

Chapter IX

Madam Stella's Fashion Boutique

November 21, 1925 – December 25, 1925

After returning from Ensenada, Curly still had one week of his leave left. Their birthdays and anniversary were fast approaching and he was in a quandary as to what to get Geannie. He didn't see how he could top the piano from last year. Not to mention the airplane ride in the fall. The things they had done during the month of November alone were hard to beat.

Curly thought and stewed over it for some time. Then he got the notion that he wanted to buy her a new outfit. Something nice. Something she could wear to the Officers Ball and Christmas party. Most of her nicest clothes she had coordinated with his uniforms. While getting ready for church on the Sunday after returning from Ensenada, she mentioned the fact, not really suggesting that she would like anything different.

That is when he got the idea. How hard could it be? The truth is, Curly didn't have a clue and what's worse, he didn't have a clue that he didn't have a clue. All of his uniforms were standard issue. Not much to that. He did have a bit of a civilian wardrobe that Geannie had got for him. Yes, he had been clothes shopping with Geannie before and found her approach quite tedious. When he needed a new shirt for example, he went into the store, thumbed through the rack, saw something that caught his eye, checked the size, paid for it, took it home and wore it.

He knew what Geannie liked and didn't like. She didn't like the flapper look. She liked to emphasize her figure without flaunting it. As for her hair, she kept it just past her shoulders. The tight curls that were popular at the time didn't hold in her hair. Rather, the natural wave to her auburn hair prevailed. Using rollers in her hair did enhance the effect. She parted it on the left side and brushed it behind her left ear; the right side covering her ear.

The flapper fashion did however usher in a revolution in women's fashions and Geannie liked much of what was showing up the store windows. She didn't like the pant suits that women were beginning to wear. She typically wore dresses or skirts with the hem right at her knees, but she had several that were longer. She really liked the new women's undergarments on the market. They were much more comfortable and flexible than the corsets she used to wear.

So Curly hatched a plan. He was going to go shopping and get her a new outfit. As a ruse, he found a reason to attend a briefing at the air station. He dressed in his uniform and left home. When he left, he would only say that he would be gone a while. Besides Geannie had things to keep herself busy.

Oh, he did go to the briefing alright, but it only lasted a half an hour. Then he caught a ferry across the bay and took a cab to downtown San Diego. He had the cabbie drop him off in the main shopping district. He hadn't walked very far before he found an upscale women's apparel shop and went in.

The ringing of the of the bell alerted the sales clerk who had been helping two women already in the store. "May I help you, sir?" she greeted him. The lost look in his eye told her that she really had a live one. Not to be dishonest, but she knew she could take advantage of his naivety.

"Yes, ma'am," Culry replied. "I'm looking for something for my wife for our birthdays and anniversary. I mean her birthday." The sales lady listened patiently as he went on to explain. "You see, we have the same birthday and that is also our anniversary."

"How long have you been married?" she asked with great interest. Her interest was more playing along than sincere.

"Four years on the seventh." he responded proudly.

"Do you know her size, Commander?" She asked knowing full well from his uniform that he was actually only a Lieutenant (junior grade). It was simply flattery on her part.

"That's Lieutenant, ma'am." he corrected her. "Well she is five feet seven inches tall, medium build, and weighs about a hundred and forty pounds," Curly responded confidently not realizing that he hadn't answered her question.

The sales lady tried another approach. "Do you know her measurements?" she asked.

"Ummm," Curly thought for a moment. "Umm, yes." he said reaching for his wallet. "She had me help her measure herself a while back for something she was ordering from a catalog. I thought the information might come in handy some time, so I wrote it down." Looking at the slip of paper he retrieved he continued, "She is thirty seven inches around her... um, you know." He began to blush.

"Her bust?"

"Um, yeah." Curly stammered.

"Go on." she encouraged.

He continued, "Thirty three and a half inches around just under her, um..." he paused, "... um, bust. Twenty six inches across the middle."

"Her waiste?"

"Umm... Yeah." he uttered in frustration. He concluded, "And thirty seven inches around her hips."

The sales lady made a mental note of the measurements she had been given and began to construct a mental image of the woman he was shopping for. But she still needed one more piece of information. "How full is she in the bust?" she asked.

"Um... Before or after she nurses our daughter?" he answered.

The sales lady was probably beginning to wonder what rock he crawled out from under. Persistent in wanting to make a sale, she said, "Never mind. I think I have enough information."

She had just one question for Curly. "Dose she wear a corset or a brassiere?" she asked.

Caught off guard again, he responded with, "Or a what?"

"A brassiere." she said. Then she repeated her question, "Dose she wear a corset or a brassiere?" She went on to explain, "You see, it makes a difference in the way the bodice fits?"

Not sure what a bodice was, Curly answered her question as quickly and simply as possible. "A brassiere." The hue of the blush on his face had grown several times brighter.

Changing the subject, she directed Curly's attention toward the styles of dresses she had in Geannie's size. She began pulling items off the racks. She laid them out in a manner for Curly to look over. He picked them up one at a time and held them out to look at more closely. The sales lady patiently stood back and gave him time and space to look them over.

As he tried in his mind to picture them on her, he selected two dresses that he really liked. He couldn't tell from looking at them, as they hung limp. He needed to see them filled with a body to really tell. Then he got an idea.

"Excuse me ladies." He said approaching the two women still browsing through racks of clothes. I am trying to decide which of these to buy for wife. Would you mind trying them on for me?" Curly asked, "You're both about her size."

He got an immediate response from one of the women, "I beg your pardon, sir!" she blurted.

"Oh, come on Sis." the other one jumped in. "We came here to try on clothes didn't we. Lets help the gentleman out." she said as she took one of the dresses.

"Well, alright." the other agreed as she took the other dress. A few minutes later, the two women came out of the dressing room and modeled for him.



The sales lady, seeing even more potential sales encouraged them to parade down the aisle as if it were a fashion runway. They began to have fun with it and tried their best to act like professional models. They would stop and turn around to show off the dress they had on. All the time the sales lady raving about how fabulous the two women looked in what they were wearing.

The sales lady then began putting accessories with the dresses. She introduced jewelry, scarves, and handbags. She had them try on shoes and hats.

"What size hat does your wife wear, sir?" the sales lady asked.

"Umm. Actually Geannie and I are the same size." Curly responded.

"Splendid!" the sales lady responded as she snatched his peaked officer's cap off of his head. She

first placed it on the head of the the unwilling model to compare her size. It fit her a little loose. Then she placed it on the willing model. It was way to big for her. "We'll try the hats on you first, sir." she snapped, leaving his hat perched on the woman's head for the moment.

For the next few minutes, she embarrassed Curly even further by having him try on hat after hat. The ones he liked she had the models put on to match them up with the dresses they were wearing.

Finally Curly decided that he liked one outfit over the other. "I really like the peach colored dress and hat," he declared. "The only thing I am not sure about it the straight waist. Geannie likes her clothes more fitted."

The sales lady was right on it. She got behind the model, the reluctant one, and began gathering the loose fabric until it fit snugly to the woman's figure. Then with one hand still holding the back of the dress, she stepped between them and with the other hand did the same to the other dress.

Curly looked them over closely. Again he blushed as he studied the two rather shapely women who he didn't know. Finally he made up his mind, he wanted the peach dress. It had five pleats around the bottom that came up about halfway to the hip line. It had an orange bow attached to the right side of the dress just below the hip with a matching collar. The short sleeves capped the shoulders and blended into the bodice at an angle.

Releasing the willing model to go change out of her dress, she kept the other one captive.

"Now if your wife is five seven," the sales lady went on, "the hem would come just about to her knees." she said as she hiked up the hem, revealing the shorter womans legs. Her blush increased about three shades as this strange man looked at her legs.

"That's the look she likes." Curly happily exclaimed. "Yes! I like it."

By then, the other lady had changed and had returned. "Oh, that looks good on you. Sis." she exclaimed.

The sales clerk released the gathered material. "Now stay put, dear," she instructed the unwilling model. "I'm just about through with you."

Directing her attention to Curly, "I could easily have it altered." she told Curly. "May I suggest," she went on, "that we move the bow up a few inches between the hip and waist. I think it would help emphasis her figure."

"Oh!" she exclaimed excitedly. "I could attach a bow to the hat as well. See how the short, three quarter brim arcs around to the left. I could put a bow right here," she said pointing to a place on the hat, "and it would be in line with the bow on the dress."

Curly just shook his head in agreement.

"You may go now, dear." she said releasing her captive.

The other lady, still holding the dress she had modeled, said to the sales clerk, "I'll take this one, along with the hat, hand bag, and shoes."

"Splendid, my dear. It looked just...", the sales lady went on as she diverted her attention to from Curly and rang up the purchase.

The second woman returned with the items she had modeled and handed them to Curly without saying a word. Catching the sales ladies attention, she asked, "Do you have another one just like it in my size?"

Delighted, the sales lady took care of the second woman and rang up her purchase.

As the two women were about to leave the shop, Curly approached them one more time. "Thank you, ladies." he said. "I could have never figured it out without your help."

The accommodating woman replied, "Why it was our pleasure." She extended her hand. As she excitedly shook his hand. She continued, "That was so much fun! That dress is to die for. I hope your wife just loves it."

The other woman simply nodded her head and coldly said, "Good day, sir."

"Ladies." Curly said as they left the shop.

The sales woman wasn't finished with Curly yet. She took the measurements that Curly had provided and began adjusting an adjustable torso frame to match her height and figure. Once the frame was adjusted, she mounted the dress on to it and began fitting it. Curly wondered why she just didn't do that to begin with.

Once it was all fitted, she asked "What do you think,sir?"

Curly told her that it all looked great.

Leaving it mounted, she told him that she could have it ready the end of the week.

She rung up all of the items, including the hat, handbag, and scarf and presented him with the total amount.

Curly reached for his billfold and fingered through his cash. "I don't have quite that much." he said. "What if you leave out the handbag?"

She gave him the new amount.

He had that much, and handed it over.

"Thank you so much Commander. I'm sure your wife will be thrilled. I'll have it ready for you at the end of the week." She said handing him a bag containing the rest of the merchandise.

"Thank you ma'am. Actually," Curly said as an after thought, "could you hang on to this for me until then?"

"Certainly. I'd be happy too. Oh sir, I need to get your name."

"Sheffield Brason. Good day, ma'am"

As Curly left the shop, the sales lady who actually owned the shop was very pleased with the results of her efforts. Her satisfaction was interrupted as another customer entered the shop and she turned her attention to her.

As Curly left the shop, he was exhausted from the ordeal but confident that Geannie would love it. At the end of the week, he returned to the shop to pick up the dress.

“Oh, Commander.” the sales woman greeted him as he entered the shop. Curly didn't bother to attempt to correct her this time. “Let me get your merchandise for you. I'll just be a moment.”

“Thank you, ma'am.” Curly responded politely. He just wanted to get in and get out as quickly as possible.

A moment later she returned. “I still have the hand bag. Would you like to purchase it to complement the dress?” she asked thrusting it into Curly's hands. Before he could respond, she continued, “I just received a shipment of shoes. There is one style that would look lovely with it as well. I have it in several sizes. Would you chance to know her shoe size?”

Curly's head was spinning. “No ma'am. I don't know her shoe size. You know,” he said trying to cut her off, “maybe I could get them for her for Christmas.”

“What a splendid idea. Why don't you come back then. Now, sir. If you would like, I could gift wrap these for you. It's on the house.”

“Yes ma'am. That would be great.” Curly agreed.

The sales lady disappeared into the back room. A moment later she returned with a beautifully gift wrapped package, complete with a ribbon and a bow. Conveniently attached to the ribbon was a little tag with the name and address of the shop on it.

Curly left the shop swearing that he would never set foot in there again. He took a cab back to the ferry dock, crossed the bay to the air station and stashed it in his locker with his flight gear.

Curly's leave had expired. It had been a wonderful thirty days. The visit from the Austins and the suite at the Hotel de Coronado and the trip to Ensenada made it a wonderful vacation. But now it was over and Curly reported for duty on December 1st. The first week and a half of December was filled with routine training missions.

Curly and Geannie celebrated their twenty seventh birthdays and fourth wedding anniversary on the seventh. That year it was on a Monday. As usual, that morning Curly only wished Geannie a “happy birthaversary.” That was a new term he came up with. Happy anniversary and birthday was just too much of a mouthful to spit out. He gave her a celebratory kiss but didn't mention anything about a present. Geannie

was left to wonder all day what he had gone and done this time.

That evening as he returned from the air station he brought the complementary wrapped package home with the tag still attached to the ribbon. Geannie had the table set and dinner waiting. Curly noticed right away that Geannie had gone all out. She set out the best of her mismatched dinnerware. "That's what I could have got her." he thought to himself. Curly made a mental note to himself that that would be a great gift for another time. Geannie was in the kitchen so he quickly stashed the gift in the coat closet by the door.

"Hi, Geannie," he called out. "I'm home."

"Happy birthaversary, Flyboy." She greeted him. "That is a great word. I don't know why we didn't come up with that sooner." She set the last of dinner on the table. With her hands free she gave her lover and best friend a hug and a kiss.

"Is Sandy, asleep?" he asked.

"I wouldn't know." Geannie answered. "She's not here, Susan has her for the evening. I'm taking you dancing after dinner." she announced.

Curly smiled, knowing what he had in store for her after dinner. "She can wear her new dress tonight." He thought to himself.

"You made my mother's chicken pot pie!" Curly blurted with excitement. "What's the special occasion?" He laughed.

They talked about their day and what each other had done. Still nothing was mentioned about a gift. When dinner was over, Curly helped clear away and dried the dishes.

Finally, Geannie couldn't stand it any longer. After he put the last dish away she cornered him, put her arms around his neck and demanded. "Alright, Flyboy! Where is it? The suspense is killing me."

"Where's what?" Curly asked trying to look innocent.

"My surprise."

"Oh that. Didn't I tell you, Ensenada was your gift this year."

"Huh uh." Geannine said giving him a playful slug on the shoulder. "Give it to me." she plead.

"Okay, if you insist. Come out here and sit down." he said leading her by the hand.

Geannie sat down.

"Now close you eyes." Curly instructed.

Geannie heard the closet door open and the rustling of paper. She began bouncing her legs on the balls of her feet.

Curly set the package on her lap and Geannie immediately opened her eyes as grabbed the package. The first thing she noticed was the little tag. She picked it up and read it out loud, "Madam

Stella's Fashion Boutique – 141 Main Street San Diego, California.”

“Curly, you didn't?” she moaned.

“Didn't what?” he asked.

“You didn't try to pick clothes for me, did you?” She asked hesitantly. “This could be mighty interesting.” she laughed.

“Well sweetheart, open it already. I think you will love it.”

Geannie had the package ripped open in an instant and looked in. She saw the peach colored hat with the orange bow setting on top of peach colored dress. “Oh, Curly!” She gasped. “Its lovely.” She took the hat out and set it aside and found the scarf. She ran it through her hands and set it beside the hat. Then she gently lifted the dress out by the shoulders and held it out in front of her as she stood up to examine it. “Oh Curly,” she gasped again. Geannie turned it around and held it close to her and looked down over it. “Oh Curly,” she gasped for the third time as she reeled around on her feet.

“Go try it on.” Curly encouraged.

Geannie took the dress, the hat, and scarf and dashed into the bedroom and closed the door behind her. Curly interpreted that to mean that he was to wait right where he was.

In her excitement, Geannie practically ripped off the housedress she had on. From the other room Curly was set at ease as he could hear her squeals of delight as she put it on.

As she stood in front of the mirror while doing it up, she marveled that it fit her perfectly, and it was the just the look she preferred. She put on the hat and wrapped the scarf around her neck.

In a moment she stepped out of the bedroom. Curly knew the dress was beautiful but he was not prepared for how beautiful it looked on her.

Geannie paused for a moment and turned around slowly. “What do you think? How do I look?”

“Very keen.” he said as he rose to his feet.

Then she threw herself into his arms. “Oh Curly,” she gasped yet again. “I think it's perfect!” Then she smothered him with a big kiss.

Then she released herself from his arms and stepped back. “It fits perfectly, how did you manage to pull it off?” She asked.

Curly's only response was, “Lets just say, I had a little help.” Then he added, I got it for you to wear to the officer's ball and Christmas party. You will go to it with me, won't you?”

“Are you asking me out on a date, Lieutenant?” she asked shyly. “I am a married women, you know. What would my husband think?”

“I think he would want you to.” Curly answered.

“Then, I say yes.” Then Geannie realized, “I can wear this dancing tonight! You'd better freshen up,

Lieutenant.” Then Geannie commented off handedly, “Now I need to get some matching shoes and a hand bag.”

“Do you want me in uniform or in a suit and tie?” Curly asked.

“Your uniform, by all means.” she answered. “I want everyone to know that this dame has herself a flyboy!”

Curly changed into his dress uniform while Geannie fixed her hair and put on a dab of Curly's favorite perfume. It was still early when they arrived at the prohibition legal night club. There was plenty of time to dance the evening away and still pickup Sandy and get home before it was too late. After all Curly had to report for duty in the morning.

Later that week, Curly went to sea with his squadron and was gone for six days. While he was away, Geannie bought a Christmas tree and had the apartment all decorated by the time he returned. She had dug out her Christmas records and carols and other sounds of the seasons wafted from her Electrola. Sandy was still too little to realize what all of the excitement was about.

The night of the Officers' Christmas Ball and party arrived. Geannie had hired the teenage daughter of one of the families living in the officer's housing complex to babysit Sandy. She had used this girl on occasion in the past and found her to be very reliable. She had asked her weeks in advance before anyone else could get her first. This girl liked sitting for the Brasons because Geannie paid better than most of the other mothers. Knowing that Sandy was in good hands, they left for the ball.

Geannie was delighted to wear her new dress as they walked arm in arm into the gaily decorated main hangar that had been transformed into a dance hall, complete with a stage for a full orchestra. The hangar was decorated with all of the trimmings of Christmas and of course there was even a Christmas tree. Geannie had spent two days helping the Navy Wives Organization with the decorating.

The far end of the hangar was lined with rows of banquet tables. Geannie and Curly sat with their friends; Shorty and Wilma and Freddy and Susan. Wilma and Susan raved over Geannie's new outfit. She told them how Curly had picked it out all by himself. The two women were even more impressed. If only they knew the whole story.

The evening festivities commenced with a speech from the commanding officer. Following his remarks the chaplain was called upon to say Grace. A lovely catered meal was served by sailors in dress whites who had been assigned the detail. All during the meal the orchestra played softly.

During desert there were more speeches followed by a musical number performed by the Coronado High School choir, a duet by one of the officers and his wife, and even a piano solo by Geannie. The program wrapped up with the entire group singing a few rounds of Christmas carols, as Geannie

accompanied them.

At the conclusion of the program, sharply dressed officers and their elegant ladies poured onto the makeshift dance floor. Curly got the first dance with Geannie. The pilots of Fighting Two were a close knit, cohesive unit and knew each other very well. Well enough to know each other's wives as well. What followed was a mixer as they traded partners for the next several numbers. After having danced with nearly half of the squadron, Curly and Geannie found themselves back together again. Throughout the rest of the evening they traded partners some more. Even pilots from other squadrons or station personnel who Curly didn't know wanted a dance with the pretty lady in the peach dress.

About a week before Christmas, Curly found himself in downtown San Diego. He was about to do something he swore he would never do again. He took a deep breath and opened the door. A chime sounded to alert his presence.

"I'll be with you in a moment." the shrill voice that made him cringe called out.

"Oh Commander." Madam Stella greeted him. "I've been expecting you. I assume you have returned for the handbag."

"Yes ma'am," Curly responded. "And a pair of those shoes you were telling me about."

"Splendid!" Madam Stella replied. "I have the handbag right here. I even took the liberty to attach a matching bow to it. Now, about those shoes," she continued. "Do you know her size?"

Curly was prepared. Or so he thought. Pulling a slip of paper from his pocket he answered, "Yes, Ma'am. I do. While she wasn't looking I measured a couple of her favorite shoes. They were both ten and three quarters of an inch long and three and half inches wide."

That was not quite the answer Madam Stella was expecting, but it was enough for her to work with. Doing a quick calculation in her head, she derived the size.

"How tall did you say your wife is, Commander?" she asked.

Curly reminded her, "She is five feet seven inches."

"Oh yes, of course. And how tall are you sir?" she asked.

Not knowing what that had to do with anything, Curly answered, "Five nine."

Madam Stella continued her rambling, "Well then, we don't want a heel more two inches now do we. A lady should never be taller than her man."

Within a couple of minutes, Madam Stella had selected a pair of shoes in the correct size and matching color. Setting them on the counter she asked, "Will there be anything else?" She asked politely. "Some jewelry, perhaps." She suggested. Picking up a sample bottle of perfume, she sprayed some on her wrist. "I just received this luscious perfume." she said showing her wrist under Curly's nose.

“No thank you, Ma'am.” he replied emphatically.

“Very well, then.” she said ringing up the sale, Then she added, “Now, sir. If you would like, I could gift wrap these for you. It's on the house.”

“By all means.” Curly answered.

Madam Stella disappeared into the back room. A moment later she returned with a beautifully gift wrapped package, complete with a ribbon and a bow. Conveniently attached to the ribbon was a little tag with the name and address of the shop on it. This time, Curly removed the tag.

Christmas morning they exchanged gifts. Geannie was thrilled with the handbag and shoes. They fit perfectly. She wondered how Curly did it! Later in the day, after attending Christmas services at the St Paul's United Methodist Church, they got together with Freddy and Susan, and Shorty and Wilma for Christmas dinner. After all, they were family. A family away from home.

* * * * *

Madam Stella's Fashion Boutique of course is fictional but the two dresses described are from the 1925 McCall's Catalog.

