

Read on for an exclusive
first chapter from

THE SENTINEL

The new Jack Reacher by

LEE CHILD
AND ANDREW CHILD

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ONE

Rusty Rutherford emerged from his apartment on a Monday morning, exactly one week after he got fired.

He spent the first few days after the axe fell with his blinds drawn, working through his stockpile of frozen pizzas and waiting for the phone to ring. *Significant weaknesses*, the dismissal letter said. *Profound failure of leadership. Basic and fundamental errors.* It was unbelievable. It was . . . a mistake. Plain and simple. Which meant it was certain to be corrected. And soon.

The hours crawled past. His personal email silted up with nothing more than spam. And his phone stayed silent.

He resisted for another full day, then grabbed his old laptop and powered it up. He didn't own a gun or a knife. He didn't know how to rappel from a helicopter or parachute from a plane. But still, someone had to pay. Maybe his real-life enemies were going to get away with it. This time. But not the villains in the video

games a developer buddy had sent him. He had shied away from playing them, before. The violence felt too extreme. Too unnecessary. It didn't feel that way any more. His days of showing mercy were over. Unless . . .

His phone stayed silent.

Twenty-four hours later he had a slew of new high scores and a mild case of dehydration, but not much else had changed. He closed the computer and slumped back on his couch. He stayed there for the best part of another day, picking at random from a stack of Blu-rays he didn't remember buying and silently begging the universe to send him back to work. He would be different, he swore. Easier to get along with. More patient. Diplomatic. Empathetic, even. He would buy doughnuts for everyone in the office. Twice a month. Three times, if that would seal the deal . . .

His phone stayed silent.

He didn't often drink, but what else was there to do? The credits began to roll at the end of another disc. He couldn't stomach another movie so he retreated to the kitchen. Retrieved an unopened bottle of Jim Beam from the back of a cabinet. Returned to the living room and put a scratchy old Elmore James LP on the turntable.

He wound up asleep, face down on the floor, after . . . he wasn't sure how long. All he knew was that when he woke up his head felt like it was crammed full of rocks, shifting and grinding as if they were trying to burst out of his skull. He thought the pain would never end. But when his hangover did finally pass, he found himself experiencing a new emotion. Defiance. He was an

innocent man, after all. None of the bad things that had happened in the town were his fault. That was for damn sure. He was the one who'd foreseen them. Who'd warned his boss about them. Time after time. In public and in private. And who'd been ignored. Time after time. So after seven days holed up alone, Rutherford decided it was time to show his face. To tell his side of the story. To anyone who would listen.

He took a shower and dug some clothes out of his closet. Chinos and a polo shirt. Brand new. Sombre colours, with logos, to show he meant business. Then he retrieved his shoes from the opposite corners of the hallway where he'd flung them. Scooped up his keys and sunglasses from the bookcase by the door. Stepped out into the corridor. Rode down in the elevator, alone. Crossed the lobby. Pushed through the heavy revolving door and paused on the sidewalk. The mid-morning sun felt like a blast furnace and its sudden heat drew beads of sweat from his forehead and armpits. He felt a flutter of panic. Guilty people sweat. He'd read that somewhere, and the one thing he was desperate to avoid was looking guilty. He glanced around, convinced that everyone would be staring at him, then forced himself to move. He picked up the pace, feeling more conspicuous than if he'd been walking down the street naked. But the truth was that most of the people he passed didn't even notice he was there.

In fact, only two of them paid him any attention at all.

The same time Rusty Rutherford was coming out of his apartment, Jack Reacher was breaking into a bar. He was in Nashville, Tennessee, seventy-five miles north and east of Rutherford's sleepy little town, and he was searching for the solution to a problem. It was a practical matter, primarily. A question of physics. And biology. Specifically, how to suspend a guy from a ceiling without causing too much permanent damage. To the ceiling, at least. He was less concerned about the guy.

The ceiling belonged to the bar. And the bar belonged to the guy. Reacher had first set foot in the place two days earlier. On Saturday. Almost Sunday, because it was close to midnight by the time he got into town. His journey had not gone well. The first bus he rode caught fire and its replacement got wedged under a low bridge after its driver took a wrong turn twenty miles out. Reacher was stiff from the prolonged sitting when he eventually climbed out at the Greyhound station, so he moved away to the side, near the smokers' pen, and took a few minutes to stretch the soreness out of his muscles and joints. He stood there, half hidden in the shadows, while the rest of the passengers milled around and talked and did things with their phones and reclaimed their luggage and gradually drifted away.

Reacher stayed where he was. He was in no hurry. He'd arrived later than expected, but that was no major problem. He had no appointments to keep. No meetings to attend. No one was waiting for him, getting worried or getting mad. He'd planned to find a place to stay for the night. A diner, for some food. And a bar where he

could hear some good music. He should still be able to do all those things. He'd maybe have to switch the order around. Maybe combine a couple of activities. But he'd live. And with some hotels, the kind Reacher preferred, it can work to show up late. Especially if you're paying cash.

Music first, Reacher decided. He knew there was no shortage of venues in Nashville, but he wanted a particular kind of place. Somewhere worn. With some history. Where Blind Blake could have played, back in the day. Howling Wolf, even. Certainly nowhere new, or gentrified, or gussied up. The only question was how to find a place like that. The lights were still on in the depot, and a handful of people were still working or waiting or just keeping themselves off the street. Some of them were bound to be local. Maybe all of them were. Reacher could have asked for directions. But he didn't go in. He preferred to navigate by instinct. He knew cities. He could read their shape and flow like a sailor can sense the direction of the coming waves. His gut told him to go north, so he set off across a broad triangular intersection and on to a vacant lot, strewn with rubble. The heavy odour of diesel and cigarettes faded behind him, and his shadow grew longer in front as he walked. It led the way to rows of narrow, parallel streets lined with similar brick buildings, stained with soot. It felt industrial, but decayed and hollow. Reacher didn't know what kinds of businesses had thrived in Nashville's past, but whatever had been made or sold or stored it had clearly happened around here. And it

clearly wasn't happening any more. The structures were all that remained. And not for much longer, Reacher thought. Either money would flow in and shore them up, or they'd collapse.

Reacher stepped off the crumbling sidewalk and continued down the centre of the street. He figured he'd give it another two blocks. Three at the most. If he hadn't found anything good by then, he'd strike out to the right, towards the river. He passed a place that sold part-worn tyres. A warehouse that a charity was using to store donated furniture. Then, as he crossed the next street, he picked up the rumble of a bass guitar and the thunder of drums.

The sound was coming from a building in the centre of the block. It didn't look promising. There were no windows. No signage. Just a thin strip of yellow light escaping from beneath a single wooden door. Reacher didn't like places with few potential exits, so he was inclined to keep walking. But as he drew level, the door opened. Two guys, maybe in their late twenties, with sleeveless T-shirts and a smattering of anaemic tattoos, stumbled out on to the sidewalk. Reacher moved sideways to avoid them, and at the same moment a guitar began to wail from inside. Reacher paused. The riff was good. It built and swelled and soared, and just as it seemed to be done and its final note was dying away a woman's voice took over. It was mournful, desperate, agonizing, like a conduit to a world of the deepest imaginable sorrow. Reacher couldn't resist. He stepped across the threshold.

The air inside smelled of beer and sweat, and the space was much shallower front to back than Reacher had expected. It was also wider, effectively creating two separate areas with a dead zone down the middle. The right-hand side was for the music lovers. There were a couple of dozen that night, some standing, some dancing, some doing a bit of both. The stage was beyond them, against the far wall, taking up the full depth of the room. It was low, built out of beer crates, with some kind of wooden sheeting nailed across the top. There was a modest speaker stack at each side, and a pair of metal bars hanging from the ceiling to hold the lights. The singer was front and centre. She seemed tiny to Reacher. Five feet tall at the most, and as thin as a needle. Her hair was in a perfect blonde bob, which shone so brightly that Reacher wondered if it was a wig. The guitar player was to her left, nearest the door. The bassist mirrored him on her right. They both had wild curly hair and high, sharp cheekbones, and looked so alike they could have been twins. Certainly brothers. The drummer was there too, pounding out the beat, but the shadow at the back of the stage was too deep for Reacher to see her clearly.

The left-hand side was for drinking. There were six round tables, each with four chairs, and four stools at the bar, which was set against the wall, opposite the stage. It was kitted out with the usual array of beer pumps and bottle fridges and spirit dispensers. A mirror ran its full width with a jagged star-shaped fracture mid-way up in the centre. A bottle thrown, Reacher

thought. He liked the way it looked. It added character. But it wasn't enough to outweigh the biggest flaw in the place. The section of ceiling in front of the bar. Hanging from it were dozens of bras. Maybe hundreds. There were all kinds of styles and colours and sizes. Where they'd come from, Reacher didn't want to know. It seemed sleazy to him. Unnecessary. And bad from a practical point of view. To get to the bar anyone reasonably tall would have to either push his way through or stoop down beneath them. Reacher waited until the band finished their last song then bent at the waist and pivoted round until he was close enough to snag a bar stool. He was the only customer on that side of the room, and he couldn't tell from the bartender's blank expression whether that was a situation he was happy with or not.

'Coffee,' Reacher said, when the guy finally acknowledged him. 'Black.'

'Don't have coffee,' the guy replied.

'OK. Cheeseburger. Fries. No lettuce. No pickle. And a Coke.'

'Don't have cheeseburgers.'

'What food do you have?'

'Don't have food.'

'Where around here does?'

The guy shrugged. 'Don't live around here.'

Reacher took his Coke and turned to look at the stage. He was hoping another band would set up, but there was no sign of activity. Half the audience had drifted across and congregated around the tables. The

rest had already made for the door. With no more music and no hope of any food, Reacher figured he might as well finish his drink and follow them out.

He continued in the direction he'd been going before he was lured inside, but when he reached the alley at the far end of the building he heard a scuffling noise. He half-turned and almost collided with the lead guitar player from the band he'd just heard. The guy took a step back, his eyes wide with fear and his guitar case raised like a shield, and the singer almost piled into him from behind. Reacher held up his hands, palms facing out. He was aware of the effect his appearance could have. He was six feet five. 250 pounds. His hair was a dishevelled mess. He was unshaved. Children had been known to run screaming at the sight of him.

'I'm sorry, guys.' He attempted a reassuring smile. 'I didn't mean to startle you.'

The guitarist lowered his case, but he didn't step forward.

'Great performance tonight, by the way,' Reacher said. 'When are you playing again?'

'Thanks.' The guitarist stayed back. 'Soon. I hope.'

'Here?'

'No chance.'

'Why? Bad crowd?'

'No. Bad owner.'

'Wait.' The singer glared up at Reacher. 'Why are you here? Do you work for him?'

'I don't work for anyone,' Reacher said. 'But what's the problem with the guy?'

The singer hesitated then held up one finger, then another. 'He wouldn't pay us. And he ripped us off. He stole a guitar.'

'One of mine,' the guitarist said. 'My good spare.'

'Really?' Reacher stepped back. 'That doesn't sound like good business practice, but there has to be more.'

'Like what?' The singer looked at the guitarist.

'Like nothing,' he said. 'We finished our set. Packed up. Asked for our money. He refused.'

'I don't get it,' Reacher said. 'A place like this, music's the draw. Not the décor. That's for damn sure. You need bands to have music. And if you don't pay the bands, how do you get them to play? Sounds like a self-defeating strategy to me. You must have done something to piss the guy off.'

'You don't get the music business.' The guitarist shook his head.

'Explain it to me.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm asking you to. I like information. Learning is a virtue.'

The guitarist rested his case on the ground. 'What's to explain? This kind of thing happens all the time. There's nothing we can do about it.'

'Bands don't have the power.' The singer put her hand on the guitarist's shoulder. 'The venues do.'

'Isn't there anyone who could help you put things right? Your manager? Your agent? Don't musicians have those kinds of people?'

The guitarist shook his head. 'Successful musicians, maybe. Not us.'

'Not yet,' the singer said.

'The police, then?'

'No.' The singer's hand brushed her jacket pocket. 'No police.'

'We can't involve them,' the guitarist said. 'We get a name for being difficult, no one will book us.'

'What's the point in getting booked if you don't get paid?'

'The point is, we get to play. People hear us.' The singer tapped the side of her head. 'You can't get discovered if you don't get heard.'

'I guess.' Reacher paused. 'Although if I'm honest, I think you need to consider the message you're sending.'

'What message?' The guitarist leaned one shoulder against the wall. 'Suck it up. That's all we can do.'

'That's how we're going to make it,' the singer said. 'In the end.'

Reacher said nothing.

'What? You think we're doing the wrong thing?'

'Maybe I'm out of line.' Reacher looked at each of them in turn. 'But it seems to me you're telling the club owners it's OK to rip you off. That you're happy not to get paid.'

'That's crazy,' the singer said. 'I hate not getting paid. It's the worst.'

'Did you make that clear?'

'Of course.' The guitar player straightened up. 'I

did. I insisted he pay us. He made like he was going to, and took me to his office. Only there was a guy waiting there. One of the bouncers. He's huge. They must have planned the whole thing in advance because he didn't say anything. Didn't wait. Just grabbed my hand. My left.' He held up his left hand to emphasize the point. 'He grabbed it and pushed it down on to the desk where there's this kind of metal plate. It's all dented and stained. Anyway, he held my hand there, and the owner went round the desk and opened the top drawer. He took out a hammer. Used the claw thing to spread my fingers apart, then said I had to choose. We could have the money, and he'd break my fingers. One at a time. Or I could leave, unhurt, with no cash.'

Reacher was conscious of a voice in his head telling him to walk away. Saying this wasn't his problem. But he had heard how the guy could make a guitar wail. He remembered watching his fingers when he was on stage. They were the opposite of Reacher's own. Quick and delicate, dancing across the strings. He pictured the thug grabbing the guy's hand. The owner, wielding the hammer.

Reacher stayed where he was. 'If you like, I could go back in there. Help the owner see things from a different angle. Maybe get him to reconsider tonight's fee.'

'You could do that?' The singer didn't look convinced.

'I can be very persuasive.'

'You could get hurt.'

'Not me. The owner, maybe.'

‘He has a hammer.’ The guitarist shuffled on the spot.

‘I doubt the hammer will come into play. And there wouldn’t be a problem even if it did. So why don’t I give it a try? What have you got to lose?’

‘I’m not sure I’m—’ the guitarist started.

‘Thank you.’ The singer cut him off. ‘We appreciate any help you can give us. Just please be careful.’

‘I always am,’ Reacher said. ‘Now, tell me about the guitar. Your good spare. The guy really stole it?’

‘The big guy did,’ the guitarist said. ‘Kind of. He followed me down from the office and snatched it. Then he tossed it down the stairs to the basement and looked at me all weird, like he was daring me to go get it.’

‘You left it there?’

The guitarist looked away.

‘Don’t feel bad. That was the right move.’ Reacher paused. ‘Was it worth much?’

‘A grand, maybe?’ The guitarist shrugged. ‘That’s a lot to me.’

‘And the owner, with the hammer. What’s his name?’

‘Lockhart. Derek Lockhart.’

‘How much did he promise to pay you?’

‘Five hundred dollars.’

‘OK. And aside from Lockhart, the big guy, and the bartender, who else works here?’

‘No one.’

‘There is someone,’ the singer said. ‘A kid who busses tables. He’s out back, most of the time, smoking weed.’

‘Anyone else?’

‘No.’

‘Have you seen any weapons on the premises?’

They looked at one another and shook their heads.

‘OK, then. Where’s Lockhart’s office?’

‘Second floor,’ the guitarist said. ‘Stairs are past the bathrooms.’

Back inside, a solitary customer was nursing his last bottle of beer. The barman was shoving a threadbare broom across the floor between the tables and the stage. There was no sign of anyone else so Reacher made his way past the bathrooms and walked up the stairs. He saw one door leading off a narrow landing. It was closed. Reacher could hear a voice on the other side. It was male, he was sure of that, but he couldn’t make out any words. They were soft. Rhythmic. Like someone counting. Probably checking the night’s take. So they’d likely be locked in. Reacher took hold of the handle. Turned it. And simultaneously slammed his shoulder into the door. It gave easily, sending fragments of splintered wood spinning into the air.

‘I’m sorry, gentlemen.’ Reacher stepped into the room and pushed the door back into its ruined frame. The space was small. More like a closet than an office. Two men were crammed in behind the desk, shoulder to shoulder. The regular-size guy Reacher took to be Lockhart. The other, a slack, flabby giant, would be the bouncer. Both were frozen in their seats. And the surface of the desk was covered with

heaps of creased, greasy banknotes. ‘I didn’t realize it was locked.’

‘Who the hell are you?’ It took Lockhart a moment to find his voice.

‘My name’s Jack Reacher. I represent the band that played for you tonight. I’m here to talk about their contract.’

‘They don’t have a contract.’

‘They do now.’ Reacher took hold of a bentwood chair, which was the only other piece of furniture in the room, tested its strength, and sat down.

‘Time for you to leave,’ Lockhart said.

‘I only just got here.’

‘You can’t be here. Not during the count.’

‘You didn’t think that through all the way, did you?’

Lockhart paused, searching for a trap. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You said I can’t be here. And yet clearly I am. Faulty reasoning on your part.’

‘You can leave.’ Lockhart spoke with exaggerated clarity. ‘Or I can throw you out.’

Reacher smiled. ‘*You* can throw me out?’

Lockhart’s fist clenched on the desk in front of him. ‘I can have you thrown out.’

‘Are you sure? Where are all your guys?’

‘I have all the guys I need, right here.’ Lockhart pointed to his companion.

‘Him? For a start, he’s one guy. Singular. So you’d have to say *the only guy I need*. But that’s not right either, is it? Because he’s obviously not up to the job. I

could be asleep and he couldn't throw me out. I could have died of old age and he still couldn't do it.'

Reacher was watching the big guy's eyes. He saw them flicker towards Lockhart. Saw Lockhart respond with the tiniest nod of his head. The big guy rose out of his chair. Reacher knew there was only one possible play that stood any chance of success. The guy could launch himself straight over the desk. If he was quick enough he'd arrive before Reacher was on his feet. But even if Reacher was already standing, the guy would still have his most powerful weapon. His weight. He had at least a hundred pounds on Reacher. Coupled with the speed he'd have gained diving forwards, all those pounds would translate into some formidable momentum. There'd be no way for Reacher to counter it. He'd be knocked backwards on to the floor. Pinned down. Jammed in the corner, unable to bring his fists or feet or elbows to bear. And unable to breathe. Then all the guy would have to do was wait. Physics would finish the fight for him. He could just lie there till Reacher passed out. It would be the easiest victory he'd ever won.

The guy made the wrong choice. Instead of diving over the table, he tried to shimmy around it. That was a serious mistake for someone with his build. Reacher's goading had clouded his thinking. He wasn't focused on the win. He was picturing the pummelling he could dish out. Which gave Reacher time to scoop up the metal-covered board from the desk. Grip it securely with one edge against his palms. And drive it

up into the guy's onrushing neck like a reversed guillotine blade, crushing his larynx and windpipe. Then Reacher shoved him square in the face and the guy fell back in the direction he came from and landed in the corner, choking and spluttering.

'Normally I wouldn't have done that,' Reacher said, settling back in his chair. 'Not right off the bat. I'd have given him a chance to walk away. But then I remembered he was the one who took that poor kid's guitar, so I figured all bets were off.'

Lockhart was scrabbling for his phone. 'We should call 911. Fast.'

'Your friend will be fine,' Reacher said. 'Or maybe he won't. But in the meantime, while he's dealing with his breathing issues, let's get back to the band's contract. How much did you promise to pay?'

'I promised nothing.'

Reacher ran his finger along the edge of the board. 'I think you did.'

Lockhart lunged sideways, going for his drawer. Reacher tracked his movement and tossed the board, spinning it like a frisbee. It caught Lockhart on the bridge of his nose, shattering the bone and rocking him back in his chair. 'I'm beginning to think this toy is dangerous.' Reacher picked up the board and dropped it on the floor. 'You shouldn't play with it any more. Now. The contract. Give me a number.'

'Five hundred dollars.'

'Five hundred dollars was the original figure. But since it was agreed, you've revealed an interest in

human fingers. Tell me, how many are there on a guitar player's left hand, for example?'

'Five.' Lockhart's voice was muffled thanks to his restricted airway.

'Technically there are four. The other digit is a thumb. But I'll take your answer. So, five hundred dollars, multiplied by five, is . . .?'

'Twenty-five hundred.'

'Very good. That's our new figure. We take cash.'

'Forget it.'

'There's plenty of cash here. If counting is too difficult for you, maybe I should just take all of it.'

'All right.' Lockhart almost squealed, then he selected five stacks of bills and slid them across the desk.

'Good. Now let's add your late payment fee. That's an additional five hundred.'

Lockhart glowered, and handed over another stack.

'We're almost done now. Next up is the equipment replacement surcharge. A round one thousand.'

'What the . . .?'

'For the kid's guitar. Your buddy tossed it down some stairs. Get the money back from him if you want, but there's no way it's coming out of my client's pocket.'

Lockhart's eyes were flickering back and forth across his dwindling heap of cash. Reacher could almost see his brain working as he calculated how much he had left, and whether his chances of keeping any would improve if he cooperated. 'OK. Another thousand. But not one cent more. And tell those kids if

they ever come back, I'll break more than their fingers. And even if they don't come here, they'll never play in this town again.'

Reacher shook his head. 'We were doing so well, and you had to ruin it. You didn't let me finish. We'd covered the payments. But we hadn't gotten around to the incentives. This is important, so listen carefully. Every band member I represent has me on speed dial. If anything happens to any of them, I'll come back here. I'll break your arms. I'll break your legs. And I'll hang *your* underwear from the ceiling of the bar. While you're still wearing it. Are we clear?'

Lockhart nodded.

'Good. Now, incentive number two: other bands. Even if I don't represent them, I'm extending an umbrella agreement. As a courtesy. Think of it as my contribution to the arts. What it means is that if I hear about you ripping off another band, I'll come back. I'll take all your money. And I'll hang your underwear from the ceiling of the bar, same way as before. Are we clear on that, too?'

Lockhart nodded.

'Excellent. And in case you were wondering, I'll be carrying out random spot checks to test for compliance. When is the next band playing here?'

'Tomorrow.'

'OK. I hope they're as good as tonight's. But even if they're not, remember. They get paid.'