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LEE CHILD

"A SKILLFUL BLEND
OF SEX . . . SPIES . . .
SUSPENSE AND
NONSTOP ACTION."

—*The Washington Post*

A **JACK REACHER** NOVEL

PERSUADER

LEE CHILD

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CHAPTER 1

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

The car was a seven-year-old Chevy Caprice. It was black and had no police markings. But it had three radio antennas and plain chrome hubs. Most cops you talk to swear the Caprice is the best police vehicle ever built. This guy looked like he agreed with them. He looked like a veteran plain-clothes detective with the whole of the motor pool at his disposal. Like he drove the ancient Chevy because he wanted to. Like he wasn't interested in the new Fords. I could see that kind of stubborn old-timer personality in the way he held himself. He was wide and bulky in a plain dark suit made from some kind of heavy wool. He was tall but stooped. An old man. He turned his head and looked north and south along the road and then craned his thick neck to glance back over his shoulder at the college gate. He was thirty yards away from me.

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

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

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

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

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

I took my gloves off and tossed them into the back of my van. Stepped out into the road where my view was better. I saw the Lincoln come up the driveway at a moderate speed. It was black and shiny and immaculate. It had plenty of chrome on it. Plenty of wax. The

college cops were way behind it. It paused at the ceremonial gate and turned left and came south toward the black police Caprice. Toward me.

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

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

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

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

I had less than a second to decide.

I flipped the tail of my coat and pulled out the Colt. Aimed very carefully and fired once at the Toyota's grille. The big gun flashed and roared and kicked in my hand. The huge .44 slug shattered the radiator. I fired again at the left front tire. Blew it out in a spectacular explosion of black rubber debris. Yards of blown tread whipped through the air. The truck slewed and stopped with the driver's side facing me. Ten yards away. I ducked behind the back of my van and slammed the rear doors and came out on the sidewalk and fired again.

the left rear tire. Same result. Rubber everywhere. The truck crashed down on its left-side rims at a steep angle. The driver opened his door and spilled out on the blacktop and scrambled up on one knee. He had his gun in the wrong hand. He juggled it across and waited until I was fairly sure he was going to point it at me. Then I used my left hand to cradle my right forearm against the Colt's four-pound weight and aimed carefully at center mass like I had been taught a long time ago and pulled the trigger. The guy's chest seemed to explode in a huge cloud of blood. The skinny kid was rigid inside the cab. Just staring in shock and horror. But the second guy was out of the cab and scrambling around the front of the hood toward me. His gun was coming around at me. I swiveled left and paused a beat and cradled my forearm. Aimed at his chest. Fired. Same result. He went down on his back behind the fender in a cloud of red vapor.

Now the skinny kid was moving in the cab. I ran for him and pulled him out right over the first guy's body. Ran him back to my van. He was limp with shock and confusion. I shoved him into the passenger seat and slammed the door on him and spun around and headed for the driver's side. In the corner of my eye I saw a third guy coming right at me. Reaching into his jacket. Some tall heavy guy. Dark clothes. I braced my arm and fired and saw the big red explosion in his chest at exactly the same split second I realized it was the old cop from the Caprice and he had been reaching into his pocket for his badge. The badge was a gold shield in a worn leather holder and it flew up out of his hand and tumbled end over end and landed hard against the curb right in front of my van.

Time stood still.

I stared at the cop. He was on his back in the gutter. His whole chest was a mess of red. Blood was all over him. There was no welling or pumping. No sign of a heartbeat. There was a big ragged hole in his shirt. He was completely still. His head was turned and his cheek was hard against the blacktop. His arms were flung out and I could see pale veins in his hands. I was aware of the blackness of the road and the vivid green of the grass and the bright blue of the sky. I could hear the thrill of the breeze in the new leaves over the gunshots still roaring in my ears. I saw the skinny kid staring out through my van's windshield at the downed cop and then staring at me. I saw the college security cruiser coming left out of the gate. It was moving slower than it should have been. Dozens of shots had been fired. Maybe they were worried about where their jurisdiction began and where it ended. Maybe they were just scared. I saw their pale pink faces behind their windshield. They were turned in my direction. Their car was doing maybe fifteen miles an hour. It was crawling straight at me. I glanced at the gold shield in the gutter. The metal was worn smooth by a lifetime of use. I glanced at my van. Stood completely still. One thing I learned a long time ago is that it's easy enough to shoot a man. But there's absolutely no way to unshoot one.

I heard the college car rolling slowly toward me. Heard its tires crushing grit on the blacktop. Everything else was silence. Then time restarted and a voice in my head screamed go go go and I ran for it. I scrambled into the van and threw the gun down on the middle seat and fired up the engine and pulled a U-turn so hard we came up on two wheels. The skinny kid was thrown all over the place. I got the wheel straight and stamped on the gas and took

off south. I had a limited view in the mirror but I saw the college cops light up their roof bars and come right after me. The kid next to me was totally silent. His mouth was hanging open. He was concentrating on staying in his seat. I was concentrating on accelerating as hard as I could. Traffic was mercifully light. It was a sleepy New England town, early in the morning. I got the van wound up to about seventy miles an hour and tightened my hands on the wheel until my knuckles showed white and just stared at the road ahead, like I didn't want to see what was behind me.

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

He didn't respond. He was slack with shock and crunched up in the corner of his seat, as far away from me as he could get. He was staring at the roof. He had his right hand braced against the door. Pale skin, long fingers.

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

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

"I know."

"You shot him."

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

"He was showing you his badge."

"How far back are the others?"

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

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

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

"Glove compartment," I said.

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

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

The kid said nothing.

“Glove compartment,” I said again.

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

“Shit,” I said.

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

“Get down on the floor,” I said.

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

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

“I need you to watch,” I said. “Stay down as far as you can.”

The kid didn't move.

“Get up,” I said. “*Now*. I need you to watch.”

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

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

“Don't do it,” the kid said. “You can still put this right.”

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

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

The kid turned to face me.

“Are you crazy?” he said.

“You know what happens to people who shoot cops?” I said back.

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

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

“Who *are* you?” he asked.

“No, who are *you*?” I asked back.

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

“I’m a target,” he said. “For abduction.”

It was an odd word to use.

“They were trying to kidnap me,” he said.

“You think?”

He nodded. “It’s happened before.”

“Why?”

“Money,” the kid said. “Why else?”

“You rich?”

“My father is.”

“Who is he?”

“Just a guy.”

“But a rich guy,” I said.

“He’s a rug importer.”

“Rugs?” I said. “What, like carpets?”

“Oriental rugs.”

“You can get rich importing Oriental rugs?”

“Very,” the kid said.

“You got a name?”

“Richard,” he said. “Richard Beck.”

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

“So who were those guys?” I asked.

Richard Beck shook his head. “I have no idea.”

“They knew where you were going to be. And when.”

“I was going home for my mother’s birthday. It’s tomorrow.”

“Who would know that?”

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

“There’s a community?” I said. “Rugs?”

“We all compete,” he said. “Same sources, same market. We all know each other.”

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

“*You* got a name?” he asked me.

“No,” I said.

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

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

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

He went very quiet.

“I can’t take you to the cops,” I said. “That’s just not possible. You understand that, right?”

killed one. Maybe three. You saw me do it.”

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

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

He didn’t speak.

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

He didn’t answer.

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

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

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

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

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

The highway was four minutes ahead.

“Where’s home?” I asked.

“Abbot,” he said.

“Abbot what?”

“Abbot, Maine. On the coast. Between Kennebunkport and Portland.”

“We’re heading in the wrong direction.”

“You can turn north on the highway.”

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

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

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

He shook his head, violently, like a seizure.

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

“Those guys are dead,” I said. “Like the damn cop.”

“They might have associates.”

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

“They cut it off and mailed it,” he said. “The first time.”

“When?”

“I was fifteen.”

“Your dad didn’t pay up?”

“Not quickly enough.”

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

“You OK?” I asked.

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

The highway was two minutes ahead.

“Please,” he said. “Help me.”

“Shit,” I said, for the third time.

“Please. We can help each other. You need to hide out.”

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

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

“We’ll have to find a car,” I said.

“Where?”

“Anywhere. There are cars all over the place.”

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

“Where are we going?” Richard asked.

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

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

“Got to hide the busted window,” I said.

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

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

“You’re going to steal this car?”

I nodded. Said nothing.

“Is that smart?”

“You’d think so if it was you who’d accidentally shot a cop.”

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

“You’re the lookout,” I said.

He stepped away and scanned the lot and I fed the wire down inside the car and jiggled around and jiggled the door handle until it popped open. I tossed the wire back in the trash and bent down under the steering column and pulled off the plastic shroud. Sorted through the wires in there until I found the two I needed and touched them together. The start

motor whined and the engine turned over and caught and ran steadily. The kid looked suitably impressed.

“Misspent youth,” I said.

“Is this smart?” he asked again.

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

He paused with his hand on the passenger door and then kind of shook himself and ducked inside. I racked the driver’s seat back and adjusted the mirror and backed out of the store. Took it easy through the mall lot. There was a cop car crawling around about a hundred yards away. I parked again in the first place I saw and sat there with the engine running until the cop moved away. Then I hustled for the exit and around the cloverleaf and two minutes later we were heading north on a wide smooth highway at a respectable sixty miles an hour. The car smelled strongly of perfume and there were two boxes of tissues in it. There was some kind of furry bear stuck on the rear window with clear plastic suckers where its paws should have been. There was a Little League glove on the back seat and I could hear an aluminum bat rattling around in the trunk.

“Mom’s taxi,” I said.

The kid didn’t answer.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “She’s probably insured. Probably a solid citizen.”

“Don’t you feel bad?” he said. “About the cop?”

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

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

“What the hell kind of answer is that?”

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

He said nothing.

“Anyway, it was your dad’s fault,” I said.

“For being rich and having a son?”

“For hiring lousy bodyguards.”

He looked away. Said nothing.

“They *were* bodyguards, right?”

He nodded. Said nothing.

“So don’t *you* feel bad?” I asked. “About them?”

“A little,” he said. “I guess. I didn’t know them well.”

“They were useless,” I said.

“It happened so fast.”

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

“You saying you noticed?”

“I noticed.”

“Not bad for a van driver.”

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

The kid nodded, uncertainly.

“You got a name yet?” he asked.

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

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

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

“You need to call them?”

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

“The cops will call them. They think you’re in big trouble.”

“They don’t have the number. Nobody does.”

“The college must have your address. They can find your number.”

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

I shrugged and kept quiet and drove another mile.

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

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

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

“OK,” I said. “My name is Reacher.”

We spent a few minutes cutting across a tiny corner of Vermont and then struck out north and east across New Hampshire. Settled in for the long, long drive. The adrenaline drained away and the kid got over his state of shock and we both ended up a little down and sleepy. I cracked the window to get some air in and some perfume out. It made the car noisy but it kept me awake. We talked a little. Richard Beck told me he was twenty years old. He was in his junior year. He was majoring in some kind of contemporary art expression thing that sounded a lot like finger painting to me. He wasn’t good at relationships. He was an only child. There was a lot of ambivalence about his family. They were clearly some kind of tight, close-knit clan and half of him wanted out and the other half needed to be in. He was clearly very traumatized by the previous kidnap. It made me wonder whether something had been done to him, apart from the ear thing. Maybe something much worse.

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

We crossed the state line and then about twenty miles short of Portland he squirmed around and checked the view out of the back very carefully and told me to take the next exit. We turned onto a narrow road heading due east toward the Atlantic. It passed under I-95 and then ran more than fifteen miles across granite headlands to the sea. It was the kind of

landscape that would have looked great in summer. But it was still cold and raw. There were trees stunted by salt winds and exposed rock outcrops where gales and storm tides had scoured the dirt away. The road twisted and turned like it was trying to fight its way as far east as it could get. I glimpsed the ocean ahead. It was as gray as iron. The road pushed on past inlets to the left and right. I saw small beaches made of gritty sand. Then the road curved left and immediately right and rose up onto a headland shaped like the palm of a hand. The palm narrowed abruptly into a single finger jutting directly out to sea. It was a rock peninsula maybe a hundred yards wide and half a mile long. I could feel the wind buffeting the car. I drove out onto the peninsula and saw a line of bent and stunted evergreen trees that were trying to hide a high granite wall but weren't quite tall enough or thick enough to succeed. The wall was maybe eight feet tall. It was topped with big coils of razor wire. It had security lights mounted at intervals. It ran laterally all the way across the hundred-yard width of the finger. It canted down suddenly at the ends and ran all the way into the sea, where its massive foundations were built on huge stone blocks. The blocks were mossy with seaweed. There was an iron gate set in the wall, dead-center. It was closed.

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

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

"Honk the horn," Richard Beck said.

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

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

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

It was a long drive up to the house. Gray ocean on three sides. The house was a big pile. Maybe some sea captain's place from way back when killing whales made people respectable fortunes. It was all stone, with intricate beadings and cornices and folds. All the north-facing surfaces were covered in gray lichen. The rest was spotted with green. It was three stories high. It had a dozen chimneys. The roofline was complex. There were gables all over the place with short gutters and dozens of fat iron pipes to drain the rainwater away. The front door was oak and was banded and studded with iron. The driveway widened into a carriage circle. I followed it around counterclockwise and stopped right in front of the door. The door opened and another guy in a dark suit stepped out. He was about my size, which made him a lot smaller than the guy in the lodge. But I didn't like him any better. He had a stone face and blank eyes. He opened the Maxima's passenger door like he had been expecting to see it, which I guessed he was, because the big guy in the lodge would have called ahead.

"Will you wait here?" Richard asked me.

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

It was a reasonably long wait, probably close to forty minutes. Without the engine running the car grew cold. It rocked gently in the sea breeze eddying around the house. I stared straight ahead through the windshield. I was facing northeast and the air was whipped and clear. I could see the coastline curving in from the left. I could see a faint brown smudge on the air about twenty miles away. Probably pollution coming up out of Portland. The city itself was hidden behind a headland.

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

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

"Is he OK?" I asked.

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

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

“I’m Elizabeth Beck,” she said.

“Jack Reacher,” I said.

“My son explained your predicament,” she said.

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

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

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

“Would you like to come in?” she asked.

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

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

“Two guns,” I said. “Empty. In my coat pockets.”

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

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth Beck said.

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

“Do you need anything?” Elizabeth Beck asked.

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

“I’m kind of tired,” I said. “Long day. I really need a nap.”

She smiled briefly, like she was pleased, like having her own personal cop-killer asleep somewhere would relieve her of a social pressure.

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

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

I turned to the guy in the suit. I assumed he was Duke.

“When do I get the guns back?” I asked.

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

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

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

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

The message said: *I'm in*.

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