

*When a Secret Service agent shoots the president he was sworn to protect, it sparks the trial of the century – treason by the country's first gay vice president. Did the VP conspire to murder his boss, or was it all a masterful set up?*

## **Rampart**

By Truscott Jones

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**POWER, TREASON AND LOVE DON'T MIX**

# **RAIMPART**

**TRUSCOTT JONES**



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## Treason

*noun*

\ 'trēzən \

1. the crime of betraying one's country, especially by attempting to kill the sovereign or overthrow the government

//They were convicted of treason

2. the action of betraying someone or something

//Doubt is the ultimate treason against faith

## **March 30**

(Five Months plus Seven Days before Trial)

*Entering the “Red Zone,” the inner most security perimeter, was the easiest of all. Further out, on the fringes of the North Carolina State Fairgrounds, overzealous sheriff’s deputies and hyperalert local cops took their jobs seriously – for most of them, a presidential visit was a once in a lifetime event. For these officers, someone with Sam Kilbrough’s preternatural vigilance, whose erect posture and purposeful movements contrasted with the excited frenzy of the arriving crowd, might draw attention.*

*As it turns out, he needn’t have worried. No one questioned him. He knew where to find the gaps, how to bypass the funneling ropes and mobile chain link barriers and avoid the first ring of metal detectors. Not once did he have to flash his old United States Secret Service identification.*

*But the final access point was different. The 300 or so specially selected guests granted entry to the apron of grass fronting the central stage required specific credentials. By appearances this portal posed the greatest challenge: parallel-  
rowed steel barricades buttressed by laser sensors in the wide no-man’s land; a ring of state troopers spaced 12 feet apart; and but one way in, a tall, gray pulse induction magnetometer, manned by four very dour, very stout members of the USSS. Precisely why, for Sam Kilbrough, it was no hurdle at all.*

*Even without the electronics, they would sense the 9mm Glock G43 tucked inside his bright blue Gore-Tex windbreaker. They would assume any agent, even a former one, would carry something in so public a setting. Accordingly, as he approached the machine he removed his hands from the jacket's pockets and, catching the attention of one of his old colleagues, motioned his head toward his right side. With a jerk of her chin, she directed him around the scanner.*

*"Missing us already?" she commented, her expression flat, her aviators concealing the subtle inflection in her eyes.*

*"Oh, you know ... I miss the excitement."*

*Official word was Kilbrough had resigned. Rumor was he was fired. The reasons for the axing, as happens with gossip, varied wildly. He had pissed off his super, or the director, or the president himself! He had slept with the wrong person. He drank too hard, too long, in the wrong place, or at the wrong time. He'd lost a step.*

*The sheer volume of chatter meant anything was possible, none of which affected his popularity with the guys and gals in the field, all of whom thought, "But for the grace of God, there go I."*

*For the agents manning this particular checkpoint, his presence at today's rally implied something new entirely – Kilbrough was on assignment. Ask nothing, stay out of his way.*

*"Enjoy the speech," she said, returning to her scrutiny of the inflow.*

*"Thanks." He quickly moved on, finding a spot on the field six feet stage right of the podium. He*

*ran his fingers through a sheen of sandy blond hair that floated like ocean-churned foam atop a base of dark brown roots. There were already two fluid rows of excited invitees between himself and the elevated plywood platform, which was fine. For now, they would partially conceal him, not that it mattered, as he knew how to avoid drawing attention. Even if someone on the president's detail recognized him, their biggest challenge would be not smiling. When the time came, he'd push his muscular frame forward with ease.*

*Sam used the time before the president's arrival – 40 minutes per schedule, in reality closer to an hour – to assess his surroundings: profiling each of the growing number of people within a ten-foot circle, which he judged the outer reach of potential interference with his plans; noting the layout of the dais to predict, based on his past experience, the precise sequence of POTUS' route; taking stock of the sun's position, cloud cover and any other conditions that might affect visibility or Kilbrough's movements, or those of the target and his protectees.*

*And, he had to be prepared to pleasantly interact with any eager enthusiast choosing to engage him, lest he appear the odd loner, which even an amateur might mark as a problem.*

*All of these things Sam did. As the minutes passed, he settled confidently into his mission, maintaining vigilance, growing comfortable, like a swimmer acclimating to the water's initial chill.*

*At 10:38, though Kilbrough didn't need to check his watch, the wail of distant sirens seeped in, steady and incrementally louder. The*

*motorcade approached. Dignitaries began taking their seats along the back side of the platform. The buzz around him heightened.*

*“Guess we’re getting close,” an older man to his left said, failing miserably to hide his excitement. He wore a MAGNUS THORNE campaign button on the lapel of his off-the-rack sports coat. Not a big donor by the looks of him; his presence on the VIP grounds and his age – early 70s, Sam guessed – likely meant he was a Super Volunteer. “I think you’re right,” Kilbrough replied with the smallest smile possible, then looked away. The last thing he wanted was an extended conversation.*

*A helicopter swung overhead, its thump ... thump ... thump pulsing through bodies as it hovered close, making one last check of the president’s approach before banking and moving away, its rhythmic beat replaced by the rumble of the lead motorcycles rolling into place behind a high curtain running behind the stage. Although blocked from view, clouds of dust announced the arrival of what Sam knew was a train of black SUVs, and ultimately The Beast, the president’s armored limousine.*

*A diminutive, bald man in a rumpled suit approached a podium bearing the distinctive Great Seal of the President, its majestic eagle clutching both olive branch and arrows as if unsure whether peace or war should prevail. The speaker stepped onto a small rostrum to compensate for his short stature. He grasped the microphone and pulled it downward to the consternation, Kilbrough noticed, of the advance man off to the side, who would now*



*have to readjust it when he removed the riser, readying the lectern for the much taller president.*

*“Good mornin’ ev’body,” the host shouted, jolting the audience in his direction. “I’m Clive Green, chairman of your North Carolina Republican Party.” He droned on, welcoming everyone, giving each of the minor dignitaries seated behind him a moment of recognition, and praising the efforts of the local GOP machine.*

*Sam ignored him, instead scanning the movements between himself and the enormous security tent set up behind the grandstand. He knew the drill, knew which motions, which gestures would signal “Go” time.*

*Two agents made their way into the crowd, immediately in front of the stage, the closest a mere five feet away.*

*Two more took positions at either end of the platform.*

*Atop the short stairs at the rear, yet another suited, sunglass adorned bodyguard looked back and forth between the tent beneath him and the podium, suddenly leaping up and onto the main deck.*

*Simultaneously, the advance man waived at Clive, who, taking the signal to end his warmup act, stopped mid-sentence and yelled, “Ladies and Gentlemen, it is now with great pleasure, and Eee-mense pride ...”*

*Sam saw the familiar shock of perfectly coiffed blondish hair bobbing up the steps, a smile already pasted on the practiced politician’s face.*

*“... that I present to you ...”*

*As expected, all eyes turned to the commotion. Cell phones rose, their owners hitting the big red "Record" buttons.*

*"... the President of the United States, Magnus Thorne!!!"*

*Kilbrough felt his weapon with his mind; he dared not reach for it until he was ready.*

*Thorne, because he was a ubiquitous presence on TV and online, on magazine covers and front pages, seemed imaginary in the flesh, almost other worldly as he strode across the stage. Those present doubled-checked their senses as if ensuring his authenticity.*

*The president stopped halfway, slowly waving his hand above his head, deep, short, right, left.*

*Sam clapped, like those around him with free hands. Directly in front of him a middle-aged woman lofted a Thorne★Styles sign from the previous campaign, serendipitously shielding him from the stage.*

*The president's feet resumed their trek to the podium. He was 30 feet away. Twenty. Twelve.*

*And then, as Kilbrough anticipated, as Thorne had done at every rally before, the president cut toward the stage's edge.*

*Sam lowered his arms to his sides, wiggling the fingers on his dominant right hand.*

*Thorne looked down into the crowd with his trademark sheepish grin, stretching out his arms to allow his subjects to briefly touch him. Agents appeared at Thorne's sides to unobtrusively grab his waist, preventing him from being pulled in.*

*Kilbrough slowly moved his hand toward the opening in his jacket, maintaining focus on the target area, his actions now on auto-pilot.*

*The president grazed outreached fingers, moving still closer, brushing another trembling hand, and another. Four feet.*

*Kilbrough, in one deft movement, slipped the 18-ounce weapon from its holster, his finger secure on its heavy trigger.*

*Thorne, having completed his routine, was lifting up with the help of his men, their attention divided between control of his body and any potential threats below.*

*Sam lunged forward, easily wedging aside the people in front of him, closing the short gap with his extended arm.*

*Thorne looked into his eyes, recognizing both Kilbrough and his own fate. There was anticipation in his gaze. Resignation.*

*In the split second before Sam squeezed, the president didn't freeze in bewildered panic as would be expected. Instead, he tensed, and twisted.*

*The blast was deafening. But even before its echo finished rippling, even before the acrid smell of gunfire permeated the air, before Thorne had time to feel the 9mm bullet pierce his flesh, Kilbrough had already tossed the weapon across the stage, spreading his face and arms flat onto the raised hardwood, ready to be tackled.*

*As they brutally wrestled him to the ground, Sam ignored the pain. Instead, his mind concentrated on the memory of his late father, a giant presence taken from him too soon. Sam*

*wondered if he could ever justify to his dad why he had done this.*

*Probably, he decided.*

*After all, he had the blessing of the man most important to them both.*

## Prologue

“Mr. Vice President, let’s talk about your close relationship with Rachel Maslow.”

The tall, athletic African American man looming over me, from a less than respectful three feet away, shows his talent as a prosecutor. In only nine words he has introduced Maslow, unapologetic leader of the group Americans believe is democracy’s greatest threat; has linked *me* to *her*; and has branded our fleeting connection as a “close relationship.” All of this without asking a question, leaving me no avenue for escape.

I wasn’t coached on this, and although popular opinion regards me as intelligent, a quick thinker and good talker, they are unaware of my true superpower: preparation. As far back as high school my M.O. has been to hoard data, sluice it for the best nuggets, and draw what I need depending on the circumstances. Point is, I don’t “wing” it. I knew we’d talk about Maslow – extensively – but wasn’t planning to start behind the Eightball like this. I need to remain calm, know I can’t let the jury see me sweat. But I feel naked.

“Multiple records place the two of you at a Dallas fundraiser for her radical organization, The Aberdeen Circle, seven years ago this month.”

Again, no question. Just a sinister framing of what, back then, was considered smart politics. In symphony with his statement, on a large portable screen set up across the room from the jury, there is a still in glorious high definition showing me smiling broadly, my left arm around Maslow’s waist, the pair of us waving from behind a dais as if life-long BFF’s.

“Had you and this terrorist leader ever met, or otherwise collaborated before *that* show of support?” he asks, pointing accusingly at the picture.

I have been warned not to be argumentative. I've been instructed a million times to answer *only* the question asked, don't *volunteer* any information. Besides, he has already implied too much for me to unwind without appearing super defensive. So, I answer simply, truthfully ... frustratedly.

"Yes."

The prosecutor feigns surprise, like I've just admitted something extraordinary, though he knows damn well Maslow and I go back years, even before that portrait of mutual affection *still* reflecting off the taught 63-inch surface.

"Really," he says, his voice halfway between query and underline. I don't bite, so he twirls his index finger in an unspooling motion, and then commands, "Tell us about that."

Where to begin, especially with all of the half-truth admissions he's already made on my behalf? I'm not confused about the history – my team and I have been over this in excruciating detail a zillion times. My concern is to convey the *innocence* of my connection to a woman whose followers are accused of scheming to assassinate my boss.

"Mr. Vice President?"

I focus on the prosecutor, unable to keep myself from a slight smile. It's my go-to gesture for disarming hostile adversaries. Looks good on air. Has worked well over the years. At the moment, however, it draws puzzled frowns around the room and suddenly seems smarmy.

"I first met her ..."

"Met who?" he interrupts sharply. "For the record, you understand," he adds, waving the back of his hand at the court reporter behind him, whose middle-aged fingers are stabbing her stenotype keyboard as she glares at me. I realize he is going to make me say her poisonous name as many times as possible.

"Ms. Maslow," I clarify in a neutral voice, attempting to convey neither pride nor shame. "I first met Rachel Maslow about 10 years

ago, a week or so before I announced I was running for mayor of Dallas.”

Some of the jurors are leaning forward. Most of them are taking notes. All of them are very, very serious.

“A decade,” he declares, widening his eyes. “You became involved ... politically, that is,” he purrs, “with The Aberdeen Circle *over a decade ago!*”

“No, I met Ms. Maslow at that point,” I correct.

The prosecutor fingers his red power tie, the puzzled look on his face hiding his glee that, after an hour on the stand, I have finally slipped up. I have finally tried to parse words, to split hairs, to show my fear of his implications. For a man as skilled as this inquisitor, that’s all it takes.

“Now, Mr. Vice President, let’s make sure we are talking about the same set of facts.” He turns his back to me, faces the jury, and uses one hand to pinch the other’s index finger. “One,” he says. I hear his voice as the cocking of a gun’s hammer. “Rachel Maslow is the founder and supreme leader of *TAC*. You know that today, and you knew it when you first engaged her 10 years ago, correct?”

“Yes.” I mentally hunker down into a defensive ball, doing what I was told to do all along: one-word answers. Don’t fight on his turf.

“Two,” he says, waving a “V”, “You knew Maslow and The Aberdeen Circle were one in the same when they were the very first to endorse your campaign, right?”

I’m biting my tongue, because on the day I announced, I released the names of over 100 endorsements. The prosecutor is making it sound like Maslow and *TAC* were my lifeblood. “Yes.”

“Three.” With a Boy Scout salute he adds a patina of honor to his next point. “You also knew *TAC* was an extension of the terrorist Maslow when she became the co-chair of your presidential campaign six years ago, true?”

I don't want to concede that Rachel is a terrorist, or even a criminal, and despite all the popular innuendo, all the assumptions, no one has *proven* she or Aberdeen were behind the shooting. Six years ago, in fact, when I made Rachel an *honorary* co-chair, both Maslow and *TAC*, except for those on the hardcore fringe, still had pretty good reputations.

"Yes." I try not to choke on the word.

"In fact," he continues, no longer bothering to number his assaults, "The Aberdeen Circle contributed ten thousand dollars to your mayoral campaign, and another fifty thousand to your presidential committee, correct?"

"Something like that," I answer. The prosecutor's brow furrows in disappointment. His crown is empty, only a margin of closely shaved gray stubble encircling it, so those wrinkles extend high in an exaggerated fashion.

"Are you disputing the large amounts of cash they gave you?" he challenges, even though I didn't. I wasn't. But before I can clarify that we received numerous donations from varied sources, that I simply don't remember precise numbers, he has flashed copies of both checks onto the screen, as if to cut me off from lying about it.

"No, I was only ..."

"Are these the checks?"

"They appear to be."

The prosecutor moves his head slowly from side to side, and glances at the jury, a bemused look as he repeats my words, "They *appear* to be," suggesting with his eyes and his emphasis that I am somehow in denial. Who wouldn't want to distance himself from these miscreants, he implies.

"Maslow, too," he announces. "Separate and apart from *TAC*, she also gave you money over the years, right?"



“To my campaigns, yes.” Apologies to my attorney, but I couldn’t let that slide. Maslow was a political supporter. She didn’t buy my family’s groceries.

He ignores my clarification, pressing on with “Let’s talk about the inauguration five years ago.” A picture of the festooned West Front of the U.S. Capitol goes up, showing the lower section’s tiered rows immediately surrounding the podium. There I am, my right hand raised, my left on the Bible held by my husband Brady as I take the oath of office. He, and standing next to him Anna, our daughter, are beaming. I am serious, as usual.

“This was an extraordinary moment for you, wasn’t it Mr. Styles? The first homosexual vice president in American history being sworn in.”

Inside I wince – it is only recently that society returned to the pejorative “homosexual” rather than the lighter, more accepting “gay.” Outwardly, I display a small, amiable smile. “My family and I were all quite thrilled, and honored.” I want to say more, but again, *Keep it Short*. My attorney will let me share my story when it’s our turn.

“Now, Mr. Vice President, do you see this lower bowl area closest to the action,” he asks from the screen, sweeping his hand from one side to the other. I nod. He nods back. “I checked with the office of the Architect of the Capitol, and they tell me this sector seated 598 guests.” He pauses to see if I will comment. I don’t.

“Other than your husband and daughter, were you specifically allowed to invite any guests?” Good lawyers never ask a question unless they know the answer. This prosecutor knows Magnus Thorne didn’t want me as his running mate. In a tight race, I merely checked enough boxes to help him win. That’s it. He began shutting me out the moment the rally announcing my selection ended. This is going to be embarrassing, but worse, I see where he’s going.

“Yes, I was, but it is the president’s ...”

“How many, Mr. Vice President?” he cuts in. “How many people did you get to choose? Or should we simply consult the Inaugural Committee’s final report, which I believe has an appendix labeled, ‘Guests of the Vice President’?” The prosecutor makes a move toward the stacks of documents on his table, as if saying, “I’ll make you tell the truth,” again implying a predilection to fabricate.

“Maybe, half a dozen,” I say as nonchalantly as possible. No resentment here!

He tilts his head and pouches out his lips as if considering my answer, seeming to decide if it’s good enough. “So, about six. Six people out of 598.” He lets the math work its own, simple humiliation. Then, he thrusts. “Can you name them for us?”

With the indifference of narrating a grocery list, I comply. But the effort to act like there’s nothing to see is pointless – everyone knows who one of the names will be. It’s the other people I recite, though, which makes her inclusion even more ominous. “Let’s see. My father. Brady’s parents and his brother. Winnie Butler. Rachel Maslow.”

The prosecutor lifts his chin, looking up, either in wonder, in contemplation, or in shock. “Your immediate family,” he begins, “Ms. Butler, who happens to be your loyal lifelong friend and campaign manager, ...” He pauses, pivots to the jury, an action blatant in its purpose, but still effective to underline his next three words. “And Rachel Maslow.”

I could explain that most everyone else I would have considered – important public officials, high dollar donors – had already been invited by the Inaugural Committee, or that I had dozens of other guests in the equally fantastic seats of the upper bowl. But that would be like diving into quicksand, every exculpatory word merely highlighting the prosecutor’s point: Maslow and I were *tight!*

I never actually saw her that day ... or ever again. My schedule was tightly scripted by the White House, and she wasn’t on any of those

guest lists. Pretty quickly during our first term, The Aberdeen Circle began its rapid descent into public disrepute. Natural enemies on the far right waited patiently for the public to grow weary of *TAC*'s lofty human rights origins, and when radicals in Maslow's orbit went too far, they pounced. By the midterms, even the Thorne administration, of which I was a technical if irrelevant part, piled on against "The Homo Horde," "The Pink Peril," showcasing the dangers of the "Gay Mafioso" as a feature of its very effective culture war.

The prosecutor walks me through all of those homophobic official policies, making me squirm again and again for my loyalty to the president; coating me in a hypocritical tinge for failing to stand up to the assaults against the gay community; implying the resentments surely building inside me.

It's no wonder, he leaves unsaid, I was working so hard behind the scenes to help Maslow and *TAC* undermine the president, *my* president! The prosecutor "proves" this by trotting out call logs from both my office at the White House, and the "USNO," the United States Naval Observatory, my official residence. They showed numerous calls to Maslow and other *TAC* leaders. This shouldn't be a surprise. I was tasked with trying to calm the waters, trying to explain how Thorne's onslaughts – the bans on gay adoption and same sex marriage, the criminalization of gender-affirming care, even the removal of federal funding for schools employing gay teachers – weren't as bad as they seemed (they were!). He makes it sound like I was plotting against the administration when I was actually doing its disgusting dirty work – literally trying to avoid bloodshed.

"Not only," he thunders, waving a sheaf of papers in the air, "were you using official channels to communicate with the people who would soon shoot President Thorne, you also did so surreptitiously." The prosecutor has me identify a stack of CelluServe bills, my private mobile carrier, and then projects copies onto the large screen, all of the

numbers blocked out with thick black strokes as if hiding sinister secrets, except for certain yellow-highlighted lines. “Yes,” I acknowledge, over and over and over, every item emphasizing a call to Rachel Maslow. He makes sure her name crosses my lips each time. He doesn’t ask me what we talked about, knowing the jurors’ imaginations will fill in the blanks much better than the truth.

“All of this,” he points at the accumulating pile of documents on his table, “leads to your final dispatch only five months ago, March 29, the day before the assassination attempt. *The ... very ... last ... time* you contacted Rachel Maslow.”

And there it is, a small four-by-six-inch scrap of paper, more authentic for its slightly worn, wrinkled appearance, illuminated to many times its size on the rectangular canvas. No matter how well I spin my tale – which is the truth, by the way – the story will wind its way to this note I never should have written.

The prosecutor makes it look worse by overlaying, one-by-one, “incriminating” graphics: first my thumbprint, which he swears he’s ready to authenticate with an expert if I wish to deny the oily marking is mine; an arrow pointing from a bubble explaining the ink matches a special pen from my desk – one given me by President Thorne at the signing ceremony for an urban renewal bill I, as a former mayor, was allowed to shepherd through the Senate (how ungrateful, or sick, my choosing *this* symbol of gratitude for my betrayal); the friendly “E” at the end, “for Eli, right?” he asks, overstating our friendship. All of this proving the damning document is mine – something I never denied!

Yes, the note. The one Maslow was supposed to destroy, but kept, either through negligence, or because even then she sensed some advantage. We were stunned during “discovery,” the process before trial requiring parties to exchange what they intend to show the jury, when the prosecution produced a copy.

Thirteen little words. The jurors are engrossed, squinting, or slanting their torsos toward it, or grimacing, or looking down. Regardless of the movement, it is clear they, to say the least, disapprove. But none of them look at me. Not a single one.

**R –**

***I can't help anymore. You need to act now, before it's too late.***

**E**

Having plunged the knife, leaving me bleeding in my small, uncomfortable wooden chair, the prosecutor walks over, a strange look of sympathy emerging from his dark features. All eyes are on him, anticipating his next action.

Then he crouches down, his face a mere foot from mine, his eyes dancing. A small smile appears. “It’s not that bad, Mr. Vice President,” he says. He reaches out his arm and places a large hand on the point of my shoulder, squeezing it. “It’s not that bad.”

I struggle to return to the real world. Hell, it’s hard for me to breathe after the whipping I’ve just endured.

I look around the room. A “juror” is whispering into a very young “judge’s” ear. Others on the “jury” are comparing notes, two of them dismantling the screen where so many horrors were projected. Slowly I realize, I remember, like the adjustment one makes awakening from a nightmare, that my now kindly tormentor is Mandela Briggs, my own lawyer. As devastatingly authentic as it seemed, this was all ... pretend. A “mock session,” they call it. My trial is a good month away.

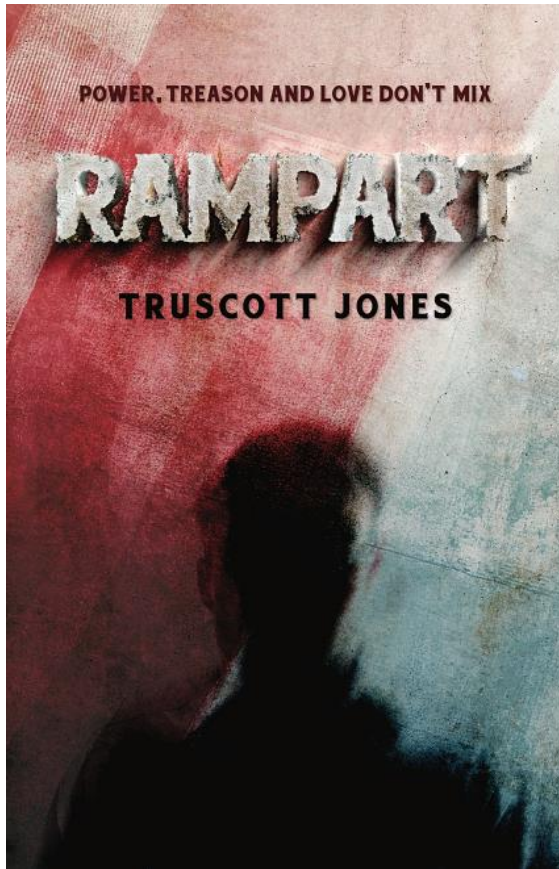
The characters in *this* courthouse – actually, Briggs’ conference room – all work for him, and thus, for me: associate attorneys, legal assistants, secretaries, technicians.

This drama was one big practice run, an elaborate scrimmage. “We need to put you through your paces,” Mandela had explained, “show you what it’s going to be like.” Now I know.

Hell. That’s what it’s going to be like. Hell.

And the punishment for the crime, treason, with which I am charged?

The death penalty.



*When a Secret Service agent shoots the president he was sworn to protect, it sparks the trial of the century – treason by the country's first gay vice president. Did the VP conspire to murder his boss, or was it all a masterful set up?*

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