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## The Meeting

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# The Meeting

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Laura Sue Lindsey

It is late. The dark streets are wet and the freezing drizzle mists the shoulders of well-dressed men looking about for their cars. A woman comes through the Hall's doors. In her black wool wrap, she looks quite white; she is very straight and tall, but this is merely an illusion of pump heels and breeding. She remains motionless, letting a flood of people pass her on the stairs until only the last trickle chatting in the light keep her from being left entirely behind. Several of the men have glanced at her in passing, she is a handsome woman without an escort in such weather, but their solicitude is returned by a cold and empty smile, a professional dimple and elegant fidget with her glove. Her gaze continues to hold its place on the drive in front of the building.

"It's a cold night to be standing outside. Can we give you a lift somewhere?" The man is young and proud of his wife whose hand he has tucked in the crook of his arm. They have the look of committee volunteers; the exhausted relief of people who "pull it off." She notices the wife pinching him hard through his coat, and has no doubt he will soon regret inviting a strange woman to get into their car.

"I'm waiting for someone. Thank you." She brushes off the moisture collecting on her coat and gives her gloves a final tug before descending the stairs. In the parking lot, discarded programs scatter as icy gusts of wind blow down the empty streets.

She is alone and surrounded by the sounds of a sleeping city; the far-off clanging of metal, the swish of steam rising from dark factories, even the neon signs have a humming noise only heard this time of night. With an anxious and hurried look, she searches the entrances of dark alleys, pulling her light jacket up around her ears and pushing her hand deep into her pocket. A drunk in a truck honks and hangs his head out the window to yell out unintelligible babble. She would be frightened, but the realization that she has found the right alley pushes thoughts of danger out of her way.

She had been late and the parking lot full. In the powder pink safety of dusk, she'd concentrated more concern on the condition of her shoes from the long walk than remembering her choice of parking locations. The entire night became a disaster as soon as the concert had started and she was forced into a seat without having found her companions for the evening. Somehow they had managed to leave without her as well. Then standing on the stairs like that. Her heels tap a rapid staccato remembering the humiliation.

She stands under the last bit of light and searches her purse for keys. The "clink" when she drops them on the

cement causes her to pause, listening as if the sound might have attracted "some person." A rustle of papers and movement a few yards ahead confirms the idea. She grabs the keys and begins to back out of the alley, determined to find a policeman to escort her back to her car. The stupidity of her position becomes obscenely clear when she hears a cough coming from the alley.

"Don't worry lady. I'm just sleeping here. That must be your car down there, right?"

The voice rises from beneath a pile of newspapers. The man himself looks as if he might be another bundle of trash blown into the doorway. He is white, that much she can make out, and old; his beard spreads like dirty paste down his shirt front. He struggles to get up and she watches him hop down the side of the building pressing his hand against the wall for support. One of his legs drags behind and the ankle is twisted.

"Stop there," she orders, "I'm going to go get a policeman to walk me to my car. You better leave before I get back." She spins around and attempts to run, but her heels bend under and jam in the crack of sidewalk.

"Don't do that lady. I'm not hurting anyone. See?" He raises his hands. The lady is having trouble with her shoes and he stands there with his hands in the air while she pulls one shoe out of the sidewalk and the other off her foot. "They'll run me into a shelter." He can see she is thinking things over. "I heard that drunk out there. Maybe he's looking for you. This is a bad part of town...I was kind of watching your car, too."

"I just bet you were."

"I was. That's a real nice car and I was going to scare anybody off if they tried to steal it." He hadn't really thought of that, but the words seemed to be calming her down. If she told the police he was out here they'd find him, and he was in no mood to sleep on the floor with a bunch of kids and dirty winos again. His own stench was bad enough.

"Oh, alright, but keep your hands up."

As she came close, he could see her skin was white as paper and her legs were just little bony creaky things without those tall shoes on. She was clutching the shoes and her purse against her ribs and walking in her stockings. He couldn't figure the knuckle-headedness of some people. If those earrings were real, they could keep someone like him off the street for months; an amount worth more than the price of a life to some. She passed in front of him and he thought, that was that; but then she

turned back around and started to say something. Her face is very beautiful, he thought, but she should eat more. It's a crazy world with these rich people starving themselves like that.

"Here."

The lady's arm reached out from her body and he felt confused, not knowing what she wanted him to do. He shuffled along the wall until they were face to face. Her odor of perfume and soap was strong. Careful not to touch his fingers, she held out some money by a corner and he pulled free two five dollar bills. He never looked at her face again, just the money, money from heaven.

"Thanks lady, I can really use this," he spoke into his shoes, "but try to stay out of these alleys from now on. There's some pretty bad folks down some of these places." He was relieved to hear the car door close behind her and the engine start.

The ten dollars wanted spending and he thought he'd try the late night diner down on Kentucky. Maybe if they saw the money first, that he was there for more than coffee, they'd let him in. The neon coffee cup in the window could be seen flashing two blocks away and he cursed his useless leg, thinking about the hot bowl of chili he was set on ordering.

Just before he opened the door, he felt the wind freeze hard against his chin and laughed, rubbing the bills inside his pocket. The force of his good mood caused his empty stomach to cramp and growl. Through the glass, he could see people inside begin to look up from their eggs and papers. "That sure was a nice lady," he thought. "I should have asked her to join me. You know Sam, sometimes you've got the manners of a damn dog." He opened the door and stood in the heat and stared at the bright lights of the diner. The chili smelled good tonight.

