

Safe at Home



# **Safe at Home**

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Peter Hunt, HR manager at TransSpeed Delivery, sat back in his chair and looked across his somewhat cluttered desk at the woman he was interviewing for one of the two open positions of counter clerk. She had just graduated from college with a degree in business communications. She was smart, pretty, but reserved. Perhaps that was why she was applying for a job that was obviously far beneath her skill set.

“I’m just a little curious, Miss Dunbar, as to why you’re applying for this position. To be blunt, you’re over-qualified. We like to hire people we believe will be with us for a long time. After all, training employees isn’t cheap. I’m worried we’ll hire you, you’ll work here for three months, and then you’ll leave for the first job that comes up that more closely matches your degree.”

Carrie Dunbar leaned forward a bit in her chair to look him in the eyes directly. She knew her light brown eyes sometimes had a hypnotic effect on people, so she was hoping to apply that talent here.

“Mr. Hunt,” she said softly, “before I graduated from college I had received four job offers, including one from a company I had already been an intern with. I didn’t select TransSpeed at random. I’ve read the company history and studied the company financials that are publicly available. TransSpeed is a growing company with a bright future. I may be applying as a clerk today, but I believe as TransSpeed grows, I can grow with it. You may be hiring a clerk today, but I know you’ll be getting much more than that.”

Whether it was her answer or her eyes that did it, it didn’t matter. Peter Hunt smiled and leaned forward.

“I believe that too,” he said. “Welcome to TransSpeed, Miss Dunbar.”

He stood up and offered her a congratulatory handshake. Carrie stood up and accepted. With a smile she left the office and got into her car. She breathed a heavy sigh of relief as she started it up. What she had said was true. She had indeed had four other job offers, all of which offered more money. But she didn’t want to travel or work at places that kept her routinely after dark. A job as a counter clerk, where she could clock out and be gone before dark each day, was just what she wanted. Carrie was afraid of the dark. Or rather, Carrie was afraid of what was in the dark.

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Carrie was just 4 years old when her parents were killed. She had been home with a babysitter while her parents had gone out. As usual, she had gone to bed at 8:00. For some reason she had been unable to fall asleep. At about 10:00 she had heard her parents’ car drive up. But the sound of their arrival hadn’t calmed her in any way. Rather, she had felt more tense. Anxious, she had crawled out of bed and gone to her bedroom window that overlooked the driveway. The car was sitting in the driveway, engine running. The garage door wasn’t going up. Carrie watched her dad step out of the car and walk toward the panel on the garage door. Just as he was about to get there something moved in the bushes next to the house. Her father had apparently noticed it too because he froze. There was a sound, Carrie would later learn to recognize it as a predatory growl, then something dark jumped from the shadows and landed on her father.

He struggled and screamed, making sounds Carrie had never thought could come from a human being. For some reason that Carrie could never come to terms with, her mother had gotten out of the car and

run toward her husband. Before she could get there a second shadowy form had emerged and attacked her. The screaming and struggling had lasted for only a few more moments. The dark creatures then melted back into the darkness and disappeared. The babysitter had come outside just seconds later. As soon as she had seen the bodies she screamed and fled back into the house. Minutes later the police had come. Carrie could only stare in terrified silence at the bloody bodies that had been her parents as the sirens began wailing and blue, red, and white lights flashed throughout the night.

Through her tears, Carrie told the police what she had seen. The police searched with flashlights that night and other people came the next day, but whatever creatures had killed her parents were gone. In the end, investigators concluded a pair of big cats, most likely mountain lions, were the cause of death. They searched houses for illegal cages, then had combed through the canyons and hillsides. They had never been found.

Lacking any relatives, Carrie had been placed in foster care. Carrie had been too young and traumatized to realize how abusive her first set of foster parents had been to her. She knew they cared little for her, and she in turn cared little for them. Six months after being placed in the home, the two people she was supposed to call “mom” and “dad” had left her alone while they went out. Carrie had eaten the cold, meager meal they'd left out for her and crawled sadly into bed. When they had at last come home late that night, Carrie was awake.

Carrie's bedroom was in the back of the house, and despite the fact she had been slapped more than a few times for being out of her bed after 7:00, she had come out of her room and walked toward the front door. She had been perhaps 10 feet from the door when a growl stopped her. It was like the growl of the dog they kept in the backyard, but so much deeper. Carrie heard her foster parents talking and laughing loudly one moment, then deathly silence the next. A moment later the silence was torn by shrieking and screams. The dog in the backyard, who barked at anything, was strangely quiet. Less than a minute later, there was no sound. A huge shadow seemed to float across one of the windows at the front of the house, then nothing. The police came the next morning, called by a neighbor who had seen the two bodies out front. Carrie found herself back in the foster care system looking for another home.

The pattern had continued throughout her childhood. She would be with a foster family for a few months or even in one case an entire year, then one or both parents, coming home after nightfall, would be killed. By the time Carrie was 10 she had gone through six sets of foster parents. Each death was the same, something akin to a large cat. Coincidence turned into suspicion and at one point Carrie overheard a conversation between an investigator and some of the people who ran the foster home. Carrie's parents had left behind a considerable sum of money. The money was to be used to care for her. When she turned 18, \$50,000 was to be given to whoever her parents were. But if the foster parents died while caring for Carrie, their assets were to be put into Carrie's trust. The trustee had been questioned four times, and each time he had been released. Nothing could connect him to any of the killings. But the impact had remained. Carrie became the cute, rich orphan that nobody wanted.

In high school she was the girl everyone wanted to date, though she never went out if the date happened after dark. People called her funny names, but Carrie held firm. She didn't need to be a police detective to understand that anyone close to her was in danger after dark. Her freshman year in college had seen her break that rule one time. The guy had been so nice, and the movie was one she had really wanted to see. His body had been found two days later, mauled by what was believed to be a big cat.

Since then Carrie had never gone out at night. She lived alone in a gated condo complex, leaving in the morning and coming home before sunset. No one associated with her was safe after dark. She wasn't even sure if she was.

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As Carrie had claimed in her interview, she had proven to be a valuable asset to TransSpeed. Within two months of her hire she had made some suggestions to procedures, which had saved the company a small amount of money in the short term and a larger amount over time. Four months after that she had suggested a move to a newer technology that would be even more cost-effective. Six months later she had been promoted to assistant manager. Now with some degree of control over her schedule, her life had started to become routine. Routine meant Carrie could start being friendly to some of her co-workers. Routine meant Carrie could relax. Routine meant complacency.

About a year later, two years after Carrie had begun working at TransSpeed, she had finally been talked into going out after work with some of the other counter staff. It hadn't been that hard. She hadn't seen or heard any of the shadow creatures in years, and going home to an empty condo was never a lot of fun. So she went.

There were six of them and after a brief discussion they decided on the White Elephant, a small bar/restaurant about a half mile from work. As Carrie drove over she found herself singing along to the radio. It dawned on her how much she missed the company of others then. The thought of what she had been missing out on caused a tear to come to her eye. What had those creatures, whatever they were, stolen from her? They had isolated her. They had made her alone.

“Damn you to hell!” she muttered under her breath. “Damn you!”

As she pulled into the parking lot she noted that she still had about an hour before sunset. And from there she had another 30 minutes or so to get home. She had time.

Carrie found her co-workers at two tables pulled together. She walked up to them and they greeted her.

“It's about time we got you to come out!” said Stacy, a manager from one of the other departments.

“Some of us just work harder than others and need to go home and rest,” Carrie shot back playfully.

Carrie sat down, ordered a drink, and let the fun begin. She laughed, talked, and forgot herself. For a time, life was for her what it was for most people. That time seemed like only minutes when she happened to glance at a window. It was dark outside. She froze, her glass inches from her mouth.

“What's wrong?” asked one of her co-workers.

Carrie stared out the window. There were so many shadows.

“Hey, you okay?”

Carrie shook herself.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, trying to look and sound normal. “I just realized I was supposed to...um...call my

doctor. I was supposed to set up an appointment.”

“Now? Isn't that a bit late?”

“She keeps odd hours,” Carrie said. “I gotta go.”

Carrie hastily grabbed her things, put some money on the table to cover her bill, then almost ran from the place.

Carrie bumped into two cars in the parking lot, distracted by shadows cast from the lights in the parking lot. A couple people looked at her like she was drunk and shouldn't be driving, but she didn't care. She had to get home.

When she got to her car she paused. There were no shadows around it except for underneath. She had to chance it. She couldn't stand in the parking lot forever. She remotely unlocked the car, looked around, counted to three, then grabbed the door and got in. She slammed the door behind her. She waited until she stopped trembling before starting the car.

“You can do it,” she whispered out loud. “You'll make it home. You'll make it home,” she repeated.

The car started and she pulled out. Something moved just off to her left and she nearly gave herself whiplash trying to see it. She was more spooked when she saw nothing there.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God,” she mumbled.

She tried to stay calm on the way home, but she drove faster than she should have, nearly ran into a car as she ran a red light, and practically screeched into her complex's parking lot. Carrie shut the car off and looked around. Her condo was on the second floor. The parking lot had lights and the walkways in front of the condos were also lit, but there were two areas with bushes she would have to pass to reach the stairway. The elevator, better lit but farther away, wasn't an option.

Counting to three again Carrie got out of her car and raced like a lunatic for the stairway. She grabbed the rail at the base and practically stumbled up the first three steps before regaining her balance. At the top of the stairs she ran down the hallway to her door, key already in hand. She fumbled at the lock for a moment, then got the key in and nearly broke it twisting it in the lock. She threw open the door, jumped inside, then slammed the door shut behind her, shaking the wall of the building.

Carrie quickly slid the two bolts in place and leaned against the door, exhausted. Sweat was pouring from her and her breathing was ragged. Then she started to laugh. Not loudly, but with a sense of maniacal relief. She'd made it. She'd been out past dark and no one had gotten killed.

Carrie stood up against the door and took a deep breath. And then a shadow quickly flitted past her balcony.

“An owl,” she said to herself in a whisper. “Just an owl.”

But she didn't move. There was no connection to her balcony from the floor or a neighbor. Whatever she had seen was either on the balcony itself or had moved by it in the air. When a minute had passed and nothing happened, and there was no sound, Carrie started to relax. It had either been an owl or just

her imagination. She moved quickly to the balcony and pulled the curtains, closing it from view. Normally she left the curtains open so she could have daylight when she got home. She might have to reconsider that now. When there was no further sound or movement, she began to relax a little more. A nervous giggle escaped her.

Several minutes later Carrie came out of the shower and moved to her bedroom. The events of the last half hour had drained her of any desire to do anything but crawl into bed. She dressed for bed and snuggled under her covers, intending to read a book for a couple hours or until she fell asleep. She had just opened the book and was about to pick up where she left off when she heard it, the unmistakable low growl that had haunted her for years. It wasn't coming from the balcony but from just outside the front door. Carrie froze in terror.

A minute later Carrie hadn't moved and had hardly breathed. Another minute passed in silence. And another. Carrie was about to relax when she heard the sound of something scraping against the front door of her condo. It started from the top of the door and then slowly slid all the way to the bottom. When the scraping stopped, another, softer growl could be heard. Carrie dropped her book and pulled the covers up to just below her nose. It was out there waiting for her. And she knew, sooner or later, it would come in.

Neither the growl nor the scrape repeated itself, but Carrie didn't move or sleep the entire night. When the light from outside began to brighten and she knew it was daylight, she was still frozen in place. It wasn't until her alarm went off and she started in fear that she made herself move. She crawled out of bed and stretched, stiff from a night of not moving. But she was alive. She was alive. Her euphoria was tempered by her tiredness. She would celebrate later by coming home before dark and enjoying her book. She was alive.

As she walked out of her condo and turned to lock the door she noticed the gouges on the door. There were three in a long line from the top to bottom. The grooves were deep, maybe a quarter inch. Whatever it was, it had been there, waiting for Carrie. She would need to buy a heavy duty screen for the door. And then she wondered if that would really make a difference. She shuddered.

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Carrie endured the jokes for a few days about her rapid departure from the get-together with good humor, refusing to say anything more about why she had run from the restaurant. When the jokes died down things returned to normal and Carrie's life fell back into routine. But there would be no complacency this time. Carrie would stick to her own rules. She would not be out after dark.

On the Friday of that week, about a half hour before her shift ended, Carrie was filling in at the counter for a worker on break when a man walked in the door carrying a box to be shipped. Why her eyes had been drawn to him when he entered she couldn't say, but they lingered on him. He was somewhere around six feet tall with a lean but not skinny build. His hair was neatly cut around his symmetrical face and he had a half smile. He was wearing dark slacks and a dark maroon shirt that shimmered just a bit in the fluorescent lights.

“Rawr,” mumbled Melanie, the clerk next to Carrie. “I'll take two and don't call me in the morning.”

Carrie giggled. Melanie was known as the “flirt clerk” because she often flirted with the more handsome customers. She would have been an assistant manager long ago if not for the habit.

As Carrie and Melanie worked through customers, every few moments Carrie looked up at the man and caught him staring at her. When he saw her, he smiled. It wasn't a leering smile, but it was something beyond just a casual smile. Carrie started to steel herself. If she timed her work right she could make him go to Melanie and wouldn't have to deflect him.

When he was next in line Carrie turned to glance at Melanie. She was doing an international shipment. There was no way she could avoid this man. So she finished up her customer and looked up with the plastic smile she had managed to perfect over the years.

"Next," she said.

As the man moved toward her there was something there that caught Carrie's attention. He didn't seem to walk as much as glide.

"How can I help you?" she asked in her most wooden voice, doing her best not to look at him.

When there was no response for several seconds Carrie looked up. He was looking intently at her with that smile on his face. Carrie wouldn't have called him gorgeous. She had seen several men more attractive. She'd even been on daytime dates with some of them. But there was something about him that made him more than just handsome.

"That's better," he said. His voice was smooth but not deep, like clear honey. "I always hate talking to the top of someone's head."

Carrie bit back the apology she was about to offer and tried to make her face look like a doll's, complete with silly smile. His smile never flickered.

"I'd like to send this package," he said.

"You've come to the right place," Carrie retorted, unable to hold back the sarcastic reply.

He let out a short laugh.

"I knew there was a personality in there," he said lightly. "Your eyes are far too intelligent for anything else."

Carrie found herself looking at the man. Something stirred within her. Something that had nothing to do with a handsome face smiling at her.

"You have gold flecks in your eyes," he said, his voice dropping just a little so Melanie couldn't hear. "That's beautifully unusual."

Carrie hadn't looked at her eyes in a long time. She had to think back to her freshman year of college when someone had last told her about her eyes. They were light brown, almost golden in the sunlight, and they did indeed have flecks of gold in them. How long had it been since someone had been close enough to notice? And then she looked at his. They were identical. She couldn't hold back a gasp of surprise.



“Strange coincidence, huh?” he asked.

Carrie felt it was anything but a coincidence. This man being here, looking at her, had to be purposeful. There had to be a link. If there was, she couldn't immediately place it. She had been an only child. Was he a distant relative who had somehow managed to track her down?

“Yeah,” Carrie replied absently.

There was a silence that lasted about two seconds too long. With what appeared to be a little effort the man unlocked eyes and looked down at the box on the counter.

“Anyway,” he began, his voice back to smooth honey, “I need to send this. But I want to set up an account. I just opened a business nearby and I'm going to be sending things all over the place.”

Like her mind, Carrie thought. All she could focus on was that he was near and would be coming in often.

“Is there some paperwork I need to fill out?” he asked, his smile turned up a notch or two on the brightness scale.

Carrie had to shake herself to come back down to earth.

“Huh? Oh yeah, yes. I'll meet you over at the middle desk,” she said, pointing to a row of three desks off to the side with privacy panels. “It shouldn't take more than a few minutes to get you set up.”

“That'd be great,” he replied.

Carrie memorized every detail as she went through the paperwork. His name was Samuel Rye and his business was only a couple blocks away called Crystal Stars. When she asked him about it, he told her it was a manufacturing business where they turned crystals and minerals into decorative objects people could hang from ceilings or in windows or whatever. Because of the special process they used, the stars retained a little light, even in total darkness, and shined.

“They're used as guardian pendants, good luck charms, and totems,” he said, his smile dimming just a bit. “To keep the dark away.”

Carrie shivered as he said it.

“Do they work?” Carrie found herself asking before she could stop herself.

“I haven't had any complaints,” he answered back, his smile back in full force.

By the time they had finished, it was time for Carrie to call it a week. She took the package from Sam and told her it would be sent out this evening. He thanked her, flashed one last smile at her, then glided out the door.

“My god,” Melanie said to Carrie as she walked back toward the counter. “Could you have taken any longer with him? Why didn't you just jump him right there?”

Carrie was feeling a little too light-headed to respond. She only smiled, clocked out, and went to her car. The drive home, even at the end of the week, seemed to fly by, and before she knew it she was at her condo complex. She got out of her car and practically skipped up the stairs. But her mood changed almost immediately when she got to her door. She needed that privacy screen door this weekend. Carrie quickly opened the door, rushed inside, and shut the door behind her.

Carrie warred with herself all weekend long. She picked out a solid steel door at the home hardware store and had it delivered. While she worked to get it installed she couldn't help but think of Sam. There was no way he could be thinking anything about her. A guy like that was bound to have his pick of women. There was a certain confidence and aura about him that was very attractive. Why would he go for an assistant manager at a shipping company? Of course, he had taken a lot longer than he needed to. He had talked to her about things totally unrelated to shipping packages. But she couldn't get anywhere close to him. The marks on her door were proof of that. He would be killed. The crystals keep the dark away. Keep the dark away. What did that mean? Had it meant anything?

By the time Monday rolled around Carrie's caution had won out over her hope. She had convinced herself that Sam was just another guy with only one thing on his mind. And when the day had passed and she didn't see him, she was all but convinced he was a jerk. A part of her defended him, telling her that it was unrealistic for him to send a package every day, but the other part shouted that side down. It was a defensive response and she knew it, but what choice did she have?

Carrie arrived home and found a note on her door from the property manager. He liked the new door and would have the wooden door repainted when she arranged for a convenient time. And a package had been delivered for her. Carrie went down to the office and picked up the package. It was small and light. When she looked at the return address she nearly dropped the package. It was from Crystal Stars.

Carrie tried to control herself as she walked briskly back to her apartment. When she was inside she grabbed a steak knife and cut open the package. Inside was a small card and a box about two inches square. Carrie pulled out the card. It was white, glossy card stock with a single blue, eight-pointed star on the front. She opened it.

*To keep the dark away.*  
- Sam

Carrie stared at the card. A hundred questions began to run through her mind. Who was Sam? How did he know where she lived? What did his words mean? Other questions flitted through her brain, so many that she had to sit down and catch her breath. Then she reached for the smaller box inside. It was the same glossy white color with the same blue star on top. She opened it. Inside was a five-pointed crystal star on a thin, flexible wire. At first glance the crystal was clear, but as Carrie picked it up it seemed to glow with an inner light of its own. A kaleidoscope of colors played along the arms of the star, turning from red to orange, all the way to blue and purple, then cycling back, again and a gain.

There was something else about the crystal as well, something more than just the changing colors. It was as if there was something in there, something embedded in the crystal itself, that seemed comforting, soothing. It was like...it was sort of like looking into Sam's eyes.

Carrie looked at the card again. She turned it over. There was another sentence on the back.

*Hang it where it will get some light.*

Carrie looked around her apartment. During the day the sun would come in from the balcony and hit the kitchen. It would mean leaving the balcony curtains open during the day again. There was also a window in her bedroom that got plenty of light as well. Somehow she wasn't quite ready to put something from a stranger in her bedroom. So she went with the kitchen. There were some magnetic hooks on her refrigerator. She'd put things on them from time to time, but mostly they just hung empty. So she put it there.

She would have been hard pressed to explain it, and just thinking about it made her shake her head, but Carrie would have sworn the feeling in her condo changed just for the hanging of the star. She found herself humming as she made her small dinner. She even caught herself laughing while watching a show on TV. And her sleep that night was as peaceful as it had been since...since she had lost her parents. She would have to see Sam the next day and thank him. And get some answers.

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It was about 15 minutes before her shift ended on the next day when Sam walked in. He was wearing dark blue slacks and a royal blue dress shirt that was made of the same shimmery material as the maroon one. Carrie was in the manager's office off to the side and didn't see him come in, but a moment later Melanie peeked her head in the door. She had a goofy grin on her face.

“Your dreamboat's back,” she said. “And he's looking for you.”

It took Carrie a moment to understand Melanie's comment, and then she nearly knocked the chair over she had been sitting in as she stood up so quickly.

“Down, girl,” Melanie joked. “I don't think he's running away.”

Carrie blushed, then fought herself to appear calm as her heart rate doubled and she walked out of the office. He was standing off to one side with a large box on the counter. He looked at her and a large smile came to his face showing off a set of flawless teeth. More than that, there was a warmth in that smile that made Carrie's heart skip a beat.

“H-hi,” Carrie squeaked when she got close to him.

She flushed and dropped her eyes to the counter. She felt like such a schoolgirl!

“And hi to you too,” he said as if he hadn't heard anything. “I hope I didn't interrupt anything.”

How he managed to sound so sincere mystified her. She could have been taking her last breath and would have interrupted it for him.

“Nothing that can't wait,” Carrie managed, her voice back under control.

“Good,” he said. “I was wondering if you could answer a couple questions.”

“I was wondering if you could too,” she said back, proud of herself for not letting his pretty smile get the best of her.

“Then you got it,” he replied as if she hadn't had a tone of accusation in her voice. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” she answered sincerely. “Thank you.” And then she caught herself. “How did you know where I lived? And what did you mean with that comment?”

He was unfazed by the first barrage of her assault and his expression never wavered.

“Those might be answers best given over dinner,” he said softly.

“I don't do dinner,” she said reflexively.

His cheery demeanor faded almost instantly. He looked at her intently for a moment, seeming to understand more than the face value of the statement. And was that concern hiding back there? And then his eyes were twinkling again.

“I'll pay,” he said lightly.

A small laugh escaped from Carrie and she smiled. His response had caught her off guard.

“I appreciate it,” she said, “but I can't.”

That was definitely concern on his face. Not the sort of concern or discouragement she had often seen on the faces of other guys she had turned down. This was something different. Something almost knowing.

“There's not a burly boyfriend involved, is there?” he asked, his smile looking forced.

“No,” Carrie sighed without catching herself.

Something flashed across his face, some raw emotion, but it was gone so quickly that Carrie couldn't identify it. Then his face seemed to relax. He wasn't smiling, but whatever other emotions had been there before were gone.

“I'll let you think about it,” he said. “It's probably a bit soon. Now, about this package.”

He asked a few questions, nothing that any other clerk couldn't have answered, then left the package and walked out. It wasn't until he was gone that Carrie realized he hadn't answered any of her questions. Maybe she'd have appetizers with him or something. Something that could be over in an hour. Something where she, and he, could still be home before dark.

Carrie had half expected the large box to arrive at her house, but it had apparently gone somewhere else. Thursday afternoon, at again about 15 minutes before her shift ended, Sam came in again. He was holding four boxes, each about the same size as the one that he had sent to Carrie. Carrie, who had been out in the area but not at the counter when he walked in, walked to an empty space at the counter and motioned him over.

“Those for me?” she asked as he came up to the counter.

She had been sleeping well for the last few nights and it had considerably brightened her mood. She was perhaps more playful than would have been considered decent, but she wanted him to ask her out again. She needed answers.

“They could be,” he replied, a little taken aback at her forwardness. “I could just change the addresses.”

“You have mine memorized?” Carrie playfully shot back.

“Etched in stone.”

“You ready to tell me how you got it?”

“Does that mean we're doing dinner?”

“Appetizers. I'm off in about 15 minutes. Meet me at the White Elephant?”

“Tell you what,” he countered. “You go home first, change into something a little less like a billboard for TransSpeed, and I'll pick you up.”

Carrie paused. Even if he followed her right out of work it would be nearly an hour before they were sitting down. That would only give them about 30 minutes before sunset, and then only 30 minutes to get home. But she had so many questions.

“Or is there a place closer to you?” he asked.

Carrie let out a breath of relief. There were a couple places only about 5 minutes from her condo. They weren't trendy spots, but the food was decent. And she'd be close to home.

“That sounds better,” Carrie smiled. “It'll also keep the gossip to a minimum,” she added, tilting her head toward Melanie who seemed to be keeping an eye on them.

Sam gave her a slight wink in understanding. He asked a few more random questions about shipping, then took his boxes and went back to stand in line while Carrie went back to the office. When she was leaving, she noted Sam was at the counter. He didn't look up as she went by.

Carrie drove home faster than normal and rushed up to her condo. She took a quick shower and then paused at her closet. A moment later she was pulling on a skirt that came a couple inches above her knees and a red blouse. She was debating whether red was the sort of color to wear on a first date and was about to switch to a different color when the doorbell rang. She half-walked, half-ran to the door and opened it.

Sam was standing there smiling with a single white rose in his hand. He extended it to her wordlessly.

“Thank you,” Carrie whispered.

As she took it from him their hands brushed against each other. A spark went through her at the contact. She nearly dropped the rose in surprise.

“Come in,” Carrie said, stepping aside. “I just need to grab some earrings and I'm ready.”

He came in and she closed the door behind him. She dashed to her room for a pair of earrings. As she put them in she checked the clock. It was 5:30. There was about an hour until sunset. Time enough to get a few questions answered and find out who he was. Time enough to get back home before it grew dark.

As they were leaving her condo she turned and locked the security screen.

“Problems with burglaries?” he asked casually.

“Not really,” Carrie answered quickly. “Never hurts to be careful though.”

“Wild animals?” he probed further.

Carrie's heart skipped a beat.

“No,” she squeaked. “I mean, no,” she replied, clearing her throat.

“I just noticed the gouges in the door,” he said as they started down the steps to the parking lot. “Seems like something pretty heavy was dragged on the door.”

Carrie held the rail securely as she took another step. Something told her his questions weren't random observations, but she wondered just how much he knew and how much she should tell him. If she admitted the truth to herself, she was afraid he'd run the other way if she told him what had caused the gouges. And she wanted his company. She knew it was selfish of her, but she had been lonely for so long.

“Yeah,” Carrie mumbled.

To Carrie's relief Sam didn't pursue the conversation. He walked her to the car and then drove to the place Carrie suggested. It wasn't fine dining, but it was frequented by people after working hours, so the food and drinks were decent even if the prices were a little high. They were able to get a small table away from the bar and most of the noise. After ordering drinks and appetizers, Carrie fixed Sam with a look.

“I hope I'm not in trouble,” he said cheerfully. “I'm over 21, so it's okay.”

“Who are you?” Carrie asked, trying her best not to look him directly in those twinkling eyes.

“Samuel Rye,” he smiled back, “owner of Crystal Stars, manufacturer and seller of crystals with a little light in them.”

“You know what I mean,” Carrie said, able to focus and get more serious. “How did you find out where I live?”

His smile slowly dimmed and then faded. His eyes, however, kept twinkling.

“It's not hard to do when you know the right people,” he answered lightly.

“What are you, government? FBI? Am I still being investigated? I had nothing to do with any of it.”

Carrie could feel the emotions welling up inside of her. Here she was thinking this guy was interested in her and he was just some glorified cop trying to figure out how she'd gotten so many people killed.

“Hey, easy,” Sam said soothingly. “I’m not investigating you and I’m not from any police or government agency.”

He reached out a hand as if to touch her arm but pulled it back before he did.

“Actually,” he said, looking down at the table and almost chuckling to himself, “I’d walked by TransSpeed a couple times before I came in and saw you. The first time I came in you were at lunch, so I asked one of the clerks, Melanie I think, who you were.” He looked up and smiled. “She was quite happy to find me your address.”

Carrie stared at him for a moment, then had to laugh as relief washed over her.

“I’m going to have to make her work overtime,” she said. “That little sneak!”

Sam laughed with her. Carrie felt herself get warm inside.

“So tell me about yourself,” Sam said. “How did a girl like you end up at TransSpeed?”

The minutes seemed to drift by as Carrie lost herself in conversation. Sam was engaging and quick-witted, and was always ready with a nod or smile. He also seemed to share her interests in books and movies. And when he laughed...perhaps it was that Carrie hadn't been emotionally invested in a guy in a long time, but it was musical to her. And it seemed to affect him too. Like he was laughing for the first time in a long, long time.

“I think I’m going to need to excuse myself for a moment,” Carrie said, smiling.

“Your makeup still looks good,” Sam replied.

Carrie gave him a smile and chuckle. She turned to grab her purse off the back of her chair and stopped in mid-motion. She had been sitting facing away from any windows. As she had turned she was able to see out of one. It was dark. She had stayed too long.

“Something wrong?” Sam asked, his voice edged with tension and concern.

“I have to go,” she said, grabbing her purse and standing. “Please, take me home now.”

“It wasn't the makeup thing, was it?” he asked, standing and waving a server over. “Because I meant it,” he added, trying to force a smile to his face.

“No, we just need to go. I need to get home. Please.”

The server came over and Sam handed her some cash to cover their bill, then he followed Carrie to the door. She paused at it, looking into the parking lot. The car wasn't that far away, but there were so

many shadows. Between cars, at the edge of the building. And how was she going to get to her condo?

“You okay?” Sam asked.

“No.”

He didn't say anything but started leading her toward the car. Carrie turned her head on a quick swivel with every car they passed. When she sat down in his car and he closed the door she grew more tense. As he walked around the car she stared at him, hoping against all hope that something didn't jump out of the shadows at him. When he stepped in and closed the door she let out a long breath.

“Hey, it's alright.”

“No it's not,” she said, looking out the windows at all the shadows. “It really isn't.”

Sam remained quiet as he pulled the car out of the parking lot and drove back to her complex. Carrie hardly looked at him on the way. Her mind was racing. Her eyes were darting across every dark spot, looking for anything that was moving. And she was wondering what to do when they got to her complex. She knew whatever it was would be there. It had been there before. The security screen on the door seemed like a stupid idea now. It would take her twice as long to open her front door. That was time she wasn't sure she had.

The car pulled into the parking lot and Sam quickly got out before Carrie could say anything. He came around to her side and opened the door for her. She didn't make a move to step out.

“It's alright,” he repeated.

“No,” Carrie said, her voice barely above a whisper.

She didn't see anything, but she knew whatever it was, it was out there, waiting. She turned to look at Sam. The smile on his face was forced, she could tell, but the look in his eyes wasn't. Not quite determination and not quite rage, mixed with a little twinkle. The flecks seemed to catch the light from some of the lamps and sparkled.

“Come on,” he said softly. “I'll walk you up.”

There was something in his eyes and voice that seemed to call to her beyond the physical. There was a comfort there that she hadn't felt in so long. She slowly got out of the car.

He walked silently next to her toward the stairway and down the walkway to her door. Her hands were shaking so much that she dropped her keys. He bent down and picked them up for her. As he stood up she looked at him and caught his eyes. They were moist. She turned away to unlock the door. When she turned back he was looking out over the parking lot.

The screen door opened, then the wooden door. He turned to her. It must have been her imagination. There was nothing in his eyes now. Just the regular twinkle. And his smile.

“I enjoyed our time,” he said softly.



“Y-yes,” Carrie said, her eyes darting to look around him. “I did too.”

Carrie's eyes continued darting around. Everywhere there were shadows. How could she have stayed out so late? And why with him? She didn't want him to end up like everyone else. There had to be a way to save him.

“Do you have to go home now?” she asked. “Wouldn't you like to come in for a bit?”

She almost regretted saying it. It sounded like a wanton invitation. What would he think of her?

“Not tonight,” he said, his smile making her feel warm and, somehow, making the darkness seem just a little less dark.

“Not to do anything,” she quickly added. “You know, just to talk.”

Carrie wanted to cringe. She sounded desperate. But she couldn't tell him the real reason. It sounded better to look desperate than crazy.

“I'd like to take you up on your offer, but another night,” he said. “I have an early morning tomorrow.”

He took her hands in his and Carrie practically jumped at the charge she felt.

“I really enjoyed myself tonight,” he said, his voice a little husky now. “I want to do it again. Soon.”

He let go of her hands and turned to go. Without thinking, Carrie reached out and grabbed his arm. He turned around to look at her.

“Don't go,” she said, nearly begging. “Please.”

He didn't look upset or even very surprised. With his other hand he gently lifted her hand from his arm and raised it to his lips. He brushed it ever so slightly.

“I'll see you again,” he said.

He slowly let her hand go and stepped back, then turned to go. Carrie watched until he'd reached the stairway, then slipped inside her condo. It took an effort for her to not shut the door in her panic. She turned the deadbolt in the screen door and then shut and bolted the wooden door. A tear came to her eye as she leaned against the door. The star crystal seemed to illuminate the condo. Perhaps it was enough.

Carrie had been leaning against the door for nearly a minute, trying to calm herself and reassure herself that Sam would be okay when she heard it. There was no mistaking that low growl, not when it had followed her throughout her life. It wasn't coming from her balcony, and it wasn't just outside her door. She knew where it was. Down in the parking lot. By Sam.

A moment later came a roar. A series of snarls and growls followed. The sounds seemed to go on for hours, though it was under minute. And then came the silence. The tears were already flowing down Carrie's cheeks as she slumped down against the door and collapsed on the floor of her condo, sobs wracking her body. Still crying minutes later she fell into a grieving and guilt-induced sleep. She

never heard the sirens approaching or the police knocking on her door to see if she could shed any light on the body that lay dead in the parking lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carrie was hardly present at work the next day. It was Friday and most of the clerks were smiling, ready for the weekend. Carrie felt like a raincloud. Melanie remarked that her eyes were red, but Carrie hardly answered her. Melanie, who normally was quick with something snarky, offered her an ear if she needed it then quietly left the manager's office.

Carrie barely made it through the day. When she left no one said anything to her. The weekend was quiet and lonely. She didn't leave the house and barely ate. Once, late Saturday, she happened to look at the star crystal. Its brightness and seeming warmth for a moment cheered her. It didn't last long however. It reminded her of who had given it to her, someone she would never see again. Someone, like all the others, she had caused to get killed.

By the time Monday rolled back around Carrie felt like a zombie. She got a few mumbled greetings but not much else. Twice during the day she thought about going outside and standing in traffic. She wasn't sure she could live with the pain.

Near the end of her day she was at the counter filling in again.

"Next," she called out robotically.

A man placed a box on the counter before her. She hardly looked up at him.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

"I certainly hope so," he answered. "I'm looking for a beautiful young woman who owes me a second date."

Carrie's head shot up. She did a double and then a triple-take. Tossing aside her decorum and company rules she reached across the counter and grabbed Sam in a hug. She wasn't aware of the tears running down her cheeks as he silently hugged her back. When she finally tore herself away several seconds later, there was a silly grin on her face despite the tears she was wiping away.

"What-- How--" she stammered out, unable to form a complete sentence. "I heard it."

His eyes seemed to twinkle under the fluorescent lights and that familiar smile was on his face. To his credit he didn't play dumb or pretend he didn't know what she was talking about.

"Pick you up at 6:00?"

"How are you here?" Carrie demanded again, almost yelling. "I heard it!"

"Not here," he said, the smile thinning just a bit as he nodded toward Melanie and one of the other clerks who were both staring. "At dinner. Please just put this one on my bill."

He left the package on the counter, gave her a wink, then turned and walked out.

“Looks like someone just rose from the grave,” Melanie said, smiling at Carrie.

Carrie looked at her co-worker, unable to stop smiling. He should have been dead. Everyone else had been.

“Yes,” she said absently.

The thought occurred to her that she wasn't actually sure which of them, her or Sam, was the one who had risen from the grave.

Carrie left the office a few minutes later more confused than happy. Not that she wasn't happy to see him again, but she was very confused. She'd heard it. There were the gouges on her door. She had seen her parents die. She had seen others die. She had been out after dark. And yet there he had been. He shouldn't have been alive. Not after all these years.

By the time she got home she had tossed the confusion aside and chosen happiness. It was possible this was a change in her life. Maybe it would all start coming together now. Maybe she could start being like other people and didn't have to be afraid of the dark anymore. And maybe, just maybe, there was a future for her with a guy.

At 6:00 precisely her doorbell rang. Carrie answered it wearing her little black dress. It came a little higher above her knee than the skirt from the first date did, and the cowl neck hung seductively low. She didn't want to appear too eager for him, but again, it had been so long since someone had done more than look at her from a distance. A little close looking seemed appropriate.

“Wow,” Sam said as he looked at her.

He was wearing dark gray slacks and a black dress shirt with faintly iridescent pinstripes. For some reason they reminded Carrie of the star hanging in her kitchen.

“It's not too much?” Carrie asked, suddenly self-conscious about how much of herself she was showing.

“If I had a daughter I might question it, but from where I'm standing now I can't say I object,” he answered with that familiar smile.

Carrie shrugged, smiled, and then threw her arms around him. There was a rush of energy that shot through her and nearly took her breath away. Then she found herself crying on his shoulder. She tried to tell herself she was being stupid for putting so much into a guy she didn't really even know, but she couldn't help herself. She had been alone, truly alone, for so long. And here he was, alive.

“You're going to get my shirt all wet,” Sam said into her hair, though he made no effort to end the embrace. “And we'll be late for dinner. We have reservations.”

Carrie pulled back and wiped at her cheeks and eyes.

“Sorry,” she said, trying to laugh through the tears. “I'm not normally like this. I was...”

"It's okay," he said softly. "I kind of understand."

"No, you couldn't possibly," she said.

"You might be surprised," he said enigmatically.

Carrie looked at him. She had never really done that yet. The way he moved. That easy smile. The way his arms felt around her. And that energy she felt when they touched. That couldn't all be her imagination, could it?

As they walked to his car Carrie couldn't help but look around. The sun still had a half hour or so before setting, but it didn't bother her quite as much this time. She knew she wouldn't be home before dark. She also knew, or hoped she knew, that Sam wouldn't die.

He drove them to a restaurant Carrie had only been to once before. It was more expensive than what she chose for herself, but the food had been good. They had a table near the back. Carrie tried to sit in a seat that faced the windows, but Sam steered her into one that looked at a seascape on the wall behind him.

"I normally like to look out the windows," she said, turning her head to look at the darkening sky.

"You're much too distracted that way," he replied. "I prefer to have all of your attention."

"There's a reason," she said, wondering if she should bring it up now.

"Let's order first," he cut in gently.

A moment later a waiter came. Sam ordered a bottle of white wine and then asked if he might take the liberty of ordering for the two of them. Carrie shrugged and said yes. They made small talk until after the waiter had poured the wine and left, then Carrie fixed him with her gaze.

"What happened?" she asked sternly.

His face slowly grew serious. He paused for several moments and Carrie wondered if he would answer or try to evade the question. He hadn't denied anything back at her work.

"There are more of them out there," he said without answering the question.

Carrie wanted to shriek and run at the same time. She also wanted to know. So many times she had warred with herself about whether the creatures were real or not, each time knowing that they were and that there was nothing she could do about it. But if there were more of them out there she wasn't safe. Neither was he. Not after dark.

"We have to go," she said. "I have to be home before dark."

Sam reached out a hand and placed it on her wrist on the table. No, it wasn't her imagination. There was a definite spark of energy every time they touched.

"It's okay," he said, his voice more serious than she had ever heard it. "I hunt *them*."

Carrie's mouth dropped open and she knew it. She was also too stupefied to close it.

“What them?” Carrie finally managed. “What are they? Who are you?”

He occupied a couple seconds admiring the wine in his glass before taking another sip. As he put the glass down he took a deep breath and then fixed her with an intensity that made her sit up straight.

“No one says their real name anymore,” he began. “We mostly call them shadow cats or shadow beasts. They are real, they are dangerous, and they've been following you for your whole life.”

“Why? Why me? And who is 'we'? Who are you?”

He looked down at the table and took another deep breath. Why did this seem so hard for him? He wasn't the one who was alone.

“The full story is not mine to tell,” he said, looking back up at her. “What I can tell you is this. The crystal in your condominium will protect you when you are there. It has no power over them but the light in it keeps them away. That's why you've always been safe in the daytime. Without trying to sound poetic, there's a little sunshine in there. You probably haven't seen it really shine, and hopefully you won't, but you'd understand if you did. It's pretty bright,” he finished with a smile.

“Who are you?” Carrie repeated.

“It's probably best for now if you just know me as Sam,” he said, deflecting her question. “One day, soon, I hope to be able to tell you the entire story. Knowing it all now would needlessly complicate things. What is important for now is that you know you are in danger when you're out after dark.”

“I've known that for a long time. But you're not? These shadow things can't hurt you?”

He offered a small chuckle.

“No, shadow cats are dangerous to anyone and everyone, even the people that use them. Their danger to me is no less than their danger to you. Only, I'm dangerous for them too.”

“What are you, some sort of shadow beast Superman or something?”

Carrie said it half-jokingly, but there was a part of her that wanted it to be true. After all those years of being alone, having her own Superman to defend her would be nice. No, it would be more than nice.

Sam managed a half smile at her comment.

“I'm sorry,” Carrie said softly. “I didn't mean...you know, I'm not very good at jokes. I had a therapist back in high school who told me I was under-socialized. I guess I still am.”

“I bet your therapist never had to deal with shadow beasts,” Sam countered, rolling with the flow.

A small laugh escaped Carrie, surprising her. To think that she was able to laugh about these shadow cats who had been following her throughout her life. There was a sense of relief growing inside her.

She wasn't crazy. It wasn't her fault. Or was it?

“Why me?” she asked again. “Why are these things following me? Are they hunting me?”

Sam picked up his wine glass and absently swirled the liquid inside of it. His eyes were focused on the glass but Carrie could tell his thoughts were on something else. Was he debating what he could tell her?

“I'm not sure the answer to that question will help you sleep any easier,” he said at last, his eyes not meeting hers.

“I'm not sure your non-answer will help me sleep any easier,” Carrie deadpanned.

Sam laughed. Despite herself, Carrie had to laugh too. A small voice inside her whispered that she shouldn't be so pliable to Sam's expressions, but she refused to listen to it. She was attracted to Sam in a way she couldn't understand. She could only hope he felt the same.

“I suggest we leave that answer for another time as well,” Sam said at last.

“I'm beginning to sense a pattern here. You tell me what I already know and nothing else. Or am I missing something?”

“I told you about the crystal,” Sam defended with mock offense. “And that, for the first time in your life, the hunter is becoming the hunted.”

“But you won't tell me what they're hunting for. That's kind of important to me.”

Sam took another sip of his wine.

“Me too,” he said softly.

Their salads arrived a moment later and the conversation devolved into smalltalk. By the time they finished dinner, an hour later, most of the bottle of wine was gone and Carrie had described the night her parents had been killed. She had done her best not to cry while telling it, not wanting to draw attention to herself in the restaurant, but a few tears had escaped her eyes anyway. At one point she had managed to catch a glimpse of Sam's face while telling the story. She had expected to see the usual expression of pity she got when she told the story, but instead his face had turned hard, almost grim. She had remarked on it. He had responded by wiping away a single tear himself and then telling her how he was truly sorry. He had sounded so hurt when he said the words, as if her loss was his too.

The walk out to the car still made Carrie tremble. Sam had resumed his casual air, and it made her feel more at ease too, but her head was still on a swivel every time they passed a shadow. She didn't know how many Sam had encountered that first night, and she had no idea how many there were. The only thing she knew for certain was that Sam had said she was still in danger if she was out after dark. So why was she out after dark with him?

The drive home was uneventful. Sam tried to engage her in conversation, but too many questions and a growing sense of fear kept Carrie from being able to answer in anything other than single words and grunts. After a time he gave up and they continued to drive in silence. When they arrived at her

complex parking lot, Sam shut off the car and turned to her. He looked reassuringly at her.

“You'll be okay,” he said softly. “They can't harm you once you're inside.”

“But I'm not inside,” Carrie said stiffly, her eyes darting around the parking lot. “Can you promise me I'll make it inside?”

He only paused a moment before answering, yet it was enough to make Carrie very uneasy.

“Yes,” he said. “You'll make it inside.”

She didn't comment on his delay. Her mind was instead focused on her getting to her condo. She also wondered how he would get back to his car. He said he hunted them, but she didn't see anything to hunt with. He didn't have a gun, bow and arrow, or any hunting gear. He had obviously made it the last time. Even so, she didn't know how.

Sam stepped out of the car and walked over to her side. As Carrie stepped out she thought she caught a slight movement between two cars behind him. A gasp escaped her and she began to tremble. Sam turned and looked in the direction she had been looking. After a moment he turned back to her.

“Just a regular cat,” he said soothingly. “Come on.”

He took her hand. The little jolt of energy shot through her arm as he did, making her gasp again. He led her to the stairway and they climbed up, her head turning from side to side. She could hear the sound of someone's television and a car pulling into the parking lot after them. No other sounds reached her ears. The lack of obvious danger made Carrie more tense. Every sense she had told her she was being watched, and yet she couldn't see or hear anything to validate it.

Her hands were trembling as she took the keys from her purse. It took her two tries to get the key into the lock to open the security screen. It only took her one to open the door. As she did, she noted that the star crystal was glowing brighter than normal, casting faint shadows throughout her kitchen and into the dining area.

“What does that mean?” she asked, turning to Sam. “Are they here?”

To her surprise Sam didn't look tense or nervous. In fact, he seemed far too calm for her. The flecks in his eyes caught the light from the star crystal and seemed to be dancing.

“There's something close,” he said without much concern.

“Come in,” she said, stepping inside the condo. “Just stay here. You said they can't get in here with the crystal.”

“Your offer is very tempting,” he smiled, not moving from the threshold, “but I can't. Don't worry.”

“That's easy for you to say. I saw what those things did,” she continued, her voice becoming slightly angry. “They killed my parents.” Then, more softly, “I don't want them to kill you too. Please.”

For a moment it looked like he might step inside as he hesitated. Then he raised her hand to his lips

and kissed the back gently before letting go. He stepped back and closed the screen door.

“Lock it,” he said. “I’ll see you soon.”

Reflexively, Carrie locked the screen door and then closed the other door, securely fastening the deadbolts. She stood by the door, one ear listening and one eye on the star crystal. As the seconds ticked past she tried to imagine where Sam was on the way to his car. She was guessing he was down the stairway when a growl sounded so close outside her front door that she jumped back with a scream. The star crystal flashed a brilliant white, lighting the inside of her condo like it was daytime. A moment later it dimmed back to a softer glow. Outside, Carrie thought she could hear snarling and growling. There were punctuated moments of wails and snarls, a yowl that seemed to split her eardrums, then silence.

Carrie stayed where she was, unable to make herself move toward the door to see what was going on outside and unwilling to move to her bedroom as though things were alright. She hoped Sam would come back to her door and ring the doorbell to tell her he was okay, but with each passing moment that event seemed less and less likely. Had the crystal been glowing less strongly, as it usually did, she perhaps could have found the courage to move to the door and peer out. But it stayed steady. As steady as it had been when she had been hearing the noises outside. She didn't want to, but there was only one conclusion Carrie could draw. The shadow beast was still out there somewhere...and Sam wasn't.

It was about a half hour later when the crystal's light dimmed back to its normal level. Rather than going to the door Carrie turned toward her bedroom. Despite the story the crystal seemed to tell her, she tried to hold on to the belief that Sam was still alive. There was no basis for that belief, she knew, yet she held on to it. It was the only way she could keep herself going. Feeling numb, she dressed for bed and then crawled under the covers. She would see Sam tomorrow, she told herself, and he'd explain what happened. She would see him tomorrow.

Tuesday morning came with an anxious, and probably unfounded, sense of hope. Carrie dressed and went to work. She grew more anxious as each hour passed. But she clocked out and was on her way home with no sign of Sam. Wednesday passed the same way. When she got home, anxiety had turned to depression.

“Why did I let him take me out after dark?” she asked herself as she cried over a frozen dinner. “I killed him. Just like my parents.”

She couldn't finish dinner. She turned off the TV and the living room lights and slowly shuffled toward her bedroom. She was almost there when the star crystal suddenly began shining like daylight. Carrie stopped. A low growl came to her ears. It was coming from the area of her balcony.

“The crystal in your condominium will protect you when you are there,” came Sam's words in her mind.

She wasn't sure how reassuring those words were now. Not with one of them just outside.

The growling continued. There was a different tone to it though. A slightly higher tone that almost sounded frustrated. Like it wanted to get in. Carrie immediately thought of the gouges on her front door. When they had been made it had been done in one long scratch. There hadn't been a real effort



to come through the door. If one of those things could do that with one scratch, what could they do with several or with real effort? And would a glass sliding door provide any safety?

And then a second growl answered the first. This one came from just outside the front door. Carrie nearly wet herself in fright. There were two of them, and they had her trapped in her condo. Her thoughts flew back to the night her parents had died. Two of these beasts had torn into them and left them dead in front of their own home. They had come now for her. How could one tiny crystal keep them out?

With a force of will Carrie moved stiffly to her bed and crawled under the covers. She pulled them up to her chin and sat in bed, waiting for the inevitable. Sooner or later she would hear the scratch on the sliding glass door or in the security screen and then one or both beasts would be inside. She was going to die in her own bed.

Tears began rolling down Carrie's cheeks as resignation made her think of all she had missed in her life. Growing up without parents, bouncing from foster home to foster home. All the parties and friends she had never had because going out at night was something she couldn't do. And all the people that had died because of her. It was only fitting, she thought to herself, that she go out the same way as all those others she loved or might have loved. So she waited for it to happen.

Somewhere during the night Carrie fell asleep. She awoke to the sound of her alarm going off on a bright and sunny Thursday morning. For some reason she wasn't dead. The two beasts hadn't come inside. She couldn't believe it was all due to the crystal, but there was no other explanation. It had saved her life. If only Sam had been carrying one with him she might see him again.

"You look like a zombie," Melanie said to Carrie when she arrived at work. "You need to go home and sleep."

"I'm okay," Carrie muttered, getting herself a cup of coffee.

"If that's what you look like when you're okay, I'd hate to see you when you're sick."

Carrie spent all day in the manager's office. She came out twice to deal with customers, then retreated to the office as soon as she could. By the time 3:00 rolled around it was pretty much a conclusion among the clerks that Carrie had been dumped by the good-looking customer. Carrie heard as much as two clerks talked within earshot of the door. She didn't care. It was better than the real story, that he was dead because she let him take her out after dark.

Carrie clocked out a half hour later and walked out to her car. No one said anything to her. She drove home and parked. As she entered her condo her eyes happened to glance at the star crystal dangling on her refrigerator. The sun hadn't begun to set yet, but it seemed as if the crystal was already glowing. That could only mean that those creatures were near.

"Do it," Carrie said to herself. "Just do it."

She had been debating with herself all afternoon. She could end all of her misery by just throwing the crystal away. The beasts would then be free to come in and get her. It would all be over. She closed the door behind her and headed toward the kitchen. It would take just a moment and then, later in the night, it would all be over. She reached out to the crystal. As her hand was about to close on it her

doorbell rang.

“Who's there?” Carrie shouted.

There was no answer. Maybe it had been a delivery. She knew they sometimes left packages at the door after ringing the bell. Her curiosity trumped her depression and she went to the door. She opened the wooden door and stopped.

“Hey there. Hungry?”

Sam stood outside her security screen door. Even through the black metal she could make out his sparkling eyes and bright smile.

“You're dead,” was all she could think to say. “They killed you.”

“Not yet. Would you like to invite me in while you get changed? I don't want to look like a stalker out here.”

Carrie opened the door for him. Where he had been dressed in a colored shirt before, he looked more like an undertaker now in black slacks and a long-sleeved black dress shirt. She stepped aside as he came in. She would have thrown her arms around him if she hadn't been so shocked.

“Let's not go out,” she said, closing the two doors behind him. “We can order in.”

“We kind of need to,” he said, his smile looking the same while his eyes seemed to be trying, unsuccessfully, to hide something not as pleasant.

“Need to?” Carrie asked, her voice suddenly rising. “Need to?! I don't need to look over my shoulder on my way home! I don't need to spend days worrying if you're even alive or not! And I certainly don't need two of those things sitting outside my condo all night! What I need are answers!!”

The anger in her voice surprised her. It was as if two decades of frustration and fear were all coming out at once, aimed at this smiling stranger who kept wanting her to stay out after the sun went down. Sam never flinched, though his smile dimmed.

“I can give you a couple more,” he said gently. “The rest you're likely to discover yourself tonight. If you'll come to dinner with me.”

The offer was tempting. But so far all she'd gotten from Sam was extra fear and stress.

“No,” she said. “I know what you're doing. You're taking me out at night so those things come after me. I don't know why, but you're trying to get me killed. The only thing I'll discover tonight if I go out with you is how much it hurts to get killed. No thank you.”

She crossed her arms and glared at Sam, challenging him to deny her words. He looked back at her and she could see the conflicting emotions in his eyes. All she really wanted was for him to deny it. Just tell her that she was wrong.

“You're partly right,” he said at last. “I am taking you out at night so the shadow beasts come. But

they're not after you. Not yet. Though maybe they are now, if there were two of them outside your place here. Your time may be up. If it is, I'm the only hope you have."

"My only hope for what? A speedy death?"

"To live without fear. And I will tell you one other thing," he added after a moment. "Those were not your parents who died that night so long ago. They were two guardians who brought you to what they believed was safety. Your parents are alive. They are waiting for you. You can go back to them as soon as we find whoever has sent the shadow beasts after you."

The words hit Carrie so hard that she nearly lost her balance while standing. Not her parents? Her parents were still alive? Where? Who was she then? Who was Sam?

"Who were they?" she asked.

"Your guardians," he repeated.

"Who sent them? Who assigned them to me? If they weren't my parents, who were they?"

There was a long pause before Sam answered again. When he did, there was no smile on his face and the flecks in his eyes appeared to blaze fiercely.

"They were my parents," he answered softly.

Carrie stood speechless. In less than two minutes her entire world view had dramatically altered.

"I'll wait here," Sam said, moving toward her living room. "Dress casual. We'll be running tonight."

Carrie looked at Sam's clothes as he sat down on her couch. Exactly what was his definition of casual? Not that she doubted he could run in whatever he was wearing, but what was she supposed to wear?

"Casual?" she asked.

"Something you can run in," he reiterated, picking up a magazine from her coffee table.

"Um, okay."

Carrie emerged from her room a few minutes later in a casual top, jeans, and tennis shoes. Sam gave her a quick once-over and stood up.

"Let's go," he said, moving to the door. "Hope you like burgers."

They drove to a casual restaurant a few blocks away specializing in burgers. After they ordered, Sam started a conversation about her work and how things were going. Carrie played along, understanding that he was just trying to kill time until their food arrived. After the server placed their burgers and fries in front of them, the conversation immediately took a more serious turn.

"I'm sorry," Carrie said. "I didn't know. All this time I thought they were my parents. I'm so sorry for you."

“Thanks,” he said softly. “It's been a long time, even longer since I last saw them, but I appreciate it. In some ways they were more your parents than mine. I miss them though. Or I miss what I remember of them.”

“Why? Why were they with me?”

“That's a bit of a long story, longer than we have time for tonight. Here are, if you will, the highlights. Your name is not Carrie Dunbar, in case you haven't figured that out. Your real name is Princess Cirene Alsoth, daughter of Emperor Almen and Empress Luwen, rulers of the Four Kingdoms. Shortly before you were born, war broke out in the kingdoms. It should have ended quickly, but the invading army had two sorcerers with them, powerful ones from the northern lands. You were sent here, under the care of my parents, regents of one of the kingdoms and trained Guardians of the Empire. Somehow, one of the sorcerers discovered where you had been sent and came after you, bringing with him the shadow beasts. That actually turned the tide of the war. Had that sorcerer stayed, the imperial army would likely have been defeated. It took many years, but eventually the invading forces were beaten back. That was when it was discovered that one of the sorcerers was no longer with them. It didn't take too long to figure out that he had come here for you.”

“To kill me?”

Sam paused and took a drink of his soda. Carrie recognized this as a stalling tactic he used whenever he didn't know how much to say or if he wanted to say it.

“At first, no. You see, you're not just a normal person.”

“I'm a princess, I know now,” Carrie said with a smile, trying to interject some humor into what would have sounded outlandish if not for her history.

Sam smiled back genuinely.

“Not just that. Your parents are sorcerers, very powerful ones. As their daughter, you have inherited their power. There is within you a great power. It is currently dormant, though I imagine you have felt it spark when you and I have touched. I've felt it.”

“I kind of thought that was just me,” she said, managing a shy smile. “You know, that thing that happens sometimes when a guy and girl..”

Carrie trailed off, blushing tremendously. She looked down at her food, but then glanced back up. To her surprise, Sam seemed to be blushing a little as well. He noticed her looking and coughed while he looked down at his plate.

“Anyway,” he said, coughing again, “the idea behind the beasts is to completely isolate you. Then, when you're totally alone, he comes.”

“And what?” Carrie asked when he didn't continue.

“No one knows for sure. There are stories, rumors. Supposedly there are ways to take power from one individual and give it to yourself. I have no idea if that's true or not. If there were really two beasts

outside your condo, then he was ready to try.”

“There were definitely two. Probably whatever one had come right after you last left and another one.”

“Oh, it wasn't the one that was there when I last saw you.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I killed that one. And the one before that too.”

“You killed them? How? I saw them kill my – I mean, your parents. They're really big and fast.”

“All creatures have weaknesses. If luck holds you will see what I mean tonight.”

They lapsed into silence for a time, each one picking at their meal without really eating it. Carrie continued to glance out the windows, watching the sky slowly turn dark.

“Then what?” she finally asked, giving up on eating and pushing her plate away. “What happens when you kill them?”

“Then *you* happen.”

“*I* happen? What do you mean?”

Sam pushed his plate away as well, his burger half eaten.

“I am no sorcerer, at least not like your parents and certainly not like you,” he said. “I do not know the proper ways to summon your powers or gifts. When we begin training in our gifts, the first method to bring them out is intense emotional or physical stress. You have lived with this most of your life, so your powers are certainly close to the surface. When the time comes, I have no doubt that they will come to you.”

Carrie looked at him. He couldn't be serious.

“I want to believe you,” she said, disbelief written across her face, “but you're speaking nonsense. First you tell me that my real name is Karen --”

“Cirene,” he corrected.

“-- Cirene and that I'm a princess somewhere. Then you tell me that those were *your* parents who died that night and that these things, shadow beasts or cats or whatever, are trying to kill me now because I have magic powers. It's all a little hard to believe.”

“I'm certain it is,” he responded easily. “Given the world you've grown up in it makes sense to think you're just an ordinary woman who's been born under one of the most unlucky stars. But then think about it. While the rest of the world is safe after dark, you have to be inside. Huge, dark beasts that come out of the shadows killed who you thought were your parents, and probably dozens of other people who have been around you, all without leaving a trace. And there are the marks on your door. Surely those were not put there by someone making a joke at your expense. Hard to believe indeed, yet

no less true. You are a princess and sorceress, and tonight, if all goes well, you will meet the sorcerer who wishes to have your powers.”

Carrie sat in silence for a long moment.

“It still sounds crazy,” she muttered.

“For this world, yes. In the world from which you come, no.”

They sat for another half hour, mostly in silence. Carrie asked a couple more times about how she could be a sorceress, but Sam either would not or could not give her any further information. He then indicated it was time to go. Carrie looked at the dark outside. Her stomach began to rumble. She had lived her whole life in fear of the dark, afraid of these things, and now she was intentionally set to meet them. Her only protection was a man who called her a princess. It took a supreme effort of will to move and keep her dinner from coming back up.

Carrie broke out in a cold sweat during the drive back to her condo. Sam made one attempt to talk to her, but she was unable to speak. When he opened her door, he had to help her to stand as her legs shook and she couldn't support herself.

“Do we wait here?” she asked, her voice breaking.

“Not as you are, no,” he smiled. “You need to sit down...or have a strong drink.”

She leaned heavily on him as they slowly climbed the stairs. Every time he took a breath she jerked her head, looking for something moving. Not seeing anything did nothing for her. She knew they were out there, two of them. Two had been enough to kill his parents.

At her door she couldn't summon the strength to even reach into her purse for her keys, so while she leaned on him he reached in and grabbed them. As he began to unlock the security door two growls sounded. Carrie's head snapped up. They were on either side of them, about 15 feet away. How had they come up here? How come she hadn't seen them?

Sam opened the security door and then quickly opened the front door, pushing Carrie into the doorway. The crystal star in her condo was shining brightly, sending light from inside out onto the walkway.

“Get inside,” Carrie said. “Come on.”

Sam looked at her and the flecks in his eyes were practically lights of their own. She looked down at his right arm where it was held against his midsection. In his hand and leaning against his arm was a long, white blade about a foot long. Its handle was black and the curved blade tapered from about five inches wide at the handle to a point at the end. It gave off a soft white glow. Carrie knew it was his weapon against these beasts, and that he was on her side, and still it seemed the most wicked weapon she had ever seen.

Sam closed the security door part way, creating a sort of barrier between himself and Carrie, at the same time clearing any obstacles between himself and the two beasts. Neither one moved. Carrie could see them. He had called them shadow cats, but their build was more like a bulldog with stocky bodies. They both stood about four feet high at the shoulder and their legs were sturdy. She couldn't see

any signs of claws or even eyes. They were like shadows, completely black.

Sam turned to his left and took a step toward the beast there. His knife began to glow brighter. The beast backed up with each step, seemingly afraid to get close to the light. At the fourth step, the beast behind Sam, and now closer to Carrie, suddenly charged. It was as though Sam was suddenly there in front of the door. His knife flashed daylight white and he shoved open the screen door. The shadow beast crashed into it, shaking the walls of the building. An arm reached around, three long claws visible in the bright light of the knife. Sam slashed. The arm severed at the elbow joint and the black limb dropped to the walkway. The beast let out a shriek of pain and jumped back. Black blood dripped from the severed limb.

When Carrie turned to look back at Sam, he had moved back toward the second beast. The knife was very dim, almost dark, and the beast was close to him. However, it was wary of getting too close and continued to snarl and growl at a distance. Sam lunged in, swinging the knife toward the beast's head. There was no flash of light, and the knife passed through the beast as if through smoke.

Carrie's attention was drawn back to her left at the low growl. She turned to see the first shadow beast approaching. Even without its front left leg Carrie knew it was more than enough of a creature to kill her. She took a step back into her condo. The creature continued to move toward her. When it got close, Carrie kicked the security door with her foot. But with no flash of light or anything else, the door went right through the beast and clanged against the wall. She took another step back.

The shadow beast moved into the doorway. The light from the crystal streamed around her. Within the light the beast became more solid than shadow. She could make out the eyes, faintly glowing, and its long claws at the end of powerful legs were clearly visible. It hesitated. Carrie hoped it was the crystal keeping it at bay. She had no other defense.

The thing stood staring at her for what seemed minutes. Then, as if it had made a resolution, it emitted a long, low growl, as much full of menace as it seemed pain, and stepped forward. Carrie opened her mouth to scream, but the sound caught in her throat and she began coughing. The beast took another step, its growl definitely holding more pain than threat. And then it let loose with an ear-piercing shriek. It slammed against the walls of the doorway, struggling to get free. Sam stood there beside it, his white knife fairly shining as he slashed at the shadow beast again and again. Then, he dropped to the ground. Seeing its escape route, the beast bounded over Sam and began fleeing down the walkway. Sam stood up. There was black blood on his face and across his shirt.

"Let's go," he said.

Carrie could only stare at him. She was about to ask if he was okay when he spoke again.

"I'm fine," he answered quickly. "We can't lose it. Let's go!"

Carrie stepped out of the doorway and into the night. The star crystal had gone all but dark again so that she could barely see in the night now. She looked to her right. A dark form lay crumpled on the walkway.

"Forgive me, Princess," he said.

Before she could ask what for, he wrapped an arm around her and then vaulted over the railing of the

walkway toward the parking lot below. This time Carrie did manage something close to a scream as she was suddenly falling. There was no jarring stop when they landed. It was as if she had just hopped down a single stair.

“Later,” he said, forestalling any questions she may have been about to ask.

He grabbed her hand. That familiar jolt of energy shot through her again, this time so intense that it almost hurt. He began running. She robotically ran with him, the force of his motion making her legs move. Only it was more like flying. Things moved past them in a blur. They came out of the parking lot and he stopped. He looked to the left and right. A dark shape struggled to their right, moving down the sidewalk and leaving a trail of black blood. Holding her tightly he began running after it.

For a creature that was missing a leg and bleeding from at least two cuts on its side, it was moving fast. Carrie wasn't sure where it was going until they arrived several minutes later at an open canyon area. Sam paused, then started carefully into the canyon.

“Where are we going?” Carrie asked as she slid down a short embankment.

“After it,” Sam said, picking the least obstructed way through some bushes.

“How do you know it's in here? I don't hear anything.”

“It's not solid now without light, but it's still bleeding. It'll lead us right where we need to go.”

Carrie looked down at the ground. There weren't any clouds in the sky and the moon was about half full, but she couldn't see anything on the ground, especially among all the bushes. They followed some trail that only Sam could make out for a few more minutes and then stopped at a growth of trees. The branches grew close together and low to the ground, but there was a small area touching the ground that was open, like a cave entrance. It looked like some place a family of coyotes would sleep during the day.

“Is that a good idea to crawl in there?” Carrie asked, already certain that it wasn't.

“This is a portal,” Sam answered. “The appearance is an illusion.” He turned to her. “Ready to meet your destiny?”

“No,” Carrie squeaked.

Sam bent down and lifted the left leg of his pants. A hilt, nearly identical to the hilt of the knife he carried, was strapped to his ankle. As he pulled the hilt from the strap, a knife blade appeared.

“Take this,” he said, handing the knife to her, hilt first.

“I can't use a knife,” Carrie said, shying away from the wicked-looking weapon.

“You'll need it,” he urged. “Just because this sorcerer no longer has his shadow beasts doesn't mean he still doesn't want you dead to get your powers. While he lives, your life is in danger, and the lives of all the people in the Four Kingdoms.”



Carrie nodded and reached out for the hilt of the knife. When she grasped it, the blade suddenly burned bright white, almost blinding. And then a moment later it went dark, leaving just the hilt in her hand.

“What happened?” Carrie asked. “Where'd it go?”

“Curious,” Sam said, looking at the space where the knife had just been. Then, “Ready?”

“Still no,” Carrie answered.

“Good. Let's go.”

Sam smiled and took her hand.

They stepped forward. Carrie closed her eyes, expecting her face and body to be hit and scratched by branches. Instead, there was a brief moment of a chill. She opened her eyes. They were standing in what appeared to be a cave. Attached to the walls evenly spaced were several flaming torches, casting an adequate but eerie light. About 30 feet from them stood a man dressed in a dark-colored robe. At his feet was the shadow beast, curled in a ball and leaning against him. It was making a sad, keening sound as though asking for help to ease its pain. The man had a hand on its head. His eyes, however, were fixed on Carrie and Sam.

“Princess Cirene,” the man said, offering a small, mock bow. “And, if I am not mistaken, Prince Regent Rame Sirin.”

He didn't even offer Sam a mock bow.

Carrie looked at the man. He was tall, at least a few inches taller than Sam. Even though he wore a robe Carrie could see that he had broad shoulders and an athletic build. His flowing golden hair came past his shoulders and his blue eyes fairly glowed on their own. She couldn't help thinking that he was incredibly handsome.

“I was wondering what had happened to my creatures,” the man continued. His voice was soft and gentle, yet it carried throughout the cavern. “My immediate reaction to the first one was that some accident had occurred, some fluke. When the second one failed to return, I admit that I was worried. I thought that she had somehow awoken herself and I had waited too long. But when my last two returned last night, the light still in their eyes, I knew what had happened. And now only one has returned to me, mortally wounded, leading its killer and the hidden princess. Tell me, Rame, how did you do it? Was it, truly, a Wolf's Tooth?”

“We prefer to call them Lightknives,” Sam answered. “Not all the old knowledge has been lost.”

The man nodded.

“Most impressive,” he acknowledged. “I knew it was a mistake to not attack your kingdom first. I warned them your people were more dangerous to achieving victory. They wouldn't listen. We had an army of over 200,000, while your entire kingdom numbered less than 30,000, including women and children. Your kingdom would surrender when the seat of the empire fell, they said. I knew better. Your kingdom borders the Black Swamp. I would have traded half our entire army for just a thousand of your people. I was right, I see. Though it offers me little consolation now. Even so, why have you

come, Rame? Surely it is not revenge for the deaths of your parents?" he finished, his voice cynical.

"Not entirely," Sam replied, his jaw clenched tight.

The sorcerer laughed. It was a sound full of genuine humor and complete derision.

"Come now, you don't expect me to believe you came here for any benefit of her, do you? You could return her to her world where the best teachers would gladly help her to become aware of and harness her powers. My cats are all dead, except for this one who will be dead soon. Nor can I return to that world where I would be hunted until I was caught and killed. The only reason you are here is to avenge yourself on me."

"If I believed you, I would take her and be gone now. You have not spent all this time isolating her and bringing her powers almost to the surface simply to let her go because of the death of a few beasts. Just as you hunted her here you would hunt her there. That cannot be allowed."

"Ah, so you have brought her here as your sword. For surely you know that a Wolf's Tooth, no matter how effective it can be against a shadow cat, is all but useless against a sorcerer."

"All but," Sam repeated softly. Then, loud enough to be heard, he added, "I don't suppose you'll just surrender and come along peacefully to face a tribunal."

The sorcerer laughed that derisive laugh of his.

"Hardly," he said. "You are of little concern to me, and her powers are still within my reach. As they say in this world, you'll not take me alive."

There was a long moment where nothing more was said. Carrie looked back and forth from Sam to the sorcerer. The shadow beast at the man's feet had stopped making any noises now. She wondered if it were dead.

"What happens now?" Carrie whispered to Sam. "Are we supposed to do something?"

Before Sam could respond, two more shadow cats stepped out of the shadows behind the sorcerer. They started to walk toward Sam. The wounded shadow cat stood up and hobbled behind them.

"You said that was your last one," Sam said, taking a step back, his lightknife held in his right hand and now leaning against his forearm in a defensive posture.

"I've killed your parents, Rame, and many others to get at this woman here. What is a lie to me? You were able to kill one and wound another, but I do not think you will be so adept with three. Do you?"

Sam took another step back and stood in a crouched position. His knife flickered between white and black as the shadow cats began to fan out in front of him. His head turned from side to side to keep all three in view.

"And as for you, Princess Cirene," the sorcerer said, turning his full attention to Carrie, "we have some unfinished business concerning your death."

For a moment he just stood looking at her, then Carrie's right hand holding the knife hilt suddenly shot up in front of her. There was a flash of light as a white blade instantly appeared, then just as suddenly the light vanished. Carrie looked at her hand, still held in front of her. The hilt of the knife was all that was there. She looked at the sorcerer. He seemed, if possible, more surprised.

“What was that?” Carrie asked, surprise and fear mingled together.

For an answer, her hand jerked three more times in quick succession, each jerk accompanied by a flash of light. When it stopped, spots were dancing in front of Carrie's eyes. Yet she was unharmed.

“Amazing,” the sorcerer said in apparent awe. “There are books many centuries old speaking of this. You are truly special, Princess Cirene. I doubt Rame even knows what he has helped to bring about. It matters little though, at least to you, who will soon be dead.”

Carrie turned to Sam, hoping for some advice or encouragement. But he was backed up against a wall of the cave. One of the shadow beasts was unmoving on the ground in front of him. Carrie noticed it wasn't the one missing a leg. There was a long gash across Sam's front running from his left shoulder to his waist. A thin line of blood soaked the torn clothing at its edge.

A sudden move of her hand and another flash of light turned Carrie's attention back to the sorcerer in front of her. He looked awestruck and frustrated at the same time.

“Stop it!” Carrie yelled at him.

The sorcerer laughed, the sound more derisive as it was directed specifically at her.

“Your abilities only delay the inevitable,” he said, smiling at her like a cat contemplating a wounded bird. “I cannot touch you yet, but my cats can.”

They both turned to look toward Sam. He was on the ground, struggling as the two shadow cats tried to get at him. His knife flashed here and there, each movement accompanied by a sound of pain from one of the beasts. Even beneath the two dark shapes, Carrie could see that his clothing was torn in several more places and red blood dotted the ground around him.

“I can wait,” the sorcerer said simply.

“Why?” Carrie demanded. “Why do you have to wait?”

“You don't see, do you? Not surprising, given how you've been raised. Your abilities, in conjunction with the Wolf's Tooth you bear, make you immune to my magic. To try to take the Tooth from you physically would be folly. You are no warrior and neither am I. But you hold the knife. It can kill in the hands of a child as readily as in the hands of a trained master.”

“You said these weren't any good against sorcerers.”

“All but useless,” he corrected patronizingly. “You cannot reach out to me with it, but it is a blade nonetheless, and I am still mortal. I would not put myself within your reach. So I shall wait.”

They both turned to look once again at Sam. Carrie could only scream at what she saw. Sam was lying

motionless underneath a shadow beast. The other one, the one missing a leg, was now heading back toward Carrie and the sorcerer. It moved slowly, hobbled by many more cuts that were leaving a trail of dark blood on the ground.

“Farewell, Rame,” the sorcerer said smugly. “And now,” he said, turning back to Carrie, “it’s your turn.”

Carrie could only stand as the shadow beast approached her. She could tell from the way it moved and the sounds it was making that it also was not long for this world. But the cave was too small. It would live long enough. Carrie looked at the knife hilt in her hand. No shining blade appeared. She was defenseless. Her mind began to count the seconds. She had three, maybe four left to live. She held the bladeless hilt in front of her, trying to muster some sort of last effort defense.

The shadow beast was nearly within striking range when all light in the cave went out. It was utter and complete darkness.

Something large moved, then there was a horrible shriek and yowl right next to Carrie.

“Rame!” shouted the sorcerer, his voice coming from where he had been standing.

A single shaft of light appeared where the sorcerer last was. Carrie watched. It was a small triangle at first, then it slowly elongated.

“Rame,” came the sorcerer’s gurgling voice, half in resignation and half in disbelief.

The torches in the cave flickered back to life. Sam stood behind the sorcerer. His lightknife was thrust through the sorcerer’s back and had come out his chest, casting the shaft of light.

“All but useless,” Sam whispered venomously into the sorcerer’s ear.

The sorcerer gurgled a small chuckle, then his eyes rolled back into his head. Sam let him fall to the ground.

Carrie stared for several moments at the fallen man, then turned to Sam. He held the lightknife in his right hand, point down. He was staring at the sorcerer with a certain finality.

“I thought you were dead,” Carrie said at last, relief slowly washing over her.

Sam looked down at himself. There were cuts and scratches on his arms, legs, chest, and face. While a couple of the cuts looked deep, most were little more than surface scratches.

“I thought so too. And so did he.” He smiled. “One lie deserves another.”

“Is it over then?”

Sam placed the hilt of the lightknife in an elastic band at his waist. When Carrie offered hers to him, he gently pushed it back.

“That belongs to you,” he said. “And to answer your question, no, it’s not over. In fact, it is just

beginning.”

Sam moved to the walls of the cave and began feeling around.

“What are you looking for?”

“There is a portal here that will take you home.”

“Home? Me?”

“I will be going with you,” he said without turning around, still feeling along the wall. “It is my home too.”

“What about everything here?”

“This is not your world, Princess. This, to put it metaphorically, was just the prologue. The real book of your life starts – ah, here it is.”

Sam stepped back from where he had moved along the wall. As he did, the darkened wall seemed to ripple and then began to change. As Carrie watched, a large opening appeared. Beyond it stood a land of dark green grass, rolling hills, and a forest where the leaves of the trees were purple, green, and red. To the left, almost out of view in the distance, stood a large castle. Sam dropped to one knee at the edge of the portal and bowed his head.

“I am Rame Sirin,” he began, speaking to the floor, “Prince Regent of the Kingdom of Santrelle. I welcome you, Princess Cirene Alsgoth, back to your home and pledge you my undying service.”

Cirene stood for a moment in shock and silence. Rame did not move or look up.

“What am I supposed to do?” she asked. “This is new for me.”

Rame didn't lift his head, but she heard him chuckle.

“If you wish, you can ask me to rise and accompany you home.”

“Rise, Sam – I mean Rame.”

Rame stood up, smiling.

“Now take me home,” she said softly.

Rame offered his arm. She took it. Together they walked through the portal. As they did, a feeling washed over Cirene. It took her a moment to recognize it. It was the same feeling she had experienced when she had come home and locked her door. A feeling of being at home and safe. Only this one was so much stronger and so much more comforting. This truly was home.

“Halt!” yelled two male voices. “State your name and business here in the Emperor's forest!”

Rame winked at Cirene and then turned toward a large tree. Two men wearing shining armor appeared

standing next to the tree. At their waists were both a short and long sword, and a bow was slung over their shoulders. Each wore a long vest over their armor of white cloth trimmed in gold. In the center of the vest was a large bird of prey similar to an eagle with its wings outstretched. On the bird's chest was a circle divided into four equal parts, the parts colored red, blue, black, and green, the symbol of the Four Kingdoms.

"I am Prince Regent Rame Sirin, here to present to the Lord and Lady a long-sought-for gift."

The men looked a little closer at Rame and then bowed deeply at the waist.

"Our apologies," the guard on the left said. "It has been a long time, Prince Rame. And might I ask what, or who, is the gift?"

Rame smiled.

"You may. I present to you your princess, Cirene Alsgoth, returned at last to her home."

The men's draws dropped, and then so did the men, each man falling to one knee and bowing his head.

"Rise," Cirene said, getting used to the protocol.

The guards did so, the look of awe still fully present on their faces.

"My Princess," the guard on the left said. "We have so long feared the worst. The entire kingdom will be most pleased!"

"We require a horse," Rame stated. "It would not do for the Princess to walk the distance."

The guard on the right ran into the trees and returned a minute later leading a large white horse. Rame helped her mount. Then he took the reins and began leading the horse. The guard who had brought the horse ran ahead of them.

"Will I see you again?" Cirene asked as they traveled toward the castle.

"If you wish it."

"You know that I do."

"It would be my honor and pleasure."

An hour later, a large party of mounted horsemen could be seen riding hurriedly to meet them, coming from the direction of the castle. Rame looked up at her.

"Welcome home," he said.

"Thank you, Rame. Thank you."

THE END