

PROLOGUE

Senator J.A. Burnside lay dead. A single gunshot to his right temple had done its intended damage. The senator had been reclining in an oxblood leather club chair when the trigger was pulled, and now both he and the chair rested on the silk Turkish carpet, his crimson smoking jacket camouflaging the blood flow. The look of relaxation frozen on his face seemed to suggest relief. His left arm rested against his hip. A glass with the faint ochre residue of fifty-year-old scotch stood on top of a still standing mahogany First Empire end table. The perfect final flavor. Besides the overturned chair, nothing appeared out of order. Everything occupied its proper place. Nothing had been stolen. Nothing indicated a forced entry. Nothing suggested a struggle. Only the Kerr's Patent Revolver a few inches from Burnside's outstretched hand looked out of place.

The police quickly arrived at the senator's penthouse condo in Alexandria. Despite the premium such properties commanded, the condo lacked the sonic privacy one would normally expect in such a building. New construction tended to skimp on sound dampening—not that it would have made much of a difference. The report that killed Burnside shattered an otherwise muted evening. Loud and occasionally odd sounds emanating from the senator's apartment were not unusual, especially later in the evening. Burnside entertained often and with revelry. Muffled classical music and laughter were commonly heard by the senator's less-than-thrilled neighbors.

This was different. The crack of a revolver was unmistakable—an abrupt, jarring resonance that sent tingles through the bones of everyone nearby. When asked, neighbors affirmed they'd heard nothing before or after the single shot; no slamming doors, no footsteps in

the hall, not even the chime of the elevator announcing its arrival.

Senator Burnside, deep in his second term, served as the junior senator from his native state of Indiana. Childless and a confirmed bachelor, he looked much younger than his forty-seven years suggested. He was tall and fit, and the burgeoning gray invasion of his light blond hair was mercifully slow. Burnside routinely ranked among the best dressed men in politics. This made him quite eligible in the District's social scene, but he kept no serious girlfriend, preferring the casual dalliance to commitment. In the senator's mind, now spilling out on his blue Turkish rug, monogamy was ungenerous at best. If he was being honest, it was downright selfish to limit himself to one woman while denying so many others the opportunity to indulge in the type of ecstasy he provided.

No one questioned his public taste in women. His inamoratas frequently graced the society pages of the *Washington Post*, *Esquire*, and *GQ*. Speculation about the senator's romantic life and rumors of exotic proclivities garnered far more attention than his political career. Remarkably, the senator led a scandal-free life even as libertine innuendo often swirled around him.

Burnside's senatorial life consisted primarily of voting the party line and dolling out patronage. He had determined early in his term that attendance for anything short of the State of the Union was optional, including visits to his constituents. The only consistent criticism of his tenure pertained to the senator spending more time in New York and Nantucket than Indiana. He ran with a glamorous crowd, the token politician amongst the glitterati.

Thanks to his senatorial status, Burnside served on the Board of Directors for the Smithsonian and the Kennedy Center. Opera premieres and gallery openings in DC and New York defined his schedule, and the Louvre, Tate Modern, and Bolshoi enjoyed his annual patronage. Part anachronism, part progressive, the sybaritic Burnside had been an artful blend of the serious and the frivolous. Independently wealthy, stable, and from a historically prominent family, why J.A. Burnside would kill himself proved anybody's guess.

1

Tradd Mashburn rubbed his bloodshot eyes. “Jeeeesus,” he hissed under his breath. Against his light green eyes, the scarlet spider webbing added a Christmas flair to his otherwise haggard appearance, comically juxtaposed by his perfectly pressed suit. Still unsure as to why he bothered to come into the office, Tradd slumped back in his desk chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his index finger and thumb. The Richmond Bar Association’s Young Lawyers Division had held a happy hour the previous night at a rooftop bar in the Fan neighborhood, where the promise of “I’ll only have a beer” was broken by 6:45. By round four, beers switched to bourbon. A friend suggested a round of boilermakers, a brilliant idea unanimously accepted.

Tradd didn’t recall much after that. He’d awoken on his couch, wearing yesterday’s clothes, with only his pastel bowtie undone. For some reason, he found it advantageous to sleep wearing his tortoise shell Persol sunglasses. Even when passed out drunk, Tradd exuded Southern spezzato. Taking the first sip of the Commonwealth of Virginia Attorney General’s Office battery acid masquerading as coffee, Tradd let out a much louder, “Fuck!” Tradd’s profane outburst resulted not from the taste, though it was wretched, but from hot liquid threatening to upset the precarious balance inside Tradd’s stomach. He’d considered forcing himself to vomit before coming to the office but decided against it.

Tradd had been a good law student, but never quite great. He cared little for grades or the trinkets they bestowed upon the earner. By his own admission, he owed his current employment to family connections—or at least the interview. He liked to think that his in-

candescent personality and rakish good looks were what had cinched it. Either way, his tour in the Attorney General's Office was quite the professional coup. The AG's Office was the first step of a career that would move to big law associate to partner to either governor or senator. At least, that was how Tradd envisioned it as he fought off regular bouts of professional ennui. Dreaming big was the key to surviving the infancy of a legal career. However, ambition would not perform his present responsibilities for him.

Sitting at his desk, Tradd tried fruitlessly to fight off his hang-over. Raising his left hand to his temple, the throbbing proved so palpable that he could check his pulse by it. He longed for a quiet morning. Unfortunately, the day did not offer such a leisurely pace. His email inbox lit up with an urgent assignment. Unusual—nothing assigned to a rookie lawyer in the AG's land use and historic preservation division is ever urgent, Tradd determined as he cursed his decisions from the previous evening. Silently, he made another promise to himself that he needed to cut back on the booze, if not for his career's sake then for his liver's, especially on weeknights.

Summoning up all the concentration he could muster, Tradd opened his messages, squinted at the screen and read. Progress evaded him. Salutations required maximum effort, and the LCD monitor pierced his straining eyes like a jagged blade. The contents of his stomach waged a relentless offensive against him. Soon, it would breach his defenses like flood waters over a Louisiana levee. He resisted its surge for as long as he could, pushing down hard on his roiling gut. Five minutes and only one paragraph later, Tradd fled to the bathroom. Relief would soon be his.

2

One hundred miles north, Detective Arch Williams arrived in the lobby of the recently departed Senator Burnside's building. No official announcement regarding the senator's death had been made. For such a prominent figure, Burnside's next of kin proved surprisingly elusive, and the Alexandria Police wanted to inform family before informing the world. Dead famous people often had slews of relatives popping up to grab their piece of the departed's estate. To Arch's knowledge, no one had even produced a will in the hours since the death had been confirmed. The vultures, legitimate or not, would soon be circling this carcass. Big money always attracted them. As he crossed the lobby door's threshold, Arch met two junior detectives, each nursing a lukewarm cup of over-sweetened gas station coffee.

"Whatcha think?" Arch grumbled.

"The coffee at a shitty convenience store is better than the stuff at the office," one of the younger detectives joked.

Never one for comedy at a murder scene, Arch fired back, "About the dead senator, dickhead. What the hell did you think I was asking about? How many times you jerked off today? This guy served our country. Show some goddamn respect."

The two younger officers recoiled at their superior's unamused tone. Their eyes flashed with guilt.

"It's pretty cut and dried, sir," the other junior detective asserted with a touch too much certainty for Arch's taste. "Guy shot himself. No break-in. Nothing's out of the ordinary. Neighbors didn't hear anything other than the shot. Only weird thing is that he used an antique gun."

"Cut and dried, huh? You sound pretty damn certain consid-

ering you've been here for, what, an hour? At the academy, did they teach you about the dangers of jumping to conclusions?"

"Take a look at the scene," the junior detective replied, chastised but still certain. "What else could it have been? It's not like someone would bother to assassinate a senator from Indiana. Nothing appears to be stolen, and given what's inside, a burglar would have had a field day. Antiques, nice watches, paintings, and shit—all untouched. No signs of a struggle or anything like it. Must have had some demons or something. You'll see, detective."

"CCTV? Personal security system?" Arch asked.

"Nope. Nothing like that," the other junior detective answered. "Lobby has one and other public areas have CCTV, but the penthouse does not. Maximum privacy, I guess. We did find a camera in the bedroom, but it hasn't been used in quite a while. It looks like it's more for, uh, recreational use. Anyway, it's blank."

For some reason, this didn't surprise Arch.

The three Alexandria detectives rode the elevator to the penthouse in silence. Arch figured that this assignment was a punishment of sorts. Like many cops, he hated press cases, and this was a press case—and a bizarre one to boot. *Someone served me a shit sandwich*, Arch thought, swallowing hard. This came as no surprise. Arch had stepped on plenty of toes during his career. He excelled as a detective but failed as a workplace politician. Colleagues liked him well enough, but a stark anti-authority streak ran through him. In the course of being right, he'd pissed off plenty of superiors over his career. They couldn't fire him—he was a stellar detective—so making his life miserable was the only other option. Someone was having his revenge. The elevator doors opened with a *ding*, revealing the extravagant penthouse floor. Both junior detectives in tow, Arch entered the senator's apartment, stopping in his tracks as he took in the scene.

Burnside didn't live in an apartment—he lived in a museum. Not that Detective Williams possessed any profound understanding of antiques, but he realized that this was among the most opulent spaces he had ever entered. Silk rugs were artfully arranged across the oak-

stained hardwood floors, and the walls proudly displayed an expensive art collection—Arch even recognized one of the artists' names. Cold daylight poured in through the broad glass panes that once provided Burnside with a panoramic view of the Potomac. Next to a small but well-stocked bar, a state-of-the-art phonograph indicated that the senator had been a music lover. Arch rifled through some of the LPs closest to the phonograph. All had Italian titles. He recognized one: *Tosca*. Opera lover. *How 'of the people', senator*, Arch mused. *Lotta opera listeners in Hoosier country?*

Bobby Singh, the Alexandria coroner and forensics examiner, appeared from the senator's study and beckoned. "Over here, Arch," he said in an overly cheery voice.

"Hey Bobby," Arch responded with a friendly tone as he made his way over to his friend. The two had worked frequently together over the years, and Arch enjoyed the coroner's dark, slightly grotesque sense of humor, not to mention the confident way he paired the white lab coat of his profession with the saffron turban of his religion.

The senator's body had been taken to the morgue that morning, and law enforcement was combing over any potential evidence. Taking in the death scene, Arch focused on the overturned chair and the blood that had dripped onto the azure carpet and dried, leaving a wine-colored stain. Next to the chair, a tumbler with a few milliliters of scotch remained undisturbed. Arch walked to the table and brought the glass to his nose. He delighted at the scent. The subtle caramels and vanillas filled his nostrils. Such a spirit was far beyond his paygrade. Turning to Singh, he asked, "Anything interesting?"

"If you consider a gunshot wound made by an antique pistol to be interesting, then yeah," Singh answered.

"Seriously?" Arch replied incredulously, recalling one of the younger detective's remark. "He shot himself with an antique gun?" Gesturing to the junior detective with the smart mouth, Arch added, "I thought that fuckface over there was trying to be clever. Christ, man."

“Yep. That’s a new one for me too. I guess he wanted to make a signature statement on the way out.”

“Judging by this place, this dude got off on being unique. Look around. There’s nothing normal about anything here.”

“That’s the thing about rich people,” Bobby started. “They always gotta be different and special. As if the rest of us mortals gave a fuck about their lives.”

“True that, Bobby.” Looking around, Arch unlocked his phone. “I guess we’d better tell the powers that be to schedule a presser.”

“I guess so,” Singh answered with a morbid smile. “Maybe you’ll get to call the president too; brief him on the death of an inconsequential senator. But first, you have to take a look at this study. Suicides come weird, but this one makes my highlight reel.”

“You’re certain that it’s a suicide? I don’t want to tell the chief and later look like an asshole.”

“Pretty much. All signs point to it. Well, all except one. And it’s too late for you to not look like an asshole. That ship has long since sailed.”

“Don’t hold back on me, Bobby.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. You’ve developed a prickly demeanor as you’ve gotten older—”

“About the FUCKIN’ gun, you jackass! I don’t need a goddamn personality critique this morning. I got an ex-wife for that. She loves telling me what’s wrong with me.”

“You walked right into that one, ace. Couldn’t resist. Anyway, it’s the gun,” Bobby stated as he handed Arch a photograph of the scene. “The gun is right next to the senator’s head.”

“And?”

“That’s odd. In my experience, the gun is never that close to the victim’s head. The force of the discharge propels the gun out of the deceased’s now-lifeless hand. Once the trigger is pulled, the hand goes limp. Without the resistance, the blowback from the

gun can make it go any number of ways away from the victim. Usually lands out of his reach at the very least. Sometimes on the other side of the room. Really depends on a lot of factors.”

“What are you saying? That the gun placement is impossible?”

“Hold your horses, Arch. I didn’t say that. I said that I’ve never seen it. That doesn’t mean it can’t happen. Suicides are weird, man. Weird shit happens.”

“Hmmp,” Arch added—tuning into his detective’s intuition. “Why do you think it’s there? Someone place it there?”

“That would be an obvious way, but I’m not saying that. No, sir. Could’ve been anything. Strange bounce. Light gunpowder charge resulting in a smaller blowback force. Not sure, and I can’t say anything definite. Nor will I at this time. Especially about another party being somehow involved. That would change the situation considerably, not to mention make me look like an idiot.”

“Jesus, Bobby, don’t get your panties in knot. No one’s pressing you for an answer.”

Bobby smiled. “I’ll let you know if we find anything interesting. I’ll also let you know if we don’t. You know how I love wasting your time and making you stay late with pointless information.”

The two parted with a laugh. Arch looked through the photos of the scene with the corpse present. The senator’s right arm lay on the peacock blue carpet, cocked at a forty-five-degree angle—the revolver only a few inches from the top of his outstretched fingers. A perfect suicidal pose, he thought, just as one would expect it to be. As seen on TV. The clear conclusion. On the elevator ride back to his car, Arch replayed the crime scene in his mind. Only one piece didn’t fit: the placement of the gun.

3

Granville Carr stood on the front veranda of New Blenheim Farm, puffing away on his Dublin pipe. The straw brim of his Panama hat shielded his naked eyes from the eastern glare. Morning rose over western Loudoun County, Virginia. Blooms filled Carr's nose, and bird songs swam across the grounds. Carr loved the morning, particularly the moment when the sun was just an hour old. The whole day and all of its possibilities lay ahead, and Carr deemed wasting possibilities a sin. As Carr drank in the May morning, he suspected that today would be a glorious day.

Today, like most every day save the Sabbath, Granville Carr inspected his property on horseback. New Blenheim shot out in every direction, and a pedestrian course would take far too long. *A gentleman never neglects his possessions*, Carr reckoned. If he was fortunate enough to own land, he must maintain and preserve it for three reasons. First, a gentleman did not acquire what he could not put to good use. Second, by maintaining what he had, a gentleman proved that he was an appropriate steward of it. Third, a gentleman need understand that there are many people far less fortunate than him. Allowing his possessions to go to waste insulted those people and painted the possessor as a frivolous ingrate. This code of conduct defined Granville Carr—such mandates provided guidance and comfort, illuminating the proper ways in which to conduct one's affairs. While hardly a unique perspective, Carr lamented how adherence to tradition and honor consigned one to an ever-diminishing minority.

Carr knocked out the dead embers of the golden weed from his pipe, then placed the pipe on a short table between two deep green rocking chairs. As he did, the clip-clop of iron-capped hooves grew

prominent as Sarabeth Malone, the barn manager, came into view atop a chestnut mare. To her left, a saddled, unmounted gray stallion followed her lead. Sarabeth offered a friendly wave to her employer. "Good morning, Mr. Granville. Are you ready, sir?"

Born and reared in Winchester, Virginia, Sarabeth Malone had worked for Carr for many years. She, alongside so many wealthy urbanites, found succor in the sophisticated hamlets of Piedmont Virginia. It didn't hurt that bucolic hunt country estates paired well with their East Hampton beach houses. Whatever their motives, they wanted well-run estates, and their resources were practically limitless. Though mostly absentee landowners, they restored and maintained many significant properties, saving them from neglect and slow destruction.

Sarabeth worked hard in the service of such people, forging a sterling reputation among the equestrian circles. Several years of hard work made Loudoun landowners covetous of her services. Offers were made and politely rebuffed. Granville Carr first encountered Sarabeth Malone just as he had an opening for a barn manager. He knew of her—very little of hunt country life escaped his notice—and she certainly knew of him. New Blenheim was the crown jewel of western Loudoun. Sarabeth accepted Carr's offer immediately, and for the last fifteen years, she had begun every day blissfully on the farm. Nearly all of the people who worked for Granville Carr enjoyed long tenures. Carr valued loyalty supremely. Only honor outranked it. Carr sought to surround himself with people on whom he could rely, people he could trust.

"Good morning, Sarabeth. It is truly an exquisite morning, don't you think?"

Bringing both horses to a halt, she answered, "Isn't every day on New Blenheim exquisite, Mr. Granville?"

"Touché," he said, wearing a broad smile. He descended the stairs to ground level, his immaculately polished brown leather riding boots clacking on the field stone steps. Sarabeth smiled warmly as she handed her employer the reins to Gunpowder, the unmounted

gray stallion. Despite his near septuagenarian status, Granville Carr mounted the horse like a man one-third of his age. "Thank you, Sarabeth. I'll see you here on my return."

With a final tweak of his moustache, Carr dug his boot heels into Gunpowder's barrels. Training commandeered the stallion's nervous system. Electric impulses conveyed the rider's instruction. The beast did not hesitate. Before Sarabeth could respond, Granville and Gunpowder exploded to a full gallop. The morning's inspection had commenced.