LEE CHILD

JAMES PENNEY'S NEW IDENTITY

THE PROCESS THAT turned James Penney into a completely different person began ten years ago, at one in the afternoon on a Monday in the middle of June, in Laney, California. A hot time of day, at a hot time of year, in a hot part of the country. The town sits comfortably on the east shoulder of the road that winds from Mojave to LA, fifty miles south of the one and fifty miles north of the other. Due west, the southern rump of the Coastal Range Mountains is visible. Due east, the Mojave Desert disappears into the haze. Very little happens in Laney. After that Monday in the middle of June ten years ago, even less ever did.

There was one industry in Laney. One factory. A big spread of a place. A long low assembly shed, weathered metal siding, built in the sixties. Office accommodations at the north end, in the shade, two stories of them. The first floor was low grade. Clerical functions took place there. Billing and accounting and telephone calling. The second story was high grade. Managers and designers occupied the space. The corner office at the right hand end used to be the Personnel Manager's place. Now it was the Human Resources Manager's place. Same guy, new title on his door.

Outside that door in the long second floor corridor was a line of chairs. The Human Resources Manager's secretary had rustled them up and placed them there that Monday morning. The line of chairs was occupied by a line of men and women. They were silent. Every five minutes the person at the head of the line would be called into the office. The rest of them would shuffle up one place. They didn't speak. They didn't need to. They knew what was happening.

Just before one o'clock, James Penney shuffled up one space to the head of the line. He waited a long five minutes and stood up when he was called. Stepped into the office. Closed the door behind him. Sat down again in front of the desk. The Human Resources Manager was a guy called Odell. Odell hadn't been long out of diapers when James Penney started work at the Laney plant.

"Mr. Penney," Odell said.

Penney said nothing, but he nodded in a guarded way.

"We need to share some information with you," Odell said.

Then he stopped like he needed a response out of Penney before he could continue. Penney shrugged at him. He knew what was coming. He heard things, same as

anybody else.

“Just give me the short version, OK?” he said.

Odell nodded. “We’re laying you off.”

“For the summer?” Penney asked him.

Odell shook his head.

“For good,” he said.

Penney took a second to get over the sound of the words. He’d known they were coming, but they hit him like they were the last words he ever expected Odell to say.

“Why?” he asked.

Odell shrugged. He didn’t look like he was enjoying this. But on the other hand, he didn’t look like it was upsetting him much, either.

“Downsizing,” he said. “No option. Only way we can go.”

“Why?” Penney said again.

Odell leaned back in his chair and folded his hands behind his head. Started the speech he’d already made many times that day.

“We need to cut costs,” he said. “This is an expensive operation. Small margin. Shrinking market. You know that.”

Penney stared into space and listened to the silence breaking through from the factory floor. “So you’re closing the plant?”

Odell shook his head again. “We’re downsizing, is all. The plant will stay open. There’ll be some maintenance business. Some repairs, overhauls. But not like it used to be.”

“The plant will stay open?” Penney said. “So how come you’re letting me go?”

Odell shifted in his chair. Pulled his hands from behind his head and folded his arms across his chest, defensively. He had reached the tricky part of the interview.

“It’s a question of the skills mix,” he said. “We had to pick a team with the correct blend of skills. We put a lot of work into the decision. And I’m afraid you didn’t make the cut.”

“What’s wrong with my skills?” Penney asked. “I got skills. I’ve worked here seventeen years. What’s wrong with my damn skills?”

“Nothing at all,” Odell said. “But other people are better. We have to look at the broad picture. It’s going to be a skeleton crew, so we need the best skills, the fastest learners, good attendance records, you know how it is.”

“Attendance records?” Penney said. “What’s wrong with my attendance records? I’ve worked here seventeen years. You saying I’m not a reliable worker?”

Odell touched the brown file folder in front of him.

“You’ve had a lot of time out sick,” he said. “Absentee rate just above eight percent.”

Penney looked at him incredulously.

“Sick?” he said. “I wasn’t sick. I was post-traumatic. From Vietnam.”

Odell shook his head again. He was too young.

“Whatever,” he said. “It’s still a big absentee rate.”

James Penney just sat there, stunned. He felt like he’d been hit by a train.

“So who stays on?” he asked.

“We looked for the correct blend,” Odell said again. “Generally, the younger end of the workforce. We put a lot of management time into the process. We’re confident we made the right decisions. You’re not being singled out. We’re losing eighty percent of our people.”

Penney stared across at him. “You staying?”

Odell nodded and tried to hide a smile, but couldn’t.

“There’s still a business to run,” he said. “We still need management.”

There was silence in the big corner office. Outside, the hot breeze stirred off the desert and blew a listless eddy over the metal building. Odell opened the brown folder and pulled out a blue envelope. Handed it across the desk.

“You’re paid up to the end of July,” he said. “Money went in the bank this morning. Good luck, Mr. Penney.”

The five-minute interview was over. Odell's secretary appeared and opened the door to the corridor. Penney walked out. The secretary called the next man in. Penney walked past the long quiet row of people and made it to the parking lot. Slid into his car. It was a red Firebird, a year and a half old, and it wasn't paid for yet. He started it up and drove the mile to his house. Eased to a stop in his driveway and sat there, thinking, in a daze, with the motor running. Then he heard the faint bell of his phone in his house. He made it inside before it stopped. It was a friend from the plant.

"They can you too?" the friend asked him.

Penney mumbled his answer so he didn't have to say the exact words, but the tone of his voice told his friend what he needed to know.

"There's a problem," the guy said. "Company informed the bank. I just got a call asking what I was going to do about the payments I got. The bank holding paper on you?"

Penney went cold. Gripped the phone.

"Paper?" he said. "You bet they're holding paper on me. Just about every damn thing I got. House, car, furniture. They got paper on everything. What they say to you?"

"What the hell do you think?" the guy said. "They're a bank, right? I stop making the payments, I'm out on the street. The repo man is coming for the car right now."

Penney went quiet. He was thinking. He was thinking about his car. He didn't care about the house. Or the furniture. His wife had chosen all that stuff. She'd saddled him up with big payments on all that stuff, just before she walked out. She'd called it the chance for a new start. It hadn't worked. She'd gone and he was still paying for her damn house and furniture. But the car was his. The red Firebird. That automobile was the only thing he'd ever bought that he'd really wanted. He didn't feel like losing it. But he sure as hell couldn't keep on paying for it.

"James?" the guy on the phone said. "You still there?"

Penney was imagining the repo man coming for his car.

"James?" his friend said again. "You there?"

Penney closed his eyes tight.

"Not for long," he said. "I'm out of here."

“Where to?” the guy said. “Where the hell to?”

Penney felt a desperate fury building inside him. He smashed the phone back into the cradle and moved away, and then turned back and tore the wire out of the wall. He stood in the middle of the room and decided he wouldn’t take anything with him. And he wouldn’t leave anything behind, either. He ran to the garage and grabbed his spare can of gasoline. Ran back to the house. Emptied the can over his ex-wife’s sofa. He couldn’t find a match, so he lit the gas stove in the kitchen and unwound a roll of paper towels. Put one end on the stove top and ran the rest through to the living room. When his makeshift fuse was well alight, he skipped out to his car and started it up. Turned north towards Mojave and settled in for the drive.

His neighbor noticed the fire when the flames started coming through the roof. She called the Laney fire department. The firemen didn’t respond. It was a volunteer department, and all the volunteers were in line inside the factory, upstairs in the narrow corridor.

Then the warm air moving off the Mojave Desert freshened up into a hot breeze, and by the time James Penney was thirty miles away the flames from his house had set fire to the dried scrub that had been his lawn. By the time he was in the town of Mojave itself, cashing his last pay check at the bank, the flames had spread across his lawn and his neighbor’s and were licking at the base of her back porch.

Like any California boom town, Laney had grown in a hurry. The factory had been thrown up around the start of Nixon’s first term. A hundred acres of orange groves had been bulldozed and five hundred frame houses had quadrupled the population in a year. There was nothing really wrong with the houses, but they’d seen rain less than a dozen times in the thirty-one years they’d been standing, and they were about as dry as houses can get. Their timbers had sat and baked in the sun and been scoured by the dry desert winds. There were no hydrants built into the streets. The houses were close together, and there were no windbreaks. But there had never been a serious fire in Laney. Not until that Monday in June.

James Penney’s neighbor called the fire department for the second time after her back porch was well alight. The fire department was in disarray. The dispatcher advised her to get out of her house and just wait for their arrival. By the time the fire truck got there, her house was destroyed. And the next house in line was destroyed, too. The desert breeze had blown the fire on across the second narrow gap and sent the old couple living there scuttling into the street for safety. Then Laney called in the fire departments from Lancaster and Glendale and Bakersfield, and they arrived with proper equipment and saved the day. They hosed the scrub between the houses and the blaze went no farther. Just three houses destroyed, Penney’s and his two downwind neighbors. Within two hours the panic was over, and by the time Penney himself was fifty miles north of Mojave, Laney’s sheriff was working with the fire

investigators to piece together what had happened.

They started with Penney's place, which was the upwind house, and the first to burn, and therefore the coolest. It had just about burned down to the floor slab, but the layout was still clear. And the evidence was there to see. There was tremendous scorching on one side of where the living room had been. The Glendale investigator recognized it as something he'd seen many times before. It was what is left when a foam-filled sofa or armchair is doused with gasoline and set alight. He explained to the sheriff how the flames would have spread up and out, setting fire to the walls and ceiling, and how, once into the roof space, the flames would have consumed the rafters and dropped the whole burning structure downwards into the rest of the building. As clear a case of arson as he had ever seen. The unfortunate wild cards had been the stiffening desert breeze and the close proximity of the other houses.

Then the sheriff had gone looking for James Penney, to tell him somebody had burned his house down, and his neighbors'. He drove his black-and-white to the factory and walked upstairs and past the long line of people and into Odell's corner office. Odell told him what had happened in the five-minute interview just after one o'clock. Then the sheriff had driven back to the Laney station house, steering with one hand and rubbing his chin with the other.

And by the time James Penney was driving along the towering eastern flank of Mount Whitney, a hundred and fifty miles from home, there was an all-points-bulletin out on him, suspicion of deliberate arson, which in the dry desert heat of southern California was a big, big deal.

The California Highway Patrol is one of the world's great law enforcement agencies. Famous throughout America and the world, romantic, idealized. The image of the West Coast motorcycle cop astride his powerful machine is one of the nation's great icons. Smart tan shirt, white T underneath, white helmet, mirrored aviator glasses, tight jodhpurs, gleaming black boots. Cruising the endless sunny highways, marshaling that great state's huge transient population toward a safe destination.

That's the image. That's why Joey Gunston had lined up to join. But Joey Gunston soon found out the reality is different. Any organization has a glamour side and a dull side. Gunston was stuck on the dull side. He wasn't cruising the sunny coastal highways on a big bike. He was on his own in a standard police spec Dodge, grinding back and forward through the Mojave Desert on U.S. 91. He had no jodhpurs, no boots, his white T was a limp gray rag, and his mirrored shades were cheap Rayban copies he'd paid for himself in L.A., which he couldn't wear anyway because he was working the graveyard shift, nine at night until six in the morning.

So Joey Gunston was a disillusioned man. But he wasn't bitter. He wasn't that type of a guy. The way it worked with Joey, hand him a disappointment and he wouldn't fold up.

He would work harder. He would work so damn hard that he would escape the dull side and get the transfer over to the glamour side. He figured it was like paying his dues. He figured he'd work U.S. 91 in a factory-beige Dodge with plastic CHP badging stuck on the doors as long as it took to prove himself. So far it had taken thirty-one months. No news about a transfer to U.S. 101 and a motorcycle. Not even a hint. But he wasn't going to let his standards drop.

So he carried on working hard. That involved looking out for the break he knew had to be coming. Problem was, the scope for a break on U.S. 91 was pretty limited. It's the direct route between LA and Vegas, which gives it some decent traffic, and there's some pretty scenery. Gunston's patch stretched a hundred and twenty miles from Barstow in the west over to the state line on the slope of Clark Mountain. His problem was the hours he worked. At night, the traffic slackened and the pretty scenery was invisible. For thirty-one months he'd done nothing much except stop speeders and about twice a week radio in for ambulances when some tanked guy ran off the road and smashed himself up.

But he carried on hoping. That Monday night at nine o'clock he'd read through the bulletins pinned up in the dispatcher's office. He'd copied the details into a leatherette notebook his sister had bought for him. One of those details concerned an APB on a Laney guy, James Penney, arson and criminal damage, believed to be on the loose in a red Firebird. Gunston copied the plate number in large writing so he'd be able to read it in the gloom of his car. Then he'd cruised sixty miles east and holed up on the shoulder near Soda Lake.

A lot of guys would have gone right to sleep. Gunston knew his colleagues were working day jobs, maybe security in L.A. or gumshoeing in the valleys, and sleeping the night away in their Dodges on the shoulder. But Gunston never did that. He played ball and stayed awake, ready for his break.

It arrived within an hour. Ten o'clock that Monday evening. The red Firebird streaked past him, heading east, maybe eighty-five miles an hour, maybe ninety. Gunston didn't need to check his leatherette notebook. The plate jumped right out of the dark at him. He fired up the Dodge and floored it. Hit the button for the lights and the siren. Jammed his foot down and steered with one hand. Used the other to thumb the mike.

"In pursuit of a red Firebird," he radioed. "Plate matches APB."

There was a crackle on the speaker and the dispatcher's voice came back.

"Position?" he asked.

"Soda Lake," Gunston said. "Heading east, fast."

“OK, Joey,” the dispatcher said. “Stick with him. Nail him before the line. Don’t be letting the Nevada guys get in on this, right?”

“You got it, chief,” Gunston said. He eased the Dodge up to a hundred and wailed on into the night. He figured the Firebird might be a mile ahead. Conceivable that Penney might slew off and head down into the town of Baker, but if he didn’t, then Penney was his. The break had maybe arrived.

He caught up with the red Firebird after three miles. The turn down to Baker was gone. Nothing on the road ahead except fifty-seven more miles of California, and then the state of Nevada. He eased the wailing Dodge up to twenty yards behind the Firebird’s rear end and hit the blue strobes. Changed the siren to the deafening electronic pock-pock-pock he loved so much. Grinned at his windshield. But the Firebird didn’t slow up. It eased ahead. Gunston’s speedo needle was shivering around the hundred-and-ten marker. His knuckles tightened round the grimy vinyl wheel.

“Son of a bitch,” he said.

He jammed his foot down harder and hung on. The red Firebird topped out at maybe a hundred and twelve. It was still there ahead of him, but the acceleration was gone. It was flat out. Gunston smiled. He knew the road ahead. Probably better than a guy from Laney did. The climb up the western slope of Clark Mountain was going to tilt things the good guys’ way. The upgrades would slow the Firebird. But the Dodge had plenty of good Detroit V8 torque. New police radials. A trained driver. Fifty miles of opportunity ahead. Maybe U.S. 101 and a big bike were not so far away.

He chased the red Firebird for thirty miles. The grade was slowing both cars. They were averaging about ninety. The Dodge’s siren was blaring the whole way, pock-pock-pock for twenty minutes, red and blue lights flashing continuously. Gunston’s conclusion was this Penney guy had to be a psycho. Burning things up, then trying to outrun the CHP through the dark. Then he started to worry. They were getting reasonably close to the state line. No way was he going to call in and ask for co-operation from the Nevada boys. Penney was his. So he gripped the wheel and moved up to within feet of the speeding red car. Closer and closer. Trying to force the issue.

Ten miles short of the state line, a spur runs off U.S. 91 down to the small town of Nipton. The road leaves the highway at an oblique angle and falls away down the mountain into the valley. The red Firebird took that turn. With Gunston’s police Dodge a foot off its rear fender, it slewed right and just disappeared straight out from in front of him. Gunston overshot and jammed to a stop, all four wheels locked and making smoke. He smashed the selector into reverse and howled backward up the shoulder. Just in time to see the Firebird cartwheeling off the road and straight down the mountainside. The spur had a bad camber. Gunston knew that. Penney hadn’t. He’d

taken that desperate slew and lost it. The Firebird's rear end had come unglued and swung out over the void. The red car had windmilled like a golf club and hurled itself out into space. Gunston watched it smash and bounce on the rocks. An outcrop tore the underside out and the spilling gasoline hit the hot muffler and the next thing Gunston saw was a belch of flame and a huge explosion rolling slowly a hundred feet down the mountainside.

The California Highway Patrol dispatcher told Joey Gunston to supervise the recovery of the crashed red Firebird himself. Nobody was very upset about the accident. Nobody cared much about Penney. The radio conversations back and forward between the dispatcher's office and Gunston's Dodge about an arsonist dying in his burning car on the slope of Clark Mountain carried a certain amount of suppressed ironic laughter. The only problem was the invoice that would come in next month from the tow-truck company. The protocols about who should pay such an invoice were never very clear. Usually the CHP ended up writing them down to miscellaneous operating costs.

Gunston knew a tow-truck operator out in the wastelands near Soda Lake who usually monitored the police bands, so he put out a call and got a quick reply. Then he parked up on the shoulder near the turn down to Nipton, sitting right on top of the skid marks he'd made overshooting it, and sat waiting for the guy. He was there in an hour, and by midnight Gunston and the trucker were clambering down the mountainside in the dark, pulling the truck's giant metal hook behind them against its ratchet.

The red Firebird was about two hundred yards down the slope, right at the end of the cable's reach. It wasn't red any more. It was streaked a fantastic variety of scorched browns and purples. All the glass had melted and the plastic had burned away. The tires were gone. Penney himself was a shriveled carbonized shape fused to the zigzag metal springs which were all that was left of the seat. Gunston and the wrecker didn't spend too long looking at him. They just ducked near and snapped the giant hook around the offside front suspension member. Then they turned back for the long climb up the slope.

They were panting hard and sweating in the night air when they got back to the tow truck. It was parked sideways on the road, circled by Gunston's red danger flares. The steel cable snaked off the drum at the rear of the cab and disappeared down into the dark. The driver started up the big diesel to power the hydraulics and the drum started grinding around, reeling in the cable, hauling the wreck upward. Time to time, the remains of the Firebird would snag in the brush or against a rock and the truck's rear suspension would squat and the big diesel would roar until it dragged free.

It took the best part of an hour to haul the wreck the two hundred yards up to the roadway. It scraped over the concrete shoulder and the driver moved the truck to a better angle and sped the drum to haul the wreck up onto the flatbed. Gunston helped him tie it down with chains. Then he nodded to the driver and the tow-truck took off

and lumbered back west. Gunston stepped over to his Dodge and killed the flashing lights and fired up the radio.

“On its way,” he said to the dispatcher. “Better send an ambulance over to meet it.”

“Why?” the dispatcher asked. “He’s dead, right?”

“Dead as can be,” Gunston said. “But somebody needs to chisel him out of the seat, and I ain’t going to do it.”

The dispatcher laughed over the radio. “Is he real crispy?”

Gunston laughed back. “Crispiest guy you ever saw.”

Middle of the night, and the sheriff was still in the station house in Laney. He figured a lot of overtime was called for. It had been a busy day. And tomorrow was going to be a busier day. There was a fair amount of fallout to deal with. The lay-offs at the factory had produced unpredictable results. Evening time had seen a lot of drunkenness. A couple of pickups had been rolled. Minor injuries. A few windows had been broken at the plant. Mr. Odell’s windows had been the target. A few rocks had fallen short and hit the mailroom. One had smashed the windshield of a car in the lot.

And Penney had burned three houses down. That was the problem. But then it wasn’t a problem any more. The silence in the station house was broken by the sound of the telex machine starting up. The sheriff wandered through to the booth and tore off a foot and a half of paper. Read it and folded it and slipped it into the file he’d just started. Then he picked up the phone and called the California Highway Patrol.

“I’ll take it from here,” he told them. “This is Laney County business. Our coroner will see to the guy. I’ll go out to Soda Lake with him right away.”

The Laney County coroner was a young medic out of Stanford called Kolek. Polish name, but the guy was from a family which had been in California longer than most. Forty years, maybe. The sheriff rode east with him in his official station wagon. Kolek wasn’t upset by the late call. He didn’t object to working at night. He was young and he was new and he needed the money. But he was pretty quiet the whole way. Medical guys in general are not keen on dealing with burned bodies. The sheriff didn’t know why. He’d seen a few. A burned body was like something you left on the barbecue too long. Better than the damp maggoty things you find in the woods. A whole lot better.

“We got to bring it back?” Kolek asked.

“The car?” the sheriff said. “Or the guy?”

“The corpse,” Kolek said.

The sheriff grinned at him and nodded. “There’s an ex-wife somewhere. She might want to bury the guy. Maybe there’s a family plot.”

Kolek shrugged and turned the heater up a click. Drove through the night all the way from Mojave to Soda Lake in silence. A hundred and thirty miles without saying a word.

The junkyard was a stadium-sized space hidden behind a high wooden fence in the angle made by the road down to Baker where it left the highway. There were gleaming tow trucks lined up outside the gate. Kolek slowed and passed them and nosed into the compound. Inside the gate, a wooden hut served as the office. The light was on inside. Kolek hit his horn once and waited. A woman came out. She saw who they were and ducked back inside to hit the lights. The compound lit up like day with blue lights on poles. The woman directed them to the burned Firebird. It was draped with a sun-bleached tarp.

Kolek and the sheriff pulled the tarp off the wreck. It wasn’t bent very far out of shape. The sheriff could see that the brush growing on the mountainside had slowed its descent, all the way. It hadn’t smashed head-on into a boulder or anything. If it hadn’t caught on fire, James Penney might have survived.

Kolek pulled flashlights and his tool kit out of the station wagon. He needed the crowbar to get the driver’s door open. The hinges were seized and distorted from the heat. The sheriff put his weight on it and screeched it all the way open. Then the two men played their flashlight beams all round the charred interior.

“Seat belt is burned away,” Kolek said. “But he was wearing it. Buckle’s still done up.”

The sheriff nodded and pointed.

“Airbag deployed,” he said.

The plastic parts of the steering wheel had all burned away, but they could see the little metal hinges in the up position, where the bag had exploded outwards.

“OK,” Kolek said. “Now for the fun part.”

The sheriff held both flashlights and Kolek put on some heavy rubber gloves. He poked around for a while.

“He’s fused on pretty tight,” he said. “Best way would be to cut through the seat springs and take part of the seat with us.”

“Is the body bag big enough?”

“Probably. This isn’t a very big corpse.”

The sheriff glanced in again. Slid the flashlight beam over the body.

“Penney was a big enough guy,” he said. “Maybe better than five-ten.”

Kolek grimaced. “Fire shrinks them. The body fluids boil off.”

He walked back to the station wagon and pulled out a pair of wire cutters. Leaned back into the Firebird and started snipping through the zigzag metal springs close to where they were fused to the corpse. It took him a while. He had to lean right in, chest-to-chest with the body, to reach the far side.

“OK, give me a hand here,” he said.

The sheriff shoved his hands in under the charred legs and grabbed the springs where Kolek had cut them away from the frame. He pulled and twisted and hauled the body out, feet-first. Kolek grabbed the shoulders and they carried the rigid assembly a few feet away and laid it carefully on the ground. They stood up together and the body rolled backwards, stiff, with the bent legs pointing grotesquely upwards.

“Shit,” Kolek said. “I hate this.”

The sheriff was crouched down, playing his flashlight beam over the contorted gap that had been Penney’s mouth.

“Teeth are still there,” he said. “You should be able to make the ID.”

Kolek joined him. There was a distinctive overbite visible.

“No problem,” he agreed. “You in a hurry for it?”

The sheriff shrugged. “Can’t close the case without it.”

They struggled together to zip the body into the bag and then loaded it into the back of the wagon. They put it on its side, wedged against the bulge of the wheel arch. Then they drove back west, with the morning sun rising behind them.

That same morning sun woke James Penney by coming in through a hole in his motel room blind and playing a bright beam across his face. He stirred and lay in the warmth of the rented bed, watching the dust motes dancing.

He was still in California, up near Yosemite, cabin twelve in a place just far enough from the Park to be cheap. He had six weeks' pay in his billfold, which was hidden under the center of his mattress. Six weeks' pay, less a tank and a half of gas, a cheeseburger and twenty-seven-fifty for the room. Hidden under the mattress, because twenty-seven-fifty doesn't get you a space in a top-notch place. His door was locked, but the desk guy would have a pass key, and he wouldn't be the first desk guy in the world to rent out his pass key by the hour to somebody looking to make a little extra money during the night.

But nothing bad had happened. The mattress was so thin he could feel the billfold right there, under his kidney. Still there, still bulging. A good feeling. He lay watching the sunbeam, struggling with mental arithmetic, spreading six weeks' pay out over the foreseeable future. With nothing to worry about except cheap food, cheap motels and the Firebird's gas, he figured he had no problems at all. The Firebird had a modern motor, twenty-four valves, tuned for a blend of power and economy. He could get far away and have enough money left to take his time looking around.

After that, he wasn't so sure. There wasn't going to be much call anywhere for a metalworker, even with seventeen years' experience. But there would be a call for something. He was sure of that. Even if it was menial. He was a worker. He didn't mind what he did. Maybe he'd find something outdoors, might be a refreshing thing. Might have some kind of dignity to it. Some kind of simple work, for simple honest folks, a lot different than slaving for that grinning weasel Odell.

He watched the sunbeam travel across the counterpane for a while. Then he flung the cover aside and swung himself out of bed. Used the john, rinsed his face and mouth at the sink and untangled his clothes from the pile he'd dropped them in. He'd need more clothes. He only had the things he stood up in. Everything else, he'd burned along with his house. He shrugged and re-ran his calculations to allow for some new pants and work shirts. Maybe some heavy boots, if he was going to be laboring outside. The six weeks' pay was going to have to stretch a little thinner. He decided to drive slow, to save gas, and maybe eat less. Or maybe not less, just cheaper. He'd use truck stops, not tourist diners. More calories, less money.

He figured today he'd put in some serious miles before stopping for breakfast. He jingled the car keys in his pocket and opened his cabin door. Then he stopped. His heart thumped. The tarmac rectangle outside his cabin was empty. Just old oil stains staring up at him. He glanced desperately left and right along the row. No red Firebird. He staggered back into the room and sat down heavily on the bed. Just sat there in a daze, thinking about what to do.

He decided he wouldn't bother with the desk guy. He was pretty certain the desk guy was responsible. He could just about see it. The guy had waited an hour and then

called some buddies who had come over and hot-wired his car. Eased it out of the motel lot and away down the road. A conspiracy, feeding off unsuspecting motel traffic. Feeding off suckers dumb enough to pay twenty-seven-fifty for the privilege of getting their prize possession stolen. He was numb. Suspended somewhere between sick and raging. His red Firebird. The only damn thing in his whole life he'd ever really wanted. Gone. Stolen. He remembered the exquisite joy of buying it. After his divorce. Waking up and realizing he could just go to the dealer, sign the papers, and have it. No discussions. No arguing. No snidey contempt about boys' toys and how they needed this damn thing and that damn thing first. None of that. He'd gone down to the dealer and chopped in his old clunker and signed up for that Firebird and driven it home in a state of total joy. He'd washed and cleaned it every week. He'd watched the infomercials and tried every miracle polish on the market. The car had sat every day outside the Laney factory like a bright red badge of achievement. Like a shiny consolation for the shit and the drudgery. Whatever else he didn't have, he had a Firebird. Until today. Now, along with everything else he used to have, he used to have a Firebird.

The nearest police were ten miles south. He had seen the place the previous night, heading north past it. He set off walking, stamping out in rage and frustration. The sun climbed up and slowed him. After a couple of miles, he stuck out his thumb. A computer service engineer in a company Buick stopped for him.

"Car was stolen," Penney told him. "Last night, outside the damn motel."

The engineer made a kind of all-purpose growling sound, like an expression of vague sympathy when the person doesn't really give a shit.

"Too bad," he said. "You insured?"

"Sure, Triple A and everything. But I'm kind of hoping they'll get it back for me."

The guy shook his head. "Forget about it. It'll be in Mexico tomorrow. Some senor down there will have himself a brand new American motor. You'll never see it again unless you take a vacation down there and he runs you over with it."

Then the guy laughed about it and James Penney felt like getting out right away, but the sun was hot and James Penney was a practical guy. So he rode on in silence and got out in the dust next to the police parking lot. The Buick took off and left him there.

The police station was small, but it was crowded. He stood in line behind five other people. There was an officer behind the front counter, taking details, taking complaints, writing slow, confirming everything twice. Penney felt like every minute was vital. He felt like his Firebird was racing down to the border. Maybe this guy could radio ahead and get it stopped. He hopped from foot to foot in frustration. Gazed

wildly around him. There were notices stuck on a board behind the officer's head. Blurred Xeroxes of telexes and faxes. US Marshal notices. A mass of stuff. His eyes flicked absently across it all.

Then they snapped back. His photograph was staring out at him. The photograph from his own driver's license, Xeroxed in black-and-white, enlarged, grainy. His name underneath, in big printed letters. James Penney. From Laney, California. A description of his car. Red Firebird. The plate number. James Penney. Wanted for arson and criminal damage. He stared at the bulletin. It grew larger and larger. It grew life-size. His face stared back at him like he was looking in a mirror. James Penney. Arson. Criminal damage. All-Points-Bulletin. The woman in front of him finished her business and he stepped forward to the head of the line. The desk sergeant looked up at him.

"Can I help you, sir?" he said.

Penney shook his head. He peeled off left and walked away. Stepped calmly outside into the bright morning sun and ran back north like a madman. He made about a hundred yards before the heat slowed him to a gasping walk. Then he did the instinctive thing, which was to duck off the blacktop and take cover in a wild birch grove. He pushed through the brush until he was out of sight and collapsed into a sitting position, back against a thin rough trunk, legs splayed out straight, chest heaving, hands clamped against his head like he was trying to stop it from exploding.

Arson and criminal damage. He knew what the words meant. But he couldn't square them with what he had actually done. It was his own damn house to burn. Like he was burning his trash. He was entitled. How could that be arson? A guy chooses to burn his own house down, how is that a crime? This is a free country, right? And he could explain, anyway. He'd been upset. He sat slumped against the birch trunk and breathed easier. But only for a moment. Because then he started thinking about lawyers. He'd had personal experience. His divorce had cost him plenty in lawyer bills. He knew what lawyers were like. Lawyers were the problem. Even if it wasn't even arson, it was going to cost plenty in lawyer bills to start proving it. It was going to cost a steady torrent of dollars, pouring out for years. Dollars he didn't have, and never would have again. He sat there on the hard, dry ground and realized that absolutely everything he had in the whole world was right then in direct contact with his body. One pair of shoes, one pair of socks, one pair of boxers, Levis, cotton shirt, leather jacket. And his billfold. He put his hand down and touched its bulk in his pocket. Six weeks' pay, less yesterday's spending. Six weeks' worth of his pay might buy about six hours of a lawyer's time. Six hours, the guy might get as far as writing down his full name and address, maybe his date of birth. His Social Security number would take another six. The actual nature of his problem, that would be in the third six-hour chunk. Or the fourth. That was James Penney's experience with lawyers.

He got to his feet in the clearing. His legs were weak with the lactic acid from the unaccustomed running. His heart was thumping. He leaned up against a birch trunk and took a deep breath. Swallowed. He pushed back through the brush to the road. Turned north and started walking. He walked for a half-hour, hands in his pockets, maybe a mile and three-quarters, and then his muscles eased off and his breathing calmed down. He began to see things clearly. He began to understand. He began to appreciate the power of labels. He was a realistic guy, and he always told himself the truth. He was an arsonist, because they said he was. The angry phase was over. Now it was about taking sensible decisions, one after the other. Clearing up the confusion was beyond his resources. So he had to stay out of their reach. That was his first decision. That was the starting point. That was the strategy. The other decisions would flow out of that. They were tactical.

He could be traced three ways. By his name, by his face, by his car. He ducked sideways off the road again into the trees. Pushed twenty yards into the woods. Kicked a shallow hole in the leaf-mold and stripped out of his billfold everything with his name on. He buried it all in the hole and stamped the earth flat. Then he took his beloved Firebird keys from his pocket and hurled them far into the trees. He didn't see where they fell.

The car itself was gone. In the circumstances, that was good. But it had left a trail. It might have been seen in Mojave, outside the bank. It might have been seen at the gas stations where he filled it. And its plate number was on the motel form from last night. With his name. A trail, arrowing north through California in neat little increments.

He remembered his training from Vietnam. He remembered the tricks. If you wanted to move east from your foxhole, first you moved west. You moved west for a couple hundred yards, stepping on the occasional twig, brushing the occasional bush, until you had convinced Charlie you were moving west, as quietly as you could, but not quietly enough. Then you turned about and came back east, really quietly, doing it right, past your original starting point, and away. He'd done it a dozen times. His original plan had been to head north for a spell, maybe into Oregon. He'd gotten a few hours into that plan. Therefore the red Firebird had laid a modest trail north. So now he was going to turn south for a while and disappear. He walked back out of the woods, into the dust on the near side of the road, and started walking back the way he'd come.

His face he couldn't change. It was right there on all the posters. He remembered it staring out at him from the bulletin board in the police building. The neat side-parting, the sunken gray cheeks. He ran his hands through his hair, vigorously, back and forward, until it stuck out every which way. No more neat side-parting. He ran his palms over twenty-four hours of stubble. Decided to grow a big beard. No option, really. He didn't have a razor, and he wasn't about to spend any money on one. He walked on through the dust, heading south, with Excelsior Mountain towering up on

his right. Then he came to the turn dodging west toward San Francisco, through Tioga Pass, before Mount Dana reared up even higher. He stopped in the dust on the side of the road and pondered. Keeping on south would take him nearly all the way back to Mojave. Too close to home. Way too close. He wasn't comfortable about that. Not comfortable at all. So he figured a new move. He'd head west to the coast, then decide.

He put himself thirty yards west of the turn and stuck out his thumb. He was a practical guy. He knew he wasn't going to get anywhere by walking. He had to get rides, one after the other, anonymous rides from busy people. He decided as a matter of tactics not to look for rides from solid citizens. Not from anybody who looked like they might notice him or remember him. He had to think like a fugitive. A whole new experience.

After forty minutes, he came up with an ironic grin and realized he didn't have to worry about avoiding the solid citizens. They were avoiding him. He was standing there, thumb out, no baggage, messy hair, unshaven, dusty up to the knees, and one vehicle after another was passing him right by. Glancing at him and accelerating down the road like he wasn't even there. The sun wheeled overhead and dropped away into afternoon, and he started to worry about getting a ride at all. He was hungry and thirsty and vulnerable. Alone and on foot in the exact middle of the hugest and most contemptuous landscape he had ever seen.

Salvation arrived in the form of an open-topped Jeep, dusty and dented, a sandy color that really wasn't any color at all. A guy about forty at the wheel. Long graying hair, dirty tie-dye shirt, some kind of a left-over hippy. The Jeep slowed and plowed into the dust. Stopped right next to Penney and the driver leaned over inside and shouted across over the throb of the worn muffler.

"I'm going to Sacramento, my friend," he said. "But if you want the Bay, I can let you off in Stockton."

Penney shook his head, vigorously.

"Sacramento is great," he shouted. "Thank you very much."

He put his right hand on the windshield frame and his left hand on the seatback and swung himself inside exactly like he'd done with Jeeps in Vietnam.

"You just lay back and look at the scenery, my friend," the driver shouted over the muffler noise. "Talking is not an option in this old thing. Too loud, you know what I mean?"

James Penney nodded gratefully at him and the old hippy let in the clutch and roared

off down the road.

The Laney County Medical Examiner's office was just that, an office, and a fairly rudimentary one. There were no facilities for post-mortem examination, unless Kolek wanted to clear his own desk and slice the carbonized lump open all over it. So he had taken the body bag down to the facility the County used over in northern Los Angeles. It was a big modern morgue, well equipped, and busy. It was busy because it sucked in all the business from the ring of small counties surrounding it, as well as handling its own substantial quota of unfortunates. So Kolek had parked the bag in the cold store and signed up for the first free visitor slot of the day, which was mid-afternoon. It was a half-hour slot, but Kolek figured that was going to be more than long enough. Not a hell of a lot of doubt about how Penney had died. All that was left was a routine ID through the dental data.

Laney itself had one dentist, serving the population of two thousand people. He had never seen Penney. But he was reasonably new, and the sheriff said it wasn't unusual for Laney people to forget about their teeth. The factory gave health insurance, of course, but not the best in the world, and dentistry required a contribution. But the surgery nurse was a stout old woman who had been there through three separate tenures. She went through the system and found the Penney file where it had been stored after his last visit, twelve years before. It was a thin packet of notes and film in a buff envelope. Kolek signed for it and threw it into the back seat of his wagon. Checked his watch and headed south for the morgue.

James Penney got out of the old hippy's jeep right on the main drag into the southern edge of Sacramento, windblown, tired, ears ringing from the noise. He stood by the side of the road and waved and watched the guy go, waving back, long gray hair blowing in the slipstream. Then he looked around in the sudden silence and took his bearings. All the way up and down the drag he could see a forest of signs, bright colors, neon, advertising motels, air and pool and cable, burger places, eateries of every description, supermarkets, auto parts. Looked like the kind of place a guy could get lost in, no trouble at all. Big choice of motels, all side-by-side, all competing, all offering the lowest prices in town. He walked down to level with three of them. Figured he'd use the middle one. Hole up and plan ahead.

But then he decided to try something he'd read about once in a travel guide. Check in late, and ask for an even lower price. Late in the day, the motel would be keen to rent another room. They'd figure something is better than nothing, right? That was the theory in the travel guide. It was a theory he'd never tried, but now was the time to start. So he went straight out for a late lunch or an early dinner or whatever it was time for. He chose a burger chain he'd never used before and sat in the window, idly watching the traffic. The waitress came over and he ordered a cheeseburger and two Cokes. He was dry from the dust on the road.

The forty-year-old left-over hippy with the long graying hair drove on downtown and parked the dusty and dented jeep right up against a hydrant outside the Sacramento Police Department's main building. He pulled the keys and stepped out. Stood and stretched in the warmth of the afternoon sun before ducking inside.

The Drug Enforcement Agency's Sacramento office was located in a suite of rooms lent to them by the police department. The only way in was through the precinct hall, past the desk sergeants. Agents had to sign in and out. They had to collect internal ID badges to wear inside the building, and they had to leave them there on their way out. Two reasons for that. They tended to look more like criminals than agents, and the badges kept confusion inside the station house to a minimum. And because they were working undercover, they couldn't afford to slip their IDs into their pockets, absent-mindedly or by mistake, and walk out like that. If they did, and they got searched by whatever new friends they were trying to make, there could be some very bad consequences. So the strict rule was the IDs stayed at the precinct house desk, every moment the agents weren't actually inside and wearing them.

The forty-year-old hippy lined up to sign in and collect his badge. He was behind a couple of uniforms with some guy in handcuffs. One desk sergeant on duty. A wait. He scanned the bulletins on the back wall. High risk of forest fire. Missing children. Then a face stared out at him. An APB teletype. James Penney. Laney, California. Arson and criminal damage.

"Shit," he said. Loudly.

The desk sergeant and the cops with the cuffed guy all turned to look at him.

"That guy," he said. "James Penney. I just drove him all the way over here through the mountains."

The sheriff in Laney took the call from Sacramento. He was busy closing out the files on the previous day's activity. The DWIs, the broken windows, the smashed windshield, the small stuff. The Penney file was already in the drawer, just waiting for Kolek's formal ID to tie it up.

"Penney?" he said to the Sacramento desk sergeant. "No, he's dead. Crashed and burned on the road out to Vegas, last night."

Then he hung up, but he was a conscientious guy, and cautious, so he found the number for the morgue down in L.A. He was stretching his hand out for the phone when it rang again. It was Kolek, calling on his mobile, straight from the dissecting table.

"What?" the sheriff asked, although he already knew what from Kolek's voice.

“Two main problems,” Kolek said. “The teeth are nowhere near. Penney had a bridge across the front. Cheap dentures. These are real teeth.”

“And?” the sheriff asked. “What else?”

“This is a woman,” Kolek said.

Penney had finished his meal in the Sacramento burger shack when he saw the four police cruisers arrive. He had a dollar on the table for the waitress and was getting up ready to leave. He had actually lifted off the sticky vinyl bench and was sliding out sideways when he caught sight of them. Four cruisers, playing leapfrog along the strip of motels. The cops were going into each office in turn, a sheaf of papers in their hands, coming out, sliding along to the next office. Penney sat back down. Stared out at them through the window. Watched them leapfrog south until they were out of sight. Then he stood up and left. Turned up the collar on his leather jacket and walked north, not quickly, not slowly, holding his breath.

The Laney sheriff was on the phone. He had tracked Penney to his bank. He was aware of the big cash withdrawal yesterday. He had looked at the road on the map, Laney to Mojave, and he’d guessed correctly about the northward dash along the flank of Mount Whitney. He’d called gas stations, one after the other, working north through the phone book, until he found a pump jockey who remembered a red Firebird whose driver had paid from a thick wad of cash.

Then he’d done some mental arithmetic, speed and distance and time, and started calling a thin cluster of motels in the area he figured Penney had reached at the end of the day. Second number, he’d found the right place, the Pine Park Holiday Motel up near Yosemite. Penney had checked in at about nine o’clock, car and all, name and plate number right there on the desk guy’s carbon.

Beyond that, there was no further information. The sheriff called the nearest police department, ten miles south of the motel. No report of a stolen Firebird. No other missing automobiles. No knowledge of a woman car thief in the locality. So the sheriff called the Mojave General Motors dealership and asked for the value of an eighteen-month-old Firebird, clean, low-mileage. He added that amount to the bank’s figure for the cash withdrawal. Penney had rendezvoused at the motel and sold his car to the dead woman and was on the run with nearly fifteen grand in his pants pocket. A lot of money. It was clear. Obvious. Penney had planned, and prepared.

The sheriff opened his map again. The Sacramento sighting had been just plain luck. So now was the time to capitalize on it. He wouldn’t be aiming to stay there. Too small, State capital, too well policed. So he’d be moving on. Probably up to the wilds of Oregon or Washington State. Or Idaho or Montana. But not by plane. Not with cash.

Paying cash for an air ticket out of a California city is the same thing as begging to be arrested for narcotics trafficking. So he'd be aiming to get out by road. But Sacramento was a city with an ocean not too far away to the left, and high mountains to the right. Fundamentally six roads out, was all. So six roadblocks would do it, maybe on a ten-mile radius so the local commuters wouldn't get snarled up. The sheriff nodded to himself and picked up the phone to call the Highway Patrol.

It started raining in Sacramento at dusk. Steady, wetting rain. Northern California, near the mountains, very different from what Penney was used to. He was hunched in his jacket, head down, walking north, trying to decide if he dared hitch a ride. The police cruisers at the motel strip had unsettled him. He was tired and demoralized and alone. And wet. And conspicuous. Nobody walked anywhere in California. He glanced over his shoulder at the traffic stream and saw a dull olive Chevrolet sedan slowing behind him. It came to a stop and a long arm stretched across and opened the passenger door. The dome light clicked on and shone on the soaked roadway.

"Want a ride?" the driver called.

Penney ducked down and glanced inside. The driver was a very tall man, about thirty, muscular, built like a regular weightlifter. Short fair hair, rugged open face. Dressed in uniform. Army uniform. Penney read the insignia and registered: military police captain. He glanced at the dull olive paint on the car and saw a white serial number stenciled on the flank.

"I don't know," he said.

"Get in out of the rain," the driver said. "A vet like you knows better than to walk in the rain, right?"

Penney slid inside. Closed the door.

"How do you know I'm a vet?" he asked.

"The way you walk," the driver said. "And your age, and the way you look. Guy your age looking like you look and walking in the rain didn't beat the draft for college, that's for damn sure."

Penney nodded.

"No, I didn't," he said. "I did a jungle tour, seventeen years ago."

"So let me give you a ride," the driver said. "A favor, one soldier to another. Consider it a veteran's benefit."

“OK,” Penney said.

“Where you headed?” the driver asked.

“I don’t know,” Penney said. “North, I guess.”

“OK, north it is,” the driver said. “I’m Jack Reacher. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Penney said nothing.

“You got a name?” the guy called Reacher asked.

Penney hesitated.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Reacher put the car in drive and glanced over his shoulder. Eased back into the traffic stream. Clicked the switch and locked the doors.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“Do?” Penney repeated.

“You’re running,” Reacher said. “Heading out of town, walking in the rain, head down, no bag, don’t know what your name is. I’ve seen a lot of people running, and you’re one of them.”

“You going to turn me in?”

“I’m a military cop,” Reacher said. “You done anything to hurt the Army?”

“The Army?” Penney said. “No, I was a good soldier.”

“So why would I turn you in?”

Penney looked blank.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“What did you do to the civilians?” Reacher asked.

“You’re going to turn me in,” Penney said, helplessly.

Reacher shrugged at the wheel.

“Well, that depends,” he said. “What did you do?”

Penney said nothing. Reacher turned his head and looked straight at him. A powerful silent stare, hypnotic intensity in his eyes, held for a hundred yards of road.

“What did you do?” he asked again.

Penney couldn’t look away. He took a breath.

“I burned my house,” he said. “Near Mojave. I worked seventeen years and got canned yesterday and I got all upset because they were going to take my car away so I burned my house. They’re calling it deliberate arson.”

“Near Mojave?” Reacher said. “They would. They don’t like fires down there.”

Penney nodded. “I should have thought harder. But I was real mad. Seventeen years, and suddenly I’m shit on their shoe. And my car got stolen anyway, first night I’m away.”

“There are roadblocks all around here,” Reacher said. “I came through one south of the city.”

“You think they’re for me?” Penney asked.

“Could be,” Reacher said. “They don’t like fires down there.”

“You going to turn me in?”

Reacher looked at him again, hard and silent.

“Is that all you did?”

Penney nodded. “Yes, sir, that’s all I did.”

There was silence for a beat. Just the sound of the wet pavement under the tires.

“Well, I don’t have a problem with it,” Reacher said. “A guy does a jungle tour, works seventeen years and gets canned, I guess he’s entitled to get a little mad.”

“So what should I do?”

“You got attachments?”

“Divorced, no kids.”

“So start over, someplace else.”

“They’ll find me,” Penney said.

“You’re already thinking about changing your name,” Reacher said.

Penney nodded.

“I junked all my ID,” he said. “Buried it in the woods.”

“So build a new identity. Get new paper. That’s all anybody cares about. Pieces of paper.”

“Like how?”

Reacher was quiet another beat, thinking hard.

“Easy enough,” he said. “Classic way is find some cemetery, find a kid who died as a child, get a copy of the birth certificate, start from there. Get a social security number, a passport, credit cards, and you’re a new person.”

Penney shrugged. “I can’t do all that. Too difficult. And I don’t have time. According to you, there’s a roadblock up ahead. How am I going to do all of that stuff before we get there?”

“There are other ways,” Reacher said.

“Forgeries?”

Reacher shook his head. “No good. Sooner or later, forgeries don’t work.”

“So how?”

“Find some guy who’s already created false ID for himself, and take it away from him.”

Penney shook his head. “You’re crazy. How am I going to do that?”

“Maybe you don’t need to do that. Maybe I already did it for you.”

“You got false ID?”

“Not me,” Reacher said. “Guy I was looking for.”

“What guy?”

Reacher drove one-handed and pulled a sheaf of official paper from his inside jacket pocket.

“Arrest warrant,” he said. “Army liaison officer at a weapons plant outside of Fresno, looks to be peddling blueprints. Turns out to have three separate sets of bogus ID, all perfect, all completely backed up with everything from elementary school records onward. Which makes it likely they’re Soviet, which means they can’t be beat. I’m on my way back from talking to him right now. He was running, too, already on his second set of papers. I took them. They’re clean. They’re in the trunk of this car, in a wallet, in a jacket.”

Traffic was slowing ahead. There was red glare visible through the streaming windshield. Flashing blue lights. Yellow flashlight beams waving, side to side.

“There’s the roadblock,” Reacher said.

“So can I use this guy’s ID?” Penney asked urgently.

“Sure you can,” Reacher said. “Hop out and get it. Bring the wallet from the jacket.”

He slowed and stopped on the shoulder. Penney got out. Ducked away to the back of the car and lifted the trunk lid. Came back a long moment later, white in the face.

“Got it?” Reacher asked.

Penney nodded silently. Held up the wallet.

“It’s all in there,” Reacher said. “I checked. Everything anybody needs.”

Penney nodded again.

“So put it in your pocket,” Reacher said.

Penney slipped the wallet into his inside jacket pocket. Reacher’s right hand came up. There was a gun in it. And a pair of handcuffs in his left.

“Now sit still,” he said, quietly.

He leaned over and snapped the cuffs on Penney’s wrists, one-handed. Put the car back into drive and crawled forward.

“What’s this for?” Penney asked.

“Quiet,” Reacher said.

They were two cars away from the checkpoint. Three highway patrolmen in rain capes were directing traffic into a corral formed by parked cruisers. Their light bars were flashing bright in the shiny dark.

“What?” Penney said again.

Reacher said nothing. Just stopped where the cop told him and wound his window down. The night air blew in, cold and wet. The cop bent down. Reacher handed him his military ID. The cop played his flashlight over it and handed it back.

“Who’s your passenger?” he asked.

“My prisoner,” Reacher said. He handed over the arrest warrant.

“He got ID?” the cop asked.

Reacher leaned over and slipped the wallet out from inside Penney’s jacket, two-fingered like a pickpocket. Flipped it open and passed it through the window. A second cop stood in Reacher’s headlight beams and copied the plate number onto a clipboard. Stepped around the hood and joined the first guy.

“Captain Reacher of the military police,” the first cop said.

The second cop wrote it down.

“With a prisoner name of Edward Hendricks,” the first cop said.

The second cop wrote it down.

“Thank you, sir,” the first cop said. “You drive safe, now.”

Reacher eased out from between the cruisers. Accelerated away into the rain. A mile later, he stopped again on the shoulder. Leaned over and unlocked Penney’s handcuffs. Put them back in his pocket. Penney rubbed his wrists.

“I thought you were going to turn me in,” he said.

Reacher shook his head. “Looked better for me that way. I’ve got an arrest warrant, I want a prisoner in the car for everybody to see, right?”

Penney nodded.

“I guess,” he said, quietly.

Reacher handed the wallet back.

“Keep it,” he said.

“Really?”

“Edward Hendricks,” Reacher said. “That’s who you are now, rest of your life. It’s clean ID, and it’ll work. Think of it like a veteran’s benefit. One soldier to another, OK?”

Edward Hendricks looked at him and nodded and opened his door. Got out into the rain and turned up the collar of his leather jacket and started walking north. Reacher watched him until he was out of sight and then pulled away and took the next turn west. Turned north past a town called Eureka and stopped again where the road was lonely and ran close to the ocean. There was a wide gravel shoulder and a low barrier and a steep cliff with the Pacific high tide boiling and foaming fifty feet below it.

He got out of the car and opened the trunk and grasped the lapels of the jacket he had told his passenger about. Took a deep breath and heaved. The corpse was heavy. He wrestled it up out of the trunk and jacked it onto his shoulder and staggered with it to the barrier. Bent his knees and dropped it over the edge. The rocky cliff caught it and it spun and the arms and the legs flailed limply. Then it hit the surf with a faint splash and it was gone.