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Opening Extract from...

Simple Genius

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simple genius

1

There are four acknowledged ways of meeting your maker: You can die by natural causes including illness; you can die by accident; you can die by another's hand; and you can die by your own hand. However, if you live in Washington, D.C., there is a fifth way of kicking the bucket: the political death. It can spring from many sources: frolicking in a public fountain with an exotic dancer who is not your wife; stuffing bags of money in your pants when the payer unfortunately happens to be the FBI; or covering up a bungled burglary when you call 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue home.

Michelle Maxwell was currently stalking the pavement in the nation's capital, but because she wasn't a politician, that fifth choice of mortal exit was not available to her. In fact, the lady was focused only on getting so wasted she'd wake up the next morning with a chunk of her memory gone. There was much she wanted to forget; much that she *had* to forget.

Michelle crossed the street, pushed open the bullet-pocked door of the bar and stepped inside. The smoke hit her first, some of it actually from cigarettes. The

other aromas were rising off substances that kept the DEA jacked up and in business.

Brain-piercing music crushed all other sounds and would provide an army of hearing specialists with lucrative business in a few years. While glasses and bottles clinked, a trio of ladies ground it out on the dance floor. Meanwhile, a pair of waitresses juggled trays and bad attitudes, all the while prepared to slug anyone attempting to grab their ass.

The bar's collective attention turned to Michelle, the only WASP in the house this or probably any other night. She looked back at them with enough defiance that they returned to their drinks and talk. That status could change because Michelle Maxwell was tall and very attractive. What they didn't realize was that she could be nearly as dangerous as a bomb-wrapped terrorist and was looking for any reason to put her foot through someone's front teeth.

Michelle found a corner table in the back and wedged in, nursing her first drink of the night. An hour and more drinks later, the woman's rage began to swell. Her pupils seemed to grow dry and harden, while the rest of the eyeball eased to a blood red. She lifted a finger at the passing waitress who satisfied her thirst one last time. Now all Michelle wanted was a target for the fury that had laid claim to every square inch of her.

She swallowed the last drop of alcohol, stood and whipped her long dark hair out of her face. Michelle's

gaze zoned the room grid-by-grid looking for the lucky one. It was a technique the Secret Service had pounded into her head until that instinct of observation became the only way she could look at anything or anyone ever again.

It didn't take long for Michelle to find the man of her crystallizing nightmare. He was easily a head taller than anyone else in the place. And that head was chocolate brown, bald and beautifully smooth with a column of gold rings stacked in each thick earlobe. His shoulders spanned about a mile. He wore baggie camouflage pants, black military boots and an Army green shirt that showed bare arms full of knotted muscles. He stood there sipping his beer, swaying that big head to the beat of the music, mouthing trash lyrics it was impossible even to hear. Definitely her kind of guy.

Michelle shoved aside a man who stepped in front of her, walked up to this living mountain and tapped him on the shoulder. It felt like she was touching a block of granite; he would do very nicely. Tonight, Michelle Maxwell was going to kill a man. This man, in fact.

He turned, slipped the cigarette from his lips and took a swig of beer, the mug barely visible in his bear paw of a hand.

Size did matter, she reminded herself.

"What's up, baby?" he said, idly blowing a smoke ring to the ceiling and taking his gaze off her.

Wrong move, baby. Her foot connected with his chin, and he staggered backward, knocking down two smaller men. The impact sent a shock wave of pain from Michelle's toes to her pelvis, so hard was his chin.

He tossed the mug at her; it missed, but her slashing front kick didn't. He bent over as air was torn from his gut. Michelle next slammed a vicious kick to his skull with such force she could almost hear his vertebrae screaming over the apocalypse of the music. He fell back, one hand pressed against his bloody head, eyes wide in panic at her raw power, at her speed and precision of attack.

Michelle calmly eyed both sides of his thick, quivering neck. Where to hit now? The trembling jugular? The pencil-thick carotid? Or perhaps the chest cavity, throwing his heartbeat into a fatal misfire? And yet it looked like the fight had gone out of the man.

Come on, big boy, don't disappoint me. I came all this way.

The crowd had cleared back except for one woman who streaked off the dance floor, screaming her man's name. She aimed a meaty fist at Michelle's head, but Michelle deftly sidestepped the charge, grabbed her attacker's arm, bent it behind her and gave her a push. The lady kept right on going, taking down a table and two patrons sitting there.

Michelle turned back to confront the boyfriend, who was doubled over, breathing hard and clutching

his gut. He suddenly made a bull run at her. That charge was halted by a crushing kick to his face, followed by an elbow thudding against his ribs. Michelle finished this off with a neatly executed side-kick that disrupted a good bit of the cartilage in his left knee. Screaming in pain, the big man dropped to the floor. The fight had now turned into a slaughter. The silent crowd took one collective step back, unable to believe David really was kicking the crap out of Goliath.

The bartender had already called the cops. In a place like this, 911 was the only number on the speed dial besides the lawyer's. From the looks of things it was doubtful they would be in time, though.

The big man managed to stand straight up on his one good wheel, blood running down his face. The swells of hatred in his eyes said everything that needed to be said: Either Michelle had to kill him or he was going to kill her.

Michelle had seen that same look on the face of every son of a bitch she had ever kicked the male ego out of and that list was impressively long. She'd never started one of these fights before. They usually resulted from a thick-headed slob hitting on her and not reading the not-so-subtle cues she sent back. Then she would stand up to defend herself and the men would fall down, with an imprint of her boot on their knuckled heads.

The blade whipped at Michelle after being pulled

from the mountain's back pocket. She was disappointed by both the choice of weapon and the feeble thrust. She sent the knife sailing away with a well-aimed kick that broke one of the man's fingers.

He retreated until his back touched the bar. He didn't seem so big now. She was too fast, too skilled, his superior size and muscle were useless.

Michelle knew that with one more shot she could kill him: a snap of the spine, a crushed artery; either way he was six feet under. And from the look on his face, he knew it too. Yes, Michelle could kill him and maybe vanquish the demons inside her.

And that's when something snapped inside Michelle's brain with such ferocity that she almost deposited all the booze in her belly on the heel-scarred floor. For perhaps the first time in years Michelle was seeing things as they were really meant to be seen. It was startling how fast the decision was reached. And once she made it, she did not revisit the issue. She fell back on what had dominated her life: Michelle Maxwell acted on impulse.

He threw a weary punch and Michelle easily sidestepped it. Then she aimed another kick, this time at his groin, but he managed to clamp a big hand on her thigh. Reenergized at having finally seized his elusive quarry, he lifted her up and threw her over the bar and into a shelf of wine and liquor bottles. The crowd, delighted at this change of events, started chanting, "Kill the bitch. Kill the bitch."

The bartender screamed in fury as his inventory spilled over the floor, but he stopped when the big man came over the bar and laid him out with a wicked uppercut. Next, he picked Michelle up and twice slammed her headfirst into the mirror that was hanging over the demolished booze, cracking the glass and maybe her skull too. Still enraged, he drove a massive knee right into her gut, and then threw her to the masses on the other side of the bar. She hit the floor hard and lay there, her face bloody, her body going into spasms.

The crowd jumped back when the big man's size sixteen boots landed next to Michelle's head. He grabbed her by the hair and lifted her straight up, her body dangling like a spent yo-yo. He studied Michelle's limp form, apparently deciding where next to hurt her.

"In the face. In the damn face, Rodney. You mess it up good," screamed his lady, who'd picked herself off the floor and was dabbing at the beer, wine and other crap staining her dress.

Rodney nodded and swung a big fist back.

"Right in the damn face, Rodney!" his lady screamed again.

"Kill the bitch!" barked the crowd a little less enthusiastically, sensing the fight was just about over and they could return to their drinking and smoking.

Michelle's arm moved so fast Rodney didn't even seem to realize he'd been struck in the kidney until

his brain told him he was in awful pain. His scream of fury actually drowned out the music still ripping from the bar's sound system. Then his fist connected to her head, once, knocking a tooth out; and then he hit her again; blood gushed from her nose and mouth. Big Rodney was hauling back for the crusher when the cops kicked down the door, guns out, looking for any reason to start shooting.

Michelle never heard them come in, save her life and then arrest her. Right after the second blow landed she started to fade into unconsciousness and didn't expect to be coming back.

Before she blacked out completely Michelle's final thought was simple: *Goodbye, Sean.*