

Safe at Home



Safe at Home

By O. H. Reads

Copyright (c) 2016

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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.

* * * * *

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

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

