VINTAGE

THE EMPEROR OF OCEAN PARK

STEPHEN L. CARTER

Contents

Cover
About the Book
About the Author
Also by Stephen L. Carter
Dedication
Title Page
Epigraph
Prologue: The Vineyard House

Part I: Nowotny Interference
  Chapter 1: The Latest News by Phone
  Chapter 2: A Visit to the Coast
  Chapter 3: The White Kitchen
  Chapter 4: The Charmer
  Chapter 5: A Graveside Encounter
  Chapter 6: The Problemist
  Chapter 7: The Roller Woman
  Chapter 8: More News by Phone
  Chapter 9: A Pedagogical Disagreement
  Chapter 10: A Tragic Coincidence
  Chapter 11: A Modest Proposal
  Chapter 12: A Special Delivery
  Chapter 13: A Familiar Face
  Chapter 14: Various Freedoms of Speech
  Chapter 15: Two Encounters
  Chapter 16: The Three Fools
  Chapter 17: The Brass Ring

Part II: Turton Doubling
  Chapter 18: More News by Phone
  Chapter 19: Two Tales are Told
  Chapter 20: The Halls of Justice
  Chapter 21: A Trip Around the Circle
  Chapter 22: Conversation with a Colonel

Chapter 23: The Ambiguous Figure
Chapter 24: The Diagnosis
Chapter 25: A Modest Request
Chapter 26: Sam Loyd’s Challenge
Chapter 27: A Painful Encounter
Chapter 28: Two News Flashes
Chapter 29: An Enjoyable Evening
Chapter 30: The Usual Suspects
Chapter 31: Brown Week
Chapter 32: A Piece of the Answer
Chapter 33: A Helpful Chat
Chapter 34: A Story Unravels
Chapter 35: The Skeleton
Chapter 36: A Brother’s Tale

Part III: Unprovided Flight
Chapter 37: Some Historical Notes
Chapter 38: A Domestic Interlude
Chapter 39: Unexpected Visitors
Chapter 40: Another Discovery
Chapter 41: Confrontation
Chapter 42: Deadline
Chapter 43: A Choice is Made
Chapter 44: Stormy Weather
Chapter 45: A Call to Arms
Chapter 46: Resting Places
Chapter 47: A Decision at Post
Chapter 48: Zwischenzug
Chapter 49: A Plan is Carried Out
Chapter 50: Again Old Town
Chapter 51: An Old Friend Returns
Chapter 52: Old Friends Visit
Chapter 53: Another Old Friend Arrives
Chapter 54: An Unsteady Return
Chapter 55: The Elm Harbor Connection
Chapter 56: A Summer Stroll

- Chapter 57: Some Pieces are Traded Off
- Chapter 58: A Plausible Account
- Chapter 59: On the Other Hand …
- Chapter 60: Endgame
- Chapter 61: Angela’s Boyfriend
- Chapter 62: The Battle for George
- Chapter 63: The Water Baby
- Chapter 64: Double Excelsior

Author’s Note
Copyright

About the Book

Judge Oliver Garland has just died in suspicious circumstances. Conservative and controversial, Garland had many enemies. Many years ago, he’d earned a judge’s highest prize: a Supreme Court nomination. But in a scene of bitter humiliation in front of a televised audience and before the eyes of his family, he had to withdraw his nomination. It was a national scandal, and a private agony, one from which he never recovered. Now, year’s later, The judge’s death raises even more questions than his life did and seems to be leading to a second terrible scandal. Could he have been murdered? He has left a strange message for his son Talcott, a professor at an elite Ivy League law school, entrusting him with ‘the arrangements’ – a mysterious puzzle that only Tal can unlock, and only by unearthing the ambiguities of his father’s turbulent past. When another man is found dead, and then another, Talcott must risk life, marriage and reputation, following the clues his father left him.

About the Author

Stephen L. Carter is the William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Law at Yale University, where he has taught since 1982. He is the author of seven non-fiction books. He and his family live near New Haven, Connecticut.

ALSO BY STEPHEN L. CARTER

God's Name in Vain:
The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics

The Dissent of the Governed:
A Meditation on Law, Religion, and Loyalty

Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy

Integrity

The Confirmation Mess:
Cleaning Up the Federal Appointments Process

The Culture of Disbelief:
How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion

Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby

For Mom, who loved a mystery, and for Dad, who is not in this one: I love you both, always

Stephen L. Carter

THE EMPEROR OF OCEAN PARK

VINTAGE

Deux fous gagnent toujours, mais trois fous, non!
(Loosely: Two fools always win, but three fools, never!)

—Siegbert Tarrasch

(Note: The chess piece Americans call the bishop, the French call *le fou*.)

PROLOGUE

THE VINEYARD HOUSE

WHEN MY FATHER finally died, he left the Redskins tickets to my brother, the house on Shepard Street to my sister, and the house on the Vineyard to me. The football tickets, of course, were the most valuable item in the estate, but then Addison was always the biggest favorite and the biggest fan, the only one of the children who came close to sharing my father's obsession, as well as the only one of us actually on speaking terms with my father the last time he drew his will. Addison is a gem, if you don't mind the religious nonsense, but Mariah and I have not been close in the years since I joined the enemy, as she puts it, which is why my father bequeathed us houses four hundred miles apart.

I was glad to have the Vineyard house, a tidy little Victorian on Ocean Park in the town of Oak Bluffs, with lots of frilly carpenter's Gothic along the sagging porch and a lovely morning view of the white band shell set amidst a vast sea of smooth green grass and outlined against a vaster sea of bright blue water. My parents liked to tell how they bought the house for a song back in the sixties, when Martha's Vineyard, and the black middle-class colony that summers there, were still smart and secret. Lately, in my father's oft-repeated view, the Vineyard had tumbled downhill, for it was crowded and noisy and, besides, they let everyone in now, by which he meant black people less well off than we. There were too many new houses going up, he would moan, many of them despoiling the roads and woods near the best beaches. There were even condominiums, of all things, especially near Edgartown, which he could not understand, because the southern part of the island is what he always called Kennedy country, the land where rich white vacationers and their bratty children congregate, and a part-angry, part-jealous article of my father's faith held that white people allow the members of what he liked to call the darker nation to swarm and crowd while keeping the open spaces for themselves.

And yet, amidst all the clamor, the Vineyard house is a small marvel. I loved it as a child and love it more now. Every room, every dark wooden stair, every window whispers its secret share of memories. As a child, I broke an ankle and a wrist in a fall from the gabled roof outside the master bedroom; now, more than thirty years after, I no longer recall why I thought it would be fun to climb there. Two summers later, as I wandered the house in post-midnight darkness, searching for a drink of water, an odd mewling sound dropped me into a crouch on the landing, whence, a week or so shy of my tenth birthday, I peered through the balustrade and thus caught my first stimulating glimpse of the primal mystery of the adult world. I saw my brother, Addison, four years older than I, tussling with our cousin Sally, a dark beauty of fifteen, on the threadbare burgundy sofa opposite the television down in the shadowy nook of the stairwell, neither of them quite fully dressed, although I was somehow unable to figure out precisely what articles of clothing were missing. My instinct was to flee. Instead, seized by a weirdly thrilling lethargy, I watched them roll about, their arms and legs intertwined in seemingly random postures—making out, we called it in those simpler days, a phrase pregnant with purposeful ambiguity, perhaps as a protection against the burden of specificity.

My own teen years, like my adulthood dreary and overlong, brought no similar adventures, least of all on the Vineyard; the highlight, I suppose, came near the end of our last summer sojourn as a full family, when I was about thirteen, and Mariah, a rather pudgy fifteen and angry at me for some smart-mouthed crack about her weight, borrowed a box of kitchen matches, then stole a Topps Willie Mays baseball card that I treasured and climbed the dangerous pull-down ladder to the attic, eight rickety wooden slats, most of them loose. When I caught up with her, my sister burned the card before my eyes as I wept helplessly, falling to my knees in the wretched afternoon heat of the dusty, low-ceilinged loft—the two of us already set in our lifelong pattern of animosity. That same summer, my sister Abigail, in those days still known as the baby, even though just a bit more than a year younger than I, made the local paper, the *Vineyard Gazette*, when she won something like eight different prizes at the county fair on a muggy August night by throwing darts at balloons and baseballs at milk bottles, and so solidified her position as the family's only potential athlete—none of the rest of us dared try, for our parents always preached brains over brawn.

Four Augusts later, Abby's boyish laughter was no longer heard along Ocean Park, or anywhere else, her joy in life, and ours in her, having vanished in a confused instant of rain-slicked asphalt and an inexperienced teenager's fruitless effort to evade an out-of-control sports car, something fancy, seen by several witnesses but never accurately described and therefore never found; for the driver who killed my baby sister a few blocks north of the Washington Cathedral in that first spring of Jimmy Carter's presidency left the scene long before the police arrived. That Abby had only a learner's permit, not a license, never became a matter of public knowledge; and the marijuana that was found in her borrowed car was never again mentioned, least of all by the police or even the press, because my father was who he was and had the connections that he did, and, besides, in those days it was not yet our national sport to ravage the reputations of the great. Abby was therefore able to die as innocently as we pretended that she had lived. Addison by that time was on the verge of finishing college and Mariah was about to begin her sophomore year, leaving me in the nervous role of what my mother kept calling her only child. And all that Oak Bluffs summer, as my father, tight-lipped, commuted to the federal courthouse in Washington and my mother shuffled aimlessly from one downstairs room to the next, I made it my task to hunt through the house for memories of Abby—at the bottom of a stack of books on the black metal cart underneath the television, her favorite game of Life; in the back of the glass-fronted cabinet over the sink, a white ceramic mug emblazoned with the legend black is beautiful, purchased to annoy my father; and, hiding in a corner of the airless attic, a stuffed panda named George, after the martyred black militant George Jackson, won at the fair and now leaking from its joints some hideous pink substance—memories, I must confess in my perilous middle age, that have grown ever fainter with the passage of time.

Ah, the Vineyard house! Addison was married in it, twice, once more or less successfully, and I smashed the leaded glass in the double front door, also twice, once more or less intentionally. Every summer of my youth we went there to live, because that is what one does with a summer home. Every winter my father griped about the upkeep and threatened to sell it, because that is what one does when happiness is a questionable investment. And when the cancer that pursued her for six years finally won, my mother died in it, in the smallest bedroom, with the nicest view of Nantucket Sound, because that is what one does if one can choose one’s end.

My father died at his desk. And, at first, only my sister and a few stoned callers to late-night radio shows believed he had been murdered.

PART I

NOWOTNY INTERFERENCE

Nowotny interference—In the composition of chess problems, a theme in which two Black pieces obstruct one another’s ability to protect vital squares.

CHAPTER 1

THE LATEST NEWS BY PHONE

(I)

"THIS IS the happiest day of my life," burbles my wife of nearly nine years on what will shortly become one of the saddest days of mine.

"I see," I answer, my tone conveying my hurt.

"Oh, Misha, grow up. I'm not comparing it with marrying you." A pause. "Or with having a baby," she adds as a footnote.

"I know, I understand."

Another pause. I hate pauses on the telephone, but, then, I hate the telephone itself, and much else besides. In the background, I hear a laughing male voice. Although it is almost eleven in the morning in the East, it is just nearing eight in San Francisco. But there is no need to be suspicious: she could be calling from a restaurant, a shopping mall, or a conference room.

Or not.

"I thought you would be happy for me," Kimmer says at last.

"I am happy for you," I assure her, far too late. "It's just —"

“Oh, Misha, come on.” She is impatient now. “I’m not your father, okay? I know what I’m getting into. What happened to him is not going to happen to me. What happened to you is not going to happen to our son. Okay? Honey?”

Nothing happened to me, I almost lie, but I refrain, in part because I like the rare and scrumptious taste of *Honey*. With Kimmer for once so happy, I do not want to cause trouble. I certainly do not want to tell her that the joy I feel at her accomplishment is diminished by my concern over how my father will react. I say softly, “I just worry about you, that’s all.”

“I can take care of myself,” Kimmer assures me, a proposition so utterly true that it is frightening. I marvel at my wife’s capacity to hide good news, at least from her husband. She learned some time yesterday that her years of subtle lobbying and careful political contributions have at last paid off, that she is among the finalists for a vacancy on the federal court of appeals. I try not to wonder how many people she shared her joy with before she got around to calling home.

“I miss you,” I say.

“Well, that’s sweet, but, unfortunately, it’s starting to look like I gotta stay out here till tomorrow.”

“I thought you were coming home tonight.”

“I was, but—well, I just can’t.”

“I see.”

“Oh, Misha, I’m not staying away on purpose. It’s my job. There’s nothing I can do about it.” A few seconds while we think this through together. “I’ll be home as soon as I can, you know that.”

“I know, darling, I know.” I am standing behind my desk and looking down into the courtyard at the students lying on the grass, noses in their casebooks, or playing volleyball, trying to stretch the New England summer as they leap about in the dying October sun. My office is spacious and bright but a bit disorderly, which is also generally the state of my life. “I know,” I say a third time, for we are at that stage in our marriage when we seem to be running out of conversation.

After a suitable period of silence, Kimmer returns to practicalities. “Guess what? The FBI will be starting to talk to my friends soon. My husband too. When Ruthie said that, I’m like, ‘I hope he won’t tell them *all* my sins.’” A small laugh, wary and confident at the same time. My wife knows she can count on me. And, so knowing, she turns suddenly humble. “I realize they’re thinking about other people,” she continues, “and some of them have awfully good résumés. But Ruthie says I have a really good shot.” *Ruthie* being Ruth Silverman, our law school classmate, Kimmer’s sometime friend, and now deputy White House counsel.

“You do if they go on merit,” I say loyally.

“You don’t sound like you think I’m gonna get it.”

“I think you *should* get it.” And this is true. My wife is the second-smartest lawyer I know. She is a partner in the biggest law firm in Elm Harbor, which Kimmer considers a small town and I consider a fair-sized city. Only two other women have risen so high, and nobody else who isn’t white.

“I guess the fix could be in,” she concedes.

“I hope it isn’t. I want you to get what you want. And deserve.” I hesitate, then plunge. “I love you, Kimmer. I always will.”

My wife, reluctant to return this sentiment, strikes out in another direction. “There are maybe four or five finalists. Ruthie says some of them are law professors. She says two or three of them are your colleagues.” This makes me smile, but not with pleasure. Ruthie is far too cagey to have mentioned any names, but Kimmer and I both know perfectly well that *two or three colleagues* boils down to Marc Hadley, considered by some the most brilliant member of the faculty, even though he has published exactly one book in a quarter-century of law teaching, and that came almost twenty years ago. Marc and I used to be fairly close, and I am not close to many people, especially at the university; but the unexpected death of Judge Julius Krantz four months ago ruined what slight friendship we had, sparking the behind-the-scenes competition that has led us to this moment.

"It's hard to believe the President would pick another law professor," I offer, just for something to say. Marc has been lobbying for a judgeship longer than my wife, and helped Ruthie, once a favored student, land her current position.

"The best judges are people who have practiced real law for a while." My wife speaks as though quoting an official contest rule.

"I tend to agree."

"Let's hope the President agrees."

"Right." I stretch a creaky arm. My body is aching in just the right places to make it impossible to sit still. After breakfast this morning, I dropped Bentley at his overpriced preschool, then met Rob Saltpeter, another colleague, although not quite a friend, for our occasional game of basketball, not at the university gym, where we might embarrass ourselves in front of the students, but at the YMCA, where everybody else was at least as middle-aged as we.

"Ruthie says they'll be deciding in the next six to eight weeks," my wife adds, reinforcing my secret suspicion that she is celebrating far too soon. Kimmer pronounces Ruthie's name with remarkable affection, given that, just two weeks ago, she derided her old friend to my private ear as *Little Miss Judge-Picker*. "Just in time for Christmas."

"Well, I think it's great news, darling. Maybe when you come home we can—"

"Oh, Misha, honey, I have to go. Jerry's calling me. Sorry. I'll talk to you later."

"Okay. I love you," I offer again. But I am declaring my affection to empty air.

(II)

Jerry's calling me. To a meeting? To the telephone? Back to bed? I torture myself with risqué speculations until it is time for my eleven o'clock class, then gather my books together and rush off to teach. I am, as you may have gathered, a professor of law. I am in the vicinity of forty years of age and was once, in the mists of history, a practicing lawyer. Nowadays, I earn my bread by writing learned articles too arcane to have any influence and, several mornings a week, trying to stuff some torts (fall term) or administrative law (spring term) into the heads of students too intelligent to content themselves with B's but too self-absorbed to waste their precious energy on the tedious details one must master to earn A's. Most of our students crave only the credential we award, not the knowledge we offer; and as generation after generation, each more than the last, views us as a merely vocational school, the connection between the desire for the degree and the desire to understand the law grows more and more attenuated. These are not, perhaps, the happiest thoughts a law professor might endure, but most of us think them at some time or other, and today seems to be my day.

I hurry through my torts class—what new is there to say, really, on the subject of no-fault insurance?—and I get off several nice lines, none of them original, that keep my fifty-three students laughing for much of the hour. At half past twelve, I trudge off to lunch with two of my colleagues, Ethan Brinkley, who is young enough still to be excited about being a tenured professor, and Theo Mountain, who taught constitutional law to my father as well as to me and who, thanks to the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and an indefatigable physical constitution, may well teach my grandchildren. Sitting with them in a disintegrating booth at Post (only the uninitiated call it Post's), a grim deli two blocks from the law school, I listen as Ethan tells a story about something hilarious that Tish Kirschbaum said at a party last weekend at Peter Van Dyke's house, and I am struck, as so often, by the sense that there is a white law school social circle that whirls around me so fast that I discern it only in tiny glimpses: until Ethan mentioned it, I had no idea that there *was* a party last weekend at Peter Van Dyke's house, and I certainly was offered no opportunity to decline to attend. Peter lives two blocks away from me, but stands miles above me in the law school's hierarchy. Ethan, in theory, stands miles below. But skin color, even on the most liberal of campuses, contrives a hierarchy of its own.

Ethan keeps talking. Theo, his bushy white beard spotted with mustard, laughs in delight; as I try my best to join in, I wonder whether to tell them about Kimmer, just to see the pomposity drain for a splendid moment from their satisfied Caucasian faces. I want to tell *somebody*. Then it occurs to me that if I spread the news around and Marc subsequently beats out Kimmer for the nomination—as I suspect he will, albeit undeservingly—all the arrogance will come flooding back, only worse.

Besides, Marc probably knows anyway. Ruthie would not tell Kimmer Marc's name, but I bet she has told Marc Kimmer's. Or so I assure myself as I walk, alone, back along Town Street to the law school. Lunch is over. Theo, old enough to have a granddaughter at the college when most of us still have children in grade school, is off to a meeting; Ethan, an expert on both terrorism and the law of war, is off to the gym, for he keeps himself athletically taut in case MSNBC or CNN should call. I, with nothing in particular to do, return to the office. Students flurry past, all colors, all styles of dress, and all shambling along in that oddly insolent gait that today's young people affect, heads down, shoulders hunched, elbows in at the sides, feet hardly leaving the ground, yet managing all the same to convey a sense of energy ready to be unleashed. Marc probably knows anyway. I cannot escape the thought. I pass the granite glory of the Science Quad, into which the university seems to pour all its spare cash nowadays. I pass a gaggle of beggars, all members of the darker nation, to each of whom I give a dollar—*paying guilt money*, Kimmer calls this habit of mine. I wonder, briefly, how many of them are hustlers, but this is what my father used to call an "unworthy thought": *You are better than such ideas*, he would preach to his children, with rare anger, commanding us to patrol our minds.

Marc probably knows, I tell myself once more as I trip up the wide stairs at the main entrance to the law buildings. Ruthie Silverman, I am willing to bet, has told him everything. Theo taught Ruthie, too, and my wife and I were her classmates; but it is Marc Hadley upon whom she, like so many of our students, lavishes her most lasting devotion.

"That's the problem with students," I murmur just under my breath as I cross the threshold, for talking to myself, which my wife assures me is a sign of insanity, has been my lifelong habit. "They never stop being grateful."

Nevertheless, prudence prevails. I decide to keep Kimmer's news to myself. I keep most things to myself. My world, although occasionally painful, is usually quiet, which is how I like it. That it might suddenly be overtaken by violence and terror is, on this sunny autumn afternoon, quite beyond my imagining.

(III)

IN THE HIGH-CEILINGED LOBBY, I run into one of my favorite students, Crysta Smallwood, who has a tremendous crush on data. Crysta is a dark, chunky woman of not inconsiderable intellectual gifts who, before law school, majored in French at Pomona and was never called upon to manipulate numbers. Since her arrival in Elm Harbor, the discovery of statistics has made her delightfully crazy. She was in my torts class last fall and has spent most of her time since on her twin loves: our legal-aid clinic, where she helps welfare mothers avoid eviction, and her collection of statistics, by which she hopes to show that the white race is headed for self-destruction, a prospect that gladdens her.

"Hey, Professor Garland?" she calls in her best West Coast slur.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Smallwood," I answer formally, because I have learned through hard experience not to be too familiar with students. I walk toward the stairs.

"Guess what?" she enthuses, cutting off my escape, heedless of the possibility that I might be headed someplace. Her hair is a very short Afro, one of the last in the school. I am old enough to remember when few black women of her age wore their hair any other way, but nationalism turned out to be less an ideology than a fad. Her eyes are a little too far apart, giving her a mildly unsettling walleyed look when she meets your gaze. She moves very fast for a woman of her bulk, and is consequently not so easy to avoid. "I've been looking at those numbers again. On white women?"

"I see." Trapped, I gaze up at the ceiling, decorated with ornate plaster sculptures: religious symbols, garlands of yew leaves, hints of justice, all repainted so often that they are losing their sharp definition.

"Yeah, and, so, guess what? Their fertility rate—white women?—is so low now that there won't *be* any white babies by about 2050."

"Ah—are you sure about those figures?" Because Crysta, although brilliant, is also completely nuts. As her teacher, I have discovered that her enthusiasm makes her careless, for she often cites data, with great confidence, before taking the time to understand them.

“Maybe 2075?” she proposes, her friendly tone implying that we can negotiate.

“Sounds a little shaky, Ms. Smallwood.”

“It’s because of abortion.” I am on the move again, but Crysta easily keeps stride. “Because they’re killing their babies? That’s the main reason.”

“I really think you should consider another topic for your paper,” I answer, feinting around her to reach the sweeping marble staircase to the faculty offices.

“It’s not just abortion”—her voice carries up the stairwell after me, causing one of my colleagues, nervous little Joe Janowsky, to peer over the marble railing in his thick glasses to see who is shouting—“it’s also interracial marriages, because white women—”

Then I am through the double doors to the corridor and Crysta’s speculations are mercifully inaudible.

I was like her once, I remind myself as I slip into my office. Every bit as certain I was right on subjects I knew nothing about. Which is probably how I got hired in the first place, for I was intellectually bolder when I was intellectually younger.

That, plus the happenstance of being my father’s son, for his influence around the campus faded only slightly after the trauma of his confirmation hearings. Even today, well over a decade after the Judge’s fall, I am buttonholed by students who want to hear from my own mouth that my father is indeed who they have heard he is, and by colleagues who want me to explain to them how it *felt* to sit there day after miserable day, listening stoically as the Senate methodically destroyed him.

“Like watching somebody in *zugzwang*,” I always say, but they are not serious chess players, so they never get it. Although, being professors, they pretend to.

Searching for a distraction, I leaf through my in box. A memorandum from the provost’s office about parking rates. An invitation to a conference on tort reform in California three months from now, but only if I pay my own way. A postcard from some fellow out in Idaho, my opponent in a postal chess tournament, who has found the one move I hoped he would miss. A reminder from Ben Montoya, the deputy dean, about some big lawyer who is speaking tonight. A moderately threatening letter from the university library about some book I have evidently lost. From the middle of the stack, I pull out the new *Harvard Law Review*, skim the table of contents, then drop it, fast, after coming across yet another scholarly article explaining why my infamous father is a traitor to his race, for that is the level to which the darker nation has been reduced: being unable to influence the course of a single event in white America, we waste our precious time and intellectual energy maligning each other, as though we best serve the cause of racial progress by kicking other black folks around.

All right, I have done my work for the day.

The telephone rings.

I stare at the instrument, thinking—not for the first time—what a nasty, intrusive, uncivil thing the telephone really is, demanding, irritating, interrupting, invading the mind's space. I wonder why Alexander Graham Bell is such a hero. His invention destroyed the private realm. The device has no conscience. It rings when we are sleeping, showering, praying, arguing, reading, making love. Or when we just want desperately to be left alone. I think about not answering. I have suffered enough. And not only because my mercurial wife hung up so abruptly. This has been one of those peculiar Thursdays on which the telephone refuses to stop its angry clamor for attention: a frustrated law-review editor demanding that I dispatch an overdue draft of an article, an unhappy student seeking an appointment, American Express looking for last month's payment, all have had their innings. The dean of the law school, Lynda Wyatt—or Dean Lynda, as she likes to be addressed by everybody, students, faculty, and alumni alike—called just before lunch to assign me to yet another of the *ad hoc* committees she is always creating. “I only ask because I love you,” she crooned in her motherly way, which is what she says to everybody she dislikes.

The phone keeps ringing. I wait for the voice mail to answer, but the voice mail, like most of the university’s cut-rate technology, operates best when not needed. I decide to ignore it, but then I remember that my conversation with Kimmer ended badly, so perhaps she is calling to make up.

Or to argue some more.

Bracing myself for either alternative, I snatch up the handset, hoping for the voice of my possibly repentant wife, but it is only the great Mallory Corcoran, my father’s law partner and last remaining friend, as well as a Washington fixer of some repute, calling to tell me that the Judge is gone.

CHAPTER 2

A VISIT TO THE COAST

(I)

I ARRIVE in Washington on Friday afternoon, the day after my father's death, leave my bags at the home of Miles and Vera Madison, my wife's diffident and proper parents, then go over to the Shepard Street house, only to find that Mariah, in her orderly way, has done most of what needs doing. (By unspoken agreement, we both know the family cannot rely on flighty Addison, who has yet to relay any travel plans.) Long ago, Mariah was a plump, disorderly child, with a terrible inferiority complex about her younger, fair-skinned sister, for an obsession with pigmentation is even now the curse of our race, especially in families like mine. As she grew older, Mariah became a stately, almost regal, beauty, somehow ignored nevertheless by the men of the Gold Coast (as we style our narrow, upper-middle-class strip of the darker nation), perhaps running now to fleshiness, but that is to be expected after bearing five children, according to sour Kimmer, professional lawyer and amateur fitness guru. (Kimmer has borne exactly one, a half-planned accident we named Bentley after his maternal grandmother's maiden name.) The adult Mariah is also fabulously well organized, the only one of the children who takes after the Judge in that respect, and she does not believe in rest. But moments after I walk through the door of the rambling and ugly Shepard Street house where we both spent our teen years, Mariah dumps the rest of the work on me. She does this, I think, not out of grief or malice or even exhaustion, but out of the same trait that led her to quit journalism for a career of raising her children, a peculiar willed deference to men, inherited from our mother, who required of her two daughters less that they play a role than that they display an attitude: there were tasks unfit for their gender. Kimmer hates this in my sister, and has accused her, once to her face, of wasting the brain that earned her Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year at Stanford. Kimmer tossed out this line at a Christmas party in this very house that we foolishly attended two years ago. Mariah, smiling, responded calmly that her children deserve the best years of her life. Kimmer, who scarcely broke her professional stride when Bentley was born, took this as a personal attack and said so, which gave my sister and me another reason, if one was needed, not to speak to each other.

You should understand that in many ways I love and respect my sister. When we were younger, Mariah was, by common agreement, the most intellectually able of my parents' four children, and the one most earnestly and touchingly devoted to the impossible work of gaining their approval. Her successes in high school and college warmed my father's heart. To warm my mother's, Mariah married once and happily, an earlier fiancé who would have been a disaster having conveniently absconded with her best friend, and she produced grandchildren with a regularity and an enthusiasm that delighted my parents. Her husband is white and boring, an investment banker ten years her senior whom she met, she told the family, on a blind date, although sweet Kimmer always insists that it could only have been the personals. And, if I admit the truth, Mariah has always preferred white men, all the way back to her high-school years at Sidwell Friends, when, under the hawklike scrutiny of our brooding father, she began to date.

At Shepard Street, Mariah is greeting callers in the foyer, formal and sober in a midnight blue dress and a single strand of pearls, very much the lady of the house, as my mother might have said. From somewhere in the house wafts my father’s terrible taste in classical music: Puccini with an English-language libretto. The foyer is small and murky and crowded with mismatched pieces of heavy wooden furniture. It opens on the left to the living room, on the right to the dining room, and in the back to a hallway leading to family room and kitchen. A broad but undistinguished staircase strides upward next to the dining-room door, and along the upstairs hall is a gallery where I used to crouch in order to spy on my parents’ dinner parties and poker games, and where Addison once made me hide in a successful effort to prove to me that there is no Santa Claus. Beyond the gallery is the cavernous study where my father died. To my surprise, I see two or three people up there now, leaning on the banister as though it belongs to them. In fact, there are more people in the house than I expect. The entire first floor seems filled with somber suits, a larger slice of financially comfortable African America than most white Americans probably think exists outside the sports and entertainment worlds, and I wonder how many of the guests are happier about my father’s death than their faces attest.

When I step through the front door, my sister offers me not a hug but a distant kiss, one cheek, other cheek, and murmurs, “I’m so glad you’re here,” the way she might say it to one of my father’s law partners or poker buddies. Then, holding my shoulders in something still short of a hug, she looks past me down the walk, eyes tired but bright and mischievous: “Where’s Kimberly?” (Mariah refuses to say *Kimmer*, which reeks, she once told me, of faux