

While investigating the murder of a Navy SEAL, NCIS Agent M. Mason Montrose finds himself dragged into a terrorism plot that will rock the country, from the halls of power on Pennsylvania Avenue to the financial palaces of Wall Street.

broken charm

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# **broken charm**

**a novel**

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**tuesday, september 9**

**1:47am**

**prologue**

**H**e strolled along the broad cobbled walk that made up the frontage of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. Over three months of planning, he traversed this path a thousand times, seeing it at every hour of the day and night, every day of the week. He'd observed the traffic patterns for the tourists and the locals alike, which shops and restaurants were the most popular and when they were the most crowded. He studied all of the approaches and memorized the most expedient paths for egress.

Not that he should need them. If all went according to plan, he would be able to stroll out of town on the broadest of boulevards under the light of the noonday sun. That might be asking for a bit much, though.

Pausing, he turned in place, drinking in the details of the landscape that surrounded him, from the lights of the Maryland Science Center to the spotlights shining on the USS Constellation, moored in place across from the old maritime museum. It was a nice little stretch of real estate. Down right cheerful under the summer sun. That, of course, would be changing in the very near future. Cheerful was packing its bags, fixing to board the next train out of Charm City while Depressing was locked and loaded, and looking to rain ugly on this part of town. Over the past several years, the city fathers had invested several tens of millions of dollars in taxpayer revenue in an effort to bring the once bustling Inner Harbor area back to life; raising it from a death of neglect, waste, and crime. They'd done a masterful job creating an oasis that drew the tourists and their money back to the city's center.

Federal funds would be earmarked once this area was designated a federal disaster area. Sites of national tragedy that tugged at the collective heartstrings of the populous had a way of getting the dollars needed to rebuild.

There would definitely be cause to rebuild.

The unrelenting pressure of time urged him back into motion. A million things needed doing, with at least double that number that could go wrong. Ironically, he might feel better about the entire situation if some untoward incident did unfold to foil the operation, despite his best efforts. Even as he thought it, he chased the insubordinate musings from his head.

He was a gun for hire, paid vast sums of money to hunt hard targets on battlefields in every corner of the world; from glass high rises in foreign

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capitals to filthy dives in backwater provinces. In every case, the contract defined the target and the battlefield, but only after it was accepted. The terms were never a negotiation and once accepted, the contract had to be fulfilled. That said, despite his proclivities for creating mayhem, he was still a fairly patriotic individual who was having a hard time reconciling an act like this on his home soil.

No. His team would complete the contract as they had a hundred times before. Plan and execute, leaving a trail of bodies and unanswered questions in their collective wake as they moved on to the next operation, no finish line in sight. That was the cruel joke of it all, the one-liner that made the devil chuckle and twist the ends of his perfectly trimmed black moustache.

This game had no finish line.

It ended in death.

One hundred percent of the time.

He fantasized sometimes about settling down, living a quiet life. Okay, maybe not a quiet life, but one that allowed him to enjoy the fruits of his labors. He could retire while he was still young; live the remainder of his life in blissful debauchery. He had more than enough money to live like a rock star for the next hundred years. But that was just a daydream. He was addicted to the adrenaline, addicted to the thrill of being one of the masters of the universe. Laws and rules applied only as far as they hindered his forward progress, but nothing bound him or his activities. He knew in his heart of hearts that no matter his day dreams and passing fancies, until the day the Reaper came knocking on his door, there would always be another campaign to wage, another mission to complete. People, after all, were only human and sometimes they needed killing.

Thinning the herd was an honorable and necessary enterprise.

He mounted the steps and passed the fountain, heading towards the busy thoroughfare that was Pratt Street. Even at this hour, with a majority of the restaurants and shops closed and bars announcing last call, traffic flowed steadily down the four-lane road. He stopped at the corner, trying to remember where in the hell he'd parked his car. He was slipping. All those memorized routes weren't going to do him a bit of good if he couldn't find his wheels. To his right stood ESPN Zone and the entrance to Little Italy, to his left was the convention center and Camden Yards, and in front of him stood a closed down set of office buildings with an adjoining public garage.

ESPN Zone. Parked next to a sunshine yellow Corvette Stingray. How could he have possibly forgotten that? Lack of sleep was a possibility. Well tonight wouldn't be any kind of help in that department. His feet started

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to steer him towards his car and the possibility of a catnap but he stopped himself at the last second.

Shuffling footsteps behind him, hushed voices full of criminal intent barely reached his ears over the traffic. He smiled ever so slightly. They were still there; the tall wiry kid with the baggy pants and long dreadlocks, the thick one in the oversized Wizards home jersey, and the squirrely looking character wearing a collection of thumb thick gold chains that would have done Mr. T proud. They'd been shadowing him for the better part of fifteen minutes now.

He looked down at his watch, certain that he had plenty of time to kill. Well, maybe not plenty of time. He had places to be and people to see.

The equipment was already loaded, which was good, but the drive was going to take better than an hour. And he always got lost heading into DC. Definitely not plenty of time, but maybe just enough. Better to stop dicking around and just get it on.

He stepped off the curb and headed for the darkened garage.

As his foot hit the asphalt, the voice of his unarmed combat instructor boomed out from the dark recesses of distant memory, gravelly, harsh, and sounding so much like the script out of some straight-to-video waste of celluloid that he almost laughed. The chuckle may have passed his lips had that thick New York accent not haunted his dreams for years following his advanced assault training. Gunnery Sergeant Rimer, while he was still drawing breath, proved himself to be one of the most brutal human beings ever to stride the face of the planet. He seemed to take great pride in turning his students into hyper-capable killing machines and more than a little pleasure in demonstrating their weaknesses. Long story short, the man was a beast who made every one of his students' lives a living hell for the duration of their six months at the Advanced Combat School tucked comfortably back into the foothills of North Carolina.

"When outnumbered by skilled opponents, more times than not, you will lose. As the number of opponents you face grows, your odds of surviving the fight fall geometrically and the skill level of the opposing fighters becomes less and less of a factor."

Skill wasn't going to be a factor here. These guys might as well be wearing clown shoes and big red noses for all the stealth they were displaying. Besides, this was just foreplay for the big game, a little something to take the edge off. The real hunt was a few hours and half a state away versus an individual far more dangerous than these wanna-be gangsters ever dreamt of being.

The voice in his head droned on. “There are only three ‘musts’ to surviving. You must remain calm and keep your head about you. Not only will this allow you to slow things down, it unnerves your opponents and makes them think you know something they don’t. If they are thinking, they aren’t kicking your ass.”

Don’t panic – check.

“Second - you must strike first. They aren’t expecting it. So as you stand there bedazzling them with your unearthly calm, size them up. Pick your victim. Know your primary and secondary moves. When you strike, be fast and brutal. Completely disable your primary opponent so that you can turn and face the remainder, ready to take down the next guy in line. If calm unnerved them, watching one of their buddies roll around on the ground in a pool of their own blood may well massage a few bladders.”

Do enough damage to the kid with the chains that the other two wet themselves – check.

“Third - you must keep your feet. This is not a grappler’s fight; it is a numbers game. If you lose your feet, you have lost the fight. Create distance. Close and clear, always moving away from the fallen. The alternative is becoming one yourself.”

Try not to trip over anyone – check.

He completed his mental checklist, nodding with each point as though he was standing there on the practice mats in the gymnasium waiting for the sparring to begin. But the days of training were a lifetime away. The mats were gone, replaced by the oil stained cement floor of the nearly empty parking garage; the lines of nervous soldiers in ill-fitting camouflage pants and muddy brown t-shirts dwindled down to the three colorfully garbed hoodlums behind him. Class had long since been dismissed.

A tune up would do him some good. Combat-tested and hardened Navy SEALs were no joke. They were hard to track and harder to kill. Much easier and safer to drop them at a distance, but the setup required that this be an up-close-and-personal job; the type from which one rarely walked away unscathed. Hell, it was more the type from which one rarely walked away.

As much as his nerves bristled at the thought of the act, he wasn’t overly excited about committing it. He’d come to like young Petty Officer Houlihan. If only the kid didn’t have such a Boy Scout complex. If only he hadn’t tried to sell them all down the river.

If only...

But Boy Scout he was and sell out he did and now the powers that be had green-lighted him for execution. In exactly two hours and thirty-seven

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minutes, Petty Officer Eoghan Houlihan would be the memory that initiated the operation in earnest.

The only thing standing in the way of progress now was the trio of soon-to-be-dead lightweight hustlers trying to sneak through the echo inducing emptiness of the parking structure.

Darwin was not on their side.

**tuesday, september 9**  
**chapter one**

“ . . . and the story is still developing. What we have so far is that the police are reporting a brutal triple homicide in the Inner Harbor early this morning. With details still coming in, there is speculation that the multiple murder, which puts the city at two hundred forty two deaths this year and well on its way towards breaking the three hundred mark for the second year in a row, is gang related. The Police Commissioner will be holding a press conference at eight thirty this morning. In other news this morning, we will be speaking with Mr. Josh Anderson of Anderson/Clayton Investment Group at the top of the hour about the record climb in the market, which has been on fire all summer long. Speaking of being on fire, let’s go over to Stu Waterman in our weather center. Stu, does it look like we’re going to get any relief from this heat?”

Special Agent M. Mason Montrose sped through the building pre-dawn traffic on the Wilson Bridge, a little slice of hell for the poor souls that traversed its persistently congested span on their daily commute. Mason was struck by how many of these early mornings he was having as of late. Why did criminals always feel the need to commit their crimes in the wee hours of the morning? Why couldn’t they decide on a nice mid-afternoon terror spree, something that wouldn’t drag him from the comfortable depths of his bed hours before the sun came up?

Perhaps they were trying to avoid the heat of the day. Made sense. It’d been an inordinately hot summer. The glowing digital numbers of the dashboard clock showed five thirty three in the morning and already ice cold air blasted in the cockpit of the steel gray Infiniti SUV. Stu the weatherman cheerfully claimed that record-breaking heat was on the horizon, so everyone awake and listening at this unmentionable hour should try to keep cool. Apparently, Stu the weatherman was a master of the obvious. The sun had yet to break the horizon and the air was already thick and hot; dead air that coats the skin with oily sweat at the slightest hint of physical exertion. Not quite Africa hot but more than oppressive enough to make one seek out the air-conditioned climes offered up by malls and movie theaters. Not that Mason wanted to spend his day wiling away hours in the sterile, repetitive confines of Annapolis Mall, but sweltering crime scenes held very little in the way of appeal.

Especially considering the mood he was in. Or more precisely, considering the mood his lovely bride to be, the venerable Ms. Delaney

Somers, had put him in. There was nothing in the world more invigorating than an early morning argument, especially when one had no idea why he was arguing in the first place.

*"If you don't know why I'm upset, I'm certainly not going to tell you!"* Mason said in a nasal mockery of his fiancée's voice. The script seldom, if ever, changed. He was either supposed to be an empath or a mind reader, he could never figure out which. Not that it mattered because he was neither. And she was never pissed off, never angry, just upset. "If I knew why the hell you were mad at me, I wouldn't be asking!"

For some reason he felt the compulsion to continue the dispute, despite the fact that he'd already lost resoundingly. The only reason he was even close to presenting a winning case now was that Delaney was still home in bed, or at least he assumed as much, while he was hightailing it to work. Had she pursued another vocation, she would have set the legal world on fire, destroying courtrooms as a defense attorney. Instead, she worked in a flower shop, spending her days arranging bouquets and gift baskets. God given talent squandered as far as he was concerned. Somewhere out there, a crime lord was weeping his eyes out, languishing behind bars but for her choice in careers.

Music broke through the angry silence of the car, the ringtone he'd downloaded the night before, a catchy little ditty by some one-hit wonder, alarming loud. Not really wanting to answer, but knowing that it was inevitable, he let the tune play out for a few extra beats before grabbing the phone, flipping it open and pressing on the speaker button.

"Montrose here."

"Morning, sunshine."

Mason could feel the heat run up the back of his neck and color his face. The phone had to have been off in order to ring, so she couldn't have heard all the choice things he'd been saying throughout his commute. If she'd heard any of it, he was sure that some cosmic bell would already be ringing the start of round two.

"I thought you went back to bed." He tried to sound nonchalant, as though the morning, and the brawl that started it off, had never occurred – that all was as it should be.

"Yeah, well," she started. He could hear the embarrassment in her voice. "I don't know; this morning was kinda over the top."

Mason nodded his ascent. It had been a little over the top. Like squirrel hunting with a ten gauge shotgun was a little over the top. Hearing her admit that, though, hearing the fragile tone in her voice, doused his anger.

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The girl could be terminally frustrating, but he'd yet to find a way to stay mad at her. He could picture her lying there on their shared king size bed, short black hair an absolute disaster, the phone nestled up against her ear. She'd worn his old soccer jersey to bed last night, red and black with OUTLAWS scrawled across the front. Mason loved her in that jersey. The V-neck let him see her breasts when she bent over. He was fairly confident that was the reason she wore it so often, a fact she vehemently denied.

Why had he been mad at her again?

"You there, Mason?" she asked.

He was suddenly uncomfortable. The scar across his abdomen burned, making him shift in his seat. Ugly thoughts ran through his mind, making good the promise of Malloch Farmer one more time. Mason winced, pulling at the seat belt as if that would help.

"You know, making up is the best part - over the top this morning means over the top tonight."

"Is that all you think about?" she asked incredulously.

"Better get your rest."

"You are a hopeless pervert."

"And you wouldn't have me any other way," he added. "Look, I'm almost to the site. I'll call you later, all right?"

"Sounds good to me," she replied, relief obvious in her voice now. "Love you, Mason."

He smiled through the pain in his stomach. She did love him. As lopsided a couple as they were, she was all about him.

"Bye, beautiful."

He closed the phone and slid it back into its sleeve as Headquarters, Naval District Washington hove into view. It was time to go to work.

## **chapter two**

Mason scanned the scene unhappily. It was lit up like a Hollywood premier, massive stand lamps burning through the way too early morning darkness, lending the entire scene all the ambience of an overexposed photograph. About a hundred people, the majority wearing the bright summer white uniforms of Navy enlisted, stood gathered around the yellow-taped perimeter. Mason wasn't exactly sure what all of them were doing here at this ungodly hour. He could see Dr. Antoine Kelbin and the Crime Scene Unit he led continually telling people to stay back behind the barrier. Mason was worried that too many feet had already been there, wandered through the field of evidence, unwitting accomplices to the destruction and theft of possibly bankable evidence. A lot of actionable evidence, little things like slivers of glass or pieces of paper, even bullet casings, wandered away from crime scenes stuck to or in the bottoms of some curious onlooker's shoe.

Navy Shore Patrol weren't exactly the most nimble of cats when it came to establishing a perimeter. It was generally a fifty/fifty shot, depending heavily on the experience level of the resident Chief Master at Arms. Master Chief Caleb Price was the CMAA for the headquarters buildings. No slouch by any definition, Master Chief Price ran a tight crew of Sailors. He would be pissed if he saw the circus playing out around this scene.

There was no helping that now; he just had to hope that Dr. Kelbin's crime scene team had arrived early enough to salvage something of value.

He approached the yellow tape, holding up his gold badge to prevent any questions of access or authority. Dr. Kelbin met him as he ducked under the bright yellow tape.

"You look like a sack of smashed assholes this morning, Marion."

Mason shot Dr. Kelbin a warning glare. The M. in M. Mason Montrose stood for Marion - a name whose origins were unknown to him and which he detested more than life itself. The unfortunate moniker did not hale from family, no other Marions had fallen from the Montrose tree, male or female. Had his father, strongly named Jefferson Montrose, not been killed by a drunk driver when Mason was only six years old, there would have been some words between them. His mother contributed nothing to the defense of the selection, placing the blame squarely at his deceased father's feet, though Mason had his suspicions. When pressed, she would offer up the fact that, 'Marion is a lovely name.'

Mason didn't find that opinion the least bit comforting.

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He found Dr. Kelbin's knowledge of his given name even less comforting.

Mason shrugged. "It's Mason, cock."

Dr. Kelbin half grinned at him. "Where's your girlfriend?"

"I'm sure he's on his way. I'll let you ask him all about it when he gets here. I'd get a stretch in before you ask. I'd hate it if you pulled something when he shoves your head up your ass."

Dr. Kelbin laughed aloud. "He really isn't a morning person, is he?"

Mason shook his head and looked down at his watch. There was a lot to be done. Grimes said he was leaving some thirty minutes ago. It shouldn't be long but the big man would just have to catch up.

"So, what are we looking at?" Mason asked the criminalist.

"A couple of things. Probably most prominent on that list is the very dead Hull Technician First Class Eoghan Houlihan. It was on his ID card." He gestured in the direction they were headed, into the line of cars.

As they continued forward, Mason looked around. The guard shack was some seventy-five yards behind him. The headquarters building rose up out of the asphalt, five stories of red brick and single pane glass, the door only about thirty feet from the closest of the cars. Three stories up, a small black surveillance camera swept over the busy parking lot. There would be others; the entire perimeter would be covered by surveillance. The gate should have its own set of cameras. He would have to get a look at those tapes.

Within a couple of seconds, they reached the body. Mason gazed down at a young male that looked every bit as Irish as his name indicated; a pale face with a sprinkle of freckles splayed over the bridge of the nose, capped with a crown of close-cropped carrot orange hair. The throat was one big gaping wound overflowing with bloody foam. A single slice that looked to go all the way to the bone. There were definitely better ways to go.

Mason could think of about fifty right off the top of his head.

"It was a brutal attack," Dr. Kelbin continued. "The young Petty Officer was incapacitated with a taser and our unsub tried to saw his head off. We've got arterial spray all over both of those cars."

They both leaned over the body, careful not to step in the blood that had pooled around it. The average adult body holds some ten to twelve pints of blood. The unfortunate Petty Officer Houlihan looked to have spilt at least twice that much.

"He was, what, about two hundred, two hundred and fifty feet away from armed Marines? Why the hell didn't he call out for help?" Mason asked.

Dr. Kelbin pointed to the garish crimson stripe that bisected Petty Officer Houlihan's thick neck. "Never had the chance. Our unsub went deep, straight through the windpipe. The vic had no chance to yell. His jugular was severed. I'd bet your paycheck that the carotid artery was severed as well. The only noise this kid was making was the gurgling sound of blood pouring down into his lungs while he bled out. If he hadn't bled out, he'd have drowned."

Mason stood and took a step back, trying to drink in the entire scene. Petty Officer Houlihan was lying on his back, head towards the headquarters building. His arms were down by his sides and his legs were straight, almost as though someone had laid him out; tidied up after the act. The clothing, which was soaked with blood, was otherwise undisturbed. The victim's build was muscular, athletic muscle vice bulky muscle. His hands were thick and calloused, with little white scars crisscrossing his knuckles. They looked like a mechanic's hands, minus the black stains of engine grease.

"Was this how the body was found?"

Dr. Kelbin shot him a dirty look.

"Just asking," Mason said defensively. "You notice the hands?"

"No defensive wounds. Not even a bruise."

Mason nodded in ascent. This kid looked to be in great shape. There should be signs of a struggle, something to show that the young Sailor fought back, tried to defend himself. Instead, it looked like he'd lain down in the parking lot and fallen asleep. It didn't fit.

"You said he was hit by a taser?" Mason asked.

"Could be your big break. Scott found residue over there, deeper into the cars," Dr. Kelbin said, pointing back over the body. The good doctor stood there with an expectant look on his face, as though he was waiting for Mason to ask how taser residue could be a big break. Mason already knew, and so wasn't going to give Dr. Kelbin the satisfaction.

Pretty much everyone in law enforcement knew. Every CO2 cartridge used in a taser was loaded with dozens of brightly colored discs marked with the cartridge's serial number. The law required that every single cartridge sold legally be registered so that if police found the residue at a crime scene, not unlike the one Mason was standing in, they would be able to trace it back to the person that originally purchased the cartridge. It was a safeguard the industry placed on itself to prevent their non-lethal weapons from becoming a weapon of choice for criminals.

Apparently their unsub wasn't aware of that little piece of weapons trivia. Either that or he simply wasn't impressed by it.

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Mason pulled out a digital recorder and stepped around the car to the left of the victim, stepping carefully to avoid the blood on the ground. He reached the spot that was marked as the discovery point for the taser residue and pressed the record button.

“Our unsub was lying in wait. He knew when the victim was going to be here. He hid here behind one of these cars and pounced once the vic had passed by. Speaking of which, have we figured out which vehicle belonged to our victim?”

Dr. Kelbin shook his head no. Mason decided to wing it, knowing where the attack took place, he would guestimate the rest and see how the evidence either proved or disproved his theory.

“So our unsub lets Houlihan go by and then shoots him in the back with the taser, incapacitating him. When the victim hits his knees, the unsub comes in from behind and slices the throat with one swipe. Being attacked from behind and incapacitated would explain the lack of defensive wounds - there was no time to mount a defense.”

Mason paused for a second, another thought jumping into his brain.

“This was an act of necessity, not of anger.”

Dr. Kelbin looked at him, eyebrow arched.

“The change in body position. If he got hit from behind, the body would be laying face down, arms splayed. But it’s not face down, the arms and legs aren’t splayed. This body was laid to rest. Someone took a huge risk here, waiting around until Houlihan was too far gone to do anything about it and then changing the body’s position to one of repose vice violence. Whoever killed Petty Officer Houlihan liked him.”

“I think that will be the title of my next album - ‘whoever killed Petty Officer Houlihan liked him’,” Dr. Kelbin said dryly. “The guy, and I am assuming that our unsub is a guy here, just about decapitated the boy. Perhaps ‘like’ is too strong of a word in this instance.”

Mason felt the blood rise in his cheeks, slight embarrassment that broke his train of thought. “You know what I mean. He obviously didn’t like him enough to not kill him, but it doesn’t change the fact that our unsub knew the victim well enough to not want to leave him crumpled up face down in the parking lot.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

Mason hated the horrors that sounded reasonable in this job. He just nodded his head in assent. “How long before I get some actionable intell off that taser residue?”

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“I think we should have something for you as soon as we get the stuff back to the lab. We’re about finished up here, so maybe an hour. Two tops.”

Mason gave him another nod. There was a lot to be done before he could act on anything new. He had to find Petty Officer Houlihan’s vehicle. He had to talk to the Chief Master-at-Arms, Master Chief Price, about getting a hold of the security tapes. He had to map and photograph the scene. Oh, and he had to figure out what in the hell Petty Officer Houlihan was doing at the Headquarters Building at the Washington Naval Yard at 0430.

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