



Evermore

Author: *Ken Sanchez*

Category: LGBT+

Description: River Hayes had spent years alone with the ocean, tracking the fragile recovery of a coastal ecosystem—and avoiding the kind of loss that once shattered his world.

But everything changed the morning he found a letter sealed in wax, bobbing in the surf.

It was addressed to him.

Signed by a man named Finn.

And filled with memories of a love River couldn't remember living.

Finn Torres didn't know why he kept waking up with ink-stained fingers and finished projects he couldn't recall completing.

Or why dreams of saltwater and green eyes haunted him with the weight of something lost.

But when River walked into his bookshop carrying a letter Finn had no memory of writing, something inside him recognized the truth—even if his mind couldn't explain it.

As strange messages, missing memories, and impossible familiarity pull them together, River and Finn must navigate the blurred lines between science and mystery, grief and healing, past and possibility.

Total Pages (Source): 49

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

First Light

River

Cold air bit at his skin as he slipped from beneath the heavy quilt, bare feet finding the worn wooden floor of the lighthouse cottage.

Through the kitchen window, Beacon Point's automated light swept across the water—thirty seconds of illumination, thirty seconds of darkness.

Eight months of living beneath that rhythm had made it the metronome of his solitary life.

Coffee first, always coffee first. Then wetsuit, fins, the whole routine that helped quiet whatever had been chasing him through his dreams. River grabbed his thermals from the back of the chair where he'd dropped them last night, still smelling faintly of salt and neoprene.

Sarah's letter was still sitting there on the counter, her loopy handwriting practically shouting at him from across the kitchen. He'd been avoiding it for three days now. River sighed and ripped it open while waiting for the coffee to finish its ancient gurgling.

Hey stranger, Still alive out there? Jake says you missed dinner again last week. I know, I know, you're busy saving the ocean one kelp forest at a time. But seriously, when's the last time you had an actual conversation with someone who isn't a sea urchin? Call me back. I worry. Love you, S

River crumpled the letter and tossed it toward the trash, missing by a foot. Sarah meant well, but she didn't get it. Some conversations were more dangerous than diving alone in a storm.

Crescent Beach was empty, thank god. The tourists couldn't handle the sketchy trail down the cliff face, and the locals knew to leave him alone when he was working.

River picked his way down the forty-foot drop, gear bag bouncing against his back.

The tide was perfect—low enough that his makeshift research station wasn't underwater, high enough that he could actually get to the good stuff.

He'd been monitoring this ecosystem for two years, documenting its slow recovery from chemical devastation. Each dive was a data point in a story of resilience that nobody else seemed interested in reading.

The wetsuit was a second skin, neoprene conforming to his body with intimate familiarity. River walked backward into the surf, letting the ocean claim him until he could slip beneath the surface into the world that made sense.

Forty feet down and the world finally made sense again.

No more lighthouse sweeping overhead, no more crumpled letters from worried sisters.

Just him and his breathing and the weird, beautiful alien landscape that most people would never see.

River moved through the kelp like he belonged there, camera in one hand, data sheet in the other, talking to the sea urchins like they were old friends.

“Looking good, guys,” he murmured into his regulator, watching a cluster of juveniles that had been bare rock six months ago. “Keep it up.”

The work ate up time without him noticing. Measuring, photographing, scribbling notes on waterproof paper about pH levels and growth rates. This was what he was good at—finding the hope in places everybody else had written off as dead.

His air gauge finally registered—time to surface. River made the slow ascent his training demanded, pausing to let nitrogen escape his bloodstream, eyes tracking sunlight through the water column above.

He broke surface near his gear station, pulling the regulator from his mouth. The morning had brightened while he was below, early light turning water from gray to green. Perfect visibility. Perfect conditions. Perfect solitude.

That's when he spotted the bottle.

It was bobbing against the rocks where the current always dumped random crap—usually beer bottles and plastic bags that made River want to throttle every tourist who'd ever visited the coast. But this one was different.

Old-school glass, thick and heavy, with what looked like actual wax sealing the top instead of some cheap metal cap.

River fished it out, curious despite himself. No barnacles, no slime, like it had just been dropped in the water yesterday. Which was weird, because everything that spent time in the ocean got claimed by something.

He cracked the wax with his dive knife, half-expecting the whole thing to fall apart. But the cork underneath came out clean, and there was actually paper inside. Dry paper, which should have been impossible.

River unrolled it carefully, the way he handled anything that might disintegrate if he breathed on it wrong.

The handwriting hit him first—old-fashioned and fancy, like someone had actually learned cursive instead of just faking it. Then he read the first line and felt his stomach drop straight through the ocean floor.

My dearest River,

I know this will seem impossible, but I need you to understand that what we have is real, even when you can't remember it. Even when I can't remember it. Even when time itself seems determined to keep us apart.

River's hands trembled as he continued reading, his rational mind searching for explanations while the words described details about his life no stranger should know.

The letter knew shit it shouldn't know. His research grids, his timing, the fact that his coffee was probably getting cold while he stood there reading.

River looked around the empty beach like maybe someone was hiding behind the rocks with binoculars, but there was nobody.

Just him and the waves and this impossible piece of paper.

You're looking for logical explanations right now, like the writer was inside his head.

Stalker, maybe. Elaborate prank. Case of mistaken identity.

But the truth is more complicated than that, and I don't have time to explain everything in one letter.

Just know that I love you, River. I love the way you talk to your marine samples when you think nobody's listening.

I love how you stand up to Dr. Reeves when she wants to rush your research timeline.

I love that you still wear your father's watch even though the salt water is slowly destroying it.

River's hand went to his wrist automatically, where Dad's old Submariner was fogging up again despite the supposedly waterproof gaskets.

The thing had been dying a slow death for two years now, but he couldn't make himself take it off.

Every dive felt like he was carrying a piece of his father with him, even if the salt was eating it alive.

How the hell did this person know about the watch? About him talking to sea urchins like they were therapy animals? About the way he pushed back when Dr. Reeves tried to rush his work?

The letter continued, filled with intimate observations about his storm nightmares, his habit of eating cereal for dinner when research consumed his attention, the guilt that made him push into dangerous conditions. The writer—signed only as “Finn”—knew details River had never shared with anyone.

I'm writing this during one of the clear moments, when I can remember everything we've shared. By tomorrow, it might be gone again, but tonight the love feels so real I could drown in it. Be careful out there, River. The ocean took your father, but it doesn't get to have you too.

Always yours, Finn

River read the letter three times, searching for clues that would reveal the hoax. The paper felt genuinely aged, the ink slightly faded like fountain pen work exposed to salt air. The handwriting showed emotional variations that suggested authenticity rather than forgery.

But the content was impossible. Nobody knew about his conversations with marine samples or his father's watch. He'd never mentioned storm nightmares to anyone, not even Jake. The details were too intimate, too specific.

River folded the letter carefully and secured it in his gear bag, hands moving automatically while his mind raced. The name "Finn" meant nothing to him. He'd never met anyone by that name, never had a relationship that could produce such intimate knowledge.

The rational part of his brain insisted there had to be an explanation. People didn't just know things about strangers. Love letters didn't appear in bottles with impossible timing and accurate predictions.

But as River climbed back to his truck, the letter's words echoed with disturbing persistence. It felt less like someone observing his behavior and more like someone who had lived inside his head.

The Beacon Point Marine Research Station was functional concrete and steel that prioritized durability over aesthetics. River's lab was controlled environment where he could process samples without distraction, but today the familiar space felt claustrophobic.

He arranged his morning's collection—water samples, photographs, data—but his attention kept drifting to the letter in his desk drawer. Every time he tried to focus on

pH readings or kelp growth, his mind returned to those impossible words.

“You look like hell, Hayes.”

Jake was leaning in the doorway with his coffee and that stupid grin that meant he was about to give River shit about something. His ranger uniform was already trashed from whatever he'd been doing since dawn—mud, salt spray, the usual evidence of actually working for a living.

“Gee, thanks. Really what I needed to hear today.” River didn't look up from his microscope, even though he'd been staring at the same slide for twenty minutes without actually seeing it.

“I'm just saying, you look like you've been wrestling with existential dread again.” Jake wandered into the lab like he owned the place, which, honestly, he kind of did at this point. “What's eating you?”

River almost told him about the letter. Almost pulled the damn thing out of his desk and said, Here, read this and tell me I'm not losing my mind. But it felt too weird, too personal. Like showing someone your diary.

“Just working through some data,” he said instead.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

“Bullshit.” Jake dropped into the chair next to River's desk. “You've been staring at that slide like it holds the secrets of the universe. Either you've discovered alien life, or something's seriously messing with your head.”

“I'm thinking.”

“You're brooding. There's a difference.” Jake settled into the chair beside River's workstation. “Talk to me. What's eating at you?”

River sighed and pulled the letter out. “Someone left me this. During my dive this morning. And before you say anything, yeah, I know how crazy it sounds.”

Jake read it with the same focus he brought to incident reports, but his expression kept getting more and more concerned. “Jesus, River. This is...” He looked up. “This is really fucking specific. Like, stalker-level specific. You're sure you don't know anyone named Finn?”

“Never heard of him in my life.”

“And this stuff about your dad's watch? Your research?” Jake was reading it again, frowning. “This isn't stuff someone could just figure out by following you around. This is intimate.”

“Tell me something I don't know.” River took the letter back, folding it carefully. “That's why I can't figure out what the hell is going on.”

“Okay, so maybe it's someone from way back? College? Someone your dad knew?”

Jake was in problem-solving mode now, which River appreciated even if it wasn't going to help.

“I'd remember someone who knew me this well. And the handwriting doesn't ring any bells.”

Jake stood up and walked over to the window, looking out at the harbor with that alert expression he got when things didn't add up. “You want my honest opinion? Take this to the cops. Someone's been watching you way too closely, and that's not romantic, it's creepy as hell.”

“Right. And tell them what? 'Officer, someone wrote me a love letter that knows too much about my life'? They'll think I'm paranoid.”

“They'll think you're being smart.” Jake turned around, looking serious. “River, I've seen what happens when people get obsessed. This isn't normal.”

River wanted to argue, but Jake was right about the obsessive quality. The letter demonstrated knowledge requiring either extensive surveillance or impossible intimacy. Both options were disturbing.

“I'll think about it,” River said, knowing he wouldn't follow through. Something about the letter felt too personal for police intervention.

Jake studied his face, clearly debating whether to push harder. “Promise me you'll be careful. Change your routine. Don't go places alone until we figure out who's behind this.”

“I'm always careful.”

“You're always competent. That's different.” Jake grabbed his mug and headed for

the door. “And if you get more messages, call me immediately. Don't handle this alone.”

After Jake left, River tried to lose himself in familiar work rhythms, but the letter's words kept intruding. He found himself checking the harbor through his window more frequently than usual.

Dr. Amelia Reeves arrived for their weekly review, her presence filling the lab with comfortable authority. She examined River's latest data with careful attention.

“The restoration rates are exceeding projections,” she said, flipping through photographic documentation. “The kelp recovery is remarkable. You should be proud of this work.”

“Thanks.” River tried to match her enthusiasm, but his attention kept drifting to the desk drawer. “The ecosystem is more resilient than expected.”

Dr. Reeves studied his face with sharp perception. “Everything okay? You seem distracted.”

“Just thinking about the next phase.” River gestured toward charts mapping slow recovery across different coastline sections. “Some areas aren't responding as quickly.”

“That's normal variation. Ecological recovery isn't linear.” She fixed him with the direct gaze that had intimidated graduate students for decades. “But that's not what's bothering you, is it?”

River considered telling her about the letter, seeking rational perspective. But it felt too intimate, too potentially embarrassing.

“Personal stuff,” he said finally. “Nothing that affects the work.”

“Personal stuff affects everything if you let it.” Dr. Reeves gathered her materials. “Take time off if you need it. The ocean will still be here when you get back.”

After she left, River sat alone as afternoon faded toward evening, the letter's presence like physical weight. He'd built his life around predictable patterns and measurable phenomena, but the message had introduced mystery his scientific training couldn't process.

The rational response was clear: document the incident, report it, take precautions. But rationality felt inadequate when faced with words from someone who seemed to know him better than he knew himself.

The lighthouse cottage felt different when River returned that evening, as if the letter had changed his relationship with the space. The beacon's familiar rhythm seemed more intrusive. His sanctuary had been compromised by knowledge that someone had been observing his private moments.

River spread the letter on his kitchen table under bright light, studying it with methodical attention. The paper was definitely aged.

But the content remained impossible. The writer knew about eating cereal from the box during research absorption. About talking to marine samples like colleagues. About guilt that drove unnecessary risks during storms.

River looked at the Submariner on his wrist, crystal fogged with accumulated moisture.

The watch had been a gift for his father's twentieth Coast Guard anniversary, engraved with coordinates marking his first rescue.

River had worn it daily since the funeral, unable to let go despite salt water slowly corroding the movement.

How could a stranger know the watch's significance? The way River touched it unconsciously when thinking about his father? The guilt that made him keep wearing it despite damage?

The phone rang while River was trying to convince himself to eat something that wasn't cereal. Sarah, right on schedule for her weekly “make sure River hasn't become a hermit” call. He thought about letting it ring, but she'd just keep calling back.

“Hey, Sarah.”

“You sound weird. What's wrong now?”

God, she was like a bloodhound for emotional distress. “Nothing's wrong. I'm fine.”

“Uh-huh. And I'm the Queen of England.” Sarah's voice had that mix of love and exasperation that meant she was settling in for a long conversation. “Talk to me. What's going on?”

“I'm not isolating, if that's what you're getting at.”

“I didn't say you were. But now that you mention it...” He could hear her moving around, probably doing dishes or grading papers while simultaneously psychoanalyzing her emotionally stunted brother. “When's the last time you talked to someone who wasn't Jake or Dr. Reeves?”

River looked at the letter sitting on his kitchen table. Did mysterious correspondence count? “I talk to people.”

“Sea urchins don't count.”

“They're excellent listeners.”

“River.” Sarah's voice went soft, the way it did when she was genuinely worried. “I know you're still dealing with Dad's death. I get it. But you can't just disappear into that lab forever. It's been two years.”

“I'm not disappearing.”

“Then prove it. Come to dinner this weekend. Bring a friend. Hell, bring a date if you can remember how those work.”

River almost laughed. If only she knew about the love letter from a complete stranger who somehow knew his life better than he did. “I'm not ready for dating.”

“You're never going to be ready if you keep living like you're the only person left on earth.” Sarah sighed. “Dad wouldn't want this for you, River. He'd want you to be happy.”

There it was. The Dad card. The one thing guaranteed to make River's chest tighten up like he was trapped under thirty feet of water. “Don't.”

“Don't what? Tell you the truth?” Sarah's voice got firmer. “You think honoring his memory means punishing yourself for surviving? Because that's not grief, River. That's guilt, and it's eating you alive.”

River wanted to tell her about the letter, about impossible intimacy from someone who seemed to understand his isolation better than his own sister. But Sarah would want to analyze it, apply psychological training to something defying rational explanation.

“I'm not disappearing,” he said. “I'm just working through some things.”

“For two years? River, healthy grief has a timeline. What you're doing isn't healing, it's hiding.”

After Sarah hung up, River sat while the beacon continued its rotation, casting moving shadows across the letter's pages.

His sister wasn't wrong about isolation or avoiding emotional connection.

But she didn't understand that some wounds were too deep for conventional healing, that some guilt required ongoing penance.

The letter suggested someone else understood. Someone who knew about storm nightmares and dangerous diving and conversations with marine samples. Someone who saw isolation not as pathology but as protection.

River touched the watch face, feeling slight roughness where corrosion had begun pitting the crystal. The letter's writer understood that some destruction was worth accepting, that some connections were worth maintaining even when they caused ongoing damage.

He folded the letter carefully and returned it to the drawer, but words continued echoing as he prepared for bed. Someone named Finn claimed to love him, understand him, know details that should have been impossible to obtain.

Tomorrow, he would start looking for answers. Tonight, he would dream about voices that felt familiar despite being completely unknown.

River's research into the name “Finn” began before his morning coffee finished brewing.

Local directories revealed one result: “Between the Lines,” an antiquarian bookshop in the historic waterfront district.

Limited hours, no website—a business catering to serious collectors rather than casual browsers.

The coincidence felt too neat. A love letter from someone named Finn, and exactly one person by that name locally. River's scientific training made him suspicious of convenient explanations, but curiosity overrode skepticism.

The drive took him through neighborhoods he rarely visited, past Victorian houses converted to galleries and cafes. The historic district retained working fishing village charm—weathered docks and functional boats rather than decorative ones.

“Between the Lines” occupied a narrow three-story building between a pottery studio and wine bar, deep green facade with gold lettering suggesting old-world craftsmanship. The window displayed rare books and antique maps, arranged with careful attention by someone who understood their value.

River parked across the street and studied the building while debating his approach. He could walk in and ask about the letter, but that felt too direct, too potentially embarrassing if this was mistaken identity. Better to observe first, gather information before committing.

Through the window, he could see someone moving among tall bookshelves—a man with auburn hair catching afternoon light as he arranged volumes with careful, reverent movements.

Something about his posture suggested deep familiarity with the space, comfortable navigation of someone who knew exactly where everything belonged.

River found himself studying the man's profile, noting vintage clothing that looked authentically worn rather than costume-like.

Cardigan over oxford shirt, functional suspenders.

Clothing suggesting someone living slightly outside contemporary fashion, choosing pieces for quality and comfort rather than trends.

The man looked up from his work and their eyes met through the window. River felt an unexpected jolt of recognition, as if seeing someone familiar despite being certain they'd never met. The sensation was disorienting, intimate in a way that made him feel caught in impropriety.

Instead of entering the shop, River turned and walked back to his truck, heart racing with disproportionate adrenaline.

The man in the bookshop was attractive, certainly, but River's reaction felt deeper than aesthetic appreciation.

It felt like recognition, reunion, coming home to a place he'd never been.

The rational explanation was obvious: power of suggestion.

He'd been thinking about someone named Finn for twenty-four hours, built up expectations and emotional investment around the mysterious letter writer.

Seeing an attractive man in the right location had triggered false familiarity—a well-documented psychological phenomenon.

But as River drove toward the lighthouse cottage, the image lingered with disturbing persistence. Auburn hair catching light like burnished copper. Hands moving with the

same careful reverence he brought to marine specimens. Eyes that had seemed to hold matching recognition.

The letter waited in his desk drawer, its impossible intimacy now connected to a face and place. River knew he would return to the bookshop, knew he would eventually work up courage to walk through that door and ask the questions building since he'd first read those elegant words.

But tonight, he would content himself knowing Finn Torres was real, that the bookshop existed, that the mystery had tangible anchor in the physical world. Tomorrow, he would begin understanding how a stranger could know him better than he knew himself.

The lighthouse beam swept through his windows in endless rhythm. River fell asleep with the letter's words echoing in his mind and auburn hair catching afternoon light burned behind his closed eyes.

In his dreams, a voice he'd never heard spoke words he somehow recognized, and for the first time in two years, the storm nightmares stayed away.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Between the Lines

Finn

Nine o'clock on the dot, same as always. Finn unlocked the door to “Between the Lines” and breathed in that smell he'd never get tired of—old books and lemon oil and the kind of quiet that only came with a thousand stories just waiting for someone to crack them open.

God, he loved this place. Three years of opening this door every morning, and it still felt like coming home.

He wandered through the narrow aisles, nudging a maritime history back into line, fixing a poetry collection that some browser had left crooked.

Everything had its spot, and after three years, Finn knew exactly where that was without even thinking about it.

The morning light was hitting the Melville first-editions in the window just right, making the leather bindings glow like old friends waving hello.

He was reaching for a book that had shifted out of place when he spotted the guy across the street.

Tall, broad-shouldered, just standing there on the sidewalk like he was trying to work up the nerve to do something.

Dark hair catching the light, hands stuffed deep in his jacket pockets.

Something about the way he held himself screamed careful—like someone who worked with dangerous stuff and had learned the hard way not to make sudden moves.

Finn found himself staring through the window, watching this stranger who was obviously wrestling with some kind of internal debate. The guy wasn't just killing time or window shopping. He was looking at the bookshop like it had answers to questions he couldn't figure out how to ask.

Then their eyes met.

Holy shit.

Everything just... stopped. Finn got hit with this wave of recognition so intense it felt like getting punched in the chest. He knew this guy. Knew those green eyes, knew exactly how they'd look when they smiled, knew how those hands would feel—strong but gentle.

Except that was completely impossible. Finn had never seen this man before in his life.

The stranger looked just as shocked, going through the same confusion, the same weird sense of finding something he hadn't even known he was looking for. They stared at each other through thirty feet of street and glass, both looking like they'd been struck by lightning.

Then the guy just turned and walked away. Fast. Like he was running from something.

“Wait,” Finn said to the empty shop, pressing his hand against the window glass.

He watched the man disappear around the corner and felt this panic that made absolutely no sense.

His heart was going crazy, his hands were shaking, and there was this awful hollow feeling in his chest like something important had just been ripped away.

This wasn't normal attraction. This felt like loss. Like grief. Like watching someone you loved walk away forever.

What the hell was that about?

Finn tried to shake it off and get back to normal stuff. Books to shelve, orders to deal with, Mrs. Chen coming by later to pick up that atlas he'd finished restoring. Regular work that usually kept his brain occupied.

Every few minutes he'd catch himself looking toward the window, hoping to see the guy come back. Hoping for another shot at whatever that moment had been.

By lunch, he'd managed to convince himself it was just one of those weird things that happen sometimes—seeing someone who reminds you of a dream or some half-forgotten face from when you were a kid. Nothing more mysterious than random brain weirdness.

He headed upstairs to his workshop with the maritime journal Mrs. Chen had dropped off yesterday.

Beat-up old thing from 1847, leather cracked and faded, some pages coming loose.

But the text was full of firsthand whaling stories that would be absolute gold to

historians once he got it fixed up properly.

The workshop was his favorite part of the whole building—microscopes and tools arranged exactly how he liked them, everything in its place. This was where he did his real work, bringing back books that other people thought were too far gone to save. He was damn good at it too.

Finn sat down at his main workstation and cracked open the journal to see what he was dealing with. Standard stuff, really. The spine needed rebuilding, some pages had torn free, everything would need cleaning before he could start the actual repairs. Maybe two weeks of careful work.

But then he looked closer and his stomach dropped.

The binding was showing signs of recent work. Not amateur attempts, but skilled restoration using the exact same techniques he would use. Someone had already started the cleaning process, and they clearly knew what they were doing with salt-damaged paper.

Finn grabbed his work log—the detailed notes he kept on every single project. According to what he'd written down, he'd only gotten this journal yesterday. Hadn't started any work on it yet.

So why the hell did it look like someone had been working on it for days?

He flipped to a section he remembered being completely illegible from water damage. The text was perfectly restored now, the faded ink somehow revitalized through chemical treatment he definitely hadn't done. The work was flawless. Exactly as good as he could have done it himself.

Actually, it was exactly how he would have done it. Same techniques, same

materials, same attention to detail.

With his hands starting to shake, Finn checked other projects around the workshop.

A ship's log that should have been untouched looked like it had been through advanced cleaning.

Maritime charts had been flattened and treated for mold damage he'd been planning to deal with but hadn't gotten to yet.

Even his tools looked like they'd been used recently, despite him clearly remembering cleaning everything before he left yesterday.

Then he found the notes.

Detailed instructions in his own handwriting, describing restoration work with an urgency that was completely unlike his usual calm approach to documentation.

Used the Venetian method for ink revitalization. More effective than expected. Need to remember this—running out of time to finish everything.

Finn stared at the note. His handwriting, no question about it. But he'd never heard of the Venetian method, and what did “running out of time” even mean? He never rushed his restoration work. Ever.

The cold dread started creeping up his spine as another memory surfaced—finding his mother in their old kitchen at three in the morning, humming while she organized spice jars with military precision.

She'd looked up at him with bright, focused eyes and said, “Almost finished with the inventory, mijo. Just need to get everything catalogued before—” Then she'd stopped,

confusion flooding her face like someone had flipped a switch. “What am I doing down here?”

That was how it had started with Mom. Projects she couldn't remember beginning, work completed with skills that seemed to come from nowhere, that strange urgency about finishing things she couldn't explain.

Near the end, she'd spend entire afternoons reorganizing photo albums with meticulous care, only to stare at them later like she'd never seen them before.

Mom used to do things she couldn't remember too, especially near the end.

The journal sat open in front of him, its pages perfect with work he couldn't remember doing.

The pattern was so familiar it made his chest tight with recognition and terror.

This was exactly how it had looked when he'd find his mother's projects—completed with skill and attention to detail that proved she'd been present and focused, even though she had no memory of the work itself.

Oh God. Was this how it had started with his mother? Small gaps that got bigger and bigger until there was nothing left but confusion?

Finn closed the journal with shaking hands and walked to the window overlooking the street.

The workshop felt wrong now, filled with evidence of a version of himself he couldn't remember being.

The restoration work mocked him with its excellence, proving that whoever he

became during these lost periods was just as skilled, just as dedicated to his craft.

But when had it happened? How many hours had he lost? And why couldn't he remember any of it?

Dr. Martinez had been taking care of the Torres family forever, had walked them through his mom's whole nightmare with this mix of medical knowledge and honest kindness that Finn appreciated even when the news was shit.

Her office was on the second floor of this old Victorian house, and the waiting room still had that antiseptic smell of people looking for answers to problems they couldn't explain.

“What's going on, Finn?” Dr. Martinez settled into her chair with that patient way of hers that had gotten them through the worst parts of his mother's illness.

Finn tried to figure out how to explain without sounding completely insane. “I'm losing time. Hours where I can't remember what I did, but there's proof I was working, doing stuff normally.”

“Can you give me some examples?”

“I found work completed in my shop that I have no memory of doing. Complex restoration that should take days, using techniques I don't remember learning.” His voice got tighter. “It's not like forgetting where I put my keys. It's like someone else is living parts of my life.”

Dr. Martinez scribbled notes while he talked, keeping that professional neutral face. “How long has this been happening?”

“I don't know...” Finn hesitated, then just went for it. “I'm scared I'm getting

whatever killed my mom.”

“Finn, your mother had early-onset dementia, which usually doesn't show up until much later in life. You're twenty-six. What you're describing sounds more like dissociative episodes from stress and grief.”

“Dissociative what now?”

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

“Your mind disconnects from what's happening as a way to cope with overwhelming stress.

It's actually pretty common after losing someone important.” Dr. Martinez leaned forward, voice gentle but firm.

“You've been through hell with your mother's death. Grief shows up in all kinds of ways, including memory problems.”

Finn wanted to believe her, wanted to think this was just his brain being weird about grief instead of something that would slowly eat him alive. But what he'd found in his workshop felt like more than stress-related amnesia.

“The work I found is too complicated for someone having some kind of mental episode. It takes concentration, skill. Someone spacing out couldn't do complex book restoration.”

“Actually, lots of people function pretty well during dissociative periods, especially doing familiar stuff.” Dr. Martinez put down her pen and really looked at him. “I want to get you set up with a grief counselor and maybe something for sleep and anxiety. Bad sleep makes memory stuff worse.”

“What about brain scans? Neurological testing?”

“Based on what you're telling me, I don't think we need that right now. Let's try the psychological approach first.”

Finn left feeling more frustrated than relieved. Dr. Martinez's explanations made sense and felt completely wrong for what he'd discovered. She was treating him like some grieving kid with normal symptoms, not someone experiencing actual brain weirdness.

The walk back to the shop took him through the harbor district, past beat-up docks and working boats. He went slow, needing time to process how isolated he felt from any kind of medical understanding.

At the harbor overlook, he stopped and stared out at the lighthouse, white tower stark against the afternoon sky. Something about the view hit him with this powerful longing, like he should be somewhere else, with someone else, sharing this moment.

The feeling was specific, not just general loneliness. He was missing a particular person he couldn't name but somehow missed desperately. Not just wanting company, but wanting someone who would take his fears seriously without writing them off as psychological bullshit.

Finn found himself imagining conversations with someone who would listen to his concerns about lost time without immediately deciding it was grief-related. Someone who would look at the evidence in his workshop with the same careful attention they'd give any other mystery.

The fantasy felt so real he could almost hear another voice asking intelligent questions, almost feel someone standing next to him offering the kind of support that made scary truths bearable.

But when he turned around, the overlook was empty except for seagulls and waves hitting rocks. The loneliness that followed felt way out of proportion to just being alone, like he'd been abandoned by someone important instead of just reminded that he was by himself.

That night, Finn sat in his apartment above the shop, surrounded by all the books and vintage furniture he'd carefully picked out over the years.

Stuff that usually made him feel comfortable and at home.

But tonight, the familiar rooms felt wrong somehow, like they'd been designed for two people instead of one.

The reading chair by the window looked lonely without a companion. The kitchen table seemed way too big for just him. Hell, even his bed felt too wide, too empty, like his body remembered sharing the space with someone else.

While looking for a pen in his desk drawer, he found a small leather journal he didn't remember buying. The pages looked well-used, filled with his handwriting describing stuff that felt totally foreign even though he'd obviously written it.

Weirdest dreams last night. Not the usual anxiety bullshit about forgetting things or losing time, but peaceful ones.

I was underwater but could breathe just fine, following someone with green eyes who showed me things I've never seen before.

Tide pools full of crazy sea life, underwater forests swaying like meadows.

The dreams feel more real than being awake sometimes. In them, I know stuff about ocean ecosystems I've never studied. I can identify marine animals by how they behave, understand relationships between species I've never heard of. Knowledge that comes from nowhere.

When I wake up, I miss him. Miss someone I've never met, from dreams I can barely remember. The feeling sticks to me all day—real enough to taste but impossible to

hold onto.

Finn read entry after entry describing dreams and feelings that were completely foreign but somehow familiar at the same time. The journal was like a record of some relationship with a person who lived in his subconscious but was totally absent from his actual memory.

But the emotions in those words felt absolutely real. The love described hit him right in the chest like something fundamental and true. Even without being able to remember what had caused those feelings, his body recognized them.

He closed the journal with shaking hands, overwhelmed by more evidence of a version of himself existing outside his conscious awareness. The entries described deep connection with someone he'd never met, detailed knowledge he'd never learned, feelings too specific to write off as fantasy.

Outside his window, the lighthouse kept its eternal rhythm—thirty seconds of light, thirty seconds of darkness.

Finn fell asleep in his chair with the journal in his lap, his last thought wondering if the green-eyed guy from his dreams might be real, might be out there somewhere looking for him just as desperately as he was looking for answers he couldn't name.

When morning came, he'd wake up with no memory of reading the journal, no conscious knowledge of why his chest felt hollow from missing something important. But somewhere in the spaces between memory and dreams, the truth would stay.

Love existed whether or not he could remember where it came from. And somewhere among the research stations and tide pools around Beacon Point, someone was following the same inexplicable pull toward answers that made no rational sense.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Crossing Currents

River

Three days of shitty sleep and zero concentration finally broke River's resolve.

The letter kept burning a hole in his desk drawer, impossible to ignore and getting more painful by the hour.

Every logical argument he'd made for staying away from the bookshop crumbled against one simple truth: he needed to see that guy again.

The letter sat in his jacket pocket, folded carefully in a waterproof sleeve. Returning it was the smart thing to do. The responsible thing. The thing that would close this weird chapter and let him get back to his predictable routine of research and solitude.

But as River crossed the street, smart felt completely inadequate for whatever the hell he was walking into.

The brass bell above the door chimed like wind chimes when he pushed inside, and suddenly he was surrounded by the smell of old books and lemon oil.

Afternoon light streamed through tall windows, making dust motes dance between towering shelves.

The place was bigger inside than it looked from the street, stretching back into shadows filled with maritime histories and ancient maps.

Everything screamed careful attention and expert knowledge. Books weren't just alphabetical—they were organized by historical period and subject. The lighting was perfect for preservation. Even the temperature felt controlled.

“Can I help you find something?”

The voice came from behind a shelf of exploration narratives, and River turned to see the auburn-haired guy emerging with arms full of leather-bound books.

Up close, the impact hit even harder than through the window.

Warm brown eyes with gold flecks. Freckles scattered across his nose like constellations.

Ink stains on his fingers that said he still believed in actual handwriting.

But it was the way he moved that really got to River. Gentle, like each book was something alive that deserved respect. Careful attention, like River's words actually mattered. None of the impatience or fake politeness River had learned to expect from most people.

“Actually, yeah.” River pulled out the letter, its weight feeling both heavier and lighter than it should. “I found this a few days ago, and I think it might be yours. Or at least from your shop.”

Finn set down his books and took the letter, curiosity shifting to genuine confusion as he examined it. River watched for any sign of recognition, but Finn's bewilderment looked completely real.

“This is my handwriting,” Finn said slowly, turning the envelope over. “But I don't remember writing it. And I definitely don't know how it ended up wherever you

found it.”

“Crescent Beach. In a bottle.”

Finn's eyes widened, and he opened the envelope with the delicate care he'd use on something centuries old. River held his breath, watching Finn read his own words.

But Finn's confusion only got worse as he read, his forehead creasing in a way that looked genuinely distressed.

“This has details about your life I shouldn't know. Personal stuff. Work stuff.” He looked up, meeting River's eyes with vulnerability that made River's chest tight.

“I'm sorry, but I have no idea how I could have written this.”

“Neither do I. That's why I wanted to bring it back. Thought maybe you'd have answers.”

“What's your name?” Finn asked suddenly.

“River Hayes.”

Something flickered across Finn's face at the name—not recognition exactly, but something deeper. Something that made his breath catch and his grip on the letter tighten.

“River,” he repeated softly, and the way he said it made River's name sound like something he'd been waiting his whole life to say.

They stood there in the narrow aisle surrounded by centuries of stories, two strangers who felt like old friends, holding a letter that shouldn't exist. River felt the pull

toward Finn getting stronger—not just attraction, but something that felt like gravity, like coming home.

“You said you found this at a research station?” Finn asked, voice carefully controlled but his eyes still holding that impossible familiarity.

“I’m a marine biologist. I study coastal restoration at Beacon Point.” River gestured toward the harbor visible through the front windows. “Tide pool recovery, mainly.”

Finn’s face lit up with genuine interest, and some of the tension in River’s chest eased. Safer ground.

“Tide pool ecology,” Finn said thoughtfully. “Organisms adapting to cycles of exposure and submersion, right?”

River blinked. “You know marine ecology?”

“I read a lot.” Finn’s smile was embarrassed, like he was apologizing for knowledge outside his wheelhouse. “And I find the parallels interesting. Marine organisms adapting to tidal cycles, books surviving damage over time. Different mediums, similar principles.”

The parallel was elegant and unexpected. River found himself looking at Finn with new appreciation, seeing past the vintage clothes and gentle manner to sharp intelligence underneath.

“That’s actually beautiful,” River said, meaning it. “Most people think marine biology is just cataloguing fish.”

“Most people think book restoration is just gluing pages together.” Finn’s smile became more genuine. “But really, it’s about understanding how materials respond to

stress over time. How careful intervention can strengthen rather than weaken the original.”

River nodded enthusiastically, recognizing the passion that drove Finn's work because it matched his own.

“Environmental restoration follows the same principles.

You can't just remove damage and expect everything to return to its original state. You have to work with what remains, support natural recovery.”

“Exactly.” Finn's eyes lit up with enthusiasm. “People want restoration to be about returning to some perfect original state, but that's not how healing works. Healing incorporates the damage, makes it part of the story.”

They were leaning closer as they talked, drawn together by shared understanding and genuine excitement. River realized he was having the kind of conversation he'd been craving for years without knowing it.

“Want to see some books that might interest you?” Finn asked suddenly, tone casual but his eyes holding an invitation that felt like much more. “I have maritime preservation texts that might be relevant to your work.”

River should have politely declined. He'd returned the letter, confirmed Finn was as confused as he was. Mission accomplished. Time to leave before this got more complicated.

But Finn was already moving toward a wall of environmental texts, enthusiasm infectious and knowledge compelling. River found himself following without deciding to, drawn by the promise of more conversation and the simple pleasure of Finn's company.

The maritime section contained books River had never seen outside specialized libraries. First-edition conservation manuals, historical restoration studies, ecosystem research that predated his training but demonstrated insights still relevant decades later.

“This might interest you,” Finn said, pulling a volume from a high shelf with the casual reach of someone who knew exactly where everything belonged. “1920s study of tide pool recovery after oil contamination. Methodology's outdated, but the observational data is remarkable.”

River accepted the book and opened it carefully, immediately recognizing its value. The author had documented recovery patterns that paralleled his own research, but with eight decades of hindsight.

“This is incredible,” River said, genuinely impressed. “How did you know this would be relevant?”

“Lucky guess.” Finn's smile was modest, but something in his eyes suggested the choice had been more deliberate. “Plus, your field notebook is sticking out of your jacket, and I can see the section headers.”

River glanced down. Finn was right—his research notes were visible, organized in his usual methodical format. But Finn's ability to interpret their significance suggested knowledge beyond casual reading.

“Are you sure you're just a book restorer?” River asked, half-joking but genuinely curious.

“I'm sure.” Finn laughed, but it carried an edge of uncertainty River didn't understand. “Sometimes I surprise myself with what I know, though. Like the information just appears when I need it.”

Something wistful in Finn's tone suggested the gaps in his knowledge troubled him, but before River could ask, Finn was already moving toward another section.

“If you're interested in restoration techniques, you should see the workshop upstairs,” Finn said, invitation carrying that same casual tone that felt like much more. “I could show you some methods for treating salt-water damage. Might be useful for your field equipment.”

River had already spent longer here than planned, and his truck was in a two-hour zone. But Finn's offer sparked genuine curiosity, and the prospect of more time in his company felt more appealing than returning to solitude.

“I'd like that,” River said, surprising himself with how much he meant it.

The workshop felt like stepping into a craftsman's sanctuary, where time moved differently and every tool had been chosen with reverence. Afternoon light streamed through tall windows, illuminating work surfaces covered with restoration projects.

River moved through the space fascinated, watching mastery in an unfamiliar discipline.

Microscopes and specialized tools occupied every surface, arranged with the same methodical care he brought to his own equipment.

The air smelled of preservation chemicals and aged paper, but underneath lay something warmer—the scent of someone who spent days surrounded by stories.

“This is where the real work happens,” Finn said, settling at his main workstation with comfortable familiarity. “Everything downstairs is presentation. Up here, it's about saving things that would otherwise be lost.”

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

River watched Finn demonstrate the delicate process of separating water-damaged pages, hands moving with steady confidence despite the complexity. Each movement was deliberate, informed by years of experience.

“The key is patience,” Finn explained, voice taking on the tone of someone who genuinely enjoyed teaching. “Rush it, and you cause more damage. But take time to understand what you're working with, and amazing recoveries are possible.”

River found himself leaning closer, drawn by the parallels to his own work and the simple pleasure of watching Finn's competent hands bring order to chaos. Their shoulders brushed as River moved for a better view, and the brief contact sent an unexpected jolt through his nervous system.

“Want to try?” Finn asked, gesturing toward a practice volume showing similar damage. “The technique transfers to other materials. Might be useful for field notebooks that get soaked during storms.”

River accepted more eagerly than expected, genuinely curious but increasingly distracted by Finn's proximity. As Finn guided his hands through the technique, professional interest became secondary to the intimacy of shared work.

Finn stood close enough that River could feel his body heat, catch the subtle scent of lemon oil and old paper on his clothes.

When Finn's hands covered his to demonstrate proper pressure, River's concentration shattered.

All his attention focused on the warmth of Finn's skin, the careful way their fingers moved together.

“Like that,” Finn said softly, voice close to River's ear. “Feel how the page wants to move, then help it find its way.”

River nodded, not trusting his voice, focusing on the task with intensity that had nothing to do with book restoration and everything to do with the man whose presence seemed to fill empty spaces in his chest he hadn't known existed.

Time passed unnoticed as they worked in comfortable silence, their occasional contact—brushing hands, leaning close, the quiet intimacy of shared focus—charging the air between them with possibilities River hadn't allowed himself to consider in years.

“You're a natural,” Finn said as River successfully separated a stubborn page cluster. “Most people try to force it, but you're letting the materials guide you.”

“Good teacher,” River replied, but the compliment felt inadequate for what was happening between them, the way Finn's patient instruction was making him feel seen and understood in ways that extended far beyond professional appreciation.

The light shifted as afternoon moved toward evening, reminding River that the outside world still existed despite his growing absorption in Finn's company. He should leave. Should return to his research station and the familiar rhythms of solitary work.

But leaving felt like tearing away from something essential.

“This has been incredible,” River said reluctantly, setting down the tools with hands that wanted to keep working, keep finding excuses to stay close to Finn's warmth. “I

had no idea book restoration was so sophisticated.”

“Most people don't.” Finn's smile was pleased but tinged with something that looked like disappointment at River's departure. “It's specialized, and we don't get many visitors who understand the complexity.”

River hesitated at the stairs, torn between the rational need to leave and the inexplicable desire to stay. Finn seemed to be experiencing the same debate, expression hopeful but carefully controlled.

“Would you like some coffee?” Finn asked suddenly, the domestic gesture feeling surprisingly natural. “My apartment's upstairs, and I've got a decent espresso machine. We could keep talking about restoration techniques, or whatever comes up.”

“I'd like that,” River said, meaning it more than he'd meant anything in a long time.

Finn's apartment occupied the third floor, accessed by narrow stairs that felt like climbing toward a secret world.

The space was small but perfectly arranged, every piece chosen for both function and beauty.

Vintage furniture that suggested careful curation.

Books everywhere, organized with the same attention that characterized the shop below.

River moved through appreciating Finn's taste and the obvious care he'd taken creating a home that reflected his personality.

Reading chairs positioned for optimal light.

A compact kitchen that managed to be both functional and charming.

Windows offering views of both harbor and lighthouse that had become such a significant part of River's routine.

“Nice place,” River said, meaning it. The apartment felt warm in a way that had nothing to do with temperature and everything to do with the careful attention Finn had paid to making it feel like home.

“Thanks. Took a while to get it right.” Finn busied himself with the espresso machine, movements efficient but relaxed. “I wanted it to feel like an extension of the shop, but more personal. A place where books and life could coexist.”

River settled into one of the reading chairs, finding it perfectly comfortable, positioned to offer views of both harbor and room interior. From here, he could watch Finn prepare coffee while observing how the apartment balanced professional and personal elements.

“You live alone?” River asked, then immediately regretted the personal question. “Sorry, none of my business.”

“It's fine. And yes, alone.” Finn glanced over, expression slightly wistful. “Have for a couple years. Since my mother died, actually.”

River felt his chest tighten with recognition and sympathy. “I'm sorry. That's rough.”

“Thanks. It was... complicated.” Finn's voice carried weight suggesting complexities beyond normal grief, but he didn't elaborate as he finished their coffee. “What about you? Family in the area?”

“Sister in Boston. Parents both gone.” River accepted the espresso cup, noting the

care Finn had taken with presentation, warming the cups despite the casual nature of their gathering. “My dad died a couple years ago. Coast Guard accident during a storm rescue.”

Finn's expression shifted to immediate understanding, recognition that only came from personal experience with devastating loss. “That explains your connection to the ocean. Professional and personal.”

“Something like that.” River found himself speaking more openly than usual, encouraged by Finn's empathy and the comfortable atmosphere.

“I grew up around Coast Guard families, learned to dive before I could swim properly. But after Dad died, the water became something different. Less recreation, more... purpose.”

“Purpose can be healing,” Finn said thoughtfully, settling across from River with his own coffee. “After Mom died, I threw myself into restoration work. There's something therapeutic about fixing things that seem irreparably damaged, proving careful attention can bring them back to life.”

River nodded, recognizing the parallel between Finn's approach to grief and his own. They'd both chosen professions involving healing and preservation, both found comfort in work requiring patience and faith that broken things could be made whole.

As evening deepened outside, their conversation flowed from professional topics to more personal territory.

River shared his concerns about the isolation of his work, how marine research could become consuming to the point of excluding normal social connections.

Finn opened up about the challenges of running a specialized bookshop in a tourist

town, the difficulty of finding customers who appreciated true historical preservation.

Neither mentioned the letter that brought them together, but its presence lingered in subtext. The impossible intimacy of its contents, the way it demonstrated knowledge neither could explain, the questions it raised about memory and connection.

River realized he was reluctant to leave, reluctant to end their time together and return to the lighthouse cottage that would feel even more solitary after the warmth of Finn's company. The conversation had revealed depths in both that deserved further exploration.

"I should probably head back," River said reluctantly, though he made no move to stand. "Early dive tomorrow, need to check my equipment."

"Of course." Finn's tone was understanding but tinged with the same reluctance River felt. "This has been really nice, though. I don't often get to talk with someone who understands the passion behind preservation work."

"Same here. Most people think marine biology is just swimming around looking at fish."

They both laughed, shared understanding creating another moment of connection that made River's departure feel like loss. As he finally stood, River found himself hoping for an excuse to return.

"Would it be okay if I stopped by again sometime?" River asked, the question carrying more weight than it should. "I'd like to see more of your techniques, maybe share some research findings if you're interested."

"I'd like that very much." Finn's smile was genuine and warm, free of careful politeness. "And River? Thanks for returning the letter. Even if we couldn't figure out

how I wrote it, I'm glad it brought you here.”

River left with Finn's words echoing in his mind and the promise of future visits warming his chest despite the cool evening air.

The letter remained a mystery, its impossible contents unexplained.

But whatever strange circumstances had brought them together, River found himself grateful for the connection they'd discovered.

Walking back through Beacon Point's quiet streets, River realized that for the first time in two years, he was looking forward to something beyond his research.

Looking forward to conversations with someone who understood his work and passion.

Looking forward to time with a man whose gentle intelligence had made the afternoon feel like a gift.

The lighthouse beam swept across the harbor as River drove home, steady and reliable as always. But tonight, its illumination felt less like solitude and more like guidance, pointing toward possibilities he'd forgotten existed and connections he hadn't dared hope for.

In his pocket, the mystery letter remained unanswered. But in his chest, something that had been closed for too long was beginning to open, allowing in light that made the dangerous prospect of caring about someone feel worth the risk.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Deepening Currents

River

The lighthouse cottage felt different in the pre-dawn darkness, charged with possibilities that hadn't existed before yesterday's unexpected afternoon at Finn's place.

River's mind was already wide awake, replaying every moment they'd spent together with the obsessive attention he usually saved for research data.

The memory of Finn's hands guiding his through book restoration made his chest ache in the best possible way.

The way Finn had stood close enough for River to catch his scent—lemon oil and old paper and something warmer, more personal.

How Finn had actually listened when River talked about his work, like it mattered to someone outside the academic bubble.

River dragged himself out of bed and stumbled toward the kitchen, muscle memory handling the coffee routine while his brain stayed fixed on auburn hair catching afternoon light and brown eyes that seemed to hold depths worth exploring.

The percolator gurgled to life, echoing through the cottage's small rooms like a heartbeat.

On the kitchen table, that weird letter sat exactly where he'd left it. River spread it out next to his coffee and read it again, now able to match the elegant handwriting to the man who'd sworn he couldn't remember writing it. Finn's confusion had seemed completely real, not performed.

But the details were still impossible to explain.

River tried applying his scientific training to the mystery, approaching it like any research problem.

When could Finn have watched his routines closely enough to write such specific descriptions?

The harbor overlook had clear views of Crescent Beach—someone with binoculars could track his diving patterns.

Public records had info about his research grants.

Local papers had covered his dad's death.

But the emotional stuff in the letter went way beyond simple observation.

The way it captured his internal voice, his thought patterns, the specific guilt that made him take stupid risks during storms. That kind of understanding required either a really deep personal relationship or something beyond normal human perception.

River folded the letter and shoved it back in the desk drawer, but its presence kept nagging at him. Whatever weird circumstances had created it, the mystery had led him to Finn, and that connection felt way more important than any rational explanation.

The research station at Crescent Beach welcomed River with its familiar chaos of equipment and marine samples, but his usual absorption in the work felt disrupted by thoughts that kept drifting toward a certain bookshop owner.

River unpacked his gear on autopilot while his mind replayed Finn's smile, the way his eyes had lit up when discussing restoration techniques.

Data collection demanded his complete attention—water temperature, pH measurements, photos of marine life recovery in designated grid sections.

But River found himself working faster than usual, driven by restless energy that had replaced his normal methodical pace.

The tide pools seemed more vibrant today, their colors more intense.

Everything felt heightened, like his growing connection with Finn had somehow sharpened his perception of beauty everywhere.

“Someone's in a good mood today,” Jake's voice cut through his distracted observations, and River looked up to find his friend approaching with a knowing grin.

“Just a good day for field work,” River replied, attempting casual dismissal while privately acknowledging Jake was right. He did feel lighter today, more engaged, less weighed down by the grief that had become his constant companion.

Jake settled beside the research station and started organizing tools. “Right. And I'm sure it has nothing to do with whatever put that particular expression on your face.”

“What expression?”

“The one that says you've been thinking about someone instead of marine biology for

the first time in two years.” Jake's grin widened as River's innocent confusion failed completely. “Come on, man. You're practically glowing. Either you discovered a new species or you met someone interesting.”

River focused intently on his underwater camera settings, buying time. Jake had been pushing him toward social connection for months, encouraging him to emerge from the isolation that followed his dad's death. But discussing Finn felt too new and fragile to survive Jake's well-meaning analysis.

“Met the owner of that bookshop in the historic district,” River said finally, aiming for casual. “Interesting guy. Knows about preservation techniques that might be relevant to equipment maintenance.”

“Bookshop owner.” Jake's tone suggested he wasn't buying the professional framing.

River kept his focus on equipment, but he could feel Jake's attention sharpening. “Finn Torres. Specializes in maritime history and rare book restoration.”

“And you're interested in him because of his restoration techniques.”

River finally looked up, meeting Jake's knowing expression with resignation. His friend had always been able to read him too easily.

“Mostly,” River admitted. “But he's also smart, passionate about his work, easy to talk with. We had coffee yesterday afternoon, and it was... really nice.”

“Nice enough that you're thinking about him instead of focusing on your research?”

“I'm focusing fine.”

“You just tried to measure water temperature with your dive light.”

River looked down and realized Jake was right. He'd been so absorbed in thoughts of Finn that his equipment handling had gone completely automatic. The kind of distraction that could be dangerous during actual diving.

“Okay, maybe I'm a little distracted,” River conceded. “But it's not necessarily bad. When's the last time you saw me excited about anything outside this research station?”

Jake's expression shifted from teasing to genuine concern mixed with hope. “It's been way too long. I was starting to worry you'd forgotten how to connect with people who aren't marine invertebrates.”

“I haven't forgotten. Just haven't found anyone worth the effort.” River returned to his equipment checks, movements more deliberate now. “Finn's different. He gets the importance of preservation work, the patience it requires. And he listens like my research actually matters.”

“When are you seeing him again?”

The question hung between them, and River realized he'd been avoiding thinking about it directly.

Yesterday had ended with mutual interest in continuing their acquaintance, but no specific plans.

River found himself wanting to return to “Between the Lines” but struggling to identify a legitimate reason that wouldn't seem too eager.

“Soon, probably,” River said, then made a decision that surprised him with its spontaneity. “Actually, I'm thinking about inviting him here. Showing him the tide pools during optimal viewing conditions. He seemed genuinely interested in the

ecosystem recovery project.”

Jake's smile was knowing but approving. “That's a great idea. Share your passion with someone who might actually appreciate it.”

River felt a flutter of anticipation at the thought of bringing Finn to his research station, of sharing the underwater world that had become his refuge.

The prospect of watching Finn's face as he discovered the complexity of tide pool ecosystems felt more appealing than any social interaction he could remember contemplating.

The afternoon return to the bookshop felt different from River's previous visits, charged with intention rather than mystery.

He'd spent the morning rehearsing casual conversation starters, but when he pushed through the entrance, the familiar scent of aged paper and lemon oil made his carefully planned words evaporate.

Finn was helping an elderly woman locate a specific cookbook, his patient attention evident in every gesture.

River watched from behind a shelf, noting how Finn listened to her detailed description of a recipe her grandmother had used, how he asked clarifying questions without making her feel rushed, how his genuine care transformed a simple business transaction into something approaching personal connection.

“She wanted something about Depression-era cooking,” Finn explained after the customer left with obvious gratitude. “Her family is trying to recreate recipes from their great-grandmother's kitchen, but they only have memories and fragments to work with.”

“Did you find something useful?”

“A 1930s community cookbook from Maine. Not exactly what she was looking for, but close enough in time period that it should help them reverse-engineer the techniques they remember.” Finn's smile was pleased but modest, like helping people connect with their family history was just part of his job.

River found himself drawn to Finn's approach, the way he treated each person's request as worthy of serious attention regardless of commercial value. It revealed the same careful empathy Finn had shown during their restoration session, the same genuine interest in preservation and connection.

“I've been thinking about those maritime books you recommended,” River said, settling into what was becoming their familiar conversation pattern. “The methodologies are more relevant to my field work than I expected.”

“I'm glad they're useful.” Finn moved toward the section where they'd browsed yesterday, movements easy and unselfconscious. “Did the 1920s tide pool study provide good historical context?”

River nodded, impressed again by Finn's retention of details. “The recovery patterns they documented match what I'm seeing now, but with decades of perspective that help me understand which changes are normal variation and which represent genuine improvement.”

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

They fell into easy discussion about research methodology and historical perspective, their conversation flowing with natural rhythm. Finn asked insightful questions about long-term ecosystem monitoring, demonstrating understanding that went beyond casual interest.

“Would you like to see the actual research site?” River asked. “The tide pools are accessible during low tide tomorrow afternoon, and the viewing conditions should be optimal.”

Finn's face brightened with what looked like genuine enthusiasm, though River caught a flicker of something else in his expression. Not reluctance, but something deeper. Recognition, maybe. Like the invitation confirmed something he'd been expecting.

“I'd love that,” Finn said, response immediate and warm. “What time works best?”

“Around three o'clock. The pools will be fully exposed, and the afternoon light is perfect for seeing the ecosystem complexity.” River realized he was already mentally planning the visit, selecting which pools would provide the most impressive displays.

“Fair warning, though. The access path is a bit treacherous. You'll want appropriate footwear.”

“I'll be prepared.” Finn's smile held quiet confidence, like he'd navigated challenging coastal terrain before despite his apparent lack of marine biology background. “Should I meet you at the beach, or find you at the research station?”

River gave directions to Crescent Beach and explained the trail markers, but part of his mind was already focused on tomorrow's anticipation.

The prospect of sharing his underwater world with someone who might genuinely appreciate its beauty felt more significant than any casual social interaction should.

River arrived at Crescent Beach forty-five minutes early, driven by restless energy and the need to ensure optimal setup.

The tide was perfect, exposing vast rocky areas that revealed complex ecosystems normally hidden beneath ocean waters.

Afternoon sunlight angled through the clear water of exposed pools, illuminating marine life with natural spotlight intensity.

He arranged demonstration materials with the care of someone preparing for a crucial experiment, though the stakes felt more personal than professional.

Underwater cameras positioned for optimal documentation.

Field notebooks opened to relevant data pages.

Everything organized to showcase the beauty and complexity of tide pool ecosystems at their most impressive.

At exactly three o'clock, Finn appeared at the top of the cliff trail, dressed appropriately in worn jeans and sturdy boots that suggested he'd done this before.

River felt his chest tighten with anticipation as Finn descended the narrow path with careful confidence, movements suggesting familiarity with challenging coastal terrain.

“This is incredible,” Finn said as he reached beach level, gaze sweeping across the exposed tide pools with genuine wonder. “I had no idea there was this much complexity hidden beneath the surface.”

River felt a surge of pride at Finn's obvious appreciation, the same satisfaction he'd experienced when sharing restoration techniques. “Most people never see it because they visit during high tide, when everything's underwater. But low tide reveals entire cities of marine life.”

He led Finn carefully across the rocky coastline, pointing out safety considerations and conservation protocols. Finn listened with the same attentive focus he'd shown during book restoration instruction, asking questions that demonstrated genuine interest rather than polite curiosity.

“The key is moving slowly and watching where you step,” River explained as they approached his primary research grids. “Every surface that looks empty probably contains life forms that are vulnerable to disturbance.”

River guided Finn to a large tidal pool that served as perfect introduction to ecosystem complexity, its clear water revealing layers of marine life in careful ecological balance.

Sea anemones anchored to rocks like underwater flowers.

Hermit crabs negotiating territory disputes with complex behavioral protocols.

Miniature kelp forests providing shelter and food for countless smaller species.

“Look at this,” River said, crouching beside the pool and gesturing for Finn to join him at water level. “This single pool contains representatives from at least a dozen different phyla, all coexisting in relationships that have evolved over millions of

years.”

Finn settled beside River with careful attention to conservation guidelines, movements respectful of the marine environment.

Up close, River could smell the faint lemon oil scent that clung to Finn's clothing, could observe the concentrated expression that transformed his gentle features into something intense and beautiful.

“How do they manage resource competition?” Finn asked, demonstrating understanding that surprised River with its sophistication. “With limited space and food sources, there must be complex territorial and feeding relationships.”

River found himself responding with enthusiasm that exceeded his normal educational outreach, excited by Finn's insightful questions and obvious fascination.

He explained predator-prey relationships, symbiotic partnerships, the way different species had evolved to exploit distinct ecological niches within tidal pools' confined space.

“It's like book conservation,” Finn observed, drawing parallels that delighted River with their elegance.

“Different materials require different treatments, but they all need to coexist in the same archival environment. Understanding the relationships between preservation techniques is just as important as mastering individual methods.”

River looked at Finn with growing appreciation, impressed by his ability to find connections between seemingly disparate fields. The parallel was sophisticated and accurate, demonstrating interdisciplinary thinking River rarely encountered outside academic conferences.

As they moved between different pools, River found himself watching Finn's face as much as the marine life itself.

The way his eyes widened when River pointed out camouflaged species that seemed to materialize from apparently empty rock surfaces.

The careful attention he paid to behavioral demonstrations, species interactions, the complex relationships that maintained ecological balance.

“This is extraordinary,” Finn said as they observed sea stars engaged in slow-motion predation of shellfish, their hunting behavior so gradual it was almost invisible.

“The patience required for this kind of research must be incredible. Documenting behavioral patterns that unfold over hours or days rather than minutes.”

“Most people don't have the attention span for it,” River admitted. “They want immediate gratification, obvious action. But the real discoveries come from sustained observation, from learning to see patterns that only emerge over extended time periods.”

Finn nodded with understanding that felt deeper than simple intellectual appreciation. “Like restoration work. The most important changes happen slowly, through sustained attention rather than dramatic intervention. Learning to trust the process instead of forcing immediate results.”

River felt his chest warm with recognition for Finn's understanding. Here was someone who grasped not just the technical aspects of his work but its philosophical foundations, the patience and faith required to support natural healing processes.

The afternoon passed with surprising speed as they explored different sections of River's research area, conversation flowing between scientific observation and

personal reflection.

Finn asked questions that revealed genuine curiosity about marine ecology, but also shared insights about preservation that enriched River's understanding of his own work.

As the tide began turning and water levels started rising, River realized he was reluctant to end their exploration.

The shared wonder and intellectual connection had created something that felt rare and precious, mutual understanding that made him feel less alone in his passion for environmental preservation.

“Thank you for sharing this,” Finn said as they carefully made their way back across the rocky coastline toward the cliff trail. “I feel like I've been given access to a secret world that most people never see.”

“Thank you for appreciating it,” River replied, meaning it more than any polite response should warrant. “It's not often I get to share this with someone who understands why it matters.”

As they climbed back toward the parking area, River found himself hoping for future opportunities to continue their exploration of both marine ecosystems and the growing connection between them.

Finn's genuine fascination suggested possibilities for ongoing collaboration, for shared discoveries that would enrich both their understanding of preservation and their appreciation for each other's expertise.

The lighthouse beam began its evening rotation as they reached River's truck, steady rhythm reminding them of time's passage and the approaching end of their afternoon

together.

But the connection they'd forged while exploring hidden worlds felt like something that would endure beyond any single shared experience.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Parallel Tides

Finn

Finn woke up grinning at his ceiling like an idiot, which was honestly embarrassing for a grown man who owned a bookshop and paid taxes.

But there it was—pure, stupid excitement about spending the afternoon looking at tide pools with a guy he'd known for less than a week.

His body was practically vibrating with anticipation.

“Get it together, Torres,” he muttered, rolling out of bed and immediately stubbing his toe on the nightstand. “Ow, shit. Great start.”

He hobbled to his closet, and here's where things got weird again. His hands went straight for old hiking boots and jeans with grass stains—clothes that screamed “I know what I'm doing outdoors” despite the fact that Finn's idea of adventure usually involved climbing stepladders.

But somehow, these felt right. Like his body had a plan his brain wasn't in on.

The hiking boots were worn in all the right places, which was strange because Finn couldn't remember the last time he'd been hiking. Salt stains on the leather and treads worn smooth in patterns that suggested regular contact with wet rocks.

“When did I become an outdoorsy person?” he asked his reflection, which

predictably had no answers.

The journal on his nightstand was open to more pages he definitely hadn't written, filled with notes about marine ecosystems that read like someone who actually knew what they were talking about.

Kelp restoration after environmental trauma requires understanding natural recovery cycles.

You can't rush it—just like you can't rush repairing a water-damaged manuscript.

The materials want to heal themselves. Observed significant recovery in sectors C-7 through C-12 over the past three months.

The sea stars have returned in numbers that suggest ecosystem stability.

“Okay, that's actually pretty smart,” Finn said to his empty apartment. “Good job, mysterious sleep-writing Finn.”

He flipped through more pages, finding detailed sketches of marine creatures he'd apparently observed, notes about tidal patterns and water temperature variations, even weather observations that correlated with optimal diving conditions.

The handwriting was definitely his, but the knowledge it represented seemed to come from months of careful study.

The panic was still there, lurking under his ribs.

But today it felt more like anticipation than fear.

Whatever was happening to his brain, it was bringing him knowledge instead of

taking it away.

And somehow, all of it seemed connected to River—which should have been terrifying but instead felt like the best kind of mystery.

The bookshop felt like it was moving in slow motion, every customer interaction dragging when all Finn wanted to do was fast-forward to three o'clock.

Mrs. Patterson wandered in looking for her weekly romance novel, and while Finn helped her select something with pirates and proper amounts of swooning, she studied his face with the sharp attention of someone who'd known him since he was knee-high.

“You seem different today, dear,” she observed, accepting her book with obvious approval. “Positively glowing. Your mother had that same look sometimes—like she was living in two worlds at once, seeing connections the rest of us missed.”

Finn felt a flutter of something he couldn't name. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, she had such an interesting way of seeing time in stories,” Mrs. Patterson continued, her voice warm with memory.

“She'd talk about books like she'd lived through them personally. Could tell you exactly how the characters felt in ways that went beyond just good reading comprehension.” She paused, studying Finn's face.

“She used to say some people experience stories differently—more deeply, across different layers of time.”

The words hit Finn strangely, creating an echo he couldn't quite place. He'd always assumed his mother's passion for books was just that—passion. But Mrs. Patterson

was suggesting something else, something that felt important even if he couldn't grasp why.

“I never really thought about it that way,” Finn said carefully.

“Well, you're young yet. Sometimes these things develop over time.” Mrs. Patterson tucked her book into her purse with satisfaction. “She always said you had the same gift, you know. Said you'd understand someday.”

After Mrs. Patterson left, Finn found himself staring at the biography section where his mother used to spend hours, running her fingers along the spines like she was reading Braille. He'd thought it was just her love of history, but what if it had been something more?

Around noon, Professor Hendricks from the university stopped by looking for maritime histories for his research. While Finn pulled the relevant volumes, the elderly academic made casual conversation about local book collectors.

“Your mother had quite the unique perspective on historical texts,” Professor Hendricks mentioned, accepting a first-edition whaling account with reverent hands.

“She could discuss these maritime journals like she'd spoken to the captains personally.

Most remarkable historical intuition I've ever encountered.”

“Historical intuition?” Finn repeated, that same flutter of recognition stirring in his chest.

“The way she could extrapolate from fragments, understand the emotional context behind the words.

She'd point out details in ship logs that trained historians missed—subtle signs of crew tension, evidence of storms that weren't explicitly mentioned.” Professor Hendricks shook his head in admiration.

“Almost like she could see the whole story when the rest of us only had pieces.”

Finn helped him carry the books to his car, but the professor's words stuck with him long after he'd driven away. His mother's “gift” was starting to sound less like exceptional scholarship and more like something that ran parallel to his own mysterious episodes.

Crescent Beach was even more spectacular than River had described, all dramatic cliffs and hidden pools that looked like nature's secret artwork.

River was waiting by scientific equipment, and when he spotted Finn, his whole face transformed with this smile that made Finn's stomach do something that definitely wasn't scientifically explainable.

“You made it!” River called, jogging over like an excited golden retriever. “And you dressed perfectly. Most people show up in flip-flops and wonder why they can't navigate wet rocks.”

“Lucky guess,” Finn said, though his boots felt like old friends and his body seemed to know exactly how to distribute weight on uneven surfaces.

River was wearing a wetsuit unzipped to his waist, neoprene sleeves tied around his hips, and a faded t-shirt that clung to his shoulders in ways that made Finn's mouth go dry.

Salt water had dried in his hair, leaving it tousled and wild, and there was something about seeing him in his natural element that made Finn's heart do embarrassing

acrobatics.

“Okay, ground rules,” River said, professional demeanor not quite hiding his obvious excitement. “These ecosystems are incredibly fragile, so we move slowly and watch where we step. Don't touch anything unless I say it's okay. And try not to fall in—the water's about fifty degrees.”

River launched into enthusiastic explanations about tidal patterns and ecosystem complexity, and Finn found himself completely absorbed.

Not just politely interested—genuinely fascinated.

River's passion was infectious, but more than that, River himself was magnetic.

The way he gestured with his whole body when excited.

The way he crouched down to point out tiny details like they were precious gems.

“This is a whole city,” River said, indicating a large tide pool. “Look—there's drama, politics, romance, survival. It's like a soap opera, but with more tentacles and better special effects.”

Finn burst out laughing. “Did you just compare marine biology to a soap opera?”

“Hey, you haven't seen the territorial disputes between sea anemones. It gets intense.” River grinned boyishly. “Last week I watched this epic battle over prime real estate that lasted three hours. Better than any reality TV.”

As they moved between pools, River's enthusiasm never flagged. He pointed out camouflaged species hiding among rocks and kelp, explained complex feeding relationships with the excitement of someone sharing state secrets.

But Finn found himself experiencing these weird moments where he'd spot something before River pointed it out, or know which rocks were stable without testing them first. When River mentioned hermit crab shell-swapping behavior, Finn nodded and said, "Right, and they form little queues when someone finds a really good shell, like they're waiting in line at the DMV."

River stopped and stared at him. "How did you know that?"

"I... good guess?" Finn felt heat creep up his neck. "You're a really good teacher?"

"That's not something you'd guess. That's specific behavioral knowledge." But River looked more intrigued than suspicious. "Have you been secretly studying marine biology?"

"Maybe my subconscious is just really into learning?"

River studied his face with careful attention. "You keep surprising me. Most people need multiple exposures before they can distinguish between similar species, but you're picking up identification patterns like you've been doing this for years."

They were examining a particularly diverse pool when River got excited about what he swore was a juvenile octopus hiding under kelp.

Finn leaned forward for a better look, and his foot hit a slick patch of seaweed.

He pitched forward with a very undignified yelp, but instead of face-planting into salt water, he found himself caught against River's chest.

"Whoa there," River said, arms solid and warm around Finn's shoulders. "I've got you."

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

The catch had required quick reflexes and surprising strength, and suddenly Finn was very aware of the muscles in River's arms, the steady way he held him upright, the careful restraint in his grip.

Finn looked up to thank him and found their faces about two inches apart. River's eyes were this incredible green up close, like deep water with sunlight filtering through, and suddenly Finn couldn't remember how breathing worked.

“Hi,” he said stupidly.

“Hi,” River replied, voice gone soft and rough at the same time.

Neither moved for what felt like an hour but was probably three seconds.

Finn could feel River's heartbeat against his chest, could smell salt water and sunscreen and something warm that was just River.

The moment stretched between them, full of possibility and something that felt way too big for a guy who'd known the other guy for less than a week.

River's grip shifted slightly, hands moving from Finn's shoulders to his waist, and Finn felt electricity shoot through his nervous system. The tide pool exploration suddenly felt like the least important thing in the universe compared to the way River was looking at him.

“Uh,” Finn said eloquently.

“Right,” River said, but he didn't step away immediately. His hands lingered at Finn's waist for another heartbeat before he helped him stand properly. “Coffee? I make terrible coffee, but I've got a really good view.”

“I'd love terrible coffee,” Finn said, meaning it more than he'd meant anything in recent memory.

River's cottage was exactly what Finn would have imagined if he'd been asked to picture where a marine biologist should live.

All weathered wood and windows facing the ocean, with the lighthouse rotating overhead like a lazy ceiling fan.

Books everywhere, scientific equipment, underwater cameras, charts and maps covering most wall space.

But walking into it felt like coming home after a long trip, which was ridiculous because he'd never been here before.

“Make yourself at home,” River said, heading toward the kitchen. “Fair warning—I wasn't lying about the terrible coffee.”

Finn wandered to the ocean-facing windows. The view was incredible—the research site they'd just explored spread out below, the lighthouse beam beginning its evening rotation, endless Atlantic horizon that seemed to call to something deep in his chest.

But more than the view, standing there felt right. Like this was his spot. Like he'd stood here before, watching the lighthouse beam sweep across water while coffee brewed and River moved around behind him with comfortable domestic sounds.

“Hey, can you grab the sugar?” River called. “It's in the cabinet above the?”

“Got it,” Finn called back, already moving toward the kitchen before his conscious mind registered the request. His hands reached for the correct cabinet without hesitation, found mugs and sugar with automatic knowledge, even grabbed spoons from a drawer his fingers located without looking.

River appeared in the doorway with a confused expression, holding coffee beans. “How did you know where everything was?”

Finn froze with the sugar container halfway to the counter. Shit. “Uh... lucky guess? Most people keep sugar near the coffee maker?”

“I keep it there because I'm the only one who uses it. But you went straight to it.” River wasn't accusatory, just puzzled. “And you grabbed two mugs like you knew I'd want coffee too. Plus spoons from a drawer you couldn't see from the living room.”

“Maybe I'm just really good at reading kitchen organization?” Finn tried for casual, but his voice came out slightly strangled.

River studied his face for a moment, then smiled. “Maybe you're just naturally intuitive. I like that in a person.”

The coffee was actually pretty good despite River's protests. They settled on the couch together, close enough that Finn could see the gold flecks in River's eyes and catch the faint scent of salt water that seemed permanently embedded in his skin.

“So,” River said, curling one leg under himself, “tell me something embarrassing about yourself. Something that'll make me feel better about almost dropping you into a tide pool.”

Finn laughed. “You didn't almost drop me. You saved me from my own clumsiness and probably a very cold surprise.” He thought for a moment.

“Okay, embarrassing. When I was twelve, I got so absorbed in reading during a family barbecue that I walked straight into the pool. Fully clothed. Book and all.”

“No way.”

“Completely ruined a first-edition copy of 'Treasure Island.

' My dad was furious, but my mom just bought me a waterproof book light for my birthday.” Finn's chest tightened at the memory of his mother's patient smile.

“She said if I was going to read everywhere, I needed to be prepared for everything.”

River's expression softened with recognition and sympathy. “She sounds like she really got you.”

“Yeah, she did.” Finn looked out at the ocean to give himself a moment. “She used to say that people who love books love stories, and people who love stories understand that the world is bigger and more mysterious than it appears. I think she would have liked you.”

“Why's that?”

“Because you see stories everywhere too. In tide pools, in ecosystem relationships, in the way creatures adapt and survive.” Finn met River's eyes, seeing understanding there that made his chest warm. “You just tell them with science instead of words.”

River was quiet for a moment, something shifting in his expression. Then he launched into an enthusiastic story about accidentally short-circuiting a community center while giving a presentation on sea cucumber reproduction, gesturing so wildly he nearly spilled his coffee.

Finn found himself laughing until his sides hurt, partly at River's description of intestinal defense mechanisms, but mostly at the way River's whole face lit up when he talked about his work.

“You're kind of amazing, you know that?” Finn said without thinking, then immediately wanted to sink into the couch cushions.

River went still, coffee mug halfway to his lips. “Yeah?”

“I mean...” Finn felt his face burning. “Your passion for your work. The way you explain things like they're the most fascinating discoveries in the world. You make tide pools sound like magical kingdoms.”

“They are magical kingdoms,” River said seriously. “Most people think I'm a marine biology nerd who needs to get out more.”

“Well, you are a marine biology nerd,” Finn said. “But that's not a bad thing. It's actually really attractive.”

The words hung between them, loaded with more meaning than Finn had intended. River set down his coffee mug and turned to face him fully, green eyes intense with something that made Finn's pulse quicken.

“Finn,” he started, then seemed to lose whatever he was going to say.

“Yeah?”

“This is going to sound crazy, but... does this feel familiar to you? Not just attraction, but like... like we've done this before?”

Finn's heart stopped, then started beating double-time. “What do you mean?”

“I mean sitting here, talking like this. You knowing where things are in my kitchen. The way we communicate—it's like we've been having conversations for years instead of days.” River ran a hand through his hair, looking frustrated with himself. “I sound insane.”

“You don't sound insane,” Finn said quietly. “It does feel familiar. All of it. Like I've been here before, like I know you better than I should after a few days.”

They looked at each other for a long moment, the lighthouse beam sweeping through windows and painting moving shadows across their faces. Something significant was happening, something that felt bigger than attraction or coincidence.

“That's probably impossible,” River said finally.

“Probably,” Finn agreed. “But impossible things have been happening to me a lot lately.”

River's eyebrows went up with obvious interest. “What kind of impossible things?”

Finn hesitated, then decided to trust the warmth in River's eyes. “Memory gaps. Finding work completed that I don't remember doing. Knowledge I shouldn't have.” He gestured around the cottage. “Knowing where you keep your coffee mugs.”

“That's...” River was quiet for a moment. “That's actually not as crazy as it sounds. The letter you wrote but don't remember writing? It knew things about me that no one should know. Personal details, professional routines, even family history.”

“What are you saying?”

“I don't know what I'm saying,” River admitted. “But maybe we don't have to figure it out right now. Maybe we can just... see what happens.”

Finn felt something loosen in his chest, some knot of fear and confusion that had been tightening for days. “I'd like that. Seeing what happens.”

“Good,” River said, and his smile was soft and real and made Finn feel like maybe impossible things weren't always bad things. “Because I really don't want this to end.”

The lighthouse beam swept through the windows again, and Finn realized they'd been sitting there talking for hours without noticing time passing.

The cottage felt like a bubble outside the normal world, a place where mysterious knowledge and inexplicable familiarity could coexist with the simple pleasure of good conversation and growing attraction.

“River?” Finn said softly.

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For today, for sharing your work, for not thinking I'm completely insane when I say impossible things are happening to me.”

“Thank you for listening like my work actually matters. For asking questions that show you're really paying attention.” River's smile turned slightly self-conscious. “And for not running away when I get overexcited about marine biology.”

As evening settled around them and the lighthouse began its nightly rhythm, Finn thought maybe River was right. Maybe they didn't need to understand everything immediately. Maybe some mysteries were worth living with if they brought you to the right person.

Even if that person made your heart race and your rational mind panic and your entire

understanding of reality feel like it was built on shifting sand.

Especially then.

Shifting Patterns

River

R iver stared at the same pH reading for the third time in five minutes, his concentration shot to hell and back.

The numbers blurred together like alphabet soup, meaningless data that normally would have his full attention but today felt about as important as counting grains of sand.

His mind kept drifting to auburn hair catching afternoon light, to brown eyes that seemed to hold secrets he desperately wanted to decode, to the way Finn had fit against his chest when he'd caught him from falling.

“Christ,” he muttered, shaking his head and forcing himself to focus on the water samples arranged across his lab bench. “Get your shit together, Hayes.”

But his brain had other plans. Instead of chemical analysis, he found himself replaying every moment of yesterday's tide pool exploration, from Finn's genuine fascination with marine ecosystems to the charged moment when they'd almost kissed to the comfortable domesticity of sharing coffee in his cottage.

The memory made his chest warm and his hands slightly unsteady as he tried to measure precise amounts of testing solution.

Something about Finn's instant understanding of marine ecology nagged at him,

though.

Not in a suspicious way—more like a puzzle piece that didn't quite fit but felt important.

River had spent years teaching undergraduates basic tide pool concepts, and most people needed multiple explanations before they grasped ecosystem relationships.

But Finn had absorbed complex information like he already had the framework to understand it.

The lab door opened with its usual squeak, and Dr. Reeves walked in carrying her ever-present clipboard and the expression of someone who'd noticed things weren't quite right.

River straightened automatically, trying to look like he'd been absorbed in important scientific work instead of daydreaming about a certain bookshop owner.

“Good morning, River,” she said, settling into the chair beside his workstation with the careful attention of someone preparing for a potentially difficult conversation. “How's the data analysis coming along?”

“Fine,” River replied, then glanced at the samples he'd supposedly been processing for the past hour and realized he'd made almost no progress. “Actually, maybe not so fine. I'm having trouble concentrating today.”

Dr. Reeves followed his gaze to the largely untouched samples, then back to his face with the perceptive look that made her such an effective supervisor. “Everything okay? You seem distracted, which isn't like you. Usually I can barely get your attention when you're in analysis mode.”

River considered deflecting with some excuse about poor sleep or equipment problems, but Dr. Reeves had been mentoring him long enough to see through bullshit with laser accuracy.

Plus, she'd been encouraging him to develop connections outside of work for months, so maybe honesty wouldn't be completely unwelcome.

“I met someone,” he said finally, the admission feeling both natural and terrifying. “Someone I'm interested in. And apparently my brain has decided that's more important than marine chemistry.”

Dr. Reeves's eyebrows rose, but her expression was pleased rather than concerned. “Someone interesting enough to derail your legendary focus? This is significant news.”

“Maybe too significant,” River admitted.

“I've known him less than a week, but I can't stop thinking about him. We spent yesterday afternoon exploring the tide pools, and it was...” He trailed off, searching for words that wouldn't sound completely ridiculous.

“It was the best afternoon I've had in years.”

“That's wonderful, River. You've been isolating yourself since your father's death, and while your research is important, human connection is equally necessary for long-term wellbeing.” Dr. Reeves leaned forward with genuine interest. “Tell me about him.”

River found himself describing Finn with more enthusiasm than he'd shown for anything non-marine-related in recent memory.

The bookshop, the restoration work, Finn's gentle intelligence and surprising knowledge of coastal ecosystems. The way they'd communicated like old friends despite being strangers, the domestic comfort of sharing coffee and conversation.

“He sounds lovely,” Dr. Reeves said when River finally paused for breath.

“And you sound happier than I've heard you in months. But I have to ask—is this affecting your work quality? Because while I support your personal growth, we have research deadlines and data that marine conservation groups are depending on.”

River looked at his neglected samples with a mixture of guilt and something else he couldn't quite name.

Not defiance, exactly, but a growing sense that maybe there were things more important than perfect data collection.

“It's affecting my concentration, but not my commitment to the work. I just need to figure out how to balance things better.”

“Balance is good. Obsession, whether with work or relationships, is not.” Dr. Reeves stood and moved toward the door, then paused. “Take the afternoon off. Get your personal life sorted, then come back tomorrow ready to focus. The ocean will still be here, and so will the data.”

After she left, River sat alone in his lab, surrounded by the familiar chaos of scientific equipment and marine samples that had been his world for the past two years.

But today, it felt incomplete. Like he'd discovered there were rooms in his house he'd never bothered to explore, and now the space he'd been living in felt cramped and insufficient.

He found himself pulling out his field notebooks, flipping through pages of observations and data that suddenly seemed connected to Finn in ways he couldn't explain.

Weather patterns that might affect optimal diving conditions.

Ecosystem recovery rates that paralleled manuscript restoration techniques.

Marine behavior observations that felt like they'd been written with Finn's insights in mind.

River shook his head, telling himself he was seeing patterns that weren't there. But the feeling persisted—like his research and his growing connection to Finn were part of the same story, written in a language he was only beginning to understand.

The harbor-side pub where River and Jake usually met for lunch was crowded with the usual mix of local fishermen, Coast Guard personnel, and tourists who'd discovered that the best seafood came from places that looked like they might collapse if you sneezed too hard.

River found Jake at their regular table in the back corner, already nursing a beer and wearing the expression of someone who'd been waiting for juicy gossip.

“You look different,” Jake said without preamble as River slid into the opposite chair. “Good different. Like you remembered you're a human being instead of a marine biology robot.”

“Thanks for the pep talk.” River signaled the waitress for his own beer, then settled back to endure what he knew would be thorough interrogation about his personal life. “Dr. Reeves noticed too. Apparently my legendary focus has turned into legendary distraction.”

“Because of bookshop guy?”

“His name is Finn, and yes.” River accepted his beer with grateful hands, taking a long drink before continuing.

“We spent yesterday afternoon together, and it was...” He paused, trying to find words that wouldn't sound like something from a romantic comedy.

“It was perfect. Easy and comfortable and exciting all at the same time.”

Jake's grin was knowing and slightly smug. “You're falling for him.”

“I barely know him.”

“Doesn't matter. Sometimes it happens fast, and trying to fight it just makes you miserable.” Jake gestured with his beer bottle for emphasis.

“I've been watching you turn into a hermit for two years, and yesterday was the first time I've seen you genuinely excited about anything that wasn't underwater.”

River wanted to argue, but Jake wasn't wrong.

The past twenty-four hours had felt like emerging from a fog he hadn't realized he'd been living in.

Colors seemed brighter, conversations more interesting, even the familiar routine of his morning coffee had felt charged with anticipation for what the day might bring.

But underneath the excitement, something else was stirring.

A restless energy that made him want to understand everything about Finn

immediately.

Where his marine biology knowledge came from.

Why he seemed so familiar with River's routines and preferences.

How someone could write a letter containing intimate details they shouldn't know.

“It's just happening so fast,” River said. “Last week I didn't know he existed, and now I'm reorganizing my entire mental landscape around him. That's not normal, right?”

“Normal is overrated. Besides, when was the last time you met someone who got your attention this completely?” Jake leaned forward with the intensity of someone making an important point.

“You've been going through the motions for two years, River. Work, sleep, dive, repeat. No social life, no romantic interests, no connections that matter outside your research.”

“My work is important.”

“Your work is important, but it's not enough. Humans aren't meant to live in isolation, especially not humans who've been through trauma.” Jake's expression softened slightly. “Your dad wouldn't want you to stop living because he couldn't.”

River felt the familiar twist of guilt and grief that always accompanied mentions of his father, but today it was accompanied by something else. Recognition that maybe Jake was right, that maybe the isolation he'd chosen as protection had become a prison instead.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

But there was also something new—a growing certainty that understanding what was happening with Finn was crucial in ways he couldn't articulate. Not just for their relationship, but for something larger and more significant.

“Finn makes me feel like myself again,” River admitted quietly. “Not the grieving son or the obsessive researcher, just... myself. Like I'm interesting and worth knowing for reasons that have nothing to do with my tragic backstory or my professional achievements.”

“That's huge, man. That's the kind of connection people spend their whole lives looking for.” Jake raised his beer bottle in a mock toast. “So what's the problem?”

River hesitated, then decided to trust Jake with the part of the story that was keeping him awake at night.

“There's something weird happening. Not just the attraction, but genuinely strange things.

He wrote me a letter that he doesn't remember writing, containing details about my life that he shouldn't know.

And yesterday, he seemed to know things about my cottage, about where I keep stuff, like he'd been there before.”

Jake's expression shifted from enthusiasm to concern. “Weird how? Stalker weird or supernatural weird?”

“I don't know. Maybe both? I keep telling myself there has to be a logical explanation, but the evidence is piling up and none of it makes sense.” River realized his hands were clenched around his beer bottle, his body betraying an intensity he hadn't consciously acknowledged.

“I've been thinking about it all morning, trying to piece together patterns, looking for connections.”

River took another drink, using the pause to organize his thoughts.

“Part of me thinks I should be running in the opposite direction, but a bigger part of me can't imagine not seeing him again.

And there's this other part that thinks.

.. that thinks maybe understanding this is the most important thing I'll ever do.”

Jake studied River's face with the careful attention of someone who'd known him for years. “You're getting that look again.”

“What look?”

“The same one you had after your dad died.

Like you're trying to solve something that can't be solved, and you're going to tear yourself apart trying.” Jake leaned forward.

“River, I get that this is mysterious and probably fascinating from a research perspective, but don't lose sight of the fact that this is about a person you care about, not a scientific problem to crack.”

“Then don't run,” Jake said simply. “Figure it out together. Whatever's happening, it brought you two together, and from where I'm sitting, that looks like a good thing.”

River's phone buzzed with a text, and when he glanced at it, his heart did something embarrassing and athletic in his chest. Finn's name on his screen, a simple message that felt like Christmas morning:

Finn

Hope your day is going well. Last night was incredible. Thank you for sharing your world with me.

“Speak of the devil,” Jake said, noting River's expression. “That's a good look on you, by the way. The 'someone actually likes me' glow.”

River typed back quickly:

River

Best afternoon I've had in years. Want to do it again soon?

Finn

Absolutely. Let's try and cook dinner together tonight if you want to come over. Fair warning, my cooking is hit or miss, but the company is guaranteed excellent.

River felt his entire day reorganize itself around that invitation, research deadlines and professional obligations suddenly feeling manageable rather than overwhelming.

But underneath the excitement, that new intensity pulsed like a second heartbeat—the need to understand, to observe, to figure out what was really happening between

them.

“He wants to cook dinner together,” he told Jake, then realized how ridiculous he probably sounded.

“And you're practically vibrating with excitement about domestic activities.

Yep, you're definitely falling hard.” Jake finished his beer and stood up.

“Go home, shower, buy good wine, and don't overthink this. Sometimes the best things in life happen when you stop trying to control every variable.”

But as Jake walked away, River found himself mentally cataloging all the variables he wanted to understand.

The timeline of Finn's mysterious knowledge.

The specific details in the letter that couldn't be explained by casual observation.

The way Finn moved through River's space with impossible familiarity.

River spent longer than strictly necessary selecting wine at the local shop, torn between wanting to impress Finn and not wanting to seem like he was trying too hard.

But part of his attention was also devoted to planning.

Tonight, he would pay closer attention. Not in a suspicious way—he trusted Finn's confusion about the strange incidents was genuine—but with the careful observation skills that had made him a successful researcher.

He finally settled on a bottle that split the difference between thoughtful and casual, then stopped at the market for ingredients that might complement whatever Finn was planning to cook.

Standing in the produce section holding organic tomatoes and trying to decide between different types of cheese, River had a moment of recognition about how dramatically his priorities had shifted in the span of a week.

Last Tuesday, his biggest decision had been which statistical analysis to apply to his latest data set. Today, he was agonizing over whether fresh basil would seem presumptuous while simultaneously planning how to gather data about impossible phenomena.

The transformation should have been alarming. Instead, it felt like discovering a new species—thrilling and significant and worthy of intensive study.

As River drove through Beacon Point's narrow streets toward Finn's building, his mind organized itself around questions that needed answers.

How long had Finn been experiencing memory gaps?

What other knowledge had appeared without explanation?

Were there patterns to when the strange incidents occurred?

By the time he parked outside the bookshop, River had decided that tonight he would begin documenting everything. Not because he didn't trust Finn, but because whatever was happening felt important enough to require proper investigation.

The evening light made the Victorian building's weathered brick look warm and welcoming, and River could see lights glowing in the upper floors where Finn's

apartment waited.

Taking a deep breath and gathering his wine and groceries, River climbed the front steps and knocked on the door that led to the residential entrance, his heart racing with anticipation and the growing certainty that he was about to discover something that would change everything he thought he understood about reality.

Whatever impossible truths might be waiting upstairs, River was ready to document them all. Because understanding Finn—really understanding him—had become the most important research project of his life.

Deepening Waters

Finn

Finn stood in his kitchen, staring at the vegetables he'd laid out like he was preparing for surgery instead of dinner, and wondered when cooking had become so nerve-wracking.

His hands trembled slightly as he arranged asparagus spears with unnecessary precision—the kind of attention to detail that suggested he was either losing his mind or falling harder than he'd ever fallen for anyone in his life.

Probably both, if he was being honest.

The apartment hummed with anticipation tonight, every surface seeming to vibrate with potential.

He'd spent twenty minutes arranging books that were already perfectly organized, another ten adjusting lighting that was already ideal, and now he was treating vegetables like they held the secrets to the universe.

“Get your shit together, Torres,” he muttered, then immediately started laughing because he was talking to asparagus like it might answer back. “Great. Now I'm having conversations with produce. That's definitely a good sign.”

River's knock came exactly when he'd said it would, because apparently the man was punctual in addition to being gorgeous, intelligent, and capable of making Finn's

brain turn to complete mush just by existing.

Finn wiped his hands on his apron—when had he started wearing an apron like some kind of domestic goddess?

—and went to answer the door before he could lose his nerve entirely.

River stood in the hallway holding a bottle of wine and a bag of groceries, his dark hair slightly windblown and his green eyes bright with the same anticipation that was making Finn's stomach do acrobatic routines.

He'd changed out of his research clothes into jeans and a sweater that made him look less like a serious scientist and more like someone Finn desperately wanted to curl up against on cold nights.

“Hey,” River said, his smile soft and real and completely devastating to Finn's remaining composure.

“Hey yourself,” Finn replied, stepping aside to let River into his space. “Fair warning—I may have gotten slightly ambitious with the menu, so dinner might be excellent or completely inedible.”

“I brought backup,” River said, holding up the grocery bag. “Fresh bread, good cheese, and ingredients for the world's most basic pasta if everything else goes wrong.”

“You're perfect,” Finn said without thinking, then felt heat flood his face. “I mean, that's perfect. The backup plan is perfect.”

River's smile grew softer, more knowing, like he understood exactly what Finn had meant and wasn't bothered by the slip. “I like that I'm perfect too.”

They fell into kitchen rhythm that felt impossibly natural for two people who'd known each other less than a week.

River moved around Finn's space like he'd been there countless times, finding the wine opener without asking where it was kept, locating plates and glasses with automatic knowledge that should have been impossible.

But tonight, small things felt slightly off.

Finn found himself reaching for ingredients he couldn't remember buying, his hands moving through familiar motions while his mind lagged behind.

When he opened the spice cabinet, he automatically grabbed saffron—expensive saffron that he definitely didn't remember purchasing and couldn't afford on his bookshop budget.

“How do you want these?” River asked, gesturing toward the mushrooms Finn had bought specifically because they'd looked perfect at the market.

“Sliced thin,” Finn said, then watched in fascination as River's hands moved with practiced skill, cutting each mushroom into precise pieces that were exactly the right size for risotto. “Where did you learn to cut vegetables like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you actually know what you're doing instead of just hacking away and hoping for the best.”

River paused, a slight frown crossing his face. “I'm not sure, actually. I don't remember learning knife skills, but my hands seem to know what they're doing.”

The familiar chill of recognition ran down Finn's spine.

More mysterious knowledge, more evidence that both of them were experiencing things that defied rational explanation.

But tonight, he didn't want to analyze or worry or question.

Tonight, he wanted to cook dinner with a man who made him feel like himself for the first time in months.

“Join the club,” Finn said, stirring the risotto that was somehow turning out perfectly despite him having no clear memory of learning the technique. “Apparently we're both developing skills we didn't know we had.”

As he stirred, Finn felt a strange moment of displacement—like he was watching himself from outside his body.

His hand moved the spoon in slow, practiced circles while he added stock in careful increments, but part of his mind seemed to be somewhere else entirely.

Somewhere with the sound of water and the smell of salt air.

“You okay?” River asked, his voice cutting through the odd sensation.

Finn blinked, finding himself back in his kitchen with River looking at him with concern. “Yeah, sorry. Just zoned out for a second.”

They cooked together with the kind of easy collaboration that usually took couples years to develop, anticipating each other's movements, sharing tasks without negotiation or confusion.

River seasoned the mushrooms exactly how Finn would have done it.

Finn poured wine without asking if River wanted any, somehow knowing he did.

But the strange moments kept happening—little disconnections where Finn would find himself doing something without conscious memory of starting it, or reaching for utensils he couldn't remember owning.

“This is either really romantic or really weird,” River observed, watching Finn add stock to the risotto with movements that felt automatic despite being unfamiliar.

“Can't it be both?” Finn asked, then immediately regretted opening that particular door. Because yes, everything about their connection was weird, but it was also the best thing that had happened to him in years, and he wasn't ready to examine it too closely.

River moved closer to taste the risotto, his shoulder brushing against Finn's as he leaned over the pan. The contact sent electricity through Finn's nervous system, and when River hummed approval at the taste, the sound went straight to places that had nothing to do with cooking.

“God, that's good,” River said, his voice slightly rough. “Seriously, where has this skill been hiding?”

“Maybe it just needed the right motivation,” Finn said, then realized how that sounded and felt his face burn again. “I mean, cooking for someone else instead of just myself.”

River turned to face him fully, and suddenly they were standing close enough that Finn could see the gold flecks in his eyes, could smell the salt water that seemed permanently embedded in his skin. “Is that what I am? Motivation?”

Finn's mouth went dry. "Among other things."

The moment stretched between them, loaded with possibility and questions neither of them seemed ready to ask. River's hand came up to touch Finn's face, gentle fingers tracing his cheekbone like he was memorizing the shape.

"We should eat," River said finally, but he didn't step away.

"We should," Finn agreed, making no move toward the stove.

They might have stood there indefinitely, caught in the magnetic pull that seemed to exist between them, but the timer chose that moment to go off with urgent insistence. Finn laughed and stepped back, grateful for the interruption even as his body protested the loss of River's proximity.

"Saved by the bell," he said, turning off the heat and checking the risotto's consistency. "Perfect timing."

"Perfect everything," River murmured, and Finn wasn't sure if he was talking about the food.

Dinner was a revelation in more ways than one.

The risotto turned out better than anything Finn had ever made before, creamy and rich with flavors that seemed to have developed from nowhere.

But more than the food, it was the conversation that left him feeling like he'd discovered something precious.

River was funny in ways that caught Finn off guard—dry observations about academic politics, stories about underwater encounters with marine life that had

distinct personalities, commentary on the tourists who visited his research station expecting him to be some kind of aquatic tour guide.

“Last week this family showed up during low tide,” River said, gesturing with his wine glass in a way that suggested the story was heading somewhere ridiculous. “Three kids, all under ten, and they wanted me to explain why the sea anemones weren't 'doing anything interesting.'”

“What counts as interesting to a ten-year-old?”

“Apparently shooting lasers or performing tricks. I tried explaining that their feeding behavior was fascinating in its own right, but that didn't go over well.” River grinned. “So I may have told them that sea anemones were actually alien scouts gathering intelligence for an underwater invasion.”

Finn nearly choked on his wine. “You did not.”

“I did. Complete with scientific-sounding explanations about their sensory capabilities and communication methods. The kids were riveted, the parents were horrified, and I probably traumatized an entire family's relationship with marine biology.”

“You're terrible,” Finn said, laughing hard enough that his sides hurt. “Those poor kids are going to be afraid of tide pools for the rest of their lives.”

“Or they'll become marine biologists specifically to study alien sea anemones. I prefer to think of it as inspiration.”

The laughter felt good, natural in a way that made Finn realize how little he'd been laughing lately.

River had this ability to find humor in ordinary situations, to see the absurd side of life without being cruel or dismissive.

It was exactly the kind of perspective Finn needed without knowing he'd been missing it.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

As the evening progressed and wine made both of them more relaxed, their conversation turned more personal.

River shared stories about growing up in a Coast Guard family, about learning to navigate both literal and metaphorical storms. Finn found himself talking about his restoration work with passion he usually kept carefully contained, describing the satisfaction of bringing damaged books back to life.

“It's like being a time traveler,” Finn said, surprising himself with the poetry of the comparison.

“Every book contains the thoughts and experiences of people who lived in completely different worlds.

When I restore something, I'm not just fixing physical damage—I'm preserving connections across centuries.”

River leaned forward with obvious interest. “That's beautiful. I never thought about conservation work that way, but you're right. We're both in the business of maintaining connections—you across time, me across species.”

The parallel felt significant in ways Finn couldn't articulate, but as he reached for his wine glass, another one of those strange disconnections hit him.

For just a moment, he saw the scene differently—River across from him at a different table, in different clothes, the conversation familiar like they'd had it before.

The feeling passed quickly, but it left him slightly disoriented.

“Can I ask you something personal?” River said, his voice gentle but curious. “You mentioned your mother died a couple years ago, but you never said how. And some of the things you've told me about your memory issues... I'm wondering if there's a connection.”

Finn felt his chest tighten with familiar grief and the terror of finally saying the words out loud to someone who mattered.

“She had early-onset dementia. Started showing symptoms when I was seventeen, but it took two years to get a proper diagnosis because she was so young. Everyone kept saying it was stress or depression.”

River's face went very still, like he was processing something significant. “Dementia. At that age. Jesus, Finn.”

“It was like watching someone disappear gradually,” Finn continued, the words spilling out now that he'd started.

He'd never told anyone the full story, had never trusted someone enough to share the details that still haunted his dreams. “First she'd forget recent conversations, then faces of people she'd known for years.

She'd stand in our kitchen looking completely lost, like she'd never seen it before.”

“That must have been terrifying for both of you.”

“The worst part was that she'd have these moments of clarity where she'd realize what was happening.

She'd look at me with complete awareness and apologize for forgetting who I was, like it was her fault instead of her brain betraying her.” Finn's voice cracked slightly.

“She died two years ago. Complications from pneumonia, but really she'd been gone long before that.”

River reached across the table and took Finn's hand, his grip warm and steady. “I'm so fucking sorry. That's not fair at any age, but to watch that happen to your mother when you were still a teenager...”

“The thing is,” Finn said, finally voicing the fear that had been eating at him for months, “I think I might be developing the same condition. The memory gaps, the lost time, finding evidence of things I don't remember doing. What if it's genetic? What if I'm going to end up like her?”

As he spoke, Finn felt that disconnected sensation growing stronger. The edges of his vision seemed to blur slightly, and River's voice sounded like it was coming from farther away than it should.

“Memory issues can have lots of causes,” River was saying, his voice concerned but distant. “Stress, grief, sleep deprivation—none of which necessarily point to genetic disease.”

“But what if they do?” Finn asked, and his own voice sounded strange to him, like he was hearing it through water.

“Then we'll figure it out together,” River said, his voice firm with conviction that took Finn's breath away. “Whatever's happening, you don't have to face it alone.”

The simple offer of support broke something loose in Finn's chest, some knot of fear and isolation he'd been carrying since his mother's diagnosis.

But along with the emotional relief came a growing physical disorientation.

The room seemed to be shifting around him, like he was on a boat in rough seas.

“Why?” he asked, the word coming out raw with emotion he couldn't contain. “Why would you want to get involved in this mess? You barely know me.”

“Because the person I barely know is incredible,” River said simply. “Because you make me laugh and think and feel things I thought I'd forgotten how to feel. Because when I'm with you, everything makes sense in ways it hasn't for years.”

Finn felt tears burning behind his eyes, overwhelmed by the kindness and certainty in River's voice. But he also felt something else—a pulling sensation, like he was being drawn away from the present moment by forces he couldn't understand or control.

“I'm scared,” he admitted, his voice starting to sound distant even to himself. “About my brain, about losing myself the way she did, about dragging someone else into something that might get really ugly.”

“I'm scared too,” River said, and his face was starting to look blurry around the edges. “About caring this much about someone I just met, about the weird stuff that keeps happening around us, about the possibility that this could all disappear as suddenly as it appeared.”

River was standing now, moving around the table toward him, but Finn felt like he was watching through thick glass. “But I'd rather be scared with you than safe without you,” River continued, his voice growing more distant. “If that makes any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” Finn whispered, then found himself moving around the table toward River before conscious thought could interfere, though his movements

felt clumsy and disconnected.

River's arms were around him, solid and warm, but Finn could feel himself slipping away from the moment despite the anchor of physical contact. River's hands smoothed down his back with careful tenderness, and Finn tried to focus on that sensation, to use it to stay present.

“Thank you,” Finn said against River's shoulder, breathing in salt water and something that was purely River. “For not thinking I'm crazy. For not running away. For making me feel like I'm worth taking care of.”

River pulled back just enough to look at Finn's face, his green eyes intense with emotion that made Finn's heart race. “You are worth taking care of. You're worth everything.”

The kiss happened without conscious decision, born from emotion too big to contain in words.

River's lips were soft and warm, moving against Finn's with gentle hunger that sent electricity through his nervous system.

But more than physical attraction, the kiss carried emotional weight that took Finn's breath away.

Recognition. That was the word that came to mind, though it makes no rational sense. Not the recognition of someone he'd kissed before, but something deeper. Like his soul recognizing its other half, like coming home to a place he'd never been but had always belonged.

But as they kissed, the disconnected feeling grew stronger. Finn felt like he was experiencing the moment from multiple perspectives simultaneously—kissing River

for the first time, but also remembering kissing him countless times before, in different contexts, different settings.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing unsteadily, Finn felt tears on his cheeks that he didn't remember shedding.

“Hey,” River said softly, his hands coming up to cup Finn's face with infinite gentleness. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong,” Finn said, though his voice came out shaky with emotion he couldn't name. “Everything's right, and that's what's terrifying.”

River studied his face with concern, and Finn realized he was experiencing something that went beyond normal attraction or even early relationship intensity. He felt like he was grieving and celebrating simultaneously, mourning something lost while rejoicing in something found.

“Finn,” River started, but before he could finish the thought, the disconnected feeling suddenly intensified.

The room began to shift around them in ways that made no physical sense. Colors became too bright, then too dim. River's voice sounded like it was coming through water, then from very far away.

“River,” Finn said, his voice sounding distant to his own ears. “Something's happening.”

“What kind of something?” River's hands tightened on his face, anchoring him to the present, but the pulling sensation was getting stronger.

Finn tried to explain, but words felt inadequate for what he was experiencing.

Time seemed to be becoming unstable around him, past and present bleeding together in ways that made no sense.

He could see River's face in front of him, concerned and beautiful, but also see other versions of the same face in different contexts, different times.

Images flashed through his mind—underwater scenes that felt like memories but couldn't be real, conversations in settings he'd never been to, moments of intimacy that seemed to span years instead of days.

“I can't—” Finn started, then felt the world slide sideways.

For several minutes that felt like hours, Finn existed in a space between moments, aware of River's voice calling his name but unable to respond coherently.

The visions came in waves—diving through kelp forests with equipment he'd never used, research data that made perfect sense despite being about subjects he'd never studied, quiet domestic moments in River's cottage that felt like coming home.

When the episode ended, he found himself sitting on his couch with River kneeling in front of him, green eyes dark with worry and something that tasted of blood in his mouth.

“There you are,” River said, his voice rough with relief. “You've been out for about ten minutes. How do you feel?”

Finn touched his nose and his fingers came away red with blood he didn't remember starting. “Like I just went through a blender. What happened?”

“You seemed confused about where you were, when you were. You kept talking about diving and water temperature readings, research data about kelp restoration.”

River's hands were gentle as he helped Finn clean the blood from his face. "Does any of that ring a bell?"

Finn shook his head, then immediately regretted the movement as dizziness swept through him. "I don't remember anything after feeling disoriented. But this is exactly what I was talking about—the episodes I've been having."

"Has it ever been this intense before?"

"I don't know. If I don't remember the episodes, I can't really judge their intensity, can I?" Finn attempted a weak smile, but River's expression remained seriously concerned.

"We need to get you to a doctor."

"I've been to doctors. They think it's stress."

"Then we need to find better doctors," River said firmly. "This isn't normal stress response, Finn. This is neurological, and it needs proper evaluation."

Finn wanted to argue, to insist that doctors had already dismissed his concerns and another consultation would just result in more recommendations for rest and anxiety management.

But the blood on his hands and the exhaustion weighing down his limbs suggested River might be right about needing more serious medical attention.

"Will you stay?" Finn asked, hating how small his voice sounded. "Tonight, I mean. I don't want to be alone in case it happens again."

"Of course," River said without hesitation. "I'm not going anywhere."

River helped him settle more comfortably on the couch, then disappeared into the kitchen to make tea and clean up the dinner dishes they'd abandoned.

Finn listened to the domestic sounds with gratitude that went beyond simple appreciation for help.

River was choosing to stay, choosing to take care of him, choosing to get involved in something that was clearly more complicated than either of them had signed up for.

When River returned with tea and settled beside him on the couch, Finn found himself curling against his side with automatic trust that should have been impossible after such a short acquaintance.

“Thank you,” he said against River's shoulder. “For not freaking out, for not leaving, for making me feel like I'm not crazy.”

“You're not crazy,” River said, his arm tightening around Finn's shoulders. “Something's happening that we don't understand yet, but that doesn't make you crazy.”

As the evening settled around them and Finn felt himself relaxing into River's warmth, he realized that whatever was happening to his brain, whatever mysterious episodes were disrupting his life, he was no longer facing them alone.

River's presence felt like a lighthouse in a storm—steady, reliable, guiding him home even when he couldn't see the shore.

The thought should have been comforting, and it was. But it was also terrifying, because caring about someone this much after such a short time felt like another symptom of something being fundamentally wrong with his perception of reality.

Or maybe it was the first thing that had been completely right in years.

Either way, he was too tired and too grateful to analyze it tonight. Tonight, he would just let himself be held by someone who made him feel safe, and worry about the implications tomorrow.

Turbulent Currents

River

R iver stood in Finn's kitchen at six AM, holding a mug of coffee he'd made with automatic familiarity, and tried to convince himself that what had happened last night fell within the realm of normal human experience.

The morning light streaming through the windows made everything look deceptively ordinary—dish towels draped over the sink, books scattered across the counter, the lingering scent of last night's risotto still hanging in the air.

But nothing about this situation was ordinary, starting with the fact that he'd known exactly where Finn kept his coffee filters despite never having seen him make coffee before.

From the bedroom came the soft sounds of Finn sleeping peacefully, which was more than River had managed on the couch.

Every time he'd started to drift off, his mind replayed the moment when Finn's eyes had gone unfocused and distant, when he'd started talking about water temperatures and diving protocols with knowledge he shouldn't possess.

River took another sip of coffee and admitted to himself that he was scared shitless.

Not just about Finn's condition, but about his own reactions to it.

The protective instincts that had kicked in last night felt way too intense for someone he'd known less than a week.

The way he'd immediately started planning medical consultations and research strategies felt like behavior reserved for family members or long-term partners, not for someone who was essentially still a stranger.

But Finn didn't feel like a stranger. That was the problem.

“River?” Finn's voice came from the bedroom, thick with sleep and confusion. “Are you still here?”

“Kitchen,” River called back, setting down his mug and moving toward the bedroom door. “How are you feeling?”

Finn appeared in the doorway wearing rumpled clothes from last night, his auburn hair sticking up in directions that should have looked ridiculous but instead made River want to smooth it down with gentle fingers.

His brown eyes held the cloudy confusion of someone trying to piece together memories that didn't quite fit.

“Like I got hit by a truck,” Finn said, rubbing his forehead with a grimace. “And like I'm missing pieces of last night. I remember dinner and...” His cheeks flushed slightly. “I remember kissing you. But after that, everything gets fuzzy.”

River felt his chest tighten with sympathy and growing concern. “You had an episode. Similar to what you've been experiencing. You were disoriented for about ten minutes, talking about things that didn't make sense in context.”

“What kind of things?”

“Marine biology. Diving procedures. Technical stuff about underwater research that you shouldn't know.” River watched Finn's face carefully, noting how the color drained from his cheeks. “You also had a nosebleed.”

Finn's hand went automatically to his nose, though the bleeding had stopped hours ago. “I don't remember any of that.”

“That's what's worrying me.” River moved closer, his protective instincts overriding any concerns about overstepping boundaries. “We need to get you to a doctor. A real doctor, not someone who's going to dismiss this as stress.”

“River, I've been to doctors. They all say the same thing—grief reaction, anxiety, maybe depression. Nobody takes the memory gaps seriously.”

“Then we find doctors who will take it seriously.” River's voice came out more forceful than he'd intended, but the idea of Finn facing this alone made something fierce and desperate rise in his chest. “This isn't normal stress response, Finn. This is neurological, and it needs proper evaluation.”

Finn studied his face with an expression that was part gratitude, part confusion. “Why do you care so much? I mean, I'm grateful that you do, but this is heavy shit to take on for someone you just met.”

The question hit River like a punch to the gut, because he didn't have a rational answer. By any reasonable standard, he should be backing away from this situation, not diving deeper into it. But the thought of abandoning Finn when he was clearly struggling felt physically impossible.

“Because when I look at you, I don't see someone I just met,” River said, the honesty surprising him. “I see someone I've been looking for without knowing I was looking. And I'm not walking away from that just because things are getting complicated.”

Finn's eyes filled with something that looked like relief mixed with disbelief. "Even if I'm losing my mind?"

"Especially if you're losing your mind. That's when you need people most." River reached out to touch Finn's face, noting the way he leaned into the contact like he was starving for gentle touch. "Get dressed. We're going to the clinic, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

The Beacon Point Medical Center smelled like disinfectant and the particular despair of people waiting for answers they probably didn't want to hear.

River sat beside Finn in the waiting room, noting how Finn's hands shook slightly as he filled out intake forms that asked about family medical history and current symptoms.

"Previous episodes of confusion or disorientation," Finn read aloud, his voice carefully neutral. "Well, that's cheerful."

"Just be honest," River said, though privately he was already preparing for the likelihood that they'd encounter the same dismissive attitude Finn had experienced before. "The more accurate information they have, the better they can help."

Dr. Martinez turned out to be a middle-aged woman with kind eyes and the patient demeanor of someone who'd spent years dealing with worried families.

She listened to Finn's description of his symptoms with attention that seemed genuine rather than perfunctory, taking notes and asking follow-up questions that suggested she was taking his concerns seriously.

"Memory gaps and episodes of disorientation can have many causes," she said after completing her examination.

“Stress, sleep deprivation, grief reactions, even nutritional deficiencies.

Given what you've told me about your mother's death and the recent changes in your life, I think we're looking at stress-related symptoms.”

River felt his jaw clench with frustration. “What about the nosebleeds? The fact that he's demonstrating knowledge during episodes that he doesn't possess when fully conscious?”

Dr. Martinez turned to him with polite attention. “And you are?”

“River Hayes. I'm a marine biologist, and I've witnessed these episodes firsthand. This isn't simple stress response—there are neurological components that need investigation.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Dr. Martinez said, her tone diplomatically neutral, “but stress-related dissociation can present in many forms. The important thing is that Finn is receiving appropriate support and managing his anxiety levels.”

“So you're not going to order any tests?” River pressed, his scientific training rebelling against the lack of thorough investigation. “No neurological screening, no brain imaging, nothing to rule out organic causes?”

“I'll order basic blood work to rule out obvious metabolic issues,” Dr. Martinez conceded. “But based on Finn's age and the temporal relationship between these symptoms and his recent loss, I believe we're dealing with psychological rather than neurological factors.”

River wanted to argue further, but Finn's hand on his arm stopped him. “It's okay,” Finn said quietly. “This is what I expected.”

But it wasn't okay. River could see the disappointment and fear in Finn's expression, the way he was already preparing to accept that his concerns would be dismissed again.

The protective fury that rose in River's chest felt disproportionate to their relationship timeline, but he didn't care about proportionality anymore.

“We'll get a second opinion,” River said as they left the examination room. “Someone who specializes in neurological issues, someone who won't just assume everything is stress-related.”

“River, you don't have to?—”

“Yes, I do,” River interrupted. “I absolutely do have to.”

They were heading toward the exit when a familiar voice called Finn's name from behind them. River turned to see a young woman approaching with the determined stride of someone on a mission, her dark hair and brown eyes marking her as obviously related to Finn.

“Maya,” Finn said, his voice holding a mixture of relief and resignation. “I didn't expect you to come.”

“You called and said you were at the medical center with someone I'd never heard of,” Maya replied, her gaze shifting to River with undisguised suspicion. “Of course I came.”

River found himself under intense scrutiny. Maya was smaller than Finn but carried herself with authority that suggested she was accustomed to taking charge in family crises.

“You must be River,” Maya said, her tone carefully neutral. “I’m Maya, Finn’s sister.”

“Nice to meet you,” River replied, though Maya’s expression suggested the feeling wasn’t mutual. “Finn’s told me a lot about you.”

“Funny, he hasn’t told me anything about you until this morning.” Maya’s attention shifted back to Finn. “What happened? Your call was pretty vague about why you needed medical attention.”

Finn glanced at River uncertainly, clearly struggling with how much to reveal. “I had an episode last night. More severe than usual. River thought I should get checked out.”

“Episode of what?” Maya’s voice sharpened with concern. “Finn, you said you were feeling better lately.”

“I was. I am. It’s just...” Finn trailed off, looking overwhelmed by the prospect of explaining his condition to his sister while standing in a hospital corridor.

“Can we take this somewhere more private?” River suggested, noting how other people in the waiting area were starting to pay attention to their conversation.

Maya studied him for a moment, then nodded. “My car’s outside. We can talk there.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

The drive to a nearby coffee shop passed in tense silence, Maya clearly processing the implications of River's prominent role in her brother's medical care while River tried to figure out how to explain his investment in Finn's wellbeing without sounding completely insane.

“So,” Maya said once they were settled in a corner booth with coffee none of them seemed particularly interested in drinking, “how long have you two been seeing each other?”

“About a week,” Finn said, his honesty making Maya's eyebrows rise significantly.

“A week. And you're already accompanying him to medical appointments and making decisions about his healthcare.” Maya's tone was carefully controlled, but River could hear the protective anger underneath. “That seems fast.”

“It is fast,” River admitted. “But Finn's condition is concerning, and he needed someone to advocate for him with medical professionals who aren't taking his symptoms seriously.”

“What exactly do you know about his condition?” Maya asked, her attention shifting between them with the sharp focus of someone conducting an interrogation.

River looked at Finn, who nodded permission for him to share what he knew.

“Memory gaps, episodes of disorientation, evidence of activities he doesn't remember performing. Last night he had a severe episode that included confusion about time and place, plus a nosebleed that suggests possible neurological involvement.”

Maya's expression grew increasingly troubled as River described the symptoms. "This is worse than what you told me on the phone," she said to Finn. "You said you were having some memory issues, not full episodes."

"I didn't want you to worry," Finn said defensively. "And I wasn't sure how to explain something I can't remember experiencing."

"Finn, given Mom's history, any neurological symptoms need immediate evaluation. You can't just hope they'll go away on their own." Maya turned back to River with slightly less hostility. "Thank you for taking this seriously. Too many people would have just assumed he was being dramatic."

River felt some of the tension in his shoulders ease. "I'm a scientist. When I see patterns that don't fit normal explanations, I investigate rather than dismiss."

"What kind of patterns?"

River hesitated, then decided that Maya deserved to know what they were dealing with.

"Finn has demonstrated knowledge during episodes that he doesn't possess when fully conscious.

Technical information about marine biology, specific details about my research and personal life that he shouldn't know."

Maya was quiet for a long moment, processing this information. "That doesn't sound like the kind of dementia Mom had. Her episodes involved forgetting information, not gaining knowledge she'd never learned."

"Exactly," River said, feeling validated by her observation. "Which is why I think we

need more thorough medical evaluation. This might not be the same condition your mother had.”

“Or it might be something else entirely,” Maya said thoughtfully. “Something that requires specialized expertise rather than general practice assessment.”

They spent the next hour discussing Finn's symptoms in detail, Maya providing family medical history while River shared his observations of the anomalous episode. Despite her initial suspicion, Maya seemed to appreciate River's scientific approach and genuine concern for Finn's wellbeing.

“I have a colleague at Mass General who specializes in rare neurological conditions,” Maya said. “I can try to get Finn an appointment, but it might take weeks.”

“Anything is better than being told it's just stress,” River said. “In the meantime, I'll keep track of episodes and look for patterns that might help with diagnosis.”

Maya studied his face with the careful attention of someone evaluating potential threats to her family. “You're really invested in this, aren't you? In him.”

“More than I probably should be, given the timeline,” River admitted. “But yeah, I'm invested.”

“Why?”

River looked across the coffee shop to where Finn was getting a refill, noting the careful way he moved, the gentle attention he paid to other customers, the slight vulnerability in his posture that made River want to wrap him in protective arms.

“Because he's extraordinary,” River said simply. “Because he makes me laugh and think and feel things I thought I'd forgotten how to feel. Because when I'm with him,

everything makes sense in ways it hasn't for years.”

Maya nodded slowly, something in her expression shifting from suspicion toward cautious approval. “Okay. But if you hurt him, or if this turns out to be some kind of elaborate manipulation, I will make your life very unpleasant.”

“Fair enough,” River said, meaning it. “But I'm not going anywhere. Whatever's happening with Finn, we're going to figure it out together.”

Later that afternoon, River found himself at the research station, supposedly organizing equipment but actually trying to process everything that had happened in the past twenty-four hours.

His hands moved automatically through familiar tasks—checking regulators, organizing underwater cameras, updating logbooks—while his mind churned through questions that had no easy answers.

The strange thing was how natural it felt to be planning his life around Finn's needs.

Not just the medical appointments and family meetings, but the way he'd automatically started thinking in terms of “we” instead of “I.” His research schedule, his evening plans, even his long-term goals seemed to be reorganizing themselves around Finn's presence.

Jake found him there an hour later, predictably carrying coffee and wearing the expression of someone who'd heard interesting rumors.

“So,” Jake said without preamble, settling beside River's workstation with the casual familiarity of years of friendship. “Word around town is that you spent the morning at the medical center with the bookshop owner. Everything okay?”

River looked up from the equipment he'd been cleaning for the third time. "Finn had a medical episode last night. We went to get it checked out."

"Medical episode?" Jake's tone sharpened with concern. "What kind of episode?"

"Neurological. Memory loss, disorientation, nosebleed. He was talking about marine biology research like he'd been studying it for years." River set down the regulator he'd been obsessively adjusting. "The doctor thinks it's stress-related, but I'm not convinced."

"That's pretty serious shit to be dealing with after knowing someone a week."

"I know how it looks," River said defensively. "But you didn't see him, Jake. He was completely confused about where he was, when he was. And the things he was saying—technical details about my research that he shouldn't know."

Jake was quiet for a moment, studying River's face with the attention of someone reading warning signs. "You're falling hard for this guy."

"Harder than I've ever fallen for anyone," River admitted. "Which is terrifying and probably stupid, but there it is."

"Just be careful, man. I've seen you get obsessive about things that matter to you, and this guy clearly matters a lot."

River wanted to argue, but Jake's observation hit closer to home than he'd like to admit. He was already thinking about Finn constantly, planning research strategies for understanding his condition, mentally reorganizing his entire life around being supportive and helpful.

"I'm trying to be careful," River said. "But I can't just walk away from this. From

him.”

“I’m not saying you should walk away. I’m saying don’t lose yourself in the process of trying to save him.”

The words lingered in River’s mind long after Jake left, an uncomfortable reminder that his protective instincts might be crossing into obsessive territory.

But every time he thought about pulling back, about establishing healthier boundaries, he remembered the fear in Finn’s eyes and the way he’d leaned into River’s touch like he was starving for gentle contact.

Whatever was happening between them, whatever mysterious forces were influencing their connection, River knew he was in too deep to turn back now. Finn needed him, and that need felt more important than any reasonable concerns about timeline or emotional safety.

Even if it meant risking everything he thought he understood about love and rational decision-making.

River returned to the bookshop as evening settled over Beacon Point, drawn by the warm light glowing in the windows and the need to check on Finn after the day’s medical frustrations.

He found Finn in his restoration workshop, surrounded by damaged books and specialized tools, moving with the careful focus that characterized his professional work.

But River could see the tension in his shoulders, the way he was using detailed work to avoid thinking about the morning’s dismissive medical consultation.

“How are you feeling?” River asked, settling into the chair beside Finn's workstation.

“Like a medical mystery that nobody wants to solve,” Finn said without looking up from the manuscript he was treating for water damage. “And slightly embarrassed that you had to spend your morning in doctors' offices because of my brain malfunctioning.”

“You don't have anything to be embarrassed about,” River said firmly. “You have a medical condition that needs attention. That's not your fault.”

“But involving you in all this drama is my fault. We've known each other a week, River. You shouldn't have to deal with my neurological issues and overprotective sister and whatever the hell is happening to me.”

River reached over to still Finn's hands, noting how they were trembling slightly with anxiety and exhaustion. “Look at me.”

Finn finally raised his eyes from his work, and River felt the familiar punch of attraction mixed with something deeper —the recognition that this person mattered to him in ways that transcended rational explanation.

“I'm exactly where I want to be,” River said, meaning every word.

“Dealing with whatever's happening, supporting you through medical investigations, earning your sister's approval—all of it.

This isn't obligation or pity or some misguided rescue complex. This is me choosing to be here because being anywhere else feels impossible.”

“Why?” Finn's voice was soft with vulnerability that made River's chest ache. “Why would you choose to get involved in something this complicated?”

“Because you're worth it,” River said simply. “Because what we have is worth it, even if I can't explain what it is or why it's happening so fast.”

Finn was quiet for a moment, his brown eyes searching River's face for signs of doubt or regret. “I'm scared,” he admitted finally. “About my brain, about losing myself the way Mom did, about dragging you down with me if things get worse.”

“I'm scared too,” River said honestly. “About caring this much about someone I just met, about the possibility that I can't protect you from whatever's happening, about the fact that I'm already in so deep that losing you would destroy me.”

They looked at each other across the workshop table, two people who'd found something precious and terrifying, both acknowledging that their connection had accelerated far beyond normal relationship timelines.

“But I'd rather face all of that with you than be safe without you,” River continued. “Whatever's happening to your brain, whatever these episodes mean, whatever your family medical history suggests about the future—we'll figure it out together. I'm not going anywhere.”

Finn's eyes filled with tears he didn't try to hide. “Promise?”

“I promise,” River said, reaching across the table to take Finn's hands in his own. “Whatever comes next, you're not facing it alone.”

As afternoon light slanted through the workshop windows and the familiar scents of old paper and preservation chemicals surrounded them, River realized he was making a commitment that terrified and exhilarated him in equal measure.

He was promising to stay with someone whose condition was deteriorating, whose future was uncertain, whose very identity might be at risk.

But looking at Finn's face, seeing the relief and trust and growing love in his expression, River knew he'd made the right choice.

Whatever mysterious forces had brought them together, whatever supernatural elements were influencing their connection, whatever medical challenges lay ahead—they would face it all together.

Shifting Sands

Finn

The next morning, Finn stared at the maritime journal spread across his workbench and tried to remember when the hell he'd become capable of miracles.

The leather binding gleamed with fresh treatment, every page carefully cleaned and stabilized, the faded ink revitalized to near-original clarity.

It was museum-quality restoration work that should have taken him three weeks minimum, but according to his project log, he'd completed it yesterday while River was at the research station.

“What the actual fuck,” he muttered, flipping through pages that showed evidence of techniques he'd never learned and skills he definitely didn't possess twenty-four hours ago.

The work was flawless, demonstrating knowledge of advanced preservation methods that came from years of specialized training he'd never received.

His hands shook slightly as he examined the restoration notes written in his own handwriting, detailed observations about paper composition and ink chemistry that read like they'd been written by someone with a PhD in conservation science.

The person who'd completed this work knew things about maritime preservation that Finn had never studied, used techniques he'd only read about in academic journals.

But more disturbing than the mysterious expertise were the marginal notes that had nothing to do with book restoration.

Comments about diving safety protocols, observations about marine ecosystem recovery, detailed knowledge about underwater research that connected to River's work in ways that made Finn's chest tight with panic.

Water temperature optimal for kelp restoration at 58-62°F. Observed significant recovery in research grids C-7 through C-12. Important to monitor pH levels during spawning season to ensure reproductive success of recovering populations.

Finn read the note three times, his rational mind rejecting what his eyes were telling him.

He'd never been diving. He'd never studied marine biology beyond casual conversations with River.

He had no idea what research grids C-7 through C-12 even were, let alone how to monitor their recovery progress.

But there it was, written in his unmistakable fountain pen script, demonstrating knowledge that could only have come from direct observation and professional training he'd never received.

The workshop suddenly felt claustrophobic, filled with evidence of a version of himself he couldn't access or understand.

Finn pushed back from his workbench and walked to the window overlooking the harbor, needing to see something stable and familiar while his world felt like it was built on quicksand.

The lighthouse beam caught the afternoon sun, steady and reliable in ways that made Finn's throat tight with longing.

He thought about River at the research station, probably analyzing yesterday's data or preparing for tomorrow's dive, completely unaware that the man he was falling for was losing bigger chunks of his identity with each passing day.

River

How are you feeling today? Want company for lunch?

Finn stared at the message, torn between desperate need for River's presence and growing shame about the evidence of his deteriorating condition.

How could he explain that he'd apparently spent yesterday afternoon completing expert-level restoration work he had no memory of doing?

How could he admit that his workshop was filled with notes demonstrating knowledge he'd never acquired?

Finn

Need to work through some things. Rain check?

He typed back, hating himself for the deflection but unable to face River's concerned questions about his latest episode.

River

Of course. Call if you need anything. I love you.

The casual way River had written those three words made Finn's chest ache with longing and terror in equal measure. How could someone love him when he was losing pieces of himself daily? How could he build a future with someone when he couldn't trust his own mind?

The bell downstairs chimed around three in the afternoon, indicating someone had entered the bookshop despite the fact that Finn hadn't officially opened for the day.

He listened to footsteps on the stairs with growing apprehension, not ready to deal with customers or small talk or pretending everything was normal when his reality was disintegrating around him.

“Finn?” Maya's voice carried up from the second floor, warm with concern and the particular tone she used when she was trying not to freak out about something. “You up there?”

“Workshop,” Finn called back, grateful for her presence despite knowing this conversation would probably be difficult. Maya had always been able to read him too easily, and today he felt like an open book written in a language he didn't understand.

Maya appeared in the workshop doorway wearing her “concerned sister” expression, the one that had become depressingly familiar during their mother's illness.

She moved through his space with the careful attention of someone looking for signs of crisis, her dark eyes cataloging details that might indicate how worried she should be.

“How are you feeling?” she asked, settling into the chair beside his workstation. “You seemed pretty shaken up after the medical appointment yesterday.”

“I'm fine,” Finn said automatically, then immediately realized how unconvincing that

sounded given the evidence of confusion and fear probably written all over his face.

Maya raised an eyebrow in the skeptical expression that had been perfected during years of dealing with Finn's tendency to downplay problems. "Try again. And maybe with more honesty this time."

Finn gestured toward the maritime journal and the restoration notes that documented knowledge he shouldn't possess.

"I'm finding more evidence of work I don't remember doing.

Detailed, professional-level work that demonstrates skills I've never learned.

Plus notes about marine biology that suggest I've been conducting underwater research in my spare time."

Maya examined the journal and notes with the careful attention she brought to her psychology case studies, her expression growing more troubled with each page.

"This level of technical knowledge is concerning, Finn. Combined with the episodes River described yesterday, it suggests something more complex than stress-related amnesia."

"You think?" Finn's voice came out sharper than he'd intended, frustration and fear bleeding through his attempt at casual dismissal. "Because I'm pretty sure normal people don't develop expertise in fields they've never studied during periods they can't remember."

"Have you talked to River about this? He might be able to provide context for some of the marine biology observations."

Finn felt heat rise in his cheeks, embarrassment mixing with defensive anger. “Right, because involving my boyfriend of one week in my ongoing mental breakdown is exactly what our relationship needs right now.”

Maya's expression shifted, becoming more pointed. “Speaking of which, don't you think you're moving pretty fast with him? I mean, he accompanied you to a medical appointment yesterday and took charge of your healthcare advocacy. That's serious relationship territory, not casual dating behavior.”

“He didn't take charge of my healthcare,” Finn protested. “He supported me when the doctor dismissed my concerns. There's a difference.”

“Is there? Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you're depending on someone you barely know to navigate a serious medical crisis.” Maya leaned forward with the intensity that meant she was about to say something he probably didn't want to hear.

“What happens if his feelings change? What happens if dealing with someone with mysterious neurological symptoms gets old?”

Finn felt something cold and sharp settle in his stomach. “River's not like that.”

“How do you know? You've known him a week, Finn. A week. That's not enough time to understand someone's character or commitment level, especially when dealing with something this serious.”

“It's enough time to know that he makes me feel safer than I have since Mom died,” Finn said, his voice rising with emotions he couldn't contain.

“It's enough time to know that he listens to my fears without dismissing them, that he takes my symptoms seriously when everyone else thinks I'm just stressed, that he looks at me like I'm worth caring about even when my brain is falling apart.”

Maya's expression softened slightly, but her concern remained evident.

“I understand that he makes you feel good, and I'm glad you've found someone who cares about you.

But depending on him this much, this quickly, isn't healthy.

What if you're just transferring the caretaking dynamic you had with Mom onto this relationship?”

He had spent years taking care of their mother, learning to anticipate her needs and manage her confusion. Maybe he was gravitating toward River's protective instincts because they felt familiar, because being taken care of was easier than figuring out how to take care of himself.

“That's not what this is,” Finn said, but his voice lacked conviction.

“Isn't it? You've been independent for two years, Finn.

You've built a successful business, maintained your own apartment, handled your finances and social life without help.

But suddenly you meet someone who offers to take care of you, and you're ready to hand over responsibility for your medical care and decision-making.”

“He's not taking responsibility for my medical care. He's supporting me through a scary situation.”

“By researching your symptoms, advocating with doctors, planning your treatment strategy.” Maya's voice was gentle but implacable. “Those are caretaking behaviors, Finn. And while they come from a good place, they're not a sustainable foundation

for a romantic relationship.”

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Finn wanted to argue, but Maya's words were hitting targets he hadn't realized were vulnerable.

He had been letting River take the lead on medical research and doctor advocacy.

He had been relying on River's scientific background to legitimize concerns that doctors dismissed when Finn raised them alone.

But that didn't mean his feelings for River were just dependency in disguise. The connection between them felt deeper than caretaking dynamics, more real than trauma bonding over his medical crisis.

"I love him," Finn said quietly, the admission surprising him with its certainty.

"Not because he takes care of me, but because of who he is.

Because he's passionate about his work and funny in unexpected ways and gentle with things that are broken.

Because when he looks at me, I feel like someone worth loving instead of someone who's falling apart."

Maya was quiet for a moment, her expression cycling through emotions Finn couldn't identify.

"I know you think you love him. But love that develops this quickly, under these circumstances, needs to be examined carefully. Are you falling for River, or are you

falling for the way he makes you feel about yourself?”

“Does it matter?”

“It matters because one is sustainable and the other isn't. If your feelings are based on how he manages your medical crisis, what happens when the crisis resolves? What happens if it gets worse and he can't handle it?”

The questions hung in the air between them, loaded with implications that made Finn's chest tight with panic.

Because Maya wasn't wrong about the timeline being compressed or the circumstances being unusual.

But she was wrong about the depth of what he felt for River, the way their connection seemed to exist independent of his medical symptoms.

“I can't believe you're asking me to choose between my relationship and my family,” Finn said, defensive anger rising to cover his fear.

“I'm not asking you to choose anything. I'm asking you to be careful about making major life decisions while you're dealing with a serious medical condition that affects your judgment and memory.”

“My judgment is fine.”

“Is it? Because you're talking about love after knowing someone for a week.

You're allowing near-strangers to make medical decisions for you.

You're experiencing episodes that suggest significant neurological dysfunction.”

Maya's voice rose with frustration and fear.

“None of that suggests your judgment is operating normally.”

Finn felt tears burning behind his eyes, overwhelmed by the combination of his sister's concerns and his own growing terror about what was happening to his mind.

“So what am I supposed to do? Push away the one person who makes me feel human because the timing isn't convenient? Live in isolation because my brain might be falling apart?”

“I'm supposed to watch you repeat Mom's pattern? Watch you get confused and lost and forget who you are?” Maya's voice cracked with emotion she'd been trying to contain. “I can't go through that again, Finn. I can't watch someone else I love disappear gradually while I stand by helplessly.”

The raw fear in her voice stopped Finn's defensive anger cold.

Maya had been his caretaker during their mother's illness, had managed medical appointments and insurance claims and the slow erosion of their family's normalcy.

She'd put her own life on hold to handle their mother's needs, and now she was watching him develop symptoms that might require the same sacrifice.

“Maya,” Finn said softly, moving toward her with hands that wanted to offer comfort. “I'm not Mom. Whatever's happening to me, it's not the same thing that happened to her.”

“You don't know that. Memory loss, confusion, behavioral changes—those were all her early symptoms too.” Maya wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, trying to regain composure.

“And you're making the same mistakes she made, isolating yourself from family while depending on someone who might not stick around when things get difficult.”

“River isn't going anywhere.”

“How can you possibly know that?”

Finn wanted to explain about the recognition he felt when he looked at River, the way their connection seemed to transcend normal relationship timelines, the sense that they'd been looking for each other without knowing it.

But explaining supernatural certainty to someone trained in psychology would only reinforce Maya's concerns about his judgment being compromised.

“I know because I trust him,” Finn said finally. “I trust what I feel when I'm with him, and I trust that he feels the same way.”

Maya studied his face with the careful attention she'd learned during their mother's illness, looking for signs of delusion or wishful thinking. “And if you're wrong? If he leaves when your condition gets worse or the novelty wears off? What then?”

“Then I'll deal with it. But I'm not going to push him away because of possibilities that might not happen.”

Maya was quiet for a long moment, clearly struggling with wanting to protect him while respecting his autonomy. “I'm setting up an appointment with a neurologist in Boston,” she said finally. “Someone who specializes in early-onset memory disorders. Will you go?”

“Yes.”

“And will you consider slowing things down with River until we have more information about what you're dealing with?”

Finn felt his chest tighten with the impossibility of that request. Slowing things down with River felt like asking him to stop breathing, like cutting off the one source of stability and joy he'd found since his mother's death.

“I'll consider it,” he said, the lie coming easier than he'd expected.

Maya nodded, clearly recognizing the non-commitment but accepting it as the best she was going to get. “I'm worried about you, Finn. Not just medically, but emotionally. You're making decisions that could affect the rest of your life based on feelings that developed under unusual circumstances.”

“I know you're worried. But I need you to trust that I'm capable of making my own choices, even if they're not the choices you'd make.”

After Maya left, Finn spent the evening alone in his apartment, surrounded by evidence of knowledge he couldn't remember acquiring and haunted by his sister's warnings about moving too fast with River.

He tried to focus on reading, on normal activities that might ground him in familiar routines, but his mind kept circling back to the impossible restoration work and the marine biology notes that suggested he'd been living a life he couldn't remember.

As night settled over Beacon Point and the lighthouse beam began its rotation, Finn's emotional turmoil reached a breaking point.

The familiar disorientation began creeping in around the edges of his consciousness, but this episode felt different from the beginning—more gradual but also more pervasive.

Instead of the sudden confusion that usually marked his episodes, reality seemed to be shifting subtly around him, like looking at the world through water that was slowly becoming more turbulent.

The walls of his apartment appeared to shimmer slightly when he wasn't looking directly at them. Books seemed to rearrange themselves on shelves just outside his direct vision. The lighting in the room shifted in ways that had nothing to do with the darkness gathering outside his windows.

Finn rubbed his eyes, thinking fatigue or stress might be affecting his perception, but the subtle wrongness persisted. Everything looked almost exactly as it should, but with tiny details that didn't match his memory of how things were supposed to be.

The coffee mug on his side table was a different color—still ceramic, still the right size and shape, but blue instead of the green he remembered buying specifically because it reminded him of sea glass.

When he picked it up to examine it more closely, it felt exactly right in his hands, perfectly familiar despite the color change.

“Okay, this is new,” Finn muttered, setting the mug down and looking around his living room for other subtle alterations.

The framed photograph on his bookshelf showed the same scene—him and Maya at last year's harvest festival—but Maya was wearing a red sweater instead of the blue one he distinctly remembered her buying specifically for the occasion.

In the photo, she looked exactly like herself, happy and relaxed, but the wrong sweater made the entire image feel like it belonged to someone else's memories.

Panic started building in Finn's chest as he noticed more small changes.

The pattern on his throw pillows was slightly different, the same general design but with details that didn't match what he remembered choosing.

A book on his coffee table had a different cover design, though the title and author were exactly right.

Everything was wrong, but only by degrees. Like someone had taken his apartment and made tiny adjustments that preserved the overall feel while changing specific details that only he would notice.

His phone trembled in his hands as he dialed River's number, desperation overriding embarrassment about calling for help with something that sounded completely insane.

“Finn?” River's voice was warm with concern, probably because Finn rarely called this late. “Everything okay?”

“I need you to come over,” Finn said, his voice shaking with fear he couldn't control. “Something's happening to my apartment. Things are changing, but they're not changing, and I can't tell what's real anymore.”

“I'm on my way,” River said immediately, without asking for details or demanding explanations. “Stay on the phone with me until I get there.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

The ten minutes it took River to drive from his cottage felt like hours while Finn sat carefully still in his reading chair, afraid that moving around might trigger more changes.

River listened without judgment, asking practical questions about what he was seeing and how he was feeling, his calm presence providing the only anchor Finn had to consensus reality.

When River arrived, he took one look at Finn's terror-stricken face and immediately wrapped him in protective arms that felt like the safest place in the universe. "Tell me what you're seeing," he said gently, his hands smoothing down Finn's back with careful tenderness.

"Everything's almost right," Finn said against River's shoulder, breathing in salt water and something purely comforting.

"The mug's the wrong color, Maya's wearing the wrong sweater in the photo, the book covers are different.

It's like someone took my life and made tiny adjustments that only I would notice."

River looked around Finn's living room with the careful attention he brought to scientific observation, then back at Finn with gentle confusion. "Everything looks exactly like it did yesterday. Same mug, same photos, same books you showed me when you were deciding what to lend me."

Finn pulled back to stare at him, then at the objects that looked completely wrong to

his eyes but apparently normal to River's. "You don't see any changes?"

"No changes at all. Everything's exactly where it was before."

The reality that River couldn't see what he was experiencing hit Finn like physical pain. Either he was losing his grip on objective reality, or the episodes were becoming so severe that they were affecting his visual perception of his environment in ways that weren't externally observable.

"I'm losing my mind," Finn whispered, the words tasting like defeat and terror.

"You're not losing your mind," River said firmly, his hands coming up to cup Finn's face with infinite gentleness. "You're experiencing symptoms of a medical condition that we're going to figure out and treat. But you're not crazy, and you're not alone."

They spent the night on Finn's couch, River holding him while he tried to reconcile the visual input his brain was providing with the logical knowledge that his apartment hadn't actually changed.

River stayed awake, monitoring Finn's condition and providing the kind of steady presence that made the impossible feel manageable.

By morning, the visual distortions had faded, leaving Finn's apartment looking exactly as it always had. But the memory of seeing changes that weren't there remained vivid and disturbing, evidence that his condition was progressing in ways that defied medical explanation.

"We need to document this," River said over coffee, his scientific mind already organizing the information into patterns that might yield understanding.

"Everything you experienced, how long it lasted, what might have triggered it. If we

can establish patterns, we might be able to predict episodes or find ways to manage them.”

Finn nodded, grateful for River's logical approach to something that felt completely beyond rational understanding. “You really think this can be figured out?”

“I think everything can be figured out if you gather enough data and ask the right questions,” River said with conviction that made Finn feel less alone with his terror. “We just need to find the right experts and the right approach.”

Three days later, Maya called with news that made Finn's chest tight with hope and apprehension in equal measure.

“I got you an appointment,” she said without preamble, her voice carrying the satisfaction of someone who'd fought bureaucracy and won. “Dr. Elena Voss at Mass General. She specializes in unusual neurological conditions, and she had a cancellation for next week.”

Finn felt his breath catch. “That fast? I thought you said it would take weeks to get in with a specialist.”

“It would, normally. But when I described your symptoms to her office, Dr. Voss specifically requested to see you. Apparently your case fits a research interest of hers.”

“What kind of research interest?”

“Memory disorders that don't fit standard diagnostic categories. Young adults developing sudden cognitive changes.” Maya's voice carried cautious optimism. “She's published papers on atypical neurological presentations that sound similar to what you're experiencing.”

River looked up from where he'd been pretending to read while obviously listening to every word of the conversation. "That's good news, right?"

"I think so," Finn said, though something about the timing felt almost too convenient. "What did you tell her office about my symptoms?"

"Just the basics—memory gaps, episodes of confusion, acquisition of knowledge during altered states. I may have mentioned that you're demonstrating expertise in fields you've never studied." Maya paused. "Why? Are you having second thoughts about seeing a specialist?"

"No, I want to see her. It's just..." Finn trailed off, unable to articulate why the idea of someone specifically requesting to see him based on his symptoms felt unsettling rather than encouraging.

"It's just that you're scared," Maya said gently. "Which is completely understandable. But Finn, we need answers. Your episodes are getting more frequent and more severe."

The appointment was scheduled for the following Tuesday, giving Finn a week to worry about what kinds of tests Dr. Voss might want to run and what those tests might reveal. River offered to drive him to Boston, an offer Finn accepted with relief that surprised him with its intensity.

"You don't have to take a whole day off work for my medical appointment," Finn said, though privately he was desperate for River's presence during what felt like a potentially life-changing consultation.

"I want to be there," River said simply. "Besides, someone needs to take notes and ask the scientific questions you might forget to ask."

The drive to Mass General passed in tense conversation about what they hoped to learn and what they feared they might discover.

Finn found himself cataloging all the ways his episodes had changed over the past weeks—becoming more frequent, lasting longer, involving more complex knowledge that he couldn't explain.

Dr. Voss turned out to be a sharp-featured woman in her forties, with silver hair and intense blue eyes that suggested intelligence and curiosity in equal measure.

Her office was filled with medical journals and case studies, but also with books on topics that seemed unrelated to neurology—maritime history, folklore, psychological research on memory and identity.

“Mr. Torres,” she said, extending a hand with professional courtesy. “Thank you for coming. Your sister described symptoms that fit a pattern I've been researching for several years.”

“What kind of pattern?” Finn asked, settling into the chair across from her desk while River took detailed notes.

“Complex neurological phenomena that don't fit standard diagnostic categories.

Episodes involving apparent access to information or skills that the conscious mind hasn't acquired through normal learning processes.” Dr. Voss opened a thick file and pulled out several research papers.

“I've documented similar cases in other patients—young adults who develop sudden expertise during altered consciousness states.”

River leaned forward with obvious scientific interest. “How many similar cases have

you documented?”

“Twelve, over the past eight years. All involving individuals between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five, all presenting with memory gaps and episodes of confusion, all demonstrating knowledge during episodes that they don't possess when fully conscious.”

Finn felt his heart rate accelerate. “And you have theories about what causes this?”

“Several theories, though nothing definitive yet. Some cases seem connected to emotional trauma or significant life changes. Others appear linked to specific geographical locations or family histories.” Dr. Voss studied Finn's face with clinical attention.

“Have you noticed any patterns in when your episodes occur? Specific triggers or circumstances that seem to precipitate them?”

“Emotional stress, sometimes. Being near the ocean.” Finn glanced at River uncertainly. “Strong feelings, whether positive or negative.”

“Interesting. And the knowledge you demonstrate during episodes—does it relate to any particular field or area of expertise?”

“Marine biology, mostly. Underwater research techniques, diving protocols, ecosystem restoration.” Finn felt heat rise in his cheeks. “Things that connect to River's work, even though I've never studied them formally.”

Dr. Voss made notes with obvious interest, her attention shifting between Finn and River in ways that felt calculating rather than purely medical. “Mr. Hayes, you're a marine biologist, correct? Have you noticed correlations between your research activities and Mr. Torres's episodes?”

“Some,” River admitted reluctantly. “Finn has demonstrated knowledge of my specific research projects during episodes, including details he shouldn't know.”

“Fascinating. This suggests a level of cognitive connection that exceeds normal information sharing between partners.” Dr. Voss gathered her notes with obvious satisfaction.

“I'd like to conduct some specialized testing to understand your brain's unique processing patterns, Mr. Torres. Nothing invasive, just some neuroimaging and cognitive assessments.”

The offer felt like a lifeline thrown to someone drowning in confusion and fear. After months of doctors dismissing his symptoms as stress, here was someone who not only understood what he was experiencing but believed it could be studied and potentially managed.

“What would that involve?” Finn asked, torn between desperate hope and growing unease about Dr. Voss's particular interest in his case.

“Standard neurological imaging, some specialized memory tests, possibly some experimental approaches to help you gain more conscious awareness during episodes.” Dr. Voss stood and moved to her bookshelf, pulling out a journal article.

“I've been developing therapeutic techniques specifically for cases like yours.”

She handed Finn the paper—a research study on “Anomalous Memory Access in Young Adults with Neurological Episodes.” Reading the abstract, Finn felt his breath catch as he recognized symptoms and experiences that matched his own almost exactly.

“Other people are experiencing this?” he asked, scanning the case studies described

in the research.

“More than you might expect. Though most cases are misdiagnosed as stress-related disorders or early-onset dementia.” Dr. Voss returned to her seat with obvious enthusiasm for her subject.

“I believe we're looking at a distinct neurological phenomenon that mainstream medicine hasn't recognized yet.”

River examined the research paper with obvious skepticism. “These are pretty extraordinary claims. Have these findings been peer-reviewed?”

“Some aspects, yes. Others are still in the preliminary research phase.” Dr. Voss's expression suggested she was accustomed to skepticism from the medical establishment. “Which is why I'm particularly interested in documenting Mr. Torres's case thoroughly.”

Finn looked between Dr. Voss and River, seeing hope and caution warring in equal measure. “If I agree to participate in your research, what exactly would that involve?”

“Regular monitoring of your episodes, some experimental therapeutic approaches, comprehensive documentation of your case for the research literature.” Dr. Voss's smile carried satisfaction that felt slightly unsettling.

“I think you'll find that understanding your condition changes everything about how you experience it.”

They left the appointment with plans for follow-up testing and a thick packet of research materials to review.

Finn felt hope mixing with apprehension in his chest—finally, someone who might

be able to explain what was happening to his mind, who might be able to help him regain some control over his own consciousness.

But River's expression remained troubled during the drive home, his scientific skepticism clearly activated by Dr. Voss's research claims and immediate interest in Finn's case.

“What are you thinking?” Finn asked as they crossed the bridge back into Beacon Point.

“I'm thinking her research is intriguing, but I want to verify her credentials and look into her published work before we commit to anything experimental,” River said carefully. “Some of her claims about memory access and cognitive connections sound more like parapsychology than neuroscience.”

“But she's the first doctor who's taken my symptoms seriously. The first person who thinks this might be treatable.”

“I know. And I want to explore every possibility that might help you.” River reached across to take Finn's hand. “I just want to make sure we approach this carefully.”

As evening light slanted through Beacon Point and the lighthouse beam prepared for another night of steady rotation, Finn realized he was standing at a crossroads that would determine everything about his future.

Trust Dr. Voss and her experimental research, risking unknown consequences for the possibility of understanding and control.

Or continue living with episodes that were becoming more severe and frequent, watching his grip on reality erode gradually.

Either choice carried enormous risks. But for the first time since his symptoms had started, Finn felt like he had options beyond slow deterioration and growing confusion.

Even if those options led him into territory more dangerous than anything he'd experienced so far.

Fractured Moments

Finn

The university archives smelled like old secrets and academic desperation, all musty books and fluorescent lighting that made everything look slightly sickly.

Dr. Voss had set up what she called a “research laboratory” in a basement room that felt more like a bunker than a medical facility, surrounded by towers of case files and equipment that looked like it belonged in a science fiction movie rather than actual healthcare.

“Thank you for coming, Finn,” Dr. Voss said, gesturing toward a chair that faced her desk like some kind of interrogation setup.

“I know this environment isn't typical for medical consultations, but my research requires privacy and specialized equipment that isn't available in standard clinical settings.”

Finn settled into the chair, trying to ignore the way the basement's concrete walls seemed to press inward and the way Dr. Voss's intense blue eyes never seemed to blink.

He'd spent three sleepless nights thinking about this appointment, alternating between desperate hope that someone finally understood his condition and growing anxiety about what that understanding might reveal.

“Before we begin,” Dr. Voss continued, opening a thick folder that contained more documentation than Finn had expected, “I want you to know that everything you tell me is completely confidential. My research exists outside normal medical channels, which means we can explore possibilities that conventional medicine might dismiss.”

“What kind of possibilities?”

“Neurological phenomena that don't fit standard diagnostic categories. Conditions that involve the brain accessing information or experiences outside normal conscious awareness.” Dr. Voss leaned forward with obvious fascination.

“Tell me about your first episode. When did you notice something unusual happening?”

Finn found himself describing his symptoms with more detail than he'd shared with any previous doctor, encouraged by Dr. Voss's obvious interest and lack of dismissive skepticism.

She took extensive notes, asking follow-up questions about timing, emotional triggers, and family medical history with the thoroughness of someone who genuinely believed his experiences mattered.

“Your mother's condition,” Dr. Voss said after Finn finished describing his family background, “was diagnosed as early-onset dementia, correct? But did doctors ever consider alternative explanations for her symptoms?”

“Alternative explanations?”

“Memory disorders that involve accessing rather than losing information. Conditions where the mind experiences confusion about temporal boundaries rather than simple cognitive decline.” Dr. Voss pulled out a brain scan image, pointing to highlighted

areas with obvious expertise.

“These are scans from patients with similar symptoms to yours. Notice the unusual activity in the temporal lobe region.”

Finn stared at the brain images, feeling a mixture of validation and terror.

Finally, someone was treating his condition as medically legitimate rather than stress-related nonsense.

But seeing physical evidence of neurological abnormality made the reality of his situation hit with devastating force.

“So this is real,” he said quietly. “I’m not just losing my mind from grief or anxiety.”

“Your experiences are absolutely real, and they have a neurological basis that can be studied and potentially managed.” Dr. Voss’s expression was professionally sympathetic but also contained something that looked like scientific excitement.

“The question is whether you’re willing to participate in experimental treatment approaches.”

“What kind of experimental approaches?”

“Techniques I’ve developed for helping patients gain conscious awareness during episodes, methods for documenting and understanding the information accessed during altered states.” Dr. Voss gathered the brain scans with careful hands.

“I should mention that you’re not my first patient with these symptoms. There are others, and some have made remarkable progress.”

The offer of hope felt like oxygen to someone who'd been suffocating. "How many others?"

"Enough to establish patterns, to understand that this condition, while rare, is manageable with proper support and intervention." Dr. Voss closed her folder with obvious satisfaction.

"I'd like to schedule regular sessions with you, document your episodes more thoroughly, begin developing individualized treatment strategies."

Finn nodded eagerly, desperate for anything that might help him understand what was happening to his mind. "Yes. Whatever you think will help."

"Excellent. We'll start with detailed monitoring of your episodes, then progress to more active interventions." Dr. Voss stood, indicating the session was concluding. "In the meantime, keep a detailed journal of any unusual experiences. The more data we have, the better we can help you."

Walking back to his bookshop through Beacon Point's quiet streets, Finn felt lighter than he had in months. Finally, someone who understood his condition, who believed it could be treated, who saw him as a medical case worth solving rather than a young man having an extended grief reaction.

But the relief was complicated by growing fear about what Dr. Voss's research might reveal about his future, about whether the condition would progress like his mother's had, about what it meant to have a rare neurological disorder that existed outside normal medical understanding.

The bookshop felt different when Finn returned, charged with activity he couldn't remember participating in.

His customer log showed a full day of sales and interactions, detailed notes in his handwriting about conversations and book recommendations that should have been memorable but existed in a complete blank space in his memory.

“What the hell,” Finn muttered, flipping through pages of documentation that suggested he'd had a perfectly normal, productive day of work while his conscious mind had apparently been elsewhere entirely.

The notes were thorough and personal, demonstrating the kind of customer service that required genuine engagement and attention.

Recommendations for specific customers based on their interests, follow-up questions about previous purchases, even personal observations about regulars who'd been dealing with family issues or health problems.

Mrs. Chen seemed much better today. She mentioned her arthritis is improving with the new medication, and she's ready to tackle more challenging mystery novels.

Recommended the Louise Penny series starting with “Still Life.” She lit up when I mentioned the small-town setting would remind her of her childhood in rural Vermont.

Finn read the note three times, trying to summon any memory of Mrs. Chen's visit or their conversation about her health and reading preferences.

Nothing. The interaction had apparently happened while his consciousness was somewhere else entirely, leaving only evidence that some version of himself had been present and engaged.

The bell above the door chimed, and Finn looked up to see Mrs. Patterson entering with her usual cheerful energy, her arms full of the romance novels she devoured like

literary candy.

“Finn, dear,” she said, approaching the counter with obvious warmth, “I just wanted to thank you again for our lovely chat yesterday. You were so sweet to listen to me ramble about Harold, and your suggestion about the grief support group was exactly what I needed to hear.”

Finn felt his stomach drop into his shoes. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Patterson. Yesterday?”

“When I was telling you about missing Harold’s voice, how quiet the house feels without him humming off-key in the shower.” Mrs. Patterson’s expression shifted to concern at Finn’s obvious confusion.

“You suggested I might benefit from talking to other widows who understand what it’s like to lose someone after forty-three years of marriage.”

“I... yes, of course,” Finn managed, though panic was rising in his chest like flood water. “I’m glad the suggestion was helpful.”

Mrs. Patterson chatted for a few more minutes about her progress with grief counseling and her gratitude for Finn’s compassionate listening, then left with her weekly selection of happily-ever-afters.

Finn stood behind his counter, shaking with the realization that he’d apparently provided meaningful support to someone during a period he couldn’t remember experiencing.

His phone buzzed with a text from River:

River

How did the appointment with Dr. Voss go? Want to grab dinner and talk about it?

Finn's hands trembled as he typed back:

Finn

Can you come to the shop? I need to see you. Something's happening.

River

On my way.

The fifteen minutes it took River to arrive felt like hours while Finn sat among evidence of a day he'd lived but couldn't access, wondering how much of his life was happening without his conscious participation.

Was he becoming a spectator in his own existence, watching from the sidelines while some other version of himself handled daily responsibilities and human connections?

When River burst through the door with obvious concern written across his face, Finn felt something inside him break apart with relief and terror.

“What's wrong?” River asked, moving immediately to Finn's side with the kind of protective instincts that made Finn's chest ache with gratitude and fear.

“I lost an entire day,” Finn said, his voice cracking with emotions he couldn't contain.

“I apparently had customers, made sales, had meaningful conversations with people about their personal lives, and I can't remember any of it.

Mrs. Patterson just thanked me for helping her process her grief over her dead

husband, and I have no fucking idea what she's talking about.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

River's expression cycled through concern and growing alarm as Finn showed him the customer notes and described Mrs. Patterson's visit. "This is more extensive than your previous episodes."

"It's getting worse, River. I'm disappearing piece by piece, and I don't know how to stop it." Finn felt tears burning behind his eyes, months of accumulated fear finally overwhelming his ability to maintain composure.

"What if I end up like my mom? What if I forget who you are, forget who I am, just drift away until there's nothing left?"

"Hey," River said, pulling Finn into his arms with the kind of gentle strength that made everything feel temporarily manageable. "That's not going to happen. We're going to figure this out."

"How can you know that?" Finn asked against River's shoulder, breathing in salt water and warmth while his world felt like it was disintegrating around him.

"Because I'm not letting you disappear. Because Dr. Voss thinks your condition can be treated.

Because whatever's happening to you, we're facing it together." River's hands moved in soothing circles across Finn's back, and Finn felt some of the panic ease despite the impossibility of their situation.

But as River held him, Finn experienced something that felt like déjà vu but deeper, more specific.

The exact pressure of River's arms, the particular way his hand settled at the base of Finn's neck, the rhythm of his breathing against Finn's temple—all of it felt familiar in ways that suggested this comfort had been provided before, many times, under similar circumstances.

“This feels like we've done this before,” Finn said without thinking, then immediately regretted voicing something that sounded completely insane.

River went still for a moment, his hands pausing in their gentle movement. “What do you mean?”

“I don't know. It just feels familiar, like muscle memory or something.

Like my body remembers being comforted by you even though my mind doesn't have those memories.” Finn pulled back to look at River's face, noting the way his green eyes held something that looked like recognition mixed with confusion.

“That's probably just because you feel safe with me,” River said, but his voice carried uncertainty that suggested he'd experienced the same sense of familiarity.

Before Finn could respond, the room began to shift around him with the now-familiar sensation of reality becoming fluid. But this episode felt different—shorter, more targeted. Instead of general disorientation, Finn experienced a moment of expecting River to know things he hadn't told him yet.

“She thinks the episodes are connected to emotional intensity, especially around our relationship. She wants to monitor how being with you affects my temporal—” Finn heard himself saying, though he was pretty sure he hadn't decided to speak.

Finn stopped abruptly, his conscious mind catching up with words he didn't remember choosing. River was staring at him with obvious concern and growing

confusion.

“Finn,” River said carefully, “you never told me what Dr. Voss said about your condition. You just said something was happening when you texted me.”

The realization that he'd been about to share information from a conversation River hadn't been part of sent ice through Finn's veins. “I think I just had another episode. A small one, but I was about to tell you things.”

River's expression grew more troubled. “These episodes are becoming more complex, more specific. We need to document everything and get you more comprehensive help.”

“Dr. Voss wants to do more testing, regular sessions to monitor my condition.” Finn wiped his eyes with shaking hands. “She thinks it can be managed.”

“That's good news. But in the meantime, I don't want you staying alone. Not when you're losing chunks of time and experiencing reality distortions.” River's protective instincts were clearly in full gear. “Come stay at my place tonight. I want to keep an eye on you.”

The offer of River's cottage, of safety and companionship and the steady rhythm of the lighthouse beam, felt like salvation. “Are you sure? I don't want to be a burden.”

“You're not a burden. You're the person I care about most, and I'm not letting you face this alone.” River's voice was firm with conviction that made Finn's chest warm despite his terror about what was happening to his mind.

River's cottage welcomed Finn like a sanctuary, all warm light and ocean views and the particular comfort that came from being in spaces designed by someone who understood the healing power of natural beauty.

Finn found himself moving toward the ocean-facing windows with automatic navigation, drawn to the lighthouse beam beginning its evening rotation with inexplicable familiarity.

“It's starting,” Finn observed, watching the light sweep across the water in its eternal pattern. “The lighthouse, I mean. I love watching it begin the night cycle.”

River paused in hanging up their jackets, something shifting in his expression. “Night cycle?”

“The rotation pattern. It's different at night than during the day, slower and more deliberate.” Finn realized he was sharing knowledge he didn't remember learning. “The beam is designed to provide maximum visibility for ships navigating coastal waters during hours of reduced natural light.”

“Finn,” River said carefully, “the lighthouse is fully automated. It runs the same pattern twenty-four hours a day. There's no day and night cycle difference.”

The correction should have embarrassed Finn, but instead it filled him with confused certainty that his information was accurate. Somewhere in his mind, he possessed detailed knowledge about lighthouse operations that contradicted what River was telling him.

“Maybe I read it somewhere,” Finn said, though the explanation felt inadequate for the specificity of his knowledge.

They prepared dinner together in River's compact kitchen, and Finn found himself moving through the space with startling familiarity.

He knew without looking where River kept his good olive oil, which cabinet contained the spices, how to adjust the stove's temperamental burner that required

specific handling.

“You're getting comfortable in my kitchen,” River observed, watching Finn locate ingredients without guidance.

“It's a well-organized space,” Finn replied, though privately he was disturbed by how natural River's kitchen felt, like he'd cooked there dozens of times instead of just a handful.

Over dinner, River asked gentle questions about Dr. Voss's assessment and treatment recommendations, his scientific background making him probe for details about methodology and evidence base.

Finn found himself describing the appointment with growing confidence, encouraged by River's obvious interest and lack of skepticism.

“She showed me brain scans from other patients with similar symptoms,” Finn said, surprised by how much hope he felt discussing his condition. “Real neurological evidence that what I'm experiencing has a physical basis.”

“That must have been validating after months of being told it was just stress.”

“Incredible validating. And terrifying, because it means this is real and probably progressive.” Finn set down his fork, appetite disappearing as the implications hit him again. “But at least now I have hope that it can be understood and managed.”

“What kind of management strategies did she suggest?”

“Regular monitoring sessions, detailed documentation of episodes, eventually some experimental approaches to help me gain conscious awareness during altered states.” Finn hesitated, then decided to voice his growing fear.

“River, what if the treatment doesn't work? What if this condition just keeps progressing until I lose myself completely?”

River reached across the table to take Finn's hand, his touch warm and steady. “Then we adapt. We find ways to support you through whatever comes next. But we're not giving up hope before we've even tried.”

The simple promise of continued support, regardless of what his condition might mean for their future, broke something loose in Finn's chest. “I love you,” he said, the words emerging without conscious decision but feeling absolutely true.

River's eyes widened slightly, not with surprise but with recognition, as if he'd been waiting for those specific words. “I love you too. More than I thought possible after such a short time.”

“It doesn't feel like a short time, does it?” Finn asked. “It feels like we've been building toward this conversation for much longer than we've actually known each other.”

“It feels like coming home to someone I've been looking for without knowing I was searching,” River agreed, his thumb stroking across Finn's knuckles with gentle insistence.

That night, River offered his bed while insisting he'd take the couch, but Finn's anxiety about sleeping alone in an unfamiliar space made River reconsider.

They settled together in River's bed with careful distance that gradually dissolved as Finn curled against River's warmth, seeking the comfort that seemed to quiet his racing thoughts.

“Thank you,” Finn whispered against River's shoulder as the lighthouse beam swept

through the bedroom windows. “For not thinking I'm crazy, for not running away, for making me feel less alone with all this.”

“Thank you for trusting me with it,” River replied, his arms tightening around Finn with protective tenderness. “Whatever happens with your condition, whatever Dr. Voss's treatment involves, we're in this together.”

The steady rhythm of the lighthouse beam and River's breathing gradually lulled Finn toward sleep, his body relaxing for the first time in weeks.

But as consciousness faded, he experienced a moment of profound recognition—not just of River's presence, but of this exact comfort, this specific safety, this particular peace that came from sleeping in River's arms while the lighthouse kept its faithful watch.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Morning brought confusion wrapped in embarrassment and tied with a bow of complete bewilderment.

Finn stirred in River's bed, warm and comfortable and gradually becoming aware that something was wrong.

Not wrong in a bad way—wrong in a way that suggested he'd done something significant during the night without any memory of the activity.

On the nightstand beside River's bed sat a letter written in Finn's unmistakable handwriting, several pages of elegant script that demonstrated the kind of emotional intensity usually reserved for love letters or suicide notes.

But Finn had no memory of writing anything, let alone the detailed correspondence that bore his signature.

River was already awake, sitting up in bed with the letter in his hands, his expression cycling through emotions Finn couldn't identify.

Confusion, certainly. Concern, obviously.

But also something that looked like recognition, as if the letter contained information that connected to knowledge River already possessed.

“Did I write that last night?” Finn asked, though the evidence was undeniable.

“I woke up around three AM and found you sitting at my desk, writing with complete

absorption. You seemed fully awake and purposeful, not like you were sleepwalking or confused.” River's voice was carefully controlled, but Finn could hear underlying tension. “Do you remember any of it?”

“Nothing.” Finn held out his hand for the letter, dreading what he might have revealed during another episode. “What does it say?”

River hesitated before handing over the pages, his reluctance suggesting the content was either deeply personal or completely disturbing. Finn read his own words with growing horror and confusion:

My dearest River,

I don't know why I'm writing this or how I know the things I'm about to tell you, but something in my mind is insisting these words need to exist on paper. Maybe it's another symptom of whatever's happening to my brain, but it feels more like remembering than imagining.

I know about the storm that took your father when you were sixteen.

I know you were supposed to go on that rescue mission with him, but you had the flu and stayed home.

I know you still wake up sometimes thinking you hear the Coast Guard radio crackling with emergency calls, and that you check the weather obsessively before any diving expedition because you're terrified of being caught off guard the way he was.

I know about the scar on your left shoulder from when you fell off the dock trying to impress Sarah McKenna when you were fourteen, and how your father bandaged it while lecturing you about showing off for girls.

I know you keep his dive knife in your equipment bag even though the blade is too worn to be useful, because it makes you feel like he's still watching out for you underwater.

I know that you talk to marine specimens when you think no one is listening, the same way your father used to talk to his rescue equipment before difficult missions.

I know you chose marine biology partly because the ocean took him from you, but mostly because it was the last place you felt connected to who he was.

I don't understand how I know these things, River.

They feel like memories, but they're not mine.

They feel like conversations we've had, but we haven't.

I'm scared that my condition is worse than anyone realizes, that I'm losing the ability to distinguish between what's real and what my damaged brain is creating.

But I'm more scared that I'll forget you the way my mother forgot me. I'm scared that whatever's happening to my mind will take away the best thing that's ever happened to me before I've had time to fully understand what we have together.

I love you. I know it's too soon and too intense and probably evidence that my judgment is completely compromised, but I love you with a certainty that feels older than our relationship timeline. If I forget everything else, I hope I remember that.

Always yours,

Finn

“This is impossible,” Finn whispered, staring at words that demonstrated understanding of River's private history that no one should possess.

“You never told me about Sarah McKenna or the scar on your shoulder.

I've never seen your father's dive knife or heard you talk about feeling connected to him through your work.”

River's face had gone very pale, his green eyes wide with something that looked like fear mixed with impossible recognition.

“Everything in that letter is accurate. Details I've never shared with anyone, memories I thought were completely private.

Even my sister doesn't know about some of these things.”

“How could I know them?”

“I don't know. But Finn...” River's voice dropped to almost a whisper. “This isn't just lucky guessing or intuitive understanding. This is intimate knowledge that would require either extensive surveillance or...” He trailed off, unable to voice the supernatural implications.

“Or what?”

“Or something that conventional medicine can't explain.”

Finn felt the world tilt sideways, reality becoming unstable in ways that had nothing to do with his medical condition. “What are you saying?”

“I'm saying maybe your episodes aren't just neurological phenomena.

Maybe they're something else entirely, something that conventional medicine can't explain or treat." River took the letter back, studying it with the careful attention he brought to scientific data.

"And I'm saying that if that's true, we need to be very careful about who we trust with this information."

The implication hung between them like a sword waiting to fall. If Finn's condition wasn't purely medical, if it involved accessing information from impossible sources, then Dr. Voss's research might not be the salvation he'd hoped for.

It might be something much more dangerous.

Ripple Effects

Finn

The bookshop bell announced Maya's arrival with its usual cheerful chime, but there was nothing cheerful about the way she moved through the door like a woman on a mission to save someone from themselves.

Finn looked up from the restoration project he'd been pretending to work on—another piece he apparently couldn't remember starting—and felt his stomach drop at the expression on his sister's face.

“We need to talk,” Maya said without preamble, her psychology training evident in the way she controlled her tone despite obvious emotional distress. “Now.”

“Hello to you too,” Finn said, attempting lightness that fell flat in the face of Maya's obvious concern. “What's got you looking like you're about to stage an intervention?”

“Mrs. Patterson called me yesterday. She's worried about you.” Maya settled into the chair across from his workstation with the careful attention of someone preparing for battle.

“She said you seemed confused during your conversation, that you asked her the same questions multiple times and didn't seem to remember things she'd told you just minutes before.”

Finn felt heat creep up his neck. “Mrs. Patterson is eighty-three and probably

confused herself about what happened.”

“Then there's Mr. Maury, who said you recommended the same book to him three times in one visit, each time like it was the first time you'd thought of it.

And Sarah from the coffee shop mentioned you seemed disoriented when you went in for your usual order, like you couldn't remember what you usually ordered.” Maya's voice was getting tighter with each example.

“Finn, people are noticing. Your condition is becoming public.”

“So what if I'm having some memory issues? Everyone forgets things.”

“Everyone doesn't have entire conversations they can't remember having.

Everyone doesn't complete professional work with no recollection of doing it.

Everyone doesn't—” Maya's voice cracked slightly.

“Everyone doesn't scare the people who care about them by disappearing mentally while their body goes through the motions.”

Finn wanted to argue, but the evidence was mounting in ways he couldn't dismiss.

His condition was no longer something he could hide or downplay.

It was affecting his interactions with customers, his professional competence, his ability to maintain the basic social connections that kept his business running.

“I'm managing,” he said, though the words sounded unconvincing even to himself.

“Are you? Because from where I'm sitting, it looks like you're pretending everything is fine while your life falls apart around you.” Maya leaned forward with the intensity that meant she was about to say something he really didn't want to hear.

“Maybe it's time to consider more structured care.

Someone to help you manage daily tasks, monitor your episodes, ensure you're safe when these memory gaps happen.”

The suggestion hit Finn like ice water, triggering every fear he'd been carrying since his mother's diagnosis. “Structured care? You mean supervised care. You mean treating me like I'm incompetent to manage my own life.”

“I mean protecting you from the consequences of a condition that's obviously getting worse.” Maya's voice rose with frustration and fear.

“What happens when you're working with dangerous restoration chemicals and have an episode?

What happens when you're driving and lose time?

What happens when you can't remember basic safety procedures?”

“What happens when you decide I'm too broken to live independently and I end up in some facility being managed by strangers who don't give a shit about who I am?” Finn's voice came out sharper than he'd intended, months of accumulated terror bleeding through his attempt at rational discussion.

“That's not what I'm suggesting?—”

“Isn't it? Because that's exactly what happened to Mom.

First it was 'just some help around the house,' then it was 'supervised activities,' then it was a fucking memory care unit where she forgot who we were and died surrounded by people who called her by the wrong name.” Finn was on his feet now, pacing behind his workstation like a caged animal.

“I'm not going down that path, Maya. I'm not giving up control of my life because my brain is acting weird.”

“Your brain isn't acting weird, Finn. You have a serious neurological condition that's progressing faster than you want to admit.” Maya's voice was thick with tears she was trying not to shed. “I can't watch you deteriorate while pretending everything is manageable. I can't go through that again.”

The raw pain in her voice stopped Finn's defensive anger cold.

Maya had watched their mother disappear gradually, had managed the practical details of progressive cognitive decline while trying to maintain hope that treatment might help.

Now she was watching him develop symptoms that looked terrifyingly familiar, and her protective instincts were colliding with his desperate need for autonomy.

“I'm not Mom,” Finn said more gently. “Whatever's happening to me, it's different. Dr. Voss thinks it can be managed.”

“Dr. Voss is researching experimental treatments for a condition that might not even exist. You're betting your safety and independence on someone whose credentials you haven't even verified.” Maya wiped her eyes with angry swipes.

“What if she's wrong? What if her treatments make things worse?”

What if you're just postponing the inevitable while putting yourself at risk?"

"Then at least I'm making my own choices about my care instead of having decisions made for me by people who think they know what's best."

"And what about River? How long do you think he's going to stick around when your condition gets worse? When the episodes become more frequent and severe? When caring for you becomes a full-time job that interferes with his research and his life?"

The question hit Finn's deepest fears with surgical accuracy.

He'd been wondering the same thing, lying awake at night terrified that River's feelings would change when the reality of his condition became clear.

That the man who'd fallen for the charming bookshop owner wouldn't want to deal with someone whose brain was systematically betraying them both.

"River's not going anywhere," Finn said, but his voice lacked conviction.

"How can you know that? You've been together less than two weeks, and you're already depending on him for medical advocacy, emotional support, and basic reality testing. That's not sustainable, Finn. It's not fair to either of you."

"It's not fair for you to show up here and demand I give up my independence because you're scared of watching another family member get sick." Finn's voice was rising again, grief and terror making him cruel.

"I'm not asking you to take care of me the way you took care of Mom.

I'm not asking you to sacrifice your life for mine."

“But you're asking River to do exactly that,” Maya shot back. “You're asking someone who barely knows you to manage a medical crisis that trained professionals can't even diagnose properly.”

The accusation hung between them like a blade, cutting through Finn's defenses to expose fears he'd been trying to ignore.

Maybe Maya was right about his relationship with River moving too fast, becoming too dependent, asking too much of someone who hadn't signed up for progressive neurological decline.

“Get out,” Finn said quietly, exhaustion replacing anger as his emotional resources hit their limit. “Just go, Maya. I can't do this right now.”

“Finn—”

“Go. Please. Before we say things we can't take back.”

Maya left with tears streaming down her face, and Finn stood alone in his workshop surrounded by evidence of work he couldn't remember doing, wondering if everyone he loved was going to abandon him or if he was going to drive them away first to avoid the pain of watching them leave.

The emotional turmoil felt like a physical storm building in his chest, pressure and electricity that made the air around him seem to vibrate with potential energy.

Finn recognized the warning signs from previous episodes, but this time the approaching displacement felt different—bigger, more comprehensive, like a wave that would sweep away everything in its path.

The episode hit like stepping through a doorway into a parallel life.

One moment Finn was standing in his workshop surrounded by familiar tools and half-finished projects, and the next he was in the same space but everything was subtly different—brighter, more organized, filled with work that demonstrated expertise he'd never developed.

But this wasn't like his previous episodes. Instead of brief confusion or partial displacement, Finn found himself fully aware that he was experiencing something impossible while simultaneously living it as if it were completely normal.

He was himself, but he was also a version of himself who had made different choices, developed different skills, built a different life.

The knowledge existed in his mind alongside his actual memories, creating a strange double consciousness where he could access both versions of his experience simultaneously.

In this reality, his mother's illness had been diagnosed earlier, treated more successfully.

She was still alive, living in a comfortable assisted care facility where she maintained most of her cognitive function and could still recognize him during visits.

The crushing grief that had defined Finn's last two years simply didn't exist here, replaced by manageable sadness about her condition but also ongoing hope for her recovery.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

His relationship with Maya was different too—closer, less fraught with unresolved trauma from their mother's death. They worked together more as a team, supporting each other through their mother's illness instead of Maya carrying most of the burden while Finn struggled with guilt and helplessness.

And River. In this version of reality, they'd met under completely different circumstances.

Finn had been volunteering for marine conservation efforts, had encountered River during a research expedition rather than stumbling into his life during a personal crisis.

Their relationship had developed slowly over months of shared environmental work, built on common interests and mutual respect rather than Finn's desperate need for stability.

They were together in this reality, but their connection felt fundamentally different—more balanced, less intense, developed through normal relationship progression rather than crisis bonding.

River wasn't trying to fix Finn's medical problems because Finn didn't have medical problems. Instead, they were equal partners working toward shared goals, supporting each other's professional development and personal growth.

“The reef restoration data looks promising,” River said, appearing in the workshop doorway with enthusiasm that felt familiar but focused on different concerns than Finn was used to. “The kelp transplantation is showing better survival rates than we

projected.”

Finn heard himself responding with detailed knowledge about marine biology that he'd apparently developed through years of conservation work. The conversation flowed naturally, both of them contributing expertise and insights, neither carrying the weight of medical crises or neurological symptoms.

But even as Finn experienced this alternate reality with full sensory detail and emotional engagement, part of his consciousness remained aware that it wasn't real.

He could feel the episode happening, could sense the temporal displacement that was allowing him to access experiences that belonged to a different version of his life.

The strange thing was how appealing this alternate reality felt.

In this version of his life, he wasn't struggling with mysterious neurological symptoms or depending on someone he barely knew for emotional stability.

His relationships were healthier, his professional life was thriving, and his future felt hopeful instead of terrifying.

But it also felt less intense, less vital than the reality he actually inhabited.

The love between him and River in this alternate timeline was genuine but not desperate, comfortable but not transcendent.

They cared about each other deeply, but without the fierce protectiveness and consuming need that characterized their actual relationship.

The episode lasted what felt like hours but was probably only minutes, giving Finn extensive access to experiences and memories that belonged to this other version of

his life.

He attended their mother's birthday party at the care facility, watched Maya graduate from her doctoral program without the stress of managing family medical crises, celebrated professional achievements with River that felt satisfying but not life-changing.

When reality snapped back into focus, Finn found himself sitting on his workshop floor with tears streaming down his face and a bone-deep sense of loss that felt like grieving for someone who'd died.

The experiences he'd just lived through had felt completely real, more vivid and detailed than normal memories, but they were gone now, leaving only echoes and the devastating awareness of how different his life could have been.

River found him twenty minutes later, having rushed over after Finn failed to answer repeated phone calls. He burst through the workshop door like a man expecting to find disaster, his face cycling through relief and alarm when he saw Finn sitting on the floor with obvious signs of distress.

“Jesus, Finn, what happened?” River dropped to his knees beside Finn, hands moving over him with gentle urgency, checking for injury or signs of physical distress. “I’ve been calling for an hour.”

“Episode,” Finn managed, his voice hoarse from crying over experiences that hadn't actually happened but felt more real than most of his actual memories. “Really long one. Really intense. I think I was gone for... how long was I gone?”

“Your last text was around noon, and it's almost three now.” River helped Finn move to his workstation chair, noting the way his hands shook and his coordination seemed impaired. “What did you experience?”

Finn tried to explain what he'd seen and felt during the displacement, but the words felt inadequate for the scope of what he'd experienced.

How could he describe an entire alternate life that had felt completely real but couldn't have happened?

How could he articulate the profound sense of loss for experiences that had never occurred?

“It was like living a completely different version of my life,” Finn said finally.

“Same people, same basic circumstances, but everything was different. Mom was still alive and recovering, Maya and I had a better relationship, we met under completely different circumstances and developed our relationship slowly over months instead of weeks.”

River's expression was carefully controlled, but Finn caught flickers of something that might have been recognition, as if the described alternate reality resonated with him in ways that should have been impossible.

“The details you're describing,” River said slowly, “do they feel like memories or like dreams?”

“Like memories. Like things that really happened, even though I know they couldn't have.” Finn wiped his eyes with shaking hands.

“River, what if my episodes aren't just neurological dysfunction?

What if I'm somehow accessing alternate versions of my life? Different timelines where things happened differently?”

The suggestion sounded insane even as Finn voiced it, but River didn't immediately dismiss the possibility.

Instead, he looked thoughtful in the way that suggested his scientific mind was processing information that challenged conventional understanding while also trying to find rational explanations for impossible experiences.

“That would explain some of the knowledge you've demonstrated,” River said carefully. “Details about my life that you shouldn't know, familiarity with places and experiences you've never had in this reality.”

“It would also mean I'm completely losing my grip on what's real and what isn't.”

“Or it would mean reality is more complex than we understand.” River helped Finn stand, noting how unsteady he remained. “But right now, what matters is that these episodes are getting more severe and lasting longer. We need better medical intervention.”

Finn wanted to argue, but the devastating aftermath of the episode had left him feeling fragile in ways that made independence seem less important than safety. Maybe Maya was right about needing more structured support. Maybe he was beyond the point where he could manage his condition alone.

“I'm scared, River,” Finn admitted. “Not just about the episodes, but about what they mean for us. What if the version of our relationship I experienced during the episode is more real than what we have? What if this intense, desperate love is just a symptom of my condition rather than something genuine?”

“Then we deal with whatever comes,” River said with quiet determination that felt like an anchor in stormy waters. “But we don't borrow trouble from possibilities that might not happen.”

The next morning brought Mrs. Pemberton, arriving at precisely nine AM with the kind of expectant smile that made Finn's chest tight with dread.

She moved through the bookshop with the careful steps of someone who valued every object around her, her elderly hands gentle on the spines of books as she made her way to his workshop.

“I'm so sorry to bother you, dear,” she said, settling into the chair across from his workstation with obvious excitement.

“But I was wondering if you might have any updates on my husband's journal?”

I know we discussed it being a challenging restoration, but I've been thinking about it so much lately.”

Finn stared at her blankly, panic rising in his chest as he tried to summon any memory of her husband, her journal, or any conversation they might have had about restoration work. “Mrs. Pemberton, I'm so sorry, but could you remind me exactly what journal you're referring to?”

Her face fell slightly, disappointment mixing with concern. “Harold's maritime journal from his merchant marine days. I brought it to you about three weeks ago after the basement flooding damaged so many of our family papers.”

She reached into her handbag and pulled out a photograph showing water-damaged pages covered in faded handwriting, the kind of personal historical document that represented irreplaceable family memories.

“You said you thought you could save most of the text, that it would take time but the damage wasn't as extensive as I'd feared.”

Finn nodded and smiled while internally screaming, having no memory of this conversation or any record of receiving such an important family document.

The photograph showed exactly the kind of challenging restoration work he specialized in, but he had no recollection of agreeing to take on the project.

“I’ve been having some organizational issues with my current projects,” Finn said, hoping his voice sounded more confident than he felt. “Could I check my records and get back to you with a proper status update?”

Mrs. Pemberton's expression shifted from enthusiasm to worry. “Of course, dear. But Finn, are you feeling alright? You seem different than when we spoke before. More... distant.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

The gentle concern in her voice made Finn's throat tight with emotion he couldn't afford to show.

Mrs. Pemberton had been coming to his shop for years, had trusted him with family documents and personal treasures, had developed the kind of relationship that made his work feel meaningful rather than merely commercial.

Now he was failing her in ways that went beyond simple business incompetence. He was betraying the trust of someone who'd counted on his expertise and reliability, all because his brain was systematically erasing interactions and commitments that mattered.

"I'm fine, just a bit scattered lately with some health issues," Finn said, the partial truth tasting bitter. "I'll locate your husband's journal and call you with a proper update by tomorrow."

After Mrs. Pemberton left with obvious disappointment and growing worry, Finn sat in his empty workshop and faced the reality that his condition was destroying not just his professional life but his sense of himself as someone reliable and trustworthy.

He couldn't restore books he couldn't remember receiving.

He couldn't maintain relationships built on expertise and care when he forgot conversations and promises made during episodes.

His phone rang with River's name on the display, and Finn answered with relief at hearing a familiar voice that still felt safe and grounding.

“How are you feeling today?” River asked, his concern evident even through the phone connection.

“Like I'm watching my life fall apart in real time,” Finn said honestly. “I just had a customer ask about work I apparently agreed to do but have no memory of accepting. She trusted me with her late husband's journal, and I can't even remember her bringing it to me.”

“That's rough. But Finn, maybe it's time to consider temporarily closing the shop. Just until we can get your condition under better control.”

The suggestion felt like admitting defeat, but continuing to operate while having episodes that affected his professional competence wasn't fair to customers or sustainable for his reputation.

The bookshop was his identity, his livelihood, his connection to meaningful work, but he couldn't risk further damage to relationships with people who trusted him with irreplaceable materials.

“You're right,” Finn said quietly. “I need to close, at least temporarily. Which means I need to figure out how to survive financially while pursuing treatment that might not even work.”

“You don't have to figure out the financial implications alone,” River said gently. “I can help cover essential expenses while you focus on getting better.”

The offer should have been comforting, but instead it highlighted how much Finn had come to depend on River for everything from emotional stability to practical problem-solving.

Maya's accusations about unsustainable relationship dynamics echoed in his mind,

mixing guilt with gratitude in ways that made his chest tight with complicated emotions.

“I can't ask you to support me. We've barely been together any time at all, River. That's not something you take on for someone you've known two weeks.”

“It's not about timelines or obligations,” River said firmly. “It's about caring what happens to you and wanting to help however I can.”

“But what if Maya's right? What if I'm asking too much of you? What if my condition gets worse and you realize you signed up for more than you can handle?”

River was quiet for a moment, and Finn could almost hear him thinking through the implications of the question. “Do you want to slow things down? Do you want to try to establish more normal boundaries?”

The idea of creating distance from the person who made him feel safe and grounded felt impossible, but maybe that was exactly the problem. Maybe his inability to imagine functioning without River's support was evidence that Maya's concerns were valid.

“I don't know what I want,” Finn admitted. “I just know that I'm scared of losing you, and I'm scared of destroying what we have by needing too much too soon.”

“Then let's figure out how to make this work sustainably,” River said. “Not by creating artificial distance or pretending we don't care about each other, but by building something that can weather whatever comes next.”

Two days later, Finn found himself packing a bag for an extended stay at River's cottage, trying to convince himself that this was a practical solution rather than evidence of complete dependence on someone he'd known for such a short time.

The lighthouse cottage welcomed him with familiar warmth—ocean views and comfortable furniture and the steady rhythm of the beacon that had begun to feel like home in ways that should have taken months to develop.

But along with the comfort came growing awareness of how much his life had reorganized itself around River's stability and support.

“This feels like giving up my independence,” Finn said, settling his belongings in River's bedroom while trying not to notice how natural it felt to see his clothes hanging beside River's in the closet.

“This feels like accepting help when you need it,” River corrected, though his voice carried understanding of Finn's complicated feelings about the arrangement.

They established routines designed to help Finn stay grounded—regular meal times, constant communication about his mental state, activities that might reduce the emotional stress that seemed to trigger episodes.

River approached Finn's care with methodical attention, documenting patterns and adjusting strategies based on what seemed most effective.

“This is nice,” Finn said that evening as they prepared dinner together, noting how naturally they moved around each other in the kitchen, how easily their conversation flowed between serious topics and gentle humor.

“It is nice,” River agreed. “But Maya wasn't completely wrong about the timing being unusual. Most people don't move in together while managing medical crises after knowing each other for two weeks.”

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“I’m having thoughts about whether we’re building something sustainable or just responding to crisis.” River paused in chopping vegetables, his expression thoughtful. “But no, I’m not having second thoughts about wanting to be with you or help you through this.”

“Even though my brain is systematically betraying both of us?”

“Especially because your brain is systematically betraying both of us.” River’s smile was soft with affection and determination. “This is when you find out what love actually means, when things get difficult and complicated and scary.”

That night, lying in River’s bed with the lighthouse beam sweeping through the windows and River’s breathing steady beside him, Finn realized they’d crossed some invisible line between dating and partnership, between casual affection and committed love.

The circumstances weren’t conventional, but what they’d built felt real and strong and worth protecting.

Even if it was happening faster than normal. Even if it was built on crisis and need rather than typical relationship development. Even if Maya was right about the risks of depending so completely on someone he’d known for such a short time.

Because sometimes love didn’t follow reasonable patterns or conventional timelines.

Sometimes it arrived in the middle of impossible circumstances and demanded that you choose between safety and connection, between protecting yourself and opening your heart to someone whose presence made everything else bearable.

Finn had made his choice. Now he just had to trust that River had made the same one, and that their love was strong enough to weather whatever came next.

Scientific Pursuit

River

R iver's laptop screen glowed at three AM, his eyes burning from hours of reading medical journals that all seemed to dance around the edges of what was happening to Finn without ever hitting the mark.

His coffee had gone cold, but he kept taking sips anyway, the bitter liquid keeping him focused on search terms that yielded increasingly esoteric results.

“Come on,” he muttered, clicking through another abstract that promised breakthrough insights but delivered nothing but academic jargon. “There has to be something.”

The lighthouse cottage felt different with Finn sleeping while River worked obsessively in the living room, surrounded by printouts and notebooks filled with observations about episode timing and triggers.

What had started as helpful documentation had become an all-consuming quest to solve the mystery through pure intellectual force.

His phone buzzed:

Jake

Haven't heard from you in a week. Everything okay up there?

He stared at the message, trying to remember the last time he'd thought about anything other than Finn's medical situation. When had he last checked in with friends, responded to social invitations, or engaged with the world outside their increasingly isolated bubble of crisis management?

River

Things are complicated right now. I'll call you soon.

Jake

That's what you said last week. And the week before. I'm worried about you.

River closed the phone without responding, unable to explain that worry was a luxury he couldn't afford. Finn needed answers before the condition progressed beyond help. Everything else felt like distraction.

"River?" Finn's voice came from the bedroom doorway, soft with sleep and confusion. "What time is it?"

"Late. Or early, depending on how you look at it." River minimized his research windows, guilt making him defensive. "Did I wake you?"

"No, just... the bed felt empty." Finn moved into the living room, noting the scattered papers and empty mugs that suggested hours of work. "You're researching again."

"Just trying to understand your condition better."

Finn settled onto the couch beside River, close enough that their shoulders touched. "Any breakthroughs?"

“Nothing concrete yet. But I'm building a database of similar cases, looking for patterns that might suggest treatment approaches.” River gestured toward his laptop screen, where dozens of tabs displayed medical studies. “There's got to be something that explains what's happening to you.”

“And if there isn't?”

The question hit River like a punch to the gut. “There will be. I just have to look harder, dig deeper.”

Finn studied River's face with careful attention. “When's the last time you slept more than four hours? Or ate something that wasn't coffee and leftovers?”

“I'm fine.”

“You're not fine. You're running yourself into the ground trying to solve something that might not have a solution.” Finn's voice was gentle but firm. “I appreciate everything you're doing, but I need you to take care of yourself too.”

River wanted to argue, but Finn's concern was valid. He had been neglecting basic self-care. But stopping felt impossible when every hour of delay might mean another severe episode, another piece of Finn lost.

“I can't stop looking,” River admitted. “Not when you're getting worse and I'm the only one who believes your condition is real and treatable.”

“You're not the only one. Dr. Voss believes it too.”

“Dr. Voss believes it's worth studying. That's different from believing it's treatable.” River closed his laptop with unnecessary force. “But maybe she's right about needing more investigation.”

Dr. Voss's laboratory had expanded since River's last visit, filled with monitoring equipment that looked more sophisticated than anything he'd seen in standard medical facilities. She greeted him with obvious enthusiasm, her sharp eyes brightening when he explained his desire to collaborate.

"I've been hoping someone with your background would become involved," Dr. Voss said, leading him through her research materials. "Finn's case presents unique challenges that require interdisciplinary expertise."

"What kind of challenges?"

"His episodes demonstrate neurological activity that doesn't match standard patterns for memory disorders." Dr. Voss pulled up brain scan images, pointing to highlighted areas with obvious excitement.

"These readings were taken during one of his episodes. Notice the unusual activity in the temporal lobe region."

River studied the scans with growing fascination and alarm. The patterns were unlike anything he'd seen, suggesting neurological events that went far beyond simple memory issues. "What could cause activity like this?"

"That's what we need to determine. I'd like to propose more intensive monitoring of his episodes, with equipment that can capture real-time neurological data."

"What kind of monitoring?"

"Continuous EEG recording, environmental sensors, detailed documentation of episode progression." Dr. Voss's enthusiasm was infectious, but something about her intensity made River uncomfortable. "With proper data collection, we might identify patterns that lead to breakthrough understanding."

River's scientific training responded to the systematic approach, but his protective instincts worried about treating Finn like a research subject. "Would this be invasive?"

"Minimally. Most equipment would be unobtrusive, designed to capture data without interfering with normal activities." Dr. Voss began pulling out devices that looked like they belonged in a NASA laboratory.

"The goal is comprehensive documentation that might reveal insights previous studies have missed."

"And you think this could lead to treatment options?"

"I think this could lead to understanding. And understanding is the first step toward any meaningful intervention." Dr. Voss's expression was professionally encouraging, but River caught glimpses of something that looked less like medical compassion and more like scientific hunger.

"Are you willing to help with setup and data collection?"

River agreed before fully considering the implications, his desperation for answers overriding concerns about experimental procedures. If Dr. Voss's approach could provide insights that conventional medicine had missed, then the inconvenience and potential risks were acceptable costs.

"Excellent. We'll start with basic monitoring and gradually increase scope based on what we discover." Dr. Voss began organizing devices with obvious satisfaction. "I think you'll find that systematic investigation yields much more useful results than emotional support alone."

The lighthouse cottage transformed into something resembling a research facility

over the next few days, with sensors positioned throughout and monitoring equipment humming constantly.

River threw himself into the setup with obsessive energy, determined to create the most comprehensive data collection system possible.

“This is getting intense,” Finn observed, watching River calibrate another sensor. “I feel like I'm living in a science experiment.”

“You are living in a science experiment,” River replied, not realizing how that sounded until Finn's expression shifted. “I mean, we're applying scientific methodology to understand your condition.”

“Is that different from treating me like a test subject?”

River paused in his equipment adjustments, noting the hurt in Finn's voice. “Of course it is. Everything we're doing is designed to help you.”

“Everything you're doing is designed to gather data about me. There's a difference.” Finn settled into his reading chair, the one spot in the cottage that hadn't been equipped with monitors. “When's the last time we had a conversation that wasn't about my symptoms?”

The question caught River off guard, forcing him to realize that their relationship had become entirely focused on Finn's medical condition. Every interaction was filtered through the lens of data collection.

“The monitoring is temporary,” River said, though he couldn't specify how long it would continue. “Once we understand what's happening, we can go back to normal.”

“What if there is no normal? What if this is just who I am now, and you're going to

spend the rest of our relationship trying to fix me instead of just being with me?”

“I’m trying to help you,” River said, more defensive than intended.

“You’re trying to solve me. Like I’m a research problem instead of a person you care about.” Finn’s voice was quiet but steady. “I miss the version of you who used to just hold me when I was scared, instead of immediately analyzing what might have triggered my fear.”

River wanted to argue that systematic investigation was more helpful than emotional support, but looking at Finn’s face, he realized that wasn’t necessarily true. The monitoring equipment could capture data, but it couldn’t provide the comfort and stability that Finn needed.

“The data collection is showing interesting patterns,” River said, trying to redirect toward concrete results. “We’re identifying environmental and emotional triggers that seem to influence episode severity.”

“Great. So now you know that I have episodes when I’m stressed. That’s definitely breakthrough information.” Finn’s sarcasm was gentle but pointed. “What are you going to do with that knowledge? Try to eliminate all stress from my life?”

“I’m going to use it to develop management strategies.”

“By controlling my environment and monitoring my emotional state?” Finn stood, moving toward the window where the lighthouse beam was beginning its evening rotation. “That’s not management, River. That’s imprisonment.”

The accusation stung because River could see how his systematic approach might feel constraining rather than helpful. But the alternative—watching Finn continue to deteriorate without understanding why—seemed like abandoning him.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

“I'm scared,” River admitted, his scientific detachment cracking. “I'm scared that if I don't find answers, you're going to keep getting worse until I lose you completely.”

Finn turned from the window, his expression softening. “And I'm scared that you're going to lose yourself in trying to save me. That you're going to become so focused on my condition that you forget who I am when I'm not having episodes.”

They looked at each other across the cottage living room, surrounded by monitoring equipment and research materials, two people who loved each other but were struggling to find balance between medical necessity and emotional connection.

“What do you need from me?” River asked, genuine confusion evident. “How do I help you without losing myself in the process?”

“I need you to remember that I'm still me, even when my brain is acting weird.

I need conversations that aren't about symptoms. I need you to hold me when I'm scared without immediately trying to figure out what triggered the fear.” Finn moved closer, his voice gentle but firm.

“I need you to love me as I am, not as the person you think I could be if my condition was fixed.”

River felt something crack open in his chest, months of accumulated pressure releasing in a rush of emotion he'd been suppressing through systematic investigation. “I do love you as you are. But I'm terrified of losing you to something I don't understand and can't control.”

“You might lose me anyway,” Finn said quietly. “My condition might get worse despite all your research. But if you spend all your time trying to fix me, you'll miss the time we have right now.”

The truth crashed over River like a wave, forcing him to confront the possibility that his obsession with finding solutions might be preventing him from actually being present with the person he was trying to save.

The next morning brought Dr. Voss arriving early, her expression bright with excitement as she reviewed overnight data.

“The monitoring equipment captured fascinating neurological activity during Finn's episode,” she said, spreading printouts across River's kitchen table. “But more importantly, we've documented something unprecedented.”

“What kind of something?”

“Finn's brain activity showed patterns consistent with active memory formation and retrieval, but the memories he was accessing appear to be real events rather than fantasies.” Dr. Voss pointed to specific data points with obvious fascination.

“Cross-referencing with your journals and photographs, we've confirmed that several experiences Finn described during his episode actually occurred.”

River felt the world tilt sideways. “What do you mean they actually occurred?”

“I mean Finn described your private thoughts during research dives, childhood memories you've never told anyone about, internal monologues you had while working alone in your lab.” Dr. Voss's excitement was palpable, but River felt only growing horror.

“His brain is somehow accessing memories that should be impossible for him to know.”

“That's impossible.”

“It's unprecedented. But the data is conclusive.” Dr. Voss pulled out more documentation, showing correlation between Finn's episode descriptions and River's own recorded experiences.

“We need to understand how this is happening, what mechanisms allow his brain to access information it shouldn't have.”

River stared at the evidence, his scientific training warring with the impossibility of what the data suggested. Either Finn was somehow accessing River's memories, or something was happening that transcended normal understanding of neurology.

“What does this mean for treatment?” River asked, though he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

“It means we need more comprehensive monitoring, more detailed documentation of the correlation between his episodes and real events.” Dr. Voss began organizing materials with obvious excitement. “This could be the breakthrough we've been hoping for.”

“Or it could be evidence that his condition is beyond anything we can understand.”

“That's why we need more data. I'd like to propose bringing Finn to my laboratory for more comprehensive testing.”

“Absolutely not.” River's response was immediate and firm, his protective instincts overriding scientific curiosity. “He's not a lab rat.”

“This research could help him, River. It could help others with similar conditions. But we need to approach it systematically, with proper controls.”

“We need to approach it with respect for Finn's humanity. He's not a research subject, he's a person who deserves to be treated like one.”

Dr. Voss's expression shifted, revealing something that looked less like medical compassion and more like scientific frustration. “Your emotional attachment is compromising your objectivity. This condition requires systematic investigation, not sentimental protection.”

“My emotional attachment is the only thing keeping Finn's wellbeing as the priority instead of your research goals.” River stood from the table, his patience exhausted. “I think it's time for you to leave.”

After Dr. Voss left with obvious reluctance, River sat alone surrounded by monitoring equipment, wondering if his scientific approach had become part of the problem rather than the solution.

Finn found him there an hour later, sitting with his head in his hands, surrounded by evidence of his obsession with solving an unsolvable mystery.

“Bad morning?” Finn asked, settling across from River with careful attention.

“Dr. Voss had some findings about your episodes,” River said, immediately regretting mentioning it. “But I don't think her research approach is in your best interest.”

“What kind of findings?”

River hesitated, unsure how to explain that Finn's brain was apparently accessing

memories that belonged to someone else. “She thinks your episodes involve real memory retrieval rather than fantasy. But she wants to treat you like a research subject instead of a person who needs support.”

Finn was quiet, processing the implications. “Real memories of what?”

“Experiences we've shared. Moments that I documented but never shared with you.” River looked up, meeting Finn's eyes with fear and confusion. “It doesn't make sense, but the data suggests you're somehow accessing information you shouldn't have.”

“That's terrifying.”

“It's impossible. But it's also what the evidence suggests.” River gestured toward the monitoring equipment surrounding them. “I've been trying to approach your condition scientifically, but maybe some things can't be understood through systematic investigation.”

“Maybe some things can't be understood at all,” Finn said gently. “Maybe the point isn't to solve my condition, but to learn how to live with it.”

River felt something inside him resist that possibility, his scientific training rebelling against accepting mystery without pursuing explanation.

But looking at Finn's face, seeing the exhaustion that months of medical investigation had created, River realized his quest for answers might be causing more harm than help.

“I've been treating you like a research problem instead of a person I love,” River admitted, the words feeling like confession. “I've been so focused on finding solutions that I've forgotten to just be present with you.”

“I know you want to help. But I need you to love me more than you need to fix me.” Finn reached across the table to take River's hand, his touch warm and grounding. “I need you to be my partner, not my doctor.”

The simple request felt revolutionary after months of approaching their relationship through the lens of medical crisis management. River squeezed Finn's hand, feeling the monitoring equipment around them like accusatory witnesses to his failure to prioritize love over problem-solving.

“What if I disconnect all this equipment?” River asked, gesturing toward the sensors. “What if we just try to be together without treating every moment like a potential data point?”

“I'd like that,” Finn said, his relief evident. “I'd like to remember what it feels like to be loved instead of studied.”

They spent the afternoon dismantling the system River had so carefully constructed, removing sensors and packing away equipment that had transformed their home into a laboratory.

With each device they disconnected, River felt something loosen in his chest, pressure he hadn't realized he was carrying.

“Better?” River asked as they surveyed the restored cottage, its comfortable domesticity no longer compromised by scientific apparatus.

“Much better,” Finn replied, settling onto the couch and pulling River down beside him. “Now come here and just hold me. No data collection, no analysis, no documentation. Just hold me.”

River wrapped his arms around Finn, breathing in the familiar scent of lemon oil and

old paper, feeling the steady rhythm of Finn's heartbeat.

For the first time in weeks, he wasn't thinking about episode patterns or research strategies.

He was just present with the person he loved, offering comfort without trying to solve anything.

"I love you," River said against Finn's hair, the words carrying weight that had nothing to do with medical conditions or research findings.

"I love you too," Finn replied, relaxing into River's embrace with obvious relief. "Even when you're trying to turn me into a science experiment."

"Especially when I'm trying to turn you into a science experiment," River corrected, his voice soft with affection and regret. "Someone has to keep me grounded in reality."

They sat together as evening approached and the lighthouse beam began its rotation, two people who'd found their way back to each other after getting lost in the maze of medical crisis and scientific investigation.

River knew Finn's condition wasn't resolved, knew that episodes would continue and answers might never come.

But for the first time in months, that felt manageable as long as they faced it together.

Even if love couldn't cure neurological conditions, it could provide the stability and comfort that made difficult circumstances bearable. And sometimes that was enough.

Breaking Points

River

R iver sat on his cottage floor holding Finn's limp hand, watching the most important person in his world breathe like he was barely tethered to consciousness.

Finn sat up suddenly, his eyes open but unfocused, and began organizing invisible papers with careful precision.

His hands moved through empty air as if handling delicate documents, his expression concentrated and professional.

He reached for things that weren't there, spoke to people who didn't exist.

“The binding needs reinforcement here,” Finn murmured, his voice carrying the confident tone he used when discussing restoration work.

“Late nineteenth century, probably 1880s based on the thread composition.” His fingers traced patterns in the air, following the outline of imaginary books with expert familiarity.

River watched in fascination and growing horror as Finn conducted detailed conversations with invisible customers, demonstrated restoration techniques to empty space, moved through his cottage as if it were a fully functioning bookshop filled with people and projects that existed only in whatever reality his mind was accessing.

“Mrs. Pemberton, I understand your concerns about the water damage,” Finn said, his voice warm with professional compassion as he gestured toward the cottage wall as if it were lined with shelves. “But most of the text is salvageable. Your husband's journal will tell its stories again.”

The conversation continued for twenty minutes, Finn responding to questions River couldn't hear, explaining restoration processes in detail that demonstrated knowledge he'd never shared with River.

He moved through the cottage like a performer in an invisible play, interacting with a world that felt completely real to him but existed nowhere River could see.

When Finn finally collapsed back onto the couch, his eyes closing as if he'd just completed an exhausting day's work, River felt something cold settle in his stomach.

This wasn't just temporal displacement or memory confusion.

Finn was living entire alternate realities, complete with sensory detail and emotional engagement that seemed more vivid than his actual life.

Two hours total. Two fucking hours where Finn had been gone, his body present but his mind somewhere else entirely, leaving River to stare at his face and wonder if this was what losing someone looked like—not all at once, but piece by piece, breath by breath.

“Come back,” River whispered, his voice hoarse from saying the same words over and over. “Please come back to me.”

Finn's eyelids fluttered like he was trying to surface from deep water, his fingers twitching against River's palm. When his eyes finally opened, they were cloudy with confusion, searching River's face like he was trying to place a half-remembered

stranger.

“Where...” Finn's voice came out scratchy and uncertain. “I don't... where are we?”

“Home. You're at home with me.” River helped Finn sit up slowly, noting how his coordination seemed off, how he moved like someone learning to inhabit their own body. “You had an episode. A long one.”

“Episode?” Finn looked around the cottage like he'd never seen it before, his gaze settling on familiar objects with obvious bewilderment. “I don't remember... what happened?”

Finn wasn't just losing time during episodes anymore—he was losing the context around them, the framework that connected his experiences into something resembling continuity. Each episode was stealing bigger chunks of his identity, leaving him more adrift in his own life.

“We had a fight,” River said gently, though the admission tasted like failure. “About my research, about how I've been treating your condition. You got upset, and it triggered the episode.”

“We fought?” Finn's confusion was heartbreaking, genuine distress at the idea that he might have hurt River without remembering. “About what? I don't... I'm sorry, I don't remember being angry with you.”

“You weren't angry. You were hurt. Because I've been treating you like a problem to solve instead of a person to love.” River's throat tightened with guilt and grief. “And you were right.”

Dr. Voss arrived twenty minutes later, moving with barely contained excitement as she pulled out a notepad. “I know you don't want monitoring equipment,” she said

quickly, “but I need to document this episode. The duration you described is unprecedented.”

She moved closer to Finn, who was still sitting dazedly on the couch, and began her examination with clinical efficiency.

“Two hours of active engagement,” she continued, her eyes bright with scientific hunger as she checked Finn's pupils. “Tell me everything he did, every word he spoke.”

“Why?” River asked, something in her tone making his protective instincts flare. “What aren't you telling us about his condition?”

Dr. Voss paused in her equipment setup, her professional mask slipping slightly.

“My daughter had similar episodes before she died.

Same pattern of temporal displacement, same access to impossible knowledge.

I've been researching this condition for eight years, trying to understand what happened to her.”

The admission hit River like cold water. “Your daughter?”

“Elena. She was twenty-seven when the episodes started. By the end, she was accessing entire alternate realities, living complete lives in her mind while her body deteriorated.” Dr. Voss's voice cracked slightly, revealing grief she'd kept hidden behind scientific objectivity.

“I couldn't save her because I didn't understand the condition well enough.

But Finn's case shows patterns Elena never developed. There might be hope for intervention.”

River felt his world shift as Dr. Voss's motivations became clear. She wasn't just studying Finn—she was trying to solve the mystery that had killed her child, using his condition to unlock secrets that might prevent other families from experiencing her loss.

“What kind of intervention?” River asked, though he wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer.

“Controlled environment monitoring. Medical supervision during episodes. The research potential is enormous, but we need proper facilities.” Dr. Voss's scientific enthusiasm warred with maternal grief in her expression. “I have colleagues who would be very interested in Finn's case.”

“He's not a case,” River said, his protective instincts flaring. “He's a person who deserves dignity and privacy, not medical exhibition.”

“He's a person with a condition that could help us understand what happened to my daughter and prevent it from happening to others.” Dr. Voss's mask slipped further, revealing desperation beneath her professional demeanor. “But we need more controlled conditions to maximize our understanding.”

“Get out.” River's voice was quiet but absolute. “Take your equipment and your grief-driven research and get the fuck out of my house.”

Dr. Voss looked genuinely shocked by his response. “River, you don't understand what's at stake here. If we can document Finn's condition properly, we might be able to prevent?—”

“We might be able to prevent you from using someone else's medical crisis to work through your unresolved trauma about your daughter's death.” River stood up, positioning himself between Dr. Voss and Finn. “Leave. Now.”

After she left with obvious reluctance and thinly veiled frustration, River sat back down beside Finn, who was watching the interaction with growing clarity and concern.

“Was she trying to help me or replace her daughter?” Finn asked, his voice small and uncertain.

“I'm not sure there's a difference to her,” River admitted. “But there sure as hell is to me.”

River's professional life crumbled more gradually than he'd expected, like a sandcastle slowly claimed by rising tide rather than destroyed by a single wave.

Dr. Reeves found him passed out at his lab workstation three days later, surrounded by empty coffee cups and research printouts about neurological disorders that had nothing to do with marine biology.

“This ends today,” Dr. Reeves said, her voice carrying the authority of someone who'd made an administrative decision. “You're taking medical leave, effective immediately.”

“I can't take leave. I need?—”

“You need to remember that you're human before you can help anyone else.” Dr. Reeves began packing away his research materials with efficient compassion. “This isn't punishment, River. It's intervention before you completely burn out.”

River wanted to argue, but looking around his lab—at the scattered papers and empty food containers and evidence of his deteriorating ability to maintain basic professional standards—he realized she was right.

He'd become so consumed with solving Finn's condition that he'd stopped functioning as a competent adult.

Jake showed up at the cottage that evening with takeout food and the determined expression of someone prepared for a difficult conversation.

He took one look at River's appearance—unshaven, wearing the same clothes for three days, surrounded by research materials—and set the food down with obvious concern.

“We need to talk,” Jake said, settling onto River's couch without waiting for invitation. “When's the last time you showered? Or ate something that wasn't powered by caffeine? Or had a conversation that wasn't about Finn's medical condition?”

River wanted to defend his behavior, but Jake's observations were uncomfortably accurate. “I'm trying to help him.”

“You're trying to save him. But you can't save someone from a neurological condition through pure force of will.” Jake's voice was gentle but implacable. “When's the last time you and Finn had fun together? When's the last time you laughed about something that wasn't related to his episodes?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Every interaction with Finn had become filtered through the lens of his medical condition, every conversation directed toward understanding or managing symptoms. They'd stopped being lovers and become patient and caregiver.

“I don't know how to just ignore what's happening to him.”

“I'm not asking you to ignore it. I'm asking you to remember that he's more than his condition, and your relationship is more than a medical crisis.” Jake stood up and moved toward the kitchen.

“When's the last time you cooked him dinner just because you wanted to, not because you were monitoring his nutritional intake for episode triggers?”

“I'm so scared, Jake. I'm scared he's going to keep getting worse until there's nothing left of the person I fell in love with.”

“That's valid. But you can't prevent that possibility by researching yourself into the ground and treating him like a medical case instead of your partner.” Jake returned from the kitchen with a concerned expression.

“There's nothing in your fridge but condiments and beer. When did you last grocery shop?”

“I don't remember.”

“Right. So here's what's going to happen.

You're going to shower and eat actual food and sleep for more than four hours.

Then you're going to figure out how to love Finn without trying to cure him.” Jake's voice was firm but caring.

“Because right now, you're not helping him.

You're just creating two people who need rescue instead of one.”

After Jake left, River stood in the wreckage of his life and realized his friend was absolutely right. He looked like hell, felt worse, and most importantly, he'd been treating the person he loved not like a partner, but like a puzzle to decode.

First, the shower. He stripped in the hallway, leaving clothes in a trail that felt symbolic.

When he stepped under the hot spray, he stood still for a long moment, letting the water sting his skin.

He used shampoo, actually scrubbed his scalp until he felt like a person again.

He washed his body slowly, letting his hands move over sore muscles, rinsing away the nights spent hunched over data and fear.

Then food. There were groceries on the counter—Jake's doing—and River opened the bag with something like reverence.

He found pasta, sauce, real vegetables. He chopped onions, added garlic, let the scent fill the kitchen like warmth returning to an old house.

When he plated the meal, it wasn't survival—it was care.

He sat down at the small table, lit a candle, and ate each bite slowly. Not multitasking, not reading, not thinking. Just eating. When he finished, he washed the dishes because he wanted to live in a space that felt like life was being lived here.

That's when Finn found him.

He stood in the doorway, the golden spill of the lighthouse beam catching in his hair, and just looked at River.

“You look...” Finn's voice was hoarse, quiet. “You look like yourself again.”

River turned, drying his hands. He hadn't even realized he'd been smiling.

“Jake staged an intervention. Apparently, I was disappearing into your crisis instead of just being present for it.”

Finn stepped closer, slowly, like he wasn't sure if he was allowed. River met him halfway.

“I'm sorry,” he said, taking Finn's hands. “I've been treating you like a problem to solve instead of a person to love.”

Finn's fingers tightened. “I missed you. The real you. Not the research-obsessed version.”

River cupped his face, holding it like something worth protecting.

“I love you,” he said, voice steady now. “Not your brain. Not your condition. Not the mystery of what's happening to you. Just... you.”

Finn's eyes filled with tears. “I love you too. So much that watching you try to save

me has been breaking my heart.”

They kissed, tentative at first, a remembering. The kiss deepened slowly, as if they were relearning each other's language. River pulled Finn closer, and Finn came willingly, pressing against him with quiet urgency.

“Bedroom?” River asked, breathless.

Finn nodded. “Please.”

The walk down the hallway felt like a sacred procession. River turned down the covers with intention. The room glowed dimly, golden shadows cast by the lighthouse beam circling like a slow heartbeat across the walls.

They undressed each other with reverence.

River peeled away Finn's shirt, baring the pale stretch of his chest. He bent and pressed a kiss to Finn's sternum, then lower, letting his lips chart every inch like a map he never wanted to forget again.

Finn's fingers trembled as he unfastened River's pants, pulling them down carefully.

River reached into the nightstand drawer for lube, setting it beside them. No rush. No assumption. His gaze searched Finn's face. “Okay?”

Finn nodded and leaned in, whispering against River's mouth, “Yes. Please.”

They touched without hesitation now. River let his hands roam over the familiar terrain of Finn's body—his chest, his sides, the curve of his waist. When he slipped a hand between them, cupping Finn's cock, it was gentle and exploratory. Finn moaned, soft and desperate, rocking into his hand.

River slicked his fingers with lube, warming it before trailing lower.

Finn opened for him without needing to be asked, knees parting as he pulled River close.

River kissed him while his hand explored, fingers circling Finn's hole, teasing gently.

When he slid one inside, Finn gasped—soft, sharp, wanting.

River took his time. One finger, then two, slowly working him open with careful, loving strokes. He murmured praise between kisses—how good he was doing, how beautiful he looked like this, how much he loved him.

Finn rocked back onto his fingers, hungry now. “River,” he whispered. “I want you. Please.”

River pressed their foreheads together, catching his breath. Then he lubed his cock and lined himself up, hand steady on Finn's hip.

“Tell me if you need anything.”

“I just need you,” Finn said, and pulled him in.

The first push was slow, a stretch that made Finn groan and bite his lip. River kissed his temple, whispering soft reassurances, waiting until Finn gave a tiny nod before sliding in deeper.

It was slow. Reassuring. Not just sex but something deeper—like they were piecing each other back together one stroke at a time. River moved in long, careful thrusts, watching the way Finn's face softened, how his eyes fluttered shut in bliss.

Finn wrapped his legs around River's waist, meeting every thrust with desperate grace. Their mouths found each other again and again, kissing through moans and quiet gasps, hands tangling, hearts pounding in sync.

When Finn came, it was with River's name on his lips, voice breaking into a sound that felt like release and forgiveness all at once.

River followed moments later, burying himself deep and shuddering as pleasure took him. He collapsed against Finn, careful not to crush him, and they lay there tangled, breath coming in heavy, grateful pulls.

The lighthouse beam rotated across the ceiling, a slow rhythm of light and dark.

Finn curled into River's chest, one hand tracing slow circles over his ribs.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Thank you for not giving up on us when I forgot how to be present.” River's arms tightened around Finn. “I promise to do better. To love you more and try to fix you less.”

That night, for the first time in weeks, River slept for eight straight hours without dreaming about research or medical journals. He just slept, peaceful and grounded, with the person he loved safe in his arms.

The next few days brought a different kind of crisis, one that felt less medical and more like something out of a paranoid thriller. River started noticing things that seemed insignificant individually but formed a disturbing pattern when considered together.

Power outages during important conversations with Finn.

Equipment malfunctions when they were making progress understanding his condition.

Subtle rearrangements in the cottage that suggested someone had been inside while they were away—books moved slightly on shelves, papers reordered in ways that preserved their apparent organization while disrupting River's actual system.

“Am I losing my mind, or does it feel like someone's watching us?” River asked Finn one afternoon, noting how his laptop had developed a mysterious glitch that corrupted files related to his research.

“You're not losing your mind,” Finn said, his voice carrying the exhaustion of someone who'd been dealing with reality distortions for months. “I've been feeling it too. Like there's someone else in our story, someone who doesn't want us to figure out what's happening.”

River couldn't shake the feeling that they were being manipulated by someone who understood Finn's condition better than they did, someone who had reasons for preventing them from developing effective treatments.

The universe had different plans for their attempt at domestic normalcy.

River was pulled from sleep around midnight by Finn talking in his sleep, but not the confused muttering that usually accompanied his episodes.

This was conversation, clear and directed, as if he were responding to someone River couldn't see.

“I know you're worried about the research,” Finn said, his voice carrying the tone of someone continuing a long-standing discussion. “But Dr. Voss isn't trying to help. She's trying to document the condition for her own purposes.”

River lay still, listening to one side of a conversation that seemed to be taking place between Finn and some version of himself that had access to information the conscious Finn didn't possess.

“River's trying so hard to fix everything, but he doesn't understand that some things can't be fixed, only managed.” Finn's voice was sad but affectionate. “He loves me enough to destroy himself trying to save me, but that's not what I need from him.”

River felt his chest tighten with recognition—Finn was articulating concerns they'd discussed earlier, but with a clarity and perspective that suggested deeper understanding than his conscious mind seemed to possess.

“The interference isn't random,” Finn continued, his voice growing more urgent. “Someone's actively working to prevent us from understanding what's really happening. But they're not trying to hurt us—they're trying to protect us from making things worse.”

The conversation continued for another ten minutes, with Finn responding to questions and comments from someone River couldn't hear, discussing their relationship and his condition with insights that went far beyond what his waking mind could access.

When Finn finally fell silent, returning to normal sleep, River lay awake wondering what the hell was happening to the person he loved.

“How are you feeling?” River asked over coffee the next morning, studying Finn's face for signs of exhaustion.

“Better, actually. Like I slept really well for the first time in weeks.” Finn smiled, and River's heart broke a little at how genuine and peaceful he looked. “Thank you for just holding me last night. It felt nice to be close without you analyzing everything.”

River nodded and smiled back, not mentioning the hours of conversation Finn had carried out with invisible participants. Because maybe Jake was right about needing to love Finn as he was instead of obsessing over what his condition meant.

But as they prepared for another day of trying to build a relationship alongside an impossible medical mystery, River couldn't shake the feeling that they were running out of time to figure out what was really happening before Finn's episodes progressed beyond the point where any kind of normal life was possible.

The lighthouse beam had stopped its rotation with the arrival of dawn, but River felt like they were still navigating in the dark, guided only by love and hope that might not be enough to keep them from crashing against whatever truth was waiting for them in the deepening mystery of Finn's disappearing mind.

Fractured Reality

Finn

Finn opened his eyes and immediately felt like he was swimming up from deep water, consciousness returning in layers that didn't quite align with each other.

River sat at the kitchen table with his laptop, morning light streaming through windows, and everything looked exactly right except for the nagging sense that something fundamental had shifted while he slept.

“Morning, love,” River said, glancing up with a smile that made Finn's chest warm with familiar affection.

“Hey,” Finn replied, the word carrying more weight than it should have, like an echo of countless similar mornings they'd shared together.

“You were talking in your sleep again. Something about needing to water the tomatoes before it got too hot.” River closed his laptop, giving Finn his full attention. “Sounded urgent, whatever it was.”

Finn felt a flicker of confusion because he could clearly remember their garden—neat rows of vegetables they'd planted together, the way River had insisted on building raised beds even though Finn thought they were overkill, the satisfaction of their first harvest. The memory was so vivid he could smell the soil, feel the sun on his back as they worked side by side on weekend mornings.

But looking out the cottage windows, there was only wild coastal grass and rocky shoreline. No garden. No raised beds. No evidence they'd ever grown anything together.

“Must have been dreaming,” Finn said carefully, not wanting to admit how real the garden felt in his memory.

“Must have been a good dream. You seemed happy.” River stood and moved toward the coffee maker, his movements carrying easy familiarity. “Want some breakfast? I was thinking about making those blueberry pancakes you love.”

Another ripple of confusion. Finn couldn't remember expressing a preference for blueberry pancakes, couldn't recall River making them before, but the suggestion felt right in ways he couldn't explain. Like remembering something that should have happened but hadn't.

“Sure,” Finn said, because agreeing seemed safer than trying to navigate the gap between what felt familiar and what he could actually remember.

River moved around the kitchen with comfortable efficiency, gathering ingredients and heating the pan, humming softly under his breath. Everything about the scene felt domestic and established, like they'd been doing this dance for years instead of months.

“River,” Finn said carefully, “how long have we been together?”

River paused in his pancake preparation, something shifting in his expression. “You know how long. Why are you asking?”

“Humor me.”

“A few months. Since you found that letter in the bottle and came to return it.” River's voice carried gentle concern. “Are you feeling confused again?”

Finn nodded, because confused felt accurate. The timeline River described felt both right and completely inadequate for the depth of intimacy he felt between them.

“It feels like longer,” Finn admitted.

River was quiet for a moment, clearly processing Finn's words. “The episodes have been getting more frequent. Maybe they're affecting your perception of time, creating false memories of experiences we haven't actually shared.”

“False memories?”

“Dr. Voss mentioned it's possible with your condition. Your brain might be filling gaps with experiences that feel real but never actually happened.” River's voice was gentle but firm. “Like the garden you just mentioned. We've never grown vegetables together, but your mind created a memory of it.”

The explanation hit Finn like cold water. The garden memory felt absolutely real—the weight of tools in his hands, the satisfaction of working in soil, quiet conversations while they weeded between rows. But according to River, none of it had ever happened.

“How many of my memories are fake?” Finn asked quietly.

“I don't know. But we'll figure it out together.” River moved closer, his presence immediately comforting. “The important thing is that what we have right now is real.”

“I love you,” Finn said suddenly, the words emerging without conscious decision but

carrying absolute certainty.

“I love you too,” River replied immediately, his voice warm with matching conviction. “More than I thought possible in such a short time.”

The qualifier—“in such a short time”—should have been reassuring. But it only highlighted the disconnect between the timeline River described and the depth of connection Finn experienced. If their relationship was only months old, why did loving River feel like the most natural thing in the world?

The cottage's spare room had become Finn's refuge, a place where he could try to sort through his increasingly unreliable memories without worrying about alarming River.

He'd covered the walls with lists and diagrams, desperate attempts to create some framework for understanding what was happening to his mind.

Real memories (probably): Meeting River at the bookshop, the tide pool exploration, moving in together.

False memories (definitely): The garden, detailed knowledge of River's preferences, conversations we've never had.

Uncertain: The depth of my feelings, how well I think I know him, whether our connection is real or manufactured by my brain.

The lists grew longer each day, filled with observations that never seemed to resolve into clarity. Finn found himself caught between trusting his emotions and accepting the timeline River described.

River found him there that afternoon, surrounded by notebooks and scattered papers.

“What's all this?” River asked gently, settling beside Finn on the spare room's narrow bed.

“My attempt to figure out what's real,” Finn said simply. “Turns out it's more complicated than I expected.”

River examined some of the lists, his expression growing more concerned as he read. “You've been spending a lot of time thinking about this.”

“I've been spending a lot of time confused about this.

There's a difference.” Finn gestured toward the evidence of his mental struggle.

“Everything feels simultaneously familiar and impossible.

I love you with the intensity of someone who's been building a life with you for years, but apparently we've only known each other for not that long.”

“Intense feelings can develop quickly under the right circumstances,” River said carefully. “What we've been through together—that kind of shared experience can accelerate emotional connections.”

“Is that what you think this is? Accelerated emotional connection?”

River was quiet, clearly struggling with his own questions about their relationship's rapid development. “I think we found something special, and I think the circumstances made us both more open to connection than we might normally be. But that doesn't make what we have less real.”

Finn wanted to believe that, but the explanation felt inadequate for the depth of familiarity he experienced with River. The way they moved around each other, the

comfortable silences, the sense that they understood each other on levels that usually took years to develop.

“What if my brain is creating false memories to fill in gaps?” Finn asked quietly. “What if I'm not actually remembering real experiences with you, but generating fake ones based on what I wish our relationship was like?”

“Then we deal with that. We figure out how to build something real regardless of what your brain is doing with memory.” River's voice was steady but carried undertones of uncertainty.

Before Finn could respond, Dr. Voss arrived for one of her regular check-ins, carrying her usual medical bag but looking more serious than her previous visits. She moved through the cottage with clinical authority, setting up basic monitoring equipment.

“The current medication seems to be helping with episode frequency,” she observed, checking Finn's blood pressure and pulse. “But we're still seeing significant symptoms that suggest ongoing neurological instability.”

“What does that mean for treatment?” Finn asked, though part of him wasn't sure he wanted to know.

“It means we may need to adjust the current protocol.

The medication is managing some symptoms, but we're still seeing breakthrough episodes.” Dr. Voss opened her bag to reveal additional pill bottles and monitoring tools.

“I've been developing more targeted approaches based on your specific responses.”

River leaned forward with obvious concern. “More targeted how?”

“Different medication combinations, adjusted dosages, additional supplements that might prevent the neurological events entirely rather than just reducing their frequency.” Dr. Voss's voice carried medical authority, but also something more personal.

“We're learning more about your condition with each episode, which allows me to refine the treatment.”

The prospect of adjusted treatment felt both hopeful and frightening. Finn's current medication had helped somewhat, but the episodes were still occurring, still pulling him away from reality.

“What would the adjustment involve?” Finn asked.

“Modified dosages of your current medications, plus additional compounds that target the specific brain regions showing unusual activity.” Dr. Voss began organizing her materials.

“The goal would be to stabilize your neurological responses completely, eliminate the displacement episodes, restore reliable memory and temporal perception.”

“And if the new combination doesn't work?”

“Then we continue refining until we find the right approach for your specific condition.” Dr. Voss's confidence was both reassuring and slightly unsettling. “Every case is different, but I'm optimistic about the protocols we're developing.”

Finn felt cautiously hopeful. His current situation—living with uncertainty about his own perceptions, unable to trust his memories—was exhausting.

“I want to try the adjusted treatment,” Finn said.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

“Good,” Dr. Voss replied with obvious approval. “We'll start with modified dosages and monitor your responses carefully.”

The breaking point came during what seemed like a perfectly normal conversation about dinner plans. Finn was feeling more stable than he had in days when words started emerging from his mouth that he didn't remember choosing to say.

“I think we should go with the salmon for the main course,” Finn said, his voice carrying the tone of someone continuing an established discussion. “It's more elegant than chicken, and your mother always said she preferred fish at formal events.”

River looked up from his laptop with obvious confusion. “Salmon for what?”

“For the reception dinner. The caterer said we need to finalize the menu by Friday if we want to guarantee availability.” Finn felt his chest warm with excitement, the same emotions he'd felt during months of careful planning.

“I know you wanted something simple, but with both our families coming, we should probably go with something more sophisticated.”

River went completely still, his expression shifting from confusion to alarm. “Finn, what reception? What caterer?”

“For our wedding,” Finn said, then felt the words hang in the air like something toxic as he realized what he'd revealed. “The reception dinner for our wedding next month.”

“We're not getting married next month. We're not planning a wedding.” River's voice was gentle but firm, delivering truth that felt like physical impact. “We've never discussed marriage or talked to caterers or made any wedding plans.”

The words hit Finn like ice water, reality reasserting itself with devastating clarity. The excitement in his chest turned cold as he processed what River was telling him. There was no wedding, no caterer, no reception dinner they'd been planning for months.

“We're not?” Finn's voice came out small and confused.

“We've never talked about marriage, Finn. We've never made plans like that.” River's voice carried growing concern as he realized the scope of what Finn had been experiencing. “What you're describing—none of that has happened.”

Finn felt the world shift sideways as he understood how severely his grip on reality had deteriorated.

He could remember the proposal with perfect clarity—River nervous but determined, the conversation about their future, the quiet joy of deciding to build a life together.

But apparently it had all occurred inside his own mind.

“But I remember everything,” Finn whispered, his voice breaking with confusion and growing terror. “The planning, the decisions, the excitement about our future together. It feels completely real.”

“I know it feels real,” River said, moving closer with obvious alarm. “But Finn, we've never had those conversations. We've never made those plans.”

The realization that he'd been living in elaborate fantasy while River remained

anchored in consensus reality hit Finn with devastating force. His condition hadn't just progressed— it had reached the point where he couldn't distinguish between lived experience and imagination.

The shock triggered something that felt like drowning, not in water but in time itself. Finn felt himself sliding away from River's cottage, from the conversation, from everything that anchored him to the present moment.

What followed felt like living entire lifetimes compressed into impossible duration.

Decades of partnership with River rushed past in vivid detail—anniversaries and quiet mornings, fights that led to deeper understanding, the gradual accumulation of shared experiences that formed the foundation of lasting love.

Finn experienced years of domestic happiness, watching seasons change through cottage windows, growing older together with deep contentment.

He felt the weight of established routines, the comfort of being known completely by someone who loved him without reservation, the satisfaction of building something meaningful with a partner who understood him completely.

But underneath the joy ran constant awareness that none of it was actually happening, that his body remained unconscious while his mind created elaborate fantasies.

The experiences felt more real than reality, more satisfying than any actual relationship could be, which somehow made returning to consciousness even more devastating. When Finn finally surfaced back to awareness, the cottage was full of concerned voices and emergency medical equipment.

“How long?” Finn asked, his voice hoarse and unfamiliar.

“Six hours,” River said, his voice rough with strain. “You’ve been completely unresponsive. We couldn’t wake you up, couldn’t get any response at all.”

Finn felt hollow and disconnected, like someone recovering from profound loss. The memories of his extended fantasy remained vivid and emotionally satisfying, which made facing actual reality feel like mourning something beautiful that had never existed.

“I lived decades,” Finn said quietly. “Years and years of life with you, growing old together, building the kind of relationship that most people never get to experience. But it was all in my head, wasn’t it?”

Dr. Voss leaned forward with obvious professional fascination. “The neurological activity during your episode was extraordinary. Your brain responses suggested you were processing experiences as if they were occurring over extended periods of real time.”

“But they weren’t real experiences. They were fantasies my damaged brain created because it can’t handle actual reality anymore.” Finn tried to sit up and immediately felt dizzy, the room spinning in ways that had nothing to do with his episode.

“We need to get you to the hospital,” River said, his voice tight with worry as he noted Finn’s pale complexion and obvious disorientation. “Six hours of unconsciousness isn’t something we can handle on our own.”

“I’m fine,” Finn protested weakly, though his body was clearly not cooperating.

“You’re not fine. You collapsed, you’ve been unconscious for six hours, and now you can barely sit up without getting dizzy.” River was already reaching for his phone, his protective instincts in full gear. “I’m calling an ambulance.”

“No ambulance,” Finn said, mustering enough strength to sound firm. “But... maybe the emergency room. Just to make sure everything's okay.”

Dr. Voss began packing her equipment with obvious reluctance. “I should accompany you. The medical staff will need context about his condition.”

River helped Finn to his feet, noting how unsteady he remained, how much effort it took for him to coordinate simple movements. “Can you walk to the car?”

“I think so,” Finn said, though he leaned heavily on River's support as they made their way toward the cottage door.

The drive to Beacon Point Medical Center felt both eternal and too short, River's hands gripping the steering wheel while Finn dozed fitfully in the passenger seat, still clearly exhausted from whatever his brain had put him through during those missing hours.

“River,” Finn said softly as they pulled into the hospital parking lot. “What if this is just who I am now? What if the episodes keep getting longer and more intense until I never come back?”

River felt his chest tighten with fear and determination. “Then we figure out how to love each other through it. But we're not giving up on finding answers, and we're not accepting that this is permanent until we've explored every option.”

As they walked into the emergency room, Finn leaning on River's arm for support, both of them felt the weight of crossing a threshold into more serious medical territory.

The episodes had progressed beyond what they could manage at home, beyond what love and hope could handle without professional intervention.

Whatever was happening to Finn's mind, whatever was causing these extended disappearances from reality, they needed more help than they'd been willing to admit. Even if that help came with risks and uncertainties that might change everything about their relationship and their future together.

Desperate Measures

River

R iver paced the emergency room's waiting area like a caged animal, his sneakers squeaking against linoleum that smelled of disinfectant and despair.

Six hours. Six fucking hours Finn had been unconscious, and the doctors kept running tests that told them absolutely nothing useful about why his brain had decided to check out of reality for an entire afternoon.

“Mr. Hayes?” A tired-looking doctor in scrubs appeared, clipboard in hand and the expression of someone about to deliver news that wouldn't make anyone feel better. “We've completed the initial workup on Mr. Torres.”

“And?” River stopped pacing, his heart hammering with equal parts hope and dread.

“All the scans came back normal. Blood work, EEG, MRI—everything looks completely typical for a healthy twenty-six-year-old male.” The doctor flipped through pages that apparently contained a whole lot of nothing. “There's no medical explanation for the extended unconsciousness he experienced.”

River felt the ground shift under his feet. “What do you mean no medical explanation? People don't just lose consciousness for six hours for no reason.”

“Sometimes neurological events can occur without showing up on standard testing. We'd like to keep him for observation, run some additional tests?—”

“He's awake,” River interrupted, because he could see through the glass doors into Finn's room where the man he loved was sitting up in bed looking confused and fragile. “Can I see him?”

The doctor nodded, but River was already moving toward Finn's room, driven by the need to touch him, to confirm he was really back and coherent.

“Hey,” River said softly, settling into the chair beside Finn's hospital bed. “How are you feeling?”

Finn looked at him with eyes that seemed slightly unfocused, like someone trying to bring the world into proper alignment. “Tired. Confused. Like I've been dreaming for years and just woke up.” His voice was hoarse, uncertain.

“You collapsed in the kitchen while we were talking about...” River hesitated, not sure if mentioning the wedding conversation would trigger another episode. “You just went down. Completely unresponsive.”

“The wedding,” Finn said quietly, and River's heart sank because apparently the conversation was still vivid in Finn's memory. “I was talking about our wedding that's never going to happen because it only exists in my head.”

Before River could respond, familiar voices echoed from the waiting room—multiple voices, heated discussion, the kind of family drama that meant someone was either very pissed off or very scared.

Maya appeared first, like an avenging angel in scrubs, her dark eyes blazing with fury and terror in equal measure.

But she wasn't alone. Behind her came a man River had never met but recognized immediately from Finn's bone structure and auburn hair—Captain Torres, looking

uncomfortable in civilian clothes and carrying himself with the military bearing that never quite went away.

“Where is he?” Maya demanded, her voice carrying across the emergency room with enough authority to make nurses look up. “Where's my brother?”

River stood up and left the room, preparing for the confrontation he'd been dreading, but his attention was caught by Captain Torres, who was studying the hospital environment with the careful attention of someone evaluating a potentially dangerous situation.

“I called Dad,” Maya said, noting River's surprise. “Figured if Finn's having episodes this severe, maybe it's time for family medical history that might actually be useful.”

Captain Torres stepped forward, extending a hand to River with formal courtesy that didn't quite hide his obvious discomfort. “You must be River. I've heard... some things about you.”

“Sir,” River replied, accepting the handshake while wondering what exactly Captain Torres had heard and from whom.

“The doctors said there's no medical reason for him to have been unconscious for six hours,” Maya continued, her psychology training evident in the way she'd clearly gotten a full briefing.

“Which means this was psychological. Which means his condition is worse than either of you have been admitting.”

“Maya—”

“Don't 'Maya' me. I told you this relationship was moving too fast, that the emotional

intensity was making his symptoms worse.” Maya's voice was getting louder, drawing attention from other families dealing with their own medical crises.

“And now he's having episodes so severe they require emergency intervention.”

River felt guilt and defensive anger war in his chest. “You think this is my fault?”

“I think a man with a rare neurological condition shouldn't be in a relationship that's clearly triggering more severe episodes.” Maya stepped closer, her protective instincts on full display. “When's the last time Finn had a normal day?”

But Captain Torres was frowning, his attention caught by something Maya had said. “Did you say neurological condition?”

Maya turned to her father with obvious exasperation. “Yes, Dad. The condition Finn's been dealing with for months. The memory gaps, the confusion, the episodes where he loses time.”

Captain Torres went very still, his face cycling through emotions River couldn't identify. “Episodes where he loses time and seems to be somewhere else mentally?”

“You know about this?” River asked, something cold settling in his stomach.

“I know about something that sounds very similar.” Captain Torres looked toward Finn's room, his expression troubled. “Your mother had episodes like that. Before the diagnosis they gave her, before the doctors decided it was dementia.”

Maya's face went white. “What are you talking about?”

“Your mother didn't have dementia,” Captain Torres said quietly, the admission clearly costing him. “She had something else. Something the doctors didn't

understand and couldn't treat. Something that made her mind... slip between different times, different realities.”

River felt the world tilt sideways.

“Why didn't you tell us this before?” Maya asked.

“Because I hoped it wasn't genetic. Because I hoped Finn would be different.” Captain Torres ran a hand through his graying hair, looking every year of his age. “Because I've been running from this for years, and I thought maybe if I didn't acknowledge it, it wouldn't be real.”

Dr. Voss chose that moment to appear, emerging from Finn's room with her ever-present notebook and the expression of someone who'd just collected fascinating data. But she stopped short when she saw Captain Torres, something shifting in her expression.

“Captain Torres,” she said, her voice carefully neutral. “I wasn't expecting to see you here.”

“Doctor Voss.” His tone was equally neutral, but River caught undercurrents that suggested a history between them. “I hear you've been treating my son.”

“I've been researching his condition. The same condition that killed your wife, though you were never willing to cooperate with my investigation then.” Dr. Voss's professional mask slipped slightly, revealing old frustration.

“Perhaps now you'll be more willing to share relevant family medical history.”

River looked between them, understanding dawning. “You've met before.”

“Dr. Voss approached me years ago, asking questions about Elena's episodes, wanting to study what had happened to her.” Captain Torres's voice was tight with old pain. “I wasn't interested in turning my wife's suffering into someone else's research project.”

“And now your son has the same condition, and your refusal to cooperate may have cost valuable time in understanding how to treat it.” Dr. Voss's excitement was barely contained behind professional demeanor.

“His episodes are providing unprecedented data about consciousness and temporal perception.”

Maya stepped between Dr. Voss and the door to Finn's room. “What exactly are you proposing to do to my brother?”

“Extended monitoring, detailed documentation of his neurological responses during displacement events.” Dr. Voss spoke about Finn like he was a fascinating case study rather than a human being. “This condition offers insights that could help others.”

“Others like your daughter?” Captain Torres asked quietly, and Dr. Voss went very still.

“My daughter died from this condition because I didn't understand it well enough to help her,” Dr. Voss said, her professional composure cracking slightly. “Finn's case could prevent other families from experiencing that loss.”

River felt pieces of a puzzle clicking into place. “Your daughter had the same condition as Finn's mother?”

“Temporal Perceptual Displacement. It runs in families, usually through the maternal line, though it can skip generations.” Dr. Voss's mask slipped further, revealing the

grief-driven motivation behind her research.

“Elena died because the doctors didn't recognize the symptoms until it was too late.

Sarah—my daughter—died because I couldn't convince her to accept treatment.”

“What treatment?” Maya asked sharply. “Because so far, all you've done is monitor and study Finn. You haven't actually offered any concrete treatment options.”

Dr. Voss opened her briefcase, revealing vials and documentation that looked more serious than her previous materials.

“Experimental protocols that I've been developing based on the research with Finn. Medication combinations that might stabilize the neurological activity, prevent the temporal displacement episodes.”

“Might,” Captain Torres said, his tone skeptical. “The same way treatment might have helped Elena if I'd been willing to let you use her as a test subject.”

“The same way treatment could help Finn if his family is willing to trust medical intervention over denial and avoidance.” Dr. Voss's voice was getting sharp, professional frustration overriding grief-motivated compassion.

“Can everyone please stop talking about me like I'm not here?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Finn's voice came from the doorway of his hospital room, where he stood in a hospital gown and socks, looking pale but determined. River felt his heart clench at how fragile Finn appeared, how carefully he moved.

“You should be resting,” River said, moving toward Finn with automatic concern.

“I should be part of conversations about my own medical care,” Finn replied, his voice quiet but firm. “And I'd really like to understand what everyone's been keeping from me about my family's medical history.”

Captain Torres stepped forward, his military bearing unable to hide his obvious guilt and pain. “Finn, I'm sorry. I should have told you about your mother's condition, about what really happened to her.”

“What really happened to her?” Finn's voice was carefully controlled, but River could see the tension in his shoulders.

“She didn't have dementia. She had Temporal Perceptual Displacement—the same condition you're experiencing now.” Captain Torres looked like each word was being dragged out of him.

“The doctors didn't understand it, couldn't treat it.

I watched her slip away gradually, living in different times, different realities, until she couldn't find her way back to us.”

Finn was quiet for a long moment, processing this information. “So this is genetic.

This isn't going to get better.”

“We don't know that,” Dr. Voss interjected. “Your mother's case was decades ago, before we understood neuroplasticity and temporal processing. The experimental treatments I've developed might be able to stabilize your condition.”

“Experimental treatments that you haven't actually described,” Maya pointed out. “What exactly are you proposing?”

Dr. Voss pulled out documentation, spreading it across the nearby surface.

“Medication protocols that target the specific brain regions showing unusual activity during episodes. Environmental controls that might prevent triggers. Behavioral interventions that could help maintain connection to present reality.”

River studied the papers, his scientific training allowing him to understand some of the technical terminology. “These are pretty aggressive pharmaceutical interventions.”

“The condition is aggressive. It requires aggressive treatment.” Dr. Voss's tone carried medical authority, but also desperation. “Without intervention, Finn's episodes will continue to increase in frequency and duration until he's unable to maintain any connection to consensus reality.”

“Like what happened to Mom,” Finn said quietly.

“Like what happened to Elena and Sarah,” Captain Torres added. “Both of them lost to a condition we didn't understand and couldn't treat.”

“I want to try the experimental treatment,” Finn said, his decision surprising everyone with its clarity. “But I want safeguards. I want medical supervision that isn't just Dr.

Voss. I want my family involved in every decision. And I want the right to stop treatment if it's making things worse.”

Dr. Voss nodded eagerly. “Those are reasonable conditions. I can arrange for oversight from other specialists, establish monitoring protocols?—”

“And I want complete honesty about risks,” Finn continued. “I want to know exactly what these medications might do to my brain, what side effects are possible, what happens if the treatment doesn't work.”

“The biggest risk is that without treatment, your condition will continue progressing until you lose all connection to present reality,” Dr. Voss said. “But yes, I'll provide complete documentation of potential side effects and complications.”

Maya looked skeptical but resigned. “If this is what you want to do, I'll support it. But I want second opinions from doctors who aren't personally invested in experimental research.”

Captain Torres was quiet for a long moment, clearly struggling with old guilt and new decisions.

“I should have been more involved when your mother was sick. Should have fought harder for treatment options, for understanding what was happening to her.” He looked at Finn with obvious regret. “I won't make the same mistake twice.”

River felt cautiously hopeful for the first time in weeks. “So we try the experimental treatment. With medical oversight, family support, and the understanding that we can stop if it's not helping.”

“And if it doesn't work?” Finn asked quietly.

“Then we adapt,” River said, reaching for Finn's hand. “We find ways to love each other and build a life together regardless of what challenges we face.”

As they gathered Finn's belongings and prepared to leave the hospital, River noticed Dr. Voss hanging back, clearly wanting to discuss implementation details but recognizing that her audience was emotionally exhausted.

“We'll start slowly,” she said to the group. “The goal is stabilization, not dramatic change.”

As they headed toward the hospital exit—Finn leaning on River's arm, Maya and Captain Torres flanking them with protective vigilance—River felt like they were finally taking concrete action instead of just reacting to increasingly severe episodes.

But he also felt like they were crossing a threshold into territory where medical intervention might change Finn in ways none of them could predict. The experimental treatment offered hope, but it also carried risks that could alter everything about the person River had fallen in love with.

The lighthouse cottage felt different when they returned, charged with tension that had nothing to do with Finn's medical condition and everything to do with family dynamics that were being renegotiated in real time.

Captain Torres looked around the space with obvious discomfort, clearly seeing evidence of a life his son had built without his involvement or knowledge.

“This is where you've been living,” he said, the statement carrying multiple layers of observation and judgment.

“This is where I've been happy,” Finn replied simply. “For the first time since Mom died, I've been building something that feels like home.”

Captain Torres nodded slowly, accepting the implicit criticism of his absence during Finn's grief and recovery. "It's a good place. Peaceful."

As evening settled around them and they began planning for the experimental treatment, River felt cautiously optimistic about their approach.

They had medical expertise, family support, and clear protocols for managing risk.

Maybe the experimental treatment would provide the stability Finn needed to maintain his grip on reality while preserving the love and connection that had become the center of both their lives.

But as they prepared for bed, River noticed things that made his protective instincts flare.

Captain Torres kept checking locks and windows, his military training apparently activated by something he couldn't articulate.

Maya seemed jumpy, her psychology background making her hyperaware of environmental factors that might affect Finn's condition.

And Finn himself seemed different—more grounded but also more fragile, like someone who'd accepted the reality of his condition but wasn't sure what that acceptance would cost him.

River lay awake long after the others had fallen asleep, watching over the person he loved while wrestling with the growing certainty that the experimental treatment was their best hope but also their biggest risk.

Whatever Dr. Voss's medications did to Finn's brain, whatever changes they produced in his neurological functioning, there would be no going back to the version of him

that River had fallen in love with.

The lighthouse beam swept through their bedroom windows with its usual steady rhythm, but tonight it felt less like guidance and more like a countdown to changes none of them could predict or control.

The Treatment

Finn

Finn sat in Dr. Voss's basement laboratory surrounded by enough monitoring equipment to run a small clinic, trying not to think about how much the setup looked more like an academic research facility than a medical treatment center.

EEG machines, blood pressure monitors, and neurological testing apparatus covered every surface, humming with the kind of electronic intensity that made his skin crawl with anxiety.

"This is really happening," he said to River, who was gripping his hand like a lifeline. "We're really doing this."

"We don't have to," River replied immediately, his green eyes dark with worry and something that looked like dread. "We can walk out right now, find other doctors, try different approaches."

"What other approaches?" Finn gestured at the monitoring equipment that had been tracking his episodes for months without providing any useful treatment options.

"Every doctor we've seen either thinks I'm having a psychological breakdown or wants to study me like a lab rat. At least Dr. Voss is offering to actually do something."

River's grip on his hand tightened. "Something experimental and potentially

dangerous. Something that could make your condition worse instead of better.”

“My condition is already getting worse. Yesterday's episode lasted six hours, River. Six fucking hours where I lived through decades of experiences that felt more real than this conversation.” Finn looked around the laboratory, noting Dr. Voss making final adjustments to equipment that looked more like university research apparatus than medical devices.

“I can't keep disappearing into fantasies while my actual life falls apart.”

Dr. Voss approached with a clipboard and the expression of someone about to explain something complicated to people who probably wouldn't understand it. But there was something else in her demeanor now—an excitement that seemed less about helping Finn and more about the opportunity to study him.

“Are you ready to begin?” she asked. “The setup is complete, and the neurological mapping looks optimal for documenting your specific brain activity patterns.”

The word choice—documenting rather than treating—made River's attention sharpen. “Explain it one more time. What exactly are you going to do to him?”

“The targeted magnetic stimulation is designed to anchor his consciousness to linear time by disrupting the neurological patterns that seem to trigger his displacement episodes.” Dr. Voss gestured toward machines that hummed with barely contained energy.

“We'll use transcranial magnetic stimulation to recalibrate his brain's relationship with temporal perception while monitoring the neurological responses in real time.”

Finn felt his stomach twist with nerves. “So you're going to use magnets to reset my brain?”

“Essentially, yes. The magnetic fields will target the specific regions showing unusual activity during your episodes, ideally stabilizing them to prevent future displacement events.” Dr. Voss's confidence was both reassuring and troubling.

“The procedure is experimental, but transcranial magnetic stimulation is an established treatment for various neurological conditions.”

“Are you sure you’ve told us all of the risks involved?” River asked, his protective instincts clearly working overtime.

“Temporary headaches, possible short-term memory disruption, minor changes to mood or cognition during the adjustment period.” Dr. Voss delivered the list with clinical detachment.

“But given the progressive nature of Finn's condition, the risks of not intervening may be greater than the risks of treatment.”

But there was something in her tone that suggested she wasn't being entirely forthcoming about either the risks or her true motivations for offering this treatment. River caught it too, his expression growing more suspicious.

“How many times have you performed this specific treatment?” River asked.

Dr. Voss hesitated before answering. “Finn's case is unique. The treatment protocol has been designed specifically for his neurological responses.”

“That's not an answer,” River pressed. “How many times have you done this procedure?”

“This will be the first clinical application of the specific protocol,” Dr. Voss admitted. “But the underlying technology is well-established, and the theoretical foundation is

sound.”

Finn felt cold dread settle in his stomach. “I’m going to be your first test subject.”

“You’re going to be the first patient to receive a treatment designed specifically for your condition,” Dr. Voss corrected, but the distinction felt meaningless when Finn was the one taking all the risks.

River stood up abruptly. “We’re leaving. This is insane—you want to experiment on him with a procedure you’ve never performed before.”

“All medical breakthroughs require first applications,” Dr. Voss said, her professional mask slipping slightly to reveal the research-driven motivation underneath. “Without patients willing to accept experimental treatment, we can’t advance our understanding of neurological conditions.”

“Understanding,” Finn repeated, hearing the echo of Dr. Voss’s real priorities. “This isn’t really about helping me, is it? This is about studying what happens when you apply magnetic stimulation to someone with my condition.”

Dr. Voss’s expression shifted, revealing the truth she’d been hiding behind medical authority. “Helping you and advancing our understanding of temporal perceptual displacement aren’t mutually exclusive goals. Your case could provide insights that help others with similar conditions.”

“But if helping Finn were the primary goal, you’d be more conservative with treatment approaches,” River said, understanding dawning. “You’d try standard interventions first, established protocols, proven approaches.”

“Standard interventions don’t work for TPD because the medical community doesn’t understand the condition well enough to develop effective treatments,” Dr. Voss

replied. “Experimental approaches are the only hope for patients like Finn.”

“Or experimental approaches are the only way to collect the data you need for your research,” Finn said quietly, pieces of the puzzle clicking into place.

“My mother, your daughter—they didn't receive treatment because you didn't understand the condition.

And now you're using me to gather that understanding.”

Dr. Voss went very still, her professional composure finally cracking completely. “My daughter died because I couldn't help her. I refuse to let that happen to another family when I have the means to study and potentially treat this condition.”

“Study first, treat second,” River said, standing up and pulling Finn toward the door. “We're done here. We'll find other doctors, other approaches.”

“There are no other doctors,” Dr. Voss said, her voice taking on an edge of desperation. “I'm the only researcher in the country working on TPD. Without this treatment, Finn's condition will continue progressing until he's lost to you completely, just like Elena was lost to her family.”

The words stopped Finn in his tracks because she was right about one thing—his episodes were getting worse, and they hadn't found any other medical professionals who even understood his condition, let alone knew how to treat it.

“What if we compromise?” Finn asked, the words surprising himself as much as River. “What if we do a modified version of the treatment? Lower intensity, more conservative approach, with the understanding that we stop if I show any signs of distress?”

River turned to him with obvious alarm. “Finn, you don't have to do this. We can keep looking for other options.”

“What if there are no other options?” Finn asked quietly. “What if Dr. Voss is right that this is the only chance we have to stabilize my condition before it gets so bad that I lose myself completely?”

Dr. Voss seized on his wavering resolve. “We can start with minimal stimulation, just enough to observe your neurological responses. If the treatment shows promise, we can gradually increase intensity based on your comfort level.”

River looked between them, clearly torn between protecting Finn from experimental treatment and supporting his desire to try anything that might help his condition.

“If we do this—and I mean if—then I want safeguards.

I want the right to stop the treatment at any point if I think it's harmful.

I want complete transparency about what you're doing and why.”

“Agreed,” Dr. Voss said quickly, but there was something in her expression that suggested her agreement might not mean much once the treatment began.

Finn looked at River, seeing his own fears reflected in the man he loved more than he'd ever thought possible. “I'm sorry for putting us in this position.”

“Don't,” River said firmly. “Don't apologize for having a condition you can't control. And don't apologize for letting me love you through it.”

“Whatever happens in there, whatever this does to my brain, I need you to know that loving you has been the most real thing in my life.”

River's eyes filled with tears he was trying not to shed. "Nothing's going to happen. You're going to be fine, and we're going to figure out how to build a normal life together."

"And if I'm not fine?"

"Then we'll build an abnormal life together. But either way, we're building it together." River leaned forward to press a soft kiss to Finn's forehead. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Dr. Voss cleared her throat with obvious impatience. "If you're ready, we should begin. The optimal conditions for this treatment won't last indefinitely."

Finn squeezed River's hand one more time, then nodded to Dr. Voss. "Let's do this before I lose my nerve completely."

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

The transcranial magnetic stimulation began as a rhythmic tapping sensation against Finn's skull, like someone gently knocking on bone to get his attention. The magnetic coils positioned around his head hummed with electronic energy, creating fields that he could feel but couldn't see.

“How are you feeling?” Dr. Voss asked, her attention focused on monitors that were tracking his brain's response to the treatment.

“Like there's a woodpecker inside my skull,” Finn replied, his voice coming out slightly distorted. “Is it supposed to feel this intense?”

“Some sensation is normal. Your brain is adjusting to the magnetic fields.” Dr. Voss made adjustments to her equipment, increasing the intensity despite Finn's obvious discomfort. “We need to reach the threshold where your neurological patterns begin to stabilize.”

But instead of stabilizing, Finn felt his consciousness becoming increasingly unstable, like someone had loosened the moorings that kept his mind anchored to the present moment.

The laboratory around him began to shimmer and shift, reality becoming unreliable in ways that went beyond his usual episodes.

“Something's wrong,” Finn said, his voice sounding distant even to himself. “This doesn't feel like stabilizing. This feels like everything's coming apart.”

River moved closer, his presence becoming the only solid thing in a world that was

rapidly becoming fluid. “Dr. Voss, maybe we should reduce the intensity?—”

“The treatment needs to reach therapeutic levels to be effective,” Dr. Voss interrupted, but her attention was focused entirely on her monitoring equipment rather than Finn's obvious distress.

“His brain activity is showing extraordinary patterns.

We're getting unprecedented data about TPD neurological responses.”

Data. That's what she cared about—not Finn's wellbeing, not his comfort, not whether the treatment was actually helping his condition. She was using him to collect research data, and his safety was secondary to her scientific goals.

But Finn couldn't focus on Dr. Voss's betrayal because his consciousness was fracturing, scattering across different moments and possibilities like leaves in a hurricane.

Instead of anchoring him to the present, the magnetic stimulation was throwing him violently between different versions of his life with River.

Flash: River in their cottage kitchen, older and more weathered, arguing with someone Finn couldn't see about the dangers of experimental treatment.

Flash: River holding him while he cried about losing himself, both of them decades older, their love deepened by years of navigating his condition together.

Flash: River alone in the cottage, staring out at the lighthouse beam, mourning someone who was gone.

“Stop,” Finn gasped, though he wasn't sure if he was speaking to Dr. Voss or to

whatever force was pulling him through these impossible experiences. “Please stop, this is too much.”

“The intensity needs to increase for the anchoring effect to take hold,” Dr. Voss said, adjusting her equipment despite Finn's obvious distress. “His neurological responses indicate we're approaching a critical data collection threshold.”

River's voice cut through the chaos, sharp with alarm and protective fury. “He's in pain. Look at him—this isn't working.”

Finn tried to focus on River's face, using his voice as an anchor, but the magnetic fields were intensifying and his consciousness was fracturing further.

He could feel his body in the laboratory chair, could hear Dr. Voss's equipment humming with increasing intensity, but his mind was experiencing multiple versions of his relationship with River simultaneously.

The most disturbing part wasn't the chaos—it was how real each version felt, how completely convincing every possibility seemed while he was experiencing it.

These weren't fantasies or dreams or false memories.

They felt like actual lived experiences, different choices and outcomes bleeding together until Finn couldn't distinguish between what had happened and what might happen.

“River,” Finn called out, his voice carrying across what felt like vast distances of time and space. “I can see you. All the different versions of you. Some of them are trying to warn me about something.”

“Warn you about what?” River's voice was getting harder to hear as the magnetic

stimulation reached levels that made Finn's entire nervous system feel like it was vibrating out of sync with reality.

But before Finn could answer, his consciousness scattered completely, experiencing multiple timelines simultaneously with overwhelming intensity that made coherent thought impossible.

In the temporal storm that followed, Finn lived through years of different possibilities in minutes that felt like decades. He saw versions of his life with River that spanned every conceivable outcome—some beautiful, some devastating, all feeling absolutely real while he experienced them.

In one version, they grew old together peacefully, Finn's condition stabilizing through love and patience rather than medical intervention.

River's hair went gray, his face lined with years of laughter, and they spent quiet evenings in the lighthouse cottage reading books and watching the beam rotate through their windows.

In another, River became obsessed with curing Finn's condition, descending into research madness that consumed their relationship until River was more doctor than partner, more researcher than lover.

Finn watched himself deteriorate while River documented every symptom, every episode, every sign of progression with scientific detachment that replaced emotional connection.

The most vivid version showed River seventeen years older, broken by loss and desperate with accumulated grief. This older River moved through the temporal storm with purpose, manipulating events from outside normal time, trying to prevent something catastrophic from happening.

“Stop fighting me,” the older River said, his voice carrying across impossible distances. “I’m trying to save us both from making the same mistakes I made.”

“What mistakes?” Finn called back, struggling to understand what he was seeing.

“Trusting her. Believing that love could be fixed through science. Thinking that experimental treatment would give us back our normal life.” The older River’s voice was thick with years of accumulated regret.

“The treatment doesn’t anchor you to linear time, Finn.

It breaks down the barriers completely. That’s how I’m here—seventeen years too late to save the person I loved most.”

The revelation hit Finn with devastating clarity.

Dr. Voss’s treatment wasn’t designed to cure his condition—it was designed to make it worse, to break down his consciousness completely so she could study the results.

And this older River had been trying to prevent that outcome by triggering episodes that would drive them apart before they reached this moment.

“You’ve been manipulating us,” Finn said, understanding flooding through him despite the chaos. “The interference, the episodes getting worse, the emotional triggers—that was you trying to break us up.”

“I was trying to save you from this,” the older River replied, his voice breaking with emotion. “I watched you disappear completely when the treatment broke down every barrier in your mind. I lived seventeen years knowing I could have prevented it if I’d just convinced myself to let you go.”

But Finn felt anger rise through his terror, fury at being manipulated by someone who claimed to love him while actively sabotaging their relationship. “You don't get to decide what's best for us. You don't get to destroy our love to prevent a future that might not happen.”

“It will happen. The treatment will shatter your consciousness completely, and I'll spend the rest of my life mourning someone who's still alive but no longer accessible to anyone who loves him.”

“Then I'll take that risk,” Finn said, his decision crystallizing despite the chaos surrounding him. “I'd rather risk everything for love than accept safety without it.”

In the laboratory, alarms were beginning to sound as the magnetic stimulation equipment surged beyond normal parameters.

Through the temporal storm, Finn could hear River's voice demanding that Dr. Voss reduce the intensity, his terror cutting through all the noise and chaos to reach Finn's scattered consciousness.

“I'm here,” Finn called back, using River's voice as a guide through the temporal chaos. “I'm coming back.”

The magnetic fields reached peak intensity, and Finn felt his body convulsing in the laboratory chair while his consciousness fought to reassemble itself around the anchor of River's voice.

Equipment alarms began screaming warnings about dangerous exposure levels, but Dr. Voss ignored them, her attention focused entirely on the unprecedented brain activity patterns showing on her monitors.

“Shut it down!” River was shouting, his voice raw with desperation. “You're hurting

him!”

“The data collection is at a critical stage,” Dr. Voss replied, her excitement overriding concern for Finn's physical state. “His neurological responses are showing complete temporal displacement integration. This is exactly what we hoped to document.”

But Finn wasn't achieving integration. He was experiencing complete fracture, his consciousness scattered across multiple possibilities while his body went into distress from magnetic exposure beyond therapeutic levels.

Only River's voice kept him tethered to any version of reality, calling him back from the temporal storm with love and terror and absolute refusal to let him disappear.

Through the chaos, Finn suddenly saw him clearly—the older River, seventeen years damaged by grief, standing in the corner of the laboratory watching the scene unfold with heartbreak and bitter satisfaction.

This was the moment he'd been trying to prevent, the treatment that would destroy everything they'd built together.

“I can see you,” Finn managed to say, his voice barely audible over the alarms and equipment noise. “I can see what you've been doing, trying to save us from ourselves.”

The older River's expression shifted from manipulation to desperate pleading. “It's not too late. You can still choose to walk away, choose to let him go before this destroys you both.”

“No,” Finn said, his decision final despite the chaos. “I choose love. I choose the risk. I choose him.”

The older River's face crumpled with defeat and understanding. “Then you choose to create me—seventeen years older and broken by loss that could have been prevented.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I choose to prove that love is stronger than your fear.” Finn forced his consciousness to focus, to gather itself around the anchor of River's voice calling him home. “Either way, it's my choice to make.”

The magnetic stimulation equipment began malfunctioning at exactly that moment, systems failing in ways that had nothing to do with Dr. Voss's settings or the apparatus reaching its limits.

Warning lights flashed in patterns that seemed almost deliberate, alarms screamed about impossible system errors, and the basement laboratory filled with electrical disturbances that defied explanation.

Something was interfering with the equipment from outside normal causation—the same force that had been manipulating Finn's episodes, creating temporal disturbances, trying to prevent this exact moment from occurring.

“Finn!” River's voice cut through everything, terror and love and absolute determination to reach him regardless of the chaos.

Finn felt himself falling back into his own body as the equipment shut down in emergency protocol, his consciousness finally anchoring to the present moment through sheer force of will and the gravitational pull of River's love.

The last thing he saw before exhaustion claimed him was River diving toward him through flashing warning lights, risking everything to reach him as the laboratory descended into emergency shutdown.

And in that moment, as consciousness fled and everything went quiet, Finn felt peace for the first time in months.

He'd seen the truth about their manipulation, understood the forces working against their love, and chosen to fight for what they had despite all the risks and fears and warnings from futures that might never come to pass.

Whatever happened next, they would face it together, without manipulation from broken versions of themselves or experimental treatments designed more for research than healing.

They would find their own way through love and patience and the simple faith that some things were worth risking everything to protect.

Even if that faith led them into the same darkness that had claimed the older River's hope seventeen years too late to change anything.

Even if choosing love meant choosing to become broken by it.

Even then.

Emergency

River

The world exploded in sparks and smoke and the screaming of machines failing in ways that defied explanation.

River dove through the chaos without thinking, his body moving on pure instinct toward Finn's convulsing form in the laboratory chair.

Heat from shorting circuits scorched the air, but all River could see was Finn's face, pale and twisted with pain as the magnetic equipment discharged in patterns that seemed almost deliberate.

"Finn!" River's voice tore from his throat as he reached for the emergency shutdown, his hands shaking as he tried to stop the nightmare Dr. Voss had created. Sparks flew from the magnetic coils, and the smell of burning electronics filled his lungs with acrid smoke.

Dr. Voss was shouting something about data collection, about breakthrough readings, but River couldn't hear anything over the sound of his own heartbeat hammering against his ribs.

Finn's body went limp as the machines finally died, leaving them in sudden, terrible silence broken only by the hiss of cooling metal and River's ragged breathing.

"Jesus Christ, Finn, wake up." River's hands found Finn's face, his skin cold and

clammy, no response when River touched his cheek. “Please wake up, please be okay.”

But Finn wasn't okay. His eyes were closed, his breathing shallow, and when River checked his pulse it was too fast and too weak. Whatever Dr. Voss had done to him with her experimental equipment, it had pushed his brain past the breaking point.

“Call an ambulance,” River yelled at Dr. Voss, who was crouched beside her destroyed equipment, looking more devastated about her ruined research than concerned about her patient who might be dying.

“The data,” Dr. Voss mumbled, picking through smoking circuit boards like she was searching for buried treasure. “Years of research, all the breakthrough readings...”

“Fuck your data!” River scooped Finn into his arms, surprised by how light he felt, how fragile. “He's not breathing right, and you're worried about your goddamn research?”

Dr. Voss finally looked up, seeming to register for the first time that Finn was unconscious and possibly in serious medical danger.

River held Finn against his chest while they waited for the paramedics, whispering every prayer and promise he could think of. The basement laboratory felt like a crime scene now, filled with the wreckage of equipment that had been designed to help but had nearly killed the person River loved most.

“I'm sorry,” River whispered against Finn's hair. “I'm so fucking sorry I let her do this to you.”

The ambulance ride felt like drowning in slow motion. River sat beside Finn's gurney while paramedics worked with quick, professional movements, checking vital signs

and asking questions River couldn't answer.

“He has some kind of neurological condition,” River said, his voice barely steady. “Temporal displacement episodes.”

The paramedic's expression shifted to something between confusion and concern. “What kind of doctor was performing this treatment?”

“I don't know anymore,” River admitted, watching Finn's face for any sign of consciousness returning. “I thought she was trying to help him, but now...”

Now River wasn't sure about anything except that he'd let someone he barely knew perform experimental procedures on the person who mattered most, and Finn might pay the price for River's desperation to find solutions.

Maya was waiting at the hospital entrance like a storm about to break, her scrubs wrinkled from rushing over from her own job, her face a mask of fury and terror that made River's stomach drop.

She took one look at Finn being wheeled into the emergency room and turned on River with the kind of rage that came from months of accumulated fear.

“What the hell happened?” Maya's voice carried across the waiting room, drawing attention from other families dealing with their own crises. “You said you were getting a second opinion, not letting some quack experiment on him with electrical equipment.”

“Maya, I can explain?—”

“Explain what? How you let someone torture my brother because you couldn't accept that his condition might not have a cure?” Maya stepped closer, her voice dropping to

something more dangerous than shouting. “How you convinced him to risk his life for experimental treatment that nearly killed him?”

River felt every word like a knife between his ribs because Maya was right. He had pushed for the experimental treatment. He had convinced Finn to trust Dr. Voss despite warning signs that something wasn't right about her approach.

“I thought it would help,” River said, his voice breaking on the admission. “I thought if we could just find the right treatment, the right approach...”

“You thought you could fix him.” Maya's expression was a mixture of heartbreak and disgust. “You thought love meant solving his medical problems instead of accepting them.”

Before River could respond, a doctor in scrubs appeared with the carefully neutral expression that hospital staff learned for delivering news that might destroy people's lives. River felt his heart stop as he waited for words that would either give him hope or take away everything that mattered.

“Mr. Torres is stable,” the doctor said, and River felt like he could breathe again for the first time in hours. “The electromagnetic exposure caused some neurological stress, but his vital signs are strong and I don't see any signs of permanent damage.”

“Thank God,” River whispered, his legs going weak with relief.

“However,” the doctor continued, “he's still unconscious, and his brain activity suggests he's experiencing some kind of extended neurological event. His EEG readings show patterns consistent with REM sleep, but much more intense. As if he's dreaming with unusual vividness while unconscious.”

Maya's face went pale. “How long could this last?”

“We're not sure. Has he experienced anything like this before?”

River and Maya exchanged glances, both thinking about Finn's episodes and the way they seemed to transport him to experiences that felt more real than actual life.

“He has a condition,” River said carefully. “Memory displacement episodes. They've been getting more severe lately.”

“I see. Well, we'll continue monitoring his brain activity. But right now, all we can do is wait.”

Waiting turned out to be the hardest thing River had ever done.

He sat beside Finn's hospital bed while machines beeped their steady rhythm, monitoring vital signs that stayed frustratingly stable while Finn remained somewhere else entirely.

His face was peaceful, like he was having pleasant dreams, but River knew better.

“I'm here,” River said quietly, holding Finn's hand and trying not to think about how still it was. “Wherever you are, whatever you're experiencing, I'm right here waiting for you to come back.”

Jake appeared sometime after midnight, moving through the hospital room with the careful quiet of someone who'd dealt with medical crises before. He took one look at River's red-rimmed eyes and exhausted posture, then settled into the chair beside him without saying anything.

“How long has he been out?” Jake asked finally.

“Eight hours. The doctors say his brain activity is off the charts, like he's

experiencing something incredibly intense, but he won't wake up.” River rubbed his face with hands that shook from too much coffee and not enough sleep.

“What if I broke him? What if that treatment damaged his brain permanently?”

“You didn't break him,” Jake said firmly. “You tried to help him. Sometimes trying to help goes wrong, but that doesn't make you responsible for everything bad that happens.”

“I pushed him toward experimental treatment because I couldn't handle watching him get worse. I made his medical decisions based on my own fear instead of what was actually best for him.” River's voice cracked with exhaustion and guilt.

“Maya's right. I've been trying to fix him instead of just loving him.”

Jake was quiet for a moment, studying Finn's peaceful face. “You know what I think? I think you've been loving him the only way you knew how. That doesn't make it wrong, even if it didn't work out the way you hoped.”

Around three in the morning, River noticed the first strange thing.

The room grew cold suddenly, like someone had opened a window to winter air, but all the windows were closed and the heating system was working fine.

River pulled his jacket tighter, but the cold lingered in a way that felt unnatural.

Then the lights flickered. Not the steady flicker of electrical problems, but a deliberate pattern, like someone was sending signals. River looked around the room, expecting to see a nurse or maintenance worker, but they were alone.

“Jake,” River said quietly. “Are you seeing this?”

Jake looked up from his phone, noting the flickering lights and the way their breath was starting to mist in the suddenly frigid air. “That's not normal hospital weirdness.”

The flickering stopped, but the cold remained, and River felt the strangest sensation that they were being watched. Not by hospital staff or security cameras, but by something that understood more about Finn's condition than any of them did.

“There's someone else involved in this,” River said, the realization hitting him like ice water. “Someone who doesn't want Finn to get better.”

“What do you mean?”

“The interference we've been noticing. Equipment failures, power outages, the way his episodes always seem to happen at the worst possible moments.” River stood up, pacing beside Finn's bed as pieces of an impossible puzzle started clicking together.

“What if someone's been manipulating his condition? Making it worse on purpose?”

Jake looked skeptical but didn't dismiss the idea completely. “Who would do that? And how?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

River was about to answer when he saw something that made his heart stop.

In the doorway of Finn's hospital room stood a figure that looked exactly like him, but older, more weathered, wearing clothes River recognized from his own closet.

The figure watched them with eyes that held years of accumulated grief, then turned and walked down the hospital corridor like he belonged there.

“Did you see that?” River whispered, his voice barely audible.

“See what?”

River looked at Jake, then back at the doorway where the impossible figure had been standing. Nothing there now except empty hallway and the distant sounds of hospital activity.

“Nothing,” River said, but his hands were shaking as he sat back down beside Finn's bed. “I thought I saw something.”

But he had seen something. Someone who watched them with the careful attention of a person waiting for specific events to unfold. The same way River had been watching Finn, but from the wrong side of time.

River spent the rest of the night staring at the doorway, finally understanding that his own strange experiences - the inexplicable familiarity with Finn, the misplaced memories, the moments of knowing things he shouldn't - hadn't been separate from Finn's condition.

They'd been part of the same phenomenon, just manifesting differently.

Thomas Wright appeared the next morning carrying a leather satchel and looking like a man who'd been debating whether to get involved in something he didn't fully understand.

River recognized him from the lighthouse museum—the old curator who collected maritime stories and seemed to know more about local mysteries than he usually shared.

“Heard about what happened,” Thomas said, settling into the visitor's chair with the careful movements of someone whose joints had seen too many years. “Brought some things you might find interesting.”

“About what?”

“Your situation.” Thomas opened his satchel and pulled out a slim folder. “Been researching families like yours for decades. People dealing with temporal displacement, unexplained episodes, reality that doesn't behave the way it should.”

River leaned forward, desperate for any information that might help him understand what was happening. “Other people have had episodes like Finn's?”

“Similar patterns, going back over a century.” Thomas pulled out a faded newspaper clipping from 1943.

“Young woman named Sarah Caldwell started having what her husband called 'time slips'—episodes where she seemed to experience other versions of her life.

But here's what caught my attention: her husband reported seeing an elderly version of himself during her worst episodes.”

River's blood turned to ice water. "Someone who looked like him but older?"

"Exactly. And according to his account, this figure seemed to be trying to communicate something. Usually warnings about treatment approaches or medical decisions." Thomas showed River another document, this one from 1967.

"Here's another case. James Morrison's wife had similar episodes, and he swore he saw his future self trying to prevent him from seeking certain treatments."

River stared at the documents, his mind reeling. "You're saying this has happened before?"

"The pattern is consistent across multiple cases spanning decades. The displacement condition affects more than just the patient—it seems to create temporal echoes that allow glimpses of possible futures." Thomas studied River's face with sharp eyes. "Have you been seeing things you can't explain?"

River wanted to lie, to dismiss what had happened as stress-induced hallucination, but Thomas's documentation suggested he might be the only person who would understand. "Last night, I saw someone who looked exactly like me, but older. He was watching Finn."

Thomas nodded like this was exactly what he'd expected to hear. "The echoes appear during medical crises, when the patient's condition reaches critical points. Sometimes they try to communicate directly, sometimes through environmental manipulation."

"Environmental manipulation?"

"Equipment failures, power outages, circumstances that prevent certain choices from being made." Thomas gathered his documents carefully. "Have you noticed unusual interference around Finn's episodes?"

River thought about the equipment failures, the power outages during important conversations, the way Finn's episodes always seemed to escalate at moments that drove them toward crisis.

“Someone's been sabotaging us,” River said, understanding hitting him with devastating clarity. “Someone who knows how this ends, who's been trying to prevent us from making choices that lead to disaster.”

“That would fit the pattern I've documented,” Thomas agreed quietly. “The question is whether you're going to fight the manipulation or try to understand what it's warning you about.”

Before River could answer, Finn's heart monitor started beeping faster, his peaceful expression shifting to something more active. His eyelids fluttered, and River felt hope explode in his chest as consciousness seemed to return after three days of absence.

“Finn?” River leaned forward, taking his hand and feeling it squeeze back weakly. “Hey, you're in the hospital. You're safe. You're okay.”

Finn's eyes opened slowly, unfocused at first, then finding River's face with obvious relief. “River,” he whispered, his voice hoarse. “You're here. You're real.”

“I'm here. I'm not going anywhere.” River felt tears on his face that he didn't remember starting. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I've been living other people's lives.” Finn tried to sit up, wincing at the soreness in his muscles. “But River, I need to tell you something important. About what I saw during the treatment.”

“What did you see?”

Finn's expression grew serious, his brown eyes holding knowledge that seemed too heavy for someone who'd just regained consciousness. "I saw him. The older version of you. He's been manipulating my episodes, trying to drive us apart to prevent something terrible from happening."

River felt the world shift around him as Finn confirmed what he'd barely been willing to believe. "You saw him too?"

"He's been interfering with my condition, making the episodes worse at specific moments to sabotage our relationship."

He thinks he's protecting us, but he's actually destroying what we have." Finn struggled to sit up further, urgency in his voice.

"River, we need to understand what he's trying to prevent, because whatever it is, he's willing to sacrifice our happiness to stop it."

River looked at Thomas, who was listening to their conversation with the fascination of someone whose research had just been vindicated by living witnesses.

"It seems," Thomas said quietly, "that your temporal displacement has attracted the attention of someone who's lived through the consequences of the choices you're making now."

"But why would a future version of me try to destroy our relationship?" River asked, his mind struggling to process the impossible situation they were facing.

Finn met his eyes with an expression that held both love and terrible understanding. "Because in his timeline, trying to save me destroyed us both. And he'd rather have us broken apart than watch us repeat his mistakes."

River felt everything he thought he understood about reality crumble around him.

They weren't just dealing with Finn's medical condition anymore.

They were dealing with someone who had lived through the consequences of their love and was actively working to prevent them from fighting for what they had.

The question was whether they would let fear of an unknown future destroy their present, or whether they would choose to face whatever was coming together, regardless of what older and supposedly wiser versions of themselves thought was best.

Looking at Finn's face, seeing the determination in his eyes despite everything he'd been through, River knew which choice he was going to make. They would fight for their love, even if it meant battling against versions of themselves who thought they knew better.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Pieces of Truth

Finn

The knock on the hospital room door came with a hesitation that made Finn's chest tighten before he even saw who was standing there.

Maya stepped inside first, her expression carefully neutral in the way that meant she was about to drop a bomb on his already fragile world.

Behind her, filling the doorway with uncomfortable silence, stood their father.

Captain Torres looked older than Finn remembered, his Coast Guard bearing intact but somehow diminished by the hospital setting. The smell of antiseptic and illness seemed to make him smaller, like he was shrinking away from memories that lived in places like this.

“Dad,” Finn said, his voice coming out flatter than he'd intended.

“Son.” Captain Torres stepped into the room with the careful movements of someone walking through a minefield. “Maya said you were... that you needed family here.”

Finn almost laughed at the irony. Family. The man who'd walked out when their mother started getting confused, who'd abandoned them to handle medical crises and insurance forms and the slow dissolution of everything they'd thought was permanent.

“Where were you when Mom needed family?” The words escaped before Finn could stop them, years of buried resentment surfacing with the sharp edge of hospital fluorescents and too much time to think.

Captain Torres's face went gray, his hands fidgeting with the Coast Guard cap he still carried everywhere like a security blanket. “Finn, that's not—I couldn't handle what was happening to her.”

“You couldn't handle it, so you just left?” Finn struggled to sit up straighter in his hospital bed, anger giving him strength he didn't know he had. “She needed us, and you disappeared.”

“Because I knew what she was seeing,” Captain Torres said quietly, his voice breaking years of carefully maintained silence.

“I knew about the conversations she claimed we'd had, the places she described that we'd never been. I knew because sometimes... sometimes what she said would happen actually did happen.”

The room went quiet except for the steady beep of medical equipment and the sound of Finn's world rearranging itself around information that changed everything.

Maya leaned forward, her psychology training engaged. “Dad, what are you talking about?”

“Your mother would tell me about rescue operations before I got called out to them.

She'd describe exactly how they would unfold, who we'd save, what equipment would fail.” Captain Torres looked at his hands like they might hold answers he'd been too afraid to find.

“I thought she was getting lucky with guesses, or maybe picking up information from radio chatter. But it happened too often, too precisely.”

Finn felt his heart racing as pieces of an impossible puzzle started fitting together. “She was seeing different versions of reality.”

“She was seeing futures, possibilities, things that hadn't happened yet but would.” Captain Torres met his eyes for the first time since entering the room.

“And when I realized that what she was experiencing wasn't madness but something else entirely, something I couldn't understand or control, I ran.”

“You left because she had abilities you couldn't explain?” Maya's voice carried disbelief and growing anger.

“I left because loving someone who lives partially outside normal reality is terrifying.” Captain Torres's admission hung in the air like something toxic.

“Every day with her was like living with someone who had one foot in our world and one foot in possibilities I couldn't see.

I wasn't brave enough for that kind of love.”

Finn felt validation and horror in equal measure. His mother hadn't been losing her mind. She'd been experiencing something similar to his own condition—displacement from linear time, access to experiences that felt real but existed outside consensus reality.

“The doctors said she had dementia,” Finn said.

“The doctors didn't know what they were talking about.” Captain Torres rubbed his

face with hands that shook slightly.

“They saw an older woman who talked about things that hadn't happened and assumed cognitive decline.

But Elena wasn't losing memories. She was gaining access to experiences that existed in different timelines.”

Dr. Voss arrived that afternoon carrying medical files and wearing the expression of someone who'd spent hours connecting dots that painted a troubling picture. She spread documents across Finn's hospital table with the focused attention of someone building a case.

“I've been reviewing your mother's medical records,” Dr. Voss said, her voice carrying subdued excitement. “The symptoms documented by her doctors are completely consistent with Temporal Perceptual Displacement.”

River looked up from his position beside Finn's bed, where he'd been quietly processing the family revelations. “You've known about the genetic connection this whole time?”

“I suspected based on Finn's symptoms, but I needed confirmation from medical records.” Dr. Voss pointed to specific entries in their mother's file.

“Look at these documentation patterns. Memory displacement episodes, knowledge acquisition that couldn't be explained, temporal confusion that doctors interpreted as cognitive decline.”

Maya leaned forward, studying the documents. “Why didn't anyone recognize it as TPD?”

“Because most medical professionals have never encountered temporal displacement.

The symptoms look like dementia or psychological disorders to doctors who aren't familiar with consciousness research.” Dr. Voss gathered the medical files carefully.

“But understanding Finn's family history explains why his condition manifested so dramatically.”

“How so?”

“TPD tends to activate during periods of intense emotional stress, particularly related to loss or trauma.

Elena's condition probably began during a difficult period, and Finn's activated after her death.” Dr. Voss's clinical detachment was both helpful and disturbing.

“The genetic predisposition was there, but it needed emotional triggers to manifest.”

The condition hadn't appeared randomly. It had emerged from the deepest pain he'd ever experienced.

“Is that why my episodes got worse when River and I got closer?” Finn asked.

“Emotional intensity can trigger more frequent displacement events, but it can also provide stability if the relationship is supportive.” Dr. Voss paused, her expression shifting to something more personal.

“Which brings me to something I should have told you earlier about my own involvement in TPD research.”

River's attention sharpened. “What do you mean?”

“You already know about my daughter, but what I didn't mention is that her condition has an official designation now. Temporal Personality Displacement, or TPD.” Dr. Voss's voice was steady but her hands shook slightly.

“I've been researching this specific condition ever since her death, hoping to understand what happened and prevent similar losses.”

“That's why you pushed for the experimental treatment,” River said, understanding and anger evident in his voice. “You weren't just trying to help Finn. You were trying to understand what happened to Elena.”

“I was pursuing answers for both of you,” Dr. Voss admitted. “But I realize now that my personal investment compromised my judgment about appropriate treatment approaches. I nearly killed you in pursuit of answers about my own loss.”

Finn felt sympathy and anger toward Dr. Voss in equal measure. Her motivations were understandable, but she'd used his condition to pursue her own research goals rather than focusing on his wellbeing.

“The experimental treatment made everything worse,” Finn said. “But it also showed me something important about the manipulation we've been experiencing.”

Dr. Voss pulled out brain activity charts from his treatment session. “Your neurological responses during displacement episodes suggest you're not experiencing random temporal confusion. You're accessing specific alternate versions of your life with River.”

That evening, after the medical discussions wound down and the hospital settled into nighttime quiet, Finn and River spread everything they'd learned across his hospital table like pieces of a puzzle they were finally beginning to solve.

“Look at this pattern,” River said, pointing to dates he'd marked on a calendar. “Your severe episodes consistently happen right after we have important conversations or make progress in our relationship.”

Finn studied the timeline, seeing what River had discovered. “The manipulation isn't random. Someone's been triggering episodes specifically to sabotage our emotional development.”

“Every time we get closer, every time we start building stability, you have an episode that creates crisis and pushes us apart.” River's voice carried frustration and growing understanding. “It's like someone's been orchestrating our suffering.”

“The older version of you,” Finn said, remembering the figure he'd encountered during the experimental treatment. “He's been trying to prevent us from finding happiness together because he couldn't handle losing me in his timeline.”

River was quiet for a moment, processing the implications. “So he's been making your condition worse to convince us that our relationship is doomed.”

“He's been stealing our happiness to prevent a future that might not even happen.” Finn felt anger building as he understood the scope of the manipulation they'd endured.

“But during the treatment, I realized something important.

He's not trying to prevent our relationship—he's trying to prevent you from becoming him.”

“What do you mean?”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

“He became obsessed with curing my condition instead of accepting it.

He turned love into a medical mission, and it destroyed everything we'd built together.” Finn met River's eyes, seeing understanding dawn there.

“He's trying to save us from his own mistakes by sabotaging us before we reach the point where you start seeing me as a problem to solve.”

River reached for Finn's hand, intertwining their fingers with the automatic intimacy that had survived every episode and crisis. “But I don't want to cure you. I want to love you exactly as you are.”

“I know that. And he probably knew that too, at first. But grief and desperation can change people, make them do things they never thought they'd do.” Finn squeezed River's hand, feeling certainty build in his chest. “The question is whether we're going to let his fear write our story.”

Maya knocked softly before entering with Thomas Wright, both carrying documents that suggested they'd been collaborating on research.

“We've been looking into similar cases,” Maya said, arranging papers in the systematic way her psychology training had taught her. “Thomas has documented dozens of families affected by temporal displacement over the past century.”

Thomas opened a leather folder, revealing handwritten accounts and newspaper clippings. “I've had some time to rest and gather more documentation since we talked yesterday,” he said, settling back into his chair. “The pattern I mentioned is even

more extensive than I initially showed you.”

“What kind of additional evidence?” Finn asked.

“More detailed accounts of the temporal echoes we discussed. Family members not just seeing alternate versions, but experiencing direct interference.” Thomas pointed to a faded newspaper account.

“This case from 1962 - the husband reported that the older version of himself didn't just appear during episodes, but actively sabotaged medical equipment to prevent certain treatments.”

River leaned forward with obvious interest. “Are there accounts of people successfully confronting these temporal echoes?”

“A few. Families who chose to face the manipulation directly rather than being controlled by it.” Thomas pulled out a handwritten letter.

“This woman documented her experience confronting a temporal figure who'd been sabotaging her marriage. She wrote that understanding the manipulation was the first step toward reclaiming control.”

“How did she confront it?” Finn asked.

“She returned to the place where the interference had been strongest and demanded direct communication rather than continued manipulation.” Thomas looked between Finn and River with eyes that had seen too many impossible things.

“She forced the temporal echo to explain its actions, then made her own choices about how to respond.”

Maya spread out more documents, showing patterns Thomas had identified. “The key seems to be understanding that temporal echoes aren't trying to harm people. They're trying to prevent specific outcomes based on their own traumatic experiences.”

“But they don't have the right to make those choices for other people,” Finn said, his decision crystallizing. “Even if the future version of River has lived through losing me, that doesn't give him the authority to destroy our present.”

River nodded, his grip on Finn's hand tightening with shared determination. “We need to go back to the lighthouse cottage. That's where the interference has been strongest.”

“Are you sure you're ready for that kind of confrontation?” Maya asked, her protective instincts clearly warring with her understanding that Finn needed to fight for his relationship.

“I'm ready,” Finn said, feeling stronger than he had in months. “I'm tired of being a victim of someone else's fear. I'm tired of having my episodes triggered by manipulation instead of natural causes.”

Thomas began gathering his documents, but paused to look at Finn with an expression that was part encouragement, part warning.

“Just remember that temporal echoes are usually created by profound trauma and loss.

Whatever you're confronting experienced the worst possible outcome of the choices you're making.”

“Then we'll have to prove that the worst possible outcome isn't the only possible outcome,” River said.

As they prepared to leave the hospital, Finn felt cautious hope building in his chest for the first time since his condition had begun. He understood his family history, knew the genetic basis of his condition, and recognized the scope of the manipulation they'd endured.

Most importantly, he had River beside him—not trying to cure his condition but willing to accept it as part of loving him. That felt like the kind of foundation they could build a life on, regardless of what temporal echoes thought was best.

“Ready for this?” River asked as they walked toward the hospital exit.

Finn looked at the man he loved, seeing determination and fear and hope in equal measure, and felt his own resolve solidify into conviction.

“I'm ready,” Finn said. “Let's go home and face whatever's been trying to destroy us.”

Truth

River

The lighthouse cottage felt different when they returned from the hospital, charged with tension that had nothing to do with Finn's medical condition and everything to do with the confrontation they both knew was coming.

River moved to the kitchen to make coffee, needing something normal and domestic to anchor himself while Finn settled carefully on the couch, still moving with the cautious exhaustion of someone recovering from a medical crisis.

"You're scared," Finn observed, watching River's hands shake slightly as he measured coffee grounds.

"Terrified," River admitted, not bothering to lie. "I'm about to face someone who thinks our love is doomed."

Finn stood up and moved into the kitchen, wrapping his arms around River's waist from behind. The simple contact was grounding, familiar, real in ways that made the supernatural strangeness surrounding them feel manageable.

"Whatever warnings we get, whatever threats, we make our own choices," Finn said against River's shoulder. "Nobody gets to write our story for us."

River leaned back into Finn's embrace, feeling some of the tension leave his body. "What if they're right? What if trying to build a life together really does destroy us?"

“Then we get destroyed together,” Finn said simply. “I’d rather risk everything with you than be safe without you.”

The coffee maker gurgled to life, its familiar sound interrupted by the temperature in the cottage dropping dramatically. Their breath began to mist, and the lighthouse beam outside flickered erratically before going completely dark.

“We know you’re here,” River called out, his voice carrying more strength than he felt. “We know what you’ve been doing. If you want to save us so badly, then talk to us directly instead of hiding.”

The lighthouse beam flickered back to life, casting strange shadows through the cottage windows. In the shifting light, a figure materialized in their living room doorway—unmistakably River, but seventeen years older and broken by accumulated grief.

River had glimpsed this impossible version of himself before, but seeing him fully was like looking into a mirror that reflected loss instead of possibility.

The man’s hair was streaked with premature gray, his face lined with exhaustion that went bone-deep.

He wore clothes River recognized from his own closet, but they hung on his frame like they belonged to someone who’d forgotten how to take care of himself.

“Jesus,” River whispered, his rational mind struggling to process what he was seeing.

“You really have no fucking idea what you’re doing to each other,” the older River said, his voice carrying authority earned through years of consequences. “I’ve been trying to save you from making the same mistakes I made.”

Finn stepped out from behind River, facing his temporal tormentor with courage that made River's chest swell with pride and terror. "You've been sabotaging us. Making my episodes worse, triggering them at the worst possible moments."

"I've been trying to teach you both to let go before you destroy the very thing you're desperate to preserve." The older River's eyes held pain that made River want to look away.

"Do you have any idea what it's like to spend seventeen years knowing you could have prevented your own heartbreak if you'd just been brave enough to walk away?"

"We're not walking away," River said, his voice stronger now. "Whatever you think we should do, whatever warnings you have, we're not giving up on each other."

The older River laughed, but it was the sound of someone who'd forgotten how joy was supposed to work. "That's exactly what I said. That love meant fighting for each other, solving problems, finding cures for what was broken."

River felt Finn move closer to him, their hands finding each other automatically. The simple contact seemed to make the older River's form flicker, like their present connection weakened his ability to maintain his presence.

"Tell us what actually happened," Finn said, his voice carrying quiet strength. "Not warnings, not manipulation. Tell us the truth about how your story ended."

The older River was quiet for a moment, his expression cycling through emotions River couldn't identify. When he finally spoke, his voice carried the weight of seventeen years of accumulated grief.

"You want the truth? I became obsessed with curing Finn's TPD. Not managing it, not accepting it, but eliminating it completely." The older River's form flickered as he

continued.

“I tried everything. Experimental medications, dangerous treatments, research that consumed every moment of our lives until I forgot how to be his partner instead of his doctor.”

River felt ice in his veins because he recognized the obsession his older self was describing. The desperate need to fix, to solve, to make everything normal.

“What happened to him?” River asked, though he wasn't sure he wanted to know.

“I convinced him to undergo one final experimental treatment. A procedure that promised to anchor his consciousness to linear time permanently.” The older River's voice broke slightly. “But instead of anchoring him, it shattered every temporal barrier in his mind completely.”

“Jesus,” River whispered, understanding beginning to dawn.

“He didn't die. He didn't disappear. He jumped so far backward through his personal timeline that our first meeting was erased entirely.” The older River's form was becoming more transparent, his presence unstable as emotional energy drained from the confrontation.

“I lost him to a reality where we'd never met, where our love story had never happened.”

The cottage fell silent except for the irregular flickering of the lighthouse beam and River's heart breaking for a future that might never come to pass.

“I've spent seventeen years living in a world where the most important relationship of my life never existed,” the older River continued, his voice barely audible now.

“Where I remember every moment of our love, but he has no memory of me at all.

I've been trying to teach you to let go before you destroy the very thing you're desperate to save.”

Finn's hand tightened in River's, his presence solid and real despite everything the older River was telling them. “How are you here if that's what happened? How can you manipulate our timeline?”

“When Finn's temporal barriers were destroyed, it created... fractures. Places where different timelines bleed through.” The older River's explanation was simple, exhausted. “I learned to move through those fractures, to influence events in timelines where you still have choices to make.”

“You've been sabotaging our happiness to prevent us from reaching the point where I become you,” River said, understanding finally clicking into place.

“I've been trying to save Finn from the worst possible outcome of your love.” The older River's form was flickering more rapidly now.

“In my timeline, your obsession with curing him destroyed his mind completely. I thought if I could just convince you to accept what happened to his mother, to let him go before you started researching treatments...”

“But we're not you,” Finn said firmly. “Our choices don't have to lead to your mistakes.”

“How can you be sure? How can you risk everything on hope when I'm standing here as proof of what happens when that hope goes wrong?” The older River's voice was fading with his presence.

“I loved you just as much as he does. I was just as determined to fight for our relationship. And I destroyed him trying to save him.”

River looked at Finn, seeing determination and love and absolute trust in his brown eyes. The older River was asking them to choose fear over hope, safety over love, loneliness over the risk of loss.

“Because this is our story to write,” River said, his voice steady despite the impossible situation they were facing. “Your experience is real, your pain is real, but your timeline isn't the only possible outcome.”

The older River's form stabilized slightly, as if their defiance gave him something to focus on. “Then you choose to create me —seventeen years older and broken by loss that could have been prevented.”

“We choose to create our own future,” Finn said quietly. “Whatever that looks like.”

The older River's expression shifted through grief and frustration and something that might have been desperate hope.

“If you insist on this path, if you refuse to learn from my mistakes... then at least let me show you the truth. Let me show you exactly what your love becomes when fear drives every choice.”

River felt Finn's hand squeeze his, both of them understanding that they were about to see something that would either strengthen their resolve or break it completely.

“Show us,” River said, his voice carrying more certainty than he felt. “Show us what we're choosing to risk.”

The older River's form became more solid, as if their willingness to face the truth

gave him the energy he needed to maintain his presence.

“Then prepare yourselves. What you're about to see is love turned to obsession, hope turned to desperation, and the slow destruction of everything you think you're fighting to preserve.”

River kissed Finn then, soft and desperate, a promise made before witnesses to whatever future they were about to confront. When they broke apart, they turned to face the older River together, hands clasped, ready to see the worst possible version of their love story.

“We're ready,” River said.

The older River nodded, his weathered face holding both admiration and pity for their courage. “Then let me show you how love dies when it becomes more important to cure someone than to simply be present with them.”

The Other Timeline

Finn

The cottage air still shimmered with residual energy from Future River's presence, charged with electricity that made Finn's teeth ache.

Future River stood in their doorway—not quite solid, not quite translucent—carrying grief like a second skin.

The weight of his sorrow pressed against Finn's chest until breathing became work.

Finn's hand found River's without thought, fingers threading together in the automatic way of people who'd learned to anchor each other through storms. River's palm was warm, real, present in ways that made Future River's flickering form seem even more heartbreaking.

“You want the whole story?” Future River's voice carried the particular exhaustion of someone who'd been telling himself the same lie for years. “Fine. But I should warn you—watching love turn to obsession is like watching someone drown in slow motion.”

The lighthouse beam stuttered overhead, its usual steady rhythm broken by whatever temporal chaos Future River brought with him. In the fractured light, Finn could see how the years had hollowed out his face, carved lines of regret so deep they looked permanent.

Future River's gaze fixed on their joined hands, and something cold slithered down Finn's spine. The parallel felt too precise, too deliberate—like looking into a mirror that showed not your reflection but your future grave.

“We sat on this same couch,” Future River continued, moving closer.

The temperature dropped with each step, turning their breath to mist. “Finn had just come home from the hospital, trying to piece together what was happening to his mind. I was already making plans. Charts. Research protocols. A systematic approach to saving him from himself.”

River's fingers tightened around Finn's. “I'm not?—”

“You're not me yet,” Future River said, almost gently. “But you're walking the same path I walked, making the same choices for the same reasons. I can see it in your eyes—that desperate certainty that love should be enough to fix anything.”

Finn felt his stomach drop as recognition hit. “How did it start? The obsession?”

Future River settled into their reading chair like he belonged there, like this conversation was a reunion instead of a warning.

“With patterns. Your episodes clustered around our happiest moments—after we made love, after we talked about the future, after we found that particular peace that comes from being completely known by someone.”

“At first, I told myself I was being observant. Protective.” Future River's laugh held no humor. “Then I started taking notes.”

River went very still beside him. “Notes about what?”

“Everything. What you ate before episodes.

How long you'd slept. What we'd talked about.

The barometric pressure, for Christ's sake.” Future River's form flickered as emotion destabilized whatever kept him tethered to their timeline.

“I convinced myself that if I could just identify the triggers, I could prevent them. Control them.”

Finn's mouth went dry. He remembered River's notebooks, filled with careful handwriting documenting his episodes like weather patterns. At the time, it had felt like love expressed through science. Now it felt like the first step toward something darker.

“I want to understand what we're choosing,” Finn said, squeezing River's hand. “Not just the warning—the reality.”

The cottage around them began to shimmer, walls becoming translucent as Future River's memories bled through. Finn felt the familiar tug of temporal displacement, but gentler this time, like being invited into a story instead of swept away by one.

The scene that materialized around them was their cottage, but different. Older. The walls were covered with charts and graphs, turning their home into something that looked more like a research facility than a place where people lived and loved.

A younger version of River—though still older than their current River—sat hunched over a desk covered in medical journals and printouts. His hair was streaked with premature gray, his shoulders carrying the particular tension of someone fighting a war he couldn't win.

“Finn's episodes are increasing in frequency,” this other River muttered to himself, making notes with hands that shook slightly. “Seventeen this month versus twelve last month. Need to identify the variable that's changed.”

The cottage door opened, and Finn watched himself enter—or rather, watched a version of himself that moved with the careful deliberation of someone never quite sure where they were in time. This other Finn looked fragile, uncertain, like a person constantly questioning their own perceptions.

“How was the bookshop?” the other River asked, looking up from his research with eyes that assessed rather than welcomed.

“I...” Other Finn paused, confusion flickering across his features. “I think it was good? Mrs. Patterson was there, or maybe that was yesterday. Time feels slippery today.”

Other River was already writing this down, documenting the confusion like a symptom to be tracked rather than an experience to be supported.

Finn felt his heart breaking as he watched this other version of their love—still present, still real, but filtered through fear until it became clinical observation instead of human connection.

“This is three years in,” Future River said, his voice barely audible over the scene playing out around them. “I'd already turned our relationship into a case study. You stopped being my partner and became my patient.”

The scene shifted, showing them the cottage bedroom where monitoring equipment beeped softly beside the bed. Other River sat watching other Finn sleep, clipboard in hand, timing the intervals between peaceful rest and episodes that pulled him away from linear time.

“I told myself I was protecting you,” Future River whispered. “But I was really trying to control you. To manage you like a condition instead of love you like a person.”

Other Finn stirred in the bed, eyes opening with the cloudy confusion that had become his normal state. “River? Are you documenting my sleep patterns again?”

“Just making sure you're safe,” other River replied, but his tone was weary, defeated. The love was still there, but buried under layers of medical necessity and systematic observation.

“I'm not a lab rat,” other Finn said quietly, tears leaking from the corners of his eyes. “I'm the person you fell in love with. At least, I used to be.”

He could hear his own voice in that plea, could feel the slow erosion of dignity that came from being treated like a problem requiring solution instead of a person deserving love.

The scene shifted again, showing them a final, devastating argument that played out with the terrible inevitability of Greek tragedy.

“I found another treatment,” other River was saying, his voice bright with desperate hope. “Experimental electromagnetic therapy. It could anchor your consciousness permanently, stop the episodes completely.”

Other Finn stood by the window, his reflection ghostly in the glass. “What if I don't want to be anchored? What if my episodes aren't something to cure but something to accept?”

“Accept?” Other River's voice cracked. “Accept watching you disappear piece by piece? Accept that the person I love is being erased by their own brain?”

“The person you love is standing right here,” other Finn said, turning from the window with a sadness that looked bone-deep. “But you can't see me anymore because you're too busy trying to fix me.”

Finn felt tears streaming down his face as he watched this other version of himself speak truths he'd been afraid to voice in their own timeline.

The recognition was devastating—he could see exactly how easily they could have ended up in the same place, love poisoned by the desperate need to control what couldn't be controlled.

But something else nagged at him as he watched the scene unfold. The timeline still felt wrong somehow, the pieces not quite fitting together.

“Wait,” Finn said, his voice cutting through the memory. “You said you're seventeen years older than River. If this scene is three years into your obsession, and you lost me after the final treatment...”

Future River's form flickered, becoming less stable. “I... yes.”

“You lost me fourteen years ago, not seventeen,” Finn said, understanding dawning with horrible clarity. “Which means you've been interfering with our timeline for fourteen years, not just trying to prevent your own past.”

River's arm tightened around Finn as they both realized the scope of what Future River had done. “You've been actively creating the very problems you claim to be preventing.”

The memory dissolved around them, leaving them back in their real cottage with Future River's form becoming more unstable as the truth destabilized his presence.

“It's a paradox,” River whispered. “You've been causing your own past by trying to prevent it.”

Future River's expression crumbled as the full scope of his temporal loop became clear. “Fourteen years. Fourteen years of trying to prevent a future I was actively creating.”

“Every episode you triggered,” Finn said, anger building in his chest. “Every moment of doubt you created, every time you made us question our relationship—you were writing the very story you were trying to prevent.”

“The experimental treatment,” Future River whispered, his form flickering but somehow managing to maintain coherence. “You only agreed to it because the episodes had become so severe, so frequent...”

“Because you made them severe and frequent,” River finished. “You created the crisis that led to the obsession that destroyed your timeline.”

Future River stood frozen in their cottage, the weight of his revelation settling around him like chains. His form stabilized, grief and horror warring across his features as the full scope of what he'd done became undeniable.

“I can't... I can't undo fourteen years of interference,” he said, his voice hollow. “The temporal fractures are too deep. But knowing what I've done...”

“Changes everything,” Finn said firmly. “Stop trying to control our story. Stop creating the problems you're trying to prevent.”

“But if I stop, if I let events unfold naturally...” Future River's voice carried the desperation of a man watching his last hope crumble. “You might still make the same choices. You might still lose each other.”

“Or we might not,” River said, something hardening in his voice as he looked at this broken version of himself. “Or we might make different choices. Or we might find ways to love each other that you never discovered because you were too busy trying to control outcomes.”

Finn felt clarity settling in his chest like sunlight breaking through clouds. “You've been so afraid of your story repeating that you've been forcing it to repeat. But we're not you. Our love doesn't have to become your tragedy.”

Future River's form shuddered, temporal energy crackling around him as the contradiction of his existence—preventing a future he'd spent years creating—threatened to tear him apart. “Then write your own story,” he said, his voice breaking. “Don't let fear—mine or yours—dictate your choices.”

“We will,” Finn said, anger building as the scope of Future River's manipulation became clear. “But only if you stop writing it for us.”

Future River remained standing there, solid enough to cast shadows, his presence a constant reminder of what their love could become if fear drove their choices. The cottage air still thrummed with temporal energy, charged with the weight of revelations that had changed everything.

River's arm tightened around Finn as they both stared at this broken echo of their future, understanding now that their real battle wasn't against Finn's condition or their own fears—it was against the man who'd been orchestrating their struggles from the shadows.

The lighthouse beam continued its stuttering, erratic rhythm, and Future River made no move to leave. He stood in their cottage like a specter of their potential doom, grief-worn and desperate, the living embodiment of love poisoned by the need to control what couldn't be controlled.

The confrontation that had been building for months was finally here.

All is Lost

River

Fury coursed through River's veins like molten metal, burning away years of Future River's manipulative bullshit in one white-hot moment of clarity. The cottage still held the supernatural chill of temporal interference, but River's rage could have melted steel.

“You don't get to rewrite our story because you were too much of a coward to love someone whose mind works differently,” River said, his voice cutting through the cottage's charged air.

He kept his arm around Finn, needing the solid reality of his partner's warmth against the ghostly presence still haunting their space.

Future River's form snapped into sharper focus, grief-worn features hardening with defensive pride. “Coward? You think I wanted to spend fourteen years in a world where the only person I ever loved had been erased from existence?”

“I think you're so terrified of uncertainty that you'd rather destroy our present than risk our future. You couldn't handle loving someone without guarantees, so you've been sabotaging us from the shadows like some twisted guardian angel.” River said.

“I've been trying to save you from the kind of loss that fractures reality itself.” Future River stepped closer, and the temperature plummeted until their breath misted in the suddenly arctic air.

“I watched love become obsession, watched care become control, watched myself destroy the very thing I was desperate to preserve.”

River felt the accusation land because it carried the weight of truth. They had walked that same path—the research charts, the desperate treatments, the slow transformation of love into medical mission. But seeing the warning signs meant they could choose differently.

“You're right,” River said, and watched Future River's weathered face cycle through surprise. “I have been trying to fix Finn instead of loving him. I turned our relationship into a cure-seeking mission, just like you did. But here's the difference—I can see it now. I can choose to stop.”

“Can you?” Future River's laugh was like glass breaking in an empty room. “When his episodes stretch into days? When you wake up beside someone whose mind is living decades in the past? When you realize that accepting his condition means accepting that you might lose him to it completely?”

River's hand found Finn's automatically, their fingers threading together with the practiced ease of people who'd learned to anchor each other through storms. “I don't know,” River admitted, his honesty clearly shocking his future self.

“But I'd rather risk making your mistakes than guarantee our loneliness by giving up before we've even tried.”

“You're still trying to control outcomes, still treating love like a problem requiring management. You haven't learned anything—you've just changed tactics.”

Future River's form began to flicker, temporal energy destabilizing under emotional pressure. “I'm trying to prevent you from becoming me.”

“By becoming exactly what destroyed your relationship in the first place.” River's voice rose with each word. “Manipulation. Control. Treating us like we're too stupid to make our own choices about our own lives.”

The argument was escalating beyond rational discourse, both versions of River fighting over fundamental questions about love and fear, protection and possession.

River could feel years of accumulated desperation pouring out of his future self—all that grief and regret crystallized into the desperate need to prevent anyone else from experiencing the same loss.

“Stop.”

Finn's voice cut through their battle like a blade through silk, quiet but carrying absolute authority. Both Rivers turned toward him as he stepped slightly forward, brown eyes blazing with something that looked like controlled fury.

“Both of you stop fighting about me like I'm some prize to be won instead of a person with my own fucking agency.”

River felt shame burn through his anger as he realized they'd been debating Finn's future without including him in the conversation—treating him like an object of concern rather than an equal partner in his own life.

“I'm not some helpless victim who needs protecting from his own choices,” Finn continued, his voice carrying the particular steel that came from years of being underestimated.

“I know exactly what I'm risking. I know my condition might get worse.

I know loving me means accepting uncertainty that most people couldn't handle.”

Future River opened his mouth to protest, but Finn held up a hand that somehow commanded silence from a man who'd spent years manipulating time itself.

“I'd rather have five years of imperfect, messy, complicated love than fifty years of safety without connection,” Finn said, his words carrying the weight of absolute conviction.

“I'd rather risk everything for the chance to build something real than accept protection that comes at the cost of never truly living.”

River felt his heart crack open with pride and love and desperate admiration for this man who faced impossible circumstances with such fierce courage.

This was why he'd fallen for Finn—not despite his condition, but because of the strength it had taught him, the wisdom that came from accepting uncertainty as life's only constant.

“You don't understand what you're choosing,” Future River said, his voice breaking with years of accumulated pain. “You don't know what it's like to watch someone disappear piece by piece while you convince yourself that love should be enough to save them.”

“And you don't understand what it's like to be treated like a condition instead of a person,” Finn shot back, moving closer to River until they stood united against the specter of their potential future.

“To have your humanity reduced to symptoms and triggers, to be loved for who you might become rather than who you are.”

Finn's voice grew stronger, more certain. “Every episode you triggered, every moment of doubt you manufactured, every time you made me question whether River

loved me or just wanted to cure me—you created the exact dynamic that destroyed your timeline.”

The full scope of his interference, the way his attempts to prevent tragedy had created the very instability he'd been trying to avoid.

“You've been so focused on preventing the ending that you forgot love isn't about guarantees,” Finn continued. “It's about showing up completely for whatever time you have, choosing each other every day even when that choice terrifies you.”

Future River went very still, his temporal form stabilizing as the weight of Finn's words settled into the space where his heart used to be.

“I never learned to love your condition as part of you,” he whispered, voice breaking entirely.

“I spent fourteen years trying to save you from yourself instead of learning to love you as you were.”

The admission hung in the cottage air like smoke from a pyre, carrying all the weight of choices that had led to ultimate loss. River could see his potential future clearly now—the man he could become if fear drove his decisions, if he turned love into medical necessity.

“I became exactly what you feared most,” Future River continued, his form growing more transparent as emotional energy drained from maintaining his presence. “Someone who saw your TPD as a problem to solve rather than part of the extraordinary person I loved.”

River felt tears burning behind his eyes as he watched this broken version of himself confront the full scope of his failures. Future River had convinced himself that grief

and regret had given him wisdom, when really they'd just created another form of the same controlling obsession.

“You could have had a lifetime together if you'd just accepted that love doesn't require curing the person you love,” River said gently, his anger transformed into overwhelming sadness for this shattered echo of himself.

“I know that now,” Future River replied. “But knowing doesn't undo fourteen years of living with consequences I created through my own inability to?—”

The cottage suddenly convulsed like a living thing in pain, walls shimmering as competing temporal fields began tearing at the fabric of reality. The lighthouse beam outside strobed erratically, its steady rhythm shattered by the chaos building around them.

“What's happening?” Finn asked, pressing closer to River as their home became a battleground of conflicting time streams.

Future River's form was destabilizing rapidly, flickering between solid and translucent as his emotional breakdown triggered massive temporal disturbance.

“My abilities are collapsing,” he said, his voice distorting as chaos consumed his presence.

“Confronting the futility of everything I've done is breaking down the grief that gave me temporal access.”

The lighthouse beam blazed so bright it turned their windows into sheets of fire, then plunged them into absolute darkness. River felt Finn jerk beside him, body going rigid with the telltale signs of violent displacement.

“Finn,” River said urgently, turning to see his partner's eyes rolling back, consciousness being torn away by forces beyond their control. “Stay with me. Don't let the interference pull you under.”

But Finn was already convulsing, his mind caught between competing temporal fields like a ship in a hurricane. This wasn't the gentle drift of his usual episodes—this was violent, catastrophic displacement, his consciousness being shredded by the storm Future River's breakdown had unleashed.

“Stop this!” River shouted at his future self while supporting Finn's weight. “Whatever's happening, stop it before you kill him!”

“I can't control it!” Future River's form was barely visible now, flickering like a broken transmission. “The emotional collapse is creating a temporal storm! All three timelines are colliding!”

Reality bent around them as past, present, and future bled together in patches of impossible confusion.

River caught glimpses of other versions of their lives—moments of joy that had never happened, conversations in futures that might never come to pass, all bleeding through the cracks in linear time.

Finn was caught in the center of it all, his consciousness being pulled in multiple directions by forces far beyond human endurance.

River watched helplessly as his partner's body went completely limp, mind apparently scattered across so many realities that his physical form could no longer maintain basic function.

“Finn!” River called, but Finn's eyes stared at nothing, seeing realities River couldn't

access, experiencing timelines where their love had never existed.

The cottage shuddered like it might collapse, furniture sliding across buckling floors as the temporal storm reached critical intensity. The lighthouse beam outside was strobing like an emergency beacon, its century-old rhythm destroyed by the chaos consuming their reality.

“I have to get him out of here,” River said, trying to lift Finn's unconscious form while their world disintegrated around them. “The interference is too strong—it's going to tear his mind apart.”

“There's nowhere to go,” Future River replied, his voice barely audible over the sound of reality breaking. “The storm is centered on the lighthouse. The entire area is compromised.”

River felt panic clawing at his chest as he realized they were trapped in a supernatural catastrophe of their own making.

Future River's grief-driven abilities, Finn's natural temporal sensitivity, and the lighthouse's mysterious properties had created a perfect storm that none of them could control.

“This is what you wanted, isn't it?” River screamed over the chaos. “You wanted to separate us, to prove that loving him was impossible. Congratulations—you're about to get your wish.”

“This isn't what I wanted!” Future River's voice cracked with desperate horror. “I never wanted to hurt him! I just wanted to spare you both from?—”

The cottage gave one final, violent convulsion, and then Finn was simply gone.

Not unconscious. Not displaced. Gone.

River's arms held nothing but air where the love of his life had been standing moments before. The absence was so complete it felt like a physical wound, like part of his own soul had been torn away and scattered across impossible timelines.

“Where is he?” River demanded, turning toward Future River's fading form. “What happened to him?”

Future River stared at the empty space with the expression of a man watching his worst nightmare come true. “He's been pulled too far back,” he whispered, his voice hollow with devastating understanding. “The temporal storm sent him spiraling backward through your entire relationship history.”

“How far back?” River's voice came out strangled, barely human.

“I don't know. Maybe to your first meeting. Maybe before you ever met.” Future River's form was barely visible now, his temporal abilities exhausted by the catastrophe he'd created. “My interference combined with the emotional intensity... I've caused exactly what I was trying to prevent.”

The cottage fell silent except for the lighthouse beam resuming its steady rotation, as if nothing had happened, as if the most important person in River's world hadn't just been erased from existence.

River stood alone in the devastating quiet, his arms still extended where Finn had been, staring at empty air while Future River's final words echoed in the space between heartbeats:

“I'm sorry. God, I'm so fucking sorry.”

Then Future River was gone too, leaving River completely alone in a cottage that felt like a mausoleum.

The furniture they'd chosen together, the books Finn had left scattered around, the lingering scent of old paper and lemon oil—all of it remained, but without Finn's presence, it felt like a museum display of a life that no longer existed.

River sank to his knees on the cottage floor, staring at the space where Finn had vanished, finally understanding what Future River had been trying to save him from. Not the gradual pain of watching someone slip away, but the instantaneous agony of losing them completely, irrevocably.

The lighthouse beam swept through the windows in its eternal rhythm, no longer comforting but mocking in its constancy—a reminder that time moved forward even when the person you loved had been lost to it entirely.

River knelt there in the silence, surrounded by the wreckage of good intentions and the unbearable weight of absolute loss, and learned what it meant to have your heart stop beating while your body continued the pointless work of staying alive.

The silence stretched on, broken only by the sound of his own ragged breathing and the terrible knowledge that love, despite everything he'd believed, hadn't been enough to save them after all.

Letting Go

River

The silence wasn't peaceful—it was predatory, stalking through the cottage like something that fed on absence.

River stood frozen in the main room, his body refusing to move as if motion might make Finn's disappearance more real.

The emptiness pressed against his chest until breathing became conscious work.

No soft humming from the workshop where Finn lost himself in restoration projects. No pages rustling as he read by the fireplace, unconsciously tucking one leg beneath him. No gentle scratch of his fountain pen recording thoughts that would make River smile when he found them later.

The lighthouse beam swept through the windows like always, but it felt dimmed, muted, as if even the light was mourning. Where it used to catch fire in Finn's copper hair, now it illuminated only dust motes dancing in empty air—thousands of tiny particles where a whole person used to be.

River's hands trembled as he stared at the exact spot where Finn had vanished, his eyes burning from refusing to blink. As if his desperate gaze could somehow tear a hole back through time and drag his partner home from whatever impossible place he'd been scattered to.

The cottage door exploded inward hard enough to rattle windows in their frames.

Maya burst through first, her dark eyes wild with the particular panic that came from sensing supernatural disaster.

Jake and Dr. Voss followed close behind, their faces carrying the pale terror of people who knew something unthinkable had happened.

“Where is he?” Maya demanded, her voice splintering on the words. “Where's my brother?”

Jake surveyed the scene with military precision. His expression hardened with grim understanding of what they'd walked into.

Dr. Voss immediately started yanking equipment from her bag, her scientific mind defaulting to data collection even in crisis.

“We need to track his temporal signature while the trail's still fresh,” she said, her voice maintaining clinical detachment despite the chaos.

“If we move quickly, we might be able to follow his displacement pattern and?—”

“No.”

The word came out of River's mouth with such quiet finality that all three of them stopped and stared. River looked between their frantic preparations and felt something crystallize in his chest—a choice he'd been avoiding for months finally presenting itself with startling clarity.

He could join their rescue mission. Could throw himself into the desperate pursuit that felt like love but was actually control wearing love's clothes. Could spend the

next fourteen years becoming the broken thing that Future River had shown him was possible.

Or he could break the cycle.

River's mind immediately started racing, that familiar panic rising like floodwater in his chest. He needed to do something. Create something, fix something, control something, anything to avoid the terrible powerlessness of just?—

But as he looked at Dr. Voss's equipment scattered across his floor, understanding hit River with the force of a lightning strike.

This desperate need to fix everything, to control every outcome, to turn love into a research project—this was exactly what had destroyed them in Future River's timeline.

The irony would have been hilarious if it wasn't so fucking devastating.

Every attempt to save Finn had only pushed him further away.

Christ, it was harder than he'd expected.

Every instinct screamed at him to move, to act, to do something instead of just standing here accepting that Finn was gone.

River's hands clenched into fists as he fought the overwhelming urge to grab Dr. Voss's equipment and start scanning for temporal signatures himself.

“I have to stop trying to save him,” River said, his voice barely steady as he wrestled with years of scientific training that demanded he find solutions. “I have to start trusting him.”

The words felt like stepping off a cliff, but for the first time in months, River sensed something solid beneath his feet. Not the ground of certainty, but the bedrock of truth.

Maya stared at him like he'd started speaking in tongues. "River, that's my brother?—"

"I know whose brother he is," River interrupted, his voice gaining strength even as his hands shook with the effort of not reaching for Dr. Voss's monitoring equipment.

"And I know that every time we've tried to manage his condition, every time we've treated his TPD like a problem requiring solution, we've made everything worse."

Dr. Voss's equipment clattered to the floor as she rounded on him, her scientific mind reeling at what he was suggesting.

"You can't just give up on him!" she argued, desperation making her voice sharp.

"We have technology, monitoring systems that could track his displacement. We could follow him into the temporal stream, anchor his consciousness, bring him back to linear time!"

Her eyes held the same obsessive gleam that had once driven River's research, the same look he'd seen in his own mirror for months. The same desperate certainty that love meant never accepting what you couldn't control.

River felt the pull of her argument like gravity. Part of him—the scientist, the problem-solver, the man who'd spent months documenting every aspect of Finn's condition—wanted to grab those instruments and start searching. But a larger part recognized the trap.

“We're on the verge of breakthrough treatments,” Dr. Voss continued, her words tumbling over each other in their urgency. “Electromagnetic anchoring, consciousness stabilization protocols. You can't abandon him to this condition when we're so close to a cure.”

“There's nothing to cure,” River said, and the words felt like swallowing broken glass.

Not because they were untrue, but because accepting them meant accepting uncertainty on a scale that terrified him.

“Finn isn't broken. He's different. And I've spent so long trying to fix what didn't need fixing that I nearly lost him to my own fear.”

Maya paced the cottage like a caged animal, her hands clenched into fists. “That's my brother lost somewhere in time,” she said, tears making her voice thick. “He could be gone forever, and you want to just... wait?”

Her professional training in psychology was at war with her personal terror of losing Finn the way they'd lost their mother. But as she looked around the cottage—at the research equipment scattered everywhere, at River's notebooks documenting Finn's every breath—something shifted in her expression.

“Every intervention has made things worse,” she said slowly, as if the realization was surprising her. “Every treatment, every attempt to control his episodes. Fighting his condition hasn't helped him—it's hurt him.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Maybe fighting is what's been hurting him all along.”

Jake stepped forward, his hand finding River's shoulder with the steady pressure of

someone who understood the difference between giving up and letting go. “Sometimes the bravest thing you can do is step back and trust the people you love,” he said quietly.

His military background had taught him when retreat was strategy rather than cowardice, when supporting someone meant believing in their strength rather than trying to rescue them from their own battles.

“You've been trying to save Finn from his TPD for months,” Jake continued. “But what if he doesn't need saving? What if he needs someone who believes he can handle whatever comes?”

River's hands shook as he began gathering the research materials scattered throughout the cottage—charts tracking Finn's episode patterns, medical journals about temporal displacement, notebooks filled with his own desperate theories about triggers and treatments.

Months of obsessive documentation that had turned their love into a case study.

Maya gasped as she recognized some of her own research among the papers River was feeding to the fireplace, but he continued steadily, watching months of work curl and blacken in the flames.

The smoke smelled like burning dreams, like the death of the illusion that love could be managed through scientific method.

“I'm not giving up on Finn,” River said as the last chart crumbled to ash, though his voice cracked with the effort of convincing himself. “I'm giving up on trying to change him.”

Removing the medical equipment felt like performing surgery on himself.

River dismantled every monitor, every tracking device, every piece of apparatus he'd used to quantify and control Finn's condition.

Heart rate monitors that had tracked his stress levels during episodes.

EEG equipment that had measured his brain activity during displacement.

Electromagnetic field detectors that had never found anything useful but had made River feel like he was doing something.

Each device represented a way of watching rather than seeing, measuring rather than accepting, controlling rather than loving. As he carried them outside, River felt physical relief, like he was removing weights from his chest that had been crushing him without him realizing it.

The cottage immediately felt different—lighter, more breathable, more like the home they'd started building together before fear turned it into a research facility. Sunlight streamed through windows no longer blocked by monitoring screens, illuminating dust motes that danced like liberated spirits.

But the real work was harder than clearing space—it was filling it with faith instead of fear.

River began creating what he could only think of as a love letter written in objects and arrangements.

Books Finn had mentioned wanting to read, positioned where morning light would fall across their pages.

Art supplies for the creativity that his TPD seemed to enhance rather than diminish.

Comfortable chairs arranged to catch the lighthouse beam's warmth.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

He placed fresh flowers by the window where Finn liked to watch the tide pools, their colors bright against the glass.

Set up a tea service with the Earl Grey blend Finn favored, complete with the honey he stirred in when he thought no one was watching.

Created small domestic altars throughout the space—not shrines to what was lost, but welcome mats for what might return.

Every object was chosen not to control or monitor, but to say “you are loved as you are” rather than “you need to be fixed.” River was creating a space that celebrated Finn's TPD as part of what made him extraordinary, rather than treating it as a flaw requiring correction.

River looked around the transformed cottage with something that surprised him—compassion rather than anger toward his own past behavior. “I was trying to save us the only way I knew how,” he said quietly. “But love isn't about prevention. It's about presence.”

As evening fell, River completed his work by lighting the lighthouse beacon to its full brightness and propping open the cottage door. The beam swept across the darkening ocean in steady rhythm, neither urgent nor demanding, simply present and constant.

River understood that he couldn't call Finn back—that would be another form of control, another attempt to manage what couldn't be managed. Instead, he was creating a beacon of unconditional love, a signal that said “when you're ready, you have a home here that accepts all of you.”

The open door was an invitation, not a demand. A welcome mat, not a trap.

River settled into the reading chair by the window, prepared to wait with whatever patience love required. He had no timeline, no expectations, no research protocols to follow. Just faith that Finn was strong enough to find his way home when he was ready.

In the days that followed, River established routines that felt like prayers made flesh.

He woke with the sunrise and made coffee for two—not out of delusion, but out of hope.

He tended the cottage with meditative care, cooking meals that filled the house with welcoming scents, maintaining the small garden Finn had started behind the cottage.

Each task became an act of faith, a way of staying present with his love for Finn rather than trying to control its expression. He was learning that the act of loving could exist independently of being loved in return, that presence could be its own form of prayer.

Maya visited daily, her own healing intertwined with River's patient waiting.

At first she came bristling with barely contained anxiety, checking every corner as if Finn might materialize from his temporal displacement like a magic trick.

But gradually, she began to understand what River was creating—not a museum of loss, but a living space of faith.

“You're different,” she observed one afternoon, watching River arrange wildflowers with the same careful attention he'd once devoted to episode documentation. “More... grounded. Like you've found some kind of center I didn't know you had.”

During these visits, River shared stories about Finn that celebrated his gifts rather than lamenting his condition.

He told Maya about Finn's ability to sense a book's emotional history through touch, his uncanny intuition about which restoration projects would bring him joy, his gift for making customers feel truly seen and valued.

River spoke of Finn's TPD not as a medical condition but as part of his unique way of experiencing the world. "He doesn't see time the way we do," River explained, his voice warm with affection rather than clinical assessment. "And that's not a limitation. It's a different kind of sight."

Dr. Voss struggled more deeply with River's approach, her scientific training at war with what she was witnessing.

She arrived periodically with new theories and experimental treatments, offering to fund search and rescue missions into temporal displacement that sounded more like science fiction than medicine.

"You're not fighting for him," she accused during one particularly heated visit. "You're giving up when he needs you most."

River met her anger with steady calm that had taken him weeks to develop. "I'm not giving up on Finn," he explained. "I'm giving up on trying to make him something he's not. There's a difference between supporting someone and trying to fix them."

Dr. Voss left frustrated, but her visits became less frequent as she began to question her own need to turn every mystery into a problem requiring solution.

Weeks passed with no sign of Finn's return, but River maintained his commitment to acceptance over action.

Well-meaning friends suggested he should “do something,” that his patience was really abandonment disguised as love.

But River had found something deeper than the need to act—he'd found peace in uncertainty itself.

Some evenings, especially when the lighthouse beam swept through the cottage at just the right angle, River swore he could feel Finn's presence.

Not as a ghost or temporal echo, but as the warmth of being truly loved by someone who was learning to love without conditions.

He was creating space for a love that existed beyond linear time, beyond the need for guarantees or control.

After three weeks of patient waiting, River discovered a bottle among the rocks near his old research station during his dawn walk. His heart leaped, but he approached with careful calm, understanding that desperation would be a return to his old patterns of grasping and controlling.

This bottle was different from the mysterious messages that had started their relationship—clearly fresh, containing a single sheet of paper covered in Finn's careful handwriting.

River's hands trembled as he broke the seal, but his breathing remained steady.

He'd learned to receive gifts without demanding more, to hope without demanding guarantees.

Finn's letter described his experience in temporal displacement with vivid detail—how he'd been visiting every moment of their relationship but experiencing it

in perfect chronological reverse, seeing their love story from ending to beginning.

I started with our fight and worked backward to our first meeting. I'm seeing our love story from the ending to the beginning, understanding how we got to where we are.

River's eyes filled with tears as he read Finn's account of witnessing their relationship's deterioration in reverse, seeing how love had gradually transformed into fear and control. But Finn's words carried no blame, only growing understanding of the forces that had driven them apart.

I'm not broken. I'm different. And that difference is what let me find you in the first place.

River sobbed as he read these words, recognizing the acceptance he'd been struggling to achieve reflected back in Finn's growing self-love.

My TPD isn't a barrier to our love—it's the reason our love transcends ordinary limitations. I'm learning to see it as a gift rather than a curse.

The letter expressed deep gratitude for River's willingness to wait rather than chase, to accept rather than fix.

I can feel your peace from here. I can sense that you've stopped trying to rescue me and started trusting me to find my own way home. That changes everything.

River understood that his acceptance had created a different kind of anchor—not one that held Finn in place, but one that gave him a reason to choose return.

You're not trying to change me anymore. You're just loving me. And that love is what's guiding me back to you.

River responded immediately, writing with steady hands and clear heart about his journey toward acceptance, about learning to love Finn's TPD as part of who he was rather than despite it.

I'm not waiting for you to be cured. I'm waiting for you to come home as yourself—all of yourself, including the parts that experience time differently than I do.

He sealed the letter in a bottle and placed it gently in the tide pool during high tide, no longer trying to control the timing or guarantee a response. He'd learned to trust the ocean, time, and love to carry his words wherever they needed to go.

Walking back to the cottage, River felt something he hadn't experienced in months—genuine peace. Not the peace of certainty, but the peace of trust. Not the peace of control, but the peace of love that asked for nothing in return except the chance to exist.

The lighthouse beam swept across the water behind him, steady and constant, neither demanding nor pursuing. Just present. Just loving. Just waiting for whatever came next with infinite patience and faith.

Parallel Healing

Finn

Finn existed somewhere between drowning and flying, suspended in a temporal current that felt like warm honey mixed with starlight.

The usual terror of his TPD episodes had evaporated, replaced by something that made his soul feel weightless.

He was traveling backward through time, but not as a victim dragged by forces beyond his control—more like a swimmer who'd finally stopped fighting the tide and learned to let it carry him home.

Their love story unspooled around him in reverse, each memory sharp as cut crystal, revealing patterns he'd been too close to see while living them forward. The sensation was disorienting as hell, but also revelatory in ways that made his chest ache with recognition.

He wasn't lost in time anymore. He was excavating it like an archaeologist uncovering buried treasure.

The first scene hit him with devastating clarity—their confrontation with Future River, the moment when River had stood with Finn against the broken echo of their potential future.

But experiencing it backward, Finn saw what he'd missed in the chaos: how River's

desperate need for control had finally been broken by understanding rather than fear.

“You don't get to rewrite our story because you were too much of a coward to love someone whose mind works differently,” River had said, pulling Finn closer.

But watching it in reverse, Finn caught what he'd been too overwhelmed to notice—the way River's voice had gained strength from their unity, how their joined hands had anchored them both against Future River's manipulation.

This wasn't the end of their love. This was the beginning of it becoming real.

As Finn continued his journey backward, he witnessed each moment of their relationship's evolution with new eyes.

He saw how gradually they'd been learning to navigate his TPD together, how River's genuine care had been slowly shifting from trying to fix to learning to accept.

But he also saw something else—the shadow figures lurking at the edges of every crucial moment.

“You manipulative bastard,” Finn breathed, watching scene after scene with dawning understanding. Every time they'd approached real peace, every time River had started to see Finn's TPD as gift rather than burden, Future River had interfered.

Temperature drops when they were making breakthroughs. Equipment failures precisely timed to moments of growing acceptance. Episodes triggered just as River began to relax into loving Finn as he was.

The pattern was so clear now it looked like a constellation in the night sky of their relationship.

Future River's manipulation had created the very anxiety and instability he claimed to be preventing.

Every interference had pushed River further from acceptance, every triggered episode had made Finn more confused and withdrawn.

Moving deeper into their history, Finn found the golden moments that had sustained them both—their early days when River had simply held him through episodes without trying to intervene, when love had been enough without needing to cure or change anything.

Their quiet domestic scenes blazed like small suns in the temporal stream.

Cooking together while rain drummed against windows.

Reading by firelight while the lighthouse beam painted moving pictures on their walls.

Exploring tide pools while morning sun turned the water into liquid diamonds.

In these moments, River had loved him exactly as he was, TPD and all.

These memories shone with purity undimmed by the fear that came later. Finn understood now that River's capacity for acceptance had always existed, only overwhelmed by Future River's constant interference.

“He never let us find our own way,” Finn murmured to the temporal currents swirling around him. “Every time we started to trust each other, he created chaos to drive us apart.”

But there was something else, something that made Finn's chest expand with wonder

instead of grief. His TPD wasn't the curse that separated him from normal love—it was what allowed him to experience love across impossible circumstances.

His condition had brought him to River through bottles that crossed time, had let him write letters his conscious mind couldn't remember, had created moments of recognition that transcended ordinary limitations.

The very thing that made him feel broken had actually been the bridge to the most extraordinary love he'd ever known.

“I'm not broken,” Finn said to the temporal stream, his voice growing stronger with each word. “I'm different. And that difference is what makes our love possible.”

For the first time since his mother's death, since that first terrifying episode that had sent him spinning through time, Finn felt something miraculous: gratitude. Not resignation, not mere acceptance—actual, bone-deep gratitude for his condition.

His TPD wasn't an obstacle to love. It was a unique pathway to it.

As Finn journeyed deeper into their history, he began to understand what had destroyed Future River's original timeline. It wasn't TPD itself—it was the absolute refusal to accept TPD as part of their love story, combined with the desperate need to control what couldn't be controlled.

Future River's memories bled through the temporal stream, showing Finn a man who'd spent years trying to cure rather than accommodate, who'd transformed their relationship from love story into medical mission.

Every recovered memory carried the same desperate theme: the need to fix, to control, to make Finn “normal.”

“He never learned to love me as I am,” Finn whispered, the words carrying more sadness than anger. “He loved an idea of who I could become if I were cured.”

One memory blazed with particular clarity: River watching him restore a damaged book, his eyes soft with admiration. “The way you see stories,” River had said, “like they're living things with hearts and souls. I never understood that books could be loved until I watched you love them.”

In that moment, River hadn't been trying to fix or change anything. He'd simply been present with Finn as he was, marveling at the unique way his mind worked. Finn had felt seen and valued not despite his differences but because of them.

“These moments are what matter,” Finn realized, his voice thick with emotion. “Not the fear or the medical crises. These moments of pure love—this is what's real.”

Finn began to understand his temporal displacement as a gift rather than a burden, recognizing that it allowed him to experience love from multiple perspectives and timelines.

His TPD gave him insights into their relationship that linear time couldn't provide, let him see patterns and connections invisible to ordinary perception.

“This is why I'm different,” Finn said with growing certainty. “Not to be fixed or cured, but to love and be loved in ways that transcend normal limitations.”

His condition wasn't something to overcome. It was something to embrace as part of his unique capacity for love.

Moving further backward, Finn reached their first meeting—River pausing on the sidewalk, caught by something in the bookshop window.

From this temporal vantage point, Finn faced a crucial choice. He could continue backward into a time before they'd met, erasing their relationship entirely. Or he could choose to return to the present and face whatever uncertain future awaited them.

The option to erase everything held real temptation. He could undo all the confusion and medical crises. Spare River the fear that had nearly overwhelmed him. Spare himself the episodes and memory gaps that had caused such anguish.

But erasing their relationship would also eliminate every moment of joy, connection, and growth they'd shared. It would be choosing safety over love, certainty over the beautiful risk of caring deeply.

He thought about River's laugh when Finn told him stories about the books he restored.

The way River's eyes lit up when discussing marine ecosystems, passion making him glow like he'd swallowed sunlight.

The quiet mornings when they'd wake up tangled together, River's breathing against his neck like the most beautiful anchor to the present moment.

Most importantly, he thought about their unity against Future River—how they'd stood together, finally understanding that their love didn't need to be perfect to be real.

“I choose us,” Finn said to the temporal stream, his voice carrying absolute decision. “I choose the mess and confusion and uncertainty, because I also choose the love and wonder and connection. I choose River as he is, and I choose myself as I am, and I choose whatever future we create together.”

The decision felt like diving into deep water—terrifying and exhilarating, requiring complete trust in his ability to swim in uncertain currents. But for the first time since his TPD had manifested, Finn felt ready to swim rather than simply survive.

Love wasn't about guarantees or perfect outcomes. Love was about showing up fully for another person, choosing them every day even when that choice was terrifying. Love was about embracing the beautiful risk of caring deeply, knowing that deep care meant deep vulnerability.

Finn used his temporal displacement intentionally now, understanding that his condition wasn't something that happened to him but something he could work with. His TPD became a tool of love rather than a source of suffering, a way of choosing connection across impossible circumstances.

“I'm not fighting my way back to linear time,” Finn realized. “I'm choosing to return to the present because that's where River is waiting for me.”

The temporal stream responded to his intention, currents shifting to carry him forward rather than backward through time.

The journey required more effort than his previous episodes, but Finn moved with growing confidence.

Each moment forward felt like choosing to embrace their love despite its complications.

He wasn't returning to a perfect relationship. He was returning to one that was learning to be real—messy, uncertain, but built on genuine acceptance rather than the need to fix or control.

As he moved forward through time toward River's present, Finn felt something he'd

never experienced: genuine excitement about his TPD. Not resignation or acceptance, but actual anticipation for what his unique relationship with time might offer their love story.

He was different. He was extraordinary. And he was finally ready to come home to someone who could love him exactly as he was.

As Finn chose love over safety, he felt a presence in the temporal stream—Future River, watching with something approaching wonder.

“Love isn't about ensuring happy endings,” Future River whispered, the words carrying years of painful education. “It's about showing up fully for whatever time you have.”

For the first time since his timeline's tragedy, Future River felt something other than regret: peace. He'd spent years trying to control love instead of experiencing it, so focused on preventing loss that he'd never learned to appreciate what he had while he had it.

“You don't need saving,” he said to Finn's departing presence. “You never did. Love him as he is. Trust him to be strong enough for whatever comes.”

As Finn's presence faded from the temporal stream, Future River whispered a blessing that carried across time: “Remember that the most profound love isn't about forever—it's about fully, completely, courageously now.”

For the first time in years, Future River let himself exist peacefully, finally understanding that love didn't require control—it required presence.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Evermore

River

R iver woke before dawn, pulled from restless sleep by something unnamed that hummed beneath his skin.

Not the familiar knot of anxiety that had taken residence in his chest—that old companion of sleepless nights and worry—but something else entirely.

Anticipation, maybe. Hope wearing a disguise he barely recognized.

He lay still for a moment, listening to the lighthouse beam sweep across the cottage walls with its eternal rhythm. The empty space beside him no longer felt like an accusation. Strange, how absence could transform from wound to waiting.

Something had shifted in the air overnight. He felt it the way sailors sense weather changes, the way tide pool creatures know when the ocean's coming home.

Dawn called to him through salt-stained windows. River pulled on yesterday's clothes and stepped outside, letting instinct guide his feet toward the beach. The sky wore watercolor shades of rose and gold, the sun climbing hesitant over the horizon like a child peeking around a doorframe.

And there—God, there—sitting beside the tide pools where they'd first explored together, was Finn.

River's heart forgot how to beat for one terrible, beautiful moment.

Finn looked... settled. That was the word.

Not the displaced, flickering presence of his episodes, but solidly, completely here.

He wore the same clothes from months ago, but they looked fresh somehow, as if time itself had been gentle with him during his absence.

At the sound of footsteps on sand, Finn turned. His face broke open with a smile that hit River like sunlight after storm—no confusion clouding those copper eyes, no temporal displacement lurking behind his gaze. Just joy, pure and uncomplicated.

“Hey,” Finn said, simple as breathing, as if he'd only stepped out for morning coffee instead of vanishing for months into the impossible.

River approached like a man walking on water, afraid each step might shatter the moment. What if this was another episode? What if touch would trigger disappearance? But Finn read his hesitation and reached out first, hand steady as bedrock.

“I traveled our entire relationship backward,” Finn explained, voice carrying a new centeredness that made River's chest tight with wonder. “Every moment from end to beginning. I saw how much you love me, River. I saw the real love underneath all that beautiful, terrified fear.”

Finn's fingers found his, warm and solid and impossibly present. No flickering, no temporal drift—just choice, conscious and clear.

“I watched your hands shake when you helped me through episodes,” Finn continued, thumb tracing circles on River's palm like he was writing love letters on skin.

“Saw the tears you tried to hide when you thought I was getting worse. Every attempt to control my condition—it all came from terror of losing me, never from wanting to change who I was.”

River felt tears threatening, his throat closing around words that felt too small for this moment. He'd prepared for every outcome except this: Finn returning with understanding instead of blame, with grace instead of anger.

Their embrace carried different weight than any before. Not desperate or fearful, but peaceful in its acceptance of whatever came next. River buried his face in Finn's shoulder, breathing in books and salt air and home, finally letting himself believe this was real.

“I'm sorry,” River whispered against Finn's neck, words torn from someplace deep and raw. “Christ, I'm so sorry for trying to fix you instead of just loving you.”

Finn pulled back to meet his eyes, and River saw something that stole his breath. Not forgiveness—because there was nothing to forgive. Just love, pure and uncomplicated as morning light.

“You were trying to save me the only way you knew how,” Finn said, palm cupping River's face with infinite tenderness. “But I don't need saving, River. Never did. I just needed someone brave enough to love me exactly as I am.”

River kissed him then—slow, thorough, tasting salt and something sweeter. Hope, maybe. Or the simple relief of coming home. Finn kissed back with certainty that made River's knees forget their purpose, no hesitation or fear, just pure joy of connection.

When they broke apart, both breathing hard, Finn rested his forehead against River's. “We're going to be okay,” he said quietly. “We're going to be more than okay.”

For the first time in months, River believed him.

They walked back to the cottage hand in hand, morning sun warming their faces as tide pools caught fire with reflected light. River kept stealing glances at Finn, hardly daring to believe this was real, that the man beside him was truly home.

“Tell me about the temporal stream,” River said as they settled on the cottage's front porch with coffee that tasted like ordinary magic. “What was it like?”

Finn was quiet for a moment, eyes distant with memory. “Like being given hindsight while still living the story,” he said finally. “Every moment of our relationship from end to beginning, watching how love and fear got tangled together like fishing line in a storm.”

He sipped his coffee, expression thoughtful. “Experiencing it backward taught me something I never could have learned going forward. How much beauty we created even in the chaos. How much love lived underneath the medical monitoring and research papers and desperate attempts at control.”

River's chest tightened with shame, but Finn reached over and captured his hand.

“I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty,” Finn said gently. “I'm telling you because I saw your love, River. Even when it felt like control in the moment, I could see the love underneath. That love is what brought me home.”

River had to look away, overwhelmed by the magnitude of Finn's grace. “I turned our relationship into a research project,” he said, voice rough with unshed tears. “Made you feel like a condition to manage instead of a person to love.”

“You were scared,” Finn said simply. “You'd never loved someone whose brain worked differently, and you did the best you could with the tools you had. But now

we both know better.”

River shared his own journey then, the peace he'd found in letting go of the need to fix or control.

“I spent so much energy trying to save you from your condition that I never considered maybe you didn't need saving. Maybe you just needed someone who could see your TPD as part of what makes you extraordinary instead of something that made you broken.”

Finn's smile was radiant. “That's exactly what I needed to hear,” he said. “Not that you'd found a cure or treatment or way to make episodes stop, but that you could love me with my TPD, not despite it.”

They talked about Future River then, processing the manipulation and interference that had shaped so much of their relationship.

“I forgave him,” Finn said quietly. “In the temporal stream, I saw how much pain he carried, how trapped he was in his own inability to let go. He wasn't evil, River. Just lost.”

River nodded, understanding that forgiveness didn't mean condoning Future River's actions, but recognizing the suffering that drove them. “He was trying to save us from his mistakes by making us repeat them,” River said. “Ultimate irony.”

“But it taught us something important,” Finn pointed out. “We saw exactly what our relationship becomes when fear drives choices instead of love. That's not a future either of us wants.”

They both acknowledged that Finn's TPD would always be part of their relationship, requiring adaptation and understanding rather than cure. Episodes might become less

frequent or intense, but they would never completely disappear. For the first time, that felt like acceptance rather than defeat.

“I don't want to change your TPD anymore,” River said, words feeling like sacred vow. “I want to learn how to love you with it, how to support you through it, how to see it as part of what makes you who you are instead of something that takes you away from me.”

Finn leaned over and kissed him softly, lips warm and sure against River's. “That's all I ever wanted,” he whispered against River's mouth. “Just to be loved as I am.”

They kissed again, deeper this time, River's hands threading through Finn's copper hair as months of fear and separation dissolved into pure connection. When they broke apart, both breathing hard, Finn's eyes were bright with tears of joy.

“We're going to be okay,” Finn said again, and this time River felt the truth of it in his bones.

Maya arrived at the cottage to find them cooking breakfast together, domestic rhythm natural and unforced. She stood in the doorway watching her brother flip pancakes while River scrambled eggs, both moving around each other with easy familiarity of partners who'd learned to dance together.

“Thank God,” Maya breathed. “Finn, you asshole, you scared me to death.”

Finn grinned and pulled his sister into a fierce hug. “Sorry for the dramatic exit,” he said. “But I had some things to figure out.”

Maya pulled back to study his face, trained eye looking for signs of confusion or displacement. But Finn's gaze was clear and present, more centered than she'd seen him in months.

“You look different,” she observed. “More... solid.”

“I feel different,” Finn agreed. “I finally understand that my TPD isn't a flaw to be ashamed of. It's just part of how my brain works, and that's okay.”

Maya's eyes filled with tears as realization hit.

“I spent so much time trying to protect you from your condition that I never considered whether you needed protecting,” she said, voice thick with emotion.

“Made you feel like your episodes were medical emergencies instead of just... part of who you are.”

“You were trying to keep me safe,” Finn said gently. “But sometimes protection becomes its own kind of prison.”

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Maya nodded, understanding the distinction. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I promise to do better. To support you instead of trying to manage you.”

River felt profound sense of family in that moment, watching the Torres siblings navigate their new understanding with such love and grace. This was what he’d been afraid of losing—not just Finn, but this sense of belonging, of being part of something larger than himself.

Captain Torres arrived later that morning, weathered face creased with worry that transformed into relief when he saw Finn whole and present. For the first time since Finn’s diagnosis, the Captain didn’t look like he wanted to flee from conversation about temporal displacement.

“I’ve been running from this family’s medical history too long,” he admitted, voice rough with emotion. “Your mother, your episodes... I thought if I didn’t acknowledge it, it would hurt less. But that just left you kids to handle it alone.”

Finn embraced his father with surprising warmth. “You’re here now,” he said simply. “That’s what matters.”

Dr. Voss appeared that afternoon, usual scientific fervor tempered by something that looked like respect. She examined Finn with professional thoroughness but without the desperate intensity that had characterized her previous visits.

“I’d like to continue studying TPD,” she said carefully, “but as collaboration, not cure-seeking mission. If you’re willing, Finn, your experiences could help other people with similar conditions understand they’re not broken—just different.”

Finn considered this thoughtfully. “I’d be open to that,” he said. “But as partner in the research, not subject.”

Dr. Voss nodded, and River saw genuine smile cross her face for the first time since he’d known her. “I think I could learn a lot from that approach,” she admitted.

Jake arrived with Thomas and Stella, and River watched as their small community rallied around Finn’s return with joy rather than medical concern. Thomas brought books from the shop, Stella brought soup, and Jake brought his steady, calming presence that made everything feel more grounded.

“This is how it should be,” Stella said, looking around the cottage filled with friends and family. “Community that accepts people as they are, not as we think they should be.”

River felt something click into place—not just his relationship with Finn, but his sense of belonging in this coastal town. These people weren’t just tolerating Finn’s TPD; they were embracing it as part of what made their community richer and more complex.

As afternoon wore on and friends began to leave, River found himself alone on the porch with Finn, watching sun begin its descent toward horizon.

“We have people who love us,” Finn said quietly, hand finding River’s. “People who see us as we are and choose to stay.”

River brought Finn’s hand to his lips, pressing soft kiss to his knuckles. “We’re not doing this alone anymore,” he agreed.

They kissed as sky turned pink and gold, lips warm and sure against each other, and River felt solid ground of community beneath his feet for the first time in months.

Over the following weeks, River and Finn established new routines that accommodated Finn's TPD without turning their home into a medical facility. They created anchors and safety measures that supported Finn during episodes without restricting his freedom or autonomy.

But it wasn't seamless. Some nights, River still woke in cold sweats, reaching for Finn's hand to make sure he was still there.

Some mornings, Finn stared at his reflection like he was trying to convince himself he was real.

They both carried the weight of what they'd been through—trauma didn't disappear just because love conquered fear.

River returned to his marine biology work, but with different perspective.

Instead of using research as escape from uncertainty, he found himself drawn to studying adaptation and resilience in marine ecosystems. How organisms learned to thrive in changing environments rather than simply surviving them.

Finn reopened his bookshop gradually, starting with limited hours and trusted customers.

River loved watching him work with people who had no idea about his condition.

Finn's unique perspective on time gave him insights into books and stories that amazed people, his ability to sense a book's emotional history turning casual browsers into devoted customers.

“You see stories in ways other people can't,” River told him one evening as they walked home from the shop. “Your TPD doesn't take anything away from your

ability to connect with books—it enhances it.”

Finn smiled and leaned into River's side. “It took me years to see that as gift instead of burden,” he said. “Having you believe it made all the difference.”

Finn's episodes still occurred, but less frequently and with less distress. Sometimes triggered by stress, but just as often by intense joy or emotional connection. River learned to recognize the signs—not to prevent them, but to provide support when needed.

During one particularly gentle episode, River sat beside Finn on their bed, holding his hand as Finn's consciousness drifted through time. Instead of panic or urge to intervene, River felt only peaceful presence, trusting that Finn would return when ready.

“Where did you go?” River asked softly when Finn's eyes focused on present again.

“I visited the first night we spent together,” Finn said with smile. “Got to experience falling asleep in your arms from both perspectives—as it happened, and knowing how much love was still to come.”

River kissed him then, slow and deep, marveling at how episodes that once terrified him had become windows into the extraordinary way Finn experienced love across time.

They developed communication strategies for when Finn experienced temporal displacement—simple phrases and gestures that kept them connected even when Finn's consciousness was elsewhere.

River learned to read subtle signs that indicated whether episode was distressing or peaceful, when to offer comfort and when to simply wait with patient presence.

“You've become fluent in TPD,” Finn joked one morning after brief, gentle episode during breakfast. “Like learning second language.”

“It's the language of loving you,” River replied, and meant it completely.

Their physical intimacy deepened too, River learning to make love to Finn with complete presence rather than fear that passion might trigger episode. Finn's responsiveness, the way he gasped River's name and arched beneath his touch, felt like prayers of gratitude for being accepted completely.

“I love you,” River whispered against Finn's throat one night as they moved together in darkness, lighthouse beam painting patterns on their skin. “I love all of you, every part of how your beautiful mind works.”

Finn's response was breathless and fervent: “I love you too. God, River, I love you too.”

Their love became stronger through accepting uncertainty rather than seeking guarantees. River no longer needed to know their relationship would last forever—he just needed to choose Finn fully, every day, for however long they had.

Three months after Finn's return, as autumn painted the coastline in shades of gold and crimson, River began to think about forever in different terms. Not as guarantee, but as daily choice. Not as destination, but as journey they'd take together, one step at a time.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

Finn

Five Years Later...

Finn woke to the sound of waves against the shore and River's steady breathing beside him.

Five years had passed since his return from the temporal stream, five years of learning that love didn't require perfection—just the courage to keep showing up.

The lighthouse cottage had grown with them, expanded to include a proper restoration workshop where centuries-old books waited for his careful attention.

He lay still for a moment, watching River sleep in the early morning light.

The worry lines that had once etched themselves into River's face during sleep had softened, replaced by the peaceful expression of someone who'd learned to trust rather than control.

River's dark hair was longer now, touched with silver at the temples that Finn loved to trace with his fingertips during their quiet morning rituals.

The transformation of their home still amazed him sometimes.

Where medical equipment had once cluttered every surface, books now lined the walls in careful rows.

Where monitors had beeped with urgent data, plants grew toward windows that let in natural light instead of the harsh glare of research stations.

River stirred, his eyes opening slowly to meet Finn's gaze. "Morning," he murmured, his voice rough with sleep and warm with contentment.

"Morning," Finn replied, leaning over to press a soft kiss to River's lips. The kiss tasted like home and possibility, like five years of choosing each other through good days and bad ones.

River slipped from bed to prepare coffee—a routine they'd perfected over years of learning each other's rhythms without trying to control them.

Finn listened to the familiar sounds of their morning ritual: the coffee grinder, the whistle of the kettle, River humming unconsciously as he moved through their kitchen.

Through the bedroom window, Finn could see bottles scattered across the beach from last night's storm.

Once, every piece of glass on their shore had held the potential for supernatural mystery.

Now they were simply part of the coastal ecosystem River studied and protected, beautiful debris from beautiful storms.

"Coffee's ready," River called from the kitchen, and Finn could hear the smile in his voice.

Later that morning, Finn settled into his restoration studio, surrounded by centuries-old books and manuscripts that trusted him with their secrets.

His hands moved with steady confidence as he assessed a water-damaged ship's log from the 1800s, the pages yellow with age but still holding stories worth preserving.

His customer consultation notebook lay open beside him, filled with neat handwriting documenting projects and deadlines. No more mysterious gaps where hours or days had vanished from his memory. No more waking up to find work completed by hands he couldn't remember using.

The ship's log was particularly fascinating—the captain's entries growing increasingly erratic as what he described as “time sickness” affected his navigation. Finn recognized the symptoms immediately: temporal displacement episodes that the 19th century had no name for, no understanding of.

As he worked, Finn felt the familiar shift in his awareness that signaled an approaching episode. Five years ago, this moment would have filled him with dread. Now he simply set down his tools and let the displacement wash over him like a gentle tide.

The workshop faded around him as his consciousness drifted backward through the ship's history.

He saw the captain struggling with episodes that left him disoriented and fearful, saw the crew's growing concern as their leader battled something none of them understood.

But Finn also saw the moments of clarity, when the captain's unique relationship with time allowed him to navigate storms that would have destroyed other ships.

When Finn's awareness settled back into the present, he was smiling. The episode had lasted maybe ten minutes—River had learned not to worry unless they stretched past an hour—and had given him insights into the book's provenance that ordinary

research couldn't provide.

He made careful notes about what he'd experienced, documentation that had become part of Dr. Voss's research into how TPD could be accommodated rather than cured.

His episodes were no longer medical emergencies but collaborative tools, windows into historical understanding that made him uniquely qualified for his work.

River

Hey, love. How are you?

Finn

I am good. Had an episode earlier.

River

How was the episode? The ship captain again?

Finn

Yeah. Poor bastard thought he was going insane. Wish I could tell him he was just extraordinary.

River

You kind of are, through your work. Every family you help understand TPD is a family that won't go through what we did.

Finn's chest filled with warmth at River's words. This was what love looked like after

five years of practice—not desperate fear when episodes occurred, but quiet support and genuine appreciation for the gifts they brought.

Maya arrived for their weekly lunch, no longer anxious about her brother's condition but glowing with pride in her own evolution.

Her clinical psychology practice now specialized in family support for rare neurological conditions, helping other families navigate the journey from fear to acceptance that she and Finn had traveled together.

“I had a new family this week,” Maya said as she unpacked sandwiches from the local deli. “Dealing with temporal displacement in their daughter. I was able to give them your research, show them that their child isn't broken.”

Finn felt a complex mix of emotions—grief for the families facing the terror he remembered so well, but hope that they wouldn't have to navigate it alone the way he had.

But he also knew the road ahead wouldn't be easy for these families.

Some days were still hard for him and River.

Some mornings, Finn still stared at his reflection like he was trying to convince himself he was real.

Some nights, River still woke reaching for Finn's hand to make sure he was still there.

“It's not a magic fix,” Finn said carefully. “Understanding TPD helps, but families still struggle. Still have bad days. Still wonder if they're doing it right.”

Maya nodded, her expression growing more serious. “The Richardson family is going

through that now. Their ten-year-old daughter has been having more frequent episodes since school started. They're scared and exhausted.”

“Are they coming to the support group?” Finn asked. He and River had started hosting monthly gatherings for TPD families, offering both practical advice and emotional support.

“Next week,” Maya confirmed. “I told them you'd share some of your coping strategies.”

Captain Torres joined them, having become a regular presence in their lives after learning to face his family's medical history with courage rather than avoidance. The grizzled sea captain looked more at peace than Finn had ever seen him, though grief still lived in the lines around his eyes.

“Your mother would be proud,” he said quietly, watching Finn work on the ship's log restoration. “She always said your mind worked differently, not wrongly.”

The words still hurt sometimes—the reminder of how much his mother would have loved to see him thriving instead of simply surviving. But the pain felt clean now, like grief that had been given space to breathe instead of festering in shame and secrecy.

That evening, River and Finn walked the beach at sunset, collecting bottles not for mysterious messages but for Finn's glass restoration hobby.

The simple pleasure of searching for sea glass together had replaced the supernatural terror of those early bottles, ordinary magic substituting for the extraordinary kind that had once defined their relationship.

River stopped at the tide pool where they'd first explored together, the place where

Finn had begun to understand that his condition might be a gift rather than a curse.

From his pocket, River pulled out a simple ring made from sea glass that Finn had shaped during a peaceful displacement episode months earlier.

“I can't promise we'll have a normal life,” River said, his voice steady despite the emotion Finn could see in his eyes. “Hell, I can't even promise we'll have an easy life. But I can promise I'll show up for whatever kind of life we create together.”

Finn's breath caught in his throat as he stared at the ring—sea glass worn smooth by time and tide, shaped by his own hands during a moment when his consciousness had drifted peacefully through their shared history. It was perfect in its simplicity, beautiful in its acknowledgment of their journey.

“Yes,” Finn said, laughing through tears as River slipped the ring onto his finger. “Yes, of course, yes.”

They kissed as the sun painted the sky in shades of gold and rose, their lips warm and sure against each other. The kiss tasted like promises and possibility, like five years of learning to love without guarantees and whatever uncertain future stretched ahead.

As they embraced, Finn felt the familiar shift of an approaching episode. Instead of fear, he felt curiosity—what would his displaced consciousness show him at this moment of profound joy?

The episode was brief and gentle, a flash of images that made Finn smile rather than tremble: their wedding day beneath the lighthouse, quiet mornings decades in the future when their hair was silver and their hands wrinkled but still intertwined, and yes—some harder moments too.

Times when his episodes would frighten them both, when River's protectiveness

would clash with Finn's need for independence, when they'd have to choose each other all over again through doubt and fear.

When he returned to present awareness, River was watching him with patient love, no anxiety or fear in his expression.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 9:17 am

“Good episode?” River asked, using the language they'd developed over years of navigating temporal displacement together.

“Complex,” Finn replied, kissing him again. “I saw our future—the beautiful parts and the difficult ones. All of it worth fighting for.”

Six Months Later...

Finn stood at the altar on the lighthouse overlook, surrounded by family and friends who celebrated their love as it was, not as it might be if circumstances were different. The ceremony was simple and heartfelt—no medical equipment, no temporal monitoring, just love witnessed by their community.

Jake served as River’s “best person.”

Captain Torres walked Finn down the aisle, finally present for his son's most important moments rather than fleeing from family complexity.

When it came time for their vows, Finn felt his heart hammering against his ribs with nervous excitement. He'd written and rewritten his words dozens of times, wanting to capture everything their journey had taught him about love and acceptance.

River spoke first, his voice steady and sure: “I promise to love all of you—your kindness, your creativity, your unique relationship with time.

I promise to be your anchor when you drift and your lighthouse when you're finding your way home. I promise to see your TPD not as something to fix but as part of what

makes you extraordinary.”

Finn felt tears streaming down his face as he replied: “I promise to trust our love even when my mind travels to other timelines, because you're my anchor in every moment. I promise to let you support me without trying to control me, and to support you without losing myself. I promise to see our love not as fragile but as strong enough to handle whatever strangeness time brings us.”

As they kissed for the first time as married partners, Finn experienced a gentle episode that showed their entire future together—not as guarantee but as beautiful possibility, filled with both joy and challenge, triumph and ordinary Tuesday afternoons that would matter just as much.

When he returned to present awareness, River was smiling at him with infinite tenderness.

“Good episode?” River asked, using their private language.

“The best,” Finn replied, kissing him again as their friends and family cheered around them.

Three years into marriage , on a Tuesday that started like any other, Finn had his worst episode in years.

It lasted four hours, leaving him disoriented and exhausted, temporarily unable to distinguish between past and present realities.

River found him in their garden, talking to someone who wasn't there about books that hadn't been written yet.

“Hey,” River said gently, settling beside Finn on the ground without asking questions about what he was experiencing. “I'm here when you're ready.”

It took another hour for Finn to fully return to the present, and when he did, he was crying.

“I thought I was done with the bad ones,” Finn said, his voice small and defeated. “I thought we'd figured it out.”

River gathered him close, his own hands shaking slightly. “We have figured it out,” he said firmly. “Figuring it out doesn't mean it stops happening. It means we know how to get through it together.”

They spent the rest of the day quietly, River working from home while Finn recovered his sense of linear time. By evening, Finn felt stable enough to joke about the episode, but River could see the fear lingering in his eyes—the worry that maybe their peaceful years had been an illusion.

“I love you,” River said over dinner, his voice carrying the weight of daily choice rather than desperate declaration. “Bad episodes and good ones. Easy days and hard ones. All of it.”

“Even when I forget which year it is?” Finn asked, attempting lightness but needing reassurance.

“Especially then,” River replied. “Because that's when you need me most.”

That night, they held each other a little tighter, both understanding that their love story wasn't a fairy tale with a perfect ending, but something more valuable—a daily choice to stay, to support, to see each other clearly through whatever came.

On their fifth wedding anniversary, River and Finn wrote letters to their future selves, documenting their current happiness without demands for its permanence. They'd learned that love wasn't about guaranteeing forever but about choosing fully in each present moment.

“Dear Future Me,” Finn wrote, his handwriting careful and clear, “I hope you remember how happy we are right now, even after yesterday's difficult episode reminded us that this isn't easy. I hope you remember that River makes coffee every morning with the same careful attention he brings to everything he loves. I hope you remember how his hands feel in mine during my episodes—anchor and comfort and home.”

River sealed their anniversary letters in bottles to open on their tenth anniversary, trusting in time's passage rather than trying to control it. The ritual had replaced the desperate bottle messages of their early relationship, supernatural mystery transformed into ordinary magic.

As the sun set on their anniversary evening, River and Finn reflected on the journey from mystery and crisis to acceptance and peace—though they both knew peace was something they had to choose daily, not something they'd achieved once and could take for granted.

They sat on their porch, hands intertwined, watching the lighthouse beam begin its nightly rotation across waters that held no more supernatural terror, only natural beauty and the occasional reminder that life was unpredictable.

“Do you ever regret it?” River asked quietly, his thumb tracing circles on Finn's palm. “The complexity, the uncertainty, the fact that our love story isn't simple?”

Finn smiled, leaning into River's warmth as the first stars appeared in the darkening sky. “Simple love stories are for people who don't understand that the best things in life require courage.”

They understood now that their love wasn't extraordinary despite Finn's TPD, but because they'd learned to embrace the complete truth of who they were together—difficult episodes and peaceful ones, moments of clarity and periods of confusion, the constant uncertainty that made each good day feel like a gift.

River kissed Finn as the lighthouse beam swept across them, their lips warm in the cooling evening air. The kiss tasted like years of choosing each other, like whatever challenges tomorrow might bring, like the simple certainty that they would face them together.

“I love you,” River whispered against Finn's mouth.

“I love you too,” Finn replied, his heart full of gratitude for the extraordinary life they'd built from the ordinary courage of accepting each other completely. “Evermore.”

The lighthouse beam continued its eternal rotation, illuminating tide pools where new life flourished in the spaces between sea and shore, constant change and eternal rhythms, temporary and evermore.

In its light, two men sat together on a cottage porch, their love no longer dangerous or desperate but grounded in the simple, revolutionary act of seeing each other clearly and choosing to stay.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges and new joys, and they would face them as they always had—together, fully present, choosing love over fear every single day.

That was their evermore: not a guarantee of forever, but the daily miracle of two people brave enough to love without conditions, across time and beyond understanding.

Even when love was difficult. Even when the future felt uncertain. Even when temporal displacement episodes reminded them that some things couldn't be controlled, only navigated with grace and patience and the steady anchor of partnership.

Especially then.