

THE KILLING HOUR

CHAPTER ONE

Quantico, Virginia

3:59 p.m.

Temperature: 95 degrees

"God it's hot. Cacti couldn't take this kind of heat. Desert rock couldn't take this kind of heat. I'm telling you, this is what happened right before dinosaurs disappeared from the earth."

No response.

"You really think orange is my color?" the driver tried again.

"Really is a strong word."

"Well, not everyone can make a statement in purple plaid."

"True."

"Man-oh-man is this heat killing me!" The driver, New Agent Alissa Sampson had had enough. She tugged futilely on her 1970s polyester suit, smacked the steering wheel with the palm of her hand, then blew out an exasperated breath. It was ninety-five outside, probably one hundred and ten inside the Bucar. Not great weather for polyester suits. For that matter, it didn't work wonders for bulletproof vests. Alissa's suit bled bright orange stains under her arms. New Agent Kimberly Quincy's own mothball-scented pink-and-purple plaid suit didn't look much better.

Outside the car, the street was quiet. Nothing happening at Billiards; nothing happening at City Pawn; nothing happening at the Pastime Bar-Deli. Minute ticked into minute. Seconds came and went, as slowly as the bead of sweat trickling down Kimberly's

cheek. Above her head, still fastened to the roof but ready to go at any minute, was her M-16.

"Here's something they never tell you about the disco-age," Alissa muttered beside her. "Polyester doesn't breathe. God, is this thing going to happen or what?"

Alissa was definitely nervous. A forensic accountant before joining the bureau, she was highly valued for her deep-seeded love of all things spreadsheet. Give her a computer and she was in hog heaven. This, however, wasn't a back-room gig. This was front-line duty.

In theory, at any time now, a black vehicle bearing a two-hundred-and-ten-pound highly armed suspected arms dealer was going to appear. He might or might not be alone in the car. Kimberly, Alissa, and three other agents had orders to halt the vehicle and arrest everyone in sight.

Phil Lehane, a former New York cop with the most street experience, was leading the operation. Tom Squire and Peter Vince were in the first backup vehicle. Alissa and Kimberly were in the second backup vehicle. Kimberly and Tom, being above-average marksmen, had cover duty with the rifles. Alissa and Peter were in charge of tactical driving, plus had handguns for cover.

In consummate FBI style, they not only planned and dressed for this arrest, but they had practiced it in advance. During the initial run-through, however, Alissa had tripped when getting out of the car and had landed on her face. Her upper lip was still swollen and there were flecks of blood on the right-hand corner of her mouth.

Her wounds were superficial. Her anxiety, however, now went bone deep.

"This is taking too long," she muttered. "I thought he was supposed to appear at the bank at four. It's four ten. I don't think he's coming."

"People run late."

"They do this just to mess with our minds. Aren't you boiling?"

Kimberly finally looked at her partner. When Alissa was nervous, she babbled. When Kimberly was nervous, she grew clipped and curt. These days, she was clipped and curt most of the time. "The guy will show up, when the guy shows up. Now chill out!"

Alissa thinned her lips. For a second, something flared in her bright blue eyes. Anger. Hurt. Embarrassment. It was hard to be sure. Kimberly was another woman in the male-run world of the bureau, so criticism coming from her was akin to blasphemy. They were supposed to stick together. Girl power, the Ya Ya Sisterhood and all that crap.

Kimberly went back to gazing at the street. Now she was angry, too. Damn. Double-damn. Shit.

The radio on the dash suddenly crackled to life. Alissa swooped up the receiver without bothering to hide her relief.

Phil Lehane's voice was hushed but steady: "This is Vehicle A. Target now in sight, climbing into his vehicle. Ready, Vehicle B?"

"Ready."

"Ready, Vehicle C?"

Alissa clicked the receiver. "Ready, willing and able."

"We go on three. One, two, THREE."

The first siren exploded across the hot, sweltering street, and even though Kimberly had been expecting the noise, she still flinched in her seat.

"Easy," Alissa said dryly, then fired the Bucar to life. A blast of hot air promptly burst from the vents into their faces, but now both were too grim to notice. Kimberly reached for her rifle. Alissa's foot hovered above the gas.

The sirens screamed closer. Not yet, not yet...

"FBI, stop your vehicle!" Lehane's voice blared over a bullhorn two blocks away as he drove the suspect closer to their side street. Their target had a penchant for armor-plated Mercedes and grenade launchers. In theory, they were going to arrest him while he was out running errands, hopefully catching him off guard and relatively unarmed. In theory.

"Stop your vehicle!" Lehane commanded again. Apparently, however, the target, didn't feel like playing nice today. Far from hearing the screech of brakes, Alissa and Kimberly caught the sound of a gunning engine. Alissa's foot lowered further toward the gas.

"Passing the movie theater," New Agent Lehane barked over the radio. "Suspect heading toward the pharmacy. Ready... Go."

Alissa slammed the gas and their dark blue Bucar shot forward into the empty street. A sleek black blur appeared immediately to their left. Alissa hit the brakes, swinging the back end of their car around until they were pointed down the street at a forty-five degree angle. Simultaneously, another Bucar appeared on their right, blocking that lane.

Kimberly now had a full view of a beautiful silver grill gunning down on them with a proud Mercedes logo. She popped open the passenger's door while simultaneously releasing her seatbelt, then hefted her rifle to her shoulder and aimed for the front tire.

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

The suspect finally hit his brakes. A short screech. The smell of burning rubber. Then the car stopped just fifteen feet away.

"FBI, hands on your head! HANDS ON YOUR HEAD!"

Lehane pulled in behind the Mercedes, shouting into the bullhorn with commanding fury. He kicked open his door, fit his handgun between the opening made between the window frame and the door and drew a bead on the stopped car. No hands left for the bullhorn now. He let his voice do the work for him.

"Driver, hands on your head! Driver, reach over with your left hand and lower your windows!"

The black sedan didn't move. No doors opening, no black tinted windows rolling down. Not a good sign. Kimberly adjusted her left hand on the stock of the rifle and shrugged off the rest of her seatbelt. She kept her feet in the car as feet could become targets. She kept her head and shoulders inside the vehicle as well. On a good day, all you wanted the felon to see was the long, black barrel of your gun. She didn't know if this was a good day yet.

A fresh drop of sweat teared up on Kimberly's brow and made a slow, wet path down the plane of her cheek.

"Driver, put your hands up," Lehane ordered again. "Driver, using your left hand, lower all four windows."

The driver's side window finally glided down. From this angle, Kimberly could just make out the silhouette of the driver's head as fresh daylight surrounded him in a halo. It appeared that his hands were held in the air as ordered. She eased her grip slightly on her rifle.

"Driver, using your left hand, remove the key from the ignition."

Lehane was making the guy use his left hand, simply to work the law of averages. Most people were right-handed, so they wanted to keep that arm in sight at all times. Next, the driver would be instructed drop the car key out the open window, then open the car door, all with his left hand. Then he would be ordered to step slowly out of the car, keeping both hands up at all times. He would slowly pivot 360 degrees so they could visually inspect his form for weapons. If he were wearing a jacket, he would be asked to hold it

open so they could see beneath his coat. Finally, he would be ordered to walk toward them with his hands on his head, turn, drop to his knees, cross his ankles and sit back on his heels. Then they would finally move forward and take their felony suspect into custody.

Unfortunately, the driver didn't seem to know the theories behind a proper felony vehicle stop. He still didn't lower his hands, but neither did he reach for the key in the ignition.

"Quincy?" Lehane's voice crackled over.

"I can see the driver," Kimberly reported back, gazing through the rifle sight. "I can't make out the passenger side, however. Tinted windshield's too dark."

"Squire?"

Tom Squire had cover duty from Vehicle B, parked twenty feet to the right of Kimberly. "I think...I think there might be someone in the back. Again, hard to tell with the windows."

"Driver, using your left hand, remove the key from the ignition." Lehane repeated his command, his voice louder now, but still controlled. The goal was to remain patient. Make the driver come to you, do not relinquish control.

Was it Kimberly's imagination, or was the vehicle now slowly rocking up and down. Someone was moving around...

"Driver, this is the FBI! Remove the key from the ignition!"

"Shit, shit, shit" Alissa murmured beside Kimberly. She was sweating hard, streams of moisture pouring down her face. Leaning half out of the car, she had her Glock .40 aimed between the crack between the roof of their vehicle and the open door. Her right arm was visibly shaking, however. For the first time, Kimberly noticed that Alissa hadn't fully removed her seatbelt. Half of it was still tangled around her left arm.

"Driver-"

The driver's left hand finally moved. Alissa exhaled forcefully. And in the next instant, everything went to shit.

Kimberly saw it first. "Gun! Back seat, driver side-"

Pop, pop, pop! Red mushroomed across their front windshield. Kimberly ducked and dove out of the vehicle for the shelter of her car door. She came up fast and spread cover fire above the top of her window. More pop, pop, pop.

"Reloading rifle," she yelled into the radio.

"Vince reloading handgun."

"Taking heavy fire from the right, backside passenger window!"

"Alissa," Kimberly called out, "cover us!"

Kimberly turned toward her partner, frantically cramming fresh rounds into the magazine, then realized for the first time that Alissa was no longer to be seen.

"Alissa?"

She stretched across the front seats. New Agent Alissa Sampson was now on the asphalt, a dark red stain spreading across her cheap orange suit.

"Agent down, agent down," Kimberly cried. Another pop, and the asphalt exploded two inches from Alissa's leg.

"Damn," Alissa moaned. "Oh damn that hurts!"

"Where are those rifles?" Lehane yelled.

Kimberly shot back up, saw the doors of the Mercedes were now swung open for cover and bright vivid colors were literally exploding in all directions. Oh, things had gone definitely FUBAR now.

"Rifles!" Lehane yelled again.

Kimberly hastily scrambled back to her side, and got her rifle between the crack of the car door. She was frantically trying to recall protocol. Apprehension was still the goal. But they were under heavy fire, possible loss of agent life. Fuck it. She started firing at anything that moved near the Mercedes.

Another pop, her car door exploded purple and she reflexively yelped and ducked. Another pop and the pavement mushroomed yellow one inch from her exposed feet. Shit!

Kimberly darted up, opened fired, then dropped back behind the door.

"Quincy, rifle reloading," she yelled into the radio, her hands shaking so badly now with adrenaline that she fumbled the release and had to do it twice. Come on, Kimberly. Breathe!

They needed to regain control of the situation. She couldn't get the damn rounds into the magazine. Breathe, breathe, breathe. Hold it together. A movement caught the corner of her eye. The car. The black sedan, doors still open, was now rolling forward.

She grabbed her radio, dropped it, grabbed it again, and yelled "Get the wheels, get the wheels."

Squire and Lehane either heard her or got it on their own because the next round of gunfire splattered the pavement and the sedan came to an awkward halt just one foot from Kimberly's car. She looked up. Caught the startled gaze of the man in the driver's seat. He bolted from the vehicle. She leapt out from behind her car door after him.

And a moment later, pain, brilliant and hot pink, exploded across her lower spine.

New Agent Kimberly Quincy went down. She did not get up again.

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