

PROLOGUE

JR answered the prepaid cell phone and listened to the recorded message, a message from Mr. S himself:

Tomorrow at 10:30 p.m.

That was it. Much shorter than usual, but based on the previous messages, JR understood it completely. He was to drive the old van to the predetermined location and meet with two men. The men would be armed, and they would be wearing ski masks. They would give JR instructions on where to take them.

Five thousand dollars just for driving. Easy money. JR poured himself a cup of coffee and smiled, happy that he was finally making some decent money doing the kind of work he enjoyed.

1

The chrome letters tacked to the wall over the service counter said Mac's Diner.

Mac's.

Original.

United States Deputy Marshal Clete L. Garrison was dragging a French fry through the ketchup on his plate when a pair of armed robbers walked in and told everyone to get on the floor.

Jeans, leather jackets, ski masks. Walking clichés, every meth head's vision of what a menacing thug should look like. One of them had red eyebrows and a revolver, the other a very skinny body and a sawed-off shotgun. Garrison slid out of the booth and eased himself to a facedown position, lying head-to-head with Felisa Cayenne, the young lady who'd been sitting across from him at the table.

"Do something," Felisa said. "You're supposed to be protecting me."

"Trust me. That's what I'm doing."

"You're a federal law enforcement officer. You can't just lie here and do nothing."

“Watch me.”

The robbers were amateurs. You could tell by the way they dressed and the weapons they carried. The grips on the handgun were secured with electrical tape, and the barrel on the twelve-gauge appeared to have been filed with a chunk of concrete. Addicts in need of a fix, most likely. All they wanted was money.

“Look,” Shotgun Slim said. “Guy in the sports coat. There’s a bulge under his left armpit.”

Revolver Red advanced toward Deputy Marshal Garrison.

“You a cop?” he said.

“Just take what you want and get out of here.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“I think I did.”

“Pull the gun out and toss it over here. Try anything and I’ll kill you.”

Garrison reached into his jacket, unsnapped the safety strap on his shoulder holster, gripped the butt of his semi-automatic pistol with two fingers, eased it out and tossed it toward Revolver Red’s feet.

Shotgun Slim had herded the kitchen staff and the waitresses into one corner, and all the other customers were curled up on the floor beside their tables. One of the women was praying softly.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Garrison said. “You got a third guy waiting in a car outside. He probably never wanted to do this in the first place. That’s why he’s out there, and you’re in here. He’s probably getting a little antsy right now, because this was only supposed to take a couple of minutes. He’s getting nervous. Sweating bullets. Another sixty seconds and he’ll be

smoking the tires out of the parking lot. What then? You going to hitchhike home with your loot?"

"Shut up," Revolver Red said. He grabbed the semi-automatic and jammed it into his waistband, leaned over and started patting Garrison's pockets. He extracted a set of keys and a leather wallet.

"There's about two hundred dollars in there," Garrison said. "You can have it. Just leave everything else."

"Clete L. Garrison," Revolver Red said. "United States Deputy Marshal. What's the L stand for? Loser?"

"It stands for none of your business."

Revolver Red laughed. "You're a real tough guy, aren't you? Let's see how tough you are with your brains splattered all over the—"

"Wait," Shotgun Slim said. "He's a U.S. Marshal? Who's the chick with him?"

"How am I supposed to know?"

"Get her ID."

Revolver Red tapped Felisa's leg with the toe of his leather work boot.

"Turn over," he said.

Felisa turned over.

"My purse is in the car," she said. "Please don't hurt me."

"I'm not going to hurt you, baby. What's your name?"

"Seriously?"

Shotgun Slim walked over from the other side of the room. The sides of his sneakers were stained with some sort of red dirt. He was holding a brown paper carryout bag filled with money from the cash register.

“I know who you are,” he said to Felisa. “My daughter has all your songs on her iPhone.”

“Who is she?” Revolver Red said.

“Felisa Cayenne. She’s a singer. She has a TV show.”

“I thought I smelled money.”

“Yeah, and she has a United States Marshal with her. We need to go.”

“You’re kidding, right? This could be the best score ever.”

“You want to kidnap Felisa Cayenne?”

“Why not? We could be millionaires.”

There was a long pause. Shotgun Slim was thinking it over.

“No,” he said. “Let’s just take what we have and bounce.”

“I don’t think so.” Revolver Red aimed his gun at Felisa’s face. “Get up, baby. We’re going for a ride.”

“Please,” Felisa said. “My earrings are real diamonds. They’re worth—”

Revolver Red kicked her in the ribs. Hard.

“Get up!” he shouted.

“Leave her alone,” Shotgun Slim said.

While Revolver Red and Shotgun Slim were staring each other down, bickering about whether or not to take their little caper to the next level, Garrison took the opportunity to reach for the backup pistol strapped to his left ankle.

Unfortunately, Revolver Red witnessed the movement from the corner of his eye.

Before Garrison could clear leather, Revolver Red aimed and fired twice.

While all this was going on, there was a man sitting in a corner booth on the other side of the restaurant, calmly sipping on a cup of coffee.

It was very good coffee.

Hot.

Black.

Just the way he liked it.

The driver's license in the man's wallet identified him as Derek Ray Green, but that wasn't his real name.

His real name was Nicholas Colt.

And he was taking notes.

2

The man portraying the role of Clete L. Garrison was not a professional actor. Like the other players in this cheesy little dramatic recreation of the Felisa Cayenne abduction, he worked for The Circle, a secret government agency that specialized in monitoring and eliminating homegrown terrorists and assassins. Unlike the other players on the set, he was the lead operative on the project, and he was Nicholas Colt's immediate supervisor.

His name was Kurt Valinger.

He rose from the floor, brushed himself off, walked over to Colt's table carrying a large envelope.

"What did you think?" Valinger said.

"I thought the coffee was very good."

"About the training exercise."

"Not very good."

Valinger slid into the booth. He was younger than Colt, mid-thirties probably, but most of his hair had abandoned ship, and what was left had started graying at the temples. Brown eyes, flabby chin, acne scars. He didn't look anything like the secret agents you see in the movies.

"What was your problem with it?" he said.

"For one thing, the whole troop could use some acting lessons."

"But you got the gist, right?"

"Yeah. I got the gist. How accurate is it?"

"Well, there weren't any security cameras inside the restaurant, so we had to cobble it all together from eyewitness reports. You know how that goes. But I think it's pretty close to what actually went down."

"Why is The Circle involved in a kidnapping case?" Colt said. "I thought the FBI handled that sort of thing."

"They do. We're not investigating the abduction. We're interested in the guy who drove the getaway car."

The getaway car.

Okay.

That didn't make any more sense than the rest of it.

Colt sipped his coffee. "Why didn't Garrison square off against the bad guys right off the bat? He never should have gotten on the floor."

"He's dead, and we'll never know for sure, but we think his actions—or lack thereof—might have been related to his involvement in a similar incident four years ago. In that case, three innocent bystanders were hit by Garrison's stray bullets. Two of them died. One of the ones who died was an eleven-year-old girl."

“He probably should have been taken off field duty at that point.”

“Probably.”

“Was there ever any sort of ransom demand for Felisa?”

“No. Which is really strange. From what we gathered from the witnesses inside the restaurant that night, it seemed like these guys were totally in it for the money.”

“One more thing,” Colt said. “Why was Felisa being escorted by a law enforcement agent?”

“She was on her way to testify at a murder trial.”

Colt considered that. “Seems like quite a coincidence that she got nabbed when she did. Are you sure—”

“We’re not sure of anything at this point, but we’re thinking it was just that. A coincidence. Several witnesses at the diner said the perpetrators seemed surprised that she was there. The one guy didn’t even know who she was.”

“Could have been an act.”

“I don’t think so. Anyway, the FBI is handling all that.”

Valinger opened the envelope and pulled out a black and white photograph, what appeared to be an enlarged still from a security camera. At the center of the composition there was a Caucasian male leaning against an older model Ford Econoline van. Missing bumper, no hubcaps, dented fenders. The image was grainy and blurry, but Colt could see the outline of the man well enough.

“You’d think an NFL linebacker could afford a nicer vehicle,” he said. “Who is this guy?”

Valinger pulled out another photograph, a portrait of an army officer in his dress uniform. Ribbons, medals, the works. There was an American flag in the background and a gold leaf pinned to each shoulder board.

“We’re pretty sure this officer is a younger version of the guy standing by the van,” Valinger said. “His name is Jack Reacher. He was a major in the United States Army. Military Police, One Hundred and Tenth Special Investigations Unit. He was a good guy, once upon a time. A bit of a rogue, but good. Now he’s a drifter. No home address, no source of steady income.”

Colt studied the photos side by side.

“Could be the same man, but it’s hard to tell. The resolution on this one is—”

“We know Reacher was in the area at the time, and our height and weight estimates from the security footage match up. He’s a very large man. Six feet five inches tall, two hundred thirty pounds. Your comparison to an NFL linebacker wasn’t far from the mark. He’s ripped like someone who works out at the gym eight hours a day, yet supposedly he never exercises. According to our intel on him, it’s all natural. Genetic. Like some kind of animal. Six-pack abs, pecs like slabs of granite, biceps like bowling balls. It’s in his DNA, along with some very unusual patterns of aggression. But you’re right about the picture. It’s hard to tell. We’re not a hundred percent certain that Jack Reacher is the man leaning against the Ford van. That’s where you come in.”

Colt didn’t want anything to do with any of it, but he didn’t have much of a choice. On his last assignment with The Circle, in a charming little place in Indiana called Sycamore Bluff, he’d managed to become the target of a South American drug kingpin named Sergio Del Chivo.

And since Colt was a target, so were Juliet and Brittney, his wife and adopted daughter.

The Circle had whisked Colt away to a secure location and had altered his appearance with plastic surgery and hair dye and contact lenses, and supposedly Juliet and Brittney were getting the same treatment. Not that Colt would know. He hadn't seen them or talked to them in months, despite assurances from Valinger and others that the separation was only temporary. Try to be patient, they'd said. These things take time.

Colt had been cooperative and polite about the whole thing, but his patience was starting to wear thin.

"So what is it about this Reacher guy?" he said. "Why are you looking for him?"

"We're not looking for him. We know where he is. The general vicinity, anyway. We just need to monitor his activity and find out for sure if he was the driver in the picture."

"Why? Why is it so important to identify the driver?"

"Because three days later, that same van was found packed with explosives."

"Found where?"

"DC. Along one of the president's routes to Andrews, where Air Force One takes off and lands. We have to assume—"

"Okay," Colt said. "I get it now."

Any other government agency would have brought Reacher in for questioning. But The Circle didn't work that way. Once they determined that a threat was imminent, they stamped it out right away. They nipped it in the bud. No hesitation, no questions asked.

"We've been keeping an eye on Reacher," Valinger said. "Now we need to watch him closer. Once the evidence reaches the tipping point, we'll take him out."

"You want me to kill him?"

"No. If necessary, the L and E will be assigned to another operative."

L and E.

Locate and eliminate.

“So you want me to make friends with the guy or what?” Colt said.

“You’re not to engage with him at any time. In fact, you’ll probably never even see him. Your involvement will be on the periphery. We want you to get inside Reacher’s world. Blend in with the people he’s had contact with. Gather information, send daily reports directly to me. That sort of thing. The code name for the operation is Blaze Two. You’ll be fully briefed tomorrow morning.”

“Sounds easy enough.”

“Yeah. Except that Jack Reacher seems to attract trouble like a magnet. You’ll need to be on guard twenty-four-seven. Complacency kills, Mr. Colt. Remember that, and you’ll probably come back here in one piece.”

“Before I do anything, I want to see my wife and daughter,” Colt said. “Or at least talk to them.”

“You’ll get to talk to them when The Director says you can talk to them. I thought we were clear on that.”

“We’re clear on it. But how long do I have to wait?”

“I don’t know. It could be tomorrow. It could be five years from now. Best to just put all that out of your mind for the time being.”

An unexpected surge of fury washed over Colt like a wave. He loved Juliet and Brittney more than life itself. He needed to know that they were okay. He stood and grabbed his coffee mug and hurled it overhand like a baseball. It shattered, splattering the front wall of the set with a violent brown stain. Shards of ceramic shrapnel flew in all directions.

“You want me to put it out of my mind for five years, Kurt? Sorry, but I’m not putting it out of my mind for five seconds.”

Colt stormed out of the faux diner, pushed his way through a double set of doors and exited the soundstage. He weaved his way through the corridors and climbed the stairs to the dormitory on the fourth level. By the time he got to his room, someone was already there waiting for him.

3

Colt didn't recognize the operative standing at his door, but he recognized the handgun she was pointing at him. It was a Smith and Wesson .40 caliber semi-automatic. Four-inch barrel, eleven-round magazine. It was a nice compact carry weapon capable of boring a nice fat hole into human flesh.

"What are you going to do, shoot me?" Colt said. "I got mad and threw a cup of coffee. Not a capital offense, last I heard."

"I have instructions to hold you here until Mr. Valinger comes."

"What's your name?"

"Not important."

She reminded Colt of Diana Dawkins, the operative who'd recruited him into The Circle a couple of years ago. Not her looks, but her attitude and the way she carried herself. He knew that she wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger if she needed to.

Colt hadn't heard anything from or about Diana since they worked together on the Sycamore Bluff assignment. They narrowly escaped with their lives on that deal. They had been

through a lot together. He considered Diana a friend, and he wondered where she was and how she was doing.

“I’m going to open the door now,” he said. “Will you be joining me?”

“Not necessary.”

Colt figured as much. The dorm rooms didn’t have any windows, so it wasn’t like he was going to escape or anything. He pressed his thumb against the electronic scanner, popped the lock and walked inside and shut the door behind him.

The entire space was about a hundred square feet. There was a twin size bed and a small desk with a laptop and a private bathroom and a short little refrigerator and a microwave and a television. Colt plunked a couple of ice cubes into a glass, twisted the cap off his jug of Old Fitzgerald and poured himself a double. He sat on the bed and clicked on the television and watched a *Seinfeld* rerun. His nerves had settled considerably by the time someone started banging on his door.

It was Valinger.

Colt let him in.

“Sorry about what happened down there at the soundstage,” Colt said. “I lost my temper, and there’s no excuse for it. All I can say is that it won’t happen again.”

“I know you want to see your wife and daughter, Mr. Colt. I understand that completely. But we do expect our operatives to behave professionally at all times. I was forced to notify The Director about your outburst, and any sort of punishment will be administered by him. In the meantime, he thinks it would be prudent to send a partner along with you on the Jack Reacher assignment.”

“I can handle myself, Kurt. I don’t need a babysitter.”

Colt didn't understand why Valinger had been *forced* to contact The Director about a broken coffee cup. Talk about overreacting. Like running and telling the principal in sixth grade when someone shot you with a spitball. The men and women at the top had more important things to think about. Colt had lost his cool for a minute. It was no big deal.

Valinger walked over to the desk and sat down on the chair.

"Got any more of that whiskey?" he said.

Colt fixed Valinger a drink, poured himself another one while he was at it. The bottle was almost empty.

"When you spoke with The Director, did you happen to mention the cause of my anger? That I want to see Juliet and Brittney?"

"I did. He said he would look into it."

"Thanks. Is the young lady with the gun still outside my door?"

"No. I sent her on her way. I just needed to make sure you didn't leave the complex before I talked to you. I'm not sure you understand the gravity of the Jack Reacher situation, what he's capable of if he sets his mind to it."

"You said he was ex-military, so I assume he's had some training."

"A lot. And he's learned some things on his own through the years. At the briefing tomorrow morning, you will be given a condensed version of his files, about five hundred pages of things you'll need to know to run the case. My advice is to study those pages carefully. In most businesses knowledge is power. In ours it can mean the difference between living and dying."

"I'll keep that in mind," Colt said. "Where's Reacher now?"

“In Virginia, not far from DC. Little town called Rock Creek. If the van was his, he’ll probably try something else soon. He doesn’t like to fail.”

“And if the van wasn’t his?”

“We have other operatives tracking other leads. All you and your partner need to focus on is Jack Reacher. If he wasn’t involved in the attempted bombing, you might find something else on him that we can use. I’m ninety-nine percent certain that Jack Reacher is an enemy of the United States, Nicholas. I would bet my career on it.”

Colt bathed his teeth with another sip of liquor.

“I’m not sure how useful that blurry photograph is going to be,” he said. “I would like to see the video it was taken from.”

“I thought you might,” Valinger said. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a flash drive, slid it into one of the USB ports on Colt’s computer.

Colt got up from the bed and walked over to the desk.

“That’s the parking lot outside the restaurant?” he said.

“Yes. Mac’s Diner, Rock Creek, Virginia. This footage came from a camera mounted over the entrance.”

The Ford van was parked in the front row, but it was still probably thirty feet or so from the lens. The light pole two rows behind it cast a harsh glare over the scene, making it difficult to see many details.

“What time of night is this?” Colt said.

“Shortly after eleven. As you can see, there weren’t many cars in the parking lot.”

“Good time to rob a restaurant. Not many people go out to eat that time of night. And the local police were probably busy with shift change reports. No patrol cars happening by.”

“Exactly.”

“So why were Cleve Garrison and Felisa Cayenne there at that time?”

“Garrison brought her to the DC area from New York City. He made the late run and then stopped at an out-of-the-way place because of her celebrity status.”

Colt nodded. He stood there and watched the monitor while nothing happened for a few minutes. Then the door on the driver’s side of the Econoline opened and a man climbed out. He was taller than the van. Narrow waist, broad shoulders. He leaned against the side panel and crossed his arms.

“Why did he get out?” Colt said.

“Who knows? He might have been getting antsy because the job was taking longer than expected. Or he might have just needed to stretch his legs.”

Colt wondered if the man’s motivation might have been a little more defined than that. Then he wondered something else.

“Why would Jack Reacher have been involved in a robbery in the first place?” he said.

“For the money. Like I told you, he has no source of steady income. It was Sunday night, and there was a lot of cash in the safe from the weekend. Over ten thousand dollars. The day and time they chose to knock off the place was no accident. They knew what they were doing.”

“Did they get the money?”

“No. You saw what happened in our reenactment down at the soundstage. But if things hadn’t turned out like they did, I have no doubt that the guys in the ski masks would have forced the manager to open the safe.”

“They got Felisa Cayenne instead.”

“Right.”

“And they needed to get out of there quickly after they shot Garrison.”

“Right.”

“Felisa’s one of the most popular singers out there right now,” Colt said. “Plus she has the TV thing.”

“She’s loaded, that’s for sure. Hard to fathom why there hasn’t been a ransom demand.”

“I used to be a musician myself, you know.”

“I know,” Valinger said.

Colt was no stranger to the troubles that sometimes accompanied fame and fortune. He had been the leader of a popular southern rock and blues band in the 1980s. Platinum records, sold out shows. He’d owned mansions on both coasts. He’d driven the finest automobiles and had stayed at the finest hotels. He was a regular on all the major talk shows, and he couldn’t go anywhere without the paparazzi hounding him. But all that came to a screeching halt when a chartered jet crashed and burst into flames, killing his wife Susan and their baby daughter Harmony and all the members of his band. Colt was the sole survivor.

It had been a long time ago, but some things never changed. When you’re famous, you have to watch your back constantly. Felisa Cayenne probably figured she was safe sitting across from a United States Deputy Marshal. But she figured wrong.

Colt watched the video some more. The tall muscular man opened the door and climbed back into the driver’s seat. A couple of minutes later, the two masked bandits rushed across the parking lot and forced Felisa to the back of the van, where they presumably opened the rear hatch and joined her in the cargo area. The headlights came on, and the vehicle eased forward. It stopped abruptly, lurched, and then sped away from the parking area.

“Let’s watch it again,” Colt said. “I think I saw something.”

With the poor lighting and poor resolution, it was hard to determine anything for sure. But it seemed that near the end someone had used a finger to write something on the inside of the van's grimy windshield.

One word.

HELP.