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Opening Extract from...

Hour Game

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CHAPTER 1

The man in the rain slicker walked slightly bent over, his breathing labored and his body sweaty. The extra weight he was bearing, though not all that substantial, was awkwardly placed, and the terrain was uneven. It was never an easy thing to tote a dead body through the woods in the middle of the night. He shifted the corpse to his left shoulder and trudged on. The soles of his shoes bore no distinguishing marks; not that it would have mattered, since the rain quickly washed away any traces of footprints. He'd checked the forecast; the rain was why he was here. The inclement weather was the best friend he could ask for.

Aside from the dead body draped over his sturdy shoulder, the man was also remarkable for the black hood he wore, on which was stitched an esoteric symbol that ran down the length of the cloth. It was a circle with a crosshairs through its middle. Probably instantly recognizable to anyone over the age of fifty, the logo once inspired a dread that had significantly eroded with time. It didn't matter that no one "alive" would see him wearing the hood; he took grim satisfaction in its lethal symbolism.

Within ten minutes he'd reached the location he'd carefully selected on an earlier visit, and laid the body down with a reverence that belied the violent manner in which the person had died. He took a deep breath and held it as he undid the telephone wire holding the bundle closed, and unwrapped the plastic. She was young with features that had been attractive two days prior; the woman was not much to look at now. The soft blond hair fell away from the greenish-tinged skin, revealing closed eyes and bloated cheeks. Had the eyes been open, they might have still held the startled gaze of the deceased as she endured

her own murder, an experience replicated roughly thirty thousand times each year in America.

He slid the plastic all the way free and laid the woman on her back. Then he let out his breath, fought the urge to retch caused by the stench of the body, and sucked in another lungful of air. Using one of his gloved hands and his light, he searched for and found the small, forked branch that he'd earlier placed in the bramble nearby. He used this to support the woman's forearm, which he'd positioned such that it was pointing to the sky. The body's rigor mortis, though rapidly fading, had made the task difficult, but he was strong and had finally levered the stiffened limb to the correct angle. He took the watch out of his pocket, checked with his flashlight to make sure it was set properly, and placed it around the dead woman's wrist.

Though far from a religious man, he knelt over the body and muttered a brief prayer, cupping his hand over his mouth and nose as he did so.

"You weren't directly responsible, but you were all I had. You didn't die in vain. And I believe you're actually better off." *Did he really believe what he had just said? Maybe not. Maybe it didn't matter.*

He looked at the dead woman's face, studying her features scrupulously as though a scientist observing a particularly fascinating experiment. He had never killed another person before. He'd made it quick and, he hoped, painless. In the dull, misty night the woman seemed surrounded by a yellowish glow, as though she'd already become a spirit.

He drew farther back and examined the area all around, checking for any extraneous items that might lead to evidence against him. He discovered only a piece of cloth from his hood that had caught on a bush near where the body lay. *Careless, you can't afford that.* He placed it in his pocket. He spent several more minutes looking for other such items nearing microscopic size.

In the world of criminal investigation it was these forensic "no-see-ums" that did one in. A single drop of blood, semen or saliva, a smudge of fingerprint, a hair follicle with a bit of DNA-littered root attached, and the police could be reading you your rights while prosecutors circled hungrily nearby. Unfortunately, even full awareness of

that reality offered little protection. Every criminal, no matter how careful, left potentially incriminating material at the crime scene. Thus, he'd taken great care to have no direct physical contact with the dead woman as though she were an infectious agent that could cause a fatal disease.

He rolled up the plastic and pocketed the telephone cord, checked the watch once more and then slowly made his way back to his car.

Behind him lay the dead woman, her hand upraised to the watery heavens. Her watch was slightly luminous in the dark and made a dull beacon for her new resting place. She wouldn't remain undiscovered for long. Dead bodies aboveground rarely did, even in places as isolated as this.

As he drove off, the hooded man used his finger to trace the symbol on his hood, making the sign of the cross at the same time. The crosshairs symbol also appeared on the face of the watch he'd placed on the dead woman's wrist. *That should certainly get a rise out of them.* He took a breath full of excitement as well as dread. For years he had imagined that this day would never come. For years his courage had faltered. Now that the first step had been taken, he felt a great sense of empowerment and liberation.

He shifted into third gear and sped up, his tires grabbing the slicked roadway and holding firm as the darkness swallowed up the lights of his blue VW. He wanted to get to where he was going as fast as possible.

He had a letter to write.

CHAPTER

2

Michelle Maxwell picked up her pace. She'd completed the "flat" portion of her run through the hills around Wrightsburg, Virginia, sequestered southwest of Charlottesville, Virginia; the terrain would now grow much steeper. Maxwell was a former Olympic rower who'd subsequently spent nine intense years in the Secret Service. Consequently, the five-foot-ten-inch woman was in remarkable physical shape. However, an enormous high-pressure system had parked over the entire mid-Atlantic, making this spring day unusually humid, and her muscles and lungs were beginning to strain as she headed up an incline. A quarter of the way through her run she'd put her shoulder-length black hair into a ponytail, though stubborn strands still found their way into her face.

She'd left the Secret Service to start a private investigation firm in this small Virginia town, partnering with another former Secret Service agent, Sean King. King had left the Service under a dark cloud but had become an attorney and forged a new life in Wrightsburg. The two hadn't known each other while working for Uncle Sam; rather, they'd teamed up on a case the previous year while Michelle was still in the Service and King had become embroiled in a series of local murders. After bringing that matter to a successful conclusion and gaining some notoriety in the process Michelle had suggested they start their own firm, and King, somewhat reluctantly, had agreed. With the reputation they'd gained from the previous case, and their skills as investigators, the business had quickly become a success. There had come a lull in the work, though, for which Michelle was grateful. She was an outdoors woman, and she got as much satisfaction out of camping or

running a marathon as she did busting counterfeiters or putting the clamps on a corporate spy.

The woods were quiet save for the rustling branches from a moisture-laden breeze that was conjuring miniature cyclones from last winter's dead leaves. However, the sudden crack of tree branches caught Michelle's attention. She'd been told that the occasional black bear could be spotted around here, but if she did encounter an animal, it was far more likely to be a deer, squirrel or fox. She thought nothing more of it, although she took comfort in the pistol riding in the clip holster attached to her fanny pack belt. As a Secret Service agent she'd never gone anywhere without her gun, not even the toilet. One never knew where a nine-millimeter SIG and fourteen rounds might come in handy.

Moments later another sound caught her attention and kept it: running feet. In her Secret Service days Michelle had heard many types of running feet. Most had been innocuous; others signaled a darker purpose: stealth, attack or panic. She wasn't sure how to classify this one yet: good, bad or out of shape. She slowed her pace a little, using her hand to shield her eyes from the sunlight breaking through the tree canopies. For a few seconds there was dead silence, then the sounds of rushing feet returned, now much closer. Okay, what she was hearing was clearly not the measured pace of a jogger. There was a level of fear in the rushed and unsteady-sounding footfalls. Off to her left now, it seemed, but she couldn't be sure. Sound tended to whipsaw here.

"Hello," she called out, even as her hand reached down and took out her pistol. She didn't expect an answer and didn't get one. She chambered a round but kept the safety on. As with scissors, one should avoid running with a loaded gun while the safety was off. The sounds kept coming; it was human feet certainly. She glanced behind her; this might be a setup. It could be done in pairs: one to draw her attention while the other got the jump on her. Well, if so, they were going to be very sorry they chose to pick on her.

She stopped now as she finally locked on the sound's source: it was to the right, above the knoll directly in front of her. The breathing was accelerated; the rush of legs, the crashing of underbrush, seemed frenetic. In another few seconds whoever it was would have to clear the rim of dirt and rock.

Michelle slipped off her gun's safety and took up position behind a wide oak tree. Hopefully, it was only another jogger, and the person wouldn't even be aware of her armed presence. Dirt and pebbles shot out over the edge of the knoll heralding the arrival of the source of all the commotion. Michelle braced herself, both hands glued around her pistol grips, ready if necessary to put a bullet between someone's pupils.

A young boy burst out from the top of the knoll, was suspended in space for an instant and then with a scream tumbled down the slope. Before he hit bottom another boy, a little older, came into view at the knoll's crest but caught himself in time and merely slid down the slope on his butt, flopping next to his companion.

Michelle would have thought they were just horsing around, except for the look of utter terror etched on both their faces. The younger one was sobbing, his face streaked with dirt and tears. The older boy pulled him up by the scruff of his shirt, and they took off running, both their faces crimson with accelerated blood flow.

Michelle holstered her gun, stepped out from behind the tree and held up her hand. "Boys, stop!"

The pair screamed and shot around on either side of her in a blur. She spun around, grabbed for one but missed. She called after them, "What's wrong? I want to help you!"

For an instant she contemplated sprinting after them, but despite her Olympian background, it wasn't certain she could catch two young boys whose feet were apparently jet-fueled by sheer fright. She turned back around and looked toward the top of the knoll. What could have scared them that badly? She quickly altered her line of thinking. Or *who* could have? She looked once more in the direction of the fleeing boys. Then she turned back and cautiously made her way up in the direction the kids had come from. *Okay, this is getting a little dicey.* She thought about using her cell phone to call for help but decided to check things out first. She didn't want to call the cops in only to discover the boys had been spooked by a bear.

At the top of the knoll she easily found the path the two had used. She slipped through the narrow trail erratically carved by their frantic flight. It ran for about a hundred feet and then opened into a small clearing. From here the path was less certain, but then she spotted

the piece of cloth dangling on the lower branch of a dogwood, and she made her way through this cleft in the forest. Fifty feet later she came to another clearing, this one larger, where a campfire had been doused.

She wondered if the boys *had* been camping here and indeed been frightened by some animal. And yet they'd had no camping gear on them, and there was none here in the clearing. And the fire didn't look all that recent. *No, something else is going on.*

In an instant the direction of the wind changed and drove the smell deep into her nostrils. She gagged, and her eyes assumed their own level of panic. She'd experienced that unmistakable smell before.

It was putrefied flesh. *Human flesh!*

Michelle pulled her tank shirt up and over her mouth and nose, trying to breathe in the stink of her own sweat rather than the rank odor of a decomposing body. She made her way around the perimeter of the clearing. At 120 degrees on her mental compass she found it. Or her. In the brush that ran along the fringe of the clearing the hand was sticking up, like the dead woman was waving hello or in this case good-bye. Even from this distance Michelle could see that the greenish skin on the arm was slipping down off the bone. She scooted around to the upwind side of the body and took a replenishing breath.

She ran her gaze along the corpse but kept her gun ready. Though the stench from the body, its discoloration and the skin slippage showed the woman had been dead for quite some time, it could have been recently dumped here and the killer still nearby. Michelle had no desire to join the lady's fate.

The sun was glinting off something on the woman's wrist. Michelle drew closer and saw that it was a watch. She glanced down at her own watch; it was two-thirty. She sat back on her haunches, her nose cemented into her armpit. She called 911, calmly telling the dispatcher what she'd found and her location. After that she called Sean King.

"Do you recognize her?" he asked.

"I don't think her own mother would know her, Sean."

"I'm on my way. Just stay on your guard. Whoever did it might come back to admire his handiwork. Oh, and Michelle?" said King.

"Yeah?"

"Can't you just start running on a treadmill?"

She clicked off, took up a position as far away from the body as she could while still keeping it in view, and maintained a sharp lookout. The nice day and endorphin-churning run in the beautiful foothills had suddenly taken on a grim veneer.

Funny how murder had a way of doing that.

CHAPTER

3

The small clearing was seeing quite a bit of activity, all of it man-made. A wide area had been cordoned off with yellow police tape intertwined among the trees. A two-person forensics team was foraging for clues directly around the crime scene, analyzing things that seemed far too small to be of any significance. Others hovered over the body of the dead woman, while still others were threading their way through the surrounding woods and underbrush looking for items of interest and possibly the ingress and egress of the killer. One uniformed officer had photographed and then videotaped the entire scene. All the cops wore floater masks to guard against the stench, and yet one by one they took turns hustling into the woods to empty their stomachs.

It all looked very efficient and orderly, but for a seasoned observer it was clearly bad guy one, good guys naught. They were finding zip.

Michelle stood off a ways and watched. Next to her was Sean King, her partner in the private investigation firm of King & Maxwell. King was in his forties, three inches taller than the five-foot-ten Michelle, and had short dark hair graying at the temples. He was trim and broad-shouldered but had gimpy knees and a shoulder that a bullet had ripped into years ago during an arrest that had gone awry while he was working a forgery investigation as a Secret Service agent. He'd also once been a volunteer deputy police officer for Wrightsburg but had resigned, swearing off guns and law enforcement for the rest of his days.

Sean King had suffered through several tragedies in his life: a disgraceful end to his Secret Service career after a candidate he'd been

guarding was assassinated right in front of him; a failed marriage and acrimonious divorce; and most recently, a plot to frame him for a series of local murders that had dredged up the painful details of his last days as a federal agent. These events had left King a very cautious man, unwilling to trust anyone, at least until Michelle Maxwell hurtled into his life. Though their relationship had started off on very rocky ground, she was now the one person he knew he could absolutely rely on.

Michelle Maxwell had started life at a dead run, streaking through college in three years, winning an Olympic silver medal in rowing and becoming a police officer in her native Tennessee before joining the Secret Service. Like King, her exit from the federal agency hadn't been pleasant: she'd lost a protectee to an ingenious kidnapping scheme. It was the first time in her life she had failed at anything, and that debacle had nearly destroyed her. While investigating the kidnapping case she had met King. At first she'd taken an instant dislike to the man. Now, as his partner, she saw Sean King for what he was: the best pure investigative mind she had ever been associated with. And her closest friend.

Yet the two could not have been more different. While Michelle craved adrenaline highs and pushing her body to the limit with intensive, lung-and-limb-shocking physical activities, King preferred spending his leisure time hunting for appropriate wines to add to his collection, dabbling in owning the works of local artists, reading good books, as well as boating and fishing on the lake that his home backed to. He was an introspective man by nature; he liked to think things out thoroughly before taking action. Michelle tended to move at warp speed and let the pieces fall where they may. This partnership of supernova and steady glacier had somehow flourished.

"Did they find the boys?" she asked King.

He nodded. "I understand they were pretty traumatized."

"Traumatized? They'll probably need therapy all the way through college."

Michelle had already given a detailed statement to the local police, in the person of Chief Todd Williams. The chief's hair had become noticeably whiter after her and King's first adventure in Wrightsburg. Today his features held a resigned expression, as though murder and mayhem were now to be expected in his tiny hamlet.

Michelle watched as a slender and attractive red-haired woman in her late thirties carrying a black satchel and a rape kit arrived on the scene, knelt down and started examining the body.

"That's the deputy medical examiner assigned to this area," King explained. "Sylvia Diaz."

"Diaz? She looks more like Maureen O'Hara."

"George Diaz was her husband. He was a very noted surgeon in the area. He was struck by a car and killed several years ago. Sylvia used to be a professor of forensic pathology at UVA. Now she's a physician in private practice."

"And a deputy M.E. on the side. Busy woman. Any children?"

"No. I guess her work is her life," said King.

Michelle put her hand up to her nose as the direction of the wind changed yet again, flinging the stench of the body directly at them. "Some life," she said. "God, she isn't even wearing a mask, and I'm about to hurl from back here."

Twenty minutes later Diaz rose, spoke with the police, popped off her examination gloves and started snapping pictures of the body and surrounding area. Finished with that, she stowed her camera and started to walk away when she noticed King. She smiled warmly and headed toward them.

Michelle whispered, "And you forgot to tell me that you two dated?"

King looked at her surprised. "We went out a few times a while back. How'd you know that?"

"After spending close-up time with a dead body, you don't get a smile like that unless there was a prior relationship."

"Thanks for the astute observation. But be nice. Sylvia's really wonderful."

"I'm sure she was, but I don't need to hear the details, Sean."

"Rest assured, you'll never hear the details while there's breath in my body."

"I see. You're being quite the Virginia gentleman."

"No, I just don't want to be critiqued."

CHAPTER

4

Sylvia Diaz gave King a hug that lingered a bit past "friends" status, Michelle felt, and then King introduced the two women.

The deputy medical examiner looked at Michelle with what the latter perceived as an unfriendly gaze.

"I haven't seen you in a while, Sean," Sylvia said, turning back to him.

"We'd been swamped with investigative work, but things have finally slowed down."

"So," Michelle broke in, "do you have a cause of death on our corpse yet?"

Sylvia looked at her with a surprised expression. "That's not really something I can discuss with you."

"I was just wondering," said Michelle innocently, "since I happened to be one of the first on the scene. I guess you won't know for sure until you do the post."

"You'll be doing the autopsy here, won't you?" asked King.

Sylvia nodded. "Yes, although suspicious deaths traditionally were sent over to Roanoke."

"Why no longer?" asked Michelle.

"There used to be four official facilities certified to conduct autopsies in the state: Fairfax, Richmond, Tidewater and Roanoke. However, due to the generosity of John Poindexter, a very wealthy man who was also a past Speaker of the House in the state General Assembly, we now have a certified forensics substation right here."

"Strange donation, a morgue," said Michelle.

"Poindexter's daughter was killed here years ago. Wrightsburg falls

on the jurisdictional line between the medical examiner's office in Richmond and the western district office in Roanoke. Because of that, there was a fight over which office would perform the autopsy. Roanoke finally won out, but during the transfer of the body the vehicle was involved in an accident, and vital evidence was lost or compromised. Consequently, the girl's killer was never caught, and as you can imagine, her father was not very happy. When Poindexter died, his will left the money to build a state-of-the-art facility." Sylvia glanced over her shoulder at the body. "But even with a state-of-the-art facility the cause of death on this one might be tricky."

"Any idea on how long she's been dead?" asked King.

"A lot depends on the individual, environmental factors and degree of decomposition. With a body dead this long the postmortem may give us *some* idea of a time frame, but that's all."

"I see some of the fingers have been chewed off," said King.

"Animals, clearly." Sylvia added thoughtfully, "But still there should have been more signs of invasion. They're trying to get an ID on her now."

King said, "What do you make of the hand posed like that?"

"Afraid that's for the official detectives, not me. I just tell them how the victim died and collect any evidence during the post that might be useful. I played Sherlock Holmes when I first started doing this job, and I was quickly put in my place."

"There's nothing wrong with using your specialized knowledge to help solve a crime," commented Michelle.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Sylvia paused and said, "I can tell you that the arm was braced up by the stick and that it was done deliberately. Beyond that, I'm out of ideas." She turned to King. "It was good to see you again, even if it was under these circumstances." She put out her hand to Michelle, who shook it.

As the woman walked off, Michelle said, "I thought you said you *used* to date."

"We did. It's been over a year now."

"I'm not sure she got the message."

"I really appreciate the insight. Maybe you can read my palm next. You ready to go? Or do you want to finish your run?"

"Thanks, but I've had enough stimulation for one day."

As they passed close by the body, King stopped and stared at the hand that was still pointing to the sky, his face suddenly tense.

"What is it?" Michelle asked, watching him closely.

"The watch," he said.

She glanced at it, now seeing that it was set to one o'clock and didn't appear to be running. "What about it?"

"Michelle, it's a Zodiac watch."

"Zodiac?"

"Something tells me we're going to see this person's work again," said King.