

Opening Her Eyes

By

Debbie Mumford

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For my beloved.
You continue to sweep me off my feet.

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*E*mily Jane Williams chewed the nail of her right index finger and stared at her computer monitor. The glowing words mocked her with their blatant invitation to experience life beyond her small, Rocky Mountain town.

<Crusader says: Join me in Shanghai. I'll make it my mission to show you a good time.>

The chat room friend she'd been fantasizing about for the past six months wanted to meet her. A shiver tingled across her spine and she squirmed in her well-worn secretarial chair.

She ran trembling fingers through her curly red hair and bit her lower lip. This called for a witty remark, something that downplayed the rapid staccato of her heart. Unfortunately, her fingers moved with a life of their own.

<Sleeping Beauty says: Why now? Why Shanghai?>

<Crusader says: Why not now? A knight must meet the lady he's destined to adore.>

A bubble of delight spread through her core, but she frowned and forced herself to remember that she knew nothing about this man. She had no business making plans to meet an Internet acquaintance. For all she knew, he could be a psychotic killer...or the love she'd been waiting for.

<Crusader says: What do you say? Are you up for an adventure?>

Her heart raced at the implied challenge.

<Sleeping Beauty says: Shanghai? No way! If I agree to meet you, it'll have to be here, on my home turf.>

That would put an end to his nonsense. Any man adventurous enough to choose Shanghai as a rendezvous would be totally uninterested in her little world.

<Crusader says: Name the time and the place. I'll be there.>

* * *

Saturday night found Emily seated at a table near O'Connor's dance floor. An interesting mix of restaurant, bar, and dance club, the establishment gave its patrons room to breathe on a Saturday night.

Daria, Emily's best friend since preschool, had stationed herself at the bar. Her fingers tapped a swizzle stick in rapid syncopation as she scrutinized her friend.

Emily sympathized with Daria's agitation—a combination of nerves about the coming rendezvous and shock over Emily's appearance. Emily hadn't looked this good since college, and even then she'd lacked the sense of style she'd crafted so meticulously these last few days.

So here she sat, a beautifully groomed young woman resisting the urge to bite her newly manicured nails. Crusader had better show.

A low whistle caused her to turn, only to find Chris Peterson standing beside her chair. Daria's good-looking younger brother had just arrived home on military leave.

"Wow," he said, taking in every detail of her flirty red dress and freshly styled hair. "You're a knockout, Emily."

She looked past him to the door, and then met his eyes. "Thanks, and welcome home...but I'm meeting someone." Emily didn't want to be rude, but she didn't want him ruining her chances with Crusader.

"I know you are, and I must say, he's a lucky man." Chris pulled out the chair opposite her and deposited his lanky six-foot frame on it.

"Chris! Get up!" She felt heat rise in her cheeks. "I can't believe Daria told you about this, but I *am* expecting someone."

He smiled, a maddening, slow smile; the kind that had driven her nuts when they were kids. "Daria didn't tell me. Crusader did."

Her pulse skipped a beat. She focused on Chris, everything else fading away. She hadn't told Daria Crusader's screen name.

“Where did you hear that name?” She felt every heartbeat, every breath that flowed through her lungs.

Chris reached across the table and took her hand. “Wake up, Sleeping Beauty. It’s time to see the world as it really is.” He stroked her fingers with his thumb. “I’m Crusader.”

She snatched her hand away, jumped to her feet and turned to leave. Before she’d gone two steps, Chris blocked her path.

“Great idea,” he said. “Let’s dance.”

He used Emily’s momentum to maneuver her onto the dance floor. With his strong arms encircling her, she had to force herself to think. Her body wanted to melt into his embrace.

She pushed back and peered up into his handsome face. “What are you up to, Chris? Why the big mystery? If you wanted a date, why didn’t you just ask?”

He threw back his head and laughed until other patrons began to stare. When the fit passed, he dropped his head close to hers and said, “Emily, you’re amazing, but oblivious. I’ve been asking you out since high school. You’ve never taken me seriously.”

He tightened his embrace and rubbed his chin across her red-gold hair. “I had some leave coming; I wanted to see you. Crusader seemed like a good tactic.” He shrugged and added, “Daria gave me your screen name.”

For once in her life, Emily was speechless. She delighted in the thrill of her friend’s firm embrace and marveled that she’d looked right past him her whole life. Daria’s little brother had grown into quite a man.

“What if I’d agreed to meet you in Shanghai?”

“I’d have hopped a military transport, but I knew you wouldn’t.” His blue eyes sparkled. “I wanted Crusader to shake you up. Make you look at yourself and see what I see—a fascinating, sexy woman.”

She blushed and lowered her gaze.

“But mostly, I wanted to throw you off balance so you’d have to open your eyes and really see me. Not Daria’s kid brother; not the boy who teased you in school. Me...the man who’s been crazy about you for years.”

She glanced up and their eyes met. A spark ignited and fire raced through her body.

“Can you see me yet, Emily?”

She swallowed, throat suddenly parched. “Yes, Chris. I see you.”

He roared with delight and lifted her into the air.

Emily gazed down at him and wondered how she could have missed the love shining in his eyes.

~End~



AUTHOR BIO

DEBBIE MUMFORD lives in Vancouver, Washington with her husband of more than 30 years, ghost-white cat and toasted-marshmallow colored bullmastiff. Her short fiction has appeared online in Flash Me Magazine, KidVisions, and Dragons, Knights & Angels. She has several novels available from Freya's Bower in addition to anthologies with Wild Child Publishing and Adams Media. Debbie is represented by the Levine Greenberg Literary Agency.

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