

ONE

The stranger got into position under the street-light at eleven p.m., as agreed.

The light had been easy to find, just like he'd been told it would be. It was the only one in the compound that was still working, all the way at the far end, six feet shy of the jagged metal fence that separated the United States from Mexico.

He was alone. And unarmed.

As agreed.

The car showed up at 23:02. It kept to the centre of the space between the parallel rows of lock-up garages. They were made of metal, too. Roofs warped by the sun. Walls scoured by the sand. Five on the right. Four on the left. And the remains of one more lying torn and corroded ten feet to the side, like something had exploded inside it years ago.

The car's lights were on bright, making it hard to recognize the make and model. And impossible to see inside. It continued until it was fifteen feet away then

braked to a stop, rocking on its worn springs and settling into a low cloud of sandy dust. Then its front doors opened. Both of them. And two men climbed out.

Not as agreed.

Both the car's back doors opened. Two more men climbed out.

Definitely not as agreed.

The four men paused and sized the stranger up. They'd been told to expect someone big and this guy sure fit the bill. He was six feet five. Two hundred and fifty pounds. Chest like a gun safe and hands like backhoe buckets. And scruffy. His hair was coarse and unkempt. He hadn't shaved for days. His clothes looked cheap and ill-fitting, except for his shoes. Somewhere between a hobo and a Neanderthal. Not someone who was going to be missed.

The driver stepped forward. He was a couple of inches shorter than the stranger, and a good fifty pounds lighter. He was wearing black jeans and a black sleeveless T-shirt. He had on black combat-style boots. His head was shaved, but his face was hidden by a full beard. The other guys followed, lining up alongside him.

'The money?' the driver said.

The stranger patted his jacket pocket.

'Good.' The driver nodded toward the car. 'Back seat. Get in.'

'Why?'

'So I can take you to Michael.'

‘That wasn’t the deal.’

‘Sure it was.’

The stranger shook his head. ‘The deal was, you tell me where Michael is.’

‘Tell you. Show you. What’s the difference?’

The stranger said nothing.

‘Come on. What are you waiting for? Give me the money and get in the car.’

‘I make a deal, I stick to it. You want the money, tell me where Michael is.’

The driver shrugged. ‘The deal’s changed. Take it or leave it.’

‘I’ll leave it.’

‘Enough of this.’ The driver reached behind his back and took a pistol from his waistband. ‘Cut the crap. Get in the car.’

‘You were never going to take me to Michael.’

‘No shit, Sherlock.’

‘You were going to take me to someone else. Someone who has questions for me.’

‘No more talking. Get in the car.’

‘Which means you can’t shoot me.’

‘Which means I can’t kill you. Yet. I can still shoot you.’

The stranger said, ‘Can you?’

A witness would have said the stranger hardly moved at all but somehow in a split second he had closed the gap between them and had his hand on the driver’s wrist. Which he pulled up, like a proud fisherman

hauling something from the sea. He forced the guy's arm way above his head. He hoisted it so high the guy was raised up on his tiptoes. Then he drove his left fist into the guy's side. Hard. The kind of punch that would normally knock a man down. And keep him down. Only the driver didn't fall. He couldn't. He was suspended by his arm. His feet slid back. The gun fell from his fingers. His shoulder joint ripped apart. Tendons stretched and snapped. Ribs shattered. It was a grotesque cascade of injuries. Each one devastating in its own right. Each one enough to sideline the guy for weeks. But in the moment he hardly noticed any of them. Because his entire upper body was convulsing in agony. Searing bolts of pain shot through him, all stemming from one place. A spot just below his armpit, where a dense tangle of nerves and lymph nodes nestled beneath the skin. The exact spot that had just been crushed by the stranger's massive knuckles.

The stranger retrieved the driver's fallen gun and carried him over to the hood of the car. He laid him back, squealing and gasping and writhing on the dull paintwork, then turned to the other three guys. 'You should walk away. Now. While you have the chance.'

The guy at the centre of the trio stepped forward. He was about the same height as the driver. Maybe a little broader. He had hair, cropped short. No beard. Three chunky silver chains around his neck. And a nasty sneer on his face. 'You got lucky once. That won't happen again. Now get in the car before we hurt you.'

The stranger said, 'Really? Again?'

But he didn't move. He saw the three guys swap furtive glances. They had to decide what to do, but with their leader out of commission their command structure was disrupted. He figured that if the guys were smart, they'd opt for a tactical retreat. Or if they were proficient, they would attack together. But first they'd work one of them around to the rear. He could pretend to check on the injured driver. Or to give up and get in the car. Or even to run away. The other two could create a distraction. Then, when he was in place, they would all rush in at once. A simultaneous assault from three directions. One of the guys was certain to take some damage. Probably two. But the third might have a chance. An opening might present itself. If someone had the skill to exploit it.

They weren't smart. And they weren't proficient. They didn't withdraw. And no one tried to circle around. Instead, the centre guy took another step forward, alone. He dropped into some kind of generic martial arts stance. Let out a high-pitched wail. Feinted a jab to the stranger's face. Then launched a reverse punch to the solar plexus. The stranger brushed it aside with the back of his left hand and punched the guy's bicep with his right, his middle knuckle extended. The guy shrieked and jumped back, his axillary nerve overloaded and his arm temporarily useless.

'You should walk away,' the stranger said. 'Before you hurt yourself.'

The guy sprang forward. He made no attempt at disguise this time. He just twisted into a wild roundhouse

punch with his good arm. The stranger leaned back. The guy's fist sailed harmlessly past. The stranger watched it go then drove his knuckle into the meat of the guy's tricep. Both his arms were now out of action.

'Walk away,' the stranger said. 'While you still can.'

The guy lunged. His right leg rose. His thigh first, then his foot, pivoting at the knee. Going for maximum power. Aiming for the stranger's groin. But not getting close. Because the stranger countered with a kick of his own. A sneaky one. Straight and low. Directly into the guy's shin. Just as it reached maximum speed. Bone against toecap. The stranger's shoes. The only thing about him that wasn't scruffy. Bought in London years ago. Layer upon layer of leather and polish and glue. Seasoned by time. Hardened by the elements. And now as solid as steel.

The guy's ankle cracked. He screamed and shied away. He lost his balance and couldn't regain it without the use of his arms. His foot touched the ground. The fractured ends of the bone connected. They grated together. Pain ripped through his leg. It burned along every nerve. Way more than his system could handle. He remained upright for another half second, already unconscious. Then he toppled onto his back and lay there, as still as a fallen tree.

The remaining two guys turned and made for the car. They kept going past its front doors. Past its rear doors. All the way around the back. The trunk lid popped open. One of the guys dropped out of sight. The shorter one. Then he reappeared. He was holding

something in each hand. Like a pair of baseball bats, only longer. And thicker and squarer at one end. Pickaxe handles. Effective tools, in the right hands. He passed one to the taller guy and the pair strode back, stopping about four feet away.

‘Say we break your legs?’ The taller guy licked his lips. ‘You could still answer questions. But you’d never walk again. Not without a cane. So stop dicking us around. Get in the car. Let’s go.’

The stranger saw no need to give them another warning. He’d been clear with them from the start. And they were the ones who’d chosen to up the ante.

The shorter guy made as if to swing, but checked. Then the taller guy took over. He did swing. He put all his weight into it. Which was bad technique. A serious mistake with that kind of weapon. All the stranger had to do was take a step back. The heavy hunk of wood whistled past his midriff. It continued relentlessly through its arc. There was too much momentum for the guy to stop it. And both his hands were clinging to the handle. Which left his head exposed. And his torso. And his knees. A whole menu of tempting targets, all available, all totally unguarded. Any other day the stranger could have taken his pick. But on this occasion he had no time. The taller guy got off the hook. His buddy bailed him out. By jabbing at the stranger’s gut, using the axe handle like a spear. He went short, aiming to get the stranger’s attention. He jabbed a second time, hoping to back the stranger off. Then he lunged. It was the money shot. Or it would have been,

if he hadn't paused a beat too long. Set his feet a fraction too firm. So that when he thrust, the stranger knew it was coming. He moved to the side. Grabbed the axe handle at its mid-point. And pulled. Hard. The guy was dragged forward a yard before he realized what was happening. He let go. But by then it was too late. His fate was sealed. The stranger whipped the captured axe handle over and around and brought it scything down, square onto the top of the guy's head. His eyes rolled back. His knees buckled and he wilted, slumping limp and lifeless at the stranger's feet. He wouldn't be getting up again any time soon. That was for sure. After that kind of a blow he might not be getting up ever.

The taller guy glanced down. Saw the shape his buddy was in. And swung his axe handle back the opposite way. Aiming for the stranger's head. Looking to knock it off his shoulders. He swung harder than before. Wanting revenge. Hoping to survive. And he missed. Again. He left himself vulnerable. Again. But this time something else saved him. The fact that he was the last of his crew left standing. The only available source of information. He now had strategic value. Which gave him the chance to swing again. He took it, and the stranger parried. The guy kept going, chopping left and right, left and right, like a crazed lumberjack. He managed a dozen more strokes at full speed, then he ran out of gas.

'Screw this.' The guy dropped the axe handle. Reached behind him. And pulled out his gun. 'Screw answering questions. Screw taking you alive.'

The guy took two steps back. He should have taken three. He hadn't accounted for the length of the stranger's arms.

'Let's not be hasty.' The stranger flicked out with his axe handle and sent the gun flying. Then he stepped closer and grabbed the guy by the neck. 'Maybe we will take that drive. Turns out I have some questions of my own. You can—'

'Stop.' It was a female voice. Confident. Commanding. Coming from the shadows near the right-hand row of garages. Someone new was on the scene. The stranger had arrived at 8 p.m., three hours early, and searched every inch of the compound. He was certain no one had been hiding then.

'Let him go.' A silhouette broke free from the darkness. A woman's. She looked to be around five ten. Slim. Limping slightly. Her arms were out in front and there was the squat outline of a matt-black pistol in her hands. 'Step away.'

The stranger didn't move. He didn't relax his grip.

The woman hesitated. The other guy was between her and the stranger. Not an ideal position. But he was six inches shorter. And slightly to the side. That did leave her a target. An area on the stranger's chest. A rectangle. It was maybe six inches by ten. That was big enough, she figured. And it was more or less in the right position. She took a breath. Exhaled gently. And pulled the trigger.

The stranger fell back. He landed with his arms spread wide, one knee raised, and his head turned so

that he was facing the border fence. He was completely still. His shirt was ragged and torn. His entire chest was slick and slimy and red. But there was no arterial spray. No sign of a heartbeat.

No sign of life at all.

The tidy, manicured area people now called *The Plaza* had once been a sprawling grove of trees. Black walnuts. They'd grown, undisturbed, for centuries. Then in the 1870s a trader took to resting his mules in their shade on his treks back and forth to California. He liked the spot, so he built a shack there. And when he grew too old to rattle back and forth across the continent he sold his beasts and he stayed.

Other people followed suit. The shanty became a village. The village became a town. The town split in two like a cell, multiplying greedily. Both halves flourished. One to the south. One to the north. There were many more years of steady growth. Then stagnation. Then decline. Slow and grim and unstoppable. Until an unexpected shot in the arm was delivered, in the late 1930s. An army of surveyors showed up. Then labourers. Builders. Engineers. Even some artists and sculptors. All sent by the WPA.

No one local knew why those towns had been chosen. Some said it was a mistake. A bureaucrat misreading a file note and dispatching the resources to the wrong place. Others figured that someone in D.C. must have owed the mayor a favour. But whatever the reason, no one objected. Not with all the new roads

that were being laid. New bridges being constructed. And all kinds of buildings rising up. The project went on for years. And it left a permanent mark. The towns' traditional adobe arches became a little more square. The stucco exteriors, a little more uniform. The layout of the streets, a little more regimented. And the amenities, a lot more generous. The area gained schools. Municipal offices. Fire houses. A police station. A courthouse. A museum. And a medical centre.

Some of the facilities became obsolete over the years. Some were sold off. Others demolished. But the medical centre was still the main source of healthcare for miles around. It contained a doctor's office. A pharmacy. A clinic, with half a dozen beds. And thanks to the largesse of those New Deal planners, even a morgue. It was tucked away in the basement. And it was where Dr Houllier was working, the next morning.

Dr Houllier was seventy-two years old. He had served the town his whole life. Once he was part of a team. Now he was the only physician left. He was responsible for everything from delivering babies to treating colds to diagnosing cancer. And for dealing with the deceased. Which was the reason for that day's early start. He'd been on duty since the small hours. Since he received the call about a shooting on the outskirts of town. It was the kind of thing that would attract attention. He knew that from experience. He was expecting a visit. Soon. And he needed to be ready.

There was a computer on the desk, but it was switched off. Dr Houllier preferred to write his notes

longhand. He remembered things better that way. And he had a format. One he'd developed himself. It wasn't fancy, but it worked. It was better than anything those Silicon Valley whizz-kids had ever tried to foist on him. And it was sure as hell cheaper. He sat down, picked up the Mont Blanc his father had bought him when he graduated medical school, and started to record the results of his night's work.

There was no knock. No greeting. No courtesy at all. The door just opened and a man came in. The same one as usual. Early forties, tight curly hair, tan linen suit. *Perky*, Dr Houllier privately called him, because of the bouncy way the guy walked. He didn't know his real name. He didn't want to know.

The guy started at the far end of the room. The cold storage area. The meat locker as Dr Houllier thought of it, after decades of dealing with its contents. There was a line of five steel doors. The guy approached, examined each handle in turn, but didn't touch any of them. He never did. He moved on to the autopsy table in the centre. Crossed to the line of steel trolleys against the far wall, near the autoclave. Then he approached the desk.

'Phone.' He held out his hand.

Dr Houllier passed the guy his cell. The guy checked to make sure it wasn't recording, slipped it into his pants pocket, and turned to the door. 'Clear,' he said.

Another man walked in. *Mantis*, Dr Houllier called him, because whenever he looked at the guy with his long skinny limbs, angular torso, and bulging eyes he

couldn't help but think of the insect. Although he did know this guy's real name. Leo Dendoncker. Everyone in town knew it, even if they'd never met him.

A third man followed Dendoncker in. He looked a little like Perky, but with straighter hair and a darker suit. And with such an anonymous face and bland way of moving that Dr Houllier had never been inspired to find him a nickname.

Dendoncker stopped in the centre of the room. His pale hair was almost invisible in the harsh light. He turned through 360 degrees, slowly, scanning the space around him. Then he turned to Dr Houllier.

'Show me,' he said.

Dr Houllier crossed the room. He checked his watch, then worked the lever that opened the centre door of the meat locker. He pulled out the sliding rack, revealing a body covered by a sheet. It was tall. Almost as long as the tray it lay on. And broad. The shoulders only just fitted through the opening. Dr Houllier pulled the sheet, slowly, revealing the head. It was a man's. Its hair was messy. The face was craggy and unnaturally pale, and the eyes were taped shut.

'Move.' Dendoncker shoved Dr Houllier aside. He pulled the sheet off and dropped it on the floor. The body was naked. If Michelangelo's *David* was made to embody masculine beauty, this guy could have been another in the series. But at the opposite end of the spectrum. There was nothing elegant. Nothing delicate. This one was all about brutality. Pure and simple.

'That's what killed him?' Dendoncker pointed to a

wound on the guy's chest. It was slightly raised. Its edges were rough and ragged and they were turning brown.

'Well he didn't die of sloth.' Dr Houllier glanced at his watch. 'I can guarantee that.'

'He'd been shot before.' Dendoncker pointed at a set of scars on the other side of the guy's chest. 'And stabbed.'

'The scar on his abdomen?' Dr Houllier shook his head. 'Like some kind of sea creature? I don't think that's a knife wound. More likely shrapnel.'

'Whatever.' Dendoncker turned away. 'I guess death was tired of waiting for him. He pushed his luck one time too many. What else do we know about him?'

'Not much.' Dr Houllier snatched up the sheet and spread it loosely over the body. 'I spoke to the sheriff. Sounds like the guy was a drifter. He had a room at a motel outside of town. He'd paid through next weekend, in cash, but he had no belongings there. And he'd registered under a false address. One East 161st Street, the Bronx, New York.'

'How do you know that's false?'

'Because I've been there. It's another way of saying Yankee Stadium. And the guy used a false name, too. He signed the register as John Smith.'

'Smith? Could be his real name.'

Dr Houllier shook his head. He moved back to his desk, took a Ziploc bag from the top drawer, and handed it to Dendoncker. 'See for yourself. This was in his pocket.'

Dendoncker popped the seal and fished out a passport. It was crumpled and worn. He turned to the second page. *Personal Information*. 'This has expired.'

'Doesn't matter. The ID's still valid. And look at the photo. It's old, but it's a match.'

'OK. Let's see. Name: Reacher. Jack, none. Nationality: United States of America. Place of birth: Berlin, West Germany.' Dendoncker glanced at the body then tossed the passport in a trash can next to Dr Houllier's desk. 'Burn that.' He turned to the two guys he arrived with. 'All right. I've seen enough. Get rid of the body. Dump it in the usual place.'