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H O U R G L A S S H E I G H T S

This book is dedicated to my loving wife. She never lost faith in me during my writing journey, and never allowed me to give it up for a regular pay cheque.

I love you, Nic.

Ian David Noakes

HOURGLASS HEIGHTS

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Prologue

CRIMPLE TOLD ME THAT I NEEDED TO LET IT GO, that I was only sixteen years old when it happened and that I shouldn't have allowed such a tragic burden to weigh so heavily on my young shoulders. He told me that I could never have predicted such a terrible thing would happen and that I shouldn't continue to blame myself. I was told a lot of things but none of them made any difference. I couldn't let it go, and I wouldn't allow it to run away from me. This tragic burden would weigh upon my narrow shoulders until my final breath because I did blame myself.

Crimple was right when he said I couldn't have predicted such a murderous act, but the truth was it did happen. I had lied to my father and he had been brutally murdered because of my own selfish behavior. At sixteen, I wasn't a child and I didn't deserve to be happy.

Fifteen years later, there I was, burdened and still struggling to summon the courage to keep going. I existed with the knowledge that the easy way out wouldn't help me if I wanted to look my father in the eye when I reached the Pearly Gates.

A communal printer sparked to life from within the shadows of an open-plan office space sprinkled with what could be mistaken for the same old desks that I used to hide behind in school. Equally old computers perched on the desktops and the classroom image was completed by bulletin boards that filled the walls. These, however, weren't covered with mundane homework assignments. No, these days I looked upon grisly crime scene photos, suspect profiles and wretched back-stories of humans at the lowest moments in their lives.

I was alone as usual, but that was my own doing. I was the only one desperate enough to be working at such an ungodly hour. I didn't want to be at home sleeping because, for me, sleeping wasn't the same as the typical slumber that innocent people could experience at the end of a working day. For me,

sleeping meant fidgeting in bed, thinking. It was never a good idea to allow my mind to wonder about the past.

It didn't bother me so much when I was at the precinct. Day or night, the precinct provided me with the sanctuary of my own bubble – a security bubble created to protect the people around me as much as to protect myself.

It was better to ruminate over what the printer had just been spitting out because work served two purposes: it kept me busy doing something meaningful, which meant less worry time, and it provided an opportunity to burn both ends of the world-renowned candle.

I was finally able to tear the results from a dated inkjet that had only just completed its task. I was sure it was only a matter of time before it would be replaced with a swanky new laser-jet that would spit out a hundred pages a minute, but the decade-old thrum of this printer invigorated me. It reminded me of filling out fake police reports as a child when my dad had to bring me in to work with him.

Back then, I always caught the bad guy with my meticulous administrative work and my amazing powers of deduction. My fingertips would be covered in black ink and my crime reports would be peppered with smudges. Just like my dad's.

If the department shrink had been able to read my mind, I'm sure I wouldn't have been deemed fit for duty. A police detective couldn't be broken. My father once told me that the role of a detective was simple: stop the bad guys. He had been a well-respected detective on the police force – until I lied and ended his reign, that is. It wasn't easy back then for a Japanese detective to earn respect on the force, and I owed it to him to uphold the Tanaka name and carry on catching the bad guys.

The printout delivered the news I had hoped for, but it was too late to act on it tonight. I would speak to the captain in the morning and maybe he would finally deem me fit enough to leave the office and actually follow up on something myself. I knew I was a good cop – a great cop even. If blackmail and attempted murder couldn't get me out of bed and keep my life progressing forward, then I was in trouble.

Chapter 1

THE RAIN BATTERED THE HELL OUT OF HOURGLASS HEIGHTS, a quaint, four-story apartment building that looked like it had been plucked from the countryside and then dropped smack bang on the northern edge of the city limits.

If any building deserved to have the hell battered out of it, then Hourglass Heights was that building. On the outside, the brickwork had crumbled and the paintwork had peeled back around the window and door frames. A closer inspection would reveal that the woodwork had once been burgundy, and that the brickwork had once had the weathered-countryside look that a typical rural bed-and-breakfast would have boasted in its prime years.

The inside told a different story altogether, one that began back in the late eighties when an ambitious couple had made the trip from Japan to open and run their own apartment building. Like any couple upping roots and travelling to a new country, Hiro Naoki and his wife Yuri, hadn't found it easy. Though Hiro had dreamed for most of his forty years of moving to a new country and running his own business, for Yuri the change had been like moving to another planet and she struggled to adapt to such a different way of life.

Twenty-five years later, only shattered dreams and a younger wife remained for Hiro. He was now just a shadow of the younger man who once held big ambitions for a successful business and happy family, something he'd been determined to achieve after a bleak childhood. Hiro had managed to keep Hourglass Heights alive, but his marriage to Yuri had died many moons ago.

Hiro lay with his head wrapped in his pillow and his arm drooped over the top to keep it firmly in place. Akemi, his pretty new wife, lay beside him. She stared at the ceiling, but she wasn't interested in drowning out the rampant sounds of a bed crashing into the wall that were coming from the apartment next

door. Hiro snored through the cacophony of primal grunting and banshee-like screaming.

“Hiro?” Akemi whispered in more blind hope than expectance. Hiro mumbled in his sleep and tucked his knees tighter into his chest to form a perfect foetal position. Akemi ruffled her spiky black hair, returned a muffled whimper and slumped back onto her side of the bed. She wasn’t in the mood to sleep.

She stared at the wall that threatened to topple over and end their lives before morning, then turned her gaze to Hiro who was still snoring. Slowly, Akemi clambered onto her knees and gripped the headboard to steady her weight. After one last glance at Hiro, Akemi pressed her ear against the wall and shifted to a more comfortable position with her elbows perched atop the headboard. Akemi smiled her cheekiest smile.

The relentless grunting and groaning intensified, and the thumping from the bed next door grew so furious that it began jolting Akemi’s head, but she had no intention of moving away from the wall. Instead, she positioned all her weight on one arm and slithered her free hand down her body through the wrinkles of her silky gown and only stopped when she reached warm flesh.

Akemi closed her eyes as she dragged the edge of her gown up to her navel and secured it between her ribs and the headboard. A gentle moan escaped her lips as her fingertips brushed along the crease at the top of her leg. Another moan trickled through her lips, this time with more intensity as her fingers traced her clitoris. Akemi glanced down at Hiro as another loud groan penetrated the wall. She was desperate to continue, but craved Hiro’s touch even more.

“I know you awake, Hiro!” Akemi waited, but Hiro didn’t move an inch. His snores continued in accompaniment to the banging of the bed on the other side of the wall. She rested her hand on his shoulder and leaned in toward his ear. “Mr. Naoki, no fakin’ me!” she pouted with a frustrated whisper, but Hiro merely fidgeted into a different position and started to snore again. “Hiro, I want stuffing like neighbor do. Please!”

When Hiro still didn't move, Akemi surrendered to defeat for five short seconds. But then a big smile pushed up her beautifully defined features.

"I give you hand," she giggled. Like a snake seeking out its prey, Akemi's hand slithered across the quilt, intertwining between the folds, valleys and hilltops formed by the duck feathers inside the quilt and searching for the edge so it could go in for the kill. Akemi twitched a cheeky grin and gently tightened the palm of her hand around Hiro's penis. Although Akemi had petite hands, there wasn't enough rigidity in Hiro's wrinkled manhood to give her something to work with.

After a full minute of squeezing, tugging and stroking, it became obvious to Akemi that sex wasn't on the menu tonight. She snatched her hand from beneath the quilt and crossed her arms like a petulant child who had been denied a lollipop.

"No fair, mean man!" Akemi waited, hoping her stares could magically turn Hiro into the ball of sexual energy she craved.

When Hiro wasn't working, he could usually be found watching his favorite wildlife programs. One animal that fascinated him was the possum, a creature he'd learned was famous for playing dead when under attack, though in truth, they go into shock when stressed. Hiro cracked a smile when he wondered if that was just what he was doing now.

Akemi tugged the quilt over her shoulder and turned away from him. A tiny sigh drifted from her mouth, but it made Hiro's smile fade away. It wasn't a sigh of anger. Hiro knew Akemi loved him, but he also understood she was a young woman.

Hiro opened his eyes. He wanted to show Akemi some affection but didn't want to lead her on. He wasn't a young man anymore, and he was exhausted. In an impressive maneuver, he let out a groan that could only escape the lips of an unconscious man. He wrapped his arm over her and quickly resumed snoring. For good measure, beneath his snoring, he muttered the words "Love you, Akemi."

Akemi shook her head, but couldn't hold back a tiny smile. She placed her hand on his forearm, kissed his hand and gently eased it between her shoulder and jaw to rest on.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE BEATEN WALL was the Sommer residence. Lorraine and David had been married for fourteen years and refused to allow the transition of time to dictate how frequently they made love or how passionate and vigorous their sex should be. When the mood took them, Lorraine and David liked it hard and fast – and the mood had taken them tonight.

A family photograph struggled to stay upright on a bedside table that was being abused as aggressively as the wall. The photograph featured the couple hugging their twelve-year-old twin girls on a sunny beach. They didn't go away very often so they treasured those rare days when they were able, and this photograph was a constant reminder of the importance of escaping the city with your family. They loved their children to distraction but saw no reason to use them as an excuse to place boundaries on their sexual fantasies or to act in a way the world believed an experienced married couple should.

Lorraine didn't have the body of a super-model but her curves were in all the right places. She was a dedicated wife and mother, and it was her decision to stay at home and raise her children as she saw fit. Because the couple shared the same values and goals, it was rare that they would fight over the children.

Though it didn't seem possible, the pace of the rocking bed intensified. The bed joints had started squeaking and were now on the verge of splintering and falling apart under the pressure. These sounds only added to the moment for them as their love-making approached a crescendo.

"I love the fuckin' shit out of you, love-pot," David grunted, before biting Lorraine's lower lip and brushing the backs of his fingers across her cheek.

David worked as a salesman at a local car dealership. Business had been pretty slow the past couple of years, so David was never going to make it rich selling cars. But he was okay

with that because so long as he could pay the rent and put food on the table. His family was all he needed to keep smiling.

With grinding hips and a strained face, Lorraine howled loudly and ran her fingers through David's hair before gripping it tightly and pulling his face closer to her own.

David's body shuddered as if a bolt of lightning had struck him deep inside his belly and then rocketed to his head.

His eyes closed.

Chapter 2

MY STOMACH GROANED AT ME ON THE WAY HOME, begging me to eat before the twisting and wrenching committed it to the hunger nut-house. I sympathized after feeding it nothing but shitty coffee and stale city air for the past fifteen hours.

I pulled into a parking lot that was surrounded by a handful of fast-food outlets. No famous brand-names like McDonalds or KFC, but a collection of local outlets that tried to put a spin on them by using similar colors and fonts in their logos and then playing on the words. You had Burger Queen for all the burger-and-fries lovers, Ken's Tucky Fried Chickens for the poultry-bucket fanatics, and Pizza Smut for the pizza nuts. That was my place, though I can't think for the life of me why I had ever ventured into a fast-food establishment with "smut" in the name.

A big sign in the window flashed "Best Pizza in the City." I couldn't argue this statement. The pizza could have been topped with shit and sugar and it still would have tasted good after I'd worked for so long on so little.

I sauntered inside and the aroma of crispy bread, toasted mozzarella, seasoned pepperoni and rich tomato sauce helped my weary legs carry me to the counter. I hadn't noticed the burly suburbanite gawking at me from the corner when I had first arrived. When I finally did, you would have thought his thick woolly sweater and black jeans would have caught my eye first; but instead, it was the wedding band swirling around his finger and the old-fashioned glasses he pushed up his nose to get a better look at my ass.

When he noticed that I'd spotted him gawking at me, he swiftly focused his attention on a fishing magazine he had opened on his lap. I stared for a while, judging his guilty façade.

"Marcia, you're late tonight!" Carlos beamed as he approached the counter with a pizza box. "I thought I must have cocked-up your last pizza." *Topped with shit and sugar, remember?*

“Just a busy night, Carlos. Pizza was just as good as the last one.”

Carlos flashed his shinier-than-white teeth again and slid the pizza box across the counter with a steaming foam cup perched on top of it. He patted my hand and tossed in one of his cheesy, innocent winks for good measure.

Carlos was born and raised in New York, and if I hadn't been looking his way when he spoke I would have sworn he was Ray Liotta from *Goodfellas*. If I were to put sex on a plate for him, he would be tempted to take a bite – but unlike Ray's character, he knew the lines that shouldn't be crossed. He was a married man and although the idea of screwing a cop might have appealed to him, I think Carlos would have bitten his knuckles and resisted the impulse. But do you ever really know what's going through the mind of a man?

“Thanks, Carlos. Keep well.” I glanced over my shoulder on the way to the door, curious whether Wedding-Band Man was still ogling my ass. This time he held the magazine halfway up his face, gawping at me as I left. There was no mistaking what was going through the head of this man: he wanted to fuck me before going home to his wife and family with dinner.

He held my stare as I made my way through the glass door. I turned my back on him and ventured across the parking lot.

I slid into my Honda, laid my pizza on the passenger seat and positioned my steaming coffee cup on the dashboard. I had the keys in the ignition, but something deep and strong inside stopped me from turning it. The steam misted up my windshield, but I could still make out the front of the pizzeria. He was still in there. Longing to fuck me.

I'd eaten two slices of pizza and it had started raining by the time Wedding-Band Man finally walked out. I had no idea why I had waited for him, and I had even less an idea what I was going to do next.

My hand pulled the door handle. That “something deep and strong” reared its ugly head again. Why didn't I resist it? It was becoming clear in my mind what I was going to do next, and although the deep and strong was pushing me forward,

something closer to the surface of my consciousness was telling me that it was wrong.

I opened the door and stepped head first into the wet night. I was only a few strides from my car before my white cotton blouse was soaked and see-through, sagging across my breasts and leaving very little to the imagination. I carried on regardless, the rapid raindrops now glancing off my saturated clothing. I stopped when headlights flashed just in front of me. He was staring at me through his windshield.

This time, there was no magazine to obscure his longing look at me. I knew how wrong it was to do this. After all, I was a dedicated detective. Back in the days when I was a beat cop, I'd arrested people for doing what I was purposely stumbling into.

He killed his lights, left the motor running and waited in the car. He knew I had taken a big risk already and that I was very likely to see it through, regardless of what he did next. He was right.

I pressed forward toward his car, a station wagon that completed the family picture. When I reached it, he didn't open the door. He didn't even wind down the window. He just sat and waited for me to make the next move. As I tapped the window, a sly grin creased his face as he leaned across the passenger seat and inched the door open.

I gripped the edge of the door and, for the first time, a moment of uncertainty tickled my decision making. The door rim was ice-cold from the bitter night and my hand started to shake. I was a strong-minded detective, so why was I so intent on going through with this? And, more importantly, why was I so scared?

The thinking and hesitation was killing me. I swung the door wide open, refusing to allow myself another second to reflect on what I was doing. Reflection could wait until I had hot water running down my lathered body in the comfort and security of my shower – and maybe not even then, because I was doing this for a reason. A priest would call it penance. I called it punishment. I believed that I deserved everything this man would do to me. After all, I didn't give it a second thought

fifteen years ago when my father was being bludgeoned to death in an alley.

Climbing into the car soon proved to be the only control I had over the next ten minutes. He pinched my chin hard with his smooth, paper-pushing hand and held it far enough away so that he could look into my eyes. He stared at me for a while, examining me. He seemed unsure, yet determined.

A second wind suddenly exploded through his body and into his hands. He gasped and fumbled with his fly, struggling to release his throbbing erection. With growing frustration, he pushed his pelvis out of the seat so he could pull down his trousers and unleash his frustrations and regrets on me.

I hit my head in the mayhem, but he didn't ask if I was okay. Instead, he wrapped my long black hair around his fingers and slowly but surely shunted my head toward his lap.

"Open, open, open," he snapped in harsh, labored breaths. He didn't say what, but I knew that he wanted me to open my mouth. I didn't have time to take a breath before he forced my head down hard. I couldn't inhale, but he didn't care. He pulled my head up by my hair, but his erection still occupied my mouth and I was unable to take a breath before he pushed me back down.

I gasped and I gripped his knee hard, but I didn't fight back; I couldn't and wouldn't. His foreskin drew back and gathered around my lips as the silky tip of his penis slid around the walls of my mouth. As he pushed my head down further, his shaft journeyed down my throat. His girth blocked my wind pipe and I gagged and gurgled. But I refused to stop him.

I opened my mouth wider, searching for oxygen to draw into my lungs, but the vacuum sucked my cheeks in tight as he forced my head up and down on his cock.

A tiny jet of liquid released in my mouth, but I knew that it was far from over.

It was difficult for me to reflect on what I was feeling as he shoved and pulled my head up and down by my hair, but when I finally entertained a momentary thought, I realized that it was *pity* for this man. Was he actually doing anything wrong? He was violently abusing me in his car, sure, but I had invited the

abuse. I wasn't naïve enough to believe that this man would walk through his front door afterward with his family-size pizza and tell his wife what he had done to me. Instead, he'll kiss her on the cheek and give absolutely no indication that he'd just fucked a stranger in his car while their dinner cooled on the back seat.

I gasped and choked as he maneuvered his cock deeper into a position that wouldn't allow me a snippet of oxygen to keep me lucid. I'd tipped over the ledge of panic, but that deep and strong something inside me prevented me hurting this man to attempt an escape.

Without warning, he navigated my mouth off his penis and held my head up like a trophy to admire as drool and pre-ejaculate clung around my mouth and dangled from my chin.

I was humiliated – and rightly so.

He revered my face for a few very long seconds. A guilty smile flickered for the smallest moment and then disappeared. He was as out of breath as I was. I thought that maybe he had finished, but he was just resting up for the dramatic climax.

He heaved me on to his lap. His erection was hard and it hurt me as he blindly fumbled with it in his hand, trying to plunge it inside me. His tension and anxiety stung my neck through his hot breath. I shrieked out loud when he entered me. He rammed me harder, panting like a rabid animal that had just escaped captivity and was rediscovering its primal instincts.

I shoved my palms against the ceiling of his station wagon and pushed down hard. He barely had room to pull back his hips and thrust, but he remained deep, punching the depths of my womanhood. Each blow struck a deep emotional chord within me. It hurt physically, but not as much as it hurt to live with the knowledge that I was responsible for something so terrible.

I turned to face him and leaned in for a kiss. Of course, the something deep and strong inside me knew that he wouldn't succumb to such an affectionate gesture and that I would be rejected and humiliated. That was why I did it. He wrenched my face away.

I lowered my hands from above my head and, as I did, he clutched my shoulders and drew me down hard into his lap. He

tugged my blouse and tore at my collar, ripping it over my breasts as he lost control. He didn't care enough to apologize.

He grunted, exhaled spittle with a long deep sigh, and closed his eyes, momentarily still and silent. I was stuck in his lap and if his erection plunged any deeper I'd be dead. One could argue that I *was* dead, but I could still feel the hurt. And with the hurt, a pain that slept far deeper: regret.

I trembled on his lap, but I wasn't the cause of the movement. It was him. He tilted my head back, gazed into my eyes, and then jerked his hips forward, hard, and held it. He didn't break eye contact as his shaking intensified. Did he feel the minutes running away from him as normality knocked on his door? Was he finally wondering if he could deal with the memory of this encounter in the future, or whether witnessing something so wicked within himself would haunt him for the rest of his life?

He closed his eyes. His body twitched and something warm released inside me. It was over and I no longer needed to be here.

He started to cry. The strong arms that had thrown me around his car only minutes before weakened and flopped to his sides. I slipped off his penis and scrambled out of the car. I didn't say a word because there was nothing to say.

As I tugged my skirt down over my thighs, a pathetic hand grabbed my arm. He had a wallet in his other hand and he gestured to the money inside, but all I could see was the moon glistening off his wedding band.

I shrugged free and crossed the parking lot to my car. I wondered what my father would think if he could see me now. Was he there above, sitting beside God, watching me punish my life from the inside out, all in his name? If so, would he be able to see that I was drowning in shame? I hoped so.