

The Calm Before the Storm
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Everyone was surprised when Forrest suddenly disappeared, but Old Man did not seem to be phased. Old Man assured the group, everyone, everything would be fine, and all is well.

There's that phrase again, thought Mary.

Mary, John, Sylvia, Elly, Twix, Henry, Aronia and Grace seemed to take that as a good answer and continued with their chit chatting, drinking, and eating. The concoction Old Man had made always eased spirits and revived those who drank it. Energy was renewed and relaxation was had. The group decided not to focus on the pressing issues. They wanted to connect and just be themselves for a bit.

After a short while, the sun was waning on the horizon and everyone felt it was time to go home. They needed to get some real rest before continuing the fight tomorrow.

Henry and Aronia went to do their thing, while Twix found a spot in the big mesquite tree to stretch out. Mary, Sylvia, Elly, Grace, and John were sent to Mary's home. Inviting John to stay at her place, Grace went on home. John accepted but first wanted to spend some time with Mary before heading off to bed.

After entering the house and making sure things were okay, nothing was out of the ordinary, Elly and Sylvia got some ice cream and retired to the living room to watch a show. John and Mary went out to the porch swing to talk.

"I have really missed you," John said as he slowly took Mary's hand in his. "I have been so worried about you. Not knowing how you are. Not hearing back from you.... And then this. I don't want to see you hurt."

"John, I was lost after you made that decision years ago. I didn't know what to do, or what to think about *us*," said Mary, fiddling with a loose thread on her shirt with her other hand. "I thought we had everything figured out back then. It completely through me for a loop." Mary paused and looked into John's eyes. "I have *truly* missed you, too."

"I wish I had come here under different circumstances," John sighed. "I have wanted to find you many times but never had the courage. I have never loved anyone like I've always loved you. I'm glad this came to be, but I'm not sure what the future holds now."

Mary could see the torture in his face as he struggled to tell her more, and couldn't form the words. She touched his cheek. "But you are here, John, and we are together, at this moment, right now. We have to do what we can with this time and hope we'll have more time to be together on the other side of it all." A tear rolled down her cheek as John gripped her hand tighter with assurance in them.

Mary snuggled closer to John and rested her head on his shoulder as he held her. That was the comfort she needed. It made everything else disappear for a bit of time. Just sitting there, hearing his breathing, feeling his warmth, knowing he was there, where they should have been

all this time—together.

She had never forgotten her love for him, or his love for her. Even though her heart was broken those many years ago, she could forgive it all, simply with his presence beside her at that moment.

Mary gathered herself together, sat upright and told John they should get some rest. “We don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but we need to make sure to be prepared for it.”

John stood up, offering his hand to Mary. Mary took his hand and got up, hugging John in return. It was incredible to have him close again.

“Okay, I’m going,” said John. “I’m sure Grace and I need to report and make sure we’ve prepared for whatever might happen tomorrow as well. We will keep a watch on the house. We already have things in place to alert us if anything stirs in the night.” John paused. “Mary, I will make sure you are safe.”

He pulled away from her reluctantly, leaning down to place a gentle kiss on her forehead. Mary watched him bound down the porch steps, heading to Grace’s house, then went inside to join the girls.

Elly and Sylvia were such a delight to see, like old times, sitting on the couch watching TV and laughing, cutting up with each other. It brought back memories of the friendship the four of them had in college. Nothing could separate the four—or so they thought then. Mary could not believe how things had changed so completely. She wished she could go back to the simpler times, before the virus, before everything went into chaos and survival mode.

Elly and Sylvia looked up as they heard the door close and motioned for Mary to come sit between them.

They hugged and started giggling, reminiscing about better and more carefree times.

“Okay girls,” said Mary. “We *must* get to bed. Y’all figure out who is getting the couch and who is getting the guest bed. There is a cot in the guest bedroom too. Or y’all can figure out if you want to share the queen bed in there.”

Mary made herself a cup of chamomile and lavender tea before following the hallway to her own bed. She had a lot going on in her head and needed calming before trying to sleep. She knew whatever was to come next might get rough, but that feeling of “All will be well,” lingered.

It’s funny how things, even during the chaos, seem to fall in place. She had thought about John often recently, and now here he was. She didn’t know what the future would hold but was more than willing to try again and let that love grow.

Mary put down her tea, half-finished, laid down in bed and drifted off to sleep. A sleep, which even though it came quickly, was restless.

Her dreaming went back through the events of the last days—finding out what Michael really was, that Grace had a daughter, that Grace and John were investigating Michael, Sylvia’s mom, so many new things, and everything seemed to come full circle to bringing things, and people, to her. The seeds, whose power she had never known about and the fact one was being

cultivated for each country.

She was not sure what part she still had to play in this, but she knew she had found a new strength and courage she did not have before.

Mary's thoughts were calm as the saying "All is well" echoed in her mind. The last thought she had before waking to the sun streaming through her window was remembering her dream and the soldier saying clearly . . . "Love will save us in the end."

Carina A. Brunson is currently the editor and co-owner, along with her husband, of the Winter Texan Times, a seasonal paper for the Rio Grande Valley's Winter Texans. Besides over 15 years of newspaper experience – reporting, writing and editing – and website administration, she has worked in public relations, marketing and customer service. She likes crafts, cross stitch, playing with her Cricut, service opportunities, reading and movies with the family. She is a bit of geek type liking nearly all things sci-fi, superheroes, D&D, etc. Carina wanted to partake on this adventure to expand on her writing skills and touch on something she hasn't done since her early years of writing.