

prologue

*At the still unnamed military* prison in the middle of the Nevada desert, the interrogators always kept a stainless steel pitcher of ice water on the table. If Salim Mohammed answered their questions satisfactorily, he would get a glass of water. If not, he would go thirsty until they let him back into his cell. That could be hours from now, hours in which they let the desert heat continue to suck him dry. His throat was already parched. Today they had chained him to a post in the courtyard in the midday sun. "Niggers don't get sunburned," the guard had taunted him. "They just burn in hell."

This was hell and he was burning. He watched a bead of water slide down the outside of the pitcher, making a trail he wanted to follow with his tongue. Today's interrogator was new, older and fatter with a slouch he kept fighting by pushing his rear against the back of the chair. His voice had a dull, monotonous tone, not like Mr. Angry, who ranted and raved, or Mr. Kind, who had come only a few times. Mr. Kind was tall and thin and leaned forward as he paced the room. He tried to wheedle information out of Salim, giving him water when he asked for it. What would he call this new interrogator? Mr. Nobody?

Mr. Nobody asked the same questions and Salim gave the same answers. No, he wasn't aware that the Islamic charity the Raleigh mosque supported was a terrorist organization. No, he hadn't channeled money through the mosque's accounts to terrorist cells in the United States.

Mr. Nobody poured himself a glass of water and brought it slowly to his lips. "If you continue being uncooperative, Mr. Jones," he said, refusing to use Salim's Muslim name, "we're going to send you out of the country for interrogation. To a prison which isn't nearly as nice as this one. To Egypt or Saudi Arabia maybe. You've heard about what they do to prisoners there?"

Salim's mouth was so dry it hurt to speak. "You can't do that."

"Yes, we can. You're no longer a citizen."

"The Supreme Court is hearing my case in two weeks."

Mr. Nobody shook his head incredulously. "You really believe the Supreme Court is going to be sympathetic to your case? You're a terrorist, Mr. Jones, and this country has no room for terrorists."

Salim felt faint. If they didn't give him water soon, he was going to die of thirst. Maybe that's what they wanted; maybe Mr. Nobody was the last in line, the executioner. The room started to spin, so he closed his eyes and dropped his head, hallucinating his mother singing him an old gospel tune:

*Wade in the water.*

*Wade in the water, children.*

*Wade in the water.*

*God's gonna trouble the water.*

On the edge of consciousness, he heard Mr. Nobody shouting and then the door opened and he heard the voice of Mr. Kind. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" Mr. Kind exclaimed. "Get him some water, fast. He's no use to us dead."

part one

# I

*Justice Matthew Pomeroy sat in the passenger seat of his wife's car, trying not to brake with his foot as she darted in and out of the heavy traffic on Connecticut Avenue. Although she lacked confidence in almost every other aspect of her life, Dora drove like a New York cabbie. He was grateful to have her as a chauffeur. Ever since his high school accident, he didn't trust himself behind the wheel. He'd been drunk the night he swerved off the road and hit a tree, but the police never tested him because his father was the District Attorney. Thank God he'd just dropped her off at her parents' house; otherwise she would have died. He spent two months in a body cast considering that, considering everything. He figured he was handed a light sentence for a reason, and that reason became his life's work.*

He enjoyed good health in the intervening decades, but several years ago his heart started acting up and this morning his blood pressure reading was the highest ever. They were on their way to see his cardiologist, Dr. Levinson, who was known in Washington as a man of discretion, well versed at keeping the coronary secrets of the rich and powerful.

Stopped at a red light, Dora started to make a list out loud for their daughter's wedding. "We have to pick up the invitations on the way back," she said, "and remind me to call around about florists. David's parents are going to pay for the flowers, but I said I'd find a florist for them. And then I need to call Jessie and figure out when she's coming home next..."

Matt half-listened, the rest of his mind focusing on a case the Court was deciding next week. It was a challenge to one of the more controversial provisions of the first Citizen Defense Act, or CDA as it was known now. The plaintiff Salim Mohammed, an African-American convert to Islam, had been stripped of his citizenship and incarcerated indefinitely because the Justice Department claimed he belonged to a terrorist cell. It was the first time the government had stripped someone of citizenship under the act. Once again, Matt's would be the swing vote, and the responsibility weighed heavily on his shoulders. He knew if the first CDA was judged unconstitutional, it would have an impact on the enlargement of the act now before the Senate.

"I wish Jessie would come home more often," Dora was saying. "Atlanta's not that far away and I could really use some help. They're always going to David's family on the weekend."

"That's because it's only an hour from Atlanta."

"The plane ride here isn't much more than an hour."

"Dear, there's a big difference between getting in a car and getting on a plane."

"I know," she sighed. "I just miss her."

Jessie was their only child. Dora had tried hard to keep the umbilical cord attached, even through Jessie's twenties, but their daughter had finally severed it. Secretly, he was glad, though he would never say so. He watched his daughter's ascent in the competitive medical research world with the same pride with which he'd watched her take her first steps as a toddler. The Centers for Disease Control was the perfect place for her. And David was OK. A Roman Catholic, but not a strict one, with a good job as a tenured business professor at Emory. It could be a lot worse.

Dora pulled into a narrow space in the parking lot at the doctor's office. Matt opened the door, careful not to scratch the car next to them. It was harder lifting himself from the seat than it should have been. He felt like he had gained a few pounds, quite a few in fact, but he hadn't. He breathed heavily as they climbed the stairs to the second-floor office. Dora wanted to come into the examination room with him, but he insisted that she stay in the waiting room. He didn't recognize the nurse who took his blood pressure. She looked barely out of high school and smiled too brightly as she wrote down his numbers. "How is it?" he asked.

"170 over 105."

“Not so good.”

“No,” she said, still smiling. “Too high.”

“Well, hello, Matt,” Dr. Levinson greeted him as he entered the room. He was one of the few people outside the justice’s family and close friends who called him by his first name. The doctor had seen him naked and poked and prodded him in private places too many times to stand on ceremony. He was from a different generation too, a product of the sixties. He was bald now, but on his desk there was a photograph of him fresh out of medical school with long black hair and a beard, ministering to children on an Indian reservation. Along with the stethoscope around his neck he wore a string of turquoise beads. Now his only jewelry was a simple gold wedding band. He picked up Matt’s chart. “Been under a lot of stress lately?”

“The usual.”

“A little more than usual?”

“Maybe,” Matt acceded reluctantly. “We’re deciding a big case next week.”

“I read about it. If I was in your position, my blood pressure would go up too. I’m going to increase your medication, but I want you to check your blood pressure twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening, and phone in the numbers twice a week to the office. The medicine should help, but I think you need to do more to manage the stress. Are you exercising?”

“Sometimes.”

“How often?”

“A couple times a week.”

“That’s not enough—every day, like it or not. And,” he added, “watch the sodium intake.”

“OK.”

The doctor paused and looked earnestly at him, too earnestly. “The country needs you, Matt.”

Comments like that were precisely what made his blood pressure rise, but he couldn’t bring himself to tell the doctor. He suspected Dr. Levinson was a liberal, and he was the liberals’ last hope on the Court because even though he was a Republican, he had a reputation for independence and for voting his conscience. He took the new prescription and shook the doctor’s hand. “Remember to call in your numbers,” Dr. Levinson instructed as he showed him to the door.

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A different set of numbers worried the President’s chief advisor, Lyndon

Tottman. The latest polling data showed the President losing his lead and running neck and neck with Democratic candidate Bill Hartley. And as if that wasn't enough bad news for the day, Lyndon had just learned that the Saudis had withdrawn billions of their dollar holdings from American banks and converted them into Euros deposited in French and German banks. The dollar was plummeting.

He was in an emergency meeting now with the President, Treasury Secretary Brad Ames and Federal Reserve Chairman Phil Douglas. Lyndon didn't like Phil; he was a holdover from the last administration, a skilled technocrat but without the sense of mission the President expected from his team. When his term was up, they would let him go.

The President turned to get the go-ahead from Lyndon, as he always did, as though he was scared to start anything by himself. Lyndon was an African-American in his early forties, named after Lyndon Johnson by parents who made good in the Great Society, rising through the Texas state civil service from lowly clerical positions to senior management. Now they were dead, and Lyndon was born again. God had blessed him not only with a sharp mind but the kind of physical energy that allows you to get by just fine on a few hours of sleep. He nodded at the President. "Shoot," the President said.

Brad fired the first salvo. "Mr. President," he began, "we've got a crisis on our hands."

The President leaned forward over his vast expanse of desk. "I know—Lyndon told me. What did the Saudis want to do that for?"

"They're punishing us for going into Syria," Lyndon said straightforwardly. "They warned us there would be consequences. Well, we can come up with a few consequences of our own."

"No, I don't think it's that," Phil interjected, his face nervously twitching like a lab rat getting electric shocks. "Sooner or later it was going to happen. The dollar's weak and getting weaker. If I were the Saudis, I'd probably do the same thing."

"That's unpatriotic of you, Phil," Lyndon quipped.

"I'm not talking about patriotism here," Phil replied, still twitching. "The financial markets don't give a damn about patriotism. The real question is who's next after the Saudis. How bad does it get and what do we do about it?"

"Well, what can we do about it?" the President asked.

"The first thing we need to do is to restore confidence. We've got to raise interest rates so foreign investors get a better return on their dollars."

“But that will drive the economy further into recession,” Brad countered.

“That’s the price we have to pay.”

“I can’t pay that price,” the President responded. “Any more bad news on that score and my approval rate dips below 60 percent and that’s not where I want to be, only eight months out from the election. If we don’t play this right, Hartley’s going to seize on it. Did you see his last campaign ad? There’s a clip of me standing by an abandoned factory, with his voiceover saying, ‘It’s the economy, stupid.’”

“I understand your concern, Mr. President, but if we don’t raise interest rates, we risk a major run on the dollar,” Phil told him.

Lyndon leaned back in his chair, stretching his legs. “What the President is suggesting, gentlemen, is that we need to pick our pain carefully. Americans care more about jobs than about whether the dollar is going up or down. Besides, we can blame this one on the Saudis. Who likes the Saudis?”

“And what do we do when the Japanese start pulling out?” Phil asked with a touch of anger in his usually well-modulated voice. “Blame the Japanese?”

Lyndon shrugged. “Why not? A new yellow peril.”

“I hope you’re kidding.” Phil paused, looking directly at the President. “If we don’t raise interest rates, we’re courting economic disaster, and ultimately that’s going to affect the polls too. There’s no way you can get around it.”

“I’ve got a solution,” Brad said with a flush on his pallid cheeks. Behind his back people called him Casper the Ghost. He looked almost albino, as though he never stepped outdoors. “We raise the interest rate a few decimal points and announce that we’re considering a further hike. Whether we do that or not is another question, but at least it buys us some time and restores confidence in the short term without deepening the recession too much. And then we come up with a tax cut proposal for the little guy—not much, but enough to show we care and to make up for the fact that gas prices are rising.”

“I like that,” the President said.

“But we can’t afford a tax cut,” Phil cautioned.

“Just a little tax cut for the little guy,” Lyndon chimed in. “We’ll get to work on it.” With that, he made eye contact with the President, signaling it was time to bring the meeting to a close.

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Lisa looked nervously at her watch. Even if there was no traffic, she was already late for picking up Sam. Senator Barrett had scheduled their meeting for

3:00, but it was after five now and she still hadn't showed up in the office. "What should I do?" she asked Marla, the senator's executive secretary. "I have to leave, but the Senator is going to be really pissed off. She wanted me to brief her on the new Citizen Defense Act."

Reluctantly, Marla looked up from her computer. She was in her sixties, jaded but generous, with a penchant for plaid jackets that didn't quite match her skirts. An e-Bay addict, she was currently engaged in a bidding war for a Hummel figurine, a boy with a fish. "Can you believe it's up to \$150 dollars now?" she said to Lisa, pointing at her screen. "I don't know whether to top that or not."

"What should I do, Marla?" Lisa asked again, this time more desperately. "You know her better than me."

Marla shrugged. "What can I say? She's always pissed off—it's just a matter of degree. If you leave now, wear some heavy armor tomorrow and I'll try to provide some reinforcements."

"Thanks," Lisa said as she returned to her desk to pick up her jacket and briefcase. She walked briskly down the corridor to the elevator, but when the door opened, Senator Barrett stepped out. She was a big, broad-shouldered woman in her late fifties who had followed the law of the political jungle so long that she was starting to look like one of its beasts. Lisa imagined her as a tiger on her better days, a hyena on her worse. A permanent scowl was etched into the wrinkle lines on her face. "Where are you going?" she asked Lisa. "I thought we were meeting."

"I have to pick up my son."

"That bill is over 600 pages long and we're voting on it the day after tomorrow. I need you to brief me on it."

"I realize that," Lisa responded, "but we were supposed to meet at three."

The senator glared at her. "I need you to be flexible, Lisa. Washington runs on different time than Minneapolis. Didn't I tell you that when I hired you?"

Lisa felt her face flush, but she managed to control her voice. "Yes. I'm sorry," she said. "I'll brief you first thing tomorrow morning."

"All right, but don't let this happen again."

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Nick was looking at his watch when Sam finally hit a three-pointer. 6:15. Fifteen minutes late. "Did you see that, Mr. Connor?"

"That was great," Nick lied. "See if you can do it again."

Except for the janitor cleaning the locker room, they were alone in the

school. All the other after-school kids had been picked up more or less on time, but Sam's mother was late again, even though last week she paid over \$50 in late fees. A dollar a minute was the charge during the first half hour, rising to two in the second. Nick was pissed off. He had only two hours between this job and the next at the fitness club and she was eating into his time, taking him and her son for granted. One more infringement and he was going to tell the principal that Sam had to leave the program. He was a nice enough kid even though he sucked at sports, being a little too fat and way too cautious. Nick looked at his watch again. 6:20. He wouldn't have time to make dinner.

The basketball hit the rim and bounced back toward him. He caught it and passed to Sam who tried a two-pointer this time, without success. "Just keep working at it," Nick advised. "That's what it takes. Got a hoop at home?"

Sam shook his head. "We live in an apartment."

Nick was surprised. Most kids who went to the prestigious Ryder School in Chevy Chase lived in big houses, not like the kids at Jefferson Elementary in Southwest D.C., where he used to work. There were homeless kids in that school and the basketball hoops had no netting. They laid him off because they did away with gym classes in the last round of budget cuts.

He was looking at his watch when Lisa came in. "I hit a three, Mom," Sam shouted as he ran over to her, still young enough to want a hug.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she apologized to Nick.

"Almost twenty-five minutes."

"I'll pay," she responded quickly.

"That's not the point. I need to have a word with you, Ms. Derby—alone."

"Sam, why don't you go get in the car," she said, tousling his hair. "I'll be there in a second." The boy left reluctantly, with one parting shot, an air ball that arced gracelessly and hit the floor with more of a thud than a bounce.

"This can't go on, Ms. Derby," Nick began. "You might not believe this, but I have a life. In fact, I have another job I need to get to by 7:30 in Bethesda. And have you ever thought about how your son feels when you're late every day? I watch him watching the other kids leave with their parents."

"I'm sorry I'm late," she bristled, "but I'm a single mother and I have the kind of job that demands I stay late some times. I pay the fees. And please don't pretend to know how my son feels. That's not your job."

"Oh, yes, it is." He looked hard at her, like he might look at one of the kids acting up. "One more time and we'll ask Sam to leave the program."

“You can’t do that.”

“It’s in the contract you signed, Ms. Derby. The school reserves the right to expel students from the after-school program if their parents are habitually late. I suggest with the money you spend on late fees you hire someone to pick him up. Other parents do that.”

“So he can come home to an empty house? He’s only eight years old.”

“You can hire people to take him to their home and you can pick him up from there. Ronald Jacobs’s mother does that.”

“She does?”

There was something in her clueless response that reminded him of Sam, and he softened toward her despite himself. She needed help, he could see that. Like most of the other women who sent their children to Ryder, she was a Washington professional, dressed for success in a sleek beige pantsuit, but she didn’t carry the act off as well as the others. Her haircut was ragged, her leather purse scuffed. Her lip was quivering, but he pretended not to notice. “Why don’t you try calling Mrs. Jacobs?”

“I will,” she said. She paused, looking at him for the first time as if he were anything other than an enforcer. “Thanks for the suggestion.”

As she turned to leave, he picked up his clipboard from the bleachers, jotting down \$20 instead of \$25 in late charges.

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In Maidenhead Beach, North Carolina, Faith Jones closed up the fish store at six and walked over to the beach, as she did almost every evening when the weather was fair. It was her only moment of peace all day. Since her husband Paul died five years ago, she had managed the store by herself, buying from the fishermen and selling to the tourists, and now that Jackson was in prison, she had her daughter-in-law Samira and grandson Ali to worry about too. They’d moved in with her when they were evicted from their house in Raleigh after Jackson’s arrest. Faith refused to think of her son as Salim Mohammed. He was christened Jackson after her favorite uncle, and Jackson he would forever be in her eyes and the eyes of the Lord.

She kicked off her shoes and walked along the wet sand at the water’s edge. It was low tide and sand crabs were scurrying around like nervous nellys. Usually she got a kick out of watching them, but this evening she was too preoccupied with Jackson’s case to pay them much heed. She picked up a shell, turned it over

in her hand, then tossed it in the direction of a gull feeding off a fish carcass. The bird went screeching off into the air.

She wished she could screech and fly away too, fly all the way to that military prison in Nevada where they were holding her Jackson in solitary. The prison was so new it didn't even have a name. She wondered if he had a window in his cell and could see the sky. It wasn't so long ago that he would have been running ahead of her on the beach, teasing her to chase him, dashing into the water and swatting at a breaking wave right before he ducked under. When the weather got warmer, Ali could do that if his mother let him. Samira dressed in a long black robe and was scared of the sea. She was a city girl, born and raised in Raleigh. She couldn't even clean a fish.

Faith's hands always smelled of fish, no matter how much perfumed soap or lotion she used. Maybe that's why Ali shied away from her. She wanted to sit him on her lap and rub his fuzzy head, but like a timid puppy, he wouldn't come close unless she offered him a treat. He liked gingerbread cookies. She'd have to make some more. Maybe they could decorate them together. The poor boy. Over fifty men had come that night to arrest his father with a helicopter overhead. Samira said she couldn't tell whether they were cops or soldiers since they were dressed in black. If they'd asked, Jackson would have given himself up voluntarily, but they just knocked down the door and ran up the stairs pointing their guns. Ali saw it all. He saw them push his father to the floor and manacle his hands. Sometimes at night Faith heard Samira comforting him after a nightmare.

Faith looked out over the sea. The spring sky was streaked with pinks and oranges and the water was blue gold, her favorite color. She wondered if Jackson could see and hear the ocean when he closed his eyes at night in the desert. She hoped so. She hoped her son at least found some peace in his dreams.