

A JACK REACHER THRILLER

LEE CHILD

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

THE HARD WAY



'The invincible Reacher is as irresistible as ever'
SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

Jack Reacher is alone, the way he likes it.

He watches a man cross a New York street and drive away in a Mercedes. The car contains \$1 million of ransom money. Reacher's job is to make sure it all turns out right – money paid, family safely returned.

But Reacher is in the middle of a nasty little war where nothing is simple. What started on a busy New York street explodes thousands of miles away, in the sleepy English countryside.

Reacher's going to have to do this one the hard way.

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THE HARD WAY

Lee Child



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For Katie and Jess: two sweet sisters

Jack Reacher ordered espresso, double, no peel, no cube, foam cup, no china, and before it arrived at his table he saw a man's life change forever. Not that the waiter was slow. Just that the move was slick. So slick, Reacher had no idea what he was watching. It was just an urban scene, repeated everywhere in the world a billion times a day: a guy unlocked a car and got in and drove away. That was all.

But that was enough.

The espresso had been close to perfect, so Reacher went back to the same café exactly twenty-four hours later. Two nights in the same place was unusual for Reacher, but he figured great coffee was worth a change in his routine. The café was on the west side of Sixth Avenue in New York City, in the middle of the block between Bleecker and Houston. It occupied the ground floor of an undistinguished four-storey building. The upper storeys looked like anonymous rental apartments. The café itself looked like a transplant from a back street in Rome. Inside it had low light and scarred wooden walls and a dented chrome machine as hot and long as a locomotive, and a counter. Outside there was a single line of metal tables on the sidewalk behind a low canvas screen. Reacher took the same empty table he had used the night before and chose the same seat. He stretched out and got comfortable and tipped his chair up on two legs. That put his back against the café's outside wall and left him looking east, across the sidewalk and the width of the avenue. He liked to sit outside in the summer, in New York City. Especially at night. He liked the electric darkness and the hot dirty air and the blasts of noise and traffic and the manic barking sirens and the crush of people. It helped a lonely man feel connected and isolated both at the same time.

He was served by the same waiter as the night before and ordered the same drink, double espresso in a foam cup, no sugar, no spoon. He paid for it as soon as it arrived and left his change on the table. That way he could leave exactly when he wanted to without insulting the waiter or bilking the owner or stealing the china. Reacher always arranged the smallest details in his life so he could move on at a split second's notice. It was an obsessive habit. He owned nothing and carried nothing. Physically he was a big man, but he cast a small shadow and left very little in his wake.

He drank his coffee slowly and felt the night heat come up off the sidewalk. He watched cars and people. Watched taxis flow north and garbage trucks pause at the kerbs. Saw knots of strange young people heading for clubs. Watched girls who had once been boys totter south. Saw a blue German sedan park on the block. Watched a compact man in a grey suit get out and walk north. Watched him thread between two sidewalk tables and head inside to where the café staff was clustered in back. Watched him ask them questions.

The guy was medium height, not young, not old, too solid to be called wiry, too slight to be called heavy. His hair was grey at the temples and cut short and neat. He kept himself balanced on the balls of his feet. His mouth didn't move much as he talked. But his eyes did. They flicked left and right tirelessly. The guy was about forty, Reacher guessed, and furthermore Reacher guessed he had gotten to be about forty by staying relentlessly aware of everything that was happening around him. Reacher had seen the same look in elite infantry veterans who had survived long jungle tours.

Then Reacher's waiter turned suddenly and pointed straight at him. The compact man in the grey suit stared over. Reacher stared back, over his shoulder, through the window. Eye contact was made. Without breaking it the man in the suit mouthed *thank you* to the waiter and started back out the way

he had entered. He stepped through the door and made a right inside the low canvas screen and threaded his way down to Reacher's table. Reacher let him stand there mute for a moment while he made up his mind. Then he said 'Yes' to him, like an answer, not a question.

'Yes what?' the guy said back.

'Yes whatever,' Reacher said. 'Yes I'm having a pleasant evening, yes you can join me, yes you can ask me whatever it is you want to ask me.'

The guy scraped a chair out and sat down, his back to the river of traffic, blocking Reacher's view.

'Actually I do have a question,' he said.

'I know,' Reacher said. 'About last night.'

'How did you know that?' The guy's voice was low and quiet and his accent was flat and clipped and British.

'The waiter pointed me out,' Reacher said. 'And the only thing that distinguishes me from his other customers is that I was here last night and they weren't.'

'You're certain about that?'

'Turn your head away,' Reacher said. 'Watch the traffic.'

The guy turned his head away. Watched the traffic.

'Now tell me what I'm wearing,' Reacher said.

'Green shirt,' the British guy said. 'Cotton, baggy, cheap, doesn't look new, sleeves rolled to the elbow, over a green T-shirt, also cheap and not new, a little tight, untucked over flat-front khaki chinos, no socks, English shoes, pebbled leather, brown, not new, but not very old either, probably expensive. Frayed laces, like you pull on them too hard when you tie them. Maybe indicative of a self-discipline obsession.'

'OK,' Reacher said.

'OK what?'

'You notice things,' Reacher said. 'And I notice things. We're two of a kind. We're peas in a pod. I'm the only customer here now who was also here last night. I'm certain of that. And that's what you asked the staff. Had to be. That's the only reason the waiter would have pointed me out.'

The guy turned back.

'Did you see a car last night?' he asked.

'I saw plenty of cars last night,' Reacher said. 'This is Sixth Avenue.'

'A Mercedes Benz. Parked over there.' The guy twisted again and pointed on a slight diagonal at a length of empty kerb by a fire hydrant on the other side of the street.

Reacher said, 'Silver, four-door sedan, an S-420, New York vanity plates starting OSC, a lot of city miles on it. Dirty paint, scuffed tyres, dinged rims, dents and scrapes on both bumpers.'

The guy turned back again.

'You saw it,' he said.

'It was right there,' Reacher said. 'Obviously I saw it.'

'Did you see it leave?'

Reacher nodded. 'Just before eleven forty-five a guy got in and drove it away.'

'You're not wearing a watch.'

'I always know what time it is.'

'It must have been closer to midnight.'

'Maybe,' Reacher said. 'Whatever.'

'Did you get a look at the driver?'

'I told you, I saw him get in and drive away.'

The guy stood up.

'I need you to come with me,' he said. Then he put his hand in his pocket. 'I'll buy your coffee.'

'I already paid for it.'

'So let's go.'

'Where?'

'To see my boss.'

'Who's your boss?'

'A man called Lane.'

'You're not a cop,' Reacher said. 'That's my guess. Based on observation.'

'Of what?'

'Your accent. You're not American. You're British. The NYPD isn't that desperate.'

'Most of us are Americans,' the British guy said. 'But you're right, we're not cops. We're private citizens.'

'What kind?'

'The kind that will make it worth your while if you give them a description of the individual who drove that car away.'

'Worth my while how?'

'Financially,' the guy said. 'Is there any other way?'

'Lots of other ways,' Reacher said. 'I think I'll stay right here.'

'This is very serious.'

'How?'

The guy in the suit sat down again.

'I can't tell you that,' he said.

'Goodbye,' Reacher said.

'Not my choice,' the guy said. 'Mr Lane made it mission-critical that nobody knows. For very good reasons.'

Reacher tilted his cup and checked the contents. Nearly gone.

'You got a name?' he asked.

'Do you?'

'You first.'

In response the guy stuck a thumb into the breast pocket of his suit coat and slid out a black leather business card holder. He opened it up and used the same thumb to slide out a single card. He passed it across the table. It was a handsome item. Heavy linen stock, raised lettering, ink that still looked wet. At the top it said: *Operational Security Consultants*.

'OSC,' Reacher said. 'Like the licence plate.'

The British guy said nothing.

Reacher smiled. 'You're security consultants and you got your car stolen? I can see how that could be embarrassing.'

The guy said, 'It's not the car we're worried about.'

Lower down on the business card was a name: *John Gregory*. Under the name was a subscription: *British Army, Retired*. Then a job title: *Executive Vice President*.

'How long have you been out?' Reacher asked.

'Of the British army?' the guy called Gregory said. 'Seven years.'

'Unit?'

'SAS.'

'You've still got the look.'

'You too,' Gregory said. 'How long have you been out?'

'Seven years,' Reacher said.

'Unit?'

'US Army CID, mostly.'

Gregory looked up. Interested. 'Investigator?'

'Mostly.'

'Rank?'

'I don't remember,' Reacher said. 'I've been a civilian seven years.'

'Don't be shy,' Gregory said. 'You were probably a lieutenant colonel at least.'

'Major,' Reacher said. 'That's as far as I got.'

'Career problems?'

'I had my share.'

'You got a name?'

'Most people do.'

'What is it?'

'Reacher.'

'What are you doing now?'

'I'm trying to get a quiet cup of coffee.'

'You need work?'

'No,' Reacher said. 'I don't.'

'I was a sergeant,' Gregory said.

Reacher nodded. 'I figured. SAS guys usually are. And you've got the look.'

'So will you come with me and talk to Mr Lane?'

'I told you what I saw. You can pass it on.'

'Mr Lane will want to hear it direct.'

Reacher checked his cup again. 'Where is he?'

'Not far. Ten minutes.'

'I don't know,' Reacher said. 'I'm enjoying my espresso.'

'Bring it with you. It's in a foam cup.'

'I prefer peace and quiet.'

'All I want is ten minutes.'

'Seems like a lot of fuss over a stolen car, even if it was a Mercedes Benz.'

'This is not about the car.'

'So what is it about?'

'Life and death,' Gregory said. 'Right now more likely death than life.'

Reacher checked his cup again. There was less than a lukewarm eighth-inch left, thick and scummy with espresso mud. That was all. He put the cup down.

'OK,' he said. 'So let's go.'

The blue German Sedan turned out to be a new BMW 7-series with OSC vanity plates on it. Gregory unlocked it from ten feet away with a key fob remote and Reacher got in the front passenger seat sideways and found the switch and moved the seat back for leg room. Gregory pulled out a small silver cell phone and dialled a number.

‘Incoming with a witness,’ he said, clipped and British. Then he closed the phone and fired up the engine and moved out into the midnight traffic.

The ten minutes turned out to be twenty. Gregory drove north on Sixth Avenue all the way through Midtown to 57th Street and then two blocks west. He turned north on Eighth, through Columbus Circle, onto Central Park West, and into 72nd Street. He stopped outside the Dakota Building.

‘Nice digs,’ Reacher said.

‘Only the best for Mr Lane,’ Gregory said, nothing in his voice.

They got out together and stood on the sidewalk and another compact man in a grey suit stepped out of the shadows and into the car and drove it away. Gregory led Reacher into the building and up in the elevator. The lobbies and the hallways were as dark and baronial as the exterior.

‘You ever seen Yoko?’ Reacher asked.

‘No,’ Gregory said.

They got out on five and Gregory led the way around a corner and an apartment door opened for them. The lobby staff must have called ahead. The door that opened was heavy oak the colour of honey and the warm light that spilled out into the corridor was the colour of honey too. The apartment was a tall solid space. There was a small square foyer open to a big square living room. The living room had cool air and yellow walls and low table lights and comfortable chairs and sofas all covered in printed fabric. It was full of six men. None of them was sitting down. They were all standing up silent. Three wore grey suits similar to Gregory’s and three were in black jeans and black nylon warm-up jackets. Reacher knew immediately they were all ex-military. Just like Gregory. They all had the same look. The apartment itself had the desperate quiet feel of a command bunker far from some distant point where a battle was right then turning to shit.

All six men turned and glanced at Reacher as he stepped inside. None of them spoke. But five men then glanced at the sixth, which Reacher guessed identified the sixth man as Mr Lane. The boss. He was half a generation older than his men. He was in a grey suit. He had grey hair, buzzed close to his scalp. He was maybe an inch above average height, and slender. His face was pale and full of worry. He was standing absolutely straight, racked with tension, with his fingertips spread and touching the top of a table that held an old-fashioned telephone and a framed photograph of a pretty woman.

‘This is the witness,’ Gregory said.

No reply.

‘He saw the driver,’ Gregory said.

The man at the table glanced down at the phone and then moved away from it, towards Reacher looking him up and down, assessing, evaluating. He stopped a yard away and offered his hand.

‘Edward Lane,’ he said. ‘I’m very pleased to meet you, sir.’ His accent was American, originally from some hardscrabble place far from the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Arkansas, maybe, or rural Tennessee, but in either case overlaid by long exposure to the neutral tones of the military. Reacher said his own name and shook Lane’s hand. It was dry, not warm, not cold.

‘Tell me what you saw,’ Lane said.

'I saw a guy get in a car,' Reacher said. 'He drove it away.'

'I need detail,' Lane said.

'Reacher is ex-US Army CID,' Gregory said. 'He described the Benz to perfection.'

'So describe the driver,' Lane said.

'I saw more of the car than the driver,' Reacher said.

'Where were you?'

'In a café. The car was a little north and east of me, across the width of Sixth Avenue. Maybe twenty degree angle, maybe ninety feet away.'

'Why were you looking at it?'

'It was badly parked. It looked out of place. I guessed it was on a fireplug.'

'It was,' Lane said. 'Then what?'

'Then a guy crossed the street towards it. Not at a crosswalk. Through gaps in the traffic, at an angle. The angle was more or less the same as my line of sight, maybe twenty degrees. So most of what I saw was his back, all the way.'

'Then what?'

'He stuck the key in the door and got inside. Took off.'

'Going north, obviously, this being Sixth Avenue. Did he turn?'

'Not that I saw.'

'Can you describe him?'

'Blue jeans, blue shirt, blue baseball cap, white sneakers. The clothing was old and comfortable. The guy was average height, average weight.'

'Age?'

'I didn't see his face. Most of what I saw was his back. But he didn't move like a kid. He was at least in his thirties. Maybe forty.'

'How exactly did he move?'

'He was focused. He headed straight for the car. Not fast, but there was no doubt where he was going. The way he held his head, I think he was looking directly at the car the whole way. Like a definite destination. Like a target. And the way he held his shoulder, I think he might have had the key out in front of him, horizontally. Like a tiny lance. Focused, and intent. And urgent. That's how he moved.'

'Where did he come from?'

'From behind my shoulder, more or less. He could have been walking north, and then stepped off the sidewalk at the café, north and east through the traffic.'

'Would you recognize him again?'

'Maybe,' Reacher said. 'But only by his clothes and his walk and his posture. Nothing that would convince anyone.'

'If he crossed through the traffic he must have glanced south to see what was coming at him. At least once. So you should have seen the right side of his face. Then when he was behind the wheel, you should have seen the left side.'

'Narrow angles,' Reacher said. 'And the light wasn't great.'

'There must have been headlight beams on him.'

'He was white,' Reacher said. 'No facial hair. That's all I saw.'

'White male,' Lane said. 'Thirty-five to forty-five. I guess that eliminates about eighty per cent of the population, maybe more, but it's not good enough.'

'Didn't you have insurance?' Reacher asked.

'This is not about the car,' Lane said.

'It was empty,' Reacher said.

'It wasn't empty,' Lane said.

'So what was in it?'

'Thank you, Mr Reacher,' Lane said. 'You've been very helpful.'

He turned and walked back to where he had started, next to the table with the phone and the photograph. He stood erect beside it and spread his fingers again and laid the tips lightly on the polished wood, right next to the telephone, like his touch might detect an incoming call before the electronic pulse started the bell.

'You need help,' Reacher said. 'Don't you?'

'Why would you care?' Lane asked.

'Habit,' Reacher said. 'Reflex. Professional curiosity.'

'I've got help,' Lane said. He gestured with his free hand around the room. 'Navy SEALs, Delta Force, Recon Marines, Green Berets, SAS from Britain. The best in the world.'

'You need a different kind of help. The guy who took your car, these folks can start a war against him, that's for sure. But first you need to find him.'

No reply.

'What was in the car?' Reacher asked.

'Tell me about your career,' Lane said.

'It's been over a long time. That's its main feature.'

'Final rank?'

'Major.'

'Army CID?'

'Thirteen years.'

'Investigator?'

'Basically.'

'A good one?'

'Good enough.'

'110th Special Unit?'

'Some of the time. You?'

'Rangers and Delta. Started in Vietnam, ended in the Gulf the first time around. Started a second lieutenant, finished a full colonel.'

'What was in the car?'

Lane looked away. Held still and quiet for a long, long time. Then he looked back, like a decision had been made.

'You need to give me your word about something,' he said.

'Like what?'

'No cops. That's going to be your first piece of advice, go to the cops. But I'll refuse to do it, and I need your word that you won't go behind my back.'

Reacher shrugged.

'OK,' he said.

'Say it.'

'No cops.'

'Say it again.'

'No cops,' Reacher said again.

‘You got an ethical problem with that?’

‘No,’ Reacher said.

‘No FBI, no nobody,’ Lane said. ‘We handle this ourselves. Understand? You break your word, I’ll put your eyes out. I’ll have you blinded.’

‘You’ve got a funny way of making friends.’

‘I’m looking for help here, not friends.’

‘My word is good,’ Reacher said.

‘Say you understand what I’ll do if you break it.’

Reacher looked around the room. Took it all in. A quiet desperate atmosphere and six Special Forces veterans, all full of subdued menace, all as hard as nails, all looking right back at him, all full of unit loyalty and hostile suspicion of the outsider.

‘You’ll have me blinded,’ Reacher said.

‘You better believe it,’ Lane said.

‘What was in the car?’

Lane moved his hand away from the phone. He picked up the framed photograph. He held it two handed, flat against his chest, high up, so that Reacher felt he had two people staring back at him. Above, Lane’s pale and worried features. Below, under glass, a woman of breathtaking classic beauty. Dark hair, green eyes, high cheekbones, a bud of a mouth, photographed with passion and expertise and printed by a master.

‘This is my wife,’ Lane said.

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

‘Her name is Kate,’ Lane said.

Nobody spoke.

‘Kate disappeared late yesterday morning,’ Lane said. ‘I got a call in the afternoon. From her kidnappers. They wanted money. That’s what was in the car. You watched one of my wife’s kidnappers collect their ransom.’

Silence.

‘They promised to release her,’ Lane said. ‘And it’s been twenty-four hours. And they haven’t called back.’

Edward Lane held the framed photograph like an offering and Reacher stepped forward to take it. He tilted it to catch the light. Kate Lane was beautiful, no question about it. She was hypnotic. She was younger than her husband by maybe twenty years, which put her in her early thirties. Old enough to be all woman, young enough to be flawless. In the picture she was gazing at something just beyond the edge of the print. Her eyes blazed with love. Her mouth seemed ready to burst into a wide smile. The photographer had frozen the first tiny hint of it so that the pose seemed dynamic. It was a still picture but it looked like it was about to move. The focus and the grain and the detail were immaculate. Reacher didn't know much about photography, but he knew he was holding a high-end product. The frame alone might have cost what he used to make in a month, back in the army.

'My Mona Lisa,' Lane said. 'That's how I think of that picture.'

Reacher passed it back. 'Is it recent?'

Lane propped it upright again, next to the telephone.

'Less than a year old,' he said.

'Why no cops?'

'There are reasons.'

'This kind of a thing, they usually do a good job.'

'No cops,' Lane said.

Nobody spoke.

'You were a cop,' Lane said. 'You can do what they do.'

'I can't,' Reacher said.

'You were a military cop. Therefore all things being equal you can do better than them.'

'All things aren't equal. I don't have their resources.'

'You can make a start.'

The room went very quiet. Reacher glanced at the phone, and the photograph.

'How much money did they want?' he asked.

'One million dollars in cash,' Lane answered.

'And that was in the car? A million bucks?'

'In the trunk. In a leather bag.'

'OK,' Reacher said. 'Let's all sit down.'

'I don't feel like sitting down.'

'Relax,' Reacher said. 'They're going to call back. Probably very soon. I can pretty much guarantee that.'

'How?'

'Sit down. Start at the beginning. Tell me about yesterday.'

So Lane sat down, in the armchair next to the telephone table, and started to talk about the previous day. Reacher sat at one end of a sofa. Gregory sat next to him. The other five guys distributed themselves around the room, two sitting, two squatting on chair arms, one leaning against the wall.

'Kate went out at ten o'clock in the morning,' Lane said. 'She was heading for Bloomingdale's, I think.'

'You think?'

'I allow her some freedom of action. She doesn't necessarily supply me with a detailed itinerary. Not every day.'

‘Was she alone?’

‘Her daughter was with her.’

‘Her daughter?’

‘She has an eight-year-old by her first marriage. Her name is Jade.’

‘She lives with you here?’

Lane nodded.

‘So where is Jade now?’

‘Missing, obviously,’ Lane said.

‘So this is a *double* kidnapping?’ Reacher said.

Lane nodded again. ‘Triple, in a way. Their driver didn’t come back either.’

‘You didn’t think to mention this before?’

‘Does it make a difference? One person or three?’

‘Who was the driver?’

‘A guy called Taylor. British, ex-SAS. A good man. One of us.’

‘What happened to the car?’

‘It’s missing.’

‘Does Kate go to Bloomingdale’s often?’

Lane shook his head. ‘Only occasionally. And never on a predictable pattern. We do nothing regular or predictable. I vary her drivers, vary her routes, sometimes we stay out of the city altogether.’

‘Because? You got a lot of enemies?’

‘My fair share. My line of work attracts enemies.’

‘You’re going to have to explain your line of work to me. You’re going to have to tell me who your enemies are.’

‘Why are you sure they’re going to call?’

‘I’ll get to that,’ Reacher said. ‘Tell me about the first conversation. Word for word.’

‘They called at four o’clock in the afternoon. It went pretty much how you would expect. You know we have your wife, we have your daughter.’

‘Voice?’

‘Altered. One of those electronic squawk boxes. Very metallic, like a robot in a movie. Loud and deep, but that doesn’t mean anything. They can alter the pitch and the volume.’

‘What did you say to them?’

‘I asked them what they wanted. They said a million bucks. I asked them to put Kate on the line. They did, after a short pause.’ Lane closed his eyes. ‘She said, you know, help me, help me.’ He opened his eyes. ‘Then the guy with the squawk box came back on and I agreed to the money. No hesitation. The guy said he would call back in an hour with instructions.’

‘And did he?’

Lane nodded. ‘At five o’clock. I was told to wait six hours and put the money in the trunk of the Mercedes you saw and have it driven down to the Village and parked in that spot at eleven for exactly. The driver was to lock it up and walk away and put the keys through a mail slot in the front door of a certain building on the southwest corner of Spring Street and West Broadway. Then he was to walk away and keep on walking away, south on West Broadway. Someone would move in behind him and enter the building and collect the keys. If my driver stopped or turned around or even looked back, Kate would die. Likewise if there was a tracking device on the car.’

‘That was it, word for word?’

Lane nodded.

‘Nothing else?’

Lane shook his head.

‘Who drove the car down?’ Reacher asked.

‘Gregory,’ Lane said.

‘I followed the instructions,’ Gregory said. ‘To the letter. I couldn’t risk anything else.’

‘How far of a walk was it?’ Reacher asked him.

‘Six blocks.’

‘What was the building with the mail slot?’

‘Abandoned,’ Gregory said. ‘Or awaiting renovations. One or the other. It was empty, anyway.’

went back there tonight, before I came to the café. No sign of habitation.’

‘How good was this guy Taylor? Did you know him in Britain?’

Gregory nodded. ‘SAS is a big family. And Taylor was very good indeed.’

‘OK,’ Reacher said.

‘OK what?’ Lane said.

‘There are some obvious early conclusions,’ Reacher said.

Reacher said, 'The first conclusion is that Taylor is already dead. These guys clearly know you to some extent, and therefore we should assume they knew who and what Taylor was. Therefore they wouldn't keep him alive. No reason for it. Too dangerous.'

Lane asked, 'Why do you think they know me?'

'They asked for a specific car,' Reacher said. 'And they suspected you might have a million dollars in cash lying around. They asked for it after the banks were closed and told you to deliver it before the banks reopened. Not everyone could comply with those conditions. Usually even very rich people take a little time to get a million bucks in cash together. They get temporary loans, wire transfers, they use stock as collateral, stuff like that. But these guys seemed to know that you could just cough it up instantly.'

'How do they know me?'

'You tell me.'

Nobody spoke.

'And there are three of them,' Reacher said. 'One to guard Kate and Jade wherever they took them. One to watch Gregory's back while he walked south on West Broadway, on a cell phone to a third who was waiting to move in and pick up the keys as soon as it was safe.'

Nobody spoke.

'And they're based a minimum two hundred miles upstate,' Reacher said. 'Let's assume the initial action went down before about eleven o'clock yesterday morning. But they didn't call for more than five hours. Because they were driving. Then they issued instructions at five o'clock for a ransom drop more than six hours later. Because they needed the six hours because two of them had to drive all the way back. Five, six hours, that's two hundred miles, maybe two fifty, maybe more.'

'Why upstate?' Lane said. 'They could be anywhere.'

'Not south or west,' Reacher said. 'Or they would have asked for the ransom car south of Canal, or they could head straight for the Holland Tunnel. Not east on Long Island, or they would have wanted to be near the Midtown Tunnel. No, north on Sixth was what they wanted. That implies they were happy to head up towards the George Washington Bridge, or the Henry Hudson and the Saw Mill, or the Triborough and the Major Deegan. Eventually they hit the Thruway, probably. They could be in the Catskills or anywhere. A farm, probably. Certainly somewhere with a big garage block or a barn.'

'Why?'

'They just inherited your Mercedes Benz. Right after hijacking whatever Taylor drove out of Bloomingdale's yesterday. They need a place to hide them.'

'Taylor was driving a Jaguar.'

'There you go. Their place must look like a luxury car lot by now.'

'Why are you so sure they're going to call back?'

'Because of human nature. Right now they're mad as hell. They're kicking themselves. They know you, but maybe not all that well. They took a chance and asked for a million dollars in cash, and you bagged it up without a moment's hesitation. You shouldn't have done that. You should have gambled and stalled. Because now they're saying, damn it, we should have asked for more. They're saying, we should have tested the limits. So they're going to get back on the phone and hit you up for another chunk. They're going to feel out exactly how much cash you've got lying around. They're going to bleed you dry.'

‘Why wait so long?’

‘Because it’s a significant change in strategy,’ Reacher said. ‘Therefore they’re arguing about it. They’ve been arguing about it all day. That’s human nature, too. Three guys always argue, pro and con, stick to the plan or improvise, play it safe or take the risk.’

Nobody spoke.

‘How much *have* you got in cash?’ Reacher asked.

‘I’m not going to tell you,’ Lane said.

‘Five million,’ Reacher said. ‘That’s what they’ll ask for next. The phone is going to ring and they’re going to ask for another five million dollars.’

Seven pairs of eyes turned towards the phone. It didn’t ring.

‘In another car,’ Reacher said. ‘They must have a big barn.’

‘Is Kate safe?’ Lane asked.

‘Right now, she’s as safe as houses,’ Reacher said. ‘She’s their meal ticket. And you did the right thing, asking to hear her voice the first time. That set up a good pattern. They’ll have to repeat it. The problem will come after they’ve had the last payment. That’s the toughest part of any kidnap. Giving the money away is easy. Getting the person back is hard.’

The phone stayed silent.

‘So should I stall?’ Lane asked.

‘I would,’ Reacher said. ‘Parcel it out. Keep it going. Buy some time.’

The phone didn’t ring. No sound in the room except the hiss of cooled air and men breathing low. Reacher glanced around. Everyone was waiting patiently. Special Forces soldiers were good at waiting. For all the occasional spectacular action they saw, they spent a lot more time waiting standing by, passing the time in readiness. And then nine times out of ten they were stood down, action cancelled.

The phone didn’t ring.

‘Good conclusions,’ Lane said, to nobody in particular, through the silence. ‘Three guys, far away. Upstate. On a farm.’

But Reacher was completely wrong. Just four miles away through the electric city darkness, right there on the island of Manhattan, a lone man pushed open a door to a small, hot room. Then he stepped back. Kate Lane and her daughter Jade passed in front of him without meeting his eyes. They stepped inside the room and saw two beds. The beds looked hard and narrow. The room felt damp and unused. The window was draped with black cloth. The cloth was duct-taped to the walls, across the top, across the bottom, down both sides.

The lone man closed the door and walked away.

The phone rang at exactly one o'clock in the morning. Lane snatched it out of the cradle and said 'Yes?' Reacher heard a faint voice from the earpiece, distorted twice, first by a machine and then again by a bad connection. Lane said, 'What?' and there was a reply. Lane said, 'Put Kate on the phone. You've got to do that first.' Then there was a pause, and then there was a different voice. A woman's voice, distorted, panicked, breathy. It said just one word, possibly Lane's name, and then it exploded in a scream. The scream died into silence and Lane screwed his eyes shut and the electronic robot voice came back and barked six short syllables. Lane said, 'OK, OK, OK,' and Reacher heard the line go dead.

Lane sat in silence, his eyes clamped shut, his breathing fast and ragged. Then his eyes opened and moved from face to face and stopped on Reacher's.

'Five million dollars,' he said. 'You were right. How did you know?'

'It was the obvious next step,' Reacher said. 'One, five, ten, twenty. That's how people think.'

'You've got a crystal ball. You can see the future. I'm putting you on the payroll. Twenty-five grand a month, like all these guys.'

'This isn't going to last a month,' Reacher said. 'It can't. It's going to be all over in a couple of days.'

'I agreed to the money,' Lane said. 'I couldn't stall. They were hurting her.'

Reacher nodded. Said nothing.

Gregory asked, 'Instructions later?'

'In an hour,' Lane said.

The room went quiet again. More waiting. All around the room men checked their watches and settled back imperceptibly. Lane put the silent handset back in the cradle and stared off into space. But Reacher leaned forward and tapped him on the knee.

'We need to talk,' he said quietly.

'About what?'

'Background. We should try to figure out who these guys are.'

'OK,' Lane said vaguely. 'We'll go to the office.'

He stood up slowly and led Reacher out of the living room and through a kitchen to a maid's room in back. It was small and plain and square and had been fixed up as an office. Desk, computer, fax machine, phones, file cabinets, shelves.

'Tell me about Operational Security Consultants,' Reacher said.

Lane sat down in the desk chair and turned it to face the room.

'Not much to tell,' he said. 'We're just a bunch of ex-military trying to keep busy.'

'Doing what?'

'Whatever people need. Bodyguarding, mostly. Corporate security. Like that.'

There were two framed photographs on the desk. One was a smaller reprint of Kate's stunning picture from the living room. A seven-by-five instead of a fourteen-by-eleven, in a similar expensive gold frame. The other was of another woman, about the same age, blonde where Kate was dark, blue eyes instead of green. But just as beautiful, and photographed just as masterfully.

'Bodyguarding?' Reacher said.

'Mostly.'

'You're not convincing me, Mr Lane. Bodyguards don't make twenty-five grand a month.'

Bodyguards are big dumb lumps lucky to make a tenth of that. And if you had guys trained for close personal protection you'd have sent one of them out with Kate and Jade yesterday morning. Taylor driving, maybe Gregory riding shotgun. But you didn't, which suggests that bodyguarding isn't exactly the business you're in.'

'My business is confidential,' Lane said.

'Not any more. Not if you want your wife and daughter back.'

No reply.

'A Jaguar, a Mercedes, and a BMW,' Reacher said. 'Plus more where they came from, I'm sure. Plus a co-op in the Dakota. Plus lots of cash lying around. Plus half a dozen guys on twenty-five grand a month. Altogether big bucks.'

'All legal.'

'Except you don't want the cops involved.'

Involuntarily Lane glanced at the photograph of the blonde woman.

'No connection,' he said. 'That's not the reason.'

Reacher followed Lane's gaze.

'Who is she?' he asked.

'Was,' Lane said.

'Was what?'

'Anne,' Lane said. 'She was my first wife.'

'And?'

Silence for a long moment.

'You see, I've been through this before,' Lane said. 'Five years ago. Anne was taken from me. I was just the same way. But back then I followed procedure. I called the cops, even though the men on the phone had been very clear that I shouldn't. The cops called the FBI.'

'And what happened?'

'The FBI screwed up somehow,' Lane said. 'They must have been spotted at the ransom drop. Anne died. They found her body a month later in New Jersey.'

Reacher said nothing.

'That's why there's no cops this time,' Lane said.

Reacher and Lane sat in silence for a long time. Then Reacher said, 'Fifty-five minutes. You should be ready for the next call.'

'You're not wearing a watch,' Lane said.

'I always know what time it is.'

Reacher followed him back to the living room. Lane stood by the table again, with his fingers spread on the surface. Reacher guessed he wanted to take the call with his men all around him. Maybe he needed the comfort. Or the support.

The phone rang right on time, at two o'clock in the morning exactly. Lane picked it up and listened. Reacher heard faint robot squawks from the earpiece. Lane said, 'Put Kate on,' but his request must have been refused, because then he said, 'Please don't hurt her.' He listened for another minute and said, 'OK.' Then he hung up.

'Five hours from now,' he said. 'Seven o'clock in the morning. Same place, same routine. The blue BMW. One person only.'

'I'll do it,' Gregory said.

The other men in the room stirred with frustration. 'We should all be there,' one of them said. He was a small dark American who looked like an accountant, except for his eyes, which were as flat and dead as a hammerhead shark's. 'Ten minutes later we would know where she is. I can promise you that.'

'One man,' Lane said. 'That was the instruction.'

'This is New York City,' the guy with the shark's eyes said. 'There are always people around. They can't be expecting deserted streets.'

'Apparently they know us,' Lane said. 'They would recognize you.'

'I could go,' Reacher said. 'They wouldn't recognize me.'

'You came in with Gregory. They might be watching the building.'

'Conceivable,' Reacher said. 'But unlikely.'

Lane said nothing.

'Your call,' Reacher said.

'I'll think about it,' Lane said.

'Think fast. Better if I leave here well in advance.'

'Decision in one hour,' Lane said. He moved away from the phone and headed back towards the office. *Gone to count out the money*, Reacher thought. He wondered briefly what five million dollars looked like. *The same as one million*, he guessed. *But with hundreds instead of twenties.*

'How much money has he got?' Reacher asked.

'A lot,' Gregory said.

'He's down six million in two days.'

The guy with the shark's eyes smiled.

'We'll get it back,' he said. 'You can count on that. As soon as Kate's home safe we'll make our move. Then we'll see who's down and who's up. Someone poked a stick in the wrong hornets' nest this time, that's for damn sure. And they wasted Taylor. He was one of us. They'll be sorry they were ever born.'

Reacher glanced into the guy's empty eyes and believed every word he said. Then the guy stuck out his hand, abruptly. And a little warily. 'I'm Carter Groom,' he said. 'I'm pleased to meet you. I think

I mean, as much as I can be, given the circumstances.'

~~The four other men introduced themselves with a quiet cascade of names and handshakes. Each man~~ was polite, nothing more. Each was full of reserve in front of a stranger. Reacher tried to tie the names to faces. Gregory he already knew. A guy with a big scar over his eye was called Addison. The shortest guy among them was a Latino called Perez. The tallest was called Kowalski. There was a black guy called Burke.

'Lane told me you do bodyguarding and corporate security,' Reacher said.

Sudden silence. No reply.

'Don't worry,' Reacher said. 'I wasn't convinced anyway. My guess is you guys were a operational noncoms. Fighting men. So I think your Mr Lane is into something else entirely.'

'Like what?' Gregory asked.

'I think he's pimping mercenaries,' Reacher said.

The guy called Groom shook his head. 'Wrong choice of words, pal.'

'What would be the right choice?'

'We're a private military corporation,' Groom said. 'You got a problem with that?'

'I don't really have an opinion.'

'Well, you better get one, and it better be a good one. We're legal. We work for the Pentagon, just like we always did, and just like you did, back in the day.'

'Privatization,' Burke said. 'The Pentagon loves it. It's more efficient. The era of big government is over.'

'How many guys have you got?' Reacher asked. 'Just what's here?'

Groom shook his head again. 'We're the A-team. Like senior NCOs. Then there's a Rolodex full of B-team squad members. We took a hundred guys to Iraq.'

'Is that where you've been? Iraq?'

'And Colombia and Panama and Afghanistan. We go anywhere Uncle Sam needs us.'

'What about where Uncle Sam doesn't need you?'

Nobody spoke.

'My guess is the Pentagon pays by cheque,' Reacher said. 'But there seems to be an awful lot of cash around here, too.'

No response.

'Africa?' Reacher said.

No response.

'Whatever,' Reacher said. 'Not my business where you've been. All I need to know is where Mr Lane has been. For the last couple of weeks.'

'What difference does that make?' Kowalski asked.

'There was some surveillance,' Reacher said. 'Don't you think? I don't suppose the bad guys were just hanging out at Bloomingdale's every day on the off-chance.'

'Mrs Lane was in the Hamptons,' Gregory said. 'With Jade, most of the summer. They only came back three days ago.'

'Who drove them back?'

'Taylor.'

'And then they were based here?'

'Correct.'

'Anything happen out in the Hamptons?'

'Like what?' Groom asked.

‘Like anything unusual,’ Reacher said. ‘Anything out of the ordinary.’

‘Not really,’ Groom said.

‘A woman showed up at the door one day,’ Gregory said.

‘What kind of a woman?’

‘Just a woman. She was fat.’

‘Fat?’

‘Kind of heavysset. About forty. Long hair, centre part. Mrs Lane took her walking on the beach

Then the woman left. I figured it was a friend on a visit.’

‘Ever saw her before?’

Gregory shook his head. ‘Maybe an old friend. From the past.’

‘What did Mrs Lane and Jade do after they got back here to the city?’

‘I don’t think they did anything yet.’

‘No, she went out once,’ Groom said. ‘Mrs Lane, I mean. Not Jade. On her own, shopping. I drove her.’

‘Where?’ Reacher asked.

‘Staples.’

‘The office supply store?’ Reacher had seen them all over. A big chain, red and white décor, huge places full of stuff he had no need of. ‘What did she buy?’

‘Nothing,’ Groom said. ‘I waited twenty minutes on the kerb, and she didn’t bring anything out.’

‘Maybe she arranged a delivery,’ Gregory said.

‘She could have done that on-line. No need to drag me out in the car.’

‘So maybe she was just browsing,’ Gregory said.

‘Weird place to browse,’ Reacher said. ‘Who does that?’

‘School is back soon,’ Groom said. ‘Maybe Jade needed stuff.’

‘In which case she’d have gone along,’ Reacher said. ‘Don’t you think? And she’d have bought something.’

‘Did she take something in?’ Gregory asked. ‘Maybe she was returning something.’

‘She had her tote,’ Groom said. ‘It’s possible.’ Then he looked up, beyond Reacher’s shoulder. Edward Lane was back in the room. He was carrying a large leather duffel, and struggling with its bulk. *Five million dollars*, Reacher thought. *So that’s what it looks like*. Lane dropped the bag on the floor at the entrance to the foyer. It thumped down on the hardwood and settled like the carcass of a small fat animal.

‘I need to see a picture of Jade,’ Reacher said.

‘Why?’ Lane asked.

‘Because you want me to pretend I’m a cop. And pictures are the first things cops want to see.’

‘Bedroom,’ Lane said.

So Reacher fell in behind him and followed him to a bedroom. It was another tall square space painted a chalky off-white, as serene as a monastery and as quiet as a tomb. There was a cherrywood king-size bed with pencil posts at the corners. Matching tables at each side. A matching armoire that might have held a television set. A matching desk, with a chair standing in front of it and a framed photograph sitting on it. The photograph was a ten-by-eight, rectangular, set horizontal, not vertical on the axis that photographers call landscape, not portrait. But it was a portrait. That was for sure. It was a portrait of two people. On the right was Kate Lane. It was the same shot as in the living-room print. The same pose, the same eyes, the same developing smile. But the living-room print had been cropped to exclude the object of her affection, which was her daughter Jade. Jade was on the left of the

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