



## Exit Strategy (A Nick Mason Novel)

By Steve Hamilton

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**In the stunning follow-up to the *New York Times* bestseller *The Second Life of Nick Mason*, the remarkable hero fights to take back control from the crime lord who owns his life, as he races to complete a daring and dangerous new mission...**

Nick Mason has been given a true mission impossible: Infiltrate WITSEC, the top-secret federal witness-protection program that has never been compromised, locate the three men who put his boss Darius Cole behind bars for life, and kill them.

But first he has to find them—they're ghost prisoners locked down around the clock in classified "deep black" locations by an battalion of heavily armed U.S. marshals charged with protecting them—and the clock is ticking. Cole is appealing his conviction, and these witnesses are either his ticket to freedom or the final nail in his coffin. If they testify, Darius Cole will never step foot in the outside world again. If they are killed, he will walk out a free man.

As he risks everything to complete his mission, Mason finds himself being hunted by the very man he replaced, the ruthless assassin who once served, then betrayed, Darius Cole. Rather than waiting to be Mason's next victim, he has escaped witness protection to hunt down and kill Mason himself.

In an action-packed journey that leads from a high-security military installation in the Appalachian Mountains to a secret underground bunker hidden far below the streets of New York City, Nick Mason will have to become, more than ever before, the lethal weapon that Darius Cole created.

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### Editorial Review

Review

#### Praise for *Exit Strategy*

“A compelling trek across very dark terrain putting Nick Mason through increasingly pulse-pounding paces with so much non-stop suspense, I read the book in two sittings.”—*Huffington Post*

“[Hamilton has] perfected his craft as an author of high-powered, fast-paced crime thrillers. *Exit Strategy* . . . moves so quickly you instantly find yourself sucked into its slipstream and pulled along like a water-skier behind a low-flying rocket careening toward the finale.”—*NY Journal of Books*

“*The Second Life of Nick Mason* rocketed Steve Hamilton to literary stardom, all the reasons for which are on clear display in that book’s sequel, *Exit Strategy*. . . . The book’s brisk prose wondrously sets the tone, starting with, “You kill one person, it changes you. You kill five . . . it’s not about changing anymore.” Think Don Winslow at his coolest, as Hamilton turns up the heat in a bold, bracing and brilliant thriller.”—*The Providence Journal*

“The intensity Hamilton generates here is almost too much—like a wailing siren growing steadily louder at the same time its pitch climbs ever higher—but readers will be utterly powerless to close the book. Noir is all about characters attempting to find options for themselves where none exist. The brilliance of this thoroughly uncompromising novel lies in the way Hamilton, with the legerdemain of a master conjurer, turns despair to hope and back again, finally blending the two into their own unique nightmare world. Stunning.”—*Booklist* (starred review)

“When it comes to no-nonsense, pressure-cooker plotting, Hamilton has few rivals. The book starts turning up the heat from the start [and] maintains its breathless pacing until the end. . . . Its hard-wired plot and adrenaline-fueled scenes make it another must-read for fans of lean, mean crime fiction.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“The action is nonstop in Hamilton’s latest, and the violence quotient has risen, but Nick remains an empathetic character for whom readers will gladly root. Aficionados of Gregg Hurwitz and Thomas Perry will quickly become fans.”—*Library Journal*

“Another knockout performance. . . . Hamilton has carefully crafted an atmospheric, edgy thriller with strong characters and a swiftly escalating tension level. . . . Easily one of the best crime novels of the year – even though it surely will be facing strong competition.”—*Lansing State Journal*

“One of our favorite authors, Steve Hamilton continues the gritty, action-packed saga of Nick Mason in his newest book, *Exit Strategy*. . . . If you have weekend plans, clear them. This is the kind of book that demands to be read in one sitting. . . . The pacing is stunning, cinematic in its precision.”—*Harbor Light News*

“How does Nick resolve this second life he is now forced to live? The manner in which he does so is revealed in this fascinating novel by Steve Hamilton, and the suspenseful way he accomplishes it is typical of what we have come to expect from this author, in this newest page-turner. . . . Expect the unexpected from this wonderful author. . . . Highly recommended.”—*Midwest Book Review*

#### Praise for *The Second Life of Nick Mason*

“[*The Second Life of Nick Mason*] is so good, it legitimately stands shoulder to padded paranoid shoulder with the classics of the crime noir genre...There are so many terrific elements in this novel—Nick’s haunted character, a plot that never darts in the direction you expect it to, and a truly ingenious climax—that I could be here till Labor Day singing its praises.”—Maureen Corrigan, NPR Fresh Air

“The sinner who gets a chance to start over is an archetypal figure in crime fiction. Steve Hamilton works a smart variation on it in *The Second Life of Nick Mason*.”—Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times Book Review*

“[An] intelligent thriller....The reader has a vulnerable underdog to root for: a loser who may yet be born to win.”—*The Wall Street Journal*

“The plotting is crisp, and the story moves smoothly, slipping easily between timelines....Nick is a very mobile character juggling different sides of his identity. One day, he’s slitting the throat of a man in a public restroom, and another he’s shopping for a puppy. That Hamilton is able to imbue both of these scenes with sharp tension is a testament to his skills as a writer. And as expected from a writer with Hamilton’s award-winning, best-selling track record, all the novel’s threads tie up in a powerful, violent resolution.”—*The Los Angeles Review of Books*

“A complicated plot, a lot of action, some vivid language and a variety of nicely detailed scenes.”—*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

“In this edgy noir from a crime fiction maestro, an ex-con struggles with unexpected freedom, falteringly rebuilding his life while a depraved puppet master still behind bars pulls his strings.”—*O Magazine*

“It’s a killer summer read.”—*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

“An impressive new series...*The Second Life of Nick Mason* is a new chapter in Hamilton's career, and it's intensely exciting. The concept is fresh, the action is heart-pounding and Nick Mason is a solid protagonist. His halo is tarnished but his intentions are gold. Readers will connect with him and clamor for his return.”—*Shelf Awareness*

“A high-octane, tension-filled novel that's received well-deserved praise from great authors.”—*Huffington Post*

“[A] heart-pounding thriller with cinematic appeal...Hamilton cleverly imbues the narrative with myriad of twists and turns, allowing the intricate plot to unfold with stunning and extraordinary skill and suspense. From the honor amongst thieves, to the honor amongst those sworn to protect us, to the loyalty among childhood friends and beloved family, multiple worlds collide as Hamilton catapults us into Nick Mason's complex psyche.”—*Esquire.com*

“As fertile as Chicago is for crime fiction, it isn't often that an outsider captures the underside of the local scene as memorably as Steve Hamilton does with *The Second Life of Nick Mason*, the terrific first installment in a projected series...The novel more than lives up to its hype.”—*Chicago Tribune*

“[A] reinvention of the noir thriller...There are a number of ways Hamilton could have gone that would have turned his knockout premise into pandering. Instead of patronizing readers with a morality tale (criminal struggling against the dark pull of enterprise), Hamilton gives us a bad guy who is willing—and able—to do worse. The result is edgy and intelligent entertainment that hits with the force of a narrative bullet...Hamilton gets just about everything right in Nick Mason.”—*Arizona Republic*

“Steve Hamilton’s new novel, *The Second Life of Nick Mason*, is every bit as good as Don Winslow and Harlan Coben and Michael Connelly say it is.”—*New York Daily News*

About the Author

**Steve Hamilton** is the *New York Times*–bestselling author of twelve novels, most recently *The Second Life of Nick Mason* and *Die a Stranger*. His debut, *A Cold Day in Paradise*, won both an Edgar and a Shamus Award for Best First Novel. His standalone novel *The Lock Artist* was a *New York Times* Notable Crime Book and won an Alex Award and the Edgar Award for Best Novel. He attended the University of Michigan, where he won the prestigious Hopwood Award for writing, and now lives in Cottekill, New York, with his wife and their two children.

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1

You kill one person, it changes you.

You kill five . . . it’s not about changing anymore.

It’s who you are.

Quintero knew this. He’d seen it in other men. Had seen it in himself. He saw it now as he watched Nick Mason prepare, remembering the day he picked him up at the gates of the federal prison in Terre Haute.

Remembering Mason’s first job, in the motel room. The look on his face afterward—blank, bloodless—when he brought the Mustang to the chop shop.

When he said he’d never do it again.

Until the next phone call.

That was the unwritten contract Nick Mason had signed. Twenty years of his life back in exchange for his service to Darius Cole. On call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. To do whatever was asked of him.

No matter what it was.

Mason stripped off his shirt to reveal the lean, hard muscles of a welterweight and pale white skin with no tattoos.

Even after five and a half years inside, he had come out without one drop of jailhouse ink on his body. Cole had made sure of it. Mason strapped on the soft armor tactical vest, thick enough to stop anything up to a .44 Magnum, then he pulled on the black turtleneck over that. With the black pants, the black rubber-soled shoes, it was the uniform of a professional. He took the black balaclava, formed it into a skullcap, and put it on over his close-cut hair. He pulled down the mask, adjusted it across his eyes, took one look in the mirror. Satisfied, he rolled it back up.

Quintero took the black canvas bag from his shoulder and put it down on the table. Mason unzipped the bag and looked inside.

“Everything you’ll need is in there,” Quintero said. “You have to remember, these are high-end guys. Top

shape, know how to use their firearms.”

“How many of them?”

“Between ten and twelve,” he said. “Not enough to stop you.”

Mason shook his head as he tried on the scuba gloves.

“What’s the most important thing I told you?” Quintero asked.

“Stay off the twenty-first floor,” Mason said. “At exactly ten o’clock, it’s going to blow.”

“Once that happens, you’ll be able to walk right out of there.”

Mason nodded.

“Tell me the plan again,” Quintero said. “Step by step.”

“The delivery truck,” Mason said. “It enters the parking garage at exactly nine thirty-five p.m. . . .”

Nick Mason watched the truck turn into the parking garage from Columbus Drive. It stopped at the large metal door while the driver waited for the man at the window to slide the door open. This gave Mason twenty seconds to climb under the truck, grab on to the exhaust system brackets, and lift his body’s weight from the concrete, the canvas bag looped tight to his back.

The scuba gloves were thin and flexible, giving him a good grip and protecting every surface, even the underside of this truck, from fingerprints.

The truck rolled a hundred yards until it came to a stop, and the door slid shut behind it. When the truck was turned off, Mason lowered himself to the ground and stayed there, the canvas bag next to him.

It was 9:37 p.m., most of the business offices on the ground floor closed, the dinner rush at the restaurants over. Mason waited for the driver to get out of the truck, then followed a dozen yards behind him. He was inside the building.

The Aqua. Eighty-two stories high, one of the most distinctive buildings in downtown Chicago, on the north side of the Loop, with undulating balconies that wrap around the building on all four sides like rippling water. Inside, the theme continues through all of the decorations, from the blue-and-green color scheme to the saltwater fish tank in the lobby.

Mason moved quickly, without rushing, knowing exactly where to find the freight elevator. The target was on the forty-third floor, so he hit the button for 42, then used the fireman’s override to take him all the way to his floor without stopping.

When he got to the forty-second floor, Mason stepped out of the elevator into the empty hallway. He spotted a room service tray on the floor outside one of the rooms, picked that up, and emptied it of all of the items except for the silver plate cover. Then he went to the stairwell at the end of the hallway and took the stairs up to forty-three.

Mason cracked open the stairwell door and scanned the hallway. The marshal was sitting in a chair outside

the door, seven or eight doors down. Young, maybe thirty. Stocky. He looked more bored than vigilant. Mason opened up his canvas bag, took out the Mossberg 500 shotgun. Pistol grip model, with the shorter barrel. Six shell capacity. It was loaded with what the manufacturer artfully called a crowd control munition, silicone plugs that they said would cause “nonlethal but incapacitative trauma” upon impact.

Incapacitative trauma.

In other words, it would only make you wish you were dead.

“You need to get over this,” Quintero said to him. “Killing one man and leaving everybody else alive.”

Mason didn’t answer. He loaded the plugs into the shotgun.

“That gun in your hands, you think it cares who’s on the other end?”

Mason looked up at him.

“You gotta be the same way,” Quintero said. “Before this bullshit gets you killed.”

Mason took the H&K USP semiautomatic from the bag and put it in his belt. The cartridge held fifteen nine-millimeter rounds, with a sixteenth already chambered. Finally, he took out the stun baton and hooked it to his belt. Eighteen inches long, three pounds of reinforced aluminum, with a “police force level” rating of twelve million volts that would shut down a man’s entire neuromuscular system. One more piece of insurance.

Mason dropped the empty canvas bag to the floor, put a pair of low-profile plugs into his ears, then took one final moment to breathe, to focus on what was about to happen, because once it started it would all flow quickly, one movement after another, without a single beat of hesitation.

He opened the stairwell door and moved down the hallway. The room service tray hid the semiautomatic in his belt—positioned at eleven o’clock for a right-handed cross draw—and also hid the baton and most of the shotgun.

The marshal stood up and said, “Hey! You can’t be here!”

That moment of indecision as the marshal reached for his radio. Mason dropped the tray and leveled the shotgun at the man’s chest, had just enough time to see the young man’s eyes go wide as he pulled the trigger and sent the silicone plug into his abdomen, just below the tactical vest.

The marshal went down, curled up in a ball. He wouldn’t be getting back up, not without a lot of help and some pain medication. Mason pulled the balaclava down over his face as he approached him. The man looked even younger up close—a kid who had no business being stationed here alone. Mason reached into the man’s jacket and removed the Glock from his holster, along with his radio. Then he took out the pen from his own pocket—the tip had been replaced by a DC adapter and the barrel contained a circuit board that would read the 32-bit hotel code and repeat it back to the card reader in less than a second.

He knew the clock was ticking now. Somebody had heard that shot, was already calling down to the front desk.

“The marshal inside the room is the leader of the team. He’s an iron man. Eight hours straight, he doesn’t



leave his client's side. Not to sleep, not to eat, not to use the fucking bathroom—unless he actually drags the man in there with him.

“He takes this shit personally, and he can shoot. They got one of his target sheets hanging up at the range. So don't fuck around.”

Mason plugged the pen into the charging port on the bottom of the door's locking mechanism and the light flashed green. He pushed the door, ready to kick it all the way open when it caught against the security latch, but the door swung free.

Mason stepped inside, staying close to the wall. He didn't see any movement in the room. The only light was the nighttime ambient glow coming from the window. He took a few more steps into the room, his right finger on the shotgun trigger. As he looked into the small kitchen, then the bedroom and the bathroom, the truth became obvious:

There was nobody here.

No marshal. No target.

The room was a decoy.

“How do we know the accountant will be there? If he's in WITSEC—”

“We have a marshal on the inside. McLaren has been moved up to Chicago for a pretrial deposition.”

Ken McLaren, once Darius Cole's chief accountant. A former IRS agent, a genius at moving money overseas, “redomiciling it” by investing in businesses that all looked legal on paper, then bringing the money back, avoiding any taxes.

For almost a decade, he made Cole a shitload of money.

Then McLaren's son got picked up on the University of Chicago campus with a dealer-weight bag of ecstasy pills, and they held that over McLaren's head until he agreed to testify against Cole.

“You're setting up for the retrial,” Mason said.

“You don't need to worry about that. All you need to worry about is—”

“I know. I hit him, then I leave.”

“Don't even think about the second thing until you've done the first.”

Mason went back out to the hallway and grabbed the marshal, still curled up in a fetal position and holding his abdomen. He cried out in pain as Mason dragged him into the room and closed the door.

“Where is he?”

The marshal didn't respond. Mason put the barrel of the shotgun against the man's temple.

“Strike one . . . Where is he?”

“Fuck you,” the marshal said.

Mason moved the barrel from the man’s temple to his leg, pulled the trigger, and sent the silicone plug at sonic speed into the thigh muscle. The man recoiled from the shock of it, and then a half second later the trauma arranged itself into one coherent message to his brain and he started screaming.

Mason gave the man a few seconds to wear himself out. Then he put the barrel back to the man’s temple.

“Strike two . . . Where is he?”

“Up,” the man said, sputtering and trying to catch his breath.

“Up where?”

“Ten floors. Fifty-three.”

“Which room?”

“I don’t know.”

Mason put the barrel against the man’s temple again.

“5307.”

Mason took the handcuffs from the man’s belt, hooked one to the man’s right wrist, and dragged him a few feet over to the bar top, where there was an old-fashioned brass footrail near floor level. He hooked the free cuff to the rail, then he took the phone off the bar and threw it in the kitchen sink. As he bent down to take the man’s cell phone, he put his mouth close to his ear.

“If he’s not there, I’ll make you wish I had killed you.”

Mason picked up the room service tray on his way out, went back to the stairwell, and climbed ten floors to fifty-three. He cracked open the hallway door.

The hallway was empty.

No man out front, one more way to keep the room a secret.

Mason moved quickly down to 5307, took out the pen, and keyed the lock. He was surprised once again when the door didn’t catch on the latch, barely had time to process how the marshal had set him up for this, when the door behind him swung open.

“Freeze!”

Mason turned just in time to face the gun blast and feel the impact against his chest, the bullet halted by the vest but the force spreading out through his body like he’d been hit by a sack of cement. He pulled the trigger of the shotgun as he fell backward, but the shot was high. The marshal was already stepping forward, lining up for his second shot, when Mason fired again. This time, he hit the man in the groin and he went down, landing on Mason’s legs.

Mason pushed the man off him. This man was older, with graying hair and a worn face—had probably been a marshal for thirty years at least. Sworn to protect his clients with his life. He clutched at his groin with both hands, his eyes closed tight, sucking in air with rapid breaths through clenched teeth. Mason took the man's Glock and his radio and then dragged him into the apartment across the hall.

The place was barely furnished. Couch, television, coffee table, lots of empty space and nowhere to hide. He went into the kitchen. Then the bedroom, looked under the bed, in the empty closet. He went into the bathroom and slid open the shower curtain.

Where the hell is McLaren?

Mason came back into the main room, stood there for a moment, remembered where he was, what made the Aqua the Aqua: the balconies on every floor, all the way to the top. He went to the curtain and pulled it open.

The accountant was outside, pressing up against the far corner of the iron railing. He wasn't the man Mason had expected—not a pencil-pushing scarecrow but a man who obviously spent time at the gym, even if the biceps that strained against his dress shirt were purely for show. Mason slid the door open, felt the cold rush of air against his face. He could hear the traffic on Columbus, fifty-three stories below. A siren wailed in the distance, probably already on the way to this building, while a million lights from the city glittered all around them. Under any other circumstances, it would have been a beautiful place to be.

The accountant stood up straight and looked him in the eye as Mason took the semiautomatic from his belt.

The time for nonlethal force was over.

As Mason raised the semiautomatic, he saw something in McLaren's eyes, turned a beat too late, and felt the impact on his right forearm. The gun clattered to the balcony floor and was kicked away as Mason swung around to face the recovered marshal. I should have made sure he was out, the words ringing in his head even as he faced a bigger problem, as the marshal lined up Mason and hit him across the jaw. Mason came back up, swung his foot right into the man's groin, and put him down again.

He was reaching for the baton on his belt when the accountant tackled him from behind, the momentum carrying them back into the room. Mason, the accountant's arms still locked around him, landed flush on the coffee table and flattened it. Mason twisted around and grabbed for the man's neck, but the accountant had fifty pounds on him, and he started swinging wildly at Mason's head. He felt McLaren's wedding ring scrape one of his cheeks, felt another blow next to his eye, and then as the man tried to aim a fist into his ribs, he let out a cry of pain as his hand crumpled against the tactical vest. Mason, still clutching the metal baton, laid it against the side of the accountant's head.

Mason rolled them both over just in time to see the marshal pick up the shotgun from the floor. Mason grabbed it and twisted it away, breaking at least one of the marshal's fingers as the gun went off, feeling the heat through his gloves as the television screen exploded. Mason hit the button on his baton and jabbed it right into the man's neck, sending twelve million volts into this body. The marshal was frozen in place until Mason took the baton away and hit him in the head with it, sending him to the floor for the last time.

Mason picked himself up, found all of his weapons, and wiped the blood from his cheek.

"Make sure he knows," Quintero said to him. "Make sure he knows who sent you."

“You think there’s going to be any doubt in his mind?”

“I’ll pay you,” McLaren said. He was slowly getting up to his feet, one hand pressed against the side of his head where Mason had hit him. “Whatever Cole’s paying you, I’ll double it.”

“It’s not always about money,” Mason said as he raised the semiautomatic again.

This was the one step Mason didn’t have to plan for. Didn’t want to plan for, or think about, in any way. He knew this moment would come, knew that everything else would fade to gray, that the target would stand before him and he would pull the trigger, everything reduced to pure technique: concentrate on the front sight, let the target become nothing but a blur. One more breath, then a smooth pull.

“Please,” the accountant said. And Mason pulled the trigger three times.

Chest, chest, head.

The body hit the floor.

Mason looked at his watch. It was 9:57 p.m. The decoy room had cost him valuable time.

He had three minutes to get out before Quintero’s bomb went off.

2

Mason left the dead accountant in a pool of blood, stepped over the body of the unconscious marshal, and opened the door. Hearing footsteps and voices to his left, Mason went right.

He opened the stairwell door and started going down, still carrying the shotgun, the semiautomatic tucked back into his belt. The balaclava was still pulled down over his face, until he pushed it up clear of his mouth so he could breathe as he pounded his way down one set of stairs after another.

He made it down ten floors. Then twenty. The numbers went by in a blur, as he looked at his watch and saw that he had less than two minutes left. He was on the landing of the twenty-seventh floor, pausing for one second to grab another breath.

He heard the squawk of a radio on the other side of the hallway door, froze for one beat and was about to continue going downward, but then the door opened and he found himself suddenly face-to-masked-face with a one of the marshals. The man quickly recovered from his shock and yelled, “Freeze!”

Mason shot the first marshal below the vest line. The silicone plug folded the man in half and made him drop his gun. Mason threw himself behind the cover of the door, racked the shotgun, and in one smooth motion emerged to take down the second marshal. He pulled himself back behind the door again, racked the shotgun one more time, and recognized the subtle hollow feel of an empty weapon.

Fuck. All six rounds gone.

Staying behind the door, Mason let the third marshal come closer until he could see the barrel of his Glock. He slammed the door on the man’s arms, pulled the Glock away and hit him across the face with it.

Wrapping him up, Mason pressed his forearm against the man's throat, the other arm to the back of his neck, and locked everything together. Ten seconds of steady pressure on the carotid artery, cutting off the blood supply. Then he let the marshal slide to the floor.

He checked his watch.

One minute.

He heard the voices above him again. More footsteps. He kept going down the stairs, one flight after the other. Until he heard another voice yelling and, a half second later, a gun blast and the metallic sound of a slug ricocheting off the rail inches from his hand. He threw himself against the wall and took the semiautomatic from his belt. He didn't have time to think about lethal force versus nonlethal force versus anything else in the world. He pictured what would happen next if he hesitated: the marshals cornering him, ordering him to drop his weapon, taking him away in handcuffs, just the first step in a process he'd already been through once before. Only this time he'd end up in a prison cell for the rest of his life.

Whatever he had to do, he was not going to let that happen.

There were voices below him now, echoing the voices above, which were getting louder. He threw open the door and ran down the hallway. He had no choices left.

He was fifty feet down the hallway when he realized where he was.

The twenty-first floor.

"How the hell am I supposed to get out?" Mason had asked Quintero. "These weapons aren't exactly quiet."

"The twenty-first floor is being renovated, so it'll be empty at night. There are explosives in one of the rooms, and they'll go off at exactly ten o'clock. Exactly. Make sure you have your watch right."

"What if I'm on that floor?"

"There's eighty-two fucking floors in that place, Mason. You only got one to avoid. Just be on the move at ten o'clock and you'll get out."

He didn't bother checking his watch. He knew he had seconds left.

"Drop the weapon!"

Mason turned and fired the semiautomatic just to give himself cover. But then he felt another impact, this time high on his right shoulder, the pain so much different from the shot that had hit him in the vest. This pain was sharp instead of dull and concentrated in one white-hot pinpoint. I'm hit. The words rang hollow and faraway in Mason's mind. Not urgent, just information. A problem that he didn't have the time to solve yet. He fired again and saw the marshal retreat behind the door, turned just in time to see another marshal coming from the opposite direction.

"Get on the ground! Get on the ground!"

Mason fired at the doorknob closest to him, kicked open the door and ran through the empty room. He barely registered the bare drywall and paint cans, shooting out the back window as he ran, shattering it into a

million pebbles of glass just before he went through to the balcony and over the edge of the railing.

The next moment was nothing but heat, light, and sound, obliterating everything else. The force of the explosion chased him as sudden and immediate as a giant animal pursuing him into the cold night air. He grabbed at the railing with one hand, already feeling it slipping from him, the street twenty-one stories below waiting to receive his falling body.

A second wave hit even harder than the first, and he had to let go. He felt himself falling, reaching out with nothing more than pure instinct until another iron railing slammed against his left arm and he wrapped his arm around it. He was one floor below the explosion now, the cold like a dive into the ocean, but as he grasped the rail he felt his fingers slipping again. Hanging there, trying to pull himself over, he could hear the fire raging on the floor above him. Another window blew out. The sirens wailed in the distance. He looked down and saw the flashing blue lights on the police cars twenty floors below him.

It all felt so far away, everything but the pain in his right shoulder and the four inches of cold metal he could feel through the glove on his left hand, the last anchor keeping him from falling.

Mason gathered himself and tried to raise his right arm.

Nothing. The arm was dead.

He could feel the blood trailing down his arm. His right glove was wet, blood dripping from his fingertips. His left hand was growing more numb by the second. His grip was weakening. He could hold on for one more minute. Maybe two.

After everything he had been through, to die this way . . .

He thought of his daughter, pictured her face in his mind, pictured her running across the soccer field. Said her name out loud—"Adriana"—in defiance of the howling wind that swirled about him. He tried one more time to swing his right arm up to the rail.

Got it.

He had the iron railing under his armpits now, and as his feet scrambled against the edge of the balcony he found purchase and pushed himself up over the top. He collapsed on the balcony, lying on his back and taking long breaths of air. There were more sirens down on the street, the police cars' wails mixing with the firetrucks' honking bass notes. In one second, the Aqua had become the center of the world. As Mason rolled to his feet, he touched his right shoulder with his left hand. He couldn't feel blood through his glove, but as he pulled it away he saw shiny bright red.

He tried the window. This one was unlocked. He went through another apartment, stopping to rummage through a laundry hamper until he found a red shirt. It was short-sleeved and three sizes too big for him, but he slipped it over his black shirt, the entire right side of which was now soaked in blood. He stopped for one more moment, felt the room spinning and had to reach out to steady himself against the wall. Then he went out the door and into the chaos of the hallway. The fire alarm was blaring wildly, hazard lights strobing on either side of him. A dozen people were moving toward the stairwell. Mason joined them, folding the balaclava into a skullcap again. Wondering if there was any chance he could blend into the crowd.

There were at least a hundred more people in the stairwell. Every age, every race, but all with one thing in common: the blind panic of something real. They could all feel it. This was not a fire drill. Somewhere a few

floors above them, these people were stumbling onto the incapacitated marshals, probably causing a new round of panic on top of everything else. But down here on the twentieth floor, it was a simple issue of survival, of getting down the stairs and then out onto the street.

Mason kept up with the throng until he had to stop again for a moment and brace himself against the wall. When an older woman touched his arm and asked if he was all right, he looked away from her and kept moving. The crowd kept growing, as more people streamed off each floor into the stairwell like tributaries into a river, until reaching the ground level and emptying into the lobby.

“There’s an exit directly in front of that doorway.” Quintero’s instructions coming back to him now. “Fifty feet and you’re out.”

Mason hung back, looking through the doorway at the main entrance. A half dozen marshals stood by, not stopping anyone but carefully scanning the face of everyone leaving the building. He saw the marshals stop a man around Mason’s age and size, check him over, then finally let him go.

“If there’s a problem, you have another exit to your right. A hundred feet.”

He looked in that direction, saw another group of marshals watching the other exit.

“Your third choice is the tunnel. But you go down there, you’re out of options.”

Mason looked toward the glass doors leading down to the underground pedestrian walkway, the rat’s maze of tunnels that ran beneath most of the Loop. There was one local cop at the entrance directing people away, back toward the main doors.

“Use the tunnel only if you have no other choice.”

As Mason edged his way out into the lobby, he stayed against the wall until he saw the cop talking to a middle-aged couple. He slipped the balaclava back over his face and moved quickly to the entrance. The cop was turning just as Mason got there and barely got his hands up before Mason hit him with a left cross. Mason stepped over him, swung open the glass door, and went down the stairs to the tunnel.

“Go north. Then west. There are exits on Water Street, Columbus, Stetson.”

Mason’s shoulder was on fire now, and he could hear someone coming down the stairs after him.

“After that, stay left at every intersection. If things get really fucked, find the abandoned tunnel just before Michigan Avenue.”

He was trying hard to keep the map of the tunnels clear in his mind, but his head kept spinning and the map with it.

More voices, pounding footsteps, echoing loudly against the tile walls. Everything looked blue in the harsh artificial lights, cops seemingly everywhere in the maze, as Mason started running, his heart pumping and more blood soaking into his shirt.

I’m lost. I have no fucking idea where I’m—

There!

He saw plywood boards covering the entrance to the old tunnel. There was a door cut into the plywood, kept shut with a padlock. He shot at the lock and missed it the first time, focused his eyes and shot again. Then he pushed the door open and made his way down through the darkness. There was water dripping, rats moving somewhere close to him, the smell of dust from another era. He reached for the stun baton so he could use the flashlight on the end, but it was long gone.

He staggered and tripped his way across the old railroad tracks until he saw a dim light shining up ahead. A city block away, but it looked like a distant star in the sky. The creak of wood behind him, more voices, a thin beam from a flashlight, searching for him.

Mason picked himself up from the ground one more time, saw the light growing brighter, and finally found the wooden stairs leading upward. He made it to the top and put his right shoulder to the wood without thinking about what he was doing, almost passing out as a wave of pain and nausea swept through him. He pushed the door open, the sudden glare from a streetlight almost blinding him.

It was all a blur after that. He made his way down the street, turning away from the sirens and the blinking lights as they went by. He found his car somehow, through muscle memory and sheer guts. Got behind the wheel, turned the ignition, missed one car after another by inches as he pulled out into traffic.

And then he made his biggest mistake of the night.

He headed north.

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