

Prologue

Rage knew that this was the end.

He held the unconscious federal agent in front of him as a shield, his only protection from being shot again. His legs buckled; he felt more unsteady by the second. The remaining armored troopers had moved in, taking positions. He was surrounded.

He turned to see that the large agent had advanced on him as well. This man was the leader, beyond a doubt. Rage looked into his eyes: cold, murderous, clear and blue, like slicks of ice. A flash of familiarity gripped Rage, elusively – then let go before he could understand. They had known each other somewhere, or sometime, before.

The agent smiled malevolently, nodding at him. As if issuing a challenge. Rage somehow knew that taking him out would present his one chance to escape.

He had to do it now, before his consciousness slipped away completely.

Without hesitation, he dropped the agent and leapt forward. In a blinding motion, the enormous man reached out, caught him mid-leap by the neck, and swiftly threw him down to the pavement.

Dazed, head pounding, Rage looked up at the night sky, which faded in and out as a blur of darkness and the faint glow of street lamps. He saw the man appear in his view, staring down from above, then abruptly had the wind knocked out of him as a massive foot planted itself across his chest.

“I’ll gather you’re not used to this,” the man said smugly, leveling the rifle.

The agent fired, and everything went black.

1

Inception

It happened on a Saturday morning, with no warning that it would change their lives forever.

Inside the Edgewater branch of Chicago Savings and Loan, the clock on the wall had just struck nine o'clock. The page-a-day calendar that hung next to it read March 12th. Early spring sunshine had set the bank lobby with a soft, warming glow.

Rage pushed through the front double-doors and entered the teller line. There was only one window open, and he was second in line behind an elderly couple. He'd glanced around to see a young woman had also just walked in, now behind him in line.

Somehow, the sight of this woman got him thinking about her again; how she had died quietly just days before, in her bed just before dawn, her hollow, sad, tired eyes closing for the final time, her soft, wrinkled hand going limp in his, the sun rising empty on the windowsill.

A loud bang echoed through the room as the front doors burst open. Rage looked over to see the first man club the door security guard with the butt-end of a shotgun. The second man fired into the ceiling. Both were wearing black stockings over their heads. Everyone about him scattered to the floor. The first man shouted at the teller to keep her finger off the silent alarm. The second man fired the shotgun again, blowing to bits the teller window next to hers to make the first man's point.

"Everyone on the floor!" the first one shouted, waving his gun. The second man barred the front double doors with a crowbar. "Get *down* I said!" he screamed, shoving one of the bankers to the floor.

Rage crouched down, his eyes moving to the elderly couple, huddled against each other on the floor, both terrified. He swiveled his head back toward the woman, whose eyes met his. Though her dangling auburn hair obscured part of her face, he could see she shared the couple's frightened expression.

He closed his eyes and thought about his gift.

He had used it only once before, years ago. Since then he'd sworn to her he would never use it to harm another.

And this was a public place ... with witnesses ...

No. The thieves would take the money and leave.

It was that simple. It *would* be that simple.

The first robber, the smaller of the two, pushed a large burlap sack across to the teller. "Fill this," he barked, pointing the gun at the terrified woman.

The second robber kept the shotgun pointed at the group, telling everyone to stay calm, stay where they were, and it would all be over in a matter of minutes.

Mira Givens huddled on the lobby's tile floor, too frightened to move. She was starting a new job on Monday, and had only come in to put in a direct deposit slip for her first paycheck. Now she was face down on the floor, while above her men were pointing guns at her and the others around her.

From the floor she saw the black boot of the second robber pivot in her direction. She did not look up but imagined him looking down at her.

She then caught the eye of the man who'd been in front of her in line, and she was briefly struck from the moment. Aside from his rugged features and rumpled hair, his eyes were the blackest, coldest eyes she'd ever seen. Those black eyes locked with hers, then quickly looked away. But in that instant, in those eyes, she felt an odd calm, an inexplicable, momentary reprieve from the dire situation they were all in, as if somehow, everything would be all right.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the black boot tapped her ribcage. "You. Up," the gruff voice came from above.

The usual Saturday morning buzz of Nick's Diner on Chicago's far north side was interrupted by the dispatcher's voice crackling through the portable radio. Seated at the counter, Lawrence Parker took the call. A hostage situation at the Chicago Savings and Loan's Edgewater branch. Negotiators were being called, but since he and his partner Gino were closest to the scene, they set down their forks, flipped a pair of ten-dollar bills on the counter, and headed out the front door toward their squad car.

Hopping into the passenger seat, Larry called in the response to dispatch, his heart hammering behind the Kevlar vest as it began to sink in. His ten years on the force had exposed him to more shootouts, robberies, and drug busts than he'd cared to count. But this was different. Janna had been lost in a hostage standoff four years ago. Two bastards, two guns. Two seven-year-old sons left without a mother, a husband without a wife.

As the cruiser sped eastbound, he felt his head begin to pound.

Gino Urrutia had been Larry's partner since his rookie days. "Hey," he said, glancing over at Larry from behind the wheel. "Gonna be fine. Standard procedure. Hold 'em there 'til the negotiators arrive. They'll find out what

these shitheads want, they free the hostages, we nail ‘em. You know the drill. Just follow my lead, okay?”

Larry looked out the window at the streets moving by in a blur. “Everything’s cool,” he said under his breath.

As the frantic teller pulled the stacks of bills from the drawers and dropped them in the smaller man’s burlap sack, the large man kept one eye on Rage and the others.

The teller’s drawers empty, the small man took the sack from the counter and moved toward his accomplice. At this, the large man grabbed the young woman’s arm and pulled her up to him. “Gimme your purse. Now,” he said to her, then addressed everyone else. “That goes for all o’you. Take ‘em out, put ‘em on the floor. Do it now.”

Face to face with the large robber, her right wrist being held tightly, Mira handed her handbag to the man, who tossed it into the burlap sack. The small one picked up the wallets, purses, and handbags the others had laid on the floor.

The large man eyed Mira, a smile coming to his face. “Lucky for you we ain’t got room for ya in the bag,” he sneered.

The small man folded up the sack and took it under his arm, still pointing the shotgun, and nodded to his partner. As the two men made their way toward the front doors, a screech of tires came from the front parking lot.

“Son of a bitch, the cops!” the small man roared.

Outside, Larry and Gino took up positions behind the squad car. Through tinted bank windows and glaring morning sun, he made out about nine or ten figures inside. Larry radioed in for backup, ordering units to every possible exit. The hostage negotiators would be arriving any second.

Inside the lobby, the small robber barked to his partner, “We gotta get outta here before they surround us. We need leverage. Take the broad and head for the back.”

Cocking the shotgun, the large robber pulled Mira tight. “Looks like you’ll be comin’ with us, after all.”

At this Rage stood up and grabbed the large man’s forearm. “If you’re gonna take someone, take me.”

BANG. The shotgun went off. Startled by Rage's sudden move, the large man had fired it inadvertently, right into Rage's stomach. The lobby seemed to freeze in time. Rage fell backward. The teller screamed. The elderly woman fainted.

"Shit!" yelled the small man. "Head for the back, now!"

The large man pulled Mira, squeezing her under her right arm, overpowering her struggles. They made their way toward the rear exit as more sirens approached outside.

Outside, Larry heard the gunfire erupt inside the bank. Signaling to Gino, he rushed toward the back entrance, taking cover at the alley's edge.

The emergency exit door boomed open, and two men with black stockings over their heads emerged, the second much taller than the first. Both were armed. Larry pivoted into the alley entrance, his revolver pointed directly at them.

"Freeze!" he screamed at the two men.

Larry saw the young woman being held under the large man's arm.

"Drop your guns, and let the woman go," he ordered them.

Without warning the small man pointed the gun at Larry and fired. From out of nowhere a third man appeared between Larry and the robber, taking the shotgun blast in his right shoulder. In one blinding motion, the newcomer ripped the gun from the small man's hand then spun into a kick that connected with the large man's jaw. Larry could hear the sickening crunch as the jawbone shattered. Completing his full spin, he rounded up on the small man and punched him square in the chest, sending him flying into a brick wall. As the large man fell, he turned back to pull the woman free while kicking the shotgun from the robber's limp hand.

Larry stood there, thunderstruck. His gun was still pointed at the spot where the two bank robbers once stood, both now lying unconscious on the worn pavement. The intervener set the stunned woman down near the alley wall.

The man, maybe mid-twenties, was wearing a black t-shirt and torn jeans. Both his right shoulder and lower abdomen were bleeding, as if he'd been shot moments before also. He wore a shocked expression, but showed not even the slightest sign of pain. He was maybe five-foot-six, with matted black hair. He looked down at the two unconscious bank robbers, then over to Larry, as if analyzing whether Larry would become a threat himself. He took up the burlap sack and pulled out what looked to be a wallet, then tossed the sack in Larry's direction. Then, before Larry could utter a word, the man leapt all the way up onto the adjacent building's roof, and was gone.

2

Asset One

Along the unlit suburban streets of Washington, D.C., all was still. A soft night wind whispered through ancient trees.

The deep, precise hum of an engine gradually broke the silence, gaining volume as it drew nearer. Headlights came into view, their bright beams cutting forth through the darkness.

The red Lamborghini Murcielago rounded the corner onto 16th Street. It was headed toward Washington's affluent Fortuna Estates district. It moved along streets lined with ancient maples and oaks, and perennial flora adorning the high red brick curb lines. Street lights illuminated the silky curves of the exotic sports car as it downshifted into second gear, making its turn onto South Hillside Avenue. A tall, black wrought iron fence ran along the front of the estate. It took up the entire first block of South Hillside: a clear partition from the rest of the already exclusive neighborhood.

The car approached the front entrance. A tiny infrared security badge on the upper left edge of the windshield triggered the front gates to open, permitting the vehicle to pass through to the estate grounds.

The car downshifted into first gear, navigating the winding driveway, passing a vast expanse of lush landscaping. Groves of imported trees and shrubs, rare plants in full bloom mixed in with verdant floral gardens, stretched from either side of the paved path. A small driving range was flanked by tennis courts off to the far right. To the left, a massive, almost castle-like greystone estate house, complete with towering ornate windows, twenty-five foot high pillars along the facade, and gigantic limestone gargoyles at each corner of the roof, loomed forebodingly against the moonlit sky.

The Lamborghini slowed as it arrived at the far set of quadruple garage doors to the side of the house. The infrared trigger once again activated, opening the garage door programmed for that car.

Elias Todd pulled into the rear garages of his expansive home with a shrewd grin on his face. Tonight's job could not have been easier: posing as a waiter at a fundraiser, slipping an undetectable poison pill in an old geezer's drink. The autopsies would show the man had died of a heart attack; no signs

of foul play. All so the man's twenty-something wife could collect more quickly on his billion-dollar estate.

Two hours of work, netting a half-million-dollar payout.

If they could all be that simple, he thought to himself.

It was just before midnight on Monday. He switched off the ignition and climbed out of the Lamborghini, adjusting the cuffs of his black tuxedo as he made his way to the connecting door to his house.

He switched on the light to the large, wrap-around kitchen. Black marble countertops reflected the soft glare from the rows of recessed lighting above. Stained oak cabinets lined each wall surrounding him, stretching up toward the eleven-foot ceiling. He opened his liquor cabinet and poured himself a glass of scotch, walking the glass to the kitchen's large center island and pulling off his bow tie. Taking a sip, he glanced down at the Monday edition of *The Washington Post*, scanning the review of his work from Sunday evening. A foreign dignitary from Ghana, shot in the head. Front page this time.

After scanning his iPhone for after-hours activity on his stocks, Todd downed the rest of the scotch and decided to head off to sleep. Grabbing his tie from the counter, he flipped off the kitchen lights and headed toward the living room stairway.

Rounding the corner into the massive living room, Todd switched on the overhead chandelier light, revealing the twenty men in full-body SWAT gear who'd been waiting for him.

An exceptionally large man, tall and broad-shouldered with thinning, steel-gray hair and a long, visible scar down his right temple, stepped forward and addressed him: "Mr. Todd, we'd like a word with you."

Without hesitation, Todd pulled the automatic pistol from inside his vest and began firing in their direction, then pushed off into a backflip toward the kitchen. He lowered himself into a somersault, using the kitchen counters as cover, and tore the knife rack down off the end counter wall. Popping up from behind the counter, he threw each of the twelve carving knives at his pursuers in rapid succession, then immediately ducked back down. He needed to force them to take cover; give himself time to get to the garage and make his escape. Judging from the screams, he knew he'd connected with at least eight to ten of them.

Staying low, he pushed the door open and rolled backward into the garage, firing a few more rounds into the kitchen before kicking the door shut. In the blackness of the garage he made his way to his industrial tool stand against the near wall. He grabbed it at the corners, heaving it high into the air, lodging it against the door. He switched on the light only to find another group of armored agents surrounding him, all with rifles pointed.

"Drop your weapon. Hands in the air, behind your head," an agent in front ordered him.

Raising his arms slowly, Todd surveyed the situation around him. There were about ten or twelve of them, all armored and heavily armed, complete with night-vision lenses. Even with his unique abilities, escape would be a near impossible task without the element of surprise.

He slowly lowered the automatic pistol, setting it on the garage floor before placing his hands behind his head.

A series of thuds came from behind him: the agents inside the house were trying to force their way through the door from the kitchen. A booming voice called through the door, ordering those in the garage to open it. Two of the men went to shift the tool stand away from the door but were unable to move its six hundred pound mass. Three more agents joined them, and began to slowly push the tool stand off to the side.

Seizing the opening, Todd roundhouse-kicked a rifle from one of the agents' hands, then, grabbing it in mid-air, opened fire on the unit. The agents scrambled for cover, erratically returning fire. The pounding of automatic-machine-gun fire filled the garage.

Suddenly the house door gave way, abruptly smashed open from the other side. The large man appeared in the doorway and immediately fired at Todd three times, connecting twice with Todd's neck, and once with his upper chest.

Todd jerked backward, clutching his neck. He began to feel his consciousness slip away. As his strength left him, the gun slid from his hands and made a flat clack as it hit the floor. He leaned against the car nearest him, trying to keep his balance. Eyes rolling back, he finally dropped to the floor.

Colonel Nolan Hayes did not lower his weapon as he entered the garage. Several of his men lay dead or stunned around the smooth concrete floor, while others cautiously emerged from behind cover of Todd's now bullet-riddled collection of expensive cars.

He looked down at Elias Todd's still body on the floor. "He's definitely one of them," he said quietly to himself, examining the wounds that the three oversized tranquilizer darts had left on Todd's neck and chest.

Hayes turned to his Second Lieutenant. "Contact the Ops group at the Pentagon; let them know Asset One has been secured."

"Right away, sir," the agent replied, then stepped away to make the call.

Hayes then called over to four of his other men. "Clark. Rogers. Assemble the Box and get him inside it immediately. Avin and Worley, watch the subject and keep your firearm pointed at him at all times. If he so much as twitches, put another dart in him."

"Yes, sir," they replied.

Seconds later, Argon Clive, Hayes' Lead Investigator, entered the garage. "Colonel Hayes," he said as he approached him. "I think you'll want

to have a look at his private records. Much of the contents appear to be encoded, but from what I've seen thus far, his history is quite extensive. He also has a large file full of newspaper clippings of assassinations and high-profile hits. From what I'm able to gather, the subject appears to have been a hired killer of some sort."

Glancing around the garage, Hayes pondered this development. "Do a thorough search, then impound all evidence immediately. That information could be useful to us, but it's of secondary importance right now. Ops has already worked out Mr. Todd's "death" for the local authorities and press – but we don't want to leave anything that might lead to a larger investigation at that level. We need this, as well as our other acquisition, to be clean."

"Understood, I'll get my men on it."

As Clive walked away, Nolan Hayes stepped out of the garage and headed down the driveway. His heart rate had begun to pick up; the urge was returning. Glancing behind him cautiously, he strode toward a thicket of trees.

When no one was in view, he rolled up his sleeve. Again looking around him, he dug into a pouch in the side of his belt and drew out a small syringe.

Removing the cap, he took a breath, then plunged the tiny needle into his forearm.