

Gone Forever

Jack Cameron, #1

by Scott Blade, ...

Published: 2015

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*Jack Reacher saved my life. For that, I am indebted.
This book is dedicated to Lee. Thank you.*

“I’m the last Reacher on earth, far as I know.”
—Jack Reacher

Chapter 1

JACK REACHER IS DEAD.

At least that’s what I thought up until a few days ago. That is the name of my father. Jack Reacher. No middle name. No need for one. I have none. Like father, like son.

Up until a few days ago I had no idea where I was going or what I would do with my life because my life had never been my own. Not yet. Not really.

After graduating high school, I had no plans for college and no plans for the military and no real plans of my own. I didn’t know it yet, but I had never felt freedom. I know now that my mother had never known freedom either. In fact, hardly anyone knows true freedom. Americans are supposed to be the freest people in the world. That was kind of our mantra: *land of the free and home of the brave*. But real freedom wasn’t something that most people could afford.

There was only one guy that I could see was truly free. I didn’t know it yet, but the path of my life would be dictated by this guy I had never met—my father.

My father was dead to me and that was fine because at least then I knew where he was. Maybe not specifically. I didn’t know if he was buried, cremated, or just out there somewhere. All I knew was that he was gone from my life.

My whole life, I never knew who he was, never thought about him, and never asked about him. Why would I? I was born without knowing him and I was fine with that. Now that I know his name, I almost wish that I had never heard of him because the day that I heard his name was the day that my mother died, which set me on a course that would change my life forever.

I was raised by a single parent, a tough woman, a small-town sheriff, and she had been more than enough.

I grew up without a father and still had a good life, growing up in Mississippi, a town called Carter Crossing, the back of beyond, the stereotype of a small town. It was rural, but never dull, not under the surface. On the surface, things seemed quiet, but take a closer look and small towns have their secrets, like shadows stalking them.

I never lived in a city, but I'd never been country or rural or redneck or however you want to describe someone from a rural area in the South. People from small towns don't grow up to be that way, not always and not for the most part. Small-town life isn't like the movies.

Mine wasn't.

In a small town, there was plenty to do and plenty that needed doing. We had to do for ourselves. In Carter Crossing, I fired guns, hunted animals, and learned survival in some of the most rugged terrain available. The United States Army used to have an elite training base here for Army Rangers; the 75th used to send the best of the best here to train for a time. It was quite a big deal for us. This town was built up around the base, no other real economy to speak of.

The closing of the base almost killed the town and it may yet be a slow death. Many Southern towns are in a sad state of disrepair: crumbling roads, closed stores, sunken economies, abandoned high schools, wastelands of empty plazas, graveyards for old trains, and like Carter Crossing, forgotten military bases. Parts of Mississippi are like the third world. It took leaving the state for me to see that, because like I said, I never really knew any better until after that day.

Growing up, my mother insisted that I have two educations. The first was a school education and the second was a life education, which was okay by me; I liked to learn things.

I learned the sciences, math, philosophies, and I learned how to fire guns and how to clean them and store them and the many different kinds of guns. I learned how to fight, I learned how to kill, and I learned how to use restraint. I learned how to hunt and skin animals, but I never cared much for that sort of thing because the animals had never done anything to me so why should I go around killing them?

My mother was a sheriff and an MP for the United States Marine Corps before that. It was important for her that I learned the family trade. My life was like boot camp; only my boot camp lasted for eighteen years and not three months like for most Marines.

She trained me in both the military life and the cop life and I became good at both.

I studied and participated in crime scene investigations, interpretations, evidence collecting, and forensics from the time I was a boy. I was so good at it that I solved many of the crimes in Carter Crossing even though I couldn't take the credit for any of them. We couldn't let the loved ones of homicide victims or the voters know that a minor was solving cases, which was fine by me. I didn't care about credit or trophies or recognition or even acknowledgement. Solving crimes and setting things right was in my genes, ingrained in my DNA like human programming. I didn't like things going wrong; it didn't seem right to let bad people get away with bad things.

I grew up to be big too—huge. It was a genetic thing like my mind; my physique had been inherited through my ancestry.

At the age of six, I was tough. Got into my first fistfight at the age of five. Kids learned quickly not to mess with me. If they left me alone, then I left them alone. I wasn't a bully. I hated bullies. Some of the other kids would pay me for protection from bullies. I made a good profit in elementary school protecting smaller kids

from the bigger ones. They paid me part of their lunch money like a recovery fee. A fine enterprise for me. I didn't have many friends. Not really. I was like Frankenstein—everyone was afraid of me and I was misunderstood.

The school's coaches loved me. All the way through school they tried to get me to play football. And I did. I played for one season until I broke another kid's jaw, not on purpose. The coach instructed me to tackle him without holding anything back. All season he had been riding me, accusing me of not giving it my "full potential." He said that I had feral eyes. I'll never forget that. *Feral*. I'd never heard that word before to describe another human being. It's a great word. *Feral*.

It described that experience better than any other word because for a few seconds I lost control. I went into a rage. I ran straight at this kid. He stood cocked down low on the line, in the ready position, less than a second after the ball was snapped—less than half a second. No one was blocking him and my quarterback had been left wide open, baiting him, but instead of charging the quarterback like he had been trained to do, he simply stood there, frozen with his feet still firmly planted in the dried dirt. He had a clear shot. The quarterback was lined up in his mind's reticle and he knew it, but something that he saw in his peripherals stopped him dead in his tracks. Something *feral*.

He had seen me. The sight of my massive bulk running him down had frozen him solid. In his quivering eyes I could see the sheer terror that overcame him as he stared at this hulking goliath running him down like a freight train.

I ran behind the quarterback from the opposite side of the line. I ran past the other players and ran right at the kid. Headed straight at him was 190 pounds of moving teenaged mass. I was a 15-year-old freshman and he was a 17-year-old senior, but he was right to be terrified of me. Like I said, I was a real-life Frankenstein.

I was fast too. At that time in my life, I ran daily. Being a part of a football team had a lot of advantages. One of them was being forced to exercise. The coaches weren't worried about me getting bigger or stronger; they only wanted me faster.

The coaches focused my training on running and endurance. So I was fast. I was known for my speed. The kid had no time to retreat and he knew it. In that split second, he had time for only one thing—that was to fear for his life.

For the first time in my life I performed an action that I'd never even thought of before. I achieved a feat that later on would save my life. Never had I been trained to do this move. It was pure genetics, some kind of ancient warrior gene that lay dormant in my bones until that second. I ran at the kid, full speed, with no intent of braking, no flinching, and no hesitation. At the last microsecond, I reared my head back, contracted my neck muscles and shoulder muscles, and then I catapulted. My head whipped forward in a violent slingshot motion like a cannonball and I felt the skull lunge forward and my helmet whipped and crashed into the kid's face, straight through the open-faced part of his helmet, and shattered the bones in his nose and jaw. The truth is that if his helmet hadn't had the hard plastic faceguard on the front, the adults might've been cleaning up that kid's face with a sponge.

I delivered a colossal head-butt.

The force behind my blow had sent his helmet flying off his head, the facemask broken into pieces, and I had broken more than that. The kid's nose splintered

and cracked, his front teeth sprayed out of his mouth: two white incisors and three broken canines. His chinbone had pierced through his skin and his jaw snapped and split, everything broken.

Parents and school officials rushed the field to the kid's side as he lay crying and wailing like a dying animal. Paramedics had to rush the kid off in an ambulance.

Two things happened after that: I never played again and he never looked right again. I never meant to seriously hurt anyone. I heard the kid had to wear a steel wire for six months. I learned a serious lesson about my own strength and I could never bring myself to play a full contact sport again.

After that I spent most of my time after school helping my mom at work in a kind of penance for my destruction of the kid's face. She was the sheriff and her jurisdiction was the entire county, a hard job. Sometimes things were slow and she spent her downtime with me. Other times the job demanded all of her focus.

When I was older, she assigned me to shadow our only detective like a school project. I was to ask him questions and watch and learn and take mental notes, which I did.

We were a small community, but with the sheriff's department in charge of the whole county, the detectives who came through over the years stayed busy enough.

I learned a lot about investigation from them.

My mother was my only parent, but the deputies and the two ladies who worked in her office had become my family. My mom knew that she could leave me alone and that I would manage fine. I was always tough, tougher than other kids, tougher than most adults. She used to tell me that I was tougher than some Marines she had known.

Ever since I was big enough to lift a gun, she had trained me to use them. She had been a Marine for 16 years, a previous life, long before I was born. She used to say, "I had a rich uncle. He paid for me to tour the world." It was something that Marines said. It meant that Uncle Sam had paid her to travel. I was a little envious about that because I always wanted to travel.

In the military, she had been a Marine cop; then she had returned home to serve our community as sheriff. My grandfather was the county sheriff before her. He served Carter Crossing for years until he died, also before I was born.

When he was alive, everyone called him Chief. After he was gone, they all called her Chief. No one called her Sheriff Devereaux and I never heard anyone call her by her first or middle name, not once. The citizens of Carter County would never even bat an eye at the fact that technically she wasn't a chief. Sheriff departments don't have chiefs, just a sheriff and his deputies.

Elizabeth Anne Devereaux was my mother's name, but everyone called her "Chief." I was no different.

I said, "Chief." I stared at her while she lay dying in an old warm bed. Not a hospital bed, but her own bed. A hospital bed would have meant that she had a fighting chance. It would have meant that she was undergoing treatment and that a staff of nurses and doctors and possibly x-ray technicians were working around the clock to keep her alive. It would have meant that she had an IV bag

and heart rate monitor and machines plugged into her, monitoring her progress and possibly her recovery. However, there were no heart rate monitors and no machines watching over her, guarding her progress as she fought to stay alive, but there was an IV—a morphine drip that she barely used. It was there to make her passing more comfortable.

My mom had always fought and won, but this time she had fought the good fight and now the cancer had won, not winning, already won. It was over and there was no fight left. I saw an understanding of this loss written across her face.

In the next room, there was a hospice nurse waiting in case we needed anything or in case my mother had pain, but she didn't complain. She never had. Not once, my whole life had I ever heard her complain. Even on her death bed, she smiled at me like she was staring at an angel, but I was the one looking at the angel.

My mother was devastatingly beautiful—a fact that I had to cope with my whole life because I had gotten into my fair share of fights at school with the other kids who would make comments about her. They used to call her a *MILF* and a *cougar*—negative words in my opinion, at least about my mom. Then again, what son wouldn't agree with that?

In my early teen years only new kids made the mistake of commenting on my mom. Once I corrected them, they never made it again. My mom would discipline me for putting kids in the hospital whenever they made rude comments about her; it became a cycle. They'd make snide remarks, I'd correct them, and she'd punish me, and so on.

When I reached my teen years I simply learned to accept their comments like it was the way of the world. Boys were going to make rude comments about her and there wasn't a whole lot that I could do about it. So I got used to it.

Suddenly, the hospice nurse came in from the hallway and asked, "Is everything okay?"

Her clothes smelled of cigarette smoke, not overwhelming, but beyond faint. She had been here all day. I couldn't expect her not to take a smoke break here and there and I doubted that my mother could smell it. Still, a nurse who smoked and dealt with cancer patients seemed downright peculiar to me.

The nurse was perhaps 30 years old, shaped like a raindrop—small top and heavy bottom half. She had short blond, slightly curly hair and piercing blue eyes, her most noticeable physical feature. They must've been colored contacts on top of her real blue eyes because they were unnaturally blue like the Pacific Ocean—not that I knew at the time what the Pacific Ocean looked like because I had never been there—but they were the color blue that I imagined it to be.

She had a pleasant, comforting demeanor like a monotone clock that ticks back and forth in a subtle, hypnotic, soothing sensation. This quality was an asset in her line of work because calming people was surely something that boded well for hospice staff.

I said, "Everything's good."

The hospice nurse turned back to the hallway and left the room.

I looked at my mother with the gentlest expression I could make.

She looked back at me and smiled wider. Her hair was black, peppered with long gray strands, and thick; it was inches thick. For my entire life, she had had long, thick hair. The shortest that I remembered it was two feet long and it

probably weighed about two pounds. Now it was draped across the pillow that propped her up. Her hair spilled over the fluffy layers like black lava pouring out over hills and crevices and rocks.

She looked at me and struggled to sit upright. I reached down and held her hand in mine. It looked like a tiny little thing held in a giant's palm. My hands were like frozen turkeys.

She asked, "How are you?"

I said, "Save your strength."

She sat upright anyway. I grabbed a couple more pillows and layered them behind her. She fell back against them and rested there.

She said, "I'm fine. Your mother was a Marine, remember?"

I smiled at her, but gave no response.

She coughed for a minute and then relaxed.

I asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Listen to me. I've got to tell you something."

"You really should save your strength."

"Listen to me. Okay?"

I stayed quiet. She paused and the room was filled with a heavy silence. Then she said, "You're a good man. I was a Marine for 16 years of my life and I've been the sheriff for this community for the rest of it.

"I'm a proud woman, but the hardest job that I've ever had was being your mother. Raising a boy without a daddy is a hard line of work. But I did all right. I taught you about weapons. I trained you how to fight like a Marine. How to speak like a Marine. How to treat a lady. How to take care of yourself. Most importantly, I taught you how to think for yourself.

"And on top of all that I've been so thankful that you turned out so naturally gifted."

She coughed again for a good few minutes and then she righted herself and said, "I raised you to do the right thing. But there are things that you do, things that you naturally are, that I never taught you. You are the smartest person I've ever known. You're honorable. You're going to be a great man. The only other man I loved almost as much was your father.

"Use your talents for good. I want you to help people, the way that your father helped this town."

I had no idea what she was talking about because she had never spoken of him before.

She began grasping at my arm like she was having a quick attack. She coughed some more until it subsided, which was almost as fast as it had come on, and then she began breathing normally.

I breathed in and breathed out.

We were both quiet again for a long moment until she said, "Since the day you were born, I've had two missions. The first was to raise you the best that I knew how.

"I'm only one parent. I tried my best to be your mother and father, but there's no real substitute for a real father."

She paused a beat, swallowed hard, and then she said, "I want you to understand that I had my reputation to think about. I left here when I found out I

was pregnant with you. I drove down to the Gulf Coast. You were born and we lived there for almost a year, but I didn't make enough money to stay there. Biloxi didn't have a lot of jobs. It was all hotels and casinos. I worked in one of those resorts for months, working security. Imagine, I had been a cop in the U.S. Marine Corps and there I was a single mother working security in a casino."

She chuckled lightly and then she continued. She said, "I never made enough money for us. So we returned home and we've lived here ever since."

I followed her as best that I could, but I wasn't quite sure what she was driving at. She took me to the Coast and I was born there. That was something that I never knew, but what was she getting at?

She paused again. I thought that she was about to have another coughing attack. Instead, her voice cracked and went up in pitch and her eyes brimmed with tears and she started crying. I was 18 years old at the time. I had graduated from high school and I had known my mom all my life. I had seen her enforce the law, beat up guys three times her size, take down criminals, solve murders, look at the most vile things imaginable done to cadavers, and I had never seen her shed a tear or break a sweat, but right then she was crying.

She said, "Please don't hate me. I don't want you to hate me. That's why I'm trying to explain my reasons. I want you to understand."

I reached out and brushed her forehead in a slow, loving motion. I squeezed her other hand and tried to speak, but she went first.

She said, "The voters in this town can be judgmental. This is the South. And I needed my job back in order to give you the best life that I could."

"So I lied to you. I lied to everyone. I didn't want them thinking that I had gotten knocked up by a drifter. I didn't want them thinking that your mom was a slut and that's exactly what they would've thought too."

"But mostly I didn't want to lose you. I started lying and lying and the years rolled by and before I knew it I had lied so much that I started to believe the lie more than the truth."

She paused again. I saw the thought process sparking behind her eyes and I saw the hesitation like she had a long-held secret that she was reluctant to share.

She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply; then she let out her secret. She said, "I don't know why I lied to you for so long. Really I don't."

"Your father's alive. He's not dead and he never abandoned us, not really, not on purpose."

"Truth is that he doesn't know about you, but not because he left. Because I never told him."

She paused longer, like she was waiting for some kind of emotional outburst from me. She waited for some kind of sign that I was furious with her like she had expected it or like she had wanted it or like the guilt had torn her up so much that she needed it.

I stayed quiet. No reaction, no outburst, just calm silence. To this day I think that my silence stung her worse than any outburst of rage or anger or spite that I could've expressed. There aren't many things that I regret because I'm not that kind of guy. Regret is something that simply isn't in my nature because regret is like a sponge; it will soak up all your time and thoughts. But the one thing that I

think about from time to time is that moment with my mother and I feel a little guilt about not easing her burden of remorse when I had the chance.

She said, "I wanted to tell him. I looked for him when I was pregnant. You see, he was in the Army when we met, but they said that he was out right after. I wanted to find him and tell him about you, but I didn't have the chance. Not when I was pregnant."

She stopped cold and stared at me with those huge pleading eyes. I could see that she didn't want me to hate her. It broke my heart to even think that she believed that I would.

I said, "I don't care about him. I only care about you."

She breathed a long sigh of relief that could've extinguished a candle from across the bed and then she said my name. I cocked my head and stared into her eyes, thinking to myself that this might be one of the last times that I ever saw life in them. Only I was wrong. It would be the very last time.

"I was so afraid of what you would think of me. I meant to tell you so many times."

I felt my heart wrench and twist like it was in a pair of vice grips.

I said, "I love you."

She smiled. Then she said, "There's more."

I nodded.

"The second mission that I set out for myself was to find him. To tell him about you. About us. He deserves to know you and you deserve to know him."

"Your father is a drifter now—completely untraceable, but when I met him he was a soldier, a military cop like I was. He was undercover at the time posing as a drifter."

She smiled and chuckled warmly at the memory and then said, "He didn't own a thing. Not one item to his name except for some stupid clothes and these idiotic shoes and a toothbrush that he kept in his pocket."

"A toothbrush," she repeated and then her chuckle slowed and vanished. A moment later, a hearty smile cracked across her face like she was remembering a lost love. Her eyes stared past me into the corner of the room and up to the ceiling.

Then she said, "I've tracked him over the years after I learned that he'd left the Army. I know that he travels with no attachments and I know that he's helped people all over the place. Tracking him was very, very hard and sometimes impossible. I never could predict where he'd turn up next. But eventually I could figure out where he'd been because he was a drifter. Yes, he most definitely was. But most drifters are poor, dirt poor. And your daddy, he liked to stay in motel rooms. Hell, the first place I ever saw him was in front of a motel."

I hadn't seen my mom smile so much, not since we learned of the cancer.

She said, "And eventually I learned that your father had a thing about anonymity. He'd never check into a motel under his real name. So when I started calling motels; I'd ask for management and give them my name with the word *sheriff* out in front of it. I found that most times they'd fax me a copy of their guest registries. Of course, I never saw his name on one of them, not once, but I did start to wonder how Chester A. Arthur and Zachary Taylor and Dwight Eisenhower were renting rooms because I found all of their names registered."

She stopped for a second and stared at me, waiting for confusion on my face, but there was none and then she asked, "Do you know who those guys were?"

"Presidents," I said.

She smiled, still quizzing me even on her death bed.

"So I figured that your father was using the names of dead presidents every time that he had to fill out a registry. Then at some point I couldn't track him that way anymore. He must've started using some other names. Combining them maybe."

"But basically that is your father. A drifter with nothing to lose who wanders aimlessly and helps everyone who crosses his path, anyone who has a problem that requires his kind of help."

He sounds like a warrior monk, I thought, but I stayed quiet. And as if she knew what I was thinking she said, "He's like that old show that we watched on late night TV. You know the one about the traveling stranger who helped people along his path."

I said, "Kung Fu with David Carradine. But he wasn't actually a wanderer because wander implies that he walked aimlessly through the Wild West, but in fact, he was on the run. So actually David Carradine's character was an innocent fugitive avoiding persecution. He was also searching for his lost brother."

She said, "A man on a quest."

I nodded.

She said, "Now you will be a man on a quest like *Kung Fu*.

"Take my phone. In it you will find detailed notes, files, police reports, court documents, news articles, videos, photos, and anything that I could find out about your father."

She opened her right-hand palm, handed me her cell phone, and then said, "Find him. His name is your name. That's why I always call you by your last name. Not because I am a Marine. It's because it's his last name and the only name that he's known by. He was in the Army. He was a military cop and his name is Jack Reacher."

She struggled to sit up straight without the pillows. She reached out her arms to me like she wanted a hug. I leaned forward and hugged her tight. She felt delicate in my arms. I tried my best not to crush her.

She pulled me down closer to her and whispered in my ear.

She said, "I love you, Reacher."

Later that night, my mother died in her sleep. I never bothered to get the hospice nurse because I couldn't let go of my mom's hand. She died as peacefully as anyone could and I sat with her, never moving, not even budging, not once. I watched her fall asleep. After she was asleep, I sat back and thought about my happiest memories of living in Carter Crossing, of my mom. I'd lived a good life here. And then halfway through the night she coughed in her sleep, only a few times at first and then the cough grew louder and louder. I felt her hand squeeze mine for a moment and then she was gone. Every part of her was completely still and her hand had gone limp in mine.

I leaned forward and brushed her hair from her face with my fingertips and combed it downward and to the sides. I reached up and felt her face. Her skin had

turned cold and the lines in her face relaxed and her chest stopped rising and I knew that my mother had passed on.

Chapter 2

Carter Crossing was a small town, but like many towns it had a lot of lawyers. Most of the county lived within the town's limits and so all of the court's business was handled here. On Main Street, past the sheriff's office, there were four low buildings. In the back of one of them, the one on the corner with odd red and yellow awnings that hung over the sidewalks, was the law office of Chip Weston. His walkway was around the side, past some small shrubs. I followed the stone path back, naturally skipping over the gravel and placing each foot on the stone.

He waited outside his door to greet me.

Chip was a 40-year-old man with an average build, average height and weight. He had a reader's stare like he went through stacks of books a week. I imagined that when he left his office he probably went home, poured a scotch—neat, and sat back to read a book.

Another remarkable feature about him was his hair. He had thick, curly hair, black and graying around the sideburns.

Chip had been my mother's attorney and they had been friends for many years. He had learned of her death the same way as the rest of the town. It was the front page of the tiny, little newspaper that a local guy named Robbie Mile ran out of his tire shop.

Robbie had inherited his tire business from his father. Tires were the only thing that his father had ever done. Robbie had gone to school for two semesters to be a journalist. It was rumored that he wanted to leave Carter Crossing and move to New Orleans to work for the *Times-Picayune*, but that dream was stomped out about four years ago when his dad passed away and left him a small business to run and a mountain of debt to manage. He could've turned down the business, watched the bank foreclose on his dad's building, and let the IRS seize everything else, but that was not something that sons in the South did.

Since Robbie would never have the chance to write for a major paper, he decided that our community needed a publication. He started his paper and it did reasonably well. He charged nothing for it. The people here picked it up at the local diner and a few other places. He turned a small profit off the advertisements.

It was usually boring and only one page in length—front and back, but the townspeople talked about it all the time. It was the only real news that any of them cared about knowing.

Today's issue read: "*Chief Gone.*"

I had glanced at it in a pedestrian's hand on my way through the town to Chip's office. I didn't need to read it because I already knew what it would say. It'd announce my mother's departure and funeral arrangements, set tomorrow morning, and it had probably talked about her many years of service to the

community and her dedication to her job and to her son, name not given. I knew that because everyone loved her.

Chip had called me early that morning after he heard the news of my mom's passing.

He said, "I'm so terribly sorry for your loss."

I replied, "Thank you."

"I need to see you today. I know that you're dealing with a lot, but it's important."

I asked, "Can it wait until tomorrow? After the funeral. Or the next day?"

He paused and breathed heavy on the other end of the line. His voice resonated a kind of regret like he hadn't wanted to be in this position, but had no choice. With my mother, that was probably true.

Then he said, "Your mother insisted that you come to see me as soon as possible. She left some instructions for you regarding her burial. Unfortunately, I must see you before that. Today."

I held her cell phone to my ear and looked up at a ceiling fan. It whirred and spun and shook under the ceiling.

I said, "One hour."

Then I clicked the end button on the phone.

The paramedics had taken my mother's body away early in the morning. They drove her to the only funeral parlor in town, the Ford-Elder Funeral Home.

The oldest son of the Elder family had gone to school with me. He was about my age. He'd gone off to college after he graduated last spring. He was majoring in business administration so that he could take over the family business. That sort of thing was common practice here. Sons took over their fathers' businesses. One generation followed the next and the cycle of small-town life continued.

I walked into Chip's office. He held the door open and greeted me with a warm look on his face and a hot cup of coffee in his hand.

He reached the cup out to me and said, "Coffee? I made a fresh pot."

I shook my head and said, "No thanks. I don't drink coffee."

He shrugged and motioned for me to follow him.

There was no secretary in his lobby, but there was a desk for one. I wasn't sure if he had an assistant or not. Maybe there wasn't enough business in town for him to have a staff. Maybe fewer lawyers would've helped.

I'd seen television shows with law offices as part of the sets. Law and cop shows were popular in the South. The offices in those shows were always fancy with dark oak paneling and leather chairs. The office doors were usually large and thick and beautifully polished.

Chip's office couldn't have been farther from this image. It was a rinky-dink, two-room office with wallpaper that looked like green pea soup. His doors looked like planks of wood scavenged together from ship wreckage.

His desk was an old, rusted steel thing with one drawer and two empty slots where there had once been other drawers. He had three chairs in the room, two on my side of his desk and one on his.

His chair was the nicest of the three and it was still a piece of junk. It had a faded brown pillow cushion on the back part. The stuffing poured out of two gaping holes like it was trying to escape.

He gestured at the guest chairs and said, "Have a seat."

I sat. He followed suit and sat across from me.

He placed his coffee cup down on top of some legal papers and looked up at me.

"How are you holding up?"

The concern in his voice seemed sincere. Something unique about small town folks was that they were genuine in their concerns. Of course I couldn't compare that to people from cities because I'd never really been anywhere, not yet.

I looked at Chip and then I said, "I'm okay. She went peacefully. Not much fuss."

He nodded like he had expected that, but I guessed that everyone who knew my mother would've expected her to not make a federal case out of death. Then he leaned back in his chair and opened his one steel drawer. The springs hissed and whined as they stretched back with the drawer. After it was opened, he reached into it and pulled out a thin, stapled document.

He released the drawer and it slowly retracted itself to the closed position.

A spring-loaded desk drawer? Never heard of that.

He flipped through the pages and began to read to himself. Then after a few moments, he looked up at me and said, "This is your mom's last will and testament. I know this seems like bad timing on my part, but in it she expresses two basic issues and one is time-sensitive. First you are to inherit her house, the money in her savings account, and all of her possessions.

"The second part is how she wants her remains disposed of."

I cocked my head and moved my focus to him instead of the backside of the papers.

He kept his eyes on her will and read the second part.

"This is her own words," he said and cleared his throat. Then he read, "I don't wish to be buried. I've arranged it with the Ford-Elder people that they're to bury an empty coffin at my funeral. My funeral is for the townspeople. It's for them to grieve and move on."

He took a moment and swallowed. Then he continued, "The funeral home is going to have me cremated and my ashes given to you. I want you to take them and scatter them across the old train tracks. This is very important. I can't explain to you why except to tell you that by now I should've told you about your father. You, he, and your grandfather are the only men that I've ever loved.

"That train, the one that used to barrel through our town every night at midnight when you were a kid, it meant something to your father and me. I want you to scatter my remains across the decommissioned tracks. In a way I've been decommissioned and that's where I want to be.

"I love you. And I loved your father since before you were born. Scatter my ashes and let me go. Mr. Weston has been instructed to sell the house and give you the money. So don't worry about selling it.

"Let me go. I want you to pick up where I left off and get Jack Reacher. Find him. I want you to know him. There's only one way that you can do that. Follow in

his footsteps. There's a huge world out there. Go see it. Follow your own nature. It will lead you to him."

Weston stopped reading and looked up at me.

He said, "That's it."

I nodded.

He paused like he was waiting for me to say more.

Then he said, "You don't have to do any of this. I have to abide by her wishes because that's the law, but you don't. The house will have to go on the market. There's nothing I can do about that. She left the profits from the sale to you, but she left no room to deviate from her wishes."

He was silent for a moment and then he said, "Are you okay?"

I nodded.

He said, "Well, I have her ashes here. Are you okay with scattering her?"

I felt so much emotion inside that I didn't know how to act. So I simply nodded again.

He pushed forward the last page of the document to me and handed me a fountain pen.

"Sign the bottom. It's acknowledging that I've given you clarification on her will and testament and that you agree to carry out her wishes."

I stayed quiet and leaned forward, grabbed the pen, and signed the document in solid blue ink.

He reached back and picked up a square-shaped box that I hadn't noticed before from the top of a filing cabinet.

He said, "Her ashes."

In the box, there was a plastic bag with my mother's remains. She'd been three feet from me ever since I sat down and I hadn't even noticed.

I realized that there was nothing left for me in Carter Crossing. Ever since the moment that my mother's hand went limp in mine, the only thing that I'd thought of was the open road.

I shook Weston's hand and exited the building carrying my mother's ashes.

I turned east and headed toward the railroad tracks.

It was 9:48 a.m. and the town was up and full of life. I walked the downtown streets and turned and zigzagged so that I could avoid as many people as possible. I didn't want to stop for anyone because then I'd have to stop for everyone.

I walked past the diner and the local hotel and bars. Went beyond the banks, a gas station, a public park, and the grocery. I kept my head down, avoiding everyone's gaze.

Occasionally people would wave at me or call me over to them. I ignored them and continued on.

I walked for twenty minutes and stopped at an intersection with a traffic light. A steady stream of cars passed. I'm not sure if anyone recognized me. No one honked or stopped. In a small town everyone knows everyone. It was common practice to honk and wave.

I kept my head low as best I could and tried not to make eye contact with anyone, but there was no way for me to stay unseen. Everyone knew me and I stood out. I was the easiest person to find. I could be spotted in a crowd in less than the blink of an eye.

That's what you get when you are a Reacher. The most I had weighed was the year before I had gotten up to 250 pounds. That was because that summer my mother had me doing all kinds of grunt work for the city. Real push-and-pull stuff. I mowed public lawns, trimmed hedges, planted trees, and uprooted dead ones. I did most of the city's landscaping around the public buildings including around the high school and its football and baseball fields.

I was consuming five heavy meals a day just to keep up with my hunger from all of that work in the sun. I ate a lot of fast food and tons of protein and drank gallons of water.

Besides being such a gigantic guy, I also had thick, long black hair like my mother. She liked my hair long and let me grow it. She said it made me look Native American like one of those old, painted warriors. At such a young age, my skin was already sun-beaten and rough. I tanned easily; at the moment I was olive complexioned because I hadn't been out in the sun that much since before the winter.

My mother had gotten sick eight months ago and I had been coming straight home after school to take care of her.

The cars and pedestrians continued to go by. I ignored them.

I pulled the box with my mother's ashes close to my chest like a football. I crossed the intersection and headed on toward the train tracks.

I crossed between a two-story building and an abandoned post office and then came out onto a small open field. There it was. The railroad crossing ran straight through the center of town, north to south. It split the town in half. Literally, there had always been the right side and wrong side of the tracks. What that really had meant was there was the white side and the black side, as most of our black population lived on the wrong side of the tracks. Not something that I was ever particularly proud of, but it had been that way long before I was born.

Grass and weeds had grown thick over the rail bed. The trains had stopped running when I was a kid, long ago. There was no evidence left of them except the old, rusted tracks.

I surveyed the nearest street that crossed over. It ran west to east. On one side of the tracks the old train warning sign still stood upright. The broken bottom half of a warning sign stood on the opposite side for oncoming traffic. The top half of it had vanished long ago. Probably taken out into the woods and used for target practice by local kids.

I stomped through the overgrown grass in the clearing and made my way to the tracks.

The middle, connecting planks were mostly still intact, but a few of them were split here and there. Nearly 15 years of neglect had seen to that.

The rocks in between the lines were still an off-white color. Not much would erode them anyway. Rocks never really changed.

I walked along the tracks for a while. I stopped at the crossing road and turned my head and looked both ways. There were no cars in sight.

I looked to the east. That had always been considered the bad side of town. It was mainly small project housing and some abandoned factories.

An old sign on the side of the street caught my eye. It used to be blue and reflective, but now it was mostly peeled away and the letters were faded. I could still read it because I already knew what it had said.

It read:

**Kelh m rmy Base
4 Mil s Ah ad**

Kelham Army Base was the old base that this town had been built up on half a century ago. My mother never spoke too much about it and I never asked. It seemed to be a hard subject for her. It was like she avoided the topic on purpose.

The sun was just past the ten o'clock position in the sky. The May weather was cool for this time of year, almost down to 60 degrees. It felt more like early spring than the preface to summer.

The summer would be hot and humid and probably rainy.

I took a deep breath and held out the box. I opened it and pulled out the bag containing my mother's ashes.

It was heavy for such a small bag. I tossed the box on the ground and watched it roll a couple of times off the road. I wasn't worried about littering. No sheriff's deputy would've said anything about it, not to me, and not on this side of town.

Next I pulled my house keys out of my pocket and used the sharp jagged edge to tear the bag open. I started at the top and sawed a hole down to the middle.

I returned the keys to my pocket and stood still for a moment.

I gauged which way the wind was blowing. I didn't want to throw open the bag and scatter her ashes into the wind and have my dead mother's ashes blow back on me.

After I acquired the right direction, I twisted back, ripped open the hole big and wide and then I whipped the bag around like a fisherman casting a net. One powerful swing and the ashes released into the wind. They were carried off fast. My mother had been here and then she was gone.

It was only a matter of seconds until she was spread out perfectly over the tracks.

I watched her until she was lost to sight.

I stood there, breathing, taking in the scenery. This was the town that I had grown up in. It was my home—the only place that I had ever known.

I pulled out my house keys again and stared at them. Then I reared back and threw them as hard as I could. They flipped and spun through the air, off into a northwest direction. I lost sight of them in the heavy grass.

I'd never carried a wallet. I didn't like the bulky feeling in my pocket. I had my bankcard and my driver's license in my back pocket. I liked traveling light and I had no credit cards to worry about, not at my age.

I pulled out my mother's cell phone and switched it on.

It had a full charge and a strong signal. It read the name of the service provider at the top corner. The phone's wallpaper was a picture of us together. I was young and she was young. We laughed and smiled and were full of life. It was the way that I wanted to remember her.

I looked in the phone's photo album. There were mostly photos of me, of her, of us hunting, and then there was one photo of a man in an army uniform. It was an old photo, possibly a screenshot from the Internet. It was a roster photo from an early '80s or late '70s class from West Point Military Academy or someplace similar, a graduate picture or something. He was a newly minted officer.

In the background to his right-hand side was an American flag, draped on a pole like a coat rack. It was a smaller indoor flag. The stars and stripes curved over the folds. The man in the picture towered over the flagpole by several inches. It was obvious that the flag was meant to be photographed with normal-sized men and this guy was anything but normal-sized. He was huge like me. The photographer must have had to back the camera up all the way against the opposite wall just to fit the new graduate in the frame.

His features were rugged, even with his clean-shaven face. He had a chiseled jaw and an arched brow like concrete and he had blue eyes and fair hair. He was a little older than me now, maybe three years. He could have been twenty-one or twenty-two.

The other thing that I immediately noticed about him was that he looked exactly like me. Except for his hair, we could have been brothers or cousins or he could have been... my father.

A wave came over me. For the first time since my mom's small hand had gone limp in mine, I felt something like a feeling of direction, of purpose. It swept over me, steering me like a compass, pointing me the right way. This was my father.

This was Jack Reacher.

Chapter 3

I walked on the side of the road back toward downtown. I passed by the diner, the sheriff's station, and the outlet stores. I passed by people I had known all of my life. I passed them without a second glance, or a second thought, because they were in the past now. I walked like a man possessed, which reminded me of *Kung Fu* again—the wandering stranger. I continued west and walked the old, dusty main street out of town. Cars passed me by. Some drivers recognized me and slowed, but no one stopped to ask how I was. They took one look at my face, at my demeanor, and left me alone. I walked 47 minutes straight, no break, no rush, just a steady pace. I was surrounded by low-hanging trees in a thick green and brown forest on both sides of the track. The ditches along the sides of the road were dry along the beds and covered in layers of grass along the tops. Gravel was sunk into the bottoms of the ditches, probably washed in from the road by the rains—Mississippi had rainy summers.

I had spent my whole life living in one place except for a brief stint in Biloxi on the Gulf Coast. Of course I had only just learned that from my mother the night before and I was too young to remember living there.

I was 18 years old, a citizen of an America that I had barely seen, and I had sights to see and places to visit. There was an entire frontier out there filled with mountains and rivers. There were huge cities and there were deserts. There was

countryside and there were parks. There was forest and there were hotels and music. There were historical places and there were plenty of roads and tracks and paths. There were graves and there were places where legends had been born. I was a citizen of a remote part of a nation that had so much more to offer.

I stayed straight on the only road that led out of this place. One way in and one way out. I placed one foot in front of the other and stuck out my thumb, headed somewhere that I didn't know.

I headed west.

It wasn't long before I heard vehicles approaching from behind me. I craned my head and looked over my shoulder. Two pickup trucks drove up behind me, carrying small clouds of dust behind them.

The first one was a brand-new crew cab, a white Silverado. It pulled a small trailer.

The second truck was an old, beat-up thing, probably a Ford. It was the ugliest truck that I had ever seen. Some of the body was slapped together from other dead trucks. The thing looked like it had just driven out of a junkyard.

The guy in it had his left arm hanging out of the window. His fingertips to the middle of his bicep was made up of rugged sun-beaten skin until it crossed directly over to a pale tan line and disappeared up his sleeve. He pulled up alongside me and leaned over in the seat. The passenger window was down. He looked at me and asked, "You need a lift, son?"

I had to bend down just to see into the cab and this was not a small truck.

The guy wore gray slacks, a plaid shirt with a pack of cigarettes in his front pocket, and a genuinely concerned look on his face. He was middle aged. Looked like he had had a hard life, but managed to keep a good outlook.

The guy wore gray slacks, a plaid shirt with a pack of cigarettes in his front pocket, and a genuinely concerned look on his face. He was middle aged. Looked like he had had a hard life, but managed to keep a good outlook. He smiled at me and showed some crooked teeth and some empty slots where there had once been teeth.

His right arm was draped across the top of the steering wheel at the twelve o'clock position like he had been driving with the bottom of his forearm instead of his hands.

I said, "I'm headed out of Carter County."

He asked, "Where to?"

I said, "West. I suppose."

He said, "Get in. I'm headed dat direction for da next half hour or better."

I opened the door and got into the truck.

The guy was a safe driver whenever he had a passenger in his truck—that was evident. As soon as I sat down, he returned his hands to the ten and two o'clock positions as designated by the Mississippi Highway Book of Road Regulations for Safe Automobile Use.

No traffic behind us, yet he still used his signal like he was going to merge and looked over his left shoulder for a good long second. A safe driver. And then he hit the gas and the engine roared and the truck sped off, leaving a cloud of dust behind us.

“What’s your name, son?”

I twisted in my seat and craned my head as far back over my right shoulder as I could. I gave the end of Carter Crossing one final, hard look.

Then I turned forward in my seat and reached up to grab the seatbelt. Mississippi has a seatbelt enforcement policy. The last thing that I wanted to do was get this guy a ticket. So I pulled the seatbelt out of its holster and down across my chest and clicked it into its latching mechanism.

Then I turned to him and said, “Reacher.”

Chapter 4

I had made it with the guy in the old junkyard truck for about 60 miles from my hometown until he let me out. I really had no clear direction of which way I was headed, but I knew that I didn’t want to head south, the direction that he wanted to go. South would’ve gotten me nowhere because there was nothing south but rural country, the state capital, and the Gulf of Mexico. And Jack Reacher wasn’t in the Gulf of Mexico. So he dropped me off at a gas station off Highway 118, near the corner of a road called Blackwell, a big paved road, blacktop that was completely empty and with no landmarks in sight, just the gas station and flat lands, probably farms.

I stayed at the gas station for a spell. Inside I used my debit card and bought a bottle of water and one of those gas station sandwiches, not the healthiest thing, but I was hungry since I hadn’t eaten all day or the night before. At the checkout, I stared at the roadmaps displayed in front of the counter and wondered if anyone ever bought those anymore because everyone had smartphones with Google Maps. I paid for my items and then went outside the gas station and sat on the curb. I ate my sandwich and drank from the water bottle. I drank nearly half the bottle in one gulp.

Highway 118 ran parallel with interstate 48, which was just over the horizon, not even 100 yards from me. I figured that I would get a lot farther a lot faster if I could hitch a ride on the interstate, so I finished my sandwich and threw the wrapper into a trashcan. Then I crossed over the highway and walked to the interstate along decent roadside terrain. The grass was green and freshly cut and smelled of springtime. I walked across a large field and heard the rush of cars on the interstate, traveling fast like you would expect on a busy freeway. I heard *Whoosh! Whoosh!*

Semi-trucks and big rigs hauled goods at higher speeds than the highway traffic to destinations that I could only guess at and imagine. Gas trucks, oil tankers, trucks filled with limbless trees, and two trucks filled with brand new Dodge Vipers rocketed past me, shaking the smaller, personal vehicles. The 18-ton trucks versus four-cylinder compact cars were like big kids playing with small kids. Some trucks headed east and some west, but all had destinations to somewhere, a purpose and a route. Mississippi was a state to pass through.

I walked up a hill on the side of the interstate and began walking along the shoulder up on the westbound side. I walked with the traffic and stuck my thumb

out again. I walked about six miles, glad that the summer heat hadn't set in yet because I walked for 79 minutes straight and not a single car had even slowed down for me.

I had retracted my thumb long ago as well as thrown away my empty water bottle. I usually wouldn't litter, but the particular ditch that I tossed it in was filled with trash. I didn't think that my water bottle would make much of a difference and any local wildlife that lived there were probably used to the trash.

I walked on for another ten minutes and I'd started to think that maybe this was a bad idea. I wondered how my father had done this for so many years. Then I figured he must have used public transportation more than hitchhiking. I bet that buses were probably the way that he traveled from place to place. America had no high-speed train system, not yet, maybe one day.

Just when I was about to give up hope on ever getting a ride, a blue Ford Fusion with a nice coat of wax glimmering in the sunlight pulled out in front of me. It stopped so abruptly that the tires let out smoke and the smell of rubber filled the air. The brakes howled as the car halted to a stop on the shoulder in front of me a good 40 yards away. I scrambled toward it. I saw that the driver must have had second thoughts because the brake lights went off at one point before I reached the car like he was about to speed off. He had probably seen me in the rearview mirror and realized how gigantic I was. Although my clothes had been relatively clean from when I left town, I still looked like something out of a horror movie. A giant hitchhiker with long, black hair was not the kind of guy that drivers preferred to pick up. Then again, these days the hitchhikers risked as much as the drivers. I had heard stories of hitchhikers getting murdered by killers who drove around looking to take advantage of lost, nomadic travelers. Generally as a hitchhiker, you were at the mercy of whatever driver was kind enough to stop because drivers could be choosers, but riders less so.

Still I wasn't a dream-come-true-looking hitchhiker. If there was such a thing as a drifting marauder who sought out hitchhikers to kill, I doubted that he would pick me because besides being a walking giant, I could handle myself; that was something that any idiot with two eyes could see. One look at me and you knew I was capable of self-defense with no problem.

I didn't want to lose this ride so I picked up my pace and jogged the rest of the distance to the car before he changed his mind. I reached the passenger door and grabbed the handle. I pulled at it and it sprang back into place, making a snapping sound. The door was locked. I paused a moment and stared at myself in the reflection of the window. The window buzzed down just enough to leave a crack. I felt the blast of air conditioning rush out as a scatter of cold air. I stooped down and the cold air caressed my face as I peered into the car at the driver.

The guy driving had not been a guy at all, not an old man like I had met earlier, but a young, attractive girl. She must've been my age or a year older, but not much more than that and I doubted that she was younger than me. No way did her parents let her drive this long stretch of interstate alone if she was seventeen or less. No, this had to be an endeavor of her own choosing.

I said, "Thanks for stopping."

She looked me up and down and then back up again. I could see the hesitation and the worry in her face and even a hint of fear. She had probably thought, *Oh my God! What have I done?*

I smiled the friendliest smile that I could muster, showed my teeth like the ones that I had seen in dentist offices.

Then she asked, "Where are you headed?"

I didn't want to scare her by suggesting that I was some sort of drifter, which technically I wasn't—not yet. I wasn't sure exactly what point I had to reach in order to be qualified as one, but I was sure that it wasn't 66 miles and less than three hours of travel.

I looked at her and said, "Oxford."

This made sense considering my age. Maybe she would think that I was some sort of free-spirited college student backpacking across the state, going back to school, even though I had no backpack, no luggage, and no place to carry fresh clothes. I hoped she wouldn't notice those small details.

It was the middle of May and the spring semester had ended, but maybe I was returning to school for summer classes after a two-week hiatus. Some kids wanted to graduate early and took summer classes, so this could make sense.

She wore a Mississippi State University jersey. On the front of it was a picture of a cartoon bulldog, their mascot.

"Are you a bulldog?" I asked. I continued to smile, but not too big, not enough to frighten her.

She smiled back and said, "Sure am."

She had a thick Southern accent. It almost sounded cliché, like it had been rehearsed.

She clicked the button on her door and I heard an electronic lock snick; the passenger door unlocked. I pulled the handle and the door opened. I dumped myself into the seat. It was a tight fit getting into her car. These vehicles weren't built for a man of my size. I had to spend several seconds trying to find the latch to move the seat back.

She watched me fumbling around for a moment and then she said, "It's on the bottom."

I found the bar to the seat mechanism and pulled it up. The seat slid all the way back as far as it would go. It wasn't enough room for me to recline, but it was enough to fit my legs into the foot well and shut the door. My knees rested against the dash, but I didn't complain; at least I wasn't outside walking anymore.

I looked at her and said, "I appreciate it. I've been out there for over an hour. I was beginning to think that no one was going to stop."

She nodded and smiled and began to drive forward. She merged with the traffic, taking us off the shoulder and up to a comparable speed with the other cars.

She glanced my way and said, "Don't forget to buckle your seatbelt."

I nodded and pulled the belt around my chest.

We rode in silence for a little ways. She was still scared of me. I saw that in her demeanor: shaking hands, nervous glances, and she kept glancing at her glove box. I decided it was best to break the ice before she pulled over and kicked me out or pretended to get gas and drive off as soon as she sent me into the next gas station for an energy drink or a water bottle or a soda.

I said, "I wouldn't have thought that I would get a ride from a beautiful, young woman. Isn't it kind of dangerous for you to be giving rides to strangers? Especially ones that look like me?"

She smiled and then she said, "I figure that I'm safer with a big guy like you than I am out here on my own. You know, because of all of the abductions in this county."

"Abductions?"

"Yes. In this part of the state there are amber alerts all the time. It's been happening for years in this county and three other ones nearby. Young girls. A girl from my school drove through here by herself last year. No one has seen her since."

She paused a beat and then she asked, "Haven't you heard about it?"

I shrugged and stayed quiet.

"Her name was Ann Gables. She was a really pretty girl,"

I stayed quiet.

"It's been happening for so long that it isn't even on the news anymore. It was like national news the first year, but now it's just like another girl has gone missing. Oh well. It's just Mississippi. Who cares about them rednecks? Right?"

I asked, "It is that bad? How long has it gone on?"

"Five years or so. Now it's like an urban legend."

"Your parents are okay with letting you drive this interstate on your own?"

"There's a gun in the glove box."

I stared at the dash, realized why she had glanced over at the glove box now.

Then I said, "Okay. Are you sure that you should have told me that? What if I'm the culprit?"

She smiled and said, "Nah. I knew it wasn't you when I saw your eyes. They're nice eyes. A kind man's eyes. Besides I can tell that you're too young to be the bad guy. This started five years ago. You would've been in junior high for sure."

I nodded. The thing she had said about my eyes was nice. I wasn't used to good-looking young women paying me compliments, and she was a good-looking woman. She had that kind of coed look like she belonged at a home game somewhere, cheering on her quarterback boyfriend.

I said, "My name is Reacher."

"Jill," she replied.

"Nice to meet you."

She did a double take at my name and then she asked, "What kind of a name is Reacher?"

I said, "It is a family name. My first name is Cameron, but nobody calls me that."

"Okay. It's nice. Goes with your arms."

"My arms?"

"Yeah," she said and then she glanced over at them and traced them with her eyes, a quick look over, but she made a point of making it obvious.

I followed her gaze and stared at my long, awkward arms that led to my oversized hands. They looked like sledgehammers that were screwed onto my wrists instead of thick wooden handles.

She looked back at the road. A grin swept across her face and she said, "Your arms. They're so long. You must have a record arm span."

I stayed quiet and stared at my arms, feeling a little insecure. That was what she was telling me, what she really meant. I was a freak with tree trunks growing out of my shoulders and then she must've sensed my self-doubt because she reached over with her right hand and touched my left forearm, gently.

She said, "No, I like them. I didn't mean it in a bad way."

She poked at my bicep and said, "You must get a lot of girls. Girls like to feel protected. That's why I picked you up. Honestly. I wanted to feel safe."

I nodded. I didn't know what else to do. I had always been a little self-conscious about how I looked, not in a bad way, not like I had thought of myself as ugly, but I was no pretty boy. That was for damn sure.

There was more silence in the car as we drove in the fast lane. I looked out the window and stared at the terrain as it brushed by and then I saw a highway sign that read:

**Tupelo
65 miles**

She said, "You don't go to school. Do you?"

I said, "No."

Then she said, "So where are you headed exactly? Because I'm turning south at Tupelo."

"I'm going west. No particular destination."

"What are you, like a drifter?"

"I'm searching for my father. I figure that he is west, so that's the direction that I'm headed."

She looked at me strange and then she said, "You don't know where he is exactly? And you're just headed west, hoping to what?"

She paused a beat. Then she said, "Run into him?"

"That is 100% right. I have no idea where he is. I have no plan. Just to head west."

"You know west is a big place? If he's in the United States you're looking at like a million miles."

I said, "1,559,951 square miles."

She craned her head at me like a reflex and then she asked, "You know the exact amount?"

I said, "The United States is roughly 3,794,100 square miles."

She began calculating in her head. I could see it on her face. Not an easy thing to do while driving for most people, especially with smartphones. Normally a person would pull out a smartphone, start googling and adding up numbers on a calculator app. I had seen it a thousand times. A driver partakes in a conversation, hears a statistic or has a disagreement with another person and he pulls out his smartphone and looks up the topic, even when he's driving. The world has become a place of instant distractions and multitasking.

She said, "If you're taking half of that then actually you're looking at 1,900,000 or so, not 1,500,000 or whatever you said."

"1,559,951. And you're right. Half of the United States' total square miles is 1,897,050. Close to 1,900,000. But you have to take out 674,198 square miles."

"674,000, why?"

"674,198 square miles," I said. "Because that's the combined area of Alaska and Hawaii in square miles."

She shook her head and then she said, "Did you already think out all that math?"

I shook my head back.

"So you just know those numbers off the top of your head?"

I nodded.

She said, "How? What are you, like a genius?"

"No. Far from it. I like to read and learn things... facts, and I like numbers. My mother had me read every book that she could ever get her hands on. I'm from a rural town. There's not much else to do besides learning," I said, slightly bending the truth because the reality was I had had plenty to do back home. There was no reason to tell her that I spent my teenage years solving homicides and studying dead bodies and learning about police work.

She nodded and said, "All of Northern Mississippi is rural. Even cities like Tupelo aren't really that big."

I stayed quiet.

She must have sensed that that was the end of the conversation because all she said was, "Good luck with finding your dad."

I nodded again.

Then there was silence for a spell. I supposed that she didn't want to intrude in my private business and I respected that about her. She was a nice girl.

We drove on for another hour through the rest of Marion County, about 52 miles. She was speedy, but an alert and cautious driver like a lot of young people that I had known.

To break the silence and to answer my own curiosity, I said, "Before you let me out I wanted to ask about those abductions. What are the cops doing about it?"

"Not much. The FBI is involved, but they have been since the beginning. They came to my school the first year and handed out pamphlets and emergency numbers to call in case we saw anything. They even opened a temporary field office in Brownville. I think it's still there."

She paused a beat and checked the fast lane in her side mirror and then she signaled a lane change and moved the car over, pulling left. She accelerated and the little four-cylinder car picked up speed. I felt the engine purr, not roar like a V6 or higher; it purred like a small car does, a house cat compared to a V6 leopard or a V8 lion.

"They said that over ten girls had gone missing and all of it was in this area. These four counties I mean. That's why we're supposed to ride in pairs like a safety carpool, but I've been driving back solo. That was when my father bought me a gun and taught me how to shoot."

She waited like she expected me to say something back, but I stayed quiet.

Chapter 5

Jill drove around the interstate cloverleaf and successfully merged into the southbound traffic. She headed to the nearest exit into Tupelo where she glanced over at me and said, "Sorry I didn't drop you off before the intersection. I forgot that it was so close. I'll let you out at this gas station coming up on the right-hand side. Maybe you can catch someone who's headed back."

"Don't worry about it. It was nice enough of you to give me a ride this far. I'll be fine."

She followed a sign for the gas station and pulled into the lot. She pulled up to the pump and put the gear into park. Then she killed the engine. She turned in her seat to me and leaned over the center console to give me a hug. The seatbelt quietly stretched with her contorted body.

I hadn't expected her to hug me and my body locked up for a moment, a reaction to being touched unexpected I guessed, like a reflex.

She said, "It was nice to meet you. Good luck."

"Do you want me to pay for your gas? To pay you back for the ride."

She smiled at me and then she said, "You really are the sweetest man, like a gentle giant. No thanks. I hope that you find your dad."

I pulled the door lever, got out of the car, and stretched my legs and my arms out as long as they would reach. It made me think of what she had said about my arm span. I ignored my self-doubts and just enjoyed the feel of the stretch like I had been crammed into a cargo box and had just gotten free. I looked up at the sun to check the time. It was in roughly the half-past three o'clock position, but I wasn't sure. My mother had taught me to tell direction and time by the shadows on the ground, not the sun, but I could guess. Of course, this only worked in the daytime and when there were shadows and a sun. Today was a sunny day so there were plenty of shadows to use this technique. But I had a fully charged cell phone in my pocket so why use the sun like a pioneer when it was just easier to look at the home screen to see the time. I didn't need the sun to tell the direction either because I already knew which way was west. It had been clearly marked on the interstate signs.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone and touched the screen. It lit up, the background of me and my mom appearing behind a message that read:

Slide to Unlock

It referred to an arrow that flashed like one of those traffic arrows on the back of a road construction truck that told drivers to use the other lane.

I ran my finger across the screen and unlocked the phone. It had no passcode. Usually most phones required one at this phase, but my mother hadn't had one on hers, no point. Being sheriff meant that you needed to maintain quick access to your cell phone, a job requirement.

I looked at the time, 3:36 p.m., and then I searched through the call log. The phone notified me that I had over a dozen missed calls, several voicemails and some text messages. Most of them were from her office. There was no reason for

me to listen to them so I ignored them and clicked the power button on the phone. The screen returned to black and I slipped it back into my back pocket.

I didn't really need anything from the store, but I decided that it was best to go to the restroom while I was near one. So I headed inside and used the bathroom. Afterward I walked through the store and peered through the window. I watched as Jill's car pulled away from the pump. It drove onto the blacktop—the tires made that slow rolling sound—and then she sped away and was lost to sight.

I stepped outside and looked around the lot, saw four cars parked under the gas station's cover and four drivers of all different ages and sizes, pumping gas. I could've approached any one of them and asked for a ride, but I wasn't too keen on that tactic. What if they thought I was panhandling before I even got a word out? People are immediately defensive when approached because they're always getting hit up for change by panhandlers. It was a big problem in Mississippi. I knew that for sure. I figured that it was best to let one of them approach me. On top of that, forget about a normal-sized stranger coming at you to ask for a ride in an unfamiliar gas station. Instead picture a giant coming at you while you pump gas. That would intimidate you, probably even scare you. If I kept that up it would only be a matter of time before one of the drivers complained to the clerk behind the counter and then he'd call the manager or worse—the police, or the manager would call the police. They'd think I was some sort of delinquent and next thing you know I'd be getting a ride all right, but in the back of a state trooper's car and all because I needed a ride west. No, I was better off headed back to interstate 278 and walking until someone pulled over and offered me a ride.

So I began walking out of the lot and back to the interstate on-ramp.

As I walked out I saw an old fuel truck about medium size drive in with faded symbols along the side. I could make out the writing as the truck crossed between the pumps and I walked away. It read:

Jackson West Air Fields
Caution Jet Fuel in Tank

Far from Jackson.

I shrugged, passed the old fuel truck, and didn't give it a second glance. I continued onto the interstate.

The on-ramp was steep and short. Walking up it was quite a brief workout, like stair climbing.

At the end of it I headed north before I could turn on the cloverleaf and go west. I hugged the shoulder of the overpass as best I could. It wasn't very wide, not wide enough for a car anyway, which I guessed was supposed to be the standard, but maybe not on the cloverleaf parts. Having grown up in Mississippi I knew that its roads were not the best, but they were better than some of the neighboring states.

As luck would have it, I only had to walk for five more minutes because just before I turned onto the loop that took me to the westbound lane of Interstate 278, I heard a horn behind me. I turned to see the fuel truck from the gas station; it had caught up with me. The truck slowed to a stop 13 feet behind me with no cars behind it so the driver hadn't even bothered to pull over to the little shoulder. He just stopped in the middle of the turning lane and honked his horn.

I walked back to the passenger side, remembered to smile, and looked into the window.

The guy behind the wheel was an old white-haired man in a bright red cap and gray overalls like a mechanic wears. There was a faded blue patch on the upper left breast of his overalls with writing on it. I couldn't make it out from this distance, probably his name, stitched into the fabric.

Sitting in the passenger seat at attention was a black-and-white border collie. It was old, with gray hair checkered through the black in its fur.

The dog hadn't growled or jumped up when I leaned against the window. It simply waited for its master to speak. This was a well-trained dog. They were quite the pair, must've been together for years. The dog was probably his age in terms of dog years.

The guy was very, very old, well beyond the age of retirement, probably a great-grandfather with a dozen grandkids running around somewhere, maybe spread out all over the state, maybe the country.

I grabbed the door handle and pulled the door open. It squeaked loud like it had never been opened before. The first thing to hit me about the inside of the cabin was a musty smell, not bad, but not great either. It smelled like he had been living in his truck, which was entirely possible.

The bench seat was made of old, worn leather. I don't know what color it was supposed to be because it was so old that the color was indiscernible. I guessed that it had been light brown originally.

The dog's fur was all over the place. It was a long-haired border collie, which was a medium-sized dog. This one was maybe 45 pounds or so. Not a small dog, just smaller than I thought a border collie to be, but then again I'd never seen one in real life.

The guy spoke first. He said, "Howdy."

His voice was squeaky and I immediately knew why. His incisors were gone and the rest of the teeth that he had left were rotting so badly that they were a brownish color like he needed to see a dentist, and soon. The inside of his mouth looked like the remains of a bombed city just after the bombing had taken place, like it was still smoldering. His breath hit me like a ton of bricks.

A thought occurred to me right after the smell of his breath swept across my face.

How the hell did he manage to eat? He must've been on a soup-only diet.

I made a mental note that if I'm going to be hitchhiking I'd better start carrying gum or breath mints or Tic Tacs. At least that way I could offer some to whatever driver picked me up.

I could've asked, "Would you like a piece of gum?" Polite conversation. No one would think that it meant anything in particular about his or her own breath and most people wouldn't turn down a free stick of gum. Most importantly it would spare me from having to endure bad breath. I imagined that riding with this guy was going to be long if all I could focus on was his breath.

I said, "Hi. How is your day going?"

"It's going pretty good so far. Nice weather. So you need a ride?" he asked. There was a kindness in his voice and face. He radiated like a proud grandparent and then I knew exactly why no one had mentioned his breath to him. His demeanor

was so kind that it immediately made a person look right past his bad breath. This guy glowed like an angel, just the way you expect a loving old grandpa to glow.

I said, "I would surely appreciate one."

He said, "Hop in. Let's get going. And don't mind Link. He won't bite. Move over, Link."

The dog moved over. It didn't bark or snap or dismiss his command. It was perfectly obedient, truly a great dog.

Link moved to the middle of the bench, made the effort seem like a great struggle, then he curled up and rested his head on the seat. He didn't pay me any more attention, not a sniff like I had seen other dogs do. This dog had this *if it's okay with my master, then it's okay with me* attitude, like his master's approval was gospel.

I got into the truck, closed the door, and grabbed at the seatbelt, but it was gone. I grinned, tried not to look like it was a big deal, which it wasn't.

The old guy noticed the move and said, "Sorry, son. Dere is no seatbelt. I hope dat's okay? I promise dat I'm a good safe driver."

I smiled and said, "No problem."

I believed the old guy. Old grandpas were usually good drivers. Slow and safe was a statistical reality about old guys, so I didn't doubt that he was a good driver. I was more surprised that he hadn't replaced the seatbelt, especially being that he was dressed like an airplane mechanic. I guessed that airplane mechanics and car mechanics had different priorities. To an airplane mechanic a seatbelt at 30,000 feet was completely unnecessary and more of a placebo precaution for the passengers, just to give them peace of mind more than to actually save their lives. When a plane drops out of the sky at 30,000 feet and plummets to the ground, the last thing that will save a passenger's life is a seatbelt. A car is a different story. Cars don't reach speeds of hundreds of miles per hour and travel tens of thousands of feet above the ground and cars barely deal in gravity when compared to airplanes.

I figured that the old guy never had many passengers because he had a kind of loneliness about him.

He said, "I'm really not supposed ta pick anyone up, but ya look lost out here and I got a long drive still. I'd sure like da company."

His voice hung on the word "sure" and it came out with a slight whistle at the end. He grinned wide. That was when I realized that one of his bottom front teeth was broken, not chipped, broken in half. The air produced by his windpipes must've hissed right through his missing incisors and then scraped across his broken tooth, creating a distinctive whistle, especially on the pronunciation of the letter "s."

I was having quite the luck with drivers today. My first had been an old man missing his teeth, but in good spirits, and now I had another old guy with messed-up teeth and again in great spirits. I wondered if a lot of my future drivers would be the same type of blue-collar old guy.

Jill was certainly going to be a very rare breed of driver for me, which was a shame because I liked pretty girls. But I didn't mind good-spirited old guys.

I looked over at him and said, "I appreciate you stopping."

"So son, where ya headed?"

"West."

"I'm headed about twenty-five miles west to a little fishing town called Black Rock. You can ride with me all the way if ya want and den yer on yer own."

"Thank you. That's kind of you."

"Where's your bag?"

I asked, "What?"

"Luggage? Doncha have a bag?"

I shrugged and said, "No bag. Just me."

Then I expected him to ask, "*Where do you keep your toothbrush?*" But he didn't. I guess a toothbrush was the last thing on his mind.

He hit the gas and the fuel truck picked up speed and slid over to the truck lane. He wasn't a slow driver, that was for damn sure; that had been a miscalculation on my part. He pushed the old truck as hard as it would go, which wasn't very fast. It wasn't quite struggling with the sudden request from the gas pedal to jump forward, but it wasn't like Jill's Ford Fusion when it jumped to life.

He said, "I tought hitchhikers always carried a bag. Ya know, with camping gear or a sleeping bag or somedin'. So ya can sleep out under da stars. Ya don't look very prepared, if ya don't mind my saying so."

He hung on the "s" in "saying so." The whistle followed.

I said, "This is my first day hitchhiking. I guess I didn't really think it out that far ahead."

He nodded. He wasn't surprised; then again, I doubted that much of anything ever surprised him anymore.

We continued to drive down the interstate. The old guy was fast, but he wasn't heavy footed because he kept the truck at a steady 70 miles per hour, the maximum speed limit on Mississippi interstates.

Some of the other vehicles on the road drove much faster and some drove much slower. At one point we were stuck behind two 18-wheelers. One drove in the fast lane at a slow speed and the other drove in our lane at a slow speed. I guess that it was the responsibility of the truck in the fast lane to speed up, pass, and then move over to the truck lane if he was going to continue to drive slowly. The driver of that truck seemed not to be concerned with such formalities. I was pretty sure that I had heard somewhere that it was illegal for big trucks to drive in the fast lane. They were legally required to use the fast lane only for passing other vehicles.

We drove in silence for about 20 minutes until finally I decided to break it.

I asked, "Is there an airport nearby?"

The old guy said, "No. I'm driving out ta Jarvis Lake. I work at a small airstrip outside Jackson."

I said, "Are you headed to Jarvis for business or pleasure?"

He said, "Officially, neither. It's fer work, but I plan on doing some fishing while I'm dere."

Another whistle.

The old mechanic looked back over his shoulder behind the seat to a narrow rear cargo space between the front bench and the back wall. It was an area that was too small for a backseat, but unusually wide in a single cabin truck. It was as if this truck had been specially designed. Of course, I had never ridden in a fuel truck before, so I had no idea what the interior of one was supposed to look like.

I leaned back and peered into the cargo space. There was an old metal tackle box. There were a couple of fishing rods against the rear wall, folded up.

Looked like the old guy was prepared for some major fishing on the lake.

I said, "What kind of work will you be doing on a lake?"

He said, "Flying boat."

"Flying boat? You mean a seaplane?"

He shook his head and then he said, "Common mistake, son. Everyone calls dem seaplanes. A seaplane is a plane dat can land on water. I mean technically yer right dat dat's what I'm going dere fer, but dere are two types of seaplanes. Da one everyone dinks of is basically just a seaplane or a floatplane. And da second is like da plane dat I'm goin' ta work on. It's a flying boat or super scooper. It's one of dose water bombers. Ya know, fer fighting forest fires from da air. Dey are da large planes. Da fuselage on dem is shaped like da hull of a boat. It's a boat dat flies. Sometimes they're fer transporting cargo, but mostly nowadays ya usually see dem as water bombers."

I nodded.

"Anyway, I'm meeting a guy with a flying boat."

"Why is this guy flying a water bomber to a lake in Mississippi? We don't have any forest fires."

The old guy said, "It's some rich fella. Probably oil money. Maybe flying his buddies out ta a remote lake fer some fishing. I've never had anyone fly a flying boat out ta a lake before, not fer recreational use, but a seaplane, sure. Dey're probably carrying a small boat stored in da hull or da guy has a big crew dat he's bringing wid him. Dese planes can usually hold two pilots, one jump seat, and maybe eight passengers on a bench in da back."

"So why does he need you to drive to the lake?"

The old guy said, "Look at dis vehicle. I'm driving jet fuel out dere for da plane. No available jet fuel in Black Rock for da rich guy ta use ta refuel da plane. I dink he's flying from da Gulf or somewhere. Gonna need fuel ta return."

I nodded. It made sense. The rich guy needed to refuel so the old guy was meeting him there.

Then the old guy said, "My name is Hank, by da way. Hank Cochran. I was in da navy fer 25 years; den I retired. Now I work as a mechanic at a small air strip in Jackson. Dat's my story. So who are you?"

I said, "My name is Reacher, first name, Cameron. My mother was the sheriff of Carter Crossing and my father was in the army. She died and now I'm searching for him."

Hank smiled a wide smile. The sight of his missing teeth and the smell of his bad breath rushed out at me, but his smile was full of warmth. I couldn't resist smiling back at him.

Chapter 6

Jack Reacher was a name that I'd never heard before yesterday, at least not the *Jack* part, but it echoed in the chambers of my mind. I looked out the

window of the fuel truck and my lips moved inadvertently. I mouthed the name, *Reacher*.

"Did ya say somedin'?" Hank asked.

I turned and broke free from my thoughts of the stranger who was my father.

"Thinking out loud."

"I do dat all da time. Well actually I talk ta ole Link here, but he don't say much back."

Hank let out a chuckle and Link looked up after hearing his name.

"Good boy, Link," Hank said.

The dog wagged his tail.

I gazed out across the Mississippi horizon through the front windshield. The land was mostly flat and filled with tall pine trees with green, leafy tops. I calculated that we were getting close to the off-ramp for Black Rock, which was Hank's final destination. Mine continued on farther down the road, a long road.

I stared out above the trees; portentous, dark clouds filled the sky, foreshadowing bad events ahead.

Great. I was about to lose my ride and be stranded in the rain. It looked like those clouds would turn into a thunderstorm in about 30 minutes.

It was the month of May and Mississippi was a rainy place in late spring.

The old guy stared out at the horizon. He squinted his eyes, making a detailed expression on his face and then he said, "*Wheew wee.* Looks like a storm rolling in."

I stayed quiet.

Then he said, "Son, ya should ride wid me ta Jarvis. I'm stayin' in a nice cabin on da lake while I wait fer Mr. Caman ta arrive."

"Caman?" I asked.

He said, "Da rich fella wid da seaplane. His name is Caman. He won't be arrivin' till tomorrow or da day after dat. I'm headed dere early so I can get in some fishin'. I wanted time ta use his cabin. I've never stayed dere before, but he said it would be okay. It's supposed ta be two stories wid four empty bedrooms, so I have plenty of room. You could stop in wid me and stay until da storm passes.

"I can't imagine dat he'd object ta dat. He's a foreign fella, but sounded real nice on da phone."

I thought for a moment.

Then he said, "Link and I'd be happy ta have some company. Dese storms usually only last a night. In da morning dere will be some good fishin'. You could help me reel some in. I got an extra rod."

I looked back out at the clouds. A silvery lightning bolt flashed across the underbelly of one of the bigger ones and the thunder crackled a split second later. It echoed with plenty of sound and fury through the sky like a ripple through the water.

I looked back at Hank and said, "Sounds great."

Hank smiled.

We saw the off-ramp to Black Rock and took it. We drove about two miles through a heavily wooded area. Magnolias grew on both sides of a dusty, old road. Not a rocky road—the drive was smooth enough—but I could tell that it hadn't been blacktopped in over a decade. The road ended in a fork less than a mile from

the southeast corner of the lake, where the lake branched off from the main body and snaked inland for a half mile.

To the right-hand side and up on a hill there was a sign that read:

This way to Jarvis Lake Houses

To the left-hand side of the fork a sign read:

Black Rock/Jarvis Dam

Up on the right-hand side past the signs there was what looked like a small compound, like one of those that you see on the news whenever the ATF or the FBI or the DEA is about to raid the premises. It was a series of scruffy mobile homes and crumbling buildings bunched together like a wagon train, with no fence and no signs of life.

The mobile homes were perched way back away from the street. Past them there was a new-looking white brick house with hunter green shutters built off farther east, toward the trees. It looked like the headquarters for the whole thing. In the back and sloped way down about 40 yards from the house was a large, freshly painted white barn. It was definitely brand new, like a new addition to the compound, with a long, dirt track running up to it from the road. The barn had shiny new motion sensor lights installed high up on the corners that glimmered and reflected sunspots like flashes from a distant handheld camera or a sniper scope.

The most striking part of the compound was an enormous Confederate flag flying high above the trees, right in an open field, near the track. It was attached to a gigantic steel flagpole. It looked as if the people living here had spent their life savings on it and no money on their mobile homes.

The flagpole stood massive, even over the magnolias, pine trees, and heavy oaks. The steel was polished to a shine that glimmered with or without sunlight. In a way it was the most majestic flagpole that I had ever seen, including the one at the army base near my hometown back when it was open.

“Da lake is dammed up on da west side. We’ll be drivin’ across it if we go into town, but we’re headed dis way ta da cabin,” he said, and pointed to the right-hand side.

I nodded.

He turned the steering wheel and headed up the hill on a road that was paved, but worse than the track that we drove in on, really falling apart. It had been pushed up and cracked all over the edges by the roots of a patch of big oak trees growing side by side.

I saw where locals had cut down the limbs of the trees so that they didn’t grow into each other. Only the limbs that faced outward away from the road grew into long, majestic tentacles that reached toward the sky.

The old gears of the fuel truck whined and clanked as Hank switched them around in order to climb the hill. A small part of the hill shot up steeply like the on-ramp that Hank had picked me up on, but once we climbed over it, the land was basically flat again.

We drove down a winding lane that hugged the corners and curves of the lake for about five miles and then I saw the water from the road. A razor-thin beach made up of sand and rocks knotted the shoreline. The water reflected the stormy dusk sky. Another lightning bolt crackled overhead, lit up the lake, and was reflected on the water. For that one second and a quarter, the entire lake was bright white until it died back to the dull reflection of the dusky clouds.

“We’d better hurry up and unload everything as soon as we get there,” I said. Hank nodded.

We arrived at the lake house. It was hidden from the road by a patch of thick trees. Tangled behind the trees in the shrubbery and vines there was a black, iron bar fence, cutting off access to the backyard. But behind the trees there was a walkway next to a small clearing of green grass. Then I laid my eyes upon what Hank had called a cabin, but the truth was is that it was more like a huge lake house. I’m not sure of the distinction, but I imagined a cabin as this tiny place with one bedroom and a fireplace and made of lumber while the house was huge and mostly constructed of brick. Hank had said it was larger, but he should have said that it was massive. It must have been four thousand square feet.

The building was brick on the front and the rest of the house was made of wood, probably real and probably oak. It looked sturdy like it could withstand hurricane conditions, but I doubted that full-blown hurricane force winds blew this far north, not category five winds. I’ve lived in Mississippi all my life and I can’t recall one making it this far north; the rain had, but not the strong winds. By the time a hurricane blows this far inland, it’s reduced to a tropical storm by the distance and amount of water that it releases over the land between here and the Gulf.

The old guy pulled the truck up to the side of the house on a small gravel driveway. He threw the gear into neutral and stomped on the emergency brake, locking the vehicle in place. Then he killed the engine.

He said, “Do ya mind unlockin’ da house fer me? I need ta bring in my gear.”

I said, “I can carry your stuff in for you.”

He nodded gratefully and we exited the vehicle.

Hank held his door open a little longer than I did in order to allow Link to crawl out. The dog’s black-and-white fur blew in the wind as he walked behind his master.

The storm approached our position fast. The air smelled like wet, stale rain, and a sea smell hung in the breeze as if we were out on the open water.

I looked up over the horizon of the lake and saw that the clouds had closed in. I could see a blanket of rain on the other side of the dark lake. It had already started raining on that side, over the town of Black Rock.

I went to the driver’s side of the fuel truck and opened the door. I pulled Hank’s seat forward and grabbed all the gear that was behind it. I grabbed a suitcase in one hand and the fishing rods and tackle box in the other. Then I closed the door and walked up the gravel driveway to the side door that Hank had left open for me. I entered. The door led into a massive kitchen area with a big island countertop in the middle of the room. There was expensive cabinetry with black chrome handles on everything. There was a gas stovetop. There was a refrigerator built into the wall. The doors were constructed with a new wooden finish and they matched the walls, virtually blending in—a spectacular house.

Hank said, "Just put dat fishing gear down by da door. I'll use it tamorrow."

I nodded and set them down. Hank came over to me and took his suitcase. It was one of those wheeled suitcases with a handle that popped out of the top, good for airports. He set it down, the little wheels touching the floor like landing gear for a jet. Then he pulled the handle up, extended it to its full length, and walked off with it. The wheels rolled across the tile, clicking as they hit the grout.

"I'm goin' ta bed. I'm gettin' up early in da morning so I can get some good fishin' in. Hopefully da rain will have let up by then. Please join me out on da dock behind da cabin. Dat's if ya want ta fish," Hank said in a cheery voice like he was talking to his grandson, which I could have been. He was old enough. I could even have been his great grandson.

I said, "See you in the morning."

Hank said, "Ya can sleep in any of da rooms upstairs dat ya want. I'm going ta sleep downstairs. Back bedroom. Da stairs aren't good on my knees."

Then he yawned a loud old-guy yawn, his open mouth exposing his missing teeth. He turned and left me alone in the kitchen.

Link barked at me like he was saying goodnight and scurried behind his master. They disappeared down the darkness of a long hallway and into the bowels of the house.

I took out my mother's phone and switched it on. The screen lit up with the wallpaper of the two of us smiling. I was probably about 12 years old in that picture

I opened the phone and scrolled through some of the notes on Jack Reacher that she had left for me. Then I switched back to the picture of him from West Point. I gazed at it for a moment. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what he would look like now: a little grayer, the same height, probably the same weight, maybe a little heavier, and definitely a lot older, like fifty or so.

In the picture, he had fair hair, cut short. He might have a beard now since he wasn't in the army anymore. Then again, he might not. He had left the army just before I was born, 18 years ago. They say that you can leave the army, but the army never leaves you. I was fairly certain that the same had rung true about this man.

Jack Reacher was a hard man to find. He had no cell phone, no Facebook, no LinkedIn, no social media, no email, no mailing address; he had nothing. Most people wouldn't understand that, but I did. I understood it perfectly. It must be the Reacher blood, but I knew exactly the feeling of being trapped and wanting nothing more than to leave. My whole life I had had the burning desire to get up and go. Forward momentum was the best way to describe this urge. I never felt right unless I was going forward, but my life had been stationary. I grew up and lived my whole life in the back of nowhere in Mississippi and I had never known what else was out there in the world, but I had always wanted to.

Yesterday, my mother died. I loved her, but now she was gone and there was no reason to stay stationary any longer; nothing kept me from leaving.

I knew so many kids who grew up in Mississippi with me and they all wanted to leave, but they stayed. I imagined that their parents before them had the same desires growing up here. They grew up trapped, isolated, and wanting more out of life, but then they hit adulthood. Before they knew it they were having their own

kids and starting their own families and then they were stuck in Mississippi just like their parents. Not everyone was like that. I knew plenty of people who loved living here, but that's my perspective. Why stay in a place that has limited resources, limited economy, and limited experiences when you can simply go somewhere else?

I was a Reacher. It was in my blood to roam. Somewhere out there was my father, a man who knew nothing about me. I wanted to find him.

I opened my eyes and stared at his picture a little longer. Then I switched off the phone to conserve the battery. I hadn't thought to bring a charger, so I would have to buy one eventually.

I walked up the stairs to the second floor of the lake house and entered the first bedroom. I collapsed on top of the bed. I didn't turn it down or anything because I was beat from a long day. I didn't even take off my shoes. I just slept on top of the covers.

Warm sunbeams fell across my face through the window. I opened my eyes sharply and was wide awake. I sat up in bed. I reached over to the nightstand, picked up my cell phone, and switched it on. The battery was still charged. The phone powered on and my mother's face smiled back at me from the wallpaper. I looked at the time: 6:35 a.m. I left the phone on and slipped it into my pocket. I figured that it was practical to leave it on; no reason to turn it off anymore because I wasn't answering it anyway. I kept it on silent and left it that way.

I got up, straightened out the bed from where I had ruffled the comforter by sleeping on it, and then left the room as I had found it.

I didn't have to get dressed because I was still in the same clothes that I had worn yesterday. I hadn't even thought about what I would wear today. I couldn't just throw these clothes in a washer. If I did that, what would I wear while I waited for them to wash and dry?

No way could I borrow something from Hank. Forget the fact that his personal style didn't quite suit me. Just his measurements were a total deterrent from even asking because the guy was maybe 5'6" tall and weighed about 150 pounds soaking wet. He wasn't going to have clothes that would even fit me. I doubted that he even had a beach towel that was big enough to fit around me. No way. I'd have to wear a bed sheet. That left no choice but to acquire some new clothes. I couldn't keep walking around in the same dirty clothes all day. Maybe I could get away with it for one more day, but it was the middle of May and I had been walking out in the sun all day yesterday, and I planned on doing more today. I would need fresh, new clothes for that because no driver would stop for me in dirty, smelly clothes. Even if a driver did stop, he would take one whiff of me and hit the gas.

I wondered if the owner of this house had any clothes stuffed in the closets that I could borrow while mine washed and dried. I walked to the closet, opened it, and peered in. The closet was empty except for some fresh linen for the bed and a couple empty, steel rod hangers that clanked together gently from the rush of air that followed after I opened the door.

I could've checked the other bedrooms. Maybe a previous occupant had left his clothes in one of the closets and they were a size comparable to my own. Instead I

shrugged and gave up that idea because I realized I didn't know what I was going to do even if I found clothes in my size. I couldn't just take a stranger's clothes. Even if I was only borrowing them, I could still understand how someone might view that as stealing.

So I gave up.

I walked downstairs and found that Hank and Link were gone. The fishing gear was gone as well. They must have gone out on the dock.

I walked to the kitchen and opened the fridge. It was stocked with bottled waters, sodas, and condiments, but there was no food. I wasn't going to take anyone's food anyway, but I didn't think that anyone would mind if I grabbed a bottle of water. There was plenty of it—two cases.

I picked up a bottle, opened it, and gulped it down in about 60 seconds. I stopped for breath just once. I was parched. Afterward, I looked for the trashcan and found it near the corner closest to the sink, hidden in a cupboard that pulled out. I pulled on the handle and the whole thing came rolling out on a cheap-looking white plastic track.

I crushed the bottle and trashed it. Then I stopped and eyeballed the side door that I had entered through the night before. It was on the far wall just in front of an entrance into another room. I looked at another door at the rear of the house. This one must lead to the backyard. I walked over to it, exited the house, and closed the door behind me.

Outside, the air was nice. A cool breeze blew off the lake. I stretched my arms out to full length in the morning sunlight. Then I walked farther into the yard and gazed out over the horizon. Closer to my line of sight there was a single tree growing tall near the edge of the property line. There was a long shadow trailing from the roots off in a westward direction. There was a stoned-in grill at the edge of the house on a long cement slab, with steps going down a short hill to the grass. The sky was clear and deep blue and sunny with no storm clouds, or clouds of any kind for that matter. The high trees created a green barrier around the lake like an old fortress wall, thick and reinforced in some places and eroding in others. Rows of low buildings outlined the northwest corner of the lake like a painting of an American landscape.

That was the small town of Black Rock.

A good-sized dock, big enough to anchor a seaplane and as new as the house, protruded out over the lake. Hank sat on the tip, loosely holding a fishing rod that extended up and out over his head. The fishing line disappeared far off into the water. He sat, hunched over, on an old cream-colored bucket. The lid appeared to be tightly sealed underneath his small frame. His elbows were planted near the tops of his knees. The end of the fishing rod's long handle was firmly planted into a large gap between the boards on the dock below him.

His dog rested behind him. It was curled up like it had been in his truck. I liked dogs. I always had. Dogs were an important part of small-town life.

The edge of the water was about 100 feet from the back of the house and the dock began about 15 feet before that. It stretched out about 65 feet over the water. There was no railing to keep someone from slipping in, but I doubted that anyone would need it. I could see the bed of the lake this close to the shore. The water was pretty shallow, at least this close it was.

The dock was basically just the platform, the wooden pillars beneath, the boards, and the nails. I kept thinking of it as a dock, but really I wasn't sure if it was considered a dock or a pier. I was pretty sure that no one would call it a wharf. It could have been a pier, but it was thick enough to anchor a seaplane on the end, so I thought that a small dock was a better description.

Hank had invited me to join him last night, but I didn't really want to fish. I had no interest in it. If I ever wanted to eat fish, I would just look for a seafood restaurant and order from the menu. So I hung back near the house. I took a moment to plan my next move.

My phone started to vibrate in my pocket. I pulled it out. It was reminding me that I had missed calls and voicemails—55 of them. I didn't even bother to look through them. Instead, I touched the screen and opened the settings menu. I switched the phone to airplane mode. Now no one could call me.

The only person in the world that I wanted to hear from was Jack Reacher, but he wouldn't be calling me. He didn't even know about me. From what I've learned of him so far, he may not even have known how to use a cell phone, much less own one. I clicked the power button on the top of the phone and the screen went dark. It was now in standby mode. I slipped the phone back into my pocket.

I started thinking about my next move and quickly came to the conclusion that the best thing for me to do was to walk around the lake, the southwest side, back down the road to the fork, and take the road into town. I was already here so it made sense to take a look at Black Rock. I figured that I might as well see America like a tourist while looking for clues about my father.

In town I could buy new clothes and a cell phone charger, plot out my route, and get a bite to eat. Then I could be gone by noon, back on the road, back on the hunt for my father.

I made it down to the edge of the lawn and the beginning of the dock. That was when I noticed a hiking trail worn in the soil from the foot traffic running on it. It looked like it might go all the way around the perimeter of the lake. I didn't know the actual stats for Jarvis Lake, but I could see that it was long. It wasn't like one of the Great Lakes, but it was a big lake for Mississippi.

I looked left, looked right, and then I paused. Running straight toward me was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. Not just in real life, but in movies and the Internet. She was breathtaking. She should have been in fitness magazines. She jogged the track at a very brisk pace.

She looked like a gazelle. She was tall, maybe 5'10" and she was lean—flat stomach, muscular shoulders, and strong legs. She looked like a professional runner, like an athlete. She must have been a runner her whole life, probably track in high school and then college.

As she neared me, I realized that I had been staring straight at her. My gaze never let up, not once. In normal situations, whenever I've been caught staring at a woman, I've quickly looked away like I had only been glancing. This trick wouldn't have worked here because she had seen me staring at her from just a few yards away and she hadn't flinched, not even a little bit. She kept on running toward me. She was probably used to guys staring at her. In fact, she probably expected it, like breathing.

She wore a tight gray-and-white outfit, runner's clothes, tight gray pants that stopped just below her knees and a tight white short-sleeved top.

She had incredible breasts, not too big, but far from small—perfect.

She wore white-and-red laced-up running shoes. They looked brand new, still stiff from never being worn and clean like they were straight out of the box.

Her hair was long and blond and pulled back in a tight French braid.

She had long bangs. The tips touched the top of her eyebrows. She had an Eastern European look about her. If she hadn't spoken to me, if she had just run right by without saying a word, I would've thought that she was from Eastern Europe. For sure. No doubt about it. But she stopped three feet from me. She continued to run in place, shuffling from one foot to the next and then she bent over and placed her hands on her knees. She panted hard with long recovery breaths, then she stood up tall and pulled earbuds out of her ears. She held the ends in one hand and stared at me.

She must have been around 35 years old, an older woman, older than me anyway. I hadn't really considered 35 to be old, but I was only 18. She was what my high school friends called a cougar or a puma, which meant that she was an attractive older woman. I believed that the puma was slightly older and the cougar was much older. I wasn't sure what the age minimum was in order to be considered a cougar or a puma, but I surmised that the puma represented a younger version of a cougar. Therefore, she was a puma.

Her lips moved and she gave me the biggest smile—all white teeth.

She was magnificent. Her eyes were green and bright and her skin was tan and smooth. She took good care of herself; that was for damn sure.

She was so beautiful that I became overwhelmed with the urge to bow to her like I was some giant slave worker and she was royalty. She was the queen and I was nothing if not her servant.

She said, "I haven't had a man stare at me so hard since I was in college."

I gasped because the whole experience had been in slow motion. From the second that I saw her to this moment, I had been suspended in time. I couldn't speak. The only thing that I could do was stand there trying to breathe like I was the one who had just run miles around the lake.

She said, "Are you okay? Do you need a doctor?"

She smiled at that joke. I wasn't sure why.

I recovered and then I said, "Reacher. My name is Reacher."

She said, "Sheldon."

Then she paused for another deep breath and she asked, "Are you here fishing?" I shook my head.

"Visiting?"

I shook my head again.

"Tourist?"

I said, "Kind of."

There was a pause between us and then she said, "Okay. Well nice talking to you, or not, such as the case may be."

She smiled and returned her earbuds into her ears; then she jogged away.

I waited and watched her run off. I would've been lying to myself if I didn't admit that I stared at her rear as she went.

She turned back to look at me only once, but that one look had meant a lot. She was gorgeous, she had talked to me, and she had looked back at me. I had never experienced love at first sight before. I wasn't sure that this qualified. It could've just been a case of meeting a woman more beautiful than you ever thought possible, which meant that it was probably lust at first sight. Either way, it felt good.

A voice from behind me said, "Aren't ya glad dat ya decided ta stay on da lake wid me?"

I spun around and saw that Hank and Link were standing on the dock staring at me and having their own little chuckle over my behavior, Hank for obvious reasons, and Link was excited because Hank was excited. They were about 15 feet away, the old man with nothing in his hands but a pair of pliers, and the dog at his feet.

I smiled and said, "Yes, I am."

Hank said, "Sit by me and fish."

I said. "I will sit with you a while, but I don't fish."

Hank nodded. He returned to the edge of the dock next to his fishing rod and Link followed and sat down next to him.

I joined them. Hank sat on his bucket and I sat down on the dock. The bottom of my shoes touched the water before I even let my legs dangle all the way down, so I had to pull them up and sit Indian style.

Even sitting down, I towered over Hank and Link. My silhouette must have looked like Frankenstein's monster sitting next to the elderly blind man that he met in that old black-and-white movie, except that Hank wasn't blind.

I shook off the imagery and asked, "Catch anything?"

Hank said, "Oh, sure. I caught tree fish already. Look in da bucket over dere."

I glanced in a second bucket beside me. Three huge fish were covered in ice.

I said, "Nice."

No more words were exchanged for a while. I studied the water and then the opposite shoreline. There were trees and rocks and more trees. Next I scanned the northwest side of the lake. I saw full piers and watched as boats were launched into the water. I scanned past them and studied the low buildings. Most of the town was bunched up in the same rows of buildings. From this distance I couldn't tell what they were, but I knew that there must have been banks, a fire station, bait shops, motels, bars, cafés, a school, a police station, a clinic or two, and of course, a church. This was the South and the South was a very religious place. I looked to the east of town and saw a group of buildings close together like a small military complex. One of the buildings was two stories and the others were one. From this distance it all looked expensive. A shiny, swirling barbed wire fence surrounded the place like a prison fence. It created an impressive quarantine perimeter around the complex.

I said, "Hank, what is that compound across the lake? It looks like a prison."

Hank raised his hand above his eyes like he was saluting. He used it to block out the sunlight and then he squinted to see across the lake.

He said, "No. Dat's da Eckhart Medical Center. It's a research complex or somedin'. It's one of da only other economies here. Da biggest group of da townsfolk make deir money from tourism and fishing. I would say about 15

percent of da town works for da Eckhart Medical Center or get deir business from dere."

"Why the prison fence around it?"

Hank squinted again and asked, "How da hell are ya seeing dat detail? Dat fence is so tiny from here. I can't even tell what it is fer sure."

"I have perfect vision. Perfect hearing. I always have."

Hank said, "I think dat dey do research on animals dere or somedin'. Dey don't want any escapin' or any environmentalists breakin' in. I've heard dat dey've had problems with activists in da past."

He'd whistled every "s."

I said, "Big fence. What kind of animals do they have in their? Bears?"

"I never really dought about it before."

I shrugged. A moment of silence fell between us and then I stood up. My legs had fallen asleep from sitting Indian style. I shook one and then the other, trying to get the blood circulating again.

I looked down at Hank. He hadn't noticed that I had stood up until he saw that my giant shadow cast over him like an incoming predator. He stared directly up at me with his head completely cocked back.

He said, "Are ya leavin' us?"

I nodded and said, "Thank you so much for the ride and a place to crash for the night, but I'd better be on my way."

He put his fishing rod back down in the crack between two boards and stood up. He extended his hand for a handshake and smiled warmly.

He said, "Good luck, son. Come back if ya need a place ta stay tonight."

I shook his hand, tried not to crush it, and thanked him. I turned and looked at the back of the lake house.

I could walk around the side of the house, take the road back to the fork, and walk into town along the road, but I decided to take the jogging path that Sheldon had run along. It looked like it snaked all the way around the lake. This route had two bonuses that I could see. It was scenic, following the lake, and there was a chance that Sheldon would turn around and run back this way, in which case I could see her again. So I walked and left Hank, Link, and the lake house thinking that I would never see any of them again.

Part of me wishes that that had been true.

Chapter 7

I walked for 44 minutes along the jogging path, following the same winding route and the same direction that Sheldon had taken before she vanished into the forest of pines. It took me 44 minutes to make it around Jarvis Lake to the edge of town.

I reached the outskirts at around 8:30 in the morning and I was hungry. I hadn't even thought that if I had stayed with Hank for another hour he would have probably cooked us some breakfast. Old grandpa types were like that. At

least that was what I had always believed. My grandpa had died long before I was born.

She had followed in her father's footsteps and now I was following in mine.

I sighed and thought, *What the hell am I doing?*

What am I supposed to do when I find Jack Reacher anyway?

I paused from walking and took a break without even realizing it. My feet stopped and I stood there on the outskirts of town.

I looked around, half buried in my thoughts.

The jogging path had led me into a clearing that merged with the road that headed into town. The track, here neatly made with a fresh synthetic material that looked like sawdust, became a part of a paved sidewalk that paralleled the town's main street.

I shook off the thoughts of my father and of Hank's cooking trout and made up my mind to get a good solid breakfast. I had plenty of money in my bank account and a town, no matter where it was in the United States, was bound to have restaurants, cafés, and fast-food joints. Eateries were as American as apple pie. I didn't imagine that there was a town anywhere that didn't have a place where you could get a good hearty breakfast. Especially small towns. Small towns relied on tourism. They relied on outsiders to come in and pump cash into the local economy.

Black Rock was a fishing town, so it relied heavily on the lake to generate income. Naturally it would have seafood restaurants and a diner or two.

I decided to stop for breakfast and then shop for new clothes and a cell phone charger. I walked into town and noticed a lot of out-of-towners, definitely tourists and vacationers. They were mostly older, white men and mostly from Mississippi or Alabama or Louisiana or Tennessee or Georgia; the accents that I had hated to hear in movies were prevalent here among the diner customers. They drove around in big, fuel-guzzling pickups and wore polo shirts, sunglasses, and ball caps. They all had beer guts and tan lines. They were the faces of the Southern fishermen with money to spend.

Black Rock prospered on their money. So I knew that there would be some good Southern cooking here.

I walked into the heart of town. The traffic was moderate and everyone seemed to already be awake.

I walked on underneath streetlights and past a tiny florist shop with an awning shaped like a giant rose petal over the door, an ice cream shop that hadn't opened yet, and a bakery that smelled of fresh beignets. I moved beyond the town's municipal buildings. I saw a courthouse with a sign out front that read:

PUBLIC SAFETY COMPLEX

It looked like the town had housed all of its public safety services under one roof. The courthouse was obviously here. In front of the building there were a couple cop cars parked in the lot. In the rear, under a standalone carport there was a fire truck, a shiny, old red thing that looked to be about 30 years old. But the city had taken good care of it like it was more of a spokesman rather than a functional fire vehicle.

I guessed that they didn't get a lot of use out of it. They must have washed it constantly. They probably visited the local school and allowed the kids to hang on it for pictures. The kids probably took turns ringing the siren. It might have been the only time anyone ever heard the damn thing.

Black Rock so far had portrayed itself as a quiet town. Any ruckus in the area probably took place on the lake.

I looked back at the cop cars, studied them briefly. It was a pair of Dodge Intrepids. They were old, maybe 10 years, but like the fire truck, they were well maintained.

The Dodge Intrepid was not an uncommon vehicle to be used by police departments. Of course the Ford Crown Vic was more common, but for a small town like this, budget was everything. The Dodge Intrepid police package was probably lighter on the city's budget, and the fact that they didn't have a lot of ground to cover made it viable to keep the same cars for 10 years. I was sure that it was equally important to keep them in proper working order.

I left the Public Safety Building and walked around the town a bit longer. I decided to not stop for breakfast for at least another half an hour. I wanted to scan the town for all the options that it had to offer. Plus I wanted to plan out my day, so I ventured on.

Cars and trucks drove past me in a kind of slow speed like the drivers were all intrigued by the giant stranger who walked among them.

As I walked I discovered that the town had at least three different kinds of Christian churches. I saw no other religious house of worship to speak of. There were no synagogues, no temples, and no shrines. I wasn't surprised. The South was not known for being tolerant of other religions outside of Christianity. Even then, the South was not very tolerant of too many denominations of Christianity.

Although, in my experience the South was far more open to pluralism than its reputation told. I had grown up with other kids who had gay parents or were gay themselves. I knew black kids, white kids, Asian kids, and Hispanic kids. I grew up in a small town not unlike Black Rock.

I imagined that not all of the different people who lived in Carter Crossing had been Christian. We had Jewish people, atheists, and even a Buddhist family. No one in the town ever protested any of those beliefs. It never caused any friction, no wars, no feuds. Everyone had gotten along fine, but I never saw a building of worship that wasn't a Christian church. I'm sure that there were some in places like Jackson or Biloxi, but not in Carter Crossing and probably not in Black Rock.

Still, something about this town felt different to me. Something was missing and it was eating away at the smallest part of my brain like a pilot fish swimming close to the great white shark, cleaning it by nipping away at the small parasites that festered on its sandpaper skin. I was the shark and this small something was nipping at me like a pilot fish, only I couldn't tell what it was.

I stopped and shrugged, alone and to no one but myself.

I'm hungrier than I thought. I need to eat.

I abandoned my survey of the town and decided to go straight to breakfast. So far I had seen a diner that was about three blocks in the opposite direction. I turned back, pivoted on my right foot, and swung around like a drill instructor had shouted, "BOUT FACE!"

Then I headed back in the other direction, back to the diner.

On the way, I searched the landscape for an electronics department store where I could buy a new phone charger. The only thing I found was a cell phone payment center, but it was not the service provider that my mother had used. I doubted that they carried the phone charger that I needed or any phone accessories for that matter. It didn't look like a store, just a place for people to pay their phone bills.

I walked on until I returned to the corner where I had seen the diner.

The sign on top of the building read:

Roy's Red Dinner

The spelling was wrong. Diner is spelled with one "n," not two. When I entered, sat down, and opened my menu, I realized that they knew that it was spelled incorrectly, part of their gimmick I supposed. The first page in the menu had a cartoon drawing of a short, fat, bald, white man with a pitch-black mustache, the owner and founder. The caption beside his character read:

Roy

Next to Roy's cartoon picture was a story entitled "The Red Dinner."

It went on to explain that when it first opened, the diner's sign was spelled wrong and it stuck. Originally it was called the Red Dinner because the outside of the building was a bright red color. The paint had been recently redone as far as I could tell because it was still bright red.

The story said that Roy had owned the diner for 25 years until five years ago when he passed away. His daughter now ran the place.

I skimmed past the rest of the story and gazed at the food options. They had lots of breakfast items to choose from. They were all egg based, which was fine by me because all I was in the mood for was eggs and bacon. My mother was a great parent, but she wasn't good at feeding me breakfast when I was a kid. We ate a lot of hamburgers for breakfast until I was old enough to learn my way around the kitchen; then I began cooking our meals. I wasn't a gourmet chef, but I liked to think that I could make a good breakfast.

My cooking philosophy was simple: foods with only one or two ingredients and make it taste good. The problem with the American diet was that everything was processed, refined, and altered long before it ever hit the shelves. That was something that the general public was aware of, but it never affected sales.

Being that I had done our grocery shopping, I made it a habit to read the nutrient panel that was printed on every label, item, and box in the store. The main things that I always looked for were not the calories, sugars, or fats. The main things that I paid attention to were the ingredients. Most everything that was shelved in the American grocery store had multiple ingredients of chemicals that I had never heard of and were not taught in school except in AP Chemistry classes. I would think to myself, if I can't pronounce it, then my liver has no idea what it is—best to avoid.

Eggs were an item that whenever you went to buy them, you probably never read the ingredients. Why should you? Eggs come from chickens. The ingredients should read "eggs" and nothing else, but that wasn't always the case. On today's grocery stores, eggs that you buy are usually enhanced or processed in some way. They are injected with who knows what kind of chemicals and the chickens are fed all kinds of crap. On the typical label of an egg carton, you will often find more ingredients than just eggs.

I had to go out of my way to find a place where I could purchase real organic, unprocessed foods to cook for us. I found that the best thing to do was to always be on the lookout for farmers markets or to look for a local farmer who pulled over to the side of the road and sold his crops out of the back of his truck. Nine times out of ten that was safer than buying the processed foods from the store.

When I turned 15, I was happy that there was a local woman, Betsy Shoemaker, who had opened up an organic foods store. The prices were high, but worth it for our health, and the food tasted better, at least to me it did.

I went shopping there twice a week, sometimes three times. The problem with organic, real food was that it went bad quickly. Unprocessed food had a natural expiration date like nature was saying, "*This food is bad now.*"

I believed in eating clean. I knew that my mom didn't always follow this same belief. She loved hamburgers and pizza. Being away from home all of the time as a sheriff meant that she was eating out a lot: fast food, gas stations, or the diner in the local hotel. She went there a lot. She often would eat there alone. It was more than just a routine; it was more like a ritual.

She had taken me there every year around March. I never really knew why, but it became our tradition. We would go to the diner at the old hotel. That was *our* thing. We ordered coffee and hamburgers. I never drank coffee and she knew that, but she'd ordered me a cup anyway and I never touched it.

We'd speak casually, but for the most part she was quiet like she was somewhere else. My mom was good with me. We had a good relationship. Whenever we went hunting, fishing, or solved crimes, we talked and laughed. I remembered one time she had taken me to a murder scene; the body of an old man was sprawled out underneath a white sheet.

"Who killed him?" she had asked.

I said, "I don't know."

She never got mad at me.

She said, "Look around the room."

I said, "I can't see the body."

She said, "You don't need to. More often than not the details in your surroundings give away more clues than a dead body does."

I tried and then I said, "I can't."

She said, "Yes, you can. You can do anything that you want."

I was only 10 years old the first time that she took me to a crime scene like that. Looking back on it, I understood how someone could see it as unorthodox, even borderline immoral. But my mom was training me for something. She had seen more of life and death than most people. She had three decades of experience solving murders. She had the insight into a world that most people didn't know about and I think that she wanted me to be prepared for it.

The same way that Robbie Mile's father had taught him about tires and cars, my mom taught me about solving crimes, about righting wrongs.

I was 10 years old and I was looking at a murder scene after the fact. I looked at the room. It was a motel room way off Interstate 72, exit 131B to the north. We were almost at the end of my mother's jurisdiction. The Tennessee border was only seven and a half miles away.

I remembered closing my eyes and reenacting the crime scene in my head. Without any of the details of the dead man's appearance, I saw a man, two empty beer bottles, and a glass of wine on the tabletop. I saw a condom wrapper on the floor near the trashcan. I saw the dried suds of shampoo or shower gel still near the drain in the tub. I saw a toilet seat that had been left in the down position.

I saw a piece of wadded tissue paper in the trashcan. Inside it was a chewed-up stick of gum.

There were subtle signs of a struggle—disheveled furniture, lamp shade skewed, and someone had been rolling around on the bed. The only thing that indicated definitively that a struggle had occurred was the bathroom mirror. It was cracked like someone had been slammed into it.

My mother said, "What happened here?"

I kept my eyes closed, still scanning over the room in my mind. I said, "The guy was shot."

I pointed at the wall behind my mother and opposite the bed. Blood was splattered high up on the wall and on the corner of the ceiling. I never opened my eyes.

I said, "There is blood splattered on that wall. The guy was shot from someone lying underneath him on the bed. The bullet was fired close range and diagonally, probably through his gut. It exited through his back and sprayed blood in an upward angle. That was why it was so high up on the wall."

"And there is stippling."

My mother asked, "And what is that?"

I said, "Burns on his skin from gunpowder. That's how I know that he was shot in the gut. It also means that it was a close-range shot."

She asked, "What kind of bullet? What kind of gun?"

I shook my head. Then I said, "I have no idea."

I heard her frustration, but she hadn't made any remarks. It was just there in her breathing.

She asked, "So, who killed him?"

I opened my eyes and asked, "Where's his wallet?"

"We found it outside in the bushes."

"His car?"

"Gone."

I asked, "Was the money gone?"

She nodded and then she asked, "So, who killed him?"

I said, "A prostitute. He wanted to go straight to sex after they had had a few drinks. He drank beer out of the bottle and she drank wine by the glass. He refused to pay her upfront so she pulled a small caliber gun out of her stocking, probably, or a nearby purse or wherever a woman might hide a small handgun. She shot him right in the gut—point blank."

My mom asked, "And then?"

I said, "Then she rolled him off her and grabbed his car keys and his wallet. She ran outside, took money out of the wallet, and stole his car."

"Any chance that it was self-defense? Maybe the guy refused to pay and then decided to force himself on her?"

"Maybe. But either way. That's up to the prosecution. And this guy's dead. The woman is not. I doubt that the prosecutor will let it go as self-defense."

She nodded. "My job is to solve, not to judge. Always remember that, Reacher. I don't want you to act outside of the law."

I stayed quiet.

She paused and then she said, "Good job. Every man is innocent until proven guilty. Judgment is up to a judge and jury, not a single man."

"Did you want a coffee?" a voice asked.

I looked up from the menu. An older waitress with deep-set brown eyes and a warm smile on her face stood over me, gazing down.

She held a pitcher of steaming coffee in her right hand and had an old, white coffee mug in her left. The mug looked like it had seen its fair share of dishwashers. It was worn, faded, and had tiny razor cracks on the exterior. They weren't deep enough to affect the sturdiness of the mug, but they had cracked the paint.

I looked up at her with a smile and said, "No thanks. I don't drink coffee. Let me just get a glass of organic milk and two eggs, four pieces of bacon, and four pieces of toast."

I ordered organic milk because I liked organic milk. Didn't like coffee.

The waitress smiled and turned and then disappeared behind a counter piled with beverage machines. Menu items like pies and cookies were displayed in glass containers. Soon she came out from behind the display with a glass of white organic milk and placed it in front of me. She handed me a set of silverware in a napkin that was rolled tight and held together by a thin sticker like a seal on an envelope. I ripped through the sticker and placed the silver in front of me.

I put my lips to the glass of milk and drank. It was good. Cold.

Exactly 12 minutes later, the food came. Smelled good.

The food had arrived on a red ceramic dish. I guessed that the whole theme behind the red diner was all of the red dishes as well as the red painted walls, everything red. I wondered why the coffee mugs were white and not red, but I dismissed my curiosity almost as fast as I had raised the question.

I was more interested in eating.

After I finished my breakfast, I asked the waitress about the area. She explained that the town's economy was based on the lake, which was obvious. It was the next part that I was more interested in. She told me that there was a medical research facility that played a smaller role in the town's economy and then she didn't say another word about it. She went on to tell me that she had grown up here in Black Rock and that she was retiring in a few years here.

You're probably going to die here, I thought. Not on purpose, not with any kind of intentional meanness, but thoughts come and go and there's not anything that we can do about it.

I glanced at her nametag. It read "Hazel."

I asked, "The medical place, is that the compound that's surrounded by the barbed wire fence?"

She nodded and said, "It's called the Eckhart Medical Center. The town's only clinic is run out of it. Dr. Eckhart has been great to us. Before the doctor, we all had to drive to Oxford for serious inflictions."

"Is it a hospital?" I asked.

"No, it's a research facility. They do research on animals or something. The north lower wing is set up as a clinic and emergency room. There is a 24-hour staff. The doctor keeps business hours and is always on call."

I nodded and stayed quiet.

She paused and put the check down in front of me and then she asked, "Will there be anything else?"

"Where is the nearest Radio Shack?"

She looked at me with a blank expression and then she said, "There's Cellular Citi. It's the only electronics store in town. They carry all kinds of stuff. It's like a small Best Buy. Want me to draw you a map?"

I smiled and said, "That would be great."

She set her tray down on my table, pulled out a pen, tore a clean sheet off a notepad, and began drawing a small map on the paper. It took her 47 seconds to finish. She handed the map to me.

I accepted it and smiled and then she left.

I looked at the check. The bill was \$9.55. I opened my wallet, pulled out a ten and a five, and left the bills stacked on top of the check. The five made it a 57.1% tip.

I stood up from the table and held the map up to my line of sight. I stared at it. The sunlight peered in through the diner windows and dulled through the napkin. I memorized the exact route that she had plotted out for me and then I crumbled it up and left it on the table. The map was etched into my memory.

My mind worked like a computer. It always had. I could visualize anything that I've seen before or imagine anything with great detail just by closing my eyes and concentrating. The map was stored with exact precision in my mind.

I left Roy's Red Dinner and walked on to the electronics store. I needed to get a charger for my phone.

It took me 13 minutes to walk to the store, following the map that the waitress had drawn up for me. The store smelled like it was once a Laundromat. Instead of tile, it had carpet. It was a thick blue carpet that was stained from God knows what. Not the cleanest department store ever.

Suddenly I was glad that I wore shoes. I would've never walked on the carpet barefoot. No way.

I went straight to the counter and pulled my phone out of my pocket. It took the clerk all of two minutes to find the charger that I needed. I paid for it and left the store. Total time spent in there was three minutes and 17 seconds.

After the store I didn't have a plan of attack on which direction that I needed to travel. So I let my feet guide me naturally. Left seemed as good a direction as right, so I decided that from now on if I was confused about which way that I wanted to travel I'd pick left.

I turned left and walked through the town. I have to admit that I was starting to understand my father a little more. Being a stranger in a strange place was appealing, like I was on the frontier. I was an explorer in a place that had already been explored, but never by me.

Being told of a place and experiencing it for myself were two completely different things.

During my walk through town—past the bait shops, the bars, two seafood restaurants, a used-car lot, a used-boat lot, and some kind of shabby-looking seafood museum—I found myself in deep thought about all the kids from my generation. I thought about how they all went off to college and studied about foreign places and read books about life and never experienced any of it on their own. They read from ancient texts written by dead men from long ago. They learned about old philosophies and learned mathematical equations without ever putting them to use for themselves.

Suddenly, a sense of profound enlightenment washed over me. A sense of purpose came over me that I could barely describe. Academic life or a so-called normal life weren't right for me. I wanted to discover my own way, my own philosophies, my own path—like my father had.

I stopped walking and found an outside café. I sat at a table and ordered a water. The waiter offered me a bottle, but I said tap would be fine. He frowned and brought me a to-go cup filled with ice water.

I sat and opened my cell phone. The battery was down to 40 percent. I swiped the screen and unlocked the phone. I opened up my mother's notes and began reading.

It wasn't long before I saw what my father had done, before I realized and understood the choice that he had made.

In her biography of him, my mother wrote how he had lived a life of military service. He had grown up on military bases. He had been born on one in West Berlin.

After traveling the world and attending dozens of schools, he joined the army and went to West Point Military Academy. He became a military cop—one of the best. He spent 13 years in the service where he had quickly risen to rank of major. At one point he had lost it and then regained it. He was the C.O. of his own special unit.

My mother listed everything in a tidy outline of dates and brief descriptions. There was a list of medals, major incidents, investigations, and other relevant information.

There was a dated outline of wounds that my father had. One of these involved a bombing in Beirut where he was hit in the abdomen by a piece of another man—a severed jawbone.

There were medical reports scattered throughout the notes. He had been hospitalized for being shot once in New York City. He had awokened in the

hospital after a knife fight in the same city, different occasion. New York City had not been Jack Reacher's friend; that was my impression.

He had had it rough. That was for damn sure.

My mom's notes went on to piece together many of the cases that he had been involved in after he mustered out of the army. Some were bizarre, some had missing pieces, and some were filed away ass backward by the cops. My mother had done her due diligence, which was like her, and she had put together stories that read like crime novels, but the more I read them, the more they made sense.

One case involved a master counterfeiter, where my uncle was killed, shot in the back of the head. Another where my father had been kidnapped alongside an FBI agent. There were case files involving a murder and corruption in Texas, murders in New York City involving a POW named Hobie, a missing mercenary group from New York led by some guy named Edward Lane, a sniper who shot and killed five people, the largest forgotten stash of military narcotics in American history in South Dakota, and there was even a file involving a dirty bomb that exploded in a recycling plant in Colorado.

Jack Reacher's life was more than a crime series. He had done what I felt the need to do. I wanted to travel, see the world, and let the road guide me. If, along the way, I came across something that didn't feel right, then it was up to me to make it right.

I spent all morning and most of the afternoon reading through them, but the realization that I wound up on happened right at the beginning, right in the front of Jack Reacher's life story.

I knew what he had done, what he *was* doing. He was free. He had grown up and served a life in the U.S. Army. He had served for someone else. He had always been told where to go and what to do. It wasn't until he was 36 years old that his life changed forever.

In 1996, he had met my mother. He had been assigned the last case of his military career, a case that sent him undercover, and that's where they had met. From reading his history, I understood that for the first time in his life, he thought for himself. He had defended a country that he had never seen. He had watched guys die for a country that he had never known. He had killed for a freedom that wasn't his and then he had met my mother and life as he had known it was gone forever.

So far, I had only lived for one day the way that he had lived for the last 18 years and already I knew what took him a lifetime in the service to learn. I knew that service to the military wasn't for me. It had worked for lots of people and I'd always respect them, but it wasn't the life for me. I didn't need to wear a uniform to have honor. I respected those who did, like my father, but it wasn't for me. I didn't want the status quo. I knew that I didn't need the degrees, the medals, the orders to tell me to do the right thing. I didn't need anyone ordering me to kill for them blindly without knowing that I was serving justice. I had grown up serving justice. It was in my genes.

My father had spent the last 18 years seeing the country that he loved and helping others who crossed his path. His calling was now my calling.

My dad had helped the powerless, the little guy. Why shouldn't I? If I came across the kinds of injustices that he came across, I don't think that I would have done anything different.

I read on.

The most detailed of the cases that she had written about was the one where she had met him back in 1996. That was the one that I read over and over again. It was also the only case that she had firsthand knowledge about. She hadn't speculated. She had straight up told me that Jack Reacher had solved the murders of some young women from my town and she didn't know how many foreign women in a place called Kosovo.

Jack Reacher had found the culprits and knew that they were going to get away with their crimes. She even said that they had already gotten away with them, so my father did the only thing that he knew how. He "righted" the situation. He murdered the culprits after they had freely confessed to the murders and the cover up.

He killed two men right on the train tracks. He broke their necks in their car and left them parked on the tracks, the same tracks that I had grown up knowing. The same tracks that I had scattered my mother's ashes over.

I wondered if that was why the tracks were decommissioned. I wondered if it was because of the *accidental* killing of two men who had remained parked on them when the midnight train plowed through and steamrolled them into the ground.

My mom had seen the whole thing, all of it, and she had heard everything. The two men were guilty as sin and my father had killed them for it.

My mom had written:

If Reacher hadn't killed those two men, I can only imagine how many more girls would be dead. I can only imagine how many lives he saved and how many families he spared the fate of losing their daughters.

My mom had taught me to never take the law into my own hands, but she had seen my father do it. Now in her notes I read her comments about it. She simply explained the events and made one solitary statement of opinion on the matter. She wrote five simple words and then she said nothing more about the whole affair. She wrote:

Reacher did the right thing.

Chapter 8

It was the middle of the afternoon before I realized it. I hadn't moved from the café. The same chair. Same table outside. I had read the story of my father, a stranger, and yet he was me.

I switched off my cell phone and put it in my pocket. The battery on it was dying.

I tossed a couple of bucks on the table since I had taken it up all day and then I stepped onto the sidewalk and headed east.

I had seen a motel on the east side of town about a block from the lake. I figured that it was a good idea to stay an extra night, see more of the town. Why not? Besides I wasn't in a hurry. Since I wasn't exactly sure where Jack Reacher was, it didn't really matter if I took my time or not. I had no real destination and no real time limit.

I walked past the store where I had bought the phone charger, passed some parked cars, and crossed the street. To the left-hand side of the street there was a series of townhouses with privacy fences and black iron bars on the windows and patriotic signs posted in the yards.

I walked on until I came to the end of a faded entrance to a parking lot of a Super 8 motel.

I walked into the lot and up to the office door and pulled it open. A bell dinged above my head. It was attached to the door, an ancient, but time-tested warning system.

A tall, older man with one crutch came limping out of a side room. He saw me and nodded. He wore a yellow trucker's cap and an old gray polo shirt.

He limped over to the counter and went behind it and asked, "Can I help you?"

I said, "Can I get a room for the night?"

He looked down at a clipboard and studied it like it was a patient's chart, then he said, "I have a single room all the way at the end. Number 14."

I said, "Works for me."

He nodded, turned, and grabbed a key off the wall.

He turned back around and said, "\$27.50."

I pulled out a wad of money and pulled off a 20 and a 10 and handed them to him.

He just stared at me for a moment and then he said, "Hope that you don't expect me to walk you all the way down there? I got a bum leg."

I shook my head.

He handed me the key and asked, "Anything else?"

I asked, "Change?"

He said, "I ain't got no change."

He pointed to a sign on the wall that read:

Exact change only

I grinned and nodded and turned to step out onto the sidewalk, but he cleared his throat and interrupted me.

I turned back to look at him. He had the guest registry turned toward me. He tapped his old frail finger on the paper and said, "Sign in. State law. Gotta sign in."

I returned to the counter and took a blue ballpoint pen from his hand and stared down at the paper. I paused for a moment and thought back to a lesson that my mother had taught me. One time we had taken a trip to New Orleans to watch the Saints play the Cowboys. We had stayed off Bourbon Street in some rundown old hotel with fake balconies and shutters. The whole place was painted pink and it had faded to an almost orange tint.

My mother had signed the registry Alenka Vřiši divů. Later she explained to me that this was Croatian for Alice in Wonderland. My mother had spent 16 years traveling the world as a Marine cop. She was full of surprises.

She had taught me to never use my real name when checking into a motel. I guess she meant as long as they didn't ask for my ID.

I shrugged and began writing the first alias that I could think of.

I signed the register: Jeremy Shockey. Shockey had played for the New Orleans Saints during the Super Bowl in 2010. They won that year. I figured that the old man might've recognized the name, but I doubted that it'd make any difference, that he'd call me out on it.

I put the pen down and never handed it back to the guy. I smiled and walked out of the office and down the sidewalk to room number 14.

It *was* the last room. There was no upstairs. No neighbors above. There was only the neighbor in room 13.

As I crossed in front of room 13, I saw that the door was ajar just a hair, maybe an inch. I saw an eyeball peering out at me from the darkness in the room.

The shades were drawn and the lights were off. The sun filled the terrain with its final light. Room 13 stayed as dark as possible. Whoever occupied that room didn't want anyone to know that he or she was there.

The second that I stepped one foot in front of it, the door slammed, the deadbolt locked into place, and the chain rattled as it was swiped across the top of the door.

Maybe the occupant was an old woman or some timid person. I wasn't offended. I wasn't a dream neighbor in a seedy motel like this one.

I was a scary guy, but my clothes were pretty normal. I was wearing an ordinary green t-shirt with an abstract design on it and baggy blue jeans. Typical teenager clothes, but I looked like an ape.

I had been surprised at the generosity of the people that I met in the last two days, especially Hank and the girl who had picked me up yesterday. The rides that I had gotten were people who seemed genuinely nice and friendly.

I slid the key into my door and turned it. The door opened and a thick dust seeped out. The air was stale. It didn't smell bad, just unused, like an attic.

I entered the room and shut the door behind me. The lights flickered on. The room was in decent shape. Bed was made, carpet was relatively clean and spot free and the furniture was old, but worn.

I slipped the key into my pocket and decided to take a nap. It was early, around sundown, but I was tired.

I pulled the cell phone charger out of the little bag that had the electronics store's name on it. I plugged it into an outlet near the nightstand and I plugged the other end into my phone. I left it on the nightstand to charge. I double checked to make sure that the phone was still in airplane mode and set it down.

I figured that people were still calling it, searching for me, but I had no interest in talking to any of them. I had spent my entire life in a rural town in Mississippi, but as far as I was concerned, now I was done with that life.

I had loved my mother, but she was gone. The last thing that she would have wanted for me was to stay stuck in this state any longer than I had to be.

I remembered that she had turned 18 and the first thing that she had done was join the Marine Corps. She left and then she had returned only because my

grandfather had gotten ill. Coming back home, she took over his responsibilities and that had forced her to stay.

Mississippi was like that. It was the poorest state in the Union—last in education, last in healthcare, and having the lowest median income per person out of all 50 states. It was dead last, but Mississippi also had the lowest cost of living of any state and it was generally an easy place to live. Traffic was never really heavy, not like major urban areas. Living here was simple. If you wanted to go somewhere you could hop in your car and go. Light traffic, no tolls, free parking, short lines, few people; there were a lot of perks to living in such a simple and unpopulated state. Still I was ready to leave. I felt lucky that I had just started my life and there was a huge country out there. I wanted to see all of it.

Chapter 9

I sat at Roy's Red Dinner once again, inside corner booth with my back to the wall—an old instinct which meant that I had a cone of only about 90 degrees to watch over. It was much easier to protect myself if I only had to worry about a quarter of the surroundings. The rest was already protected by the wall.

It was about ten past eight in the evening. There were no sun rays or shadows to predict the time. I knew this because there was a giant clock on the back wall above the counter. It had little cartoon hens drawn above or beside or beneath each of the quarter-hour bars. There was a large red rooster just underneath the 12 o'clock position.

Probably years ago, Roy or his wife or his descendants had seen the clock in a garage sale and thought that it would fit the little diner. Since everything was red, it did.

A young, Hispanic girl about 21 years old approached my table. She was the evening waitress, I guessed. She looked fairly new. It was something about the way that she walked, as if she was confused about what her section was, and she was a lot more energetic than her counterparts like she hadn't been corrupted by years of complacency. She wore a fresh smile on her face.

Her nametag read: "*Maria*."

It looked new and gleamed in the light. It was colored silver with bold black lettering. It reflected my face behind the letters in an obscure way like looking onto the surface of a spoon.

She stopped in front of my table with her notepad at the ready. She was tiny too, probably 5'2" tall. Even though I was seated, she had to look up at me.

She said, "Hi, cutie. Are you ready to order?"

Normally, I'd respond quickly to another person when she spoke to me. Either I'd answer as directly as possible in short sentences or I'd say nothing. In which case, silence was my response.

In this instance I was taken by surprise. This girl said that I was cute. I hadn't expected that and she had meant it. I could tell. I knew how to look for lies in someone's face, another cop trick that my mom had taught me. This girl wasn't

lying, so I smiled and said, "I will have the cheeseburger plate. No fries. Just the burger. And a glass of the organic milk."

She looked up from her notepad and said, "We don't have organic, only whole."

"They gave me organic earlier."

She smirked and leaned forward and smiled. She rested her elbows on the tabletop and said in a low voice, "I've only been here for a week, but that's long enough to know that these old bitches around here lie about everything."

I nodded and smiled.

She stood back upright and asked, "Whole milk, sir?"

I shook my head and said, "No milk."

She asked, "Water? Coffee?"

"Water is fine."

She nodded, smiled, and walked away. She returned with water and a coffee.

She placed both down on my table and pulled a clean spoon out of a plastic covering and slid it into the coffee.

She said, pointing a finger toward the inside of my table, "Sugar is there. Do you need cream?"

I said, "I didn't want coffee. Just water."

"You didn't say no to the coffee. You only said yes to the water. For you, the coffee is free."

She turned to walk away, stopped, looked back over her shoulder, and winked at me.

I couldn't remember the last time a girl flirted so hard with me. I shrugged and took out my cell phone.

I switched off the airplane mode and the phone started to vibrate and light up with missed calls, voicemails, and text messages. Many of the callers I knew and many I had no clue who they were.

I logged onto an email account that I had created for school. In actuality, I never really used modern technologies that much. I knew how. I understood the ins and outs of mobile devices, the Internet, and social media as much as everyone else from my generation. There was just something ingrained in me that preferred the natural, old ways. I liked to speak to a person face to face, not by text message and I never cared to share my every single thought or feeling on a social media site. Never saw the point. Feelings and thoughts are meant to be private and they are pretty much meaningless. Thoughts are only thoughts, not actions, not words. They are merely impulses and electronic signals firing in the brain. They don't reflect anything about you. Only your actions speak about you.

Whenever someone, a classmate or friend, ever asked me if I had Facebook, Twitter, or one of those networks, I'd say, "Reachers don't tweet!"

One of the things that I did actually like about modern connectivity and social media was how fast we got our news. Sports scores were fed instantly to the Internet. I could go online and read news coverage from around the world instantly. I loved that. I had always been curious about the outside world.

While I waited for my food, I checked the news in sports. Germany was doing well in soccer. It was rumored that the Cleveland Cavaliers might get back their star player, who had left the team to play for Miami for the last decade. It hadn't

happened, but was merely the words of journalist speculation. Then there wasn't anything else of interest.

After sports I turned to news headlines. I browsed the articles until I found something interesting. There were articles about the president's low job approval ratings, the bad economy, and something about the civil unrest in the Gaza strip, basically nothing new, and then there was an article about a raid by the DEA and the Mexican Federales on a major compound on the coast of Mexico. Then I saw an article on the rising stock prices of bottled water, and finally there was an article about the CEO of Starbucks promoting an idea to pay for college tuition for its employees.

The DEA thing looked the most interesting, so I clicked on the link beneath the article and the webpage loaded. The story talked about a man named Oskar Tega. Apparently, seven days ago the DEA and the Mexican Federales had enough evidence to finally arrest the criminal mastermind named Oskar Tega. They had connected Tega to a string of secret operations all the way from Mexico to the south of Florida.

DEA agents raided his coastal compound on the Gulf of Mexico and found it empty.

Then 24 hours later one of Tega's secret locations was discovered, too late because it had been burned to the ground.

The article said that the men who were already arrested in connection to Oskar Tega had called the locations *granjas*.

My Spanish wasn't very good. I knew people who spoke perfect Spanish and I had taken some classes in high school, but I didn't recognize the word.

Maria came by and smiled at me.

She dropped off the red plate with the cheeseburger, she placed a bottle of ketchup in front of me, and then she asked, "Can I get you anything else?"

I asked, "Do you speak Spanish?"

She looked at me and her smile turned to a look of disappointment.

She said, "Oh baby, you aren't like these racist idiots that live here, are ya?"

"No. No way," I said.

She smiled again.

"I'm just wondering if you speak Spanish."

She said, "Sí. I remember most words. I'm not from Mexico. I'm from Texas, but my grandma and I used to speak Español. My mom, she only spoke in English, but she understood it just fine."

I handed her my cell phone after I enlarged the section with the word that I wanted translated and then I asked, "Can you tell me what this word means?"

She grabbed the phone gently with one of her hands, leaned in toward it, and studied the text. Then she said, "This word means *farms*. Oh I heard about this. This guy Tega is some kind of drug kingpin. He escaped capture and they think that he fled to Cuba. But his men are here in the U.S."

"They've been visiting all of his farms and taking their product out and then they leave no witnesses. There was this town in Texas. Tega's men went there a few days ago and they took back whatever drugs were there. Then they murdered all of his employees and left half of the town on fire."

"It's like what the Germans did in World War II."

A puzzled look must have fallen across my face because she immediately responded.

She said, "You know? Like when the Russians would raid German villages and instead of finding prisoners and supplies, the Germans had burned everything to the ground and left their ruined homes behind. They made it impossible for the Russians to use any of their supplies."

I said, "That's called *scorched earth* and it wasn't the Germans; it was what the Russians had done to the Germans."

She said, "Yup. That's it. Well, enjoy your burger."

I nodded.

She walked away from the table.

I continued reading about Oskar Tega.

Police thought that he was in Cuba and they weren't sure how he'd gotten out of Mexico without them noticing. They guessed by boat or possibly he'd chartered a plane or that he already owned one. There was a large docking space at the end of a pier on his property. They figured that he'd cast off in a yacht possibly days before. The DEA assumed that he had bribed his way past SEMAR, the Mexican Navy, or possibly Tega had gotten past the U.S. Coast Guard on the outer perimeter. Tega was a well-connected man. Now no one knew where he was.

I took two big bites from my hamburger. One. Two. It was more than halfway gone. I had a big appetite and was hungry. Hitchhiking and tourism were hard work.

I put the burger back down on the plate and clicked on the top Internet search bar. I typed missing girls from Mississippi.

The circle icon rotated around and around indicating that the browser was searching and then several results came back: missing children, missing girls, murders, and so on.

I added the word north in front of Mississippi and clicked the search button again.

The web browser searched and came up with links to articles like *FBI baffled at missing girls in North Mississippi*.

I clicked on one link and it took me to an article about five years old. I skimmed through it. It told the same story that Jill, the college student from yesterday, had told me. Missing young girls. Most of them driving along the freeways and highways. All of them had left one destination and were expected at another, but never made it.

Sheriffs, local police, and the FBI had all been involved. The investigation never went anywhere and remained open.

Some reports claimed that the girls were abducted by hitchhikers, but this was nothing but speculation.

Some of their vehicles had been found abandoned, left in ditches or in shopping mall parking lots. In my experience, one thing that a young girl never did was leave her car behind. The reports went on to say that some of the girls' vehicles were never found.

I took two more bites of my cheeseburger and finished it. I slid the plate away and drank some water. The coffee cup remained untouched.

I turned off the phone and put it back into my pocket.

The local story about these missing girls was interesting, but I wasn't going to solve a case that the FBI couldn't solve in five years. Besides it had nothing to do with me. Nothing at all.

Maria returned to check on me.

She grabbed the plate off the table and said, "Do you want anything else?"

I said, "No thanks. Just the check."

She slid the check over to me and winked. As I reached for it, her index finger brushed against the top of mine like she was purposely trying to touch me.

I looked up at her and smiled.

She walked away.

I flipped the check over and saw that below the total she had written her phone number with a smiley face underneath.

I smiled. I placed a twenty dollar bill on top of the check, a generous tip, but well worth the service. I committed her number to memory.

I got up from my booth and left the diner.

Chapter 10

Before I returned to my motel room, I walked around the town for two more hours. I wanted to get a good look at the nightlife. I stopped at a couple of dive bars. One was a country western bar. It was fun. There was a band playing. They played a few rock 'n' roll songs, only they made them country sounding. They weren't too bad, some local band that I had never heard of and would never hear of again.

The second bar was a juke joint filled with aging hipsters. Both bars were busy, not completely packed, not wall-to-wall people, but busy.

I never once got carded. Probably because of my size and facial stubble. I was rather unkempt. The last time that I had shaved was when my mother was alive a few days before. The expression *baby face* wasn't something anyone would say about my features.

I looked like a grown man. I could have easily passed for early 20s. Maybe even mid-20s, but I was only 18 and a half. My birthday was in November. So I seized the opportunity and ordered a single beer at the hipsters' bar, no shots, no hard liquor, just the one beer. I didn't want to push my luck.

After I left the bars, I walked down to the lake and gazed over the calm water. I felt the breeze blow warm, soft air across my face and neck.

Jarvis Lake was a man-made lake and man-made lakes were generally calm lakes. No reason for high wave activity.

I stared out over the water. Across the lake I saw various lights from the houses and cars. A few boats were peppered across the lake. Tiny lights blinked, indicating where they were, telling other boats that there was a boat right there.

Nearby, a dock was loaded with plenty of nighttime fishermen. I heard voices and laughing in the distance. I looked to my left and saw the Eckhart Medical Center. I walked toward it, curious as to what went on there.

The town of Black Rock was a relatively poor town. The buildings were old, taken care of, but definitely used. Not too many of them were newer than ten years. Most of the newer businesses were probably old remodeled buildings.

The Eckhart Medical Center was the one exception. The buildings were nice—expensive. They were painted white with closed green shutters on every window, a fresh-looking paint job.

None of this was really all that unusual, but the security was something that troubled me.

I walked closer to the perimeter of the complex. I got as close to it as I could without raising suspicion. It wasn't like it had a posted guard or anything, but there was tall barbed wire fencing all around it except at the front. The only places where the security was lacking were the two entrances. One of them was a dark entrance with a small glass doorway with no visible markings or signs. Staff entrance, I guessed.

The second entrance was a double automatic door with a flat, black rubber mat in front. The sign above the door read: 24-HOUR COMMUNITY CLINIC.

According to Hazel, the waitress, this was the town's main source of health care.

Both Hank and Hazel had said that animal research went on there. That was the explanation for the extra security measures—animals. But what kind of animals required security cameras and a barbed wire fence?

Maybe the security was more to keep activists out rather than keep the animals in.

Something else dawned on me. Maybe it was because I had seen both the daytime people and the nighttime people, but I hadn't seen any minorities, not a single black person, no Asian people, no foreigners, and only one Hispanic. Black Rock was a small town, but there had to be a few thousand people living here. How could they all be white? This was 2014, not 1955, but Maria was the only minority that I had seen. Every bar, diner, café, store, or street where I had walked so far I had seen only white people. The South, especially Mississippi, had a bad reputation for being racist and segregated. That might've been the case 40 or more years ago, but in my experience, Mississippi people were as tolerant as anyone else was anywhere.

Still it was odd.

I shrugged off my curiosity about the Eckhart Medical Center and turned and headed back to the motel.

Back in my room, I sat down on the bed and realized that I had forgotten to buy new clothes. Guess I was going to have to wear the same clothes tomorrow. I didn't want to sleep in them again and I didn't want to wake up and wear dirty clothes. So I decided to take them off and wash them in the sink. I'd never tried it before, but I figured that it'd work as well as anything. For thousands of years, mankind, or more precisely womankind, has washed clothes in streams and rivers.

I washed my jeans first. I used shampoo out of the little bottle from the shower. I used nearly the whole bottle on the pants. I wasn't sure if it would make a good detergent, but it had to be better than sleeping in them again.

I rolled the jeans in a towel to soak up some of them moisture and then tossed them over the shower rod and left them to hang there and dry. Next I took off my shirt and rinsed it in the sink. I decided to use hand soap for the rest of my clothes and save the remaining shampoo for my hair.

The shirt was much easier to wash than the jeans. The fabric was cotton and soaked up the soap faster than the jeans.

I let the hot water run and lathered up both sides of the shirt with hand soap. I rinsed and then I wrung it out and stretched the ends in opposite directions so it didn't shrink as it dried. I hung it up next to the jeans. Next I cleaned my socks and left them on the side of the tub. I washed my face off in the sink and decided that I was beat. I wanted to sleep. I could take a shower in the morning and put on clean clothes, although they may not be completely dry. That would suit me just fine.

I decided to discard my underwear. No reason to clean it and I certainly didn't want to wear it again. So I took it off and threw it in a wastebasket in the bathroom.

Before I went to bed for the night I looked in the mirror and smacked my head.

Great, Reacher! You forgot to get a toothbrush!

Guess I had a lot to learn about the nomadic life. My father had a lot to teach me. Even without being with me, he was already teaching me lessons.

I went to the bed, pulled the covers back, and slid in. I reached over and clicked the button on the lamp.

The lights shut off.

I closed my eyes and pictured my father's graduation picture from West Point.

My mind was powerful. When I pictured something, I saw it in vivid detail. I had more than a photographic memory; I had a photographic imagination. I could visualize anything and everything. Every sliver of color, every single star from the American flag behind my father was accounted for. I thought of him until I was asleep.

I woke up at 1:37 in the morning. I knew this because I checked my cell phone before I got up and out of bed to see what all the noise was. That was when I met Dr. Chris Matlind and the three guys who wanted to do him bodily harm.

I heard voices and shouting and what sounded like roughhousing through the wall.

Some of the dialects were so thick that they sounded like muffled cartoon voices.

I wasn't sure what was going on at first.

I got out of bed, went to the bathroom, and grabbed my pants. They were still pretty damp. With no source of heat to dry them I didn't expect them to be dry enough to wear yet, but I had to put something on. I couldn't go over and confront my neighbors wearing no pants.

I slipped the jeans on and buttoned and zipped them. No belt. No shoes. No shirt. I was getting too angry to bother putting them on. I didn't even check to see if my shirt was dry.

I got a glance at myself in the mirror. I was still half asleep. My face looked groggy. My legs and thighs were now damp from my jeans. I had gone to bed with

my hair down. So now it hung down across my face in what my ex-girlfriend from high school had called *whacked bedhead*.

With my hair hanging around my face, I looked like something out of a nightmare. I looked like a caveman with one idea on my primal brain: *kill*.

I stormed out of my room, barefoot, and over to room 13 next door.

The door was halfway open. Before I reached it, I heard the voices more clearly.

One guy spoke articulately, even sounded educated, only his voice was nasal like he was pinching his nose.

He said, "Please, don't hit me again. You fractured my nasal bones."

Another voice said, "You broke his nose, Daryl."

A different voice, a deeper voice said, "I know what he meant, Jeb. Now grab his arms. This city boy is going in the truck."

The nasal voice said, "I only want her back. Please don't hit me again. Just give her back to me and we'll leave."

A third voice, a new voice said, "Daryl, let me hit him with the bat."

Daryl said, "No, Junior. I think that Pa is gonna wanna talk to him without broken bones. 'Sides, we ought to put him in the truck instead of carr'n' him."

Jeb said, "Yeah, Junior, he is cohop'ratin'. No reason to hit him with the bat. Not yet."

The word is cooperating, I thought, reactively, like an old grammar teacher.

Before I even opened the door, I heard the frustration from the guy whom I assumed to be Junior, an audible expression, like a loud sigh from an ungrateful child.

Then I kicked the bottom of the door with my left foot, not hard and not soft. Just enough to swing the door open slowly in a kind of dramatic scene when the door in a haunted house creaks open and the occupants stop and stare. A big part of dealing with potentially violent situations is using tactical strategy—something that my mom had beat into me, literally. She had taught me to always fight with my head first and then if all avenues of theatrics, of diplomacy, of cerebral tactics had been exhausted, I always had the *other way* of handling a potentially violent situation.

The door creaked open. I hadn't surveyed the scene as well as I should have because it wasn't until the door was all the way open, when I was committed to the plan, that I realized these guys might have had guns.

Stupid Reacher, I thought. Rookie mistake.

Then I could see these guys completely and I felt better. They didn't have guns. They didn't have knives, not in their hands. If they had had guns they would have pulled them on me.

Then again, they would have pulled them on the poor guy whose nose gushed blood. Right then and there. Why threaten him with fists and a baseball bat when you can pull a gun on him?

If they had had knives then they would have pulled them on me for sure.

They were still, frozen with fear. I knew the look of fear on a man's face. I had frightened many opponents myself. Mostly schoolyard bullies, even rednecks. These three most certainly would've fit into that category like a bad cliché.

They wore clothes that were practically interchangeable. Blue flannel. Green flannel. Sleeves torn off. One white, grease-stained t-shirt. One trucker hat. All wore work boots. All wore dirty, ripped jeans.

These guys were rednecks. No doubt. Their smell could only be described as *stink*.

One of them, the one called Junior, held an ancient-looking Louisville slugger. The end was stained and partially splintered. It had been used before.

On whom? I wondered.

I didn't know the answer to that question, but I did know that it wasn't going to get used on me. That was for damn sure.

They looked alike except that one was missing all of his teeth, except for one that dangled in the front like it wouldn't be much longer before he lost that one too. One guy was fatter than the other two, but they all looked like they had won their fair share of hotdog-eating contests.

The guy on the left-hand side was obviously the leader because the other two looked at him for some kind of order. Maybe he was the oldest brother, Daryl. If they were brothers. They might have been cousins.

Small gene pool.

The guy in the third position was Junior, no doubt about that because he held the bat and had only the one tooth. He must have been the lesser brain, the *Curly* of the bunch.

The guy standing behind the victim had to be the one called Jeb. The victim was a short, wiry guy. Short brown hair. Looked to be in decent shape, not much of a fighter though. He had that kind of gym look like he worked out, but had never had a real fight in his life.

A pair of glasses lay on the floor near his feet. One of the lenses was shattered and cracked. I guessed that they had hit him hard in the face. Once to shatter his glasses and knock them off his face and then again to break his nose or fracture it.

The three brothers or cousins or whatever they were stared at me. The one behind the victim let his jaw drop.

Black, long strands of hair fell across my face. They probably could only see my eyes and no other facial features, just the darkness around my face.

I spoke first.

I said, "Guys. I'm trying to sleep next door. You aren't being very neighborly."

The one called Junior spoke with a stutter in his voice. Maybe from fear.

He said, "You should mind ya business. So... ju... just go back into ya own ro... ro... room and we just forget we saw ya."

The three guys paused like they were waiting for me to reply.

I didn't.

The one called Daryl said, "Now you listen, fella. We don't have a beef with you. You just go on back to your room and we'll forget, like Junior here says."

I sized the three of them up in less than a second. Then I spent five more seconds looking them up and down, making it obvious that I was doing it.

I said, "Fellas, it looks to me like you're not wanted in this man's room."

I turned my head and looked at the door frame, briefly. It was splintered. One of them had kicked it in. Then I stared back at them in a slow kind of stare with violent thoughts shining out of my eyes.

I said, "You broke into this man's room. Attacked him. You are trying to kidnap him. And all of that would have gone fine, but you made one fatal mistake, a colossal mistake."

Finally, Jeb spoke in a sarcastic, idiotic tone. He asked, "Yeah? What?"

I said, "You woke me. I don't like to be woken up. Not by three inbred idiots like you."

"What ya gonna dew 'bout it?" Junior asked.

He started to step away from the others, lowering his bat. He was making room for a swing. Their second mistake.

The room was small. I stood in the doorway. Not even all the way in. Just in the doorway. From Junior's position he would have to reach over with his left hand, grab the handle of the bat to reinforce the swing, and then pivot with one foot and step forward with his left. Next he'd have to swing the bat with full force and swing it high.

If he managed not to hit Daryl on the upswing, then I'd still have the three to four seconds that it would take for him to execute the move correctly because he'd have to check back and make sure the Daryl was clear of the swing. Three to four seconds was a *long* time in a fight. It was time that I would take advantage of. In less than a second all I had to do was step back and out of the doorway. Back into the night.

Not even a second after I processed the thought, Junior acted. His brother Daryl had seen what he was trying to do.

I saw Daryl give him a nod like a signal that said, "Go for it!"

Junior reached over, grabbed the bat with both hands, pivoted, and swung. Daryl ducked back and fell onto the bed so that the swing would miss him, which it did.

In the last bit of the second that it took for Junior to swing his bat at my head, I stepped back. The bat collided with the inside of the doorframe. Hard.

Two feet away, the window, set low on the wall, shattered. Cheap glass crumpled away like dust.

Imagine swinging a Louisville slugger as hard as you can, without pausing or stopping, at a telephone pole. The force from the resistance of the thick telephone pole would ripple through the bat and fracture or even break the bones in your wrists and arms and fingers. That was exactly what happened to Junior.

I heard the bones in his hands and wrists crack. There were multiple sounds of cracking. His wrist bones shattered. He wouldn't be swinging that bat for a long time. That was for damn sure.

His fingers dangled from his hands and the bat fell to the ground.

Like a glooming killer, I stepped into the room.

Junior dropped to the floor and started wailing through his 99% toothless mouth. He sounded like a dying animal.

His right hand was better than his left. He reached over and cupped his left.

He cried like a baby.

Daryl looked up at me and reacted. He lunged at me, swinging a right hook my way, but I had long arms with a long reach.

I swung a right uppercut. I was faster than him and my reach was farther, much farther. Where he had to lunge at me, I could stand my ground and reach him.

My right fist caught him right center in the nose, crushing it. His right hook grazed my left shoulder and did zero damage. It was like a mosquito bite, less than a mosquito bite, more like pocket lint.

I pulled my punch back and watched as he fell back onto the ground. He grabbed at his nose and screamed when he touched it.

Blood gushed from his nostrils in a long, flowing river and his nose was bent away from his face like a clock hand pointing to a quarter after the hour.

I wasn't sure if the short, wiry guy that they were attacking had really had a broken nose, but Daryl's nose was broken, that I knew for sure. No doubt. He was lucky that it was still attached to his face. He was lucky that shards of it hadn't gone into his brain and killed him. Perhaps the only reason that it hadn't was because he had a tiny brain, if there was one there at all.

I stared back over at Jeb—the last man standing.

I grinned.

He held tight onto the short, wiry guy. He was practically using him as a human shield, like I was pointing a gun at him.

I stepped closer.

"What do you say? Jeb? You want a shot at me?"

He started trembling. I knew this because the short, wiry guy that he held onto was trembling.

Jeb peered over the guy's shoulder at me. He begged, "Don't hurt me, please!"

I said, "Here, Jeb. I'm going to give you the chance to make up for your boys here."

I knelt down and picked up the bat. I leaned it against my shoulder like a batter lining up for a good swing.

Then I said, "I'd say that so far it looks like strike two for you."

I pointed the bat down at Daryl. He and Junior were both rolling around on the floor holding their broken appendages, only Junior did something stupid. Truly stupid. Like a dumb animal. He tried to get back up. He must've known that I could see him because I was staring down at him.

I swung the bat in a quick backswing, not full force, not even close, but far from a light tap. I hit Daryl square in the mouth as he was trying to get up on one knee. That was the moment that I knew how important that one tooth had been to him because he screamed in agony when it came flying out of his mouth from the force of the blow.

The bat hit him right in the mouth and broke the one tooth off. His head whipped back and he fell back on his ass, but the first thing that happened was his screaming.

Jeb looked on in horror. The screaming died down to a whimper and then I pointed the bat back at Jeb. I flipped it in the air and caught the tip in my right hand. The handle stretched out to him.

I said, "Take it. Go for strike three."

Jeb stared at the bat like it was a trap.

“I’m unarmed. You could be the hero.”

Jeb walked slowly backward like he was trying to retreat, only there was nowhere for him to go. I blocked the entrance.

I stepped forward and over Daryl.

Jeb said, “No. No. I don’t want to. Please just go.”

“Take the bat.”

He stayed quiet.

He looked down at Daryl. I knew that Daryl, who was behind me now, was trying to get up.

These guys just don’t learn, I thought.

I flipped the bat again in the air and caught the handle and then I pivoted around like I was taking a golf swing and clubbed Daryl right in the nose with the thick end of the bat.

I didn’t do it like I was hitting a long drive and not like hitting a baseball. I hit him like I was putting, hard enough to break whatever cartilage and bone that remained in his nose, but not enough to kill him. I didn’t want to drag a dead body out of there.

He screamed almost like no other scream that I had heard before. Almost.

In the same fluid motion I spun back around and faced Jeb and his hostage.

I pointed the bat at him again, stretched way out, one-handed.

I said, “No one is going to help you. Let this guy go and drag your boys out of here or I’ll take this bat and make it strike three. Okay, Jeb?”

His attention came sharply into focus when I said his name. So I said it again, “Jeb, if you choose option B, I will hurt you worse than I did them. Much worse.

“What’s it going to be?”

He shook his head, violently. He said, “Let me go. I promise we’ll get out of here.”

“Good choice. I knew that you were the smart one.”

It took Jeb three minutes and 41 seconds to help his two fallen comrades back to their truck. Not bad.

I watched as they piled into an F-150. It was brand new. They fired up the engine and sped away, leaving a cloud of dust behind them.

The truck had the Confederate flag stained in the rear window. It was one of the trucks from the redneck compound of mobile homes and that giant flagpole that I had seen earlier. The taillights faded away.

I walked back into the motel room and stared at the short, wiry guy that they had beaten up.

I asked, “Are you okay?”

The guy had stuffed tissue paper into his nostrils while looking in the bathroom mirror.

Without looking at me, he said, “Thank you.”

“You should go to the clinic. Get that nose looked at. You might need a doctor.”

He looked at me and smiled. Then he said, “It’s only a nasal fracture with some profuse bleeding. Not a great big deal. And I am a doctor.”

I nodded. Stayed quiet.

He walked over to me, kept his head tilted back to stop the bleeding, and then reached his hand out, offering me a handshake.

Even though his head was tilted back, he still could look straight up and see me. He was about 5'9" tall.

I towered over him.

I reached out and took his hand and shook it.

He said, "My name is Chris Matlind."

I could see that the guy was clearly still shaken up, now that I had the chance to really look him over. It was worse than shaken up. He looked terrible. His face was unshaven and unkempt. His hair was unwashed and he kind of smelled. It wasn't as bad as the stink of the greasy rednecks or the old musty smell from Hank, but it was far from a pleasant scent.

The room was cluttered.

Dirty clothes were piled in one of the corners. There were two big suitcases, one black and wide open. It was almost empty of clothes.

The second one was still neatly closed in the far corner. It was pink with a green flower pattern. I had never seen a more girlie-looking suitcase. I was surprised that a man would have such a thing.

I said, "My name is Reacher."

He glared at me strangely and said, "That's an unusual name."

"It's my father's name," I said, and left it at that.

He asked, "Did you mean what you told those guys? I mean you made it seem like you were only intervening because they had disturbed you."

"They did wake me. But I wasn't going to let them take you."

He nodded.

I stayed quiet.

Then he asked, "Aren't you going to ask what's going on?"

I said, "Nope. None of my business."

A defeated look came over his face like he needed me to be interested, desperately. So I shrugged and asked, "So, what exactly is going on? Why were those guys trying to take you out of here? You must've done something pretty bad for a few fat rednecks to break down your door and try to kidnap you. Do you owe them money or something?"

"I don't owe them money."

He stopped talking. A look came across his face, a look like he wasn't sure if he could trust me. Then his eyes swelled up like he was going to burst into tears. I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder. His t-shirt was soaked in blood from his nose bleed. I tried not to touch that part of his shirt.

I said, "It's okay. You can trust me."

He said, "They have my wife...like a hostage."

Chapter 11

I said, "Coffee. Do you drink coffee? I don't drink coffee personally, but I find it makes for a good way to have a conversation. Over coffee. That's what normal people do. We'd better get coffee. You got a car?"

Fearful, Chris said, "No! We mustn't!"

"Get coffee? Like I said, I'm not a fan either. But I'm awake. You're awake. And I saved your ass. So you're going to explain to me what the hell is going on. Let's get coffee or water or whatever you want."

Matlind said, "No, I mean about the car."

I asked, "You don't have a car?"

"Yes. Well, I do, but they have it."

I asked, "They have it?"

He nodded.

He said, "The mechanic has it. It broke down eight days ago."

"Is that diner in town open all night?"

"I'm not sure, but I can't go there. They're in on it too."

"What? The thing about your wife?"

He nodded.

"Do you know if it is 24 hours?"

He said, "I don't know."

"Let's find out. I'm tired. I had a long day and you have a story to tell. Don't worry. No one is going to mess with you as long as I'm here."

I left Chris for five minutes and returned to my room. I grabbed my shirt. It was dry enough. I slipped it on and then my socks and shoes. I laced them up and walked out of the room.

I shut my door, but didn't bother to lock it. What would be the point? I had nothing left in it. No valuables. No belongings. Nothing. And the room had nothing worth stealing.

I reentered Matlind's room and asked, "Ready to go?"

He stood up from the bed, released his nose, and pulled out the tissues. The bleeding continued, but wasn't as bad as before.

I asked, "Is your nose broken?"

"Yes. It isn't too bad though. I can't go to the hospital. They don't even have one here. There is a clinic. If the local doctor sees me, he'll insist that I get driven to the nearest hospital and that's probably in Oxford."

"I can't take the chance of being sent away. I have to find my wife."

"Okay. Okay. Let's deal with one problem at a time. First we have to fix your nose."

He nodded.

I asked, "Do you have any medical tape?"

He shook his head.

I asked, "Do you have any duct tape?"

He replied, "In my suitcase. Over there. With my tackle box. I like to fish."

I stood up and walked over to the suitcase that he had pointed to. I searched through the opened large black suitcase. Inside there was a small tackle box and a travel-sized fishing rod. I grabbed the tackle box, popped open the lid, and peered in. I saw hooks, fishing lures, and a small roll of duct tape. I reached down and picked up the duct tape and walked over to Matlind.

I said, "Move your hands away from your face."

He followed my instructions. I took a good look. It wasn't the worst nose break ever, but he was lying about the pain. It must've hurt like a train wreck, like he had gotten hit in the face by a steamroller.

I lied back to him. I said, "It is broken. Not too bad, but I'm going to have to set it. We can use the duct tape to act as a kind of field dressing. It will work just as good as any medical dressing that you'd get in the emergency room."

He asked, "How do you know that?"

I said, "My mom was a Marine and a sheriff and I was in ROTC. Plus I've been an unofficial cop my whole life."

"Unofficial cop? Like a deputy?"

"Something like that. Now hold still."

He nodded and then he said, "Do it."

He breathed in deeply and held it like that was my signal to go for it.

I put the roll of tape down on the bed behind him and reached out with both hands. I grabbed, pulled, and snapped his nose back into place. It cracked with the sound of bones jarring together like a box of nails and then the nose snapped back into place.

Matlind squirmed and tried to escape me. For a moment I think that he had forgotten that I was trying to help him, but then he stood still. He said, "Now the duct tape. I'm ready."

Quickly, I peeled a strand of tape off the roll and strapped it to his face. Horizontal. Nice and tight.

I stepped back and got a good look.

I said, "That will work fine. Doesn't look great, but then again any dressing on your face isn't going to help a guy win any beauty contests."

He nodded and said, "Thank you."

"Now, let's get to the diner and talk about your wife."

He agreed. He stood up and checked himself in the bathroom mirror, then grabbed a new t-shirt and a fresh button-down shirt and took off his old shirt and exchanged them for the new set.

Probably couldn't stand looking at the blood stains.

We left the motel and walked downtown and back to the diner.

It was eight minutes past two o'clock in the morning.

Chapter 12

The walk to the diner was peaceful. It was a nice night outside. The stars shined bright in the sky, what ancient philosophers, modern poetry graduate students, and mothers everywhere would have described as *twinkled*. The wind blew softly around us, carrying the sound of rustling leaves in the tree branches overhead.

In the distance there was the sound of barking dogs. The lake was several blocks away, but the smell of water carried across the breeze.

Power lines hung overhead and streetlights lit up the sidewalks, not that we needed to use the sidewalks. There wasn't a car on the street. Not one.

It was a ghost town.

I wasn't familiar with the local liquor laws, but I imagined that this was a dry county after 1 a.m. because Mississippi was full of them. I'm sure that the bars and liquor stores had stopped serving long ago. So no one was out on the town. No reason, unless you wanted to grab a bite to eat at the diner.

Roy's Red Dinner was one of the only buildings lit up. A neon red light traced the roof and shined up into the night sky. Above us, the red glow beamed off the bottom of the low clouds.

Matlind and I entered the diner. We were the only people in the place and I didn't see any reason to make the waitress walk farther than necessary, so we sat at a booth near the kitchen.

We seated ourselves. Matlind held a menu in front of his face. It trembled in his hands.

I knew that he was starving, had to be because his stomach growled and his face was sunken like he hadn't eaten in days, but I doubted that he was really looking over the menu. I doubted that he would order any food. It looked more like he was trying to hide his face from the staff.

I didn't need a menu. I had it memorized. I knew the items. I knew the prices, with tax.

After another minute of waiting, Maria burst through the kitchen door full of pep. She smiled at me, didn't even look at Matlind, and then she walked over to our table.

She said, "You're back."

I said, "We just needed to get out and grab some coffee."

She said, "I thought that you don't like coffee?"

I said, "I don't. Generally. I mean it as an expression. You know, like how people are always saying 'Let's grab some coffee.'"

She nodded and then looked Matlind up and down. He never looked past his menu. Never acknowledged her. He was still hiding his face.

She asked, "What's with your friend?"

I said, "He's shy. Bring him a coffee and a bottle of water for me."

She nodded and smiled and walked away.

I turned to Matlind. He moved the menu downward and looked at me.

With a tremble behind his voice, he said, "She knows who I am. The whole town is in on it."

He looked paranoid, but I stayed quiet.

I said, "Tell me what happened."

Before he began, Maria returned with our drinks. She saw Matlind's face and recognized him. I was sure of it, but she kept quiet.

She walked away and never offered to take our orders. She knew we weren't there to order food.

Matlind looked at me and began.

He said, "Eight days ago, I married the most beautiful woman in the world. Her name is Faye.

"She and I met a year ago at a hospital. She is a nurse and I had just gotten out of medical school. I'm a doctor. I guess I told you that."

I nodded. Stayed quiet.

"I haven't slept. I haven't eaten.

"Faye and I worked on the Gulf Coast. We got married on the beach. Decided to go on our honeymoon. She has a mother who can't travel. Medical reasons. She lives in Chicago.

"So we thought that we'd make our honeymoon a road trip. We wanted to drive through rural places and take in the scenery. We were really going to take advantage of it. We had two weeks and we were in no rush.

"Faye is really into history. She loves old towns and dives and I love to fish. So we thought that we would detour off the interstate and make our way to Jarvis Lake.

"I had a friend who drove through here once. He told me about the fishing."

He stopped, paused a beat, and then took a sip of coffee. It was straight black. No cream. No sugar.

I took a drink of water.

He made a satisfied expression like he had just tasted the nectar of life. I had seen people enjoy coffee, but never understood it. What was the big deal with people and coffee and coffee shops and caffeine? Might as well stuff their faces with caramels. But I stayed quiet.

He said, "So we drove into town. We got a room at the motel. The cabins were all booked or I would have gotten one of those."

I nodded and thought about how the *cabins* are really huge and not what I considered to be a cabin at all. Then I shrugged and listened closely.

He took another sip of coffee, followed by another satisfied look.

I had seen that look before. Coffee was like crack to most people. I had seen Americans stuff themselves into coffeehouses to pay \$5 or more for a cup of coffee. I didn't get it, but then again, I had never really given coffee a chance.

I just grew up without it as a part of my diet. My mom drank it, but I had never felt the urge to give it a try. Plus, I had no desire to get addicted to a beverage that would end up costing me tens of thousands of dollars over the course of my life.

Matlind said, "Faye and I checked into our motel and then we drove into town. We walked along the lake. We..."

I interrupted him. I asked, "I thought that you didn't have a car?"

He said, "I don't have one that works. I'm getting to that part."

I nodded.

He said, "We walked the lake. All the way around it, followed a jogging path. We sat a couple of times. It is really beautiful. Very rural and quaint."

"We stayed out near the lake for a long time, the entire morning. Before we realized it, it was noon. So we decided to walk back to town.

"That was when we passed the redneck headquarters, the one near the fork on the south side of the lake. Has the giant Confederate flag?"

I said, "I saw it."

He said, "That was where our trouble started, with the occupants of the compound, three of which were those guys you met in my motel room.

"The bastards who broke my nose."

He said this and reached up with his free hand to lightly touch his makeshift nose splint.

He winced slightly at the pain and his eyes shut tight and then reopened. They watered. I could see agony rush across his face, but he didn't complain. He toughed it out. He was taking it like a soldier.

He said, "We walked out along the road, right next to the compound. The mobile homes were all quiet. But as soon as we were alongside them, they were full of life like we'd tripped an alarm or something.

"Everyone who lived there had come out to see us. The men. The women. Even the children came outside and stared at us. I'm telling you that I've never seen anything like it. I'm from the South. I was born in Georgia. I lived in Alabama. Hell, I graduated from Southern Alabama. And I've never seen anything like it before.

"Those rednecks stopped whatever the hell they were doing and came outside and stared at us."

He began tearing up. The agony on his face turned to sheer terror. He was white with it.

He said, "The look. The looks on their faces was like nothing that I had ever seen before. It was like we had reverted back to a time before civil rights. Before apartheid even. It was like we had gone back to the time of slavery."

I followed, but wasn't quite getting it. Why were they staring at the Matlinds so hard? What the hell does slavery have to do with it?

Then he said, "I was scared that they weren't going to let us leave. But all they did was stare. Some of them stood on their porches. Some of them came all the way to the edge of their properties. They just stared.

"We froze with terror. I know that they had guns. Rednecks have guns. But they didn't even need them. There were dozens of men in the family. Big, fat guys like the ones that you met.

"I thought for sure that they were going to lynch us."

I still wasn't quite following. Why would they lynch a young white doctor from Mobile?

Matlind wasn't seeing the puzzlement on my face because he kept on with his story. I saw in his eyes that he wasn't even seeing me. He had been staring right at me, but he wasn't seeing me.

He was visualizing the story as it happened. He was so caught up in it that I doubted that he'd ever be able to shake it off.

Then he said, "We stood there frozen for a good five minutes. And finally I grabbed her hand tight and told her we'd better go. We didn't run. We just walked away.

"No one came after us. No one followed. They didn't pursue us. I was certain that they wanted to do bad things to us. I had no doubt in my mind. But they didn't chase. They just let us go."

Then he was silent.

He looked up at me. Real fear swam in his eyes.

He stared at me and said, "They didn't chase after us because they knew that we would never get away."

He repeated, "They knew because the whole town is in on it."

I asked, "In on what? I'm not following. Why would these rednecks care about you?"

He ignored me and said, "We got back to town. I told her we should leave right there, right then. She wasn't as scared as I was. She was scared in the moment, but the moment had passed. So she had shrugged off the whole thing like she was used to it.

"She insisted that we stay and eat at the diner like we had planned.

"This diner. So we came in here and didn't utter a word about the rednecks. We just wanted to eat. She insisted that we continue our honeymoon. She said we could just stay on our side of the town and enjoy our time."

He fell silent again and peered around the diner like he was looking for the waitress or anyone who was familiar and then he said, "We had a different waitress. This one is Latina. She is the only minority that I've seen in this whole town. I didn't notice it before. Faye hadn't noticed it. Or maybe she had. I'm not sure."

I nodded. I had also noticed that. I remembered thinking that it was unusual, but this was the South after all. *No minorities* was strange. I was from a small town in the backwoods of Mississippi and we had plenty of minorities. There was an entire side of town that was all black families. We had gay people, black people, a small Asian community, and every type of minority that there was.

No one in my town cared about racial or sexual differences. I had never known a racist person in my life. That was outdated thinking. The generation before my mother's. Maybe there had been some. Maybe there had been members of the Klu Klux Klan in my neighborhood, but if there were they were the quietest and most tolerant racists that I'd ever heard of because modern small-town American life went on.

I understood what Matlind was telling me. I still wondered what it had to do with the rednecks and his wife.

I looked at him with an expression that said *continue*. He acknowledged it and then he said, "We sat over there."

He pointed to a booth on the other side of the diner, near the entrance.

He said, "Waitresses never came to us. Not one of them. They ignored us. I kept waving them over and they never came. The patrons never acknowledged us either. No smiles or cheery hellos. The strangest part was that they weren't rude. They didn't shout rude comments or give us rude stares. Not like the rednecks. They simply didn't look at us. We sat there for over 20 minutes and then I grabbed the manager. He had walked by and didn't even acknowledge that we'd been sitting there with no menus or drinks.

"I was furious. I shook the guy. I asked him what the hell was going on! Why the hell was everyone ignoring us!

"Faye grabbed me by the arm and insisted that we leave. I was so angry. I shook the manager even harder because he stayed quiet. He was a young guy. I guessed that he could take it, but finally he looked at me and asked me to leave. He asked me to leave."

Matlind took another sip from his coffee, a long one, and then said, "I was furious. I mean what the hell?"

"Now I remember that he hadn't acknowledged Faye either. He never looked at her.

"He said that he was going to call the sheriff if we didn't leave. So we left."

I nodded.

He said, "We went straight back to the motel and packed and went to the car. I started it and then it broke down right as we were passing through town. I mean it just died.

"I pushed it into a service lot. A little old shop. The mechanic must have had it in his family for generations.

"He came out to the lot and helped us. He never really looked at Faye either. Just talked directly to me.

"He took a look under the hood and told me that it'd be a day or two before he could fix it."

I asked, "Is it done now?"

He said, "No. Every time that I go there he says it'll be another week."

He looked deep into my face with complete desperation.

He said, "Reacher, the very next morning I woke up in my motel room and she was gone. Vanished. The door was left wide open. I could hear the sounds of passing cars, but my wife was gone. I called to her and called to her, but she had vanished. Not a note. Not a message. Nothing. She was gone.

"I checked with the old guy in the office. He never actually saw her. And she'd left no message."

I asked, "What about your cell? Did you call her?"

"My cell phone was gone. I have no pictures of her. No contacts. All of my numbers were in there. I can't call anyone. I can't remember anyone's number and the phones in the rooms don't work.

"Don't you think that I've tried?"

He paused a beat and then said, "No one in town will let me use a phone. Don't you think that I tried? I went everywhere and begged and pleaded. No one will help me! I'm a prisoner here! I can't leave! I can't call out!"

He took a deep breath and paused again.

"That little manager remembered me. He called the sheriff and the sheriff came. He brought one of his deputies, right here to my door. I thought, thank God! Finally someone was going to help me find my wife!"

I stayed quiet.

He said, "But that's not what happened! Not at all! It was the most shocking thing! They threatened to arrest me! Said I was acting erratic and indecent! Said that the manager from the diner had filed a complaint!"

Matlind caught himself growing angry. I watched him sit back in his seat and take a deep breath; then he let it out. He took one more and let it out and then said, "So I told the sheriff about my wife. He took my statement. Right out front. I had to sit in the police car and give him the whole story.

"He didn't believe me. He said maybe she left me. Right in the middle of the night. She just left me."

I felt stunned and then I asked, "He didn't ask questions? Do an investigation? Fill out reports? Put out an APB on her?"

Matlind shook his head.

He said, "No way. Nothing. He did nothing.

"I mean, sure he asked the staff here. He spoke to the manager, but the guy just claimed that I was being unruly. He told him that I grabbed his arm and harassed him and the other patrons. And he claimed that no one saw her. They only saw me. Like she was a ghost. He acted like I'd made her up! My own wife!"

I asked, "What about the rednecks? You told him about that?"

Matlind shrugged and said, "I did. He even made a big show of driving me out there with one of the deputies."

"And?" I asked.

He said, "And the deputy was related to them somehow. He was like their cousin or something. I know because of the way he talked to them like he was the redneck liaison or something. It was weird."

"The oldest male, I guess their father, came outside and spoke to the sheriff for a long time. I had to remain in the back of the squad car like a prisoner. I tried to jump out of the car and hear what they were saying, but the door was locked from the outside."

"The deputy had locked me in!"

I nodded. My jaw didn't drop, but I was a little shocked. The police work sounded shady, but the whole story was tough to swallow, except for the fact that there had been three rednecks in his motel room. They had broken down his door and they had broken his nose and they had tried to abduct the guy. If I hadn't seen that with my own eyes, I'd think that he was crazy, but the rednecks had been real. He didn't fake them. He didn't conjure them. I had seen them with my own two eyes.

He looked down at his shiny, new wedding band for a moment; that too was real. I had never been married. I was only 18 years old and had never been interested in the marriage thing, but I had known married people in my life. Some liked it. Some didn't. I had been to weddings and I had seen happy couples. I had also been to many murder scenes and seen dead husbands and dead wives. Many, many times one spouse was the one who had killed the other and many, many times, the spouse never even tried to hide it.

Matlind twisted the wedding band around his finger like a nervous habit and then said, "I've been here ever since. I've tried looking for her everywhere. I don't know what else to do."

I asked, "Did you call the Feds?"

"No one in the town will let me use a phone. I told you that! I'm a prisoner here! I can't leave! I can't call out!"

"Calm down," I said.

He listened immediately, obediently and then he said, "I dealt with the sheriff already. What is the FBI going to do?"

I nodded. He was right. The FBI would probably reprimand the local sheriff's department by calling the governor, who'd call the mayor, but that would be the extent of it. The FBI dealt with kidnappings, but there was no proof of a kidnapping, no ransom, and all of the witnesses claimed that his wife doesn't exist. I could see his problem.

Even if the FBI or the state police got involved, the sheriff would say that Matlind was crazy anyway, and so far he might have been. I had no way to be

sure, not yet. A gut feeling told me that this guy was telling the truth, but I had no hard evidence that his story was real. All I had were three rednecks, a distraught husband, no eyewitnesses, and a wedding band that could be fake. I'd gone on less. I'd seen my mom go on less.

Matlind drank from his coffee, stared off into the tabletop, maybe at the cracks in the wood, and then said, "Those redneck assholes. They took her. I know it."

I said, "I don't understand. You described that they stared at you and Faye like it was with some kind of intense hatred, but I don't understand why. Why are you saying that they took her? And what about that part about the lynching?"

Then I finally understood. Before Matlind looked up and said one more word to me, I had gotten it. I knew exactly why he was so scared. I knew exactly what he was suggesting.

He looked at me and said, "Faye is black."

Chapter 13

I finished my bottled water and Matlind drank the rest of his coffee. Maria came around and offered Matlind a refill and asked me if I'd like another bottle of water. I shook my head and Matlind stayed quiet, so she figured that he didn't want any more coffee. Not that it mattered. He was so wound up that I doubted the extra caffeine would have made any difference.

Matlind wasn't going to sleep anytime soon.

Still, I said, "We should go. You need some sleep."

Matlind asked, "Can you help us?"

I heard the desperation in his voice. It tugged at me like that of a helpless child.

I nodded, didn't even think about it. I just reacted in the way that I guessed my mother would've predicted. She'd known that I'd help someone who needed it. In a way, when I look back on my life, all of the training and police work that she involved me in, I think that she had always known who I'd become. Crime scenes had been my classrooms. Chris and Faye Matlind's nightmare would be my first case on my own.

He paused, took a deep breath, and closed his eyes for a moment. Then he said, "Thank you! Thank you so much!"

I said, "I'll stay longer. We'll sort this out and then I'm on my way."

He nodded and thanked me again.

A glimpse of hope shot across his face like a meteor across the night sky.

I said, "Don't thank me yet. Let's get her back first."

He nodded.

I said, "So the last thing that happened was that you woke up and she was gone? Along with both of your cell phones, but she left her luggage?"

He said, "That's right. Those rednecks took her!"

I shook my head.

I said, "No. That doesn't make any sense. Why did they take her while she slept and yet they left you alone only to try and kidnap you last night? They could've

just gotten you both at the same time. No, I wouldn't be so sure that they had anything to do with it."

"What about the way that they stared at us? And why did they try to take me anyway?"

I stayed quiet.

"Maybe they didn't want to do it in front of their kids during the daytime?"

"Maybe they weren't trying to take you at all. Maybe they wanted to get rid of you. I still think that we need to look closer at the whole situation."

"You mean like an investigation?" he said.

I said, "Someone should. If the sheriff is not going to help find her, then we'll have to do it ourselves."

Maria brought me another bottled water and the check. It only had a charge for the coffee on it. I peeled out a five dollar bill and left it for her. And for the second time that day I left her a good tip.

Matlind had walked out of the diner and I had stayed inside to say goodbye to Maria.

I waited, standing up near the long counter and looked around the diner. The few others there paid no attention to me. They were all staring at the TV that hung near the real wall above a cracked mirror.

The volume was low, but the closed caption was on. There was a news report showing a town in Texas called Crosscut. Most of the town was burned to rubble. A story ran about a drug kingpin who had his men burn their properties to the ground. The kingpin was Oskar Tega, the name that keeps popping up on the news lately.

Suddenly, Maria burst out of the kitchen and walked over to me.

She asked, "Do you need any change?"

I said, "No. It's yours. I didn't want you to think that I wasn't going to call you. I have your number still."

She said, "You left it on the table earlier."

I said, "I memorized it."

"You memorized it?"

"Yes."

I stared back up passed her and watched another scene of burning rubble from the destroyed town of Crosscut.

Maria turned and looked back at the TV as well. Then she said, "Crosscut. That whole thing is a mess. I'm from a different part of the state, but my family tells me Crosscut is all anyone can talk about. It's just so hard to believe that a Mexican drug lord had a major operation right in a small town like that."

A moment passed and she smiled and then she asked, "So, you memorized my number? What are the last four digits?"

I said, "1864."

She smiled and she asked, "How do you remember that?"

I said, "Well, 1864 is the year before the end of the Civil War. In 1864, Lincoln implemented a strategy that would win him the war and crush the Confederacy."

"With what, more guns?"

"No the victory wasn't about guns or bullets. It was about economics."

Maria had a puzzled look on her face and honestly I wasn't sure if it was out of genuine interest or because she couldn't care less about the American Civil War.

I said, "Old Abe and Grant used *total war* to win the Civil War. It means that they won by crushing both the armed forces and the economy of the South."

She nodded along and then she changed the subject. Apparently she wasn't interested in American history. She said, "So you do know my number. You gonna call me?"

I said, "Wait and see. I might."

I smiled at her and she looked up at me, stared into my eyes.

She said, "You have nice eyes. They are the bluest eyes that I've ever seen."

I smiled bigger. That was something that I had heard from women before. It was one of my few traits that wasn't so scary. I was proud of my eyes. Sometimes I felt like they were the only reason that another human being even knew that I was a human being too and not a deranged Sasquatch man.

She leaned to the right-hand side and looked past me at Matlind, who stood outside.

"That guy you're with. He is so sad. I heard his wife left him. She disappeared."

I asked, "What do you know about him?"

She said, "Well, he was in here the other day. He was claiming that he was looking for his wife. He went off on the manager. He was delirious."

"Did you see her?"

"No. I was off. I only heard about it."

I asked, "Did any of the other waitresses?"

She said, "The ones on the day shift are old ladies. They've lived here forever. Worked here forever and they love to gossip, but they only talked about how crazy he was. Never mentioned a wife. And I didn't ask."

"Do you believe that she's real?"

She said, "A man like that, he's bent out of shape about somebody. He's not faking that part."

"Would you ask around for me? Don't push the issue. Just casually?"

"I can try, but I don't really talk to the other girls. The only person here who ever talks to me is Andrew, the cook. And he's kinda slow. Something wrong with him."

I nodded and said, "Can I ask you something else? Have you noticed that there aren't any minorities here?"

She said, "That was the first thing I noticed. I moved here a month ago. Came here by accident, trying to start a new life sort of thing. I'm from Texas and wanted to run away. So I drove until I found this place. I liked the lake and thought I had never lived in a small town, so why not?"

"I noticed right off the bat that because I'm Latina, people here treat me different. I mean sure the folks here have been nice to my face. And the fishermen who come through are friendly, but the store and bar owners didn't seem to want to hire me. They smiled, took my application, but no interviews, and no one even looked at my application. At this one place, the electronics store, I even handed the guy a blank application. Didn't even write on it just to see if he'd say anything. He never even looked down at it."

"And finally I walked in here and demanded that the graveyard manager talk to me. He said that the people in this town were old and had an old way of thinking.

"He said it wasn't anything personal. He never said the word 'racist,' but he implied it. He said it like 'they don't like outsiders.'

"No one here has said anything inappropriate to me or anything, but I'm telling you, Reacher, that they are some of the most racist people. They keep it to themselves, but it's there. Under the surface.

"I mean there are no black people here. There are no Asians. No other Hispanics. There are gay people. I mean there must be. One out of four people are gay. So the odds say that there have to be some, but they stay closeted. No way are they going to risk coming out in this place. It's like the land that time forgot."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say or to think. I had never in my wildest dreams imagined that a place like this still existed, even in the South.

"I'm the only minority in this whole town."

I nodded and thanked her and turned to walk away.

She said from over my shoulder, "Goodbye."

I stayed quiet, just walked out of the diner and stepped out onto the sidewalk and nodded at Matlind. We turned and walked along the streets in a kind of somber silence, headed back to the motel.

Matlind had a kind of relief on his face. I guessed that having someone believe him had made him feel like there was hope.

For the last eight days he had been on his own, scared and alone, and now he was no longer alone. Now, there were two of us.

We made it back to the motel. He stopped outside in the parking lot and stared at his broken door frame.

I saw the fear on his face.

I said, "Take my room. I'll sleep in yours. We can start looking in the morning. We aren't going to be able to accomplish anything tonight and you need rest."

"Right now rest is the best thing that you can do for yourself. Tomorrow I'll look around."

"Can you find her?"

"I'll find her."

He paused and then he asked, "Do you think that she's alive?"

"She's alive."

"What makes you think that we'll find her?"

I said, "They don't know about me. No one does. Not really. Maybe the rednecks."

"What if they do have her?"

I said, "They don't."

He asked, "What if they do?"

I said, "They don't. And if it turns out that they do, at that point they'll wish that they had never made such a grievous error."

He nodded, stayed quiet. He just looked down.

I said, "Matlind, go to sleep. Take my room."

And he did. I waited and heard the lock click.

I went into his room and pushed the splintered door as far closed as it would go.

I went into the bathroom, past all the luggage and piles of dirty clothes in the corner.

There were female items spread out all over the bathroom: makeup, mascara, a box of tampons, fragrances, one bottle of cologne, one razor, and two sets of toothbrushes.

A pink razor, a nice foldable one, rested on the side of the tub. A bottle of girlie shaving cream sat on the ledge next to it. The lid was off. A dab of white residue that must have once been cream hung out of the tip of the can.

On the bathroom shelf, near the sink were bottles of Midol, Aspirin, Motrin, some prescription bottles, and an asthmatic inhaler.

I looked up from the countertop and stared at myself in the mirror. I looked tired and less threatening because of it.

I rubbed my eyes.

I used the bathroom, washed my hands, and dried them off on a towel that hung near the shower curtain. Then I walked over to the bed, left my clothes on, and fell on top of the covers.

Lights out.

Chapter 14

I woke up late in the morning. I figured that the time was 10:35 a.m. I rolled over and looked at my cell phone. It read 10:34 a.m. but the four switched just as I looked at it. Now it was 10:35 a.m.

Time was a funny thing. I could tell it by shadows on the ground, but that was a survival technique that my Marine and sheriff mother had taught me. That was a technique that could be taught to anyone.

The real abnormality that I learned about myself early on was something that I couldn't quite explain and still couldn't always control. Whenever I needed to know what time it was all I had to do was just know. The really strange thing about the time in my head was that I had always had the ability to measure time. It was like there was a stopwatch in my head. I could measure distance and time down to seconds. The human brain is a powerful thing.

When I was a kid, my mom and teachers realized how smart I was. They pulled me out of school at the age of six and tested me for quantitative and analytical thinking skills.

I tested with perfect scores for someone three times my age in every category: advanced problem-solving, puzzles, and analyzing information. But I remained in a normal school. I never wanted to be different and my mom respected that.

They said that I was a genius, a word which comes from ancient Rome. A *genius* was believed to be a spirit that guided a person in his or her intellectual endeavors like a kind of tutelary deity.

The noun is linked to the Latin verb, *gigno*, *gignere*, *genui*, *genitus*, which means "to bring into being, create, and/or produce."

Being that I had never created or produced anything I figured that I wasn't a genius and I had no desire to be one. I never wanted to create art or write

literature or design monuments or spend my days solving long math equations or cracking impossible codes for the NSA or even creating complex algorithms for large sums of money from private technology companies. And my mother respected that about me. She used to say, "Reacher, you can go anywhere and you can be anything that you want. If you want to be a genius, then be a genius."

For me, I thought of genius as best said by a little-known guy named David Hume, an old, Scottish philosopher. He had died in 1776, the year that our country was born, one of the reasons why I remembered him so well.

Old David Hume had basically said that the way people see a genius is similar to the way people see the ignorant because a genius is looked at as a man who is estranged from society, as well as a man who exists in some lonely, remote, and distant place, far away from the rest of the world.

I was—like that.

From an early age, different organizations were always trying to recruit me.

The Army had been one of them. I didn't know until now that part of their interest was probably my last name. I'd always thought that it was because of my abilities. Now I feel foolish, but the Marines had shown interest in me as well and so did the Air Force.

I never thought much of any of it. I thought it was something that they had done to all of the kids who were in ROTC with me, but they didn't.

No matter what the different branches tried, I never even considered a military career as an option. Of course, I never considered anything as an option for my future. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up. I guessed that I'd go into law enforcement, a family trade after all, and I liked helping people. I liked correcting injustices. If Matlind had told me the truth, then a great injustice had been perpetrated on him and his wife.

I hoped that she was still out there, still alive, and that I would reach her in time.

Chapter 15

I checked in on Matlind. He was in a deep sleep. There was a bottle of *Ambien* next to his wallet on the nightstand.

I backed out of his room and left him to sleep. No reason to wake him. He slept like the dead and he probably needed it. Besides, I needed to investigate alone. I was better alone.

I locked the door from the inside and closed it behind me.

The sun was high in the sky and the trees seemed to move. They creaked in the wind. The air was warm and the smell was that of fresh, clean air.

For most fishermen, the day's catch had already come and gone because fishing was an early morning sport, a very early morning sport best started before the sun comes up.

I set out to explore the town and to search for Faye Matlind.

I had no photograph of her because someone had taken Chris's cell phone, where he had kept all of his pictures. I had had no real clues except for the rednecks. They were my only lead.

I walked and took out my phone. I unlocked it and skipped the missed messages, calls, emails, and voicemails. I pulled up the Internet and looked up the name, "Faye Matlind."

I figured that she'd probably have a social media account of some sort. Something with her picture on it. So, I searched all of the main search engines and social networks that I knew were popular. I found nothing for her. I had found a Facebook page for Chris Matlind, but it must've been ancient. Maybe only used once. He had no profile pictures. No photo albums. He had only a dozen friends and his last post was from four years ago.

Some people didn't use social media. I was one of them. I knew how to use it, but I didn't have a page or a profile.

I gave up this idea. I didn't need her picture anyway. She was a young black woman in a town full of old white people. She would stick out with no trouble at all.

I continued into town.

I hadn't eaten since dinner the night before, but I decided to skip breakfast and I wasn't interested in lunch.

I wanted to find Faye. Enough time had already elapsed without anyone looking for her.

I walked the roads and through the suburbs. I walked past the school, the post office, the public safety building, the people on the sidewalks, and the cars parked along the side of the streets. I saw a dismal public library with a parking lot that could've been a graveyard for old cars; the only cars that were in it were from the '70s or earlier. I continued walking through the town. There were more bait shops, a couple of gun stores, two hardware stores, a four-wheeler store, and then there was the other side of the diner. I had walked the long way around it from the night before.

I walked past two gas stations, one with a liquor store attached, and one with a broken old carwash that probably hadn't worked since 1980.

I walked past another small grocery store. It was an old chain brand store that I recognized the name of, but thought went out of business over a decade ago.

I took one more look at the Eckhart Medical Center and got a better look at the clinic attached to it. It was open for business and it was busy because the parking lot was full. Across the street from the clinic was a small plaza with another grocery store, this one smaller than the others that I'd seen, and it had a tiny drugstore attached to the corner.

The drugstore had a drive-through window, but the window was closed and dark inside and the lane to drive through it had been roped off with extensions.

I walked the downtown. I looked around for store clerks, attendants, cleaners, anyone who held a blue-collar job. I wanted people who made less money than everyone else, people who might be in a more talkative mood than the others. I wanted to ask them if they had seen a young black woman a week ago. I found a few townspeople who fit the bill. So I inquired about Faye's whereabouts, but no one had seen her.

They hadn't lied to me. Generally, no one ever lied to me. Most people had the common sense to tell me the information that I required and to do it quickly. Even if I acted polite, which usually I was, they told me fast. Most people didn't want to risk being discovered in a lie. Not by me. And not about something as serious as a missing woman.

Later in the morning, I came across one lady who walked a French poodle. An older lady, grandmotherly. She was as sweet as could be.

I asked, "Ma'am, do you know anything about a young black woman who came to town last week? She is missing."

The old lady replied, "Oh, dear. Missing. Oh, dear."

I said, "Ma'am, have you seen her?"

She shook her head in an early *Exorcist* movie kind of way, like it was about to start spinning around and around, but it didn't. Instead, she said, "I heard about that poor fellow who's looking for her, but I haven't seen her. I hope that it works out. Poor thing."

I nodded. She was telling the truth. She hadn't seen Faye or Chris. She knew nothing. Just gossip. The old birds probably had some sort of phone tree. One would call another one and spread the latest rumors. That sort of thing.

I didn't want to be one of those rumors. I didn't want to lose the element of surprise on whoever had Faye. So I didn't push her any farther. I shrugged, thanked her, and moved on.

I neared one of the churches, the one with the short steeple. A bell sounded from inside. I looked at the shadows on the ground. It was noon.

I had run out of places to search.

There was still the rest of the lake, which looked to just be houses and neighborhoods. I figured that I could spend the rest of the day retracing the Matlinds' hike around the lake and I could end at the rednecks' compound. That way I could take my time, make sure that there were no other places for answers, and by the time I reached the fork at the southwest side and the redneck compound, it would be dark.

That was where I shined—in the dark.

Chapter 16

Before I set out to trek around the lake, I needed to eat something. I thought about going back for Matlind, but eight days without sleep, the guy deserved to sleep the day away, so I walked toward the diner. I wanted to eat and I kept thinking about this guacamole steak burger that I'd seen on the menu. I wanted to try it, but the diner was located at the center of town and was surrounded by buildings. Before I went to eat, I wanted to get a look from the lake's shore and plan out my route, so I decided to walk two blocks to the lake and then head to the diner.

It only took three minutes and 53 seconds for me to reach the lake. I stopped and stood near the edge. The lake was full of boats and fishermen and there were a couple of Jet Skiers chasing each other in a wide circle.

On the little stony beach, kids played and parents fished and drank beer with the labels covered by bottle koozies.

I ignored all of that and scanned the shoreline. I followed it from left to right. Most of the eastern side seemed to be residential, lake houses, woods, and not much else.

It was a lot of area to cover, a lot of area for a new bride to go missing in, and a lot of area to hide a body. Then there was the lake itself. I wasn't familiar with the depths that it went, but it looked deep enough to sink a body. If it was deep enough, it could be years before it resurfaced.

I shrugged. I didn't want to think about her as dead. The clock ticked away, but I had the right perspective. Right now this was a rescue mission, not a recovery. To think of it as a recovery was to give up hope that Faye was alive and that would condemn her to death, if she was still alive.

I turned and left the shoreline behind me.

I walked the two blocks past the Eckhart Medical Center and to the corner in front of the drugstore, where I stopped. My animal brain switched on and my primal instincts surfaced because at that moment, that exact second, I stood on the sidewalk and watched a normal and frequent, daily occurrence take place, one that pissed me off.

A man was hitting on a woman and she rejected his advances, but he continued.

She rejected him again and again, making it obvious from where I stood that she was clearly uncomfortable and wanted to leave.

I saw her just as she stepped out of the drugstore, a small bag in her hand and a purse on her arm, and then I saw the man. First he was cruising in his car down the street with his head hanging out of the driver's side window. He rubbernecked at her and then he pulled over into the parking lot, left his car running, and got out. He went over to her and stopped her by just standing dead in her way.

He kept on hitting on her and she kept on rejecting him. She tried to walk around him, but he followed her to her vehicle and continued to harass her.

She continued to reject him and she even started raising her voice to him.

He ignored her rejections, and in a rural accent, like one of those fat rednecks, he taunted her.

This was a common everyday occurrence in America, around the world. A man hit on a woman. She rejected him. He harassed her. Typical everyday situation. Nothing new about that. Normally I would've already intervened when the guy had gone too far, which this guy clearly had done. Normally I would've strongly encouraged the guy to apologize and to move along, but this everyday situation was anything but normal because the woman who was being harassed was the beautiful woman that I had met yesterday morning, the one who jogged around the lake. And the guy was armed. He had a Glock 22 holstered in a plain, brown side holster on his belt. But far worse than that was the fact that this guy was a sheriff's deputy in full uniform.

Chapter 17

The deputy leaned against Sheldon's car door, hindering her from getting in and driving away.

Staying on the sidelines, doing nothing, ignoring an injustice wasn't in my nature. I had generations of cop genes flowing through my blood and bones. So I crossed the street and walked straight up behind the cop.

A flash of recognition came across Sheldon's face.

I stood four feet from the guy before he heard me. Not good situational awareness.

Uniform or no uniform, cop or no cop, I talked to him like he was just another guy.

I said, "The lady said that she isn't interested in talking to you. She made that clear."

The guy turned to face me. He was startled.

Some kind of cop training or ancient predatory urge to defend an imaginary territory came over him because he immediately reached for his gun. He left it holstered. He rested his hand on the butt. It probably made him feel safer. Whatever.

He wasn't going to draw on me. Not here. Not in front of witnesses on a relatively busy cross section of street in broad daylight. Just then several customers left the drugstore behind him. A mother with her three young kids walked to their car from a shoe store in the plaza. No way was he going to draw, not when he was the one who was in the wrong.

He opened his mouth to speak, but before he let out a word, I smelled his breath. He smelled like he had bathed in alcohol. I detected vodka and whiskey and probably beer on his breath. Everyone had gone to the party.

The guy must've been up all night doing shots. He probably never went to bed.

He wasn't wasted. Not completely. Buzzed bad, but mostly coherent.

He asked, "Who the HELL are you!"

I said, "Me? I'm nobody. I'm a passerby."

He looked puzzled, like he hadn't been at the top of his class.

I said, "But you. You're a cop. A sheriff's deputy by the look of your uniform. You're supposed to uphold the law. You're supposed to always make your department look good.

"Right now I'd say that you are failing. Miserably."

The cop looked at me with fury in his eyes.

He said, "I'm talking to this lady. She is not your concern. I'm gonna let you walk away now before you get hurt."

"Hurt?" I asked. "I agree. One of us will get hurt. But it won't be her and it certainly won't be me. And that only leaves you. You could pull that gun on a couple of innocent people. And you could slip and the gun could come out of your hand. It could go off and hit you in the leg or the arm and then you'd have to go to the hospital. And explain how this happened."

He asked, "Are you threat'nin' me?"

He gripped the gun's handle. He didn't brandish it, just grabbed it like a gunslinger waiting for the count of three.

He said, "Threat'nin' an officer of the law is illegal here."

I said, "Harassing a citizen, especially sexually harassing a female one, is illegal everywhere.

"Now. Get your hand off your gun. As of right now, we are just a couple of guys talking. Having a verbal dispute. A disagreement."

My hands hung harmlessly by my sides. No sudden action. No threatening motions. I knew all of the signals that cops were trained to look for and at that moment I displayed none of them.

Still I stayed within grabbing distance of the deputy in case I needed to take the Glock from him before he hurt someone with it.

I said, "Two guys having a verbal disagreement are just that—two guys. Not friends. Not enemies. Just two guys.

"If you pull that gun out then we'll be enemies. And you don't want to be my enemy. Trust me."

The cop stayed quiet. He stood there frozen. He wanted to pull out his Glock and arrest me. I saw it in his eyes, but he didn't.

With witnesses everywhere, he'd never be able to charge me with anything that would stick. Whatever bogus charge he came up with would get dismissed in court and he'd be suspended for sure. Probably lose his job whenever Sheldon's testimony came up.

The guy moved his hand away from his gun as he looked around the parking lot and realized that I was right.

I smiled and took a glance at his nameplate. *Gemson.*

Strange name. Stranger than mine even.

I said, "Good call. Why don't we just keep this between us?"

He nodded, slowly.

I said, "And in the future why don't you just steer clear of this woman. Now if I were you, I'd leave your squad car parked where it is, take the keys out of the ignition and get on your cell phone or radio. Call the dispatcher. Tell her that you have suddenly come down with a stomach bug and then walk or call a cab and go home. Get some sleep and sober up."

Gemson said, "I will see you again."

He said nothing else, just looked around to see if anyone had paid close attention to what had happened. No one seemed to have picked up on it.

Satisfied, he walked away. Not fast. Not slow. He used a normal speed until he was lost to sight.

I walked over to the cop car, reached in through the window, pressed the gear to neutral, and then I gripped the roof and the side of the car and pushed it over near the curb. It was a fire lane, but, hey, this was an emergency vehicle. Then I popped the lever back to park and reached down and turned off the ignition. I tossed the keys onto the seat, didn't much care if someone came along and stole the car. Not my business.

Chapter 18

I hadn't noticed before but Sheldon had dropped her grocery bag while trying to get away from Gemson. Her purchases had spilled out all over the ground. She bent over and began recovering them.

I walked back up the drive to the parking lot, reached her, knelt down beside her, and began helping her pick up the spilled contents.

I put my hand on a box marked *Salbutamol*, a medication for mild to severe asthma. There were various other pharmaceutical items. One box marked *Elavil*, an antidepressant, and *Ambien*, a sleep aid. There were a couple of boxes of *Norflex* and *Flexeril*, both muscle relaxers, and there were various other medications that I had never heard of and gauze and other medical supplies.

I said, "That's a lot of medications. And *Salbutamol*, that's for asthmatics. You don't have asthma. No way. Not the way that you run and the shape that you're in. Are you a drug dealer or something?"

She scooped up the boxes of pills quickly and then smiled.

She said, "No. And what do you mean about the shape that I'm in?"

I shrugged and then I said, "Your body is immaculate. I'm guessing that you don't have an ounce of fat on you. No way does someone with severe asthma work out and run as much as you do."

She smiled, nodded, and then said, "I work at the clinic. This is a supply run."

I nodded and smiled back.

She stood up and straightened out the bottom of her romper. It looked new. It had a tribal pattern. The bottom was short, well below her fingertips, if she had reached them down by her sides. The back had a "V" shape cut down from her neckline. Her hair was long and blond. She wore it down. The breeze scooped it up and blew it slowly behind her.

She looked comfortable and magnificent all at the same time.

I said, "You don't dress like someone who works in a clinic."

"What's wrong with the way I dress?"

"Nothing. You look good. Really good. Is it your day off?"

She said, "No. I have clothes at the clinic. We have lockers. I have my scrubs there."

I nodded.

She smiled at me.

She said, "Nice seeing you again. Very nice."

She looked me over.

I said, "I know that you have to bring all that stuff in, but would you like to have lunch with me?"

She paused a beat and looked down at a slim wristwatch that hung from her left arm. Then she frowned at the time.

She said, "I really can't. I'm sorry. I have to get to the clinic. Rain check?"

I nodded. Stayed quiet.

She said, "You can find me at the clinic."

I smiled and said, "Give me your phone number."

She told me the digits. I didn't write them down, just spoke them. I memorized them. She pulled a pair of sunglasses out of her purse and slid them onto her face, pushing the top all the way up on the bridge of her nose. They were big, bulky things like the kind actresses wear.

She got into a new model BMW, started the engine, and pulled away. I watched as she turned the corner and was gone. I thought nothing more of it. It was time to grab a bite to eat, so I headed off toward the diner.

Chapter 19

Starbucks is a company that has grown exponentially, from a single coffee bean to the largest coffee empire in the world. There is more than one reason for its success. First, coffee is addictive. Second, Starbucks provides a place for people to get together. Whatever the reason, Starbucks all over the world are hubs for people to gather, to talk, to read, and to work on whatever it is that people do on their laptops.

Black Rock didn't have a Starbucks. In this case, the place that served as a hub was the diner, and that was where I was.

I sat in the same booth as before. Hazel was my waitress. The place was busy. Middle of the day and the lunch crowd was here; hell, the whole town was here. The place was filled with restaurant sounds: the *clinking* of plates, the *tinging* of silverware, and the *humming* from the ovens in the kitchen.

I drank a glass of milk and devoured a grilled chicken sandwich.

The diner was full of fishermen in from a morning on the lake, swapping stories of their catches, and gloating over those who had caught nothing. In the corner across from me sat a group of firemen. They wore blue t-shirts with the town of Black Rock's crest on the front and *Fire Department* written in big bold letters on the top.

One of them looked kind of old to be a fireman, but I doubted that they saw much action here. So I figured that the townspeople were safe, for now.

At another table sat a pair of office types and across from them, nearer to the bathrooms, there was a blind guy with a younger man and a well-behaved golden retriever, a service animal.

I took the people in the booth next to me to be city officials of some sort. They wore suits and talked about town ordinances and spoke ill of the public by making the occasional joke about some lady who apparently had filed the wrong forms.

I decided to google the Matlinds again and see what else I could find out.

I took my cell phone out of my pocket and checked the Internet. I googled both Matlind and Dr. Matlind. No results and then I typed in Faye's name. Nothing.

I searched combinations of their names and the word "*married*." Nothing.

I checked a website related to local arrests and crimes. There was nothing about Faye, nothing about Chris. There was a good bit about the missing girls, but nothing new to me. The cops were baffled before and still were today. They suspected that the girls were targeted because they had traveled alone on lonely highways and interstates.

The only thing that caught my attention was one website that had posted pictures of the missing girls, which was good because I could memorize their faces. Most were young. Some were white. Some black. Some Hispanic. The only thing that jumped out at me about them was that they were all beautiful. I don't

mean simply attractive. I mean *beautiful* like a model is in real life. They were drop-dead gorgeous. Really top-quality-looking young women.

The website also mentioned the missing teenage girl from Grange Town, which was about 40 miles south of the lake. Her name was Ann Gables. There was a picture of her on the website with an amber alert. She was a minor. She was black and stunningly beautiful.

I remembered her name. She was the missing girl from Jill's school. Jill was the girl who gave me a ride two days ago.

Whoever was behind their disappearances had picked them because they were so good-looking, but I was sure this was information that the FBI and local sheriffs already had.

However, if Deputy Gemson was any indication as to the performance of the local sheriff's office, then I wasn't surprised that they hadn't found any of the girls yet.

I thought about Faye's possible connection to the missing girls. Perhaps, it was related or perhaps Chris was right about the rednecks. Or maybe she had left him. It happens.

I switched my phone to standby and slipped it back into my pocket. Then I sat back and tried to pick up on any clues that I might have missed.

There was an old guy seated across from me at the next booth. He wore a red trucker's hat and blue overalls. He tilted a white coffee mug all the way back until the contents were emptied. Then he stood up and thanked Hazel and left money on the table.

I watched him leave the diner and then I looked back at his table. He had left behind today's newspaper. I had seen guys leave behind their newspapers before. They left them for the next reader like change left in one of those take-a-penny cups at the gas station. They just paid it forward.

I scooted out of my booth and stood up and reached across the aisle. I swiped up the paper and began skimming through it. It was *USA Today*. No local stories would be in it, but it didn't matter. I was interested in the cover story.

There was a giant photo of a Mexican man. In large print above his picture it read:

WHERE IS HE?

The article was about Oskar Tega. The DEA was having a real problem finding him. They now believed that he had escaped by private jet. They thought he was in Cuba, but they hadn't ruled out the possibility that he was still in the U.S.

The article recapped how Tega had escaped capture and landed in a small town in Texas. One of his farms was located there. His men had stocked up on whatever kind of drugs he manufactured and then they burned the whole town to the ground. Some kind of scorched earth policy.

That was when I noticed the sheriff's deputies outside. Four men pulled up in three police cruisers. One of them was Deputy Gemson.

They rolled up to the front of the diner. Light bars blared.

The other patrons stared out of the diner windows. They didn't react. No one knew what to do. Many of them had never seen the cops use their light bars before, not in this town.

The Dodge Intrepids with the police package, a good deal. Finally they were getting their money's worth.

The cops jumped out of their cars and lined up behind them outside of the diner. They drew out their weapons and pointed them at the front doors.

Two shotguns. They were Mossberg 590s. Both had pistol grips and both were deadly. Probably department issued. Not good for their target.

The other two deputies, including Gemson, held out Glocks.

I saw one of them get on his radio. There was some inaudible chatter and then the guys ran for the door. They had decent moves. Probably practiced at least once a week on their entries.

One shotgun and one deputy with the Glock covered the front door; then Gemson and the other deputy ran around the building and out of sight. They went to cover the backdoor.

In 17 seconds from start to finish they were in the diner and 16 and a half seconds before that I realized that they were there for me.

I had spent my summers training with my Marine and sheriff mom and I knew the routine. I knew the score. These country boys were here for me, not a doubt in my mind. Gemson had not heeded my advice. Instead of going home and sleeping it off, he had gone and rounded up his cop buddies.

I finished my milk and stood up. Hands raised.

Gemson entered through the back with the deputy carrying the shotgun. The other two came in through the front at a nice fast speed, sweeping the room and scanning the other patrons, all of whom had dropped as low as they could. Most sank down in their seats. Hazel hid behind the counter. One guy from inside the kitchen door stuck his head out and pulled it right back in half the time that it had taken him to stick it out in the first place.

The first deputy with the shotgun screamed at me to get down. He screamed it over and over.

“GET DOWN! GET DOWN!”

I stayed standing. I wasn't going to get down. No way. I had just cleaned my clothes the night before and I wasn't about to get them dirty on this floor. These guys could forget about that. So I stayed standing.

Gemson eyeballed me and moseyed on over to me. I noticed immediately that he had listened to me, partially because he had gone home. That's where he showered and changed his clothes before grabbing the cavalry because he didn't stink of booze anymore. Probably hadn't wanted them to notice it. It would've been harder to explain to his cop buddies that he was on the job, intoxicated. It would've made my defense more plausible.

He got even closer. Too close. If I wanted to I could have lunged for him. I could've grabbed his Glock away and shot him in the chest before he knew it, before any of them knew it was happening.

These other cops weren't going to fire. Not in here. Too crowded. There were women and children present. Even if they did fire, I could've swiped the gun and

ducked and rolled and gotten enough shots off to kill the one who had run in with Gemson.

He'd be dead and I would've shot my way out the back, but I did nothing. I stood still with my hands up. Then I lowered them and reached them out in the universal symbol for cuff me.

And Gemson did. He stepped up like a hero and slapped the cuffs on me—tight.

He said, "I got ya, city boy."

I smiled for three reasons. First, he had cuffed me in the front. Rookie mistake. Second, he had gotten close enough that I could still have taken his weapon from him. The third thing I said out loud: "I'm not a city boy. I grew up in a town smaller than this, but you probably think that I'm from the city because I can read books and speak with big words."

He sneered and said, "Ya under arrest, boy. Silence is one of ya rights and I suggest ya exercise it."

Silence was something that I was good at. So I stayed quiet.

Chapter 20

Gemson made sure that he drove me. I sat in the back of his car, handcuffed in the front. He talked the whole time, but I didn't listen. I thought about Matlind. He wouldn't be okay on his own. I had to get out of this somehow.

Always try to find the good in any situation; that was my motto, one of them, and that was what I did. I was detained by the police, but they had zero on me. Witnesses would've sworn to that. Of course the only one that I knew by name was Sheldon, but how hard would she have been to find? Probably not hard at all. Even if I hadn't known that she worked at the Eckhart Clinic, I still bet that she was easy to find, probably the easiest resident.

In this town, how many other women would have looked as good as her? One? Two? I'd bet more like zero. No way would anyone have mistaken her. The men here would've been able to identify her by a sketch if it was drawn by a third grader. No one was going to not know who she was. Her statement would put me in the clear of whatever bogus charges that Gemson had dreamed up.

We got to the stationhouse. It was in the Public Safety Building that I had seen yesterday.

Gemson turned off the light bar as we pulled into the parking lot. He parked the car and got out. He waited for the other three cops to pull up and then he got me out.

The four cops took me into the building. Each had one hand on me. My arms. My back. Restraining my movements. Wise choice.

The inside of the station was a ghost town. Their dispatch center must've been in another part of the building because there were no employees there except for the cops who had brought me in.

One of the other deputies said, "Step this way."

I followed his instructions. After they saw that I was complying, they took their hands off me.

Gemson and one of the other deputies went into another room, while the two remaining cops took me into a back room and fingerprinted and booked me. I ended up in a holding cell in less than 15 minutes. I would have been impressed except that these guys had nothing else to do.

I was their top priority. I was their *only* priority.

I waited for another 20 minutes before I met with the sheriff.

I sat on the rear bench in my cell. No bed. Just a hard bench that thrust out from the wall.

I stared through the cell bars. It looked like I hadn't taken my eyes off the wall across from my cell, but really I was imagining Chris and Faye Matlind, a newlywed couple that took a detour through Mississippi and ended up in a peculiar, small town that held hatred for people who were different.

I hadn't personally witnessed any mistreatment, not like Matlind had described, but I couldn't justify the fact that there were no minorities here except for Maria. However, she worked late nights when the town was asleep and she probably stayed indoors when they were all awake. Most people probably didn't know that she lived here.

If the rednecks were guilty of abducting Matlind's wife, perhaps they didn't know about Maria either or perhaps she was too visible, didn't make for an ideal target.

Suddenly, I heard a noise. Down the hallway from my cell, there was a thick, metal door, painted white to match the walls. The door creaked open and a man nearing 60 entered. He had deep blue eyes and slicked-back white hair. He limped slightly, not enough to require a cane, but enough to slow him down in a foot chase.

He walked slowly over to my cell and then he stopped out in front of it.

He said, "Son, I'm the county sheriff. My name is Ty Grady. You can call me Ty. I don't mind."

I stayed quiet.

He said, "The law says that you are innocent until a judge says otherwise. So until he says otherwise, then we can be on a first name basis. Right?"

I stayed quiet.

He said, "Exercising your right to remain silent? Well that's okay. It *is* your right."

I nodded.

He said, "Stand up, son, so I can get a good look at you."

I remained seated for a moment. Then I decided that cooperating might get me out faster, maybe even today if I was lucky. So I stood up and walked closer to the bars.

Grady backed away after he saw me stand up.

Behind that were my ice-blue eyes like a wolf's.

I had been told a few times in my life by girls that I had nice blue eyes. They had used the word "nice." but that wasn't the only image that my eyes projected. My ice-blue eyes could also be terrifying. Right then, that's what they were. I had been born with the ability to stare a man down with an ice-cold stare.

Sheriff Grady felt that cold stare. It burned him like dry ice.

He was a veteran sheriff, probably had seen it all, but now he was trembling. It was only slight, but it was there.

He said, "So you aren't going to talk. And that's fine. Like I said before, that's your right under the law, but just because you are going to be silent doesn't mean that you can't listen.

"Your name is Cameron Reacher. That's what your driver's license says."

I stayed quiet.

He said, "Do you have parents? They should be notified that we have you in custody."

I stayed quiet.

"Cameron, this will go a lot better on you if you cooperate at least some."

I paused for a second and thought about it. I decided that I needed this to go faster, so I said, "Reacher."

He said, "Pardon?"

"My name is Reacher. No one calls me Cameron."

"Reacher? Last name. Like in the military?"

I nodded.

"Do you have parents?"

"I had a mother."

"Had?"

"She died. She was also a sheriff."

He looked at me with renewed interest.

He asked, "A sheriff? What was her name?"

I said, "Deveraux."

His jaw dropped. He said, "Deveraux? I know..."

Then he stopped talking. He waited and then he said, "I *knew* your ma. She's passed on?"

I nodded.

His jaw closed and he said, "I'm sorry to hear that. I saw her about two years ago at a conference in Tupelo. Very good woman. I didn't know that she had a son."

I nodded.

"Well, that might give you a little more lenience with the judge. I believe that he met your ma once."

I stayed quiet.

He said, "Do you know why you're here?"

Still quiet.

He said, "Assault."

I grinned and then I said, "Your deputy started it."

Grady looked confused and then he asked, "Deputy?"

I said, "Yeah. From earlier today. Your deputy picked the wrong man to mess with and I wouldn't call it assault. Maybe his feelings got hurt, but I didn't hurt anything else. Not that I hadn't wanted to."

He said, "I'm not sure what you're talking about, son."

I said nothing more.

He paused and shrugged and then he said, "I'm talking about the three guys from your motel room last night. You sent two of them to the clinic."

Chapter 21

Ty Grady was a well-spoken man for a country sheriff, at least he was better spoken than his deputies seemed to be, but not as well as my mom had been. I suspected that he had been educated somewhere else and moved here.

Grady was not a common Mississippi name.

He wore an official county sheriff department's jacket even though it was May, like a symbol of his profession. On his belt he had an old web holster with a Glock 22 in it. All I could see was the butt of the gun. It glimmered black in the dim lights. It looked well maintained, well oiled and shined.

He said, "Those boys say that you attacked them."

I said, "I attacked three armed men?"

He asked, "They were armed?"

I said, "One had a Louisville slugger."

"A baseball bat? You took on three heavyset guys, put two in the clinic, and one had a baseball bat?"

I said, "That's about the sum of it. Except I didn't attack them."

"You didn't?"

"No. They attacked my neighbor at the motel. The guy in room 13. You should check on him."

"Yeah? Why is that?"

"His wife is missing. She was abducted and those guys had something to do with it."

He said, "Those boys didn't abduct anyone."

I said, "They were trying to abduct him."

He said, "They never mentioned anything about a motel room. They said that you attacked them in the parking lot."

"They must be confused. Maybe when they fell on their baseball bat. Either way, I never attacked anyone."

He nodded and then said, "Well you're here for the day and night. The judge will hear your case in the morning. He's on the lake today. Will be the whole day I'm afraid."

I said, "Grady."

He leaned in close to the bars.

I said, "You need to check on Chris Matlind, the guy in room 13 at the motel. He'll be in my room today. Room 14. His wife is missing and he is scared. He thinks that the whole town is in on it. Claims that no one will help him. Not even you."

"That guy that you're talking about never came here with any wife. We investigated and questioned him and multiple eyewitnesses. No one saw any wife or any other woman with him."

I said, "Sheriff. She is a young black woman. Could be that the rednecks took her because of it or it could be that her disappearance has something to do with

all of those missing girls, like she is the latest victim. Might be that those rednecks that you're protecting are into more than you think."

He said, "Those boys might be into making moonshine and stockpiling illegal guns. Maybe even cooking meth, but that's the extent of it. They'd never hurt anyone."

He turned to walk away.

He stopped, didn't turn back, but said, "I don't give a shit if anyone is black or purple. No one here has taken her because she isn't real. Period."

He continued walking. He made it halfway down the corridor.

I said, "Grady, my mom was a sheriff. I know the cop life. It's your duty to check on every crime that is reported to you. No matter how much you don't believe it. I'm telling you that Matlind is telling the truth. I saw it in his eyes. That guy lost someone and she might still be here and she might still be alive."

He stopped, but never turned around. He said over his shoulder, "I will personally go by and talk with him."

He turned and walked down the hall and was lost to sight.

Chapter 22

I wasn't familiar with prisons. I had never seen the inside of one except in the movies. I was familiar with holding cells.

Four walls, a cot or bench, a toilet, and bars or a heavy door, that was all there was to it.

I guessed that I was lucky to have my own cell.

My mother had taught me a lot about the way of Marines.

She had said, "Once a Marine, always a Marine."

Marines never stopped being Marines, even after they left the Corps. That was one of their crazy things, like a code, and my mom was no exception. She ran my life like a Marine. Up at the same time, lights out at the same time and just because she was gone most of the time investigating crimes didn't mean that the routine stopped. For my whole life she worked as a sheriff. When I was old enough she'd take me out on patrol with her. Some people thought that this was an irregular parenting practice, but I loved it.

To her I was a Reacher and it was in my blood to learn these things.

Another lesson that she had taught me was to sleep when you can because you never know when the next chance will be.

Sitting in jail and worrying about my situation wasn't going to help Matlind and it certainly wasn't going to help find Faye. Waste of energy.

I lay down on the hard bench and closed my eyes.

I figured that I probably could've asked for a pillow and a blanket or they could've at least offered me that, but I would be okay. I'd slept on worse.

They had taken my cell phone. I had to use my mind to mark the time. It was 2:45 in the afternoon. Sounded right.

Chapter 23

The FBI's Domestic Investigations and Operations Guide covers policies and procedures on how the FBI deals with domestic crimes such as kidnappings.

Traditionally, officials are strictly bonded to stay within the confines of the law in order to try and recover a kidnapped individual, but the Patriot Act changed that. It gave authorities considerably more room to *maneuver* within the law in order to secure abductees.

In abductions there was an unwritten rule—the 48-hour rule.

If an abductee wasn't rescued within 48 hours, then the rescue generally turned into a homicide investigation. The kidnapping part was over. Chances were the victim was already dead. Not good for Faye Matlind. What was even worse was that there had been no ransom demands—not one.

If she was taken by the same people who took Ann Gables or any of the other missing girls, then Faye was as good as dead.

I knew that. I hoped that Chris didn't.

I woke up to a dark hallway and an even darker cell. The lights had shut off.

I estimated that the time was somewhere around 10:30 at night.

I got up from the bench and stretched my arms out as far as they would reach. The muscles in my body had cramped up from that tiny stiff bench.

I stood up and walked over to the bars. I craned my head and peered down the hallway.

A single fluorescent light blinked in front of the door to the corridor.

Another light was above my cell, but it only flickered once and then went completely black. I wasn't sure if it was out or just off. Neither would've surprised me. I didn't imagine that they came down here often to do maintenance.

I closed my eyes and listened hard. Surely someone was supposed to be guarding me. I heard nothing but the hum of an air conditioner somewhere outside my wall. Probably a large outside unit.

I sat back down on the bench and thought and then decided to return to sleep.

Chapter 24

I slept for another hour and woke up to a faint noise that sounded like keys rattling in someone's pocket.

I sat straight up and peered into the darkness. First I craned my head and looked down the edge of the cell toward the door to the hallway. The single light still flickered in the darkness.

I saw that the door to the hallway was wide open. I turned my head and stared at the center of my cell door. I stared through the bars. Someone was standing there.

The door swung open in an abrupt, fluid motion and the light above it flickered once. I saw in that brief flash two things that unsettled me.

First, it was a short stranger whom I had never seen before. Not a cop. No uniform. Not one of the rednecks. My first thought was maybe they had gotten their cousin deputy to let them in and maybe they had come for me in the quiet of the night. Small towns were known for that kind of corruption, but the stranger I'd glimpsed was definitely not one of them. He was Hispanic.

The second thing I noticed that stirred me up inside was that at the end of a short arm, in a gloved hand—outstretched and pointed right at me—was what looked like a Heckler & Koch P30 with a suppressor attached to it.

Possibly it was a P30L or LS. I thought P30L. Not a common gun in this area except among collectors. A good weapon. Better when it's not pointed directly at your center mass.

I remained still. I had the chance to dive to the right-hand side, roll, and come at the guy with a fast right hook. It was dark enough that I had a good chance to make the connection before a novice shooter fired his weapon, but I wasn't sure how novice this guy was. He might've been as novice as a newborn and then again he might've been born holding a gun, which was a more likely scenario being that he had broken into a jail cell in the middle of a stationhouse. Also the guy might fire blind. Even a novice can fire randomly into the dark and hit something, especially in such a confined space. I was fast, but not faster than bullets. The distance between where I stood and his last known position was about 11 or 12 feet.

I might've made it. Maybe. But I didn't want to get shot. Better to wait and learn his intent, then react.

Unless he fired. At which point it didn't matter the odds. It didn't matter the questions that boiled in my head. If he fired a single shot, then I'd react. Self-preservation demanded it.

He hadn't fired. Instead he clicked on a flashlight in his left hand and killed my chances of using the dark to my advantage.

He shone the light right in my eyes, which told me immediately that this was not a novice guy. Therefore, I had made the right decision in refraining from action. Then he said in a thick Mexican accent, "Stand up."

I stood up.

He tucked the flashlight between his cheek and shoulder like it was a telephone and then reached his left hand toward his center mass and removed something from around his body. It was something that was thick and bunched up like he had been holding onto a snake.

He tossed it at my feet.

I looked down. He returned the flashlight to his left hand and pointed the beam at the coiled object on the ground. It was about a seven-foot coil of extension cord, orange and bright under the beam from the flashlight.

He said, "Tie it into a noose."

That was when I knew that I should've reacted sooner.

Chapter 25

The first time that I'd seen the Public Safety Building in Black Rock, I had thought that it was a brand new building. I had been half right. Most of it was new. New brick. New doors. New roof. But the building was old. It was remodeled and added onto and then years later it had been remodeled again. From the outside I hadn't been able to tell. It had looked brand new—a fine job. But now that a short Mexican whom I had never seen before was pointing a solid Heckler & Koch P30L attached with a sound suppressor at my head, I realized that it had been remodeled and wasn't built new like I had originally thought.

I realized this because the Mexican guy seemed intent on forcing me to hang myself from the thick, brand-new sprinkler system that had been put in place above my cell. Staring up at the metal pipes that ran along the ceiling, I saw that the floor above me was newer than and lower than the walls, like the ceiling had been built only to split a larger floor in half. There were signs of paint distortion and chipped-away ceiling fragments that were much older than the rest of the building.

The Mexican guy said, "Now throw the cord over the pipe."

I tossed the cord over the pipe.

He said, "Loop it around the pipe and tie the other end around the bars. Make sure that it's tight."

I did as he said. The cord was tight and the pipe was strong enough to support my weight.

He said, "Jump up and grab the pipe and hang from it. Like monkey bars."

I evaluated the situation. My mind raced. I couldn't calculate a scenario to escape that didn't involve bum rushing him and getting shot in the process. So, I jumped up and hung from the pipe. He said, "Now slip your head through the noose."

I followed his instructions.

He said, "If you don't do as I say, I'll find people that you care about and kill them."

I nodded. Sweat dripped from my brow. I appeared terrified.

He said, "Hang yourself."

I didn't move.

He fired the gun and the muzzle flashed bright in the blackness and the sound popped and echoed in through the stationhouse. A gun suppressor didn't silence bullets to a low ping sound like in the movies. The amount of sound that was silenced varied from gun to gun, but in a small room like a jail cell or a quiet stationhouse with cement walls, the sound is like a pop that sounds much louder than someone dropping a pin, even louder than someone breaking a window with a baseball bat.

The bullet zipped past my head and embedded deep into the ceiling above. Small chips of ceiling fell down on me and probably peppered my hair.

I cringed.

He said, "Hang yourself or I will shoot you and you will be dead anyway. Then I will find people you love and they will die too."

I didn't move.

He pointed the gun downward in an area where no man wants to get shot.

I took a deep breath and let go of the pipes. The fall wasn't far enough to break my neck, which was a huge relief, but my feet dangled off the ground. It was far enough to strangle me.

The stranger watched as I strangled to death.

I was calm at first, but soon enough I felt the breath rush out of me and the fear of death overpowered me. I clawed and grabbed at the cord.

My legs kicked out violently and flailed around. He dodged back to avoid them. He kept the flashlight beam in my eyes and he kept the gun pointed at me. He watched as I struggled to breathe, to live, and in less than a minute, my body was limp.

The Mexican guy had watched me hang to death.

Chapter 26

The Mexican had figured that I knew how to tie a hangman's noose. And I did.

I knew how to tie all sorts of complicated knots. My mom had been a Marine, but it was the Navy that was known for their knot craft. She had had friends in the Navy and she had said, "The usefulness of a Navy man was his ability to tie a knot. A good knot could mean the difference between life and death in certain situations."

This had been one of those situations.

In order to tie a fake hangman's knot, you have to tie a hangman's noose but lengthen the short end and swap it as the long end. Pulling on this end instead won't tighten the noose, but to the casual observer it will look the same. The sliding end has to be hidden inside the coil so there is no risk of tightening the noose. The surrounding coil has to be loose enough to ensure it can be pulled free.

I had tied the trick knot, but if the Mexican had turned on the overhead lights, he might've seen this. He might have lived longer.

The Mexican came in close to me to check to see if I was breathing. I wasn't. Then he waited for a long minute to make sure that I was dead. It appeared that I was. That was when he lowered his gun and turned his back on me—mistake.

I squinted, barely opened my eyes, and peeked out. I saw his back turned, opened my eyes all the way, and peered up. I reached up, grabbed the pipe overhead, lifted my body upward, and slid my neck out of the noose. It throbbed and ached from the fall when my neck had dropped and was caught by the noose, but my trick knot had worked. Any greater a drop and my neck might've broken and I would be dead, but I wasn't. I was alive.

I dropped silently to the floor. I was barefoot, so staying quiet wasn't hard.

I tiptoed in a low crouch. The floor was hard and cold under my bare feet. I snuck up behind the guy. He had fallen for my hoax, but he was no amateur. He must've sensed me behind him like a guy with a military background, some kind of special forces. He flipped around fast, gun ready to fire.

He blind fired once into the darkness and the bullet whizzed past me. I heard it hit the opposite wall.

The guy saw me in the muzzle flash, but it was too late. I was already right on him.

I had never played baseball in my life, but I had always liked the sport. I had always respected the high-speed throws of major league pitchers. I was fascinated at how many miles per hour some of their fastballs could fly. A hundred miles an hour was fast, faster than most people had ever driven their cars. Faster than they were allowed to drive their cars.

I couldn't hit a fastball like that, much less pitch one, but I was fast and strong and powerful, stronger than most guys, that was for damn sure.

I swung a vicious right hook through the air so fast and so hard that it knocked the guy off his feet, not as fast as a major league fastball, but I doubted that a major league fastball would've knocked the guy's head clean off. I hadn't knocked it off either, but I had come damn close.

I heard him hit the wall on the other side of the hallway about a second after my punch connected somewhere on his head. I wasn't sure where my punch had landed because it was too dark to tell, but I felt the vibrations of breaking bones and snapping teeth through my knuckles.

The guy hit the wall hard, hard enough that if the force of the punch hadn't killed him, then the solid surface of the wall would have.

I picked up the flashlight. He had dropped it and it had rolled and stopped against my feet.

One of the guy's shoes was still laced up and on the ground where he had been standing. The gun had flown back a few feet and landed in the center of the hallway.

I moved the beam up to the guy's body. Not only had he kept his head attached, but it had turned around a little farther than it was meant to, like it had been screwed on wrong.

My punch had broken his neck or it had broken when he bounced off the wall. I wasn't sure which. Either way, the guy was dead.

I picked up the gun and pointed it at the open door at the end of the hall in case he hadn't been alone.

No one rushed in after him. No backup to check on him. No one came to see what that loud noise had been. No one to check on his progress.

I bent down and checked the guy's pockets. I found his wallet and IDs and sifted through them—totally phony. Silenced Heckler & Koch P30L, gloves, nice clothes, clean cut, able to make his way into the stationhouse, stole the keys to the cell, and the fake IDs were good. This guy was a professional hit man. No question.

Who the hell sent you? And why are you after me? I questioned.

There was far more to Faye Matlind's disappearance than a clan of Mississippi rednecks.

Chapter 27

I picked up the gun. I was right; it was a Heckler & Koch P30L. I detached the silencer and slipped it into my pocket. I wasn't concerned with stealth. I dumped myself back onto the bench in the cell and slipped my shoes back on one-handed. I had kicked them off before I went to sleep. The strings were still all laced up.

I walked past the holding cells and out of the hallway and then checked the bullpen. No one was around. I searched for my belongings and found them in a manila envelope marked Reacher, sitting in an evidence cabinet with a tiny steel drawer that squeaked when I opened it. My ID, ATM card, and cell phone were the only items in it.

I tore it open, emptied out the contents, and returned them to my pockets.

I stood up and explored the rest of the station, clearing each room as I went. Nothing. Then I started to wonder where the hell the night watch deputy had been. Surely someone was assigned to watch the jail while I was there? But there was no sign of life anywhere.

No matter what happened next, I wasn't going back in the cell. No way. That was for damn sure.

I tucked the gun into my waistband and exited the police station.

The night air was clammy and gusty. Thin, almost nonexistent clouds moved fast overhead like someone was speeding up time.

Through the dips in the clouds, I could see the stars. They were lively. One of the perks of living in a small town or the country was seeing bright stars.

I could see the lake off in the distance, a couple of blocks beyond the Eckhart Medical Center. It looked quiet, peaceful.

The streets were quiet. I heard the faint whines of a steel guitar from the country bar down the street. To the north I heard the sedative buzzing of one of those pesticide trucks that drove up and down the street at night, spraying for insects, almost like a pest itself as it buzzed through the silent town.

I began walking through the parking lot when I noticed something irregular. One more sound hit my eardrums.

It was a *beeping* sound. No it was a *dinging* sound. A familiar sound like a car's seatbelt alert.

I crouched down low and looked around the parking lot. I held my hand near the butt of the P30L, ready to draw it out quickly if I needed to. I looked left. Looked right. Checked all around me.

The building was empty, but the parking lot still had cars. There were five police cars and two trucks, all with reflective, official sheriff markings on the doors, and all quiet.

One car had no light bar on the roof.

Across from the cars were two civilian vehicles.

All of the cars were parked neat in two rows. All except for one.

One police cruiser was stopped in the middle of the parking lot, facing the street.

I stood up tall to get a better look at it. The passenger door was wide open, but no one was in it. From this distance, it appeared unoccupied.

The open door was tripping the seatbelt alert in the dash and it beeped and beeped.

I crept over to the cruiser, staying close to the rear of the parked cars for cover. I hadn't drawn the Heckler & Koch, not yet. If there was a cop inside or nearby, he would've been within his rights to shoot me without warning if he had seen a gun in my hand. As far as he knew I was an escaped, armed fugitive. No judge in the world would convict him of a wrongful discharge of his weapon under those conditions.

I neared the car and gasped. Inside, sprawled across the front bench was Gemson. Blood covered the dashboard toward the passenger side like it had been sprayed across the front of the car.

He had been shot in the head.

I drew the P30L out of my waistband and scanned the area. There was no one in sight. He must've been shot by the Mexican. That was how the guy had gotten the keys and access to my cell. Then I stopped, frozen in place. Just to be sure, I ejected the clip and counted the rounds. Missing an extra round, plus the one fired back in the cell.

Great. Now I was holding the weapon that had shot a cop. And a cop that I had had an altercation with in public. With witnesses.

Why did the guy try to get me to hang myself if he had just shot Gemson? I had no idea.

Best I could figure was that it was a message or some kind of sick turn-on that the guy had. Like he got off on making his victims kill themselves. A lot of hired killers in history had their own signature styles; suicide was the Mexican's.

Since Gemson was an armed deputy, I guessed that the guy didn't want to take a chance with him, so he put a bullet in his head.

I lowered the gun and swung the car door open.

I leaned in and checked Gemson's pulse.

Suddenly, his left hand grabbed my wrist. He was still alive.

Chapter 28

Gemson breathed irregularly, but he was breathing. He grabbed my wrist and then passed out. I examined his wound. He'd been shot in the head, but it turned out to be just a grazing—deep, but not fatal. He was lucky that the Mexican guy hadn't double-tapped him.

Careless, but lucky for Gemson.

Blood loss was a different story. He had lost a lot of blood. I couldn't tell how much, but his skin color had faded, not quite blue like a corpse, but not far from it.

Most police cruisers were equipped with a first aid kit in the trunk. So I popped the trunk and scrambled back to it. I looked inside and found the kit. It was a small green case with a white cross on the lid. I grabbed it and closed the trunk. Then I returned to Gemson and opened the case.

I pulled out a long strand of gauze and medical tape. I wrapped his head several times—tight; then I taped it off. I tilted his head to one side. Gravity should slow the bleeding.

I grabbed the radio and clicked the button and put the receiver to my mouth.

Pressing down on the call button, I asked, "Is anyone out there? Officer in need of urgent medical assistance!"

I released the button and waited. Listened hard. Static and then I said, "Respond!"

Static again.

I said, "Respond! Officer down!"

No response. Gemson was on his own tonight.

I guessed that if he had needed backup, he was supposed to call for it on his cell phone. So I dug through his pockets and found his phone and searched through his contact list and found Grady's information. I hit the call button and waited.

Dial tone and then a ring.

Two rings in and the sheriff answered.

He was groggy. Probably asleep.

He said, "It is late. This had better be an emergency."

"Gemson has been shot."

Silence on the other end.

Grady asked, "Who is this?!"

I said, "You need to come! He's dying! He's been shot!"

Grady asked, "Reacher? How'd you get out of your cell?"

I said, "There's no time! He's been shot in the head. He's lost a lot of blood. Get over here! Now!"

Then there was silence on the line. I imagine that Grady's brain was still half asleep and trying to process the information.

Grady said, "Take him to the clinic. It's only two blocks south of the station. I'll be there."

He hung up.

I looked around. I looked at the car keys hanging in the ignition of Gemson's cruiser.

I could've left him in the clinic parking lot and driven away. I could've been miles away in their police car before I'd have to dump it.

With the cover of darkness I might've passed the state line. One of three states. I could've driven straight north and crossed over into Tennessee.

Tennessee had a lot of back roads. Plenty of places to dump a car.

I could've been back on the road and moving on from this nightmare, but a voice in my head said, "You must do the right thing."

It echoed over and over like some kind of predetermined destiny, some kind of instinctual voice that was set deep in my bones as if it had started with my ancestors and cursed my line for all time.

I looked down at Gemson's dying body in my arms and then I reached across him and slammed the passenger door closed. I turned the key and fired up the car and hit the gas.

In a finely tuned police cruiser I was there in seconds. Seven of them to be precise.

Chapter 29

I waited on the street in front of the Eckhart Medical Center, the clinic side.

The building was two stories with thick windows tinted black. I imagined that was to protect the occupants from sunlight.

The clinic was attached to the largest building and the rest of the complex was surrounded by the barbed wire fence. The back of it faced the lake. At the end of the street were a boat launch and a shabby little pier with one boat tied to it. It rocked slowly on the water.

I waited outside of the squad car, my back planted against the rear on the driver's side. The P30L rested on the trunk lid next to me.

I had switched the light bar on so that the red and blue lights lit up the night sky. The colors reflected off storefront windows and parked cars as the lights spun in a clockwise rotation and then a long extension of the lights fell across the lake like a lighthouse beacon and rotated back across the street.

A low fog rolled across the top of the water. The red and blue lights magnified in the mist.

Seven minutes later, I heard distant police sirens blaring through the quiet town like a banshee on the moors. The wailing noise was deafening in the silence.

Eight and a half minutes after that Sheriff Grady pulled up in an old department-issued Chevy Tahoe. The light bar on the roof wailed and flashed in sync with a set of smaller lights buried deep in the front grill and then the tires squealed as he braked to a stop. They died off in a quick hiss as they screeched across the road in front of the Eckhart Medical Center.

Two seconds later, his deputies rolled up in their patrol cars. Both had one driver and no passengers. The two cops jumped out of their vehicles. The only one who wore a shred of his uniform was Sheriff Grady. His deputies wore department-issued jackets with the sheriff badges patched on the right arms, but none of them wore the proper uniform. I guessed that they hadn't had time to change. They were probably in their pajamas when Grady called them.

Sheriff Grady jumped out of the Tahoe with his Glock drawn. He stretched his arms out across his hood and pointed the gun at me from about thirty yards away.

His deputies followed suit. The sirens had stopped the moment all three vehicles stopped.

Grady yelled, "Stand up with your hands up and walk toward us."

I said, "Sorry Sheriff. I'm not doing that."

Grady said, "Reacher. This isn't a game. Now follow my directions."

He waited a moment and then repeated his orders.

I stayed behind the cover of the police car. I looked at him and shook my head.

I said, "Not going to happen."

Silence and then I said, "Grady. Your man is dying. I didn't shoot him. Another guy attacked me in my cell. He had Gemson's keys. He tried to kill me. He must've shot Gemson first."

"You're wasting time. He's losing blood."

Grady looked at Gemson. The guy wasn't moving, but he was pressed up against the closed passenger door.

I peeked in on him. His coloring wasn't good.

I said, "Tick tock, Sheriff. You can try to come and get me, a course of action that none of you will survive. That I can promise. That I can pretty much damn guarantee.

"Or you can holster your weapons and help me get Gemson inside the clinic before he bleeds to death."

Grady remained where he was.

One of his deputies looked at him. The guy said, "Gemson looks bad."

I said, "I'm telling you the truth. Faye Matlind is missing. And now someone just tried to kill me. You need to believe me or this is going to turn bad for you, Gemson, and a whole lot of other people."

At that exact moment, in the silence of a standoff, I heard the most recognizable sound in modern police combat. It was the ultimate conversation stopper. The last word.

A pump-action shotgun had cocked not far from us. We all froze as we heard *CRUNCH! CRUNCH!*

The four of us looked over toward the clinic's entrance.

Grady said, "Doctor, go back inside."

I saw a pair of small hands on a muscular, female physique holding a Remington 870 pump-action shotgun with a pistol grip and a collapsible stock. One of the best shotguns ever made.

Beyond the barrel of the shotgun was a beautiful woman with long blond hair and a muscular frame like a fitness model.

Sheldon.

She said, "Reacher. Grady. You boys stop all this nonsense and bring Gemson inside before he bleeds to death. Before I shoot all of you."

Grady said, "Dr. Eckhart. Now don't do anything stupid."

Sheldon was a doctor? And an Eckhart? She had said that she *worked* at the clinic. What she should have said was that it was *her* clinic. Her last name was on the sign.

Sheldon said, "Ty, I'm not asking. I'm telling."

Chapter 30

One of the deputies helped me carry Gemson into the clinic.

Gemson wasn't particularly heavy for either of us, but he had completely passed out. Dead weight was harder to move than a half-conscious person.

We half-carried, half-dragged Gemson into the clinic.

Sheldon pointed to a room opposite the waiting room at the same time she leaned the shotgun back somewhere out of sight behind a shelf filled with boxes of feminine hygiene products.

We carried Gemson past a reception area that sat two people behind a long countertop, past a public water fountain, bathrooms, and into an examination room.

We laid him on an examining table.

Sheldon unwrapped the gauze that I had wrapped around his head and began inspecting his wound. She told the sheriff that he should call Oxford and ask for a medical chopper. Gemson needed hospital attention, which was not the kind of attention that Sheldon could provide in a small-town clinic.

Grady left the room to make the call.

Sheldon looked business-like. She reached up with a scrunchy around her wrist and pulled her hair back into a ponytail. She wore a pair of blue scrubs.

She finished looking over Gemson and then she wrapped his head tight and tilted it in a way that reduced the bleeding. She injected him with something and he was conscious.

He started to babble on and on about nonsense.

She looked at me and said, "He needs to stay conscious.

"You saved his life."

I nodded and stayed quiet. I figured he wouldn't have done the same for me. But that hadn't mattered because it didn't matter what he would have done. It only mattered what I did.

Chapter 31

We waited for the helicopter for 25 minutes. It came from Oxford General Hospital.

The chopper was an MD 520N, a fairly decent chopper used for police and rescue operations all over the world. This one was painted white with a dark blue stripe right across the middle. A red light blinked from the bottom of the canopy.

We stood outside and watched as the chopper flew over the trees. The rush of wind from the rotors blew the treetops in calm, firm gusts like the oncoming winds from a tropical storm. The chopper pilot maneuvered the helicopter over power lines and streetlights.

The chopper yawned as it descended at a steady pace. The skids landed on the street with a low *thump* sound.

The pilot was good.

The main rotor and tail blades kept turning. Debris from the road flew up into the air, drifted away behind the chopper, and was swept up into the night.

The deputies picked Gemson up and helped a pair of paramedics strap him to a gurney. They strapped him in tight and loaded him onto the helicopter.

We stood outside and watched as the chopper lifted off the ground and flew away.

Grady looked at me and scratched his nose and at the same time he said, "Reacher, would you wait inside for a moment. Doctor, is that okay?"

Sheldon smiled at me and said, "Of course."

Grady pointed at one of his deputies and said, "Take that boy inside and watch him for a moment."

I put my hand up and said, "That won't be necessary. If I wanted to run, I would have."

Sheldon said, "Ty, I think that Reacher has proven himself."

Grady leaned forward and put his hand on her shoulder like he was trying to say something out of my earshot, but I heard him fine. He said, "I don't trust him."

Sheldon said, "If it weren't for him, Gemson would be dead."

Grady shrugged and made a kind of retreat. He backed away about a foot and stared at the ground for a moment like he wanted to phrase his next statement right.

Sheldon never gave him the chance to speak. She said, "The bullet did more than graze his head. I think it fractured his skull. At the very least! And Reacher could've walked away and left him to die."

Grady thought for a moment, conflict on his face. Finally, he faced me and said, "For now, you're no longer under arrest. I appreciate your helping my deputy. But don't you be leaving just yet. I need to know what the hell is going on."

I said, "All I know is that I was asleep in my cell. I woke up and some Mexican guy was waving a gun in my face."

A confused look fell across Grady's face.

He asked, "Mexican guy?"

I nodded and said, "A dead Mexican guy now."

Grady cocked his head and looked at me. He asked, "So there's a dead guy in my jail?"

I said, "Dead as can get."

Then I paused a beat, reached into my pocket, and pulled out the P30L. I handed it to him, butt first. He stared at the gun; his brow wrinkled and created several distinguished slopes across his forehead.

I said, "The Mexican was armed with this."

Grady inspected it and sighed and nodded. He slipped the gun into the back of his waistband.

He said, "Okay. For now you stay here with Dr. Eckhart."

He looked over at his deputy again and said, "Stay with them."

His deputy nodded. I shrugged and followed Sheldon and the deputy into the clinic.

Grady and the other deputy left their vehicles on the street with the light bars on and went on foot back to the Public Safety Building. I guessed they wanted to block the street from any traffic, or more importantly, from me getting away in a vehicle.

The road that they were parked on was the only way out. Not that it mattered, because I wasn't going anywhere.

Chapter 32

Sheldon stood at the reception counter. Even in her scrubs, her muscular frame stuck out at me. She called to me like a siren. I tried to look away, but she was like a vortex and I was being sucked in.

She caught me staring. She grabbed the countertop and heaved herself up on it and casually sat down. Her legs waved back and forth like a teenage girl's.

“What are you staring at?”

“I was remembering my mother.”

She tilted her head and then she asked, “What? I remind you of your mother? Like I’m old enough to be your mother?”

I smiled and said, “No. Nothing like that. I was thinking that when I was a kid, my mom was beautiful. Everyone wanted her. I used to beat up the kids at school because of it.”

She looked perplexed. Strands of blond hair from her ponytail fell across her left shoulder.

She asked, “I don’t understand what that has to do with you staring at me?”

“I was thinking that I would hate it if you were mine.”

Her smile diminished. She asked, “What?”

I said, “I’d hate for you to be mine. Like my girlfriend.”

“Why is that?”

“Because of all the fights I’d get in over you.”

She smiled even wider.

I was serious. It wasn’t a line. I meant it. I had just met Sheldon and already I was fighting over her.

I said, “A beautiful woman can be a deadly thing. Look at Cleopatra or Helen of Troy. A beautiful woman can destroy a nation.”

“So I’m like Cleopatra?”

I smiled. Then I said, “Cleopatra ain’t got shit on you. That’s for damn sure.”

She paused and smiled and looked away like some far-off realization slapped her across the face.

I asked, “What is it?”

She turned back and smiled again.

“I like you. I think.”

“You think?”

She said, “I mean we just met, but you’re different. A lot different than these small-town people.”

“Aren’t you from here?”

At first she shook her head and then she nodded.

I was confused.

She said, “I’ve only lived here for five years. I got a special grant to open this Medical Center and it had to be here so I came here.”

“So where are you from?”

She hesitated for a second then she said, “Here.”

“Really?”

She said, “I moved away for a while. I actually went to school abroad. Fell in with the wrong crowd and then I got my medical degree and came back.”

I looked around, starting on the walls, full of medical posters and plaques. Boxes of unused medical supplies were piled like there wasn’t enough room for them in a storage closet. There were boxes of female medical supplies and hygiene products. There were skin products and boxes of birth control pills, Plan B tablets, and female contraceptives.

I said, “Wow. Lots of female stuff here.”

She cracked a smile and then said, “Country women have a lot of needs.”

I looked down at the computer screens behind the counter. I guessed that this was the nurses' station. The screensavers danced around on the monitors like flickering candlelight. A low humming came from down the hall.

I saw several open doorways. Probably examination rooms. All were dark.

I said, "Looks like you've done pretty well for yourself."

She stayed quiet and then said, "Wasn't always like that. Believe me, there was a dark time in my life. But sometimes you have to do things that you don't want to do in order to do good things too."

I asked, "Is that why you stay here? In this small town? Something bad from your past?"

She said, "It's hard to escape a place like this."

I smiled and nodded. I knew something about feeling stuck in a small town in Mississippi. In fact that was all I ever knew. Suddenly, I felt grateful that I had realized it now rather than later on in life.

She said, "When I was abroad I met a nice guy. We got to know each other and he offered to fund a clinic and research facility for me. He paid for my schooling and so I'm under obligation to maintain this facility. I only have another year and then I will be free and clear."

I asked, "What will you do then?"

She said, "I'll move away. Maybe one of the coasts. I like Florida. I don't know."

"You sound unhappy."

She smiled and shook her head. Her eyes blinked and opened. They were unforgettable, a kind of gray color. I had never seen that color before. In the sunlight, when I had met her, I hadn't noticed.

She said, "Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful. I do have *some* moral objections."

I asked, "With what?"

She said, "The research side."

"Animals?" I asked.

She looked off in the distance for a second. Her eyes stared at one of the medical posters on the wall—a poster about pregnancy.

She said, "Right. Animal testing. Gotta pay for this clinic somehow."

Chapter 33

I spent the better part of an hour with Sheldon and we talked like a pair of teenagers who had never kissed before, which technically, I was. At least the teenage part.

I was 18 and a half years old, but she never asked, so I hadn't told her. Why should I?

She probably thought that I was in my 20s, which was okay by me.

It was now 1:15 a.m. I could've talked to Sheldon all night. She was an amazing woman. Truly something sensational. Why she was single, I had no idea.

The one thing that I wanted to do more than talk to her was to stare at her amazing beauty. The only thing that I wanted to do more was kiss her. Everywhere.

In that moment, she was the only thing that I cared about. Under different circumstances, I would've given up my mission and stayed in Black Rock with her.

Between finding a father that I had never known and staying with this beautiful woman, hands down she was the easy choice.

She asked, "You're the reason that I had so much business yesterday? I was setting broken bones all morning."

I smiled and said, "Sorry about that."

She smiled back and then said, "Don't worry about it. This town is full of backward people. They don't like outsiders."

"Gemson isn't any different. Women. Blacks. Hispanics. People here don't care."

I said, "I grew up in a place like this. Don't judge the South by the people here. Where I'm from, my community has its racial scars too. But there are good people."

She nodded and then changed the subject.

She asked, "Was your mother really the sheriff?"

I nodded.

She said, "My parents are dead."

I stayed quiet.

She trailed off into her own thoughts, lost in some distant memory.

I asked, "What is it?"

"What is what?"

"You're thinking about something. What is it?"

"Nothing. Just glad that I met you."

I smiled.

Right then and there, three things happened.

First, Sheldon Eckhart leaned forward and kissed me with a pair of lips that were sweeter than any fruit. Her kiss was incredible. It swelled through me like a hurricane. My hair tingled, my skin perspired, and my heart beat fast.

I kissed her back and then I gently caressed the back of her head.

I kissed her and she matched me move for move.

Her lips were wet and her skin was smooth and soft.

She smelled good, like a wet rainforest. Her kiss was alive and wet like one too.

She mesmerized me. If Sheldon had stopped kissing me right then and said "stay with me," I would've dropped my quest for Jack Reacher and stayed the rest of my life.

It would have meant the rest of my life secluded and yet surrounded by people that I didn't belong with. And I would've been happy to do it. I would've done anything for her.

The second thing that happened at the same time that we were locked in a passionate kiss was that I remembered Matlind and I realized that I had gotten sidetracked.

And the third thing that happened ended our kiss. Sheriff Grady walked in, with a less than happy look on his face.

He stood inside the doorway with an accusatory look in his eyes like he had just caught me with his wife.

We were silent for a moment.

He interrupted the silence and asked, "So who is the dead Mexican in my jail cell?"

I said, "I have no idea. All I know is that he tried to kill me and that he is definitely a professional hit man."

Chapter 34

Sheriff Grady stared at me with a kind of swollen look, like he had grown tired of me. I couldn't say that I cared. One of his deputies walked up behind Grady and stopped about three yards away. He rested his hand on the butt of his holstered Glock.

These country boys still didn't trust me. I couldn't say that I blamed them.

I faced the sheriff. I needed to get back to Matlind. It had been most of a day and he wasn't safe on his own. Not if this professional hit man was somehow related to his missing wife, which was the only thing that made sense to me. I had kicked a hornets' nest and it had to be because of Faye Matlind's disappearance. She was the one thing that connected me to a Mexican hit man. Had to be. And in that case, Chris Matlind was at the center of something. I doubted if Grady was going to take him seriously. It was best that I got back there.

I said, "I need to go back to the motel."

Grady said, "You need to stay in my custody."

"Am I still a prisoner?"

"You're a witness. There are a lot of unanswered questions here."

I said, "You don't need me. And you can't take me back to the jail, not after what happened."

"So what do you suggest? That I let you go?"

"Take me back to my motel. At least there I can get some sleep before morning."

Grady paused like he was searching his brain for the right answer. He knew that I was right. I couldn't go back to the jail. It was a crime scene now and it wasn't safe there, but right then it wasn't safe anywhere.

Grady looked at his deputy, not Mike, but the other guy.

He said, "Lewis, take the boy back to the motel and stay outside in your car till I call you."

Lewis came all the way into the room. He looked at me and made the *come here* gesture with his hand. I ignored him and looked back at Sheldon.

I held her hand in mine. She slid off the countertop and stared up at me with those gray eyes like storm clouds brewing—beautiful and dangerous.

She was tiny underneath my frame. The lights above hit my back and cast a shadow over her from my body. It consumed her like she stood in the wake of a tall tree.

I asked, "Will I see you later?"

She smiled and said, "I hope so."

Chapter 34

Deputy Lewis and I drove back to the motel in his police cruiser. I sat in the back.

We didn't have to go far. Maybe ten minutes.

Lewis drove with the light bar off. There was no rush in getting me to the motel.

He hadn't spoken until we came to a traffic light. It was one of those times when the light turned red for us and we were the only car on the road.

After we stopped at the light, Lewis reached up and adjusted his mirror. I saw his eyes in the reflection. The light shone red across the top of his face.

He said, "Ya saved my friend's life, but ya're the reason that he got shot in the first place. I reckon that I owe ya some justice for that, but I can't do nothing to ya. The sheriff said so, but that don't mean that I can't tell ya that I don't like ya."

He spoke without an accent, but still managed to slur his speech in a kind of backwoods sort of way just like Gemson. Maybe that was how he had gotten the job in the first place, like he came off as the smart one.

I asked, "Do a lot of backwoods justice here?"

He said, "When the situation requires it, we'd been known to take a bad guy out into the woods and teach him a lesson before we book him."

"You abuse your prisoners?"

"We don't hurt anyone who ain't got it coming. And sometimes prisoners like to try to run. We gotta teach them a lesson."

"So why are you telling me this?"

He asked, "Maybe ya want to pull over before we get to the motel? Maybe ya want to try to run?"

I said, "Sheriff told you to drive me to the motel. I'm not a prisoner. You're escorting me like I'm a VIP. Kind of like a chauffeur."

He scowled in the mirror and stared back at me and then said, "Ya may think that ya aren't, but ya'll end up back behind bars soon enough. I'd bet my badge on it."

I stayed quiet.

He asked, "So ya wanna get it over with now? I'll pull over and we can get out and settle this."

I said, "You pull over and only one of us is getting back in the car. The other is going to need that medical chopper to come back for him."

Lewis paused. He almost said something, but the light turned green and he continued on to the motel.

We stayed quiet the rest of the way.

The motel was dark and quiet. The parking lot was half full. The cars were silent and still. A family of raccoons rustled through a dumpster at the next parking lot over.

Lewis stopped the car in the parking lot to let me out.

He said, "Get out. I'll be sitting in the car. Sheriff's orders."

I paused.

He said, "What? Do you need me to check your room for you? Are you scared?"

I ignored him. I reached into my pocket and pulled out Gemson's cell phone. I tossed it on the back bench.

I didn't bother to explain, just got out of the car and shut the door behind me. Not hard. I didn't want to slam it. I wanted him to know that his remarks hadn't affected me, which they hadn't.

I went to room 14. I had left Matlind there the night before. I only hoped that he had stayed put and waited for me to return like I'd asked.

I knocked. No answer.

I knocked again—hard. No answer.

I reached down and grabbed the handle and twisted the knob and pushed the door open.

The room was dark. I flipped on the light. The room was empty. No sign that Matlind had ever slept there. The bed was remade as though it had never been slept in.

The only thing left in the room that didn't belong was my phone charger. It was still plugged into the wall.

I left the room, left the door open, and checked next door. Maybe Matlind had returned to his own room to wait with his own stuff. Maybe he needed to shower and needed his own belongings.

The doorframe was still shattered and it would probably stay that way for weeks. Judging by the state that the motel had been in, I doubted that the owner got around to fixing things in a prompt manner.

A dim light shone through the cracks between the curtains and the splinters of the door.

I pushed the door open. It creaked and more splintered wood fell from the top of the frame.

The light that dimly lit the room was from the bathroom. And the reason why Matlind had not answered me was because he was dead.

His body lay flat across the bed. His arms were twisted out and away from him. His fingers on his left hand reached out to me like he wanted me to take his hand and follow him. A Beretta Px4 Storm weighted down the tip of his index finger.

It had a black, rubbery look to it. It lay on the bed like a snake, coiled and waiting for action. The smell of gunpowder lingered in the air.

At the top of the bed and partially on the wall were dried stains—part blood, part brain, and part skull fragments.

Matlind had blown his brains out.

He had woken up and found that I had abandoned him too. First his wife vanished and now me. He had set his hopes on me and I had let him down.

So he took his own life.

Chapter 35

As long as I could remember, I had guns and crime scenes in my life. Growing up the son of a small-town sheriff, guns and dead bodies went hand in hand like how riding a bike went hand in hand with a guy who grew up in a life with a non-sheriff parent.

I studied Matlind's corpse and scanned the motel room carefully.

On the cold, hard tile at the foot of the bed was a shell casing. I knelt down and inspected it without picking it up.

I got down on my hands like I was going to do a pushup. The tile was dusty. I went all the way down, eye level with the brass so I could see the head stamp.

The bullet was a 9mm.

I pushed up and got back on my feet. I looked over the corpse.

I bet that if I ejected the magazine out of the Beretta Px4 it would have been loaded with 9mm parabellums. That was the most popular bullet in the U.S. It was used in over 60 percent of police firearms.

I inspected Matlind's entry and exit wounds.

He had put the gun barrel in his mouth and the muzzle of the gun must've pushed all the way till he involuntarily began swallowing it because the exit wound had taken out the top part of his brainstem and the bottom of his brain.

I looked at his fingers on his left hand.

I couldn't recall whether or not Matlind had been left-handed. Maybe. I saw gunshot residue on his left hand and clothes. It was all the way to his forearms.

He hadn't killed himself. The suicide had been staged. I knew that for sure.

It seemed like his fingers weren't broken, a typical sign of a faked suicide. That didn't mean that he wasn't forced to pull the trigger or that he hadn't been coerced in some other way.

I saw no visible evidence that he hadn't done it, but I knew because I had met a man who tried to get me to commit suicide. I was positive that he had murdered Matlind first. That was how he knew about me.

He had come here after I left and questioned Matlind and murdered him, probably convinced him that he'd kill Faye.

The dead Mexican who had tried to kill me was connected to Faye's disappearance somehow. Had to be. No other logical explanation.

I stepped back to the door and opened it wide with my foot.

Lewis saw me and turned on his headlights and then his light bar. I wasn't sure why, probably thought that it would irk me. His engine had still been running. He was parked in the lot facing my door.

The cones from his light bar lit up the room every time they rotated by.

This time I was the one who used my hand to gesture for him to come to me.

He got out of the car and approached.

Before he reached the door, he said, "What? You need me to tuck you in?"

I stepped out of the doorway to let him see the room and the dead body.

I said, "No. But you might need me to do your damn job for you."

His jaw dropped open and he stared at the corpse.

He said, "Oh, God!"

I said, "You'd better call the sheriff over here."

Chapter 36

We waited outside for Grady to arrive. Deputy Lewis hadn't known what to do; that was obvious.

Under normal conditions, he should've locked down the crime scene as best he could. He should've locked me in the rear bench of his car, but he hadn't done those things.

The only thing that he had done was to move his car closer to room 13 and light up his light bar so that it spun faster, no siren, only the blue and red lights. I'd guessed that the faster spin was to signify more immediate danger.

They flashed and lit up the motel's exterior. Other guests started opening their doors and peering out of their windows. It was after midnight and they had been awoken by the bright emergency lights from Lewis's police cruiser.

Lewis had said nothing to me since he saw Matlind's body. Two dead bodies in one night must have been plenty for him.

I felt bad on the inside. I had seen plenty of corpses. That hadn't bothered me, but I had been responsible for Matlind's death. I could've stayed with him or brought him with me. The only reason that I had left him was to let him sleep, and now the guy would never wake again. Stupid on my part.

The guy's wife was missing. Some rednecks tried to take him. I should've taken this more seriously.

I wasn't quite seeing how a Mexican hit man and the rednecks were connected.

A drug-related arrangement?

The sheriff drove up in his Chevy Tahoe. The light bar rolled and flashed, out of unison with the lights from Lewis's squad car. The Tahoe's tires squawked as Grady pulled it into the parking lot.

Grady got out and walked over to us.

He gazed at me with a look on his face like *what are you doing out of cuffs?* But he said nothing about it.

He went past us and into the room. He looked over the crime scene, the body, the brass. He didn't touch anything. He came back out of the room a couple minutes later.

He stepped out into the parking lot. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a half-empty pack of Newports. He opened the pack and slid a cigarette and a lighter out. He lit the cigarette.

He took two drags and then said, "Reacher, you're bad luck."

I nodded.

He said, "I never even heard of you until yesterday and now I have two dead bodies and a wounded deputy."

"One guy tried to kill you in prison and another shot himself in the head. Both strangers here."

I stared down at him, his eyes covered by the brim of his hat. Even with the police lights flashing, darkness covered his face and the only facial features that I could see on him were whenever he took a drag from his cigarette. The brief light flashed across his face revealed the gray stubble of a man who had had a long day.

He said, "Well. Looks like suicide. Did you touch anything?"

"No," Lewis said.

"I'm talking to Reacher."

I stayed quiet. He waited until the silence was awkward and then he asked, "Well? Did you touch anything?"

I said, "No. But I did have a look."

“And?”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you know dick-all about crime scene investigation.”

“How do you mean?”

“I was never in law enforcement as an employee, but my mother was a sheriff. So, I’ve seen some things. And there is a clue that stands out. Don’t you see it? It’s obvious.”

Grady took a final puff of his cigarette and then tossed it onto the concrete.

He asked, “What’s that exactly?”

I said, “You’re going to kill yourself. How would you do it?”

“Gun, I guess.”

I said, “That’s the most common form of suicide among men Matlind’s age.”

He said, “So?”

I said, “I’m asking.”

He said, “I don’t know.”

I said, “Do you know how many people killed themselves last year?”

He said, “I have no idea. 10,000?”

I said, “Try 22,175.”

He asked, “How do you know that?”

I ignored his question.

I said, “Do you know how many people died from automobile deaths?”

He said, “I don’t know.”

I said, “18,000. That’s less people died in this country last year in automobile deaths than suicides. Do you know how many suicides were men?”

He said, “The majority.”

I nodded. I said, “More than 16,000. That’s 72%.

“So, 72% of Americans who took their own lives last year were men.”

He nodded.

I asked, “Know how many were from guns?”

He said, “Most?”

I said, “50% were from self-inflicted gunshot wounds. The rest were suffocation and poisoning.”

He nodded.

“Do you know how many doctors killed themselves from gunshot wounds?”

He shook his head.

I said, “Not many. About 400 doctors commit suicide every year and guns are the method used least often. Generally they overdose. Doctors self-medicate. It’s the ideal choice. Write yourself a prescription for a painless and deadly drug. Overdose. Easy as anything.”

He shrugged.

Then I asked, “What else?”

“What else what?”

“What else do you see?”

The sheriff looked back over the crime scene.

“Look, the guy’s wife left him on their honeymoon. She ran out. So he got depressed. And he shot himself. End of story. I see nothing else here.”

“Look at the gun,” I said.

He looked and paused over it.

I said, "You don't have an investigation unit here, right?"

He shook his head and said, "No."

"Then it doesn't matter if you pick it up if no one else is coming to inspect it."

Grady said, "I do all of the homicide investigations in this town. I know how to conduct a crime scene."

I nodded like I was apologizing.

He said, "We don't get a lot of murders here. At least not before you got here."

Grady reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out an old bandanna. It was red with black tribal symbols dotted all over it.

He wrapped it around his hand like a glove. He picked up the gun and smelled it.

"It smells like it has been fired recently. Safety is off. The ballistics would probably match the bullet in his head. There's gun powder residue on the area around his left hand."

I stayed quiet.

"So what am I missing?"

I paused and said, "Why was I arrested?"

"Assault on those boys."

"Three guys to be precise."

"So?"

"Three tough rednecks. Grown men."

"So?"

"So not a challenge for me. Obviously."

"What's your point? That you're tougher than three idiot rednecks?"

"Tougher than three full-grown rednecks, apparently. Tougher than a short, wiry doctor from the Gulf Coast, definitely."

Grady said, "What the hell are you getting at?"

"The gun. Does it work?"

The sheriff nodded and then he asked, "So?"

"It works. You just said that it's a working firearm. It looks pristine, well kept. And it works. It fired a bullet tonight and killed Chris Matlind."

"Yes. Yes. I can see that. So he killed himself."

I said, "No. He didn't."

"Just say what you are getting at."

"Why was I arrested?"

"Assault!"

"Those rednecks were here to attack Chris. They wanted to drag him out of his room and abduct him against his will. They made that fairly obvious."

"So?"

"Chris was afraid for his life. Terrified. I saw it."

Grady shrugged.

"First, a man who wants to die is *not* afraid of three men. Second, a man who has a perfect firing gun isn't afraid of three men. Certainly, he didn't need my help if he had a gun in his room."

Grady nodded. He seemed to understand.

"Chris Matlind didn't have a gun eight hours ago. I'm willing to bet that Chris Matlind had never fired a gun in his life. He certainly had never fired a Beretta Px4. Look closer at his hands. There's no initial powder on them, only some residue. He didn't fire that gun. Not point blank. And putting the gun into the back of his throat was as point blank as you can get."

"Plus, one thing that struck me about this motel when I saw the rooms was that they have tile, not carpet. I've never heard of a motel with tile instead of carpet. I'm just starting this traveling thing. But that seems unusual to me."

Grady asked, "What does that tell you?"

"The casing from a Beretta Px4 ejects from the top right-hand side of the gun. The Beretta Px4 Storm spits it out of the top fast. It's so fast that if you blink you'll miss it."

"Okay?"

"This type of casing doesn't just fall to the floor directly after being ejected. It would've landed farther away and then rolled because of the tile. This casing is lying directly beneath his feet and to the right-hand side."

"The bullet was fired point blank and from inside of his mouth. But he didn't fire it. Someone else stood over him and forced it down his throat. I think that whoever murdered him grabbed a tuft of his hair and jerked his head back. The killer shoved the gun down his throat and fired. That's why the brain and skull patterns are spread across the wall and not the ceiling."

"You put the gun in your mouth and fire upward, traditionally the exit remains will spray across the ceiling, not the wall."

"I'm also willing to bet that if a medical exam is conducted on him, it would find that one or several of his fingers are broken."

"And you don't think that we would've looked that far into it? We have Dr. Eckhart. I'm sure that she would've found such a thing."

"I'm sure that she would have. She certainly is competent enough. I don't think that the man who murdered Chris cared about that. It would've been after the fact. I don't think he planned on staying in town."

"He just wanted this to pass for a suicide for a couple of days at the most. He's buying himself time. He's passing through."

"You're the only stranger here," Grady said.

I said, "Not true. There's another stranger here."

"Who's that?"

"The dead guy in your jail."

Chapter 37

We left the motel. Deputy Lewis had been told to stay alert in the parking lot all night. He was to guard the crime scene.

Grady told him to set up crime scene tape around the last two rooms.

Grady hadn't handcuffed me. No one had read my Miranda Rights to me. As far as I could tell I was not under arrest. I was free, but Grady made it fairly clear that he didn't want me out of his sight.

We drove in the Tahoe. The wheels rocked and bounced as he took tight turns around corners.

The same traffic light from earlier had turned red for us as well, but Grady ran it.

He said, "Since you aren't safe anywhere and I don't trust you, you and I are partners in this thing."

I said, "What do you propose?"

He said, "I disagree with your assessment about Matlind. I say his wife left him and he killed himself. End of story. She might even be shacked up here with a local or a tourist. The lake is full of young businessmen on vacations far away from their wives."

"Just because you have a couple of interesting observations doesn't mean shit."

I asked, "So how do you explain the Mexican?"

He shrugged and said, "He followed you here. You brought some kind of trouble to my town. Whatever."

I stayed quiet and just thought about the kind of idiots that can be found in small Southern towns. I thought how they're the ones that give the rest of us a bad name.

"So why are we back here?" I asked.

We had pulled back into the Public Safety Building's parking lot.

"We're going to have a better look at your Mexican friend. You say that he tried to kill you and that he killed Matlind. I don't see any connection between the two. But let's see that mind of yours prove me wrong."

He parked the Tahoe, killed the motor, and stepped out. The driver's seat squeaked as he got out, like it had probably done a million times.

He opened the back door and let me out.

We walked into the building, past the reception area, past the bullpen, and down some steps to the door to the hallway with the holding cells.

Grady flipped a couple of switches and the holding cells lit up bright.

Lying against the wall was the tangled mess of limbs that made up the corpse of the man who had tried to kill me. His neck was still broken.

Grady went over to the body, reached into his back pocket, and pulled out his wallet.

I said, "I already checked his IDs. Phony. They're good, but fake. That's the biggest clue that he's a professional. IDs like that must've cost good money."

Grady asked, "So, who is he?"

"Some kind of Mexican hit man. Like I told you."

"How do you know that he's Mexican?"

"Was Mexican. And I don't. Not for sure. Just a hunch."

Grady said, "Share your theory?"

I shook my head and then said, "Not yet. I need more first."

Grady nodded and searched through the dead guy's other pockets. He found a back-up pair of surgical gloves besides the ones that the dead guy wore. They were white and bunched up into a ball of loose fingers.

"I bet that if you send the gun in Matlind's motel and those gloves off to a crime lab, you'll find fibers from the glove on the gun."

"Gloves aren't uncommon. It doesn't prove anything."

"This guy killed Matlind. Case closed. You know it. You just don't want outsiders poking around. If I'm right, you have to call the state police. Probably the FBI too. I know that you small-town types don't like the Feds, but this is out of control now. It's time to call in the outsiders that you so desperately hate before this gets any worse."

Grady stayed quiet. He frowned and stared at the gloves.

I said, "Faye could still be out there and alive. This is big, too big for you to handle on your own. You need to call the Feds. And call them now."

"Who is Faye?"

"Are you listening? Faye Matlind is the missing wife. She's still missing. Whoever this guy was, he's connected to Faye. He wanted to shut us up. Had to be. It's the only thing that makes any sense. He probably killed Matlind and tried to kill me."

Grady stayed quiet. At first he nodded like he agreed.

Then he shook his head and said, "No. I never saw Matlind with any woman. No one else in town saw her either. I've been sheriff here for 15 years. These people are good, quiet folk. They aren't hiding some big conspiracy about a missing woman."

"Matlind came into town and started trouble at the local diner one day. That has been my only exchange with him. There is no wife."

"I know these people. I know those rednecks. They bring barbecue in for the tourists to buy every Sunday. They're good, quiet people. The whole town is. We don't need some outsiders here poking around in our business."

I shrugged and gave up. It was like trying to convince a brick wall.

He went on, just repeating himself. He said, "Mr. Matlind's death is tragic, but there's no wife! This is a small town. No one remembers her being here. Don't you think that someone would've remembered her? A black woman! In case you haven't noticed Black Rock only has rural white people living in it. Someone would've seen a black woman."

"Hell! She would've been the talk of the town."

"And no one saw her!"

I breathed in and breathed out. He was heated. I could see that, but what good would come from arguing with a backwoods sheriff?

Then he said, "I think that we've had enough of you."

He tossed the gloves back onto the corpse. They landed on his stomach. I caught a glimpse of the hit man's face. Even in death, he grinned at me.

Grady wiped his hands together like he was done with the investigation.

He said, "As unfortunate as this day is for Mr. Matlind, you've caught a break."

I asked, "What do you mean?"

He said, "Our jail is a crime scene like you said. We've got two deaths. I don't see any reason to hold you on an assault charge being that we have nowhere to hold you. So you're free to go. And I suggest that is what you do. Lewis will take you back to the motel to pick up your belongings and then he'll drive you out to the highway."

I said, "I don't have any belongings."

"No baggage?"

"Nothing."

Grady got on his radio and hailed Lewis. He gave him instructions to return to base.

There was a crackle from the radio and Lewis gave an affirmative response. Grady looked up at me and said, "Then the highway is your next destination." He paused a beat and said. "Don't ever come back."

Chapter 38

Deputy Lewis escorted me in his police cruiser out of town. We drove in silence.

The wind rushed around the cruiser as we picked up speed, blowing a hot marshy odor off the lake.

The sky had been calm most of the night, but now it was waking. Huge storm clouds crawled slowly toward Black Rock from the north.

They looked like wispy, dark creatures swarming across the sky. Lethargic, but steadily creeping in over the town.

Lightning cackled in the far distance.

Lewis drove across the land bridge. I gazed out over the lake for what I thought would be the last time. Dark shapes appeared across the surface as my eyes adjusted to the blackness. Night fishermen, most likely. Most of them began cranking their motors to escape the moving storm clouds. They headed back to their boat launches.

We drove past the land bridge and onto the two-lane dusty road that headed into town.

I saw the last part of the jogging track that I had met Sheldon on. A feeling of disappointment rolled over me that I would never see her again. I turned in my seat and stared out the back window until the jogging track was lost to sight. Then I turned around and faced front.

The police cruiser slowed as we came to the fork in the road. We stopped on the northwest side of the fork. I gazed over to the left at the north side. I saw through the tall pine trees the huge Confederate flag. It flapped violently on the pole.

I said, "Your friends had better take down their flag or it'll get rained on. Probably ruined."

Lewis looked at me in his rearview and first grinned, then gave me a hawk-like scowl. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something. Instead, a kind of low snarl came from his mouth and he turned his sights back to the road and headed south.

I looked to the east and thought about Hank and his dog. I wondered if they were still there.

I hoped that he had gotten his fill of fishing. The old guy had to deal with two storms in three nights.

I remembered that he had said that he used to be a pilot in the Navy. He had probably flown missions in Vietnam. He could handle a little rain.

It struck me that he was crazy enough to go out there and fish during the storm.

I turned and looked out the west side, out of my own window. The land moved in front of me. Trees turned into thicker trees and then back to thinner ones.

After 15 minutes we hit Highway 35.

Lewis skidded the car onto it and headed west. He picked up speed.

The highway was barren. We saw a passing car here and there, but not much else in the way of nighttime travelers.

Lewis gunned the motor and the car got up to 90 miles per hour.

After about 20 minutes we were nearing Interstate 55.

Lewis turned the light bars on. The red and blue lights flashed. We passed a couple of trucks that took up both lanes until we got right behind them. They saw Lewis's police lights and pulled over to opposite shoulders.

Lewis floored past them, turned onto the loop for Interstate 55, and headed south.

I could hear the wind howling even though my window was rolled all the way up. It whistled and hissed like it wasn't sealed properly.

We drove for a couple of minutes. Then Lewis slowed the cruiser and pulled over to the shoulder.

Another interstate cloverleaf lay in front of us.

He left the light bar on and the engine running. He got out of the car, walked around the hood, and came over to my door. He opened it and stepped back. He gave himself a wide berth from me, out of my reach.

I got out of the car and stretched my legs and my arms.

He rested his hand on the hilt of his holstered Glock, a move that I had gotten used to at this point. Then he said, "From here ya can head in any direction that ya want. Ya can get on the 278 and hitch a ride east er west. Ya can stay on 55 and head north er south. It's up to you. But don't come back to Black Rock."

Lewis got back into his car and sped away. He got on the off-ramp on the cloverleaf like he was headed east and crossed under the overpass. I lost sight of him for a moment. Then he was back on the other side of 55 headed north. Back to Black Rock.

I watched as his light bar switched off and his red taillights faded into the mist. Then I turned and looked at the cloverleaf and scanned all directions.

Five minutes later I headed west on 278.

I walked on for a ways. I didn't want to stay at the cloverleaf. A hitchhiker standing at the cloverleaf might look confused about the direction he wanted to go.

I wanted to go west. At least west seemed as good a direction as any.

Truth was that I just wanted to return to Black Rock.

I thought to myself.

You're on a mission. What difference does it make what happened in a small backwater town? Forget about it. Matlind is dead. Where's my father? That's the only thing that matters.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my cell phone.

I had a signal. So I went into the Internet browser and searched for bus stations.

The search took a while. I stood on the border of the blacktop and the shoulder. My face was lit up in the darkness by the phone's screen. A car sped past me. I

had missed it because at that moment I only wanted to forget about Matlind and his wife—whether she was real or not.

My phone indicated that the nearest bus station was in Clarksdale, about 35 miles away.

The good news was that my phone light had garnered the attention of a van driver.

The guy pulled over to the shoulder about 30 yards in front of me.

I saw the brake lights shimmering in the darkness. I put my phone back into my pocket, didn't check the battery. I walked to the van.

I neared the rear and saw the vanity plate.

It read:

ISWHTIS

Which I guessed meant it is what it is. I hated that saying because everything in life is what it is. A monkey is what it is. And so on. But I wasn't going to pretend that its meaning didn't fit my current predicament. And then it dawned on me. It wasn't my predicament. It had been Chris Matlind's. It had been or maybe still was Faye Matlind's. It was Sheriff Grady's. And it was Sheldon Eckhart's predicament. It had nothing to do with me. The town of Black Rock and all of its problems were just that. They were their problems. Not mine, but other people's.

I got to the passenger door and opened it.

The driver was a young scruffy guy with a soul patch and no other facial hair to speak of.

He had one finger on the front of his lips, the international symbol for shush.

He said in a low voice, "Quiet."

He motioned to a sleeping girl in the rear of the van.

He whispered, "My wife. Where are you headed?"

I said, "The hell out of Mississippi."

He nodded and smiled.

Then he said, "That's where we're headed. Hop in."

I smiled. I was glad that someone had stopped for me in the middle of the night. In the dark I was even more terrifying than in the sunlight. I looked like the kind of guy who was only out in the dark. Like a crazed killer. So I was afraid that no one was going to stop for me. I'd figured that I'd probably be out the entire night walking.

Besides my looks, I was also concerned about my smell. I realized that I hadn't showered in days. I had cleaned my clothes two nights ago. They didn't smell clean anymore, but they weren't filthy.

I had spent several hours yesterday sleeping in a jail cell. Jail cells aren't known for cleanliness.

My fears of stinking up this guy's van disappeared when I realized that this couple was a pair of hippies or rockabillies in this part of the country. They smelled of marijuana.

That smell killed every other odor inside the van.

I closed the door and the guy sped off. He wasn't the most cautious driver, but I didn't complain.

The guy's wife must've been used to it because she slept deeply on a bundle of bedspreads and laundry. Swerving from the slow lane to the fast one hadn't even shaken her awake. And she was definitely not wearing a seatbelt.

The guy wasn't either.

I reached for mine and found it and slipped it on. Better safe than sorry.

The guy started to talk and told me about himself and his wife.

I listened. I thought that it would distract me from thoughts of Black Rock.

Occasionally, I acknowledged the guy with a polite nod.

We drove for more than an hour. The guy pushed the van hard—not a vehicle known for speed. It topped out at around 70 miles per hour.

The guy had his window rolled down. Hot air blew in like an industrial fan was blowing it across the van.

A couple of minutes past 1 a.m., we neared Clarksdale.

I said, "You can drop me off at the next exit."

The guy said, "Nonsense. We can take you into town. Where are you going?"

I said, "The Greyhound station."

He nodded. We drove past the next mile marker and then turned off at the Clarksdale exit.

His wife snored for a minute and then rolled over and was silent again.

We stopped at a traffic light and turned east. Then the guy pointed at a blue street sign that had the Greyhound symbol on it. The arrow pointed south along a service road that was overly lit by streetlights.

He turned onto it and drove another two hundred yards, past a gas station, an all-night McDonald's, and a small two-story motel with three blank letters on the sign.

The Greyhound station was across the street from a doughnut shop.

The guy made a U-turn and pulled into the front of the station.

He looked at me and smiled.

He extended his hand and said, "I never told you my name. It's Hank."

I smiled and thought about Hank from Black Rock again. Small world.

I extended my hand and took his in mine. Mine swallowed his up like a whale swallowing its food whole.

I said, "Reacher."

I turned, opened the door, and stepped out into the hot night.

I shut the passenger door and waved Hank goodbye. He drove off.

I went into the bus station and walked up to the counter.

The woman behind it had a steaming hot coffee in front of her in a paper cup.

She leaned her head on her hand like she was falling asleep.

I cleared my throat loud enough to wake her.

She looked up at me and asked, "Can I help you?"

There was a tone in her voice like she didn't want to bother with me.

I looked up at a huge monitor above her. It displayed available destinations and times that the buses ran.

The next departure was for Little Rock. It was in 34 minutes.

I said, "One ticket. Little Rock."

I hadn't said please.

She gave me the ticket and stayed quiet. No *thank you*. No *sit over there, sir*. Nothing.

I walked over to a row of chairs that were connected on the bottom by a black metal bar.

Several other people already waited. Most of them were asleep.

One girl was probably a teenager. She slept with her head down and a hoodie pulled over most of her face. I saw her profile. She had no luggage near her except a pink knapsack with a teddy bear sewn onto it.

I took a seat and waited for the bus.

I thought about my mom. About Jack Reacher. Anything to keep my mind off Matlind and Black Rock.

I held my bus ticket and breathed in and breathed out. Then I looked back at the sleeping girl again. Hood down. Face down. Now buried in her arms.

She looked uncomfortable. Tired. Frustrated.

Maybe she was running from something. Maybe I was running from something. Not Carter Crossing. I had given that place enough of my life.

My mom was dead. What was I going to do, return home and run for sheriff? Take the reins?

I had spent four years in ROTC. My mom had been a Marine. My dad had been an MP in the United States Army. Why not join the military? Then I'd be following in both my parents' footsteps.

I shrugged like I was actually having a conversation with someone else.

Get a grip.

I looked around the room. Big clock on the wall. It was now 1:15 a.m. The bus for Little Rock would be arriving soon. No time to nap now. I'd nap on the bus.

I wasn't tired anyway. Not in the slightest. I was too wound up. Too tense.

I looked at the other people waiting. Young. Old. All had luggage. Brown bags with handles. Black bags with handles and wheels. Some old. Some new.

Then there was that girl. I was back looking at her. She had no bags. No luggage except for the pink knapsack.

I had no luggage. *No luggage.*

Normally women carried things. On average, female travelers carried more items than men. New clothes. Toiletries. Empty space for store-bought items and souvenirs.

Faye Matlind had been on her honeymoon. She had packed. She was a female traveler.

I had switched rooms with Matlind and I had seen plenty of luggage in his room. There had been female items. Lots of things.

I sat up straight in my chair. I dug into my pocket and pulled out my phone.

I unlocked the screen and examined it. Low battery life.

I clicked the phone icon and dialed Grady's number from memory.

It rang and he answered.

I could pick out the confusion in his voice like it was highlighted with a different tone. The kind when someone answers an unfamiliar caller.

I said, "I swapped rooms with Matlind. Night before last. I stayed in his room and he stayed in mine."

"Reacher?"

I said, "In his room, there was extra luggage. Girlie luggage. There were perfumes, an extra toothbrush, razors, some female medications, makeup, and a box of tampons."

Grady said, "Reacher. It's over. Matlind killed himself. He was crazy."

I said, "You think Matlind invented his wife still? That he imagined a woman and he brought luggage for her? No one does that!"

"Faye Matlind is real."

There was dead air for a long moment and then Grady said, "Reacher, this is not your fight. It isn't your business. I'm the sheriff in this town. Wherever you're headed, keep on going! It's not your concern!"

Grady hung up.

I stared at the phone. The screen slashed a warning: *battery critical*.

I pocketed the phone, leaned back in my seat, and stared at the huge clock on the wall. It was now 1:20 a.m.

Why should I get involved? It's Grady's problem. I just want to find Jack Reacher.

You will do the right thing, my mom had said.

Her voice and her frail, dying body stared back at me from my memories for a long minute.

Then a man's voice in the distance said, "Now boarding for Little Rock."

Chapter 39

The bus was cold and I was too big for the seats even though they were like captain's chairs. Two to a row. And they reclined to 115 degrees.

I had my own row, which was good because I had leg room, but I was still too tall for the seat. I couldn't recline because an older couple sat behind me. I didn't want to be right in their faces. So I just stayed seated upright.

I pulled out my phone and checked the battery. It would die soon.

I started thinking about that missing girl that Jill had told me about again—Ann Gables.

What was the connection between her and Faye Matlind?

The bus had Wi-Fi onboard. So I pulled up the Internet and did a local search on Ann Gables in the news. Images came up of her high school yearbook pictures and her Facebook and then stories about her and the other missing girls.

The FBI had thought that she was one of the victims. If she was one of the missing victims, then so was Faye. No doubt about it.

I searched for a few minutes and then I stopped. I realized that these stories weren't going to tell me anything. If other people had discovered it, the FBI would have solved it by now.

I started to look through other news, just the headlines. Then something caught my eye. It was about the manhunt for the criminal, Oskar Tega.

I shrugged. Might as well try to read about something else since I was on a bus out of Mississippi and had no plans of returning to Black Rock.

I clicked on the article and skimmed it.

Tega had eluded authorities, escaped by sea, was thought to have come to Texas and burned one of his *farms* to the ground. Nothing that I didn't already know.

The end of the article said that it was thought that he hadn't escape by boat, but by seaplane.

My brow furrowed and I stared at the screen.

Seaplane?

Hank, the old guy, the airplane mechanic from two days ago, had talked about a seaplane. He had explained the difference between a seaplane and a flying boat.

The flying boat was also called a water bomber, those planes that fly over a forest fire and drop tons of water over the flames.

I thought back about what he had said. He had driven from Jackson to Jarvis Lake to refuel "*some rich guy's seaplane*." But actually it had been a flying boat.

He had said the guy was flying his rich friends in for some fishing.

I thought back about my conversation with Maria. What had she said about Texas?

Oskar Tega had visited Texas, taken back his product, and then murdered his employees. The thing that stuck out was that he had used a scorched earth policy.

His men had set fire to the farm and most of the town. They destroyed the evidence, but the police knew that it was them.

Why cover your tracks and hide that you were even there when it was so obvious that it had been Tega? I couldn't get why anyone would go through all that trouble to destroy evidence when it hadn't affected the fact that everyone knew it was him.

I read some more about Tega. There was nothing new in this article. I moved on.

What was the name of the town in Texas?

I was sure that Maria had told me, but I couldn't recall and that was rare for me. I usually remembered everything.

I returned to the home screen on my phone and dialed Maria's number from memory.

The phone rang and rang and I got her voicemail. I left no message.

I hung up. A few seconds later, I received a text.

"Who is this?"

I replied, "Reacher. Can you talk?"

She texted, "At work. 'Sup?"

I texted, "Battery dying. What's the name of the town in Texas with Tega's farm?"

She replied, "?"

I texted, "Granjas?"

Time passed like she had gone back to work.

Then she replied, "Crosscut."

I texted back, "Thanks."

I went back into my Internet browser. A low battery warning popped up again.

I ignored it and searched for Crosscut. The phone searched and offered several results. I scanned them until I found what I was looking for.

Crosscut was a small town, far from any major urban areas in west Texas. It was nothing but desert and tumbleweeds, the perfect secluded place to hide drug manufacturing in the U.S.

Nothing new was reported in the articles. There was no evidence left behind of the product. There was no evidence of any drug manufacturing.

Therefore, I reasoned that it was logical to question how the DEA knew that he trafficked drugs. So I started researching, sifting through articles and old clippings about him, just as fast as my eyes and mind could process them... and that was fast. I found nothing. No evidence concluded that Oskar Tega was a drug dealer. The only connections that the cops had made between his operations and drugs were from his known associates, which were drug cartels, but no evidence that he himself manufactured anything.

Then I had another idea. I searched for missing girls in and around Crosscut. Sure enough, the county had had numerous reports of missing girls—travelers mostly. Same as around Black Rock.

An alarm went off in my head like a prison siren. That was the connection—Tega.

I dialed Grady again.

The phone rang and rang. I heard a beeping noise and then Grady answered.

“What?”

Grady had known that it was me calling.

“The guy in the news, the drug lord.”

Grady asked, “What guy?”

“Oskar Tega.”

“Tega? What about him?”

I said, “He’s not selling drugs.”

“What?”

“Tega isn’t in the drug business. He’s not dealing drugs.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

I said, “Oskar Tega isn’t dealing drugs. The Feds have him all wrong.”

“What the hell does he have to do with anything?”

“I rode into Black Rock with this old airplane mechanic. He said that he was meeting a rich guy on the lake. The rich guy had a seaplane.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

I said, “Oskar Tega escaped from the DEA from his beach house in Mexico. He escaped by seaplane.”

Silence on the other line.

I took the phone away from my ear and checked the screen. A red battery symbol flashed, but the line was still there.

“Grady?”

Grady said, “Are you saying that he’s coming here? But why?”

“Look up Crosscut, Texas.”

He said, “I know about Crosscut. It’s been on the news.”

Another pause.

Then Grady asked, “You think that he’s making drugs here? In my town?”

“I don’t think that he’s in the drug business at all. Think about the missing girls, Grady. Girls from all around your county. And the neighboring counties.”

“Yeah.”

“Enough missing girls to raise suspicion, but spread out over four counties so that no one can pinpoint an exact location that might be connected to them.”

He wasn't making the connection.

I said, "Think, Grady. They're spread out to hide the fact that they're all going to the same place."

Silence.

Then I said, "Think about why Tega torched his own compounds in Crosscut after he left. What was the point? The DEA figured that they belonged to him anyway. So why torch them for no reason? And what difference would it have made if the cops connected the farm to him? He had already cleared it out and was long gone."

Grady stayed quiet.

I said, "And the Mexican hit man. Why send him? Why try to kill me? Why kill Matlind? What was the point?"

Silence. I heard Grady breathing on the other line. I could picture the expression on his face as he was trying to figure out what I already knew.

He said, "I don't know."

I said, "To shut me up. He sent the hit man to silence both of us."

"So he didn't want either of you talking? But why? What did you know?"

"It wasn't what I knew. It was what one of us or the cops would figure out later."

"What's that?"

"Tega isn't a drug dealer. He isn't destroying evidence and killing witnesses to hide *who* he is. He's destroying evidence and killing witnesses to hide *what* he is. And he's coming to Black Rock and he's going to kill everyone involved and burn your town to the ground just to keep his secret."

"What secret? What is..."

Then silence, not dead air, not static, but cold silence fell over the phone. No sound.

I waited a long moment and then I shouted, "GRADY! GRADY!"

I looked at the phone. It was dead.

Shit!

Oskar Tega was going to Black Rock or he was already there and he was going to leave Black Rock burned to ash.

Chapter 40

Darkness hovered to the west. The night sky was all around me, but the darkness to the west was thick and grim and stood out like a lone dark cloud on a sunny day.

To the east was Jarvis Lake, the small town of Black Rock, and a brewing storm.

I was on a bus about 40 miles north of Clarksdale on Interstate 61.

The ride was smooth and most of the passengers slept. They were seasoned bus riders.

I couldn't sleep. All I thought about was Black Rock and Faye Matlind and I felt an overwhelming sense of guilt as if I had left the scene of a car crash and had ignored a dying survivor on the scene that I hadn't wanted to bother with.

It was 15 minutes since I had spoken to Grady on the phone. This was his problem. It was his jurisdiction and I wasn't even in law enforcement.

It was none of my business. Or that was what I kept repeating to myself. So why did I feel the burning urge to return?

I supposed it was my Reacher blood.

In the last four days I had felt two types of urges that I couldn't quench by doing nothing. The first was traveling and the second was correcting the uncorrected. I couldn't walk away, not then. If I continued on the path of looking the other way, I would never feel right again. It would've never sat right with me. So I leaned over the seat, reached up, and pulled the emergency stop. I jumped out of my seat and began trekking up the aisle toward the front of the bus.

The driver glanced up in the rearview. He must've been terrified by the massive giant who came up behind him. I walked toward the front of the bus in huge strides.

Three-fourths of a second later I had to grab the headrest of the nearest seat in order to brace myself because the bus was hauling to a stop.

Tires howled, the brakes squealed, and tire smoke filled the air behind the heavy machine.

The bus came to a full stop sprawled diagonally across two lanes.

The passengers were all abruptly woken up. Most of them had skipped the disoriented phase and kicked into full alert as if they had awakened seconds before a fatal crash.

By the time the driver turned to interrogate me about why I had pulled the cord, I was already standing at the door to exit.

I said, "Open it! Now!"

I used the cop voice that my mom had taught me and that I had heard her use many times before. Lots of sound and fury. It wasn't about yelling. It was about meaning and power.

As always, it worked. The guy jumped into action and flipped a black handle on the center console. The doors opened and I leapt off the bus and started the long trek back to Black Rock.

Chapter 41

I walked south on 61. Jarvis Lake was about 35 miles east of me, but I had already combed through the roadmap in my head. There was no straight shot back to Jarvis. I had to take 61 south and then cut east on 278. This route took me about 25 miles out of my way, but it was the quickest way back.

I walked the long stretch of road with my thumb out. I walked at a fast pace and didn't run because I didn't want to scare away any potential rides by running. I hadn't had a lot of experience with hitchhiking, but I doubted that anyone would stop for a giant who was running.

A guy with a monstrous stature, waving down cars in the middle of the night, was probably not someone people would stop for anyway, but I figured walking at a brisk pace gave me better odds than flat out running.

I walked for more than an hour before I took a break. I had seen cars, big trucks, one delivery truck for a soda company, a pair of twin pickups with the same logo on the side, and another Greyhound, but none stopped for me.

No one stopped.

I walked on. The highway was dark for a while and then a set of red lights sparkled in the distance. They weren't brake lights because they moved up behind me.

As they got closer I heard the whine of a siren. It neared and I saw it. It was an emergency vehicle, an ambulance.

It sped past me. The woods to the east echoed the screeching siren until it faded off into the distance.

The ambulance was like a small white ghost sailing along the blacktop, past me, and then it was gone.

I hoped that it wasn't headed to an accident up ahead because that would delay any vehicles that were driving south, which was the direction that I wanted to go.

I walked on for another 20 minutes and saw no one. I rounded a bend of trees and walked underneath an overpass. Then I saw the line of taillights. All bright. All stopped on the interstate. There was an accident. It was fresh. A lone cop was setting up road flares. He had sparked one up and tossed it on the road behind what looked like a two-car crash.

A black pickup had jackknifed a sedan. I couldn't tell the make or color of the sedan. It was crushed like crumpled paper.

The paramedics were pulling the driver of the truck out of the passenger side.

From the looks of the sedan, they would need the fire department to get the occupants out, but no one paid any attention to the occupants of the sedan. It looked like it was already too late for them.

Brake lights filled my side of the highway. Seconds after I neared the end of the taillights, a second cop arrived on the scene. And then another one. All state troopers.

Sirens howled and lights flashed in unison.

Maybe I could get a ride from one of the stopped cars. They might take pity on me. Sometimes seeing the pain and suffering of others ignites a certain helpfulness in people.

So I walked on the white line of the east shoulder. I glanced in each car as I passed it.

The new cops started guiding the closest cars around the accident.

The cars adjusted their course slightly and drove on the shoulder and around the accident.

I reached the middle car. The cars in front of me started to pull forward. The car that I had just passed was alongside me again.

I peered into the window. It was a middle-aged woman. Brown hair cut short and spiked. She had a tough military look to her. But she couldn't have been more than 100 pounds. She sat in her seat, close to the steering wheel.

The car that she was in was a little thing. Maybe a Kia? I wasn't sure about the symbol on the front.

It was blue.

She looked back at me. No real interest in her face, but she rolled her window down.

She leaned out and said, "Hey, you."

I turned to her and smiled, not too wide, just a good normal smile.

She asked, "Where ya headed?"

I said, "Black Rock."

"I have no idea where that is?"

"Jarvis Lake?"

She nodded. She looked forward. The cars in front of her were moving again. Their brake lights lit up the inside of her cabin. Now the interior of her car was turning black.

The details of her face—lips, eyes, nose, and cheeks—had all vanished in the darkness.

She said, "Quick. Get in."

The car in the other lane took advantage of her stalling and jumped in line and followed the other cars around the accident.

I opened the passenger door and dumped myself into the seat. I had to cram my legs into the foot well. Her car wasn't made for someone my size.

I wanted to get the door closed and the car moving before I concerned myself with comfort. So I shut the door—my knees pressed against the dash.

The moment that I shut the door; the car behind us honked. The woman next to me looked in her rearview and shook a fist up in the air.

She said, "Hold on!"

Then she paused for a second.

She said, "Seatbelt! We are *safe* in my car."

I obeyed her instruction and pulled the belt around me. There wasn't much slack after I had latched it into the buckle.

She pressed the gas and the little four-cylinder car jumped to life. We passed the cop directing traffic and then she got in the fast lane and hit the gas.

Just 27 minutes later I was back near Clarksdale.

My driver was nice enough to drop me off on the eastbound side at a gas station.

She was actually headed south.

I hadn't argued.

She dropped me off at the gas station. The only problem was that it was closed. Only the pumps were dimly lit. Automatic credit card machines were the source of the dim lights.

Luckily highway 278 wasn't far.

I set out toward it. I cut through a short field that had been freshly mowed. The smell of cut grass lingered in the air.

I made it to the interstate and began walking along the shoulder. I stuck my thumb out every time a car passed, but all they did was pass. No one stopped.

The storm clouds were some distance from me, which was good because I didn't want to walk in the rain. But it was bad because that meant that I was far from Black Rock.

I ran the math in my head. I was somewhere around 70 miles away from where I needed to be.

I walked on for another 30 minutes. I saw only 11 cars in that time. I checked the time in my head. It was about 2:45 in the morning. I needed to get a ride and fast.

I decided to move to the left-hand shoulder. Not something that was taught in driver's education, but I figured maybe people driving in the fast lane were slightly turned off because they'd have to slow down, cross two lanes, and then stop on the shoulder just to pick me up. Then I questioned my own logic here because there was just as much chance of someone driving in the slow lane, and then I moved to the center. This time of night and long-distance driving would make anyone lethargic, thus I might have a better chance in the middle of the road.

Before long, I heard the sound of tires speeding along the pavement behind me, the hollow sound of a car going over the speed limit.

I turned and glanced over my right shoulder. The car drove and switched on its high beams. Maybe the driver was sizing me up or maybe he was trying to avoid hitting me. I wasn't sure.

Within 25 seconds the car had flown by me without slowing.

I saw Alabama plates on the back of it.

I walked another 14 minutes and then another sound of distant tires came up behind me. This sound was accompanied with a squealing drive belt. It shrieked over and over, a loud mechanical sound like a struggling engine.

I stopped and turned. This time I stood completely still and had my thumb stuck way out.

Stop! I need you to stop! I thought.

The driver must've seen me from far away because he slowed and the whining of the bad drive belt slowed with the vehicle.

The car was an old Corvette, driven by an old guy.

The Corvette slowed and came to a stop right behind me. The guy had decided to pick me up before he sized me up. That had been a first.

I walked up to the hood. It had more than a few dings in the grill.

The paint had rusted sections and parts chipped away. I imagined that at one time it had been a beautiful cherry red.

The guy stuck his head out and glared at me.

He asked, "Ya gonna stand thar ssss... starin' or ya ggggg... gonna get in?"

The guy stuttered in a thick redneck accent.

I jumped to it and scrambled to the passenger door and climbed into the seat.

Immediately, I noticed the guy's old, flip-style cell phone resting in the cup holder nearest me.

I stared at it like it was the object of a long quest. I thought about asking the guy to borrow it, but I dismissed the thought and just looked away.

I looked around the car like I was admiring it.

The guy hit the gas and we took off.

The guy asked, "Where ya headed?"

I said, "I need to get to Black Rock. It's urgent."

The guy said, "GGGG... good. I'm headed tttttt... to Memphis. I ccccccc... an drop you offffff afterrrrr... I ggggg... get on 55 nnnnn... orth."

He hadn't asked why it was urgent or any other details. He pushed the accelerator harder and the Corvette sped up. The belt whined so fast that it almost became an ambient noise like a well-oiled jet engine.

Before I knew it we were nearing 100 miles per hour and I wondered if the drive belt would last under the pressure. The driver didn't seem to care and it was his car, so I figured that he'd know better than me.

The guy checked a bulky, black device on the dash that blinked periodically. It was a radar detector. It was suction cupped to the windshield.

I looked out the windshield and gazed into the storm ahead.

I knew that Oskar Tega would be there. He didn't know that I was coming. I hoped that Faye was alive and I hoped that I would make it in time.

Chapter 42

The guy had been a nice driver too, like all the others I'd met so far. Too bad my mind had been on the destination.

The guy had turned north on 55 to let me out on the side of the road. There was an off-ramp up ahead that veered off to the east.

He had told me to take that ramp. It led to 35. That went straight into Jarvis Lake from the west.

I reconfigured the route from the west in my head, but I let him tell it anyway. He had been a lifesaver and I didn't want to disavow that. He stuttered, but it was no big deal.

He let me out, but not before he had asked me twice if I was sure, because he had leaned over and stared up at the storm clouds on the horizon.

They were low and obvious, even in the dark. The center and darkest part was in the direction that I was headed.

I reassured him that I'd be fine, thanked him, and went on my way.

The clouds were bad, but so far there hadn't been a drop of rain. No thunder. No lightning. Only the clouds.

I walked down 35. Checking the calculations in my mind, Black Rock was more than five miles away and I was tired as hell. But I was full of grit and I was going to get there.

I figured that it would take me less than an hour and a half, maybe quicker if the weather stayed in my favor. I walked along an empty and lonely stretch of highway. The road was old and seemed badly kept. It was bumpy and wide with lots of potholes.

I walked in the middle of the road because I didn't figure there was much danger of getting run over. If any headlights were hurtling down the road, I would've seen them coming from more than a mile away because the highway was as straight as a bullet's path.

Any cars coming up behind me, I would've heard because there was no noise except the rhythmic sounds of crickets, the flutter of night birds flying from tree to tree, and the smooth rustling of blowing leaves from the night's wind.

There was no sign of human life. Not a car. Not even the distant outside lights of a country house.

I passed a couple of dilapidated buildings that had once been stores. Now they were nothing more than boarded-up windows and termites. They had been abandoned for so long that all of the glass that had once been in the windows was completely gone. Not a shard remained.

I walked on. Finally, there were signs of life. I saw an airport sign with a turn-off. Then I looked over the distant trees and saw the lights of a small airport. I didn't see anything going on.

It reminded me of Hank Cochran and Link, the collie. I guessed that Tega used Hank probably because his knowledge of Tega's particular seaplane.

I kept moving. I looked back only once more before I was one mile from Jarvis Lake.

As if on cue, a thick fog rolled in from the direction of the lake, like dark smoke rising from an active volcano.

I put one foot into the blanket of fog and a chilling feeling swarmed through me like I had crossed a physical wall.

I walked another five minutes in the fog and could barely see 20 feet in front of me. Then I saw a flash of lightning off in the distance and a second later I heard the rumble of thunder and then another lightning bolt cracked through the sky. It lit up the land with a giant white flash. The fog multiplied its power and all that I saw was white.

I heard another thunderclap. It was high and far away at first; then it rolled across the sky like a sonic boom. A moment later there was a second lightning bolt and then a third. Each charged across the sky and then I heard a low thunderous rumble. It was slower than the other ones. It continued and grew louder and louder like it was nearing me. It came from over my shoulder to the southwest.

I gazed back and looked up at the sky as I walked. Then I stopped and looked up.

The new sound wasn't a thunderclap. It was the sound of twin plane engines roaring.

It was coming in low over my head. I saw the underbelly of a plane. It was painted black as the night like it had been designed for CIA stealth missions.

It had no blinking lights on the bottom. It was too dark and the fog was too thick to tell if there was a tail number.

The plane had no visible landing gear, but it flew low like it was coming in for a landing.

The flying boat, I thought.

It was Oskar Tega and the rest of his men. It had to be. He was arriving to get the rest of the girls and kill any of his employees who remained. That meant that Faye was probably still alive and she was probably still on the grounds in Black Rock.

The plane flew in, passed overhead, and vanished in the fog ahead.

Another lightning bolt crashed far in the distance and I got one last glimpse of the tail as the plane descended over the lake. The lightning vanished and the darkness returned. I lost sight of the plane. Then there were two things that I regretted.

The first was that I reached into my pocket and pulled out that Corvette driver's flip-style phone. I had stolen it, swiped it before I had gotten out of the car and I'd felt bad about it, but I needed it.

I had wanted to ask if I could borrow it, but what would I have said?

Can I borrow your phone for a day or so? I'll mail it to you.

It was a cheap phone and hopefully he wouldn't be too bent out of shape about it.

I flipped open the phone and started dialing Grady's cell number. The phone rang and rang. I waited and walked at the same time. The phone rang some more and then it went to voicemail.

I said, "Grady. It's Reacher. Meet me at the rednecks' compound. I'm going to save Faye Matlind. Call me back at this number."

I hung up and then I searched my memory banks. I found Sheldon's number and dialed it. The phone rang once and she picked up like she had been waiting. Her voice sounded awake and alert. She must've been an early riser. Very early.

"Hello? Who's this?" she asked.

"It's Reacher."

"Where are you calling from?"

"The road."

"Road?"

I said, "Yes. I'm on my way back. I think I know what's going on. A real bad guy is in town. His plane just flew over my head."

There was a pause.

Then she asked, "Plane? What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'll explain later. Where's Grady?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Did you try calling him?"

"Voicemail," I said.

"He must be on the other side of the lake. Out of reach."

"Come get me, okay? We'll have to make a stand without him."

"Make a stand? What are you talking about?"

"I'll explain when you get here. Just come and get me. And Sheldon..."

She paused a beat, then said, "Yes?"

"Bring your gun."

I thought about that nice pump-action shotgun that she had pointed at me and Grady earlier.

At that exact moment, the second thing that I regretted happened.

It started raining.

Chapter 43

Ten or 15 minutes had passed. I wasn't sure because the rain messed with the stopwatch in my head. It beat down hard. It came on like a flood. The sky dumped inches of it on top of me.

I had had no time to prepare. Maybe the lack of sleep or the expenditure of energy was slowing me down, but I failed to get the flip phone into my pocket

before it had gotten soaked. The screen shut down first and then it made a buzzing noise. It was ruined.

I had heard that you could let a wet phone soak in rice overnight and that would fix it. I wasn't sure how this would work and it didn't matter. It wasn't my phone and I was never going to be able to return it anyway. So I tossed it off to the side of the road. The rain came down so hard and thick that I couldn't even make out individual drops.

I pulled my shirt up over my head like a hood. It didn't help much, but it was something. It slowed the water getting into my eyes by about 20 percent.

The rain was cold this time, colder than the weather had been.

I was in serious danger of catching hypothermia.

I held a hand over my eyes like a visor. I tried to shield my eyes so that I could see, not that there was anything to see.

The rain started to come down even harder. Now it was like a torrential downpour.

I started shivering. My skin goosebumped over. My jaw started chattering. My shivers turned to a shake. I wanted to run to the trees and find cover, but I had to press on. Then I saw a pair of headlights coming toward me.

A vehicle with bright high beams drove up, slow and safe.

I waved my arms in big motions up in the air—the universal signal for flagging someone down. The vehicle drew nearer. It was an SUV. I couldn't tell the make or model.

It drove up slowly and came to a stop in the middle of the road. The brakes squealed from being wet, not from the speed.

The high beams switched to low beams and I saw Sheldon behind the wheel. She looked dry and comfortable.

I scrambled around to the passenger door. I didn't check to make sure that it was unlocked. I just opened it and dumped myself into the seat. I slammed the door all in one fluid movement.

I pulled my shirt down and smiled at her with a wide smile. Regardless of what was happening in her town, I'd never been more glad to see someone. And my smile told her exactly that.

She said, "You're soaked."

I shook my head and my hair like a wet dog. Water droplets sprayed across her dash and on the inside of the passenger window.

"Towel?"

She had a towel in her hand, outstretched to me.

"Thanks."

I grabbed it and dried off in a flutter of hand movements. It was soaked by the time I'd finished. And I was still wet.

She asked, "Where to?"

"Redneck compound. And go as fast as possible."

She made a U-turn and headed back in the opposite direction. Water splashed up and away from the tires.

I asked, "Did you bring your gun?"

"Glove box."

Not the shotgun, I thought.

I reached forward and popped it open.

The gun inside was a CZ 52, not a good gun. Suddenly I would've traded anything for the shotgun. This was barely better than no gun. It was one of the worst guns ever. Czech made. Terrible aim. Firing pin easy to remove.

"This is your gun?"

"Yes. I bought it for protection. Why?"

"It's a piece of crap. Terrible gun. What about the shotgun? Where is the Remington?"

"I never had any shells for that. I was bluffing with it."

I scowled as I looked down at the piece-of-shit gun that she had brought me. I tilted it in my hand and studied it in the dim light from the dashboard lights.

Guess that I can throw it at a bad guy, I thought.

I asked, "Where the hell did you buy it? The Soviet Union thirty years ago?"

"I bought it in an auction."

I sighed and then I asked, "Historical?"

"It was part historical. Why? It's a gun."

I said, "Unless you can manage to pull it on your attacker at pointblank range, it won't do much good."

"The guy told me that it was a great deal."

"It is if you paid for it with pocket change."

She said, "Besides the shotgun with no bullets it's all I've got. I'm not used to needing a gun."

I said, "The shotgun with no shells would've been better. At least we could bluff again."

She stayed quiet.

Then I asked, "Does it fire?"

"Yes. I've fired it before. Like I said, I wanted protection. So I took it out to the woods and fired it."

I shrugged. I couldn't be mad at her for it. I hoped that I wouldn't need to fire it. It'd probably blow up in my hands.

I checked it. The safety was switched to the on position. I turned the gun and examined the butt. On an old European-style gun the magazine ejector was on the bottom.

I ejected the magazine and inspected it. It was loaded. I replaced the magazine back into the gun and pulled back the slide. A bullet chambered. Ready to fire, if it would fire.

It was heavy in my hand. The frame was all steel parts. There was a bulky back end between my thumb and index knuckle.

Despite being an old relic, it'd been well maintained. Clean. Oiled. Looked like Sheldon kept up with it. Guess I'd have to trust her.

I asked, "So what about Grady?"

"Something's going on across the lake. And now they've got to deal with the weather."

I nodded and said, "We're on our own."

She asked, "What's going on? Exactly."

"You know the rednecks?"

"Of course."

“And you know about Chris Matlind?”

She nodded without taking her eyes off the road. She was glued to it like our lives depended on it, which they did. The rain wasn’t letting up.

I said, “They’re the ones who abducted his wife. They’ve been taking women all over North Mississippi.”

“Taking women? What? Why?”

I paused a beat. Then I said, “This is a small town. There are no secrets in a small town.”

“What are you saying?”

“I think you know something. You *all* have known something. No way have they been doing it in complete anonymity.”

She said, “They’re a bunch of idiots who drink beer and shoot squirrels. No one knows anything about taken women.”

“Come on, Sheldon. Tell me the truth. What’ve you heard?”

“Only that they grow weed. Maybe cook meth. But no one says anything else.”

“They keep to themselves. It wasn’t until you blew into town that they started making a ruckus.”

I said, “They do more than cook meth.”

“Like what?”

“Second night that I was here they tried to take Matlind. It’s deeper than meth. More than random abductions. They’re part of something.”

Sheldon looked doubtful. She asked, “Like organized crime?”

I nodded.

I said, “More like an international crime syndicate. Has to be.”

“Are you serious? Most of them barely passed high school. A couple of them can’t even read.”

“Yeah. They aren’t rocket scientists. They’re walking redneck clichés, but they aren’t the brains behind the operation.”

“Who is?”

“Have you heard of Oskar Tega?”

Her eyes flashed at me.

She said, “Yeah. The guy from the news. He escaped capture in Costa Rica. But he’s hiding in Cuba?”

I said, “That’s what the media was saying, but tonight I was on a bus and checked the news. Now they’re saying that he’s thought to have escaped on a seaplane.”

“And a compound in Texas was burned to the ground. It was his. The guards, equipment, even the immigrant workers were all burned. The drugs and any cash were the only things missing.”

“So what does that mean?”

“The old man who’s staying on the lake. The day that I first saw you, I was with him.”

She nodded.

I said, “He’s an airplane mechanic. He was paid to drive here from Jackson. He said that he was coming here to refuel a special type of seaplane.”

She asked, “A seaplane?”

Then she veered the car to the middle of the road. She turned the wheel and let off the gas to fight a quick skid. She regained control, fast, and continued on.

Then she asked, "So the seaplane is Oskar Tega's and the rednecks are selling drugs for him?"

"The rednecks are well-financed. I saw their compound when I first got here. They drive brand new F-150s. They have a new brick house and a brand new barn. I noticed that the barn has motion sensors hanging above it. Those sensors are attached to expensive-looking floodlights."

"And that giant Confederate flag. The flag itself might've cost a few thousand dollars, but that steel flagpole had to cost a fortune. It's huge. I've never seen anything like it. Where else are they getting the money? Not from selling weed to the tourists. No way."

"And I doubt that it's from cooking meth. I believe that they are cooking meth, but that's not where they make their money."

She said, "So you think that they're cooking meth, but they're making their money from kidnapping women? Like for a ransom? But no one has gotten a ransom for all of the missing girls."

I shook my head and said, "They aren't selling drugs. Not to Tega. And they aren't kidnapping the women for ransom money. They're taking the women for him because that's his real business. They aren't drug dealers. They're human traffickers."

"Tega isn't a drug dealer. He's a human trafficker."

"And he's been paying the rednecks a percentage like a finder's fee. That's where they make their money."

She looked over at me; an incredulous look crossed her face.

I said, "We have to get there before they do."

She asked, "They?"

I said, "The old guy said that his client was flying in with a group of guys. Plural. Tega's coming and he's not coming alone. The old guy said that the plane seats eight on the rear bench. So Tega probably has five guys with him, depending on how much cargo he had."

"Cargo? You mean the women?"

I nodded.

She paused a beat and then she said, "This sounds crazy. Are you sure about this?"

I said, "Sheldon, Oskar Tega escaped in a flying boat. It's a huge seaplane."

She nodded.

I said, "Just before I called you, I saw a flying boat. It flew just over my head and it was headed to the lake. It was landing. Oskar Tega is already here. My bet is that he's headed to the rednecks by now and he plans to take what is his and kill everyone else."

She turned her head, took her foot off the gas, and stared at me with shock in her eyes.

I nodded.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

I said, "Whatever is necessary."

She stayed quiet. She pressed her foot harder on the gas and accelerated the SUV.

Ten minutes later we were at the fork. One slow minute after that we were parked.

Chapter 44

We parked on the side of the road down from the compound. A patch of trees hid her SUV.

The rain slowed and I scanned the compound as best I could from the SUV.

Sheldon squeezed the steering wheel. She killed the headlights and left the engine running.

The windshield wipers swept rain off the glass. The sound echoed through the cabin like a slow, loud clock.

Sheldon broke the silence. I heard the nervousness in her voice.

She said, "Oh. Take this."

She reached into her center console and pulled out a hands-free set.

She said, "It has Bluetooth. It's already paired to this phone."

She handed me a smartphone.

I stared at it.

She said, "I have two for work."

I placed the set in my right ear.

She pulled out a second phone and called me.

I clicked the tiny button on the back of the Bluetooth.

I said, "Hey."

She said, "Okay. I can hear you."

I looked back out over the compound. The rain had slowed more, but the fog was still thick.

I saw the rednecks' pickups. A couple other vehicles were parked near them. I couldn't make them out. More trucks, probably.

Sheldon asked, "What's the plan?"

"I have no idea."

"What're you going to do?"

I looked at her and smiled and then I held the gun and got out. The door opened smooth, but a rush of cold air blew in some rainwater. It misted across the seat behind me.

I reached to shut the door and the wind pushed it out of my grip. A wind tunnel sucked it closed. The door slammed. The wind outside howled and the trees waved. A huge bolt of lightning crashed across the sky and over the direction of the lake.

The storm was loud enough to camouflage any door-slammaing noise.

The fog lit up with that quick color of all-consuming white. It was like a giant flashbang across the sky. Even though it was bright and thick, it camouflaged my movements like a blizzard in a snow-ridden climate.

Sheldon's voice came over my earpiece and said, "I'll stay here and try to contact Grady again. I'll keep you on conference calling."

"Good idea. If you get him, tell him to bring everything he's got. I'm sure that these rednecks are armed to the teeth. If I don't come back out or this goes sideways, drive to the other side of the lake and find him."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to sneak in, grab the women, and sneak out."

"What about Tega? What if he's there?"

"He's not. Remember, his plane just landed. In this weather, they'll still be trying to find their car. Besides, the cops can deal with Tega. All I want to do is keep my promise to Matlind."

She stayed quiet.

I said, "Sheldon, if a firefight starts, you drive away."

"Okay."

She said nothing else.

I said, "Forget about the conference calling. Radio silence for now. I need to be able to concentrate. I'll call you if I need to."

I clicked off the Bluetooth.

Chapter 45

The rain hammered down in one huge rush like an invading force. Then it slowed suddenly.

A minute later, it stopped.

I was left in the cold, damp night with only the fog as cover. It was enough.

I snuck through the trees and made my way to the edge of the compound's erratic circle of buildings. I ran up to the closest one while the sounds of my footsteps were muffled by the storm and I pressed my back along the edge of the building. It was wood. It smelled of wet boards and had the odor of animals inside. There was no sound.

I shimmied along the wall and snuck up to a window. Then I crouched underneath it. I didn't risk peeking in. This window was near the back door. You never pick the first window, near the door. Nine times out of ten, that's the one where someone is waiting with a shotgun on the interior to blow off the head of the first person to peer in. So I moved at a steady, quiet pace to the second window.

It was dark. I peeked in.

The room was quiet and empty. I scanned around it. It was some kind of guest room or bedroom with no personal belongings. There was no sign that anyone lived in it. No pictures. No jewelry on the vanity. No sheets on the bed, just an old mattress.

The closet door was wide open. No shoes on the floor. No clothes hanging on the bar. Empty.

The door to the bedroom was open. I saw no sign of any life at all. It wasn't clean, but it wasn't dirty. This appeared to be just an extra building. Maybe they let their dogs play here instead of locking them up at night in a pen or shed.

The only distinct thing about this building was that animal smell, except there were no dogs. No cats. No animals at all.

I went around to the backdoor and tried the knob—unlocked.

I twisted it and opened the door in a quiet rush. I threw myself against the outer wall in case someone inside had a gun pointed in my direction. Nothing.

I entered the building with the CZ 52 drawn.

I'd been raised to believe that if you pointed a gun, you'd better be ready to fire it. I wasn't ready because that piece-of-shit gun wasn't worth firing. But in the dark, a gun barrel looks like a gun barrel and I could scare someone with it. So it was better than nothing.

Besides, rednecks tend to embrace the second amendment. And I was trespassing.

Luckily there was no one in the building; it took only a few seconds to confirm that. The structure had only four rooms total. And they were all small.

The only thing that I found of use was a Maglite. It was a foot long, black, shiny thing. Dangerous, as a club. So I grabbed it. It would be more use than the Cold War relic that Sheldon had given me, especially in close-quarter combat.

I left the little house and headed to the main one. It was the next closest one.

The fog began thinning. I saw the outlines of vehicles and the other buildings.

The main house was the only one with lights on.

In order to get there I'd have to travel through the center of the front yard. It was about 100 feet. I couldn't be sure. Too dark. Too foggy.

I slipped the CZ 52 into the waistband of my jeans. No reason running with it. No reason in even having it out. The more I thought about it, the more it scared me just to have it tucked in my pants.

The Maglite would work fine.

I kept the light off.

I crouched down halfway in a low position and scrambled across the yard.

Halfway to the main house, I made out its red brick. From a distance, the house had looked brand new, but now that I was closer to it I saw that it wasn't new. It was an old, two-story house. The newest addition was a grayish wooden deck that had been slung around the front.

A porch swing rocked and swayed at a medium speed in the breeze.

The porch lights were on, but paled by the fog. There was one light on in the house. That was all.

It was late at night, so all of the dead lights weren't unexpected. I'm sure that no one expected Tega to visit. I'm sure that it was meant to be a surprise.

I had run through two-thirds of the yard when I heard a strange sound. It sounded like the bell from a buoy floating off in the distance.

The slow *ding*.

Ding.

Ding.

Sound was ominous in the silence.

I stopped and peered around to discover what the source of the sound was and then I realized that it came from above me, from the flagpole. I gazed up into the darkness. My eyes followed the giant steel frame of the flagpole. It towered over

me. At this range it looked massive, like standing underneath the Washington Monument and looking straight up.

The top of it was hazy through the weather, but I made out the flag. It was drenched and flapped like a wet bag in the breeze.

They left it up?

That didn't sat well for me. Rednecks were known for being fanatical, but also patriotic. Usually they were more fanatical about their patriotic beliefs than anything else, at least enough to have the flag and to raise it every day and take it down every night. But they left it up in this nasty weather? That seemed unusual.

I pressed on.

I scrambled for the porch and the front door. No lights came on. No signs of life.

I peeked in through a man-sized window. Still no signs of life. Then I reached for the doorknob and turned it. It was unlocked. The door creaked open with a high-pitched whiny sound.

No one came rushing out. No inhabitants. No guys with guns. None of Tega's men. No one.

I clicked the Maglite on, brushed over the downstairs with it.

The house had an open layout. The stairs were big and wide. They curved up from the bottom of the house and led upstairs, traced by a snaking banister.

I spotlighted every inch of my line of sight with the Maglite. Nothing.

I walked upstairs. Not silently. Not loud. A medium effort. Medium pace. I wanted to go fast, but not loud.

At the top of the stairs, I saw that there were three doors. All bedrooms. All wide open.

There was no one in the house. Not unless they had hidden in the attic and in the cupboards. I couldn't understand it. Where were they?

I returned downstairs. The light from the Maglite fell across the bottom steps as I descended and then it swept across the floor. I moved it around the living room to get a better look.

There was broken glass against the downstairs back wall and furniture was shattered and knocked over.

I'd been in too much of a hurry before to notice.

Dumb Reacher, I thought.

I should've noticed. There were signs of a struggle all over the living room. I had skipped the details and went right to the open doorways.

A long Persian rug near the front door was stained in wet shoemarks. There were multiple ones.

I clicked on the Bluetooth. A female computer voice asked, "Call whom?"

I said, "Sheldon Eckhart."

The voice replied, "I don't recognize that number."

Sheldon probably hadn't programmed her own name into her own phone. So I thought for a second and then I said, "Call back."

The voice said, "Calling."

Sheldon had been the last person to call this phone, so it would dial her number back.

The phone rang and she answered.

I said, "We're too late. The main house is a wreck. There are signs of a struggle. Broken furniture and glass."

"That doesn't sound good."

"Stay back. I'm headed to check the barn."

I looked around the house quickly. There were no guns. I thought that was unusual for a family of rednecks. I imagined that most had rifles perched across the top of the fireplace like trophies, but these had none. Just a big, hideous clock that ticked the time away.

I shrugged.

I clicked the Maglite off and held it in my left hand and then I pulled the CZ 52 out of my waistband and held it in my right hand. I clicked the safety to fire and kept the muzzle facing downward. I had to be careful tramping through the house with a loaded, untested gun. Matlind had said that there were kids here.

I turned the back corner of the house and saw the barn in the distance. A gravel track led up to it. It was over a hill and around some trees. Before, when I drove in with Hank, it had looked closer to the back of the house, but now I saw that it was farther back.

I moved along the track making little noise.

Halfway down the path, I saw other houses far in the distance. They looked like more family-style dwellings. There were backyards with swing sets and animal pens.

Still I saw no signs of life.

I scrambled up the track and made it to the barn doors.

They were shut. The barn was a two-story building made of wood and painted a red color like the brick on the house.

Parked off to the side of the track, near the trees was another SUV. I saw the rear lights. They were off and the vehicle was empty.

I said, "Sheldon. Get ready. We may have to move. Quick."

Her voice sounded crisp in the Bluetooth set.

She asked, "Why? What's wrong?"

I neared the barn doors. They were about 20 feet in front of me.

I said, "The motion sensors. They aren't coming on."

I waved my left hand in the air to try to get their attention. The sensors clicked and rattled, but never came on. No bright lights. No sounds. Just moving darkness.

I switched on the Maglite and stared up at them.

"The bulbs have been shot out."

I saw bullet holes in the machines. The motors whirred and sputtered and tried to switch the lights on, but nothing happened.

"There's something else."

She asked, "What?"

I shone the light across from me at the rear of the parked SUV.

"I'm staring at Grady's truck."

His Tahoe was parked right there in front of me. The light bar was as lifeless as the rest of the cold machine.

Sheldon said, "Oh, my God! Is he involved?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

She asked, "What's in the barn?"

I stayed quiet.

I moved in closer to the doors. I left the Maglite's beam on and scanned the door with it and then I reached out and rapped on the door. Not a loud knock, just a couple of moderate taps. No one answered and then I put the Maglite underneath my arm, cradled it tight in my armpit, and held the CZ 52 with the same hand. With my free hand I reached out and grabbed the barn's door handle and jerked it open. The door swung out and jittered on along the swing.

Next I reached over and jerked the other one. It swung out the same. The two massive doors were light on their hinges.

I squinted my eyes, tried to adjust to the lack of light inside. Past the darkness, I saw several figures swaying and moving high above me.

I stood hard on the ground, burying my feet into the wet, muddy soil and jammed the gun outward, two-handed, ready to fire.

The Maglite dropped out of my armpit and sunk into the mud.

I shouted, "FREEZE! FREEZE! FREEZE!"

It was the way that I had learned all of my life. A powerful cop voice, like before, only this time loudness counted.

None of the men in front of me responded. I couldn't make out details from this distance, but it looked as though they kept on swaying.

I shouted, "STAY PUT! STAY PUT!"

I dropped quickly to one knee and scooped up the muddy Maglite. Then I lifted it and scanned the men inside. I counted more than a dozen. I couldn't tell who they were. I couldn't see enough through the fog and darkness to tell if they were even armed.

I figured that they were obeying me because no one shot at me.

I got up from my knees and moved in fast. I stepped inside the wide entrance, took a few strides into the barn, and then froze.

Grady was there. So were the rednecks. The ones that I had met in Matlind's room were there. It looked like all of the able-bodied men were there. The sheriff's deputies were there. Lewis carried up the rear.

The air was filled with a stench. It was strong.

I shone the light around the room and scanned it. I saw on the sides of the barn there were different flasks, giant pots, and an expensive air filtration system.

The rednecks had definitely been cooking meth here. There was evidence of that everywhere. It looked like I had caught them all red-handed. It looked like that, but that wasn't what I had actually found. Not at all. Not by a longshot.

I slipped the gun back into my waistband. I reached up to my ear and cupped it to block out the outside noises.

I said, "Sheldon?"

"Yup. Did you find the women?"

"Nope. I found the rednecks and Grady. And his deputies."

Silence fell over the connection. Then she asked, "You found them? So Grady is involved?"

I said, "No. He's dead. They're all dead. They're in the barn. Someone bound their hands and feet and hung them from the rafters."

She paused and gasped.

"They're all dead? All of them?"

"Yes. Dead as anything. It was done recently."

"I thought that you said that Oskar Tega had just arrived. How could he have gotten here so fast?"

"He must've had help. Like guys already here. He sent a guy into my jail cell to kill me. I'd thought that he was a lone man like a hit man, but maybe Tega had a group here already—a kill team. Like they knew that they were coming here a week ago."

"The day before the DEA raided his house in Mexico, I bet he had already sent guys here ahead of himself. The sheriff and the rednecks are casualties."

She asked, "So the sheriff wasn't in on it?"

"Neither were the rednecks. From the looks of this barn, they were busy with their own operation."

"Grady probably had stock in their meth business."

"I was wrong. Someone else was taking those girls. We're looking at two separate operations. The rednecks dealt in meth and Oskar Tega dealt in humans. That's why Grady was reluctant to call in outsiders. He was protecting the rednecks. Everything must have gone sour between them."

She was silent.

I looked at the dead faces.

I said, "Tega is here and now it's time to clean up and that's what he's doing. His men killed these guys to cover his true operation or to get rid of loose ends. I don't know. Probably, he wants the cops thinking that he's a drug dealer. That's what has worked for him so far."

"He'll be taking the girls international. We have to find them before that happens or no one will ever see them again."

Sheldon stayed quiet.

I walked out of the barn. I returned the CZ 52 into my waistband and lowered the Maglite. I stopped cupping my ear.

I stared off into the distance.

I said, "Where else could they be?"

From the main house, I hadn't been able to see the lake, but now the fog was rolling out like a living creature, like somewhere there had been a giant inhaling it. Like smoke. It was now low to the ground. The storm clouds still hovered in the air, but the thunder had quieted.

I stared across the lake. My jaw dropped. I saw bright orange and red lights rising toward the sky. It was a fire. Across the lake, it roared and burned high above the buildings.

Orange hues tornadoed up into the sky. Black smoke floated up and merged with the storm clouds and then there was an explosion. The fire had reached a gas tank or a propane tank and exploded. It ripped across the horizon and burst upward into a ball of smoke and flame.

I looked on in horror as the fire consumed the Eckhart Medical Center and I thought one thing to myself. One idea came to mind. One condition burst into my head—*asthmatic*.

Faye Matlind had severe asthma.

Chapter 46

The rain started again. It was slight. A sprinkle. No thunder. No lightning. Just the raindrops. I had been standing there for a long time without moving, without flinching. I had lost track of the time, but it must've been 15 or more minutes.

I stared at the roaring fire across the lake. It grew and spread. It devoured the buildings in the Eckhart Medical Center and moved to the perimeter fence.

Steel wires from the barbed wire snapped and the sharp sounds jetted across the water. Then the wires whipped up into the air and down again like giant tentacles.

The fire grew and roared and consumed the neighboring buildings.

A transformer exploded from the heat and sparks of electricity fired into the night sky like a fireworks show with only one color—the sharp white flash of electricity.

I spoke into my earpiece.

“Sheldon?”

She didn’t respond.

Instead, a voice within earshot and with a thick Latin American accent said, “Mr. Reacher.”

I turned to my left. My right hand went straight for the CZ 52. It came out fast and I aimed it in the direction of three short men.

I’d been distracted by the explosions across the lake and the thoughts of Faye Matlind’s asthmatic condition, so I hadn’t noticed them. They got the drop on me, not an easy thing to do. They had snuck up on me in the darkness.

Careless.

They saw the CZ 52 in my hand, but none of them reacted.

I didn’t fire.

The guys were dressed all in black. Black jeans. Black rain slickers with hoods slung back. Their heads were exposed and the rain misted down on them. I saw their faces.

The guy in the middle, the one who had already spoken, said, “Toss the gun.”

An idiotic move for any man to make, even when he is outgunned. If I tossed the gun, then I was as good as dead. No way was I going to get rid of my only leverage.

Except one factor. These guys had one thing that was better leverage than what I had.

Besides two of the men armed with FN-P90s, which is a great submachine gun. Accurate. Reliable. Deadly.

The one extra factor of leverage that they had was that the guy in the middle had a Five-seven pistol in his hand and it was pointed at Sheldon Eckhart’s head.

Chapter 47

The three guys in front of me were Mexican. Short, wiry, and deadly. They had me dead to rights and they knew it.

The sprinkle turned into a drizzle. Water trickled harmlessly from the sky in a kind of mist. The wind blew and the treetops swayed and sagged under the pressure, but the thunder and lightning had stayed quiet.

The middle guy said, "I am Oskar Tega. You are Mr. Reacher."

I wasn't sure if he was asking me or merely stating a fact. So I nodded.

Tega pushed the Five-seven pistol closer to Sheldon's head. The muzzle pressed into her skin.

"This is your woman?"

He jerked her by the tuft of her hair, pulling her close to him. She let out a whimper. His lips moved inches from her ear.

I stayed quiet. Looked at the guy on the left-hand side, then the guy on the right-hand side, and then back to Tega.

Oskar Tega wasn't anything special. He was older than I had pictured. Maybe early 50s. His hair was black and gray and slicked back. Stubble had besieged his face. Earlier I had thought that he wore black, but I was wrong. He was dressed in a dark green slicker. It looked black in the dark.

He had no muscle definition. No tone. He had no visible body fat either. He was a thin guy. So were his friends.

I stared at Sheldon. I never lowered the CZ 52, even though I was pretty sure that it was useless.

She said, "I'm sorry. They were going to kill me."

Tega nodded and then he whipped her around and pointed the Five-seven at her head.

"Toss the gun, Mr. Reacher. Or I kill her."

Sheldon stared at me with tears in her eyes. She begged, "Please. They'll kill me."

I thought about *Salbutamol* again. I thought about asthma and I thought about Faye Matlind and her dead husband. And then I thought about Sheldon's body. Immaculate.

I pictured her jogging around the lake in my mind. Kept my eyes open. Gun trained on Tega. With a body like that she must've run and exercised six, maybe seven days a week.

Asthma. Salbutamol. Faye Matlind.

Then in a sudden and quick movement, I pointed the gun straight at Sheldon, center mass and said, "Not if I kill her first."

And then I squeezed the trigger.

Sheldon's face turned white, but she hadn't closed her eyes. She hadn't flinched.

The gun hammer fell back and the empty air was filled with a snapping metallic sound like a mousetrap. It echoed into the trees and was lost in the distant sound of the roaring fire from across the lake.

Nothing else happened. No gunshot. No bullet. Nothing.

The gun hadn't fired. So I tossed it to the ground and dropped the Maglite. I didn't raise my hands like a prisoner usually does. Instead I lowered them to my sides. Let them relax.

"You removed the firing pin."

I shook my head and looked at the CZ 52 as it sank down in the grass and mud.

I looked back up and said, "I knew that gun was a piece of shit. One thing about the CZ 52 is the easily removable firing pin.

"No way does a woman like you live here in this town, own a Remington shotgun, and not know anything about guns. You set me up. Probably led the sheriff here.

"But the truth is that you probably could've just left the firing pin in that stupid gun. You could've left it alone. That shitty relic probably would've blown up in my hand."

Sheldon's eyes turned cold and Tega released her from his grip. She stepped forward.

She asked, "How did you know?"

I stared at her emotionless and said, "You met a man abroad? A benefactor?"

Then I turned to Tega and said, "Tega, I wondered when you'd show your face. I thought for sure it would've been after we made it to the Medical Center."

Tega asked, "Where?"

"The Eckhart Medical Center."

He nodded, pointed the Five-seven at my chest.

I said, "Sheldon works for you. She always has. That's how you got so many girls. She's the one who looked after them. They'd need a medical doctor to keep them healthy. To keep them sedated. To keep them calm. To keep them prime for your customers.

"And she probably was the one going around and abducting them. I mean who's more trustworthy than a doctor? And a woman doctor? No one would suspect her."

Sheldon said, "How did you know? When?"

I said, "The day I met you. In retrospect. But I was slow. Too slow. I liked you. I ignored my suspicions.

"You ran around the lake like an Olympic runner. Really immaculate shape. Great body. You could earn your Fitness Pro Card.

"You could compete nationally.

"But it was the *Salbutamol* that gave you away. I saw you buying it."

Tega cocked his head and looked at me with questions in his eyes.

He tried to say the word, but couldn't.

Sheldon said, "*Salbutamol*. It's a medication for severe asthma."

I asked, "Who would you be buying that for? Yourself? You don't have asthma. No one with serious asthma would be able to have a body like yours. No way!"

"You fed me that bullshit that you were buying it for the clinic, but you only had one box. No, that was for someone in particular, a patient, but not one from this town. No, if it were a regular patient, then you would have bought a lot more. Might as well stock up on it instead of having to return to the store constantly and buy new boxes.

"And you had all kinds of female products stacked up in your clinic. I saw them. Boxes and boxes. Enough for an all-girl community.

"Who's that all for? The women here? No offense, but I've been around this town and it is a boring place. No one here is having that much sex.

"You didn't need it for anyone who lives here. You needed it for Tega's girls. That's who.

"You need Salbutamol to treat Faye Matlind. She is real. I saw her medications in Chris Matlind's motel room. She's asthmatic.

"You had to take care of her. You were in charge of taking care of all of them. Tega can't use his stock if it's dead or pregnant. Can he?

"Plus, why does the Eckhart Medical Center need that barbed wire fence? Not because of animals. That place was surrounded like a prison because it is a prison."

Tega interrupted. He said, "So you figured it out. You know why I'm here?"

I said, "You're here to pick up your human stock. You aren't into drugs. That's all smoke to keep the cops guessing. You deal in sex slaves.

"You're scum. The lowest of the low. I'll admit that at first I thought that the rednecks were keeping the girls, but you'd never trust a bunch of rednecks. They aren't the best at keeping secrets.

"One of them gets caught, they'd roll on you first chance they'd get. No way would you use them. But you did buy drugs from them. They cooked your meth.

"Which Sheldon used to keep the girls tweaking.

"I'm guessing that they're already loaded on your seaplane. And they are tweaked out of their minds. Probably have no idea what day it is. Let alone where they are or what's happening to them.

"You used her to take care of the girls for you. You trusted her. And who can you trust more than a doctor?"

Silence fell across us. No one spoke for a long moment and then Tega said, "Good for you. You got it. For a boy, you are quite smart."

Sheldon looked away for a moment and then she returned her stare to me. It was cold, uncaring.

Tega moved his finger into the Five-seven's trigger housing.

I said, "Before you kill me, tell me, how did you recruit her? Was it money?"

Sheldon said, "How do you think a small-town girl gets through medical school? In this backwoods state? He paid for my school. He paid for the Medical Center.

"I belong to him."

I nodded and said, "He paid for your schooling and in return you had to host his criminal enterprise here in a small town."

She nodded. It was as simple as that and I didn't condone it, not by a long shot, but I understood it. I had grown up in Mississippi. Parts of it were still bordering on the third world. I understood wanting to escape, but not like this. Then I said, "All of those lives. Matlind, Grady, and none of those women will ever make it out alive. You know that. I hope that it was worth it."

Tega said, "Sheldon was my first girl."

He reached out his right hand, lowered the Five-seven with his left, and caressed her face. There was some obvious sentimentality there.

I nodded again. I got it. She was his first girl.

They had met when she went out of the country. Became lovers. She probably had dreams of being by his side in Mexico. Living out their days on a Mexican beach.

She'd work some kind of local clinic and he'd run his operations from Mexico. They would travel together under the guise of her Medical Center's name, doing medical charity work. But the reality was far darker than she had predicted. And now she was just as guilty as he was.

Tega said, "I'm afraid it is time for us to go. But I'm so impressed with you I will give you the gift of a painless death—a quick bullet to the head."

Tega raised his Five-seven again, pointed at my head, and prepared to fire.

Chapter 48

The thing about last requests was that they were almost always a means of stalling. But 99 times out of 100, they were frivolous. The same end always came. The man headed for death always got to the same place.

I was about to die. I had fallen for this woman's tricks and gotten myself into an ambush.

What the hell?

I asked, "Last request?"

"What?"

"Don't I get a last request?"

Tega thought for a long moment. Then he lowered his Five-seven.

"Make it quick."

I stepped closer to Sheldon.

Tega quickly raised the Five-seven back up and followed me with it. The two guys on his sides followed suit, but I moved slowly so that they'd know that I wasn't planning an attack. And I wasn't. Not yet.

I said, "Give me some of your goods one last time."

"What?" she asked.

"Come on. I'm about to die. Let me touch you one last time. Let me kiss you again. Like last night. You loved it. I know you did."

I looked at Tega and said, "The sounds that she made. You should've heard her."

Anger came across Tega's face. It was slight. Before he had been a man of statue-like composure. Always in control. But this anger came from deep within. It came from a place of extreme mistrust.

In men like him, no matter how composed he was, that primal instinct to protect what belonged to him ran deep. And Sheldon belonged to Tega. He knew it and she knew it.

Tega asked, "You slept with him?"

Sheldon said, "No!"

I said, "She wanted to. We didn't have time."

Tega stared at me and said, "What are you trying to do?"

He wasn't a stupid man.

Sheldon said, "I kissed him, but it was for you. For us. I played a part. Baby, I'd never betray you."

She looked at him and put her hands on his face.

She said, "Kill him and let's go."

Tega looked at her, taking his eyes off me for a second, but I couldn't do anything. His guys had me in their sights.

The drizzle stopped and the air dampened to a sticky dew. No more rain.

Tega wanted to do more than shoot me. I saw it in his eyes. He wanted to make me suffer. Then he looked over my shoulder. He stared at the barn and smiled.

He said, "You just lost the pleasure of a painless death. Get in the barn."

I turned. Tega and his men followed me back to the barn.

We walked through the gloom to the barn doors. They were still open.

Grady and the other dead bodies hung by their necks. They swayed and moved slowly out of unison like a room full of eerie marionettes.

Tega stepped into the barn past me. His men looked straight at me, never losing their concentration.

One of them stepped up close to me and motioned for me to follow Tega deeper into the barn. We walked to the middle, near the hanging corpses.

Whatever he had planned for me, they'd seen it before. They knew this routine.

I hoped that it wasn't to hang me like the rest of them.

Tega searched the barn. He looked at all of the walls and then he said, "This is the only way in and out. The door has a steel padlock on the outside. Do you know why?"

I shook my head.

He said, "To keep people out. Do you know what else a lock like that is good for?"

I shook my head again.

He said, "Keeping people in."

Then he said, "The rednecks cooked meth in here. Do you know what happens a lot with meth?"

He didn't wait for me to respond.

He said, "It explodes. It's flammable. Yet, the padlock outside is not. The logic of these rednecks leaves me. But that is how it is."

I stayed quiet.

Then he asked, "This word *flammable*; you know this word?"

I stayed quiet.

"I love this word. Americans make so many things that are *flammable*. Like products used to cook meth. As you figured out, I do not sell or make drugs. I am not in the drug business. I am in the sex business."

He nodded to Sheldon.

He said, "I would not be sure which of these chemicals is flammable if it were not for the label."

He walked over to a row of plastic barrels. He looked at the labels.

He smiled.

He kicked hard at one barrel. It fell over. The lid came off and the liquid contents spilled out across the ground.

Tega moved on to the next barrel and kicked it over and then the next and the next.

The air filled with a rancid smell of chemicals mixing.

I had a suspicion of what they were. One was probably ethanol.

He said, "Do you know what I am going to do to you?"

I said, "No clue."

He said, "You are lucky. Really. If I had more time, I'd stay and do a slow job on you. But I don't have that kind of time."

"I am going to lock you in here and let you burn alive."

Tega stepped out of the barn. He lowered his gun. Then he looked at his men and said, "Hazlo."

Everyone stepped out of the barn, except for me.

Tega said, "Goodbye, Mr. Reacher."

I waited in the barn while Tega's men locked the padlock. Two minutes later, the barn was a roaring inferno of exploding meth chemicals and wood.

Chapter 49

Tega had spilled dangerous, flammable chemicals all over the floor of the barn. He and his guys and Sheldon backed out and watched as the chemicals ran.

Tega smiled at me as his guys closed the doors. I heard the rustling of a chain and then the padlock clicked.

A few minutes later, the walls on the north and south sides started smoking.

Flames ate through the wood like a brushfire. It wouldn't be long before the flames connected with the meth chemicals and I'd be burned alive.

I heard more noises outside, voices, but I couldn't tell what they were saying.

I looked around the room. I checked the corners and the tables and I checked for weapons on the corpses. Nothing.

I found keys in Grady's pocket. If I got out I could take his Tahoe.

The flames started to spark onto the floor. The blaze began to eat up the walls. Wood splintered and the fire scratched at the outer walls like a pride of lions trying to get in. I had to get out.

I kept my head calm. I focused on where I stood. There was no reason in trying to understand how I let Sheldon get the best of me.

There'd be plenty of time for second guessing later, once I escaped.

I looked around the barn some more. Still nothing. I looked up at the roof. There was a closed hatch on the upper south side, but it might as well not have been there. It was 20 feet above me, well out of reach. Then I faced away from the corpses. I looked in the direction that they had looked before they died. I studied their points of view. That was when I noticed a difference for each of them.

The sheriff and the deputies looked toward the doors. Their heads hung facing the direction of the doors as if Tega's men were the last things they saw before they died. But the rednecks looked in a different direction. They stared off to the left-hand side and downward. Their bodies swayed in a twisted kind of synchronization.

They virtually stared at the same spot, a huge wooden table.

I rushed over to it. I had hoped that I would find something that was common among rednecks. And I did.

I tossed the table over on its side and jerked up a rug underneath it. I found a loose wooden plank. I pulled it up and saw my salvation.

On the floor was a thick concrete cover that acted like a trapdoor. A short, partially fragmented rope reached out from the top. It was a handle for the door.

I grabbed the cord and pulled. The concrete was heavy, but I managed. The door came up and scraped along the edges of the trapdoor opening.

I peered in and found a small bunker with a crawlspace. The far wall was too dark to tell how far back it went. But I could trace the walls by sight.

It was dark and damp, which was good. The damper the better. I might be safe in there.

I hopped in and pulled the cord behind me and the concrete block slid back into place.

I listened as the fire tore and ripped through the walls of the barn. It hadn't taken long for the flames to reach the batch of spilled chemicals.

I pulled down on the cord with all of my strength and weight. I wanted to keep the concrete cover closed tight.

I heard an explosion. Heat and smoke sprayed through the tiny cracks around the concrete. I hung by the cord a couple of inches off the floor.

My knees were tucked under my body.

The fire had stayed out of the bunker, but the heat grew. It was like being in an oven set to low—hot, but not enough to cook me. Not yet.

I hoped that the explosion would take most of the flames outward, which it did. I'd wait a few minutes and then surface. Tega would be gone by then. But just then the cord snapped under my weight and I fell a few inches. Not a big deal. I rolled and got up on my knees. My head nearly bumped on the ceiling.

Dust from the concrete ceiling sprayed down into the chamber as a second explosion blasted from above.

It sounded louder than before. I hoped that was the last of it.

A tiny row of lights along the bottom back wall flickered to life. Maybe they were automatic. Maybe the tremor from the blast had shaken them on.

They barely lit the crawlspace.

I saw two things. First the bunker wasn't a bunker at all. It was too small and there was no food stored in it. Plus there was nowhere to go to the bathroom. No kitchen facilities. No visible power source.

There was barely room to stretch out and sleep.

And the second thing that I saw made me smile ear to ear. It wasn't a bunker because it was a weapons cache.

Chapter 50

Another explosion rocked the concrete walls and the dim lights went out.

I waited in the thick darkness. The fire above me tore and chewed and devoured huge chunks of the barn. I heard a section collapse.

I had to get out before the rest of it came down. The roof might've been blown off by the explosions. Or it might be hanging by a board. I couldn't wait for the whole thing to collapse on top of me. I could be trapped inside.

So I closed my eyes and pictured the gun collection in my mind. I scanned through it. It was impressive. That was for damn sure. Assault rifles, long guns, handguns, and even some classics lined the walls.

There were magazines stacked on the ground near each gun. Some of them had been fired on a regular basis. Either for fun or target practice or just to make sure that they were kept in good working order.

I chose to grab a good modern assault rifle. The M4 Carbine. The A1 version, an improved version from past M4 design. A great weapon. It came into wide use in 1997. This was the basic design. No scope. No flashlight.

I grabbed the nearest magazine. Loaded it. Readied it for use.

I clicked it to fire a three-round burst.

I picked up an extra magazine and slipped it into my back pocket. I lowered the gun and carried it by the handle and then I crawled underneath the concrete block and prepared to open it.

I planted my feet firmly on the ground and pushed up on the block with my shoulders like I was doing calf raises. I used the muscles in my legs, knees, and calves and pushed.

The block wasn't weighted down by any obstructions, which was good, and it moved up and slid back. I crouched back down and aimed the gun at the opening in case someone stuck his head in.

No one did.

The smoke was thick and the heat rushed across my face like hot steam.

Up until this point I had felt both unlucky and foolish. Getting ambushed, betrayed, having to hike all the way back, having given up and leaving in the first place, and abandoning Matlind's quest. But just then something happened that was good.

It started to rain again.

It was subtle at first, but within seconds it was a strong downpour.

The rain was unlike before, when it was cold. Now it was hot, but better than the heat of the fire. The rain came down and put out sections of the blaze.

I smiled. I lifted my head out of the hole, quickly. There was no one there, just traces that were left of the barn and huge dancing flames.

I scrambled out of the bunker and rolled. I came up on one knee and twisted at the hip, covered the path created by the rain. Fire danced around in my cone of sight. But there was no other movement. No bad guys.

The fiery barn walls surrounded me in a 290-degree arc. A single clear path lay open from me to the double barn doors.

The doors themselves had exploded off the hinges and shot outward somewhere. I had no idea where.

I stayed crouched and rushed through the opening while I had it.

At the end I rolled again and came up with the M4 ready to fire at anything that moved.

I scanned through the fog. Nothing moved but the dancing fire.

The fog was thick, but the fire lit a good 30-foot radius.

To my left-hand side was the rear of Grady's parked Tahoe. I crouched and trudged over to the bumper. I put my back to it and flicked the M4 through the area again.

I stayed low and scanned a third time just to be safe. Then I heard a noise a little way down the track. Like rustling. I backed up to the front of the Tahoe and peered through the glass.

One of Tega's guys walked up the track. He held his FN-P90 all wrong. He held it one-handed with the stock shoved in his armpit.

He had a flashlight attachment switched on and was using it to search the area around the opposite side from me.

I had no idea what made him veer off so far. Maybe he walked back from Tega's convoy. Maybe he had run from the explosion and now was returning.

I stayed put. Let him check that side and then come to me.

I didn't want to fire. I had no problem with shooting the guy in the back. No problem at all. My problem was that I wasn't sure that the guy was alone.

The M4 was a loud gun. Even with the background noise of the deafening fire, the gunshots from the M4 would be heard by nearby bad guys.

So I waited.

The guy searched the area across from me for 20 seconds or so and then he began approaching Grady's Tahoe.

He walked at normal speed. He wasn't really expecting me to be here and then when he reached halfway, his cell phone rang. He paused and reached into his pocket. He let the FN-P90 drop down to one side in his left hand. The light's beam shined a tight circle at the guy's feet.

He pulled out his phone and answered.

He spoke in Spanish that I didn't understand and then he said, "He's dead, boss."

He paused and listened like he was receiving orders. Then he said, "I'm looking for his body now."

He paused again, listened, and said, "I call you when I see him."

I grinned because the guy had just told me that he was all alone.

He hung up the phone.

I wasn't a fan of firing a gun for the first time, especially when my life depended on it. That was no one's ideal situation, but if I had test fired it, the guy would've made me.

So, I clicked the M4 to fire a single-round burst.

In one fluid motion, I stood up, knees straight, shoulders loose, ready for the kick. I aimed down the sight and fired four steady shots at the guy.

All I had needed was one.

All four hit him center mass in an uneven circle right in his heart.

An explosion of red burst through his back and sprayed out the front of his chest. The guy flew back like he'd been jerked by a bungee cord, pulled by a high-speed train.

The FN P90 hung in the air in slow motion and dropped to the ground. I didn't have to touch it to know that it was cold. He hadn't had the chance to fire it.

I walked over to the guy. Checked him to make sure that he was dead, not that I needed to.

I ignored his pockets. I wasn't interested in their contents. I ignored the FN P90. I was satisfied with the M4. I lowered it and gripped it by the top-mounted handle. I turned, looked at the fiery barn one last time, and then sprinted back to Grady's Tahoe.

I dug in my pocket for the keys. I felt a bunch of splintered pieces of plastic. I pulled out the phone that Sheldon had given me. It was shattered. I dropped the pieces to the ground.

The Bluetooth had fallen out of my ear somewhere.

I checked my mom's phone. It was fine. Then I dug around for the keys again. I found them and took them out.

I pressed the unlock button on the key remote. The Tahoe unlocked.

I hopped in, tossed the M4 on the passenger seat, shut the door, and fired up the engine. I popped it into reverse, backed up, and hit the gas. The tires turned and shot up mud behind the vehicle and then it took off.

Chapter 51

I spun the Tahoe's steering wheel as I turned the vehicle to catch up to Oskar Tega.

The track curved and pitched. Tall, disturbing pine trees flapped along the sides like they were warning me to turn back. There was no ditch.

The rear tires skidded through the mud, splashing wet, orange muck across the back window. The rain beat down on the roof. The pounding echoed through the interior.

I had the wipers working overtime to keep the rain and the mud off the windshield.

I kept the light bar off and the high beams bright.

Oskar Tega had left before I escaped the barn, but I wasn't sure how much earlier or at what speed he'd traveled. Therefore, I had no way of calculating how long it'd take to catch him.

I did know that they hadn't started the seaplane. Not in this rain. But it would happen soon.

The first opportunity that they had for clearer conditions, they would be gone forever.

I pushed the Tahoe as fast as I could without losing control. I was experienced with driving in the mud. This was Mississippi.

I'd been 15 years old when my mom had taught me how to drive. She used a police cruiser and a dirt road obstacle course. I knew how to drive in these conditions. I was good at driving in these conditions.

My hair whipped across my face as I bounced and shifted in the seat.

I turned a sharp corner and sprung up onto a paved road. Loose items in the front console jittered. Coins fell across the foot well.

Up ahead I saw the tail end of a convoy of F150 pickups. It was Tega and his men. They drove cautiously through the weather. They had given me the advantage.

I sped up. The Tahoe's engine roared and charged like a chariot of horses. I pulled up onto the convoy several car lengths behind them. Their taillights fluttered in the rain. The red beams were visible every time that the rear truck braked, which was often. Then they faded into the fog.

I stepped on the gas. The engine roared and the gas pedal shook. Thunder roared overhead and then softened into a low rumble.

I reached over my left shoulder and grabbed the seatbelt. I pulled it down and snapped it into the locking mechanism and then I tugged to make sure that it was fastened.

The Tahoe had come with the police interceptor package, which meant that Grady's vehicle was armored and reinforced and built to withstand damage.

Another great feature was the battering ram on the front grill.

I caught up with the convoy. At first they must've thought that I was one of them, the guy that Tega had left behind, probably, because they stayed driving slow. But as soon as I got close enough to see their license plates, the two F-150s hit the gas. The passenger in the rear truck leaned out of his window and started firing at me.

Bullets sprayed and darted across my hood. Two pierced through the window and zipped past my head. If I had had a passenger in the front seat, he'd be dead.

I swerved to the left-hand side of the road and out of the bullets' path.

The passenger fired again and again in rapid succession. The rain and the fog hindered my vision, which meant that his was also hindered. He continued to fire off course. Bullets whizzed past and into the weather behind me.

The guy followed my high beams, adjusted his trajectory, and fired. The front right-hand headlight exploded in a burst of broken plastic and glass from the bulb. It went dark.

I reacted and shut off the other light. I ducked down behind the wheel and darted the Tahoe back to the right-hand lane.

The guy firing thought that I had stayed in the same place. I heard crackles of bullets spray across the hood again as I traversed into the right-hand lane.

One bullet just missed my head as I swerved to the right. It flew through the interior and shattered the rear window. Cracks from the bullet holes in my front window spider-webbed across the glass until I could no longer see out.

I drove closer to the rear of the back truck and slammed into the back bumper.

I disengaged my foot from the gas and let the truck in front swerve and skid. I braked. In this weather and at this speed, the truck would've flipped if I had rammed it and driven full force ahead.

I didn't want it to do that.

If the truck flipped, it would've rolled over my hood and probably crushed my head. That wasn't the plan. So I let the driver regain control. Then I leaned over the console and grabbed the M4. I lifted it, switched it to full auto, squeezed the trigger, and fired through the windshield.

The glass shredded and then the front half flew forward and broke off. It was tossed off to the right-hand side and the wind tore it off and sent it flapping behind me.

The rain beat down and flew through the opening. The wipers were left mangled. They whipped up and down on the hood like broken insect antennas.

The passenger reacted to the sound of gunfire. He had regained control of his aim and started firing his FN-P90.

The first sequence of shots rang out into the night. Everything seemed to slow. I fired the M4 into the rain and the fog and the darkness.

Moving at a speed that was dangerous in these conditions, I still managed to control both the Tahoe and the M4, even with the recoil. My mom had never taught me to drive and shoot at the same time, but I did it.

I wasn't just blind firing. The guy in front of me had been. That was one major advantage that I had. My headlights were dark. My vehicle was camouflaged by the darkness and the weather conditions. But you can't disengage brake lights, not from the vehicle's interior while driving. They designed cars that way. It was dangerous to be able to switch them off in the middle of driving your car.

The guy firing from the passenger seat didn't know my exact position. He only knew that I was behind him, but I knew exactly where he was.

I fired the M4 in a tight horizontal arc of right to left—point A to B. Seven rounds rocketed out of the M4.

Once I reached point B, I rested my trigger finger for a second and then restarted the process from point B back to point A. Six rounds spent.

I knew instantly that I had hit the driver in the back because I didn't make it back to point A.

In a heap of slow-motioned violence, the truck jerked to the left-hand side and the truck's right-hand tires came off the ground.

A half second later the truck flipped. It bounced and rolled on the pavement.

Glass shattered. The roof halfway crushed inward and then the vehicle skidded along the wet road. Sparks flew from underneath the roof as it slowed to a stop.

At the same time, I slammed on the brakes. The Tahoe skidded and fishtailed violently. The rear swung around to the front and stopped perpendicular to the road.

Quickly, I released the steering wheel, raised the M4, two-handed, and pointed it at the wreckage through the passenger window. No movement.

I pressed the button on the seatbelt's locking mechanism and the belt shot up and raked across my chest.

I popped open the door and stepped out.

I used the Tahoe for cover and stood on the step bar and pointed the M4 across the roof.

I looked through the sight. Nothing moved from the flipped truck.

I watched the taillights of the front F-150 as they faded in the distance. They hadn't even stopped to check on their friends. Tega must've been in the forward truck. No way would his men have left him behind. He was their paycheck.

I kept the F-150 in my line of sight and walked through the rain toward it.

It was dark except for the brake lights. They were bright like the driver's foot was pressing down on the brake pedal.

I scrambled to the back of the downed truck.

I checked the passenger side first since I knew that he'd been armed and I had gotten the driver with at least one round.

The F-150's bed was garbled and crushed.

Glass pebbles crackled beneath my feet.

I peered into the passenger side through the sights of the M4.

A short Mexican guy hung dead from his seatbelt. His head was twisted too far over his left shoulder. He was wide-eyed. His neck had been broken in one swift snap. Must've happened when the truck bounced.

The FN-P90 was broken into two uneven pieces. Hard to do. The barrel hung from a shred like torn fabric.

I smiled. At least one down and then I walked around the hood. The underbody was caved in. Engine fluids leaked and seeped out like a waterfall. They pooled on the ground and mixed with the mud and the rain.

The battery sparked.

Better make this quick. Don't want it to explode, I thought.

I scrambled over to the driver's side.

The driver crawled out of the front. He used his hands to drag himself out across the concrete. Rain fell and beat against his small back. Blood trailed behind him in a curved, smeared pattern back to the truck.

He had no visible weapon.

His left arm was broken. His legs were broken and mangled, tracking behind him like dead weight.

Two bullet holes gaped near the small of his back. He had lost so much blood that I doubted that he'd live much longer.

As I got closer, I realized my horrible mistake.

He had been a she. It was Sheldon.

Chapter 52

Sheldon's hair was wet and matted from blood and rain. She had hit her head hard when the truck flipped.

I lowered the M4 and held it down and low. I knelt beside her and gently rolled her over. I held her head up and cradled it in my palm.

I frowned. I set down the M4.

I stared at her. I said, "Sheldon."

She looked up at me. One of her eyes was swollen shut like she had been punched hard.

Her front teeth were missing and blood spilled out of her mouth.

"Why? Why did you do this?"

Sheldon gasped. She stayed quiet.

I said, "Tell me what to do. Tell me how to save you."

She said, "No."

"Please. Tell me something. Anything."

"No. There's nothing. I'm dying."

I couldn't respond.

She said, "Reacher. I'm... I'm sorry."

"Don't do that. You can survive. Where's your phone? I'll call for help."

She reached out with her one working, bloody hand and touched my chest. I thought that she was trying to reach my face like my mom had four days ago. Only Sheldon had no strength left and then she said. "Don't let them on the plane. If Oskar gets them on the plane... you lose."

She froze suddenly like a block of ice. Her eyes remained wide open, but her lips stopped moving. Her chest stopped breathing and her life faded away.

I heard the battery from the flipped truck spark again.

I had to move.

I knelt down farther and picked up her body. I left the M4 on the street. I tucked her in close to me. Her head rolled back and hung over my arm.

I ran as fast as I could with her in my arms.

I wanted to get her body away from the vehicle. I knew it was only a matter of time before it caught fire and exploded. All of that spilling gas and the sparking battery. It'd happen. And it did. As I ran with her.

A bright flash of electricity sparked and the truck exploded behind me.

A ball of fire erupted and propelled into the sky like a surface-to-air missile launch.

A giant force of air burst out in all directions from the explosion. It hit me square in the back like a giant's fist from out of the clouds.

It launched me forward and off my feet.

I dropped Sheldon's body and rolled just at the tree line.

I hit my head hard on a loose rock when I hit the ground. I rolled some more. And then everything went black.

Chapter 53

I woke up in the dirt and fog. My head pounded like someone had hit me with a baseball.

I had no idea how long I'd been out. It'd been long enough for the rain to slow to a light drizzle again, but not more than 15 minutes.

Sheldon was near me. I touched her hand as I sat up. I looked over at her corpse. Her good eye stared up at me—lifeless.

I had no time to be sad. I had to save Faye. And then there was Oskar Tega. I was going to kill him. That was for sure.

I jumped to my feet. A sudden dizziness struck me like a blow to the head.

I touched the top of my head. Pain seared through my brain.

I shuddered and then I studied my hand. No blood. That was good. But I had hit my head hard. I had no concussion; at least I was fairly confident that I had none. But I was definitely going to be sore for a few days. No doubt about it.

I stood still for a moment and let the pain weaken and then I shook it off.

I looked down at Sheldon for a long moment and then I trekked back to the truck. I wanted to recover the M4 or at least find a working firearm.

The truck burned and the fire rose up and lit the area like a floodlight. I hunted around and saw no sign of the M4.

The trees around the truck were on fire. The flames had climbed while I was unconscious and now the tops had burst into flames.

I wasn't going to make it back to the Tahoe. Not through the smoke and flames. I turned around and stared east.

The rain had slowed and the fog began rolling off toward the lake, but the road was visible.

Tega's truck was gone. He'd be a couple of miles up the road at the lake house.

I knew that Faye would be unharmed and alive. He needed her that way. She was a valuable commodity. But I worried about Hank. I hoped that I'd make it in time.

I doubted that Tega would leave him behind. That wasn't a part of his scorched earth policy.

I gave up worrying about my head and started running.

Chapter 54

My head hadn't reset. My phone was dead. I didn't know the time. But I guessed that it was somewhere around 4 a.m.

The sky was still grim, but the thunder had stalled and I hadn't seen a lightning bolt in a long while.

I neared the driveway to the lake house.

The stolen F-150 was parked behind Hank's fuel truck.

I scrambled behind the loading bed and crouched down.

I gazed around the front yard.

The trees blocked most of the house from view. I saw the garage doors. The house had a three-car garage. One of the doors was wide open.

Tega hadn't posted any visible sentries.

I had only my bare hands to use as weapons. And that was all that I needed.

I reckoned that if he had no visible sentries posted in the front yard, perhaps the open garage door was a trap. A wide entrance inviting and left unguarded when Tega knew that I was still out there. Ambush. Had to be.

I crept out to the cover of the trees and away from the driveway.

I made it to a good spot along the middle of the yard in line with the front door. I stared through the open garage. I had perfect vision, and even better night vision.

The garage was dimly lit by a utility lantern. The lantern hung near the garage door and left a huge shadow of darkness near the rear. That was where the guard would be. He would be sitting there, staring out toward the yard, and waiting for me.

He'd use the shadows as cover. He knew that I wouldn't have spotted him until it was too late. Even worse was the fact that these guys had been well-armed. The guy was probably sitting there wearing night-vision goggles.

He'd put bullet holes through my chest before I even knew that he was there.

I studied my other options.

That was when I noticed that the fuel truck had a long hose uncoiled and extending from the rear side of it. Then I heard a motor kick on and the hose thickened fast as it filled with fuel.

The hose stretched out long from the truck, traced along the driveway, and vanished into the open garage. So there was another reason why they had left the door open. They were refueling the seaplane. A very long hose had been used and led through the garage. Possibly it ran through the kitchen and through the backdoor of the house or an open window. Then I wondered if they had even posted a guy in the cone of shadow in the garage. Maybe they just left the door open so that the hose could feed through it.

The front door and the gate on the side would be locked or guarded.

I wondered if I could draw the sentry out of the shadows, if he was even there.

If there was a guy hiding there, he was good, but in the dark I was better.

I got down. Low. I crawled on my elbows and knees through the mud and wet grass until I reached the walkway between the garage and the front door. I crouched and hid near the bushes. No one came out either the front door or the garage. I skulked over to the edge of the garage. I stayed out of the line of sight, stood up straight, and put my back in line with the wall, but didn't touch it. Then I shimmied along it. I passed the first garage door, then the second.

I made it to the edge of the open one and stayed out of the light. I studied the ground for moving shadows. Nothing. I crouched back down and moved out toward the fuel truck. I got down on the ground and lay flat on my stomach. I moved prone along the concrete until I was underneath the front of the truck and behind the tire. I was hidden in shadow and peeked out from behind the tire. I stayed covered.

I waited. I stared into the garage.

There was a van parked half-covered in shadow. The side of the van had the Eckhart Medical Center logo stretched across it. More proof of Sheldon's guilt. The back doors of the van had been left open. One swung back and forth slowly, like someone had burst through it only seconds ago.

They must've used the van to transport Faye and the others after they set the Eckhart Center on fire. I wondered how many girls were present. They wouldn't have used a van for only one girl. There must've been more.

I smiled because I realized that more than one girl was going home tonight. Then I saw that in the shadows near the driver's side of the van there was a guy.

He was crouched down and leaning against the back wall. I saw his outline and the outline of his rifle. I couldn't tell what it was. I assumed that it was an assault rifle or another FN-P90. It was too big to be a smaller submachine gun.

It could've been the FN-P90 with a suppressor attachment.

I saw his head. No night-vision gear, which was good.

I squirmed forward. Slowly. I took my time. I wanted to stay unnoticed. One wrong move and he'd shoot me dead.

I made it to the rear of the truck. I shuffled over to the side closer to him. I was about to be in plain sight, but only for a moment. I would pull back after I did what I needed to do.

I rolled over onto my back and reached up and grabbed the bottom side of the truck. Then I leaned out and took my eyes off him. He made no movement. I

reached up quickly and grabbed the nozzle from the hose and pulled as hard as I could.

The nozzle ripped off the fuel line and sprayed fuel across the back tire and onto the concrete.

I removed my hand quickly and rolled back into the darkness under the belly of the fuel truck. I kept rolling until I was out and on the other side of the truck, away from his view. I scrambled to my feet and stayed crouched behind the rear passenger side tire.

I waited until I heard his footsteps. He'd taken the bait.

I swiveled and peeked up past the edge of the tank.

The guy had his gun pointed outward, ready to fire. He walked out of the shadows and scanned the area.

I stayed hidden.

He came to the driveway and let out a loud gasp at the sight of the hose leaking fuel like it was a big inconvenience—an accident.

He scanned the area again. The guy wasn't dumb, not completely. He lowered the weapon. He pushed down on the concrete with the silencer end of a FN-P90.

He knelt down and grabbed the hose. He lifted it like he was going to reseal it onto the open end of the tank.

He never made it that far.

I grabbed his head with my hand. He was small. I could've palmed his head in my hand if it were severed from his body.

Interesting idea.

I slammed his head into the side of the fuel truck as hard as I could. I was mad. Once. Twice. Three times.

I reared his head back and saw that where his face had been was a bloody mess of protruding nostril bones and mangled teeth and smashed eyes.

I thought of Matlind. I thought of Grady and then I thought of Sheldon. I pulled his head far back like a bowler cocking back to bowl a strike and I slammed it once more into the side of the truck. I heard his skull crack like a flower pot.

The force of my slam was so powerful that his head bounced off the truck and I lost my grip. He flew backward. His legs twitched one time and only once and then the guy was dead.

Two down.

Three if I counted Sheldon as one of them. But I didn't.

I picked up the guy's gun. I left the fuel line on the ground, spewing out fuel. I entered the garage.

Chapter 55

The interior of the house appeared empty. Plenty of noise came from the backyard. Just to be sure, I checked the downstairs.

I knew that Tega had had at least two guys. I had killed two. There had to be more than that, but not many. He was short two already. I felt good about my odds.

I checked the downstairs living room, the kitchen, the pantry, the bathroom, and the closets. It wasn't until I got to the back bedroom that I smelled the stench of a dead body.

I hoped that it wasn't Hank. I liked that old guy. But at this point he would've been expendable to Tega.

I pushed open the door and gasped. There was a dead body lying on the floor at the foot of the bed, but it wasn't Hank.

They had shot Link, the Border collie.

I bit down hard. My teeth crunched together and the bones in my temple tightened.

I liked dogs. Killing the dog made me feel as if they'd killed a kid. It was senseless.

I spun around and headed back down the hall to the kitchen.

As I rounded the corner, the back door swung open and another small Mexican guy stepped in. He had a handgun stuffed into the front waistband of his jeans. He wore a gray t-shirt and baggy blue jeans with white sneakers. He was young, probably my age. He had a gang-look about him like he was newly minted.

Maybe he was some kind of American member of Tega's outfit, freshly recruited from the streets.

I had no idea. I didn't care. I gave him those few seconds of thought and nothing more.

I stepped into the kitchen—fast. I walked up to him plain as day and big as a horror movie slasher. Then I reached out with one hand, grabbed his shirt, bunched up his collar, and jerked him off his feet into the kitchen.

He made a low yelp, but no one heard it.

Before he could make a second sound, I raised the FN-P90 one-handed over my head like a club and smashed him square in the face with the hilt.

It was a solid and vicious blow.

His nose cracked under it. He fell and I let go of his shirt.

He grabbed his nose and began to squeal in a low whimper. Before he made another sound or went for his gun, I fired two rounds into his neck and shoulder.

The bullet went straight through his throat and into the floor. A messy through and through shot.

He grappled at the entry hole with both hands. He tried to scream, but he was inaudible.

He writhed around on his back like a snake's body without a head. I turned back to the door and pointed the gun at it. I was ready for another guy to enter and check on his buddy.

I waited for a whole minute.

Sounds of the guy behind me wriggling around were all I heard and then he fell silent.

I twisted back to check on him. He was dead. There was a pool of blood so big that I could've filled a bucket with it.

I whispered, "You shouldn't have killed the dog."

Then I walked over to the door. I left it open. I clicked the gun to full auto. I switched off the kitchen lights and peered outside. No one noticed me. I know that because no one shot at me.

The first thing that I looked at, that I stared at, was the flying boat.

It floated in the water at the edge of the dock. It rocked up and down over the waves caused by the storm. It was majestic. It was painted all black with a red-tipped nose.

The number along the side was painted white and stood out from the darkness. The only thing that I could see of the plane was its outline and the white and red paint.

The black color camouflaged it perfectly with the dark lake beyond.

I stopped staring and scanned the people in the backyard.

At that exact moment the twin engines cranked to life. They started dull at first and then revved up to a gentle roar.

A light clicked on in the cargo area. The side door was wide open.

I took the opportunity and scrambled away from the kitchen door and hid behind the cover of a bricked-in grill.

I put my back to the brick side and breathed in and breathed out.

No one had noticed me.

I leaned over and got a better look at the surroundings.

Tega was near the door to the plane. He pushed a girl into the back, while two other girls waited to be shoved in after.

The second one I recognized. She was Ann Gables, alive. I couldn't believe that she was still here. She moved slowly like a zombie. All three of them did.

They were doped up.

Ann went into the plane and swiveled left; then Tega grabbed the final girl by her arm and pulled her toward the plane.

She turned back to the house as if she wanted to run but was too weak.

It was Faye Matlind. Had to be. She was black, about Chris's age, and she was stunning.

Even with no makeup and her hair in complete disarray, all three girls were naturally beautiful. That's why they had been picked, I supposed.

Tega must've been considered one of the finest dealers of sex slaves in the world.

Faye got on board the plane and Tega waved at the only other guy that he had left.

Tega said, "Ve por el piloto."

Get the pilot. That was the best that I could translate.

I glanced over my shoulder back at the kitchen door. The young guy had been their pilot or maybe the guy in the driveway. I wasn't sure. I was sure that in about ten seconds this guy was going to make it to the kitchen and see the dead gangbanger and I would be made.

I peeked back over the grill and saw the one guy well enough; I could hit him from here. No problem, but Tega was in the doorway of the seaplane. Too far. And with the fog and rain, I couldn't be sure about the accuracy.

I decided to take the shot.

I jumped up and aimed.

The guy saw me and reacted fast. He went for a sidearm tucked in a holster that was clipped to his belt, but all he got out was the hilt of what looked like another Beretta Px4.

Just like the one that killed Matlind.

It was that fraction of a second that I took to process that thought that caused everything to go wrong.

I got the first guy with three 5.7×28mm rounds fired through the suppressor.

The muzzle velocity of a 5.7×28mm bullet fired from the FN-P90 was something around 2,500 feet per second. That would be hindered slightly by the suppressor, but I wasn't worried about that.

The last Mexican guard wasn't going to run faster than the muzzle velocity of the FN-P90.

I squeezed the trigger and the gun fired fast. The recoil was pretty manageable, one of the perks of the bull-up design.

Five bullets burst into the guy's center mass. Not one shot missed.

One of the purposeful designs of the FN-P90 was to fire high velocity 5.7×28mm rounds. This was to stop over-penetration of the bullet. Therefore, the gun was designed to promote minimal collateral damage. It was rare that one of these rounds fired all the way through a target or ricocheted.

It was the perfect urban submachine gun. And everything was going perfectly until I moved to kill Tega. Hank Cochran, the old mechanic, stepped out of the back of the plane. He'd been in the cockpit starting the plane. Probably checking the systems before they took off.

Tega hadn't heard my gunshots, but he saw the explosions of red mist that burst out of his guy's chest.

He reacted fast. Faster than any of his guys had.

He pulled out the FN Five-seven pistol, a companion pistol to the P90. I wondered if these guys got them all in a package deal.

The Five-seven was a semi-automatic pistol.

In two quick seconds, Tega moved sideways, grabbed Hank, and ducked behind him like a human shield. I lost my aim. I had no clear shot. I would've hit Hank and killed him.

I released my finger from the trigger, but kept it in the trigger housing.

Tega fired the Five-seven in my direction.

I ducked behind the bricked-in grill.

Bullets sprayed across the opposite side, hitting the grill. I heard the metal-on-metal sound again like the hood of Grady's Tahoe earlier.

The bullet hit the grill and then the brick. A couple sprayed over my head and shattered two large windows from the house.

He stopped firing. I knew that he wasn't reloading, but if he had been that would've been my chance to return fire. He was doing something else. I knew what he should do only a microsecond before he figured it out.

He was aiming at the propane tank beneath the grill.

I jumped up and dove to the right-hand side.

He fired the Five-seven.

Two bullets ruptured the tank. The smell of gas filled the air fast, like a flood of water.

He fired again and the tank exploded.

A small fireball erupted into the air.

I had seen three or four fireballs that night. I wasn't sure because I had lost count.

I rolled away from the fireball and back to my feet, full stance, and took aim.

Tega's head was in my sight, but his body was behind Hank. He stood tight behind him. And they were over 30 feet away.

I had no clean shot.

I screamed at Tega.

"Wait!"

Tega pointed the Five-seven at me.

Tega shouted, "Gringo? Is that still you?"

He didn't fire, not yet. I was too far for him to aim at. At least I hoped that I was.

He had done pretty well with the propane tank.

His gun was getting low on ammo. The Five-seven held a good number of rounds. I couldn't recall the capacity of a standard magazine. I knew that he had fewer bullets than I had.

The P90 held 50 rounds. I had the advantage in that department, but that advantage was little use.

He hadn't wanted to fire because if he missed then he'd have to reload and then I'd have him.

He shouted, "Mr. Reacher, you are a hard man to kill."

I shouted, "No one else has to die. Let him go."

The twin engines from the plane hummed and vibrated in their casings. They were ready to go and then I realized that Tega wouldn't shoot Hank. He needed him. His pilot was dead. He'd need Hank to fly the plane. I wasn't sure if he had realized that yet. So I shouted, "Your men are dead! Your pilot is dead! You aren't going anywhere! Not without that man to fly your plane!"

Tega shouted, "I'll kill him! I don't care! I'll find another way out!"

He wasn't bluffing. He was rich and connected. He'd find another way. I had only one play left. I had to gamble.

I said, "You can still leave, Tega! Let them go!"

Tega shouted, "Drop your weapon! And I will let them live! Hell, I'm so impressed with you, Gringo, that I'll let you live!"

I waited. I stayed quiet.

He tilted his head. A crazed look came across his face and he shot Hank just to prove he wasn't bluffing.

Chapter 56

The weather over the lake was about as good for flying conditions as it was going to get.

The morning hours fast approached and hints of early morning sunlight pierced through the cloudy sky. The bottoms of the storm clouds turned to a dark gray color as the sun's light shone through them.

On a normal morning on Jarvis Lake, early-bird fishermen would've been waking up and readying their boats and trailers for the drive to the boat launch.

But this hadn't been a normal night. The only emergency employees left in the town of Black Rock had to be the fire department. I was certain that they had their hands full with the fires.

Across the lake, the Eckhart Medical Center was still blazing. The fire had spread to the nearby buildings. No way was the fire department able to help anyone else right now.

Oskar Tega had shot Hank through the leg. The old guy had screamed a bloodcurdling scream that wrenched through my ears and echoed across the lake.

If it had been a normal morning, I was sure that everyone on the lake would've heard him. Probably the gunshot too. But no one was on the lake. Not today.

Tega shouted, "Throw it away! Or the next one kills him!"

I shouted, "Okay! Okay!"

I tossed the gun and raised my hands. I wasn't sure what the next few minutes would bring. I prayed that Tega wouldn't shoot me.

He moved Hank aside and stepped out onto the dock.

He approached me, keeping me in his sights the whole time. He got about ten feet away. He had me at his mercy. I was sure that I was about to die, but Hank saved my life.

Tega looked down the barrel of the Five-seven and took aim; then he glanced over his head back at Hank. It was a quick glance. Not long enough for me to rush him, but long enough for him to see that Hank had started limping over to the gun of the guy that I had shot a moment ago.

Tega fired in the air over my head. Hank froze.

Tega kept the gun on me and shouted, "Old man! I will make a deal with you. You fly my plane and give me no more trouble and I will let him come with us. I'll let you both live."

Hank stopped limping. He turned back to Tega. I saw that he was thinking it over. He took a long minute.

Make up your damn mind, old man!

Then Hank said, "Give me your word?"

Tega rolled his eyes. Then he shouted, "What, you don't trust me, old timer?"

He paused a beat and said, "I give you my word."

Hank said, "Den you got yourself a deal."

Tega lowered the Five-seven and said, "You're a lucky man, Gringo. Come on. Let's go! I'm on a tight schedule."

Tega motioned for me to go toward the plane.

He stepped back and maintained a ten-foot distance from me, well out of my reach. He was a smart guy. I guessed that was how he had lasted so long in his world.

I stayed quiet and followed his instructions. Kept my hands raised high and walked toward the open door of the seaplane.

I stopped at Hank and helped him walk back to the plane. He was hurt, but he'd survive.

We boarded and Tega followed.

The engines were much louder from inside the plane. This plane was barebones. It had a cockpit and two rear benches. Metal. No seatbelts. No modern luxuries. It was like a military plane.

Tega shouted over the roar of the engines.

“You sit in the seat over there at the front of the plane. I want you far from me and always in my line of sight.”

I followed his instructions and sat down on the bench.

Tega remained standing near the back of the plane. He slammed the door shut and locked it. The metal sound echoed in the chamber even over the engine noise.

He kept the gun on me. Then he shouted, “Try anything! Querido Dios! I’ll shoot you dead!”

I nodded.

He shouted up to Hank, who had made it to the pilot’s seat and buckled himself in.

“Old timer, take us up!”

Hank nodded back and started pushing buttons and moving levers. Then he tugged on a handle from above. The plane’s engines roared louder, as if they were changing gears, and then the plane started to shift and move forward.

Hank took it out on the water and then turned the plane to face the longest stretch of the lake. He accelerated forward.

He shouted back at Tega, “Ya’d better sit down!”

“Don’t worry about me, old timer. You just fly the plane.”

Hank smiled and pushed another lever and the plane jettied forward in a powerful push.

The plane shot across the water—fast.

I felt the vibrations of the engines through the metal bench.

My ears rattled.

I looked out the plane’s window and saw the trees on the shoreline as we flew by.

Water splashed up.

We bounced once. Twice. And then we were up in the air. We climbed up into the low storm clouds.

Off in the distance, a lightning bolt flashed and crackled. The underbelly of the storm clouds lit up.

We climbed farther and faster.

Not a lot of things scared me. When I found out that my mother was dying from cancer, I had been scared of losing her.

Right then, in that moment, I was a little scared.

Chapter 57

Tega never let his gun hand rest. But how long could he hold it up. Not forever. Probably not even that much longer. I was already impressed at how long he had managed to hold the Five-seven. The weight must’ve been straining his wrist.

I looked over at Hank. His leg was bleeding badly.

I shouted back to Tega, “His leg is bad. If I don’t clean him up, we won’t make it very far.”

Tega breathed heavily. Then he acknowledged that I was right.

He shouted, "No. Faye, you do it."

Faye was the least dopey of all of the girls.

"You are a nurse, right?"

She nodded and stood up. She was woozy. Anyone could see that.

Tega patted her on her butt.

She got closer to me.

I said in a regular voice which sounded like a whisper in the noisy chamber, "Faye, Chris sent me."

She looked at me. Her eyes faded in and out, but she was coherent, mostly.

She asked, "Chris?"

There was plenty of recognition in her voice.

"Yes."

She walked to Hank and smiled at him.

She said, "I'm going to take a look at your leg."

She plopped down into the copilot's seat. Then she leaned over and started checking his wound. I leaned in and looked like I was watching, but I spoke in a low voice to both of them.

I said, "I'm going to get that gun from him. As soon as I make a move, open the rear cargo door."

Hank glanced over at me from the corner of his eye.

He said, "Are ya sure? Ya could get sucked out."

"Don't worry about me. If we fly out of the country, we're all dead."

I started to turn back. I was going to rush him. I'd probably get shot in the process. I had no better option and then Faye reached back and grabbed my arm—tight. Her nails dug into my right forearm.

She said, "Wait. Let me distract him."

Before I could object, she made her move.

She stood up and wobbled over to him.

Tega jumped up from the bench and pointed the Five-seven at her.

She stopped and said, "Relax. I need the um..."

She scratched her head.

"I need the first aid kit. It's under the bench."

Tega glanced down at it.

A bright orange case was stuck beneath the bench, just as she had said.

Tega nodded and motioned with the gun for her to grab it.

I clenched my fists. I flexed the muscles in my legs. I was ready to pounce on him.

Tega returned his aim to me.

Faye knelt down, still acting dopey. Or she really was. I couldn't tell.

She grabbed the case, unhooked it from the bench, and then she swung it in a fast and vicious backhand.

The case nailed Tega square in the face. The bottom swung open and the contents flew out.

There was no first aid stuff in it. There was a flare gun with a bunch of flares.

The flare gun bounced onto the floor near the other girls.

At the same time, Hank hit the button to open the rear door and I leapt up toward Tega.

A bright warning light came on and flashed red across the interior of the plane. A loud warning sound buzzed. It continued to buzz as the back of the plane cracked open.

Immediately a blast of air sucked through the cabin like a vacuum. It was light at first, but became heavy and gained more power as the doors continued to slowly open.

I reached Faye first. I grabbed her and flung her to the front of the cabin. I had no choice. She had a tiny frame. She was probably a size zero. The wind would have sucked her right out.

Then I swung blindly at Tega with a powerful left hook with a huge fist on the end.

I hit him square in the shoulder. He had the gun pointed in my direction. He fired it.

My punch flung him off balance and several bullets whizzed by me.

The Five-seven takes the same rounds as the P90, with the same non-ricochet bullet technology. They just slammed into the metal walls of the plane. No penetration.

I came back at him with a right jab. The plane bounced and the suction grew more powerful. It was hard to aim my blows. This one got him dead on the solar plexus, but it wasn't the most powerful blow ever. Not my best work.

Even if I hadn't had to fight in sketchy conditions, I was still exhausted from being awake for more than 24 hours.

Tega dropped his gun and let out a loud shriek. He flew back against the starboard bench. I realized that he wore body armor under his rain slicker.

He jumped up and came at me. I grabbed him and tried to throw him out the doors, but he seized my collar and used the momentum of the throw against me. He returned with a fast right jab and then a left hook.

His fist was small, but he had some muscle. He knew how to fight and he was fast; most little guys were. That was the biggest advantage that little guys had always had over me. They were weaker, but quick.

He aimed for my face, but he missed and caught me in the chest.

He would've been better off if he had gotten me in the face.

Still I was exhausted and it hurt, but I hadn't squealed, not like he had. I shook it off and reared my right fist back, but he used dirty tactics. He kicked me in the groin.

Any man anywhere has at least one major weak spot—the groin. I was no different.

I stopped my punch and grabbed at my groin. It hurt like no kind of pain that I had felt in years.

I didn't have time to worry about it. I tried to go at him again, but the pain hit me like a truck and I clamped up again.

Tega went for the Five-seven.

He got to it.

The rear door was now completely open.

Tega stood about six feet from me. We were both at the back of the plane.

He pointed the gun at me and once again I thought I was a dead man. Game over.

Tega began to squeeze the trigger, but just then from out of left field a flare from the flare gun launched out of the barrel. It hissed past me and torpedoed in Tega's direction. It lit up the cabin in a bright orange flash. The flare jeered completely between us and shot out into the night.

It exploded outside the back of the plane.

A split second before it exploded, Tega had turned quickly and returned fire in the direction of the flare's origin, but the explosion caused him to misfire. It threw him off balance.

He had intended to hit Faye Matlind. She had picked up the flare gun, loaded it, and fired it at Tega, but she missed.

Instead, Tega fired two rounds. They hit two different targets.

One round shot into the plane's gauges. It caused all kinds of noises and alarms to start beeping and dinging.

The second bullet caused more damage. It did something that was rare for one of those rounds. It penetrated the pilot's seat and shot through Hank's chest.

The old guy fell forward and clenched his sternum.

He leaned against the controls and the plane dipped into a quick nosedive.

The girls tumbled forward into the cockpit. They were all wide awake now. The adrenaline from all of the danger had jumpstarted their bodies.

Tega stumbled a couple of paces forward and I stood my ground.

Hank's head rose up. He pulled the controls back and got us out of the nosedive almost as fast as we had gone into it. He had fought in the Navy. I remembered.

Hank was a tough old guy.

Tega jumped back to his feet and pointed the gun at me before I could attack him.

He aimed at my chest and screamed, "Te vas a morir!"

Then Hank pulled back on the controls hard. Tega lost his balance and stumbled back a few feet toward the rear, near the edge.

I swiped at his gun hand with a fast backhand.

The Five-seven went flying into the air and the slipstream sucked it out of the plane. Then I reared back on my heels, bent my knees, and leapt forward. With all the muscles from my legs all the way up and into my neck I delivered the most powerful head-butt of my life, far more powerful than the one I had done three years ago on the football field.

My brow was rigid and powerful. This head-butt landed flat against Tega's face, concaving it. Crushing his nose. Bashing his face to a pulp in one powerful and fatal blow. He was dead instantly. I knew it, but I'd never find out for sure because he went flying back in the air and the night wind sucked him out of the rear door. My body almost got sucked out after him, so I reached up with both arms and locked my palms against the ceiling, bracing myself and watched his departure in satisfaction as Oskar Tega flew up and out. Fast. His body whipped around like a leaf in a storm and seconds later he was lost to sight.

I said, "Adios."

That was the last that anyone saw of Oskar Tega.

Chapter 58

The seaplane dipped and bounced. Hank tried his best to keep it steady, but the controls were damaged beyond the point of repair.

Hank bled all over the place. He was going to die soon. No doubt about it.

I held my hands over his wounds. One over the hole in his back and one over the hole in his chest.

“You gotta get da girls outta da plane,” Hank said to me.

I said, “Can’t you land us? Or tell me how.”

“I’ve lived a long life. My kids are grown. My wife died two years ago. Dat bastard killed da last friend dat I had in dis world. I’m dyin’. Let me go.”

I moved my hand and took a peek at his chest. He was right. Blood splattered and pooled out of the wound. There was no going back for him. Not under these conditions. Even a doctor onboard wouldn’t be able to help him. He’d have only a small chance at a hospital. He wasn’t going to make it.

He grabbed my hand with his and squeezed.

He said, “Let go.”

I nodded, pictured my mom, and then I let him go. He gripped his chest and stopped the bleeding as best he could.

He said, “I’m gonna fly low above da lake. You take da girls and jump out. And don’t wait. I won’t last.”

Then he took the plane down into a slow dive.

I grabbed his shoulder and said, “I’m glad that I met you.”

I turned to the girls and said, “Ladies, listen up. The plane isn’t going to land. We’ve got to jump.”

Faye was almost fully alert. The drugs had worn off for her. So at least I had her help.

Then one of the other girls seemed to be cognitive. It was Ann Gables. This was the first time that I had really looked at her. She was still alive. Skinny, but alive.

She asked, “Jump?”

“Ann. There’s no time to explain, but you’re going to have to jump and swim,” I said.

Faye grabbed her and said, “Remember me? It’s Faye. We’re free now, but we have to jump from this plane. Can you swim?”

Ann’s face came alive like she was also alert. She said, “We’re free? I can swim.”

I said, “Good.”

Then I said, “We’re ready.”

Hank took us down above the lake. Thunder rumbled above us.

He shouted back to us, “All right. Head all da way ta da back. Jump in ten seconds. No time ta waste.”

He flew low over the lake like he was going to land.

I pushed the ladies toward the rear. I grabbed the third girl who was still woozy. Faye helped Ann.

At the rear of the plane we felt the starboard engine explode in a sudden wave of fire and wind. The plane lurched through the air and Faye and Ann both flew out the back before they were ready. I grabbed the other girl and leapt out after them.

We dropped through the air for not even three seconds and then crashed through the surface of the lake like bombs.

We sank several feet down and I started swimming with one arm. I pulled the girl with the other.

I swam and paddled through the water with all my strength. I kicked and kicked. After a long 13 seconds, I burst through the surface.

My lungs filled with hot, wet air. I sucked down the oxygen like it was my first time breathing.

The girl floated next to me, unconscious and then suddenly, she was awake and completely confused.

Second nature kicked in and she treaded water on her own. She coughed and gasped and stayed quiet. Then she started swimming away from me and toward the shore.

She might've thought that I had abducted her or that I was trying to drown her. Neither would've surprised me.

She was alive. That was all that mattered.

I turned and swam in the opposite direction toward the other shore. Not sure why. I just followed my instinct, which was to paddle to the other side.

I kicked and paddled and swam as hard as I could.

My muscles ached like nothing that I had ever felt before. But I stayed afloat.

Swimming through the lake, I thought of my mother. Her voice swept through my thoughts.

She said, "Do the right thing."

That was all I heard over and over as I swam.

"Do the right thing."

Eventually, I reached the shore.

I climbed up onto the rocks with my arms. I didn't even stand up. I just spun over and lay on my back. I stared up at the sky.

The sun had broken through the storm clouds. Thunder still roared every other minute, but the sunlight was there. Then there was one loud, thunderous sound that was a little different from rumbling thunder. It was much closer and sounded like an explosion.

I looked up in the direction of the sound and saw that it was the seaplane.

It exploded above the town of Black Rock. Pieces of the plane fell to the earth in a rainstorm of shrapnel and broken metal fragments.

I thought about Hank and then I thought nothing else.

I sat up and looked around the lake for signs of Faye Matlind. I didn't have to search long. Directly across from me, on the opposite shore, were all three of the women: the drugged one, Ann Gables, and Faye Matlind.

They were holding each other and hugging like long-lost sisters, like they had survived a horrible plane crash, which they had and more.

I smiled.

Do the right thing.

I lay back down on the stony, hard rocks and closed my eyes. I had never felt anything more comfortable in my life than that bed of rocks.

Chapter 59

It was well into the early morning hours. Cars had lined up to leave the town of Black Rock like it had the plague.

Traffic to leave was heavy and thick. The traffic of emergency vehicles from the neighboring towns, the state government, state cops, the FBI, the DEA, and the ATF were all lined up within 24 hours to get into the town of Black Rock. They had all set up their own traffic stops and perimeters and security stations.

The local motel, which had survived the fires, was fully booked.

The national media had cancelled all of their regularly scheduled programs to report on a small town in Mississippi that was on fire and to report about a missing international criminal named Oskar Tega. Now he was thought to have crashed his plane over Jarvis Lake.

They also reported that he hadn't been a drug kingpin after all, but a human trafficker.

They reported that he and his gang had been responsible for any number of abductions of young women in the last five years along the highways and interstates in the county.

Much, much earlier, I had left Black Rock.

While all the government agencies were fighting to get into the town, I was already miles away. I stood on the side of Highway 82, just outside a small town called El Dorado.

The sun was out and it was hot. I had my thumb out when a little, bright red Scion pulled over to the shoulder.

I lowered my arm and started walking toward the car. I was extremely tired. I had slept for about an hour on a bed of rocks and my back was sore.

My shoulders hurt and I felt my bones with every step that I took, but I had to keep moving. I couldn't explain it, but I was a Reacher and it was what Reachers did.

I stepped to the passenger door. I was so tired that without even leaning down to meet the driver, I opened the door and dumped myself into the seat.

I gazed over with sleepy eyes and then I started to laugh. I laughed louder and harder than I ever had before because the driver was Maria from the diner.

She smiled at me. She looked good in the morning. She also looked a little tired, but better than me for sure.

She said, "Hi."

"Well, hello."

"I never thought that I'd see *you* again."

I nodded.

Then she said, "I called you."

I shut my eyes tight and a deep frown fell across my face.

She asked, "What?"

“My phone.”

I pulled it out of my pocket. I was amazed because it was still in one piece and it was dry. My clothes and everything in my pockets had dried over an hour ago, but surely my phone was ruined.

“I swam in the lake earlier. I forgot to take it out of my pocket.”

She said, “Put it in rice. It’ll work again.”

I shrugged.

“Don’t you have it all backed up anyway?”

I nodded and smiled and then I said, “I have it all backed up.”

And I had. It was backed up inside my head. I didn’t need to keep the phone. I knew all of its secrets already.

I knew Jack Reacher’s face. I knew where he had been over the years. I knew who he was as best as anyone could from his files.

Most importantly, I remembered my mother. I didn’t need pictures of her. I had memories.

I asked, “Why are you here? Where are you going?”

Then I noticed that she had the backseat loaded up with her belongings.

She smiled and said, “There’s nothing for me in Black Rock, even when it wasn’t on fire. I’m headed home. Back to Austin. What about you? Where are you headed?”

I looked around the car and then I looked back at her.

I said, “Austin sounds great.”

She nodded and smiled.

“Mind if I sleep a while?”

She said, “Not at all.”

Then she took her foot off the brake and merged with the traffic and drove off.

Before I dozed off, she asked, “Hey, you wanna meet my parents?”

I laughed again. This time I laughed so hard that it hurt.

She laughed too. Then she asked, “So, why are you going to Austin?”

I said, “I gotta be somewhere.”

I lay back and fell into a deep, deep sleep.

Chapter 60

Two days after I left Black Rock I sat in a generic Texas diner in Austin. The kind of diner that was all over the American landscape—plain, same kinds of food, same kinds of waitresses, same kind of patrons.

I had just sat down when a skinny waitress with glasses and a bright smile stepped over to me and asked what I wanted. I ordered a bottled water and a cheeseburger and fries.

“We don’t have fries. We have hash browns.”

I shrugged and said, “That’s fine. Whatever.”

“Want anything on them?”

“Cheese.”

She nodded, wrote down my order, and walked behind the counter.

She waited her turn and then called out my order to the cooks. She went over to the beverage area. I turned my attention to the window. Where to go from here? I had no idea.

I reached into my pocket and stared at my phone. It was still dead. I hadn't tried the thing with the rice and I hadn't tried to recharge it. Truth was, I wasn't sure if I wanted it. But I held onto it like a souvenir from my past.

The waitress had returned and dropped something off in front of me. She didn't wait for an acknowledgement because a young black couple walked in and sat in the booth behind me.

She immediately greeted them with a smile.

I smiled, thinking about the Matlinds. I was sad that Faye had to find out about Chris's death from someone else. But telling her wasn't my place. Saving her was my place.

I hoped that she would recover and find love again.

I turned back to my own table and minded my own business. That was when I saw that the waitress had brought me the wrong drink.

Instead of a bottle of water, she had delivered a hot, black coffee in a less than pristine white mug.

I stared at it.

I raised my hand to get her attention.

She came over and asked, "Is something wrong, sir?"

I paused and stared back at the cup of coffee.

She repeated her question.

I said, "No. Everything is fine."

She smiled and walked away.

I stared at the coffee. Maybe I should try it before I dismiss it so quickly.

The waitress returned.

She delivered my food and asked, "Will that be all?"

I was so enthralled in the coffee that I stayed quiet.

She repeated the question.

"Sir, will there be anything else?"

I said nothing.

