

THE  
**R.E.M.**

A THRILLER.

**EFFECT**

J.M. LANHAM

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For Megan.

*Dreams must be heeded and accepted. For a great many of them come true.*

–Paracelsus

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## Chapter 1: Ham

Claire's eyes panned the interior of the stonewall chamber, searching for traces of light in the pitch-black room. The holding cell was dank and humid; a makeshift prison in some long-forgotten jungle somewhere. She had been strapped and bound to a chair for countless days without food, water, or any sign of deliverance. IV fluids hung from a stainless-steel pole nearby, providing her only source of nutrition during her cryptic stay. The hunger pangs were sheer agony, but the liquefied sustenance gave Claire a reason to believe she might make it out of this scenario alive.

*If they want me hydrated, then they must want me to live*, she reasoned. The hopeful assumption had become her survivor's mantra, and was just enough to preserve her precarious level of sanity through the days-long ordeal. She fought to keep her mind busy, but even an exercise as simple as recalling her own phone number had become an arduous task. It was as if the neurons in her brain were engulfed by a thick fog, obscuring connections and clouding her thoughts, all courtesy of the chemical cocktail being served to her by an unknown host.

*The man with the needle.* Although several people were likely involved in her kidnapping, Claire knew her short and scruffy tormentor was the one responsible for her current mental state. He was the man who flipped the lights during his daily visits. The man who dosed her with hallucinogenic concoctions delivered intravenously that sent Claire's mind to harrowing places without ever leaving the discomfort of her ill-fitting chair.

Claire had been through the crucible of torture, but that didn't stop her from trying to solve the mystery of her imprisonment. She searched for clues in a veil of darkness, hanging on to every fleeting trace of light that came from the crack at the bottom of the holding cell's only door.

The last thing Claire remembered before her kidnapping was dozing off on a flight from Boston to Los Angeles. Everything after that was a haze—a telltale sign of her recent drug-induced amnesia. She hadn't the slightest clue what her flight



number was, but for some reason she *did* remember washing down her meds with overpriced scotch just before falling asleep in coach.

She decided to focus on the basics. She knew her name was Claire Connor, and she knew she was employed—a journalist, perhaps. She didn't think she was married, but she rubbed the base of her ring finger with her thumb just to be sure. Nothing. She tilted her head forward to observe her chin-length, burgundy-red hair. The split ends dangling in front of her signaled the stress she had been under, but provided little else in the form of meaningful intel.

It was clear her investigation had little to go on. There were, however, a few sketchy memories following her high-altitude nightcap; a collection of snapshots leading up to her capture. First, there was a blurry picture of the terminal at LAX. Another shot portrayed a man in a long, dark overcoat. He watched Claire as she walked through the terminal while he pretended to talk on his cellphone. The last snapshot came with a soundtrack, and was by far the most disturbing: a dingy white shroud pressed to her face and muffling her screams.

In an instant, it hit her: *a handkerchief. At the airport. A man grabbed me from behind and held a damp cloth to my face . . . I was drugged.*

“Son of a bitch,” Claire muttered. She looked around the room again. The light from under the door was constant now, creeping across the floor and outlining two stainless-steel arms that reached up and out like metallic crab claws from each side of her chair. Both arms were wielding ominous instruments she pretended to ignore.

She turned her attention to a symbol on the IV bag hanging from one of the arms. It looked familiar. She tested her restraints, rocking her chair from side to side as she watched the metal arms move ever so slightly. The chair was firmly attached to the floor, but she was able to exert just enough force to swing the front of the affixed IV bag around to the dim interior light. That's when she noticed a logo, a stylized, silver letter A.

She knew she had seen it before, but the pharmacological roadblocks in her mind were inhibiting the connection. It was *déjà vu* in the worst sense. She glared at the logo, but nothing came to mind. She knew the answer to her kidnapping was written on the front of the bulging bag slowly spinning back and

forth between the light and the shadows—but she had no idea what the symbol meant.

Claire furrowed her brow in frustration. She would have rubbed her temples to relieve the headache that was setting in, but her five-point restraints wouldn't allow it. She considered closing her eyes, but the sound of footsteps getting closer broke her concentration. Her attention was drawn to the door, where she noticed the shuffling of feet breaking up the light at the bottom. Her heart dropped. There was a loud clank of the exterior lock, and then the door swung open. In walked a short, stocky man dressed like a seasoned government official with cheap black-rimmed glasses, a starched white button-up, and a five-o'clock shadow that spoke to long working hours with little regard for personal hygiene.

The man flipped the light switch next to the door. Claire winced and turned away, seeking protection for sensitive eyes that had long been adjusted to the dark. The man was cheery and smug.

“Jesus, Ms. Connor. A little light never hurt anyone.” He walked over to the detainee.

“You're going to do it again, aren't you?” Claire asked. The man didn't respond. She tried to keep her composure, but there was no hiding her trembling hands.

“Why are you doing this to me? Please . . . just tell me *something*. Anything.”

“We've been over all of this before, Ms. Connor. We just have to keep you awake for a little while longer.” He moved to a set of cabinets on the wall and pulled a syringe from one of the shelves.

Claire knew what was coming. The scruffy man had a fetish for administering some sort of hallucinogen into her IV, the components of which were still a mystery. Had it been something a little more mainstream like LSD or peyote, Claire's worst fear would have been a bad acid trip. One full of melting faces. Reptilian party-goers. Rock concerts officiated by the Lord of Darkness himself. This concoction, however, was nothing of the sort.

The man stood next to his involuntary patient and prepared her for the procedure. He flushed the IV line with saline. Then he brandished the syringe, giving it a flick as a drop of fluid rolled down the needle.

Claire begged, "Please. You don't have to do this."

"That's where you're wrong, Ms. Connor," the man said, never taking his eyes off the syringe. "This has to be done." He injected the solution into her port with a sadistic smile. "Just . . . think about the greater good."

Claire watched as the opaque yellow fluid clouded the IV line, quickly moving toward the crease in her arm. She could see her vein, plump and pulsating right where the needle went in. The amalgamation of fluids felt cool under her skin. The meds hit her bloodstream and her heart went into overdrive.

She gripped the armrests, bracing for the kind of pain that could only come from a nefarious toxin coursing through every blood vessel in her body. She told herself not to worry, that it wouldn't last long. The pressure in her head was intolerable. Sweat drenched her body as once-lost memories began pouring back into existence. Memories of her friends, her career, even her childhood rode in on a powerful wave of consciousness, separating her from her tormented body while washing away her pain and angst in one fell swoop.

Suddenly Claire found herself standing in a field. She looked down at her wrists, then to her ankles. The restraints she had worn for almost a week were gone. The grass she stood in came up to the pockets of her jeans, making it tough to see the sandspurs that were prickling her legs from the knees down.

She rubbed her wrists and looked over the landscape, assessing her surroundings. She was in the middle of a clear patch of land, closed in by a wall of jungle two hundred yards out in all directions. Huge ferns were scattered across the clearing. Honeycreepers fluttered around the tall ceiba trees in the distance. The noonday sun was intense and unrelenting, leading Claire to believe she was in the tropics.

She tied her jacket around her waist and started walking. She could see a hill high on the horizon, no more than a mile or two away. It would be a good vantage point, she supposed, and would hopefully lead her to a road or a nearby town. She hadn't thought about how she had escaped her holding cell. It didn't

feel important, nor would it serve to help her out of the jungle. All Claire could think about was finding a way out.

She was almost to the southern edge of the clearing when she heard a commotion coming from the wood line to the north. She turned to zero in on the noise while crouching in the grass, confident the high weeds would keep her concealed. The ruckus grew louder and more obnoxious with each passing second.

Footsteps. Erratic and offbeat, but human footsteps nonetheless. The sound of bipedal creatures barreling through the jungle in the distance was unmistakable. Claire could make out voices, but she couldn't decipher any words.

Finally, the men reached the clearing, stepping out of the shadows and into the full afternoon sunlight. There was no mistaking their attire.

*Soldiers.* A group of heavily armed men, a dozen or so, all dressed in camouflage fatigues and walking in formation. Each soldier was easily packing eighty pounds of tactical gear. Claire noticed the apparent leader of the group front and center. He was pointing over Claire's head and motioning for the others to move forward.

They were heading straight toward her.

Claire looked back toward the south end of the field. She was almost a quarter mile away from the tree line. She turned her attention back to the soldiers at the nearest end of the clearing. At their current pace, they would be swarming her position in two, maybe three minutes, tops. It was an impossible distance to close without being noticed, but she had no choice. She had to make a move.

She rose into a sprinter's stance, setting her feet while keeping her body just below the tall grass, and then she waited. She peered up toward the soldiers once more, hoping to catch at least a few of them looking the other way before she made a run for it.

That was when she noticed something was wrong. The soldiers had stopped advancing. Not only had their forward march been halted, they were now shuffling in place. Claire squinted, trying to understand what she was seeing in the bright sunlight. The soldiers' movement was sporadic. No one was talking—only distant stares and blank faces.

“What the hell?” she muttered. The soldiers had effectively transformed from an elite military unit into a stumbling herd of drunkards. A dozen fighting men were locked in a zombie-like trance, capable of standing upright, but little else. The leader caught Claire’s eye. Something was eerily familiar about him, aside from his current demeanor.

Claire looked harder. Heat radiated from the tall grass in the field and obscured the man’s face, but she could just make out his salt-and-pepper hair, cut high and tight in true Marine Corp fashion, with a rugged expression that would send chills down any foreign combatant’s spine . . .

*“Dawkins?”*

The name had barely left her lips when Claire felt it on her left. A bullet whizzed by her head, missing her by mere inches. She flinched as she hit the deck, lying flat and shielding her head while shots fired from a barrage of high-powered assault rifles downrange. Bullets cut through the field, sawing vegetation into a flurry of grass clippings raining down on Claire from above.

The shooting was ferocious. Round after round was coming from the south end of the field, aimed directly at Dawkin’s group of bumbling targets. Had Claire made a mad dash for the tree line a moment sooner, she would have run right into enemy fire. She wondered who was firing on the halted soldiers, and why they were shooting at soldiers in distress, but her questions went unanswered. The shooting stopped as suddenly as it began, leaving behind a trail of deafening vibrations that echoed off into the hot still air.

It was quiet again. Claire uncovered her ears and patted her body down, checking anxiously for bullet holes. She moved from her chest down to her legs. It was nothing short of a miracle she hadn’t been shot. She breathed a sigh of relief before remembering whom the bullets were intended for.

Claire rose up from the ground slowly, staying in a crouched position with her attention now focused on the well-being of her old friend Teddy Dawkins. She knew the man leading the team of soldiers from her time covering the Middle East for the Associated Press. Claire remembered running into Teddy about two years ago while on assignment in Costa Rica. But while she had only been in country temporarily, it appeared Dawkins might have taken on a permanent role.

She carefully searched above the tall grass for the group of soldiers. No sign of them. She pivoted to the south; the aggressors had apparently made their exit, too. Reluctant to raise her head any higher above the cover of grass, she sat back down, staying low to evaluate the situation.

“Jesus, my head!” Claire yelled. Her excruciating headache had returned. She looked to the sky, desperate to identify the source of her pain. It felt like the sun’s rays were penetrating her skull, torching nerve endings and searing her mind. Her heart started racing again. Finally, she heard a resounding voice calling from the heavens above.

“Claaaire. Wake up, Claire.”

Claire stood up and looked around, eager to locate the source of the voice.

“Time to wake up now . . .”

She looked to the sun. The light was blinding and cold, taking her away from the clearing, away from the soldiers, and most importantly, away from the fucking heat. There was nothing else to be seen or felt—there was only the light. In a fast and fluid transformation, the light turned into a single white-hot globe at the end of a long metallic arm.

Claire was back with her captor in the stonewall chamber. The man swiveled the examination light away from his subject before leaning down to speak to his patient. It was the first time the man had looked Claire directly in the eyes.

“Ms. Connor. I think it’s imperative you know how well you performed today.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The experiment you’ve been participating in. For all intents and purposes, it was a clinical success.”

“Does this mean you’re letting me go?”

The man paused, then said, “Yes. Yes, Ms. Connor. I don’t see any reason why you can’t go home.” The man walked over to a desk below the cabinets and began searching through one of the drawers.

Claire watched him carefully. She wanted to believe him, but his assurances weren’t appeasing her gut feeling that something was amiss.

“Will you tell me what this was all about?”

The question amused him. “Yes, of course. Why not.” He faced Claire. “Tell me, Ms. Connor, have you ever heard of Ham the astronaut?”

She hadn’t.

“Ham was the first hominid sent into space, flying solo during NASA’s Mercury program in the early 1960s. Naturally, Ham’s contribution to the space program was overshadowed by mankind’s achievements, but the importance of his space flight cannot be stressed enough. Chimpanzees are our closest living relatives, with ninety-six percent of their genomes identical to ours. They are a living testament to the undeniable link between humans and apes. No other candidate was more qualified to go into space in our stead than the chimp. Ham was our biological proxy; the living proof the government needed to demonstrate to the American public that space flight was safe for human beings.”

He resumed his search through the drawer. “Basically, Ms. Connor, Ham cleared the path for the space race, and look how far we’ve come since. Think about everything we have accomplished that can be attributed to the space program. Microchips, MRIs, advancements in solar technology, robotics, healthcare, global information systems . . . all byproducts of the Space Age. All beginning with a brave chimp named Ham.”

He closed the drawer and returned to Claire’s side. He leaned over and whispered in her ear. “You see, Claire . . . *you’re* Ham.”

The heavy fog was rolling in once again, cloudy and confusing. “I—I don’t . . .”

“ . . . I wouldn’t expect you to grasp the significance of our findings today, Ms. Connor. After all, the drugs do take some time to wear off. But the good news is that you’ve proven to me, as well as my associates, that our theory regarding the neurological amplification of electromagnetic radiation in a controlled REM sleep-state is valid.”

The man produced another syringe. Claire tried desperately to put together a cohesive sentence.

“What . . . what are you g-going to do?”

The man spoke softly as he reached for her port and pumped in the drug. “I already told you, Ms. Connor. I’m going to send you home.” Claire tried to withdraw her arm, but it was no use. Panic quickly succumbed to a feeling of warmth and peace, flowing into her body and calming her mind. Her breathing slowed and her head fell to the side. Her eyes grew heavy, and then everything faded to black.

**You’ve reached the end of the free chapter one preview.**

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