

Her Sunflower Man

by Ann M Streetman

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Chapter 5

Susan leaned into her bathroom mirror to apply eye shadow. Perfect shade of blue. Good choice. She wiped the rubber clamps of the eyelash curler with a tissue and worked on her right eye and then the left. She blinked after applying mascara. Yuk, but good enough. No time to start over.

She pulled on her new light blue knit dress and zipped it into place. She smiled at her reflection in the full-length mirror on the closet door. Perfect fit. Perfect color. As good as it seemed in the fitting room earlier in the afternoon. Maybe a little better.

She sat down and checked her off-black panty hose for runners. None there and a good thing since there wasn't another clean pair in the drawer. She slipped into her black patent pumps and stood up for another look. Smiling, she rearranged her ponytail cascading over her right shoulder. Andre would like it. All of it. She turned off the light in the bathroom and bedroom. As she started down the stairs, the doorbell rang. She looked at her watch. Punctual as always.

She opened the door and he stepped in. "You are beautiful tonight."

"Thank you."

"Are you ready to go?"

She grabbed her black coat from the coatrack near the door, and he helped her into it.

"You'll have to be careful on the stairs. It's a little icy."

"I should have broken it up."

"Never mind. I have my farm boots on. Just hang onto me, Mademoiselle."

Susan smiled at him and put her arm in his as they stepped out onto the landing. He guided her slowly down the steps.

"Careful of the sidewalk. It's a little icy, too."

"I'm not going to miss this icy weather," Susan said, as she stepped onto the sidewalk, grateful for his strong arm that steadied her.

He opened the passenger side door for her and held her left elbow as she swung into the cab.

"Thanks," she said as he closed the door. She watched him walk in front of the truck, handsome in his pea coat and farm boots.

As he pulled out onto the rural road, Andre said, "I took the liberty of making a reservation for a little after-theater supper. I should have checked with you about that. I will cancel the reservation if you don't want to do it."

“No. It sounds great. I don’t have to work tomorrow, so let’s do it.”

Andre patted her hand lying on the seat. “I’m glad you want to go. It will give us time to talk about the production and get to know each other a little better.”

“That will be good.”

“Do you go to the Krannert Center events often?” he asked.

“I’m ashamed to say it, but I’ve been there only once before. Just too busy.”

Andre laughed. “Mademoiselle, that is *the definition* of being too busy. We have to do something about that.”

“How about you? Do you go there often?”

“Not as much as I want to. Mostly to see plays, but I have been to some musical events.”

“With friends?” she asked. “I’m sorry. That’s none of my business.”

“Occasionally I have taken a woman there, but no one as beautiful as you are tonight.”

Susan laughed. “Tell me. Is it your French heritage that gives you such a silver tongue?”

Andre laughed. “Maybe and maybe not. Perhaps instead it was my grandfather, the American soldier who came back and convinced his French woman to marry him. I think he was and still is a persuasive person. To tell the truth, I have wondered about that. But he is a private person. I would never ask.”

He patted her hand again. “I’m just glad that we are together this evening.”

She nodded her head yes and smiled.

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Andre pulled the chair out for Susan, and she said, “Thank you.”

“They have some decent selections for a late supper,” Andre said.

“I’ve never been here. Maybe I can learn something about late supper selections and incorporate them into my restaurant’s menu, with some good marketing.”

Andre looked at her and frowned.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I wish you could forget about work for the evening. That’s all.”

“You’re right. Sorry about that.”

She looked back at the menu. “So, what do you recommend?” she asked.

With a twinkle in his eyes and a smile, he leaned toward her and said, “I like the crepes, and that *is* the French in me. I made crepes with my gra-mere, standing on a step-stool.”

“Which ones do you like?”

“None of them are as good as the ones I make, but I do order the chicken mushroom spinach crepes here and the three berry crepes when I want something sweet.”

“You’ve sold me on the berry crepes.”

He signaled the waitress and ordered berry crepes and decaf coffee in French.

When the waitress left, he smiled and said, “It’s a little game we play. She is going to the University Lille to study this summer, and she likes to practice her French. It’s a wonderful university in a beautiful city. I’ve been to the city many times and would like to go again someday.”

“I’m sure she appreciates your thoughtfulness.”

“I make deliveries to this restaurant. Now and then she opens the delivery door when I ring.”

He took a sip of water. “What did you think of the musical tonight?” he asked.

“I enjoyed it. Did you?”

“I was a little disappointed in the leading man.”

“How so?”

“I expected a better voice in a traveling Broadway cast and his acting wasn’t good either. His timing was off.”

Susan studied him. “How do you know so much about musicals?”

“Well, I don’t really. But I was in three musicals in high school that won in state competition. I played Tony in ‘West Side Story,’ and won an award for it.”

“Wow!” What else did you do in high school?”

“Competitive soccer and track and field.” He grinned at her.

“Actor, singer, guitar player, athlete, farmer, soldier! I don’t understand how all those things fit together.”

He shrugged his shoulders. “It just happened. It’s who I am.”

The waitress returned with their crepes and smiled at Andre as she said, “Bon appetit.”

He returned the smile and said, “Merci.”

Susan took a bite of her crepes. “This is wonderful,” she said.

“It’s acceptable, but I will show you ‘wonderful’ when I make crepes for you.”

“Humility is not your strongest trait.”

“I am merely telling the truth.” He shrugged his shoulders.

Susan laughed and took another bite of crepes.

“Now, it’s your turn to tell me more about your high school days,” he said.

“I already told you some of that.”

“Come on. Tell me what you liked to do back then.”

“I worked on the school newspaper and tutored and played competitive tennis. We were pretty good. We won some awards.”

“Tennis. I always wanted to learn how to play tennis. Will you teach me?”

“My roommate Lindsay and I played some during our freshman year at the university, but I haven’t picked up a racquet since then. After my parents died, I was working too hard to get enough money to finish my degree. Then since I graduated I’ve been working too hard to play. Lindsay has nagged me about it now and then, but we haven’t played.”

“When spring comes, you can help me buy some equipment and teach me how to play.”

“I would have to refresh my skills before trying to teach you or anybody else. I don’t know.”

Susan studied her plate.

“I wish I could have seen you in your tennis outfits. The short skirts. You do have the legs for that kind of skirt.”

She looked up to find Andre smiling. “I don’t mean to embarrass you. I’m just telling the truth. Just the truth.”

“OK. That’s enough of your truth-telling. What’s going on at your uncle’s sunflower farm?”

“I talked to him today. They’re just digging out from a blizzard. He’s really happy about all the snow they’ve had this winter. It will be good for the new crop.”

“Does he rotate the crops like they do here in Illinois?”

“He hasn’t been, but I’m looking into it. I’m not sure I could convince him. He thinks it’s not necessary. He may be right. I’d hate to spend a year without the sunflowers. It wouldn’t seem right.”

“What do you like about all that snow and wind in North Dakota? Do you like it just because it’s good for the sunflowers?”

“No. I like it because it’s a personal challenge to get around in that weather and a comfort to be inside out of the storm. I guess it’s sort of like you don’t know how lucky you are until you have some bad times and have to find a way through. The worst times I’ve had were in the war, and I’ve pretty much found my way through with just a few scars. I hope I don’t have more bad times ahead, but you never know.”

He reached for Susan’s hand and squeezed it. “You’ve had more than your share of bad times. I admire how you’ve found your way through.”

“Maybe not all the way through, but I’m doing pretty well. Thank you, Andre.”

They finished their crepes in silence.

“Are you ready to go now?” he asked.

Susan looked at her watch. “Wow, we’re about to close the place down. I had no idea it was getting so late.”

Andre left cash on the check and helped Susan into her coat.

When they stepped out of the restaurant, snow swirled around them as they walked arm in arm to his pickup truck.

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Andre reached for her hands and steadied her as she stepped onto the ground. The snowflakes swirled around them as they walked up the steps and onto the landing of her townhouse.

“I don’t really mind this kind of gentle snow. It’s kind of pretty. It’s the horizontal snow that I hate.”

She turned to look up at him and met his long, lingering kiss.

She pulled away. “I had a good time tonight. A really good time. Thank you for everything.”

He pulled her close to him and kissed her again. “When can I see you again?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. We can figure it out.” He silenced her with another kiss. He stepped to the door and put the key in the lock and pushed it open.

“I hope I don’t have to wait another week to see you. How about tomorrow night?”

“I’m sorry. I can’t tomorrow night.”

“Good night sweet Susan. I’ll give you a call.” He kissed her on her snowy head and hurried back to his truck. He started the engine and looked back at her door closed tight. Maybe next time. Sometime soon. Maybe she will let me in. Surely, she can tell the difference between me and the man who hurt her. Got to find a way to help her get through the damage the bastard did. And, don’t have much time to do it.

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Susan pulled the blue knit dress over her head and hung it back in the closet. Andre liked it, maybe a little too much. Would have been good to see him again tomorrow night. How could anyone be so handsome? So complicated? So lovable? So hard to resist? How can I keep it casual? What in the hell am I going to do about him?

She removed her makeup and turned off the light in the bathroom and hurried into her bedroom, hoping to get her mind on something else. Anything else but him.

She turned off the bedside lamp and slipped under the covers. She closed her eyes and saw him sitting across the restaurant table, smiling, just telling the truth. Why does he have to be so French? So charming?