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LEE CHILD

GUY WALKS INTO A BAR…

A Jack Reacher Short Story

SHE was about 19. No older. Maybe younger. An insurance company would have given her 60 more years to live. I figured a more accurate projection was 36 hours, or 36 minutes if things went wrong from the get-go.

She was blond and blue-eyed, but not American. American girls have a glow, a smoothness, from many generations of plenty. This girl was different. Her ancestors had known hardship and fear. That inheritance was in her face and her movements. Her eyes were wary. Her body was lean. Not the kind of lean you get from a diet, but the Darwinian kind of lean you get when your grandparents had no food – and either starved or didn't. Her movements were fragile and tense, a little alert, a little nervous, though on the face of it she was having as good a time as a girl could get.

She was in a New York bar, drinking beer, listening to a band, and she was in love with the guitar player. That was clear. The part of her gaze that wasn't wary was filled with adoration, and it was all aimed in his direction. She was probably Russian. She was rich. She was alone at a table near the stage and she had a pile of A.T.M.-fresh twenties in front of her and she was paying for each new bottle with one of them and she wasn't asking for change. The waitresses loved her.

There was a guy further back in the room, wedged on an upholstered bench, staring at her. Her bodyguard, presumably. He was a tall, wide man with a shaved head and a black T-shirt under a black suit. He was part of the reason she was drinking beer in a city bar at the age of 19 or less. It wasn't the kind of glossy place that had a policy about under-age rich girls, either for or against. It was a scruffy dive on Bleecker Street, staffed by skinny kids trying to make tuition money, and I guessed they had looked at her and her minder and made a snap decision against trouble and in favor of tips.

I watched her for a minute, and then I looked away. My name is Jack Reacher, and once I was a military cop, with heavy emphasis on the past tense. I have been out nearly as long as I was in. But old habits die hard. I had stepped into the bar the same way I always step anywhere, which is carefully. One-thirty in the morning. I had ridden the A train to West Fourth and walked south on Sixth Avenue and made the left on Bleecker and checked the sidewalks. I wanted music, but not the kind that drives large numbers of patrons outside to smoke.

The smallest knot of people stood next to a place with half a flight of stairs leading up to its door. There was a shiny black Mercedes sedan parked on the curb, with a driver behind the wheel. The music coming out of the place was filtered and dulled by the walls but I could hear an agile bass line and some snappy drumming. So I walked up the stairs and paid a $5 cover and shouldered my way inside.

Two exits. One the door I had just come through, the other at the end of a long dark restroom corridor way in back. The room was narrow and about 90 feet deep. A bar on the left at the front, then some upholstered horseshoe benches, then a cluster of freestanding tables on what, on other nights, might have been a dance floor. Then the stage, with the band on it.

The band looked as if it had been put together by accident after a misfiling incident at a talent agency. The bass player was a stout old black guy in a suit with a vest. He was plucking away at an upright bass fiddle. The drummer could have been his uncle. He was a big old guy sprawled comfortably behind a small, simple kit. The singer was also a harmonica player and was older than the bass player and younger than the drummer and bigger than either one.

The guitarist was completely different. He was young and white and small. Maybe 20, maybe 5-foot-6, maybe 130 pounds. He had a fancy blue guitar wired to a crisp new amplifier and together the instrument and the electronics made sharp sounds full of space and echoes. The amp must have been turned up to 11. The sound was incredibly loud. It was as if the air in the room was locked solid. It had no more capacity for volume.

But the music was good. The three black guys were old pros, and the white kid knew all the notes, and when and how and in what order to play them. He was wearing a red T-shirt and black pants and white tennis shoes. He had a very serious expression on his face. He looked foreign. Maybe Russian, too.

I spent the first half of the first song checking the room, counting people, scanning faces, parsing body language. Old habits die hard. There were two guys facing each other across a table with their hands underneath it. One selling, one buying, obviously, the deal done by feel and confirmed with furtive glances. The bar staff was scamming the owner by selling store-bought beer out of an ice chest. Two out of three domestic bottles were legit, from the refrigerator cabinets, and then the third came from their own cooler. I got one of them. A wet label and a big margin. I carried the bottle to a corner seat and sat down with my back to the wall.

It was at that point that I saw the girl alone at her table, and her bodyguard on his bench. I guessed the Mercedes outside was theirs. I guessed Daddy was a B-grade oligarch, millions but not billions, indulging his daughter with four years at N.Y.U. and a credit card that never stopped working.

Just two people out of 80 in the room. No big deal.

Until I saw two other guys.

They were a pair. Tall young white men, cheap tight leather jackets, heads shaved by blunt razors that had left nicks and scabs. More Russians, probably. Operators, no question. Connected, no doubt. Probably not the best the world has ever seen, but probably not the worst, either. They were sitting far apart from each other but their twin gazes were trained on the girl alone at the table. They were tense, determined, to some degree nervous. I recognized the signs. Many times I had felt the same way myself. They were about to go into action.

So two B-grade oligarchs had a beef, and one was protecting his kid with drivers and bodyguards, and the other was sending guys around the world to snatch her. Then would come ransom, and extortion, and demands, and fortunes would change hands, or uranium leases, or oil rights, or coal or gas.

Business, Moscow-style.

But not usually successful business. Kidnappings have a thousand different dynamics and go wrong a thousand different ways. In my experience, average life expectancy for a kidnap victim is 36 hours. Some survive, but most don't. Some die right away, in the initial panic.

The girl's pile of twenties was attracting waitresses like wasps at a picnic. And she wasn't shooing any of them away. She was taking one fresh bottle after another. And beer is beer. She was going to have to visit the restroom, soon and often. And the restroom corridor was long and dark, and it had a street exit at the end of it.

I watched her in the gaudy, reflected light, with the music shrieking and pounding all around me. The two guys watched her. Her bodyguard watched her. She watched the guitarist. He was concentrating hard, key changes and choruses, but from time to time he would lift his head and smile, mostly at the glory of being up on the stage, but twice directly at the girl. The first of those smiles was shy, and the second was a little wider.

The girl stood up. She butted the lip of her table with her thighs and shuffled out from behind it and headed for the corridor in back. I got there first. The sound from the band howled through it. The ladies' room was halfway down. The men's room was all the way at the end. I leaned on the wall and watched the girl walk toward me. She was up on high heels and she was wearing tight pants and her steps were short and precise. Not drunk yet. She was Russian. She put a pale palm on the restroom door and pushed. She went inside.

Less than 10 seconds later the two guys stepped into the corridor. I guessed they would wait there for her. But they didn't. They glanced at me like I was a part of the architecture and shouldered in through the ladies' room door. One after the other. The door slammed behind them. The music played on.

I went in after them. Every day brings something new. I had never been in a women's bathroom before. Stalls on the right, sinks on the left. Bright light and the smell of perfume. The girl was standing near the back wall. The two guys were facing her. Their backs were to me. I said, "Hey," but they didn't hear. Too much noise. I caught them by the elbows, one in each hand. They spun around, ready to fight, but then they stopped. I am bigger than the Frigidaires they had been dreaming about back home. They stood still for a second and then pushed past me and pulled the door and headed out.

The girl looked at me for a moment with an emotion I couldn't read, and then I left her to do what she needed to do. I went back to my seat. The two guys were already back in theirs. The bodyguard was impassive. He was watching the stage. The band was finishing up. The girl was still in the bathroom.

The music stopped. The two guys got up and headed back toward the corridor. The room was suddenly crowded with people standing and moving. I went over to the bodyguard and tapped him on the shoulder and pointed. He took no notice. He didn't move at all, until the guitar player started backing away off the stage. Then he got up, the two movements perfectly synchronized, and I knew I had gotten it all wrong.

Not an indulged daughter. An indulged son. Daddy had bought the guitar and the amp and hired backup musicians. The boy's dream. Out of the bedroom, onto the stage. His driver at the curb, his bodyguard watching all the way. Not a team of two from his rival, but a team of three. An adoring groupie. The boy's dream. A classic honey trap. A last-minute tactical conference in the bathroom, and then action.

I shoved my way through to the back and got to the street well ahead of the bodyguard, just as the girl was hugging the boy and turning him through a half circle and pushing him toward the two guys. I hit the first one hard and the second one harder and got blood from his mouth all over my shirt. The two guys went down and the girl fled and then the bodyguard showed up. I made him give me his T-shirt. Bloodstains attract attention. Then I left through the front.

The obvious move would have been to turn right, so I turned left, and I got the 6 train at Bleecker and Lafayette, heading north, the last-but-one car. I settled in and checked the faces. Old habits die hard.