

Chapter 1

Will Moore sat in a lounge chair by the hotel pool in his Bermuda shorts and white polo shirt, browsing through photos of escorts on his phone. The dark-haired one reminded him of his wife when she was young. He instinctively looked to her eyes in search of the deep feeling and sharp intelligence of the woman he loved. But these eyes were empty, and everything about the photo looked fake, from the blow-dried hair to the over-done make-up to the glossy, slightly parted lips that promised pleasure.

Will put the phone down and thought, *Why am I looking at her? I can have her at home. And she's better now than she was at that age.*

He looked out toward the broad, extravagant pool where the mothers and fathers played with their children. In winter, there would be hundreds of people here, but May was the beginning of the slow season in Miami, and there were no more than twenty guests on the deck this morning. It was quiet enough to hear the breeze in the palms and the waves breaking beyond the bushes.

At fifty, Will looked like an inflated version of himself at thirty. The weight he had put on through years of indulgence in beef and alcohol was evenly distributed throughout his body, and he carried it well. His brown hair showed no trace of grey. His skin was stretched smooth across his broad face, which was red from the South Florida heat. He had the healthy, vigorous look of a man who enjoyed life, and the easy confidence of a man accustomed to getting what he wants.

He thought back to the young woman he had met at the party a few nights before, with the blonde hair and the clear blue eyes, the quick smile and the easy, open manner. She was one of the models hired to mix with the guests; but her lithe, athletic figure, her dancer's grace and upright posture made her stand out from the others, who looked skinny and underfed. She told him over a glass of wine that she had trained in ballet as a teenager and then quit when the pressure to be perfect took all the joy out of it. She liked to joke and flirt. She was simple and direct. She was in every way the opposite of his wife, whose life was all interior. Too bad he blew his chance with her.

They had shared a cab back to the hotel after the party and had a drink at the bar. At the end of the evening, when she said good-bye as she left the elevator, her backward glance lingered just a split second too long, and he knew he had an opportunity.

He ran into her in the lobby the next night, after his dinner plans fell through. Did she have plans? No. He took her to a restaurant and they went through two bottles of expensive wine. He told her about his business, importing high-end furniture and art from Asia. She told him about modeling and her life in New York.

She was lively, open and expressive, and he marveled at how willingly she went along with his plan, drinking all the wine he offered, like Gretel readying herself for the witch's pleasure. She was clearly intelligent. She knew where this was going. But she seemed to him a little reckless. Perhaps a little self-destructive. He kept refilling her glass before she could empty it.

In the cab back to the hotel, she began to slouch, and her head bobbed whenever the car hit a bump. In the elevator, she leaned heavily against the wall. When the doors opened on the ninth floor, Will held her just above the elbow to steady her. His grip was almost tight enough to bruise. At the end of the hallway, she wavered on her feet as he slid the magnetic key card into the lock. She said in a pathetic voice, "I drank too much, Will. I don't feel good."

Will steered her to bed and sat her down. He knelt and removed her shoes. Then he went into the bathroom and raised the toilet seat and dropped a towel on the floor. A few seconds later, she stumbled in with her hand over her mouth, the vomit pushing through her fingers as she leaned toward the toilet.

Will left the bathroom without a word. She stayed on her knees for several minutes, vomiting and cleaning up after herself. When she returned to the room, Will was sitting on the couch. He watched in silence as she walked to the side of the bed. She looked at him sadly and began to pull down the strap of her dress.

Will shook his head. "Don't do that."

"No?"

"No. Get some sleep."

She lay on top of the covers, and Will filled a glass of water in the bathroom. When he set it on the nightstand beside her, he asked, "Do you feel better?"

"The room's not spinning anymore."

He turned out the lamp next to the bed.

When she awoke sweating in the middle of the night, Will was asleep on the couch, still fully dressed. At 8:00 a.m., he was sitting by her side in a fresh suit of clothes, gently rubbing her shoulder. "I hope you feel better," he said. "I'm sorry about last night. That was my fault."

That was yesterday morning. He had thought of her often since then. If she had come from the agency, he might have made her go through with it. But then, if she had come from the agency, he would not have had to get her drunk. She would have been happy to collect whatever her share of the \$1500 fee was. Will tried to tally up how much his little habit had cost him over the past twelve months, but he couldn't even remember how many cities he had visited in that time.

A year and half earlier, he was surprised when his accountant, Arnie, confronted him about his escapades. Arnie's disapproving mention of your little call girls rankled him. An accountant, of all people, should see the sense of negotiating a fee for a service. It was so much neater than the unpredictable and ongoing expenses of a real relationship.

But Arnie had pulled him aside and said, "What's going on, Will? You used to go to Asia every six or eight weeks. Now you're there ten or fifteen days out of every month. Or you're in New York, or Miami, or Vegas. Why?"

"It's business," Will explained.

"You can't keep giving me these expense reports, flying first class and staying in suites in five-star hotels," Arnie said. "You can't keep charging dinners for half a dozen people with wine at two-hundred dollars a bottle."

"Relax," said Will.

"Uh-uh," said Arnie. "Your travel and entertainment expenses are way too high. The IRS won't allow it. We're already cash-poor from all the money you took out of the company to put into that trust. We could have kept the stores open in Portland and Seattle if you weren't skimming off all the profits. It's cash flow that's killing us."

"It's my company," Will said.

"And that's why you should be concerned," Arnie said. "If we hit two bad months in a row, we'll be leaning hard on our credit line. I don't want to borrow to finance your extravagance."

"OK, Arnie, I get it. You don't need to lecture me."

"Sorry, Will, but I think I do need to lecture you. You're running off the rails here. You built this company by being frugal and making wise choices. When you had your fun, you did it on the cheap. Now you're getting to be the fat old lion that lives for the spoils more than the hunt." Arnie lowered his voice and said sternly, "I read the credit card statements every month. Your personal ones too. If I see one of your little call girls show up on a company card, I'm not paying it."

"Do you think I'm that stupid?" Will started to turn away, but Arnie caught his arm.

"I don't know, Will." Arnie's voice was serious. "I'm just trying to bring you back on track. You have to tone it down. Get back to being the person who built this business."

Will considered his words. Finally, he said, "I'll keep my eyes open for opportunities. We can bring in more revenue."

Arnie frowned. "That's not the answer I wanted to hear, Will. It's not just the cash flow I'm worried about."

Will found his new revenue stream, and he told himself as he watched the palms swaying in the breeze that he should have spent some of that cash on a professional instead of wasting his time with the blonde-haired girl. Now he was sitting by the pool because he knew she was still in the hotel. She ran in the mornings then went to the beach for a swim. Wouldn't it be nice if she walked by and he got another chance?

But it was too hot, even in the shade, and he was about to go in when he saw her coming toward him. She wore a blue bikini beneath a see-through white wrap. Her hair was tied in a ponytail, and her face was flushed and covered with beads of sweat from the run she had just finished.

There was that smile again. That bright, lovely smile. "Hi, Will."

"Hey Ella. How far did you run?"

"Eight miles. I have to cool down."

"You want a drink?"

"No alcohol," she said.

"No, something cool. The waiter is on his way over."

"Maybe a daiquiri," she said. "Without the rum."

Will ordered the drink, while Ella fanned herself with her hand and watched the children in the pool.

"When's your next shoot?" Will asked.

"In two days."

"Mmm. Too bad I'll miss it."

"When do you leave?" Ella asked.

"Tomorrow. Late morning."

They were quiet for a moment, then Ella began, "Will..."

His phone rang. He looked at the name on the screen, and then held up his finger and said, "Just a minute. I have to take this. Hello?"

His eyes narrowed and his body tensed as he listened. "What do you mean, stuck in customs? How could it be stuck?" He paused and listened. "It was just random? Well, where is it?" Pause. "OK, the X-ray is broken. Is it in the machine?" He listened again. "Are they going to open the container?" Pause. "Well goddammit, what do you know?" He let out a sigh as the person on the other end spoke, then he said with frustration and a tinge of fear, "You call me as soon as something happens."

When he hung up, he looked pale and his breathing was fast and shallow. He stood up and ran his fingers through his hair, then, looking a little dizzy, he sat back down.

"You OK, Will?" Ella asked.

"No."

"What's the matter?"

"Business. Bad business." His chest tightened, he struggled to breathe, and his face looked ashen.

"Oh my God, Will! Are you having a heart attack?"

"No. Shut up. Don't make a scene."

"You need an ambulance."

Will looked at her sternly and said in the calmest voice he could muster, "No ambulance. No scene. Just get me a cab."

They stood and walked into the hotel, her arm steadying him as he had steadied her two nights before. She reminded him to breathe deeply as they passed slowly through the lobby.

She got him into a cab in the hotel drive, and they went to the hospital. Ella held his phone and wallet while the doctors examined him and ordered tests. After two hours, she peeked in on him as he sat on the edge of an examination table in a white paper robe.

The doctor said, "Your pulse is strong and your heart sounds fine, but your blood pressure and your cholesterol are high." He looked at Will's chart. "You say there's no history of heart disease on your mother's side. What about your father's side?"

"I never met my father," Will said.

"Have you ever had an anxiety attack?" the doctor asked.

"Ha! I'm not an anxious person," Will said.

"Are you under stress at work?"

"I had a scare today."

"That's when the tightness and breathing problems started?"

"Yeah."

"Will," said Ella. "Someone called you twice. I didn't answer."

"Can I have the phone?" Will asked. He went into the hall and made a call. Ella heard him say, "So it's through? Why didn't you call me?" Pause. "Oh, right. You did. I didn't have the phone with me. Sorry." He let out a long breath. "Shit!"

He returned to the room looking more relaxed. "Come on," he said to Ella. "Let's get out of here." He removed the hospital gown and put his shirt on.

"Mr. Moore," said the doctor, "I think you should have more tests. I don't think you had a cardiac event, but you are at risk."

"Doc, I'm fine." He turned to Ella and said, "Come on, let's go."

"Do you want anything for the anxiety?" the doctor asked.

"Scotch," said Will.

They took a cab back to the hotel. Will spent most of the drive quietly looking out the window. He was breathing easily, though he looked tired. From the driveway to his room, Ella walked with her arm through his. He didn't need help at this point, but he enjoyed her

touch. She left him on the couch in his room, where he stared blankly at the wall, rubbing the hint of stubble on his chin.

"I hope you feel better," she said.

"Hmm? Oh. Thanks for coming with me. Sorry to ruin your day."

"You didn't ruin it. Are you sure you'll be OK?"

"I'll be fine," Will said.

When she left, he stretched out on the couch and thought about how to get out of this business he was in. He fell asleep after half an hour and woke again at 5:00 p.m. when Ella knocked on his door. She was wearing the same bikini and wrap. Her cheeks were a little sunburned and she had sand on her calves and feet.

She presented him with a bottle of Scotch and said, "For your anxiety."

"For my pleasure," said Will. "Come in."

Ella walked to the balcony door, and Will unwrapped the two glasses on the mini-fridge. "Would you like some?" he asked.

Ella squinted and held her hand in front of her eye, her thumb and forefinger half an inch apart. Will poured a tall glass for himself and a shot for her. He sat on the couch and she sat next to him, turning sideways and pointing her knees toward him as he handed her the glass. They made a toast. "To joy," Will said.

"To your health," said Ella. She took a sip and made an unpleasant face. She drank the remainder in a single gulp, and then said, "So what was that all about?"

"You don't want to know," Will said.

"Do you always get so wrapped up in work?"

"Let's talk about something else."

With a mischievous smile, she put her finger in the open collar of his shirt and rubbed the hair beneath his collarbone.

"Am I getting under your skin, Will?"

"You're... What are you doing?"

"What do you want me to do?"

He looked at her and wondered, *Is she a prostitute?*

She stood up and removed the wrap around her bikini.

If she's not, he thought, *she's racing toward trouble.*

Ella said in a teasing, condescending voice, "Does the big bad customs man scare you?"

She poured herself another shot of Scotch and said in a flirtatious tone of mock-annoyance, "I'm bored, and the straps of my top are digging into my skin."

She sat on the couch again, closer to him this time, so the straps were within his reach. When he hesitated, she said, "Are you scared, Will? I didn't take you for the hesitant type."

In a minute, she was undressed and undressing him. She took his hand and pulled him from the couch to the bed. Then she turned and opened the sliding glass doors. She walked onto the balcony, leaned against the rail and looked out over the pool, the dark green palms and the turquoise water of the Atlantic. Her behind was a little whiter than the rest of her.

"What the hell are you doing?" Will said. "It's still daylight. People will see you!"

"Look at this view, Will. I love the color of the sea."

"Get in here!" Will demanded.

Ella turned to face him and said flatly, "Come out and get me."

"Are you crazy? You're going to get us thrown out of here."

She leaned back against the railing and smiled. "You're leaving tomorrow anyway. Come join me. The air is wonderful."

Will put on his shorts and stormed onto the balcony. He grabbed her by the arm, pulled her back into the room, and slid the glass door shut with almost enough force to break it.

Ella smiled at him. "You're dressed again. Now we'll have to start all over. And look at you shake. Are you that angry?"

"You fucking lunatic! I know people in this hotel. They know me. You can't behave like that."

"You're not going to let me get away with this, are you Will?"

He pushed her to the bed. She reclined onto her elbows and smiled and said, "Don't break me, Will."

A short time later, they were lying side by side. Will was on his back. Ella was on her side, her index finger tracing circles in the hair on his chest.

Will said, "You're crazy, you know that?"

"I know. You are too. I was worried for a while you might have a real heart attack, the way you were going at it."

"You got me all wound up," said Will.

"It's not hard to do," said Ella.

"I like you," Will said.

"Mmm. I like you too." She plucked a hair from his chest.

"Ow! What was that for?"

"For letting your guard down."

She turned onto her stomach and propped herself on her elbows. "Will. You said the other night you like a woman's body. Every part of her body." She rolled onto her back and said, "Show me what you like."

Will sat up and looked at her.

"Go ahead," she said. "Take your time, and show me all the things you like."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I got what I wanted. Now it's your turn."

This comment, more than anything she had done or said, caught him off guard. He thought he had just gotten what he wanted. He thought that was his turn. Who was playing whom in this little game?

Did it matter? She had invited him in for more.

Chapter 2

That was how the affair began, and Will thought it would end there in Miami. But she told him she would be in Los Angeles the following month for a series of photo shoots. Will lived in Santa Barbara and had plenty of excuses to travel to LA, where his company maintained an office, a warehouse, and a showroom.

He told her to rent a car and pick a nice hotel. "Put it on your card, and I'll pay the bill."

When he first saw her in LA, he was struck again by the brightness of her presence. Her clear eyes, clear skin, clear voice, her openness and her ready smile brought youth and light into his day. But she was on her way down, he could tell. In bed, she was wild in a way that none of his prostitutes could fake, as if she were willing to destroy herself all at once, in a single act.

If he had had soul enough to care for her, he would have been alarmed. He would have tried to help. But he was having too much fun, and he didn't expect his young prize to be around much longer. LA had plenty of men with eyes out for women for like her.

The last time they were together in the hotel in Los Angeles, she looked tired and worn, and she kept sniffing. After sex, they watched TV in the hotel bed while she held on to him. He looked at all her shopping bags full of new clothing and tried to calculate in his head how much it would cost him to pay off that credit card bill. He made a guess and divided the figure by the number of times they had sex. She was cheaper than some of his call girls.

When he got up to leave, she said, "Please don't go."

"I'm spent for today," he said. "I couldn't go again if I wanted to."

"I don't mean that. I just mean... we could order in some food. I don't want to go out, and I don't want to be alone." Her eyes were a little bloodshot and red around the rims.

She's not as pretty when she looks sick, Will thought. I don't like her when she looks like that. He started to put on his clothes.

"I haven't slept in two days," she said. "I'm fucking up, Will. I have to get out of LA."

"I have a house in Goleta," he said as he put on his shirt. The house was one of the secrets he kept from his wife. He stored some valuable furniture there, and kept the place handy for dalliances when he couldn't get out of town. "If you need a retreat, you're welcome to it."

"Send me the address," she said.

He didn't think she'd take him up on it, but she called him on her way up from LA a few days later. He met her in front of the house, and she wouldn't get out of the little convertible Mustang she had rented, so he got in and they talked.

In LA, she said, she was doing a lot of cocaine. "I just... I just hooked up with the wrong people." Her eyes kept drooping as if she might nod off. "I wouldn't touch it in New York,

because I hate what it does to people. It brings out the worst in everyone. Even me. I start acting like my sister. I can't go back there."

Will gave her the key to the house. He left her alone, and she spent much of the next three days sleeping. When he stopped by the house on the fourth day, she was just returning from a run. Her glow and her smile were back.

In the kitchen, she reminded him that he'd promised to pay her credit card bill. "I'll pay it," he said.

She hesitated then said, "I have three cards."

"OK," Will said.

"Two of them are maxed out. And I'm down to, like, two hundred bucks on the third. Do you think you can pay one of them?"

"Send me the bills," Will said. "I'll pay them."

He didn't ask for sex that day. He wanted to give her another day to recover. As he drove back to his office, he thought, *I'll wait a while before I pay those bills. If she's really down to two hundred bucks, she can't go anywhere.*

After a couple of days, Ella understood he was stalling. She thought her generosity in bed might inspire him to pay, but it only made him want to keep her around longer. By her seventh day in the house, she resented him and felt trapped. She had enough gas in the car to get back to LA, but things there would be worse. Her job was gone. She had missed four days of shooting and hadn't returned her agent's calls. The only thing waiting for her in LA was her troubled group of friends and their cocaine.

Her eighth day in the house was the first day of summer. She called her sister and asked her to buy a plane ticket back to New York.

"Why can't you buy it yourself?" her sister asked.

"Because, Anna, I just don't have any money right now."

"Oh, God, what the hell did you do?" Anna asked. "Did you get yourself fired?"

"I... I don't know. I kind of drifted away. I started seeing this guy in LA. His friends were all, like... They were a mess. None of them ever slept."

"So you're in LA?"

"Goleta, actually."

"What are you doing there?"

Ella was silent.

"Well?" her sister demanded. "Are you going to answer?"

"I'm sorry," is all Ella could say.

"So you're seeing some guy in Goleta? Are you pregnant?"

"No."

"Are you in danger?"

"No."

Her sister let out a long sigh. "I can't tell you how much it pisses me off to see all the ways you fuck up."

"You don't have to tell me," Ella said. "I know, OK? I know I fucked up. Will you help me?"

Her sister sighed again, as if to rub it in. "OK. Santa Barbara to New York?"

"Yes."

"Any particular day?"

"As soon as you can."

"OK," said Anna. "I'll call you back."

Anna called back later that afternoon. "I got you on an afternoon flight in three days."

"Thank you," Ella said. "Thank you."

"You'll have to find your own way from the airport."

"Thank you," Ella said again.

"You owe me," said Anna.

"I know."

Once again, her spirit was light. Will noticed it immediately when he visited that afternoon. He found her irresistible when she was bright and happy, and he couldn't wait to have sex with her. At first she demurred. She was done with him and wanted to be polite about it.

But he was persistent and so blinded by desire he couldn't see how far apart they were in their feelings for each other. Finally, she agreed. She would express in this one final act all her hatred for him. Her contempt for him only grew when she saw how excited he was. He trembled, as he had that first time in Miami.

She pushed him down angrily, leaning against his throat as she climbed on top. She gave free reign to her hatred, and in doing so, she tapped into a deep well of frustration with her life and herself. It flowed out freely and uncontrollably. She was aggressive, rough, rude, and abusive. The act of love looked like an act of violence. Will found this a tremendous turn-on, and to her surprise, so did she.

All she could think about after he left was how she wanted to do it again, and this scared her. She was physically and emotionally wide open, ready to receive the person who would cross her path in just a few days. The one she might otherwise have turned away from.

Chapter 3

Susan Moore stood in her bedroom wearing only a bra and underpants on that first shining day of summer. Her dark-brown hair, still damp from the shower, fell just past her shoulders. Her sharp, dark eyes instantly conveyed a commanding intelligence. Her chest and hips were full and soft, the flesh bulging just slightly around the top of her underwear and the side straps of her bra. Outside the window of the high-ceilinged room, down the hill, past the palms and the terra cotta rooftops of Santa Barbara, a tiny white sail glided silently across the glistening Pacific.

On her way to the closet, Susan stopped and picked up the wedding photo from the dresser. She and Will were thinner then. She remembered the moment the photo was taken, and how genuinely she meant that smile.

Will had found her at just the right time in her life; or perhaps, as she now thought, just the wrong time. Fifteen years ago, in the weeks before her parents' accident, she was waiting tables at The Evening Star in Los Angeles. Will had seen her there before, but he felt no particular interest in her until she waited on him. When she approached his table that evening, he thought, *Ab, the unsmiling one*. She was quiet and introverted, and had the placid, slightly distant expression of a daydreamer.

When she introduced herself and described the day's specials, she stood with her shoulders square to him, looking directly into his face with an open, unguarded expression. Behind her eyes was a deep sea of feeling and imagination. Part of her was somewhere else. The dark, lively eyes and the direct simplicity of her manner drew him in like a whispering voice. When she spoke, he felt as if they were the only two people in the room.

Throughout the meal, Will watched her come and go among the tables. Her face occasionally showed hints of emotion that had nothing to do with what was going on around her. She's responding to her thoughts, Will realized. And there's a lot going on in there.

When she waited on him again two weeks later, it was clear she didn't remember him. He tried without success to engage her in conversation, then watched with jealousy as a huge smile spread across her face in response to a little whisper from the bartender.

Her face still bore a trace of that smile when she brought his check a minute later. The sight of her so far removed from his feelings of envy and desire filled him with a sense of hopelessness. She asked if everything was OK.

"Oh. Yeah. Everything was fine," he said, though she could see it wasn't.

He signed the check, adding a generous tip, and then got up to leave. Two steps from the table, he felt a touch on his shoulder, and turned to see her looking up at him with an expression of gratitude.

"Thank you," she said.

The powerful swelling he felt in his chest in response to this recognition was as disconcerting as it was uplifting. His heart was not the organ that normally responded to women.

A few days later, she left LA and returned to San Diego to care for her parents, who had barely survived a collision on the freeway. She didn't show up for the beginning of her graduate program, and when she failed to return the university's calls, she forfeited her scholarship and the future she had planned.

When her father left the hospital with a cane, his mouth hung slightly open. The words that had once come easily to the avid reader and bookstore owner now eluded him, and he had trouble making sense of simple newspaper articles. In the middle of a sentence, he would sometimes stop abruptly, searching silently for the next word before giving up in frustration and dismay. Over time, he talked less and less.

Her mother, who bore the brunt of the impact, was in and out of the hospital for eight months before pneumonia finally took her. Susan was at her bedside with her father when he pointed to the oxygen tubes in her nose and said with unusual clarity, "Don't let me go like that."

Those words unnerved her. Where was he going? He was all she had left. But after losing his words and his books and his wife, he found less and less to draw him out of bed each day. Susan knew he was giving up, but she couldn't bring herself to admit it. Gentle as he was, he was the model of strength in her life. If death took him by force, there was no shame in that. But if he gave in willingly, why should anyone continue? He died less than a month after her mother.

She never quite got over the abandonment and betrayal she felt at his death. Mentally and emotionally, she felt as if she had been stripped down to nothing, and she would have to rebuild her life and herself from the ground up. But she had no ground to build on, except the wound of her loss.

And so, as an oyster builds a pearl around the irritating grain of sand, she wrapped layer upon layer of defenses around her wound. Over the years, a strong mind, a quiet pride, emotional depth and a natural reserve gave the pearl its luster, and men and women alike admired her. Now, at forty, she was just reaching the peak of her beauty. A younger face could not express the depth of her character.

She didn't remember meeting Will at the restaurant. In her telling of the story, she first saw him in LA a little more than a year after her parents' death. She watched from the window of a coffee shop as two men argued over a parking space. It looked like the larger man was going to hit the smaller one when Will strolled casually into the scene and said something she couldn't hear.

The big man replied to Will with some menacing words, and the little one took the opportunity to get away. Will stood his ground and kept talking, in a casual, almost playful way, and gradually the big man relaxed. In a minute, they were joking with each other.

When Susan returned to the bookstore where she worked, she replayed the scene in her mind, trying to fill in the words she couldn't hear. In those days, she had a vague, persistent

fear that some new disaster was always just around the corner. The little scene in front of the coffee shop impressed her because Will had intentionally walked into a dangerous situation and then took control of it. She kept asking herself, *How can a person approach the world that way?* But she couldn't answer that question.

Two weeks later, Will walked into the bookstore. She recognized him right away, and watched from the register as he browsed the business section. Her curiosity overcame her shyness, drawing her silently forward until she stood beside him.

When he turned to find the eyes from The Evening Star looking up at him, the expression of surprise on his face caused her to say, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sneak up on you."

She wondered as his look of surprise melted into recognition: *Do you know me?*

"Can I help you find something?" she asked.

He had already found the book he came for, and he watched her quietly as she rang up the purchase. She kept her eyes on the register and didn't look up at him until the sale was complete, although she could tell he was admiring her. As she folded the top of the paper bag and handed it to him, she finally raised her eyes to his and looked at him with the same open, unselfconscious expression that had enchanted him twice before.

Her eyes took in everything, feeding the mind that churned visibly beneath, and he could not help falling into them as they studied him. But her face showed nothing of what she felt. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't find the words.

Then she startled him with a simple question. "Are you going to ask me out?"

If she had asked this with a smile, with a hint of excitement or annoyance, he could have gauged his chances right away. But she asked it as a simple matter-of-fact inquiry, as if she just wanted to know, *Am I reading you right?*

"Because if you are," she said at last, "I'll say yes." Her brow softened. The flesh on her cheeks moved upward almost imperceptibly as the hint of a smile appeared on her lips. Beguiled by these little changes that transformed her, he struggled at first to speak, and then stammered, "Would you like... Would you like to go to dinner?"

She answered softly, "Yes."

At dinner that night, she asked him about the incident in front of the coffee shop. Will didn't remember it until she fed him some details.

"Oh, that," he said, with a dismissive wave. "I don't know what that guy's problem was."

"Why did you get involved?" Susan asked.

"I thought he was going to put his fist through that little guy's face."

"So you volunteered your own face? You don't mind getting hit?"

"Oh, no," Will said. "I do mind getting hit."

"What did you say to him?"

"I asked him if it was really worth getting that upset over a parking space. He kind of looked at me and sized me up, like he was wondering if he should hit me. I could see he didn't really want to take on someone his own size.

"He was wearing a Clippers shirt, so I said, 'You know, the real reason you're so pissed off is because you're a Clippers fan, and they suck.' He didn't know quite what to make of that. He said, 'Are you a Lakers fan?'"

"I said, 'Not really. But if you're going to pick a loser, why not shoot the moon and go with Golden State?'"

When Susan asked him to explain, Will said, "The Warriors lost sixty-five games this year. They finished dead last in the NBA. Anyway, he thought that was funny, and he started to loosen up."

"And you kept talking to him," Susan said.

"Yeah," Will shrugged. "He started getting friendly. Whenever I see an opportunity to bring someone over to my side, I take it. Maybe I'll never see him again, but I know there's one more person in the world who bears me goodwill."

Susan interpreted this statement in the best possible light, as a sign of Will's desire to spread friendship and make peace. Looking back now, after many years of marriage, she was able to interpret the words more accurately. "An opportunity to bring someone over to my side" said a lot about Will, the opportunist who divided the world into his side and the other side.

At the end of the evening of their first date, on the sidewalk in front of her apartment, she stepped forward and kissed him on the cheek. When she stepped back, he looked disappointed.

Oh, I didn't do that right, she thought. He wanted a real kiss. She looked down at the pavement, and then back up at him, thinking, *Please don't give up on me. It takes me a long time to warm up to someone. But I'm worth it. I swear I am.*

Watching her eyes as these thoughts passed through her, Will thought she looked like a stray dog in search of a home. "Can I see you again?" he asked.

Her whole face blossomed into the magical smile he had seen that day in the restaurant two years earlier.

"Yes."

The first time they slept together, his passion was clear, and the experience she had feared might be awkward was deeply moving instead. It shook her out of her depression and re-awakened her to life.

That was thirteen years ago. They married within nine months, and for a while she travelled with him everywhere as his business grew. Throughout those early years, his

devotion to her was unwavering. She could see in his eyes and feel in his touch that no woman was as beautiful or as interesting to him as she was. At the parties and fundraisers they attended, he made sure she had everything she wanted. When she was stuck in conversation with some bore, he moved in to relieve her. He could see before anyone else when the introvert began to tire under the strain of socializing, and he took her home.

She enjoyed watching him interact with other men. He had an instinctive sense of people's spatial boundaries. He knew exactly where the line was between friendly and uncomfortable. In business interactions, he would slowly maneuver himself into position just an inch inside that boundary. Then he would put his hand on the other man's shoulder, gripping it just a little too tightly while he continued to speak cheerfully. The ambiguity of his touch was calculated to make people confused about whether they should feel reassured or threatened. He was at once their friend and capable of hurting them.

Will could tell a great deal about a person from their reaction to this treatment. The trusting, naive and unsuspecting showed insufficient alarm at these minor trespasses. The fearful shrank back almost imperceptibly. The strong pushed back. The ones in whom he inspired passion and trust leaned into him. From these reactions, he could gauge whether a person would be motivated more by threats or by generosity, whether he should appeal to their loyalty or their self-interest, and how far he might be able to push them.

Each of these interactions was, in its own way, a reenactment of that first scene Susan had witnessed in front of the coffee shop—Will was slowly and subtly taking control of the situation. And though he was tall, physically strong and imposing, he ruled by confidence and charm instead of force. His employees respected and admired him, and Susan admired him too.

So long as the food and sex were good, he was an easy man to please. The predictable rhythms of his appetites, along with his confidence, money, and easy manner, gradually transformed her perception of the world from a place of terrifying uncertainty to one of safety and stability. As the foundation of their marriage solidified, her confidence returned.

With friends and acquaintances, she spoke more freely. Her once placid and unexpressive face began to show more clearly the warmth of her character and the liveliness of her mind.

By the sixth year of their marriage, she was outgrowing her husband. She had tired of the ports of Asia, and of playing the wife of the wealthy importer to an audience of businessmen who appreciated her in broken English. She travelled with him less and less, and spent more time at home in Los Angeles, raising money for the arts and charities with the wives of other wealthy men.

After nine years, she stopped travelling with him entirely, except for vacations. She convinced him to buy a house in Santa Barbara, where she could have a quieter life, in fresher air, away from the traffic and the egos of the city. Will's business was running smoothly then, with the day-to-day operations in the hands of a few trusted managers.

Susan expected him to work less after the move. Instead, he travelled more, scheduling six days away to conduct three days of business. And something in him changed in the past two years. She had a sense of what it was, but she didn't want to admit it to herself until just recently, when news from the doctor forced her to confront what she had been avoiding.

She looked again at the wedding photo with sorrow and regret. *If only I had been a year older when I met you*, she thought. *If only I had been year wiser. A year further removed from that awful time. I might have known better.*

The phone rang as she put the photo back on the dresser.

"Hello?"

"Susan?"

"Hi Leila," Susan said as she walked into the closet and began to browse through the hanging dresses.

"Are you coming to book group tomorrow?"

"No," said Susan. "I don't even know what book you're reading."

"*Victory*," said Leila, "by Joseph Conrad."

"That's not really a book group book."

"You've read it?"

"A long time ago."

"It's so slow. Is it even worth finishing?"

"Of course," said Susan. "All of his books are. You have to be patient with Conrad, but if you're willing to slow down, he rewards you."

"Well I'm choosing next month's book," Leila said. "*The Echo Maker*, by Richard Powers."

"Ugh. That's an awful book." Susan walked into the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, examining with disapproval the flesh that bulged around her bra straps.

"He won a prize for that!" Leila protested.

"He should have been punished."

"I hear an echo. Are you in the bathroom?"

"Yes, just looking in the mirror."

"Well I hope you're dressed," Leila said.

"Not really."

"Oh, Susan, don't stand in front of the mirror without clothes. No good can come of that."

"I didn't used to be so... soft."

"You didn't used to be forty. Seriously, Susan, don't stand there looking at yourself."

"Don't tell me you don't do the same thing," Susan said.

"I hung a curtain over my mirror."

"Really?"

"No," said Leila, "but I should. Every time I get out of the shower, I catch a glimpse of myself and think, 'Put some clothes on, you cow. You can't walk around my house like that.' Of course, I've had four kids, so I'm a bit worse for wear. How's Will?"

Susan took a deep breath.

"Oh," said Leila. "Bad subject?"

"Bad subject," Susan said. "I don't know how Will is. He's probably fine." She leaned toward the mirror and examined the little wrinkles at the corners of her eyes.

"Are you two going through a rough patch?"

"I guess you could call it that," Susan sighed.

"Eddie and I have been through some tough times, but they pass. You can get past this."

"I don't know anymore," Susan said.

"Have you considered counseling?"

"There's no point," Susan said. "He's seeing someone else."

"Oh. Oh... I didn't know that. I'm sorry, Susan. I'm so sorry. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Susan said.

"Oh, that's terrible. How long have you known about this?"

"I don't know. In my heart? At least a year."

"Oh, Susan. I never would have guessed. That has to weigh on you, but you never show it."

"If I seem composed," Susan said, "it's because I work really hard at it."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No, Leila. But thank you. I have an appointment this morning."

"With who?"

"Someone who will help me out of this mess."

"Well I hope it does you some good. Call me if you want to talk. I miss you. We should talk more often."

"I know," Susan said. "I'm out of touch with everyone these days."

"Well don't be. Call me."

"I will. Bye, Leila."

Susan walked to the closet and chose a simple black dress that suppressed her curves. She brushed her hair until every strand was in line, then filed one polished, manicured fingernail. The others passed inspection.

In the kitchen, she placed several items into a large envelope: two photos of her husband, a photo of his silver Mercedes that showed the license plate, a page printed from Google maps that pinpointed his office, and some papers with his name and age and a description of his furniture business.

Her composure was slipping, but her resolve was not. As she walked to the front door, the tapping of her heels on the stone floor echoed through the empty house, and she refused to release the tears from her reddening eyes.