

Jerand's Choice

Book Two of *The Trackers*

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One

"Stop right there! Don't move an inch," yelled Beau.

He had heard the distinctive sound of the rattle and knew it was on the path that Jerand was walking just parallel to his. Stopping dead still, Jerand asked,

"What is it, Beau?"

"Rattlesnake. Just in front of you. Back up very slowly, ok? Don't make any other sounds or movements."

Jerand obeyed, and the rattler quieted.

The two had been hiking the mountains behind the cabin since dawn and this was the time of the morning that rattlers liked to sun themselves, partially hidden under a rock. Jerand was about to step on the rock on the side of the trail, which would surely have upset the snake. Jerand came over to Beau's path.

"That was a close one. I would have surely been bitten when I stepped on that rock," said Jerand.

"For sure. One of the things that takes the longest to learn about the forest is instinct. There are so many sounds, it takes a long time to learn which are good and which are dangerous," answered Beau.

"Well, it's been almost three years since I started my training with you and I still feel like a novice sometimes."

"Don't worry. You're doing great," replied Beau. "It was the same with Erin and me in the early days back in Sarn. And, we had to mostly learn it by ourselves. My Pa helped some, but it took years for us to become seasoned trackers with good instincts."

"But, I do feel good about my blade work. You're an excellent teacher, Beau."

"I credit Master Chaun. He taught me a lot more than just blade work. Soon I will start teaching you some of those things. You are doing very well with the sword," Beau said. Patting Jerand's shoulder.

They headed down the mountain towards the cabin where Erin would have lunch ready for the three of them. Jerand had his own place over the General Store, but spent most days with Beau and Erin. He liked to eat breakfast and lunch with them because he loved Erin's cooking, especially her biscuits. She was happy to have him around and was glad he was learning to track. They always needed help on big tracking jobs and Jerand had learned very quickly. He was almost as good as Erin these days.

"It's about time for another trip down to Sarn and Ryker," Erin said as they sat down to lunch.

"Yea, Safer will think I've been eaten by a bear, it's been so long," Jerand replied.

"Naw, he knows you can outrun any bear," smiled Beau.

Safer was the leader of the Dockrats in Ryker and raised Jerand from a young boy. He was like a father to Jerand. He taught him everything he needed to survive in the city, and Jerand missed him greatly.

Erin laughed and said,

"I have to take some things down to Carla that I picked up in town," Erin said. "Can we go first thing in the morning?"

"Sure. The horses need a good workout, too. Ready for more riding lessons, Jerand?" Beau asked.

“Guess so. I'm not nearly as quick to get sore as I first did. The saddle must have softened up a bit, eh?”

“No, you've hardened up,” Erin answered. “You sure have changed since we first met you in Ryker. Any regrets?”

“None at all. I love my new life and my new friends. But there are days I miss the dockrats too.”

“Yea, we miss them too,” added Beau.

Jerand was a dockrat in Ryker until Beau and Erin put the bug in his ear about coming to Walder's Point and learning to be a tracker. Jerand thought then that he would never leave home, but eventually the day came when he showed up at their door and told them he was ready to start training. They were delighted.

It had been months since they had visited family and friends in Sarn and even longer since they had been to Ryker. The next morning after a hearty breakfast, they packed up the horses and set off for Sarn. It was a nice warm day on the trail and they all talked about seeing everyone again.

“Did you remember Carla's things?” Beau asked.

“Yes, they are in my saddlebags. It's just some spices and cloth she needs. I got them the last time we were in Walder's,” Erin answered.

“They sure seem happy in your old house, Beau,” Jerand said.

“Yes. They love it in Sarn and everybody loves them. I knew it would be a good match,” Beau said, smiling.

They arrived in Sarn and went directly to Erin's parents house. Kate and Nelson were getting up in years now, as they had Erin late in life. They were so glad to see them and told Beau and Jerand to go see Durik while Kate and Erin fixed lunch. Nelson went to see Jeb and Carla have them join everyone. Durik was working away on the anvil when Beau and Jerand walked in.

“Hey, Durik!” Beau hollered over the pounding of the hammer.

Durik put the hammer down, wiped his hands on his apron and gave Beau a hug.

“Great to see you Beau. And, you too, Jerand,”

“Good to see you too, Durik,” Jerand answered. “You look busy.”

“Yea, making new metal hitching posts for the General Store in Walder's.”

“I noticed one of the old wooden ones leaning a bit last time I was there,” Jerand said.

“If I do a good job on these three, maybe other businesses in town will want some too.”

“Since when have you ever done anything but a good job?” Beau asked.

Durik smiled and they heard a voice from behind them,

“He always does a good job, as everyone knows,” Miss Elly said as she gave Beau and Jerand a hug.

“You're all just prejudice,” Durik stated.

“Looks like we have good reason,” Jerand said as he inspected one of the finished posts. “This is beautiful work, Durik.”

Beau told them that Erin and Kate were fixing lunch and asked if Durik could take a break and join them. He agreed and they all headed out. Beau was just about to tell them he was stopping to see Jeb and Carla when he saw them walking with Nelson towards his house. They greeted Beau and Jerand warmly and continued on.

The late lunch turned out to be an early dinner and they spent the rest of the day visiting. Beau and Erin explained they were heading to Ryker for a visit. Jerand said he was missing the dockrats and was glad for this chance to see them. They all found their beds late in the evening and slept in the next morning. After a quick breakfast at Elly's, Beau, Erin and Jerand saddled up and headed to Sarn.

"Been a while since we rode this way," Erin commented.

"Even longer since we walked it," Beau answered.

"Just how long have you two been tracking together?" Jerand asked.

"Since we were 15 or 16, right Erin?"

"That's right. I remember spying on the Sarn Council when we were 17," she answered.

"Wow. That's almost 10 years. No wonder you guys are so good at it."

"Seems like another world ago," Erin mused.

"Yea, were just old-timers, I guess. Closing in on 30, we are," Beau laughed.

Erin and Jerand smiled. It did seem to her like a lot has happened since those carefree days of tracking the hills around Sarn as a youngster. She always knew that her and Beau would end up together and she loved her life. Seems like there was always an adventure to keep them busy. She had a lot of wonderful people around her and she made a vow to tell them all when she got the next chance.

Two

They were just on the outskirts of Ryker when Jerand spotted one of the dockrats sitting on a watch hill. He thought it was a bit odd, but called to him.

"Hello Candy! It's me, Jerand."

The boy came running up to Jerand as he dismounted and gave him a hug.

"Great to see you Jerand."

The hug of joy quickly turned into a very serious face and Jerand knew something was wrong.

"We better sit," Candy said.

They all put the horses to graze and sat down with Candy.

"I have some bad news," he said.

"I knew it," answered Jerand. "What's happened."

"Safer has been murdered," the boy said with tears starting to form. "Happened just three days ago."

All three friends just sat there for a moment in stunned silence. Erin started quietly sobbing and Beau put his arm around her. He could see that Jerand was very badly shaken.

"Do you know who?" Jerand asked Candy.

"Yes. There has been a rival gang in town the last couple months. They want to take over the dockrats territory."

"Where are they now?" Beau asked.

"They hide out in the forest. Nobody can figure out just where. The sheriff and some deputies tried to find them yesterday, but had no luck."

"How many are there?" asked Jerand.

"Bout 30 or so."

They talked quietly for a few minutes more and when everyone was recovered from the shock, they all headed to town. It was a very strange feeling for them all to not be escorted to Safer once they got to the first safe house. Within an hour of their arrival, almost all the dockrats in Ryker joined them. Since he was the oldest, Baller did the talking for Safer.

"We want you to help us get them, Jerand. You were Safer's favorite and we think you should take his place," Baller stated.

"I'm not sure I can take his place, but I will stay until we find them, no matter how long it takes."

"I would expect that, Jerand. And, we will help you all we can," Erin said.

They talked for several hours developing a plan. It was decided that Beau and Erin would head back home and Jerand would stay until he found out where the gang was hiding, then send for them. The word on the street was that the gang wanted control of the streets so they could start pressuring businesses.

"They wanted to send a strong message to the dockrats, so they ambushed Safer one night right in front of a safe house," Baller explained.

"You make sure you get word to us the minute you locate them. Don't try anything on your own, ok?" Beau said.

"I promise. I'll start looking tomorrow and we should have them in a few days, a week at most," he replied.

"We will need help with so many of them. I will talk to Sheriff Grant before we leave," Beau said.

They all broke up and Beau, Erin and Jerand went to the Stag for dinner. Ty Akers, the proprietor, was glad to see them and set them up with rooms. He sent someone to get the Sheriff and Ty lead them to a private room and took their dinner orders. Sheriff Grant and Deputy Lane joined them a short time later.

"It's great to see you three. I just wish it was under better circumstances," Grant said after he and Lane sat down.

"I understand you tried to find them, Grant," said Erin.

"Yes, Lane and I and a half dozen deputies went looking yesterday. We found an abandon shack where we think they were staying, but it was empty. We searched the area and found no sign of them," he answered.

"What we need are some good trackers. Know any?" Lane grinned at Beau and Erin.

"It just so happens we do. He's sitting right here," Beau said, nodding to Jerand.

"That a fact? Well, how about we help you locate them Jerand?" asked Grant.

"Thanks, Sheriff, but I think the dockrats and I can find them. I will need your help once we locate them, though."

"Agreed. How many will we have?" asked Grant.

"Well, the three of us, plus Durik. Several dockrats, you and Lane." answered Beau.

"Seems a bit thin. How bout I ask Connell? He could bring a couple students. That should give us plenty of swords to do the job."

"Wonderful idea, Sheriff. Tell him Erin needs his help. And Beau," Erin smiled.

The rest of dinner was spent making plans. When they finished, Beau, Erin and Jerand were shown to rooms and the Sheriff and Lane bid them goodbye for now. The Sheriff told Ty that any expenses incurred by the three will be covered by his office. Ty smiled and said he had special rates for ex-deputies and dockrats, so not to worry.

The next morning Beau and Erin headed to Sarn and Jerand went back to the safe house.

When Beau and Erin got to Sarn, they called a meeting at Durik's house. They explained what happened to Safer and what the plan was with Jerand and the dockrats. Durik agreed to accompany them when they got the word.

"How many of you will there be?" asked Nelson.

"More than enough to roust out these culprits, not to worry," Erin answered.

"We will still worry," Elly said, glancing at Durik.

"I'll be careful, dear. And, I'll have plenty of help." Durik stated.

After a couple hours visiting, Beau, Erin headed home. They instructed Durik to be on the lookout for a messenger from Ryker. He was to send him back to Ryker and to get word to them right away. They would have everything packed and ready to leave at a moment's notice.

Jerand sent word for Baller to join him at the safe house. They spent an hour making plans and deciding who would accompany them. Jerand wanted to keep the group small and post watchers in strategic areas in the forest. They picked six from a large group of volunteers.

"Don't worry. Everyone will get a chance to help. I'll know after I take a look at their old hideout about how long it will take to find them," Jerand explained.

Jerand and his dockrats set out for the abandoned shack. He placed several dockrats in strategic positions as they went, with instructions to watch for anyone bolting and report back

to him, but don't follow. He found the shack and gathered a lot of good information. It looked like the group split up, each taking a different direction. Clever, thought Jerand. Over the next few days, Jerand and two dockrats tracked them.

On the fourth day, he found the place where the group joined back up again. They all headed north away from town. He followed.

It was very slow going, but after several more days, he found them in a small hideout at the entrance of a ravine. He posted the two dockrats to watch the hideout and report back if they leave. He headed back to the safe house to organize the group that would go after the gang. A rider was sent to notify Beau and Erin. A runner was sent to Grant and Connell. All with instructions to meet at the safe house first thing in the morning.

The rider arrived in Sarn and gave the word to Durik and headed back to Ryker. Durik took a fast horse to the cabin.

"A rider just came from Ryker. Jerand has found their hideout. It's being watched by the dockrats," Durik explained.

Beau and Erin grabbed their gear and they all headed back to Sarn. It was almost dark when they got there, so they decided to go down in the morning.

Both Erin and Beau had to assure everyone that everything would be ok. They had a dozen experienced people and the element of surprise. Jerand would have everything all planned out and nothing would be left to chance.

The three headed to Ryker first thing the next morning. Jerand put out the word to have everyone meet at the private room and the Stag. Ty was told of the meeting and he had biscuits and coffee ready for the group. Jerand selected three dockrats that had the most fighting experience and they all arrived at the Stag first.

Grant and Lane came next. Connell and two of his students arrived just as Beau, Erin and Durik were riding up. They all sat down and Jerand updated them on what he found.

"I estimate about 30 gang members in the hideout. It is at the bottom of a deep ravine that goes up the mountain. So, we are a bit outnumbered."

"Fortunately for us, they probably don't have 2 master swordsmen and a master with the rapier. Or, two veterans of the Kings guard. I think we can do the job," Grant stated.

"I agree," said Beau.

"Ok then, first thing we do when we get close to their hideout is have Beau and Erin scout the area for any watchers or out sentries. If you find any, disable them if possible. If not, kill them," Jerand said.

A look passed between Grant and Beau.

Jerand said grimly, looking at them. "We are talking about Safer's killers here."

Everybody nodded their assent.

"Next, Durik and Connell's two students will circle around to the ravine and watch for any that bolt out that way. Grant, Lane and I will be at the main entrance. Connell, Beau and Erin, backed up by dockrats, will enter the hideout from the east side. It has the most cover. Beau, you call them out. Erin, you try to hamstring any that you can. When this is not possible, Beau and Connell will kill them. We will take care of any that come out the main entrance."

"Sounds like you've thought this through, Jerand," Grant said.

"I've thought of nothing else. And, there is no use talking to them to find out which one killed Safer. They are all equally responsible." he replied.

The plan was set. They all checked their weapons and headed to the hideout. It took

almost an hour to get to the point where they all stopped and Beau and Erin went ahead. They reported back a short time later that no sentries or watchers were posted. The entire gang was in the hideout. Their first piece of luck.

Everyone got in place and Beau called out,

“Hello the camp. You are surrounded. Put down your weapons and come out the main entrance.”

There was no response. Beau, Connell and Erin started in. All of a sudden a group of members rushed them. Erin was able to hamstring two, but six gang members were killed by the expert swords against them. The dockrats bound the ones hamstrung.

Two members tried the path up the ravine. Durik had instructed the students how to capture them alive. His guard training kicked in and the members were no match for the expertly trained students. They fought hard, with no intention of being taken alive. The students had no choice but to kill them both.

Eight members challenged the three on the main entrance. The fight was fast and furious. Grant and Jerand dispatched 6 of the 8 and Lane took the the other 2 by surprise after they thought they had won through. The gang members had very poor weapons and Grant and Lane had years of experience. Jerand killed 4 of the 6 by himself. All 8 members were killed.

There were still about a dozen left in the main camp building. Beau called for them to surrender and that all their fellow members were dead. Finally, they came out and rushed Beau and Connell. 4 were killed immediately and the rest made it through to Erin and the dockrats. Erin fought hard and took 2 down. After a short fight with the dockrats, the six remaining knew it was over and surrendered. The dockrats quickly bound them.

Grant and two dockrats were injured. 22 gang members were dead and six surrendered or were hamstrung. It was the end of the gang.

Three

The memorial for Safer was well attended. Even the Ryker Councilmen attended. When it was over, the group met at the safe house. Baller, with most of the dockrats approached Jerand and said,

“We have decided that you should take Safer's place.”

Jerand was taken back. He looked at all the dockrats closely,

“I am honored, but I must give it some thought. I'll have an answer for you in the morning.”

Jerand, Beau and Erin went to the Stag that evening. He discussed the offer from Baller over dinner.

“It's obvious they think a lot of you Jerand. Baller even outranks you,” Beau said.

“Sleep on it before you make your decision. You have to follow your heart. Choose well, Jerand,” Erin added, hugging him.

Jerand was awake long after they went to their rooms. He thought about all the dockrats and what they meant to him. He remembered first meeting Safer and how much the leader did for him over the years. But, he also remembered first meeting Beau and Erin when they were looking for the men that killed Beau's pa. And, how much they have done for him since. He liked his life now and has learned a lot from them. It was a difficult decision, for sure.

After breakfast the next morning, the three went to the safe house to meet with Baller and the dockrats.

“I really appreciate your trust in me, but after thinking about it, I've decided to go back with Beau and Erin. Ryker just isn't my home anymore. It's with them.”

That brought tears to Erin's eyes. Beau looked relieved.

“I think Baller should take Safer's place. He is older and more qualified than me.”

All the dockrats present cheered. Baller said,

“Ok, I accept. But, don't be a stranger that stays up north. Come and see us once in a while. You too, Beau and Erin.”

“We will. Count on it,” Jerand said.

The three then went to the Sheriff's office where Grant and Lane was thanking Connell and his students for their help.

“I can see this is something that will be valuable for my future students. I will ask Lane to speak to all my classes about what we've done here,” Connell said.

“I'd be happy to,” Lane said.

Grant looked at Connell and said,

“I'd like to make these two students honorary deputies. I hope when they are finished with your classes that one or both will consider joining us. There is a lot they can teach my deputies.”

“I appreciate that,” Connell replied.

“And, the Ryker Council expresses their thanks to all of you, too,” Grand added.

Durik, Beau, Erin and Jerand left Ryker and headed to Sarn. They were all tired, but pleased that the gang was no longer in operation. Beau, Erin and Jerand stayed in Sarn for several days, telling and re-telling the story. Elly was worried about Durik the entire time.

“You're too old to be chasing after gang members,” she said to Durik.

"I didn't chase anyone. They came to me. Or us. All I had to do was to instruct Connell's students and they did all the work. They were very good swordsmen," Durik said, smiling.

Jeb & Carla were relieved that Erin and Beau were safe. They asked them why they took such a dangerous job. Beau explained that not all tracking jobs involved criminals. And, this was for Safer. He was a very good friend. The gang needed to be stopped.

With goodbyes all around the three headed home the next morning.

Things were quiet with Beau, Erin and Jerand for several months. They completed the additions to the cabin and Jerand decided to move into it from his place above the store. He only worked in the store a couple days a week now and he wanted to concentrate on his tracking and fighting skills. The three were finally all together.

After some discussions, Beau and Erin decided to make Jerand a full partner in the tracking business, with a third of the profits. They named it the Wright Tracking Co.

"Wow. I'm a business owner now. With a real salary. Safer would be pleased," he said one day at breakfast.

"That he would, Jerand. We are," said Erin.

"I can't believe you two wanted a scrawny young dockrat to part of your business," Jerand stated.

"You might have been scrawny dockrat, but Erin saw potential there. And she is a very good judge of character," Beau responded.

"There were several dockrats that we saw potential in, but you were our favorite," Erin said.

"So, now it's time we started doing some work that paid money, huh?" Jerand asked.

"Yea, it's been a while since we talked to the Sheriff in Walder's. Guess we should pay him a visit," Beau said.

Just then, a knock came at the door. Beau answered and there stood the Sheriff.

"Come in Sheriff. Want some coffee and biscuits?" he said.

"We were just now talking about paying you a visit. We've been down south for a while," Erin said.

"I've come to hire you. We have a situation in Walder's that I think you can help with. Boy, are these good biscuits!" the Sheriff Bennet said.

"I've noticed the same thing myself," responded Jerand, smiling.

"Three convicts killed two guards and escaped from our jail. They are murderers and were awaiting transfer to a larger prison. It's been 2 days now and we lost their trail in the forest north of Walder's. Think you can pick up their tracks?" the Sheriff asked.

"Well, if there hasn't been any rain in the area in the last 2 days, we should be able to," Beau answered.

"If you do find them, I don't like the odds...three against three. And they are ruthless!" Bennet exclaimed. "Should you take some deputies with you?"

"They would only slow us down. And, they can't go as quietly as us." Erin responded.

"And we know the forest much better than them. We have ways to lead them into traps. We will not engage more than two of them. And we can take two," Beau smiled at Erin.

Both she and Jerand agreed.

"Ok, you know best. I'll have my deputy take you to where we lost their trail and he will

return.”

Bennet left and they packed up what they would need for the trip. They always took a little extra, just in case. They headed to the Sheriff's office to pick up the deputy. He lead them to a the place where they lost the trail.

“I'll head back now. Good luck. And, be very careful, especially with the short blond one. He is really good with those knives he carries. After they escaped, they broke into the General Store and stole the weapons the have now,” the deputy explained.

“Thanks for the information. We'll be extra careful,” Beau said.

The three started their sweeps every 10 ft from the spot. Erin first, then Beau and Jerand the farthest out. Within an hour, Erin reported a trail. Beau joined her and whistled for Jerand. They followed the trail until dark and setup camp. Cold rations, no fire. At first light they started out again. Within a couple hours they heard the trio in a camp just ahead. They discussed how to go about capturing them.

“Let's split up and wait for one to leave camp for the privy or water. Whoever is closest to that one, take him out,” Beau explained.

“Then wait for the signal and come back and help with the other two,” Erin added.

“What if it's the blond one that leaves. I'm worried about those knives,” Jerand admitted.

“If it is the blond one, just let him go and circle back here and wait for us. We'll come up with another plan,” Beau instructed.

They split up and stationed themselves near the camp on 3 different sides. Sure enough, after a short time, one of them headed out for the privy. It was not the blond one and Erin was closest to him. The group must have felt safe because he took no weapon. Just as he stopped behind a bush and started to unbuckle, Erin came up behind him and hamstringed his right calf. He yelled and went straight down. She bound him tight and headed back to camp.

Jerand rushed the second one and engaged him. He had a long sword. They fought for a few minutes and Jerand cut him badly on the shoulder. He dropped the sword and surrendered, bleeding badly. Jerand looked at Beau. He was fending off the two knives when Erin joined him. She got behind the blond guy and tried to hamstring him, but the guy was too fast.

Jerand pulled his short belt knife and threw it at the blond. It buried in his side and he dropped a knife to put a hand on the wound. It was just what Beau needed. He buried his sword in the blond's chest. It was over.

“Thanks Jerand. That was quick thinking with your knife,” Beau said, patting Jerand on the back.

“It was just the distraction you needed, Beau. The guy was very fast and I couldn't get a disabling swing at him,” Erin explained.

“Where's the third one?” Beau asked.

“I left him hamstringed and bound out by that bush,” Erin pointed.

“Good work you two. It was a good plan,” Beau said.

“Luckily, you got the blond one and not me,” Jerand smiled.

They buried the dead blond and tended to the wounds of the other two. They made a travois for the hamstringed one and all headed back to town. When they arrived, they explained how things went and Bennet and the deputies were amazed that none of the three trackers had a scratch. The Sheriff said the blond had no family and they would leave him buried right

where he was.

“We'll take these two directly to the big prison, with plenty of escorts,” Bennet said.

Beau looked at the deputy that showed them the spot to start and said,

“You were right. The blond was very fast.”

The city of Walder's lost two deputies and the city council was very grateful the escapees were caught and paid the Company well. It was more than they earned in the last 6 months.

They headed back home, pleased with this job.

“Seems like every job we get from a Sheriff requires serious fighting. Maybe we should be charging more,” Jerand said.

“I think we should, unless we get a bonus like this job,” Erin replied.

“Yea, we only need 2 or 3 jobs a year like this one and we would be set,” Beau smiled.

Four

One morning a week or so later, Erin was just cleaning up from breakfast and said, "The extra money from the Walder's council sure will come in handy. It will help pay for the new baby," she said, looking at Beau and grinning.

They both jumped up whooping and hugged on Erin over and over again. Beau and Erin had been together for several years now and were ready to start a family.

"Just think. I'll be Uncle Jerand! How great is that?"

"And, I don't want you to worry about your place here, Jerand. We will fix up a little nursery area in our room." Erin said.

"I'm sure I can get my old room back," Jerand said.

"Nonsense. There is plenty of room here. Not another word."

"We should go tell your parents, and everyone else." said Beau.

"We will. But, we have some time. I'm only a few weeks along."

"They will be so excited to be grandparents," said Jerand.

"Yes, this baby will have lots of people to fuss over it." Beau beamed.

Of course, both Beau and Jerand made a big fuss over Erin. They didn't want her tracking, cooking or cleaning anymore. She let them fuss for a day or so and finally said,

"Listen you two. I'm pregnant, not an invalid. I have many months before I have to slow down to the speed you want me to go."

"Well, we just don't want anything to happen," Beau answered.

"Nothings going to happen. Let's just go on as normal until I'm about 8 months, then I'll go to Sarn and let Ma, Elly and Carla do the fussing, ok?"

"Ok. You know best. But no heavy lifting. Ask one of us for help," Jerand said, and Beau agreed.

She just shook her head and smiled.

Winter was almost upon them and tracking was slow over the cold months. It was too easy for others to follow tracks in the snow, so they didn't need help. Jerand ask for more hours in the store. Mainly for the money, but also to give Beau and Erin more alone time. There were several chores that Beau and Jerand came up with to do. Make a nursery area. Insulate the cabin more for better heat. The baby wasn't due for months yet, but they wanted to get these things done during the slow period. Come spring, tracking jobs would increase and they wouldn't have the time.

Jerand suggested he and Beau make a crib. Beau wanted to make the porch bigger and fence it in so the baby would have more playroom. The two would keep busy for most of the winter. When Erin was into her second month, they all took a trip to Sarn. Nelson and Kate were just beside themselves with joy. Elly and Durik were also. Durik said he would make any baby furniture they needed, just let him know. Carla and Elly got busy knitting clothes and blankets. It was a busy winter for everyone.

Beau was pleased with the nursery and new porch when the weather finally broke in the spring. Erin was amazed that the two could get so much done in just a few months. Soon, it was time for them to take Erin to Sarn for the last month or so.

"What should we do during your last month?" Beau asked.

"You can just stay busy around the cabin and I'll send Durik for you when it's time."

"But what if the baby comes before we can get down there?" the concerned father to be asked.

"Don't worry, I'll know when it's down to a week or so left." Erin assured them both.

Beau and Jerand headed back to the cabin. They were almost home when they heard a nickering noise off the road. Both their horses whinnied and threw their heads up.

"Did that sound like a horse to you?" asked Jerand.

"It sure did. Coming from that direction."

They both headed toward the sound and after just a couple hundred feet, they found a small colt trapped in a snow back. They rushed to it and picked it up. There was nobody or other horses around.

"Where in the world could this little guy have come from?" Jerand ask.

"Wanna follow it's tracks back while I take it to the cabin?"

"Ok. I'll meet you there, hopefully in an hour or so."

Jerand tracked the colt back about a mile to a small ranch on the outskirts of Walder's. He followed the tracks right to the barnyard and saw the broken fence where it got out. He knocked on the door of the cabin. A young women answered,

"Yes, may I help you?"

"Hello ma'am. My name is Jerand. My friend and I found a small colt over on the Walder's road and I tracked it here. Did you know it got out of the yard?"

"Why no, I didn't. But, I'm not surprised. That colt's been a handful since it was born. Almost 3 weeks now."

"Well, my friend has taken it to our cabin to care for it." Jerand said.

A small voice came from inside the cabin asking who it was at the door. The young woman answered,

"Its someone that found that pesky colt, Ma," she answered.

"Please, won't you come in, sir?"

"Well, for just a minute, then I'd better get back."

Jerand stepped in after kicking all the snow from his boots.

"My name is Evie and this is my ma," she said pointing to the older woman in a bed in the main room.

"I'm Jerand. My friends and I own the Wright Tracking Company. We live about a mile or so from here on just off the Walder's road." Jerand replied.

"Well, Jerand, I'm not sure you did us a favor, finding that colt. It's been trouble for us. My Pa died a couple months back and ma is poorly. I just don't have time to take care of it," Evie explained.

"So sorry for your loss ma'am," Jerand said.

"Evie, please. And this is Harriet," she said indicating her ma.

"Pleased to meet you both."

"I don't suppose you could take that colt off our hands?" Evie asked.

"Be glad to Evie. How much do you want for him?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. Just getting him a place to live is payment enough."

"Well, I'm sure Beau and Erin would insist on payment. How about twenty dollars?"

"Beau and Erin? The trackers? I've heard about them from friends in town. They are very popular around these parts." Evie said.

"They are indeed. And, I live with them full time now. I used to live in town above the General Store. I worked there part time."

"Why yes, I recognize you. You've helped us with our purchases a couple times," Evie

stated.

"Well, I helped so many people..."

"That's ok. No need to explain."

In fact, Jerand thought he recognized her when she first opened the door. She was a very pretty young woman, but he was too shy to let on. They talked a few more minutes and Jerand left. It took over 30 minutes to get back home. The snow was still deep in some parts of the woods. He couldn't believe his luck. They found that colt and he met a pretty girl, all in the same afternoon.

When he got back to the cabin Beau said the colt was not hurt and was a fine looking animal.

Jerand explained everything to Beau and added,

"I think we should pay her 20 dollars for the colt. And, by the looks of the sparse kitchen, maybe some food too."

"That sounds fair. Looks like the baby already has a horse and it's not even born yet."

"I'll put some things together in the morning and take them over, then," Jerand said.

"Ok. How old did you say this Evie is?"

"Bout my age, I suspect. Maybe a bit younger."

"Is she cute?"

"How would I know, Beau. I don't know anything about women. Maybe she is or maybe she isn't..."

"Never mind, Jerand. Forget I ask," Beau said grinning broadly.

Things were progressing nicely in Sarn. Kate and Elly were sure that Erin was about a week away. They told Durik to go get the boys. The plan was that they would stay in Durik's place and he would stay at Elly's. The whole town was anxiously awaiting the first birth in Sarn since Erin was born. Jeb and Carla were constantly over to Erin's house with food and presents from people in town.

It was just before dark when Beau, Jerand and Durik returned. Beau said to Erin,

"So, you think it's a week away already?"

"About that. How are things at the cabin?"

"Everything is fine. We have a new member of the family already."

Beau proceeded to tell her about the colt and the new friend of Jerand's.

"He's been over there everyday since we found the colt. This Evie must be real pretty," Beau said.

"Now, Beau, don't embarrass him like that," Kate said, looking at Jerand turn red.

"I'm not embarrassed. I just think she is nice."

"Well, you learned all about surviving on the streets, tracking and sword fighting, but nothing about girls," Beau said. "We just want to make sure you do the right thing by Evie, is all."

"I'm sure Jerand will figure it out, Beau. He is a very bright young man," Erin said, smiling.

Jerand was over to see Evie at least 3 times before Durik came to get them. Evie's ma, Harriet, took a turn for the worse and the doctor in Walder's said she doesn't have much time left. Jerand felt bad for her, since he knew exactly what it was like to lose your ma and pa. He

barely remembered his. And, he lost Safer, who was the only pa he knew. If there was anyway he could help Evie he was convinced he should do it. As soon as Erin has the baby, he will take a ride up to check on her again.

It was only 3 days later in the morning that Erin went into labor and had a healthy baby boy. Kate came out of the bedroom and said to Beau,

"You have a son, Beau. Both Erin and the boy are fine."

All the men let out a whoop. Jeb, Durik, Nelson and Jerand all congratulated Beau. Drinks were passed all around.

"Can I see them?" Beau asked Kate.

"Sure, but just a few minutes. She needs rest."

Later that day, Jerand asked Beau if they had a name picked out yet. He told everyone that they decided if it was a boy, his name would be Mason John Wright, after his pa and his pa's pa. Everyone loved the name and drinks were passed all around again. The whole town showed up at the Publik House with more presents and drinks.

"Erin should be up tomorrow and you can all see the new parents then. They will open all the gifts in the afternoon," Elly announced. Everyone cheered and left, saying they would return tomorrow.

The next morning, right after breakfast, Jerand slipped out of town heading north. Beau saw him go and told Erin what he was about.

"I'm so glad he has found a friend his own age."

"And, she just lost her pa, so she really needs help. Jerand loves helping people, so it's a great match," Beau added.

"Think you're feeling up to a get together at the Publik House this afternoon, Erin?" asked Elly.

"Sure, I feel just fine. Besides, everyone will be doing everything for me. All I have to do is sit and show off Mason John."

"And, he already has a nursery, play place on the porch, crib and even his own pony," Beau beamed.

"That's right. You can teach him to ride when you get home," Nelson kidded.

"Now, Nelson, be nice," Kate smiled.

The Publik house was near full that afternoon. Congratulations went all around and presents were opened. Jerand showed up just before the last present was opened. The present was not marked from anyone, but Beau knew it was from Jerand and saved it till last. Erin opened it and found a beautiful copper plaque with an inscription. Erin read it,

"To Erin and Beau. Congratulations on your first of many children. We would all love to see the baby on your next trip here."

It was dated and signed by by all the dockrats in Ryker, as well and Grant, Connell and Lane.

"Oh my, thats so lovely. How did this get here?" Erin asked.

"I picked up at the General Store a couple weeks ago. Grant had it delivered. And, everyone that signed it pitched in and paid the store for 6 months worth of food for Mason John," explained Jerand.

Erin started crying as Beau hugged her.

"Sounds like you have some very good friends down there, dear," Kate said, smiling.

"Yes, we do. And, here too. We are so very lucky."

Five

It was about a week later that Beau loaded Erin and Mason John in the wagon and headed north. Jerand was already gone and Durik said they could bring the wagon back later with the supplies that were on the list he gave Beau. It was from Carla and Elly. Beau said he would have Jerand bring it back soon. Maybe he would bring his friend for everyone to meet. They all agreed that was a great idea.

They got to the cabin later that day and Beau got Erin and baby settled in. He was just starting to fix something to eat when Jerand came in. He had a sad, worried look on his face and said,

"Harriett died this morning. Evie needs my help with things, so I won't be here for dinner."

"I'm so sorry, Jerand. Can we help," Erin said.

"I saw Durik's wagon outside. Think I can use it to take Harriett into town?"

"Certainly. I'll get it ready," Beau answered.

Jerand gave Erin and baby a big hug and said,

"After the funeral, maybe I will bring Evie over to meet you and Mason John."

"I'd love that, Jerand. Give her our condolences, please."

"Ok, I'll be back later."

Beau gave Jerand a hug and sent him and the wagon on his way. He went back in the cabin and asked Erin,

"Are you real hungry?"

"No. Seems like I've done nothing but eat for days."

"Good, Lets just relax and enjoy Mason John. If he stays awake that is. He seems to sleep all the time. Is that normal?"

"Of course it is dear. He's a new baby, it's what they do," Erin answered, grinning.

Jerand arrived at Evie's house and found two of her friends from town already there. They were discussing how they would get Harriet into town and Jerand said,

"Don't worry. I brought my friend's wagon."

"Oh, thank you Jerand. How very thoughtful," Evie smiled warmly at him.

They all loaded Harriett into the wagon and headed into town. They dropped her off at the mortuary and headed back to Evie's house.

Evie thanked Jerand again and kissed him on the cheek. He blushed and said,

"You know, I don't even know your last name."

"Carsen. Evie Carsen. Whats yours?"

Jerand stopped a moment, looked at Evie with an embarrassed look and said,

"I'm not sure. I never had a use for one. My Pa and Pa died when I was very young and the dockrats in Ryker were the only family I've ever known."

"You should really have a last name. Why not take Beau's name? They are like your family, aren't they?"

"That's a good idea. I'll ask them tonight. How would you like to come over and meet them sometime?"

"I'd love to. Just as soon as I clean things up here. Can you come back in a couple days?"

"Absolutely. And, anything you don't need anymore, I can haul off in the wagon."

"You are so kind to me. And, you hardly even know me."

"I know we are the same now. No parents. I have tons of friends though. Do you have many?"

"Just a few in town. Nobody really close."

"Well, how would you like all my friends to be yours too?"

"Can you just do that?"

"Sure, you can. There is no limit on friendship," Jerand said, smiling.

Later, after supper the four of them were sitting around relaxing. Beau had just come in from unhitching the wagon. Jerand was cleaning up the dishes and Erin was nursing the baby. Jerand said,

"Can I ask you two a personal question?"

"Sure you can. What is it, dear?" asked Erin.

Ever since becoming a mother Erin started calling anyone younger than her, dear.

"I was talking to Evie about her last name. It's Carsen, by the way. She ask me mine and I realized I don't know what it is. My sister never told be before she went away and I never needed one with the dockrats. Can I take your name, Beau?"

Erin and Beau looked at each other and Beau said,

"I'd be honored, Jarend."

"Jerand Wright. I like it," Jerand said, smiling.

He gave them both a hug and said he was turning in. Beau and Erin sat up long after Mason John was back to sleep. They talked of family, friends and how their lives had turned out. They were both content. Beau couldn't wait for spring to get back out on the trails. He was out of shape just sitting around all winter and needed some good exercise.

Jerand was up early and said he was going to town. He offered to fill the list that Durik gave Beau. He needed a few things and would take the wagon.

"Do you need anything, Erin?"

"Just some more nappies. Can you get a couple dozen for me?" she answered.

"Sure, be back later."

"Can you check with the store clerk to see if we've had an inquires?" Beau asked.

"Will do," Jerand said and left.

He had just finished getting everything at the store when he saw Evie walking with some man, heading towards him. He started to speak to her and when she saw him, she turned down another street and kept going. He was sure she recognized him and couldn't understand why she ignored him. He also wondered who the man was. After getting all the supplies he needed, he checked with the clerk about the inquires.

"Only one inquiry, Jerand," the clerk said and he handed him the envelope.

"Thanks, Davis," he replied. He thought for a minute and said,

"Was that Evie Carsen I just saw outside the store?"

"Yes, it was. Her and that no good brother of hers just left. Why? Do you know her?" asked Davis.

"Yes, we've met. What's wrong with her brother?" Jerand ask, relieved.

"He's been gone on another one of his mysterious trips. Wasn't here for either one of his parent's deaths."

"Is he back to stay now?"

"Who knows with him. If I were Evie I'd run him off again. He is nothing but a bully."

"Hmmm. Thanks Davis," Jerand said and left.

He thought about the brother all the way back home. Maybe he will live in the house with Evie now. He wondered where he had been that he couldn't get back here for his parents funeral. It just didn't seem right. And, he had a mean scowl on his face and he didn't like the way he was leading Evie. Almost looked like she didn't really want to be with him. He would have to go over later and see what she has to say.

"I just didn't like the way he looked, that's all," Jerand said to Erin, later.

"Did he speak to you?" asked Beau.

"No, and Evie didn't either. It's almost like she was embarrassed and didn't want to talk to me."

"That is strange," Erin said.

"I'll go over tomorrow and see her. Find out why she ignored me."

"Be careful. If he is her brother, he may not want you around her now that she is alone," Beau said.

"I will. I would never go against her wishes."

The next morning after breakfast, Jerand saddled his black for a ride to Evie's. He decided at the last minute to take his sword. He wasn't sure why, he just had one of those dockrat feelings. He knocked on Evie's door a few minutes later. She answered and when she saw him, she stepped out and closed the door.

"I'm sorry, Jerand. I can't talk to you now. My brother has returned and he is in a foul mood."

"Do you know why?"

"He blames me for his missing ma's funeral. But I had no idea where he was. I really don't think you should get mixed up..."

"Who's there Evie?" asked a gruff voice.

"Just a friend, Call."

The door opened and her brother stepped out onto the porch. He smelled strongly of liquor and said to Jerand,

"I don't think you should be bothering Evie. She's still in mourning. Best be on your way."

"Shouldn't Evie decide that, friend?" asked Jerand.

"I decide things for her now. And, I said git!"

He pushed Evie back inside the house. Jerand could see she was very afraid. And he had a good idea why.

"I've been helping Evie since her ma died. I bought the colt from her and helped her take her ma into town after she passed. She is my friend."

Well, she has me now. She don't need any friends."

"I'd like to hear that from her, if you don't mind."

"I do mind. Maybe I should take you out in the yard and teach you some manners."

"Maybe you should try."

Call grabbed Jerand's arm and started pushing him towards the barnyard. Jerand waited until they were out of sight of the open front door and turned on him.

"That's enough," Jerand said as he whipped his arm from Call's grasp. "Touch me again at your peril."

"Oh really. And what is a young runt like you going to do?"

"I'll just have to teach you some manners. And, I don't like the way you treat Evie, either."

"She is my sister. I'll treat her anyway I want."

"Not in front of me you won't. She is my friend and I look out for my friends."

Call started to take a swing at Jerand and he ducked under the swing and pushed Call backwards. He tripped and fell. Jerand could see he was now furious. He got up and pulled a knife and started walking towards Jerand. Instinctively, Jerand pulled out his sword and said, "Not a good idea to bring a knife to a sword fight."

Evidently, Call thought he was bluffing and came at him, knife held low for a belly wound. Jerand raised his sword, flicked the knife to the ground and came down on Call's arm, slicing his arm just about the wrist. He screamed,

"You cut me. I'm bleeding!"

"You're lucky to be alive. The last person that came at me with a knife isn't. How about you and me go inside and let Evie tend to that arm."

Call didn't move.

Jerand put the point of his sword just in front of Call's face and told him to get inside. He followed him in and Evie was crying and visibly afraid of what would happen next.

"Evie, what is it? Why are you crying? And, you're shaking," Jerand said as he put his arm around her.

"You don't know Call. He will kill you for this."

"I don't think so. He has a bad knife arm now. Can you bandage it for him?"

"Hurry girl, I'm bleeding," Call said as he took a swing at her and missed.

Jerand once again put his sword point to Call's neck.

"If you touch her again, I will kill you, understand?"

Call paled and just shook his head. Evie brought bandages and wrapped his arm.

"You have no right threatening me in my own home," Call snarled.

"I don't believe this is your home. It belongs to Evie."

"What makes you think that?" Call asked.

"Because you left her to take care of her parents. You weren't even interested enough to come when they both died. This is Evie's place not yours."

"We'll see about that," Call said.

"Yes, we will. The sheriff is a good friend of mine and after I explain things to him, you will have no claim here. And, I will ask him for a writ that keeps you away from Evie," Jerand said seriously.

"He can't do that. I'm family."

"All it takes is a word from Evie and he can do it. Evie, do you want this so called brother of yours living in this house?"

Evie could see that Jerand had the upper hand here and felt he would protect her, so she said,

"I don't want him near me. He has a terrible temper and he hits me all the time. He did the same thing to our ma when she was alive."

That really incensed Jerand and it was all he could do to keep from running this guy through. But, he held his temper and said,

"That's all the sheriff needs to hear. I suggest you pack your things and be on your way. I know the sheriff and when he hears that you hit your own ma, he will throw you in a cell so fast you won't have time to think. So, make your choice. Pack your things and get out of here or go with us to see the Sheriff."

"All right, I'll go. But you'll pay for this someday."

"Just what I needed to hear. Evie and I will go register a harassment and threat charge against you. If the Sheriff or any of his deputies see you anywhere in the area, he will arrest you. If I were you, I'd go somewhere far away and get some help for that temper of yours. It's likely to get you killed someday."

Call packed his things under the watchful eye of both Jerand and Evie. After he left, Jerand took Evie into town to see Sheriff Bennet. He explained all that happened and had Evie sign the complaint. Bennet promised to put up posters on him all around the area. If anyone sees him, they will report it and he will be locked up. They both thanked him and headed back to Evie's place.

When they got to Evie's house, she said,

"That was absolutely the best thing anyone has ever done for me, Jerand. I think you are very brave to stand up to Call. He is very mean."

"Well, being a bully is never a good thing. He needed a lesson. But, just in case, I think you should come back to the cabin with me. He may try something before he leaves town. I would feel better, ok?"

"Yes. I would feel better too," Evie smiled and kissed his cheek again.

"Beau and Erin will be pleased to finally meet you."

"And, I can't wait to see the baby."

"We can ride double on the black. It's only a short way."

"Let me get a few things packed first."

Beau and Erin were just starting lunch when Jerand came in.

"I brought some company for lunch," Jerand said.

"There's plenty, bring them in," replied Erin.

Jerand stepped back and Evie came through the door. Jerand said,

"Beau, Evie, this is my good friend Evie."

Erin caught her breath when she saw how beautiful Evie was. Beau just stared.

"Oh my, what a pleasure it is to finally meet you Evie. Are you hungry?" Erin said.

"Well, yes, I guess so. It's been an exciting morning."

They all sat for lunch while Jerand explained all that had happened. He told them about registering the complaint with Bennet and about the posters that will be put around town.

Beau looked at Evie and asked,

"He actually hit his own ma?"

"Yes. Several times," she answered.

"It's a good thing it was Jerand there and not me. I don't think I would have held myself back," Beau said, looking at Erin.

"It's a good thing you weren't there, Beau. You may have had a hard time explaining to the Sheriff your justification," Erin smiled.

"I think Call got exactly what he needed. He had every bit of it coming to him, for a long time now," Evie said.

They visited all afternoon and Evie and Erin got on very well. Evie held Mason John as much as she could. Both Beau and Erin seemed to take to her.

"What are your plans for the house now, Evie." Beau asked.

"Well, I'm not sure. I am afraid to stay there for now. I have a feeling that Call will come back to teach me another lesson."

"He'd better not. If the Sheriff doesn't get him, I will," Jerand said.

"If you're there. If I know Call, he will show up in the middle of the night. He's done it before."

"Let Beau and I think on it for a while. I'm sure we can come up with something," Erin smiled at her.

"Yes, we have plenty of family and friends in both Walder's and Sarn. I'm sure we can..." Beau started to say.

"Yes. And, it just so happens that our dear friend owns the Publik House in Sarn and she needs help and cannot find it. You could live and work there for as long as you want, I'm sure." Erin interrupted.

"Wow, thats great! What do you think Evie?" asked Jerand.

"How far is that from here?" Evie asked.

"It's close. A short ride by horse or wagon. And, I can see you all the time," Jerand added.

"Well, that sounds like a plan then. When do we go?" Beau asked.

Beau and Jerand took Evie back to her house in the wagon and packed all her things she wanted to keep. She told them she really would like to sell the place, since it held bad memories for her. They agreed.

"We'll put fliers at the General Store and we can sell it for you after you've gone to Sarn," Beau said.

"That would be great. With any luck, Call will never find me again."

"If he somehow finds you in Sarn, he will have Durik to contend with. He is our best friend and the blacksmith there. He was also in the King's Guard," Beau said.

"Plus, I'll be there a lot now, too," Jerand grinned.

After all Evie's things were loaded up, Beau and Jerand boarded the place up as best they could and they headed back home. Evie expressed concern about there being room for her tonight in the cabin and Jerand said she could have his room and he would bunk in the nursery with Mason John. Beau assured her it would be no problem for one night. They would head to Sarn in the morning and she would have her own room there. They both assured her she would love Kate, Elly and Carla. And they would love her.

Evie started crying with joy and Jerand put his arm around her asked if she was alright.

"I'm just so happy," Evie sobbed.

"You deserve it, finally. And, you're going to be happier when you get setup in Sarn. It's a great place with great people," Jerand said patting her shoulder.

Beau just grinned. He was also very happy that Jerand had someone to take care of again.

Six

They headed out the next morning. Evie, Erin and Mason John in the wagon and Beau and Jerand on their horses. When they got to Sarn, they went to Durik's first. Introductions were made all around and Erin pulled Elly aside.

"We will fill you in later on all the details, but we would appreciate any help you can give Evie. Jerand is crazy about her and she has been abused by her brother for a long time. Her parents are both dead now."

"She seems very nice and just what I need at the Inn. My manager is trying to do it all by herself and cannot keep up," Elly said.

"Sounds like a good match then."

"Even so, I want to set her and my manager down to make sure Evie thinks she can do the job. She seems very bright and is well-spoken. Must have been training from her ma, huh?" asked Elly.

"I suspect so."

They took her over to Kate and Nelson's house and introduced her. Then to Jeb and Carla's. Everyone seemed to like her and commented to Erin and Beau about how beautiful she was. When the visiting was over Elly asked Jerand and Beau to bring her things to the Inn and took her in to talk to the manager.

"Evie, this is Norma, my manager. She runs the Inn and lives upstairs. And, she is by herself and could use some help, right Norma."

"Yes. Good to meet you Evie. Have you ever worked in a place like this before?"

"No, but I used to fix all the family meals when ma and pa were alive, so I can cook and clean."

"Excellent! Those two things alone keep me going," Norma smiled.

"We will have Jerand and Beau load all your things in the downstairs room. It's very large and will hold what you need. The rest we can put at the smith," Elly said.

"I'm not sure what your salary will be, but we can discuss that later, ok?" Norma asked.

"I don't need a salary. Just room and board. I'm selling the family home, so I will have plenty of money."

"And, I understand from Jerand that you are worried about your brother finding you," Elly said.

"Yes. Jerand fought with him and run him out of town. I filed papers with the sheriff saying that he must stay away from me, but he may try to find me to teach me another lesson."

"Good to know. We will have everyone in town keep a watch out," Norma said.

"The Sheriff posted fliers in Walder's about him, maybe we can get one of those," Evie added.

"Yes. I will have Jerand pick some up and post them here," Elly said.

"I can't thank you enough for all you're doing for me. I already feel like Jerand, Beau and Erin's family."

"And they are our family, so welcome to the family, Evie," Elly said, patting her hand.

While Evie was getting settled in, Erin was talking to her ma and Carla. She told her all that Evie had told them in the cabin yesterday. While they were all glad for Jerand, they felt so bad for Evie. It will take her a long time of being around loving people to erase the bad memories.

"We will all help her make new memories," Kate said.

"How old is she, Erin?" asked Kate.

"I'm not sure, but Jerand thinks the same age as him or a bit younger. I would guess 17 or 18."

"She sure is a beautiful girl," Carla commented.

"Yes, I can see why Jerand was taken with her," smiled Erin.

"Do you think things will get serious with them?" Carla asked.

"Maybe, but not for a while. She has a lot to work through. But, I know Jerand will be good for her," Erin answered.

"He is a good boy. He will help her a lot," Kate added.

After Evie was settled in her new room, her and Jerand headed to Erin's house. There was a big dinner planned for this evening and they were the guest of honor. Everyone talked to Evie and made her feel welcome. Nobody pressed her for any information, they just talked about Sarn, the dockrats and the latest things happening in Walder's. Just before dark, Jerand, Beau, Erin and Mason John headed back to their cabin. Tomorrow was Evie's first day, so they all turned in early.

She was worried that she could to the job, but Norma promised to train her for the first week.

Evie loved her new room. She had not eaten as much as she did tonight. And, everything was delicious. She was sure she would fit right in with all these wonderful people. She really liked Jerand and she knew he liked her. She was hoping the house would sell quickly and she could close that chapter of her life. Jerand promised to teach her to ride and then they could go shopping in Walder's. He also said he wanted to take her to Ryker to meet all the dockrats. She was not sure why they were called that or what they did, but she was looking forward to learning all about them.

Evie learned her job quickly and came to love it. All the customers loved her too. She did have a couple young men try to make a pass at her, but Norma put a stop to it quickly. Jerand came to see her every few days and she really looked forward to his visits. Sometimes he would just come for dinner and they would sit out on the patio talking till almost dark, then he would head home.

One day, a few weeks later, Beau and Jerand walked into the Inn and she greeted them warmly. It was a slow day and she accepted their offer to sit down for lunch.

"I have an offer on your house. A couple weeks ago Nelson stopped on his way back from Walder's and I asked him to go take a look at it. He told me what it should bring. He knows about those things," Beau reported.

"It only has the one acre, right?" Jerand asked.

"Yes, and it does need work, but the roof is good and so is the wood stove," Evie said.

"Well Nelson said I should be able to get \$5000 for it. The offer I got yesterday was for \$6000," Beau smiled.

"Oh my. That is way more than I would have ever dreamed."

"So, I should accept?" asked Beau.

"Certainly. I'm going to have to open an account at the bank in Walder's, I guess," Evie said.

"We can go up and do that on your next day off. Meanwhile, we can put the money in our business account and move it later, ok?" Jerand asked.

"That sounds good. And, like I said, I want to give some to your family, Beau, for all your help," Evie said.

"Not needed. You're family, Evie," he responded.

"I insist!" Evie stated. "I'll ask Erin what would be fair next time I'm up."

"Well, ok, we will save it for Mason John, then," Beau smiled.

"Or the next one. Maybe your daughter," Evie said.

Everyone laughed and finished their lunch. Evie went back to work and Beau and Jerand headed home.

Jerand and Beau worked all summer long on small tracking jobs. One job took them down below Ryker and they stopped in to see Baller and Grant. They updated them on all that happened lately and Jerand said,

"Next time I come down, I will bring my friend, Evie. She wants to meet everyone."

"Your girlfriend?" asked Baller.

"Well, she is a girl and she is my friend, so, yes, I guess so."

"That's wonderful news, Jerand. And, about time. What are you now, 20?" asked Grant.

"Almost 21," Jerand answered.

"Just a babe yet, eh Beau?" Grant smiled.

They stayed the night at the Stag and headed home in the morning. The job was tracking down someone that stole from a business in Walder's and vanished in the woods. Beau and Jerand found him in a tavern in a small town south of Ryker and recovered almost all the money from him. It was a substantial amount and they returned it to the Sheriff in Walder's. The business was very pleased and paid the Company a substantial recovery fee. They wouldn't have to take any more jobs the rest of the summer, now.

Seven

The months passed and winter was setting in. The young couple that bought Evie's house were all settled in and fixed up the place real nice. Call never came back to the house and nobody in Walder's had seen hide nor hair of him. He must have taken Jerand's advice.

Mason John was growing fast. Beau had him on the back of the pony already and he loved it. He would be a natural rider. Of course, Erin worried that he would slip and fall, but he never did. One night after dinner, the three were talking around the fire and Jerand said,

"I think it's time to thinking about getting my own place."

Erin looked at Beau and they both knew why he felt this way at this time.

"Really? You want to build or buy?" asked Beau.

"Probably buy a couple acres and build. Is it a difficult thing to do?"

"No, not really. We know enough people that have all the experience you need," answered Beau.

"And, between Evie, Elly, ma and me, decorating would be easy. And fun," added Erin

"Where do you think I should build it?"

"Depends. Do you want to live near Walder's or Ryker or in Sarn?" Beau asked.

"I'm not sure yet. I think I should talk to Evie and see what she thinks."

"You've discussed this already with her?" asked Erin.

"Just in passing. Not a whole lot though."

"Do you have plans to ask her to live in this house?" asked Beau.

"I believe I do. And, I think she might say yes, too," Jerand beamed.

"Well, don't sound so definite about things," Erin kidded.

"It just takes me a long time to make some decisions and act, that's all."

"I think Call probably has a different opinion on that," Beau smiled.

They all shared a laugh.

The following day, Jerand went to see Evie. She was just getting off shift, when he walked in. They had supper together and talked.

"I talked to Beau and Erin about getting my own place. Once I decide where, I think I want to buy some land and build. What do you think would be a good place?"

"You're asking my opinion? On a decision so large? Wow, I'm flattered."

"You know how I feel about you, Evie. I was hoping you might live there with me, like Beau and Erin do."

"Well, that sounds perfect to me. But, don't you think we should at least spend the night together first?"

"I guess. I want to, but...."

"You're shy."

"Yea, I suppose I am."

"How about we have dessert and coffee in my room? We'll see what might develop?"

"What a wonderful idea," Jerand grinned.

Two months later, Jerand and Evie found an acre of land they liked about half way between Sarn and Ryker. They liked the idea that both places were close and they could still have their privacy. Jerand already discussed the idea of him looking for tracking jobs in Ryker and Beau liked the idea. He trusted Jerand enough now that he could do small jobs on his

own. For big jobs, Beau would go down and help him. Erin rarely did any tracking jobs anymore. She was too busy with Mason John and the rest of the family.

"I think we should start building in the spring. We want enough room for lots of kids, right?" Jerand asked Evie at dinner in the Inn.

"Of course. Do you know how to build a house?"

"No, but Durik, Beau and Nelson do. And they already said they would help design it. We can hire contractors in Ryker to do most of the work. We would just design and consult."

"Sounds like you've got a plan."

"Yes. Once we move in, will you continue to work here, do you think?"

"I think so. For a while. It probably depends on how much it costs and how long our money lasts."

"You have a lot more than I do, so you get to make most of the decisions about things."

"That sounds fair. Do you think you will get many tracking jobs?"

"Not at first, but once Grant and the dockrats get the word out, I may have to hire some help."

"Do you know any trackers besides Beau?"

"There are a couple dockrats that I could train and they would be very good at it."

"That's great, Jerand. When you get that busy, I will find a replacement and stay home."

"Have I told you lately that I love you?"

"Why, Jerand. No you haven't. But it sure is nice to hear. And, I love you too."

Jerand and Evie built their house in the spring. Evie got pregnant the following winter. Jerand had to hire two dockrats to help with all the business he was getting out of Ryker, mostly from Grant and Lane. Evie found someone to take her place at the Publik House and Elly sold the place to Norma, her manager. They were very happy in their new house and continued to be for many years to come.

Beau and Erin bought a house in Walder's Point. Beau hired another tracker and his business was good. They continued to go to Sarn every couple weeks or so.

Kate and Nelson were happy seeing their grandkids on a regular basis. And, their home became the place everyone went for all the holidays.

Carla lost Jeb the following year from pneumonia. There was a huge ceremony and he was buried in the Sarn cemetery. Within a couple years, Carla died too. The last few years of their lives were some of the happiest they had known.

Jerand told Evie, Beau and Erin one day that the decision to not accept the leader of the dockrats was the smartest thing he had ever done. And the luckiest thing that ever happened to him was a colt breaking through the fence and getting stuck in the snow. That led to his current life. And Evie. He also told them he was very thankful they asked him to come work with them back when he was just a lowly dockrat.

All in all, Jerand has been very lucky and has made some good choices in his life. He wishes everyday that Safer could see how well things have turned out for him.