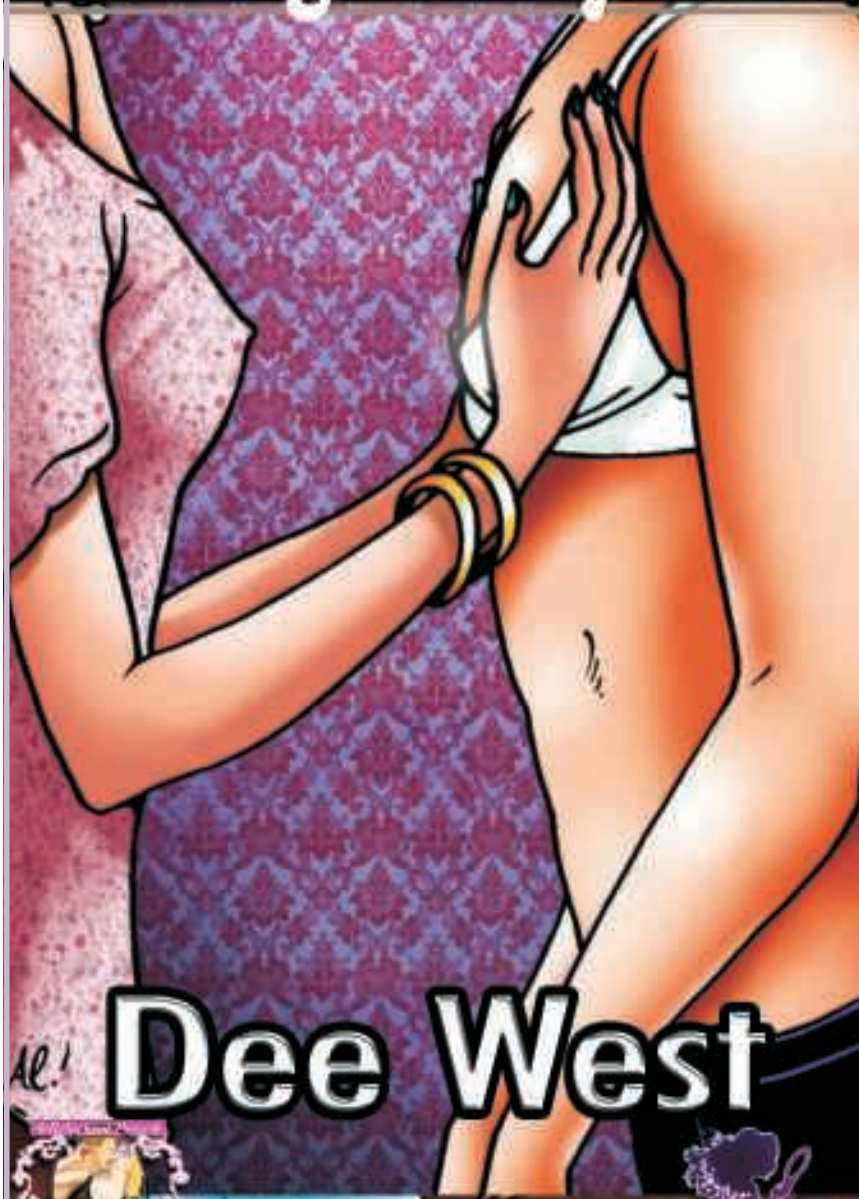


Looking For My Beau



AL!

Dee West



An "Adult Tv" Novel



Reluctant Press TV/TS Publishers

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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 crowded, 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.”

Two finger tips now traced along the straps. Once on my shoulders, she paused, then laid a finger there. She paused for a moment, then with the side of her fingers, stroked down my arms to my hips, then back along my torso, until she reached the edge of the bra again.

I breathed more deeply now, feeling her trace my shape, feeling the bra holding me, encircling me, as if it was holding me together, keeping me from flying all apart, exploding into space.

“Mmm,” she said. “Feel. Feel my eyes on you, drinking you in. The touch we feel the first time another’s desire exposes us. It’s wonder, in that first touch; surprise. Can you feel that?”

I nodded.

“The first time,” she whispered. “I remember. It was spring, huge moon hanging over the bay. Soft grass beneath one of the oak trees in the park. He reached, slipped one button free. Then another. Then another.”

She sighed.

“When he saw my bra, I heard him swallowing a little gasp. I felt his finger graze the fabric, trace the line of the straps, the bottom edge, the V that cut across my breasts. He stroked a finger on the fabric of the cups, wondering, astonished.”

I started to turn towards her, but she laid her palm against my waist to hold me still.

“Imagine that,” she whispered. “Astonished.”

Her finger-tips continued tracing paths like those that unnamed boy had traced so long ago.

“That’s all that happened, really, that time,” she said. “But I want you to feel that wondering touch, the eyes that drink you in. The magic. Close your eyes for a moment, and feel again. Perhaps we are back in high school, maybe it is summer. Evening. A drive, a walk, aimless. Not sure where you are going, content to follow along. You stop. The spot, maybe the park, maybe the car if it starts to rain.”

We paused, the hear the rain clatter on her window, distant rumble of thunder.

“Eyes lock,” she said. “You both know, maybe you’re both just a little bit afraid, but also more than a little thrilled as you step towards this edge. You feel buttons slip free, feel yourself exposed to another’s gaze, another’s wondering touch. You shiver.”

She paused.

“You shivered?”

“You know I did,”

“I know you did,” she said.

“What happened then, to you?” I asked.

A long pause then. Her hand still on my waist, holding me there, my back to her. I couldn’t see her face.

“Oh,” she said. “I don’t know. Lots, really. Nothing, really. We didn’t end up, he and I, the way it is supposed to, I guess. What my eyes desired, what my touch sought, was something different.”

I felt her finger, toying with a strap.

“Different, yes,” she murmured. I barely heard, over the hammering of the rain.

“What happens now, to me?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, “It’s pouring out there. It’s warm and safe in here.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, it is.”

She let me turn to her, but stepped back, away from an embrace I thought she wanted. I saw her eyes moving up and down my body, then stare into mine, unblinking, seeking. Perhaps mine did the same.

“Tell me,” she said, reaching towards me, once again tracing the edge of a bra strap. “You feel this, yes? You feel my bra on you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“And it’s OK? It’s not too tight?”

“Not too tight.”

“But snug enough to feel?”

“Snug enough to feel.”

I started to lower my chin, trying to see, but she eased her finger along my jaw, to hold my eyes to hers.

“It’s not time to look yet,” she said. “Enjoy another’s gaze, just now.”

She smiled.

“Besides, there’s more I need to fix. Can you wait here?”

I nodded.

Eyes locked, she stepped another pace backwards, bent her knees and reached into a shopping bag she’d left at the side of the sofa.

I heard a rustling of paper.

“Close your eyes,” she said.

I felt her come towards me, felt her finger, now on the upper edge of the right bra cup, now slipping under. Then, something else, a brief chill, a slow shift of weight, half solid, half liquid, as the bra hugged it closer to my body.

“Eyes closed,” she said.

The same again with the left cup.

“Shh,” she whispered. “Just feel.”

She laid her palms against my shoulders, then stroked down. I felt with the pressure of her palm, the way fingers trail behind, the shape of breasts. I felt her hands trail lower, to my waist, pressing.

I stood there, eyes closed, as she stroked me again that way, and then again, as if to make me feel a shape, as if to mold me into shape.

“Ready?” I asked, opening my eyes.

“Not yet,” she smiled, almost sadly. “It takes a but more work. That’s the way, for any of us, before we are quite ready.”

I nodded

“Shall I?” she asked

I nodded once again.

She bent her knees again, reached behind her to the shopping bag, brought out a brush. I closed my eyes as she brushed and fluffed and teased my hair, feeling a relaxing warmth flow through my head, as if following the path of her brushing.

“Eyes closed,” she said. “And follow me.”

She took my hand, and led me. A dozen steps, no more. A creak of hinges. Hands on my shoulders, turning me.

“OK” she said.

The light was low and golden from the lampshade by her bed. The air was filled with scent, like sandalwood perhaps. Maybe jasmine. An old wooden dresser, chest high, a row of neat small bottles, glowing like liquid rubies, honey, sapphire, puffs and brushes and lipsticks laid out carefully in front. Behind, a old, dim mirror..

And me.

And us.

My hair, lit from below from the lamp, a halo. Two white straps of the bra, a swell of breasts. Her hands on each of my shoulders, holding me steady, holding me safely. Her face, behind mine, leaning forward, drinking our reflected image in.

My eyes, full of wonder.

Once again, I spent a night in another's bed. Not that any of what you might expect happened. I spent the night curled up by her side, felt her arm across me, protective and still. Somehow, next to me, she felt bigger than I, heavier. I slept dreamlessly..

The rain continued through the next day, heavy drops from low gray skies. Waking, I watched the streams of water snaking down her bedroom window, felt the chill outside in contrast to the warm island beneath the covers. I lifted her arm from mine, slipped free. There was a bathrobe — well, a robe — draped over the bedstead. I slipped it on, padded out to the kitchen.

The coffee was where it should be. That is, where I would put it, in my own kitchen. I made it strong. I found eggs in the fridge, a bit of country ham. Instant grits in a cabinet. I set out two cups on a tray I found, poured milk into a cow-shaped pitcher, laid a couple of sugar cubes on each saucer. A plate of eggs and ham, a bowl of grits filled the rest of the tray, and I carried it carefully to the bedroom.

She stirred when I sat on the bed, setting the tray down on the nightstand, and then pushed herself up as I swung my legs onto to bed, and lifted the tray to my lap. Her eyes darted from the tray to me, and where the robe had fallen open, so that white of my bra cup showed.

She smiled.

“Sweet of you,” she said. “You didn’t need to.”

I shrugged.

She sipped her coffee. Then cut forkful of eggs, a bit of ham.

“Open wide,” she said.

She fed them to me.

“Saturday,” she said. “It’s pouring out. Warm and cozy here.”

“Yes.”

“Last night,” she said. “It was just a hint. A little playing, ‘round the edge.”

I leaned towards her, lifted my hand to cup her face.

She held my hand there for a while before she spoke again.

“Did you enjoy?” she asked.

Suddenly, I felt the edge, the crevasse opening at my feet. She must have sensed it, so she pulled me close.

“Tell me,” she said, pushing my head to her shoulder.

“Physical,” I said. “Almost physical. A sort of trembling, rapid trembling. I feel it, even when my heart beat slows. Behind my knees. The hollow behind my collar bone.”

I paused.

“And here.”

I moved my hand from her cheek, carrying her hand along, and laid them on my belly, just below my navel.

She held our hands there for a while.

“And?” she asked..

I blushed.

“Lower, too,” I muttered.

“Here?” She touched me there.

“No,” I said. “Down. Lower. Between my legs. That’s where I felt the shakiness.”

“The need?”

“I guess it was the need. A need, some kind of need, anyway.”

She glanced down at the breakfast tray. Then back to my chest, then where the robe had fallen away. She reached out with a finger, stroked my bra.

“You’re comfortable with this?” she asked. “You didn’t need to make me breakfast, didn’t need to keep that on,” nodding at the bra.

She reached to me, traced her finger along the edges of the bra. I felt the trembling again.

“I’m not making you do anything,” she said. “Not making you wait on me, getting up early, fixing breakfast, serving it. Not making you wear a bra.”

She lifted my chin, so that she looked into my eyes.

“You’re comfortable?” she asked. “Comfortable here, with me?”

“Yes. No,” I said at last. “Not really. I don’t know.”

With that, she smiled.

“Good,” she said. “Would you like to be? Comfortable like this?”

That was a question that I couldn’t answer. Wouldn’t answer.

“Come on,” she said. “Let’s see.”

She swung herself off the bed, pulled me up. Led me to her bathroom, turned the bathtub tap on, full blast and steaming, poured in blue crystals of scented bath salts. She lifted her robe off me, reached round and unhooked my bra.

“In,” she said.

It felt as if I soaked in there for hours, though of course that couldn’t be. But long enough so that something in me seemed to have melted away in the steam and scent that filled the room, the stories that she told me about growing up back home, on other side of that divide; about games played, chatter chattered, dreams dreamed.

Still in the steam, lost in the maze of stories of another’s life, she gently shaved me. With comb and brush, curlers and driers, she played with my hair, trying this, trying that, explaining all the while, words and words and more about a world of things I didn’t know, like a pre-recorded cram course in another language.

Wrapped in her words, I leaned against her as she curled up on her sofa. We watching movies that I'd never seen before, leafed through magazines I'd never known existed, her murmured words explaining, elaborating, commenting. Hypnotic.

The rain kept falling, as if to wash away what used to be my world..

At some time, in the afternoon, she decided it was time. Wordless now, she took my hand, led me back to the bedroom. Stroking hands slipped her robe off me, directed my arms skyward for my dive.

Once again, she slipped a bra on me, once again I breathed deep to feel it, snug, as if holding me together.

I felt her hands strong down my front, fingers following the gentle swell contained by my bra, palms along my waist, my hips.

She knelt to guide one foot to step into a pair of panties. Then the other, then eased them up my now-smooth legs.

“OK?” she asked.

“OK,” I said.

“Trembling?”

“Maybe just a little,” I said.

“We won't go too fast,” she said. “I've got just the thing.”

She pulled a hanger with a pair of high-waisted, wide-legged pants from her closet. From her dresser came a soft turtleneck, in pink.

The pants were black, like the ones I wore for my walks on the edge, but different, too. The fabric was slicker, satiny. The sweater, snug, but even softer yarn; the pink a color I had never dared. It was cut short, so that the wide, high waistband of the pants, the flow of cloth below hinted at the curve of hip and thigh.

She turned me towards the mirror.

“Better?” she asked.

“Better,” I whispered.

“It’s not only the way you look, but the way you look can be a part of who you are,” she said. “Would you like to look a bit more like the way you could?”

I nodded.

And with a soft brush of powder, she produced a flush on my cheeks. Lipstick gliding over lips suddenly red, shadowing of smoky brown around my eyes.

In the mirror, I saw someone I had never known.

Me.

Outside, the rain had slowed. The clouds thinned enough so that the rosy light of sunset filtered through. The low-angled, long-shadowed warm light made my mirrored image seem almost like a painting. I turned my head slightly, saw light and shadow define the curl of hair behind my ears, the feathered curve falling towards my shoulder, catching the soft cowl of the sweater. I saw the shift of color and shade define the curve of what would be my breasts as I turned my shoulders this way, that. I saw red lips —

so boldly red — half smile. Mysterious smile. Knowing smile.

Behind me, I heard her rustling in her closet, picking some clothing for herself, slipping it on. Then she stepped behind me, swept a hand over my head, trailing a string of pearls behind, clipped it closed behind my neck. Then, once again, she stood behind me, in the shadow, a hand on each of my shoulders, almost possessive. We looked into that painting for a while.

Her white shirt gleamed, stiff as it was with starch, or maybe newness. Cut loose, and yet somehow it fit. She cinched a necktie into place. It was just very slightly askew. Still watching our image in the mirror, I reached back to slide it straight.

“Handsome couple,” she said.

“Oh yes,” I answered.

“The rain’s eased off,” she said. “Would you like dinner out?”

I caught my breath.

“It’ll be OK,” she said.

She took my hand and led me to the sitting room. She knelt, propped my hand on her shoulder, lifted my foot and slipped it into a sandal angled on a wedge of cork.

“To keep your toes out of the puddles,” she said, slipping the other on.

She shrugged herself into a jacket, my tweed jacket, actually, as bulky and shape-erasing on her as it was on me. Then she helped me into a bright red

rain slicker, handing me a rain hat, broad-brimmed, round-crowned, easing it back farther on my head than I had put it, tugging the brim into an easy gentle curve.

“There,” she said, lifting her elbow for me to take. “Just put one foot in front of the other, now. Let’s walk.”

The street outside was quiet. No one else strolled, only a car or two swooshed by on the rain-wet asphalt. The way I wove my arm in hers made me lean towards her, slightly off balance here. As I was for that entire day and the night before. I kept my steps small, and with a whispered hint from her, found that if I swung my hips so that each step I took landed not quite a foot directly into front of my other foot, my balance was much easier to keep. I swayed in a way I never had before, but holding me as she did, she managed my gait as carefully as a rider on a show horse.

After several long blocks, we reached the boulevard. Light spilled from all the stores and restaurants, the last drizzling of rain from the store refracted neon blues and reds and greens. A stream of traffic hummed, people scurried on the sidewalk, jostling past us.

I felt — well, you know the way you sense somehow when someone’s watching? In a way, you know it can’t be true. There’s no sixth sense, not really. And yet, you swing your gaze, and another’s eyes snap away. I felt eyes on me, whether it was so or not. A glance from a fellow jostling past, pulling his hat brim lower. From half a block ahead, another briefly turns and looks and turns again to hurry past. Behind, the tap-tap-tap of quick steps slowing, falling into rhythm with my half-stumbling, hip-swinging pace.

It was a bit like walking on the edge, where she and her partner stopped me the other night, yet somehow more.

She leaned towards me.

“You feel?” she whispered. “Feel their eyes on you?”

I pulled myself a little closer to her.

“Desire,” she said. “You are the focus of it. Desire. Eyes brush. Stay an extra second, maybe more. A smile, imagining — what? Your hair splayed across a pillow, your reddened lips smiling back. A stare, a little bolder. The wolfish grin. Like his.”

She nodded at the man who hurried past.

“I am a little scared,” I said.

“Yes,” she replied. “A little, I know. It is to be a little vulnerable, to be desired, isn’t it? And also something else, too?”

“A little thrilled,” I whispered.

Chapter 4

The odd thing about us was where desire lay. I knew, maybe by then, maybe a little later, that the game we played was not about her desire for me. Or mine for her. There was, I think, something in her touch that made it clear. Delicate, tweaking a necklace so it lay just so, or nudging a strand of hair into place — more like a barber’s touch than any lover’s. Maybe there something in her eyes, peering deep into me yet somehow without the inner light that murmurs: desire.

There was also something in me, too, telling us where we were headed, though I didn't necessarily want to know.

She was more frank than I was, anyway. She wanted women. She had had some. She made that clear right from the start. I wanted — well what? She probed, I retreated. With a delicacy that belied her usual approach, she would back off. We both knew that her doing so was only temporary, though. For the moment, she seemed more focus on exploring what she wanted. I was the blank sheet on which sketched first one image, then another. I was her chance to explore the way her own desires might look, without the risk of her desire shifting to encompass me. Just as a haircut can be a work of art, intended to intrigue and bring another closer, so I was in her hands. A new lipstick, a blouse and then as she stepped back to study the effect on me, the question that she asked herself: Do I like this? Yet it was more than a question of a color or a cut of cloth. She was working out a theory of herself, by thinking through a theory about what is in others that fired desire in her. I was her experiment, safe because she did not want me. I was her way of looking at the world and saying: Yes, it may well be that there are in fact two kinds of people, but where do you draw the border line? Asking as well: On which side do I stand now? Asking, perhaps, for both of us.

“It's not like it's a huge new notion to divide the world in two,” I told her, as we walked together down the avenue one afternoon.

We ambled side by side, me managing the new short-stepping, swinging gait more easily. She clomped along, deliberately cop-like, flat-footed in her heavy shoes. We were both still practicing, it seems.

“Men and women, boys and girls,” I said. “Nothing more natural, from when we’re kids, to say: You know, there are two kinds of people.”

“Boys and girls,” she said. And then slowly repeated, very slowly, laying a palm on her chest as she started, then sweeping her hand, rather gracefully, to point to me.

She wore what she usually did when we went walking: a loose, shape-hiding shirt, stiff jeans, belted against her hip. Since it was a mild day, she hooked my jacket over her shoulder. I wore a pair of high-cut trousers, a bright red belt she told me would make my waist look slimmer, a blouse cut so that sometimes it seemed as if there was only air below — though sometimes (as I turned or stretched), my bra smoothed the cloth into a fuller curve. The sleeves, slightly puffed at the top, were so short they left almost the whole of my arms exposed. Despite the sun, I was glad for the linen blazer that she found for me.

That morning, I had trimmed her hair again. Now, after some window-shopping, she wanted to take me to a salon. I was at loose ends, with no one else to see and nothing else to do and so I thought: why not?

But as we headed there, she paused. I stopped. The crowd flowed past, sidewise glances at the unexpected obstacle. I caught, from the corner of my eye, the look that lingered on the new-revealed curve of my chest as I turned towards her. I felt a shivering in my lower back. On the edge, something was about to happen.

“Girls and boys” she said. “But that’s not us, really, is it? I mean, well, who’s who? When we lie down beside each other, have you ever turned to press your body onto mine, to push your lips to mine, your

tongue in me? Have you ever tried simply to take me for own?"

"And you?"

"And me," she nodded, "Have I ever lay back, waiting for you to take and me to yield?"

"I didn't think you wanted that," I said.

"I don't," she said. "And I didn't think you could manage the other."

I flushed.

"That's a little tough to hear," I said.

She shrugged.

"I know I like to inject myself into events, to make things happen. You don't. I guess I should be more like you than I am. That's how I'm supposed to be. You, though, you should be more like me. Or maybe, oh, say my partner. He's a do-er, a shaker-up of things. Strictly action. Biff, bang, move on."

"Scary guy," I said.

"No," she said. "Not really."

"The way he glared."

"Just a cop thing," she said. "Exaggerated, too. That's how you know it isn't real. He's not going to be a cop much longer. He goes to school, at nights. Going to be oh, I don't know. A lawyer. A businessman. Something where you spot what you want, charge after it, take it. I like that damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead thing. That's how I like to do things. And you, tell me. You don't find it a little — interesting?"

All that energy. Just vibrating away. Practically within reach, or I should say right there, ready to reach you. It's like it's barely contained sometimes. Sometimes I think, it must be like riding a whirlwind."

"But you don't want that?"

She laughed.

"No," she said. "Not really. Not unless I get to have a say about which way the wind is going to take us. I'd rather be the whirlwind."

"Except," I said, "There is the question of the rider."

"That's right," she said. "The rider. For me, the rider matters. For him, I think sometimes it's all so Wham-bam thank you ma'am, that he doesn't even see. That's the difference between him and me. He acts, and he moves on. I act, I hold. Be nice if he were different, I suppose. But then," she shrugged, "A lot of guys are like that."

And her eyes glanced at me, as if to say, Not you. As if to say, I dare you to find out.

"And the difference between me and you?" I asked.

"Like I say, I act."

"And I?"

"Actions, reactions," she said. "Court, be courted. Push and yield. Give and accept."

I reached for her hand, indifferent to glances of the passers-by.

“There’s one thing you forget,” I said.

“There is?”

“There is. Let’s ask it about that push, the yielding that you keep talking about. The arm that draws another close, the face that tilts back for the kiss.”

“Yes?”

“There is as well, in that moment before they join, when the one who’s yielding reaches out, and entwining fingers in the actor’s head, becomes the one who pulls them closer. The moment with the actor yields.”

“Yes,” she said. “Yes.”

“Come on,” I said, tugging her gently. “I’ve got something I want to show you.”

As it happened, we were just outside the store she dragged me into that first evening our adventure started. This time, I was the one who led us to the back, who found the dress she had first dared me with, the frivolous little swirl of cloth that told me that I found a path I needed to explore.

“Are you sure?” she asked,

“I’m sure,” I said.

“You want to try it on?” she said.

I’d never worn a dress before, but somehow I knew.

“Not here,” I said. “It fits, I’m sure. But not here. I want you, just you, to be the first. I want everything to be just right.”

“You’ll need some things,” she started.

“I know,” I said.

We found the shoes not very far away. Blushing, I let her take me to a shop that just sold lingerie. From there, a taxi to the hair salon. Somehow, my hair thickened, filled out, through some magic of scissors, curlers and spray. It was late afternoon when we finally made it to her place.

First came the steaming bath, then perched on the side of her bed, eyes closed, to savor the cool, astringent touch of foundation, brushing of blush on cheeks, smudge of dark on eyelids. The slow, smooth glide of lipstick.

I stepped into confections of lace and satin, let her pull up the panties, the peach silk half-slip, adjusted the bra just so.

I lifted my arms, to dive once more into something new, to let her slide the dress — the dress! — onto me. I felt the waist, snug on mine, the perfect curve of cloth following the swell beneath my bra, the way a breeze from the window set the hem brushing my thighs above my knees, the airiness beneath the filmy material of the skirt. .

Feeling tippy, insecurely balanced in high heels, I held my hands high, still poised for diving as she zipped me in. I kept them high, still lifted, like a dancer’s, trembling a bit trying to balance until she circled my left wrist with a hand, and pushing my hip with the other, set me spinning.

I saw us in the mirror. Saw myself spin, the dress float round my thighs. A look in her eyes that seemed to say this might well be the time.

And then, the doorbell rang.

I jumped, startled. I felt the sharp acid taste of fear rise in my throat. I'd crossed a line, for her, spinning there almost child-like with only the thin, flowery cloth floating between me and exposure.

And yet, that sense of vulnerability felt delicious, too.

She laid a finger to my lips.

Like I said, I used to believe coincidence was chance. Somehow though, despite the odds, despite my faith in chance, I wasn't that surprised when a man's voice — her partner's — called through the door:

“Surprise, look who I found.”

Stepping through the open door, before I'd had a chance to clatter and stumble my way into the bedroom was the woman I had fled so many months before.

She fixed me with that implacable stare of hers. After a long moment, she flashed her most sardonic half-grin.

“My girlfriend,” the woman cop said to me, then, to her, started: “This is ...”

“We've met,” she said, grinning more broadly now..

Thrusting her hand to mine, she grabbed it, gave a vigorous pump so that, taken back, I felt my wrist undulating in an easy S, following gracefully in her grasp.

At that point, the male cop stepped in.

He, too, glanced at me, appraisingly. I saw his eyes traveling, from the lush waves of hair the salon had contrived to fall so that they hid my ears, to the deep, but not too deep V of the dress on my chest, the dark red lips she'd so carefully applied just a few minutes ago but that now seemed to be far, far too much; down along the flowing, shifting folds of the skirt, down naked, exposed legs to my heels, one poised genteelly before the other.

I'd swear I heard a low whistle of breath escaping when he finished.

"Saw her at the old place," he told his partner, when he finally broke his stare and nodded at her girlfriend. "Back in town from back home. I knew you two would want to see each other right away."

There was, of course, a kind of tension in the air. I sensed it, even if the male cop did not.

Her girlfriend — my girlfriend, I once had sort-of hoped — had left, after all. She left the city for that little bayside town, looking there for something she'd not found in this huge city. And finding what there? Me? Or just an overwhelming sense of missing her? Standing there, piercing me with those implacable eyes, what did she see? The person she had wanted? Or the fading outlines of someone she once had thought she might well learn to care for.

I felt a hand, her hand, the cop's, trail down my side, saw yearning in her eyes as she turned toward the other.

I saw the male cop's gaze bounce back and forth between them, then back to me.

The funny thing was, neither woman seemed surprised. Not the one, with her old girlfriend returned. Not the girlfriend, with me standing there. Dramatic as the ending of the first act of a play, it had a sort of theatrical flatness, too. It wasn't real feeling surging beneath the surface here, but something more like the heightened exaggerations of an actor's over-trained voice.

Or rather, let me say, the feelings surging were just mine, making knees and elbows tremble, spine shiver.

And the audience, the guy?

I couldn't tell.

This was not, however, chance. The coincidence of the four of us here, in this place, at this time, was contrived. I knew it, in my bones, knew it by, I have to say, intuition. Newly-flowering intuition, maybe. Four of us, together on the stage here; four of us, originally from the same place. One strong connection — of love, or of desire, I couldn't tell — between the two women. Another, between the two police partners: not love, but an empathetic knowing one another. I sensed undertones of dissatisfaction, too. The one woman had left the other, the partners were locked in a kind of strutting competition of competence, of insisting on the strength to cope with challenge. Other connections: me and the women; obscure, hard for me to define, perhaps because I myself was less defined. A complex geometry, with one missing line. No line connecting two of the actors on the stage. Only, perhaps, a low whistle, sounding the way.

“A drink?” he said, looking straight at me as he asked the women. “Calls for a celebration, if you ask me. Old loves rejoined, the world remade afresh.”

“Yes,” his partner said. “I’ll get some wine.”

She stepped into the kitchen. We three stood, more than a little awkwardly, three points of an uneasy triangle. I lowered my eyes. It is a most demure effect, I know, but really I did not want to read the barely suppressed laughter in her girlfriend’s eyes. Nor what I thought I read in his. I worried how the imp inside her might burst out with the revelation that limited all of our options. I didn’t want to see the options he was weighing in his mind’s eye.

“Sit,” he said, after his partner handed round the glasses. She perched on the edge of the armchair, her girlfriend eased herself onto the arm.

That left the sofa. I edged myself carefully at one end, forgetting — not knowing— to smooth my skirt first, so it rode up a bit. I pressed my knees together tight, angled my legs towards the sofa arm. It was a old one, low, with sagging springs.

He flopped down in the middle, hard and heavy. The cushions slanted down. I felt myself on the edge of sliding down towards him. I pressed my angled calves to the floor to try to hold myself away.

He acted as if he didn’t notice, asking the girlfriend about what she’d been doing, was she staying, how were things back on the bay.

I couldn’t really concentrate. She said something about experimenting, staring at me as she did, as if to say she was not the only one to be doing so. I sipped my wine, too fast. My legs trembled with the effort of holding myself away.

He slouched, spread his legs, angling his hips deeper into the sofa, the new weight deepening the sag. I slid. My leg brushed his.

I felt my hem brushing my thigh, teasing my skin a bit as I tried to shift my weight. The skirt so thin, I seemed to feel even the rough texture of his jeans against my leg, seemed to feel the hard muscles of his thigh below the denim.

The talk went on, and on and on around me. Another glass, another.

Her girlfriend yawned.

“I’m tired, it’s a long trip. I’ll just sling my bag into the bedroom, OK?”

I shot a panicked look at her. My clothes were there, and if I left, I’d leave with what I wore. I never before had dared to venture out with a skirt fluttering around my knees.

She understood me in a moment.

“Hold on,” she said. “Let me gather your shopping.”

She turned to her partner.

“We had a girls’ day out,” she said. “Too much shopping. Don’t you dare tease!”

She loaded up several bags. Some, the things we’d bought that day. Others, things she owned that she’d shared with me.

The pile of bags made him laugh.

“Like moving day!” he said. “Don’t know how you two managed. Why don’t I give you a hand?”

I flushed.

“I live uptown,” I whispered. “It’s a long way.”

“Not a big deal,” he said. “C’mon, I’ll drive.”

His car, amazing, was parked just outside her door, a triumph in a city where finding a spot to leave your car was a daily victory.

I eased myself into the passenger seat, sure he was ogling my rear.

The drive seemed endless. The nighttime streets were almost empty, street lamps flashed by, neon signs gaudy against the velvet sky.

When he saw where I lived, his eyes narrowed for moment, as if a memory of something crossed his mind. Then, shaking his head, he gathered up my bags.

“Let me,” I said. “I can take them from here.”

“Don’t be silly,” he replied. “I’ve got it.”

Nervous, I went up the front steps, fumbled a bit with my key, led him up the stairs to my apartment door.

We paused.

It was that moment. The one where you’re supposed to offer an invitation to come in, or figure out a way to simply say good night. The one might lead a lot of places — from sitting room and another, pleasant glass of wine to — well, to the other room. Or maybe just some chit chat and an invitation to get together again sometime. The other, just to say good night, was safer.

“My place is kind of a mess,” I whispered.

He looked down, peering deep into my eyes.

“I understand,” he said. “I hope, maybe another time.”

And then, cupping my chin with one hand, he tilted my head back

I was sure he felt my heart thudding.

A long, long moment, waiting. Wondering if he would.

He would.

His lips brushed mine, so lightly that it might have been a dream. He stepped towards me, eased one arm around my shoulder pulled me in, pressed lips closer still.

And so I'd come right up to the edge. Once he had gone, and I was safe inside, I crumpled down on my sitting room rug. The skirt puffed up around, awkwardly as an upset child's. I had no clue about what to think or do or even how I felt I felt my eyes begin to water, shook my head to try to clear my mind..

There was, first of all, him For this night, at least, he wanted me. Perhaps it would be only a passing thing, and he'd forget. Perhaps not.

Then there was me. He'd wanted me this night, and I? Did I want a different ending to this night? Perhaps it was a passing thing and he'd forget. Would I?

I was scared of how he felt that he could do exactly what he wanted with me, how he could with such

confidence simply sweep me into his kiss. Yet I also was thrilled that he had swept me there. The power that he had to do so, the strength of his arms, size of his body next to mine, his certainty that he might have his desire, made me shake. With fear? Or something else?

The practical problem was that if he did come back, who would he meet? If he met the guy who, it seems, once had lived in my apartment, well, what then? If he'd met the stranger whose shopping he totted tonight, what then? The one was trouble. The other, too.

If he came back, when might he? He didn't have a number for me, had no way to reach me except to come knocking at my door sometime. But when? If I did not want the one kind of trouble, could I manage to always look like the person he thought was living here? And if I managed that, and if he came around, then what?

Too many questions. Too many answers.

I tortured myself for an entire day, afraid to venture out.

Then, he called.

He got my number from his partner, he said. He hoped I didn't mind. He'd like to meet again, dinner perhaps?

Well, perhaps.

He knew a terrific place; quiet, best food in the city, though hardly anyone knew. Italian, I liked Italian, of course, he said, brushing past any notion that I might want something different than what he had picked.

And as it happened, Italian was one of my very favorite things, I suddenly discovered.

And so, I had a date.

A date.

I called her in a panic. She made me tell her everything. And then again.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said. “I don’t know why I did.”

“Sure you do,” she answered. “You just aren’t ready to admit it.”

“I’m not ready for this,” I said.

“Oh,” she laughed. “You’d be surprised. Still, you do need to get ready. I can help.”

She came an hour later. She had two shopping bags, each from a different pricey store on the avenue in one hand; Over her shoulder, a gym bag, crammed full. Her girlfriend followed, grinning.

“Getting ready is an art,” she declared.

It started with a long hot soak, with colored bath salts steaming fragrance. I felt knotted muscles ease and loosen, let my head swim, let daydreams flicker and take hold, then disappear again.

She brushed my hair, so that it shone like the thick glossy fur of some sub-arctic forest creature. From the gym bag, her girlfriend took a nail file, then some polish. She did my face, gave me the lipstick for my purse, in case I needed to freshen it later. Bending to one shopping bag, she lifted out a bra, sinful satiny pink. Panties to match.

The dress she brought left my shoulders mostly bare, the thin shoulder straps seemed as if they could hardly hold it from falling free. It floated easily around my body, cinched snugly only at my waist, the hem brushing my mid-thigh.

I felt as if it was barely there, I felt defenseless as a ripe peach — the dress was the pink and yellow of a peach — ready to be plucked.

“It’s too much,” I whispered. “I mean: not enough. There’s too much of me just hanging out there in the air”

“It is just right,” she said. “Turn, now.”

The skirt swirled around me as I did. The two of them critiqued, debating with each other about how I ought to place my feet. I tried one way for them. Then the other.

“Sit,” she said, and so I did. Neither liked the way I smoothed cloth under my rear, the way I swung, or tried to swing, myself sideways into a chair. A web of sharp commands wove round me: this is how we do that and no, you can’t do that.

It was, she said, trying to reassure me, a girlhood’s-worth of little rules and manners seeping in, in just an hour or two or three.

“How easy, when you think of it,” she said. “It only seems a lot because this is a crash course.”

She took my hand, holding me by the ends of my fingers, to lift my arm. Relaxed, my wrist slipping easily down, my arm followed, unresisting.

“Yes,” she said. “I think you get it.”



And it was? A way, it seemed, of delicate engagement with the world. A way of touching and withdrawing at the same time. Consider: Perched on the edge of a chair, knees pressed together, legs tucked neatly beneath, you embody a kind of tension. I'm here; I'm ready to take flight. The curve of thigh and calf is like a spring, the slight outward arching of your back says I am not relaxed yet, but somehow that gentle curve suggests exactly how you might slip into ease. Perched there, on the chair's edge, you wait to see what happens next.

"You get it," her girlfriend said, staring into my eyes.

She pushed some silver bracelets on my wrist, so that they'd slide along my forearm, jingling softly, with every move, focusing attention — his and mine — on the smallest gesture I might make. She draped long, low-hanging loops of necklace so they hung between my breasts, and draw the eye.

A pair of heels, and a shawl in case of chill.

And then his knock.

He laughed when he saw all of us, but didn't seem to think it odd; we were, it seemed, a species half familiar, half unknown, and (as I found) he delighted in being baffled by what he saw as our mysteries.

The two women brushed off his half-hearted invitation to join us; I shot a look of panic, but they ignored me.

And so, he reached for my hand, I laid my fingers across his, let my wrist bend. The smallest movement of his hand then a signal, subtle as the nudge of a rider's knees that breaks a horse into a gallop, and with a little push of heels to floor, slow easing of the

spring of neatly tucked legs, a swing of hips, a pretense of being lifted, I flowed upright.

Outside, the lavender sky beginning to fade into violet and then the soft, dark enigmas of the night, we walked.

But not too far, just a few long blocks down the busy street that abutted mine. Walking there, as the sidewalk grew more crowded, he slipped an arm around my waist. I saw him glare, when he evidently thought one man's glance lingered just a bit too long.

The restaurant was tucked beneath a gallery, a half-dozen steps led down. Somehow, he'd slipped down them ahead of me, held my hand as if to guide me as, hip turned, I carefully stepped down, half sidewise, as if negotiating a precipice.

As, indeed, I was.

Inside, whitewashed walls, paintings of deep blue sea and red-roofed, sparkling white buildings climbing up green hillsides of an imagined haven, far across the sea. There were only a half-dozen tables, but it was still early and we were alone for now.

He held a chair for me, then swung round the table, stood there for a moment as if peering at a painting, before sitting himself.

His happy grin flashed white.

There is, I've come to find, an advantage to letting another person pick the place where you're going to eat. He filled the initial silence of our date by telling me about the specialties of the house, how it reminded him of places that he'd been and where he'd like to do, slowly drawing me, so that conversation

began to flow despite my constant whisper to myself to be on guard.

And so we talked of what we'd liked, and what we'd like to do (though not everything that one of us at least wanted eventually to do, for he was polite and well-brought up); learning one another by our aspirations and desires (though not every desire) instead of by some blunt and point-by-point outline of who I am and what I do before that dialogue of "Shall we?" "Let's."

Did he sense something about what not to ask, I wondered.

We sipped our wine, and talked.

Slowly, perhaps it was the wine, perhaps the talk, I began to relax. I pulled my chair a little closer; not perching now but leaning softly onto its back. I found that I was smiling — had I done so from the start of this adventure? I wasn't sure, but I was smiling now, it seemed.

Another bottle.

A glass, and then, a brush of cloth against my calf. I shot a glance, but read no signal in his eyes. Legs brush; people shift on their chairs from time to time. Don't they?

It was one of those restaurants that take their time, and so, when your dishes come, you take your time as well. We shared an antipasto, picking with tiny forks at paper-thin slices of prosciutto that melted on the tongue, meaty and rich, gleaming olives slid along lips, a crunch of celery. Forks dipped, alternating: borders not yet quite ready to be crossed.

When the main course came, he asked if he could try a bite of mine, extending a forkful of his veal dish for me. I had to lean to reach, stick out my tongue to catch a slow-forming dollop of sauce. I saw his eyes dart down my front.

When he reached for a taste of mine, his hand brushed casually against my forearm.

There may have been other diners arrive, or passers-by on the street above who glancing down perhaps might smile to see a couple share their dinner; the one, his bulk barely contained by his jacket, the other, shoulders pale, bracelets sliding along thin forearms moving, almost anxiously, to touch a strand of thick, dark hair, tug at a dress as if it did not fit, obscure a smile, as if it were not already seen, and noted.

We played the usual little game over dessert, ending, as it so often seems to, by agreeing to share. This time, a brush of hand from time to time, our alternating forays for another bite not quite so precisely timed.

Perhaps it was the wine.

Chapter 5

He called again the next day. Tickets to the symphony, would I care to go? I would — and then, in yet another panic, I called her.

She listened, translating tales of brushing hands and glances that produced a flush into a worry about what I should wear — safer territory than to consider him. She launched into a long discourse that swept me past fretting about what he wanted. in order to consider me and my wants. Me. Me. An echo of that

shiver when his eyes are locked, and you are — I was — the center of another's attention. The echo that reminds you that what matters is not the unease that the glance inspires, that sense of not knowing the path ahead that's so unsettling. What matters is the delight of being desired.

And so, a lengthy discussion about what to wear. What night was it, which concert hall, what seats, what program and when the start? Gradations of casual and formal to consider, expectations of city men and how they might differ, or might not, from back home. And hair? And shoes? What purse? What jewelry?

For each of her pronouncements that this night, that time, those seats meant how one ought to look, my protest that it was too much was registered and then blithely ignored in her rush of words.

For all she didn't fuss much with her own look, she acted as if she liked to fuss over mine.

The upshot was, of course, that she carried the day.

The concert was on a Saturday, a factor in her insistence that, no, I needed something new and something much more formal than I thought. We spent that rainy morning on the avenue, dashing from the drizzle into that heady mix of fragrant air and muffled sounds and rows of mirrors marching deep into a once-secret world of adornment.

We debated — she debated, I mostly just listened — colors: not red, does that blue suit? is black just too funereal? She lectured on the way this fabric draped, or that. One way of cutting cloth did this, it might work for you. Maybe that. Dizzied by a flood of terms I'd never heard before, I gave up simply nodded

with her final choice. Long, pale folds falling from my shoulders, bloused by a thin satin sash, then flowing down to the ground. It made me think of what a girl in ancient Greece might wear, as the sun-warmed dust she stirred while walking to a well smoothed all sharp edges from the sight, so that feel of her sway of hips, curve of the arm balancing her water jug, the fluttering of cloth against a bright blue sky seeped all the deeper into memory.

The rest was easier, though she still made us take our time. I would wear sandals. Three simple loops of silver around my neck. Three dangling, tiny chains of silver, dangling from each ear, to catch first the light and then his eyes. Once caught, then, as they swayed, they were to draw the light and then his gaze back to my face. The piercing hurt.

Back from the expedition, she made me practice walking to avoid tangling my feet, as well as the sweeps of arm and hand, some subtle, some for show, to manage the fall of cloth from my waist.

She didn't like my hesitant daubs of makeup, and took over. The dark eyeshadow, the brush of rose on my cheeks looked almost garish, I thought. In the glitter of concert hall lights against the night, it was just right, she reassured.

She left before he knocked.

But she knew what I hadn't. He wore a dark suit, as if to contrast with my pale dress and in so doing let me shine all the more. When we arrived, he wove us carefully through the crowded lobby of the concert hall, the men, like him, all in dark suits, the rest of us bright and sparkling, sultry of eye, flushed of cheek, red of lips.

Our seats were in the balcony. I leaned forward to look around, he draped his arm easily over the back of my chair.

The lights dimmed. A hush.

The first chords that the conductor commanded went through me like a knife. A piece I once had loved, but it had been years since I'd put that scratched old vinyl record on. The power of the sound, the sense of life, of real people moving together, breathing together to make the music stunned me.

At the end, while the others leapt to their feet and clapped, I had to reach into my clutch to find something to dab at my eyes. I saw him turn, a stab of worry flash across his face, before he realized.

The music left me speechless. Somehow, he knew, and so when it was time to leave, he took my arm without a word, and led me out.

Next to the concert hall, there is a small park. There's a fountain centered in a small brick-paved plaza, a wall of dark, carefully-pruned trees block the lights and sounds of the city beyond, there are planters full of flowers and some benches. Since it's a city, nobody goes there at night, preferring to scurry under street lamps on to safety. Not us.

We stood for quite a while by the fountain, holding hands, not speaking yet, simply listening to barely-there music that the splash and drip of water made. When it was time — I don't know how he knew it was, but when it was the moment, the right moment, he eased his arm along my lower back, encircling me around my waist. He held me like that, not moving, for another good long while. Then, as if the

rhythm of the splashes told him how, he swung me round so that we faced. And started dancing.

We circled round the plaza once, him leading us as slow and stately as a diplomat. A second round, a spin or two. A little closer. A third tour round the plaza, and a fourth and then, who bothers counting.

He pulled me close.

I think he felt me trembling, and pulled me closer still.

I heard his breath coming faster, and faster. Wondered if he felt mine. Wondered if he knew that I could feel his erection press upward, outward, firm against my belly, seeking me.

I put on a dress when I got up the next day, the first time I started my day out that way. I kept in on the whole day, also the first time I'd done that. I mostly just pattered around, mindlessly doing a bit of this or that, gathering laundry, reading.

Trying not to put words on the message that he, wordlessly, had sent.

I've never minded time alone. This day, though, it was hard to settle down. I'd sit a bit, pace. Sit, stand again. At first, it all seemed random, like the tiny agitations that make dust motes dance in a sunbeam. Then I realized that I was quite unconsciously practicing. The sweep of hand under your skirt when sitting, a bend of wrist, the way knees press together and angle sidewise as you bend down.

I tried to stop myself, flopping down, legs sprawled, on my sofa, frowning into a book. And before long, knees joined, fingers tweaked at my hem, legs swung up, tucked neatly under my rear as I set down the book and perched there.

Thinking.

I felt as if suggestions from somewhere outside me were seeping in, like the whispered words of a hypnotist's suggestions as you follow the swinging pendulum of a pocket watch. And yet I knew, I felt it in my bones, that such subtle suggestion could not be too strange, too foreign, or they would not work. I knew something deep inside me had been tapped. How? By whom?

I had other things to consider too. My grant to be here had run out, as I said. I could go back down south, behind the wall of books in my cramped office, the pile of papers, marked in red, that spilled across lecture room desks, like a buffer zone that kept my students at a distance.

I wondered if I could find a way to live here, in the city. Asked myself how that would look, what would I do, who might I be with. Perhaps I might find a modest corner, meekly carve myself a spot, while bolder spirits studied greater topics as I, sitting demurely, tugged a hem into place and started to relearn myself. A corner of a library, perhaps, or maybe an assistant of some kind, checking footnotes, making calls, fetching coffee. I imagined — don't you laugh now — how nice that trim pink suit might look as I settled down at a desk, the way my heels might click-clack an accompaniment as I moved along the long dim stacks of a library. There might be just enough to manage in a life like that. I might even treat myself from time to time to something special. There was so much that you could enjoy here in the

city, even the most modest of us, on our own: plays and paintings, strolling in the sun or window shopping, museums and music. .

And so, despite myself, I thought of him again.

Thought perhaps that that life, all alone, while comfortable enough, meant missing out on something. Wondered at reason why my thoughts kept circling back to him.

Funny that all four of us — him, me, her, her girlfriend — all came from the same state, spent time in the same college, knew the little paper mill town by the bay so well. Funny how one crossed path with one and then crossed again with others. Perhaps, unaware, we each had snatched a glance of one another, not knowing how our lives would interweave.

I circled round and rounds these thoughts, Each time I seemed to move towards a resolution, towards discovery, I hesitated, reconsidered. Restless, I sprung up, grabbed the bright red slicker she'd packed for me, and headed out.

I walked and walked and walked. No particular direction, no plan. I wasn't really thinking, wasn't really aware of anything much except that sense that something was about to happen, had to happen soon. The tension of choices not made my body seemed to hum with energy.

I made most of the way downtown before I slowed myself back to awareness of my surroundings. It was late afternoon, I was just a few blocks from where he'd first met me, running my ID against his list of pending warrants; this was the place where, reading contempt in his glare, he'd hinted I belonged that night. The first of the sloe-eyed cowboys of the night had claimed their doorways, a tall blonde drag queen

in her short silks clattered along the other sidewalk. Men cruised by, muted in their dark suits, darting glances. None at me.

I walked on. Now, I was on the block where he and she had found me, just a few weeks ago. Here, too, the parade of the night was getting set to start. Here, from the streetlights that she leaned against, came an angry glance from the woman in the red shorts and high-heeled boots, and a sharp, exhaled snort of dismissal. The man who'd just glanced my way, walked to her and won her sudden, flashing smile.

And then, there he was.

I saw his long day in his face; maybe the lines around his eyes, the unbuttoned collar of his blue uniform, that hint of city grime you can't quite see but feel you need to splash off of your face the next time you find yourself before a sink and faucet.

A tired smile.

"A nice surprise," he said, his eyes guarded. "Just coming off my shift. My car's around the corner. Can I give you a lift?"

We drove to his place, agreeing with barely a word that that would be the plan, both curious. I wondered what I'd find, what clues to help me solve the puzzle of him and me. He, no doubt, was speculating about what might happen on his home ground.

His place was neat and rather spare, on the top floor of an old walk-up. There was a bay window, facing west, above the rooftops across the street, the sky was fading into violet. He had an old, overstuffed armchair set before the window.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I’d really like a quick shower. Do you mind? Put on some music, maybe. There’s beer in the fridge. Wine on the counter, if you’d rather. Pour me one, too, whichever you prefer.”

It took a moment to find the glasses, but I managed. I poured two glasses, set one on the small table by his armchair, along with the bottle. His CDs and player were on a low stand below the window; I sat on the cool wood of the floor, set down my glass, and fingered through his collection, taking my time.

I heard him ease into the chair when I’d finally decided; the sigh of the cushion, his own of-the-day’s aches finally easing.

“Come on,” he said. “Sun’s about to set. I’ve got the perfect view.”

I slid myself across the floor, leaned against the chair, between his legs. The first tentative chords of the piano began just as my back touched the chair’s cracked, warm leather.

A few drips of water meandered through the hair of his calf, a small puddle formed at his heel.

We saw a line of gold, then peach, then rose etch one cloud, then another. The violet of the sky beyond slowly deepened. Rose turned red, then a violet deeper than the sky, then clouds merged with sky, and the first stars began to shine through.

We sipped our wine, listened to the piano wind and weave its way through a piece, like water rippling down a stream.

He bent to pour more wine for me; lifting my glass with one hand, I laid the other on his knee for balance. And left it there.

We watched the stars emerge, his hand toyed with my hair. I leaned my head against his leg, absently stroking the outside of his thigh, about his knee.

I took another sip of wine, set down my glass, And then, with that hand, stroked his other leg.

His bathrobe slipped away from his thighs; I let my hands slowly explore the shape of his legs, feel the slight roughness of hair, the hard muscle below. My hands let me sense his shape, as we both kept gazing at the stars.

And then, simply to feel was not enough. I wanted to see his eyes, wanted to see what I read there. Turning, then, I knelt there between his legs.

Gazing into his eyes, I felt a kind of peace. Felt it flowing warmly across my skin, melted slowly into my wrist, my elbow, deeper still, into my bones. I felt as well a kind of energy begin to thrum. His, I think. It seemed to move under my touch, like a current of electricity just beneath his skin, Trembling now. I feel that current resonating as my hands glided along his legs. Still stroking, my fingers seemed to sip it into my hands, my wrists, my arms. My stroking hands now reached his hips, his waist; ranging back to his thighs and calves, before returning to begin the circuit one again.

The inside of my wrist brushed his erection.

Almost afraid to look, but somehow unable not to, I glanced down. I stretched a finger out, barely touching, as cautious as a wild creature of the woods when a hand extends with offered nut. As if confronting

something new and strange. I ran my finger tip along his length, from root to head, feeling velvet skin slide over steel below. I touched the purple edge of the head, felt it burning, then traced a line back down, and then along the crevice where his scrotum touched his thigh.

I suppose I must have wondered: I did this?

Still hesitant, I made a circle of thumb and forefinger at the root of his shaft, holding them there, as if taking measure of its heft or calibrating its potential force.

I stroked upward, once.

Again.

Then, letting him free, I cupped my hand to hold his balls, feeling them hot and heavy, shifting impatiently as I cradled them.

I felt him reach, fan fingers in my hair. I leaned forward just a bit to feel them there. His shaft brushed my cheek. I lift a hand to hold it close.

Perhaps I thought: This is for me?

Perhaps not.

But I rocked forward on my knees another inch, stretched the tip of my tongue to the purple edge of his glans. Touched, and withdrew, as if burned by the heat. I tasted the velvet skin of his shaft, so lightly that I didn't sense the hardness just below. But with the next, a little lower down, I did. Tasting again, lower still, his erection once again brushed against my cheek. I didn't need to hold it, simply let it touch and fall away and touch again as I licked, until feeling the heat there, I again touched that purple edge.

“Please,” he whispered.

I parted my lips and nestled the purple edge of his glans in them. My hand, holding his balls against, felt them tighten to his body. I felt him shudder, and I shuddered too,

And with an soft inhaled breath, I eased him in. The gentlest suction, a small slide of lips down shaft. Breathe out, inhaling again, bringing him to me, just a little more.

Again. Sliding lips back to his head with the next exhaled breath, sliding down a little farther, a little faster with my next gasp in.

Lips parted for a deeper breath, I let my tongue slide down his shaft, cushioning, tasting, exploring the shape of him. Inhaling again, feeling him pulse, I slid back to his head as I exhaled. Again.

Then, inhaling now, more purposeful, as when you want to bring the last thick bit of sweetness up a milkshake straw, I felt him start pumping, pumping.

Gasping for breath, I let him slip free

I felt the warm and salt-tinged flood I summoned spurting, onto my chin, my neck, the hollow between my collar bones...

Chapter 6

But if I crossed one line, I did not dare to cross the next.

I wouldn't let him touch me, wouldn't stay. We daubed at what now seemed a mess, on my face, his chair. He was awkward, I embarrassed. That last

gasp for air, leaving him pumping his essence into the air, seemed like a failure, though what I had in fact failed at still frightened me.

And it seemed to have opened distance between us.

He drive me home, wordlessly. At my place, I saw his eyes narrow again, as if trying to remember something. Scared that what he'd remember was the address of the guy he'd checked out on the hookers' block, I blurted thanks and scampered up, almost running up the steps.

His partner called the next morning.

"Did something happen?" she asked.

I told her that something had.

"I'm worried," she said. "I may have let something slip. We were walking out from the station to our unit. He asked me something about you. I think I may have said 'his' when I should have said 'hers'. He shot me a look."

"Oh God," I said.

"Then it was like shutters slamming shut," she continued.

She said, her voice as theatrically emphatic as an actress's, that it might make sense for me to leave town for awhile. As it happened, her girlfriend was headed south; she'd take me if I liked. If I could pack a bag, she'd meet me in a hour. A plan, all worked out. She must have worried over it for hours, worked it out until she had it down pat. It seemed as neat as a movie script.

I said I'd go.

I threw some old clothes and some new in my bag, not really thinking. Pulled on a pair of jeans, a T-shirt and sandals. In 90 minutes, we were out of the city, curving down the ramp to the Turnpike, passing the green sign pointing south.

We drove through the night. I slept, despite uneasy dreams that kept awakening me. By morning we were bumping down the old four-lane past the paper mill and crossed the last, low bridge into town, the bay shimmering and silver to the right.

"I'm going to take you to a friend of mine," she said. "My landlord doesn't approve of guys spending the night."

"Guys?" I suppose I thought.

The place was a mile beyond the town, down a long, shell-paved track through scrubby pine and reeds, a large frame house right by the bay, white paint gleaming in the sun, shaded by knobbly old oaks, dripping Spanish moss, with broad porches on all four sides, to catch the air, no matter how which direction the breeze might blow.

She seemed to have free right to come and go and lead me in without bothering to knock. An open space, wider than the usual hallway, lead to sliding glass doors through which I saw the bay sparkling, the pale sand of the barrier island and the dark blue of the ocean beyond. The doors were open, a breeze wafted through, smelling of salt water and sun. On the far side, a man stood on the porch, back to us.

She took my hand, and led me to him.

He turned, and I saw he was the man I'd met the morning that I fled this place so many weeks before. His blunt fingers circled a coffee mug, beneath a frayed old bathrobe, his T-shirt stretched taut across a broad chest. The breeze ruffled pale hair, a silver dusting of stubble on his jaw made his tan seem all the deeper.

"Ah," he said, "So you found your beau?"

Then peering closely.

"Or maybe not."

My room took up a corner of the first floor, with windows facing the bay. It was nearly as large as my apartment was. Ten steps from the big double bed to the old wood dresser that the clothes I'd brought from the city only half filled, ten to the large french windows looking out over the bay. I think it was a daughter's room once, maybe a wife's. The closet was crammed with her clothes, in styles long since out of fashion, with no room to hang up what I'd brought with me.

He went out most mornings, digging for clams in mud flats when the tide was out, helping a neighbor haul crab pots. It wasn't work he had to do to earn a living, but work he had to do for other reasons, reasons that I really didn't understand. I went along a few times, but found it hard. The mud cloyed at my feet, slogging through the flats was exhausting after an hour or so. The crab pots were so heavy that my arms ached for days after my first morning on the water. On the boat chugging back across the bay, sitting on the transom looking back over the wake, I thought I saw, from the corner of my eye, how his

friend shoot me a glance, spiced with a kind of judgment that was hard to think about. I saw the glance, then saw my host simply shrug, declining to engage. Still, after a few days, he started slipping out before I woke.

Housebound, then, I set sail across different waters, I took back bearings on where I'd been, trying to map the shoals and rocks I'd managed to avoid and peer ahead to where they lay. Seeking the channel's buoys, you might say.

And one day, found some.

He'd come back earlier than usual. A towering dark mass of clouds looming to the west told even him it was time to head for shore. I was in my room, leafing through the closet, telling myself I was just trying to find room to hang a newly-ironed shirt, when he trod down the porch, past my open window and paused.

I think he must have been there for at least a minute or two before I realized. I turned. Our eyes met, and I flushed.

"Go ahead," he said at last, nodding at the closet. "I'm going to take a dip before the storm comes. I'll fix some drinks, we'll watch it from the porch."

I nodded, dumbly.

"That one, maybe," he said, pointing at the long, lace-trimmed satin robe my hand was resting on.

He swam for quite a while, as it happened. I saw the first rain drops dimpling the bay as I stretched myself along the chaise lounge, by the ladder that led from the porch down to the float where he kept a dinghy tied. He'd left glasses and a silver pitcher on the



table by my side, its misted surface forming droplets of its own.

I poured a glass, and sipped, and watched.

The rain was coming faster when he hauled himself up the ladder, water streaming down his body. I saw him slowly looking me over, eyes traveling the lacy edges of a V that I could not keep quite closed over my legs. My hand clutched the cloth below my breastbone, trying to hold everything together. Not just the robe.

“A towel?” I asked, watching the rivulets flow from his shoulders, round his biceps, tracing pathways through the hair of sturdy thighs, a sheen of water on his chest. His soaked shorts clung wetly; revealing heavy-hanging balls and penis.

Knees pressed, I swung my legs off the lounge, and still clutching the robe, started towards a bathroom.

He was still standing, back turned now, watching the rain fall. Tentative, I reached up with the towel to daub his shoulders, then his back.

He turned again, facing me. I let my hand holding the towel drop to my side.

“You know,” he drawled, in that slow, stately serious way that all the Low Country gentry favor. “You know, the problem’s really not that hard.”

His eyes were on my hand, still clutching the robe.

“Not that hard,” he said, lifting his gaze to peer into my eyes.

“Maybe, not what you think it is, either,” he added.

“No?” I breathed, my voice shaking.

“No,” he nodded gravely. “Everyone except you sees it. We’ve seen it for a while. We look at you, we see — well, to be blunt, we see a girl. Simple. You don’t yet. O.K. That’s O.K. You’ve come close, right up to the edge, in fact. We thought, maybe walking the night streets would do it, maybe that dance in the park, in the moonlight. Thought you came close then. Or maybe that one night with him. We all thought you had made it there by then. I know he did.”

He shook his head.

“But you didn’t stay, of course.”

He took hold of the towel, lifted it between us. I let my hand follow.

“Come, dry me off,” he said.

I nodded, I let go of my robe, with both hands on the towel, started to pat at his chest.

“Oh, come on,” he said. “More than that. You know that it takes more than that.”

From pats with the towel’s ends to long strokes down arms and shoulder, to brisk rubbing of chest and thighs and calf.

When I had done, he lifted me from where I knelt beside his leg, so that we stood face to face once again.

“What do you see?” he asked.

The rain thrummed loudly now on the tin roof of the porch. I heard a distant roll of thunder.

“You,” I said.

“Yes,” he said. “And who am I?”

“You are someone who makes things happen.”

He bowed his head a bit, acknowledging the truth of that..

“What else,” he asked.

“I see,” I started, stopped, and tried again. “I see.”

“Say it,” he said. “Don’t be afraid.”

“I see a man,” I said.

He nodded. “That’s right,” he said. “And more.”

“A big man,” I said. “A man who can take what he wants.”

“Droit de seigneur,” he said. “You know the term?”

I shook my head.

“The big man’s right — the lord’s right, actually, if you translate word for word,” he said. “A right you earn from actions past, service to your king, once upon a time, and from being ready always to act, now and for forevermore.”

I let the towel drop. He placed his hands upon my shoulders, peered into my eyes.

“Droit de seigneur, it can mean the right to be the first,” he said. “You understand? The first, the one to take the maidenhead.”

“I am a little scared,” I whispered.

“Don’t be,” he said. “There’s more, Look close. Look into my eyes. And tell me what you see.”

I looked.

“Tell me,” he said again.

“Desire?” I whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “You see desire. I can’t deny. And can you see what’s reflected there, when you look into my eyes?”

I shook my head.

“It is a girl. I see a girl,” he said. “More: Reflected in her eyes, I see myself, I see her seeing me. See how her eyes measure the weight of me, wonder at the heat beneath my surface, the life inside me that’s swelling up and out and seeking the life in her. That’s seeking her.”

The clouds scudded by faster now, rain eased. In the long low light of the dying afternoon, I looked into his eyes, and saw.

“It is a little scary, standing on the edge,” he said. “And there’s something about accepting that another seeks something in you. And you in him.”

I nodded.

“Are you ready to seek it then?”

I nodded once again, And was enfolded in his arms.

He kissed me hard, with an urgency I’d never felt before, Pulling me tight, I felt the strength of arms used to work that I could never do. Wrapping my

arms around his neck and shoulders, I felt his muscles shifting, working as he held me tight or momentarily eased his grip to let his hands roam my body. I felt them pressing my waist, combing through my hair, cupping my rear and holding me so that I could feel his erection, hard and hot against my belly.

He swept one arm down, hooking me behind knees, the other around my shoulders, and swung me in the air.

I hung there, arms round his neck, my head leaning against his shoulder, as he carried me into the bedroom, as if I were as small and weak as a kitten. Yet, vulnerable as I felt, folded there in his arms, I felt protected by his strength, secure because his purpose seemed so irresistible. I felt that way though I knew, remembering the demanding pressure of his erection, that he was about to take me, that he intended to impale me, to thrust himself inside me, until his unstoppable need, his undeniable desire filled me. Transformed me.

He carried me into my room. Laid me on the bed. I watched him, his eyes on me as he stepped out of his still-wet shorts. Lying there, looking at him looming over the foot of the bed, I saw him swing his arms in a large, loose overhead circle, maybe to stretch himself, maybe a version of the strutting dance the male bird performs to dazzle his drab hen.

And then, he was on me.

His lips pressed hard against mine, I felt his body surge onto me, his hips pushing mine down, ease and press again. He pushed his tongue deeply between my parted lips, I felt his torso pushing up as if to follow him as he tasted me, as he probed deep inside my mouth, deep as if he might sip at my core. I felt him swing one thigh between mine, then the

other. I felt his erection rising, seeking, thrusting towards me. Seeking, not yet finding. I felt him on my belly, then as he arched his back, lifted his hips and plunged them once again to mine, felt him pushing, pushing, pushing towards me. I felt his erection, still seeking, slide along between my legs, begin to plow a furrow on my skin towards the crevice between my cheeks.

He pumped and pumped and my hips began to move with his. That gnaw of need that centered just behind my own (now ignored) version of his thrusting organ, began to spread. From that small space where I was meant to have a cleft, that trembling heat of my desire burned warmer, ever warmer.

When I thought I could stand no more, he thrust an arm behind my back, and rolled us, so that he lay on his back, and I was straddling his thighs. I was panting, trying to catch my breath. His eyes fixed on me, he reached to the nightstand, fumbled for a tube of lotion, glopped a dollop on one palm, and gently rubbed between my legs, easing it up to the entry there. I felt myself begin to open, felt him slip a finger in and stir a slowly widening circle. I moaned, I couldn't help myself. With that, he placed a hand on each side of my waist, lifting my hips then drawing me up his body until we were aligned, and he let me sink onto him.

I've heard the first time can be painful. In olden times, I've read, they hung the bloodstained sheet outside a bridal chamber, just to assure the village that the proprieties had been observed. It wasn't like that at all for me.

Holding me firm, he slid me slowly down his length; I thought of honey flowing thickly, sweetly, for he seemed to flow into me just that way — or maybe I flowed on to him. Inch by inch, he pushed into me,

filling me, making me sigh, When he was deep as he could be he paused. I felt him throbbing, felt something deep inside me pulse in sympathy. Then, rocking his hips, I felt him withdraw; even more slowly than he entered me, and torn between regret and the thrill of feeling him move inside me I moaned. But when he had almost slipped me, he once again pulled me down the long delicious length of him.

And again, and again.

Breathing harder now, the two of us, rising and falling a little faster, each time he pulled me onto him, each time he lifted me so he could plow deep into me again. His hands no longer were all that pulled me, lifted me. Now it was me, bending knees to sink onto my arching back to feel the slide outwards that promised yet another thrust.

And then we rolled again, and I was on my back, feeling the weight of his hips pressing mine deep into the bed. I lifted my knees to his shoulders, as he thrust into me, thrust again and again until my hips began to dance with his. He plowed me deep, and trying to withdraw, could not since I would my hips to me to keep him throbbing at my core. And then before we knew it he was pumping, pumping and I was crying: yes and yes and yes.

I felt his orgasm exploding inside me, waves and waves of him flooding in. And as he did I felt as if my body shattered into a million sparkling bits of star stuff, flung against the dark night sky until with one long shuddering breath I gathered form and once again was myself, on bed, beneath his panting body. Myself, and not the self I'd been.

He rose early, as was his habit, the next morning — except that it was from my bed that he got up.

Drowsy, I heard him clatter in the kitchen, and contentedly drifted back to sleep.

But when I finally woke, wrapped the silk and lace of the robe around myself to walk out to the porch, I saw he hadn't left.

He sat at the small glass-topped table where I liked to sip a morning coffee. But not alone. The three of them, the two cops from the city and her girlfriend, sat there with him, beaming at me, like a family at a graduation.

Smiling, but no one said a word.

The male cop stood and pulled out a chair for me, inviting me with a gesture of his palm to sit. I swung myself on the seat, sweeping the robe along my thighs as I did, and as if pressured by their gazes, looked down demurely at the table.

“You look quite lovely this morning,” her girlfriend said, breaking the easy silence as she sipped her coffee. For once, she simply smiled. Nothing mocking. Nothing ironic.

“I told you that she would, didn't I?” she added, turning to the male cop..

“You did,” he said. “And you were right. Blooming, I think. Blooming. That's the word.”

We sipped our coffee, watched the gulls chase waves across the bay, felt the breeze, the morning sun.

I could have stayed like that for hours but — as I had learned the night before — some men can be impatient when it is time to act.

He stood, stretching again with that wide-sweeping, overhead circling of arms.

“Got some things to talk about,” he said. “Go on, grab a shower if you like, throw on something.”

I was quick in the shower, less so, I’m afraid, with the closet. Finally, though, I decided: a simple dress with bright, hopeful colors, small folds and pleats that hugged me just below my shoulders and fell freely down to a hem half-way down my thighs. Arms bare, neck low so that a watchful eye might see the swelling curve of a bra cup; a dress for being open to the world, for even the lightest waft of air to move.

“Perfect,” he said, when I rejoined them.

I blushed, and quickly sat, across the circle from him, between the two police officers, so I could look out over the bay..

“Who starts?” he asked.

“I do,” the male cop said. “Like this.”

He reached over, took my hand and held it.

“Just this,” he said. “To hold your hand. To want to hold your hand. That’s all I need to say, I think.”

His partner smiled, at him, as well as me.

“We do change, yes,” she said. “The seed is buried, something stirs inside, down in the dark. The stalk thrusts up and out, the way — ” she giggled here — “the way that certain parts are wont to do, as we girls know so well. And at the right moment, just the right moment, the sunlight and the morning dew and, of course, a certain need brings forth a flower.” She smiled.

“Hi flowers,” she said, with a small wave of her hand at her partner, and at me.

Her girlfriend stood, and stepped around so she could stand behind me, resting a hand on each shoulder.

“I’ve known since we were little kids,” she said. “About me. About you. Someday, it will be fun to sit together on the beach, or page through scrapbooks that our mothers kept, and say: Do you remember this? To say to one another: To think, I almost had forgotten. We’ll laugh together, maybe dab away a tear or two. We’ll hug, and always know we were, and are, the best of friends.”

I saw a shine of unshed tears in her eyes, and turned from her, to her girlfriend, the cop, and to her partner, his hands still cradling mine, and then to the last of the quartet.

He stood, too. In that stately, careful way of a Low Country aristocrat, the way that always worked whether framed by a judge’s robes or khaki for a work boat, he took command. As, of course, he had before.

He took his time, also the Low Country way. He talked about all three of us, about how three of us from this town, his town, had wanted things we thought we couldn’t find here. How we, me first, since I was a year or two older than the others, had moved

out, to the college, to the city, thinking we would find what we needed there, without quite knowing what we needed, what we wanted. He was too circumspect to come right out and say that he, in fact, had known. He watched us seeking, watched us start to find, nudged one or two as indirectly as he could. Then, finally, since he was the kind of man who believed in taking action, he acted.

He glanced at me here. I blushed deep pink.

And then he told my story. Not quite the way I set it out here, but every incident, every meeting. He knew about that evening between the cop's knees, about what had gone so right and what, not quite so much. About the concert, even the piece that made my eyes tear up, the dance. About the stab of jealousy when her girlfriend showed up, about the way a famous store on the avenue swallows sound and fills the air with dizzying scent, so that you barely know what end is up when she floats a chiffon dress along your body. About the stab of fear from a cop's glare, or the gaze of a pier-side idler, asking, as he asked me now, glancing at my hand held tight:

“Looking for your beau?”

But knowing now, all of us, that I needed to look no longer.

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