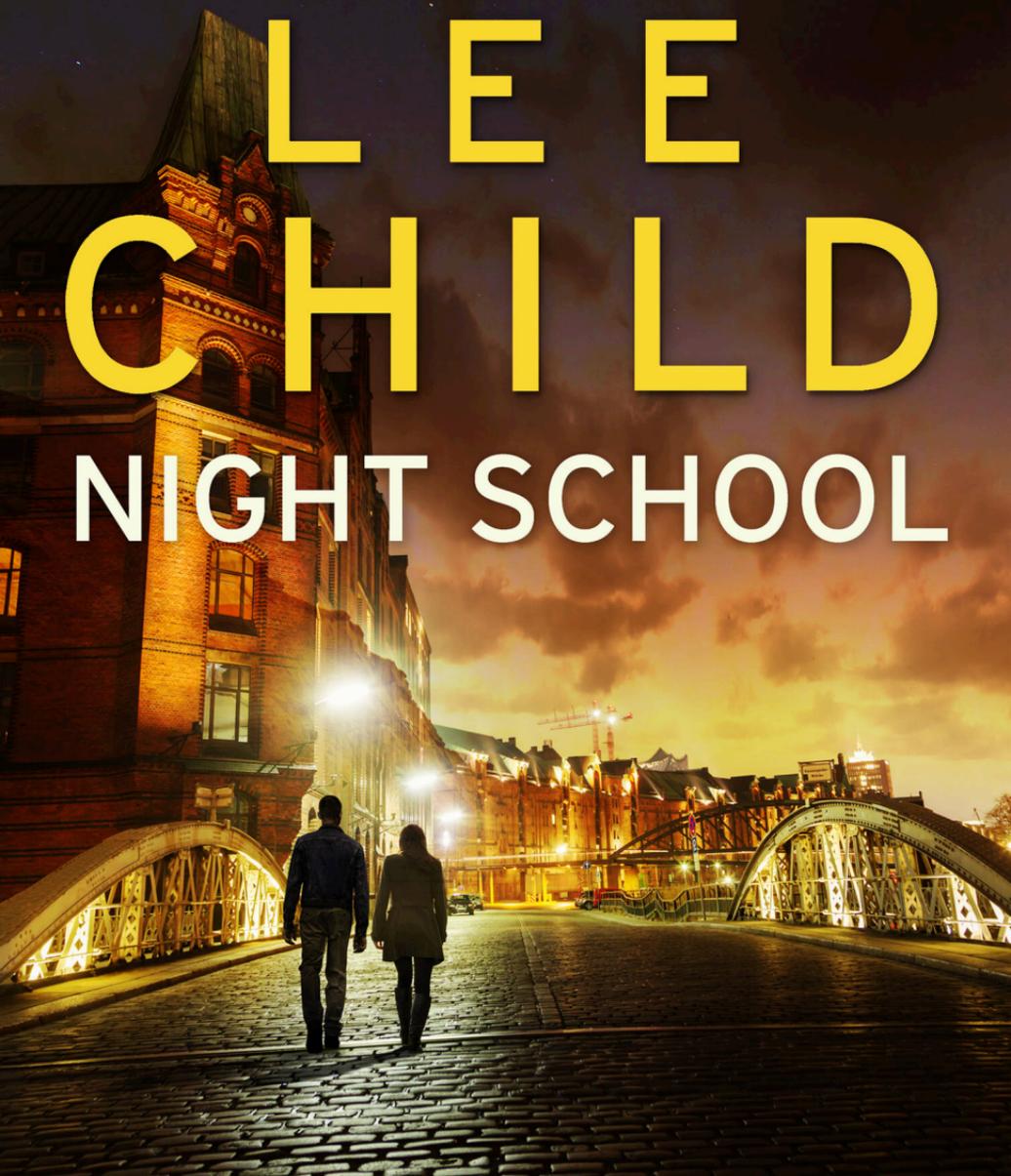


THE NEW
JACK REACHER
THRILLER

LEE
CHILD
NIGHT SCHOOL



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ONE

In the morning they gave Reacher a medal, and in the afternoon they sent him back to school. The medal was another Legion of Merit. His second. It was a handsome item, enamelled in white, with a ribbon halfway between purple and red. Army Regulation 600-8-22 authorized its award for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services to the United States in a key position of responsibility. Which was a bar Reacher felt he had cleared, technically. But he figured the real reason he was getting it was the same reason he had gotten it before. It was a transaction. A contractual token. *Take the bauble and keep your mouth shut about what we asked you to do for it.* Which Reacher would have anyway. It was nothing to boast about. The Balkans, some police work, a search for two local men with wartime secrets to keep, both soon identified, and located, and visited, and shot in the head. All part of the peace process. Interests were served, and the region calmed down a little. Two weeks of his life. Four rounds expended. No big deal.

Army Regulation 600-8-22 was surprisingly vague about exactly how medals should be handed out. It said only that decorations were to be presented with an appropriate air of formality and with fitting ceremony. Which usually meant a large room with gilt furniture and a bunch of flags. And an officer senior in rank to the recipient. Reacher was a major, with twelve years in, but other awards were being given out that morning, including three to a trio of colonels and two to a pair of one-star generals, so the big cheese on deck was a three-star from the Pentagon, who Reacher knew from many years before, when the guy had been a CID battalion commander working out of Fort Myer. A thinker. Certainly enough of a thinker to figure out why an MP major was getting a Legion of Merit. He had a look in his eye. Part wry, and part seal-the-deal serious. *Take the bauble and keep your mouth shut.* Maybe in the past the guy had done the same thing himself. Maybe more than once. He had a whole fruit salad of ribbons on the left chest of his Class-A coat. Including two Legions of Merit.

The appropriately formal room was deep inside Fort Belvoir in Virginia. Which was close to the Pentagon, which was convenient for the three-star. Convenient for Reacher too, because it was about equally close to Rock Creek, where he had been marking time since he got back. Not so convenient for the other officers, who had flown in from Germany.

There was some milling around, and some small talk, and some shaking of hands, and then everyone went quiet and lined up and stood to attention, and salutes were exchanged, and medals were variously pinned or draped on, and then there was more milling around and small talk and shaking of hands. Reacher edged towards the door, keen to get out, but the three-star caught him before he made it. The guy shook his hand and kept hold of his elbow, and said, 'I hear you're getting new orders.'

Reacher said, 'No one told me. Not yet. Where did you hear that?'

'My top sergeant. They all talk to each other. U.S. Army NCOs have the world's most efficient grapevine. It always amazes me.'

'Where do they say I'm going?'

'They don't know for sure. But not far. Within driving distance, anyway. Apparently the motor pool got a requisition.'

'When am I supposed to find out?'

'Sometime today.'

'Thank you,' Reacher said. 'Good to know.'

The three-star let go of his elbow, and Reacher edged onward, to the door, and through it, and out to a corridor, where a sergeant first class skidded to a halt and saluted. He was out of breath, like he had run a long way. From a distant part of the installation, maybe, where the real work was done.

The guy said, 'Sir, with General Garber's compliments, he requests that you stop by his office at your earliest convenience.'

Reacher said, 'Where am I going, soldier?'

'Driving distance,' the guy said. 'But around here, that could be a lot of different things.'

Garber's office was in the Pentagon, so Reacher caught a ride with two captains who lived at Belvoir but had afternoon shifts in the B ring. Garber had a walled-off room all his own, two rings in, two floors up, guarded by a sergeant at a desk outside the door. Who stood up and led Reacher inside, and announced his name, like an old-time butler in a movie. Then the guy side-stepped and began his retreat, but Garber stopped him and said, 'Sergeant, I'd like you to stay.'

So the guy did, standing easy, feet planted on the shiny linoleum.

A witness.

Garber said, 'Take a seat, Reacher.'

Reacher did, on a visitor chair with tubular legs, which sagged under his weight and tipped him backward, as if a strong wind was blowing.

Garber said, 'You have new orders.'

Reacher said, 'What and where?'

'You're going back to school.'

Reacher said nothing.

Garber said, 'Disappointed?'

Hence the witness, Reacher supposed. Not a private conversation. Best behaviour. He said, 'As always, general, I'm happy to go where the army sends me.'

'You don't sound happy. But you should. Career development is a wonderful thing.'

'Which school?'

'Details are being delivered to your office as we speak.'

'How long will I be gone?'

'That depends on how hard you work. As long as it takes, I guess.'