

An Uneasy Traveler
by Evelyn Klebert

Cornerstone Books Publishers

An Uneasy Traveler

A Cornerstone Book

Published by Cornerstone Book Publishers

Copyright © 2007 by Evelyn Klebert

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American
Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner
without permission in writing from the copyright holder,
except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review.

Cornerstone Book Publishers
New Orleans, LA

www.cornerstonepublishers.com

ISBN: 1-887560-87-4

ISBN 13: 978-1-887560-87-0

MADE IN THE U.S.A.

Dedication

With respect to the city and the people of New Orleans, a place that will always be an inspiration and a testament to the endurance of the human spirit.

Chapter 1

The smell of coffee wafting across the bookstore came as a comfort to him as he walked inside to escape the bitter cold of the January morning. His face felt numb and in some respects oddly paralyzed. Yes, granted getting out on the road on such a day was stupid — but he'd been working doggedly all week and the idea of spending the whole weekend alone shut up in his mountain home was intolerable; nice, cozy, well-furnished as it might be, at the moment it still felt like a prison.

So he foolishly braved the sleet and heavy downpour of snow; after all wasn't that the purpose of four-wheel drive? And not so surprising was the fact that the retail stores were open, to accommodate, no doubt, all the crazies just like him.

Superficially pleased with himself and feeling a bit of a thaw in the facial region he rolled out the plans: first a hot coffee, a mocha coffee — a bit of caffeine and a bit of desert. He unwrapped the long beige scarf that his sister had bought for him years ago, and, due to his forgetfulness, rarely made it out of the closet. The girl behind the cafe counter looked young, teenager-like young. Smiling half-heartedly she murmured, "Getting pretty bad out there?"

He felt a slight, albeit brief stab of guilt. She would no doubt rather be somewhere else, not waiting on those who were not clever enough to stay home. He couldn't in that instant remember exactly where teenagers would rather be. That was much too far back. He was driving fiercely into his forties, without a seatbelt he might add. It wasn't this poor, perturbed, young girl's fault that he hadn't taken the time to cultivate a social life — so that he would actually have somewhere else to be. Although glancing at the store window to the side of them and the increasingly turbulent weather outside perhaps home would have been a good choice.

"Umm, I'll have the mocha coffee."

"With or without whipped cream?"

Probably shouldn't, "Okay with."

She nodded and was off to fill his order, the one for the crazy man who didn't want to be home alone.

He had been married once. Although in truth it didn't really feel like it, more like a foggy dream that sort of still held onto the fringes of his awareness. Perhaps that was why he spent years pouring his energies into other directions. The experience had been dank and dismal for both of them, especially the end. Better not to start than reach that sort of an anguished conclusion.

Here she was again, still smiling at him with very little conviction. "Here you go sir."

It certainly was a frothy drink, probably too frothy for a rugged man like himself. He didn't consider himself a gentile sort of person, rather more outdoorsy, at least in appearance. But as he'd always acknowledged, he was a mass of contradiction. It had its benefits on occasion, being so frequently misjudged.

He slipped the young girl a few dollars as a guilt tip, which she received with little joy.

As he wandered toward the main thoroughfare of the store he felt that tingling feeling as though the whole world for just a fraction of a second was at his feet. Where should he venture today: the dark corners of psychology; the wide world of sports, the abyss of pulp fiction? It was like a carnival, the possibilities of entertainment were endless.

As he often did on these ventures he decided to roam and let the vibes guide him — let something spark his interest. He was a Pisces; they were largely governed by the energies of emotion. At least that was what his Mom had informed him of at an early age. Astrology was one of her hobbies, as was Palmistry, yoga, and rather off the course auto repair. She hated the idea of being taken by mechanics who thought her ignorant. He smiled, even at her age she blew him out of the water with her energy. "It's just that you need someone to complement you, and then you'll find your real niche in the world." He frowned; he had to buy her a birthday gift. He could do that now. And then he saw the history aisle and was willingly drawn off-track.

The pull had been strong that morning, uncomfortably strong. The weather would be bad, that much she knew; but she did live in the city, and the roads would not be treacherous, at least not for her. So the question then became, did she ignore the invisible fingers scraping along her skin, the ones that once ignored would continue to dig more deeply until she reached a fevered-pitch of irritation, or would

she scrape the snow off her windshield and just go, and get it over with. It's a gift her grandmother had told her on more than one occasion, but it didn't feel like a gift. It felt like a vise around her at times that dragged her helplessly along.

She dug deep into her dresser drawer for the silky pair of long johns that only made their appearance at this time of year, on very cold, ridiculously cold days. It was wearing on her, all of it. She had just crossed into her thirties and she felt worn-out. She didn't bother with make-up. Who would be out anyway on a day like this?

Ancient Egyptian history, he had settled into one of the strategically placed reading chairs in the bookstore and sipped his Café Mocha while he perused a volume on pre-dynastic Egypt. He'd always been drawn there, to Egypt that is. He'd even planned a trip there, or rather preplanned one. That was the summer before he and Talia split. He wanted to go hunting for antiquities and she wanted to go lie on a beach somewhere. They'd gone to the beach, but it had done them more harm than good. His mother had commented rather dryly, "It's not a good idea to give in, but then hold resentment. It just ends up poisoning everything." It hadn't been the cause of their break-up, but he had to admit that it had speeded the demise.

Longingly, he flipped through the pages of the oversized volume, captivated by the photographs of the ancient ruins. It had been a long time since he'd thought about Egypt. He felt as though he'd spent the last five years of his life in hibernation, licking his wounds, producing enough uninspiring art to support his lifestyle.

It was an odd feeling that was coming over him, a sort of quickening inside him. As though he'd been in a kind of trance and was just now on this very remote, wintry day able to dust off his old dreams and remember how it felt to be truly charged again.

He didn't really hear her footsteps as she turned the corner on the far end of his aisle. He didn't hear her. But he certainly felt her, as though a cataclysmic charge of electricity, the likes of which he had never experienced before, had just propelled through every cell of his body.

When she was a little girl, she felt the pain of others. It was not as though she sympathized with them or was exceedingly compassionate. She actually, truly, physically experienced their pain.

As a child, she was moody, given to inexplicable bouts of depression or euphoria. Her father was concerned for Aubrey's mental state. Her mother was not. It was then, very young, that she was introduced to those who understood who she was, who could help her.

As she stepped out of the car, the cool snowflakes hit her face. She breathed deeply in the icy air, and pulled the black leather gloves that protected her hands on more tightly. It felt good to be out, energizing. She'd been in doors for nearly the whole of last week. She'd been ill. She was susceptible to it.

Again, the pull reached out to her as though it were a lasso wrapping itself around her waist and pulling her toward the store. There would be no peace unless she heeded it. You are always being guided her grandmother had told her. But sometimes to her shame she did wish they would guide elsewhere and give her a little peace.

She pulled the red knit hat that she had put on lower around her ears. She certainly didn't need a relapse from her recent infection. There was still a deep rumbling in her chest that hadn't completely cleared. Her boots crunched on the ice as she plowed forward.

Aubrey had grown up in New Orleans and so at an early age was exposed to the nuances and diversity of a city so overrun with divergent cultures. She came to respect and appreciate individuality, expect the unusual, and accept the power of the unseen.

At five her family moved into a house where St. Charles and Carrollton Avenues meet in the river bend. It was a beautiful old place, with shiny wooden floors and a lovely brick-layer patio on the side. There was even a rose garden that her mother began to tend to tirelessly.

Aubrey's bedroom was on the second floor. It was spacious with a lovely bay window and a window seat actually built into the wall beneath it. It should have been a dream, but the little brown-haired girl knew the moment that they crossed the threshold that something was not right.

She could tell that her mother Anna sensed the same thing, but for her it seemed easier to brush aside. She had lost a baby earlier in the year and her emotions were commandeered by grief. That was why she didn't protest about the house, and let Aubrey's father purchase it. He was a deeply caring man, but, as she would come to understand later, one that limited his own understanding of things. Some

people actually, she observed, erected self-imposed boundaries on their willingness to understand the true nature of life. Those boundaries could never be forced down by anyone else. It must be one's own choice.

It was in the house that Aubrey saw her first spirit, or ghost, a term she wasn't particularly comfortable with. It was clear early on that the grief in that house far surpassed anything that her own troubled family had brought with them.

As she pushed open the glass door of the bookstore, the first thing that struck her about the inside was the quietness. She stood on the threshold, the door swinging silently closed behind her, and she sensed a calmness that she had not expected. The draw had been so strong and she was usually not guided to a place because things were calm. She was usually guided because of trouble or pain. She breathed in deeply and cleared her mind of thought. Briefly she glanced over to the coffee bar. There was a girl there, leaning on the counter flipping through a magazine. She hadn't even looked up at the sound of the door. Aubrey's mind opened to vibrations — some frustration, irritation but nothing much to note there.

She turned forward, before her the aisles of the store appeared deserted. But then again she felt the pull, gentle at first and then more insistent. It would be really irritating if she came out on a lousy day like this one for a wild goose chase.

It's truly difficult, especially when you're five, to discern the difference between your own feelings or emotions and those of someone else. That is if you're a sensitive. That was the name that her grandmother would give Aubrey's particular gifts some years later, when she finally told her about it. It was quite some time before she did.

It began as waves of inexplicable sadness that would wash over her at odd times: when she was out on the patio with her roller skates; when she was drawing a picture at the kitchen table; or maybe when she was taking a bubble bath. There was no rhyme or reason for the violent flood of emotion, just that it was real, powerful, and as upsetting as anything she had ever experienced.

And then there was that one night. It was late, very late. She awoke abruptly in her bed feeling a terrible pain in her stomach. Then when she looked down, her pristine white sheets were running red

with blood and the handle of a knife was sticking out at the wound's origin. There was no way of telling how long she'd been screaming before she was in her mother's arms. But then of course they had all determined that it was a nightmare, because there was no blood, no knife. But the pain felt all too real, and it did take some time before it finally disappeared.

He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to quell the crazy surge of shakiness that seemed to have taken him over. It was like the after shocks of an impact, but what had he been hit with? He slowly closed the oversized book that he had been clutching, a bit too tightly, as testified the bright red indentations on his palms. As he opened his eyes with more than a bit of blurriness he focused for the first time on the figure at the end of the aisle. His was a side view. It was a woman, seemingly intent on examining the titles before her. She wore a long coat, dark gray, and had long brown hair that flowed several inches down her back.

Jacob Wyss rubbed his eyes to further clear his vision. He tried to focus more acutely on her. Her leather gloved hands brushed a few of the books on the shelf, but she hadn't picked anything up. Stuck in the pocket of her coat he saw some piece of bulky red material protruding. He glanced around. They were alone. His heart's rapid beat that had escalated abruptly moments before was slowing, but the feeling of disorientation had not. It was as though he was somewhere else now. Although his physical surroundings were unchanged, something else — basic, primeval, molecular, had shifted inside him.

He saw her hands drop to her sides and then there was a hesitation. She turned slightly then too quickly rounded a corner and disappeared from his sight. There were not even moments of thought before he rose to his feet and began to follow her.

It was strange that on this chilled, wintry day so far away from home that she would be dwelling on Rose. Rose was what she came to call the woman who roamed the house on Carrollton Avenue. It had been nearly a month after the incident in her bed that she first glimpsed her. There had been similar sporadic episodes that she kept to herself in the house. Of course they weren't nearly as traumatic as the first. After the shock and newness wore off, the strange nature of things in that particular house became somewhat the norm for Au-

brey. Children in many ways were more resilient, more accepting of change. But as she became older she found herself less flexible, not able to bounce back nearly so quickly.

Rose was a young woman, perhaps no older than seventeen. She had an affinity for looking out the window in the hallway of the second floor. It was a lovely large window that overlooked the rose garden. The first time Aubrey glimpsed her she mistook the figure for her mother. They had a similar physique — long, willowy and delicate. And they both had hair of an ash-blond shade. But the long white nightgown was not one that Aubrey recognized. And when she turned her face slightly in the shadowed hallway she could see that the pale face was that of a much younger woman. It wasn't hard to connect the thick, drowning waves of sadness with this figure. As she watched her, Aubrey felt as though she would suffocate in the ocean of desolation that washed over her.

Aubrey pulled off the red hat and without much attention shoved it into the pocket of her coat. She made a mental note that she would get a hot cup of tea before she walked back outside of the bookstore into the chill.

Clearing her mind again of debris from the past she let the calling gently pull her in its direction. It was intense but not in an overt way. When someone was in severe emotional distress there was a chaotic feeling to the call, not any calmness. When there was fear or danger it was similar, although slightly different. Once she had been called to a meeting with a teacher, but that was something very direct. This was not the same. It was strong, consistent, but not direct.

She walked down toward the wall directly opposite of the vibration. She must approach with caution. There was no telling what she was walking into and that in itself was odd.

The first thing he did was head to the front door. He wanted to make sure she didn't slip out without him noticing. He didn't consider the fact that his behavior was a bit bizarre. He was acting on instinct. He didn't know what he wanted; only that she couldn't leave until he figured it out.

He stood in front of the entrance, breathing deeply in a strange sort of panic. And then he heard low murmurs. His eyes slowly moved over to the coffee bar only a half dozen yards away. Her back was to him, but it was she. The woman in question was at the counter,

talking to the girl that he had purchased his coffee from — the same coffee that he'd abandoned unfinished moments before somewhere deep inside the bookstore. He continued to stand there watching, sort of paralyzed. There was a cup in her gloved hand and she moved away from the counter out of his view.

Firmly convinced there was no choice, he walked into the café to seek her out. She sat at a small table in the corner. There wasn't another soul about. Even the girl at the counter had disappeared into some back room for the moment — just two souls now, his and hers. As he approached the table her head remained bowed not acknowledging his approach, just intent on stirring her steaming beverage.

He smiled. Being pleasant and what could be loosely described as charming was a skill he had mastered. "I know this is odd," he began, "but I was wondering if I could join you for a few moments. Being out on a day like this sort of makes me feel like the last person on the face of the earth."

Slowly her eyes rose to meet his and a bit of that electrical sort of jolt that he'd felt so acutely moments before delicately skimmed along his nerves again. Her face was lovely but her eyes were devastating to him — green, unflinchingly, dramatically green.

It was best not to make any direct contact, not even direct eye contact. She had found this out through experience. One day long ago, she had gone to a hospital to help a very ill child. Just perchance as she was standing in the hallway his mother brought him by in a wheelchair. Their eyes met and the little boy smiled at her with curiosity. She could tell that he knew, knew that she was a friend, knew that she was there to help. He was very aware. Some adults were also sensitive or perceptive in the same way, but most she'd found dismissed such feelings. But Aubrey had learned caution and the best thing to be was inconspicuous.

She could feel the man at the far end of the aisle as she rounded the bookshelf. She kept her eyes forward and pretended to be looking for some particular title. It was strong what she felt, intense fluctuations of energy coming from him, but in no distinct pattern.

So strange, this was a highly complex and advanced spirit, and he had no idea. All that power at his fingertips and he was just sitting on it. She sighed. What now? This wasn't exactly her area.

Her gloved fingers lightly tapped on a book in front of her. There didn't seem to be any specific distress, a little frustration but join the club. Well perhaps she could send out a little influence, to draw him in the direction of esoteric studies. Putting that vibe out would be easy enough and she could get home in time to do a little housework before the whole day was shot. This past week of illness had left everything in a wreck.

She focused inward concentrating on pushing some of her psychic barriers down that she had painstakingly spent so many years constructing. She first must let herself open to his energy corridors before she could interject into them.

As she concentrated her hands instinctively balled into fists; the outer bands of energy were as she expected not terribly strong, but any inclination that she placed here would be disregarded as a passing whim. She must go deeper. As her consciousness moved further inward, she could feel herself begin to draw closer to the core with very little effort. The power swept around her aggressively and she began to experience a slight panic. It was so much more intense than she'd encountered before. It took only seconds to realize clearly that this was a mistake. This wouldn't work. She was way over her head. With all the discipline she had she tried to back away, but the tentacles of energy that had drawn her to this place wrapped firmly and completely around her.

The slight panic now exploded into fear. The realization hit hard; she had not been guided at all. It was he. He had called her, consciously or not, this man had summoned her. She was thrown off balance, the fear taking hold. So dangerous, she was losing all control.

And then she felt herself violently yanked forward into his mind, the past.

The desert swirled around her, hot on her skin. There were gold bands on her arms. He stood at her side and spoke to her in a language that she did not remember, and held her hand in a clasp not of tenderness but possession.

Her eyes were teary — her head pounding so furiously that it felt like she would pass out. Even her hands were trembling. She rounded the bookshelf without looking back. She was nauseated, overwhelmed. What the hell had happened?

It was sheer panic that was flowing through her veins now. But then a calm voice from within surged up, a familiar one. *Calm Aubrey. It's all right. There is no danger here. Go and sit for a while.*

Every fiber of self-preservation was telling her to tear out of here as quickly as she could. But she did trust, so she would wait. She would have some tea, wait five minutes, then tear out of here.

It's difficult for a five-year-old to know how to deal with a spirit in distress, especially one that did not acknowledge her presence. And since there was no one available to guide her, Aubrey did the best she could. At first she just tried to ignore Rose, as everyone else seemed so accomplished at doing.

Rose, she came to believe, was caught up in some painful and disorienting personal drama. Why else was she there? She certainly didn't seem very happy about it.

After the first glimpse she had of her, Aubrey started seeing, but most often feeling, her more frequently. After a short time it didn't frighten her, these waves of sadness and hopelessness. After all these feelings didn't really belong to her, they were just sort of like a calling card that Rose was about somewhere.

It was about three months into their unique acquaintance that Aubrey made a breakthrough. She got it into her head that if she could experience Rose's feelings perhaps Rose could feel hers.

Late one night when she was in bed she felt the familiar downpour of sadness. She ventured into the hallway to Rose's favorite spot where the apparition was standing, mournfully looking out the window. With all her might Aubrey concentrated on a feeling of happiness, a powerful one like her mother's hug. It took a few minutes and then the tragic woman turned to the little girl with a distinct look of surprise.

He stood there waiting for an answer. Unbelievable, this person had just turned her psyche inside out and now he'd followed her. She struggled with everything she had to disguise her shakiness. But at the moment she was having trouble even holding onto her tea without spilling it. She smiled slightly, not too warmly. "I'm sorry. I'm a little preoccupied today. I don't think I'd be very good company."

The man standing in front of her could be called handsome, sort of rugged, bearded, with nice eyes, brown, warm but distinctly a

little sharp. "Well," he sort of shrugged in an unassuming way, "for a day like this I think you'd be great company."

Her eyes widened a bit. What was that supposed to be a compliment or some kind of joke? Her voice took on its dismissive, icy quality. "I don't really know how to take that."

He put his hands in the pockets of his coat, reminding her sort a little of a kid that had been chastised, "Yeah maybe that wasn't exactly the right thing to say."

She took a sip of her scalding tea, ignoring the sting to her mouth. "Maybe not." He hadn't moved. He wasn't going away. It was evident not that she would have to do something very harsh to get rid of him. But at the moment, still recovering her footing from the tumult she'd experienced, she found she didn't have it in her. And beyond that she had to admit there was curiosity. What she'd experienced with him before, well she couldn't quite wrap her brain around it. Would a conversation be so harmful? It could give her some answers.

His eyebrow rose a bit in question. "Do I get to sit down or have I been dressed down and dismissed?"

She indicated the chair across from her. "You can sit," and then she added dryly, "for a little while."

He settled in across from her, and then extended his hand, "By the way I'm Jacob Wyss."

She hesitated. This was no problem. She was protected. That was why she wore the gloves so often, but she still felt profoundly shaken and more than a little bit wary. Harmless he seemed, but most appearances she'd found were thin veneers to what was truth. And what she'd experienced before definitely wasn't harmless. Cautiously she returned the handshake and minimized its duration, but even that caused a strange frisson along her senses. "Aubrey," she murmured, "Aubrey Mason."

He smiled but he'd noticed her reluctance, and it seemed to bother him. "Pleasure to meet you Aubrey Mason. I've got to tell you that when I decided to come out today I had no idea that the day would take such a turn."

Her heartbeat picked up a bit. He was so perceptive. She could feel it, but she didn't want to. She was trying very hard to protect herself with layers of barriers but at this moment it seemed as though everything was in tatters. "You're not drinking anything?" she inquired.

“Um yeah,” that innocent question seemed to befuddle him a bit. “I had a coffee earlier.”

“Oh,” she left it there and waited. She strummed her fingers along the sides of her mug of tea. She was not about to hold up this conversation. After all, it wasn’t her idea.

He sort of rubbed his chin thoughtfully and for some reason that simple gesture made her smile a bit. “Do you live around here? I mean did you have to drive far in the snow?”

“Well, no actually I have an apartment, not very far.” The tea had cooled a bit so she could drink it comfortably. “And you? Did you have far to drive Mr. Wyss?”

He reacted a bit, a little surprised at the formality perhaps. She didn’t know why she did it, maybe to throw him a bit off-balance. “Well yes Miss or would you rather Ms. Mason, I drove in from the mountains, just outside of Crozet.”

She was smiling now. He was funny, “Ms. will do. That seems a bit unwise on such a day, driving I mean in such conditions.”

“Yes, well I have to confess that this is not the first time I’ve been labeled as unwise.”

“That seems hard to imagine.”

“Not really, if you get to know me.”

His eyes flickered for a second to the counter where the sales-girl had returned. She couldn’t resist. “Do you feel the need for another coffee Mr. Wyss?”

He laughed, “Um, if I get one will you still be here when I get back?”

She swallowed, wondering, “I suppose for a few minutes longer.”

He nodded, “And when I get back do you think you might call me Jacob.”

She leaned back in the chair feeling calmer and more relaxed, although unsure if she had reason to be. “Well we’ll just have to see.”

“Yes,” he responded, “we will.”

“Not a coffee drinker?”

She shook her head; she had pretty brown hair, wavy and thick. “No, I’m not.” In fact mostly everything about her was pretty.

But also distant, that would be his impression. She was holding herself at a deliberate distance from him. He’d taken in quickly there

was no wedding ring, no engagement ring on that long, tapering finger. The other hand did have a ring, a silver one done in a kind of weave, sort of Celtic in design he guessed. He had an eye for detail; it came with the trade. He was an artist. And he had decided not so many few minutes ago that Aubrey Mason would be his next subject, willing or not. He was hoping for willing though.

"I've found that you can pretty much divide the world into coffee drinkers and non-coffee drinkers."

"Oh and there aren't any who might do both?" He was enjoying the way her eyes sparkled a bit when she found him amusing, which was actually happening quite frequently in this conversation.

"Oh sure, but people who drink coffee are usually dedicated to it, drink it every day, not like those who dabble in it."

"Do you think the word addicted might be more appropriate than dedicated? Dedicated implies some sort of choice in the matter." And she liked sparring; he'd already picked that up.

He nodded, "I see you're into the half-empty philosophy."

The beautiful green eyes got a little cold, "I like to deal in reality."

He smiled a bit. He'd irked her. That was okay as long as she didn't get up and walk out. "Whose reality Aubrey?" He emphasized her name a bit. It was the first time he'd used it, and he could see something flare for a second in those captivating eyes. "Doesn't that all depend on one's perception?"

"Perception does not alter truth Jacob," he couldn't suppress a huge grin. She was right and obviously took being right very seriously.

"No," and he raised his frothy Café Mocha to her in a mock toast. "No it does not, although it often does make a pretty picture." She looked at him with question. "Sorry, I'm an artist. I deal in perception. In fact I'm having a showing at the downtown mall next week. Maybe you might want to stop by."

She shrugged a little. That made her uncomfortable. Why was that? Didn't want to be pinned down this one. And that was all he had been strategizing about since he sat down at her table. Something in his blood was going kind of crazy around her. He didn't understand it, not in the least. But he wasn't going to just let her walk through those doors and out of his life until he got a handle on it.

She glanced down at the thin, silver watch on her wrist. "I'm afraid I have to be going. I have some things to take care of."

His eyes flickered over a large picture window to the side of them. It appeared that the snow had stopped. She was already gathering her purse, making movements to leave. She glanced up at him. "Will you be able to get back all right?" hesitating, "I mean to the mountains."

"Yes, I'll manage," he murmured.

"Drive slow. It can be tricky, you know." She was concerned. That was nice.

She started to get up and he couldn't stop himself. Instinctively he reached out and put his hand on her arm. She just sort of froze at the contact, and then gingerly sat back into the chair that she'd started to rise from.

"Aubrey I'm sorry, I feel like I just have to see you again."

His words bothered her. Something was wrong here that he couldn't pinpoint. "Jacob," she began with great deliberation. "This is a bit awkward, but I'll be honest with you. I'm not really dating right now if that is what you have in mind. I'm just not open to that right now."

He nodded, "Well are you open to friendly conversations? Because I've really enjoyed this one, and lately quite frankly I've found that kind of rare." She smiled, seemed a little afraid he thought. Was he being scary? "I promise you'll like me more when you get to know me." He didn't want to push too much or he really would scare her.

Again she met him head on with those eyes. "My life is complicated."

"Married?"

Slowly, she shook her head.

"Involved? An escaped convict?" Again she shook her head, trying to suppress a smile a bit he thought.

"Okay anything else I'll brave. So not trying to be too high schoolish, can I have your number?"

She just stared at him, "You're very pushy."

"Only when it really matters." He took one of his business cards out of his pocket and slid it over to her facedown with a pen. She paused for a moment, just sort of staring at it. He really thought for a moment that she might tear it up and throw it at him. But she didn't.

She picked up the pen that he'd placed on the table and began to write.

"I don't know if this is a good idea Jacob."

"Well then we'll take a risk. I'm overdue for one." He was a bit relieved when she was finished and the card was back in his possession. "Can I walk you to your car? I'll even scrape the snow off your windshield."

She stood up and pulled out a little red hat that she put on. Good grief she was adorable. "That offer I find very hard to resist."

He grinned with satisfaction, "That was the plan."