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NOVEL

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LEE CHILD and ANDREW CHILD



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In Too Deep



A REACHER NOVEL

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For Richard Pine—ten years and counting...

Chapter 1

The pain hit first, then the sound followed, the way lightning beats thunder in a storm.

The pain was in Jack Reacher's right wrist. It was sharp and sudden and hot, and it was more than strong enough to eclipse the dull throbbing ache that filled his head. The sound was a single, round, lingering note. Metal on metal. Distinct, but inconsequential next to the ringing in his ears.

The pain and the sound came after he tried to move his arm. That was all Reacher knew. He had been asleep—no, somewhere deeper and darker than sleep—and when he floated to the surface he was rocked by waves of dizziness. He was lying on his back. Not in a bed. Not on the ground. On something smooth and artificial. And cold. The chill was seeping through his shirt and into his shoulder blades and down his spine. A sharp ridge was cutting into his calves. His head felt like it was being crushed against the hard surface. So he had drawn his right elbow back, ready to lever himself up. Or he had tried to. And it wasn't just the discomfort that had stopped him. Something was fastened around his wrist, preventing it from moving more than a couple of inches. Something cinched in tight. It bit into his skin, but that wasn't what hurt the most. It was one of the bones in his forearm. Maybe more than one. Some kind of major damage had been done beneath the skin. That was clear.

Reacher tried to move his left arm. There was no pain, but that wrist was also restrained by something sharp. So was his left ankle. So was his right. He couldn't see what he was attached to, or what he was bound with, because there was no light. Not the slightest glimmer. The space he was in

was completely dark. There was no noise, now that the metallic *clink* had died away. And no movement of the air. Reacher had no idea where he was. No idea how he had gotten there. But someone must have brought him. And shackled him. And whoever had done those things was going to rue the day. That was for damn sure.

The same time Reacher was slipping back into oblivion a man was standing at the side of the road, five miles away to the north, watching for smoke or flames. He had used plenty of names over the years but at that moment he was calling himself *Ivan Vidic*. He was heavysset and a little stooped, which made him look shorter than the six feet two he claimed on his driver's license, and his bald head was all sharp angles and ridges, like it had been carved from stone by someone without much skill. His car was parked by the second of a set of three switchbacks. It was a notorious spot for accidents. The turns were sharp and close together and poorly lit. The road was separated from a steep drop by a wide shoulder and a rusty safety rail and the camber coming off the apex of the first bend was way out of whack. Something to do with ancient geological deposits deteriorating and undermining the layers of bedrock deep down, way below the surface. Nothing that couldn't be fixed, given the right amount of money. But money was scarce in those parts so the local Department of Roads and Bridges had just thrown up a couple of warning signs. They didn't help to keep vehicles from crashing, but the county lawyers said they might keep the department from getting sued in the aftermath.

An SUV had crashed there, a little earlier that day. A Lincoln Navigator. It had left the road, clipped a tree, rolled three times, and come to rest back on its wheels. Its roof was caved in. Its hood was dented. Its doors were bent and twisted and all its windows were starred and opaque. Vidic had watched the accident unfold. He'd had no alternative because he had been following,

driving fast and sticking close behind. He had mashed his brakes the moment the Lincoln lost control and had skidded to a stop while the other vehicle was still moving. Then he had jumped out and crept closer to the wreck, sniffing the air for gasoline fumes and straining his ears for any hint of fuel dripping from a fractured line or cracked tank.

The Lincoln had wound up in bad shape, but its driver had come out even worse. He was dead. His neck was broken. There was no doubt about that. Vidic had smiled when he saw what had happened. It wasn't the outcome he'd expected. But it was one he could use. More than that, it was like the answer to a prayer. An echo from his childhood floated into his head: *God helps those who help themselves*. His grin grew wider, then he turned his attention to the passenger. At first Vidic thought the guy was bound for the morgue, too, but when he checked he felt a pulse. So he adjusted his diagnosis: The guy just had a concussion and a broken wrist, judging by the sharp edge of the bone he could see jutting out beneath his skin. The guy's size had saved him. He looked huge. Comfortably six feet five, even slumped against the door. Easily 250 pounds. And all bone and muscle. No fat.

Vidic had called a couple of guys for help and while he waited for them to arrive he had hauled the driver and the passenger out of the wreckage. That wasn't easy. The driver's head was flopping around all over the place and his body was slack and soft and difficult to grip. The passenger was worse because of his size and shape. His arms were bigger than the driver's legs. His wrists were too broad for Vidic to wrap his fingers around. Vidic was out of breath and sweating despite the cool air when he heard wheels on the asphalt behind him, and he only just had time to finish rifling the passenger's pockets and transferring the few possessions he found there to his own.

The new guys had shown up in a Ford pickup truck, which turned out to be a practical choice. There was no way they'd have been able to manhandle the passenger's unconscious body onto the backseat of a regular car. He was too big. Too awkward. They wouldn't have had enough room to maneuver.

So the three of them heaved him up onto the load bed and tossed the driver's corpse in next to him.

The guy who had been driving the pickup was called *Darren Fletcher*. He was a couple of inches taller than Vidic but slimmer and maybe twenty pounds lighter. He slammed the tailgate into place then turned to Vidic and said, "You saw it happen?"

Vidic nodded.

"When you called and said it was Gibson's Lincoln I was hoping you were wrong."

"Have you ever known me to be wrong?"

Fletcher grunted and said, "Walk me through it."

Vidic shrugged. "Gibson was driving pretty slow. Pretty careful. I caught up to him by chance. I was heading back to base. Guess he was, too. He kept going the same speed for maybe a mile. His usual Steady Eddy self. Then he must have seen my car. Seen it, but not realized it was mine because all of a sudden he tried to lose me. He hit the gas, but at exactly the wrong time." Vidic nodded at the wrecked vehicle. "As you can see. Exhibit A."

"Did you flash your lights? Honk your horn? Make it look like you were up for a race?"

"No. Why would I? I'm not sixteen."

"So why did he try to lose you? Or whoever he thought you were?"

Vidic shrugged again. "Paranoia is my guess. It's in the air. It started when O'Connell died and it's worse since Bowery disappeared."

Fletcher was silent for a moment, then he said, "The big guy who was riding with Gibson. Who is he?"

"No idea."

"He doesn't have ID?"

"No."

"Any luggage? A backpack, at least?"

"Just this." Vidic took a pistol from his waistband and handed it to Fletcher. "A Glock 17. The FBI's weapon of choice. Make of that what you will."

Chapter 2

Fletcher and the other guy had taken off in the Ford and left Vidic to deal with the Lincoln. He had checked the glove box and the trunk for anything containing personal information then turned his attention to the driver's seat. He had been ready to clean up any blood that had been spilled, but there wasn't any. Gibson's skin must not have been pierced in the accident. Or at least not while his heart was still beating. Vidic had smiled. That made his next task easier. He glanced across to the passenger side and noted the position on the doorframe where the impact with the big guy's head had left a bloodstain. He took a knife from his pocket, made a nick on the pad of his left thumb, and squeezed a few drops of blood onto the frame of the driver's door in a corresponding spot, only around three inches lower. He grabbed the steering wheel. The gearshift. He adjusted the rearview mirror. Prodded a bunch of climate control and entertainment system buttons. He took a cellphone from his pocket, double-checked that it was the right one, and jammed it down the side of the seat. Then he put his foot on the brake and turned the key. Nothing happened. Some kind of safety system must have shut off the ignition when the vehicle hit the tree. And isolated the fuel supply, with any luck, Vidic thought. He used his knife to pry off the cover from the gearshift release, selected Neutral, then opened the door and jumped down. He climbed into his own car, fired it up, pulled in behind the Lincoln and gave it a gentle nudge. It rolled a couple of yards and ground to a halt. Vidic leaned a little harder on the gas. The Lincoln rolled faster. It kept going this time and picked up more speed. Enough to help it bust through the safety rail and disappear into the darkness on the other side.

Vidic had stopped his car and hurried to the gap the Lincoln had made in the rail. He could see the vehicle fifty feet below, on its roof, three wheels still turning. He had stood and watched. There was no explosion. No sign of fire. He waited twenty minutes, to be sure. Then his remaining cellphone began to ring. The call was from a number he recognized. He hit the answer button and said, "Hey, Paris. What's up?"

A woman's voice came on the line. It was low and curt and a little shaky around the edges. She said, "Is it true? Gibson's dead?"

"He is. Yes. Another one bit the dust."

"It was an accident?"

Vidic didn't answer.

Paris said, "I heard he crashed his car. Broke his neck."

"You heard right."

"You saw it happen?"

"The whole thing."

"Someone was with him?"

"A stranger."

"What kind of stranger?"

"Just some nobody hitching a ride. Nothing to worry about."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Because I can't help thinking—Bowery disappears then a mystery guy shows up and just happens to hitch a ride with one of our crew?"

"Sometimes coincidences happen."

"Maybe. Or maybe Bowery grew a conscience. Ratted us out."

"He didn't rat us out. That's not his style."

"Then where is he?"

"He stiffed us, is my guess. Made the exchange and ran off with the cash."

"Why would he do that? It's pocket change next to what we've got coming. He knows what's at stake. He'd be nuts to run now. Unless he knows there won't be another payday. And how would he know that? Unless he made sure of it?"

“Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t have ratted us out. He doesn’t have anything on us.”

“He knows about the report.”

“He doesn’t have a copy.”

“He doesn’t need a copy. He knows what it’s about. Broadly speaking. He knows where I got it. Either one of those things would be enough to get every agent in the lower forty-eight crawling up our asses before we could blink.”

“All right. Take a breath. Trust me. What happened to Gibson had nothing to do with Bowery. And nothing to do with the stranger.”

“What *happened* to Gibson? So it wasn’t an accident.”

Vidic didn’t respond.

“Gibson was a good driver. He knew that road. He wouldn’t just crash his car for no reason. So the crash wasn’t an accident, was it? Tell me straight.”

“It was. And it wasn’t.”

“That’s your idea of *straight*?”

“Listen. I found something out about Gibson. Earlier today.”

“Found out what?”

“I can’t say. Not on the phone. But it has implications.”

“What kind of implications?”

“First and foremost, we need to shift up our timetable.”

“By how much?”

“We have forty-eight hours, maximum. Then we need to be gone. Like we never existed.”

“That’s not possible.”

“It is. Grab what you need from the house. Just the essentials. Not so much as to be suspicious. We have the one physical job to take care of. Then we can cash in on the report later.”

“The job’s not happening for five days. It can’t. We have to wait for the final delivery.”

“No. We have to take what’s there now. Eighty percent of something is better than a hundred percent of nothing. I’ll talk to Fletcher. Get him to move up the schedule.”

“And if he won’t?”

“We’ll walk.”

“I don’t want to walk. I set the job up. Found the opportunity. I’m invested.”

“I get that. But, end of the day, that job’s a luxury. It’s not make or break. We have to stay focused. Think about the future. Our new lives. Not what we’re leaving behind.”

Paris didn’t reply.

“That just leaves one loose end.” Vidic glanced down at the wrecked Lincoln. He thought about the two men he’d dragged out of it. Gibson. And the giant stranger. One dead. One alive. For now, anyway. He raised the phone back to his ear and said, “I’m going to need a bunch of phosphorus. Can you bring some to the house?”

“I can try. How much?”

“Enough to burn a body. Completely. Prints. Teeth. DNA. The full nine yards.”

Chapter 3

Reacher was again woken by a sound. A door opening, this time. His eyes were closed but he could sense light. Fairly dim. Then much brighter. He heard footsteps approaching. One set. They came close, then stopped. Reacher opened his eyes, slowly, against the glare. The dizziness had receded a little but everything looked pale and washed-out, like a watercolor made by a beginner who didn't throw enough paint into the mix. A man was standing by Reacher's side. He was wearing jeans and a gray T-shirt. He was slim, like a runner, and maybe six feet four. His fists were clenched and Reacher thought he looked angry, maybe even scared, but was trying to hide it.

The man said, "I'm Darren Fletcher. Who are you?"

Reacher ignored him. If they'd searched him, Fletcher would already know his name. And if Fletcher hadn't searched him, he wasn't worth wasting breath on. Reacher concentrated on his surroundings instead. He saw that the restraints on his wrists and ankles were handcuffs, and that he was secured to a rectangular steel table. The floor was covered with white tiles and the walls were lined with steel shelves. The place was some kind of food storage or preparation area, Reacher figured. Then he turned back to Fletcher because the thought of food was making him feel sick.

"This silent act? It isn't helping you," Fletcher said. "You need to understand how serious this situation is. A man is dead. He was my friend. So you need to tell me who you are. You need to explain why you were in his car. And what made him go crazy and smash into a tree."