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Reloaded

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Michael Grant

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For Katherine, Jake and Julia

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

ONE

“Oh, I needed that.”

The president of the United States, Helen Falkenhym Morales, was feeling gratified. She and her husband had just sat in bed and watched Jon Stewart take apart the Senate majority leader, a Morales foe. And for once the president had gone off-diet and actually eaten most of a butterscotch sundae.

An enemy ridiculed, and a gooey sundae: a good end to an otherwise lousy day.

Monte Morales leaned across the bed and wiped a bit of whipped cream from her chin, popped it in his mouth, and smiled.

She liked that smile; it was a very particular smile, and if it were not for the fact that her life was lived according to a rigid schedule, well . . . he was still sexy after all these years.

Her husband, Monte Morales, the first gentleman, or as most people referred to him, MoMo, was ten years younger than she and kept himself in good shape for a man of forty-five. It was one of the things the American people liked about him. They

liked his good looks; they liked his obvious devotion to his wife; they liked the stories about his genial weekly poker games with some of the other spouses of important Washington players.

They didn't approve of his smoking cigars in the White House, but the American people were willing to forgive so long as he kept on being the charming, easygoing counterbalance to his wife's razor-edged personality.

MoMo was the living proof that the president couldn't be all bad—even her enemies admitted that.

“What's bothering you, babe?” MoMo asked.

She turned and frowned at him. It had sounded perilously close to criticism. “What do you mean? It's time for bed, that's all.”

He sat up, swung his legs off the side of the bed, and said, “Not now, I mean generally. You've been a little weird.”

“Weird?” The word was absurd applied to Helen Falkenhym Morales. Difficult, cold, critical: those were the words applied to her most frequently. No one thought she was weird.

MoMo shrugged his broad shoulders. “I mean . . . off. Just, sometimes. Little stuff. You were talking during the program.”

“So?”

“So you never do, that's all.”

“Really? You think ten minutes before we go to sleep is time to start questioning me?” She pulled on a robe and glanced at her pad. Nothing there that needed immediate attention.

MICHAEL GRANT

There was a coup under way in Tajikistan. That could wait.

And there was a briefing book from Patrick Rios, the new director of the ETA—the Emerging Technologies Agency. Rios, late of the FBI and a real go-getter type, was pushing hard to go after McLure Industries. What Rios didn't seem to understand was that Grey McLure and his son had been murdered in what had been—until the UN terrorist attack—the biggest headline event of the year. Go after McLure?

Well . . . why not, now that she thought of it. Rios was very smart, very capable. He reminded the president of herself, somehow. When she pictured Rios, she always seemed to see herself as a young, aggressive prosecutor.

She trusted him.

She needed to give him a free hand.

He was very like her, a good guy, reliable.

In fact, the two memories—of Rios and of herself at that age—were wired together. The president's brain could not think of Rios without thinking of herself.

“Babe, that's not what I'm saying,” MoMo said. He stood to wrap his arms around her, but she moved away, heading toward the bathroom and a hot shower, her end-of-day relaxation ritual. He followed. “It's just I'm wondering if you're okay.”

“Listen, MoMo, I'm tired. And until thirty seconds ago I was feeling like I had put a pleasant full stop on this lousy day. So if you have something to say, let's get to it.”

She slid back the glass door on the shower and turned the water on. It would take thirty seconds for the water to heat up.

“Okay,” he said, suddenly very serious. “It’s a bunch of little things. You’ve developed a nervous tic in your eye.”

“It’s the pollen—it’s been terrible.”

“You call me MoMo. You never used to. I don’t mind it from other people, but that’s not what you call me.”

She hesitated. “Okay.”

“You ate raw tomatoes.”

“What?”

“You ate raw tomatoes. You hate them. You dropped the F-bomb in the Cabinet meeting. You never do that. The last couple days I see you staring in the mirror, and it’s like you just go blank. The other day you snapped at the photographer. When do you ever do that?”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I’ve been under some pressure lately,” she said, her voice dripping sarcasm.

“You’ve been under pressure since I’ve known you, Helen, you don’t snap at people who work for you, not people who can’t defend themselves. It’s just . . .” He shrugged helplessly. “I just wonder if maybe we should take a few days up at Camp David.”

“I can’t do that,” she said icily. “I’m not the first lady, I’m the goddamned president. I have actual work to do.”

The insult was like a knife in his ribs. He gulped, shocked by it.

MICHAEL GRANT

“See, that’s not the kind of thing you say,” he said finally.

She blinked.

“Sorry, Mo—, sorry, sweetheart. I’m . . .” She forced a helpless smile. “Yeah, maybe I need some time off.”

“Maybe more than that. That twitch, all this little stuff, more than I can remember right now . . . maybe you should call the White House physician. Just have him check. You know . . . could be . . . I don’t know.”

The president nodded solemnly. “Okay. Now I’m taking a shower. Want to join me?”

“You know I’m a bath man,” he said, his tone half reproach, half forgiveness.

She put her arms around him. “But I’m lonely in that big shower all alone.”

When they were under the spray she considered her options.

MoMo wouldn’t let it drop. He was nothing if not persistent. He loved her and he would keep pushing. And pushing.

Something was wrong with her—that was the hell of it. She had felt it. She knew it was true. Something wrong.

But she had a year until the election. This was no time to look weak. This was no time for doctors to be finding a tumor or a stroke or even just too much stress.

But what could she do? How could she stop MoMo from loving her right out of the White House?

Later she would recall that question.

Later she would ask herself how she had decided on the terrible answer.

But at this moment all she saw was that it would have to be a single swift blow. No second chances.

She pressed close to her husband. She kissed him. She ran her fingers through his wet hair, held both sides of his head tight, and with every muscle in her body smashed the back of his head against the tile wall.

MoMo sagged to the floor. Blood came with surprising force, more than she would have imagined.

She left the water running, stepped from the shower, crossed to the bathtub, and began filling it with hot water.

It took a couple of minutes before there was enough water in the tub.

MoMo groaned in the shower. Nonsense sounds, not words, but still she had to hurry.

She slid back the shower door, knelt down, put her hands under his arms, and dragged him the five feet to the tub. That much was easy: he was wet and soapy, and the floor was tile.

The harder part was pushing him up over the side of the tub. For the scenario to work it would have to seem as if he'd slipped and smashed his head against the side of the tub. It would be a long night of making sure that bloodstains were only in exactly the right places. The president would be scrubbing.

She manhandled MoMo into the rising water in the tub.

MICHAEL GRANT

Now he was moaning and moving feebly, like a sleepwalker, like a drunk, uncoordinated.

He splashed into the tub.

His eyes fluttered open as she ground the bloody wound against the back of the tub.

“Mwuh?” he managed to say.

Mustn’t leave handprints. Had to do this right. She pressed her palms against his chest and leaned her weight on him until his head was completely submerged.

His dark eyes blinked, seemed to gain awareness for just a moment, and his arms came up out of the water to push back . . .

Too late. His lungs filled.

He vomited into the water.

And then she no longer had to hold him down. MoMo wasn’t going anywhere.

It would be a tragedy. The nation would mourn. She would get a ten-point sympathy bounce in the polls.

Her secrets would be safe.

A sob heaved up from inside her. She loved him. She loved him with all her heart.

And she had just murdered him.

In an office in a building on the 1800 block of Pennsylvania Avenue, just streets from the White House, Bug Man tore the gloves from his hands.

He was shaking.

He felt sick. He climbed out of the chair, made it five steps on the way to the very nice executive bathroom before falling to his knees, gasping as if he'd been running a marathon.

He had been.

Down in the meat, down in the nano, he had been racing his exploding-head-logo nanobots, laying wire like some demented lineman from elements of the president's ego, her self-image, to images of MoMo.

Bug Man had long since cauterized a number of areas storing what might be called ethics or morality. In fact, they weren't that, they were memories of books, sermons, lectures, and—much more powerful—the images of victimization from her childhood in San Antonio that formed the basis of her core decency.

Like most politicians, and all presidents, she had a strong ego. She'd always had well-developed instincts for survival, what some would describe as ruthlessness. But it had been balanced by pity, kindness, fellow feeling, love.

Bug Man had needed a less moral, more ruthless person. He had needed her simplified—the better to manipulate, the better to convince her to give Rios and his brand new government agency free rein to quash any unhelpful investigations, to oppose any international action.

So Bug Man had made her that. He had needed her to be

MICHAEL GRANT

suggestible to paranoia; he had needed to be able to plug that heightened aggressiveness and ruthlessness into pictures of any and all whose actions might threaten the Armstrong Fancy Gifts Corporation.

Yes.

Well.

Brains are subtle things. Some miswiring had created the twitches and tells that had alerted MoMo to changes in his wife. The president's heightened aggression combined with weakened restraint had led now to murder.

But for the last desperate minutes Bug Man had not been trying to get Helen Falkenhym Morales to kill her husband MoMo. He'd been trying to stop her.

Once he'd seen where she was going he'd tried—way too little, way too late—to make her see MoMo as an extension of herself.

The only result was that later, too damned late, she would feel remorse. Guilt. Which would only create its own problems.

Bug Man was on his knees, blood pounding in his face, stomach churning with fear, waiting for the call.

When his phone did ring it still startled him.

He wondered how long he could go without answering. He wondered if he could keep from vomiting again. Or crying.

“Yeah,” he whispered into his phone.

“Oh, Anthony.” The voice was not the ranting fury of the

Armstrong Twins. It was Burnofsky. “Anthony, Anthony: what have you done?”

“Jesus Christ!” Bug Man wailed. “I didn’t know the crazy bitch would—”

Burnofsky laughed his parchment-dry laugh. “Watch what you say. Washington is full of big ears.”

“What am I . . . What do . . .” He couldn’t even frame the question. His breathing was short and harsh. “The Twins . . .”

“Past their bedtime, fortunately. The only one watching the video feed was me.”

It was a sign of how frightened Bug Man was that he welcomed this news. He despised Burnofsky, but he was terrified of Charles and especially Benjamin Armstrong.

“But there will be no hiding this, of course,” Burnofsky went on.

Bug Man cursed, but there was no anger left in him. All was cold knife-steel fear now. The Twins—Charles and Benjamin Armstrong, those freaks—were not patient with underlings who screwed up.

The things they could do to him . . . An earlier error had been punished with a beating delivered by AmericaStrong thugs against Bug Man’s legs and buttocks. He still couldn’t sit in a chair without a handful of Advil. Now he had endangered everything.

“I’m a twitcher; I’m a fighter, not a goddamned spinner,”

MICHAEL GRANT

Bug Man pleaded with the phone. “I took down Vincent himself. I took down Kerouac before him. I’m the best. I’m important. They can’t kill me! This is—”

“Mmmm,” Burnofsky said, amused, gloating, already seeing in his opium-addled brain the price the Twins might demand. “You’re screwed, Anthony my young friend. There’s only one person on this green Earth who can save you. Do you know who that is, Anthony?”

Bug Man was trembling. Even now, no anger. Anger would come later, along with self-justification, but right now, with his face inches from the floor and his whole body feeling sick, Bug Man could only moan.

“Who, Anthony? Who can save you now, you arrogant little Limey shit? Say the word.”

“You,” Bug Man whispered.

Silence stretched as Burnofsky absorbed his rival’s defeat. Then the older man said, “Go limp. Power down. Go to your hotel, screw your girlfriend, but do nothing else until I tell you.”

The phone went dead. Bug Man rolled onto his side and cried.