

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING SERIES

JACK REACHER

**LEE
CHILD**

AND

ANDREW CHILD

NO PLAN B

A NOVEL

LEE CHILD and ANDREW CHILD



 Delacorte Press | New York

No Plan B



A JACK REACHER NOVEL

No Plan B is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Lee Child and Andrew Child

All rights reserved.

Published in the United States by Delacorte Press, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

DELACORTE PRESS is a registered trademark and the DP colophon is a trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Child, Lee, author. | Child, Andrew, author.

Title: No plan B: a Jack Reacher Novel / Lee Child and Andrew Child.

Description: First Edition. | New York: Delacorte Press, [2022] | Series: Jack Reacher; 27

Identifiers: LCCN 2022033381 (print) | LCCN 2022033382 (ebook) | ISBN 9781984818546 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781984818553 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3553.H4838 N66 2022 (print) | LCC PS3553.H4838 (ebook) | DDC 813/.54—dc23/eng/20220721

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022033381>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022033382>

Ebook ISBN 9781984818553

randomhousebooks.com

Book design by Virginia Norey, adapted for ebook

Title page art adapted from an original photograph by leon134865/stock.adobe.com

Cover design: Carlos Beltrán

Cover image: © Ktsdesign/Getty Images

ep_prh_6.0_141524372_c0_r0

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*By Lee Child and Andrew Child*](#)

[*About the Authors*](#)

Chapter 1

The meeting was held in a room with no windows.

The room was rectangular and it had no windows because it had no external walls. It was contained within a larger, square room. And the square room was contained within an even larger octagonal room. Together this nest of rooms formed the command hub of Unit S2 at the Minerva Correctional Facility in Winson, Mississippi. Along with its sister segregation unit, S1, it was the most secure place in the complex. It was laid out with walls like the concentric rings of a medieval castle. Designed to be impregnable. From the outside, even if attacked by the most determined rescuers. And from the inside, even during the most extreme riot.

The safety aspect was welcome but the reason the hub had been chosen for this meeting was its seclusion. The opportunity it offered for complete secrecy. Because the rest of Unit S2 was vacant. There were no guards. No admin staff. And none of its 120 isolation cells were in use. They weren't needed. Not with the way the prison was run under its current management. The progressive approach was a cause of great pride. And great PR.

There were six men in the room, and this was the third covert meeting they'd held there in the last week. The men were spread out around a long, narrow table and there were two spare chairs pushed back against a blank, white wall. The furniture was made of bright blue polycarbonate. Each piece was cast in a single mold, leaving no joins or seams. The shape and material made the items hard to break. The color made it hard to conceal any parts that did somehow get smashed off. It was practical. But not very comfortable. And all left over from the previous administration.

Three of the men were wearing suits. Bruno Hix, Minerva's Chief Executive and joint founder, at the head of the table. Damon Brockman, Chief Operating Officer and the other joint founder, to Hix's right. And Curtis Riverdale, the prison's warden, next to Brockman. The man next to

Riverdale, the last one on that side of the table, was wearing a uniform. He was Rod Moseley, Chief of the Winson Police Department. On the opposite side, to Hix's left, were two guys in their late twenties. Both were wearing black T-shirts and jeans. One had a broken nose and two black eyes and a forehead full of angry purple bruises. The other had his left arm in a sling. Both were trying to avoid the other men's eyes.

"So is there a problem or not?" Brockman shrugged his shoulders. "Can anyone say for sure that there is? No. Therefore we should go ahead as planned. There's too much at stake to start running from shadows."

"No." Riverdale shook his head. "If there *might be* a problem that means there is a problem, the way I see things. Safety first. We should—"

"We should find out for sure," Moseley said. "Make an informed decision. The key is, did the guy look in the envelope? That's what we need to know."

No one spoke.

"Well?" Moseley stretched his leg out under the table and kicked the guy with the sling. "Wake up. Answer the question."

"Give me a break." The guy stifled a yawn. "We had to drive all night to get to Colorado. And all night again to get back here."

"Cry me a river." Moseley prodded the guy with his foot. "Just tell us. Did he look?"

The guy stared at the wall. "We don't know."

"Looking in the envelope isn't definitive," Riverdale said. "If he did look, we need to know if he understood what he saw. And what he plans to do about it."

"Whether the guy looked is irrelevant," Brockman said. "So what if he did? Nothing in there gives the slightest clue to what's going on."

Riverdale shook his head. "It mentions 10:00 A.M. on Friday. Very clearly. The time, the date, the place."

"So what?" Brockman raised his hands. "Friday's an occasion for joy and celebration. There's nothing remotely suspicious about it."

"But the photograph was in there." Riverdale jabbed the air with his finger in time with each syllable. "Eight by ten. Impossible to miss."

"And again, that means nothing." Brockman threw himself back in his chair. "Not unless the guy actually comes here. If he shows up on Friday. And even then we'd be OK. We chose very carefully."

"We didn't. How could we? We only had nine to pick from."

A smile flashed across Moseley's face. "Ironic, isn't it? That the one we picked really is innocent."

"I wouldn't call it ironic." Riverdale scowled. "And there weren't nine. There were only five. The others had family. That ruled them out."

"Nine?" Brockman said. "Five? Whatever. The number doesn't matter. Only the outcome matters. And the outcome is good enough. Even if the guy shows up, how close would he get? He'd be a hundred feet away, at least."

"He doesn't have to show up. He could see it on TV. Online. Read about it in the newspapers."

"The warden has a point," Moseley said. "Maybe it would be better not to draw so much attention this time. Maybe we should cancel the media. We could float some BS about respecting the inmate's privacy, or something."

"No need." Brockman shook his head. "You think this guy has a television? A computer? A subscription to *The New York Times*? He's destitute, for goodness' sake. Stop looking for trouble. There isn't any."

Hix tapped his fingertips on the tabletop. "Media exposure is good for the brand. We always publicize. We always have. If we change now we would only attract more attention. Make people think something is wrong. But I do think we need to know. Did he look?" Hix turned to the guys in the T-shirts. "Best guess. No wrong answer. The chips fell where they fell. We understand that. Just tell us what you believe."

The guy with the broken nose took a deep breath through his mouth. "I think he looked."

"You think?" Hix said. "But you're not sure."

"Not one hundred percent."

"OK. Where was the envelope?"

"In the bag."

"Where was the bag?"

"On the ground."

"You put it down?"

"I needed my hands free."

"Where was it when the car arrived?" Hix said.

The guy with the sling said, "On the ground."

"In the same place?"

"How could we know? I wasn't there when Robert put it down. Robert wasn't conscious when I picked it up."

Hix paused for a moment. “OK. How long was the guy alone with the bag?”

“We don’t know. Can’t have been long. A couple of minutes, max.”

“So it’s possible he looked,” Hix said. “Glanced, anyway.”

“Right,” the guy with the broken nose said. “And the bag was ripped, remember. How did that happen? And why? We didn’t do it.”

Brockman leaned forward. “It was a crazy scene, from what you told us. Wreckage everywhere. Total chaos. The bag probably got ripped by accident. It doesn’t sound like some major clue. And the other two haven’t reported that he looked.”

The guy with the sling said, “They haven’t reported at all. We don’t know where they are.”

Brockman said, “Must still be on their way back. Phone problems, probably. But if there was anything to worry about they would have found a way to let us know.”

“And the guy didn’t mention anything about it to the police,” Moseley said. “I’ve talked to the lieutenant over there a couple times. That has to mean something.”

“I still think he looked,” the guy with the broken nose said.

“We should pull the plug,” Riverdale said.

“That’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” Brockman said. “We didn’t set the date. We didn’t pick the time. The judge did when he signed the release order. You know that. We pull some bullshit delaying tactic, we wind up ass-deep in inspectors. You know where that would land us. We might as well shoot ourselves in the head, right here, right now.”

Riverdale scowled. “I’m not saying we delay. I’m saying we go back to the original plan. The switch was always a mistake.”

“That would solve Friday’s problem. If there is one. But then we’d have no way out of the bigger jam we’re in. Carpenter’s situation.”

“I said from the start, the solution to that is simple. A bullet in the back of his head. I’ll do it myself if you’re too squeamish.”

“You know what that would cost? How much business we would lose?”

“We’ll lose a lot more than money if this guy joins the dots.”

“How could he do that?”

“He could come down here. You said so yourself. He could dig around. He was a military cop. It’s in his blood.”

“It’s years since the guy was an MP,” Moseley said. “That’s what the lieutenant told me.”

Hix tapped the tabletop. “What else do we know?”

“Not much. He has no driver’s license. No employment history, according to the IRS. Not since he left the army. No social media presence. No recent photographs exist. He’s a hobo now. It’s kind of sad, but that’s the bottom line. Doesn’t sound like much to worry about.”

Brockman said, “Hobo or millionaire, what kind of crazy person would travel halfway across the country because he read a few documents and saw an innocuous picture?”

“Speculate all you want but this still worries me,” Riverdale said. “Each time we met, we thought we had the problem contained. Each time we were wrong. What if we’re wrong again now?”

“We weren’t wrong.” Brockman slammed his palm into the table. “We handled each situation as it came up. Ninety-nine percent.”

“Ninety-nine. Not one hundred.”

“Life isn’t perfect. Sometimes there’s broken glass to sweep up. Which we’ve done. We found out there was a leak. We plugged it, the way we all agreed to. We found out about the missing envelope. We retrieved it, the way we all agreed to.”

“And now this strange guy has looked in the envelope.”

“He may have. We don’t know. But you have to admit, it’s unlikely. He didn’t tell the cops. We know that. And he didn’t tell the FBI or the Bureau of Prisons. We would know that. So say he figured everything out from a couple of seconds alone with the envelope. Why keep the knowledge to himself? What’s he going to do with it? Blackmail us? And you think he’s somehow going to schlep twelve hundred miles before Friday? Come on.”

“Gentlemen!” Hix tapped the tabletop again. “Enough. All right. Here’s my decision. We can’t know if the guy looked in the envelope. It seems unlikely, so we shouldn’t panic. Particularly given the consequences. But at the same time it pays to be cautious. He’s easily recognizable, yes?”

The guy with the broken nose nodded. “For sure. You can’t miss him. Six-five. Two hundred fifty pounds. Scruffy.”

“He’s banged up pretty good, remember,” the guy with the sling said. “I took care of that.”

“You should have killed him,” Brockman said.

“I thought I had.”

“You should have made sure.”

“How? *Make it look like an accident.* Those were our orders for the other two. I figured they applied to this guy, as well. Hard to sell that story if I put a bullet in his brain.”

“Enough!” Hix waited for silence. “Here’s the plan. We’ll mount surveillance. Round the clock. Starting now, through Saturday. If he sets one toe in our town, we’ll be waiting. And here we don’t have to worry about how anything looks.”

Chapter 2

Jack Reacher arrived in Gerrardsville, Colorado, mid-morning on a Monday, two days before the Minerva guys met in secret for the third time. He had hitched a ride in a truck that was delivering alfalfa bales to a farm south of the town so he covered the final mile on foot. It was a pleasant walk. The weather was warm, but not hot. Tufts of cloud drifted across the wide blue sky. The mile-high air was thin and clear. As far as he could see, the land was flat and green and fertile. Watering gantries marked the boundaries of endless fields and between them stalks and leaves of all sizes and shades stretched up toward the sun. To the left, the horizon was dominated by a line of mountains. They jutted straight out of the ground, no gentle buildup, no smooth foothills, and their peaks, capped with snow, cut into the atmosphere like the teeth of a saw.

Reacher continued until he came to the town's main drag. It carried on for about a half mile, and there was only one block on either side before the stores and offices gave way to the residential streets. The commercial buildings were uniform in size. They were two stories high and they all had similar designs. They were all a similar age, too—late nineteenth century, based on the dates carved into some of the lintels—which gave the place a kind of time-capsule feel. A time when craftsmanship was still valued. That was clear. The facades were all made from stone or marble or granite. The woodwork around the doors and windows was intricately carved and lavishly picked out with gold leaf. And every aspect was flawlessly maintained. Reacher appreciated what he saw. But he wasn't in town to admire its architecture. He was there to visit its museum.

The previous day Reacher had picked up a newspaper someone had abandoned in a diner. He found an article about a dentist and a metal detector. The gadget had been given to the guy as a retirement gift. Some kind of an in-joke based on his reputation for finding fillings done by other dentists in new patients' teeth and insisting on replacing them. Anyway, to occupy his sudden leisure time the guy reinvented himself as an amateur

archeologist. He'd long been obsessed by the Civil War so he set out to visit a whole series of battle sites. Big and small. Famous and obscure. And at Pea Ridge, Arkansas, he found a bunch of artillery fragments and other artifacts. These got rolled into a traveling exhibition about the evolution of Union tactics, which caught Reacher's eye. Gerrardsville was one of the venues for the display. And as he was only a few miles away while the show was still open, Reacher figured he'd take a look.

Reacher had a cup of coffee at a café he happened to walk past and got to the museum before lunchtime. He stayed until it closed. When he had to be shooed out by one of the curators. Her name was Alexandra. Reacher struck up a conversation with her about the exhibit. The subject turned to the kind of restaurants there were in the town, and they wound up going for a burger together. Alexandra picked a scruffy kind of place. It had rough wooden tabletops. Long benches. Creaky floorboards. Old LP covers were tacked up all over the walls. But the food came fast. The plates were piled high. The prices were low. Reacher liked everything about it.

While they ate the subject changed to music and they wound up at a bar together. It was small. Intimate. Dark. A blues band was playing. Mainly Magic Slim covers with a handful of Howlin' Wolf songs sprinkled through. Reacher approved. Alexandra ordered a couple of beers and as they drank the subject changed again. It led them in a whole different direction this time. And all the way to Alexandra's apartment.

Her apartment was above a store near the main intersection in the town. It was a small place. The style was minimalist. It didn't have much in the way of furniture. Or décor. But it did have a fridge, so they had another beer. It had a CD player, so they listened to some more music. It had a bedroom. And once they reached it, there wasn't much need for more of anything else.

Chapter 3

The museum didn't open the next day until 10:00 a.m. so Reacher and Alexandra stayed in bed until the last possible minute.

They stayed in bed, but they didn't spend all their time sleeping. Alexandra knew she was cutting it fine but she took a quick shower anyway. She felt it was wise after their recent level of activity. Reacher made coffee. Then she kissed him goodbye and hurried away to her chosen slice of the past. Reacher took a more leisurely shower then made his way down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk. He was thinking about his more immediate future. He paused to gaze at the mountains for a moment. Then he saw a woman walking toward them. She was on the other side of the street, heading west, almost at the intersection. The *Don't Walk* sign was lit up. A guy was standing on the opposite corner, waiting for it to change. And a bus was heading north, about to pass between them.

—

The bus driver only saw movement.

Not much more than a blur. Low and to her right. A spherical object. Swinging down and around through a quarter of a perfect circle. Like a melon had somehow been attached to the end of a rope, she told the mandatory counselor the following day. Only it wasn't a melon. It was a head. A human head. It was female. Inches from the windshield. There. Bright and pale in the sunlight, like it already belonged to a ghost. Then gone. But not because the driver had imagined it. Not because it was an illusion, like she prayed for it to be. Because it continued on its arc. All the way to the ground. In front of the bus.

Then under it.

The driver veered hard to the left. She threw all her weight onto the brake. No hesitation. No panic. She was well trained. She had years of experience. But she was still too late. She heard the tires squeal. Heard her

passengers scream. And felt the impact. Through the steering wheel. Just a slight, muted ripple running around the hard plastic rim. Less of a jolt than if she'd driven through a deep pothole. Or hit a log. But then, asphalt doesn't have bones that crush and shatter. Wood doesn't have organs that rupture and bleed.

The driver shut her eyes and willed herself not to vomit. She knew the kind of scene that would be waiting for her on the street. She'd been an unwilling partner in a stranger's suicide once before. It was an occupational hazard.

The guy on the opposite corner saw a lot more.

He saw the bus heading north. He saw a woman arrive at the southeast corner of the intersection. He had an unobstructed view. He was close enough to be credible. In his statement he said the woman looked nervous. Twitchy. He saw her check her watch. At first he figured she was in a hurry. He thought she was going to try to run across the street before the bus got too close. But she didn't. She stopped. She stood and squirmed and fidgeted until the bus was almost alongside her. Until there was no chance for it to slow or swerve.

Then she dived under its wheels.

The woman dived. The guy was certain about that. She didn't trip. She didn't fall. It was a deliberate act. He could tell from the timing. The way her body accelerated. The curve it moved through. The precise aim. There was no way it could have been an accident. She had done it on purpose. He could see no other explanation.

Reacher was the only one who saw the whole picture.

He was about fifty feet from the intersection. His outlook was also unobstructed but he had a wider angle of view. He saw the woman and the guy waiting to cross in opposite directions. And he saw a third person. A man. Around five foot ten. Wiry-looking. Wearing a gray hoodie and jeans. On the same side as the woman. Eight feet away from her. A foot back from the curb. Standing completely still.

The guy had picked his spot carefully. That was clear. He was in the general vicinity of the crosswalk so he didn't attract attention the way

someone loitering aimlessly might. He was far enough away from the woman that he didn't appear to be connected to her in any way. But he was close enough that when the bus approached he only needed to take a couple of steps to reach her side. His movement was smooth. Fluid. He was more like a shadow than a physical presence. The woman didn't notice him appear next to her. She didn't notice his foot snake around in front of her ankles.

The guy planted his hand between the woman's shoulder blades and pushed. It was a small motion. Economical. Not dramatic. Not something most observers would notice. But sufficient for the guy's purpose. That was for sure. There was no danger of the woman stumbling forward and bouncing off the front of the bus. No danger she might get away with broken bones and a concussion. The guy's foot took care of that. It stopped the woman from moving her own feet. It made sure she pivoted, ankles stationary, arms flailing. And it guaranteed she slammed horizontally onto the ground.

The impact knocked the breath out of the woman's body. Her last breath. Because half a second later the bus's front wheel crushed her abdomen as flat as a folded newspaper.

Chapter 4

The bus came to rest at an angle from the curb like it had been stolen by a drunk and then abandoned when the prank lost its gloss. The front end was partly blocking the intersection. Reacher saw the route number on the electronic panel above its entry door switch to a written message: *CALL POLICE*. He also saw the dead woman's legs. They were jutting out from under the bus, about halfway between its front and rear wheels. One of her sneakers had fallen off. The guy who had pushed her took a black trash bag from the back pocket of his jeans. He shook it open. Crouched down next to her bare foot. Stretched an arm under the bus. Snagged something and pulled it out. Reacher realized it was the woman's purse. The guy slipped it into the trash bag. Stood up. Adjusted his hood. And strolled away, heading south, disappearing from sight.

Reacher ran across the street, diagonally, toward the bus. The sidewalk was starting to fill up. People were spilling out of the shops and cafés and offices to gawp at the body. A man in a suit had stopped his car and climbed out to get a better look. But no one was paying any attention to the guy in the hoodie. He was melting away through the fringe of the crowd. Reacher barreled through the spectators, shoving people aside, knocking one of them on his ass. The guy in the hoodie cleared the last of the onlookers. He picked up his pace. Reacher kept going, pushing harder. He barged between one final couple and broke back into a run. The guy was sixty feet ahead now. Reacher closed the gap to fifty feet. Forty-five. Then the guy heard the footsteps chasing him. He glanced over his shoulder. Saw Reacher bearing down on him. He started to run, still clutching the trash bag in one hand. He slipped his other hand up inside his hood. Jabbed at a device that was jammed into his right ear. Barked out a couple of sentences. Then veered off into an alleyway that stretched away to his left.

Reacher kept running until he was a couple of feet from the mouth of the alley. Then he stopped. He listened. He heard nothing so he knelt down, crept forward, and peered around the corner. He figured if the guy

had a gun he'd be looking for a target at head height. If he had a knife he'd be winding up for a lunge to the gut. But Reacher didn't encounter any threat. There was no response at all. So he got back to his feet and took a step forward.

The alley was the cleanest he had ever been in. The walls of the adjoining buildings were pale brick. They looked neat and even. There was no graffiti. None of the second-floor windows were broken. The fire escapes looked freshly painted. There were dumpsters lined up on both sides. They were evenly spaced out. Some were green. Some were blue. All had lids. None was overflowing, and there was no trash blowing around on the ground.

The guy was thirty feet away. His back was against the left-hand wall. He was standing completely still and the trash bag was on the ground at his feet. Reacher moved toward him. He closed the gap to twenty feet. Then the guy lifted the hem of his hoodie. A black, boxy pistol was sticking out of his waistband.

The guy said, "Hold it. That's close enough."

Reacher kept moving. He closed the gap to ten feet.

The guy's hand hovered over the grip of his pistol. He said, "Stop. Keep your hands where I can see them. There's no need for anyone to get hurt. We just need to talk."

Reacher closed the gap to four feet. Then he said, "Anyone else?"

"What?" the guy said.

"Someone already got hurt. The woman you pushed. Was there a need for that?"

The guy's mouth opened and closed but no words came out.

Reacher said, "Down on the ground. Fingers laced behind your head."

The guy didn't respond.

"Maybe there is no need for anyone else to get hurt," Reacher said. "And by *anyone*, I mean *you*. It all depends on what you do next."

The guy went for his gun. He was fast. But not fast enough. Reacher grabbed the guy's wrist and whipped it away to his right, spinning him around so he was facing the wall.

"Stop." The guy's voice was suddenly shrill. "Wait. What are you doing?"

"I'm going to see how you like it," Reacher said. "There's no bus. But there are bricks. They'll have to do."

Reacher let go of the guy's wrist. Moved his hand up. Planted it between the guy's shoulder blades. And pushed. It was a huge motion. Savage. Wild. Way more than sufficient. The guy tried to save himself but he had no chance. The force was overwhelming. He smashed into the wall, face-first, and flopped onto the ground like the bones in his legs had dissolved. Blood was sluicing down from the gashes in his forehead. His nose was broken. There was a serious chance he could suffocate. Or drown.

Neither of those outcomes would have worried Reacher too much.