

Prologue

Cheryl Flynn's desk was a wreck. Its entire surface was smothered underneath three large piles of unopened correspondence, which her employer had done his level best to completely ignore. She was contemplating sliding everything into the paper shredder when she heard her boss's heavy footsteps approaching in the hallway.

Caught off guard, she looked at her clock and confirmed that it was just past eight o'clock in the morning. *They must be bobsledding in hell today*, she thought to herself with a chuckle. Cheryl couldn't recall a single Friday that Alabama's Lieutenant Governor, Silas Grigsby, had shown up to work before noon. Thursday evenings were generally his time to mingle with the senators over at their local watering hole. He took great pleasure in getting blitzed on the taxpayers' dime as he and his colleagues joked half-heartedly about their misuse of state funds.

Cheryl smoothed her shirt as her employer flung open the office door.

"Good morning, sir," she said as she brushed a stray hair away from her right eye. "Is everything all right, Mr. Grigsby?"

Silas Grigsby did not answer. He marched straight past her desk, his eyes fluttering behind his wire-frame glasses as he read a piece of paper clutched in his hands. He rushed through the waiting area and straight into the confines of his private office, slamming his door behind him as he went.

It had not been a good morning. The Lieutenant Governor dropped the piece of paper on his cluttered desk and went straight for a cabinet tucked between two

bookshelves on the far wall. He opened its door and snatched a full bottle of Oban scotch. He thought about filling up one of his crystal glasses, but opted instead for a more direct approach. Wrenching the cork from the bottle, he took a deep draw. In his haste, a dribble of Scotch landed on the front of his white linen shirt.

“Damn!” Grigsby cursed as he corked the bottle and ripped his dress shirt out of his pants. He threw it over the back of his chair and grabbed a spare off a hanger in his closet. He’d made a habit of keeping an extra suit in his office for many years, having cheated on his wife more days of their marriage than not. He tucked in the fresh shirt and straightened it in front of the full-length mirror in his closet before slipping his pair of blue suspenders back over his shoulders. He loosened them slightly to accommodate his belly which seemed to be swelling larger everyday. Grigsby was sweating profusely as he slicked back the few gray hairs remaining over his ears. Spraying a quick blast of cologne around his neck, he took a deep breath and composed himself in the mirror before his eight-thirty meeting with Alabama Governor, Douglas “Mac” McMillan.

Douglas McMillan, a two-term governor, had been one of the most popular governors in the history of the state of Alabama. He had won both of his elections with landslide victories and was seen by his constituents as a true democratic leader in the areas of educational reform, improvement in state infrastructure, and the general weeding out and prosecution of state corruption. He was many things to many people, but he was no friend to Silas Grigsby.

Silas Grigsby had been a partner in one the most prestigious law firms in Alabama before being tapped as a successor to the Lieutenant Governor who, had died of a heart

attack just hours after his re-election. McMillan had initially fought the appointment, but conceded on the basis that his previous lieutenant governor had been a bulldog of a man who was largely responsible for pushing through some of his more controversial policies. Douglas McMillan was no fool. He knew that everything in life revolved around proper balance and, like it or not, he knew he needed a “fixer”--a brutal thug he could send to the front lines while he kept the public focused on the success rating of his agenda.

Grigsby had been more than happy to accept the post. It was raw power that had attracted him to law in the first place, but in his mind, his law career had always been a stepping stone to a more lucrative career in the political domain. He had never voted for Douglas McMillan and typically found himself at odds with most of the governor’s policies, but he could not fathom turning down the offer when it came across his desk. He jumped at the chance to scheme his way into the inner circles of the power elite. It was no secret that McMillan had powerful connections in Washington. The current president, Arthur T. Simkin, had been an old fishing buddy of the governor since their days at Auburn nearly forty years earlier.

Grigsby backed away from the mirror as he straightened his tie. It felt uncomfortably tight. He was not accustomed to feeling nervous and even less accustomed to being blackmailed. He lifted the piece of paper from his desk and read the small typed letters once again, scowling all the while before he angrily fed it into his shredder. The words tumbled over and over in his brain: “Convince him or this will be tomorrow’s front page.” The bastard had even been able to produce a picture. *How the hell did he get that?*

The Lieutenant Governor slouched back in his chair, fuming at his predicament, imagining his secretary's reaction. Undoubtedly, she would be crushed to find herself plastered across every newspaper in the state of Alabama as the Lieutenant Governor's mistress. Cheryl was a young woman with her whole life ahead of her and who had never been in any serious trouble. But, she had been around his office long enough to produce at least some shred of evidence which might be used to save her own skin. *She could prove to be a liability* he thought, *if someone pushed her hard enough.*

"Shit," Grigsby uttered as he stood up and went to his closet to retrieve his suit coat. *Well, none of this will matter in an hour,* he told himself confidently. *MacMillan knows better than to go against me when I have my mind made up.* He slipped his coat around his shoulders and pulled his trousers up just a touch. "Everybody knows who's fucking this cat," he remarked with smug assuredness as he stalked off toward his boss's office.

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It was after midnight when Silas Grigsby poured his last tumbler of Scotch. He stumbled on the corner of an antique rug as he walked across the lounge of his sprawling antebellum mansion tucked away on a dark hillside overlooking downtown Montgomery. He eased himself into a large leather chair as he noticed his reflection in one of the rooms' floor-to-ceiling windows; a body, he acknowledged only for a moment, which had swollen to nearly unrecognizable proportions.

Grigsby ran a fat finger around the edge of his tumbler before he took a sip and placed it next to his humidor on the side-table. He pulled his cigar cutter from his pants

pocket and clipped the end off a very expensive cigar to celebrate another in a long line of political victories. This one, however, held an even more personal meaning as it had helped to keep his “good” name, such as it was, from being dragged across the state like a dog tied to a truck bumper.

He puffed on the cherry-flavored cigar, savoring not only its distinctive aroma, but also the exquisite absence of his wife which always heightened his sense of satisfaction. He had specifically arrived home late enough to miss her completely, though he had no doubt where he could find her if need be. She was exactly where she was every night after eight o’clock: upstairs, in bed, loaded to the gills on prescription medication. She had been a beautiful woman years before, but now he found her utterly repulsive.

Their wedding had been more of a financial arrangement than anything to do with love, at least that’s how he had seen it. Cynthia Grigsby, on the other hand, had been madly in love with her husband but had been ground down over the years by a stream of constant abuse, both physical and mental. Unfortunately, with his connections in the state, Silas Grigsby had negotiated a devious series of arrangements which would not only allow him to walk away with her entire family fortune, but would also leave her committed to one of the state’s “finer” institutions for long-term psychiatric “care.” Having never worked a day in her life, she coped with her situation as she had coped with most uncomfortable situations over the years; aggressive avoidance and excessive self-medication.

The mere thought of the subservient position he had created for his wife usually sent a tingle of joy through his bones, but not this night. Whoever had blackmailed him

had been able to cut through the bureaucracy like a laser. Grigsby took another sip of his scotch as he thought, *I'll have to give this matter my full attention very shortly.* He did not take kindly to being herded around like some mindless cow. *And, why was that Coast Guard appointment so important?* Silas Grigsby felt most uneasy when he was in possession of the least amount of facts and, at that moment, every question just led to more questions. *Admiral Carver would have been just as good a selection for the Head of the Coast Guard as Admiral Jackson. Their service records are damn near identical! What have I missed?*

He pondered his situation for as long as he could stand it but finally resigned himself to the fact that his head was too cloudy, whether from the events of the day or from the half bottle of scotch. Either way, he would get a fresh start in the morning, and he would find the answers he sought even if he had to tear the state of Alabama apart in the process. He stood up, bracing himself against the back of his chair until the swimming feeling in his head passed. Then, he made his way over to the old spiral staircase, gripped the rail, and began to work his way up one step at a time.

He was nearly to the top when he heard a clicking noise and caught sight of a small flash of light from underneath his wife's bedroom door. He put his right hand over his right eye and tried to focus his left eye on the crack underneath the door. There was another flash, then another. Silas Grigsby stabilized himself at the top of the stairs then walked over to the door of his old bedroom. He opened the door and stepped into the room.

There was a blinding flash of light from the walk-in closet to his left. He tripped, waving his arms as he grasped for something to hold onto. He hit the floor with a resounding thud which shook the room. Grigsby pulled himself up by the bed-sheets, wiping a touch of blood from his chin. "Goddammit, Cynthia!" he shouted. "What are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm afraid your wife is...indisposed at the moment, Mr.Grigsby," a cold voice spoke in a thick German accent.

"Who are you?" he demanded as he staggered to his feet. "What do you want?"

"You've already given me what I wanted, *Lieutenant Governor*," the man seethed with terrifying menace. "Now, I just thought I might convince you and your wife to... *indulge me.*"

"Indulge you in what?" Silas Grigsby asked as his eyesight began to return to him. He turned quickly to his right and saw that his wife was lying on top of the covers, motionless. Her eyes were wide open, lifeless in their unwavering stare. "Good Lord!" he shouted as he stumbled back away from the side of the bed. "Is she..."

"Dead?" the German chuckled. "No. She is heavily sedated, but I assure you she is *acutely* aware," he answered while slipping back into the shadows as Grigsby strained to see him in the moonlight streaming in through a slit in the curtains. "Do you have much interest in photography, Silas?" he asked as he blinded the Lieutenant Governor with another flash. Grigsby fumbled for the bed post and caught it just as he was about to fall back to the floor.

“It’s a fascinating, hobby. I’ve been toying with it since I was a boy,” the German said as he gazed through the view-finder. “Ah, that’s perfect, Grigsby. Stand next to your wife like the perfect politician you are.”

“What is it you want?” Silas Grigsby snapped as he stepped backwards until he bumped into his wife’s nightstand. “I already got your man appointed! What more do you want!”

“I need to work on my low-light photography,” the German answered absent-mindedly, “and, I never leave loose ends hanging about. They always have a way of tripping you when you least expect it,” he said as he set off another flash, keeping Grigsby as blind as possible.

“Now, reach behind you on the nightstand,” the German ordered. “Do it!” he yelled as Grigsby hesitated. “Now!”

As his hands fumbled behind him, he felt the cold steel blade lying lengthwise across the front edge of the table. He picked it up, his hands shaking as he held it out in front of his face.

“Very good,” the German sneered at Grigsby as he cocked a gun in the fragile silence and pointed it at Silas Grigsby’s head. The lieutenant governor saw the glint of moonlight against the barrel as it appeared from the darkness. “Now, when I count to three you are going to plunge that knife into your wife’s heart.”

“What?” Grigsby uttered in frightened confusion as he dropped the knife.

“Pick it up or I start picking you apart where you stand.”

Weeping, he bent over and picked it up from the floor. “No,” he pleaded in vain. “Please, God, don’t make me do it!” he cried as he risked a glance into his wife’s eyes which were twitching back and forth. “Oh, God” he moaned as the German began to speak.

“One...”

“Please, no...”

“Two...”

“Cynthia...”

“Three!”

The German snapped shot after shot, laughing in rapturous elation as warm jets of blood flew through his frames. He found his subjects’ level of passion for the project to be more than satisfactory.

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It was just after dawn when a black Ford Mustang sped out of downtown Montgomery and headed south at breakneck speed. Its driver slipped on a pair of dark sunglasses as the first rays broke across the horizon. He rolled a small splatter of blood back and forth between the index finger and thumb of his left hand as he drove. As he had expected, his phone rang before he even made it out of the city limits.

“Everything is in order,” he answered without hesitation. “Admiral Jackson will be the next Commandant of the Alabama Coast Guard.”

“And Grigsby?” a boisterous voice boomed in his ear.

“Ah, yes, I should think that before noon there will be adequate news coverage of a *tragic* murder/suicide involving poor Silas Grigsby and his lovely wife.”

“Perfect, Heizer. You’ve done well, as always,” the voice complemented the German as he continued. “Head back to Gulf Shores and ready your men. I want to start collecting our shipments as soon as Admiral Jackson is appointed.”

“Sehr Gut,” he replied in German as he hung up the phone, not bothering to tell his employer that his men had been in place for weeks. He glanced at the camera bag riding shotgun in the seat next to him and smiled, gently patting the top of the bag. His next trip to the dark room would be most enjoyable, indeed.