

ONE

EVENTUALLY THEY PUT REACHER IN A CAR AND DROVE HIM TO A motel a mile away, where the night clerk gave him a room, which had all the features Reacher expected, because he had seen such rooms a thousand times before. There was a raucous through-the-wall heater, which would be too noisy to sleep with, which would save the owner money on electricity. There were low-watt bulbs in all the fixtures, likewise. There was a low-pile carpet that after cleaning would dry in hours, so the room could rent again the same day. Not that the carpet would be cleaned often. It was dark and patterned and ideal for concealing stains. As was the bedspread. No doubt the shower would be weak and strangled, and the towels thin, and the soap small, and the shampoo cheap. The furniture was made of wood, all dark and bruised, and the television set was small and old, and the curtains were grey with grime.

All as expected. Nothing he hadn't seen a thousand times before.

But still dismal.

So before even putting the key in his pocket he turned around and went back out to the lot. The air was cold, and a little damp.

The middle of the evening, in the middle of winter, in the north-eastern corner of Virginia. The lazy Potomac was not far away. Beyond it in the east D.C.'s glow lit up the clouds. The nation's capital, where all kinds of things were going on.

The car that had let him out was already driving away. Reacher watched its tail lights grow faint in the mist. After a moment they disappeared completely, and the world went quiet and still. Just for a minute. Then another car showed up, brisk and confident, like it knew where it was going. It turned into the lot. It was a plain sedan, dark in colour. Almost certainly a government vehicle. It aimed for the motel office, but its headlight beams swung across Reacher's immobile form, and it changed direction, and came straight at him.

Visitors. Purpose unknown, but the news would be either good or bad.

The car stopped parallel with the building, as far in front of Reacher as his room was behind him, leaving him alone in the centre of a space the size of a boxing ring. Two men got out of the car. Despite the chill they were dressed in T-shirts, tight and white, above the kind of athletic pants sprinters peel off seconds before a race. Both men looked more than six feet and two hundred pounds. Smaller than Reacher, but not by much. Both were military. That was clear. Reacher could tell by their haircuts. No civilian barber would be as pragmatic or as brutal. The market wouldn't allow it.

The guy from the passenger side tracked around the hood and formed up with the driver. The two of them stood there, side by side. Both wore sneakers on their feet, big and white and shapeless. Neither had been in the Middle East recently. No sunburn, no squint lines, no stress and strain in their eyes. Both were young, somewhere south of thirty. Technically Reacher was old enough to be their father. They were NCOs, he thought. Specialists, probably, not sergeants. They didn't look like sergeants. Not wise enough. The opposite, in fact. They had dull, blank faces.

The guy from the passenger side said, 'Are you Jack Reacher?'

Reacher said, 'Who's asking?'

'We are.'

'And who are you?'

'We're your legal advisers.'

Which they weren't, obviously. Reacher knew that. Army lawyers don't travel in pairs and breathe through their mouths. They were something else. Bad news, not good. In which case immediate action was always the best bet. Easy enough to mime sudden comprehension and an eager approach and a hand raised in welcome, and easy enough to let the eager approach become unstoppable momentum, and to turn the raised hand into a scything blow, elbow into the left-hand guy's face, hard and downward, followed by a stamp of the right foot, as if killing an imaginary cockroach had been the whole point of the exercise, whereupon the bounce off the stamp would set up the same elbow backhand into the right-hand guy's throat, one, two, three, smack, stamp, smack, game over.

Easy enough. And always the safest approach. Reacher's mantra: get your retaliation in first. Especially when outnumbered two to one against guys with youth and energy on their side.

But. He wasn't sure. Not completely. Not yet. And he couldn't afford a mistake of that nature. Not then. Not under the circumstances. He was inhibited. He let the moment pass.

He said, 'So what's your legal advice?'

'Conduct unbecoming,' the guy said. 'You brought the unit into disrepute. A court martial would hurt us all. So you should get the hell out of town, right now. And you should never come back again.'

'No one mentioned a court martial.'

'Not yet. But they will. So don't stick around for it.'

'I'm under orders.'

'They couldn't find you before. They won't find you now. The army doesn't use skip tracers. And no skip tracer could find you anyway. Not the way you seem to live.'

Reacher said nothing.

The guy said, 'So that's our legal advice.'

Reacher said, 'Noted.'

'You need to do more than note it.'

'Do I?'

'Because we're offering an incentive.'

'What kind?'

'Every night we find you still here, we're going to kick your ass.'

'Are you?'

'Starting tonight. So you'll get the right general idea about what to do.'

Reacher said, 'You ever bought an electrical appliance?'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'I saw one once, in a store. It had a yellow label on the back. It said if you messed with it you ran the risk of death or serious injury.'

'So?'

'Pretend I've got the same kind of label.'

'We're not worried about you, old man.'

Old man. Reacher saw an image of his father in his mind. Somewhere sunny. Okinawa, possibly. Stan Reacher, born in Laconia, New Hampshire, a Marine captain serving in Japan, with a wife and two teenage sons. Reacher and his brother had called him *the old man*, and he had seemed old, even though at that point he must have been ten years younger than Reacher was that night.

'Turn around,' Reacher said. 'Go back wherever you came from. You're in over your heads.'

'Not how we see it.'

'I used to do this for a living,' Reacher said. 'But you know that, right?'

No response.

'I know all the moves,' Reacher said. 'I invented some of them.'

No reply.

Reacher still had his key in his hand. Rule of thumb: don't attack a guy who just came through a door that locks. A bunch is better, but even a single key makes a pretty good weapon. Socket

the head against the palm, poke the shaft out between the index and middle fingers, and you've got a fairly decent knuckleduster.

But. They were just dumb kids. No need to get all bent out of shape. No need for torn flesh and broken bones.

Reacher put his key in his pocket.

Their sneakers meant they had no plans to kick him. No one kicks things with soft white athletic shoes. No point. Unless they were aiming to deliver blows with their feet merely for the points value alone. Like one of those martial arts fetishes with a name like something off a Chinese food menu. Tae kwon do, and so on. All very well at the Olympic Games, but hopeless on the street. Lifting your leg like a dog at a hydrant was just begging to get beat. Begging to get tipped over and kicked into unconsciousness.

Did these guys even know that? Were they looking at his own feet? Reacher was wearing a pair of heavy boots. Comfortable, and durable. He had bought them in South Dakota. He planned to keep on wearing them all winter long.

He said, 'I'm going inside now.'

No response.

He said, 'Goodnight.'

No response.

Reacher half turned, and half stepped back, towards his door, a fluid quarter circle, shoulders and all, and like he knew they would the two guys moved towards him, faster than he was moving, off-script and involuntary, ready to grab him.

Reacher kept it going long enough to let their momentum establish, and then he whipped back through the reverse quarter circle towards them, by which time he was moving just as fast as they were, two hundred and fifty pounds about to collide head-on with four hundred, and he kept on twisting and threw a long left hook at the left-hand guy. It caught him as designed, hard on the ear, and the guy's head snapped sideways and bounced off his partner's shoulder, by which time Reacher was already throwing a right-hand uppercut under the partner's chin. It hit like a how-to diagram and the guy's head went up and back the

same way his buddy's had bounced around, and almost in the same second. Like they were puppets, and the puppeteer had sneezed.

Both of them stayed on their feet. The left-hand guy was wobbling around like a man on a ship, and the right-hand guy was stumbling backward. The left-hand guy was all unstable and up on his heels and his centre mass was open and unprotected. Reacher popped a clubbing right into his solar plexus, hard enough to drive the breath out of him, soft enough not to cause lasting neurological damage. The guy folded up and crouched and hugged his knees. Reacher stepped past him and went after the right-hand guy, who saw him coming and swung a feeble right of his own. Reacher clouted it aside with his left forearm and repeated the clubbing right to the solar plexus.

The guy folded in half, just the same.

After that it was easy enough to nudge them around until they were facing in the right direction, and then to use the flat of his boot sole to shove them towards their car, first one, and then the other. They hit head-on, pretty hard, and they went down flat. They left shallow dents in the door panels. They lay there, gasping, still conscious.

A dented car to explain, and headaches in the morning. That was all. Merciful, under the circumstances. Benevolent. Considerate. Soft, even.

Old man.

Old enough to be their father.

By that point Reacher had been in Virginia less than three hours.

TWO

REACHER HAD FINALLY MADE IT, ALL THE WAY FROM THE SNOWS of South Dakota. But not quickly. He had gotten hung up in Nebraska, twice, and onward progress had been just as slow. Missouri had been a long wait and then a silver Ford, driven east by a bony man who talked all the way from Kansas City to Columbia, and then fell silent. Illinois was a fast black Porsche, which Reacher guessed was stolen, and then it was two men with knives at a rest stop. They had wanted money, and Reacher guessed they were still in the hospital. Indiana was two days going nowhere, and then a dented blue Cadillac, driven slowly by a dignified old gentleman in a bow tie the same blue as his car. Ohio was four days in a small town, and then a red crew-cab Silverado, with a young married couple and their dog, driving all day in search of work. Which in Reacher's opinion was a possibility for two of them. The dog would not find easy employment. It was likely to remain for ever on the debit side of the ledger. It was a big useless mutt, pale in colour, about four years old, trusting and friendly. And it had hair to spare, even though it was the middle of winter. Reacher ended up covered in a fine golden down.

Then came an illogical loop north and east into Pennsylvania, but it was the only ride Reacher could get. He spent a day near Pittsburgh, and another near York, and then a black guy about twenty years old drove him to Baltimore, Maryland, in a white Buick about thirty years old. Slow progress, overall.

But from Baltimore it was easy. Baltimore sat astride I-95, and D.C. was the next stop south, and the part of Virginia Reacher was aiming for was more or less inside the D.C. bubble, not much farther west of Arlington Cemetery than the White House was east. Reacher made the trip from Baltimore on a bus, and got out in D.C. at the depot behind Union Station, and walked through the city, on K Street to Washington Circle, and then 23rd Street to the Lincoln Memorial, and then over the bridge to the cemetery. There was a bus stop outside the gates. A local service, mostly for the gardeners. Reacher's general destination was a place called Rock Creek, one of many spots in the region with the same name, because there were rocks and creeks everywhere, and settlers had been both isolated from one another and equally descriptive in their naming habits. No doubt back in the days of mud and knee breeches and wigs it had been a pretty little colonial village, but later it had become just another crossroads in a hundred square miles of expensive houses and cheap office parks. Reacher watched out the bus window, and noted the familiar sights, and catalogued the new additions, and waited.

His specific destination was a sturdy building put up about sixty years before by the nearby Department of Defense, for some long-forgotten original purpose. About forty years after that the military police had bid on it – in error, as it turned out. Some officer was thinking of a different Rock Creek. But he got the building anyway. It sat empty for a spell, and then it was given to the newly formed 110th MP Special Unit as its HQ.

It was the closest thing to a home base Reacher had ever had.

The bus let him out two blocks away, on a corner, at the bottom of a long hill he had walked many times. The road coming down towards him was a three-lane, with cracked concrete sidewalks

and mature trees in pits. The HQ building was ahead on the left, in a broad lot behind a high stone wall. Only its roof was visible, made of grey slate, with moss growing on its northern hip.

There was a driveway entrance off the three-lane, which came through the high stone wall between two brick pillars, which in Reacher's time had been purely decorative, with no gates hung off them. But gates had been installed since then. They were heavy steel items with steel wheels which ran in radiused tracks butchered into the old blacktop. Security, in theory, but not in practice, because the gates were standing open. Inside them, just beyond the end of their swing, was a sentry hutch, which was also new. It was occupied by a private first class wearing the new Army Combat Uniform, which Reacher thought looked like pyjamas, all patterned and baggy. Late afternoon was turning into early evening, and the light was fading.

Reacher stopped at the sentry hutch and the private gave him an enquiring look and Reacher said, 'I'm here to visit with your CO.'

The guy said, 'You mean Major Turner?'

Reacher said, 'How many COs do you have?'

'Just one, sir.'

'First name Susan?'

'Yes, sir. That's correct. Major Susan Turner, sir.'

'That's the one I want.'

'What name shall I give?'

'Reacher.'

'What's the nature of your business?'

'Personal.'

'Wait one, sir.' The guy picked up a phone and called ahead. *A Mr Reacher to see Major Turner.* The call went on much longer than Reacher expected. At one point the guy covered the mouthpiece with his palm and asked, 'Are you the same Reacher that was CO here once? Major Jack Reacher?'

'Yes,' Reacher said.

'And you spoke to Major Turner from somewhere in South Dakota?'

‘Yes,’ Reacher said.

The guy repeated the two affirmative answers into the phone, and listened some more. Then he hung up and said, ‘Sir, please go ahead.’ He started to give directions, and then he stopped, and said, ‘I guess you know the way.’

‘I guess I do,’ Reacher said. He walked on, and ten paces later he heard a grinding noise, and he stopped and glanced back.

The gates were closing behind him.

The building ahead of him was classic 1950s DoD architecture. Long and low, two storeys, brick, stone, slate, green metal window frames, green tubular handrails at the steps up to the doors. The 1950s had been a golden age for the DoD. Budgets had been immense. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, the military had gotten whatever it wanted. And more. There were cars parked in the lot. Some were army sedans, plain and dark and well used. Some were POVs, personally owned vehicles, brighter in colour but generally older. There was a lone Humvee, dark green and black, huge and menacing next to a small red two-seater. Reacher wondered if the two-seater was Susan Turner’s. He figured it could be. On the phone she had sounded like a woman who might drive such a thing.

He went up the short flight of stone steps to the door. Same steps, same door, but repainted since his time. More than once, probably. The army had a lot of paint, and was always happy to use it. Inside the door the place looked more or less the same as it always had. There was a lobby, with a stone staircase to the second floor on the right, and a reception desk on the left. Then the lobby narrowed to a corridor that ran the length of the building, with offices left and right. The office doors were half glazed with reeded glass. The lights were on in the corridor. It was winter, and the building had always been dark.

There was a woman at the reception desk, in the same ACU pyjamas as the guy at the gate, but with a sergeant’s stripes on the tab in the centre of her chest. Like an aiming point, Reacher thought. Up, up, up, fire. He much preferred the old woodland-

pattern battledress uniform. The woman was black, and didn't look happy to see him. She was agitated about something.

He said, 'Jack Reacher for Major Turner.'

The woman stopped and started a couple of times, as if she had plenty she wanted to say, but in the end all she managed was, 'You better head on up to her office. You know where it is?'

Reacher nodded. He knew where it was. It had been his office once. He said, 'Thank you, sergeant.'

He went up the stairs. Same worn stone, same metal hand-rail. He had been up those stairs a thousand times. They folded around once and came out directly above the centre of the lobby at the end of the long second-floor corridor. The lights were on in the corridor. The same linoleum was on the floor. The office doors to the left and right had the same reeded glass as the first-floor doors.

His office was third on the left.

No, Susan Turner's was.

He made sure his shirt was tucked and he brushed his hair with his fingers. He had no idea what he was going to say. He had liked her voice on the phone. That was all. He had sensed an interesting person behind it. He wanted to meet that person. Simple as that. He took two steps and stopped. She was going to think he was crazy.

But, nothing ventured, nothing gained. He shrugged to himself and moved on again. Third on the left. The door was the same as it always had been, but painted. Solid below, glass above, the reeded pattern splitting the dull view through into distorted vertical slices. There was a corporate-style name plate on the wall near the handle: *Maj. S. R. Turner, Commanding Officer*. That was new. In Reacher's day his name had been stencilled on the wood, below the glass, with even more economy: *Maj. Reacher, CO*.

He knocked.

He heard a vague vocal sound inside. It might have been *Enter*. So he took a breath and opened the door and stepped inside.

He had been expecting changes. But there weren't many. The

linoleum on the floor was the same, polished to a subtle sheen and a murky colour. The desk was the same, steel like a battleship, painted but worn back to shiny metal here and there, still dented where he had slammed some guy's head into it, back at the end of his command. The chairs were the same, both behind the desk and in front of it, utilitarian mid-century items that might have sold for a lot of money in some hipster store in New York or San Francisco. The file cabinets were the same. The light fixture was the same, a contoured white glass bowl hung off three little chains.

The differences were mostly predictable and driven by the march of time. There were three console telephones on the desk, where before there had been one old rotary-dial, heavy and black. There were two computers, one a desktop and one a laptop, where before there had been an in-tray and an out-tray and a lot of paper. The map on the wall was new and up to date, and the light fixture was burning green and sickly, with a modern bulb, all fluorescent and energy-saving. Progress, even at the Department of the Army.

Only two things in the office were unexpected and unpredictable.

First, the person behind the desk was not a major, but a lieutenant colonel.

And second, he wasn't a woman, but a man.