

He watched them from the trees. He was able to detect the change in the energy fields; after all, he was stronger than they were, and this was where the energy had led him.

The children were cute, screaming, laughing, running in random circles, swinging from the tire swing that hung from the single oak tree in the yard. He could never figure out children, so full of contentment and joy. He thought he'd experienced it once, but the memory was too painful, so he buried it, barely letting it surface at all. It was frustrating, this kind of happiness and trust, and worse, they knew the truth, interacted freely without interruption.

Fortunately, most would grow up cynical and afraid. There were others who would destroy that innocence in them while they were still young—he knew this all too well. After all, it was he who would whisper in their ears, telling them of the pleasure it would bring to take a life, destroy the happiness. Some would not have anything to do with the joy of that destruction, so he had to be more creative—sending small dogs out into traffic while small children looked on, sometimes sending the children themselves out into the road, creating more fear and cynicism.

His influence and hard work were paying off. It was one of his finer moments when he whispered in the ears of the analytical thinkers to provoke a disconnection from human interaction, a technology that created interference in the valuable energy fields that carried the connections from person to person, with email, texting, and more recently “social networking.” He was giddy with the idea of human contact being all but severed. And even the children were now moving into that existence of isolated technology, except when they were lured out. The thought made him grin. Yep, it was all working out.

He could do something now, he supposed—a fall from the tree, maybe lure one of them into the forest. He could easily eliminate one of the children, but he wasn't sure yet which one held the power, because none of them were focused enough. They all had that light within them—as all children seemed to have, he thought, annoyed, still watching and waiting for an opportunity.

David felt something watching from the shadows of the trees, and the sense of uneasiness had him frowning and looking into the near forest. Each child stopped what they were doing and instinctively followed his gaze.

“Whatcha lookin' at, David?” Karina asked him.

“I thought I saw something.”

“Nam said sometimes bears come this close,” Holly put in.

But as the curiosity of children almost always overrides common sense, none of them thought to flee to safety. They just stood or sat where they were, watching and waiting.

Inside the house, Valeen looked up abruptly from her work, a sudden panic clutching at her insides. *Something's wrong! The children—go!* Without thinking about where the thought came from, she jumped up from her desk and ran out to the back patio.

She saw them all quiet and staring into the forest, and then she felt it. A danger, something evil, with intent to do harm, ready to pounce out of the shelter of the trees and attack without reason or warning.

Valeen took a steadying breath, not wanting to alarm the kids. She glanced up at the sky and saw the storm approaching. She forced her voice to be casual and spoke across the yard.

“Okay, you guys—come on in. It's going to start to rain again, and you have to get packed. Your parents will be here soon to collect you.”

A collective groan came from where they were all sitting around the tree, the tension forgotten, as the greater threat approached—that they had to leave. They all started slogging back up to the house, heads down, shoulders slumped. Normally the sight would amuse Valeen, but the imminent danger far outweighed the humor.

“David saw a bear!” exclaimed Holly.

“Yeah, it was watching us!” an excited Karina added.

“It might not have been a bear,” Beth interjected, trying to keep the situation reasonably calm as she walked up the steps, holding Nathan's hand.

“Bear, Nam! A bear,” Nathan said in a singsong voice as he was led into the house.

“It was probably just a deer looking for the bird seed I keep tossing out there,” Valeen said, still searching the trees, knowing she was trying to convince herself as well as putting the children at ease.

Hiding in the shadows, he watched curiously as the oldest boy caught the pull of energy and the rest connected like magnets to it. He grinned. “I know you can feel me. I will be the one to haunt—”

A blast of hot white light punched him in the chest, making him stumble backward. When he looked up, he saw her standing on the porch, glowing with a light he knew only he could see.

Flashes of memory shot through his mind, a pain and love so intense that he thought he would crumble into dust. He wanted to run to her, to hold on to her, and he wanted to hurt her. But the light around her wasn't one of peace or serenity; it was an instinctive reaction to kill, to protect, like the mothers of wild animals. Rays of shimmering light searched the trees, searching for the threat like a lighthouse lamp.

Forcing himself to remain calm, he immediately shielded his energy, just in case hers wasn't as weak as he thought it should be. It was a whole other kind of energy that emitted from women protecting their young, one he had witnessed, an energy that could literally tear a man in half with just a thought. Fortunately for him in this realm, even though the power was there, it wasn't recognized or channeled with exactness, but the explosion of dried leaves, fallen branches, and dirt that spewed in his direction told him she was why he was led here.

*Okay*, he thought as he brushed the debris from his shirt and began to walk away into the woods. *It begins now . . .*