



Surviving Her

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Description: When a deadly outbreak begins, changing the world forever, the only thing on River's mind is survival – until she meets Eliza.

When River's father is injured, she braves an overrun city to find help. In a desperate rescue at a chaotic hospital, she crosses paths with Eliza, a skilled surgeon on the run from the infected.

The two women are thrust together on a dangerous journey.

As they battle zombies, harsh wilderness, and their own feelings, River and Eliza must rely on each other in ways they never imagined. But is love even possible in a world that's broken?

Total Pages (Source): 40

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RIVER

River pressed her palms against the porch railing, her fingers tracing the rough grooves her father had carved into the old oak. Their cabin, nestled in the deep, wild Northanger Mountains, was so much more than a basic hut—it was their refuge, a haven of memories. Even as she started to realize that the world outside might be descending into chaos, the cabin her father had built stood firm, and she felt safe.

The wind howled through the dense forest, whipping the trees into a frenzy. The sky was a strange mix of gray and black. The atmosphere felt heavy with the promise of an imminent downpour. The air was thick with the scent of pine and humid earth and carried a metallic tang of ozone—a sure sign of the storm to come. As she stepped inside, she noticed that the cabin was very dimly lit, with only the flickering glow of the fireplace and a couple of oil lamps.

River took a deep breath, the scent of woodsmoke mingling with the faintest trace of her father's cologne—a smell she'd always thought of as spicy, warm, and comforting. A heavy feeling pressed down on her shoulders. It had been only a daysince news of the outbreak began, each report more terrifying than the last.

Her father, a man of action with a military background, had insisted they retreat to the cabin. "It's safe out there, River," he'd said, his voice calm and laced with authority. "We've got supplies for at least three months if there's just the two of us, and we ration. Let's head out there and wait this out away from other folks."

And so they'd set off in the middle of the night, leaving behind everything—home, friends, and normalcy—for the safety of isolation. The cabin, once a place for summer retreats, was to become their fortress, a place to shut out the virus and pretend, if only briefly, that everything would be okay.

But River could see the worry in her father's eyes. She recognized the fear etched on his face as they listened to the news on their battery-powered radio. The female reporter could be heard very faintly through the noisy static of the radio, her voice without even a hint of emotion.

"The government has issued an...for all citizens to stay in their...contain the spread of the virus and...public health...travel is permitted...emergency services remain operational...around the clock to manage the situation. Stay...stay informed...home."

"Have you got a phone signal at all, Dad?" River asked as casually as she could manage.

"Nope. Not a thing. Plus, the battery's running out on the radio." Her father huffed. "I don't want to waste any generator power on it. We've been through this before, River. It's a virus. They'll lock everyone down, and in a couple of months, it'll pass. Just have faith."

"You're right. Let's turn everything off to save the power," River said, trying her hardest to smile. "We get the message, right? Virus, masks, yada, yada, work from home, Skype yourfamily, learn to crochet, write a book, get vaccinated, go back to normal..."

Her father laughed. "That's the drill, hon."

River pulled her flannel shirt tighter as she closed the curtains. The temperature had definitely dropped. She loved the cabin, but the cold seeped through the walls despite

the roaring fire.

“Dad?” she called out. “Should I make some tea?”

But he was gone.

Jesus. What’s he up to now? I only turned my back for a second.

As she opened the door, a blast of icy wind nearly knocked her back. She stepped out onto the porch, her boots crunching on the weathered decking. River squinted through the gloom, trying to spot her father.

“Dad!” she cried out, her voice almost lost in the howling wind. She saw him near the edge of the clearing, struggling with a tarp that had come loose from the woodpile. His tall, stocky frame hunched against the wind, and his dark hair was plastered to his forehead by the rain that had just begun to fall.

“Stay inside, baby!” her father shouted, his voice muffled by the storm. He wrestled with the tarp, but the wind was turning it into a losing battle.

Like hell, I will.

River’s feet sank into the muddy ground as she stepped off the porch. The cold seeped into her bones, but she pushed forward, determined to get to her father.

Just as she reached him, he managed to secure a corner of the tarp under a heavy log, but the other side flapped around wildly. River grabbed it. They stood there for a moment, her father panting from exhaustion as rain soaked them both to the skin.

“Dad, come on! We need to get inside!” River shouted, struggling to make her voice audible over the wind.

Her father nodded. “Yeah, let’s—” A loud crack cut off his words. River instantly assumed someone was shooting at them from beyond the clearing. Her heart leaped into her throat as she realized that the tallest tree, one of the towering pines surrounding the cabin that they’d meant to cut down last summer but hadn’t gotten around to, had snapped under the force of the wind. It wobbled for several seconds, then began to fall, its branches slicing through the air like knives.

“Dad! Get out of the way!” she screamed. But it was too late. The tree crashed down, its trunk slamming into the ground. The impact reverberated through River’s body.

Jesus! The ground is shaking!

For a moment, everything went silent. All River could hear was the pounding of her pulse against her eardrum.

River’s eyes widened with horror as she realized what had happened. The tree had fallen directly across the path where her father had been standing. “Dad!” she sobbed, rushing forward to find him. Her feet slipped as she scrambled toward the man she loved most in the world. She saw his body partially buried beneath the massive branches.

He’s not moving!

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“No, no, no,” she whispered, dropping to her knees. Her hands trembled as she brushed away the dirt and leaves. Her father was unconscious. River recoiled as her eyes were drawn to his pale, slack face. He had a deep gash across his forehead. As she tried to stop the blood oozing from the wound with her sleeve, a wave of nausea rose in her throat.

“Oh, Daddy, wake up. Wake up, Daddy,” she begged, shaking him by the shoulder. There was no response. Panic surged through her as she did her best to remember what he’d taught her to do in an emergency.

“Assess the damage. Assess...assess,” she muttered to herself, barely able to think. “Okay. How do I assess? What does that mean? What do I do?”

Her father’s left leg had been hit by the trunk as it fell, though thankfully the tree had rolled just enough that he wasn’t still pinned under it. His leg was twisted at an unnatural angle. River noticed what she assumed was his bone jutting through the skin. The sight was horrifying. A pool of blood surrounded him, its bright scarlet hue slowly soaking into the brown mud.

“No, Daddy. You’re losing too much blood. Stop bleeding!” she shouted, her voice rising with panic.

River tried not to panic at the full extent of his injuries. Her mind screamed at her to act, to do something, anything, but she was frozen in a state of absolute helplessness.

“Daddy, please,” she whimpered, taking off her shirt and placing it against the wound, being careful not to press it too hard. Her hands soon became slick with

blood, and she knew it wasn't enough. She needed help.

"Stay with me," she urged, leaning forward and feeling for a pulse on his neck. "I feel you. I got you, Dad. You're still with me. I'll get you out of here. I promise. Just have faith."

River watched the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

Keep breathing. Just keep breathing, Daddy.

And then she heard a sound. It was quiet at first, just the faintest moan. But it sounded like the sweetest music she'd ever heard. He was still with her.

"Daddy," she whispered, tears choking her voice. "Don't speak. Just breathe. Stay awake." Her father had taught her so much about survival, first aid, how to act in an emergency...so why couldn't she get a handle on this? She needed to accept the severity of his injuries in order to help him.

Right, get a grip, Riv. What can I see? What can I do? His ribs must have broken...

River stared down at her father's face and tried to examine the deep gash.

Fluttering eyes, shallow breathing, drifting in and out of consciousness.

"Please, you have to wake up," she pleaded. But he remained still, his body slack and unresponsive. River's heart pounded. She was going to lose him.

The storm continued to rage around her, and the wind sounded like it was laughing at her helplessness as she tried to come up with a solution. She knew she had to move him. She had to get him inside the cabin somehow, but the thought of lifting him, especially with his injuries, was terrifying. But what choice did she have?

River forced herself to focus as she gritted her teeth. Her father's blood loss was the most immediate danger. She pressed a little harder on her makeshift bandage. The fabric was soaked. She had to find something more robust to bind the wound, something that would stop the bone from moving any farther.

The cabin wasn't far. But under the circumstances, it might as well have been ten miles away. Leaving her father felt so wrong, but River knew there was no other option. She stood up, the wind whipping her hair as she forced herself to put one foot in front of the other as she bolted for the cabin.

She pushed the door open and raced to the kitchen, yanking open drawers until she found a roll of thick gauze, some adhesive tape, and a pair of scissors. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she grabbed a thick towel to make a splint.

Clutching the supplies to her chest, she ran back out into the storm, nearly tripping on the porch steps as she hurried to her father's side. He hadn't moved, his breathing still shallow, and River's heart ached at the sight of him.

"I'm right here, Dad. I'm here," she said, kneeling beside him. Her voice was steady, but her veins throbbed as adrenaline coursed through her body. She tore off a strip of gauze and wrapped it firmly around his leg in a desperate attempt to slow the bleeding.

"Just hold on. I'm begging you," she whispered, tying off the already blood-soaked gauze. Next, she wrapped the towel around his leg and secured it with some of the tape. It was the most basic splint imaginable, and she knew her father would be barking instructions at her if he could and telling her where she'd gone wrong, but it was the best she could manage.

River needed to get him inside. She gently touched his shoulder, trying to rouse him.

“Dad? You have to wake up now. Open your eyes,” she begged. For a moment, his eyelids fluttered, but then a soft groan escaped his lips and he fell silent again.

River knew that she could no longer allow her fear to paralyze her. Her father’s life depended on what she did next. She shifted her position, sliding her arms under his shoulders. She braced herself and lifted, sweat pouring from her forehead as she pulled him free from the debris. He was so much heavier than she’d anticipated, and his limp body was a total dead weight.

With a strength born of desperation, River finally dragged her father clear of the tree. Every muscle in her body burned with the effort as she started to drag him across the ground.

I can’t do this.

River’s mind spun into overdrive. She couldn’t control her thoughts. But as she took a gulp of air, she tried to push aside her fear with all the force she could muster. This wasn’t about what she could or couldn’t do. It was about what she had to do. It was as simple as that.

“One step at a time,” she said through clenched teeth. “Just keep moving.”

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It took everything she had to pull her father across the clearing. The ground was uneven, soaked with rain, and the mud clung to her boots like quicksand. The wind was a constant force against her, almost as if it were trying to push her back. Her father's limp body dragged behind her, a weight that seemed to grow heavier by the second. Her arms and legs burned with the strain. Her jaw was clenched so tightly that her whole face started to ache, but she took deep breaths and kept pulling.

It felt like a whole day passed before she reached the porch steps. River glanced up at their cabin, its silhouette blurred by the sheets of rain. The door was still ajar, the faint light from inside a beacon of hope.

"We're almost there, Daddy," she cried out, though she doubted he could hear her. His head lolled to the side and his face was white. She hadn't seen or heard a reaction from him since she'd started moving him. The gash on his forehead was still bleeding, but his leg seemed somewhat stabilized. Still, she knew full well that he was fading fast and there was no time to lose.

The porch steps loomed before her like a final challenge. River braced herself, suddenly realizing that this would be the hardest part. With a deep sigh, she adjusted her grip on her father's shoulders and began the arduous task of pulling him up the steps. Each one was a monumental effort. She had to heave him up with every ounce of strength she had left as her muscles screamed in protest.

One step.

Then another.

River's breath came in short, ragged gasps, her vision blurring with a mix of rain and tears. The steps seemed to stretch on forever, an endless climb that left her wondering if she'd ever reach the top. But she kept going, refusing to let exhaustion win. The porch creaked beneath them as she finally, miraculously, pulled her father onto the flat surface.

She collapsed beside him, her chest heaving in pain. For a moment, all she could do was lie there, her body trembling with exhaustion.

Inside. I have to get him inside.

With a final, desperate surge of strength, River dragged her father through the doorway and into the cabin. The warmth hit her immediately, and the fire was still crackling. But there was no time to take solace in it. She needed to tend to her father.

She pulled him just far enough inside to close the door against the storm. River knew she couldn't lift him onto the couch, so she left him on the floor, using the thick blankets and cushions from the couch to make him comfortable. She quickly stripped off his wet clothes, her fingers numb as she cut the fabric from around the makeshift dressing and splint. The cold had already seeped into his skin, and she was afraid hypothermia would set in if she didn't act quickly.

Once she had him wrapped in dry blankets, River knelt beside him, her mind racing. She needed to get help, but how? The nearest hospital was in Campdale, at least forty miles away, and she remembered her father had mentioned their car was low on gas. Even if it had a full tank, she wasn't sure she could drive through the storm. The roads would be treacherous, and the wind had probably downed more trees along the way.

She stood up and looked through the window. It was completely dark out there as rain splattered against the glass. The thought of leaving her father alone, in his current

state, while she went for help made her feel sick, but she knew what she had to do.

River quickly changed out of her wet clothes, pulling on a fresh T-shirt, a thick sweater, and her waterproof jacket. As she laced up her walking boots, her thoughts drifted to her mother. A familiar ache in her chest rose toward her throat, something that happened every time she remembered who she and her father had lost. Her mother had always been the strongest of the three of them, the one who kept their little family together. She'd taught River to be brave, to laugh, to find joy in the small things, and to face challenges head-on, no matter how impossible they seemed.

"Mom," River said under her breath, the words spilling from her trembling lips as she tied a double knot in her laces. "Why aren't you here? I need you so bad."

If she listened hard enough, she could hear her mother's gentle yet firm voice urging her to keep going. River knew it was only a figment of her imagination, but she stood up straight, her determination hardening. She couldn't afford to dither around right now. There was no room for doubt. Her father needed her to be strong, just as her mother would've been.

Oh, God. He's so pale.

"Please stay with me, Daddy," she whispered, leaning down to plant a soft kiss on his forehead. "I'm coming straight back. I'll be as quick as I can. I promise. You hear me?"

He can't hear me.

With one final, heartbreaking glance at her father, River opened the door and stepped outside. She forced herself to move away from the cabin. The darkness swallowed her as she descended the steps.

Keep moving. You can do this.

As she trudged through the woods, her mind drifted back to her mother. The few memories she had of her were bittersweet. Her mom had always been her rock, the one person she could count on no matter what was going on in her life. Even in her final days, when the cancer had eaten through almost every cell of her body, she'd remained brave, determined to be there for her husband and daughter until her last breath.

I won't let you down, Mom. I'll get Dad out of this. I promise.

The storm raged on, but River picked up her pace. Her determination warmed her muscles and made it easier for her to make her way through the darkness.

Now and then, the wind carried the faintest hint of a distant siren or the echo of thunder, but the sounds were fleeting and indistinct. River's heart pounded with a mix of fear and hope. She knew that if she could reach the main road, she might find a vehicle that could take her to the hospital.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally emerged from the dense forest. She looked around as she desperately tried to make out any sign of civilization. The road wasn't exactly known to be a bustling artery, but she'd expected to see some signs of life.

I heard sirens...

River's legs felt like lead as she trudged along the road. Hours and hours passed. She walked and walked, occasionally stopping for a rest to ease her cramping legs. But then, the first faint glimmer of lights pierced the darkness. They were distant, but a surge of hope swelled in River's chest, spurring her on through her exhaustion. The lights grew brighter as she approached, revealing the silhouette of Campdale against the dark blue sky. The sight was both a relief and a source of fresh anxiety. What

would she find there?

2

ELIZA

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The emergency room at Holy Souls Hospital had become a living nightmare. What had begun as a typical day, which was about as busy as Eliza could generally handle, had rapidly taken a downward spiral into fear and confusion. Eliza Carter, the chief resident, had barely taken a breath since the outbreak of the mysterious virus. The once-familiar buzz of the ER was now more than she could handle as alarms blared, distressed relatives and patients cried out for help, and nurses and doctors ran from one room to another.

Eliza tried to move down the overcrowded hallway, her eyes darting left to right as she realized that more and more desperate people were flooding into the building.

We don't have enough beds. We can't handle this...

Night shifts were always chaos. Eliza liked to think of her professional (and private) life as organized chaos. But this...situation...was fast becoming a frenzy. Eliza rarely felt overwhelmed—in fact, the need to move fast and make even faster decisions was what made working in the emergency room so thrilling. Nurses and doctors tended to bustle about, their faces etched with worry, but this was something different. She stopped in her tracks and joined a crowd of people whose heads were craned upward to look at the TV mounted on the wall. All she felt in that moment was dread.

“Breaking News,” the anchor’s voice crackled, her face a mask of anxiety. “Reports are pouring in about violent attacks by individuals infected with an as-yet-unidentified virus. The situation appears to be rapidly deteriorating, with no clear understanding of the virus’s nature or how to control it. Authorities are urging everyone to stay indoors, to avoid contact with anyone displaying symptoms, and to wait for further instructions. Emergency alerts have been issued, but solid, reliable

sources of information remain scarce.”

Avoid contact? Well, it’s a little too late for that.

Eliza’s stomach churned as she watched footage of the chaos unfolding on the screen. The streets in Campdale and beyond were filled with panic-stricken people running aimlessly, some pushing others with an aggression that seemed almost primal. The camera panned to police and firefighters struggling to manage the crowds, their faces lined with pure exhaustion.

This can’t be right. It looks like a movie...but that’s downtown Campdale. What the fuck is going on?

Yann Lopez, one of the ER’s junior doctors, stood beside her. His ordinarily calm and casual demeanor was replaced by what Eliza recognized from her years working at Holy Souls as physical distress. He was visibly sweating, and his top lip quivered.

“What is this, Lopez? One of those mockumentaries? Why’s everyone staring at the TV? This isn’t the real news, is it?” Eliza asked, sensing the rising alarm in her voice.

“I checked my socials. Apparently, it’s some sort of mass hysteria,” he replied, his voice tight with nerves despite trying to sound relatively assured. “It looks like something out of a dystopian nightmare. Way worse than last time. Am I right, Eliza? It wasn’t like this last time. But I just called my buddy, Josh. You know Josh, right? He’s a midwife up on G-wing. But he’s big on Twitter or X—I don’t even know what it’s called now—and he said we’d be going into lockdown, Covid-style. It’s this virus. But it might just be a new strain of the flu. People are getting the wrong idea, and...”

Eliza nodded as she touched his elbow and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Look, from what I can gather, this virus is nothing like Covid. We’re not seeing the same

symptoms. This isn't respiratory. We've got fever, dehydration...and what else have you been seeing, Yann? Jesus. It is a virus, right? It's hard to believe this is actually happening. Why is it all over the news?"

"I have no idea. I think this is a pretty big deal. Shit. But the reports are so inconsistent, and the information is all over the place. It's making everything so much harder. My lab results are coming back with 'unknown pathogen' written all over them," Yann said in a low voice.

"Listen up," replied Eliza, trying to keep a level head. "This is nothing we haven't seen before. We get people on drips. Everyone wears a mask. We've done it a thousand times. This is all just media exaggeration. Let's not panic. It must be a slow news day, and you know how?—"

"But..." Lopez interrupted, shaking his head. "But people out there are losing their minds. We're getting conflicting info and no real guidance. It's a nightmare."

"TV lines. Masks. Calm. Got it? There's your guidance."

As Eliza turned on her heel to see her next patient, the ER doors swung open and a new wave of patients poured in. She started in disbelief, but then rushed into a cubicle to tend to a young woman who was barely conscious.

"I'm so sorry for the wait. It's been such a busy night. I don't know..." Eliza stopped talking. She didn't know how to finish her sentence. She put a hand on her patient's forehead. Her skin was clammy and she clearly had a high fever. The nurse beside her caught her eye, looking harried and out of breath.

"It's Dr. Sharples. She was found collapsed on the street," the nurse explained, her voice tinged with panic. "Her vital signs are all over the place. I'd say she's been exposed to the virus, but we're not sure."

Eliza stared at the nurse in disbelief. “This isn’t Dr. Sharples. You must be mistaken. I saw her about a half hour ago. She’s working on trauma. Listen...this woman looks nothing like her. What are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry, Dr. Carter,” the nurse said slowly, shaking her head. “This is her. This virus seems to...I don’t know...the shape of her face has changed.”

“Jesus,” muttered Eliza under her breath, feeling a knot form in her stomach. “Get her on a monitor and start an IV drip. We need to stabilize her. I’ll be back in five.”

As the nurse got to work stabilizing their colleague, Eliza stepped outside and stumbled down the hallways, pushing past people as she went. As she reached the door to the staff locker room, she punched in the code on the keypad and hurled herself inside. She collapsed onto a bed and put her head between her knees, taking deep breaths in an effort to calm her nerves.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

Her mind drifted to her family. They were out of town, weren’t they? Where had Michael said he was going? She knew he and his wife were taking their parents away on a short vacation, but she’d paid absolutely no attention to what her brother had said on the phone.

Where are you guys?

She tried calling Michael’s number, her father’s, and then her sister-in-law’s. There was no answer. She hadn’t been able to reach them all evening. There was a chance the networks were overloaded, but a gnawing sense of helplessness pushed down on her shoulders as she went over every conceivable scenario in her head.

Maybe they’re in the mountains with zero reception. Maybe their phones are

switched off because they're on holiday. Maybe the electricity went out, and their phones weren't charged. Maybe they're all just asleep after a long day, and their phones are on silent. Maybe one of them got sick. Maybe they had a car accident. Maybe they fell off a cliff. Maybe they got abducted.

Eliza stood up, the quiet of the locker room feeling unnatural, almost suffocating. She couldn't shake the memory of the dinner she'd had with them a few months ago, the image of her parents and brother vividly replaying in her mind. The smells of her mother's homemade pot roast had filled her senses as she opened the oven door, the heat blasting into the small kitchen.

Her mother had smiled at her from across the table, but there was something different in her eyes—something Eliza hadn't noticed when she'd first arrived at her childhood home. It was only when they'd all settled down, wineglasses in hand, that the real conversation began, one that now echoed in Eliza's mind like a haunting melody.

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“I can’t remember the last time we did this, Lizzy,” her mother had complained, her tone soft but heavy with emotion. Eliza could still hear the way her mother’s voice had cut through the air like a knife. “Marlene across the street...her daughters, both of them, come home nearly every weekend. Isn’t that right, Henry?”

“Come on now. Eliza’s nothing like those girls. She’s got a whole truckload of responsibilities, Anne. But she hasn’t forgotten about us. I’m right, Liz, aren’t I?” her father had asked, looking over at her with a wink.

Eliza remembered how the words had hit her, how her chest had tightened with a mix of guilt and defensiveness. As she closed her eyes to steady herself, she could almost feel the wineglass in her hand, its smooth surface grounding her as she struggled to find the right words to explain herself. “You guys know I’m trying to build a life for myself,” she’d said, her tone firmer than she’d intended, as if she needed to convince herself as much as them. “It’s a goddamn balancing act every single day, but I’m doing my best.”

The room had fallen into a tense silence for a moment, the kind that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Her father looked at her with those same concerned eyes he’d always had, the ones that could see right through her. And then, out of the corner of her eye, she’d noticed her brother sitting quietly, his hands fidgeting with the edge of the tablecloth.

Eliza had always known Michael to be the calm one, the peacekeeper, but when he finally spoke, it was like a wave crashing over Eliza, unexpected yet undeniably powerful. “Life can’t always just be about work, Eliza. Look, we get it. You’re a bigwig surgeon,” her brother had said softly, but with a hint of sarcasm. “But we miss

you. These guys miss you a ton. And they want to spend time with you, not just hear about your successes.”

Eliza had felt something inside her crack at those words, a deep, uncomfortable feeling she hadn’t wanted to acknowledge. But instead of letting it show, she nodded and mumbled a response under her breath: “I’m not a surgeon anymore.” The rest of the evening had passed in a blur, with smiles and laughter that now felt strained and distant as she remembered them.

She’d brushed off their concerns at the time, telling herself they didn’t understand the pressure she was under or the weight of her responsibilities. But now, with her family unreachable and her beloved ER plunging into chaos, the guilt settled in her stomach like a stone.

“Dr. Carter!” Carla, one of the senior nurses, shouted, her voice cutting through the din like a siren. Eliza turned to see Carla bursting into the room, her face pale and lined with worry.

“We’ve got more patients coming in, and something’s up with the power,” Carla said breathlessly, her eyes wide with urgency. “The north wing is almost completely dark, and we’ve lost the computer system.”

Cold sweat started to form at the back of her neck, but she forced herself to stay focused. “Right. We need to start moving patients to a safer area,” she instructed, her voice steady despite the chaos around them. “Can you coordinate with the other departments and let them know what’s happening? Anyone who doesn’t need a bed doesn’t get a bed. Send as many people home as you can. What’s going on at the triage station?”

Carla nodded, determination replacing some of the fear in her eyes. “I’ll go find out. We’re running out of space and resources, though.”

As Carla dashed off, Eliza stepped outside of what had briefly served as her safe space and turned her attention back to the crowded ER. The smell of fear hung heavy in the air, mingling with the metallic tang of blood. The faces of the patients blurred together—some flushed with fever, others pale and clammy, their eyes wide with confusion and fear.

As Eliza moved through the hordes of people, she heard the low but constant ringing of high-pitched voices alongside the soft beeping of machines that seemed to punctuate every second. She noticed a small group of patients huddled together near the far wall, their faces a mix of dread and confusion. Their fear was palpable, a living, breathing thing that seemed to hang in the air around them.

She approached them slowly, trying to soften her expression and exude calm even though her heart was pounding. “We’re doing everything we can to help,” she said, her voice gentle but firm. The words felt heavy on her tongue, each one a fragile attempt at comfort. “Please stay calm. We’re facing some challenges, but we’re here to support you.”

A middle-aged man, his clothes disheveled and stained, looked up at her with eyes that seemed too large for his gaunt face. His voice was rough and edged with desperation. “What’s going on? Is it really as dangerous as everyone’s saying?”

Eliza hesitated, feeling the weight of his question settle like a lead blanket over her shoulders. She searched his eyes for anything that might help her find the right words. “It seems like the situation is serious,” she finally said, her voice quieter now, tinged with the gravity of the moment. “But we’re doing our best to manage it. Right now, our focus is on providing the best care we can. Just try to stay calm and follow any instructions we give you.”

The man nodded slowly, though the panic in his eyes didn’t lessen. Eliza gave his arm a reassuring squeeze before moving on. Her thoughts kept drifting back to that

night with her family and what they'd tried to tell her. The guilt gnawed at her, a constant, nagging presence that refused to be ignored.

As she attached a fluid line to a young man who was barely conscious, Eliza's thoughts flickered to another memory—this time of Daniel, her ex-fiancé. They'd been sitting in their favorite café. The soft clink of spoons against porcelain cups had been the only sound between them for what seemed like an age.

"I just can't seem to get you away from the hospital," Daniel had said finally, his voice tight with frustration. Eliza could still see the way his hand had clenched around his coffee cup, the white of his knuckles standing out against his tanned skin. "When was the last time we spent any quality time together, Eliza? You never have time to plan this wedding. How will you ever marry me if you're married to your job?"

She'd felt a familiar defensiveness rise in her, the same one that had surfaced during that dinner with her family. "Can't you see that I'm working hard for our future?" she'd tried to explain. "You love your job. You know what it's like. I want to be dedicated to my career. It's important to me, Dan."

But the words had hung heavy, lifeless and hollow, failing to bridge the growing chasm that had opened between them. Their morning coffee that day had ended with the same suffocating silence that had become all too familiar.

Their relationship had crumbled after that, and the love they'd once shared was now a distant memory. But as Eliza ran through that conversation in her mind, the breakup felt like a fresh wound, the pain of it sharper in the face of the crisis unfolding around her.

The situation in the ER was deteriorating rapidly. The power outages were growing more frequent, the lights flickering in and out like a failing heartbeat. Eliza jumped

every time thunder rolled outside the hospital with a deep, bone-shaking rumble.

“Dr. Carter! Come! Quick! We’ve got another issue!” Lopez’s voice croaked as he ran toward her, his brow slick with sweat. “The telephone lines are down now. The internet...I don’t know. We can’t contact the outside world or get any updates. I tried to phone people to come in to help, but my calls aren’t going through.”

Eliza’s stomach twisted, a sick feeling spreading through her as the gravity of the situation sank in. “Well, this is just fucking great, isn’t it?” she swore under her breath, her mind trying to imagine the implications of all this. “Listen, there’s not much I can do about it right now. We need to focus on keeping our patients safe and stable.”

Lopez nodded, his mouth turning downward. “I’ll take a couple of the boys and see if we can secure backup generators, but we might need to start thinking about evacuating if things get worse.”

The idea of evacuating the ER was terrifying, and the logistics were nearly impossible, but she knew it was a possibility they couldn’t ignore.

3

RIVER

River continued to trudge along the rain-slicked road to Campdale, each step carefully placed on the debris-strewn path. The storm had left the terrain in total disarray, with fallen branches and scattered junk making every maneuver a cautious one. The sky was heavy with clouds, mirroring River’s state of high anxiety as she pressed forward.

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God, will this road never end?

The vibrant green forests surrounding her family's beloved cabin seemed muted by the grim reality of her father's injury.

River had consistently charted her own course throughout her life. Instead of following the conventional path of a college education, she channeled her passion for the natural world into a career as a wilderness guide. But she was now wondering if that had actually been her calling.

My legs are cramping. I swear my calves are going to explode. What am I going to do?

She usually spent her days leading expeditions for tourists and locals alike, teaching survival courses, and occasionally collaborating with Campdale University scientific research teams on fieldwork. She loved her job and couldn't imagine doing anything else. River's expertise extended beyond mere navigation; she had what her father had told her was a rare ability to instill in those around her a profound respect for nature. She remembered feeling so proud when her father had said that. But as she made her way painfully toward Campdale, she questioned whether any of it was true.

Stupid goddamn cabin. Why did you have to build it so far from civilization, Daddy? I can't handle this.

Before this so-called outbreak, River and her father were planning to make a permanent move to their family cabin, which would mark a new chapter in their lives. They intended to combine their skills to manage the land around their cabin more

effectively and run expanded survival workshops. River had been eagerly anticipating the move to their cabin, where she could cultivate their own fruit and vegetables and live off the land in a way she'd always dreamed of. However, her father's plans to rear their own meat clashed with her vegan lifestyle, which made her uneasy. At the same time, she was excited about the prospect of growing their own produce, but she struggled with the idea of raising animals for food, a reality her father was keen on exploring. She laughed to herself as she thought back to their fraught conversation on the subject.

"Dad, come on! Raising animals for meat? No way!" she'd exclaimed. "It's not something I can get behind. I'm vegan for a reason, you know?" She'd crossed her arms, her brow furrowing as she glared at her father.

"I understand, River, but it's part of the self-sufficiency we're aiming for." Her father had stood by the window of her small apartment, his hands resting on the sill as he continued in a calm but resolute tone. "It's about respecting the whole cycle of life. You can't expect to live off the land without accepting some hard truths, Lizzy!"

"Oh, Daddy," she'd pleaded, "respecting life doesn't mean I have to compromise my values." River's voice had softened slightly, but the tension in her jaw remained. She paced a few steps, her fingers gripping the edge of the table as she tried to maintain her composure. "I'm totally on board with the orchard and greenhouses, but I can't be a part of your killing spree." Her eyes met his with a mix of sadness and determination.

"We'll find a balance," he'd said. "Let's tackle one thing at a time. We'll work out the details as we go."

However, their plans had been accelerated the day before the storm hit when news reports had begun to hint at an escalating crisis. The broadcasts had spoken of a rapidly spreading infection, some mysterious ailment that was easily transmissible.

As soon as it had become clear that the authorities were urging people to stay indoors, River and her father fled to the cabin. What they'd initially planned as an exciting future endeavor had quickly become a desperate necessity.

I guess we moved sooner than we thought, huh, Dad?

River's heart pounded as she thought about her father's condition. Each minute she spent navigating the treacherous terrain felt like a minute stolen from his already limited time.

The memories of her and her dad's excitement about their plans haunted her. "We're going to expand the workshops, River," he'd said with enthusiasm. "It's going to be something special, something that'll make a real difference." Those words were a stark contrast to the current, grim reality she faced. Her father's voice echoed in her mind, urging her to stay strong. "Stay sharp, River," he would say. "The wilderness doesn't forgive weakness."

As she walked, River's thoughts drifted to similar conversations she'd had with Jess, her ex-girlfriend. Jess had always been drawn to city life and the charms of Campdale, which were a stark contrast to River's dreams of the rugged wilderness lifestyle. Their relationship had always been a dance between Jess's need for stability, a solid career, cash flow, and bougie bistros and River's yearning for independence, freshly picked wild berries, stargazing, and campfires. River remembered their conversations with a mixture of fondness and regret.

Oh, God...Jess...that night we spent in Moulin Rouge...

River pictured the moment she and Jess had sat on the cozy leather couch of their favorite bar in Jess's hometown, the rich, inviting aroma of artisanal beer enveloping them. Jess's eyes sparkled with a playful glint as she sipped her cocktail, her lips lingering on the rim.

Those lips of yours, Jess. The things they'd do to me...

"You know something, babe," Jess murmured, her voice soft and filled with a wistful tenderness. "I love these weekends here. I know you don't like spending time with my folks, but..."

"It's not that, hon," River protested. "It's just that you moan so much when I go down on you that I'm scared your brother will hear us. He's a good Catholic boy, Jessie."

"Ha ha! You're so right. But don't you think this is...more...enjoyable than your crazy hikes through the middle of nowhere? We've got a nice shower, hot food, cocktails...I mean...come on!"

River chuckled, her fingers gently brushing a stray strand of hair from Jess's face. "I know, Jess. But you have to admit, the wilderness has its own kind of magic, right?"

Jess leaned in closer, her breath warm against River's cheek. "You're right, Riv. I love discovering your world with you. When we were in your cabin, it felt like our own little paradise, away from all the noise."

River's gaze locked with Jess's, a rush of warmth and affection flooding her. "I think we made more than enough noise, if I remember right."

Jess's lips curved into a teasing smile as her fingers gently traced the back of River's hand. "Maybe. But it's still not quite my thing. I love it, but think about it! Home comforts, Riv. Here, we can eat what we want, catch a bus when we want, see the latest movie, hit a late-night queer bar. I worry sometimes that our worlds are too different."

"But we always find a way to come together."

“You can say that again,” Jess joked as their fingers entwined with an intimate closeness that spoke volumes.

The air between them had always been filled with chemistry. River had leaned in, their lips brushing lightly, sending a spark of electric desire through her body. Jess had responded with a passionate kiss, their mouths melding together in a slow, deep exploration.

I miss you, Jess. I wonder where you are right now...

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As River approached Campdale, the town looked strikingly different from the one she'd left only a day earlier. A scene of desolation replaced the quaint charm she remembered. She spotted an overturned car lying by a fuel station, its tires spinning uselessly. The contents of an abandoned backpack were scattered across the road, suggesting a hurried escape. What River thought would be a familiar route to safety now seemed threatening and alien. She forced herself to focus, pushing aside the creeping fears that threatened to overwhelm her.

Just then, a figure stumbled down the road, his clothes torn and his face smeared with grime. His breath came out in loud, ragged gasps. River's wilderness training had taught her to handle frightened individuals, but this situation seemed totally different somehow.

"Hey there! Are you okay, buddy?" River asked, keeping her voice steady.

The man's eyes darted around nervously. "Zombies...they're everywhere, I'm telling you. They're going to start attacking us. You need to get out of here, kiddo!"

River's brow furrowed in confusion. "Zombies? You're confused. Do you have a fever? What you're saying is impossible. We're not in *The Walking Dead*. Are you hurt? Talk to me."

The man's words tumbled out in a frantic jumble. "I swear to you, they're attacking people— biting, spreading this virus thing. You don't understand! I saw a woman bite her own husband. They had a kid, and she attacked him. The baby fell to the ground and?—"

River's skepticism was palpable. "Listen, sir. You sound like you're really unwell. We're talking about the flu. You get that, right? It's just a bug. People are scared because they think it's Covid all over again. That's all this is. Now, I need to get to the hospital. My father is injured. Do you want to come with me?"

The man's face twisted in fear, his voice rising in pitch. "Look around you, girl! Look at this place. This isn't a coronavirus! They're not human anymore. You need to turn back before it's too late!"

River's face hardened. Despite the man's panicked warnings, she had to keep moving forward. "I'm sorry. I can't turn back. I need to find help for my father. You can come with me or you can stay here, but I don't have time for this." She took a deep breath and pushed past him, the urgency of her mission outweighing this stranger's warnings.

The town that had been her home for so long now felt unrecognizable. The streets were deserted, storefronts shattered, and an acrid smell of smoke filled the air. Bio Moon Café, where she and Jess had spent countless mornings sipping the organic teas Jess always insisted would keep them young, supple, and horny, was now dark and silent, its door hanging loosely on broken hinges.

Why would the door be hanging off? What the hell is going on here?

River's heart ached with a mix of nostalgia and dread. This neighborhood was once her haven, but now it seemed ominous and hostile.

As River made her way farther into town and the first light of dawn penetrated the dark sky, she noticed a flurry of people in front of a convenience store.

Finally! Some life!

As she hurried toward the people, she realized that what she was seeing was a far cry from typical shoppers going about their daily business. This was a frenzy of panic buying. She stepped inside the store. Shelves were being stripped bare as people grabbed anything they could find—canned goods, bottled water, and even cleaning supplies. The store’s once-organized aisles were now a chaotic mess of overturned boxes and spilled products.

One woman frantically stuffed packages of ramen noodles into her cart while shouting at her children to “Hurry up and grab more!” A man pushed his way through the crowd, his cart overflowing with supplies. He looked back over his shoulder and yelled, “We’re running out of time!”

Running out of time for what? River felt a pang of anxiety as she spun on her heels and exited the store, her heart pounding as she navigated the turmoil of the now-bustling streets. The contrast from the eerie silence she’d experienced coming into Campdale from the northern forests was unbelievable. Just a short time ago, everything had been unsettlingly quiet. It had seemed as if the town was deserted, leaving her alone with her fears and doubts. But now the scene had transformed dramatically. As she ran a few blocks west toward the old bridge that led to the hospital and fire station, she saw a chaotic stream of people and vehicles converging on Route 92. The road was lined with cars stretching for what looked like miles, all moving southbound in a desperate exodus from the city. River’s unease grew with the realization that there was something significant unfolding that she hadn’t yet fully grasped.

This is like...a mass evacuation. What do they know that I don’t?

As River approached the hospital, she saw that the parking lot was clogged with abandoned cars, their doors flung open as if their owners had fled in haste. A crowd of desperate people surrounded the main entrance of the hospital. In their faces, River recognized raw, visceral fear—because she felt it, too.

Fuck me. What am I going to do?

River's survival instincts kicked in as she assessed the scene. The absence of emergency services was glaring. Police officers and firefighters, who were supposed to be the ones everyone could count on to bring order and security, were nowhere to be seen.

So...this is it? We're supposed to just fend for ourselves?

"Sorry, ma'am," a young woman said as River tried pushing past her, "but the hospital is at capacity. They're not accepting any new patients."

River's heart sank. "No, you don't understand. Let me get past you. I need to speak to a doctor or paramedics...or someone in charge! My father is hurt, and he's alone at our cabin. It's in the middle of the goddamn forest! Miles away from here! I need help!"

The woman exchanged a tired glance with who River assumed was her brother, given how similar their facial features were. "I'm sorry, but we're all in the same boat. You'll just have to sit it out and wait like the rest of us."

River's frustration and anger started to boil over. "No! Someone has to help me! I don't know what else to do. He hasn't got the goddamn flu, or whatever it is you're all here for. His leg has been crushed, and he's losing blood. They have to let me in!"

The young woman placed a hand on her arm. "Listen, we can only assume they're doing everything they can. It's total carnage in there."

River's desperation turned to panic. The thought of failing her father was unbearable. She tried to make her way through the waiting people, but they held her back. Tears blurred her vision as she stepped away from the entrance, the weight of helplessness

pressing down on her shoulders. “This can’t be happening,” she whispered, her voice cracking under the strain.

Just as River was about to succumb to despair, she noticed an old friend just inside the glass doors of the main entrance. She shouted out as loud as she could, “SHEILA! SHEILAAAAAAA!”

Sheila, a nurse at the hospital who River had once harbored a high school crush on, caught River’s eye. They’d shared a fleeting kiss at prom but had lost touch in the years since. Their eyes locked in a brief, silent exchange. With a subtle, knowing gesture, Sheila beckoned River toward a side entrance.

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Doing her best to avoid attention, River made her way around the building. The side door was slightly ajar, and as she approached, Sheila quickly pulled it open.

The interior of the hospital was pandemonium the likes of which River had never seen. Patients filled every available space, their moans and cries blending into one single scream of distress. The staff moved quickly but looked as exhausted as River felt, their faces reflecting the strain of what was clearly becoming an impossible task. Sheila, holding River's arm with a firm grip, led her inside.

"Do you think you caught the virus?" the nurse asked in a straightforward tone.

River shook her head. "No, it's my dad. He's up at this cabin we have in Northanger Forest, and he really needs help. Please, is there anyone who can see him?"

The nurse's weary eyes met hers, and she nodded. "I remember your dad. He was a ranger up there. I used to be a scout. He'd teach us canoeing and stuff at summer camp—he's a really nice guy. Listen, I'll try to find someone who can help, for old times' sake. But you need to know we're barely keeping up here."

River nodded, her mind racing. "Thank you, Sheila. I owe you one. Please hurry."

As the nurse disappeared into the chaos, River stood in the hallway, trying to make sense of the scene around her. The sight of so many patients in distress and the frantic pace of the overworked staff were like something out of a horror movie.

"It's spreading too fast...we're losing control." One nurse's voice trembled as she spoke on the phone, her words barely audible above the noise.

The patients she saw were either thrashing out in anger as staff walked past them or sitting on benches in eerily catatonic states, their eyes vacant and unseeing.

What did that man say? Zombies? No. Get a fucking grip, Riv.

But the man's words were starting to seem more like reality with each passing second.

The realization that the hospital might not be the refuge she'd hoped for was starting to sink in. Her father's condition was bound to be deteriorating by this point, and if she didn't get help to him soon, she knew she'd lose him. She faced a critical decision: continue searching for help in this hellhole, or plan an escape from Campdale.

4

ELIZA

The surgical lamp flickered, casting a sterile light over the operating table. It kept coming on and going off again.

I can't work like this. What the hell am I playing at?

Eliza's gloved hands moved with the precision of the seasoned surgeon she was despite her nerves. She'd managed to escape the turmoil of ER and was now in her comfort zone. The OR had always felt like home to her.

She wasn't just removing a leg—she was trying to save a life in a world that had clearly gone mad. Never had Eliza seen anything like this in her entire career at Holy Souls. The teenage boy on the table, his face pale and drenched in sweat, had been bitten. Eliza thought she knew what this meant, but she wasn't prepared to admit it to

herself just yet. Nor was she prepared to lose this kid.

The air around her and the two nurses she'd managed to drag in to help her was heavy, not just with the usual smells of antiseptic and bleached floors, but with fear—raw, unfiltered fear. Eliza had always prided herself on being composed and professional, but right now she had a severe case of the jitters. The nurse beside her, Bobby, who'd only recently arrived in Campdale, kept glancing at the door, his breathing audibly quick and shallow.

“Bobby, come on. We need to focus here,” Eliza said, trying to keep her voice steady.

Bobby rubbed his temples. “I know, but this is crazy. I mean, a kid with a zombie bite? It's just that...”

Eliza cut him off with a long sigh. “Bobby, please. Let's not use that word, alright? We don't know what's going on yet. Just keep your shit together.”

Bobby shook his head in frustration. “Wow, I've never heard you curse before, Dr. Carter. I just don't get it, though. How does a kid get bitten? His mom said his older sister did this. I can't get my head around it.”

“Then don't,” Eliza replied, feeling her irritation move up a notch. “It's happened. It's happening now. And this kid is counting on us.”

Bobby's eyes narrowed with a mix of curiosity and fear. “But someone in his own family did this to him?”

Eliza nodded without moving her eyes from the boy on the table. “I don't think anyone's saying much. From what I understood, the sister was frantic. His mother was almost catatonic when she brought him in.”

Bobby let out a shaky breath. “So, what does that mean? Is the mother a zombie, too?”

Eliza hesitated, her hands momentarily stilling as she tried to wrestle with her thoughts. “Bobby! Quit it with the goddamn zombie talk. There’s a bug going around. It’s a disease like any other, but with what looks to be a high infection rate. I can’t comment on where, how, why, or when his sister did this to him, so leave the questions for later. And preferably for someone else.”

“I reckon that mom was hiding something,” Bobby continued, his voice growing more urgent. “What if she knows more than she’s letting on? What if this isn’t just some random attack, but part of what’s going on...out there?”

Eliza’s eyes met his. “Your guess is as good as mine at this stage. But we need to stay focused on the kid. If he’s showing symptoms?—”

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“Symptoms of what?” Bobby asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Eliza swallowed hard. “Like fever, disorientation...aggression.”

“Sounds like what people are saying has been happening with the infected,” Bobby said, voice trembling. “But nobody really knows for sure. And nobody wants to fucking talk about it.”

Eliza glanced up just in time to see the other nurse, an older woman whose name she didn’t know, dart out of the operating room. She noticed her hands shaking as she fumbled with the door, her tear-streaked cheeks tense with distress.

Eliza caught Bobby’s eye. “Look what you did. Get back to work, Bobby. We’re on our own now.”

As they turned their attention back to the boy, the room itself seemed to hold its breath. Eliza’s hands shook slightly as she continued her work, determined to push through despite never having felt so vulnerable and afraid.

As she worked, Eliza’s thoughts wandered. It was as if her mind was attempting to make a brief escape from the urgency of the moment. She thought about how, just a week ago, the biggest worry in her life had been juggling her almost impossible workload with yet another fleeting relationship. She and Steve had called it quits after only a couple months of dating. Her romantic life—could she even call it that?—was a string of one-night stands and brief flings, each ending in basically the same way: a good old ghosting.

She'd always told herself that her career was the reason behind her disastrous love life. But she also blamed Tinder and its ridiculous algorithms for sending her dud after dud. The long hours and the emotional toll of the job were too much for most people (for mostmen) to handle. But deep down, she knew there was probably more to it than that. She knew, and her brother had reminded her of it time and time again; she was emotionally reserved and guarded. That made it hard for anyone to get close. Several partners had told her as much. "You're just...I don't know how to put it. You're closed off, Eliza," one of them had said a few months before walking out of her life, never to be heard from again.

And now, as she stood over this young teen who might not even make it to his first date, she wondered if she'd maybe gotten it all wrong. Had she spent her adult life pushing away every chance for a real connection? Had she prioritized saving strangers while allowing herself to be utterly alone? Because that's how she felt: utterly alone. The world seemed to be falling apart, and she didn't have a single soul to turn to.

"Dr. Carter! Watch out!" Bobby's panicked voice interrupted her, yanking her back to the present.

Eliza's gaze snapped to the monitors. The patient's heart rate was plummeting, the rhythmic beeping speeding into a frantic, disjointed alarm. "Damn it," she muttered, her hands moving faster now, working against the clock. "Get the crash cart ready!"

"On it!" shouted Bobby, rushing to get the necessary equipment.

She pressed the paddles to the patient's chest, her mind a blur of focused intent. "Clear!"

The boy's body jerked as the electric current surged through him, but the flat line persisted.

“Again!” she barked.

Another shock, another jerk, but still, the line stayed flat.

“Come on, kid. Don’t do this to me,” she whispered, more to herself than the patient, who she knew couldn’t hear her. She refused to lose him. They tried and tried to bring him back.

But even as she worked on his body, a voice in the back of her mind whispered that it was already too late. This wasn’t just a virus; this was something much worse. She just didn’t know what. What she did think was that no amount of medical expertise would be able to stop what was coming.

“Time of death, 18:47,” Bobby said quietly, his voice laced with exhaustion.

Eliza stood frozen for a moment, the reality sinking in: she’d failed. She closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, trying to push the creeping sense of dread to the back of her mind. But it was no use.

What the hell is going on here?

“I guess we did everything we could, right? I’ve never seen someone that young die of heart failure like that. Have you?” Bobby asked. But his words fell flat.

Eliza stripped off her gloves and tossed them into the bin with more force than was necessary. “We need to get him to the morgue,” she said, her voice low and hollow. “There’ll be more. We need to make room for the next one.”

Bobby didn’t argue. Together, they started to wheel the lifeless body out of the room. The ER was beyond chaos—screams, cries, the occasional thud of something heavy hitting the floor.

I can't cope with all this. What's become of my hospital? This is out of control!

"Dr. Carter, it looks like Sheila..." Bobby began, but Eliza cut him off.

"No, Bobby. Not now. I need to think."

"Dr. Carter! Come over here—now!" Sheila screamed from across the hallway.

Eliza's mind had barely processed the request before she let go of the gurney and ran toward Sheila, her medical coat flapping behind her like a banner of hope. Bobby, pale and panting heavily, followed close on her heels. The pounding in her chest seemed to sync with the frantic beats of her footsteps.

As they reached Sheila, she pulled them through a doorway and toward the side entrance.

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“She was just here! River...an old friend of mine. She was right here, I swear!”

Eliza looked through the double-glazed glass and saw immediately that the scene outside was nothing short of apocalyptic. Townspeople, patients, and even hospital staff in white coats had begun attacking each other with a feral intensity. Their faces, twisted into grotesque masks of rage, made Eliza’s stomach churn.

“Holy God. Let’s hope your friend isn’t out there,” Eliza breathed, taking in the horrifying scene. She watched as a man and a younger woman snarled and roared at each other. Their guttural screams echoed through her entire body.

“We can’t go outside!” Eliza shouted. “They’re consumed with...infection. These people are getting ill too quickly! This isn’t a coronavirus. It’s not possible. Jesus! We have to find some way out of here! What the fuck is this?”

Sheila, her face pale, stood there looking through the glass doors, tears running down her face.

“She was right here,” she repeated.

Eliza’s mind raced, trying to make sense of what she was seeing.

The bites, the aggression—everything’s pointing to a rabies outbreak...

As the small group made their way back inside the hospital, hoping to find safety, Eliza saw that the familiar corridors had totally transformed within mere minutes. Her heart pounded as she forced herself to focus.

As they rounded a corner, the scene grew even more harrowing. The infected were spilling into the hallway, their movements erratic and uncontrolled. The air was thick with the stench of blood, feces, and vomit, a nauseating mix that made Eliza's stomach twist. Her mind flashed back to her training.

Rabies is transmitted through bites. It leads to severe aggression and death. This is a nightmare scenario. We don't have what it takes to handle it.

"Eliza! Bobby!" Sheila's voice cut through the chaos, filled with a desperation that matched Eliza's own fear. "Let's get to the staff dorm. We can lock ourselves in!"

But before Eliza could respond, a horrifying shriek pierced the air. Eliza turned just in time to see an infected patient—her face a mask of swollen flesh and primal rage—lunge at Sheila. The woman's movements seemed unnaturally quick and violent as her teeth sank into Sheila's neck. Eliza stood there, her mouth ajar, as a spray of blood spewed from Sheila's mouth.

"No! No! No!" The wails of the infected swallowed Eliza's cries. Sheila's body crumpled to the ground, the light in her eyes fading fast as the infected figure continued its gruesome work.

She's eating her! She's eating Sheila!

Eliza's heart thumped wildly with the sudden shock of losing a woman who'd been such an incredible friend and colleague, but there was no time to grieve. The world had gone insane, and there was no room for anything other than survival.

"Don't look, Bobby! Leave her! We need to get moving!" Eliza shouted in anguish.

Bobby's face was ashen, his eyes wide with fear as he started to retch. "Sheila's gone. She's dead! How can this be happening? What do we do? What the fuck is

happening!?”

Eliza could only offer a strained nod through her tears. “We keep moving, Bobby. We have to get to the dorms before?—”

As they made their way down a service staircase and onto the basement level, a loud crash startled them as an infected patient burst through a nearby door. The creature twisted his mouth into a grotesque snarl. Eliza noted that his—or its—eyes were filled with a mindless fury. Eliza and Bobby scrambled down the hallway to avoid the creature, but there was nowhere to go.

The infected were everywhere now, in front of every door, their movements a nightmarish blur of rage and violence. The floor beneath their feet was littered with debris—shattered glass, broken medical equipment, and the bodies of those who’d fallen victim to the infection...or the infected. Eliza stumbled over a discarded stretcher, her breath coming in ragged gasps.

“Hey! You two! Over here!” a voice called out from somewhere behind her. But when she turned, she saw nothing but a wall of infected figures closing in.

“Dr. Carter!” Bobby’s voice seemed distant, his cry swallowed by the moaning of the infected. Eliza glanced back to see him struggling against a group of snarling...she didn’t know what the word was for them.

They’re zombies. Fuck me...I’m going out of my mind here. But they’re fucking zombies...

Bobby’s efforts to fend them off proved futile. In a matter of moments, he was totally overwhelmed, his screams lost amidst a host of snarls and roars.

Jesus, no. He’s gone. I’ve lost him. No, no, no, no, no...

“Bobby!” Eliza screeched, her voice breaking. She watched in horror as Bobby was dragged down, the infected swarming over him with brutal efficiency. This second loss within just a few minutes was overwhelming. Eliza felt like she was losing the will to live.

What’s the point in trying? They’re going to kill me no matter what I do.

The infected closed in on her now, their groans and hisses growing louder and more desperate. Eliza’s mind raced with terror...and then resignation. The infection was spreading too quickly. There would be no escape, no way to contain the outbreak. No hospital in the country had the resources to deal with this.

Eliza’s thoughts turned inward, filling her with a storm of regrets. She thought of her family, the faces of her parents and brother flashing through her mind. Memories of family dinners, laughter, and warmth filled her thoughts.

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Why didn't I spend more time with you guys?

Tears streamed down her face as she braced herself against a cold wall. The infected were nearly upon her, their jaws snapping as they closed in. The thought of never seeing her family again, of never having the chance to make things right, was almost too much to bear. The finality of the situation was heartbreaking.

As the infected reached out with bloodied hands and hungry eyes, Eliza's breath caught in her throat. She prepared herself for the inevitable—she was about to be bitten.

The world seemed to narrow to a single, terrifying moment as a tall, hefty male zombie towered over her, his jaws closing in. Her mind went blank as she looked up at him, ready to face the darkness that was about to engulf her.

5

RIVER

The stench hit River as she made her way through the hospital. It was a vile blend of sweat, blood, and something indescribably awful. Whatwasthat? The narrow corridor she found herself in was very dimly lit. She could barely see far enough ahead to put one foot in front of the other. The walls were smeared with handprints, some dark and rusty looking, others fresh and bright red. She smelled a coppery tang in the air.

Oh, God. It stinks.

She gulped back a wave of nausea.

River knew she couldn't afford to be afraid—not now. Her father was still up at the cabin, and she desperately needed to get him some help. She'd managed to get this far, and she refused to give up now.

What did I see out there? They were like animals. Jesus! They were tearing each other apart.

After Sheila left to find Dr. Carter, she'd found herself stuck by the side entrance to Holy Souls. As she waited, she'd caught a glimpse of the frenzied mass outside. It had all happened so quickly. The image stayed with her as she made her way deeper into the hospital. River wasn't sure what she would find or who she was looking for, but she knew it couldn't be any worse than what was going down outside. This Dr. Carter had to be here somewhere—and she was her only hope of saving her father.

The hallway opened up into a larger, even more distressing scene. The hospital's ER had probably always been a place of high energy, but this...this was something straight out of a nightmare. Bodies, both living and dead, littered the floors, their forms twisted in pain or frozen in expressions of sheer terror. River's heart thudded as she stepped over a lifeless arm, her eyes scanning the room for any medical personnel. She'd been to this hospital countless times and even dated one of the nurses, but she'd never seen it like this. She'd never seen anything like this, not even in the movies. Horror flicks were so not her thing.

Suddenly, she heard a guttural growl. River's attention was drawn to a group of what she assumed were infected people looming over two people dressed in white coats.

“Hey! You two! Over here!” she hollered as loudly as she could.

Then one of the figures, a man—or something that had once been a man—snapped its teeth, its body jerking as it bit into one of the white-coated people. As it ripped off an arm and started chomping down on it, it stared hungrily at the remaining doctor crouching on the floor behind him.

“Bobby!” the person on the floor cried out in desperation. It was a female voice.

“Hey! No! Leave her alone!” River’s breath caught in her throat as the creature lifted its head. Its eyes were glazed over and unseeing, and blood dripped from its mouth.

This is actually the zombie fucking apocalypse. This is happening. It’s actually happening. I have to save her.

The thing that had once been a man let out another growl, its gaze snapping to River with a suddenness that made her freeze. For a heartbeat, neither of them moved. Then, with a snarl, it lunged at the woman on the floor.

River’s instincts kicked in. She grabbed a metal IV stand and ran toward the thing. The cool steel of the metal steadied her nerves as she swung it with all her strength. The stand connected with the creature’s skull with a sickening crunch, and it staggered back. River didn’t wait for it to recover. She swung again, this time aiming for the creature’s neck. The impact sent it crashing to the floor, its body convulsing once before going still.

I got it! I killed it! I think? Oh my God. What did I do? I’m a murderer. But this is hardly a human.

River stood over the body, almost choking on her breath as she fought to keep herself from collapsing. Panic coursed through her veins at what she’d just done, but she had to survive this and save her dad. She could still hear distant screams and the faint crackle of static over the hospital intercom, but she didn’t have time to dwell on the

horror of the situation. She couldn't process killing that monster, but there had been nothing human about its behavior. As she straightened up and looked behind her, she saw the rest of the infected walking in the opposite direction en masse. She realized she'd either scared them or something else had caught their attention.

"Get up. My name's Riv. We need to find a way out of here," she said, her voice steadier than she'd expected.

"Riv? Like River? Are you Sheila's friend?" The woman's voice was hoarse. She looked around, her expression hardening as the weight of what had just happened pressed down on her. "What are you doing here? You shouldn't be here. It's not safe!"

"Did that thing bite you? Or scratch you?" River asked, ignoring the woman's questions.

"No. At least, I don't think so," the woman replied.

"Where the hell is Sheila?" River barked.

"Oh, God...they got her. And Bobby...Bobby's wife is pregnant..."

"We can't think about Bobby's wife right now. Who are you? Nurse? Doctor?" River asked, stepping closer. "My father...he's hurt. Badly. I need your help."

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The woman glanced at Bobby's corpse just a few feet away, her attention torn between the young nurse and the urgency in River's voice. She took a deep breath, clearly trying to steady herself, and then nodded. "I'm Dr. Carter. Eliza. Alright. Are the introductions out of the way? Let's move. This place...it's not safe anymore."

River nodded, her heart racing as she helped Eliza cover Bobby with a blanket. She couldn't bring herself to look too closely at the young man's face and the hollow look in his eyes. There was no time for that—not if they were going to get out of here alive.

As they turned to leave, a nearby door slammed open with a deafening bang. River spun around just in time to see another group of infected stumble into the hallway. They moved with a terrifying speed, their bloodshot eyes locking onto the two women as they snarled and clacked their jaws.

"Run!" Eliza shouted, grabbing River's hand and pulling her down the hallway.

As they sprinted through the hospital, River's lungs burned with the effort, her legs screaming for relief as she pushed herself to keep up with Eliza. Every turn seemed to lead them into more danger—more of the living dead. But Eliza clearly knew the hospital better than anyone. She navigated them through the labyrinth of hallways, up staircases, down staircases, through service areas and weird-smelling labs, through basement storage areas, and even a morgue with a determination that bordered on desperation.

They finally burst through a set of double doors into the hospital's underground parking lot, the cold air hitting them like a wall. The vast space was dimly lit, the

overhead lights flickering sporadically.

The generators must be struggling to stay on.

Eliza and River didn't stop until they reached a corner of the parking lot where an old, rusted-out pickup truck sat gathering dust. The vehicle offered some cover, so they crouched down behind it, their breath coming in ragged gasps as they tried to catch their breath.

"Are you okay?" Eliza asked, her voice shaking.

River nodded, though she wasn't sure how true it was. Every vein in her body was throbbing, but the sheer relief of having found a doctor was enough to keep her grounded. "I'm fine. But we need to figure out what to do next. We can't stay here. I don't understand what the fuck is going on. Is it really what it looks like? Zombies?"

"I think we're okay here for a while. They can't get through that door. I jammed it behind us," explained Eliza, "and...I have no clue what this is. But it's not normal, and it's like nothing I've ever seen before."

Eliza wiped a hand across her forehead, smearing a streak of blood that River hadn't noticed until now. Her eyes were wide and filled with something River couldn't quite place—fear, yes, but also something else—something that looked a lot like guilt. "You're right," River said, her voice dropping to just above a whisper. "Good job. But we still need to get out of here. Do you have any clue where can we go? The streets are just as bad as in there, you know?"

River bit her lip. Her head was full of questions, and she knew she wouldn't get answers any time soon. She'd come all this way to find a doctor, and now that she had Eliza, she had to bring her back to the cabin to see her dad. But now that she'd witnessed firsthand the state of the hospital, she wasn't sure if that was even

possible anymore. The world outside the hospital was a mess. It was more than a mess—it was insanity. There was no telling what they'd face on the road back to the cabin, and River didn't fancy their odds of making the trip in one piece. But what else was she supposed to do?

"Listen up, lady," River said, her voice coming out more steadily than she'd expected. "My father needs you. I honestly think you're the only one who can do this. Sheila said you'd help me. I know it's a lot to ask. I know you probably have your own family to go home to. But...but please..."

Eliza stared at River, her blue eyes searching River's face as if trying to gauge who she was dealing with. River felt the weight of that gaze settle deep in her chest. She knew she was asking too much of this woman—more than she had any right to. But she was asking anyway.

Finally, Eliza sighed, her shoulders slumping slightly. "Alright," she said softly. "I'll come with you. My family is out of town. Where else am I going to go? We can't stay here, and it's fair to say my patients are beyond help. I can't go back in there. There's nothing I can do, is there?"

Relief flooded through every cell of River's being. She felt it so powerfully that it made her dizzy. There were no words that could truly express her gratitude. "Thank you," was all she could muster.

Eliza flashed her a broad smile, but River noticed that there was no genuine warmth in it. "Let's just get to this cabin of yours. It sounds remote, which is what we need right now. We can talk properly when we've made our way to safety."

As they stood up to leave, River caught sight of a door at the far end of the garage. It was slightly ajar, and through the gap, she saw a faint light shining inside. "What's that?" she asked, pointing in the direction of the doorway.

Eliza squinted. “I’m not sure. I don’t ever park my car down here. Maybe it’s a way out.”

They made their way over to the door, their footsteps echoing behind them. The door led to a small maintenance workshop filled with tools and supplies that seemed like they hadn’t been touched in a while. But what caught River’s attention was the shelf in the corner, lined with dusty bottles of water.

“What is this place?” asked River.

“The hospital made some cuts about a year back. I think there was a janitor crew down here. But they outsourced the work to save on the budget. I’m guessing nobody ever came to clear this place out.”

“Is that drinkable, do you think?” asked River, pointing to the dusty bottles.

“I guess so. I mean, normally I’d be worried about microplastics in bottled water that’s been hanging around this long...but I think we’ve got bigger issues. If we can find a way to carry some of these, let’s do it,” Eliza said, grabbing one of the bottles and inspecting it. The label was faded and the plastic was slightly discolored, but when she twisted the cap open, the water inside looked clear enough.

River grabbed a bottle. Her throat felt so dry after their sprint through the hospital. She hadn’t realized just how thirsty she was until now. The water felt warm as it passed her lips, but it was better than nothing. She gulped it down.

Gross, but also...thank God!

As she continued to drink, River couldn’t help but steal glances at Eliza. The doctor was standing by the door, her eyes scanning the parking lot for any sign of danger.

“We got lucky. I can’t believe there’s nobody down here,” she said.

“Don’t say that. You’ll jinx it,” River said, laughing slightly despite the seriousness of their predicament.

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Eliza was striking in a way River hadn't expected. She didn't really know what she'd expected, but it wasn't this. She looked like she was older than River by ten years.

Jesus...don't start, Riv. Now's certainly not the time to indulge your thing for older women. Pack some of these water bottles in your bag and stop staring at her.

But she couldn't. Eliza had a refined elegance about her, a quiet confidence that River presumed came from years of experience, both in her private life and in the medical field. Her features were soft yet defined, with high cheekbones that caught the dim light and a strong jawline that hinted at the strength beneath her composed exterior. Her dark hair was pulled back into a low ponytail, a few loose strands framing her face and adding a touch of vulnerability to her otherwise confident presence.

Her deep, stormy blue eyes drew River in the most. They were sharp and intelligent, but she could see a softness in them that suggested she'd witnessed more than her fair share of pain and loss.

Well, she must have seen some terrible things working in a place like this...even before the zombies showed up.

River turned her attention to Eliza's lips. They were full and a natural dark pink. The older woman's mouth was set in a determined line, but River couldn't help but imagine what it would look like when she smiled—really smiled, with warmth and genuine joy.

I doubt I'll get to see that any time soon.

Eliza's femininity was evident even in the way she stood on the lookout, poised in the midst of chaos. Her bloodstained scrubs and coat clung to her voluptuous frame. But even in her disheveled state, River could see that there was an undeniable sexiness to her.

She obviously takes care of herself.

By this point, River was fully staring at Eliza, her heart fluttering in a way that both excited and unnerved her. She'd always been quick to develop crushes, a weakness that had gotten her into mischief more times than she could remember. But this was different. She had a feeling that this might be more than just a fleeting infatuation. There was something about Eliza that captivated her, something that made her want to know more about the woman.

"Why are you gawking at me like that?" asked Eliza in an irritated whisper.

"Sorry, doc. I didn't mean to be rude. You look just like my sister. It's weird," she said, laughing to herself at how often she'd used that line to get out of trouble. She was an only child, of course, but that was on a need-to-know basis.

River pulled herself together. She knew she had to keep her focus on the task at hand, which was getting Eliza back to the cabin to save her father. There might be time later down the line to figure out what this sudden, intense attraction meant...or there might not be. But even as she told herself this, she couldn't shake the images that flashed through her mind.

River cursed herself silently, frustrated by her own ridiculous thoughts at such a time.

"I'm going to check out the rest of this place," River said abruptly, needing an excuse to get away, if only for a moment. "Just to make sure we're alone."

Eliza nodded. “Good idea. But be careful, would you? Do you want me to come with you?”

“I’ll be fine. You have a look around here. Maybe the maintenance guys left snacks? Non...erm...perishable snacks? Like Twinkies. I heard they’re the cockroaches of the snack food world. They last forever. They’re like...the best thing you can find during the zombie apocalypse, if that’s what this is.”

“This isn’t the zombie apocalypse,” replied Eliza firmly.

“It so totally is! Did you see those monsters in there? They were humans this morning, and now they’re tearing each other apart.”

Eliza sighed desperately, hoping this was all a huge mistake.

River slipped out of the maintenance room and into a small adjacent bathroom. The door creaked as she pushed it open, and the stale air hit her as she stepped inside. It was a tiny space, barely big enough to turn around in, with cracked tiles and only a tiny amount of daylight breaking through a window around eight feet off the floor.

She leaned against the sink, gripping the edge with both hands as she tried to steady her breathing. Her thoughts were spinning out of control in a whirlwind of fear and exhaustion.

She imagined what Eliza was like in the real world. Maybe she had a boyfriend? Maybe she was gay? River’s mind wandered, interested in this striking woman.

She cursed herself again, frustrated by her inability to control her thoughts. Eliza was bound to be straight, she reminded herself. And even if she wasn’t, was the zombie invasion really the time to be thinking about dating? There was no way any type of romance, casual or otherwise, could get off the ground when either one of them could

be eaten alive at any moment, no matter how much River might wish that weren't the case.

Her father was lying on his deathbed—or deathfloor, to be accurate—and there was a deadly virus sweeping through the city. This was not the time to be fantasizing about a woman she knew nothing about, no matter how compelling the attraction.

River splashed some cold water on her face, hoping to clear her head. It worked. She needed to get back to Eliza to figure out their next move.

As she wiped her face with a threadbare towel, River caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her short blonde hair lay flat against her skull.

What's going on with the wig, Riv? Pixie cut, my ass. You look like you've been scalped.

Her reflection stared back at her, pale and haggard, with dark circles under her eyes and a look of weariness that went far beyond physical exhaustion. She barely recognized herself, and the sight made her heart ache. The image of the creature she'd killed flashed into her mind. It didn't look human, but it had been one once.

You did what you had to do to survive. Now quit worrying and move on with it, she thought. And when that's done, you need to treat yourself to a facial and some highlights because...shit, hon.

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When River returned to the maintenance room, Eliza was still standing by the door, her posture tense.

“Everything okay?” Eliza asked, glancing over at River.

“Yeah,” River replied, her voice steady. “I just needed a minute.”

Eliza nodded, her expression softening. “I get it.”

No, you don’t.

River felt a pang of guilt at the concern in Eliza’s voice. She was here, risking her life to help River’s father, and all River could think about was how hot the woman was. It was selfish and immature, and River knew it.

“Anyway...erm...we should talk about what’s going on,” Eliza said after a few moments of awkward silence. “We need to figure out what we’re dealing with.”

River let out a small sigh, grateful for the distraction. “That’s your area of expertise, right? Do you have any idea how all this started?”

Eliza ran a hand through her messy hair. “I don’t think so. I want to be honest with you. I’ve seen viral outbreaks before...we all have. But nothing like this. It’s spreading way too fast. Is it mutating, or...you know what? It’s almost like it was designed to do this.”

“Designed?” River echoed, her eyebrows arching.

Eliza hesitated, as if weighing her words carefully. “Yeah. Listen, I don’t want to jump to conclusions, but this feels...unnatural.”

“Supernatural, you mean?”

“Well...maybe. No. No, I don’t think that. But viruses don’t usually behave this way. They spread, yes, but when did we first hear about this outbreak?”

“Around two days ago? Maybe three?” River answered.

“Right. And look at where we’re at already. This feels...targeted. We’re only a couple days in, and look how wild it’s gotten. It’s like someone wanted it to spread quickly, to cause as much chaos as possible. I mean, I’ve seen this shit in movies, but never thought it could be reality.”

River’s stomach somersaulted. “You think someone did this on purpose?”

“I don’t know,” Eliza admitted. “But I think it’s a real possibility. And if it’s engineered, then whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing. And that means it could get a lot worse before it gets better. We need to protect ourselves. We need weapons.”

River scouted around and noticed two crowbars stacked by the wall.

“Reckon they’ll do?” She pointed at them.

“Better than nothing.”

Eliza and River waited until nightfall before daring to venture outside. It seemed the zombies, for want of a better word, had ventured off elsewhere. The front of the hospital seemed quiet. As they walked across the bridge toward the downtown area, Eliza saw just how much the city was in shambles. She'd thought she'd seen the worst of it back at the hospital, but out here, in the open streets, it was clear the situation was even direr than she could've imagined. Buildings that once stood as pillars of the community were now nothing more than smoldering ruins. The air was thick with smoke and ash, making it difficult to breathe.

"Why the hell have people been setting fire to everything?" she asked, voicing her thoughts aloud.

"Maybe they've been trying to burn the zombies, the walkers...the risen? We need a name for them," said River, clearly trying to lighten the mood.

"Erm, I don't think we do," replied Eliza, rolling her eyes. "I think we need to prioritize. We need to find a place to lay low for the night and work out how to get our hands on some supplies."

"We've got plenty of supplies at the cabin: canned goods, dried pulses. You name it, my daddy's got it," said River in a reassuring tone.

"Surgical equipment? Antibiotics? Sterilizing fluids? Morphine? A qualified anesthetist? We need supplies before getting to him, or this is pointless," said Eliza with a hint of irritation.

"Well...no. I guess not," replied River, lowering her head.

"I thought as much," snapped Eliza.

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Eliza glanced at River, who moved with the kind of ease that only someone who'd spent years navigating the wilderness could muster. Every step River took was calculated, every glance purposeful. Despite her embarrassment, Eliza noticed that the younger woman was like a hunter on the prowl, her eyes scanning their surroundings for any sign of danger. Eliza couldn't help but feel a surge of admiration for River.

But there was also a part of Eliza that found River's approach unnerving. Where Eliza wanted to blend into the shadows, hide from the danger, and think things through before acting, River seemed almost eager to confront the issue head-on. The contrast between them was stark, and it made Eliza uneasy. She'd spent her life learning to stay calm, to weigh the positives and negatives, and to avoid unnecessary risks. River, on the other hand, was all about action, and it was clear that she wasn't afraid to get her hands dirty.

"You hear that?" River whispered, her voice low and alert. She stopped dead in her tracks. Her head tilted slightly as she listened to the distant sound of shouts and gunfire.

Eliza tensed up, her pulse beating loudly in her eardrums as she strained to hear. "You said you saw looters this morning, right?" she said quietly, her eyes narrowing as she peered down the street. "We should find another way around. It's too dangerous to get involved."

River shook her head, her jaw set in a determined line. "It's nothing. They're not eaters. We can take them. They're only normal people. If they're looting, it means there might be some supplies we can use."

Eliza felt a surge of frustration. “I don’t like ‘eaters.’ Pick another word.”

“Biters? Rotters?” River suggested.

“What did you say before? Walkers? Let’s go with walkers. What if those people have guns? They could be violent, right? River, we can’t just go charging in there. We need to be smart about this.”

I can’t believe we’re fighting over what to call zombies. Who’d have thought this would be the new normal?

River turned to her, her eyes blazing with that wild intensity that Eliza was beginning to get used to. “I’m not saying we should charge right in like a pair of total fucking idiots. But we can’t avoid every confrontation. Do you understand? We need supplies. You’ve made that clear. So let’s go find what we need.”

Eliza’s hands clenched into fists at her sides. The tension between them was thick. She understood River’s point, but it felt so reckless to seek out trouble when it could be easily avoided. Well, maybe not easily, but they could do their best, couldn’t they? “How come you’re so eager to fight?” she demanded, her voice sharp. “There’s more to survival than breaking bones and stabbing people in the head. I saw what you did to that man in the hospital.”

“Hey! A little ‘thank you’ wouldn’t go amiss, doc. I saved your ass. And that wasn’t a man. He was one of them. And just so you know, there’s a hell of a lot more to survival than hiding in the shadows. I should know. I’ve been leading survival workshops for years. I was just about to go into business with my father, okay?” River shot back. “Look, I totally get that you’re scared. So am I. I’m scared out of my goddamn mind! But we’re not going to get anywhere by running away all the time. We need to get proactive. We need to face this shit head-on and accept that the world is now totally fucked.”

Eliza opened her mouth to argue, but stopped herself. As much as she hated to admit it, River was right—they'd never be able to avoid every potential danger. But the thought of confronting those looters head-on, of risking their lives for the chance at a few supplies, made her stomach churn with anxiety. They could be fighting over drugs and batteries, or just chips and soda.

“Fine,” Eliza said tightly. “But please...let's just try this my way. We need to observe them first and find out what they're looting. If it looks too dangerous, we back off. Agreed? Jeez, I trained to be a doctor and now I'm out here avoiding being killed by...walker zombies. This is some fucked-up shit.”

River hesitated before giving her new friend a slight nod. “Agreed. But if we have to fight, we fight. Or...erm...I fight, okay?”

Eliza pushed her unease to the back of her mind and followed River as they crept closer to the source of the commotion. Her heart threatened to burst out of her chest as they approached the corner of the street, where the looters had gathered outside a large convenience store.

From their hiding spot behind a toppled-over garbage can that had been pushed out onto the sidewalk, Eliza could see a group of men and women, their faces desperate as they tore through what little was left on the store's shelves, stuffing anything they could find into their bags. Most of them were armed—some with makeshift weapons, others with handguns that glinted menacingly in the dusky light. It hadn't taken long for the shops to become vacated and for the survivors to descend on the precious supplies. Everyone watched enough TV shows to know how apocalyptic scenarios like this played out.

Eliza's breath caught in her throat as she watched them. These people weren't just looters—they were dangerous. She could tell by the wild looks in their eyes and the way their hands shook with barely contained aggression.

“Jesus, River. Look at them! They’re insane. They’re all carrying,” she said, knowing in that moment that River’s plan was too risky. She realized that there was no way they could take on these people without getting hurt—or worse. “Come on. Let’s get out of here,” Eliza whispered, her voice trembling. “There’s too many of them. We can’t do it. We’ve got crowbars, and they have guns.”

River didn’t respond immediately. Her eyes remained fixed on the looters. Eliza could see the gears turning in her mind and felt the tense energy radiating off of her as she weighed their options. Then, with a resigned sigh, River nodded. “You’re right. Let’s move.”

Relief flooded through Eliza as they backed away from the scene, careful not to make any noise. They retreated into a nearby alley, the darkness swallowing them as they put distance between themselves and the looters. Eliza’s heart was still racing, her hands shaking with the adrenaline coursing through her veins.

“God, my blood pressure is through the roof,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Breathe, doc. Take a deep breath. That’s what it’s all about.”

“Erm...I don’t think mindful breathing, yoga, Pilates, weird vegan cookies, or any of your otherforest waysare going to cut it. My blood pressure is high because it’s an evolutionary response. My adrenal glands release hormones that cause my heart to beat faster, which in turn pumps more blood through my veins. That’s what’s happening. And it’s happening because I’m scared. Because we’re in the beginning of some kind of apocalypse, or at least that’s what it looks like. Fucking zombies.Fucking looters. My friends killed right in front of me. I can handle a lot, but this is next level.”

“Fuck, doc. Calm down. How did you even know I was vegan?” River replied curtly.

“I’ll calm down when we’re no longer in danger of getting eaten, beaten, shot, or mobbed. Does that sound okay to you? And the vegan thing was a lucky guess. I think it’s your hair that was the giveaway,” Eliza cried out, her voice increasing in volume.

“Shh!” River hissed. “If you stay quiet, there’s less chance of any of those things happening. And leave the hair alone. I’m cute as hell, and you know it,” she said, with confidence nearing the edge of arrogance.

As they continued to navigate the chaotic streets, dodging groups of zombies, looters, and ordinary folk fleeing the city, Eliza found herself relying more and more on River’s skills. River moved with an ease that Eliza envied, her instincts sharp and her senses attuned to every sound and movement. It was clear that River was in her element, and Eliza couldn’t help but be impressed. It was also clear that the scenes she witnessed were almost unbelievable. Sure, she’d binge-watched *The Walking Dead* and loved *The Last of Us*, but never in a month of Sundays did she think she’d be weaving her way through real-life zombies in her home city. The tension rose inside of her, anxiety slowly bubbling farther up her torso.

They passed through another series of alleyways, avoiding the main streets where the infected were most likely to be. The city was a labyrinth of destruction, with overturned cars, debris, and the occasional body blocking their path. The sight of the bodies made Eliza’s stomach turn; even though anyone would think she’d be used to it by now, she had to force herself to keep moving.

It wasn’t long before they encountered more people—this time, a group of armed men patrolling the streets, their eyes scanning for any sign of life. Eliza’s breath caught in her throat as she and River ducked behind a wall.

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“We could take them out. Just knock them unconscious or something and take their supplies, or even just their weapons,” River whispered.

Eliza shot her a warning glance. “Are you out of your mind? We don’t even know how many there are. Why would we risk it?”

River’s expression hardened, but she didn’t argue. Instead, she nodded and followed Eliza as they slipped away into the shadows, the men’s voices fading into the distance. River was getting a little ahead of herself, and Eliza was starting to realize she needed reining in.

Eliza could sense the younger woman’s impatience with her cautious approach. But she couldn’t afford to let that frustration cloud her judgment. They had to stay focused.

“Listen, River,” said Eliza. “I don’t mean to be so harsh with you. You’re just a little gung-ho. For my tastes, at any rate. Do you think we can compromise? I’m willing to fight if I have to, but I don’t think we’re there yet. I think maybe you’re on a bit of an adrenaline high.”

River’s response was quick and emotionless. “I’ll thank you not to be so patronizing.”

Eventually they came across a pharmacy, the glass windows shattered and the door wide open. It looked like it had already been ransacked, but Eliza wanted to take a look inside on the off chance they might find something of use. They needed medical supplies, food, and anything else that could help them on their journey.

River was the first to step inside, her eyes scanning the darkened interior for any signs of danger as she clutched her crowbar tightly. Eliza followed close behind, beads of sweat forming on her brow as they made their way up and down the aisles. The shelves were mostly empty, but there were still a few items scattered here and there—bottles of water, protein bars, vitamins, and some over-the-counter painkillers.

“I reckon we’ve hit the jackpot here, doc,” River cried out, grabbing a bottle of water and passing it to Eliza. “We so need this. Who knows how long it’ll take us to get back to the cabin? Getting to Campdale was pretty straightforward, but that was before all the infected showed up and everyone went nuts. Look at this place—it’s crazy! This has all happened today.”

Eliza took the bottle, her fingers brushing against River’s for the briefest of moments. The contact sent a charge of electricity through her and she quickly looked away, her cheeks flushing with heat.

What the hell was that?

She couldn’t afford to get distracted. Not now.

They moved quickly, gathering anything else that looked useful. River found a few flashlights, some batteries, and a first aid kit that had somehow escaped the looters’ attention. Eliza focused on the medical supplies, grabbing bandages, antiseptics, and anything else that might be useful for treating River’s father’s injuries.

I need antibiotics. The old man will probably die without them.

As they continued to search, any conversation between them dried up. Every passing minute seemed tenser than the last. Eliza couldn’t help but notice the way River moved her body. Her confidence and physicality were on full display. She was efficient, resourceful, and completely in control, and it was hard not to be impressed.

Is she doing this on purpose? Like, trying to impress me?

But there was also something else—a subtle flirtatiousness in the way River interacted with her, a teasing smile here, a lingering glance there. It wasn't too obvious, and Eliza had no clue how to handle it, but it was there.

But you're straight, Liz. Why are you even thinking about this?

As they finished gathering supplies, River turned to look at Eliza with a playful glint in her eyes. "So, doc, what's next on the agenda? You got plans for tonight? How about a candlelit dinner...or a torchlit dinner?"

Eliza couldn't help but smile. They'd been through so much already in the short time they'd known each other. She guessed it couldn't hurt to enjoy a little teasing. "We'll have to settle for protein bars, I'm afraid."

River chuckled, the sound surprisingly light given their circumstances. "I say we make the most of it. Who knows when we'll get another chance? Let's go all out! Let's have two protein bars each."

Eliza rolled her eyes, though she couldn't suppress the small smile that tugged at her lips. "You're absolutely impossible, you know that? I don't meet a whole lot of women like you, you know."

"Guilty as charged. There are no other women like me," River replied, her grin widening.

Eliza shook her head slowly as warmth spread through her chest. She didn't want to admit it, but she was secretly enjoying River's playful banter. It was so odd, though. Should she really be allowing herself to feel something so normal in the midst of what was shaping up to be a real tragedy? The world seemed like it was on the brink

of collapse. Yet she was starting to feel comfortable being in River's company. Maybe this young woman was simply a reminder that there was still plenty of life left in this world. She was a sign. River was slowly but surely teaching her not to give up.

As they finished gathering supplies, Eliza glanced toward the back of the pharmacy.

I think there's a storeroom back there.

"Hey, River. Come have a look at this. I'd say it's pretty secure. What do you think? We should stay here for the night," Eliza said firmly. "It's as safe as we're going to get."

River looked around the store, her expression thoughtful. "Yeah, I think you're right. You're getting rather good at this survival malarkey, huh? But we have to take shifts. Now's not the time to get a full eight hours, okay? We need to keep an eye out for any trouble."

Eliza nodded in agreement. She couldn't help but notice the way River looked at her. But then, she'd never been good at reading people. And she'd never had a woman show the slightest bit of interest in her. The subtle glances, the soft teasing—it all felt unfamiliar, like stepping into unknown terrain. She wasn't used to this. River's banter was clearly meant to ease the tension, but instead it left her feeling adrift, unsure how to navigate the sudden shift in their dynamic.

They settled into the storeroom, the air heavy with the scent of dust and mold. River pulled out a couple protein bars and handed one to Eliza, who grabbed it greedily.

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“I’m so ready for this. It’s total processed crap, you know. But I’m all over it,” Eliza said with a giggle.

They ate in silence for a few minutes as the exhaustion of the day began to catch up with them.

“You know something?” River said after a while, her voice soft. “I couldn’t agree more. I used to hate protein bars. I hated the whole idea of them for some reason. My dad likes to take them on our hikes, and I’m always fighting with him about it. Eat a good breakfast, stay hydrated, and nobody needs this cardboard shit. Like, if you need protein, find some real protein, right? But I swear this tastes like a five-star meal.”

Eliza chuckled. “I guess we’re about to learn to appreciate the little things in life. We all learned that during the last pandemic, right? Also, do you think we’re currently in shock about this whole zombie situation? I mean, shouldn’t we be curled up crying in panic, or something?”

River nodded, her expression thoughtful. “Yeah. It’s funny how things change. A week ago, I was worried about how to convince my dad to go vegan. Now I’m just hoping we can find something—anything—to eat. And no, we’re not in shock, we’re surviving.”

Eliza smiled, though the mention of River’s father brought a pang of guilt. She hadn’t forgotten why they were doing this. “Does vegan protein even exist?” she asked jokingly, before turning the conversation to a more serious issue. “We’ll get to him,” Eliza said, her voice steady. “We’ll get the supplies he needs, and he’ll make it. We

just need to lay low and wait until it's safer out there.”

River's eyes softened as she looked at Eliza with a mix of gratitude and something else—something Eliza couldn't quite place. “Thank you so much,” River said quietly. “For everything. I don't think I could do this without you. I don't know why you're helping me.”

Eliza grinned. She wasn't used to people relying on her, not in this way. Her job as a doctor was to help people, but this was different. This was personal, and it touched something deep inside her.

“Please don't thank me,” Eliza whispered. “We're in this together, right? And besides, you've been the one leading the way. I'm just trying to keep up. I'd have been eaten if you hadn't shown up when you did. We both know it.”

River chuckled. “Well, I think you're keeping up fine. And who could blame that zombie for wanting to eat you? Not me, that's for sure.”

The tension between them slowly eased as they settled into their makeshift camp. Eliza couldn't help but feel a growing sense of respect for River—she was strong, capable, and determined, but there was also a vulnerability to her, a softness that Eliza found herself drawn to...a softness she was intrigued to learn more about.

“So, tell me about your dad,” Eliza said after a while, breaking the silence. “You mentioned earlier that you're close, and I want to know who I'm risking my ass for.”

River smiled, although Eliza could sense the sadness behind it. “He raised me on his own after my mom passed away. He's always been there for me and supported me in everything I've done. We have our disagreements—the guy will only ever eat at the all-you-can-eat steakhouse when we go out for dinner—but he's my rock. I honestly don't know what I'd do without my dad. Jeez, I wonder if we'll ever go to that

steakhouse again.”

Eliza understood what River was saying. “It sounds like you have a really great relationship. I think you should hold on to that, especially now. And honestly, if this is anything like the movies we all watch, I’d say the world is about to change forever.”

River’s eyes widened as she looked at Eliza with a warmth that made Eliza’s heart flutter. “Yeah, I think you’re right. Anyway, I can’t think about the future too much right now, so what about you? What about your family?”

Eliza hesitated, her thoughts drifting to her own family, their strained relationship, and the distance she’d created over the years. “I have a brother,” she said slowly. “We’re close, but...I guess it’s complicated. My parents, they...well, I don’t see an awful lot of them these days. It’s kind of my fault. I put my job first.”

River’s expression softened with understanding. “Yeah, I get that. It must be hard. So you’re on your own a lot?”

Eliza shrugged. “Sometimes. I mean, they’re all away someplace right now. I’ve tried to contact them, but it’s impossible to get through. I’m praying they’re alright, but I’m also trying not to think about it too much. Like you said, I can’t think about the future right now.”

They lapsed into silence again as the weight of their shared experiences settled between them. Eliza couldn’t help but feel a connection to River. A bond was starting to form between them. It was strange, feeling so close to someone she’d just met, but there was something about River that made Eliza feel...safe. Safe in a way she hadn’t felt in some time.

As the night wore on, they took turns keeping watch, the darkness outside pressing in

on them as they huddled together in the storeroom. The sounds of the city had quieted, but the tension in the air was still palpable, a reminder that they were far from safe. Luckily there'd been no sign of the infected around them, but at times a distant scream jolted them back into their new reality.

Eliza couldn't sleep. Her mind raced with thoughts of the future and what they'd do next. But she also found herself thinking about River and how she'd stepped up, taken charge, and kept them both alive.

Something about River was drawing her in, something that made her want to understand the woman behind the confident exterior.

7

RIVER

River awoke to an uneasy stillness around her.

Did I fall asleep? Shit!

The light filtering through the doorway to the small storeroom was weak and gray, casting faint, spectral shadows on the dusty floor. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and sat up, careful not to wake Eliza, who was still curled up in the corner. As River looked around, it felt like she was in a tomb rather than a sanctuary. The high ceiling loomed above her, and the silence was punctuated only by the occasional drip of water from a tap somewhere.

Is the water still on?

River's gaze wandered over to their small stash of food and medical supplies. Eliza had spent some time neatly packing them in the corner of the room, but her heart sank

as she noticed the disturbed state of their hoard. The packets of protein bars and cough drops were in disarray. Either she'd kicked them during the nap she wasn't supposed to be taking, or someone had come into the room and tampered with it. Or maybe some big city rat had broken into their snacks. She counted the items quickly, her mind racing. There was little point, though; it was clear that their supplies had been pilfered, leaving them with a mere fraction of what they'd once had.

She felt a pang of frustration and anxiety. Their situation was precarious at best, and now that their supplies had been compromised, their chances of getting back to her father and surviving the journey seemed even slimmer than before. River's fingers traced the edges of the empty spaces in their food stash, her thoughts swirling with the implications of their loss.

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“Eliza,” she whispered urgently, leaning closer to shake her travel companion awake. “Eliza, wake up. We’ve got a major problem here. I’m not kidding, Eliza! Wake up.”

As Eliza stirred, her eyes slowly fluttering open, River’s gaze lingered on her face longer than it should have. Even in the dim light, Eliza’s beauty was undeniable—her soft, dark hair fanned out across the makeshift pillow, the curve of her delicate lips as she mumbled something incoherent, and the delicate flutter of her luscious eyelashes against her cheeks. River’s breath caught in her chest as a rush of heat coursed through her body. She’d known the minute she first saw Eliza that she was attracted to the older woman, but in this moment, the intensity of her attraction caught her off guard.

God, you’re stunning.

Desire mixed with anxiety was a potent cocktail of emotions, and she wasn’t too sure she’d be able to keep control of them. Eliza looked vulnerable, yet effortlessly alluring. River’s pulse quickened. All she wanted right then and there was to touch her, to draw her close and feel the warmth of her skin against hers, to lose herself in the intoxicating scent of her hair. It took her by surprise. She questioned if it was just the intense situation they’d found themselves in, or if maybe they were two souls meant to connect.

But River knew she had to push these thoughts aside, no matter how much her body protested. Still, she couldn’t help but let her fingers linger for a moment on Eliza’s arm, her touch feather-light, before she shook her more insistently.

“Doc?” River’s voice was a little calmer, the urgency tinged with something

else—something she'd love to confront but couldn't, given the circumstances. "We really need to talk."

Eliza's eyes opened fully now, concern clouding her gaze as she registered River's tone. She pulled back her hand, focusing instead on the trashed supply stash, trying to regain her composure.

Eliza sat up, her eyes blinking as they met River's. The dim light emphasized the fatigue etched into her features, but River still found every inch of the woman beautiful. "What's up? What's going on?" she asked, her voice still slightly groggy.

River took a deep breath in an attempt to steady her racing pulse. "Our supplies are gone. Well, a lot of them. We've been robbed. I'm not sure how, but we need to figure out what happened...and find more supplies, I guess. I think someone just snuck in and took a bunch of stuff. Thank God they didn't try to harm us."

Eliza's eyes widened with alarm. "Well, it didn't happen on my watch, River. How come someone took our stuff? So much for our plan, huh? Where's my sweater? I was counting on wearing that today. Jesus. Do I have to stay in these scrubs for the rest of my life?"

"I don't know," River said, her frustration evident. "Well, actually, I do. I must have fallen asleep. I'm sorry. I'm really fucking sorry, but I couldn't help it."

The small pile of remaining supplies looked pitifully inadequate.

"This isn't going to be enough to sustain us, but at least they didn't hurt us," said Eliza, tears forming in her eyes.

River sat back on her heels, her face set with grim determination. "It took me nearly ten hours to cover the forty miles to Campdale," she said, her voice steady but

weighted by the memory of that brutal trek. “But I’m in pretty good shape. I was moving fairly fast, and I wasn’t weighed down by anything. Even so, it was a brutal journey—plus, it was at night. My legs were cramping pretty badly by the end of it.” She locked eyes with Eliza, her expression firm but sincere. “We can totally make it without food, but it’s going to be rough. The most important thing is getting the supplies we need for my dad. That’s all I care about. After that, we have enough food to last us a while at the cabin, and there’s a spring nearby for fresh water. So let’s push through, okay?”

“How about we get a car?” Eliza asked.

“The roads south out of town are blocked. We’ve seen so many abandoned cars that I assume there’s no way out with a vehicle.”

They sprang into action, gathering what was left of their gear and preparing to leave the pharmacy.

“Okay, let’s look at what we have here: vitamins, plenty of gauze and dressings, antiseptic fluid, wipes, painkillers...” Eliza said, listing everything as she pushed it into River’s bag.

“Right...if we try to continue north, through my old neighborhood, we can get onto the road we need. It’s a more or less straight path up to the forest. Well, not straight, but direct. We just need to stay on that one road,” River explained. “There might be something left in people’s homes or stores along the way.”

Eliza nodded and they set out, their movements cautious and deliberate. The silence outside was oppressive, broken only by the distant, haunting groans of walkers.

“It looks like most people have made a run for it. They’re hiding...or dead. I mean...turned, infected...” muttered River sadly. “Actually, I don’t know what I

mean. I'm putting a brave face on things. But this is just all so sad."

"I know," replied Eliza, pulling on River's arm and bringing her closer. "I never thought I'd see anything like this. You're doing such a good job."

"I can't thank you enough for helping me," River sighed.

"Honestly, you saved my life, so it's the least I can do. I don't know what else I would've been doing other than trying to reach my parents, but maybe I'll get enough signal to call them."

"After we've sorted out my dad, I'll help you do anything. The cabin is rural and safe. I'm sure my dad will have a way of making contact with the outside world."

Eliza nodded as they made their way down the street.

The wind carried the scent of decay, and River gagged. The houses, once filled with the sounds of everyday life, stood abandoned, their doors ajar. River's senses were on high alert as they approached the small grocery store that loomed ahead.

Inside, the store was a ghost of its former self. The shelves, once neatly stocked with goods, were now a chaotic jumble of debris and scattered items.

"Look for anything that might be usable," River instructed, her voice low and cautious.

Eliza nodded, her gaze scanning the scattered contents of the shelves. "There's not much here. Let's break into someone's house and raid their medicine cabinet. All we really need is antibiotics. I doubt anyone is living in them anymore."

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“We’ll have to make do with what we can find. How about we go back to the hospital?” River said, her voice tinged with frustration. “We could be quick about it. You must have plenty of supplies there. It’s our only option. We don’t know how long this place will stay safe.”

Eliza’s response came out harsher than she would have liked. “There’s not a chance in hell I’m going back there. Half the city is in that place. No way. We’d never make it out alive. If you want to go back there, then you’re going alone.”

“Jesus, doc. Calm down would you? We’ll find another solution,” River replied, feeling guilty as soon as she realized that Eliza was hurt by her words.

I’m so sorry. Please don’t look at me like that. Come into my arms, and let me help you feel better.

As they gathered what they could, River’s attention was drawn to a faint whispering sound from outside. Her instincts kicked in and she motioned for Eliza to stay close. The sound was muffled, but it carried an unmistakable note of urgency.

“Do you hear that?” River asked, her voice tense.

“Yes,” Eliza replied, her eyes fixed on the store’s entrance. “It sounds like someone’s out there.”

River approached the entrance cautiously. The storefront was partially blocked by debris, but she could see a shadow moving outside. Her heart raced with anticipation as she prepared for whatever might come through the door.

“Look!” River said, her voice barely above a whisper. “They’re the ones who stole our stuff. That woman’s wearing your sweater.”

As if on cue, the shadow solidified into the shape of a mother and her young daughter. The mother’s face was drawn and weary, her eyes wide with desperation and fear. The young girl, clutching a fluffy toy rabbit, clung to her side.

“I guess it wasn’t really my sweater. But...what do we do? Let them keep it?” Eliza asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“Not a chance. I say we confront them,” River said, her voice steady despite the churning emotions within her. “Let’s find out what they’re playing at.”

She stepped out of the door, her gaze fixed on the pair. “Hey!” River called out, her voice authoritative. “Stop right there!”

The mother and daughter froze. The woman’s hands trembled as she tried to shield her daughter from this new danger. “I beg you,” she said, her voice quivering. “We didn’t mean to cause any trouble. We were cold and hungry. We’re locked out of our house, and...well...you know what’s happening.”

River’s expression softened as she caught a glimpse of the young child. “But you took almost everything we had,” she said, her tone edged with frustration. “We’re struggling, too. Everyone’s got their own shit going on.”

The mother’s eyes filled with tears as she looked at River. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to steal. I just...I didn’t know what else to do. The monsters are outside our house. The door’s locked anyway. My husband had the key, but he turned and...”

Eliza stepped forward, her face a mixture of compassion and resolve. “We understand it’s hard. Do you have any other family nearby? Someone who could come and pick

you guys up?”

“If you need help,” River said, her voice softening, “you can keep what you took. It’s fine. But you need to understand it’s not easy for any of us out here. Everything’s been looted. There’s almost nobody left in the city.”

“The monsters are still here,” said the little girl with a whimper.

“There’s no such thing as monsters, honey,” explained Eliza with a kind smile. “There’s a virus going around—a nasty bug. But we’ll have a solution soon. You stay with your mommy and do as she tells you, okay, sweetie?”

The mother’s shoulders sagged with relief as she looked at River. “Thank you.”

River nodded, though the anger from losing their supplies still gnawed at her. “Alright. Get out of here. Stay safe.”

River and Eliza watched them go, their hearts heavy.

“God, this is just awful. Should we ask them to stay?” asked Eliza, looking River straight in the eye.

River felt a surge of anxiety wash through her. She knew she needed to make things clear to Eliza. They couldn’t waste their time and resources on saving others. They had to put themselves first. “Listen. You’re a good person, I can tell. But we can’t help everyone we see. We’ll never make it. Let’s continue north, try to find medicine if we can, but...the main point is we need to keep going. We need to get out of Campdale.”

The conversation was disrupted as a nearby window smashed and a group of infected hurtled out.

“Fuck! Get down behind that car and don’t make a sound,” River whispered as she grabbed Eliza’s hand.

“But what about the mom and her kid?”

“They can outrun them, they’re slow. Look.” River pointed to the infected, whose skin was almost green as groans left their mouths.

“This is fucking insane. They are really zombies, aren’t they? Oh my God, what if my mom and dad are like that too? I’m never gonna see them again, am I?” Eliza panicked, losing the calm and collected attitude she tried so damn hard to uphold.

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“Just stay quiet and breathe. Let them pass. You’re okay, I’ve got you.” River grabbed her hand and pulled her close.

Eliza leaned in to River’s body. She lifted her head and stared into River’s eyes. They were soft and kind.

“Oh, God. What are we doing?” asked Eliza, smiling. “This feels so good. How do you do that? I’m terrified, but I feel so safe with you.”

River agreed. “I want to kiss you. I have since I met you. I can’t explain it.”

“What?” Eliza asked, pulling away violently. “I’m not your girlfriend, River. Why are you acting like this? I said I’d help you with your father, but that’s all there is to it. I’m not gay, okay?”

“But you...just then...you...” River stuttered in confusion, knowing full well she hadn’t imagined what had just happened. “Fine. Let’s get out of here.”

As they left the store and continued through the streets, River noted that the city felt like a silent witness to her struggle.

Why did she do that? The way she looked at me. The way her eyes met my lips. She’s in denial.

Every road was lined with abandoned vehicles, their contents long since scavenged. Buildings stood like skeletal remains of a once-thriving community. At times the infected would make an appearance, but they managed to stay out of their sight. It

seemed if they remained quiet, hidden and still, they would pass them by.

“What about over there?” Eliza asked, pointing to two high rises. “We could go looking for supplies. We’ve been walking the streets for hours. One of us is going to have to make a decision. We can’t just keep roaming up and down streets and back alleys. My feet are fucking killing me, River.”

“Oh? Your feet are killing you, are they? Should we stop off somewhere and get you a massage and pedi, Eliza?” River answered in an irritated tone. “Can’t you hear that low hum? The groaning? That’s them! They’re getting closer and soon they’ll be everywhere. Why do you think we haven’t been into any of these buildings? They’re full of infected. It seems like most of them take cover during the day. That’s what my gut’s telling me. I’m not marching you all over Campdale for the fricking fun of it, doc.”

“I’m sorry,” Eliza whimpered.

Despite feeling like her emotions were about to get the better of her, River was still determined to keep her senses on full alert, every creak and distant moan forcing her heart to race with anticipation for the next unseen threat. “Just keep up. And remember that I know what I’m doing.”

As they turned a corner, River spotted a man standing in front of a small laundromat. His presence was unexpected, and the sight of him felt like a beacon of hope in the monotony of that afternoon’s slow journey through the city. The man’s clothes were neat and clean, and he carried a radio in his hands, its crackling broadcast breaking the silence around them.

“Hello there!” River called out cautiously. “Can we talk to you?”

The man looked up, his eyes bright with a mixture of relief and curiosity. “You two

look like you've had a hell of a time of it," he said, his voice carrying a note of genuine concern. "I've been listening to these reports. They're on repeat. Things are pretty bad out there."

"Really? You can pick up the news on that thing?" River said. "Wow. My dad has one just like that. Does it work? What can you tell us?"

The man gestured for them to come closer. "The government has collapsed. Well, I guess most of them will be hiding in underground bunkers. Something like this happens, and you don't see their asses for dust, right? They're saying the military is in control now, but it seems they're struggling to contain the situation. This virus thing is spreading faster than they can keep up. I don't think it's a virus. I reckon it's chemical warfare. It'll be the commies. If you get bitten, or possibly even scratched, it's over. It's genius if you ask me."

"Let's not get political. There's no point playing guessing games," replied River with a cautious smile.

"And what about killing them? Is that what they're doing? Or are they hopeful for a cure? I mean, the military can't exactly go around killing its own citizens, can it?" interjected Eliza.

"The only way to kill them is through the head," River said, her tone grim. "We've figured that part out."

"You mean you've figured it out. I'm not talking about how to kill them. My question is, should we even be doing it?" Eliza snapped angrily. "Two days ago, it was illegal to go around murdering people. Do you remember? They're still people."

The man turned to Eliza, his expression grave. "Your friend's right. Headshots are the only way to stop them. The virus doesn't kill you—it turns you into one of them. You

can't let your guard down, not for a second."

River exchanged a glance with Eliza, their worry mirrored in each other's eyes. "We're making our way to the northern forest. We have a cabin up there," River said, her voice steady despite her uncertainty. "Any advice?"

The man considered them for a moment, then nodded slowly. "All the roads north are blocked. The military closed everything down. They laid mines. They're trying to contain it; keep the virus in the cities. But it's too late. I don't know why they're bothering. It might be worth taking a look, but you won't get out. Be careful; it's not safe out here. If the zombies don't get you, our boys in green will."

"Thanks," River said, gratitude in her voice. "We'll be careful. What are you going to do?"

"My great-grandfather opened this laundromat in 1902. I'm staying right here," he replied, smiling. "I turned eighty-two yesterday, you know? I'm not going anywhere."

"I understand," said River softly. "Happy birthday, sir. Thank you so much. Take care."

As they were about to leave, River's keen senses picked up movement behind them. She turned just in time to see three walkers stumbling toward them. Her heart jolted as she grabbed the crowbar from her belt and pivoted toward them.

"Eliza, get behind me!" River shouted.

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Eliza nodded, her face set with determination. The two of them moved as a team, River taking the lead as she lunged at one of the walkers with a precise whack to the head. The crack of its skull was loud as its limp body crashed onto the sidewalk. It was gruesome, but it had to be done. River gasped for extra breaths as the adrenaline flooded her body. Meanwhile, Eliza grabbed the old man and tried to pull him into his store, but one of the walkers had already clamped its jaw onto his leg.

“River!” Eliza screamed. “Help me! Help me!”

“Drop him, Eliza! Drop him!” River cried out as she struggled to step over the remaining two walkers, who were now lying on the ground, snapping at the old man’s legs. She heaved the old man’s body out of Eliza’s grip and threw him to walkers. “Get inside! Now!” River’s adrenaline surged as she pushed the doctor into the laundromat and slammed the door shut behind them.

She looked out of the window and watched for a few seconds as the walkers devoured the man who had only minutes earlier shown them such kindness. Her breathing was heavy and ragged. “Jesus, that poor guy. Look at them! Those things are demonic. They’re eating him!”

“Don’t look, River. Please stop it. That was too close,” Eliza said, her voice shaking. “They came out of nowhere. I tried to get him inside. I was too slow. It’s my fault. I’m fucking useless! I’m no good to anyone, and now he’s dead. At least you got one of them.”

“Yeah,” River said, not meaning to sound as though she agreed, her heart still pounding. “We need to stay alert. This new world is unforgiving. He’s gone. We need

to stay holed up in here for the night until it's safe to go out again. We have to survive this and help my dad."

"I'm sorry it's taking us longer than expected to get to your dad," Eliza replied quietly.

"It's not your fault. Nobody expected a fucking apocalypse to break out, did they?" River huffed.

As the pair settled into their new hiding place, the weight of the day's events pressed heavily upon them. The dangers they'd faced and the uncertainty of their future hung over them like a dark cloud.

"I don't even know what we're doing," River said. "We spent the day creeping around Campdale, and we're no better off than we were this morning. We haven't found any antibiotics. The walkers are everywhere. Let's get some rest while we can."

As the sun began to set, River and Eliza sat together behind the counter, the warmth of their proximity offering a small comfort amidst the cold and darkness. They'd managed to barricade both entrances with various furniture and scraps of wood.

"River," Eliza said softly, breaking the silence. "About earlier...I need to talk to you."

"Sure," River replied, her tone neutral. "What's on your mind?"

Eliza hesitated, her eyes searching River's face for a moment before she spoke. "I've been thinking, you know? About what happened earlier? It's confusing me."

River's heart skipped a beat as a mixture of hope and apprehension filled her chest. "I get that. It's confusing me, too. But I feel something when I'm around you. You

know I'm queer, right?"

Eliza's lips trembled slightly as she met River's gaze. "Of course, but I'm not. I'm scared. Everything's so messed up, and I don't want to complicate things. But I can't deny that...well..."

River reached out, her fingers brushing lightly against Eliza's. "We're here together. I'm here for you. You're stuck with me. We can figure it out as we go along. Nobody's one hundred percent straight, you know? Didn't they teach you that in med school?"

The space between them seemed to shrink, the tension crackling with an unspoken energy. "You're right. But they didn't teach us about zombies, either." Eliza laughed, breaking the tension.

"Well, there's a first time for everything!"

8

ELIZA

Eliza adjusted the shoulder straps of her backpack, the weight of it digging into her skin as she took a final glance back at Campdale. Would the town that had been her home for so long soon be a fading memory? As she made her way down the dirt cycle path, the city's edges seemed to blur in the distance. Her heart tightened as images of what she was leaving behind flashed through her mind—the faces of her colleagues, friends, neighbors, and patients would soon be distant memories. That world already seemed so far away as she and River moved east, venturing into the unknown.

River studied the map they'd found in the apartment above the laundromat, frowning as she tried to concentrate. "This is a super old map. I don't even know if these little

roads exist anymore. We can only hope they do. We should head east and then circle back up to the cabin. It'll take about a week if we follow these cycle paths...maybe more, but it's safer this way. We'll avoid the more dangerous territories."

Eliza nodded, trusting River's judgment. "If it keeps us alive, it's totally worth the extra time."

The first day passed in a blur of dusty roads and quiet, almost cheerful conversation. The route had been surprisingly peaceful so far, with the only sounds coming from the rustle of leaves and the occasional birdsong. It seemed the infected were gathered in the city, and hadn't yet wandered out into the wilderness.

"Oh my God," said Eliza, feeling her spirits lift a little. "It's so wonderful to hear the birds. They haven't got a clue what's going on. I guess nothing's changed for them."

But as evening approached, fatigue began to set in, and they both knew they needed to find shelter before nightfall.

They came across an abandoned farmhouse just as the sun started to dip below the horizon. The structure was weathered and worn, but it stood sturdy against the elements.

"This place looks about three hundred years old, doesn't it?" said Eliza, secretly wishing they were booking into a five-star hotel for the night. "Would wishing for hot running water and a soak in the tub be too much to ask, do you think?"

River pushed open the creaky door, revealing a surprisingly intact interior. It wasn't much, but it was enough.

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“A hot bath might not be on the menu, but this’ll do for the night,” River said, her voice echoing in the open space. “Let me do a quick sweep for walkers. You never know.”

Eliza nodded in agreement, setting down her pack with a relieved sigh. “It’s...well, I guess ‘perfect’ isn’t quite the word I’m looking for, but I’m happy we found this place.”

While Eliza ventured outside and gathered wood for a fire, River rummaged through the kitchen and found some old pots and pans. Before long, the farmhouse was filled with the warm glow of a fire, and the smell of a hot meal wafted through the air.

“I can’t believe you’ve managed all this. How did you do it? Talk about Jesus turning water into wine. River has turned thin air into soup!” Eliza laughed, giving River an admiring look at the same time.

“I found wild garlic outside, nettles, dandelion leaves, and some old tins of potatoes and beans in the wood store,” she replied with a grin.

“How old?” asked Eliza, a hint of concern coloring her voice.

“Don’t worry. They’re a couple years out of date, but they’ll be fine,” River replied with a teasing smile. “Canned food lasts a lifetime. I’m not sure how good it’ll taste, but we need something hot and nutritious. This is the best I could come up with.”

They ate in silence, savoring the warmth of the food. After a couple days of grainy protein bars and not much else, the hot stew felt like a luxury, and Eliza couldn’t help

but giggle a little as she took another bite.

River caught her gaze, a small smile playing on her lips. “It feels amazing to have a real meal like this, with not a single zombie in sight.”

Eliza nodded, her heart swelling with gratitude. “It really does. Thank you, River. For everything. I can’t believe it.”

River’s eyes lingered on Eliza’s for a moment longer than necessary. “You don’t have to thank me. We’re in this together, right? You got the firewood.”

“Sure, but that’s all I could do. I don’t have a clue how to light a fire or forage for food. I’m not much of a girl scout,” Eliza said, shrugging her shoulders and tilting her head gently to one side.

“You’re learning fast, doc,” River said as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Hey, River? I have a small request. I’m not too keen on the whole ‘doc’ thing, okay? It makes you sound kinda like Bugs Bunny.”

“Ha! Bugs Bunny? You’re older than I thought, Eliza.”

After dinner, Eliza watched as River disappeared behind the farmhouse. Her curiosity was piqued.

What is she up to now?

She leaned against the doorway, exhaustion weighing on her, but she couldn’t help but feel a flutter of interest as she waited to see what River was up to.

A few moments later, River reappeared, dragging something behind her. It was an

old, battered tub, its metal sides streaked with rust and dirt from years of neglect. Eliza raised an eyebrow, watching as River examined it thoughtfully, running her fingers over the rough surface.

What the heck is she doing with that old thing? Eliza wondered, intrigued by the focused look on River's face.

River set the tub down with a grunt of effort, then moved with purpose toward the old stone well near the farmhouse. Eliza's eyes followed her as she hauled up a heavy bucket of water, her muscles straining with the effort. River clearly didn't mind the hard work.

Eliza's breath caught as she watched River pour the cold well water over the tub and scrub at it with a rag she'd found in the kitchen. The sight of River working so intently, sweat beading on her brow, sent an unexpected warmth through Eliza's entire body. She'd come to truly admire River's resilience over the last few days. Still, there was something about this small act of care, this effort to create comfort in the middle of what had so far been a pretty harrowing journey, that made her heart ache in a way she hadn't anticipated.

When the tub was as clean as it was going to get, River paused to take a deep breath, her eyes glancing up to meet Eliza's. A small, triumphant smile tugged at the corners of her lips, and Eliza found herself grinning back, her exhaustion momentarily forgotten.

"So, what's the plan here?" Eliza asked, her voice soft, not wanting to break River's focus.

River wiped her brow with the back of her hand. "I figured we could use a bath. It's been a while. I thought it might help us relax a little. I'm going to heat up some water, add a little soap...it's not much, but it's something."

Eliza's heart jolted. The idea of a bath, of washing away the grime and tension of their journey, sounded like heaven. "That sounds more than amazing. I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything," River replied gently. "Just let me take care of it."

Eliza nodded, falling silent again as she watched River drag the tub inside, positioning it near the lit fireplace. River moved with quiet efficiency, gathering several large pots and filling them with water before placing them over the fire to heat. The scent of burning wood mingled with the rising steam was, in Eliza's opinion, a true luxury.

"I feel guilty watching you do all this work," Eliza said, looking down at her feet. "Can't I help? You seem to be doing everything around here. I can't just sit around being waited on hand and foot."

"Are you kidding? I love doing this stuff. This is what I was born to do. This is what my life up in the forest was supposed to be. Also, you're kinda doing me a big favor. How many people would follow a stranger into the woods to save their father during the outbreak of a zombie apocalypse?"

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Eliza smiled, sat down on the dusty sofa, and allowed herself to enjoy the sight of River moving around the room, her every action filled with quiet purpose. There was strength in River's movements, and a calm assurance that made Eliza feel safe in a way she hadn't felt in a long time.

River rummaged through one of the old kitchen cabinets and emerged with a small bar of soap that she held up with a grin. "I knew it! I found some soap. I'm not sure how good it is after all these years, but I reckon it should do the trick."

Eliza chuckled, her heart lifting at the sight of River's playful expression. "It'll be perfect," she agreed.

River set the soap aside for the moment, focusing on pouring the heated water into the tub. Steam rose in lazy tendrils as the hot water mixed with the cold well water, creating a swirling pool of warmth. River took her time, dipping her elbow in the water to make sure the temperature was just right, before finally picking up the soap and rubbing it between her hands, working it into a thick lather. She let the soap fall into the water, swirling it around with her hand until the surface was covered in a layer of frothy bubbles.

Eliza gasped. "Wow. It's such a simple thing, a bath, but right now, that looks better than anything I've ever imagined."

River straightened up, wiping her hands on her pants before turning to Eliza with a satisfied smile. "All done. Ready when you are."

Eliza nodded, already starting to unbutton the shirt she'd picked up at the laundromat.

“Thank you so much. This is...it’s exactly what I needed.”

River flashed her a gentle smile, a hint of something in her eyes that made Eliza’s pulse quicken. “You deserve it,” River said quietly. “Honestly, you’ve no idea how grateful I am to you.”

Eliza hesitated, her hands pausing on the buttons of her shirt. “Listen, I’ll make it real quick so you can have a turn too,” she offered. “I don’t want to hog it all evening.”

But River stepped closer, her gaze holding Eliza’s with an intensity that made her heart flutter. “Or,” she suggested, her voice dropping to a low, husky tone, “we could share.”

Eliza’s heart thudded in her chest. The idea of sharing the bath with River, of being that close to her, sent a thrill through her that she couldn’t quite suppress.

What’s going on here? What is she suggesting? And why am I about to agree to this?

Eliza could clearly read the intent in the younger woman’s eyes. She felt her nerves melt away, replaced by a growing sense of excitement.

“Share?” Eliza echoed, her voice barely more than a whisper.

River nodded as she reached out to gently brush her fingers along Eliza’s jawline. “The tub is big enough for both of us, and it would save me having to heat a load of water again. I think the two of us could slip into the water and...get cozy for a while. What do you say? I can keep my undies on if you don’t dig the naked thing.”

Eliza didn’t know what to think. The buzz she’d felt like a surge of electricity when River touched her had sent her into a state of confusion. The scent of lavender from the bubbles and the soft glow of the fire all combined to create a heady mix of

sensations that made her want to say yes to anything River suggested.

“I think...that sounds perfect. And I don’t mind naked,” Eliza finally replied, her voice trembling.

With that, River stepped back, giving Eliza space to finish undressing. Eliza’s movements were slow and deliberate, her fingers fumbling slightly as she shed her clothes. When she was finally bare, she glanced over at River, who was watching her with an expression that sent a shiver of desire through her.

River quickly removed her own clothes, her eyes not once leaving Eliza’s. The sight of River’s firm, lean body made Eliza’s mouth go dry, and she had to force herself to breathe as River took her hand and guided her to the tub.

The warmth of the water enveloped them as they stepped in together, the bubbles clinging to their skin as they settled into the bath’s comforting embrace. Eliza leaned back against the cool metal of the tub, the tension in her muscles melting away as the heat soaked into her bones.

Oh, wow. This is amazing.

River’s hand found hers under the water, their fingers intertwining as they sat in comfortable silence for a moment. Eliza closed her eyes, but she could still feel River’s gaze on her. It was like a sixth sense. When she opened her eyes again and looked up, she found River watching her with such an intense, unspoken emotion that it took her breath away.

“You’re honestly gorgeous. I think you’re the most beautiful person I’ve ever met, inside and out,” River said, her voice soft and gentle, almost hesitant.

A blush rose to Eliza’s cheeks as she smiled shyly. “I never thought I’d say this,

but...so are you, River. You're so pretty...so cute...you're lovely," she whispered, her free hand reaching up to touch River's face, her fingers brushing lightly over her skin.

River leaned into the touch, her eyes closing briefly as if savoring every precious second of what was happening between them. When she opened them again, there was something more profound, more urgent in the way she looked at Eliza. Without another word, she leaned forward, her lips capturing Eliza's in a kiss that was soft at first, but quickly deepened into something more passionate and primal.

The entire room faded away as they lost themselves in each other, the bath becoming a cocoon of intimacy. River's hands roamed over Eliza's body, her touch leaving trails of fire in its wake. The water rippled around them as they moved closer, their bodies pressing together in a dance that felt inevitable.

I need to stop this...I don't want to stop this.

Eliza looked straight into River's eyes as she pulled back and gasped for breath. "River, I?—"

But before she could finish, River's hand slipped under the water and brushed gently across Eliza's labia. She knew exactly what she wanted. The touch sent a jolt through Eliza, her nipples hardening immediately. Without thinking, she leaned in, her lips meeting River's in a kiss that was urgent with her unspoken desire for this vibrant and charming soul. She didn't know if she should stop, but this was the best thing she'd felt in days, maybe even years.

The kiss was a catalyst, igniting something that Eliza knew had been smoldering between them for days. Eliza's fingers traced the lines of River's athletic form as she pressed her clit against River's fingers, the water sloshing around them as they moved. River's other hand roamed over Eliza's back, pulling her closer until there

was no space left between them.

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They moved together in a frantic dance as River pushed two fingers deep inside of Eliza.

Oh...this feels incredible. I can't believe we're doing this.

The water splashed over the sides of the tub as Eliza gave in to her overwhelming need for River's rough hands. Eliza gasped as River gripped her hips, guiding her movements as she fucked her harder and deeper. Eliza moaned and grabbed the side of the bath. Even if a walker bolted through the door right now, she didn't think it could stop the pressure building in her core. Her body tensed as River's lips met hers and the deepest orgasm she'd ever felt erupted through her entire body.

"River...you just made me come. Oh, God. I've never come so fast...fuck," Eliza cried out, panting to try to catch her breath.

River laughed. "I know. Your face when you come is...it's like nothing I've ever seen before. Fuck. I liked that. I like you."

"Really? Like what? Like weird or something?" Eliza replied, her breathing still ragged as she clung to River.

"Not at all. Jesus. Just watching you come like that was the biggest turn-on. You're fucking hot. Are you sure you've never been even slightly into women? You seem pretty gay right now." River laughed.

Eliza rested her head on River's firm breasts, her heart still pounding as she tried to make sense of the whirlwind of emotions that consumed her. She'd never felt

anything like this before, this intense connection that went beyond mere physical attraction. It was as if she'd found something she had no idea she'd been searching for. She laughed softly.

"No, never."

River's fingers traced lazy circles on her back, her touch now gentle. "Are you feeling okay? You're not saying much," she asked, her voice a soft rumble that vibrated against Eliza's cheek.

Eliza nodded, a contented sigh escaping her lips. "I really am. I'm...more than okay."

They eventually climbed out of the tub, the chill of the air making Eliza shiver as she dried off. River found an old, threadbare blanket in one of the cupboards, and they curled up together on the worn-out couch in front of the dying embers in the hearth.

As they lay there, wrapped in the blanket, Eliza couldn't help but feel a surprising sense of peace. The world outside had turned into a living nightmare, but tonight she felt safe, anchored by the warmth of River's body next to hers. The doors and windows were barricaded with every piece of furniture they'd found. River had even laid out old cans and bottles that would make noise if they were knocked over by anything entering.

"Thank you," she murmured under her breath, not really daring to say what she so desperately wanted to. "I feel like...like I owe you an orgasm, but I don't know how. I don't know what to do."

River pressed a kiss to her forehead, her arms tightening around her. "You don't have to think about that right now. That's not how this works. I'm not a man. And do you know what? When the time comes, I know you'll be a natural. The way you kiss me...and touch me...I know you know exactly what you're doing. But for tonight,

making you come was more than enough for me.”

A natural? The words echoed in her mind as Eliza snuggled closer to River, letting the heat of River’s body lull her into a deep sleep.

9

RIVER

River woke to the soft light of dawn seeping through the dirty windows. The cold air nipped at her exposed skin, but the warmth of Eliza’s body beside her meant she hardly felt it. Her arm was draped around Eliza’s voluptuous waist. She wished life was normal outside. She wished she’d met Eliza on a dating app and they were about to get coffee and lunch at a cool spot in the city.

What a way to wake up.

For a moment, River lay there, her eyes tracing the curve of Eliza’s back and the way her hair fanned out across her plump breasts. Their sex played on a loop in her mind—the raw passion and the depth of the connection they’d shared surprised River with its intensity. It was unlike anything she’d ever felt, and all she could think of in that moment was her desire to do it all over again.

River wasn’t usually the type to second-guess herself, but as she lay there, a voice in the back of her mind whispered to her incessantly. What did this mean? Had she forgotten all about her father? Why add a new layer of complexity to what was already a huge challenge?

She watched as Eliza began to stir, her movements slow and careful as she extricated herself from River’s embrace. River’s hand slipped from Eliza’s waist, and she felt the loss of contact acutely, though she didn’t move to close the gap. Eliza sat up on

the edge of the couch, her back to River, the blanket wrapped tightly around her.

“Morning,” Eliza said in a raspy voice.

River could sense the conflict in Eliza before even seeing her face. It was there in the tense slope of her shoulders, in the way she seemed unsure of what to do next.

With a soft sigh, River sat up and reached out to place a hand on Eliza’s back. She felt the tension beneath her fingers, and she longed to smooth it away and reassure Eliza.

“Lize,” River murmured, her voice heavy with sleep but laced with concern. “What’s up, sweetie?”

Eliza shook her head slowly, her shoulders lifting into a shrug. “Sweetie? Really? I’m just...I’m trying to make sense of what we did last night. I don’t know if this whole zombie apocalypse situation is making me crazy or something.”

River’s eyes twitched. She didn’t like how this sounded, but she could understand that a sudden gay awakening in the midst of a zombie outbreak was hard to comprehend. “There’s nothing that says we have to figure all this out right here and now. Why can’t we take it one step at a time? That’s what we’ve been doing so far, right?”

Eliza nodded, though River could see that her doubts still lingered. “I know. It’s just that I didn’t ask for any of this. It’s not my thing, and now...”

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“And now you’re wondering if it might be your ‘thing?’” River interrupted softly, squeezing Eliza’s hand. “Well, I think it is. I think we could really have something worth exploring here. And yeah, the timing sucks. I’m worried to death about my father. You don’t know where your family is and it’s the goddamnapocalypse. But Eliza...I want you around, and I think you might feel the same way. Plus, what have we got to lose?”

Her words seemed to be sinking in, and River watched as Eliza’s posture eased slightly. She leaned in, turning Eliza’s face toward her and capturing her lips in a kiss that was meant to be reassuring. The kiss was soft and tender, but it quickly deepened as their mutual need for each other surged back to the surface.

River could feel Eliza falling into her, her hesitation giving way to the same hunger that had driven them the night before. Every last ounce of fear seemed to dissolve in the heat of the moment, replaced by a raw, undeniable desire that neither of them could ignore.

Eliza’s breath became fast and loud as River’s hands roamed all over her body, exploring every inch of her skin with relish. She pulled Eliza closer, invading her mouth with her soft, wet tongue until their need for each other became desperate. Eliza responded, her fingers growing bolder as River gently pushed her onto her back on the couch.

They moved together with a rhythm that felt both familiar and thrillingly new. River’s lips traveled down Eliza’s neck, tasting the warm saltiness of her skin as Eliza arched into her touch, her body reacting instinctively to the pleasure River was so delighted to be giving her.

Every problem that had been weighing down on River ceased to exist. There was only Eliza—the way she felt beneath her hands, the sound of her breathless gasps, the way their bodies seemed to move together so perfectly. Eliza was all that was good in the world.

“I want to taste you and touch myself. Is that okay? I’m so hungry for you,” River whispered.

“I want that a lot,” Eliza moaned.

With a newfound confidence, River made her way between Eliza’s thighs, removing her panties before sinking her tongue and lips into Eliza’s swollen vulva. Eliza’s reaction was immediate, her body tensing as she gasped. Wetness dripped down her thighs as River deeply licked and kissed her.

“Oh, River! That feels so good. So fucking good,” Eliza moaned.

River tightened her grip on Eliza’s legs and held her steady as she felt the other woman start to buck against her. River’s spare hand slid down between her own thighs, massaging her pulsing clit as her body edged toward a huge climax.

Suddenly, a loud bang caused River to jolt upright.

“Fuck. What was that?” River gasped as she wiped her lips and grabbed the crowbar she kept by their side.

Eliza could barely get herself together, her body still tingling from River’s touch.

River quickly got up and checked the windows. A couple of infected were wandering around the yard.

“Fuck, they’re outside. Stay quiet and let them pass. Your moaning must’ve caught their attention.” River couldn’t help but smirk.

Eliza sat up, quickly dressing herself and regaining her sex-addled mind.

“We should get on the road. We can’t lose more time,” she said softly, remembering the need to help River’s dad.

“As much as I hate to stop touching you, you’re right.” River sorted out her clothes and made sure the walkers had passed. “The walkers have gone now, so let’s get our stuff together and head out. We can continue this later,” she said with a gentle smile on her face.

After gathering up their belongings and scavenging anything they could find in the old farmhouse’s cupboard of medical supplies, they made their way toward the cabin.

“I’ll always remember this place, whatever happens,” said Eliza, taking one last look behind her.

The landscape grew more rugged and the terrain was more challenging, but River felt happy to have found Eliza. Even if the world was fucked right now, something good had come of it. She had one ray of light in the nightmare that was real life.

The day passed in a steady rhythm of walking and resting, the silence between them comfortable and filled with the unspoken understanding that had developed between them. River found herself stealing glances at Eliza, her heart swelling with affection. Eliza was stronger and more capable than she gave herself credit for, but there was a softness to her that River knew only a few had ever really witnessed.

As the sun began to dip toward the horizon, they came across a small clearing where a group of people had set up a makeshift camp. It felt so strange to see other human

beings. They'd been walking for hours and only caught a glimpse of the odd hare and a couple of wild ponies.

"Hold up," River urged, her voice slightly panicked. "We can't just go barging in. I can see they're not walkers, but we can't trust them. Think about it. Everybody is trying to survive and I doubt there are any cops around."

The group looked weary, their faces drawn with exhaustion. As River and Eliza approached with caution, it became clear that something was terribly wrong—one of the group members was lying on a ragged woolen blanket, her face white and covered in sweat.

Eliza's instincts kicked in immediately. "River, come on! Hurry! We need to help them," she said firmly.

River was already moving toward the group. "Okay. Just this once, though. Let's see what we can do, but we need to keep our wits about us."

As they reached the camp, a man stepped forward, his eyes filled with desperation. "Hello there. Can you help us? My little sister...she's sick. Real sick. We don't know what to do. The world has gone crazy."

Eliza knelt beside the teenage girl and did her best to assess her condition quickly. Her breathing was labored, and she had a deep gash on her leg that looked infected. Eliza's heart sank.

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“Has she been bitten by one of them?” Eliza asked, her voice calm but authoritative.

No response.

“I can help, but I need water, alcohol, bandages, and you’re going to have to let me see what medicines you have. Do you have anything?”

The man nodded, rushing to gather the supplies as Eliza set to work. River stayed by her side, offering support as Eliza cleaned the wound and applied a makeshift poultice to draw out the infection. The young woman groaned in pain, but Eliza worked quickly, her hands steady as she did everything she could to stabilize her.

“Has she been bitten or scratched? We need to know. In fact, you should have said something before you let her go digging around in an open wound!” shouted River, feeling panicked as she helplessly watched the woman she cared for putting her own life at risk to save a stranger.

“We don’t think so. There haven’t been any of those dead people around here. We’re safe here,” explained an older woman who River assumed was the mother of the wounded girl. “She fell off her horse onto a jagged rock. It was days ago. I tried to keep it clean, but there was no running water. It’s been so hard...”

As Eliza continued to work, the other members of the group watched with their eyes wide with gratitude.

“Okay, I’ve stopped the bleeding and cleaned the wound as best I can. She’s going to need rest and more care, but I think she’ll pull through. You have six days’ worth of

antibiotics here. I found them at the bottom of your first aid kit. You see these? They date back a few years, but they'll do. Give her one in the morning and one in the evening until the whole packet is gone. Even if she starts to feel better, you have to give her all of them, do you understand?" Eliza said finally, wiping the sweat from her brow as she finished bandaging the girl's leg.

The man who'd spoken earlier grasped her hand, his eyes shining with tears. "Thank you. I don't know how to repay you. Thank you so much."

"Erm, Lize?" interjected River, a hint of desperation in her voice. "Those antibiotics...couldn't we take half? I mean, my dad, he's going to..."

Eliza shook her head, offering her a small smile. "No, River. We can't do that. She needs the whole course, or she'll die from that infection." She turned back to the older woman. "Just take care of her, and make sure she gets plenty of food if you have it...and rest."

River placed a hand on Eliza's shoulder as they stood to leave. The group had already begun tending to the sick girl.

"Why don't you stay with us?" the man said suddenly, his voice filled with earnestness. "You've helped us so much. I can't tell you how grateful we are. We could use people like you. We're trying to build something here. Like...a refuge until things get straightened out."

Eliza exchanged a glance with River, who could see the temptation in Eliza's eyes. The idea of staying somewhere safe, surrounded by people who appreciated them, was more appealing than River wanted to admit. But she knew they couldn't stay, not when her father was still out there, waiting for her.

River shook her head, her voice gentle but firm. "We wish we could, but we have to

keep moving. There's someone we need to get to."

The man gave her an understanding nod, but River saw the disappointment in his eyes. "I see. But listen, if you ever need a place to stay, please know that you can always come back. We've got plenty of room. We're working on a veggie plot and a rota. We want to build a really nice little community out here."

"Thank you," Eliza said, her voice filled with genuine gratitude. "Best of luck with everything. And remember to take care of each other."

With that, they turned and continued on their journey, leaving the camp behind. The sun was setting as they walked side by side.

"Maybe we should have stayed the night?" asked Eliza.

"We need to keep moving," River sighed, her eyes fixed on the path in front of her.

10

ELIZA

Eliza's breath came in short, sharp gasps as she carefully navigated the small town's narrow, debris-strewn streets. Their journey so far had been tense, but they hadn't encountered too many infected, and the ones they'd seen were preoccupied by eating animals and corpses. Everything about it seemed completely revolting and unnatural.

"Do you know where we are, Riv?" she called out toward River, who'd gone on ahead to explore the terrain.

River turned back with a wide smile on her lips. "I do! We're in Verdwater! I used to come here with my pops to load up on bottles of cream soda. It has to be, what, just

seven miles to the cabin from here.”

“Really? We’re that close? My God! We’re on a roll here!” Eliza cried out.

The air was thick with decay, the stench of death and rot clinging to the sidewalk, the parked cars, and even the buildings like a poisonous fog. Buildings that had once been full of life now stood empty. It was as if the town itself had given up, surrendering to the relentless march of time and the horrors that had befallen it. But despite this, both River and Eliza weredelighted to be closer to their destination, and possibly within reach of more supplies. The end of the trek was in sight.

“Look! There’s an old apothecary on the next street. It’s a touristy thing. I remember it really well! It’s not a real pharmacy, but you never know! We’re due a bit of luck, right?” River said, scurrying ahead before waiting for Eliza’s response.

Eliza glanced over her shoulder, the paranoia that had been building in her chest since they left the injured young girl behind returning suddenly with a vengeance. River had run on ahead, and Eliza felt a pang of anxiety at their separation. Every sound, every shift in the air, sent her heart into a tailspin. The weight of the silence pressed down on her, thick and suffocating. The fear that had been lurking in the back of her mind started to claw its way to the surface. Her head constantly turned, looking for more infected people or other dangers.

Calm down. We’re safe for now. Cool it with the anxious thoughts, Eliza.

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She had to keep moving and keep herself busy, or she knew the panic would consume her. She knew she had to accept that this was how she rolled. She'd run on nervous energy most of her life—through college, the various roles she'd taken in hospitals, and even her love life. They needed supplies—antibiotics, bandages, anything that could help River's father. The thought of this man she'd never even met, sick and waiting for his daughter's return, spurred her on, giving her the strength to push through her terror.

Her hand tightened around the handle of a small axe River had found in an abandoned house at some point along their journey. She couldn't recall which one—the past few days were a blur. The cold metal grounded her as she moved cautiously through the streets. She thought about every step she took. Every glance over her shoulder was deliberate.

God, I feel like I'm focusing more now than I ever did in trauma surgery. What does that mean? Was I a shitty doctor? Is all that over? What am I now, then? God, I'm unemployed! But I guess I don't need to pay bills anymore.

She made a concerted effort to calm her racing thoughts. She had to stay alert, had to stay alive—for River, for herself, for her family, and for River's father, who was desperately waiting for help. But there was still a nagging fear at the back of her mind, and it grew stronger with each passing second.

The apothecary came into view at the end of the street, its old-fashioned sign hanging precariously from a single rusted chain.

"Don't worry!" River shouted back at her. "It's meant to look like this. It's one of

those olde-worlde places. It's quite fun."

Eliza stopped to take a sip of water from the bottle in her backpack. When she looked up again, River was nowhere to be seen. The sight of the empty storefront sent a cold shiver down Eliza's spine.

"River?" she called out, her voice trembling slightly as she stepped closer to the building. The only response was the hollow echo of her own voice bouncing off the brick walls. Eliza swallowed hard, her grip on the axe tightening as she cautiously approached the entrance. The door was slightly ajar, swinging gently in the breeze, and the darkness inside beckoned her forward.

"River?" she called again, this time more urgently. Still nothing. Her pulse thudded against her eardrums as she peered into the gloom, trying to make out any sign of movement.

She definitely came in here, didn't she?

A sudden crash from inside the apothecary made Eliza jump. She hesitated for a moment, every instinct screaming at her to turn and run, but she forced herself to step through the door. The interior was a mess. Shelves were overturned and their contents were scattered across the floor. The smell of rot was even more pungent here, mingling with the scent of something else—something that sent a chill down Eliza's spine.

I know that smell. It's blood. Where is she?

"River?" Her eyes were wide with fear as she continued deeper into the store. The darkness wrapped around her as the four walls pressed in.

Suddenly, a figure lunged at her from the shadows. Eliza barely had time to react,

instinctively raising the axe as a wide-eyed, decaying, infected zombie launched at her.

Jesus! What should I do? River! I need you!

She swung the axe with all her strength, the blade sinking deep into the walker's neck with a crunch that made Eliza sick to her stomach. The force of the blow sent it staggering back, but it didn't go down.

Shit, shit, shit! Remember, go for the head. The fucking head!

It came for her again, its rotting fingers reaching for her, clawing at the air with desperation.

Eliza stumbled backward, her foot catching on a fallen shelf, and she fell hard onto the floor. The zombie was on her in an instant, its weight crushing down on her as it snarled and snapped, trying to sink its teeth into her flesh. Eliza screamed, her voice high and raw with terror as she struggled to push the creature off her. But it was too strong. Its slimy, rotting hands pinned her down as its mouth gaped open and fell toward her face.

Eliza knew she was going to die. She understood with perfect clarity why she'd been afraid all day.

It was a sixth sense. Death was calling out to me.

Her life flashed before her eyes—not the life she was currently experiencing. Not this hellish world she'd been forced to inhabit. No. She thought of the life she'd lost. The memories of who she used to be, the failures, the heartbreaks, the mistakes all came rushing back, overwhelming her with a tidal wave of regret.

My parents...the hospital...my apartment...

But then, through the fog of fear and despair, a single, clear thought cut through like a beacon of light.

River.

She couldn't die. Not now. Not when she'd found something—someone—worth fighting for. Someone who needed her help. Eliza's fear turned to anger, a burning, searing rage that coursed through every vein in her body. She twisted beneath the zombie, her hand scrabbling for the axe that she'd dropped and was now lying just out of reach.

The zombie's teeth grazed her cheek.

Was that a bite? I can't feel any pain...

All she could think about was grabbing that axe and getting the walker off her. There was no question of not surviving this. She had to make it...for River.

With a final, desperate stretch, Eliza's left hand closed around the handle of the axe. She swung it up with all her strength, lodging it in the zombie's skull. Eliza watched in shock as something that looked like molasses fell from the gash in the walker's skin.

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Oh, Christ. It's clots! The blood's coagulated!

The creature's brain was hit, and its body collapsed on top of her, twitching grotesquely as the last remnants of life, if that's what it could even be called, drained away.

Eliza tried desperately to take a full breath as she moved away from the corpse. She was covered in brown blood, her skin slick with the foul-smelling fluid. Her cheek stung where the creature's teeth had touched her flesh. She raised a trembling hand to her head, her fingers coming away wet and sticky. A chunk of her hair was missing, torn out by the zombie's violent grasp.

I'm alive. Somehow, I'm still alive. But I'm going to turn...I think it got me.

But where was River?

Eliza struggled to her feet. Her legs felt weak and unsteady beneath her. She only had one goal in mind: she had to find River. She had to make sure she was okay. Ignoring the pain that radiated from her head, Eliza staggered through the old apothecary, her eyes scanning the darkened aisles for any sign of her lover.

"River? Riv? Riv?" she called out, her voice feeling hoarse. "River? Please! Where are you?"

A faint sound reached her ears—it sounded like someone in pain. Eliza's heart rate quickened as she followed the sound. She could sense the physical discomfort of her breath exiting her body. She rounded a corner, still shouting the younger woman's

name.

And that's where she found her. River was slumped against the back wall, her face pale and wet with sweat. Blood dripped from a gash on her arm hung as it hung limply at her side. Eliza's stomach twisted in knots at the sight of her. A cold, suffocating dread settled over her like a shroud.

"No, no. Were you bitten, too? No, no..." Eliza murmured, rushing to River's side. She dropped to her knees and reached out to touch River's wound, tearing a piece of fabric from her shirt to make a tourniquet. "River? Hon? Can you hear me? Please, say something. Say anything, Riv. Anything."

River's eyes flickered under her eyelids before opening slightly. She looked at Eliza, a faint, weary smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "What do you mean...bitten? Have we been bitten? Fuck, no," she whispered, her voice weak and strained. "You look okay, doc."

Tears pricked at the corners of Eliza's eyes, her relief almost overwhelming. "I'm fine," she lied, brushing a strand of wet hair from River's forehead. "You're the one I'm worried about."

River winced as she attempted to straighten up, a low sigh escaping her lips. "That...damn thing," she mumbled. "I swear it came out of nowhere. This place was all clear. I...I think I killed it, but...then another one made a grab for me. Did I break my arm or something?"

Eliza's fear for River's safety was making her feel lightheaded. "Don't look at your arm. Listen. Is there a store cupboard or something I can lock you in? I need to put you somewhere safe for a while," she said, her voice shaking. "Can you walk?"

River nodded weakly, her breath coming in shallow gasps. "Lock me up? No, don't

do that, honey. I'll manage. I can get wherever you need me to be. I can come with you," she said, her determination clear even through the pain.

Eliza carefully helped River to her feet, supporting her as they stumbled toward the exit. Every step was agony for Eliza, the pain in her head intensifying with each movement, but she pushed it aside. All that mattered was getting River to safety.

The town was eerily silent as they emerged from the apothecary, the streets empty and still. Eliza's eyes darted nervously around, half-expecting another zombie to lurch out of the shadows at any moment. But the only sound was their labored breathing.

"I need to find somewhere to hide you," Eliza said, her voice hushed as she scanned the surrounding buildings. "Somewhere I can barricade you in, just until we're both able to move properly again. I'll go get help."

River's face was tight with pain, and Eliza could see the effort it took for her to stay upright. Blood continued to drip from the wound on River's arm, and Eliza felt a surge of panic rise within her. She couldn't lose her—not now, not when the weight of her feelings had only just begun to settle in her chest.

"Why do you keep saying that? Are you scared of m-me? It...it wasn't a bite, d-doc. I fell while I was f-fighting them. I wasn't b-bitten. Promise. Let me come with you," River stuttered.

Eliza shook her head as she pointed to a small, single-story building across the street. The windows were boarded up and the door looked sturdy enough to hold back any potential attackers.

Eliza bit her lip, weighing the risk. It was a gamble, but she knew she didn't have many options. With River in this state, she needed somewhere she could rest. And

more importantly, River needed to hide...from her.

“Alright,” Eliza said, adjusting her grip on River. “We’re heading over to that building. We’re going to make a run for it. On three. Ready?”

River nodded, her jaw set in grim determination.

“One...two...three!”

They bolted across the street, Eliza practically dragging River along as they sprinted toward the building. Each step sent fresh waves of pain through Eliza’s head, but she gritted her teeth and pushed through, her only focus on getting River to safety.

As they reached the door, Eliza kicked it open with all the strength she could muster. The door gave way with a loud crack, and they stumbled inside. Eliza quickly slammed the door shut behind them. She leaned against it, her chest heaving and her heart pounding in her ears.

For a moment, the world spun around her, her vision darkening at the edges. She fought to stay conscious, forcing herself to focus on the sound of River’s breathing beside her, the warmth of her presence grounding her in the moment.

It’s happening. I’m changing.

“Eliza...” River’s voice was weak, barely a whisper, but it was enough to snap her back to reality.

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“I’m here,” Eliza said, moving to help River to the floor. “You’re safe. You need to rest, okay? Let me take a look at that arm. I need to do it quickly.”

River leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. Eliza’s hands shook uncontrollably as she examined River’s arm, wincing at the unnatural angle of the bone beneath the skin. It was definitely broken. She didn’t know how to help River with only minutes, maybe even seconds, before she changed.

“I’m sorry,” Eliza murmured, her voice thick with emotion. “This is going to hurt so bad, but I need to set it right now.”

River gritted her teeth in anticipation of the pain. Eliza gulped as she positioned River’s arm as gently as she could before bracing herself.

“Okay, I’m going to count to three again,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “One...two...three!”

She pushed the bone back into place with a sharp, decisive motion. River screamed in agony, her body tensing as she clutched Eliza’s arm. Eliza’s heart ached as she held River close, whispering soothing words in her ear.

“It’s done now,” Eliza whispered. “I’m sorry, River. I’m so sorry.”

After a few moments, River’s breathing calmed, and her grip on Eliza’s arm loosened.

“You...did g-good,” River murmured, her voice faint. “Don’t you d-dare be s-sorry.”

Eliza swallowed the lump in her throat, her mind racing with a thousand thoughts, every last one of them centered on the woman in front of her.

I have to get away from her now. I have to go.

Eliza leaned back as she wiped the sweat from River's brow. "You need to rest," she said, kissing her lover's hand softly. "Just...just rest, okay? Goodbye, River."

River's eyes fluttered shut as exhaustion finally took over. Eliza watched her for a moment, her heart aching with a mixture of fear for what was about to happen and something else—something she hadn't acknowledged until now.

Love.

It hit her like a freight train, the realization crashing over her with such force that she could barely breathe. She loved River. She was already in love with this woman. And the thought of losing her, of facing whatever lay waiting for her in the next world, was more terrifying than anything she'd ever imagined.

Eliza's hand slipped from River's. She could barely keep her eyes open, her mind drifting in and out of focus.

This is it. This is the end. Oh, River...

But just as she began to lose consciousness, a jarring sound snapped her back to full alertness.

A loud crash echoed through the room, followed by the unmistakable groan of a zombie. Eliza somehow found the strength to force herself to her feet as the world spun around her. The noise had come from the back of the building—a door she hadn't checked.

“River!” she gasped, turning to where she’d left her, but the space was empty. Panic surged through her, making her head throb with renewed intensity. “River!”

There was no response. River was gone. Nothing made sense.

Maybe this is it. Perhaps I’m in hell?

A chill settled over her. River was gone.

Eliza stumbled toward the back of the building, every step sending a sharp pain through her head. She had to find the woman she loved. She couldn’t lose her.

No! What if I kill her? Don’t be so selfish, Eliza! Maybe River saw you change and ran to safety?

But as she reached the source of the noise, her heart sank. The door at the back had been forced open, its hinges hanging limply. And beyond it, a trail of blood led out into the darkness.

“No!” Eliza cried. She stood frozen, staring at the trail, unable to make her legs move. The blood was fresh, still wet. River had been here, but now...

A guttural snarl from somewhere outside snapped her back to reality.

Was that me? Did that sound come from me? How come I’ve changed so quickly? Isn’t it supposed to take a while...hours, days, even? Why is this happening to me?

Her mind raced, torn between the primal urge to survive and the desperate need to find River. But deep down, she knew the truth. She was lost. She’d become one of the undead. And with her head pounding and her vision blurring, she had no idea which way to go.

She couldn't think. She could only act.

Eliza staggered back into the main room, her breathing uneven. She needed to get out. She had to find a way to escape. But as she tried the door that would lead her out onto the street, she discovered that it was blocked, and with each failed attempt to force it open, her panic grew.

Finally, she found a small window, barely wide enough for her to squeeze through. She clawed at it desperately. The cool air rushed in, helping her breathe a little easier.

Without a second thought, Eliza hauled herself up and through the window, ignoring the pain as the rough edges scraped against her skin. She landed heavily on the ground outside, her knees buckling.

For a moment, she lay there, her chest heaving as she gulped in the fresh air. But the sound of footsteps—heavy, dragging footsteps—sent a jolt of fear through her, and she forced herself to her feet.

A low growl echoed from somewhere nearby. Eliza's body moved on autopilot, her instincts taking over as she ran as fast as she could down the street.

At last, she stumbled into an alleyway, her lungs burning as her body gave out and she collapsed onto the ground. She couldn't shake the feeling of being hunted, of eyes watching her from the shadows. Everything hurt—her scalp, her face...her heart.

"River," Eliza whimpered, hot tears spilling down her cheeks. The darkness closed in around her, cold and suffocating, and she curled into herself, trembling with a fear

she couldn't suppress.

She was alone. Truly alone. She'd lost the only person who made her feel safe, the only person she'd ever loved. She'd lost her River to a world of monsters...and now she was one of them.

11

RIVER

River's heart thudded against her ribs as she tore through the abandoned streets of Verdwater. The town lay in eerie silence, and the air was thick with the scent of decay and stale rain. The stench clung to her. She felt like she was stuck on the edge of some dark, twisted nightmare. All she wanted to do was wake up. She had to find Eliza—nothing else mattered.

Why didn't she run? Didn't she realize they were coming? Fuck! Why did I leave her in there?

Her body had gone into pure survival mode, running purely on adrenaline. She skidded to a halt at the corner of a street, her eyes scanning the desolate scene before her. The road ahead was littered with cars, motorcycles, shattered glass, and remnants of a world that looked like it had long since died, yet this outbreak had started just a few days ago, maybe a week or so. She couldn't remember. She also realized that it didn't really matter when, where, or how this whole end-of-the-world thing had happened. All anyone needed to know was that it had happened. The wind carried the faint scent of smoke and something sour that turned her stomach, but she forced the sensation aside. Her arm ached and her head spun.

Eliza was lost somewhere in this ruin, and River felt the need to find her pressing down on her like a physical force.

“Eliza! Just shout back to me!” she called out, her voice slicing through the oppressive silence. The only response was the distant rustle of leaves blowing in the heavy breeze and the low creak of a window swinging open and closed. She was running out of time.

She looked down at her arm in wonder. The bleeding had stopped and the pain had subsided.

How the hell did she fix this? She’s a miracle worker.

A flicker of movement caught her eye—a flash of color. River needed to know what it was. She bolted to the other side of the street, her boots crunching on the loose gravel and pieces of glass scattered across the pavement. As she approached an empty-looking burger joint, she could see the place had been ransacked—the counter was overturned, and dollar bills spilled out in a chaotic mess.

Shit! Does money not matter anymore? Why didn’t anyone pick up this money?

A wave of stale, musty air hit her as she drew closer, causing her nose to wrinkle up involuntarily. But before she could investigate further, she caught sight of a figure lurking by the entrance to the ladies’ washroom.

River tensed up, her instincts screaming at her to be on her guard. The man who emerged from the darkness was tall and gaunt, his face half-hidden behind a greasy curtain of unwashed hair. His clothes were filthy, the fabric caked with mud and something darker. The smell of him hit her like a wall—sweat, dirt, and alcohol.

Come on, Riv. Don’t judge the guy. Who wouldn’t want to get drunk right now, huh?

“What do we have here, sunshine?” the man drawled, his grin spreading across his red-stained lips. His southern accent was thick and familiar, but something about it

made River's skin crawl. Normally, she liked that kind of voice, but his felt wrong, like a red flag.

She squared her shoulders and took a step back, keeping her distance. "I'm looking for someone," she said, keeping her tone neutral despite the unease curling in her gut. "A woman. Dark hair, about my height, maybe a little taller. Have you seen her?"

The man's grin widened, revealing a line of crooked yellow teeth. He moved closer, his boots dragging lazily through the dirt. "Maybe I saw some broad run by," he said, his words slithering from his mouth. "But what's in it for me, huh? Ain't no more use for money, and you don't look like you're carryin' much of use. Got any drugs? Booze?"

A wave of disgust rolled through her, but she kept her expression blank. "I honestly don't have anything to offer you," she replied, her voice coming out colder and more abrupt than she'd intended. "Could you please just tell me where she went?"

The man's smile vanished and his eyes darkened as he took another step forward. The stench of him hit her even harder than before—sour sweat and stale alcohol. It made her stomach churn. "You think you're better than me, don't you? You're no lady. I know that much," he hissed, his voice low and threatening. "You think you can just go around demanding answers from people you don't know?"

River clenched her fists, her heart pounding. "Look," she said, keeping her voice steady. "I don't want any trouble. Just tell me what you know."

Jesus, he's an issue. How can I distract him?

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“You ought to know I’m immune, darlin’,” he continued. “Got bit over a week ago, right when all this shit broke out. Not a damn thing happened. So I reckon I’m special.”

River raised her eyebrows in doubt. He was standing way too close, and he had a grayish tinge to his skin. He certainly looked like one of the undead, and he smelled like one, too. “Are you sure about that?” she asked, her voice low. “Because you look like one. You even move a little like one.”

His face twisted with rage, his eyes turning wild as he shoved his finger in her face. “Zombies don’t talk, bitch! So why don’t you shut the fuck up before you really start to piss me off?”

River’s pulse spiked, but she didn’t back down. “You’re right,” she said, her voice calm but icy. “Zombies don’t talk. But you sure as hell don’t look human.”

The man’s hand shot out, reaching toward her collar. River ducked, narrowly dodging his grasp, but he was fast—too fast for someone who was infected. His fingers grazed her skin and she felt a surge of disgust. Her injured arm flared with pain, but she couldn’t focus on that now. Her mind raced, trying to calculate his next move.

“You think you can just walk away from this?” His voice was laced with venom as he ran toward her again, this time grabbing her injured arm. His grip was firm, crushing her muscles and making her cry out in pain.

With pain radiating up her arm, she refused to give him the satisfaction of seeing her break. She swung her free arm, her fist connecting hard with his throat. The impact

made him choke, a strangled sound escaping his lips as his grip loosened just enough for her to wrench herself free.

She stumbled backward, her foot catching on something sharp. A piece of broken metal sliced through her boot, sending a jolt of pain through her foot, but she couldn't stop moving. She hobbled back, her eyes locked on the man as he recovered, his face contorted with fury.

“Bitch!” he spat, clutching his throat. “You’re gonna regret that.”

River’s heart pounded in her chest, every instinct screaming at her to run. But she stood her ground, muscles tensing, ready for his next attack. The guy had the unnatural motions of the infected, but his mind was still intact.

He’s probably high...

She could feel his rage simmering, boiling over as he advanced again. But this time, she was ready.

“Get the hell away from me!” she snapped.

As she stumbled to create some distance between them, her foot caught on a shard of broken metal. The sharp edge cut through her boot, slicing into her skin, but she had no time to register the pain. She was already hobbling away, the sound of his protests fading as she picked up her pace.

When she finally slowed, the town had thinned out, giving way to the wild, untamed land that bordered it. Tall grass swayed in the breeze, the only sign of life in this forgotten place. The sky above had deepened into a bruised purple, the last light of day clinging to the horizon like a fading memory. The air was thick with the scent of damp earth and the faint tang of metal—a storm was coming.

“Eliza,” River murmured, her voice nearly lost in the growing wind. Panic clawed at her insides. She needed to find Eliza, to hold her, to make sure she was safe. She couldn’t shake the feeling that something terrible had happened to her.

As if in answer to her silent plea, she spotted movement in the distance—a figure stumbling through the tall grass, heading toward the open field beyond. River’s breath caught in her throat. It was Eliza. Her heart surged with both relief and terror as she began to run, the grass whipping at her legs and the ground uneven beneath her feet.

“Eliza!” she screamed, her voice raw as it carried across the field.

As she drew closer, she realized the state Eliza was in—her dark hair messy, her clothes torn and soaked through with mud. The sight sent a jolt of desperate panic through River, but it was the look in Eliza’s eyes that truly scared her. She looked terrified. She looked like she was in pain.

“Eliza!” River shouted desperately. “It’s me! It’s River!”

Eliza hesitated, her steps faltering for just a moment. But then she continued forward, her gaze distant, as if she hadn’t heard River at all. The realization hit River like a punch to the gut—Eliza wasn’t herself. She was lost, trapped inside her own mind.

“No...no. This can’t be happening,” River whispered. She couldn’t lose Eliza, not after everything they’d been through.

“Eliza!” she called again, her voice cracking. “It’s me! I’m here! I found you!”

This time, Eliza stopped. She turned slowly, her eyes searching the air in front of her as if trying to find something solid to hold onto. River saw a flicker of recognition in her face, a faint spark of life.

River moved closer, her hands outstretched. “Eliza, it’s okay,” she said, her voice trembling. “I’m here. Please, come back to me.”

Eliza’s eyes focused on her, the fog lifting slightly as she blinked in confusion. “River?” she said, choking back tears, the word almost lost in the wind.

“Yes! Yes!” River shouted loudly, the sound of Eliza’s voice filling her with a fierce sense of relief. “It’s me! It’s your River! I’m so sorry. I promise I won’t leave you again.”

Eliza’s face crumpled and she took a shaky step toward River. Her movements were slow and deliberate, as if she were afraid she might fall apart if she moved too quickly. River rushed to close the distance, wrapping her arms around Eliza the moment they were close enough to touch. Eliza’s body was cold, her skin clammy and pale, but she was alive. She was here.

“You’re okay,” River whispered, her voice thick with emotion as she held Eliza tightly. The rapid thud of Eliza’s heartbeat against her chest reminded her of how close they’d come to losing everything. “You’re still here. I thought I’d lost you.”

Eliza’s breath hitched, her voice trembling like a scared child’s. “But I’ve changed, River. I’m a walker. Can’t you see? My face, my skin...it’s like them.” Her voice wavered, thick with fear and disbelief.

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River pulled back slightly, cupping Eliza's face in her hands, the cool, damp skin beneath her fingers sending a shiver through her. "No," River said firmly, shaking her head. "You're not a walker, Eliza. You're here. We're having a conversation. I see you. I'll always see you."

Eliza's wide eyes filled with tears, her breath shaky as she tried to hold on to reality. "But I really thought I felt it," she whispered. "The cold, the numbness...I'm not the same. What about my face? Can't you see the bite?"

River leaned in, pressing her forehead against Eliza's, her thumbs brushing away the tears streaming down her cheeks. "You haven't changed one bit, Eliza. You're just scared and probably in shock. It's completely understandable." She took a deep breath, steadying herself before she spoke again. "I met someone while I was looking for you. He said he was immune. He said he got bitten over a week ago, but nothing happened to him. Maybe it's the same for you. Or maybe you didn't get bitten hard enough. Honestly, it's just a scratch on your skin. The walker barely broke the surface, I swear. I think you're having an anxiety attack."

Eliza blinked, confusion and disbelief flickering in her eyes. "Immune? No, that's...that's not even possible. Not with a virus like this. It's too new. There's just no way that's possible."

"I didn't believe him either," River admitted softly. "But Eliza, you're not turning. You're not like them. Please believe me. You just need to get cleaned up, safe, and warm."

Eliza's voice cracked. "Then why do I feel like I'm falling apart? Everything...feels

wrong. I'm cold."

River pulled her closer, her grip tightening as if she could physically hold Eliza together. "Because you've been through hell," River whispered fiercely, her voice growing thick with emotion. "You're exhausted and traumatized. But you're alive, Eliza. I swear, you're alive. You're going to be okay."

Eliza buried her face in River's neck, her body trembling as she fought back sobs. "I don't want to be like them. I don't want to ever turn into one of them," she choked out, her fingers gripping River's shirt like she was afraid to let go.

"You're not," River insisted, her voice calm and reassuring. She pressed a kiss to Eliza's temple, her lips lingering there for a moment, letting the warmth and love between them be the anchor in this storm. "I won't let that happen, you hear me?"

For a moment, they stood in silence, their bodies entwined. The fear, the danger, the uncertainty—it all melted away, leaving only the two of them.

Eliza pulled back, her watery eyes searching River's face. "You promise?"

River smiled softly, squeezing her shoulder. "I promise," she whispered. "After everything we've been through and how you make me feel...how I feel when I think I've lost you...I think I might be falling for you. I'm sorry it's so soon. I'm such a fucking typical lesbian. But I need you to know. Maybe it's this fucked-up situation we're in, but my feelings are just so...real."

Eliza's lips quivered. She let out a shaky breath, nodding slowly. "I think I love you too," she whispered back, the emotion behind her words undeniable. "I don't understand it, but I do. It can't be anything else. It has to be love."

The confession hung between them, a fragile truth that had been waiting to surface.

River's heart beat faster as she leaned in, her lips brushing against Eliza's in a kiss that was both gentle and urgent, filled with all the things she didn't know how to say aloud. This wasn't what she'd expected when she'd set out to find help for her dad. Just a week ago she was doing regular things, like tidying the house, cleaning up, taking a shower, and suddenly the world was upside down and she was falling for a stranger. A doctor. Eliza. But it felt so natural.

Their kiss deepened, as slow and deliberate as if time had stopped, and nothing mattered except this—their connection, their love. River's hands slid down to Eliza's waist, pulling her closer. She needed to feel the warmth of her body against hers. She needed to keep her safe.

River opened her eyes first. "We're going to be okay. I'll get us to the cabin and get you warm and cleaned up. We'll figure all this out when we get to safety and save my father," she whispered.

Eliza nodded, her eyes still wet but filled with something stronger now—hope. "I believe you," she said softly.

12

ELIZA

The trees whispered, their brittle branches creaking like bones breaking in the cold. Eliza's breath came in ragged gasps, her lungs burning with each step. The path to the cabin was uneven, scattered with roots that seemed determined to trip her at every turn. They had to be cautious on the last leg of the journey, avoiding any trouble at all costs.

Eliza stumbled again, nearly dragging River down with her. River's grip tightened on her hand, pulling her up.

“We’re almost there,” River panted, though her voice carried none of the certainty it had an hour ago.

“I knew you’d work it out. You’re like an orienteering master or something.” Eliza smiled.

“You think? Well, that’s kind of you to say, because I was starting to get a little worried.”

Eliza nodded, but her legs felt like lead, each movement agonizing. Her body was bruised and battered, her muscles aching from the unrelenting pace and constant fear. She was so certain that she was turning into one of them. She was also surprised by the strength of her feelings for River.

“What was that?” she asked, with more than a hint of panic in her voice.

Every sound in the forest seemed amplified—the snap of a twig, the rustle of dead leaves underfoot, the distant cry of something that wasn’t human. Her eyes darted to the shadows, her heart hammering. She had to remind herself to breathe, to stay calm. They couldn’t afford to panic now, not with the cabin so close.

“Don’t worry. It’s the same old noises. The dead must be making their way into the woods, but we can hear them coming a mile off. Just stay close to me.”

“Do you think...” Eliza’s voice faltered, but she forced the words out. “Do you think he’s still going to be there?”

River didn’t answer immediately. Her jaw tightened, her eyes fixed on the path ahead. She’d been the strong one on this journey, the one Eliza had been able to count on when everything seemed impossible. But now, even River’s face showed cracks. Her skin was a ghostly white, and her movements were sluggish. It was as if

exhaustion had finally caught up with her.

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“He has to be,” River said, her voice barely above a whisper. She glanced at Eliza, her eyes red-rimmed with exhaustion. “He just has to be.”

Eliza swallowed the lump in her throat and kept moving, but the silence between them was suffocating. She couldn’t stop thinking about what River had said about the last time she saw her father—his face pale and feverish. She’d left him behind with promises to return, but now, with each step that brought them closer to the cabin, her mind replayed the final image that River had given her: her father lying on the floor, his chest barely rising and falling, the blood loss...

Is this guy really going to have survived? I doubt it. But I can’t tell her that. I’ve never once been able to tell her that. I’ll do everything I can to help. She needs me to.

Her hand slipped from River’s for just a moment. She reached out, grabbing for River’s arm, gripping it as if she might lose her in the growing darkness.

“Hey,” River said softly, stopping to look at her. Her face, despite everything, still held a glimmer of hope. “I’m not going anywhere. I told you that, right?”

Eliza nodded, though the weight in her chest wouldn’t lift. She couldn’t lose River. She’d lost her family already, and she was going to have to accept that she may never see them again, but River was now like her new family, and the surprising connection brought her some warmth in the new, cold, dark world.

She wasn’t sure how long they’d been walking—minutes, hours, it all blurred together—but when the outline of the cabin finally came into view through the trees, Eliza felt a surge of relief so powerful it almost knocked her off her feet.

“Is that it?” she shouted. “Is that your place, Riv? Please tell me we’re here.”

“Yes! There it is,” River said, her voice laced with disbelief. “We made it. We fucking made it!”

But as they approached the cabin, Eliza’s stomach twisted into knots. Something felt off. The air around it was too still, too quiet. She exchanged a glance with River, who was frowning as her eyes scanned the perimeter.

“Do you think...?” Eliza started, but the words died on her lips.

River didn’t answer. She pushed forward, her steps quickening as they neared the front door. The cabin’s wood was old and weathered, the windows dark, reflecting nothing but the growing gloom around them. Eliza’s heart pounded in her chest as River reached for the door handle, her hand trembling slightly. She hesitated, just for a moment, and then pushed the door open.

Inside, the air was thick with the smell of sickness. The dim light from the windows barely illuminated the small room, but there, on the bed in the corner, was River’s father, Thomas.

“Dad! I’m back!” cried River. “You got yourself into the bed? But how? Oh my God!”

“Thomas, hi. My name’s Eliza. I...” Eliza’s voice cracked as she rushed forward, her legs almost giving out beneath her as she reached his side.

He didn’t respond. His skin was gray, and his chest rose and fell in uneven, shallow breaths. Beads of sweat clung to his forehead and his eyes were closed, his face contorted in pain. There was a crumpled bottle of water next to his hand and a wrapper from some kind of protein bar.

“He’s lost so much weight. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. It’s worse than I thought,” River whispered, kneeling beside him. She placed a hand on his forehead and pulled it back immediately, her eyes wide with alarm. “He’s burning up. You don’t think one of them got in here, do you?”

“I don’t. He’d be dead if the infected had gotten in. Listen, Riv. He’s actually better than I thought he would be,” Eliza admitted. Her hands shook uncontrollably as she pulled the blanket back, revealing the full extent of his condition. His shirt was soaked through with sweat, and the wound on his leg had turned an angry red, the infection spreading outward like a dark web.

“We have to do something,” River said, her voice rising in panic. “Do you know how to?—”

“Calm down,” Eliza interrupted, though her voice was far from steady. “I can save him. I have to try.”

Eliza’s heart raced as River rummaged through what little supplies they had left. Her movements were frantic, her hands shaking as she grabbed a bottle of antiseptic and a few bandages.

“I can’t lose him,” River whispered.

Eliza’s hands hovered over Thomas’s body as she tried to push away the stress that threatened to cloud her judgment. “We have to clean the wound first. That’s the priority.”

River nodded, swallowing as she reached for the antiseptic and a clean rag. Eliza dabbed the antiseptic onto the wound and Thomas groaned, his face contorting. Her heart clenched, but she kept going. They didn’t have time for hesitation.

River's voice was strained as she spoke. "Are you going to cut away the infected tissue?"

Eliza froze. "That's the idea...but with what?"

River's eyes were dark as she met Eliza's gaze. "There's a knife in the kitchen."

Eliza's stomach lurched at the thought, but she knew River was right. If they didn't act fast, the infection would spread even farther, and then there would be no hope for Thomas.

"Fine. Get it. It'll have to do," Eliza said, her voice steadier than she felt.

River hesitated for a moment, her gaze flicking to the door as if she were listening for something beyond the walls. Then, with a nod, she turned and headed to the kitchen to retrieve the knife. The silence that followed was suffocating. Eliza could barely breathe as she looked down at Thomas's feverish face. His life was hanging by a thread, but if River realized just how bad it was, she wouldn't be able to handle it. Eliza knew it.

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When River returned, the knife glinting in the dim light, a cold dread settled over Eliza. She took the knife, her hand trembling as she approached Thomas's side.

"You can do this," River whispered, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I'll hold him down."

Eliza nodded, though her mouth was dry. She gripped the knife as tightly as she could.

For a moment, the world narrowed to just the two of them—Eliza and Thomas—and the sound of his breathing, faint and ragged. Her vision blurred as she positioned the blade just above the infected tissue.

"I've done this a thousand times before. Why am I so scared? Okay. Here goes nothing," she muttered, quiet enough that River couldn't hear.

She pressed the knife against the edge of the infected tissue, and Thomas jerked violently beneath her touch. His body spasmed, his head twisting to the side as a low moan escaped his lips.

"Hold him still," Eliza hissed. "I can't have him thrashing around like that. I don't have anything to anesthetize him with, so pin him down."

River leaned down, pressing her weight against her father's shoulders, holding him steady as Eliza continued cutting. Each slice felt like it was cutting through rotten meat. Blood and pus seeped from the wound and the stench of infection was unbearable, but Eliza didn't stop.

Thomas groaned again, louder this time, his eyelids fluttering as if he was on the verge of waking up. His body trembled beneath their hands. Eliza became more and more fearful with every sound that escaped his lips, but she steeled herself, forcing herself to keep working. She couldn't let her emotions cloud her judgment. Not now.

"You almost done?" River whispered from across the bed. Her voice strained as she fought to keep Thomas still. Her knuckles were white as she gripped his shoulders. "You've got this. Just a little more."

Eliza nodded, though she had no words of comfort for River. Her vision blurred with unshed tears as she focused on the rotting flesh she was slowly carving away. It felt like time had slowed to a crawl, each second stretching into an eternity. The cabin was deathly silent, save for Thomas's labored breathing and the occasional rustle of movement as River adjusted her grip.

Finally, Eliza removed the last piece of dead tissue and dropped the knife onto the floor. Her hands were covered in thick, jelly-like blood. She reached for the bottle of antiseptic and poured the liquid over the wound, watching as it bubbled and hissed, cleansing the raw flesh beneath.

Thomas arched his back as the antiseptic burned through him. Eliza flinched, guilt stabbing at her heart, but she forced herself to keep pouring. She grabbed the clean bandages from the table and wrapped them tightly around his leg, sealing the wound as best as she could.

When she was finally done, she sat back on her heels, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She felt as though she might collapse right there on the floor.

River slowly released her grip on Thomas and sank to a seat beside him, her face drawn. She reached for Eliza's hand and squeezed it tightly. "You did it, you fucking did it!" she whispered, her voice thick with relief. "He's still with us."

Eliza stared down at Thomas. He looked so fragile, so close to the edge of death, and Eliza couldn't shake the fear that they hadn't done enough. That despite everything, they were still going to lose him.

"Is it going to be enough?" River's voice trembled as she looked up at Eliza, clearly desperate for some reassurance.

"I don't know," Eliza admitted quietly. "I did what I could for now. I'm going to have to set the bone soon, or the leg will be permanently damaged. But he has to be in a fit state before I operate. And I need sterile conditions...or as close as I can get."

"But..." River whispered. "Say we manage that, and you fix his leg. He'll be fine after that, won't he? He'll be normal?"

"Things will never go back to normal, sweetheart," Eliza replied sadly. "He could have suffered brain damage. The infection could cause sepsis. We don't know anything yet. It looks like he's had a serious head trauma. We might find he has convulsions now, or seizures. I don't want to make any promises I can't keep. He needs antibiotics, rest, and monitoring to start."

"I do," River stated, her eyes glazed over. "I want you to make promises you might not be able to keep. Make them, Eliza. For me."

Eliza stared at River, the weight of her words sinking in like a heavy stone. The room felt smaller and tighter, and the distance between them was more than physical.

"I can't do that, River. You know I can't. I will always be honest with you, like I would be with anyone I care for, or treated at work. I will never lie to you."

River's hands clenched at her sides as she started pacing, each step quick and restless. "I need him, Eliza. He's the only person in the world who means anything to me."

Eliza stood still, the statement landing with a cold, brutal finality. “What?” she asked, the quiet in her voice sharper than any shout. “Do I not mean anything to you now that you’ve gotten the help you wanted?”

River looked at her, guilt flashing briefly in her eyes, only to be replaced by a guarded expression. “It’s not like that, Eliza. You don’t understand. He’s my father. I can’t just...I can’t let him die. You don’t know what that would do to me.”

Eliza felt the room shift, her thoughts swirling with the sharp sting of River’s words. “And what do you think this is doing to me?” she asked, her gaze fixed on a point just past River, refusing to meet her eyes. “I said I love you, River. I thought we were in this together. But right now, it feels like I’m just...nothing. I’m just your doctor, right?”

River’s lips parted as if to respond, but no words came. Eliza turned away, her mind spinning, trying to grasp the reality of what she’d just heard.

“I thought we mattered,” she whispered, the quiet of the room suddenly overwhelming. Eliza’s heart felt heavy with uncertainty. She glanced out the window, where the last traces of daylight had faded completely, leaving the world outside shrouded in darkness. “Anyway, I think he’ll make it through the night,” she said in a voice just above a whisper.

River didn’t answer right away. She stared down at her father. Her lips pressed into a thin line, as if she was weighing her words carefully. Finally, she looked up at Eliza, her expression grim. “You need to do better than that. We’ll keep watch and do whatever we can.”

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They sat quietly, the weight of their exhaustion pressing down on them. The cabin was cold. Eliza shivered, wrapping her arms around herself as she listened to River's steady breathing.

"Why does it feel like everything is hitting me at once?" Eliza whispered, her voice breaking.

River's gaze softened as she reached out to touch Eliza's arm. "I'm sorry. You know I didn't mean to say those things. I'm confused...and totally devastated. I know we're doing everything we can," she said gently. "Well, you are. It turns out I'm pretty useless."

Eliza looked away. "Don't talk crazy. You got us here. You saved me too."

After a long silence, River stood up and walked over to the small fireplace in the corner of the cabin. She crouched down and began to stoke the embers, adding a few logs to the dying fire. The flames sputtered to life.

"We should keep him warm," River said, her voice practical but strained. "The fever is bad, but the cold will only make things worse, right?"

Eliza nodded, still sitting beside Thomas. She reached for the extra blankets folded in the corner of the room and gently draped them over his body, tucking the edges around him to keep the heat in. His skin was clammy, but at least now he wasn't shivering.

River returned to sit on the floor beside her, the fire's warmth slowly spreading

through the room. “We’ll take turns watching him,” Eliza suggested quietly. “One of us can rest while the other stays awake. We’ll need our strength if things get worse.”

River shook her head. “I don’t want to sleep.”

Eliza gave her a small, sad smile. “I know,” she said softly. “But you’re no good to him if you’re too exhausted to think straight.”

The minutes stretched into hours as they sat in the dim light of the cabin, the fire crackling softly in the hearth. The wind outside had picked up, rattling the windows and howling through the trees like a distant wail. Eliza’s body was stiff and sore and her muscles ached, but she couldn’t bring herself to move.

At some point, River dozed off in the chair by the fire, her body slumped with exhaustion. Eliza didn’t wake her. She knew River needed the rest. Constant fear gnawed at her, keeping her awake, her mind constantly circling back to the question that had been plaguing her since they arrived: would Thomas survive? Would he be able to make sense of the world he woke up in?

Eliza’s eyes burned with exhaustion and her body screamed for rest, but her heart wouldn’t let her leave his side. She reached out, gently brushing her fingers through his hair, her touch feather-light. His skin was still warm, too warm, but the fever didn’t seem to have worsened. Not yet.

“Come on, Thomas,” she whispered, her voice cracking with emotion. “You have to fight. Your daughter needs you.”

Her words balanced in the air, unanswered, as the night stretched on. She leaned forward, resting her forehead against the edge of the bed, her fingers still tangled in his hair. She closed her eyes for just a moment.

Suddenly, Thomas stirred.

Eliza's head snapped up, her heart leaping into her throat as his eyelids fluttered. His lips parted and a low sound escaped him—a sound halfway between a groan and a whisper.

“Thomas?” Eliza's voice was sharp and panicked as she leaned over him. “Thomas, can you hear me?”

His eyelids opened, revealing a sliver of dark, feverish gaze staring up at her.

“Who the hell are you? Get off my property,” he spat, his fingers curling into a fist as he raised his arm.

13

RIVER

River rushed to stand between her father and Eliza, her palms raised in a gesture of peace. Thomas's eyes were wild, but she met his gaze head-on.

“She's here to help, Dad. She's with me,” River said firmly. “She helped you last night, and she's going to do it again. You need surgery. She's a doctor.”

Thomas grunted and clenched the blanket, pulling it taut with an agitated jerk. His posture was rigid. The muscles in his neck tensed as he glared at Eliza, who remained motionless, frozen to the spot. Eliza's complexion drained of color, and the professional, self-assured demeanor River had first seen in her was nowhere to be seen under the weight of Thomas's forceful presence. She noticed the subtle quiver in her fingers as she fidgeted with her clothes.

“She’s not the enemy,” River insisted, advancing with deliberate steps. “She’s the reason you’re still here. You’ve endured a lot. You’ve been through total hell, Daddy. I understand it’s hard to trust, but she’s with me. She’s part of me, Dad. You can have faith in her.”

Thomas’s muscles tightened, the anger in his posture softening just a fraction as he leaned back against the pillows. He looked lost and confused, in pain and exhausted.

Eliza took control as she spoke. “Thank you, Thomas. You’ll be fine if you follow my instructions. Riv? I’m going to need something to fight the infection,” she said, her voice seeming to gain confidence and authority as she spoke. “You might know more than me about this, but there are a few wild plants that might work as antibiotics. I think I saw some near the river on our way here—look for willow bark and yarrow. I’d say it was about half a mile back. And if you can find some honey, it’ll help a lot.”

River nodded enthusiastically and grabbed her bag. She knew exactly where to go and what to find. Her survival and outdoor experience were skills that she cherished now more than ever.

As she stepped out of the cabin, she took in the familiar sights of the forest. It had been too long since she’d allowed herself to notice the richness of the world around her—the vibrant greens, the soft rustling of leaves, the earthy smell that grounded her immediately.

God, it's good to be back.

Every step through the undergrowth stirred memories of better times. She felt the weight of the last few days lift slightly, her senses remembering a part of her life that had been pushed aside.

As she bent to collect the first plant, a rustling sound caught her attention. Startled, she looked up to see a familiar face emerging from the trees: Kara Wilson.

No way.

"Kara!" River exclaimed, her voice coming out high-pitched with surprise. It had been ages since she'd last seen Kara, but there she was, carrying a basket filled with mushrooms and roots, just like the old days.

I must be hallucinating from the stress.

"River!" Kara's smile was wide, her eyes reflecting the same joy. "Look at you—still out scouting, I see." She raised her basket. "I'm just out gathering for Fort Haven. We're still standing, you know."

"Fort Haven? I can't believe it!" River's heart lifted. She hadn't heard anything about them for so long. "I should've known there'd be people up there, but I haven't given it much thought. How many of you are there?"

"Plenty! More people are arriving by the day. By the hour, in fact," Kara said, her words tinged with pride. "It's been tough over the last week or so. There aren't a lot

of undead around in the woods. We've been picking them off and burning the bodies. We still don't have a clue what's going on. I guess none of us do, but we're holding on, canning whatever we can find—just like the good old days, right? Your dad taught us so much. Can you believe all this shit, Riv?"

River couldn't get her words out fast enough as she told her old friend all about her father and what she'd been through to get him help. "Once he's better, maybe we'll head your way," River said, feeling lighter with the knowledge that the world outside hadn't completely collapsed. "He's not out of the woods yet, but my...girlfriend knows what she's doing."

Kara squeezed her arm. "Look at you, Riv! Finding time for romance even though the world's come to an end. You'll get through it. And when you're ready, come find us. You know we'd love to see you guys."

The encounter left River with a sense of purpose. As she made her way back to the cabin, her bag full of plants, she finally felt hope again.

Inside the cabin, Thomas's condition had worsened. Eliza had laid out her makeshift surgical tools, her face set in a mask of concentration. River handed her the plants, and without a word, Eliza began grinding them into a paste. She sterilized the knife. River felt the atmosphere in the room grow tense.

"I remembered we have some honey in the pantry. We got it a few years ago. It'll still be okay, right?"

"It's better than nothing, yes. You were gone a while, Riv. You didn't meet any walkers, did you?"

"No, no. Not at all. You won't believe this, but I met this woman I used to go on scouting hikes with years ago. She volunteers up at this Fort Haven place. It's about

twenty, twenty-five miles south of here. It's a great place. Dad and I used to love it there. It's a big, outdoorsy camping site. She said a good amount of people are holed up there. They seem to be making a go of it, sticking together and helping each other out. They're in good hands with her."

"It sounds amazing, but...listen up. The infection has spread deeper than I feared. There's no other choice. I have to do this now."

The wooden walls of the cabin seemed to close in tighter around them. Thomas's ragged groans cut through the otherwise still air. Eliza's hands worked steadily, but River noted the concern in her eyes every time she glanced at Thomas. Eliza moved with practiced precision, her focus unwavering. The cabin, once a sanctuary for River and her father, now felt like a trap.

River stood by her father's side, her heart pounding with a rhythm that seemed too loud in the quiet space. She watched as Eliza prepared for the surgery, her movements efficient but tinged with the strain of what was at stake. Each sound from Thomas—his restless murmurs and the occasional pained sigh—made River's stomach clench tighter. The severity of his infection was evident, the wound on his leg swollen and dark, a menacing sight that spelled the need for drastic intervention.

Eliza turned to River, her expression firm yet sympathetic. "River, I need you to stay calm," she said, her voice steady. "But I'm going to need your help. We don't have much time."

River nodded, though her hands trembled slightly as she reached out to steady her father. "I'll do whatever you tell me to do," she promised, trying to sound more confident than she felt. She glanced at her father, who lay motionless except for the occasional shallow twitch. His face was so pale that her heart ached.

River moved to her father's side, her hands resting gently on his shoulders. "Dad,"

she said softly, though her voice was tinged with desperation. “I need you to hang on. We’re going to get you through this. Eliza’s the best. Just stay with us.”

Thomas’s body tensed at her touch, his murmurs growing more intense. River felt her resolve falter, but she clenched her teeth and squared her shoulders. Her internal monologue sounded so loud against the backdrop of the cabin’s silence. Failure was not an option—losing her father would leave her broken. Life would be pointless without him.

As Eliza worked, River could see just how fiercely determined she was. Her hands, though steady, moved with urgency as she made the necessary incisions. River’s role seemed simple enough—she just had to hold her father down as he writhed in pain. The sounds around her were raw and visceral. The knife made a dull, repetitive sound as it sliced through flesh, and Thomas’s cries of agony filled the cabin, mingling with the echoes of River’s own anxiety.

“Can’t we do something to help him deal with the pain? He can’t handle this!” she screamed as she tried to catch Eliza’s eye.

Eliza’s brow was furrowed with concentration, her face close to the wound as she worked to remove the infection. The air was thick with the smell of antiseptic and the earthy aroma of blood, a reminder of the harsh reality they faced.

“We don’t have anything except some vodka. I gave him half a bottle while you were out. That’s why he’s bleeding so much,” Eliza explained without breaking her focus. “He’ll need the rest later.”

River’s voice wavered as she spoke to her unconscious father. “Fight, Dad. Please. We need you. I need you.” Her words were a desperate plea in the midst of the chaotic scene.

The minutes dragged on, each one stretching out as Eliza worked tirelessly. The tension in the cabin was palpable, an oppressive force that pressed down on them. River's hands were wet with sweat, her grip on her father firm yet gentle.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Eliza straightened her back, wiping her brow with a forearm smeared with blood.

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“It’s clean. I’ve cleared the infection. I need to wrap the leg now, but I think the worst of it is over. I’ve reset the bone. If I can bandage it tight enough, he’ll most likely be fine.”

Eliza exhaled deeply, her shoulders sagging as she took in the sight of Thomas. River, overwhelmed with relief, let her own tears flow freely. The sight of her father, his fever now breaking, was a balm to her frazzled nerves. She collapsed into Eliza’s arms.

“Thank you, thank you so much,” River whispered, her voice muffled against Eliza’s shoulder. “I don’t know what I would have done if...”

Eliza’s embrace was gentle, her presence a steady anchor in the storm of reality. “I think he’s going to be okay,” Eliza assured her softly. “I did everything I could. He has a real chance now. But he needs strict bed rest and close monitoring.”

Their eyes met, and River saw the depth of Eliza’s commitment mirrored in her gaze. The gratitude and affection River felt for Eliza was almost overwhelming.

Oh my God, thank you for this woman.

As Thomas slept, his condition stabilized, and River and Eliza finally had a chance to catch their breath. They stepped outside for a moment, seeking a brief respite from the confines of the cabin. The world outside was calm, the forest stretching out in tranquil silence. Even if at any moment the infected could appear, it almost seemed like the world was normal out here.

“I totally get why you love it out here,” said Eliza quietly.

“I know. My dad and I were going to really make something of this place. But, well...” replied River, the disappointment in her words evident.

“You still could,” suggested Eliza.

“You think? Like...a zombie retreat center? Kill a few walkers on your way in and then enjoy some home-grown veggies? Yeah, I can see the pamphlets now.”

Eliza took River’s hand, her touch warm and reassuring. “This has all been so much,” she said softly. “Seriously. I mean, what the fuck? I could laugh just thinking about it. Goddamn zombies, Riv. It doesn’t even sound real. The zombie apocalypse! But at least I found you.”

River nodded, her gaze drifting over the landscape. “I never imagined this would be our reality,” she admitted. “But maybe we can really start over out here. It feels safer than the city, that’s for sure. There’s a chance we could have a life beyond just surviving. I’ll help you make contact with your family, too, I promise.”

Eliza’s smile was filled with confidence. “Thank you. I pray they’re out there safe somewhere. I’m certain we can make it work here, at least for now. We’ll build something real. And when your father is better, he’ll help us. And we can even venture out and see what else there is. Fort Haven, huh? That’s what it’s called?”

River’s thoughts drifted to the conversation she’d had with Kara Wilson. The chance encounter had helped remind her that they weren’t alone. There were other people out there who were getting through this. That felt like a lifeline.

“We’ll get through this,” River said, her voice firm with resolve. “Life ain’t over yet.”

Eliza lowered her head as if she was embarrassed. “I’m with you, you know? No matter what. My feelings for you have come on so quickly. It almost feels as unreal as the zombies. I didn’t even know I was gay.”

“I’ll never rush you, y’know? We can take this at your pace. There’s a fuckload to get our heads around right now, and your sexuality is the safest problem we have,” River said with a gentle laugh.

The day turned into evening, and River and Eliza returned to the inside of the cabin. They barricaded the doors and windows to make it their safe haven for now. Thomas was resting peacefully, and his condition was stable. River’s mind raced with thoughts of the future—of what lay ahead for them once Thomas was fully recovered.

What is this I’m feeling? Is it real happiness? Apocalyptic happiness?

In River’s bed, they moved closer without even saying a word, their connection pulling them in. A sense of safety finally allowed them to relax, even if only temporarily. Their kiss began gently, but soon became more passionate. As they lost themselves in each other, the tension of the last few days dissipated, replaced by relief and comfort.

“I want to feel every part of you. Every curve, every scar, every inch of your skin,” Eliza whispered.

River’s fingertips moved gently over Eliza’s skin, feeling her warmth. The softness of her body responded with the slightest shiver. Eliza’s breath caught in her throat as River’s lips brushed against hers. The kiss began slow and tender before deepening. The scent of Eliza’s skin, now just as familiar as it was intoxicating, enveloped River, pulling her deeper into the moment, her heart racing.

As their mouths met fully, Eliza shifted closer, her body naturally aligning with

River's. River's hand moved to Eliza's breast, cupping the soft curve. Eliza's breath hitched, her chest rising to meet River's touch as her back arched slightly, pressing their bodies closer together. The heat between them grew, intensifying with each passing second, their connection more than physical—it was something instinctual, primal.

River's hand slid down, her fingertips tracing the curve of Eliza's hip before dipping lower. She felt the warmth and slickness between Eliza's legs, the subtle pulse of blood rushing through her swollen clitoris. Eliza trembled beneath her touch, her body opening, her labia soft and wet as she shifted instinctively to welcome the sensation. River explored her gently, her fingers gliding over the sensitive skin, each movement eliciting a quiet moan from Eliza, whose hips arched in response.

River listened to the rhythm of Eliza's breathing, every gasp and shudder guiding her. Her fingers moved with deliberate care, stroking Eliza's clitoris in slow, measured motions, feeling the soft tension building in her body. Eliza's hands gripped River's waist, pulling her closer, and soon they were fully entwined. River's thigh pressed between Eliza's legs, the friction heightening the intensity of their closeness.

“Let me touch you, please,” Eliza groaned.

River took her hand and pushed it to her swollen clit, guiding her to massage it in time with her own body movements. As River continued, she felt Eliza's pelvic floor muscles contracting in rhythmic pulses around her fingers.

The tension built within Eliza, her body moving in time with River's hips as they found a shared rhythm. The feeling of being so connected, so profoundly attuned to Eliza's every movement, overwhelmed River. The heat between them and the sound of their bodies moving together filled the room.

Eliza's orgasm came in waves, her body tightening and her breath catching in a series

of soft, gasping moans. River felt it in the way Eliza's muscles clenched and her clitoris pulsed beneath her fingers as Eliza's release washed over her. She could make her come so quickly. She already knew how to work her body into pleasure. The sight of her coming undone pushed River into an intense radiation climax as Eliza's fingers moved firmly against her clit.

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The flood of post-climax hormones left them both feeling weightless, suspended in a shared euphoria. River held Eliza close, the connection between them making them forget the rest of the world.

As the first pale light of dawn seeped through the cracks in the cabin walls, River and Eliza lay tangled in each other's arms, their breath steady as the weight of the night before lingered between them. The world beyond felt distant, a ghost that could wait as long as they wanted it to.

River shifted slightly, her lips curving into a small, satisfied smile as she gazed at Eliza. "Isn't this situation just...crazy? We saved my dad—well, you saved my dad, and we found each other in the process, but only after the world turned upside down, chewed us up, and spat us out."

Eliza's smile was soft and knowing. She reached for River, her fingers brushing lightly across her back as if to confirm her presence. "We certainly did that," she murmured, drawing her closer. "And now we've got to move forward and see what's next."

They lay like that for a while before taking turns to check on Thomas.

River watched Eliza get out of bed and smiled to herself. She felt something deep inside her—the certainty, the quiet strength that had been forged in the space between them. There was no need to say it out loud. The feeling she had for Eliza was like nothing she'd felt before. And now River had her by her side to face the challenges ahead. She knew they'd make it through this, one step at a time.

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

Eliza stood at the edge of the communal garden. She watched as the others went about their daily tasks—Peter tending to the crops, Lily gathering herbs for the medical supplies, and Marcus and Jared working on the newest cabin.

Wow...those guys are nuts. How do they get those things up so fast?

The once-abandoned forest had become their sanctuary, a place where they'd built something new, something they could actually call home.

A year ago, this had seemed impossible. They'd been a ragtag group of survivors, just barely scraping by, with no idea if they'd even make it through the winter. But now, they had not only survived—they'd thrived. The cabins, though simple, were sturdy and warm, built from the very trees that surrounded them. The garden was flourishing, providing them with a steady supply of vegetables and herbs. And most importantly, they had each other.

The infected sometimes tried to approach, but they'd been able to hold them off. Makeshift traps, trenches, and hand-carved spears lined the fencing of their sanctuary.

Eliza's mind wandered back to the early days of their settlement, when everything had felt so precarious and every day had been a struggle to find food, keep warm, and protect themselves from the dangers that lurked beyond the trees. But now they'd found a rhythm, a way of life that made sense. Each person had their role, whether it was hunting (game or the infected, depending on the day), building, teaching the children, or tending to the weak and sick. Together, they'd built something to be proud of.

“Eliza! Hey! There you are!”

Eliza turned to see Lily hurrying toward her, a basket of freshly picked herbs in her arms. The younger woman’s face was flushed from the morning’s work, her auburn hair pulled back into a tight, smooth bun. She was one of the brightest souls in their community, always eager to help and full of energy.

“I swear I’ve been looking for you all morning,” Lily said, setting the basket down on the ground. “Were you napping?”

“Yes, I’ve been exhausted lately. I think it’s too many late nights on the watch.”

“It’s just that we’ve got a couple patients in the medical cabin. It’s nothing too serious, just some cuts and bruises from chopping wood, but I was thinking you’d want to take a look. What do you reckon?”

Eliza smiled. “What do I reckon? Let’s go, Lily.”

They walked together toward the medical cabin, passing by the others as they worked. Eliza waved to Marcus and Jared, who were sweating buckets as they hammered away at the frame of the new cabin. They’d become the de facto builders of the community, always eager to lend a hand when new arrivals needed shelter.

“Keep at it, boys!” Eliza shouted as she walked past.

“We’re burning up too many calories here!” cried Marcus, winking at Eliza and flashing her a toothy grin. “Where’s River? We need some real muscle here!”

They passed by the central firepit, where several people were preparing for lunch. Clara, the schoolteacher, was kneeling next to a group of children, showing them how to properly clean and gut a fish—a skill they’d need as they grew older. Clara’s face

lit up when she saw Eliza approaching.

“Eliza! Good morning, sweetie! Are you coming by the school later? The kids are dying to learn more about your medical skills. They really enjoyed your talk last week,” Clara called out with a grin.

Eliza laughed. “I’ll stop by after I’m done in the medical cabin. Okay?”

The children giggled, crowding around Clara, who was already moving on to the next thing, her teaching as much a part of their daily life as any other task. The small school they’d set up in one of the older cabins had become the heart of the settlement. It wasn’t much, just a few benches and a chalkboard salvaged from the ruins of a nearby town, but it was enough. The children learned reading, math, geography, history, and art. Clara had made it her mission to ensure they had knowledge that went beyond mere survival skills.

Lily elbowed Eliza gently. “They’re really learning, you know? It brings them purpose.”

Eliza smiled, but there was a flicker of nervousness behind her eyes. She loved the idea of the children being excited and learning, but the reality of raising children in this world weighed on her constantly.

Do those kids know how dangerous the outside world is yet?

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The medical cabin came into view—a reasonably sturdy structure they’d built together, its roof thatched from reedsgathered at a nearby stream. Inside, the air was cool, faintly smelling of the dried herbs and flowers hanging from the ceiling. The shelves were lined with jars of medicinal plants, tinctures, and whatever supplies they’d managed to scavenge over the past year. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to treat most of the minor injuries, infections, and viruses that tended to crop up, apart from the big one. There was still no cure for walkers.

Lily opened the door for Eliza, and they stepped inside to find Peter sitting on one of the wooden benches, holding a rag to his arm.

Eliza spotted the blood immediately. Her heart lurched.

“Peter, is that a bite?” Eliza asked as she tentatively crossed the room. “Speak!”

Peter chuckled, shaking his head. “No. I went and did it again. What can I say? Jared and I got a little too enthusiastic with the hammering. He missed a nail, and my arm was...let’s say...in the way. I’d ring the bell if I got bitten. I know the rules as much as anyone else.”

Eliza sighed with relief as she inspected the wound. It wasn’t deep, but it needed cleaning and maybe a couple stitches. She nodded at Lily, who quickly fetched a bowl of boiled water and some clean bandages from the shelf.

“You got lucky, kiddo,” Eliza said, dipping a cloth in the water and gently cleaning the cut. “You guys really need to be more careful. We can’t afford to lose anyone, especially not someone who’s so good with a hammer.”

Peter winced but kept his smile. “You won’t get rid of me that easily. I’ve still got a cabin to finish, and winter’s coming fast.”

Eliza chuckled as she threaded the needle to stitch him up. Moments like this gave her a sense of purpose and stability. She’d always been a healer, even before everything fell apart, but now her role in the community felt more important than ever. Each wound she treated and each illness she cured was a small victory in a world filled with so much loss.

“River’s back, by the way,” Peter said. “I saw her coming in from the woods just before I came over here.”

A rush of relief flooded Eliza. She hadn’t even realized how tense she’d been as she waited for River to return. Every time River left on a supply run, Eliza couldn’t ease the sense of panic within her chest. The woods were dangerous, filled with wild animals, zombies, and the ever-present threat of other survivors—those who weren’t so friendly. But River was strong and capable and always came back with something to show for her efforts.

“Thanks, Peter. I’ll go find her,” Eliza said as she knotted the last stitch.

Peter stood and, with caution, flexed his arm. “Thanks, doc. I think you saved my life.”

“Slight exaggeration there, Peter, but you’re welcome.”

He left the cabin with a wave, and Eliza turned to Lily, who was preparing a poultice.

“Can you handle things here for a while?” Eliza asked.

The young woman nodded, her face severe but confident. “I’ve totally got it covered.

Go get your River.”

Eliza left, her steps quickening as she made her way toward the outskirts of the settlement, where she knew River would be unpacking whatever she’d managed to scavenge on her horse.

The settlement had grown over the year, from just a few scattered survivors to a thriving community. There were twelve cabins now, each one home to a family or group of individuals who’d found their way here, seeking safety and stability. A communal garden provided most of their food—potatoes, carrots, beans, and a variety of herbs—while the hunters brought back wild game from the surrounding forest. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to keep them fed and healthy.

As Eliza approached the clearing where River was working, she spotted her partner kneeling by a pile of supplies, sorting through them with methodical precision. River’s hair was tied back, loose strands sticking to her neck from the sweat of the long journey.

“Look what I found, babe,” River said, holding up a bundle of clothes. “Can you use these for bandages? They look new—still got the tags on them. Well, they’re not new now, but theywerenew. There’s nothing new anymore. How weird. I guess I never really thought about that.”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. I get you.” Eliza smiled reassuringly. She knew that River was on a natural high after her trip, and wanted to help calm her frayed nerves. “You did a great job, darling. I could really use those. New or not new, I don’t care.”

“And this...” River pulled out a small tin, grinning triumphantly. “...is coffee.”

Eliza’s eyes widened in delight. “Coffee? No way! You’re kidding.”

River stood, stretching her back. “I went to the Johnsons’ old place a few miles out. I knew that most of it was picked clean ages ago, but I decided to take another look, and I found this in the garage behind a load of paint tins. It’s still sealed! I thought I’d bring you something nice for a change.”

“Well, I have news too. Aron came back earlier from his outing to the city camp, and guess what? My parents and brother are there, and they’re alive.” Eliza smiled as a single tear fell down her cheek.

“No fucking way! That’s incredible news. I told you we’d find them. I told you we would never give up hope,” River said as she grabbed Eliza and pulled her into a tight hug.

Eliza laughed, her disbelief still adjusting to reality. “I’m gonna see them again. They’re going to come here and join us. I...I can’t believe it.”

“I’m so happy, baby. They’re gonna love it here. I can’t wait to meet them.” River smiled as she grabbed her bag of goods and slung them over her shoulder.

“I can’t wait, but for now, come on,” Eliza said, pulling River toward the cabins. “You can show me the rest of your spoils later. The kids are waiting for me. I’m pretty sure they’ll want you to come along too. You’re famous around here, you know? Like a superhero.”

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“Cool. That’s so my thing,” River replied with a wink. “Do you think they’re ready for some survival training?”

Eliza nodded. “Clara’s been teaching them some of the basics, but I think they’re ready for a little extra tuition. Just don’t scare them, got it?”

“Me? Scare them?” River asked in surprise, raising her eyebrows.

“Yes, you! Please don’t give them all the gory details about walkers and how you like stabbing them through the brain or decapitating them. You know exactly what I’m talking about,” Eliza said, her tone almost chastising.

“Yes, you’re right. I don’t mind a little decapitation now and again.” River laughed. “But I’ll keep it PG-13.”

As they walked through the settlement, they passed by the communal kitchen, where a few of the older residents were washing pots. The smell of stew filled the air, making Eliza’s stomach rumble. Meals were always a communal affair, with everyone pitching in. It was one of the ways they’d built a sense of togetherness, a reminder that they were all in this together.

When they reached the school cabin, Clara was waiting at the door, her hands on her hips. The children were already gathered inside, their eager faces pressed against the windows as they waited for Eliza and River.

“There you two are,” Clara said. “The kids have been driving me crazy asking when you’d get here.”

Eliza smiled, stepping inside with River. The cabin was filled with makeshift desks and chairs, all hand-built from scavenged materials. The walls were covered with drawings the children had made—pictures of the forest, animals, and scenes from their lives here. It was a simple space, but it was filled with life and energy.

The children immediately crowded around Eliza, their questions tumbling out in a rush.

“So, what can we learn today? How do we fix a wound, miss?”

Eliza smiled and sat down with them, ready to teach.

As they left the school cabin, River and Eliza made their way back toward their tiny home, passing through the heart of the settlement. Not far off, they could hear the sound of someone chopping firewood. The whole community buzzed with life, something that had seemed impossible not so long ago.

Their cabin stood on the edge of the settlement, slightly apart from the others, nestled beneath a large oak tree. It was modest, built with their own hands like all the others. Outside, they had a small vegetable patch where Eliza grew herbs and some vegetables—a source of fresh ingredients for her medicines and their meals.

Inside, the cabin was simple but cozy. It had a single room with a bed, a small table, and a few shelves that held their belongings. A fire crackled in the hearth. River dropped her pack by the door and stretched.

“Home sweet home,” she said, her voice low and content. “Did you see my dad this morning? Is he okay?”

Eliza walked over to the hearth and knelt to stoke the fire. “He’s fine. He was stretching his legs when I saw him. In fact, I think he stopped to lecture Marcus on where he was going wrong with the thatching.”

“Sounds about right.” River chuckled.

“Every time you go out, I worry, you know? But then you come back, and I realize that there’s just no need for me to be this stressed.”

“It’s just because you love me, right?” River grinned, charming as ever.

“I don’t just love you, I really love you!” Eliza laughed.

“Like, how much out of one hundred?”

“I’d say at least ninety,” Eliza teased as she pulled River in toward her, biting her lip.

“You know what, I’ll take that.” River smiled.

As their bodies tangled in their cozy wooden home, they couldn’t wish for anything more. No matter what happened in the outside world, they’d found each other. They’d made a home. And now they had a life to live...together.