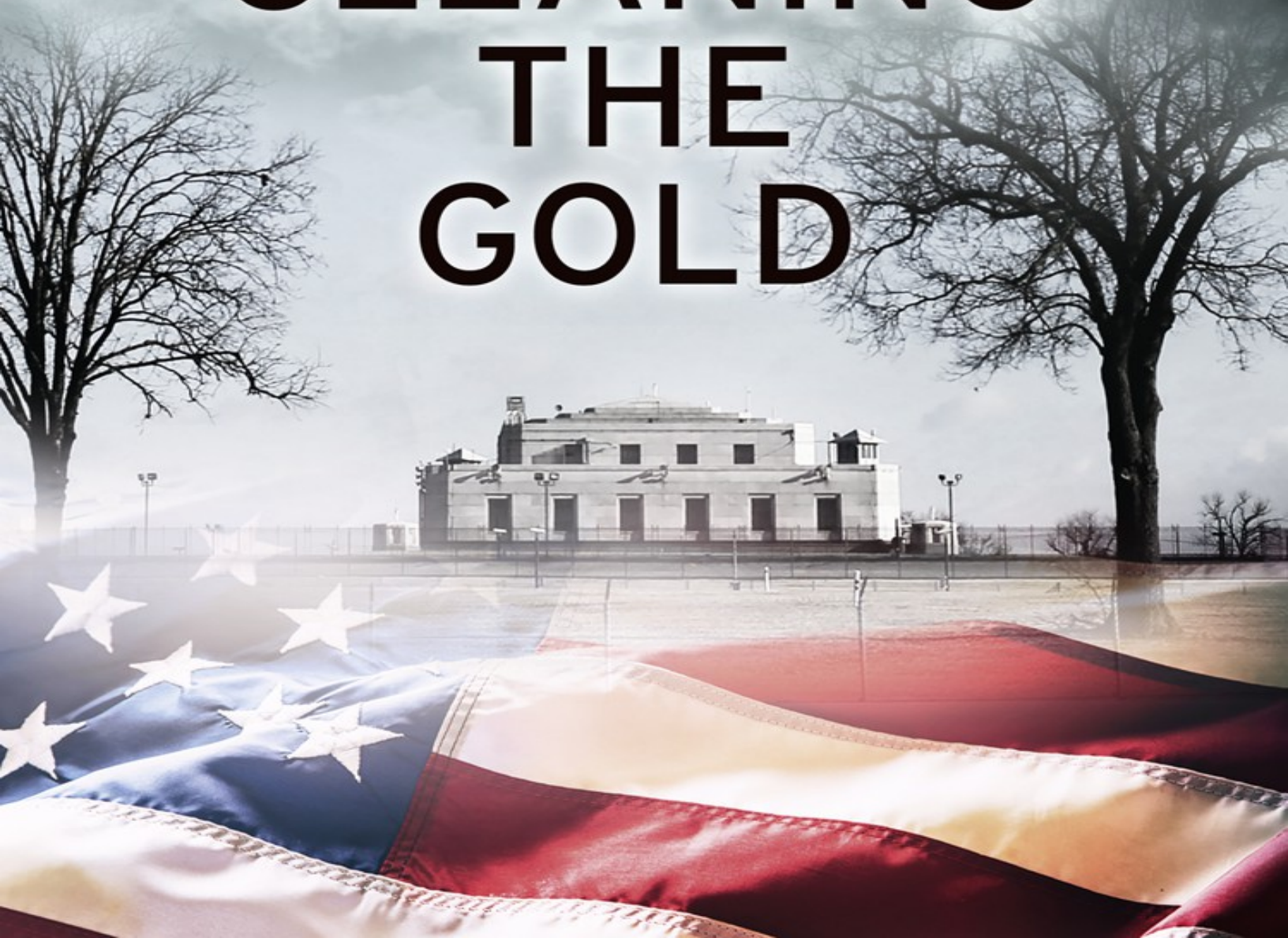


A JACK REACHER AND WILL TRENT THRILLER

**KARIN  
SLAUGHTER  
LEE CHILD  
CLEANING  
THE  
GOLD**



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Dear Readers

We're so thrilled to finally be able to share a short story with you that has been several years in the making!

We've been friends for nearly two decades now – and also fans of each other's writing. Over the years, our conversations have often turned to the topic of what our series characters, Jack Reacher and Will Trent, would do if they met in real life. Would Will arrest Reacher for taking out some vigilante justice on a bad guy? Would Reacher break Will's face or throw him down a well? The challenge was finding a way for them to work together. Both men have strong moral compasses, but they each reach true north in very different ways. Finding a case that would bring them into each other's orbit was a very long conversation that finally resulted in a plot that we were both excited to work out on the page.

The result is *Cleaning the Gold*. We started off writing our own chapters separately but as the stories became intertwined things merged, so you won't necessarily know who wrote what – and we really hope you enjoy it. No matter what, we think Jack and Will had a pretty good time navigating the beginning of a beautiful friendship ...

Best wishes,  
Karin Slaughter and Lee Child

Will Trent sat across from a closed office door listening to mumbled voices discussing the two DUIs and spotty work history on his employment application. The conversation did not seem to be going in his favor. Not good. Will needed this job. Otherwise his real job was screwed.

He wiped his forehead with his sleeve. The temperature outside had already passed the boiling point. Inside was not much better. His sweat had started to sweat in the dank, 1950s tomb of a government building. The low ceiling sagged even lower. The drywall was swollen from humidity. He watched a bead of perspiration drop from his nose and roll across the floor. A gutter ran down the middle of the linoleum from decades of Army boots trotting up and down the hallway.

Will shifted in the chair. His vertebrae had transformed into zip ties strangling his spinal column. The muscles in his legs were congealing. His body ached for two reasons. The first was from the send-off his girlfriend had given him the night before. And this morning at the aptly named park and ride. The second was because he'd spent the entire one-hour flight from Atlanta to Lexington with his knees punching into the seat in front of him, jammed between a toddler screaming at a paperclip and a flatulent senior citizen.

Only one of those reasons was worth the ache.

From behind the door, a voice bellowed, "I don't give a good God damn what you think, Dave."

Colonel Stephanie Lukather, the woman in charge of the United States Bullion Depository. An important command, but what did Will know? Most of his knowledge of the federal government's gold reserves came courtesy of Wikipedia and *Goldfinger*.

The facility was adjacent to the Fort Knox Army base, located at the intersection of Bullion Boulevard and Gold Vault Road. The main door was twenty tons of drill and torch-resistant material measuring twenty-one inches thick. Around \$350 billion in precious metals was stored inside. The

US Mint Police guarded the facility and the US Army guarded them. The vault had been opened for public inspection just once, in September of 1974. Previously, in 1964, Pussy Galore had knocked out the entire base with her Flying Circus and a dirty bomb inside the vault had been disarmed with 0.07 seconds to spare.

The door finally swung open.

Major Dave Baldani gave Will a smirky look.

Will knew that look. It was the way a good guy put a bad guy in his place. He used it a lot in his day job as a special agent with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. But Will wasn't at Fort Knox as a cop. He was working undercover as an ex-Army captain who'd fallen down the rabbit hole of stupid decisions after two tours of duty in Afghanistan.

His ID was air-tight unless you could crack the Pentagon's database. Jack Phineas Wolfe, honorably discharged in 2016. Two DUIs. Community service. Probation. Divorced. No kids. Overdrawn at the bank. Maxed out on his credit cards. Evicted from his last known place of residence. Car repo'd by the bank. Searching for honest work, or as close to honest as he could get.

"Hurry, boys." Colonel Lukather was early fifties, lean and trim with her long blonde hair pinned up in a military style. She gave an impatient roll of her hand. "I'm waiting for you."

Will had to duck his head to stand. The drop-ceiling was eighteen inches lower than it should've been. The dark paneled walls had buckled with age. Locked filing cabinets lined one side of the room. The colonel's regulation metal desk was shoved against the other side. There were no windows. The air didn't move. He could've been standing inside of a coffin.

Colonel Lukather pointed up at the low ceiling, explaining, "Brig Gen upstairs wanted a shower in his office. Shit rolls downhill. I don't need a skylight, Wolfe. Sit."

Will took one of the chairs across from her. Baldani remained standing about two inches from Will's shoulder—another good guy/bad guy trick.

Lukather said, "Wolfe, you've been in some trouble since you FTA'd."

Will didn't hear a question, so he didn't give an answer.

Lukather rested her hand on his file, waiting for the ensuing silence to wear him down.

Will didn't wear.

The clock on the wall gave a sharp *tock*.

Baldani let out a long, smoker's wheeze of a sigh.

"Dave, looks like we've got ourselves a genuine Captain Jack here." Lukather opened the file and pretended to read the information for the first time. "Stationed in BFE. Fifth in your class at John Wayne School. Stacked up your chest candy in the Sandbox. Earned your Triple Threat. Quite the gung-ho mo-fo. You certainly win the big dick contest in the room."

Will hadn't had time to study any Army jargon, so he was clueless except for the last bit, which seemed accurate.

"Then—" A page was turned in the file. Lukather's finger trailed down Jack Wolfe's background check. "Two DUIs. Bad divorce. Bad credit. What makes you think I should pay you fifteen dollars an hour and put you up in one of my hotels for the privilege of working on my base for the next few days?"

Will shrugged with one shoulder in the same eat-shit way perps did when he was interrogating them. "Up to you."

Baldani shifted on his feet, clearly annoyed.

Lukather looked up from the paperwork. Maybe she gave Will credit for honesty, because she didn't tell him to get the hell out of her office. "Do you know what the job is?"

"Janitorial?" Will shrugged again, solely to piss off Baldani. "The posting mentioned something about cleaning."

She said, "Not your usual butts and elbows. What do you know about gold?"

Another shrug. "I could use some."

"All right, shitbrain." Baldani had reached his limit. "Check the attitude. You're talking to a full bird colonel."

Will turned his chin two degrees, ignoring him, but not ignoring him.

Baldani's fists clenched, which was stupid because the minute he raised his arms, Will could punch the guy's nutsac into his asshole.

"That's enough, boys." Lukather closed Jack Wolfe's file. The employment decision had been made, but she didn't choose to share it. Instead, she told Will, "Gold is a naturally occurring chemical element with the atomic number 79. It is classed as a soft metal, so it can easily be scratched or damaged. The oil on your hands can corrode or tarnish the finish, diminishing the value. When handling, it's recommended that you wear lint-free, cotton gloves. Masks are required because the moisture from your breath or saliva can leave spots that can't be removed."

Will waited for the rest of the speech.

“Executive Order 6102, issued by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1933, outlawed the private ownership of gold coins, bullion and gold certificates, which forced citizens to sell those items to the Federal Reserve. In 1936, the Treasury Department began construction of the Gold Vault, eventually transferring via a heavily armored train convoy the majority of the gold reserves to our facility. We currently have deep-stored in sealed vaults north of 147.3 million troy ounces, primarily in the form of 12.4-kilogram gold bars that range from .900 to .999 purity. The rest of the nation’s reserve is held by West Point and Denver.”

Will raised his eat-shit shoulder again. “And?”

“By order of Congress, the vaults are examined annually by the Treasury Department’s Office of the Inspector General. Eyeballs only. It would take months to check the serial numbers of each individual gold bar against the inventory. Which is what brings us to the here and now, Captain Wolfe. TS/Ultra 42-12 under the 1978 Compartmentalization of Treasury’s Governing Acts requires that each item of gold be manually inspected every ten years. We are at our current ten-year mark in that process, and we find ourselves with days to go and one man down.”

Will retired the shoulder shrug. He rubbed his jaw, trying to tamp down the invisible teenage Will that was jumping around like a meth-head on a pogo stick. He had hoped that the undercover job could take him inside the facility, but this was *inside the vaults*. With *the gold*. They were talking Oddjob territory.

He had to get clarification. “You want me to handle the gold?”

“You’re basically a maid,” Baldani said. “You clean the gold. That’s what the Act really stands for. CTG. Cleaning the gold.”

Lukather supplied, “It takes us exactly nine months to get through the full inventory, and I happen to be ahead of schedule right now, which is a very good thing. We work twenty-four-seven, with two teams of six in the daylight hours, two more teams of six from balls to eight. For security reasons, no team gets more than two weeks inside the vaults, and we use outside personnel—preferably former Army—so no one on base gets too familiar with the comings and goings. As I said, we’re damn close to the finish line, but day shift needs another cog in the machine.”

Will considered her words. She hadn’t actually offered him the job, but she’d read him into an ultra-top-secret program, which was as good as.