

MISCHIEF AT MORLEY HOUSE

Written by

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EXT. MORLEY FAMILY PLANTATION - EVENING

SUPER: MORLEY HOUSE TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA 1846

A massive, rural palace. Immense magnolia trees dance in the breeze. The home is dark save for a few ground floor windows.

INT. MORLEY HOUSE - KITCHEN

A petite black girl, ZONA, 16, places cups, saucers and a coffeepot upon a platter. Behind her, ADA, a 50+ black woman, washes a large skillet in the sink. She turns to speak.

ADA

Take care with that, girl. You don'
wanna drop a thing in this house.

Zona nods, cautiously lifts the platter.

ZONA

Yes'm.

INT. DINING ROOM

A bright, ornate room, its centerpiece is a large oblong table. Three finely dressed diners occupy it.

At the head, EDMUND MORLEY, 45, lean and pale. His attention is fixed on the fat, tanned man to his right, ZECHARIAH TWEED, 55. Across from Tweed sits prim MARGARET MORLEY, 20.

The animated Tweed speaks with a thick Southern drawl.

TWEED

...now ya'll know ahm not a
gamblin' man, but Lord help meh,
that's one wagah ah could not
resist!

Tweed brays, Edmund displays far more reserved amusement. Margaret cracks a crooked smile as she picks at her plate.

TWEED (CONT'D)

If not for this man here, your good
fathah - know where ahd be raht
now...?

INT. HALLWAY

Zona walks the dimly lit space. She takes a sharp, half-breath and pauses.

Turns, looks behind her. Nothing to see. Silence. Her hand trembles, chattering the empty cups in their saucers.

Tweed's loud guffaw breaks through, startling Zona. She places her hand atop a wobbly cup. Twists back around, hurries down the hall.

INT. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Zona enters as Tweed, still chuckling, sips from a now empty glass. Tweed acknowledges her appearance.

TWEED

Ah, perfect timin' mah dear.

EDMUND

Indeed.

Zona approaches Margaret and places a cup and saucer at her side. Picks up the coffeepot and goes to pour, but -

EDMUND (CONT'D)

Zona! It is Zona, yes?

She nods.

EDMUND (CONT'D)

Our guests are always served first.
You have been told.

She raises the pot back to the platter.

ZONA

Yessir. Sorry sir.

MARGARET

Just pour, dummy.

Zona looks to Edmund, he nods. She fills Margaret's cup.

HALLWAY - LATER

Zona nears the entrance to the kitchen. Backs through the door.

KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

She turns into the room and sees - something - that halts her mid-step. A hollow gasp and the platter falls, CRASHES loudly to the floor. Zona SCREAMS.

DINING ROOM

The trio react to the noise. Edmund shakes his head in disgust. Pushes his chair back as if about to stand.

MARGARET

No.

KITCHEN

Zona cowers. Just feet from her splintered mess, a translucent entity - a GHOST. The spirit, barely recognizable as a woman, mouths unheard words.

Ada rushes in from a large pantry within the kitchen. The Ghost vaporizes upon her entrance.

ADA

No, what'd you do, girl?

ZONA

It, she...Miss...

ADA

You saw her, didn't you?
(smiles)

We all do in time. She don't mean no...

Margaret swings open the kitchen door. Surveys the scene. Peers down upon Zona.

ZONA

I'm sorry, Ma'am. I think - Miss Margaret - I think I seen a spirit, a gho...

Margaret coldly backhands the word from the girl's lips.

MARGARET

Not another word of this nonsense.

(to Ada)

If she's to be allowed in this house, she will learn the rules of this house. Teach her.

Ada nods, defeated.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Now clean this up and bring in dessert.

DINING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Margaret enters smiling.

MARGARET

They're all so careless. It was nothing.

INT. MARGARET'S BEDROOM - LATER

A dressed down Margaret sits at an elegant vanity table. Eyes closed, she brushes her long, auburn hair.

Stops mid-stroke. Her content air falls. She clenches her eyes tight, speaks with a cold calm.

MARGARET

Go.

A sound, a HUM. The hum becomes a voice, hushed and airy.

GHOST (V.O.)

Mmmaaarrrrr....

She shakes her head "no", as if trying to convince herself.

MARGARET

(angrier)

Go!

Margaret takes a deep breath, calms. Opens her eyes to find only her reflection in the mirror. She cracks that crooked smile, returns to brushing. With her first stroke -

A DISMEMBERED HAND materializes behind Margaret, unseen to her. It slowly caresses her hair.

The Hand twists a lock between its willowy fingers - and YANKS Margaret's head backward.

SMASH CUT TO:

FLASHBACK

SUPER: 1841

INT. MORLEY HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

A young MARGARET MORLEY, 15, quietly exits the exterior door.

EXT. MORLEY HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

She jogs out into a small yard toward a shed in the distance.

UPSTAIRS ROOM POV

Someone watches Margaret's journey.

BEHIND SHED - CONTINUOUS

Margaret rounds the corner in a hurry. Slows herself upon encountering a young black man, JESSE, 15. Tall and handsome, he offers a coy smile as Margaret now ambles his way.

JESSE

Didn't think you'd really come.

MARGARET

I do a lot of things you wouldn't think I'd do.

She finds a spot and leans against the wall.

JESSE

Here.

He reaches into his pocket, pulls out a peach. Retrieves a small, crude knife from another pocket. Cuts her a piece, jabs it with the tip of the knife and offers it with a smile.

JESSE (CONT'D)

The sweetest peach for the sweetest peach.

Margaret laughs at him, not with him. She slaps it, knife and all, from Jesse's hand.

She grabs his collar and pulls him in for a kiss.

LISBETH (O.C.)

Margaret!

LISBETH MORLEY, 18, stands in judgment of the two.

LISBETH (CONT'D)

(to Jesse)

Get!

Jesse retreats around the corner. Lisbeth approaches Margaret, who remains unfazed.

LISBETH (CONT'D)

You know what would happen if Daddy caught you with him? If you care about that boy at all, you'll keep your distance.

MARGARET

(laughs)

You're so stupid. Care for some Negro boy? I'm just having some fun. Ever kissed one?

Lisbeth reaches around Margaret's head, pulls her hair.

LISBETH

Don't see him aga...

Margaret delivers a sharp slap to Lisbeth's face.

MARGARET

Don't what now?

Lisbeth shakes her head in shock, disgust. Margaret eyes go narrow, her mouth goes tight. Lisbeth exits.

Margaret's eyes fall, something on the ground catches her attention. She smiles. Kneels, reaches for...

INT. MORLEY HOUSE - LIBRARY - NIGHT

Lisbeth relaxes with a book on a small lounge. The lantern beside her offers just enough light to read by, but no more.

Engaged by her reading, she doesn't hear the faint sound of

THE LIBRARY DOOR slowly opening near her. An obscured figure passes through it. A silent moment, then

A FIST CRASHES into Lisbeth's chest from behind her. A red blotch appears. Before she can even gasp, another blow.

And another. Furious, rapid blows rain down upon her chest and back. Her once white blouse is now a sickening crimson.

Within seconds, it's over. Lisbeth slumps to the floor, dead.

A small, crude knife falls near her - the letter "J" engraved in its handle.

The unseen attacker SCREAMS a uniquely feminine scream.

EXT. GALLOWS - DAY

Jesse is hustled up to the platform by a broad, bearded man. The crowd boos and yells as he appears before them.

A small, old man steps to the platform and reads aloud.

OLD MAN

On this day, August seventeen, eighteen hundred and forty-one, we are called upon to render justice by the decree of the honorable Judge Percell Founders. He has found the Negro Jesse Wills guilty of the wanton murder of Miss Lisbeth Morley. The sentence given is hanging by the neck until dead. May God have mercy on his wretched soul.

The old man nods to the other, steps off the platform. Jesse begins to weep as a noose is placed around his neck. The weeping is silenced by the sack pulled over his head.

The trap door falls beneath Jesse's feet.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. MORLEY HOUSE - MAIN ENTRANCE - AFTERNOON

A horse and carriage waits. Edmund and Tweed exit the building, followed by Margaret. They descend the tall front steps.

Tweed climbs into the carriage, Margaret and Edmund pause.

A servant, ENOCH, 20, exits with two large suitcases. Hurries to the carriage, heaves the luggage inside.

EDMUND

(to Margaret)

I'll be home by Thursday noon.

Edmund kisses her forehead. Climbs aboard the carriage. The driver takes his place. Edmund speaks from his window.

EDMUND (CONT'D)

No wild cotillions - hear?

MARGARET

Daddy.

The coach pulls away.

Margaret ascends the steps. Turns at the door. Enoch still stands in the path below. A mutually furtive glance.

She enters the home, leaving the door open.

INT. MORLEY HOUSE - EDMUND'S BEDROOM - LATER

Margaret and Enoch make love. She drags her fingernails across his dark, sinewy back.

Her MOANS are easily heard through the rooms open door.

GUEST BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Zona gathers dirty linens, hears a passionate cry.

HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

She follows the noise, past the wide staircase between the rooms. Toward an open door.

EDMUND'S BEDROOM DOOR - CONTINUOUS

Zona finds the wet, writhing couple.

ZONA

Enoch?!

Enoch breaks his stride, turns to find Zona in the doorway.

ENOCH

Zo...I...Don' tell Momma.

Zona flits away. Margaret grabs Enoch's face and twists it back to her.

MARGARET

Go get her.

ENOCH

Aw, she ain't gonna say nothin'.

MARGARET

I want to hear that from her. Bring her to my room.

With Margaret's last word a GUST of air rushes through the door and around the bed.

It flutters the sheets, shakes pictures on the wall, rattles the glass inset doors of a small gun cabinet.

The glass CRACKS.

Margaret pulls Enoch's face toward her.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

Go!

INT. HALLWAY - LATER

Enoch walks with Zona down the dark hallway. He guides her with a firm grasp on her forearm. They approach a door and pause.

ENOCH

She just wants to talk.

ZONA

I ain't got nothin' to say.

ENOCH

Good.

Enoch knocks. A voice on the other side of the door responds.

MARGARET (O.S.)

Come.

Enoch twists the knob, pushes the door open a few inches. The door pushes back. He presses on before

THE DOOR SLAMS shut.

INT. MARGARET'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Margaret, nude from the waist up, turns toward the door across the room.

MARGARET

Come in!

Enoch leads Zona in. Both are struck by Margaret's nudity. Zona looks away.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

(to Enoch)

Wait downstairs. Where I said.

Enoch nods, pushes Zona deeper into the room. He exits, closing the door behind him.

Margaret speaks as she gazes upon her reflection.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Have a seat on the bed.

Zona cautiously perches upon the end of the large bed.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
I would apologize, but you seem to enjoy seeing things you shouldn't see.

ZONA
I swear Miss Margaret, I didn't see nothing worth talkin' 'bout.

Margaret, peeling off a stocking, turns to Zona.

ZONA (CONT'D)
Earlier, I mean. Nothing that's any of my business to talk about, ma'am.

MARGARET
Right. Fine.

Margaret removes the other stocking. Stands, motions to a nightgown draped over a chair.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Help me with that.

Zona retrieves the gown, steps to Margaret. Zona pulls it over Margaret's body.

ZONA
Not a word, I...

MARGARET
Shh, I know. You're done for the night, go - to wherever it is you sleep.

Zona agrees, turns away to the door. Margaret buttons her gown.

Stands and finds the pair of stockings on the table. Margaret quickly overtakes the gap and swings the stockings over Zona's head, and around her neck.

Margaret STRANGLES Zona, twisting the hosiery tightly around her throat. Zona fights, but Margaret is a bigger woman.

Margaret kicks at the back of Zona's knee, collapsing the girl and tightening her grip. Zona struggles. She's losing.

Zona hops upward, throws her head back and

SMASHES Margaret in the mouth. She loosens her grip, lets go. Lifts a hand to her face - she's bloody and missing her front teeth.

Zona sees the chance, finds the strength to rise and

KICKS Margaret in the stomach. She falls. Zona runs.

Margaret runs to the table. Catches her ruined face in the mirror - and smiles.

MARGARET (CONT'D)

You want to get messy, bitch?

She pulls open the drawer. Slides a book over to reveal a very large knife.

EDMUND'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

A gentle breeze tussles the room.

The doors of the gun cabinet SHATTER.

HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Margaret bolts from her room, a small lantern in one hand, the knife in the other. Zona flies down the hallway toward the staircase.

Margaret equals her speed.

Stands atop the stairs as Zona twists her ankle on the steps. Falls in a heap.

MARGARET

Never did learn those rules, did you? Rule number one, Miss Margaret always gets her way.

She takes a single step down, raises the blade.

CLICK. A metallic sound pauses Margaret.

Margaret turns, all passion leaves her body.

The Ghost, more defined as ever, stands before Margaret. It's Lisbeth, no doubt -

HOLDING A GUN. One of her father's, it wavers in the spirit's ethereal hands.

LISBETH
No more, Margaret.

BANG. The revolver fires. Bucks back through Lisbeth's form, dispersing it.

Margaret takes a shot in the chest, dives backward down the staircase.

The gun hits the floor, Lisbeth rematerializes above it.

Zona screams.

Margaret tumbles down the steps. Her lost knife embeds on the railing.

Her lantern SMASHES upon its fall, igniting a small piece of carpet. Zona pulls herself up, hobbles down the steps as the flames catch.

She makes it to the bottom. Looks back. Lisbeth pulls back into the dark.

Ada rushes in, finds the fire and Zona, staring at empty space.

ADA
Sweet Jesus.

Zona smiles.

ZONA
She don't mean no harm.

ADA
Who girl? Miss...?

Lisbeth materializes at the bottom of the staircase, as clear as day in the flames light.

LISBETH
Run.

She wisps away as quickly as she came.

Ada pulls Zona toward the front door. The flames devour the room.

FADE OUT.