

The Senator's Wife

Mississippi in July had to be the hottest place on earth, Veronica Honneker thought despairingly. The temperature had already reached 94, and was still climbing. If the atmosphere got any more stifling, she wouldn't be able to breathe. The big white canvas tent she stood beneath sheltered her from the sun, but that was about all that could be said for it. Though her purple linen shift was short and sleeveless, it was still too much to be wearing on so hot a day. Her pantyhose could have been made of lead for all the air they let reach her legs. Her bra pinched. She could feel her antiperspirant giving up the ghost even as she swung into the closing lines of her luncheon speech. Moisture trickled down her back; her armpits felt wet. The small electric fan whirring on the floor of the platform beside her, ostensibly provided for her comfort, barely stirred the air.

"Remember, a vote for my husband is a vote for education. And education is the bridge that will take the state of Mississippi into the twenty-first century," Ronnie concluded her standard speech, trying to ignore a fly that had buzzed around her head for at least the last three minutes. Swatting at flies looked ridiculous, as she had learned from watching other speakers do it on videotapes provided by one of Lewis's many flunkies. Don't swat flies, do smile, hang on to the sides of the podium if you can't think of anything else to do with your hands. . . . She'd had so much advice drummed into her head since marrying Lewis that she was sick of it.

Her smile was genuinely warm with relief as she finished talking. Ronnie unfolded her cramped fingers from the edge of the podium and acknowledged the polite applause with a wave. Almost before she had left the dais, her audience had turned its attention to their desserts. If not forgotten, she was certainly dismissed.

They didn't like her, she knew. She had never been, and never would be, one of them. She was a northerner, a carpetbagger as the locals called her behind her back, a young, beautiful woman of no particular pedigree married to a rich, distinguished older native son whose roots went deeper than those of the state icon, the five-hundred-year-old Friendship Oak.

The hostess--Mary something, Ronnie hadn't quite caught the last name--touched her elbow, steering her to the table closest to the speaker's platform. As always, this was where the biggest contributors would sit. And she always, always had to make nice to big contributors.

"Mrs. Honneker, this is Elizabeth Chauncey. . . ."

Ronnie smiled and offered her hand to the elderly woman just introduced.

"I know your mother-in-law," the woman informed her, and proceeded to tell her in excruciating detail just exactly how that was. Ronnie listened, smiled, and responded as intelligently as she could before being drawn on. It took over an hour to greet everyone in the tent. By the time she had clasped hands and exchanged a few words with the last potential donor/voter, Ronnie's head ached, her hand throbbed, and she felt limp from the inside out.

This was another thing about being married to a senator that she hated. Meet and greet, be nice to the voters. Always on. Smile, no matter how she felt. Well, today she felt lousy. All she wanted was to go home, take a shower and a couple of Tylenol, and lie down.

Fat chance of that.

"That went well," Thea, her press secretary, said cheerfully as fair officials hustled them toward the back of the tent, where a state trooper was holding open a canvas flap for their exit. Thea Cambridge was thirty, only a year older than Ronnie herself. She was attractive, with short dark hair, a slim figure, and a nice sense of style. She had worked for Ronnie for two years now, and Ronnie considered her a friend.

Passing through the triangular opening, Ronnie walked into a wall of blazing heat, blinding light, swirling dust, and nauseating smells: hot dogs, cotton candy, livestock droppings, vehicle exhaust. For a moment, as her eyes adjusted, she could see nothing. She paused, blinking, her retinue milling around her as they all took a minute to get their bearings.

Mississippi in July was her idea of hell on earth. If it was not for the thrice-damned polls, she would be summering in Lewis's cottage in Maine, as she had since they'd been married. Just the thought of that cool green shoreline made her feel hotter now. Lewis's summer house was almost the best thing about being married to him.

Mississippi in July was, arguably, the worst.

"Miz Honneker?" The voice was male, deep, and thick as honey with a down-home southern drawl. Though Ronnie still could not see clearly, she suspected a reporter, simply because they always came after her when she least felt like dealing with them. She stretched her mouth into one more smile.

"Yes?" she said into the glare.

"I'm Tom Quinlan. This is Kenny Goodman. Quinlan, Goodman, Associates."

"Oh, yes?" Vision slowly adjusting, Ronnie saw two men dressed in white shirts and lightweight summer suits standing in front of her. One was plump and sweating, light blue coat open and yellow tie askew, with pale skin and a thick crop of curling black hair. The other, the man who had spoken, was taller, leaner, with blond hair that was

just beginning to recede around the temples and the tan complexion of someone who spent a great deal of time outdoors. His gray suit coat was buttoned over a broad-shouldered, athletic-looking frame, his navy tie was in place, and he looked altogether cooler and more collected than his companion.

"How nice to meet you," she said, offering first the blond man and then his companion her hand while Thea and the state troopers looked on with varying degrees of caution. It was necessary for the Senator's wife to be accessible to attract votes, of course, but there was also a slight degree of risk anytime a stranger approached her. Nuts were everywhere these days--and she was a favorite target.

However, these men seemed harmless enough, even if they did appear to expect her to know their names. Were they perhaps contributors? Big contributors? Should she know their names? Lewis's office sent a list, periodically updated, of people for her to memorize.

She was almost sure that the names she had just heard were not on it.

Her smile widened, just in case. Money was the lifeblood of politics, as Lewis had drummed into her head from the time of their marriage. For Lewis, as well as all the other politicians she knew, show me the money was not just a popular catchphrase. It was a way of life. A way of staying alive. For she was convinced that politicians only lived while they held office. Lewis's senate seat and all that went with it were as necessary to him as the air he breathed, Ronnie thought. He needed the attention, the limelight, the power, the way other men needed food and drink.

If only she had understood that before she married him.

"We're political strategists, Miz Honneker. We're working for you now," the blond man said dryly as she shook the other man's hand. His tone made it clear that she had been unsuccessful at concealing her ignorance of their identities. Not that it mattered. Consultants' opinions were more important than their votes. And since their marriage, Lewis had inflicted so many of them on her that by now they were about as welcome as a pair of buzzing flies.

"Oh." Ronnie's hand dropped to her side, and she stopped smiling. Her cheeks ached so from her marathon effort in the tent that it was a relief to let them relax, if only for a few minutes. Her headache, forgotten for a moment, returned in full force. Flexing her sore fingers, she glanced at Thea.

"We got a fax from the Washington office this morning," Thea said apologetically in response to that glance. "I was going to show it to you later today. I--didn't realize that they would be joining us this soon."

Thea knew how Ronnie felt about consultants. After the last one advised her to gain twenty pounds--"Look how much more popular Oprah was when she was heavy!" he

had said--she had vowed not to listen to any more.

"Mrs. Honneker, you're supposed to judge the Little Miss Neshoba County Pageant in five minutes," a plump woman in a gaudy floral dress called as she hurried up to them. The dress struck a chord in Ronnie's memory: Rose. The woman's name was Rose, and her dress was bedecked with enormous cabbage roses.

It was the kind of memory exercise that she usually did rather well. One of her few assets as a political wife was her ability to remember names, she thought.

"Thank you, Rose," Ronnie said with a smile. Rose beamed. It was clear that she was flattered to have the Senator's wife remember her when they had only met for a moment several hours earlier. Things like that, Ronnie had learned, made people feel important. And making people feel important was a way to win votes. And winning votes was the name of the game.

"Mind if we tag along?" the blond man asked. Quinlan--that was his name, she would remember it by associating the name with a quiver full of arrows, and he seemed to be tightly strung, like a bow.

Ronnie shrugged her assent. Nodding politely as Rose chattered away, she was escorted toward the tent where the pageant would be held. Thea, a fair official, a state trooper, and the two newcomers to her retinue followed close behind as they navigated through the eddy and swirl of activity that made up the fair. Young couples walking hand in hand, women in casual clothes pushing babies in strollers, teenagers in baggy shorts calling to each other, groups of older women in floral dresses: Ronnie smiled at all impartially as they wove through the crowd. A few smiled back.

A very few.

Sometimes she felt like the most hated woman in Mississippi.

They were almost at their destination when it happened. Ronnie had just spotted the white canvas peaks of the large tent on the other side of the busy cotton-candy machine. A steady stream of people were filing in through the front of the tent, past a large, balloon-bedecked placard that said Little Miss Neshoba County Pageant, 2 p.m. As usual, Ronnie was being led toward the back. A trio of officials already awaited her at the tent flap, which was being held open. They were looking her way, their expressions expectant.

The woman exploded out of nowhere. She came running in from the left, from somewhere beyond the cotton-candy machine, screaming words that seemed to make no sense. She was a big woman, tall and heavy, dressed in too-tight green shorts and a striped blouse, her hair dyed blond and her face florid and sweaty from the heat.

"Whore!" she screamed, darting toward Ronnie.

Ronnie stepped back, alarmed, and instinctively threw up her hand as something that glinted silver in the sunlight came hurtling through the air at her. A smell, sharp and distinctive. A blow, as something hard struck her upraised arm and bounced off. The sensation of liquid splashing everywhere, pouring over her, thick and heavy and cool.

Ohmigod, she thought.

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