



**Rick's Hostage**  
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# Chapter 1

## Head Shot

**A**fter ten minutes the gun got uncomfortable against Jack's temple. The metal chafed and jammed skin against bone, and Rick wouldn't let off any. Fear gave way to a combination of annoyance and fatigue.

"Look: is there somewhere else you can hold that? I mean, it's *really* starting to dig in. Maybe my neck or something?"

"Shut up." Rick's breath came out with the words, hot on Jack's ear. Jack had personal space issues as it was, and, to be honest, this whole thing with their sweaty bodies mashed together... it was getting a little *queer*.

"Come on," Jack said, "I'm starting to wonder whether or not putting up with this crap is worth it. We could get to wherever it is you think you're escaping to, and you might *still* drop me so I don't testify when—and I mean *when*, not *if*—you're caught. Use a little—*ow!*"

Rick must've decided that *shut up* didn't work so well, and maybe jamming the gun harder against his hostage's sore temple and twisting it might make a better case for silence. Jack squirmed, and their feet got caught up in each other; Rick came closer to involuntarily pulling the trigger than either of them could have guessed.



**I**n the crosshairs of his scope, a police sniper noticed the hostage yell at his captor, as best as he could manage over his shoulder, and a half-second later the sound of his voice made it to the cop's rooftop perch.

"You know what? Shoot me! I *dare* you! Good luck getting away then! And I bet a murder charge would be worse than a little white-collar crime! Go ahead—pull the trigger if you're man enough, *pussy!*"



**J**ack couldn't see behind him, but he *knew* that god-awful smirk the bastard always wore drooped slightly. The barrel eased off his

temple—just a little—and the arm he had wrapped around Jack’s throat shifted.

“Deep down, you really *want* me to, don’t you?” Rick’s anger had given way to curiosity. “You *want* to die. Die at my hand. It’s what you need to complete your *oblogkah*.”

If Jack could have turned and looked at his captor, he would have. What the hell was that word he used?

The gun wavered as Rick began to whisper in his ear: “*Omjonwa Bu Disipi—*”



**T**he barrel of the Colt knockoff came off the hostage’s head, and, authorization or no, the SWAT sniper recognized what might have been the only chance he was getting. His rifle held a .300 WinMag round, and the kick against the cop’s shoulder was savage, but he kept his eyes open through the scope the whole time. He was professional enough to see that the round had drifted an inch to the right in its flight, and human enough for his stomach to lurch as it found its mark and did exactly what it was created to do.

## Chapter 2

### Briggs

**A**re you sure you'd never met this guy before, even casually, Mister Palmer?"

A defeated sigh escaped from between two meaty but manicured hands. The fingers on Jack Palmer's right hand obscured the welt on his temple, but even a casual glance would tell you he'd just been through something traumatic. *No*, thought Sergeant Lamont Briggs as he studied the man, *something extremely inconvenient, but not traumatic*. Below Palmer's well-groomed hands, a pair of hairy forearms jutted out of the rolled-up cuffs of a cotton dress shirt, which held the elbows that served as the foundation of the whole rickety structure.

"I told you, *I haven't...* sorry, it's not like I ever got a good look at the guy. So sure, maybe I cut him off in traffic once and flipped him off. Or maybe he worked the counter of some coffee shop and I chewed him out for taking too long. It's a big city, and there's lots of ways to piss someone off in the course of a normal day."

Briggs didn't *want* to lean on the victim like he was, but something about the whole episode smelled like the ass end of a week-dead carp. In the debrief, the sniper told him how Palmer appeared to chew out a guy who had a gun to his temple.

"You, uh, got any explanation about how he knew your name?"

The hands were back over the eyes now. What was going on under there? Briggs thought the man's fingers clenched, imperceptibly, before they came down altogether and revealed the victim's tired, droopy-jowled bulldog face.

"How the hell should I know? You never heard anybody call someone Jack before, as in 'hit the road'? He could have just as easily called me Bucko or Dick, for all I know."

That did little to assuage Briggs. He'd expect about anything, from whimpering 'I don't know' to a deer-in-the-headlights expression of complete confusion. Instead the question piqued defiance from the

man. True, you don't rise to the top of a large corporation by being timid, but was Palmer held at gunpoint on a regular basis, or... or what?

There wasn't much else the Sergeant could do. What was he going to do—charge Jack Palmer with something? How was it going to be obstructing justice when the crime was played out in front of a score of cops? With the suspect now down in the morgue, awaiting a pointless autopsy with an obvious answer?

Briggs froze, chewing on something for a couple of seconds before suddenly looking at his guest.

"Alright. There's one more thing we need you to do, Mister Palmer. It won't be pleasant, but we just want to make a hundred percent sure you've never seen this guy. If he's part of something bigger, there might be other threats we need to uncover."

"I'm sorry; do I really have to? I've just been through a lot, you know. Can't you take some pictures and show me later?"

"I've got to insist. The shrinks say every hour that passes reduces the chance of recognition."

Palmer looked to consider a fight, but nothing came out of his yap and he stood on weary legs. Apparently one of his strengths as an executive was knowing how to pick his battles.

"Let's just be quick. My wife hasn't found out about any of this, and I sure as hell don't want her finding out about it from the six o'clock news."

"Sure."

They could have taken the elevator down, but Briggs instead led the way to a door at the end of the hall that opened on a poorly lit stairway. The sounds of their shoes reverberated off the sickly paint of the walls while a mold-soaked funk assaulted their noses. Briggs wasn't sure why he wanted to use the stairs and not the elevator. He had a vague feeling that Palmer needed to be broken down a little, or at least pushed off balance.

The door at the bottom creaked on its hinges, and a pneumatic closer protested as it brought it back to the jamb. They took a right down the short corridor in the basement, tiled in gray linoleum. The door at the end had a five-button keypad at the top, and Briggs punched three of the keys before yarding it open.

On the other side the linoleum continued, gray and ugly despite daily sullen attempts at mopping years of grunge away. A row of oversized stainless steel file drawers covered the far wall; no need to guess what

*they* held. Briggs kept a step behind and to the side of Palmer, and studied him closely from his vantage point.

Nothing. The guy was ice.

They took a few steps beyond the vaults and to the center of the room, which held a stark metal table complete with a fresh corpse.

Jack Palmer looked back at the cop, raising an eyebrow. In response Briggs held out an outstretched arm and nodded once.

It didn't take long to see what was wrong with the subject. The entry wound made a small circle above the ear, so neat you could measure across to get the caliber of the round that had done the damage. The other side of the head—in defiance of someone's attempt to push everything back into place—bulged under flaps of skin that fit together poorly.

If you put the wound out of your mind, the corpse looked to be catching a nap. No, it was more than that, Briggs observed, it looked like the guy was having a hell of a good dream. The left side of his lips had curled up into a smug little smile. A little like someone with an inside joke would allow himself around an oblivious stooge. A little like the one on the Mona Lisa.

Briggs had forgotten to note his guest's first impressions of viewing his assailant's body. He'd seen more than a cop's fair share of gunshot victims in his almost eighteen years on the force, and none of them looked all that happy about being put on a slab. If anything, most of them didn't appear to have an opinion about it one way or another. The smirk on the perp's waxy face made Briggs want to reach over and pull his mouth down.

"Anything?" The word came out of the cop's lips automatically.

Palmer looked another couple of seconds, and shook his head. "Nope."

"Alright. Sorry I wasted your time. But *please*, if something comes to mind, any kind of recognition... might even be in a dream tonight. Give me a call, okay?"

Jack Palmer turned to him and gave an eerie reflection of the smile that his assailant wore. "Absolutely."

Briggs watched him go, not bothering to give out the card with the numbers he could call if he wanted counseling. This guy wouldn't need any help, and if he did, he could afford his own high-priced shrink. He certainly didn't need one that worked for the county for twenty grand a year.

# Chapter 3

## Casual Dining

Wow! You're home early."

It hadn't occurred to Jack that it wasn't seven yet. It seemed like he'd been at the police station all day. The surprise that Lucy registered meant that she hadn't heard his name on the news.

"Yeah, for once I was actually able to wrap things up by five."

"I haven't even started dinner yet. Maybe we could go out and—hey, what happened to your forehead?"

"Oh, this? Hit my head on a file drawer. It was the stupidest thing. I was on the phone while I did it - I must have sounded like an idiot."

"Do you want any ice for it?"

"No, Lucy... it'll be fine. You said something about going out for dinner?"

"Well, I *was*... Do you think we'll be back by eight? I've got my—"

"Yeah, I know. Bridge night with the girls. I think we'll be able to get in and out; it's usually slow on Tuesday."

Lucy threw him a strange look for just a second. It was no secret that Jack had grown increasingly uncomfortable with her evenings out. Then, quickly, she pasted a smile on and went upstairs to change.



Most times they went out in public, Jack and his wife spoke to each other with masked tension, and one could picture the objects on the table that separated them as chess pieces. Lucy, as always, was the one drawing the attention of the other patrons, stunning as ever in a red evening dress that was both tasteful and revealed her hourglass figure, the plunging neckline displaying some of the finest work Aesthetic Surgical Partners had done. Even now, Jack liked looking at her when she was made up. Of course, he'd always derived more pleasure from being seen *with* her.

Tonight, he perched in his seat more relaxed than he did when they were newly married. He even asked about the friends she would be

joining for cards later that evening. Talk was small and meaningless, but at least it existed.

Jack thought about his afternoon and wondered how he could get a morgue photo of Rick. He knew where the guy had lived; it wasn't too far from the restaurant, actually. He pictured getting into the bastard's loft, personally this time instead of hiring people to break in. Walking to that bedroom by the third-floor windows, the one that didn't have any curtains to hide what went on in there. He visualized leaving the stark, no-shitting-around morgue photo on the bed that Lucy liked to visit, under her perfect little alibi, those little bitches she called friends providing a cover story for her.

What would she think of that photo on the pillow? She knew him better than Jack ever could: how would *she* interpret that little shit-eating grin his dead face held? Would she be in on his little inside joke?

Jack got a sick pleasure out of seeing him slabbed like that, grin or no... but what was up with that oogedy-boogedy stuff he muttered, right before the cops had drilled him?

"Are you okay, Jack?"

He realized he'd been staring at her without hearing a word she said. "Sorry," he retorted, as he had so many times before, only this time he truly sounded remorseful. "I'd just forgotten how beautiful you are."

It was talk like that which had won Lucy over in the first place. She looked at him in a way that she hadn't since... it had been years.

Maybe Jack had her thinking the file drawer had knocked some sense into his head. Maybe, after a few more nights like this, he could make her wonder if Rick was still worth seeing on the side...

*Well, a little late for that now.* Nope, he'd taken that bastard right out of the competition.

Lucy sounded a little nervous as she said: "You know, Jack... I don't *need* to play cards tonight."

Jack actually considered it for a second. He could take her home, continue to romance her, maybe start a fire, and win her back the nice way. There would be some sort of double victory in that, right? Knowing he'd have won, either way?

Then he thought about his wife, on top of Rick, in that set of photos that the private investigator gave him in exchange for five grand. No curtains on those third-floor bedroom windows to cover her betrayal. No hesitation about performing in front of an audience of those strange African masks Rick collected staring at them from the walls, grinning with approval.

*Stick to Plan A, so you don't think of that while you two are getting' it on, and do something stupid like hit her.*

"No, hon," Jack said out loud, "you don't get out much, and I'm really tired. Whacked myself on the head today, after all. I need a good night's sleep... just don't make too much noise when you come home."



**T**he drive home was as frosty as it typically was when they went out. Jack had a CD in, and soft Jazz—which she hated—pumped from the speakers of his SUV.

He'd decided to wait for her to leave, then get to Rick's apartment as fast as he could. She wasn't a very aggressive driver, and never took shortcuts, so he could make it there first. He didn't have a morgue photo, but he could still be waiting for her when she walked out of the building, wondering where he was, wondering why he'd stood her up.

And he could tell her, right there. Watch her stunned look, observe how she processed so many things coming at her at once: *You knew? Where is he? What happened to him?*

Jack did his best to hide his anticipation as they pulled into the garage, and didn't try to change into pajamas too quickly. Lucy's face had gone sullen as she followed him up the stairs to their room. She slipped out of the dress, and her hesitation caught Jack's attention.

She was fabulous, magnificent, beyond description, in a black teddy and stockings that she *knew* he liked. She arched an eyebrow at him. One last chance.

And he didn't take it. Without bothering to remove anything else, she slipped on a pair of jeans and a casual shirt.

"Don't worry about me waking you up. I'll be really quiet."

Jack heard her start to cry as she went down to the garage, but couldn't make himself call after her.

# Chapter 4

## The Big Reveal

The door to Rick's apartment showed no signs of police attention. Whatever had happened in that downtown plaza that morning seemed to be all they needed to see. Hostage situation, gunman taken down, open and shut case.

On the entire drive over, Jack had sped as much as he dared, cut off a number of people, and even went up a parkway ramp headed the wrong direction, pulling a quick u-turn across a median in front of several startled motorists. He guessed he had a ten minute advantage on his wife.

He'd had a copy made of every key she had, hoping that one of them corresponded to Rick's place. Beyond that, he didn't have much of a plan.

That was uncharacteristic; Jack *always* had a plan, and a backup, and a Plan C, followed by a number of contingencies in case a detail or two didn't go right. It was how he'd managed to frame Rick.

Getting in was simpler than he'd thought. He got past the buzzer-controlled lobby door by holding it open for a grateful tenant who juggled takeout, cell phone, keys, and dry cleaning. It's amazing what a well-dressed, groomed man in his fifties can do without suspicion.

Jack had a general idea of where the apartment was. And when the fifth key on his copy of Lucy's set let him into the second door he tried, he slipped through the entry and into a darkened hallway.

It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim light that filtered up from the street through the unclashed windows. An arch penetrated the wall to the right, probably a kitchen area, and a living room awaited ahead at the end of the hall. The place smelled a little stale, but not overpoweringly so, except for a chemical tang; one familiar but not instantly recognizable.

On the walls were some of those damned African masks, grinning at nothing, perched over sticks with feathers or hair jutting from the ends. Several frames held photos that could not be seen in the dimness.

He decided there must be a lamp in the living room. His shoes made a hollow clacking on an old but solid wood floor. Ahead of him Jack could make out the silhouette of a couch, and a recliner, with an odd shape breaking up its outline—

“I didn’t expect *you* to come to *me*.”

Jack jumped, making an *oop* from the base of his throat. Did Rick have a roommate? Then why the hell wasn’t there an answer to his knock?

“I’d expected Lucy, of course. I didn’t want to disappoint the dear lady by standing her up. Not when she goes through all the shit you give her during the week.”

The shape rose now, and Jack wondered if he really wanted to find a light switch.

“Who...” he stopped before sounding stupid. He knew that voice. It had just been in his ear less than twelve hours before.



**H**e had her against the wall. Jack, bound, with a racquetball duct-taped inside his mouth, got treated to a live version of what he’d already seen in black-and-white photographs. He’d had only cold contempt when he first looked at the pictures, already in the initial stages of plotting his revenge. There was cold this time as well, different, an ice pick in his gut.

Here was Rick, alive and well. But Jack had heard the slug hit the guy’s head, a hollow, slightly wet *doof* immediately followed by the report of the rifle that sent it. He’d turned to see the collapsed pile of meat and bone that had once been a human, the exit wound mercifully against the pavement, only a neat little circle of red entering above the ear, *knew* it was unmistakably Rick.

*Why doesn’t she see me?*

It was dark in the bedroom, but not black. Surely Lucy would have noticed her husband lashed to a chair in the corner. But she didn’t even look over at him.

He tried to call out to her, to tell her to run, get out of this place and its not-as-dead-as-he-should-be resident, but all that escaped was an inhuman hooting sound. One that she should have heard but didn’t.

And that’s how it went, twenty minutes that stretched out into an eternity, until they finally finished. Lucy collapsed onto the bed, one knee up, arms behind her head, talking about how *wonderful* Rick was,

about how her husband never gave it to her like that, on and on. Rick got up, walked toward Jack, still whimpering and making hooting sounds, and lit a cigarette.

He bent over, resting his hands on his thighs, eye level with his captive. He took a heavy drag and the corner of his mouth twisted up slightly, in a now too-familiar expression.

The ember on the end of his smoke brightened, illuminating Rick's face. Jack watched in horror as his rival reached over his head with his right hand, and up to his ear with his left. He pulled up a flap of skin and hair, revealing an ugly, ragged hole the size of a baseball, making Jack glad the cigarette didn't burn any brighter.

*"She's still mine, Jack,"* he whispered. *"Always will be."*

Then Rick casually plucked his cigarette from his mouth, gave Jack a single nod as he exhaled fully, still wearing that smug half-smile. He spun and walked back to the bed holding the smoke out to Lucy, who accepted it and took a deep draw.

Rick said: "Shame you have to head home so soon, Lucy-loo, but I have a feeling your husband might suspect something. And, as much as I hate to admit it, I've got a few things I still need to do before I can call it a night."

## About the Author

Greg M. Hall has a dozen stories published online and in print, and his debut novel, *Traffic Control*, is available online and in select bookstores. For more of his stories, visit his website at [www.gregmhall.com](http://www.gregmhall.com), his podcast at [www.killbox.mevio.com](http://www.killbox.mevio.com), or his blog at [sf.gregmhall.com](http://sf.gregmhall.com). He lives in eastern Nebraska with his wife, a bunch of kids, and pet tortoise.

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