

## Belonging

She woke to a pink blush in the sky above. Jake was gone, and Bear snored softly in his sleeping bag a few yards away. It didn't take her long to slip into her clothes and sneakers, and then she went looking for him.

He was standing near the edge of the trees that bordered the prairie grass expanse along the road. He turned to look as she approached, and she could see his smile even in the pre-dawn light. She kissed him on the cheek as she stepped in front of him and leaned back. He put his arms around her and they both contemplated the road, as well as the burgeoning light in the east above it. She was the first to speak.

"How are you?"

"I am...the best I've ever been."

She reached up, and grasped his forearms. They were silent for a bit while the sun broadcasted its imminent arrival and the sky brightened.

She decided to test the waters. It was in her nature to question, now. Life so far had seen to that.

"You get that we might get more out of this than just us?"

He did take a few moments to answer, but as he did, she felt his embrace tighten a bit. Then he relaxed.

"Brin, I've been alone most of my life. It's not what I wanted, and it wasn't anything I chose. I walked through day after day, year after year, waiting to see if that was all I was going to get.

Then, at what seemed like the end of the world, your father picked me up and brought me to you. I'm sure you look at that differently, but to me it was my miracle.

All I want is you, and whatever being with you brings. You're my home."

She could feel the tears come without warning, and the emotions behind them were legion. She was unprepared for the immersion that followed. She could feel Jake tense as she started to sob.

"Brin--."

She tapped his forearm with one hand, and managed a choked,

"Shhh."

He waited, holding her as she explored the deep sea she suddenly found herself in.

She had had a happy childhood. She had been part of a functioning family, until the accident.

Then everything had changed, and now she couldn't escape Jake's statement.

*"Brin, I've been alone most of my life."*

She fought the tears, and they finally surrendered just as the sun peeked over the mountains to the east, and full color flooded the world once more. Jake stayed silent while she wiped the moisture from her face with one hand, and then returned it to his arm again. She apologized, knowing that she didn't really have to.

"Sorry. That came as...sort of a surprise."

He didn't reply, waiting as though he thought she might not be done.

She realized she wasn't.

"It's just...I didn't realize how alone I've been, too, before you said that. I know not the same as you.

I know my parents loved me. But I think they both found ways to unplug from me, in a way, you know? After the accident, my mom blamed my dad, and my dad blamed himself. I'm pretty sure that was it.

When I decided to go live with dad, maybe my mom saw that as a betrayal? I don't know. I guess, though, that it became easier and easier for her to not see me. Who wants a reminder of that kind of pain?

And my dad, I think, because he thought it was his fault, maybe he didn't feel like he deserved to be my dad anymore. But he didn't have any choice, right? We got along ok, and he looked after me, but we were never close again, like before."

She stopped and sighed, squeezing Jake's arms before returning to it.

"And if your *parents* can disconnect from you like that, why wouldn't I think that anybody else could do it, too?

I didn't like that my dad chose you. I've said that. But I think I kept you away more because I didn't think you'd...stick? But you did. You didn't let me get rid of you, and you *know* I tried."

She felt him kiss the top of her head. She turned within his embrace, and put her arms around his neck. She looked him in the eyes as she finished out her thoughts. This was the other thing she'd felt last night.

"All that to say, I know what you mean. I feel like I'm home now, too."