

## Something Beautiful

The intercom buzzed, startling Christian out of his reverie. He put down the *before*-photos of the breast-augmentation scheduled for the following morning and hit the button.

"Yes?"

"Dr. Troy, there's a woman here to see you," the receptionist's voice said through the tiny speaker. "She doesn't have an appointment, but she says she's an old acquaintance."

"What's her name?" Christian asked. He welcomed the distraction; studying files always made him feel tired and worn. He would much rather just go ahead and cut, except that was bad form for a surgeon.

"Mrs. Peterson."

Christian searched his brain but failed to come up with a face that might match the name. Oh well. He saw so many women, both professionally and personally, he could not be expected to keep up with all their names.

"Please send her in."

"Of course, doctor."

A few moments later the door to his office opened and Mrs. Peterson entered. She was a slim woman, almost to the point of being thin, with an oval face framed by blond, shoulder-length hair. He judged her to be about thirty-five years of age. Tiny crows' feet were beginning to show around her eyes but her breasts were still high and firm.

"Hello Christian," she said, and gave a low laugh. "You haven't changed a bit, have you?"

He blinked, still unable to recall either her name or her face. "Excuse me?"

"You were undressing me with your eyes," she said. "You still do that with every woman you meet?"

"I wasn't--" he began to defend himself, then gave a wry smile. "Okay, I was. Professional hazard, you see. Please, have a seat." He gestured at the chair opposite his desk.

He waited until she was seated before he leaned forward and rested his hands on the desk. "So," he said, deciding to use one of Sean's tactics until he knew what she wanted,

"tell me what you don't like about yourself."

She laughed again. "Oh, this isn't a consult, if that's what you think." She paused, meeting his eye and studying his face until he shifted in his seat. "You don't remember me, do you?"

"I'm sorry, I can't say I do, Mrs. Peterson." He was beginning to grow uncomfortable. The last time someone asked him that same question, the woman offered him the sexual services of her underage daughter. The breast-augmentation file suddenly seemed much more appealing than it had five minutes ago.

"Megan," she corrected. "You would know me as Megan Norwood."

The name did ring a vague bell and Christian searched for the connection. "I'm sorry," he said again after several minutes, shaking his head.

"Eight years ago," she suggested. "We met at that Gayle Fashions party, when they opened the Miami branch."

Suddenly it hit him. "Of course. Megan!" She'd been the make-up artist for the models, although he mistook her for one of her charges when he first laid eyes on her. He recalled he had taken her out a few times until he grew bored and moved on. She had not taken it well, he remembered. He eyed her warily. "What can I do for you?"

She offered him a gentle smile again. "Don't worry, Christian. I'm not here to make trouble for you. After you. . . broke up. . . with me, I met a wonderful man, Charles Peterson. Charlie's been very good to me. I would like to talk to you, though. But not here." She gestured at the office. "Why don't you come over to my place tonight. We'll have dinner. And we'll talk."

Christian hesitated. Instinct told him to turn her down. But reason prevailed. After all, what could happen? She appeared to be calm and coherent, not a crazy, scorned woman. And she did wear a wedding band on her left hand, so she was telling the truth about being married. She probably told the truth about the rest too. "All right," he found himself saying. "Around seven?"

Megan nodded. "Seven is fine. Here's the address." She dug a small piece of paper from her purse. He was a little miffed to see the address was already written on it, in a feminine script that was neat and round. She must have been quite sure he would agree.

Megan got up and walked to the door. "I'll see you at seven. Christian," she turned around, "it's nice to see you look well."

"You too," he said, before he could stop himself. Again, she smiled, and closed the door behind her, leaving him thoroughly confused, curious and with a tiny amount of misgivings about agreeing to their dinner date.

oOo

A few minutes before seven that evening, Christian pulled up at the sidewalk in front of the address Megan had given him and killed the engine. The Petersons lived in a moderate ranch style house, one of many similar homes, in a quiet suburban street on the outskirts of Miami.

He took a few moments to gather his thoughts. He had spent most of the afternoon trying to remember everything he could about Megan Norwood. She'd never been a patient, although not for lack of persuasion on Christian's side. No woman was gifted with such a perfect form that he couldn't find flaws to be corrected. But Megan had been secure enough in her own body to turn down his offers and suggestions. "I'm fine the way I am," she'd told him one night, a little annoyed when he wouldn't let up. "Take it or leave it."

He'd left it.

That had upset Megan a lot. She was never the hysterical, screaming type, but she had told him in no uncertain terms what she thought of his cruel way with women. She'd called him a bastard, and an ogre, but Christian had been called worse names, so he shrugged it off, and quickly put Megan Norwood out of his mind once his interest in her was over. He remembered she had shown up at the office a few weeks later, but he refused to see her and Sean had talked her into leaving.

He had neither seen nor heard from her since, until this afternoon.

Shaking his head at himself, wondering if he was going to get himself into trouble, or if this was going to be a case of ex-lovers enjoying a friendly dinner, he reached into the car and pulled out the bottle of wine he brought. She liked white wine, he thought he recalled, although he wasn't sure.

He walked up the path to the front door and rang the bell. While he waited, he looked around and studied the house and garden. It was a simple home, one of many built over the past decade, but the paint on the walls was fresh and the lawn recently mown. He was curious to meet the elusive Charlie Peterson, wondering what the man would think of his wife inviting an ex-lover over for dinner.

The door opened and he turned back, opening his mouth to greet Megan. It snapped shut again, when he realized there was nobody in the door opening.

"Hi." A voice rose from about the level of his hips. Christian directed his gaze downward and met a pair of startlingly blue eyes. They belonged to a girl, her golden-blond hair -- the color of fresh hay, like her mother's, he noted-- pulled into pigtails. She was dressed in a bright red dress that accentuated her hair and eyes. She was going to be a beauty when she grew up, Christian thought. That would be another ten or twelve years, though.

"Are you Christian?" The girl wasn't in the least shy, studying him with unconcealed curiosity.

"Yes, I am." He flashed her a smile and held out his hand. "And whom do I have the pleasure?"

She giggled at the exaggerated formality and placed her small hand in his. "I'm Helen," she replied.

"Leny?" Megan's voice came from somewhere in the house.

"He's here!" the girl called back. She pulled on Christian's hand, forcing him to step across the threshold.

"There you are." Megan walked into the hallway. She obviously came straight from the kitchen, and was pulling off an apron, wiping her hands on the cloth before she threw it aside on a chair. "I wasn't sure you would come."

"Neither was I," Christian admitted. "Here. This is for you and your husband."

A brief look of pain flitted across Megan's face before she recovered and accepted the bottle. "Thanks. But Charlie's not here. He's--"

Helen interrupted her mother. "My daddy is dead," she told Christian, her blue eyes looking up at him earnestly. "Mommy misses him very much."

"That's right, sweetie," Megan said. She hoisted her daughter onto her hip and caressed her cheek. "We both miss him, don't we?"

"Uh huh."

"I'm sorry," Christian said. His apprehension grew stronger. Why had Megan reappeared in his life? Why had she asked he come over? Did she hope to rekindle an old flame? He decided he would leave as soon he politely could.

However, the evening progressed in a most pleasant way, without a trace of old grudges or recriminations. Megan explained how she met Charles Peterson, and had been happily married for six years. "He died in a car crash, two months ago," she said. "In that terrible accident over on the Turnpike."

Christian remembered he heard about it on the news. A multiple car wreck, leaving three people dead and fifteen wounded, had blocked off the road for most of a full day before the wreckage was removed. "I'm sorry," he said, sincerely offering her his sympathies. Megan accepted with a nod, and served up their dessert.

Helen often put her two cents in to the conversation, her clear voice ringing through the living room, lightening the mood whenever the grown-ups threatened to grow morose. Christian found himself reminded strongly of Annie, Sean's daughter. The girls were roughly of the same age, and Helen was as precocious as Annie was.

"Look at the time!" Megan exclaimed after she cleared away the dishes. She pointed at the clock. "It's way past your bedtime, little Missy! Bip-bip, go wash your face and brush your teeth. I'll be right up to tuck you in."

"Can Christian come tuck me in?" Helen looked hopefully at him.

"Ah. . . I'm--" Christian stammered. "Sure."

Helen yipped in pleasure and clambered from her seat. She raced up the stairs, little pigtails bouncing. Christian and Megan looked after her.

"She's a great girl, your daughter," Christian offered.

"She is, isn't she." Megan agreed. "Oh, I have something I wanted to give you before you leave. Just a moment." She got up and left the room, returning a few moments later with a small, rectangular package in her hand, which she gave to Christian.

He hefted the package. It was heavy, and he suspected it contained a book. He glanced at Megan, a question on his face.

"Open it later," she said. "You'll understand."

Before Christian could reply, Helen called for him from upstairs, and he forgot about the

mysterious present.

oOo

It wasn't until he arrived home, about an hour later, when he tore off the paper, that he found his hunch to be correct. Megan had indeed given him a book. He read the cover aloud: "The Iliad, by Homer." He furrowed his brow. Why ever would Megan give him an old classic to read? Come to think of it, why would she give him a present at all?

Their last meeting had not ended well. And although the evening had been most pleasant, much more so than he had expected, it offered very little in the way of answers. He still had no idea why Megan Norwood contacted him after all these years. In fact, the evening had merely compounded the mystery.

He browsed through the book, scanning a passage here and there, but found the language stilted and far too elaborate for his taste. With a shake of the head, he tossed the book onto the bedside table and went to take a shower and get himself ready for the night.

Twenty minutes later, already feeling drowsy, he lay in the dark, going over the events of the day while waiting for sleep to overtake him, when abruptly something clicked in his head. Something he had seen but not truly registered. Until now.

Christian shot up from the pillow, suddenly wide awake, and switched the light back on. He fumbled for the book on the bedside table and scanned the back cover. "*Homer's Iliad begins nine years after the Greek armies first arrived at Troy.* Bla bla bla." He read further down the page. "*Helen of Troy and the Trojan War were central to the early history of ancient Greece.* Oh shit. . . Helen of Troy?" Christian gasped, struggling for air. What was Megan trying to tell him?

oOo

Time seemed to crawl at a snail's pace for Christian Troy. The day refused to end. He hadn't slept well; thoughts and memories kept churning around in his head, and it wasn't until the sky to the east glowed pink with the new day that he fell into a restless slumber.

He glanced at his appointment calendar to check who he was supposed to see next, and groaned. 15.00, *Mrs. Grubman: lipo-consult.* He could not deal with that old hag today!

It was ten minutes to three. Christian got up and walked over to Sean's office.

"I need a favor," he said by way of greeting.

Sean raised an eyebrow.

"Mrs. Grubman. She comes in at three o'clock. But I need to take care of some personal business."

Sean remained silent for a few minutes, and Christian could see the wheels turning in his head. The last time Sean had dealt with Mrs. Grubman, it had nearly cost them their practice. "C'mon, Sean. You owe me this much."

Sean sighed. "All right. All right, I'll see her."

"Thanks."

Christian closed the door behind him. Mrs. Grubman was the last on his roster for the day, so he could leave the office with a clean conscience.

Soon he found himself back at the Peterson house. He had to talk to Megan. He had to know if his hypothesis was true; if what he thought she was trying to tell him was indeed her message. He had no idea what he would do if he were right. His mind simply failed to think that far. However, not knowing drove him crazy.

He rang the bell. Megan opened the door.

"Hey," he said, not sure what else to say.

She opened the door wider and motioned him inside without a word. She proceeded him to the living room. "Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee?"

"No, thanks." Christian rubbed his hands together, not quite willing to proceed. "Where's Helen?" he asked.

"She's in school," Megan said.

"Oh." He looked up and caught Megan's eye. "Megan, last night. You gave me that book for a reason. And I think I know what it is. But I need to be sure. I need you to tell me. Is Helen mine?"

Megan nodded, and smiled with gratitude. "I knew you'd understand. Yes, she is. She's

your daughter."

The next instant, Christian found himself slumped on the couch and he realized his knees had given way. "Wow. . ."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away," Megan rushed on. "I couldn't. I was afraid you would not believe me. I wanted you to meet Leny first, form an opinion for yourself without prejudice."

"She's a great kid," Christian murmured. His brain still was trying to catch up to the truth. A daughter. . .

Suddenly he sat up and fixed Megan with a stare. "Why haven't you told me before? Why didn't you come to me? I could have helped you."

She gave a dry laugh. "Helped me how, Christian? What would you have done? Given me a check and referred me to one of your doctor friends to use a sharp scalpel? The way we broke up. . . I tried to tell you, about a month later, when I was certain I was pregnant. You had your partner escort me from your offices. That's when I knew I was on my own."

Christian realized Megan was right. Being a father was not on his list of things to do, never had been. He did not believe he was fatherhood material. The recent incident with Matt confirmed those beliefs. He still smarted from Julia's words: *a real father would never do what you did*. He was much better at playing the fun uncle than dealing with the responsibilities of raising children. Yes, when confronted with a pregnant ex-girlfriend, he probably would have convinced her to have an abortion.

The thought gave him cold chills. To think that Helen would never have existed. . . That she would not have looked at him with those bright blue eyes, which suddenly were so familiar; would not have bounced around with joyfulness, her pigtails hopping up and down.

"Does she. . . does she know?"

"No. She believes Charlie is her daddy. And he has been, for all of her life. I was eight months pregnant when I met him. He never made a deal out of my expecting another man's baby. He accepted her like his own from the moment she was born. For now, I don't want Leny to know. She's too young. Someday, though, you can tell her."

It stung. The thought that the little girl believed another man to be her father left him aching. However, Megan was right. Helen had never known any other father, and she



was too young to understand how complicated adults could make a situation.

"Why now?" Christian asked. "Why do you bring her into my life now, after all these years?"

Megan shrugged and looked away. "Charlie's death has got me thinking," she muttered. "I have no right to keep Leny from you. Or you from her."

Christian thought there was more to the issue than simple courtesy but he didn't press her. He had enough on his mind to keep him in serious thoughts until next week.

Outside, a car horn honked an announcement. A moment later, the front door opened, and Helen breezed in, carrying a book bag that looked far too large for her small frame. "Christian!" she cried with delight upon seeing him. "You came back!"

"I did." He found he was grinning widely. "And if it's all right with your mother, I'd like to come back more often."

oOo

Over the next few weeks, Christian spent most of his free hours with Helen and Megan. Sometimes he took them out, for ice cream or to visit the beach. Other times they stayed at home, and watched television or played board games. An easy camaraderie developed between him and Megan. None of the old fire was rekindled, but they got along well, connected through their bond with Helen.

Amazingly, he took to fatherhood like a duck to water. No one was more surprised than Christian himself. Never in his life had he believed that family life would suit him. And deep down he worried that he would grow bored some day, that he would let Helen down by taking his attentions elsewhere.

One evening, after he had tucked his daughter into bed and read her the story of Cinderella, he mentioned his fears to Megan.

She laughed. "I don't think you have to worry about that, Christian. I have seen you change more over the past three weeks than in the eight years since I last saw you. Children will do that to you. You're a natural father. And it eases my mind to know she'll be in good hands."

He wondered about the last remark, but did not find out what Megan meant until the fourth week after she waltzed into his office like a ghost from the past.

On Saturday morning, less than a month after he met his daughter for the first time, Christian walked up the Peterson driveway. He had promised Helen he would take her and her mother to the zoo, where they were going to "visit the lions", as Helen put it.

Before he could even ring the bell, Helen flung open the door. "I'm going to see the lions," she sang. "I'm going to see the lions."

Christian could not help but smile at her eagerness. "That's right," he said, lifting her high and whirling her around until she squealed. "There will be lions and elephants and monkeys and zebra."

When he caught sight of Megan, some of his good cheer faded. She wasn't dressed to go out. Instead, she hugged her robe around her. Her face was drawn and pale, with dark circles around her eyes. And was it his imagination, or had she lost more weight? "Woah," he said. "You don't look so good. Are you all right? Another headache?"

Megan nodded. "Yes. I haven't slept much all night. I don't think I can come to the zoo with you guys today."

"You should go see a doctor," Christian said. "You seem to have an awful lot of migraines."

"You're a doctor." Megan smiled weakly.

Christian rolled his eyes. "I'm better at dealing with the outside of people's heads than the inside," he said wryly. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes. Go ahead and take Leny out. She has been looking forward to it all week. I don't want to spoil her fun. Besides, it'll help me catch up on some much needed sleep."

"Are you sure?" Christian asked. Helen was tugging impatiently at his hand.

"Yes, I'm sure. You guys go and have fun. Hey!" The last was directed at Helen who had dashed through the door and was running to Christian's car. "Aren't you going to say bye to your old mom?"

Helen came running back, flinging herself at her mother. "Bye Mommy!"

Megan crushed her to her, and Christian could see tears glimmer in her eyes. "Bye, sweetie. You be good to Christian, okay?"

"Promise, Mommy. Christian, let's go!" Again she raced away.

"I love you!" Megan called after her.

She turned to Christian. "You better go," she said with a sad smile. "Before she combusts with impatience."

"We'll be back in a couple of hours. You take care, all right? Call me if something comes up." He gestured with his cell phone.

"I will. Bye, Christian." She closed the door behind him.

oOo

Gently, Christian lifted the sleeping girl from the back seat. Helen was exhausted after a long day wandering from exhibit to exhibit -- seeing the lions, watching the seals being fed, cuddling with the rabbits at the children's section of the zoo. They had eaten ice cream --twice--, and hotdogs for lunch. He knew that wasn't exactly a very responsible meal, but how often did he get to spend an afternoon alone with his daughter? A little spoiling had never hurt anyone.

The house was silent and the sound of the doorbell drifted through the front door when he pushed the buzzer. Helen shifted in his arms, waking up slowly. "Are we home?"

"Yes, honey. We're home. Mommy will put you in the bath, and then I'm going to tuck you into bed, so you can dream about all those furry friends you made."

"I liked the rabbits," she mumbled sleepily.

The lions had scared her a little, but what child could resist a cuddly bunny?

Christian rang the bell again. Helen was growing heavy in his arms, and he shifted her to get a better grip. Still nobody answered the door. "Megan?" Christian called. He tried the knob. To his surprise it turned and the door swung open. He made a mental note to remind Megan to lock it next time. This might be a quiet suburban neighborhood, but it was still part of Miami, a city with one of the highest crime rates in the country.

"Megan?"

"I think Mommy is sleeping," Helen offered. "She gets tired sometimes in the

afternoons."

"Uh huh," Christian replied absently. He closed and locked the door behind them, and took Helen to the living room. He put her down on the couch. "Stay here, okay? I'll go see what your mother is up to." He didn't see anything out of order in the hallway or the living room, so he supposed Helen was right. Megan had looked exhausted, and she had probably taken a painkiller, which knocked her out. That would explain why she hadn't heard the doorbell, or his calls.

"Okay." Helen stuffed her thumb back in her mouth and snuggled against the pillow.

Assured that she would be all right, Christian ascended the stairs, taking two steps at a time. He knocked on the master bedroom door. He waited, but there was no reply.

"Megan?" He quietly opened the door. The shades were drawn, casting the room in a gray gloom that sucked the color from the carpet and the furniture. Megan was lying on the bed. She was on her back, her head resting against the pillow, her eyes closed.

Christian smiled, and was about to close the door again silently, when something stopped him. A sense of dread washed over him. Something was wrong. But what? He listened more closely, holding his breath. His heart jumped into his throat when he realized what it was he heard.

Or rather: not heard.

A sleeping person made noise, however soft. Breathing, a heartbeat. Here, there was nothing. The bedroom was as silent as a tomb. Christian walked into the room, not wanting to, but unable to stop himself. He put a finger against Megan's throat. Her skin felt cold to the touch; he found no pulse. Megan was dead.

His gaze fell on the small pill bottle on the bedside table. He picked it up. It was empty. Christian glanced at the label and discovered it was a morphine based prescription painkiller. Real dangerous stuff. "Dammit," he swore.

When he put the bottle back, he saw the note that had drifted to the floor.

His fingers trembled when he unfolded the sheet of paper. The note was in Megan's handwriting, but Christian was startled to see that it no longer was the neat, round script he remembered from the address card. The letters were shaky, clearly written by a trembling hand.

*"Dear Christian,*

*I wish I could have given you more time. More time to get acquainted with Helen. More time to get used to being a father. But I have no more time to offer. The pain is growing too much to bear. And I believe you will do the right thing. You and I, we've had our issues in the past. But together we created something beautiful. We created life. I have no regrets. Please, Christian, take good care of my girl. Take good care of our daughter.*

*Yours,  
Megan."*

"Dear God." The words slipped from his lips unbidden.

All the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. The headaches. The strange things Megan had sometimes said, and which he hadn't understood at the time. Why she had introduced him to his daughter after all these years. Megan had been dying. The prescription drug she used to overdose on was given to terminal cancer pains to alleviate their pain. She must have known she was dying for a while. She tried to prolong her life as long as she could, until the drugs no longer helped and she could no longer stand the pain.

"Is Mommy going to wake up?" The quiet voice from the doorway anchored him in the turmoil of his thoughts. He turned around. Helen was looking at Megan with big eyes. Her lower lip trembled.

"Oh, honey." His throat constricted and he had to swallow hard several times before he could speak again. Christian's eyes burned while he took his daughter in his arms. "She's not going to wake up, sweetheart. Not ever again."

## **Epilogue**

In accordance with Megan's last wish and his own fierce desires, Christian wasted no time in adopting Helen formally. Despite his reputation as a womanizer, it wasn't hard to get the court to agree. A blood test confirmed his paternity, and Megan had left a notarized letter with her lawyer stating that it was her will for Christian to adopt Helen.

Megan had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor seven months earlier. And when her husband, Charles Peterson, died shortly after in the highway accident, she realized there was nobody left to take care of her daughter except Christian, Helen's biological father. Megan had been an only child, and her parents passed away several years before.

He would forever be grateful to Megan, he thought. For believing in him, for giving him the chance to prove himself a father. She had told him she believed Helen would be "in good hands." He would do his utmost to prove her right.

He watched while his daughter played with Annie McNamara in the sand near the surf.

"Christian, look!" Helen held up a shell she found in the mud.

He smiled and waved at her. He just wished she could remain eight years old forever; he already dreaded the day she would catch a man's eye and start dating. . . After all, the world was full of sharks preying on a young woman.

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