

Bad Luck and Trouble

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Extract

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ONE

THE MAN WAS CALLED CALVIN FRANZ AND THE HELICOPTER was a Bell 222. Franz had two broken legs, so he had to be loaded on board strapped to a stretcher. Not a difficult manoeuvre. The Bell was a roomy aircraft, twin-engined, designed for corporate travel and police departments, with space for seven passengers. The rear doors were as big as a panel van's and they opened wide. The middle row of seats had been removed. There was plenty of room for Franz on the floor.

The helicopter was idling. Two men were carrying the stretcher. They ducked low under the rotor wash and hurried, one backward, one forward. When they reached the open door the guy who had been walking backward got one handle up on the sill and ducked away. The other guy stepped forward and shoved hard and slid the stretcher all the way inside. Franz was awake and hurting. He cried out and jerked around a little, but not much, because the straps across his chest and thighs were buckled tight. The two men climbed in after him and got in their seats behind the missing row and slammed the doors.

Then they waited.

The pilot waited.

A third man came out a grey door and walked across the concrete. He bent low under the rotor and held a hand flat on his chest to stop his necktie whipping in the wind. The gesture made him look like a guilty man proclaiming his innocence. He tracked around the Bell's long nose and got in the forward seat, next to the pilot.

'Go,' he said, and then he bent his head to concentrate on his harness buckle.

The pilot goosed the turbines and the lazy *whop-whop* of the idling blade slid up the scale to an urgent centripetal *whip-whip-whip* and then disappeared behind the treble blast of the exhaust. The Bell lifted straight off the ground, drifted left a little, rotated slightly, and then retracted its wheels and climbed a thousand feet. Then it dipped its nose and hammered north, high and fast. Below it roads and science parks and small factories and neat isolated suburban communities slid past. Brick walls and metal siding blazed red in the late sun. Tiny emerald lawns and turquoise swimming pools winked in the last of the light.

The man in the forward seat said, 'You know where we're going?'

The pilot nodded and said nothing.

The Bell clattered onward, turning east of north, climbing a little higher, heading for darkness. It crossed a highway far below, a river of white lights crawling west and red lights crawling east. A minute north of the highway the last developed acres gave way to low hills, barren and scrubby and uninhabited. They glowed orange on the slopes that faced the setting sun and showed dull tan in the valleys and the shadows. Then the low hills gave way in turn to small rounded mountains. The Bell sped on, rising and falling, following the contours below. The man in the forward seat twisted around and looked down at Franz on the floor behind him. Smiled briefly and said, 'Twenty more minutes, maybe.'

Franz didn't reply. He was in too much pain.

The Bell was rated for a 161-mph cruise, so twenty more minutes took it almost fifty-four miles, beyond the mountains,

well out over the empty desert. The pilot flared the nose and slowed a little. The man in the forward seat pressed his forehead against the window and stared down into the darkness.

'Where are we?' he asked.

The pilot said, 'Where we were before.'

'Exactly?'

'Roughly.'

'What's below us now?'

'Sand.'

'Height?'

'Three thousand feet.'

'What's the air like up here?'

'Still. A few thermals, but no wind.'

'Safe?'

'Aeronautically.'

'So let's do it.'

The pilot slowed more and turned and came to a stationary hover, three thousand feet above the desert floor. The man in the forward seat twisted around again and signalled to the two guys way in back. Both unlocked their safety harnesses. One crouched forward, avoiding Franz's feet, and held his loose harness tight in one hand and unlatched the door with the other. The pilot was half turned in his own seat, watching, and he tilted the Bell a little so the door fell all the way open under its own weight. Then he brought the craft level again and put it into a slow clockwise rotation so that motion and air pressure held the door wide. The second guy from the rear crouched near Franz's head and jacked the stretcher upward to a forty-five-degree slope. The first guy jammed his shoe against the free end of the stretcher rail to stop the whole thing sliding across the floor. The second guy jerked like a weightlifter and brought the stretcher almost vertical. Franz sagged down against the straps. He was a big guy, and heavy. And determined. His legs were useless but his upper body was powerful and straining hard. His head was snapping from side to side.

The first guy took out a gravity knife and popped the blade. Used it to saw through the strap around Franz's thighs. Then

he paused a beat and sliced the strap around Franz's chest. One quick motion. At the exact same time the second guy jerked the stretcher fully upright. Franz took an involuntary step forward. Onto his broken right leg. He screamed once, briefly, and then took a second instinctive step. Onto his broken left leg. His arms flailed and he collapsed forward and his upper body momentum levered him over the locked pivot of his immobile hips and took him straight out through the open door, into the noisy darkness, into the gale-force rotor wash, into the night.

Three thousand feet above the desert floor.

For a moment there was silence. Even the engine noise seemed to fade. Then the pilot reversed the Bell's rotation and rocked the other way and the door slammed neatly shut. The turbines spun up again and the rotor bit the air and the nose dropped.

The two guys clambered back to their seats.

The man in front said, 'Let's go home now.'

TWO

SEVENTEEN DAYS LATER JACK REACHER WAS IN PORTLAND, Oregon, short of money. In Portland, because he had to be somewhere and the bus he had ridden two days previously had stopped there. Short of money, because he had met an assistant district attorney called Samantha in a cop bar, and had twice bought her dinner before twice spending the night at her place. Now she had gone to work and he was walking away from her house, nine o'clock in the morning, heading back to the downtown bus depot, hair still wet from her shower, sated, relaxed, destination as yet unclear, with a very thin wad of bills in his pocket.

The terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 had changed Reacher's life in two practical ways. Firstly, in addition to his folding toothbrush he now carried his passport with him. Too many things in the new era required photo ID, including most forms of travel. Reacher was a drifter, not a hermit, restless, not dysfunctional, and so he had yielded gracefully.

And secondly, he had changed his banking methods. For many years after leaving the army he had operated a system whereby he would call his bank in Virginia and ask for a

Western Union wire transfer to wherever he happened to be. But new worries about terrorist financing had pretty much killed telephone banking. So Reacher had gotten an ATM card. He carried it inside his passport and used 8197 as his PIN. He considered himself a man of very few talents but some varied abilities, most of which were physical and related to his abnormal size and strength, but one of which was always knowing what time it was without looking, and another of which was some kind of a junior-idiot-savant facility with arithmetic. Hence 8197. He liked 97 because it was the largest two-digit prime number, and he loved 81 because it was absolutely the only number out of all the literally infinite possibilities whose square root was also the sum of its digits. Square root of 81 was nine, and eight and one made nine. No other non-trivial number in the cosmos had that kind of sweet symmetry. Perfect.

His arithmetic awareness and his inherent cynicism about financial institutions always compelled him to check his balance every time he withdrew cash. He always remembered to deduct the ATM fees and every quarter he remembered to add in the bank's paltry interest payment. And despite his suspicions, he had never been ripped off. Every time his balance came up exactly as he predicted. He had never been surprised or dismayed.

Until that morning in Portland, where he was surprised, but not exactly dismayed. Because his balance was more than a thousand dollars bigger than it should have been.

Exactly one thousand and thirty dollars bigger, according to Reacher's own blind calculation. A mistake, obviously. By the bank. A deposit into the wrong account. A mistake that would be rectified. He wouldn't be keeping the money. He was an optimist, but not a fool. He pressed another button and requested something called a mini-statement. A slip of thin paper came out of a slot. It had faint grey printing on it, listing the last five transactions against his account. Three of them were ATM cash withdrawals that he remembered clearly. One of them was the bank's most recent interest payment. The last was a deposit in the sum of one thousand and thirty dollars, made three days previously. So there it was. The slip of paper

was too narrow to have separate staggered columns for debits and credits, so the deposit was noted inside parentheses to indicate its positive nature: (1030.00).

One thousand and thirty dollars.

1030.

Not inherently an interesting number, but Reacher stared at it for a minute. Not prime, obviously. No even number greater than two could be prime. Square root? Clearly just a hair more than 32. Cube root? A hair less than 10.1. Factors? Not many, but they included 5 and 206 along with the obvious 10 and 103 and the even more basic 2 and 515.

So, 1030.

A thousand and thirty.

A mistake.

Maybe.

Or, maybe not a mistake.

Reacher took fifty dollars from the machine and dug in his pocket for change and went in search of a pay phone.

He found a phone inside the bus depot. He dialled his bank's number from memory. Nine forty in the West, twelve forty in the East. Lunchtime in Virginia, but someone should be there.

And someone was. Not someone Reacher had ever spoken to before, but she sounded competent. Maybe a back-office manager hauled out to cover for the meal period. She gave her name, but Reacher didn't catch it. Then she went into a long rehearsed introduction designed to make him feel like a valued customer. He waited it out and told her about the deposit. She was amazed that a customer would call about a bank error in his own favour.

'Might not be an error,' Reacher said.

'Were you expecting the deposit?' she asked.

'No.'

'Do third parties frequently make deposits into your account?'

'No.'

'It's likely to be an error, then. Don't you think?'

'I need to know who made the deposit.'

'May I ask why?'

'That would take some time to explain.'

'I would need to know,' the woman said. 'There are confidentiality issues otherwise. If the bank's error exposes one customer's affairs to another, we could be in breach of all kinds of rules and regulations and ethical practices.'

'It might be a message,' Reacher said.

'A message?'

'From the past.'

'I don't understand.'

'Back in the day I was a military policeman,' Reacher said. 'Military police radio transmissions are coded. If a military policeman needs urgent assistance from a colleague he calls in a ten-thirty radio code. See what I'm saying?'

'No, not really.'

Reacher said, 'I'm thinking that if I don't know the person who made the deposit, then it's a thousand and thirty bucks' worth of a mistake. But if I do know the person, it might be a call for help.'

'I still don't understand.'

'Look at how it's written. It might be a ten-thirty radio code, not a thousand and thirty dollars. Look at it on paper.'

'Wouldn't this person just have called you on the phone?'

'I don't have a phone.'

'An e-mail, then? Or a telegram. Or even a letter.'

'I don't have addresses for any of those things.'

'So how do we contact you, usually?'

'You don't.'

'A credit into your bank would be a very odd way of communicating.'

'It might be the only way.'

'A very difficult way. Someone would have to trace your account.'

'That's my point,' Reacher said. 'It would take a smart and resourceful person to do it. And if a smart and resourceful person needs to ask for help, there's big trouble somewhere.'

'It would be expensive, too. Someone would be out more than a thousand dollars.'

'Exactly. The person would have to be smart and resourceful and desperate.'

Silence on the phone. Then: 'Can't you just make a list of who it might be and try them all?'

'I worked with a lot of smart people. Most of them a very long time ago. It would take me weeks to track them all down. Then it might be too late. And I don't have a phone, anyway.'

More silence. Except for the patter of a keyboard.

Reacher said, 'You're looking, aren't you?'

The woman said, 'I really shouldn't be doing this.'

'I won't rat you out.'

The phone went quiet. The keyboard patter stopped. Reacher knew she had the name right there in front of her on a screen.

'Tell me,' he said.

'I can't just tell you. You'll have to help me out.'

'How?'

'Give me clues. So I don't have to come right out with it.'

'What kind of clues?'

She asked, 'Well, would it be a man or a woman?'

Reacher smiled, briefly. The answer was right there in the question itself. It was a woman. Had to be. A smart, resourceful woman, capable of imagination and lateral thinking. A woman who knew about his compulsion to add and subtract.

'Let me guess,' Reacher said. 'The deposit was made in Chicago.'

'Yes, by personal cheque through a Chicago bank.'

'Neagley,' Reacher said.

'That's the name we have,' the woman said. 'Frances L. Neagley.'

'Then forget we ever had this conversation,' Reacher said. 'It wasn't a bank error.'

THREE

REACHER HAD SERVED THIRTEEN YEARS IN THE ARMY, ALL of them in the military police. He had known Frances Neagley for ten of those years and had worked with her from time to time for seven of them. He had been an officer, a second lieutenant, then a lieutenant, a captain, a major, then a loss of rank back to captain, then a major again. Neagley had steadfastly refused promotion beyond sergeant. She wouldn't consider Officer Candidate School. Reacher didn't really know why. There was a lot he didn't know about her, despite their ten-year association.

But there was a lot he did know about her. She was smart and resourceful and thorough. And very tough. And strangely uninhibited. Not in terms of personal relationships. She avoided personal relationships. She was intensely private and resisted any kind of closeness, physical or emotional. Her lack of inhibition was professional. If she felt something was right or necessary, then she was uncompromising. Nothing stood in her way, not politics or practicality or politeness or even what a civilian might call the law. At one point Reacher had recruited her to a special investigations unit. She had been a big part of it

for two crucial years. Most people put its occasional spectacular successes down to Reacher's leadership, but Reacher himself put them down to her presence. She impressed him, deeply. Sometimes even came close to scaring him.

If she was calling for urgent assistance, it wasn't because she had lost her car keys.

She worked for a private security provider in Chicago. He knew that. At least she had done four years ago, which was the last time he had come into contact with her. She had left the army a year later than he had and gone into business with someone she knew. As a partner, he guessed, not an employee.

He dug back in his pocket and came out with more quarters. Dialed long distance information. Asked for Chicago. Gave the company name, as he remembered it. The human operator disappeared and a robot voice came on the line with a number. Reacher broke the connection and redialed. A receptionist responded and Reacher asked for Frances Neagley. He was answered politely and put on hold. Altogether his impression was of a larger operation than he had imagined. He had pictured a single room, a grimy window, maybe two battered desks, bulging file cabinets. But the receptionist's measured voice and the telephone clicks and the quiet hold music spoke of a much bigger place. Maybe two floors, cool white corridors, wall art, an internal phone directory.

A man's voice came on the line: 'Frances Neagley's office.'

Reacher asked, 'Is she there?'

'May I know who's calling?'

'Jack Reacher.'

'Good. Thank you for getting in touch.'

'Who are you?'

'I'm Ms Neagley's assistant.'

'She has an assistant?'

'Indeed.'

'Is she there?'

'She's en route to Los Angeles. In the air right now, I think.'

'Is there a message for me?'

'She wants to see you as soon as possible.'

'In Chicago?'

'She'll be in LA a few days at least. I think you should go there.'

'What's this all about?'

'I don't know.'

'Not work related?'

'Can't be. She'd have started a file. Discussed it here. She wouldn't be reaching out to strangers.'

'I'm not a stranger. I've known her longer than you have.'

'I'm sorry. I wasn't aware of that.'

'Where is she staying in LA?'

'I don't know that either.'

'So how am I supposed to find her?'

'She said you'd be able to track her down.'

Racher asked, 'What is this, some kind of a test?'

'She said if you can't find her, she doesn't want you.'

'Is she OK?'

'She's worried about something. But she didn't tell me what.'

Racher kept the receiver at his ear and turned away from the wall. The metal phone cord wrapped around his chest. He glanced at the idling buses and the departures board. He asked, 'Who else is she reaching out to?'

The guy said, 'There's a list of names. You're the first to get back to her.'

'Will she call you when she lands?'

'Probably.'

'Tell her I'm on my way.'