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A JACK REACHER NOVEL

# TRIPWIRE

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LEE CHILD



JOVE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my daughter, Ruth.  
Once the world's greatest kid,  
now a woman I'm proud  
to call my friend

# Prologue

*H*OOK HOBIE OWED the whole of his life to a secret nearly thirty years old. His liberty, his status, his money, everything. And like any cautious guy in his particular situation, he was ready to do what was necessary to protect his secret. Because he had a lot to lose. The whole of his life.

The protection he relied on for nearly thirty years was based on just two things. The same two things anybody uses to protect against any danger. The same way a nation protects itself against an enemy missile, the same way an apartment dweller protects himself against a burglar, the same way a boxer guards against a knockout blow. Detection and response. Stage one, stage two. First you spot the threat, and then you react.

Stage one was the early-warning system. It had changed over the years, as other circumstances had changed. Now it was well rehearsed and simplified. It was made up of two layers, like two concentric tripwires. The first tripwire was eleven thousand miles from home. It was an early, early warning. A wake-up call. It would tell him they were getting close. The second tripwire was five thousand miles nearer, but still six thousand miles from home. A call from the second location would tell him they were about to get very close. It would tell him stage one was over, and stage two was about to begin.

Stage two was the response. He was very clear on what the response had to be. He had spent nearly thirty years thinking

*about it, but there was only ever one viable answer. The response would be to run. To disappear. He was a realistic guy. The whole of his life, he had been proud of his courage and his cunning, and his toughness and his fortitude. He had always done what was necessary, without a second thought. But he knew when he heard the warning sounds from those distant tripwires, he had to get out. Because no man could survive what was coming after him. No man. Not even a man as ruthless as he was.*

*The danger had ebbed and flowed like a tide for years. He had spent long periods certain it was about to wash over him at any time. And then long periods certain it would never reach him at all. Sometimes, the deadening sensation of time made him feel safe, because thirty years is an eternity. But other times it felt like the blink of an eye. Sometimes he waited for the first call on an hourly basis. Planning, sweating, but always knowing he could be forced to run at any moment.*

*He had played it through his head a million times. The way he expected it, the first call would come in maybe a month before the second call. He would use that month to prepare. He would tie up the loose ends, close things down, cash in, transfer assets, settle scores. Then when the second call came in, he would take off. Immediately. No hesitation. Just get the hell out, and stay the hell out.*

*But the way it happened, the two calls came in on the same day. The second call came first. The nearer tripwire was breached an hour before the farther one. And Hook Hobie didn't run. He abandoned thirty years of careful planning and stayed to fight it out.*

# 1

JACK REACHER SAW the guy step in through the door. Actually, there was no door. The guy just stepped in through the part of the front wall that wasn't there. The bar opened straight out onto the sidewalk. There were tables and chairs out there under a dried-up old vine that gave some kind of nominal shade. It was an inside-outside room, passing through a wall that wasn't there. Reacher guessed there must be some kind of an iron grille they could padlock across the opening when the bar closed. If it closed. Certainly Reacher had never seen it closed, and he was keeping some pretty radical hours.

The guy stood a yard inside the dark room and waited, blinking, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom after the hot whiteness of the Key West sun. It was June, dead-on four o'clock in the afternoon, the southernmost part of the United States. Way farther south than most of the Bahamas. A hot white sun and a fierce temperature. Reacher sat at his table in back and sipped water from a plastic bottle and waited.

The guy was looking around. The bar was a low room built from old boards dried to a dark color. They looked like they had come from old broken-up sailing ships. Random pieces of nautical junk were nailed to them. There were old brass things and green glass globes. Stretches of old nets. Fishing equipment, Reacher guessed, although he had never caught a fish in his life. Or sailed a boat. Overlaying everything were ten thousand business cards, tacked up over every spare

square inch, including the ceiling. Some of them were new, some of them were old and curled, representing ventures that had folded decades ago.

The guy stepped farther into the gloom and headed for the bar. He was old. Maybe sixty, medium height, bulky. A doctor would have called him overweight, but Reacher just saw a fit man some way down the wrong side of the hill. A man yielding gracefully to the passage of time without getting all stirred up about it. He was dressed like a northern city guy on a short-notice trip to somewhere hot. Light gray pants, wide at the top, narrow at the bottom, a thin, crumpled beige jacket, a white shirt with the collar spread wide open, blue-white skin showing at his throat, dark socks, city shoes. New York or Chicago, Reacher guessed, maybe Boston, spent most of his summertime in air-conditioned buildings or cars, had these pants and this jacket stashed away in the back of his closet ever since he bought them twenty years ago, brought them out and used them occasionally as appropriate.

The guy reached the bar and went into his jacket and pulled out a wallet. It was a small, overloaded old item in fine black leather. The sort of wallet that molds itself tight around the stuff crammed inside. Reacher saw the guy open it with a practiced flick and show it to the bartender and ask a quiet question. The bartender glanced away like he'd been insulted. The guy put the wallet away and smoothed his wisps of gray hair into the sweat on his scalp. He muttered something else and the bartender came up with a beer from a chest of ice. The old guy held the cold bottle against his face for a moment and then took a long pull. Belched discreetly behind his hand and smiled like a small disappointment had been assuaged.

Reacher matched his pull with a long drink of water. The fittest guy he had ever known was a Belgian soldier who swore the key to fitness was to do whatever the hell you liked as long as you drank five liters of mineral water every day. Reacher figured five liters was about a gallon, and since the Belgian was a small whippy guy half his size, he should make it two gallons a day. Ten full-size bottles. Since arriving in the heat of the Keys, he had followed that regimen. It was working for him. He had never felt better. Every day at four o'clock he sat at this dark table and drank three bottles of still



water, room temperature. Now he was as addicted to the water as he had once been to coffee.

The old guy was side-on to the bar, busy with his beer. Scanning the room. Reacher was the only person in it, apart from the bartender. The old guy pushed off with his hip and stepped over. Waved his beer in a vague gesture that said *may I?* Reacher nodded to the opposite chair and broke the plastic seal on his third bottle. The guy sat heavily. He overwhelmed the chair. He was the sort of guy who keeps keys and money and handkerchiefs in his pants pockets so that the natural width of his hips is way exaggerated.

“Are you Jack Reacher?” he asked across the table.

Not Chicago or Boston. New York, for sure. The voice sounded exactly like a guy Reacher had known, spent the first twenty years of his life never more than a hundred yards from Fulton Street.

“Jack Reacher?” the old guy asked again.

Up close, he had small wise eyes under an overhanging brow. Reacher drank and glanced across at him through the clear water in his bottle.

“Are you Jack Reacher?” the guy asked for the third time.

Reacher set his bottle on the table and shook his head.

“No,” he lied.

The old guy’s shoulders slumped a fraction in disappointment. He shot his cuff and checked his watch. Moved his bulk forward on the chair like he was about to get up, but then he sat back, like suddenly there was time to spare.

“Five after four,” he said.

Reacher nodded. The guy waved his empty beer bottle at the bartender who ducked around with a fresh one.

“Heat,” he said. “Gets to me.”

Reacher nodded again and sipped water.

“You know a Jack Reacher around here?” the guy asked.

Reacher shrugged.

“You got a description?” he asked back.

The guy was into a long pull on the second bottle. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand and used the gesture to hide a second discreet belch.

“Not really,” he said. “Big guy, is all I know. That’s why I asked you.”

Reacher nodded.

"There are lots of big guys here," he said. "Lots of big guys everywhere."

"But you don't know the name?"

"Should I?" Reacher asked. "And who wants to know?"

The guy grinned and nodded, like an apology for a lapse in manners.

"Costello," he said. "Pleased to meet you."

Reacher nodded back, and raised his bottle a fraction in response.

"Skip tracer?" he asked.

"Private detective," Costello said.

"Looking for a guy called Reacher?" Reacher asked. "What's he done?"

Costello shrugged. "Nothing, far as I know. I just got asked to find him."

"And you figure he's down here?"

"Last week he was," Costello said. "He's got a bank account in Virginia and he's been wiring money to it."

"From down here in Key West?"

Costello nodded.

"Every week," he said. "For three months."

"So?"

"So he's working down here," Costello said. "Has been, for three months. You'd think somebody would know him."

"But nobody does," Reacher said.

Costello shook his head. "I asked all up and down Duval, which seems to be where the action is in this town. Nearest I got was a titty bar upstairs someplace, girl in there said there was a big guy been here exactly three months, drinks water every day at four o'clock in here."

He lapsed into silence, looking hard at Reacher, like he was issuing a direct challenge. Reacher sipped water and shrugged back at him.

"Coincidence," he said.

Costello nodded.

"I guess," he said quietly.

He raised the beer bottle to his lips and drank, keeping his wise old eyes focused tight on Reacher's face.

"Big transient population here," Reacher said to him. "People drift in and out, all the time."

"I guess," Costello said again.

"But I'll keep my ears open," Reacher said.

Costello nodded.

"I'd appreciate it," he said, ambiguously.

"Who wants him?" Reacher asked.

"My client," Costello said. "Lady called Mrs. Jacob."

Reacher sipped water. The name meant nothing to him. Jacob? Never heard of any such person.

"OK, if I see him around, I'll tell him, but don't hold your breath. I don't see too many people."

"You working?"

Reacher nodded.

"I dig swimming pools," he said.

Costello pondered, like he knew what swimming pools were, but like he had never considered how they got there.

"Backhoe operator?"

Reacher smiled and shook his head.

"Not down here," he said. "We dig them by hand."

"By hand?" Costello repeated. "What, like with shovels?"

"The lots are too small for machinery," Reacher said. "Streets are too narrow, trees are too low. Get off Duval, and you'll see for yourself."

Costello nodded again. Suddenly looked very satisfied.

"Then you probably won't know this Reacher guy," he said. "According to Mrs. Jacob, he was an Army officer. So I checked, and she was right. He was a major. Medals and all. Military police bigshot, is what they said. Guy like that, you won't find him digging swimming pools with a damn shovel."

Reacher took a long pull on his water, to hide his expression.

"So what would you find him doing?"

"Down here?" Costello said. "I'm not sure. Hotel security? Running some kind of a business? Maybe he's got a cruiser, charters it out."

"Why would he be down here at all?"

Costello nodded, like he was agreeing with an opinion.

"Right," he said. "Hell of a place. But he's here, that's for certain. He left the Army two years ago, put his money in the nearest bank to the Pentagon and disappeared. Bank account shows money wiring out all over the damn place, then for three months money wiring back in from here. So he drifted

for a spell, then he settled down here, making some dough. I'll find him."

Reacher nodded.

"You still want me to ask around?"

Costello shook his head. Already planning his next move.

"Don't you worry about it," he said.

He eased his bulk up out of the chair and pulled a crumpled roll from his pants pocket. Dropped a five on the table and moved away.

"Nice meeting you," he called, without looking back.

He walked out through the missing wall into the glare of the afternoon. Reacher drained the last of his water and watched him go. Ten after four in the afternoon.

AN HOUR LATER Reacher was drifting down Duval Street, thinking about new banking arrangements, choosing a place to eat an early dinner, and wondering why he had lied to Costello. His first conclusion was that he would cash up and use a roll of bills in his pants pocket. His second conclusion was that he would follow his Belgian friend's advice and eat a big steak and ice cream with another two bottles of water. His third conclusion was that he had lied because there had been no reason not to.

There was no reason why a private investigator from New York should have been looking for him. He had never lived in New York. Or any big northern city. He had never really lived anywhere. That was the defining feature of his life. It made him what he was. He had been born the son of a serving Marine Corps officer, and he had been dragged all over the world from the very day his mother carried him out of the maternity ward of a Berlin infirmary. He had lived nowhere except in an endless blur of different military bases, most of them in distant and inhospitable parts of the globe. Then he had joined the Army himself, military police investigator, and lived and served in those same bases all over again until the peace dividend had closed his unit down and cut him loose. Then he had come home to the United States and drifted around like a cheap tourist until he had washed up on the extreme tip of the nation with his savings running out. He had taken a couple of days' work digging holes in the ground, and the couple of days had stretched into a couple of weeks,

and the weeks had stretched into months, and he was still there.

He had no living relatives anywhere capable of leaving him a fortune in a will. He owed no money. He had never stolen anything, never cheated anybody. Never fathered any children. He was on as few pieces of paper as it was possible for a human being to get. He was just about invisible. And he had never known anybody called Jacob. Never. He was sure of that. So whatever Costello wanted, he wasn't interested in it. Certainly not interested enough to come out from under and get involved with anything.

Because being invisible had become a habit. In the front part of his brain, he knew it was some kind of a complex, alienated response to his situation. Two years ago, everything had turned upside down. He had gone from being a big fish in a small pond to being nobody. From being a senior and valued member of a highly structured community to being just one of 270 million anonymous civilians. From being necessary and wanted to being one person too many. From being where someone told him to be every minute of every day to being confronted with three million square miles and maybe forty more years and no map and no schedule. The front part of his brain told him his response was understandable, but defensive, the response of a man who liked solitude but was worried by loneliness. It told him it was an extremist response, and he should take care with it.

But the lizard part of his brain buried behind the frontal lobes told him he liked it. He liked the anonymity. He liked his secrecy. It felt warm and comfortable and reassuring. He guarded it. He was friendly and gregarious on the surface, without ever saying much about himself. He liked to pay cash and travel by road. He was never on any passenger manifests or credit card carbons. He told nobody his name. In Key West, he had checked into a cheap motel under the name Harry S. Truman. Scanning back through the register, he had seen he wasn't unique. Most of the forty-one presidents had stayed there, even ones nobody had heard of, like John Tyler and Franklin Pierce. He had found names did not mean much in the Keys. People just waved and smiled and said hello. They all assumed everybody had something to be private about. He

was comfortable there. Too comfortable to be in any hurry to leave.

He strolled for an hour in the noisy warmth and then ducked off Duval toward a hidden courtyard restaurant where they knew him by sight and had his favorite brand of water and would give him a steak that hung off both sides of the plate at once.

**T**HE STEAK CAME with an egg and fries and a complicated mix of some sort of warm-weather vegetables, and the ice cream came with hot chocolate sauce and nuts. He drank another quart of water and followed it with two cups of strong black coffee. Pushed back from the table and sat there, satisfied.

"OK now?" the waitress smiled.

Reacher grinned back at her and nodded.

"It hit the spot," he said.

"And it looks good on you."

"It feels good on me."

It was true. His next birthday was going to be his thirty-ninth, but he felt better than ever. He had always been fit and strong, but the last three months had brought him to a new peak. He was six feet five tall, and he had weighed 220 when he left the Army. A month after joining the swimming pool gang, the work and the heat had burned him down to 210. Then the next two months, he had built back all the way to about 250, all of it pure, hard muscle. His workload was prodigious. He figured to shift about four tons of earth and rock and sand every day. He had developed a technique of digging and scooping and twisting and throwing the dirt with his shovel so that every part of his body was working out all day long. The result was spectacular. He was burned a deep brown by the sun and he was in the best shape of his life. Like a condom crammed with walnuts, is what some girl had said. He figured he needed to eat about ten thousand calories a day just to stay level, as well as the two gallons of water he needed to drink.

"So you working tonight?" the waitress asked.

Reacher laughed. He was earning money for doing a fitness regime most people would pay a fortune for at any shiny city gymnasium, and now he was headed for his evening job,

which was something else he got paid for that most men would gladly do for free. He was the bouncer in the nude bar Costello had mentioned. On Duval. He sat in there all night with no shirt on, looking tough, drinking free drinks and making sure the naked women didn't get hassled. Then somebody gave him fifty bucks for it.

"It's a chore," he said. "But somebody's got to do it, I guess."

The girl laughed with him, and he paid his check and headed back to the street.

FIFTEEN HUNDRED MILES to the north, just below Wall Street in New York City, the chief executive officer took the elevator down two floors to the finance director's suite. The two men went into the inner office together and sat side by side behind the desk. It was the kind of expensive office and expensive desk that get specified and paid for when times are good and then sit there like a sullen reproach when times turn bad. It was a high-floor office, dark rosewood all over the place, cream linen window blinds, brass accents, a huge slab of a desk, an Italian table light, a big computer that had cost more than it needed to. The computer was glowing and waiting for a password. The CEO typed it in and hit ENTER and the screen redrew into a spreadsheet. It was the only spreadsheet that told the truth about the company. That was why it was protected by a password.

"Are we going to make it?" the CEO asked.

That day had been D-Day. D stood for *downsizing*. Their human resources manager out at the manufacturing plant on Long Island had been busy since eight o'clock that morning. His secretary had rustled up a long line of chairs in the corridor outside his office, and the chairs had been filled with a long line of people. The people had waited most of the day, shuffling up one place every five minutes, then shuffling off the end of the line into the human resources manager's office for a five-minute interview that terminated their livelihoods, thank you and good-bye.

"Are we going to make it?" the CEO asked again.

The finance director was copying large numbers onto a sheet of paper. He subtracted one from another and looked at a calendar. He shrugged.

"In theory, yes," he said. "In practice, no."

"No?" the CEO repeated.

"It's the time factor," the finance director said. "We did the right thing out at the plant, no doubt about that. Eighty percent of the people gone, saves us ninety-one percent of the payroll, because we only kept the cheap ones. But we paid them all up to the end of next month. So the cash-flow enhancement doesn't hit us for six weeks. And in fact right now the cash flow gets much worse, because the little bastards are all out there cashing a six-week paycheck."

The CEO sighed and nodded.

"So how much do we need?"

The finance director used the mouse and expanded a window.

"One-point-one million dollars," he said. "For six weeks."

"Bank?"

"Forget it," the finance director said. "I'm over there every day kissing ass just to keep what we already owe them. I ask for more, they'll laugh in my face."

"Worse things could happen to you," the CEO said.

"That's not the point," the finance director said. "The point is they get a sniff we're still not healthy, they'll call those loans. In a heartbeat."

The CEO drummed his fingers on the rosewood and shrugged.

"I'll sell some stock," he said.

The finance director shook his head.

"You can't," he said, patiently. "You put stock in the market, the price will go through the floor. Our existing borrowing is secured on stock, and if it gets any more worthless, they'll close us down tomorrow."

"Shit," the CEO said. "We're six weeks away. I'm not going to lose all this for six lousy weeks. Not for a lousy million bucks. It's a trivial amount."

"A trivial amount we haven't got."

"Got to be somewhere we can get it."

The finance director made no reply to that. But he was sitting there like he had something more to say.

"What?" the CEO asked him.

"I heard some talk," he said. "Guys I know, gossiping. There's maybe somewhere we can go. For six weeks, it might



be worth it. There's an outfit I heard about. A lender-of-last-resort type of thing."

"On the level?"

"Apparently," the finance director said. "Looks very respectable. Big office over in the World Trade Center. He specializes in cases like this."

The CEO glared at the screen.

"Cases like what?"

"Like this," the finance director repeated. "Where you're almost home and dry, but the banks are too tight-assed to see it."

The CEO nodded and gazed around the office. It was a beautiful place. And his own office was two floors higher, on a corner, and even more beautiful.

"OK," he said. "Do it."

"I can't do it," the finance director said. "This guy won't deal below CEO level. You'll have to do it."

IT STARTED OUT a quiet night in the nude bar. A midweek evening in June, way too late for the snowbirds and the spring breakers, too early for the summer vacationers who came down to roast. Not more than maybe forty people in all night, two girls behind the bar, three girls out there dancing. Reacher was watching a woman called Crystal. He assumed that was not her real name, but he had never asked. She was the best. She earned a lot more than Reacher had ever earned as a major in the military police. She spent a percentage of her income running an old black Porsche. Reacher sometimes heard it in the early afternoons, rumbling and blatting around the blocks where he was working.

The bar was a long, narrow upstairs room with a runway and a small circular stage with a shiny chrome pole. Snaking around the runway and the stage was a line of chairs. There were mirrors everywhere, and where there weren't, the walls were painted flat black. The whole place pulsed and pounded to loud music coming out of a half dozen speakers serious enough to drown out the roar of the air-conditioning.

Reacher was at the bar, back-to, a third of the way into the room. Near enough the door to be seen straight away, far enough into the room that people wouldn't forget he was there. The woman called Crystal had finished her third spot