

Monday Morning

The minivan barely tapped the rear bumper of the Jaguar.

Neither car should have been in the intersection in the first place, but there was a MARTA bus stalled in the right-hand lane of Piedmont Road, forcing all the cars trying to turn right onto Peachtree Road to merge into the center lane with all the traffic that was trying to cross Peachtree. So, instead of stopping behind the white line as they should have, both the minivan and the Jaguar had crept into the intersection of Piedmont and East Paces Ferry Road.

The selfish optimism of Atlanta motorists never ceased to amaze Laura Chastain. Not only did they insist upon running stop signs and red lights, and entering intersections when they **clearly** would not be able to pass through them, they never really committed to stopping. Instead, they rolled, claiming every inch of pavement they could.

That was precisely what the lady in the minivan was doing, rolling, one micrometer at a time, as she blocked the intersection. Maybe she was feeling conspicuous, and not without reason. She could have bought herself a hefty ticket if there had been a cop on the scene – which, as it happened, there was, although she couldn't know that the man at the wheel of the Jeep Wagoneer that was waiting to turn

left from East Paces Ferry onto Piedmont was, in fact, a cop. But neither could she have known that the driver and his passenger were not particularly anxious to get through the intersection in a hurry.

Laura Chastain and Amos Kowalski were oblivious to the traffic jam, sharing a perfect moment, listening to an Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong duet. Amos had just taken his hand off the gearshift and placed it on Laura's knee. As she turned to smile at him, she saw the accident – which was hardly worthy of the name, as it was, by any definition, just a tap.

The minivan could not have been going more than five miles an hour, probably less. The guy in the Jag could hardly have been aware of the impact. The van lady didn't seem to be – at least, she didn't throw her vehicle into reverse, or leap from the driver's seat to apologize. It's possible that she didn't even **realize** that she had hit the Jaguar. Maybe she wondered why its driver came out of the car, storming toward her with a golf club in his hands.

Laura certainly wondered what he was doing, right up to the moment he swung the club – it was an iron – and smashed the van's windshield. Laura gasped in shock. His actions were extreme to the point of being bizarre, and he looked so...normal, just an average guy, maybe in his forties, attired in a "business casual" ensemble of gray trousers and a slate-gray shirt, open at the collar. Laura noted, as he teed off on the van's headlights, that he was balding, and that he had allowed his hair to compensate by growing over his collar in the back. It was funny, she thought later, how much detail she had taken in. He wore little wire-framed glasses, which he pushed up onto the bridge of

his nose as he proceeded around to the passenger side of the van, which positioned him directly in front of Amos' Jeep.

Laura started to say something to Amos, but by that time he had already vaulted out of the Jeep and sprinted into the intersection. "Call 911!" he shouted over his departing shoulder. Laura fumbled her cell phone, not willing to take her eyes off him as he ran straight at the man with the club, holding his I.D. and shield above his head and shouting "Police!"

The club-wielding man turned as Amos neared, pausing only a moment before swinging again and shattering the front passenger window. Laura could hear the shrieks of the woman and children inside the car; they almost drowned the voice of the 911 operator. She tried to concentrate on the questions the 911 operator was asking – where was she? What was the closest address? Was the attacker armed?

Now Amos was trying to talk to the man, holding his hands out, showing that he was unarmed, trying to reason. Laura would have preferred him to draw his gun and stand the man down without all the discussion, which she felt was unnecessary under the circumstances. The golf-club man apparently agreed; he hefted the club over his head and warned Amos away. Laura jumped from the car, ready to do something if the man swung at Amos. He didn't. He took another step toward the van, raised the club again, and brought it across one of the rear windows. Laura could see the children inside, scrambling for safety, screaming and howling in terror. This time the window didn't break. The man prepared to swing again.

Amos took advantage of the fractional second when the assailant's backswing had him off-balance. He lunged at him, and hit him low, like a cornerback bringing down a

wide receiver. They both crashed to the pavement. She saw the attacker's head hit the street, and bounce. Laura expected that he would remain there, prone and unconscious, but he didn't. He fought Amos furiously, trying to reach the gun Amos wore in a holster on the back of his belt, and when that didn't work, flailing at Amos with his club, landing ineffective foreshortened blows on his shoulders.

When she saw that, Laura abandoned the cell phone and the 911 operator, and ran, murder in her heart. "I will kill you!" she heard herself screaming. "I will kill you!" She wanted to bounce his head off the pavement again – that would be lovely. She wanted to land a kick in his ribs with the toe of her sling-back pump; she imagined the satisfying crunch of the pointed toe connecting with the man's ribs

In her anger and fear, Laura didn't notice the house painter who had gotten out of his truck. She was almost there when the painter reached down, with an economical gesture, and jerked the attacker to his feet, Amos still grasping his knees. The painter held the man, one brawny arm across his neck, the other behind his back, wrenching the golf club away in the process.

Amos stood, and unhooked handcuffs from his belt – the handcuffs that always embarrassed Laura so much when he took his jacket off in public. The man saw the cuffs, gave up, sagged against the painter with a strange moaning cry. Amos snapped the handcuffs on him, and then they heard the sirens. It was over.

Laura stood, shaking with frustrated rage. Her fists were still clenched, still hopeful of landing a punch on the Jaguar driver, who was now sobbing pathetically in the custody of the house painter. Amos was inside the van, checking the children for injuries. A patrol car pulled up, followed by another, and blue-uniformed cops poured

out of them. Laura stumbled to the curb and sat down, disregarding the potential damage to her skirt and pantyhose, heedless of the stares of the drivers who were by now pulling around the Jeep and passing through the cleared intersection, off to work a little late, but with a great story to tell at the water cooler.

Laura waited while the van was moved to the parking lot of the restaurant on the corner, and the Jaguar hooked up to one of the omnipresent tow trucks that homed on accidents like bats on moths. No one took any notice of her, not even Amos. He was talking to one of the uniformed cops, describing what had happened, and laughing. **Laughing**, when just a few minutes before he could have been **killed**. Laura's fists tightened, and her nails dug into her palms.

Finally, after what seemed like an age, Amos approached her. "You okay?" he said. Laura didn't answer, but landed a glare on him that could peel paint. "I know," he said, "You're mad at me. You wanted me to wait for the **real** cops. You don't like to have your boyfriend jumping on maniacs in public. But, sweetheart, it's my job."

She hunched her shoulders and looked away; she was furious with him, all the more so because he was right. She wanted to hit him, almost as badly as she had wanted to hit the golfing man a few minutes earlier. Amos, shrewdly, guessed what was running through her mind. "I bet you want to hit me, just smack the crap out of me, don't you? It's just the adrenaline – you'll come down in a minute. C'mon. Let me help you up."

He was right; the anger and the fear were both ebbing away. She reached up and took his hands, and allowed him to pull her to her feet and into his embrace. He snorted. "Buckhead," he said. "Some damn neighborhood you live in, Chastain. If this is what they do here on a Monday morning, I don't wanna know what goes on Saturday night."

She laughed. Then she punched him.

Chapter 1

“I don’t give a fat damn what you **think**, young man. I want to know what you **know**! Don’t come into my courtroom unprepared because you’re too damn disorganized to talk to your client.”

Laura Chastain winced. Even when it wasn’t directed at her, Judge Root’s wrath was a terrible thing. The hapless defense lawyer straightened his tie, playing for time, and tried to recover his poise. “Your Honor, I haven’t had an opportunity to discuss a strategy with my client....”

“Strategy? Who the hell needs a strategy? This is an arraignment, son – head ‘em up and move ‘em out. Is he guilty or not?”

“Well, that’s the thing – you see, we haven’t had a chance to discuss the case, not really, Your Honor, and I just thought if I could have a little more time....”

“Why haven’t you had time? And what the hell is there to discuss? It’s an arraignment. He’s accused of robbing a liquor store. He’s supposed to enter a plea, and then we’ll talk about bail. You don’t need to **take a meeting** to do any of that, do you?”

“Yes...I mean, we **did** meet, Your Honor, but we disagreed on what course we should take at this juncture.”

“**Juncture?** What the **hell** are you talking about? You’re a public defender, son, and this ain’t the Supreme Court. I don’t allow **junctions** in my courtroom. Get on with it.”

“Yes, uh, but...you see, there’s some question as to whether I should be representing him at this hearing...he doesn’t like me, Your Honor,” the unfortunate tyro concluded lamely.

“Then he’s got more sense that I’d have given him credit for. You! Defendant!”

“Yes, sir,” the accused answered, grinning at his attorney’s discomfiture.

“I bet you’ve spent a helluva lot more time in court than your lawyer here. Am I right?”

“I reckon you are, Your Honor,” came the beaming reply.

“Then you know the drill – are you pleading guilty or not?”

“Not guilty, Your Honor, and I’d like to say that this peckerwood wanted me to plead guilty. At my **arraignment**,” with a contemptuous glance at his counsel. “I done told him I ain’t pleading guilty – I got a sheet, Your Honor, and you gonna have to send me down a long time if I plead guilty. No sir, I want a trial with a jury,” he said with the authority of a man who had been there and done that.

“Do you wish him to continue to represent you, son?”

“I wish to fire his ass, Your Honor.” Titters rose from the courtroom; even the Bailiff was having a hard time keeping a straight face.

“Your Honor, my client....” The perspiring defender tried to get back in the game, but the judge pulled him up short. “It seems to me that your client has decided to represent himself, counselor. And might I add that it seems like a good call to me.”

Laura thought it was time to stick her neck out – probably right onto the chopping block, but nobody had ever accused her of being afraid of a little judicial reaming. “Your Honor, in view of the gravity of the charges, I think the defendant should be encouraged to reconsider his decision to fire his lawyer.”

“What the hell difference does it make to you?” Judge Root snorted. “If the man wants to appear **pro se**, I say let him.”

“I’m not convinced that the defendant is fully aware of the gravity of his situation, Your Honor. He has a previous felony conviction, and if he’s found guilty on this charge, he’s looking at a minimum sentence of twenty-five to life. That’s not a jaywalking ticket, with all due respect to Your Honor. His, ah, legal experience may be adequate for the purpose of this proceeding, but I question his ability to sustain a defense at trial.”

Judge Root threw up his hands. “I fail to see why the prosecution should want to make its job more difficult, but if I’ve learned anything about you in the past year, Miss Chastain, it is to expect the unexpected. Defendant! Re-hire that skinny boy who calls himself a lawyer, and make him shape up.”

Fifteen minutes later, with his client arraigned and on his way back to the Fulton County Jail, the thoroughly cowed defender caught up with Laura in the hall of the courthouse. “Hey – thanks for helping out in there. I’m Avery Daniels. You’re Laura Chastain, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“You went to law school with a buddy of mine – Jim Norris. When he heard I was coming to Atlanta he told me to look out for you.”

“Well, tell him I said hey.”

“Listen, I really appreciate what you did. Is he always like that?”

“Norris?” Laura asked, remembering Jim vaguely as a consummate law-school weiner, and thinking it figured this kid would know him.

“No, Judge Root – is he always such a jerk?”

“He’s not a jerk. He’s a judge on one of the busiest benches in the country, and he doesn’t have time to teach law in the courtroom.”

Avery pulled himself up. “He didn’t have to teach me anything – I know what I’m doing. I wasn’t going to plead my client guilty. Shit, what kind of a moron do I look like?” Laura took the question as rhetorical and allowed him to continue. “I simply suggested to my client that he might want to **consider** a plea and he went nuts on me. We got called up before I could sort things out. I just met him five minutes before his case was called. But I still think he ought to plead to a lesser charge.”

Laura shook her head. Although she was a dedicated prosecutor, she always put herself in to the shoes of the defense, and in this case she believed that the accused man was right in demanding a trial. He was probably a cagey courthouse veteran who knew that the only plea bargain he’d get from the District Attorney would put him on a bus to a state prison within forty-eight hours. But if he held out for a trial, he’d spend months – maybe a year or more – in the far friendlier, if crowded, confines of the Fulton County Jail, close to home and, if he had the right connections inside, maintaining a lifestyle not so different from the one he was leading now. And after a year, who could say what the prosecution’s case would look like? The eyewitnesses who had put him in the liquor store might have moved on, or forgotten what they saw – all in all, a risk worth taking.

Laura would have counseled him to stick it out. If things looked grim as his trial date approached, he could still strike the same bargain he could today, with credit for the time served before the trial.

Laura, after a year as a prosecutor, knew that the dimmest-seeming inmate was capable of this sort of crude calculus, but she didn't feel inclined to clue Avery Daniels in on the game. He'd managed to rub her the wrong way—by dragging her into his doofus problems in front of a notoriously fierce judge, or by invoking the irritating memory of one of her least-favorite classmates. She didn't know. But as far as Laura was concerned, Avery Daniels could learn the rules of the jungle on his own. Laura shrugged at him and said, "He's the client. You do what he wants to do, counselor."

"Well, you heard him—he wants to fire my ass. He hates me."

"He'll hate you a whole lot more if he ends up spending his golden years as a guest of the state of Georgia, which with his record is a real possibility."

"I know that. I was gonna ask you if we could plead him on a misdemeanor."

"No."

"Why? He didn't hurt anybody."

"He attempted to rob a liquor store at gunpoint."

"But the gun wasn't loaded."

Laura was becoming exasperated. "How was the poor clerk to know that – or the cops who caught up with him? He's lucky he didn't get shot full of holes. And he's going to serve his time if I have anything to say about it." What she didn't add – what she shouldn't have **needed** to add – was that it was an election year, and her boss, District Attorney Marshall Oliver, wouldn't thank Laura for going easy on a career criminal three

months before the primary. Laura looked at her watch. “ Look, I have to get going. My only advice to you is this: represent your client. Get to know the facts and see what you can do with them. And listen to him.”

Avery drew himself up. “You know, I was in the top ten percent of my law-school class. I clerked for a Federal judge in Virginia. I just took this job for the courtroom experience. When I’ve logged some trial time, I’m going to set up my own criminal defense practice. I think these scumbags are lucky to get a lawyer like me for free.”

Laura started to reply, but she was luckily interrupted by someone shouting. “Laura! Chastain!” Laura looked around. She smiled when she saw Detective Carlton Hemingway trotting toward her. “Hey!” she said, happy to see Carlton for his own sake, but equally glad to be able to get away from Avery. “Look, Avery, I’ll see you around. Don’t take it too hard – consider it your initiation. You’ll get the hang of it soon.” Avery strode off huffily. “Carlton!” Laura said, turning to a more pleasant companion.

“Hey,” the detective said with a grin. “Heard you and your man mixed it up with a yuppie this morning.”

“There’s entirely too much gossip in the Police Department,” Laura said sternly.

“Naw, I hear Kowalski was a real hero. Took on a bald guy with a five-iron singlehanded.”

“It wasn’t funny at the time,” Laura said, remembering all too vividly her own rage. She changed the subject. “What brings you to the hallowed halls of Justice, anyway? Testifying?”

“Nope,” the detective replied. “Research.”

“Research? What for?”

“I’ve got a missing person case, and I need some background on the victim.”

Hemingway was a homicide detective, but missing persons cases went to his squad when foul play was suspected. “Not a child, I hope?” Laura said. There was no worse case for a cop than a missing child.

Carlton shook his head. “Adult male. Got a minute? Maybe you can give me some ideas. You did the corporate law drill for a while, didn’t you?”

Laura nodded. “About seven years.”

“This guy’s who’s turned up missing is a businessman. His co-workers and family are sure that someone’s killed him, but I think they’re been reading too much Agatha Christie. Guys like this don’t get offed, but they do disappear – usually under their own power. “

“What makes you think that’s what happened?”

Carlton shrugged. “Instinct. His house was clean as a whistle – no sign of anything violent going down there. His car’s missing, too—but he’s been gone two, maybe three days. We usually find the car pretty quickly in a murder case. I figure he and the car are still together. What I’m thinking is that there may be something dicey about his business, something that might make it advisable for him to disappear for a while. I came over here to check his name through the court records – you know, see if anyone’s suing him or something along those lines.”

“Good thought,” Laura said. “You’ll need to search the federal system, too. I can save you a trip to the federal courthouse, if you’ve got a few minutes. Why don’t you come back to the office with me? We’ve got all the online databases – I can just plug in a

few coordinates and we'll see what pops up. And I have a friend who can clue us into what the IRS thinks of this guy. If it's a money problem, they'll most likely be involved."

"Thanks," Carlton said. "I was kind of hoping I'd run into one of you lawyer types. I don't mind kicking down doors or reading autopsy reports, but financial stuff bores me to death."

Laura and Carlton had walked to the end of the hall, where she yanked open the door to the stairwell. The elevators were entirely too slow and crowded for her; she preferred to climb the three flights to her office. "I haven't seen you around for a while," Laura said as they began the ascent. "What have you been up to?"

"Little of this, little of that. How 'bout you? Guess Kowalski's still in the picture."

Laura smiled. "Yep. He's finished renovating his house, so he's taken over mine. He's building a brick wall and planter boxes on my patio this week."

"Sounds serious. Any plans you want to tell me about?"

"Nope. I like things just the way they are." They arrived on the landing, and Laura pushed through the door to a dim corridor banked with file cabinets and office doors. She led Carlton to her own patch of county real estate. "Take a seat," Laura said. "I'll just check my messages and fire up the computer." There was nothing urgent on her voice mail, so she launched into a records search, explaining to Carlton what she was doing as she went along. "Okay, we'll look under his name first – what is it, by the way?"

"Lawrence Belew."

“Oh, yeah—I read about this in the paper yesterday. He’s some kind of a computer jockey, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he a ‘systems consultant,’ whatever that means. He does a lot of government business. He went to ‘the ‘House,’ of course,” he said, his voice tinged with resentment. Morehouse, ‘the African-American Harvard,’ was noted for its tightly networked alumni. Most of Atlanta’s black power brokers were ‘Morehouse Men,’ or were tight with those who were. “Then he got a masters at Georgia Tech for good measure. Covered both sides of the street, you might say.” By which, Laura assumed, Carlton meant that he made contacts in the white business world. And what was wrong with that?

“You don’t seem too nuts about Lawrence Belew – what’s the name of his firm, anyway?”

“Seventh Generation Systems. And it’s not that I don’t like him; I never met the brother. But I know the type. Buppie. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth.”

“Buppie, as in...?”

“Black Urban Professional. Slick car, cell phone welded to the ear – you know what I mean.”

“Hey, baby, I live in Buckhead. Don’t get me started on the cell phones. Okay, I’m coming up empty here. He’s not a party to any lawsuits, nor is his firm. Let’s check some other sources. I’ll switch over to a news database.” Laura waited as the search engine did its job. “Lots of pieces on him, mostly about his business. He’s not just tied in with City Hall – looks like he’s got contracts with everyone, from the big corporations to

the county and state governments, too. But there's nothing here that makes me see trouble. What do you know about his personal life?"

"Very little. He's a real loner, they say. No girlfriend, few intimate buddies. Even his firm is funny – he's only got a couple of permanent employees, a secretary and a payroll clerk. He hires people for specific jobs."

"That's par for the course in his line of business. They get a contract, and hire independent programmers to do the work."

"Yeah, and he hires a lot of kids – college and even high school students who're smart about computers. Very few of them seem to know anything about his personal life, other than the fact that he was a Star Trek buff."

"Surprise, surprise." Laura said with a chuckle.

Carlton wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, and I don't recall seeing a lot of brothers on the Starship freakin' Enterprise."

Laura laughed again. "Don't be such a hard case, Carlton."

Carlton shrugged. "I just like to keep it a little more **real**, myself."

Laura hooted. "Oh, give it up, Carlton. If you could, you'd be driving a Lexus and getting Mr. Sulu's autograph in a heartbeat. You're just jealous."

Carlton grinned. "Oh, sure. Jealous of a herb. That'll be the day." He stood up. "Thanks for the help, anyway."

"No problem. I'll call my IRS contact right away and get back to you as soon as I hear anything. Good luck."

"Yeah, good luck wasting my time. This guy's gonna turn up in a day or two, and I will have missed some real cases."

“Grumpy! Call me when you’re in a better mood and we’ll have lunch.”

Carlton snorted and left Laura laughing.

Chapter 2

The Jeep was there when she pulled into her driveway. She had been all but certain that it would be, but she was relieved just the same. She pulled out the bag of expensive groceries she had picked up on the way home. She had invested in apology food: jumbo shrimp, with beady little eyes still attached, asparagus, and wine that cost more than ten dollars a bottle – which violated one of her principles, but it was a wine Amos especially liked. And ice cream, which was more for her than for him, but he wasn't the only one who'd had a bad day.

She shut the door of the car softly, and crept into the kitchen through the back door. She didn't want him to see her yet, not until she could get a reading on his mood. She put the bag on the counter and craned her neck to look out the window the overlooked the patio.

The signs were good: he had Sinatra on the boom box, which meant that he was in a good mood. A blue-collar, salt-of-the-earth, none-of-your-fancy-pants-music mood, but that was okay, a good sign, in fact. She would have worried if he had chosen Billie Holiday; Laura didn't care for the Billie mood, which was melancholy and silent. But

Frank meant that things were okay. She watched him for a few minutes as he slathered mortar on bricks and tapped them into place with a satisfying **chink**.

Looking at him like this, with him unaware of her gaze, made her knees a little rubbery. They were still in that stage where their mutual physical attraction was a novelty. Sure, Laura had always known that Amos Kowalski was an attractive man. But now he was **her** attractive man, and that made a difference. At one time, not so long ago, their relationship had been professional, and she could remember being embarrassed when she found herself contemplating that six-foot-two frame, the square jaw, and those green eyes. Her knees were getting a little wobblier just thinking about him. She couldn't believe that she had **punched** him. She prepared herself to explain to him what had happened this morning. Taking a steadying breath, she stepped to the french doors that opened to the patio and stepped outside.

"Looks good," she said, hoping that she sounded cheerful.

He turned and smiled at her. He certainly didn't seem angry. She returned the smile, relieved but still worried.

"You're running late," he said, unconcerned. "Like it?" He stood up and wiped his hands on his cement-encrusted pants.

"Yes. Amos, I'm so sorry. I am **so sorry**. I've just been sick all day..."

A puzzled frown skewed his forehead. "Why? About what?"

"About this morning. I don't know why I did it. It was inexcusable."

"What are you talking about?"

"Amos, I **hit** you this morning."

He laughed. “Yeah, you did. Sucker-punched me, to be accurate. Good thing I’ve been working out; the abs of iron hardly felt it.”

“Don’t laugh at me! I’m trying to discuss this seriously.”

“What’s to discuss? You were scared half to death, and something had to give. It just happened to be my gut. Better me than some poor jerk down at the courthouse, I figure.”

“Yeah, well, there was one of those, too, but that’s beside the point. There is no room in this relationship for violence...”

He threw back his head and howled with laughter. “You call that violence? Oh, sweetie, don’t get your knickers in a twist – it is funny. What chick magazine did you get that from?”

Laura bridled. “Listen here, mister, just because you’re listening to Frank Sinatra and laying bricks doesn’t mean you can start **chick-ing and broad-ing** me. I’ll ring-a-din-ding your bell again if you don’t watch it.”

“That’s more like it. Look, Laura, you have nothing to apologize for. Zero. You’re a civilian, and you don’t know how to handle the adrenaline rush. I’m a cop; I’m used to it.”

“Oh, yeah, like the cops handle themselves **sooo** well all the time,” she said with a sarcastic fling of her hands.

“Well, maybe not all of ‘em, but **I** do. Anyway, I know exactly what happened to you. The guy was attacking me, and you wanted to kill him. I thought it was sweet. And I had the punch coming to me. I should have checked on you right away, but instead I let

you sit there and stew while I helped clear the mess up. I should have let the real cops handle it.”

“Maybe,” Laura said placated. “Or maybe if you had come straight to me, I would have knocked you down. I just wish you wouldn’t charge into situations like that. He was trying to get your gun, Amos, and he was hitting you with what amounted to a deadly weapon. Don’t they tell you not to go into a situation without backup?”

“I sized it up, and I made the decision. He wasn’t going to hurt me. And, by the way, there’s no way he could have gotten the gun. I’ve had a little experience in taking guys down safely. And he was just a big blob of frustration, anyway. I knew he’d fold in a minute.”

“What happened to him?”

“He’s down at Grady for psychiatric evaluation. Just a stress case, in my opinion – he lost his job, things weren’t going so well at home, so when that poor lady tapped his bumper he was ready to flare up. But that was all it was – a flare. You saw how quickly he came down. I knew he would. And by the way, he was **compos mentis** enough by the time they got him downtown to call for a lawyer. In fact, he called your old pal Craig Fannin. So don’t cry for him.”

“I certainly will not. And I hope Fannin charges him a ton of money. Maybe he’ll have to sell the damn Jaguar and buy a Hyundai to pay the bill,” Laura said spitefully.

“If he owned the Jaguar— if he’s like ninety percent of these guys, he had it on lease; Jaguar style on a Honda budget.”

Laura laughed. "You're undoubtedly right, as always. I stopped and picked up something for dinner. Shrimp. And asparagus, for risotto."

"Oh, now I **know** you're sorry. I should let you beat me up more often."

"Shut up, or I will. Are you ready to stop working?"

"Just about. I need to take a shower before dinner."

"That's okay. It'll take a while to get things ready. I've got to change before I start, anyway."

"I'll finish out here and take a shower." Laura started back to the kitchen, but he caught her hand. "You can apologize a little more, if you want." She slipped her arms around him and laughed as he kissed her. She pulled away after a minute. "We better stop, or we won't make it to dinner."

"And?"

"I'm hungry," she said. "Let me go before I faint."

"Bullshit," he grumbled, but he released her.

Thirty minutes later Laura was chopping asparagus and tending a pot on the stove when a cleaned-up Amos joined her in the kitchen. "Want a glass of wine while you cook?" he asked.

"Sure. I bought your Australian stuff; it's in the refrigerator. How was the rest of your day, anyway?"

"About average," he said as he searched for the corkscrew. "Yours?"

"The usual pageant of human folly. I ran into Carlton Hemingway at the courthouse."

"Oh? What's he up to?"

“That missing person case – you know, the computer guy. It’s been on the news. Carlton’s very sure that he’s hiding out somewhere, chortling over his ill-gotten gains. I offered to do a records search for him, to see if there were problems with the business.”

“Find anything?” Amos asked as he handed her a glass of wine.

“Nope. Clean as a whistle. I even checked with a pal in enforcement at the IRS. The man is a stand-up, taxpaying citizen. If you want to know the truth, Carlton has a little chip on his shoulder about guys like this Lawrence Belew.”

“What about Belew would get Carlton in a twist?”

“Oh, nothing – it’s just that Belew’s a buppie. You know, a black entrepreneur who knows all the important people in Atlanta. He went to all the right schools, and had it pretty easy relative to a guy like Carlton, at least. To tell you the truth, I think Carlton is a bit of a classist. He only respects you if you’ve had some hard knocks.”

Amos laughed. “He’d say he’s just keepin’ it real.”

“Actually, that’s what he **did** say. Would you mind setting the table? I have to keep stirring this stuff. Anyway, whatever did happen to Lawrence Belew, it didn’t involve his absconding with the corporate funds. Why would he – it’s his company, 100%. He’d only be robbing himself.”

Amos, retrieving plates and silverware, shook his head. “He’s most likely off living out some personal fantasy.”

“You mean sexual, I suppose?”

“What other fantasies are there?” he replied with a wry smile. “He’s probably got a secret life, and he just forgot to manage expectations back in his everyday world. It happens.”

Laura waved her wooden spoon at him. “So typical – Carlton thinks it has to be about money; you think it’s gotta be sex. Your frames of reference are so totally shaped by your personalities!”

“Oh?” Amos asked as he filled water glasses from a pitcher. “And what’s your theory, great and wonderful Oz?”

Laura thought for a moment. “Well, Carlton does have one point – in a murder, the car usually turns up abandoned somewhere. That hasn’t happened, so I think he’s onto something when he says that Belew and his car are still together. But I don’t think he’s off in some tax haven – I think he had an accident, and the car slid off the road into a gully somewhere. Someone will stumble across the car, with Belew in it, as soon as the kudzu dies back in the fall.”

Amos laughed triumphantly. “I should have known! Carlton and I may think the guy’s a thief or a pervert, but we at least are willing to offer up a hope that he’s still alive. But you think he’s dead – that’s what being a lawyer does to you.”

Laura started to argue with him, but she stopped and laughed instead. “**Touché**. I guess being a prosecutor does give me sort of a Gothic outlook. Well,” she said, picking up her wineglass, “wherever Lawrence Belew is, I just pray that he’s safe. I get the feeling he was – **is** – a pretty decent guy.”

“Amen,” Amos added.

“Okay, it’s done – get ready to be dazzled by my culinary skill.”

Laura ladled out the risotto, tossed the salad, and joined Amos at the table. They talked about more pleasant topics while they ate – plans for the weekend, Laura’s new

nephew, the upcoming election. As they finished, Amos said, “That was great. You’re getting to be a regular Martha Stewart.”

“Sure, I’ll be making a chandelier out of ordinary household paperclips and bottlecaps any day now. You really liked it?”

“Very much,” he said, as he helped clear the table. Then, in a blandly disinterested tone, he asked, “Anything particular you wanted to do tonight?”

“No,” Laura replied, as she cleared the table. “But I’m guessing there’s something **you’ve** got in mind.”

“As a matter of fact, I wouldn’t mind catching the hockey game.”

“Hockey? Good grief, it’s practically summer – they’re still playing **hockey**?”

“Yeah. They play indoors now, you know, so they don’t have to worry about the ice melting,” he said.

“There’s no need to be smart with me, mister. Of course we can watch the game. You can explain it all to me.”

“As if you cared. You don’t have to humor me any more; I accepted your apology.”

“I’m not humoring you. I have ice cream, and one box of frozen Girl Scout Thin Mints left. Give me thin mints, and I can watch anything....”

“Even **Oprah**?”

“No, for **that** I need booze. Go on and turn on the TV. I’ll finish up here.”

When Laura arrived in the living room, Amos had tuned the television to the Blackhawks game, and had settled onto one end of the sofa. Laura gave him a dish of ice cream, placed a plate of cookies on the coffee table, and sat on the other end of the sofa.

She pulled her feet up onto the sofa and took two cookies. “Don’t let me eat too many of these. What’s going on?”

“It’s just started,” he said. “The Blackhawks are up one game in the series.”

“So if they win this one they go on to the next round?”

Amos laughed. “No, I hate to break it to you, but these aren’t the playoffs. This is still regular season.”

“So what you’re saying is that we have **weeks** of fun to look forward to.”

“Potentially, yes.”

They watched in silence for a while, Laura wincing theatrically when the skaters collided and bashed each other into the walls. Amos laughed at her. “Oh, lay off. I watch the figure skating when you want to. And **that** would be a lot more interesting if they could body-check. It would add a real element of suspense – get two of those gals in the skimpy costumes out there and let ‘em go at each other. Then you’d get the male viewing audience.”

An hour later Laura was sound asleep, oblivious to whatever high-sticking, icing or what-have-you was happening on the ice up there in Chicago. Amos nudged her awake shortly after eleven.

“Did I miss anything?” she yawned.

“Just the most exciting hockey game ever played,” he said.

“Shucks. Tell me all about it.” She extended her hands to Amos, who was standing. He pulled her to her feet, a little too hard; she overbalanced into him. He caught her, and held her. She looked up into his eyes. “Tell me about it later,” she said with a smile.

