

BLUE MOON

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ONE

The city looked small on a map of America. It was just a tiny polite dot, near a red threadlike road that ran across an otherwise empty half inch of paper. But up close and on the ground it had half a million people. It covered more than a hundred square miles. It had nearly a hundred and fifty thousand households. It had more than two thousand acres of parkland. It spent half a billion dollars a year, and raised almost as much through taxes and fees and charges. It was big enough that the police department was twelve hundred strong.

And it was big enough that organized crime was split two separate ways. The west of the city was run by Ukrainians. The east was run by Albanians. The demarcation line between them was gerrymandered as tight as a congressional district. Nominally it followed Center Street, which ran north to south and divided the city in half, but it zigged and zagged and ducked in and out to include or exclude specific blocks and parts of specific neighbourhoods, wherever it was felt historic precedents justified special circumstances. Negotiations had been tense. There had been

minor turf wars. There had been some unpleasantness. But eventually an agreement had been reached. The arrangement seemed to work. Each side kept out of the other's way. For a long time there had been no significant contact between them.

Until one morning in May. The Ukrainian boss parked in a garage on Center Street, and walked east into Albanian territory. Alone. He was fifty years old and built like a bronze statue of an old hero, tall, hard, and solid. He called himself Gregory, which was as close as Americans could get to pronouncing his given name. He was unarmed, and he was wearing tight pants and a tight T-shirt to prove it. Nothing in his pockets. Nothing concealed. He turned left and right, burrowing deep, heading for a backstreet block, where he knew the Albanians ran their businesses out of a suite of offices in back of a lumber yard.

He was followed all the way, from his first step across the line. Calls were made ahead, so that when he arrived he was faced by six silent figures, all standing still in the half circle between the sidewalk and the lumber yard's gate. Like chess pieces in a defensive formation. He stopped and held his arms out from his sides. He turned around slowly, a full 360, his arms still held wide. Tight pants, tight T-shirt. No lumps. No bulges. No knife. No gun. Unarmed, in front of six guys who undoubtedly weren't. But he wasn't worried. To attack him unprovoked was a step the Albanians wouldn't take. He knew that. Courtesies had to be observed. Manners were manners.

One of the six silent figures stepped up. Partly a blocking manoeuvre, partly ready to listen.

Gregory said, 'I need to speak with Dino.'

Dino was the Albanian boss.

The guy said, 'Why?'

'I have information.'

'About what?'

'Something he needs to know.'

'I could give you a phone number.'

'This is a thing that needs to be said face to face.'

'Does it need to be said right now?'

'Yes, it does.'

The guy said nothing for a spell, and then he turned and ducked through a personnel door set low in a metal roll-up gate. The other five guys formed up tighter, to replace his missing presence. Gregory waited. The five guys watched him, part wary, part fascinated. It was a unique occasion. Once in a lifetime. Like seeing a unicorn. The other side's boss. Right there. Previous negotiations had been held on neutral ground, on a golf course way out of town, on the other side of the highway.

Gregory waited. Five long minutes later the guy came back out through the personnel door. He left it open. He gestured. Gregory walked forward and ducked and stepped inside. He smelled fresh pine and heard the whine of a saw.

The guy said, 'We need to search you for a wire.'

Gregory nodded and stripped off his T-shirt. His torso was thick and hard and matted with hair. No wire. The guy checked the seams in his T-shirt and handed it back. Gregory put it on and ran his fingers through his hair.

The guy said, 'This way.'

He led Gregory deep into the corrugated shed. The other five guys followed. They came to a plain metal door. Beyond it was a windowless space set up like a boardroom. Four laminate tables had been pushed together end to end, like a barrier. In a chair in the centre on the far side was Dino. He was younger than Gregory by a year or two, and shorter by an inch or two, but wider. He had dark hair, and a knife scar on the left side of his face, shorter above the eyebrow and longer from cheekbone to chin, like an upside down exclamation point.

The guy who had done the talking pulled out a chair for Gregory opposite Dino, and then tracked around and sat down at

Dino's right hand, like a faithful lieutenant. The other five split three and two and sat alongside them. Gregory was left alone on his side of the table, facing seven blank faces. At first no one spoke. Then eventually Dino asked, 'To what do I owe this great pleasure?'

Manners were manners.

Gregory said, 'The city is about to get a new police commissioner.'

'We know this,' Dino said.

'Promoted from within.'

'We know this,' Dino said again.

'He has promised a crackdown, against both of us.'

'We know this,' Dino said, for the third time.

'We have a spy in his office.'

Dino said nothing. He hadn't known that.

Gregory said, 'Our spy found a secret file on a standalone hard drive hidden in a drawer.'

'What file?'

'His operational plan for cracking down on us.'

'Which is what?'

'It's short on detail,' Gregory said. 'In parts it's extremely sketchy. But not to worry. Because day by day and week by week he's filling in more and more parts of the puzzle. Because he's getting a constant stream of inside information.'

'From where?'

'Our spy searched long and hard and found a different file.'

'What different file?'

'It was a list.'

'A list of what?'

'The police department's most trusted confidential informants,' Gregory said.

'And?'

'There were four names on the list.'

'And?'

'Two of them were my own men,' Gregory said.

No one spoke.

Eventually Dino asked, 'What have you done with them?'

'I'm sure you can imagine.'

Again no one spoke.

Then Dino asked, 'Why are you telling me this? What has this got to do with me?'

'The other two names on the list are your men.'

Silence.

Gregory said, 'We share a predicament.'

Dino asked, 'Who are they?'

Gregory said the names.

Dino said, 'Why are you telling me about them?'

'Because we have an agreement,' Gregory said. 'I'm a man of my word.'

'You stand to benefit enormously if I go down. You would run the whole city.'

'I stand to benefit only on paper,' Gregory said. 'Suddenly I realize I should be happy with the status quo. Where would I find enough honest men to run your operations? Apparently I can't even find enough to run my own.'

'And apparently neither can I.'

'So we'll fight each other tomorrow. Today we'll respect the agreement. I'm sorry to have brought you embarrassing news. But I embarrassed myself also. In front of you. I hope that counts for something. We share this predicament.'

Dino nodded. Said nothing.

Gregory said, 'I have a question.'

'Then ask it,' Dino said.

'Would you have told me, like I told you, if the spy had been yours, and not mine?'

Dino was quiet a very long time.

Then he said, 'Yes, and for the same reasons. We have an agreement. And if we both have names on their list, then neither one of us should be in a hurry to get foolish.'

Gregory nodded and stood up.

Dino's right-hand man stood up to show him out.

Dino asked, 'Are we safe now?'

'We are from my side,' Gregory said. 'I can guarantee that. As of six o'clock this morning. We have a guy at the city crematorium. He owes us money. He was willing to light the fire a little early today.'

Dino nodded and said nothing.

Gregory asked, 'Are we safe from your side?'

'We will be,' Dino said. 'By tonight. We have a guy at the car crushing plant. He owes us money too.'

The right-hand man showed Gregory out, across the deep shed to the low door in the roll-up gate, and out to the bright May morning sunshine.

At that same moment Jack Reacher was seventy miles away, in a Greyhound bus, on the interstate highway. He was on the left side of the vehicle, towards the rear, in the window seat over the axle. There was no one next to him. Altogether there were twenty-nine other passengers. The usual mixture. Nothing special. Except for one particular situation, which was mildly interesting. Across the aisle and one row in front was a guy asleep with his head hanging down. He had grey hair overdue for a trim, and loose grey skin, as if he had lost a lot of weight. He could have been seventy years old. He was wearing a short blue zip jacket. Some kind of heavy cotton. Maybe waterproof. The butt end of a fat envelope was sticking out of the pocket.

It was a type of envelope Reacher recognized. He had seen similar items before. Sometimes, if their ATM was busted, he would step inside a bank branch and get cash with his card from the

teller, directly across the counter. The teller would ask how much he wanted, and he would think, well, if ATM reliability was on the decline, then maybe he should get a decent wad, to be on the safe side, and he would ask for two or three times what he normally took. A large sum. Whereupon the teller would ask if he wanted an envelope with that. Sometimes Reacher said yes, just for the sake of it, and he would get his wad in an envelope exactly like the one sticking out of the sleeping guy's pocket. Same thick paper, same size, same proportions, same bulge, same heft. A few hundred dollars, or a few thousand, depending on the mix of bills.

Reacher wasn't the only one who had seen it. The guy dead ahead had seen it too. That was clear. He was taking a big interest. He was glancing across and down, across and down, over and over. He was a lean young guy with greasy hair and a thin goatee beard. Twenty-something, in a jeans jacket. Not much more than a kid. Glancing, thinking, planning. Licking his lips.

The bus rolled on. Reacher took turns watching out the window, and watching the envelope, and watching the guy watching the envelope.

Gregory came out of the Center Street garage and drove back into safe Ukrainian territory. His offices were in back of a taxi company, across from a pawn shop, next to a bail bond operation, all of which he owned. He parked and went inside. His top guys were waiting there. Four of them, all similar to each other, and to him. Not related in the traditional family sense, but they were from the same towns and villages and prisons back in the old country, which was probably even better.

They all looked at him. Four faces, eight wide eyes, but only one question.

Which he answered.

'Total success,' he said. 'Dino bought the whole story. That's

one dumb donkey, let me tell you. I could have sold him the Brooklyn Bridge. The two guys I named are history. He'll take a day to reshuffle. Opportunity knocks, my friends. We have about twenty-four hours. Their flank is wide open.'

'That's Albanians for you,' his own right-hand man said.

'Where did you send our two?'

'The Bahamas. There's a casino guy who owes us money. He has a nice hotel.'

The green federal signs on the highway shoulder showed a city coming up. The first stop of the day. Reacher watched the guy with the goatee map out his play. There were two unknowns. Was the guy with the money planning to get out there? And if not, would he wake up anyway, with the slowing and the turning and the jolting?

Reacher watched. The bus took the exit. A state four-lane then carried it south, through flat land moist with recent rain. The ride was smooth. The tyres hissed. The guy with the money stayed asleep. The guy with the goatee beard kept on watching him. Reacher guessed his plan was made. He wondered how good of a plan it was. The smart play would be pickpocket the envelope pretty soon, conceal it well, and then aim to get out of the bus as soon as it stopped. Even if the guy woke up short of the depot, he would be confused at first. Maybe he wouldn't even notice the envelope was gone. Not right away. And even when he did, why would he jump straight to conclusions? He would figure it had fallen out. He would spend a minute looking on the seat, and under it, and under the seat in front, because he might have kicked it in his sleep. Only after all of that would he start to look around, questioningly. By which time the bus would be stopped and people would be getting up and getting out and getting in. The aisle would be jammed. A guy could slip away, no problem. That was the smart play.

Did the guy know it?

Reacher never found out.

The guy with the money woke up too soon.

The bus slowed, and then stopped for a light with a hiss of brakes, and the guy's head jerked up, and he blinked, and patted his pocket, and shoved the envelope down deeper, where no one could see it.

Reacher sat back.

The guy with the beard sat back.

The bus rolled on. There were fields either side, dusted pale green with spring. Then came the first commercial lots, for farm equipment, and domestic automobiles, all spread over huge acreages, with hundreds of shiny machines lined up under flags and bunting. Then came office parks, and a giant out-of-town supermarket. Then came the city itself. The four-lane narrowed to two. Up ahead were taller buildings. But the bus turned off left and tracked around, keeping a polite distance behind the high-rent districts, until half a mile later it arrived at the depot. The first stop of the day. Reacher stayed in his seat. His ticket was good for the end of the line.

The guy with the money stood up.

He kind of nodded to himself, and hitched up his pants, and tugged down his jacket. All the things an old guy does, when he's about to get out of a bus.

He stepped into the aisle, and shuffled forward. No bag. Just him. Grey hair, blue jacket, one pocket fat, one pocket empty.

The guy with the goatee beard got a new plan.

It came on him all of a sudden. Reacher could practically see the gears spinning in the back of his head. Coming up cherries. A sequence of conclusions built on a chain of assumptions. Bus depots were never in the nice part of town. The exit doors would give out on to cheap streets, the backs of other buildings, maybe vacant lots, maybe self-pay parking. There would be blind corners

and empty sidewalks. It would be a twenty-something against a seventy-something. A blow from behind. A simple mugging. Happened all the time. How hard could it be?

The guy with the goatee beard jumped up and hustled down the aisle, following the guy with the money six feet behind.

Reacher got up and followed them both.

TWO

The guy with the money knew where he was going. That was clear. He didn't glance around to get his bearings. He just stepped through the depot door and turned east and set out walking. No hesitation. But no speed either. He trudged along slow. He looked a little unsteady. His shoulders were slumped. He looked old and tired and worn out and beaten down. He had no enthusiasm. He looked like he was en route between two points of equally zero appeal.

The guy with the goatee beard followed along about six paces behind, hanging back, staying slow, restraining himself. Which looked difficult. He was a rangy, long-legged individual, all hopped up with excitement and anticipation. He wanted to get right to it. But the terrain was wrong. Too flat and open. The sidewalks were wide. Up ahead was a four-way traffic light, with three cars waiting for a green. Three drivers, bored, gazing about. Maybe passengers. All potential witnesses. Better to wait.

The guy with the money stopped at the kerb. Waiting to cross. Aiming dead ahead. Where there were older buildings, with

narrower streets between. Wider than alleys, but shaded from the sun, and hemmed in by mean three- and four-storey walls either side.

Better terrain.

The light changed. The guy with the money trudged across the road, obediently, as if resigned. The guy with the goatee beard followed six paces behind. Reacher closed the gap on him a little. He sensed the moment coming. The kid wasn't going to wait for ever. He wasn't going to let the perfect be the enemy of the good. Two blocks in would do it.

They walked on, single file, spaced apart, oblivious. The first block felt good up ahead and side to side, but behind them it still felt open, so the guy with the beard hung back, until the guy with the money was over the cross street and into the second block. Which looked properly secretive. It was shady at both ends. There were a couple of boarded-up establishments, and a closed-down diner, and a tax preparer with dusty windows.

Perfect.

Decision time.

Reacher guessed the kid would go for it, right there, and he guessed the launch would be prefaced by a nervous glance all around, including behind, so he stayed out of sight around the cross street's corner, one second, two, three, which he figured was long enough for all the glances a person could need. Then he stepped out and saw the kid with the beard already closing the gap ahead, hustling, eating up the six-pace distance with a long and eager stride. Reacher didn't like running, but on that occasion he had to.

He got there too late. The guy with the beard shoved the guy with the money, who went down forward with a heavy ragged thump, hands, knees, head, and the guy with the beard swooped down in a seamless dexterous glide, into the still-moving pocket, and out again with the envelope. Which was when Reacher

arrived, at a clumsy run, six feet five of bone and muscle and 250 pounds of moving mass, against a lean kid just then coming up out of a crouch. Reacher slammed into him with a twist and a dip of the shoulder, and the guy flailed through the air like a crash test dummy, and landed in a long sliding tangle of limbs, half on the sidewalk, half in the gutter. He came to rest and lay still.

Reacher walked over and took the envelope from him. It wasn't sealed. They never were. He took a look. The wad was about three quarters of an inch thick. A hundred dollar bill on the top, and a hundred dollar bill on the bottom. He flicked through. A hundred dollar bill in every other possible location, too. Thousands and thousands of dollars. Could be fifteen. Could be twenty grand.

He glanced back. The old guy's head was up. He was gazing about, panic-stricken. He had a cut on his face. From the fall. Or maybe his nose was bleeding. Reacher held up the envelope. The old guy stared at it. He tried to get up, but couldn't.

Reacher walked back.

He said, 'Anything broken?'

The guy said, 'What happened?'

'Can you move?'

'I think so.'

'OK, roll over.'

'Here?'

'On your back,' Reacher said. 'Then we can sit you up.'

'What happened?'

'First I need to check you out. I might need to call the ambulance. You got a phone?'

'No ambulance,' the guy said. 'No doctors.'

He took a breath and clamped his teeth, and squirmed and thrashed until he rolled over on his back, like a guy in bed with a nightmare.

He breathed out.

Reacher said, 'Where does it hurt?'

'Everywhere.'

'Regular kind of thing, or worse?'

'I guess regular.'

'OK then.'

Reacher got the flat of his hand under the guy's back, high up between his shoulder blades, and he folded him forward into a sitting position, and swivelled him around, and scooted him along, until he was sitting on the kerb with his feet down on the road, which would be more comfortable, Reacher thought.

The guy said, 'My mom always told me, don't play in the gutter.'

'Mine too,' Reacher said. 'But right now we ain't playing.'

He handed over the envelope. The guy took it and squeezed it all over, fingers and thumb, as if confirming it was real. Reacher sat down next to him. The guy looked inside the envelope.

'What happened?' he said again. He pointed. 'Did that guy mug me?'

Twenty feet to their right the kid with the goatee beard was face down and motionless.

'He followed you off the bus,' Reacher said. 'He saw the envelope in your pocket.'

'Were you on the bus too?'

Reacher nodded.

He said, 'I came out the depot right behind you.'

The guy put the envelope back in his pocket.

He said, 'Thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have no idea. More than I can possibly say.'

'You're welcome,' Reacher said.

'You saved my life.'

'My pleasure.'

'I feel like I should offer you a reward.'

'Not necessary.'

'I can't anyway,' the guy said. He touched his pocket. 'This is a payment I have to make. It's very important. I need it all. I'm sorry. I apologize. I feel bad.'

'Don't,' Reacher said.

Twenty feet to their right the kid with the beard pushed himself up to his hands and knees.

The guy with the money said, 'No police.'

The kid glanced back. He was stunned and shaky, but he was already twenty feet ahead. Should he go for it?

Reacher said, 'Why no police?'

'They ask questions when they see a lot of cash.'

'Questions you don't want to answer?'

'I can't anyway,' the guy said again.

The kid with the beard took off. He staggered to his feet and set out fleeing the scene, weak and bruised and floppy and uncoordinated, but still plenty fast. Reacher let him go. He had run enough for one day.

The guy with the money said, 'I need to get going now.'

He had scrapes on his cheek and his forehead, and blood on his upper lip, from his nose, which had taken a decent impact.

'You sure you're OK?' Reacher asked.

'I better be,' the guy said. 'I don't have much time.'

'Let me see you stand up.'

The guy couldn't. Either his core strength had drained away, or his knees were bad, or both. Hard to say. Reacher helped him to his feet. The guy stood in the gutter, facing the opposite side of the street, hunched and bent. He turned around, laboriously, shuffling in place.

He couldn't step up the kerb. He got his foot in place, but the propulsive force necessary to boost himself up six inches was too much load for his knee to take. It must have been bruised and sore. There was a bad scuff on the fabric of his pants, right where his kneecap would be.

Reacher stood behind him and cupped his hands under his elbows, and lifted, and the guy stepped up weightless, like a man on the moon.

Reacher asked, 'Can you walk?'

The guy tried. He managed small steps, delicate and precise, but he winced and gasped, short and sharp, every time his right leg took the weight.

'How far have you got to go?' Reacher asked.

The guy looked all around, calibrating. Making sure where he was.

'Three more blocks,' he said. 'On the other side of the street.'

'That's a lot of kerbs,' Reacher said. 'That's a lot of stepping up and down.'

'I'll walk it off.'

'Show me,' Reacher said.

The guy set out, heading east as before, at a slow shuffling creep, with his hands out a little, as if for balance. The wincing and the gasping was loud and clear. Maybe getting worse.

'You need a cane,' Reacher said.

'I need a lot of things,' the guy said.

Reacher stepped around next to him, on the right, and cupped his elbow, and took the guy's weight in his palm. Mechanically the same thing as a stick or a cane or a crutch. An upward force, ultimately through the guy's shoulder. Newtonian physics.

'Try it now,' Reacher said.

'You can't come with me.'

'Why not?'

The guy said, 'You've done enough for me already.'

'That's not the reason. You would have said you really couldn't ask me to do that. Something vague and polite. But you were much more emphatic than that. You said I can't come with you. Why? Where are you going?'

'I can't tell you.'

'You can't get there without me.'

The guy breathed in and breathed out, and his lips moved, like he was rehearsing things to say. He raised his hand and touched the scrape on his forehead, then his cheek, then his nose. More wincing.

He said, 'Help me to the right block, and help me across the street. Then turn around and go home. That's the biggest favour you could do for me. I mean it. I would be grateful. I'm already grateful. I hope you understand.'

'I don't,' Reacher said.

'I'm not allowed to bring anyone.'

'Who says?'

'I can't tell you.'

'Suppose I was headed in that direction anyway. You could peel off and go in the door and I could walk on.'

'You would know where I went.'

'I already know.'

'How could you?'

Reacher had seen all kinds of cities, all across America, east, west, north, south, all kinds of sizes and ages and current conditions. He knew their rhythms and their grammars. He knew the history baked into their bricks. The block he was on was one of a hundred thousand just like it east of the Mississippi. Back offices for dry goods wholesalers, some specialist retail, some light manufacturing, some lawyers and shipping agents and land agents and travel agents. Maybe some tenement accommodations in the rear courtyards. All peaking in terms of hustle and bustle in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Now crumbled and corroded and hollowed out by time. Hence the boarded-up establishments and the closed-down diner. But some places held out longer than others. Some places held out longest of all. Some habits and appetites were stubborn.

'Three blocks east of here, and across the street,' Reacher said. 'The bar. That's where you're headed.'

The guy said nothing.

'To make a payment,' Reacher said. 'In a bar, before lunch. Therefore to some kind of a local loan shark. That's my guess. Fifteen or twenty grand. You're in trouble. I think you sold your car. You got the best cash price out of town. Maybe a collector. A regular guy like you, it could have been an old car. You drove out there and took the bus back. Via the buyer's bank. The teller put the cash in an envelope.'

'Who are you?'

'A bar is a public place. I get thirsty, same as anyone else. Maybe they have coffee. I'll sit at a different table. You can pretend not to know me. You'll need help getting out again. That knee is going to stiffen up some.'

'Who are you?' the guy said again.

'My name is Jack Reacher. I was a military cop. I was trained to detect things.'

'It was a Chevy Caprice. The old style. All original. Perfect condition. Very low miles.'

'I know nothing about cars.'

'People like the old Caprices now.'

'How much did you get for it?'

'Twenty-two five.'

Reacher nodded. More than he thought. Crisp new bills, packed tight.

He said, 'You owe it all?'

'Until twelve o'clock,' the guy said. 'After that it goes up.'

'Then we better get going. This could be a relatively slow process.'

'Thank you,' the guy said. 'My name is Aaron Shevick. I am forever in your debt.'

'The kindness of strangers,' Reacher said. 'Makes the world go round. Some guy wrote a play about it.'

'Tennessee Williams,' Shevick said. '*A Streetcar Named Desire.*'
'One of which we could use right now. Three blocks for a nickel
would be a bargain.'

They set out walking, Reacher stepping slow and short,
Shevick hopping and pecking and lurching, all lopsided because
of Newtonian physics.