot through them.

Reacher walked up to their table, settled into one of the empty chairs, and balanced the briefcase on his lap. No one spoke for a moment, then the older guy said, 'This table's taken. Find your own.'

Reacher said, 'I'm here to deliver a message. I'm not staying.'

'What message? Who are you?'

The woman nudged her husband and gestured to the briefcase on Reacher's lap. Confusion had replaced all the happiness on her face.

Reacher said, 'You dodged a bullet.' He wrenched both locks, took the manilla envelope out of the briefcase, and set it on the table.

'Is that . . . ?' Deep lines ate into the older guy's forehead.

'It's your money. Take it.'

'I don't understand. Why so soon?' The guy picked up the envelope and looked inside. His hands started to shake. 'Wait. Where's our profit? We were promised—'

'You were conned. There is no profit.'

'There is. There will be. Those other people – they tripled their money. We need . . . What have you done? How . . . ? Who are you? You've ruined everything!'

Reacher slid his hand into the briefcase and pulled out a random bundle. He dropped it on the table.

'What's this?'

'The other couple's *profit*. There are fourteen more, exactly the same. Go ahead. Count it.'

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The old guy looked at the bundle for a long moment, like he was expecting it to grow legs and move on its own, then cautiously picked it up. There were three elastic bands holding it together. One in the center and one at either end. The guy hooked a fingernail around the band on the left and tugged it free. He fanned the bundle out. There was a twenty-dollar bill at the top. A twenty at the bottom. And between them, nothing but pieces of cut-up newspaper.

Harvey Jones caught his breath, pulled out his phone, and started to walk the final block toward the venue. He couldn't risk being seen getting out of a taxi – a black town car with a chauffeur would be a different story – and it gave him a final chance to run through the brief from his employer. Reading in a moving vehicle always made him sick. The instructions said that he was to find a guy named Gilmour, who had asked for an urgent meeting. Why he wanted to meet was unknown. Two possibilities had been surmised. Gilmour was losing his nerve and wanted to bail on whatever job he was supposed to be doing. Or Gilmour was losing his mind and wanted to renegotiate terms. Either way, the answer was the same. Not a snowball's chance in hell. Gilmour was to stay the course. He was to stick to the terms of their deal, or bad things would happen. What those bad things would supposedly be was left up to Jones. He would get to improvise. To showcase his talent, albeit to an audience of one.

Jones put his phone away and allowed himself a

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moment to daydream. He was heading to the Lyric Theatre in Manhattan, not some yuppified coffee place in downtown Baltimore. He was Sir Ian McKellen's understudy about to step in and save the day with the most inspired performance of the decade, not . . . Wait. There was something wrong with his left arm. A jolt of pain surged from his shoulder to his wrist. His fingers tingled. He felt like a steel belt had been thrown around his chest. Someone was tightening it. Clamping it down. His legs gave way. He fell face down on the sidewalk. Managed to wriggle and roll onto his back. Then wished he hadn't, because a safe fell onto his chest. Followed by a truck. And that was the last thing he ever felt.

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THREE

The older couple stumbled out of the coffee shop shell-shocked, despondent, but with their money tucked safely back in the husband's jacket pocket. Reacher was left at their table with their barely touched foamy drinks. He pushed them away, set the briefcase on the floor, waited a minute to give the couple the chance to get clear, then stood up to leave. But instead of heading to the exit, he joined the line at the counter. He'd only had two cups when he was there earlier. He'd cut his consumption short in order to follow the guy who'd first had the briefcase. It was not quite noon. He had plenty of time. So he ordered another coffee and took it to his original table, which was still free, complete with its abandoned newspaper.

Two single customers and the group of six left while he was drinking his coffee, but no one new came in. No one paid any undue attention to anyone at another table. No other scams were unfolding, as far as he could see. The only slightly weird thing was that a couple of

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times he spotted a guy peering in through one of the windows without ever coming inside.

Reacher finished his cup then picked up the paper and glanced at the story on the front page. It was a rabble-rousing piece about a crisis that was brewing on the border between Turkey and Armenia. The gist was that a separatist faction from a small region in Armenia was helping Iran to refine weapons-grade uranium in return for support with their territorial claims. A whistleblower had defected from the group and had smuggled out video footage of the nuclear centrifuges in action. Clips had been posted online. Experts had chimed in. Condemnation was growing throughout the West. Diplomats were pressuring the separatists to quit, forthwith. The separatists were denying any involvement. Negotiations had hit a brick wall so talk was turning to the likelihood of a US-led invasion. No troops had yet been committed, but there were reports of a private contractor stationing its operators on the Turkish side of the Armenian border, primed for a rapid response if an intervention became necessary.

Reacher turned the page. He didn't like private military contractors. The idea of war for profit didn't sit well with him. The next story his eye fell on was about the evils of social media. Reacher had no experience in the field, and even less interest, so he put the paper down and fetched a refill of coffee.

Reacher drained his second cup, took another refill, then made his way to the door. As he went out the guy who'd been at the window finally decided to come in.

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He made it over the threshold right as Reacher got there. The other guy raised both hands, palms out, and leaned back like he was trying to get out of the way. One hand grazed Reacher's shoulder just as their torsos brushed together. A classic pickpocket maneuver. An innocent contact to distract from a sinister one. Reacher kept an eye on the guy in case he bolted for some hidden rear exit and at the same time took a rapid inventory of the contents of his pockets. He felt his toothbrush. His expired passport. His ATM card. And a modest bundle of cash. Nothing was missing. It was a false alarm. Reacher continued on his way.

Reacher had one task to accomplish – buying a coat – and all afternoon to do it, so he took his time. He saw that a gaggle of pedestrians had gathered on the sidewalk a half block to the west. No one had been there when he returned from the alleyway, not long before, so he paused to see what had caught their interest. An ambulance had stopped in the middle of the street. A cop car was angled on either side, keeping the traffic at bay. A pair of paramedics were wrestling with a loaded gurney. Trying to heave it into the back of their vehicle. They were struggling, but not hurrying. A figure was strapped to it, covered with a blanket. Mostly covered. A giant pair of shoes protruded from one end and Reacher could see a shock of carefully styled brown hair at the other. A man's arm in a wide black sleeve dangled down from the side. The fingertips almost grazed the pavement. Reacher watched until the gurney was

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finally secured and the ambulance's doors were closed. Then the paramedics made their way to the cab, climbed on board, and pulled away. Gently. There were no lights. And no siren. Which meant there was no chance for the guy in the back, Reacher thought. He wondered what had happened. He hadn't heard any gunshots while he was in the coffee shop. No screeching of tires to suggest the guy had been run down. Nothing that pointed to a car wreck. And the cops on the scene looked pretty relaxed, so he figured it must have been some kind of innocuous accident. The random hand of fate, striking when it was least expected.

Reacher melted away with the rest of the crowd and began to wander the streets, heading generally toward the center of the city but zigzagging here and there to pass an interesting building or avoid waiting at a busy intersection. He didn't want to spend too much on the coat, partly because he had no interest in fashion, but mainly because he never kept clothes of any kind for very long. Shirts, pants, and underwear he bought, wore for two or three days, junked, and replaced. A coat could theoretically last longer, but he didn't know how long he would need it. He could be on a beach the next day. Or in a desert. So he avoided streets with any hint of high-end boutiques and eventually wound up at a mom-and-pop hardware store. Inside, he saw a selection of work jackets. Beige or brown. Faux-fur linings or plaid. He found one with sleeves that were just about long enough and took it to the register. He figured the tax and pulled out his cash so he'd be ready when he

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got to the front of the line, then stopped and stepped aside. He saw that he'd been correct about one thing back at the coffee shop: Nothing was missing from his pocket. But now a whole other kind of issue had come to light. Something extra was in there. Something that shouldn't have been. That hadn't been when he paid for his second round of coffee. A quarter of a sheet of letter paper, roughly torn on two sides and folded into a compact square. Reacher opened it. A message had been written in the center in bold capitals. It said:

MUST DISAPPEAR
LIFE IN DANGER
NEED HELP!
VACANT WAREHOUSE, ARGYLE &
HORSEFERRY, MIDNIGHT TONIGHT
COME ALONE
BRING WHAT I'M OWED

And at the bottom of the sheet, in paler, shakier letters, like it was added as an afterthought:

PLEASE.

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FOUR

Nathan Gilmour stayed in the coffee shop for half an hour after Reacher left. He stood in line, constantly glancing over his shoulder, bought a cappuccino, and took it to the table that Reacher had been using. Not because he was stalking Reacher. He still had no idea who Reacher was. But because that was the table with the best view of the entrance. Gilmour was pretty sure he hadn't been followed, but the circumstances called for caution. He needed to be certain. He kept an eye on the door as he sipped his drink. He took his time. He emptied a quarter of the cup. Half. Then when he was confident that no one was paying him any attention he took out his phone – the one he'd used for texting – and switched it off. He held it under the table, out of sight, slipped off its back cover, and removed the battery. He had made contact with the person he'd been told to find. *The biggest guy in the place*. He had no doubt about that. So he wouldn't need to send any further messages.

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Or to receive any. And even though Gilmour had no reason to believe that the man he'd been communicating with had the means to track his phone, he saw no reason to take the risk.

The note Reacher had found in his pocket wasn't intended for him. That was clear. The guy at the coffee shop had planted it on the wrong man. *Bring what I'm owed* implied a degree of familiarity with the guy's situation that Reacher did not have. Reacher had no idea how the guy could have mistaken him for someone who did, but he figured he had a more urgent question to answer: what to do about the note. He didn't know the guy who had planted it. He didn't owe him anything. He hadn't asked to get involved. So there was nothing to stop him from dumping the note in the trash and getting on with his day.

Except . . .

The note did make it sound like the guy was in serious trouble. If he were crying out for help and this message was the key to him getting it, Reacher felt it was only right to let him know it had gone astray. He would want someone to do that for him if the shoe were on the other foot. Plus returning the note shouldn't be difficult. It shouldn't take long. It wouldn't stop him from catching the band he'd come to town to see. And most important it shouldn't stand in the way of his plan to leave town without delay.

Except . . .

An abandoned warehouse at night could be a smart

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place for a rendezvous. Especially for someone who was in danger. Who was wanting to fly under the radar. But it could also be the perfect venue for an ambush. Which made it the kind of location that Reacher usually made a point of avoiding, even when he wasn't the intended victim.

Reacher inspected the torn edges of the piece of paper the note was written on. He checked both sides. He was looking for traces of a letterhead or a logo or an address that could tell him where the paper – and therefore the guy – had come from. He found nothing. He held the note up to one of the ceiling lights in the hardware store, searching for a watermark. He found nothing there, either. He laid the note flat on his palm and gazed along its length, hoping to see the imprint of whatever had been written on the previous sheet, but the paper was smooth. It held no clues. Nothing to tell Reacher where he could intercept the guy ahead of the rendezvous at the warehouse. So he was left with the same two options he had started with. Trash the note, or try to return it and risk walking into a trap.

The smart thing to do would be to walk away. Reacher knew that. He had no skin in the game. No obligation to help a total stranger. But he did have a curious nature. He couldn't help wondering what this guy must have done to be in fear for his life. Where he had honed the sleight of hand needed to slip the note into Reacher's pocket without getting caught. And on top of that his eyes kept getting drawn back to the final scrawled word at the bottom of the page. *Please*.

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Something about the way it was written resonated with him. It tipped the scale away from *trap*, making it feel more like a genuine plea. Not the kind of thing Reacher found it easy to walk away from.

Reacher folded the note and tucked it back into his pocket. He figured that an abandoned warehouse was likely to be dark so he looked for a display of flashlights. He selected one that would fit in his pocket then returned to the register, paid for his items, and asked the clerk for directions to Argyle and Horseferry. Then he left the store and started walking, more purposefully than before. He had time before the concert was due to start so he figured it wouldn't hurt to head to the address stated in the note. Take a look at the place. Get a sense of what level of risk was involved, then make a final decision.

Nathan Gilmour's next destination was a cramped third-floor walk-up apartment in a plain, unrestored building. It was a quarter of a mile away from the coffee shop but it took him two hours to reach it. He started out walking. He meandered along for half a dozen blocks, crossing the street at random intervals and using the reflections in storefront windows to see if anyone was following him. No one seemed to be. He dodged into an alleyway, pressed his back against the rough brick wall, and waited to see if anyone turned in after him. No one did. No one even glanced in his direction. He came back out and hailed a passing cab. He gave the driver the name of a bar. It was a ten-minute

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drive. Gilmour paid the fare in cash, entered the bar, and made his way straight to an exit at the rear that he knew led to another alley. He hurried to the next street. Walked another ten blocks. Hailed another cab, and this time he asked the driver to take him to a car rental office. He used a Delaware license with a fake name and a bundle of cash to pay for a Chevy Malibu for a week. The car was midsize. Its contours were bland. It was an insipid silver color. It was totally boring in Gilmour's eyes. But that was the whole point. On the road it was as close to invisible as he could get.

Gilmour parked a block away from the apartment building and sat behind the wheel for ten minutes pretending to look at his phone. When he was happy that no one had followed him he walked to the building's main entrance, let himself in, and took the stairs to the third floor. There were two apartments leading off the landing and neither had a name or a number on its door. There were no identifying marks whatsoever. Gilmour liked it that way. He had no idea how his neighbor felt about it. He had never met them. He liked that, too.

Gilmour worked the lock, which was stiff with age and a lack of maintenance, pushed the door open, and stepped into a narrow hallway. The space was dark and the air was stale and heavy with dust. Gilmour nodded to himself. That meant he could be reasonably sure no one had been inside snooping around. Not recently, anyway. He checked that his go bag was in its usual spot on the floor and continued to the apartment's

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main room. It had one window with no kind of a view – just the crumbling bricks on the side of the next building – but that didn't matter to Gilmour because he kept the drapes permanently closed. He flipped the light switch. There was a small kitchen area in one corner, which was adequate for anyone whose interest in food extended no further than brewing coffee and reheating frozen dinners in an ancient microwave. There was a dining table with two chairs. And a black leather couch with splits in two of its three cushions. Gilmour lowered himself onto the one cushion that wasn't ripped, reached for the TV remote, then paused. He felt safe for the first time since leaving the coffee shop. He couldn't go back to his office. He knew that. He couldn't go home. But this place – threadbare and unkempt as it may have been – was secure. He had started renting it a year ago when it became clear that access to a bolt-hole was turning into more than a luxury. He paid cash, as far in advance as he could afford. He used a false name. And he made sure that no one else knew about it. He'd only ever let its existence slip once, to one person. A woman. It was in a very special circumstance so he wasn't worried that she would mention it. Even if she remembered or realized the significance, there was no way she could ever breathe a word.

Zack Weaver checked his phone for the fiftieth time that afternoon. Was there signal? Still yes. Was there a text from Harvey Jones? Still no.

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Weaver forced himself to stop pacing in front of the desk in the room he used as an office in his home in Fells Point, which felt like a different world from Gilmour's apartment. He crossed the room and flopped down in the beat-up leather lounge chair in the corner by the door and balanced the phone on its arm so he could see the screen. Another minute ticked over on the display. Then another.

The anger that had been boiling Weaver's blood ever since Jones failed to check in on time was starting to cool. It was giving way to fear. The job Weaver had sent Jones to do was simple: Scare some sense into Gilmour. Make sure he knocked it off with his *911 emergency* BS and held up his side of the bargain. And Gilmour was so paranoid and flaky that a Boy Scout in a Halloween costume could get it done, let alone a giant like Jones.

At first Weaver assumed that Jones had taken care of business and then wandered off to do whatever it is out-of-work actors do with their time and had just forgotten to send his report. So Weaver had prompted Jones via text. A whole string of them, one after another. A dozen in total. A single message Jones might have missed. But twelve? That seemed unlikely. Something else must be going on.

Weaver knew that Gilmour was ex-military. If Jones had spooked him – and the whole point of sending Jones was that he was so scary-looking – Gilmour could have overreacted. Gotten into a fight with Jones. Killed

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him, even. Or if Gilmour had caused a scene in public they both could have gotten arrested. And that would be worse. There was no way either of them would stay silent for long.

Weaver moved back to his desk and fired up his laptop. He called up the local news station's website and right away had his answer. The latest story detailed how a local man had collapsed and died on a city sidewalk a few minutes before noon that day. A heart attack was suspected. Not foul play. No mention was made of a third party being involved, which was good. No name was given, either – presumably next of kin had to be informed before that could happen – but the time corresponded and the location was a block from the coffee shop where Jones was supposed to meet Gilmour. Weaver switched to a social media site and checked which hashtags were trending. He clicked on one that sounded relevant and a photograph popped up. It was blurred and poorly framed – obviously taken on a phone, probably by someone getting jostled by a crowd – and it showed a pair of paramedics trying to lift a man's body onto a gurney at the edge of a sidewalk. The body was inert. The man was huge. Weaver couldn't see his face, but given his height and bulk, there was no doubt in his mind. It was Jones. The only question that remained was whether he had been leaving the coffee shop after dealing with Gilmour, or if he had still been on his way to meet him. If he'd been leaving, then there was no problem. The message would have been delivered. But if he'd

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