

FATAL JUDGMENT

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A BIRD WHOSE SONG I didn't recognize was singing high in the tree beside me when the car pulled up to the curb. Black Lexus sedan, newer model, semi-tinted windows. I stepped forward, hearing the click of the passenger door unlocking. I opened the door, glanced at the driver, and slid inside.

"Sure you don't want to come in?"

"I'm sure," Laura Porter said, staring straight ahead.

I shut the door. "It's good to see you."

She nodded but didn't respond. It was early evening on a Monday in mid-August, shadows stretching across the street toward my house as dusk descended. I heard laughter down the way at Schiller Park as dog walkers gathered, and the sound of a car engine cutting off as someone scored a lucky parking space behind us. Inside, Laura's Lexus smelled of coffee, Armor All, and above all her perfume.

"So," I said.

Seconds that might have been centuries passed in silence as she studied her windshield. Her hands remained on the steering wheel, knuckles as white as if she were navigating a hairpin curve on a southern Ohio country road instead of sitting parked on a neighborhood street in Columbus. She was dressed professionally, in a lightweight gray jacket and skirt with a white blouse. As if she'd ditched her robe and come directly from chambers.

At last she said, "I need your help."

"OK. With what?"

"I'm in trouble."

"I'm sorry to hear that. What kind?"

"It's . . ."

"Is it the campaign?"

She didn't respond right away. Eons passed as one-celled organisms floating in primordial soup evolved, took to the land, built civilizations, made love and war, invented streaming TV, declined, and went extinct. The bird in the tree stopped singing.

"It's not the campaign," she said. "At least not directly. But I'm in a bind and I didn't know who else to call. I hope you don't mind."

"Why would I mind?"

A nervous laugh. "We didn't exactly part on the best of terms, if you recall."

I studied her profile, the set of her jaw and the look of concentration as she stared down my street in German Village. Smelled her perfume. Realized she was wearing contacts, not the glasses I was accustomed to. But that's what happens when the only time you spend with someone is Sunday mornings in a condo with the curtains drawn and it's next stop: bedroom.

"I'll take the blame for that," I said. "I was the one who broke things off. Remember?"

"Oh, I remember. You blindsided me, that's for sure. Bringing back such lovely memories of Paul. But maybe it was for the best, in the long run."

"I'm sorry—"

"Skip it, Andy. That's not why I'm here. I'm a big girl. That's in the past now."

"Is it?"

A shadow fell over her face as she wrestled with her thoughts. I'd seen that look before, but not in the bedroom. "The Velvet Fist," they called her at the courthouse, though not to her face. Fair but tough. A judge who called them like she saw them. It was on the strength of that reputation she was running for a seat on

the Ohio Supreme Court, and, according to everything I'd heard and read, had a decent shot at winning this fall.

"Laura—"

"I said skip it. I'm in trouble, real trouble, and I need your help."

"I'm listening."

"Please do, for both our sakes."

In hindsight, Laura's and my time together marked one of the stranger episodes in my life. She was a judge on the county common pleas court who earned her nickname handing down long prison sentences, especially to defendants convicted of violent offenses. I'm a private investigator who does a little security on the side. We met at a Christmas party hosted by my sometime boss, defense attorney Burke Cunningham, almost seven years ago. Two days after the party, Laura called me out of the blue with a job offer. She needed a bodyguard. She'd had threats from the brother of a gangbanger she put behind bars for life plus fifty years. The pay was good and the assignment simple enough: drive her to the courthouse each morning and back to her condo each afternoon. She preferred a private guy like me as opposed to the sheriff's office security detail because she didn't want hints of her vulnerability bandied around the gossipy legal community. Two weeks passed without incident. Then one cold January afternoon she asked me inside on the pretense of checking the alarm system. In a matter of minutes my assignment evolved into bodyguard with benefits. She canceled my contract and we started our relationship.

Such as it was. By mutual agreement I called on her once a week. Sunday mornings at 11:30 a.m. sharp, rain or shine, brunch plans or otherwise, to meet her physical needs after a bitter divorce that left her wary of anything smacking of commitment. Letting myself in with a loaned key. The confidential situation suited both of us just fine for a month of Sundays and then some. I knew enough not to bring up the cases in her courtroom, despite the fact they were often subject to stories in the *Columbus Dispatch*. If she knew anything about my pre-private

eye background, she never mentioned it, up to and including my fall from grace as an Ohio State quarterback and short stint with the Cleveland Browns. We kept the small talk to the weather and Columbus traffic and focused mostly on shedding our clothes as quickly as possible.

Then came the day I suggested dinner out. From Laura's reaction you would have thought I'd proposed prancing naked together through the lobby of the Franklin County Courthouse at lunchtime. So I broke it off. Strings-free sex sounds good until you're staring into a bachelorhood future with only slightly more days ahead than behind and growing tired of always going to movies alone.

Although come to think of it, I'm still a bachelor and most of the time just stay in and watch Netflix.

Laura's reaction to my breakup was resolute: I hadn't seen or spoken to her for nearly five years. Until my phone buzzed that morning and I answered and she asked if she could see me as soon as possible. I asked if she wanted me to meet her at her condo—I knew the way, after all. She said no, that she'd swing by my house. And then after a pause asked for directions.

I shoved away the memories and looked at her.

"Go ahead."

She pushed a strand of thick, dark hair off her patrician brow, and for the first time since I arrived steadied her eyes, the color of a clear sky in January, directly on mine. I swallowed, taking in her perfume, recalling Sunday mornings.

"Before I say anything else, I need you to promise me something."

"If I can."

"If you can?"

"Just being honest. I can promise a lot of things—discretion, protection, my signature on a souvenir football jersey if I'm in a really good mood. But I can't promise to break the law or overlook a crime or drink any cocktail with cucumber involved. I live by a code."

“Andy, I’m serious.”

“Same goes for cilantro—”

“*Andy.*”

I apologized. Told her I defaulted to jokes because I was nervous seeing her again.

“Me too,” she said.

“Take your time. Whenever you’re ready.”

She took a breath. “I’m ready.”

“In that case, so am I.”

We were in each other’s arms almost before I realized what was happening. Her mouth was on mine, urgent, her lips as soft as I remembered them. I cupped my left hand around her neck and pulled her closer. We kissed like that for almost a minute, passion growing as long-dormant memories of our Sunday mornings surfaced. She murmured something and I reached under the hem of her blouse and pushed my left hand onto her cool skin. She gasped but didn’t resist. It was like being in middle school again, except in a Lexus.

“Let’s go inside,” I whispered. “What will the neighbors think?”

“Yes,” she said, her breath warm on my cheek.

And then her phone went off.

In fairness, I’m as culpable as the next guy when it comes to disruptive ring tones. My current flavor of the month, “Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns N’ Roses, was not exactly soothing. But that was a harp version of Pachelbel’s Canon in D compared to her abrasive, old-fashioned telephone jangle, as jarring at that moment as if someone had rolled down the window and dashed a bucket of ice water on us.

“Shit,” she said, pulling away. “*Sorry.*” She fumbled for her purse and pulled out the offending device. I glanced at the screen and glimpsed a caller ID photo of a man I didn’t recognize: angular face, dark hair, forced smile.

“Hi,” she said. Several seconds passed. “What? *What?* My God—are you all right?” She glanced over at me. Our eyes locked, just for a moment, before she turned away. “No, don’t do that. Just

stay there. I'll be right over. No. No. I'm not sure. Maybe fifteen minutes. You're sure you're OK? All right. I will. OK—goodbye.”

She disconnected the call and dropped the phone in her purse.

“I need to go.”

“Go where? Who was that?”

She hesitated. “I apologize, Andy. Maybe this was a mistake.”

“A mistake? What are you talking about?”

“I can't—”

“Laura, what's going on? That didn't sound good.”

“Please. I have to go.” She glanced at her watch. “I just need a little time. Maybe then I can explain everything.”

“Should we be calling the police? If this is something to do with being a judge, with a case, you can't take any risks.”

“No—no police.”

“Why not?”

“I can't tell you. And I really need to go.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

She hesitated again, wrestling with her thoughts once more. The Velvet Fist, deep in contemplation. I sat back in my seat. Considered my options. Thought about where this ranked on the list of strange dates I'd been on. Decided it was top five, and that included the time I was subpoenaed in flagrante delicto.

After a few seconds she shook her head. “Give me an hour. Just to make sure everything's OK. Will you still be home, if I come back then? I'm really sorry—”

“Nothing to be sorry about, if you're sure. And yes, I'll be home. I promised Hopalong we could watch *Homeward Bound* again.”

“Thanks,” she said, oblivious to the joke. She looked at her phone as if expecting it to ring once more. “And yes, I'm sure. I won't be long, promise.”

“That's fine. But just in case, do you have a dollar?”

“What?”

“You heard me. A bill, preferably, but I'd take one of the Susan B. Anthony coins, too.”

“Andy, please. I've got to get—”

“Just a dollar.”

Puzzlement filled her face as she stared at me. I didn’t look away. Sighing deeply, she dug into her purse, pulled out a wallet, opened it, and retrieved a bill. “I’m really not sure why you’re—”

“Thank you,” I said, tucking it into my shirt pocket. “I’m considering that my retainer. I’m officially working for you now, which means I’ll need your permission before I can tell anyone about our conversation.”

That almost won a smile. She opened her mouth as if to say something, then closed it at the sound of a ping from her purse. She reached in, picked up her phone, looked at the screen, and tightened her lips. What I saw next on her face startled me: it was pure fear.

I said, “It’s not too late to change your mind—I could still come along.”

“Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll see you soon.”

“In that case I’ll be here. With the dollar.”

She didn’t respond as I opened the door and climbed out. I waited just a moment, but she gave a little shake of her head. Reluctantly, I shut the door, and two seconds later she drove off. She paused briefly at the stop sign at Whittier, rolled through, and was gone.