

Looking For My Beau

By Dee West

Chapter 1

You could say it all started with the haircut. Hers, that is. My makeover took a little while longer to complete, as I'll explain. Anyway, maybe you will remember the style. Long and tousled on top, bangs dipping unevenly to the eyes — in the salons' posters, those eyes were always a little sultry, a little wild, with random strands of hair flying off in all direction as if windblown or as if the model had just paused in the midst of some tempestuous act of passion. Sides and back would be cut short, very short — but just right to draw the gaze to a slender neck or delicate curve of chin and ears. Startling, the first time you saw it, the way it played with the usual signals of boy and girl.

“Surprised?” she asked, opening the door to my knock and giving me a first sight of her new look.

She tossed her head, a quick snap to flick the bangs clear, then lifted her hand with a theatrical lit-

tle flourish, cocking a hip and bending a knee to lift her calf and slide her foot a little ways up along the door-frame, posing like an old-time pin-up girl. She flashed that crooked little half-smile of hers, the one that ever since we were little kids together always looked as if she also arched an eyebrow, skeptically, invitingly, even when she hadn't. The short cut, pixie style they call it, made her look more impish than ever.

"Surprised," I admitted.

Still, I couldn't say the necessary: that I liked it. It seemed to signal something new, and maybe a little strange, between us. Definitely something new, and unexpected, about her. Short, as if to say: I am all business; I do not fuss, I am direct and to the point and have no time to waste. Long strands to stroke clear from her eyes, and so to (quite coyly) call attention to her disarray, as if it might be you who had distracted her. It was, I think, what some would call a boyish look that made her seem (to me at least) so much more the girl. It was a style we didn't often see back home. Still, she'd always had a style we weren't used to. That's why, a few years back, she fled this little Low Country town, so mired in days long gone past, the place where we'd both grown up. Off to art school, so she said, in the big city to north. What brought her back now, though, no one could tell.

She had a place upstairs in one of the shambling, large Victorian houses upwind from the paper mill. She called it her grace and favor place because she rented it for hardly any money from one of the town's oldest families, one of the quiet, in-the-background people who evidently thought the jewelry that she learned to make up north might be an asset to the town, or so she said once. It was a pleasant place, in any event. Thick old oaks, draped with gray-green Spanish moss, lined the streets. The tang of salt from

the bay filled the air. It was, I always thought, the nicest part of town, anchored at one end by a little line of shops selling the unnecessary down by the water, at the other, by the stately brick churches that made a wall a few blocks from the highway. A back-water, its streets untroubled by the twice daily tide of silent, sullen men driving their pick-up trucks to and from the mill, barely aware of the smaller group who came before the dawn to set out in the boats swept the bay for its shrimp and crabs. It was the part of town that the women seemed to own, walking kids down shaded, crumbled sidewalks to the school, dresses swishing like the whispered secrets they exchanged with one another, far above their children's heads. I'd been walked to school down those streets; she had as well. The same streets where the women paraded reluctant men and children through sunny Sunday mornings to a stuffy church. The part of town where, in the quiet of a pleasant morning, the women knelt down by their flower beds, or strolled to the shops downtown, or sometimes might be spotted simply standing, watching, like guardians of all the rules and the traditions that kept those calm, untroubled streets (like the town itself) unchanged and peaceful through the generations. No wonder that she felt she didn't fit here. Odd, too, that so many years after we'd both left, some presence by the bay still had a pull for both of us.

It was a long haul down Highway 17 for me to come back to the bay though. All that winter I kept hoping that hours of driving to show up and simply spend time with her now that she was back would, sooner or later, lead her to say that I could stay the night. It hadn't though. Yet, still I came. It was like stepping back into a crush from school, mingling that same intense need to connect and deep confusion about what, exactly, you wanted to do together, if the object of your crush ever reciprocated.

Confused as ever, then, I followed her when she stepped back from the door to let me into her apartment. Missing my moment again, for just as I didn't understand enough back then to realize I should say that I liked her new look, I had not thought to bend to her and brush my lips to her cheek or to take her hand. I did not, for the umpteenth time, try to reach across whatever invisible, unspoken thing had so many years ago started to pull us apart, stretching the lines that tied us. from the days when we were very little, Stretched them until they were tight as violin strings. Instead of reaching for her, then, I paused at the coat rack in her entry hall to hang up my bulky tweed jacket. Just as I had every time before when I'd come back to see her. It was my uniform in those days, like the frayed woven tie I wore, a signal of the college quads I haunted, the kind of work I did. In those days everything I wore was all a size or two too large, thick and heavy, as if I could force a larger image of myself on an unbelieving world. As ever, my fussy gesture made her grin.

That night, though, I felt that something, somehow had shifted. The game we played so unconsciously with one another had changed. It was as if there was a different pitch in the unheard hum of tension between us, as if the violin strings had been wound another quarter-turn on their pegs, tuned for a more urgent tone, a quickened pulse to the next movement. Somehow the haircut seemed part of it. So, too, did that free-and-easy way she had of swinging herself just outside my reach, though she'd always managed to be just outside my reach before.

A breeze rustled the branches outside. The thick, stiff leaves of the magnolias rattled softly, curtains of Spanish moss swayed in the moonlight. It felt as if all the world was in motion, and all I had to do was yield to where the wind wanted to take us.

She'd been working, still in the stiff jeans and paint-stained shirt she wore when she was bent over her antique jeweler's bench, finishing the latest order for the rings and bracelets that she made. The sharp, hot smell of solder and sizzling flux hung in the air. I saw the row of graving chisels set neatly in a row, the glint of the tiny anvil on the high work table by the window, the jewelers' loupe lying there. All ready for her to make something new.

But before I could step closer to see what she was working on, she laid her palm on my breastbone, pushed me back.

"I want out," she said. "I'm starved."

"Want me to fix something?" I asked.

A secret little half-smile, as if I had confirmed a bet she'd made with herself. It was an offer made before, and happily accepted. She never liked to cook, she'd often say. I kind of enjoyed fussing to fix something nice, and the admiring praise my efforts brought.

"Let's walk," she said. "We can grab a bite somewhere."

She grabbed my jacket from the rack, and wrapped herself inside.

"Hey," I said.

"Here," she said. "Take this."

Bending to the sofa, where she had so carefully laid it out of sight, she lifted up a sweater, and tossed it, underhand, and almost casually to me.

"It's nice and warm," she added. "Try,"

It was a turtleneck. She stepped close, to tug it down. Cut long, it reached my hips. The sleeves reached high into narrow shoulders, clung to my arm. There was a hint of the metallic in the tightly-woven pastel yarn, so that it caught the lamp-light and seemed to glitter for a moment. A kind of elastic held the sweater almost too snugly to my body, compressing my chest, constraining me from taking too deep a breath.. I smelled her scent, but couldn't say if it was her, as she lifted her hands to my temples and combed them through my hair, or if her perfume had simply saturated the soft fabric that was hugging me so closely. Her touch was mesmerizing. I hadn't bothered with a haircut for a while, and she teased, and fluffed and brushed, at first as if she just enjoyed to toy with it, but soon as if she had some end in mind.

"There," she said, stepping back, and nodding with satisfaction.

The space between us now made me aware of just how snugly the sweater enveloped me, from jaw to hips, and down, embracing me as if to smooth my rough edges away, to mold me to fit some notion that I didn't understand.

She stared intently.

Flushing, I dipped my eyes from her gaze, and waited.

"Dinner," she declared, at last. Taking my arm, she tugged me towards the door, and down the steps to the street.

It was only a few blocks from her place to the line of darkened shops and half-empty restaurants huddled by wooden wharf and piers where the shrimp boat captains and the yachtsmen tied their dinghies. We

half-trotted, not holding hands, through the tree-lined streets, she striding ahead, me trying to keep up, until we came to the small plaza at the foot of St. James Street.

She paused, glanced around, and grabbing my hand, dragged me down the wooden walkway to a small restaurant halfway down the block.

“Two,” she blurted, almost growling, to the man leaning on the desk at the restaurant doorway.

He nodded, as if too long familiar with her ways, or perhaps as if he had been waiting for us. I guessed he was the owner, not a waiter. He wore a neat dark suit and tie, the subdued and not-quite-casual look that the town’s quietest old grandees favored in the evening, and glanced around the nearly-empty room with the calm regard of a manor lord. Finally, as if making a grave decision to bestow a boon on a deserving leet-man, he led us to a table by the windows overlooking the water.

“Let me,” she said, as the man handed us menus — me first — and wine list. I tried to place his face and couldn’t. But that, just like his easy slide from lord to playing at servant, was something we were used to, with the authoritative, quiet men of the old families. You’d see them just often enough, from just far enough away, to think you knew them. That way they had of brushing your attention off was their way of taking control of any situation, and never seeming to. They learned it over centuries, from the days when the colonial proprietors bestowed the great fiefs that brought an old world to a new.

She ordered wine, tasted it when it came, and nodded. Ordered food for both of us, as well. The she-crab soup was something special, she said. She wouldn’t hear of my trying anything else, not on a

first visit. The man nodded, complicit. I was the silent partner in this play. And went along.

We drank. We ate. The soup was rich and creamy in the way we favor in our part of the world. The crab tasted of the bay whose smell filled the night air. She filled the air with words, voice shifting tone, deep and gruff one moment, light and laughing another, imitating this mutual friend then that, the guy from school who'd gone and become a cop for goodness, the classmate who, like her, had left here for the city. A wave of hand or tilt of head caricaturing a favorite gesture of another brought people I'd long forgotten back to mind. I am sure I might have seen myself in some of her show if she had not ordered that second bottle.

It was very late when the man handed her the bill. She waved me off, brusque as a business executive after a disappointing lunchtime pitch, when I offered to split the cost.

We walked back slowly beneath the arching trees and spinning stars. Time seemed to slow. Something was waiting to happen.

In the shadow between pools of light from the streetlamps, she pushed me against the trunk of one of the thickest oaks. I felt the rough bark as she pinned me there.

She kissed me fiercely. It was as if she wanted to devour me, looming over me, tongue probing deep, mouth pushing on me, pressing the back of my head to the oak. Her hands kneaded my waist and stomach urgently, like a sculptor working recalcitrant clay.

I stayed the night, sleeping only fitfully on the large, cold bed. I remember only that my dreams were strange, but not what made them strange. I remember waking when I realized she'd tugged the covers tightly over her, leaving me without and shivering, until finally, just at dawn, I gave up and padded out to the kitchen.

In another's home, generally, nothing's ever where it ought to be, though everything is set just right for the person living there. You sense how things fit, how the books in the shelf, the souvenirs from a beach vacation or road trip to the city, hint at the one who placed them there. In the dim light of dawn, in particular, a room can seem as artful as a stage set. Or so I've found.

Perhaps it seems I know too much about awakening in another's bed, exploring hints of another's life, the suggestions on a night-stand or in a set of shelves, the photos stuck to a refrigerator door. I really don't. I am a quiet person, or, as she told me once, long before that strange dinner and our first kiss the night before, I was someone who'd rather wait to be fulfilled than to pursue, and maybe fail. I lived a low stakes life, she said. I was, she'd say, more than a little passive, a little too content to yield to smaller pleasures, as the tradeoff for dodging bigger pains. She herself, she proclaimed, favored intensity. It was a lecture I had heard more than once, you understand, Usually by the time she reached that point, she'd start to pace. Movement and change: that's what I need, what I want, she'd say. I want to act, to push for what I need. To go.

Stillness and waiting; impulse and push. They contrast, and yet they also complement, don't they?

Think of a couple. One is waiting, the other advances. One hopes, one acts. One reaches out, one yields. And both, at the end, are satisfied.

Her place was very quiet. I tiptoed around, just looking, wondering, feeling unsettled, trying to understand the night before. And failing to.

Then, back in the bedroom, thinking to wake her, I realized that the pile of covers on her side of the bed was just a mess of sheets and blankets. She had slipped away before I had awakened..

She'd kept my jacket, too. I slipped on my pants, pulled her turtleneck on, since there was still a nip in the air, and stepped outside, to see if I could find her.

She wasn't on the porch, or in the yard. I walked the long block to St. James Street, glanced up and down, and didn't see her. Not sure where else she'd go, I jogged down towards the water, thinking she might have gone for breakfast things.

Mist from the bay still floated through the streets, hung over the wooden planks of the pier. Gulls crowed, I heard a distant splash of oars.

Then, a voice:

“Looking for your beau?”

I turned, and saw him, leaning against a bollard, coiling rope. It took a moment to realize he was the man from the night before. He wore his faded work-shirt and his rumpled khaki pants as comfortably as he had worn his suit; the silver dusting of stubble on his square chin as natural to him as last night's precisely knotted tie. He was a big man, I realized. He almost seemed to grow in the morning light. It was as if shedding that neat jacket and that tie had

let him fill out, breathe more deeply so that his chest and shoulders broadened and his head reached still closer to the sky. Once again, I thought I almost knew him, once again, his calm, unmoving gaze seemed to say that I didn't, much as anyone might wish to.

"Gone," he continued, nodding as if pointing to the bay, the sound of oars. Then, after a moment, he pointed to the shadowy shape of a trawler chugging through the mist towards the point and the ocean beyond.

He laughed briefly under his breath and turned toward me, giving me a long, considering look. His brow knotted as if concentrating, his dark eyes seemed almost to impale me, fixed on me as they were. I felt pinned to where I stood as his gaze sliced through the mist to me, as if to see something I could not. His eyes slowly traveled up and down me, from the moccasins I'd slipped on without thinking, to wind-blown hair, and lingered on my face, flushed with embarrassment to almost match the rosy glow of that sweater in the dawn light.

I spun, suddenly frightened, and ran back to my car. And safety.

Chapter 2

In a way, I suppose, I kept on running. By spring, I was in the city.

Still, I managed the affair cautiously, as was my wont. I carefully made sure to secure a grant, and applied for leave from the college for the semester. I found a small place in a neighborhood that I had studied carefully beforehand and therefore knew was quiet and safe — the kind of place where people knew what ought to be, and how they ought to be, and

where surprise was not at all to be welcomed. I knew no one there, but that, too, was part of the safety that I sought.

Or maybe what I should say is that being there was part of the safety that I thought I sought. After she had pushed me against that tree trunk, after I was pinned there by another's will, another's probing, searching kiss, after I'd been frozen where I stood by another's piercing stare, I felt as if something broke loose inside me. I wanted a haven, or so I thought, a place in which shelter until my anchors might stop dragging through unknown depths and could once again take hold.

Except they didn't. And looking back now, I suppose I didn't really want them to. After just a day or two, I took to wandering the streets, long walks to places I'd never been before, where I might well have lost my way, except that the city's grid of streets made that unlikely. Still, the possibility was there, especially as my first, short explorations grew longer, and my wandering farther and farther into different corners of the city led me to linger through the evenings, later and later into the chill of night.

I found the streets you find in many cities, the ones where all the strange and weird and needy people hiding in the daytime crowd come out on parade for one another. The blocks where there are street lights to loiter by, to lean against. Where neon gleams, the garish colors fracture on rain-washed pavement, reflecting up again to dazzle and confuse. Cars crawl, strollers saunter, and passers-by pose their questions with a glance. Whispered words are answered with a nod — or with a sudden quickening of steps.

For a while, I was one of the quick-steppers. Eventually, I sauntered.

It was still cold when the sun was down and when the wind, funneled by the empty looming office towers, whipped in from the water. As I wandered deeper into the night, I took out that pale tight sweater I never managed to return to her after that one night, and draped it carefully on a sitting room chair, considering it for a day or two before one evening, telling myself that it would be a chilly night, I tugged it on, smoothed it over my hips, fluffed out my mussed and still-too-long hair And ventured.

The first time, I resumed my quick march, afraid to linger. Same the next night when I ventured out again, wearing the sweater. On the next, heart thudding, I made myself walk slower, keeping my eyes downcast.

But before long, maybe that night, maybe the next, I managed to see (when I dared look out of the corner of my eye) the ebb and flow of the people of the street. I noted the way that passers-by might lock glances. I saw the little nods, lips moving soundlessly. I wondered idly, as if observing from afar, if a lingered glance was meant for me, if a whispered conversation wandered round the question of who I might be and what I wanted.

I still felt cold. I brought a scarf — for warmth, I told myself. It was a subdued, multi-colored swatch, wide enough to wrap, shawl-like, round my shoulders, if I wanted. Or to let slip until it circled me that way, if I wanted to imagine that I hadn't wanted. For another week, maybe longer. I continued my patrol, lowered eyes darting for a clue, ears cocked, waiting for a word.

One night, I heard it.

"You!" the cop said, stepping right in front of me,

He jabbed a hand out, palm up.

I stared. The stream of strollers parted around us and flowed on. The women leaning on the street lights straightened themselves, and slowly edged away.

"I.D." he said.

I fumbled past the hem of the turtleneck — not that one that I'd forgotten to give back to her, but one almost exactly like it, in a slightly different pastel shade I'd told the clerk was a birthday present.

"Sister?" she had asked. "I'm sure she'll love it."

I kept my license and a bit of cash in the front pocket of the floppy, wide-legged pants I wore, another recent purchase, one that won me an odd look from another store clerk when he rang it up. When I finally dug up the plastic card and handed it over, the cop stared, glanced back at me, frowning.

"Visiting?" he asked after a moment.

"No," I said. "I live uptown."

He frowned again.

"You're supposed to change an out-of-state license when you move," he said. "Where's your car?"

"I sold it back home," I said. "I didn't think I'd need it here. I walk everywhere I want to go."

He grunted.

"You've been here how long?"

Maybe a month, I told him. I heard some steps behind us. I felt his partner approach and pause, a step behind my back, peering over my shoulder at my license.

"This isn't the best place," she said, speaking so softly I barely heard. "Not if you don't know your way around. It's a big city."

Her partner snorted.

"Any warrants?" he asked. "Might as well say, I'm gonna run you anyway."

"No warrants," I said.

He snorted again.

"I bet."

His eyes narrowed, looking me over again. I couldn't read them: impatience? contempt? something else? Then, after another long moment, eyes sweeping me head to foot and back, he stepped to the curb, muttering into his radio.

His partner eased around, to take her turn to stand in front of me.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

I shrugged. I wasn't sure I knew the answer, really.

"Not the safest part of town," she said.

"I'm never bothered," I replied.

She nodded.

“Yes,” she said, after a pause. “I see. I can see how that would be the case.”

She took a half step closer.

“You know why people come here?” she asked. “You know what’s happening here?”

She needed to tell me. I needed only to wait.

“They’re looking for something,” she went on, nodding towards a couple by the street light a half a block away. “You do know what?”

The couple up the street bent heads a little closer to each other.

“Is that what you are looking for?” she asked me. “That? I don’t think you’re going to find it here.” Her eyes now, as her partner’s had, swept me in. That hint of — pity? disdain? I couldn’t tell.

“Maybe downtown,” she murmured. “There’s a street.”

I told myself I had no idea what she meant.

“It’s a big city. Lots of ,” she paused. “Different kinds of people.”

I flushed.

“You look like you might like that better,” she tried again, shook her head. “Nothing wrong with that. But their scene’s on that street, downtown. Not too far. Maybe that’s where you really want?”

She watched me closely.

“You live nearby?” she asked, at last.

Not too close, I replied, naming my neighborhood.

“Nice,” she said. “Nice part of town. Quiet.” And then: “So, why here?”

“I don’t know,” I started, then realized that I did, in fact, know. That this moment with two cops, that hint of a situation that could spin of my control had given me a clue. Those sharp, skeptical stares of theirs that seemed to slice through all dissembling, all delusion had started, once again, to shake something deep inside me loose, just as another glance had done, not all that many weeks before, so many miles to the south.

“I come because I like to walk on the edge,” I said. “I like the sense of things about to happen.”

Her partner had come back.

“Yes,” he said. “Things about to happen.” Then, turning to her, he said: “Clean. No warrants. No nothing.”

“Hmm,” she said. “The edge.” She looked me over once again, the too-long hair, the wide-legged pants, turtleneck hugged tightly to my body, bright scarf. Then, leaning close, lips by my ear, she whispered: “I wonder if you’d step over?”

Her partner grinned.

“Step over?” I whispered.

“The edge,” she breathed. “I wonder if you’d go all the way?”

I used to believe that coincidence was just chance. Now I think we coincide — we share the moment and the space — as a consequence of what we've done. Or maybe what we've wanted, whether or not we ever dared admit. But back then, the next day after our encounter, when I spotted the woman cop outside the library where I was supposed to be at work, I thought it was just a fluke. It seemed so, anyway, perhaps because it took a moment for me to recognize her, since she was not in uniform..

“Hi,” she said, striding towards me, waving. As if we'd had a date to meet.

At the time, of course, I hadn't really thought how far I'd gone when I wandered. I'm not sure I was a conscious of how much I changed the way I looked when I joined the night-time promenade, or else I might have wondered at how easily she found me, in my daylight uniform of jacket and tie, hair gathered in a ponytail tucked carefully out of sight. Surprised by what I thought was chance, it seemed not at all odd that she could pick me out from the crowd pouring out at day's end onto the avenue. I was startled — but on reflection reassured by what I thought was merely chance.

She took my elbow, as purposeful as a cop, but hooking her arm in mine and bending towards me like any girl with her boyfriend. Without her uniform hat, I saw her blonde hair in that same short-and-long tousle that my friend had liked, but that was already starting to fade from fashion here in the city. She wore a simple dress, bright blue blazer, heels.

Making as if to lean her temple on my shoulder, she laughed:

“We’re almost the same size,” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

I felt her arm, hooked in mine, tug.

“Come along,” she said. “I thought I’d window shop a bit. Let’s walk together.”

The avenue is famous, as I’m sure you know, for its shops and for the pleasures of strolling by and admiring their ever-changing display windows. I had nothing particular to do, except, maybe later for my own amble on the edge. I never really planned on that evening stroll; odd that it seemed to happen every night. isn’t it?

She tugged — well, barely tugged, just the slightest pressure — and so we walked. Another tiny signal, arm-to-arm, and we paused. A window full of bright flowered dresses, promising the summer soon to come. Another: glow of colored silk, like rubies, fresh green leaves, the intense blue of a calm mountain lake in bright sunlight. Another: lines of high heels and boots. Another: fluffs of pink and flutterings of lace to make you blush.

Another, slightly firmer tug, and we were inside a store. Beneath a soaring ceiling, two lines of columns, I could see round counters, rows of tiny bottles; brass racks of clothing: blouses, skirts. Lights sparkled, the huge room seemed to swallow sound, so all I heard was her.

“I need something,” she said. “You don’t mind.”

Not quite a question.

She browsed intently. She'd lift a hanger from a rack, hold the blouse (and later, working our way back through the store, a dress) against her body, peer down, spin round to find one of the store's mirrored columns

From time to time, quite casually, she'd hold a blouse against me.

The first time, it lasted barely for a second, long enough to frown and shake her head. I hardly noticed. The subdued sound, the smell of perfume from the central aisle lulled me. So, a blouse swing quickly before me; several against her. Another held by me, a few more against her.

"So patient," she murmured at one point, lingering over her reflection with one small cloud of chiffon that for some reason particularly caught her fancy.

"Not many others would be quite so — " A pause. Then: "willing."

We were deep in the back of the store now. There was no one else around. She lifted another dress from the rack. The skirt was full, but not too long, the flower-patterned fabric floated light as the mist as she brought it closer. It was a dress for having drinks on a lawn that leads down to water, for listening to music in the summer night, for laughing happily while walking arm and arm under the stars She held it against me, gently turned me towards the mirror.

I can't say how long we gazed. Long enough so that, reflected back to us, the soft cotton seemed to meld with my own reflected image. As if, that is, we saw what the dress might look like if I really wore it. I couldn't break my gaze. It seemed as if the lights around us, lights reflected back at us faded; the rack of dresses behind us, that head-high wall against the

rest of the world, no longer to be seen in the mirror. Only the summer twilight, maybe a hum of garden party conversation, the sound of musicians tuning up.

“Well?” she whispered.

My heart was racing,.

“I was waiting for you just now,” she continued. “Not all that hard to find you. After all, I am a cop.”

I nodded, still watching us in the mirror.

“Not all that hard to find you,” she repeated. “On the avenue, or,” and then she nodded towards the mirror: “Or in there.”

She nudged my shoulder, so that I swayed a bit and we could watch the dress flow with me.

After another while, she glanced towards the changing rooms just a few steps away.

“Do you want to try?” she asked..

Turning to face me, gazing into my eyes, she shook her head.

“No,” she answered for me. “Not just now. Not quite yet.”

I felt like I could breathe again.

“Not quite yet,” she continued, but now speaking for her, for her analysis, for her findings from the investigation that started when her partner stopped me on the street, curiosity engaged (the way any cop’s interest is) by the sight of what does not fit in. Me, in this case.

“Not quite yet.” Did I say it? Or just think it?

“There’s some — what is the word?” she said. “Some preparation, I would say. A bit of thinking, bit of talking. Some underpinnings to arrange.” She laughed.

“Yes, underpinnings,” she continued. “And really, there’s no point unless you do it for another’s eyes.”

Gently, she lifted the dress from me, returned it to its rack. She handed me two bags from other stores that she’d been carrying and that I hadn’t noticed before, as she swept me along the scenario she’d just been playing.

“Come on,” she said. “Take me home.”

She hooked her arm in mine again, and tugged.

“It’s O.K.,” she said. “My girlfriend’s gone. And we have lots we need to say.”

Chapter 3

I suppose her place wasn’t really all that far away, but it seemed to take forever to arrive. A quiet street, like mine. Row-houses, two stories high here, not four, like mine; brick and siding, not the stone of the older buildings in my too-expensive neighborhood. Lights in the windows glowed, domestic and calm, for we had lingered quite a while on the avenue and it was very late.

She led me up the stoop, holding me firmly, arm still hooked securely in my elbow, while she fumbled with the key and led me in. Up dim-lit stairs, another fumble of the keys and then inside.

Once in, she let her arm slip free, eased the shopping bags from my grip and set them on the floor, sank into an overstuffed, dusky pink sofa and kicked off her shoes.

“Ah,” she sighed, rubbing a foot. “Maybe you can imagine how good that feels.”

I stood, not knowing what to do except to look. Besides the sofa, she'd put just one other chair on the bright woven rug that covered part of a hardwood floor that gleamed in the lamplight as if it was just waxed. Two posters on the wall: a Parisian dancer, kicking a dark-stockinged leg skyward through a cloud of lace, the calm face of a woman, eyes mysterious, half-smile enigmatic. Books on a low set of shelves along one wall, a counter separating the kitchen just beyond.

“There's something or other in the 'fridge, if you want,” she said. “Fetch me a beer? Heels just kill my feet.”

I found her beer, and brought it to her.

“Sit,” she said, patting the sofa.

I sat, silent.

“I know,” she said. “You know I know.”

“You know?”

She laughed.

“Oh yes,” she said. “I know you. I do. And I also know things you do not. A lifetime's worth of things, little things, maybe, but still I know them All the little things that make us seem so different, you and me. You realize that, too. More to the point, though, you

want to know what I do. Maybe you're curious. Maybe more. Whatever, that is why you're here. That's why you've come here, all this way. That's why I — well, I suppose I could say that is why I lured you here."

She plucked at her skirt, and sighed. Nudged her shoes with her toe, and when she saw me glance that way, nodded.

"Not really my usual, I'm afraid," she said. "I'm more the, um, tom girl type, you might say. But I did it for you. I hope you appreciate it."

"You look very nice," I said.

She laughed again.

"What a girl's got to do for a compliment!" she said. "Well, maybe you'll understand that too, soon enough. Or maybe not."

She sighed again, leaned down to rub her foot.

"So hard to start. But let me try," she said.

She closed her eyes a moment, as if searching for the words to say, or maybe just trying to remember an argument she had rehearsed, or a script read long ago.

"I think I know what it's like to be you," she said at last.

She paused again, as if debating with herself for one last time before deciding she would plunge right in..

"And I think you wonder what it's like to be someone like me."

I felt the edge quite near us now. It felt as if her arm were still hooked in mine, tugging me closer, ever closer to a place where I would need to jump.

“It’s something new for you, I think,” she continued. “Something shook you up, turned things around. Back home maybe? I know back home, I’m from down there myself. And, like you, I’m here now.”

“Like me?”

“You’re not the only one who likes to walk on the edge,” she said. “Walk close, stand on your tippy-toes to peer over — I know. I’ve seen you.”

A sharp, sarcastic snort now.

“Really, that get-up,” she said. “We’d watched you for quite a while. What were you doing down there — well, we had to wonder. A block for hookers, or some drugs? And you parading back and forth. The gay bars are down another half a dozen blocks. If you like street action, you get your cowboys, sailor boys down farther still. The drag queens, more uptown. But you?”

She laughed.

“So femme. Or trying. The sweater, the pants. That scarf.”

I flushed.

“Sorry,” she said. “I’m not trying to make fun. But what we have to do for that compliment! Even that glance, that moment of appreciation. The waiting for it, the patience that it takes.”

She shook her head.

“He doesn’t get it,” she said. “My partner. Once we knew — we knew fast — you weren’t a john, and once we figured you weren’t interested in the drugs, he said we ought to move you on. You didn’t fit, he didn’t like that. He worried. But me, I knew.”

“Yes?”

“Sure,” she said. “You have to understand, some people like to make things fit. Move ‘em around, maybe. Trim off a rough spot. You know. Maybe your dad was that way, maybe you know a guy like that, down at the garage, say. Or by wharf back home. Fiddling with things, lugging them around. Whatever. Then, there are some who are the ones who wait to be moved, or trimmed to fit. Active, passive. You see?”

“Sure,” I said. “There are two kinds of people, like the joke goes.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Maybe not so much. My partner’s take, since he’s a two-kinds-of-people guy, is: fits, doesn’t fit. Slides easily into good guy/bad guy. Very useful for a cop. Me, I know what it means to fit and not to fit. I have to really. Not necessarily fitting in myself. My partner, he’s a move ‘em on type. I’m a fiddler: trim a little here, add a little there. Did it on a car, back home. Did it to myself, once I came to understand I’m not content to wait for what I want, to try to be beguile it from the wider world, they way they taught us girls back home.”

“Can’t feature you all dressed up at cotillion,” I said.

“Nor I you,” she fired back. “Though as it happens, I was. Wanting to dance with the girls, of course.”

“Ah,” I said. “And did you?”

“No. Girls don’t act, but are acted on. At least at the dance. Or down there. Girls yearn, but it’s the guy who initiates. Confusing, for someone like me. And over-simple, too. Since girls know ways to incite the things that boys think they initiate.”

I obviously must have looked confused.

“Sure,” she said. “Take a lipstick. When we put it on, why do we do it? When we browse at the store over this pink or that one, that red or that burgundy shade, what’s going on? You want to catch that first dart of an eye, make it linger. You want to signal, come to me. But you don’t want to go to him, yourself. And you see, that’s your problem.”

“Yeah?”

“Say: yes? not yeah,” she said. “A little lilt, too. It suits you better. And yes. You, I think, are more inclined to coax what you want from the world, if you knew what you wanted from the world. But you don’t quite fit the part. You tried to fiddle a bit, to make a fit, but you’re not really a fiddler. More a fiddlee.”

She laughed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t mean to tease or to put you down. I’ve been there, kind of a mirror image of where you are. Know all the tools you need when you are supposed to wait for someone. But wanting and not knowing what I needed to make things — well, me — fit right. You know about making things fit, the theory of it, enough to see when they don’t fit. But you don’t know what you need, the ways of fitting. Or even what someone else is supposed to do to take you in hand and fit you in. So, that outfit you parade in: skinny snug top, those floppy pants for a wide bottom. Trying to make a fit, not knowing how.”

She laughed again.

“But you forgot something.”

“Forgot?” I was baffled. I had no idea what she might mean.

“Sure,” she said. “Surprised me, really.”

She stood and stretched.

“Sorry, I just need to get out of these things. Give me a second.”

She walked past me, down a short hall.

“I’ll be right back,” she called over her shoulder, and closed the door to her bedroom.

I heard her laugh abruptly, the sound of clothing thrown at a hamper or a wall.

And then a softer, sadder laugh, the creaking as she opened her door.

“You know what surprised me?” she asked as she walked back to me, in a sweat-suit now, tousling her hair briskly with one hand.

I didn’t answer.

“No breasts,” she said. “You forgot breasts.”

And then, she tossed the bra she’d been hiding so carefully behind her back, a slow and easy underhand, right at me. Startled, I caught it, held it up.

“I think you need to try,” she said. “Let me help.”



She pulled me gently to my feet. Stepped close enough for a kiss, but that was not the plan here. She reached and eased my tie loose, slowly unbuttoned my shirt, stroked it free.

I could have simply folded my arms. Could have simply bent to her and kissed her. Could have, at any time that evening, simply said: “You’re wrong,” or “You’ve got nerve” or something blunter or something just as simple as “Good-bye.”

I didn’t.

Instead, I stood there, shivering, though her apartment wasn’t cold.

She placed her hands on my waist and stroked upwards, with her touch directing my arms above my head, just like a high-diver about to plunge. With a nudge of her hip, she signaled me to turn, so that my back was to her as she reached up, and slipped my right arm, then my left, through the ribbon-like shoulder straps, and slid the bra down. I kept my arms up for my dive. With delicate tugs of her finger tips, she set the straps at the curve of my shoulders, and then, running a finger down the inside of my right arm, signaled me that it was time to dive.

Slowly I lowered my arms to my side, as she hooked the bra onto me.

We stood like that for quite a while.

My breath came short and fast, my heart raced. I felt her fingertip running across my back, tracing the edge of the bra.

“Shhh,” she said. “Just feel.”