

Toxic Lies
by
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Scene 1: A high school teachers lounge.

Hey, Charlie, what's going on?
PAUL

Getting ready for the pool party.
CHARLIE

The highlight of the year.
PAUL

Yeah, listen, who's this new biology teacher?
CHARLIE

He's been teaching here a whole year and you never met him?
PAUL

I stay in my lane.
CHARLIE

Wow, really?
PAUL

You meet him?
CHARLIE

Sure, we've become good friends.
PAUL

What's he like?
CHARLIE

Nice guy. Young, good personality. Did you meet him?
PAUL

No, not yet.
CHARLIE

I'll introduce you.
PAUL

Don't bother.
CHARLIE

What?
PAUL

Yeah, forget it. CHARLIE

What's the problem? PAUL

I hear his name's AHMED? CHARLIE

Right. PAUL

That tells me everything I need to know. CHARLIE

Which is? PAUL

My question is what kind of name is AHMED anyway? CHARLIE

It's Arabic. PAUL

Arabic?! CHARLIE

Yeah, I googled his name. PAUL

What is he a Muslim? CHARLIE

A Muslim? I don't know. I didn't ask. PAUL

He's associated with that ilk. CHARLIE

C'mon, guilt by association. You're smarter than that. PAUL

Guilt, period. CHARLIE

Wow, you are off the wall today. PAUL

I thought there was a Muslim ban. CHARLIE

He's American born. PAUL

I've got to meet up with JESSICA. CHARLIE

You two still going out? PAUL

You hear anything different? CHARLIE

No. PAUL

We're still going strong. Real strong if you know what I mean. CHARLIE

See you later today. PAUL

Scene 2: CHARLIE's apartment with JESSICA

You ready for the pool party tonight? CHARLIE

Yeah, of course. JESSICA

What time do you want me to pick you up? CHARLIE

Listen, we've got to talk. JESSICA

What about? CHARLIE

I need some space. JESSICA

CHARLIE
What is this? Are you breaking up with me?

JESSICA
I just need a breather, that's all.

CHARLIE
What the hell did I do wrong?

JESSICA
Look, CHARLIE, I don't feel we connect.

CHARLIE
Socially? Politically? Culturally? What?

JESSICA
Emotionally.

CHARLIE
What the hell does that mean?

JESSICA
You have to ask?

CHARLIE
It's a fair question, don't 'ya think?

JESSICA
You should look into yourself a little more deeply.

CHARLIE
Who do you think you're kidding? I've seen you talking to that new biology teacher, Ahmed.

JESSICA
I talk to everybody.

CHARLIE
You're dropping me for him?

(He grabs her shoulders)

JESSICA
Stop right there.

CHARLIE

I'm a champion swimmer. Just look at my stats.

JESSICA

I didn't go out with you because of your stats.

CHARLIE

If that's how it's gonna' be, how about one last bump for old time's sake.

JESSICA

What?! We never had a bump in the first place.

(He moves closer to her.)

CHARLIE

C'mon, what the hell.

JESSICA

Stay back.

CHARLIE

Be nice now.

(He kisses her. She resists.)

JESSICA

What the hell is wrong with you?

(She knees him in the groin.)

Just stay the hell away from me. Did you forget I have a black belt in karate? You try anything like that again and I'll do more than put my knee into your precious mid-section.

Scene 3: Lights dim on them and go up on Ahmed and Charlie

AHMED

Look, PAUL mentioned that you have a problem with me.

CHARLIE

No problem.

AHMED

That's not what PAUL said

CHARLIE

Why don't we just stay in our separate lanes?

AHMED
What does that mean?

CHARLIE
I'm just glad we're not in the same department.

AHMED
So, if we were?

CHARLIE
It would be very uncomfortable, okay.

AHMED
Why?

CHARLIE
Let me be perfectly blunt. You're an A-rab, AHMED.

AHMED
You're mistaken. If you haven't noticed, I'm African-American.

CHARLIE
Same thing.

AHMED
If you don't know the difference between an African and an Arab, you need to go back to college and take a class in the social sciences.

CHARLIE
AHMED is an A-rab name, so therefore –

AHMED
I didn't choose my name. It's a name I was given by my parents.

CHARLIE
Who are also Muslim A-rabs.

AHMED
They converted to Islam.

CHARLIE
You and your whole family ought to go back to Saudi Arabia.

AHMED

They were born here. My ancestors have been here long before your potato munchers sailed from Ireland to these shores.

CHARLIE

I don't have time to play around with you.

AHMED

You know, I thought you were just a shit, but you're a vile human being.

CHARLIE

Go on, get out of here.

AHMED

I know what you tried to do with JESSICA and failed.

CHARLIE

She was all over me, and I began to feel smothered. So, I said bye-bye.

AHMED

That's not how she tells it.

CHARLIE

I don't care what she tells you.

AHMED

You really know how to turn things around, don't you?

CHARLIE

Go and have fun, and screw her brains out.

AHMED

So, you're not only a racist but also a misogynist.

CHARLIE

What's the matter? Sorry you didn't get to her first and bed her down?

AHMED

God, what in the world happened to you, CHARLIE? You're in pieces, man.

CHARLIE

I'm in pieces alright. And you know why?! After fifteen out of the nineteen Muslim hijackers, who were from Saudi Arabia, flew into the twin towers where thousands were killed and even though it's been more than twenty years the wounds are still fresh.

AHMED

I wasn't flying one of those planes. The way I figure it, that would make me a five- year-old terrorist. I was probably riding a tricycle at the time, hard to barrel into tall buildings on a three-wheeler.

CHARLIE

I lost my father that day!
(beat)

AHMED

It was tragic.

CHARLIE

You know what's really tragic? Living in that black Muslim skin of yours. How you walk through your day with that rag-headed, nigger grin.

(AHMED places his hands around his throat.)

AHMED

I'm going to take you out as you exhale your last breath, CHARLIE.

CHARLIE

Fuck you!

(AHMED squeezes his throat and then lets him go.)

AHMED

You know what? Live in your own hell. In your own stinking pool of hatred.

(Lights change. Sound effect of water lapping in a pool; a shadow of man drowning in a pool. Momentarily, a Detective enters and surveys the scene.)

WINSTON

Okay, let's fish this body out of the pool and have the Medical Examiner perform an autopsy.

Scene 4: Lights dim and go up on Teachers' lounge, end of the school day. AHMED, PAUL and JESSICA enter.

PAUL

Did you hear about CHARLIE?

AHMED

What's that?

JESSICA
You don't know?

PAUL
Charlie was found dead floating in the pool at the party last night.

AHMED
Get out! Really?! What happened?

JESSICA
It was on the eleven o'clock news.

AHMED
Wow.

JESSICA
That's unbelievable

PAUL
He was far too young.

AHMED
I despised the guy but I never wanted to see him dead.

PAUL
He was rough on you.

AHMED
Tell me about it.

PAUL
Where the hell was I that night?

JESSICA
Maybe onto to your fifth or sixth drink.

PAUL
I was quite possibly out of it.

AHMED
I did nothing to deserve the shit he threw at me.

PAUL
I have to warn you.

AHMED
Warn me?

PAUL
Both of you were at each other's throats. You have to be prepared.

AHMED
Prepared for what?!

PAUL
Who do you think they're going after?

AHMED
CHARLIE was a throwback to another time. And probably a Trump fan.

(Detective Winston enters.)

WINSTON
I'm Detective Johnson. We need to talk.

PAUL
Sure.

WINSTON
Are you PAUL DiMaio?

PAUL
Yes.

WINSTON
I need to ask you a few questions. You, two, can go. I'll talk to both of you later.

AHMED
Yeah, whatever you need.

JESSICA
See you later, PAUL.

AHMED
(gesturing)

Give us a call.

(AHMED and JESSICA exit.)

PAUL

Are you here because of CHARLIE's death?

WINSTON

Very astute. Sherlock Holmes has nothing on you.

PAUL

Thanks for the compliment.

WINSTON

You bet. Have you given much thought about CHARLIE Duffy's death?

PAUL

It's all everyone's talking about.

WINSTON

It's clear he was murdered.

PAUL

He wasn't hit by a lightning strike?

WINSTON

No burn marks.

PAUL

Or, maybe, tripped and hit his head on the concrete?

WINSTON

No blood on the pavement.

PAUL

Then fell into the pool, unconscious?

WINSTON

None of those things.

PAUL

Is it possible he had a heart attack?

WINSTON

Again, no.

PAUL

What about a shark attack?

What are you, a comedian?

WINSTON

I tried stand-up for about a year.

PAUL

I see that didn't work out too well for you.

WINSTON

That's harsh.

PAUL

My apologies.

WINSTON

Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.

PAUL

You know what I say: According to the ME, he clearly died from someone forcing him underwater.

WINSTON

That's conclusive?

PAUL

Pretty much.

WINSTON

I'm so sorry to hear that.

PAUL

How long have you known him?

WINSTON

We started teaching at the same school here together. So, about five years.

PAUL

Was he well liked?

WINSTON

By some.

PAUL

You're a little hesitant?

WINSTON

Not everyone is as well liked as I am. PAUL

Oh, really? WINSTON

Just pulling your chain. PAUL

Got it. WINSTON

So, where were we? PAUL

No serious conflicts with any of his students? WINSTON

Not that I know of? PAUL

Are you sure? WINSTON

(beat)

Sorry I can't be more helpful. PAUL

We're looking at all possibilities. WINSTON

Do you suspect someone? PAUL

We suspect a lot of people. WINSTON

I'm sure a few students would like to kill some of their teachers, but that's just a wish. PAUL

Are you one of them? WINSTON

I'd like to think I'm pretty reasonable. I don't take pleasure in dominating my students. I'm not into S and M. PAUL

That's good to hear.

WINSTON

Yeah, I think I'm pretty likable.

PAUL

Oh, I can see that. For sure. You look like a real delight.

WINSTON

Thank you, Detective.

PAUL

Were there some students at that pool party?

WINSTON

Yes.

PAUL

Tell me more.

WINSTON

One of the teachers has a very wealthy father who invites the faculty to his house at the end of the school year and he invites a few of their best and brightest seniors with them.

PAUL

How many students were there?

WINSTON

I'd say three, maybe four.

PAUL

You have names?

WINSTON

Let me check.

PAUL

What about teachers? Anyone have a grudge against CHARLIE?

WINSTON

He was more popular with the students than he was with his colleagues.

PAUL

Why do you think that is?

WINSTON

PAUL

As the swim coach, he took his team to the state championship five years in a row and won three of them. The Principal loved him for bringing so much attention to the school, and he felt he could do no wrong, say what he wanted to say and get away with it.

WINSTON

And did he?

PAUL

Did he what?

WINSTON

Do you always answer a question with a question?

PAUL

I never noticed.

WINSTON

Well, I do.

PAUL

Sorry. At one time I thought of becoming a psychotherapist. They always pose a question with a question instead of answering the original question.

WINSTON

I think that's what you should do.

PAUL

Really?

WINSTON

Yes, you should see a psychotherapist, not become one.

PAUL

Oh, that's cold.

WINSTON

Getting back to my question, did he say whatever he wanted and get away with it?

PAUL

Most of the time, yes.

WINSTON

So, he would have some enemies?

Yeah, he did. PAUL

Would you be one of them? WINSTON

We got along. PAUL

You took the middle road, huh? WINSTON

Anything else I can help you with? PAUL

Yes, remember to get me the names of the students who attended the party. WINSTON

Sure, no problem. PAUL

That should be it for now. WINSTON

If I think of anything else – PAUL

(WINSTON hands him a business card.)

Here's my card. WINSTON

Okay, Detective Johnson. PAUL

Call me anytime. WINSTON

What should I call you? Handsome? Debonair? The life of the party? PAUL

(WINSTON looks at him sternly.)

Never mind, I will call you serious. Very, very serious.

WINSTON
My direct line is on the card.

PAUL
Got it.

(WINSTON exits.)

Now, there's a man who's fond of humor and the light-hearted life.

(WINSTON walks into an interrogation room. AHMED sits at a table.)

WINSTON
AHMED, right?

AHMED
Correct.

WINSTON
How are you doing?

AHMED
I'm hanging in there.

WINSTON
How long have you been teaching at the school?

AHMED
One year.

WINSTON
You like teaching?

AHMED
Very much.

WINSTON
You have a good rapport with your students?

AHMED
Yeah, pretty sure.

WINSTON
Where did you get your degree?

NYU.

AHMED

Expensive school.

WINSTON

I've got student debt up to my eyebrows, but I had a partial scholarship.

AHMED

Good for you.

WINSTON

Look, I don't mean to be curt, but can we cut to the chase here and skip the chit chat? I don't have any information to help you solve a homicide.

AHMED

How do you know it's a homicide? You talk to the ME?

WINSTON

Me? I don't talk to myself.

AHMED

ME, Medical Examiner.

WINSTON

Just playing with you.

AHMED

Oh, God, not another comedian. You and PAUL have a comedy team?

WINSTON

Just trying to keep it light.

AHMED

There's nothing light about a murder.

WINSTON

I talked to PAUL DeMaio after you had interviewed him.

AHMED

So, he told you?

WINSTON

Yes.

AHMED

WINSTON
What did you think of CHARLIE?

AHMED
I'm not sure he was an effective teacher. He wasn't well liked by his peers.

WINSTON
By you as well?

AHMED
You can put me on that list of people who disliked him.

WINSTON
Why are you clenching your fist?

AHMED
Just a nervous habit.

WINSTON
Ready for action?

AHMED
Two tours in Iraq will do that to you.

WINSTON
That changed you, didn't it?

AHMED
You ever been in the military?

WINSTON
Afghanistan for me.

AHMED
Then, you must know.

WINSTON
I do.

AHMED
There's nothing like combat to focus the mind.

WINSTON
I lost two of my men to IEDs. Blown up right in front of me. If that doesn't have an impact on your world view, I don't know what does.

Then, you know. AHMED

All too well. WINSTON

How do you remain so calm? AHMED

If you really want to know, a year of therapy. You ever get any? WINSTON

Don't need it. AHMED

You sure? WINSTON

Why? Do you think I suffer from PTSD? AHMED

I can recommend a good therapist. WINSTON

I'm fine. AHMED

Your hypervigilance is a sure sign. Almost anything can set you off, especially when someone like CHARLIE pushes the hot buttons on your personal nuclear code. WINSTON

Yeah, he pushed them hard. AHMED

Like he was the enemy? WINSTON

Not like. He was the enemy! AHMED

As the enemy you wanted to bring down. WINSTON

I wanted him to end his racial taunts. AHMED

I can understand. I've had my share.

WINSTON

Then, you know.

AHMED

I do.

WINSTON

Good to hear.

AHMED

He was insensitive. I get it.

WINSTON

But I'm cool now.

AHMED

What do you teach?

WINSTON

Biology.

AHMED

I'd like to think we don't resort to violence when someone steps on our toes.

WINSTON

Steps on our toes and necks for centuries in the most brutal way.

AHMED

You should be teaching American History, not Biology.

WINSTON

American History is too brutal, especially for black people.

AHMED

Survival of the fittest. That's pretty brutal.

WINSTON

Where are you going with this?

AHMED

CHARLIE Duffy.

WINSTON

AHMED
What about him?

AHMED
That has nothing to do with me.

WINSTON
You had a run in with him.

AHMED
So?

WINSTON
Maybe you ratcheted up your anger.

AHMED
Sure, I wanted to knock him on his ass and give him a good beating for things he's said to me.

WINSTON
But that wasn't enough. You had to drown him.

AHMED
What is this? Get the black man day!

WINSTON
I'm doing my job.

AHMED
What did you do? Undergo black conversion therapy?

WINSTON
What?

AHMED
You know, to become whiter than you are.

WINSTON
It didn't work.

AHMED
Oh, I think it did. You sold your soul to the white hierarchy. You're not black, you're a white dude disguised as a black man.

WINSTON
I'm a homicide detective in search of people who commit murder.

AHMED

Oh, my race, your race, has nothing to do with this?

WINSTON

You're my primary suspect.

AHMED

I'm not the only black man on the faculty.

WINSTON

I already interviewed the others. None of them had any run ins with CHARLIE.

AHMED

Just me, huh?

WINSTON

You've got motive. Someone saw you with your hands around his throat.

AHMED

Who?

WINSTON

The who isn't important.

AHMED

It is to me.

WINSTON

You have a low threshold for anger, AHMED. It doesn't take much to set you off.

AHMED

That's endemic to our race, especially when someone demeans me. And if it demeans me, it demeans you. How many black people have you locked up in your career? How many white people? What's the ratio? Is it fifty-fifty, seventy-thirty, or eighty-twenty?

WINSTON

I never took a count.

AHMED

Maybe you should.

WINSTON

I don't discriminate among murderers.

AHMED

Whether they be white or black?

That's right. WINSTON

Tell me another tall tale. AHMED

You think I'm against you? WINSTON

I do. AHMED

It's not true. WINSTON

Then show it by taking your foot off my neck. AHMED

Look, you can confess now and you can get a lesser sentence. WINSTON

Alright, that's it! I know my rights. I want to see a lawyer. AHMED

Your prerogative. WINSTON

Scene 5: As AHMED exits, brief blackout. Lights up as WINSTON conducts JESSICA into the interrogation room.

Have a seat. WINSTON

Will this take long? JESSICA

That depends on how honestly you answer my questions. WINSTON

Then, this should go very, very quickly. JESSICA

I'll take that as full-throated honesty. WINSTON

JESSICA
I'm an open book. Just turn the pages.

WINSTON
How long have you known the victim?

JESSICA
About five years.

WINSTON
Friendly with him?

JESSICA
Not overly.

WINSTON
Really? You two went out together, didn't you?

JESSICA
Is that important?

WINSTON
I think so.

JESSICA
Alright, a few times. Nothing serious.

WINSTON
Was that mutual?

JESSICA
No, he was more into me than I was into him.

WINSTON
Why did you break up with him?

JESSICA
When I told him I wanted some space, he came onto me really strong.

WINSTON
He was physical with you?

JESSICA
Yes.

WINSTON
So, you fended him off?

JESSICA
I did, and we rarely spoke again.

WINSTON
You seem pretty athletic.

JESSICA
I keep in shape. I run. I work out.

WINSTON
And, you can hold your own.

JESSICA
You've got to be prepared for anything these days.

WINSTON
What do you mean? Are you implying he –

JESSICA
Tried to rape me.

WINSTON
I'm sorry you had to go through that.

JESSICA
He didn't get very far.

WINSTON
Were you at the party the night he drowned?

JESSICA
Yes.

WINSTON
Do you think you're strong enough to take him on?

JESSICA
What do you mean by that?

WINSTON
Maybe you wanted to retaliate.

JESSICA
I just wanted him to stay away.

WINSTON
For good?

JESSICA
Well, yeah, he was poison to me.

WINSTON
Did you tell anyone about the incident with CHARLIE?

JESSICA
Yes, one person.

WINSTON
PAUL DiMaio?

JESSICA
No, AHMED.

WINSTON
You told, AHMED?

JESSICA
He was the person I was going out with at the time after I broke it off with CHARLIE.

WINSTON
Did CHARLIE know that?

JESSICA
I'm sure he picked up on it.

WINSTON
Did he say anything about that to you?

JESSICA
No, but I bet CHARLIE resented the fact.

WINSTON
Why? Because AHMED's black?

JESSICA
Of course. That's the main reason I broke if off with CHARLIE because of what I had heard him saying about AHMED.

WINSTON
And you're now married to AHMED?

JESSICA
That's right.

WINSTON
How did he react when you told him about CHARLIE's intentions?

JESSICA
That was a big, big mistake.

WINSTON
What was?

JESSICA
Never tell a man his significant other was assaulted.

WINSTON
Did AHMED confront CHARLIE?

JESSICA
He cooled down when I told him I kneed him in the groin.

WINSTON
You and AHMED get along?

JESSICA
Yes, absolutely.

WINSTON
He ever become violent?

JESSICA
No.

WINSTON
How about with you?

JESSICA
No!

WINSTON
Has he ever hit you?

Are you serious?
JESSICA

Has your husband ever hit you?
WINSTON

No way. He loves me and I love him.
JESSICA

You'd do anything for him, wouldn't you?
WINSTON

Yes, of course.
JESSICA

Even lie?
WINSTON

I'd do anything to protect him.
JESSICA

Does that include lying?
WINSTON

Now, you're going too far!
JESSICA

Were you at the party that night?
WINSTON

Yes.
JESSICA

By yourself?
WINSTON

I was with AHMED.
JESSICA

Did you know CHARLIE was going to be there?
WINSTON

Yes.
JESSICA

WINSTON
Where was CHARLIE?

JESSICA
He was all over the place. Talking to people. Drinking. In the pool. Out of the pool.

WINSTON
Did you talk to CHARLIE?

JESSICA
No.

WINSTON
Were you with AHMED the whole time?

JESSICA
Yes, every single minute.

WINSTON
Was AHMED with you during the storm?

JESSICA
We were inside the house until the storm passed.

WINSTON
CHARLIE, too?

JESSICA
There were about forty to fifty people there. I don't know where he was.

WINSTON
That's because CHARLIE was faced down floating in the pool.

JESSICA
Have you interviewed all the people at the party?

WINSTON
Most of them.

JESSICA
Then, keep looking.

WINSTON
It's just a matter of time.

JESSICA
Good luck with that.

WINSTON
I don't depend on luck. I depend on facts

Scene 6: AHMED and JESSICA's apartment. Lights up with PAUL, JESSICA and AHMED.

PAUL
How did your interview go with the Detective?

JESSICA
Alright, I guess.

PAUL
Yeah, same here.

AHMED
I know what's happening here.

JESSICA
You do?

AHMED
It's pretty obvious, isn't it?

PAUL
You're becoming paranoid.

AHMED
It's a sixth sense we have when doom and gloom hovers. They're going to charge me.

PAUL
You don't know that.

JESSICA
The detective suspects that I killed him.

PAUL
You couldn't hold him underwater.

JESSICA
If he was drunk enough.

AHMED
That's not out of the realm of possibility.

JESSICA
You think I did it?

AHMED
Only kidding, babe.

PAUL
But why would you possibly kill him?

AHMED
CHARLIE tried to rape her!

JESSICA
Maybe! I'm not sure. I was scared, as any woman would be. But would he really rape me? I can't say with complete certainty.

AHMED
You're giving him too wide of a corridor.

PAUL
Whoa, whoa, whoa, when did this happen, JESSICA?

JESSICA
A while ago.

PAUL
And you didn't report it?

JESSICA
As I said, I wasn't sure about his intent.

AHMED
His intent? Isn't that clear to you by now?

PAUL
Wow. I didn't think CHARLIE was capable of anything like that.

JESSICA
The detective is still conducting interviews with people at the party.

PAUL
I gave him the names of the students who attended. CHARLIE wasn't loved by all of them.

JESSICA

The principal, the staff, and the parents lionized CHARLIE. He brought home the state title.

AHMED

That's the only thing that saved his ass when he was there, but now his ass is dead, and my ass is on the line.

PAUL
(to JESSICA)

You said your interview went well, right.

(beat)

JESSICA

I lied.

AHMED

Lied about what?

JESSICA

About you.

AHMED

Me?

JESSICA

I told him we were together the whole time at the party.

AHMED

Weren't we?

JESSICA

There was a gap when I didn't know where you were. I couldn't afford to tell him that.

PAUL

AHMED and I were talking for a long while.

JESSICA

When the storm hit, I didn't see you in the house.

PAUL

He was there.

AHMED

There you go.

JESSICA
Okay, then, I guess we're good.

PAUL
Then who killed him?

AHMED
Whoever did is going to be hard to prove.

JESSICA
No one's come forward to say they saw someone do it.

PAUL
No witnesses, no finger prints of any kind.

JESSICA
Ideal to murder someone in a swimming pool.

PAUL
Maybe it'll turn out to be an unsolved, cold case.

JESSICA
(to AHMED)
See, you'll have nothing to worry about.

AHMED
Magical thinking?

JESSICA
Look, it was my fault. I shouldn't have told you CHARLIE tried to assault me. And I'm not even sure he was trying to rape me.

AHMED
You're not sure?

JESSICA
I stopped him right away before he went too far.

AHMED
You had to disable him by kicking him in the balls. If you hadn't done that, he would have gone further.

JESSICA
That's where I'm uncertain. I don't want to presume.

PAUL
You did the right thing.

AHMED
After you told me, I had to confront him.

JESSICA
And do what?

AHMED
What do you think?

JESSICA
What? You never told me. Why didn't you let me know?

AHMED
It's not something I'm proud of.

JESSICA
You were defending me. And if you went further –

AHMED
Are you saying that you believe it was me?

PAUL
C'mon, take it easy, the both of you.

AHMED
Hell, JESSICA, you've got to believe I didn't do it.

JESSICA
It doesn't matter.

AHMED
Do you want to live with a murderer?

JESSICA
Of course not.

AHMED
That detective went full bore on me. He's a racist, too. Just like CHARLIE.

PAUL
He's black like you.

AHMED

So? White, neo-Nazis are against white anti-fascists. White against white. You think this is any different?

PAUL

It's a false equivalence.

AHMED

What? You're telling me that justice is blind?

PAUL

I'm not naive.

AHMED

The Detective thinks that because I harbor this hatred for CHARLIE that I would be the numero uno suspect.

PAUL

You have a lawyer.

AHMED

Yes, but that's no guarantee of anything.

JESSICA

You haven't been charged yet.

PAUL

Is he a good lawyer?

AHMED

I don't know from lawyers, but I do know it will cost us a lot of money, which we don't have. We both still have student loans to pay off.

JESSICA

We'll deal with it.

PAUL

Did you talk to your lawyer?

AHMED

He knows what's going on.

PAUL

What does he say?

AHMED

That if worse comes to worse, he can get me a plea deal.

PAUL

He's talking a plea deal at this early stage?

AHMED

He's floated a few options, but that's the worst one.

PAUL

That's nuts!

AHMED

Admit the killing and I go to prison for twenty years instead of life.

PAUL

That's insane!

AHMED

I'm trying to be positive.

PAUL

Your students admire you.

JESSICA

They talk about you in glowing terms.

AHMED

I can't rest on the kudos of my students.

PAUL

There are others on your side.

AHMED

History is not on my side. I grew up in the Bronx with a single mother. I never did drugs. I was the first in my family to get a college education. And now I have a good chance of getting convicted, ending my career, blowing up my life, my marriage...

JESSICA

This is a different time.

AHMED

This is the end of all times when the police are killing us in broad daylight.

JESSICA

Take it easy.

(beat)

AHMED
(to JESSICA)

I don't understand. Why did you marry me in the first place? You don't need to confront this in your life.

JESSICA
You've never asked me that question before.

AHMED
Maybe I should have.

JESSICA
Here's my honest answer in three words, okay: I love you.

AHMED
Were you rebelling against your strict parents?

JESSICA
No... Well, yes, they are strict.

PAUL
Interracial marriages are common today. Nobody cares anymore.

AHMED
Oh, really? It's become a cliché now.

PAUL
That's not what I meant.

AHMED
(to JESSICA)
You mean to tell me they didn't give you a hard time about marrying me?

JESSICA
Not really.

AHMED
C'mon.

JESSICA
I'm serious.

AHMED
Whoa, you are such a good liar.

JESSICA

I'm not lying.

AHMED

Your parents were completely okay with us?

JESSICA

When they realized you wanted to marry me, they took our relationship more seriously. They just wanted me to be happy as any parent would.

AHMED

Hmmm.

JESSICA

I don't lie about that, honey.

AHMED

(to PAUL)

Do you believe her?

PAUL

All I know is I've been supportive of the both of you, always have been.

JESSICA

Where do we go from here?

PAUL

We wait.

AHMED

I'm not equipped for waiting.

(WINSTON enters.)

WINSTON

We found something at the bottom of the pool.

AHMED

Oh, yeah, what's that?

WINSTON

A ring.

(WINSTON takes out a small see-through evidence bag with a ring inside.)

JESSICA

Why is that relevant?

WINSTON

There are initials engraved on the rim. It's a wedding ring.

AHMED

Okay, just stop right there. I can explain –

WINSTON

The initials are AH. As in AHMED Henderson.

JESSICA

There were forty to fifty people there, many of them swimming in the pool. Did you check on the others?

WINSTON

There was one teacher I spoke to whose name is Anthony Hernandez.

PAUL

There you go.

WINSTON

He didn't drop it in the pool. He's still wearing his ring.

AHMED

It never fit comfortably on my finger. It was always loose. Tell him, babe.

JESSICA

He always kept playing with it to make sure it wouldn't fall off. We were going to get a new one.

AHMED

It must have fallen off. I didn't even notice that it was gone.

WINSTON

If you were always fidgeting with it, you would have noticed.

AHMED

I thought I lost it. I wasn't sure where.

WINSTON

Turn around, AHMED.

AHMED

What the hell, man? Why?

(AHMED stands and WINSTON puts him in handcuffs.)

WINSTON

You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand the rights I've just read to you? With these rights in mind, do you wish to speak to me?

AHMED

Yes, I've got three words, I am innocent!

(Blackout. End of Act I.)

ACT II

Scene 1: PAUL at AHMED's and JESSICA's apartment.

PAUL

How are you doing?

AHMED

At least I'm out on bail, and I'm trying to take this one day at a time.

JESSICA

That's all you can do.

AHMED

So, now, I'm headed for trial.

JESSICA

They can't prove anything with your ring at the bottom of the pool.

AHMED

They're going to try.

PAUL

You were swimming and it slipped off your finger. It was loose to begin with.

JESSICA

That happened before CHARLIE drowned.

AHMED

That's not the way the prosecution is going to see it. They're going to say that in the tussle between us he pulled on my hand and took my ring off.

PAUL

I remember you swimming with others in the pool. I was with you. We both got out of the pool at the same time and wiped ourselves dry.

JESSICA

You two seem to be together a lot at the pool party.

AHMED

What are you implying?

JESSICA

Did you both conspire to drown Charlie?

PAUL & AHMED

C'mon.

JESSICA

Did you notice the ring was missing when you got out of the pool?

AHMED

No. I don't recall when it was missing.

JESSICA

I don't remember it being off your finger. Or, maybe I didn't want to know.

AHMED

What the hell does that mean?

JESSICA

Maybe I was afraid to ask you?

PAUL

Your attorney will discredit that so-called piece of evidence.

AHMED

I said too much to the Detective, and I think the prosecutor is going to use my statements against me.

PAUL

Like what?

AHMED

The things CHARLIE said that made me angry enough to strangle him because of his assault on JESSICA.

JESSICA

All the teachers are on your side.

PAUL

I checked out your defense lawyer. He wins a great majority of his criminal cases.

AHMED

He better be as good as Johnny Cochran. If the ring doesn't fit you must acquit.

PAUL

I see you've got a sense of humor about this.

AHMED

Yeah, it's called black humor.

JESSICA

That's very literal.

AHMED

And I bet that's where the term black humor comes from. It's dark, gallows humor just like the lynching of black folks during Jim Crow. Except the only people laughing were the white people stringing us up.

JESSICA

Alright, that's enough, honey. Now, you're really beginning to scare me.

AHMED

Sorry, I've got to stay level-headed. For you, me, and the bundle you're carrying.

PAUL

What's this?

JESSICA

I'm pregnant.

PAUL

Wow! Really? Congratulations.

AHMED

Yeah, that really came as a surprise. I didn't expect it.

JESSICA

We've been trying for a long time.

AHMED

We even went to a fertility specialist to find out if there were anything wrong with us.

Surprisingly, it all worked out. JESSICA

You, two, must be really excited. PAUL

I'm just not sure about the timing. AHMED

The timing is not great. JESSICA

It'll all pan out. PAUL

I'm meditating three times a day now to keep calm. It's what I did when I was stationed in Iraq. AHMED

Is there anything I can do for you now? PAUL

Take care of JESSICA in case – AHMED

I'll be fine. JESSICA

You can count on me. PAUL

I don't need a babysitter. JESSICA

That's not true. You'll need one eventually. PAUL

Ha-ha. JESSICA

AHMED
(to PAUL)

How are you doing?

PAUL

I can't focus, and my students are noticing. Your students keep asking me how you're doing.

AHMED

What do you say?

PAUL

I say Ahmed's enjoying this immensely. Everyone should try it.

AHMED

Black humor?

PAUL

White humor.

AHMED

You'll need to get better at it.

PAUL

I'm doing my best.

AHMED

I'm trying to do the same.

JESSICA

(hugging AHMED)

He's been pretty good considering –

AHMED

(to JESSICA)

You keep me steady on this rickety tightrope I'm walking on. And it's a strong wind out there....Excuse me, but I have to be rigorous about this. It's my time to meditate.

Scene 2: Lights dim in his bedroom, AHMED is sitting on the floor and meditating. The ghost of CHARLIE enters.

CHARLIE

Wow, you really landed in the soup, AHMED.

(AHMED opens his eyes and rises off the floor.)

AHMED

Wait a minute, what are you doing here? You're dead.

Just came to visit. CHARLIE

Alright, what do you want? AHMED

Some conversation. CHARLIE

You want to talk? AHMED

Is that too much to ask? CHARLIE

In light of where my mind is right now, yes! AHMED

You know, it can get pretty lonely from where I sit. CHARLIE

Tell me about it. AHMED

What do you do to fill in the empty spaces and the time? CHARLIE

I do a lot of thinking. AHMED

Hey, same here. CHARLIE

I didn't know we had anything in common. AHMED

What do you think about? CHARLIE

I'm reviewing my life. Such as it is. AHMED

That's exactly what I do. CHARLIE

Where does that take you?
AHMED

To the scene of the crime.
CHARLIE

In my life review, I haven't arrived there yet.
AHMED

When you do, let me know.
CHARLIE

Why?
AHMED

I want to know who killed me.
CHARLIE

Wasn't it me?
AHMED

Are you admitting to the crime?
CHARLIE

Everybody else seems to think so. I'm beginning to believe it myself.
AHMED

I'm not even sure it was you.
CHARLIE

I had plenty of motivation to take you out.
AHMED

Oh, no doubt about it.
CHARLIE

But did I?
AHMED

If I were you, I would have killed me, too.
CHARLIE

What?
AHMED

CHARLIE

Yeah, I was a real dick. No doubt about it. I wish I knew that back then. Maybe things would be different.

AHMED

Wow! That's something coming from you.

CHARLIE

I wasn't a decent human being.

AHMED

You admit that?

CHARLIE

You see things differently when you're on the other side. Unfortunately, it's too late and you can't do anything about it. That's the real tragedy.

AHMED

How's that?

CHARLIE

Differences don't matter anymore. Everything just ends when you exhale your last breath.

AHMED

I wish that were true on this side of the border.

CHARLIE

We all get here soon enough.

AHMED

That's quite a transformation. I'm shocked.

CHARLIE

No one is more shocked than me.

AHMED

Who really killed you? Was it me?

CHARLIE

Here's my honest answer: I don't know.

AHMED

You didn't see a face?

CHARLIE

As I was swimming in the pool a flash of lightening arched overhead. I look up and someone from behind jumps in and keeps pressing down on my shoulders. After a minute or so, I really couldn't tell how much time had passed. I waved good bye to my bodily self, because it couldn't catch up to me. My body just receded into the distance and I go dark.

AHMED

No white light, huh?

CHARLIE

Just darkness. But it's pretty quiet. No sound.

AHMED

That's not reassuring.

CHARLIE

It's still pretty peaceful.

AHMED

You think it was JESSICA?

CHARLIE

I did feel sharp fingernails deep into my shoulders.

AHMED

Oh, God, no.

CHARLIE

As I said, I can't be entirely sure.

AHMED

So, what am I left with here?

CHARLIE

Doubt. The impossibility of knowing the truth.

AHMED

Well, what now?

CHARLIE

Au revoir, my friend.

AHMED

Yeah, yeah, au revoir.

CHARLIE

See you soon on the other side.

AHMED

Soon?! What the hell does that mean? Soon?

CHARLIE

Take care.

AHMED

Wait...wait. You said my friend. Are we friends now?

(No answer as CHARLIE slips away into darkness.)

CHARLIE? CHARLIE, are you still there?

(Ahmed rises off the floor as the Detective enters.)

AHMED

What do you want? Come to gloat?

WINSTON

Just seeing how you're holding up.

AHMED

Why do you care?

WINSTON

I'm not against you.

AHMED

You were relentless.

WINSTON

It's what I had to do.

AHMED

Everything just led to me, huh?

WINSTON

You had the motive, you were physical with him. You, of all the people at the school, was subjected to his racist taunts.

AHMED

I'm supposed to let that pass.

WINSTON

Why didn't you go to the principal and lodge a legitimate complaint.

AHMED

Charlie was in the principal's pocket as long as he was winning trophies for the school. They bent over backwards to keep him from accepting offers as at colleges that were trying to recruit him.

WINSTON

You should have tried.

AHMED

You know nothing about school politics.

WINSTON

I know better than to raise my fist in anger.

AHMED

Are you having second thoughts?

WINSTON

About what?

AHMED

Are you having trouble sleeping at night? Am I railroading another black man for a crime he didn't commit.

WINSTON

Sure, I will admit there are black people who are incarcerated for crimes they didn't commit.

AHMED

You're looking at one of them.

WINSTON

I'm still looking into other possible suspects.

AHMED

Keep on looking.

WINSTON

Stay level headed, AHMED, stay calm.

AHMED

Easy for you to say.

(The Detective leaves.)

Now, where was I --

(AHMED sits on the floor and continues to meditate.)

Scene 4: PAUL's apartment. Lights darken as PAUL falls asleep. The ghost of Charlie appears to PAUL, who wakes up with a fright.

PAUL

Oh, God, what is this? A nightmare with you at the center of it. What do you want?

CHARLIE

Why so hostile?

PAUL

Maybe it's because you're supposed to be dead and now you've come back to haunt me.

CHARLIE

I'm just looking for some information.

PAUL

A little late for that.

CHARLIE

We didn't have much of a relationship, did we?

PAUL

It was casual.

CHARLIE

I saw you as neutral, you know, vanilla, neither here nor there.

PAUL

I try to live under the radar.

CHARLIE

That's clear.

PAUL

You're not very insightful.

CHARLIE

What do you expect? I was a jock.

You're a cliché. PAUL

And to that I say touché. CHARLIE

Maybe I underestimated you. PAUL

Everyone did. CHARLIE

Maturity is not your strong point. PAUL

How about a little honesty from you? CHARLIE

I think that's my hallmark. PAUL

There's something about you that doesn't click right for me. CHARLIE

What's that? PAUL

You're not who you say you are. CHARLIE

Really? PAUL

You're Jewish. CHARLIE

So that bothers you? PAUL

Hell, no! I'm not an antisemite. CHARLIE

You're not? PAUL

CHARLIE

As long as they hold off the Muslims, I'm cool with that.

PAUL

Wow, what a surprise.

CHARLIE

But you're too connected with AHMED.

PAUL

He's my best friend.

CHARLIE

Here's what I think. You killed me, didn't you?

PAUL

Did I?

CHARLIE

You didn't like my way with the students, how they admired me, how I could do no wrong because I was the winning swim coach around.

PAUL

Alright, that pissed me off!

CHARLIE

I could see it in your attitude towards me.

PAUL

Including your pungent remarks about AHMED?

CHARLIE

AHMED, please.

PAUL

And your attempt to rape JESSICA.

CHARLIE

That was no rape, that was consensual.

PAUL

Bullshit!

CHARLIE

She can tell it anyway she wants, but I know the truth.

PAUL

You wouldn't know the truth if it bit you on the ass.

(PAUL lunges for him and grabs him tightly.)

CHARLIE

Hey, I'm dead, I feel no pain now. You can't hurt me.

PAUL

I wish I could kill you...again.

Scene 3: Teachers' Lounge, end of day. Lights dim and slowly come up on PAUL and JESSICA. Teacher's Lounge, end of day.

PAUL

How was your day?

JESSICA

Exhausting.

PAUL

Mondays are always the worst for me.

JESSICA

I'd go home now, but I can't move.

PAUL

Why are we always the last to leave?

JESSICA

I need to decompress before rising to the surface.

PAUL

That sounds like a water metaphor.

JESSICA

You're right. It's always lurking, thinking about the drowning at the party.

PAUL

I know. I go to bed at night. And then I dream about him.

JESSICA

You do? What about?

PAUL

He's always there, living in the shadows.

JESSICA

That dream of yours sounds more like a nightmare.

PAUL

I'm living that nightmare the whole day.

(WINSTON enters the teacher's lounge.)

PAUL

What are you doing here, Detective?

JESSICA

You've got your man.

WINSTON

I believe I do.

PAUL

You believe or you think?

WINSTON

I'm pretty convinced.

JESSICA

What is it you want?

WINSTON

(to PAUL)

What puzzles me is getting a clear picture of what you were doing that night?

PAUL

I was soused.

WINSTON

So, you were too drunk to notice anything out of the ordinary?

PAUL

Completely out of it.

WINSTON

And that's your excuse?

It's a fact.

PAUL

JESSICA, can you corroborate that?

WINSTON

Yeah, he appeared inebriated.

JESSICA

Appeared?

WINSTON

Yes.

JESSICA

He couldn't be faking it.

WINSTON

Faking it?!

PAUL

Yes, to make it appear you were incapacitated to serve as an alibi.

WINSTON

That's ridiculous.

PAUL

And then when everyone was in the house you jumped into the pool and drowned him.

WINSTON

Come on.

JESSICA

That's really farfetched.

PAUL

It's possible.

WINSTON

Anything is possible, but not probable.

PAUL

I know both of you are fond of AHMED –

WINSTON

I'm his wife. I'm more than fond.

JESSICA

Yes, and being very protective.

WINSTON

That's what wives do.

JESSICA

To the point of stopping CHARLIE from continuing to hound AHMED with his racist remarks.

WINSTON

So, I drowned him? All by myself.

JESSICA

You may have had help.

WINSTON

From AHMED?

JESSICA

From PAUL.

WINSTON

Oh, this is crazy town thinking.

PAUL

Are you accusing us of drowning CHARLIE?

JESSICA

No, just probing, no stone left unturned. I have a duty to find the truth.

WINSTON

Good luck with that.

JESSICA

Thank you, I'll need it.

WINSTON

(WINSTON begins to leave.)

Talk again, soon.

(WINSTON exits.)

JESSICA

Do you believe him?

PAUL

I'm more concerned about AHMED's spirits right now. How is he?

JESSICA

He's just been indifferent about everything lately.

PAUL

He's not losing faith in his chances of acquittal, is he?

JESSICA

I think the anticipation is getting to him.

PAUL

He's been meeting with his lawyer, hasn't he?

JESSICA

On a daily basis.

PAUL

I just know he didn't do it.

JESSICA

Are you sure?

PAUL

Well...yes. I don't have any doubts.

JESSICA

It's what I have to believe.

PAUL

You have to believe it? Or, you're compelled to believe?

JESSICA

Hey, don't get on my case.

PAUL

Are you losing faith in AHMED?

JESSICA

Are you?

I'm solid.

PAUL

I know that.

JESSICA

AHMED and I are real close, nothing else. I love him as a brother.

PAUL

I know, but I have to wonder what's going to happen to him. And that's not the worst part. I often think about Charlie's death that night and what part I may have played in it.

JESSICA

You just lost me.

PAUL

You're not the only one who Charlie haunts.

JESSICA

Scene 6: AHMED's and JESSICA's apartment. Ghost of Charlie enters and confronts JESSICA.

What do you want from me now?

JESSICA

The truth.

CHARLIE

Sorry, I have nothing to say.

JESSICA

Listen, I deserve to know who killed me.

CHARLIE

You don't deserve anything.

JESSICA

Can't you be kind to the already dead.

CHARLIE

As you were kind in life? Especially to me?

JESSICA

Just tell me the truth. And I'll get out of your head, gone forever.

CHARLIE

JESSICA

Why is that so important to you now? Why should you even care?

CHARLIE

What else do I have?

JESSICA

Oh, I'm supposed to take pity on you. It's pretty ironic, a world-class swimmer dying in a pool where he lived most of his life.

(She laughs.)

CHARLIE

Please, I'm begging.

JESSICA

Here's my honest answer: I don't know.

CHARLIE

Oh, you know.

(She grazes her forefinger against his chin.)

JESSICA

Really, you sure about that?

(He grabs her finger.)

CHARLIE

Mighty sharp talons you got there, JESSICA.

JESSICA

What of it?

CHARLIE

It's what I felt piercing my shoulders, pushing me under the water.

JESSICA

Did you see my face?

CHARLIE

Maybe if I hadn't been drinking so much, I would have.

JESSICA

So, you don't know.

CHARLIE
That's why I'm asking you.

JESSICA
That'll be your punishment. Never knowing.

CHARLIE
Damn it, JESSICA! I need to know.

Scene 7: As lights dim JESSICA turns to PAUL in the Teachers' lounge or their apartment.

PAUL
What now?

(beat)

JESSICA
I'm six months away from giving birth.

PAUL
You're healthy right?

JESSICA
All's good.

PAUL
That's what I want to hear.

JESSICA
Shouldn't I be thrilled to the heavens?!

PAUL
Well, yes.

JESSICA
I'm not.

PAUL
Wow, you're going to be a mother and AHMED a father. That's uplifting, don't you think?

JESSICA
It did in the beginning, but now –

PAUL
Now what?

JESSICA
Months ago, we even talked about getting an abortion.

PAUL
Someone lost that argument.

JESSICA
This will put an additional burden on AHMED.

PAUL
It'll give him hope.

JESSICA
He may not be able to hug his child for twenty years if he's convicted.

PAUL
Take this one step at a time.

JESSICA
I'm agonizing over this.

PAUL
I know you are.

JESSICA
He's overwhelmed.

PAUL
You're freaking me out right now.

JESSICA
None of this is logical.

PAUL
The law isn't logical, that's for damn sure.

Scene 8: AHMED's jury trial. JESSICA and PAUL are present. Lights do down and come up to the interior of a court room.

JESSICA
(to PAUL)
I can barely stand the suspense.

PAUL
You and me both.

JESSICA

Hold my hand, please. You've been a rock for me.

PAUL

That's what friends do.

JUDGE (played by WINSTON)

Has the jury reached a verdict?

FOREMAN (played by CHARLIE)

We have your honor.

JUDGE

Will the defendant please rise?

(AHMED rises to his feet.)

Foreman, please read the verdict.

FOREMAN (played by CHARLIE)

We the jury find the defendant – guilty of murder in the second degree.

(PAUL and JESSICA hold on to each other as the verdict is read.)

JUDGE

Do you have any final words before you're sentenced?

AHMED

I am a husband, an expectant father, and a teacher, but I am innocent and I will proclaim my innocence loudly. I am grateful for the support of my wife, my friend and for the students and parents who have supported me. I will bear this verdict with stoic determination by appealing the jury's decision. I will continue to fight, but I will go down as an innocent man.

Scene 9: Prison cell. Lights come up on Detective JOHNSON and AHMED.

AHMED

Another visit from you? Why am I so popular?

WINSTON

You're hard to keep at a distance.

AHMED

So, this is the end for me.

You still have your appeal.

WINSTON

More waiting time.

AHMED

It comes with the territory.

WINSTON

How goes your continuing search?

AHMED

I circled back to PAUL and JESSICA.

WINSTON

Why?

AHMED

What do you think?

WINSTON

You think they did it?

AHMED

Either one of them on their own or both of them.

WINSTON

So, you don't think I did it even though the jury convicted me?

AHMED

I didn't say that.

WINSTON

That sounds exactly what you're saying.

AHMED

Why wouldn't they be involved?

WINSTON

That's my wife you're talking about and my very best friend.

AHMED

Who may be trying to protect you.

WINSTON

AHMED

Forget it. Leave them alone. The jury convicted me. Full stop.

WINSTON

That contradicts what you said at your trial.

AHMED

So be it.

WINSTON

You're admitting you drowned CHARLIE Duffy?

AHMED

Yes.

WINSTON

Just you with no assist from PAUL or JESSICA?

AHMED

That's right.

WINSTON

I wish I could believe you.

AHMED

That's the truth.

(Lights dim on them and come up on JESSICA and AHMED.)

JESSICA

Don't worry, honey, we'll win the appeal.

AHMED

I'm not worried. I'm getting use to this, babe.

JESSICA

You've never had to stand trial before and land in jail.

AHMED

My whole life has just spiraled into another trajectory.

JESSICA

Believe me, I know it's been unbearable for you.

AHMED

Even meditation doesn't seem to be working. I'm seeing and hearing things I can't believe.

JESSICA

Like what?

AHMED

CHARLIE! He keeps popping up in my head, especially when I'm meditating or trying to.

JESSICA

He's a ghost that just keeps on giving.

AHMED

I'm looking at a twenty-year sentence. How can I help you with the child you're carrying?

JESSICA

I'll be fine.

AHMED

Suppose I lose the appeal?

JESSICA

You have to be positive.

AHMED

But if it doesn't, I'll never be able to play with the baby, tuck it in at night, read stories. I'll miss out on all of that.

JESSICA

Somehow this will all work out.

AHMED

But I won't be there, JESSICA.

JESSICA

I will. PAUL will help out, too.

(Lights dim as JESSICA exits. PAUL sits down with AHMED.)

PAUL

AHMED, you doing okay?

AHMED

Just visiting or is it something else?

I'm going to see Detective Johnson. PAUL

That's over. AHMED

You're going to get out of here. Trust me. PAUL

How is that going to happen? AHMED

I'm going to tell him the truth. PAUL

The truth? AHMED

You didn't kill CHARLIE and I believe that with every cell in my body. PAUL

I always knew that. AHMED

There's something else. PAUL

(beat)

I killed CHARLIE. AHMED

He wasn't hounding you. PAUL

In my head he was. AHMED

Wait a minute. What the hell is going on here? You killed him?! PAUL

I'm going to confess. AHMED

But why would you? It makes no sense.

PAUL

It does, much more than you think.

AHMED

Are you doing this for me? So, I can be cut loose? That's crazy.

PAUL

You should be with JESSICA and the coming baby.

AHMED

Why would you murder CHARLIE?

PAUL

Every time CHARLIE called you the N word it cut through me like a knife. Being Jewish, I've been subjected to my share of insults – kike, yid, Christ killer, And the N word coming from anyone always stunned me, because it is filled with hate and venom. I couldn't hold back any longer, so I snapped. You remember what it was like that night, it was a real hot and humid and he said, can you imagine all those niggers in Newark sweating their black asses off in this heat while we're swimming in this pool. I held that bastard's head down as far as I could. Well, trust me, I'm going to make it right, AHMED. You're going to be set free. I swear, I promise.

AHMED

Why didn't you tell this to the Detective in the first place?

PAUL

Because I thought for sure you would get off. I knew you didn't drown him.

AHMED

I'm fucking stunned.

PAUL

I'll make this right.

AHMED

How?

PAUL

By telling the truth. You have a wife and a baby on the way. I don't have either of those things. I'll pay for this. You shouldn't.

Scene 10: Lights dim and go up on WINSTON and PAUL in WINSTON's office.

WINSTON

So, Mr. DiMaio, what can I do for you?

PAUL

It's about AHMED. I'm pleading for his life.

WINSTON

He's been convicted and sentenced.

PAUL

I've got to tell you the truth.

WINSTON

I've looked for the truth, dug deep as far as I could, even though it was possible that you or JESSICA drowned CHARLIE, but I came up with nothing.

PAUL

I killed CHARLIE.

WINSTON

This is the craziest thing I've heard in my career in law enforcement. Nothing beats this one.

PAUL

I'm an exception to the rule.

WINSTON

So, let me get this straight, a white guy kills another white guy over racism?

PAUL

Why not?

WINSTON

Whose gonna' believe that? Not me, not the courts.

PAUL

Why won't you believe me?

WINSTON

That's not motive enough for me.

PAUL

But you're black.

WINSTON

Gee, I never noticed. Thanks for pointing that out to me. I like revelations.

PAUL

Can't you at least see the possibility of me doing this?

WISTON

No. Not when AHMED has been found guilty. Especially when there were five African-American jurors.

PAUL

They were dead wrong.

WINSTON

What? Members of the jury are racists, too?

PAUL

No, just misguided.

WINSTON

Look, what evidence do you have that you're responsible for the crime?

PAUL

My confession.

WINSTON

We need hard evidence. Is there DNA proof?' Blood, hair fibers, fingerprints. Anything?

PAUL

What about the strangulation marks on his neck? I had my hands around his throat.

WINSTON

The ME didn't find any bruises on his neck.

PAUL

The bruises on his shoulders from my fingernails with me pushing down hard on him.

WINSTON

Nothing there either.

(beat)

PAUL

What am I supposed to do now?

WINSTON

Go home. I'll still keep digging. I haven't given up.

PAUL

Do you want to see an innocent black man go to jail for twenty years?

WINSTON

An innocent man, no. A convicted murderer, yes.

PAUL

Don't you have any empathy for him?

WINSTON

Yes! Of course, but my work is based on evidence and nothing else.

PAUL

I'm admitting to the crime. Put me in handcuffs.

(beat)

WINSTON

No more talk. I have many more cases to solve.

(WINSTON gets up and exits, leaving PAUL alone)

Scene 11: AHMED's and JESSICA's apartment. Lights come up on PAUL and JESSICA.

PAUL

We need to talk.

JESSICA

About what?

PAUL

I'm trying to figure out the best way to tell you this.

JESSICA

For God sake, PAUL –

PAUL

Please...please...sit down.

JESSICA

Alright, enough. Tell me. What's going on?

PAUL

It's about what I've done.

JESSICA

I don't understand. What have you done?

PAUL
AHMED didn't drown CHARLIE

JESSICA
We both know that.

PAUL
I don't ask for your forgiveness because what I'm about to say is unforgivable.

JESSICA
You're not making much sense.

PAUL
I murdered CHARLIE, and I went to Detective Johnson to tell him that, but he wouldn't believe me.

(A lengthy beat.)

JESSICA
You're as innocent as AHMED. You didn't murder CHARLIE.

PAUL
Yes, I did.

JESSICA
No! You idiot, you didn't. It was me!

PAUL
No way. You?! That's ridiculous.

JESSICA
You forget that CHARLIE had a few drinks that night, so he wasn't all there. It was easy to drown him. You may have wanted to and imagined doing it, but you didn't. I did.

PAUL
But why would you?

JESSICA
He raped me!

PAUL
You said you kneed him in the groin.

JESSICA
That didn't stop him. When I kicked him, he just got meaner, more aggressive, and he threw himself at me.

PAUL

You have a black belt in karate.

JESSICA

That was what I told him, thinking that would hold him back.

PAUL

You lied to AHMED and me?

JESSICA

I was ashamed. I couldn't admit that he had raped me, but I was going to make him pay for violating me. He was all alone in the pool and I jumped in behind him and I thrust my sharp nails into his shoulders.

PAUL

But the Detective said the Medical Examiner didn't find any penetration marks on his shoulders.

JESSICA

All I know is that I pressed downward, yelling at him as he was underwater for what he had done to me. If it's sex he wanted, I gave it to him, pumping him up and down in that pool until he was totally out of breath. It was his orgasm of death, purification for me and total relief.

PAUL

That sounds pretty convincing, but I don't buy it. Sorry, JESSICA.

(In silhouette we see AHMED fastening a rope in his cell, poised to hang himself. He steps on a stool as WINSTON enters his cell.)

JESSICA

I'm just sorry that AHMED got tangled in this net.

PAUL

If AHMED had known the real story, he surely would have killed CHARLIE.

JESSICA

He did know.

PAUL

Are you saying that AHMED actually killed him?

JESSICA

I saved him from doing just that.

PAUL

What do you mean?

JESSICA

We were trying to get pregnant, but when after many months the specialist determined that AHMED had a very low sperm count. And when I did get pregnant, AHMED was jubilant.

PAUL

And now?

(Her cell phone rings. WINSTON is on the other end.)

WINSTON

JESSICA?

JESSICA

Hello... Yes... this is JESSICA Henderson.

WINSTON

I'm so sorry. I have terrible news to report.

JESSICA

What is it?

WINSTON

It's about AHMED.

JESSICA

Is something wrong?

WINSTON

At approximately six pm, AHMED tried to take his own life.

JESSICA

Oh, my God, no...no...no...

WINSTON

I said he TRIED to take his one life. He didn't succeed. I want to let you know he's fine.

PAUL

What's going on?

WINSTON

They're investigating how he was able to get hold of a rope –

JESSICA

He wouldn't do that!

WINSTON

I know this is terribly painful to hear --

PAUL

What's going on, JESSICA?

(She puts her cell phone down and begins to weep. WINSTON exits.)

Why are you crying?

JESSICA

AHMED attempted suicide.

PAUL

What?!

JESSICA

I knew he was becoming more depressed. Something in the back of my mind whispered that he was going to do something like this.

(The ghost of Charlie enters.)

CHARLIE

As I said to AHMED, I'm not sure who killed me. The police believed it was AHMED. They had the proof, and he had every reason to carry it out.

PAUL

Why take such a drastic step? He still has the appeal.

JESSICA

He lost everything – me, his job, his child.

CHARLIE

I wasn't kind to AHMED. And I regret that.

JESSICA

My God, all of this is because of me.

CHARLIE

But then again, JESSICA had real motivation to take me down. I raped her. I don't know what was going through my head at the time. Hyper masculinity. The big jock syndrome. I guess I couldn't handle rejection.

I'm guilty, too.

PAUL

How?

JESSICA

I told AHMED I had drowned CHARLIE. He probably thought I had betrayed him.

PAUL

No, he didn't think that.

JESSICA

Sure, he did.

PAUL

CHARLIE

PAUL saw the whole thing unfold in front of his eyes and I bet he decided to beat JESSICA and AHMED to the punch. He loved them and he witnessed the agony they were going through.

JESSICA

I told AHMED the truth about what I had done.

PAUL

You did?

JESSICA

Yes.

PAUL

How did he take that?

JESSICA

He understood why I had done it. He said he was more than willing to remain in jail for me and our child.

PAUL

He sacrificed himself for you.

JESSICA

I'm guilty for all of this.

CHARLIE

All I know is that they all lied. It was a bunch of toxic lies. They didn't kill me. I drowned in my own pool of hatred. I was so drunk that night I couldn't even swim any longer. I drowned myself. No one held me down.

PAUL

No, no, no. Don't put this on yourself. All of this is because of Charlie. The rape, his racism, and his death.

CHARLIE

You see things differently on the other side of life. It's too late to change but there is hope that somehow people can look beyond themselves, can turn inward and crush the vile in their hearts. I don't know for sure. I have my doubts, but it's something I would like to believe.

JESSICA

Somehow, I feel we all wanted to kill CHARLIE.

CHARLIE

No one killed me. It was an accidental death, death by drowning while being totally intoxicated.

PAUL

I think....there's some truth to that.

JESSICA

I need to remind myself that AHMED is still alive, but wounded, hurt, and feeling abandoned.

PAUL

He's not abandoned. He has you, me, even the Detective.

JESSICA

AHMED is going to need all of our support going forward.

(AHMED looks out at the audience. PAUL holds onto JESSICA as lights dim and CHARLIE enters the darkness.)

End of play

