

Whisper of the Woods by D. G. Driver (Excerpt from Chapter Seven)

The sun had risen and cast a beautiful golden glow over the campsite. Its light hadn't pierced the canopy of the giant trees yet. I stepped toward the darkness and felt what tiny amount of heat the sun provided dissipate. A chill shuddered through me. I tugged the hood of my jacket over my head and ducked my chin into my jacket where the zipper met at the top. I should've worn a scarf. That was a mistake. Mittens or gloves would've been smart too. I shoved my hands into my pockets as deep as they would go. Willing myself forward, I went through the first barrier of trees and within a few steps lost sight of the camp completely.

The ground crunched under my feet, and the constant buzzing, clicking and chirping of the morning bugs and birds was crazy loud. I swear with every step they buzzed, clicked and chirped louder. I lost two inches of height from being hunched over because of the cold and the onslaught of nature noise. I plugged forward, looking up enough so I wouldn't walk into any trees. Not all of them were red cedar monsters, but they were all big and close together. I recalled that on New Year's Eve I ran through this area in the dark. Why didn't I slam into any of them? Why didn't I get a broken nose? All that happened to me that night was a twisted ankle. It should've been so much worse.

While it was hardly bright in the forest, there was enough light to see where I was going and it pretty much looked like I was going in circles. The ground was covered with nettles and a mulch of rotting leaves. I was not some tracker from an old western adventure story. I had no idea how to look at a broken branch or stare at the mud and figure out if someone had ever walked this direction or decipher where they were going. I thought about all the movies I'd seen where that kind of talent seemed to be innate to American Indian characters. Well, there was some misrepresentation, huh? I had no idea which way to go – right, left, forward, probably not backward. But then again, I wasn't sure if I'd turned around.

So I stopped. I got still and that at least eliminated two noises: the crunching and my heavy breathing. I closed my eyes and tried to picture the forest from the other night to see if anything would stand out in my memory as a landmark. All I could picture was darkness and trunks of trees. Not helpful at all. I doubled my efforts.

Almost as if my concentration caused little doors to close on my ears, the deafening sound of nature silenced. My head felt light with the sudden lack of noise. It felt like I was shut up in a soundproof box. It was kind of freaky but awesome at the same time. I kept my eyes closed and stayed as still as possible for fear that I would mess up whatever weirdness was happening. I held my breath.

Yes.

That's what it sounded like. A word. An affirmation. Whispered with a lot of air and hissing. Was it real?

Yes.

I heard it again. It really happened. I wasn't making it up. I dared to open my eyes. No one was standing in front of me. I turned my head. No one was within proximity of me to have whispered and be heard.

...the one...

That sounded like there was more to it, like it had faded in and faded out again. They were definitely words. I strained to hear more. My body tensed to the point of aching.

...come...

Yes. The one. Come. What did it all mean? I listened for something to connect it all together. I listened to try to tell if it was a man's voice. Or a woman's. Or was it several voices. It kind of sounded like several voices at once.

...come...

I heard it again, but it was at a distance, a little further forward and to the right. I took a step in that direction and waited.

Yes.

Again in that direction, but almost like the person had ducked behind yet another tree further on. Was I to chase this person? What if this person was playing a trick on me? What if it were one of the loggers?

Come.

Further yet. If I didn't follow, I feared I would stop hearing the voice. I took several steps in that direction and then stopped to listen again.

"Is something wrong with you? Why do you keep taking a step and then stopping?"

That was not the voice I wanted to hear. This one came from behind me and sounded distinctly like my cousin. I flipped around to find Ronnie standing about a yard behind me. He was overweight and had let his hair get kind of long and stringy around his neck and jawbone. I envied the jacket he wore, a thick fleece-lined denim coat that looked way warmer than the puffy jacket I had on. A plaid scarf was tied around his neck. Cargo pants, boots, and work gloves finished off the woodsy appearance. I looked around for a giant axe, mildly surprised he wasn't holding one.

"What are you doing here, Paul Bunyan?" I asked him.

"I could ask the same about you. Didn't see your dad drive up."

"I got here early. He'll be here in a bit. I didn't see *your* dad's car out there either."

"I drove here on my own."

"Why?" I asked him. "Are you suddenly interested in what's going on out here?"

"Of course I'm interested," he said. "I live on the reservation. My father is Tribal Chief Executive. This tree-cutting directly affects me. The bigger question is why do *you* suddenly seem interested in what's going on out here?"

It was a fair challenge. I hadn't been too present lately. Not by choice. Every morning since New Year's I woke hoping my parents would let me skip school and come out to the protest site, but they insisted I go to class, telling me they'd pull me if they needed me.

Ronnie took a couple steps closer to me. He might be seventeen days younger than me, but he's quite a bit bigger than me. My mom said he was born bigger than me. She took me with her to the hospital the day he was born and he was a good three pounds heavier and two inches longer. I'm no shorty now, but Ronnie made me feel small. "Are you going to try to get up in that tree and see if you can get everyone to freak out about you again? Classic case of a girl desperate for attention."

"You think I purposely climbed up in the tree and waited until I was found? Why would I do that?"

"Because you liked it when everyone was talking about how you found mermaids, and when that stopped you needed to find something else to get people talking about you."

"That's stupid," I told him, although it made a certain amount of sense. I was feeling pretty desperate and lonely. And it did feel kind of good when everyone worried about me. I certainly saw a side of my mother that was rare. Maybe I did climb the tree, and I didn't remember it. Was

that even possible? Of course I shared none of these thoughts with my cousin. “I was thirty feet in the air, Ronnie. Wanna tell me how I did that?”

“I think your friend Carter helped you and then left.”

My cousin was a dolt. “Really. You think my boyfriend boosted me up into a tree – a tree that I had to get out of by climbing down a ladder, mind you – and then left me there all night without telling anyone where I was?”

“He’s shifty enough for that,” Ronnie said. “I mean, he went along with all your mermaid crap.”

“That’s because it wasn’t...” I shut my mouth. I wasn’t supposed to say the mermaids were real anymore. Mom insisted that I keep all that hushed up. I pulled my hands out of my pockets and put them up in defeat. “Fine. You’re taller than Carter. Come with me to the tree and try to boost me up. Let’s see how that works.”

“Fine,” he agreed. “I’ve been wanting to prove it anyway, because I’m tired of Grandfather talking about how the magical Spirit of the tree did it.”

I thought of the haunting voices I’d heard right before Ronnie showed up, the ones that seemed to be leading me deeper into the forest. “Grandfather said I was lifted up by Tree Spirits?”

“Grandfather is a nut for the old legends, you know that.” Ronnie tucked his stringy hair behind his ears. “And he won’t stop about that tree. He talks about it every time Dad and I come around. Dad told me we weren’t going to visit him anymore until after the tree is finally chopped down.”

I made a silent vow to myself to go visit Grandfather as soon as possible.

“Do you know where the tree is?” Ronnie asked.

“I think it’s this way,” I said, pointing in the direction from which the voices had been coming. I started walking and Ronnie fell into step beside me. I remembered the tree wasn’t too far from the campsite. After a couple minutes we came upon it. I knew it was the correct one because of the gash from my uncle’s axe. On a trunk with a ten foot diameter, a gash like that appeared no bigger than a paper cut on a pointer finger, but the thing that really stood out about it was its color. The gash was blood red against the brown bark. I would have expected the flesh of the trunk to have been lighter than the bark, but it wasn’t. It was dark and moist, like the sap was bleeding out of it. It hurt to look at it, and an urge overwhelmed me to rip material from my shirt so I could bandage it. I jammed my hands into my pockets to stop myself and craned my neck backward so I could look anywhere else. My eyes found the tree limb where I’d been found on New Year’s Day.

It was high up. It seemed even higher than before. I remember how I thought I might possibly be able to hang from my arms and drop to my dad’s shoulders. Looking at it now, I see why Dad waited for a ladder. There was no way that would’ve worked. Honestly, it seemed now like there would have been a twenty foot gap between my dangling feet and my dad’s shoulders.

I pointed at it and nodded at Ronnie. “That’s the lowest branch, Brainiac. Looks like it’s at least thirty or forty feet high. Wanna help me get up there?”

Ronnie sneered at me and then started running his hands along the trunk, up and down, side to side, inspecting it all over.

“What are you doing?”

He didn’t answer. It took him several minutes to go around the whole tree. I followed and watched him get more frustrated at the smooth, giant base with every moment. Finally, he stopped and slammed the tree with both palms as hard as he could. A sharp burn went through

my thighs. My knees buckled as I lost balance and fell to the ground. I got my hands out in front of me in time to keep from banging my head against a big root protruding from the ground.

Ronnie looked down at me but didn't make the slightest effort to help me up. "You okay?" he asked without any indication that he actually cared. "Did you trip on something?"

"I don't know. I..." I didn't know how to explain what happened. My legs still stung. I got to my feet and leaned against the tree.

Ronnie backed away from it, his eyes still searching for something to help explain the mystery of how I got up into the tree. He shook his head. "I don't know how you did it."

Falling or climbing? Mystery to me too.

"Me either," I said, pretty sure he was talking about the climbing.

Another one of his sneers. "I'm *going* to find out. You can count on that."

I grinned at him, trying my best to make it look wicked. "Hey, here's an idea. We keep the tree from being chopped down until you do. I bet the tree will stay up forever that way."

"You're so funny. You should be a comedian," Ronnie said. "Oh, that's right. You're already a joke."

Okay, that stung. I didn't let it show. I never liked my cousin, and it was wonderful to discover that I could dislike him even more than before.

His cell phone rang, startling me. The ring was a horrible, distorted rock song I didn't recognize, and it was jarring against this peaceful world of bird chirping and leaf rustling. Ronnie laughed at me for jumping and then answered his cell that was so big it bordered on being a tablet. "I'm at that tree you hate with June," he said after a beat. It had to be Uncle Nathan on the other end.

"No, Randy didn't know anything. Said Uncle Peter and Aunt Natalie left late last night after a big group meeting, but nothing was decided."

My parents hadn't mentioned a meeting. Why wasn't I included? Were they trying to decide if they were going to keep up with this protest?

"No one was here except Randy this morning when I drove up."

So, the Rav-4 was Ronnie's. I tried not to be jealous that he got a newer, nicer car than mine. I imagined he was getting enough grief down at the reservation where a lot of kids could barely afford new clothes let alone a car. The reservation might be having money troubles, but Uncle Nathan seemed to be doing fine. Maybe if he bought Ronnie an older, cheaper car, he could put the rest of the money he spent toward helping the reservation. That'd save a tree or two. I sighed. At least my car was a pretty color.

I suspected that even though Uncle Nathan earned income from the casino and his Tribal Chief Executive position that he still made less than my mom. It was impossible to earn less than my dad, because most of what he did was voluntary. So, I wondered if the car and cell phone were token gifts to my cousin to make up for not having enough money to send him to college. Hardly any of the reservation kids went on to college, and I kind of doubted Ronnie was working toward an academic scholarship.

"Well, that's what I thought, and then I looked out the window and saw June walking across the camp. Her parents aren't here, but she says they're coming." He paused for a moment, and I could hear his dad's muffled voice. "I don't know why she's here," Ronnie responded defensively. He looked at me. "Why are you here?"

"To keep Uncle Nathan from chopping down these trees. Why do you think?"

Ronnie's eyes rose to the 40-foot high limb, but he didn't say anything to me. He spoke into the phone. "She's being in the way."

“My parents are coming today. They haven’t quit.”

Ronnie repeated that for his dad. I think the man cussed on the other end. That or he sneezed. It was a loud, sharp sound that made Ronnie pull the phone away from his ear and dart his eyes away from me, embarrassed. He took a few paces away from me so that I couldn’t hear his conversation. After a minute, he came back, putting the phone in his back pocket. I couldn’t help thinking how wide his pockets had to be to accommodate a phone that large.

“Dad says he’s coming over here with the Plantation Lumber crew this afternoon. They’re going to start on this section, and there’s nothing you or your parents can do about it. You might as well go home.”

“I’m not leaving,” I told him. “We’ll block them.”

“You don’t have anyone left on your side. Even your mom sounded like she was going to back out, according to my dad.”

“You don’t know my mom. She never backs out.”

I’d never known her to, anyway, but it sure sounded like she wanted to quit when she got home last night. I hoped Ronnie was wrong. My thighs weren’t stinging anymore, but now there was this horrible buzzing in my ears. It was like the sound of a hornets’ nest, if hornets could talk, because amidst the buzzing I swear I could hear words like “help”, “need”, and “please.” It kept getting louder, and I almost couldn’t hear Ronnie talking to me over it.

“...only way is if you climb up in the tree again.”

“What?”

He did a heavy sigh at having to repeat himself. “I said, if you stand here, Dad’s men will push you out of the way. You don’t have any rights here. You’re trespassing on reservation land.” I started to protest, but he stopped me. “You’re dad doesn’t count anymore. He hasn’t lived here in thirty years. The only thing you can do is climb up into the tree again. We can’t chop it down if you’re in it, can we?”

“Is that a dare?”

“Yeah, you can take it that way.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

“Go ahead.” He crossed his arms. “Show me.”

“I can’t right now. I need a ladder.”

“No ladder,” he said. “Do it like you did on New Year’s Eve. Right now. With me watching. You show me how you did it, I’ll make sure the tree doesn’t get chopped down. For now, anyway.”

Ronnie was a class-A piece of work. When he was a boy did his dad tell him bedtime stories from the villain’s point of view? Is that how evil people raise their kids to be equally evil?

I leaned my head against the tree trunk. The noise was giving me a headache. “Go meet your dad. If Randy knows I’m here, then he’ll have called my parents. They’ll be here soon.”

“Are you staying here?”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “What choice do I have? Someone has to guard the tree.”

“You’re so dumb, June,” he said.

“There’s a word that starts with D that suits you too.”

Ronnie kicked the tree really hard right above the roots and then began walking away without another word. I bit back the scream from the intense pain that went through my shin, not wanting him to see or ask questions. Tears formed in my eyes. I lifted my leg, pulled off my boot and hiked up my jeans to see a welt that would definitely bruise.

“What’s going on?”

When Uncle Nathan swung the axe at the tree, my belly felt slashed too. When Ronnie slapped the tree, my thighs stung. When he kicked the tree, my shin got bruised. Was I going crazy? Was my mind tricking me into thinking I was getting hurt right alongside the tree?

Or was it the tree doing this to me?

I faced the tree and felt around the trunk like Ronnie had a few minutes earlier. It was a silly thought, but I wondered if I could feel handholds and footholds that he couldn't find. The bark was rough against my fingers and palms. Curious, I picked at the bark, attempting to peel a little off. It broke off easily, but simultaneously I felt a scraping pain on my cheek. I snapped my hand back from the tree and pressed my fingers to my face. I couldn't feel any wound, but it felt like I'd been cut – badly.

"Sorry." Did I just apologize to the tree? The pain eased. The noise in my head lessened, and the feeling of panic along with it.

I put my hands back on the tree. A tickling sensation started against my palms, almost like dogs nuzzling their noses into them. I pulled my right hand back and looked at it. Nothing was in my hand; nothing was on the tree. I put my hand against the tree again, in a slightly different spot. The tickling sensation began again, along with a nudging. The bark of the tree swelled beneath my hands until my fingers were wrapped around knobs that seemed to have been pushed out of the tree to perfectly fill the size of my palms.

I stepped on a root and then reached higher to see if there would be another one. Again, I experienced the same sensation of the flat, rough bark suddenly growing into a perfect handhold. I grabbed it. I couldn't see any more of them above me.

With my weight on my right foot, I lifted my left and scraped at the trunk, trying to find a nodule sticking out far enough to put weight on, but my boot didn't catch on anything. I reached up higher with my hand, and another knob formed into my palm. Impulsively, I tore the boot off my left foot and tossed it to the ground, followed by my thick sock. I skimmed around the trunk with my bare foot again, and almost instantly my skin found something sticking out of the tree wide enough for my foot and strong enough to hold my weight. I rose two feet off the ground.

Now, with my weight on my left foot, I hurriedly rid myself of my right boot and sock. I reached up again with my left hand this time. Where there had been nothing, I found yet another handhold. My right foot found a spot to land, too. I continued upward. Each bump that grew out of the tree for me was perfectly positioned and precisely the right size for my hands and feet.

When I was thirteen, my dad took me to a gym a few times to have me learn rock climbing. He was preparing me for a trip we might take to Utah where poachers were killing Bald Eagles and the chicks were being left in the nests to die. He wanted us to be prepared to climb to save them if necessary. We never wound up taking that trip. Mom took the company to court, and the operation stopped. When I trained with Dad I'd worn a harness, and there were gym mats at the base in case I fell. This was the first time I'd climbed for real. Nothing was protecting me as I rose higher and higher on this tree, yet I felt certain I wasn't going to fall. The tree was allowing me to climb up, helping me climb up. The tree wanted me up inside its branches.

In a matter of moments, I passed the branch I'd been found on two weeks ago. I kept going. As long as the tree provided me the hand and footholds, I saw no reason to stop. I didn't bother looking down. I was too amazed by what was happening – the magical ladder the tree provided. I rose higher and higher until my muscles began to sting, and my shoulders pinched from the workout.

When I felt like I couldn't climb anymore, the mysterious knobs ceased to form. I felt around above my head, but the tree had stopped providing them, as if it knew I couldn't go any

further. Carefully, holding on to other branches above me, I managed to put a leg over the thick branch beside me and straddled it while leaning my back against the sturdy trunk. Only now did I notice how hard I was breathing and that sweat trickled down from my hairline even though the temperature was still so brisk. I finally dared to glance down. From where I sat I could barely see the ground. Lower branches full of thick sprays of needles blocked most of the view. If I had to guess, I was a good hundred feet up. Probably more.

Fear seized me. My back went rigid, and my arms gripped the trunk behind me. I squeezed the branch with my thighs as tightly as I could. What had I been thinking? I was going to fall. I was going to die. I looked down carefully, hoping to see all the hand and footholds on the trunk that would help me get back down. There wasn't a sign of them. They had been phantoms.

"I'm trapped."

No sooner had I spoken those words, than I heard a soft whisper in response: Yes.

