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LEE

A

JACK REACHER

STORY

CHILD

THE

CHRISTMAS SCORPION

The Christmas Scorpion

A Jack Reacher Story

Lee Child



A Dell Ebook

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A Dell Ebook Original

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The Christmas Scorpion

By Lee Child

About the Author

Excerpt from Past Tense

Jack Reacher was happy to play the hand he was dealt, and to live life the way it came. Except for one strong preference: he liked to be warm in winter. Which imposed some kind of shape on his year. By October at the latest he would start heading south. Usually the end of December would find him at his most distant point. The Florida Keys, sometimes. Or Tucson, Arizona. Or Mexico, one year, after the State Department found it convenient to renew his passport. Always either tropical or desert. In recent years he had seen more Christmas lights strung up in palm trees than fir trees. They looked pretty good, especially at night. And there were lots of them. Once he had read a newspaper story about homeowners in the Northeast having such elaborate Christmas displays they needed new breaker panels. Now the same thing was happening way to the south. Everyone loved Christmas. Except the guy in the Santa suit, who was liable to pass out from heat exhaustion.

That particular year the plan worked as normal. On Christmas Eve Reacher arrived in a small town near Barstow, California, out in the desert halfway between Edwards Air Force Base and Fort Irwin. Not as far south as usual. But he knew both places from days of old, especially Irwin, which was a gigantic army training ground, where he had spent many a happy hour. He liked the emptiness. He liked the climate. Warm, dry, and reliable.

But not that particular year. What also arrived on Christmas Eve was snow, in huge quantities, in what media elsewhere were quick to call a one-time freak once-in-a-lifetime storm of the century. Around Barstow no one called it anything, because the power went out immediately, and the phones went down, and the cell towers went off line. Not surprising. The great state of California wasn't so great with snow. Especially when the snow was wet and heavy and three feet thick on the ground. Cars were buried. Roads were invisible. The rocky tan desert was replaced by a smooth white blanket, as far as the eye could see.

Reacher got inside as soon as he could. He saw a lone low building up ahead. Some kind of bar or roadhouse. He stumbled in through the door, his back thickly coated with snow, his pants soaked to the thigh. He huffed and puffed, and clapped his hands together, and stamped on the mat. He was the fifth refugee. There were two couples already in there, a man and a woman somewhere north of sixty, and another man and woman somewhere south of forty. They all looked like they had arrived not long before, the same way he had, huffing and puffing and stamping and clapping. He nodded a rueful all-in-the-same-boat greeting, and they all nodded back.

The power was out. There were candles burning on the bar, and one on every table. Not decorative candles. No sleighs or reindeer. They were utility items, made of greasy white wax, from the hardware store, next to the dish mops and the kitchen matches. Each table also had a Christmas tree on it, about a foot high, made of feathery green plastic dusted with silver glitter. There were icicle lights hanging from the ceiling. Without power they looked like strings of dull gray pearls.

There was a guy behind the bar, a lugubrious fellow, maybe seventy years old. He called out, "Get you something?"

Reacher glanced around. The candles were all set on porcelain saucers, all the same, white and sturdy, like hotel ware crockery. Which was good, because saucers implied cups, and cups implied coffee, which was what he wanted, black, no sugar.

Except the power was out.

He said, "What have you got?"

The guy said, "Beer."

"Works for me."

The guy ducked down to a silent refrigerator and put a long-neck bottle on the bar. Reacher took it. He thought the older couple looked a little upset. They were going to be stranded overnight, and they didn't like it. The younger couple weren't married. Reacher was sure of that. Not romantically involved at all. They were colleagues of some kind. Like business travelers, except they weren't dressed like it. No suits or wrinkle-free fabrics. Both were in worn denim jeans and T-shirts and old leather jackets. Both looked fit and competent. The guy had short brown hair, neatly brushed. The woman had short black hair, cut in a bob that just missed her collar.

Military, Reacher thought. Which made sense, with Irwin a hop one way, and Edwards the other. Except they weren't American. He was sure of that, too. Some subtle thing. They were foreign contractors, maybe. Or liaison officers from friendly forces, out of uniform, maybe off duty. Or maybe not, because they looked just as upset as the older couple. They were going to be stranded overnight, and they didn't like it.

Reacher took a table. The older couple fussed and stopped and started, as if they weren't sure whether to blame each other, or reassure each other. The younger two stared at their phones, and fiddled with a larger device they tried to keep hidden, but which Reacher recognized as a NATO transceiver tied to a joint command network. It wasn't working. He heard them whisper. Like BBC radio. British Army, he thought. Maybe due at Irwin for a training

exercise. Maybe embarrassed they were late. No way of getting in touch. Bad show. Not cricket. Reacher knew the British Army. It liked to be reliable, if nothing else.

The woman got up and came over to his table. She was tall and lithe and she had a great smile.

She asked, "Do you have service on your phone? Maybe you're on a different network."

Her accent was from somewhere in England.

"I don't have a phone," Reacher said. "Sorry."

The woman didn't answer.

"Comms failures happen all the time," Reacher said. "Nothing you can do about it, soldier."

"Are you from Fort Irwin?"

"Is that where you're headed?"

"We're supposed to be there now," she said.

"Who are you?"

"You first," she said.

"Right now I'm nobody. Once upon a time I was 110th MP."

"Really?"

"For my sins."

The woman turned back and said, "Tony, come here."

The guy got up and came over, just the same, tall and lithe. But no smile.

The woman said to him, "This gentleman was in the 110th over here."

The guy said, "When?"

Reacher said, "Back in the day."

"How far back?"

"You were in high school. Or the workhouse, or whatever you had over there."

"Did you know Andrew Parker?"

"British guy. He trained with us. He was a lunatic."

"He was ours. They still tell stories."

"You're 1st RMP?"

Royal Military Police. They work for the queen.

The guy stuck out his hand and said, "Tony Jackson."

The woman said, "Annie Ness."

“Jack Reacher.”

They sat down at his table, half lit by the window, half by the candle. Annie Ness was pretty. But tough. Not hard, but not to be messed with, either.

She asked, “What kind of vehicle have you got? Ours is what they gave us at the airport.”

“I don’t have a vehicle,” Reacher said. “Sorry.”

“Then how did you get here?”

“Hitched a ride, and walked the last two miles.”

“Why?”

“It started snowing and the guy refused to go any further.”

“I meant, why here?”

“Because it’s supposed to be warm and dry.”

She didn’t answer.

“Now I’m changing my mind,” Reacher said. “About the climate, obviously. And about you, as well. Whatever you’re late for ain’t happening anyway, because it’s snowing at Irwin, too. I bet half the people supposed to be there are stuck somewhere else. Yet you’re asking me all kinds of questions. Which suggests your duties are more urgent than a joint training exercise. You’re 1st RMP, and you don’t like that I can’t really explain why I came here. Which suggests you’re looking for a guy. To which I say best of luck, and to save you time, I’m not the guy you’re looking for. I’m some other guy.”

Tony Jackson said, “You would say that anyway.”

“I would have stopped talking after I told Ms. Ness I don’t have a phone.”

“Annie,” she said.

“I would have laid low at that point. I would have aroused no further suspicion.”

Jackson said, “We need to get out of here.”

“That’s going to be difficult.”

“How would you do it?”

“I wouldn’t. I’m not looking for a guy. I would stay here. Maybe buy myself a bag of potato chips.”

“We can’t stay here.”

“Why not?”

Jackson didn’t answer. At the other table the older lady seemed to be urging her husband to go do some particular thing. She was practically poking and

prodding. Eventually the guy got up and crossed the room and came to a stop at Reacher's table, with Ness on his left, and Reacher dead ahead, and Jackson on his right.

"Excuse me," he said. "My wife wondered if you were perhaps discussing a way out of here. If so, she wondered if you would perhaps include us in your party. There are no facilities here. There are no beds. There is no food, and no adequate heating. My wife feels we'll freeze to death, or starve."

"Merry Christmas," Reacher said.

"Perhaps you have a large and capable vehicle."

"We don't. But if we figure something out, you'll be the first to know, OK?"

"Thank you," the old guy said, and he turned and walked back to his own table, where he sat down and whispered to his wife. Presumably updating her on his progress. When he finished she nodded once, but she didn't look any happier.

Reacher said, "What's so urgent up at Irwin?"

Jackson asked, "Can you help us?"

"How could I? I'm retired."

"You could call the MP barracks. You might still know someone. You could mention the 110th. I'm sure that makes people want to help."

"Usually it makes people want to shoot me in the face. Anyway, communications are down."

Jackson nodded. "The NATO net needs a plane in the air. This will blow over in an hour, surely. They'll get one back up. You could ask Irwin to send a helicopter."

"I could ask for a dinner date with Miss California, too. And a million dollars in cash. I wonder which I would get first?"

"This is serious, Reacher."

"Says you."

Annie Ness glanced both ways and hunched forward and whispered, "We're a close protection detail. Bodyguards, basically. We got separated from our principal. We think he's at Irwin without us. Or stuck somewhere along the way."

"Who is he?"

Jackson said, "Can't tell you."

Ness said, "Our minister of defence. Spelled with a letter c."

"You're kidding," Reacher said. "On Christmas Eve?"

“Exactly. A super-secret meeting. Who would expect it?”

“Is he on his own?”

“He went in the lead car. He wanted to talk to his aide in private. We were in the trail car. We spun off but they didn’t see and they drove on.”

“A super-secret meeting with who?”

“Your secretary of defense, spelled with an s.”

“That’s a fairly big deal.”

“Our briefing made it sound like the fate of the world hangs in the balance.”

“Possibly exaggerated.”

“But still,” she said.

“They’re at Fort Irwin,” Reacher said. “They’ll be OK. It’s a secure facility. There are lots of men with guns.”

“Unless he got stuck somewhere along the way.”

“Let’s assume he didn’t.”

“We can’t assume,” Ness said, and then she said nothing more.

Jackson said, “We could search with the helicopter.”

“There is no helicopter,” Reacher said. “Who do you think I am?”

“We need to find our guy.”

“Is this about saving face? That train left the station long ago.”

“It’s about saving lives.”

“You think he’s going to starve, too? I bet the aide put a sandwich in his briefcase. That’s what those guys are for.”

No answer. No reaction. No smile.

Reacher said, “This is serious, isn’t it?”

“I told you it was.”

“You know of a specific threat.”

“There’s been some internet chatter. Most of it coherent. There’s been a name repeated over and over. We think it’s the name of an operator or an agent. Always the same in every language, as if it’s more of a description than a name, as if it derives from a physical characteristic.”

“What’s the name?”

“The Christmas Scorpion.”

“What kind of physical characteristic would that be? What does a Christmas scorpion even look like?”

“We don’t know. But obviously the guy is a superstar. They talk about him like Lionel Messi.”

“Who?”

“Football player.”

“Soccer,” Ness said. “Barcelona.”

“Like Cristiano Ronaldo at Real Madrid,” Reacher said.

“Exactly. This guy is top five in the world. And he knows about the meeting.”

“We need a helicopter,” Jackson said.

Reacher looked out the window. The snow had stopped falling. The sky was lightening.

He said, “First we need NATO.”

Jackson looked at the transceiver, down in his lap. No signal. The old guy at the other table coughed to get attention, and looked over, optimistically, hoping for good news.

Reacher whispered, “We can’t leave them behind. They’ll tell the papers the military evacuated us but not them. They’ll cause a scandal. And we should take them anyway. No beds, no food. This is a state of emergency.”

Jackson looked down and said, “NATO is back.”

“Get the CO in the MP barracks.”

Jackson did, after a lot of back and forth. He handed the transceiver to Reacher, who said, “Look up DCR 120 in your code book, and call me back on this frequency.”

He clicked off.

Ness asked, “What’s DCR 120?”

“A solid gold promise he’s about to get a medal and a promotion.”

“Is he?”

“Depends what happens next.”

The guy came back on the line. Reacher asked for everything short of the dinner date and the million bucks in cash. The guy agreed. He said a Black Hawk would be there in twenty minutes. The older lady tightened the scarf around her neck, and buttoned her coat. She seemed equal parts excited and worried about the helicopter.

Which arrived five minutes early, dropping low where the road was buried, kicking up a whole new blizzard, hovering with its wheels in the snow, but not set down, because who knew what the snow was hiding? Reacher floundered out to meet it, keeping low, and he ushered the older lady past

him, and turned back into the artificial blizzard for her husband, so he didn't see the same blizzard catch the older lady's scarf, and flap it up, thereby for a split second exposing a small round tattoo in the pit of her throat, the size of a silver dollar, of a Christmas wreath complete with leaves and bows and candles, all surrounding the black silhouette of a scorpion.

The Black Hawk was a roomy machine, but basic inside, with all kinds of wires and belts and straps and webbing, and nothing to sit on except canvas slings bolted to the bulkheads. Not like a commercial airliner. Not even economy class. It was a deafening metal box full of snow, kicked up through the door by the beating rotor.

Annie Ness got the older couple situated, and then she sat down next to Tony Jackson. Reacher gave the pilot a wait-one gesture, and he plugged in headsets for Ness and Jackson and himself, so they could confer with the crew over the scream of the engines. The pilot looked back, and Reacher said, "We have two humanitarian evacuations, plus two British Army MPs actively searching for a high-ranking official from their own government, who may or may not have made it by road to Irwin after the storm started, and who currently has a credible security threat against him."

The pilot said, "What's the medical status on the humanitarians?"

"Cranky but stable. No urgency, within reason."

"They can hear what you say, you know. It's me they can't hear."

"Notice they're not denying it."

"Is the high-ranking Brit a civilian?"

"Affirmative, plus a civilian aide."

"Irwin gatehouses report no civilian arrivals in the last six hours."

"Then they're stuck in a snowbank somewhere between here and there."

"I hope they turned the motor off. You can gas yourself."

"Then you freeze. We better go find them."

"Which is why I asked about the needs of the evacs. We can't follow the roads because we can't see the roads. A visual search could take some time."

"They'll survive," Reacher said. "But sooner or later you're going to have to feed them. You should call ahead. Food and warmth seem to be the issues."

The engines screamed louder and the Black Hawk lifted. Out the portholes the light was bright again, and the snow billowed like a huge flat donut, perfectly symmetrical all around, until they were a thousand feet up, when the

small local disturbance far below settled back to earth, like sparkling mist, an insignificant smudge on a vast white sheet. We can't see the roads, the pilot had said, and he was right. Whatever vertical distance there was between the crown of the blacktop in the middle and the bottom of the ditches either side was less than the depth of the snow. The view was literally featureless. Icy white everywhere, perfectly smooth, perfectly flat, uninterrupted.

The pilot asked, "What kind of vehicle were they in?"

Jackson said, "A Chevrolet staff car. An Impala. A saloon."

"Sedan," Ness said. "Not very tall."

Reacher checked the sun in the sky. A winter afternoon. Christmas Eve. About as low as the sun ever got, in Southern California.

He said, "Go up a bit. Five thousand feet, maybe."

From the new altitude they could see faint hints of shadows thrown out by the low sun, where the crust of the snow rose or fell half an inch. Over what? Some shadows were isolated and meaningless, just rocks, but others made patterns. Some made straight lines, or gentle curves, which with a little imagination could be linked to other faint ghostly hints of more lines and curves, miles farther on, all heading roughly north of east, which was where Fort Irwin was.

Reacher said, "I think that's the road."

They followed it, five thousand feet up, thumping and clattering, with terse words and static in their headsets, sometimes guessing for miles at a time, sometimes needing to zigzag back and forth before picking up the next faint hints of the right direction. Difficult, but also encouraging, in a way, because in comparison they felt a snowed-in Chevy was going to look like a lump the size of a football stadium. An Impala was about five feet tall, Reacher thought, which even if buried completely would leave a broad oval hump about two feet high, which in the low sun would look like the Himalayas.

He asked, "How is the Christmas Scorpion supposed to be getting around?"

"We don't know," Ness said. "The file says he gets in and out of places like a ghost. No one has ever seen him. But we have to assume he's human. So he could be stuck in a snowdrift somewhere, same as everyone else."

"We might see him," Reacher said. "Today could be two for the price of one. Then my guy would get two medals. Or three, I guess, if your boss gave him one, too, because of how the minister of defence is an important person, relatively speaking."

"My boss?"

"The queen. You could ask her."

“I could ask for a date with George Clooney, too.”

The Black Hawk clattered onward, north and east, sometimes tilting or dropping down for a better look. There were snow-covered table rocks that could have been buried cars, but none of them were. There was no sign of life. Inside the noisy cabin the older couple sat mute, hands on their knees, looking uncertain, and maybe a little airsick from all the tilting and swooping. Reacher looked a question at them, as if to say, Are you OK? The man shrugged, and the woman responded by winding her scarf tighter around her neck.

The pilot said, “Maybe they turned back. Maybe we’re looking in the wrong direction. What would a smart driver do, under the circumstances? He just passed the spot where we picked you up, and he’s got a long distance and uncertain conditions ahead, so when the snow sets in bad, what does he do? He turns back toward what he already knows, surely. Toward the shelter he’s seen. Or maybe he heads for Barstow. In fact getting to Barstow would be a big win, with a high-value passenger on board. I think they’re behind us.”

“Unless they passed the point of no return,” Jackson said.

“Decision time, guys. If you’re wrong, we’re getting further away from them a mile every minute.”

No reply.

“Keep going,” Reacher said. “Doesn’t matter how much common sense the driver had. The passenger outranked him. The passenger is a male politician. Therefore he can’t be seen to chicken out of any challenge, ever. Turning around today would come back to haunt him eventually. It would become a metaphor. He can’t be the guy who didn’t get there.”

The Black Hawk clattered on. The old couple sat still. They looked puzzled, like people trying to reconstruct a conversation from one side of a cell phone call. Reacher patted the air, as if pushing the matter aside. As if he was saying, Don’t worry about it. The man shrugged, and the woman wound her scarf tighter around her neck.

The pilot said, “What’s that?”

Up ahead was a broad oval hump in a flat field of snow.

The hump was maybe two feet high.

Like the Himalayas.

“Go take a look,” Reacher said.

The pilot got down to where his rotor wash was blasting snow in every direction, including clean off what looked like a smooth black-painted panel, nicely contoured, no doubt newly washed and waxed for the occasion. The

roof of a government-owned Chevy Impala. No doubt about it.

The pilot put his wheels through the crust of the snow, above where he guessed the road was, and Reacher scrambled out, followed by Ness, and Jackson, and they floundered thigh-high and waist-high, like swimming standing up, to the car, where they dug with their hands, flinging snow aside, searching for a window, for a door, for a handle, digging some more, cracking the door, letting the rotor wash blast inside, like supercharged oxygen, then digging a V, and opening the door all the way, and crawling in.

They were alive. Blue with cold, and panting for air. Ness went in to check on them. She was also a medic, as well as everything else. The driver was a specialist from Irwin, young and fit, happy to wait. The aide was older and colder but it was his job to wait. So Ness hauled the minister out first. He had gray hair and gray skin, not helped by the cold. He was about sixty years old, and he was dressed in a gray suit. He was low on air and couldn't walk. Reacher was the biggest guy there, twice Ness's weight, a head taller than Jackson, so he scooped the minister up and carried him firefighter-style through the swirl and the blast to the hovering helicopter, where he twisted and went up on tiptoe and rolled the guy as gently as possible onto the cabin floor. The old couple stared from their canvas seats.

Reacher turned back to go get the others, and bumped into Jackson, who was coming the other way. Jackson put his head close and yelled, "I have to stay with the minister!" Reacher nodded and changed places with him, and slapped him on the back, as if passing the baton. He turned to go, and he was a step into his return trip when he heard the old woman's voice, above him, from inside the Black Hawk, commanding, loud and clear over the engine noise.

She said, "Stay where you are."

He didn't. He turned around. Saw she wasn't talking to him. She was keeping Jackson out of the helicopter. She was standing inside the door, leaning over the sprawling minister, pointing a gun. A Sig Sauer P226, Reacher noted, automatically. Nine millimeter, fifteen rounds in the magazine, plus probably one in the chamber, total sixteen, against maximum seven opponents, not good odds at all. On the other hand a 226 weighed twenty-seven ounces, which was a heavy weapon for a woman north of sixty. She might get tired. He stared at her. Ness said the Christmas Scorpion got in and out of places like a ghost. No one ever saw him. Because he was a she. The physical characteristic would be a physical mark, he thought. Like a tattoo. Maybe the arachnid itself on a holly leaf. Maybe with a berry. On her neck. Hence all the stupid business with the scarf. They can hear what you say, the

pilot had warned. He had used the name. Every time he looked at her she must have thought he could see right through her.

She had her target at her feet. Delivered there personally, by Reacher himself, like a gift or a tribute.

Except the story didn't work.

He felt Ness arrive behind him. She stepped up and stood shoulder to shoulder. Behind her came the aide and the driver. The air was full of snowflakes and the whop-whop of the rotor blades.

Ness whispered, "We brought her exactly where she wanted to be. She's a genius."

"Like Lionel Messi," Reacher said. "I saw him on the television. The whole world expected the far post, Messi scored at the near post. Except something is wrong. It doesn't work. Who made this threat?"

"The usual people."

"Exactly," Reacher said.

The old woman yelled, "Take a step back."

Nobody moved.

The woman pointed her gun straight down, at the minister's head. Jackson stepped back. Behind him Reacher stepped back. Ness stayed with him. Behind them the aide and the driver stepped back.

The old man stepped up next to his wife. They stood together, framed in the doorway. He took out a gun of his own. Same make, same model. Like official issue. He aimed it center-mass at the small crowd below him. His wife put her gun away. One was enough. She untied the knot in her scarf and unwound it from her neck, one turn, two. She had a small round tattoo in the pit of her throat, the size of a casino chip, of a Christmas wreath complete with leaves and bows and candles, all surrounding the black silhouette of a scorpion. She wagged her head from side to side, and rubbed the skin on the back of her neck, as if she was relieved to get the scarf off. As if it had been itchy.

She said, "The threat against the minister here has one very interesting aspect."

No one spoke.

"OK, I'll tell you," she said. "It could have been carried out at any time. Means, motive, and opportunity have been in place for many months. So why wait?"

"The meeting," Ness whispered to Reacher.

“Two for the price of one,” the old lady said. “Your minister, spelled with a c, and our secretary, spelled with an s. Two very senior figures in a very senior alliance. The resulting chaos could be fatal, especially given the times we live in, which are so bad they drove the dead guys to have a secret meeting on Christmas Eve in the first place. The fallout would be completely unpredictable. All in all it was seen as something worth waiting for. Until the two senior figures were in the same place at the same time.”

Which they weren’t yet, Reacher thought.

The woman said, “Obviously it’s absurd to think the Scorpion could be a woman. The people who pay the bills wouldn’t deal with a woman. They would doubt a woman would get the kind of access she would need, and by and large they would be right. Obviously the Scorpion is a man.”

She put her hand in her pocket and came out with a worn leather wallet. She flipped it open. There was a gold shield on one side, and a photo ID on the other.

“FBI,” she said. “My husband here isn’t really my husband. He’s my partner. Counterterrorism. We’re looking after our guy, just the same as you’re looking after your guy.”

She dug her thumbnail in the pit of her throat and peeled off the tattoo. It was printed on clingy transparent plastic.

She said, “For a long time all we knew was a year ago he had this exact design put on his chest. I promised myself I would wear this thing every day until we caught him. Call me sentimental, I guess. Or superstitious.”

Means, motive, and opportunity, Reacher thought. Why wait?

The old lady said, “For a long time that was all we knew, but now we know more. Who could realistically expect to penetrate Fort Irwin during a lockdown? Who can come and go like a ghost, without attracting a second glance? Who gets access to all the right places?”

Reacher was ready. Jackson turned and ran, which was stupid, in thick snow, with a gun at his back, and a guy as big as Reacher in his way. In the process of taking him down his T-shirt got torn, thereby exposing a tattoo on his chest identical to the FBI lady’s plastic replica. After that things went smoothly. The law ran its course. Everyone got medals, except Reacher, but he got Christmas dinner in the officers’ mess, with the fire blazing, and that was enough.

BY LEE CHILD

Killing Floor
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Persuader
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The Christmas Scorpion



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DUPEUX

LEE CHILD is the author of twenty-two *New York Times* bestselling Jack Reacher thrillers, with thirteen having reached the #1 position, and the #1 bestselling complete Jack Reacher story collection, *No Middle Name*. All of his novels have been optioned for major motion pictures—including *Jack Reacher* (based on *One Shot*) and *Jack Reacher: Never Go Back*. Foreign rights to the Reacher series have sold in one hundred territories. A native of England and a former television director, Child lives in New York City.

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To inquire about booking Lee Child for a speaking engagement, please contact the Penguin Random House Speakers Bureau at speakers@penguinrandomhouse.com.

If you enjoyed Lee Child's *The Christmas
Scorpion*

read on for a thrilling preview of

Past Tense

A Jack Reacher Novel

Available in hardcover and ebook from
Delacorte Press November 2018

Chapter One

Jack Reacher caught the last of the summer sun in a small town on the coast of Maine, and then, like the birds in the sky above him, he began his long migration south. But not, he thought, straight down the coast. Not like the orioles and the buntings and the phoebes and the warblers and the ruby-throated hummingbirds. Instead he decided on a diagonal route, south and west, from the top right-hand corner of the country to the bottom left, maybe through Syracuse, and Cincinnati, and St. Louis, and Oklahoma City, and Albuquerque, and onward all the way to San Diego. Which for an army guy like Reacher was a little too full of Navy people, but which was otherwise a fine spot to start the winter.

It would be an epic road trip, and one he hadn't made in years.

He was looking forward to it.

He didn't get far.

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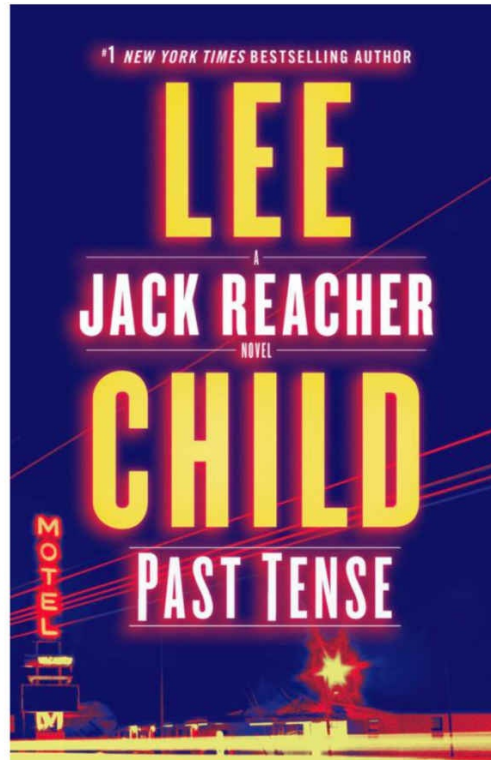
He walked inland a mile or so and came to a county road and stuck out his thumb. He was a tall man, more than six feet five in his shoes, heavily built, all bone and muscle, not particularly good looking, never very well dressed, usually a little unkempt. Not an overwhelmingly appealing proposition. As always most drivers slowed and took a look and then kept on going. The first car prepared to take a chance on him came along after forty minutes. It was a year-old Subaru wagon, driven by a lean middle-aged guy in pleated chino pants and a crisp khaki shirt. Dressed by his wife, Reacher thought. The guy had a wedding ring. But under the fine fabrics was a workingman's body. A thick neck and large red knuckles. The slightly surprised and somewhat reluctant boss of something, Reacher thought. The kind of guy who starts out digging post holes and ends up owning a fencing company.

Which turned out to be a good guess. Initial conversation established the guy had started out with nothing to his name but his daddy's old framing hammer, and had ended up owning a construction company, responsible for forty working people, and the hopes and dreams of a whole bunch of clients. He finished his story with a little facial shrug, part Yankee modesty, part genuine perplexity. As in, how did *that* happen? Attention to detail, Reacher

thought. This was a very organized guy, full of notions and nostrums and maxims and cast-iron beliefs, one of which was that at the end of summer it was better to stay away from both Route One and I-95, and in fact to get out of Maine altogether as fast as possible, which meant soon and sideways, on Route Two straight west into New Hampshire. To a place just south of Berlin, where the guy knew a bunch of back roads that would get them down to Boston faster than any other way. Which was where the guy was going, for a meeting about marble countertops. Reacher was happy. Nothing wrong with Boston as a starting point. Nothing at all. From there it was a straight shot to Syracuse. After which Cincinnati was easy, via Rochester and Buffalo and Cleveland. Maybe even via Akron, Ohio. Reacher had been in worse places. Mostly in the service.

They didn't get to Boston.

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