

White Horse

The sun was far down in the sky to the west, and Brin knew they'd be looking for a place to stop for the night. They'd just passed a mileage sign letting them know that they were only three miles from the intersection of SR 78 and the interstate they'd departed on the other side of the mountains what seemed like months ago, but had only been less than a week. She didn't think they would try to make it tonight, and was glad. She was not only tired, but emotionally exhausted. Arguing with Jake now was completely different than when he'd just been her glorified baby-sitter.

She was also taking a break from the cube-hunt, with a third cube added to the plastic sleeve in her pocket to fully banish the dark for a bit. There had always been a small adrenalin hit so far when the black was erased as the third cube clicked into place. She wondered if it would stay like that, or fade as she got used to it.

Ahead, the blacktop jogged to the left out of sight, and a yellow sign prior to the turn indicated both that there were multiple curves ahead and that motorists should reduce speed.

The woods lining the road must have absorbed the sound until the last moment, because the sound of slow hoof-beats barely preceded the shape of a horse and rider entering the curve ahead, headed in their direction.

They stopped, and the rider reined in his mount at the same time.

Everyone went for their weapons, and the figure atop the horse did the same, liberating a bow from its place on his saddle with practiced ease. The horse stood stock still, even though the person had dropped the reins in order to draw.

Brin could tell that Jake and Bear, as well as the one facing them could have let fly at pretty much the same time.

The moment elongated, but nobody did anything.

Then Jake eased the tension on his pull until he could lower the arm holding his bow. He held out his other arm, and then held up his hand palm-out. She could see Bear out of the corner of her eye lower his sling as well.

The man on the horse held his pose for a few seconds longer, but then de-escalated too. He did not stow his bow, however. The horse started forward, even though the reins still hung across the back of its neck.

As horse and rider closed the distance, she saw Jake go a step further, turning to lay his bow and the metal-tipped arrow atop the wheel-barrow, freeing both hands. Bear, however, did not put his weapon away, holding it at an angle which was in the middle ground between threat and caution.

The man was probably in his sixties, according to the lined face and gray hair tucked up under a ball cap, but nothing else about him suggested anything less than a younger man's vitality.

When he drew within a few yards, the horse stopped, seemingly of its own decision. Brin thought he was probably controlling the pale white mare with his legs alone.

There was a moment of silence as they regarded each other as the sunlight lessened minute-by-minute. The man spoke first with a nod.

"Evenin'."

Jake didn't waste any time.

"Hi, sir. I was hoping we could swap information. We've been where you're headed, and vice versa, hopefully."

The man on the horse seemed to consider, but then dismiss it. Though he *did* stow his bow, and Bear mirrored that action with his sling.

The rider focused back in on Jake when he was done hanging it on his saddle.

"Son, I don't find much truth in people these days." He indicated the three of them with a little wave of his hand. "Y'all are still walkin'. And you were pretty quick with what you got. That says somethin', but it ain't anything about what you might tell me. I think if it's all the same to you, I'll be on my way."

Brin could feel Jake ratchet up a notch next to her. She was getting used to reading him, and her take on this was any increase in intensity on his part was not going to be helpful here. So she jumped in ahead of him. She put as much of "the plead" she'd used with her father when she was little into it, and kept it short.

"Please. Can you tell us anything about Garnet, or Fall River? I'm trying to find family."

She had his attention, but only part of it. This guy was no dummy, for sure. He deliberated for a few seconds before he answered her, scratching his temple under the hat-band first.

"Miss, I'll give you one thing. Take it to heart, or don't. If you had kin in Fall River, let 'em go. I been there. It's a big hole in the ground, now. You go, you'll fall in and never climb out. Them, too." He finished, indicating Jake and Bear with a split-finger jab without really looking at them.

Jake spoke up, getting in ahead of her. Her temper flared, even though he was asking exactly the same thing that she had been going to.

"And Garnet?"

Something passed across the man's expression, some shadow that wasn't even there long enough to really be something for sure. He shrugged.

"Still there, I hear. Look, I got places to be."

Jake was right there with a question, and he sounded genuinely puzzled.

"Why stop to talk at all, then? You could've been gone before we let go. That's pretty clear. What's the point?"

The man considered him. He had hazel eyes, and they were locked on Jake again now. Something short of a smile twitched at the corners of his lips, and Brin could sense a deep potential for violence that hadn't been there just a moment earlier. She tensed, but Jake didn't seem to recognize it. The older man gave Jake his answer, and it sounded like a dismissal.

"Curiosity. Don't see a lot of requests for parley on the road."

Then the horse exploded into motion, going from stasis to a full gallop like a race-horse out of the gate. The man's only concession to this was one hand finding a hold in the horse's mane as he bent low over the horse's neck.

It was so sudden that the pair had swept around Bear close enough to make him flinch and was dwindling in the distance before the three of them could turn around.

They stared after him, as he disappeared in the deepening twilight.

Nobody said anything for at least ten seconds.

Jake was first.

"What the hell just happened?"