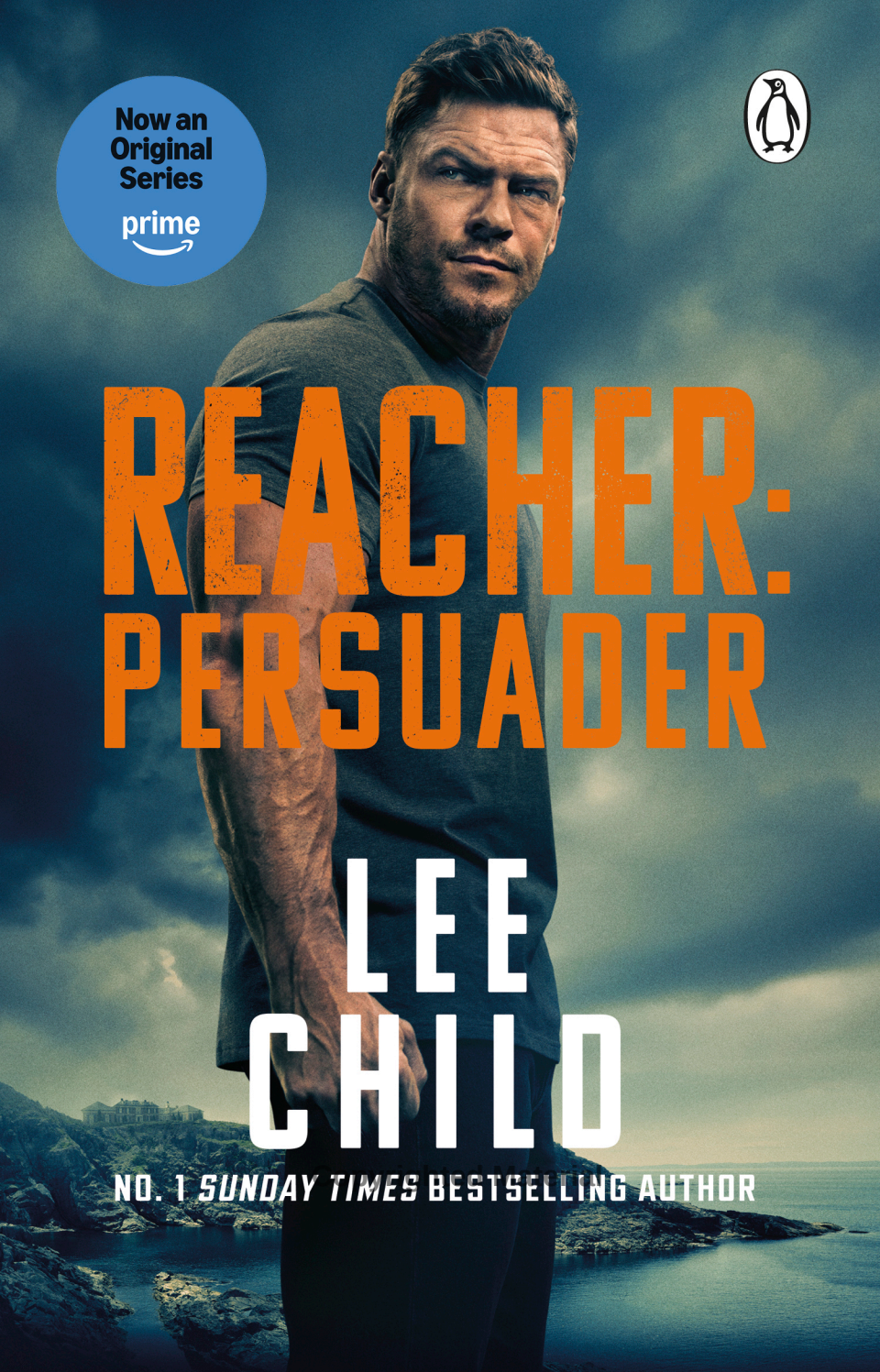

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Lee Child is one of the world's leading thriller writers. He was born in Coventry, raised in Birmingham, and now lives in England's Lake District. It is said one of his novels featuring his hero Jack Reacher is sold somewhere in the world every nine 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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SAFE ENOUGH (STORIES)
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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:
Drivers licence; credit cards; federal benefits; tax returns; dependents

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PERSUADER

Lee Child



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For Jane and the shore birds

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ONE

The cop climbed out of his car exactly four minutes before he got shot. He moved like he knew his fate in advance. He pushed the door against the resistance of a stiff hinge and swivelled slowly on the worn vinyl seat and planted both feet flat on the road. Then he grasped the doorframe with both hands and heaved himself up and out. He stood in the cold clear air for a second and then turned and pushed the door shut again behind him. Held still for a second longer. Then he stepped forward and leaned against the side of the hood up near the headlight.

The car was a seven-year-old Chevy Caprice. It was black and had no police markings. But it had three radio antennas and plain chrome hubs. Most cops you talk to swear the Caprice was the best police vehicle ever built. This guy looked like he agreed with them. He looked like a veteran plain-clothes detective with the whole of the motor pool at his disposal. Like he drove the ancient Chevy because he wanted to. Like he wasn't interested in the new Fords. I could see

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that kind of stubborn old-timer personality in the way he held himself. He was wide and bulky in a plain dark suit made from some kind of heavy wool. He was tall but stooped. An old man. He turned his head and looked north and south along the road and then craned his thick neck to glance back over his shoulder at the college gate. He was thirty yards away from me.

The college gate itself was purely a ceremonial thing. Two tall brick pillars just rose up from a long expanse of tended lawn behind the sidewalk. Connecting the pillars was a high double gate made from iron bars bent and folded and twisted into fancy shapes. It was shiny black. It looked like it had just been repainted. It was probably repainted after every winter. It had no security function. Anybody who wanted to avoid it could drive straight across the lawn. It was wide open, anyway. There was a driveway behind it with little knee-high iron posts set eight feet back on either side. They had latches. Each half of the gate was latched into one of them. Wide open. The driveway led on down to a huddle of mellow brick buildings about a hundred yards away. The buildings had steep mossy roofs and were overhung by trees. The driveway was lined with trees. The sidewalk was lined with trees. There were trees everywhere. Their leaves were just about coming in. They were tiny and curled and bright green. Six months from now they would be big and red and golden and photographers would be swarming all over the place taking pictures of them for the college brochure.

Twenty yards beyond the cop and his car and

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the gate was a pick-up truck parked on the other side of the road. It was tight against the kerb. It was facing towards me, fifty yards away. It looked a little out of place. It was faded red and had a big bull bar on the front. The bar was dull black and looked like it had been bent and straightened a couple of times. There were two men in the cab. They were young, tall, clean-cut, fair-haired. They were just sitting there, completely still, gazing forward, looking at nothing in particular. They weren't looking at the cop. They weren't looking at me.

I was set up to the south. I had an anonymous brown panel van parked outside a music store. The store was the kind of place you find near a college gate. It had used CDs in racks out on the sidewalk and posters in the windows behind them advertising bands people have never heard of. I had the van's rear doors open. There were boxes stacked inside. I had a sheaf of paperwork in my hands. I was wearing a coat, because it was a cold April morning. I was wearing gloves, because the boxes in the van had loose staples where they had been torn open. I was wearing a gun, because I often do. It was wedged in my pants, at the back, under the coat. It was a Colt Anaconda, which is a huge stainless steel revolver chambered for the .44 Magnum cartridge. It was thirteen and a half inches long and weighed almost four pounds. Not my first choice of weapon. It was hard and heavy and cold and I was aware of it all the time.

I paused in the middle of the sidewalk and looked up from my papers and heard the distant pick-up's engine start. It didn't go anywhere. It

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stayed where it was, just idling. White exhaust pooled around its rear wheels. The air was cold. It was early and the street was deserted. I stepped behind my van and glanced down the side of the music store towards the college buildings. Saw a black Lincoln Town Car waiting outside one of them. There were two guys standing next to it. I was a hundred yards away but neither one of them looked like a limo driver. Limo drivers don't come in pairs and they don't look young and heavy and they don't act tense and wary. These guys looked exactly like bodyguards.

The building the Lincoln was waiting outside looked like some kind of small dormitory. It had Greek letters over a big wooden door. I watched and the big wooden door opened up and a young thin guy stepped out. He looked like a student. He had long messy hair and was dressed like a homeless person but carried a bag that looked like shiny expensive leather. One of the bodyguards stood point while the other held the car door and the young thin guy tossed his bag onto the back seat and slid right in after it. He pulled the door shut behind himself. I heard it slam, faint and muffled from a hundred yards away. The bodyguards glanced around for a second and then got in the front together and a moment later the car moved away. Thirty yards behind it a college security vehicle snuffled slowly in the same direction, not like it was intending to make up a convoy but like it just happened to be there anyway. There were two rent-a-cops in it. They were slumped down low in their seats and they looked aimless and bored.

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I took my gloves off and tossed them into the back of my van. Stepped out into the road where my view was better. I saw the Lincoln come up the driveway at a moderate speed. It was black and shiny and immaculate. It had plenty of chrome on it. Plenty of wax. The college cops were way behind it. It paused at the ceremonial gate and turned left and came south towards the black police Caprice. Towards me.

What happened next occupied eight seconds, but it felt like the blink of an eye.

The faded red pick-up moved off the kerb twenty yards back. It accelerated hard. It caught up with the Lincoln and pulled out and passed it exactly level with the cop's Caprice. It came within a foot of the cop's knees. Then it accelerated again and pulled a little way ahead and its driver swung the wheel hard and the corner of the bull bar smashed square into the Lincoln's front fender. The pick-up driver kept the wheel turned and his foot hard down and forced the Lincoln off the road onto the shoulder. The grass tore up and the Lincoln slowed radically and then hit a tree head-on. There was the *boom* of metal caving and tearing and headlight glass shattering and there was a big cloud of steam and the tree's tiny green leaves shook and quivered noisily in the still morning air.

Then the two guys in the pick-up came out shooting. They had black machine pistols and were firing them at the Lincoln. The sound was deafening and I could see arcs of spent brass raining down on the blacktop. Then the guys were pulling at the Lincoln's doors. Hauling them

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open. One of them leaned into the back and started dragging the thin kid out. The other was still firing his gun into the front. Then he reached into his pocket left-handed and came out with some kind of grenade. Tossed it inside the Lincoln and slammed the doors and grabbed his buddy and the kid by the shoulders and turned them away and hauled them down into a crouch. There was a loud bright explosion inside the Lincoln. All six windows shattered. I was more than twenty yards away and felt every bit of the concussion. Pebbles of glass blew everywhere. They made rainbows in the sun. Then the guy who had tossed the grenade scrambled up and sprinted for the passenger side of the pick-up and the other straight-armed the kid inside the cab and crowded right in after him. The doors slammed shut and I saw the kid trapped in there on the centre seat. I saw terror in his face. It was white with shock and through the dirty windshield I saw his mouth opening in a silent scream. I saw the driver working the gears and heard the engine roaring and the tyres squealing and then the truck was coming directly towards me.

It was a Toyota. I could see TOYOTA on the grille behind the bull bar. It rode high on its suspension and I could see a big black differential at the front. It was the size of a soccer ball. Four-wheel drive. Big fat tyres. Dents and faded paint that hadn't been washed since it left the factory. It was coming straight at me.

I had less than a second to decide.

I flipped the tail of my coat and pulled out the Colt. Aimed very carefully and fired once at

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the Toyota's grille. The big gun flashed and roared and kicked in my hand. The huge .44 slug shattered the radiator. I fired again at the left front tyre. Blew it out in a spectacular explosion of black rubber debris. Yards of blown tread whipped through the air. The truck slewed and stopped with the driver's side facing me. Ten yards away. I ducked behind the back of my van and slammed the rear doors and came out on the sidewalk and fired again at the left rear tyre. Same result. Rubber everywhere. The truck crashed down on its left-side rims at a steep angle. The driver opened his door and spilled out on the blacktop and scrambled up on one knee. He had his gun in the wrong hand. He juggled it across and I waited until I was fairly sure he was going to point it at me. Then I used my left hand to cradle my right forearm against the Colt's four-pound weight and aimed carefully at centre mass like I had been taught a long time ago and pulled the trigger. The guy's chest seemed to explode in a huge cloud of blood. The skinny kid was rigid inside the cab. Just staring in shock and horror. But the second guy was out of the cab and scrambling around the front of the hood towards me. His gun was coming round at me. I swivelled left and paused a beat and cradled my forearm. Aimed at his chest. Fired. Same result. He went down on his back behind the fender in a cloud of red vapour.

Now the skinny kid was moving in the cab. I ran for him and pulled him out right over the first guy's body. Ran him back to my van. He was limp with shock and confusion. I shoved him into the

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passenger seat and slammed the door on him and spun round and headed for the driver's side. In the corner of my eye I saw a third guy coming straight for me. Reaching into his jacket. Some tall heavy guy. Dark clothes. I braced my arm and fired and saw the big red explosion in his chest at exactly the same split second I realized it was the old cop from the Caprice and he had been reaching into his pocket for his badge. The badge was a gold shield in a worn leather holder and it flew up out of his hand and tumbled end over end and landed hard against the kerb right in front of my van.

Time stood still.

I stared at the cop. He was on his back in the gutter. His whole chest was a mess of red. It was all over him. There was no welling or pumping. No sign of a heartbeat. There was a big ragged hole in his shirt. He was completely still. His head was turned and his cheek was hard against the blacktop. His arms were flung out and I could see pale veins in his hands. I was aware of the blackness of the road and the vivid green of the grass and the bright blue of the sky. I could hear the thrill of the breeze in the new leaves over the gunshots still roaring in my ears. I saw the skinny kid staring out through my van's windshield at the downed cop and then staring at me. I saw the college security cruiser coming left out of the gate. It was moving slower than it should have been. Dozens of shots had been fired. Maybe they were worried about where their jurisdiction began and where it ended. Maybe they were just scared. I saw their pale pink faces behind their

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windshield. They were turned in my direction. Their car was doing maybe fifteen miles an hour. It was crawling straight at me. I glanced at the gold shield in the gutter. The metal was worn smooth by a lifetime of use. I glanced at my van. Stood completely still. One thing I learned a long time ago is that it's easy enough to shoot a man. But there's absolutely no way to unshoot one.

I heard the college car rolling slowly towards me. Heard its tyres crushing grit on the blacktop. Everything else was silence. Then time restarted and a voice in my head screamed *go go go* and I ran for it. I scrambled into the van and threw the gun down on the middle seat and fired up the engine and pulled a U-turn so hard we came up on two wheels. The skinny kid was thrown all over the place. I got the wheel straight and stamped on the gas and took off south. I had a limited view in the mirror but I saw the college cops light up their roof bar and come right after me. The kid next to me was totally silent. His mouth was hanging open. He was concentrating on staying in his seat. I was concentrating on accelerating as hard as I could. Traffic was mercifully light. It was a sleepy New England town, early in the morning. I got the van wound up to about seventy miles an hour and tightened my hands on the wheel until my knuckles showed white and just stared at the road ahead, like I didn't want to see what was behind me.

'How far back are they?' I asked the kid.

He didn't respond. He was slack with shock and crunched up in the corner of his seat, as far away from me as he could get. He was staring at

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the roof. He had his right hand braced against the door. Pale skin, long fingers.

'How far back?' I asked again. The engine was roaring loud.

'You killed a cop,' he said. 'That old guy was a cop, you know.'

'I know.'

'You shot him.'

'Accident,' I said. 'How far back are the others?'

'He was showing you his badge.'

'*How far back are the others?*'

He stirred himself and turned round and ducked his head a little so he could line up the view out of the small rear windows.

'Hundred feet,' he said. He sounded vague and scared. 'Real close. One of them is hanging out the window with a gun.'

Right on cue I heard the distant pop of a handgun over the roar of the engine and the whine of the tyres. I picked up the Colt from the seat beside me. Dropped it again. It was empty. I had fired six times already. A radiator, two tyres, two guys. And one cop.

'Glove compartment,' I said.

'You should stop,' he said. 'Explain to them. You were helping me. It was a mistake.' He wasn't looking at me. He was staring out of the back windows.

'I shot a cop,' I said. I kept my voice completely neutral. 'That's all they know. That's all they want to know. They aren't going to care about how or why.'

The kid said nothing.

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‘Glove compartment,’ I said again.

He turned again and fumbled the lid open. There was another Anaconda in there. Identical. Shiny stainless steel, fully loaded. I took it from the kid. Wound my window all the way down. Cold air rushed in like a gale. It carried the sound of a handgun firing right behind us, fast and steady.

‘Shit,’ I said.

The kid said nothing. The shots kept coming, loud and dull and percussive. *How were they missing?*

‘Get down on the floor,’ I said.

I slid sideways until my left shoulder was jammed hard against the doorframe and craned my right arm all the way round until the new gun was out of the window and pointing backward. I fired once and the kid stared at me in horror and then slid forward and crouched down in the space between the front edge of his seat and the dash with his arms wrapped around his head. A second later the rear window ten feet behind where his head had been exploded.

‘Shit,’ I said again. Steered for the side of the road to improve my angle. Fired behind us again.

‘I need you to watch,’ I said. ‘Stay down as far as you can.’

The kid didn’t move.

‘Get up,’ I said. ‘*Now*. I need you to watch.’

He raised himself a little and twisted round until his head was just high enough to see out the back. I saw him register the shattered rear window. Saw him realize that his head had been right in line with it.

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‘I’m going to slow down a little,’ I said. ‘Going to pull in so they’ll pull out to pass me.’

‘Don’t do it,’ the kid said. ‘You can still put this right.’

I ignored him. Dropped the speed to maybe fifty and pulled right and the college car instinctively drifted left to come up on my flank. I fired my last three chambers at it and its windshield shattered and it slewed all the way across the road like maybe the driver was hit or a tyre had gone. It ploughed nose-first into the opposite shoulder and smashed through a line of planted shrubs and then it was lost to sight. I dropped the empty gun on the seat beside me and wound the window up and accelerated hard. The kid said nothing. Just stared into the rear of the van. The broken window back there was making a weird moaning sound as the air sucked out through it.

‘OK,’ I said. I was out of breath. ‘Now we’re good to go.’

The kid turned to face me.

‘Are you crazy?’ he said.

‘You know what happens to people who shoot cops?’ I said back.

He had no reply to that. We drove on in silence for maybe thirty whole seconds, more than half a mile, blinking and panting and staring straight ahead through the windshield like we were mesmerized. The inside of the van stank of gunpowder.

‘It was an accident,’ I said. ‘I can’t bring him back. So get over it.’

‘Who *are* you?’ he asked.

‘No, who are *you*?’ I asked back.

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He went quiet. He was breathing hard. I checked the mirror. The road was completely empty behind us. Completely empty ahead of us. We were way out in open country. Maybe ten minutes from a highway cloverleaf.

'I'm a target,' he said. 'For abduction.'

It was an odd word to use.

'They were trying to kidnap me,' he said.

'You think?'

He nodded. 'It's happened before.'

'Why?'

'Money,' the kid said. 'Why else?'

'You rich?'

'My father is.'

'Who is he?'

'Just a guy.'

'But a rich guy,' I said.

'He's a rug importer.'

'Rugs?' I said. 'What, like carpets?'

'Oriental rugs.'

'You can get rich importing Oriental rugs?'

'Very,' the kid said.

'You got a name?'

'Richard,' he said. 'Richard Beck.'

I checked the mirror again. The road was still empty behind. Still empty ahead. I slowed a little and steadied the van in the centre of my lane and tried to drive on like a normal person.

'So who were those guys?' I asked.

Richard Beck shook his head. 'I have no idea.'

'They knew where you were going to be. And when.'

'I was going home for my mother's birthday. It's tomorrow.'

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‘Who would know that?’

‘I’m not sure. Anybody who knows my family. Anybody in the rug community, I guess. We’re well known.’

‘There’s a community?’ I said. ‘Rugs?’

‘We all compete,’ he said. ‘Same sources, same market. We all know each other.’

I said nothing. Just drove on, sixty miles an hour.

‘*You* got a name?’ he asked me.

‘No,’ I said.

He nodded, like he understood. *Smart boy*.

‘What are you going to do?’ he asked.

‘I’m going to let you out near the highway,’ I said. ‘You can hitch a ride or call a cab and then you can forget all about me.’

He went very quiet.

‘I can’t take you to the cops,’ I said. ‘That’s just not possible. You understand that, right? I killed one. Maybe three. You saw me do it.’

He stayed quiet. *Decision time*. The highway was six minutes ahead.

‘They’ll throw away the key,’ I said. ‘I screwed up, it was an accident, but they aren’t going to listen. They never do. So don’t ask me to go anywhere near *anybody*. Not as a witness, not as nothing. I’m out of here like I don’t exist. We absolutely clear on that?’

He didn’t speak.

‘And don’t give them a description,’ I said. ‘Tell them you don’t remember me. Tell them you were in shock. Or I’ll find you and I’ll kill you.’

He didn’t answer.

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‘I’ll let you out somewhere,’ I said. ‘Like you never saw me.’

He moved. Turned sideways on his seat and looked straight at me.

‘Take me home,’ he said. ‘All the way. We’ll give you money. Help you out. We’ll hide you, if you want. My folks will be grateful. I mean, *I’m* grateful. Believe me. You saved my ass. The cop thing, it was an accident, right? Just an accident. You got unlucky. It was a pressure situation. I can understand that. We’ll keep it quiet.’

‘I don’t need your help,’ I said. ‘I just need to get rid of you.’

‘But I need to get home,’ he said. ‘We’d be helping each other.’

The highway was four minutes ahead.

‘Where’s home?’ I asked.

‘Abbot,’ he said.

‘Abbot what?’

‘Abbot, Maine,’ he said. ‘On the coast. Between Kennebunkport and Portland.’

‘We’re heading in the wrong direction.’

‘You can turn north on the highway.’

‘It’s got to be two hundred miles, minimum.’

‘We’ll give you money. We’ll make it worth your while.’

‘I could let you out near Boston,’ I said. ‘Got to be a bus to Portland.’

He shook his head, violently, like a seizure.

‘No way,’ he said. ‘I can’t take the bus. I can’t be alone. Not now. I need protection. Those guys might still be out there.’

‘Those guys are dead,’ I said. ‘Like the damn cop.’

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‘They might have associates.’

It was another odd word to use. He looked small and thin and scared. There was a pulse jumping in his neck. He used both hands to pull his hair away from his head and turned towards the windshield to let me see his left ear. It wasn’t there. There was just a hard knob of scar tissue. It looked like a small piece of uncooked pasta. Like a raw tortellini floret.

‘They cut it off and mailed it,’ he said. ‘The first time.’

‘When?’

‘I was fifteen.’

‘Your dad didn’t pay up?’

‘Not quickly enough.’

I said nothing. Richard Beck just sat there, showing me his scar, shocked and scared and breathing like a machine.

‘You OK?’ I asked.

‘Take me home,’ he said. Like he was pleading. ‘I can’t be alone now.’

The highway was two minutes ahead.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘Help me.’

‘Shit,’ I said, for the third time.

‘Please. We can help each other. You need to hide out.’

‘We can’t keep this van,’ I said. ‘We have to assume the description is on the air all over the state.’

He stared at me, full of hope. The highway was one minute ahead.

‘We’ll have to find a car,’ I said.

‘Where?’

‘Anywhere. There are cars all over the place.’

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There was a big sprawling out-of-town shopping mall nestled south and west of the highway interchange. I could already see it in the distance. There were giant tan buildings with no windows and bright neon signs. There were giant parking lots about half filled with cars. I pulled in and drove once round the whole place. It was as big as a town. There were people everywhere. They made me nervous. I came round again and headed in past a line of trash containers to the rear of a big department store.

'Where are we going?' Richard asked.

'Staff parking,' I said. 'Customers are in and out all day long. Unpredictable. But store people are in there for the duration. Safer.'

He looked at me like he didn't understand. I headed for a line of eight cars parked head-on against a blank wall. There was an empty slot next to a dull-coloured Nissan Maxima about three years old. It would do. It was a pretty anonymous vehicle. The lot was a backwater, quiet and private. I pulled beyond the empty slot and backed up into it. Put the van's rear doors tight against the wall.

'Got to hide the busted window,' I said.

The kid said nothing. I put both empty Colts into my coat pockets and slid out. Tried the Maxima's doors.

'Find me some wire,' I said. 'Like heavy electrical cable or a coat hanger.'

'You're going to steal this car?'

I nodded. Said nothing.

'Is that smart?'

'You'd think so if it was you who'd accidentally shot a cop.'

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The kid looked blank for a second and then came to and scouted around. I emptied the Anacondas and tossed the twelve spent shell cases into a garbage container. The kid came back with a three-foot length of electrical wire from a trash pile. I stripped the insulation with my teeth and made a little hook in the end and shoved it past the rubber sealing strip round the Maxima's window.

'You're the lookout,' I said.

He stepped away and scanned the lot and I fed the wire down inside the car and jiggled it around and jiggled the door handle until it popped open. I tossed the wire back in the trash and bent down under the steering column and pulled off the plastic shroud. Sorted through the wires in there until I found the two I needed and touched them together. The starter motor whined and the engine turned over and caught and ran steadily. The kid looked suitably impressed.

'Misspent youth,' I said.

'Is this smart?' he asked again.

I nodded. 'Smart as we can get. It won't be missed until six tonight, maybe eight. Whenever the store closes. You'll be home long before then.'

He paused with his hand on the passenger door and then kind of shook himself and ducked inside. I racked the driver's seat back and adjusted the mirror and backed out of the slot. Took it easy through the mall lot. There was a cop car crawling around about a hundred yards away. I parked again in the first place I saw and sat there with the engine running until the cop

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moved away. Then I hustled for the exit and around the cloverleaf and two minutes later we were heading north on a wide smooth highway at a respectable sixty miles an hour. The car smelled strongly of perfume and there were two boxes of tissues in it. There was some kind of furry bear stuck on the rear window with clear plastic suckers where its paws should have been. There was a Little League glove on the back seat and I could hear an aluminium bat rattling around in the trunk.

'Mom's taxi,' I said.

The kid didn't answer.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'She's probably insured. Probably a solid citizen.'

'Don't you feel bad?' he said. 'About the cop?'

I glanced at him. He was thin and pale and crunched up again as far from me as he could get. His hand was resting against the door. His long fingers made him look a little like a musician. I think he wanted to like me, but I didn't need him to.

'Shit happens,' I said. 'No need to get all worked up about it.'

'What the hell kind of answer is that?'

'The only kind. It was minor collateral damage. Means nothing unless it comes back to bite us. Bottom line, we can't change it, so we move on.'

He said nothing.

'Anyway, it was your dad's fault,' I said.

'For being rich and having a son?'

'For hiring lousy bodyguards.'

He looked away. Said nothing.

'They *were* bodyguards, right?'

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He nodded. Said nothing.

'So don't *you* feel bad?' I asked. 'About them?'

'A little,' he said. 'I guess. I didn't know them well.'

'They were useless,' I said.

'It happened so fast.'

'The bad guys were waiting right there,' I said. 'A ratty old pick-up like that just hanging around in a prissy little college town? What kind of bodyguards don't notice a thing like that? They never heard of threat assessment?'

'You saying you noticed?'

I nodded. 'I noticed.'

'Not bad for a van driver.'

'I was in the army. I was a military cop. I understand bodyguarding. And I understand collateral damage.'

The kid nodded, uncertainly.

'You got a name yet?' he asked.

'Depends,' I said. 'I need to understand your point of view. I could be in all kinds of trouble. At least one cop is dead and now I just stole a car.'

He went quiet. I matched him, mile for mile. Gave him time to think. We were almost out of Massachusetts.

'My family appreciates loyalty,' he said. 'You did their son a service. And you did *them* a service. Saved them some money, at least. They'll show their gratitude. I'm sure the last thing they'll do is rat you out.'

'You need to call them?'

He shook his head. 'They're expecting me. As long as I show up there's no need to call them.'

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'The cops will call them. They think you're in big trouble.'

'They don't have the number. Nobody does.'

'The college must have your address. They can find your number.'

He shook his head again. 'The college doesn't have the address. Nobody does. We're very careful about stuff like that.'

I shrugged and kept quiet and drove another mile.

'So what about you?' I said. 'You going to rat me out?'

I saw him touch his right ear. The one that was still there. It was clearly a completely subconscious gesture.

'You saved my ass,' he said. 'I'm not going to rat you out.'

'OK,' I said. 'My name is Reacher.'

We spent a few minutes cutting across a tiny corner of Vermont and then struck out north and east across New Hampshire. Settled in for the long, long drive. The adrenalin drained away and the kid got over his state of shock and we both ended up a little down and sleepy. I cracked the window to get some air in and some perfume out. It made the car noisy but it kept me awake. We talked a little. Richard Beck told me he was twenty years old. He was in his junior year. He was majoring in some kind of contemporary art expression thing that sounded a lot like finger painting to me. He wasn't good at relationships. He was an only child. There was a lot of ambivalence about his family. They were clearly some

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kind of tight close-knit clan and half of him wanted out and the other half needed to be in. He was clearly very traumatized by the previous kidnap. It made me wonder whether something had been done to him, apart from the ear thing. Maybe something much worse.

I told him about the army. I laid it on pretty thick about my bodyguarding qualifications. I wanted him to feel he was in good hands, at least temporarily. I drove fast and steady. The Maxima had just been filled. We didn't need to stop for gas. He didn't want lunch. I stopped once to use a men's room. Left the engine running so I wouldn't have to fiddle with the ignition wires again. Came back to the car and found him inert inside it. We got back on the road and passed by Concord in New Hampshire and headed towards Portland in Maine. Time passed. He got more relaxed the closer we got to home. But he got quieter, too. Ambivalence.

We crossed the state line and then about twenty miles short of Portland he squirmed round and checked the view out of the back very carefully and told me to take the next exit. We turned onto a narrow road heading due east towards the Atlantic. It passed under I-95 and then ran more than fifteen miles across granite headlands to the sea. It was the kind of landscape that would have looked great in summer. But it was still cold and raw. There were trees stunted by salt winds and exposed rock outcrops where gales and storm tides had scoured the dirt away. The road twisted and turned like it was trying to fight its way as far east as it could get. I glimpsed

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the ocean ahead. It was as grey as iron. We pushed on past inlets to the left and right. I saw small beaches made of gritty sand. Then the road curved left and immediately right and rose up onto a headland shaped like the palm of a hand. The palm narrowed abruptly into a single finger jutting directly out to sea. It was a rock peninsula maybe a hundred yards wide and half a mile long. I could feel the wind buffeting the car. I drove out onto the peninsula and saw a line of bent and stunted evergreen trees that were trying to hide a high granite wall but weren't quite tall enough or thick enough to succeed. The wall was maybe eight feet tall. It was topped with big coils of razor wire. It had security lights mounted at intervals. It ran laterally all the way across the hundred-yard width of the finger. It canted down suddenly at the ends and ran all the way into the sea, where its massive foundations were built on huge stone blocks. The blocks were mossy with seaweed. There was an iron gate set in the wall, dead centre. It was closed.

'This is it,' Richard Beck said. 'This is where I live.'

The road led straight to the gate. Behind the gate it changed to a long straight driveway. At the end of the driveway was a grey stone house. I could see it there at the end of the finger, right out in the ocean. Just inside the gate was a one-storey lodge. Same design and same stone as the house, but much smaller and lower. It shared its foundations with the wall. I slowed and stopped the car in front of the gate.

'Honk the horn,' Richard Beck said.

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The Maxima had a little bugle shape on the airbag lid. I pressed on it with one finger and the horn beeped politely. I saw a surveillance camera on the gatepost tilt and pan. It was like a little glass eye looking at me. There was a long pause and the lodge door opened. A guy in a dark suit stepped out. Clearly the suit came from a big-and-tall store and was probably the largest size it had ever offered but even so it was very tight in the shoulders and short in the arms for its owner. He was way bigger than me, which put him firmly in the freak category. He was a giant. He walked up close to his side of the gate and stared out. He spent a long time looking at me and a short time looking at the kid. Then he unlocked the gate and pulled it open.

'Drive straight up to the house,' Richard said. 'Don't stop here. I don't like that guy very much.'

I drove through the gate. Didn't stop. But I drove slow and looked around. The first thing you do going into a place is to look for your way out. The wall ran all the way into rough water on both sides. It was too high to jump and the razor wire along the top made it impossible to climb. There was a cleared area maybe thirty yards deep behind it. Like no man's land. Or a minefield. The security lights were set to cover all of it. There was no way out except through the gate. The giant was closing it behind us. I could see him in the mirror.

It was a long drive up to the house. Grey ocean on three sides. The house was a big old pile. Maybe some sea captain's place from way back when killing whales made people respectable

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fortunes. It was all stone, with intricate beadings and cornices and folds. All the north-facing surfaces were covered in grey lichens. The rest was spotted with green. It was three storeys high. It had a dozen chimneys. The roof line was complex. There were gables all over the place with short gutters and dozens of fat iron pipes to drain the rainwater away. The front door was oak and was banded and studded with iron. The driveway widened into a carriage circle. I followed it round counterclockwise and stopped right in front of the door. The door opened and another guy in a dark suit stepped out. He was about my size, which made him a lot smaller than the guy in the lodge. But I didn't like him any better. He had a stone face and blank eyes. He opened the Maxima's passenger door like he had been expecting to see it, which I guessed he was, because the big guy in the lodge must have called ahead.

'Would you wait here?' Richard asked me.

He slipped out of the car and walked away into the gloom inside the house and the guy in the suit closed the oak door from the outside and took up station right in front of it. He wasn't looking at me but I knew I was somewhere in his peripheral vision. I broke the wire connection under the steering column and turned the motor off and waited.

It was a reasonably long wait, probably close to forty minutes. Without the engine running the car grew cold. It rocked gently in the sea breeze eddying round the house. I stared straight ahead through the windshield. I was facing northeast

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and the air was whipped and clear. I could see the coastline curving in from the left. I could see a faint brown smudge in the air about twenty miles away. Probably pollution coming up out of Portland. The city itself was hidden behind a headland.

Then the oak door opened again and the guard stepped smartly aside and a woman came out. She was Richard Beck's mother. No doubt about that. No doubt at all. She had the same slight build and the same pale face. The same long fingers. She was wearing jeans and a heavy fisherman's sweater. She had windblown hair and was maybe fifty years old. She looked tired and strained. She stopped about six feet from the car, like she was giving me the opportunity to realize it would be more polite if I got out and met her halfway. So I opened the door and slid out. I was stiff and cramped. I stepped forward and she put out her hand. I took it. It was ice cold and full of bones and tendons.

'My son told me what happened,' she said. Her voice was low and sounded a little husky, like maybe she smoked a lot or had been crying hard. 'I can't begin to express how grateful I am that you helped him.'

'Is he OK?' I asked.

She made a face, like she wasn't sure. 'He's lying down now.'

I nodded. Let go of her hand. It fell back to her side. There was a short awkward silence.

'I'm Elizabeth Beck,' she said.

'Jack Reacher,' I said.

'My son explained your predicament,' she said.

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It was a nice neutral word. I said nothing in reply.

'My husband will be home tonight,' she said. 'He'll know what to do.'

I nodded. There was another awkward pause. I waited.

'Would you like to come in?' she asked.

She turned and walked back into the hallway. I followed her. I passed through the door and it beeped. I looked again and saw that a metal detector had been installed tight against the inside jamb.

'Would you mind?' Elizabeth Beck asked. She made a sort of sheepish apologetic gesture towards me and then towards the big ugly guy in the suit. He stepped up and made ready to pat me down.

'Two guns,' I said. 'Empty. In my coat pockets.'

He pulled them out with the kind of easy practised moves that suggested he had patted plenty of people down before. He laid them on a side table and squatted and ran his hands up my legs, and then stood and went over my arms, my waist, my chest, my back. He was very thorough, and not very gentle.

'I'm sorry,' Elizabeth Beck said.

The guy in the suit stood back and there was another awkward silence.

'Do you need anything?' Elizabeth Beck asked.

I could think of a lot of things I needed. But I just shook my head.

'I'm kind of tired,' I said. 'Long day. I really need a nap.'

She smiled briefly, like she was pleased, like

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having her own personal cop-killer asleep somewhere would relieve her of a social pressure.

'Of course,' she said. 'Duke will show you to a room.'

She looked at me for a second longer. Underneath the strain and the pallor she was a handsome woman. She had fine bones and good skin. Thirty years ago she must have been fighting them off with a stick. She turned away and disappeared into the depths of the house. I turned to the guy in the suit. I assumed he was Duke.

'When do I get the guns back?' I asked.

He didn't answer. Just pointed me to the staircase and followed me up. Pointed to the next staircase and we came out on the third floor. He led me to a door and pushed it open. I went in and found a plain square room panelled with oak. There was heavy old furniture in it. A bed, an armoire, a table, a chair. There was an Oriental carpet on the floor. It looked thin and threadbare. Maybe it was a priceless old item. Duke pushed past me and walked across it and showed me where the bathroom was. He was acting like a bellboy in a hotel. He pushed past me again and headed back to the door.

'Dinner's at eight,' he said. Nothing more.

He stepped out and closed the door. I didn't hear a sound but when I checked I found it was locked from the outside. There was no keyhole on the inside. I stepped to the window and looked out at the view. I was at the back of the house and all I could see was ocean. I was facing due east and there was nothing between me and Europe. I looked down. Fifty feet below were rocks with

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waves foaming all around them. The tide looked like it was coming in.

I stepped back to the door and put my ear against it and listened hard. Heard nothing. I scanned the ceiling and the cornices and the furniture, very carefully, inch by inch. Nothing there. No cameras. I didn't care about microphones. I wasn't going to make any noise. I sat on the bed and took my right shoe off. Flipped it over and used my fingernails to pull a pin out of the heel. Swivelled the heel rubber like a little door and turned the shoe the right way up and shook it. A small black plastic rectangle fell out on the bed and bounced once. It was a wireless e-mail device. Nothing fancy. It was just a commercial product, but it had been reprogrammed to send only to one address. It was about the size of a large pager. It had a small cramped keyboard with tiny keys. I switched the power on and typed a short message. Then I pressed *send now*.

The message said: *I'm in*.

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TWO

Truth is by that point I had been *in* for eleven whole days, since a damp shiny Saturday night in the city of Boston when I saw a dead man walk across a sidewalk and get into a car. It wasn't a delusion. It wasn't an uncanny resemblance. It wasn't a double or a twin or a brother or a cousin. It was a man who had died a decade ago. There was no doubt about it. No trick of the light. He looked older by the appropriate number of years and was carrying the scars of the wounds that had killed him.

I was walking on Huntington Avenue with a mile to go to a bar I had heard about. It was late. Symphony Hall was just letting out. I was too stubborn to cross the street and avoid the crowd. I just threaded my way through it. There was a mass of well-dressed fragrant people, most of them old. There were double-parked cars and taxis at the kerb. Their engines were running and their windshield wipers were thumping back and forth at irregular intervals. I saw the guy step out of the foyer doors on my left. He was wearing a heavy cashmere overcoat and carrying

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gloves and a scarf. He was bareheaded. He was about fifty. We almost collided. I stopped. He stopped. He looked right at me. We got into one of those crowded-sidewalk things where we both hesitated and then both started moving and then both stopped again. At first I thought he didn't recognize me. Then there was a shadow in his face. Nothing definitive. I held back and he walked across in front of me and climbed into the rear seat of a black Cadillac DeVille waiting at the kerb. I stood there and watched as the driver eased out into the traffic and pulled away. I heard the hiss of the tyres on the wet pavement.

I got the plate number. I wasn't panicking. I wasn't questioning anything. I was ready to believe the evidence of my own eyes. Ten years of history was overturned in a second. *The guy was alive*. Which gave me a huge problem.

That was day one. I forgot all about the bar. I went straight back to my hotel and started calling half-forgotten numbers from my Military Police days. I needed somebody I knew and trusted, but I had been out for six years by then and it was late on a Saturday night so the odds were against me. In the end I settled for somebody who claimed he had heard of me, which might or might not have made a difference to the eventual outcome. He was a warrant officer named Powell.

'I need you to trace a civilian plate,' I told him. 'Purely as a favour.'

He knew who I was, so he didn't give me any grief about not being able to do it for me. I gave him the details. Told him I was pretty sure it was a private registration, not a livery car. He took

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my number and promised to call me back in the morning, which would be day two.

He didn't call me back. He sold me out instead. I think in the circumstances anybody would have. Day two was a Sunday and I was up early. I had room service for breakfast and sat waiting for the call. I got a knock on the door instead. Just after ten o'clock. I put my eye to the peephole and saw two people standing close together so they would show up well in the lens. One man, one woman. Dark jackets. No overcoats. The man was carrying a briefcase. They each had some kind of official ID held up high and tilted so it would catch the hallway light.

'Federal agents,' the man called, just loud enough for me to hear him through the door.

In a situation like that it doesn't work to pretend you're not in. I'd been the guys in the hallway often enough. One of them stays right there and the other goes down to get a manager with a pass key. So I just opened up and stood back to let them in.

They were wary for a moment. They relaxed as soon as they saw I wasn't armed and didn't look like a maniac. They handed over their IDs and shuffled around politely while I deciphered them. At the top they said: *United States Department of Justice*. At the bottom they said: *Drug Enforcement Administration*. In the middle were all kinds of seals and signatures and watermarks. There were photographs and typed names. The man was listed as Steven Eliot, one *l* like the old poet. *April is the cruellest month*. That was for damn

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sure. The photograph was a pretty good likeness. Steven Eliot looked somewhere between thirty and forty and was thickset and dark and a little bald and had a smile that looked friendly in the picture and even better in person. The woman was listed as Susan Duffy. Susan Duffy was a little younger than Steven Eliot. She was a little taller than him, too. She was pale and slender and very attractive and had changed her hair since her photograph was taken.

'Go ahead,' I said. 'Search the room. It's a long time since I had anything worth hiding from you guys.'

I handed back their IDs and they put them away in their inside pockets and made sure they moved their jackets enough to let me see their weapons. They had them in neat shoulder rigs. I recognized the ribbed grip of a Glock 17 under Eliot's armpit. Duffy had a 19, which is the same thing only a little smaller. It was snug against her right breast. She must have been left-handed.

'We don't want to search the room,' she said.

'We want to talk about a licence plate,' Eliot said.

'I don't own a car,' I said.

We were all still standing in a neat little triangle just inside the door. Eliot still had the briefcase in his hand. I was trying to figure out who was the boss. Maybe neither one of them. Maybe they were equals. And fairly senior. They were well dressed but looked a little tired. Maybe they had worked most of the night and flown in from somewhere. From Washington D.C., maybe.

'Can we sit down?' Duffy asked.

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'Sure,' I said. But a cheap hotel room made that awkward. There was only one chair. It was shoved under a small desk crammed between a wall and the cabinet that held the television set. Duffy pulled it out and turned it round so it faced the bed. I sat on the bed, up near the pillows. Eliot perched on the foot of the bed and laid his briefcase down on it. He was still giving me the friendly smile and I couldn't find anything phoney about it. Duffy looked great on the chair. The seat height was exactly right for her. Her skirt was short and she was wearing dark nylons that went light where her knees bent.

'You're Reacher, right?' Eliot asked.

I took my eyes off Duffy's legs and nodded. I felt I could count on them to know that much.

'This room is registered to somebody called Calhoun,' Eliot said. 'Paid for with cash, one night only.'

'Habit,' I said.

'You leaving today?'

'I take it one day at a time.'

'Who's Calhoun?'

'John Quincy Adams's vice president,' I said. 'It seemed appropriate for this location. I used up the presidents long ago. Now I'm doing vice presidents. Calhoun was unusual. He resigned to run for the Senate.'

'Did he get in?'

'I don't know.'

'Why the phoney name?'

'Habit,' I said again.

Susan Duffy was looking straight at me. Not like I was nuts. Like she was interested in me. She

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probably found it to be a valuable interrogation technique. Back when I interrogated people I did the same thing. Ninety per cent of asking questions is about listening to answers.

'We spoke to a military cop called Powell,' she said. 'You asked him to trace a plate.'

Her voice was low and warm and a little husky. I said nothing.

'We have traps and flags in the computers against that plate,' she said. 'Soon as his inquiry hit the wires we knew all about it. We called him and asked him what his interest was. He told us the interest came from you.'

'Reluctantly, I hope,' I said.

She smiled. 'He recovered fast enough to give us a false phone number for you. So you needn't worry about old unit loyalties.'

'But in the end he gave you the right number.'

'We threatened him,' she said.

'Then MPs have changed since my day,' I said.

'It's important to us,' Eliot said. 'He saw that.'

'So now you're important to us,' Duffy said.

I looked away. I've been around the block more times than I care to count but the sound of her voice saying that still gave me a little thrill. I began to think maybe she was the boss. And a hell of an interrogator.

'A member of the public calls in a plate,' Eliot said. 'Why would he do that? Maybe he got in a fender bender with the car the plate was on. Maybe it was a hit and run. But wouldn't he go to the cops for that? And you just told us you don't have a car anyway.'

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‘So maybe you saw somebody *in* the car,’ Duffy said.

She let the rest of it hang. It was a neat catch-22. If the person in the car was my friend, then I was probably her enemy. If the person in the car was my enemy, then she was ready to be my friend.

‘You guys had breakfast?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘So have I,’ I said.

‘We know,’ she said. ‘Room service, a short stack of pancakes with an egg on top, over easy. Plus a large pot of coffee, black. It was ordered for seven forty-five and delivered at seven forty-four and you paid cash and tipped the waiter three bucks.’

‘Did I enjoy it?’

‘You ate it.’

Eliot snapped the locks on his briefcase and lifted the lid. Pulled out a stack of paper secured with a rubber band. The paper looked new but the writing on it was blurred. Photocopies of faxes, probably made during the night.

‘Your service record,’ he said.

I could see photographs in his briefcase. Glossy black-and-white eight-by-tens. Some kind of surveillance situation.

‘You were a military cop for thirteen years,’ Eliot said. ‘Fast-track promotion all the way from second lieutenant to major. Citations and medals. They liked you. You were good. Very good.’

‘Thank you.’

‘More than very good, actually. You were their special go-to guy on numerous occasions.’

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‘I guess I was.’

‘But they let you go.’

‘I was riffed,’ I said.

‘Riffed?’ Duffy repeated.

‘RIF, reduction in force. They love to make acronyms out of things. The Cold War ended, military spending got cut, the army got smaller. So they didn’t need so many special go-to guys.’

‘The army still exists,’ Eliot said. ‘They didn’t chop everybody.’

‘No.’

‘So why you in particular?’

‘You wouldn’t understand.’

He didn’t challenge me.

‘You can help us,’ Duffy said. ‘Who did you see in the car?’

I didn’t answer.

‘Were there drugs in the army?’ Eliot asked.

I smiled.

‘Armies love drugs,’ I said. ‘They always have. Morphine, Benzedrine. The German army invented Ecstasy. It was an appetite suppressant. CIA invented LSD, tested it on the U.S. Army. Armies march on their veins.’

‘Recreational?’

‘Average age of a recruit is eighteen. What do you think?’

‘Was it a problem?’

‘We didn’t make it much of a problem. Some grunt goes on furlough, smokes a couple of joints in his girlfriend’s bedroom, we didn’t care. We figured we’d rather see them with a couple of blunts than a couple of six-packs. Outside of our care we liked them docile rather than aggressive.’

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Duffy glanced at Eliot and Eliot used his fingernails to scrape the photographs up out of his case. He handed them to me. There were four of them. All four were grainy and a little blurred. All four showed the same Cadillac DeVille I had seen the night before. I recognized it by the plate number. It was in some kind of parking garage. There were two guys standing next to the trunk. In two of the pictures the trunk lid was down. In two of them it was up. The two guys were looking down at something inside the trunk. No way of telling what it was. One of the guys was a Hispanic gangbanger. The other was an older man in a suit. I didn't know him.

Duffy must have been watching my face.

'Not the man you saw?' she said.

'I didn't say I saw anybody.'

'The Hispanic guy is a major dealer,' Eliot said. 'Actually he's *the* major dealer for most of Los Angeles County. Not provable, of course, but we know all about him. His profits must run to millions of dollars a week. He lives like an emperor. But he came all the way to Portland, Maine, to meet with this other guy.'

I touched one of the photographs. 'This is Portland, Maine?'

Duffy nodded. 'A parking garage, downtown. About nine weeks ago. I took the pictures myself.'

'So who's this other guy?'

'We're not exactly sure. We traced the Cadillac's plate, obviously. It's registered to a corporation called Bizarre Bazaar. Main office is in Portland, Maine. Far as we can tell it started

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out way back as some kind of hippy-dippy import-export trader with the Middle East. Now it specializes in importing Oriental rugs. Far as we can tell the owner is a guy called Zachary Beck. We're assuming that's him in the photographs.'

'Which makes him huge,' Eliot said. 'If this guy from LA is prepared to fly all the way back east to meet with him, he's got to be a couple of rungs up the ladder. And anybody a couple of rungs above this LA guy is in the stratosphere, believe me. So Zachary Beck's a top boy, and he's fooling with us. Rug importer, drug importer. He's making jokes.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I never saw him before.'

'Don't be sorry,' Duffy said. She hitched forward on the chair. 'It's better for us if he isn't the guy you saw. We already know about him. It's better for us if you saw one of his associates. We can try to get to him that way.'

'You can't get to him head-on?'

There was a short silence. Seemed to me there was some embarrassment in it.

'We've got problems,' Eliot said.

'Sounds like you've got probable cause against the LA player. And you've got photographs that put him side by side with this Beck guy.'

'The photographs are tainted,' Duffy said. 'I made a mistake.'

More silence.

'The garage was private property,' she said. 'It's under an office building. I didn't have a warrant. Fourth Amendment makes the pictures inadmissible.'

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‘Can’t you lie? Say you were outside the garage?’

‘Physical layout makes that impossible. Defence counsel would figure it in a minute and the case would collapse.’

‘We need to know who you saw,’ Eliot said.

I didn’t answer.

‘We really need to know,’ Duffy said. She said it in the kind of soft voice that makes men want to jump tall buildings. But there was no artifice there. No pretence. She wasn’t aware of how good she was sounding. *She really needed to know*.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Because I need to put this right.’

‘Everybody makes mistakes.’

‘We sent an agent after Beck,’ she said. ‘Undercover. A woman. She disappeared.’

Silence.

‘When?’ I asked.

‘Seven weeks ago.’

‘You looked for her?’

‘We don’t know where to look. We don’t know where Beck goes. We don’t even know where he lives. He has no registered property. His house must be owned by some phantom corporation. It’s a needle in a haystack.’

‘Haven’t you tailed him?’

‘We’ve tried. He has bodyguards and drivers. They’re too good.’

‘For the DEA?’

‘For us. We’re on our own. The Justice Department disowned the operation when I screwed up.’

‘Even though there’s an agent missing?’

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‘They don’t know there’s an agent missing. We put her in after they closed us down. She’s off the books.’

I stared at her.

‘This whole thing is off the books,’ she said.

‘So how are you working it?’

‘I’m a team leader. Nobody’s looking over my shoulder day to day. I’m pretending I’m working on something else. But I’m not. I’m working on this.’

‘So nobody knows this woman is missing?’

‘Just my team,’ she said. ‘Seven of us. And now you.’

I said nothing.

‘We came straight here,’ she said. ‘We need a break. Why else would we fly up here on a Sunday?’

The room went quiet. I looked from her to Eliot and back to her. They needed me. I needed them. And I liked them. I liked them a lot. They were honest, likeable people. They were like the best of the people I used to work with.

‘I’ll trade,’ I said. ‘Information for information. We’ll see how we get along. And then we’ll take it from there.’

‘What do you need?’

I told her I needed ten-year-old hospital records from a place called Eureka in California. I told her what kind of thing to look for. I told her I would stay in Boston until she got back to me. I told her not to put anything on paper. Then they left and that was it for day two. Nothing happened on day three. Or day four. I hung around. I find

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Boston acceptable for a couple of days. It's what I call a 48-town. Anything more than 48 hours, and it starts to get tiresome. Of course, most places are like that for me. I'm a restless person. So by the start of day five I was going crazy. I was ready to assume they had forgotten all about me. I was ready to call it quits and get back on the road. I was thinking about Miami. It would be a lot warmer down there. But late in the morning the phone rang. It was her voice. It was nice to hear.

'We're on our way up,' she said. 'Meet you by that big statue of whoever it is on a horse, half-way round the Freedom Trail, three o'clock.'

It wasn't a very precise rendezvous, but I knew what she meant. It was a place in the North End, near a church. It was springtime and too cold to want to go there without a purpose but I got there early anyway. I sat on a bench next to an old woman feeding house sparrows and rock doves with torn-up crusts of bread. She looked at me and moved to another bench. The birds swarmed around her feet, pecking at the grit. A watery sun was fighting rainclouds in the sky. It was Paul Revere on the horse.

Duffy and Eliot showed up right on time. They were wearing black raincoats all covered in little loops and buckles and belts. They might as well have worn signs round their necks saying *Federal Agents from Washington D.C.* They sat down, Duffy on my left and Eliot on my right. I leaned back and they leaned forward with their elbows on their knees.

'Paramedics fished a guy out of the Pacific surf,' Duffy said. 'Ten years ago, just south of

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Eureka, California. White male, about forty. He had been shot twice in the head and once in the chest. Small-calibre, probably .22s. Then they figure he was thrown off a cliff into the ocean.'

'He was alive when they fished him out?' I asked, although I already knew the answer.

'Barely,' she said. 'He had a bullet lodged near his heart and his skull was broken. Plus one arm and both legs and his pelvis, from the fall. And he was half drowned. They operated on him for fifteen straight hours. He was in intensive care for a month and in the hospital recuperating for another six.'

'ID?'

'Nothing on him. He's in the records as a John Doe.'

'Did they try to ID him?'

'No fingerprint match,' she said. 'Nothing on any missing-persons lists. Nobody came to claim him.'

I nodded. *Fingerprint computers tell you what they're told to tell you.*

'What then?' I asked.

'He recovered,' she said. 'Six months had passed. They were trying to work out what to do with him when he suddenly discharged himself. They never saw him again.'

'Did he tell them anything about who he was?'

'They diagnosed amnesia, certainly about the trauma, because that's almost inevitable. They figured he might be genuinely blank about the incident and the previous day or two. But they figured he must be able to remember things from before that, and they got the strong impression he

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was pretending not to. There's a fairly extensive case file. Psychiatrists, everything. They interviewed him regularly. He was very resolute. Never said a word about himself.'

'What was his physical condition when he left?'

'Pretty fair. He had visible scars from the GSWs, that's about all.'

'OK,' I said. I leaned my head back and looked up at the sky.

'Who was he?'

'Your guess?' I said.

'Small-calibre shots to the head and chest?' Eliot said. 'Dumped in the ocean? It was organized crime. An assassination. Some kind of hit man got to him.'

I said nothing. Looked up at the sky.

'Who was he?' Duffy said again.

I kept on looking up at the sky and dragged myself ten years backward through time, to a whole different world.

'You know anything about tanks?' I asked.

'Military tanks? Tracks and guns? Not really.'

'There's nothing to them,' I said. 'I mean, you like them to be able to move fast, you want some reliability, you don't object to some fuel economy. But if I've got a tank and you've got a tank, what's the only thing I really want to know?'

'What?'

'Can I shoot you before you can shoot me? That's what I want to know. If we're a mile apart, can my gun reach you? Or can your gun reach me?'

'So?'

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'Of course, physics being physics, the likely answer is if I can hit you at a mile, then you can hit me at a mile. So it comes down to ammunition. If I stand off another two hundred yards so your shell bounces off me without hurting me, can I develop a shell that doesn't bounce off you? That's what tanks are all about. The guy in the ocean was an army intelligence officer who had been blackmailing an army weapons specialist.'

'Why was he in the ocean?'

'Did you watch the Gulf War on TV?' I asked.

'I did,' Eliot said.

'Forget about the smart bombs,' I said. 'The real star of the show was the M1A1 Abrams main battle tank. It scored about four hundred and zip against the Iraqis, who were using the best anybody ever had to give them. But having the war on TV meant that we'd shown our hand to the whole world, so we better get on with dreaming up some new stuff for the next time round. So we got on with it.'

'And?' Duffy asked.

'If you want a shell to fly farther and hit harder, you can stuff more propellant into it. Or make it lighter. Or both. Of course, if you're stuffing more propellant into it, you've got to do something pretty radical elsewhere to make it lighter. Which is what they did. They took the explosive charge out of it. Which sounds weird, right? Like, what's it going to do? Go *clang* and bounce off? But they changed the shape. They dreamed up this thing that looks like a giant lawn dart. Built-in fins and all. It's cast from tungsten and

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depleted uranium. The densest metals you can find. It goes real fast and real far. They called it the long-rod penetrator.'

Duffy glanced at me with her eyelids low and smiled and blushed all at the same time. I smiled back.

'They changed the name,' I said. 'Now it's called the APFSDS. I told you they like initials. Armour Piercing Fin Stabilized Discarding Sabot. It's powered by its own little rocket motor, basically. It hits the enemy tank with tremendous kinetic energy. The kinetic energy changes to heat energy, just like they teach you in high-school physics. It melts its way through in a split second and sprays the inside of the enemy tank with a jet of molten metal, which kills the tankers and blows up anything explosive or flammable. It's a very neat trick. And either way, you shoot, you score, because if the enemy armour is too thick or you've fired from too far away, the thing just sticks partway in like a dart and spalls, which means it fragments the inner layer of the armour and throws scabs of scalding metal around inside like a hand grenade. The enemy crew come apart like frogs in a blender. It was a brilliant new weapon.'

'What about the guy in the ocean?'

'He got the blueprints from the guy he was blackmailing,' I said. 'Piece by piece, over a long period of time. We were watching him. We knew exactly what he was doing. He was aiming to sell them to Iraqi intelligence. The Iraqis wanted to level the playing field for the next time round. The U.S. Army didn't want that to happen.'

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Eliot stared at me. ‘So they had the guy killed?’

I shook my head. ‘We sent a couple of MPs down to arrest him. Standard operating procedure, all legal and above board, believe me. But it went wrong. He got away. He was going to disappear. The U.S. Army *really* didn’t want that to happen.’

‘So *then* they had him killed?’

I looked up at the sky again. Didn’t answer.

‘That wasn’t standard procedure,’ Eliot said. ‘Was it?’

I said nothing.

‘It was off the books,’ he said. ‘Wasn’t it?’

I didn’t answer.

‘But he didn’t die,’ Duffy said. ‘What was his name?’

‘Quinn,’ I said. ‘Turned out to be the single worst guy I ever met.’

‘And you saw him in Beck’s car on Saturday?’

I nodded. ‘He was being chauffeured away from Symphony Hall.’

I gave them all the details I had. But as I talked we all knew the information was useless. It was inconceivable that Quinn would be using his previous identity. So all I had to offer was a physical description of a plain-looking white man about fifty years old with two .22 GSW scars on his forehead. Better than nothing, but it didn’t really get them anywhere.

‘Why didn’t his prints match?’ Eliot asked.

‘He was erased,’ I said. ‘Like he never existed.’

‘Why didn’t he die?’

‘Silenced .22,’ I said. ‘Our standard issue

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weapon for covert close work. But not a very powerful weapon.'

'Is he still dangerous?'

'Not to the army,' I said. 'He's ancient history. This all was ten years ago. The APFSDS will be in the museum soon. So will the Abrams tank.'

'So why try to trace him?'

'Because depending on exactly what he remembers he could be dangerous to the guy who went to take him out.'

Eliot nodded. Said nothing.

'Did he look important?' Duffy asked. 'On Saturday? In Beck's car?'

'He looked wealthy,' I said. 'Expensive cashmere overcoat, leather gloves, silk scarf. He looked like a guy who was accustomed to being chauffeured around. He just jumped right in, like he did it all the time.'

'Did he greet the driver?'

'I don't know.'

'We need to place him,' she said. 'We need context. How did he act? He was using Beck's car, but did he look entitled? Or like somebody was doing him a favour?'

'He looked entitled,' I said. 'Like he uses it every day of the week.'

'So is he Beck's equal?'

I shrugged. 'He could be Beck's boss.'

'Partner at best,' Eliot said. 'Our LA guy wouldn't travel to meet with an underling.'

'I don't see Quinn as somebody's partner,' I said.

'What was he like?'

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