

Worthy Victim

Written by

J.E. Clarke

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janetgoodman@yahoo.com
917-328-5253

INT. PRESS ROOM - DAY

Bustling with JOURNALISTS and cameras. Festooned with patriotic posters, US flags.

Behind a podium: SENATOR LINDA JONES commandeers the mike like a pro. A YELLOW line separates chairs from her stage.

SENATOR JONES

That's why I stand before you to announce: I proudly voted for the strategic surge this morning. And for any critics out there, let me make it clear. I do not feel it was in any way a "hard choice". Anyone who loves the United States of America joins me in backing our troops!

Linda soaks in the buzz. Gestures dramatically for the next sound-bite she throws.

SENATOR JONES

Make no mistake, there are many provocateurs in this country who spew non-stop criticism at what the US MUST do in the name of international law and self defense. That's both for us and our allies. The security of our nations are forever intertwined!

In the middle of the press pool sits: MAHA CHOWDRY (20).

Maha's eyes widen at Linda's words. Subtly nervous, Maha looks young for this crowd. And the press pass hanging from her neck seems... new.

Senator Jones raises her voice for a PR coup de grace.

SENATOR JONES

As we in my party understand - while our "opponents" pretend they don't - free speech is the cornerstone of our values. So let such subversives speak. Which makes it all the easier to condemn them in return, exposing what traitors they truly are!

Maha fidgets, as if that line were directed straight at her.

Senator Jones points towards the press crowd. Her demeanor morphing from firebrand to amused bureaucrat.

SENATOR JONES

But I'm sure we're all weary of political theater. Even I find it exhausting sometimes.

Journalists chuckle at that joke.

SENATOR JONES

So - I turn it over to the fourth estate. Any questions from my esteemed crowd?

Reporters stand up in unison, roar questions.

Maha wiggles through the throng. Parting it mid-center, she crosses the yellow line. Towards the stage.

And raises her voice to be heard. Thanks to an accidental lull, her voice booms.

MAHA

Senator, I have a question. One of life or death. It's no joke!

On the sidelines: An AFRICAN AMERICAN SECURITY GUARD perks up. He steps towards Maha, hand reaching for zip ties on his belt.

Senator Jones sees, waves him off. Pivoting (literally) towards Maha, she chuckles. Still in "bemused" mode.

SENATOR JONES

No, no - this is a free country. Let her speak.

(to Maha)

Young lady, you know that ordinarily, crossing that yellow line is a very, very strict "no-no". But never let it be said I don't encourage the next generation to get involved. New voices and civic engagement is what makes this - the greatest nation on Earth and history - work!

Maha winces at the hyperbole.

Too self-absorbed in her own voice, the Senator misses that cue. She waves for Maha to approach.

SENATOR JONES

A question of life or death, hmmm? Let me guess - is the Tik Tok ban your burning concern?

MAHA

Um, no. Though that's censor-

SENATOR JONES

(cuts her off)

Student debt forgiveness, then?

MAHA

That's *also* important. But not why I'm here.

SENATOR JONES

(eyes Maha closely)

You don't SEEM like a "legalize weed" junkie.

MAHA

I'm not. And "weed junkie"? That's not fair!

A few journalists behind Maha roll their eyes: "Here we go".

Maha rests a hand on the stage.

The security guard locks eyes with Senator Jones again. "Can I tackle her now?"

Linda shakes her head: "No." She flashes an increasingly ice smile towards Maha.

SENATOR JONES

Well, Miss -

MAHA

Maha. My name's Maha Chowdry.

SENATOR JONES

Miss Maha: other more -

(coughs)

...experienced journalists deserve their time, too. So - what is your "life or death" question today? Don't be shy. Or slow. Spit it out.

MAHA

I want to ask you about yesterday's massacre.

SENATOR JONES

What "massacre" do you mean?

MAHA

(beat)

The one which happened yesterday?

SENATOR JONES

But - WHERE did it occur? Young lady, if you aspire to be a journalist, accuracy with your words is a must.

MAHA

(mutters)

There are multiple massacres to choose from? That raises questions, too...

(to Jones)

The one in Kahn Younis.

Senator Jones brightens. That clears things up.

SENATOR JONES

Oh. You mean, yesterday's successful strike against terrorists? I chaired the security committee which greenlit that maneuver. Fortunately, additional ordinances were speed tracked -

MAHA

It wasn't terrorists! That was a refugee camp!

SENATOR JONES

(snorts, dismissive)

A refugee camp of human shields.

Murmurs among the journalists. This is getting heated. Which for ratings... is good.

MAHA

Human shields? That's propaganda, you know it! Most of the dead were women and children. Innocent men, too!

Smiling wryly, Jones squints at Maha's Press Pass.

SENATOR JONES

Are you really Press, young lady? Now, don't forget... you're being recorded. This room is chock full of cameras. And video never forgets. So, tell the truth.

MAHA

(stammers)

My... my major is Journalism. I'm a sophomore. My school has an internship -

SENATOR JONES

Oh. You're a DEI student. Bless your heart.

The condescension hits Maha hard. She snaps.

MAHA

Don't deflect, Senator!

Behind Maha, a MALE JOURNALIST turns to his CAMERAMAN.

JOURNALIST

Ooooh, this just got spicy. Make fucking sure you get the shot.

Maha glares up at the stage. Senator Jones stares back down, eyebrow raised.

More fluttery hand gestures between Jones and the ever-more-jumpy security guard. "Stand down. Stay away."

SENATOR JONES

(to Maha)

Deflect from what? Never mind. I answered your question. Next!

MAHA

Deflect from war crimes! And no, you haven't answered... yet!

Senator Jones crosses her arms. Now she's visibly annoyed.

SENATOR JONES

Then ask it. And we'll all be free to... move on.

Maha takes a breath. Projects her voice as loud as she can.

MAHA

Over 200 people died in yesterday's "strike". Almost all were known civilians -

SENATOR JONES

"Almost"?

MAHA

Likely, every single one. Including at least fifty kids! That's a death toll fueled by US aid and weapons. As a "Leader" on that committee you brag about, how can you justify such acts?

The two lock eyes. Senator Jones carefully calculates her answer... sighs.

SENATOR JONES

War... is a very, very an ugly thing, Dear. No-one in this room would argue that fact of life. What you can't possibly fathom at your tender age -

MAHA

Don't patronize me, Senator! And how can you call it "war", when one side isn't even armed? This is slaughter -

SENATOR JONES

That's two times you've interrupted now. I have no doubt your emotions are quite... heart felt and genuine, but it's time you let *me* explain.

Jones pauses for effect. Playing for the cameras she's hyper aware are capturing her every word.

SENATOR JONES

Innocent people die in war, too. You might label that a tragic necessity. "Collateral Damage", if you will. But no-one should call it a war crime. Earlier, you so colorfully claimed it wasn't "fair" to describe pot-heads as junkies.

On her quip, a smattering of press laughter fills the room.

SENATOR JONES

Well, difference of ideology aside, I would hope we can agree what's really "not fair" is blaming our troops and military leadership after they've taken every necessary measure needed to triumph in times of strife!

MAHA

It's "necessary" children die?!?

SENATOR JONES

Don't twist my words! You're misframing the issue. That's the sort of misinformation which makes the Tik-Tok ban so crucial.

MAHA

I thought you were *against* censorship?

SENATOR JONES

I'm against libel. Our military takes every precaution they can.

Turning a cold shoulder to Maha, the Senator points to the male journalist.

SENATOR JONES

We're almost out of time. I saw YOUR hand raised?

MAHA

(snaps, sarcastic)

So - you're saying our military's incompetent? The greatest nation in the world can't tell the difference between an enemy soldier and a pregnant woman in a tent?

Senator Jones' eyes blaze. This is personal now.

SENATOR JONES

"Incompetent"? I'll have you know I have a son deployed actively in that region. I'm very, very proud of him - as any true patriot and loving mother would be! You smearing our military as war criminals is more than offensive...

MAHA

What's OFFENSIVE are the statistics in this "conflict", Senator. Health organizations have estimated at least 186,000 have been killed. Other studies calculate thousands more! That's not even mentioning those alive, but gravely wounded. If you're so pro-life, how can you justify -

Senator Jones pounds the podium. Journalists jump!

SENATOR JONES

How DARE you impugn this nation's reputation!

(eyes Maha's face)

Where's your family from, Sweetie?

MAHA

(snaps)

Chicago.

SENATOR JONES

Whatever. My son - and our troops -
deserve respect!

MAHA

How do you expect me to "respect" a
nation that dismisses the lives of
thousands killed by US bombs! People
with hopes and dreams and value.
Ripped to shreds. For what?

Senator Jones starts to respond. Thinking better of it, she
bites her tongue. And waves to the security guard: "Now".

The officer approaches Maha. Beefy and muscled, he dwarfs
her size. She stares up silently in his shadow.

GUARD

'Kay, kid. Off the soap box. Time to
go.

He takes Maha's arm, turns her towards the door.

The crowd of journalists part like the Red Sea. Maha steels
herself for ejection. Sighs.

Behind her, Senator Jones isn't done.

SENATOR JONES (O.S.)

This is exactly what I was talking
about. This new generation means
well, but they're naive. The price of
freedom is vigilance. Power. Decisive
action when called for. Action that
sometimes requires we make painful
choices. Ones which may be tragic,
but we must be proud to make.

RUSHED FOOTSTEPS onstage.

Startled, Maha breaks free - swings around to see:

A YOUNG OFFICER IN UNIFORM runs to Senator Johnson, whispers
urgently in her ear.

In seconds, the Senator's face morphs. From stoic
professionalism, to alarm. Then grief. Her knees buckle. The
Officer holds Jones up, tries to lead her off stage.

SENATOR JONES

No!

Jones stumbles back to the podium. Gazes out at the sea of
journalists - tears and mascara streak her cheeks.

SENATOR JONES

I... I've just received news. There's been a terrorist counterstrike. Not on our allies. Our troops. My son...

Johnson sobs. The room falls silent.

SENATOR JONES

(choking)

My son has been recorded as a casualty. He wasn't in a combat role - just housed in barracks which were bombed.

Reporters surge towards the stage, the yellow line ignored.

CONGRESSIONAL AIDES hug Jones. The Senator cries inconsolably in their arms.

The only one left behind is.. Maha. Standing in the now-empty press pen, she stares at the outpouring of sympathy, conflict emotions on her face.

Pulling herself together, Senator Jones commandeers the mike one last time.

SENATOR JONES

I'm afraid this press event is over. But I promise my son's sacrifice will not be in vain. He was a beautiful, brilliant soul with a full life ahead of him. The terrorist act of attacking non-combative personnel is NEVER justified. I swear, through the power of my office and as mother, I will make damned certain those responsible answer for this crime!

Jones' voice cracks. Maha wilts. But whispers under her breath, so soft only the security guard hears:

MAHA

Thanks for answering my question. When it comes to collateral damage, your son counts. Thousands others.. don't.

Maha turns and walks towards the exit. Looks as broken as Jones, though in a different way.

The security guard watches. Sudden sympathy and understanding in his eyes.

FINAL FADE OUT: