



A
JACK REACHER
THRILLER

LEE
CHILD

THE NUMBER ONE BESTSELLER

61 HOURS

'An iconic modern hero' *DAILY MAIL*



About the Book

**GET READY FOR THE MOST EXCITING COUNTDOWN
OF YOUR LIFE**

HOUR SIXTY-ONE

Icy winter in South Dakota.

A bus skids and crashes in a gathering storm. On the back seat: Jack Reacher, hitching a ride to nowhere.

HOUR THIRTY-ONE

One brave woman is standing up for justice.

If she's going to live to testify, she'll need help from a man like Reacher. Because there's a killer coming for her.

HOUR ZERO

Has Reacher finally met his match?

He doesn't want to put the world to rights. He just doesn't like people who put it to wrongs.

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Read Jack Reacher's Next Adventure

Extract from *The Midnight Line*

About the Author

Have You Read Them All?

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61 HOURS

Lee Child

For my editor,
the irreplaceable Marianne Velmans

ONE

Five minutes to three in the afternoon. Exactly sixty-one hours before it happened. The lawyer drove in and parked in the empty lot. There was an inch of new snow on the ground, so he spent a minute fumbling in the foot well until his overshoes were secure. Then he got out and turned his collar up and walked to the visitors' entrance. There was a bitter wind out of the north. It was thick with fat lazy flakes. There was a storm sixty miles away. The radio had been full of it.

The lawyer got in through the door and stamped the snow off his feet. There was no line. It was not a regular visiting day. There was nothing ahead of him except an empty room and an empty X-ray belt and a metal detector hoop and three prison guards standing around doing nothing. He nodded to them, even though he didn't know them. But he considered himself on their side, and they on his. Prison was a binary world. Either you were locked up, or you weren't. They weren't. He wasn't.

Yet.

He took a grey plastic bin off the top of a teetering stack and folded his overcoat into it. He took off his suit jacket and folded it and laid it on top of the overcoat. It was hot in the prison. Cheaper to burn a little extra oil than to give the inmates two sets of clothes, one for the summer and one for the winter. He could hear their noise ahead of him, the clatter of metal and concrete and the random crazy yells and the screams and the low grumble of other disaffected voices, all muted by doglegged corridors and many closed doors.

He emptied his trouser pockets of keys, and wallet, and cell phone, and coins, and nested those clean warm personal items on top of his jacket. He picked up the grey plastic bin. Didn't carry it to the X-ray belt. Instead he hefted it across the room to a small window in a wall. He waited there and a woman in uniform took it and gave him a numbered ticket in exchange for it.

He braced himself in front of the metal detector hoop. He patted his pockets and glanced ahead, expectantly, as if waiting for an invitation. Learned behaviour, from air travel. The guards let him stand there for a minute, a small, nervous man in his shirtsleeves, empty-handed. No briefcase. No notebook. Not even a pen. He was not there to advise. He was there to be advised. Not to talk, but to listen, and he sure as hell wasn't going to put what he heard anywhere near a piece of paper.

The guards beckoned him through. A green light and no beep, but still the first guard wanded him and the second patted him down. The third escorted him deeper into the complex, through doors designed never to be open unless the last and the next were closed, and around tight corners designed to slow a running man's progress, and past thick green glass windows with watchful faces behind.

The lobby had been institutional, with linoleum on the floor and mint green paint on the walls and fluorescent tubes on the ceiling. And the lobby had been connected to the outside, with gusts of cold air blowing in when the door was opened, and salt stains and puddles of snowmelt on the floor. The prison proper was different. It had no connection to the outside. No sky, no weather. No attempt at décor. It was all raw concrete, already rubbed greasy where sleeves and shoulders had touched it, still pale and dusty where they hadn't. Underfoot was grippy grey paint, like the floor of an auto enthusiast's garage. The lawyer's overshoes squeaked on it.

There were four interview rooms. Each was a windowless concrete cube divided exactly in half by a wall-to-wall desk-height counter with safety glass above. Caged lights burned on the ceiling above the counter. The counter was cast from concrete. The grain of the formwork lumber was still visible in it. The safety glass was thick and slightly green and was divided into three overlapping panes, to give two sideways listening slots. The centre pane had a cut-out slot at the bottom, for documents. Like a bank. Each half of the room had its own chair, and its own door. Perfectly symmetrical. The lawyers entered one way, and the inmates entered the other. Later they left the same way they had come, each to a different destination.

The guard opened the door from the corridor and stepped a yard into the room for a visual check that all was as it should be. Then he stood aside and let the lawyer enter. The lawyer stepped in and waited until the guard closed the door behind him and left him alone. Then he sat down and checked his watch. He was eight minutes late. He had driven slowly because of the weather. Normally he would have regarded it as a failure to be late for an appointment. Unprofessional, and disrespectful. But prison visits were different. Time meant nothing to prisoners.

Another eight minutes later the other door opened, in the wall behind the glass. A different guard stepped in and checked and then stepped back out and a prisoner shuffled in. The lawyer's client. He was white, and enormously overweight, marbled with fat, and completely hairless. He was dressed in an orange jumpsuit. He had wrist and waist and ankle chains that looked as delicate as jewellery. His eyes were dull and his face was docile and vacant, but his mouth was moving a little, like a simpleminded person struggling to retain complex information.

The door in the wall behind the glass closed.

The prisoner sat down.

The lawyer hitched his chair close to the counter.

The prisoner did the same.

Symmetrical.

The lawyer said, 'I'm sorry I'm late.'

The prisoner didn't answer.

The lawyer asked, 'How are you?'

The prisoner didn't answer. The lawyer went quiet. The air in the room was hot. A minute later the prisoner started talking, reciting, working his way through lists and instructions and sentences and paragraphs he had committed to memory. From time to time the lawyer said, 'Slow down a bit,' and on each occasion the guy paused and waited and then started up again at the head of the previous sentence with no change in his pace and no alteration to his singsong delivery. It was as if he had no other way of communicating.

The lawyer had what he considered to be a pretty good memory, especially for detail, like most lawyers, and he was paying a lot of attention, because to concentrate on the process of remembering distracted him from the actual content of the instructions he was getting. But even so some small corner of his mind had counted fourteen separate criminal proposals before the prisoner finally finished up and sat back.

The lawyer said nothing.

The prisoner said, 'Got all that?'

The lawyer nodded and the prisoner lapsed into a bovine stillness. Or equine, like a donkey in a field, infinitely patient. Time meant nothing to prisoners. Especially this one. The lawyer pushed his chair back and stood up. His door was unlocked. He stepped out to the corridor.

Five minutes to four in the afternoon.

Sixty hours to go.

The lawyer found the same guard waiting for him. He was back in the parking lot two minutes later. He was fully dressed again and his stuff was back in his pockets, all reassuringly weighty and present and normal. It was snowing harder by then and the air was colder and the wind was wilder. It was going dark, fast and early. The lawyer sat for a moment with his seat heating and his engine running and his wipers pushing berms of snow left and right on the windshield glass. Then he took off, a wide slow turn with his tyres squeaking against the fresh fall and his headlight beams cutting bright arcs through the white swirl. He headed for the exit, the wire gates, the wait, the trunk check, and then the long straight road that led through town to the highway.

Fourteen criminal proposals. Fourteen actual crimes, if he relayed the proposals and they were acted upon, which they surely would be. Or fifteen crimes, because he himself would then become a co-conspirator. Or twenty-eight crimes, if a prosecutor chose to call each separate issue a separate conspiracy, which a prosecutor might, just for the fun of it. Or just for the glory. Twenty-eight separate paths to shame and ignominy and disbarment, and trial and conviction and imprisonment. Life imprisonment, almost certainly, given the nature of one of the fourteen proposals, and then only after a successful plea bargain. A failed plea bargain was too awful to contemplate.

The lawyer made it around the highway cloverleaf and merged into the slow lane. All around him was the thick grey of falling snow in the late afternoon. Not much traffic. Just occasional cars and trucks going his way, some of them faster and some of them slower, answered by occasional cars and trucks going the other way, across the divider. He drove one-handed and jacked up off the seat and took out his cell phone. Weighed it in his hand. He had three

choices. One, do nothing. Two, call the number he had been told to call. Three, call the number he really should call, which in the circumstances was 911, with hasty back-ups to the local PD and the Highway Patrol and the county sheriffs and the Bar Association, and then a lawyer of his own.

He chose the second option, like he knew he would. Choice number one would get him nowhere, except a little later, when they came to find him. Choice number three would get him dead, slowly and eventually, after what he was sure would be hours or even days of hideous agony. He was a small nervous man. No kind of a hero.

He dialled the number he had been told to dial.

He checked it twice and hit the green button. He raised the phone to his ear, which in many states would be a twenty-ninth crime all its own.

But not in South Dakota.

Not yet.

Small mercies.

The voice that answered was one he had heard four times before. Coarse, and rough, and laced with a kind of rude animal menace. A voice from what the lawyer thought of as another world entirely. It said, 'Shoot, buddy,' with a smile and an overtone of cruel enjoyment, as if the speaker was enjoying his absolute power and control, and the lawyer's own consequent discomfort and fear and revulsion.

The lawyer swallowed once and started talking, reciting the lists and the instructions and the sentences and the paragraphs in much the same way they had been relayed to him. He started talking seven miles and seven minutes from a highway bridge. The bridge didn't look much like a bridge. The roadbed continued absolutely level but the land below it fell away a little into a wide shallow gulch. The gulch was dry most of the year, but in five months' time

spring meltwater would rage through it in a torrent. The highway engineers had smoothed the gulch into a neat culvert and packed forty giant concrete tubes under the roadbed, all to stop the foundation getting washed away once a year. It was a system that worked well in the spring. It had only one drawback, which showed up in the winter. To counter it the engineers had placed signs ahead in both directions. The signs said: *Bridge Freezes Before Road.*

The lawyer drove and talked. Seven minutes into his monologue he reached the most obviously naked and blunt and brutal and egregious of the fourteen proposals. He recited it into the phone the same way he had heard it in the prison, which was neutrally and without emotion. The coarse voice on the other end of the phone laughed. Which made the lawyer shudder. A core moral spasm came up literally from deep inside him. It jerked his shoulders noticeably and ground the phone across his ear.

And moved his hand on the wheel.

His front tyres slipped a little on the bridge ice and he corrected clumsily and his rear tyres swung the other way and fishtailed once, twice, three times. He slid across all three lanes. Saw a bus coming the opposite way through the falling snow. It was white. It was huge. It was moving fast. It was coming straight at him. The back part of his brain told him a collision was inevitable. The front part of his brain told him no, he had space and time and a grass median and two stout metal barriers between him and any kind of oncoming traffic. He bit his lip and relaxed his grip and straightened up and the bus blew past him exactly parallel and twenty feet away.

He breathed out.

The voice on the phone asked, 'What?'

The lawyer said, 'I skidded.'

The voice said, 'Finish the report, asshole.'

The lawyer swallowed again and resumed talking, at the head of the previous sentence.

The man driving the white bus in the opposite direction was a twelve-year veteran of his trade. In the small world of his specialized profession he was about as good as it got. He was properly licensed and well trained and adequately experienced. He was no longer young, and not yet old. Mentally and physically he was up there on a broad plateau of common sense and maturity and peak capability. He was not behind schedule. He was not speeding. He was not drunk. He was not high.

But he was tired.

He had been staring into featureless horizontal snow for the best part of two hours. He saw the fishtailing car a hundred yards ahead. Saw it dart diagonally straight at him. His fatigue produced a split second of dull delay. Then the numb tension in his tired body produced an overreaction. He yanked the wheel like he was flinching from a blow. Too much, too late. And unnecessary, anyway. The sliding car had straightened and was already behind him before his own front tyres bit. Or tried to. They hit the bridge ice just as the steering told them to turn. They lost grip and skated. All the weight was in the rear of the bus. The huge cast iron engine block. The water tank. The toilet. Like a pendulum, way back there. The rear of the bus set about trying to overtake the front of the bus. It didn't get far. Just a few crucial degrees. The driver did everything right. He fought the skid. But the steering was feather light and the front tyres had lost traction. There was no feedback. The back of the bus came back in line and then swung out the other way.

The driver fought hard for three hundred yards. Twelve long seconds. They felt like twelve long hours. He spun the big plastic wheel left, spun it right, tried to catch the skid,

tried to stop it building. But it built anyway. It gathered momentum. The big pendulum weight at the back slammed one way, slammed the other. The soft springs crushed and bounced. The tall body tilted and yawed. The back of the bus swung forty-five degrees left, then forty-five right. *Bridge Freezes Before Road.* The bus passed over the last of the concrete tubes and the front tyres bit again. But they bit while they were turned diagonally towards the shoulder. The whole bus turned in that direction, as if following a legitimate command. As if it was suddenly obedient again. The driver braked hard. Fresh snow dammed in front of the tyres. The bus held its new line. It slowed.

But not enough.

The front tyres crossed the rumble strip, crossed the shoulder, and thumped down off the blacktop into a shallow ditch full of snow and frozen mud. The underbody crashed and banged and scraped on the pavement edge for ten long feet before all momentum was spent. The bus came to rest at an angle, tilted a little, the front third in the ditch, the rear two-thirds still on the shoulder, and the engine compartment hanging out in the traffic lane. The front wheels hung down to the limit of their travel. The engine had stalled out and there was no sound beyond hot components hissing against the snow, and the air brake gently exhaling, and the passengers screaming, then gasping, then going very quiet.

The passengers were a homogeneous bunch, all except for one. Twenty white-haired seniors plus a younger man, in a bus that could seat forty. Twelve of the seniors were widowed women. The other eight made up four old married couples. They were from Seattle. They were a church group on a cultural tour. They had seen the Little Town on the Prairie. Now they were on the long haul west to Mount Rushmore. A side trip to the geographic centre of the

United States had been promised. National parks and grasslands would be visited along the way. A fine itinerary, but the wrong season. South Dakota weather in the winter was not famously hospitable. Hence the fifty per cent take up on the tickets, even though the tickets were cheap.

The odd passenger out was a man at least thirty years younger than the youngest of the others. He was sitting alone three rows behind the last of the seniors. They thought of him as a kind of stowaway. He had joined the bus that same day, at a rest stop just east of a town called Cavour. After the Little Town on the Prairie, before the Dakotaland Museum. There had been no explanation. He had just gotten on the bus. Some had seen him in prior conversation with the driver. Some said money had changed hands. No one was sure what to think. If he had paid for his passage, then he was more like a steerage passenger than a stowaway. Like a hitchhiker, but not quite.

But in any case he was considered a nice enough fellow. He was quiet and polite. He was a foot taller than any of the other passengers and evidently very strong. Not handsome like a movie star, but not ugly, either. Like a just-retired athlete, maybe. Perhaps a football player. Not the best dressed of individuals. He was wearing a creased untucked shirt under a padded canvas jacket. He had no bag, which was strange. But overall it was vaguely reassuring to have such a man on board, especially after he had proved himself civilized and not in any way threatening. Threatening behaviour from a man that size would have been unseemly. Good manners from a man that size were charming. Some of the bolder widowed ladies had thought about striking up a conversation. But the man himself seemed to discourage any such attempt. He slept through most of the drive time and all his responses to

conversational gambits had so far been entirely courteous but brief, and completely devoid of substance.

But at least they knew his name. One of the men had introduced himself, on his way back down the aisle from the toilet. The tall stranger had looked up from his seat and paused, just a beat, as if assessing the costs and benefits of a response. Then he had taken the proffered hand and said, 'Jack Reacher.'

TWO

Reacher woke up when the momentum of the skid smashed his head against the window. He knew where he was, instantly. *On a bus.* He spent the next split second calculating the odds. *Snow, ice, reasonable speed, not much traffic. We're going to either hit the divider or fall off the shoulder. Worst case, we're going to tip over.* OK for him. Maybe not so good for the old folks in front of him. But probably survivable. He was more worried about the aftermath. Twenty old people, shaken up, maybe injured, cuts, bruises, broken bones, stranded miles from anywhere in a gathering winter storm.

Not good.

Then he spent the next eleven and a half seconds holding on, gently resisting the alternating inertia of the fishtails. He was the rearmost passenger, so he was feeling it worst. The folks nearer the front were swinging through smaller arcs. But they were fragile. He could see their necks snapping from side to side. He could see the driver's face in the rear-view mirror. The guy was hanging in there. Not bad. But he was going to lose. A luxury bus was a very unwieldy type of vehicle. *Be careful what you wish for.* He had been in Marshall, Minnesota, for no very memorable reason, and he had hitched a ride with a guy heading west to Huron, South Dakota, but for some private reason the guy wouldn't take him all the way and had dumped him at a rest stop outside of a place called Cavour. Which had seemed like bad luck, initially, because Cavour was not exactly teeming with transcontinental traffic. But two cups of coffee later a white luxury forty-seat bus had pulled in

and only twenty people had gotten out, which meant empty places were there to be had. The driver looked like a straightforward kind of a guy, so Reacher had approached him in a straightforward kind of a fashion. Twenty bucks for a ride to Rapid City? The guy asked for forty and settled for thirty and Reacher had climbed aboard and been very comfortable all day long. But the comfort had come from soft springs and vague steering, neither one of which was doing anyone any favours at the current moment.

But seven seconds in, Reacher was getting optimistic. With no foot on the gas, the bus was slowing. Didn't feel like it, but it had to be true. Simple physics. Newton's Laws of Motion. As long as no other traffic hit them, they would wobble around for a spell and then come to rest, maybe side-on, maybe facing the wrong way, but still right side up and drivable. Then he felt the front tyres bite again and saw they were going to drive straight off the road. Which was bad. But the driver braked hard and held tight through a whole lot of thumping and banging and scraping and they ended up half on and half off the blacktop, which was OK, except they had their asses hanging out in the traffic lane, which was not OK, and there were suddenly no active mechanical sounds at all, like the bus was dead, which was definitely not OK.

Reacher glanced back and saw no oncoming headlights. Not right then. He got up and walked to the front of the bus and saw flat land ahead, all white with snow. No cliffs. No embankment. Therefore no danger from a weight transfer. So he ducked back and started encouraging the geezers to move up the bus towards the front. That way if an eighteen-wheeler slammed into them it might just shear off the rear of the bus without killing anyone. But the geezers were shaken and reluctant to move. They just sat there. So Reacher moved back up front. The driver was inert in his

seat, blinking a little and swallowing down his adrenalin rush.

Reacher said to him, 'Good work, pal.'

The guy nodded. 'Thanks.'

Reacher said, 'Can you get us out of this ditch?'

'I don't know.'

'Best guess?'

'Probably not.'

Reacher said, 'OK, have you got flares?'

'What?'

'Flares. Right now the back of the bus is sticking out in the traffic lane.'

The guy was unresponsive for a moment. Dazed. Then he leaned down and unlatched a locker beside his feet and came out with three warning flares, dull red cardboard tubes with steel spikes on the end. Reacher took them from him and said, 'Got a first-aid kit?'

The guy nodded again.

Reacher said, 'Take it and check the passengers for cuts and bruises. Encourage them to move up front as far as they can. Preferably all together in the aisle. If we get hit, it's going to be in the ass.'

The driver nodded for a third time and then shook himself like a dog and got into gear. He took a first-aid kit from another latched compartment and got up out of his seat.

Reacher said, 'Open the door first.'

The guy hit a button and the door sucked open. Freezing air blew in, with thick swirls of snow on it. Like a regular blizzard. Reacher said, 'Close the door after me. Stay warm.'

Then he jumped down into the ditch and fought through the ice and the mud to the shoulder. He stepped up on the blacktop and ran to the rear corner of the vehicle. Blowing snow pelted his face. He lined up on the lane markers and ran thirty paces back the way they had come. A curved trajectory. Thirty paces, thirty yards. Ninety feet. Near enough to eighty-eight. Eighty-eight feet per second was the same thing as sixty miles an hour, and plenty of lunatics would be driving sixty even in a snowstorm. He leaned down and jabbed a flare spike into the blacktop. The crimson flame ignited automatically and burned fiercely. He continued the curve and ran another thirty paces. Used the second flare. Ran another thirty and used the third to complete a warning sequence: three seconds, two, one, *move the hell over.*

Then he ran back and floundered through the ditch again and hammered on the door until the driver broke off his medical ministrations and opened up. Reacher climbed back inside. He brought a flurry of snow in with him. He was already seriously cold. His face was numb. His feet were freezing. And the interior of the bus itself was already cooling. The windows all along one side were already pasted with clumps of white. He said, 'You should keep the engine running. Keep the heaters going.'

The driver said, 'Can't. The fuel line could be cracked. From where we scraped.'

Reacher said, 'I didn't smell anything when I was outside.'

'I can't take the risk. Everyone is alive right now. I don't want to burn them up in a fire.'

'You want to freeze them to death instead?'

'Take over with the first aid. I'll try to make some calls.'

So Reacher ducked back and started checking the old folks. The driver had gotten through the first two rows.

That was clear. All four of the window-seat passengers were sporting Band-Aids over cuts from the metal edges around the glass. *Be careful what you wish for.* Better view, but higher risk. One woman had a second Band-Aid on the aisle side of her face, presumably from where her husband's head had hit her after bouncing around like a rag doll.

The first broken bone was in row three. A delicate old lady, built like a bird. She had been swinging right when the bus changed direction and swung left. The window had tapped her hard on the shoulder. The blow had bust her collar bone. Reacher could see it in the way she was cradling her arm. He said, 'Ma'am, may I take a look at that?'

She said, 'You're not a doctor.'

'I had some training in the army.'

'Were you a medic?'

'I was a military cop. We got some medical training.'

'I'm cold.'

'Shock,' Reacher said. 'And it's snowing.'

She turned her upper body towards him. Implied consent. He put his fingertips on her collar bone, through her blouse. The bone was as delicate as a pencil. It was snapped halfway along its length. A clean break. Not compound.

She asked, 'Is it bad?'

'It's good,' Reacher said. 'It did its job. A collar bone is like a circuit breaker. It breaks so that your shoulder and your neck stay OK. It heals fast and easy.'

'I need to go to the hospital.'

Reacher nodded. 'We'll get you there.'

He moved on. There was a sprained wrist in row four, and a broken wrist in row five. Plus a total of thirteen cuts,

many minor contusions, and a lot of shock reaction.

The temperature was dropping like a stone.

Reacher could see the flares out the rear side windows. They were still burning, three distinct crimson puffballs glowing in the swirling snow. No headlights coming. None at all. No traffic. He walked up the aisle, head bent, and found the driver. The guy was in his seat, holding an open cell phone in his right hand, staring through the windshield, drumming his left-hand fingertips on the wheel.

He said, 'We've got a problem.'

'What kind of a problem?'

'I called 911. The Highway Patrol is all either sixty miles north of here or sixty miles east. There are two big storms coming in. One from Canada, one off the Lakes. There's all kinds of mayhem. All the tow trucks went with them. They've got hundred-car pile-ups. This highway is closed behind us. And up ahead.'

No traffic.

'Where are we?'

'South Dakota.'

'I know that.'

'Then you know what I mean. If we're not in Sioux Falls or Rapid City, we're in the middle of nowhere. And we're not in Sioux Falls or Rapid City.'

'We have to be somewhere.'

'GPS shows a town nearby. Name of Bolton. Maybe twenty miles. But it's small. Just a dot on the map.'

'Can you get a replacement bus?'

'I'm out of Seattle. I could get one maybe four days after the snow stops.'

'Does the town of Bolton have a police department?'

'I'm waiting on a call.'

'Maybe they have tow trucks.'

'I'm sure they do. At least one. Maybe at the corner gas station, good for hauling broken-down half-ton pick-up trucks. Not so good for vehicles this size.'

'Maybe they have farm tractors.'

'They'd need about eight of them. And some serious chains.'

'Maybe they have a school bus. We could transfer.'

'The Highway Patrol won't abandon us. They'll get here.'

Reacher asked, 'What's your name?'

'Jay Knox.'

'You need to think ahead, Mr Knox. The Highway Patrol is an hour away under the best of circumstances. Two hours, in this weather. Three hours, given what they're likely dealing with. So we need to get a jump. Because an hour from now this bus is going to be an icebox. Two hours from now these wrinklies are going to be dropping like flies. Maybe sooner.'

'So what gets your vote?'

Reacher was about to answer when Knox's cell phone rang. The guy answered it and his face lightened a little. Then it fell again. He said, 'Thanks,' and closed the phone. He looked at Reacher and said, 'Apparently the town of Bolton has a police department. They're sending a guy. But they've got problems of their own and it will take some time.'

'How much time?'

'At least an hour.'

'What kind of problems?'

'They didn't say.'

'You're going to have to start the engine.'

'They've got coats.'

'Not good enough.'

'I'm worried about a fire.'

'Diesel fuel is a lot less volatile than gasoline.'

'What are you, an expert?'

'I was in the army. Trucks and Humvees were all diesel. For a reason.' Reacher glanced back down the aisle. 'Got a flashlight? Got an extinguisher?'

'Why?'

'I'll check the underbody. If it looks all clear I'll knock twice on the floor. You start up, if anything goes on fire I'll put it out and knock again and you can shut it down.'

'I don't know.'

'Best we can do. And we have to do something.'

Knox was quiet for a spell and then he shrugged and opened up a couple more compartments and came out with a silver Mag-lite and an extinguisher bottle. Reacher took them and waited for the door to open and climbed out into the spectral crimson world of the flares. Down into the ditch again. This time he trudged counterclockwise around the front of the bus because the oblique angle put more of the left side above the blacktop than the right. Crawling around in the freezing ditch was not an attractive prospect. Crawling around on the shoulder was marginally better.

He found the fuel filler door and sat down in the snow and then swivelled around and lay on his back and wriggled into position with his head under the side of the bus. He switched the flashlight on. Found the fat tube running from the filler mouth to the tank. It looked intact. The tank itself was a huge squared-off cylinder. It was a little dented and scraped from the impact. But nothing was leaking out of it. The fuel line running back towards the engine compartment looked OK. Snow soaked through Reacher's jacket and his shirt and freezing damp hit his skin.

He shivered.

He used the butt end of the Mag-lite and banged twice on a frame spar.

He heard relays clicking and a fuel pump start up. It wheezed and whined. He checked the tank. Checked the line, as far as the flashlight beam would let him. He kicked against the snow and pushed himself further under the bus.

No leaks.

The starter motor turned over.

The engine started. It clattered and rattled and settled to a hammer-heavy beat.

No leaks.

No fire.

No fumes.

He fought the cold and gave it another minute and used the time to check other things. The big tyres looked OK. Some of the front suspension members were a little banged up. The floor of the luggage hold was dented here and there. A few small tubes and hoses were crushed and torn and split. Some Seattle insurer was about to get a fair-sized bill.

He scabbled out and stood up and brushed off. His clothes were soaked. Snow swirled all around him. Fat, heavy flakes. There were two fresh inches on the ground. His footsteps from four minutes ago were already dusted white. He followed them back to the ditch and floundered around to the door. Knox was waiting for him. The door opened and he climbed aboard. Blowing snow howled in after him. He shivered. The door closed.

The engine stopped.

Knox sat down in his seat and hit the starter button. Way at the back of the bus Reacher heard the starter motor

turning, churning, straining, wheezing, over and over again.

Nothing happened.

Knox asked, 'What did you see down there?'

'Damage,' Reacher said. 'Lots of things all banged up.'

'Crushed tubes?'

'Some.'

Knox nodded. 'The fuel line is pinched off. We just used up what was left in the pipe, and now no more is getting through. Plus the brakes could be shot. Maybe it's just as well the engine won't run.'

'Call the Bolton PD again,' Reacher said. 'This is serious.'

Knox dialled and Reacher headed back towards the passengers. He hauled coats off the overhead racks and told the old folks to put them on. Plus hats and gloves and scarves and mufflers and anything else they had.

He had nothing. Just what he stood up in, and what he stood up in was soaked and freezing. His body heat was leaching away. He was shivering, just a little, but continuously. Small crawling thrills, all over his skin. *Be careful what you wish for.* A life without baggage had many advantages. But crucial disadvantages, too.

He headed back to Knox's seat. The door was leaking air. The bus was colder at the front than the back. He said, 'Well?'

Knox said, 'They're sending a car as soon as possible.'

'A car won't do it.'

'I told them that. I described the problem. They said they'll work something out.'

'You seen storms like this before?'

'This is not a storm. The storm is sixty miles away. This is the edge.'

Reacher shivered. 'Is it coming our way?'

'No question.'

'How fast?'

'Don't ask.'

Reacher left him there and walked down the aisle, all the way past the last of the seats. He sat on the floor outside the toilet, with his back pressed hard against the rear bulkhead, hoping to feel some residual heat coming in from the cooling engine.

He waited.

Five minutes to five in the afternoon.

Fifty-nine hours to go.

THREE

Forty-five minutes later the lawyer got home. A long, slow trip. His driveway was unploughed and he worried for a moment that his garage door would be frozen shut. But he hit the remote and the half-horsepower motor on the ceiling inside did its job and the door rose up in its track and he drove in. Then the door wouldn't shut after him, because the clumps of snow his tyres had pushed in triggered the door's child safety feature. So he fussed with his overshoes once more and took a shovel and pushed the snow back out again. The door closed. The lawyer took off his overshoes again and stood for a moment at the mud room door, composing himself, cleansing himself, taking a mental shower. Twenty minutes to six. He walked through to the warmth of his kitchen and greeted his family, as if it was just another day.

By twenty minutes to six the inside of the bus was dark and icy and Reacher was hugging himself hard and shivering violently. Ahead of him the twenty old people and Knox the driver were all doing pretty much the same thing. The windows on the windward side of the bus were all black with stuck snow. The windows on the leeward side showed a grey panorama. A blizzard, blowing in from the north and the east, driven hard and relentlessly by the winter wind, hitting the aerodynamic interruption of the dead vehicle, boiling over it and under it and around it and swirling into the vacuum behind it, huge weightless flakes dancing randomly up and down and left and right.

Then: faint lights in the grey panorama.

White lights, and red, and blue, pale luminous spheres snapping and popping and moving through the gloom. The faint patter of snow chains in the eerie padded silence. A cop car, coming towards them on the wrong side of the divided highway, nosing slow and cautious through the weather.

A long minute later a cop was inside the bus. He had come through the ditch and in through the door, but he had just gotten out of a heated car and he was wearing winter boots and waterproof pants and gloves and a parka and a plastic rain shield over a fur hat with ear flaps, so he was in pretty good shape. He was tall and lean and had lined blue eyes in a face that had seen plenty of summer sun and winter wind. He said his name was Andrew Peterson and that he was second-in-command over at the Bolton PD. He took off his gloves and moved through the aisle, shaking hands and introducing himself by name and rank over and over again, to each individual and each couple, in a manner designed to appear guileless and frank and enthusiastic, like a good old country boy just plain delighted to help out in an emergency. But Reacher was watching those lined blue eyes and thinking that his front was false. Reacher was thinking that Peterson was actually a fairly shrewd man with more things on his mind than a simple road rescue.

That impression was reinforced when Peterson started asking questions. Who were they all? Where were they from? Where had they started today? Where were they headed tonight? Did they have hotel reservations up ahead? Easy answers for Knox and the twenty old folks, a tour group, from Seattle, hustling from one scheduled stop at the Dakotaland Museum to the next at Mount Rushmore, and yes, they had confirmed reservations at a tourist motel near the monument, thirteen rooms, for the four married couples, plus four pairs who were sharing, plus four