

## Passing rapids

I held her tightly as the light went out in her eyes. Naomi's body went limp, her grip on my hand loosened. I couldn't save her, just like I couldn't save Zoe. I don't know how long I sat there, with my arms wrapped around the still body of the village girl who was last to trust me when I first arrived. Five months ago, she wouldn't even speak to me in class. Ultimately, curiosity drew her to me. She would listen as I talked about my travels, prompted by dozens of questions from other students. One day, she caught up to me after class and asked me to finish the story I had been telling earlier when the bell interrupted me. So I told her. After that, she accepted me. First as a teacher, then as a friend. Naomi wasn't that much younger than me, maybe four or five years. She had her whole life in front of her. And now she doesn't. -She's gone.- I whispered. Jack nodded. I didn't mean to say it out loud, I even forgot Jack was there. Looking up, I saw the pained expression on his face. Our eyes met. -We need to take her back.- Jack said.

Sun torched the open fields that stretched between the river and the village. Jack carried Naomi, and I walked beside him. The scene kept replaying in my head; the tree branch breaking, taking the wire the villagers used to cross the river down with it. Naomi falling into the swollen river and getting caught in the currents. Being a strong swimmer, she managed to break free and head for the bank. I ran down to the water, ready to pull her out when she came close enough. Then, some log that was floating down the river slammed into her. It's sharp edge pierced her abdomen. I jumped in as soon as I saw her go under, but, even as I was dragging her to the shore through the shallows, I had a feeling the damage was irreparable.

Jack found us shortly after. I did my best to stop the bleeding, still red stains covered my jeans. Now, they dried in the midday heat, and the fabric kept sticking to my skin. The walk to the village felt endless. Puddles leftover from last night's storm reflected the clear blue sky, broken branches were scattered around. The tree that broke under Naomi's weight must have been damaged in the storm, but she didn't notice it. If I met her on time instead of waiting for Jack, we'd have crossed the river together and one of us would have surely seen it. If they had a bridge in this middle of nowhere, we wouldn't have to worry about that at all. If a hospital existed in this remote area where time seemed to stand still... It must have been even worse for Jack, being a doctor. To sit there, knowing he could save her with the right equipment, but the things he needed weren't a part of this world.

It was almost noon when we reached the first clay huts. People stood in the doorways and watched us as we passed. A few women gasped, children ran to their parents. Jack did most of the talking when we entered Naomi's house. Her mother's sobs stayed in my ears for hours, clear and desperate in my mind.

Naomi was buried at sunset the same day. It was a quiet, simple ceremony. So different from Zoe's. Afterwards, Naomi's mother approached me. She looked at peace, but sorrow remained in the deep lines of her face. It would stay there for a long time, probably forever. I felt I should say something to her, but no words seemed worthy. She spoke instead. She told me how much Naomi admired me, and how she often retold my stories to her after school. We talked for a while. I told her Naomi reminded me of myself at times, with her adventurous spirit and with how

hard it was to earn her trust. Naomi's mother smiled, twisting one corner of her lips upward in a familiar way. Naomi used to have that same unique smile. Knowing I'll never see it again was gut-wrenching.

Jack and I walked home in silence. Stars dotted the dark sky. We reached our little house, but neither of us seemed eager to enter. Jack spoke up as we were standing awkwardly in the front yard. -I need to ask you something.- he said quietly. There was a way he said it, I knew right away what it would be about. It was about time, too. I couldn't keep it secret for the rest of the volunteering mission. After today, I didn't want to.

I walked over to the nearby rock pile and sat on one of the bigger boulders. Jack did the same. I raised an eyebrow at him, waiting. -Who is Zoe?- he finally asked. And, as the cool night air touched my sunburnt skin, I started my story.

I told Jack about my best friend, my roommate, my colleague. I told him about the earthquake, and the scream from the other room. I told him how she died, buried under tons of concrete, and I couldn't get to her. I told him why I hate the city, with its towering buildings suffocating you, waiting to crush you. I told him why I run out into the open at random times at night, when being inside is unbearable. I told him what made me come all the way out here, searching for peace.

Then, I cried. I cried for Zoe, and I cried for Naomi. He held me. And I cried. I broke. In his arms. Under the open sky. I looked at him through a haze of tears. I wrapped my arms around him. He kissed me, and I knew. I knew I found what I had lost. My life.