

NICKED BY EROS

By

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This is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and places are of the author's imagination and not to be confused with fact. Any resemblance to living persons or events is merely coincidence.

Dedication:

This one's for Lisa, my sister who lives with her hero in Plymouth, MA.

Author's Note: As always, when an author writes about a real place she strives for keeping place names and events as close to the truth as possible. Many fine bed and breakfast inns can be found in Plymouth, but The Rock B&B is strictly a figment of my imagination. The Children's Museum is closed at current, but Plymouth Rock, The Mayflower II, and many other fine representations of the early history of our country and the crossing of cultures are still to be found today. This is a work of fiction, all mistakes in place names and descriptions of real places are strictly mine.

Chapter One

The jangling of the telephone jarred Steve Martucci out of a dream. It had been a good dream, too. One filled with palm trees, warm breezes, and sexy women in bikinis.

He rubbed his face and listened to the wind whipping ice pellets against his bedroom window. The end of January in Boston held no resemblance to tropical paradise.

"Yeah?" he said into the phone. He squinted at the red numbers of his clock. Two-thirty in the morning, this better be important.

Palpable silence from the other end of the line, then a kind of sob reached him. Heaviness settled in his gut. "Mom, is Dad okay?" Who else could it be? He heard a sniff, then a female voice said, "Is this Steve Martucci?"

Relief caught him by the throat. Not Mom with another piece of bad news about Dad's health.

"This is Martucci. Do you know what time it is?"

"My name is Marion Ramos, I run the B Street Women's Shelter." Her breath hitched.

A cold sweat broke out on his exposed chest. It chilled him to the bone. He's sent a client and her daughter to this shelter just two days ago to get them away from an abusive husband and father. It was a safe haven, unless they'd told someone where they were.

He hoped they'd kept quiet.

"What can I do for you, Ms. Ramos?"

"Your name was in her file as a safe contact. The police said I should call you."

"What? Why?" He sat straighter in bed. A beam of light edged through the opening between the window and the drapes. The cold glow filtered into the room.

Ms. Ramos cleared her throat. "A man entered the shelter tonight. He ... somehow he knew how to find Sheila Jones and Becky. They ... he killed them both." Her voice quavered to a whisper.

Steve's heart sank in his chest. "Killed them? No."

"I'm sorry. It's been a difficult night. The police told me that you could call them for more information." She gave him a name and phone number at the police department.

Anger, hard and bitter as the weather, welled up in him. "Did they arrest the bastard who did it?" His fists

knotted in the sheets.

"No, he climbed out a window just as the police arrived."

Steve hung up the phone and stared into the shadows of his room. The range of emotions flowing through him was so many and so strong that he couldn't name them all. He pounded his fists against the bedclothes and stared at the phone, at the clock, at anything to get the vision of Sheila and her little girl out of his head.

She'd trusted him to help her be safe until they could put her husband in jail. A restraining order and a stay at the anonymous women's shelter should have been enough.

But it hadn't been.

He'd failed her and now she and five-year-old Becky were dead.

* * * *

Lucy Symons walked up the flagstone walk to a wood shingled house on Water Street in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Her little car with the Colorado license plates huddled on the road looking out of place just opposite the waterfront. It, and Lucy, were more used to parking in the shadow of Pikes Peak and the front range of the Rocky Mountains.

Still, here she was. She put her hand on the brass knocker, lifted it, and let it fall. Then she noticed the sign, The Rock B&B--Please come in. So she did.

A small room full of antiques and welcome greeted her. The smells of cinnamon and roast beef wafted to her nose. Warmth suffused her as the last of the bitter wind was pushed out as she shut the door.

"Adele?" she called. She let her suitcases drop to the floor. The house clearly welcomed her; she hoped that Adele's invitation had been as well meant.

She wandered further in, following her nose, and found the kitchen. A note was propped against an unlit candle in the center of the table. "Gone to the store, be back soon. Make yourself at home. Adele."

Lucy hadn't seen her aunt Adele in ten years, but somehow the older woman had learned that Lucy needed someplace safe and far from Colorado to recoup. Lucy's lousy choices in men had almost caused her sister to be killed at the hands of Lucy's latest lousy choice. The fact that Lucy had also been blackmailed into helping the creep steal technology from her ex-husband had turned her into an all around loser, in her opinion. The only thing she could think to do was leave. Let her sister get on with a life without Lucy around to create chaos.

But where to go? That's when Adele's invitation, to spend some time during the off season at the Rock Inn B&B, had arrived via email. It had been a sign, or a miracle, one that Lucy could not refuse. She packed quickly, drained her savings account, put her belongings into storage, and left Colorado.

Days of driving later, here she was. Unfortunately, with a new lease on life staring her in the face, she still had no idea what to do with herself. But do something, turn her life around, that was definitely in her plans.

This time she'd do it by herself, for herself, without the wishes of some guy messing her up. Because that's what had happened before. Drake had been all wrong for her, she'd been afraid of his raw sexuality. Jack had been a mistake for the opposite reasons. He'd been so lackluster that she'd considered him safe. But he'd been the one who'd drawn the gun. She'd sworn off men after him.

He's in prison half a continent away. A good thing to remember.

So here she was, ready to start a new life as ... as what?

* * * *

The palace of the gods on the top of Mount Olympus had never been more welcoming. Aphrodite sat in her private salon and enjoyed the caress of Helios's golden rays. Eros's entry jerked her out of her pleasant thoughts.

His golden curls would have looked feminine on any other male, but on him they just accentuated his broad shoulders and laughing eyes. The skimpy white draping of cloth didn't hurt either, Aphrodite allowed. Tiny wings that protruded from his back along with the bow and quiver of arrows strapped across his right shoulder added to his mystique. Just as she had planned that they would all of those ages ago.

High cut cheekbones sat on either side of a strong nose. His wide set blue eyes could blow cold with ire and warm in passion. Yes, he was her son. But the son of the Goddess of Love wore a frown and a childish pout.

"You know I hate this get up," he said as he threw his length across a delicate divan.

Aphrodite sent a measure of strength to the beleaguered piece of furniture. "You know that this time of year it's especially important that we remind everyone, even our fellow immortals, about the importance of love. It has been this way for several hundreds of years."

He raised a golden eyebrow. "You needn't lecture me on my duty, Mother. It wears thin. I'd rather be garbed in something more comfortable when you insist I consort with mortals. Something from Ralph

Lauren would suit me just fine."

Aphrodite allowed a golden smile to light her face. She knew just how it looked, having practiced it for millennia. "You needn't tread among mortals in your current form this year, dear son."

He sat up. "Really? I hope you have something more challenging than the usual hearts and flowers routine."

"Yes, I do. The man is heart sore. He's the driven sort and his whole life has revolved around assisting victims of violence. But something went wrong and he cannot forgive himself. He needs a woman who sees him with clear eyes and a gentle heart to help him."

"And you need me because?" He stood and twanged his bowstring.

"The woman needs him just as much, but she refuses to trust herself again. She's made poor choices in the past. Choices of the heart that could have been disastrous for those she loves."

"Sounds like same old, same old to me."

She pushed a curl back into place and called her golden mirror to her hand. "The difference is that you will be in disguise."

"I've done that before."

"This year you will go in the guise of a middle aged woman named Adele."

"Hunh?" He stopped fiddling with his accoutrements.

"It's the only way. This woman is the only one that both parties trust. So, don't mess it up." Like last time, she almost said.

"Why can't I be a dolphin or a stallion or something interesting?"

"Really, Eros, whining does not become you. This is your task, to help these mortals understand that to first love another, they must love the person they are."

"Fine. When and where do I go?"

She waved a gilded hand at him. He transformed immediately into a woman of about fifty. This was Adele. Her hair was shoulder length and salt and pepper. Sparkling brown eyes and a full, soft mouth set off a pleasant face made interesting by experience. Adele stood at five feet, seven inches tall and she

wore a well cut pair of charcoal wool slacks, leather boots with a two inch heel, and a lipstick red cashmere cowl neck sweater.

"You leave with Helios in the morning," Aphrodite said. "The place is called Plymouth. It is winter, of course, in that part of the world. I know you prefer the tropics, but it couldn't be helped."

"This body feels odd."

Aphrodite waved her hand again and a full length mirror appeared suspended in front of Eros. She walked to his side. "What do you think?"

He grimaced. "I think I'm going to like the clothes but the rest ... sucks."

She laughed and transformed him back to his usual self. "I'll keep an eye on you. Don't worry, you'll do fine. Just...."

"Just what, Mother?"

"Just don't do anything stupid like the last time. Just don't fall in love."

Chapter Two

Two mornings later Lucy peeked out of the door of her cozy bedroom. Though Adele had told her that she'd be the only guest, she'd heard voices earlier. One of which was distinctly male.

She hesitated, not wanting to speak to anyone but Adele, but the allure of breakfast called to her. The smells of brewing coffee and something with cinnamon had tempted her out of bed earlier than usual.

The deep timbre of the male voice made her pause again.

Never mind. She pushed her hair out of her face, straightened the sweats she'd pulled on, and strode into the kitchen. No middle aged salesman, because who else could it be, was going to keep her from Adele's cooking.

She stopped in the entry to the kitchen and stared at the man seated at the table. This was no middle aged salesman. No, he appeared closer to his late twenties, a bit older than she, and he had money written all over him. Broad shoulders beneath a deep green sweater, large hands that buttered a bagel, blond hair that clearly was used to high priced hair cuts--this man was everything she was running away from. Attractive, rich, and sneaky is how she pegged him before he even turned his face to her.

The face, rugged and frowning, threw her guesses about his character into doubt. The sadness that lingered in his dark chocolate eyes made her rethink her second guessing.

Whoever he was, she planned on staying a healthy distance away.

"Good morning, Lucy," Adele said from the stove. She held a fork in her hand. Bacon sizzled from the frying pan. "Come in, sit. This is Steve Martucci. He's going to be staying here for a few days. Steve, this is Lucy Symons, the niece I told you about from Colorado."

"Good morning," Lucy said to Adele. She looked at Steve Martucci. He rose from his chair as she approached the table. Not only was he easy on the eyes, he was tall enough that she had to tilt her chin up to meet his gaze.

"Hello," he said. His voice, richly baritone, sent a shiver down her neck.

That's all he said. No "how are you?" no "pleased to meet you." Just "hello" before he sat down and turned his attention back to his bagel.

Fine, she didn't want him here anyway. If he wanted to be rude, then she would just ignore him.

Lucy detected a distinct chill in the silence that was only mitigated by the sizzling of the bacon and the occasional drip from the coffee maker. When the stove timer went off, sending a shrill ringing through the room, she jumped. Martucci glanced up at her before returning his stare to his coffee cup.

As if the noise brought things back to normal, Adele said, "What are your plans today, Lucy?"

Lucy sipped Adele's excellent coffee. "I think I'll walk to the library before I go down to the beach."

"It's a big change from Colorado," Adele said. She brought a platter of bacon and a pan of cinnamon rolls fresh from the oven to the table and joined Lucy and Martucci for breakfast.

"Yes." The biting cold here had a different feel to it. The sea scented everything. After a walk on the beach yesterday in the wind, she'd tasted salt on her lips.

She loved the wild tug of the wind in her hair. The different sounds the waves made as they curled ashore

mesmerized her. Sometimes they were soft and shooshing, other times they crashed as if they were angry. Their unceasing movement echoed the restlessness that had driven her here.

Walking along that restlessness brought her peace.

"Steve, what about you?" Adele probed.

"I don't know."

He looked ready to drop, Lucy thought. Deep purple smudges under his eyes gave his face a hollow look. She wondered if he'd been ill. Then she mentally shook herself. He wasn't her concern. She looked at his face again. Maybe he just needed some rest, she decided. Or he needed a place to recoup, like she did. Whatever he needed, she was the last person who could help him out. She couldn't even help herself.

The pity party is over, she told herself silently.

"Is there anything I can get for you while I'm out, Adele?" she asked. "Maybe I can save you a trip."

"No thanks, I'll be going out later anyway." Adele paused. "Do you need anything, Steve?"

"I think I just need a nap." He grinned for the first time since Lucy had set eyes on him. The small gesture moved his face from attractive to drop dead gorgeous.

Her stomach did that flip-flop thing as her cheeks warmed.

No way. Get a grip.

She stood and bent over to hug Adele. "I'll see you later." Five minutes later she'd changed into jeans and a sweater, donned her coat, hat, and gloves, and was striding down Water Street.

The sea was sullen today and its leaden color matched the heavy clouds. A gusting wind rattled the tree branches together. She snuggled deeper into her down coat. It was late enough in the morning that she didn't have to dodge commuter traffic or school traffic. Every now and then someone she didn't know waved to her from a passing car. It was a friendly town, smaller and less crowded at this time of year, according to Adele, than between Memorial Day and Labor Day. It had a comfortable with itself feel to it.

Any place that had been around since 1620 had better be comfortable with itself, she mused.

She set a brisk pace, trying to outrun her thoughts of Steve Martucci as much as to get to the library quickly. There was something about him, a vulnerability that was out of sorts with her first impression of

him.

The library was just ahead. The warm brick structure welcomed people up its marble steps into an interior that reflected an eclectic blend of the early twentieth century and more modern technology.

A piece of white paper flapped on the door in the morning breeze. Lucy took a moment to read it. "Part time help wanted. Inquire at the desk." Could this be what she'd been looking for? As much as she appreciated Adele's generosity, and she'd only been sponging off her for two days, it didn't feel right to just take without giving back. A part time job, she could handle that.

She pulled the door open and went inside.

* * * *

Exhaustion made Steve's body tingle and his head ache. The bed, made up in flannel sheets and a down comforter, couldn't have been more comfortable. Pinging from the radiator made a quiet background noise along with the soft sounds of feet moving in the rooms on the other side of the door and the creaky sounds that were to be expected in such an old house.

Soothing, yes, it should have all soothed him into a dreamless sleep.

Except that every time he closed his eyes, he saw their faces as they'd been at the morgue. Sheila and Becky, victims of domestic violence, beaten to death by an enraged husband and father. Steve had promised them they'd be safe, he'd keep them safe. All they had to do was testify against the man and he'd be put away for years.

Steve drew an arm across his face and struggled to forget. But he couldn't. He'd made a promise and failed them in a tragic way. Fate had given them respite from pain and misery. His was building day by day.

He blinked away the grit in his eyes. There had to be a way to help them, people like them. He flopped onto his side. It was someone else's battle now. He'd left the field as bruised and battered spiritually as they had been physically. He hadn't helped them, he'd become responsible for their deaths.

This wasn't helping. Not helping those people, not helping him. He had to stop beating himself up. That's what everyone told him. After everything had gone to hell he'd even tried therapy. In the end, all he'd wanted to do was quit his job and start over. A stress-less job, like feeding birds or sweeping a sidewalk, would suit him just fine. His partners had refused his resignation; they would not buy him out. They wouldn't let him off the hook, damn it. Instead, they'd suggested he take a sabbatical, like college professors do. Time off to contemplate and reevaluate what he wanted from life.

When he'd called Adele, she'd said of course he could come. She hadn't asked questions. He'd known

her for years, since his family had vacationed in Plymouth when he was a kid.

The last thing he wanted to do was put the effort into actually thinking because he was afraid that then he would be required to reevaluate. He didn't want to think, he didn't want to do anything but sleep.

Of course, he couldn't sleep. Around and around he went, his mind spun so constantly that he couldn't tell it to quit.

Maybe a walk would help. He pulled aside the drapes and looked out. The sky matched his mood, brooding and mean. Yeah, he felt just about mean enough to spit into the Atlantic and dare it to spit back.

He remembered a breakwater within walking distance. He pulled on his warmest clothes, had a quick word with Adele, and went outside.

For a long time he wandered aimlessly, head down and hands in pockets. He hoped to exhaust himself.

Water Street was work day busy and off season quiet. He relished his anonymity. Even though he tried to ignore his surroundings, he simply couldn't shake off the evidence of the history surrounding him. The replica of the Mayflower sat at the dock on the opposite side of the street. Further down a portico of marble columns and a steel fence protected the rock that mimicked the one supposedly stepped on by the pilgrims in 1620.

He knew from experience that in the summer these streets would be congested with tourist traffic. All he saw today, besides everyday traffic, was one yellow school bus and a group of kids surrounding the rock with a couple of adults in tow.

Further down the street he spied the long jetty of boulders that formed a breakwater. He had no wish to even say hello to a stranger so he headed for what looked like "isolation point" to him. Once he made his way over the boulders to the end and stared into the pewter colored sea, he imagined himself cut off from the human race, and not sure who was better for it, the human race or him.

The wind was what his father would call, "bracing." Moisture saturated the air and it was so cold that Steve couldn't smell a thing. The parka he wore came with a hood and he was happy to pull it up. He ignored the cold when he lowered himself to the edge of a rock. He sat and watched the endless motion of the sea and attempted to lose himself in it.

Time got away from him. He thought he might even have let the rhythm of the sea put him to sleep in this unlikely place. Whatever happened, he didn't focus on his surroundings again until he heard a voice behind him.

Chapter Three

"I thought for a minute someone had added another boulder to my favorite sitting place."

Steve whipped around. He had to blink a few times before his eyes would focus, but when they did, a knot formed in his gut. It was the blond from the B&B this morning. What was her name? Lauren, or Lucky? No, it was Lucy. The last name had been an unimportant blur.

The meaning of her words sank in. Her sitting place?

"Ah." Brilliant come back. His lips had dried and there was no spit in his mouth. He swallowed a few times before he was able to speak. "You mind sharing?"

That's not what he'd planned to say. He'd planned a surly retort, like so what, I'm here now, or possession is nine-tenths of the law. Something smart-alecky like that had been on the tip of his tongue.

Man, she was coming towards him. The last thing he wanted was company. Solitude, he craved solitude so he could beat himself up some more.

Time to move on, rang through his head as if he heard the words spoken. Undoubtedly it was his unconscious speaking. His conscious mind wanted to mull a bit more.

She glanced at him, gave him a small smile, then sat two stones away. Though the stones were huge her presence surrounded him. To his surprise he realized that it wasn't unpleasant. Now, if only she doesn't want to talk, he thought.

As if the gods had been paying attention, she turned her face to the sea. All he could make out was the edge of her profile outlined by her hood. It was a nice profile, he thought. Straight nose, well-formed chin, and the kind of pouty lips that just asked to be kissed.

Whoa, where had that thought come from? Kissing this woman, no way. That wasn't why he was here. He was here to think.

Another part of his brain kept his thoughts on her lips. They were rosy and no doubt warm and moist. He licked his own as he thought about Lucy's mouth. It had been months since he'd kissed anyone but his mother, and that was always just a peck on the cheek. Months since he'd even thought about sex. No, that was a lie. He thought about sex a lot, just hadn't had a chance to do more than that. Besides, after all the tales of sexual and physical abuse he heard as a victim's rights advocate, some days he went home and wondered if anyone ever did it with caring and compassion anymore.

The wind picked up and moved blond strands around Lucy's face. She felt his eyes on her but didn't turn to look into them. Though she'd never seen him in a coat, and he'd been bundled against the elements, she'd known it was him as soon as she'd seen him. Impulse moved her to join him, to speak. Then she wondered if she should have. The face he turned to her was bleak, the face of a man who had lost hope. She'd almost turned around and left him to his own thoughts, but something made her stay.

Perhaps her own loneliness made her sensitive to him. Besides, this had quickly become her favorite spot on the waterfront. She could watch the fishing boats with their wing-like nets and the lobster boats, bulwarks piled with traps, moving to and fro in the harbor. Gulls constantly turned and called overhead.

This was a great place for kids to scramble and explore. At least in more moderate weather. She wondered what it would be like to stand here at the very edge during a storm. Would the waves boom and spray over her head? Would she be swept away?

When she twisted to look off to the right she heard the crinkle of paper in her pocket. The job application for the position at the library waited there. She hadn't filled it out right away. She wanted to think about this choice. After all, it wasn't as if she had no professional skills. She was a trained and experienced dental hygienist. That had not been her life dream, though. It had simply been a means to independence after high school when modeling hadn't panned out and she hadn't known what she wanted to do with her life. Her older sister had suggested a trade school. It had been a surprisingly good fit, at least for a while.

Now Lucy wanted more for herself, she just wasn't sure what. All she did know was that it would not include needing a man to complete her. She shivered.

The rasp of cloth against rock had her looking over her shoulder. The man, Steve, had stood. He stared at her, indecision clear on his face. He frowned then held out a hand to her.

"I'm freezing. Want a hand up? You've been out longer than I have." His voice, though muffled through his thick scarf, managed to send tingles of awareness through her.

Just what she didn't want, attention.

"No," she said. "Thank you," she added.

His arm dropped to his side. Without another word he turned and walked away. Good, now she wouldn't have to think about him.

Except that now she couldn't help but think about him. His hair was blond, a shade or two darker than hers. She wondered if it was silky to the touch. That, of course, brought her to the subject of his hands. They'd buttered that bagel rather competently this morning. What else were they competent at? Heat warmed her cheeks at the thought.

If she didn't have such a wretched history with the opposite sex, she'd definitely be thinking about Steve Martucci and what he could do with his hands in more detail.

Hah! Forget it. If that ever happened, and it never would, but ... she'd be toast.

A haunted air lingered about him. His strong face was made for laughter, but she thought it had been a long time since he'd really laughed. The grin this morning hadn't counted.

The sun slid behind the heavy clouds. Lucy stood. A cup of something hot would go down good followed by a good long think about this job application. It was a step forward, a badly needed baby step forward. Maybe it was time to take a chance. Though many people might scoff at her taking a job as a library page, part time and for minimum wage, this was a tiny step on her road to a different way of living.

For the first time in months she allowed a spring in her step and let her heart open a bit to hope.

As she let herself in the door, she heard a voice from the small office. She couldn't see who it was, but it was a man's voice and it wasn't Steve's. Curious, she peeked her head around and said, "Who's there?" before she could see a person.

She heard a snap and saw a white light flicker. Adele stepped to the doorway smoothing her hair down and straightening her sweater.

"Oh, it was you. I thought I heard someone else," Lucy said.

"Yes, just me. I had a radio talk show on. That's what you must have heard." Adele took Lucy's arm and turned her towards the kitchen. "I've got apple cinnamon muffins just about ready to come out of the oven and the coffee is fresh."

"Sounds perfect. Let me go put my coat away and I'll be right back." Lucy touched the paper in her pocket. She pulled it out and showed Adele. "I'm thinking of applying for a part time job at the library. Could I use you for a reference?"

Adele's eyebrows shot up. "Of course, yes, please do. This is a surprise. I thought you were here to recoup and all that."

"I am, but I also want to be a little busy. And I hate to think I'm sponging off your generosity."

Adele slid the muffin tin out of the oven then pulled mugs and the coffee pot over to the table. "I never would consider a guest as sponging off me." She smiled. "Besides, I like your company. If you feel better working a bit, that's great. It might just be the beginning of something else. I sense great things in the offing for you."

"Thank you." Lucy hugged Adele on impulse and was surprised by the other woman's hesitance before she hugged Lucy back. Funny, she'd always considered this aunt the warm, fuzzy type. Though Adele dressed in designer slacks and sweaters, she'd never been shy about hugging a niece or nephew.

It's probably nothing, Lucy thought. "I'll be right back," she said out loud.

As she reached the door, Adele said, "Would you knock on Steve's door? He's two rooms down from you. He looked mighty chilled when he came in a bit ago."

"Sure."

* * * *

Eros smoothed down the sweater of his disguise and swore. That had been a close call. Lucy had almost walked in on the conversation with his mother. Curse Aphrodite and her need to be in control. She'd given him this assignment and now she wanted to know every detail. Had this happened yet, had that happened yet? You'd think she didn't trust him. If it weren't for that one little incident eons ago.... Her memory was long; she wasn't apt to forget almost losing him to Psyche.

Another time and place, he reminded himself. Now, what could he do to throw these two together even more?

A knock on the front door interrupted his thoughts. Steve and Lucy were just entering the kitchen as Eros opened the door. A large man stood there. Eros stepped back at the aura of menace surrounding this mortal.

"Can I help you?" Eros hoped not.

"Yeah, I saw your sign. Wondered if you have a room available." The gruff voice chilled Eros, the Boston accent sounded harsh to his ears.

"Um, no. I don't take guests this time of year, just family."

"My name's Jim Pearce and I'm just looking for a room. I'll pay cash."

This alarmed Eros even more. Most guests paid by credit card after making reservations weeks in advance.

"No," Eros said firmly, though with Adele's courteous manner it didn't sound firm enough. "Try one of the hotels up the street. You'll get a better price anyway." He made to close the door.

Jim Pearce stuck his foot between the door and the frame so that it wouldn't close.

"Need any help, Adele?" Steve stepped up. Eros was glad he was there; otherwise he might have had to break his disguise to get rid of this goon.

"I was just telling Mr. Pearce that he should try one of the other hotels."

Pearce pulled his hat down over his eyes and turned his head as Steve put his hand on the door. "Never mind." Pearce turned away.

"What's going on?" Lucy asked.

Pearce turned back and glanced at Lucy. He smirked then left.

Eros shivered. If he knew anything about mortals after all these years, it was that the bad ones gave off a psychic stench. The air around Pearce reeked. He locked the door, fastened a smile onto Adele's face, and led the others to the kitchen.

* * * *

Steve couldn't get that guy's voice out of his mind. Sure, he'd grown up in Boston; the accent just came with the territory. In fact, to Steve it wasn't an accent, just the way everyone talked. Still, there was something there that reminded him of someone. Who? He shook his head. It would come to him. In the meantime, he'd been glad that Adele had turned the guy away. It was bad enough Steve had to share the B&B with Lucy. She was a pleasant stranger and a relative of Adele's, but she also carried some baggage with her. He had enough experience with victims to be able to tag one right off.

He'd had enough of victims. Even though his basic nature was to help people in distress, this damsel was on her own. He'd sent his armor to the cleaners and his sword to be fashioned into a plowshare.

Even so, he checked the door again when he thought the others were busy elsewhere late in the afternoon. The locks consisted of a sturdy deadbolt and a simple lock on the antique handle. Not enough, he thought. He'd see about it. Did Adele have any kind of alarm system? He'd check into that too.

Just how strong was this door, anyway? It looked sturdy enough, but it also appeared to be just a thick slice of wood. He had his shoulder to it, just to test the heft, when he heard someone clearing her throat.

"Is there a problem with the door?" Lucy asked. A slight frown marred her forehead. Her green eyes glinted in the light from the fireplace.

"Can you keep your voice down?" Steve whispered.

She closed the distance between them. "Why?"

Yeah, why? He was acting paranoid. "I don't want Adele to worry."

"About what? Oh, you mean about that guy who came to the door earlier? Why should she worry about him?" She was close enough for him to feel her heat.

He smelled wood smoke on her hair mixed with something flowery. For an instant, all he wanted to do was lean in so that he could take a huge nose full of her scent. Tendrils of curling gold had escaped her ponytail. The urge to touch them made his fingers twitch. Not to mention that mouth, again with the mouth, he thought. Get over the mouth.

"You're staring," she accused. She backed away and held her arms folded across her chest.

He blinked. Then he folded his arms across his chest and leaned his back against the door. "You're nice to look at. It's probably not the first time a man has appreciated how you look." Better to stay on the offensive, not let her realize how close he'd come to touching her.

Her eyes opened wide. Man, she was gorgeous, especially now when he could practically see steam coming out of her ears. This was definitely better than worrying about doors and alarms and security.

When she replied, she spoke low and fast. "Yes, I've had men look at me. Then I've known men who go farther than look. I've had it with that kind of man, so keep your looks to yourself." She turned on her heel.

Great, now he could get back to the business of the door, though he was vaguely disappointed that she didn't stick around.

He watched her back as she stopped and rolled her neck. She looked over her shoulder at him before retracing her steps. "I think that was just a distraction to keep me from asking what you are up to. Just how do you know my aunt? Why are you really here?"

He narrowed his eyes. She wasn't as easily gotten rid of as he'd thought. "Adele and I have known each

other for years. We have reason to trust each other. As for why I'm really here...." He pushed off from the door and approached her. Amusement flooded him when she widened her stance like a fighter and stood her ground.

They were almost nose to nose before Steve stopped. Her minty breath moved across his face. He shivered.

"Why I'm here is my business. But while I am, I intend to make sure Adele is safe. Have you got a problem with that?"

"She's been in this location for years. Why would she not be safe?"

"I'm just a careful kind of guy."

"You seem more than a little paranoid to me."

The fact that she'd hit the nail on the head irked him. She licked her lips as she held his gaze with her own. His eyes focused on her mouth ... again. Instead of ignoring desire, he gave in. He dipped his head down and touched his lips to hers.

She stood absolutely still. He wasn't even sure she was breathing, all he was sure about was the soft, warm texture of her lips and the fact that he'd made a mistake.

One taste was not enough.

Chapter Four

Shock kept Lucy from moving. Her nostrils flared as he angled his mouth over hers. The intimacy of the gentle touch made her tremble. It was the simplest kiss she had ever received yet it rocked her.

Footsteps from the direction of the kitchen had her jumping back. Steve's hands had come up to her

arms. She swatted them away and whirled around to face Adele. The other woman held a wooden tray in her hands. Three steaming mugs and a covered basket were all Lucy could see. Adele placed the tray on the steamer trunk that served as a coffee table between the fireplace and the sofa.

"I thought we'd have some hot buttered rum before dinner," Adele said. She looked at Lucy.

Lucy saw an eyebrow rise ever so slightly, but Adele didn't say anything about what must be an obvious flush on Lucy's cheeks or the rosy color of her lips. She struggled not to touch her lips because surely they were swollen. When no one was looking, she checked with her tongue and could finally be satisfied that they would not give her away.

"Sounds good," Steve said. He moved away from Lucy without a glance in her direction.

"I need to wash first." Lucy headed for her bedroom. It felt like running away, okay it was running away. But right now the last thing she wanted to do was sit down and make polite conversation with that man.

He'd had the nerve to kiss her. She couldn't get over it. One minute they're having a discussion about doors or safety or something, and then he's kissing her.

Talk about a kiss, too. She'd been kissed by experts in the past, but Steve's blend of soft caresses on the lips made her cheeks warm just thinking about it.

She splashed water on her face and stared at her reflection in the mirror. Why had he done that?

Which brought her back to the question of why was he here? Was there a connection?

He'd been concerned when that man had shown up at the door and argued with Adele. Concerned enough to check the locks and the strength of the door when Adele clearly hadn't worried about it. Lucy wondered if Steve would be double checking all of the doors of the ancient house.

Was he a cop? Or did he have first hand knowledge of what might happen if someone wanted to get into a house, or at the people in the house, if they wanted to?

Thoughts to ponder. She went out to see if she could glean anything from idle conversation. When Steve glanced her way as she entered the room, she was certain his gaze strayed to her lips before he grimaced and looked away. Perhaps he regretted the kiss.

She probably should, but it had been just so sweet.

The conversation turned to hockey, a passion, it seemed, of both Steve and Adele. Lucy knew that once they got into it they wouldn't notice whether she was paying attention or not. Her ex-husband had been

like that. She picked up one of the novels she'd checked out of the library and settled in for a trip between the pages.

* * * *

A sound outside her windows woke her, startled her from a fitful sleep. She lay in bed listening. When she didn't hear it again, she decided it must have been one of those noises that old houses have. They creaked and moaned and crackled with changes in the weather. This was certainly a house old enough to have such sounds to wake an unaccustomed sleeper.

Scratch. Scratch. She sat and drew the quilt under her chin. She hadn't imagined it. Someone was moving in the leafless bushes near her window. The clock showed one a.m. Surely Adele and Steve were asleep by now, though after supper they had settled in for an old movie on the television. She'd gone to her room early with a cup of tea and her book to finish and had fallen asleep with the light on.

She was glad for the light, now. She stayed away from the window as she took her flashlight from where she'd put it by the bed and tiptoed to the door. Now it was her turn to check all of the doors.

After she pulled the door to her room shut, she turned on her flashlight to get her bearings, then turned it off again so whoever was outside wouldn't know someone in the house was up and moving around. Taking careful steps in her sock covered feet she made her way to the sturdy front door. Her hands found the deadbolt locked from the inside. That was good enough for her.

She knew of two other entries into the house that were not windows. One was a door in the kitchen that led into the back yard. In the summer the yard contained an authentic kitchen garden. This time of year it held snow and the skeletons of bushes and trees.

Her toes connected with the table leg as she stepped through the kitchen. She smothered a curse and hobbled along. The door back here had a mullioned glass upper half. No curtains obstructed the view from the outside in. Lucy scooted to the side to be less visible. She peered out. All she could see in the light that filtered from the streetlights on the street was the lonely birdbath and ghosts of trees. She dared not shine her light out. Fear crept with the steady growth of icicles around her.

It was silly to feel this way, though. She wasn't alone. No gothic heroine here. She had two other very capable adults in the house. Why didn't she just wake one of them?

Then again, what if she was imagining the whole thing? No, she'd just do a quick check of the last door. It was a bulkhead service door in the basement, or cellar as it was called here. Adele had shown it to her on her first day during a tour of the house.

The latch to the little door leading down to the cellar lifted without a sound. Lucy couldn't remember if there were any windows down there as she stared into a pit of darkness. She decided not to chance it and

stepped onto the first stair hoping that her eyes had adjusted to the dark enough to get her down the stairs without breaking her neck.

The whole cellar, including the walls of the stairwell, was crafted of stones and boulders taken from the surrounding fields when the house had been built. The stairs were of wood, the third one down creaked when she stepped onto it. The noise shouted in the silence. She kept one hand on the cold stone wall as she stepped carefully down.

At last she felt the stone floor icy beneath her feet. She wasn't as familiar with this room as with the rooms upstairs and knew she had to chance some illumination or she'd just blunder around. She flipped the switch of her flashlight and held a hand over the beam so that she could adjust the brightness. It wasn't a big space, but it was full of odds and ends that created weird shadows in the wavering light. She shivered.

Get it over with and get upstairs to your warm bed.

She loved it when she gave herself good advice.

The steps up to the bulkhead door were at the opposite side of the room, of course. She stubbed the toes on her other foot on the way, of course. The steps were bathed in a pool of darkness even when she was standing right at the edge of them.

Just shine the light up, she told herself. All you have to do is make sure the lock is fastened.

Just as she took her hand away, someone grabbed her shoulder.

She dropped the flashlight, which immediately went out, and screamed.

Rather, she tried to scream, but a large hand covered her mouth. It dragged her until her back stopped against something warm and solid. Strong arms enveloped her. She relaxed as Steve's scent came to her nostrils.

He moved his hand away. "Just don't scream. We'll have Adele down here for sure."

The dimmest glimmer of light slanted down the stairs from the doorway.

Anger and relief surged together with fear and adrenaline. "Why did you do that? All you had to do was say my name." She'd never come closer to hitting a person.

"Yeah, right, and you'd have just said, 'Hi Steve, let's snoop around together.' Sure."

She groped around on the floor feeling for her flashlight. "I wasn't snooping," she said, her voice a whisper.

"Then what?"

Her hand touched the smooth plastic form of her flashlight. When she stood, the top of her head connected with his chin. "Ouch!"

"Man, what'd you do that for?"

Dizziness grabbed at her. She fought against the throbbing pain, rubbed at where surely a knot would be tomorrow, and then gave up and sat on the hard floor. She couldn't muster up any words right now and wished he'd just be quiet and let her try to think away the pain.

"Lucy?"

"I'm down here."

"Okay."

Air currents shifted, the sounds of his clothes rubbing against the stones made her realize that he'd sat, too. Actually, after you got used to the cold, the dark quiet was rather peaceful, Lucy thought. Or would be if she'd been alone. Steve's form was becoming more distinct as her eyes got used to the dark. His body was a dark bulk not far from her. His breathing came in slow, deep breaths. If she was lucky, he'd fall asleep here and she could scurry up to her room and forget all about this embarrassing incident.

No such luck.

"So," his baritone raised the hairs on her nape. "What where you doing skulking down here?"

"I wasn't skulking." She winced as another throb of pain pulsed through her head. "Okay, look, I heard a noise outside and thought I'd check the doors. I didn't want to chance a light."

"Have you got gothic heroine syndrome, or something? My sisters read that stuff. Wait a minute. Usually the cover shows a woman running around in a night gown. Um, what are you wearing?"

Heat pooled in her stomach as the timber of his voice changed, deepened. "You sound like a pervert making a phone sex call," she snapped.

"How would you know about that?" The darkness that was Steve shifted closer to her.

"Not by personal experience, if that's what you're getting at."

He scooted closer. His warmth, even inches away, was a stark contrast to the chill of the floor.

"So, what about the doors? Are we secure?"

She was aware of his warm breath and struggled not to move closer to him. "Yeah," she rasped. "I mean, yes, except I didn't have a chance to double check the latch on the bulkhead. You grabbed me too soon." She paused. "Why did you do that?"

He stopped breathing for a minute space of time. When he spoke, his voice was closer to normal, not sexy and intriguing. "I heard something, just wanted to check it out. When I found the cellar door open, thought I'd better investigate."

"Did that guy today spook you that much? He seemed harmless to me."

"There was something in his voice...." He shifted. "Give me your flashlight. I'll check the door, then we can go someplace that doesn't have the atmosphere of a deep freeze."

All business again. Lucy handed him her flashlight. As he took it, he also grabbed her hand and tugged. His touch lingered when he should have let her go. Another good looking guy looking to score, she thought. When will I ever stop attracting them?

Steve blinked in the light when he thumbed the switch. He moved away from Lucy and checked the bulkhead door. All secure, but he felt a sense of relief that he'd checked, even though it meant spending close quarters time with this all too attractive woman.

She was just out of his circle of light when he turned back. Her hair glowed as it fell to where her shoulders must be. Her eyes, green he knew, would shimmer in the yellow light if he dared move closer to her.

He was afraid of her, for her. She had just that sense of innocence that appealed to the perverts, her own word, out there. Men like the enraged husband who had taken two innocent lives. Maybe like that guy who'd come to the door today. Maybe like all men.

He grimaced. He had to get away from her.

"Come on," he growled and pointed the light toward the stairs.

She turned without a word and went in front of him. At the bottom step, she paused. "Listen. Do you hear something?"

He looked down at her hand where it touched his sleeve. A small hand, feminine, a hand that didn't understand the violence in men. "No."

As he stepped onto the bottom stair, a sudden rush of wind blew down the passage. He shivered and watched the door slam shut. "Hey!" He scrambled up the stairs, anxious to pull the door open before the old latch fell and locked them in. Too late, the door was shut tight.

Lucy followed him up the steps. "What happened?" She tried the handle. The door didn't budge. "I thought these doors had a way to open them on both sides. Isn't there a light down here?" She bent over examining the handle.

Steve saw a switch on the wall next to the door. He flipped it and sighed when a weak bulb came on overhead. It wasn't much, probably no more than forty watts, but it beat the flashlight any day.

Lucy jiggled the handle. She tugged on the door. It was when she started banging on the door with both hands, frantic, that he realized there might be more of a problem than being stuck with him in the cellar.

"Hey, wait, you'll hurt yourself." When he grabbed her hands he felt tremors running through her body.

"I have to get out of here," Lucy said, her breath ragged. When she looked up at him, her eyes were wide, pupils dilated. Fear emanated from her.

He always saw their fear. Part of him pulled back. He didn't want to get involved with her, couldn't chance it. Sweat beaded on his forehead in the chill of the place. Then he found what he needed, a reason. This wasn't a victim of domestic violence. She was afraid of something else. Not the dark, she wandered around the house and down here in near Stygian blackness with nothing more than a feeble flashlight.

She pulled away from him and smacked the door again. Then she shook her open hand before she shrank to the top step and held herself. "Is there anyway you can open the door?" she said. It sounded like she'd gritted her teeth. The words came out with painful control.

"Let me try, now that we have some more light." He strove to make his voice calm and reassuring as if he were talking to a child.

She sat right next to the door, blocking his way. Her jerk when he touched her shoulder told him volumes.

"Lucy." He knelt beside her. "You're going to have to move a bit if I'm going to be able to get to the door."

Her back was a wooden plank, stiff and hard. At last she moved sideways enough so that he could see what he needed to see. The stairs were old wood, she'd probably have a seat full of splinters, but he couldn't worry about that right now. It was clear that she had a problem with closed in places. Even with the light, he could see no way out.

The door was made up of twelve inch wide vertical planks, solid as the day they were fastened together and set into place. When he examined the handle, he saw how there was a place for a thumb bar, but it seemed to have snapped off sometime in the centuries during which it had been a part of the mechanism. Next he looked at the hinges. Maybe he could pull the pins and slide the door off that way. But the hinges were so tightly imbedded into the frame that was so closely fitted to the wall that he couldn't even get a finger through, much less whatever tool he might find around here.

He rubbed his face as he stared at Lucy's hunched back. He had to find a way to relax her. From the dial on his watch, it was several hours until they could expect Adele in the kitchen making breakfast.

Before he could speak, she straightened. "I'm fine," she whispered. "I just have to breathe, that's all. I'm sure everything will be fine. Don't worry, I don't need you to take care of me. I don't need anyone." She sniffed. "I don't suppose you can open the door."

"No."

She stood, her hands knotted at her waist. "Well, what could be the worst thing that could happen?"

He took one of her hands. "So, how long have you been claustrophobic?"

"I was hoping you hadn't noticed." Her chin came up, but it trembled.

"That's it, be mad. It's better than being scared."

"I'm not scared."

"Me either."

She sat again. He joined her. The stair wasn't all that wide, but the stairwell was chilly and all he had on was a tee shirt and sweatpants. At least she didn't jerk away from him this time.

"What...." she licked her lips. "What if the light goes out?"

"I'll be right here." The last thing he could promise was that he could protect her.

"So, talk to me. Why are you here?"

He felt her shiver and put a tentative arm around her. She didn't pull away. "I heard a sound in the cellar and came to investigate," he said, knowing that it wasn't what she was looking for.

She snorted. "You know what I mean. Why are you at a closed B&B in the middle of February on the coast of Massachusetts?" He couldn't see her eyes, but imagined she'd just rolled them.

How was he to answer her question? Tell her that the last people he'd tried to help had died anyway? Tell her that he was a burnout and good for nothing anymore?

"I like to fish," he said.

"Hah, I should have known. You're a closet fisherman. Your haircut and hand knit sweaters gave you away."

He felt her relaxing against him and was glad that her anxiety was lessening. "Your turn. Why are you here, etcetera, etcetera, and etcetera?"

"Salt water taffy." She rubbed her arms and settled closer.

"Salt water taffy?"

"Yeah, it's fresher here."

His turn to snort. "We're a couple of bad liars, aren't we?"

She nodded. "Everyone has secrets. You know?" She turned her face so that her big green eyes stared up at him.

Her hair tumbled around her shoulders, disheveled and golden. Her mouth quivered, she bit the bottom lip. Her eyes widened, as if they understood that he was going to do something he knew he shouldn't.

"Lucy," he whispered. This time he cradled her head in his hands, watched her lashes sweep over her eyes just before he kissed her. He waited, hesitated, sure she would tell him to stop or would push him away.

She didn't.

When their lips touched, she moaned and turned her head to deepen the kiss.

Chapter Five

Lucy knew she should push him away. It was probably a pity kiss anyway because he felt sorry for her because she was scared. She put her hands up to shove at him and instead found them cradling either side of his head as she deepened the kiss.

A bolt of desire seared her from head to toe when his tongue probed against her lips. She opened her mouth and melted into his. The chill of the cellar, the cold stones, the closed in sense of it all flew right out of her mind. All there was room for was this kiss, this sense of coming home.

Somehow they shifted and she found herself cradled in his lap, one of his arms supporting her shoulders, the other free to roam. And roam it did. He caressed her face, stroked down her arm, and cupped her buttocks before lingering on her breast. Though she wore a sweatshirt and jeans, she felt the warm weight of his palm where it cupped her. When his thumb grazed her already hard nipple she couldn't help but arch into his touch.

Before she could react further, he'd removed his hand. She moaned her disappointment only to find his hand had moved to find the bottom of her sweatshirt. Now she felt lingering flames where his skin touched hers. His fingers found the lace at the edge of her bra and traced around it. When his finger slipped under and found her soft skin and the gem hard nipple, she forgot to breathe.

He groaned and moved his mouth from her lips to her ear. He nibbled on her earlobe while gently squeezing her nipple and rubbing her breast until the heat pooling in her groin threatened to explode. If he didn't stop now, she'd come sitting here in his lap in the cellar of her aunt's house.

Oh God. He was exactly the wrong man for her doing exactly the right things to her.

"Stop." She was sure she'd only thought it, but it must have come out of her mouth, because he stopped nibbling her ear. His hand stilled.

The sounds of their hearts beating, deep inhalations of breath, even the soft swish as their clothes rubbed together was amplified in the heady silence.

Wordlessly he set her aside then stepped to the bottom of the stairs. She watched him stretch from side to side, enjoyed the play of his back muscles under the thin skin of his tee shirt. All the while she struggled

to steady the tremor in her limbs. The chill that his body had protected her from returned. She hugged herself as much for comfort as for warmth. Her body yearned for more of his touch, but his rapid disconnection could only mean that he regretted ever kissing her in the first place.

A scraping sound from the other side of the door reached her ears. "Adele," she shouted, unable to keep an edge of panic from her voice. She pounded on the door.

It swung open just missing Lucy's cheek. Adele stared at her. Electric light poured in behind Adele leaving the woman backlit and mysterious. Then she stepped so that the glow hit her familiar face.

"I thought I heard noises. It's a good thing I sleep lightly or you would have been stuck here until breakfast." Adele drew Lucy out of the stairway and into the welcome open space of the kitchen. She started to pull the door closed.

"Wait." Lucy stopped her. Steve's slow footsteps came up the stairs.

Adele's eyebrows rose, two question marks of sorts, but she didn't say anything, didn't ask the obvious. She simply looked from Lucy to Steve.

"It's not what you think," Lucy said, not looking at Steve.

"What do I think?" Adele asked.

Steve rubbed at the back of his neck. Lucy felt her cheeks warm and imagined the spreading blush. She never could control it.

"I heard a noise and thought I'd check the doors. Steve heard me and followed me to the cellar. We were checking the bulkhead when the door at the head of the stairs shut. I don't know why it shut, it just did. We couldn't get out. Then you came."

"Yeah, what she said," Steve said.

Lucy saw the corners of Adele's mouth curl up on the ends. The woman's dark eyes sparkled.

"Well, I don't know what to say. You're both adults. But I'd think you could find a more comfortable place for a tryst." She turned away. "Turn out the light before you go to bed."

"Wait," Lucy said. "It's not like that." Adele kept walking.

Lucy turned on Steve. "Now look what you've done."

* * * *

Eros left the mortal plane and flew to Olympus. He had a thing or two to say to his mother. He found her lounging by the hot springs; Pegasus was romping in the clear water. His wings sent up rainbow sprays that sounded like wind chimes as the droplets fell back into the pool.

Aphrodite turned her lovely face to Eros. Her eyebrows rose. "I thought we were going to use magic to talk to each other."

"The mortal woman, Lucy, almost caught us today. This seemed safer."

"Safer, but tricky if you don't get back there soon."

"Don't worry. Things are right on track. I locked them together tonight. Just for a little while, but long enough for the mutual attraction they're fighting to surface." He grinned.

"Don't look so smug. You know how humans can be about love. One bad experience and they fight every opportunity for years."

"I know that, but most humans don't have my help. Valentine's Day is two days away. If they aren't lovers by then I'll ... I'll...." He scratched his golden curls.

"You'll think of something," Aphrodite said. She reached a languid hand toward Pegasus. The magnificent horse stretched its wings and flew to her side. "There's a good boy," she crooned to the horse.

"Why did you send that guy?" Eros asked.

"Your language is becoming distinctly human, Eros, even after such a short time among mortals." She sighed. "What guy?"

"He said his name was Jim Pearce. One of those scruffy looking humans with a stinking aura."

She continued stroking the beast's muzzle, the hint of a frown teased her brow.

"Didn't you send him? You've been known to surprise me now and then," Eros said.

"I did not send a mortal to you. Show him to me."

Eros projected a picture of the man, his voice, his aura to Aphrodite. "So if you didn't send him, why did he show up?"

"I don't recognize anything about him." She shrugged. "Just a stray human, nothing to worry about."

"If you say so."

"What will you do next?"

"About the lovers? I'm going to throw them together as much as possible, and I mean together." His wings glowed as he considered his options. "I'll talk to you soon."

"Do."

He left his mother stroking Pegasus absentmindedly. They made a perfect picture in the perfect setting in the golden world of Olympus.

* * * *

The terms tossing and turning applied to the rest of Lucy's night. She couldn't get comfortable. Every time she thought she would drift off, she felt Steve's lips on her again. Her imagination replayed all the nuances of the night, every touch, every sensation. Heat flowed through her again as she recalled how he had touched her and the tingling, crazy, yes! yes! yes! way it had made her feel.

She'd felt like a woman consumed by passion, not like a woman who had fled a loveless relationships because she'd been too "cold." Cold did not describe her reaction to Steve Martucci.

At last she heard Adele's brisk footsteps in the hall. It was early by her little travel clock, but she threw back the blankets and quilt and headed for the shower anyway. It looked like this little respite was not going to allow her to actually rest. Not as long as Steve was sharing the house.

"Hi, Adele," she said when she walked into the kitchen a half hour later. Steve was absent, for which she was both grateful and regretful at the same time.

Adele handed Lucy a piece of paper and a slick brochure along with a cup of fresh brewed coffee.

"What's this?" Lucy asked. She sat at the table, blessed the first person to invent the drink of coffee, and looked at the papers in her hand.

"The top one is my letter of recommendation for you for the job at the library."

"Oh, thank you." At last, something going right.

"The brochure is something I put together years ago when I still accepted winter guests. It lists museums

and attractions that are open this time of year. I was thinking you could get Steve out of the house."

Lucy frowned. "I'm not the right person for the job. I barely know him. Besides, he's just the kind of man I'm trying to avoid."

"Avoid?" Adele's expressive eyebrows waggled. "I didn't suggest a romantic liaison, just friendly company around town."

Lucy felt her cheeks warm as she thought about last night's unexpectedly romantic interlude.

"I'd take him myself," Adele continued, "but I have a list of errands the length of my arm to run before the next spell of bad weather socks us in."

What Lucy could see of the sky foretold a clear, sunny day. It would be bright and cold, probably with a good breeze off the bay. Suddenly she desperately wanted to be outside, bracing herself against the elements of nature instead of against her own emotions. If she could be outside, she'd even be able to tolerate Steve's company. The day was looking up.

"Okay, if Steve is willing, I am."

"Willing for what?"

She bumped the table as she turned at the sound of Steve's voice. Her coffee sloshed, making a mess of the tablecloth and the papers she had set there. "Look at what you made me do."

"Again it's my fault?" He looked like an ad for Brooke's Brothers gets out of bed. All rumpled, in his robe that was untied, his bare feet the obvious reason that she hadn't heard him enter. Sexy didn't come close to describing him, even when he yawned.

Adele shoved a coffee mug into his hand and guided him to a chair. "Sit," she ordered as she replaced the wet table cloth with a dry one and picked up the sopping papers. "I've got these saved on my computer. I'll just go print up another copy." She scurried away, saying, "Lucy, I forgot to get the newspaper. Will you see if it's on the front step?"

Without glancing at Steve, Lucy went to the front door. A blast of chill air hit her as she opened it and looked out. There was the newspaper, just as Adele had suggested. When she bent to grab it the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. She straightened and looked down the walk to the gate. A man stood there. The man who'd been at the door last night looking for lodging. He wore a dark overcoat and a ski hat, also black. His eyes bored into Lucy. She couldn't move. Then he smiled and his face transformed from frightening into handsome, charming even.

Lucy smiled in return then stepped back into the house and shut the door. What had he been doing outside the house? Probably just passing by. She shrugged off her unease and took the newspaper into the kitchen where Adele was setting out her fresh from the oven coffee cake and taking Steve's order for breakfast.

Just as Lucy sat, he looked at her. His eyes stared into hers, holding her mesmerized by the liquid heat in them. As quickly as that she knew she wanted more from him than a few stolen kisses.

He was bad for her, the wrong man. Something told her it didn't matter what she thought. Her body had already given up the fight. It was only a matter of time before the rest of her succumbed.

Chapter Six

Adele shoved them both out the front door shortly before ten a.m. Steve held the brochure in his hands; Lucy had her job application and recommendation.

"I want to drop this off at the library," she said to Steve as they strode down the sidewalk.

"You don't strike me as the librarian type," Steve commented. His breath came out in little puffs in the cold morning air.

"What type would that be?" She didn't look at him because when she did, all she could think about was how his mouth had felt on hers and the licking flames of his hands stroking her torso. Good thing the scarf wrapped around her face fully, otherwise he'd be able to see the flush that was surely crawling up her neck.

"Oh, you know, tweedy and reading glasses and lives with a cat, that type."

She hazarded a glance at him. His eyes twinkled under the brim of his stocking cap. "I'm allergic to cats."

He laughed.

After that, they walked a bit slower. "Did Adele give you any time to look at that brochure?" she asked after a comfortable silence.

"Not really, she seemed agitated about something."

"I noticed that, too."

He opened the tri-fold paper. Lucy peeked over his arm at the list. It wasn't very long; apparently winter openings and hours were limited. She assumed that this time of year most visitors were school children on field trips.

"We have a selection of indoor and outdoor sights to see," Steve said. They stopped at a corner waiting to cross. The library was just ahead.

"I suppose it depends on how cold we want to get and how much walking we want to do." They crossed and went up the steps into the library. "I'll just be a moment," she said.

"Take your time." He unbuttoned his coat as she walked to the front desk. She was directed off to the side and out of his sight.

The wintry sun didn't offer much warmth, but the light had a clarity that brought Steve to the front windows of the building. They offered a vista of the harbor and street so that he could see many of the attractions listed on the brochure. Mentally, he ticked off the places he hadn't visited since he'd been a boy.

He'd always loved the harbor. At least once a summer his dad would take Steve and his brother down to the wharf to get on a deep sea fishing charter. There was something about the smells of a fishing boat and the wharf that made him feel young again. If Lucy didn't mind the walk, he'd suggest going there. It was at the other end of the street, past the Mayflower II dock.

A movement behind one of the bushes by the library entrance caught his attention. As he watched, a man stepped away from the cover and walked up the steps to the library. He wore a long, dark coat and a black stocking cap. Nothing unusual considering the season and the weather, but something about this guy set Steve's hackles rising.

When the man entered the library and Steve could get a closer look, he realized it was Pearce, the guy who'd tried to get a room at Adele's yesterday. Again, something about the man tickled at the back of Steve's mind. He knew this man from somewhere. He just couldn't put a finger on it.

At that moment, Lucy emerged from wherever she'd been hidden. Steve watched her shake hands with a woman who looked to be about Lucy's age. The woman wore a bright yellow sweater over snug slacks. Her dark hair was cut to swing with every move of her head. Lucy's golden hair and slender height made

for a pretty contrast.

Lucy turned her head, her mouth curved up in a smile. Their eyes met. Something hard broke inside Steve, loose pleasure threaded through him. He smiled back and enjoyed the color that flashed onto her face as she looked away.

She was walking back to Steve when he saw Pearce approach her. The man blocked Steve's view of Lucy. All he could see was the man's large form, menacing in a way that Steve couldn't explain.

Lucy stepped around the man and rejoined Steve. Her lips were a flat line, no longer the generous smile of before.

"What did he want?" Steve asked before thinking. It wasn't his business unless he wanted it to be. He decided right then that he wanted it to be.

"Just to say hello," Lucy said. She adjusted her scarf and buttoned her coat. "It's funny, though. I saw him this morning outside the house when I went to get the newspaper."

That warning prickle hit the back of Steve's neck again. He shook it off. "Just coincidence."

"Yeah, that's what I thought." She looked over her shoulder, then smiled back at Steve. "So, what did you think of the head librarian?"

"I didn't see her."

"Sure you did. It was that dark haired lady I shook hands with. You were staring right at her."

Steve kept as straight a face as possible. "Librarians have sure come a long way since I was in school."

Lucy laughed. "What's first on your list?"

"Funny you should ask. Are those good walking shoes? I want to show you some of my favorite places."

"Lead on. Adele said we weren't to come back until after lunch."

Steve glanced over his shoulder as they left the library. Pearce was staring at them, his eyes unreadable from across the room.

* * * *

Lucy didn't complain about the long walk down the waterfront even though the clear air blew hard off

the north Atlantic. They stopped to look at Plymouth Rock and decided they'd wait for another day to tour the Mayflower II, replica of the original ship. They stayed on the bay side of the street walking steadily into the wind until they reached the pier where the fishing boats went out past the breakwater.

"Let's find a cup of coffee," Steve said. He pulled Lucy through the doors of a small café next to the pier. They found a table by the window and ordered. The place was not busy at this time of day. The locals had gone about their business and it was too early for a lunch crowd. Except for a man sitting in a shadowy corner, they had the place to themselves.

Lucy rubbed her hands together. "It's so pretty here, so different from Colorado."

Steve watched her profile as she stared out the window.

When she turned her head, her gaze held Steve's for a minute. Her green eyes danced with the light from the moving water outside. He couldn't get enough of them.

A hint of pink appeared on her cheeks. She lowered her lashes and slid her gaze over her shoulder. Unaccountably, her eyes opened wide and came back to him. A slight frown creased her brow.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'd swear he's following me," Lucy murmured. She looked over Steve's shoulder again.

"Who?" He started to turn, but she stopped him with her hand on his.

"Don't look, he's staring right at us."

The urge to look was hard to fight. Instead Steve focused his attention at where Lucy's hand covered his. He turned his hand so it held hers--the most natural thing in the world.

Her hand trembled in his. She bit her lower lip and all he wanted to do was kiss her again.

"You're distracting me," she said, but she didn't move her hand away.

"Yeah."

"You're the last thing I need distracting me."

He shrugged. "If you say so. So, who's behind me? I can practically feel the stare. What's he doing, throwing darts with his eyes?" He hoped to lighten her mood, but she didn't smile.

"It's Pearce. He must have followed us from the library, somehow gotten ahead of us. Why would he do that? He gives me the creeps."

"Twice in one day could be coincidence. Three times is too much." Steve considered their options. He didn't like thinking that this guy might be stalking Lucy.

"Oh," she said. "He's leaving. Let's stay here for lunch. Then when we leave we'll know for sure that he's not following us. I'll call Adele and let her know."

"Good idea." He watched Lucy walk to a pay phone behind the reception desk and kept his eyes on her while he pulled out his cell. His call to a buddy in the Boston Police Department was over before she came back to the table. Having friends in the P.D. was a blessing. They could always be counted on. If they had anything on this Pearce guy, he'd know before the end of the day.

They ordered fresh scallops and hot clam chowder made the New England way with plenty of potatoes and milk and enough clams to satisfy.

Lucy relaxed against the back of her chair as she sipped her coffee and thought about everything she still didn't know about the handsome man with the sad eyes who sat across the table from her. They'd talked about family but avoided talk about jobs. They'd talked about music and art and cars, but neither had asked for nor offered information on why they needed a break from whatever drove them to get up in the morning, or from what had driven them here.

Lucy felt the deep liquid pull of desire every time a smile worked its way from Steve's mouth to his eyes, making their brown deliciously welcoming. Those smiles didn't last. He always seemed to be looking over his shoulder or around the small café, like he expected something to happen and he wanted to be prepared.

Had he lived a life where looking over his shoulder was more the norm than an aberration? Maybe she should just ask.

"What do you do for a living?" they asked at the same time.

"Great minds think alike," Lucy said and laughed. There it was again, that wary smile at odds with sexy eyes that crinkled at the corners.

"Yeah, I guess so." He looked into his mug, then out the window. She could see his eyes following the flight of the gulls as they landed and took off from the pier.

"You know that I'm kind of in between jobs right now. I was a dental hygienist in Colorado." She sipped. "I needed a change."

"Kind of a drastic change of scenery, don't you think?"

"Some things need drastic."

His face turned away from the window, but he didn't ask what she meant by her comment. She almost wished he would so she could get it over with. Just tell him what a loser she was and how badly she'd messed up. That way she wouldn't be hanging on his every word and waiting for the next time she could melt into his eyes. Because he wouldn't want to be with her anymore.

She leaned back in her chair, the silence stretched between them. Her chest loosened when he called for the check. He hadn't challenged her, but he hadn't shared anything of himself, either.

They were bundled up and heading for the door when she couldn't resist saying, "You didn't say what you do."

"I know."

All she could see of his face was the hard line of his mouth. He opened the door. A strong gust pushed her against him. His body held her steady; his hand came up and grasped her shoulders. She felt his reassuring pressure through her heavy layers of clothing. The desire to just sink back into him and let him hold her was so strong that it scared her.

She moved out of the doorway to get away, not just from him but from the feelings that he engendered within her. They were dangerous feelings; she didn't think she could afford to feel them. Not with this man, not at this time, because she would surely screw it up.

"What's next on our list?" she asked once they were both outside. She looked at the sky. Dark clouds skidded across the sky with the wind, turning the crystal bright day dimmer, like someone had turned a switch. Despite the weather she'd promised Adele to keep Steve out and busy, whether he'd tell her anything about himself or not, so she'd play along a bit longer.

Steve glanced up, too. He took another look at the brochure. "I think you'll like the Children's Museum. They'll let you touch things." He waggled his eyebrows, the somber man hidden under wraps again.

"Lead on."

Lucy was glad that the museum wasn't too far away. Not only had the wind picked up, but the temperature had plummeted. When they stepped into the shelter of the entryway, the world sounded hushed after the noise of nature outside.

A cloak room was just to the side of the entry. Lucy and Steve left their coats, hats, and scarves on the

hangers provided. They paid the fee and moved into the large bright room. A group of children with several adults in tow stood around one of the near exhibits. Steve took Lucy by the elbow and steered around them. The touch of his hand on her arm made her shiver, but if he felt it he didn't react. She should pull away, she knew she should, but just couldn't bring herself to do it.

Near the back of the room a series of dioramas had been set up to show how life must have been when the Pilgrims landed in the seventeenth century. Looking at replicas of the homes of the Native Americans and the homes that the Pilgrims eventually fashioned made Lucy glad for central heating and indoor plumbing. If the weather today was an indicator of the weather back then, she imagined winter to be a miserable time.

She said as much to Steve. His answer surprised her. "It was what they knew." He moved her along to a glassed in case that showed crude drums and rattles and another with deer hide clothing.

"They told stories and worked on basketry and crafts during the winter months. The Native Americans were singularly suited to life here. They knew where to find food during all seasons of the year. They even showed the Pilgrims how to do it. None of those early Europeans knew much about fishing or farming, they had to be taught. These generous people taught them. Even so, the first winter was a disaster." His voice, low and deep, was like a whisper in her ear. The intimacy of the way he spoke created a shiver in the pit of her stomach.

"You know a lot about those times," she said to him. His face was close enough to see the shadow of his beard, to feel the heat of his breath.

"You can't grow up in Massachusetts without learning about the Pilgrims and the Native Americans and the way they interacted. History fascinated me. How human beings interact with each other fascinated me." His mouth was only inches from hers.

The possibility of interacting with him fascinated her.

She wondered what he would do if she moved closer. The urge to set her lips against his overwhelmed her.

The sound of a child crying brought Lucy to her senses. She jerked back and looked around. The room had emptied of children except for the one little girl who was standing near the sign that pointed to the restrooms. She wasn't more than four or five, younger than those school children who had been there earlier. Where was her mother?

Steve reacted before Lucy. She saw the look on his face as he approached the child, it was a mixture of sympathy and something like fear. But when he squatted down to talk to the little girl, his body language was unthreatening. Lucy couldn't hear his voice because he kept it low and gentle. She thought the little girl might feel better if Lucy was there, too, but she hesitated to intrude. Instead, she stood back and

watched as Steve handed the child a clean handkerchief and talked to her some more.

In a little while the girl had stopped crying and had wiped her face clean. She even smiled at Steve, a smile that had her worship all over it. Lucy's heart did a slow barrel roll when she saw the girl put her little hand, with utter trust, into Steve's big one and the two walked over to the counter by the door. She was charmed by the handsome man with the sad eyes who clearly knew how to take care of those who couldn't take care of themselves. What was he doing here?

"Looks like you lost your escort," a deep voice said.

Startled, Lucy whirled to see Pearce looming next to her. He stood too close, closer than a stranger had a right to. Again, he smiled and his face became rugged and handsome rather than brooding and menacing, yet Lucy couldn't feel comfortable with him. He was good looking, had a cultured way of speaking, and dressed well. Just the kind of man who had always appealed to her. Yet something in the way he held himself made her want to back away.

And something in the way he looked at her made her know that he wanted her to back away. Her reaction would give him power.

She stood her ground and said, "You've been to all the same places we've been today."

"It was a good day for a walk, until the weather moved in." He leaned against the display case, arms crossed over his broad chest.

Lucy fought against her discomfort. Her heart beat fast, like when she felt threatened, not the way she felt when Steve looked at her that way. "Have you been following us?" she asked.

"Why would I do a thing like that?"

"I don't know, but you should leave us alone."

"Oh, I'd like to have you alone."

"Take a hike, Mister." Sudden rage made Lucy's blood sing. She'd done nothing to warrant this man's attention. "If you follow us anymore, I'll get a restraining order from the police for harassment."

He laughed. "Restraining orders are just pieces of paper."

Her anger and discomfort grew.

Steve appeared behind Pearce. He must have heard the last remark. His face had hardened, his eyes slits,

as he put a hand on Pearce's shoulder. "Time for you to leave," Steve said.

Pearce's gaze moved from Lucy's feet slowly up. He smiled at her and said, "Until later." Then he pushed Steve's hand off his shoulder and walked away.

"Creep," Lucy said. The desire to wash had never been so strong, as if she'd unwittingly touched filth.

"Stay away from him," Steve growled. His face, granite hard, had a shadow on it. His eyes blazed with a strong emotion. Lucy had a feeling it wasn't the warm cuddly kind. Anger radiated from him, from the set of his chin to the way his hands were clenched into white knuckled fists.

"He approached me," Lucy said, suddenly angry at Steve. "I was handling the situation just fine.

"That guy has predator written all over him," Steve said. He rolled his shoulders. "I'm just glad I got to little Amanda before he did."

Lucy softened a bit. "That's her name?"

"Yes."

"You were really good with her."

"I've had practice." His mouth stayed thin, and his tone-- bitter. "Let's get out of here."

"What about Amanda?" Lucy asked as they got their coats.

"The manager will make sure her parents come for her. They handle separated children and parents all the time."

Lucy put a hand out to stop him from blasting through the door. It forced him to stop and look at her. "I don't know how you did it, or how you knew how to do it, but that little girl knew that she was safe with you and she could tell you what was wrong. That's a gift, Steve."

"It's a curse," he ground out. He turned his back on her and stalked out of the building.

Chapter Seven

A blast of snow hit Lucy as she followed Steve. The wind blew so hard that she took a moment to steady herself before moving off. Though it was mid afternoon, the streetlights had come on. They cast faint halos of murky light at regular intervals along the street.

A fog horn blew its lonely call somewhere out in the bay. Lucy struggled to catch up with Steve, but strong gusts buffeted her every step. She put her head down and trudged on. Though she was well covered and layered and swathed, blowing snow found its way down her neck and up the space between her gloves and into the sleeves of her coat. Frigid air vied with her lungs for each breath.

A strong hand took her elbow. She glanced to see that Steve had returned. What she could make out of his face wasn't reassuring, just a slash where his mouth was and his eyebrows glittering with a snowy frown. Whatever he was feeling, he'd come back for her. Together they fought the elements until they could turn onto the walk to The Rock Inn.

The house felt silent and empty after the chaos outside. Lucy stamped the worst of the snow from her boots and hung up her coat, hat, and scarf to dry out.

"Adele," she called. No familiar footsteps came towards her, no cheery greeting. The sensation of emptiness increased.

"She must be out," Lucy said. "I hope she's not stuck somewhere in this." She pulled off her boots and left them on the mat beside the front door. Freedom from the heavy outer garments had her feeling almost light headed.

Steve hadn't said a word. When he'd shed his outer clothes, he stalked through the living room and into the kitchen. Lucy padded behind. She put on a kettle of water as he picked up a piece of paper propped between the salt shaker and pepper mill on the table. The frown between his eyes deepened.

"She's at a sick friend's house up the coast. Says she put our dinner in the fridge and hopes we don't mind being deserted," Steve said after looking over the note. "She left a number if you want to give her a call."

"Let me see." Lucy took the note from him. "Well, I hope she has sense enough to stay put." She couldn't help but be aware of the warmth emanating from him as they stood close, and of his unique scent.

"Do you want tea, hot chocolate?" she asked. Any reason to move away, keep herself busy before she

made a fool of herself. Before she took his hands and held them between hers. Before she tried to smooth the worry off of his face.

"Thanks, whatever you're fixing is fine. I'll see what's in the refrigerator." His voice had lost the hard edge it had had at the museum. Lucy heard an undercurrent of strain and realized he was deliberately masking his feelings. Feelings that had been so close to the surface that they'd been ready to erupt before they'd stepped into the storm.

She wanted to know what drove him to such strong emotions. Was it the reason he was here and not at whatever high rise, high paying job that everything from his clothes to his haircut screamed was his place in life?

The tea kettle whistled for attention. Lucy busied herself brewing the tea, trying to ignore the actions of the man who made this large kitchen tiny just by occupying it.

"Tea's ready," she said at last. "Let's see if Adele left any wood in the fireplace."

"There's a pot of cheese fondue for later," Steve said. "She left this tray, too." He held a platter of sliced quick breads and fruit in his hands. Lucy stared at his hands, they were large and competent and she remembered how they'd felt on her skin.

Desire flooded her. She couldn't speak. Instead, she led the way to the living room and set the tea on the old chest that stood in for a coffee table. Steve set the food next to it and got busy at the fireplace. Neither spoke until the fire was lit and the tea was poured. Steve leaned against the mantle, mug in hand. His posture suggested relaxation, but Lucy was aware of an undercurrent of restlessness in him. It was easy to recognize, it mimicked her own.

Down the hall the old grandfather clock chimed the hour. The wind picked up and threw snow against the windows. The crackle of the flames and the scent of the burning wood made for a nice counterpoint to the storm raging outside, and calmed the storm of emotions that filled her. She was just beginning to relax when the sharp jangle of the telephone jarred her.

Steve pushed off the mantle, but Lucy reached the phone first. Static was punctuated by a word or two. "Adele," she mouthed to Steve. "I can't hear you very well," she shouted into the phone.

"Stranded ... staying here ... storm abates. Blizzard ... worst ... fifty...." Adele's voice faded.

"Okay, stay safe. We're fine, don't worry about us." Lucy strained to hear. All she could hear was something like, "Opportunity wasted," before the line went dead.

She stared at the now silent phone. "The phone's out," she told Steve. "But she's safe and staying where she is." She frowned.

"What's wrong?" Steve asked.

"Her last words were odd. Something about opportunity wasted. I wonder what she meant by that?"

The lamps flickered as the wind moaned through every crack in the old house.

Steve nodded. "One of her favorite sayings is 'an opportunity ignored is an opportunity wasted.'"

"I wonder what she meant." The lights dimmed.

"I saw some flashlights in the kitchen," Steve said.

"Yeah, don't want to ignore the opportunity to find them before—"

Something crashed against the roof. The electric lights flickered one last time before going out all together.

"—Before we wasted the opportunity to find them?" Steve finished. "Too late."

Lucy lit one of the candles on the mantle. "Here." She handed it to Steve and lit another for herself.

"Why don't you see if you can find the flashlights, I'll see about more candles."

Maybe it was a trick of the candlelight, but Lucy was sure that Steve had lost the drawn look on his face. She rotated her shoulders in an effort to relax. Some banging and clanking came from the kitchen as she rummaged through the buffet and a dresser, finally finding Adele's cache of extra candles. She found a glass bowled oil lamp, too, but it was empty of oil and she couldn't fathom where Adele may have hidden that.

Steve returned to the living room without flashlights but with a tray holding the fondue pot and precut French bread. A bottle of red wine dangled from his fingers.

"Let me help you with that." Lucy grabbed the wine just before it slipped. She looked at the label, very nice.

"According to my watch it's only about four, but I'm starved. Plus, I didn't want to keep opening and closing the fridge since we don't know how long the power will be out." Steve shrugged. "Eating seemed like a good idea."

"Let's pull everything a little closer to the fire. It's getting chilly in here."

They managed to pull the coffee table toward the hearth, but the sofa wouldn't budge. Lucy removed the pillows and settled them around the low trunk while Steve lit the flame under the pot. Soon they had cheese bubbling and were dipping chunks of bread into it.

The mellow, red Merlot went down easily. After eating in silence, Lucy, thinking back on their day, said, "You were good with that little girl today."

Steve's fork stopped in mid stab. "I'm good with victims, or at least I was." He sipped his wine.

"Was?"

His dark eyes flickered with a deep bleakness in the warm light. "Yeah. The last victims I tried to help died."

Lucy reached out to cover his hand. He flinched at her touch, but she wouldn't let him move away. She waited, just stroking his hand and watching him struggle with whatever demons drove him.

The rage and helplessness that he'd felt since the night he'd gotten the call filled Steve all over again. "I told them I'd protect them, the courts would protect them. All they had to do was testify against the slime who'd hurt them. They believed in me and the damn court order. Then he came for them and they were dead."

His words echoed in the air between them.

"Were you a police officer or a body guard?" Lucy asked, her voice soft.

"No."

"Did you make them as safe as the law allowed?"

A sharp pain struck at her words. He looked at the hand holding the wine glass. He'd clenched it so hard that the stem broke. It cleared his mind. "Yes."

"You were a victim's advocate."

He nodded, staring at her, wondering how she could bear to be in the same room with him.

"Steve," she picked up the hand she'd been stroking. "How many people have you saved?"

A brilliant light went off behind his eyes. He fought dizziness. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, these weren't the first people, victims of domestic violence, I assume, that you tried to help.

How many people over the course of the years have you helped turn their lives around?"

He shook his head, her words thrummed inside him.

"How many people were able to find healthy, happy lives again because of you?"

"You don't understand. This mother and daughter are dead because of me."

"No. They had more chances because you were around to help." She gently shook his hand, then took it into both of hers. "I'm having a hard time buying this woe is me act. You have a hard job, working with people who have a hard time helping themselves. It must be very rewarding when it works."

He hadn't thought of it that way. "But...."

"But nothing. If you honor these people who died by beating yourself up because the system failed them, you have accomplished nothing."

He waited for her to throw his hand down and sneer at him. Waited for her to walk away because he hadn't been strong enough or smart enough to save two lives. Waited for the emptiness to swallow him up.

"They needed you, Steve. You were there for them." She knelt so she could hold both of his shoulders in her small hands. She planted a soft kiss on his lips and smiled her gentle smile. "I honor you for them. You'll never forget these two people. What happened to them makes you stronger for the others who need you, like that little girl today. Thank you."

Her arms came around him like a benediction. The hard shell of self doubt and grief he'd worn shattered in her embrace. He hadn't needed forgiveness, he'd needed validation.

His breath came out in one large sigh as he moved to return her hug. The action sent them both off balance. They ended up sprawled on the cushions, his face a fraction of an inch away from hers. He watched her eyes widen. She licked her lips.

It was instinct that brought his mouth to hers. She'd healed him with her words and her actions. It was only right that he seal it with a kiss.

She tasted like mulled wine, hot and sweet. The sensation of heat, a soft tipped arrow through the heart, seared him as she kissed him back. Her hands traced the contours of his face, his neck, leaving fire in their wake.

He stroked her arms through the sweater she wore, it wasn't enough. He needed to touch skin, Lucy's

skin. She gasped when he pulled her sweater from her body. Her eyes, brilliant in the firelight, shone with an inner fire that burned him.

Her skin quivered beneath his hands. He bent to kiss her belly, her ribs. In a heartbeat he'd removed her bra and worshipped her breasts, the buds of her nipples with his mouth and hands. She moaned when he stopped to catch his breath.

"Steve," she whispered.

She reached for his sweater as he undid the zipper of her slacks. Then her hands were on him, stroking his arms, the tight muscles of his abdomen where he fought for control. They moved to his waistband and slid beneath, seeking. His manhood, heavy and swollen, stood erect as she stroked him.

With a swiftness born of desire, he whisked her slacks and panties off of her. Naked, her skin shone golden. All he could do was stare at her perfection.

"Steve?"

"You are so beautiful," he said. His voice sounded harsh and low to his ears.

Her fingers fumbled with his belt. He saw them shake and wondered if he was going too fast. But he couldn't seem to stop himself. He wanted to touch her, kiss her, explore her secrets. The way she touched him, her trembling, had him ready to explode when their joint efforts finally got his pants off.

Amazingly, when they both lay naked together, their fervent movements ceased. An air of expectation surrounded them. For the first time in many minutes, Steve was aware of his surroundings. In a creaky old house with a blizzard whirling around them, a storm that mimicked the way his emotions moved in him and were reflected in Lucy's eyes. He put a hand on her hip. She stroked his legs.

As one, they came together. Their lips met. He couldn't get enough of her. Her soft breasts, nipples taut, teased his chest while the curls of hair between her legs rubbed against him.

He touched her there, where her legs parted for him. She was slick and ready. All he took time for was to tear the foil package and slip on the condom, then he slid into her welcoming heat.

Lucy cried out, her pleasure throbbing through her as Steve entered her. He filled her, steadied for an instant, then began to move. As he did, he rained fire on her throat, her breasts, and her eyes with his mouth. She couldn't get enough of him. All the while she felt her body tighten with need.

The logs flared with heat and the wind crashed against the house as Steve's orgasm caught Lucy up and magnified hers. She held onto him, unable to let go, lending her strength, feeling his compassion all tied up in a dizzying knot of desire that swept them away.

* * * *

Lucy woke to a chill. Through sleepy eyes she watched Steve, naked, put more logs on the fire. She blinked and looked at herself. Not again, she'd done it again. Fallen in love with a man who would surely use her then throw her away.

A dart-like pain twisted in her heart then subsided.

She blinked back tears as she sat up and started pulling her clothes back on. A phone rang somewhere, a cell phone. Steve jerked to a stand, as if he'd been burned. She watched him fumble through his clothes, finally coming up with the cell phone.

"Yeah," he said. He glanced at her but his face was shadowed so she couldn't read his expression. Something he heard made his head whip back to the phone. "Yeah," he said again, his mouth hard, lips tight. Something not quite right about this phone call.

Lucy headed for the kitchen, then remembered that the power was off. Away from the fire the full chill of the house struck her. She shivered and rubbed her arms wondering if she'd be able to get warm again. A glance toward the sofa showed Steve pulling on his clothes with jerky, upset movements. Had their lovemaking been a disappointment to him? Did he regret those moments of passion?

It couldn't happen again, that was all she knew. Even though his sensitivity and gentle touch, his strength and compassion were everything she wanted in a man, she couldn't get over the feeling that she wasn't good enough for him. If he didn't realize it yet, he would. They always did, just when she thought she was ready for happily ever after.

Steve's eyes softened for an instant when she came back to him. He reached a hand out and cupped her face. It was too much. She held his hand, smelled the richness of their lovemaking on him, and wanted more.

Be strong, she reminded herself. She stepped back and started returning the pillows to the sofa. "Who was that?" she asked, gesturing to the phone.

His head swung from her to the phone gripped tightly in his hand. He stared at it for a minute, as if he'd forgotten its function. "My friend on the Boston P.D." The lines around his mouth tightened.

Alarmed by his expression, Lucy held out a hand to him. "Bad news?"

"I don't know. They I.D.ed Pearce. He's the man, the husband and father, who stalked Sheila Jones and Becky, my clients, to the safe house and murdered them there." He held the phone so hard that Lucy

thought it might crack in his hand.

"I can't let him get away, Lucy." His eyes glowed with cold fire that had her shivering again.

Chapter Eight

Icy cold washed through Lucy. Pearce? "He's the man? What's he doing here? Does he know who you are?"

Steve didn't answer as he busied himself with the fire. Lucy thought about Pearce. He'd been attractive and nicely dressed. Just the kind of man she'd fallen for in the past. Something about him hadn't felt right, though. A sense of something unclean had surrounded him and made her keep her distance. Steve had been nearby during all their brief instances of meeting. Lucy remembered feeling safer with Steve around.

Steve had stopped poking at the logs. His hand gripped the mantle as he stared into the flames. This was eating him up inside. Lucy wished she knew what to do to help him. Pearce was a blight, a parasite who preyed on the innocent, she was sure of it.

"How can I help?" Lucy asked.

He shook his head. "I can't let you get involved. This man is dangerous."

"Now that the police know where he is, can't they just come and get him?"

"Roads are closed up and down the coast. This is one of those twenty-year blizzards you hear legends about."

"Then Pearce isn't going anywhere, either."

Steve brightened. "Yeah, I guess he's not."

"Do the police know where he's staying?"

"Not yet. Apparently he's paying with cash, and he seems to have a lot of it. You can't trace cash."

"True, but we can scope out the hotels in town and see if we can find him. Adele knows everyone, she'll help."

"This is my problem. I'll handle it." The rough note in Steve's voice growled at her.

"He was hitting on me, Steve. He made a point to speak to me, leer at me. I have a stake in seeing him taken into custody."

"Lucy."

She moved toward him to take his hands, give him some comfort from the strength she felt building inside her. He backed away. His eyes were remote, cold.

"Don't you get it?" he said, his voice harsh and trembling. "I won't be able to protect you."

"Don't you get it?" she said, her voice gentle. "What you've given me has made me strong enough to protect myself."

As soon as she said it, she knew it was true. He had let her be strong for him. He'd opened up his despair and shown her the face of it and she'd been able to comfort him and hold him and love him.

Love him, yes, she did love him. The idea rocked her. The strength of it scared her. The truth of it warmed her as the house cooled around them under the howling weather of February.

* * * *

Aphrodite waved an elegant hand and the image of Lucy and Steve that she'd been watching in her mirror bowl vanished. All that was left was the reflection of her lovely self. Eros hovered several feet off the ground nearby. He had always enjoyed stretching his wings, it relieved his stress. Though what he could be stressful about was not clear.

"Things are going nicely," she said.

"The blizzard was a bit of luck."

"Luck had nothing to do with it."

Eros grimaced and floated down until his feet touched the marble floor. "Of course, you couldn't leave it to luck, could you?"

"For some humans, realizing the truth in their hearts requires a little push." She stood and sauntered to the edge of the pool, dipped a bared foot into the water, and gazed into the distance. "Apparently you are half way towards finishing this year's assignment. The woman has fully acknowledged her love for the man. She is a wonderful example of the best that the race has to offer, don't you think?"

When Eros didn't answer, Aphrodite strolled to her harp stand and picked up the golden instrument. She understood her son's underlying dismay. The man had not yet realized how strong love could make him. He did not know that loving the woman would make him stronger and better.

She could fix it with a snap of her fingers, but she resisted the impulse. It had been her experience over the millennia that humans did best when the gods stayed out of their affairs. At the most, she could make the setting right, create the right atmosphere for them to realize the truth themselves. This was what she'd struggled to impart to Eros during his yearly jaunts among mortals.

"Here," she thrust the harp into his hands. "Play something. You know it always helps you figure out what to do."

The carefully crafted instrument looked tiny in Eros's large hands, but when he touched the strings the music of the spheres rang out true. He played for some time. As he did, the signs of frustration that were invisible to others but glaring to his mother vanished.

"Tomorrow is the day they named for that Saint Valentine and dedicated to you, Mother." His eyes shone.

"Yes."

"By midnight tomorrow this must be resolved."

"Of course."

"I'll need some help with the earth bound weather."

"Yes, dear. I'm sure I can call in a favor or two." She touched a finger to her rosy lips. Perhaps Zeus could be persuaded. She'd have a chance if that harridan of a goddess who was his wife wasn't around. She composed the momentary ire. Hera had always been the jealous type. There was no getting around it. But Aphrodite knew just how to get around Hera.

As she pulled her mirror bowl toward her again, she waved off Eros. "Go, dear one. You'd best get back. Oh." She pulled a delicate satchel made of her favorite swan's feathers from under her seat. "These might come in handy."

Eros took the bag from her and looked inside. "Kind of trite, don't you think?"

Her laughter made his earlier music sound like the clanging of cow's bells. The Olympian birds stopped in their flight to listen. After she regained control of her mirth, Aphrodite said, "The humans are a sentimental race. Be liberal, but remember, you must be done by midnight. And no playing with time again. You remember how that got you into trouble before."

He blew her a kiss and flew off. Aphrodite returned to her mirror and bent to her task.

* * * *

It was too cold in their bedrooms to consider sleeping there. Lucy and Steve spent what was left of the night huddled on opposite ends of the couch. Each time one inadvertently touched the other, a mumbled apology was said. Every now and then one of them would add another log to the fire, but except for the crackle of the flames and the sigh of the diminishing wind, the house was quiet.

Steve watched Lucy's profile as she dropped off to sleep. Their lovemaking had been hot and sweet and so unexpected that he was glad for the time to think, because he sure hadn't been doing that before. He called himself a wide array of bad names. The worst thing he could have done was to take advantage of her. She'd been trying to comfort him and he'd fallen all over her. It was a good thing he'd had both a condom and the presence of mind to use it. The consequences of that, well, he'd seen them daily in his work. Unwanted children of single parents being shuffled from court to family to family services. No child of his would ever suffer that disjointed childhood.

He regretted the phone call that had changed that magical respite from his guilt. It didn't matter what Lucy said, he'd given a promise and had failed in the worst way. Her arms and body had held comfort, the kind of solace he needed. But the news from Boston had jarred him away from any kind of afterglow. The heat he'd felt had been the same kind of helpless rage he'd experienced when he'd first heard the news.

Now, he allowed himself a grim smile, he had a chance to atone in a small way. He'd catch Pearce, or whatever his real name was, and make sure he was put away for the rest of his born days. That creature would never hurt another human being.

Lucy moaned in her sleep and shifted on the couch, as if the chaos of his emotions had reached her while she slumbered. The least he could do was give some comfort in return. He moved so that her head rested in his lap, tried to ignore the kindling of returning desire, and settled in to wait for the sun to herald the dawn.

To his surprise, the sun did show itself in the morning. He'd expected another day of snowing and blowing. When the faint rays made their weak way through the east windows, a sense of well-being filled him. Lucy stirred on his lap. With a click and a whirl of returning power, the lights came on as he heard

the furnace start to hum from somewhere in the cellar.

Just as he reached for the remote to check the TV news, a scarf-draped Adele bustled through the front door. Lucy jerked as the cold hit them. She sat, pushing the blanket away. Her eyes, green as spring grass, were wide and wondering when she looked at him. He wanted to kiss her lips again, he decided. Caress her pink cheeks and anything else that he could reach.

Adele stopped when she spied them. Snow fell from her boots as she stamped them on the carpet by the door. Her arms were filled with packages and her eyes held a twinkle that made Steve think of jolly old elves, not middle aged inn keepers.

"There you are," Adele said. "I'm glad you found the firewood and food." She started removing layers of outer clothes and hung them on the hooks by the door.

"Is the storm over already?" Lucy asked. She hurried over to Adele and helped her with the packages.

Steve put the remains of their meal on the tray and carried it to the kitchen, not quite ready to meet Adele's questioning gaze. When Adele and Lucy walked into the kitchen, Adele's news sent a spin of dread through him.

"The storm started petering out around midnight." She laughed. "The weather men were astonished. They'd expected a three day blizzard and got one that lasted less than twenty-four hours. New England weather—so unpredictable. As soon as the roads were plowed this morning I started home. Only got stuck once, and that was trying to get into my own drive. I'll have to call the service to plow me out."

"Are all the roads open now?" Lucy asked.

"Open in a relative sense," Adele said as she rummaged through one of her bags. "Four-wheel drive is recommended. Why? Do you need to go somewhere?"

Lucy looked at Steve. He sensed that she was waiting for him to tell Adele about Pearce. He knew he needed Adele's help, but hated asking for it. Lucy frowned at him. As if he could read her mind, he knew she was telling him to quit being an arrogant male.

"Look what I found yesterday," Adele said. She pulled an elegant feathered bag from one of the larger shopping bags. The white feathers begged to be stroked. Steve imagined using just one of them to stroke Lucy.

Whoa, where had that idea come from? A glance at Lucy showed a flush creeping up her neck. Had she been thinking something similar? The thought pleased him. Then he remembered Pearce and made a decision.

"Adele, we had news yesterday about the man, Jim Pearce."

Lucy smiled at him. It made asking for help worthwhile.

Adele frowned a bit. "Wasn't he the man who wanted to rent a room?"

"Yes. And yesterday it seemed like wherever we were, he was. Like he was following us. He spoke to Lucy twice and...." He didn't want to tell her about the little girl in the museum.

"What about him?" Adele said. He had her complete attention now.

"He's wanted for questioning in the murder of two of my clients." It was hard to get the words out, but the more he explained, the easier it got.

Adele gasped. Lucy came to hold Steve's hand.

"I had a call from a friend in the Boston P.D. They can't trace Pearce; apparently he's not using a credit card. Pearce isn't his real name. But with the streets being plowed, I'm sure he won't stick around long."

"We need to find him. Steve needs to find him," Lucy said.

She squeezed his hand. It was nice.

"What do you want me to do?" Adele said.

"Everyone in town knows you. Would you call around to the hotels and whatever inns are open and see if anyone fitting his description has checked in? We can make sure he doesn't leave town before he can be apprehended," Steve said.

Adele turned to the phone before he stopped speaking. "I know just who to call."

Steve hurried to pull on his boots and other outer gear. Lucy joined him.

"I don't like the idea of you coming along," Steve said.

She didn't look at him as she dressed. "You know he'll be less suspicious if he sees us together the same as yesterday. You have your cell phone. He won't get away this time." The steely determination in her voice sent a thrum of hope through him.

On impulse, he pulled her close and kissed her. He meant it to be a quick little peck, but her mouth opened on his and when her tongue touched his, the heat that shot through him made him realize just how

much he needed her. She brought back compassion to his life and even love.

Love? Where had that come from? He wasn't worthy of love.

He tried to push her away, but she only eased back so that he could see the light in her eyes.

"I know what to do about Pearce now, but I don't know what to do about you," Steve whispered. He laid his hands on either side of her face.

"You'll figure it out," she said.

Adele stepped into the foyer. "Ahem."

They jumped apart. Steve searched for his gloves. Lucy pulled a stocking cap over her hair.

"Pearce just checked out of the North Main Inn," she said. "He's driving a little black rental."

They were out the door before she could finish. As the door slammed behind them, she lifted her arms in the air releasing a cloud of red, pink, and white hearts to flutter onto all the surfaces. They were edged with gilt and shimmered with magic.

Chapter Nine

The foot of heavy snow hampered their efforts as they made their way to the sidewalk. Though the snow had stopped and the roads were being cleared, the sky was bleak and watered gray. A bitter wind gusted off the shore sending a lone gull from a rock into the sky.

"This way," Steve said. He took Lucy's arm and they headed up the street as fast as they could scramble.

Lucy was panting before they went ten feet. "This is ridiculous," she said. "You'll never get there in time by hauling me. Go, go. I'll catch up. And call your buddy, now. Maybe they can call the local cops before Pearce gets too far."

Though the suggestion made sense, Steve hated to leave her. He looked back as he made the first intersection. Except for the bright pink hat she looked forlorn.

A snarling black car skidded through the intersection, almost hitting Steve as he stepped off the snow bank that was now the curb.

"Hey," he yelled.

The driver in the black car sneered at him as his tires lost traction. It was Pearce. Steve lunged for the car, hoping to grab onto the door handle and stop him somehow.

He managed to bang into the car door, slowing down Pearce's progress. A low growl erupted from Steve's throat. He couldn't let this guy get away.

"I'm almost there," he heard Lucy shout. "Be careful."

The car spun in the ice and snow and slush. Grateful that the traffic was practically non existent, Steve tried to hold onto the spinning car and keep from being slung beneath its wheels. He grabbed the door handle and pulled. The door swung open, taking Steve with it. He held on and muscled the door so that it was ajar. Pearce glared at him. Steve held on with one hand and punched at Pearce with the other.

"You're crazy," Pearce shouted. "Get off!"

"You're a murderer," Steve shouted back. "Stop the car!"

Pearce said something low and indecipherable. Then Steve was surprised to hear the other man cackle.

Something changed in the way the engine sounded. It revved and the tires caught hold. Pearce had either struck a lucky patch of sand or had thought to put the transmission into the lowest gear. Whatever he did was enough to straighten out and pick up speed.

Steve struggled to hold on.

"Steve!" It was Lucy.

Pearce had seen her.

Lucy had stepped out of the deeper snow and relative safety of the sidewalk. She was slipping and sliding and trying to get to him.

She fell as Pearce gunned the car again.

"Lucy," Steve shouted. "Move out of the way."

She looked up. Even from yards away he saw her eyes widen and shine with an emerald light.

She stood. She yanked at her booted feet but they were stuck fast in the thick slush and snow. Pearce gunned for her. At the last minute Steve took a chance of launching himself from the car. He fell on her and rolled her away from the car tires. They landed in a hard bank of plowed snow as the car screeched off.

Steve got up in time to see the black car spin out and hit the stone gazebo that protected Plymouth Rock. Two local police cars careened down the street and slid to a stop. Patrolmen leaped out, guns ready. They surrounded Pearce's car. Steve felt a warm trickle on his head. Lucy pushed him off of her and screamed for help.

Her eyes shone as she spoke. "Don't you dare faint on me," she said. "Don't you dare."

"Yes ma'am," he said. Then the pain in his head took him away.

* * * *

Lucy put another cloth on Steve's forehead. The lump and growing bruise were vivid reminders of the ugliness they'd been a part of this morning. If Steve hadn't jumped when he had, she'd be dead by now. She was sure of it. Steve had saved her life. The look in Pearce's eyes as he'd aimed his car at her had been a look of such pure evil that Lucy still shook with the intensity of it.

Thankfully the paramedics had been on the heels of the police; Adele had kept the phone busy this morning. Lucy had given a brief statement to the police, then climbed into the ambulance with Steve. His cell phone had been ringing. She answered it for him. It was his buddy in Boston; they were on the way. Lucy gave them a brief sketch of the situation, then settled down to let medicine and the law work out their own little problems.

Now in the emergency room all she wanted to do was hold Steve's hand and be assured that he'd be all right. He was so pale and cold. She chafed his hands.

The ER doctor pulled the curtain back. Steve blinked. "Where's the elephant that ran over me?" he mumbled.

"In jail," Lucy said. "And it wasn't an elephant. It was a monster."

The doctor put her hand on Steve's chest when he would have sat up.

"Lie still, you've got a mild concussion. We found the rock that you dinged your head on. You're a lucky man." She shone a penlight in his eyes, nodded, and said, "You can go home if you want, but I want you right back here if you start getting nauseous or dizzy than you are now. Understand?"

"He understands," Lucy said. She'd make sure of it.

After the doctor left, Steve rubbed a hand across his brow. "That was some wild ride."

She punched him in the shoulder.

"Hey, why'd you do that?"

"You scared three years off of me," she said. Because of the lump in her throat she couldn't speak above a whisper. "Don't ever do that again."

He put a hand against her cheek. "I had to save you. If I hadn't done that, he would have gotten away."

She blinked back tears. "You did save me. I think you saved yourself, too." She put a kiss on the palm of his hand. "I love you, Steve."

"You saved me. You believed in me, Lucy." He pulled her down so that he could kiss her. "You saw the real me and helped me look at myself in the mirror again."

The next kiss was less gentle, more filled with hungry passion. Lucy shivered.

"I love you, Lucy. Now, let's get out of here."

* * * *

"Well done, Eros," Aphrodite said as she watched the scene play out in her mirror bowl. "They finally see the true face of love, but first they had to understand the truth about themselves. Now they see it reflected in each other." She smiled and the sun shone a little brighter.

"Thanks, Mother." He stood behind her. "What about the real Adele? Living in her place gave me an idea of what she must be like. Will she have pleasant memories of this event? What will she remember?"

Aphrodite laughed. "I forgot to tell you. That's your final assignment this year. To give Adele the memories of this week, and to give her a few romantic memories of her own. Do you think you can do that?"

"What's the catch?"

"The only 'catch' as you so crassly say it, is to not fall in love yourself, as always."

"But I like her already, Mother."

She waved him off. "Go, do what you will."

She laughed again, the sound as beautiful as spring rain falling on a happy brook. Eros grinned and headed back toward mortal grounds, this time dressed as an urban cowboy, ready to sweep Adele off her feet.

"I love Valentine's Day," Aphrodite said.

THE END