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Opening Extract from...

Entry Island

Written by Peter May

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ENTRY ISLAND

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CHAPTER ONE

The front door of the summerhouse opened straight into the living room through a fly-screen door off the porch. It was a large room occupying most of the downstairs footprint of a house that the murdered man used for guests who never came.

A narrow corridor at the bottom of the staircase ran off to a bathroom and a small bedroom at the back of the property. There was an open fireplace with a stone surround. The furniture was dark and heavy, and took up most of the floor space. Sime thought that although the house itself had been remodelled, this must still be the original furniture. It felt like stepping back in time. Generous old armchairs with antimacassars, worn rugs strewn across uneven but freshly varnished floorboards. Heavy-framed oil paintings on the walls, and every available space cluttered with ornaments and framed family photos. It even smelled old in here, and made him think of his grandmother's house in Scotstown.

Blanc fed cable off into the back bedroom where he would set up his monitors, and Sime lined up two cameras on

tripods to focus on the armchair facing the window, where the newly widowed woman would be well lit. He set his own chair with its back to the window so that his face would be obscured to her, but every micro sign to flit across her face would be evident to him.

He heard floorboards creaking overhead and turned towards the staircase as a policewoman came down into the light. She looked bewildered. 'What's going on?'

Sime told her they were setting up for the interview. 'I understand she's upstairs,' he said. The officer nodded. 'Send her down, then.'

He stood by the window for a moment, holding the net curtain aside, and remembered the words of the sergeant enquêteur who had met them at the island's only harbour. *Looks like it was her that did it*. Sunlight caught his face so that it was reflected in the glass, and he saw his familiar lean features beneath their tumble of thick blonde curls. He saw the fatigue in his eyes, and the shadows that hollowed his cheeks, and he immediately jumped focus to gaze out across the ocean. The longer grass along the cliff's edge was dipping and diving in the wind now, white-tops blowing across the gulf from the south-west, and in the distance he saw an ominous bank of dark cloud bubbling up on the horizon.

The creak of the stairs brought his head around, and for a moment that seemed like an eternity his world stopped.

She stood on the bottom step, her dark hair drawn back from the delicate structure of her face. Pale skin stained by

dried blood. Her bloodied nightdress was partially covered by a blanket draped around her shoulders. He could see that she was tall and holding herself erect as if it were a matter of pride not to be cowed by her circumstance.

Her eyes were a dark, crystal-cut blue with darker rings around the pupils. Sad eyes filled with tragedy. He could see the shadows of sleeplessness smudged beneath them as if someone had drawn charcoal-stained thumbs across the skin.

He heard the slow tick, tick of an old pendulum clock on the mantel, and saw motes of dust suspended in the light that slanted through the windows. He saw her lips move, but there was no sound. They moved again in silence, forming words he couldn't hear, until he became aware suddenly of the irritation in her voice. 'Hello? Is there anyone home?' And it was as if someone had released the pause button and his world wound back up to speed. But the confusion remained.

He said, 'I'm sorry. You are . . . ?'

He saw her consternation now. 'Kirsty Cowell. They said you wanted to interview me.'

And out of his turmoil he heard himself saying, 'I know you.'

She frowned. 'I don't think so.'

But he knew he did. Not where, or how, or when. But with an absolute certainty. And that feeling he had experienced on the plane returned to almost overwhelm him.

CHAPTER TWO

I

Hard to believe that just a few hours ago he had been lying in his own bed over a thousand kilometres away in Montreal, arms and legs tangled among the sheets, sweating where they covered him, freezing where they did not. His eyes then had been filled with sand, and his throat so dry he could barely swallow.

During the long night he had lost count of the number of times he had glanced at the digital display on his bedside clock. It was foolish, he knew. When sleep would not come, time crawled with the unerring pace of a giant tortoise. Watching its painful passage only increased the frustration and reduced the odds of sleep even further. The faintest of headaches lay just behind his eyes as it did every night, increasing in its intensity towards morning and the pain-killer that would fizz furiously in his glass when it was time at last to rise.

Rolling over on to his right side he had felt the empty space beside him like a rebuke. A constant reminder of failure.

A cold emptiness where once there had been warmth. He could have spread himself across the bed, warming it from the heat of his own body, but he felt trapped on the side where he had so often lain in simmering silence after one of their fights. Fights, it had always seemed to him, that he never started. And yet through all the sleepless hours of these last weeks, he had begun to doubt even that. Harsh words endlessly replayed to fill the slow, dark passing of time.

Finally, at the very moment he had felt himself slipping off into darkness, the trilling of his cellphone on the bedside table had startled him awake. Had he really drifted off? He sat bolt upright and glanced at the clock, his heart pounding, but it was still just a little after three. He fumbled for the light switch, and blinking in the sudden glare of the lamp grabbed the phone.

From his riverside apartment in St Lambert, it could take anything up to an hour and a half during rush hour to cross the Pont Jacques Cartier on to the island that was Montreal City. But at this hour the huge span of arcing girders that straddled the Île Sainte Hélène fed only a trickle of traffic across the slow-moving water of the St Lawrence River.

As the lights of empty tower blocks rose up around him, he swung on to the off-ramp and down to Avenue de Lorimier before turning north-east on Rue Ontario, the dark silhouette of Mount Royal itself dominating the skyline in his rear

mirror. The drive to 1701 Rue Parthenais took less than twenty minutes.

The Sûreté de Police was housed in a thirteen-storey tower block on the east side of the street with views out towards the bridge, the TV station and the mountain. Sime took the elevator up to the *Division des enquêtes sur les crimes contre la personne* on the fourth floor. It never failed to amuse him how the French language needed nine words where one in English would do. Homicide, the Americans would have said.

Capitaine Michel McIvir was returning to his office with a coffee, and Sime fell in beside him as he walked along the corridor past framed black-and-white photographs of crime scene investigations from the fifties and sixties. McIvir was barely forty, just a handful of years older than Sime, but wore an air of authority that Sime knew would never be a fit for him. The capitaine glanced at his sergeant enquêteur with shrewd eyes.

'You look like shit.'

Sime grimaced. 'That makes me feel so much better.'

'Still not sleeping?'

Sime shrugged, reluctant to admit the extent of his problem. 'Off and on.' And he quickly changed the subject. 'So why am I here?'

'There's been a murder on the Magdalen Islands, out in the Gulf of St Lawrence.' He called them by their French name, Les Îles de la Madeleine. 'The first in living memory. I'm sending an initial team of eight.'

'But why me? I'm not on the rota.'

'The murder took place on l'Île d'entrée, Sime. Better known to its inhabitants as Entry Island. The Madelinots are French-speaking for the most part, but on Entry they speak only English.'

Sime nodded, understanding now.

'I've got a light aircraft standing by at St Hubert airfield. It'll take about three hours to get out to the islands. I want you to lead interrogations. Thomas Blanc will monitor. Lieutenant Crozes is your team leader, Sergeant Superviseur Lapointe on admin and logistics.' He hesitated, uncharacteristically. It did not go unnoticed by Sime.

'And the crime scene investigator?' He posed it as a question, but already knew the answer.

McIvir set his mouth in a stubborn line. 'Marie-Ange.'

II

The thirteen-seater King Air B100 had been in the air for over two and a half hours. During that time barely a handful of words had passed among the eight-officer team being sent to investigate the Entry Island murder.

Sime sat on his own up front, acutely aware of everything that set him apart from his colleagues. He was not an habitual member of their team. He had only been attached because of his linguistic background. The others were all French in origin. Each spoke English, to a greater or lesser

extent, but none was fluent. Sime's heritage was Scottish. His ancestors had arrived speaking Gaelic. Within a couple of generations the language of home had all but died out, to be replaced by English. Then in the 1970s the government of Quebec had made French the official language, and in a mass exodus half a million English-speakers had abandoned the province.

But Sime's father had refused to go. His great-great-grandparents, he said, had carved out a place for themselves in this land, and he was damned if he would be forced off it. And so the Mackenzie family had stayed, adapting to the new francophone world, but holding on to their own language and traditions in the home. Sime supposed he had much to thank him for. He was equally at home with French or English. But right now, aboard this flight to investigate a murder on a distant archipelago, it was what set him apart. The thing he had always wanted to avoid.

He glanced from the window and saw the first light in the sky to the east. Below them he could see only ocean. They had left the tree-covered Gaspé Peninsula behind them some time ago.

The stooped figure of Sergeant Superviseur Jacques Lapointe emerged from the tiny cockpit clutching a sheaf of papers. He was the man who would facilitate everything. Accommodation, transport, all their technical requirements. And it was Lapointe who would accompany the body of the victim back to Montreal for autopsy in the basement of 1701 Rue

Parthenais. He was an older man, somewhere in his mid-fifties, with big-knuckled arthritic hands and a spiky black moustache shot through with silver.

'Okay.' He raised his voice to be heard above the roar of the engines. 'I've booked us into the Auberge Madeli on the Île du Cap aux Meules. That's the main administrative island, and it's from there that the ferry leaves for Entry. About an hour for the crossing.' He consulted his notes. 'The airport's on Havre aux Maisons, linked to Cap aux Meules by bridge, apparently. Anyway, the local cops'll meet us there with a minibus, and it looks like we'll be just in time to catch the first ferry of the day.'

'You mean they'd have sailed without us?' Lieutenant Daniel Crozes raised an eyebrow. The team leader was almost the same age as Sime, but a little taller and possessed of dark good looks. Somehow he always managed to maintain a tan. Quite a feat during the long, cold Quebecois winters. Sime was never quite sure if it derived from a bottle or a sunbed.

'Not on your life!' Lapointe grinned. 'It's the only way of getting a vehicle over there. I told them I'd sink the fucking thing if they didn't hold it for us.' He inclined his head to one side. 'Still, it looks like we won't be disrupting the schedules. And it does no harm to keep the locals on side.'

'What do we know about Entry Island, Jacques?' Crozes asked.

The big man pulled on his moustache. 'Not a lot, Lieutenant. Main industry's fishing. Dwindling population. All English-speakers. Fewer than a hundred, I think.'

'One less now,' Crozes said, and there was some muted laughter.

Sime glanced across the aisle and saw Marie-Ange smiling. With her short, brown, blonde-streaked hair and lean, athletic figure, there was something almost boyish about her. But nothing masculine in her liquid green eyes, or the full red lips she stretched across the white teeth of that disarming smile. She caught him looking at her, and the smile immediately vanished.

He turned back to the window and felt his ears pop as the small aircraft banked to the right and began its descent. For a moment he was dazzled by a flash of red sunlight reflecting off the ocean, before the aircraft banked again and he saw the Îles de la Madeleine for the first time. A string of big and small islands linked by causeways and sandbanks, lying on an axis that ran from south-west to north-east. Oddly, it formed an overall shape not unlike a fish-hook, and was perhaps around sixty kilometres in length.

As they turned to make their final descent towards the airstrip on the Île du Havre aux Maisons, the pilot told them that if they looked out to their right they would see Entry Island sitting on its own on the east side of the Baie de Plaisance.

Sime saw it for the first time, silhouetted against the rising sun and lying along the horizon with its two distinctive humps like some toppled Easter Island statue, almost lost in a pink early morning mist that rose from the sea. And

quite unexpectedly he felt a shiver of disquiet down his spine.

III

Sime stood stamping on the quayside, breath billowing about his head in the early morning light as Lapointe reversed their minibus on to the *Ivan-Quinn* ferry. Flight cases packed with their equipment were strapped to the roof. Sime wore jeans, leather boots and a hooded cotton jacket, and stood a little apart from the others. Not a space that the casual observer might have noticed, but to him it felt like a rift as deep as the Grand Canyon. And it was more than just language that separated them. Blanc crossed the divide to offer him a cigarette. Had he known him better, he would have known better. But Sime appreciated the gesture.

'Gave it up,' he said.

Blanc grinned. 'Easiest thing in the world.'

Sime cocked a quizzical eyebrow. 'Is it?'

'Sure. I've done it hundreds of times.'

Sime smiled and they watched in silence for a while as Lapointe manoeuvred into the tight, two-vehicle car deck. He glanced at his co-interrogator. Blanc was six inches smaller than Sime, and carrying a good deal more weight. He had a head of thick, curly black hair balding on top, a monk's tonsure in the making. 'How's your English?' Sime said.