

## The Truth

We returned to the road as soon as I'd relieved Now-Dead Antagonist of my bow, his, and all the rest of his stuff worth taking. I knew it was a risk, but a rapid pace on pavement as opposed to slow stealth through the trees seemed a better bet, at least until we'd put some distance between us and the horror show moving in the other direction. I had no idea how often their outliers checked in, but if it was indeed often, we were probably screwed anyway.

Neither of us spoke as we followed the narrow road at a fast walk, the wheel-barrow tires humming quietly behind us.

We'd gone maybe a quarter-mile before I saw the first human structure. It was a small cabin, set far back from the road, and roughly constructed. I watched carefully, but nothing moved at the two small windows, or in the tiny clearing it occupied as we passed it.

Then, I could see what looked like a small neighborhood in the distance, with slightly taller buildings behind it. The diminutive Pine Notch at last, I assumed. I informed Brin of this, speaking quietly, even though we were still quite far away. She didn't offer much back, just asked the only pertinent question.

"Now what?"

I'd already decided on that.

"Not through. I don't want to give anyone else a shot at us, if I can help it. People suck, now."

Her answer was two things at once. There was one on top, and one below it.

"My Dad would probably agree."

"Ok, ouch."

She held up a hand, palm out, while doing her best to look directly at me, a tiny smile on her face.

"I trust you, Jake. It just seemed a little categorical."

"I present the last month as exhibit A, your honor."

She tilted her head from side to side, and then shrugged, obviously not dissuaded.

"I'm just saying, if it's us two against the world, what chance do we have? We'll need help at some point."

"Ibid, your honor."

"Don't be a jerk. You know I'm right, or you wouldn't have agreed to this."

"Ok, fine. But for sure not here."

I could now see dust on a small portion of the road ahead, and realized a dirt road crossed the black-top there, heading off in opposite directions. It was decision time, and in the absence of a map one way seemed as good as another.

"Pick a number between one and two."

"One point five."

"Ok, I deserve that. Left or right, then."

"Left."

So we turned that way, now heading further away from the interstate. Tall pines bracketed the opening as we followed our new path through them into a small meadow beyond. The dirt road was in decent condition, graded flat, and partially graveled. A two-strand barb-wire fence bounded the

meadow to our right, but it was open on the other side of the road. It didn't take long to pass through the open space and back into the forest, the fence to the right then zagging away from the road through the trees at an angle, defining some boundary that meant nothing to us.

The surrounding trees quickly transitioned to old growth stature, the canopy rising to nearly double the height, and the road ahead began to wind its way between the immense trunks, an indication that nature's gravitas can have a distinct influence on human plans.

The road did tend toward the north in the mean, which was good for us, and there weren't any structures visible from it. Maybe this was state or federal land, or a protected habitat, not that it mattered much anymore to remnants like us still crawling around among irrelevant markers like the fence we'd left behind.

Because I'd lived with inter-personal silence as a prominent participant in my life, I didn't have a reliable internal chronometer to measure segments. It's only when Brin spoke up that I realized a fair amount of time had passed since we'd left the paved road behind with nothing passing between us.

"Jake."

"Yes."

"Are we going to talk about it?"

Of course I knew what she meant. Why should I be suddenly terrified? I knew how I felt, and I'd said it out loud. The unexpected bit had been the reply, and the pivot of my personal universe. I found myself caught in an internal loop, positing answers to her question that would never be uttered, as none of them could carry the full weight of the response I wanted to make.

We went on in silence again for a bit through the shadows, the occasional ray of sunshine making its way down to the forest floor through the canopy like a benign and apathetic lightning strike. She started again, obviously done waiting for me.

"I've not been kind to you. I know that. I've told you some of the reasons, but beyond them and to be honest, I don't think of myself as kind. I've known how you felt this whole time. It radiates off of you. I think one of the things I like most about you is how easy you are to figure out."

Reader, meet irony. Irony, Reader.

She went on.

"What does that say about me? I like you because you are easy to understand?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not explaining this very well. It's not just that. Jake, you are many wonderful things, but I've never been anywhere close to this before. I never allowed myself to want it, because I didn't believe I'd be any good at it. The 'can't see' thing only set it in cement."

She paused, as if to give me another chance to respond. When I didn't, it didn't seem to interrupt her train of thought at all, she just continued.

"I'm not taking it back. I meant it, like I know you did. But you need to know that I have no idea what happens from here, if anything. I didn't even know for sure if it was true until you said it, and now I'm afraid."

Her side-long glance at me communicated exactly what she wanted it to, but I wondered whether a one-way street like that could return anything to her. I'd never know, as she handed me a verbal prompt as well.

"Your turn, now."

It seemed like I should need more time to figure out a response, but it turned out that I didn't. That should've been a red flag, but welcome to me.

"Brin, I don't need you to do anything, one way or the other. Whatever this is or isn't, it doesn't change anything from my side."

She groaned in frustration.

"What is it with you guys and the stoic hero? You'll feel the same whether I give back or not? You think you get *points* for that, you dumbass?"

Her animation, even in outrage, was captivating. I did feel stupid, but it didn't seem to matter. I put out the first thing that came to mind.

"Yes, I am dumb. Please advise."

"*And*, a penalty for trying to manage me. Give me something *real*, please."

I could see that the trees ahead were diminishing, and eventually opened out onto a significant motorway cutting across the dirt lane ahead. Just a guess, but this must be west-bound state route 78, as it wasn't big enough to be the interstate. I stopped at the edge of the tree-line, and she did as well, reacting to the resulting tension as the wheel-barrow ceased forward motion.

I turned to look at her, even knowing that didn't carry any weight. She looked toward me. She had demanded, so I gave.

"I'm yours. That's it. Anything you need that I have, I'll give it. Just tell me."

She didn't say anything immediately, but then stepped side-ways, first grasping my fore-arm to guide herself, and then leaned against me, pressing her head against my shoulder for a two-count. Then she stepped away, back to her side of the wheel-barrow before speaking.

"I'll let you know."

And there it is, Reader. A chance, early days. Result to be determined.

I hope you don't mind if I talk to her now, more than you. Don't take it personally.

End Part One

