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THE EYES OF MYSTIC FOREST

By, Amy Hamlet

1. Going Home

I was riding in the car with my dad, on the way to my new home. I checked my seatbelt for the third time. I looked out the front window, and tensed up when I saw a car coming down a small road. I relaxed when the car came to a complete stop, and waited on us to pass. Dad hit a bump and I gasp.

“Sorry baby,” dad said.

“It’s ok dad. It’s not your fault.”

As I watched the trees becoming thicker as the city lights dimmed; I recalled the day that had been the worst in my life.

That Thanksgiving night, Mom let me drive the car home from Tim's family's house. The police said someone ran a stop light, and skidded into the passenger side of the car where my mom and Tim were sitting. The wreck itself is hazy. I remember the ambulance ride, as well as the E.R. but everything else is just a blur. The only real thing to me now, is that I will never see my mom or Tim again.

My mom’s name was Sandy. Until the accident, I lived with her during school, and came to stay with my dad in the summer. They split up when I was ten, but they both were good parents.

My dad is Gabe Taylor. He’s a strong, but fair man. I loved my summers here as a child. Now, it all seems different.

In the driver’s seat, my dad was very quiet, probably because he didn't know what to say any more than I did. He spent the entire 3 months with me at the hospital. I had suffered a cracked spine, and three broken ribs. Dad was at my side when I woke up. I knew it took all his savings, and even dipping into his retirement fund to be there, but he didn't want to move me until the doctors assured him it was *completely* safe.

Mom had a life insurance policy, but dad said that was mine and insisted I put it in savings. Dad told me not to worry, but I was practical, I knew that he wasn't used to paying for a teenager fulltime. I knew this would be a change for both of us, since I have to change schools and friends. I wasn’t sure if I’d fit in. I

was going to be 18 on May 6, and would decide then where I wanted to live, but for now, I felt safe with my dad.

When I felt the car slow down, I instinctively pushed on the non-existent brake pedal on the passenger side, where I was sitting.

My name is Veronica Taylor, but my mom and dad had always called me Ronnie. I'm 17 years old with waist length wavy brown hair, and the same blue eyes as my dad. Even though his hair is lighter than mine is, we look a lot alike. My hair is usually down, but today I put it in a ponytail. I didn't want to take the time to do anything else with it.

I still remember my summer friends, but only distantly. It seemed like it had been years, though it had only been six months since I was there. I wondered how much had changed in that six months.

"*Happy Valentine's Day*," dad said unexpectedly, and broke up my thoughts. I hadn't even realized what day it was.

"Thanks dad, I had forgotten about that." I didn't really want to think about it either.

"That's ok; you've had a lot on your mind. Here you go" He leaned over, opened the glove box of the car, and handed me a small package out of it.

I was stunned. I took the box out of his hand, wrapped in light blue. I could tell dad had *not* been the one to wrap it; there was even a bow on top.

"What is it?" I looked at him.

"Open it," he said, with a grin on his face.

I slowly pulled off the paper, and it was a small jewelry box. I looked up at him to see he looked nervous. I opened the box, and it was a ring. I had seen it before. It was my Grandmother Lottie's wedding ring. I didn't know what to say.

"I was going to give this to you when you came this summer, for your birthday, but after the accident well, I thought you might like it. Susan sent it to

me a month ago, but I was afraid to give it to you until now." He grinned, and took a sideways glance in my direction.

Susan was dad's girlfriend. She was a pretty woman with light brown shoulder length hair, and hazel eyes. She was taller than I was, and had a slightly larger frame. Her and dad had been seeing each other on and off for about two years. I liked her, but I was a little jealous that she knew him better than I did.

"*Thanks dad, I love it!*" It was beautiful, gold with a single diamond in the center. I tried it on and it fit the middle finger on my right hand. It was perfect.

We didn't talk much on the rest of the ride home. *Home*. That word meant something else now. It used to be with mom in whatever big city she chose to live in at the time. Dad had always lived in the same town, on the same street for as long as I can remember. It was a small town with a large amount of wooded area circling it like a large green wall. They named the town after the forest that surrounded it, Mystic Forest. Dad had always called it home, and it was close enough to Sabre Beach that I didn't mind coming.

"Are you ok?" He looked at me worriedly.

"Yea dad, just thinking about what will happen now," I didn't want to tell him I *wasn't* ok. It would only worry him more.

We rounded the corner, and I saw the house, looking unchanged. Just the same as it did in August when I left, but it *felt* different this time. It was colder than I was used to, and not as green as I remembered it. It felt ominous seeing the dead leaves that had fallen onto the cold hard ground.

"Here we are Ronnie," he looked more anxious than I felt as we pulled into the driveway. We took my bags out of the truck, and carried them to my room. It was small, but I had a window that looked out at the woods behind our house, and my own bathroom, so it wasn't that bad really.

Dad left me alone, and that was good. I wasn't sure I could hold in the tears anymore, so I shut the door behind him. I walked to the window and looked at the forest. It was different than I remembered, not *just*, because the leaves were brown instead of green, something else I couldn't put my finger on. "Oh well, it's probably just my imagination." I said to myself.

I let my hair down and decided to unpack and settle in. I was putting my clothes in the dresser, when I heard mumbled voices from the living room.

I slowly opened the door to hear who was there. I knew one of them; it was dad's best friend, Randy Sabre. He had been around here my entire life. He and my dad had met when they were kids. Even though they lived in different towns, they had always been friends. He was a good-looking man with dark hair and eyes. However, the thing I will always remember most about him is his voice. He had a deep, sensual voice, which could calm even the most obnoxious of men.

Randy lived on the beach where dad would take me when I visited here during the summer. Randy's family had been the first to settle there a long time ago, and so they named the beach after them.

Then I heard another voice, a voice I didn't recognize, a soft voice, so I stopped at the door and listened to see if I could figure out who it was.

"How is she doing?" I heard Randy say.

"I don't know. She keeps things bottled up so much, I'm not sure," dad answered him.

"I hope she will talk to someone about it, before it gets worse." Randy's soft voice said.

Then I heard the third voice again. "I can try to talk to her. I know what she is going through more than most. You remember I had a friend that *died* in the crash that I survived in?"

"Yea I remember. You weren't driving though, and you were just a kid then, but it couldn't hurt to try if you want." Dad said, sorrowfully.

I decided I didn't want to hear them talk about me anymore so I shut my door, hard enough that they would hear me, but not enough to startle anyone, and came down the hallway. I saw Randy, and he smiled at me. He came over and pulled me into a comforting hug.

"It's good to see you again, though I am sorry for the reason. I loved your mom, and I will miss her." I knew he wasn't trying to make me sad, and it was

hard not being soothed by his soft voice. As a child, I would hide around the doors, just to listen to him talk.

I looked over to see who else was here, and saw the most striking boy I had ever seen. He was tall, and looked maybe 19 or 20 years old. He had the same dark eyes and hair as Randy. I couldn't remember ever meeting him before, but I felt like I should know him. I didn't mean to stare, but I must have been since I heard Randy clear his throat. I glanced away quickly.

"This is my son, Drake. He lives with his mom in the summers, so you two have never met before."

"Hi Ronnie, it's nice to finally meet you in person. Dad talks about you all the time." His voice was just as sensual as his dad's was, and I couldn't help seeing how good looking he was.

"It's nice to meet you too. Sorry about staring, but you look so much like your dad; I was taken aback a little." I looked over at Randy, "I'm sorry Randy, but with everything that has happened this past year, I had forgotten you had a son."

"Don't worry about it darling. I understand. We all have some adjusting to do."

I went to look out the window as the men were talking about a fishing trip next weekend. I tried to put their voices out of my head. I was looking at the now brown leaves on the ground in the yard. I didn't realize at first, I wasn't standing there alone. He was so quiet that I hadn't heard him come over, and I jumped when I turned around and saw him.

"Sorry." He said.

"That's ok. My mind was elsewhere." It was always on my mom.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" He looked out the window too.

"Thanks, but not tonight. I think I'm just gonna go to bed. It's been a long day. It was nice to meet you. Maybe we will see each other again soon."

"Count on it. Our dads spend almost every weekend together when you're not here, so you should probably get used to seeing a lot of me." He smiled, and I smiled back before I went to the hallway that led to my door.

I thought of school tomorrow, as I got ready for bed. Dad told me I could wait, but I think I need to get into a regular routine as soon as I can. I was already nervous as I lay down, but that soothing voice came into my head as I closed my eyes.

I woke up early the next day. I was ready to get on with my life, and I hoped I really could. I wasn't looking forward to school. Not because I was afraid to meet new people, I had done that a lot when mom would decide she needed new scenery, or just broke up with another boyfriend, but because I was afraid of the, '*poor girl*', looks I was bound to get from the kids at school. I didn't know if they knew *why* I had moved here or not, but I was sure they would ask.

I met the bus at the corner, and sat in the first available seat I could find. Susan had enrolled me last week so all the formalities were done. At least I didn't have to do that. The ride was short, and no one talked to me, I was glad. I had never been one to make friends easy. I asked a black haired girl on the bus where the office was, and she was nice enough to show me.

"Come on," she smiled at me, "I'll walk you there. By the way, my name is Hailey Cunningham. Welcome to Mystic Forest."

"Thanks, Hailey. My name is Ronnie Taylor. It's nice to see a friendly face."

She smiled even bigger, she was really a lovely girl, and I hoped we could be friends, "Here you go." She pointed toward the door, "I have to get to class, hope I see you later," she called back as she hurried off down the hall.

The receptionist was the first to give me the '*look*' I was dreading. "You must be Veronica. I've got your schedule, and list here for you."

"Thank you." I said, as she pointed out the way to my first class.

"Down the hall to the right."

When I walked in the classroom, the bell had already rung, and so everyone was looking at me. The teacher pointed to an open seat, and kept on talking. He must have known I was coming. The seat was right beside the girl who had showed me to the office, and when I sat down, she smiled at me. She had such a warm smile that I felt relaxed sitting there, and I smiled back.

As luck would have it, Hailey and I had almost every class together. She was a very pretty girl. With long black hair, and dark eyes, she actually resembled Randy.

She was talking softly to me as we sat there. Her mom and dad had split up when she was young, and she lived with her mom. She said she was sorry about my mom and stepdad, though he wasn't and I didn't correct her. Then she dropped the subject.

I couldn't feel angry with her for saying what she did. At least she hadn't asked me what happened. How would I tell her I had killed them?

After 4th period, Hailey asked me to sit with her at lunch. She introduced me to Brad. He was a good-looking tall boy with blonde hair. He reminded me of the boys that played football at my last school. He had a big laugh, and an even bigger smile. He didn't ask me about moving here, whether it was because he already knew, I wasn't sure, and I didn't want to ask. No matter the reason, it was *almost* like a normal day at school.

The bus ride home was not bad either. Hailey said she usually drove to school, but her car was in the shop. "It was fate. We were *meant* to meet today," she said, matter of factly, as she was sitting in the seat next to me.

I didn't know if I believed in fate, but I nodded my head anyway. I wasn't one to believe in anything I couldn't see with my own two eyes.

"See you tomorrow," she said, as she got off the bus.

I just waved. I thought we were going to be friends, though I wasn't sure why. I felt a draw to her, as if we had met in another life, as ludicrous as that sounds.

Dad was still at work when I got home. He was the local Forest Ranger, so he was in the woods a lot. If someone reported an animal attack, it was up to him to track it. He was good at his job, but when he would have to go track a bobcat or something in the middle of the night, I would worry he wasn't coming back. I never thought a car was more dangerous than any animal, and I never thought it would be my mom and not my dad either. Not that I would rather it had been my dad, I loved him dearly, I just always worried *more* about him than my mom.

I finished my homework before dad got home, and I was looking in the kitchen for something for supper when I heard the truck pull in the drive, and the door open, "*I'm home baby.*"

"Hey dad," I looked around the kitchen door at him. "I was just looking for something to fix for dinner."

"Don't worry about that. We're going out." He had a suspicious look on his face.

I wasn't sure I wanted to go out, but I wasn't much of a cook so I didn't argue. I knew dad could cook modestly since I had been coming here for the last seven summers after he and mom split, but he looked excited about going out, and I wanted to make him happy.

I didn't look to see where we were going, until I saw the road that lead to Randy's house. I didn't know why, but I was suddenly nervous. "Are we going to see Randy?"

"Yup."

He didn't explain, "I thought we were going out to eat?"

"We are, in a way."

I was still confused, but as we pulled up to the house, I saw the fire, and all the people. It was a party.

I wasn't sure I was up to it, but it was too late now. I put on my best face, and got out of the car. The first person I saw was Susan. She had me in a hug so tight that it left me gasping for air. Then I saw Randy, and he too hugged me. I had

met most of the people here from my summers with dad, but the one I was looking for was absent.

I pretended to myself it didn't matter anyway.

The night seemed to take forever. I smiled at all the right times, and chatted when I had to.

Most of the people there were a little older, but they all took turns giving me hugs, and telling me how glad, they were that I was there, and how sorry they were about my mom.

Even though I had met most of these people only *once*, they all seemed to know my name. I suppose dad had told them before I came here.

I walked around saying hi, and listening to their brief conversations. Dad was hovering so much I couldn't relax.

When I was finally alone, I snuck off on a walk to the beach. I loved Sabre Beach, I loved coming here in the summer, but it was cold tonight. I didn't let that bother me as I walked just close enough to the water to be soothing, without getting wet.

I don't know *when* I was aware that I wasn't alone, but I saw someone at the edge of the woods. It was too far to see whom it was, or what they were looking at, but I got the impression they were looking at *me*. I must be paranoid.

The person in the woods spooked me, so I decided it was time to get back to the party. I was halfway there when I ran into Randy and dad. They must have come to look for me, because when they saw me, they seemed relieved.

"Where have you been?" Dad said, angrily.

"Sorry dad. I just went for a walk on the beach to clear my head."

"Next time take someone with you this time of night! You scared me to death!"

I'd never seen dad so worried about me taking a walk before. I decided it was best *not* to tell him about the person I saw near the woods. If he was gonna get this upset over a *walk*, it might just throw him over the edge.

By the time we got home, I was ready for bed. It has been a very long day, and I was glad it was over. "Night dad."

"Night Ronnie."

Over the next few weeks, life became normal again. School here was the same as any other I had been to. Hailey walked with me to class and I didn't mind. She was fun to hang around.

One day during lunch, I was watching Brad. He seemed out of sorts. He wasn't joking and laughing like usual. It worried me, so I asked Hailey about it.

"He gets that way sometimes. You never know when it's about to happen, but it only lasts a few days so we have just learned to over look it." She shrugged her shoulders.

I was still unsure about it, but I didn't bring it up again. Hailey was right, about 3 days later, Brad was his normal teasing self. I wondered what it was, but figured it wasn't my business.

Thursday at school, Hailey had asked me if I wanted to go out with the others one night. "It'll be fun, we're just gonna go eat, and then to the theater to watch movie."

"When?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Ok that sounds nice. I can use a night out. Can you pick me up?"

"Sure, I'll be there about 5 then."

Dad was home when I got there. That was unusual. "Hey dad, off early?"

"Yea baby, it's a slow week."

"That's good isn't it? No one getting chased by animals, or starting fires in the woods?"

"Yea it is," he laughed, "how was school?"

"It was fine. Hailey asked me to go to out with her and the rest of the gang tomorrow night, if it's ok. We're just going to a movie."

"Sure baby. I'll be at Randy's anyway so go, and have a good time. Just be back by midnight."

"Ok dad, thanks."

I went to the kitchen to do my homework. I was actually excited about going out. I just wish someone else were going to be there.

No, I'll put that thought out of my head and have a good time.

Dad had said he would be at Randy's place. Why does he go over there so much? Drake told me that dad and Randy spent a lot of time together, and he was right. They spent nearly every weekend together. I wondered what they were doing, but was afraid to ask. I wasn't sure I would like the answer.

I hadn't seen Drake since the first night I had gotten here, even though he had told me to get used to seeing him. I couldn't stop myself from thinking about him, even though I didn't want to. I was sure he had a girlfriend, he was so handsome, and I didn't want to be the girl that drooled after an unavailable boy. I tried to distract myself when I was alone, which I was a lot, so I wouldn't think about him. It never worked.

Why couldn't I get him off my mind, and why do I get the feeling I should know him from somewhere. Like some unknown force linked us.

School went by slow Friday. Even Hailey felt it. During math class, she leaned over to whisper to me. "Will it ever *end*?" I had to laugh, and the teacher gave me a stern look. That made Hailey giggle, and then the teacher looked at her.

Finally, when the day was over, I was walking to the bus when Hailey hollered out, "*Don't forget. I'll be there at 5.*"

"Ok." I called back.

I was watching thru the window when Hailey pulled in the driveway, she honked the horn for me. I wasn't the only one she had picked up, I saw Brad in the car as I got to it. "Hey Brad." I said as I slid into the back seat.

"Hey Ronnie."

I watched Brad from the back seat, but he seemed the same teasing guy I had met on the first day. I wish I knew what was with him sometimes. I decided it was not my business, and I wasn't going to think about it. I was going to have fun tonight.

We decided to go to MD's to eat, and talk about what movie we wanted to see. Gabby and Sammy were already there by the time we pulled in. They all wanted to see the new vampire movie. I didn't care so I went along with it. We laughed so hard at the restaurant; the employee's were looking at us. I could tell they couldn't wait for us to leave.

"I think we're making the workers mad." I said to the rest of them. They all looked over at the girl who was giving us looks, and laughed again. We made sure to clean up before we left. Just to show we meant no harm.

The movie was crowded when we got there. We were lucky to find a couple who didn't mind scooting over so we could all sit together. When the movie started, we all finally got quiet and watched. It was a good movie though not what I expected.

After the movie was over, we hung out by the cars in the parking lot talking. I wasn't really into the conversation, I drifted away to someone I didn't want to think about.

"Earth to Ronnie," I finally heard Brad say. I grinned as I realized everyone was looking at me.

"Sorry," I said embarrassed, "I was daydreaming."

"About who?" Hailey asked smiling.

"What? No one," I tried to say.

"Yea, no one, sure, with that smile on your face?"

I couldn't tell them I was thinking of someone that probably had a girlfriend. "No, no one," I said again. I knew they weren't convinced, but they let it drop.

"So, you ready to go then?" Hailey asked a little while later.

"Yea, I'm supposed to be home by midnight."

"Ok then. Let's go."

When we were in the car on the way home Hailey started again. "So really, who were you thinking about?"

Then Brad started, "Yea, Ron, Who is stealing you from me?"

Brad was like that, and I knew it didn't mean anything. "No one is *stealing* me from you Brad. I was just thinking of someone I met the first night I got here. I haven't seen him since."

"That's good. I don't want to break anyone's head this year." He laughed, and so did Hailey.

The rest of the ride was just gossiping. They asked what other kinds of school I had been to, and how they were different from Mystic. We were all wondering what we were going to do this summer. Brad was all for running off to Vegas to get married. We laughed again. I was tired when Hailey pulled into the driveway. "See you Monday guys."

"See you Monday," they both said. I watched them drive off before I went inside.

The living room light was on, but dad wasn't on the couch. I walked to his room and the door was shut, so I figured he had gone to bed. I turned out the lights and lay down myself.

On Saturday, I woke up early, and was alone at the house. Dad had left me a note; he and Randy were fishing again. Dad had rode with Randy and left the truck at the house. He had let me drive it to the store once before, so I didn't think he would mind if I went for a drive today.

It was getting warmer, it was almost May, and so I thought I would go to Sabre Beach. It was sunny, and no clouds, so it was a good day to go.

I drove *slowly* to the place I remembered, watching every car cautiously on the road. I was still nervous about driving. The accident flashed into my mind, but I pushed it away and continued.

I had been to Sabre Beach a lot when I was younger, but I had never driven myself, so I was surprised I found it so easy. I parked the truck, got out my MP3 player, and started walking. It was a beautiful spring like day, and I was off in my own little world.

Out of nowhere, I got a nagging feeling I wasn't alone so I looked behind me, and saw nothing. I turned my music up, and just walked on.

I was just enjoying the beauty of the beach. I stopped to watch the waves of the green-blue water wash up on the white sand, and roll back off leaving a smooth surface that appeared untouched by human hands. I could see the peacefulness in the resounding waves as I let my mind clear up the confusion I had felt since my mother died.

It was almost as if the water was healing my heart. I knew it would be ok now. I *needed* it to be ok.

I started walking again. A little while later I got the feeling *again* that, I wasn't alone, so I turned off my music, and looked all around, but *still* saw nothing. I really was getting paranoid I guess. I didn't turn my music back on, but I kept on walking until I saw a fallen down tree. It must have been that way awhile; it seemed covered in sand and moss from the water. I found a place to sit on it that looked like a carved out seat.

Sitting on that tree looking around, I noticed I could barely make out Randy's house in the distance. Until then, I hadn't realized how close he lived to the beach. I contemplated going over there for a peek at what they were doing, but thought better of it.

I laid back and closed my eyes. As I was sitting there, listening to the waves, I was thinking of my new life, and how I wanted it to be, when I got the feeling *again* that I was not alone, so I opened my eyes.

I screamed, and jumped up until my eyes adjusted to the sudden light, and I saw Drake standing there. He had his hands up in front of him, as if he was trying to block me from hitting him. I looked down at my own hands and realized I had them up in fists. I dropped my hands down to my sides, and averted my gaze so he couldn't see my expression, "Oh, sorry I didn't see you there."

"That's ok, I thought you were asleep. I was gonna wake you, but you looked so beautiful there, I was afraid to touch you." He said with a smile.

"Are *you* the one who's been following me?" I said a little too angrily when I looked back up at him.

"*What!* Someone has been following you. *Where did you see them?*" He started looking around for someone else.

"*No no....* I'm just being paranoid, and you startled me so...but the night Randy had the party I snuck off for a walk, and I thought I saw someone at the edge of the forest. I'm sure it was nothing, but it spooked me then, so it's probably why I feel like someone is here now, when there clearly isn't." I looked around again, and shrugged my shoulders.

"Ok." He said, but I could tell he looked concerned. He was still looking around. "What are you doing out here alone?"

"Well, dad and Randy went fishing again, so I thought I would come to the beach and hang out. What are you doing here?"

"I come out here a lot just to scout around and think about stuff. How have you been doing? Are you making friends? Do you have a boyfriend yet?" He said, with a teasing grin.

"Yes I made some friends, and no I don't have a boyfriend, though I don't know how that is your business."

"Just wanted to check and see if I had any competition."

He looked smug, and I know I must have blushed, but I turned my head. I was secretly hoping he would say something like that. I turned around, looked into his dark brown eyes, and melted.

In the sun his short dark hair shined almost blue and his tanned skin was glowing. He smiled, and I realized I was staring at him, and dropped my head again. As if his voice wasn't enough, he could also control me with his eyes.

"I didn't get to talk to you much that first night, I'm sorry I was rude. I was hoping to see you again. How about that walk now?" I asked.

"I would *love* that walk now."

At first, we walked in silence not knowing what to say. It wasn't uncomfortable, just quietly walking along.

Drake finally broke up the silence, "How are you doing, *really*?"

"I'm getting by I guess. I see dad looking at me sometimes, and I can tell he is wondering the same thing. Really, I *am* doing ok. How about you? What do you do when you're not on the beach?"

"Mostly I'm in the woods. I want to be a ranger like your dad, so he has taken me under his wing, he's mentoring me."

"How old are you?" I was sure he was at least 19 or 20.

"I'm 18, you?"

"17. But I'll be 18 in May."

"I'll be 19 In June. What grade are you in this year?"

"I'm a junior. I'm supposed to be a senior this year, but mom moved around so much when I was in grade school I fell behind. She tried not to move as much

when I got into high school. I can't wait to get out of school this year. I usually like school, but I really need a break this time. How about you?"

"I'm out of high school. That's why your dad is helping me. So I can take over someday." He got a meaningful look in his eyes and said, "I'm really sorry about your mom Ronnie. I know it must be hard."

I was quiet for a while, just thinking about mom when he interrupted my thoughts.

"I shouldn't have brought it up. Now I've made you sad."

"No, its ok, you didn't mean anything." I paused before asking him, "I heard you and my dad talking about you being in an accident when you were at my house. What was that about, if you don't mind talking about it?"

He was quiet for a minute and I thought maybe I shouldn't have said anything but then he started, "I was 13 when a friend and I were riding with his mom to a football game. A truck ran out in front of us, but it was too late to stop. His mom hit the truck. He was in the front seat, with no seatbelt, and flew out the window. I was in the back and just tossed around. He died at the hospital that night, and all I got was a broken arm, and a cut on my head. His mom survived, but was never the same. She didn't blame me for living, but she always looked at me different after that. She and her husband, and the daughter they had left, moved away a year later, and I never heard from them again."

He didn't say their names, and I didn't ask. I didn't want to make it harder for him. "I'm sorry Drake."

"It's ok. I have long since dealt with it, but if you ever need to talk, I *will* be here. I can listen really well."

I couldn't say anything to him at that minute so he continued, "I know it's too soon for you now, but I will be here... *when* you're ready."

I didn't know why, but it made me feel better just knowing that I had someone who understood.

We just talked awhile about school, and he asked me whom I had met. I was telling him about Hailey, when I realized it was getting dark. "I better go. Dad will be worried if I'm not home soon. He doesn't know I took his truck." I smiled sheepishly.

"Then we better get you back home." He smiled.

Dad was waiting there when I got in, I was sure I was gonna be in trouble. He was on the couch watching TV, and I went to sit next to him.

"How was your day?"

"Fine," I was surprised to see he wasn't mad. "How was yours?"

"It was ok. We didn't catch anything today. Did you enjoy the beach?"

"Uh... yea... how did you know where I was at today?"

"Drake called me to say he saw you there. He is a really nice kid you know." He looked at me with a funny kind of grin. I realized he was hoping Drake and I would get to know each other better. So was I, but I wasn't going to tell him that.

"I'm gonna go to bed, unless you need anything, ok?"

"No I'm ok. There's some spaghetti in the microwave if you want to eat first."

I *was* hungry; I hadn't realized it until he brought it up. "Ok, thanks."

I ate quickly and went to bed. I knew whom I would be thinking of when I lay down, and I wasn't sure I wanted to. He had hinted at the idea that he liked me, but he could have just been teasing. I was afraid I was only one who felt that way.

As I lay down, all I could hear was that voice.

2. First date

When I woke up, I was afraid yesterday was a dream. I knew I liked Drake, but I wasn't sure if he liked me, and I was not the kind of person who could ask. I was *not* that bold. I had been on a few dates in the past, but never had anyone who I would have called a boyfriend. I mostly went out in groups with my friends.

I could hear dad wandering around the house so I decided it was time to get up myself. He was sitting at the table eating a bowl of cereal, so I got one myself, and sat down. We didn't say anything at first, but then he looked at me, and I knew he was about to.

"So what do you really think of Drake?"

I made a point of taking my time with my breakfast while I pondered what to say. "He seems nice."

"Is that all?"

I knew he was trying to get me to say more, but I wasn't ready to say it aloud yet. "Yea, why do you ask?"

"He's a really good kid. Knows what he wants to do with himself."

"I have only talked to him *twice* dad, but he does seem like a good guy."

That was all he said about the subject, but I suspected there might be more he wanted to ask, but decided to let it go. I was glad. I didn't want him running off to tell Randy I had a crush on his son.

"So what are you going to do today?"

"I have to go to work. Somebody claimed they were chased by something in the woods, so I have to go track it, and see what it is. Probable just a wild dog or something, but it's my job to look."

"Ok dad. I think I'll go back to the beach if it's ok. Can you drop me off on your way?"

He hesitated a minute, did he know something I didn't? "Well, I guess it'll be ok. You be careful out there though."

"I will dad."

I went to get dressed, and he waited in the living room. When I was ready, we headed out. He dropped me off, and went toward Randy's house. That was somewhat strange if he was hunting dogs in the woods, unless it's the woods behind Randy's house. I didn't wonder about it too long, I just wanted to go walking, and clear my head with those *soothing* waves.

I found myself by the very same tree I had sat on yesterday, so I sat down. It was still early so I was alone, and that is what I wanted anyway. I lay back, closed my eyes, and just enjoyed the sun on my face. I don't know how long I sat like that, but I was aware that there were noises, so I looked up.

People had started coming to the beach, and I was not alone anymore. I just watched them. There was some kids playing, and parents sitting back watching them. I knew it wasn't going to be crowded today, because the season was too young for that, but the few that were here kept my mind from thinking about the one person I wanted to think about.

As the time passed, I decide to walk a little farther out, so I got up and went toward the forest line. Dad would never let me go this far when he would bring me here as a kid, so I was always curious about it.

I decided I was gonna go check it out myself. I walked slowly, almost cautiously; as if I was afraid something was gonna jump out at me. I was being ridiculous and I knew it, so I held my head up, and went on. I was looking at the newly forming leaves on the trees just ahead of me. It was as beautiful as the autumn leaves, and their entire color explosion in any town I'd ever been. This was almost compelling. I wanted to get a closer look, so I continued moving closer until...

"Ronnie!" I heard someone call. It can't be that voice.

I turned around and saw him. It *was* Drake.

"Hi."

"Where are you going?"

"I was just gonna walk in the woods. Why?"

"Want some company?" He said with a smile, and then looked at me with those eyes so I couldn't say no.

"Sure."

"I didn't expect to see you here today." There was a little humor in his voice.

"Why not? You fixed things with my dad yesterday." I made it a statement not a question.

"I didn't want you to get grounded so I couldn't take you out next weekend."

I just looked at him. That was a statement too. "Are you asking me out?"

"You can look at it like that."

"What makes you think I will say yes?" I tried to sound confident.

He just smiled "Are you saying no then?"

I hesitated, "No.... I just would prefer if you ask me first, that's all. I don't like people to *assume* they know what I want."

He looked up at the sky as if he was thinking of something, and then he smiled, and looked at me. He took my hand, and got down on his knee. I was in shock. I looked around anxiously to see if anyone was watching us. I looked back down at him, and then he looked up at me and said "Veronica Taylor, will you go out with me next Saturday?"

I couldn't speak. I just looked at him, and finally nodded. He stood up, grinned at me, and said, "Was that better?"

"You are such a jerk." I laughed, and he laughed with me. Nevertheless, in my mind I was jumping up and down with excitement. I completely forgot about

going in the woods, and we started walking again. He was taking me away from the forest, and toward the beach. I finally realized and said, "Hey. I was going to the woods."

"Sorry. I just got distracted and went off course. Would you like to go get some lunch?"

I looked at him, and then past him to the forest that seemed to beckon me, but my heart won out. "Sure. That would be nice. Do you have a car? Dad just dropped me off and I was gonna walk home."

He smiled, "Of course I have a car. Let's go."

He took me all the way to Branceville. I wondered why so far, but decided not to ask. I barely remembered being here when I was a kid and dad had taken me to Chucky Cheese for a birthday party. We went the local MD's and pulled in. "Nice choice." I told him, and he laughed.

As we sat there, he asked me if I liked Mystic High. "It's about the same as any other I went to, just smaller.

"What about living in a small town?"

"It's different. It takes some getting used to. So, where are we going this weekend?"

"I thought we could go to dinner, and maybe catch a movie. You know, your typical date. I want to start slow." He was teasing again. I could see the smile on his face. I wouldn't care if we went to the city dump, as long as it was with Drake.

He was still asking me about my life as we headed home. I decided it was my turn.

"Hey, I think I should get to ask you about your life now. Don't you?"

He laughed, "Yea I guess so. What do you want to know?"

I thought for a minute, "Well, how long have you been working with dad?"

"Since I was 16."

"How many girlfriends have you had?" I grinned.

He took a quick glance over at me before answering, "A few."

I wasn't sure if I liked that answer, but I continued. "What do you do for fun?"

"I practice martial arts."

That interested me. "Really? Are you any good?" I smiled again. I just couldn't help myself, I felt like a kid in a candy store.

"Yea, I think I'm pretty good." The look on his face told me he might be a *lot* better than he was letting on.

I was staring at him; he seemed to notice, and smiled at me. I looked down quickly. "Why don't you have a girlfriend now?" I wasn't sure I wanted the answer to that one either.

"Haven't found the right one yet, until now that is." He looked directly in my eyes as he said it. Not even a remote hint of teasing, or embarrassment in his face. I couldn't hold his gaze; I let my hair fall around my face.

School seemed to be everlastingly this week. I couldn't concentrate on anything during class, or any other time.

"What's on your mind Ronnie?" Hailey finally said as we walked to class after lunch. "You have been walking around with your head in the clouds all week."

I smiled at her, but didn't know if I should tell her. I decided it would be ok so.... "I've got a date this weekend." I couldn't keep the excitement out of my voice.

She looked as excited as I feel and squealed at me. "That's great! Is it anyone I know?"

"I don't think so. He lives at the beach with his dad. I met him through my dad."

"He's from the beach? Who is his dad?" She seemed apprehensive.

I could almost see sadness, or was it concern in her face."Randy Sabre. Why?" I was afraid of the answer at first.

Her face lightened up after I said his name. "I know some people from the beach too. I was just wondering if it was someone I knew. I've heard the name before, but never met him. I know the beach is named after his family."

The look was gone. What was it about I wondered. I just played it off like I didn't notice."Do you go to the beach a lot?"

"No," her eyes were almost sad, "mom doesn't like me to go there."

"Why not?"

"I don't know really. She told me about some story about an old boyfriend. It doesn't matter anyway, I prefer the mall." She laughed, but I think she was trying to convince herself as much as me. "So, where are you going?"

"I don't really know. He's being kind of mysterious about it."

"Well, you better call, and tell me everything!"

"Sure, as soon as I know something myself," I laughed.

I wondered what the look on her face was about. School played out the rest of the day in a blur. I was riding home on the bus when I realized that I hadn't told dad I was going out this weekend. Still, from his reaction about the beach on Saturday, I think he will be pleased with me going out with Drake.

Dad was on the couch when I got in. That was out of the ordinary for him. He was usually gone until about five in the afternoon.

"Hey." I said as I walked through the door. "What are you doing home so early?"

"I have to go out later. I thought I'd take you to Susan's house before I left."

"I can stay by myself dad. I'm not a kid you know."

"I know. I just didn't think you wanted to stay alone. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

"I don't mind. I have a lot of homework to do so I will be fine. I promise to get to bed early, and not go out if that makes you feel any better."

"Ok, if you're sure baby, I'll just go then. There's some lunch meat in the fridge if you want it."

"Thanks dad. I'll be fine." I said, as he was scurrying out the door.

I was glad for the quiet, but I was a little apprehensive about being here alone at night, though I would never tell dad that.

I decided to eat before I got into my homework. I had several exams to study for, so I knew the time alone would be a good thing. I was reading my science book when I heard someone pull up. I figured dad had asked Susan to check on me, so I went to the door.

I stopped short when I looked out the window. It wasn't Susan at all. I didn't know who it was. I ducked down under the window, and reached over to lock the door when they knocked. I didn't say anything. I just crouched there in silence they knocked again louder.

"I know you are in there. I saw you moving around when I pulled up."

I managed to turn the lock quietly on the door, and call out, "Gabe's not here come back tomorrow!" I tried to sound brave, but the tremble in my voice gave me away.

"I'm not here for Gabe. I'm looking for *you* Veronica. Please open the door."

I was speechless, "I don't open the door for people I don't know. Go away." I finally managed to choke out.

"My name is Doug. I *really* want to talk to you. It's important." I heard him trying the knob.

My head told me not to open the door. There was something ominous in his voice. Something that made my skin *crawl*. "If you want to talk to me, come over during the day and not late at night when I'm alone, and maybe I will open the door."

This must have made him mad, because he started yelling. "*OPEN THE DAMN DOOR!*"

I ran to my room, and locked myself in. I heard him bang on the front door a few more times. It sounded like he was trying to break it down, and then it went quiet. I still didn't leave my room. It could just be a trick. I don't know how long I was there, but I heard a car gun its engine and speed off.

I slowly opened my door; I walked as quietly as I could to the living room, and went to look out the window. He was gone. I shut the curtains, and double-checked the lock.

I went back to my book, still open on the kitchen table, but I couldn't concentrate anymore. I just closed it up, intending to go sit on the couch. Why hadn't I just gone to Susan's like dad wanted? Now I would never get to sleep tonight. I could call her to come get me. I went to the phone in the kitchen, and picked it up when I heard a noise on the porch.

Had he come back? Did he bring help to get in the house? I got on the floor under the kitchen table, and just listened for the banging to start again. I heard a knock, but I didn't say anything. They knocked harder.

"Go away!" I shouted. "*Or I'm going to call the police!*"

Then I heard his voice. "*Ronnie. Are you ok? It's me Ronnie, Its Drake!*"

I started crying as I got up to go to the door. I went over to the window and carefully pulled the curtain back and looked just to see if it was a trick, but it was him. I unlocked the door, but I didn't need to open it, he already was.

"*What happened? What's wrong?*"

I just started to really sob, and he pulled me into his arms. "Ronnie *please*, what is this about?"

"Someone came over." I choked out between sobs, "He wanted me to let him in. I told him dad wasn't here, but he said he wanted to talk to me. When I *wouldn't* let him in, he got angry, it sounded like he was kicking the door, and I thought he was gonna break in."

Drake turned around to look at the door, and so did I. There were dents in it that were *not* there before. I started shaking, and he held me tighter. "I'll stay here tonight. I know Gabe is gonna be late, and I am *not* going to leave you here alone with someone trying to break in."

I was glad of that, but something crossed my mind, "What about dad? If he comes home and your here this late..."

"I don't think Gabe will be mad when we tell him what happened. I'll make a bed on the couch." He assured me.

I was feeling better by this point but I wasn't sure if I wanted to be alone in my room. If dad came in, and Drake and I were on the couch together, dad might not wait for an answer before shooting him. I was getting sleepy, but I didn't want to leave Drake's arms. I felt very safe

He kissed me on the head, "You should go to bed now. I'm gonna wait up awhile, and see if your visitor comes back. Did you recognize him at all, or did you even get a look?"

"No, I couldn't see him very well, but I *think* he said his name was Doug."

I felt Drake stiffen. He must have known who the man was. "Do you know him?"

"I have heard the name before." That was all he was going to say. I could tell by his reaction.

Then something occurred to me, "What are you doing here? What did you come for?"

"I was scouting in the woods looking for Gabe. I needed to tell him I found something in the woods he should look at, when I heard someone yelling. I ran this way, but he was already gone so I thought I better check on you."

"What did you find?"

"Just some carcasses, but Gabe should know."

"Oh, ok. I think I'm gonna go try to get some sleep now. Will you stay here?"

"I'm *not* going to leave."

He loosened his grip on me, and I went toward my room, "Night Ronnie."

I turned around to look at him, "Night Drake."

When I got up the next morning, I heard dad in the kitchen. *"I can't believe he showed up here. When I find him..."* Dad's voice trailed off.

"Don't go do something stupid Gabe." I heard Randy saying, but where was Drake?

I decided it was time to come out of the hallway. "Hey dad, how was your night?"

"Not as interesting as yours I hear. I *knew* I should have taken you to Susan's." I was afraid he wouldn't be leaving me alone anymore.

"It's ok dad. I'm not hurt or anything. He couldn't get in so, no harm done." I tried to blow it off, but I was sure he could see the truth on my face. "Do you know the man who came here last night?" I tried to pretend I hadn't heard them talking.

"He is just a kid that causes trouble wherever he goes. It's no one for you to worry about, baby. I'm going to have a talk with him. He won't bother you again."

The look on dad's face scared me a little. He had always been very protective, but this was too much. I was afraid he might actually hurt the man.

I almost didn't hear the bus come around the corner; I was so lost in my own thoughts.

Hailey noticed as soon as I got off the bus. "What's wrong?" She stopped me in the middle of the hall.

I told her what had happened, and she was speechless, which was a real feat for her. "What are you gonna do?" That was a good question.

"I don't know. I don't even know the guy. I guess I won't be staying alone anymore."

"Well you can come over to stay at my house when your dad is working late."

"Thanks Hailey, but I think dad is gonna start dropping me off with his girlfriend." I liked Susan, but not enough to spend every night with her.

I was glad when the bell rang and we had to go to class, so I didn't have to tell her about Drake showing up. I wasn't sure if dad even knew about him being there, and I didn't want to talk about it.

The school day dragged on as usual. It was Friday so tomorrow was my first official date with Drake, and I still hadn't told dad. I knew I needed to get home to talk to him.

I was nervous when I got home and realized that dad wasn't there, but there was a car in the driveway. It was Susan's car. I opened the door; she was on the couch reading a book. I don't know if she even knew I was home until I shut the door. She looked up from her book and smiled at me.

"Hey Ronnie, how are you?"

"Fine, what are you doing here?" I tried to pretend as if I didn't already know. I sat down beside her.

"I know it sucks having a babysitter hon." I hadn't fooled her at all, "but your dad isn't taking any chances with you after last night." She looked like she wanted to say something else, but thought better of it.

"Gabe will be home soon. He just wanted me to sit here until he gets finished. If he has to go back out tonight, Drake said he would come and stay again."

"I am *supposed* to go out with Drake tomorrow but I haven't said anything to dad yet. I'm afraid to."

"Don't be. Your dad will be very happy about it. He likes Drake a lot." I wasn't as sure as she was about that. "So what are you doing for your birthday next week?"

I had forgotten about that. I was so busy with my school tests I hadn't realized it was so close. "I'm not sure. I hadn't thought about it much."

"I will have you a party then." She said excitedly. "How about we have it at Randy's? I know you like it there, and you can invite your school friends if you want to." She looked so excited I couldn't say no so I just nodded.

I heard dad's truck pull in the driveway just then, and we both looked at the door. When he walked in, I looked at Susan. It was clear she was crazy for my dad. I could see it the way she looked at him. I decided to go to my room. Give them some time alone. "Hey dad, how was your day?"

"Fine baby."

"Good, I got some studying to do. Talk to you two later."

"Ok baby." I could tell his mind was elsewhere, so I left the room. I stopped in the hallway and took advantage of the situation, and of dad being distracted, "By the way dad, I've got a date tomorrow night with Drake."

"Ok. hon." Wow that was easy. I hurried off to my room before he could say anymore.

As it happened, dad didn't have to work, so he and Susan had dinner here. I ate in silence, and snuck off to my room as soon as I could. I was sure she would be here tomorrow when I got up. I got ready for bed, and thought about Drake. What would we be doing tomorrow night? I drifted off to sleep thinking about him.

I slept late Saturday. When I finally got up, dad and Susan were already dressed and sitting on the couch.

"Hey sleepy head," dad called, and then laughed, "Where is Drake taking you tonight?"

"I don't really know. He just said dinner and a movie. I guess I will find out when we get there." I couldn't stop myself from thinking about it all day. I tried to kill time with my studies, but I couldn't concentrate.

I finally gave up and went outside to walk around. I looked over at the woods, and thought about going for a hike. I felt a need to walk closer. It was as if the trees were calling me, and I began to walk that way, *very* slowly. I wanted to go more than anything else.

"Ronnie," someone had distracted my thoughts, "Ronnie, where are you going?"

I stopped, looked around to see Susan watching me curiously, and I shook my head. I didn't know what had come over me, but it was gone now, "Nowhere Susan, just walking around."

"Do you realize what time it is? It's almost five. What time is Drake supposed to be here?"

I wasn't sure what time he was picking me up. "I don't know. He didn't say."

"Well maybe you should start getting ready, just in case he gets here early."

"Ok." Susan was right so I went back to the house.

I was in the shower when Susan knocked on the door. "Drake just called. He said he would be here in about an hour."

"Ok Susan thanks." I heard her shut the door.

I was really getting nervous now. I didn't know what to say, or how to act. I had been on dates before, but never anything like this. They were just boys from whatever school I was going at the time. No one that made my heart skip a beat like Drake does.

I was in my room looking at my clothes. I had decided on jeans and a lacy shirt when someone knocked on my door.

"Ronnie," Dad said, "can I come in?"

"Sure dad." I looked at him curiously. "What is it?" He sat down on the edge of my bed.

"I was just wondering how you feel about Drake, *really*?"

"I don't know dad. I really like him a lot, I think. It's just all so new to me."

"Well I know he likes you a lot. I don't know why, but he actually asked me if he could ask you out." Dad smiled. "I told him he could, but the answer was up to you."

I didn't know how I felt about the fact that dad new before me that Drake liked me. "That's ok dad. I was surprised that he asked me. I thought he would have a girlfriend." Then I realized what I said, and tried to change the subject.

"What are you and Susan doing tonight?"

"Just hanging out here as far as I know." he said.

"Ok, you know I really do like her don't you?"

Dad smiled at me, "Thank you baby. I'll let you get back to what you were doing." Just then, we both heard a car pull in.

"He's here." Susan yelled.

Dad left me alone, and I got dressed fast and came out to the living room.

"Have her home by midnight Drake."

"Yes sir."

"Are you ready?"

"Yea, let's go."

I waited until we got in the car before I asked. "Where are we going anyway?"

"To Samson's, then I'm not sure."

I knew Samson's was a restaurant in Branceville, the next town over, but it was supposed to be pricy. I was quiet on the ride, but Drake asked me, "Have you heard anymore from Doug?"

"No, but dad said he was going to talk to him. It sort of worried me."

"Don't worry about Gabe. He won't do anything stupid." That didn't make me feel any better. Drake hadn't seen dad's face the other day.

We got to the restaurant, and he parked. It seemed busy. "It looks like we might have to wait a while." He seemed unconcerned about that.

"What about the movie. Won't we be late?"

"I decided not to go with a movie. I thought we might just find a place to talk, and get to know each other, if that's ok with you?" He looked at me for an answer.

"That's ok with me." I was glad. I wasn't really into going to the movies anyway. I preferred to watch a DVD at home on the couch.

He smiled and I wondered if he already had a place in mind to go. I was a little nervous about that. Where was he taking me?

We ate dinner, and laughed about stories from our childhood and our dads. It felt good to talk about mom so easily. It didn't hurt as much as before. Was it the time of passing or the company I wasn't sure.

I started to get nervous after we left the restaurant. "Where are we going now?"

"Don't worry," He smiled at me, "I think you'll like it."

I noticed we were going back towards home. I must have looked confused, "You do like the beach don't you?" He seemed worried that I wouldn't.

"Yea, I love the beach. Is that where we are going?" That was ok with me.

"If that's alright?"

"Yes it is." I smiled back and he relaxed back into his confident air.

We got to Sabre Beach as the sun was going down. It was beautiful seeing the colors on the sand. Like gold was shimmering up out of the ground. I was speechless. We walked along until we got to the fallen tree, and he stopped.

"This is the spot I saw you, and knew I couldn't go on without you." He said that with that voice that seemed to make me melt. "The day I knew I was in love."

I just looked at him. I knew I needed to say what had been on my mind since the day I saw him in my living room. "I was hoping you felt the same as me, but I was afraid to feel it myself, until tonight. I love you too Drake."

I hoped I hadn't said too much. I hung my head, but he put his hand under my chin to make me look at him. I saw the look in his eyes as he got closer to my face, and then I could feel his soft lips on mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and kissed him back. He kissed me softly at first, then pulled me tighter, with more passion, I never wanted to let go. He must have been feeling the same way. I had to stop first. He pulled away, and just kept my hand in his.

We walked on until we were almost at the edge of the tree line. Then he stopped. "I guess I should get you back home."

I hadn't realized what time it was until he said it. It was past eleven, and I didn't want to get into trouble on my first date with Drake.

"Ok." Even though I really didn't want to, we turned around, and started back to his truck.

I decided to ask Drake something on the ride home, "Drake, do you know what dad and Randy are doing almost every weekend, because they never bring home any fish? I'm not stupid enough to believe they just never catch anything."

Drake was quiet for a minute, "Have you asked Gabe?"

"No. I was afraid he wouldn't tell me."

"Well I think you are gonna have to ask them what they're doing." I could tell he wasn't going to say anything, so I decided to drop it for tonight.

Dad was still up when we pulled in to the driveway.

Drake didn't come in, he just watched me get to the door before he left. Dad was waiting on the couch, pretending to watch TV.

"Hey dad, how was your night?"

"Fine baby, how was yours?" I knew he really wanted to know where we went.

"It was great. He took me to Samson's and then we walked on the beach." Dad looked a little surprised by that.

"Samson's huh, that's a nice place."

"Yea it was. I'm somewhat tired. I think I'm going to go to bed."

"Ok baby. Love you."

"Love you too Dad."

3. Birthday Party

I slept really well that night. I didn't get up until 10 the next morning. I couldn't wait to see Drake again, but I knew it wouldn't be until Wednesday when he was off work. He told me he would be here right after school. It seemed like such a long time to wait.

The following Saturday was my birthday, and I knew he would be at the party too. Susan had already told him about it, and he had told me during dinner he would be there. That would make the whole party worth it for me.

I spent the rest of the day studying for my tests for the next week. There was only two weeks of school left and I wanted to do well. I would be a senior next year at the same school, and I wanted to make dad proud.

It was about one when I heard the phone ring, before I could get up I heard dad talking, "Where did he see it? What time? Ok. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Do you have to go out dad?" even though I already knew the answer.

"Yes baby. Are you gonna be ok? I could take you to Randy's house. Susan isn't home tonight." He looked worried.

"No dad. It's ok. I'm not worried about being alone. I'll keep the door locked, and not answer if any one knocks. Ok?"

"I don't know. I really shouldn't leave you here alone." I could see he was about to insist on taking me there.

"*Please*, I'll be fine dad." I pleaded with him.

"Ok hon, lock the door behind me, and if you get scared, or someone comes around, don't be afraid to call Randy, ok?"

"I promise dad."

After he had left to go check out another animal sighting at the beach, I was alone again. I hadn't thought of my nighttime visitor since the day after it had happened. It suddenly occurred to me I was completely alone here again, and no

matter how much I assured dad I was ok, I was worried anyway, so I made sure the door was secure, and went to the kitchen table to study.

Dad wasn't gone as long as usual, and he brought pizza home so he wouldn't have to cook. I'd been trying to learn to cook myself with help from Susan, who was a very good cook. I'd done ok for the most part she told me. On the other hand, maybe she didn't want to hurt my feelings. Still, no one has died yet, so that was a good sign.

"So did you catch whatever it was?" I asked him though I was sure he had.

Dad looked flustered a minute, like he hadn't expected me to ask, but straightened out his expression quickly, "Yea, it was just a stray dog someone had left on the beach. It happens all the time."

I wasn't sure why, but I didn't completely believe his answer.

After we ate, I went to take a shower and get ready for school tomorrow, "Night dad."

"Night baby."

I lay there thinking about what dad had said, and wondered why he seemed to be lying to me. Besides that, were *where* he and Randy going almost every weekend. I wanted to find out, but I was sure dad wouldn't tell me, and just as sure, that Randy wouldn't either. I also knew that Drake knew something he couldn't say either.

I was *going* to find out somehow. I just didn't know how yet.

School went by fast, with all the teachers going over the upcoming tests. At lunch, Hailey caught me and asked about my weekend. When I told her he taken me to Samson's, her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

"Wow. That is a really *nice* place!"

"It was fun. We walked along the beach after dinner, and just talked about everything that came into our heads." I left out the part where we said we loved

each other. It was still early in the relationship, so I didn't think she would understand. I didn't understand myself; I just knew that somehow, from the first time we had met, there was a connection.

I told her about him coming over Wednesday. She said she was happy for me, and I knew she meant it. Lunch was over quickly, so we couldn't talk the rest of the day. I was somewhat glad. I liked my privacy, and Hailey had a way of getting me to tell her everything.

I could tell that Brad was in one of his moody fits this week. I wondered what caused it. I wanted to ask him about it, but it seemed rude so I kept it to myself.

Getting off the bus, I realized the truck was there. Dad usually didn't come in until about five, so I figured he had come home to tell me he was working late again, and wanted me to go to Susan's place. I was really beginning to like her. She was good for my dad, and he needed someone in his life too. I just resented the baby treatment.

I opened the door and he was sitting on the couch. "Hey dad, what's up?"

"Hey baby. Nothing, I got the night off. I thought we could spend some time together, if you would like to?" He said it as if he wasn't sure what my reaction would be.

"That would be great dad. It's been awhile since it was just the two of us." I smiled at him. It was great to get some time with my dad. "What do you want to do?"

"How about we go get an early dinner, and then just come home and watch a movie?" He smiled at me again.

"That sounds good dad. Just a quiet night just the two of us would be just what I need." He looked extremely happy. "Let me change and I'll be ready."

"Ok baby. I'll wait here." He was beaming.

A night with my dad was something I hadn't thought about, but truthfully it is *just* what I need. I changed quickly and came into the living room. "Ready?"

"Let's go." He said.

"Where are we going?" I asked, not caring really.

"I thought I would take you to your mom's favorite little diner. It's where we met. Is that ok?" I could tell he was afraid it would bother me.

"That sounds great dad. I have always wanted to try it out. Mom talked about it all the time."

"Why didn't you say anything before?" he looked at me curiously.

I smiled at him sheepishly. "Because I wasn't sure you would want to go there." I still wasn't sure.

He understood what I meant, "Just because your mom and I split up doesn't mean I forgot the good times we had. I really loved her. We were just two different people, and we couldn't make it work. It doesn't mean we didn't love each other always, in some way."

I had never heard dad talk that way about mom before. He had never talked bad about her; we just never brought it up at all really. It was a long drive to the diner, named The Diner. It was simple, but really a cute name.

It was good food too. I wasn't sure. Mom wasn't one for picking the best eating spots. She was a pretty good cook, but when it come to going out, she would rather go to the local fast food joint instead of a real place, so I was pleasantly surprised by this place.

"How is it?' Dad finally said.

"It's really good. I love it." I really meant that too.

"Maybe we could come again sometime?" He said hopefully.

"That would be great dad."

We didn't say much thru the rest of dinner. He asked me about school and my friends, and I caught him off guard when I asked him about Susan. He didn't give me a straight answer so I decided to save that one until next time.

"What do you want for your birthday?" He caught *me* off guard that time.

"I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it. Besides, you already gave me Granny's ring. I don't need anything else." I really didn't want anything else.

"Susan wants to give you something, and she asked me what, so I told her I would ask you. Is there anything you want, or *need*?" I could tell he wanted to give me something so I thought about it for a minute.

I could use a new dress for the party Saturday, but I wasn't sure that would do, but I had an idea, "Maybe she could take me shopping Saturday morning for a new dress for the party?"

I could tell that made dad happy. He had a big smile on his face. "That would be great. I know Susan really wants to show you she loves you too, and that would make her so happy. She can take you to town, and you can pick it out. She took all day off for the party so I know she can do it early, and still have time to get everything done at Randy's."

It was great. I wanted to get to know Susan better, and I could tell she wanted to too, but was afraid to push it too far. It would work out for us both.

"What kind of dress do you want baby?" I could tell he didn't really care, but he wanted me to know he wanted to be involved in my life.

"I'm not sure dad. I guess I'll just have to look around."

"You ready to go baby?" I nodded. Dad paid the check and we went out to his truck.

We drove for a while in silence. I was thinking about how much fun the night had been. I never realized how close dad and me had become until tonight. Now I know I can't live without him. I wish I could tell mom how things were working out, she would be so happy to see us like this.

"What would you like to watch?" Dad finally said as we pulled into the driveway.

"I don't care dad. Just spending time with you is enough." I could see the happiness on his face. We just put in the first DVD we picked up, and sat there in silence. I laid my head in his lap and watched the TV.

The next thing I remember was dad waking me. "Ronnie, baby, go to bed hon, it's late."

"Ok." I mumbled and tried to get up, but I stumbled and hit my leg on the coffee table. Dad picked me up and carried me to bed. He put me down clothes and all, and covered me with the sheet.

I woke up early and dad was still home. I got up and went to the kitchen. "Hey, baby. How'd you sleep?"

"Fine dad, sorry about falling asleep on you."

"That's ok. It's been awhile since I carried you to bed though." He laughed.

I went to take my shower, and get ready for school when I heard him. "By baby, see you tonight."

"By dad."

I sat at the table for a while, and thought about last night. Wondering what was going on with dad. Why had he decided to have a daughter, dad night like that unexpectedly? Not that I minded, I didn't get to see much of him lately. Whatever was in the woods was keeping him away a lot. I didn't realize what time it was, and I almost missed the bus. The day went just like yesterday. More study sessions from the teachers. Lectures about how important our test scores were for college and stuff like that.

I decided to talk to Brad. His mood swings were so weird that they scared me. Even though Hailey never said, I knew it bothered her too. She was very standoffish when he was like that. I didn't know how to bring it up so I thought about making it a joke, "Hey Brad. How's it going, you being manic again?"

He tried to blow it off with a weak smile, "Just tired I guess." That was the only explanation I was going to get because he turned to the window, and stayed quiet the rest of lunch.

I looked over at Hailey, "My dad's girlfriend is throwing me a party Saturday night. Do you think you can come?"

She looked surprised, then sad, "I'm sorry Ronnie. I have to work at the flower shop Saturday. I wish I could."

"That's ok. Your job is important." I was a little disappointed, but I also knew it would give me more time with Drake if I didn't have to introduce Hailey to everyone.

I was glad when the day was over and I got off the bus. Dad's truck was gone, as usual, and I went in and locked the door behind me. I wasn't worried about my late night visitor, but I wasn't taking any chances. Anyway, dad had told me to lock the doors when I was alone so....

I spent the night studying for my finals. I was so into my book that I didn't notice dad come in. I jumped when he walked into the kitchen.

"Sorry baby. I didn't mean to scare you."

I looked at dad's face. He looked very tired. I glanced at the clock, and it said 9 o'clock.

"Are you ok dad?"

"Yea just tired, we chased a coyote all over the beach tonight. When we finally caught him, he was hurt so we had to take him to the vet. Drake offered to take him, so I could come home."

"Do you want me to fix you something to eat?"

"No baby. I think I'm just going to shower and lay down."

He walked out of the kitchen, and I noticed he was limping slightly. It must have been a hard night.

It was finally Wednesday and I knew I would see Drake when I got home, so the school day dragged on forever.

When I got off the bus, I saw his truck in the drive. He was waiting, leaning against the side of the house with his arms crossed over his chest and a smile on his face. He was wearing a tight black tee shirt that really accentuated his muscles. His left leg bent back, and his foot was propped on the side of the house. I ran up to him, and he grabbed me up into a bone-crushing hug. Then we kissed.

I finally pulled away so I could unlock the door, and go inside to put my books down. He just kept his arms around my waist as I open the door, and he picked me up and carried me in. He sat me down on the couch kissed me again. I had to pull away so I could breathe.

"Hi." I finally said.

"Hi." was all he said, and then he kissed me again. When he finally let me go, I just sat on the couch beside him. "How was school?"

"Boring, we're studying for are finals next week." He was studying me with those eyes again, and I could hardly breathe. "How have you been since Saturday?"

"I've been lonely, thinking about you all the time." I dropped my head, but he put his hand under my chin, and softly lifted it up. "Don't be shy around me."

I looked at him, and then just lay my head on his chest and closed my eyes. "I wasn't sure you would be here when I got home."

He pulled me up to look in his eyes. "Why?"

"I was afraid you would have time to think about it, and realize I wasn't the one for you." I tried to smile, but he just looked into my eyes and shook his head.

"That will never happen. You are *absolutely* the one I want." Then he leaned down, and kissed me again. Only this time instead of the forceful need as before, it was soft and lingering.

I was breathless when he let me go. I just laid my head back down on his chest, and we sat there for a while. When I finally rose up, he looked at me questioningly.

"I have some studying to do." I told him.

"Let me help." He followed me to the kitchen table, and sat down beside me. We studied there until dad came home. We heard his truck outside in the drive. I got up to unlock the door, and remembered I hadn't locked it today. Drake looked at me puzzled. "I lock the door when I'm alone ever since..."

"Oh." He knew what I was talking about without me finishing my sentence.

Dad came in the door. "Hey, baby, hi Drake, nice to see you here today," He surprised me by saying. I didn't think he would be mad but I didn't expect him to be *that* ok with it.

Drake stood up, "I guess it's time for me to go. I have to help dad today, and I have to be out early tomorrow."

I got up to walk him to the door. I looked at dad to see if he was watching. He wasn't so I went on. Drake turned around at the door and kissed me lightly. "See you Saturday. Ronnie. I can't wait." He said that with a smile, and I wondered what it was. I hope he didn't think he had to get me anything, and then I remembered.

"Oh, I am going with Susan Saturday morning dress shopping, so I won't be able to see you until the party." He looked sad, but smiled anyway.

"Ok. Then, I'll see you at the party."

It was 7AM when Susan picked me up for our shopping trip Saturday morning. She couldn't hide how happy she was. I was surprised at how excited I was too. We left out after saying bye to dad, and in the car she started, "You can't

believe how much it makes me happy to do this for you. When Gabe told me it was your idea...,” she couldn't say anymore.

"I want to thank you for doing this for me Susan. I don't know what I would do without you. Having dad take me, was not an option. Have you ever been shopping with him?"

"Yea I have, so I know what you mean. He is not a shopper. Still for you to ask me...."She trailed off again.

"I really do want to get to know you better Susan. I see how you look at dad, and how he looks at you." I could see her eyes glow when she thought of him.

We made small talk about everything, from school, to the party on the way to the store. When we finally got there, she said. "Today is on me so don't worry about anything."

I had brought my checkbook to buy it myself, "Susan, you are already throwing me a party. I can't ask you to buy me a dress too."

"No, the party is from all of us, me, your dad, and Randy. This is from me alone. There is no need to argue. It's settled." She said that in a way that I knew it wouldn't work to try to dissuade him, so I conceded.

We entered the mall, and found our way to the dress store. It had everything you could imagine. It took me about 15 dresses to find one I liked, and then Susan took me to a shoe store. I started to protest, but she held up her hand, "Don't even try." she said and again I knew it was fighting a losing battle. She was as stubborn as my dad was. I found a pair that matched my dress, and didn't hurt my feet. By the time we were done there, it was lunchtime. She asked me where I wanted to eat. I told her the food court was fine, so we found a table, sat my stuff down, and got our food.

"I have had a really good time today." I said when Susan sat down across from me. She just smiled.

I knew it was time to be getting back. There was still a lot of work to do at Randy's place.

"Are you ready to go Ronnie?"

"Yea I guess we better go."

The ride home was quiet. I was pleasantly surprised by my day. The only thing that could make it better was seeing Drake tonight.

It was six when we left for the party. Dad had said he loved my dress. It was royal blue, and made of satin so it shimmered in the light. It was strapless but not too low cut, so dad didn't complain. I wouldn't normally buy a dress if I wasn't going to wear it more than once, but Susan said this was *my* prom, and I should look the part. I loved the dress so much; I let her talk me into it. The shoes had a low heel, and were slip on, and they were royal blue too. I made sure I could wear them again.

"Did you have a good time with Susan today?" Dad said as we headed out.

"Yea dad, it was fun. I enjoyed it a lot."

I could see the smile on his face. However, it was true; I had had a nice time.

We rode the rest of the way without saying too much. I started to get anxious when we turned onto Randy's driveway, though I didn't know why. I got out of the car and looked around at all the people there.

They all shouted "HAPPY BIRTHDAY" in unison, and to my surprise, I wasn't the least bit embarrassed. I usually stayed away from large crowds, but I felt comfortable here at Randy's, with all my extended family. I chatted with some of them as they came up to hug me, and congratulate me on being 18 years old. I didn't think about it until they had said it, but I was *officially* an adult now.

No one felt the need to get me anything big, just a lot of hugs, and congratulations. I looked around, but didn't see Drake. Randy saw my face and whispered, "He'll be here. He's just running late." Late with what was what I wondered. Didn't he usually have Saturdays off?

It was about an hour later when I saw his car pull up. We were all outside, since Randy's living room wouldn't hold everyone. I slipped off to go see him. He was getting out of the car by the time I made it. He picked me up into a kiss that would have normally made me blush, but I just put my arm around him, and kissed him back with just as much enthusiasm as he was giving me. When we were both gasping for air, he quit and put me down. We walked up to the porch with his arm around my shoulders.

Randy was beaming, but dad looked less than thrilled to see such a public display, though he didn't say anything.

The rest of the night went by fast. Everyone was chatting, or whispering. They had all made sure to come and say happy birthday to me personally. I had only met most of them a few times, but they treated me as if they had known me my whole life. It felt like a family to me.

When Drake finally asked me to take a walk on the beach, I was more than ready to get away. We walked along with his arm still around my shoulders. "You look very sexy in that dress."

"Thank you."

"So how was your day?" He had stopped to look at me.

"Getting better all the time," I said as I put my arms around him.

"Do you want your present now?"

"You didn't have to get me anything." I was surprised he had.

"I know, but I wanted to." He handed me a small box.

My hands shook as I opened it. It was a necklace. It had my name made out of gold, hanging on a rope chain. The O in Ronnie was a stone. It was a lavender color, which shined, even in the dark. It was beautiful. "Thank you Drake. It's beautiful." I took it out of the box, and he fastened it around my neck.

"You're welcome Ronnie. The stone is an Amethyst crystal. It's supposed to protect the wearer from harm. That's why I was late. It wasn't in when I got to the jewelry store, and I had to wait for the truck to get there."

We started walking again, and I couldn't believe how happy I was, then I thought of mom.

He must have noticed the look in my eyes, "What's wrong?"

"I was just wishing mom could have met you."

"Oh."

I was quiet for a while and Drake didn't say anything. I finally stopped, and reached up to kiss him again. He responded, as I knew he would, and pulled me into a kiss that made me feel a knot in my stomach. I had to stop before it went further than I wanted it to. "We better get back. It's getting late."

"Ok." I could tell he didn't want to go back any more than I did, but dad would be getting worried.

Susan and dad were getting ready to leave when we made it back to the house. Everyone was saying goodbye, and going home.

"We were just about to leave baby. I was asking Randy if he could get you home safe."

"I'll take her home sir." Drake had spoken up, "If that's ok with you."

"Well," Dad hesitated, but I saw Susan give him a nudge. "Ok, just try not to be too late *please*."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Dad was letting me decide when I was coming home. I couldn't speak.

"No sir. Not too late."

I followed Drake into the house, and he pulled me down on his lap and kissed me again. Randy cleared his throat as he came in. Drake just laughed and

started kissing me again. Randy had decided to go to bed after everyone left, and Drake and I stayed on the couch.

The time went by fast as we sat there. I didn't want to stop kissing him, and I was afraid of how far he wanted to go. "I think you should take me home," I told him when I had the knot in my stomach that told me to stay.

"Ok...If you're sure." He looked like he wanted me to stay, but I knew that wouldn't be a good idea.

"Yea, I'm sure." I sighed.

"Ok then. I'll take you home."

When I got home the porch light was still on, but Dad must have gone to bed, so I was very quiet as I went to my room. I lay there and thought about what a perfect day it was, and if life could get any better than this. I took off my necklace, put it on the bedside table, and starred at it. The stone was beautiful and I didn't want to break it.

4. Stalker

When I woke up Sunday, I thought about Drake and my necklace. I took it off the table, and put it back on. I looked at myself in the mirror above my dresser, and couldn't believe it was really me.

Dad had to work today, and I decided to go for a walk. Every time I seem to get the chance to go walking in the woods, someone comes along. Whether it's a stranger standing at the edge, or Drake showing up unexpectedly, it didn't matter. I still had never gone. Today was the day. I would just go to the woods behind the house today. I would rather go to the ones at the beach, but these would work for now.

I put on some clothes that would be woodsy, and left dad a note on the kitchen table, just in case he got home before me. I knew it wasn't the shortest walk to the woods, so I brought a couple bottles of water, and a snack for later. I felt anxious, as I got closer to the trees. I couldn't explain why, just that I was unsure if I should be doing this, but something compelled me to keep going. I hesitated as I got to the edge of the trees, then I took a deep breath and went it.

I walked for a while just looking around. It was a wonderful sight. The leaves were new, and just starting to grow back. The dead leaves still on the ground made the most beautiful collage of colors I could never have imagined, as if they had put there for me to see. The leaves made a sound under my feet like music. I knew I was where I was supposed to be. I could hear the birds, and the squirrels in the trees above me. It was like they were all inviting me to look at their home, and I was comfortable.

I didn't know how long I had been walking when I felt someone watching me. I stopped and looked around, but saw nothing. Just my paranoid thoughts coming back, so I put it out of my head and kept on going, wishing I had brought a camera." Next time" I told myself. Then I heard leaves crunch under someone's feet besides my own. I stopped, and got very quiet. I stood perfectly still and listened. I didn't hear anything else so I thought my imagination was going wild, since I was here alone.

I decided it was time to sit, and have a snack before heading back to the house. I found a low branch to sit on. I took out my ham and cheese, and a bottle of water and sat there, lost in my thoughts.

I was eating, and thinking when I heard the leaves crunching again. I froze mid bite and waited.

"*Ronnie!*" I heard that familiar voice. "*Ronnie, are you here?*"

"*Over here.*" I couldn't believe it was him; Drake had come to look for me.

I heard him running, "What are you doing here *alone?*" He sounded angry.

"I just wanted to explore." I cringed from the tone of his voice.

He must have noticed my reaction, because his voice went back to the same soothing tone as he continued. "You should *not* go in the woods alone like this. It could be *dangerous.*"

Shocked by his reaction, I tried to hold my emotions in, "I'm sorry." I had my head down so he couldn't see the tears that were forming.

"No, *I'm* sorry for scaring you like that. I was just so scared myself that something had happened to you." He pulled me into a hug, "Let's get you back home shall we."

"How did you know I was here?" My curiosity flared.

"I came by to see you, and found your note."

"How did you get in the house?" I couldn't keep the irritation out of my voice.

"Gabe gave me a key a long time ago, in case I needed him in the middle of the night. Today was the first time I have ever used it though."

I was suspicious of his excuse, so I pressed him for answers. "Why did you use it today?"

He looked flustered, as if I had caught him off guard. "Well, when I got to the house I called for you, no one answered. I got worried so I went in, and that's when I found your note." He put his hand out for me to take it.

I took his hand, and went with him, but I was still confused. Why was he so worried? It was just the woods behind my house. I could tell that it wouldn't do any good to push the subject right now. He held my hand, and led me out of the woods and to my house before he spoke again. "I really am sorry Ronnie. I promise to take you hiking myself, as soon as it's...safe. Ok?"

"Ok Drake." I knew it wouldn't do me any good to argue, so I agreed.

When we got to the door he leaned down to kiss me. I tried to respond as I normally would, but he could tell I was still mad about the scolding he had given me.

"I really am sorry. I have to get back. I'll see you Wednesday. Love you?" He said it like a question. Still afraid I was mad I guess.

"Love you too." I reached up, and kissed him goodbye.

When dad came home later, I was worried that he would be mad too. He came in, and sat down on the couch as I waited for the scolding from him. Nothing, I was suspicious.

"How was your day dad?" I tried to be nonchalant.

"Better than yours I expect." So he knew about the hike.

"What do you mean by that?" I tried to pretend I didn't know. He wasn't convinced.

"Drake feels bad about yelling at you, you know. He was just so worried when you weren't here. He found your note, but didn't know how long you had been gone so he went looking for you. He was afraid you might get lost since you don't know the area that well yet."

I felt so stupid. They were right. I didn't know my way around very well yet, and now his concern seemed justified. I feel so bad about being angry with him.

"I'm sorry dad. How could I have just gone out there alone? I wasn't thinking. I've wanted to go hiking for a while, I had nothing else to do, and I couldn't stop myself. I can't believe I hadn't thought about how I would get back if I went too far. I was even so paranoid that I thought I heard someone following me." I laughed, but then I saw dad's face and stopped.

He looked mad for a second but then it went away, and concern entered his face, "When did you think someone was following you?"

I'm not sure, about an hour or so after I entered the woods. I thought it was just my imagination, but..."

"But what?"

"Well...it wasn't the first time I thought someone was following me. The night after I got here, when I went alone to the beach during the party Randy had, I thought I saw someone at the edge of the woods watching me. Then the day Drake found me at the beach, when I took your truck, I could have *sworn* someone was watching me then. Even the day you dropped me off there. I just thought I was imagining things. Now, I'm starting to get worried dad." I hadn't realized my voice had gotten louder and was trembling until I stopped talking.

"Don't worry about anything baby." He put his arm around me. "We'll keep you safe no matter what...ok?"

Keep me safe. Safe from what, I wanted to ask. I wasn't sure I would get an answer. I tried to sound convinced. "Ok dad." I knew my voice gave me away. Dad pulled me over on his chest, and patted my shoulder.

"It will be fine baby."

` It had been a long day, and I needed a shower and rest, so I told dad I had to get cleaned up, and he let me go. When I got to my room, I let the tears fall. Was someone following me? Why were they? I didn't know the answer to that, but I wasn't gonna take any more chances. At least, I was gonna *try* not to.

The next day I thought about the woods. I don't know why I couldn't stop myself from going toward them. It was as if I was compelled to go, though I didn't know why. I knew it was dangerous to go hiking alone, but I just wanted to, no one was here to go with me.

Maybe I would ask Drake Wednesday when he would take me with him, so I could really explore. I want to go to the woods near his house anyway, and I was sure he knew it pretty well, so I didn't see the problem.

I knew when I got to school; I knew it was going to be one of those days when nothing goes right. I dropped my books on the bus, and then again in the hallway. Maybe I was nervous about the exams. I only had to go half the day but unless I found a ride, I would be here all day.

"Hey Ronnie" It was Hailey. "Do you want a ride home after lunch? You can leave if you want to, after finishing today's tests."

"That would be great Hailey, I was hoping I wouldn't have to stay here all day."

I walked into the lunchroom after I finished my test. I sat down next to Hailey.

After lunch Hailey looked at me, "You ready to go?"

"Yea," I got up and followed her out after waving to Brad.

As soon as we got in the car, she started asking questions. "So, how are things with Drake?"

"Ok I guess." I didn't want to tell too much.

"Come on, give me details."

"What do you want to know?"

"What's he look like? "When can I meet him?"

"If you bring me home Wednesday after exams he'll be there and you can see for yourself."

She looked excited. "OK!"

As we pulled into my driveway, I was feeling anxious. I was like that so much these days. "Do you want to come in?"

"Not today, I promised mom I would help her clean."

"Ok Hailey, see you tomorrow."

I walked into the house alone and turned to lock the door. It seemed almost foolish since my visitor hadn't come back, but I wasn't taking any chances. I went to the kitchen and got a bottle of water out of the fridge.

I looked out the window and saw those beckoning trees. I knew it was stupid but I went outside anyway. I couldn't help but walk toward them, even though my mind kept telling me to turn around. I didn't make it out of the yard when I heard the phone ring in the house. It brought me back to myself, and I ran back inside.

"Hello"

"Hey baby" It was dad, "I was just calling to check on you. I wasn't sure you'd be home yet."

"I'm fine dad. I got a ride with Hailey. Are you going to be working late again?"

"No baby I was just worried about you, see you soon."

"See you later, and don't worry everything is ok. No one's tried to break in today yet." I tried to put humor in my voice.

Dad chuckled slightly, "Alright baby."

That was weird. Dad didn't usually call to check up on me. It's probably because of Doug. He has been more overbearing since the attempted break-in.

Hailey couldn't take me home Tuesday because she had an appointment after her exams, but she was still talking about Wednesday.

"What time will you be done tomorrow?"

"I've got science and history left, so I'll be done by third period." I told her.

"I still have algebra so I won't be done until fifth."

"Ok. I'll wait for you in study hall when I'm finished."

"Sounds good," she bounded off to her next class.

I watched her going down the hall, and noticed how graceful she was. It was almost as if she was dancing.

After I was finished, I went to the study room to wait. I sat there reading a book, but didn't even know what it was about. I kept looking at the clock to see what time it was. Then the bell rang I saw Hailey come in, "You ready to go." I asked her.

"Yea, I just finished my test."

We were on the way to my house when I remembered how she had glided down the hall earlier.

"I was watching you walk down the hall today Hailey, and I noticed how graceful you are. Are you a dancer or something?"

She laughed at me. "No, not a dancer, I practice martial arts. It's almost like dancing, with the balance and stuff."

"Wow, that's cool. How long have you been doing it?"

"Since I was 8, I started late. Most kids start the arts before they start school."

Before I could ask her anything else, we turned onto my street.

Drake was already there, leaning up against the house with his arms folded across his chest. He had another tight tee shirt on that he had tucked into his jeans. He had fastened them up with a belt and buckle Randy had given him. Even his work boots were sexy. He was watching the car as we pulled in.

"Wow." I heard Hailey say under her breath, "He is *fine*!"

"Thanks." I smiled at her, knowing how lucky I was to have him to call my own.

We got out of the car and he came walking toward me. "This is Hailey. She was my first friend at school. Now, she's my best friend."

"Nice to meet you Hailey," he put his hand out to shake hers. "My name is Drake."

She shook his hand back, but didn't take her eyes off his face. Drake smiled, I could tell she liked what she saw, and I became aware that I was a bit jealous.

"So," I started to get her attention, "Do you want to come in?"

"Uh...no, not today, I will let you all talk. I know you don't get to see him a lot." She winked at me as she turned to go back to her car. I felt stupid for being jealous of Hailey. I would have to get used to how girls look at Drake. If I got jealous of every girl that looked at him like that, it would drive me crazy.

After she drove away, Drake grabbed me up into a kiss. I wrapped my arms around his neck and forgot all about being jealous. He let me down so I could open the door. As soon as we were inside, he picked me up in his impossibly strong arms, and carried me to the couch. I just went with it, and kissed him as if I needed him to live. I had to pull away first. I couldn't let it get to far, even though *sometimes* I wanted it to.

"How was school?" He said after I let go of him.

"Fine, I took the last of my exams today so I don't have to go back. I am finally *free* for the summer. The last week of school was for exam retakes, and since I finished all mine, I get out a week early"

"Good. Now I don't have to get you back so early all the time." It sounded like he was teasing but I wasn't sure.

"So what do you have in mind?" I smiled at him.

He just grinned back, and started kissing me again. I pulled away, sat in his lap, and started kissing down his neck. I could feel his body tense up. I had never gotten this close to him before. I was almost afraid I wouldn't be able to stop when I heard dad's car pull in the drive. I just turned so I was sitting beside him on the couch as dad walked into the room.

"Hi baby. How was school?"

"It was ok. I finished all my tests so I don't have to go back."

"How do you think you did?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure I passed everything. Drake has been helping me study for my exams so..."

"That's great Ronnie. What do you want for supper tonight?"

"Do you mind if I take her out Gabe?" Drake had spoken up. I was surprised at what he said.

"Not at all, if that's what she wants." He looked over at me.

"Yea, that would be great." I was suddenly aware that I could go out during the week now. I know it seemed silly to be happy about that, but being an adult was new to me.

"Ok baby. Don't be out to late Drake. You have to be in early you know."

"I know sir. I will be there."

I wasn't sure what to expect, but when we left we turned toward Drakes house he shared with Randy. "You don't mind having dinner with me and dad do you?"

"No, of course not," I hadn't seen Randy since my birthday.

We pulled into his driveway and it didn't look like anyone was home. "Where *is* Randy?"

"He's not home yet."

"Oh."

"I thought I could *cook* you dinner tonight."

"I didn't know you could cook?"

"I do a lot of the cooking when I'm here. It gives dad the chance to rest."

"Ok. Can I help?" I asked as we went into the kitchen.

"No thanks doll. I want you to just relax."

I sat there watching him. I could tell he knew his way around a kitchen. "Who taught you to cook?"

"My mom, she always said a man should be able to fend for himself, even in the kitchen." He smiled at me as he said it and I had to smile back.

We both looked up when the front door opened, "Hey dad."

"Hey Drake," he said, but he was looking at me. "What are you doing here hon?"

"I'm cooking you all dinner."

"Great, Drakes as good a cook as his mom is." He winked at me and I could just smile.

Drake really was a good cook. He fixed a Mexican dish that tasted excellent. We all just sat around the table for a long time, laughing and chatting about everything.

I looked out the back door, and it was getting dark outside, "I guess I better get home Drake. I don't want you to be late tomorrow. The boss can be a pain." I smiled at him,

He smiled back, "Yea he's a real slave driver." We all laughed.

We were both quiet as he drove me home. The house was dark except for the porch light. Drake got out of the car to walk me to the door. He kissed me, "I

will see you Saturday morning. I thought we could go for an early walk on the beach."

"That would be great." I reached up as he bent down, and he kissed me ever so lightly.

"Night doll."

"Night Drake"

He waited until I was inside before I heard him head for his car. I just sighed into the darkness as I found my way to my room.

Saturday seemed a long time to wait, and without the distraction of school, it was even longer. I called Hailey to see if she wanted to come over, but she and her mom were gone for the day to the mall, her brother told me, so I was alone. Dad had left early, but not before telling me to stay out of the woods. I promised him I would, but I was staring out the kitchen window and wanting to go there. If I had a way I, would go to the beach, but I really didn't want to walk that far today.

I decided to clean the house. It wasn't really a hard job with dad gone a lot, but a good overhaul was due, so I got started. I stripped all the beds, and put the linen in the washer. Then I remade the beds with fresh, clean sheets. I climbed onto the counter, took all the dishes out, and dusted inside the cabinets. I decided it was time to move all the furniture in the living room, and sweep under it. I figured I'd rearrange while I was at it.

I was hanging the sheets up on the outside line; I always liked how they smelled in the springtime after the wind whipped them dry. I just stood there taking in the beauty of the place when I saw him.

It was a man standing at the edge of the woods behind dad's house. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. Just then, the wind picked up and the sheet I had just fixed to the line blew in front of my face. By the time I had pulled the sheet *away* from my face, the man was gone.

I wasn't sure if it was my imagination or not, so I decided it was time to go back inside the house. Whoever or whatever I had seen out by the woods had scared me. As I was locking the door, I heard dad's car in the driveway. I unlocked the door for him to come in.

He looked shocked as he came in the door. "The house looks nice baby. Did you get bored while I was gone?" He was smiling at me, and I knew he was teasing.

"Something like that." I smiled back.

I noticed he had brought home pizza. "Hope you don't mind. I didn't feel like cooking tonight."

"No that's fine dad. I'm actually kind of tired myself."

"Well no wonder." He was laughing this time. "Susan is coming over for dinner tomorrow night. She's gonna cook."

"Ok." Susan was a good cook, and I really wanted to learn more cooking skills. Since Drake was so good, I needed to try harder myself.

I considered telling dad about the man at the edge of the forest, but I didn't know who he was, or even if it was real so I figured, there was no need to upset him.

I thought about who he was, as I lay down that night. He seemed to be watching me, but he could have just been a man looking for some alone time. So why do I feel like there's something more.

I had finished the kitchen and living room yesterday, so I decided to work on the hall closet and bathroom today. I took everything out of the hall closet and cleaned the floor at the bottom, before dusting and rearranging it. It didn't take as long to do the bathroom. I just swept and mopped since I couldn't move the stuff around. I *did* rearrange the towels in the bathroom cabinet.

After I finished in the house, I decided to take a walk around the yard. I instinctively looked over to the place I had seen the man yesterday, but it was empty. All I could see were blooming trees. As I walked around the yard, I was thinking how a bench in the side yard would look pretty with some flowers around it. I looked up to see the woods again that always seemed so enticing to me. I was momentarily enthralled in my thoughts, when I heard a car coming up the road; I didn't know who it was so I went toward the porch. I had just made it to the bottom of the steps when the car pulled in the driveway, and rolled the window down.

"*Veronica!*" I knew that voice. Doug!

I stumbled and fell to my knees, as I tried to run up the steps toward the house, hoping that I could make it before he got out of the car. I was just pushing the door shut, when he pushed it back open from the outside.

"*Go away!*" I tried to yell at him, I could hear the trembling in my voice.

"*I have to talk to you!*" He yelled, as I tried to push the door shut with his strong arms pushing against me.

I knew I was going to lose.

The door flew open, and knocked me to the floor as he came inside. The look on his face scared me even more. He was the same man I had seen at the edge of the woods the day before. But, his face seemed different today, it was wild and animalistic, and not the calm stare I remembered. I tried to back away, and bumped against the couch.

"*Get out!*" My voice cracked with fear.

He reached out and grabbed the upper part of my arms with his big hands, pulling me to a standing position. I tried to fight him off, but he was stronger than I was. I was alone and helpless. I started crying.

"Please don't, please leave." I pleaded with him. "*Let me go!*" I shouted as I tried to pull away again. He pulled me closer and wrapped one of his arms around me, to hold both of my arms in one of his. He used the other to pick me up. He was carrying me outside and I tried to kick, but he shifted his body and all I got

was air. I was no match for this wild, strong man. I knew he was taking me, and I couldn't do anything to stop him. All I could think, was why me?

He went out on the porch and stopped, just long enough to look around. He seemed satisfied that we were alone, and started for his car.

"Help me!" I shouted, *"Someone please help me!"* I knew it was no good. None of my neighbors was close enough to hear me.

I didn't know where he came from, but out of nowhere, Drake was suddenly running up behind Doug, and pulled me out of his arms. He put me on the ground and turned to try to grab him, but Doug had taken off running, and made it to his car. He was shutting the door by the time Drake got to him. He was backing fast down the driveway with Drake chasing the car. Drake stopped at the end of the driveway and turned to me. He was running back to where I was sitting on the ground crying. He leaned down, *"Are you ok? Did he hurt you? How did he get in?"*

I couldn't answer him. I couldn't stop crying. He picked me up, and carried me into the house. He sat me down on the couch, and let me cry on his shirt until I could speak again. Then he took my head in his hands, looked straight into my wet eyes, and said quietly, "What is it Ronnie? How did he get in? Are you ok?"

"Yea," I managed to choke out. "I was out in the yard when he pulled up. I tried to make it to the house before him, but he was faster than I was." I had to catch my breath a moment before I could continue, "He pushed the door open, and when I wouldn't go with him, he grabbed me..." I looked up into Drake's eyes horrified, "I saw him yesterday too. He was watching me from the edge of the forest. I didn't recognize him as Doug because I never actually *saw* him the night he tried to break-in." I started crying again.

He started to take me into his arms again and then stopped. I saw him concentrating on the bruises that were forming on my arms where Doug had grabbed me.

His face went livid. I had never seen him so angry. He must have noticed the look on my face and straightened his expression. He pulled me to him again, and I lay there crying on his chest. "Don't worry. He won't be back." The tone of his usually sensual voice scared me.

I finally got control of myself, and looked up at Drake puzzled. "How did you know he was here? Where did you come from?"

"Well...." He stuttered, "I was doing some scouting in the woods behind the house, and heard you scream."

I don't know why, but I got the feeling he wasn't telling me everything. Whatever it was had saved me today, so I didn't ask him about it. "Oh."

"I'm gonna stay here until Gabe gets home. I'm not leaving you alone with him around."

"Won't you get in trouble?" I didn't want him to leave. But I didn't want him to risk his job either.

"It doesn't matter. Besides, Gabe won't say a thing when I tell him what happened."

That scared me, "Do we have to tell him?" I remembered his face when it was just dents on the door, and this was much worse.

"Yes we do. Don't you think he should know that someone is after his daughter?" He looked at me curiously.

Those words made me shiver. I hadn't thought of it that way and it scared me more.

Drake had felt my movement, "Don't worry. I won't let anyone hurt you." I felt better, but not completely at ease. What if what he said was true? Why would someone be after me?

"Drake?"

"Yea doll."

"Why do you think someone is after *me*?" I wasn't sure I really wanted to know.

"I don't know doll, but he's *not* getting anywhere near you again." He said, with such forcefulness in his voice that I knew he meant it. "*I'll kill him first!*" Those words made me shiver harder, and he pulled me closer to him.

I fell asleep on Drake's chest. Someone knocking on the door waked me up. Susan walked in, and looked at my face questioningly, "Is everything alright?"

Drake told her what had happened as I watched her face become horrified. "*Oh my, are you ok hon? Did he hurt you?*" I saw her look at my arms as she asked.

"No. It looks worse than it really is. I didn't expect you yet. Did you get off work early?" I tried to make my voice calm.

"Yes. I just wanted to spend some time with you before Gabe gets home, if that's ok?"

"Yea, that would be great." I looked down to see grass stains on my jeans. "Do you mind if I clean up first?"

"No hon. I'm sure you need some time. Gabe told me you were redoing the house but, *wow*." She was looking around the living room. I could tell she was trying to make me feel better.

"Do you like it?" I managed to ask.

"Yes. It looks really good."

"Thanks, I will be back in a few minutes."

"Take your time honey. Don't rush on my account. Drake and I can catch up."

I heard her whisper as I was walking down the hall.

"What happened? How did he get so close?" Susan knew more than I did too. I waited to hear what he said.

"I don't know. I was scouting close by, and I heard her scream for help. I tried to chase him, but I was afraid to leave her, so I let him go. Ronnie said he was watching her yesterday too."

"You did the right thing Drake. We are just going to have to watch closer from now on." I could hear fear in her voice.

"Ronnie!" I heard Drake call me from the living room.

"Yea," I walked back down the hallway, since I hadn't made it to the bathroom yet.

"I'm going to get back if you feel safe with Susan." I could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

"Sure, Drake, It's ok; I know you have to get back soon."

"If you want me to stay, I will?"

I considered saying yes, but I knew he had to go. I wouldn't want him in trouble. "No. I need to clean up. And I would like to talk to Susan anyway."

"If you're sure?"

"I am."

"Call me if you need anything .Ok?" His eyes were full of angst.

"I will." He kissed me lightly on the forehead before he walked out the door.

When I came back out of my room after my shower, Susan was checking out the kitchen cabinets. "What do you think?"

She looked startled. "Oh, sorry I didn't see you there. They look great hon. you did a really good job."

"Thanks."

We went to the living room and sat down on the couch. "Are you *really* ok?"

I couldn't answer at first. I didn't know the answer. "I don't know Susan. I don't know why he seems to want me."

"Sometimes a person will get infatuated with another person, and just can't take no for an answer. But don't worry, Drake and Gabe won't let anything happen to you if they can help it."

I knew she was right, and I tried to feel better, but I knew I wouldn't be able to until dad got home. He was my rock.

"What do you think dad is going to say? I'm afraid he might flip out."

"Gabe is sure to be mad, but he's not going to flip out hon. He will probably just keep a closer eye on you until he can find away to keep Doug away, *permanently*."

I wasn't sure she was right. She hadn't seen his face at the beach. She hadn't heard his voice after the night Doug tried to break-in.

Susan looked down at her watch, "I better get started if I'm gonna have dinner finished before Gabe gets here." I followed her to the kitchen, to get some cooking tips. We tried to talk about anything but my experience while I watched her. She was even giving me some cooking ideas as we heard dad pull in the driveway.

Dad walked into the kitchen where we were just setting the table, "*Baby, Are you ok?*" His eyes were full of anger.

I knew it was coming, "Yea dad. Drake showed up before he could take me anywhere." I tried to sound convincing, but I saw him looking at my arms. I wished I had put on something with sleeves. "I swear daddy. I am *fine*!"

We ate supper in silence. I kept looking at dad, but his expression never changed. I believed that if he could get his hands on Doug right now, he could probably strangle him. I decided it was time for me to go to bed. I couldn't take any more of dad's 'I can't believe I wasn't here' looks. He was always very

protective, but this was really eating at him. He felt like it was his fault even though I was the one who chose to stay home alone.

"I think I'm just gonna go to bed. I'm really tired from the last few days." Dad gave me an understanding look as I got up. I left the table, but got the feeling they both knew what I was really doing. I just wanted to be alone.

I couldn't sleep. I just kept on wondering what everyone was keeping from me. I knew it was about the man that had tried to kidnap me, but it didn't make sense. I had never met the man before he tried to kick my door in that night I was home alone. So *why* was he fascinated with me?

I couldn't get the picture of Doug's face out of my head. First, that night at the edge of the woods, then again when he had come in the house. I was trembling under the blankets, though it was a warm night. I tossed and turned until I had to get up. I went to get a drink of water to settle my stomach, which was now turning in knots. I remember feeling this way after the car accident that had taken my mom away from me.

I was standing at the kitchen sink rinsing the glass, when I decided to prove that it was all fine. I walked over to the closed curtains in the living room, and opened them wide to look into the dark night. I almost let out a scream as my eyes focused on a figure that was standing there, but was gone in the same second. It had to be my imagination, but I still pulled the curtains shut again, and sat down on the couch.

I didn't want to go back to my lonely bedroom and think about him again. I turned on the TV, and found an infomercial about hairbrushes that detangled wild hair. If anything could bore me to sleep that would.

I was supposed to go with Drake tomorrow, but I didn't know how that was going to go now after what had happened. Was he still going to want to take me anywhere after that? Or, would he want to lock me in a safe house?

I knew dad was hiding something from me. After Susan showed up earlier, I figured out she knew too. Does everyone but me know what's going on?

Why are there so many secrets here? I knew it had something to do with this man Doug. What I didn't know, was why it involved me.

Maybe I'd ask Drake tomorrow, and see if I can get a straight answer for once. I knew he knew something too.

I woke up during the night, and realized I was in my own bed. Had dad woken up and saw me on the couch? It wouldn't be the first time he had to carry me to bed. I turned over to go back to sleep when I remembered the face in the window. I shivered again, and then it was black.

5. The First Time

I got up around seven. I was too excited to sleep any later. Dad and Susan were still in bed. Long night I guess. I tried not to think about it. I knew Drake said we were going to go for a walk on the beach, so I dressed in shorts, and decided to wear a shirt with sleeves so Drake wouldn't see the bruises that were now *very* prominent. I went to wait on the couch.

It seemed like forever, but it was only about an hour when I heard dad getting up. I watched him come down the hall, trying to do anything to distract my thoughts.

"You're up early." He said when he saw me on the couch. "I figured since you were up late watching TV.... you might sleep in." He grinned at me.

"So are you the one who put me in bed then?" I smiled at him. As if, it could be anyone else.

"Sure am." He smiled back. "So what are you doing today?"

"Drake and I are supposed to go to Sabre Beach."

"Ok baby. I'll be gone later. Randy asked me to help him with some stuff." I knew it wouldn't do any good to ask what it was.

"Ok dad. Have fun." One day I was going to find out, if I had to follow them.

He just smiled at me. Then I heard Susan in the shower. Just as I figured, she had stayed over. I was ok with that now, and she seemed more relaxed about it too. She smiled at me nervously as she came down the hall. She glanced over at dad.

"Hey Susan, what are you doing today?" I tried to keep my tone light, so she would know I was fine.

Her face lit up. "I have to work today. Gabe and Randy have some stuff to do too. Are you going to be ok today?"

"Yea, Drake is coming over soon."

"That's great hon. He's a good guy." I just smiled.

I decided to read as I waited for Drake to show up. I hadn't even finished the first chapter when I heard him pull up. "Bye dad." I said as I ran out the door. I didn't wait to see if he was going to say anything.

I opened the passenger door, and Drake leaned over to kiss me. I scooted all the way over against him, put my arms around his neck, and kissed him back. Then I just leaned against him as he pulled out of the driveway.

"How are you feeling today?" He asked me.

"I'm feeling better. At least I'm not crying anymore." I remembered his ruined shirt when I woke up on his chest. "Sorry about your shirt."

"Don't worry about that. I can't tell you how sorry I am for not being there. I wish I didn't have to work so much, so I could be with you more."

"I understand. What you and dad do is important. I'm not scared anymore. I just won't walk outside when I'm alone until something is done about Doug." I shuddered when I thought of him.

Drake pulled me closer to him in the seat. "I think that's a good idea. I also think I am going to have to come over more often. Not leave you alone as much. I'm sure Gabe will be ok with that."

I would be ok with that too.

It didn't take long to get to the beach; he parked his truck, and was on my side before I could step out. He picked me up and kissed me again. We just stayed there for a minute, and then he put me down. We started walking toward the tree line. I was actually hoping we would go into the woods today even though I hadn't dressed for it.

"Are we going to the woods?"

"Not too far in."

I was excited. He hadn't mentioned it when he said we were coming here today. I wish he had warned me so I could have put on different clothes, or shoes

that are at least more sensible. All I had on was a pair of sandals. "You should have told me, I would have dressed differently."

"Your fine. We're only just going far enough to be under the shade anyway."

"Oh." I was disappointed, but tried not to let it show. I was with Drake, and that was the most important part.

When he steered me to the place he was talking about, I could tell he had already been here. There was a blanket and a cooler set up under a big shade tree.

"Oh, Drake, this is *wonderful*!"

"I'm glad you like it." He smiled. I sat down, and he sat beside me. "I thought it would be nice if we just talked, and spent the day together, just the two of us."

I leaned up against him, "That would be perfect." I couldn't believe he had thought of something so romantic. After the day I had yesterday, this is just what I needed, a picnic on the beach, just secluded enough that no one could interrupt.

We sat there together, sometimes talking, and sometimes quietly with me laying on his lap, or leaning against his chest.

He was asking me about mom. It was easier to talk about now. It didn't hurt as much as before. I asked him about his life when he was with *his* mom. She lived in Florida so he said it was fun, but he preferred to be here with Randy. It was his decision to live with Randy, and visit his mom in the summers.

"I would have preferred to stay in Mystic myself, but mom had me so I had to be happy wherever I was. Mom asked me one time if I wanted to stay with dad full time. She had just decided to move again, after a bad breakup with an abusive boyfriend, and needed to get far away. I could see the pain on her face, so I told her no. I couldn't hurt her like that. She never meant to make it hard on me; she thought it was what was best for me."

"I'm sorry about that Ronnie. I wish you had been here all along though. But that's just my selfish side, I wouldn't want you unhappy."

"I think the worst part about the accident, was that mom had finally found someone. Tim was a good man, and he adored her. He was good to me too. We had been coming from his parent's house when it happened. I really liked them too. It was almost like a real family again. He had asked her to marry him that day and she'd said yes." I started crying then. I just couldn't hold it in. Drake just pulled me into his arms and held me quietly.

I finally stopped, but he was still holding me. I looked in his face, and his eyes were that of understanding. "I'm sorry about that. I don't want to ruin our day."

"It's ok Ronnie. I'm glad you told me that. I'm glad I can help you heal."

He *was* helping me heal. I knew I could say anything, and he would still be here. He was the man I wanted, and I knew he'd be here forever. I just lay my head back on his lap, and relished in the thought that he wanted me.

After awhile he asked me if I was hungry, "Sure, I could eat if you want to."

He opened the cooler and had drinks, and stuff for sandwiches. He fixed mine for me and placed it on a napkin. We ate in silence for a while.

"What made you think of this today Drake?"

"I just wanted something that we could do that was just us, with no one around. This came to me last night so I got here early to set it up."

He started asking me about my life before we met. "What was it like, moving a lot?"

"I don't know. It was ok I guess. I was able to see many new places. But, I truly always wanted to stay here. I love the beach, and the woods. But mom didn't like it so..."

"What kind of boys did you date before me?" He grinned at his own question.

"No one special"

He seemed pleased by that, "Good, then I won't have to fight anyone for you later." He grinned about that too, and I just let my hair fall down around my face.

He pushed my hair back behind my ear, "Don't ever hide your face from me; I need to see it *always*."

That made me blush, but I didn't hide it. "You are the best thing to ever happen to me, and I don't want to miss anything." He pulled me into his arms and kissed me in a way, that I never wanted him to let go. I had to pull away before it went any farther. Sometimes I *wanted* it to go farther and that scared me. He sighed. "I better get you home now."

I hadn't realized until he said it that it was after noon. "Ok." I didn't really want to go but I knew it was best for now. A beach towel in the woods was not my idea of a perfect first time, and I knew that if we stayed, it would probably end up being just that.

We walked back to his truck slowly. He carried the cooler in one hand, and had my hand in his other. I had the blanket in my free hand. We didn't talk on the drive home. I was thinking about what could have happened so easily, and how I had wanted it to.

I thought about the closeness I had with Drake, and how I wanted to be closer still. I knew I wanted Drake, in a way I never wanted anyone before, but I had never been with a man in that way.

Dad was still gone when we pulled in, and I knew he would be out for a while. He usually always was when he was with Randy. I didn't open the door right away, I leaned over to kiss Drake, and he was already leaning back to kiss me. I pulled my body close to his, and he responded in the way I hoped he would. He stopped kissing my lips. I let my head fall back as he went down my neck to my chest. He laid me down on the seat of his truck, and my body reacted to his. I was letting myself go. I didn't want to stop anymore. I could feel him unbuttoning my shirt.

"Drake, stop, I can't do this here." I managed to get out thru my uneven breathes.

He stopped and rose up. "Sorry...I didn't mean to get... carried away like that." He pulled away from me.

"No." I said as I sat up. I put one leg across his lap so I was facing him. "I mean..." I said as I kissed him again. "Take me to my room."

He stopped and looked at my face for a minute. Then he opened the door, and carried me into the house. When we made it to my room, he lay me down on the bed, and was kissing my neck, and going down my now completely bare chest. He pushed himself up onto his arms, and looked at my face intently, "Are you sure?"

"Yes" I said as I reached up to pull him back down to me. I knew what I wanted, and I didn't want to wait anymore.

I didn't know long we had been there, but my head was on his chest and he was running his hand down my hair. Neither one of us spoke at first. Drake looked over at the clock, "We better get up before Gabe and dad get here."

I didn't want to move. I just kept my head securely on his chest. I never wanted to get up again. I felt *completely* safe.

He pulled himself out from under my head, and got up first. He wasn't the least bit shy about being naked in front of me, and his body was beautiful to look at. He sat down on the edge of my bed as he pulled on his pants.

"This wasn't your first time was it?" I said in scarcely a whisper.

"No." He said sounding astonished that I had asked. Then he looked at me. I saw the realization in his eyes. He reached down to take my face in his hands to make me look directly at him, "But it *was* yours wasn't it?" He said lightly. He suddenly looked worried. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have been

more...careful!" He looked away, like he was talking to himself, "I should have realized when you *hesitated*..."

"No, really, Drake it's ok, "I said, shocked by his reaction.

He took me in his arms."Are you ok? Did I hurt you?" His face was ashen. He was almost berating himself, and I couldn't let him.

"No. I'm fine really. It was nothing like I had imagined it." I tried to explain it to him. "It was wonderful... and...." I hesitated as I tried to look down, "Well... I'm glad it was you Drake." I looked up into his eyes, and gave him a small smile.

I pulled a shirt that was laying by the bed over my head, it must have been Drakes, it was too big for me, then I got up, "I'm gonna clean up before dad gets home." I said, as I looked at my rumpled hair in the mirror. "I'm a mess."

"No." He said as he came up behind me to put his arms around my waist, "You're beautiful."

I rolled my eyes, "Yea right." I turned to look at him. "I won't take long." I reached up to kiss him.

"Ok. I'll wait for you in the living room." He walked slowly out of the room.

I waited for him to leave before I went into the bathroom. I needed the time alone anyway. I took my time in the shower, to think about what had just happened. Did I make a mistake? Should I have used more self-control? No, I'm sure I was ready, I just hadn't thought about what came afterwards. I knew things with Drake and I would be different now, but *how* much different? I didn't want anything to change. It was perfect now.

He must have been thinking the same things I was. His faced looked uneasy as I walked into the front room, where he was sitting on the couch shirtless.

"Are you sure we didn't make a mistake today? Are you sure it was what you wanted?" He looked up at me apprehensively.

"What we wanted," I corrected him, as I sat down beside him and handed him the shirt I had worn.

He pulled it over his head before he spoke, "But I could have waited." He said, as he looked me in the eyes. "I would have waited forever if necessary."

"I know Drake, but I *really* was ready, and I really am glad that I waited.... for you."

He didn't say anything more, he just pulled me into his arms, and we sat there quietly. I didn't hear dad and Randy pull up, just heard the door open.

"Hey kids." Randy shouted as he came in first. "What have you two been up to all day?"

Drake responded, "We spent the morning at the beach, and the afternoon here dad."

"Are you ok Ronnie?" Dad must have told him what happened, or maybe it was Drake, but I was getting tired of the question.

"Yes Randy. I am *fine*."

"Ok hon." Randy was always the calm one.

Drake and I sat on the couch while dad and Randy were in the kitchen. I could hear them talking, but I wasn't trying to make out the words. Drake was quiet; while I had my head rested on his shoulder, he was stroking my hair. I don't know how long we sat there, but I heard dad and Randy get up and walk into the living room.

"You about ready to go son."

Drake looked up at Randy, "I'll be home in a little bit dad; I want to talk to Gabe before I leave."

"Sure, I'll see you when you get home then." I waved at Randy as he walked out the door.

Dad sat down in the chair next to the couch. "What do you need to talk to me about?" He didn't seem concerned about what Drake wanted to say.

I was curious about it myself. What would Drake need to talk to dad for?

"I was just wandering about keeping Ronnie safe, I was thinking it might be a good idea if we didn't leave her alone too often. She could come and stay with Randy while we are working during the day. Then you can bring her home when we get done, and I can stay with her on my days off."

"That's sounds like a good idea Drake; there's always someone there at Randy's." Dad agreed with him.

"Hey wait a minute, don't I get a say in this?" I was irritated they were talking about me as if I was a child.

Drake looked at me sympathetically, "We are only thinking of what's best for you."

"That's right baby, we just want to keep you safe."

I could tell that it wouldn't do any good to argue, so I give in to what they wanted. "OK fine"

Drake got up to leave, and I walked him to the door. I turned to see dad was heading for the kitchen before I reached up to kiss him. He picked me up in a kiss that made me want to ask him to stay, but dad was just in the other room so I let him go.

"I know you're not happy about staying with someone, but it's just to keep you safe until we take care of the situation." I didn't like how he said 'take care of the situation' it made me uneasy.

"I know. I'll try to be ok about it. I just don't like being treated like a child."

"Good. I don't want to lose you. I just found you. I'll see you in the morning when Gabe drops you off. Love you doll."

"Love you too." I waited until I heard his truck leave before I went to my room. What a day it was. If it weren't for having a stalker, my life would be perfect.

"Time to get up," I heard from my door. I hadn't slept very well. My mind was so full of everything that had happened over the last few days that I couldn't get to sleep.

"Ok dad. I'm coming." I shook my head to get my senses, and went to the closet. I knew I was going to be spending the day at Randy's and I didn't know how I felt about it, or how Randy felt for that matter. Would I be intruding on his life? I only hoped he was ok with it. "I'm ready dad." I said as I got to the living room.

When we were on the way dad finally spoke up, "I know you're not happy about this baby, but it's the only way to keep you safe for now."

"I'm not a kid you know." I didn't try to keep the anger out of my voice.

"It's not about that. We don't even know why Doug is following you. I can't seem to find him anywhere." He must have seen the puzzled look on my face. "I have been looking since the night he tried to kick the door in."

I hadn't thought about that. Dad did say he was going to talk to him. "I'm sorry dad. I just feel like I should be able to take care of myself. I *am* an adult now."

"It's not about age baby. It's about the fact that he almost took you *right out of the house*." His voice had risen slightly.

"I know dad. I will be good. I don't want *you* to get into trouble though"

"Don't worry about me. I can handle myself." Just then, we pulled into Randys.

"Does Randy even know I'm invading his privacy?"

"I'm sure Drake told him last night." He looked at my face, "Don't worry baby, Randy loves you too."

When we got out of the car, Drake came out of the house. "Hey doll. How was your night?"

"I didn't sleep well, too much on my mind."

"Let me worry about that stuff. You just take care of yourself." Like that was possible. I would be worried about Drake and dad finding Doug whenever they weren't with me. I didn't know if I was afraid *for* them, or afraid of what they might do if they *found* him.

Just then, Randy came to the door. "Hey there Ronnie, it's just you and me today huh?"

"It looks that way"

"We better get going Drake. If we're gonna get done early." Dad was already walking to his truck.

Drake leaned down to kiss me. "I'll see you soon."

"Ok. I'll be here." I waved my arm at the house.

Randy held up his hand. "Shall we?"

I took it, "Why not."

The day wasn't as bad as I imagined it would be. Randy was a fun, and happy person. He went out of his way to make me feel welcome. We watched TV for a while, and then we went for a walk around his property as he told me stories of Drake's younger years.

We were sitting on the porch talking about planting some flowers around the yard swing when he looked at his watch, "I have to get lunch on." He said as he got up out of his porch swing. I followed him inside.

"Can I help?"

"Oh no hon. I do this every day." I wondered what he was talking about as I watched him get some leftovers out and reheat them in the microwave.

When I heard dad and Drake come in, I realized he must fix them lunch every day. Drake walked straight to me and leaned down to kiss me. "Hey doll. How's your day been?"

"I've been having fun listening to stories of your childhood." I smiled at him.

He looked over at Randy, "Thanks dad."

"Anytime," Randy smiled back at him.

We all ate lunch quietly. It almost seemed like they were trying not to talk in front of me so I excused myself to go sit on the porch. I was alone in the swing when I saw him. I couldn't stop myself from screaming.

All three of them ran out the door. "*What is it?*" They all said together. All I could do was point. They saw him running away. Dad and Drake both took off. Was dad always that fast or was it adrenalin?

Randy put his arm around me, led me back inside, and put me on the couch. I was hyperventilating. He sat down, and put his arms around me again.

"Don't worry," He said in that soothing voice, "Your safe here. Breathe in slowly Ronnie." I tried to hold in the tears but it was useless. I was still panting when dad came back in a little later. Randy got up, and dad took his place on the couch.

"Where's Drake?" I managed to say when I had calmed down a little.

Dad looked at Randy before he answered me, "He went after him. He's tracking him through the woods now."

I wasn't sure how I felt about that. "But.... Doug is so strong... When he picked me up, it was as if it was nothing... Drake might get hurt."

Dad and Randy looked at each other and smiled. "You're not exactly huge you know baby. It's not much of a strain to pick you up." Dad gave me a teasing grin.

Dad didn't go back to work. He stayed with me here. No matter what they had said about Drake, I could tell the longer he was gone, the more anxious they both got. That made me anxious too.

While we were sitting in the living room, I decided it was time for answers. "Can I ask you two a question?"

They looked at each other for a minute, but dad answered. "Sure baby, anything."

"What are you two really doing when you're supposed to be fishing? I'm not stupid; I know you can't be fishing if you never bring home any fish."

Dad looked at me as if he wasn't sure whether he should answer me or not. "I know you're not stupid baby, and you're right, we're not fishing."

"So what are you doing?"

"We can't tell you."

"Why not?" I was starting to get mad.

"Because it's not time to tell you honey." Randy said.

"I don't understand. What time do you mean?"

"We can't tell you that either." Dad hung his head, as if he knew he was going to have to tell me this someday, but was dreading it.

Randy interjected, "It's not that we don't want you to know Ronnie. It's just not time yet. Soon you will know everything, Ok?"

I sighed, I knew they weren't going to tell me anymore, "Do you promise to tell me *soon*?"

"As soon as we can baby, as soon as it becomes necessary." Dad looked dejected, he really didn't want me to know, but knew it was coming soon.

Just then, the door burst open. I screamed again, but Drake was picking me up into a hug. "Calm down doll. It's just me."

I could feel the blood returning to my face as I looked at him. He looked ok. I had been so worried. I just grabbed a hold of him, and never wanted to let go.

"Oh Drake...I was so worried when you didn't come back." I started crying. He just put his arms around me.

It wasn't as bad this time. I was able to calm down sooner. "Did you catch him?" I wasn't sure which answer I wanted but I saw Randy and dad both looked up at the question, they wanted to know too.

"Yes I did, and he won't be bothering you again." Both dad and Randy looked relieved but I felt more anxious.

"What did you do to him?" I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

He smiled at me, "I just made it clear that if he came around you again, I would make him pay. I wasn't nice about it either, so you don't have to worry about him again. He won't bother you anymore."

"So I won't have to come here every day now. I hate putting Randy out like this."

"It *might* be a good idea, for the time being, if Gabe and I work late, or if I can't come sit with you, for you to still come here though."

"And you're not putting me out hon; I loved having you here today."

"I guess I can come sometimes, but not *every* day, Ok?"

"Ok Ronnie, but you will have come here if Gabe is working after dark. That's the worst time to be alone, and you have to be very careful." Drake had agreed.

"Ok. I'll come here if dad works late, and you can't come to my house." I promised.

I wondered what he meant by after dark being the worst time to be alone. Was there more he wasn't telling me?

6. The Clearing

Drake had kept his word about not making me go to Randy's *every* day, but I was never alone. When he and dad worked late, they still took me there, even though Drake assured me Doug wasn't coming back, he was still anxious after dark. When we would walk outside in the evening, he looked all around as if he was expecting someone to come out of the darkness.

It had been a few weeks since Drake had chased Doug into the forest. I was starting to feel like it was over, and I could go on with my life. I still went to Randy's two or three days a week, and when dad worked after dark, but I could handle that.

I liked meeting everyone who came over. Most of which treated me like family. Only a few of them seemed unsure why I was there so much. I wondered if they knew about Drake and me. Hadn't he told any of his friends? I was going to ask him that about that later.

"Time to get up, baby!" I heard dad just then.

"Uhhhh...." I groaned, "Do I have to today?" I wanted to see if Hailey could come over today. I hadn't talked to her in a while.

"You promised."

"Ok." I got up reluctantly.

Dad was waiting in the living room for me. He was smiling, as if he had a secret. I just gave him a puzzled look but didn't ask, "Ready?"

"Let's go dad." I tried to figure out what he was thinking.

I watched dad while we took the short drive to Randy's. He was smiling the whole time and I knew he was keeping something from me, "What is it dad?"

"Don't you know what day it is?" He looked at me questioningly.

I thought for a minute. Then it finally came to me, "Its Drakes *birthday!*" I shouted, "I almost forgot!" His birthday was only a month after mine on June 6 and I hadn't made it back to the store to get his present.

"Yup, and Randy asked me to bring you over to help him out today."

"Help him out with what?" I was confused.

"To help set up Drakes party."

"Oh, ok. That will be fun, but I haven't picked up his present yet. Can you take me to the store to pick it up when you get done today?"

"If you want to baby, but I'm sure Drake will be happy just to have you there."

It seemed like it had months since Doug had tried to kidnap me, but it had only been a few weeks. It seemed so distant and stupid now, but I shivered when I thought of that day.

Randy was outside when we pulled into the driveway. "Good to see you hon. Thanks so much for helping out today."

"Sure Randy I'm happy to help out anytime." I looked around, "Where's Drake?"

"He already left this morning. I didn't tell him you were coming. I didn't want to ruin the surprise." Randy grinned at me.

"I gotta go baby. I'll see you later."

"Later dad," I called back as Randy took my hand and led me in the house.

Randy pulled me to the kitchen, and pointed to the potatoes on the table, "Do you mind peeling?" He asked me.

I sat down and picked up the knife, "Anything I can do to help." I smiled at him.

We chatted like any other day. People come in and out of Randy's house all the time. I knew most of them but only in passing. It was a little embarrassing sometimes when they would say something like, "Babysitting again," or "Ronniesitting" as one of Drake's friends referred to it. I knew they were just teasing because Randy told me they all knew why I was there.

About one o'clock, Randy was on the phone, "Can you come over early today?"

"Good, yea I forgot. Ok, see you then. Thanks."

He walked over to me, "Ronnie, I forgot to pick up something from the store."

"Do you want me to go for you?" I asked hopefully.

"No thanks hon, Aaron is going to come over to sit with you while I'm gone, so you won't be alone."

"I can stay by myself." Aaron Cunningham was the one who laughed about Randy 'Ronniesitting'. He was ok really, he's Drake's best friend, a very muscular guy with long dark hair, and even darker eyes. He was fun to be around, but I didn't know if I could handle his teasing today.

"It's already taken care of Ronnie. Aaron was coming over for the party anyway; he's just getting here early."

I thought about it for a minute, but knew it was set so I accepted it. Then I had an idea. "Ok, hey, would you pick something up for me?"

"Sure hon, what do you need?"

"It's for Drake. I forgot his birthday was so close, and I haven't had a chance to get back to the store to pick up his gift." I had ordered it over a week ago.

"Just tell me where and I'll get it hon."

"Thanks Randy. It's at Millers jewelry. I already paid it off; they sized it for me. They promised it would be done by today. Let me get you the claim ticket." I

got it out of my purse and handed it to him. He didn't even look at the ticket to see what it was.

Just then, the door came open. I had been here enough to know that most of the people who came here, just walked in. Its one thing I *liked* about coming here. Everyone was family.

"I'm here, and ready to Ronniesit!" Aaron laughed as he came in the kitchen. He picked me up into a hug. "Who's after you now girl?"

"No one," Randy told him, "It's just a precaution." I saw the look that passed between them and became suspicious.

"Don't worry, I'll watch her."

I watched Randy walk out the door, and then nervously looked at Aaron. He was grinning, "Where you been all my life sexy? It's a damn shame Drake saw you first."

I tried to laugh, but I blushed instead. "That's really a shame huh?"

He laughed so hard, I thought he was going to break the windows. I went back to the kitchen. Most everything was done that could be done early so I decided to clean up. I heard the TV come on so I figured I would be alone in the kitchen and that was fine with me.

After I finished the dishes, and put everything away, I went to the living room to see if Aaron wanted anything. As I started to ask him, I noticed he was asleep. He looked much nicer in his sleep. I figured since there was nothing else to do, I would go for a walk. I left a note on the coffee table for Aaron, and went outside.

At first, I just walked around the yard, and then I looked up to see the forest. It was closer to Randy's than I had noticed before. I usually took the long way through the beach. From here, I could go either direction, left went to the forest by way of the beach, and right went straight into a different part of the forest. Right it was and I started.

I knew I wasn't supposed to go into the woods alone, and the same warnings popped into my head just like before, and just like before, it compelled me. I had to go. This time was with more intensity than before. I could almost *hear* the trees calling my name. I walked straight into the woods without another thought. It looked different than I remembered. It was greener, yes, but there was something else, almost sinister about it, but I didn't feel afraid.

The day had been warm in the sun, but in there, it was cold, like taking a walk in late autumn, and I felt myself shiver. I wrapped my arms around myself, and just kept on going. It was as if I knew where to go. As if someone was leading me, pulling me by the hand as I walked around the big oak trees, and past the pine trees. I was vaguely aware I went across a small creek. I knew my feet and shoes were wet, but I couldn't feel it, I couldn't stop myself from moving forward. I felt like I was in a dream, and I could hear the beckoning call even more now. It sounded like nothing I have ever heard before, a soft voice in my head.

I could hear birds chirping, and small animals scurrying away, but I ignored them all. I could hear the warning in my head, but it was getting lower as the voice was getting louder. I went on.

I don't know when or how I got there, but I was suddenly in a small clearing in the middle of the forest. I saw a place in the center of the clearing that looked like someone had built a bonfire the night before. There was a big rock beside the ashes. It was long and flat, and about three feet thick. It looked like a stone bed. Each corner had some kind of rod coming out of it. I walked straight for it without thinking; I knew I was supposed to be here. This place drew me, as if I belonged to it, as if it owned me.

Just then, someone grabbed me from behind. I screamed and tried to fight, tried to see who it was. Someone put a hand over my mouth and started running. I was sure it was Doug. I managed to turn my head enough to see Aaron.

"Are you gonna keep quiet?" He asked as we ran away from the clearing.

I nodded my head, and he took his hand off my mouth. He turned me to an easier position to hold, and ran faster. How had he found me? Where did he come from? What was going on?

I didn't say anything all the way back to the house. I don't know why I had gone so far into the woods. I didn't understand why it had seemed so important at the time. The voices in my head had stopped as soon as Aaron had distracted my thoughts. I felt so stupid.

I laid my head on Aaron's shoulder, and tears came to my eyes. I lay on him until I could see the house. I saw Randy pacing around the yard, and then someone grabbed me out of Aaron's arms. I almost screamed again until I saw it was Drake. He was holding me now, and running even faster than Aaron runs. I held onto him as tight as I could.

He didn't put me down until we were inside the house, then he sat me on the couch. "*Are you ok?*" I could see fear in his eyes. I just nodded.

"*What happened?*" He looked at Aaron as he came through the door.

"I'm so sorry. I fell asleep on the couch, and didn't realize she was gone." He said between panting breaths, "I saw the note that was on the table, and went to find her. I don't know how long she was in the woods," he looked at Randy, "but she was at the clearing when I got there."

"*What!*" Drake was mad. "What happened? *Did anything happen?*" Drake jumped up and stood in front of Aaron.

Aaron held his hands up in front of Drake, "No man, I got there in time. *Nothing* happened. No one was there."

Drake seemed relieved about something. He finally spoke to me. "Ronnie, what am I going to do with you?" He came over, got down on his knees, and put his head in my lap.

"I'm sorry Drake. I don't understand what's going on. I knew it was wrong, that I shouldn't go, but I couldn't stop. I could hear ..." It sounded unbelievable when I said it aloud, "I could hear the trees calling my name, like a voice in my head, and I just couldn't make myself stop and turn around. I know it was foolish, I know I shouldn't have, but I really couldn't stop myself..." I trailed off, I wasn't sure they understood that I had no choice, that I had to go there. I looked from Drake to Aaron to Randy. How could I make them understand?

Randy seemed to be thinking of something, then he left the room.

"Hey. I think you better come on over." He was on the phone, "She went to the woods again. She made it to the clearing this time."

"No ...no...nothing happened, Aaron found her before it could. Ok, see you then."

He came back in the living room. Drake had gotten up and sat beside me. He still was holding me under his arm. Aaron looked like he could jump off a bridge.

"It's ok Aaron." I tried to tell him, and he looked at me, "I would have found a way with or without you, I don't know why, but I know I would have found a way." I really couldn't explain it, even to myself. Why was I compelled to go to that spot, and why does everyone but me, seem to know what it means.

It didn't take dad long to get here. He walked in and looked straight at Aaron. Before he could say anything I stopped him, "It's not Aarons fault, I would have went somehow," And softer I said. "I know I would have."

"I know baby, I was just gonna ask him exactly what happened." He smiled.

I dropped my head back down on Drake, as Aaron told him what he knew.

Then I looked up, "Dad, I don't understand. It was as if the trees were calling me, as if I had no choice but to go. I know this how this must sound." I had to make them understand, and my voice grew louder, "I didn't even know where I was, but I seemed to know at the same time. I was heading for a place that looked like it had a bonfire with a stone bed beside it. I felt the need to go to the bed, and then Aaron grabbed me, then it was over and I realized what I had done. Like I was back to me again and the voices were gone. I'm sorry for worrying everyone."

I looked around the room. They were all looking at me with a puzzled expression. It made me weary to have them all looking at me like that, "What, what did I say?"

Aaron spoke up, "You knew *before* we got you out of the forest what was going on?"

"Yea," I said, feeling like I didn't know something, again. "What is it? What aren't you all telling me?"

Randy sat down beside me with his eyes concerned, "Usually the call of the forest is so strong, you can't break it until you're completely out of them."

I was still confused, "The call of the forest?"

"Yes," Drake talked this time, "The way you thought someone was calling your name? That's the call of the forest, and it's very strong right now. Only a few can resist it. Like me, Randy, your dad, and a few others." He looked at Aaron.

I was starting to get mad. "Is this what you've all been keeping from me?"

"Yes." Dad said. "It was necessary, but I promised to tell you when the time came, and I guess," He looked questioningly over at Randy, "Now's the time?"

Randy got up and started to pace the room. "I think you may be right Gabe. Now does seem to be the time."

"It started a long time ago." Randy began, "My grandfather told me this story when I was young. Some people live in the forest. They believe they are supposed to come into power one day to take over all the lands. It's also written that when the time comes, there will be a marked girl. A girl who will bear them the heir they seek, which will lead them to victory over the protectors.

"My grandfather, my dad and me, and now Drake, are the 'Protectors of the Forest'. We are destined to watch over, and protect anyone who enters. We are also to keep the prophecy from coming true, to keep the child from conception. Drake has known his entire life, as I did as well, that he would be the protector of the one the prophecy meant. His summers with his mom were to protect him until he was mature, to keep him safe from the Forest Dwellers."

Randy went to the window and looked out before he continued. He looked back at me, "Now the prophecy has come to light, and that's why your dad and I have been together so much. He wasn't born a protector, but he can resist the call

as much as if he was. That's why he's the one in the forest all the time. *Because* he wasn't born a protector, the dwellers can't feel him, so they don't bother him. He has become our scout of sorts; he tells us when it's safe to go in.

"The reason your dad let you go with your mom so much, even though she moved a lot, was to keep you away from here. He knew after you came here for good, it was going to be harder to keep you safe so we," he looked at Drake and Aaron, "stepped in, since Drake is supposed to protect you. And they are not the only ones, Susan is the daughter of a protector, and a lot of the people from your party are too."

I didn't know what to say. I just looked at everyone without speaking at first. "But...what does this all have to do with me? Why should it be that I, more than anyone else should be protected? Is it just because I'm Gabe's daughter?"

Drake looked at Randy, like he wasn't sure if they should answer. Randy nodded and Drake began, "The prophecy is about you. *You* are to be the 'Bearer of the Heir'. We have known since you were born. That's why your mom took you away. She and Gabe didn't break up because they wanted to; they separated to keep you safe. It's my job to protect you." He dropped his head, "And I haven't done very well so far."

I looked at dad. "Is that true? Was it all because of me? How do you know I'm the one? Maybe you're wrong." I looked up at Randy, "Maybe it's someone else."

Randy just smiled at me, and with that soothing voice said, "No hon, we're not wrong, you had the mark at birth."

"The mark?" I was confused.

Dad spoke up this time, "When you were born, you had a bruise like shape on your stomach. It was in the shape of the forest line. When Randy came to the hospital and seen it, he told me what it meant. It went away after a few weeks but we, Randy and I, started researching it. We found out that the bearer would live normally until she reaches puberty, then the trees will start calling her. The dwellers will keep her hidden until her eighteenth birthday, when she is offered up the elder to bear the leader they have all been waiting for." He grumbled.

"How is Doug in on this, because I know he is? I knew something was strange about him the first night he tried to get in the house." I didn't know how I knew, but I did.

"He is the 'Seeker of the Bearer'. He is supposed to see if you are really the one. After he realized you were, he tried to take you to the elder. Since you are already eighteen, they won't have to wait." Drake voice was full of disgust. I was feeling the same way.

I didn't know what to say, or think. I knew the way I kept going to the woods wasn't normal. I had been drawn to them my whole life, but now the forest seemed tainted. Like a tragedy had happened to lesson my feelings for it.

We all sat there a while in silence. Everyone looked up when a car pulled in the driveway.

"Well I guess its party time," Aaron said as he jumped up to open the door.

"It'll be ok, "Drake, whispered to me, "let's just try to have fun." I followed him to the door, and onto the porch. People were starting to arrive, so I put everything out of my mind.

Susan was the first one to come up to me, "Hey sweetie how was your day?"

"She knows Susan." I hadn't heard dad come up behind me.

"What? How?" She looked worriedly at dad.

"Come on in, I'll tell you what happened." Susan followed dad inside, after hugging me.

I suddenly remembered what I had asked Randy to do for me. "I'll be right back Drake," and before he could ask, I ran inside. "Randy, do you have it?"

He pulled a small package out of his pocket, "Here you go, hon."

"Thanks." I called back to him, as I put it my pocket and I went to where Drake was waiting for me.

"What was that about?"

"Nothing," He looked at me questioningly, but let it go and we went inside.

Just like before, we ate, chatted, and talked. Everyone was more open now that Randy had told them all I knew the secret. I tried not to listen to them, but I just couldn't help it. I heard them talking about how they could all take turns watching me since the calling had led me to the clearing.

"The dwellers must be ready for the ceremony," I heard someone say. I didn't want to know what that was about. I felt like a child as they talked about me as if I wasn't there.

"You want to go for a walk?" Drake finally whispered to me.

"Yes." I was glad to leave, and ready to be alone with him.

We went around to the back of the house, and walked toward the beach. I was suddenly staring at the forest. It seemed menacing instead of enticing, but it was still compelling me to come. I took a step forward, and Drake stood in front of me to stop me, and block my view.

He pulled me into a kiss, and I forgot all about the calling trees. I put my arms around his neck, and he picked me up. Before I realized it, I was kissing his neck, and he was sitting us down on the sand. He lay me down; he kissed down my neck, to my chest. I felt my need take over as my body responded to his. Then I realized we were outside on the beach.

"Stop Drake, not here."

He pulled back instantly, and just lay over beside me, "Sorry."

"No, *I'm* sorry; I just can't do this here. Not on the beach out in the open like this."

"Its ok doll, I understand."

We lay there beside each other until our breathing became normal, and I remembered the small box that was in my pocket and sat up. "What is it?"

"Here" I handed him the package.

"You didn't have to do this." He reached out hesitantly.

"I know." I said as he took the small box from my trembling hand. "Open it."

He sat up and untied the string that was around the outside of the box. He lifted the lid carefully as he took it out. He laid the box on the sand as he looked at the ring in his hands. It was gold, with his name made into the band. He tried it on and it fit the ring finger of his right hand.

"I sized your finger when you were asleep on the couch one day." He seemed surprised.

"Thanks doll. I love it." He kissed me again. I leaned into his kiss without thinking. He pulled back, "I think we should get you back to the house." My heart and body wanted to stay, but my mind agreed.

"Ok." I said.

He jumped up and reached down to take my hand and pull me up.

We walked slowly back to the house with my head leaning on his chest, and his arm around my shoulders.

Dad was on the porch with Randy and Susan when we got there. Everyone was leaving for the night.

"See you later. Thanks for coming." I heard Randy saying, as we got closer.

"Bye Drake, happy birthday." I heard a lot of people call.

"Thanks," Drake called after them.

I noticed Aaron was still there as we walked onto the porch. He was looking at me. "I'm really sorry about today, Ronnie. I promise not to fall asleep again when I'm on Ronniesitting duty." He grinned as he said it.

"It's ok Aaron." I smiled at him, "It wasn't your fault."

"Don't worry about it Aaron." Drake said, "We all knew it was just a matter of time before the call was too much for her. It just happened to happen on your watch. At least you got there in time."

"Thanks Drake. Happy birthday man, I gotta go. I'll see you all later."

After Aaron left, dad looked at me. "You ready to go baby?"

"I think Ronnie should stay here tonight." I was just as surprised as dad when Drake said it. I wasn't sure how dad would react. "Since I had to work today, I thought I could take tomorrow off and spend it with her."

I could see the concern in dad's face.

"I'll sleep on the couch, and she can have my room Gabe." Drake assured him.

"Well... ok Drake, but mind yourself!" Dad warned him.

I was in shock. I couldn't believe he had actually asked me to stay over. "I don't have any clothes with me."

"We'll go get you some and come back."

"Ok." I was elated.

We left in Drake's truck, as dad was saying bye to Randy. I was still unable to speak.

"It's ok with you isn't it. To stay over tonight I mean?"

I tried to hide the excitement in my voice. "Sure. I just can't believe dad took it so well."

"You *are* an adult now you know."

I did know that, but I still felt like a kid around dad, like I still needed his approval. "Yea I know. It's just weird." Then a thought crossed my mind, "Are you really gonna stay on the couch all night?"

He smiled, "I said I would *SLEEP* on the couch, not stay there." There was a sparkle in his eyes and I smiled. It was going to be a great night.

Randy was still sitting on the porch when we pulled up. I got out of the truck, but Drake was already there putting his arm around my shoulders to lead me to the house. "Hey dad."

"Hey kids." Randy said as we passed him to go inside. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He laughed.

Drake laughed too as he opened the door for me to go in. He led me to his room, "I'll leave you alone to change." He said, as he shut the door.

I sat on the bed for a while, and thought about everything that had happened today. Was I really supposed to be the *bearer*? This person, who was destined to bring about the heir of the forest, which would change everything and all I knew. I didn't want to think about it so I picked up my bag. I usually slept in shorts and a tee shirt, but tonight I brought a gown that was short and lacy. Was it too much? I hope not.

"Night kids." I heard Randy say as I was changing.

"Night dad." Drake said. Then a door shut, and I guessed Randy was in his room.

I figured it was safe to go to the living room so I opened the door carefully and walked out. Drake's eyes opened wide when he looked up to see me coming down the hall. "Wow! You look hot!" he smiled.

Just the reaction I was hoping for. I sat down next to him on the couch. He put his arm around me, and I reached up to kiss him. He pulled me onto his lap, and I started kissing his neck as he ran his hand down my back and pulled me as close as I could get. He started to kiss down my neck as my head lay back. I could feel his tongue on my chest, and my body showed him my intentions without speaking. He picked me up to carry me to his room as I unbuttoned his shirt. I ran my hands down his chest to his belt. I unfastened it as he laid me on the bed. We continued what we had started in the sand.

I woke up and the sheet was over me, but Drake was gone. I looked over at the clock and it said three am. I pulled on my gown from the floor, and went to find Drake. He was lying on the couch asleep so I curled up against him, and pulled the blanket up that had been kicked to the floor. He rolled over and put his arm around me, but didn't open his eyes. I fell back to sleep there.

"Wake up doll." I barely heard him say. "It's after eight."

I looked over to see that he was still there beside me his head propped up on his arm. I smiled at him, and then realized I was in that short gown. "Where's Randy." I asked as I pulled up the blanket.

"He's in the shower. He hasn't come in here yet." Drake must have known what was on my mind.

I got up with the blanket around me, and went to the bedroom to get dressed. I noticed that Drake was following me. It *was* his room, and I figured he needed to get dressed too. When I turned to say something, he was kissing me. I forgot what it was, and let the blanket fall as I put my arms around his neck. I couldn't remember why I came in.

"We better get dressed." Drake reminded me.

"Do we have to?" I said, as I reached up to kiss him again. I pulled off my gown and let it fall to the floor.

"Maybe not right now," He said. He smiled as he picked me up, and laid me on the bed.

"You kids gonna get up anytime today?" Randy called later. I was lying on Drakes chest, and was perfectly content to stay there.

"This time we do need to get up doll."

"Ok." I agreed reluctantly.

Drake got up first and was pulling his pants on as I lay there watching him. I finally got up and reached for my bag on the floor.

"I'll be right back." I said as I leaned down to kiss him.

I pulled the blanket around me, and went to take a shower. When I got back to the room Drake was still sitting on the bed waiting for me.

He was looking intently at my face, "It's a good thing we're staying home today. You look like you could probably use the rest."

"Your right about that, I really could use a day of rest. I haven't been sleeping well." I sat down beside him, "I just can't get everything out of my head. I feel like I'm going crazy. Everywhere I go, I feel like I'm being watched, but there is never anyone around."

He listened without talking. He just pulled me over onto him and whispered, "You safe here. No one is going to hurt you as long as I'm around."

I knew he meant it.

We walked out to the hall and I smelled something cooking. We went to the kitchen to see what Randy was doing. "Hey. You hungry?"

"Yea Randy, It smells wonderful. What are you cooking?"

"Breakfast burritos."

We sat at down at the table, and had breakfast together. It felt right, being there with them.

"So what are you all doing today?" Randy asked as we cleaned up the table.

"Just hanging out here for awhile dad."

"Well, I need to go to town to get some supplies for the house later. I think I'll make a day of it. Go visit some friends, unless you two need anything?"

"No dad, we'll be fine."

"Ok then. I'll just clean this up and be on my way." He started to get up.

"I'll do that Randy. You go on ahead." I got up to go over to the sink.

"I can't let you do that." He looked at me warily.

"Sure you can. It's my pleasure. I'm here enough to make myself at home anyway."

He looked at me for a second, "If you're sure?" He raised one eyebrow.

"Yes I am." I was already running water in the sink.

"I'll be on my way then." He smiled, and waved as he walked out the door.

"What will we do here all alone?" I teased, as I looked over at Drake.

"I'm sure we can think of something." He walked over, and put his arm around my waist.

After Randy left, Drake and I finished cleaning up the kitchen and went for a walk around the property it was a beautiful day, with a breeze coming off the water.

I loved watching the waves come up on the sand, and erase any signs that someone had been there. Drake and I were sitting on the sand, and I was concentrating on the sound of the waves when I looked up to see him staring at me.

"What?"

"You are so beautiful."

I smiled at him and just looked back at the water. It was coming up just enough to tickle my toes before going back down.

We made it back to the house, and sat in the porch swing. I was leaning on him, thinking about what all I had learned the last few days.

"Drake?" I asked into the silence.

"Yea doll?"

I laid my head back down on him, "What is supposed to happen if they get this heir the prophecy talks about?"

He didn't answer for a minute. I wasn't sure he was going to tell me. "The prophecy says the heir will lead them into the war with the protectors, to win over the forest and beach, and all its magic."

"What does that mean?"

"We're not sure exactly, but dad thinks it's about the rituals they perform there. When they have their fires, and get on their knees to, for lack of a better word, pray. It's supposed to bring them power. We already know they can control certain kinds of animals."

"Control certain animals?" I was almost intrigued.

"Yea, they can make some animals do their bidding."

"Like chase people out of the woods?" My eyes widened.

"Yea, something like that."

"But dad goes in the woods?" I was suddenly worried.

"Don't you remember what we told you? They can't feel him there. That's why he does so much of the tracking. They can't send away what they can't feel."

"But they can feel you?" I asked.

"No, they can't feel me either. It's kinda strange, when dad goes into the trees he can't stay long before he feels them coming for him. But they don't send anything after me. Dad thinks it might be because of my destiny to protect you, part of my strength as your protector. That's why I can go with Gabe. We tell the others when it's safe."

"What do you mean, 'when it's safe'?" My eyes narrowed.

"When the dwellers are well...unaware is the best way to put it. They are mostly up at night, so it's usually safer to go in the daytime."

"I don't understand."

"It's hard to explain, they don't sleep per say, it's more like..." He's was trying to think of another word, "...like their meditating deeply. It's similar to sleep, but they can sometimes still be aware if someone comes into the forest. And lately, they have let someone stay aware at all times."

"*Stay* aware?"

"Not go to '*sleep*' with the others, to stay alert to try to call...you into the woods."

"Is that why you all made me go to stay with Randy after dark? Because that's when the dwellers are up?"

"Yes."

"What about Aaron? He came in to get me. Can't they feel him?"

"Yes they can. That's why he was running with you, to get away."

"They were *chasing* him? I didn't see anything behind us!" I tried to remember if someone was there.

"No, they weren't chasing him then, there was only one of them up, and they wouldn't risk hurting you, but he wasn't taking any chances. He could feel them watching."

"What do you mean, not risk hurting me? It seems like that's exactly what they want to do."

"Not until you have the heir. After that, I'm sure they won't care what happens to you, but for now, they need you alive."

"So to be blunt, these dwellers want me to... *mate*... with their elder... and have his baby...right?"

I could tell he didn't like the sound of that, "Yes. That's what was written." He said with disgust in his voice.

"Well it is *not* gonna happen." I said with conviction, "I'm not *mating* with some nut job in the forest!"

"You won't have a choice doll. Just like the trees call you in, you won't be able to resist the elder either, or so the prophecy says. That's why you went straight to the altar." I could hear the anger in his voice as he spoke of it.

"I don't care what it says; you are the only one for me...ever!" I knew in my heart, I could never give myself to anyone, but Drake.

We didn't say anymore about them. I just lie down and put my head on his lap. He started to stroke my hair, and I couldn't keep my eyes open.

7. Hailey and Brad

I wasn't sure where I was when I woke up. I looked around and realized I was in Drake's bed. I didn't remember getting there. I got up and stretched my arms out until I was sure I was awake. I left the room to look for Drake. I heard him talking to Randy in the kitchen. They were sitting at the table and both looked up when I came in.

"Feel better?" Drake asked me.

"Yea. Sorry I fell asleep on you like that." I sat down next to him.

"It's ok doll. You needed a good sleep." He put his arm around me, and I lay over on him and closed my eyes again.

"Hey Ronnie." Randy finally spoke up.

"Hey." I sat up yawning.

"I was about to start dinner. You got up just in time."

"Can I help?"

"No hon. I don't mind."

I got up to go outside, and Drake followed me. "Where you going?" I could tell by his voice he was worried.

"Just to sit on the porch. Maybe the air will wake me up."

"Want some company?"

"That would be nice."

I sat down in the swing, and he sat down beside me without saying anything. He was waiting for me to talk first. I just leaned over on him, and he put his arm around me. I couldn't say anything. Everything they told me and everything that I knew came back to me. I couldn't fathom why it was me. What made me so special? What was it about me that made everyone believe I was the one?

I couldn't move. I stayed there; lying on the man I wanted to spend my life with, and wondering how long that life might be.

"Can't we just leave?" I looked up at him. "We could go away from here and not come back."

"Don't you think I've thought of that? To take you away from all this mess, but I can't leave my dad to deal with this alone, and I know you can't leave yours."

He was right. I wouldn't be able to stand it if I thought dad was in danger, "But what now? What will we do if they keep trying to get to me?"

"Dad and I were talking about that while you were asleep. It says that the bearer will bring forth the heir in her eighteenth year. If it's like it sounds..."

"That once I turn nineteen it will be over?" I interrupted him.

"That's how it sounds, but its just grasping at straws at this point. We don't know if it is worth checking into, but we're going to look anyway." He said uncertainly.

So I only had to stay away from the forest until I was nineteen. I could do that. "If that's the case, after I'm nineteen the call will be gone, and I'll be free?"

"We're not altogether sure. It's just a theory right now, but dad is researching it. That's what he was doing all day."

I finally felt some hope for the situation. Even if it's just a theory, it still made me feel better, and I was going to hold on to that hope.

"Come eat!" We heard a yell from the kitchen. I was actually smiling again as we got up to go inside.

Dad came in as we were eating supper, "What smells so good?" He said from the door.

"Come on in and eat Gabe." Randy called to him.

"Thanks Randy." Dad said, as he sat down beside me. "It looks as good as it smells."

We all sat there and laughed as we ate the dinner Randy had made. "So did you find out anything?" Dad looked at Randy hopefully as he spoke.

"Not much." Randy looked upset, "I only heard what we already knew."

"So what does it say about the eighteenth year?" Evidently dad knew as much as the rest of them about the prophecy.

"If we take it just the way it's written, that might just be what saves Ronnie, but according to what I've heard, it's still sketchy."

Dad didn't look pleased. "So we still don't know for sure?"

"I'm not giving up. I still have some people to talk to about it." He looked sure of himself.

"Is there any way to find out for sure, anyway to know?" Drake had spoke up this time. He was looking at Randy.

"I don't know son, it was written so long ago, and it's just going to take time."

"Ronnie doesn't have any time dad. We can't be with her every second of the day." He seemed frustrated.

"Calm down son. I know it's hard, but we just have to keep her away from the forest for now."

"I promise I won't go near it." I looked at Drake.

They all looked at me and smiled. "We know you don't want to baby, but it's not all up to you. If you're alone, and the dwellers call you, you won't be able to resist. We don't want to put you into that situation again. Look what happened last time."

"I understand dad, I just hate having to be watched all the time. Everyone has lives to live, and they shouldn't have to spend it watching me."

"We don't mind hon," Randy spoke up, "We all love you, and want to keep you safe."

I quit arguing for now; I knew it was useless for tonight with all their eyes on me. It didn't matter; I was not going to be a burden to everyone.

I rode home with dad. Neither one of us spoke about what I was sure was on both our minds. How would they keep me from the forest? Was there a way?

After we got to the house I had a thought, "You know dad," I started to say, and he looked over at me, "When I'm distracted, like when I hang out with my friends from school, I don't think about the trees. Maybe I could see Hailey more often, when you and Drake are working. Would that be ok?"

"That sounds like a good idea baby, and Hailey lives in town so she isn't near the trees. You could stay with her some days. You wouldn't have to be watched over there."

I ran to the phone to call Hailey, "Hey, what are you doing tomorrow? Cool, want to hang out awhile? Ok what time? See you then." Dad was looking at me as I hung up the phone. "She is gonna pick me up in the morning and we're going to go to the mall."

"Ok, baby. That sounds nice. What time is she picking you up?"

"About ten," Dad seemed satisfied by that.

"Ok, I'll call Randy and tell him you won't be there tomorrow." He picked up the phone. I didn't wait to hear what he said; I just skipped off to my room. I needed to talk to someone that wasn't constantly watching over me anyway and this was just the chance I needed.

Before dad left this morning, he stopped to look at me, "Don't leave the house until Hailey gets here."

"I won't dad; I have to get ready anyway."

It was fifteen after ten when Hailey pulled into the driveway and honked the horn. I ran out, and jumped into the seat, "Hey, Hailey."

"Hey Ronnie." she said as she backed down the drive. "So what brought all this on today?"

"I just wanted a girl's day out."

"That's cool with me. I never get to see you anymore. You're always with Drake. How did you get away from him?"

"I just told him I wanted to see you today. He said he was fine with it." It almost sounded like she thought I had to ask permission. "He knows you're my best friend."

"Ok," she seemed to relax a little. "What do you want to do?"

"Anything, as long as it's away from here."

"Ok." She said, as she took the road that led out of Mystic.

We talked on the ride as if it hadn't been weeks since we'd seen each other. She asked how Drake and I were doing. I asked her if she was seeing anyone yet. "What?" I asked as she dropped her head and grinned.

"Brad." She finally said quietly.

"Tell me everything." I listened intently.

"Well..." she went on, "we were just hanging out at the park last weekend like we do every summer, I was sitting on the swing and he was pushing me. He grabbed the back of it to hold me up in the air and when I turned around to look at him..." she hesitated and looked embarrassed.

"What?"

"He kissed me."

"Wow. Hailey, that's cool. I didn't know you liked him like that."

"Well...until that night, I hadn't really thought about Brad that way. But when he kissed me it was so natural, I guess we just didn't see it coming."

When we got to the mall, she was glowing. "We are going out on our first official date Friday, so do you mind helping me find a dress?"

"No of course not," I was so happy for them I forgot all about what was going on with me. I was just a teenager again and not some profound bearer.

Hailey was worse than me when it come to shopping. Three stores and what seemed like a thousand dresses later she was finally happy. "Do you think he'll like it?" she asked for the hundredth time.

"Yes Hailey, he'll love it." He ought to, it revealed more than it covered, what boy wouldn't like that.

"I need shoes too."

I followed her to the shoe store. It was just as tedious as the dress stores. At least I could sit down and wait here.

It was past two when we left the shoe store. "Want to eat before we head back?"

"Sure Hailey. Is the food court ok with you?" I really didn't want to go anywhere else.

"Yea that's fine."

As we headed back toward home, Hailey asked me something that shocked me. "Have you ever had sex?"

I wasn't sure what to say. "Why do you ask?"

"Sorry, I wasn't trying to pry, I was just thinking about Brad. I know from our talks that he has, and I don't know if I'm ready for that. I'm only seventeen."

"Well Hailey, if it comes up, just tell him you're not ready. If he cares about you, he'll wait."

"Do you really think so?" She seemed unsure.

"I think I know Brad, and yes, I really think so."

She seemed satisfied and dropped the subject before I had to tell her anything. I was glad, I wasn't sure I was ready to talk about *that* with anyone.

Dad wasn't there when she dropped me off at the house, "Today was fun. We should do it again sometime." Hailey said as I got out of the car.

"Yea, we should." I agreed, and shut the door. I watched her back down the driveway before heading to the door.

I stopped short. The door handle was sideways, like someone had tried to pry it open. The door had more dents in it too. When I reached for the door handle, the door just swung open. I went inside as quietly as I could, and looked around. The house looked fine, but I knew someone had been here.

I went to the phone and dialed Randy's number. Drake answered, "Hello."

"Someone was in the house."

"I'm on my way." Drake said in an instant.

A fifteen-minute drive only took him five when I heard Drake's truck pull into the driveway. He was out of the truck, and running to me as I stepped on the porch. "What happened?"

"I don't know it was like this when I got back."

"Stay here." He told me, as he went to check out the house. I was nervous standing there alone.

I noticed when he came out of the house he had my overnight bag. "I got you some clothes. You are staying with me from now on." It was a statement not a request.

"But," I started, "What about dad?"

"It's *you* they want, not Gabe. I'm not leaving you here alone."

I followed him to his truck. He opened the door for me to get in, I hesitated, "Don't worry about Gabe; he can take care of himself."

I wasn't as convinced about that as he was, but I got in anyway and let him shut the door. We drove in silence until we reached his house. "I know how you feel doll. I just couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

"I know." I looked up to see Randy standing on the porch. He looked worried and confused.

"Someone broke into Gabe's house today."

"Ronnie!" He looked worriedly at me.

"I wasn't home. I was out with a friend all day."

Randy seemed relieved. "Maybe she should stay here from now on Drake?"

"Just what I was thinking dad." He said, as he was getting my bag from the bed of his truck.

We walked into the house, and Aaron was on the couch. He got up when he saw me. "Hey Ronnie, what kind of trouble you get into now?" He laughed.

"Someone broke into her house." Randy told him.

"Why?" The teasing eyes turned into concern.

"I don't know, but they didn't seem to take anything. It just looked like they were looking for something. The dresser drawers were open in all the bedrooms, and the cabinets were searched."

I hadn't looked that far into the house, just stepped in enough to call Drake, "Someone went through the dressers?" The look on my face must have been enough to tell them what I was thinking.

"Don't worry hon," Randy's soothing voice was calming me. "They won't be able to hurt you here."

"But what about dad?" My eyes teared up.

"I'll go find him." Drake spoke up "He's supposed to be in the office today." He kissed me before he walked out the door.

"Come on," Aaron put his arm around me, "No one is going to hurt my girl," he laughed, as he led me to the couch. I tried to laugh with him. He sat me down, and kept his arm around me.

It was an hour later when Drake came back to the house. "Where's dad?" I jumped up to ask him.

"He's gonna stay at Susan's until we get the door fixed."

I was finally able to breathe easy so I sat back down, and Aaron put his arm back around me, "What did he say?"

"He agreed you would be safer here." Drake sat down on my other side, "Aaron, I don't want to have to kill you, your my best friend," Drake laughed. Aaron removed his arm laughing, as Drake replaced it with his.

Dad stopped by later that night to check on me. "Are you ok, baby?"

"Yea dad, I wasn't even home when it happened."

He pulled me into a hug, "Are you ok with staying here? You can come over, and stay with me at Susan's if you want?" He whispered in my ear.

"No dad," I knew Susan only had a one-bedroom apartment, "I'll be ok. There is always someone around here."

"Ok, Ronnie." He looked at Randy, "Are you sure you have room?"

"Don't worry, Gabe. Drake will sleep on the couch. It'll be fine, and Ronnie's right, there are people in and out of here all the time, so she won't be alone."

Dad seemed relieved by what Randy said. I was glad; I didn't want to stay with Susan. She and dad could use a little alone time. I knew they hadn't spent much time together lately because of me.

After dad left, Aaron decided it was time to go too. "See you all later. I'll be thinking about you tonight Ronnie." He laughed.

"Hey, watch it man." Drake said. "She's mine." Aaron only laughed harder.

I lay down on Drakes lap as we sat on the sofa. I was tired, but didn't want to go to bed. He stroked my hair until I fell asleep.

I woke up in Drakes bed again. How he could carry me without waking me up was surprising. I saw my bag on the dresser, and wondered what he had put in it. I saw my favorite jeans and a tank top lying on top of some other clothes, and just put them on and went out to the kitchen.

Aaron was already there today eating some eggs off a plate, "Hey girl, it's just you and me today."

"Where's Randy?"

"What, not happy with me? I promise not to fall asleep this time."

I laughed as he tried to put a look of hurt on his face. "No Aaron, I was just wondering."

"He said something about checking further into the prophecy. Something he overlooked before."

I went to the stove to fry me some eggs as Aaron finished his. When I looked in the cabinet for a plate, I decided it was time to overhaul Randy's house this time. The house was never what you would call dirty, but a good spring-cleaning wouldn't hurt it, even if it were summer.

Aaron watched me wash up the dishes after we ate, and looked at me puzzled as I climbed on the counter to get started. He seemed amused for a while, and finally decided to leave me alone to do my work and went to watch TV on the couch.

I finished up in the kitchen and started on the bathroom, when a car pulled in the driveway. I looked out the kitchen window to see who it was. I didn't recognize him, but Aaron had gone outside, and it looked like the two were arguing. I was in the living room when he came back in, still looking mad.

"Who was that?"

He hadn't noticed me until he heard me and looked up, "Oh, it was no one Ronnie, just a salesman."

"It looked like you two were having a fight."

"He didn't want to take no for an answer."

I dropped the subject, but knew there was something else. I went back to the bathroom to finish up. I had just put up the cleaning supplies when Drake pulled in.

I went out to meet him. He pulled me up into a kiss that made my stomach turn in knots. "Hey, doll. Did Aaron give you any trouble today?"

"No. He just asked me to run away and get married, but I told him he had to ask you."

"I hear you tried to steal my girl." He laughed, to Aaron as we walked through the door.

"Yea, but she's to stuck on you." He laughed back.

Drake cooked supper since Randy still wasn't home. He had just set the table when we heard a car pull up. It was the 'salesman' from earlier. This time Drake went outside.

I started to follow, but Aaron grabbed me and held me inside. I tried to get away, but he just held me tighter. When I tried to yell at him, he put his hand over my mouth. I turned my head around, and was glaring at him when Drake came back inside.

When he let me go, I turned and kicked him in the shin. "OW! Man she's feisty." He was saying to Drake, as he was rubbing his leg, who was laughing at what had happened as he came in the room.

"Who was that?" I said angrily.

They both got suddenly quiet.

"He used to be a dweller." Drake told me as we all went back toward the kitchen.

"*Used* to be?" I was confused.

"Yea, he left the forest a long time ago, and even got married to a girl in town." Drake said.

"What was he doing here? He came earlier today too." I looked at Aaron who had his head down trying not to look at me.

"He heard about the bearer coming back." Drake said with anger in his voice.

"So what he came here to take me to the elder?"

They just looked at each other and Drake sighed, "He says he wants to help you."

"Help me *how*?" Now I was suspicious.

"I don't know. We're not sure if we can trust him. He might still be drawn to the forest, even though he hasn't been back in them since he left."

"What made him leave?" I was suddenly curious above all else.

"A girl is what we heard. We're not really sure." Drake started telling me, "The story goes that a young girl was lost in the forest one night, and he was sent to get rid of her, but when he saw her he was over taken by her beauty, and instead of scaring her off, he walked her out of the forest. They say that she wanted to see him so much she went back. When he saw her again, they fell in love. She kept going back to see him, and got pregnant. They said he left with her the day she told him and he never went back."

"That's a beautiful story. Do you think it's true?"

"I don't know if the whole thing is true, but he does have a son. He goes to school at Mystic."

"What's his name?" I wondered if I knew him.

"Brad, I think."

I was shocked. "Brad?"

"Yea, why? Do you *know* him?" Drake seemed concerned.

"There's is a Brad I know there. He's dating a friend of mine. Do you think I should be worried?" I thought about what Hailey had told me.

"No I don't think so..... If he is a dweller, he's only half, and Gabe and I have never come across him in the woods."

A thought come across my mind just then, "You all said the dwellers have rituals. When do they have them?"

"Why?" Drake seemed interested then.

Brad always gets in these funny moods. It happens about once a month. It lasts a few days, and then it's over. Do you think it could be related to that?"

"It could be I suppose, but like I said, we have never seen him out there." Drake said.

Aaron spoke up just then, "Once a month huh? Maybe it's just PMS?" Leave it to Aaron to turn it into a joke.

Randy got home a little while later, but didn't have any better news. "It all says the same no matter where I check." He seemed discouraged, "I think we're gonna have to wait it out and see." He sighed.

Drake followed me to bed that night, not even keeping up pretenses anymore. "Night dad." He said as he shut the door.

"Night son, night Ronnie!"

"Night Randy," I called back. "Are you just gonna stay here tonight then." I asked Drake hopefully.

"Yes. Dads not an idiot and I'm tired of having to take you back to bed every morning when I wake up." He smiled at me. I just smiled back and walked to his waiting arms as I dropped my dress on the floor. He picked me up and carried me to the bed.

8. Surprise Beginnings

Dad came by everyday to check on me while I was here. I knew he wanted me to come home, but everyone thought I was safer here.

I was looking at the stars from the porch swing one night, when it occurred to me; the trees hadn't called me the entire time I'd been staying here. Was it because I knew the truth of what they held for me? Was it that I could resist? Or was it simply that the dwellers knew it was too late?

I decided to test it. I knew Drake and Randy wouldn't be far when they saw I was off the porch. I went to the back yard where I was the last time I heard the call before I entered the forest. I stared at it. Nothing happened so I moved closer. I listened for the voice in my head. I didn't hear anything, so I went closer.

"Ronnie!" I heard Drake say, "Ronnie *stop*!"

"No Drake, it's ok. It's not calling me." I was still looking at the trees.

"What?" He looked bewildered.

I looked back to his face, "See, it's not calling me. I don't want to go." I was smiling, but Drake looked unconvinced.

"Why don't we get back inside anyway?" He took my hand, and led me to the couch. After he shut the door, he sat down beside me, and looked straight in my eyes, "Now, explain what you mean."

"I was sitting on the porch, and realized that I hadn't even looked at the forest since I have been staying here. I knew they had quit calling me. I wanted to test it out so I went in the backyard to see, and it worked. I looked right at the trees and nothing." I was smiling at them both, but they both looked awestruck.

"You shouldn't have done that. What if you had been wrong? What if I hadn't seen you and you kept on going? What if they had gotten to you?" Drake's voice trembled.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think about that. I just wanted to see for myself. Drake I'm sorry." I put my arms around him.

Randy's soothing voice filled the room, "It's over now. Somehow, she was able to resist. Let's just think about that." Drake seemed to relax some, but I could tell he was still mad.

"I won't do it again Drake. I promise. I won't try that again." I was sorry I had even tried in the first place if it upset him this much. I couldn't stand to see him this way.

He seemed more himself then, "Just don't scare me like that anymore." He sighed, and put his face in his hands, "I couldn't stand it if I lose you."

Just then, I heard dad's truck pull up. I gave him a hug as he came through the door. I couldn't wait to tell him what had happened.

"Guess what dad?" He smiled as he saw my excitement.

"What is it baby?" he smiled back at me.

"I resisted the call!"

"What?" He looked at Randy questioningly.

"Yes," Randy spoke up, "She went around to the back of the house, and they didn't call her."

"You let her go *alone*?" Dad looked mad.

"No dad, I went on my own. They didn't know I snuck off. But it's ok. The trees didn't call me. I looked right at them, and nothing!" I know how happy I am, I just wish everyone else felt the same.

"That's great Ronnie." He was talking to me but looking at Randy. "What do you think Randy?"

"I don't know, but it's a good thing regardless."

"Your right, never look a gift horse in the mouth." Dad was smiling.

We sat there laughing for a while as the weight lifted off me. I was finally feeling normal, though I don't know why, but I wasn't going to jinx it.

"I really miss you baby." He told me that night when he was leaving.

"I miss you too dad. Maybe I can come home tonight. You'll be there and I can call Hailey and see if she wants to hang out? Since the forest isn't calling me now, it should be safe?" I looked hopefully at them.

Dad thought about that for a minute. "I think that'll be ok. I can go in late, if you don't mind covering for me Drake?"

"No sir. I don't mind."

Drake knew how much I missed dad. I knew he would understand that I needed to go with him tonight.

"Ok dad. Let me get my stuff." He was smiling as he waited for me at the door. Drake followed me to the bedroom.

He picked me up into a kiss, "I'm gonna miss you tonight."

"I'm gonna miss you too. I just need to spend some time with dad."

"I understand. You love him a lot." He reluctantly put me down so I could get my bag.

"I'll see you tomorrow." I looked in his eyes.

"Love you doll."

"Love you too." I reached up and kissed him again.

I walked out the door with dad. He led me to the truck with his arms protectively around my shoulders. Old habits are hard to break.

When I walked into my room at dad's, it seemed strange. I hadn't been back inside the house since the break-in. Susan had brought my clothes when she came over with dad the day after. I knew dad had already put up a new door, reinforced, with extra locks.

I was looking around the room; Susan must have cleaned it up when she was here. Everything was neatly folded in the dresser, or hanging neatly in the

closet. I went over to the mirror and looked at myself for a minute. I wish I knew why they had stopped calling me, or how I could resist. Either way, like dad said, never look a gift horse in the mouth.

I was turning away from the mirror, when I saw the calendar I kept on the wall next to my dresser. It wasn't on the right month. I went over to fix it when something caught my attention. I looked at the red circle that marked my period every month. I flipped the calendar over to June and counted. I went back to May and started to count again. It couldn't be right... But it was. I just stood there, could it be possible? I looked at the clock on my bedside table, eight thirty I can still call Hailey.

I went to the living room; dad was on the couch watching baseball. "I'm going to call Hailey to see if she wants to come over tomorrow, if that's ok dad?"

"Sure baby, whatever you want. I'm just glad your home tonight." He smiled, and went back to his game. I went into the kitchen to get the phone.

I took it out the back door so dad wouldn't hear me. "Hello?" Hailey said from the other end.

"Hailey?"

"Hey Ronnie," She must have recognized my voice. "What have you been up to?"

"Not much, Hailey. I was calling to see if you could come over tomorrow."

"I think so; I don't have anything else to do."

"Do you think you could pick up something from the drugstore for me on your way? I'll pay you back when you get here."

"I guess so. What is it?" I could hear the uncertainty in her voice.

"An EPT." I said it so low, I wasn't sure she heard me.

"*Oh Ronnie.*" I could hear her surprise, which turned to concern. "Are you sure? How late are you?"

"Two weeks?"

"And you just thought to get a test?"

"I've had a lot on my mind. Someone tried to break-in a few weeks ago and I've been staying with Drake since then, so it just slipped my mind."

"Well, don't worry, I'll bring one over in the morning." She assured me.

"Don't let dad see you with it." I looked around to see if he could hear me.

"No problem. See you tomorrow. The drug store opens at nine, so I'll be there about nine thirty."

"Ok Hailey and thanks." I was almost relieved. *Almost.*

I can't believe I didn't notice sooner. How could I not have known? What was I gonna do? I went back in the house, and dad was still watching the game. I sat down on the couch, and tried to look at the TV, but my mind was elsewhere. Dad interrupted my thoughts, "You get a hold of Hailey?"

"Yea, dad. She'll be here about nine thirty."

"Ok baby. I know you think you're safer now because you seem to be able to resist, but I'm not taking any chances. It could have just been they weren't trying to call you. We can't assume anything yet." He looked at me with his stern father eyes.

"I know dad, and I won't assume anything either." We sat there watching the game in silence until dad finally stood up.

"Well, I think I'm gonna hit the hay. See you in the morning."

"Night dad, I love you."

"Love you too baby."

I tried to find something on TV as I sat there alone, but nothing held my interest. I finally decided it was time to go to bed. I knew I wouldn't sleep much, but I needed to try at least.

I woke up to the sound of dad in the shower. I looked at the clock it said eight. The last time I remembered looking at the clock last night was two. I guess sleep finally won out, and I was still in the same position I fell asleep in.

I sat up on the edge of the bed thinking about what was to come, and what I would do if it turned out I was..... I couldn't even think it. Why wasn't I more careful? How could I let this happen? What am I going to do if...? No I'm not sure yet, and I'll wait until then to figure it out.

I got up and went to my bathroom, glad I had my own here. Dad was never good at the feminine stuff, so I hid most of it from him.

Dad was standing at the stove when I came into the kitchen. I smelled bacon and eggs frying.

"Hey dad." He looked up to see me coming in.

"Hey baby, I thought you might like some breakfast this morning."

"Thanks dad that would be great." I sat down at the table as he was putting two plates down. He sat across from me. "So what are you and Hailey planning on doing today?"

"Just hang out here I think. We hadn't really talked about it."

"Ok baby. I hope you all have fun. It's nice to have you here today. Are you gonna stay again tonight?" He sounded hopeful.

"I don't know dad. Let's just see what comes today. Ok?" Let's see what the test say's first.

"Ok baby." He sat in the chair watching me as I got up to clean the dishes. I was just drying the plates when I heard Hailey pull in. I went to meet her at the door.

"Hey, Hailey."

"Hey Ronnie, hi Mister Taylor," she called over my shoulder.

"Hello Hailey, Call me Gabe."

"Yes sir."

"I'm going to go for now Ronnie. I'll see you tonight. Love you."

"Love you too dad."

Hailey waited for his truck to pull out, then she opened her purse and handed me the dreaded test. I took it from her carefully, like it was something dirty. I noticed my hand was shaking. I gave her the money for it, and we headed together to the bathroom.

I sat there reading the box to see what to do, it was pretty simple, pee on the stick and wait. Hailey left me alone to do the first part. I laid it on the sink, and opened the door. "Three minutes." I told her, and she looked at her watch. I paced the bedroom as we waited.

"Time." she said to soon, I walked back into the bathroom and reached, but couldn't pick it up.

Hailey understood without me telling her, she picked it up and looked for me. I could tell by her face, "Plus." was all she needed to say.

I sat on the toilet, put my face in my hands, and started crying. Hailey leaned down, and put her arms around me.

"It'll be ok Ron; I'll help you get through this. Come on," She pulled me up, "Let's go in the other room."

I let her pull me to the kitchen, and sit me down in one of the chairs. She handed me a damp rag, "Wash your face, we need to talk."

I took the rag and washed the tears off my face, it was cool, and it felt good. I got up and put it in the sink. Hailey was just looking at me without talking; she knew I wasn't ready yet.

When I sat down, she looked me in the eyes and asked, "Drake?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"The first time was about six weeks ago."

"Have you thought about what you're going to do?" I knew what she meant.

"No, I know I'm gonna have it, but I don't know what to tell Drake, or dad, he's going to be so disappointed in me." I dropped my head again.

She put her hand under my chin so I had to look at her. "Well first you need to find out for sure. You need to see a doctor. I know a good one; it's the one my mom went to with my little brother."

Hailey picked up the phone and started to dial. "Yes I need an appointment please. Pregnancy test, yea, it was positive. Veronica Taylor. Ok, see you then." She hung up the phone. "Tomorrow at ten."

Wow that was really soon, "Who is the doctor?"

"Dr. Ambrose. It's just over in Branceville, about twenty minutes away. I can take you if you want. I'll see if mom will let me?"

"No, I think I need to do this myself."

"You shouldn't be alone."

"No, its ok, I need to do this. I really do."

"Well... If you're sure, but if you change your mind..."

"I'll call you." She wrote down the directions on a piece of paper as well as the doctor's name and phone number. I put it in my purse for tomorrow. Now I just have to find away to get dads truck without telling him why.

The rest of the day went by quickly, we didn't talk anymore about my appointment, and we just caught up on our lives. "So how are things with Brad?" I asked when we were sitting on the couch.

She smiled when I asked, "There fine." But I got the impression there was more.

"Just fine," I smiled back.

"He told me he loves me."

"When?"

"Last night when he dropped me off."

"What did you say?" though I already knew.

"I told him I love him too and he kissed me until I couldn't breathe." That's what led to my predicament.

"Be careful Hailey, you don't want to end up like me." I tried to grin.

"I know Ron; I told him last night I wasn't ready for that."

"What did he say?"

"He told me he would wait forever if that's what I wanted. That he wanted me, and not just sex."

"That's good, Hailey. It sounds like he does love you."

"I don't know how we have stayed friends for so long, and didn't see this before."

"I think the best times sneak up on you and surprise you. It was like that with Drake and me. The first time I saw him, I knew I loved him."

"What do you think he's gonna do?" I knew what she meant.

"I don't know? I don't think he's going to leave me or anything like that, but I have no idea what kind of reaction he'll have, and that scares me. What if he gets mad, what if he thinks I did this on purpose?" I was talking to myself more than Hailey.

"Don't think that way. I'm sure it will work out. Let's not think about it until the doctor confirms it anyway." I knew she was right, I was worrying over what could be nothing, but in my heart, I knew it was something.

We were still sitting on the couch when dad's truck pulled up. "Hey girls, how was your day?"

"Fine dad." I tried to sound content.

"What did you do?"

"We just hung out here all day talking," and, made a very important doctor's appointment.

"Do you want to go out for dinner? You're welcome to come with us Hailey."

"Thanks mister, I mean Gabe, but moms got plans for us tonight. Another time?"

"Whenever you want hon."

"I better go Ron. I'll talk to you tomorrow." She gave me a 'you better call' look.

"Ok Hailey, I'll talk to you tomorrow." How was I going to sit thru dinner like nothing's wrong?

I walked her to the door and she hugged me, "It'll work out." She whispered.

Dad was standing in the middle of the living room when I turned around. "You ready to go baby?"

"Sure, where are we going?" Somewhere far, far away I hope.

"I thought we might go back to the Diner. Is that ok?"

"Yea dad that will be great." Perfect.

I decided to ask as we went to the restaurant, "Dad, can I use the truck tomorrow?"

"What for baby?"

"I've got a doctor's appointment." Please don't ask any more about it.

"What are you going to the doctor for?" I knew it.

"It's a female thing, a check up." Maybe that will do the trick.

"Oh," He seemed to understand, "Sure, I think I can get Randy to come and pick me up tomorrow." Good, no more questions, it worked.

"Thanks dad." Why couldn't he have said no?

We didn't talk again until we got to a table at the diner. Then dad asked me something that shocked me, "Are you in love with Drake?"

I couldn't answer. Where had that come from? "Uh... yea dad, I think I am."

He looked as if I had said something wrong. "I knew you were. I can see it on your face when you're together. I was hoping to keep you my little girl awhile longer. But if it had to happen, at least it's a good man."

I wasn't sure this was really my dad. Had someone invaded his mind? "Are you ok dad?"

"Yea baby, I knew it was like this, I just wanted to hear you say it out loud." He dropped the subject and we started talking about Hailey. He what all we had done today, I omitted the EPT.

The ride home was quiet. I was still thinking about my doctor's appointment tomorrow. And what would happen if I were right. Is this why the trees have stopped calling me? Did they know it was too late?

I called Drake when we got back to the house. "I'm gonna stay here again tonight. I have an appointment tomorrow and dads letting me take the truck. Will you ask Randy if he'll come and get dad in the morning?"

"What kind of appointment? Maybe I can take you." I was afraid he might ask so I decided the same story I gave dad would work with Drake.

"I have to go for my female check up tomorrow." Don't ask anymore.

"Oh." I could tell by his voice that did it, "Well, ok then, tell Gabe I'll come get him. Love you."

"Love you too."

When I got off the phone dad was standing beside me. "Drake said he'll come get you tomorrow."

"Ok baby, I think I'm gonna lay down for the night. Love you."

"Ok dad, love you too."

I tried to lay down myself but my mind kept wondering back to the 'what ifs' I had been thinking about. I finally drifted off after midnight.

I woke up early, the clock said seven am. I knew dad was probably in the kitchen by now so I got out of bed. He was sitting at the table with a cup of coffee already dressed for work.

"What time is your appointment?"

"Ten this morning." I grabbed a bowl of cereal and sat down.

"What time is Drake supposed to be here?" I asked him.

"He's on his way. He called about ten minutes ago." Good, I would get to see him before I go.

I was putting my bowl in the sink when I heard his truck outside. I went out to greet him, and he met me at the door. He picked me up and kissed me like it had been years instead of days that we had seen each other.

"Hey doll. I've missed you."

I kissed him back, "I've missed you too."

"Are you coming back over tonight?" He asked hopefully.

"Yes, as soon as I get done with my doctor today."

"Good, it's been lonely at the house without you."

He put me down and went back to the truck where dad was waiting. "Bye baby. Be careful today." Dad called out.

"I will dad." I watched them pull out before I went back inside to take a shower and get ready for the inevitable.

I didn't turn on the radio as I drove to Branceville. I wanted to turn around and go back home, but I can't, I have to know for sure. Would that be a good thing? Would this stop the Dwellers from calling me? If I was already pregnant, I couldn't have their baby could I. Even if that was true, I still didn't know if this is what I wanted. A baby at 18 is not the ideal choice, but if that's how it turns out, that is the only choice.

I was afraid of Drakes reaction. I knew he wouldn't leave me, but I was afraid this would make him more protective. He would not leave me alone for a day after this.

The office was actually a clinic with lots of different kinds of doctors. I had to drive all the way around to find a spot to park. "This is going to be a long day." I said to myself as I drove around. When I finally found a place I pulled the truck in and killed the motor, "This is it."

The office was just as crowded as the parking lot. There were many young kids there so I figured there was a pediatrician in this office as well. I saw a few extremely pregnant women, and a few scared teens. I signed in and turned to find a seat. I sat down in the only available one and picked up a magazine that was at least two years old and tried to read it.

"What are you here for honey? You look scared to death." I looked up to see one of the extremely pregnant women looking at me with comforting eyes.

"I'm here to see Dr. Ambrose." I could tell the way she smiled at me; she knew why I was here.

"Don't worry honey; it'll all work out in the end." Then she went back to her own out of date magazine. I was glad; I really didn't want to talk to anyone.

I was almost finished with what I was reading when I heard my name, "Veronica Taylor?" Why did the nurse say it so loud? I got up and followed her to a small room in the back. "Why are you here today?"

I almost couldn't get the word out, "I think... I think I'm pregnant." I finally managed to say in a whisper.

The nurse looked at me and smiled, "It's ok, don't be afraid. We'll take good care of you." She was so friendly and kind looking it was hard to stay nervous so I smiled back. I guess she was used to this. I had to put a paper gown on, and then the nurse took blood and other samples. "The doctor will be here soon." She called back as she was closing the door.

It seemed like hours sitting on that cold table. I jumped when I heard a knock and then the door came open. I was expecting a male doctor with the name Bobby, but this was a woman. I was relieved as she held out her hand; I took it as she said, "I'm Dr. Ambrose. Are you Veronica?" I nodded my head as she was looking at a chart in her hand. "Well dear, let's take a look shall we?"

I wasn't sure what she meant by that until the nurse came in, pulling an ultrasound machine with her. "Now lay back and cover up with the sheet." I looked over at the spot she pointed and saw a paper sheet laying next to the pillow. I pulled it over my legs as I lay down on that cold table.

The Dr. pulled the sheet down just enough to expose my lower abdomen and put some kind of gel on me. She picked up an instrument attached to the ultrasound machine, and then put it on the gel. I watched her face as she looked closely at the monitor that was above the machine. After a few minutes and a lot of tapping on the keyboard, she looked over at me and smiled. She turned the monitor so I could see it and pointed to a small obscure picture in the middle.

"That's your baby, about 5 or 6 weeks I would guess. That would make you do about...." She pulled a small calendar out of her pocket and counted, "About Valentine's day sweetie."

"Really?" I asked. I couldn't believe my baby was due on the anniversary of my move to Mystic Forest. The doctor just smiled at me. I looked up at the monitor.

There it was the proof on this monitor of what I was dreading, and longing for, at the same time. I couldn't say anything, and I couldn't stop looking at that small obscure picture. Then the doctor pushed a button on the monitor and I heard a weird sound, like a washing machine, but, not.

"That's the heartbeat." She said when I looked at her confused. "It's good and strong."

I closed my eyes to listen to that fast rhythm for a few minutes.

"Ok Veronica," The doctor said as she lifted the instrument off my stomach, and the beating stopped. "I want to see you back again in a month." I sat up on the table and pulled the sheet back up over myself. The doctor and nurse left me alone to change. I didn't get up right away; I just sat there and thought about the tiny baby I had seen on the monitor.

Drake's baby.

As I was signing out and making my next appointment, the sweet smiling nurse came up to me, "Here are some books about becoming a mom and your prescription for prenatal vitamins, and here is a picture of your baby." She handed me a paper that looked like the obscure picture on the monitor in the room. I took everything and thanked her. "See you next month. Take care of yourself." I waved and walked out the building to the parking lot in a state of shock.

So it was true. I was going to have Drakes baby. There was no denying it now, not with the proof in my hands in the form of a tiny picture.

But, *how* was I gonna tell Drake?

How was I gonna tell dad?

I put the picture safely inside one of the books, and laid them down on the seat of the truck. I sat there for a minute so I could piece everything together. I was going to be a mom.

I decided to go to the store and get something special for dinner tonight. When I got home, I would ask Susan if she could help me cook. I stopped at the store on the way home and bought everything I think I needed. I knew Susan worked at the Mystic pharmacy so I decided to stop in to talk to her.

"Hey hon, what are you out doing today?" She said when she saw me come in.

"I'm getting something to cook for supper tonight. Do you think you can come over and help me? I want to fix something nice for everyone and you are such a good cook I was hoping you could give me some pointers."

"Ok hon, I would love to help. I get off in a couple of hours and I'll come right over."

"I want you to stay too." Someone who might be able to stop dad from committing murder would be good.

"Thanks Ronnie, I would love to." I could see the emotion on her face and had to smile back.

I walked back out to the truck-feeling better that Susan was going to help me fix supper tonight. As I was opening the door to get in, someone grabbed me from behind. Before I could scream, I felt a cloth over my nose and mouth, and someone whispered in my ear.

"You belong to us." *Doug!* I thought, and then darkness came.

I heard him talking but didn't open my eyes, "The elder will be so pleased."

I turned my head and opened my eyes enough to see my clothes lying on the ground beside me, but I could feel something draped over me. My hands and legs, bound so tight, I had lost the feeling in them. Then I felt a sharp jab to my arm.

"It's not time yet," I heard him say, then the blackness came again.

9. Bed Rest Required

I was aware I was lying in a bed, but not sure, *where* the bed was. I could hear distant voices from somewhere, but I couldn't tell which directions they were coming from.

"She wasn't raped" I heard a voice say.

"Thank god!" I heard dad reply.

"Dad?" I groaned out.

"Baby, Ronnie," I heard at the same time, Drake was there too.

"Hello Veronica." The doctor said when I opened my eyes. "You gave us all quite a scare."

I looked around to see everyone in the room, Dad, Drake, Susan, and even Randy was there.

"Where am I?" I tried to sit up and look around. The pain shot thru me like a knife.

"Branceville Hospital," the doctor said. "Do you remember what happened?"

"Someone grabbed me from behind." I tried to recall everything, but it was so hazy.

"It's ok if you can't remember everything. You were drugged." He turned to look at the others, "Why don't you all go for a cup of coffee, while I check Veronica out?"

"She's my daughter!" I heard dad say, with forcefulness in his voice.

"But she is an adult, and I need to check her." The doctor's voice was calm.

"Come on Gabe," I heard Randy say.

"We won't be gone long Gabe. She will be fine." Susan said, and dad reluctantly followed.

The doctor looked at Drake who hadn't moved from my side, "You too."

Drake looked me, "its ok." I told him.

He leaned down to kiss the top of my forehead and whispered, "I won't be far."

The doctor watched him go out the door; he closed it with a quick look back. The doctor turned to smile at me, "Veronica," he said softly, "Did you know that you're pregnant?"

I was still groggy, but I managed to speak, "I just found out this morning. Is my baby ok?" I started to panic.

"Yes, the baby's fine as far as we can tell, but we aren't sure what kinds of drugs you were given, so we want to watch you close for awhile. Who is your OB?"

"I saw Dr. Ambrose today."

"Ok, we'll send her your information. She will probably want to run some extra tests, to see if the baby was affected by the drugs."

I was starting to come back to normal, and the panic really set in. "Could it have hurt the baby?"

"Let's not worry about that now; stress is bad for it too. You need to stay calm. Let's think positively. Your attacker didn't do anything but undress you, and tie you up. But you're going to be sore for a while; you have severe bruising in your shoulder muscles so you may feel some numbness in your hands and legs for a few days. If you want to, you can go home tonight, or I can keep you here if it would make you feel better?"

"No," I thought about it, "I think I want to go home."

"Ok then. I'll have the nurse draw up your release papers."

Dad insisted on taking me home with him. Drake followed in his truck, with Susan and Randy close behind. He helped me out of the truck and to the porch. I was very sore and I could barely walk, but I couldn't take any pain medication. Drake stood with the door open waiting for me. Dad was still holding onto me as I went in and sat down on the couch. Drake sat carefully down beside me. I was tired, but I needed some answers.

"Do you need anything baby?" Dad was trying to look calm.

"No dad, I'm ok." Just then, Randy and Susan came through the door. Susan sat down on my other side, and Randy took the chair beside the door. Dad finally sat on the arm of the couch beside Susan. Everyone was looking at me so it was time to ask.

"How long did he have me?"

"About four hours." Dad said.

"How did you find me?"

"It's a long story hon, maybe it should wait until tomorrow." Susan said.

"No, I want to know now." I looked around at them.

They all looked at each other, but Susan started first. She took a deep breath before starting, "When I got off work, I saw Gabe's truck was still in the parking lot. When I went to check it out, I saw the groceries still in the back, and your books still in the seat." She looked at me and barely shook her head; I took that to mean she hadn't told anyone what the books were. "I looked around the parking lot, but didn't see you anywhere. I checked a couple of stores, and you weren't anywhere so I called Gabe and Randy. They hadn't heard from you so I called Drake to see if he knew where you might have gone. They all showed up here to look for you, but we couldn't find you. Then Drake got the idea, that Doug might have followed you, and taken you to the forest. He was right."

Then Drake continued, "We knew the ritual is supposed to be held in the clearing, but I didn't know if they would take you straight there, or hide you until the elder could be notified. I took a chance that they had taken you straight there, and I was right. I would have gotten to you sooner if we hadn't come to town

first." He shifted in his seat, "By the time I got there, Doug was preparing the ceremony by..." he clenched his teeth, "by undressing you, and he had you tied to the altar." He stopped to close his eyes.

Dad began, "I followed Drake into the woods, but he was faster than me. By the time I got there, Drake was fighting Doug, and you were lying on a slab in the middle of the clearing, next to where they normally have their fires. Some kind of sheet was over you, I took it off to see if they had done anything else to you, and by that time, Doug had ran off, and Drake gave me his shirt. He untied your hands and feet, and we put the shirt over you and took you to the hospital."

Susan began again, "Don't worry hon; they didn't have time to do the ritual. You weren't raped."

"I know. I heard the doctor when I was waking up." Everyone got quiet. It was so close, it could have happened, not that it would do any good, I was already pregnant. "Susan?"

"Yea hon?"

"Will you help me to my room to change?" I was still wearing Drakes shirt.

"Sure Ronnie." I really just wanted to ask her what she knew.

Drake helped me stand up, and Susan braced me so I wouldn't fall. I still hadn't gotten the feeling completely back in my feet. She must have known what I wanted to ask, "Your books are in my purse." She said after she shut the door. "I haven't said anything to anyone." she looked me in the eye "When did you find out?"

"I was just coming back from my first doctor's appointment when I saw you. I took a home test yesterday. That's why I wanted to fix dinner tonight, to try to ease everyone into it, but now after what happened, what am I gonna do?" I was talking more to myself than Susan.

"You need to tell them Ronnie. There is more at stake now than just your safety."

She was right, "I know I should Susan. Drake has a right to know he's gonna be a father. I'm just worried how dad is gonna take it."

"Don't worry about Gabe. I'll handle him. He won't say anything to Drake." She was pulling a big shirt on me as we were talking. She helped me stand up, and I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror over my dresser.

She held onto me as I walked over. I had bruises on both wrists that extended halfway up to my elbows. I looked down at my legs, which were aching, and saw bruises that started at my ankle, and went upward toward my knees that looked like some kind of rope pattern. It was no wonder everyone was staring I was a mess. Susan let me stand there without saying anything. I finally turned around and took a deep breath.

"Ok, let's do this. Would you bring me the small picture that's in the front of the top book?" She helped me sit back down on the bed before she went to get it.

"Sure hon," she left the room, but was back in a minute. We started toward the living room.

All three men stood up when we walked in. Dad and Drake both met us at the hallway door to help me to the couch. Dad stopped for a second, "Maybe you should go to bed baby? I know it's been a long day."

"No dad. There's something I need say." I said firmly.

He didn't say anymore as he helped Drake guide me to the couch, and sat me down. I looked up, and everyone but Susan was looking at me. I wasn't sure where to begin as I held that small picture in my hands. "What is it baby?" Dad finally asked.

"Well..." I began, "You all know I went to the doctor this morning."

"Yea we do doll. Is something wrong?" Drake sounded worried.

"No, nothing's *wrong*, but there is something I need to tell you, and it *is* related to my doctor's appointment."

Randy finally spoke, "Ronnie, your worrying us. What is it? Whatever it is honey, we'll understand."

I looked at Drake, and put the small picture in his hand. He looked down briefly and then looked back at me with a puzzled expression. I looked straight in his eyes, "Drake... I'm pregnant."

The silence was deafening. I was sure I had made a mistake. I looked over at Susan. I could feel the tears in my eyes. She pulled me carefully, and I lay over on her shoulder. I looked at dad, and *he* had tears in *his* eyes. He got up and walked to the window, his hands were in fists. Then I felt Drake lightly tugging me away from Susan, and laying me onto himself. "I'm sorry." He whispered in my ear. I sat up and looked at him.

"What for?"

"For doing this to you," He looked down at the picture, still in his hand.

"We did this Drake." I told him. "We did this together." He pulled me back onto his chest.

Susan got up, went to the window, and took dad's hand. "Daddy?" I said weakly, he turned to look at me "Are you disappointed in me?" I dropped my eyes.

He came over and got down on one knee in front of me, "No baby, I'm not." He put his hand under my chin so I would look him in the eyes, "I love you. I'm just a little shocked. Give me a minute to soak it all up." He reached up, and softly hugged me.

Susan sat back down beside me, and reached for the picture that was still in Drake's hands, "May I?" she asked Drake. He handed it over without a word. "Did the doctor give you a due date hon?" She asked me as she looked at the picture.

"On Valentine's Day," I looked at dad and smiled.

"Well...." Randy finally spoke up; He looked excited, as he looked over at dad, "We're going to be granddads."

Dad actually smiled along with Randy and Susan. Drake just sat there with his arm around me. I looked at his face, but I couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Susan could almost read my mind, "Randy, Gabe, how about a walk outside?" They both looked at me, but followed her anyway. I saw dad reach for the picture that Susan still had.

I put my hand under Drake's chin, and made him look at me. "Are you mad at me?"

He looked horrified, "No...No, why would you think that? You did nothing wrong. I can't be mad at you."

"But..."

"I'm just trying to get a handle on things. I was afraid I wouldn't be able to protect you, and now I have to protect you both. It's just going to take some time for me to adjust. To figure out what will happen now. Everything is much more complicated."

Now the light tears, turned into real crying. "I'm sorry Drake. I didn't mean to make it harder for you. I didn't do this on purpose. I didn't mean for this to happen."

"That's not what I meant. I never thought you did this on purpose. You didn't do this at all." He was talking softer, "I should have been more careful. I shouldn't have stopped myself."

"Now *you're* being ridiculous. Your right about me not doing this, but neither did you. We did it together, and we have to deal with it together. We are having a baby Drake, *together*."

He pulled me back to him, "A baby." I heard him say softly. "We're going to have ...a *baby*."

"You're gonna move in with me." He said suddenly. "It's safer there, and now we have *more* to be careful with." He put his hand on my stomach. I couldn't help but smile.

The others came back and Randy came over to hug me. "Ronnie, don't you worry about anything. This baby will be taken care of like no other."

"Ronnie is moving in with us dad. It's the safest place for her."

"Hey. I can take care of my daughter." Dad said quickly.

"I know you can Gabe. It's not about that. It's about the fact that she will never be alone there, and Doug can't come on Sabre land." Dad looked at Drake, and then at Randy.

"I know that Drake, but looked what happened when I started letting her stay there before." He held up the picture of the baby.

"Gabe," Susan was talking now, "It's too late to throw blame. They are both adults and things happen. Let's just focus on the joy of the situation."

I could see he was giving in. "I know. I just don't want to lose my little girl." He sighed.

"You're not *losing* me dad. I love you. I will always be your little girl, but now I'll be your little girl... with a baby."

Dad looked at me and smiled. "I'm really going to be a granddad huh?"

I smiled back at him, but Drake started talking, "That's why it'll be safer for her at Sabre. We have to think about the baby too. We don't know what the dwellers will do when they find out. This is going to change everything."

"Well I think she should stay here a few days until she can get around by herself." Dad argued.

"I agree with you there Gabe," Randy spoke up.

"Can I decide for *myself*?" I was tired of them talking about me as if I wasn't there.

"I'm sorry Ronnie," Randy said, "Your right; we should be asking you what you want."

"I want to stay with Drake. I will stay here tonight dad, but tomorrow I want to go to Sabre. It really is the safest place, and I don't want anything to happen to my baby."

"Ok baby if that's what you want, but remember we have to keep *you* safe to keep the baby safe, so you have to listen to us now." Dad was right.

"I know dad, and I'm not going to do anything that will jeopardize the baby." I instinctively put a hand on my stomach.

"Do you want to stay here tonight Drake?" My mouth dropped open, and Drake just looked at dad like he was insane.

"Uh... yes sir. I would like to stay with Ronnie, if you'll let me."

"Sure, but with her in such pain, you should bunk on the couch." That wasn't a request on dad's part.

"I agree Gabe. That would be best. I'm gonna go get some clothes and come back doll. Will you be ok here without me?"

"Of course she will," Randy said. "I'll stay until you get back. The more here the better," he looked over at me.

"Ok dad." Drake leaned down to kiss me softly before he left.

Susan got up to leave after Drake had left to get some clothes, "I'm sorry Ronnie, and I have to be at work early so I have to leave. Do you need anything before you go?"

"Yes Susan, can you get me the books out of your purse?"

She reached down to hand me the books, I opened one up and handed her the prescription from the doctor "will you take this in and get it filled for me please?"

She took it from my hand, "Sure thing hon. I'll be glad to. I'll drop it at off at Randy's after work tomorrow." Then she leaned down to kiss my forehead, "You take care of yourself." Dad walked her to the door.

Drake wasn't gone long. He came over to me when he came in, and sat down beside me. "Well I'm gonna get home now." Randy said as he got up out of the chair, "I'll see you all tomorrow." He waved as he walked out the door.

I leaned over on Drake and closed my eyes. I didn't realize how tired I was until just then.

When I woke up I was in bed and it was still dark. I was covered in sweat and panting as though I had been running. Just then, dad and Drake both ran in the room.

"What is it?" "What *happened*?" They said together. Drake sat down beside me, and pulled me into his arms and dad just stood there with a worried look in his eyes.

"I think I was dreaming. I only remember seeing Doug and some old man coming to me. I was tied up and I tried to scream, but nothing came out." I was starting to cry, "I saw the old man, and he was smiling at me. He said now your mine." I couldn't say anymore.

"It was just a nightmare doll." Drake was stroking my hair. "They can't get you. I won't let them."

"Its ok baby," dad said as he sat down on the other side, and put his hand on my arm. "No one is gonna hurt you." He looked up at Drake, "Maybe you should stay in here the rest of the night. She shouldn't be alone."

"If you're ok with that Gabe."

"Yes," he sighed "Anything to make her feel safe."

Dad pulled me onto him as Drake got up and left the room. He came back with a pillow and blanket that I assumed he was using in the front room. He laid them on the floor next to my bed.

"I'll sleep here. I don't want to hurt you during the night." He said, as he looked me.

Dad gave me a hug and left the room as I lay back down. "I don't know if I can sleep now Drake?" I said as he took his place on the floor.

"You need to try doll. I will be here all night so you don't need to worry."

I closed my eyes, thought of my little washing machine, and drifted off.

Drake was still asleep on the floor by my bed when I woke up. The sun was coming bright through my window so I knew it was late. I tried to rise up and stretch my arms but the pain in my shoulder made me yell out.

Drake sat straight up and looked at me with his eyes red, "Are you ok?" he asked anxiously as he jumped up off the floor.

"Yea, my shoulders hurt more today is all." I said as he sat down on the very edge of my bed. "I can't believe we slept so late." The clock said ten thirty.

"Yesterday was a long day doll." I didn't want to think about yesterday. I just wanted pretend it didn't happen, at least, most of yesterday. That washing machine sound, burned permanently in my head.

We both jumped as the phone rang in the kitchen. Drake went to get it, "Stay there Ronnie, Its probable Gabe checking on you. I'll be right back." Stay right here, like I could move alone as sore as I am.

"That was Dr. Ambrose; she wants you to come in this afternoon for some tests. I told her I would have you there."

"What time?" I wasn't sure I would be able to go today, but I wanted to see if the baby is ok so I'll do it somehow.

"Four."

"I guess I better get cleaned up then." I looked at him sheepishly, "Can you help me to the tub so I can shower?"

He just smiled at me, "Sure doll, I'll help you." He leaned down to help me up. "Come on."

We walked slowly to the bathroom. He was a perfect gentleman when he helped me undress and sat me down in the tub. "Just call me when you're ready to get out." He said as he closed the door.

I took my time while I tried to stretch my arms and legs. I couldn't put my arms up enough to wash my hair, and I wasn't sure I wanted to ask Drake to go that far, but it was necessary, "Drake," I called out unwillingly.

He cracked the door, "You ready to get out?"

"No..." I still wasn't sure about this, "Um... do you think you can help me with my hair?"

"Sure." He opened the door and came in.

I was more than embarrassed while he kneeled down by the tub, and picked up the shampoo bottle. "I feel like a child."

"Don't worry about it doll." He said as he lathered up my hair, "It's not your fault. You'll be up and around, and able to do this yourself in a few days."

He got up to grab a towel after rinsing my hair. He helped me up and put the towel around me as I stepped slowly out. I was hoping dad wouldn't show up right now. The hot water must have helped my aching muscles. It was easier getting back to my bed than it was going to the bathroom. Drake opened the dresser, "What do you want to wear?"

"Just a sundress. It'll be easier than anything else."

He pulled out the one on top, "This ok?" I nodded as he pulled it over my head. I stood up weakly on my own. The numbness in my legs had been replaced by pain, but my shoulders really hurt.

I heard the phone ring as he put a protective steadying arm around me. I sat back down as he went to answer it. "It was Hailey. I told her you were busy. She wants you to call her later." I had forgotten about calling her after what happened.

"Ok Drake," I stood again. "I think I can make to the other room now."

He walked beside me with his hand up ready to catch if I stumbled. I made it to the couch and sat down. "Do you know where the doctor's office is?" I asked as he sat down beside me.

"Yea, I have been there before." I didn't ask why. "We should call Gabe and tell him, so he doesn't worry if he comes here and you're gone."

That was a good idea. I don't want him to worry more than was necessary. Drake got up to use the phone. "Hey Gabe, the doctor wants to see Ronnie today.... At four...Yea...we'll go to my place after.... Ok, see you there."

So it's settled. I was going home with Drake today. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I was happy, yes, but I didn't want to hurt dad by leaving either.

The day seemed to go fast. It was three when Drake finally said, "Let's go doll. We don't want to be late." I slowly stood up and tried to stretch my arms up again, it wasn't as bad this time, but still hurt. He followed me as protectively as before, with his hands up to catch me if I start to fall. When we got to the truck, he opened the door and helped me in.

The ride to the doctor was longer than before. Drake was driving more carefully than he usually did. I guess to keep from hurting me. I could tell this was how it was going to be from now on. The parking lot was almost empty this time of day. Drake parked as close as he could to the door. The office was just as empty and seemed more comforting this time, maybe because Drake was with me. I signed in and went to sit on the couch like seat in the middle.

We were only there about fifteen minutes when the sweet smiling nurse called me back. "How are you today?" She looked at me puzzled as I limped over. She looked down at my arms and legs at the very prominent bruises. "What happened sweetie?" She was genuinely concerned.

"I was attacked yesterday." She looked like she wanted to ask more but thought better of it, she just showed me to another tiny little room.

"The doctor will be here soon." She said and with a glance at Drake, she shut the door behind her.

We sat there in silence as we waited for the doctor. Drake kept pacing the room and looking at the door. It seemed like forever, but it only a half hour went by when someone knocked. Drake opened it and the doctor came in reading the chart in her hands. She held her hand up to him, "I'm Dr. Ambrose."

He shook her hand, "I'm Drake Sabre. It's nice to meet you."

"Are you the father?"

"Yes." Drake looked happy about saying that. I had to smile.

"The hospital sent me your blood work from last night," she was looking at me, "It looks like your attacker gave you a mild sedative. It shouldn't affect the baby, but just to be safe, I want to take more blood and check it again."

I was relieved, and Drake looked the same. "I will want to see you again in a week to do another blood test just to make sure." She smiled as she looked at me, "Don't worry, I'm sure it will be fine. I'll call you tomorrow with the test results."

She closed the chart and looked at my bruises. "You need to take it easy for awhile, nothing strenuous until you heal." She looked at Drake, "I don't want her lifting anything heavy. Bed rest for a few days would be good too."

My life was going to be hell. I knew Drake would take everything she told us to heart.

I made my next appointment and we left the office. "Let's get you home." Drake smiled.

Drake was in a better mood on the way home. "I'm glad everything is ok." He said unexpectedly, "I didn't realize how worried I had been until the doctor said it was ok." I wasn't sure where this was coming from, but I let him continue. "I guess I really am gonna be a father."

He was quiet the rest of the way home. I started to get nervous when we pulled onto the road that led to his house. Dad's truck was in the driveway. He came out on the porch as we pulled in. Drake came over to my side and helped me out of the truck. We walked to the stairs and he stopped, he turned and

picked me up and carried me in and put me down on the couch with my feet up. Everyone was looking at me as I raised my head.

"Everything is fine. I have to go back in a week for more blood tests, but the doctor said she thinks it will be fine."

Dad let out a big breath, as if he'd been holding it all day. "Thank goodness baby." He sat on the arm of the couch by my feet.

"Well, " Randy said, "How about dinner?"

I started to get up, but Drake stopped me, "Bed-rest Ronnie, remember?" He explained to everyone what else what the doctor had directed to him today.

"Don't you worry honey," Randy said, "I'll take good care of you." He left the room and came back with a tray that had a plate of food and a glass of tea on it. "Here you go. I'm not taking any chances with my future daughter in law, or my grandbaby."

I had to smile at what he had said. I hadn't thought about Drake and I getting married, but it sounded nice. I looked over at Drake and he was smiling too.

Everyone ate in the living room; I think it was to make me feel better. We laughed like it was a party. Dad got up to leave later that night; I could tell by the look on his face he wanted me to come but didn't say anything. He just leaned down and kissed me lightly on the forehead, "I'll see you tomorrow baby."

"Love you dad."

"Love you too."

I waited for dad to shut the door before I looked at Drake, "Will you help me to bed." He got up and came over to help me up.

"Wait," We both looked at Randy as he walked to the kitchen. He came back with something in his hands. "Here Ronnie," I reached up to take what he was handing me. It was a vitamin. "The bottle says one a day," he told me, as he handed me a drink of water to take it.

"Thanks Randy." I took the extremely large pill.

"I told you, I'll take good care of you." He smiled. Now I know where Drake gets it.

Drake made a bed on the floor beside me just like before. I heard him snoring almost as soon as he lay down. It had been a long day for him, and I knew he didn't sleep much last night.

I reached over to pick up the phone extension next to his bed. Randy had put it in this morning; he thought there should be one in here, in case I needed it. I knew Hailey would be worried if I didn't call her soon. "Hello?"

"Hey Hailey."

"Oh Ron, I've been worried about you."

"I'm, sorry Hailey. After I left the doctor the other day, I was attacked."

"*WHAT!* Oh my God! Are you all right?"

"Yea, I'm ok, just bruised up."

"What happened?"

"I stopped at the pharmacy to see if Susan, my dad's girlfriend, wanted to come over and help me with dinner. I was going to fix something nice to smooth things over before I told them. When I got back out to the truck, someone grabbed me from behind and held a cloth over my mouth. That's all I remember until waking up in the hospital."

"Who found you? How did they know you were gone?"

"Susan came out and saw the truck still there and called everyone to see if they knew where I was. Dad, Drake and Randy, as well as Susan started looking for me and found me in the forest. I'm not sure of the specifics of it but I'm just glad to be home."

"Wow Ron. That was quite an ordeal. Are you sure you're ok?"

"Yea Hailey. As long as I'm here, I feel safe. No more lone trips though."

"I'm really glad you're ok. So what did the doctor say?"

"I'm definitely pregnant."

"Have you told Drake yet?"

"I told him last night. I'll be staying with him from now on."

"What did your dad say?"

"He was shocked at first, but he's trying to be supportive I think."

"What about being attacked? Are you sure you're ok?"

"Yes, I'm just going to have to take it easy for awhile. The doctor put me on temporary bed rest. It's really nothing. I'm just bruised and sore, but Drake is treating me like a glass doll." I didn't want to tell her all the details. She didn't know about the dwellers, why scare her.

"I'll let you go for now, but I want to come see you soon, ok?"

"That would be great Hailey. I'd like to see you too." I gave her the directions to the house.

"I'll see you soon Ron. Take care of yourself, and take advantage of the bed rest for a while. Love you!"

"Love you too Hailey. Good night."

"Night Ron."

I lay back down, closed my eyes, and thought about my life with Drake. I could see me walking down the aisle, and him waiting at the end. I could see a little boy playing in the yard with Drake as the sun was going down.

10. Binding

The next few weeks went by slow. Drake went back to work, but I couldn't do anything around the house. I tried to help cook or clean after I was able to walk by myself, but no one would let me.

The doctor had said all my tests were fine, but I was still to take it easy. Drake took that to mean, sit on the couch with my feet up at all times. Randy would at least let me sit at the table for supper, even though he would fix it and sit it in front of me. Every night by my plate, was a big vitamin.

At least Drake was letting me bathe on my own now. Thankfully, Susan had started to come by every night for that when I still needed help.

Hailey came by one day when Drake was at work. Randy treated her as if she was family. "Would you like some tea honey?"

"No thanks Mr. Sabre."

"Call me Randy." He told her with a smile.

"Yes sir." She smiled back.

He excused his self to do some nonexistent work around the house. "Want to sit on the porch?" I asked hopefully.

"Sure," she said as she got up and headed for the door. She looked around the yard, "It's really beautiful here."

"Yea it is."

We sat down in the swing, "So how are you really feeling?"

I looked at the trees across the way before I answered, "I don't know. In a way, I'm excited, but I'm also scared to death."

"I'm sure that's normal. You didn't plan this; it was a big surprise so that makes it scarier." She looked at me with an understanding smile. "What does Drake say?"

"Not too much. He just treats me as if I'm gonna break if he drops me. I know he's just trying to take care of me, but it's getting to be too much."

"Maybe you should tell him that."

I just thought about that for a while. I decided to turn the attention away from me, "So how are things with Brad?"

She looked at the trees this time, "It's ok, but I sometimes think I never knew him at all though."

"Why?"

"Do you remember the mood swings he used to get?" I nodded, "Well, I asked him about it the other night and he just about bit my head off. It scared me. He started yelling at me, said it was none of my business." She looked like she was going to cry.

"I'm sorry Hailey. Have you talked to him since that happened?"

"He called me this morning but mom told him I was out. I'm not ready to talk to him yet." She looked at the trees again.

"Maybe you should talk to him in a neutral spot. Then you won't have to be scared."

"That's a good idea Ron. I'll call him when I get home." She looked down at her watch, "I gotta go Ronnie. I told mom I would be home by dinner."

"Ok Hailey. Call me later ok?"

"Ok. See you later."

"Later." I watched her drive off as I saw Aaron pull in. He was looking at her car puzzled.

I was still sitting in the swing when he came up to the porch. "What was Hailey doing here?"

"Huh? How do you know Hailey?" I couldn't believe he knew her.

"She's my sister." He looked at me strangely, "How do *you* know her?"

"She's my best friend, the first person at school to talk to me when I moved here. You never mentioned a sister, and Hailey lives in Mystic. I just thought your last names were a coincidence."

"She's my half sister. Her mom took her and left when she was a baby. I don't think I've ever seen her in Sabre before."

"She told me her mom wouldn't let her come."

"Figures, she never liked it here, and after she had Hailey, she left. She lived in Branceville for a few years but they moved back here when Hailey started school. Hailey doesn't remember me, but I watch out for her when I can. It broke dad's heart to see her, and her not know who he was."

I didn't know what to say. I had never seen this side of Aaron before. It made me feel closer to him in some way, even if Hailey didn't know him. "I'm sorry Aaron. If it bothers you to have her here, I'll go to her house from now on."

"No, don't do that. I love seeing her, even if she doesn't recognize me, I will always watch out for her."

I didn't know what to say. He seemed happier than I had ever seen him before, not teasing, but sincerely happy. "Ok, Aaron, though finding out what you told me now makes something she said once make more sense."

He looked me puzzled, "What do you mean?"

"When I told her about my first date with someone from Sabre, she got this look on her face like she didn't like it," I looked up at him and smiled, "But when I told her Drakes name, her expression changed. Maybe she was worried that I was dating her brother."

Aaron let out that big laugh I was used to hearing, "I doubt it. As far as I know, she doesn't know about me. Too bad it's not true though," He winked at me. I had to laugh. By now, I was used to his flirty, teasing ways so I winked back. "So what's going on in her life? Is there anything you can tell me?"

I stopped smiling the question had surprised me. I wasn't sure I should tell him, it really wasn't my place. "I don't know Aaron. It's her life and I'm not sure I should tell you her secrets."

"Nothing personal," He sat down by me, "How is she doing in school. Does she have a boyfriend? Just stuff like that. Please, I miss her."

I couldn't say no to those pleading eyes. "Ok, but just the basics. She does really well in school; she's on the honor roll. She loves the mall and shops a lot. She has a ten year old brother she watches when her mom works."

"A little brother huh? That's nice I guess. At least she's not alone," His eyes seemed to fall somewhat. "You didn't tell me if she has a boyfriend." He suddenly remembered.

I was hoping not to have to go there. "Don't you think that's too personal?"

"Not when it comes to my sister it's not," Out comes the protector in him.

"Well... I really shouldn't tell you that. It's her business."

"Ronnie, I can tell by the way you're tiptoeing over the subject that she does. Is there something I should know about him? Something you want to say, but are afraid to?"

How did he know me so well? "I really shouldn't."

"Come on Ronnie. You're worrying me. He's not *mean* is he? No one is *hurting* her are they?" His eyes blazed at the thought of Hailey being in danger.

"No Aaron, he's not hurting her, but, well, he did scare her the other night. He yelled at her when she asked him a question, and she said it scared her so bad she had to leave." From the look on Aarons face, I shouldn't have told him that.

"Who is it?"

"I'm afraid to tell you."

"Why?"

"Look at you Aaron, your upset at the thought of her and him getting into an argument. If you knew who he was..." OOPS

"What do you mean 'who he is' Ronnie?"

Thank goodness. Drake pulled in and Aaron looked away from me. I got up to go meet him at the driveway.

"What's wrong?" He could tell by my face I was upset.

"Why didn't you tell me Ronnie knew Hailey?" Aaron asked Drake before I could say anything.

"It never came up." Drake was looking at Aaron closely now. He could see the anger in his eyes. "You know Ronnie needs to stay calm. You better not upset her." There was anger in his voice.

"I'm sorry Drake. I just got mad because Ronnie knows my sister better than I do. I didn't mean to get upset." He looked at me.

"It's ok Aaron. I understand. Just remember I can't tell you everything. She's my best friend and she trusts me."

Drake still looked a little mad, but he let it go. "So what was this all about anyway?"

"I was trying to get Ronnie to tell me who Hailey was dating. She mentioned that I wouldn't like the guy and..." Recollection came to his face. I knew he was remembering when I had told them about a friend of mine dating Brad. "NO!" I stood behind Drake when I saw the anger in Aaron's face. "NO!"

"Hey man." Drake said as he pushed me behind him further. "Calm down Aaron. What is it man? What are you thinking?"

"I'LL KILL HIM!" I knew that he figured it out. "I'LL KILL HIM!" He tried to run to his car, but Drake grabbed him around his arms and held him there.

Randy must have heard Aaron yell and came running outside. He got in front of him and with that soothing voice, "Aaron. Calm down Aaron. You can't let yourself lose control, whatever it is, you have to focus."

I could see reason returning to Aaron's face and he dropped his head, "Tell me it's not him Ronnie. Tell me it's not *Brad*." He looked at me. My silence must have told him it was. "No, not her, not him."

Drake and Randy managed to get Aaron into the house. I followed them inside and watched Aaron sit down in the chair. He still had his head down, almost as though he was crying. He looked at me with pleading eyes, "Please tell me he hasn't hurt her?"

I sat down on the arm of the chair beside Aaron. "No Aaron. She asked him why he gets the mood fits he sometimes gets and he got angry and yelled at her, but that was it. She left him and went home. Nothing else happened. I *swear*. I wouldn't let anyone hurt Hailey either, she's my best friend, and I love her. Ok Aaron?"

"Ok Ronnie. But if he does do something to her..."

"You'll be the first one I tell." I leaned over and hugged him. He was like the big brother I never had.

He pulled me into his lap and looked at Drake with his usual teasing grin back on his face, "See I told you she loves me more. We're going to Vegas this weekend to get married."

Everyone laughed and the mood lightened up in the room. "Time for dinner!" Randy finally said when the laughter calmed down.

I could still see a small glimmer of fear in Aaron's teasing dark eyes.

No one mentioned Hailey, or Aaron's behavior the rest of the night. When Randy brought out a blanket and pillow and handed them to Aaron I was surprised, "Are you staying over tonight?"

"I'm on Ronnie's sitting duty tomorrow." He laughed.

I looked at Drake. "Why?" Randy usually stayed with me so I was unsure what was going on.

"Dad had some stuff to do tomorrow, and I can't get off work so we asked Aaron to come stay. We'll be gone early, and this way Aaron doesn't have to get up and come, he'll be here."

"What are you doing tomorrow Randy?"

"I'm researching the prophecy again. A friend came across some papers about it in his father's stuff and we're gonna look at it and see if there's anything we don't already know."

"Oh, ok I guess."

"What?" Aaron grinned, "Afraid you won't be able to resist me here all alone?"

Drake punched him in the arm and we all laughed as Aaron rubbed that spot, "Hey man, take it easy will ya."

"Just a warning," Drake grinned.

I got up to go to bed and Drake followed. "Still gonna sleep on the floor?" I asked as he shut the door.

"I don't know doll? How are you feeling tonight?"

"I'm feeling really good." I smiled, as I pulled off my dress in front of him. Something I hadn't done since the day after my abduction. The bruises were just shadows now and the soreness was all, but gone.

He was looking at me with those eyes I couldn't resist and I walked over, put my arms around his neck, and started kissing him. It seemed like it had been forever since he had kissed me the way he was doing now. I put my body against his and he responded. He picked me up as I started to kiss his neck. He laid me gently down on the bed and I could feel his tongue going down my neck toward my chest. It was just like it had been the first time.

Drake was gone when I woke up the next morning. I grabbed a towel and headed for the shower. Aaron was sitting at the table when I came in the kitchen

for my herbal tea. Randy had forbidden me to drink coffee, and this was my substitute. It wasn't that bad really.

Aaron had a cup in front of him and just watched me as I put the teabag in my cup, and poured hot water on it. I sat down across from him and he looked at me and smiled, "Wow that looks good Ronnie." He was teasing me again.

I just glared at him and he laughed harder. "I'm not in the mood for you right now Aaron. You know I can't drink coffee anymore."

"Oh yea," he thought for a minute, "Are you gonna go back to school this year? It's only a little over a month away."

I hadn't even thought about school. "I guess so. I hadn't really thought about it." Now I pictured myself wobbling down the halls and I didn't like it.

"Well no one would blame you if you took a year off you know."

I thought about that for a minute. "Well maybe I can just home school myself until the baby comes then go back." I was talking to myself, but Aaron answered.

"That might work. We'll all help you." I never thought of Aaron being so adult like. I knew he was a year older than Drake, but he always acted more like a kid so it's hard to think of him any other way.

"Thanks Aaron." I couldn't believe he was being so helpful.

The rest of the day went by pretty smooth. Aaron was his normal obnoxious self and kept going on about rolling me down the driveway when I was too big to walk. I tried to laugh, but I was really thinking about all the rumors that would be flying around if I didn't start back to school in the beginning.

As we sat down for lunch, Aaron got a serious expression on his face when he looked at me. "Ronnie, I'm really sorry about last night. I have an extremely bad temper when it blows. I didn't mean to scare you."

"Don't worry about Aaron. I know you were just worried about Hailey. I am too, but the truth is, I have gotten to know Brad pretty well, and I really don't believe he'll hurt her. He loves her Aaron."

He looked down at the plate in front of him before talking, "I think I was letting my own prejudice feelings take over. It's not the kid's fault who his father is."

"I know, and believe me, I understand. Every since you all told me the truth, and then finding out about the dweller that came over, I've been worried too. I don't know what comes over Brad, and whatever it may not be his fault, but it still worries me, for Hailey *and* for him."

Aaron was putting his plate in the sink when something occurred to me, "Randy said the other night that the dwellers can't come on Sabre land. But the man that came over, he was a dweller. How could he, if the others can't?"

"I don't know, but Randy has a theory about that."

"Well," I waited, "What is it?"

"Randy thinks because he rejected the forest, that it freed him from the binding that was put on the dwellers by our great-grandfathers."

"The binding?" I asked, as the door opened. It was Randy and Drake coming back.

"Good," Aaron said, "Randy can probably explain it better."

"Explain what?"

"The binding, it was put on the dwellers a long time ago, to keep them from coming onto Sabre land. Ronnie was asking me about it."

Randy sat down and looked at me. "Maybe we should wait until Gabe gets here. He's on his way, and I'm sure he'll want to hear it too. He's never questioned it so I don't know if he knows the story either. But maybe it's time."

I wasn't sure what he meant by 'it's time', but I was sure now, more than before, I wanted to know. I paced around the room until dad showed up. He looked around at everyone before he spoke up, "Is something wrong?"

"No Gabe," Randy started. "We were just waiting on you before we begin." Dad looked worried, "It's just something Ronnie wants to know about, and I thought you should too."

Everyone sat down in that little living room and got quiet as Randy began, "Back when my grandfather was young, the dwellers started showing up on Sabre land during the day. Before that, they had always stayed in the woods and only come out at night. Our grandfathers were worried that they we're going to try to start the war, even though the bearer, had not been born."

He looked at me and smiled before he continued. "They started watching the forest line to see if they could figure out what they wanted. Even though the prophecy was wrote already, the dwellers then had been peaceful, and stayed away from here. With them showing up during the day, the protectors became worried."

"Then one day, a dweller came out of the forest in the daylight and straight up to the young protector who was on watch duty that day. It was my grandfather. Papa got up and met him halfway across the landline to stop him before he could get any farther. The dweller stopped. He looked at my papa and raised his hand as if in piece. My papa wasn't sure if it was real. The man he saw was very young and almost looked like he was part animal himself. The dweller sat down where he stood and started talking to him."

"We have come to ask for your help." Papa stood there just listening to this wild looking man, but he knew not to speak to him. The man continued. "Our people are dwindling and our numbers are going down. We wish to ask for some of your young to repopulate our forest."

"My papa was in complete shock, and disgusted by the thought of what he had said. The man spoke again, "We have been watching your young and they are very strong. We will go in piece if you allow us this one request. We will stay in the forest again."

"Papa knew this was never going to happen. That no one would give their children to these dwellers. "And if we say no?" He finally asked him."

"Then we will take." The man said as he stood up. Papa stiffened himself for the fight he was sure was coming, but the wild man just turned and went back to the same place he had come."

"He ran to his father, and told him what had happened. My great-grandfather alerted the rest of the protectors and they had a meeting. They decided it was time to stop them from coming on our land, before they could kidnap our children."

"My great-grandfather went to see the local shaman. He gave him several stones he called them Peridot Crystals. He said they would provide a shield of protection. He told him to bury them all around our lands in unison with each other. That would bind their spirits together and the dwellers wouldn't be able to cross over to Sabre land again. That night all the protectors went out together and buried these stones. The dwellers have not been able to come onto Sabre land since."

Everyone was quiet after Randy finished his story. I didn't know what to say, so kidnapping went a long way back to these dwellers. I just assumed it was only me.

"So what did they do?" I finally asked.

"We don't know. No one reported any missing children, but back then, it was hard to say. We know there aren't many dwellers in the forest, but as we've never seen them together, we're not sure of their numbers. About the only time we do see them is at night when they stand on the edge of the woods, staring this way."

"What about the one that left? He came here. How could he?" I was curious.

Randy looked at me, "We believe it's because he rejected their way of life and the prophecy. It could also be that he wasn't born a dweller. On the other hand, maybe he's only half, we did here tales that the females would call a man into the forest to seduce him. It's all theories really, nothing that can be proven."

Everyone was quiet again. We thought about what we heard.

Drake broke the silence, "We found out more about the prophecy today. He kept it in a safe until the owner died and dad's friend, Cane showed it to us. He had never seen it either. His dad had kept it from all of us." Drake seemed slightly irritated.

From the look on their faces, Drake and Randy hadn't liked what they had come across.

"So tell us," Dad finally said after a few minutes.

Drake started this time, "The paper he gave us was very old and part of it was unreadable, but it mentioned the bearer and the child. Only this one didn't say she was to conceive with the Elder."

He looked at me before he continued, "Just that the Elder would raise the child to lead the war. It almost read like the father of the child was a protector. The exact words went something like this, 'The bearer, who is marked at birth, will herself give bear to a child of the outlanders. That child will lead the battle that will cast the outlanders from us and return what is to be, to we who are the true rulers of the magic. The child will be brought forth to the Elder and raised as one with him.'"

"Outlanders?"

"That's what the dwellers called us back then, the outlanders." Randy said.

No one could speak. I felt tears coming to my eyes. "**NO!**" I shouted, and everyone stood up. "**NO!** They are *not* taking my baby! **NO!** I won't *let* them! Please Drake. Tell me it's wrong! Tell me they won't get our baby!" I looked at him, then dad and Randy. Even Aaron looked horrified.

"Calm down Ronnie." Randy's voice soothed. "No one is getting the baby. We won't let that happen."

Drake put his arms protectively around me. I just sobbed onto his shirt. "I won't let anyone come near our child Ronnie."

"That's right," Aaron spoke up, "I won't either. It's my niece or nephew you know."

"Its ok baby," Dad was talking this time; he came over to kneel in front of me. "You're not alone. A lot of people will be here to protect you." He reached up to kiss my head. "It's our job to protect you," He put a hand on my stomach, "and my grandbaby." He just leaned back on his knee and looked at me. I tried to smile, but it wouldn't come. I just couldn't think of anything to smile about.

I tried to sleep that night but I couldn't. I just kept seeing an old man taking my baby, and running into the woods with it.

Drake stirred, "What is it Ronnie?"

"I can't sleep. I just can't stop thinking about what the 2nd prophecy says."

He rose up and looked at me. "No one is going to take our baby. Too many people will protect you both. Please believe that you're both safe."

I lay my head over on his chest and tried to close my eyes. Drake stroked my hair until I was asleep.

11. Aaron and Hailey

Aaron decided to stay with us from now on, only going home when he had to. He along with Drake and Randy took turns staying with me at all times. I felt safer when one of them was around. They were all strong, even Randy. Susan and dad would come by, dad almost every night, and sit sometimes. Susan was good at listening. Even though she had never had any kids, I could ask her anything. I guessed that being a pharmacist probably gave her some incite.

I loved watching Drake in the yard some nights when he was practicing. I knew he was a martial artist, I just never knew how sensual it looked when someone was doing the moves so graciously. He almost looked like he was dancing with the night. Aaron would sometimes practice fight with him, but Drake always seemed to get the upper hand.

Hailey called me whenever she could, but hadn't been able to come by. She had to help her mom at their flower store most of the time.

It was almost time for me to go back to my OB. Drake had taken me the day after my attack and the checkup after that as well, but I didn't know if he was going to take me this time. He had been working so much, I was sure he had forgotten about it until he came in the night before, "What time is your appointment tomorrow?"

"Eleven." I told him, "But I'm sure I can get Susan or Aaron to take me, if you need to work."

"No. I want to be there."

"Ok Drake." I was glad. I wanted him there too.

"Everything looks ok." Dr. Ambrose said after she had examined me. "Now let's hear the heartbeat." She took a small device out of her pocket as I lay back. She put the gel on my stomach and placed it the sensor right in it.

Whoosh.... Whoosh... The little washing machine sounded. I looked at Drake. He was standing there looking amazed as he listened to that fast rhythm. It's probably how I looked the first time I heard it. Neither of us spoke. We just listened.

"It sounds good Veronica," the doctor said as she lifted it off and the sound quit. "Really strong." She handed me a rag to wipe off the gel, "I want to see you in another month. I think it's safe for you to go back to your regular routine. The only restriction I am going to give you is no heavy lifting." She looked up at Drake, "Make sure she doesn't pick up anything heavier than ten pounds."

"Yes ma'am."

Drake didn't say anything else as we walked to the truck. He just had the same look of awe on his face. It wasn't until we had left the parking lot that he finally said, "I can't believe it. It's really going to happen."

I knew what he meant. It was my reaction when I had heard that sound. "Yes it is Drake." He glanced over at me. "It really is."

Randy was sitting at the kitchen table when we got home. He looked over his reading glasses when we walked into the room, "So, how was it?"

"I heard the heartbeat dad." Drake was ecstatic.

"That's great son." Randy looked as happy as Drake.

"What are you doing Randy?" I looked down to see what he was reading.

"I'm trying to figure these parts out that we couldn't read." It was the paper he and Drake had went to see before. "Cane said I could bring it here. Said he had no use for it and since it was about you, he thought we should have it."

Drake sat down by Randy, "Have you been able to get anywhere with it yet?" He looked hopefully down at the tattered old paper, carefully laid out on the table.

"Not much really. Just words here and there."

They both looked disappointed, but started looking at the paper anyway. The phone rang just then. Randy picked it up, "Hello. Hang on. Its Hailey hon." I took the phone and went to the front room.

"Hey. How's it going?"

"Fine Ron, are you gonna be home tomorrow?"

"Yea, why?"

"Mom said I could have the day off and I wanted to come see you if you feel up to it?"

"That would be great Hailey! I was hoping to see you soon."

"Cool. I'll be there around noon or so." Her voice sounded as excited as mine did.

"I can't wait. See you then." I hung up the phone in a better mood than before, if that was possible after hearing my baby.

I took it back to the kitchen, "Hailey is coming over tomorrow if that's ok?" They both looked at each other. "What?"

"Well hon, Aaron was gonna stay with you tomorrow." Randy said.

"Oh, ok. I'll call her back and tell her she can't come tomorrow."

"Who can't come?" I heard from the doorway as I reached to pick up the phone. I didn't know Aaron had come in. I just looked at him.

"Hailey." Drake said, "She was going to come over tomorrow to see Ronnie, but me and dad will both be gone and we need you to stay here."

"So," Aaron looked confused.

"We weren't sure how you would feel about her and you being here at the same time." Randy asked.

"It's fine with me. She won't know me anyway, so what's the harm. I'll keep my distance, but Ronnie will still be safe and see Hailey."

"If you're sure?" Drake looked at him questioningly. Aaron nodded.

"Thank you Aaron!" I went over to hug him.

He picked me up, "Hey, I thought we weren't gonna tell Drake about us?" He said with that teasing grin of his.

I looked over at Drake, he was smiling at Aaron, but he held up his hands in fists, "I told you Aaron, I don't want to have to kill you, but I will." He laughed as well as the rest of us.

Drake and Randy went back to their paper, and I went outside. I was only there a few minutes, when Aaron sat down beside me. "Ronnie sitting again?" I asked him.

"No Ronnie. I just wanted to ask you a question."

"Hailey." I just looked at him and waited. "I just wanted to know what you think about her not knowing me. It's always bothered me, but our dad wouldn't let me tell her."

"Are you asking me if I think you should tell her?"

"Yea, I guess I am."

"I can't tell you that Aaron. I can't tell you to go against what your father told you. Or what Hailey's mom thinks. It's not my place."

"Do you think its right?"

I thought about that for a minute. "No, I don't agree with it, but I can see where her mom is coming from, taking her away from all this mess."

"I know what you're saying Ronnie. I just miss her. It's not fair to have to watch her like a stranger."

"I know Aaron." I put my head on his chest, and he put his arm around me. "It's not fair, but then again, neither is life."

Drake walked outside, "He caught us again." Aaron said as he squeezed me tighter.

Drake didn't laugh this time. "Come inside."

The tone of his voice scared me. "Aaron was just playing."

"It's not that." Drake said as we followed him to the kitchen. "It's what we just read."

I looked down at Randy and then at the paper in his hands. "What is it Drake? You're scaring me."

Randy laid his glasses down on the table. "Well, from what I understand, of what little I can read, this paper was written after the original prophecy. Almost like an updated version. It seems to be an interpretation of the original. It seems like this one was in case the other didn't come true. Sort of like it's their backup plan of sorts. I don't know which one they are going by for now, so we will just go with the original one until we find out different. "

I was happy their not after my baby, but I was still worried what might happen when the dwellers find out it's too late.

"So does this mean the baby is safe?" I looked hopefully at Randy.

"It just appears that the dwellers are still after you, and not the baby is all. *You* on the other hand are still in danger for now."

Drake didn't seem to feel any better. "So what are we going to do now?" He looked at Randy.

"I don't know son. Just keep looking I suppose."

Drake got up and went outside. I started to follow him, but Aaron stopped me. "Let me go talk to him Ronnie."

I wasn't sure, but I conceded. I didn't know what to say. I was glad they weren't after the baby, but I was still unsure. If they still wanted me, then the baby wasn't safe either. "Randy what are we going to do?"

"Just the same as we have been. You don't go anywhere alone. Drake will be ok. Just let him work it out himself."

After awhile, I went outside to look for Drake. He wasn't on the porch so I went around to the backyard. I guess he and Aaron went for a walk. I started to go back to the house when I saw him. He was standing at the edge of the forest. I don't know who he was, but he was staring right at me. I tried to scream, but nothing came out. I tried to run, but my legs were like jelly. I couldn't move. I heard Randy open the door, but I was in back. I knew he couldn't see me. I heard him call my name; he would come to look for me when I don't answer. Why couldn't I move?

Finally, I got hold of myself, "*RANDY!*" I managed to yell, "*RANDY! HELP ME!*" I saw him running at me. I pointed to the trees where he stood. Just then, Aaron and Drake came running up from the beach. They saw him and took off toward him. Randy came and pulled me around to the front of the house. I heard Aaron yell from the trees.

"It's ok hon, he'll be ok." He must have felt my tension in his strong arms. It all went dark.

I could hear voices around me. "Is she gonna be ok?"

"Yes, she just fainted. She'll come around in a few minutes."

"Drake" I finally said when I had my voice.

"I'm here. You're ok Ronnie."

I opened my eyes and he was kneeling on the floor beside me. I looked around, "Where is Aaron? I heard him yell." I remembered the pain I had heard in his voice.

"He's gonna be fine. He had to go get some stitches. Gabe took him to the E.R."

"What happened?" I started to panic.

"Calm down doll. They sent a wolf after him. They couldn't find me, so they went after him." He could see the fear in my face. "He's ok. He'll be back soon. It was nothing really."

"When did dad get here?" I looked at the clock, it said eight thirty.

"He was pulling in the drive way when we were bringing Aaron in the house. He said to just put him in the truck and they left."

"How long ago was it?" I looked at the clock again, knowing it couldn't have changed much.

"About five minutes ago hon." Randy was sitting on the arm of the couch at my head.

I sat up to a sitting position; Drake got up and sat down beside me. I laid my head over on him, "It's my fault. I saw him standing there, but I couldn't speak. I couldn't even move. I was so scared."

"It's ok hon. it's not your fault. Aaron and Drake went into the forest alone. They know what they're doing. Remember Ronnie, it's their job. Sometimes it's dangerous."

"I know, but if I could have called out sooner, or run away..."

"No doll, we would have chased him anyway. It's what we do to keep people safe. We know what we're doing."

"Why was he there? Why did he stare at me?"

Randy sat down on my other side. "We told you before; they sometimes come to the edge of the forest to stare at us. We don't know why." He stood up, "I'm gonna make you some tea. Do you want something to eat? You haven't eaten much today."

"Yea, Randy thanks."

He was back in a few minutes with some sandwiches on a tray and three glasses of tea. Beside one of the glasses was my vitamin. I took it without question. He sat the tray down on the coffee table and we all ate in silence. After I had eaten just half of mine, I lay my head down in Drakes lap.

I woke up in bed again. I must have fallen asleep on Drakes lap, waiting to hear about Aaron. I looked at the clock, 8AM. I couldn't hear anyone talking like I usually did. I got up to go see if Aaron was back.

"Hey girl," I couldn't mistake that booming laugh. "Bout time you got out of bed."

I walked over to see for myself he that was ok. He had a bandage from his knee to his ankle, and had it propped up on the coffee table. "Oh, man Aaron, are you ok?"

"This is nothing. It doesn't even hurt."

"That's because you're on drugs." Drake laughed.

I looked at Aaron. "They gave me a shot of pain killer before I left the hospital this morning." He smiled up at me.

"Breakfast!" I heard Randy yell from the kitchen. I walked in and dad was sitting in one of the chairs.

"Hey dad," I walked over to give him a hug.

"How are you feeling baby?"

"I'm ok dad. I just wish everyone was." I looked over as Aaron limped into the room and drop down in the closest seat.

"Don't worry about it Ronnie." He tried to say between mouthfuls of bacon. "I told you, it's nothing."

We all sat down to eat and Randy filled dad in on yesterday. After breakfast, dad had to go to work and Drake and Randy got ready to leave. Drake looked at Aaron, "I can stay if you don't feel up to it."

"No, you go on. I'll be fine here with our girl." He winked at me. "Won't we Ronnie?"

"It's ok Drake. I'm not going outside. Hailey is supposed to be here soon. I'll be ok." He thought for a minute, but decided to go on. He reached down to give me a kiss before leaving.

I still felt responsible for Aaron getting hurt. I tried to take care of him, but he wasn't having it. "Ronnie, I'm fine. Please stop trying to wait on me." He said after the tenth time I asked if I could get him anything. "I'm not dying ok."

"Ok Aaron, but I can't help feeling it's still my fault."

"How many times do I have to tell you, I would have chased him anyway?"

I gave up and sat down to watch TV with him. It was a ballgame of some kind so I wasn't interested. I picked up the book I had started when Drake wouldn't let me off the couch when we heard someone knock on the door. I figured it was Hailey so I got up to go see. I noticed Aaron stiffen up a little. He was nervous about her coming too.

When I opened the door, she grabbed me into a big hug, "I'm so glad I could come today, Ron. I've really missed you."

She looked over at Aaron sitting in the recliner. Her face went white. "Aaron?" He looked up at her puzzled that she knew his name. "Oh my God! Aaron!" She ran over, sat down on him, and started to cry, "I can't believe it's you! I was hoping, but I never really believed I would see you here!"

Aaron was speechless, and so was I. He just put his big arms around her tightly, "How do you know who I am?" the surprise, written all over his happy face.

She just sat there on him until she was able to talk, "I found some of mom's old pictures from when she was with our dad. I saw a boy in several and started researching it. I found out I had a brother and asked mom if I could see dad. She told me he had died a few years ago. When I asked her if he had any other kids, she lied and told me he didn't, even though I knew about you, I couldn't find you. Mom wouldn't let me come here. She thinks I'm visiting Ronnie. I didn't tell her Ronnie lived in Sabre now, or she probably wouldn't have let me come today." She put her head back down on his chest.

"Hailey, why didn't you tell me you had a brother in Sabre?" I asked her.

"I was afraid if you knew him, you would tell him about me."

"Is that why you looked concerned when I told you I was dating someone from Sabre?"

She smiled at me, "Yes. I knew it was wrong, but for that second, I was jealous that you might know him, when I didn't."

Aaron pulled her up to look her in the face, "I've always known about you. Dad made me promise not to contact you until you were eighteen, so I couldn't see you. But I have been watching you, whenever I could get to Mystic anyway." He pulled her back into a hug, "You have no idea how hard it was to keep that promise after dad died." I could see tears in his eyes now.

Hailey looked down to see Aarons bandaged up leg, "What happened?" She looked concerned.

He followed her gaze, "Oh, nothing, just a dog bite."

Hailey didn't look convinced, but she let it go. She got up carefully, afraid of hurting his leg, and sat down on the couch seat closest to him. Still holding his hand she asked, "What happened to our dad?"

Aaron's eyes fell, like he really didn't want to say. I knew from what Drake had said that their dad was dead, but I never asked any details. I didn't want to know. I sat there in silence, giving them the chance to bond. It's the least I could do for both of them.

Aaron started, "Well, it was about two years ago. About a month after I turned eighteen. Me and dad were in the woods, he was teaching me how to..." He must have realized that Hailey didn't know the real story of the woods. He was thinking of a way to tell her without revealing too much... "...to hunt, when a bobcat attacked us. It started after me first, but... Dad jumped on it and wrestled it down. By the time I had shot it, it was too late. We took him to the hospital, but he had too many injuries. He died that night." Aaron didn't say anymore. He was silently crying.

"I'm sorry Aaron. Mom just said he died. She wouldn't tell me anything else. I'm so sorry." Hailey was crying too.

"It's ok Hailey. I'm ok. Dad was a great man. He talked about you all the time. Your mom was nice enough to send us pictures so at least we got to watch you grow." He pulled out his wallet, "See?" He took out a picture of Hailey, only a few years younger. "She quit when I sent her a letter about dad." He seemed sad about that. "That's when I started to go see you. I'm sorry for doing it that way, but I just wanted to see if you were ok."

"It's ok Aaron. I just wish you had come to me."

"I promised dad I wouldn't. I couldn't break that promise."

"I understand." Hailey looked over at me, "So how are you feeling about... things?" She seemed like she wasn't sure if she should say what things she meant.

"The baby's fine." I said and she smiled. "I saw the doctor the other day."

"So everyone knows?" She looked at Aaron.

"Just those of us here, I haven't gone public yet."

"Well you won't be able to hide much longer you know." She made a gesture with her hand about my belly getting bigger.

I had to laugh and so did Aaron. "Yea, soon we'll have to roll her everywhere!" He laughed even harder when I gave him a dirty look, but Hailey was laughing with him.

I hadn't seen how much they looked alike until now. They had the same beautiful smile.

The rest of the day was fun. Aaron took us on a walk on the beach, after I assured him I was fine. Hailey really wanted to see it. He held us on either side of him with our hands in his. I knew it was so if I tried to run to the forest he could hold onto me. I don't know if it was because of Hailey being there, or Aaron's protective hand, but I didn't hear anything, not a single voice. It was great to be able to walk along in my favorite place again.

Hailey broke the silence, "Do you think we could go to the woods sometime?"

Aaron's hand tightened on mine, "I don't know Hailey. It's not safe right now, but maybe someday, when it is, I'll take you." Aaron smiled at her.

She didn't bring it up again. We went back to the house; Hailey had to be home by six. Her mom was very strict, and she wasn't going to risk grounding now. I hugged her at the door and she said we had to go shopping soon. I would need new clothes. I agreed and then excused myself to the kitchen so she and Aaron could have their time.

Aaron was all smiles when he entered the kitchen. I had started dinner so he sat down at the table. "Thank you Ronnie."

I looked at him, "What for?"

"For bringing Hailey into my life. I would never have gotten the courage to talk to her if she hadn't come here to see you."

"Sure you would have Aaron. I just made it happen sooner." A thought came to my head, "Are you gonna tell her the truth?"

He looked down, "I don't know. Dad said I had to when she became eighteen, but, should I really bring her into all this?"

"It's really up to you, but do you want her to find out when she decides to go hiking?"

"No. I just want to keep her safe. I don't want her to end up like us; always on the verge of insanity."

"I know Hailey pretty well. I think she's strong enough to handle it. I'm not telling you what to do, but think about that. She'll be eighteen in a few months."

"I know." He seemed like he had mixed feelings. He lightened up when we heard Drake and Randy come in.

Drake walked straight up to me and put his arms around my waist. "How was your day doll?"

"It was great. Hailey came over you just missed her. She had to get home early." I looked at Aaron, who was beaming.

"She knew me." Drake and Randy's mouths fell open. "She knew who I was."

Randy sat down by him, "Tell us what happened." He smiled at Aaron.

I finished supper as Aaron told them the story. "I can't believe it." Drake finally said, "But she doesn't know the legend about Sabre or the prophecy though?"

"She didn't mention it." Aaron's face fell again. "Dad wanted me to tell her when she becomes eighteen. I don't know if I should though."

Randy spoke to him with that soft voice, "You'll know when the time comes."

Aaron took a pill and went to lie down early. Evidently, our walk on the beach hurt more than he let on. He was snoring in no time.

Randy took this time to ask me about his reaction to Hailey, "How was he really Ronnie?"

"He seemed fine. He was really surprised she knew him though."

"We all are. When her mom found out the truth about Sabre, she told Aaron's dad she didn't want any part of it. He tried to explain that Hailey is part of this, but she believed if she kept her from it, she would never have to know. He did convince her to come as close as Mystic by promising he would keep his distance. Now it seems like fate has intervened."

Fate. That's what Hailey had said to me on my first bus ride home. I didn't believe then, but now. So much has happened I wasn't counting anything out. "I think you may be right about that Randy." I looked over to see Aaron sleeping on the couch and felt suddenly tired. "I'm gonna hit the hay for tonight." Drake followed me to bed. I sat down on the edge and he sat beside me. "Do you believe in fate?" I looked at him.

"Yes I do. Just look at you and me. The first time I saw you, I knew we would be together." I knew that too.

12. BJ's Story

Over the next few weeks, Hailey came by on regular bases. I don't know if it was for me or Aaron, but the two became very close. I was happy for them both, I wished she didn't have to lie to her mom to come; it made things difficult for her. I knew she would be eighteen soon and I was afraid of what would happen. She said she was gonna tell her mom the truth after her birthday. I also knew that Aaron was struggling with his decision.

He came out on the porch one night while Drake and me were watching the stars, "Hey guys, am I interrupting?"

"No man. Have a seat." Drake pointed to the chair across from us, "What's on your mind?"

"I decided to tell Hailey the truth." He looked at us like he was still unsure. "I think she should know now that she's here so much."

"That's great man; I knew you'd go that way." Drake was not surprised.

"I think it's the right thing. She is here a lot, and we don't want her to find out the hard way." I tried to be supportive. "She's taking me shopping tomorrow." I looked down at Drake's sweats I was wearing, "I need some new clothes."

Aaron laughed, "Yea, you are starting to look like a beached whale." Drake laughed with him and I punched him in the gut.

Hailey showed up early the next day, "You ready?" She just opened the door without knocking she was family now.

"Ready, but not willing," the idea of maternity clothes did not appeal to me, but I couldn't keep wearing Drake's. I had to tie them up, though probably not for long. I grabbed my checkbook, "Let's go."

"Wait Ronnie," Drake called out. He walked over and handed me a bunch of bills.

"What's this for?" I looked at him.

"Your new clothes," he seemed puzzled.

"I've got my own money." I held up the checkbook in my hand.

"But this is *my* baby. So take it." His eyes were unwavering. I just stuffed the bills in my purse and we left.

"That was nice of him." Hailey said as we drove off.

"Yea, he thinks its his *sole* responsibility to give me everything. I've tried to tell him, half the responsibility is mine, but it's just easier to let him think his way, for now anyway." Hailey looked sad. "What's wrong?"

"I broke up with Brad the other day."

"Why?"

From the look on her face, I wasn't sure she was going to tell me. "He was in one of his sour moods. I usually try to just go along with him, be patient, but he was...I don't know, so angry. All I did was ask if he could take me home early, and he just snapped. He screamed in my face, 'you just don't understand!' I told him to help me too," She hesitated before finishing, "And then he pushed me up against the door. I thought he was going to hit me. I screamed at him to let me go. I landed a kick on his chest and he fell down. I took off and walked home. When he called me later, I told him it was over."

"Oh Hailey, I'm so sorry. I know how much you cared for him." I was not gonna be the one to tell Aaron about this.

"Yea, at least I thought I did. Lately I had been feeling like we were drifting apart anyway. I didn't even cry." Then she looked over at me, "Don't you say a word to Aaron. He didn't like Brad as it was. Though I don't know why, he never met him."

"Just the protective brother in him, I'm sure." More than you know I thought.

"Yea, you're probably right, anyway, nothing to worry about now."

We pulled into the mall and Hailey changed the subject. "So what are you gonna do about school? It starts in a few weeks?"

"I'm just gonna home school myself this year. I already have most of it set up, and everyone said they would help. I'm gonna go thru Sabre High."

"I'll help you too, if I can." We made it to the dreaded maternity shop. "Let's shop."

Hailey dropped me off at home about three, "Aren't you coming in?"

"No. I have babysitting duty tonight. Moms on another date, I'll call you later."

"Ok." I reached in the back to get my bags. I had one new outfit on already. It was better than Drakes big shirt and my unbuttoned pants I left in.

When I got to the door, Randy took the bags from my hands, "You should have honked. I would have came and got these."

"There not heavy Randy. You baby me too much." I had to smile; he was almost as bad as Drake about me being careful. "Where's Drake?" I followed him into the kitchen. He fixed me a glass of tea and sat it in front of me.

"He and Aaron had to go help Gabe. Someone saw a wild dog or something."

I always worried when they went into the woods. Even though it had been quiet for a while, I couldn't help thinking they were in danger. "How long have they been gone?"

"A few hours. Don't worry hon. they'll be fine." He used that voice on me again.

We both looked toward the door when we heard a knock, "Stay here." He told me.

"What are you doing here?" I heard Randy say to someone.

"Please listen. I only want to help."

"I don't see how you can."

"I know about the prophecy. I know about the bearer. You need to know the truth. Please listen to me."

"We know too. You can't tell us anything." Randy's voice sounded angry.

"Just let me talk to her."

"You better not come near her, if it's that important, you can tell me."

"It's a long story. Can I come in?"

"I'll come outside."

"She's here, isn't she? I need to see her."

"No!" Randy was starting to get very mad. "Tell me or leave."

"Maybe I should come back when your son is here too. You should all here this."

"I don't know if that's a good idea BJ. Drake is very protective, in both senses if you know what I mean."

"Still, I think you both will want to hear what I have to say."

"Ok. Come back about seven. If Drake wants to hear you out, we will. But be warned, I don't know how he'll react."

"That sounds fair. I'll see you at seven."

I heard the door shut. Randy came back into the kitchen, "What do you think he wants to say?"

Randy looked concerned, "I don't know, but maybe if we let him talk, he'll stop coming around."

The others didn't make it back until almost six. Randy had taken to pacing the floor. Whether it was worry over them, or that they may not get back before BJ returned, I wasn't sure, but he was relieved when we heard the truck outside.

"Thank goodness." I heard him mumble.

"Honey, I'm home." Aaron said as he entered the room.

"Hey dad," Drake came over to me; he noticed my new clothes before he leaned over to kiss me. "You look good doll."

"I look fat."

"No you don't baby." Dad chimed in. "You look beautiful."

"What's wrong?" Drake finally saw Randy's face.

"BJ was here again. He pleaded with me to listen to him. He said he wanted to talk to both of us. I told him to come back at seven, and if you wanted to listen, we would hear him out then." I watched Drake's reaction. He didn't seem mad.

Aaron spoke up, "Maybe if we let him tell his story, he'll stop trying to see Ronnie. I'm getting kind of tired of running him off." He must have come over more than I knew.

"That's a good idea. Maybe we should hear him out. If he knows something we don't, it might be helpful." I couldn't believe Drake was saying this. Then he looked at dad, "Can you take Ronnie home with you tonight?"

"What! No! Whatever it is it's about me, and I want to hear it too."

"I don't think so doll. It could be a trick."

"Hey man." Aaron looked at Drake, "We'll all be here. He can't touch her. None of us would let him."

"That's right Drake. She's my daughter and I want to hear what he has to say too. If it's about her, I should hear it."

"Don't worry Drake. I'll be fine with all of you here." I could see he wasn't happy about this, but also that he was giving in.

"Ok, but he can't get even close to her." His voice was set. I could tell he wasn't going to let his eyes off me one second while BJ was here.

The men ate quickly as we waited for BJ to show up. I looked at the clock every few minutes. Six fifty, six fifty-four, at seven oh three, we heard a car pull up. Drake and Randy went to the door and Aaron stood up by me. Dad was sitting beside me on the couch.

"Hello BJ. We have decided to listen. Just remember, we are still protectors, and we will not stand for betrayal from you." Drake's voice almost scared me it was so menacing.

When BJ walked into the living room, he looked at me with wide eyes. He took a step toward me. Dad jumped up, and Aaron stood in front of me and got in BJ's face as Drake grabbed him from behind. "No!" BJ said, "I was only gonna shake her hand." His voice sounded scared.

"You don't touch her." Drake's voice commanded.

BJ just sat down, but looked at me again as Aaron sat on the arm beside me, and Drake sat on the floor in front of me. Randy seemed to be the only one at ease.

BJ was still looking at me; it was starting to make me feel uncomfortable. I was beginning to think that maybe Drake was right I shouldn't be here. I started to say something, but Drake beat me to it, "If you don't stop staring at her, I'm *going* to rip your eyes out!"

BJ looked away, "Sorry. I just can't believe it's true." He took a quick glance at me again, and then turned his attention Randy, "It's too late isn't it? She's already pregnant?"

My mouth dropped open and Drake stiffened in front of me. Dad leaned closer to me and Aaron leaned forward, ready to spring. Only Randy stayed calm, "What makes you say that?"

With another glance in my direction he began, "I can see that for myself. It just proves I should have listened to my conscience sooner. Maybe I could have stopped it."

"Would you just say what you've come to say?" Drake was really getting annoyed.

"Ok," BJ began, "I'm sure you know that the prophecy states that the bearer will be brought to the elder in her eighteenth year. What you believe is that he is supposed to father a child that will lead them to war. You're wrong about that. First let me explain my story, and then you'll understand better."

"I'm sure you've heard about my leaving the forest for my love, that's right. It was also for my child, Brad. You see, I'm the grandson of the elder. My mother is his daughter. I'm only half though. My father was one of the men my mother seduced to keep our line going. I have no idea who he really is, and she probably doesn't either.

"However, because of my lineage, my son is the true heir of the forest. I have tried to keep him away, but as he gets older, the call is stronger and I'm not sure how much longer I can keep him away. Now with the bearer coming back," He took a quick glance in my direction, "The dwellers are trying even harder to get him. Now that you understand that, I'll get to the real point."

"The prophecy does state that the bearer is to be offered up to the elder; however it doesn't state that he is to father the child. There is a second prophecy. I don't know if you are aware of it, but it states that the child is to be brought forth to the elder to be raised as one with him."

Randy interrupted BJ, "We know about the second, but it was worn down, and we couldn't read it all."

"Ok then, you might know that the child is supposed to belong to an outlander, a protector. I'm not sure if her child is that of an outlander, but the way your son is behaving, I believe it is. If that's the case then all could be lost. The dwellers already know about the baby."

"How do you know that? I thought you didn't see them." Drake asked him.

"Haven't you noticed that the dwellers are being quiet right now? That they haven't been watching you like usual. It's because they are preparing. Let me explain further. The second prophecy also states that the true heir of the elder is to join, as one, to the child of the outlander. Brad is the true heir and," he looked at me again, "since she is pregnant, and I believe that child is the child of the outlander, it's to be joined to him."

"What do you mean joined? Like married." I asked but didn't really want to know.

"It means their souls are to be joined. So the leader, the true heir, can unbind Sabre, and they can all walk freely in *both* lands, yours and theirs. Then he can start the war to lead the outlanders away."

Everyone was quiet. I could feel Drakes stiffened body lying on my legs. I could feel tears in my eyes. Randy broke the silence, "You told us you wanted to help BJ. How can you help? Do you know how to stop it?"

"No. I was hoping to warn you before the child was conceived, but as I'm too late for that;" He looked at me and Drake again, "All I can tell you now, is to keep her away from the elder, and I'll try to keep Brad away from them too. I can tell you that the ritual to join the two is to be preformed right before the child is to be born. That's why they are waiting, for the time to be right. She is to be placed on the altar, and then anointed with the oils. Then they'll join Brads hand in hers and bind them together with the elder chanting over her. After the joining of the souls, they'll sacrifice her to the leader, by burning the remains. It's said she won't survive, as her soul is connected to the child, when the child's soul is gone, so will she be."

BJ got up to leave, "I'm sorry I couldn't help you more." Then without another word, he left.

I couldn't move. I couldn't speak. I was numb. I couldn't even cry. My hand went over my stomach in a protective motion. I could feel Drake on my legs, and see the horror in every ones faces, but I felt alone. Alone and afraid, afraid of what I had just heard, afraid of what was supposed to be. I just sat there, without any hope in my heart. They were waiting for my baby, Drake's and my baby. We had created the very thing they sought after the most. Now how will we keep them from getting it?

Drake turned to look at me. He got up on his knees and put my face in his hands, "It *won't* happen. I won't let it. Our baby *will* be safe."

"*How* Drake? How will you do any more than you've already done? What if Brad *does* join them? What if somehow, they are able to get me there? How are we gonna stop it, now that we know what they want." I finally started crying. I put my head on Drake and just sobbed. He put his arms around me tight. He was just as worried as me; I could feel it in his tense strong arms as he held me there.

Dad was pacing again. His natural instinct when he didn't know what else to do. He looked over at Randy, "What now?"

Randy was the only calm one in the house that was full of tension. "Well Gabe, as far as I can tell by what we just heard, Ronnie is safe until time for the baby to be born. Then the dwellers will try to take her for the ceremony to join with Brad. If he rejects it like his father, we have nothing to worry about, but that's a long shot, we won't count on that."

Drake had taken dad's seat beside me on the couch. "Maybe we should leave Sabre." He looked at Randy.

"Your life is here. Ronnie's doctor is here. Do you really want to take the baby away from his heritage and family?" Dad was right. I didn't want to leave either.

"No Drake." I finally stopped crying enough to talk. "I don't want to leave. I'll just have to be more careful. I won't even go on the porch alone. We will just hope we can figure it out before the baby is due." I knew it was gonna be hard, but I also know, the most important thing was safe for a few more months.

Drake looked defeated, "Ok. For now we can stay, but if the closer it gets, we can't figure out how to stop it, we'll leave. Ok?"

"Ok." I agreed

13. Hailey's Birthday

The house was unusually tense and hectic. Randy had found a restorer who specialized in old papers. He made an appointment with him to look at the second prophecy. Drake was overbearing. He hardly left my side. Only when Hailey was here, did I get the chance to breath.

Aaron had made it his job to be Drakes second in protecting Hailey and me, even though she didn't know she needed it. If the ceremony was set, we needed as many protectors as possible. We knew Hailey would be eighteen soon, and Aaron was sure now more than ever, she needed to know.

Susan had gotten my home schooling set up through Sabre high. It was easier than I thought it would be. I just had to do the work, and mail it in. I was planning to go back to finish out my last semester at Sabre after the baby was born.

Hailey was at the house when I got back from my last OB appointment. Drake and dad both went this time, one to watch the front and one for the back. They were taking no chances like before.

"Hey." She jumped up as we entered the kitchen, where she was having coffee with Randy. "So, what did the doctor say?"

"She said everything is normal and coming along fine. Dad even got to hear the heartbeat today." I looked over and he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Next time is mine." Randy spoke up.

Aaron was sitting next to Hailey at the table. He's always close to her when she's here. "Little sis is gonna be eighteen this weekend Ronnie." I could see the happiness and worry in his eyes. The time was almost here, and now he was wavering in his decision.

"That's great Hailey. What are you gonna do?" I was hoping she wasn't planning a party.

Randy said. "Since you can't go there, she wants to come here."

I was unsure of that, but I didn't want to say anything. "Want to sit outside Hailey?" She knew why I asked.

She walked over and put her cup in the sink, "Sure." She followed me outside. I knew Drake would be close to the door listening, in case I needed him.

"What about your mom?" I watched her eyes for a reaction. They fell slightly.

"I don't know yet. I haven't told her where my party is going to be. I'm afraid she will freak out on me. You know she doesn't want me here. I hate lying to her, but she hasn't given me a choice. She almost caught me last week. She came by your house to ask me to keep my brother and when we weren't there, she called Gabe at the office. He told her I had taken you to the store." She looked down, "Now other people are lying for me too."

"I know it has to hard Hailey, but just remember, in a few days, you can tell her the truth and it will all be over," For her mom at least I thought to myself.

"My actual birthday is tomorrow. I think I'm gonna sit her down tomorrow night and tell her the truth. I wish she didn't feel the way she does about Sabre. I don't even know why. It's so beautiful here."

"What about school? Mystic starts Monday doesn't it?"

"Yea, I only have one year left, so I'm gonna finish. I just wish I knew where I was gonna finish at." I knew she had thought about moving to Sabre. She just wasn't sure when.

"I hope it's all going to be ok. I wish I could help you." I wish she didn't have to be in all this mess.

"I know Ron. And I thank you for everything. If it wasn't for you, I may have never gotten to know Aaron." I wasn't going to tell her she was wrong about that.

"I gotta go. Mom said to be home early today. She thinks I spend too much time with you. She also suspects you're pregnant. One of her friends said they saw you at the doctor last month. I told her there were other doctors there

besides Dr. Ambrose, but she is still suspicious." She reached over to hug me, "Love you Ron."

"Love you too Hailey."

I watched her go to her car. I heard the door, but I didn't look. I knew who it was.

"Is she going to be ok?" Drake said beside me.

"Yea, she's strong. I just wish it didn't have to happen this way. I wish she could stay blissfully ignorant."

"I know doll." He put his arm around me protectively.

We saw him at the same time. I gasped and Drake had me up and ran in the house before I could scream. "Someone's at the edge of the forest."

Drake, Aaron, and dad took off as Randy sat down beside where Drake had put me down on the couch.

"Don't worry." He could read my face so well, "They'll be fine. I'm sure it's nothing." He stood up, "Come on, help me in the kitchen."

We started supper, but my mind was elsewhere. I kept looking at the clock on the wall. Thirty minutes, One hour. It was a little over an hour before they came back. Randy had set a plate in front of me, but I wasn't eating.

"Did you find out anything?"

"No Randy." Dad was talking. "He got away."

"That's too bad. I wish we could catch one and try to make them talk. It would be helpful to know what their planning. Oh well. How about some dinner Gabe?"

"No thanks. I'm meeting Susan at her place tonight. We're going out. Thanks anyway." He leaned down to kiss me bye, "Love you baby."

"Love you too dad."

When I got up the next day, I was already anxious. I knew Hailey was telling her mom everything tonight and I was scared for her. Her mom learned of the history of Sabre, when Hailey was a baby. It freaked her out so bad she had left and took Hailey with her. Now she was gonna hear that Hailey had still managed to find her way here anyway, even if she didn't know the truth yet. How was that going to turn out? I wished I could be there to help her, but I knew she had to do this on her own.

I decided to call her to see if she was ok. "Happy Birthday Hailey!" I tried to put enthusiasm in my voice.

"Thanks Ronnie." She sounded worried. "How are you feeling today?"

"I'm just worried about you. Call me tonight if you need to. No matter what time, ok?"

"Ok. I will. I have to get ready for the day. Mom is taking me to the mall. She got a sitter for my brother and said she wanted to spend the day with me. I'm gonna talk to her when we get back."

"Ok Hailey. Good luck." I hope it worked out for her, that her mom loves her enough to accept who she is.

I thought about Hailey all day. Drake could see the worry in my face, "its ok doll. She knows what she's doing. It's her choice and I think she is able to handle it." I knew he was right. I knew it was the right thing for Hailey.

Drake, Randy, Aaron, and I were all sitting on the couch later when we heard a car pull up. I looked at the clock, eight thirty. Who would be coming at this time? The men all jumped up when the door opened.

It was Hailey, and she was crying. Aaron got to her first. "What happened?"

She came over to sit beside me. "I told my mom." She sniffed as Aaron came to sit beside her. "And she completely freaked out. She told me not to come

here anymore, and not to see you anymore." She looked at Aaron, "I told her no. That you were my brother, I wasn't going to stop coming to see you, and she couldn't stop me. She told me if I continued to come over here, not to come back. That I didn't know what was going on here, it was dangerous, and that she wasn't going to let my little brother into the mess. I packed my clothes and left."

She laid her head on Aaron. "I'm sorry Aaron; I know this is not your fault. I want to be here. I like it here. I feel like I belong. Like its home." She dropped her head like she didn't know why she was saying these things. Like she didn't know why she was feeling them. We all knew, and soon, so would she.

"Don't worry Hailey. You can stay at my house. I'm here all the time and its only five minutes away, so it's yours for now, if you want it." He looked at her questioningly.

"Thanks Aaron, but you don't have to do that. I've got some savings, I can get a room."

"There's no way my sister is going to stay at a hotel!" He pulled something from his pocket, "Here's the door key. I'll show you the way and come back if you want to."

Randy stood up, "I don't think Hailey should stay alone tonight. She's had a traumatic evening. If you want to stay home tonight Aaron, I think we'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" Aaron looked at me.

"I'll be fine tonight. Hailey needs you more." I assured him.

Hailey got up to go toward the door, "Can you drive?" She looked at Aaron, "I'm not feeling up to it."

"Sure. I'll put your stuff in my truck." I followed them to the door.

Drake and Aaron put Hailey's bags in the truck while Randy pulled her car around back.

"Are you sure you're ok?" I asked her when I knew no one was listening.

"I'll be ok. Mom will come around when she gets over the shock. She just needs time. I know her, she doesn't like being wrong." Aaron beckoned her over; she gave me a hug before she left.

"Do you think it'll work out?" I asked Drake when we in bed that night.

"I don't know doll. Everything happens for a reason. Maybe it's what's supposed to be. Now Hailey will be closer and when she learns the truth, maybe she'll want to help. I think a fight is inevitable, and we'll need all the protectors we can get."

I just thought about that as we lay there. I knew he was right. We were going to need everyone's help to make it through the next five months.

Hailey was excited about Randy throwing her a party the coming weekend. She had met many of the people around here from being here when they come to check on any progress in our current problem. Everyone knew to watch what they said around her, Aaron must have given them a heads up. Now Aaron was planning to use the help of the protectors, to ease Hailey into the truth of her heritage. Safety in numbers he joked to them.

Hailey had come over every day. She was glad to help anyway she could. She was cooking in Randy's kitchen trying to get the food done before the people got there. Hailey and I were just bringing the food out to the table that was set up in the yard when they started showing up. Everyone treated her as if she had been there her whole life. I wondered if she realized that. If she noticed anything different about the mood here, she didn't say.

After everyone ate, we gathered around the yard to talk. Aaron asked Hailey to sit by him. She did without question. "Hailey, I think it's time for you to know where you really come from."

She looked at him then, with worry in her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean the legend of Sabre Beach, the legend of the protectors."

"The protectors? That's an old wives tale... Isn't it?" She was looking very interested now.

"Well, some of it is. Protectors don't fly or use magic, but a lot of it is true. Let me tell you the true story." Aaron began.

"A long time ago, no one knows how long exactly, there was a small group of people who settled on the beaches here. Their leader was Randy's ancestor, Randall Sabre. For years, they lived peacefully without problems. Then one night, two young ancestors of the protectors were hunting in the woods. They felt someone watching them and then, out of nowhere, coyotes chased them out of the forest. The young boys went and told their fathers what had happened. Their fathers, believing the boys had just gotten scared and ran out of the forest, decided to find out. When they entered the forest, they also got the eerie feeling they were being watched. Then the same coyotes chased them too."

"The two fathers went to the leader, Randall Sabre, and told him of their experience. He sent his son to see if what they said was right. That someone didn't want them in the woods. His son returned to say he had too felt a presence too, but nothing chased him. He followed the presence to a clearing and saw people there gathered around a fire saying strange words. He snuck away without anyone seeing, to report what he had seen. The leader wanted to see this for his self. He entered the forest and felt a feeling he didn't understand. That he wasn't alone. Several people chased him to the edge and stopped."

"The leader had a theory, and he decided to test it. He sent his son, and one of the other boys, to enter the forest at different places. Just as the leader had predicted, the young boy *was* chased, and his son was not. After that he tested all the men and boys in the village to see which ones were noticed and which ones were unseen by these dwellers of the forest. The ones that couldn't be seen were charged with the duty of watching the dwellers in an effort to find out what it was they were doing there. So the few who could would sneak into the forest to observe the dwellers, and watch them. They saw the people send animals after anyone they saw in the woods near the clearing, and that sometimes they would talk strange and draw others in."

"After Randall heard all this from his son, and the few others that went with him, he decided that he and the other men who could feel when the Dwellers were near, had to protect their people from these dwellers. They started patrolling the lands and realized they can *also* feel if anyone was lost or hurt in the woods. They would send in someone to retrieve them. They soon noticed that

they were stronger than the rest of the men, as well as being better scouts and trackers. Then the original decedents of Sabre Beach protected anyone who entered the forest. Randall Sabre called them, 'The Protectors of the Forest'."

Aaron looked over to see Hailey's expression. She seemed interested, but not at all convinced, as if someone had told her a fairytale. "That's a nice story big brother. Are you trying to scare me?"

"No Hailey, but there is more" he began again. "As you know, Randy and Drake are the decedents of Randall Sabre, but what you don't know, is that we are descendents of the protector he sent to scout with his son that first time he tested his theory. You and I are also descendents of the settlers of Sabre. It's our job, as well as some of the other people here, to protect anyone who enters the forest. Right now, the forest wants Ronnie and her baby. We can't let that happen. We need you to join up to help. Our blood is almost as strong as Randy's." He looked at Hailey, who was now in shock.

"So you are telling me, I'm supposed to be a *protector*? That I'm to go into the woods and get people?" She didn't seem convinced. "Are you joking Aaron, because it's not funny. Especially when you say, they want Ronnie and the baby. It's not funny at all."

Randy spoke up with that soothing voice, "Hailey, we know it's hard to believe, but it's all true, even the part about Ronnie and the baby being in danger. If you don't wish to stay, we'll understand. You weren't raised here so you don't know the extent of what's going on, we won't hold it against you if you leave."

She looked astounded, as his words finally registered with her, "This is what mom was talking about wasn't it? She said it was dangerous, and I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but I just thought she was making it up so I would stay away." I could see the belief in her eyes now. "How is this about Ronnie and the baby? How are they in danger?"

Drake looked up at me before talking, "Well, the dwellers believe Ronnie is supposed to give them the heir that will bring them power. We aren't sure about the specifics of it, but we won't let her alone until we do."

Hailey looked at me, "What was really going on when you were attacked. I knew you were keeping something from me then. Is it about this too?"

I looked at Hailey. I wasn't sure if I should tell her. I looked at Randy and he nodded his head, "Well, yes it was. One of the dwellers had followed me to the doctor when I first found out I was pregnant. He grabbed me outside the pharmacy, and took me to the clearing in the woods. He tied me to the stone alter in the middle. Drake, Aaron and dad found me before he could do any real damage. However, since I'm the dwellers primary target, I am never alone." I looked up at everyone. "Haven't you noticed that I have body guards all the time? Even *Aaron* is almost as overbearing as Drake."

Aaron smiled at me, "I can't let anything happen to my girl and our baby." Drake punched him in the gut. Hailey laughed.

"I can't believe it, I'm a protector. I want to know everything." She smiled up to them all. I could see the relief on Aarons face as every took turns filling her in on everything. I watched her face as they told her about the prophecies. Not knowing which one the dwellers believed, and the differences between the two, omitting who the true heir *really* is.

And then came time to tell her about Brad, and his role in the prophecy. No one wanted to say it so I did, "Hailey, I have to tell you something that you're not going to like."

"Like what?" she laughed, "My best friend is either going to be raped by my maniacs or their going to steal the soul out of the kid she already has, what could be worse?"

"We told you about the second prophecy, but we didn't tell you who the Elder's heir was." I hesitated.

"Unless you tell me it's Aaron. I think I'll be ok." Aaron punched her lightly in the arm for that remark.

"No, Hailey. It's... Brad." Everyone was quiet. We all knew how she felt about him.

She didn't seem surprised by what I said. Or even very upset about it, "I think in a way, I might have known something like this. He always seemed like he was different in so many ways. I knew there was something about him, that I

should stay away. At least now I know why." She looked up at Aaron determinedly, "I want to help. Teach me."

Aaron smiled, "Whenever you're ready. We can start training you tomorrow, if you want to."

"Training me? How, tell me more unbelievable stories."

"No hon," Randy spoke up, "Physical training. You're a protector now. You are stronger than average, but you still need to learn to fight, and control it. We don't have much time, most protectors' start very young. The baby is due in about five months, so we have to hurry."

"I'll be ready, and you might be surprised." She grinned at Aaron, "No one is going to hurt Ronnie or the baby." She smiled at me and I smiled back.

Hailey crashed on the couch after everyone else had left, Aaron on the floor beside her. Drake and I were on our way to bed when he decided to ask me, "So what was that all about with Hailey earlier? The way you two smiled at each other, like you had a secret?"

"You caught that huh?" I grinned.

"Yea."

"Well, like you, Hailey has a background in martial arts, and she's really good. I've seen her in action."

Drake laughed quietly. "Aaron is going to get his butt kicked. I can't wait to see that." I had to laugh too.

The next morning, we were all in the yard watching Aaron tell Hailey about how to stop an attack from behind, which is how the dwellers came at you. She was playing the helpless girl part well. I was trying not to laugh as she asked him questions about how to turn and grab, or how to throw him off. After awhile, he decided he had told her enough to practice approaching her from behind.

I saw her standing there smiling as he came up. Before he could get a grip on her, she grabbed his arm, throwing him over her shoulder to the ground, and hitting his gut as he fell.

He just looked up at her with amazement. Then comprehension set in and he laughed. He jumped up to go at her again from the front. She brought her leg up with one swift kick, planted it on his chest, and had him on the ground again. He stood up to brush himself off. He didn't notice her crouch down and swing her leg around to knock his legs out from under him. Down he went again.

By this time we were all laughing so hard, we had tears in our eyes. Aaron had always been a good fighter even without the training Drake had, so it was funny to see him taken down by a 120lb girl.

"I give," He said without getting up. He was laughing too. "Maybe Drake should try you. Feel up to it man?" He looked hopefully at Drake.

"Sure, I'll try her skills out." Drake seemed confident.

Hailey smiled at Drake as he stepped out onto the yard. She didn't know about him either. She was expecting another easy win, but I had seen Drake practicing in the yard. It would be hard to say who was better.

Drake came at Hailey from behind, when she went to throw him he blocked her, and took her down. She smiled up at him, "Finally some competition."

They almost looked as though they were dancing. Drake blocked her every kick, and she blocked his every punch. She tried to sweep him like she had Aaron, but he jumped in time, and had her pinned. It was fun to watch. Even Aaron seemed to be enjoying himself.

He had come over to sit by me. "It's about time Drake found an opponent he can't take in five seconds. We're going to need all we can get when the time comes. Randy is afraid, the closer the time gets, the more they'll try to take you."

As I was watching them fight it out, I wished I could try too. I had never been much of a fighter, but now I was completely helpless. I couldn't even defend myself. Aaron must have noticed the look on my face. "Hey, don't worry about it. You'll be fine. No one is going to come near you. We'll *all* protect you."

"It's not that Aaron. I know you'll all protect me. I just wish I could protect myself." I looked back at Drake and Hailey, neither one of them willing to give.

"Did you know Hailey was ninja girl?" Aaron had starting watching them again too.

I smiled sheepishly, "She had told me she was a martial artist. That she has been training since she was 8 years old."

"Drake started as soon as he could walk by himself. Randy said it was better discipline for him, and since he was with his mom in the summers, he had classes there too, so as not to interrupt his real training." He laughed, as Hailey landed a kick to Drakes chest.

After they were both panting so hard they couldn't breathe, Randy brought out a pitcher of tea and some glasses, "Time for a break!" It was not a request.

Drake was asking Hailey where she trained, and for how long as we sat there, "I started at 8 and have been going ever since. Before I had to give it up to help mom at the store, I was training the younger kids."

"I started training at about 3. I knew it would help someday, since I already knew about my life as a protector."

I tried to listen to them, but they could have been speaking Latin for all I could make out of the rest of their conversation. It was all about what style they had trained as, or what their specialty was.

Aaron seemed to understand what I was thinking, "It's all Greek to me." He whispered, "And I've had to listen to Drake my whole life about it." He laughed.

The days seemed to go by faster after Hailey new her real heritage and her and Aaron's relationship was stronger than ever. You could see them out in the backyard training every night. I enjoyed watching Aaron get knocked down a notch.

He was starting to learn her weaknesses. He even had Hailey down a few times. The first time he got her down she fainted that she was hurt, and when

Aaron bent down to help her, Hailey let him have it. Drake and I were laughing so hard, we were crying.

I felt better with Hailey there now. She really took her destiny to heart. When we first met, she said it was fate, now I think she was right. Destiny or maybe it was just luck, but whatever it was, Hailey and I definitely belonged in each other's lives.

The only thing that lingered around the house was the second prophecy. It was in the back of all our minds, lingering around to remind us that the worst is yet to come.

14. The 2nd Prophecy

Randy had taken the second prophecy to the restorer in Branceville. He knew it could take a few weeks to sort it all out. Randy had confidence in the man, even though the rest of us were unsure about it. I wasn't altogether sure I wanted to know what it really said. The speculation was much worse than it should be. I knew partly what it said, Drake and Randy had been able to figure out a small piece, but the waiting got worse as the days passed.

Even Randy had seemed to become impatient. He checked the mail everyday relentlessly. It was saddening to see his fallen face when he would return empty handed. The rest of the house was tense, but still went on as if nothing important was coming in the mail.

Hailey's mom had called several times. She convinced Hailey to come back work at the store a few days a week. Using the guilt, she felt over her little brother's sadness, to coax her to say yes. She had vehemently refused to move back in, without giving her mom a reason. She was even paying Hailey to work.

Hailey had also opted for homeschooling. But her days mostly spent researching the legends of the protectors, and of Sabre Beach. Being better at computers than the rest of us, it was a good job for her. When she wasn't on the computer she had brought from home, or reading another book she had found about Sabre, she was training with Drake and Aaron. Neither one of them minded when she would sneak up and attack, especially Aaron.

I was a little bit jealous of Drake training her, not because I was afraid of them getting closer. Drake had made his feelings about me clear, and reminded me every day about them, but that I couldn't be the one to help him when the time comes. Her skills with martial arts made her one of the ones that would lead the attack, should it come to that, and most of them believed it would.

Hailey came to sit by me one night while the guys took their turn practicing.

"What's wrong Ronnie?"

"Nothing really, I'm just feeling insignificant."

"Why?"

I looked at her face, "I want to help, but all I can do is sit here and let everyone else take care of me. I don't mean to be jealous, but watching you and Drake train...well, it reminds me of how helpless I really am."

Hailey smiled, "You don't have to be jealous Ronnie. I understand how you feel, but you have to think of your baby. That's the most important thing."

"I know that, but sometimes I wonder if it's really about that, or is it because no one wants the dwellers to come out of the forest."

"Don't think like that Ronnie. You know it's about protecting the baby more than anything else."

"In my heart I do, but my head keeps wondering, if I hadn't come to live here, then no one would be in danger. And if I hadn't gotten pregnant, would everyone be doing something else right now."

"I know I'm the last one to join the protectors. And because of that, I can see from an outside view. So believe me Ronnie, everyone here would be protecting you, even if there were no prophecy. They all love you, and want to protect you, and not just thwart the prophecy."

I thought about what Hailey said. I knew she was right, but I still couldn't stop feeling that way. My mind had so many thoughts; I just couldn't get them straight.

I was still thinking about what Hailey said as I lay down that night. Drake and Aaron were still in the backyard training, just like they have been doing every night.

I felt Drake lay down beside me, "Are you still awake?"

"Yes."

"Then maybe you can tell me why you think everyone is just trying to prevent the prophecy."

I wasn't surprised Hailey had talked to Drake. "I don't know. It just doesn't make sense, most of the protectors didn't know me until I moved here. Now they

are all asking me how I'm doing, and if I the forest called me again. It just seems logical, that after waiting all this time for the marked girl to arrive, their first priority would be to protect the beach and not me."

Drake looked straight in my eyes, "Ronnie, even if you don't remember them, all the protectors have known you since you were born. Gabe and dad are best friends, and dad is the leader of the protectors, so they have all watched you grow up. This has nothing to do with the prophecy, and everything to do with you."

"Maybe they have known me all this time, but as soon as they heard about the mark after I was born, I'm sure they started planning then on how to keep me away from the elder."

Drake shook his head, "No one but dad and Gabe knew about the mark, until dad told me when I was 16. They only found out after you moved here."

"Dad didn't tell the others. Why not?"

"That was dad's idea. He felt like you needed a normal life, not one of suspicion. He knew no one would treat you different, but he also knew they wouldn't have let you be an innocent child if they knew. He wanted you to be happy."

I felt like a cad for what I'd been thinking. "I'm sorry Drake. I've been ridiculous."

"Not ridiculous Ronnie, just overly cautious. I might have thought the same thing if it was me. Now you need to get some sleep."

I turned over and lay my head on Drake's chest. My irrational thoughts gone, and I fell asleep more relaxed than I had in a while.

It was over a month later when the package finally came. Randy almost danced in from outside. He was holding it up for us all to see. As luck would have it, dad and Susan had come over to stay for dinner that night.

"It's here!" He yelled to Aaron and Hailey out the back door. They both stopped their work out, and ran inside.

We all sat down at the kitchen table, not sure, we wanted to hear what it said. Randy opened a small envelope first. It was a letter from the restorer.



Mr. Sabre,

I regret I was unable to interpret the entire document in question. I have sent you the readings I was able to decipher. I hope it helps in your resolve. Please sir, if you have any questions, feel free to call me. I look forward to further business with you.

Sincerely,

Robert Marks



No one could hide the disappointment on their faces after the letter. We just hoped that what he was able to decipher was enough to help. Randy pulled out the prophecy, it was in a protective covering, and laid it aside. Then he pulled out what we were all waiting for, and dreading. He opened the manila envelope, and read it aloud.

The first part we already knew.

The bearer, who is marked at birth, will herself give bear to a child of the outlanders. That child will lead the battle that will cast the outlanders from us, and will so return what is to be, to we who are the true rulers of the magic. The child is to be brought forth to the Elder, to be raised as one with him.

He went on to the next part.

On the eve of birth, when the child is full with soul, the Elder will join the soul of his chosen heir to the soul of the child with the oil of the forest. Through fire and smoke, the bearer will release the soul to the heir.

I heard Drake gasp. BJ had talked about this sacrifice.

Randy continued with the next piece of paper.

For the chosen heir is not bound by the will of the outlanders, and with the combining of the souls, he will bring about the unbinding for to open the lands to us.

"What?" I heard Aaron say.

Randy just read on, ""

The chosen heir will lead us to the outlands to claim what is rightfully ours.

Everyone was quiet. I leaned over on Drake and started to cry. He put his arm around me, but he was also beyond speech.

Randy was the only one who spoke, "At least we know more now. On the eve of birth, even doctors don't know that exact day."

Drake finally looked found his voice, "But if no one really knows the exact day, won't they try to take her as close as possible? To have her there when the time comes?" His voiced cracked. I had never seen him cry, but he was on the verge.

Aaron looked at Randy, "What do you think it means 'the chosen heir is not bound by will of the outlanders'?"

"It sounds like the heir can come on our lands." Randy seemed worried.

"Then Brad can come here, even if he chooses to go to the dwellers?" Hailey looked worried now, as do all of them.

"Well, for now Brad is still ignorant. Let's just hope he continues that way." Randy said.

Dad looked worse than I felt. I knew it was hard for him, knowing he couldn't protect me himself, But this was beyond anything we could have imagined. I could see the regret in his eyes. Like it was his fault, this was happening. I got up from Drakes arms and went to hug dad.

"It'll be ok dad. I won't be stupid. I'm not letting anything happen to this baby."

Hailey spoke up, "None of us are going to let anything happen to either of you," She had come over to put her arms around dad and me.

"We still have about four months to wait. If this is right, Ronnie will be fine until it comes time for her to deliver. When it gets closer, then we'll decide how best to proceed." Randy said reassuringly.

We all knew what Randy meant by that. Deciding whether to go on the offensive, or wait. I was worried. The two most important men in my life were

also the only ones who could go into the forest unnoticed. I knew if it came to an attack on the dwellers, they would take the lead. That would also put them in the most danger.

After supper, Hailey and Aaron went back to training, I think Aaron's pride was hurt, he was determined to take her down. Dad and Susan decided to go home, and Randy lay down. That left Drake and me alone in the living room. He was sitting beside me, but he was looking far away.

"What are you thinking?" I asked him.

He looked up at me and I saw tears in his eyes, "How am I going to stop this? If Brad can walk on both lands, how can I stop it?"

I reached up to kiss him. With Hailey and Aaron staying now, we didn't have much time alone, with the exception of our room, and by the time we got there at night, it was late, and I was tired.

My actions seemed to startle him a minute, then he caught on. He pulled my round bellied self into his lap, and started kissing me as if it was our last night together. I held onto him with all I had. He was kissing down my neck to my chest as I lay my head back. Then I pulled his shirt off and started to kiss his neck. He was pulling mine off as well, forgetting we weren't alone.

"Get a room!" Came from the back of the living room where Aaron and Hailey had just come in.

I grabbed my shirt over me as Hailey was covering Aaron's eyes. Drake seemed undeterred as he just picked me up and we went to our room. He lay me down on the bed. Then he kissed me again.

Later, as we lay in each other's arms, I looked at Drake and he was looking down at me, with a look I recognized on his face. "How can you still look at me like that, I'm huge?" I looked down at my small balloon of a stomach. "And it's going to get worse."

"You are more beautiful today, than the first time I saw you."

His words made me smile, even if he was lying. "You must be blind."

The next day, Drake was on the phone with dad. They were discussing a scouting trip. I knew what they meant, and it scared me. I was hoping Randy or someone would tell them not to, but else everyone seemed to agree.

I tried to hide my disapproval, but Drake saw right through me. "I know what you're thinking." He said after he was off the phone, "But it's not necessary. Gabe and I are the only ones who can go. It's the right thing to do. We need to know as much as we can. We need to know their plan if we can find out."

I knew he was right, but it done nothing to help my feelings. I still wished there was a different way.

I walked outside to watch Hailey and Aaron with her training. I heard them arguing as soon as I opened the door. "I will be fine Aaron! Stop hovering over me! I'm an adult and a protector too!"

"You're not going!" Aaron's voice, usually full of teasing, was intense. "And that's final!"

I tried to defuse the situation, "What's wrong?"

"Tell him Ron. Tell him to let me go into the forest." Hailey looked at me smugly.

"No!" Aaron was not going to waver.

I looked at her and could see her determination, but I agreed with Aaron. "You know its dangerous Hailey. Maybe you should wait until it's safer."

She looked at me as if I was a traitor as she stomped off to the door. That stung, she is my best friend and I should back her, but it is too dangerous, especially for a protector. The dwellers would feel her and she could get hurt. I knew Hailey pretty well, and if she wanted something bad enough, but she couldn't be that stupid. She wouldn't risk everything she was trying to protect. Would she?

I would have to watch her now.

I kept my eye on Hailey for a few days. She seemed like she was going to give up on the idea of scouting for now.

A few weeks later, while dad and Drake planned their first scouting trip, Aaron came in the kitchen looking concerned. "Have any of you seen Hailey today?"

"No Aaron. She went to work this morning and hasn't made it home yet." Drake didn't seem concerned. He didn't know what Hailey wanted to do.

"I just got back from the store, and they said she left two hours ago. When I drove by my house her car wasn't there either."

A thought came to my head. No way, she wouldn't do that. No, that would be stupid. Then Hailey came running in the door.

"It worked! They didn't know I was even there!" She looked so excited I couldn't even be mad. "Aaron! It worked."

I wasn't sure he knew what she was talking about. He seemed confused at her enthusiasm. "What are you talking about?"

"The forest stupid. I went in, and they didn't know I was there."

"*YOU WENT INTO THE FOREST!*" Aaron's face was livid. "How could you do that? You could have been killed!"

Her faced dropped. The excitement was gone, followed by anguish. "But.... I had to try."

Aaron's face calmed when he saw how she reacted. "I'm sorry Hailey. I was just worried. I didn't mean to get so upset."

She lightened up, and then went up to hug him. "It was fine Aaron. I went in, and nothing happened."

"Tell me everything." Aaron tried to look excited.

She sat down as we all listened. "Well, I was on the way home from work when I got the idea. I parked my car down the road so you wouldn't know I was

home." She grinned at Aaron, "I knew I needed to know for sure. I went inside the woods just a little. I felt something strange. I started to wait for something to happen, but nothing did. I went a little further, just to see. I still felt that strange feeling. I stood there about fifteen minutes, and still nothing. I started to look around, to follow that feeling.

"I couldn't believe how quiet I was. I didn't even notice how far I had gotten until I heard the voices. I got scared and tried to hide, but I couldn't find a place. I waited, but all it was, was some strange words and many voices. I inched closer, and through the tree's I saw them. They were on their knees and it looked like they were praying. I watched for a while, but one of them looked up. I decided it was time to leave. I realized I didn't know where I was, but I knew where I was going. I just kept going...and here I am!" Her face was glowing.

"Wow." Aaron's face was amazed.

"That's wonderful Hailey." Randy said from behind. I hadn't heard him come in. "Another scout."

"No way!" Aaron chimed in. "She's not going in again!"

"Yes I am!" They were both so stubborn.

"We'll talk about it later Aaron." Randy could always defuse the situation. "After we see what's coming."

I knew he was talking about Drake's and dad's scouting trip in a few days. I was still hoping something would happen to stop it. I knew it was a long shot, but still, a girl can hope. The day was not going to be easy. Aaron and Randy were staying with me, as well as Susan. At least I can talk to her; she will be as worried as me.

"Ready for bed doll?" Drake broke up my thoughts.

"Sure." I was tired and anxious, not a good combination for sleep.

It looked like Drake had something on his mind. He seemed to be contemplating something. I just watched him as he pulled off his shirt. Whatever

it is, he'll tell me when he wants to. He was still thinking about it when he sat down by me on the bed.

"Ronnie?" He actually looked nervous.

"What is it babe?"

He got down on the floor, and took something out of his pocket. What was he doing? It couldn't be...

"Ronnie...will you marry me?" He held up the little box in his hands.

I was in shock. I just looked at him a minute. I felt a smile come across my face. "YES!" He reached up to put the ring on my finger. I was happier than I had ever been.

The ring was white gold with a cluster of diamonds in the center. Surrounding the cluster was a small row of roses made onto the ring. It was the most beautiful ring I had ever seen.

"When did you get this?" I was looking at the shining ring on my hand.

He smiled with embarrassment, "Almost two weeks ago."

I looked down at him in amazement, "And it took you this long to ask me?"

He looked at me with those intense eyes. "I was afraid you might not be ready." He looked down; "I thought you might say no." he looked up at me again and smiled wide. "You don't know how happy you've made me Ronnie."

I pulled him up to me, "I think I do."

He got up and started kissing me. I was kissing him back with such force he had to catch us before we fell. He picked me up and lay me down on the bed. I knew we would be together forever.

We slept in late the next day. It was a long night for us. I heard doors open, but I ignored them. I didn't ever want to get up. I watched Drake sleep in the bed next to me. I don't know how long it was, but he started to stir. He opened his eyes to see me staring down at him. I leaned down to kiss him as he leaned up to

me. He looked at the clock, "We still have time," he said as he was pulling me down on top of him.

"Time to get up!" Someone finally hollered through the door later. I couldn't stop myself from giggling. It was Aaron's voice. "Come on now. Everyone is waiting." He was laughing as he walked away.

We unwillingly got out of bed. I knew Aaron would be hell today, but it really was time, it was afternoon. I slowly went to the front room, expecting the looks. Hailey was there, and she and Aaron were arguing again. "I told you, I'm going!"

"No you're not!" Aaron yelled back.

Not this again I said to myself. Hailey was an adult. I tried to interrupt, to show Hailey the ring, but she was glaring at Aaron too much to see, "*HEY!*" I said loudly, "*Look!*" I held my hand out to her.

She looked up at me annoyed at first, until she realized I was holding out my hand. "Oh! Ronnie. It's beautiful. Congratulations!" She stood up to hug me.

"About time!" Aaron was saying to Drake. "I thought you would never get the nerve up. I thought I was going to have to marry her to keep the talk down." He laughed.

Randy came in to see what the excitement was about. I showed him my hand. "I knew it was just a matter of time." He said with conviction.

I went to the phone to call dad. He wasn't in, but I left him a message to come by tonight. I figured I would tell him in person. I was almost afraid of his reaction. When I came back to the living room, Drake was talking to Aaron about the scouting trip.

"I think if she can handle it, it would really help."

"She's just learning Drake." Aaron was almost pleading with him.

"You know it's an instinct with us. We were born to do this. She has already proven herself on her own. Three would be better than two." So, Hailey wanted

to go with Drake and dad. I don't know how I feel about that. It's her decision though, and Aaron should see that. She was just as stubborn as he was.

Randy had joined the conversation, "I think it should be up to Hailey. She's a grown woman who knows the risks. If she feels she can handle it, well then who are we to say otherwise."

Everyone knew he was right. Hailey looked smug. I was still afraid for any of them to go, but I knew they would anyway.

"So when is it?" I had to know.

"Saturday morning, while they're asleep," Drake said.

He knows I don't like it either, but that I know it has to be this way. He was reassuring me all the time. 'Gabe and I did this all the time before. We know what we're doing.' It never helped. I was still going to worry. Even through all the pretenses, I could see Hailey's doubt. She was just as nervous as Aaron was about going. She would not back down though. Never show weakness to your opponent.

Dad was happy about Drake and me getting married. This surprised me, but I was glad too. He and Susan looked at the ring and they hugged us both before leaving for the night.

As it turned out, Hailey couldn't go with Drake and dad on the first scouting trip. Her mom had called Friday night to say her little brother was sick and she needed Hailey to cover for her at the store. Hailey tried to persuade them to wait until she got off at eleven, but everyone agreed that they needed to get there early. They were set to leave at seven.

15. Hailey's Scout

I got up with Drake Saturday to see him off, even if I wished he didn't have to go. Dad was already there waiting for him. I had to go hug dad. I was just as worried about him as Drake, maybe more so. Dad didn't have the martial arts training, or the extra strength that Drake had, but he did know his way around the woods, and he *is* a very good fighter. I had seen him in a scrap before, over Susan, dad left that fight without a scratch.

After they left, Randy tried to distract me with taking a short walk around, chatting about everything, but what's on both of our minds. Susan couldn't make it until after two and so it was just us until Hailey got home.

I still couldn't concentrate. I had never been this worried in my life. I wished more than ever, that I could talk to mom. She was always good at difficult situations. I had started to pace the house when Randy said it was time to fix lunch, he makes sure I eat right. He claimed it was for Hailey to have after a day's work. I could smell the leftover stew he was warming up from dinner last night. I sat down to rest my feet; they had started to swell. As I was getting up to see if Randy needed any help, I felt a sharp pain in my abdomen.

"AAHHH!" I screamed and grabbed my stomach. Randy came running through the door, and leaned down beside me. The pain hit again. I doubled over, and fell onto the couch as Aaron and Hailey came walking through the door. They both ran over to join Randy, as I lay there unable to move.

"We have to get her to the hospital!" I could hear Randy, but it sounded distant.

I felt Aaron pick me up with ease. "Take my car!" I heard Hailey this time, again in the distance.

"Drake!" I heard my voice say.

I was aware I was in a car. I could hear voices, but I couldn't make anything out. I could feel the pain in my stomach. It was blinding. I felt someone pick me up again, I tried to look up to see who it was, but my eyes wouldn't open. Then I heard nothing, as everything went black.

I don't know where I was, but I was aware of people around me. I could feel the needles and tubes coming off me as I moved. "Drake?" I heard myself say again.

"I'm here Ronnie." His voice sounded relieved.

I opened my eyes to see if I was dreaming. He was standing by the bed I was in. "*The baby!!?*" I was afraid to ask.

"The baby's ok." He said in a tired voice.

"Where am I?" I tried to look around.

"You're at the hospital doll. Randy and Aaron brought you in."

"How long have I been here?"

"About fifteen hours."

I looked around the room. I saw dad and Hailey there too, sitting in the chairs beside the bed. They looked as tired as Drake. They must have been up here all day.

I looked back at Drake, "How did you know?"

"Hailey came to the woods and got us." He looked over at her and smiled, "She is really good, a better tracker than me."

I looked down at Hailey and she was smiling. "Where *are* Aaron and Randy?"

"They're in the waiting room asleep. They wouldn't leave the room until Gabe or I got here. They're exhausted." He smiled, "I'll go get them if you want."

I didn't have to say anything; they both came in the room then. "Oh, honey." Randy looked relieved. "I was so worried." He said, as he hurried over to my bed.

"Hey girl!" Aaron beamed, "You scared us to death."

I looked back at Drake. "What happened?"

Drake looked at dad before talking. Dad came over to bedside and picked up my hand. "You started to have early labor baby. The doctor stopped it for now, but they want to keep you here tonight to make sure it doesn't come back. From now on, you don't need any stress. You will be on total bed rest. Dr. Ambrose said because of your young age, your previous attack, along with your back injury last summer, you are going to have to be very careful from now on. You're going to have to let us take care of you."

I looked at dad with wide eyes. "What do you mean 'total bed rest'?"

Drake answered this time. "It means no more cooking, cleaning or walks until the doctor says otherwise." His face looked determined. As if he was going to make sure, I did exactly what they just told me.

"I will. I am not taking any chances with our baby." I looked back at dad, "When can I go home?"

"Not until tomorrow afternoon, if you don't have any more contractions." His face looked understanding, "I know it's hard, but it's necessary."

"I know dad. I promise I'll do what the doctor says." I looked at Drake, "I won't take risk our baby."

I was ready to go home the next day. I hadn't had any pains since I woke up. The doctor came in to talk to me, "I think I'm going to keep you another day, just in case Veronica, If all goes well, I'll let you go tomorrow, just remember, bed rest, and avoid stress. We don't want this baby too early. From now on, I'll want to see you every two weeks. Take it easy." Then she left the room and I was alone.

Avoid stress, how was I supposed to accomplish that one. With my dad and fiancé in the woods watching people who want my baby, my best friend determined to go with them, constantly worrying about someone grabbing me and taking me to the forest, and my future father in law's constant hovering that was sure to come. How was I supposed to avoid stress?

Drake took me home the next day, after assuring the doctor he would keep me off my feet as much as possible, and not allow me to pick up anything heavier than a glass of tea. He drove home as easily as he could, slower than I'd ever known. Even slower than the first time, he had brought me to see the doctor after my attack.

He carried me inside, though I tried to tell him I could walk, and lay me down on the couch that now resembled a bed. Randy had replaced the old one with a hide-a-bed so I could stay there all the time, and not have to walk to Drake's and my room. I wasn't sure about that, how would we get any time alone this way, not that Drake would risk me or the baby with physical contact, but still, privacy went out the door this way completely.

I looked straight at Drake, who was sitting carefully on the edge of what was now my bed.

"What happened in the woods? Did you find out anything? How did you know I was in the hospital?"

Drake smiled at my bombarded questioning. "One at a time doll." He looked at Hailey, "You can thank Hailey for me being at the hospital." She smiled.

"Why."

"Well," Hailey began, "I told Aaron and Randy to take you in my car to the hospital. I knew Gabe and Drake were in the woods, so I went to find them. It was easy for me. It was almost like I had lived in those woods all my life, and knew exactly where to go. I saw Gabe first, since they had split up, I told him what had happened and that you were being taken to the hospital and he went for the house."

She looked at him, "You run fast for an old man you know," Dad just grinned at her, "And then I went to look for Drake. I found him near the clearing. He was watching the dwellers so close, he didn't even know I was there. He jumped when I touched his shoulder. One of them almost spotted us so we decided to leave. When I told him what happened, he took off too."

She glanced over at dad then Drake, "You didn't have to leave me there you know." She smiled again, "But I learned a lot in those few minutes I was alone anyway."

Drake looked at Hailey, "I'm sorry about that."

"Don't worry about it, it was a good thing, and you went where you needed to be."

I looked over at Hailey puzzled, "How did you find them so fast?"

Randy spoke this time, "She must have the gift of tracking. I've never seen anyone who could find Gabe before."

"What did you all find out?" I was curious.

Dad spoke up, "Not much baby. We only wanted to scout for the best spot to go at night. Hailey found out more than we did."

I looked over at Hailey, "What did you find out?"

"I was able to see exactly how many there are, twenty-two of them actually. At least we will know what we're up against. It's not much, but it's a small part."

"*How* did you find out?" I asked.

"Well, since they were all *unaware*, I walked over to the clearing and counted. None of them even knew I was there at all." She sounded amazed and proud at the same time. She cast an 'I told you so' glance at Aaron.

I looked at Randy, "So now what?"

Drake answered, "Next we go in at night. So we can try to hear what their planning. With Hailey's help, I think it will work."

I must have had a frightened look on my face, "Don't worry baby. We're not going right away. We don't want to push our luck just yet." Dad's smile made me feel better, but if they acted this way every time I looked worried, I was going to have to try to hide my face better.

The next few weeks were tense. Planning the nighttime excursion was the primary topic. I tried to be ok with it, especially since we knew Hailey could go closer than anyone undetected, and seemed to feel the dwellers approach quicker too. She and Drake had discovered that on a trial scout the week before.

My days were always the same. Wake up to breakfast in bed. Watch TV, which was boring, lunch in bed, listen to everyone plan, then dinner in bed with the medicine the doctor sent home. Drake stayed with me at night, though he was always a safe distance away. Aaron slept in the recliner, and Hailey was in mine and Drakes room.

The nighttime scouting trip was getting closer. I was starting to worry about it. I knew that they all knew what they were doing, but it didn't help. I tried to stay calm, to do what I needed to protect my baby, but I still felt a nagging feeling that something bad was going to happen. Randy said it was just my concerns showing through. I was imagining it because I was so nervous. He was probably right, but it didn't help me feel better.

Susan had come over to cook one night. She tried to give Randy a break from waiting on me whenever she could. After supper we were all sitting in the living room, dad, Hailey and Drake were talking about the upcoming expedition to the forest, and Susan sitting lightly on the edge of my prison bed.

"Have you and Drake set a date yet?"

The question caught me off guard, "Uh... we haven't really talked about with everything that happened." I saw him look up from his talk to get my reaction to the question, "Whenever Drake is ready, so am I." I smiled back at him.

"If you want to be married before the baby comes, maybe you should talk about a date." Susan was right. I did want to be married before the baby. I looked at Drake, and he just smiled and went back to his discussion.

Later that night, as Drake lay beside me; I started thinking about everything. I did want to get married before the baby comes, but would it be possible. If I couldn't stand longer than it takes me to walk to the bathroom and

back, how would I walk down the aisle to Drake? There had to be a way, some compromise somehow.

"What are you thinking?" Drake interrupted my thoughts.

"About getting married."

"What about it?" His eyes squinted.

"Susan's right. We should pick a date if we want to be married before the baby gets here."

"We don't have to get married before the baby comes. I'll wait until you're ready. Don't think I asked just because you're pregnant."

"I know that Drake, but I want to get married soon. I want to be married before I give birth. I know it sounds old fashioned, but I *want* to be married first. Do you understand that?" I hoped he did.

"Yes doll I do. I want to marry you as soon as I can. I've just been waiting on you to decide."

"Well, I'm ready now. I think we should talk about doing it soon."

Drake smiled, "Whatever you want Ronnie."

Drake didn't bring it up again and neither did I, but it was still in my mind. I *will* find away to marry him soon, maybe I could ask Susan to help me. For now, we had other things to worry about. That would be the impending scouting trip.

It was set to happen on Halloween. The dwellers will be having a ritual for the new moon. Hailey was to go close enough to find out if the *others* can get close enough to hear anything. Aaron is not happy about the way it was turning out, but he knew it was the only way. Randy was not as optimistic as he usually was. The danger of it is so much worse with it being a night scout. Hailey seemed *completely* ready, almost excited to go. I was a basket case. If I knew it would work, I would beg them not to go. I knew I had a few weeks to wait, but it didn't help. The closer it gets, the more worried I became.

It seemed like it had been years since I was at that alter, but it's been four months. So much has happened in such a short time, that my life was not even, *close* to what it was when I first moved to Mystic. My dad was not just a Park Ranger; he was a protector though not born one. I was getting married soon, and I was pregnant. Worse still, my child is supposed to be joined up with some stranger in the woods to be a leader who wants to take over Sabre Beach, though we aren't entirely sure why. My life feels like a book, a fantasy book.

The doctor agreed to let me get up more since I hadn't had any pains since I was in the hospital. I had to promise that I wouldn't lift anything, and not stay on my feet more than ten minutes at one time. Randy had taken me this time. Drake had to do some daytime scouting for the Halloween event. His eyes had tears in them when he heard the heartbeat. My next appointment I was having another ultrasound. The doctor told me she might be able to tell the sex of the baby then. I wasn't sure I wanted to know. I would ask Drake what he wanted before I decided.

Randy was all smiles on the ride home. "Thank you for letting me be with you today hon."

"You don't have to thank me Randy. It's your grandbaby, and you have taken such good care of me, the baby might not be here if it wasn't for you."

Drake was back home by the time Randy and me pulled up. He was waiting by the door for me. "How is everything?"

"I can get out of bed. I can walk to our room now, instead of being in everyone's way in the living room all the time."

Drake looked at Randy, "What did they say exactly?"

"That she could get up for ten minutes at a time, but still no lifting or bending for awhile yet." Drake seemed satisfied with what Randy told him.

Drake looked at Hailey when we walked in, "Your losing your bed tonight Hailey. Ronnie can get up and walk a little now."

"Good." She said, "I was tired of it anyway."

The rest of the day was all about the next excursion to the woods. I decided not to listen. I was reading one of the books from my first doctor's appointment. I didn't notice when Hailey came to sit beside me, "Is that book good?"

I looked over the top of it, "Scary actually."

She laughed and then looked serious. "Do you think you could sit outside for a bit?"

I knew Hailey wouldn't ask me this if it wasn't important... I looked over at Drake; he was discussing something with Aaron and dad. "Sure."

We got up unnoticed, or so I thought and went to the porch. It was getting colder; the forest was turning all the shades of fall. It would be beautiful if not for the fact there were people in there who wanted my baby or me. We sat on the swing and pulled a blanket over our legs. I looked over at Hailey she looked confused.

"What is it Hailey?" I thought she might be rethinking her decision to go on the night scout.

"Mom called today, while you were at the doctor." I could tell there was more, "She was delivering a message to me from..., well, from Brad. He wants to see me. He said to tell me he still loves me." Now I could see her inner conflict. Does she betray her heritage and go see him, or break his heart again. "What do you think I should do?"

"I can't answer that Hailey. Only you know where your heart lies. I know you want to protect the baby, and me, but you have to do what you think is right. Don't let some family loyalty influence you. How you feel about Brad is the real question." I could see her eyes tearing up.

"I don't know how I feel. I do think about him sometimes, but I believed he didn't want me, even though I broke it off with him. He never tried to see or talk to me after that so, I just thought he didn't love me anymore. Now after hearing he wants to see me, I'm not sure if it was really that I didn't love him, or just the fear he put in me when he pushed me up against the door that last night."

"*WHAT!*" Aaron had stepped outside at just the wrong moment. He was furious. "*I WILL KILL HIM!*" He took a step only to have Drake's arms around him, and dad in front pushing him back. I didn't even see either one of them come outside. Through all that, he was still going forward.

Hailey looked anxiously at me, "I assumed you told him!" Her eyes were full of fear.

"I was *not* going to be the one to tell Aaron that. When he figured out whom you were dating, oh man. So I knew not to."

"Aaron!" Hailey tried to talk to him, "Please Aaron, don't do this. *Please!*" she was crying, "You'll get hurt, or worse! You'll kill him, and I'll never see you again, please Aaron!"

Aaron finally looked over at Hailey. Randy came outside and tried to sooth him with his voice, "Aaron, it's over, whatever it was, is now over. Come inside."

"No. He wants to see her again. *NO!*" Apparently, he had heard more than I thought. He looked at Hailey, "It's a trick Hailey! Don't go see him! Please!" He was calming down now, but Drake didn't release his grip. "I'm ok Drake. Let me go!"

"No. Not until I'm sure you're not going to do anything stupid."

"Come on man. I swear I'm ok. I just need some space." Drake released his grip and Aaron took off again, only this time Hailey ran and swept under his legs throwing him off balance. He fell to the ground where she grabbed one of his big arms and pulled it behind his back twisting it up. "Ow! Hailey!" He yelled in pain. "I give. Ow. Let me up!"

"Do you swear you won't try to run again?"

"I swear!" He was panting, "Now *please* let me up!"

Hailey released his arm and he turned over, still panting, "Girl, you are *evil*."

Everyone laughed. Drake was rolling on the ground from seeing Aaron brought down by his sister again.

Hailey had beaten Aaron so much since her finding out the truth, it didn't bother him anymore, but he still *always* underestimates her. He got up off the ground and hugged her up. "Just don't trust him Hailey. No matter what he tells you if you do see him? Ok?" His eyes were pleading.

"If I go see him, you will be with me." Aaron seemed pleased by that. "But you can't hit him." His face fell then, "If he needs a good beat down, I'll do it." Aaron enjoyed the idea of seeing Hailey kick someone's butt besides his own.

I was laughing along with everyone else when I heard it.

The trees were calling me.

I couldn't stop myself from walking toward them. No one was watching me. They were all still laughing at Aaron. I just kept on going; no one would see me leave. It was a beautiful and eerie feeling to be free from it all, like I could finally breathe again. I didn't have to be afraid of them. They wanted me. They *needed* me. I knew I shouldn't go any closer. I should stay away, but I didn't know why. So I kept on.

Would anyone even miss me? Would they come and look? How can I stop myself? I need to stop. Then it happened. I felt it, a small kick from inside my body. I stopped and looked around. I was so close. There it was again, a small kick. I reached down to feel my stomach. Then it hit me. They wanted to take its soul.

I started to shout, "*Drake!*" He was already running to me. He picked me up and ran inside. He didn't let go until I was safely on the couch with the door shut and everyone was around me.

"What happened?" He looked at me with questioning eyes. "I almost didn't see you!" He seemed to be angry with his self.

"The trees were calling me. I was going in. I couldn't stop until..."

"Until what?" He looked concerned.

I smiled, "The baby kicked. I felt it kick, and came back to myself."

Drake started to smile, "The baby kicked?" He put his hand on my stomach too. "You felt it kick?"

Just then, it happened again. Drake felt it this time. His eyes were glowing, "I felt it!" He looked around the room, "I just felt our child kick!" He laid his head on me then.

After that, everyone wanted a turn. My stomach became public property for a while. Even Aaron put his hand on me, with Drake's warning eyes on him.

Aaron laughed, "I'm just biding my time until she gets tired of you." Drake punched him, and laughed.

I didn't know why the trees had started calling me again. I thought it had stopped altogether. Randy said they had stopped calling for me, and that was why I hadn't heard then before, but why start again. Even though no one said it, they were all worried too. I could see it in their faces. We were all wondering the same thing. Were we wrong? Was the second prophecy that we had come to believe, wrong? If so, why would they still call me when, I clearly can't give them what they want, a child. I can't have another at the same time as the one I'm having now.

Everyday drew closer to the closing night of my anticipation. I wanted so bad to run, to leave Mystic, and never look back. Could I do that to dad, to Randy, whom I had come to love, or Hailey and Aaron, after they had protected me, and who I loved as well. The answer is no, I couldn't. I knew I would eventually come back, even if I tried to leave.

Then what would happen. Would they start again? But if I left, would they go after some other girl, some unsuspecting young girl, a girl who wouldn't know the truth? No. I had to stay, to see it through to the end. I was counting on everyone here to help. I hated being weak, useless and hidden. But I will not let anything happen to the child growing inside me. I *will* do everything I can to protect it, until my last breath. If that means holding up in Randy's house, then that's what it will be. If I had to endure the pain of watching the most important people in my life, go out to the danger, I will do it. Any of the people here, would lay their life down for this baby. I hated to ask that of them, but if that's what it takes, I will endure. Is that selfish? It probably is, but I couldn't help how I feel. I need this baby, like I need air, to live.

Hailey was feeling better about the trip all the time. She gets more excited every day. I watch her and Drake training in the yard. I see the thrill on her face when, however rare, she gets the best of him.

"What are you thinking?" Aaron sat beside me and added another blanket to my legs. Randy probably thought I needed it.

"I was wishing they didn't have to do this. That it's not right to let all of you risk your lives for what is *supposed* to happen to me or my baby."

Aaron put his arm around me, "We love you *and* the baby. Any of us would do this without you asking, and you never asked us to do this Ronnie. We all want to." He hugged me closer when I shivered. "Maybe you should get inside, before you get sick."

Aaron was right. I had to stay well for the baby. "Ok." He walked me in and carried my blankets, I was after all not supposed to carry anything, and everyone, especially Randy took that to extremes.

I went to bed early, but I couldn't sleep until Drake got there. He tried to be quiet as he lay down beside me, then he noticed I was still awake. "Are you ok?" He could see the conflict in my eyes.

"No. I hate all of this, you, dad, and Hailey in danger. It's my fault entirely. I don't want to lose anyone Drake. Why did this happen to me?" I started to cry, something I had been doing a lot lately. Was it the hormones? Susan had told me about them. I wasn't sure, but I knew the pain was real?

Drake held me without talking. His strong arms always soothed me. I lay there on him until I was too tired to fight it any longer.

16. Halloween

I was lying in bed without closing my eyes. I knew what would be coming if I did. The day had been all about the coming night. The night I wish had never gotten here. I heard Drake open the door quietly. He must have been crazy to think I could sleep right now. I didn't say anything as he carefully lay down beside me. I turned over to look at his face.

"Sorry doll. Did I wake you?"

"No. I wasn't asleep. How can I sleep?" He pulled me close to him and started to stroke my hair.

"I know your scared Ronnie. We all are a little frightened. But you know this has to be done."

"I know it does. That doesn't mean I have to like it." I pouted like a child.

Drake laughed at my face. "You worry too much. Let me do all the worrying in this house."

Like that could ever happen. I decided to change the subject, "You do remember what tomorrow is, don't you?"

"Yes doll. We get to see our baby." He did remember the ultrasound.

"Dr. Ambrose said she might be able to tell the sex, if we wanted to know it." I still hadn't decided if I did or not. Maybe Drake will decide for me.

"I don't know. I think I want it to be a surprise. What do you think?"

"I don't know either. I would be ok waiting if you would rather do that."

"If it's ok with you, I would like to wait." His eyes were almost pleading. I couldn't deny him.

"Ok then. We'll wait." I wanted to bring up a subject we hadn't touched on yet. I wasn't sure how to approach it. "Drake?"

"What is it doll?" He could see everything in my eyes.

“Have you thought about ... names?”

He grinned a little. “Yea... A little bit. Why have you?”

“Only girl names.” I smiled at him.

“What are they?” He really looked interested.

“Well... I like Kelley if the baby’s a girl. What do you think?” I looked hopefully at him.

“I love it. How about boy’s names, I’ve got one if you want to hear it.”

“Yes. Of course I do.” I was getting excited now.

“Drake Randall Sabre Jr. We can call him DJ.” The look on his face was bliss. I knew he really wanted this.

“It’s perfect Drake!” I loved it. My son named after his father.

I reached up to kiss Drake. We hadn’t been able to be close for so long. I knew he wanted me as much as I wanted him. I pulled him closer. I needed him right then for so many reasons. He started to pull away.

“Please don’t.” I held him tighter.

I didn’t need to try very hard. He was kissing my neck and going down to my chest. I was holding him as tight as I could. I didn’t want to stop. He was pulling off my gown, and I was holding onto him for dear life.

I knew the appointment was for nine. But I couldn’t seem to want to get up. Drake was still sleeping beside me, and I didn’t want to wake him. He was so perfect laying there. I looked at the clock. 7 I knew it was time.

I shook him awake. “Drake, it’s time to get up. We don’t want to be late.”

He rolled over and pulled me down on top of him. I leaned down to kiss him. “Are you ok?” There was concern in his eyes.

"I'm fine. The baby is fine. You know I haven't had any more problems. It'll be ok. Today you will see." I got up and went to get a towel for my shower.

Waiting for the doctor in that tiny room was making me anxious. They had me laid out on a cold table with jelly stuff on my stomach. It was only a few minutes, but it seemed like hours. Finally, the wait was over.

When Dr. Ambrose put the sensor on my stomach and I could see the baby, I almost cried. Drake was staring at the monitor with amazement. The baby was sucking its thumb. I couldn't believe it. We could make out arms and legs, even the heartbeat. All of my worries were gone at that moment. Nothing else in the world mattered more to me than that tiny being on that monitor screen.

"Isn't that the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?" Drake couldn't stop looking. I was so thrilled I almost didn't hear the doctor start talking.

"Now everything looks wonderful Veronica. I think we can loosen up on some of your restrictions. However, I still don't want you to lift or bend at all. Is that clear?"

"Yes Dr. Ambrose, I will do whatever it takes to keep the baby safe."

"Do you want to know the sex?" The doctor asked us. I looked at Drake.

"No thank you Dr. Ambrose. We would rather wait." I think if he hadn't spoke up just then, I might have said yes.

"Ok. I'll see you in 2 weeks then." She left the room.

Drake helped me off the table with that amazement look still in his eyes.

The nurse handed me a video as I signed out and I made my next appointment. I thanked her and we left.

We were pulling out of the parking lot when Drake looked at the video cassette still in my hands. "What's that?"

I looked down at it and read the side 'Taylor Baby Ultrasound' "I think a video of my ultrasound." I told him uncertainly.

"Great. Now everyone can see the baby's ok."

I tried to concentrate on that, but my mind kept going to tonight. The closer we got to home, the closer it got for the scouting. I knew Drake was feeling confident about it, but he knew I was still scared. It was going to be a long night, for everyone.

It was 9 o'clock when they left for the forest. I tried to keep my mind off my family out in the woods. I was even thinking about all the children that must be out trick or treating by now. The costumes they would be wearing, not knowing the dangers that lie in the forest most of them took for granted. How they would walk up to a stranger and ask for candy.

I never liked trick or treating much. I preferred to go to Halloween parties instead of knocking on doors. I mean if you wanted candy, why not buy your favorite, and eat it. Mom said that was part of the fun, not knowing what you might get. She would make me knock on a few doors before conceding and taking me to the store and then if there was a party somewhere she would let me go.

I don't remember the last time I *actually* dressed up in a costume. I was always so shy. I was afraid everyone would laugh at me. I remember when I was little, she would dress me up and take me around, but that ended when I started to cry about looking foolish. I don't remember at what age that was, but I was in grade school. I remember all my young friends' excitement about going out after dark. Maybe that was the appeal. Not the candy, but the feeling of being out in the dark at night, when they were supposed to be at home in bed.

I looked at the clock again. 10:15 how long were they supposed to be gone. No one really had any idea. There wasn't a set time as to when they would get back. Since we didn't know how long it would take to gather information, we couldn't put a time limit on it.

I started watching everyone in the room. No one was at ease, even Aaron hadn't joked since they left. He just looked scared. He would sit in the chair

awhile, then pace the floor aimlessly. He was looking at the clock more than I was, if that was possible. He would go look out the door then pace again. It would be a good distraction if I didn't know why he was doing it.

I looked over at Randy. He was trying to distract himself by reading. He was usually the calm, cool, and collected one of us but tonight I could see fear in his eyes. I hated that his only son was risking his life for us. He was looking at the door as much as Aaron, though not as noticeably. He would look down at the book in front of him then back to the door. I don't remember ever seeing him as tired as he looked now.

Susan was completely different. I know she is just as worried as the rest of us but she didn't move. Her eyes glued to the TV screen though I'm sure she had no idea what was on. I only saw her glance quickly at the door a couple of times. I know she loves my dad by the look in her eyes when he would look at her. I also know that she is thinking the same thing I am. Dad was not a born protector so he doesn't have the protector strength. That made him more vulnerable to the dwellers. We both knew dad wasn't weak, he worked out regularly, but that didn't help how I felt now.

I was tired but I didn't want to sleep. I wanted to be there when my family got home. I could feel my eyes closing but I tried to keep them open.

I heard Susan's voice, "Honey, you need to sleep. It won't do any good to have you tired. The baby needs you to be at your best."

"No. I can't. I have to be here."

Susan didn't argue. She wouldn't go either so she must know how I feel. I could feel my eyes closing again. I looked over at the clock *again*. 2:45 my eyes closed. I tried to open them, but they wouldn't. I was aware someone picked me up. Thru the crack in my eyes, I could see Aaron's face. He must be carrying me to bed. I couldn't fight it any longer.

I could hear voices in the distance. I looked around the room to see light coming in thru the window. What time was it? I tried to focus on the clock next to the bed. Eight-thirty, they must be home. I thru the blankets off and tried to jump up, "AAHHH" The pain shot thru my stomach like a knife. Drake was running in to see me lying on the floor.

"What is it? Is it the baby? What happened?" He was almost hysterical. I could see dad and Randy standing there, but I couldn't speak. I just clutched my stomach. The pain was starting to ease. I looked up to see Drake's tired forlorn face.

"It's ok." I told him. "It's easing down."

"Maybe we should get you to the hospital" His eyes looked frantic.

"No. It was my fault. I tried to get up to fast, and I just got a pain. It's gone now. Don't worry." I tried to stand up, but Drake picked me up instead.

"I can walk." He wasn't listening. He took me to the front room, and put me on the couch. Aaron was asleep on the floor and Susan was in the recliner.

"I'm not taking any chances from now on." He said. I could see the lines under his eyes from lack of sleep.

"What time did you get in?" I looked at dad.

"About 4:30." Dad's eyes were just as tired looking as Drakes.

"Where's Hailey?" I had just noticed she wasn't there in the living room.

"In my bed sleeping," Randy said. He was looking at a strange paper on the coffee table.

"What have you got?" I pointed to the paper.

"We, I should say Hailey found it by the clearing. We don't know if it's important or not so we brought it back." Dad looked hopeful that this document could somehow help.

"Is anyone going to tell me what happened last night?"

"We're waiting until we can all be awake." Randy said. He was still looking at this new piece of information. "I might have to give Mr. Marks a call later." He seemed to be talking to himself.

Aaron and Susan were up first. The sounds in the room probably helped bring them out of their coma like sleep. It was another hour before Hailey came out of Randy's room, still looking asleep actually. I wasn't altogether sure she knew where she was.

Randy was on the phone with Mr. Marks when Hailey finally spoke.

"Did you get anything off that paper?"

Randy came out of the kitchen, "I have an appointment with Mr. Marks at 4 this afternoon, hopefully he will get more out of this than I can."

"Can't you get any idea at all from it?" Hailey looked at him hopefully.

"From what I can make out, it appears to be ingredients of some kind. Not like cooking but like, well for lack of a better word, potion." His face was puzzled. "Maybe Mr. Marks can get the rest of it."

"So is anyone going to tell us what happened out there?" Aaron was as impatient as I was.

"Ok." Drake began, "let's just tell what we know and get it over with."

Hailey went first, "Well it wasn't hard to know where to go. I seem to be able to get to their location easy. We saw them going in a line toward the clearing, and followed back far enough not to be seen. We waited until they were on their knees."

Hailey was smiling. "I went closer to scout and see if any of them were searching the forest. One of them was so Gabe" she looked at him, "Decided to lead him away so we could get closer. That's when I saw the paper on the ground. I didn't take time to look at it. I just stuck in my pocket and motioned for Drake to come closer."

Drake started to talk then, "At first all they were doing was praying I guess. Then the old one motioned to some of them. I followed them to a remote place while Hailey stayed near the others. I heard them talking about the true heir. I guess they meant Brad. One of them had seen him at the edge of the forest earlier that day. They seemed to think he'd be joining them soon. The old one

looked happy. He must really be important to whatever their planning. Anyway, I went back to Hailey, I didn't want to push my luck, and Gabe was back."

Dad started talking then "I managed to get away from the dweller that was tracking me. When he lost me, I went back to warn the others that he was probably coming to tell them about me being there. When I got back, Hailey told me about Drake following the old one. I tell you, I was starting to get very nervous. I saw him coming so we decided to head back, but they followed again. They never saw us, but they patrolled so we couldn't move. Finally they must have decided they scared me off and went back so we rushed back here." Dad was smiling thru his tired eyes.

"Well," Randy started, "I think you two," and he looked at dad and Drake, "Should get some sleep. You can stay here Gabe. Take my bed. I have an appointment later and we need alert people to stay with Ronnie." He smiled at me.

Dad agreed and went to lie down. Drake hesitated but I knew he was tired. "I'll be ok Drake. You should get some rest."

"Yea man," Aaron spoke up, "You look like hell. I'll be here to Ronniesit." He laughed.

Drake finally conceded and went to our room after kissing me.

Hailey was beside herself with happiness. She had been so nervous about it before they left, but now she is utterly elated. I don't know if it was about the scout, or something else. I could see she was still tired but she was too excited to sleep.

"Hey Ron. Do you want to sit on the porch?" She looked at me with pleading eyes, and I just couldn't say no.

"Sure Hailey." I grabbed up a blanket off the back of the couch and followed her.

She sat down in the swing and I threw the blanket over both our legs.

"So what's this all about?" I could see there was something she wanted to tell me.

"Brad sent me another message thru mom." She held up a note that she had taken out of her pocket.

She opened it up and began to read it to me.

Dear Hailey, I know I made a real mess of things and I'm sorry. I want to see you, to explain everything. I will tell you whatever you want to know. I just want to see you again. I miss you like crazy and I can't stand being away from you any longer. Please meet me at your moms store Sunday night at 7.
Love, Brad

Her face was glowing.

"Isn't it great Ronnie? He wants to tell me everything. Maybe he'll even tell me about the Dwellers too. That would really help. Don't you think so?" I could tell she wanted me to agree with her.

I wasn't as convinced as Hailey was now. Hadn't Drake just said he was at the edge of the forest yesterday? "I don't know Hailey. It could be a trick. Maybe you shouldn't go. Or at least meet him somewhere more public." I hated not sharing her enthusiasm.

Her face fell. "I trust him Ronnie. I've known him all my life. I really believe he knows something and wants to help." Her eyes were pleading.

I could tell there was no reasoning with her. She had already made up her mind. Well I wasn't going to let her go alone. "I'll go with you."

“What? No, you can’t, the baby? You have to stay here and take care of yourself. I won’t put you in danger.” Her face was full of anger.

“So you agree that it’s dangerous to go see him? Then maybe you should take Aaron.” I knew that wouldn’t work but I had to try.

“No way am I taking Aaron anywhere near Brad. He’ll kill him.” She was determined. “I’ll go on my own. I can take care of myself. If you don’t believe that then ask Aaron how his chest feels after I kicked him or Drake for that matter. I’ve planted a few good ones on him too.”

It was useless to argue. I knew what she is going to do. But I knew what I was going to do too. *I’ll follow her* this time. I just have to figure out how first. With all my constant protectors watching my every move, this was going to be quite difficult.

17. Brad's Tail

Sunday was only 3 days away. Not much, time to plan a get-away like this. I knew asking Aaron was out of the question. He would just go right up to Brad and punch him in the face. I knew Drake would never approve of me doing this so I had to go it alone.

The plan was simple. I would tell the men I was tired and go lay down. The window in my bedroom had no screen on the outside, so I would climb out of it. It was on ground level so that wouldn't be hard.

The hardest part was hoping no one would hear Drake's truck start up. It was a stick shift so I could roll it back away from the house by putting it in neutral. Maybe that would be enough. Then I would park far enough away from Hailey she wouldn't notice me. If all that worked, I could *maybe* get close enough to them to hear what they said. If anything looked out of order, I could yell for help.

That was the plan I had in my head. Now, was I brave enough to pull it off was the real question.

Hailey told Aaron she was having dinner with her mom after work Sunday so he wouldn't expect her home early. Only I knew the truth. I was watching Drake and Aaron train on the back porch when I decided it was time.

At about 6:30 I told Drake I was tired and wanted to lie down. He offered to come with me, but I told him I would be fine, and to keep on training with Aaron. He said he would come in later to check on me. That made me nervous. If he came in and I was gone, he would think something happened.

I decided to leave him a note just in case.

Drake, I'm sorry for lying to you. Hailey got a letter from Brad and is meeting him tonight at her moms store and I'm going to follow her. Brad said he wanted to explain everything to her, but I'm afraid it might be a trap. Please don't be mad. I'll be fine. Love you, Ronnie

I only hoped that I would get back before Drake read that note. If not I hoped he would believe I was ok. He would probably be mad that I had done this but I'll have to deal with it, if it happens, then.

The window opened rather easy. No strain at all which was good, I wasn't sure about that, and I hadn't tested it. I sat backward on the window seal, and pulled my enormous self thru. I twisted my legs up, brought them around, and sat them on the ground; it was easier than I thought.

I walked quietly to the truck. Parked at the end where it would be easy to get out in a hurry. That made it the farthest from the house, which was good. I got in and put the truck in neutral. It started to roll down the driveway almost too fast. When I was sure I was far enough away, I started the engine, and hurried away so no one would notice.

I had been to the store many times before, and I knew there was a place in the back of it fixed up for breaks, with a table and a couple of chairs. I figured that was where they would talk. I parked the truck in the front of the store in the farthest spot away from the break area. As I got out, I saw a car coming up. It was Brad. I waited until he had pulled around back before I continued. I slowly walked to the side of the building to stand where I can hear them, and not noticed. I heard Hailey acknowledge Brad.

"Hey Brad. It's nice to see you again." She sounded happy.

"I wasn't sure you would come this time." I heard Brads voice then.

"I wasn't sure myself if I was going to either. But I need some answers Brad." Her voice was astoundingly harsh. "I have always looked over *everything* you do, but now I need to *know* everything."

"I'll tell you everything. Let's sit, this could take awhile." I heard the scraping of chairs.

I was debating on whether or not to get closer when something touched my shoulder. I screamed.

I heard chairs scraping again and Hailey yell.

I looked behind me and it was Drake. He looked angry. "*What are you doing here?*" He said in a harsh whisper,

"I couldn't let Hailey come here alone." I looked over to see Hailey and Brad coming around the corner.

"Ronnie what were you *thinking*." Hailey was just as mad as Drake. Her arms folded across her chest.

I looked at Brad. He was staring at my ballooned stomach. I instinctively put a protective arm around my belly. Drake pushed me behind him when he noticed where Brad was staring.

"Oh no!" Brad was saying. "It can't be. Not Ronnie." He actually looked worried.

Drake looked at him, but Hailey spoke up. "What do you mean it can't be Ronnie? What are you talking about?" her voice suddenly getting louder.

Brad looked at Drake before talking. "Maybe I should explain it to you all." He motioned to the break area. "Do you want to hear it?" He was looking at me then.

I just nodded my head, but Drake still held me behind him. He didn't trust Brad.

Brad spoke again, "I'm not going to hurt anyone. I just think you need to know the truth. Especially since Ronnie is pregnant. You'll need the facts, now more than ever."

"Ok Brad. But I'll be watching you." He glared at him.

We all went to sit on the cold chairs that were in a modest looking break area behind the store. Drake took off his coat, and placed it around me. I sat in the closest seat to the exit, as Drake stood behind me ready to grab me up and run if necessary. Hailey was looking at Brad. I could see she still loved him, in the expression on her face.

He began... "First let me ask you a question." He looked at Drake, "Do you know about the protectors?"

"Of course, I am one." Drake looked annoyed.

Brad looked astonished, but let it go. "Good then I don't have to tell you that there are people who live in the forest called dwellers do I?" Brad looked at Drake again.

"No. I know about the dwellers too." Drake sounded bored.

"Do you know their whole story? Where they came from and what they believe?" Brad was still looking at Drake.

Drake started to look interested then. "No I don't."

"Then that's where I'll start." He sat down beside Hailey.

"The legend says that the dwellers, which were previously called 'The Forest People', came here from another land. None of the stories tells exactly which land. It just said that that they lived in the trees, and only came out at night. There was a civil war between the two groups. The ones who wanted to venture out into the world, and the ones who wanted to *stay* in the trees. After a battle ensued, the tree dwellers left to find the legendary magic forest they had always believed existed. Their mapping led them to Sabre Beach. They believed they had found it.

"They made camp in the middle of the forest where they had found an empty clearing. It cemented their belief that they were where they were supposed to be. They soon noticed they could tell if anyone had entered their forest. It's a feeling that someone is around, and they quickly sent them away. They also found they could have canines do their bidding. That's how they scared people off. They sent canines after anyone they felt were dangerous to their plan.

"It's also believed that they stayed there many years without troubling anyone, until their numbers started to dwindle. Then they asked the protectors, they called them outlanders, for help, but they refused. They had decided to take what they needed, children, and leave for a different part of the forest."

He glanced at Drake again to get his reaction, but Drake stayed quiet, “When the plan was created, and all the males of the dwellers had prepared the hunt for the children. They set out, only to realize they could no longer leave the forest. They reported to the elder of what had happened, and he was not surprised. He had been keeping a secret himself, prophecies about the outlanders. He told them to wait until the time came, and they would have rule over not just the forest, but the beach as well. They all trusted the elder, and did as he said, though they worried about their decreasing numbers. But the elder was a shaman of sorts and could do magic himself.

“Do not fear my children; I can make them come to us.” He said to them. No one knew what he meant by that so they watched him. He took oils from the tree lands and mixed them together. Then said words they didn’t understand. That’s when they saw a woman come to the clearing, and lie down on the altar. She seemed to be under a spell, and the others were afraid. He asked which of the men favored this woman. No one could understand what he meant so he said he would take her for himself. As she lay there, he poured the oils on her and said more words. When she finally was aware where she was, she didn’t leave. She stayed as his wife.

“Now the men understood, and they all wanted him to call someone for themselves. The elder said only the noble could acquire a wife and he set them all different tasks to complete. It’s said only three of them had succeeded in these tasks, and so only three more women were offered up. The women were only there to give bear to children to enhance their numbers. When the sisters asked the elder to bring them husbands he refused. So they decided to take what they had learned about calling, and would secretly call men to the forest and seduce them. The elder didn’t mind that, he just didn’t want any outlanders in his tribe.

“The elder didn’t know at that time the outlanders could resist the call. He *also* believed that all the outlanders were all men. He knew one of the prophecies said; it will be the child of an outlander, which leads them to victory. He waited for the children to be born, only to see the women had not seduced any outlanders. They were just indiscriminate men. The elder didn’t know at the time the mother was to be the offspring of the wanderer. The wanderer is one who can come in unnoticed.”

He looked at me again, probably thinking of *who* my father was.

“Now, there are *two* prophecies, and the elder wasn’t sure which one to go by. He was willing to try the one he had from the old lands where he had come from. That one was for him to father the child with a marked girl. He didn’t know who she was; just that she would be born with the line of the forest over her womb. This story was told to the male child of each elder as they died so the next in line would keep watch for the girl.

“It was many years before they heard of her. Now when he found out the girl was born, the current elder tried to call her in her 10th year, but the marked girl was gone. He waited patiently for her return. He knew she would come back. It was her destiny after all. Then when he heard she had returned, he sent the seeker to bring her to him. The seeker is the only one, who can leave the forest, but even he cannot come on Sabre land. So when a protector came and took her before the ceremony started, the elder decided, after hearing what happened that the second prophecy must be the one to follow?

“So now this is where I come in. The elder is my great-grandfather. Every generation since the first elder have heard, and believed, the story of the long awaited child. Until my dad that is. He knew as a child that he might be the one who brings about the war with the outlanders, but he didn’t want any part of it. He left after he fell for my mom. She was pregnant with me, and he just couldn’t bear to let her go. Now it seems they want *me* to take the place as the true heir. To be the one the prophecy is about.”

Brad stopped to look at me. “I’m sorry Ronnie. Dad told me about this story a few months ago, but I didn’t believe him even though I knew I could hear the trees calling me. Then yesterday I went as far as the edge of the forest, and I saw him, a dweller. Then I knew it was all true. I was actually afraid it was Hailey who was the bearer, and I wanted to warn her, but now that I see you....”

Hailey was still looking at Brad. She seemed to have something on her mind, “Do you know where the prophecies came from?”

“No. That’s something dad didn’t know either. Just that they have been around as long as the dwellers have. Over a hundred years.”

I was hoping he would know, but I figured that was something we would never know about. We just have to keep either one from happening. I felt Drake’s tension. He must have been hoping for an answer too.

“So what are you going to do Brad, because I’m not about to let Ronnie, or the baby get hurt.” Drake voice was overly harsh.

Brad looked at Drake then. “You must be the father huh?” That was a good assumption, what with Drake still standing very protectively over me.

Hailey finally started to talk. “Thank you for telling this to us Brad. I know it must have been hard.” She looked like she wanted to comfort him.

“Dad keeps telling me I can resist. He did, so I can too.” He dropped his head in shame. “But I’m not as strong as he is.”

“Yes you are.” Hailey told him reassuringly. “You don’t have to do what they want you to. Ronnie is our friend and we have to protect her. Her baby is at stake, and I am not letting anyone hurt either of them.” She looked firmly at him. “Not even you Brad.”

Brad looked at Hailey in amazement. She had never been so bold before. But he didn’t know who she truly was either. She looked him straight in the eye, “I’m a protector too.”

He seemed a little stunned by her announcement. He had not even considered for a minute that she was a descendent of the settlers. He honestly looked happy about it. “That’s great Hailey. Ronnie couldn’t ask for a better protector than you.”

Hailey looked at Drake. Brad didn’t know he was a martial artist too. She wasn’t about to tell him, and neither was Drake.

“I just hope I’m strong enough to stay away. I don’t want any part of it.” Brad looked defeated.

“I’ll help you Brad.” Hailey chimed in. “If you feel like you can’t resist then call me, and I’ll help you.” She reached over and hugged him.

Drake put his hand on my shoulder. I was starting to get cold. He could feel my shivering. “We need to get Ronnie back to the house. She’s getting cold.” He gently pulled me up and hugged me up to him. He was cold too, but he would never admit it.

“Ok.” Hailey looked warily at Brad before we walked around to the parking lot.

I looked up at Drake. “How did you get here anyway?” Remembering I had taken Drake’s truck.

“I took Aarons truck. I was afraid if I didn’t he would follow me, and I wasn’t sure if he could be around Brad without hitting him.”

“I would deserve it for the way I’ve treated Hailey, and for what I’m intended to do to Ronnie.” Brad lowered his head, “I’m really sorry about the last time we were together Hailey. I didn’t mean to throw you into that wall.”

Drake’s eyes went wild. Apparently, he didn’t know about that. I grabbed him before he could lunge at Brad. Hailey stood in front of Brad who did nothing to guard himself.

“Drake, don’t! He’s trying to make amends. Ask him what I did to him before I walked out.” She looked smug.

“She kicked me in the chest and left me on the floor knocked out.” He rubbed his chest absentmindedly. Drake smiled.

She had already told me that part before. I laughed it off then because she hadn’t known her true heritage.

We walked back across the parking lot and Drake opened the passenger door of Aaron’s truck. I looked at him perplexed. “What about your truck? You don’t want to *leave* it here.”

“Me and Aaron will come back and get it. I can tell him about Brad away from the house, that way so he doesn’t break anything.” He laughed.

I was at the house waiting on the couch for Drake and Aaron to come back with Drake’s truck. Randy and dad both scolded me for being irresponsible about my health, and not asking for help with Hailey. Hailey was telling Randy everything she had found out from Brad.

"I don't think it's a good idea to see him alone Hailey." Randy told her. "If he needs guidance, I will go with you to help him. You know I can stay calm and handle it."

Hailey acknowledged the fact that Randy, if anyone, could probably help her with Brad. If he was fighting the call so bad that he needed help, Randy's soothing voice might just be what he needs to hear.

Aaron came in the house before Drake. He seemed ok about it, but I could tell he wasn't happy.

"Why didn't you tell me?" He looked at Hailey.

"Because I knew how you would react, Aaron. You never liked Brad for the fact of who his father is, and I didn't think you would hear him out peacefully." She was right about that I was sure.

"Your right, I probably would have just beat him to a pulp, and brought you home. I don't know what I'm going to do with you Hailey. Falling for a *dweller*?"

"He's not a *dweller* Aaron. His great-grandfather is." She was letting him know right away that she didn't link Brad in with the people in the woods. "Your just prejudice against him for something he can't control."

Hailey went outside to practice her martial arts. She always does that when she's upset. It seems to bring her thoughts together. Drake didn't follow her this time. He was just looking at me. I knew he thought I was wrong for following Hailey, but it turned out to be a good thing. We found out more than we had hoped.

I was tired so I got up to go to bed and Drake followed me. He was still mad so I figured he wanted to say it in private, and not in front of everyone else. I turned and faced him as he was shutting the door.

"Ok. Let's have it." I looked him directly in the eye.

He walked over and kissed me very gently. I couldn't believe it. He was *not* mad at me. Why wasn't he? I hoped it was because he knew I was safe, but I had to ask.

“What is this?” I said when he finally let me go. “I expected you to be furious at me.”

“You’re not a child Ronnie. I know what you did was wrong, but I also know you. You wouldn’t have been able to forgive yourself if anything had happened to Hailey and you could have helped her. I’ll admit I’m not happy you went, but it all turned out ok.”

I reached up to kiss him this time. I pulled back, “If there’s a next time, I promise I’ll tell you and let you handle it. If you promise to listen first, and attack later if it comes to that.”

“Deal” He started kissing me again. He picked me up, though I don’t know how, I’m absolutely huge, then he lay me on the bed carefully, and I forgot all about everyone else for awhile.

18. The Lone Excursion

It was edgy around the house again. We were all waiting for the paper that Hailey had found in the woods. It may be nothing but a mixture to heal a cut but everyone was hoping it was more. I wasn't sure I wanted to know more. Every time we learned something else it made things worse, not better.

It was two weeks before the paper came back from the restorer. I saw the familiar envelope when Randy brought it in. Dad and Drake were gone and Hailey had a shift at her moms store so it was just me Randy and Aaron, who was asleep in the recliner again. I think he could sleep standing up.

"Is that it Randy?" I looked tensely at the package in his hands.

"Yes it is hon." He looked confident.

He was looking at the envelope that was in his hands. I thought he was going to open it but he put it down on the coffee table.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"I think we should wait until Gabe and Drake get back." He was still looking at the package as if he was afraid of what it was going to say.

I wasn't sure I could wait that long. I tried to distract myself with a book. I even started flipping the TV channels but nothing helped. I kept looking from the package to the clock to the door. Randy seemed at ease but I was sure he was just as nervous as I was.

It seemed like forever waiting in that room for the rest of my family to get home. I knew it was getting dark by the light fading from the window. Aaron had woken up and asked about the paper on the table. Randy told him we were waiting but he thought we should go on and tell them later.

Hailey came thru the door a little after six and noticed the letter right away. "Oh. I can't believe it's finally here." She picked it up and noticed it wasn't open, "When are we going to read it?" She looked over at Randy.

"After Drake and Gabe get here," Randy told her. She looked disillusioned.

Then Hailey took to pacing the floor and watching the clock. I tried to help Randy with dinner but he sent me back in the living room. I started watching Aaron and Hailey take turns looking at the door then the clock. They would walk to the window and look out then sit down. So amused by their antics; I didn't hear Drake's truck until Aaron ran to the door.

He yanked it open "Hey guess what? The paper came back today. Randy wouldn't open it until you two got here." He said irritated.

Dad came in first and I went over to hug him. I looked for Drake and he was still outside. He looked troubled about something. I went over to him. "What's wrong?"

"Just tired doll. I had to track today and almost got too close to the Dwellers. Gabe had to come and get me. I think I'm losing my edge." His face was hard and worried. I wish there was something I could do for him.

"You're just tired from overdoing it. You need to slow down. I need you. You have to think of us as well as yourself you know."

"I know Ronnie. I just can't stand the thought of something happening to you and I'm going to do everything in my power to stop it."

"I know you will Drake. Well let's go in. The paper Hailey found came back today and we were waiting for you to get back before opening it." I took his hand and led him in.

We all gathered in the living room. Drake took his usual place beside me on the couch. Aaron on the floor and Randy sat in the recliner holding the dreaded package in his hands.

The first thing he pulled out was the personal letter that Mr. Marks had sent. We all waited anxiously to hear what he had to say this time.



Mr. Sabre,

Thank you for letting me assist you again. I hope this is helpful in your quest for your family history.

Sincerely,

Robert Marks



Randy pulled out the paper that was in the same protective covering as the prophecy had been and laid it aside on the table.

We all held our breath as he pulled out the translation Mr. Marks had sent.

To bring forth the soul of the outlander child, the bearer must be ready to labor by being anointed with these oils of the forest; Lavender, to bring about birth and; Melissa, to slumber the bearer. The heated oils poured on the womb of the bearer, and her hand bound to the heir. The soul is to be released by the sacrifice of the bearer to the flames. The smoke will then bring the soul into the heir.

Randy laid the paper down.

“Well at least what they are going to do during the ceremony. Since they have to wait for Ronnie to go into labor, it will take longer to perform. That will give us time to plan the attack should it become necessary.” Dad said.

“What are the oils the paper talks about?” Aaron asked.

"It's probably referring to essential oils. They are supposed to be healings aids for people who prefer alternative medicine. I think I'll check into it." Hailey had found herself a new project.

I was just sitting there thinking about the baby, wondering if I was strong enough to protect it. I don't know how long it was but I noticed Drake looking at me. I tried to smile but it wouldn't come. All I could do was stare at the floor.

"It's going to be fine doll. I won't let it get that far. No one is going to get you or the baby." He sounded so sure of himself but I could see the fear in his eyes.

"I think I need to lie down." I told him. Drake got up to follow me to our room.

He closed the door and came to sit down on the edge of the bed. He looked as tired as I suddenly felt.

"You can go back in there to talk to the others about the paper. You didn't have to come in here if you didn't want to."

"Do you want to be alone? I can go back out front." He said quietly.

"No, I was just suddenly very tired. I can't seem to get everything off my mind. I don't know what's wrong with me. I want to cry all the time, when I'm not mad that is. I just can't seem to make anything better. I'm sorry Drake, I just don't understand it." I knew I was rambling but I just couldn't stop talking.

Drake was smiling at me, which made me mad again. "It's ok doll. It's just your hormones out of whack with the baby. It's not your fault."

He was probably right. I was a weeping mess lately with no reason to be crying. Even Aaron was afraid to talk to me when I was that way. I would bite his head off.

Hailey had decided to find out everything she could about the oils mentioned in the 'soul joining ceremony'. She was spending a lot of time on her laptop around the house lately, and even more at the library.

She came in one day from Branceville looking rather pleased with herself. "I finally got it." She held up a paper in her hand.

Drake had come and picked up Aaron earlier so it was just Randy and me at the house when she walked in. I wasn't sure what she was talking about at first, but Randy came out of the kitchen, and smiled.

"You found out what the oils were?" He asked her.

"Yup."

I suddenly became interested. "Well, what does it say?"

She sat down in the chair and opened the paper in her hands.

"First the Lavender oil; *aids childbirth and acts as a central nervous system sedative*. It seems that's how they are going to do this on the eve of birth. They want to put you in labor. And the Melissa oil; *balances hormones and brings acceptance and understanding*."

"So if you mix the two together, the oils will sedate you so you can't fight them, and also causes labor so they can do their ritual whenever they want to."

It went quiet. So, the due date didn't matter to them. They believed they could cause my labor to come, and steal my baby's soul whenever they wanted. If that was the case, then what are they waiting for now? Brad I suppose. It's all moot without the chosen heir anyway. As long as he can fight the call, I was ok.

Hailey looked pleased that she had found the answer, but not happy either. I know it's hard for her now. She had started to talk to Brad more, and really believed he could resist, but she was still wary all the same. She loves him but is that enough. In the back of her mind, she is afraid she might have to fight him anyway. Could she do it? Could she turn away from the man she loves for a baby that was not even born yet? How can I ask her to do that when I know the love she feels? I feel it every time I look at Drake.

It was almost time for the men to get home so I went to the kitchen to help Randy start supper. He had been teaching me how as well as Susan had. I think I was getting better, but who knows. Maybe it's terrible, but no would tell me and hurt my feelings.

Susan had come over this evening to check up on everyone. Dad was keeping her in formed of all the important stuff so I was surprised to see her when she walked thru the door but happy too.

"Hey Susan. I thought you were still working. Did you finally find a replacement?" Her last one had resigned a month ago and she was having trouble getting someone to help.

"Yes I finally did. A girl graduated last year with a degree in pharmaceuticals. She has been looking for a year and saw my ad it the Branceville times and I hired her yesterday. She's a real quick learner so I took the night off." Susan lay back on the couch exhausted. I could see the dark circles under her eyes from not getting a day off in almost a month.

Dad's eyes lit up when he saw Susan on the couch as he and the others came in that night. Her eyes were doing the same. I wondered why they didn't get married. Maybe it was because of me. They were afraid it would bother me. I had to think of some way to let dad know it was ok. I wanted him to be happy after all.

After Hailey had told, the rest of the guys about what she had found out, the conversation of the evening turned to Thanksgiving. It seemed that Randy was planning a big dinner with all the protectors. He wanted me and Hailey to get to know them better. I was fine with that but I wasn't sure if I could keep a straight face all night. I really don't like crowds.

I could hear Randy talking about some protectors that had moved to Branceville. I hadn't thought about any of them moving away, but I guess they do have a choice about their life.

"I hadn't realized that there were protectors that had moved away." I looked at Drake.

He got a defeated look in his eyes, and I thought I had made a mistake by asking him. "They're my cousins. Their dad was Randy's older brother. He and his

wife died in a plane crash 6 months ago. The oldest son had gone to Branceville to college. He had just turned 18 when they died. He quit school and got a job so he could raise his two younger brothers. They are 17 and 14. Too young to be Protectors really, but they have talent. The youngest could track me when he was 12. We were hoping to do this without them, but they keep calling Randy. They can sense something, but we haven't told them yet. It's just a matter of time though. The oldest one is persistent and won't back down to anyone."

The idea of children coming here when it was so dangerous frightened me. "Is there any way to keep them out of this?"

"Dads trying but they know something is up. It's in our blood to feel when we're needed. When my uncle died, the sense went to his children. Age is not a factor when it comes to the call." He looked over at Randy.

"Don't worry honey. I'm trying to stall them. I've been telling them it's just busy around here, and there is no need to come back right now. I don't know how long that's going to work though. The boys are intelligent, and they suspect I'm lying to them." Randy seemed nervous. Was it because he was afraid these kids were going to show up or was he just thinking of his lost brother.

"Is that how you were there every time I was in trouble? You could feel that I was in danger?" I had never asked Drake the real story of how he was always so close after I learned the truth. Now I was curious.

He looked sheepishly at me. "Yea. I could feel it. But, sometimes I was almost too late. Like when Doug had you at the altar. You were so far away that day, I almost missed it and then..." He couldn't say what was on his mind.

"But you found me. You saved me then just like every other time. Don't think about what could have been. Let's focus on what's coming." I rubbed my stomach and he lay his hand down on top of mine and smiled.

Drake looked at Randy, "What do we do when they show up? You know it's just a matter of time before they do dad. You can only ignore the feeling for so long, and then you have to follow."

"I know son, I don't know how long. I just hope its long enough." He said fearfully. "We'll just have to deal with it when it comes."

The rest of the night Randy and Susan discussed what to have for Thanksgiving dinner. They decided on the traditional menu. It was going to be a big event. It was less than 2 weeks away so they had to hurry. Dad offered to bring over the folding tables he kept in his garage along with the chairs. Susan thought a buffet would be best since Randy didn't have a big enough dining room table to accommodate all the guests.

I was still thinking about the young boys who everyone believed was eventually going to show up. Hoping they would not. I couldn't stand it if a child was hurt because of me. Even if they were talented trackers I was not going to be responsible for someone so young being in danger.

Drake assured me that night that if they came, it was not my fault.

"Yes it is Drake. What if they get hurt? Even if only the oldest one goes with you, how can we leave his little brothers without a guardian? I won't be able to live with myself any more than if any of you get hurt."

"It might not even come to that. Brad is still at home with his dad. If he stays there until it's too late, then we're clear."

I knew he was just trying to make me feel better. Hailey said Brad was hearing them call him more than ever. He is still trying to resist but for how long? I tried to hang on to the fact that Brad doesn't want to hurt Hailey either, and going to the dwellers was the surest way he could hurt her.

Drake took the next day off to spend it with me. He said we needed some time alone so he took me to Branceville to eat and then shopping. He made me sit down on the benches after we left every store. He even sat there and put my feet in his lap.

I overdid it in the baby store.

I knew our baby would need clothes when it was born, so I searched thru all the racks and found some gender neutral outfits. When we finally left the clothing

store, we went to a baby furniture store. He bought a bed that could go from a crib to a toddler bed as the baby grew. Then he picked up a stroller and a high chair that I was sure the baby wouldn't need until it was much older.

He even started to get diapers and baby wash, but I told him it was a little early for that. I convinced him to wait at least another month. I hadn't noticed the outfit he had put in the cart until we were loading everything into the truck. It was for a girl. A 2-piece diaper set that was light pink, and the front of it read 'Daddy's Angel'.

I looked at him and he smiled. "I couldn't resist." I let it go at that, and climbed in the truck.

We stopped for an early dinner and headed back to Sabre. "I had a great day Drake. I'm so glad we did this. I hadn't even thought of baby clothes until you took me to the store today."

He smiled as he glanced over at me. "You know you could have gotten more. I hear babies out grow stuff fast."

"You spent too much already. What with the crib, clothes, and everything else, you had already bought. Why won't you let me help you pay for any of it?"

"It's my job to take care of you and our baby."

Sometimes his macho independence was too much to bear. It was both of our responsibilities, and yet he takes it all on himself. Well next time I would go without him and we'll see. Hailey would take me if I asked her to.

Aaron came out to help unload the truck when we pulled in.

"*WOW* man. Who are you buying all this for? The baby isn't even here yet. Where are you going to put all this stuff anyway?"

Drake just smiled at him. I knew he would set up the crib in our room but Aaron had a point. Was Randy's house able to hold all this? I wasn't sure.

To prove me wrong, Randy had already made a place in the kitchen for the high chair, and had Aaron add an extra dresser to Drakes and my room for the

baby's clothes. The bed had been moved around to accommodate the new addition of a baby bed.

They had even gone as far as to straighten the hall closet to put the stroller.

I only hoped it wasn't all in vain. No, I wouldn't think like that. This baby will be fine. It was all going to work out.

I followed Drake to our room and lay down as he was putting all the new clothes in the dresser. He looked over at me worried, "Are you ok? Did I keep you out to long?"

"No Drake, I'm fine. It's just my swollen ankles and feet that are bothering me."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, put my feet in his lap, and began rubbing them. It felt so good I drifted off to sleep.

Drake, dad and Hailey had another excursion to the woods but found nothing different. Randy was disappointed but not surprised. He said we would wait until it was closer to time before the next scout. I was glad that they wouldn't be out there any time soon., I remember how cold the forest felt when I had made it to the clearing and it was spring then so I was sure it was unbearable now when it was the so cold.

Randy started concentrating on the Thanksgiving party. He and Susan took a trip to Branceville to get all the necessary supplies for so many people. Susan said the local store didn't have everything she needed. That left me there with Aaron. I really liked Aaron but he was so depressed lately since Hailey had started to see Brad again. I didn't know what to say to make him feel better. I was just as worried as everyone else was that Brad would soon be joining the others in the woods.

"Hey Aaron. Just you and me today I guess."

He looked up from the chair, "Huh? Oh yea I guess."

I could tell it was going to be a long boring day. I decided to go thru the new clothes we had bought for the baby to organize the dresser. I put the smallest stuff in the top drawer and went larger on the way down.

Drake had said we need to get a changing table to keep diapers and bath stuff on, he had seen it in a magazine. I actually agreed to that. It seemed like something would really come in handy. I did convince him to wait until we get the diapers before getting the table.

When I came back into the front room, Aaron was still sitting in the same chair. He looked even more withdrawn if that was possible. Had something happened that I didn't know about?

"Hey Aaron, what's wrong?"

"Brad called."

So, that was it. It's one thing to know, it's another to hear it. He could just imagine Hailey was at work or with her mom, but to hear Brad ask for her is too much for him.

"He wanted to talk to you. I told him you weren't here. If you want to talk to him, you can call. Here's the number he gave me." He handed me a crumpled piece of paper.

Why would he want to talk to me? We had only been acquaintances at school. He was close to Hailey. Maybe it's about the dwellers. Maybe he found out something else.

I went to the kitchen to get the phone. I took it out the back door so Aaron wouldn't hear me. I was afraid he couldn't handle it. "Hey is Brad there? Thank you."

"Hello."

"Hey Brad, its Ronnie."

"Hey, I was hoping you would call."

"Of course I would. What's up?"

"I thought you should know about Hailey. She's about to do something stupid."

I was suddenly extremely concerned. "What is it?"

"Well, she told me about you all going out to get information in the woods at night."

"Yea, and?"

"Well, she plans on going on her own. You know, alone."

"WHAT!" I was frantic. "*WHEN?*"

"Tonight. She just told me today. I would have told you sooner if I could, but she said she just decided. She said something about being able to get closer than anyone else."

I knew I had to stop her, "Thanks Brad. I'll take care of it. Don't worry. Ok?"

"Ok Ronnie. I knew if anyone could talk her out of it, you could. Take care of yourself." The line went dead.

I was frozen in place, and not because of the ice on the ground. I was frozen in fear. Why would she do this? What is her purpose? Hadn't they found out everything they could for now? I needed help.

"Aaron, have you seen Hailey today?"

"No. Why?" I could see anger in his face, "Did *he* do something to her?"

"No Aaron. It's what she's going to do to herself."

"What are you talking about?" I could see confusion in his eyes.

"She's planning a lone excursion! *Tonight!*" I was frantic and spoke louder than I planned.

"What! How do you know this?" Aaron's was starting to panic.

"Brad told me. She mentioned it to him earlier."

"We have to stop her!" His face was just as frantic as I felt.

"We have to find her first. Is her car out front?"

He walked over to the window. "Yes, it's at the end of the drive. She must have already gone!" He started to run out the door. I grabbed his shirt.

"*No Aaron!* They can *feel* you! You'll get hurt!" I was pulling with all my might. "*Please Aaron, don't go!*"

I was no match for him. I fell on the floor. The pain shot thru me like a knife, but I ignored it. I made it to the phone and dialed dad's office number first, no answer. I tried the new cell phone number Drake had gotten so I could reach him if anything happened. He answered on the first ring.

"Ronnie, are you ok?"

"Yes Drake. It's Aaron. He went to look for Hailey in the forest. She planned a lone excursion. *Please Drake*. Aaron will be felt, he'll get hurt."

"I'm on my way." He hung up.

I couldn't move from the floor. I just lay over and held my stomach. The pain was all but gone. I also realized I was alone for the first time in months. I was scared. What if someone knew I was alone? No, they can't come on Sabre land, right. I'm safe here.

It seemed like forever I lay there waiting, but only a few minutes passed when the door burst open, and Drake and dad came in. Drake ran over to pick me up.

"Are you hurt?" His eyes were fearful.

"No. just a cramp, but you have to find them. They could get hurt."

"I can't leave you here alone."

"Yes you can. Please *go*, get them *now!*"

He hesitated, but dad spoke up, "We have to go now Drake. We need to find them while it's still light out."

Drake looked at me again. "Don't open the door, and don't go outside."

I agreed and they left me there again. I wasn't going to let them know I was terrified. It would only stop Drake from going, and he had to go. I sat on the couch where Drake had let me down. I didn't move. It was the longest hour in my life. Randy came in and looked at the horror on my face.

"What happened?" He ran over to me. He looked around and saw no one. "Where is everyone?"

"Drake and dad went to find Aaron and Hailey in the woods."

Susan had come in to hear the last part, and dropped her bag on the floor. "What?"

I told them everything I knew, which wasn't much. I omitted the part where I fell to the ground. Everyone waited anxiously in the living room for them to return. Susan stared at the TV and Randy paced.

I just sat there staring at the floor when Drake burst in the door carrying Hailey. My heart sank.

Aaron followed with dad in his arms. *NO!*

"Oh *no!* What *happened?* What *happened to them?*" I was already beside dad where Aaron had sat him down. He was conscious, but he seemed to be in a state of bewilderment. Hailey was out cold. Aaron was beside her now.

"*Daddy?* Dad, are you ok?" I said thru tears. "*What happened?*" I demanded to know as I looked up at them.

Drake started to talk. "When we left here we weren't sure which way to go. I could feel them, but by the time we got there, the dwellers were on the way to get Aaron."

"Hailey was so close to the clearing when they sent people out that they saw her too. Aaron was trying to fight them off her, but there was so many. I saw

what was happening, but I was so far away. Gabe beat me there and he started on the ones who had Hailey.”

“He was doing well at first, but one of them hit him from behind before I got there. I helped Aaron with the ones he was fighting, and then we came up behind them and finally pulled the rest of them off Gabe and Hailey and they ran. By that time, Gabe was down, and Hailey was unconscious. So we carried them back here.”

“They sent 10 of them on us this time. They are *really* watching us now. We could feel even the coyotes coming as we got in the yard.”

Randy was checking out Hailey as Drake spoke. She was pretty bruised up, and her eye was already getting dark. Aaron was hovering over her not looking much better. He had the faintest of bruises on his cheek, and blood from his nose was still on his face.

Dad didn’t look as bad as the others. He just had the lightest of darkness forming under his eye. Drake looked completely unscathed, not a mark on him. If his clothes weren’t dirty, you wouldn’t know he had been in a fight.

“Don’t you think we should take them to the hospital?” I asked apprehensively.

Hailey stirred, “I’m not going to any hospital. I’m fine.”

Dad had finally come around too, “It’s ok baby. Daddy will be fine.”

I wasn’t so sure, but Drake said, “If we take them in, the police will be called. What do we tell them? ‘You see officer there are these people who live in the forest and we were spying on them and they attacked us’. They’d think we’re crazy.” He put his arm around me.

I knew he was right, but I couldn’t help but worry. What if one of them had a concussion, or worse? I knew after my abduction; the cops had asked me about it. I told them I was out the whole time and didn’t know who it was, but this is different. There’s no way to explain it without leaving suspicion behind us.

The pain I felt when I tried to hold Aaron back was gone, but I was still troubled about it. I wasn't going to tell Drake about though. It might make him and Aaron fight, and that's not what we need right now.

Aaron finally spoke up, "I'm sorry Ronnie. Are you ok? I saw you fall, but I was so worried about Hailey I wasn't thinking."

Drake eyes blazed. "You let her *fall*!" he jumped up and was right in Aaron's face.

"No Drake." I tried to defuse the situation, "It wasn't his fault. I grabbed his shirt and tried to pull him back. It's my fault. I should have known better than to try to hold someone as strong as Aaron. I'm fine, really."

"Don't try to protect me Ronnie. I deserve whatever Drake wants to do to me. I could have hurt you." He dropped his head.

I grabbed Drake's arm and held him. "He had to go get Hailey. Look what happened. She could have been killed. *Please* Drake, let it go."

Drake was still glaring at Aaron. "For Ronnie's sake I'll let it go, but if you ever do anything that stupid again, best friend or not, I'll break you head!"

Randy intervened, "Drake that's enough. He was distraught about his sister. You can't tell me if it was the other way around, you wouldn't do the very same thing." He could always calm the situation.

Drake looked better, but I could see he was still mad.

Hailey chimed in, "Drake it's really my fault. I should have known better than to go alone. I thought I could handle it. Now I know I can't." She hung her head.

I was emotionally exhausted so I got up to go to bed. Drake followed me. "Are you sure you're ok?" His eyes full of apprehension.

"Yes Drake. I'm just exceedingly tired now. I think I'm going to lie down."

"Do you want me to stay in here with you?"

“No it’s ok I’ll be fine.” I really wanted to be alone.

“Ok. I’m going to see if Gabe wants me to take him home, or if he’s just going to stay here tonight. I’ll be back soon.”

I was glad when I was alone. I had so much on my mind. My best friend and father were both hurt because of me. I know they would say it was not just for that reason, but the truth is that if I had not had to come back to Mystic, the dwellers wouldn’t be trying to take over the beach.

I couldn’t deny that mine and Drakes relationship, and what it produced, is really the reason for of all this. I could hear Drakes truck start up. I guess dad decided to go home, or maybe to Susan’s. Either way I was glad. He doesn’t need to be so close to me. It’s dangerous for him. I know I’m wallowing in self-pity but I don’t care. I am pregnant after all; shouldn’t I get to wallow sometimes?

19. Thanksgiving

I could feel Drake lying beside me. It was still dark out so I knew it must be late. I got up to get a drink of water for my parched throat. Aaron was asleep in the recliner and Hailey was lying on the couch not even bothering to open it to a bed tonight. I tried to be quiet as I walked past but I heard Hailey.

“Ronnie? What are you doing up?” Hailey startled me.

“Oh. Hi. I was just getting a drink. What are you doing up?”

“I can’t sleep. I put my brother in danger today. How could I do that?” I got my drink and came over to sit beside her on the couch.

“You just wanted to help me. I wish everyone would just stop though, before anyone dies. I’m so afraid I’m going to lose one of you.” I was almost crying.

Hailey put her arm around me. “Ronnie, you can’t think like that. We love you and none of us will let anything happen to you or your baby.” She was crying to now. “I promise not to do anything like that again. Ok?”

“Ok Hailey. Why did you do that anyway?”

“I just thought if I was alone, like last time, I could get more information. I heard Aaron and Drake talking the other day that they wished they could find out more so I figured I’d give it a try.”

She looked at me sheepishly. “But I know now it was wrong. I won’t ever go without backup again.” She looked over at Aaron. “He was so stupid to come after me. He knows they feel him. It’s not like I haven’t kicked his butt before anyway. I don’t need him to babysit me.”

I laughed quietly. Hailey looked at me confused. “I used to be the one everyone babysat.” We both laughed and then Aaron stirred so we put our hands over our mouths to stifle it.

I noticed movement behind me and turned suddenly. Drake had come to look for me. “You ok doll? I woke up and you were gone.”

"Yea I'm fine. I just came to get a drink and Hailey was awake so we were talking."

"Ok doll. I'm going to lie back down unless you need anything."

"No I'm ok. Love you."

"Love you too doll." He headed back to our room.

"I guess I better go back to bed. You need to get some sleep too. Your eyes are bad enough without lack of sleep too." I laughed at her scowling face, "I'll see you in the morning Hailey."

No one talked anymore about Hailey's impromptu trip to the forest. She knew it was wrong so why berate her for it. The discussion now centered on the upcoming dinner and everyone that was supposed to be here.

There are going to be six protectors here not including the ones that pretty much lived here all the time. Randy's house has turned into a boarding house as of late. Not that he minded in the least 'the more the merrier' he always says when Hailey and Aaron stay over.

I couldn't help but wonder if their staying was because they were too tired to go home or to have more here to watch me. I hadn't so much as looked at the woods in weeks, much less walked toward them. I wish everyone would give me a break already.

That was too much to ask I guess. I couldn't even check the mail alone anymore. Of course, Randy usually checked it himself anyway but it was still annoying. I have taken to walking around the house at night.

Even though they were here, I still felt alone because they were all asleep. Drake had woken up a few times and come to find me but other than that, it was peaceful.

It was 4 days until Thanksgiving. I was wondering around, up late again. When I heard something outside, I started to wake up Drake, but it was such a

beautiful sound, I couldn't turn away. I walked over to the window and just looked out. There was nothing there. I decided it was safe to step out on the porch to listen to that music like sound.

I felt the draw of it pulling me off the porch but I couldn't stop. Where was it coming from? Who was singing that wonderful melody? I needed to find out. I left the door open as I continued following the music. I could hear my own voice in my mind telling me to turn around it was a trick. I simply couldn't make my feet stop moving. I tried to call for Drake but no sound came out of my mouth. I had to go but I wanted to turn and come back.

I heard another voice calling me but it was so far away. I was almost there now, to the singer who wanted me. Who needed me? I heard the other voice again but I still didn't know who it was.

Then someone grabbed me from behind. *No*, it was a trick! I tried to scream but there was a hand over my mouth. I couldn't see who was carrying me so I tried to twist but I couldn't move. Then I was on the ground and two people were fighting. The singing was gone and I saw not two but four people fighting. It was Drake, Aaron, and Hailey fighting with someone I had never seen before.

I tried to get up, to run away but I was suddenly so cold I couldn't move. I was still in my gown and my feet were bare. Drake and Aaron had taken off to chase the man further into the woods and Hailey knelt down by me. She was still weak from her last encounter with the dwellers and now I had put her in danger again. I started crying. I just lay there on that cold ground and cried.

"It's ok Ron. They're gone now. Drake and Aaron chased them away." She put her arms around me.

"It's not that," I snubbed through the tears. "I put you in danger again, all of you. How could I be so ludicrous? I actually thought I was helping someone, though I'm not sure who."

Hailey just pulled me up onto her lap. I knew she couldn't carry me so we just lay there together and cried. Drake and Aaron weren't gone long. When they got back, Drake leaned down to see if I was ok. He touched my bare arm, "She's freezing! We have to get her home *now*!"

I could feel myself shivering. My hands trembled like mad and I could barely feel my toes. I couldn't even talk anymore.

Drake was the fastest but Aaron was the strongest. Aaron picked me up and hurried out of the forest with Drake right beside him. I couldn't seem to hold my head up and it fell limply back. Drake held my head until they had me safely in the house. Aaron laid me down on the couch and Randy was already there with blankets to cover up my shivering body. I could hear them all talking but I couldn't make out a sound.

Then it all went dark.

I wasn't sure where I was when I woke up. My head was so foggy I couldn't get a grip on anything. I finally opened my eyes enough to see I was in bed. I had 20 pounds of blankets over me and I was sweating. Drake was on the floor by the bed. He either got hot, or was afraid he would hurt me, to lay there on the floor like he was. Not even a pillow under his head.

"Drake." I whispered. "Can you hear me?"

He rose up instantly and looked at me with unfocussed eyes. "Ronnie?"

"Yea Drake. Are you ok?" I tried to lean down to check him but the blankets held me there.

He finally came around and looked me straight in my eyes. "Ronnie." He sounded relieved. "Oh *Ronnie*. I was so scared. You had us worried to death." He got up and sat on the edge of the bed. "Are you feeling ok?"

"Yea I'm just hot right now."

He helped me take off some of the blankets, and I felt better. "What happened last night? You were almost taken." Drake eyes were full of apprehension.

I tried to remember what happened. "I'm not sure. I was up wandering around the house, and I heard something outside. I remember looking out the

window, but not seeing anything. I opened the door and heard singing. Someone needed me. The next thing I remember is you fighting someone.” I tried to comprehend it myself, but couldn’t. “How did you know I was out there?”

“Hailey woke up cold and saw the door wide open. She looked outside and saw someone, but she wasn’t sure who it was. She came and knocked on our door and asked if you were in here. When we realized you weren’t in the house we took off to find you. Luckily, you were still in sight.

“The dweller saw us and dropped you, but we got him before he could run. When Hailey left to go to your side, he slipped away. Aaron and me chased him, but I didn’t want to go too far in with Aaron so we came back to get you. You were so cold you couldn’t even stand up. Aaron picked you up, I held your head, and we brought you in. You blacked out on the couch so I brought you in here.”

I had done it again. Put everyone I love in danger. How was I ever going to live with myself? I started crying on Drake’s shirt. “I’m so reckless. I keep putting everyone in danger. I don’t even know why this time. I can’t remember even getting to the woods.”

Drake held me out from his arms so I had to look him in the eye. “This is *not* your fault! The dweller was calling you. You were vulnerable from being barely awake, and he caught you. I’m just glad you left the door open so Hailey woke up. Otherwise we might not have known for hours you were gone.” He pulled me back to his chest. “You can’t ever wander outside at night again. I’ll tie you to the bed if I have to.”

I tried to laugh at him but I knew he would probably do it if I kept on walking to the woods. Maybe I would do it to myself.

The only thing I that lingered on my mind was that it was a year ago today that I lost my mom and Tim forever. I cried again laying there on Drake’s chest. He didn’t ask me why, maybe he already knew.

I knew it was Thanksgiving, but I couldn’t think of anything to be thankful for. My last Thanksgiving dinner had gone dreadfully and unspeakably wrong and I didn’t want a repeat of it. I looked over at the clock; it was already 9:30. Why

Drake hadn't waked me up? I dressed quickly and I tried to put on a happy face as I walked into the front room. I'm sure I fooled no one.

Drake was standing in the middle of the room looking around. He was probably trying to figure out how we were going to fit everyone in here.

"Why did you let me sleep so long?" I walked up to him and put my arm around his waist.

He smiled at me, "You need your sleep doll and you are so beautiful when you sleep, I hate waking you up."

I smiled back at him.

Everyone was in a hurry this morning. I went to the kitchen to try to help out, but there is an old saying 'to many cooks in the kitchen' and it seemed to hold true today. With Susan and Randy in there, there was no room in the kitchen for me.

I decided to help Drake and dad rearrange the living room to accommodate all the people that were coming over later, 'The Protectors of the Forest'. That name should be change to 'The Protectors of Ronnie', or that how it feels sometimes anyway.

When I walked into the living room, Drake was pushing the couch up against the far wall, and dad was carrying in the folding tables he had brought from home. I went over to help him by grabbing one of the matching folding chairs that was leaning up against the door.

"*Put that down!*" I heard Hailey yell from outside. I didn't realize she was here, she was supposed to have dinner with her mom and little brother.

"What are you doing here?" I tried not to sound so happy but I wasn't looking forward to hearing all the stories from the protectors alone.

"Change of plans," she smiled "Mom decided to take Collin to see his dad and I am *not* going there." Hailey was helping Drake and dad with the living room now, and so I sat in one of the folding chairs in the corner to watch, since that is the only thing I'm *allowed* to do.

After Drake had moved the couch, he and Aaron set up the tables in the middle of the room. The folding chairs lined up all around the remainder of the walls.

It reminded me of a school dance. I even imagined all the shy kids sitting in them waiting for someone to ask them to dance.

Hailey *was* almost dancing. She seemed to be very to be happy to be here I could almost see her excitement, like it was coming off her face. Was it just being here or was there something else on her mind. I saw Aaron looking at her with curious eyes he must be wondering the same thing.

I could smell the aroma of the fresh food coming from the kitchen. Everything you think you need for Thanksgiving was there. Turkey, dressing, potato salad, coleslaw, deviled eggs, and even a ham. Susan had made pumpkin and sweet potato pies the night before and brought them over this morning. Because of the amount of people coming over Randy had actually baked two turkeys.

The guests were due to arrive about four this afternoon and it was already after two. I was starting to get jittery though I don't know why.

A few of the protectors I knew had moved to Branceville after their parents died. Drake told me they hadn't shirked their protector duties, they were just kinda young, and everyone wanted to keep them out of this. We knew they had called a few times but Randy had managed so far to hold them off. I felt uneasy about the whole thing, as one of them is my age, but I knew he had to take care of his younger siblings.

Susan and Randy had begun to bring the food in and place it on the tables in the living room. They were setting up the buffet Susan had suggested for everyone who was coming.

It was close to four when we heard a knock on the door. Randy greeted our first guests and invited them in. A couple I met briefly at my birthday party so long ago. They were also there when Hailey had found out the truth but I didn't say anything but hi at the time. I remember their names are Cody and Michelle, both are protectors, and they had just gotten married before I moved here. Dad had missed their wedding to stay with me at the hospital.

They greeted everyone there and Michelle came over to me and pulled me into a hug. Cody just waved with his big green eyes glowing and his short dark hair was gleaming under the lights. Michelle also had beautiful green eyes but her hair was what my mom would call dishwater blonde.

Michelle was smiling at me kindly, "How are you feeling Ronnie? Are you taking care of yourself?" The concern in her eyes had surprised me a little. I suddenly felt a kinship with her.

"Yea Michelle, I feel ok. Just tired a lot." I couldn't help but smile at her.

I saw Cody walk over to Drake and take his hand. "I hear congratulations are in order?"

"Thanks Cody. I couldn't be happier." Cody walked over to me then and leaned down to hug me. I tried to get up to meet him but he stopped me. "You stay there darling. I'll come down to you."

I really liked them after that. Michelle was sweet and caring and Cody was a lot of fun to be around. I could see why they were together. When they were standing side by side, it was like they were one, made for each other.

Mike and Kate showed up a few minutes later. They were brother and sister. Neither one had been married nor had any kids. They were the oldest with the exception of Randy and dad, who both still considered themselves protectors. They were in their late 20's.

Kate was quiet and shy around me but Mike had no problem with that at all. If you couldn't tell by looking at them, both had the same light brown eyes and medium brown hair, you wouldn't know they're relatives they were so different.

Mike came right over to me and picked me up with ease into a big bear hug. Drake had to come over and tell him to be careful and put me down. Kate said hi in a soft whisper. She held her hand out and gently but briefly shook mine. There was a sadness in her eyes as she stood there looking at me.

I noticed that Kate didn't talk to anyone for very long. She just listened quietly to what they were saying and nodded at all the right times.

I caught Drake alone and asked him, "Why does Kate seem scared of everyone? She doesn't talk to anyone at all."

He looked over at her for a minute. Maybe considering if he should tell me or not. "Well, when she was young, maybe about 15 or 16, she was tracking with Mike when she came upon some dwellers. She hadn't felt them so they took her by surprise. The dwellers believed at the time she was the bearer because she was the only female protector they had felt. They held her for three days before her dad and Randy was able to find her. I'm not going to get into details but she hasn't been the same since. Mike never lets her out of his sight either. He blames himself for what happened to her and he's been trying to make it up to her ever since."

I was horrified. I was only with Doug for 4 hours and I couldn't imagine being in those woods for 3 days. Now I understood the sadness. I wish I could help her but I wouldn't have any idea how. I watched her for a while. She would sometimes look out the window and stare into nothingness. She would quickly look away if she noticed someone looking at her. Mike watched her as much as I was. He did seem like he was very protective. Maybe too much so, if he would let her heal, maybe she would get better.

It was after five when Laura and Drew showed up. Everyone was surprised to see them show up together. They were holding hands when they came thru the door. "What's this?" Randy asked them.

"We got back together last week." Laura smiled.

"Congratulations you two," Susan said as she hugged them both. "It's about time you stop trying to fight fate."

They both came over to me. Laura had a troubled look in her eyes. "I'm sorry for all you have been thru Ronnie. I wish I could have done something sooner, but we're here now," she looked over at Drew, "and we've come to help." She smiled at me.

Drew reached for my hand, "Don't you worry. With all of us here," he looked around the room at everyone, who were all looking at me too, "nothing is going to happen to you or the next Sabre generation." He had a big grin on his face as he looked over at Drake who was grinning back.

Kate actually spoke directly to me, “Have you two picked a wedding day yet?”

I looked over at Drake. We hadn’t set an official day but we had talked about Christmas Eve. “Nothing official but we have considered Christmas Eve.” Drake smiled at me.

Susan looked pleased, “That would be a perfect day!”

Drake came over to me and whispered. “What do you think? Christmas Eve?”

I looked at Susan and then at dad and Randy. “Christmas Eve it is.” I smiled and everyone started shaking hands and hugging.

Laura came over to sit beside me, “That doesn’t give much time to plan. I’ll help in any way I can.”

Hailey piped up. “We have to get a wedding dress. Maybe you could go with us to get it. I don’t know too many places in Branceville except the mall and it doesn’t have anything there.”

Kate actually spoke again, “I can make it if you would like that?” She said, quietly, and unsure.

I gave her a great big smile and went over to hug her. “That would be wonderful!” She hugged me back softly.

Randy was bringing plates out of the kitchen by then. “Time to eat everyone!”

“Here here” Aaron said at once. He was never one to turn down food.

Everyone was sitting in the chairs with plates in our laps. I could hear Hailey and Susan talking about my wedding. Kate was talking to Laura about the color scheme. And what kind of dress would be best for my growing self. I was just listening to them quietly unless they asked me a question.

Occasionally I would look at Drake, and he would look over and smile at me. He and the other men were discussing the attack that they all still believed

was inevitable. They were talking about sneaking up on the dwellers. Wondering how they would take them by surprise, since most of the protectors couldn't go into the forest unnoticed.

Drew, Mike, and Cody were tremendously happy to hear how close Hailey could get to the clearing. They started to plan with her as the lookout. I wasn't thrilled at that idea.

Everyone jumped when we heard a knock on the door. Five people ran over to stand in front of me as Randy and Aaron went to the door.

"Oh my goodness!" I heard Randy say happily.

My posse moved out of the way so I could see who it was. I saw a young boy, and two young men. I assumed it was the Sabre boys from Branceville.

"Well, come on in and eat with us since your here." They all thanked him graciously, went to the table, and filled up plates to the max with dinner. They looked like they could out eat Aaron.

No one said anything at first. Everyone just finished their plates and a few went for the pumpkin pie in the kitchen. The Sabre boys all went back for seconds. I wondered whether they had had a home cooked meal in awhile. The mother in me wanted to make sure they were eating properly.

After they had finished their second helping of pie, the boys all finally came up to me to introduce themselves. The oldest one had sandy brown hair, and ice blue eyes that bore into you. The second was actually bigger, and looked older than his brother, with dark blonde hair and blue eyes. The youngest one looked like trouble, he also had dark blonde hair and blue eyes, but he smiled like the cat that ate the canary.

"Hi, my name is Sonny, this is Kevin," he pointed to the tallest of the 3, "and this is Zac." They all shook my hand.

"Hi. I'm Ronnie, Gabe's daughter. It's nice to meet you all."

The youngest looked at me and grinned sadistically, "Do you want to play ball?"

I looked at him puzzled. "I'm sorry. What do you mean?"

"Well since you already have a ball under your shirt I thought maybe....."

I couldn't help but laugh. Yup, the little one was definitely trouble. I heard his older brother scold him, but Zac never took the smile off his face.

"It's ok." I said thru the tears in my eyes. "He's just a kid after all."

Randy finally got everyone calmed down. "Ok, now the funs over." He looked over at the Sabre boys and asked, "Why did you come today? It's a welcome surprise, but you all never do anything without a motivation."

The oldest one; Sonny, spoke first. "Uncle Randy, we all know something is going on and we *needed* to be here. I know you said on the phone that it was nothing, but we can feel it now, stronger than ever. We figured if we showed up, you might tell us the truth then."

Randy looked defeated. He had tried to keep them away to no avail. He decided to tell them the truth. "Ok boys," he sighed, "I think it's time. Sit down this could take awhile."

Everyone listened quietly as he told them of the second prophecy. Their eyes went wide with wonder. None of them could look away from his face. He went as far as to tell them about the spell and potion, omitting who the prophecy was about. He made them gasp when he told of Brad, the true heir, and how he is trying to resist.

Sonny, who seemed to be the spokesmen of the three finally asked, "So is this bearer in Sabre *now*?"

Drake sat down by Randy. "Yes Sonny. She is here. She's already pregnant too."

They looked up at all the men of the group, Kevin asked the unavoidable question, "Who is the father?"

Drake looked him in the eyes and smiled a little, "Me."

Zac started cackling uncontrollably. Everyone looked at him like he was crazy. Thru chuckles he finally spoke, "Leave it to the good one of the family to knock up some random girl!" He fell out of his chair laughing so hard. Yup, he was *unquestionably* trouble.

Drake smiled in spite of himself, and Aaron was roaring behind him. Then everyone else started. It was hard to be mad at Zac; he was just too much fun.

Drake finally spoke again, "You're not exactly right you know. It wasn't some *random* girl. She's the daughter of the *wanderer*, Gabe."

Zac stopped laughing immediately and turned to look at me along with his brothers. Zac said, "*No way.*"

Sonny was looking at me too, "I can't believe it. She was sitting here all along, and *I couldn't feel it.*"

"Don't feel bad." Aaron said behind him. "None of us knew about the second prophecy until after Ronnie moved here."

Sonny looked at Drake, "So your gonna be a dad huh?"

Drake smiled, "Yep, and we're getting married next month."

"Congrats man." The boys all shook Drake's hand.

Zac came over, and carefully sat down beside me. "Welcome to the family," he said, and winked at me. Definitely, trouble.

The boys all got serious and started asking Randy questions. He told them about Doug and the kidnapping, as well as the trees calling. I'm not sure I would have told them everything, but since they were in it now, I guess they should know everything. When he got to the last time I had wandered outside, all the protectors were listening then. He hadn't told them yet.

The rest of the night was deliberations on how to keep me away from the forest. Drake was confident he was able to do it himself. But he was hardly sleeping as it was, and I feared he would be getting burnt out soon.

I spoke up quietly, "Maybe I should stay with dad some?"

NO! I heard in unison. Even dad had said it. Randy looked at me, and with that soothing voice he explained, "If you leave Sabre land hon, Doug can find you. I know the calling is stronger here but they can't come on it to get you. You're the safest here."

I didn't try to argue. I really wanted to stay here with Drake. I felt safest with him.

Everyone went back to their regular talks, about trying to get the dwellers before they could get me. The women were talking about my wedding again.

I could hear the men and *boys* talking about the woods and the calling. I heard Zac, the youngest of the boys; say he would do some tracking while he was here. I didn't like that idea. I knew Hailey had already tried that alone with disastrous consequences.

Sonny started asking about Brad. I saw Hailey watching closely now, eager to hear what was said about him. I knew show loved him, but we didn't know if it was enough to keep him away.

"So who is this Brad?"

Aaron answered him, "He is the son of the dweller that left the forest years ago. You do remember the story don't you?"

"Yea I remember. I just never suspected they were related to the elder."

"None of us did."

"So how are we supposed to keep Ronnie away from the woods?" Kevin asked.

"We have been keeping a protector on her at all times, mostly without her knowing it." I heard Aaron whisper.

That must be why he and Hailey never go home anymore. I was slightly irritated, and yet comforted by the thought at the same time.

"We'll be glad to help." Zac chimed in.

"We've got it covered for now Zac. But if we need you, I promise we'll ask." Drake answered him.

"Ok," Sonny said, "If you need us just call." I saw him give Drake a piece of paper. I assumed it was a phone number.

Hailey distracted me when she came over to sit down. I wasn't in a celebrating mood, and she knew it. "Hey Ron. Don't worry, it'll be ok. Let's talk about the wedding. What are your favorite colors, pink and lavender right?"

"Yea?" I was surprised she knew.

"So do you want that to be your wedding colors then?"

"Sure Hailey that would be great."

Kate came over to me then, "I need to measure you for the dress. I only have a month so I should start right away."

"Ok. Do you have a tape measure?"

She pulled one out of her purse that was on one of the tables and smiled, "Always."

Kate, Hailey, and I went to my room, so I could strip down to my *bare* essentials to be measured. I could tell from her actions that she did this a lot. She made the remark that she would have to make it where the belly had room. A flowing dress she called it.

"Now you'll have to come over to my house for the fittings after I get it worked out. Is that ok? It's on Sabre land so you'll be safe."

"Of course it is. I would love to get out of this house a little." Kate smiled again. I could see this was her passion. Moreover, I loved the idea of a handmade dress too. "I don't know how to thank you enough for doing this Kate."

"It's my pleasure I assure you."

It was after 10 when people started to leave. I was drained. Cody and Michelle had offered the Sabre boys to stay with them. They had refused Randy

saying his house was full enough. I was glad they had accepted their invitation. Since they said there was no way they were going to stay away now, it was better than them staying in a hotel.

Drake followed me to bed. I was sure he was as fatigued as I was. He was smiling when I lay down. "How was it? Meeting all the protectors and actually talking to them?"

"I had more fun than I expected to."

"Kate must have truly taken to you. That was the most I ever seen talking to anyone but Mike."

"I really liked her. She was so nice to offer to make my dress."

Drake looked at me seriously. "Are you ok with getting married next month?"

"Yes. I think it's a great idea. You know I wanted to get married before the baby is born. What do you think?"

"I think that's perfect." He was kissing me as he said it. I forgot what we were talking about and just went with it.

20. The Plan

Susan was as excited about the wedding as I was. She was here every day to talk about the plans. She took me to my first fitting at Kate's house. It was a small mansion. Kate greeted us at the door and Mike excused himself to go get some *essentials* he called them.

Kate still didn't say much just how she was coming along with the dress. She had already cut the fabric, and had it lying on a large table. So she could easily pin up any areas that needed to 'be tucked' as she put it.

As we were leaving Kate's house she looked at the necklace that Drake had given me. She reached out and took it with her hand carefully, "Is this an Amethyst crystal?"

"Yes, Drake gave it to me for my birthday."

She seemed concerned, "Do you know the story of the Amethyst crystal Ronnie?" Her eyes looked anxious.

"Drake said it was to protect the wearer from harm." I told her apprehensively, shocked by her reaction.

"That's true but it's also to help ease you into meditation. Do you know what that means?"

Susan and me both gasped. "Do you mean it would help put me in a meditative state, like a trance?"

"Yes. Have you worn this every day since you got it?" She looked concerned.

"No, but I have worn it a lot." I started thinking about all the times the forest lured me into its clutches.

"What about the last time you were called? Do you remember if you had it on then?"

I tried to think. I usually take did off at night but I had forgotten to because I had fallen asleep on the couch again. "Yes! I think I did have it on!"

"Well maybe there's your answer. If you have this on when they are chanting there calls, it may be helping them to lure you in." She was very sure of herself.

Was she right? Was the thing Drake had gotten to protect me actually doing the opposite instead?

"Thanks Kate, I didn't know about any of this. I'll be aware now." I tried to keep the fear out of my voice but it was growing.

Susan spoke up, "We have to get going now. We'll see you in a week for the next fitting." Susan reached out to give Kate a hug and we left.

I looked at Susan as we drove away. She looked deeply concerned so I asked her, "Do you think it's possible? Could my necklace be helping them call me?"

"I don't know hon, but we do know the power of crystals. They keep the dwellers off our lands so we shouldn't disregard this either. Maybe we should have Hailey research it."

I agreed with her. I just hope it was wrong. Drake would blame his self if my necklace were helping them get to me.

When we got back home, Drake wasn't there so I didn't have to tell him yet. Susan went Straight to Hailey with what we had learned to see if she could come up with anything. Hailey was thrilled to have another project.

When Drake and dad came home later, we told them as well as everyone else what Kate had told us.

I could see the guilt on Drake's face. I tried to tell him it wasn't his fault but he wouldn't listen. He went out the door and Aaron followed.

They were in the back yard practicing so I went to watch them. Drake noticed me watching them and came up to me. He reached around my neck and removed my necklace.

"Just in case," he told me when I tried to protest.

"But it could be wrong Drake. We're not sure yet. Maybe it's not my crystal." I said hopefully.

"No chances." He was not going to budge so I took my necklace, placed it safely in the box, and put it in my dresser drawer.

Susan and I made plans to go shoe shopping after my next doctor's appointment. I asked Drake if Susan could come with us and he said it would be ok if she just took me. I don't think he liked the idea of shoe shopping.

Laura was calling on a regular basis. It turns out she was an OB nurse so she was telling me what to expect. It was scary sometimes to hear the horror stories about childbirth. I tried to sound interested as she was explaining everything to me. It was nice to talk to someone who knew first hand, no matter how frightening it is.

The next day was my appointment. Susan showed up early so we could get there in time she said. I suspect she was just anxious since this is the first time she had taken me.

We left the doctor and went to get something to eat. Susan was really a lot of fun. If she were *this* bad over my wedding, how would she be if she and dad got married? I was thinking about how it would feel if she was my stepmother, "Susan?"

"Yea hon." She looked up at me.

"Why don't you and dad get married?"

Her mouth dropped open and her face turned beet red. "Why do you ask that?" She asked after she composed herself.

"I see how you two look at each other. It's clear you love each other."

"Well Ronnie. It's complicated."

"How so?" I was intrigued.

"You see hon; I was married once a long time ago. It ended badly. Gabe was married to your mom too so we've talked about it but neither one of us really want to do that again. Do you understand?"

"Yea I guess but you should talk about it. I mean if you two think you'll be together forever then, why not?"

"I see what you mean hon but right now we are happy so I think we'll keep it this way for awhile." She smiled and I knew that was the end of this conversation...for now anyway.

There was only a week away until the wedding. Randy was trying to figure out how we could everyone in the house and still have chairs for them all. It wouldn't be like thanksgiving where they could just line them up around the walls. They wanted to make an isle for me to walk down.

Susan had taken Hailey to get her bridesmaid dress that afternoon. We had seen one that was light pink when she had gotten her dress for her date with Brad and hoped it would still be there. I decided not to go with them because I was so tired all the time now. I didn't think I could handle the mall with the two people who couldn't say no to just *one* more store.

I had already gone with Drake to buy gifts for everyone after my last OB appointment. The tree was standing up in front of the window. It was a modest tree with white lights already made into it. Hailey had put decorations on it and a star on top. She seemed happy about it being Christmas time. The presents were all wrapped and under the tree. Only Aaron, the big kid, had tried to peek.

The Sabre boys had started to come around more regularly. Maybe it was the fact that this felt like the family they needed. I knew they must have really

been missing their parents. I had already spent one Christmas without my mom but I was also in the hospital then so this was a little scary for me too.

Drake asked me about it one night when we were laying down. It's the only alone time we ever got anymore.

"Are you ok Ronnie? I know this must be hard for you."

I thought about it for a minute before answering him. "Yea, I think I'm ok. I just wish mom could see me now. What would she think about all of this? Would she be disappointed in me becoming a teenage mother? Would she be happy about being a grandmother? I'll never know and that's the worst part."

Drake didn't say anything. He just pulled me closer.

Dad and Drake still had their regular jobs to do most days but with the weather cold, there was never any real reason for anyone to be in the woods. Mostly it was teenagers looking for a hiding spot to make out dad told me. I thought it was a funny place for that but if you were young and wanted to skip school and hang out; the woods were the best hiding places.

Dad told me he had to take a couple of kids to the hospital for hypothermia but that they would be fine. I couldn't help but think if those kids knew what was really in the forest, would they still go there?

Just like he had said at Thanksgiving, Zac had come over to scout the woods. Even if he was the best, I still didn't want a child to go. Randy seemed to understand my anxiety.

"I know you don't want him to go Ronnie, but he knows what he's doing better than most of the men do. He has never been detected or chased and he has been in the woods since he was 3."

Hailey had offered to go with him but he refused. Even his brothers were backing his decision.

Sonny was the one who came to talk to me. "Even if I told him he couldn't go, he still would. We know that this is important, and it needs to be done. Zac is

a strong scout and he'll be fine. You are going to be our family soon and we won't let anything happen to our family"

I finally give in. It was obviously hopeless to keep trying to dissuade him.

Zac came over and put his arm around me. "Don't worry about me. I know you think I'm a kid but I can handle myself. I've been doing martial arts since I was 3 and I am stronger than your average 14 year old." He gave me that Cheshire cat grin again, "I know you don't want to lose me now that we found each other."

I had to laugh at him. He was just as much a flirt as Aaron. "Ok." I finally said. Then I looked at him seriously, "Just *please* be careful. They are watching closer now."

"I will." He promised as he got up to walk out the door. He looked back and winked at me then he was gone.

Sonny and Kevin paced the floor. I sat in the recliner with my swollen feet elevated. Randy was trying to read again and Hailey was on her computer doing more research.

Dad and Drake came in later and looked around at the solemn faces. "Isn't Zac back yet?" Drake asked anxiously.

Randy looked up at him, "No."

"Maybe I should go look for him." Drake asked.

Kevin looked up at him, "You know you'd never be able to find him."

Drake took to pacing the floor then. He and the other boys were casting anxious glances at each other and then the door. It was getting colder out and the sun was going down when Drake spoke up again, "I have to go find him."

He grabbed his jacket, and headed for the door when it burst open. Zac was shivering and couldn't even talk. Randy jumped up to get some blankets from the hall closet as Sonny was leading Zac to the couch.

"Are you ok?" Sonny asked him as he sat down and Randy threw blankets over him.

He still couldn't talk so he just nodded. Sonny sat down on one side of him and Kevin on the other. They were rubbing up and down his arms to create friction to try to warm him up. Randy had put a blanket around him like a jacket and was rubbing his back. His teeth were chattering so hard I was afraid they might just break.

It was 30 minutes later before he could even breathe easy. I knew it was a bad idea. Now just look at this child, on the verge of hypothermia, and for what, to get information they may or may not help anyone. I should have fought harder to keep him out of this.

When Zac warmed up, and had actually managed to drink some of the hot chocolate Randy had brought him, he started to talk. "You all ain't going to believe this. I heard them," he took another drink. "I was right beside the clearing and I heard everything."

Sonny finally relaxed. "Tell us what you heard Zac."

Zac leaned back on the couch, pushed off some of the blankets, and started to talk again. "I could feel them in the clearing so that's where I went. They were praying at first and I just waited. Then I noticed someone come up to the altar. I couldn't see who it was but I knew they knew him. The elder, who had been standing by the fire, turned around and spoke to the new guy. 'The chosen heir has returned' he said, so I figured it was the Brad guy you told us about." I could hear Hailey gasp. I looked over and saw the tears in her eyes.

He took another sip out of his cup. "I saw the new guy follow the Elder to another place and I went over to see if I could hear them. The elder actually gave the man a hug! Do you believe that! Anyway, the new guy didn't hug back. He just looked mad but he didn't say anything.

"The elder started to talk to him. He said the day had been set now that he was here. I think he was talking about the joining, because he said they only had another month until the soul would be ready. Then he said it was the chosen heir's job to bring the bearer to them when the time is right. Something about not bound by the protectors spell, I couldn't hear it all because of the wind blowing. Then I heard the new guy talk. I wasn't sure he could at first, but he said 'Not to worry. It will be done'. I figured it was my queue to leave since I couldn't feel my

toes anymore. I just came back here and that's it." He finished talking and just focused on the hot cup in his hands.

I looked over at Drake. I couldn't read his face. It was blank. Haley had left the room, probably to call BJ to see if it was really Brad. I was numb. A month, they were planning to do this in a month. That would be almost a month before the baby was actually due.

Randy finally spoke up then. "Well it looks like we have found out everything we need to know. We will need everyone we can get to watch out for the coming day." He looked over at the Sabre boys then.

Sonny spoke up, "We'll be here. We can set up a tent if we have to. No one is going to hurt our family." The other two nodded in agreement.

"There'll be no need for tents. We may be tight around here for a while, but there are plenty of blankets and pillows, and we can set up pallets on the floors. Aaron's house is only five minutes away so some people can stay there if he doesn't mind." He looked at Aaron.

"Anyone is welcome to stay there. I don't have a problem with that at all." Aaron smiled at Randy.

Drake was still quiet. I know he is trying to think of a way to protect our baby and me. He needs to realize he can't do it alone.

"Drake?" I tried to get a response. "Drake, are you ok?"

He looked at me. "Huh? Oh yea doll," he came over to sit on the arm of the chair beside me, "I'm fine. We just have to concentrate on you now." He tried to smile but I could see the panic on his face.

Aaron stood up. "I think there should always be two people with Ronnie at all times now. Since Brad has joined them, the call is going to get worse I'd bet."

"I'll help." Sonny said.

"Me too." Kevin spoke up.

"Hey, don't forget about me." Zac was grinning.

How could I justify having children protect me when I should be the one protecting them.

Hailey came back into the living room. I could tell she was defeated. She tried to keep Brad away but he just couldn't resist them after all. I looked at her questioningly.

She finally spoke up. "I talked to BJ. He said Brad had left the house earlier and he didn't know where he went. He said he didn't think he was going to the forest or he would have stopped him. He said he would let me know as soon as he found out anything."

I finally looked over at dad. He hadn't said a word since Zac had come in and I was worried about him. His face was pale. His usually sky blue eyes looked almost grey. I had to go over to him. I put my arms around him and he just held on to me. He whispered in my ear, "Don't worry about me. I'll take care of everything. You just need to keep yourself and this baby healthy."

I wasn't sure what he meant about taking care of everything. He must be talking about attacking the dwellers now that they have a clearer idea as to when it was all supposed to go down.

Aaron and Hailey were taking the Sabre boys to their house for the night so dad said he would stay here. I was glad to have him so close. Drake followed me to bed.

He lay down beside me and looked at my face. "You shouldn't let yourself get stressed out like this. You know what the doctor said. You just need to concentrate on the wedding. It's in just a week you know."

I tried to think about that as I closed my eyes but I just couldn't get the image of myself lying on a cold slab in the middle of the forest out of my mind. Drake stroked my hair until I went to sleep.

21. The Wedding

The next 5 days was preparing for the wedding. There was still a lot to get ready. I had to go for my final fitting at Kate's, and then bring it home and hide it in the back of the closet so Drake couldn't see it. That was Susan's idea, I wasn't into the traditional theories of a wedding, or I would be *walking* down the aisle instead of waddling.

Drake was even starting to act nervous. He asked Aaron again today if he had remembered the tuxedos. "Yes Drake, for the 4th time, I got them at the house." He just shook his head.

Hailey had found the dress we had seen, and it was perfect. Light pink with ribbon straps. It was form fitting, and stopped just above her knees. She was *absolutely* beautiful in it. I could see the pain in her eyes over Brad, but she was trying to hide it. She was still researching my Amethyst crystal, but had let it go for now. I was hoping to wear it when I get married but that wasn't going to happen. No one wanted to take the chance.

Laura had come over to talk to me about the baby. She had the idea that with the dwellers so close to having their ceremony, they might have someone follow me everywhere so a home birth might be in order. I balked at the idea. She said it was so they couldn't get me during birth, when the baby was 'full of soul' as they had put it. I wasn't keen on the idea, but she was going to set it up just in case. I didn't ask her what that meant.

All the protectors were taking shifts now at the house, or when I had to go somewhere. I had two men with me at all times. Even if I was with Susan or Hailey, I guess it was a macho thing.

Randy and Susan had offered to cook everything for the reception. I thought that was a good idea and they asked me what I planned on having. I told them they could plan what to have, since they were the best cooks here. Susan had already agreed to make my cake so Randy focused on the reception menu. He told me he knew that barbeque meatballs were my favorite so he would have to fix them.

Drake was even more overbearing than ever since we got the new information. The only time he left my side was when someone would drag him away. He would even follow me to bed at night when he clearly needed to be discussing the upcoming battle.

Hailey came home from the library a few days before the wedding, announced she had found the Amethyst crystal, and knew what Kate had meant.

She read what she had found; *"The Amethyst crystal cuts thru illusion; enhances psychic abilities and is excellent for meditation. It also aids channeling abilities."*

"What does it mean?" Aaron asked.

"Well," she started, "It sounds like when someone wears an Amethyst crystal they are more prone to meditation and channeling. So, it may be helping them to call her to them. It would probably be a good idea not to wear it for awhile Ron." She looked at me.

I sighed; I had hoped that Kate was wrong and that my necklace was nothing more than just jewelry but I have learned the importance of crystals since coming here. After all, if it wasn't for the Peridot crystals buried all around, the dwellers could come here anytime they wanted.

It was just another drawback to everything. Can we never get a break?

The night before the wedding was the worst. Aaron was trying to convince Drake to come with him and Drake was unwaveringly refusing. "No! I'm not going to leave her alone!"

"Man Drake, there is going to be 6 protectors here tonight."

Randy had asked Mike and Drew to stay over so Drake would feel better, but it wasn't working. Those two, along with dad and Susan, as well as Hailey and Randy should be enough.

"No!" Drake was really being stubborn. "No one will be in the room with her. I'm not going!"

I walked over to him, "Drake. It'll be ok. The window has been nailed shut, and I won't be able to move around all the bodies on the floor. Please just go. I'll be fine." I reached up to kiss him.

Mike came up with an idea, "How about if I bunk on the floor outside your room. Then if she comes out, she'll have to step on me. I won't let her out if the house."

Drew also had an idea, "And I'll sleep by the front door. If she does get by Mike, she won't be able to open the door with me there. Ok?"

Drake finally gave in, but only after making everyone promise if there were a problem, they would call him immediately.

Aaron was getting impatient. "Come on man, let's *go*."

Drake pulled me into a kiss before he left, and whispered in my ear, "If you get scared don't hesitate to call me. I'll miss you tonight doll. I love you."

I whispered back. "I promise if I need you, I'll call. I love you too."

Aaron finally dragged Drake out the door. I watched them back down the driveway before going to the kitchen to sit with Hailey. She was making our bouquets for tomorrow. She had gotten the stuff from her moms store and brought it home. She told me she had done this for many people in town and she was doing it for me as a wedding present. Kate had given her some scraps left over from my dress so she could mix it in and make it match.

She finally looked up at me, "You should try to get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day, and you need to be fresh."

She was right of course. I was extremely tired. "I'm also afraid if I go to sleep tonight, when I wake up it will all have been a dream and I would be at dad's house getting ready for school. And that Drake and I had never met. I can't even imagine my life without him now that I know him and the idea that he won't be here, frightens me more than the dwellers."

She smiled at me, "It's not a dream Ron. Its real and you *really* are getting married tomorrow, and you *really* are having a baby. So go now and *get some rest!*"

I left the kitchen and saw Drew on the floor just where he said he would be, in front of the door. I turned down the hall and Mike was by my door sleeping. I tried to get around him to get in, but he was right there in the way. I stepped on his arm and he jumped up. He had to catch me as I started to fall backward from his jerking his arm out from under my foot. I must admit, he was quick. He apologized, and got up for me to go in. I heard him fall right back down where he had been. I hoped I wouldn't step on him again in the morning.

When I opened my eyes, I knew it was my wedding day. Drake had spent the night at Aaron's house to keep with the tradition of not seeing the bride until the wedding. I just lay there taking in the idea that I was getting married today.

Hailey cracked the door and peeked in to see if I was awake. I looked over at her and smiled. She opened the door wide and came to sit on the edge of my bed.

"How are you feeling today?" What a stupid question. I was a nervous wreck.

"Just peachy!"

"It's time to get up. You don't want to miss your hair appointment."

I knew it was also Christmas Eve, but all I could think about was the fact that in a few short hours I would be Mrs. Sabre. I went to the dresser and put on a comfortable outfit. I knew I would be wearing a wedding dress later so something easy to get over my head was best. My dress was safely in the back of the closet in dark plastic so Drake wouldn't see it before I walked down the aisle. All the sudden I became weak at the knees. Hailey steadied me.

"Careful. You don't want to fall down today."

"I think I'm ok now." She let me go and my knees trembled again.

"Easy does it. You don't want me to have to carry you down the aisle do you?" She laughed.

I laughed with her, picturing her trying to carry my 140 pounds down the aisle where Drake would be waiting.

I finally got a hold of myself and she let me go.

"Come on. We don't want to be late."

Hailey drove me to the local salon where we would both get our hair and makeup done. I don't wear much makeup normally but this is a special occasion. I was glad they didn't overdue it. It was just enough to show off my eyes and lips.

We made it back from the salon in just enough time for me to get dressed. I knew Drake wasn't coming until just before time so I wasn't surprised that his truck wasn't there.

When I walked into the house, everything was changed. The couch and recliner, pushed back all the way to the far wall and, folding chairs lined up with a gap in the middle for me to walk thru.

Randy, dad, and Susan had decorated the whole place. Pink and lavender streamers were hanging down from every corner. Pink roses were on tables under every streamer. There was a small table in the back. To hold the wedding cake Susan had made. It had white icing with pink and lavender icing roses on all three tiers with a bride and groom on the top.

"It's beautiful Susan." I said to her as she was standing by the door smiling at me. I guessed the decorations had been Susan's idea but I'm sure dad and Randy had put them up.

Susan and Hailey followed me to my room to get ready. I carefully took my handmade wedding dress out of the closet, removed the protective covering, and lay it flat down on my bed. I looked at my dress. It was sleeveless with narrow straps across the shoulder. The bodice was short; it stopped right under my breast and was white satin. Bellow the bodice the dress flowed. It was a white satin underlay with off white lace over it. It stopped just below my knees. My shoes were almost flat and made of white satin.

Hailey and Susan carefully pulled my shirt over my head, as to not ruin my hair. It had been curled and pulled up on the sides with a clip that Kate made out of the scraps from my dress. It was lace at the top and satin trailed down the length of my hair. I opted not to go with the traditional veil so this was my substitute.

I heard Aarons truck pull in and knew Drake must be there. My stomach turned in knots, and I felt like I was gonna throw up.

"Calm down baby." I hadn't heard dad come in.

"Daddy! I can't believe it. I'm getting married!"

"I know baby." He took a step back and looked at me, "You look beautiful Baby. Just like an angel." I could see tears in his eyes.

"Thank you dad."

He came over and lightly kissed me on the cheek. "It's almost time."

Susan patted my arm. "I've gotta go to my seat now honey. You do look beautiful. Love you"

"I love you too Susan, and thanks for everything."

She smiled as she was walking out the door. It was just a few minutes later when I heard the music.

"That's my queue." Hailey said and grabbed a small bouquet and walked down the hall as dad led me to the door to await my song. Then I heard it, The Wagner's march. Dad had my arm and gently pulled me out into the hall. He had picked up my bouquet and handed it to me as I started moving slowly toward Drake. I could see him in his tuxedo with his hair neatly slicked back off his face. He was wringing his hands and I saw his face light up when he saw me coming toward him. It suddenly felt like a very *long* walk to get to my dream.

I didn't even notice all the people who were staring at me. It was like there was no one there but dad and me, except Drake waiting at the end of that long aisle.

I couldn't take my eyes off Drake as dad took my hand and placed it in his. We looked at the preacher and he began.

I can't remember being this happy my entire life. Except for the occasional dance with dad, Randy and even Aaron, Drake never left my side.

I knew Drake was planning something for tonight but no one would tell me what it was. Not even Hailey. I was sure we couldn't go on a traditional honeymoon, not that I would mind that, but overall, it didn't seem likely.

I was wrong.

After the reception, when everything was winding down I went to my room to change out of my dress for something better for the road, though I wasn't sure where the road was leading. Drake was waiting for me when I came back. I stopped at the door and threw my bouquet and it landed in Susan hands. I watched her turn three shades of red as she looked over at my dad, who was smiling.

I was surprised that Drake led me to Hailey's car instead of his truck and I looked back at her. She just stood on the porch smiling at me.

As we were backing down the driveway, I looked over at Drake and he had a smirk on his face.

"What's going on?" He just glanced over at me and smiled as we headed out of town.

"At least tell me why we're in Hailey's car."

"I thought it would be easier for you than my truck."

He was right about that. It was getting harder to get into Drakes 4x4 Chevy 1500 pickup truck all the time. I knew he wasn't going to tell me so I give up and started to watch the road signs for clues.

I tried to pay attention to the signs as we went down the highway but I didn't recognize any of them.

"Come on Drake. One hint *please*?"

“Nope.”

It was hopeless. I was lost and Drake wasn't talking. The baby had been moving the whole ride and I was tired. At about 10, he pulled into a hotel parking lot. I waited in the car as he checked in and paid for the room. He came out with a card key in his hand. He drove to the back of the hotel and parked. I got out and he was already carrying our bags up to the door of what I assumed was our room for the night.

“We're just here for the night doll.” He said as he put our luggage on the table that was in the center of the enormous room.

“Please won't you tell me where we're going?”

He thought for a minute, “One hint I guess. Its somewhere you've never been.” He laughed as I sat on the bed and pouted.

“Don't worry doll. We'll be there in the morning.” He promised me.

He sat down beside me on the huge bed and started kissing me gently. I forgot about being mad.

We didn't sleep much that night. Drake was very soft and gentle not wanting to hurt me or the baby. I only have 6 weeks left and he was getting more anxious than as I was.

We got up around six and prepared to leave. After we had gotten our stuff together and Drake loaded the car back up, he went to the front to check out. I waited in the car and when he was done, he pulled back out and headed for the highway.

“Merry Christmas,” Drake said as we headed away from the hotel.

“Merry Christmas,” I told him back.

"I thought we would wait until we get there before I gave you your present if that's ok?"

"Of course it is Drake. I was thinking the same thing myself."

I started watching the road signs again hoping for the smallest clue as to where we were going. After about 30 minutes of driving, I saw it. I looked over at Drake and he was smiling.

"We're going to Florida, to see your mom?" I couldn't hide the excitement in my voice.

Drake glanced over at me, "Yup."

"Oh Drake." Then I suddenly became very nervous. "Does she know... you know everything? Does she know about the baby?"

Drake spoke in that soothing voice he saved for when I was being ridiculous. "Yes Ronnie. She knows everything. She has always known about my destiny but she was however surprised to hear I fell in love with my charge. And yes she knows about the baby however, being a mother she had to go into the why weren't you safe speech. That was along talk." He laughed.

"What is she going to think of me? That I'm a horrible person who seduced her only son and then got him to marry me." I was rambling again but I just couldn't stop.

"Ronnie quit! She's not going to think anything of the sort. She is going to love you. She actually yelled at me for putting *you* thru this. She was a young mother too so she knows how you feel."

Sometimes it's hard to remember that Drake is only a year older than me. He always seems so much older than he really is. Wisdom beyond his years my mom would say.

"Tell me about her." I hadn't thought a lot about Drake's mother. I only knew what he had told me before and now I wanted to know everything since I was getting to meet her.

"First I almost forgot something." He pulled a small pink phone out of his shirt pocket. "Here you go."

I took what he was handing me and looked at it. It was a cell phone.

"I've already put my number in it so all you have to do is hold down the number two button and you can reach me anytime. I figured you were so close to delivering you might need a way to get me quickly."

I hadn't thought of that before. I was always either with Drake or at Randy's where there was a phone immediately available. I never considered the idea I might need one but I guess if it makes Drake feel better I'll keep it.

"Thanks Drake." I dropped the little phone in my purse. "Now will you tell me about your mom?"

"Melinda is not your typical mom. She prefers me to use her name instead of mom, and I always have. She was young when she and my grandparents came for a visit to Sabre Beach one year. She was only 17. She and dad met when he went into the woods to find her after she had gotten lost. Dad was 20 then but her parents didn't mind, they even let them get married before she turned 18. I came along 9 months later. Did you know she and dad are still married?"

"No, he never talks about her. The only thing he's ever really said was how good she could cook."

"Dad misses her so much; it's hard for him to talk about her. Just like your parents, they didn't separate because they wanted to. Melinda moved back to Florida, to take care of my grandpa, when he was diagnosed with cancer. Dad and her talked about moving together but with the prophecy and my destiny, they decided to live separately."

"Grandpa died 2 years ago but Melinda said she couldn't leave Florida yet. She had gotten really close to him after grandma died 10 years ago. Now it's the only place she still *feels* them. She just can't seem to leave. Melinda and dad have lived apart since grandma died. I don't know if they even *could* live together again. Dad says when he retires from being a protector he's going to go to Melinda and stay. I don't know if he will ever retire though." Drake eyes were full of sadness.

“You said your mom, Melinda knows about the prophecy. Does she know about the second one?”

“Dad told her a few months ago. She called me to see how you were doing after finding out the truth. She wanted me to bring you here to live with her to keep the baby away. I told her you couldn’t leave your dad. That you were afraid it would hurt him if you left. She understood because of how she felt about her dad.”

“Does she know we’re coming?”

He gave me a quick sideways glance and grinned. “It was her idea. She can’t wait to see you. She wanted to come to the wedding but she doesn’t like being around that many people. When I told her who your father was, she was overjoyed. Said he was a good man and I couldn’t do any better than to be with his daughter.” He looked over at me and smiled again. I had to smile back.

“Drake, now that we’re married I can ask you anything right?”

“You could have asked me anything before.” He glanced at me perplexed.

“Well,” I was afraid to ask. I still felt like it wasn’t my business but I have to know. “I know you and dad have almost the same job....and I know that even though dad is ok financially... he doesn’t have a lot of money left over for unnecessary things.... But, you always seem to have money. Like with the baby shopping, you wouldn’t let me pay for any of it with my savings and yet it was over 1500\$ worth of stuff. I guess what I’m trying to ask is...”

He interrupted me, “Where do I get all my money?” He smiled.

I tried not to blush as I grinned and nodded.

“Well, it’s from my mother’s family. When my grandparents died, they split everything between me and Melinda. I let her have the house and she transferred most of the assets to me. It was quite a lot. Both of my grandparents came into their marriage with family money so they never wanted for anything.”

“Melinda, before she had met dad and given up that lifestyle, had never cooked or cleaned. She told me once she always hated being waited on but her

mother insisted that she remain a *proper* lady. That all flew out the window when she met dad though. He wouldn't use Melinda's money. They just set up a trust for me when I turned 18, but after grandpa died, Melinda put most of the rest of it in there too. So when I turned 18, I got control of it."

I was looking at him with my eyes wide. He had never told me anything about this. "Wow Drake. Why didn't you ever say anything? I was afraid I was using up your money with the baby. I was even going to give Hailey my checkbook to get more stuff so you wouldn't have to buy it."

"Don't use your savings. It's for college. Besides the first time I ever used my money was for you, to get your maternity clothes. Even though you looked *hot* in my shirts, I thought it was time. Now you have given me a *reason* to use it, a baby."

"Can I ask how much?" I said it very quiet. I had never had too much extra money before and I was intrigued that someone did and never used it.

"Of course you can. It's yours too now."

"Well..."

He looked embarrassed "about 2 ½million."

My mouth dropped and my eyes popped open, "2 ½ million *dollars*?"

He seemed really embarrassed now. "Yea, I know it's a lot, but being raised by dad; I only used what I needed, which meant nothing, until now. He is too proud to take any of it, though I tried to give it to him."

"Well at least you know I didn't marry you for your money. I never knew you had any."

He laughed. He was finally at ease again. I was almost sorry I had asked him about it.

22. Melinda

We had only been driving 3 hours when he pulled off the interstate. He weaved around a few streets and then was going down a narrow road that seemed to lead nowhere. I was watching out the windows at the trees that should have been bare from winter but still had a hint of green to them.

I looked up in the distance and saw a big yard surrounded by bushes as high as my head. He followed the road to an opening in the bushes up a long driveway to a house that looked like the kind you could only see in magazines. He went slowly up to the house and parked beside a black 1967 Shelby Mustang GT 500 with silver racing stripes. I couldn't stop staring at it.

I heard Drake laugh. I looked over at him, "That Melinda's car. It was my grandpa's but she kept it after he died. It's the one thing he would never let her have before."

I didn't see any other cars around, "Is that her only car?"

"Yup. She always said if she had that one, she wouldn't need another." He laughed again.

He retrieved our bags out of the trunk as I stood by the door of the car. I was too afraid to go to the front door alone. He held the bags in one hand and took mine with the other. We walked up to the door. He dropped my hand, reached into his pocket, and pulled out a key. He unlocked the door, pushed it wide open, took my hand again, and pulled me into the huge entryway of this fabulous house, or maybe I should call it a castle. I felt very intimidated standing there with Drake who seemed perfectly at ease.

"Melinda!" He called into the empty room.

"Drake!" I heard from up the stairs. "Oh Drake! You made it!" She said as she was running down.

I was awestruck when I saw her. I had imagined a dark haired dark eyed elegant woman wearing an evening gown, but she was nothing like that. She had platinum blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes. She was wearing jeans and a tee

shirt. Not much different from Drake's except hers were a lot smaller. She was about my height and was the size I *used* to be.

She reached up to hug him in a tight grasp and I saw she had tears in her eyes. She released him and turned to me. She pulled me into a soft hug, "You must be Veronica."

I hugged her back. All my worries about her liking me seemed so foolish now. "Hi Melinda, please, call me Ronnie." I looked over at Drake. He must have told her my whole name.

"I'm so happy you both came!" I liked her instantly. I had to smile at her enthusiasm.

"Like I wouldn't have come," Drake smiled at her. "I wanted you to meet the love of my life."

She put one arm around Drake's arm and her other around me, "Come on now. I fixed you something to eat." She looked over at me. "I hope you're taking care of yourself Ronnie. You have my grandbaby to think about."

She actually reminded me of Randy.

She led us to the dining room. There was enough food on the table to feed everyone at Randy's for a week. I peeked around her at Drake and he smiled again.

"I wasn't sure what you like so I cooked a little bit of everything." She looked at me with embarrassment.

Drake finally let go of Melinda and led me to a chair. He pulled it out for me to sit and eased it up as close to the table as my belly would allow. Then he did the same for his mom.

I felt like a child as he fixed my plate and set it down in front of me. He sat down beside me then and reached for his own.

Melinda just watched him as he ate. I noticed she didn't eat much. She seemed to pick at her plate somewhat. Of course looking at her size, it's a wonder she ate at all.

Drake finished up and pushed his chair back to wait on me. He looked over at Melinda. "Just as good as ever Melinda," he smiled.

"Thank you Melinda, it was very good." I told her.

She actually looked embarrassed again. Maybe she was shyer than I was, if that was possible.

"Drake, Ronnie looks tired. Maybe you should show her to your room to rest. I'm sure she could use freshening up too."

He got up and held his hand for mine, "Come on doll. Let me show you *our* room."

I took his hand and he tenderly pulled me up. I followed him the stairs and just looked up. How was I going to make it up *all those stairs*? I didn't have to wonder; he reached down and picked me up. I tried to tell him I could do it but he didn't listen, he just kept going all the way up the stairs and down the long hallway to the last room on the floor.

He leaned down, turned the knob with one hand, and pushed it open with his foot. I looked over and all I could see was the window at the far side of the room. It wasn't a window; it was sliding glass doors that led out to an upstairs patio. He sat me down on the bed and went to get our luggage that was still in the entry hall.

I walked over to the glass doors and looked out to see the meadow that it overlooked. It was a beautiful sight. Not the menacing and yet compelling forest behind Randy's house, but the serenity and tranquility of what they should be.

I jumped when something touched my shoulder.

"Sorry." Drake said as he also looked out the doors. "Beautiful isn't it." He followed my gaze.

"Yes it is. How come you never told me about all this?" I looked up at him.

"I don't know. I think it was because I wanted you to love the real me. Not what I am when I'm here."

"You mean like fixing my plate and placing it in front of me?" I raised an eyebrow at him.

He grinned, "No. That was so you wouldn't reach across that big table. I didn't want you to strain. You know you still have to be careful. I mean when I'm here, I act as I'm supposed to. A person with money, but for me that's as phony as it gets. I'm not a rich guy. I'm an average guy who just happens to be the son of a rich woman."

"Were you afraid I would want you for your money?" I smiled up at him.

"Well, you wouldn't be the first one who did." He said nervously.

I wanted to ask him about that but thought better of it.

"I wouldn't have cared either way. I just wish you had trusted me more." I scolded him.

"I know but by the time I realized you wouldn't have cared I was afraid you would be mad I hadn't told you sooner."

"So you thought bringing me here and surprising me like this was better?" I was still angry with him for deceiving me.

He sighed, "I guess that was a bad idea. Do you forgive me?" He gave me the eyes he knew I couldn't resist.

"Aww Drake. Yes, I forgive you but don't keep anything else from me ok. You don't have any more secrets do you. Like a kid on the other side of town or something, right?" I looked at him suspiciously.

He thru his head back and laughed, "You caught me. I forgot to tell you about my other wife next door. We just had our second baby." He laughed again.

I smacked his arm, "That's not funny."

I laughed and turned to look out the glass doors again. It was peaceful.

"Do you want to go outside?" He saw me looking toward the glass doors.

"*NO!* I'm not going out there!" I was amazed he had even considered that I might want to stand on a thin piece of wood with nothing under me, when I was the size of a baby elephant.

He was laughing at the horror that I was sure was on my face.

"You know I wouldn't let anything happen to you. It's perfectly safe."

"I'll take your word for it." I said as I stepped away from the door.

"Ok. I won't make you do anything you don't want to." He was still chuckling.

"How long are we staying?"

"Only a few days, I know you can't be away to long. You have another doctor's appointment soon and you don't need to miss it." He was very vigilant when it came to my health. He never forgot an appointment or an order from the doctor.

"It's not for 5 days. What are we going to do until then?" I assumed we were going to hang out here and get to know his mom.

"Well tonight we're going to go out with Melinda. She wants to show you her world. She asked what kind of food you like. I told her you like Chinese. Is that ok?" He looked at me hopefully.

"That would be great." I hoped I wouldn't have to dress up. I didn't have dress maternity clothes.

"Is it a dressy kind of place?" I asked hesitantly.

"Kind of, but don't worry. We're going shopping first," ugh, not more shopping.

"Is it ok if Melinda comes with us?"

“Of course it is. I want to get to know her too.”

He smiled. “Good, then I won’t have to persuade you to buy anything. She’ll buy it whether you want it or not.”

That scared me. I didn’t want her to think I wanted possessions and money. “No Drake. She’ll think all I want is you to get me stuff. I don’t want her to think I’m a gold digger.”

He rolled his eyes. “She already knows you don’t want anything. She was the one who asked if she could take you shopping. She seemed to think you didn’t have enough luggage when we got here.”

At least I know why Drake feels the need to take care of me in every way now. He gets it from his dad *and* his mother.

“Wait a minute, it’s Christmas day. Is there even anything open?”

“You’d be surprised what’s open here on Christmas. Which reminds me...?” He walked over to his suitcase and opened it. He walked back over and handed me a box.

I took it carefully. I looked down and saw it was a jewelry box. There was a pink ribbon around it. I pulled it loose and opened it. It was another necklace. Almost like the one he had given me before only instead of an Amethyst crystal, it had a diamond. I looked up at him.

“Drake, it’s beautiful!”

“I figured since my last one was the wrong thing to get, I had another one made.”

I turned around for him to fasten it on me. I walked over, opened my purse, and picked up the small box for him. “Here”

He opened the box slowly. I watched his eyes as he looked down. It was a watch. It was gold with diamond accent.

“I thought it might come in handy for timing contractions when the time comes.” I smiled at him.

He came over and hugged me. "It's perfect Ronnie." He took his old ragged one off and replaced it with the one I just gave him.

Drake drove to the clothing store. It was a bigger than any store I had ever been in. Clearly, Melinda had been there before. She walked right up to the clerk and asked for Ben.

"Right away Mrs. Sabre." The clerk said.

I looked for Drake and he was sitting in the entry on a couch by the door. When he saw me looking at him the look on my face must have made him laugh. I scowled at him and he laughed harder.

"How are you today Mrs. Sabre?" A thin well-dressed man smiled at her. He looked over at me, "You must be the daughter-in-law we've heard so much about."

Melinda put her arm around my waist, "Yes she is. Isn't she lovely?"

I looked back at Drake again and he was still just sitting there smirking like he was silently telling me 'I told you so'.

"Well Ben, we need some maternity clothes for Ronnie. Do you have anything that will work? Something to bring out the blue in her eyes."

"Yes we do Mrs. Sabre. I will have then brought out for you. Is there anything specific you were looking for?"

"Yes, we need a dinner dress for tonight." He turned and went into the back. When he returned, he had several outfits laid across his arm. He held them up one at a time as Melinda nodded or shook her head.

Her eyes lit up when he came to a light blue sheer over satin sundress. "Let's try that one." She held it up to me, "It matches your eyes Ronnie. Why don't you try it on?"

I took the dress carefully; I didn't want to rip it. Ben showed me to a dressing room and closed the door. I looked at this exquisite dress and wondered if I could wear it without damaging it. I managed to get it on but the zipper was in

the back. I cracked the door and looked around. No one was out there so I went to the door I knew led to the lobby. I cracked it and saw Drake still sitting in the same place. I motioned for him to come with my finger. He followed me into the back.

“Can you please zip me up?” I turned around. I heard him chuckle as I felt the zipper come slowly up my back. “Thank you.” I said embarrassed.

I turned around to let him see me. The dress stopped above my knees and I was afraid it was too short. Drake turned me to look at the mirror behind me. It wasn’t too short at all. It was beautiful.

I hesitantly opened the door wide as Drake followed me out. Melinda put her hand over her throat and sighed. “You are more beautiful than ever.” She looked up at Drake, “What do you think?”

I felt him lightly smack my bottom before he said anything. “She is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

By the time we left, I had three new dresses and three new pairs of shoes, a pair to match each dress. Drake was still smiling as we left. I could see he was having a ball just watching my reaction to it all. I was tired when we made it back to the house. Drake carried me upstairs and rubbed my feet until I fell asleep.

“Hey doll. It’s time to get up. You need to get ready for dinner.”

“Uumm, Do I have to?” I didn’t want to open my eyes.

I could hear him laughing in the distance. “Yea doll. Come on.” He lightly tugged on my arm.

I yawned loudly. “That was the best sleep I’ve had in awhile. Maybe we could take this bed home with us?” I smiled at him.

“It won’t fit in our room.”

I turned around and looked back at it, “To bad.”

I stood up and tried to stretch, “Ow!” another pain shot thru my stomach. I doubled over and fell on the bed as Drake made it to me.

“Are you ok? The baby!” His voice was fearful.

“It’s... its ok...Drake. It was just....just a cramp.” I tried to say. “It’ll.....pass like.... like the rest.”

Drake was helping me sit up. “Maybe we shouldn’t go tonight. Melinda will understand. I don’t want you to do too much. We don’t need this baby coming out too early.”

The pain was subsiding, “No Drake. I’ll be ok. It’s almost gone now. I think I just did too much today. I need to take it easy. Not be on my feet as much. I don’t want to disappoint Melinda. Help me get dressed.”

Drake wouldn’t let me get up. He got the dress carefully out of the plastic covering and pulled it over my head. He even squatted down and put my shoes on me. It reminded me of Prince Charming putting Cinderella’s glass slipper on her at the end of the movie. I had to laugh aloud.

Drake looked up at me but didn’t ask. I don’t know if I would have told him anyway.

We arrived at the restaurant at precisely 8 o’clock. The maître d showed us to a small table near the back. He held out the chair first for Melinda then for me. Drake sat down and ordered a glass of wine for his mom and tea for me. He just sipped his water. The menu was in Chinese. I looked at Drake and he seemed at ease. He said something quietly to Melinda and she smiled and nodded. They both looked at me. I gave Drake and angry look but he just grinned.

I leaned over to whisper to Drake. “What’s going on?” I didn’t try to keep the anger out of my voice.

“You’ll see.” He was still grinning.

「私に甘酸っぱい鶏があり、その美しい女性はMongolianポークを持っている。紳士にある低いmienが」。

That's what I heard but what she had actually said was,

"I'll have the sweet and sour chicken and the lovely lady there will have Mongolian pork. The gentleman will have the low mien."

I was astounded. Melinda told the waiter all that in Chinese. She looked over, saw my face, and blushed. Drake was laughing to his self.

"Is there any more surprises I should look out for?" I asked him.

He looked up as he thought, "No. I don't think so."

"Well can you at least tell me what I'm having?"

"I told Melinda to order you the Mongolian pork." He sounded sure of himself.

I was pleasantly surprised. "Oh. Ok, that will be fine."

After dinner, Melinda asked if we would like to accompany her to some high-class fundraiser the next day. Drake told her I wouldn't be able to stand up that long. He told her about my preterm labor and the cramps I still have. She completely understood and said we would have the house to ourselves for most of the afternoon. I liked that idea.

Even though I had slept most of the afternoon, when we got home I was still exhausted. I was very careful in putting my dress back up; still afraid I might rip it. Drake looked just as tired as I felt. He was already lying down when I came out of the bathroom. His eyes were closed, so I tried to lie down carefully, but he turned over and looked at me.

"Did you have fun today?" He asked.

"Surprisingly yes. Your mom is so sweet. I don't know why I was afraid to meet her. Of course, I don't know about her buying me stuff though. I know those dresses were expensive." I didn't hear the final price but I was sure it was way up there.

“She loves to buy people stuff. Especially clothes. You made her day by letting her. She will probably be sending baby clothes every month once it’s born.”

I don’t know if I liked that idea. It might hurt dad and Randy’s feelings but I don’t want to hurt hers by telling her not to either. “Can you at least tell her not to go overboard? The baby will outgrow the stuff so quickly, if she sends too much the baby may not get to wear it all.”

“Don’t worry Ronnie, she won’t be that way. She doesn’t want to show off her money, she just wants to help out.” He must have known what I was thinking.

“And I really appreciate that. I just want *us* to take care of the baby ourselves. I don’t like the idea of depending on anyone.” I hoped he understood what I meant.

“I know doll. She won’t go overboard. She did ask if we would bring the baby to see her though. I told her we wouldn’t have a problem with that once you were healed from delivering.” He looked at me questioningly.

“Of course we’ll bring the baby to see her. She will be the grandmother after all.” Then I thought of something, “Will she want the baby to call her Melinda too?”

“Actually no,” He sounded surprised to say it, “She wants the baby to call her nana if it’s ok with you?”

I was as surprised to hear that, as he was to say it. “Yea, that would be fine with me.” I couldn’t take the shock out of my voice.

The next day Drake took me for a walk around the grounds. There were benches set up at different places all over. “Melinda would sometimes come out here to sit when she was young. She said it was to get away from the noise of the house, so Grandpa had these put in so she wouldn’t have to sit on the ground.”

We were sitting on a bench in front of a small pond. I could see fish jumping out of the water. It was soothing. No wonder Melinda would come out here. It was so peaceful.

I was leaning on Drake just watching the fish, "To bad I don't have any fish food. I would love to see them jump for that. It's interesting to watch. I never thought about it before but it really is beautiful to watch pure nature in action."

"I can get some and we can bring it back tomorrow if you like."

"No it's ok. But maybe when we bring the baby to visit we can."

"Of course we can. We can do anything you want to." He looked at his watch, "We had better be getting back. It's almost dinner time."

"Are we going out again?" I knew there was no excitement in my voice.

He looked down at me. "Are you tired?"

"No. I just don't know if I can take another language barrier."

He laughed. "No. we're actually eating at home tonight. Melinda is fixing dinner." He glanced at me, "But not like before. It will be a real dinner. Not a buffet of everything in the kitchen."

That sounded nice, an intimate dinner with Drake and Melinda, no one interrupting or listening. "That would be nice."

Dinner was small. Melinda had put candles in the center of the table and fixed everything Drake told her I liked. Grilled chicken on a bed of fried rice and she even made homemade rolls. Randy had been right, she was an excellent cook.

After we ate, I looked at her, "Thank you Melinda that was wonderful. It was perfect."

She looked down at the table and blushed. "You're very welcome Ronnie."

I stood up to help carry the dishes to the kitchen when Drake took the plate out of my hand, "No, I'll do that. You sit down."

He quickly hurried out of the room and left Melinda and me sitting there. I tried to see which way he went but he was already out of sight. I looked over at Melinda and she looked as astonished as I was.

I tried to make conversation, "So how does it feel to live in a big house like this?"

She rather smiled at me. "Actually I prefer a smaller place. This house has been in my family since my parents were married, 60 years ago, and I still get lost in it."

I had to laugh. "I understand."

Drake came back in the dining room. I could see right away there was something wrong. "What is it Drake?"

He quickly put an unconvincing smile on his face. "It's nothing Ronnie. Nothing to worry about."

I didn't say anything but I could tell it was something. Drake glanced over at Melinda. She quickly put on a happy face too. "Say Ronnie. Want to take a quick tour of the house?"

I knew they were conspiring silently but I just nodded. She got up out of her seat and I followed. She took my hand and we headed the way Drake had disappeared before.

She led me down a long hall and turned a corner, "This was my father's study." She said as she opened a door.

I obediently walked inside and looked around. It looked more like a library. The walls lined with books, and a desk right in the center. I turned around to look her right in the eye.

"What's going on? I know there is something up. I think since it probably has to do with my baby I should know."

Melinda quickly turned away and began to wring her hands together.

"Please Melinda, you have to tell me."

“Well, the thing is, I don’t know. I could just tell that Drake needed to be alone so I offered to show you the house. I’m sure it’s nothing. He would tell you if it was important.” Her face didn’t look as sure as her words would have me believe.

“Let’s go look at the sitting room shall we?” She was still trying to distract me.

“Ok.” I agreed but only as not to hurt her feelings.

The next room we walked into, she referred to it as a sitting room. I looked around. It was clear a woman had decorated it. Everything was light blue and frilly.

“This was my mother’s favorite room, where she would entertain guests after dinner. Daddy let her decorate it herself, and after she died, he couldn’t bear to change it. I would find him in here sometimes crying.” I could see the sadness in her eyes as she talked about her parents. It was clear she missed them still.

I tried to think of something to get her mind elsewhere. “How about showing me the kitchen?”

She recovered herself, looked at me, and smiled. “Sure Ronnie. Come on.”

The kitchen was massive. There were two refrigerators and two stoves. In the middle was a kitchen isle that Melinda had used to make the rolls. It still had flour on it.

“I’m sorry for the mess. I haven’t had a chance to clean up yet.” She blushed.

“I think we should get back.” She took my hand and led me back down the hall and back into the dining room. Drake was nowhere around.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait for him.” Melinda sighed.

I watched Melinda clean up the dining room while we waited for Drake to come back. I tried to help, but she said she needed to distract herself and to sit still. I just sat there wondering how bad it must be to keep him gone so long.

It was an hour later when he finally came back inside. "Where have you been?" Melinda said angrily.

"I'm sorry Melinda, Ronnie. I went for a walk on the grounds."

I knew he was lying. "Drake what's going on? I know your keeping something from me." My voice cracked.

"We're going to have to cut our trip short Ronnie. I'm sorry Melinda, but we have to leave first thing in the morning." He looked over at me. "You need to get some rest tonight. We'll be driving straight thru tomorrow. No stops."

"Ok Drake." Melinda said quietly.

He went over to hug her. It looked like he was whispering in her ear. Aloud he said, "Don't worry Melinda; we'll come back as soon as we can."

I said goodnight to Melinda and followed Drake the stairs, "You have to tell me Drake. I'm scared."

He picked me up and carried me to the room without talking. I was starting to get mad.

He sat me on the bed and went into the bathroom without a word.

I waited for him to come out. I had my arms crossed over my chest. "Drake! You better tell me now!" I knew I raised my voice, but I really didn't care.

"Calm down Ronnie. You don't need stress. I'll tell you in the morning if you're calm."

"I won't sleep if I have to wait all night. Did something happen at home? Is that it? Was someone hurt? Please Drake. I need to know." I started crying.

"Ok Ronnie, if you promise to think about the baby, and stay calm." He sat down beside me on the bed.

"I promise Drake. What is in my head is probably worse than it really is." I was imagining all sorts of terrible things.

He sighed. "Ok, just remember that's it's ok now." He hesitated again. "Gabe.... Well Gabe decided to take matters into his own hands last night." He was watching my face for a response.

I tried to keep my face calm but I could feel the apprehension growing.

"He...." Drake looked down, "He went into the forest. The dweller that was patrolling saw him and but he didn't see the dweller. You know that since he wasn't a born protector he can't sense them. He has only gone out in the daylight alone before and he didn't know one was patrolling. By the time he saw the coyotes it was too late."

My hand went to my mouth and I could feel tears in my eyes. I could picture my dad with wild animals mauling at him as he lay there screaming for help that was nowhere around.

"Zac had gone to get him out as soon as everyone realized he had left. By the time he got there though, the coyotes had him down. Zac said Gabe was still fighting from the ground."

I was really crying now. I saw them in my mind as Zac tried to drag off the coyotes and pull my dad to safety.

"Zac's strong and he managed to get them off, but Gabe was hurt. Randy took him to the hospital and that's where he is now." He reached out and pulled me into his arms. "I'm sorry Ronnie. We are going to leave as soon as it's light and drive straight to Branceville."

I tried to get up. "We have to go now!"

"It's dark now and you need to rest. I have to tell Melinda what happened. I'm not going to argue with you. We will leave as soon as the morning comes." His face was set. There was no changing his mind but I was still going to try.

He left the room to talk to Melinda. I couldn't move. He hadn't told me how bad dad was. If he was still in the hospital, it must be bad. I started to pack my clothes, not even trying to fold them first.

Drake came back in the room as I was putting his in the other suitcase.

"Ronnie. Please stop. It won't help him if you hurt yourself." He took the clothes out of my hands and let me fall on him crying.

"First light, I promise."

"I'll hold you to that." I told him sternly.

I lay down even though I was sure I wouldn't sleep. Drake sat on the end of the bed, pulled my feet on his lap, and started rubbing them. It was a sure way to put me out. I closed my eyes as I snubbed and tried to relax. All I could do was thinking of how dad had risked his self for me and if I had been there maybe, he wouldn't have gone.

I woke up to see that Drake wasn't in the room. I sat up and looked around. I became scared. "Drake!" I was starting to panic. "Drake! Where are you?"

I pushed the blankets back and put my feet on the floor. I walked to the door and opened it. The hallway was dark. I stumbled down the unfamiliar hall and called again "Drake!"

My eyes were focusing to the darkness and I saw him running down the hall for me. He put his arms around me and I started crying in his shirt.

"I didn't know where you were. I couldn't find you."

"I'm sorry Ronnie. I had to get everything ready to leave. I'm sorry." He held me tight and led me back to the room and down on the bed. "Lay back down Ronnie. We'll be leaving soon but you need to rest."

"No Drake. I'm awake now. Why can't we leave now?" I started to stand and he held me there beside him.

"Maybe you should take a nice soothing bath. It will make you feel better."
He went toward the bathroom.

He was in there a few minutes, and I heard the water on. He peeked his head around the door, "Come on doll. It's ready for you."

I walked to the bathroom and Drake had lit candles along the sink and had the huge tub full of warm water. I was almost catatonic as I looked at him. He pulled off my gown, led me to the bathtub, and helped me sit down. I sat there in that warm bubbly water and closed my eyes. I just wanted last night to be a horrible dream. I could feel Drake rubbing my shoulders and down my back. I could feel myself starting to relax, my body becoming less tense. Drake always knew just what I needed.

"I have some good news Ronnie."

I opened my eyes and looked at him.

"Gabe is home. Well not *his* home, but with Randy. He's doing fine. He has some stitches and a pulled shoulder but other than that, he's fine."

I could feel the relief rush over me like someone had lifted a heavy brick off my heart.

"He's really ok?" I could still picture him with coyotes tearing at him. I tried to push that out of my head.

"Yes. He's really ok but he's not happy about staying with dad." He was smiling.

"Do you know why he went out there?" I think I already knew.

"No. I was so worried about *what* happened I didn't think to ask *why*." He was washing my hair by this point.

"He was probably trying to protect me." I hung my head. "He still thinks he has to protect me alone."

Drake was listening to me intently. He knew how I was about dad. I have already lost mom and I couldn't take it if I lost dad too.

Drake held the towel for me as I got out of the tub. When we walked back into the bedroom, I could see the sun just starting to come up thru the big glass doors.

I walked over to it as Drake followed. I watched the pink touched sky as the sun's rays fought thru the darkness of the night. The pink was slowly changing. I could see the sky getting lighter as the sun rose higher in the sky. I lay my head over on Drake's chest and just watched the sky turn light blue.

The same shade as my dad's eyes.

I looked up to see Drake staring at me. "The sunrise has nothing on you."

I leaned up to kiss him. "We better get packed Drake. I need to see dad." I hoped he understood.

"I know doll. I've already packed, and the car is right outside the door. Melinda is downstairs waiting to say good-bye. She, more than anyone, understands your urgency to get back to Gabe." He hugged me gently.

I walked over to the bed and saw that on Drake's side was an outfit I didn't remember bringing. It was a casual looking pantsuit. I suspected Melinda had done some more shopping yesterday after her fundraiser.

I looked up at Drake and he just shrugged. "That's Melinda, never enough clothes." He laughed.

Melinda was waiting at the bottom of the stairs when Drake carried me down. She was pacing around and wringing her hands.

Our bags were by the door, ready to go. I noticed there was an extra one we didn't bring.

I walked over to hug her, "I'm sorry about leaving early Melinda. I have had such a good time here. Please, I hope you understand. After my mom died, dad was all I had until I met Drake."

"I understand Ronnie. I truly do. Just promise to come back as soon as you can."

"We will." I promised.

Drake leaned down to hug her before picking up our luggage. "Love you Melinda."

"Love you son. Take care of them." She pointed at me.

"I will." He released her and picked up our stuff. I couldn't help but see the similarities between them. Not physically, Drake was the spitting image of his father, but the emotional bond that was there between them. I could see how much it hurt them to have to separate now with everything so strained and unsure. It made me sad to have Drake leave her in such a state.

"I love you too Ronnie. Take care of yourself and the baby."

"I love you Melinda. I promise the baby is the most important thing to me and I won't let anything happen to it."

I followed Drake out the door to the waiting car already running in the driveway. I would miss Melinda and this peaceful place very much.

23. Drake's Secret

I was watching the road signs again. Not to find out where we were going but this time to see how much farther it was until I could see my dad. Even though Drake had assured me he was fine, I had to see it for myself. Drake was quiet most of the way. He seemed to have something on his mind but couldn't put it into words.

"What are you thinking about Drake?"

He sighed. I wasn't sure he was going to answer me at first. "I should have been there. If I were home, Gabe wouldn't have gone out there alone. I shouldn't have taken you so far away." I could see the distress on his face. He had known my dad his whole life. I never thought of how close they were but I could see it in his eyes now.

"I'll bet he would have found away whether you were there or not. It's not your fault Drake. Don't beat yourself up about it." If only I could take my own advice.

It was the longest 5 hours in my life. I was getting more and more anxious as we made it to Sabre Beach. Drake looked more relaxed. I impatiently waited until he stopped the car before I yanked the door open. He ran around the car to get me out but I was already standing. I looked up to see Randy on the porch with Hailey and Aaron beside him. They all had a solemn look on their faces.

I walked up to the porch, "Where is he?"

"On the couch," Randy told me, as he moved out of my way.

I walked past them all and went straight to the couch. Dad's eyes were closed so I sat down carefully so as not to wake him. Both of his eyes were swollen and black. His left arm was in a sling and he had bandages on his left leg, which was propped on a pillow. I reached out to touch his unharmed hand and he opened his eyes.

He looked surprised to see me and then mad. "I told them not to tell you! I told them not to ruin your honeymoon!"

“Don’t worry about it dad. I made Drake tell me what happened.”

“You shouldn’t have come home early! I’m fine!” I could see the pain in his face as he shifted his body to hug me.

“Don’t move dad. You’ll hurt yourself.” I leaned over to barely hug him.

My anger finally set in as I realized he was going to live. “What were you thinking? Why would you try to go into the woods alone? You might have been killed! I lost mom! I don’t want to lose you too!” I started crying.

He reached his unhurt hand out to pat my arm. “I’m sorry baby. I know it was stupid but I was trying to protect you. I’m still your father and I love you.” His eyes showed a man much older than he was. I couldn’t stay mad.

“I know dad. But you can’t do this kind of thing. You’re not the only one scared. Do you think I don’t remember every day that they want my baby? That Drake doesn’t know. You can’t be reckless. You have to accept help. Do you think I like being watched like a child? No, I don’t, but I won’t risk the baby. And I don’t know if I could survive if I lost you!”

I wasn’t trying to hurt him but I wanted him to understand how I felt. I can’t lose anyone else.

He dropped his head, “Your right baby. I wasn’t thinking about what would happen to you if something happened to me. I forget sometimes that I’m not a real protector.”

“Tell me what you were doing out there.”

He grinned, “Well... I was trying to more information about the ritual and I did.” He looked proud. “I found out that Brad is not staying with them. I don’t know where he’s staying because Hailey says he hasn’t gone home, but I think it’s a good sign that he’s not in the woods all the time.”

Everybody started to come in. Drake looked suspiciously at me. He could tell I’d been crying. Aaron had one of the bags and Drake had the other two. They headed to the bedrooms. Hailey came over to sit in the chair closest to me. She

put her hand on my shoulder. I could see the tension in her eyes. I knew she was thinking about Brad. Wondering where he might be.

Randy came over and looked at dad, "Time for more pain medicine?" He asked him. Dad shook his head.

Randy looked over at me. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm better now that I've seen dad."

"How was your trip?" Randy seemed overly interested.

"It was great. I loved Melinda. She was very nice and you were right about her cooking. I just wish someone had warned me before I went." I looked at Randy accusingly.

He thru his hands in the air, "That was Drake's idea, I told him not to surprise you like that but he was afraid to tell you the truth." Randy laughed, "I warned him, but he never listens." He said as he walked toward the kitchen.

Drake was coming down the hall and must have heard Randy's parting line. He was looking at me and grinning. Dad had closed his eyes again and I got up slowly, met Drake in the front room, and put my arms around him. He put his arms around me and lay his head on top of mine.

"I won't ever keep anything from you again."

I looked up at him. He was not looking me in the eyes. I felt like he might want me to tell me something but wasn't sure how.

"You better not!" I warned him.

I was glad to be home despite the trouble that was abounded. I knew it was only a matter of time before Brad showed back up. The biggest problem was we didn't know if he would return to the dwellers or to his dad. My only hope was that as long as he was away from the dwellers, then maybe he would have time to realize the right way to go.

I was tired from the long ride and my mind was finally clear. With all the doubt about dad erased, I could finally rest. I walked back to my familiar room and lay down on my bed. Drake had followed me, to see if I was ok, I'm sure.

"Hey doll. You ok?"

"Yea, just emotionally and physical exhausted."

He sat down on the edge of the bed, "Do you want me to rub your feet?"

I considered that for a minute, "No. I think I'm just going to lay here awhile. I'll be ok." I raised my head up, "Did you hear what dad told me about Brad?"

"No but dad told me. I hope it means he's still undecided about joining the dwellers." His face didn't look as hopeful as I had liked. I knew he didn't really believe that Brad could resist.

Regardless of what I said, Drake pulled my feet over and began to rub, and I was out in no time.

I woke to the smell of something cooking. Drake had left the door open when he left, or was it when he checked on me, which I was sure he did a lot. I got up and headed toward the living room.

Dad was asleep on the couch. I could tell by the snoring. He looked so peaceful, even with the bruises on his face.

Everyone seemed to be somewhere else. I went into the kitchen, and the smell was a pot of stew on the stove simmering, but no one was there. I went to the back door and still no one. I walked back into the living room and toward the front door. I could hear voices thru it. I stopped to listen.

"How did she take the news?" Randy asked someone.

"Not too well." Drake answered. He sounded worried about something.

"I told you to tell her first."

"I know dad. I was just afraid it would be like before. I know it's stupid but still....." Why was Drake's voice quivering?

"I told you a long time ago she was better than Sheila." Who was Sheila?

"I know dad, but I was still afraid. I was just scared it would happen again." What would happen again?

I felt bad for ease dropping but clearly, Drake was still keeping something from me so I kept on listening anyway.

"I could tell right away she wasn't like that. She *is* Gabe's daughter after all. I know how hurt you were before, but you can't let that ruin what you have now." It sounded like Randy was reassuring him about something.

"The first time I saw her dad, I was sure she was the one. I couldn't stop thinking about her. It made it worse that I had to spy on her without her knowing too." He had been spying. Was that how he kept saving me? He said he could feel when I was in danger, but spying.

"That was a necessary unfortunate circumstance to your destiny. I'm just glad you were there those few times you could be. If you hadn't been so close, even feeling the danger may not have been enough. Doug may have gotten away with her before you two could really bond. Then what would we be doing? Waiting on the elder's heir instead of your baby?"

"I know dad. I wish I could tell her everything, but she is so fragile now. I don't want to upset her with the awful truth. What if it puts her in early labor?" What could be so awful? Was it about the Sheila they mentioned?

"You have to trust her to be ok. The longer you wait, the worse it will be. You can't keep this from her forever. What if *she* shows back up, what will you do then? I know you'll do the right thing son. You always do." It sounded like the conversation was over.

I figured I would make myself known now. I opened the door and Drake jumped. He looked like a kid caught red handed in the cookie jar.

"What's going on you two? It looks like I interrupted something?" I looked from Drake to Randy who just smiled.

"I better get back and check on supper." Randy said and left us alone.

I looked up at Drake. He had mixed feelings about something. I wanted to ask him what, but I didn't want him to know I was listening.

He looked at me like he was afraid I knew what he had been talking about. Did he feel me inside the door?

"How long had you been standing at the door?" So he did know.

I tried to hide my face, "A few minutes. How did *you* know I was there?"

"I can *feel* you Ronnie. I'm just not sure how long you were there before I realized you had been listening." He almost looked mad.

"Not long." I lied. "Just enough to know you're keeping something more from me."

He hung his head and turned away from me. I walked around to look him in the eyes.

"What is it Drake?" What more are you hiding from me?" I tried not to sound as irritated as I really was, but I was sure he could tell.

"I don't want to upset you now with the baby's due date being so close." He was avoiding telling me.

"You know it'll only be worse if you don't tell me. I'll just come up with stuff on my own. And it will probably be worse than the truth." I tried to coax the truth from him.

"I doubt that." He finally looked in my eyes. "Ok, Ronnie but I promise you, you're not going to like it." He sounded sure of that statement.

I sat down in the swing to wait for an answer.

He turned around to avoid my eyes. "It was before you moved here. You already know I had other girlfriends."

I remembered our first time, and his admission it was not *his* first. I could feel the jealousy for someone I had never met before.

"Well there was a girl I *thought* I loved. We had dated a little before I graduated from high school. I had known her for a while before that. She knew about my family and all about my mom so I didn't have to tell her anything. What she didn't know was my destiny, and the legend of the protectors." He paused trying to find the words to tell me this horrible tale.

"Dad and Gabe both warned me that she wasn't the one for me, but I was convinced that she was. I even told dad I wanted out of the protecting business, and no part of the prophecy."

"It broke dad's heart, but I was young and stupid. Her name was Sheila. Dad gave me an idea, and I took her to see my mom one weekend. Melinda told me never to bring her back. I was mad. I felt betrayed by my whole family.

"I took Sheila the day I turned 18 to Las Vegas to get married. Dad followed me and showed me the proof of who she was. She was a *dweller*, related to Doug and somehow able to come onto Sabre land. Fortunately I hadn't married her, but still, the damage was done." He turned back around to look at me.

"I found out she was not just after my mother's money, she wanted a child for her elder. She had already seduced me, and I was afraid she had gotten half of what she wanted. Randy, Aaron and Gabe were the only ones who knew the truth. Gabe kept watch of Sheila to see if she had gotten pregnant. Thankfully, after 3 months of watching it appeared that she had not.

"She left the dwellers soon after that, and we haven't seen her since." He turned from me again. It looked like he had tears in his eyes. "I decided that I would never love again. That I could only concentrate on my duty and then, I saw you." He turned around to look straight into my eyes, "My heart skipped a beat, and you were all I could think about. I know I've lied to you, but please believe me when I say you are the only one I ever truly loved." He was almost crying now. I wanted to reach out and hold him, but his admission was more than I could take.

I walked back into the house without a word, went to my room, and lay down on the bed. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore. Drake hadn't followed me and I was glad. I didn't want to see him right now. I just wanted to be alone. I lay there curled up in the middle of that bed for hours.

Hailey came in once to see if I was hungry. I knew I wouldn't be able to keep food down so I just shook my head. I didn't know where Drake was and I'm not sure I wanted to.

I looked at the clock and it said 2:30 AM. I lay my head back down.

I could see an image in my head and I tried to erase it. Drake standing in front of an Elvis minister with a faceless girl saying I do.

Why had he told me this story? I think I would have been happy never to know. But, *would* I be happy if I knew he was keeping something from me? No. I wanted to know everything about him. He had made a mistake when he was young. Everyone does. I had never had a steady boyfriend before, and yet he had almost married someone else. Could I ever forget that? Do I love him enough to forgive him?

I lay there still. Then the baby moved, as if to remind me of what was most important.

Yes, I do love him enough. It was hard to hear but, the truth is all I wanted from him, and now I have it. Even if it's not the truth I wanted, it didn't make it his fault.

I had to see him.

I got out of the bed and went to wash my face. The clock said 3:45 now. I figured he had camped out in the living room with Aaron and dad. I walked carefully around the sleeping body on the floor. It was Aaron.

I looked around, and Drake was nowhere.

Hailey had gone home for the night. She was staying there more now with the Sabre kids so they wouldn't be alone. Maybe Drake had stayed over there. I

looked out the window and his truck was still in the driveway so he must be here somewhere.

I went into the kitchen and it was empty. I snuck over to Randy's room. Luckily, the door was cracked, so I opened it a little farther but still, no Drake.

Where had he gone? My first thought was the forest, but he promised me he would never go in there without backup.

I had to go outside to see.

The wind came in as I opened the door. I felt a chill in the air. Was it the weather or something else? I looked around and there he was, sitting in the swing. Someone had put a heavy blanket over him.

I touched his shoulder and he was freezing. Why had no one made him come in? Of course, he was so stubborn they probably weren't *able* to make him. I could see dried tears on his face and I suddenly felt *extremely* guilty. I tried to shake him lightly. He jumped to his feet, and the blanket fell to the ground. He looked over at me. I could still see the sadness in his eyes.

He reached out and grabbed me into a hug, "Oh Ronnie. I'm *so sorry*. Can you *ever* forgive me?" He was actually crying. I had seen him on the verge of defeat before, when we found out the dwellers wanted our child, as I lay in the hospital after my kidnapping, and even the horror on his face when he came in carrying an unconscious Hailey, but I had never seen him *cry*.

I put my arms around his cold body and started to cry with him, "Yes Drake I forgive you." He held me tighter.

"I will never keep anything from you again. I will trust you from now on. I promise."

I pulled as close to him as I could. He felt me shiver. "You need to get back inside." He pulled me toward the door that was still open.

Aaron had woken up. Probably from the cold air, I had let in. He looked at Drake and then at me. "I told you, you should have told her sooner." Then he yawned and lay back down.

Drake led me to our room. We pulled the blankets around us like coats and sat in the middle of the bed.

"I guess you have some questions for me." Drake asked. His eyes scared.

I looked at him, "A few."

"Ask me anything. I'll tell you the truth no matter what my consequences are."

I just looked at him at first. He didn't look away. "Did you love her?"

"I thought at the time I did. I found out later it was a spell. That doesn't excuse my actions though." His eyes were grave.

"What was the proof Randy gave you?"

He hesitated at first. "It was a letter he found from Sheila, to her brother, Doug. It told him that the plan was almost complete, and that I was taking her to be married. It also said the first part was coming along."

"The first part?" I wasn't sure I *wanted* to know, but I *needed* to know.

He looked down at that question. I could tell he didn't want to answer it, "Getting pregnant."

"Oh." I had to ask the big question. Even though he had said it already, I had to hear it again. "And you're sure she didn't ...get pregnant?"

He looked back at me. "Gabe was watching for 3 months and she didn't show any signs of it, so yea I'm sure."

I wanted to know more, but I was afraid to ask. He looked at me as if he could tell I had more.

"You can ask me if you want to. I'll tell you everything this time." He promised.

I looked away. There was only one question left, and I didn't think I had a right to ask. "It's really none of my business. I shouldn't have gotten so mad

before. I was just shocked. I had no right to assume anything. You told me you had other girlfriends, and I should have just left it at that.”

“You have every right to know. You are carrying *my* baby, and I shouldn’t keep anything from you. I know you have something more. Please trust me. You can ask. I won’t lie, and I won’t get mad.” He put his hand under my chin so I had to look at him.

I stuttered as I spoke. “You told me once..... well you told me after *our* first time.....that it wasn’t *your* first, and I was wondering.....well, was she the only other one or was there.... you know....more?” I pulled away from his hand. I didn’t want to look at his face.

He reached down and pulled my face up to look at my eyes. I could feel the tears. “She was.....regrettably my first, but after what happened, no, there was no one else. And since I was actually under a spell, I don’t count it as my first time anymore. What I remember of it was so very different from what you and I share. You are my first true love and my first true *lover* as well.”

I tried to smile at his words, but the truth is he had been with her first no matter how he looked at it. I was not going to let it bother me though. I had known since our first time that he had been with someone else and never let it bother me. So just because I knew her name now didn’t change anything.

“I love you Drake.” I leaned over and kissed him.

He was kissing me back and I could feel the tension leaving. I held onto him as though my life depended on it, as though he was the only thing keeping me together. And in a way, he was and I was never going to let him go.

We slept late the next day. I woke up laying on Drake’s chest the same as I did that day so long ago. I looked up at him and he was already awake. He was looking down at me smiling. I smiled back.

“What time is it?” I asked as I stretched my arms up.

“Almost noon,” He smiled.

“Wow. I can’t believe I slept so long.”

“Do you even know what time it was when we finally lay down last night?”

“No not really.” I hadn’t been watching the clock after all.

“I’m not sure of the exact time, but the sun was coming up.” He smiled. The sadness in his eyes was gone.

I thought about everything I had learned last night. I don’t know why I had reacted so badly. In the daylight, it didn’t seem so bad.

I looked up at Drake again. “I’m sorry about how I reacted. It was wrong to make you feel bad. My own insecurities caused me to act that way. It happened long before I got here, and I should have realized that.”

He looked back at me with understanding eyes. “You had every right to react that way. I shouldn’t have kept it from you. I was wrong for not trusting you. I would have understood if you never forgave me.”

I sat up and put my hand under his chin so he would look at me. “I love you. And she’s gone so we won’t ever have to talk about this again right? So there is no need to worry.”

The look in his eyes told me there was more. I decided not to ask. I didn’t think I wanted to know more.

Drake looked at his watch. “Everyone is probably wondering if we’re going to get up today. Maybe we should?”

I didn’t want to go back to my life yet, but it was inevitable. I got up slowly and went to the closet to get dressed. I felt the baby kick. I turned around and smiled at Drake. He looked at me puzzled.

I walked back over to the bed and sat on the edge. He scooted over closer and I took his hand and placed it over the spot the baby was moving. He closed his eyes and smiled.

We sat there like that for a while. The baby finally stopped moving and he moved his hand. “Thank you.”

“What for?” I wondered.

“For giving me the best gift anyone could ever get, a child to love.”

I tried not to think about the fact that we still had to figure out how to keep the baby safe.

No. I was not going to think that. The baby is safe. How could it not be with so many people protecting it?

We got up and went into the living room.

“It’s about time.” I heard Aarons voice laughing.

“Shut up Aaron.” Hailey said.

“How are you feeling today?” Randy asked.

“Fine,” I smiled at him.

He looked over at Drake, and Drake nodded. I’m sure he knew what had happened last night.

I went to the kitchen to fix myself something to eat. I just realized I hadn’t eaten since leaving Melinda's house. I was famished. I heated up some stew from last night and sat at the table.

Randy came in and sat down beside me. “Are you really ok hon?”

“Yea, I think I am. It was quite a shock though.” I looked down at my bowl in order to avoid his understanding gaze.

“Do you have any questions for *me*?” He sounded so sure I did.

I looked at him shocked. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought about it before, but he was right. I did want to ask him something. “How did you know I wanted to ask you something?”

He just smiled at me. “It would be reasonable for you to be curious about it. That’s all.”

"Are you sure you don't mind?" I wasn't sure I should ask him anything behind Drake's back. It felt wrong somehow.

Drake walked in at that time and Randy looked up at him. "I'm going to tell her now."

Tell me what? I was getting nervous again. "What is it?" I looked from Randy to Drake and back again.

"You ask me first." Randy said.

Drake fixed himself a bowl of stew from the pan I had just heated up and sat down beside me. I didn't want to talk behind his back but him being right here was almost as bad.

Drake looked at me. "It's ok Ronnie."

I looked back at Randy. "Tell me about when they were together." I didn't say who. I was sure he knew that already.

Randy's eyes were full of sadness as he spoke. "When Drake told me of her, I was so happy for him at first. He had never been a shy boy, but he had never seemed interested in anyone before either. He wanted me to meet her and that was fine. He brought her over to the house and I could tell she wasn't who she claimed to be. I couldn't figure out how she was able to come onto Sabre land either. However, that was true of BJ to so I didn't give it a lot of thought. I told him she was deceiving him, but he wouldn't listen; I could see that he was different than before. More put off about his destiny. I tried to tell him it was this girl, but it was too late. She had already seduced him with her magic, and her body. He was completely taken over."

Randy's voiced sounded strained. I could see it was hard for him to remember when Drake had rejected him. "I watched her pull him slowly away from everyone who loved him, but I was helpless. I knew I needed help so I planted an idea in his head. He took her to Florida to meet Melinda and she tried to warn him. She couldn't feel her the way I did, but she could see that she wanted money. Being who Melinda was, and her whole life, it's easy for her to read when someone loves *you*, or what you have.

“After what he called his mothers betrayal, he took the girl to Vegas. I knew they had left, but had no idea where he had taken her. Melinda called me to say they bought a plane ticket with her credit card. Then she told me where they were going. Melinda got me a flight out right away and I tracked them down. It wasn’t hard; surprisingly, I could still feel them both. I took the letter I had found in the driveway that she had dropped, and showed it to him as soon as I had found him.

“He read the letter and it broke her hold on him. They fought right there in the chapel. She tried to plead with him. Told him she was pregnant. He didn’t believe her and she took off.

“I brought him home and we waited. Drake was afraid to go into the woods, afraid that she would somehow get him to come back to her. I told him now that he had rejected her, the spell no longer worked, but he was still unsure of himself. He felt like he was the betrayer. He said he wouldn’t put us in danger by being seduced again, and so we watched out for him.

“Gabe took the lead. We told him of what she had said and who she was. He had never met her in person so we had to describe her to him. He went to the forest to watch. He saw her come in about a week later, we had at first thought she wasn’t coming back, and heard her tell them that she had failed to get Drake to marry her. Gabe said the elder smacked her across the face, for leaving the letter out where it could be found. Gabe said his eyes lit up when she told him she was pregnant.

“He came home and told us what he heard. Drake wanted to go get her then, to keep her here until the baby came. I told him we should just wait and see. It could be a trick. If they suspected they were being watched, it could be a ploy to get Drake into the forest. So instead, we waited. Gabe said she showed no signs of a woman who was pregnant. After 3 months, we decided that it was all a lie. Gabe went back in one day on a regular scout, and noticed she was gone. He searched the forest for her, but nothing. He was almost caught to, but she never returned.

“A few weeks later Drake got a letter. It was from her.” Randy looked over at Drake who had been very quiet.

He *had* been keeping something more from me and I gave him an irritated look.

Randy spoke up again. "Don't be mad at Drake. I told him not to tell you that part until I had told you everything." He looked at Drake again. "Tell her."

I looked over and Drake was putting his bowl in the sink. He was walking slowly back to the chair not meeting my eyes. He was trying to prolong telling me what the letter had said. I waited patiently.

Drake didn't look me. He looked at the tea glass in his hand he had just picked up as he began. "It said she was sorry she had tricked me, and that she couldn't stay here anymore. She also said that she really loved me, but knew my love was false and that she was never pregnant so I should go on with my life and pretend we had never met.

"I tried to find out where she had gone, but it was useless. There was no sign of her anywhere. I gave up actively looking for her after a month, but it wasn't until I saw you the first time I really ever stopped looking for her." He looked at my face to get my reaction.

I tried to hide the tears, but I couldn't. Drake reached out to hug me, but I pulled back. Randy left the room quietly to give us some time.

Drake looked at me with those soothing eyes. "I haven't looked for her since I met you. I haven't even thought of her, but one time. Not until dad asked me if I had told you about her. He was angry that I hadn't and told me the longer I waited, the worse it would be." He tried again to reach for me. I let him put his arm around me I didn't return his hug with mine.

"Do you still want to find her?" I asked him, afraid of the answer.

"No." He turned me so I had to look straight into his eyes. "The feelings I had for her have been gone since I read her letter. I knew right then they were never real. I only wanted to see if she was still alive. I was actually afraid they may have killed her when they realized she wasn't really pregnant."

I returned his hug and I could feel his tense body relax. I promised myself that I wouldn't let the past interfere with mine and Drake's future, and I meant it.

"I'm sorry. I did it again. Let my jealousy of someone I never met; interfere with what I know to be true. That you love only me." I looked up at him and smiled.

"Don't ever be sorry for telling me how you feel. You are right about one thing; you don't have to be jealous." He leaned down and kissed me softly.

"Get a room." Aaron said as he walked into the kitchen.

Drake just hugged around my enormous belly and looked Aaron. "You're just jealous that she married me." He laughed.

Aaron roared with laughter. "Just you wait. She'll get tired of you soon enough, and that's when I'll make my move."

He was still laughing as he walked out of the kitchen.

Drake looked at my face. "There's something else you want to ask." He knew me too well.

"Yes."

He was still smiling. "What is it?"

"Did Aaron know...her?" I looked up at him apprehensively.

He was still smiling. "Yes. He didn't like her either. We didn't speak for months until she was gone. She was trying to isolate me, to get me to go with her to the forest." He laughed. "When he first met you he came and told me I better hold on to you or he was stepping in. I think he really meant it."

"Well...he is *really* good looking." I teased.

Drake hugged me up harder. "I'll fight for you if I have to and we both know I can kick Aaron's butt." We both laughed.

I didn't ask Drake about his previous life again. I just enjoyed the fact that he was all mine.

24. Prison Bed

"Get up. We're going to be late." I tried to remember what Drake was talking about. Oh yea, the doctor's appointment was today.

"I'm up." I yawned.

I got dressed and we headed out to Hailey's car. She was waiting for us beside it.

"Thanks for asking me to come along Drake." Hailey was excited. She had not been able to go before.

"Thank *you* Hailey. Ronnie can't get up into my truck anymore." Drake said.

Hailey was bouncing on her feet as we waited for the doctor to come in. Drake had become used to the waiting and he was leaning against the wall with his arms across his chest. I couldn't help but see how sexy he was standing there with that tight tee shirt and jeans. I became entangled in my fantasies, and jumped, when I heard a knock on the door. Then Dr. Ambrose walked in.

I was laying there with my paper gown on waiting for my by weekly humiliation to began. Drake had come over next to my head to hold my hand and Hailey was beside him.

The doctor finished with my exam, but she looked worried. "Well Veronica, it seems you have started to dilate some." She looked at me.

"Is that bad?" I asked her anxiously.

"It's not real bad but it is cause for concern. It does sometimes happen a little early but with your history, it can be the start of early labor. We still have 5 weeks to go and we don't want it to happen to soon."

"How much?" Drake asked her. He must know more about this than I thought.

"3 centimeters," She told him. "Ronnie needs complete and total bed rest for the rest of her term. We want at *least* three more weeks before labor. By then

the baby will be fully developed and ready to deliver.” She was still looking directly at Drake. “No physical activity of any kind. Do you understand?” She looked from Drake to me.

“Yes ma’am.” Drake told her. I nodded in agreement.

“I’ll see you in a week.” She looked at Drake. “Ok?”

“We’ll be here.” Drake assured her.

The ride back home was quiet. I knew my life was gonna be hell until the baby was born. How was I going to handle Randy and Drake? Dad was using the couch so I was going to be stuck in the bedroom.

When we walked in the door, dad was in the recliner and the couch had fresh sheets on them. Someone had called Randy.

“Dad, Why are you up?” I asked him.

“You and the baby are more important than a stupid old man who got himself in trouble. Besides, I’m on the mend and I don’t have to stay in bed like you do.”

Drake picked me up and sat me down in the middle of the couch. Hailey was putting a pillow under my feet and Aaron was pulling the blankets up around me. I felt like an invalid.

I had my arms crossed over my chest. “Can I at least change clothes?”

Randy shooed everyone out of the room except Drake and Hailey who came back in with a gown. They helped me change and told everyone they could come back in. I was still sitting in the middle of the bed with my arms crossed.

Dad looked at me warily. “I know you don’t like this baby but we *will* take care of you any way we can, even if it’s against your will.” He laughed.

Randy agreed with him. “That’s right honey. None of us here wants to see you, or the baby hurt. So if the doctor says complete and total bed rest, well that’s what you’re going to get.”

I didn't try to argue with anyone. I knew they were right. I just hated to sit there, and not do anything for myself. It felt wrong. They were all watching for a sign as to when the dwellers might make a move and now they have to watch to see if I'm going to have this baby early. It wasn't right.

Susan came by that night. Randy told me she had been sick and that's why she wasn't here when I got home. She didn't want me to catch anything and risk the baby.

"Oh Ronnie, I'm sorry I wasn't here when you needed me. Gabe told me how bad you took Drake's confession."

I hadn't thought of it as a confession but that word clearly worked. I also didn't know she knew about it either.

"You knew too. Does everyone but me know? Why didn't someone warn me before I made a fool out of myself with jealousy over a faceless girl?" I pouted.

I know I sound like a child but right now, I felt like one too.

"I only found out when you and Drake left on your honeymoon. Randy told me he was going to have to tell you something big so I got it out of him. I was really irritated at Gabe for keeping it from me but he said it wasn't his secret to tell and he was right." She patted my hand as she was talking. I think she felt betrayed too, like he didn't trust her not to tell me.

Drake walked in just then. "Ronnie, no one knew about it but Gabe, dad, and Aaron." He leaned over and kissed me on my forehead. "Right now let's just concentrate on keeping you from going into labor before it's time. Ok?"

"Your right Drake, I forgive you for not telling me sooner and I'm not going to dwell on it anymore." I smiled up at him.

The rest of the week went pretty much the same.

I was given breakfast in bed. Then someone would sit by me and either watch TV or just quietly read a book. I asked Drake to buy me some new books. I

had read all of mine twice last time I was in this bed. My prison bed again. That's how I thought of it before and now it was worse.

Laura had started to come every day to see about me. She and Drew had been staying at Aarons since they found out about my condition. I felt better about her being there. I knew she was reassuring Drake that everything was going along fine. She did remind me to keep my feet elevated. It helped the swelling and I was glad for her advice.

Drew came over with her a few times. He was a nice guy but somewhat quiet around me. I think he was afraid of stressing me. I heard Laura telling him I had to stay calm.

Randy would cook most of the time but Susan was there tonight and fixed my favorite. Grilled chicken over rice. I was starting to get used to all the attention. Even the Sabre kids came around.

Zac was incorrigible. He never stopped throwing out subtle remarks about the size of my belly.

"Wow. Look at the *BIG*....pillow behind you." Or, "Yeesh it must be hard to walk without a counter weight."

I really didn't mind. He was just a kid and he was trying to make me laugh.

Aaron wasn't as subtle as Zac. "Hey Ronnie, Randy said you need help getting up. Let me get the crane and I'll be right there!"

I had to laugh at that one.

Drake was sleeping in the recliner most nights. He did fall asleep beside me once but when I woke up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom, which I did frequently, he was back in the chair again.

One night when we were alone, he looked at my fallen face.

"What's wrong doll?" He held my hand as he asked me.

"I'll never get my flat stomach back." I started crying.

I could see that Drake was holding in a laugh and that made me angry. "It's not funny! I'm a whale and you know it!"

He stopped smiling and looked me straight in the eye. "No Ronnie. You're beautiful."

I lay my head over on him. He was being sweet, even though he was lying. I fell asleep on his lap. I woke up to pee again, and he was still there, asleep sitting up. His head had fallen back and he looked very uncomfortable.

"Drake, Are you asleep?" I whispered and he stirred.

"Huh? What, No Ronnie what is it? Bathroom again?"

I grinned. "Yea," I sat up as best as I could.

He put his legs over the side and stretched. "Ok. Up we go." He leaned down to help me.

"You should have woken me up so you could move." I said as we walked down the hall.

"I was fine. Besides I love to watch you sleep. You're beautiful when you're sleeping."

He held my shoulders tightly as we walked back to the prison bed. He sat me down and propped my feet back up and went to the chair.

"Don't forget the doctor tomorrow." Drake said as his eyes slowly closed. He was snoring almost at once.

How could I forget? It's the only day I' alloyed leave the house.

Susan helped me shower and dress for the doctor. Drake was with dad in the front room talking about who was going with us today.

"I think Aaron should go." I chimed in.

Everyone, including Aaron stared at me. "I would feel safer." I lied. I always felt safe enough with Drake; I just thought that Aaron did so much for me that he deserves the chance to hear the baby too.

"Ok Ronnie." Randy said smiling. "If it will make you feel better." I could tell by his eyes he knew my true motives.

Aaron was pacing the floor in that little room. Drake had blocked me from his view as I changed, not that it mattered, and Aaron kept his eyes closed the whole time. He had offered to stay in the waiting room but I insisted he come with us to the back.

I watched Aaron's face when he heard the baby's heartbeat. He was amazed and confused. He turned around when the doctor checked my cervix. Drake tapped him on the shoulder when it was safe to look again.

"Well Veronica, I'm afraid it's still not good. You are now 5 centimeters dilated and your cervix is thinning." I could see the concern in her eyes. "I'm not sure you're going to make it 2 more weeks. I want you to stay in bed and don't get up except for the bathroom. I was hoping you would be the same, but as it's progressing so fast....." She didn't finish her sentence. "Well, we'll just have to hope this baby is ready when the time comes. I'll see you in a week, hopefully not sooner."

I looked at Drake after she left the room. His face was ashen. Aaron looked almost as bad. After I was dressed and we were in the car, Drake finally spoke up. "What are we doing wrong? Why is this happening?"

"It's my fault Drake. I shouldn't have let anything get to me. I have been so worried about everything else like them coming for the baby; I forgot that I had to take care of it myself." I started to cry.

"It's not anybody's fault." Aaron surprised me by saying. "Sometimes these things just happen."

His face looked like someone who knew from experience. I wondered what that was about.

Drake was telling everyone what the doctor had said. Now all they could think about was how to keep me from getting any closer to early labor.

Randy asked Laura if she knew anything that might help.

"I'm sorry Randy. There isn't any way to stop it if it happens. We're just going to have to wait. I still think we should be prepared if she should go into labor. I'll bring everything that's needed here if that should happen."

Randy and Drake agreed with her. They trusted that she would be able to help if the time should come that I needed to have this baby here. I was afraid if that did happen and the baby wasn't ready, what would we do then?

Drake was in the kitchen with Drew, Aaron, Randy and dad. I could hear them discussing another scouting expedition. I tried not to listen but my curiosity got the better of me.

"I think we should go tonight." Dad said.

"You're in no shape to scout Gabe." Drew told him.

"It's my own fault and I'll handle it." Dad replied. He sounded like he was offended.

"I think Drew is right Gabe. You wouldn't be any help the way you are. I know it's hard, but you're going to have to sit this one out." Drake said.

"I think I should go." Aaron said.

"No way," Drew said. "They'll feel you."

"Exactly," Aaron sounded excited. "They'll follow me and Drake can get close enough to listen."

"What about Zac? He can't be felt?" Drew suggested.

No, he's just a child!

"Sonny offered to be a decoy too." Aaron tried again. "And Kevin, he's pretty stealthy. I'll bet he can avoid them."

“What if we all went? It would distract them and you could get close to the Elder. Maybe get some information out of him.” Drew sounded sure of himself.

“No.” Drake said. “It’s not time for the attack. We will only go all-in if we have to. Tonight me and Hailey will go. If we get anymore than before we will plan then.”

I could hear them grumble. I wondered what Randy must have been thinking? He hadn’t agreed with any of them.

“You need to talk to Ronnie about this Drake. She is very fragile now and we don’t want to upset her. We don’t need to have the baby too soon and if she gets as stressed as last time. That may happen.” Randy was the only one talking sense.

I watched them all come out of the kitchen. Drake looked at me. He could tell I had been listening.

“Are you ok with this Ronnie? I’m not going to do anything to upset you. It’s just a scout to see if there’s more going on. I promise to be careful and not be gone long.”

“I know you need to do this Drake. I’ll try to be ok with it. I want to stay calm but I know it will be hard. I’ll do my best to remember what’s at stake.” I put my hand on my huge stomach.

Drake also touched my stomach. “This is to protect the *two* most important things in my life.”

It was nine when they left. Drake and Hailey went alone.

Dad was doing better but he still had the sling. The stitches gone from his leg, and his eyes were almost back to normal, but the doctor told him his sprained arm would take a little longer.

Everyone was on edge. Randy was trying to distract me by asking about my trip to Florida. He laughed when I told him about the restaurant and Melinda ordering in Chinese.

“She did that to me the first time I was there. I didn’t know what to do.”

He started telling me about when he had seen her house the first time. He said he trying to find his way to their room, he got lost. I could see the love in his eyes when he talked about her.

It was 11 when they got back, sooner than anyone expected. Drake was scowling and Hailey looked completely distraught.

“Brad’s with them again.” She said, as she went over and sat by Sonny. I had forgotten he was there, even though it took a half hour to convince Zac he wasn’t going. I was shocked to see Sonny put his arm around her shoulder, and even more shocked to see her lay over on him. Did I miss something there?

“That’s a shame.” Randy said.

After a few minutes of discussion I wasn’t listening to, everyone decided it was time for bed. Hailey told the boys she was staying here tonight. I watched them as they walked to the door. Hailey was beside Sonny the whole way and he hugged her lightly before leaving.

“Hailey,” I called her over. I glanced up at Drake. He left the room without a word. “Is there something you haven’t told me?” I looked at her suspiciously.

She got a conflicted look on her face. “Well.....” She began. “I know it’s wrong but I think.....well I think I might be falling for Sonny. I didn’t plan on it but he is just so.....so sweet and kind. He even understands why I feel so bad about Brad. I thought I loved Brad but he’s not really the one I think about now and me and Sonny have been talking while they have been staying with me.”

I could tell there was more so I let her talk without interrupting.

“And well....the other night everyone was asleep and we got really close and,” she hesitated. “Well it happened. We slept together and it was like my whole world changed. For as long as Brad and I had dated, we never got that close, and I never truly thought about sex. Then when me and Sonny were alone.....” She let off there. Her face was red with embarrassment.

"You and Sonny alone, then what?" Aaron said from the back of the room. I could hear the anger in his voice.

"None of your business Aaron," Hailey was angry now too.

"He better not have..." Aaron was so overbearing when it came to Hailey.

"Better not *what*?" Hailey asked.

"If he touched you..." Aaron couldn't even say the word.

"That's enough Aaron." Drake had heard what was going on and came back in.

"No it's not Drake. Sonny had sex with my sister and I'm going to *kill* him!" Aaron was heading for the door.

Drake got in front of him. "No Aaron. They are both adults and you need to stay out of it."

He started to push Drake out of the way and Hailey jumped up to grab him.

"No!" I yelled.

"Stop," I heard Randy's voice. "Aaron you will *not* hurt my nephew!"

I had never heard Randy so mad. His usually sensual voice was gone.

As I watched in amazement, Randy had Aaron on the floor in one swift move. He had Aaron's arm pinned behind his back and held him on the floor.

"I love you Aaron. Your father was one of my best friends, but I will *not* let you go after my brother's son. Is that *clear*?"

"Yes sir." Aaron agreed. Randy didn't release him right away. "I'm sorry Randy. I just lost my head for a minute. I swear I'm ok now."

Randy got up and pulled Aaron from the floor. "I'm sorry I lost my temper Aaron." He was brushing him off, his voice back to normal.

Aaron looked at Hailey. "Do you really like him Hailey?"

She walked over to hug Aaron. "Yes. I really like him. I think I love him."

"Well at least he's not a *dweller*. He's a protector." Aaron tried to sound supportive but I could still hear a slight edge of anger.

Drake came over to me. "Are you ok?"

"Yea, I'm ok. I was just worried for a minute but Randy had things under control." I looked at Drake, "I thought you didn't have any more secrets?"

Drake looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean Randy of course." I couldn't figure out why I had to explain.

Then Drake understood. "Oh that." He laughed. "Dad was my first martial arts teacher. He's been doing it his whole life. I thought you knew. I'm sorry. I would have told you before if I had thought about it."

I looked at Hailey. "Did you know?"

"I suspected. He just seemed like he had the demeanor for it but I never thought he was a master. Wow! He could probably take us all on and win." She looked impressed at that.

"Is he really a master?" My wide eyes looked at Randy.

He just smiled at me. "Yup," Drake answered. "Like I said, he was my first teacher."

My prison bed was really getting on my nerves. I did my schoolwork early and then I had nothing to do. Drake had bought me a few books but I couldn't concentrate on them.

I knew my due date was getting closer and I wanted to be able to get up. Laura said it wasn't a good idea. Even with less than four weeks, the baby may not be ready.

Laura decided to tell me about giving birth, just in case I had to do it at home. I tried to hide the horrified look on my face but I couldn't.

Laura laughed at me. "It's not as bad as it sounds."

I didn't see why not. I told myself I was going to have this baby in a hospital, where the painkillers were. I'm not big on pain.

"I think I'll stick to going to the hospital." I told her.

She smiled encouragingly. "I understand."

No matter what she had told me, I saw her bring in lots of hospital wrapped stuff and take it down the hall. I grimaced.

Drake laughed when he saw my face. "Don't worry doll. It's only a precaution."

My next doctor's appointment was better, and worse. The doctor gave me another ultrasound.

"Well Veronica, it seems the baby's lungs *may* be fully developed. That's a relief if you go early. Nevertheless, we still want at least another week. Now let's check your cervix."

I watched Dr. Ambrose's face. She wasn't happy about something.

"I'm sorry Veronica but you're at 7 centimeters now and your cervix is extremely thin." Her face was drawn. "I really don't think you'll be another week."

I sat up on the bed when she was finished. Drake's face was blank. I looked over at Laura who had come with us today, her face was calm. That surprised me.

"Stay on bed rest and we'll hope for the best. Ok?"

I nodded as she left the room.

Everyone was anxious when we pulled into the driveway. Dad was on the porch rocking back on his heels. I knew Drake had probably called them and told them the good and bad news.

Randy had a smile on his face as usual. "One week huh?" He said.

"At least," Drake answered him.

"I'm sure it will all work out Drake. If she has made it this far with everything that goes on here, I'm sure one more week is doable." Randy is the unyielding optimist.

Hailey and I always did our homework together and she sends it off every week. The last report we received said we were both passing.

Hailey looked distracted tonight. She didn't go back home like she'd been doing since the Sabre boys had been staying at her and Aaron's house.

"Is something wrong Hailey?" I asked her.

"No, not really, I'm just confused."

"About what?"

"Who I'm in love with," That surprised me.

"What do you mean?" I had thought she was in love with Sonny.

"I had a dream about Brad last night. That we were together and happy." She sighed. "I know I love Sonny but why would I dream about Brad now?"

"You and he have history. It's only natural to have feelings for him. It was never really resolved completely." I wasn't sure how to handle this but, I had to try. "What does it feel like when you think of never seeing Sonny again?"

She sat there a minute. "It would be awful. Why?"

"Now what about if you had to live without Brad. How does that feel?"

“I don’t know, not as bad. I think I could live without him but the idea of not seeing Sonny.....well that’s worse.” She smiled. “Thanks Ronnie. I feel better.”

I could see the light in her eyes when she thought of Sonny. I knew what her choice was going to be.

25. The Final Act

Randy had invited everyone over for dinner the following Friday. I was a little embarrassed having to sit in my prison bed while everyone else had to sit wherever they could find.

Mike, Kate, Drew, Laura, Michelle, Cody, and all the Sabre boys were there along with all of my regular protectors. No one seemed to mind sitting on the floor or the edge of my bed.

It was 4 days until my week was over. I hadn't lifted anything heavier than a pencil since my last doctor visit. I felt fine and really incredibly energized.

Everyone was at ease. We were talking about everything but what was on our minds, the dwellers and the baby.

Even Drake seemed to be more his self today. Mike was telling everyone about his new car. Kate just sat quietly beside me and listened.

"Hey, do you want to see my new car?" Mike looked at me.

"No Mike. I have to stay here. I'll just have to wait until the baby's born."

"What about everyone else. Do you all want to see it?" he said enthusiastically. "It's right outside."

"Sure." Aaron spoke up.

While everyone was outside looking at Mike's new truck, I heard the phone ring. I waited until the fifth ring before I realized no one else heard it.

After the seventh ring, I figured it must be important so I got up slowly and walked to the kitchen. It wasn't any further than the bathroom really.

I walked over to the wall and reached to pick it up when a hand came over my mouth.

I tried to struggle but it was no use. I tried to scream and I saw a knife pointed at my stomach.

"If you yell for your protector's, I'll kill you both." Brad said in my ear.

I didn't say a word.

He picked me up roughly and ran out the back door. He hesitated as he looked around. I wanted to call for Drake but he was still holding the knife in one hand.

I was aware of the cell phone that Drake made me keep in my pocket at all times but I was sure if I tried to use it now Brad would see me.

I watched where he was going, hoping I would be able to do something before he made it to the forest. I could do *nothing*. He was too strong and I couldn't even squirm away from his massive grip.

When he got to the edge of the forest, he met up with the others. He passed me to someone else. I tried to get my hand in my pocket but it was no use. This man had my pocket side against him. I had to wait.

He carried me to the clearing and sat me on the ground. Someone else was starting a fire while another person was chanting beside it.

They were all wearing robes of some sort. I could see the robes were tattered and worn. Most of them looked like they hadn't washed in months.

No one was looking at me so I took a chance. Without pulling the phone out of my pocket, I slid it open and felt for the number two button. I held it down a few seconds and hoped Drake would hear me.

Now was my only chance.

"Please Brad." I begged him loudly. "Please don't do this. We were friends Brad. How can you do this?" Please let this work. Please let Drake hear me.

An old looking man came over and backhanded me across the face. "You shut up bearer."

I held my face where he had hit me. I could feel the blood coming from my mouth and my cheek burned. I could feel my lip swelling up.

I could only hope Drake had heard everything.

I waited there, afraid to say anything else. I listened for someone to come up but I heard nothing. No one was coming. Drake hadn't heard me and now, it was too late.

I started to cry. This was it. They were going to kill me and my baby and I couldn't stop them.

One of the dwellers came over, grabbed my hand, and started to drag me over to the altar. I tried to stand but he was pulling too fast.

Another one grabbed me up and lay me down on it. I tried to fight but two more grabbed my legs and tied them to the poles. Another had grabbed one of my hands and tied it to another pole. The Elder put a cloth over my mouth. I tried to hold my breath but couldn't. Then I blacked out.

When I woke up, I knew I was naked. I could feel the cold stone under me. I could feel one of my hands was being held.

I didn't know how long it had been but I was groggy and sore.

I opened my eyes and tried to look around. I couldn't see at first. When my eyes focused, I saw Brad standing beside me. I could feel heat on one side of my body. Our hands tied together with a rope, which looked like it was made of weeds. I turned my head and the fire; which I could feel the heat from, was blazing about 3 feet from me. I could see the remnants of my clothes lying partly out of the fire so I knew the phone was gone too. Someone, who I assumed was the Elder, was pouring hot liquid on my stomach saying words I didn't understand.

I looked behind Brad and saw someone struggling. It was BJ. A man had their hand over his mouth. His eyes were wide as he looked at me. He glanced from me to Brad and then back.

I looked at Brad and he was staring off his eyes unfocussed. I tried to reason with him.

“Brad!” He looked down at me. “Brad, you know this is wrong. Please don’t do this. Think of your dad Brad. Think of Hailey. What would she think of you now? If you love *her* Brad, don’t do this!”

I couldn’t tell if it was working. I heard the Elder speak again.

“Don’t listen to her. She’s just the bearer. Your destiny will be fulfilled.” The Elder started to hit me again. I flinched but Brad grabbed his hand.

The Elder stared at him with fear. With one quick snap of the weeded rope, Brad released my hand and thru the Elder to the ground. Then he turned and punched the confused dweller that was holding his father. I saw him pick up his father and run away from the clearing into the woods.

Just then, the forest was full of people. Hailey ran over to me with Susan right on her heels. Susan had something in her hands. A sheet.

A woman grabbed Hailey from behind but was no match for Hailey’s skills. Hailey quickly dealt with her, and went to my feet to untie my binds as Susan tried to cover me.

I could see fighting all around me. Aaron was fighting three at once and Drew had two. Kate was there too and she was taking out one of the woman. I didn’t see Drake anywhere.

The Elder was gone. I hadn’t seen him leave but he was nowhere around.

Randy was even there walking around looking for someone. I suspected he was looking for the Elder. I saw Randy take off in a run away from the rest and figured he had seen him.

Mike burst thru the trees just then with one man on his back, which he quickly threw off and knocked out with one punch. He went after another one when that one was down.

Cody and Michelle were there too. They each were fighting a few dwellers at a time. I noticed Michelle was fighting the men as well as women. She seemed to be ok though.

Laura had come to help undo my binds and sit me up. I saw dad just then. He had one arm in a sling, but having no trouble punching the dwellers with his other arm. Zac and Kevin were beside him. I finally saw Drake. He was fighting three with Sonny close by fighting an overly large man.

I tried to get up and a pain shot thru me like a knife. I felt warm wetness running down my legs and I knew it was going to happen now.

Hailey had seen it first and tried to pick me up. I fell to the ground in pain and the sheet fell off me. I was cold and hurting but all I could think about was the baby was coming.

"Aaron!" Hailey yelled. *"Aaron help me!"*

Aaron punched the last one he had been fighting and ran over.

"Quick. She's in labor. We have to get her to the house!"

Aaron picked me up and Hailey draped the sheet over me. They took off running. I hope that away from the woods.

I looked at Aaron. *"Where's Drake?"* I asked him.

"Here!" I heard him coming from behind.

Aaron paused, *"She's in labor. Her water broke."* Aaron told him.

"OW!" I had another pain.

"We have to get her to the house." I heard someone say.

Drake took off running with me in his arms.

I could hear voices but I couldn't distinguish who was saying what. The voices were getting lower. I just tried to concentrate on the hope my baby was ready because it was clearly coming soon

All the sudden I fell to the ground. Someone had grabbed Drake from behind. I tried to see who it was. Drake was trying to throw him off and someone

else grabbed the man from behind. It was Randy. He had a hold of what I finally saw was the Elder, and pulled him to the ground away from Drake.

“Take Ronnie and go! I’ll take care of this one!” Randy yelled.

I saw him yank up the Elder and sling him around. He laid a punch right to the Elder’s face and he crumpled to the ground.

Drake scooped me up and kept on going. He was running so fast everything was a blur. Another pain went thru my abdomen. I wondered if it was going to be too late.

I was barely aware that we were back in the yard. Drake didn’t stop running until we were in the house. He lay me down on the bed, and ran to the bathroom. That’s where the supplies were Laura had brought.

The rest of the protectors came running in as Drake was coming down the hall. They all looked at me, lying nearly naked in the middle of the couch doubled over in pain.

Laura took the lead and sent most of them out the door. The only ones that stayed in the room were Drake, dad, Hailey, Randy, Susan and Aaron except for Laura who was completely calm and sending orders out to everyone else.

Dad was sitting behind me holding me up in a sitting position. Drake and Hailey were each on either side of me holding my legs bent. Aaron was on my left side holding one of my hands and Randy was sitting on my right holding my other.

Susan was standing beside Laura handing her whatever she needed.

I knew everyone was outside in the cold and for a moment, I worried about them. Then another pain hit and I forgot about everything else but my baby.

I knew I was laying there with nothing on. I had thrown off the soaking wet sheet when Laura made everyone leave. I didn’t care that Aaron, Randy, or even dad was there. My baby was coming.

Randy pulled a clean sheet off the back of the couch and tried to place it over me as best as he could. I was grateful for some measure on humility.

Laura was talking in a soft voice. "I'm going to have to check you now Ronnie." We all waited and then she looked up at me. "You're fully dilated and crowning. It's time. Whenever you feel a pain, you need to push. Are you ready?" Her voice was soft. It was comforting.

I nodded. I could feel the pressure building as the pain hit. I did what Laura said and pushed. It was harder than it sounds. I was holding onto Aaron and Randy's hands so hard my knuckles were white.

"Ok Ronnie. Relax for a minute." Laura said after the pain had passed.

I looked at Drake. He was smiling wide. I could hear him talking. "You can do this Ronnie." I tried to smile back when another pain hit.

"Ready Ronnie? Go!" I could hear Laura counting. When she reached ten, she told me to stop.

Another pain came right away. They were coming one right after another.

Dad was behind me whispering, "I'm so proud of you baby."

Randy was whispering soothingly into my ear. "You're doing great honey. Not much longer now."

I tried to concentrate on that soothing voice as I looked at Drake. His face was elated.

"Come on Ronnie! A big one." She was counting again. "Stop!"

I lay my head back on dad and panted. I felt numb from my waist down so I wasn't sure of the progress. I saw Laura with a small blue suction bulb in her hand and Drake was looking down at something.

"Last one Ronnie!" I pushed as hard as I could and all I felt was relief. Laura was grabbing an instrument out of Susan hands. It looked like a weird shaped pair of scissors. Drake was watching her every move. I was trying to look as she picked up something and then..... I heard a cry.

I tried to rise up further but Laura held the baby up and lay it down on my stomach. A girl. I released Randy and Aaron and reached for her. Laura put a paper drape over her and handed her to me.

"The ambulance is here!" Someone called thru the door.

Drake thru another sheet over me yelled out the door "Let them come in. *It's a girl!*"

I could hear whoops and yells coming from outside but all I could see was *her*. Aaron had moved and Drake took his place beside me and put his arm around me and we stared at our daughter together.

Everyone there followed the ambulance to the hospital. Drake had requested a private room but it was far from private. He finally had to shoo the men out so I could nurse her.

"What's her name?" Kate asked.

I looked at Drake. He answered. "Kelley Fay Taylor Sabre."

Most of them didn't leave until just before nine. Dad and Randy left about ten and Hailey right after that. I was glad for the quiet.

Drake was sitting on the edge of my bed watching me feed our daughter.

"What made you think of using the phone?" He said unexpectedly. "It was ingenious."

I was confused for a minute. "What are you talking about?"

"The cell phone, you called me and I heard you yell Brad's name. That's how we knew who had taken you." He was smiling.

I had forgotten about that. "Oh. I didn't think it worked. I figured you just knew."

"No. When we came back in the house and you weren't on the couch, I just thought you had gone to the bathroom. After 15 minutes, Susan went to see

about you. We all started to panic until the phone rang. I heard you yell Brad's name and we all made a quick plan andHere we are."

"Here we are." I said and we both looked at our perfect daughter.

I spent 5 days in the hospital. Drake was there every day from first thing of a morning until way after dark. Everyone came and went from my room. I'm sure the nurses were happy to see me leave.

Dr. Ambrose came everyday to see me. She said I had a very good delivery nurse to have done everything right.

"It was a friend of the family. She's an OB nurse." I told her.

"What's her name?" Dr. Ambrose asked.

"Laura Kenley."

"Well of course." The doctor smiled. "She's been here a long time. 5 years I think. She was the best in her class and started here right after she graduated. No wonder you had such good care." She was looking at her charts now. "I think you can go home today Veronica. Everything looks great. I want to see you in my office in 6 weeks. You take care."

Drake drove us home in Hailey's car. The entire protector team was on the porch waiting for us to arrive. I wasn't surprised.

Drake came over to help me out of the car. We unbuckled the baby from the carseat belt and went inside with everyone trailing behind us.

I saw new furniture in the room, a basinet, and playpen. There were tags on them from Florida.

I sat down with Kelley in the recliner. I smiled up at all the people who had made this all possible.

“I want to thank everyone here for my daughter. If it wasn’t for all of you, we might not be here now. I love you all.”

They all mumbled things like ‘our pleasure’ and ‘it was nothing’ and ‘don’t thank us’. But I couldn’t help but think I had the best family anyone could ever have.

Prologue

As I stood in my room that night, looking down on the little girl asleep in her bed, I wondered about what was to come.

No one had seen Brad, or his father since the day Kelley was born. His mother told Hailey she hadn't heard from them, but she packed up and left a few days later herself.

While Drake and I were at the hospital, the others went back to the clearing, and found no sign of the dwellers. They believe they moved on to another part of the forest because they can still feel something there, just very faintly.

Drake came up behind me and put his arm around my shoulder, "What are you thinking?" He asked me.

"I was wondering if it's all over."

"I don't know doll. We know something is still out there, and we're going to find it, but I do think it's over, for now anyway."

I lay my head on him, and hoped he was right. I just couldn't get the nagging feeling to go away that there was still more to come, but I'll worry about later. Now, I'm just going to concentrate on our daughter, and the feeling that for the first time in a very long time, I feel completely safe.

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