

ONE

EIGHT DAYS AGO MY LIFE WAS AN UP AND DOWN AFFAIR. SOME OF it good. Some of it not so good. Most of it uneventful. Long slow periods of nothing much, with occasional bursts of something. Like the army itself. Which is how they found me. You can leave the army, but the army doesn't leave you. Not always. Not completely.

They started looking two days after some guy took a shot at the president of France. I saw it in the paper. A long-range attempt with a rifle. In Paris. Nothing to do with me. I was six thousand miles away, in California, with a girl I met on a bus. She wanted to be an actor. I didn't. So after forty-eight hours in LA she went one way and I went the other. Back on the bus, first to San Francisco for a couple of days, and then to Portland, Oregon, for three more, and then onward to Seattle. Which took me close to Fort Lewis, where two women in uniform got out of the bus. They left an *Army Times* behind, one day old, right there on the seat across the aisle.

The *Army Times* is a strange old paper. It started up before World War Two and is still going strong, every week, full of

yesterday's news and sundry how-to articles, like the headline staring up at me right then: *New Rules! Changes For Badges And Insignia! Plus Four More Uniform Changes On The Way!* Legend has it the news is yesterday's because it's copied secondhand from old AP summaries, but if you read the words sideways you sometimes hear a real sardonic tone between the lines. The editorials are occasionally brave. The obituaries are occasionally interesting.

Which was my sole reason for picking up the paper. Sometimes people die and you're happy about it. Or not. Either way you need to know. But I never found out. Because on the way to the obituaries I found the personal ads. Which as always were mostly veterans looking for other veterans. Dozens of ads, all the same.

Including one with my name in it.

Right there, centre of the page, a boxed column inch, five words printed bold: *Jack Reacher call Rick Shoemaker.*

Which had to be Tom O'Day's work. Which later on made me feel a little lame. Not that O'Day wasn't a smart guy. He had to be. He had survived a long time. A very long time. He had been around for ever. Twenty years ago he already looked a hundred. A tall, thin, gaunt, cadaverous man, who moved like he might collapse at any moment, like a broken stepladder. He was no one's idea of an army general. More like a professor. Or an anthropologist. Certainly his thinking had been sound. *Reacher stays under the radar, which means buses and trains and waiting rooms and diners, which, coincidentally or not, is the natural economic habitat for enlisted men and women, who buy the Army Times ahead of any other publication in the PX, and who can be relied upon to spread the paper around, like birds spread seeds from berries.*

And he could rely on me to pick up the paper. Somewhere. Sooner or later. Eventually. Because I needed to know. You can leave the army, but the army doesn't leave you. Not completely.

As a means of communication, as a way of making contact, from what he knew, and from what he could guess, then maybe he would think ten or twelve consecutive weeks of personal ads might generate a small but realistic chance of success.

But it worked the first time out. One day after the paper was printed. Which is why I felt lame later on.

I was predictable.

Rick Shoemaker was Tom O'Day's boy. Probably his second in command by now. Easy enough to ignore. But I owed Shoemaker a favour. Which O'Day knew about, obviously. Which was why he put Shoemaker's name in his ad.

And which was why I would have to answer it.

Predictable.

Seattle was dry when I got out of the bus. And warm. And wired, in the sense that coffee was being consumed in prodigious quantities, which made it my kind of town, and in the sense that wifi hotspots and handheld devices were everywhere, which didn't, and which made old-fashioned street-corner pay phones hard to find. But there was one down by the fish market, so I stood in the salt breeze and the smell of the sea, and I dialled a toll-free number at the Pentagon. Not a number you'll find in the phone book. A number learned by heart long ago. A special line, for emergencies only. You don't always have a quarter in your pocket.

The operator answered and I asked for Shoemaker and I got transferred, maybe elsewhere in the building, or the country, or the world, and after a bunch of clicks and hisses and some long minutes of dead air Shoemaker came on the line and said, 'Yes?'

'This is Jack Reacher,' I said.

'Where are you?'

'Don't you have all kinds of automatic machines to tell you that?'

'Yes,' he said. 'You're in Seattle, on a pay phone down by

the fish market. But we prefer it when people volunteer the information themselves. We find that makes the subsequent conversation go better. Because they're already cooperating. They're invested.'

'In what?'

'In the conversation.'

'Are we having a conversation?'

'Not really. What do you see directly ahead?'

I looked.

'A street,' I said.

'Left?'

'Places to buy fish.'

'Right?'

'A coffee shop across the light.'

'Name?'

I told him.

He said, 'Go in there and wait.'

'For what?'

'For about thirty minutes,' he said, and hung up.

No one really knows why coffee is such a big deal in Seattle. It's a port, so maybe it made sense to roast it close to where it was landed, and then to sell it close to where it was roasted, which created a market, which brought other operators in, the same way the auto makers all ended up in Detroit. Or maybe the water is right. Or the elevation, or the temperature, or the humidity. But whatever, the result is a coffee shop on every block, and a four-figure annual tab for a serious enthusiast. The shop across the light from the pay phone was representative. It had maroon paint and exposed brick and scarred wood, and a chalkboard menu about 90 per cent full of things that don't really belong in coffee, like dairy products of various types and temperatures, and weird nut-based flavourings, and many other assorted pollutants. I got a plain house blend, black, no sugar, in

the middle-sized go-cup, not the enormous *grande* bucket some folks like, and a slab of lemon pound cake to go with it, and I sat alone on a hard wooden chair at a table for two.

The cake lasted five minutes and the coffee another five, and eighteen minutes after that Shoemaker's guy showed up. Which made him navy, because twenty-eight minutes was pretty fast, and the navy is right there in Seattle. And his car was dark blue. It was a low-spec domestic sedan, not very desirable, but polished to a high shine. The guy himself was nearer forty than twenty, and hard as a nail. He was in civilian clothes. A blue blazer over a blue polo shirt, and khaki chino pants. The blazer was worn thin and the shirt and the pants had been washed a thousand times. A Senior Chief Petty Officer, probably. Special Forces, almost certainly, a SEAL, no doubt part of some shadowy joint operation watched over by Tom O'Day.

He stepped into the coffee shop with a blank-eyed all-in-one scan of the room, like he had a fifth of a second to identify friend or foe before he started shooting. Obviously his briefing must have been basic and verbal, straight out of some old personnel file, but he had me at *six-five two-fifty*. Everyone else in the shop was Asian, mostly women and very petite. The guy walked straight towards me and said, 'Major Reacher?'

I said, 'Not any more.'

He said, 'Mr Reacher, then?'

I said, 'Yes.'

'Sir, General Shoemaker requests that you come with me.'

I said, 'Where to?'

'Not far.'

'How many stars?'

'Sir, I don't follow.'

'Does General Shoemaker have?'

'One, sir. Brigadier General Richard Shoemaker, sir.'

'When?'

'When what, sir?'

‘Did he get his promotion?’

‘Two years ago.’

‘Do you find that as extraordinary as I do?’

The guy paused a beat and said, ‘Sir, I have no opinion.’

‘And how is General O’Day?’

The guy paused another beat and said, ‘Sir, I know of no one named O’Day.’

The blue car was a Chevrolet Impala with police hubs and cloth seats. The polish was the freshest thing on it. The guy in the blazer drove me through the downtown streets and got on I-5 heading south. The same way the bus had come in. We drove back past Boeing Field once again, and past the Sea-Tac airport once again, and onward towards Tacoma. The guy in the blazer didn’t talk. Neither did I. We both sat there mute, as if we were in a no-talking competition and serious about winning. I watched out the window. All green, hills and sea and trees alike.

We passed Tacoma, and slowed ahead of where the women in uniform had gotten out of the bus, leaving their *Army Times* behind. We took the same exit. The signs showed nothing ahead except three very small towns and one very large military base. Chances were therefore good we were heading for Fort Lewis. But it turned out we weren’t. Or we were, technically, but we wouldn’t have been back in the day. We were heading for what used to be McChord Air Force Base, and was now the aluminium half of Joint Base Lewis-McChord. Reforms. Politicians will do anything to save a buck.

I was expecting a little back-and-forth at the gate, because the gate belonged jointly to the army and the air force, and the car and the driver were both navy, and I was absolutely nobody. Only the Marine Corps and the United Nations were missing. But such was the power of O’Day we barely had to slow the car. We swept in, and hooked a left, and hooked a right, and were waved through a second gate, and then the car was right out

there on the tarmac, dwarfed by huge C-17 transport planes, like a mouse in a forest. We drove under a giant grey wing and headed out over open blacktop straight for a small white airplane standing alone. A corporate thing. A business jet. A Lear, or a Gulfstream, or whatever rich people buy these days. The paint winked in the sun. There was no writing on it, apart from a tail number. No name, no logo. Just white paint. Its engines were turning slowly, and its stairs were down.

The guy in the blazer drove a well-judged part-circle and came to a stop with my door about a yard from the bottom of the airplane steps. Which I took as a hint. I climbed out and stood a moment in the sun. Spring had sprung and the weather was pleasant. Beside me the car drove away. A steward appeared above me, in the little oval mouth of the cabin. He was wearing a uniform. He said, 'Sir, please step up.'

The stairs dipped a little under my weight. I ducked into the cabin. The steward backed off to my right, and on my left another guy in uniform squeezed out of the cockpit and said, 'Welcome aboard, sir. You have an all-air force crew today, and we'll get you there in no time at all.'

I said, 'Get me where?'

'To your destination.' The guy crammed himself back in his seat next to his co-pilot and they both got busy checking dials. I followed the steward and found a cabin full of butterscotch leather and walnut veneer. I was the only passenger. I picked an armchair at random. The steward hauled the steps up and sealed the door and sat down on a jump seat behind the pilots' shoulders. Thirty seconds later we were in the air, climbing hard.

TWO

I FIGURED WE TURNED EAST OUT OF McCHORD. NOT THAT THERE WAS much of a choice. West was Russia and Japan and China, and I doubted such a small plane had that kind of range. I asked the steward where we were going, and he said he hadn't seen the flight plan. Which was obvious bullshit. But I didn't push it. He turned out to be a chatty guy on every other subject. He told me the plane was a Gulfstream IV, confiscated from a bent hedge fund during a federal proceeding, and reissued to the air force for VIP transportation. In which case air force VIPs were lucky people. The plane was terrific. It was quiet and solid, and the armchairs were sensational. They adjusted every which way. And there was coffee in the galley. A proper drip machine. I told the guy to keep it going, but that I would go back and forth myself, for refills. He appreciated that. I think he took it as a mark of respect. He wasn't really a steward, obviously. He was some kind of a security escort, tough enough to get the job, and proud I knew it.

I watched out the window, first at the Rockies, which had dark green trees low down and blinding white snow high up. Then

came the tawny agricultural plains, in tiny mosaic fragments, ploughed and sown and harvested, over and over again, and not rained on much. By the look of the land I figured we clipped the corner of South Dakota and saw a bit of Nebraska before setting out over Iowa. Which because of the geometric complexities of high-altitude flight meant we were likely aiming some ways south. A Great Circle route. Weird on a flat paper map, but just right for a spherical planet. We were going to Kentucky, or Tennessee, or the Carolinas. Georgia, even.

We droned on, hour after hour, two full pots of coffee, and then the ground got a little closer. At first I thought it was Virginia, but then I figured it was North Carolina. I saw two towns that could only be Winston-Salem and Greensboro. They were on the left, and receding a little. Which meant we were heading southeast. No towns until Fayetteville. But just before that came Fort Bragg. Which was where Special Forces HQ was located. Which was Tom O'Day's natural economic habitat.

Wrong again. Or right, technically, but in name only. We landed in the evening dark at what used to be Pope Air Force Base, which had since been given away to the army. Now it was just Pope Field, just a small corner of an ever-bigger Fort Bragg. Reforms. Politicians will do anything to save a buck.

We taxied a long time, tiny on tarmac big enough for airlift squadrons. Eventually we stopped near a small administrative building. I saw a sign that said *47th Logistics, Tactical Support Command*. The engines shut down and the steward opened the hatch and lowered the steps.

'Which door?' I said.

'The red one,' he said.

I went down and walked ahead through the dark. There was only one red door. It opened when I was six feet from it. A young woman in a black skirt suit came out. Dark nylons. Good shoes. A very young woman. She had to be still in her twenties. She

had blonde hair and green eyes and a heart-shaped face. Which had a big warm welcoming smile on it.

She said, 'I'm Casey Nice.'

I said, 'Casey what?'

'Nice.'

'I'm Jack Reacher.'

'I know. I work for the State Department.'

'In D.C.?'

'No, here,' she said.

Which made some kind of sense. Special Forces were the armed wing of the CIA, which was the hands-on wing of the State Department, and some decisions would require all three fingers in the same pie all at once. Hence her presence on the base, young as she was. Maybe she was a policy genius. Some kind of a prodigy. I said, 'Is Shoemaker here?'

She said, 'Let's go inside.'

She led me to a small room with a wired glass window. It had three armchairs in it, none of them matching, all of them a little sad and abandoned. She said, 'Let's sit down.'

I said, 'Why am I here?'

She said, 'First you must understand everything you hear from this point onward is a classified secret. There will be a severe penalty for a breach of security.'

'Why would you trust me with secrets? You never met me before. You know nothing about me.'

'Your file has been circulated. You had a security clearance. It was never revoked. You're still bound by it.'

'Am I free to leave?'

'We'd prefer you to stay.'

'Why?'

'We want to talk to you.'

'The State Department?'

'Did you agree the part about classified secrets?'

I nodded. 'What does the State Department want with me?'

'We have certain obligations.'

'In what respect?'

'Someone took a shot at the president of France.'

'In Paris.'

'The French have appealed for international cooperation. To find the perpetrator.'

'It wasn't me. I was in LA.'

'We know it wasn't you. You're not on the list.'

'There's a list?'

She didn't answer that, except to reach high up between her jacket and her blouse and pull out a folded sheet of paper, which she handed to me. It was warm from her body, and slightly curved. But it wasn't a list. It was a summary report from our embassy in Paris. From the CIA Head of Station, presumably. The nuts and bolts of the thing.

The range had been exceptional. An apartment balcony fourteen hundred yards away had been identified as the rifleman's hide. Fourteen hundred yards was more than three-quarters of a mile. The French president had been at an open-air podium behind wings of thick bulletproof glass. Some kind of a new improved material. No one had seen the shot except the president himself. He had seen an impossibly distant muzzle flash, small and high and far to his left, and then more than three whole perceptible seconds later a tiny white star had appeared on the glass, like a pale insect alighting. A long, long shot. But the glass had held, and the sound of the bullet's impact against it had triggered an instant reaction, and the president had been buried under a scrum of security people. Later, enough bullet fragments had been found to guess at a .50-calibre armour-piercing round.

I said, 'I'm not on the list because I'm not good enough. Fourteen hundred yards is a very long way, against a head-sized target. The bullet is in the air three whole seconds. Like dropping a stone down a very deep well.'

Casey Nice nodded and said, 'The list is very short. Which is why the French are worried.'

They hadn't been worried immediately. That was clear. According to the summary report they had spent the first twenty-four hours congratulating themselves on having enforced such a distant perimeter, and on the quality of their bulletproof glass. Then reality had set in, and they had lit up the long-distance phones. Who knew a sniper that good?

'Bullshit,' I said.

Casey Nice said, 'What part?'

'You don't care about the French. Not this much. Maybe you would make some appropriate noises and get a couple of interns to write a term paper. But this thing crossed Tom O'Day's desk. For five seconds, at least. Which makes it important. And then you had a SEAL on my ass inside twenty-eight minutes, and then you flew me across the continent in a private jet. Obviously both the SEAL and the jet were standing by, but equally obviously you had no idea where I was or when I would call, so you must have had a whole bunch of SEALs and a whole bunch of jets standing by, here, there and everywhere, all over the country, day and night. Just in case. And if it's me, it's others too. This is a full-court press.'

'It would complicate things if it was an American shooter.'

'Why would it be?'

'We hope it isn't.'

'What can I do for you that's worth a private jet?'

Her phone rang in her pocket. She answered and listened and put it back. She said, 'General O'Day will explain. He's ready to see you now.'

THREE

CASEY NICE LED ME TO A ROOM ONE FLOOR UP. THE BUILDING WAS worn and the contents looked temporary. Which I was sure they were. A guy like O'Day moved around. A month here, a month there, in nondescript accommodations behind meaningless signs, like *47th Logistics, Tactical Support Command*. In case someone was watching. Or *because* someone was watching, he would say. Someone was always watching. He had survived a long time.

He was behind a desk, with Shoemaker in a chair off to one side, like a good second in command should be. Shoemaker had aged twenty years, which was to be expected, because it was twenty years since I had last seen him. He had put on weight, and his sandy hair had dulled down to sandy grey. His face was red and pouched. He was in ACU fatigues, with his star proudly displayed.

O'Day had not aged at all. He still looked a hundred. He was wearing the same thing he had always worn, which was a faded black blazer over a V-neck sweater, which was also black, and which had been darned so many times there was more darn

than sweater. Which led me to believe Mrs O'Day was still alive and well, because I couldn't imagine anyone else taking up needle and yarn for him.

His grey lantern jaw flapped up and down and he stared out at me with dead eyes under overhanging brows and he said, 'It's good to see you again, Reacher.'

I said, 'You're lucky I didn't have a pressing engagement. Or I'd be complaining.'

He didn't answer. I sat down, on a metal chair I guessed was navy issue, and Casey Nice sat down on a similar chair beside me.

O'Day asked, 'Did she tell you all this is secret?'

I said, 'Yes,' and beside me Casey Nice nodded emphatically, as if very anxious to confirm she had followed her orders by so doing. O'Day had that effect on people.

He asked me, 'Did you see the summary report?'

I said, 'Yes,' and Casey Nice nodded again.

He said, 'What do you make of it?'

I said, 'I think the guy's a good shooter.'

'So do I,' O'Day said. 'Has to be, to sell a guaranteed one-for-one at fourteen hundred yards.'

Which was typical of O'Day. Socratic, they call it in college. All kinds of back and forth, designed to elicit truths implicitly known by all rational beings. I said, 'It wasn't a guaranteed one-for-one. It was a guaranteed two-for-two. The first round was supposed to break the glass. The second round was supposed to kill the guy. The first bullet was always going to shatter. Or deflect, best case. He was ready to fire again, if the glass had broken. A split-second yes-or-no decision. Fire again, or walk away. Which is impressive. Was it an armour-piercing round?'

O'Day nodded. 'They put the fragments in a gas chromatograph.'

'Do we have that kind of glass for our president?'

'We will by tomorrow.'

‘Was it fifty-calibre?’

‘They collected enough weight to make it likely.’

‘Which all makes it more than impressive. That’s a big ugly rifle.’

‘Which has been known to hit at a mile out. A mile and a half, once, in Afghanistan. So maybe fourteen hundred yards isn’t such a big deal.’

Socratic.

I said, ‘I think hitting twice at fourteen hundred yards is harder than hitting once at a mile or more. It’s all about repeatability. I think this guy has talent.’

‘So do I,’ O’Day said. ‘Do you think he’s been in the service somewhere?’

‘Of course he has. No other way to get that good.’

‘Do you think he’s still in the service somewhere?’

‘No. He would have no freedom of movement.’

‘I agree.’

I said, ‘Are we sure he was selling?’

‘What are the odds a citizen with a grievance was also once upon a time a world-class sniper? More likely the citizen with a grievance has spent some money on the open market. Maybe a small group of citizens with a grievance. A faction, in other words. Which would increase the spending potential.’

‘Why do we care? The target was French.’

‘The bullet was American.’

‘How do we know?’

‘The gas chromatograph. There was an agreement. Some years ago. Not widely publicized. Not publicized at all, actually. Every manufacturer blends the alloy differently. Only slightly. But enough. Like a signature.’

‘Lots of the world buys American.’

‘This guy is new on the scene, Reacher. This profile has never been seen before. This was his first job. He’s making his name here. And it’s a hell of an ask. He has to hit twice, and fast, with

a fifty-calibre cannon from fourteen hundred yards. If he makes it, he's in the major leagues for the rest of his life. If he misses, he's bush league for ever. That's too big of a gamble. The stakes are way too high. But he shoots anyway. Which means he *knew* he was going to hit. He had to know. For certain, twice, at fourteen hundred yards, with total confidence. How many snipers that good are there?'

Which was a very good question. I said, 'Honestly? For us? That good? I think in every generation we'd be lucky to have one in the SEALs, and two in the Marines, and two in the army. Total of five in the service at any one time.'

'But you just agreed he isn't in the service.'

'Plus therefore an additional matching five from the previous generation, not long retired, old enough to be at loose ends, but still young enough to function. Which is who you should be looking at.'

'Those would be your candidates? The previous generation?'

'I don't see who else would qualify.'

'How many significant countries are there, in that line of work?'

'Maybe five of us.'

'Times an average of five eligible candidates in each country is twenty-five shooters in the world. Agreed?'

'Ballpark.'

'More than ballpark, actually. Twenty-five happens to be the exact dead-on number of retired elite snipers known to intelligence communities around the world. Do you think their governments keep careful track of them?'

'I'm sure they do.'

'And therefore how many of them do you think would turn out to have rock-solid alibis on any random day?'

Given that they would be surveilled very carefully, I said, 'Twenty?'

'Twenty-one,' O'Day said. 'We're down to four guys. And that's

the diplomatic problem here. We're like four guys in a room, all staring at each other. I don't need that bullet to be American.'

'One of ours is not accounted for?'

'Not completely.'

'Who?'

'How many snipers that good do you know?'

'None,' I said. 'I don't hang out with snipers.'

'How many did you ever know?'

'One,' I said. 'But it's obviously not him.'

'And you know this because?'

'He's in prison.'

'And you know this because?'

'I put him there.'

'He got a fifteen-year sentence, correct?'

'As I recall,' I said.

'When?'

Socratic. I did the math in my head. A lot of years. A lot of water over the dam. A lot of different places, a lot of different people. I said, 'Shit.'

O'Day nodded.

'Sixteen years ago,' he said. 'Doesn't time fly, when you're having fun?'

'He's out?'

'He's been out for a year.'

'Where is he?'

'Not at home.'

FOUR

JOHAN KOTT WAS THE FIRST SON OF TWO CZECH EMIGRANTS WHO escaped the old Communist regime and settled in Arkansas. He had a kind of wiry Iron Curtain look that blended well with the local hardscrabble youth, and he grew up as one of them. Apart from his name and his cheekbones he could have been a cousin going back hundreds of years. At sixteen he could shoot squirrels out of trees too far away for most folks to see. At seventeen he killed his parents. At least, the county sheriff thought he did. There was no actual proof, but there was plenty of suspicion. None of which seemed to matter much, a year later, to the army recruiter who signed him up.

Unusually for a thin wiry guy he was immensely calm and still. He could drop his heart rate to the low thirties, and he could lie inert for many hours. He had superhuman eyesight. In other words, he was a born sniper. Even the army recognized it. He was sent to a succession of specialist schools, and then he was funnelled straight to Delta. Where he matched his talents with unrelenting hard work and made himself a star, in a shadowy, black-ops kind of a way.

But unusually for a Special Forces soldier the seal between the on-duty part of his head and the off-duty part was not 100 per cent watertight. To drop a guy at a thousand yards needs more than talent and athletic ability. It needs permission, from deep down in the ancient part of the brain, where fundamental inhibitions are either enforced or relaxed. It needs the shooter to really, really, truly believe: *This is OK. This is your enemy. You're better than him. You're the best in the world. Anyone who challenges you deserves to die.* Most guys have an off switch. But Kott's didn't close all the way.

I met him three weeks after a guy was found with his throat cut, in the weeds behind a faraway bar in Colombia, South America. The dead guy was a U.S. Army sergeant, from the Rangers. The bar was a hangout for a CIA-directed Special Forces unit, who were using it for downtime when they weren't out in the jungle, shooting cartel members. Which made the suspect pool both very small and completely silent. I was with the 99th MP at the time, and I got the job. Only because the dead guy was American military. A local civilian, the Pentagon would have saved the airfare.

No one talked, but they all said plenty. I knew who had been in the bar, and I made them all describe it, and they all told me some little thing. I built up a picture. One guy was doing this, another guy was doing that. This guy left at eleven, that guy left at midnight. The other guy was sitting next to the first guy, who was drinking rum not beer. And so on and so forth. I got the choreography straight in my head, and I revised it over and over until it ran smooth and coherent.

Except for Kott, who was nothing more than a hole in the air.

No one had said anything much about him. Not where he was sitting, or what he was doing, or who he was talking to. He was more or less completely undescribed. Which could be for a number of reasons, one of which was, just possibly, that although no one in his unit was going to actively rat him out,

no one was going to make stuff up for him, either. Some kind of ethics. Or lack of imagination. A wise choice, either way. Invention always unravels. Better to say nothing. As in, just possibly, hypothetically, a long fierce argument with the dead guy might become . . . nothing. Just a hole in the air.

It was a weak case, involving a lot of circular theory and a star player and a clandestine operation, but to its credit the army looked at it. And quite correctly said we were going nowhere without a confession.

They let me bring Kott in.

Most of asking questions is listening to the answers, and I listened to Kott for a good long time before I concluded that deep down the guy had an arrogant streak as wide as his head. And as hard. He wasn't making the distinction. *Anyone who challenges you deserves to die* is battlefield bullshit, not a way to live.

But I had known people like that all my life. I was the product of people like that. They want to tell you about it. They want you to understand. They want you to approve. OK, so maybe some stupid temporary pettifogging regulation was technically against them at one point, but they were more important than that. Weren't they? Right?

I let him talk, and then I backed him up and pretty much made him admit that, yes, at one point he was talking to the dead guy. After which it was downhill all the way. Although an uphill metaphor would be better. The process felt like lighting a fire under a kettle, or pumping a bicycle tyre.

Two hours later he was signing a long and detailed account. The dead guy had called him a pussy, basically. That was the bottom line. Trash talk, that had then gotten completely out of hand. Some response was called for. Some things couldn't be excused. Could they? Right?

Because he was a star player and it was a clandestine operation they gave him a plea deal. Some variant of murder two

for fifteen years. I was fine with it. Because there was no court martial I snuck the extra week in Fiji and met an Australian girl I still remember. I wasn't about to complain.

O'Day said, 'We shouldn't make unexamined assumptions. There's no evidence he ever even looked at a gun again.'

'But he's on the list?'

'He has to be.'

'What would be the odds?'

'One in four, obviously.'

'Would you put your money on?'

'I'm not saying he's our boy. I'm saying we have to face the fact there's a one-in-four possibility he might be.'

'Who else is on the list?'

'One Russian, one Israeli, one Brit.'

I said, 'Kott's been in prison fifteen years.'

O'Day nodded and said, 'Let's start with what that would do to him.'

Which was another very good question. What exactly would fifteen years in prison do to a sniper? Good shooting is about a lot of different things. Muscle control might suffer. Good shooting is about being soft and hard at the same time. Soft enough to keep tiny jitters out, hard enough to control a violent explosion. General athletic condition might suffer, which was important too, because a low heart rate and good breathing were all part of the deal.

But in the end I said, 'Eyesight.'

O'Day said, 'Because?'

'Everything he's seen for fifteen years has been pretty close. Walls, basically. Even the exercise yard. His eyes haven't focused long since he was a young man.' Which all sounded good to me. I liked the mental image. Kott, gone soft, maybe a little trembly now, wearing glasses, stooping even though he was small to start with.

Then O'Day read out the prison discharge report.

Kott's heritage was rooted in Czechoslovakia or Arkansas or probably both, but he had mapped his fifteen years of jail time like a mystical sage from the East. He had taken up yoga and meditation. He had worked out very lightly, once a day, to maintain core strength and flexibility, and he had been still for many hours, hardly breathing, all the time with a blank, thousand-yard stare he said he needed to practise.

O'Day said, 'I asked around. The girls who work here, mostly. They say Kott's type of yoga is all about stillness and relaxed power. You fade, and fade, and fade, and then bang, you go to the next position. The same with the meditation. Empty your mind. Visualize your success.'

'You saying he got out of prison better than he went in?'

'He worked hard for fifteen years. In a very single-minded manner. And after all, a gun is just a metal tool. Success is all about the mind and the body.'

'How would he get to Paris? Does he have a passport?'

'Think about the factions. Think about their spending power. A passport is the least of their problems.'

'Last time I saw him, he was signing the paper. Over sixteen years ago, apparently. I don't see how I can help you now.'

'We have to cover all the bases.'

'Which base could I possibly cover?'

'You caught him once,' O'Day said. 'If needs be, you can catch him again.'

FIVE

SHOEMAKER GOT INVOLVED AT THAT POINT, AS IF THE OVERVIEW was completed, and it was time for the details. A lot hinged on the motive for the attack. Certain factions would never hire an Israeli, which would decrease the odds to one in three, except that apparently the Israeli looked kind of Irish and had a neutral code name. Maybe the factions didn't know. Which would confuse the issue. But in the end the quest for motive had been abandoned. The State Department's list of people mad at the French was long. Therefore all four suspects were being treated equally. No profiling was allowed.

I turned to Casey Nice and said, 'This is still bullshit.'

Once again she said, 'What part?'

'Same part. This is way too much. You wouldn't piss on the French if they were on fire. Yet here you are. You're reacting like this was Pearl Harbor. Why? What is France going to do to you? Stop sending cheese?'

'We can't be seen to drag our feet.'

'You can't be seen at all. You're moving from place to place and hiding behind phoney signs. Which is good. No watcher out

of any embassy is going to figure out who you are or what you're doing. Not even the French Embassy. They can't know if you're helping or not. So why bother?'

'It's a matter of reputation.'

'There's a one-in-four chance a convicted American felon is freelancing somewhere in the world. He wouldn't be the first and he won't be the last. Our reputation could stand that kind of tiny hit. Especially because the French guy is still alive. No harm, no foul.'

O'Day stirred and said, 'We don't make the policy rules.'

'The last time you listened to the Congress Abraham Lincoln was in short pants.'

'But who *do* I listen to?'

I said, 'The president,' and stopped.

O'Day said, 'Everyone's mad at the French, which is ultimately the same thing as no one's mad at them. No one had a particular reason to shoot the guy. Not this year. Not more than usual. Therefore right now the smart money says this was an audition. Our boy was making his bones, ahead of a bigger proposition. Which would be who? No one knows, but they're all betting it's them. And why wouldn't they? They're all the most important person in the world. They've got an EU meeting coming up, all the heads of government, and then there's the G8 and the G20. That's twenty world leaders right there. Including ours. All posing for a group photograph. Standing still and smiling. On the steps of a public building, probably. They don't want a guy on the loose who can shoot more than three-quarters of a mile.'

'So this is politicians covering their ass?'

'Literally. All over the world.'

'Including our guy?'

'Doesn't matter what he thinks personally. The Secret Service is freaking out enough for both of them.'

'Hence a private jet for me.'

‘Money no object.’

‘But not just me, right? Please tell me you’re not relying on one guy here.’

O’Day said, ‘We have all the help we need.’

I said, ‘It’s likely not Kott.’

‘It’s definitely not three of them. You want to roll the dice or do the work?’

I didn’t answer that. Shoemaker told me I would be billeted in quarters nearby, and that I was restricted to that part of the base. If questioned either officially or casually I was to say I was a civilian contractor with an expertise in pallet loading. If pressed I was to say I was working with the 47th Logistics on a problem in Turkey. Which made some kind of sense. As soon as I said Turkey, the questioners would assume missiles, and the good guys would back off, and the bad guys would be misinformed. Which in O’Day’s opinion was an outcome devoutly to be desired.

I said, ‘Who’s looking for the other three?’

O’Day said, ‘Their own people, in their own countries.’

‘Not the French in France?’

‘They assume he’s gone home to lay up.’

‘Maybe he’s an ex-pat. A Russian who lives in France. Or an Israeli, or a guy from Great Britain. In an old farmhouse, or a villa by the sea.’

‘They may not have considered that.’

‘Did Kott go to live in France?’

O’Day shook his head and said, ‘He went back to Arkansas.’

‘And?’

‘We put a surveillance drone over his house a couple of times in the first month. We saw nothing to worry about. Then the drone was needed elsewhere, and he went on the back burner.’

‘And now?’

‘We got the drone back. His house is empty. No sign of life.’

Casey Nice walked me over to the quarters Shoemaker had mentioned, which turned out to be an improvised little village made up of separate prefabricated and transportable living units adapted from fifty-three-foot steel shipping containers. Eight feet high, eight feet wide, with windows and doors cut into them, and AC, and water lines and power lines all hooked up. Mine was painted sand yellow, probably shipped back from Iraq. I had lived in worse places. It was a pleasant night. Spring, in North Carolina. Too early in the year to be hot, too late to be cold. There were stars out in the sky, and ghostly wisps of cloud.

We stopped at my metal door and I said, 'Are you in one of these things?'

Casey Nice pointed to the next row. 'The white one,' she said. If she was on First Street, then I was on Second. I said, 'Is this what you signed up for?'

'This is where the rubber meets the road,' she said. 'I'm happy enough.'

'It's likely not Kott,' I said again. 'Statistically when it comes to snipers the Russians produce the most and the best. And the Israelis love fifty-calibre rounds. It's likely one of those two.'

'But it's the yoga that worries us. Clearly Kott had an aim in life. He was planning to get out and take up where he left off.' Then she nodded to herself, as if her job was done, and she walked away and left me there. I opened my door and went inside.

Inside looked exactly like a fifty-three-foot shipping container, all corrugated metal, painted glossy white all around, with a living area and a kitchen and a bathroom and a bedroom all in a line. Like an old-fashioned railroad apartment. The windows had blast covers that dropped down inside to make work surfaces. There was a plywood floor. I unpacked, which consisted of taking my clip-together toothbrush from my pocket,

assembling it, and propping it in a bathroom glass. I thought about taking a shower, but I never got to it, because there was a knock at my door. I hiked back through the narrow cramped rectangle and opened up.

Another woman in a black skirt suit and dark nylons and good shoes. This one was closer to my own age. She had an air of command and seniority. Her hair was silvery black, neatly cut but not styled or coloured. Her face had been pretty once, and was handsome now. She said, 'Mr Reacher? I'm Joan Scarangelo.'

She stuck out her hand. I took it and shook it. It felt slim but strong. Plain nails, cut short and square. Clear polish. No rings. I said, 'CIA?'

She smiled and said, 'It's not supposed to be *that* obvious.'

'I already met State and Special Forces. I figured the third wheel would come rolling down the pike pretty soon.'

'May I come in?'

My living area was eight feet high and eight feet wide and about thirteen feet long. Adequate for two, but only just. The furniture was bolted to the floor, a short sofa and two small chairs, all arranged in a tight little grouping. Like an RV, or maybe a design study for a new Gulfstream cabin. I sat on the sofa and Joan Scarangelo sat in a chair, and we adjusted our relative angles until we were looking at each other face to face.

She said, 'We very much appreciate your help.'

I said, 'I haven't done anything yet.'

'But I'm sure you will, if necessary.'

'Did the FBI go out of business? Isn't finding American citizens in America normally their job?'

'Kott might not be in America. Not currently.'

'Then he's your job.'

'And we're doing it. Which includes getting the best help we can. Anything else would be negligent. You know the man.'

‘I busted him sixteen years ago. Apart from that I know nothing about him.’

‘The EU, then the G8, and then the G20,’ she said. ‘The European Union, then the world’s eight largest economies, and then the world’s twenty largest economies. Heads of state, all in the same place at the same time. By definition all but one of them on unfamiliar turf. If one of them goes down, it’s a disaster. If more than one goes down, it’s a catastrophe. And as I believe you pointed out, the Paris shooter was ready to fire twice. And why would he stop at two? Imagine if three or four went down. We’d have paralysis. Markets would crash, and we’d be back in recession. People would starve. Wars might start. The whole world could fall apart.’

‘Maybe they should cancel their meetings.’

‘Same result. The world has to be governed. They can’t do it all by phone.’

‘They could for a month or two.’

‘But who’s going to propose that? Who’s going to blink first? Us, in front of the Russians? The Russians, in front of us? The Chinese, in front of anybody?’

‘So this is all a testosterone thing?’

Joan Scarangelo said, ‘What isn’t?’

I said, ‘Speaking of governing the world, I don’t even have a phone.’

She said, ‘Would you like one?’

‘My point is, John Kott is a guy I met for one day, sixteen years ago. I have no resources, no communications, no databases, no systems, no nothing.’

‘We have all of that. We’ll give you what leads we have.’

‘And then send me out to get him?’

She didn’t answer.

I said, ‘Here’s the thing, Ms Scarangelo. I know I only just got here, but I wasn’t born yesterday. I didn’t just fall off the turnip truck. If Kott’s the guy, you want me out there

blundering around because whoever is bankrolling him will want to stop me. Whatever faction, as O'Day likes to say. I'm supposed to bring them out in the open. That's all. All I am is bait.'

She didn't answer.

I said, 'Or maybe you want Kott to come for me himself. He's plenty mad at me, after all. I put him away for fifteen years. I'm sure that put a crimp in his lifetime plans. He's probably nursing an appropriate degree of resentment. Maybe all that yoga was for me personally, not general career advancement.'

'No one is thinking in terms of bait.'

'Bullshit. Tom O'Day thinks of everything, and chooses the easiest and most effective.'

'Are you scared?'

'You know any infantrymen?'

'This base has plenty.'

'Talk to them. The infantry puts up with a world of shit. They live in holes in the ground, cold, wet, muddy, hungry, with incoming mortars and artillery and rockets, and bombs and gas, and air assault and missiles, and they have nothing ahead of them except barbed wire and machine-gun nests, but you know what they hate most of all?'

'Snipers,' she said.

'Correct,' I said. 'Random death, out of nowhere, any time, any place, no notice, no warning. Every minute of every day. No relief. The stress becomes unbearable. It sends some of them mad, literally. And I can understand why. Right now I'm sitting in a little metal box and I'm already liking it more than I should.'

'I met your brother once,' Scarangelo said.

'Really?'

She nodded. 'Joe Reacher. I was a young case officer and he was with military intelligence. We worked together on a thing.'

'And now you're going to tell me he spoke well of me and said

I was the baddest son of a bitch in the valley. You're going to leverage a dead man.'

'I'm sorry he died. But he did speak well of you.'

'If Joe was here he'd tell me to run away from this thing as far and as fast as I can. There's a clue in the title. Military, and intelligence. He knew Tom O'Day too.'

'You don't like O'Day, do you?'

'I think someone should give him a medal and a bullet in the head and name a bridge after him.'

'Maybe this wasn't a good idea.'

'I'm surprised he's still in business.'

'This kind of thing keeps him in business. Now more than ever. He's front and centre.'

I said nothing.

Scarangelo said, 'We can't make you stay.'

I shrugged.

'I owe Rick Shoemaker a favour,' I said. 'I'll stick around.'

Predictable.

SIX

SCARANGELLO LEFT AFTER THAT, LEAVING A FAINT PERFUMED SCENT in the air, and I took my shower and went to bed. O'Day liked to start every morning with a conference, and I planned to be there, right after breakfast. Which I couldn't find. The dawn light showed we were stuck in a remote corner of Pope Field, which was vast. I figured I was a mile or more from the nearest mess hall. Maybe five miles. And my movements were restricted. Walking around Fort Bragg unauthorized wasn't the smartest thing to do. Not under the current circumstances. Not under any circumstances, really.

So I headed back to the red door and found Casey Nice in a room with a table. The table was loaded with muffins and pastries on plates, and big catering boxes of coffee. Dunkin' Donuts, not army issue. Private catering. Reforms. Anything to save a buck.

Casey Nice said, 'Comfortable quarters?'

I said, 'Better than sleeping in a hollow log.'

'Is that what you normally do?'

'Figure of speech,' I said.

‘But you slept well?’

‘Terrific.’

‘Did you meet anyone last night?’

‘I met a woman named Joan Scarangelo.’

‘Good.’

‘Who is she exactly?’

‘A deputy to the deputy director of operations.’

Which sounded junior, but wasn't. In CIA-speak a D-DDO was part of a tiny circle at the very top. One of the three or four most plugged-in people on the planet. Her natural habitat would be a Langley office about eight times the size of my shipping container, probably with more phones on the desk than I had seen in my entire life. I said, ‘They're really taking this seriously, aren't they?’

‘They have to, don't you think?’

I didn't answer that, and then Scarangelo herself came in. She nodded a greeting and took a muffin and a cup of coffee. Then she left again. I took two muffins and an empty cup and a whole box of coffee. I figured I could prop it on the edge of the conference table with the spigot facing towards me. Refills as and when required. Like an alcoholic behind a bar.

The morning conference was in a room next to O'Day's upstairs office. Nothing fancy. Just four plain tables pushed together in a square, and eight chairs for the five of us. Shoemaker and O'Day and Scarangelo were already in their places. Casey Nice sat down next to Scarangelo and I chose a spot with an empty chair either side. I got the coffee set up and bit the head off a muffin.

Shoemaker went first. He was in fatigues again, with his star, which was not surprising, but his opening analysis was informed enough to suggest he might have been worth it, which was. He said, ‘The Polish government looks set to announce a snap election, and the Greeks too, probably. Which looks like

democracy in action, but if you drill down into the European Union constitution you find a provision that allows heads-of-state pow-wows to be postponed if two or more member states are at the polls. In other words, they're running for the hills. The EU meeting ain't going to happen. Which moves us on to the G8 in three weeks. Those plans are still intact. Which gives us both the time and the target.'

I took a breath to speak but O'Day shot out a lengthy arm, with his palm towards me, like he was telling a dog to stay, and he said, 'You're about to warn us we're making a massive assumption here, and that the real target could be anything. Which is correct, but please understand we don't care about any other target. If something else gets hit, we'll be dancing jigs and reels. Until then, for operational purposes, we're assuming an assassination attempt against a world leader is already a proven fact.'

I said, 'I was going to ask who's in the G8.'

Which must have been a dumb question, because they all started fidgeting and no one answered. Eventually Casey Nice said, 'Ourselves and Canada, the UK and France, Germany and Italy, and Japan and Russia.'

I said, 'Those aren't the eight largest economies.'

'They were once,' Joan Scarangelo said. 'Some things get set in stone.'

'So if this is personal or nationalist it could be any one of them. But if it's some big terrorist statement, then with all due respect, it's probably not Italy. I mean, who would notice? Those guys change every three weeks anyway. Or Canada. You wouldn't recognize the guy if you saw him in the grocery store. Japan, the same. And France. The UK, too. Some posh boy goes face down, it's not going to destabilize the world. Germany is possibly a slight problem.'

Scarangelo nodded. 'Europe's largest economy, the region's only fiscal grown-up, and a whole new psyche that absolutely

depends on politicians *not* getting shot. Things could unravel. And rock bottom is a long way down in Germany.'

'So it's ourselves and Russia and Germany. Which is easy. Just keep those three guys under wraps. No fresh air for them. Let the other five walk about. Or send the vice presidents too, for the photo ops. Which could be spun. We're so ballsy we'll send both of them.'

O'Day nodded. 'That's Plan B, and it's already drafted. Plan A is to find John Kott. And to hope that London and Moscow and Tel Aviv meet with similar success.'

'Do we know anything about their guys?'

'We know all about them. The Brit is an ex-SAS operator named Carson. In uniform he had more than fifty kills around the world, not that anyone will admit it, one of them at two thousand yards, documented and verified. The Russian is a guy called Datsev. His first instructor was at Stalingrad, which was a hard school. The Israeli is called Rozan. Best they ever saw with a fifty-calibre Barrett, which is really saying something, for the IDF.'

'They all sound better than Kott.'

'No, they sound about as good as. Fourteen hundred yards was nothing to Kott. Pure routine. Until you busted him, that is.'

'You sound like you think I shouldn't have.'

'He was worth more to us than the grunt he killed.'

I said, 'Where is the G8 meeting?'

'London,' O'Day said. 'Technically just outside. A stately home, or an old castle. Something like that.'

'Does it have a moat?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Maybe they should start digging one.'

'The idea is not to let it get that far.'

'I can't help you there anyway. My passport is expired.'

O'Day said, 'You should speak to the State Department about that.' Then he looked up, and Casey Nice put her hand under

her jacket again, the same way she had when she showed me the embassy report, and she came out with a slim blue booklet, which she slid across to me. It was warm, like before.

It was a passport, with my name and my face in it, dated yesterday, good for ten years.