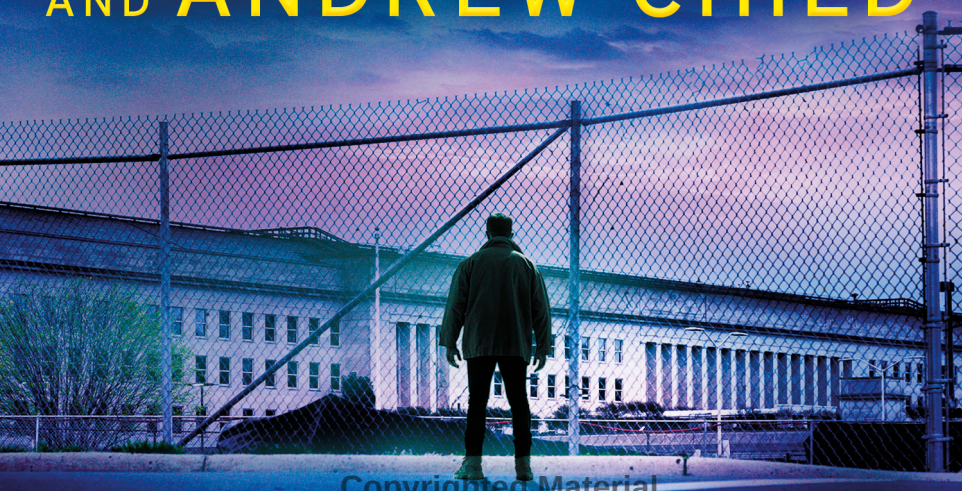
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For Larry, with thanks.

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ONE

Keith Bridgeman was alone in his room when he closed his eyes. The morning medical rounds were over. Lunch had been delivered and eaten and cleared away. Other people's visitors had clattered along the corridor in search of relatives and friends. A janitor had swept and mopped and hauled off the day's trash. And finally a little peace had descended on the ward.

Bridgeman had been in the hospital for a month. Long enough to grow used to its rhythms and routines. He knew it was time for the afternoon lull. A break from getting poked and prodded and being made to get up and move around and stretch. No one was going to bother him for another three hours, minimum. So he could read. Watch TV. Listen to music. Gaze out of the window at the sliver of lake that was visible between the next pair of skyscrapers.

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Or he could take a nap.

Bridgeman was sixty-two years old. He was in rough shape. That was clear. He could debate the cause – the kind of work he had devoted his life to, the stress he had suffered, the cigarettes and alcohol he had consumed – but he couldn't deny the effect. A heart attack so massive that no one had expected him to survive.

Defying odds that great is tiring work. He chose the nap.

These days he always chose the nap.

Bridgeman woke up after only an hour. He was no longer alone. Two other people were in the room with him. Both were women. Maybe in their late twenties. They were the same height. The same slim build. One was on the left side of his bed, nearer to the door. The other was level with her on the right, nearer to the window. They were standing completely still. In silence. Staring at him. Their hair was pulled back, smooth and dark and tight. Their faces were expressionless like mannequins' and their skin shone in the harsh artificial light as if it was moulded from plastic.

The women were wearing white coats over hospital scrubs. The coats were the correct length. They had all the necessary pockets and badges and tags. The scrubs were the right shade of blue. But the women weren't medics. Bridgeman was

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sure about that. His sixth sense told him so. It told him they shouldn't be there. That they were trouble. He scanned each of them in turn. Their hands were empty. Their clothes were not bulging. There was no sign of guns or knives. No sign of any hospital equipment they could use as weapons. But Bridgeman still wasn't happy. He was in danger. He knew it. He could feel it as keenly as a gazelle that had been ambushed by a pair of lions.

Bridgeman glanced at his left leg. The call button was where the nurse had left it, lying on the sheet between his thigh and the safety rail. His hand darted toward it. It was a fluid movement. Smooth. Fast. But the woman was faster. She snatched the button then dropped it, leaving it dangling on its wire, almost to the floor, well out of Bridgeman's reach.

Bridgeman felt his heart quiver and tremble in his chest. He heard an electronic *beep*. It came from a piece of equipment on a stand near the head of the bed. It had a screen with a number in the centre of the top half and two jagged lines that zigzagged across the full width of the lower half. The first line showed his pulse. It was spiking wildly. Its peaks were surging closer together like they were chasing one another. The number showed his heart rate. It was climbing. Fast. The *beep*s grew louder. More frequent. Then the sound became continuous. Insistent. Impossible to ignore. The number stopped

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rising. It began to flash. It changed direction. And it kept going down until it reached 00. The lines flattened out. First at the left of the screen and then all the way across until both were perfectly horizontal. The display was inert. Lifeless. Except for the desperate electronic howl.

It told of total cardiac failure.

But only for a moment.

The second woman had grabbed Bridgeman's right wrist when the alarm began to shriek. She had yanked a square blue clip off the tip of his index finger and attached it to her own. The screen flashed twice. Then the sound cut out. The heart rate started to climb. The two lines began to tick their way from left to right. None of the values were quite the same as Bridgeman's. The woman was younger. Fitter. Healthier. Calmer. But the readings were close enough. Not too high. Not too low. Nothing to trigger another alarm.

Bridgeman clutched his chest with both hands. Sweat was prickling out across his forehead and his scalp. His skin felt clammy. He had to make an effort to breathe.

The woman with the clip on her finger lowered herself into the visitor's chair next to the window. The woman on the left of the bed waited a moment then looked at Bridgeman and said, 'We apologize. We didn't mean to startle you. We're not here to hurt you. We just need to talk.'

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Bridgeman said nothing.

The woman said, 'We have two questions. That's all. Answer them honestly and you'll never see us again. I promise.'

Bridgeman didn't respond.

The woman saw him glancing past her, toward the door. She shook her head. 'If you're hoping the cavalry's going to come, you're out of luck. Those clips slip off people's fingers all the time. And what do they do? Stick them right back on. Anyone at the nurses' station who heard the alarm will figure that's what you did. So. First question, OK?'

Bridgeman's mouth was dry. He did his best to moisten his lips then took a deep breath. But not to answer questions. To call for help the old-fashioned way.

The woman read his play. She put a finger to her lips and took something out of her coat pocket. A photograph. She held it out for Bridgeman to take. It showed a gloved hand holding a copy of the *Tribune* next to a window. Bridgeman could read the date on the newspaper. Tuesday, 7 April 1992. It was that day's edition. Then he saw two figures through the glass. A woman and a child. A little girl. Even though they were facing away from the camera Bridgeman had no doubt who they were. Or where they were. It was his daughter and granddaughter. In the home he had bought them in Evanston, after his wife died.

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The woman took hold of Bridgeman's arm and felt for his pulse. It was fast and weak. She said, 'Come on now. Calm down. Think of your family. We don't want to hurt them. Or you. We just need you to understand how serious this situation is. We only have two questions, but they're important. The sooner you answer, the sooner we're out of here. Ready?'

Bridgeman nodded and slumped back against his pillow.

'First question. You're meeting with a journalist the day after tomorrow. Where is the information you're planning to give her?'

'How do you know about—'

'Don't waste time. Answer the question.'

'OK. Look. There is no information. We're just going to chat.'

'No credible journalist is going to believe a whistleblower without ironclad proof. Where is it?'

'Whistleblower? That's not what this is. The reporter's from a little weekly rag in Akron, Ohio. Where I was born. The story's about my heart attack. My recovery. It's a miracle, according to the doctors. People back home want to read about it. They say I'm an inspiration.'

'Heart attack? That's what you're going with? When you're sitting on a much bigger story?'

'What bigger story?'

The woman leaned in closer. 'Keith, we know

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what you did. What you all did. Twenty-three years ago. December 1969.'

'December '69? How do you know . . .? Who are you?'

'We'll come to who we are. Right now you need to tell me what information you're planning to give this reporter from Akron.'

'No information. I'm going to tell her about my recovery. That's all. I will never talk about December '69. Why we were there. What we were doing. What happened. Not to anyone. I swore I wouldn't and I keep my word. My wife never even knew.'

'So you don't have any documents or notes hidden in this room?'

'Of course not.'

'Then you won't mind if I take a look around.'

The woman didn't wait for an answer. She started with the locker next to the bed. She opened the door and rummaged through Bridgeman's spare pyjamas and books and magazines. She moved on to a leather duffel on the floor near the door. It held a set of clothes. Nothing else. Next she checked the bathroom. Nothing significant there, either. So she moved to the centre of the room and put her hands on her hips. 'Only one place left to check. The bed.'

Bridgeman didn't move.

'Do it for your daughter. And your granddaughter. Come on. I'll be quick.'

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Bridgeman felt his pulse start to speed up again. He closed his eyes for a moment. Took a breath. Willed himself to relax. Then pushed back the sheet, swung his legs over the side of the mattress, and slid down on to his feet. He looked at the woman in the chair. 'Can I at least sit? I'm older than you. I have one foot in the grave.'

The woman held up her finger with the clip attached. 'Sorry. The cable's too short for me to move. You want to sit, use the windowsill.'

Bridgeman turned and looked at the windowsill. Considered sitting on it. But taking orders from one of the women was bad enough so he settled on leaning against it. He watched as the other woman finished her search of the bed. Again she came up empty.

'Believe me now?' Bridgeman said.

The woman took a piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it to Bridgeman. There was a list of names. Six of them, handwritten in shaky, spidery script. Bridgeman's was one of them. He recognized all the other five. Varinder Singh. Geoffrey Brown. Michael Rymer. Charlie Adam. Neville Pritchard. And beneath the final name there was a symbol. A question mark.

The woman said, 'A name is missing. Who is it?'

Bridgeman's heart was no longer racing. Now it felt like it was full of sludge. Like it didn't have the strength to force his blood into his arteries. He

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couldn't answer. It would mean breaking his oath. He had sworn to never reveal a single detail. They all had, twenty-three years before, when it became clear what they had done. And the missing name belonged to the flakiest of the group. Better for everyone if it remained off the list.

The woman handed Bridgeman another photograph. Another shot of his daughter and granddaughter, on foot this time, halfway across a crosswalk. The picture had been taken through a car windshield.

Bridgeman was channelling all his energy into trying to breathe. It was only a name that the woman wanted. What harm could come from telling her? Plenty, he knew.

The woman said, 'Bonus question. What happens tomorrow? Or the next day? Is the driver drunk? Do his brakes fail?'

Bridgeman said, 'Buck. The missing name. It's Owen Buck.'

The woman shook her head. 'Buck's dead. He died of cancer a month ago. Right after he wrote that list. So his isn't the name I need. He said there was an eighth name. He didn't know what it was. But he was certain one of you others do.'

Bridgeman didn't answer. He was struggling to make sense of the information. Buck's conscience must have gotten the better of him. He was always mumbling about doing something stupid. But that

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didn't explain why he told this woman there was an extra name. Maybe his mind had gone. Maybe whatever cancer drugs they gave him had fried his brain.

The woman said, 'Maybe the driver will be distracted? Maybe he'll be asleep at the wheel?'

'Maybe there is another name.' Bridgeman closed his eyes. 'Maybe someone knows what it is. One of the others might. But not me. I don't think one exists.'

The woman said, 'Maybe there'll be enough of your granddaughter left to bury. Maybe there won't.'

Bridgeman was struggling for air. 'Don't. Please. I don't know. I swear. I gave you Buck's name. I didn't know he's dead. I've been sick. I've been in here. No one told me. So if I knew of some other name I'd tell you it, too. But I don't. So I can't.'

'You can. You don't have to say it. You can do what Owen Buck did. Write it down. He gave me six names. You only need to give me one.'

She pulled a pen from her coat pocket and held it out. Bridgeman stared at it for a moment. Then he took it and added *Owen Buck* to the top of the list.

He said, 'That's the only name I know. I swear.'

The woman said, 'Have you ever seen a child's coffin, Keith? Because if you haven't I don't think anything can really prepare you for how tiny it will

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seem. Especially when it's next to the full-size one your daughter will be in.'

Bridgeman's knees started to shake. He looked like he was ready to collapse.

The woman's voice softened. 'Come on. One name. Two lives saved. What are you waiting for?'

Bridgeman's body sagged. 'Buck was wrong. There isn't another name. Not that I know of. I was there three years. I never heard of anyone else getting brought on board.'

The woman stared at Bridgeman for ten long seconds, then shrugged. She took the pen and the paper and slid them back into her pocket. 'I guess we're done here.' She stretched out and touched Bridgeman's forehead. 'Wait a minute. You feel awful. Let me open the window. Fresh air will perk you up. I don't want to leave you like this.'

Bridgeman said, 'You can't. The windows don't open in this hospital.'

'This one does.' The woman leaned past Bridgeman, pushed down on the handle, and the window swung out on a broad arc. Then she scrabbled under the collar of her scrubs and pulled a fine chain up and over her head. The key to the window was hanging from it. 'Here.' She dropped the chain into the breast pocket of Bridgeman's pyjama top. 'A present. Something to remember us by, because you're never going to see us again. As promised. There's just one last thing before we go. You asked

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who we are.' The woman stood a little straighter. 'My name is Roberta Sanson.'

The woman with the finger clip climbed out of her chair. 'And I'm her sister. Veronica Sanson. Our father was Morgan Sanson. It's important you know that.'

Morgan Sanson. The name was an echo from the past. An unwelcome one. Four syllables he had hoped to never hear again. It took a fraction of a second for the significance to hit him then Bridgeman pushed off from the wall. He tried to dodge around Roberta Sanson but he never stood a chance. He was too frail. The space was too cramped. And the sisters were too highly motivated. Roberta shifted sideways and blocked his path. Then she grabbed his shoulders with both hands and drove him back until he was pressed against the sill. She checked that he was lined up with the open window. Veronica bent down and took hold of his legs, just above the ankles. She straightened and Roberta pushed. Bridgeman kicked. He twisted and thrashed. Roberta and Veronica pushed one more time. Two more times, to make sure there was no room for error. Then they let gravity do the rest.

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TWO

Jack Reacher had never been to the Rock Island Arsenal in Illinois before, but he was the second Military Police investigator to be sent there within a fortnight. The first visit was in response to a report of missing M16s, which proved to be false. Reacher was the last to join his unit, following his demotion from major to captain, so he had been allocated a less interesting allegation. Inventory tampering.

The sergeant who had filed the complaint met Reacher at the main entrance. There were maybe ten years between them. They were about the same height, six foot five, but where Reacher was heavy and broad the older man was skinny and pinched with pale skin and thin, delicate features. He couldn't have been more than a hundred and eighty pounds. That would be sixty pounds lighter.

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His uniform hung off his shoulders a little, causing Reacher to worry about the guy's health.

Once the usual courtesies were taken care of the sergeant led the way to Firing Range E, near the base's western perimeter. He locked the heavy steel door behind them and continued to a loading bench that jutted out from the rear wall. Six M16s were lying on it, neatly lined up, muzzles facing away, grips to the right. The weapons weren't new. They had spent plenty of time in the field. That was clear. But they were well maintained. Recently cleaned. Not neglected or damaged. There were no obvious red flags. No visible indication that anything was wrong with them.

Reacher picked up the second rifle from the left. He checked that the chamber was empty, inspected it for defects, then slid a magazine into place. He stepped across to the mouth of the range. Selected single-fire mode. Took a breath. Held it. Waited for the next beat of his heart to subside and pulled the trigger. A hundred yards down range the red star on the target figure's helmet imploded. Reacher lowered the gun and glanced at the sergeant. The guy's face betrayed nothing. No surprise. No disappointment. Reacher fired five more times. Rapidly. Sharp *crack*s rebounded off the walls. Spent cartridges rattled on to the cement floor. A neat 'T' shape was hammered into the figure's chest. It was textbook shooting. There

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was no sign of any problem with the gun. And still no response from the sergeant.

Reacher pointed to the magazine. 'How many?'

The sergeant said, 'Sixteen.'

'Vietnam?'

'Three tours. No misfires. If it's not broke . . .'

Reacher slid the fire selector to its lowest position. Full auto. The model was old, from before the switch to three-shot bursts. He aimed at the target's centre mass and increased the pressure on the trigger. The green plastic torso should have been shredded. The ten remaining bullets should have torn through it in less than a second. But nothing happened. Because the trigger wouldn't move. Reacher changed back to single-shot mode and lined up on the target's face. The crude contour representing its nose split in half under the impact. Reacher toggled to full auto. Again, nothing happened. Which left no doubt. The trigger would not move in that position.

He said, 'They all like this?'

The sergeant nodded. 'All of them. The whole case.'

Reacher crossed to the bench and set the gun down. He removed the magazine, cleared the chamber, pushed out the takedown pins, separated the lower receiver, and examined its interior contours. Then he held it out toward the sergeant and said, 'The trigger pocket's the wrong size. It

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won't accept the auto-sear. And there are only two trigger pinholes. There should be three.'

The sergeant said, 'Correct.'

'This isn't military spec. Someone's switched out the original with a civilian version. It makes the gun semi-auto only.'

'Can't see any other explanation.'

'Where did these come from?'

The sergeant shrugged. 'Admin error. They were supposed to be sent for destruction but two crates got mixed up and these wound up here by mistake.'

Reacher looked down at the guns on the bench. 'These would be considered end-of-life?'

The sergeant shrugged again. 'I wouldn't say so. Ask me, the condition's acceptable for weapons that would generally be held in reserve. Nothing stood out when the crate was opened. Only when a malfunction was reported. Then I stripped the first one down. Saw the problem right away. Just like you did.'

'Who decides which weapons get destroyed?'

'A dedicated team. It's a special procedure. Temporary. Lasted a year, so far. Result of Desert Storm. The war was a great opportunity for units to re-equip. Assets that are designated surplus as a result come back from the Gulf and get sent here for evaluation. Firearms are our responsibility. We

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test them and give them a category. Green: fully serviceable, to be retained. Amber: marginally serviceable, to be sold or allocated to civilian gun safety programmes. Doesn't apply to fully automatic weapons, obviously. And Red: unserviceable, to be destroyed.'

'You got sent a Red crate when you should have gotten a Green one?'

'Correct.'

Reacher paused for a moment. The account was plausible. There wasn't a kind of equipment the army owned that hadn't been sent to the wrong place, some time or other. Which was usually totally innocent. Like the sergeant said, an admin error. But Reacher was wondering if there could be a broader connection. Something to do with the recent report of stolen M16s. Someone could designate good weapons as unserviceable, fill their crates with the right weight of whatever trash came to hand, send that to the crusher or the furnace, and sell the guns on the black market. Officially the weapons would no longer exist, so no one would be looking for them. It was a feasible method. A loophole someone needed to close. But it wasn't what had happened here. Reacher had read the report. The inspection was unannounced. A full crack-of-dawn shock-and-awe operation. And it had been thorough. All the weapons crates

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on the entire base had been opened. All had the correct number of weapons inside. Not so much as a pocketknife was missing.

Not so much as a *complete* pocketknife . . .

Reacher said, 'When did these guns get delivered to you in error?'

The sergeant looked away while he did the math, then said, 'Fifteen days ago. And I know what you're going to ask me next. You're not going to like the answer.'

'What am I going to ask?'

'How you can trace which unit owned these weapons in the Gulf. Before they were sent back.'

'Why would I want to know that?'

'So you can figure out who's stealing the lower receivers. Someone is stealing them, right? And selling them. So that gangbangers or whoever can make their AR15s fully automatic. The Gulf's the perfect place to swap parts out. Officially every last paperclip is tracked. But in reality? Different units have different systems. A few have switched to computers. Most are still paper-based. Paper gets lost. It gets wet. It gets ripped. Digits get transposed. People have handwriting that's impossible to read. Long story short, you'd have a better chance of selling bikinis at a Mormon convention than tracking that crate.'

'You don't think I have a future as a swimwear salesman?'

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The sergeant blinked. 'Sir?'

Reacher said, 'No matter. I don't care who had these guns in the Gulf. Because that's not where the parts were stolen.'

Roberta and Veronica Sanson heard the impact all the way from the street outside. They heard the first of the screams over the background grumble of traffic. Then the cardiac monitor at the head of the bed started to howl again. Its lines had slumped back down to the horizontal. Its display read 00. No heart activity. Only this time the machine was correct. At least as far as Keith Bridgeman was concerned.

Roberta turned left into the corridor and made her way to the hospital's central elevator bank. Veronica went right and looped around to the emergency staircase. Roberta reached the first floor before her sister. She strolled through the reception area, past the café and the store that sold balloons and flowers, and continued out of the main exit. She walked a block west then ducked into a phone booth. She pulled on a pair of latex gloves and called American Airlines. She asked for information about their routes and schedules. Next she called United. Then TWA. She weighed up the options. Then she tossed the gloves in a trash can and made her way to the public parking lot in the centre of the next block.

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The sergeant led the way to a storeroom that was tacked on to the side of a large, squat building near the centre of the site. The wind had picked up while they were at the range, which made it hard for him to heave the metal door all the way open, and after Reacher had gone through the guy struggled to close it again without getting blown over. He finally wrestled it into place then locked it. Inside, the space was square, eighteen feet by eighteen. The floor was bare concrete. So was the ceiling. It was held up by metal girders that were coated with some kind of knobby fire-retardant material and flanked by strip lights in protective cages. There was a phone mounted by the door and a set of shelves against each wall. They were made of heavy-duty steel, painted grey. Each had a stencilled sign attached – Intake, Green, Amber, Red – and a clipboard with a sheaf of papers hanging from its right-hand upright. There were no windows and the air was heavy with the smell of oil and solvents.

The shelves held crates of weapons. Short at the top, long at the bottom. There were fourteen crates on the Red shelves. Reacher pulled one of the long ones out on to the floor and cracked it open. He lifted out an M16. It was in much worse shape than the one he had fired earlier. That was for sure. He fieldstripped it, checked its lower receiver, and shook his head.

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He said, 'It's original.'

The sergeant opened another crate and examined one of its rifles. It was also pretty scuffed and scraped. He said, 'This one's the same.'

Each crate had a number stencilled on the side. Reacher took the Red clipboard off its hook and turned to the last sheet. It showed that the crate he'd picked had been signed off by someone with the initials UE. The crate the sergeant had chosen had been initialled by DS. Reacher could only see one other set: LH. He picked a crate with a corresponding number, removed the lower receiver from one of the guns inside it, and held the part up for the sergeant to see.

The sergeant said, 'Jackpot.'

Reacher said, 'LH signed off on this. Who's LH?'

'Sergeant Hall. In charge of the inspection team.'

'Sergeant Hall's a woman.'

'Yes. Sergeant Lisa Hall. How—'

'UE and DS are men?'

'Yes. But—'

'There are no other women on the team?'

'No. But I still—'

Reacher held up his hand. 'Fifteen days ago you received a Red crate by mistake. Fourteen days ago we received a report that M16s had been stolen from this facility. We checked. They hadn't.'

'I heard about the raid. I don't see the connection.'

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'The report was anonymous, but the voice was female. I read the file.'

'I still don't—'

'Sergeant Hall realized a Red crate was missing the day after it got mishandled. She knew it could be traced back to her so she made a bogus accusation. A serious one. Stolen weapons. The investigators came running, just like she knew they would. They opened all the crates, including hers. They were looking for M16s. Complete ones. That's what they found, so they closed the case. No crime detected. Then if the missing receivers came to light, Hall had just been cleared of theft. She was hoping an investigator would make the same jump you did. That the doctored weapons arrived that way, from the Gulf.'

'No. I know Lisa Hall. She wouldn't do something like that.'

'Let's make sure. Where is she today?'

'Don't know, sir.'

'Then find out.'

'Sir.' The sergeant shuffled across to the phone on the wall. Thin clouds of dust puffed up around his feet. He dialled slowly, made the enquiry, and when he was done he said, 'Not on duty, sir.'

Reacher said, 'OK. So where's her billet?'

Veronica Sanson was waiting for her sister, Roberta, on the fourth floor of the parking garage. She

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was standing at the side of a blue minivan. They had stolen it from the long-term lot at O'Hare when they arrived in the city, two days before. Roberta nodded a greeting and opened the van's rear door. They took turns, one keeping watch, one hunkering down between the back seats and changing their clothes. Off came the hospital outfits. On went jeans and sneakers and shirts and jackets. All plain, anonymous items. When they were dressed the sisters hugged, retrieved their plain canvas duffels from the van's narrow cargo area, wiped the vehicle clean of prints, then made their way to separate exits. Roberta threaded her way west. She pushed through knots of shoppers and tourists, past the wide storefronts and cafés and offices, until she reached the Clark/Lake 'L' stop. Veronica walked south and kept going to Roosevelt, where the Orange Line emerged from its underground section.

Reacher liked the armory sergeant at Rock Island. He figured the guy was reasonably smart. Reasonably streetwise. Reasonably capable of anticipating the kind of trouble he'd be in if Hall somehow got word that she was under suspicion. But Reacher was a cautious guy. He'd learned a long time ago that it can be dangerous to overestimate a person. That unit loyalty can run deeper than deference to a stranger. Especially when that stranger is an MP.

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So he made sure that the sergeant was clear about the consequences of any phone calls he might be tempted to make. He left no room for doubt. Then he requisitioned a car from the base's motor pool and found his way to Hall's address.

Hall lived in the last of a little knot of houses stretched out along a river about four miles east of the Arsenal's main gate. Her home was small and neat. Set up for efficiency, Reacher thought. No fancy decor to maintain. No complicated yard work to stay on top of. There was no answer at the door when Reacher knocked. No sign of anyone through the windows, front or back. Just an array of budget furniture laid out as if someone had tried to re-create a picture from a low-cost catalogue. There was nothing personal. No photographs. No ornaments. None of the knick-knacks people use to impose their identity on a place. Reacher understood that. Aside from his four years at West Point he had spent his life bouncing from one base to another. Six months here. Six months there. Different countries. Different continents. Never anyplace long enough to feel at home. First as a kid, because his father had been an officer in the Marines. Then as an adult, as an officer himself. Maybe Hall had the same experience. Maybe she was anticipating her next change of station and didn't want to waste effort on a place she knew she

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was soon going to quit. Or maybe she had another reason to be ready to leave in a hurry.

Reacher walked back to his borrowed car and settled in to wait. He wasn't worried about how long it might take. He was a patient man. He had nowhere else to be. And he was naturally suited to two states of existence. Instant, explosive action. And near-catatonic stasis. It was the in-between he struggled with. The sitting through pointless meetings and reviews and briefings that made up so much of army life.

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THREE

The phone rang at nine p.m. Eastern. That was eight p.m. Central, where the call originated. Which was right on time.

It was answered immediately.

The guy who had dialled said, 'Another one's dead. Keith Bridgeman. Massive blunt-force trauma resulting from falling out of his hospital-room window. United Medical, Chicago. Twelfth floor. Had been recovering from a heart attack. Not out of the woods but was expected to pull through. Fine when the nurses did their rounds a couple of hours earlier. No reported visitors or calls or outside contact. The police are fifty/fifty suicide or accident. He must have unlocked the window himself – the key was still in hispocket – but there was no note. All for now. More 0800.'

'Understood.' The guy who had answered hung up.

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Officially the telephone line they had used didn't exist. It was one of the Pentagon's ghost circuits. There were hundreds of them in the building. Maybe thousands. They generated no records, incoming or outgoing. The call that had just ended could never be traced. It could never be correlated with the next call made on the same line, but the Pentagon guy walked through to the outer office anyway. Old habits die hard. He picked up a different phone and dialled a number from memory. A number that was not written down anywhere. Not listed. Not officially in service.

The Pentagon guy's call was picked up in the study of a house four miles away in Georgetown, DC. By Charles Stamoran. The Secretary of Defense of the United States of America.

The Pentagon guy repeated what he'd been told a minute earlier. Word for word. Neutral tone. No summarizing. No editorializing. The way Stamoran insisted it was done.

'Understood,' Stamoran said when the Pentagon guy stopped talking. 'Wait one.'

Stamoran laid the handset down on the worn leather desktop, crossed to the window, and peered out from around the side of the closed drapes. He stared across the lawn, toward the pond and beyond that the wall, picturing the sensors and tripwires and hidden cameras, and he weighed up what he'd just heard. He received

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briefings on all kinds of subjects, all the time. It was part of the job. One regular report he got was a list of significant deaths. Foreign leaders. Key military figures, friend and foe. Terrorist suspects. Essentially anyone who could upset the geopolitical status quo. Dry stuff, on the whole. But a perk of the job was that he got to add a few extra names for himself. Nothing official. Just people he had a personal interest in. One of these was a guy named Owen Buck. He had died of cancer four weeks ago. Nothing suspicious about that. On its own. Then another guy on his list had died. Varinder Singh. Electrocuted in his bath. A tape player had wound up with him in the water. Its cord was still plugged into the wall. Fifty/fifty suicide or accident, the police had said. And now Keith Bridgeman had died. Also on his list. Also fifty/fifty. Not the kind of coincidence that was ever going to pass Stamoran's smell test. That was for damn sure.

Stamoran returned to his desk and picked up the handset. 'I'm going to give you three names. Geoff Brown. Michael Rymer. Charlie Adam. They're already on my list. I want them under surveillance, twenty-four/seven, effective immediately. Send our best people. Someone looks at these guys funny I want them in a cell before they can blink. In isolation. No one gets access until I send someone to question them.'

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'Covert surveillance, sir? Or can the watchers make contact? Make it known what they're doing?'

'Covert. Strictly hands-off. These guys are Company lifers. If they cotton on to the fact that we have reason to watch them they'll disappear faster than a politician who's asked to keep a promise.'

'Understood.'

'And there's a fourth name. Neville Pritchard. He's also on my list. I want him in protective custody. The most secure place we have. The most remote. Now. Tonight. No delay.'

Stamoran dropped the receiver into its cradle and walked back to the window. Three guys were dead. Three would be watched. One would be put on ice. Which left one last name. Not on the list. Stamoran knew it, of course. So did Pritchard. But no one else did. Stamoran needed to keep things that way. The secret he had hidden for twenty-three years depended on it.

Stamoran turned his attention to Pritchard. Tried to picture his face. It wasn't easy after so many years. He could remember more about the guy's temper. He wasn't going to be happy about getting dragged out of bed and bundled off to some distant safehouse. Not happy at all. But that was too bad. When you're forced into a game of Russian roulette you have no time to worry about people's feelings. There's only one move to make. Ensure

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the bullet that could kill you is removed from the gun.

Sergeant Hall showed up a whisker after eight thirty p.m. She parked her car, a small, clean, domestic sedan, directly outside her house and walked up the path to her door. She was around five foot six and was wearing civilian clothes. Jeans, white sneakers, and an Orioles sweatshirt. Her blonde hair was tied back in a ponytail and she moved with fluid confidence, like an athlete. She wasn't in a rush. She wasn't glancing around to see if she was being watched. Reacher was pleased. It showed the armory sergeant had listened. He gave her a couple of minutes to get settled then made his own way up the path.

Hall answered the door right away. She looked surprised to see a huge guy in woodland BDUs on her doorstep, but not worried. 'Help you, Captain?' she said.

Reacher showed his military ID card then slid his wallet back into his pocket. 'I need a minute of your time. To follow up on the missing weapons case.'

Hall's expression was blank. 'There aren't any missing weapons. The MPs searched the entire base. They confirmed it.'

'The weapons aren't missing. But something else is.'

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Hall looked away. She scratched the side of her face then tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. 'I don't—'

Reacher said, 'Some of our paperwork. A couple of pages got lost. Someone screwed up. I need to fix it before our CO finds out. Just need a few details. I was told you were the person to talk to.'

'Paperwork?' Hall blinked, twice. 'Oh. OK. Sure. What . . . wait. You don't have a briefcase or a clipboard or anything.'

'Don't need one.' Reacher tapped his temple. 'I'll remember what you say. Then I'll call my base and pass the information along to the right person. He needs to do the actual form-filling. Otherwise the handwriting won't match.'

Hall didn't respond.

Reacher said, 'It won't take long. And we're in a time crunch here . . .'

'Oh. OK. What do you need to know?'

'Mind if I come inside? It's been a long day. I could use a glass of water while we talk.'

Hall paused. She looked Reacher up and down. He was practically a foot taller than her. Probably twice her weight. But he was an MP and MPs don't like to be told no. Nothing good ever comes of it. So after a moment she nodded and gestured for him to follow her down the hallway. There were framed pictures on the walls. Three on either side.

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Prints of animals and birds and scenes from nature. Hall pointed to the door on the right then continued to the kitchen. Reacher followed her direction and found himself in her living room. He stood just off centre to avoid hitting his head on a light that hung from the ceiling and waited for Hall to catch up. She appeared a minute later with two plain glasses of water. She put one on a side table next to the couch and then perched at the front of a matching armchair.

'So,' Hall said. 'Details?'

Reacher sat in the centre of the couch, took a sip of water, then said, 'The weapons that come back from the Gulf. The ones designated surplus. You're responsible for testing them? Deciding which are kept and which are disposed of?'

'My team is. Not just me. But none of those weapons are missing. The MPs searched and—'

'Who decides who tests which crates?'

Hall paused for a moment, then said, 'It's basically random. No method to it.'

Reacher said, 'Who decides?'

'I do, I guess. From a recordkeeping point of view.'

'I think you do have a method. And it has nothing to do with record-keeping. You make sure the guns that come to you to test are in good shape. And are older ones. With full-auto capability.'

'Why would I do that?'

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'Where do you get the civilian-spec lower receivers?'

'Civilian-spec? You must be confused. We have nothing to do with civilian weapons.'

Reacher said, 'Full-auto-capable lower receivers are valuable things. They can turn an AR15 that any bozo can buy into a military-grade weapon. So you swap them out, sell them, then send the complete-looking guns to be destroyed. No one ever finds out. *Should* ever find out. But you heard that a crate of doctored weapons had gotten lost on the base. An admin screw-up. That could be a big problem. You had to cover your ass. So you called in a bogus report. You said M16s were being stolen. They weren't, so you knew everyone at Rock Island would be cleared. Including yourself. Then if the doctored weapons came to light you figured the suspicion would be deflected up the chain, to the original owners in the Gulf. Who would never be traced because the systems are all out of whack.'

Hall jumped to her feet. 'Doctored weapons? I don't know what—'

'Sit down.' Reacher's voice was loud enough to have knocked her over.

Hall sat. She wriggled back into the chair looking small and deflated.

Reacher said, 'You're in a hole. So you know what you should do?'

Hall shook her head. Just a tiny, nervous motion.

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Reacher said, 'Stop digging. You're only making things worse for yourself. Now's the time to be honest. Tell me everything, right now, no more bullshit, and I'll see what I can do to help you. Maybe I can limit the damage a little. But only if you stop being a pain in my ass.'

Hall covered her face with her hands and curled up even smaller. When she emerged a moment later a tear was running down one cheek. 'OK.' She sniffed. 'I'm not admitting to anything. It wasn't me. But I know things. I'll tell you. Make you look good with your CO. Just let me use the bathroom first. I'll be quick. I need to get my head straightened out.'

Reacher said, 'Fine. But use the one upstairs.'

Hall unfolded herself from her chair and scuttled to the door.

Reacher heard light, fast footsteps on the stairs. He heard Hall's bedroom door slam shut and a couple of seconds later he heard her bathroom door close, more quietly, on the far side.

Sergeant Hall knew Reacher would have heard the doors. She wanted him to hear them. Needed him to, for authenticity. But she prayed that he did not hear the next sound she made. The slight, unavoidable squeak as she eased her bathroom window open.

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