

*April 1983*

IT WAS LATE APRIL, and we were in Chicago preparing for game two of a three-game set on a Saturday night. I love Chicago, for its many shops and restaurants. Typically, I head for the less touristy places, and since it was sunny and mild this Saturday morning, I left the hotel after breakfast on foot and headed up Michigan Avenue with no particular destination in mind, inclined to do a little window shopping. I hadn't gone far when I noticed a little shop that seemed to specialize in arts and crafts and souvenirs for visitors to the Windy City—one of many that I tend not to notice. However, I have a propensity for noticing attractive women, and in the window of this shop was a very striking woman who was setting up a display.

I watched a moment, discretely, feigning attention on some of the items, mostly ceramics and wooden trinkets, but some jewelry, too—jade and amber, and turquoise that looked rooted in Native American origins, none of which interested me, all the while watching the woman. Twice she nearly made eye contact with me, but I was quick to look elsewhere. In between her glances, I noted her long dark wavy hair, tied back, and dark eyes under finely arched brows along with a Mediterranean complexion—she used cosmetics as they were intended, to highlight her features not hide behind—and a dimpled chin. Not a Kirk Douglas crevasse left by the hammer and chisel of a stonemason, but the graceful, sensuous recess as might be found on a sculpture of Helen of Troy on display at the Art Institute of Chicago. And while this

woman's countenance might not inspire the launch of a thousand ships, I found the arrangement of her features and color alluring; yet mixed in with these physical qualities was elegance, a sophistication that hinted at substance. All of which didn't seem to fit with being a shop owner. This, too, I found intriguing. Unfortunately for me, she also had a beautiful pair of legs: not too long, and well-toned, gracefully shaped calves. Some might've found them too well-developed, even masculine, but they were the type I've always found irresistible—yes, the type that had, in the past, gotten me into trouble.

"Damn," I muttered. Then I shook my head and made off again up Michigan Avenue. I didn't get more than half a block before I turned around, came back and went into the shop, the bells above the door announcing my entrance.

"Can I help you find something?" the woman asked. She was behind the counter now where a small TV was tuned to the local morning news.

"Just looking," I said. She must've noticed me staring at her, or maybe she was aware of the time that had elapsed between my window shopping and entrance into her shop.

"I'm not for sale," she told me.

"No?"

"I'm not that kind of woman," she said, reigning in her indignity. I was certain that were I not a potential customer, she would've said something much more lethal.

"I'm sorry, miss," I said. "I didn't mean that the way it sounded." When she didn't say anything I added, "Are you the proprietor?"

"Yes." Her response seemed an effort to dismiss me; I wasn't to be put off.

"You like baseball?" I asked, noticing the sports segment of the morning news on the small TV. I was aware that I was about to commit my self-imposed cardinal sin of using my celebrity to my benefit.

Yet what choice did I have? I'd managed to stick my spiked foot in my mouth and it didn't seem as if I could expect any help from the woman.

"No."

And I realized here was no baseball groupie, which was a good thing based on my past track record with that type; yet I was running out of options to make small talk. The woman looked at me again, more closely.

"Do I know you?" she asked.

"So you *do* watch baseball—I usually have on a cap with the old English D."

"No, I don't watch baseball, but I just saw a clip of you being interviewed after last night's game."

"Did the Sox win?" I asked, grinning.

"I don't know and I don't care."

"You're not making this easy are you, miss?"

"That's the idea."

"Look," I said. "We've gotten off to a shaky start. I only came in to ask if you'd like to have dinner tomorrow night, after the game and before I leave for Cleveland."

"I have dinner every night, whether or not you leave for Cleveland."

I laughed, although the woman's demeanor had not portended humor. "That's funny," I said. "I meant dinner with me."

The woman ignored me: "I'm a businesswoman. Do you intend to purchase something?"

I looked at some of the items for sale on the countertop, my eyes alighting on a dish of blue marbles, maybe three-quarters of an inch in diameter, painted to look like globes, the continents painted on the surface in remarkable detail. I picked one out of the dish and asked how much.

"Eighty-nine cents."

I handed a dollar bill to the woman, who in turn rang up the sale and handed me my change. I exchanged the tiny globe for my change and said: “There, I just gave you the world, so you can’t turn me down.”

The woman sighed, told me: “You come into my shop, insult me, and expect me to be impressed by an eighty-nine cent bauble?”

“Not by the price, no,” I said, “but by all it foretells. I was hoping to make up for some of my previous comments, which were not intended to be insulting.” She seemed to soften a bit, but remained mute. “Come now,” I added, “when was the last time someone offered you the world?”

The woman stiffened again, told me: “That’s none of your concern.”

“No, I suppose not,” I said, “but from your response I can only surmise that whoever he was, he took it back.”

The woman said nothing, but her complexion flushed, more from embarrassment than from anger.

“Look,” I said, “I didn’t mean to pry. I was only out for a little window shopping—not for a woman, mind you—and I noticed you in your shop, and I thought to myself, now there’s an attractive woman who doesn’t have to work very hard at being attractive. On top of that, she looks intelligent, sophisticated. Beauty and brains is a tough combination to beat, at least for me.” The woman softened again, and I added, “I tend to be clumsy in first encounters. It’s not easy being a young man in the eighties. Women’s equality has also won you the right to be selective in the courtship ritual, which is a good thing—but my heart was in the right place, and I’m sorry I made you angry, and really, it takes more muscles to manufacture a frown than to let yourself smile, and if you don’t help me out here, I’ll be forced to go on and on spouting off more and more inane axioms, trying in vain to make myself sound widely read, so please help me out.”

Before she could help herself, she smiled to reveal straight white teeth from between full lips.

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s a great smile you have.”

“So I’ve been told,” she said, her tone much friendlier, although a wistful note accompanied her admission. “I have my parents to thank for braces, although sometimes I wish they hadn’t straightened my teeth.”

I realized here was a woman who, unlike Liza, didn’t relish being looked at for her body parts. Perhaps she’d gotten burned by someone who saw her only for her beauty and not as a person, a businesswoman.

“Why would I want to go out with a baseball player?”

I shrugged. “I’m just a guy who happens to play ball.”

“But you live in a fantasy world.”

“I live in the same world in which you live,” I said. “The stage may be bigger, but I’m just a regular guy trying to earn a living, same as you and everyone else.”

“Playing a kid’s game.”

“Living out a dream,” I acknowledged with a nod, “same as the research scientist who dreams of finding a cure for Parkinson’s disease.”

“But why would I want to get involved with a baseball player, even if you have just given me the world?”

I grinned. “I’m not asking you to get involved with me. I’m just asking you to have dinner, spend a couple of hours with me, get to know each other. After that... who knows?”

“But you’re a baseball player.”

I laughed. “You make me sound like a leper.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, softening more. “It’s just that—”

“You’re not a sports junkie, you’re intelligent, a businesswoman, and you think all athletes are jocks.”

“Aren’t they?”

“Some of us are—okay, most of us are. But some of us are intelli-

gent and educated.”

“And you?”

“I have a degree in communications, with a minor in journalism.”

“So why aren’t you writing for a newspaper?”

“Because writing for a paper is more respectable than playing ball?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Not in so many words. But to answer your question, I *am* writing for a paper—the *Free Press* back in Detroit. I’m doing a weekly column, a sort of baseball journal by someone in the game. Think a non-fiction Ring Lardner.”

“Never heard of him,” she said, but she seemed to see me again for the first time, with some higher esteem.

“Look, miss,” I said. “You’re obviously a woman who resents being looked at, judged, for her beauty alone, but aren’t you guilty of the same sin, judging me by my career?”

“I suppose I am at that,” she said, looking down. “But what if I—” She cut herself off.

“What if you liked me?” I hazarded.

She said nothing but looked up again, trying, unsuccessfully, to withhold her smile, and I thought maybe she already did, or wanted to.

“If you did—like me—would that be so terrible?”

“No,” she said. “But you’re a baseball player, on the road most of the year. When would I ever see you?”

“Spoken like someone who doesn’t understand the game,” I said with a grin. “During the offseason I’d be around all the time. You’d probably be glad to see me go to Florida for spring training. Miss me and, hell, I’d fly you down for a vacation—stay as long as you like. During the season, well, I can be in Chicago a few days every month, on those days we don’t play, and I could bring you to my place during home stands.”

“But home—that’s Detroit.”

“It is,” I said, “and you say that as if it’s a worse place than Cleveland, the mistake by the lake. But aren’t you getting ahead of the game? You don’t even know yet whether you like me.”

She looked at the tiny globe in her hand, and I determined that small gesture on my part had somehow endeared me to her. I continued with the pros of my argument:

“I’ve always thought of home as where I hang my cap at night. Home could just as easily be Chicago as Detroit. I love the Breezy City.”

“Windy.”

“I knew that,” I said, my delivery indicating my faux pas intended. “Look, miss—what is your name?”

“Darlene.”

“Darlene.” I said, trying on her name for size. “I like that. It suits you.” I gave her my name, told her also the name by which my teammates called me, explaining to her perplexity how I’d earned it, that it was not intended as ridicule, and finished by saying, “Look, I’m not asking you to marry me, I’m not suggesting you should sleep with me. I’m just asking you to have dinner with me. We can go Dutch if that makes you feel better, less obligated, and see how we get along, what we have in common. Let’s leave the repercussions for later.” She laughed, and I asked her if I’d said something funny.

“Repercussions,” she repeated, her voice lowered in imitation of mine. And then, in response to my puzzlement, she added, “If I didn’t know you had a penchant for writing, I’d think that was a big word for a baseball player.”

“Penchant,” I said, playing along. “That means proclivity, right?” She smiled warmly, which I found contagious and therefore returned it, adding, “The pen is sometimes mightier than the bat.”

Darlene laughed and said, “One thing you should know about me—I’m a traditional woman, so dinner is on you.”

“Good,” I said. “I like a traditional woman.”