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Opening Extract from...

Split Second

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Prologue

SEPTEMBER 1996

It only took a split second, although to Secret Service agent Sean King it seemed like the longest split second ever.

They were on the campaign trail at a nondescript hotel meet-and-greet in a place so far out you almost had to use a satellite phone to reach the boonies. Standing behind his protectee, King scanned the crowd while his ear mike buzzed sporadically with unremarkable information. It was muggy in the large room filled with excited people waving "Elect Clyde Ritter" pennants. There were more than a few infants being thrust toward the smiling candidate. King hated this because the babies could so easily shield a gun until it was too late. Yet the little ones just kept coming and Clyde kissed them all, and ulcers seemed to form in King's belly as he observed this potentially dangerous spectacle.

The crowd drew closer, right up to the velvet rope stanchions that had been placed as a line in the sand. In response, King moved closer to Ritter. The palm of his outstretched hand rested lightly on the candidate's sweaty, coatless back, so that he could pull him down in an instant if something happened. He couldn't very well stand in front of the man, for the candidate belonged to the *people.* Ritter's routine never varied: shake hands, wave, smile, nail a sound bite in time for the six o'clock news, then pucker up

and kiss a fat baby. And all the time King silently watched the crowd, keeping his hand on Ritter's soaked shirt and looking for threats.

Someone called out from the rear of the space. Ritter answered the jibe back with his own bit of humor, and the crowd laughed good-naturedly, or at least most did. There were people here who hated Ritter and all he stood for. Faces didn't lie, not for those trained to read them, and King could read a face as well as he could shoot a gun. That's what he spent all his working life doing: reading the hearts and souls of men and women through their eyes, their physical tics.

He keyed on two men in particular, ten feet away, on the right. They looked like potential trouble, although each wore a short-sleeved shirt and tight pants with no place to conceal a weapon, which dropped them several pegs on the danger meter. Assassins tended to favor bulky clothing and small handguns. Still, he mumbled a few words into his mic, telling others of his concern. Then his gaze flitted to the clock on the back of the wall. It was 10:32 in the morning. A few more minutes and they'd be on to the next town, where the handshakes, sound bites, baby kisses and face reading would continue.

King's gaze had turned in the direction of the new sound, and then the new sight, something totally unexpected. Standing facing the crowd and behind the hard-politicking Ritter, he was the only one in the room who could see it. His attention stayed there for one beat, two beats, three beats, far too long. Yet who could blame him for not being able to pull his gaze away from *that*? Everyone, as it turned out, including himself.

King heard the *bang*, like the sound of a dropped book. He could feel the moisture on his hand where it had touched Ritter's back. And now the moisture wasn't just sweat. His hand stung where the slug had come out the body and taken a chunk off his middle fin-

ger before hitting the wall behind him. As Ritter dropped, King felt like a comet flying hell-bent and still taking a billion light-years to get where it's actually going.

Shrieks from the crowd poured out and then seemed to dissolve into one long, soulless moan. Faces stretched into images one only saw in carnival fun houses. Then the blur hit him like the force of an exploding grenade as feet moved and bodies gyrated and the screams came at him from all directions. People pushed, pulled and ducked to get out of the way. He remembered thinking: there's no greater chaos than when swift, violent death knocks on the door of an unsuspecting crowd.

And now presidential candidate Clyde Ritter was lying by his feet on the hardwood floor shot right through the heart. King's gaze left the newly deceased and turned toward the shooter, a tall, handsome man in a tweed jacket and wearing glasses. The killer's Smith & Wesson .44 was still pointing at the spot where Ritter had been standing, as though waiting for the target to get back up so he could be shot all over again. The mass of panicked people held back the guards who were fighting to get through, so that King and the killer were the only ones at the party.

King pointed his pistol at the chest of the assassin. He gave no warning, called out not one constitutional right accorded the assassin under American jurisprudence. His duty now clear, he fired once, and then again, though the first time was enough. It dropped the man right where he stood. The assassin never said a word, as though he'd expected to die for what he'd done, and accepted the terms stoically like a good martyr should. And all martyrs left behind people like King, the ones who were blamed for letting it happen in the first place. Three men had actually died that day, and King had been one of them.

Sean Ignatius King, born August 1, 1960, died September 26, 1996, in a place he'd never even heard of until the final day of his

life. And yet he had it far worse than the others who had fallen. They went tidily into their coffins and were forever mourned by those who loved them—or at least loved what they stood for. The soon-to-be-ex–Secret Service agent King had no such luck. After his death his unlikely burden was to keep right on living.

1

EIGHT YEARS LATER

The motorcade streamed into the tree-shaded parking lot, where it disgorged numerous people who looked hot, tired and genuinely unhappy. The miniature army marched toward the ugly white brick building. The structure had been many things in its time and currently housed a decrepit funeral home that was thriving solely because there was no other such facility within thirty miles and the dead, of course, had to go somewhere. Appropriately somber gentlemen in black suits stood next to hearses of the same color. A few bereaved trickled out the door, sobbing quietly into handkerchiefs. An old man in a tattered suit that was too large for him and wearing a battered, oily Stetson sat on a bench outside the front entrance, whittling. It was just that sort of a place, rural to the hilt, stock car racing and bluegrass ballads forever.

The old fellow looked up curiously as the procession passed by with a tall, distinguished-looking man ceremoniously in the middle. The elderly gent just shook his head and grinned at this spectacle, showing the few tobacco-stained teeth he had left. Then he took a nip of refreshment from a flask pulled from his pocket and returned to his artful wood carving.

The woman, in her early thirties and dressed in a black pantsuit, was in step behind the tall man. In the past her heavy pistol in the

belt holster had scraped uncomfortably against her side, causing a scab. As a solution she'd sewn an extra layer of cloth into her blouses at that spot and learned to live with any lingering irritation. She'd overheard some of her men joke that all female agents should wear double shoulder holsters because it gave them a buxom look without expensive breast enhancement. Yes, testosterone was alive and well in her world.

Secret Service agent Michelle Maxwell was on the extreme fast track. She was not yet at the White House detail, guarding the president of the United States, but she was close. Barely nine years in the Service, and she was already a protection detail leader. Most agents spent a decade in the field doing investigative work before even graduating to protection detail as shift agents, yet Michelle Maxwell was used to getting to places before other folks.

This was her big preview before almost certain reassignment to the White House, and she was worried. This was an unscheduled stop, and that meant no advance team and limited backup. Yet because it was a last-minute change in plan, the plus side was no one could know they were going to be there.

They reached the entrance, and Michelle put a firm hand on the tall man's arm and told him to wait while they scoped things out.

The place was quiet, smelled of death and despair in quiet pockets of misery centered on coffins in each of the viewing rooms. She posted agents at various key points along the man's path: "giving feet" as it was called in Service parlance. Properly done, the simple act of having a professional with a gun and communication capability standing in a doorway could work wonders.

She spoke into her walkie-talkie, and the tall man, John Bruno, was brought in. She led him down the hallway as gazes from the viewing rooms wandered to them. A politician and his entourage on the campaign trail were like a herd of elephants: they could travel nowhere lightly. They stomped the earth until it hurt with the weight of the guards, chiefs of staff, spokespersons, speechwriters,

publicity folks, gofers and others. It was a spectacle that if it didn't make you laugh would at least cause you considerable worry about the future of the country.

John Bruno was running for the office of president of the United States, and he had absolutely no chance of winning. Looking far younger than his fifty-six years, he was an independent candidate who'd used the support of a small but strident percentage of the electorate fed up with just about everything mainstream to qualify for each state's national ballot. Thus, he'd been given Secret Service protection, though not at the staffing level of a bona fide contender. It was Michelle Maxwell's job to keep him alive until the election. She was counting the days.

Bruno was a former iron-balls prosecutor, and he'd made a great number of enemies, only some of whom were currently behind bars. His political planks were fairly simple. He'd tell you he wanted government off the backs of the people and free enterprise to rule. As for the poor and weak, those not up to the task of unfettered competition, well, in all other species the weak died and the strong prevailed, and why should it be any different for us? Largely because of that position, the man had no chance of winning. Although America loved its tough guys, they weren't ready to vote for leaders who exhibited no compassion for the downtrodden and miserable, for on any given day they might constitute a majority.

The trouble started when Bruno entered the room trailed by his chief of staff, two aides, Michelle and three of her men. The widow sitting in front of her husband's coffin looked up sharply. Michelle couldn't see her expression through the veil the woman was wearing but assumed her look was one of surprise at seeing this herd of interlopers invading hallowed ground. The old woman got up and retreated to a corner, visibly shaking.

The candidate whirled on Michelle. "He was a dear friend of mine," Bruno snapped, "and I am not going to parade in with an army. Get out," he added tersely.

"I'll stay," she fired back. "Just me."

He shook his head. They'd had many such standoffs. He knew that his candidacy was a hopeless long shot, and that just made him try even harder. The pace had been brutal, the protection logistics a nightmare.

"No, this is private!" he growled. Bruno looked over at the quivering woman in the corner. "My God, you're scaring her to death. This is repugnant."

Michelle went back one more time to the well. He refused yet again, leading them all out of the room, berating them as he did. What the hell could happen to him in a funeral home? Was the eighty-year-old widow going to jump him? Was the dead man going to come back to life? Michelle sensed that her protectee was really upset because she was costing him valuable campaign time. Yet it wasn't her idea to come here. However, Bruno was in no mood to hear that.

No chance to win, and the man acted like he was king of the hill. Of course, on election day the voters, including Michelle, would kick his butt right out the door.

As a compromise Michelle asked for two minutes to sweep the room. This was granted, and her men moved quickly to do so while she silently fumed, telling herself that she had to save her ammo for the really important battles.

Her men came out 120 seconds later and reported everything okay. Only one door in and out. No windows. Old lady and dead guy the only occupants. It was cool. Not perfect, but okay. Michelle nodded at her candidate. Bruno could have his private face time, and then they could get out of here.

Inside the viewing room, Bruno closed the door behind him and walked over to the open coffin. There was another coffin against the far wall; it was also open, but empty. The deceased's coffin was resting on a raised platform with a white skirting that was surrounded waist-high with an assortment of beautiful flowers. Bruno paid his

respects to the body lying there, murmuring, "So long, Bill," as he turned to the widow, who'd returned to her chair. He knelt in front of her, gently held one of her hands.

"I'm so sorry, Mildred, so very sorry. He was a good man."

The bereaved looked up at him from behind the veil, smiled and then looked down again. Bruno's expression changed and he looked around, though the only other occupant of the room was in no condition to eavesdrop. "Now, you mentioned something else you wanted to talk about. In private."

"Yes," the widow said in a very low voice.

"I'm afraid I don't have much time, Mildred. What is it?"

In answer she placed a hand on his cheek, and then her fingers touched his neck. Bruno grimaced as he felt the sharp prick against his skin, and then he slipped to the floor unconscious.

2

Michelle paced in the hallway, checking her watch and listening to the somber music wafting over the sound system. If you weren't sad, depressed or perhaps even suicidal before coming in here, you would be after five minutes of listening to this brain-numbing tripe, she concluded. She was livid that Bruno had closed the door, but she had let it go. You weren't supposed to let a protectee out of your sight, but the realities of life sometimes trumped the rule book. Still, she looked at one of her men and asked for the fifth time, "You're absolutely sure it's clean?" He nodded.

After waiting a bit more she went over to the door and knocked. "Mr. Bruno? We need to get going, sir." There was no answer, and Michelle let out an inaudible sigh. She knew that the other agents in her detail, all of them her senior in years with the Service, were watching her intently to see how she'd handle herself. Only seven percent of the approximately 2,400 field agents were women, with very few in positions of authority. Yes, it was not easy.

She knocked again. "Sir?" Another few moments passed, and Michelle felt her stomach muscles start to tighten. She tried the doorknob and looked up in disbelief. "It's locked."

Another agent stared at her, equally perplexed. "Well, he must have locked it, then."

"Mr. Bruno, are you all right?" She paused. "Sir, either acknowledge me or we are coming in."

"Just a minute!" That was Bruno's voice; it was unmistakable.

"Okay, sir, but we need to get going."

Two more minutes went by, and she shook her head and knocked on the door again. No response. "Sir, we're already late." She glanced at Bruno's chief of staff, Fred Dickers. "Fred, you care to try?"

Dickers and she had long ago reached a mutual understanding. Basically living together twenty hours a day, the detail leader and chief of staff had to get along, at least mostly, for things to work. They still didn't see eye-to-eye on everything, nor would they ever, but on this issue they were in agreement.

Dickers nodded and called out, "John, it's Fred. We really need to get going. We're way off schedule." He knocked on the door. "John? Do you hear me?"

Again Michelle's stomach muscles tightened. Something wasn't right here. She motioned Dickers away from the door and knocked again. "Mr. Bruno, why did you lock the door, sir?" No answer. A bead of sweat broke on Michelle's forehead. She hesitated for an instant, thinking rapidly, and then suddenly yelled though the door, "Sir, your wife is on the phone. There's been a serious accident involving one of your kids."

The response was chilling.

"Just a minute!"

She barked at the other agents with her, "Take it down. Take it down!"

They put their shoulders to the door, once and then twice, and then it gave way and they swarmed into the room.

A room that was empty except for a dead man.

3

A funeral procession had started off. There were only about a dozen cars in the column as it headed out along the treelined drive. Before the last car disappeared down the road, Michelle and her team had burst out the front door of the funeral home and spread out in all directions.

"Lock this whole area down," she shouted at the agents stationed by Bruno's motorcade. They raced to carry out her orders. She spoke into her walkie-talkie. "I need reinforcements. From where I don't care, just get them. Now! And get the FBI on the horn." Her gaze fixed on the rear end of the last car in the funeral procession. Heads would roll over this. Her head would roll. Right now, though, all she wanted was to get John Bruno back, preferably living.

She saw reporters and photographers pouring out of the media trucks. Despite the nice photo op it would have made and Fred Dickers's entreaties that he should allow it, Bruno had shown some backbone and refused their request to come inside the funeral home. They hadn't taken the news well. Now they were erupting with full journalistic force as they sensed a story of far greater magnitude than a candidate's visit to pay his last respects to an old friend.

Before they could get to her, Michelle grabbed the arm of a uniformed officer who had come running up, apparently awaiting instructions.

"Are you security here?" she asked.

He nodded, his eyes wide, his face pale; he looked like he might either faint or wet his trousers.

She pointed down the road. "Whose funeral procession is that?"

"Harvey Killebrew's; they're taking him to Memorial Gardens."

"I want you to stop it."

The man looked dumbly at her. "Stop it?"

"Somebody has been kidnapped. And that"—she pointed at the procession—"would be a great way to get him out of the area, don't you think?"

"Okay," he said slowly. "Yeah."

"Then I want you to search every vehicle, in particular the hearse. Got it?"

"The hearse? But, ma'am, Harvey's in there."

Michelle looked at his uniform. He was a rent-a-cop, but she didn't have the luxury of being picky. She eyed his name tag and said in a very quiet tone, "Officer Simmons? Officer Simmons, how long have you been . . . uh, in the security business?"

"About a month, ma'am. But I'm weapon-certified. Been hunting since I was eight years old. Shoot the wings off a mosquito."

"That's great." A month. He actually looked greener than that. "Okay, Simmons, listen carefully. My thinking is that the person is probably unconscious. And a hearse would be a great way to transport an unconscious person, don't you agree?" He nodded, apparently finally getting her point. Her face turned to a scowl and her voice to the crack of a pistol. "Now move your ass and stop that procession and search those vehicles."

Simmons went off at a dead run. Michelle ordered several of her men to follow him to oversee and help with the operation and instructed other agents to begin a thorough search of the funeral home. It was just possible that Bruno was hidden somewhere inside. She then pushed her way through the reporters and photographers and set up her command center inside the funeral home. From there she got back on the horn, consulted local maps and coordinated

more efforts, establishing a one-mile perimeter with the funeral home as its center. Then she made the call she didn't want to make but had to. She phoned her superiors and said the words that would forever remain attached to her name and wrecked career at the Secret Service.

"This is Agent Michelle Maxwell, detail leader for John Bruno. I'm reporting that we—that *I've* lost the protectee. Apparently John Bruno has been kidnapped. The search is ongoing, and local law enforcement and the FBI have been contacted." She could feel the ax already descending upon her neck.

She joined her team of men who were tearing the funeral home apart from top to bottom looking for Bruno. Doing all of this without disturbing the crime scene was problematic at best. They couldn't interfere with the investigation to follow, but they had to search for the missing candidate.

Inside the viewing room where Bruno had disappeared, Michelle looked at one of the agents who'd scoped the room out before the candidate entered it. "How the hell could this have happened?" she demanded.

He was a veteran with the Service, a good agent. He shook his head in disbelief. "The place was clean, Mick. Clean."

Michelle often went by "Mick" at work. It made her seem more like one of the boys, which she'd grudgingly conceded was not such a bad thing.

"Did you check out the widow, question her?"

He looked at her skeptically. "What, give an old woman the third degree with her husband lying in a coffin five feet away? We looked in her purse, but I didn't think a body cavity search was really appropriate." He added, "We had two minutes to do it. You tell me anyone who could have done a proper job in two minutes."

Michelle stiffened as the meaning of the man's words became clear. Everyone would be looking to cover his butt and federal pension over this one. Stupid now when you looked at it: giving them

only two minutes. She checked the doorknob. It had been rigged to lock when closed.

A coffin five feet away? She looked over at the copper-colored box. The funeral director was called for. He was paler now than even a mortician should be. Michelle asked him if the body was indeed that of Bill Martin. Yes, the man said.

"And you're sure the woman in here was Martin's widow."

"What woman would that be?" he asked.

"There was a woman dressed all in black, with a veil, sitting in this room."

"I don't know if it was Mrs. Martin or not. I didn't see her come in."

"I'll need Mrs. Martin's phone number. And nobody who works here can leave—not until the FBI has arrived and completed its investigation. Understood?"

If possible, the man grew even paler. "The FBI?"

Michelle dismissed him, and then her gaze fell on the coffin and the floor in front of it. She bent down to pick up some rose petals that had fallen there. As she did so, she was eye level with the skirting that ran around the coffin. She reached over the flowers and carefully drew aside the fabric, exposing wood paneling. Michelle tapped on the wood. It was hollow. Using gloves, she and another agent lifted out one of the wood sections, revealing a space that could easily have concealed someone. Michelle could only shake her head. She'd blown this all around.

One of her men came up to her with a device in a plastic bag. "Some sort of digital recorder," he reported.

"That's how they generated Bruno's voice?" she said.

"Must have gotten a snippet of him from somewhere and used it to keep us at bay while they made their getaway. They must have thought the phrase 'Just a minute' would handle most queries from us. You tripped them up with your remark about Bruno's kids. There must be a wireless bug around here somewhere too."

Michelle read his thoughts. "Because they'd have to be able to hear us to make the recorded voice answer when I called out."

"Right." He pointed at the far wall where a section of the upholstered wall covering had been pulled back. "There's a door there. A passageway runs behind that wall."

"So there's their exit." She handed him the plastic bag. "Put it back exactly where you got it. I don't need a lesson from the FBI on maintaining the integrity of a crime scene."

"There must have been a struggle. I'm surprised we didn't hear anything," said the agent.

"How could we, with that death music bellowing everywhere?" she snapped.

She and the agent went down the passageway. The empty coffin on a rolling table had been left at a doorway here that opened onto the back of the building. They returned to the viewing room, and the funeral home director was called back in and shown the hidden doorway.

He looked perplexed. "I didn't even know that was there."

"What?" Michelle said incredulously.

"We've only been operating this business for a couple of years. That's when the only funeral home in the area went out of business. We couldn't use that building because it had been condemned. This place was a lot of things before it was a funeral home. The current owners did minimal improvements. In fact, these viewing rooms went fairly unchanged. I had no idea there was a door or passageway there."

"Well, somebody certainly did," she said bluntly. "There's a door at the end of that hall that opens to the rear of the building. Are you telling me you didn't know about that either?"

He said, "That part of the facility is used for storage and is accessed by entrances inside the building."

"Did you see any vehicle parked out there earlier?"

"No, but then I don't go around there."

"Anybody else see anything?"

"I'll have to check."

"No, I'll check."

"I can assure you this is a very respectable establishment."

"You have secret hallways and exit doors you know nothing about. Aren't you worried about security?"

He looked at her blankly and then shook his head. "This isn't some big city. There's never any serious crime."

"Well, that streak was just broken. Do you have Mrs. Martin's phone number?"

He handed it over and she was called. There was no answer.

Alone for now, Michelle stood in the middle of the room. All those years of work, all that time proving she could do the job—it was all down the drain. She didn't even have the consolation of having hurled her body in front of a would-be assassin's bullet. Michelle Maxwell was now part of history. And she knew she was also history with the Secret Service. Her career was over.