

Private Investigations

My unease didn't start to dissipate until we'd put several miles between ourselves and what I now considered to be an ill-advised experiment, despite what it had revealed to us. Brin had reduced her cracker package to two cubes almost immediately with Bear's help and a paper-clip to release the zip-tie closure, which he also provided. The cost to her was apparent in her expression as she handed off her third block to him, but she didn't hesitate to do it. She wrapped the remaining two as before and pocketed them once again. As a result of her voluntary sight reduction, she added another cube to our inventory in just the first half-mile. She passed it off to us, and was walking a few yards ahead as I pulled the wheel-barrow with Bear matching my pace to the side. I turned to him.

"You know how you said that other people will figure the cubes out, too?"

He didn't look at me as he responded. He was watching the road ahead, his gaze never too far from where Brin was. That was comforting now, rather than alarming.

"Yeah."

"How many Brins do you think there are out there?"

This distracted him a little, but his side-ways glance was brief as he thought about it.

"Not many. Maybe none."

Brin spoke over her shoulder.

"I'm right here. My hearing is better than yours. Include me."

"Yeah, right, sorry. How many yous out there, you think?"

"Not many. Maybe none."

"That's *exactly* what I was thinking. What are the odds of three geniuses meeting up like this?"

Neither laughed.

"You guys have no sense of humor."

Brin was first.

"Or maybe we *do*?"

I decided to ignore it, and make my point.

"I'm trying to say that we might be the richest people on this planet right now. This is definitely the new gold rush, but we can *see* the gold."

Brin didn't miss a step.

"We?"

"Ok, you, rock-star. But don't forget the little people, is all I'm saying."

She didn't even turn around.

"Don't worry, Jake. You are my favorite little person. Sorry, Bear."

Bear just shrugged in mock hurt.

"Whatever."

I continued with my thought.

"The question is, how *do* we keep them safe? We're dragging around a post-apocalyptic fortune. It's just us three. If we get taken, it won't matter that we've spread them out a little bit. Anybody who gets the drop on us will go through all our shit as a matter of course."

Brin spoke up.

"We could bury them. You know, like pirates."

As soon as she said it, I could not only see why it was a good idea, I could see why it was the only idea. Except for one thing.

"That's it! But we'd need to know if burying them makes them invisible, though. What if there *is* another you out there?"

She stopped and turned around, prompting Bear and I to halt as well.

"That was a joke, Jake."

I shook my head.

"Why not? We know where we're going, and we sure as hell don't want to show up with these in tow until we get a lot of questions answered. Like, is your grandfather still around? If he is, does he give a shit about us? I've been thinking about this more and more the closer we get. Except for the fur monster here, everyone we've met so far has not had our best interests at heart."

Bear snorted and then responded in his trade-mark whisper.

"Easy, little man."

I waved his comment aside, a physical articulation that had more to do with me mentally brushing away any levity I might have felt. My unease had returned, and the unknown yawned before us. The cubes and their inscrutable purpose weighed on me, and maybe that's why the idea of putting them in the ground made so much sense. Put a pin in it for now, and move on to the next mile-stone. Come back to it when we knew a little more about the shape of our next envelope. I tried to project optimistic confidence while struggling with a complete lack of it.

Brin pre-empted any response I might have put forward by pointing off to the side of the road once again.

"There's one over there, but it's a ways off. Jake?"

All I felt was relief at not having to provide any more justification for my assertion.

"Right behind you."

We left Bear on the road, and made our way through hip-high brush towards a slight incline sparsely populated by scrub pine and Manzanita. She led me up and over a gentle ridge, and as soon as we had descended far enough on the other side of it to be out of sight of the road, she stopped. She turned to face me and spoke.

"You're all over the place. I can feel it. Tell me."

I had a moment, then. I had loved this woman from the instant I'd walked into Dave's living room for the first time and had seen her sitting on the sofa, but our road together since had been a circuitous route to the us we'd become. The idea that someone could see me and know me well enough to divine my emotional state based on feelings alone was nearly alien to me. Maybe my mother did when I was a kid, before she got sick. It was hard to remember anything before her exit. There'd been no one since then, for sure. I felt exposed and weak, but somehow it was ok, because it was Brin. I opened my hands in a gesture that probably didn't communicate anything beyond my own inability to put how I felt into words.

Brin didn't let me off the hook, however. She shook her head, and moved in. She embraced me, and looked up into my eyes. The feel of her arms around me, and her body pressed against mine was as oddly calming as it was exciting.

"I said tell me, Jake."

I looked up, away from those pale blue eyes, and let out a breath into the sky. It carried a lot of tension with it. Then I returned to her.

"I don't know what I'm doing. That's it. I feel like I'm taking us all through a slaughter-house chute. It'll be my fault when we go down. I--"

Brin interrupted me.

"Stop."

She pressed even closer, and her eyes were at once glacier ice and blue flame. I don't think I'd ever seen anything more beautiful before. She continued, and her words were fierce.

"My father chose you, and you know how I felt about that. But that's all gone, now. *All* gone. You're *mine*, and I'm yours. I couldn't do this alone before, and now...I don't want to. However it goes, you hear me?"

All I could do was nod, but she wasn't done. She tapped my back with one of her fingers for emphasis.

"There's a lot going on in here, I know that. I don't get it all yet, but I will. But we...I...need the Jake with no questions. I know that's not fair. All there are now are questions, right?"

You know what I mean, though, don't you? I know what you've done to keep me safe. Or maybe I don't, really, but I get that it cost you. It cost you a lot, I think, and I've made it harder for you than it needed to be. For that, I'm sorry.

But whatever it is that gave you the strength to get us this far is the only thing that'll get us any farther. Am I wrong?"

I sighed, and shook my head. There was no point in denying what she was saying. Neither was there any benefit in telling her the price tag for me. She didn't need to carry that, and I'd pay whatever for her.

"No, you're not wrong. I understand."

She let go with one arm and reached up, putting her hand on my cheek.

"Thanks for finding your way to me, Jake."

I smiled at her, squeezed her, and then let go. If I was going to switch gears, I needed forward motion. As I pulled away, I asked her,

"How far to the cube, now?"

She bent over, and picked something up from between her feet. She held it up.

"Not far."

"So, the talk was the point?"

She did the side-to-side thing with her head before she spoke.

"Kinda."

"All right. Shall we head back, then?"

Then she grinned at me.

"We could. Or, we could make out for a few minutes first. Your choice."

My heart rate spiked.

"Um, the second one, please."

