

MURDER AT THE MANSION I

In the top floor bedroom, the First Lady dreamed of making love with Rex beneath the arms of a muscular oak. Her body, cupped by the earth, moistens in feathery rain, the sky explodes with a quickening rhythm of water on leaves, and then they fall, sinking into hot muck, lost in a magic and sinful state at the bottom of America.

At fifty-four, the First Lady wore the same size six as her wedding gown. Her dark-haired beauty was a solvent to the advance of time. A stream of sun rays parted her eyelids. She bolted up from the pillow and wrapped herself in her red silk robe, a gift from Exxon's wife.

Waking Rex was odd duty. She so rarely did it. However long he may have lingered in some assignation hatched after the hustings, he always made it back, smelling clean, for several hours of sleep, his room or hers, wherever prudence deem he camp. She daubed her face with cold water and stepped into the hallway, muttering a Hail Mary for patience.

Each day he wasn't on the road, Rex was head of the Mansion he loved like a human body. His ratings had risen steadily across the years while she installed art works from distant places, purchased with her own money, the more exotic pieces a secret between them. The marble for the solarium came from quarries south of Florence, a goodwill gesture to the state from some now-interred Mediterranean administration grateful for medical supplies, food-stuff and Italo-Louisiana volunteers, dispatched by Rex on oil company airplanes to a village rubble by an earthquake west of Pisa. That is when Governor LaSalle had gone on TV. He spoke from the Capitol terrace, overlooking the statue of Huey Long, and held up His Holiness's letter: "A gift of stone, blessed by the throne in Rome, affirms the values of our state — *an international state!*"

He was a bawdy man, the most outrageous she had ever

known. Down the years he had stretched every tissue of their original love; she was tired of taking him back with stale apologies, of trying to restitch the bond. Part of him, she believed, was driven by a wild erotic charge beyond the circuitry of most men, incapable of sexual honesty, reduced to a tearful display, down on a knee like some black-face vaudevillian pleading *you're the only one I ever loved, baby, nothin', nobody else counts, I mean nobody!* Never had she felt more isolated. His levers of influence functioned more fluidly than those of her daddy, Mayor of Avoyelles for thirty-seven years and still getting votes ten summers after his funeral. Rex wielded power as naturally as some men glide across a ballroom floor. He took three showers a day and was the most spectacular politician in these latitudes since television.

Amelia LaSalle (*nee* Broussard), Queen of the 1959 Sugar Festival, Miss Louisiana runner-up, 1960, had her own issues. Battle scarred in matrimony, she had shifted of necessity to an aesthetic quest, a search for clarity in the paintings, photographs and works of anonymous artists whose carvings from black Africa lined her space in the interior of a mansion that drew more people on guided tours than any other in the fifty capitals.

She had serious money banked in her own name and tolerated his galloping libido for reasons she didn't brood upon with chemical company presidents due at ten and at a quarter past nine the Governor hadn't stirred.

She crossed the hallway and rapped the mahogany door, a gift from Hondurans who flew in every winter, generals and politicians toting weapons into marshes behind camps loaned by the petrochemical companies, feral men yet sociable in that seamless Latin way, blasting deer, rabbits, nutria, raccoon, anything in a shotgun's sight, trailing bloody boot prints back to the lodges with women who disappeared when TV lights came on for our good neighbors to the South. Partners in free enterprise type guvment.

Turning the knob, she advanced into the smaller room and pulled back the curtains, shedding a diaphanous glow on her husband of more than three decades. She shook the Governor's foot.

“Rex, honey.” *He’s fifty-five. Running around like a yard dog. Lord, Jesus: help me salvage him . . .*

“Come on, *dear*. Time to get up.”

She jostled his shoulder: an arm flopped, hand on the floor.

His eyes were wide open.

They still talk of how her screams cascaded down the banisters, streaking over portraits of long entombed governors, Mayan figurines and a Harlem painting by Jacob Lawrence, walls tremulous with echoes of her voice hitting the downstairs reception hall, startling a florist who dropped chrysanthemums, scattering yellow blossoms on the floor.

Mitchell Mudd, the Governor’s confidential assistant, had just sat down in the foyer of the boss’s office where Colonel Lawson Bellamy, the chief of state police, had come to lobby for a better pension package. Mudd was lean with dark hair; Bellamy muscular with a crew-cut the color of wheat. Popping out like springs, they raced up the stairwell in the wake of her screams, bounding into the room where the First Lady had collapsed over the body, sobbing.

Mudd cupped his fingers on her shoulders. “Miss Amelia, let me see.”

“Jesus God, Mitchell: he won’t wake up!”

Mudd cradled her shoulders as she pulled up from the bed. She covered her mouth. Colonel Bellamy held the Governor’s wrist, studied his watch, put an ear on Rex LaSalle’s chest. Bellamy pulled out his cellphone. The First Lady shut herself in the bathroom, faucet running to quiet her sobs, washing her hands in reaction to the feel of his dead skin. When Mudd cried “*you all right in there?*” she emerged from hot vapors, scowling at the men.

Bellamy barked into the phone: “We got a critical emergency with Governor LaSalle. I need a cardiac unit *immediately!*”

Out in the world, cirrus clouds hung like gauze in an azure sky. Autumn was the season Rex loved best: festivals at harvest time, football nights. For fourteen days the heat had been so brutal that people could not work outside in the middle hours. Economists were being interviewed about lost labor time.

Amelia LaSalle left for the master suite. "I need to change."
"Absolutely," asserted Mitchell Mudd. "I'm keepin' track."

The bedroom swallowed her in the silence of a crypt.

She was alone: two daughters on their own, her mother living sixty miles away, her charming half-mad rogue of a spouse gone forever. She pictured Rex's hands reaching up through misty clouds, only to be pulled down by hairy Satanic paws. Dead: why? She murmured a prayer for the soul freed from the body down the hall where Colonel Bellamy had his eyes trained on the medical men like amoebae under a microscope.

"Well, was it his heart?" the Colonel demanded.

The young doctor and his younger paramedic perspired in green smocks. "I can't document cause of death," said the physician. "But his lips are blue, his fingernails are blue, and he has an acrid smell. I'd be speculating to say he's poisoned, Colonel."

An exposed sheet revealed the Governor's right leg. Lipstick smears ran down his knee and thigh. The sheet was folded over his equator.

"You saying he didn't die of natural causes?" muttered Colonel Bellamy.

"I'm saying it's not my job to produce forensic data."

"Looks like somebody visited," stewed Bellamy.

Mitchell Mudd's black eyes glared at the Colonel. With other men present, every word was adhesive.

"We don't know enough," grunted Bellamy.

"Gentlemen," put in the emergency physician, "you need to call the Coroner. And since the Governor was Roman Catholic, you should call a priest."

"What's your opinion?" Bellamy fired back.

"His vital functions ceased operating several hours ago."

"He was vital at some point," said Bellamy, eyeing the lipwork on the dead man's leg.

"Goddamn," growled Mitchell Mudd. "Can't y'all clean him?"

"The Coroner should deal with the corpse in its present state," said the doctor. "I grew up here and don't need an order to keep

my mouth shut.”

“Cause if it opens, you’re in a sea of burning shit!” snapped Mitchell Mudd. He threw a cold glance at the paramedic, who said: “It’s all private!”

“That’s right,” said Mudd. “What a man and his wife do alone is sacred. Reporters have no morals.”

The four men stared at the body.

“Y’all take the servants’ elevator,” ordered Bellamy. “Stay in the kitchen till the Coroner comes. Nobody leaves till we got control of the physical plant.”

“We’re on call,” stated the doctor.

“We’ll get you people out,” reported Bellamy. “Won’t be long.”

The medical emergency team left.

“Media’s gonna crawl up our ass,” said Mudd.

Bellamy faced him. “What’s your story, Mitchell?”

Mudd ran his fingers through dank hair. “He was fine on the way back from New Roads last night. I didn’t see him sneak any female up here. And his wife sleepin’ down the hall? Nanh-unh.”

“My night guard would have a record of any visitor,” said Bellamy. “Rex didn’t smoke, didn’t drink, and he waddn’t overweight.” Bellamy sniffed a glass on the night stand. “Scotch! Any idea how *this* got here?”

Mudd shrugged. He was gazing glumly at the body.

Bellamy went to the window. Wooden posts of a side gallery, lined with palm fronds, supported a private balcony facing the vast back lawn and ridge of trees along Capitol Road. “I’m six-foot one and a hundred-ninety pounds,” reported the Colonel, “but even I could get out through this window. We need fingerprints on the sill, floor photos, big time forensics.”

“Not the FBI,” said Mudd, a lump moving north in his throat. “Governor hated the FBI! Sez they’re worse than the mob. God-damn, I loved Rex.” Mudd choked. “He gave me the best job of my life. This is assassination!”

“Unless a woman did it.”

“A woman kill him for what?” squealed Mudd.

“All the ones he had, possibilities multiply.”

The body loomed as a personal disaster to Bellamy: a Governor dies on your watch. “Mitch, I got to call the Federals.”

“Nobody needs to know about this man’s state,” simmered Mudd. “You call the Feds, him like that, those people feed the media and Rex is dirty forever. That ain’t fair. We don’t know what happened. We need a probe we can control.”

Bellamy had a Purple Heart from Korea. Although he considered Rex LaSalle a political genius, he had been stunned by his sex life. Since Clinton had gone to Washington, Bellamy had been mesmerized by stories of Arkansas troopers leaking dirt on the big man. At dawn Bellamy had been strategizing how to boost his pension when he met with the Governor. Now the need to cut distance from an ugly death moved to the foreground of his thoughts.

“City homicide has trouble solving passion crimes, Mitchell. This means fiber samples, a zillion tight shots, plus meshing gears with the Coroner.”

Mudd’s chin was speckled red from shaving cuts. “The Feds are cannibals, Bellamy. They eat anything they find. Humans, rugs, cars. They eat it raw.”

Bellamy rubbed his brow. “I’ll call Attorney General Abadie. He was the Governor’s ally. Oscar’s smart. Plus he’s got good lab connections.”

Mudd wiped his eyes.

Bellamy stabbed his cellphone. “Good mawnin’. This is Colonel Lawson Bellamy of State Police. I need to talk with General Abadie. Mm. He’s where? Tobago. Which is — Trinidad, I see. So, who’s minding the store? Benton’s in court upstate. My my. Who’s the General’s next best? No I haven’t. He did? And Oscar knew his daddy. Well, all right. Yes, ma’am, I will.” Bellamy cupped the receiver. “Oscar got a lawyer went to Harvard. Someone Hubbell.”

Mudd nodded vacantly.

“In the legislature,” said Bellamy into the phone. “Thank you.”

Bellamy punched the buttons once again. “Hullo, this Colonel

Bellamy of State Police. Please, ma'am: give me the Sergeant-at-Arms *immediately*."

Mitchell Mudd sat slumped in a chair.

"Mike boy," said the Colonel into his cellphone. "You know Henry Hubbell?" Bellamy's eyebrows went up. "*Good*. Get him for me lickety-split. I am holding and it is critical. Thank you, sir."

Mitchell Mudd cradled his head in his hands. He was wheezing. Poor bastard, thought Bellamy: his life just got cut down the middle.

It was 10:02 AM.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON *Last of the Red Hot Poppas*, VISIT:
<http://chinmusicpress.com/books/poppas/>

Last of the Red Hot Poppas BY JASON BERRY

COPYRIGHT 2006 JASON BERRY