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Front cover image by Shafran
Book design by Stephanie Van Orman
Author photograph by Alison Quist

<https://tigrix1.wixsite.com/stephanievanorman>
stephanievanorman.blogspot.com
tigrix@gmail.com

His Sixteenth Face

By Stephanie Van Orman

For my husband, who still has that curious look in his eye.

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INTRODUCTION

“What's going on?” I whispered, startled in the darkness.

“I'm holding you,” Christian explained evenly.

Though he was familiar, the feeling of his arms around me was not. He lifted me clean off the bed as if I weighed nothing. In the rocking chair, he settled my head into the space between his chin and his shoulder. His breath feathered down my nose to settle on the moist curves of my lips.

I had to remain calm. If I showed I was excited, even with my heartbeat, the monitors would show it, the nurses would come in and the moment would be lost. I had to stay steady, pretend his warmth, his shape and his closeness meant nothing.

“Why would you do that?” I asked. Though I had never been given this much of him, already I wanted more—his voice. “Did the doctor tell you something about my surgery that he didn't tell me?”

“No,” Christian said, brushing my hair away from my face.

It was the blackest blue in the hospital room, but there were dashes of light everywhere: my monitors blinking my condition, the lights from the building across the courtyard, and the strip of yellow light under the door. We swayed in a waltzing rhythm in the rocking chair, almost like we were dancing. The chair was in the room because I was still young enough to be in the pediatric wing of the hospital. When I looked at it, I tried not to think about all the dead children who had been rocked, and felt their last moment of comfort, before they took those fateful steps into the world of spirits. I thought about the bodies they left behind and wondered how long children had continued to be rocked, even after they had left their fragile bodies behind.

Christian, my would-be guardian angel, held me like a princess in that chair, close to my monitors. He had never rocked me before, and certainly never visited me in the middle of the night. He should not have been there outside visiting hours, but he was there—the greatest gift I had ever been given. Nights alone in the hospital were the hardest. How many times had I dreamed someone was there with me, holding me? I shivered in my happiness. He pulled a blanket over my body and tucked me in like a little girl, except I was being tucked into his arms—enjoying every moment. He smelled expensive and like the grown-up man he was.

He was not holding me because of my girlish dreams. He simply didn't have the heart to stay away. Teenage girls dying of heart disease were irresistible, in that they couldn't be left alone. His feelings for me could not be what I wished. He sat in the chair and held me, a girl so perfectly on the cusp of womanhood, and rocked me as if to lull me to sleep.

If I had been dying under ordinary circumstances, perhaps he would not have visited me after midnight. My tragedy was deeper than the death that loomed ahead of me. Three months before, my parents had both been killed in a car crash. It was a thoughtless accident. My mother had been driving my father on a slick rainy night and while applying her lipstick, she slammed into the support beams of a bridge. She killed them both instantly.

The wreck never seemed real to me.

The problem was that I had never had much to do with my incredibly rich parents. I was always away from them, with nannies or tutors who tried to teach me ballet and how to play the piano. I was only mediocre at any of these paid-for activities. My mother wasn't good at

anything, except looking pretty, which she was skilled at beyond belief. Sadly, I contrived to look nothing like her.

The closest I had ever been to my parents was when they first found out I was sick and that my life was in danger. They pawed over me and petted me, making a fuss. It didn't last. It couldn't last. Not only were children incredibly boring company for socialites, but the gloom that came with the frequent hospital stays took an incredible toll on them. They couldn't handle it. I wasn't getting better and my decline was not fast enough to be a source of drama meaty enough to feed them.

That was when my father gave me a gift. He didn't understand much about me or my specific needs, but he understood that I shouldn't be alone. He asked an acquaintance who worked near the hospital, Christian Henderson, to look out for me. Dad needed my companion to assume guardianship since neither of my parents lived in Edmonton, where I was receiving my treatment. He needed someone he could understand, so he didn't get another nanny. He gave me Christian.

And Christian was glorious. He was patient, thoughtful, bright, so charming and heart winning, it was impossible to explain. I liked him better than all the doctors. He was a young man, not yet thirty. He wore button-down vests that suggested lean muscles underneath and had a habit of turning his entire body into nothing but angles. He would rest his elbow on his knee and place his forefinger on his temple to make triangles and diamonds of his limbs. Speaking through breaks in his fingers, his words always sounded better. Sometimes he'd place one finger on his nose bridge and the other between his eyebrows and look at me through the angle of his fingers like he was looking at me through glass that helped him see better. Truthfully, I realized that until he looked at me that way, I had never been seen. When my eyes shyly met his, I thought that neither my parents nor I were off to a terrible place in the hereafter. After all, there had to be a heaven since there was a Christian.

He took the news of my parents' passing hard. I knew that was why he had snuck in that night. I had surgery coming up in a few days and there was a very real possibility that I might not wake up from it. He held me and I couldn't feel alone, because he was there.

I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and said to him softly, "You don't have to worry about me this much. It doesn't matter."

His eyes flicked toward me.

"It doesn't," I said, continuing listlessly. "I'm going to die soon. You know the odds I'll live through my next operation aren't good. That was why my parents weren't here. My mother couldn't stand to watch me die, and now she won't. Like the little match girl, there will be plenty of people to greet me when I slip out of this world. It doesn't matter, because I was hardly even here." I hoped my words would ease some of the pressure he felt, but I was only fourteen and didn't know how to spin it to make him feel the relief I wanted for him.

Christian looked at me and his eyes were all compassion and personal unrest. "And what if I was your fairy godfather and could twirl you around and make one final wish come true?"

I scowled. "The last thing I want is for you to be my father." My chest hurt and I put a hand to it.

Christian lifted my free hand and took my heart rate. He never paid attention to the monitors and insisted on feeling my heart for himself. My body betrayed me by showing my enthusiasm. Christian could feel the difference. He didn't like the result and reached for the call button.

“Stop it,” I said, putting a hand to his chest. “Can't I have a different heart rate when you offer me a wish? What's your heart rate?”

He laughed slightly and offered me his wrist.

“Can I listen to your heart instead?” I whispered.

“Is that your wish?”

I nodded solemnly.

He smoothed out his shirt over his heart and allowed me to hear it. Listening to the soft pounding made my insides melt, but then another sharp pain flared in my chest.

I gasped and curled myself into a ball.

“Are you all right?”

“It's passing,” I gasped, rubbing my chest. “It's passing. It's okay.”

He put a hand to his forehead and tried to smooth out his concern. I had pains in my chest so often, and the small ones didn't mean much. “I'm sorry, Beth. When your father asked me to watch over you, I hoped I'd bring you flowers once a week, along with some contraband, and we'd laugh a bit.”

“This level of tragedy was not what you expected?”

“No,” he breathed. “This is exactly what I expected. Exactly what I've already gone through many, many, times. Only this time, it feels worse. Like you're mine and I should be able to save you. Like I should be able to stand as a fortress between you and death, and I can't. I can't do anything.”

I had to think of something for him to do that would comfort him, and make him feel like he had done something for me. My brain settled on a thought I had every time I closed my eyes for a procedure. “If I can have one more wish. There is something I want. Something you can do.”

Christian's fingers ran in little patterns down my arm. “Tell me.”

“You could kiss me.”

“I can't,” he said, his voice clipped in the darkness.

“It's the middle of the night. No one would know. I would carry it to my grave. I don't want to die without being kissed and there is nothing else I want.”

It was silent as I waited for his answer. Finally, he said, “If I do this, you can never tell anyone.”

I gave my promise.

He shook his head slightly like he didn't want to before he turned, bent his head, and touched his lips against mine. At first, he stayed perfectly still with his lips sealed shut and the slight fluttering of our breath intermingling. Then ever so slowly, he began moving his lips, and it was completely wonderful. He understood! I didn't want a little girl kiss like a peck on the forehead. I wanted a full-blown, romantic kiss that would leave me windblown long after it was finished. I responded by kissing him the way he kissed me. It was only seconds before he had taken it too far and my heart was hammering out of control. My monitors began beeping wildly and Christian suddenly let go of me.

He looked at my flushed cheeks and the smile on my face.

“This is wrong,” he said defiantly.

“I won't tell anyone,” I reassured him and tried to think of something to say that would make him kiss me again.

Before I could say another word, I was neatly deposited back in my bed, Christian had flicked my bed lamp on and a nurse had entered the room to check on me.

“I'm going to be moving Beth to a different hospital,” he informed her curtly.

“You can't,” she stuttered. She had been my nurse for a long time. “She can only be moved by her legal guardian.”

“That's me. I'll be removing her tonight.”

The nurse was appalled but took him to the front desk to make the necessary arrangements. There was a lot of work to do to get me transferred to a different hospital.

Something inside Christian had snapped. I had never seen him like that before. He had always been friendly. When my parents died, he had been both crestfallen and charming to make my pain less, but in those moments after he kissed me, he had changed completely to a man I didn't know. The boyish charm was gone in a single breath. Suddenly, he had become someone who knew all about action and even how to change the entire world.

My head was spinning as I was detached from my machines and bundled into the backseat of his car, where he had set up a bed for me. He buckled my seatbelt and closed the door. I pulled a gray wool blanket over my legs and gazed at him as he got behind the wheel. I had never felt so safe in my whole life. Then we were on the road with the stars being the only things moving as quickly as we were. Where we were going, I didn't know. Why he thought a different hospital would be better didn't make sense to me. I was already at a better hospital, which was why I wasn't near my family in Toronto, but in Edmonton.

It didn't matter.

What happened next has always been a blur in my mind. I don't even remember getting out of the car. I remember green walls and the operating room lights in my eyes. Then, nothing. In my haze, I knew they were going to cut me and I didn't know if I would wake up again. I looked around for Christian, but I didn't see anyone. There seemed to be no one there but the doctor. Then the anesthetic kicked in and there was blackness.

That was my last operation. I had another scar down the center of my chest to add to my collection, but I never closed my eyes on an anesthetic again. My recovery felt slow, but was fast according to the new doctors in Mexico when I awoke. To my astonishment, I was recovering at a private hospital in a tiny village on the coast and spent most of my days lounging on the beach and sipping something cold.

What treatment did these doctors have that the doctors in Edmonton didn't? Aside from my scars, I felt perfect.

The whole while, Christian was there, reading to me, then diving into the water for a quick stretch. He needed a lot of quick stretches.

I asked him questions in those days. What happened? How was I healed? He always pretended he didn't hear me and if I pressed the question, he would walk away, promising to be back soon. I was too weak to hound him and eventually I understood that he would never tell me what happened, or what he had done.

In his silence, I finally understood that he had done something unthinkable, possibly criminal, something he did not believe he could do to stand as a fortress between me and death. It was a secret. He would look at me across a room and I could feel secrets simmering between us, secrets we had together and secrets we kept from each other.

My secret was the love I felt for him because my feelings for him had to be caged. We couldn't be lovers. He was a man thirteen years older than me, and he had become my legal guardian. The reality of that fact meant that everyone believed that our relationship resembled parent and child, even if he was not my biological father. How unsavory it would be if the people around us got an inkling of my feverish longing. It had to be hidden from everyone: from him, from the world, and sometimes from myself.

Alone, I could acknowledge my true feelings. I loved him completely. I dreamed of the day when the secrets that stood between us would crumble to dust and only we would be left.

CHAPTER ONE

Runaway Girl

“I’m not sure if I should pity you or envy you,” Trinity said thoughtfully as we spied on the alumni garden party. From the balcony above, she eyed Christian's impeccable shoulders and smacked her tongue stud on her front teeth. “Remind me. Is it a good thing Christian Henderson is your dad?”

I sighed. “He's my legal guardian. That doesn't make him my father.”

“He may as well be for all the fun you can have with him. How long have you been living with him?”

I corrected her. I hadn't lived with him at all.

Leaning over the railing, I fixed my eyes on Christian. As I looked at his face, his mysterious face, I felt my resolve harden. My time with him was almost up. Once I turned eighteen and graduated from high school, he would cut me loose. I was almost finished grade eleven and the reality that I had to drastically change our relationship loomed over me.

It was time to stop doing what he asked. That, in itself, was going to be difficult. I took immense pleasure in doing exactly what he suggested. I took the classes he suggested, wore the clothes he thought looked best on me, reread his messages, and thought constantly of what would please him. The problem was, if I kept playing by his rules, he would keep me firmly within the boundaries he found the most comfortable.

Those boundaries did not please me.

I looked down on him working the crowd and thought of who he was and what I had learned during the past three years.

What did he look like? His hair was wavy, tawny shade of blond. He kept quite shaggy until he swept it off his brow with mousse to expose his perfect widow's peak. He could come off as boyish until his forehead was exposed, and then he looked like a man who could be suave or ruthless as the situation dictated. His eyes were hazel but never seemed exactly the same color as the time before. It was like his eyes didn't know if they were green or brown or gray. Color didn't matter. They were his eyes and they could be any color as far as I cared. To me, he was made of perfect shapes: like the triangle of his collarbone, the lump of his Adam's apple in his throat, the angle of his widow's peak, and the squareness of the back of his hand.

If his mood was right, I didn't even see the shapes. He had wonderful eyes for making me excited. Whenever he spoke, he made me feel like he was letting me into a world where only the two of us existed, promising a delicious closeness between the two of us.

Except it didn't last. He always went away.

The longest he had ever stayed with me for a vacation had been the time I was recovering from my final surgery. After that, the holidays were a week at the most. When we were vacationing, I was in paradise, but the time always passed quickly. Soon I was sent back to school, or summer camp, or something intended to enrich my life and keep me away from him.

Christian never hesitated to send me away.

I had to be protected. From what? You would think he was a playboy with mountains of women that had to be hidden from me. I knew he dated from time to time, but those fleeting relationships weren't what kept him from me. His work? He had long since moved along from

his desk job in Edmonton. He was a director in charge of international marketing for a communication company in England. He liked his work and he was good at it, but that wasn't the clincher either. The problem was that wasn't his *only* job.

The fact was, Christian Henderson wasn't his real name.

At the garden party, I watched him shake hands with my English professor. The façade that covered Christian's face was perfect, like everything about him. It was a hair off the forehead night, where the crispness of his shirt paired with the white flash of his smile oozed wealth, education and worldly wisdom. His signature brand of luxury marked him as the best-dressed man in the room, even if he wasn't wearing the most expensive suit. It was the way he walked, the way he presented himself, and the way he gave away his attention. No one could buy or replicate his style because it wasn't real. As I watched him, I didn't see the flawless gentlemen everyone else saw. I only saw the conman who knew how to leave a good impression and wondered what I would exchange for half an hour of the kind of attention he gave others. He never looked at me like he wanted to fool me, charm me, or seduce me.

He was a liar and a gentleman. Everything he was doing, saying, was for my benefit. He had nothing to gain by sweet-talking the faculty. Even if he was a liar, I believed my father would not have been disappointed in his choice, but he was not Christian Henderson.

If he was not Christian Henderson, who was he? What was his real job?

I wished I knew.

Once, when I was staying at a hotel with him in New York, he accepted a phone call for Damen Cross. He didn't realize until after he hung up that I overheard his conversation. I was fifteen then, and suspicious, so I read a few of his messages on his laptop. He had a unique operating system and unfamiliar programs. I found a request for him to go to Israel.

He was furious when he caught me. I was terrified when he slammed the laptop shut. For a split second, I thought he was going to hit me. He didn't, but he sent me back to the boarding school that evening. Before he sent me away, he gave me an incredibly father-like lecture on snooping. I wouldn't treat my father's things that way, would I? I had no idea. I had no father.

On the plane, I was furious. Christian wasn't my father and his imitation of him made me sick to my stomach. The thing was, he felt like he had to put me in a box where his 'other lives' didn't affect me. There was no need for the partition. It didn't matter to me what Christian had done or was currently doing in his double, or triple, life. Whatever power he had, he had used it to save my life. I knew the sacrifice had been too much. Though he did everything he could to stop his discomfort from showing, something was bothering him that had not bothered him before my operation. Maybe he owed money. Maybe he was running from someone. Whatever was happening, at fifteen years old, I didn't know how to react.

The next time I heard from him, he sent me a letter, postmarked Liberia. I didn't write him back, because I wasn't sure how to proceed. I needed to know the truth about the way he lived his life, but he wouldn't tell me. I didn't see him again until Christmas when he took me to Paris and showered me with presents. He acted like himself and even apologized for being so angry in New York. I was probably just trying to check my social media? That was the moment I learned that in order to stay with him, I needed to refrain from asking questions, or lifting one finger to find out the truth. I loved him unconditionally and I needed to give him the freedom to handle whatever he had to handle without my interference. I cried like a baby to have him back... even if he lied to me constantly.

Since then, I learned to be discreet when I heard him referred to by another name. I let him think I hadn't heard. It was easy. He wanted to believe I was ignorant. Both of us knew the truth would separate us. I had to play dumb if I wanted to stay with him.

So far, I'd heard him referred to as Christian Henderson, Damen Cross, Riley Fulks, and William Farris.

Trinity interrupted my thoughts. "Look," she said, "my parents just walked in."

"They look pissed."

"They are."

I glanced at her. "Are you getting expelled this time?"

"Probably not. It looks like dad came carrying his extra-heavy checkbook. See the bulge in his pocket? He's gonna pay them off."

"Didn't he already pay for the gazebo in the park?"

"And the stone gardens," Trinity admitted. "Those knuckleheads just don't get the message. I don't want to go to school here. I've said it a million times, but they'd rather go on holiday in the Mediterranean ten months of the year than play house with me. Why aren't they worried about me going astray? I could get addicted to meth or crack, get an STI, or get an abortion. Pissy parents!"

"I still think you're lucky. At least, they're not dead," I said absently, my conversation playing on repeat. I was on repeat because I was thinking about what I needed to do to get Christian's attention. "Trinity, what do you think a girl would have to do to get booted out of this school on her first try?"

"What?"

"I have never been to the disciplinary office. What do you think I'd have to do to get expelled—no negotiation—first try?"

"Well," Trinity said, rubbing her hands together. "The difficulty is hitting that magic number between really annoying the school board and involving the police. You could get thrown out if you made a bomb threat or set a fire in one of the chemistry labs, but do you really want to toy with getting a criminal record? Those old bats on the school board have dealt with so many wild ones that hardly any scam turns their heads. Believe me, I know." She paused and looked at me with shrewd eyes. "But Beth-baby, if you wanted to get Christian's attention by acting up, shouldn't you have started already? We only have one year of high school left."

"Yeah. It's just that for some reason I always thought that once I graduated I'd get to live with him. Tonight, I realized that's never going to happen. Once I finish here, he'll ship me off to a university and phase me out of his life. I'm never going to get to spend any time with him."

Trinity nodded. "I understand. There isn't a girl in this school who doesn't faint every time he picks you up. You should have called in a bomb threat when you were fourteen. They would have gone way easier on you."

I rolled my eyes. "That's the best advice you have?"

"No," she said, grabbing my arm. "You could do the very first prank I ever pulled."

I thought back. "That naked picture you painted of the chairman of the board? No, thanks! I don't know how you kept your gag reflex down."

It stung when she flicked my ear. "No, idiot. That was my first prank in high school. I'm talking about my very first, please-pay-attention-to-me, act of defiance. I pulled it so many times,

my parents stopped reacting, but the first time I did it they were wetting themselves and I bet Christian would, too.”

“What?” I asked curiously.

“I ran away from school.”

“Now, that’s an idea,” I said nodding.

“Do you have money? How far away could you get?”

“I have money,” I hedged.

After I woke up healed in Mexico, consequences started mattering again, and the truth about my parents’ finances came forward. They were oceans deep in debt. After everyone was paid in full, there was a little money for me, but it was nowhere near the amount I would have needed if I was going to live in the luxury they had provided for me. Christian put that money away, and I wasn’t to touch it until I was an adult, but it was peanuts compared to the money he spent on me regularly. All the same, I did have Christian’s money in the form of a credit card. If I used it to pay for flights and accommodations, he would undoubtedly be able to trace me in a jiffy, but the idea wasn’t to run away to a place where he couldn’t find me. The idea was to run away to a place where he would come after me.

“You could give it a try.” Trinity winked and started down the stairs that would lead her to the reception. We were students and weren’t exactly invited, but Trinity didn’t let that bother her. She wasn’t going to miss the chance to see her parents, no matter the consequences.

I breathed in through my nose and out through my mouth to steady my nerves. I hoped I could revert to the little girl I always played when I was with Christian. If I couldn’t be his woman, I had to settle for being his little girl. After one more breath, I was ready and followed Trinity down the grand staircase.

In my school uniform, I sauntered up carefully behind him. He was drinking a glass of champagne and talking to a nondescript parent. I put my fingers over his eyes and said, “Guess who.”

He put his hand on mine and asked, “Is my girl out of bed without permission?”

“Maybe.”

“Is she in her pajamas?”

“No!”

He took my hand off his eyes and turned around to see what I was wearing. “Darling, you look quite respectable. I thought you’d dress up if you decided to crash the ‘adult’ party. It’s like you aren’t even trying to blend in.”

I put my arms around the crook of his arm, pulled his elbow against my chest, and rested my head on his shoulder. If it had been my first time doing that, I doubted he would have allowed it, but I had been doing that since Mexico. It was one of the rare forms of physical contact he allowed. We didn’t hug the way families did. He tolerated my arm clamp with an easy smile and placed a teensy kiss on the corner of my forehead.

The parent beside us started talking, like that level of clinginess in a seventeen-year-old was normal. Nothing was amiss to him. “This must be Beth.” He put out his hand for me to shake and I momentarily had to relinquish my hold on Christian. “Good job sneaking in,” the nameless parent praised. “I don’t know why they don’t allow students to come to these functions. I hardly ever see my boy.” Then his cell phone interrupted him and he excused himself to take the call.

Workaholic, I thought as the man walked away. No wonder he never got to see his son.

Christian turned his head forty-five degrees and whispered. “Beth, if you keep hanging on to me like this, people will think we’re a couple.”

I chuckled and gave him a bit of space, though I kept my hand in the crook of his arm. “That would be so embarrassing... for me. It couldn’t possibly be embarrassing for you. I mean, you’re so old that being seen with a cute young thing like me could only raise your reputation. I can hear them now, whispering about the adorable little woman you have on your arm. When they look at me, they wonder how I could have let my standards fall so totally when I clearly have so much to offer.” This was said to gently mock him. He always spoke of himself like he was so hilariously grand. “The last few times we’ve gone away together, the hotel clerks wondered why we got separate rooms, so it wouldn’t be the first time someone thought we were together.”

Christian glanced at me. “Your school uniform ruins the effect.”

“Too true,” I replied.

His lips parted like he was about to say something, but no words came out. He had been growing more and more distant. He was putting space between us. It was in dark contrast to how we used to talk when we were together. We had conversations like bubbles in the bath, you weren’t sure if they were doing anything until there were none. Like bubbles, his words were often meaningless, as if he was afraid to give himself to me. Even though he used evasive words, there had been thousands of them. Now there were dozens.

He was going to dump me and he wanted it to look natural.

Instead of giving me words, he placed a kiss on the side of my head, like I was a child. When he finally did speak, his words were light and meaningless. “What have you been up to? Slip anything good into the punch? I hate to break it to you, but it was already spiked when I arrived and not with anything tasteful, I might add.”

“I didn’t. That’s more Trinity’s game. I think the adults are plenty capable of getting themselves smashed without my help. Besides, it’s not like alcohol would improve their personalities.”

He laughed. “Probably not.” Then he dumped the rest of his champagne into a plant. He never overdid it with drinks.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked, trying to wheedle out the reason for the distance between us.

“Of course,” he drawled.

“Do you have a girlfriend these days?”

“Are you worried I wouldn’t tell you if such a thing happened?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“What, exactly, do you think would change between us if such a person existed?” he asked. His eyes darted around my person to see if there was something about me that he had missed, and then his gaze returned to my eyes, where the challenge in his question lingered.

I should have handled his direct gaze better. Unfortunately, I involuntarily averted my eyes and swallowed everything that had been waiting on my tongue.

“Besides,” he continued, “I would never refer to a woman I was seeing as my girlfriend. Girlfriends are for young men. You should be someone’s girlfriend.”

“Why would I want a boyfriend? You make being single look so charming.”

Again, he looked me over to see if he had missed something. His eyebrows lifted and dropped quickly as he dismissed whatever he had been thinking. I realized he was looking for signs of

maturity as he discarded his empty goblet on a waiter's tray. "To change the subject," he began slyly. "I was going to ask you where you wanted to go this summer. I was thinking about Sydney or maybe Okinawa. Want to go swimming?"

"What about your place? I know you have a flat in London I haven't seen."

He shrugged his immaculate, elegant shoulders. "It's boring, and I only stay there for work. It's nothing but a bed and a window."

"Yes, but I haven't seen out that window," I persisted, showering myself in innocent enthusiasm.

"It's an alley-way, darling. An alley-way. I'd much rather take you scuba diving."

I sighed and tried a different tack. "Christian, do you realize that I don't have a home? I may not have visited my parents' home more than twice a year when they were alive, but at least that was a place filled with pictures of us, books we had read, music we chose instead of elevator music, motel art, and old magazines. I haven't had anything like that in years and I'm so lonesome for it I could die. Can't you give me a place that could be my home?"

While I was speaking, he looked worried, but he calmed down considerably by the time I finished and answered smoothly. "Is that all? Why didn't you say something sooner? I hate being in the same place. I can't put down roots, but I can understand it if you want to hang your Christmas stocking on the same hearth every year. I'm sure we could arrange for you to visit one of your aunts."

"No," I interrupted. "I don't want to see them. They're still disgruntled that my parents didn't have enough money to spread around. Don't try to fob me off on them. I want a home with *you*."

He shook his hand dismissively. "You know my work has me hopping planes every other day. I would never be there."

"Fine. I bet I'd see you more in London than I do now."

Christian looked like he was tired of talking to me and I knew from his expression that he had no intention of giving in to my demand.

After that, he danced with me twice and Trinity once. Then he faked a yawn, patted me on the head and said his good-nights.

I stared at the pristine lines of his back and shoulders and felt like clawing my heart out. He was about to get a shock. I was going to run away from school.

Running away from school was too easy. Maybe it was because I was seventeen instead of eight like Trinity had been, but I felt like it should have been harder. I made flight reservations online and then I faked a headache to get out of class. I picked up my bag and slipped over the fence by the pool. That was how Trinity always snuck out and, for some reason, no one ever clued in that she just hopped over the fence by standing on the crates of salt. Once outside, I called for a ride and went to the airport.

It was hard for me to decide where to run away to. In the end, I decided to stay in Canada, but the farther away from Toronto, the better. There was a stable outside Calgary that I was quite fond of, so I decided to go there.

The trip was uneventful, as was checking into the hotel.

Day one: I hoped to make myself as much of a nuisance as possible, so I stayed in the hotel room and racked up the bill.

Day two: I took a taxi to the stable and went riding all afternoon. Except that I hadn't been riding in ages and my thighs and backside ached like murder by the time I dismounted and went back to the city. At the hotel, there was no sign of Christian.

Day three: After the bruises from the day before, I didn't want to go riding again. Instead, I lounged in the tub for most of the morning and then went shopping in the afternoon. I wished Christian would somehow meet me in the mall. Shopping without his opinion was a waste of time. In the evening, I had supper by myself in the hotel restaurant. I drove myself crazy staring at the door. Impatient, I thought that no matter where Christian was in the world when he found out I was missing, he should have been able to make it to Calgary by then.

Day four: Sick of Calgary and depressed that Christian hadn't shown up, I decided to take a train to Vancouver and made plans to be on the next one. The journey would take a day and a night, so he would have to meet me in Vancouver if he showed up at my hotel after I left. Whatever. I went to the dining room and ordered four lobster tails without any sides to feed my sorrows.

Day five: I didn't leave the room. I sulked and watched day-time TV until nightfall and then I watched late-night TV, which wasn't any better.

Day six: I packed up and paid my bill. My credit card still worked, which seemed like a bad sign, showing that I hadn't got his attention at all.

I went to the train station.

I got there an hour before boarding, so I sat down to wait. The place was littered with people but gave the impression of being empty since there were so many unoccupied chairs. Which was why it seemed unusual that the seat next to me was immediately occupied by one of the mustiest people I had ever smelled.

It was a man, swarthy and unwashed, wearing cheap cologne. He hadn't shaved in days and his loud hibiscus printed shirt was only buttoned halfway up his chest. For pity sake, we were in Canada! Who did he think he was? And why did he keep looking at me?

I tried to ignore him by burying my face in my magazine, but he was getting so close to me that I could feel his breath on my neck.

"Do you mind?" I said in my snottiest, rich-girl, voice.

He didn't move. "You like the fashion magazine, yes? Yet, you dress so boring. You need more style," he said in a thick French accent. "Do you know what I mean by style?"

I moved over into the next seat.

He slipped into the chair I had just emptied and kept talking. "You should let me teach you. I can turn you into a star."

At this point, I turned and looked directly into the sleazy loser's eyes. Color didn't matter. Shapes were all that mattered and I saw them at once. The nose was wrong, but everything else checked out. I took a chance. "Stop teasing me, Christian. It really hurts my feelings when I don't look good in the clothes you like the most. I look fine in this. Not everyone has the shape to dress like a supermodel."

He had been smiling, but he stopped when I said my lines. He leaned back in his chair and his shirt fell even more open as he placed his hands behind his head. "How did you know it was me?"

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