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LEE CHILD


A JACK
REACHER
NOVEL

NEVER GO BACK

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A JACK REACHER NOVEL

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Dedication

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About the Author

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 gray 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 northeastern 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 color. 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 center 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 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. Technical. 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 advisors.”

Which they weren’t, obviously. Reacher knew that. Army lawyers don’t travel in pairs and don’t 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 to make 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 manic 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 was: *Get your retaliation 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. For no good reason 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 on 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, toward his door, a fluid quarter circle of his shoulders and all, and like he knew they would the two guys moved toward 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 toward 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 center 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 knee. 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 toward 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.

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 then 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 who 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 forever on the debit side of the ledger. It was a big useless mutt, pale in color, 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 britches 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 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 toward him was a three-lane, with cracked concrete sidewalks and mature trees in pits. The HQ building was ahead on the left, in

broad lot behind a high stone wall. Only its roof was visible, made of gray 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 pajamas, a 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 inquiring 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 stories of 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 color but generally older. There was a long 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 pajamas as the guy at the gate, but with a sergeant's stripes on the tab in the center 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 handrail. He had been up those stairs a thousand times. They folded around once and came out directly above the center 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. This door 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 nameplate on the wall near the handle: *Maj. S. R. Turner, Commanding Officer*. That was new. In Reacher's day his name had been stenciled 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 color. 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 item, 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, a 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.

The man behind the desk was wearing the same ACU pajamas as everyone else, but they looked worse on him than most. Like fancy dress. Like a Halloween party. Not because he was particularly out of shape, but because he looked serious and managerial and deskbound. As if his weapon of choice would be a propelling pencil, not an M16. He was wearing steel-rimmed eyeglasses and had steel-gray hair cut and combed like a schoolboy's. His tapes and his tags confirmed he was indeed a lieutenant colonel in the United States Army, and that his name was Morgan.

Reacher said, "I'm sorry, colonel. I was looking for Major Turner."

The guy named Morgan said, "Sit down, Mr. Reacher."

Command presence was a rare and valuable thing, much prized by the military. And the guy named Morgan had plenty of it. Like his hair and his glasses, his voice was steel. No bullshit, no bluster, no bullying. Just a brisk assumption that all reasonable men would do exactly what he told them, because there would be no real practical alternative.

Reacher sat down in the visitor chair nearer the window. It had springy bent-tube legs, and it gave and bounced a little under his weight. He remembered the feeling. He had sat in it before, for one reason or another.

Morgan said, "Please tell me exactly why you're here."

And at that point Reacher thought he was about to get a death message. Susan Turner was dead. Afghanistan, possibly. Or a car wreck.

He said, "Where is Major Turner?"

Morgan said, "Not here."

"Where, then?"

"We might get to that. But first I need to understand your interest."

"In what?"

"In Major Turner."

"I have no interest in Major Turner."

"Yet you asked for her by name at the gate."

"It's a personal matter."

"As in?"

Reacher said, "I talked to her on the phone. She sounded interesting. I thought I might drop by and ask her out to dinner. The field manual doesn't prohibit her from saying yes."

"Or no, as the case may be."

"Indeed."

Morgan asked, "What did you talk about on the phone?"

"This and that."

"What exactly?"

"It was a private conversation, colonel. And I don't know who you are."

"I'm commander of the 110th Special Unit."

"Not Major Turner?"

"Not anymore."

"I thought this was a major's job. Not a light colonel's."

"This is a temporary command. I'm a troubleshooter. I get sent in to clean up the mess."

"And there's a mess here? Is that what you're saying?"

Morgan ignored the question. He asked, "Did you specifically arrange to meet with Major Turner?"

"Not specifically," Reacher said.

"Did she request your presence here?"

"Not specifically," Reacher said again.

"Yes or no?"

"Neither. I think it was just a vague intention on both our parts. If I happened to be in the area. That kind of a thing."

"And yet here you are, in the area. Why?"

"Why not? I have to be somewhere."

"Are you saying you came all the way from South Dakota on the basis of a vague intention?"

Reacher said, "I liked her voice. You got a problem with that?"

"You're unemployed, is that correct?"

"Currently."

"Since when?"

"Since I left the army."

"That's disgraceful."

Reacher asked, "Where is Major Turner?"

Morgan said, "This interview is not about Major Turner."

"Then what's it about?"

"This interview is about you."

"Me?"

"Completely unrelated to Major Turner. But she pulled your file. Perhaps she was curious about you. There was a flag on your file. It should have triggered when she pulled it. Which would have saved us some time. Unfortunately the flag malfunctioned and didn't trigger until she returned it. But better late than never. Because here you are."

"What are you talking about?"

"Did you know a man named Juan Rodriguez?"

"No. Who is he?"

"At one time he was of interest to the 110th. Now he's dead. Do you know a woman named Candice Dayton?"

"No. Is she dead too?"

"Ms. Dayton is still alive, happily. Or not happily, as it turns out. You sure you don't remember her?"

"What's this all about?"

"You're in trouble, Reacher."

"For what?"

"The Secretary of the Army has been given medical evidence showing Mr. Rodriguez died as a direct result of a beating he suffered sixteen years ago. Given there's no statute of limitations in such cases, he was technically a homicide victim."

"You saying one of my people did that? Sixteen years ago?"

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“That’s good. So what’s making Ms. Dayton unhappy?”

“That’s not my topic. Someone else will talk to you about that.”

“They’ll have to be quick. I won’t be sticking around for long. Not if Major Turner isn’t here. I don’t remember any other real attractions in the neighborhood.”

“You will be sticking around,” Morgan said. “You and I are due a long and interesting conversation.”

“About what?”

“The evidence shows it was you who beat on Mr. Rodriguez sixteen years ago.”

“Bullshit.”

“You’ll be provided with a lawyer. If it’s bullshit, I’m sure he’ll say so.”

“I mean, bullshit, you and I are not going to have any kind of a long conversation. Or lawyer. I’m a civilian, and you’re an asshole wearing pajamas.”

“So you’re not offering voluntary cooperation?”

“You got that right.”

“In which case, are you familiar with Title 10 of the United States Code?”

Reacher said, “Parts of it, obviously.”

“Then you may know that one particular part of it tells us when a man of your rank leaves the army, he doesn’t become a civilian. Not immediately, and not entirely. He becomes a reservist. He has no duties, but he remains subject to recall.”

“But for how many years?” Reacher said.

“You had a security clearance.”

“I remember it well.”

“Do you remember the papers you had to sign to get it?”

“Vaguely,” Reacher said. He remembered a bunch of guys in a room, all grown up and serious. Lawyers, and notaries, and seals and stamps and pens.

Morgan said, “There was a lot of fine print. Naturally. If you’re going to know the government’s secrets, the government is going to want some control over you. Before, during, and after.”

“How long after?”

“Most of that stuff stays secret for sixty years.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Don’t worry,” Morgan said. “The fine print didn’t say you stay a reservist for sixty years.”

“That’s good.”

“It said worse than that. It said indefinitely. But as it happens the Supreme Court already screwed us on that. It mandated we respect the standard three bottom-line restrictions common to all cases in Title 10.”

“Which are?”

“To be successfully recalled, you have to be in good health, under the age of fifty-five years, and trainable.”

Reacher said nothing.

Morgan asked, “How’s your health?”

“Pretty good.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m a long way from fifty-five.”

“Are you trainable?”

“I doubt it.”

“Me too. But that’s an empirical determination we make on the job.”

“Are you serious?”

“Completely,” Morgan said. “Jack Reacher, as of this moment on this day, you are formally recalled to military service.”

Reacher said nothing.

“You’re back in the army, major,” Morgan said. “And your ass is mine.”

There was no big ceremony. No processing-in, or reprocessing. Just Morgan's words, and then the room darkened a little as a guy in the corridor took up station in front of the door and blocked the light coming through the reeded glass panel. Reacher saw him, all sliced up vertically, a tall, broad-shouldered sentry, standing easy, facing away.

Morgan said, "I'm required to tell you there's an appeals procedure. You'll be given full access to it. You'll be given a lawyer."

Reacher said, "I'll be given?"

"It's a matter of simple logic. You'll be trying to appeal your way out. Which implies you're starting out in. Which means you'll get what the army chooses to give you. But I imagine we'll be reasonable."

"I don't remember any Juan Rodriguez."

"You'll be given a lawyer for that, too."

"What's supposed to have happened to the guy?"

"You tell me," Morgan said.

"I can't. I don't remember him."

"You left him with a brain injury. It caught up with him eventually."

"Who was he?"

"Denial won't work forever."

"I'm not denying anything. I'm telling you I don't remember the guy."

"That's a discussion you can have with your lawyer."

"And who is Candice Dayton?"

"Likewise. But a different lawyer."

"Why different?"

"Different type of case."

"Am I under arrest?"

"No," Morgan said. "Not yet. The prosecutors will make that decision in their own good time. But until then you're under orders, as of two minutes ago. You'll retain your former rank, for the time being. Administratively you're assigned to this unit, and your orders are to treat this building as your duty station and appear here every morning before 08:00 hours. You are not to leave the area. The area is defined as a five-mile radius of this desk. You'll be quartered in a place of the army's choosing."

Reacher said nothing.

Morgan said, "Are there any questions, major?"

"Will I be required to wear a uniform?"

"Not at this stage."

"That's a relief."

"This is not a joke, Reacher. The potential downside here is considerable. For you personally, I mean. The worst case would be life in Leavenworth, for a homicide conviction. But more likely ten years for manslaughter, given the sixteen year gap. And the best case is not very attractive either, given that we would have to look at the original crime. I would plan on conduct unbecoming, at the minimum, with a new discharge, this time without

honor. But your lawyer will run it down for you.”

“When?”

“The relevant department has already been notified.”

There were no cells in the old building. No secure facilities. There never had been. Just offices. Reacher was left where he was, in the visitor chair, not looked at, not spoken to, completely ignored. The sentry stood easy on the other side of the door. Morgan started tapping and typing and scrolling on the laptop computer. Reacher searched his memory for Juan Rodriguez. Sixteen years ago he had been twelve months into his command of the 110th. Early days. The name Rodriguez sounded Hispanic. Reacher had known many Hispanic people, both inside the service and out. He remembered hitting people on occasion, inside the service and out, some of them Hispanic, but none of them named Rodriguez. And if Rodriguez had been of interest to the 110th, Reacher would have remembered the name, surely. Especially from so early, when every case was significant. The 110th had been an experimental venture. Every move was watched. Every result was evaluated. Every mistake had an autopsy.

He asked, “What was the alleged context?”

No answer from Morgan. The guy just kept on tapping and typing and scrolling. So Reacher searched his memory for a woman named Candice Dayton. Again, he had known many women, both inside the service and out. Candice was a fairly common name. As was Dayton, comparatively. But the two names together meant nothing special to him. Neither did the diminutive, Candy. Candy Dayton? Candice Dayton? Nothing. Not that he remembered everything. No one remembered everything.

He asked, “Was Candice Dayton connected to Juan Rodriguez in some way?”

Morgan looked up, as if surprised to see he had a visitor sitting in his office. As if he had forgotten. He didn’t answer the question. He just picked up one of his complicated telephones and ordered a car. He told Reacher to go wait with the sergeant downstairs.

Two miles away, the man who only three people in the world knew as Romeo took out his cell, and dialed the man only two people in the world knew as Juliet, and said, “He’s been recalled to service. Colonel Morgan just put it in the computer.”

Juliet said, “So what happens next?”

“Too early to tell.”

“Will he run?”

“A sane man would.”

“Where are they putting him?”

“Their usual motel, I expect.”

The sergeant at the desk downstairs didn’t say anything. She was as tongue-tied as before. Reacher leaned on the wall and passed the time in silence. Ten minutes later a private first class came in from the cold and saluted and asked Reacher to follow him. Formal, and polite. Innocent until proven guilty, Reacher guessed, at least in some people’s eyes. Out in the l

there was a worn army sedan with its motor running. A young lieutenant was stumping around next to it, awkward and embarrassed. He held open the rear door and Reacher got in the back. The lieutenant took the front passenger seat and the private drove. A mile later they arrived at a motel, a run-down sway-backed old heap in a dark lot on a suburban evening-quiet three-lane road. The lieutenant signed a paper, and the night clerk gave Reacher a key, and the private drove the lieutenant away.

And then the second car arrived, with the guys in the T-shirts and the athletic pants.

There were no pockets in the athletic pants, and none in the T-shirts, either. And neither man was wearing dog tags. No ID at all. Their car was clean, too. Nothing in it, except the usual army document package stowed neatly in the glove compartment. No weapons, no personal property, no hidden wallets, no scraps of paper, no gas receipts. The license plate was a standard government registration. Nothing abnormal about the car at all, except the two new dents in the doors.

The left-hand guy was blocking the driver's door. Reacher dragged him six feet along the blacktop. He offered no resistance. Life was not a television show. Hit a guy hard enough on the side of the head, and he didn't spring back up ready to carry on the fight. He stayed down for an hour or more, all sick and dizzy and disoriented. A lesson learned long ago: the human brain was much more sensitive to side-to-side displacement than front-to-back. A evolutionary quirk, presumably, like most things.

Reacher opened the driver's door and climbed inside the car. The motor was stopped, but the key was still in. Reacher raked the seat back and started the engine. He sat still for a long spell and stared ahead through the windshield. *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.*

He adjusted the mirror. He put his foot on the brake and fumbled the lever into gear. *Conduct unbecoming, at the minimum, with a new discharge, this time without honor.*

He took his foot off the brake and drove away.

He drove straight back to the old HQ building, and parked fifty yards from it on the three-lane road. The car was warm, and he kept the motor running to keep it warm. He watched through the windshield and saw no activity ahead. No coming or going. In his day the 1100 had worked around the clock, seven days a week, and he saw no reason why anything would have changed. The enlisted night watch would be in for the duration, and a night duty officer would be in place, and the other officers would go off duty as soon as their work was done whenever that might be. Normally. But not on that particular night. Not during a mess or a crisis, and definitely not with a troubleshooter in the house. No one would leave before Morgan. Basic army politics.

Morgan left an hour later. Reacher saw him quite clearly. A plain sedan came out through the gate and turned onto the three-lane and drove straight past where Reacher was parked. In the darkness Reacher saw a flash of Morgan at the wheel, in his ACU pajamas and his eyeglasses, his hair still neatly combed, looking straight ahead, both hands on the wheel, like someone's great aunt on the way to the store. Reacher watched in the mirror and saw his taillights disappear over the hill.

He waited.

And sure enough, within the next quarter hour there was a regular exodus. Five more cars

came out, two of them turning left, three of them turning right, four of them driven solo, or of them with three people aboard. All the cars were dewed over with night mist, and all of them were trailing cold white exhaust. They disappeared into the distance, left and right, and their exhaust drifted away, and the world went quiet again.

Reacher waited ten more minutes, just in case. But nothing more happened. Fifty yards away the old building looked settled and silent. The night watch, in a world of its own, Reacher put his car in gear and rolled slowly down the hill and turned in at the gate. A new sentry was on duty in the hutch. A young guy, blank and stoic. Reacher stopped and buzzed his window down and the kid said, "Sir?"

Reacher gave his name and said, "I'm reporting to my duty station as ordered."

"Sir?" the guy said again.

"Am I on your list?"

The guy checked.

"Yes, sir," he said. "Major Reacher. But for tomorrow morning."

"I was ordered to report before 08:00 hours."

"Yes, sir. I see that. But it's 23:00 hours now, sir. In the evening."

"Which is before 08:00 in the morning. As ordered."

The guy didn't speak.

Reacher said, "It's a simple matter of chronology. I'm keen to get to work, therefore a little early."

No answer.

"You could check with Colonel Morgan, if you like. I'm sure he's back at his billet by now."

No answer.

"Or you could check with your duty sergeant."

"Yes, sir," the kid said. "I'll do that instead."

He made the call, and listened for a second, and put the phone down and said, "Sir, the sergeant requests that you stop by the desk."

"I'll be sure to do that, soldier," Reacher said. He drove on, and parked next to the little red two-seater, which was still there, exactly where it had been before. He got out and locked up and walked through the cold to the door. The lobby felt quiet and still. A night and day difference, literally. But the same sergeant was at the reception desk. Finishing her work before going off duty. She was on a high stool, typing on a keyboard. Updating the day's log, presumably. Record keeping was a big deal, all over the military. She stopped and looked up.

Reacher asked her, "Are you putting this visit in the official record?"

She said, "What visit? And I told the private at the gate not to, either."

Not tongue tied anymore. Not with the interloper Morgan out of the house. She looked young, but infinitely capable, like sergeants the world over. The tape over her right breast said her name was Leach.

She said, "I know who you are."

Reacher said, "Have we met?"

"No, sir, but you're a famous name here. You were this unit's first commander."

"Do you know why I'm back?"

"Yes, sir. We were told."

"What was the general reaction?"

“Mixed.”

“What’s your personal reaction?”

“I’m sure there’s a good explanation. And sixteen years is a long time. Which makes political, probably. Which is usually bullshit. And even if it isn’t, I’m sure the guy deserved it. Or worse.”

Reacher said nothing.

Leach said, “I thought about warning you, when you first came in. Best thing for you would have been just to run for it. So I really wanted to turn you around and get you out of here. But I was under orders not to. I’m sorry.”

Reacher asked her, “Where is Major Turner?”

Leach said, “Long story.”

“How does it go?”

“She deployed to Afghanistan.”

“When?”

“The middle of the day, yesterday.”

“Why?”

“We have people there. There was an issue.”

“What kind of an issue?”

“I don’t know.”

“And?”

“She never arrived.”

“You know that for sure?”

“No question.”

“So where is she instead?”

“No one knows.”

“When did Colonel Morgan get here?”

“Within hours of Major Turner leaving.”

“How many hours?”

“About two.”

“Did he give a reason for being here?”

“The implication was Major Turner had been relieved of her command.”

“Nothing specific?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Was she screwing up?”

Leach didn’t answer.

Reacher said, “You may speak freely, sergeant.”

“No, sir, she wasn’t screwing up. She was doing a really good job.”

“So that’s all you’ve got? Implications and disappearances?”

“So far.”

“No gossip?” Reacher asked. Sergeants were always part of a network. Always had been, always would be. Like rumor mills. Like uniformed versions of tabloid newspapers.

Leach said, “I heard one little thing.”

“Which was?”

“It might be nothing.”

“But?”

“And it might not be connected.”

“But?”

“Someone told me the guardhouse at Fort Dyer has a new prisoner.”

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