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# Cupid's Arrow

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Aspen Mountain Press

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## **Dedication**

I'd like to say thank you:

To the ladies of the PS who pushed me and to my husband who still believes in faeries, especially when they lose faith in themselves.

Dawn

## A Touch of Sin

### Elisabeth Jason

My fingers tremble so hard, I can barely hold the cell phone as I dial. Two rings, three, four. I start to pray. Five. Maybe he won't answer. Six.

"Hello?"

A curse almost slips past my lips, but I force it back. "Good evening," I push out in my most courteous, pleasant tone, ignoring the droplet of sweat trickling down my temple. "This is Kaylene with Parcels Unlimited. I have a special delivery scheduled for Mr. Amon tonight, and I'm just down the street. Is he available so I can drop by real quick?"

It almost sounds like the line goes dead before the male voice answers and my worst fear comes true. "Aye, I'm home. I'll buzz you in when you get here."

It's not a butler talking to me as I'd hoped. It's *him*. The truck's cab suddenly seems ten sizes too small. Fear squeezes my heart even as the soft, erotic lilt of his Scottish accent settles deep in my gut. I remind myself that I'm a professional and should leave my personal feelings at the time clock each morning, no matter who is on the client list...but how can I on a night like this?

Cyric Amon haunts my dreams, dreams so secret and ripe with sensation I blush just thinking about them. I confess them to my priest each week, say dozens of 'Hail Mary's' and 'Our Father's' in repentance, but nothing helps. Nothing exorcises Cyric from my mind.

Instead, my fantasies grow stronger, more vivid. The harder I fight, the greater the temptation becomes, and I despair of ever sleeping in peace again. Since moving from my small home town in Michigan to this city of sin and glittering delights, I haven't stopped thinking about him.

Here in Las Vegas, Cyric's face is on every billboard. His image is inescapable. He is a magician, the most famous illusionist in the world, and where I come from, every Sunday sermon involves his name. Magic is evil. Magic is wrong.

The scores of women who huddle together and whisper about Cyric while their kind, sweet husbands barbeque, are all victims to the charms of the devil, and I am among them, willing to burn. Every wayward thought of shedding my clothes and surrendering to his skilled, slim fingers and full, promising mouth is another step closer to hell.

I am terrified of seeing Cyric in person, but the girl who usually drives this route called in sick this morning, so it falls to me to handle his packages tonight. And now I have to face him. Alone, maybe. Sensual, dangerous, dark, for sure.

Christ, I'm in trouble.

"Very good, Mr. Amon," I finally say when he clears his throat and snaps me out of my thoughts. Inwardly, I groan at the tremor in my words. My hand fists on the steering wheel. "I'll be there in about five minutes."

A masculine grunt of consent ends the call and I toss my phone onto the passenger seat. With a shaky sigh, I insert the key into the ignition and start my truck, mentally going over my plan on how to deal with this situation one more time. This won't be like seeing him on television where I can switch the channel

to evade my imagination. No stage, no audience, no cameras to distract from the magnetic pull of his eyes. Just the man, myself, and the boxes.

It's a dream come true, and yet, everything inside of me protests as my foot descends lightly on the gas pedal. I'll have to act quickly. Get in, shove his stuff at him, collect his signature, and get out, preferably without ever meeting his unsettling gaze.

I accelerate, wishing I were anywhere else, or that I at least had the guts to face Cyric with some semblance of poise. As it is, I'm hovering somewhere on the brink of panic.

The castle Cyric built for himself on the outskirts of town looms in the distance as I turn a corner, a black fortress set against a sky bleeding the same shade of red as my lipstick, which I refuse to check. Looking to see if it's okay implies I care, that I want him to notice me as anything other than a delivery girl. I do want that, of course, but I'm also terrified of the very idea.

Rumors fly. Cyric is known as a man of insatiable sexual appetites. I believe it. At thirty-two years of age, a face to make stone weep, and possessed of the body of a golden god of the ancient world, he can select his bedmates as easily as other men choose what to drink with dinner.

And if Cyric does notice me - please God, don't let him look at me at all - and invites me into his home, I know exactly what I'll be. I'll be a statistic, just another notch on his bedpost. No matter what, I can't let that happen.

The gate is now only yards away. I ease down on the brakes and swallow past the lump in my throat, a curious mixture between excitement and dread. Quelling the urge to speed away and tell my boss no one was home, I lean out of my window and press the buzzer. For one insane minute, I can almost believe Cyric won't let me in after all, but then the gate yawns open with a strange, hitching creak, as if fate itself is chuckling at my predicament.

This is it, I guess. Time to see if I am as strong against temptation as I tell myself I am. I guide the truck along the curved, well lit driveway and watch the



headlights reflect in the heavy, paned windows of the castle. My jaw locks at the sound of branches scraping along my roof.

The noise almost drowns out my startled shriek of surprise as a fat, black cat crosses my path. It figures the powers that be had to send my favorite superstition my way exactly now, when every one of my nerve endings already stands on high alert and ready to explode.

Arrived at the door, I kill the engine, pick up my log book, then scramble onto my knees and fish Cyric's packages out from behind the seat, idly wondering what's inside. Probably gifts for his female companions. Or toys. Heat creeps along my neck and into my cheeks. Not that I know a lot about toys, but I am a little curious what a man like him would use to pleasure a woman.

Duh, my mind supplies, and I battle back the snicker rising in my throat. Chances are he doesn't need props. Not the way he looks. Two-hundred and eighty-five pounds of sex appeal and a liberal sprinkling of mystery probably do the trick for most women, including me.

With one final, steeling breath, I climb out of the truck and slam the door to announce my presence. Each tiny step makes the gravel crunch loudly beneath my work boots. I realize I'm walking slow on purpose, and I know it's ridiculous. It's not like I could prevent this meeting even if I crawled. Enough already. Chin up, shoulders back, I forge on until I gain the front steps.

The elegant door flies open, and there he is. "Kaylene, was it?"

Anything I am about to say plummets down the freezing slope of my spine and dies at my feet. I think I'm nodding, but I can't be quite sure. My brain is on lock-down suddenly. Though Cyric looks gorgeous on television, nothing could have prepared me for the reality of him at this moment.

He is a head and a half taller than I, nearly seven feet of smooth, coiled muscle and copper skin. His chest is bare, rippling with restrained power as my gaze travels over his abdomen, along the corded columns of his arms, and finally settles on his deeply tanned hands. I try to avert my eyes a heartbeat after they

stray to the kilt riding low on his trim, well defined hips, but he forces my attention back to him at once by shifting his weight and chucking me under the chin. His touch feels like lightning striking in my panties, and I resist the need to shrink back with everything I've got.

"Cat got you tongue?" Cyric quips, aiming a friendly smile at me, but the deep, pronounced burr in his voice negates any soothing effect the light inquiry might have had were he just some average guy. He looks and sounds like I imagine his Highland warrior kin did centuries ago, including the sleek, whiskey brown hair flowing in wavy strands to his waist, and it devastates my composure.

"Um, sorry," I croak like the wimp I am, lifting the packages a bit higher, and then meet his disturbing silver-blue gaze straight on, determined to stop being a dolt and make it out of here with at least some of my dignity intact. "If you'll just sign for these, I can be on my way, Mr. Amon."

"They're cash-on-delivery," he points out. His mouth quirks until one corner curls up in a sexy grin. "Should say so on your log. And as you can see, I am sort of pocket-less here. Come inside for a minute and I'll get the money, aye?"

Without waiting for my reply, he turns and sprints toward one of the massive staircases rising to the second floor on either side of the marbled foyer. Every inch of his body flexes as he moves, and I look my fill, helpless to do otherwise. He is beyond magnificent. My belly gives an ominous flip as I realize he's probably going to his bedroom.

*Bed...*

He'd need a big one.

I shake my head to chase away the unwelcome image of him sprawled atop silken sheets and heavy blankets. God, I need to get out of here. Fast.

At the top of the stairs, Cyric pauses and levels a curious, penetrating glance down at me. "Could you close the door for me, lass? This place loses heat

fast in winter, and my maid has bad arthritis, so the cold hurts her old bones. Just wait for me in the library, if you don't mind. It's the first door to your left."

With that, he disappears. Out of options, I do as he asks and enter the new room, setting his packages down on a small table beside me so I can rub my hands together, partially to relieve the chill stiffening them, partially to hide my agitation.

During the minutes Cyric is gone, I take in the quiet, subdued grandeur of his home. Nothing frilly or pretty, the place screams of masculinity from the thick, oriental carpets strewn here and there to the high-backed leather chair sitting behind an antique mahogany desk large enough to sleep on. Thousands of books line the walnut shelves surrounding me, their titles spanning every genre imaginable, even romance. Two sets of crossed Scottish claymores adorn a glass display case hung opposite the brocade-curtained windows, and I suppress a shiver, wondering how he'd look wielding a weapon. More threatening. More manly. More seductive, if that is at all possible.

The grandfather clock by the fully stocked bar chimes the hour. I glance at it, catch a glimpse of the disheveled red hair framing my wide green eyes and pale cheeks in the mirrored casing. Man, I look like hell. The last chime echoes and fades into the silence. It's eight o'clock. I should be home watching the news. I didn't even make it to mass tonight to pray for forgiveness for my latest set of Cyric-inspired thoughts. Instead, I'm standing in the home of the man I've dreamed of touching a thousand times.

In my nocturnal fantasies, he always comes to me a dark predator, stalking me into a corner, where he rips off my clothes and...

I have to stop. He is a magician, and I believe in magic, regardless of what I was brought up to think. If he *is* real, and I'm not careful, he might actually--

"Know your thoughts." His low voice is right behind me, his breath fanning the sensitive skin beneath my ear. "Do I fuck you hard in your dreams,

or do I make it slow and sweet? I want to know so I can give you what you desire, Kaylene."

The harsh words shock me as much as his sudden, unexpected closeness. Moisture pools violently between my thighs. No man has ever spoken to me like this, and I know I am lost, that I won't push him away. I want to spin around and gaze into his eyes, but I find that I am somehow frozen, loathe to face reality, to break the spell.

Both of his hands rise in my peripheral vision to knead my shoulders, massaging my tense flesh with gentle, yet firm pressure. The sensation is purely alien, a relaxing jolt of calming energy. A stifled moan escapes me before I can conceal it behind a delicate cough.

"Why do you fear me?" He murmurs the heavily accented question against my neck, trailing his calloused fingers along my throat and into the collar of my brown company sweater. "I'm just a man like any other."

*If only that were true.* My heart flutters within the confines of my chest. "I...I'm not afraid."

He chuckles, a low rumble full of sensual threat. "You lie. Your whole body trembles."

"You don't know who I am."

"Are you so sure?" His fingers caress the underside of my breast. "I can smell your wetness. Do you want to leave, or do you want me to taste your lust?"

*Say no, my mind screams...but it's far too late.*

His body quivers with strength, the scent of our mutual arousal heavy in the air. My willpower flees along with the denial hovering on my lips as he grinds his erection into the small of my back and I realize I would rather die than stop him now. This is what I want, what I've wanted since the first time I ever saw him.

I nod weakly as he steps the tiniest bit closer and lets me feel the iron hardness of his chest. His thigh pushes roughly between my legs, and I am

completely caught in his thrall, the imposing suggestion of power in his height and broad, rigid physique.

"Make me yours," I whisper hoarsely, not believing my own ears. My heart is speaking now, and it won't be denied. "One night is all I want. Neither of us has time for more."

He growls his satisfaction with my reply even as he finds and pinches one of my nipples, hard enough to make me squirm. I hiss my pleasure, jerking and bending at the waist to elude him, but the movement only brings us closer. His shaft is hard as granite under his kilt, and his supple mouth trails fire along my nape. He turns me in his arms and backs me up against the desk with long, powerful strides, then lifts me up to sit on the cool wood.

"Look at me," he orders a moment before his fingers dig into the collar of my sweater and rip it clean down the middle. The thick cotton falls away, revealing my bare breasts to his view. He glances up sharply, unleashing the full force of his blue and silver gaze on me, and the way his pupils grow deeper and blacker as our eyes meet sends a frisson of delicious fear racing through my blood.

"Speak your mind," comes his lilting command. He towers above me, so close, I can see the dark gray rings around his irises shift unnaturally. "Tell me what ye want and I'll make it true."

Inside of me, there is an odd pop, as if the restraints on my passion finally burst under his intense perusal. I reach up to cup my breasts, rubbing my thumbs over the pebbling tips and delight in how sensual I feel, how utterly feminine. "Lick me. Here."

Did I really say that? It doesn't matter, my mind reassures me, prodded to honesty by Cyric's skilled seduction. His words are a battering ram against my shyness, coaxing to life a wanton something in me, and I let him annihilate my defenses with glee.

His mouth descends on my flesh. I suck in a shuddering breath when his teeth close around my nipple even as his tongue flicks roughly against me. The pleasure is unimaginable, a precarious agony that makes me hot and wet, eager for his invasion. He never takes his eyes off my own as he continues to caress me, raining kisses along my belly until he encounters my pants. With a savage rip from his teeth, he destroys the button holding them in place and spits it out, then yanks off my boots and socks and deftly unzips me. The sight of my red lace panties only inches from his face nearly makes me come. I want him to...

"Say it," he rasps softly. "Do what pleases you."

I am helpless, every cell in me screaming with need. I kick off my pants and lay back on the desk, drawing my panties aside with two fingers. They come away slick, and I can see in Cyric's eyes that he knows how ready I am for him even now, but his heated gaze promises he won't take me. Not for a long time.

The muscles in his stomach leap under my gaze. He raises his kilt and curls one veined, sinewy hand around his cock, pumping up and down rhythmically. I watch, spellbound by the droplet of semen winking at me in the low light of the library, wishing I could suck it off. I've never been so turned on in my life.

"Let me feel you," I hear myself groan as my head falls back and my lids drift closed. "I want you everywhere. In me, on me, around me."

He wastes no time. The instant his thick, pulsing head comes into contact with my moisture, I convulse, dancing close to the edge of climax. He rubs himself against me, spreading my juices, and I exhale, a tortured sigh that echoes through the room. "Give me more. Harder."

The friction of flesh against flesh arches my back, as does the shock of seeing myself in the gilded mirror mounted on the ceiling above the desk when I open my eyes again. I didn't know it was there, but now I am glad it is, because I see everything Cyric does. The sight of the bunched fabric of his kilt shoots quick stabs of pleasure through my clit. I adore the untamed look of the garment, the

wild thrill of a Scot's cock on my body. I wish he had one of the claymores strapped to his back, but the thought scatters a moment later. His staff enters my body, just a fraction of an inch, and then he pulls away before I can scoot forward to take more of him.

I mewl my disappointment as Cyric steps around the desk. His gaze flickers like a lion's, possessed by dark hunger, swearing he'll give me everything I want. He climbs the desk and stands, drawing himself up to his full, magnificent height. The scent of leather reaches my nose as he plants one booted foot on either side of my head and continues to stroke himself.

"Get on your knees," he orders gruffly. The sword I crave to see appears in a shimmering flash of light at his back. I don't give a damn if it's an illusion or not. It makes me even hotter. He draws the blade from its scabbard and sets it on its tip, his free hand grasping the cloth-bound hilt. I can't take much more of this, feel like I traveled through time to give myself to the warrior above me, and the desire shooting through me nearly burns me alive.

When I gain my knees, he parts my lips with his thumb and pushes himself into my mouth. He tastes exotic, clean and fierce. His hand burrows into my hair and pulls my head closer, and the erotic gleam of the sword at my side drives me to greater speed, bolder moves. I don't caress him for long before he tenses, but he does not allow himself his orgasm.

Instead, he sheathes the weapon, bounds to the floor and turns to drive one finger deeply into my core, where he takes up an unyielding pace that leaves me breathless.

A blind confession of ecstasy tears from my throat, an indistinguishable sound of passion, and then his head delves between my thighs.

I am still on my knees, clutching at his long, tawny hair to keep from collapsing. His tongue swirls around my nub, tracing slow, wet circles, while his fingers probe my heat. Tiny, slippery noises fill the air, heightening every sensation a thousand-fold.

When he nibbles at my flesh, I tilt back, exposing more of myself to him and staring at myself in the mirror on the ceiling. His head angles sideways and he begins to alternate his game, first blowing cool air against me, then following with a rough drag of his velvety tongue. My climax comes hard and fast as I watch, wrenching a sob from my lips as I fall into spasm after spasm, each more violent than the one before. My nether lips close about his finger as I collapse onto my back, twisting, scraping my nails along the silky surface of the desk. The orgasm is so brutal, I can feel my pulse leap and trip at the apex of my thighs. I gasp, sucking at the air until I am nearly dizzy. I can't even scream his name.

He flips me over and grabs my legs, yanks back hard. His cock finds me in one smooth stroke, filling me completely. I cry out. He is large, thick, and the sensual slide of his hair over my skin as he buries himself to the hilt and kisses my shoulder sends new waves of desire crashing through every part of me. His long, powerful strokes carry me to a place where I die with pleasure and rise to life again with each hitching breath.

He growls and shoves his hands under my breasts, kneading them, pinching, extracting moans as he increases the force of his invasion, and I relish every moment of it. His chest and stomach ripple against my back. I want to see him when he comes, and he again knows my thoughts before I finish them.

His corded arms pick me up, throw me several inches into the air and turn me over. The strength he shows leaves me weak, wild, insatiable. He catches me and lays me down, pushing me out on the desk as he sweeps papers, pens, and the telephone to the floor on a feral roar. I see the sword over his shoulder, the kilt, his erection, and lift my hand to bite my knuckles against the need to moan like an animal.

"What do you want?" he demands, lowering himself over me until we are forehead to forehead. He pins my wrists above my head with one hand, a subtle, sensual reminder of his strength. "Say it. Don't be afraid."



The words come easily, hardly even slowed down by the distant fear of sounding wicked. "I want you to fuck me, Cyric. Harder than you've ever fucked before."

Dark satisfaction furrows his brows. His gaze travels over my body like blue fire and I know he desires me. The knowledge unleashes an exquisite need in my body, a need so strong, it hurts.

I groan a wordless reply as he continues to stroke my flesh. "Kiss me, Kaylene."

*Kiss me...* I writhe, eager to comply, claw at his chest to bring him closer. Our mouths meet, titans in battle. His tongue imitates the slow, tortuous entrance of his cock as he guides himself into me in fractions, a measured punishment I can barely take without begging for more. His kiss is commanding, dominant and deep. Some part of me slips out of my grasp, maybe my soul. He can have it, have me. Anything to end this. Anything to make it last forever.

The forceful surges of his body bring my clit into poignant contact with the root of his manhood. Unbearably sensual, the abrasive curls surrounding his shaft drive quivers up and down my spine every time he slides into me. I grit my teeth. Another climax lingers just out of reach. I sense the rigid tension in my muscles, hear the harsh intakes of my own frenzied breaths. He is merciless, pounding my flesh, his fingers splayed out on my stomach while his thumbs caress the bud nestled between my folds.

I glance up again, greedy to see Cyric and I linked, to catch the view when he spills his seed. His shoulders tremble with controlled power, and then he throws back his head and bellows his lust into the night on one final, conquering stroke. Every muscle on him leaps and dances with his climax.

He withdraws as he comes, spurts hot bursts of liquid on my clit. I twitch, gasp, rise on my elbows to watch him milk himself on me, and my orgasm tears through me like a raging flood. Our gazes collide as he pushes his thumb into me and leans down to flick his tongue over me one last time, then pulls me in for a

searing kiss. I taste us in his mouth, the sharp spice of sex. It's the most erotic thing I've ever experienced.

Every fiber of my being sings with life even as waves of pleasure slowly begin to ebb from my body. I stretch into his embrace, catlike, thoroughly sated, and rejoice in the warmth of his skin against mine when he pulls me closer still. His kiss lingers. Sweet and unhurried, the mating of our tongues becomes sleepy and languid.

When he breaks the kiss, I sigh, nuzzle his neck. He holds me for long minutes, not speaking, just cradling me against his chest, and I listen to the steady, strong rhythm of his heart, my eyes closed so my senses can absorb only him. I bury my hands in his hair and smile at the fragrance of his shampoo. Musky herbs, a subtle touch of honey. I like it, love the way he smells and feels, and some part of me wishes we could fall asleep together just like this.

Finally, he disentangles my arms from his neck and smiles down at me through lids set a half mast. "Now was that so bad?"

I give a short laugh. "You know it wasn't."

He nods, traces a finger down my cheek. His eyes shine with an odd light, almost like hesitation, but I can't be sure. "Despite what you may have heard, I'm not a monster, Kaylene."

"I never thought that," I say, and it's only half a lie. "It's just that..."

"My reputation," he offers dryly. "The consummate horn dog, seducer of innocents and master of debauchery, eh?"

I nod, unsure of what else to do, suddenly self-conscious again.

"Go out with me."

My gaze snaps up, searches his eyes. "What?"

In answer, he grasps my hand, turns it over and urges my palm open with a soft touch. Heat tingles over my skin. "Indulge me. Close your eyes," he urges quietly, a secretive grin playing havoc with his mouth.

I thrill at his request, can't wipe the silly smile off my face as I wait to see what he is about. The sensual brush of his fingertip in my palm fires my imagination. He lets his hand travel on, stroking my limbs and hair, and I sit still, shivering as he covers every inch of my body with light touches.

When he leans in for a kiss, I give myself to him on a tiny purr of satisfaction.

"Now open," he whispers against my ear before he steps back. The absence of his warmth is a palpable thing, unpleasant and cold on more than the outside.

My eyes flutter open and I look at him expectantly. When I cock my head in question, he laughs and his gaze flicks to my legs.

I follow his gaze...and gasp.

A deep crimson gown drapes over my breasts, stomach and legs, falling in shimmering waves well past my bare feet. My nails are blood red to match the dress, my wrists adorned by delicate silver bracelets. Shock races through me, leaves me speechless as my eyes meet his in wild surprise.

"Go out with me," Cyric repeats. "You look ready."

I bounce off the desk and dash to the grandfather clock, freezing when I see my face.

*Magic...*

Lipstick, subtle make-up that brings out my eyes. My hair is lustrous, piled atop my head in an arrangement of fat, silky curls. More silver rests against my collarbone, glittering in the light of the candle he brings to my side.

Our gazes meet in the mirror as he slings one arm around my waist. "You're beautiful, Kaylene. Passionate. Shy, and yet bold enough to drive me to distraction. One hour in your arms and I cannot help but wonder who you truly are. Give me a chance to get to know you better."

I can't believe what he's saying. The wild thumping of my heart might just be loud enough for him to hear. "But don't you think..."

"That you acted irresponsibly?" He smiles, shakes his head. "Aye. But it was my fault. I heard you debate with yerself long before you got here tonight, and know you feared what we might do. I wanted you nonetheless, the moment I saw you. Don't be afraid. Go have dinner with me, and if we don't get along, we can still say good-bye."

I turn in his arms, smile from the bottom of my soul. My sins turn to miracles, my fear to excitement. "All right," I say, feeling free, happy, maybe for the first time ever. No need to rush to church and beat myself up. No need to feel bad.

Only one confession remains. I gaze up at him and link my arm through his. "I'd love to go," I wink. "You did make me hungry for more."

## Eros Lost

Dawn Montgomery

### Chapter One

"Eros, listen to me." Psyche paced the length of the pool, admiring the rippling bronze of her husband's back muscles as he swam through the spiritual waters.

"No." He ducked his head. She smiled. He could hear her thoughts as though they were his own.

*Eros, you have to listen.*

*No, I don't. If the mortals wish to use their machinery to find their matches, who am I to argue?* He popped up at the edge, wiping the water from his strong face. Her heart raced. A hundred lifetimes together and she still lusted after him. *Still.*

"You're being stubborn."

"Damn straight." He kicked his feet in smooth strokes. The motion of his legs barely caused a disturbance in the water.

She sighed. This was going nowhere. Again. "Eros, she needs your help."

He gripped the edge and launched himself at her feet, landing in a tight crouch. Warm water splashed her thighs, making the gauzy material of her sarong translucent. She shivered at the burning gaze of her husband. Eros stared at the view like a man possessed while drops of liquid sluiced down his body like a caress. She smiled. The god of lust, personified.

"Keeping people 'together' is not what I do. I infuse the love, or in this case," he gave a sexy smile, "lust. Aphrodite should be directing them to their counterparts." Eros fell to his knees and pressed his face against her bare stomach. Psyche had let her self-consciousness go centuries ago. He loved to taste her child bearing battle scars more than anything. Being immortal, for her, didn't prevent the mortal woman's woes of childbirth.

His soft lips nibbled the curve of her belly button, making her shiver. "I love you, Psyche."

"I love you too, Eros, but I won't let you distract me."

"No?"

Teeth scraped the sensitive ridge of her hip. A soft sigh escaped through her lips. He knew exactly what drove her insane. His tongue lathed the soft skin. She laughed, husky and raw. In moments he'd turned her insides to molten fire. Sharp teeth nipped again. Her pussy clenched, became slick with need. Any thoughts she had flew from her mind. He knew every inch of her body. Every secret.

"If I didn't know any better, Eros, I'd say you weren't even the slightest bit curious." She ran her nails along the spread of his glorious shoulders.

He made a noncommittal noise and slipped the now heavy sarong off her hips one aching centimeter at a time. She felt the cool air against her still wet skin, chilling her in seconds. He stilled and held his face within an inch of her dripping pussy. His hot breath teased her folds. Her legs ached with the effort to remain closed. Gods he was making this difficult.

The moist heat of his breath slipped against her core making her tremble. She moaned. He knew her so well.

His tongue flicked against her sensitive skin. She moaned again, gripped his hair in tight fists. He looked up and she felt the pull of his amber eyes, holding her captive. Eros' smile turned her inside out. He slipped his tongue between her sensitive folds.

Psyche thrust against his tongue, desperate to feel his teeth lightly scrape her clit. He drove her crazy. She brushed her knuckles against his temples, smoothed his hair. His sweet tongue sent little shivers of electricity up her spine. Holy Zeus, he was amazing. She wanted to lose herself in his seduction, but something important needed to be done. He nuzzled her pussy. Although for the life of her, she couldn't remember what it was.

"Open for me." His sweet voice hummed against her. She whimpered softly.

Tempted, gods she was tempted. But she had to resist.

He ran his nails in soft circles around the back of her legs. "I can smell you, Psyche, the heady scent of you." He sighed and nuzzled her again.

Psyche shivered. Her pussy throbbed in sync with her racing heart.

"How important is this to you?"

Psyche shook her head. "Huh?" The haze of lust drove her crazy.

His gaze held hers. She could see within him a war with his pride, the pull of his old passion for creating love. The same expression she'd missed for so long. Her mind cleared slightly.

"How important is this, Psyche?"

"Very." Her breathless voice sounded rough.

He smiled and her heart melted. "You don't even remember what we're talking about, do you?" He rose and caressed her breast with light fingertips.

Psyche smiled, closed her eyes and arched against his touch. "No idea."

He chuckled and backed away.

The sudden cool air left her shaking. She watched him under lids that weighed heavy. Psyche held transfixed by his lack of touch.

He pumped his shaft, caressing the head with a thumb. His eyes narrowed to two amber slits, telling her nothing. She craved his touch but worried at her fate. Sometimes in the past, he'd tortured her for hours without letting her come, or made it the shortest most intense fuck of her life. Either way, when he had that look in his eyes, she knew she was in trouble.

He waved his hand, bringing them to their bedroom. She only had a moment to feel disoriented before he had her down on the long divan, his hard length pressed against her.

She scraped her teeth along his neck. He hissed. With shaking hands she ran her fingernails down his sides. Eros growled low in her ear, a sure sign he was about to become aggressive. Psyche nuzzled his cheek and raked her nails up his back.

He flipped her over like she weighed nothing, his breathing shallow and harsh. "I need you, Psyche." He held her hands above her head against the divan's only arm and ground against the soft flesh of her ass.



She shivered in delight.

"Look at yourself in the mirror." She felt his raw power roll over her body, igniting the fires of lust hotter than any mortal could have borne.

Psyche opened her eyes and looked at the delicately framed mirror. They'd placed it at the perfect angle for their interludes on the divan. Her cheeks were flushed to a soft red, her lids swollen in her lust filled haze. Soft brown hair curled around her face, the longer strands tumbling over her shoulder in loose waves. Her long slim fingernails dug into the dark blue velvet of the divan's arm.

Behind her Eros slipped into view, the hunger in his amber eyes making her shiver. He needed her lust like a drug. She'd give him anything, had given him everything in her mortal life. He rose behind her, his broad chest golden and glowing against her pale skin. His hair crackled with power and the glow in his amber eyes sizzled like lightning.

They'd waited so long to feed his lust that he couldn't maintain his mortal appearance. Every god fed on those around him, Aphrodite surrounded herself with those who loved her so she could feed on their emotion. Ares kept strife and political powerhouses in his circles; while they didn't have to be at war per se, they did have to constantly create discontent. Eros, unlike most, chose one follower to worship him. He had only Psyche to feed his lusts. He *could* feed from the lust of those he infused, but since it had been a while, she'd been his sole focus.

This meant she was in trouble.

Eros pushed her up onto the arm of the divan so she could see her breasts and torso. He slipped his fingers between her folds and flicked her clit with sweet torture. She gasped.

His fingers thrust inside her, stroking against the walls of her channel, making her cry out. She watched him move behind her, his radiant body worthy of her worship. He was glorious. His fingers moved from her channel and swirled on the bud of her anus. She trembled, oh gods.

The head of his shaft pressed against her dripping pussy. Her eyes were drawn to the mirror and she watched the sublime expression of lust on his face. Over the years she'd watched his many faces. Had seen him be the dark god of vengeance, forcing lust between enemies, destroying kingdoms, but right now, he was the god of her heart. Full of life, giver, receiver, everything she had ever needed in a mate.

Her heart soared and he thrust deep, the soft skin of his balls pressed against her clit. She closed her eyes on a groan grinding her hips against him, desperate to ease the ache he'd started in her body. She opened heavy eyelids.

Eros met her eyes in the mirror, his thumb pressed against the tight hole of her ass. She trembled, wanting him to push, desperate for the double penetration he offered.

Psyche pushed back against his finger and the digit slipped in, slowly, achingly. She rotated her hips and felt the resistance of her ass give way. Psyche felt his power consume her lust. He pulled his thumb to the entrance and flexed it against the edges. With a gasp of pleasure she rocked against him, the walls of her pussy tightening around his pulsing shaft.

With a groan of pleasure he slipped two fingers into her ass, rotating them to push against the wall next to her pussy. Sharp pleasure shot to her core, bringing her close to the brink. He rotated his hips, thrusting shallow and fast. His fingers pounded in and out of her, filling her with intense dark pleasure.

She watched every thrust jar her body. Her breath came in short gasps with the rising intensity. Psyche closed her eyes and threw her head back, her body moving against him in her own rhythm.

His thrusts moved deeper, riding her hard against the divan, his fingers working their magic and driving her insane. He answered her soft whimpers with groans of his own.

She reached the brink and he shoved hard, pressing her body against the arm and pulling his fingers from her ass. Psyche's body trembled from the desperate edge he'd put her on. She glared at him through the mirror and growled low in her throat. Eros pulled back slowly until the head of his cock poised at the entrance of her pussy. She wanted to move back but something in his face kept her still.

His eyes glowed bright, their deep amber depths calling for her. She cried her frustration, wanting him to move, needing to climax. She was *so* close. He shoved into her, deep, the smack of his skin against hers like heaven. Psyche shattered, her body rolled into orgasm like a tsunami crashing against land. Eros absorbed it, drew it into his body like air. She felt his pull, watched his glorious face contort in ecstasy. This is what they lived for; the god of lust was fed.

With exhaustion, she dropped her head, letting the warmth of their play and the heady scent of sex surround her.

"We'll go tomorrow, Psyche." He wrapped her in his arms carefully placing her head against his heart's beat. Eros' breathing steadied and Psyche sighed, content.

"Tomorrow." She fell into exhausted slumber.

## Chapter Two

"Well let's go see the bitch."

He looked stunning in his three piece suit. Armani had nothing on the Greek tailors Eros employed. How he could make her knees weak and irritate the hell out of her at the same time, she'd never know. For the first time in several weeks he could pass for human, thank the gods. Their lovemaking invoked his power, letting him do more in the mortal realm without draining him to the point of god-like radiance. It was a poor god that couldn't maintain mortal appearance. Retaining believability was critical.

Some of the gods had yet to make the move to the modern world. Their old angers and fears destroyed their ability to blend, be worshiped.

"Eros, she's your mother." It never ceased to amaze her how uncaring the gods and goddesses were toward their children. She thought of their oldest daughter and the twins. Psyche loved them with all her soul. How could anyone disregard a child?

"Here my love. It's time." He held the silver torque in his hands.

Psyche took a deep breath and stepped forward. They'd adopted the torque as their house jewelry when it had come into style again. Hopefully this time it would last. Its unique design and style denoted his station, showed

Psyche and their children as lesser gods to his power. What it meant was, if anyone messed with his family, he'd be all over them. And in the realm of gods, that was a benefit.

He settled it against her neck, pressing it around the contours. With a kiss on her cheek, he left their sunny bedroom. She admired the piece in the mirror. This one had crosshatching that settled against the top of her sternum. It looked elegant and hid her house of Eros tattoo very well. Being marked was something she'd learned to live with, but it didn't make wearing it in front of the extended family any easier.

She slipped on her rust colored blouse and stuck her tongue out at her reflection. It looked fantastic with her coloring. A classic beauty by Greek standards, she knew most men wouldn't look twice at her now. Eros, however, never let her forget how delicious he found her. She loved the soft swirl of her black skirt. The light material flowed like water around her legs. She smoothed it again.

Aphrodite made her nervous. She fidgeted with her torque, trying to place it perfectly, realizing that it would shift on the trip to the mortal world, but unable to help the nervous habit. They'd done well blending in, their children kept them involved. They truly kept you young. She touched the area above her breast where her heart fluttered. This was ridiculous.

She sighed. You'd think after thousands of years Aphrodite would let their past go. *Yeah right, like my son would say.*

"Stop fretting." Eros kissed her cheek. She jumped. He put his hands on her shoulders and smiled. "Time to go, gorgeous."

They went. His way. The instant move used to jar her insides, but now only made her slightly uncomfortable. She'd prefer to travel by way of the four winds, but Eros needed to be exact in his arrival. It would be terrible if they

ended up in the middle of a traffic jam or a full restaurant. Humans could ignore a lot, but two people appearing in the middle of a crowded room?

They'd arrived at the side door of the lobby. "How did you get involved with this anyway?" Eros opened the door to Aphrodite's corporate headquarters.

"The Fates called me." Psyche slipped through the door, barely avoiding the swat aimed at her butt.

"What do you mean, the Fates called you?" His voice boomed across the room, drawing attention from all Aphrodite's employees in the lobby.

Psyche chewed on her bottom lip. Sometimes she really wished he'd use his inside voice and not his 'I am a god, listen to me' voice. "Honey, you know they like to call me sometimes, just to chat. I felt their call, so I gave them a ring."

Actually, Psyche had been working with them for some time to try and get the gods involved with the world again. With the new arts movement, Greek appreciation had come back in style. There were even some mortals trying to worship in the old ways.

"Uh huh."

They reached the elevator, much to her relief. She strolled past him to the rear of the elevator.

He looked at her, his amber eyes closed to slits.

*Uh oh.* Her heart raced.

The doors closed and he hit the stop button with a tight fist. The obnoxious buzzing became white noise when he placed his hands on either side of the elevator wall. His power caressed her skin, bringing lust to the surface. The roar of her heartbeat filled her ears. Her breath came in soft gasps and she could smell her own arousal almost immediately. He pressed her against the wall, and with insanely slow movements, bunched her skirt around her thighs.

"Why are the fates involved?"

Eros soft voice gave her delicious chills. His tongue touched the tip of her ear. The tips of his calloused fingers caressed her thighs.

"The couple is fated, Eros. That's all I know."

Her breathless voice brought a smile to his lips. He knew what he did to her body. He stepped away, straightened his suit and smiled. Nimble fingers released the stop. "You should have told me that sooner."

The elevator stopped and Psyche jerked her soft skirt and blouse into some semblance of order. The door slid open. "You didn't ask."

"What is he doing here?"

The sharp voice instantly irritated Psyche. *The ice queen cometh. Aphrodite doesn't love anything outside herself. Why are we here?*

*Actually, she's gotten better, and you're here to help someone else.* One of them had to remind them why they were here. Sometimes she wished it could be anyone but her.

Eros unbuttoned his jacket with jerky motions. He walked past the enraged goddess and, brave man, turned his back to her. With nonchalance, he shoved his hands in his pants pockets.

Psyche nodded her head to Aphrodite, but the goddess stared at her son. Fine lines formed at the creases of her mouth. For a moment, Psyche felt spiteful enough to tell her, but wisely decided her afterlife wouldn't be worth it. Aphrodite's vengeance was almost as legendary as Hera's.

"This is my place of work, Eros. Why are you and Psyche here?"

Aphrodite crossed her arms.

Shocked, Psyche stared at her husband. Aphrodite never called her by her first name. Ever. As one they turned and stared at the goddess.

Aphrodite appeared uncomfortable. She, of course, looked immaculate in her soft pink cashmere suit. Self-conscious, she patted her hair. Psyche wondered what had shaken the goddess's confidence. Her long blonde curls were tucked and pinned in a tousled appearance, reminding Psyche immediately of waking up after a great night of sex. Aphrodite's face glowed with internal radiance. She never needed makeup and could change her looks with a whim. *Lucky bitch.*

*Since when did she start calling you by your first name, my love?* Eros sounded slightly miffed.

*Since the fates called her and told her we would be coming, I suppose.* Psyche wondered what the fates had said.

*Sounds fishy to me.* He was probably right.

Eros smiled, heartfelt and welcoming. Surely Aphrodite knew it was a play. "We were asked to come here."

Aphrodite blinked and bestowed a glorious smile on her son. A lesser immortal would have swooned, begged her to let them be happy, loved. Eros just ignored it.

"I have everything under control." Her smile seemed fake, somehow less than it had been a moment ago.

*She's lying.* Eros sounded amused.

*I know. But why?* Psyche watched her.

Aphrodite turned her back and led the way to her office. Her door jerked open and out stormed her assistant, looking harassed, his tie loosened, his black hair disheveled. Psyche appraised him. Normally she'd dismiss him as another Aphrodite's throwaways. She needed a few of those to match her impressive



carnal appetites, but something about him seemed different. Less vapid, more irritated. *Well. Well.*

He nodded at them and scurried away. Aphrodite pursed her lips.

"I thought you'd never step foot in my office." Aphrodite sniffed.

Psyche rolled her eyes at the melodramatic woman. She needed to get out of here, fast.

*I'll take care of Aphrodite. Why don't you go check out the little man?*

*Sounds like a plan to me, but I don't think he's her lover.*

Eros raised an eyebrow. He kissed her cheek and smiled. "I'd like for you to buy yourself something nice, my wife. Something that will entice me. The goddess and I have things to discuss. It would please me for you to spend time in your old world."

Psyche met his smile with one of her own. She bowed her head. "Thank you, husband, for the pleasure."

She left, keeping her head lowered in apparent subjugation.

Eros sent her a mental kiss. *I hate the formalities of hobnobbing. Promise me we'll make this up to each other.*

*Of course, love, as soon as I'm done playing detective.* Grateful to be away from the divine eyes of perfection, she set out on her mission.

## Chapter Three

Jeffrey Donovan was fed up with everything, his job, his inability to get laid, his boss. All of it. In moments, Psyche knew the whole deal. Why? Because he'd called his brother. On a cell phone. In his open office, if the name on the door meant anything. Within hearing distance. Psyche smirked. This detective stuff was easy.

For a moment, she felt an uncomfortable itch of fate on the back of her neck. The same itch she got that told her to call the fates in the first place. She sighed. Of course they'd be involved. She felt her happy bubble disperse like magic. He was here because she was meant overhear him. She leaned against the wall, observing him through his office window.

"I don't know what the deal is, man." Jeffrey threw a stress ball in the air, catching it with ease. She could see the frustration in the lines of his shoulders. He tossed it up, caught it overhanded, tossed it behind his back and caught it again. *Impressive.*

"No, dude. Seriously. I've never had a problem getting laid." He paused at the catch of the ball. "Yeah right, jackass. It wasn't *that* long ago." He laughed and tossed the ball again.

Psyche chewed her lower lip, lost in thought. His laugh was very nice. He was sexy as hell by today's standards. Jeff's short black hair looked tousled,

but in a cutesy sleepy morning kisses kind of way. It was endearing. Not Aphrodite's usual taste.

Was this her mark? She moved closer.

"I don't know." He squeezed the ball, onto the back of his head, rubbing it around. Psyche stifled a laugh. He definitely talked with his hands. "I end up working for the hottest number in heels I've ever seen." He laughed. "No man, I wasn't trying to sleep with her, but who wouldn't think about it?" His shoulders relaxed and he started tossing the ball again. "Yeah, well, that was a hard lesson to learn. I've grown up since that one."

He sat in his chair and kicked his feet up on the desk. "I've gone to so many parties, social gatherings, hobnob affairs, and nothing. Not even a glance my way. I'm not ugly dude." He choked on a laugh. "Yeah, well, I got my looks from your Dad." He tossed the ball across the room, smacking it against the glass. Psyche jumped.

His smile froze on his face. "I've got to go, bro." He nodded his head. "Yeah, later." His phone snapped shut. "You know, listening in on other people's conversations is usually considered rude." He set the phone down on his desk and crossed his arms. He leaned back and raised one haughty brow.

Psyche had to smile. He sure pulled off cocky well. She walked through his door and nodded to another chair.

"By all means." He kicked his legs off the desk and leaned forward, his forearms crossed where his feet had been. "What can I do for you?"

Suddenly all business, Psyche realized he was under Aphrodite's thumb for some reason other than sex. Strange, but true.

"Why do you work for someone you despise?" Probably not the best start, but she couldn't help it, she had to know. She couldn't abide living half her day under the rule of someone she hated.

"It's a good job. And I don't despise her." He frowned in disapproval.

"She hasn't been forward with you has she?" Psyche tilted her head.

His cheeks turned pink. She felt the slap of fate against the back of her head. *Shit.* She'd said something wrong. *Think.*

"I'm sorry, it's just that you seem intelligent. Not just, well, arm candy." She smiled her most entreating smile. "You're the first assistant she's had with a brain."

He rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I keep hearing that. I can tell she's never had an assistant, well executive anyway." He ran a hand through his hair. "I've been cleaning up an IRS nightmare and all she's done is smile prettily and say that she knew it would all work out." He scrubbed his face with his hand and leaned back in his chair. "How does she own the most renowned internet dating service?" He blinked. "And why am I talking to you about this?"

"Aphrodite sent me to find you." She watched his face closely.

He glared at her. "Why does she have to call herself that?"

Psyche laughed. "She asked me to request your assistance. I'm supposed to go shopping in this strange city and have no idea how to get around."

His longsuffering sigh irked her. For a minute she wondered how often Aphrodite had sent him on such useless errands.

"You don't have to help me, I'll find what I need without you." She rose.

Shock registered on his face before he rose as well. "I'm sorry, that wasn't fair." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm no help at all with shoe shopping."

"Good, I hate shoes, as a rule." She grinned.

He chuckled and held out his arm. "Shall we?"

*Eros, I'm going shopping with Jeffrey.*

*Who's Jeffrey?* She could hear the irritation in his mind's voice. Hopefully his mother wasn't stressing him too much.

*Aphrodite's assistant. He's an actual assistant.*

*Really?* Her husband sounded surprised. *Follow it through, Psyche. I've been trying to get her to show me what's wrong for an hour now. She keeps giving me the runaround. I can't even get into her compatibility software.* He sent her a mental kiss. She felt his sigh of resignation right before they separated their thoughts.

She slipped her arm through Jeffrey's and smiled. "Let's go, handsome. Show me some of your world."

## Chapter Four

"At first she came on to me." Jeffrey bit into his ice cream cone. He'd chosen mint chocolate chip, much to her surprise. He'd seemed more of a vanilla or chocolate. They sat in front of the creamery at a café table, munching away at their creamy choices.

Psyche bit into her peanut butter and chocolate ice cream mix and sighed in ecstasy. The things she'd missed out on for so many years.

"She had no work for me, nothing to actually *do* as an assistant, so I was irritated." He took another bite. "I thought she'd lost her mind. I wasn't the greatest assistant in the area. I was definitely one of the youngest."

"How difficult has it been working with her?" Psyche wondered what the hell Aphrodite had been up to with this man.

"I ignored the snide remarks and smarky assumptions." He shrugged. "For the most part, the guys just patted me on the back and said great job." Psyche could see the prick in his pride, and the feeling of inadequacy. Aphrodite may have done more damage with this one than good.

"What happened next?" She bit into her ice cream again.

"Then it stopped. Suddenly." He stared at his cone. "I was flattered that she'd find me attractive." His grin reminded her of a little boy, full of mischief.

"But she suddenly changed, became businesslike, abrupt." He shook his head like women were the biggest mystery in the world.

Psyche returned his smile. "Did anything else happen?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, the whole town dried up. Everywhere I went women behaved oddly." He shifted and took another bite of his ice cream.

"Do you think Aphrodite intimidated them?" Psyche didn't know if this was a common problem for Aphrodite's assistants.

"I don't think so, besides have you seen her? Why would she block me?"

"Have you met anyone interesting?" None of this made any sense. Maybe she really needed an assistant.

"I don't know." He chuckled and shook his head. "Well, Angela Devine."

Psyche laughed. "Devine?"

His smile turned wry. "Everywhere I go only one woman pays any attention to me. Around everyone else, she seems intelligent, funny and definitely gorgeous. She sees me and she turns into this bitchy, intolerable and vicious woman." He wrapped his cone in a napkin and tossed it in the garbage next to them.

"Her last name is really Devine?" Psyche watched the myriad of emotions cross his face. He seemed more confused than irritated. It must be a blow to his pride to have a woman treat him so poorly. He'd never be adept at hiding himself from anyone.

"I don't know her name, really. Angela is all anyone calls her but everywhere I see her, she has the Distinguished Visitor badge on." He cleared

his throat. His demeanor showed slight interest, but not enough to warrant a fate involvement.

"Ahh." Psyche sagged in her chair. Here was a man that didn't really need help. He was outgoing, friendly, incredibly sexy. Maybe he felt a little down or was running through a dry spell. If he was looking for a mate, she'd know by now. The fates must have meant someone else. They wouldn't have gotten involved if it hadn't involved a soul mate. Where did she go wrong?

"Are you ready to go?" Jeffrey smiled his assistant smile and held out his hand.

Psyche let him help her up. She scooped up her packages and they set out. So far she'd bought a few things for her handmaidens and her children. Not that anyone really *needed* anything. For Eros she bought a very hefty watch, gorgeous. He always lost his.

They passed by a trinket shop. Jeffrey continued chatting about his organizational exploits in Aphrodite's mess of a business. She didn't mean to ignore him, but she rarely misread the fates. *Well, there was that one time.*

All around her people bustled about their business, moving to the next point in their lives. All they needed was a little something to shake them up.

A slap of fate on the back of her neck was her only warning before a woman tripped on and fell against Jeff. His flailing arms caught Psyche and they all went down in a mess of limbs.

"What the hell?" Jeff sounded pissed.

"What are you doing here?" The woman's husky voice raised chills on Psyche's arm. *This was it! Finally.*

"I'm walking, damn it, or was until you pushed me." Jeff pushed himself up and dusted his hands. He reached for Psyche's hand.



Psyche stared at them both. Fate sent very few slaps, this one was impressive. Two in one day. She really needed to give them a call. Her head buzzed. She rubbed the back of her neck. It still ached. Neither really looked at her, but she didn't mind. The sparks that flew between them were almost palpable. It would take little kindling to turn it to passion.

"Pushed you? *Pushed you?*" She shoved a curly copper lock of hair out of her face. Sprawled on the ground, Psyche had a moment to appraise her. Her jeans looked faded and comfortable. The loose fit flattered her, bringing attention to the swell of her womanly hips. If not for the red hair, her emerald t-shirt would have been plain. As it was, it set off her coloring nicely. Her hair hung in loose ringlets to the middle of her back. And her heart shaped freckled face might be considered pretty if not for the furious expression marring it now.

"I don't know what you're doing here, or why, but I'm tired of you following me around." She stood in a fluid motion glaring at him the entire time.

"Following her?" Psyche looked at Jeff. "You two know each other?"

The red head scoffed. "I wouldn't say know. He's been destroying every chance I've had to interview the head of Lost Love, Inc. for my magazine, *Starfire*." She tucked the stray strand behind her ear again. "This jerk's been blocking me everywhere I go."

Psyche smiled, at a loss for words. She wanted to interview Aphrodite? *How nice*. Here was the perfect opportunity for Jeff to say something suave and smooth this over.

Jeff's jaw hung open. He'd had no idea, apparently. He snapped his jaw shut. "I am not following you, Angela. I am here because it's a free ass country."

Psyche flinched at the sound of his gritting teeth. *Or not. Nice one, Jeff. Way to blow a chance. Jeff was young, but still.*

"Wait a minute, you're Angela?" Psyche smiled.

Angela raked a glance at Psyche. In a moment she was dismissed. *Oh a spitfire.* With a chuckle at the little mortal's naiveté, she made a decision. Eros needed to see these two in action. Right now though, this was getting old.

Psyche checked her shoes, no damage to the heels, she'd be fine. She ignored Jeff's hand and stood on her own. She brushed her skirt in soft irritated motions. Psyche waited.

They yelled at each other for another several minutes. Pedestrians avoided their area by the shop and the customers were staring at them through the window. A teenaged girl with black pigtails and a shop apron stood by, waiting to interrupt, but Psyche could see the nervous twitch of the unsure. For the first time in centuries she felt embarrassed.

"You've obviously changed your tastes. Where's that little blonde twig you spend all your time with?" Angela put her hand on her generous hip and threw her hair over her shoulder with a toss of her head.

*No one* insults Aphrodite. *Twig, indeed.* "I have had *enough!*"

Her quiet voice called silence to everyone. Even the twittering kids from the sidewalk went silent. Psyche held her head high. When she met Angela's sharp green eyes, she saw the girl wince.

"I believe you owe me an apology." Psyche kept her voice steady, with effort.

Blushing furiously, Angela sighed. "You're right. I'm sorry I knocked you down. It really wasn't intentional." Her voice sounded beautiful and husky. Less edgy. She held out her hand. "Angela Wysner, rare foot in mouth sufferer." She gave a half smile.

*Almost endearing. Almost.* "I need to find my way back to my husband, Jeffrey, if you don't mind?"

She picked up her packages and glared at them both when they attempted to help her. "If you two are through making a scene, please point me to the closest cab."

Psyche boiled under the surface. No one had the right to insult the goddess. In spite of all of her many faults, Aphrodite chose to stay with the mortals. Her loyalties had been questioned numerous times and while they didn't always agree, Aphrodite had supported her husband's decision for a hiatus. She'd taken on the full weight of love distribution on her very strong, if perfect, shoulders.

"I'm sorry, I'll get you back." Jeffrey sounded reserved. His expression gave away nothing for once.

Angela dropped her hand and moved away. Psyche almost felt sorry for the girl, but insults were insults.

The drive back to Lost Love, Inc. gave her some time to think over the encounter. Outgoing and suave Jeffrey blew up and lost his cool. Angela, who seemed sweet and nice, became vicious and snarled at the man. What was going on with those two and what had Aphrodite done to screw this one up? She sighed. Hopefully the goddess would never find out that she'd been angry for her sake. It wouldn't do for anyone to know she admired the cunning seductress. Preferably from afar. Very far.

## Chapter Five

When they arrived, Jeff stared at the closed door to Aphrodite's office. His pensive look showed that his thoughts were far away.

Psyche placed a light touch on his arm. "Why don't you go home, or go do something productive? She'll be occupied for a while."

He nodded and walked away. She wondered what thoughts ran through his head.

*I'm back, Eros. I think I've found our humans.*

*At this moment, I could care less.* Eros sounded irritable.

*The fates are trying to put them together but Aphrodite's doing something wrong.*

*They're not mine, Psyche. I have nothing to do with this.* His thoughts sounded angry.

Maybe a different tactic. Aphrodite must have driven him crazy while she was gone. Psyche leaned against the frame of the open office door. She crossed her arms and waited.

"I'm not interested in making my job easier, Aphrodite. You should already know that." Eros leaned against a bookcase, his suit jacket folded over his arm. He'd already loosened his tie and the top two buttons of his shirt, and from the looks of his hair, had run a frustrated hand through it on several occasions.

"I'm not asking you to go out of your way, Eros. I don't need your help all the time, this is working out fine." Her smile seemed distracted, worried. "Did you know our successful match rate is at 89%? That's extremely impressive."

"Actually, you were asking me to go out of my way. I told you before not to bypass the fates and create your own perfect matches. They would interfere and make a mockery of our attempts. Our wants have no bearing at all. The fates are involved, and now we have to fix this." Eros gave a flicker of a wry smile Psyche's way.

Aphrodite's shoulders slumped. She stared out her window and, for the first time, Psyche wondered what it was like to be the bearer of love and have no one of your own.

"They already contacted you?" She wrapped her arms tight around her body. The goddess appeared unsure.

"They contacted Psyche." Eros narrowed his eyes.

*You probably shouldn't have said that, honey.* Psyche couldn't help the note of worry in her voice.

"They did *what*?" Aphrodite's voice shook with outrage. "They contacted *her* and not me?" Aphrodite became the goddess of rage. In moments, her demeanor changed to one of vengeance. Terrible beauty burst forth and Psyche felt her insides shake. The light from Aphrodite's eyes burned and enveloped Psyche, reminding her that she was in the presence of a true goddess. Being

immortal was a great protection but it would be best to never underestimate any of them. Psyche stood her ground, although the intelligent move would be to run, fast.

*She is letting something undermine her confidence. Aphrodite is a goddess and needs to act like it.* His smile did little to ease her nerves.

"They contacted her because you refused to call me." Eros strolled across the room, ignoring his mother's tantrum. "And I didn't listen to their call." He jerked his head toward Psyche. "She, on the other hand, convinced me to come and talk with you."

Aphrodite saw Psyche and immediately reined in her temper. In a flash she reverted to the beautiful business owner façade. Psyche blinked. *Amazing.*

"So what are we going to do about it?" Aphrodite's face could have been carved from stone.

"We?" Eros tucked Psyche against his chest and held her still trembling form tightly. "We're not going to do anything. This is your problem, remember? I've wasted my time questioning your perfect system."

With that they left the room. They held their heads high and picked up Psyche's packages on the way out. Psyche nodded her head at the pale face of Jeffrey staring at her from the hallway. She hoped he hadn't seen Aphrodite's display.

Eros threw an arm around her shoulders and chuckled. *What do you think?* He was so proud of himself.

*What an exit line.* Psyche knew this would come back to haunt them.

*Yeah, I take 'em when I can.* He chuckled.

*Are you going to help?* She held him close, wishing for a yes.

*No.*

*Stubborn. You are so stubborn.* He exasperated her.

“Let’s go home, Psyche.” He wrapped his strong arms around her and they traveled home. She was only slightly disoriented this time.

## Chapter Six

"Eros, you can't let them go." Three days they'd argued. The fates had been beating against her daily, and the piercing headache made life unbearable. It was not her place to tell him to go back to work, he was a stubborn bastard, but if he didn't do something soon, she'd have to do it all herself.

The study felt stuffy and brooding, much like her husband had been for half a century. Enough was enough. He spent too much time cooped up in here and seemed to have forgotten his purpose in the afterlife.

"The humans haven't needed me for centuries. After the 60's incident, I washed my hands of them. They are beyond my help." She looked beseechingly at him. He shook his head. "Humans are *not* worth my time." His hand made a chopping motion, but she felt indecision in his thoughts. "I won't fix this for her." He paced in front of her, his t-shirt rippling with the movement of muscle.

"I was human once too." Her quiet voice belied her anger. She still remembered the pain of losing him, how it had torn her soul apart to think she'd never see him again. He could never fully comprehend the depth of human emotion.

He cupped her cheeks with gentle hands. "I have never forgotten that, or how I almost lost you." His amber eyes glowed softly with remembered pain.



She caressed his hand with a soft glide of her fingers. Psyche smiled. "Sometimes I wonder. I really do." She turned her face from his hand. "These are my people, Eros. No matter how far away from my generation they are, how much they infuriate me, and they do, I came from the same blood. This time I have a chance to help someone. To give back for the help I'd been given to find you forever ago."

He sighed and dropped his hands. Frustration showed in the humming tension of his shoulders. "I'm not going to get out of this, am I?" She could see him weighing his options. He put his fists on his hips and stared at the heavens.

"They're fated, Eros. You know what happens when we try to slight the fates."

He grumbled something incoherent and yanked her in for a hard kiss.

She smiled against his lips and whispered. "Besides, if Aphrodite can't do it and you can?"

He chuckled and kissed her again, gently this time. "True. I think I deserve some gloating. I'm in."

The pounding in her head stopped, finally. Psyche sighed with relief. The fates were, if nothing else, dedicated to their causes.

She held him close and kissed the soft cotton covering his chest. "You know, the 60's wasn't Aphrodite's fault, Eros." She felt him stiffen.

"Why wasn't it?" She could hear the embarrassment in his voice.

"What did you expect when you infused the whole of America with love and lust? Aphrodite couldn't direct that many at one time." She rubbed his lower back, loosening the coiled tension that maintained its home there.

Psyche put her forehead against his chest. "The humans had a great time, but that much free love had to come at a price." She met his eyes. "Maybe the

human population is ready to feel real love again. Just not on such a global infusion, maybe," she grinned, "but it's definitely time you came back into your own."

He sighed. "Yeah, that's the last time I go carousing with Bacchus. Apparently lust on a massive scale causes pandemonium. Haight-Ashbury, I've been told, has never been the same."

Psyche chuckled and held him close. His scent reminded her of the sea, wild, edgy and full of life. She kissed his collarbone through the tee. Bacchus was always in trouble, but he never cared. To be so free of responsibilities and strife, she almost envied him. His hangovers, however, were legendary.

"I've missed you, you know." Psyche tucked her head under his chin and listened to the comforting beat of his heart.

His arms tightened around her. "I've been right here."

She squeezed him close. "I've missed the *you* I fell in love with." She laid her head back and soaked in his expression. "You've been gone for a while, Eros."

*I've made this hard for you, haven't I?* His comforting arms came around her waist, holding her tight.

She shrugged off the worry in his voice. "It's been hard for you, too."

Eros shook his head, a half-smile on his face. "You don't miss much do you?"

She grinned. "Not lately."

Psyche felt his lust wrap around her. His power held them close to one another. She sighed into it, felt it lift her against his heart.

"I love you, Psyche." He kissed her, his lips exploring, sensitive. Eros held his aggression in check and carried her to their room. Her body shivered

with the echo of his need for her. She never wanted to think about what losing him would have done to her. Psyche trembled at his rare tenderness.

*I love you, too, Eros, my husband.*

With every touch and caress he reminded her of his love and his promise to be true to her and himself for all of their immortal lives. He whispered against her skin of how her love had given him life. She cried at the beauty of his caresses and felt his answering love for her in the emotional ties between them.

Psyche lost all focus of the world around her as talented fingers and lips brought her to climax after climax, each one gentle and glorious. When her body shattered in one beautiful long orgasm and her body dripped in sweat, he slid his length deep inside. Psyche shuddered around him, her walls gripping him in the incredible orgasm.

He took her lips in a searing kiss and began thrusting inside her still trembling walls. Eros linked his fingers with hers and held them over her head. She arched against him and returned his thrusts with heated ones of her own.

His power filled her, driving her to the brink of insanity. She cried out against him, fighting the grip of his hands, desperate to hold him tighter to her, pull him inside her.

Eros ground against her and she screamed as an orgasm crashed around her, engulfing her in its powerful embrace. She cried at the beauty of the burning edges of her lust. He followed close behind, his body absorbing her orgasm and returning it over and over.

*I remember now, why you're rarely tender.*

She felt his tired chuckle. *Yeah, it's almost enough to kill us both.*

Eros released her hands and pulled her close, wrapping a leg around her body and tucking her in tight against the full length of him.

She wondered how long they laid there, entangled in each other's arms. Her heart slowed to a steady rhythm. Eros moved to lay his head against her chest. He loved the sound of her heartbeat. She caressed the smooth plane of his cheek. They'd start tomorrow. Finally.

## Chapter Seven

The morning's light rain felt exhilarating. They were waiting outside Lost Love, Inc for Jeffrey to show. Eros stood with booted feet firmly planted and his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket. His amber eyes were hidden by comfortable shades. Jeans and leather never looked so good on any other man. "I'm glad she gave Jeffrey the day off, but what do you think Aphrodite's been up to?"

Psyche touched the smooth cool metal of the choker at her throat. "I think she's been throwing these two together at every occasion."

Clad in her own jeans and jacket ensemble, she felt comfortable. With a small smile she tilted her face toward the rain and let it caress her skin. Rain always made her happy. The enveloping warmth of Eros moved within a breath's touch of her face.

"That obviously hasn't been working." His soft whisper gave her chills.

She cleared her throat. "Obviously not, actually, they kind of hate each other."

"Really?" Eros inhaled her scent and placed soft lips against her wet skin. With light flicks of his tongue he licked drops of rain off her cheek.

Sweet desire tingled in her stomach; he could melt her with the slightest touch. She loved him more every day.

"Yeah, really. You should have seen it. She was fire and ice." His soft kisses gave a breathless quality to her voice. "He was awkward and..." The seductive scent of his body absorbed the clean and crisp flavor of the rain. She trembled, wishing they were anywhere but in the middle of the sidewalk.

"And?" Eros chuckled. He'd barely touched her, Gods he was good. The very best.

"Excuse me." A loud masculine voice from behind Eros voice jerked her out of her lust filled thoughts.

Psyche shook her head and Eros tilted his head toward his shoulder.

"This is public property, you'll need to move on or security will call the cops."

Psyche grinned. Eros stepped aside and she watched Jeffrey's face crumble into an expression of shock. "Hi Jeff."

"I'm sorry." His voice stuttered slightly. If his bright red face was any indication, he seemed a bit embarrassed. "What are you doing here?"

"Actually, I thought we'd take a walk, if you don't mind. My husband and I would like to find that trinket shop from the other day." Psyche leaned against a parking meter. "Aphrodite's giving you the day off for humoring us, interested?"

Jeffrey's brows drew together forming a deep line. He flicked open his phone and selected a number. Psyche assumed it was Aphrodite's number. He opened his mouth but before he could speak Psyche heard Aphrodite's voice. Jeff looked at the heavens and rolled his eyes. "Yes ma'am. Day off. Thank you

for the notice." He snapped the phone shut and met her eyes with a professional façade. "I'm yours for the morning."

"Great, why don't you go get comfortable and we'll meet you somewhere for brunch." Psyche hoped he'd be up to it. *Honey, can you go find out where Angela lives? I'll call when we have a time and place.*

*No problem, Psyche. We'll meet up later.* His phone rang. With a snap, his phone opened. "Yeah?" Eros nodded his head, a sharp line formed between his brows in apparent agitation. "Yeah, I'll be there." He snapped his phone shut and gave Psyche a rueful grin.

"Oh honey, you promised no work today." Psyche gave her most winning pout.

"I know, but I have to do this. We'll meet up after your brunch. I'll call you when I'm done with this meeting." *Aphrodite's giving me the info.*

*I know it's not willingly, Eros, and you know how much she hates you talking through thought.*

*When the fates get involved, Psyche, her personal wishes take a backseat.* She could hear the glee in his thoughts. Personal wishes, huh. She knew he would stick it to Aphrodite as often as possible on this adventure. *I'll meet you at the café. Let me know when you get there.*

He pulled her in for a thorough kiss.

Psyche's heart pounded in her throat. *I hope you're in the mood for something delicious tonight.*

*I might be, Psyche. What did you have in mind?* His teeth nibbled on her lower lip, driving her insane.

*I fully intend to make this morning's frustration seem like a sweet memory.*

His chuckle shook them both. "I look forward to it." His soft lips kissed her cheek, brushing against the sensitive skin in a caress.

With a fond smile, Psyche watched him enter the building.

Jeff cleared his throat.

Psyche turned her attention to their problem child. She put her hands on her jean clad hips and gave him a wink. "Well, looks like it's you and me. Where do you want to meet?"

Jeff looked uncomfortable. The rain had become a fine mist, settling on his eyelashes like crystals. He rubbed the back of his neck and gave a charming half grin. "I know I'm supposed to take you around again. It appears I've become Aphrodite's errand boy." He held up his hands to stop Psyche's objection. "Look, whatever, I heard the rumors before I took the job. But, I'm an organizational nut and I have a lot of paperwork that needs to be done and taken over to the finance department ASAP. I'm not an idiot, nor will I ever half-ass my job."

"I never thought you would." Psyche started walking toward a corner bistro. He fell in with her, his thoughts very far away.

"*Lost Love* is in trouble." He shoved his hands deep in his suit pockets.

Psyche was floored. The business seemed to be doing so well, no one had any idea. "What happened?"

His laugh seemed forced, raw. "She runs it like it's her personal playground. She'll match people from across the country, sometimes the world, when all they'd wanted was a neighborhood dating possibility." He sighed. "Sure, they may be perfect for each other, but the customer wants their money back because it didn't give them what they'd asked for." Jeff ran an agitated hand through his hair, tossing water behind him. Neither one of them seemed to mind the rain.



Jeff held the door to the bistro open for her. The delicious smell of freshly baked bread and infused spices made her homesick for old Greece. Centuries will dull a memory, but smells, they could bring them back in an instant.

They decided on an elegant alcove that seated four. Most of the restaurants in the surrounding area catered to possible business lunches, giving privacy in areas away from the bustle of the regular lunch crowd.

She ordered an iced tea and he ordered a soda. Psyche could never abide the things, but her children loved them. He took off his jacket and slid in the seat. They were both soaked, but neither really noticed.

"If the matches are made, what difference does it make?" She could feel Eros' agreement in her mind.

Jeff stared at her from across the table. "Sometimes life gets in the way. I'm sure they would get along fine, maybe even live happily ever after if they lived close to each other." He smiled a thank you at the waitress for their drinks.

"But frankly, these people have lives, jobs, families and responsibilities. As romantic as it may seem, most people can't fly across the country to be with someone, no matter how perfect they may be." He fiddled with his soda, wiping the condensation off with a napkin. "*Lost Love, Inc.* needs some positive turn around and fast. And Aphrodite needs to pay attention to the customer's needs. It needs a revamp or she's going to lose everything."

Psyche snapped her jaws shut. She stared at Jeff's bent head and wondered how no one had known. Sure, Aphrodite had been ridiculed for her choice in mingling with the humans instead keeping to the old ways, but she could have asked someone for help. She chewed her lower lip. *Eros, are you getting any of this?*

*Some. I have an idea, if you're interested.*

*Of course.* It wouldn't do to have Aphrodite's pet project fail. It would ensure no one in Olympus would mingle with the mortals and they'd remain as they have been. Stagnant, petty, bored.

*I'll be there in a little bit. Keep him there, won't you?* With a mental kiss he left her mind and she sighed.

"So, if she does change the way she runs her business, will it make a difference?"

"I'm not on the financial end, not intimately anyway, but with bad publicity all the way around, maybe not. She has upcoming lawsuits. This is a huge deal, and since she refuses to listen, it falls to me to get all the info to the financial guys."

Psyche groaned inwardly. Aphrodite's arrogance had, once again, caused her more grief than anything or anyone else ever could. She was her own worst enemy. "Let's say it is revamped and the compatibility issues are repaired. What then?"

"We need great publicity, something to relaunch *LLI*." He took a drink of his soda. "Something positive and reason for the public to find faith in the company again." He laughed. "I'm a romantic at heart and would love to have my perfect match show up and change my life." He put his arm up along the back of the bench. "It's not going to happen." He took a drink of his soda.

"Maybe," at Angela's sarcastic tone, Jeff choked on his soda, "you're just not looking hard enough." Angela laughed.

*We're here.* She could hear the amusement in her husband's voice.

*Yeah, thanks.* She'd get him later.

Since Jeff seemed to have inhaled his soda and was now sputtering incoherently, Psyche decided to try a welcoming smile. "Hello. Angela, wasn't it?"

Angela smiled, embarrassment flushing her cheeks a rosy pink. "Yes, I really am sorry about the other day. It's nice to see you again."

Eros slid in the bench beside Jeff and pounded him on the back until he stopped coughing. Angela sat beside Psyche and after a quick drink order for the waitress, she turned to Jeff. "Mr. Love, here, has told me you may be able to help with an interview for *Lost Love, Inc.* I'm confused as to why you didn't tell me that before." Her clipped words could have frozen the faint of heart.

*Mr. Love?* Psyche raised an eyebrow.

Eros shifted, uncomfortable. *It was all I could think of.*

Psyche shook her head and waited on Jeff's response. She could see a thousand thoughts run through his head, but the next move would be... Psyche opened her mouth and felt the fates clamp on her vocals. They wouldn't allow her to speak.

*You too?* Eros was pissed.

*Yeah. This is ridiculous.*

He took a deep breath. *Please go with honesty!*

*No kidding.*

"I didn't tell you because I didn't know who you were until the last time we ran into each other." Jeff's smile seemed forced, but honest. He'd found the publicity angle he needed.

Angela's anger deflated almost instantly. "Oh." She smiled absently at the waitress when her Coke was set in front of her. "Well," Angela cleared her throat, then held out her hand, "Angela Wysner, writer for *Starfire*."

Jeff held out his hand with a relieved smile. "Jeffrey Donovan, personal assistant to *LLI*'s owner."

She shook his hand and took a drink of her soda. Her eyes widened and she practically inhaled her soda. Psyche pounded her on the back and tried not to laugh at her sputtering. Angela's jaw dropped. "You're her assistant?"

*You know, Psy, if we're lucky, these two will cough themselves into a coma and we can go back home.*

Psyche thought about the future migraines she'd have to suffer. *No thank you. Let's just see how this plays out.*

Eros grinned and passed a little lust into the would-be perfect match.

"I've been dying to do an expose on the inner workings of *LLI*. Would you be interested in making that happen?" Angela's green eyes almost sparkled out of her head. "I can't believe you've been right there, the whole time." Her smile was breathtaking.

*Will you look at that, it seems ol' Jeff's been knocked for a loop.* Eros seemed pleased with himself. She could feel Eros feeding off the lust the two were developing for each other.

"I think that would be a wonderful idea, Angela. Give me some time to schedule meetings and we can go from there." Jeff's smile could have split the sky it was so bright.

The fates released their hold on her voice. Psyche cleared her throat and smiled at their startled expressions. They'd already forgotten about the two immortals. "We'll talk later, Jeff. Right now, I think you two have business to discuss and we have to be heading home."

Jeff nodded his head. "Of course, it was my pleasure, Mrs. Love. If you're in the neighborhood give me a call. I'd love to brainstorm with you again."

Psyche nodded.

Angela moved off of the bench and said her thanks and apologies to Psyche once more.

It wasn't that Psyche doubted the sincerity of the woman's apology, it's that she'd let her temper get the best of her in the first place. It might cause those two problems if Angela didn't learn to rein in her fire. Passion was great, but constant anger beat against a couple, wore them down until love had no room to grow.

With quick goodbyes they left the bistro. Eros pulled her into an impromptu dance in the rain soaked sidewalk. She laughed at his lightheartedness and followed his lead. They danced to the alley behind the bistro and left by way of the west wind, her beloved friend from her mortal days.

## Epilogue

Psyche hung up the phone, her headache legendary. The fates were always difficult to deal with especially with their thousand paths of fated anything. She sighed. Psyche had called them the moment she'd got comfortable.

A movement at the door caught her eye. Eros stood there clad in only a towel. Her heart kicked in a heavy thud before racing. She never regretted a day of her immortality. He ran a much smaller towel through his hair, drying it.

"What did they say?" Eros threw the hair towel over his shoulder and crossed the room. With a sigh of relief he, settled next to her on the divan, pulling her into his arms and rubbing her tense neck in soothing circular motions.

"What didn't they say?" Psyche groaned her pleasure at his ministrations.

He chuckled. "Okay, I walked into that. Where do we stand with the fated couple?" His talented fingers moved to her shoulders.

"Well, they said a lot of nonsense about mortal choices and such, but basically it comes down to this." She sighed. "We get them together or they'll keep hounding us. I'm confused, though. We did get them together, didn't we?"

Eros wrapped his arms around her and snuggled her back to his chest. "I told you before, Psyche, I can do no more than infuse them. It's up to Aphrodite to push them in the right direction."

Psyche sighed. "That's what I was afraid of." She felt the heat of his skin increase dramatically. Her body responded in a flash. "I guess we just have to wait and see, don't we?" She turned in his arms and straddled his hips.

Eros' eyes closed and she could see the flush of arousal on his cheeks. The mortals must have chosen lust over their irritation with each other, at least for the night. Psyche arched against his erection, the tingle in her pussy echoing his groan.

His lust rolled over her like a soothing caress, every crevice of her body hummed. She moaned; it had been decades since a lustful couple had given him so much power.

Soft lips kissed her neck, and she sighed. Her head lolled to one side, giving him better access. He nibbled a light path to where her neck met her shoulder. Eros bit and she squirmed against him. The sharp pinch shot pleasure to the tips of her breasts and dampened the walls of her pussy. She moaned and felt an answering hum against her skin.

"At this point, their lust is so strong I could make you come without touching you." Eros' cockiness was definitely back in full force.

"Oh yeah? What makes you say that?" She trembled.

He laughed against her heated skin. "I *am* the god of Lust."

Within moments, she lay beneath him screaming her orgasm against his lips while he fed his fill. The glow of his skin sparkled, lighting up their room. She watched heavy lidded as wings of light exploded behind him.

"It's good to be back." He kissed her tenderly, his wings enveloping her in his warmth. "I love you, goddess of my heart."

*I love you too, Eros.*

*I know, Psyche. I've always known.*

To be continued...



## A Haunted Love

J.M. Snyder

February. The sky darkened later now; the days weren't quite as short as they used to be. We already put away the candles and greenery from our 'Christmas in the Colonies' bit and hired a few new employees in anticipation of the field trips schools usually do in the spring.

I wasn't really looking forward to summertime; each year it seems to get hotter and hotter. I didn't know how I managed in the cotton breeches and starched shirt I wore at work, but it could've been worse.

I could've been Angela over at the inn, with her bustle and her ten yards of fabric and her tight-ass corset. Or Thad over at the capitol building in his ironed breeches and polished shoes and long-tailed coat. Or Jeremy at the smithy's, shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows, bent over a hot furnace all day long, hammering out horseshoes and bits of iron for the tourists.

It could've been a *lot* worse.

Me, I was just a stable boy. Nothing glorious, but back in Colonial America most jobs weren't. At least I could wear my shirt open, unlaced to the

middle of my chest, and I didn't have to worry about mopping the sweat off my back because I was supposed to sweat while I worked. Part of the ambiance, I guess. Made it real.

I spent my workday carrying crates from one end of the stable to the other, brushing down the three horses we kept on site, rattling off my spiel about how my master's steed is the fastest in the thirteen colonies, once owned by Patrick Henry himself, and no, before you ask, it wasn't the one he rode that fateful night.

For a small tip I could even recite the poem, though I'd been known to hunker down beside a little girl and whisper it to her for the price of a smile as she watched me with wide eyes. The kids ate that re-enacting shit up. "Listen my children and you shall hear..." They loved it.

After the sun went down, the cobbled streets thinned out a bit as the tourists caught the bus back to the hotels. I sat on one of the benches in the square until the lamp lighter made his rounds. Greg was a short fellow with a quick laugh; how he got the lighter position when he could barely reach the candle inside each street lamp beat me. In the gloaming, his footsteps echoed off the stones and I would watch the lights flare to life one by one.

When he got close enough to where I sat, he'd always say, "Hey, how you doing kid?" Like he was so much older than me. He couldn't be forty, if that, and he had to wear a cap to cover short, spiked hair dyed an un-Colonial shade of blue. The management didn't like their re-enactors to be out of character.

They liked my hair, long blonde unruly curls I was itching to cut, but then I'd be unmarketable. Who shaved all their hair off back then? I mentioned it once and my boss said I'd have to wear a powdered wig if I did. Those things were itchy and heavy and *hot*. And whoever heard of a stable boy wearing a powdered wig? I'd have to move up to government, so I said no thanks and kept my curls, pulling them back in a tight ponytail while I worked but letting them loose the minute I was off the clock.

\* \* \* \*

There was a slight breeze rustling through the bare limbed trees like a sigh. A mild winter gave us nice weather during the day, and faint pink buds already bloomed on the tips of the branches like dots of icing decorating a cake. At night, the temperature dropped but not much, bringing in a thick fog that clung to the buildings as if it rose from the empty cobbled streets themselves. In the stables a few yards away, the horses neighed softly and further down the street came Greg's steady step, even though I couldn't see his light yet.

It grew colder now that the sun had set. My bones ached from another long day spent tending the horses and cleaning stables. How colonists managed to eke out a living was beyond me. I couldn't do it if I didn't have the luxury of a well-lit and heated apartment downtown to return to each night, or weekends away from all this. It was hard work even if it was only play-acting.

Slipping off the bench, I stretched out on the damp grass beneath one of the large oaks around the square. The last bus into town left a little before midnight. I had time to catch a quick nap, unwind a bit...folding my arms behind my head, I stared up at the sky through the fog-laced branches. The breeze breathed into my open shirt, tickled its way around my chest, hardened my nipples to make me shiver as it cooled my sweat. Wisps of clouds scurried across the moon, chasing the stars. When I closed my eyes I could imagine that it must have felt like this hundreds of years ago, because I can't hear city noises like music and traffic and people. I can't hear anything but the leaves and the horses and Greg's footsteps, distorted in the foggy night.

At times like this it was so easy to pretend this really was a colony, a whole new world with the rest of history stretched out before it, all the wars and the politics and the stuff we learned in school yet to come. With my eyes closed I felt the years peel back, layer after layer. I imagined I lay on a colonial knoll, not

some grass covered spot in a historical park. We still hadn't explored beyond the Mississippi, were still British subjects, weren't *America* yet. Here on quiet nights, alone, the past melded with the now and I wasn't even sure what year it was anymore. It could be the 1800's just as easily as it was the 21st Century.

I wasn't wearing a watch, but my shift ended at seven and there was still a tinge of rosy sunlight clinging stubbornly to the horizon. If Greg has begun to light the street lamps, one of the last tasks before the colony shuts down for the night, then I guessed it was probably a little before eight o'clock. Time enough for a quick nap.

I knew Greg would wake me up when he passed. He did it before, when I napped after work. Marie in HR would have a fit if I stayed the night at the colony, snoozing on the bench like a homeless bum. Greg has warned me many times. But it was so peaceful here, after dark, and I was suddenly so tired, I couldn't move if I wanted. I felt myself drift in and out like the breeze that blew intermittently. Just a few hours, that was it. Plenty of time left to catch the last bus into town.

\* \* \* \*

I woke with a start.

It was freezing now. As I sat up and rubbed the feeling back into my arms, I stared into the thick fog and listened. The branches creaking above me, the faint guttering of flame in the lights, was all I could hear.

Greg must've already passed by then, if the lamps are lit. In the fog he didn't even see me, so he didn't wake me up. How long I was out? Hours probably.

*The bus.*

I hoped I didn't miss it. Much as I like to doze off on site, I would hate to be forced to spend the night. After eight, even the inn was closed, and the only

place I had a key for was the stables. God, the last thing I wanted to do was lie down with the horses. I might be a re-enactor and I might take my history seriously, but I drew the line *somewhere*.

I stretched as I stood and when I walked, my shoes rang off the cobbled stones. The sound echoed through the square, off the buildings, surrounding me until it sounded as if the place were full of people, but I didn't see anyone else through the fog.

I ran a hand through my damp hair and realized the temperature was *much* too cold for the scant clothing I wore. Never would I fall asleep after work again. Next time I'd just get on the bus, go back home, forget all about the colony until I was paid to be there. Sleeping on the grass, how *stupid*. Like I couldn't get fired for that shit.

Around me, the street lamps glowed like tiny suns, haloed by the fog. As I passed beneath one lamp, the next down the street suddenly materialized into sight, like a phantom trail that lead the way. The bus ran right along the edge of the park, not more than twenty yards from here. Maybe I wasn't *too* late. I wished I could see the moon—at least then I might be able to estimate the time. I wasn't *that* tired. I couldn't have slept *too* long.

Behind me I heard a faint step. Relief flooded through me—someone else, thank *God*. It couldn't be *too* late.

"Greg?" I whirled around, eager to see someone, anyone. But if it was Greg, then it wasn't too late at all, and even if the last bus had already come and gone, he could give me a lift.

But I didn't see anything except the swirls of fog that rolled through the square. Maybe I was just imagining things. I thought perhaps I should hurry to the stop, just in case the last bus hadn't run yet, and I even managed to turn in that direction when I heard another step, a shoe on the cobbled stones and the snap of a twig beneath sudden weight.

"Greg?" This time I turned in mid-step and hurried back the way I came.

I swore I heard someone. If not Greg maybe someone else. Didn't Jeremy once say he worked late some nights? If it was him, then I knew I could still catch the bus. He lived in the same apartment complex as me.

The street lamps bobbed into view like buoys on a sea of fog. I didn't realize I was running until I saw a guy passing beneath one of the lamps. I stopped. Another re-enactor, dressed like me, wearing breeches pulled tight across his butt and a shirt billowing in the breeze that scurried down the street. I didn't recognize him. He probably worked at the plantation, or maybe part of the tea party bunch, down on the wharf.

Wherever he worked, he must have a car, right? At this hour, he had to be heading home. "Hey!" I shouted.

He kept walking and disappeared from the lamp's light as if he wasn't really there.

I chased after him. "Hey, wait!"

He walked through the next cone of light, his hands shoved into his pockets, a thin whistled tune carrying from his lips through the dense fog. I sprinted ahead and reached out, and for a brief instant my hand went numb when we touched. I hadn't realized it was so damn *cold* outside.

Then he turned and looked at me, pulling out of my grip. His eyes were so dark, they looked like pools of shadow in the light cast down from the lamp. "Kind sir," he started, in that indignant manner all re-enactors have when they were in character.

I laughed. "Jesus, am I glad to see you."

I gave him one of my brightest grins, the kind that made the girls giggle and kept the tourists coming through my stables. "You work here, right?"

When he nodded, I hurried on. "I fell asleep...stupid me, I hear you...and I don't know what time it is, the bus leaves at midnight, the last one into town. Do you know if it's already gone? I really don't want to stay in the stables tonight. God, Marie'll *kill* me if I have to sleep on site and she finds out. Are you

from this colony? I haven't seen you before."

He stared at me with wide eyes and I laughed again, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Did you catch any of that?"

For a moment, I thought I frightened him away. I was just so relieved to see someone else here. Now that I'd shut up, I noticed his dark red hair, pulled back from his face into a tight little ponytail at his nape, and blue eyes so deep, they were almost black. I'd never met anyone with eyes like his before. He couldn't be much older than me and his shirt was unlaced in the same manner as I wore mine. He must've worked one of the trades, like me, and when the breeze blew the fabric against his skin it accentuated his arms and chest.

Suddenly I found myself thinking this might be the cutest boy I had ever seen here, *ever*. Why couldn't we have met up sooner? The whole winter passed and I didn't hook up with one person, not one. All Jeremy talked about was his current crush and Thad had it bad for Angie, and Greg was just too old. He wasn't even all that cute, just funny and I didn't really go for funny, I went for hot.

This boy here in his tight-ass breeches and his flouncey shirt, he was hot. And he wasn't talking to me. *Damn*. "Look," I started again, with another disarming grin, "what time is it? Can you speak?"

"I can speak." He took another step back and looked down the street as if thinking he should make a run for it or maybe call for help.

But then he looked at me again, staring at my shoulder-length, unfettered curls — people loved the curls — and then my lips and then finally he looked into my eyes and I felt another chill like I did when I touched him. A delicious shiver that ran through me to stab at my groin. *Damn*, he had pretty eyes.

"It's after midnight." My heart sank at his words. "Has been for almost an hour now."

"Fuck," I muttered.

He glared as if I slapped him. So he was one of *those* re-enactors, the ones

who took the whole stint over the edge. Don't get me wrong, I loved my job, loved the whole historical bit, but I wasn't fooled into thinking this was truly 18th Century America here. Some guys went all out; when they were in costume, they *were* colonists. They stayed in character as long as they were dressed the part. These types even changed before they got on the bus, just because it's anachronistic.

Me, I rode the bus in full colonial garb but then again, I liked the stares and the way the kids pointed and called me Johnny Appleseed. Which I wasn't; I was just a stable hand, and right now I would've given anything to be on that bus heading home.

The guy cleared his throat. "Sir, I'm sorry, but I must be on my way —"

"Wait." Before I could stop myself I touched him again. He was the only other person here and I didn't want to be alone. "Can you give me a lift?"

"A what?" His eyes hardened and he picked at my fingers, trying to pry them off his arm. "Sir, I don't even *know* you. We haven't been formally introduced —"

I laughed. This one was cute, I liked the way he insisted on staying in character. Fine, I could play along. If it would get me a ride home and maybe his number before he disappeared, I was game. "Allow me to introduce myself, then," I bowed, fighting back giggles, "most distinguished gentleman. My name is Nicholas Wiley and I tend the master's steeds in yonder stable." I pointed across the square and couldn't see the stables through the fog, but he turned and looked and now he was smiling, too. "Perhaps you will permit me the pleasure of your name?"

He grinned at me. "David."

I tried it out under my breath and liked the way it felt on my lips.

"David Henry, at your service. I'm apprentice to the glass smith, just down the way."

"You blow glass? That shit's tight."



Suddenly, he frowned as if I wasn't quite who he thought I might be.

"Sorry," I muttered. "Slipped out of character there, didn't I? It's all good. So you do those trinkets for the tourists, right?"

He glanced down the street again like he was looking for an escape. "Sir —"

"Nicholas," I corrected him. "Or hey, just Nick. I'm not one of the orators, just a lowly stable boy."

"Nick, then," he said

I liked the sound of my name in his voice. Did I mention he was cute?

"Nicholas, *sir*, I must be on my way..."

He managed to pluck my hand from his arm and started to walk backwards, away from me.

"Wait!" I called out. "No, wait, David, listen..."

When I said his name he stopped, glanced up at my curls again and frowned. I put myself in his shoes and laughed. God, how stupid could I be? Here it was probably after midnight and we weren't even supposed to be on site at this hour. He must've thought I would get him into trouble—or hell, maybe he wondered if I wasn't some kind of pervert, hanging around after dark, looking for sex in the park, who knew? The fact that I couldn't stop looking at his chest where his shirt hung open or at his ass in those breeches couldn't add much to my appeal.

Of *course* he was scared. I would be scared too, with a weirdo like me prowling around.

He pursed his lips, as if trying to decide if he should laugh as well or just run. I didn't want him to leave just yet—I hadn't gotten his number or found out where he lived. So maybe I was a pervert, looking for something more in the dark, and maybe I was hoping I had found it in this pretty guy with the dark eyes and auburn ponytail. "David, God, I'm sorry. I know you think I'm crazy, but please, don't leave."

"I have to get home."

At least he stopped walking away.

"Me too." I closed my eyes and pressed my fingers against my eyelids until the world swam in shades of red and black. "I live downtown and I don't even want to think about walking that far. Do you have a car? I mean, can you give me a ride? Do you live in the city?"

He shook his head. "I'm staying at the inn here," he said quietly. "You might still be able to get a room for the night."

*The inn? Who's he kidding?* It was just for show, no one roomed there; the top floors were all decked out in period pieces and tours ran every thirty minutes until closing, which was hours ago.

"Look, this isn't funny anymore. It's been a long day, I missed the bus, I don't have any money and I'm hungry, I'm tired, I'm..." I sighed, exasperated. "I just want to go home."

He didn't say anything at first, just watched me. I stared at the ground and scuffed my shoes through the remnants of dried leaves, waiting for him to just walk off like he seemed so intent on doing. *So go then*, I wanted to say. *Leave me here, I don't give a fuck.*

But he surprised me. "Come on."

His change of heart was so sudden, I didn't move at first.

"Nicholas? Nick. Come on, you can stay with me. You work at the stables?"

I nodded.

"Come on." He waited until I caught up with him, and then started walking again, just a few paces ahead. Our footsteps fell into an eerie rhythm that echoed behind us as if we were being followed. I glanced over my shoulder but there was no one there, no one at all, just him and me and I held onto the sleeve of his shirt so I didn't lose him in the night and the fog.

\* \* \* \*

He had a key that unlocked the door to the inn.

"I don't think we should be here," I said. Wasn't he finished with this charade yet? "David —"

"It's fine." He pushed open the heavy door.

I expected it to be dark inside, locked up tight and musty, closed until tomorrow morning, so I was surprised to find an oily lamp burning on the desk. That couldn't be safe.

In a low whisper, he said, "Marie knows I come in late. She leaves a light out for me."

"Marie?" The Human Resource manager at the main office? The one who was going to chew my ass out because I hung around after hours? She *knew* he stayed here late? I wasn't sure if he was playing with me or not. "David, this..."

"Shh," he admonished. "Everyone's asleep."

*Everyone.* As if we weren't the only ones here.

I waited while he locked the door and pocketed the key. Then he took the lamp and led the way through the sitting room to a narrow spiral staircase that wound up past the second floor, directly to the third. It was usually roped off, marked 'Employees Only' because it was old and wooden and about to fall down...they didn't want any tourists on it.

But tonight the stairway seemed stronger, the steps rang beneath my feet, and David told me to keep it down again.

"There's no one else here," I muttered, but I didn't really believe that anymore. The place didn't feel empty to me like it should.

The third floor was a converted attic, the rafters right above our heads. I heard the wind pick up outside, the branches brushing along the roof like whispers. The hall wasn't very wide so I walked behind him, the lamp he carried casting more shadows than light. At the end of the hall he stopped, took out

another key and unlocked a skinny door, the last room on our right.

Sometimes we joked with the little kids, told them this floor was haunted, and that was why they couldn't visit it. Truth was, only the one staircase led up here and that was a lawsuit waiting to happen. There were no such thing as ghosts.

David stood aside to let me enter first. The room was awash in a golden glow thrown by small flames inside the fireplace, not so much warm as they were bright, but they made me feel sleepy. The bed looked so inviting, even with its antique lace dust ruffle and the canopy falling from the ceiling. Two wingback chairs faced the fireplace, a small table between them that I was sure didn't belong here...this floor was unfurnished, wasn't it?

I thought the attic was just a storage space, nothing more. Did Marie *really* know about this? "David." I frowned at the fire, the chairs, the shuttered windows, the bed. This didn't seem right. It was too homey, too lived in to be right. "You're staying here?"

"It's small, I know."

I heard the key turn in the lock, and then he leaned by me to set the lamp down on the table. A hint of sweat and oily smoke clung to him, an acrid odor from burning glass, sharp in the air. I suddenly hoped I didn't smell like horses. God forbid if he thought I stank.

"It's all I can afford."

"That's okay." It was cozy, but the bed looked big enough for two. If he let me hold him in the night then we'd fit just fine. I grinned at the thought—here I just met the boy and in my mind we were already sleeping together.

Sinking down into one of the chairs, I propped my feet on the hearth and kicked off my shoes. The fire dispelled the chill that had seeped beneath my shirt. "This is nice."

I unlaced my shirt further, pulled it open a bit, and lay back in the chair with my eyes shut. I could feel him watching me. My fingers trailed down my

chest, my stomach, over my crotch, until my hand rested on my thigh. Barely opening my eyes, I glanced over at him.

He stared at me, a naked hunger in his eyes that I put there, me.

Damn but he was pretty, had I mentioned that yet? By the firelight his skin glowed a healthy hue, his hair darker than it looked outside, his eyes like sapphires, faceted and sparkling. He sat down in the other chair slowly, unable to take his steady gaze from me. I could almost taste how badly he wanted to touch me.

"You can," I whispered.

"Can what?" His voice was deep and throaty, as if he'd just woken up.

"You can touch me, if you want."

He stretched out a hand before he could stop himself, brushing his fingers across my knee, then pulled back and cleared his throat, staring into the fire as if we've done something wrong and he couldn't bear to look at me any longer.

"You can have the bed. I'll stretch out on the floor. It's just the one night."

"You can sleep with me." I kept my voice soft because I didn't want to scare him away. When his cheeks reddened, I added, "I'm not talking about *that*. I don't fuck guys I just met." He didn't answer, and I nudged his foot playfully with mine. "David, it's a full. That means two people fit on it. All we'll do is sleep."

"I don't know." He glanced at me and I felt him undressing me in his mind. I hoped he liked what he saw.

I tugged at the laces on my breeches that tied up my crotch and sighed.

"You said it yourself," I pointed out. "It's just the one night."

His blush deepened. "I'm not the sort of man who does something like that."

I studied him. I couldn't be wrong—I was *never* wrong, I could spot boys like him a mile away, boys who like other boys, boys like *me*. I could pick them out of a crowd at a hundred paces. I saw the interest shining in his eyes...he

wanted me. Even if he didn't know it yet, there was something about me would haunt him until we met up again.

I already knew I would get his number first thing in the morning, and I planned to ask him out the coming weekend. I've been waiting a long time to meet someone like him; I wasn't going to let him slip away so easily. "Something like what?"

He shrugged, embarrassed.

"You don't like guys?" His lips twisted as he tried not to smile; he still didn't look my way. I wanted him to notice *me*. Reaching across the table between us, I touched his arm. "Come on, David. I see the way you look at me. You're the sexiest boy I've seen in all the time I've been here. I'm thinking we need to hook up, you and me, and I know it's not going to be tonight but I can wait. Shit, you look like the type's worth waiting for, you know?"

He smiled and ran his forefinger across my knuckles. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

I laughed. "What do you mean?"

"You talk funny."

I laughed again, surprised.

"No, not in a bad way..."

Now he snickered and his hand was on mine, he held it to his arm and his fingers eased into my palm. Such an unconscious gesture; he probably wasn't aware he'd taken my hand.

"Just a lot of funny words, and you talk so *fast*. I don't know half of what you mean but I like the way you say it."

"I'm saying we can both sleep in the bed." I grinned. "No fooling around, I promise. I like you, David. I'd be lying if I said I didn't, and I'm hoping we can get to know each other better. You work at the glasshouse?"

He nodded.

"I've been looking for a boy like you for a long time now."

"Why?" The way he looked at me, not quite so shy anymore, suggested he knew exactly what I had in mind.

"Like you don't know."

He squeezed my hand in his and laughed again.

\* \* \* \*

I was right. We both fit in the bed.

I stripped down to my boxers. My body was lean and tight from working the stables, and it felt heavenly to finally get out of costume. David didn't look at me until after I slipped beneath the blankets. Then he blew the lamp out, opened the floe until the fire guttered low, and only after it was dark enough did he take off his own clothes.

I wanted to tell him he didn't have to be like that, he had nothing to be ashamed of...I wouldn't look if he didn't want me to. But in the faint moonlight between the shutters, I could see his silhouette and my sordid imagination filled in the details. He was all muscled arms, flat stomach, curvy ass...suddenly I was glad it was so dark. Seeing him in the moonlight turned me on, and I would probably have to lie on my stomach so my damn erection didn't poke him while we slept.

He crawled in beside me, the rustle of bed sheets soft like a sigh. Without thinking, I scooted closer, my breath caressing his neck and shoulders as I stared at him in the dark.

His eyes were wide, frightened. When he moved, his hand brushed against my crotch and my dick flared to life. He pulled away quickly.

"Nicholas," he whispered.

It was almost a question. But I promised I wouldn't do anything, so I draped an arm across his chest and curled up against him. "Shh," I whispered back. I loved the way he felt in my arms. It'd been months since I slept with a

boy, no sex, just lay there and felt another's heart beat in the darkness.

I pressed my lips against his jaw where just a tiny bit of scruff had begun to grow, the meager beginnings of a goatee it'd take him years to grow.

He turned in my embrace and backed up against me. No hiding my hard-on now; he had to feel how eager I was for him. I didn't want to scare him off so I started to pull away but he surprised me by grinding his ass into my crotch.

Then he took my hands and placed them on his stomach, sighed like he *liked* this—I knew he would—and I kissed the back of his neck. He felt so warm in my arms, so *alive*; I could feel his whole body beat in time with mine. Snuggling into him as if we'd known each other forever and didn't just meet, I held him close, breathed his name, and whispered goodnight.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning I knew he was gone before I even opened my eyes. The bed was empty beside me, my arms wrapped around nothing but his pillow. The sheets smelled old and unused as I stretched awake. He took the lamp with him—it wasn't on the table between the chairs—and cleaned out the fireplace, no ashes left, no wood chips, nothing to suggest that it blazed the night before. My clothes were on the floor where I dropped them but his were gone. He could have at least woken me up before he left. I didn't even get his number.

But he worked at the glasshouse. I knew where it was—who didn't? I'd swing by on my lunch break and say hi, flirt some more, see if I couldn't convince him to stay at *my* place tonight. He wasn't getting away from me so easily.

I dressed in my rumpled costume and wished I could take a shower. My clothes felt too loose like they always did when I wore them two days in a row. I ran my hands through my hair, hoping the bushy curls weren't too out of control today. For a minute, I thought the door wouldn't open—didn't David have a



key? – but then the knob turned with a faint squeak in my hand. I wished there was some way to lock it behind myself but I couldn't figure out how so I just pulled it shut as tight as I could, careful not to slam it.

In the daylight that slanted through the shuttered window at the end of the hall, the wooden door looked brittle, the paint cracking, the jamb almost pried free from the wall. Last night it didn't look so bad. Maybe I just hadn't noticed. I made a mental note to mention it to maintenance.

Hurrying down the spiral staircase, I tucked my shirt into my breeches as I took the steps two at a time, but near the bottom I had to hold onto the railing and slow down...this thing was dangerous. It lurched beneath my weight as I vaulted over the security rope placed across the last few steps. Jesus, that thing was scary. I laced up my breeches and was halfway across the sitting room when someone called my name.

"Nick!"

I turned. Angela stood there in a pretty green gown, white apron tied around her corseted waist so she wouldn't get dirty as she set up the inn. "Hey Angie."

I needed to be at the stables by quarter to eight and felt that I was running late, but maybe she saw David leave. Slowing down, I asked, "You know that guy who works with the glass smith?"

Angela put her hands on her hips and narrowed her eyes. "How the hell did you get in here? You about scared the shit out of me, Nick! All that clomping around upstairs, I was starting to think there's something to those ghost stories you guys make up. We're not even *open* yet."

Given her outburst, I wasn't about to mention I slept up there so I just shrugged off her question. "You don't know the guy? Long red hair in a ponytail? Sexy eyes?"

"I've seen him," Angela said warily.

Usually she thought it was cute, me liking boys, but the look she gave me

said I scared her more than she let on. Now that she knew it was only me upstairs making all that racket, she was pissed. "Don't tell me he's still up there. God, you guys weren't getting it on in one of our *rooms*, were you? That's just disgusting."

"No, we weren't." But what was so disgusting about it? "Did you see him this morning?"

"No." Pointing at the door, she added, "Now get out before you get me in trouble. No one's supposed to be in here until we open, not even employees unless you work here, and you don't."

No, really? I didn't know.

I didn't move at first—I wanted to find out what more she knew of David—but she crossed the room, dress rustling like dead leaves, and with her hands on my back steered me toward the foyer. "Come on, Nicky, I ain't playing around. You're going to get me fired."

At the door, I held onto the jamb before she could shove me outside. "If you see him, tell him I'm looking for him."

"If I see him," she agreed. "Now get."

Outside, I blinked in the bright sunlight and stretched again. A few tourists already strolled down the cobbled streets, which meant the first bus had already made its run. I wouldn't miss it again tonight. I wanted to jog down to the glasshouse now, see if David was there, ask him why he let me sleep in when he knew I had to get up and if he wanted to do something for lunch. But as at the stables a few kids already waited for me to open up and I heard the horses inside, carrying on because they heard the kids and were hungry.

I'd better get to work and stick with my original plan to stop in the glasshouse at lunch.

I couldn't get David out of my mind. I worked like an automaton, fed the horses and scrubbed them down and straightened up the stables. I didn't even chat with the tourists like I usually did. My mind stayed back at the inn with my memory of David. At odd moments, I felt his skin beneath my mouth and I'd lick my lips, trying to taste something other than my own sweat. I'd lift a crate and get it halfway across the stable when suddenly I felt him in my arms again and would almost stumble, I wanted him so bad.

I wished my breeches weren't so tight – the teenaged girls that lined the fence to watch me work all stared at the slight bulge at my crotch. When I glanced at them, they giggled and looked away.

A little after noon one of the horses started to limp. I was bent over, the steed's foreleg between my knees as I picked at the loose nail on its shoe, when someone leaned over the fence and slapped my ass, a loud pop that made the girls giggle again. "Saddle up, horse boy," someone drawled.

I glared over my shoulder at Jeremy, his face red and sweaty from the forge, shirt dingy with sweat and coal. With a wink, he told me, "Lunch time, pardner."

"You're out of character." I turned back to the horse's hoof. One of the horseshoe's nails had come up just a little bit and I worked it back and forth, trying to pry it free. "Look at this."

The fence groaned as he climbed over it into the yard.

"Damn shoddy workmanship, ironsmith can't shoe a horse. You should be shot."

"I didn't do that one." He leaned over, watching as I worked at the nail, then slapped my hands away and jerked the nail out with surprising ease. He was strong, I'd give him that. "Check with Barrett. Nice horseshoe though, don't you think?"

I gave him one of those looks that said I wasn't in the mood for his games, but Jeremy picked up a new nail from the ground and handed it to me. "You

want me to hold it while you hammer it in?"

I laughed and shook my head. "That's what he said last night."

"Who?" Jeremy handed me a small mallet and watched, hands on his knees, as I hammered the shoe back into place. "You finally find someone to hook up with?"

At my grin he whooped loudly, setting the girls to giggling again. "Nick got himself some ass last night, girls."

I kicked his leg. "Shut up." If Marie heard him cuss like that in front of the tourists, she'd have a fit.

"Who is it?"

I didn't answer right away, too busy hammering on the shoe. When I was finished and the horse had trotted off, I stood up and wiped my hands on my breeches. "He works at the glasshouse."

Jeremy must've thought that was the funniest thing he'd heard all day. He laughed until I think he might just fall back on the ground; he barely stood up straight. "Jesus," he sighed. "That's so classic. He's a glass blower?" That set him off again.

I gathered up my shodding tools and headed back for the barn, ignoring his laughter. He was starting to piss me off.

"So he's got some great lip muscles, I bet. Blows glass. That's not all he blows, eh?" He followed me into the stable.

I tossed the tools in the corner—God I want to hit him in the head with that mallet, laughing at me, at David but mostly at me. What the hell was he here for anyway? "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"It's lunch time." He followed me back outside and watched as I primed the pump to wash my hands. When cold water splashed from the pump, he shoved his hands under mine. "Oh wait, he works at the glass shop? You sure?"

"That's what he said." I rubbed the grass and dirt off my hands. I didn't like the sudden shift in his mood, or the way he frowned at me. "Why?"

"Which one is he?" The forge sat across the street from the glasshouse and Jeremy was so talkative, he probably knew all the re-enactors over there by name. I should've thought to ask him about David earlier.

"Redhead. He's an apprentice there, he said. Really awesome eyes. His name's —"

"*Him?*" Jeremy shook his head. The pump ran dry and we wiped our hands over our butts to dry them off. "Sorry to be the one to break this to you, pal, but he's seeing one of the guys from the battlefield."

"He isn't." He didn't mention anyone last night. True, we didn't exactly talk much, a little flirting and then went straight to sleep, but damn, he knew what I was after, he looked like he wanted the same thing, and the way he backed up against me in the bed, I'm pretty sure he wasn't thinking of his boyfriend *then*. "Last night he was all about me. You're probably mistaken —"

"Look, I know, okay? I went out with his sister last weekend. He's seeing someone else. I'm sorry."

I studied Jeremy for a long moment. "I don't believe you."

He looked surprised. "What? Nick, why would I lie?"

I shrugged. "I'm not saying you're lying. I'm just saying you're wrong. It's a different apprentice, it *has* to be."

"Fine." Jeremy grabbed my wrist and pulled me after him, storming through the stable. "We'll go ask him. He's seeing that other guy, Paul something or other, I don't know his name but if I'm *right*, lunch is on you."

I stumbled as I tried to keep up with him. Jeremy was a big man and easily tugged me along the cobblestones behind him like a recalcitrant child. "I ain't buying you shit if it's two different guys."

"If it's not," he promised, "we'll both kick his ass for fucking you over. But you still owe me a free meal."

Outside of the forge he stopped so abruptly that I ran right into him. "Jeremy —"

He pointed across the street. "See? That's his boyfriend."

I followed his finger and stared at a young man our own age who leaned against the side of the glasshouse store. He was blonde with tight curls that hug his scalp, nothing like my shoulder-length locks. He wore one of the red coats that mark a British soldier. His hands were shoved into his pockets as he waited for someone.

He didn't look like anything David would like, as if I knew what he went for in guys. But I did, sort of. Last night he seemed very interested in me. That Brit was cute but he wasn't *me*.

Jeremy elbowed me as the door opened and another re-enactor came out. A tradesman obviously, wearing the same outfit David had on, and sure, he had red hair, but it was the wrong shade. Too light, his body too big, his waist, his arms, his legs too stocky, his ass not round enough. "That's not him," I sighed, relieved. "Nope, not by a long shot."

"That's the glass smith's apprentice."

I laughed and shook my head. Across the street the Redcoat touched the other boy's arm, the only thing that hinted they might be more than friends.

"You sure it's not him?"

"It wasn't *that* dark." The two guys disappeared into the crowd.

"Fine," he pouted, "but I *was* right. He *is* seeing that guy. So you still owe me lunch."

I'd just might buy him something, too, because it wasn't David – so last night *was* all about me, and I *still* couldn't wait to get with him again.

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the day passed in a blur of faces and not one of them his, not *one*. I bought Jeremy a sandwich at the inn for lunch and we sat on a small grassy slope by the forge to eat, keeping an eye on the glasshouse. The other apprentice

came back—Jeremy called him Ralph but no one named their kids that anymore, did they? The Redcoat walked him to the door, almost kissed him goodbye but just ruffled his hair instead. We didn't see David. Jeremy suggested that maybe he was off today. I just want to see him again.

By five o'clock the tourists started to thin out and it was time to wipe the horses down and go home. I wasn't worried about catching the bus—I liked to sit out in the square and unwind a bit first, enjoy the colony without all the hustle and bustle of visitors, and I'd be lying if I said part of me didn't hope David would be there again tonight.

Call me superstitious, but I even lay down beneath the same tree and stared up at the same sky beneath the same branches. Only tonight there wasn't much fog and it wasn't too dark out yet. Around me the colony fell silent, the sounds of tourists fading into the dusk. The sky deepened from a pale blue to dark indigo, and when I heard Greg's steady step on the cobblestones I wondered if I should ask him about David. Of course Greg would know him; he *had* to, he walked every inch of this damn site every night. I pushed up into a sitting position, hugging my knees to my chest as I waited for him to appear.

I heard my name called out in the dark. "Nicholas!"

It was David's voice, not Greg's. Standing, I couldn't quite tamp down my foolish grin as I brushed the grass off my butt. When I looked around, I saw David running up beside me, materializing out of nowhere.

"Nicholas, hey," he said breathless. He flashed me a quick smile that lit up his eyes. "I hoped we would meet again."

With a laugh I touched his arm, just to prove to myself he was there. He covered my hand with his and ducked his head when I smiled at him.

"I don't mean to sound presumptuous," he whispered. "But I thought of you all day. I could think of nothing else."

I leaned down to kiss him but David turned his face before our lips meet.

"David," I murmured against his cheek. He smelled like wild wind and

fresh hay. I pressed my mouth against his ear and sighed. "I looked for you at lunch and Jeremy thought I was talking about the other apprentice. He said you were seeing someone else —"

"I'm not seeing anyone."

David tried to step back, but my arm snaked around his waist and I hugged him close.

"Nicholas, not here."

I took his earlobe between my teeth and bit down gently. He shivered in my arms. "I thought maybe I wouldn't get to see you today," I murmured as I trailed kisses down his neck. "Are you busy tonight? 'Cause I'm thinking we can go back to my place if you want. The last bus hasn't left yet. Maybe we can get something to eat? Or go to the movies, or just watch some TV, whatever you want to do. Tell me you'll come home with me, please tell me that."

David laughed and extracted himself from my embrace. "Nicholas," he sighed. He ran a hand across his forehead and for the first time I noticed how tired he was. "I can't—I'm exhausted." He forced a smile. "I had to deliver stemware to the plantation. You should see the goblets. It took hours to shape the glass so it'll catch the light. They're beautiful."

"You did that?" The glasshouse was always a huge tourist draw—it was hard to believe all those intricate, delicate shapes started out as dirt.

But David shook his head. "Not me. I'm only an apprentice, remember? I've never even blown before."

Jeremy's nasty joke came to mind and I bit it back before I said it out loud. "Never?"

David blushed at that, like I hoped he would. I liked the color in his cheeks. Pulling him to me, I enveloped him in my arms and this time I kissed him quick, smack on the lips, before he could turn away. When he moaned against my mouth, my tongue licked his lips and tried to part them to find a way inside.



But he pushed against my chest, his hands strong, holding me back.  
“David,” I sighed. “Please.”

“Not here,” he said again, and he looked around as if someone would possibly see us. Breaking away from me, he stepped back. “I had hoped...”

“Hoped what?” I still held his wrist and I wanted him close to me again so I took a step toward him.

He stepped back, off the grass and onto the cobblestones, and I followed.

“Maybe?” he asked, and I nodded to show I was listening. “If there’s no one waiting for you at home...”

“There’s not.” My heart thudded against my ribs and I hoped he was going to ask me what I wanted him to ask. I hoped he wanted the same thing I wanted.

He took a deep breath. “Then maybe you’d like to...I’ve never asked someone this before, you’ll have to forgive me, but maybe you’d want to...”

He faltered and I squeezed his wrist, encouraging.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. And then, in a breathless rush, he asked, “Maybe you’d like to stay with me again? I know I said it was just the one night and it was, I’ll understand if you don’t want to, feel free to say no—”

“Yes.”

He looked up at me, surprised, and I laughed. “God, I’d love to.”

A slow smile spread across his face. “Truly?”

I closed the distance between us and nuzzled my nose against his neck because I loved his scent. “Yes, truly.”

\* \* \* \*

In his room the fire guttered low and he built it up again. He didn’t look at me now that we were finally alone. I sat in one of the wingback chairs and watched him hunched down on the hearth, feeding scraps of thin parchment to

the flames.

There were a million things I wanted to ask him, a million things I wanted to know. Who he was and where he came from and what he did for fun, if he liked me, if he'd been with anyone before, if he thought we might have a chance together. But none of the questions sounded right in my mind so I kept quiet. The low crackle of flames and the faint wind against the shutters filled the silence around us. When he stood, I slipped my arms around his waist and pulled him down onto my lap.

"Nicholas," he laughed.

I loved his laugh. "What?" I asked, grinning. I held him tight until he relaxed against my chest, one hand on my knee and the other gripping the arm of the chair as if he were frightened.

I eased my hand beneath his and he twined his fingers with mine, squeezed my knee and laughed again. My other hand rubbed his stomach in slow circles, spreading his shirt against his skin as I buried my nose in the hair along the nape of his neck. "David," I murmured, kissing him.

He closed his eyes and moaned softly. His fingers tightened in mine when I kissed my way around his shoulder, pushing his shirt aside with my chin, licking him, tasting sweat and flesh and pulling him closer to me. I let my hand circle lower, brushing against the waistband of his breeches and then lower still, brushing against the bulge at his crotch.

As I kissed his throat, I plucked at the laces on his breeches, nimbly unknotting them, working them open, rubbing my fingers against his thick erection. His hand trailed up my leg, cupping my own dick through my breeches; I heard his pleasure in his tiny gasps and felt it in my hand.

Gently I encircled his shaft and worked it free from his breeches as he kissed me with greedy, damp lips. With a sigh against my neck, he thrust into my hand. By the glow of the firelight I stroked his hard dick, red and stiff, the tip swollen and already beginning to come.

His own fingers did delicious things to me, smoothing the fabric of my breeches around my dick and pressing until I arched into him. I was close to release myself. On the arm of the chair our hands were sweaty, clasped them together, our fingers white from holding on fiercely; neither of us wanted to let go. His breath came ragged and hot on my neck—I imagined my lips left searing kisses along his throat and jaw.

When he came, he gasped my name and slicked my palm with his juices. Turning in my arms, he stared into my eyes for an eternity. That look alone was enough to get me off. Before I could, he slid off my lap and onto the floor. Pushing my knees apart, he worked at the laces of my breeches until opened, then took me in his mouth. I gripped the arms of the chair and with a few hard thrusts, a hungry tongue, sucking, licking, *damn!* I came in an explosive rush, pushing into him as far as I could go.

When I was spent he crawled back onto me smiling, and he whispered my name. “I’m glad you decided to stay the night.”

I tasted myself on his lips and he made me hard again just by looking at me the way he did, those blue, blue eyes of his staring right through the heart of me. “Me too.”

\* \* \* \*

He was gone in the morning.

I wasn’t surprised. Naked, I disentangled my legs from the sheets and stretched out on the bed, still warm where he curled against me in sleep. My body ached with the memory of his heated kisses and I still felt him on me, his hands phantoms on my body, his lips ghosts against my own. I was falling for this boy. My mind swirled in an exciting whirlwind, terrible and wonderful all at the same time.

Downstairs, I was halfway to the door when Angela spied me. “Nick!” she

cried, exasperated. With her hands on her hips, she blocked my exit. "I told you —"

"I know, I know." I patted her shoulder as I hurried around her. "I'm going to get you in trouble, you told me yesterday."

"Can't you find someplace else to fool around?" She blew her hair from her face and glared at me. "I mean, really. What will the tourists think?"

"I made the bed," I told her, defensive. Opening the door, I stepped out into the bright morning and stretched. "Really, Ange, I'm sorry."

She held the door open and frowned. "If you're sorry, then don't do it again."

I'd say I wouldn't but what if he asked me again tonight? I couldn't say no, not when just thinking about him makes me horny. I wanted to find him and hold him and spirit him back into the room at the end of the hall, and finally make love to him until we were both too tired to move.

"Nicholas?" Angela prompted. She was waiting for an answer.

I shrugged. "I said I was sorry. Damn, you jump all down his throat like this when he leaves?"

"I don't see him leave." There was a pout in her voice that suggested she'd like to catch him just once so she could holler at him, too.

"What time did you get here?"

"About an hour ago."

And here I thought I missed him by just a few minutes. When I woke I still felt him against me — the pillow still held the shape of his head. He *couldn't* have left over an hour ago. There was no *way*. "Well, you must've just missed him."

She narrowed her eyes, glared around the street at the few tourists already out as if they might have seen him when she didn't. "Did he just leave?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know. Angie, I'm going to be late —"

"I didn't see him," she said again.

I nodded because what else was I supposed to say? So she didn't see him, so he was luckier than me, able to avoid her and not go through this whole rigmarole. Here I'd been hoping to stop by the glasshouse before I had to be at the stables but now I was running late and wouldn't be able to see him this morning.

"Nicholas..."

"Sorry." I hurried down the steps of the inn, sick of her trying to ruin my good mood with her nagging. "I gotta go."

\* \* \* \*

At noon Jeremy came by the stables and watched me saddle up the horses. They had to be ridden every other day just to keep them in shape, even though they weren't the show mounts used in the re-enactments. One of the steeds was an old mare well past her prime; the other was a stallion that used to do the Bunker Hill run until he pulled up lame after the battle one day. The third one's a young colt Marie wanted trained for the carriage ride. When I got all three saddled, Jeremy pulled himself up on the stallion and started to prance around the yard like he didn't have anything else to do.

"Are they hiring any new smithies?" I swung into the mare's saddle. "You're always over here—they're going to fire your ass soon, demote you to stable hand."

He laughed at that. "Then what will *you* do?"

"I'll hang out at the forge, spend all day staring across the street at my boy."

Jeremy didn't respond. Instead he leaned low over the stallion's head, guiding it around inside the fence, pushing it faster until the sound of hooves filled the whole world. I knew the mare couldn't keep up but I fell in behind him and Jeremy slowed down a bit to find a steady pace so we were always on

opposite sides of the yard.

"What do you think of that?"

"Of what?" He fussed with the reins, pretending he didn't remember what we were talking about.

I crossed the yard, spurring the mare when Jeremy tried to ride away from me. "Jeremy, wait." When I was close enough I leaned over and grabbed the stallion's bridle so he couldn't ride away. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong."

But he didn't look at me and I'd known him long enough to know he was lying. I lowered my voice so the few tourists hanging around the fence didn't overhear me. "Bullshit. Talk to me."

"I *am* talking to you." He shook the reins. "Let go, Nicholas."

But I didn't. I tugged on the bridle, forcing the stallion to step closer to my mare. Jeremy's leg bumped against mine. "Tell me why you're here."

"Cause I'm your friend." He still wouldn't look at me. "'Cause it's lunch time. I don't know, Nick, 'cause I wanted to ride the damn horse, okay? Let go already."

"You came to tell me something." By the way he avoided me, it couldn't be anything I wanted to hear. "Is it about David? What is it?" When he didn't answer, I tugged on the bridle again, dipping the stallion's head towards me so hard, the horse tried to shake me loose. "Jeremy?"

With a sigh my friend said, "He's lying to you, okay? He doesn't work at the glasshouse. Ralph's the only apprentice there. Don't shake your head like that, Nicholas, I *asked*. I went over there this morning and asked to talk to the apprentice and Ralph the Malph came out. I said not you, the other one and he said there *is* no other one, just him. Just him."

He hit my wrist with the reins, a light slap that I didn't even feel but I let go of the bridle anyway, just letting it fall from my grasp. "He's not lying." He *couldn't* be. "Jeremy, you're wrong."

"I am *not*!" Anger clouded his face and he glared at me. "I'm not lying, Nick. Why would I do that? I wanted to meet the guy who's swept you off your feet. I'm thrilled for you. I know you've been lonely. You're a great guy. You deserve someone who'll treat you like a king, but he's lying to you. I don't know why, I don't know what all he's said, but he told you he worked there and he doesn't, so what else is he lying about?"

He waited for me to answer but I didn't. I couldn't.

"You don't need someone like that."

I remembered the way I felt last night, him in my arms, loving me, holding me tight. I remembered the way I felt this morning, so warm, so alive. I remembered my hopes for a relationship with this boy. "You don't know what I need."

I needed to feel this way, like I was falling and would never hit the ground. I needed to feel like this every day of my life and if David Henry was the one who made me feel it then I needed *him*. "He's not lying to me."

"How do you know?"

I heard the desperate challenge in Jeremy's voice—he wanted me to be right. He was my friend, wasn't he? He just wanted me happy. That was why he tried to talk with David, make sure he was the right one for me, playing the big brother because he wanted me to be happy.

"Nicholas, I *asked*. He doesn't work there."

I frowned at the reins in my hands, gripped so tight I couldn't feel the leather in my palms. "Maybe he works at one of the other sites. He never said it was *this* glasshouse. He only he was an apprentice, that's all. I just assumed he meant here."

Jeremy watched me, the anger fading from his face. "Why's he here then? Every night? What's up with that?"

"Maybe he's part time. Maybe he comes here looking for me. Fuck, Jeremy, I don't know! Maybe it's none of your damn business."

He winced, a wounded look in his dark eyes. "I'm only trying to help," he muttered, sliding out of the saddle. He stroked the horse's neck and didn't meet my gaze. "Sorry for being concerned."

He started to walk away. "Jeremy," I called out, but he didn't stop, just kept going, across the yard and into the shadowy interior of the stable. "Jeremy, wait!" I jumped off the mare, followed after him, but by the time I got to the stable he was already in the street, disappearing into the crowds. *Damn.*

\* \* \* \*

I didn't think David lied to me. Why bother? He had nothing to gain. I already liked him. I was smitten, I felt the moment I looked in his eyes, so dark, so blue, like still ponds frozen in the winter. He could say he was a famous actor taking cameo roles in the colonies and I'd want to be with him. He could be some jobless college student who just liked to hang out here and I'd still feel the same. I'd still want him. He didn't have to work here. He didn't have to be anyone special because he was already special to me.

I waited for him after work, same spot as before, and it was foggy again so I made sure I didn't fall asleep. I didn't want to close my eyes and miss him in the thick soup that clung to the trees and the buildings and muffled the footsteps I heard on the cobblestones. I thought I heard him. It was a steady step, but then I saw bobbing flame...it was Greg, stopping at the lamps to light the way. Standing, I wiped the damp grass from my breeches and called out, "Hey man."

Greg turned at the sound of my voice, squinting through the fog, and smiled when I stepped onto the cobblestones. "Hey boy. You're going to miss the bus."

"I won't." With my hands on my hips I stared up at the lamp, watching the way his flame licked around the wick inside the glass housing, waiting until it caught fire before I spoke again. "Let me ask you something."



With the end of his staff, he closed the tiny door on the glass housing of the lamp. Glancing at me, he said, wary, "Go ahead."

"You know who all hangs out here after dark, right?"

I figured if anyone knew David, it'd be Greg. His shift started at dusk. Maybe he'd seen David walking around the site when he was out lighting the lamps.

"Mostly. There aren't many who stay past closing. You looking for someone?"

I shrugged. "Not really." I followed him to the next lamp and watched as he lit the wick. "Well, kind of."

"Kind of?" He grinned now and with a wink he added, "I've seen you waiting the past few nights. Marie'll get pissed if she finds you here after I leave, you know."

"I know." He moved to the next lamp, and I followed behind him as if I were an apprentice myself, learning how to light the lamps to keep the blanket of night suspended above the colony. "His name's David."

If Greg was surprised, he didn't show it. I guessed he sort of knew, the same way Jeremy sort of knew, back before I told him I liked guys. "Red hair, blue eyes," I added, and then I waited. When he didn't answer, I prompted, "Ever seen him?"

Greg shrugged. "Can't really say if I have or not. Lots of boys around here fit that description."

I laughed. "It's not like these streets are teeming with people this time of the night." I couldn't even see the buildings for the fog, and I hoped I didn't miss David in all this. I should've stayed at the tree where he found me last night but I'd followed Greg down the street and the tree dissolved into the fog. I didn't know quite where it was now, and I didn't really relish the thought of looking for it alone in the dark.

At least Greg was with me, and he had a light — maybe David would see it

and find me. I didn't want to go home tonight, not when I could stay with him again. "There's only you and me, most nights. I'd think you'd notice anyone else."

"You and me and the ghosts," Greg said. His eyes twinkled and his mouth twitched, trying not to smile. I didn't know if he was putting me on or not.

"Ghosts?" I asked with a grin. "That's just crap we make up for the tourists. The inn's haunted, right? Restless tenants on the third floor, tincture at the glasshouse mixes itself after closing, shit like that. What are some of the other ones?"

"Footsteps on foggy nights." He crossed the cobblestones to the next lamp. The echoes of his shoes on the stones haunted the square, filling the air around us. "Whistling after dark. A light on in the upper floor of the inn, behind the shuttered windows."

"I can tell you that floor's not haunted." I laughed. "Chalk it up to personal experience."

Greg raised an eyebrow, interested, and I lowered my voice. "Promise not to tell..."

He nodded.

"I've spent the last two nights up on that third floor, and I haven't seen a ghost yet." True, I wasn't really looking, but I would've noticed something like that, right?

He narrowed his eyes. "Nick, you shouldn't—"

"I know." I *did* know, I just didn't care because I was too wrapped up in David to worry about it. I felt invincible, no one would know, no one would say a thing. Maybe tonight I'd tell David about the ghosts, just to scare him a bit...I'd like to feel him huddled against me just pretending he was afraid so I could kiss him and promise to protect him, keep him safe.

Just thinking of him made me start looking around again. He should've been here already. "You said you wouldn't tell."

"I won't," Greg promised. "You go up there with your boy? What's his name again?"

"David." This time when he started toward the next lamp, I hung back and didn't follow. "You go on. I'll just wait for him here."

Over his shoulder, Greg said, "You guys be careful. Watch out for ghosts."

"There aren't any." I laughed and watched him walk away, wisps of fog like television static swirling around him, fuzzing him out until he disappeared completely. Now I noticed how cold the air was, how the lamplights glistened like ice, how the world faded away in the fog until I couldn't even hear Greg's steps on the stones up ahead. I hugged my arms to my chest and shivered. Because I couldn't think of anything else to do, I headed for the inn. Maybe I could catch David there.

The inn was closed, as it should've been — each night David unlocked the door, so I didn't expect it to be open. On one side of the porch was a wooden bench; I sat down, then stretched out along its length, draping my arm across my forehead and closing my eyes. I'd wait for him here. Faint sounds echoed around me, distorted by the fog. *Ghosts*, I thought, smiling to myself. *Yeah, right*. Greg was a trip.

\* \* \* \*

I heard footsteps far away, someone crossed the square, and because it might still have been Greg, I didn't move. I barely opened my eyes and watched the fog, waiting. There was a lamp down the street from the inn, a tiny circle of light in the darkness, and it flickered, threatening to go out, then flared back to life again brighter than ever. The fog darkened, grew thick, condensed into a silhouette, and then David appeared, passing through the street lamp.

*My God*, I thought, watching him walk, head down, leaves skittering across the cobblestones to get out of his path. He was gorgeous, an angel in the

night, and almost ephemeral in the glow of the lamp. When the flame guttered, he seemed to waver, or maybe it was just the fog. He seemed insubstantial, temporal, in danger of winking out like the light above him. For an instant, I thought maybe Greg was right, maybe there *were* such things as ghosts. Maybe I'd been seeing one all along.

Then he came closer. I heard his steady footsteps and his thin whistle died on his lips when he noticed me on the bench. I was being stupid. He wasn't a ghost, he was real – I'd held him in my arms and kissed those ruddy lips. I knew he was *real*, alive, mine. Not some ghostly traveler lost in the night but *mine*. Upstairs perhaps I'd tell him what Greg said about the ghosts and I'd mention that for a moment I thought he might be one, too. We'd both get a good laugh over that.

I stayed still as he approached. I wanted him to think I was sleeping and kiss me awake. I wanted him to hold me again. I wanted to feel his hands on my body and his lips on my skin and I wanted him to stay with me until I woke in the morning. I didn't want him to leave me again.

But he didn't come over. Instead, he took the small flight of steps leading to the inn, a hand on the railing, his gaze on me. I didn't like the wariness I saw there. I didn't like the set of his shoulders or the tight line of his mouth or the way he gripped the railing tight, his knuckles turning white.

What happened to the boy who was all over me in the bed yesterday? Who couldn't *stop* touching me? I wanted that boy back.

"Nicholas," he sighed.

Giving up the pretense of sleep, I opened my eyes and smiled. "David."

He let out a breath he'd been holding all this time. "Nick," he whispered, the relief on his face hard to miss. "For a moment there I thought they were right."

"They who?" I asked, sitting up.

He came over to the bench and sank down gratefully beside me. His eyes

were wide, staring at me as if he tried to burn my face into his mind so he'd never forget me. Tentatively he reached out to stroke my cheek with one warm hand.

Warm. Ghosts weren't warm, are they? They didn't have substance. They couldn't *touch*...?

I covered his hand with mine and pressed his palm against my face, kissing his wrist. You couldn't kiss a ghost. "David," I sighed. I loved his name. "What're you talking about? Who's they?"

"The horsers." In a rush, he explained, "I went to the stables this morning and thought I'd try to catch you. I didn't mean for you to run off this morning—"

I frowned. "I didn't—"

He talked over my objection. "And I asked to speak with you but they didn't know who I meant. I don't know your family name, I just asked for Nicholas, but they didn't know—"

"There aren't any horsers. Just me, I'm the only one who runs the stables." I eased my fingers beneath his palm, lowered his hand from my face and held it in my lap. "I didn't run off this morning. You were gone when I woke up."

Slowly David frowned, his eyes flickering in the scant light as he stared at me. "No." His voice was a low whisper. "I awoke alone. I could feel your warmth, your arms still around me, so I assumed you left not minutes before. I didn't..." He trailed off, his brow creasing as he frowned. "I awoke alone."

"So did I."

He looked as if he was going to be sick. "Oh God." He pulled his hand from mine and stood, taking a step back. "They were right. You're not real. You're just a—"

"I *am* real." I stood and held a hand out to him—I wanted to touch him again, but he took another step, keeping the distance between us. "How can you say I'm not? David, you've touched me. You've kissed me. How can I not be real?"

I couldn't believe I was having this conversation. *I* was the real one here. If anyone was a ghost, it had to be him. Didn't it? It *had* to be him.

He glanced down the empty street. We were alone. "Nicholas, don't," he said, lowering his voice. "Someone will hear us —"

"It's only us. There's no one else here, David. Just you and me and the ghosts." I tried to laugh at Greg's joke but suddenly it didn't seem so funny anymore. "It's just *us*," I yelled, raising my voice until it rang off the buildings and reverberated around the square, peeling like bells in the night air.

That brought him closer — he grabbed my wrist and squeezed it tight as he pulled me toward the inn. "Quiet."

He fumbled with the key — it slipped from the lock and danced between his fingers. He was nervous, glancing up as if he expected all the lights in the inn to flare to life. "Do you need to wake the whole colony?" he asked as he turned the key.

The door opened and he led the way inside.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. I caught him around the waist and pulled him back, hugged him to me, kissed his neck and breathed deep his smoky scent. "David, I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. Please believe me, I'm so sorry."

He didn't reply. Instead, he extracted himself from my embrace and locked the door.

I followed him up the narrow spiral staircase and down the hall to his room. I was tempted to open one of the other doors that line the hallway, just to prove to him that we were the only ones there, but when I put my hand on a door knob, I heard a muffled cough from the other side.

My blood ran cold.

Maybe I was the ghost after all. Maybe David was right...maybe it *was* me.

In his room, he lit the fire to a blaze and undressed slowly. I sat on the edge of the bed and watched him strip out of his breeches, his shirt, his

stockings. Kneeling before me, he took my hands in his, looked up at me and sighed. "Nicholas, they told me I invented you. I don't know many people here, that's true. I have no one, really, and it gets so lonely, you wouldn't know..."

"I do know." I tried to touch his face but he held my hands tight and didn't let go. His naked body begged to be held, my hands ached to stroke it, but he wouldn't let me.

"They laugh at me," David continued, "I know they do. I don't care. Because I'm alone, no woman, no family, an apprentice with no real hope of advancement. Glassworks!" He laughed, the sound bitter. "It's not a very lucrative business now that the king's placed such heavy taxes on our wares."

"What king?" My hands were like ice in his and he rubbed my fingers, bringing the feeling back to them. "David, what..."

He didn't work at the glasshouse in the colony, I realized. Not *my* colony, anyway, the one tourists visited every day of the year. The one where I worked as a re-enactor, not a stable hand but a re-enactor—it was just a *job*, not a trade, and there was no king, no war, no battles, everything was staged. Nothing was *real*...maybe we were *all* ghosts there, playing at history, pretending to be colonists. Nothing more than acting.

I only saw David at night. In *his* colony, *his* world, where *I* didn't exist. There were no tourists—he never mentioned them and always looked mildly baffled when I talked about the visitors or the souvenirs or the bus, like he wasn't sure what I meant but didn't want to stop me to find out.

His wasn't a job. It was a way of life. He lived in a colony on the brink of war, ruled by a king on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

My heart skipped in my chest and suddenly my head was too light. I couldn't think straight, couldn't breathe. Couldn't even *see*, nothing but him in front of me. His lips moved but I didn't hear what he said because I'd fallen to the bed, the one we shared but we both woke up in alone. We both disappeared in the morning light.

Maybe we were *both* ghosts, caught in different eras – me a ghost in his colonial America and him a ghost in mine.

\* \* \* \*

“Nicholas.” His voice drifted into my sleep, gentle at first, soft waves that broke over me as I awoke.

“Oh, Nicholas.” The light behind my eyes was gray, morning light, sunlight from shutters thrown wide. I didn’t want to wake up. He was just a ghost, just a dream. That was why Angela never saw him leave the inn, why Jeremy couldn’t find out where he works.

He wasn’t real.

I made him up because I wanted someone to hold at night. He was the one who haunted the third floor, the one who worked in the glasshouse after hours, the one Greg heard crossing the square on foggy nights. *He* was the ghost, not me.

Not me.

I felt a cool hand on my forehead, loving fingers twining through my curls. “Nicholas, please.” His voice was soft, faded. In the early morning light, I was afraid to open my eyes because then he’d be gone. He never stayed with me during the day. He was the ghost.

But his touch seemed real. I reached out and his hand slipped into mine. “Please wake up,” he whispered.

His lips closed over mine. His mouth tasted so sweet, so tender, so *real*, that I pulled him down to me, felt his body press against mine, eased my arms around his neck and fisted my hands into his thick hair. *This* was real, it *had* to be. It couldn’t be anything else.

“David,” I sighed, opening my eyes. He leaned over me, eyes shining and bright, skin pinked and fresh, lips damp. His tongue licked out, a hint of promise



that covered his upper lip and then was gone, as if he tasted me and didn't want to miss a drop.

Ghosts didn't have tongues; they didn't have damp mouths and shiny eyes and warm skin, they didn't hold you in their arms and they sure as hell didn't have thick erections that throbbed against your thigh. Their eyes didn't slip closed with veiled delight when they shifted against you in the bed. Right?

"What time is it?"

"Morning." He moved his knee and I felt his hard dick pressed into my crotch. "You didn't disappear on me today."

"What's today?" I didn't mean the day, I meant the year. "When—"

But he kissed me again, stealing the question from my lips. "Maybe it's your time," he whispered. "Maybe it's still mine. Maybe I *did* make you up, or maybe you made me up, I don't know. I don't really care. Just stay here with me, okay? Please?"

His body was so delicious against mine that I couldn't say no. I didn't want to. As long as we were together, I didn't care what colony I'd woken into. With him above me, I didn't care what time this was, his or mine. As long as we were together.

THE END

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