



Aftershock

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:40 pm

Death

It's the small things that annoy me about autumn—the lack of birds, the oxygen-deprived leaves, the constant color red. Every day, all day, from the East Coast to the West Coast, the streets are blanketed with red. Such a lifeless color given to a lifeless season. Autumn shouldn't even be considered a season; it's just the transition of summer to winter. It's non-important. Autumn is spring without a heartbeat—the heart remains, but the beating is not present.

And what's the point of a heart with no heartbeat?

The dying leaves make it seem like a virus has swept through the streets of New York City, but that's exactly what autumn is—a virus. To everyone else, autumn represents the death of summer, but to me, it represents the death of my family. The worst part about autumn is that it's my name.

I sat on the public bus, leaning against the window with my face devoid of emotion, as if it had frozen that way. There was no reason to smile, so why pretend? A lot of people said I had RBF. Resting Bitch Face. Honestly, I wasn't even too mad about it because that meant people would stay the fuck away from me.

I watched as drops of rain trickled down the glass, streaking my view. Outside the bus, people were running around, trying to seek shelter so that they wouldn't get wet. Kind of idiotic, though. You couldn't outrun rain. I looked out at the road and noticed the streets were starting to flood as the tires on the bus splashed through the water. I was lost in my thoughts when the windows were illuminated by a flash of lightning followed by a loud roar of thunder. The storm was getting worse. I reached down,

thrusting my hand inside my purse as I fumbled around for my AirPods, popping one in each ear. I quickly thumbed through the music, assuming that it would drown out the unapologetically loud thunder. Unable to decide what song to listen to first, I hit the shuffle button.

Currently playing – Slipped Away by Avril Lavigne

Of course, the first song to play hinted at dying. Death was the whole reason I was on a damn bus at 7:45 a.m. instead of at work. When the other nurses heard the news about what happened, of course, they all offered their condolences, with a mix of—

“He’s in a better place now.” Not sure about that one—and—“I’m so sorry for your loss.” I lost him years ago.

My dad always knew how to be around without ever actually being present. Even as a kid, I never felt like he was really there. Sure, he lived with us, but there was a dullness behind his eyes that no one seemed to notice except me. I last spoke to my dad five years ago, right before he moved to California. Now, at twenty-one years old, I would finally see him again, just not in the way I had expected. I never planned on going there to visit him, at least certainly not like this. The funeral was in twenty-four hours, and I was dreading it. My mom flew out a couple days ago, but I, on the other hand, had decided to postpone the flight for as long as I possibly could, all while blaming it on the fact that I needed to finish up the week at work, but now it was the day before the funeral and I had no more excuses. My flight leaves JFK at 11:00 a.m. eastern time and lands in San Diego at 2:00 p.m. western time which gave me just enough time to go back to my apartment so that I could grab my suitcase and head back out. I didn't want to be in California for any longer than I had to.

Caught up in my own narrative, I suddenly realized that the song I was listening to had ended and I hadn’t managed to hear a single word. I debated on rewinding it, but the next song started before I could.

Currently playing – CPR by Lexi Harlow

Lexi's new album was just released a month ago, and CPR was one of the millions of songs in the world that I didn't mind listening to over and over again. Yeah, no way I was skipping one of the best songs ever. I let the music soak in as I tried to allow the melody to echo in my head.

Easily, my mind began to drift off once more. I started to think about the funeral I was about to attend. I started to think about my father.

Is all of this really worth it?

There was a point in my life where I thought my father had changed. Right after he left, I clawed for pieces of broken memories and tried to cherish the ones that made me happy...that was, until I got older and realized that those moments were never as amazing as I had tried to build them up to be. Toward the end, he smiled more. Deep down, I knew there had to be a reason for his sudden change in attitude, and the chances of that reason being because he finally realized being a part of my life was more important than going to a bar were slim to none. As a kid, I tried to ignore the pit growing in my stomach every time I thought of why he suddenly seemed so happy, but eventually, I couldn't anymore. God, how I wish I would've stopped trying to piece it together. That was the start of the domino effect that would cause our family to crumble. Of course, my mom came running in with a band-aid to mend the wounds, but once she saw the scale of the disaster, she realized there was no fixing it. But that's fine. I was fine. Everything was okay, just like it had always been. I guess I had the same problem as everyone else—I wanted to do better than okay and be more than just fine. So, what did you do when you wanted to improve your mental health? You'd go to therapy and pay thousands of dollars for someone to tell you the things that you already knew and hopefully perform surgery on your soul.

Too bad I couldn't squeeze in one extra session before my trip.

At least I had my music—the same music that I had been neglecting for the second time today. I sighed as I felt the bus heave to a stop and open its doors. Grabbing my bag, I threw it over my shoulder and stepped off the bus.

Reminiscing

A cold wind greeted me as soon as my sneakers hit the pavement, and the water pelted against my face. The song I was listening to transitioned into another.

Currently playing – Ghost by Justin Bieber

Every song I had heard so far today was about life and death. I was on a roll. I walked up to the front of my apartment complex and went inside the building. Not wanting to revel in the thought of people dying like the song suggested, I paused the music and took out my AirPods only to be met with deafening silence.

I tapped the “up” button next to the elevator and waited. Finally, a ding arose and broke the maddening silence. The elevator doors opened slowly as if they had all the time in the world. Stepping inside, I pressed the 6 and leaned against the back wall. Closing my eyes, I inhaled deeply and let my shoulders sag. I glanced up and saw the numbers begin climbing.

3. Click. 4. Click. 5. Click.

This elevator needs to be updated...badly.

Maybe I'd get stuck one day, and then I could sue the building. With all that lawsuit money, I'd be able to afford a house.

Spoken like a true Gen Z'er.

After what felt like hours, the elevator finally reached my floor. I kicked off the back wall to give myself a boost, but the sudden movement seemed to kick start my bladder and made me realize that I needed to pee. I was in such a rush to leave work that I forgot to use the bathroom...I literally had forgotten to pee.

“Idiot,” I murmured to myself.

I quickened my pace to the apartment and grabbed my keys, jamming them into the door. As I frantically twisted the doorknob, I crossed my legs trying to rid myself of any water-related thoughts. When I walked inside, I was immediately greeted with a clock staring back at me. My eyes widened as I saw the time change from 8:09 a.m. to 8:10 a.m.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:40 pm

Fuck, I'm going to be late.

I dashed into my bedroom and shimmed out of my scrubs. I ran around like a madman for a solid five minutes, flinging clothes and packing last-minute items. A surge of adrenaline hit me. I quickly transferred some of the smaller things from my purse into a large shoulder bag to use as my carry-on. Reaching for the suitcase tucked at the edge of my bed, I rolled it out into the living room while doing a brief checklist to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything.

ID? Check.

Plane ticket? Check.

Extra clothes? Check.

Toiletries? Check.

Headphones? Check.

Phone? Check.

Charger? Check.

Cash? Check.

Will to live? To be determined...

Making my way out the door, I walked back onto the elevator and down to the first floor. I tried to focus on the fact that I was going to be back here, at my apartment, in just two days—only two days of torture...I could handle that.

When I stepped outside, somehow, it seemed to be raining even harder. There was no time to turn back around and grab an umbrella, so I held my hand above my face to shield myself from being pelted in the eyes. I didn't mind it, though. To me, the rain was always less of an inconvenience and more a welcome surprise. Less people out and about, a nice bit of ASMR, washing away all the stupid pollen, watering dehydrated flowers...what's not to like about rain? I made my way to the edge of the sidewalk, heaving my suitcase behind me with one hand as I ushered the other up to the sky in an attempt to hail a taxi. Somehow, as if on cue, a huge bolt of lightning came down from the clouds.

“Abra Kadabra?” I mumbled, slightly confused. A taxi nearby pulled over and waved at me to get in. I stood dumbfounded, still confused as to whether or not I had awakened my wizardry powers. Maybe my letter to Hogwarts was being mailed out at this exact moment. It was the sound of incessant honking that tore me from my thoughts as I ripped open the taxi door and said, “JFK and step on it!”

The driver mumbled something under his breath as he floored the car, causing my head to ricochet and hit the headrest.

I bet he did that on purpose.

I rolled my eyes and huffed out a loud sigh while directing my gaze at the phone in my hands. I sent my mom a text letting her know I was on the way to the airport before tucking my phone back into my pocket.

Traffic sucked. After what should have been a twenty-five-minute car ride, we arrived at the airport forty-five minutes later. The roads were always crazy when it was stormed in New York. I hopped out of the taxi, grabbed my suitcase, and started toward the entrance while trying to avoid the large puddles on the ground that had begun to form. Stopping midway, I spun back around and dashed to the taxi.

“Wait!”

I almost forgot my bag.

Good thing the driver hadn’t pulled off.

“What the...?” he mumbled, clearly annoyed.

“Sorry!” I picked my bag up off the seat. “Thanks!”

Slamming the door of the taxi once again, I scurried inside the airport. By now, the rain had become a downpour, completely drenching my clothes within the fifteen seconds it took to get to the main entrance.

“Oh, great,” I muttered while looking down at my sweater, soaked with freezing water.

Guess I’m turning into one of those people who complain about the rain.

That just proved how annoyed I was. The squeaking of my shoes echoed in my ears as I sped over to the check-in counter. That’s when I realized again, I still hadn’t peed. I tapped my foot anxiously while waiting in line. When I took in my surroundings, I noticed everyone’s eyes fixed on the TV. Every single screen was broadcasting the news.

“The downpour is suspected to go on for several more hours and a flash flood warning is in effect for Southern New York. We urge everyone to stay inside so that you can avoid risking—”

“Next!” An older lady shouted as she handed out boarding passes.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:40 pm

I moved up in line as I lugged my suitcase behind me. The squeaking of my damp shoes caused me to wince. I hated that noise.

Okay, fuck this weather.

I wouldn't say that I was trying to manifest anything, but if the weather were to delay my flight, then maybe missing my father's funeral wouldn't be so bad...I mean, it wasn't like he ever played a significant role in my life, anyway. We lived in the same damn house for twelve years, yet I felt like I barely knew him. How fucked up was that?

The sound of the roaring thunder interrupted my thoughts once again. The line was moving relatively quickly as I got my boarding pass and handed them my suitcase. I pushed forward and made my way through TSA to screen my carry-on. After I had made it through each checkpoint, I glanced down at my phone and saw that it was 9:23 a.m.

Finally. Time to rest.

Walking over to my gate, I plopped down one of the available seats and waited for boarding to begin. I could relax, just so long as no one bothered me. Once again, as if on cue, my phone buzzed, causing me to jump at the sudden sensation. I dug the phone out of my pocket and flipped it over.

It was my mom.

Of course, she would call as soon as I sat down.

“Am I using my powers for good or evil?” I softly sighed as I answered her call.

“Hey, sweetie. Are you at the airport?”

“Yeah, Mom, I made it. I’m just waiting at the gate for boarding to start.” I yawned at the overwhelming sensation of exhaustion that inexplicably washed over me.

“Okay, I just wanted to make sure because I heard it was raining cats and dogs over there!”

I laughed slightly. “You know no one says that anymore, right?”

“Hey! I say it...and I’m someone!” She exclaimed.

“Yeah, I think that California weather is really going to your head...”

“It’s actually very beautiful up here. I can see why your dad liked it,” she trailed off.

“Yeah, he liked it so much he decided to move halfway across the country where he didn’t have to feel guilty if he ever saw us at the grocery store.”

“Autumn,” my mom began as I cut her off.

“It’s fine; I’m fine.” I wasn’t fine...but that was how the illusory truth effect worked—if you told yourself something over and over again, you’d eventually begin to believe it.

“I know this is hard for you, but going to your father's funeral is the right thing to do.”

“I know, that's why I’m going,” I frowned. That’s the only reason I was going.

“Anyway,” I started, “I’m going to go grab something to eat from someplace nearby before the flight takes off. Airplane food is way too fucking expensive.” Pushing myself up from the seat, I reached down and grabbed my bag.

“Okay, sweetie. Stay safe. I love you.” I could practically hear the sad smile on her face.

“I love you too.”

“I’ll see you soon,” she ended.

That's what worried me. Not seeing her, but seeing him.

Quickly shaking off the thought, I made my way to the nearest deli. I walked along the aisles as I looked for something appetizing. Honestly, even though my stomach was growling, I wasn’t really in the mood to eat anything, but you know...surviving requires you to eat, so I guess I had to.

Yay me.

While browsing for food, I also picked up a bottle of water, which just so happened to be the infamous and trendy water that was taking Pinterest by storm—Smart Water. Don’t get the wrong idea, though. I wasn’t one of those “crazy people” who only liked boujee water. It was just the only option the deli had. Speaking of “crazy people,” as I walked up to the front to check out, I saw a group of maybe twenty strangers screaming while running right past the store. Squinting my eyes, I whipped my head toward the direction they had just come from and felt the sudden urge to start sprinting as well. Was a chainsaw-wielding murderer chasing them? Did they just witness a plane crash? Was the building flooding? Just as I was about to give Usain Bolt a “run” for his money, I noticed that everyone else seemed pretty calm. So, no danger, I guess? Just people being crazy. Maybe I just manifested them into

existence with all my thoughts about weirdos.

Three for three. Hogwarts, I'll be waiting patiently.

I paid for my lunch and silently pleaded that those people weren't on my flight. After grabbing my receipt, I made my way back to the gate and sat down. I sighed in an attempt to relieve the stress that was building up inside as I looked down at my sad excuse for a meal—a ham sandwich and a bag of chips. Thankfully, those people weren't around, but wherever they were, I could still hear their shrill screams in the distance. To get as much peace and quiet as I could before my flight, I put my AirPods in for the second time that day. This time, I had a song in mind.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:40 pm

Currently playing – Love In Los Angeles by Lexi Harlow

It seemed fitting since I was going to California. As I unwrapped my sandwich, I slowly let the music carry me away. It would be my first time in California, but it wasn't for the vacation of a lifetime; it was for a funeral. Most people associated California with dreams coming true or finding love, but this trip was definitely not about fulfilling my long-lost dream or finding my soul mate. Hell, I mean, at this point in time, I didn't even believe that love existed at all. That's not to say that I hadn't believed in romance in the past, though. Over the last few years, I had my fair share of relationships.

First, there was Adam. He was the cliché guy that most girls don't expect to fall for. You know how the story goes. You start off as friends, then you turn into best friends, and from there, things keep going. Adam was the person I'd talk to on the phone at night about stupid shit like the latest celebrity gossip or gossip or whether a tomato was a fruit or vegetable. Then, slowly, after overlooking the person who was right in front of me, the time came when I finally opened my eyes and realized that I was crushing on Adam. It wasn't until a year into our friendship that I ever thought about him in that way, but as soon as I thought about it, I couldn't stop. No, he wasn't the most obviously attractive, but when you fall for someone, they immediately become a ten out of ten. It all started when we met in 9th grade. Adam was the new kid, and some of the jocks were bullying him. One of the popular boys called Adam "gay," and soon a lot of others followed suit. I vividly remember bolting up from my chair and yelling for everyone to shut the fuck up, or else I'd start rumors about them all having small dicks. Adam laughed, and surprisingly, so did the jocks, even though you could tell they were still trying to process what I had just said. After class, Adam thanked me, and our relationship grew from there. Eventually, we started dating, but

then something in our relationship started to change. Adam started doing track, and his circle of friends grew, causing him to become popular. Despite our differences in social standing, we continued to force our relationship to work. One night, we sat on the bench outside his house and talked for hours. His parents were at a dinner party, so he ran inside and grabbed a bottle of their vodka. We sat on the porch until midnight, drinking and just talking to each other. That's when he confessed that he thought he was gay, or at least bisexual. I couldn't say that I didn't suspect anything, but it still felt like I was being smacked in the face and stabbed in the chest when I heard those words escape his lips. That's when I realized it wouldn't be fair to stay with someone who still needed to figure out who they were...so we broke up. He deserved to find love no matter who it was with. I never stopped supporting him, but as time went on, so did what remained of our friendship. I truly believe he was my first love, though.

Then there was Daniel. He was the complete opposite of Adam. We met in college during a time when I just wanted to have fun and date a “bad boy.” He was the rebel that every girl thought they could somehow change. He was the one who egged the professors on and always had to get the last word in. Daniel even had a motorcycle—a fucking motorcycle. In your freshman year of college, that's enough to make any girl drop her panties. There may have also been a slight chance that Daniel sold “special snacks” to students, and I may or may not have been one of those students. Later in the school year, I stopped by his house to buy a “special snack,” and we ended up sitting on the couch talking about his motorcycle. I was so infatuated with Daniel in a way that I had never been with anyone else before. As we were talking, Daniel surprised me by pulling me close and eagerly pressing his lips against mine. With Adam, our kisses were tender and light, but with Daniel, there was passion and desire. The thing about Daniel, though, is that he wasn't just a bad boy; he was actually a bad person. He was a spitting image of my own father, and he only cared about his image. He even tried to gaslight me into thinking I was the reason for all of his mistakes and shortcomings. Daniel flunked his math final? He'd claim it was my fault for hanging around all the time and distracting him from his

studies. Daniel wanted to have sex, and I didn't? He'd call me a prude. Daniel didn't have enough money to buy his dream car? He'd blame me for wanting to go out on expensive dates. In Daniel's world, he was the star of the show, and no one else mattered. Four months into dating, he made the biggest mistake of all. Daniel tried one of his many attempts to get me into bed with him, and I wasn't having it. After my third "No." he lost it and said that if I didn't satisfy his "needs," he was going to go find someone else who would. That was the last straw. I told him that I would agree to sleep with him if he could name one part of the female anatomy besides the vagina, ass, or boobs. He failed miserably after asking, "Isn't that all there is?" That's when I realized that there was no way he would make me orgasm so having sex with him would've been pointless on my side. I told him he could sleep with whoever he wanted to because we were done. Daniel became red in the face and threw a temper tantrum like a three-year-old as he shouted, "Fine! I'll find someone better than you to come over within the hour!" To which I replied, "Just because we've never had sex doesn't mean I haven't seen your dick." I looked him up and down, then continued, "With your size and your knowledge of female anatomy, you will fail miserably at pleasing a woman, so do yourself a favor—save us all the embarrassment and go jerk off into a sock."

I never slept with him despite his persistence, and I didn't regret that choice for a second. I guess that story wasn't one of true love; it was one of pain and loneliness. Maybe there was no happy ending in my future.

But hey, on the bright side I had enough one-liners to burn anyone who crossed me to the ground.

Tremors Of Terror

As I was taking a sip of my, oh, so amazing, Smart Water, the ground shook slightly, causing me to abruptly sit up straight and spill a few drops of liquid on my sweater.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath while pulling out my AirPods.

Was that shaking caused by the thunder, or should I start running and screaming like those people I had seen earlier?

No, I was just overreacting, right? For all I knew, it was just some large guy a few feet away who fallen over while trying to do a handstand. Yeah, that was definitely it. Shrugging off the thought, I started to put my headphones back in when I heard the sound of someone shouting. In the distance, I saw someone wearing a black hoodie with their back facing me. The person was flailing their arms while yelling at two large men.

“I can go to the fucking bathroom by myself!” A feminine voice boomed rather loudly.

“You go, girl, don't let the man keep you down,” I whispered as I chuckled slightly while putting my headphones back inside their case.

No point in listening to music when the world clearly had other plans.

Glancing back over toward the woman, the two men now appeared to be shushing her. Considering what she did next, that did not seem like a good idea on their part. I watched as she pushed them to the side and forced her way into the bathroom.

“Don't come in here!”

As if I were hit by a wave of pure déjà vu, I remembered I needed to pee...a lot. No thanks to the Smart Water, there was no time to wait, as I quickly grabbed my bag and made a mad dash toward the bathroom. I reached my arm out to open the door, but the two men who were arguing with that woman earlier held steadfast, still blocking the door.

I laughed dryly. “Oh, don't tell me you're going to try and keep me from going to the bathroom like you did to that other girl?”

What's with men thinking they can control women?

“Sorry, ma'am, we can't let you in,” the taller man stated.

“Okay, fine, you wanna play? I can call security, and have you removed, or if that's not scary enough for two big white men, I can pop a squat and take a shit right here!” I screamed as a roar of thunder could be heard in the background.

Great timing, if I do say so myself.

And no, I did not actually need to poop, but they didn't need to know that.

I saw a group of several girls walk around the corner as I opened my mouth to speak again. Before I could, the two men hurriedly began shushing me. They looked at each other with a worried expression on their faces before stepping aside to let me in the bathroom.

“That's what I thought,” I said as I pushed past them.

I all but burst the door down, trying to get into the stall as I ran inside. That other girl must've thought I drank five gallons of water with the amount of pee I had inside of me. I didn't think it was possible for my bladder to hold that much liquid. I flushed the toilet, which, for some reason, scared me because how loud it was. Why were public bathrooms always so daunting? Especially the ones with the automatic toilets. I slowly opened the stall and walked up to the sink. From the corner of my eye, I could see the other girl standing there, washing her hands. I wanted to ask if she was okay after what happened with those men earlier, but my social anxiety got the better of me. That was the one thing I never quite understood about myself—I was

outspoken when it came to advocating for my rights, but when it came to simple conversations, I sucked.

I sighed and looked at myself in the mirror's reflection. The bags under my eyes were heavily present at this point as I took note of my tired appearance. The naturally brown tint to my skin had somewhat faded as the color now resembled somewhat of a pale, lifeless version of what it once was. Even my hair, which was usually full of voluminous curls, now fell loosely in string-like tendrils and looked way too greasy for me to believe I had just washed it yesterday. I glanced over my choice of clothing as I shifted uncomfortably while fidgeting with the hems of my sleeves. I wore a baggy black knit sweater that was slightly oversized, along with high-waisted acid-wash blue jeans and my favorite pair of black Converse. Maybe not the best choice for a flight.

Too late now.

I clutched the sides of the sink and shut my eyes tightly as I took a deep breath. I could feel the girl next to me staring as I turned on the faucet and began washing my hands to resemble some sense of normalcy, even though I was aware that I reeked of “midlife crisis in your twenties” energy.

Looking in her direction to grab a paper towel, I noticed her head immediately spin the opposite way as she walked toward the door.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:40 pm

That's weird. Am I so repulsive that she had to run away?

She seemed very shy and skittish. According to every true crime documentary I had seen, that was not a good sign. Was she being abused? I racked my brain trying to put the pieces together.

She was accompanied by two large, strange men. She had to ask for permission to use the bathroom. She was afraid to reveal her face.

The detective in me couldn't help but investigate. The human in me couldn't help but worry for her safety.

"Hey, wait—" I called out before the words became stuck in my throat.

Ignoring me, she continued to walk away. Just before she reached the handle, the floor shook violently, and lights began to hiss as they flickered. The walls trembled, and one of the mirrors bolted to the wall shattered into large fragments, falling to the floor. I yelped as I tried to brace myself against the sink, only to be thrown in the opposite direction. Now clutching the stalls, I crouched down for more stability as the ground continued shaking. The girl across from me screamed and was hurled onto the floor. With her hands sprawled out in front of her, she frantically tried to push herself backward to keep from sliding near the broken pieces of glass that now littered the floor. The sound of light fixtures rattling, and ceramic tiles clanking were the only things I could manage hear. Then there was an audible pop on my right side as the all the sounds became muffled. My vision blurred as I tried to process what was happening. I didn't want to go to my dad's funeral, but this really wasn't what I pictured happening to stop me. If this was how it ended, I didn't want my last

memory to be of a stressful trip across the country to see my dead dad. I clenched my fingers against the stall and tried to think of something—anything but this. But what if I never saw my mom again? What if I never fell in love? What if I never bought a house or owned a car? What if I never turned thirty? What if I never said goodbye to my dad? I squeezed my eyes shut and forced myself to remain level-headed. I was ripped from my thoughts by current reality as everything came back into focus. From outside the door, I could hear the panicked shouting of people in the airport.

The girl in the restroom yelled, “Earthquake!”

Not even a second later, a deafening bang rang out in the distance, followed by a metal clank and screeching against the door. The piercing noise tore right through me as I cupped my hands over my ears. Immediately following that, the sound of crumbling bricks knocked violently on the outside wall, causing the door hinges to rattle. The flickering lights, gave up there fight as darkness surrounded us.

Then, as if it were all just a bad dream, the shaking stopped. The room became still again.

A loud whirring noise kicked on, and the lights came back to life, but in a duller state than they were before. Backup generator, maybe?

“Holy fuck,” I muttered. I was hugging the stall as I slowly stood up, offering my hand to the stranger who had fallen in front of me.

“Thanks,” she said shakily while still keeping her head down. “But I got it.” She pushed herself up from the ground and dusted off her clothes.

I couldn’t help but wonder why her voice sounded so familiar. Before I could figure it out, a deep voice shouted from outside.

“Lexi? Are you okay? There’s something blocking the entrance to the door. I think it’s some kind of pillar. We can’t get it out of the way.” Frantically, he kept yelling, “Lexi, can you hear me?”

“Yes, I can hear you! I’m fine.” She held my gaze for the first time since being in here as she yanked off her hood, revealing her tousled hair. “We both are.”

That’s when I saw her face. It was Lexi Harlow.

OH MY GOD.

OH MY GOD.

OH. MY. GOD.

I’m going to faint. I’m actually going to faint in front of Lexi Harlow. Be cool, Autumn...

I tried to keep my composure as my eyes widened slightly and then returned back to normal. Without saying a word, I continued to stare at her in shock. It all made sense now. Those two men must’ve been her bodyguards. That also explained why she didn’t want me to see her face before. She wasn’t being kidnapped or abused; she was just a celebrity who didn’t want to attract any attention while going to the bathroom. Her bodyguards were just trying to protect her.

A different voice yelled from outside the bathroom this time. “I’m going to get someone to clear the debris, and we’ll get you out of there. Brian will stay here in case you need anything. Are you sure you’re okay?”

She laughed a bit, then turned back toward the door and responded, “Guys, really, I’m fine. Just get us the hell out of here.”

“We are on it!”

“Wow, an earthquake in New York,” I stated while flicking my eyes toward the ceiling. “That’s...rare.”

“Tell me about it,” Lexi mumbled as she walked toward the area opposite the stalls. Leaning her back against the wall, she slowly slid down tiles and came to a sitting position.

Out of all the days to experience an earthquake for the first time, why today? I rubbed my temples and sighed. We were trapped.

Lexi whipped out her phone and started tapping away at the screen. As I watched her type, I figured I should probably text my mom and let her know that I was okay. I began to pull out my phone, but before I did, I glanced up to see Lexi reach her arms above her head and rip off her black hoodie, then toss it to the side.

My mind began spinning. I was trapped in an airport bathroom with Lexi freaking Harlow!

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Is it getting hot in here? Oh no, I think I forgot how to breathe! How do I breathe? Breathe Autumn!

After a few seconds of mentally freaking out, I slowly exhaled while bringing my phone onto my lap. I noticed that my hands were shaking slightly as I willed them to cooperate so that I could text my mom. I clicked the green bubble at the bottom of my screen and pressed “Mom” as I began typing out a message.

Autumn: Hey, mom. I just wanted to let you know Im ok.

Mom: Why would you not be okay? Do you mean okay with coming to California for your dad’s funeral?

Oh shit, of course, she didn’t know about the earthquake. She was on the other side of the country.

Autumn: Sorry I forgot ur on the West Coast. There was an earthquake here but DON’T WORRY. Im ok. I was in the bathroom when it happened and I guess something fell outside the door so looks like im stuck here forever...

Autumn: JUST KIDDING!

Mom: WHAT? ARE YOU OKAY? I’M CALLING YOU NOW!

I guess she completely disregarded the part where I said I was okay. A loud sigh pulled me away from my thoughts as I looked at Lexi, who was now running her fingers through her hair. Her phone began buzzing as she looked up at me

awkwardly, then stood and walked to the far corner of the room and answered with a “Hello?”

Not twenty seconds later, my phone began ringing loudly as I haphazardly tapped the screen so that it would stop making noise.

Heh. At least I changed my ringtone from one of Lexi’s songs to the default tone a little over a month ago. That would’ve been awkward.

“Hey, mom. What’s new?” I chuckled, trying to make light of the situation as I turned my back to Lexi.

“What’s new?” She repeated my words with far more volume than what I had. “That’s what I should be asking you! Are you okay? What happened?” She asked, completely ignoring my humor.

“Relax, Mom, I’m okay. I’m not hurt. We are just waiting for the maintenance people to come to get us out of here.”

“We?”

I glanced back at Lexi. She was still on her phone, talking, when she must've felt me staring at her. Our eyes met briefly before she looked away once again. I heard her whisper something along the lines of, “Of course, I’m okay. I’ve survived much worse.”

“Uh, yeah, there was another girl in here when the earthquake hit, so it’s the two of us,” I said conveniently leaving out the part about who this other girl was.

“Oh, okay. That’s good, I suppose. At least you’re not alone,” she paused, then continued, “So, do you think you can make it here for your dad’s funeral?”

I frowned at that. Being in a room with Lexi Harlow almost made me forget that I was still on my way to catch a flight to my dad's funeral.

What's the point in even saying goodbye to him?

He had his chance to end things the right way, but instead, he just left. Life was way too fucking short to spend it focusing on the things that brought you pain. What logical reason could I have had for wanting to go see my dead dad? I mean, it's not like he could explain himself or even apologize for that matter. As cruel as it may have sounded, he was dead, and there was no changing that or what happened in our past...so why bother trying?

"I hope not," I mumbled without thinking twice.

"Autumn! Your dad may have made mistakes, but that doesn't warrant you missing his funeral!"

Lexi chose that moment to walk back over and sit in her previous spot. She shoved her phone in her pocket as she tried to avoid looking in my direction to give the illusion of privacy.

I ducked my head and turned even more to the side.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked slowly, the words seething from behind my teeth. My mom was always the forgiving type. She was the one who tried to make their relationship work even when it was clearly hopeless. It almost seemed like she was trying to delay the inevitable. For months, she tried to put the broken pieces of their marriage back together and failed miserably. In the end, it was my father who left. She wanted him to stay, and he wanted to leave. For that, he deserved no sympathy. My thoughts began to jumble in my head as my anger increased at the thought of what my father deserved. "A mistake is when you forget to put your milk

in the fridge! A mistake is when you leave the water on while brushing your teeth! A mistake is when you accidentally lock your keys in the car!” Lowering my voice, I added, “You know what's not a mistake? Having multiple affairs with women half your age and making no apologies for the damage it caused. You don't get up one day and accidentally forget to come home!” I could feel my anger boiling to the surface as I pushed the tears away, ignoring the pang in my heart as I spewed out more insults directed at my father. At that point, I was too far gone to register the magnitude of the words I was saying. “Just because you're not happy in a relationship doesn't warrant you to betray your wife and child! It doesn't warrant you to fuck up your life and everyone else's at the same time! Not only did he destroy my life, but he also destroyed my image of a perfect marriage, so excuse me if I'm in no rush to come to a funeral for the man I hate!” I yelled, unsympathetically, while clenching the phone in my hand.

“Watch your fucking mouth, Autumn, or have you forgotten that you're speaking to your mother? You are not missing the funeral, and that's that. End of discussion!” She screamed into the phone, causing the sound to distort.

“Watch me,” I deadpanned as I hung up the phone, slamming it on the floor next to me.

The bathroom echoed with the sound of glass clinking against the hard, ceramic tile.

Eighteen years old was when you legally became an adult, meaning you got to make your own decisions. At twenty-one, you were granted the same privileges and no less. No one could take that freedom away from you. Not even your own mother.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Trapped

My eyes stung on the verge of tears as I breathed in shakily, trying to force them away. The minute I blinked, the tears fell anyway, and I couldn't stop them. I was so angry, not only at my mom for defending him but also at myself for caring so much. Somehow, I let myself get roped into a cycle of pleasing others instead of focusing on what made me happy.

Always trying to impress dear old dad.

My happiness was the new priority. I was done trying to fix something that was clearly broken. Trying to heal a broken relationship was kind of like that nursery rhyme, Humpty Dumpty. No matter how hard the king's men tried, it was impossible for them to fix something that was so fragile in the first place. Yeah, maybe that comparison was too dark for a nursery rhyme, but have you heard of the story behind Ring Around the Rosie? I shivered at the thought as a cold chill ran up my spine. Furiously wiping away my tears, I sighed.

"Are you okay?" Lexi whispered softly.

"I'm fucking perfect," I shot back, a bit too harshly. Lexi flinched at the anger in my voice. "Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. I just...I'm fine," I said softer this time.

Lexi nodded understandably and leaned her head back against the wall.

Great, I was trapped in the bathroom with Lexi Harlow, and not only was I ruining it by being a complete jackass to her, but I was also wallowing in disgusting sadness.

I dug into my bag that was splayed on the ground next to me and put one AirPods in. Hitting shuffle on my phone, the first song started.

Currently playing – Cry by Benson Boone

As much as I loved this song, it was not making me feel better. This song amplified and heightened the emotions I was so desperate to escape from. I needed something to take away the anguish and make me want to get up and fucking dance. Unlocking my phone again, I clicked the “Dance” playlist and hit shuffle. The screen lit up and displayed the words—

Currently playing – Rerun by Honey Revenge

Closing my eyes, I tried to focus on the music and drown out reality. If I were home right now, I would get up and dance my feelings away. Not in a graceful or rhythmic way, but moreso, in a care-free way. I’d just dance away the pain. It didn’t have to be beautiful or elegant; it just had to be true to how I felt. As a kid, I used to perform concerts in front of my mirror, imagining I was on a stage in front of thousands and letting the music dictate my emotions. Sad song? I’d contort my face into the most gut-wrenching expressions and dance with the most passionate extensions of myself. Happy song? I’d smile and jump around without a care in the world. Angry song? I’d stomp my feet and play the worst air guitar in the history of air guitars. There were songs for every emotion, so, most likely, if you were feeling it, there’d be a song for it. Music could give us something to relate to when talking to other people just wasn’t enough. It was just universally understood. Song lyrics and the captivating melodies that accompanied them were the only thing that transcended everything else and allowed us to connect with each other. It also didn’t hurt that music couldn’t abandon you. I’d always believed that the purest way to feel something without thinking about it was to listen to a song that had the same meaning. It’s almost like you could hold those emotions in your hand without letting them affect your heart. That’s how I liked to deal with trauma—an arm's length away. I leaned my head back and allowed my

mind to drift away as the song took over.

Pulling my phone into my lap, I swiped upward on the screen to unlock it. I opened Instagram only to be bombarded with posts about the earthquake that struck the East Coast. There were two types of reactions—those from the East Coast who were clearly shaken up and those from the West Coast who were laughing at how much everyone was “overreacting.” I knew it wasn’t exactly possible to send out earthquake warnings because they are often so unpredictable, but a little heads-up would’ve been nice. On the East Coast, many of the posts were filled with people expressing how grateful they were to be alive after such a near-death experience, while a handful of others were sending out love to their families and friends, praying for their safety. I desperately wanted to comment that God didn’t answer prayers, but I quickly decided against it. I spent my whole life going to church and praying, only to be met with what felt like a slap in the face. If there was a God, he only existed to listen, not to help. I guess the reason I stopped believing in God to begin with, was because I didn’t understand how someone could sit there and watch while the world burned and then refuse to do a damn thing to stop it. I’d heard too many stories about kids dying from cancer, women being raped, or families being torn apart to believe that there was a God. I wish I was still the person I used to be—someone who had faith. But that was all in the past now. Instead of hope, my thoughts were only ever filled with doubt. Regardless of how I felt, it was not my place to impose my own views on other innocent people who were simply trying to wish their families well, so unless someone asked me, I was just gonna keep my own personal beliefs to myself. We all had different ways to cope, so what kind of person would I be if I tried to deny them theirs? I mean, my methods probably weren’t suitable for everyone either. If it were anyone else stuck in a room with no way out, they probably wouldn’t be this calm and detached, but I was used to it. I had always been trapped in more ways than one. Being stuck in an airport bathroom was just what it felt like to be trapped in a more physical sense.

I looked around, examining the walls, hoping to see a small door appear that would lead me out of this small enclosure. Actually, you know what? If I was hoping for things, then I'd hope for that small door to lead to fucking Narnia or something. But, of course, there was no secret passageway. The only way to leave was the same way that we came. We were stuck, and seeing as how I lashed out at the only other person in here, I probably wouldn't be talking to help ease my stress. It wasn't that I wanted to discuss the problems that plagued my mind, but talking to someone about literally anything else would distract me from all the noise in my head. If I had to choose whether to be trapped in a room full of tigers or be trapped in my head with my own thoughts, I'd definitely choose the tigers.

While still scanning the bathroom, my eyes landed on Lexi. Within the span of a few minutes, I was already so consumed with my own personal shit that I completely forgot I was in the same room as a major celebrity. It was almost as if my mind morphed her into some random, unknowable stranger who just so happened to be sitting across from me. It's crazy how clouded your vision can become when you are lost deep inside your own thoughts. Lexi was sitting with her phone on her thighs and scrolling through what seemed to be Twitter. I watched as she casually looked through several posts and laughed quietly while reading them. Her nails tapped away at the screen, causing a clicking noise to be heard when the two came into contact. The steady rise and fall of her chest drew my attention away from her hands. I got lost watching her movements. Without meaning to, I began practically ogling her. Somehow, as though it were planned, the next song that played was by Lexi.

Currently playing – No Apologies by Lexi Harlow

I let out a small chuckle at the funny coincidence. Lexi glanced at me while furrowing her eyebrows. I quickly darted my eyes in the other direction while trying to keep my head down and avoid looking at her. I failed miserably, considering that not even a full minute later, I sneakily peeked back over at her. She was focused on her phone again. As much as I wanted to ask for an autograph or a picture, now didn't

exactly seem like the best time to bring it up. Instead, I opted to discreetly open my phone and snap a quick picture of her. I internally panicked, thinking I had left my flash on, but thank God I didn't.

Glancing down at the photo, I still couldn't wrap my head around the fact that I was in a room with Lexi Harlow. She was genuinely one of the most underappreciated artists, even though she was easily the most talented. Also, side note: how the fuck was she so beautiful? I had the biggest crush on her in middle school, but at the time, I don't think I understood what those feelings meant. Being gay was something I refused to acknowledge when I was younger because it was drilled into me by the church that it was a sin. Because of that, I just never put much emphasis on sexuality, and even now, I still wouldn't exactly say I was gay, but being here was definitely solidifying the fact that I wasn't straight either. When I got older, I realized that who you fell in love with was never a sin. This only proves that my celebrity crush when I was thirteen was, without a doubt, not only Zayn Malik, but also Lexi Harlow. That's not to say that I didn't have a crush on Lexi now, but in middle school, somehow, dating someone famous seemed more attainable. As time went on, you'd realize that never happened...but neither did being trapped in an airport bathroom with your celebrity crush, yet here I was.

That's when I caught myself staring again. I wasn't trying to, but my eyes always somehow found their way back to her.

But just like the lyrics of her song stated, I had "No Apologies" for staring at a world-famous celebrity who happened to be five feet away from me. I mean, who knew if I'd ever meet another celebrity in my lifetime?

Lexi seemed too preoccupied with her own thoughts, so I thought I was safe, but that's when I noticed she had stopped scrolling and her phone screen was black. A small smile grazed her lips.

Oh no...now I'm looking at her lips.

With her head still lowered and facing her lap, she started to speak. "Take a photo. It will last longer."

Lexi

My eyes widened. I removed the singular earbud I had put in earlier and threw it into my purse, which was sprawled on the floor next to me. I felt my cheeks turn red as all the blood drained from my face. I mean, I guess I could've been a tad bit more discreet, but it was Lexi Harlow. How could I not stare? Actually, that's a good point. Anyone trapped in a bathroom with a celebrity would stare. I felt my embarrassment subside as my confidence grew.

No apologies, remember?

"Actually," I paused with a smirk on my face. "I already did." Whipping out my phone, I turned the screen toward her showing the picture I had taken earlier, featuring my master photography skills.

She let out a hearty laugh and said, "Hey, you could've just asked for a picture! I look like shit in that one!"

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

She's funny. Of course, she is.

I raised my eyebrows at her. "I just thought asking a celebrity to take a picture in a bathroom after an earthquake wasn't the best idea."

"As long as you don't climb the stalls while I'm peeing, then I don't mind," she shrugged.

I let out a small laugh as I took in the fact that I was actually having a conversation with Lexi Harlow.

"You think we will be in here for long?"

"Why? Are you going to wait until I have to inevitably go pee so that you can ask me for another photo?"

"No," I tried to suppress a grin while rolling my eyes. "I was just wondering how long I have to make you want to become best friends with me."

"Well, you're off to a good start," she smiled back. "Minus the candid photo. You get negative points for that."

"Well, fuck, I guess I have to make it up to you."

"You sound like you have something in mind."

"Well, I am a minor celebrity myself, so if you want to, you can totally take a photo

of me while we're in here," I joked.

She scoffed. "Oh, yeah? What are you famous for, then?"

"I beat the world record for most times trapped in a bathroom with a celebrity, duh."

"Lame! Negative points."

"Hey!" I exclaimed as I slapped my hand against my chest. "No, I'm just fucking with you. There's no way someone like you would want to be friends with someone like me, anyway."

I didn't know I was going to say the last part until the words were already spilling out of my mouth. It was true, though. I couldn't expect to be a good friend to someone when I could barely be a good friend to myself. I knew I wasn't the nicest or most thoughtful person, despite my best efforts, but no matter how hard I tried, I always seemed to fail. Sometimes the idea of making friends seemed too daunting, and other times it just seemed pointless.

"Don't sell yourself short."

"Well, I'm only 5'3, so it's too late for that," I countered in a joking manner.

She smiled and crossed her arms in front of her chest while narrowing her eyes at me. "You know that's not what I meant."

"Maybe," I teased, enjoying our witty banter. "You know what this reminds me of?"

"Being locked in a bathroom with a random stranger after an earthquake? Honestly, I have no idea what that would remind you of," she chuckled.

“It reminds me of that one episode of Friends where Chandler is stuck in an ATM vestibule with Jill Goodacre and makes a complete fool of himself,” I smiled. She stared at me with a slightly puzzled look on her face. “Have you never seen Friends?”

“Some episodes,” she shrugged. “I’m not a huge ‘Friends’ fan.” She paused, then wiggled her eyebrows and added, “I’m more into this singer named Lexi Harlow.”

“You need to work on your jokes,” I snorted.

“Your humor has gotten worse throughout this conversation, so I don’t think you’re one to talk.”

“Oh, you’re criticizing my humor? Also, I never claimed to be so funny that you’d pee your pants while dying of laughter.” I shrugged, then continued. “And speaking of peeing your pants, just be happy I already used the bathroom earlier, or else when I saw you, I would have actually peed my pants.”

She belted out a heavy cackle. “Now that’s a picture I would’ve liked.”

“Fine, then I’m going to wait until you have to pee and climb the stalls for a picture.”

“Wow. That’s low,” she shook her head.

“No actually those stalls are pretty high.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Oh my god. You’re an idiot.”

“So more negative friendship points, then?”

“No. You're an idiot in the best way possible,” she smiled.

I felt like my heart was about to burst out of my chest, it was beating so fast. The butterflies fluttered around like crazy in my stomach. I was really having a conversation with Lexi Harlow—the talented, fearless, inspirational, award-winning singer who I had been listening to since I was a kid. I’d like to believe that a lot of what helped me get through some of my struggles was the fact that she was so open about her experiences as well. Her voice is what initially captivated me and caused me to become a fan, but I stayed because of the way she carried herself.

“I can’t believe this is actually happening right now,” I mumbled. “Can you pinch me? Is this real?” I asked. “Can I pinch you? Are you real?” I added.

Lexi rolled her eyes. “Do you actually listen to my music, or are you just trying to be nice?”

I gasped with a look of hurt written across my face. “How dare you accuse me of being a fake fan? I would never!” I whipped my head to the side, causing my hair to fly wildly.

“Okay, okay,” she played along. “Sorry to suggest you weren’t my number-one fan.”

I pushed my hands down against the tile to sit up in a straighter position and said,

“No, seriously, you have no idea how much I used to adore you. Go on, quiz me. I probably know you better than you know yourself.”

“Used to adore?”

“Seriously,” I rolled my eyes. “Quiz me.”

“Fine, we'll start off easy. What's my full name?”

“Alexandra Michelle Harlow,” I stated matter-of-factly. “Next?”

Lexi shook her head slightly. “No.”

What the hell did she mean, no? Had she lied about her legal name? There was no way I got that question wrong.

“No, you have to answer these questions, too. I have been stuck in this bathroom with you for fifteen minutes, and I don't even know your name. You may know everything about me, but I still know nothing about you. So, new rule: for every question I ask about me, you have to answer it too,” she bargained, hoping I would agree to her terms.

“Sounds fair, but what if the question doesn't apply to me, like the name of your second album?” I challenged.

Biting her bottom lip, Lexi pondered the thought for a while, then spoke, “Then I just ask you any question that I see fit.”

“I could always just lie about the answers,” I joked back.

“We are trapped alone in a bathroom together with no one to record us or invade our

privacy,” she noted. “Might as well speak your truth.”

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“How do I know I can trust you?” She countered with a smile on her face. “At least you have an idea of who I am and what my life has been like. Can't say the same about you.”

Why was I so goddam worried about telling my secrets to her? Lexi Harlow is a millionaire singer-songwriter with dozens of awards, and yet here I was, worried about me. I was nobody compared to her. Who would she tell my secrets to? My boss? My mom? My dead dad?

“Well, you’ll be the one asking me the questions anyway, so you don't have to trust me because I won’t be asking a thing,” I pointed out. “And if there’s one thing you should know about me, it’s that you can trust me. Besides, what could I even say to make people believe me? ‘Oh, hey everyone, I was trapped in an airport bathroom with Lexi Harlow, and she spilled all her secrets to me—a total stranger.’”

“Okay,” she nodded. “That does sound a little insane.”

“Exactly.”

“But to be fair, I am Lexi Harlow. People already think I’m insane, so it’s not that far of a stretch.”

“Aren't we all just a little insane, though?”

“What are you, the cat from Alice in Wonderland?” She snorted.

Lexi Harlow snorts? Oh, this was the best thing I could ever ask for.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“No, I was actually referring to Jeffrey Dahmer. He was one insane fuck,” I shrugged, trying to hide the smile on my face.

Lexi let out a small laugh while shaking her head.

I could spend forever trying to make her smile.

“Okay, questions,” she stated. “So tell me, what is your name, random stranger, who I've been trapped in a bathroom with for fifteen minutes?”

Smiling, I answered, “Autumn Kennedy Blake.”

Autumn

“Autumn,” she hummed back.

“That’s a pretty name.”

Hearing her say my name almost made me believe it. Almost. I hated my name.

“Well, then you can have it,” I frowned.

“You don’t like your name?”

“Autumn symbolizes death.” Every tree, every leaf, every flower would shrivel up and die the moment spring turned to fall.

“It doesn’t have to,” Lexi countered. “I always thought it symbolized rebirth.” She glanced at me hopefully, anticipating that I’d come to the same conclusion.

“Every bad thing that’s ever happened to me has been in autumn.”

“So you think a season is causing all your problems?” She cocked an eyebrow.

“Well, take today as an example.”

“What’s so bad about today?” Lexi questioned. “Besides the fact that it’s the day you got stuck in a bathroom after a surprise earthquake with a total stranger who’s possibly insane, according to the tabloids?”

It wasn’t necessarily the day itself that bothered me, but more so, what would happen on it. Eventually, I would have to attend my dad's funeral. This was just the first leg of the journey I would need to take to get there. Without warning, the floor rumbled, causing me to sway back and forth. Lexi grasped at the wall, only to be thrown on her side. The lights, once again, began to rattle as the sinks vibrated vigorously. I could almost feel the bile rise in my throat as if I were on a boat, steadily rocking back and forth.

“Another earthquake?” I asked through chattering teeth.

After another thirty seconds, the shaking stopped.

Pulling herself into a sitting position, Lexi sucked in a deep breath before responding. “Probably an aftershock.”

“Is autumn the usual season for earthquakes?” I asked, oblivious to how earthquakes worked.

“There is no usual season,” she explained. “They just, kind of, happen whenever they want to.”

“Oh?” I said, accidentally posing it as more of a question.

If she didn’t know that I hadn’t experienced an earthquake before, I think my dumb question just clued her in.

“Yeah, no blaming autumn on this one,” Lexi expelled a puff of air while flipping her hair out of her face.

“Ha-ha.” I let out a fake laugh.

“What’s so wrong with autumn anyway?”

A loud knock on the door interrupted our conversation and was followed by a man yelling, “Lexi, are you—”

“I’m fine!” Lexi cut him off while rolling her eyes. “Anyway,” she said, directing her attention back to me.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“He’s...” I trailed off while attempting to think of the right word and, admittedly, trying to stall for just a bit longer. “Protective.”

“Very,” she stated. “But you’re not changing the subject that easily. What the hell is your problem with autumn?”

There were so many reasons I couldn’t stand this stupid season.

I was diagnosed with depression in autumn. When I was sixteen, my mother forced me to talk to a therapist. My grades dropped, I wasn’t eating, I shut out all of my friends, I began self-harming...everything in my life just felt empty. I had lost my purpose. After my mom saw the marks on my wrists, she cried for hours, and I cried for years.

Autumn was also when my mom and I were evicted after we couldn’t pay rent. Not many people talked about how hard it was to be raised in a single-parent household. It was more common to hear the parent talk about it, but never the kid. I couldn’t figure out if it was because of some kind of naive mindset or if kids just feared being different, but it fucking sucked at school and it felt so lonely. It’s almost like we all thought we’d be shamed for having one less adult in our lives. After losing the house, we had to move in with my aunt for a few months.

The icing on the cake was the fact that my dad abandoned us in autumn too. Not only did he pack his bags and disappear from our lives during autumn, but it was also the season he died in.

And the most important thing I hated about autumn was how cold it always seemed to

get. There was no reason for it to be twenty degrees outside when there wasn't any snow on the ground.

Even though it pained me to admit, I was a lot like this season that I wholeheartedly despised—both cold and slowly withering. In the end, I think that I just needed an excuse to hate myself.

“I don't know,” I answered honestly. “Maybe I just want something to hate instead of hating myself.”

“I know it might not mean much, but autumn is my favorite season, so stop talking shit about it,” she laughed.

“No promises.”

Lexi offered a sad smile in response. “Oh, come on. There has to be something you like about autumn.”

“Nope.”

“Fine,” she relented. “Then what do you like about yourself? Tell me about you.”

“Hi, my name is Autumn, and welcome to my TED talk,” I waved. “I like true crime, music is my therapy, and I'm good at crossword puzzles.”

Lexi huffed. “You're ridiculous, you know that?”

“Hey, look at that! You managed to figure out the one thing I like about myself. Crazy runs in the family, Lexi.” She rolled her eyes and glared at me. Shrugging at her, I crossed my arms. “That's all you're going to get. There's not much I enjoy about myself.”

“Well, sadly, you are entitled to your wrong opinion.” I scoffed at her boldness. “But I like you, Autumn Blake...so hopefully that counts for something.”

Self-Love

She likes me.

Lexi Harlow liked me, and yet I still couldn't manage to like myself. She thought I was a good person, yet I failed to see what she saw. But who's to say she even meant what she said? She could have just been trying to be polite in order to spare my feelings.

“Do you want to continue with questions?” I asked, not knowing how to continue a conversation filled with such positivity. I was never good at receiving compliments, especially when I never believed them myself.

“Well, I actually have a meeting I should be getting to.” Lexi flipped over her arm and looked at the invisible watch on her wrist.

“Pfft, oh yeah, right,” I played along. “You should get going then.”

“No, it's fine. I'd rather stay here and talk to you anyway.”

“Yeah, it's totally not because you can't leave the room.”

“No, that's definitely not it.” She winked before continuing, “What is my second studio album?”

“Lame. I gave you the idea for this question. Your second album is called Resilient.”

Lexi hummed in approval. Licking her lips, she furrowed her eyebrows and looked

down as though she were debating something. She then admitted, “Believe it or not, when I wrote that album, I actually didn’t like myself much as a person either. It kind of proved to be therapeutic, though, because it helped a lot with my confidence.”

Personally, I'd always thought Lexi was beautiful. She sat next to me with her hair falling slightly below her shoulders, wearing a black loose-fitting T-shirt with holes strategically poked on the shoulders and along the rib cage. Silver chains stitched the torn fabric together. Her slightly faded leggings were paired with black platform boots that laced up on the sides. She was wearing the simplest outfit, but somehow she managed to make it look stunning. Lexi had always been known for her bright blue eyes, which contrasted perfectly with her dark hair. Her skin was naturally pale, which was a shocker, seeing as how most of the celebrities in Hollywood seemed to lean more toward borderline blackface. Lexi never sought out color by getting spray tans or using makeup that was a shade too dark. She was the kind of person who always seemed to embrace her normal complexion. Throughout my lifetime, skin color was something that I had been hyper-aware of, and for reasons I didn't understand, society had branded being artificially tan as the ideal standard. As for natural melanin, though, that had always been seen as an inferiority complex. While sitting across from Lexi, I couldn't help but compare our two different shades and wondered if she also saw me as inferior because of my darker complexion. Skin color was something I often thought about whenever I saw someone lighter than myself and I knew the struggle of being treated differently. I couldn't sit here and say that my life was filled with a shit ton of racism and inequality because being mixed-race came with its own set of privileges, but regardless, I was never treated equally. I always admired that Lexi didn't try to adhere to societal expectations, but I guess that didn't mean she was free from any of the pressure. This just goes to show that the idea of “perfect” wasn't a one-size-fits-all solution. You could believe with all your heart that someone was the most attractive person in the world, yet that same person wouldn't see themselves in the same light.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“How can someone as beautiful as you lack confidence?”

“You're one to talk. You're fucking gorgeous.”

I shook my head, refusing to acknowledge the words she said.

My physical appearance had always been a topic of disdain. Later on in life, a lot of my depression was rooted in body dysmorphia, with a dash of hopelessness and abandonment issues thrown in. In high school, of course, I had my fair share of insecurities, but the way my confidence would drop when I graduated was something I could never have imagined. I was always known for being the skinny girl, which was never a bad thing, but I always thought I needed to be curvier. Just as I was getting comfortable in my own skin, everything changed. I gained forty pounds out of nowhere, as though my body had decided to go through puberty for a second time. I finally got my wish and became curvier, but along with it came the loss of my flat stomach and, in turn, a decrease in confidence. I didn't have the luxury of being able to skip leg day or being able to eat at McDonald's four times a week. And yeah, it's probably for the best that I stayed active and maintained a healthy diet, but it would've been nice to make that decision on my own without that choice being detrimental to the image of my self-worth. No matter how hard I tried, whenever I would look in the mirror, I constantly found that I didn't like the person I saw staring back at me.

“If you can't see how attractive you are, then you may want to consider getting your eyes checked.”

“Coming from you, that's rich.”

“To be fair, I don’t think many people are really used to being called pretty,” Lexi reflected.

“Yeah, me.” I let out a sad laugh. “I have the confidence of someone trying to leap off a building with a plastic bag for a parachute.”

“Yeah, but sometimes being too confident isn’t a good thing either.” I tilted my head to the side at her words. “Confidence can be empowering, but it can also be so damaging.”

“Cockiness?”

“More like narcissism,” she nodded. “And the thing is, most of it is rooted in the words that we hear from others.”

“It's kind of scary how much words affect the way we see ourselves,” I agreed. Being a celebrity, she would receive more scrutiny about her appearance than the average person.

“There are so many expectations to meet. How am I expected to have a flat stomach, small waist, fat ass, big boobs, long legs, thick thighs, and be as tall as a model, all while not being self-absorbed?” Lexi exasperated while throwing her hands up.

She was right. As women, there was so much that was expected of us.

You had to be thin but not skinny. You had to look curvy but not have stretch marks. You had to be seen but not heard. You had to work out but not to the point of becoming too strong. You had to deal with pain but never talk about it. You had to work the same job but get paid less. You had to be pretty but never get plastic surgery. You had to put out but not too much to be deemed a whore. You had to live in a world that wasn't built with you at the forefront but still somehow manage to

thrive.

How was I supposed to thrive when I could barely survive?

“It's impossible,” I shook my head.

“I know that. We all know that. But sometimes that mindset still gets the better of us,” Lexi confessed. “Honestly, my problem has never been about having confidence. It's about lacking it.” Her eyes seemed to drift somewhere far away, even though she was staring at the wall directly in front of her. Lexi's lips remained slightly parted as she rested her arms on her knees that had been propped up and pulled loosely against her chest. “I can only be me, which is never enough for anyone.”

“It's enough for me,” I offered a smile. “It's enough for your fans.”

“My fans deserve better than a reckless, mentally unstable, broken shell of a human,” she said, crossing her arms.

“Lexi—”

“I know that you don't like yourself, but what if I told you that I don't like myself either? People think if you're a celebrity, then your life is filled with happiness, but I can only ever remember the pain. The crazy thing is, most of my pain was self-inflicted,” she frowned. “I'm not this perfect person that you or anyone else should look up to.”

“You're not perfect,” I stated. “But that in itself is one of the reasons why I look up to you. I can count on one hand the number of celebrities that promote body positivity and mental growth, all while not fitting every single category you just listed. You are one of them,” I smiled at her. “You're my role model because you don't shy away from topics that scare everyone else. Anxiety and depression? You've talked about it.

Body dysmorphia? You've talked about it. Relationships and sexuality? You've talked about it. Addiction? You've talked about it," I listed one after the other. "It's not a straight path. Everyone has bad days." The corners of my lips curled upward to resemble a sad smile. "But you even talk about those too."

Everyone knew about Lexi's struggle with her mental health. People would tear her down and call her crazy. Even the struggle with her body image was publicized, as people claimed she had gained too much weight and looked prettier when she was younger. After her suicide attempt, Lexi's record label ended up dropping her, claiming she was "too much of a wild card."

"My choices are mine and mine alone, but they have cost me so much. I have to, time and time again, prove that I'm not a risk to record labels, managers, and even my own family. I don't think I'll ever be able to be the person my fans deserve," she shook her head. "The person I want to be."

Lexi was being vulnerable to me—a complete and total stranger. I couldn't understand why she had decided to put her trust in me, but the drive to know more stopped me from asking why. I wanted to help her without hurting her. It almost felt like I was walking on a thin rope, teetering on the line between life and death. What if the words I said next caused her to spiral into depression or trigger past suicidal tendencies?

How do I help her without making things worse?

I was so used to people tip-toeing around me, skating around certain words or phrases to avoid upsetting me, but maybe that wasn't what Lexi needed.

"I think it's pretty clear that you are flawed, but that's what makes you so amazing. We spend so much time focusing on what others think of us that we lose ourselves trying to play pretend. If you are comfortable in your own skin, fuck what anyone

else thinks. You're the one who taught me that. Maybe you just needed a reminder of some of the things you've been teaching everyone else. Maybe you just needed a reminder of the reason why your fans support you." Sometimes, people just needed to hear that they were loved and appreciated every once in a while. After all, if you stopped hearing those words of affirmation, all that remained were the words that caused you harm. "You are not God, you are not flawless, and you are not perfect, but God damn, you're one perfectly flawed person." The corners of my lips rose tenderly as I added, "Not to mention your voice is insane, and you have a killer body." Blushing, I stopped talking, figuring it would be best not to make a complete fool of myself and ramble on about how I had been in love with her since I was a child.

A single tear streamed down her cheek, but as quickly as it had appeared, she had already wiped it away.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Well, fuck. You didn't have to get all mushy.” I cracked a smile. “And you said you were a bad friend?” She laughed shakily.

“I hope I didn't overstep at all. I just want you to see yourself the same way your fans see you.”

“Not insane?”

“Well...” I dragged out slowly while avoiding eye contact.

“Hey!” She hit my foot with her own.

“Don't worry! Still not as insane as Jeffrey Dahmer.”

“Oh, shut up,” she rolled her eyes.

“Kidding!” I laughed. “I was just kidding!”

A small smile made its way across her face. Glancing at me through hooded eyes, she spoke, “You're a good person, Autumn.”

“Yeah, maybe I am,” I sighed while playing with my fingernails. “And you're a good person, too.”

“Maybe I am,” she shrugged. Clapping her hands, she spoke again, “Okay, next question.”

Tip of The Iceberg

“When was I born?”

“June 24th, 1997. You're going to have to dig deeper than that if you want to win.”

“Win? I thought we were just having fun,” she teased. “So, when were you born?”

“November 12th, 2002,” I admitted. For some reason, when I told people my birthday, they'd freak out, assuming I was thirteen. Most people knew I wasn't actually a teenager, but everyone couldn't help but feel like 2002 was just yesterday and that there was no way someone born in 2002 could be twenty-one turning twenty-two.

“Aw, you're just a baby.”

“Oh, fuck you!” I laughed. “As you once said in an interview, I'm about a thousand times older than I look.”

When Lexi was younger, she did an interview on the red carpet while at the Kids Choice Awards. Someone had asked her where she got the inspiration to create all the deep and meaningful songs that she had written. She answered that she drew from real-life experiences, to which the interviewer laughed and countered that she couldn't have possibly been through that much while still being so young. That's when I learned you should never relate age to life experience. Some ten-year-olds had been through more than others who were twice their age.

“You know about that interview?” She asked genuinely. “Okay, maybe you do win this game.”

I snapped my fingers as I ignored her comment, “Next question, please. I'm on a

roll.”

Lexi pondered for a while before asking, “What job did I say I wanted when I was a kid before I became a singer?”

“A tattoo artist, even though you have no tattoos,” I chuckled.

“Maybe in the future,” she smirked. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m a nurse.”

“Oh wow, can you look at this spot on my butt?” Lexi poked fun while flashing her award-winning smile.

“Fuck off!” I let out a boisterous laugh. Smirking at her, I added, “Actually, you know what? I will have a look.”

Lexi belted out a loud “HA!” clearly not expecting my previous comment. “You’re too funny,” she said sarcastically while shooting daggers at me with her eyes. “Why a nurse?”

“Medicine is something that has always interested me, and I loved the idea of helping people.”

“Loved in the past tense?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“As I got older, I realized some people don't deserve to be helped,” I stated flatly. “I wish I could go back to when I was a teenager and pick a different career path.”

“I have a feeling this isn't just about some random, mean patient.”

“You'd be correct,” I sharply replied, ending the conversation there.

She looked at me questioningly before deciding against pushing the topic further. Taking the hint, she continued with another question.

“What are the names of my two best friends?”

I pursed my lips, then answered, “According to the internet, your two best friends are Danielle Ciaro and Nolan Carter.”

“Wow, I'll give you a slow clap for that one,” she applauded. Lexi half smiled and nodded her head, then motioned toward me, prompting an answer of my own.

“Oh, me?” I asked. “Well, I have work-best friends.” I didn't have time to meet anyone else. I wasn't the type to go to bars or mingle online. The only place for adults to really meet was at work. Not that I ever even really wanted to go out and seek friendships. People could be assholes sometimes. I'd always been comfortable being alone. That was, until I needed a shoulder to lean on, which I would never admit to, anyway. “The coworker I am closest to is Natalia. It's funny, though, because we actually didn't like each other at first.”

I met Natalia around a year ago. When I first started, she was the nurse who trained

me. I didn't like her much during the beginning because of her strict teaching style. As time went on, we grew closer as I began to learn more about her, and she learned more about me.

"If you don't know what you're doing, you need to tell me because we can't afford to make mistakes here," she demanded while breaking open the ampule.

"You've said that already," I mumbled as I continued to draw up the epinephrine.

"Make sure you're careful with the needle. You don't want to end up pricking your—" she stopped mid-sentence. "Ow!"

Looking over at her, I noticed her finger dripping with blood as she sat the needle down. I laughed in victory while continuing to prepare my epi.

"Maybe you should take your own advice." She began mumbling curse words under her breath. Walking toward the sink, she rinsed the wound, and bandaged her finger before returning to my side. "This is the story of how the student becomes the mast—"

All of a sudden, a sharp pain radiated through my hand. I had poked my thumb with the needle. A stifled laugh echoed from beside me. I pursed and turned to look at Natalia. I was met with her smug expression as she stood with her hands on her hips.

"What were you saying?" She raised her eyebrow.

We broke out into a fit of laughter as the tension between us lifted.

"You think we can get workers-comp for this?" I speculated while grinning.

That was how we learned that we had similar personalities. It was the beginning of an

odd friendship since Natalia was fifteen years older than me, but it worked, nonetheless. Natalia was slightly shorter than me at 5'2, but still way more intimidating than I'd ever be. She had long black hair with dark eyes and frequently wore an expression that looked as though she could murder you at any minute. She was the only person I ever considered opening up to about my dad. When I told my coworkers about his passing, she was the only one who didn't try to spew positive comments at me but rather support how I was feeling. That's what I truly needed. Just before I left to catch my flight, she gave me a tight hug and made me promise I'd call her if I needed to talk. She also told me I didn't have to be afraid to open up to her about my dad. Maybe after all this was over, I'd take her up on that offer.

Lexi brought me back to reality by waving her hand in front of my face, as I clearly had not been paying attention to her question.

"If I'm that boring, I can leave and go back to the other side of the room."

"Lexi Harlow is many things, but boring is definitely not one of them."

"Oh, yeah, then what exactly am I?"

Without hesitation, I began, "Witty, sarcastic, funny, successful, vocally gifted, lyrical genius, inspirational, badass bitch—" For every characteristic, I put up a finger, counting each one then pausing almost as if I were pondering which words to say next...but I wasn't. I knew exactly what I wanted to say because those were things I had always thought about her. Now, it was just a matter of if I should say them or not. I could see her lips curl into a smile from the corner of my eyes, and that was the only sign I needed to keep going. "And Lexi?" Pausing one more time, I stifled a breath as I continued, "You are so beautiful. In every single fucking way."

Her eyes lit up at my words as she quickly averted her gaze. "Thank you," she smiled in response, her cheeks tinged with pink.

Did I just make Lexi Harlow blush?

“Aw, are you blushing?”

“Shut up. Next question.” I could almost see her physically racking her brain trying to come up with something to ask before I could interject. “Uh, what are my dog's names?”

“Nemo and—” I stuttered while frantically recollecting everything I knew about her. I even knew her stupid fucking bra size because of some celebrity gossip website and I didn't know her dogs name? “Shit, I don't know.”

“Wow,” Lexi sighed. “Wow, I'm disappointed,” she shook her head and clicked her tongue.

Page 15

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Okay, now you shut up,” I glared at her with a smile on my face.

“Dori.”

Dori? Huh? Oh, her dog's name! That was right! She named them after the two fish in Finding Nemo. How could I forget? There was a whole sequel to the first movie called Finding Dori.

“Oh! I knew that!” I yelled, mentally slapping myself.

Slowly nodding while focusing her gaze on the floor, Lexi’s voice oozed with sarcasm. “Sure, you did.”

I pursed my lips and glared at her. “What's your question then?”

“Do you have any pets?”

“As much as I want to, I don’t have enough time to take care of one.”

“Yeah, I get that,” she acknowledged while nodding her head. “What are my two sisters' names?”

“Caroline and Hazel,” I recalled easily. It always seemed like Lexi and her sisters were close. It must’ve been nice having someone to lean on when you needed support, and it probably helped that they were only a few doors down the hallway.

“Do you have any siblings?” She asked, mirroring the question about herself.

“A half-sister, Camilla. But she’s dead to me,” I shrugged, numb to the sentiment.

“What happened?” She stopped and then followed up with, “If you don't mind me asking.”

For some reason, this small part of my chaotic life never phased me much. Camilla was never truly a part of my family, so her absence didn’t hurt. The real problem was that, in order to talk about Camilla, I’d also have to bring up my father. That was the actual sore subject. Still, it only seemed fair to answer Lexi’s question, seeing as how I knew so much about her and she knew nothing about me. Besides, if I dodged every question, she would, too.

With that thought in mind, I spoke, “It’s nothing crazy. She just never tried to get to know me when she had the resources to, and I lacked them.”

Camila and I had an age difference of twelve years. My father had another child with his high school girlfriend at age nineteen, which was ten years before he met my mother. I first learned that she existed because of a picture he had in his wallet when I was five. Since she didn’t live with us, I asked if they had kicked her out of the house because she was acting bad. That's when my mom had to explain that my sister lived with her mom—a different mom.

“She didn’t want to have a relationship with you?” Lexi asked, trying to understand. “Why?”

“She always blamed my mom for our dad's spiral into insanity, but her anger was misplaced. The person she should’ve blamed was our father. I mean, cool, if she wants to take out her frustration on me and my mom, that’s fine, but I can't have any kind of relationship with someone who refuses to open their eyes and see what the hell is actually going on,” I stated, my face morphing into an emotionless state.

I could understand the anger of a broken family, but it wasn't my fault, and it certainly wasn't my mother's fault. There was always one common denominator when it came to pain—my dad. He abandoned everyone he was supposed to love.

“Insane dads...” Lexi trailed off. “I know a thing or two about that.”

It's true. Lexi's relationship with her dad was one of pain and trauma. Her whole life was on display for the public to view, and because of that, it was common knowledge what happened between her and her father. He was abusive toward her mother. As far as we know, he never laid a finger on Lexi or her sisters, but that didn't mean they didn't witness the abuse toward their mother. Lexi always said she never had a strong relationship with him because he always chose alcohol over her family. He died in 2015 after getting into a bad car accident while under the influence. It was Lexi and her mom who heard the news first. They were at the recording studio and rushed to the scene of the accident. When they arrived, it was too late. Her dad was lying lifeless on the ground with a black tarp covering his legs. If there was anyone who could understand the pain I had with my dad, it was Lexi.

“I'm sorry,” I said apologetically, knowing of the pain she was referring to.

“I'm sorry too,” she said in connection with the trauma I had with my father.

“Hey, I was thinking of starting a club,” I suggested, lightening the mood. Raising an eyebrow, Lexi motioned for me to go on. “It will be a ‘Daddy Issues Club,’ and I think I just found the first two members,” I chuckled, pointing toward the both of us.

Lexi let out a small laugh as she smiled. “Your lame joke is just what I needed, so thank you.”

“And that's exactly why I said it.” I smiled back.

“You know I have a song called Daddy Issues.”

“Have I not just proven that I’m your number one fan? Of course, I know that.”

“Well, then I think that should be our club anthem.”

“I like the way you think. We can even meet on Saturdays in this bathroom to discuss our shitty circumstances.”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

We both laughed trying to make light of something that used to be shrouded in pain. Sometimes it helped. Then I saw Lexi's facial expression change.

"So, why exactly are you in the airport today? Where are you headed to?"

The lightness of our conversation became heavy.

"I'm actually on my way to a funeral." I immediately followed up with a question of my own to avoid talking about my father. "Where are you headed?"

Lexi opened her mouth slightly, then paused as if she wanted to ask more about the funeral but decided against it. "I have an interview scheduled with a radio station and a new music video to shoot," she stated simply.

"Probably going to have to postpone it now, then, huh?"

Before she could respond, the same loud, booming voice from earlier echoed outside the door. "Lexi, just checking in. Are you still doing okay in there?"

"We are doing fine," she yelled back, emphasizing the "we" as she spoke. "You know you don't have to check in on me every two seconds, right?"

"I just wanted to let you know that Andrew said he talked to airport management and the lead security guard. They contacted the local fire department, and they are on their way. The debris is too heavy to move without some sort of machinery."

"Thanks, Brian," Lexi nodded in response, even though he couldn't see this.

Well, at least now I know their names are Brian and Andrew.

Lexi waited a minute with her ear pointed at the door as if she were making sure he wasn't nearby anymore, then asked, "So, whose funeral are you going to?"

Unraveling

Of course, she would ask that. My father was something I never wanted to talk about. Sometimes, it just felt easier to ignore the pain and pretend it never existed in the first place. When I was younger, I used to imagine I had a perfect family—one with an attentive father who had a knack for making the most stupid jokes at the worst times. There was this one scene I replayed in my head over and over again until I started to believe it was real.

The illusory truth effect at work again.

I would wake up on a Sunday morning and run into my parents' room, jumping on their beds to wake them up. Mom would roll over, accidentally smacking dad in the face as he was awakened by the chaos that was ensuing. He would pull my arm, causing me to plop down on the bed as he tightly hugged me, saying Christmas would be canceled if I continued to disturb his sleep. Instead, Mom would barter with him, saying that was too harsh a punishment and it would be more fitting to have me cook breakfast for them instead. Of course, little me, not wanting to miss out on Christmas, would scurry over to the kitchen, grabbing pots and pans while spilling flour on the counters. Two bags of spilled batter, five dirty pans, and three cartons of empty eggs later, I would return with crunchy eggs, pancakes that were too crispy to have possibly been made with the correct ingredients, and orange juice, which was probably the only edible thing there. Dad would thank me while laughing hysterically, and Mom would wear a pained smile, trying to mentally prepare for the disaster that awaited them in the kitchen. They would pull me into bed with them as they both kissed my forehead and said they loved me.

That's what I wanted, but instead, I got a broken family and a lifetime of pain.

"My dad's."

"What happened?" She shook her head slightly and spoke again, "I'm sorry. Again, you don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"No, it's fine," I confessed. "I can't avoid my past forever." Lexi offered a sad smile and nodded. Taking a deep breath, I explained, "My father was never the type of man to show his emotions. He thought any type of affection was a sign of weakness," I reflected, with a far-off look in my eyes. He never even said he loved me. Every conversation always ended with a simple 'goodbye' and nothing more. Frowning at the thought, I continued, "Things changed when I noticed him constantly sneaking off and smiling when he looked at his phone." I wish I would've left it alone, but I couldn't help my curiosity. "When we were at the dinner table one night, he left it sitting next to his plate while running to the bathroom. I saw an opportunity, and I took it. His phone was littered with texts from multiple women. I scrolled through dozens of messages and pictures until my twelve-year-old brain couldn't take anymore. That's when I walked into the kitchen and handed the phone to my mom. It was the beginning of the end."

"You can't look through a man's phone, Claire," my father yelled, snatching the phone out of her hands.

"Really, you think that's the main issue here?" My mom asked with tears in her eyes.

"Oh, come on, don't pretend like you didn't see this coming..."

He walked out of the kitchen and into the living room. Flicking on the TV, he sat down on the couch with a huff. My mom followed, hot on his heels, and ripped the remote out of his hands. I tried to follow, but my mom ushered me back into the

kitchen.

“No, Autumn!” She screamed. “We need to talk alone.” She pivoted and walked away again. Peeking my head around the corner, I watched as they continued to argue. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” She slammed the remote onto the table.

Furiously rubbing his hands against his face, he groaned, “When’s the last time we had sex, Claire?”

My mom let out a low growl. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“No!” He angrily shouted. “A man has needs, you know.”

“What kind of message does that send our daughter?” She whispered, probably more aware of the fact that I was in the next room over.

“That isn’t my problem,” he shrugged.

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

My mother sat on the couch beside him, her eyes glistening. “Not your problem? Really? If our family ‘isn’t your problem,’ what exactly do you care about then? Because it clearly isn’t raising your daughter. Do you even love us anymore?”

“Oh, come on, Claire. Men don’t need to vomit their feelings everywhere for their emotions to be known.”

“Really?” She nodded vigorously as the tears began to spill. “Because right now, I would say I’m getting the impression that you don’t want to be here at all.”

He sighed and put his head in his hands. “You know I want to be with you, Claire.”

Rolling her eyes, my mom laughed, although she was not amused. “Then you need to get your shit together and figure out what you really care about or get out.”

“Okay,” my father relented while flinging his arms into the air. “I mean, I married you, didn’t I? Isn’t it obvious I want this?”

Her face softened, then became firm once more. “Prove it,” she demanded. “Fix this, Michael, or we are done.”

I just wanted so badly to think that for at least one second of our twelve years together under the same roof, maybe he did truly love us. For a time, I actually convinced myself that he did.

But I was wrong.

“I know that feeling.”

But did she? Lexi had lived through her own trauma, but that’s just what it was—her own trauma. She never experienced my pain, and I never experienced hers. She could never understand how I felt, just like I could never understand how she felt. I knew she meant no harm in what she said, but the fact that she said it and thought it would help spoke volumes about how different we truly were.

“Turns out, not only was he cheating with multiple women, but he also had a gambling addiction and was betting money that we didn’t even have. My mom told him that he had a choice to make, but he didn’t take it seriously. I actually caught him having sex with another woman a week later.” One day after school, when I walked into the house, I saw my dad and some stranger fucking on the couch. I almost collapsed. They even saw me come through the door, but they didn’t care. That was the start of my bad relationship with sex. I was always terrified that men only cared about one thing—having a fuck buddy. Honestly, I don’t think my guess ended up being too far off. What I wouldn’t give to remove the image of them having sex from my head, but it was burned into my brain. Sure, I was never raped or forced into anything, but I still felt violated in a way that I was never able to articulate. Not even to my therapist. I looked down at my hands while fumbling with my fingers anxiously. Lexi put her hands over mine as a sign of support. “I couldn’t bear to tell my mom, so I didn’t,” I sighed. “A few months later, he had finally decided on his answer, so he packed his bags and left.” I refused to let the tears fall as I quickly blinked my eyes, willing them away. I will not give this man any more of my tears. “Five years ago was the last time we spoke on the phone. He called to say he was moving to California, and that was that.”

So much for having a picture-perfect family. The real story was much more depressing.

Even though he was around for my childhood, he never acted like a father to me. Did

he know how much he hurt us? I used to sit up at night thinking about what he was doing in California. Was he happy? Was he still using women? Did he still prioritize his masculinity over real emotion? Did he blow all his savings by gambling it away? Did he get a new family and then leave them, too? Did he ever think about us? Did he ever really love us in the first place?

Lexi lifted her hands from mine as she spoke, "I'm so sorry all of this happened."

"It doesn't matter anymore," I deadpanned. "He's dead. It's over."

But then, why do I still care so much?

"Even though you may feel like you're wrong for mourning or shedding tears over someone who hurt you, that's not a sign of weakness; it's a sign of healing. With healing comes pain. It may feel like too much to bear right now, but with time, the pain will pass."

If I could have a dollar for every time someone said that to me, I'd be fucking rich. I heard those words over and over again, "Grief takes time." She told me that, in time, my sadness would fade...yet, nine years later, I was still in the same place as I started. It took me a while to even acknowledge that I was grieving in the first place. When my therapist tried to explain it to me, it didn't make any sense. I always thought that in order to grieve someone, they had to be dead. That's when I learned that loss didn't equate to death. The repressed emotions I had been holding onto bubbled to the surface like a pot overflowing on a stovetop. I tried to search for the lid or at least turn the burner down to simmer, but there was no use. The last thing I needed was advice about how to live with my own problems. If anyone could figure a way out of this situation, don't you think it would be the person who's experienced it firsthand for years? I didn't want any advice, and, honestly, did she really think I hadn't considered what she said before?

“Time heals all wounds? Is that really your advice?” I let out a dry laugh. “You don’t know me, Lexi.”

Shaking her head, Lexi shrugged at me. “Then don’t listen to me. If you want to continue to be unhappy, then, by all means, go ahead.” She pursed her lips and added, “Whatever. It doesn’t affect me anyway.” Her eyes glossed over as though she had become blind to my presence. She sat with her arms pulled against her chest in a ridged manner. Without looking in my direction, she whipped out her phone, seemingly trying to end our conversation.

I was slapped in the face with the reality of what I had said. I offended her when she was only trying to help.

Yeah, I’m definitely a shit friend.

Anytime someone tried to lend me a hand, I’d cut it off with a butcher's knife. I guess it was in my DNA. What if Lexi was right in what she said and I was too caught up in my own narrative to even realize? Maybe happiness was a choice. It didn’t matter, though, because even if I tried to be happy, I would still only be lying to myself. Every time I tried to move on, I was only burying my past, not growing from it.

But what’s the difference?

“I’m sorry,” I sighed. “You were just trying to help. I shouldn’t have snapped at you like that.”

“Autumn, I’ve said way worse things to the people who tried to help me, so I get it. I just don’t want to waste my breath if you don’t want to listen,” Lexi voiced while still scrolling through her phone.

“I want to believe you, but after nine years, don't you think enough time has passed?

Grief and pain are different for everyone, but nine years seems like a bit too long. If I really am ‘strong,’ then why haven't I moved on already?”

“Are you actually asking?” She lifted an eyebrow and looked up at me.

“Yes?” I answered unsurely. “No,” I sighed. “I don’t know.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Lexi put her phone on the floor next to her and looked at me understandingly. “There is no ‘one’ solution,” she sighed. “But you’ll figure it out.”

“But how?”

“I don’t know,” she huffed. “Go meditate, or climb Mount Everest, or help the blind...”

She was still angry.

“Lexi,” I flicked my eyes toward the back of my head. “Seriously.”

“I can’t live your life for you, Autumn. That’s something you’re going to have to find out for yourself.”

“And if I can’t?”

Her eyes softened once again. “You will.” Huffing out a breath of air, I nodded slowly, unconvinced of her words. “I’m serious,” she argued. “It might take two weeks, six months, or five years, but you’ll get through this. I barely know you, and even I can tell you’re too stubborn to give up without a fight,” Lexi laughed softly.

She was right about that. I had been fighting for years, but it felt like I was losing. Every punch the world threw seemed to knock me off my feet, and I was tired of having to get back up. I didn’t know if I could keep going. None of this felt worth it.

“And if there is no solution?”

“Then that is your answer.”

It didn't feel like an answer. I needed something concrete and certain, not abstract and poetic. But what if there really wasn't an answer?

“Earlier, I spoke to my mom on the phone and told her I didn't want to go to the funeral anymore. I want to believe I was just being dramatic, but deep down, I can't help but wonder, ‘why would I go to a funeral for the man I hate?’” I confessed.

“It may seem like you hate him now, but dealing with the guilt and the regret of not going to his funeral will cause your pain to get worse. Even if you never forgive him, you owe it to yourself to get closure with the person who hurt you,” Lexi sighed. “Go to the funeral. Say goodbye to your dad the way you wish he said goodbye to you.” Lexi's tone stiffened, and her face became firm as she began to speak again, “Then leave. Leave and close that chapter of your life.”

“Is it really that easy?”

“No,” she responded immediately. “But it will get easier.”

“Did it for you?”

“Honestly, I thought I had moved on from my father, but maybe I wasn't as healed as I thought I was. Sometimes repressed shit still creeps back up,” she admitted. “But I think talking to someone who's lived through something similar is helping me more than I realized.”

“Why? Because I'm more fucked up than you ever were?” I joked.

“No,” she laughed. “Because I finally feel like I'm not alone.”

That's when I figured out why she wanted to help me so much. She was trying to help herself, too. The advice she gave me were the words she so desperately wanted to hear when her father died.

"But you have friends, and your sisters, and your fans."

"My friends don't understand what it feels like to lose a father, my sisters were never close to him, and my fans try to support me, but they will always be an arm's length away."

"What about your mom?"

She shrugged. "Why didn't you talk to your mom?"

"I—uh," I stuttered. "I don't know."

"Because you didn't want her to see how broken you truly were."

I opened my mouth to protest, but couldn't. "Lexi," I frowned, "You know we aren't the same, right?"

"And that's exactly how we help each other."

I stared at her, still confused. "You want to help me after I just treated you like shit?"

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

She rolled her eyes. “Get over yourself, Autumn. Do you really think you’re the only one who’s ever pushed people away or refused to take advice? Do you really think that makes you unworthy of having friends?”

“I guess not,” I mumbled.

“The correct answer is ‘Hell no!’” She yelled. “Try again with feeling,” she motioned for me to continue.

Rolling my eyes, I glared at her and dryly said, “Hell no.”

“That was pathetic.”

“Well,” I shrugged hopelessly.

“Look, Autumn, I’ve played this game before. You’re going to have to try a lot harder if you think that’s going to stop me from trying to get to know you. I’m not so easily discouraged.”

“And neither am I.”

“Then stop trying to fight me and focus on what’s actually upsetting you,” she suggested. “Your story isn’t over, so don’t give up on the possibility of healing.”

“Fine,” I huffed out. “But only if you promise not to give up either.”

Lexi looked at me daringly. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

I felt a smile creep its way onto my lips. “Why are you trying to help me so much?”

“Because you clearly won’t do it yourself.”

“Touché,” I narrowed my eyes at her.

If I had talked to someone about my pain sooner, then I would’ve been able to begin healing instead of constantly hurting. Or maybe being with stuck in an airport bathroom with Lexi was exactly the therapy I needed.

Revival

A wave of guilt washed over me. “I’m sorry for taking out my anger on you.”

“I’ve been through worse.”

I laughed dryly. That’s exactly what she had said when she was talking on the phone earlier. It still didn’t make it okay for me to use her as my own personal verbal punching bag, no matter how strong she was.

“That doesn’t excuse how I treated you.”

Never slap away a hand that is only reaching out to try and help you after you have fallen.

That was something my mom used to say whenever she tried to help me, and I constantly pushed her away. Lexi was a stranger, but she was also someone I respected from afar. She didn’t deserve how I treated her. Neither did my mother.

“Well, I’m also kind of glad you felt safe enough to say what you were really thinking. I think that’s something a lot of people struggle with, especially around

celebrities.”

There were so many people who followed celebrities blindly, regardless of their choices or their actions. Sometimes it seemed like money made people untouchable. That was not how I saw it, though. Following someone just because they had wealth and power, despite their negative impact, was not something to be proud of. Having different opinions was one thing, but you couldn’t just sit around and be a “yes-man” for your whole fucking life, no matter who the other person was.

And I think it’s clear that I was the exact opposite of a yes man.

And so was she.

“So, I take it I’m not doing a good job at trying to win you over as a friend, huh?”

“Surprisingly, I think that conversation is just what we needed,” she laughed. “It was the first test of our friendship.”

“Okay,” I pursed my lips together into a thin line. “I’ve told you my secrets. Now, it’s only fair I get to ask you some questions, too.”

Lexi’s eyes widened as she let out a singular laugh with a sarcastic undertone. “Ha, yeah, because that’s the logical next step, seeing as how my whole autobiography isn’t available to the public for everyone to see!”

“I never trust Google anyway.”

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Don’t care. It’s my turn. What’s the most embarrassing thing you’ve done?”

“I’m still asking you a question after this,” I muttered. She shrugged. I let out a sigh while I rubbed my face to hide the embarrassment that crept its way onto my cheeks. “One time when I was younger, I tried to do a backflip and landed on my face.”

“Ooo ouch,” she cringed.

“Yeah, safe to say, I’ll never try to do that again.”

“Good,” she laughed. “But on a totally unrelated note, can you try to do a front flip in reverse?”

“Oh, you just think you’re so funny, don’t you?” I glared at her. If she wanted to bring up the embarrassing questions, then I could too. “What would your stripper name be?”

She raised an eyebrow at this. “Oh, we are getting serious now, aren’t we?” I smirked and nodded back at her. “Okay, well, it wouldn’t be anything corny like cherry or diamond.” She pondered for a few seconds before landing on, “Harley, because it’s close to Harlow and reminds me of Harley Quinn.”

“Wow, you put a lot of thought into that. Is this your way of telling me you want to become a stripper?”

“Yeah, right. You wish,” She laughed. “What’s your guilty pleasure?”

“Honestly, it’s probably music.”

“Boring.”

“Dude, you just roasted your own career,” I laughed. “You make music, remember?”

“Oh,” she paused. “Whatever. I’m counting that as your question, so it’s my turn again.”

I immediately stopped laughing and began yelling in a high-pitched voice. “What? That’s not fair!”

“What type of music do you like?” She asked, ignoring my reaction.

“Only Lexi Harlow, of course.”

She hit herself on the forehead with her palm. “Duh, of course,” she clicked her tongue. “I don’t even know why I bothered to ask because that’s the only acceptable answer.”

“Obviously,” I responded while sticking my neck out. “What’s your favorite song that you’ve written?”

“Ummm,” she said while thinking for a few seconds. Lexi had four albums, not including her EP’s. First, there was Half A Heart. Most of the songs on this album were about love and heartache. Then there was Resilient, which featured music about strength and confidence. Her next album, Alive Again, was deemed a recovery anthem, which she wrote after her suicide attempt. Most recently, her newest album, Papercuts, showcased the anger and resentment that she built up inside after years of

criticism. “I think my favorite would be Insanity,” she answered.

That was one of the most vulnerable songs she had ever released, and it was the number-one single on *Alive Again*. She even admitted in an interview that *Insanity* was the first song she wrote again after trying to take her own life.

“Mine too, actually.” I could almost hear the words to the song play aloud in my head.

How will I escape this insanity?

All people care about is vanity.

Looking at me like a defective Barbie.

I don’t feel alive, not hardly.

Screaming out profanities,

How will I escape this insanity

“That song was meant to be an outlet for me, but I’m glad it helped so many other people.”

I couldn’t imagine how many emotions she had to go through while writing that song, and to top it all off, every word was so deeply personal to her. It was almost like she purposely leaked her diary online to a million strangers. I barely liked to talk about what I did over the weekend, let alone talk about my mental health journey. How did she do it?

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“What happened the night you committed suicide?” I blurted out without thinking it over first.

“I figured that question was coming,” she laughed breathlessly. “Everyone asks, but no one is ready for the real answer.”

“Do you ever tell them the truth?”

“I don’t tell them anything,” she sighed.

Most people had a rough idea of what happened, but no one really knew the full story. Lexi had just turned twenty-two at the time. Sources said she had been found unconscious alone in her room after swallowing a whole bottle of prescription drugs. They had to put her in a medically-induced coma to save her life. I remember the feeling of my heart sinking when I first heard the news. I had come home from school, and it was being broadcast on almost every channel.

Swinging open the front door, I flung my backpack over the side of the couch as it landed with a thud on the cushion. I kicked off my shoes and stretched before announcing my presence.

“Mom! I’m home!” I shouted, my hands cupping my mouth while I faced the direction of the kitchen.

“Honey, is that you? I can’t hear you over the TV! Can you turn it down?” She screamed back.

Plopping down on the couch, I held the remote control in hand, shivering at the eerie feeling of déjà vu that resonated deep within me as I thought about how my father used to have this exact same routine. Come home, kick off his shoes, announce his presence, then sit and watch TV. I was just about to mute the volume when a breaking news report popped up on the screen.

‘BREAKING NEWS! SINGER LEXI HARLOW IS IN THE HOSPITAL—’

“What?” I whispered.

I switched channels.

‘CELEBRITY LEXI HARLOW KNOWN FOR HER MUSIC CAREER IS IN CRITICAL

CONDITION—’

I clicked the remote again.

‘LEXI HARLOW IN BAD SHAPE AFTER A BOTCHED SUICIDE ATTEMPT—’

Click.

‘SINGER-SONGWRITER LEXI HARLOW OVERDOSED ON PILLS A YEAR AFTER

THE DEATH OF HER FATHER—’

Click.

‘UNSURE ABOUT HER CURRENT STATUS, BUT IT'S NOT LOOKING

GOOD—’

“Oh my god...”

It’s crazy how attached you could be to someone you barely knew, and yet when they felt pain, it was almost as though you felt it too. The scary thing about reliving that memory, though, was realizing that I had less of a reaction after finding out my own father had died. This was a heavy topic and I felt like shit for even asking her that question in the first place. I was prying for information that wasn’t mine to know in the first place. Lexi was not my family, and in all honesty, she probably didn’t even consider me a friend. I had no right to invade her privacy in that way.

“Enough of your life has been scrutinized by the public. You deserve to have things that you can keep to yourself.” I offered a sad smile. “So, pretend I never asked.”

“No!” She shot back while making a fist and slamming it down on her knee. “I’m sick of censoring myself and my experiences. I don’t want people to think that depression is some kind of taboo subject. Maybe if someone told me that it wasn’t, I would’ve talked to someone about what I was feeling instead of trying to take my own life.”

I opened my mouth to insist that she didn’t need to feel obligated to share her story, but instead, what came out was, “Okay.”

There was no way I was about to sensor her like her managers and publicists had been doing for her entire life.

Lexi let out a shaky breath, as though she were rethinking her decision. I put my hand on her shoulder as a sign of support.

“I’m here for you if you need someone to listen, but I won’t push if you decide you’re

not ready.”

Without a second thought, she began to speak.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Honestly, the thing is, it was no different than any other night, but I think that was the problem. Nothing ever got any better.” She then focused on the dimly lit lights on the ceiling mounted above us. “When I was younger, I was so consumed with being a celebrity that I felt like I needed to fit the stereotypical mold of one. I struggled with anorexia for years, starving myself so that I could have the body everyone was telling me I needed, but all of the constant voices in my head were too much. I thought the only way to stop them was by drinking, so I turned to alcohol. That quieted the noise for a while, but when the alcohol wore off, so did the silence.” I never knew she struggled with alcohol. I always thought that because of her dad's addiction, drinking was something she would never do. I guess you can't make assumptions about someone else's life, especially when you don't really know them. “After being forced into AA, I learned to focus on my own words and drown out everyone else's.” She closed her eyes as she told me things that I wasn't sure I should even be listening to. “But even that wasn't enough because, after a while, I started to resent my own voice. I hated myself even more at that point because, when I stopped purging and obsessing over my calorie intake, I gained so much weight. I felt worthless.”

Lexi and I barely knew each other. Why was she sharing so much with a stranger she had met in a public restroom? Maybe it was easier to talk to someone who felt so far away from the life that she was living. Maybe I made her feel as safe as she made me feel. Maybe this was her way of feeling less alone. Maybe, just maybe, being here with the one person who had no choice other than to listen to your story was somehow therapeutic...for both of us.

Maybe.

“Lexi...” I trailed off, at a loss for words.

“Then my father died, and the pain of losing him was too much to bear. I resented him so much when he was alive, but deep down, I always pushed for him to get better. When he died, I lost hope in the possibility of recovery. I felt like I failed him. I felt like I failed myself. I didn’t see the point of trying to get better. That’s when I refused to eat again. That’s when the voices in my head started getting louder. I started to push everyone away like he did. One night, I decided I was done trying to survive in a world that I didn’t even like.” Her voice was trembling, hoarse from retelling the details of the story. Her eyes were filled to the brim with tears. Clenching her hands into fists, she went on, “So I got drunk and bought pills from some dealer I met online.” By this point, she had started to silently cry.

When I was diagnosed with depression, I never thought about ending my life. It was more about feeling trapped for me. I always felt like there was no way out, but the thought of death being the solution never crossed my mind. I couldn’t imagine how much pain she had to be in for her to consider that as her only option.

“Lexi, I’m so sorry.” I leaned my head on her shoulder.

Wiping her tears, she explained how the suicide attempt had impacted her life. She had suffered multiple seizures, and her heart even stopped at one point. The seizure caused brain damage, which affected her speech significantly. She was in therapy for a year before she fully regained the ability to speak properly, and then it was onto the matter of actually singing. It took another five months to retrain and strengthen her voice. Recovery was a tricky journey to navigate in any sense, but the fact that she had to retrain her mind and body was something I was sure I would have never been able to accomplish.

“I honestly don’t know how I survived. I should be dead right now,” she reflected.

I couldn’t deny that. By all means, she should not be alive right now, but I was so happy that she was.

“You're just too stubborn to die,” I laughed, picking my head up from her shoulder and raising my knees to my chest. My goal had been to make her smile, not cry. But sometimes I forget it's okay to do both. “No, it's not that you're stubborn,” I said, shaking my head and refuting my previous statement. “It's that you're strong.”

She chuckled before responding, “I'm ‘resilient.’”

I laughed as she referenced her own album. “Hey, now you're getting it!” I lifted my arm up with my palm facing her.

Shaking her head slightly, she lifted her arm and slapped my hand with hers. “You're a fucking loser,” she snorted, then bumped my shoulder with her own. “But thank you.”

I was in no position to offer words of advice, and honestly, I wasn't even sure if she wanted any. All I could really do was listen to her story...but sometimes, just listening was enough.

“Hey, Lexi?”

“Yeah?”

“I'm glad you're still here.”

“Me too.”

Looking at her, I analyzed her facial expression. “Are you okay?” I questioned, hoping I didn't open old wounds with my curiosity.

“Yeah, it's actually nice to talk to someone about this.”

“Talking to a total stranger about your deepest scars,” I summarized her words. “Yeah, maybe Lexi Harlow is insane.” We both cracked up, laughing together in spite of the heavy topic that we had just discussed. Something I learned in therapy was that just because you had depression it didn’t mean you would never smile. “Speaking of being insane, ‘Insanity’ is an amazing song, by the way. You have no idea how much it helped me.”

“I wrote that song after I tried to commit suicide,” she glared at me. “I think I have a pretty good idea of how therapeutic it is.”

“That’s not what I meant.” I shook my head vigorously. “I’m so sorry.”

She laughed at that. “Relax, I was just giving you a hard time.”

“What the fuck! You’re a real ass, you know that?”

“And don’t you forget it!”

“Oh, trust me, Lexi Harlow. Everything about you is unforgettable.”

True Colors

“So, what music video are you shooting in California?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Nope, no chance I'm telling that one.”

“Fine,” I relented. “Do you still want to ask questions?”

“Oh, hell yeah! You still know way too much about me! I have to pry some skeletons out of your closet.” She eyed me up and down while letting out a heartfelt laugh.

“The only skeleton I have is the one in my body,” I bantered back.

“Jesus,” Lexi cackled. “You really need to work on your jokes.”

Looking at the grin on her face following her outburst, I countered with, “Well, it made you laugh, so I think I'm doing just fine.”

“Keep telling yourself that.” She gave an upward nod of her head while squinting her eyes at me. “Anyway, what’s your least favorite album of mine?”

“Why? So you can get mad at me?”

She shrugged noncommittally and replied, “Only if you say Papercuts.”

“Oh no, that's in my top two!” I exclaimed, reassuring her.

“Probably Resilient because I only know like four songs from that album.”

“Which ones?” She prodded back while lifting an eyebrow.

“Resilient, Dauntless, Rule Breaker, and...” I chuckled a bit before continuing, “Surprise, surprise, the song Daddy Issues.”

“Dad’s. Am I right?” She laughed, causing me to smile at her in return. “Speaking of dad’s...do you think you’ll be okay enough to go to the funeral?”

“I don't know,” I said honestly.

“Hey, just remember, you’re stronger than you think.”

Scoffing at her words, I questioned, “And if I’m not, can I send you my therapy bill?”

“Sure, Autumn. My address is 1234 Go Fuck Yourself Road.” She rolled her eyes and mumbled under her breath, “And here I was trying to be nice.”

I looked at her while she shifted positions on the floor. My legs began to tingle as if they were about to fall asleep, so I straightened them out in front of me. I rubbed my hands along the length of my calves and let out a sigh. For some reason, Lexi believed that I would be okay, but I, on the other hand, wasn’t so sure. What if going to his funeral pushed me past the point of no return?

“We can survive this, right?” I asked solemnly while pursing my lips.

“Survive what?”

“This,” I motioned with my hands to our surroundings. “Life.”

“Definitely,” she answered with certainty. I smiled at her optimism, but then she ended her thoughts with, “Until we die, that is.”

Shaking my head, I reached into my bag and threw the first thing I could find at her,

which happened to be my AirPods.

“Ass!” I yelled out while simultaneously laughing.

Lexi caught the case in her hands with ease and smiled. “You know we suck at doing these questions. We keep going off on random tangents.”

I scrunched my face at her words. “I guess you’re right.” Cracking my knuckles, I took a deep breath before yelling, “Okay, rapid-fire questions. Go!”

“What?” She panicked frantically while scrambling to think of a question. “Uhhh, what’s your biggest pet peeve?”

“People chewing with their mouths open.” I shivered at the thought. “What’s your favorite red carpet outfit?”

She pondered that question for a bit, then said, “The red satin dress with a lace train that I wore to the MET Gala.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

I remember that dress. She looked mesmerizing. People actually still talk about that outfit to this day. Lexi was even named the best dressed by Harper's Bazaar Magazine. That look was somewhat iconic. Her words pulled me out of my thoughts just in time. A second longer, and I would've been drooling.

"What is your biggest fear?"

"Being alone. What's your favorite color?"

Motioning to her current outfit, she glared at me. "As if it's not obvious."

I looked her up and down, taking note of her black attire before responding, "So pink then?"

"Definitely," she said, her voice oozing with sarcasm. "What is your favorite animal?"

"Cats because they are relatable. I also want to slap people and knock things over." Lexi tried to hide the beginnings of a smile before it took form, prompting me to ask, "What? Is that not an acceptable answer?"

She shook her head, dismissing my question. "No, it's not that," she explained. "It's just, now that I think about it, you definitely give off black cat vibes."

"Whoa," I held out my hands in front of me. "No need to bring race into this."

Lexi flung the AirPods I had thrown at her earlier back in my direction. I yelped and

bent my leg to shield myself from the impact as the headphones hit my thigh with a loud slap.

“Don’t be stupid,” she demanded while narrowing her eyes at me.

“Oh, and now I’m dumb?”

“Autumn, don’t make me come over there and slap you,” she pointed her finger at me. “Cause I’ll do it!”

I smiled and put my hand over my heart before saying, “It would be an honor to be slapped by a fellow black cat.”

“Oh my god,” Lexi mumbled. “You’re impossible.”

I laughed and shrugged my shoulders. “You know what? You were right. We are never going to get through these questions.”

“Tell me about it,” she said while throwing her head back in frustration.

“Okay, fine. Last question,” I announced as I leaned forward. “What is your biggest dream?”

This may have sounded like an ordinary question, but it was so much more than that, and she knew it. In an interview she did a few years ago, someone asked her the same thing, and she replied with, “The gorilla from King Kong.” Because of her answer, it sounded as though she took the question literally instead of figuratively. People ended up posting that clip and tagging her in it for months to follow. The misinterpretation of that specific question was actually one of the things she’s widely known for. Even people who didn’t listen to her music knew about that moment. It had become somewhat of a running gag.

Lexi let out a heavy laugh. “I swear it was a joke! I just wanted to give a silly answer! Apparently, no one understands my sense of humor,” she murmured the latter part of her explanation before also saying, “My actual biggest dream is to get a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Fuck you for that one,” she shook her head slightly.

“I just had to ask the really important questions while stuck here. It may be the only chance I get.”

Our laughter subsided, and we were left in the stillness of the room. We sat silently, and I thought about how peaceful this felt. Just beyond the doors, there were hundreds, maybe even thousands, of people running around, bumping into each other, frolicking about in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Soon, I would be sucked back into the same monotonous routine, too consumed with the demands of my own life to be able to focus on anything that really mattered. Beyond the bathroom, real life awaited me—my dad's funeral awaited me. Because of that, I never wanted to leave, but real life was calling, screaming at me to return from the safe haven I had somehow managed to find. Lexi had responsibilities to get back to, and so did I. There was no way to escape the impending, inevitable reality that we would soon leave and forget each other.

Is that how my dad felt when he left?

Maybe once he stepped foot out the door, it was easier to forget us.

I guess I'll never know.

The doctors said he died of a heart attack—stress-induced, probably. Sometimes, I regretted not reaching out. I couldn't figure out if I pushed him away to spare me the pain and disappointment of when he would inevitably disappear again or if it was to ensure that he knew how it felt to never hear from your family again.

What was that saying? It's better to have tried and failed than to have never tried at all. I didn't want to look back and wonder, "What if?"

Too late now. Maybe it was for the best that we never spoke again.

"You know, I wonder if all earthquakes lead to this much self-realization," I thought out loud.

"Only when you're trapped in a room with the right person."

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

My face lit up as I smiled unintentionally while looking at her. Lexi sat across from me with her arms and legs crossed. She caught me mid-stare, and the corners of her lips flicked upwards. I shifted my gaze abruptly. For most of the time that we'd been stuck together, I had probably been eye-fucking her like 90% it.

Wait...how long have we been in here?

I picked up my phone and pressed down on the side to unlock the screen.

10:16 a.m.

“You know, being trapped in a bathroom with Lexi Harlow has made me realize that there's something I would like to do with you before we get out of here,” I said while still looking down at my phone.

“And what would that be?” I opened my mouth to answer before she quickly cut me off. “Please, god, don't make me sign your foot or design a tattoo for you,” she begged.

The flat expression I had held earlier was replaced with one of uncontrollable laughter. I clutched my stomach as the pain radiated in my abdomen. I doubled over and cackled like a hyena while hitting my hand against the floor repeatedly.

“No way people ask you to sign their feet!”

“Oh, you'd be surprised...” she trailed off. “This one girl who was waiting in line at a meet and greet did something like that. When she got to the front, she took off her

socks and shoes, then forced me to look at her bare feet,” Lexi frowned in disgust. “But it gets worse. Then she stuck a pen between her toes while shoving it in my face so that I could take it and sign her foot.”

“What the hell?” I screamed while crinkling my nose. “There's no way someone would do that! It sounds like something straight out of a horror movie!”

“Ew, a horror movie about feet?” Lexi joked. “What kind of movies are you watching with that weird fetish of yours?”

“Nope,” I shook my head violently, causing my hair to fly in every direction. “Nope, nope, nope. Please do not force your kinks on me.”

“Ha, yeah, right! More like my PTSD. I wouldn't dream of watching a movie about feet!”

“Not even the one with the dancing penguins, ‘Happy Feet?’” I asked.

“Nope, not even that one.”

“Yeah, I watch True Crime and even that story is a bit much for me.”

“You mean like Jeffrey Dahmer and shit?”

I nodded. “More or less.”

“Must be why you like me so much, seeing as how you called me insane earlier. You have a thing for freaks?” She asked in a teasing manner.

“Oh, fuck no!” I belted out. “And if you think you're on the same level as Jeffrey Dahmer, then I don't think you know anything about what he did.”

“You’re the one who called me insane earlier.”

“Not serial killer-level insane,” I mumbled, pouting slightly. “Honestly, when I first came in here and saw you hiding your face, combined with the fact that two large men were guarding the door, I thought you were in trouble,” I confessed. “Maybe I watch true crime documentaries a bit too much.”

Raising her eyebrows, she questioned, “So, you're saying I shouldn't watch True Crime?”

“Oh,” I shook my head. “No, I’m not saying that at all. I’m saying you should definitely watch it!” She smiled at my enthusiasm. “But you have to start with the basics first, so Jeffrey Dahmer or something along those lines,” I suggested. “Then you can dive into something more obscure, like the one about the girl who stabbed a celebrity using a pen she stuck in between her toes.”

Expecting her to roll her eyes, I was surprised when she continued on with the joke. “I’ve actually heard of that last one you mentioned. Yeah, that was a tragic story,” she laughed. “I think that is where the bulk of her trauma comes from. Certainly not her father's death or her suicide attempt.”

A smile grew on my face. “But really, though, did someone try to hand you a pen with their toes and ask you to sign their foot? Are you making this up?”

“Sadly, I’m not,” she shivered at the thought. “The image of her foot is burned into my brain now.”

“Okay, well, in comparison, my request won’t be so bad then.” She glared at me, expecting the worst. “Can I sign your foot?” She jabbed me with her elbow, causing me to let out a small yelp. I rubbed my ribs before adding, “Kidding! I was just kidding, I swear! I was just going to ask if you would be willing to watch an episode

of Friends with me.”

“Oh, yeah,” she agreed with a flick of the wrist. “I can do that, no problem.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed while pumping my fist into the air.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Grabbing my phone from my purse, I pulled up Netflix and loaded into an episode of Friends. This wasn't just any episode, though; it was the one I told her about earlier. I shifted so that I was sitting next to Lexi and propped my phone up on my bag. Tapping on the screen, the opening theme song began to play.

We allowed ourselves to get lost within the episode as we compared the similarities between Chandler's situation and our current one. He had just walked into an ATM vestibule when suddenly the power went out, causing him to get stuck. The doors were automatic, meaning there was no way out until the power came back on. When he looked around, he realized that he wasn't alone and Victoria's Secret model, Jill Goodacre, was trapped with him. While repeatedly failing to impress her, Chandler eventually decided to try and blow a bubble with a piece of gum, but to no surprise, he failed again. Jill watched in horror as the gum flew out of his mouth and across the room.

"What if, when we were first trapped in here, I accidentally spit my gum across the room while trying to blow a bubble? Would that have gotten your attention?"

"Well, maybe. But not in a good way," she laughed. "We probably wouldn't have talked as much as we did today."

"Oh, come on! Really?" I let out an exasperated puff of air. "I think I would've peed my pants after seeing you stuck in here with me, and I think you would've peed your pants after seeing my gum fly across the bathroom. Honestly, that would've been a nice icebreaker for the two of us."

Lexi howled with laughter and replied, “Why on earth would—” Before she could continue, we heard a loud mechanical buzzing, followed by a thud right outside the door. There were several loud banging noises. The sound caused me to jump in the opposite direction of the door, which happened to be closer to Lexi.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. My back was fully pressed against her chest as she stifled a gasp at the sudden movement. Pushing my palms against the floor, I lifted myself up and away from her. Putting the distance back between us, I turned my attention back to the door as another jolting thud could be heard just outside.

“I think we’re about to get out of here,” she said.

Freedom

Lexi stood up for the first time in an hour as she extended her hand, prompting me to take it.

“Well, I guess this is it,” Lexi said as she grabbed my hand to help me off the ground.

I nodded while looking at her face, searching for any sign of emotion that she held.

Does she want to stay, too?

After she pulled me up, neither of us loosened our grips. My lips quivered slightly as I removed my hand from hers, eliciting a shocked expression on her face. Immediately after letting go, I pulled her into a tight hug and wrapped my arms around her. Lexi tensed for a minute before realizing what was happening. She then relaxed into my arms as she squeezed back tightly.

“Thank you for everything.”

“No. Thank you.”

“You know how earlier you said if I wanted a picture, all I had to do was ask? Well, can I have a picture now?”

“So long as you delete that other one you took,” Lexi smiled.

“Deal,” I agreed. We shifted closer together so that we fit into the frame as I snapped a quick picture. “I’m gonna get this framed so I can sleep with it at night,” I chuckled while glancing down at my phone.

“That’s nothing like the real thing, I hope you know...”

Lifting an eyebrow, I teased, “Well, we can do a test to compare...”

Lexi bit her lip as she pulled out her phone suddenly, then asked, “What’s your Instagram?”

“Autumnisfalling,” I replied while leaning down to pick up my bag.

“HA! That’s a good one.” She rolled her eyes while typing away on her phone. A few seconds later, my phone dinged, signaling a new notification. I gazed at my screen with a slack jaw as I read the new alert.

LHarlow is now following you on Instagram.

“Just in case you ever need to talk to someone,” she smiled. “I mean, I know we aren’t trapped together, so we aren’t forced to talk to each other anymore, but that doesn’t mean we have to lose touch.”

A muffled voice from beyond the door became clearer and was followed by the sound

of squeaking hinges. The door had flung open, freeing us from the prison we were once in—only it never felt like a prison to me.

“Lexi, are you okay?” A large man asked frantically. Another tall man quickly approached us as the two of them stood side by side.

“Brian, for the thousandth time, I’m fine,” Lexi groaned.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Okay, let's get you out of here,” Brian stated while glancing in my direction. “We have a plane to get on. We can get a medic to check you out while we are onboard.”

“Just a second,” she waved her hands dismissively at him. She then turned back in my direction, smiled slightly, and said, “Go catch your flight. You have a funeral to get to.”

I grabbed my bag off the floor and nodded. “Yeah, I guess I do.”

“Goodbye, Autumn.”

“Goodbye, Lexi.”

We stared at each other briefly before exiting the bathroom, then we both went our separate ways. Entering the main lobby of the airport, everything somehow felt so different. The crowded room was still bustling as people ran around talking on their phones while rushing to catch their flights. No one paid any mind to the scattered debris or the firefighters who were still clearing away the fallen support beam. To everyone else, it was just a normal day—minus the earthquake. Everyone else had no idea that just minutes ago, there were two people stuck behind those doors, just trying to escape from reality.

My thoughts were interrupted when I heard a loud barrage of yells.

“There she is!”

“It's Lexi Harlow!”

“No, way!”

“Can I get an autograph?”

I laughed silently to myself. Pressing the lock button on my phone for what felt like the hundredth time that day, I checked the time.

10:46 a.m.

Shit.

All the figures rushing past me caused my head to spin as I whipped my head in several different directions, trying to figure out which way my gate was. I haphazardly rummaged through my bag and grabbed my plane ticket. Flight 343A to San Diego, California. My eyes skimmed over the piece of paper before they landed on what I was searching for. Gate 21. I looked up and saw that I was currently standing in front of gate 18. Breaking out into a quick jog, I started in the direction of my flight past 19, then 20, and finally, I arrived at gate 21. My shoes padded against the carpeted floor. The outline of the two women standing at the desk became clearer as I saw one reach out for the door and begin to close it. My slow jog turned into a full-blown sprint.

Shit...again.

“Wait!” I yelled. The lady swung the door closed as she turned back to face me. I slammed my hands unintentionally on the desk that was now in front of me as I heaved, trying to catch my breath. “Wait, please! I need to get on that flight!” I cried while glancing at the plane through the large window behind her.

Within the time I had been trapped in the bathroom, the rain had stopped, leaving behind a gloomy trace of its existence as the clouds hung low in the sky.

The lady who stood by the door apologized with a look of sorrow on her face. “Sorry, boarding is closed.”

“Please, it can't be too late,” I begged.

“You can try and get a ticket for the next flight, but I'm sorry we can't open the door back up,” the other lady apologized.

I got exactly what I had wanted when I first walked into the airport. I missed my flight. Little did I know how much my sentiments would change within the span of an hour.

“Do you know when the next flight to San Diego is?” I asked, squeezing my eyes shut tightly.

“Unfortunately, there have been a lot of delays due to the earthquake. It's lucky this flight was even able to take off on time.”

Yeah, lucky.

“The normal schedule has changed, but you can check the departure board or head over to the ticket counter to see when the next flight leaves.”

Nodding, I gave them both a sad smile in an attempt to show some semblance of appreciation. I felt a tear make its way down my cheek as I plopped down in one of the nearby seats and took out my phone. There were multiple unread text messages from my mom, but I couldn't find the courage to open them, so I walked over to the departure board to see when the next plane from New York to San Diego would be. Of course, the next flight wasn't for another four hours—much too late to make it on time to the funeral. Maybe if I had just left a few days earlier, like my mom suggested...but then I never would've met Lexi, meaning I probably would've

decided to skip the funeral altogether.

Is this really how the story ends?

I fumbled with my phone, trying to determine the best way to break the news to my mom. She was going to be so angry at me. I couldn't bear the thought of telling her that I wouldn't be there, but the only other alternative was to say nothing and have her wait six hours, only to be disappointed when I didn't show up. There was no winning. Either way, I lost. Sitting down, I rested my head in my hands as I sulked in defeat.

Just as I was about to give up hope, a voice called from in front of me.

Help

“Autumn? Are you okay?”

Snapping my head upwards, I was greeted by Lexi’s concerned face. She was wearing her black hoodie again, probably so that no one noticed her. Her bodyguards were standing about a foot behind her.

“I missed my flight,” I pursed my lips together and shrugged hopelessly.

“Do you want to ride with me? I can drop you off at LAX,” Lexi offered.

Ride with her? Was she serious?

This can’t be happening.

“Wait. Are you offering me a ride on your private jet?”

“Yes,” she smirked while biting her lip. “Get off your ass and let’s go.” Lexi motioned for me to follow her as she turned around and headed in the opposite direction. Rushing to stand, I grasped for my bag without looking behind me.

I kind of figured Lexi and I had become somewhat close when we talked in the bathroom, but I was expecting, like, maybe a few conversations on Instagram or a free ticket to one of her concerts, not a free ride across the country on her plane. This felt like too much to ask for when I had only known her for about an hour.

But she offered anyway.

And despite only knowing her for an hour, it felt like I'd known her for my whole life.

I sped off to catch up to them.

“Are you sure this isn't too much trouble?”

“Autumn, shut up and accept help when it's offered.”

“Thank you. Like seriously, thank you.”

“Anytime.”

Was this just like a common thing for her—taking people on her private jet just for the hell of it?

“So,” I clicked my tongue. “How many other fans have you given a ride to?”

“Zero.”

“Oh. Why me then?”

“Honestly, you remind me a little bit of myself.”

“That is officially the best compliment I've ever received.”

“Then remind me never to call you smart, or amazing, or beautiful—”

“Eh,” I shrugged. “I prefer to be your twin.”

“Okay, Autumn. Whatever you say,” she laughed.

We walked through the airport in silence for the next few minutes as I tried to keep pace with Lexi, only following slightly behind her, so that I could be sure I was going in the right way. I watched as she walked in a stride with her head held high. Her two bodyguards mirrored her strength and confidence. I had no idea where we were going or how to get there, but for some reason, I trusted these two men to guide us. They both looked like they could convince anyone of anything at any given time just by using their words. It wasn't common to see someone walk around in a way that never made you question them. Even at twenty-one, I still hadn't learned how to comfortably exist in my own body. Sometimes it felt like I was simply borrowing my current body while a new one was being tailored to fit the image I so desperately desired. In my head, I was a slim model who stood at 5'7 and had legs for days with a thin waist. In reality, I was nowhere near close to that. Looking at Andrew and Brian, I couldn't help but wonder how they moved around without a care. Somehow, they had conjured the perfect recipe for how to live without shame. Suddenly we were all characters from *SpongeBob*, and the two of them were Mr. Krabs because they had the secret ingredient, and I was Plankton because I was so desperate to figure out what it was. Maybe it had something to do with them being white males, or maybe it just had something to do with me being depressed. Whatever it was, it sucked. For the first time since meeting them, I finally took note of Andrew and Brian's appearances. Andrew was a few inches taller than Brian and had medium-length blonde hair that combed back into a bun. Brian, on the other hand, was a tad bit more tan than Andrew and had dusty brown hair that was buzzed short. They both wore the exact same suit—a black jacket cuffed at the wrists with a white dress shirt tucked into black slacks. A thin black belt was also buckled around both of their waists, despite the fact that their pants fit perfectly, which was more than I could say about most of the other men I passed today whose slacks looked painfully too tight. As I scanned the room, I saw way too many people to count who were dressed as though they were on their way to a business meeting or maybe even a funeral of their own.

“This way,” Brain said with an outstretched arm.

We took a left and continued making our way through the airport. The earthquake had caused a building that once seemed so large to become so small as people rushed back and forth in a frenzy. For every person that we passed, I could hear bits and pieces of their scattered conversations. Everyone had a distinct voice, so it was easy to decipher one conversation from the next, but eventually, they all started to blur together. After a while of what felt like aimless wandering, I slowly faded out the noise, and my mind became blank. I was simply moving one foot in front of the other without thinking about my past, present, or future. That is, until, in the distance, one person in particular screamed so loudly that it brought me back to reality.

“Oh my God, it’s Lexi Harlow!”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Shit!” Lexi whispered while pulling her hood over her head and tugging the strings until the fabric cinched tightly around her face.

I looked back and saw a hoard of people running toward us. “Uhm, is this normal for you?”

“Autumn,” Lexi mumbled, “Run.”

“What?” I asked with wide eyes.

“Go!” Brian yelled, pushing me forward.

All four of us took off in a sprint, running as though our lives depended on it, and for all I knew, it very well may have. I mean, who knew what a bunch of crazed fans would do if they got close enough, especially with the whole mob mentality thing they had going on.

“Keep up!”

“I’m trying! I didn’t exactly dress for running a marathon today!”

I forced my legs to move faster as I followed behind Lexi and Brian while Andrew trailed behind, trying to keep himself between us and the screaming fans.

“Lexi, please, just one picture!”

“We love you!”

“Can you spit on me?”

“Uhh,” I smiled. “That’s...new.”

“No,” Lexi laughed. “Definitely not new.”

“Seriously?” I glanced back at the crowd while still running, only to almost bump into a stranger in the process. I swerved out of the way at the last minute and brought my hands to my chest.

“Shit!”

“Don’t look back!” Andrew scolded. “Just go.”

We must’ve passed dozens of people, some of them looking confused, and others realizing who Lexi was then deciding to join in on the chase. What started out as a group of maybe ten people had practically tripled by this point. We had run all the way to gate 36. I could barely breathe as I parted my lips and began panting heavily. We rounded a large corridor and came upon a door with a large sign that said “STAFF ONLY.” Andrew took out a key card and swiped it as the door clicked. The four of us dashed inside, and Andrew slammed the door behind us, causing the automatic lock to click into place.

“We almost died!” I heaved while bending over to rest my hands on my knees.

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic,” Lexi panted while removing her hood. She lifted her hands and began to run her fingers through her hair, trying to eliminate the static.

It didn’t work.

“Aren’t celebrity jets usually in private airports or private hangers or whatever?” I

questioned while standing back up and looking at her. “You know, because of situations like this?”

“Sometimes,” she shrugged. “This actually isn’t my jet. It’s just a rental for now.”

A rental jet? Must be nice.

“Come on, let's go, guys,” Andrew said.

The contact of our shoes against the carpet bounced off the walls as I listened to the pitter-patter of our footsteps while we walked down the narrow hallway. Another door stood in front of us, blocking the way. Andrew again swiped his key card and pushed the door. The hallway then opened up into a small boarding room that was more secluded than its counterparts found in the main lobby. They opened a final door, and this time we were immediately thrust outside, where we descended a short flight of stairs before we were finally met with pavement. The wind blew fiercely as the sky was still gray with anger from the day's previous storm. Lexi walked confidently behind Andrew and Brian as she glanced back at me, taking note of my awestruck expression. Without meaning to, I stopped walking to take in the breathtaking view in front of me—a large private jet, still shining as though it hadn't been touched at all by the rain that had doused the whole city.

“Close your mouth. You'll catch flies,” Lexi poked fun while grabbing my hand, forcing me to begin walking again.

Her hair blew across her face as she looked back at me through her long, black tendrils. I smiled down at our interlacing fingers as all of us climbed the stairs into the jet. After stepping on board, I immediately became entranced again. Inside, the plane was decorated with shades of grays and blues to add a pop of color. When we walked in, we were met with a large open area. There were four conventional airplane seats, separated into groups of two, situated next to a large lounge area with a flat-

screen TV mounted to the wall. The lounge was complete with a white seating area that was strategically placed in front of the TV, accompanied by a small mini fridge in the corner. Toward the rear of the plane was a large table, set beautifully with four more seats grouped around it. I spun in a circle, inhaling deeply while taking in the scenery.

Is this really happening?

“So, this is the plane,” Lexi stated while doing something like a Vanna White demonstration with her arms. “Up toward the front of the plane, behind this blue curtain, is where the pilots are. Right behind the cockpit are four seats for extra passengers and flight attendants. It's also where the kitchen and bar are situated.” She walked further back, listing each section as she passed. “There are four main seats for takeoff and landing near the lounge. Then we have a TV and couch over here, which I consider the heart of this room. There’s also a dining area with some extra tables and chairs.” She pointed toward the rear of the plane, hidden behind a closed door. “Back, there are three small bedrooms and a bathroom. Oh, and the communal bathroom is by the flight attendants at the front of the plane.”

“Wow.”

I had never been so captivated by something so strange yet so amazing. My typical flying experience consisted of being crammed next to sweaty men with kids kicking the back of my seat and a loud, obnoxious woman yelling at the flight staff. I felt so out of place here.

Lexi walked back toward me, seeing as I hadn't moved from the spot I started at. Brian then came up to her and whispered something, causing her to nod in response.

Turning to me, she briefly instructed, “You can sit in one of these.” She motioned to the four main seats and continued, “But once we are in the air, you can move around if you want. I just have to go do something real quick, but I'll be right back.”

“Thanks.”

Lexi retreated into one of the back rooms, along with Brian. Andrew sat in one of the four available seats situated on the left side of the plane, and I then took the seat closest to the window on the right side. Sitting down, I dropped my bag to the floor and kicked it under my seat to keep it out of the way as I began to fasten my seatbelt. I glanced out the window and looked back in the direction of the airport, wondering how many others were completely oblivious to the large private jet right outside. I turned my head back toward my lap as I stared at the phone lying in my hands and contemplated checking the texts my mom had sent me earlier. I knew I needed to, but how could I even come close to apologizing for what I had said on the phone while talking to her earlier?

Hey, Mom, sorry I was an asshole earlier, but don't worry, I'm on my way to the funeral. Oh yeah, and I'm taking a different plane to get there because I missed my flight AND the person I was stuck in the bathroom with earlier turned out to be a celebrity who offered me a ride on her private jet.

Yeah, that was not going to cut it.

I opened my messages as I began to read the series of texts my mom had sent.

Mom: You better be on your flight at 11!

From New York to California, it was a six-hour flight. I would land at 2:00 p.m. and my dad's funeral would be at 3:00 p.m. I had planned it that way—so I'd have just enough time to make it to his funeral but not enough time to sit with the fact that I was attending the funeral.

2 MISSED CALLS FROM MOM

Mom: I will call you all day until I know for a fact you're on that flight!

Mom: Your dad wasn't perfect but that doesn't mean you get to miss his fucking funeral!

4 MISSED CALLS FROM MOM.

Mom: Autumn! ANSWER YOUR PHONE!

Mom: AUTUMN! 2 MISSED CALLS FROM MOM

Mom: Pick up the damn phone!

1 MISSED CALL FROM MOM

Mom: Please...

Mom: Can you at least text me back so I know that you're okay?

Mom: Autumn

Mom: Are you okay?

Mom: Please come to the funeral...I can't do this alone.

She was worried.

I hadn't spoken to her since I told her about the earthquake. What if she thought I was still stuck in the bathroom? What if she thought I was hurt? What if she thought we had another earthquake? What if she thought the building collapsed? What if she thought I was dead, just like Dad? Not only was she worried, but she was also scared. My mother, who I thought was unshakable, was actually scared to go to the funeral alone. We constantly talked about the pain I went through when Dad left, but we never talked about her pain. What if she struggled just to get out of bed each day? What if she never moved on in hopes he would return? What if she was afraid of what attending his funeral would mean? Was this my fault? Why did I insist on trying to grieve alone?

With shaking hands, I hesitantly began to type out a message.

Autumn: Mom, I'm so sorry for what I said earlier. I was letting my anger cloud my judgement and I shouldn't have yelled at you like that. The girl I was stuck in the bathroom with overheard our conversation and helped me realize that going to dad's funeral is something I have to do...but since we were trapped for an hour, I missed

my flight...now comes the crazy part...the person who I was locked in the bathroom with was...drum roll, please...

Autumn: Lexi FREAKING Harlow!

Autumn: HOW INSANE IS THAT?

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Autumn: She offered me a ride on her jet to LAX. As soon as I land, I will rush over as fast as I can. We are taking off now. I'll explain the rest in person.

Autumn: And mom...I can't do this without you either.

Lexi's voice pulled me out of my thoughts as she sat down next to me and explained why she left so suddenly.

"Sorry, the medic had to check me out before take-off," she stated calmly before yelling the next sentence, "Even though I said I was fine!" Just then, a young man dressed in scrubs appeared and nodded toward us before exiting the plane abruptly. I watched as Lexi fastened her seatbelt. She had taken off her hoodie. After she finished securing herself in place, I saw her gaze shift to my shaking hands. Offering a sad smile, Lexi lifted her hand and rested it on mine. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I mumbled. "Just a nervous flyer." I don't know why my immediate reaction was to lie.

"Autumn, you're a shit liar," she sighed. "Seriously though, it's not like we didn't just pour our hearts out to each other like fifteen minutes ago. What's really wrong?"

"My mom," I began. "I was so focused on my own feelings about the funeral that I never considered how my mom would feel about going, especially if she had to do it alone."

"Well, you're considering her feelings now, aren't you?" She pondered.

“Of course.”

“Then that's all that matters,” she shrugged while looking down at our hands. “It doesn't matter that it took you a while to understand her pain, so long as you realize your mistake now.”

I squeezed her hand in response. “Damn,” I shook my head. “Are you some kind of omniscient God who knows the answers to all life's questions?”

“I've unlocked my third eye,” Lexi chuckled back.

“Tell me, what is the meaning of life?”

“Food,” she joked back, prompting us to both break out into laughter.

The flight attendant then came over to the loudspeaker as Brian took his seat next to Andrew. “Please fasten your seatbelts as we are beginning our ascent,” the flight attendant instructed as the sign illuminated above our heads.

The plane began speeding forward as we hurdled down the runway.

Take Off

“Yeah, if you're nervous about flying, it's probably not the best idea to book a six-hour flight.”

“Well, good thing it's not the flight that's making me nervous,” I admitted while scratching the back of my neck and looking away.

“What are you nervous about?”

It was the funeral that was making me nervous. It was seeing my mom after our argument that was making me nervous. It was being on a flight for six hours with my celebrity crush that was making me nervous.

“I’m nervous about a lot of things.”

“And pray tell, what are these ‘things’ you are nervous about?”

“Nope,” I refused while pursing my lips. “That’s the only confession you’re getting out of me for this whole entire flight. No more soul searching or heart-to-hearts.”

Lexi half-smiled as she raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?” I glared at her while nodding. “I guess we’ll see in about six hours then,” she challenged.

And at that, the plane’s nose lifted toward the sky as we climbed through the air, getting higher and higher until the ground could no longer be seen.

The fasten seat belt sign turned off as the plane steadied.

“So,” I dragged out the words before continuing, “Since we are going to California together, now are you gonna tell me what song you’re shooting a music video for?”

“Let’s just say it involves drag queens.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

My lips visibly parted as I replied, “You're going to perform in a music video with drag queens, and I'm going to a funeral? That doesn't seem at all fair.”

“We can switch places if you want,” she offered jokingly while keeping a straight face. “Where is the funeral?”

“Some place in San Diego called Kings Cross Church. Where is your music video shooting?”

Lexi cracked a smile. “Nice try, Autumn,” she said while narrowing her eyes. “Are you actually going to go to your dad's funeral? Like you're not just going to follow me around when we get off the plane, right?”

“What other reason would I have for being on a private jet with a total stranger right now? You're not all that interesting anyway,” I teased while lying through my teeth.

“More interesting than you!” She retorted. “And stranger? Is that what you think of me? I thought you knew me better than that.”

“You know what? You're right. I definitely know one thing for sure about you.”

“Which is?”

“You have a dog named Dori,” I laughed.

Lexi rolled her eyes as she let out a deep breath. She slumped back in her seat, slouching as she did so. “Oh, come on. I thought you were going to say something

like, ‘Oh, Lexi Harlow, she's so funny or she's so sexy,’ but no, you just had to comment on knowing my dog's name.”

The light from the window shined brightly, and the sky was finally visible as we rose above the clouds. I stared at her in awe as the sunlight hit her in all the right places. Once again, Lexi Harlow had managed to put me in a trance with her beauty. It was almost as though I was looking at her for the first time again.

“Lexi, you're so unbelievably sexy, but the word I was thinking of to describe you is more synonymous with beautiful. You have been my number-one celebrity crush for a reason, Lexi! You’re fucking attractive. That much is quite obvious.”

My cheeks became beet red at the sudden admission, and my eyes widened in horror. I whipped my head in the opposite direction to try and maintain as much dignity as possible while mentally slapping myself in the face.

“Autumn,” Lexi said while placing a hand on my upper arm, causing me to turn back toward her. “You never have to feel embarrassed about calling me beautiful. You never should feel embarrassed about calling anyone beautiful. If anything, I’m the one who feels a little embarrassed, you know?” I stared at her in confusion. “Low self-esteem,” she said while doing jazz hands. I laughed at the gesture. She dipped her head while looking at her lap. A small smile grazed her lips. “Calling me beautiful is the best compliment I could ever ask for, so thank you.”

Her hand still lightly grasped my arm as I gently placed my hand on top of hers. “You don’t need to thank me for telling you the truth.”

Her eyes seemed to light up at my words. She licked her lips as she looked out the window of the plane.

“You know, there are three things I wish someone would've told me before I tried to

commit suicide,” Lexi confessed. “One: that I am beautiful no matter what the tabloids say; two: that being perfect is overrated; and three: that pain comes in waves. It does not stay with you forever.”

“With time,” I echoed the same words she had told me at the airport.

“Huh?”

“All things will get better with time,” I repeated. “That’s what you said at the airport.”

“Yeah?” She raised an eyebrow at me, as though she were unsure of my point.

“Maybe you were right.”

“I’m always right,” Lexi shrugged.

“Pfft. Get over yourself.”

“Never.”

“Good,” I grinned at her. “Because you’re fucking amazing, Lexi.”

“Touché.”

Sticking my neck out to peek past Lexi, I glanced across the aisle to where Andrew and Brian were sitting. “Do you think they are listening to us?” I whispered.

“Probably,” Lexi laughed while turning her back toward me as she faced them. “Hey, do you think you guys could put in headphones or go take a nap or something?”

Andrew smirked as Brian laughed at the request.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Headphones, it is Lexi,” Andrew decided, popping in his earbuds.

“I think I'll go lay down,” Brian said while raising an eyebrow as he unbuckled his seatbelt, heading toward the opposite end of the plane. He opened the door that separated the main area from the sleeping quarters and closed it silently behind him.

“Better?” Lexi asked.

“Better,” I stated. “Actually, do you mind if we listen to some music for a while? I just need to not talk for a while.”

It wasn't that I hated talking to Lexi, I just hadn't had a conversation with such depth in a very long time. It was nice getting to know her, and I loved that she wanted to know me, but sharing so much of yourself could feel so exhausting.

“I'm not relaxing enough for you?”

“I just feel like if I talk anymore, I might vomit. I haven't shared this much with anyone since the third grade.”

“Wow, maybe I can moonlight as a therapist.”

“Only a therapist for me, though, right?”

“Of course, that's me, Lexi Harlow—Autumn Blake's personal therapist.”

I huffed out a laugh while saying, “But seriously, I could really go for some music

right now. Do you want to share an earbud?"

"I don't know. You might listen to some trash music..." she tapered off.

"Lexi, I listen to your music," I pointed out.

"Oh," she paused. "Yeah, I guess you do. Gimmie that." She ripped the AirPods out of my hand.

I shook my head while reaching to pull the other AirPods out of my bag. While looking inside my carry-on, it hit me.

"Oh, shit." My luggage was onboard the plane that I had missed. "I think my suitcase is gone," I panicked.

Lexi looked around as if she were expecting my suitcase to be on the ground somewhere near us. "Shit! I should have reminded you to ask if they could hold your luggage at the San Diego Airport! I'm so sorry!"

Seeing her frantic expression helped lessen my worry, for some reason. I wasn't sure if it was because it seemed like she cared so much about me or if I had just realized that there were more important things to focus on. Regardless, it was just a suitcase; it could be replaced. What couldn't be replaced? Meeting Lexi Harlow couldn't be. Talking to someone about my emotional baggage for the first time in a long time couldn't be. Supporting my mom when she needed me the most couldn't be. My dad's funeral couldn't be.

My face softened as I said, "Hey, it's okay. I can buy new things. I just need to focus on getting to the funeral...wearing this." I motioned to my current attire as my face contorted into a frown. "Well, at least I won't be naked," I bargained.

“Why would you be naked?”

“You never know,” I said, wiggling my eyebrows at her. I placed the right AirPods in my ear and watched as Lexi shook her head and did the same on her left side. Scrolling through my extensive list of songs, I took my time searching for something good and eventually found just what I was looking for.

Currently playing – Edge of Midnight by Miley Cyrus ft. Stevie Nicks.

Seeing Lexi nod in approval next to me, I closed my eyes as I leaned my head against the headrest.

I woke up to see Lexi playing the imaginary drums as she hit her lap with her hands while jamming out to the music.

Currently playing – Misery Business by Paramore

I immediately broke out into laughter, causing Lexi to be snapped out of her private jam session. By the look on her face, I could clearly tell that she was hoping I would keep sleeping throughout the whole song. Biting my lip, I smiled while staring at her deviously as I began to play the best air guitar possible and mouth along to the words. I heard Lexi laugh audibly through the headphones and then proceed to join in. Both of us were furiously head-banging while emphatically lip-synching the words as we put on a show for no one except ourselves.

Or so I thought.

That's when I caught Andrew snickering at us from the corner of my eye. Lexi followed my gaze, still lost in the music, as she looked him dead in the eyes and

unbuckled her seat belt to stand up. She started to rock out even harder than before. Lexi turned back to me and clicked my seatbelt until it came unlocked. Grabbing my hand, she pulled me violently out of my seat while smirking at me, daring me to join in.

Do you honestly think I'd say no to Lexi Harlow?

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

I grabbed my phone as a makeshift microphone and started performing like my life depended on it. I then shoved the phone in front of Lexi's face as she began to sing the words aloud. By the time the song ended, we both broke out in breathless laughter, too tired to conjure any real sound. Andrew started with a slow clap that gradually became faster as he applauded our oh-so-phenomenal performances.

"That was more tiring than actually performing at one of my concerts."

Panting heavily, I smiled back, unable to process what just happened. "So, is this what you do on these plane rides? Put on private shows for your flight crew?"

"Not usually, but being here with a friend is making things more interesting," she admitted as her chest still heaved from the previous workout.

"Ha! I did it! I made Lexi Harlow become friends with me!" I bounced my legs so that my feet tapped against the floor as I threw my arms up into the air.

"Yeah, yeah," Lexi rolled her eyes.

"Wait, if this isn't your normal routine, then what do you usually do?"

"Sleep, watch movies, get massages, and sometimes karaoke."

"You have karaoke?" I asked, visibly shocked, before registering the rest of what she had stated. "Wait, you have a masseuse onboard?"

The look of pure bewilderment on my face caused her to smile as Andrew chimed in

and said, “You have no idea.”

“Oh, fuck off, Andrew,” Lexi scolded playfully.

“How about something more...tame? Do you have any board games?”

She paused, opening her mouth slightly before closing it again. “I don't know. Let me check.”

“So, you're telling me you have a masseuse on the plane but not a deck of cards or something?”

Lexi walked toward the head of the plane, and without turning around, she stuck her middle finger up in the air, then disappeared behind a blue curtain. When she returned, she held a box with the word UNO on the cover as she glared at me.

“For your information, my masseuse isn't here. She doesn't fly with me all the time, the same way my chef doesn't always fly with me. This time, it's only my two security guards, two flight attendants, my assistant, and the pilots,” Lexi retorted, feeling proud.

“You have a chef?” I exclaimed.

“Oh my god,” she rolled her eyes, causing Andrew to laugh. “You know what? Never mind. I never claimed to be low maintenance.”

Flying High

I watched Lexi approach the table next to the lounge and take a seat in one of the vacant chairs. She slammed the UNO box down while pouting. I moved toward the table and sat opposite her. I took my phone out of my pocket and looked at the time.

12:45 p.m.

It had been around two hours since we took off. Only four left to go. While Lexi split the deck, I checked my notifications. No new messages from my mom...not that I'd be able to receive any texts from up here anyway.

“Okay.” Lexi’s voice caused me to look up as she began explaining the rules of UNO.

“Lexi, I know how to play UNO.”

“Oh,” she whispered as though she were embarrassed. “Then let's play.”

“It’s on.” I narrowed my eyes at her while cracking my knuckles and stretching my neck to the side.

Lexi smirked and began her turn without saying a word. Three rounds of UNO later, I was eating my own words. Lexi had won every single round and was about to win another. Maybe if I changed the color to red, then she wouldn’t be able to use her—

“UNO!” Lexi shouted.

“Shit,” I mumbled while placing down a red four.

Whipping out a blue four, Lexi had once again kicked my ass at UNO.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“HA! You sure you don't want me to explain how to play the game again?”

I flared my nostrils while pursing my lips and said, “Why don't we play something else that doesn't involve you completely destroying me?”

“That might be hard. I’m good at everything,” she teased.

“I bet I can win at karaoke,” I said without even thinking about who I was talking to.

Lexi snorted at my statement. “Okay, first of all, you don't win at karaoke, and second, are you joking?”

Well, I can’t back down now.

“I've been known to carry a tune,” I shrugged nonchalantly.

“You know I'm an award-winning singer, right?” She reminded me. “Actually, you know what? You think you can ‘beat’ me at karaoke? Let's find out.”

My eyes widened at the thought of what I had just done. Lexi stood from the table and walked over to the lounge area while calling for a flight attendant. A short girl with blonde hair and dusty freckles appeared from behind the blue curtain up ahead. She wore black slacks and a black vest with a white collared shirt underneath. Loosely tied around her neck was a red scarf to accent the uniform. She flashed Lexi a polite smile while awaiting further instruction.

“Wait—”

“Ashley, can you please hook up the karaoke machine to the TV?”

“Sure, no problem,” Ashley complied as she began to connect wires and flip through broadcasting channels.

“Lexi,” I warned. She paid no mind to my hesitation and grabbed two microphones lying on the ground next to the karaoke machine. “I was just joking! Lexi, please,” I begged as I slowly stood up from the table with my arms held out in front of me. She responded by chucking a microphone in my direction as I scrambled to catch it, fumbling over my own two feet. I just narrowly avoided falling. “There's no way I—”

“You think you're a better singer? Prove it. Pick a song,” she demanded, cutting me off.

Ashley gave Lexi the remote, then turned toward me and smiled. “Good luck. You'll need it,” she snickered before turning around and making her way back over to the blue curtain.

I wish I could disappear behind that curtain right now.

“Oh, you're in for it now,” Andrew mumbled before putting his glasses on and burying his nose in a book.

Well, fuck.

Thrusting the remote into my stomach, Lexi smirked and said, “Here.”

I held the remote out and pointed it toward the TV as I scrolled through, looking for a safe option before deciding on Therefore I am by Billie Eilish.

Lexi tsked at me while shaking her head and snatching the remote back.

“Oh, no, that just won't do,” she concluded while scrolling through the list of songs herself. “Ah, here we go.”

Up Next – Bohemian Rhapsody by Queen

“Oh, you’re enjoying this, aren't you?”

“Yes.”

Rolling my eyes at her, I put my hands on my hips. “Fine, I'll sing the song.”

“Damn right, you will.”

“Butttt you have to sing it with me.”

Lexi raised her eyebrows and cocked her head to the side. “Okay, fine. You’ve got a deal.” Lexi stuck out her hand for me to shake.

I grasped her palm with my own as we stared into each other's eyes with underlying determination.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Yeah, I was definitely in deep shit. How had I ended up in this situation again? Hopefully, her vocals would drown out my pitchiness, for both of our sakes.

Bohemian Rhapsody, starting in 3,2,1...

The lyrics appeared on the screen, and I squeezed the microphone between my fingers. I quietly began to sing as I tried to immerse myself within the music. I felt Lexi's gaze fixed on me as she stood with her arms crossed.

What's that saying? Play stupid games, win stupid prizes.

My voice cracked slightly. Lexi hunched forward, covering her mouth with her hands, stifling laughter. Seeing her amusement gave me confidence. I knew I wasn't a good singer, but that wouldn't stop me from enjoying whatever the hell was happening right now. I mean, how many other people could say they flew in a private jet with Lexi Harlow and sang karaoke? I strutted toward her and lifted her chin with my fingers while rotating my hips as I crouched downward. Stumbling over my words, I mumbled the parts of the song that I didn't know. I hadn't heard Bohemian Rhapsody in ages. If you had asked me to sing this when I was sixteen, I wouldn't have struggled so much. Still, I kept on singing, even though every other word I belted was wrong. Not even the lyrics on the screen could help me. Lexi shook her head and brought the microphone to her lips as she started to sing along. I was still crouching when Lexi moved to circle me in a sultry manner while playing with my hair, causing me to stand and face her as we sang together. Lexi held out her hand, prompting me to take it. Our fingers found each other as she twirled her arm, clumsily spinning me in a circle. Not very fitting for the song choice, but hilarious, nonetheless. I ran over to the couch and kicked off my shoes before climbing onto the

cushions. Her eyes were wide with amusement. She ripped off her shoes and joined me as we jumped around like maniacs. We continued singing the rest of the song together, and even though I was dreading singing karaoke in the first place, I was sad when the song finally ended. I collapsed onto the couch and watched Lexi as she continued to hum. There were no string of words or amalgamation of sentences that could describe how mesmerized I was by her voice. She always sounded amazing and right now was no exception. The screen on the TV faded to black as the words disappeared. Suddenly, I heard a roaring round of applause coming from the front of the plane. Andrew, Ashley, and two other women were cheering as they applauded our—or, more likely, Lexi's—performance.

“What a show!” A woman with a short brown bob commented. She grinned widely as she clapped her hands together while holding her phone between her thumb and her forefinger.

“Thanks, Macy,” Lexi smiled brightly while still standing on the couch. “Autumn, this is Macy, my assistant; Lilly, one of the flight attendants; and Ashley, the other flight attendant, who I think you had the pleasure of meeting earlier.”

“Hi,” I waved shyly, despite just singing like a maniac in front of them.

“Hello.” Lilly gave a slight bow at the waist.

Lilly looked maybe mid-twenties, but she carried herself with the knowledge of someone older. Her posture was ridged as she stood with her shoulders back and feet together. Her arms were tucked behind her, and she wore a strained smile on her face. She had shoulder-length brown hair with subtle caramel highlights and hazel-colored eyes. Both she and Ashley wore the exact same uniform, but still, somehow, hers seemed more put together.

“Nice to meet you, officially,” Ashley greeted.

Andrew interrupted us with a loud wolf whistle as he continued cheering us on. Just when I thought there wouldn't be any more surprises, Brian peaked his head out of the door toward the rear of the plane.

“So, I guess I missed the show then, huh?” He questioned.

“One hell of a performance, I'll say,” Andrew answered.

“Well, maybe they'd be willing to do an encore just for you,” Ashley proposed while raising her eyebrows and looking in our direction.

At this, I became suddenly aware of the fact that there were people from every end of the plane staring at us.

“Oh, hell no,” I mumbled.

Lexi shook her head and then said, “You want to go to one of my concerts? Buy a ticket.”

“Fine,” Brian mumbled before closing the door and leaving once again.

Everyone else followed suit as they all retreated to their respective areas to resume whatever they had originally been doing before they stopped to watch our impromptu concert.

“And on that note,” Andrew said as he stood from his seat. “Goodnight, ladies.”

He made his way to the back of the plane and exited toward the bedrooms. Lexi and I were officially alone. She plopped down on the couch next to me.

“I can't believe you made me do that!”

“Me?” Lexi slapped her hand against her chest. “You're the one who claimed to be a better singer. I just wanted you to prove yourself.”

“So...” I sat up straight while batting my eyelashes. “What’d you think?”

Lexi smiled and said, “You were perfect.”

She was joking, right? I sounded like a dying hyena. “You’re fucking with me, right?”

“Nope. You were the main event, and I’m just glad I got to be a part of it.”

“Okay, now I know you're just fucking with me!”

Lexi sat upright as well and nudged my shoulder with her own. “Autumn, just shut up and take the compliment.”

“Thank you...I think?”

“So, since you clearly won—”

I glared at her. “Yeah, ‘clearly.’”

“What do you want to do now?”

“Well,” I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know about you, but I’m fucking exhausted, so how about a movie?”

Head In The Clouds

Lexi called for Lilly and asked for a bowl of popcorn as she sat on the floor, sifting through movies.

“One bowl of popcorn, coming right up, and don't worry, I won’t burn it like Ashley always does,” Lilly promised.

From behind the thin blue curtain, I heard a small voice yell, “Hey, that was one time!”

“More like three,” Lilly smirked while disappearing behind the curtain herself.

“Oh, and blankets, please!” Lexi added.

“I’m on it!” Lilly answered.

“No, I’ll do that. You focus on not burning the popcorn!”

“That was you, not me!”

I laughed to myself at their banter. It seemed like Lilly and Ashley had known each other for years. Did they meet as flight attendants? How were they so close? Work friendships, or any friendships for that matter, didn’t really work out for me. How long did you have to know someone to have that kind of relationship because there was no one in my life who I bonded with like that. A new job meant my old friends would stop contacting me, and I would have to start all over from square one. I want what Lilly and Ashley had.

“So, what’s the story with those two?” I asked.

Lexi seemed confused at first before realizing who I was talking about. “Oh, Ashley and Lilly? They’re married. Five years this December.”

Oh.

Maybe that’s why I wanted what they had.

“No. Fucking. Way.”

“Way,” she laughed. They had that whole married couple bickering thing going on. It was kind of cute. “So, what kind of movies do you like?” Lexi asked.

“Action. No contest.”

“Okay, so looks like I have The Tomorrow War, Oblivion, 2012—”

“Oh, 2012! I love that movie!” I yelled excitedly as I shimmied in my seat.

Lexi winced at my volume. “I’m not deaf, you know.”

“Is this better?” I whispered.

Lexi glared at me. “Up until this point, I enjoyed your company, but now I only tolerate it.”

“Rude!”

It was a strange feeling, but I felt so at ease when I was with Lexi. Even though I was in a metal tin, thousands of feet in the air, surrounded by people I never knew until today, I somehow felt like I belonged. I tried to tuck my legs under me, but the tight fabric of my jeans prevented me from moving. I shifted on the couch uncomfortably as I became a little more aware of the fact that I should have worn an outfit that I could lounge about in for the plane ride instead of jeans. Pulling at the ends of my sweater, I stretched the fabric, hoping it would loosen its grip on me. Emotionally comfortable but physically uncomfortable. Story of my life. Couldn’t have it both ways.

“You okay?”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“I just have no idea why I thought the best loungewear for a plane ride was jeans and a sweater.”

“Oh, you can borrow something from my room. I have sweats and t-shirts back there in the drawers,” Lexi suggested nonchalantly while loading up the movie.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Lexi shrugged while pushing herself off the floor.

“My bedroom is behind that door and straight back.” She pointed to the rear of the plane, where Brian and Andrew had disappeared to.

“Okay, but just know that if I put one of your shirts on, you may never get it back.”

“Better not be the shirt with the skull on it then!” She yelled, sounding quieter as I had put some distance between us.

Walking back, I saw three doors and continued to the one that was directly straight ahead. When I went inside, I was met with a scent of cherry as it wafted through the air. Her room was huge...for a plane. She had a large bed with a gray comforter in the center and two nightstands on either side. There was a gray lamp resting on the right one. Above her bed was a large abstract painting filled with whites, blacks, grays, and golds that all collided in a swirl-like pattern. Scanning the room, I noticed a white dresser perched against the left wall as I made my way over to it. I opened each drawer until I found something I thought would work for lounging around—a gray sweatshirt and green sweats. I took off my clothes so fast, if there was a world

record for fastest time to get undressed, I would've won it. I sighed in relief as I donned the new, more comfortable clothes. While heading back toward the door, I stopped short of the way there and turned around to rummage through the drawers again. After finding what I was looking for, I exited the room and headed into the main area.

Hope

"You're back," Lexi beamed, now curled up on the couch under a blanket while holding a bowl of popcorn.

"You miss me?"

Ignoring my question, she complimented, "You look cute."

"Well, you always look cute."

"Wow, look who's getting more confident in their flirting skills," Lexi gathered.

Was I that obvious? Maybe I should be more subtle. Man, I'm out of practice.

I'd never actually hit on a girl before. Sure, I always knew from a young age that I was attracted to both men and women, but I didn't put much thought into it at the time. I never exactly pictured myself with a female, but I also never really pictured myself with anyone in general. Lexi was everything I wanted in a partner, but I never thought I would actually meet her, let alone that we would ever date. I wasn't saying that we could date now, but the thought didn't seem so far away anymore. I just wondered if all this time she had been flirting with me, too.

"You're one to talk."

“I’m always confident when I flirt,” Lexi winked.

She winked.

Did that mean she was flirting with me? Or was she just being nice? I was usually great at reading people, but right now, it seemed like my brain had turned to mush.

“Here.” I chucked a shirt at her.

“What’s this?”

“Your favorite shirt,” I responded. “The one with the skull.”

Lexi held up the shirt as she looked at it skeptically. “Why?”

“I didn’t put a bomb in it if that’s what you’re worried about,” I chuckled as she examined the shirt. “I just thought you might want to change your top, considering you’re still wearing a shirt with chains along the sleeves, which I imagine isn’t very comfortable.”

“Oh,” Lexi said, seeming slightly surprised. “Thanks. That’s nice of you.”

I laughed at her polite confusion. “You don’t have to wear it; I just thought you might want to.”

I moved closer and reached to take the shirt back when Lexi pulled her arm away, refusing to hand it over.

“No, I’ll wear it.”

All of a sudden, the shirt she was wearing was ripped off her body as she threw it to

the side. My eyes widened at the sight. Lexi Harlow sat in front of me wearing a purple bra, completely naked from the waist up. The blanket was covering her stomach slightly, but it was still low enough that it left her chest in full view. She then straightened her posture as she wiggled one arm through the new shirt, followed by the other, before pushing her head through the top.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Blushing hysterically, I glanced away.

“Come on, sit down.” Lexi patted the cushion next to her. “Are we watching this movie or what?”

“Yeah, wouldn't want the popcorn to get cold,” I joked awkwardly while sitting about a foot away from her.

“You're going to have to move closer if you want to share the blanket.”

“Well, only if I have to,” I jabbed as I inched toward her.

“Ha-ha,” she mocked while giving me a dirty look.

She pressed play as we watched the screen come to life on the TV. 2012 was one of my favorite movies, yet I couldn't seem to concentrate. All I could think about was the fact that this was simultaneously the best and worst day of my life.

Why was it the worst? I missed my flight. I was trapped in a bathroom after an earthquake. I got into an argument with my mom and blew the situation out of proportion. I had to see my sister for the first time in years. I had to deal with the repressed feelings about the relationship I had with my father. I had to go to a funeral.

Why was it the best? I missed my flight, which started the domino effect of events that led me to where I currently was. I was trapped in an airport during an earthquake with my favorite singer. I realized that my mom needed me just as much as I needed her. I found someone I now considered a good friend, or maybe even more. I opened

up about the repressed feelings I had toward my father. I had to go to a funeral so that I could finally learn how to move on.

I didn't believe in destiny, but maybe this was where I was meant to be. Maybe all of this happened for a reason. Or, who knows, maybe this wasn't where I was meant to be. But who cared? It didn't have to be written in the stars for me to know that I was exactly where I wanted to be.

I think I made it about forty-five minutes into the movie before I started to feel my eyelids get heavy. I tried so hard to stay awake, but after nodding off several times, sleep finally took hold.

What felt like days later, my eyes fluttered open as I looked around and took in my surroundings. The lights were dim, and the sound of voices could be heard in the distance. As I began to focus, I made out squiggly figures on a screen in front of me. I started to remember where I was. I then looked down and noticed Lexi's head resting on my lap with her eyes closed. Her chest was moving up and down rhythmically. I let a small smile graze my lips as I became aware of the fact that my hand was lying gently on her neck. Her legs were curled up in front of her as she lay on her side with her body sprawled out on the couch. Without meaning to, I began to caress her face, causing her to stir slightly. Out of nowhere, a loud booming came from the speakers as the dramatic music in the movie intensified. Lexi jerked violently and propelled herself up into a sitting position. I yanked my hand away in response as she abruptly shot up.

"What the fuck?"

"It's just the movie. Everything's fine," I explained, trying to ease her worry.

Lexi sighed in relief before looking down and realizing that her sudden movement had caused the popcorn bowl that was sitting next to her to fall over and spill on the floor.

“Crap,” she frowned.

“I got it.”

“No, it’s fine. I can get it,” she waved, brushing off my help.

We both kneeled down in front of the couch to pick up the bits of popcorn and began placing them back into the bowl, one by one. Our attention was torn from the mess on the floor when we heard a ding and saw the ‘fasten seatbelt’ sign light up. The plane started to shake violently as I grabbed hold of the couch to stabilize myself.

Air earthquake?

That is when I realized the one earthquake I had experienced was clouding my worldview. It was just fucking turbulence.

Lexi instinctively reached out and clutched the first thing she could reach, which just so happened to be my boob. Without the chance to fully secure my footing, seeing as how I was crouched down, we both toppled over, and she fell, landing on her back, pulling me down with her. I fell roughly on top of her, causing the air in my lungs to be forced out. She was still holding my boob when the shaking stopped. And just like that, the ‘fasten seatbelt’ sign turned off. Lexi’s dark hair was haphazardly laying across her face as I moved my hands to brush aside the uncooperative strands. Looking down at my chest, she yanked her hand off of me as if she had been burned. Her eyes met mine. In a split second, she was snapped out of the trance she was just in.

“Ya know, if you wanted to cop a feel, you could’ve just asked,” I smirked. “I would’ve said yes.”

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” she said with a horrified look on her face.

“Lexi,” I laughed, “It’s fine. I know it wasn’t on purpose.”

“Yeah,” she breathed.

Seeing the dazed look she still possessed, I asked, “Are you okay?”

Taking in air, Lexi replied, “You know what? As long as you’re here, I’m okay.”

“I don’t think me or my boob can protect you from plane turbulence.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Lexi smiled while shaking her head slightly. “But you can protect me from myself,” she admitted.

Without warning, she raised her hand to my face and brushed my cheek before settling on the back of my neck. Somehow, she wasn’t staring at me anymore, but instead, staring right into me.

“Lexi...” I cautioned as I noticed her face approaching mine.

“Autumn...” she trailed off.

Without warning, she pulled at my neck, bringing me toward her as our lips inched closer together. With one final tug, our lips crashed into each other. It wasn't a frantic kiss of sexual tension. It was a slow kiss filled with passion. Our lips moved together rhythmically, and my hand found its way to her waist. I could taste the vanilla Chapstick on her lips as our tongues collided in a heated motion. Out of all the kisses I'd ever had, this one broke the scale. It felt like I was experiencing my first kiss for the first time all over again, but now it was like I could actually feel it. The world around me seemed to fade away, and all I could focus on were the two of us. Lexi moved her hand from my neck to my hair and tugged gently. I bit her bottom lip, eliciting a guttural moan to escape from her mouth. I clenched my thighs together as the heat began to build between my legs. I didn't know how long we kissed each other, but to me, it wasn't long enough. Pulling apart, I opened my eyes slowly and saw the look on Lexi's face. She was smiling, but at the same time, she was crying.

Pushing myself up and away from her, I asked, “What's wrong? I'm so sorry, did you not want...?”

Lexi laughed as she sat up too. She moved closer to me, our shoulders touching, causing a shiver to run through my body.

“Autumn, I promise you, for once in my life, I’m actually okay. More than okay, really,” she admitted, wiping her tears away and staring down at her lap. “I just...I haven't felt as seen as I do when I’m with you. You listen to me. You make me laugh. You make me feel beautiful. You make me feel safe.”

I gently lifted her head so that our eyes met again. “You make me feel heard. You make me feel like my pain is justified. You make me feel like healing is possible. You make me happy.”

Lexi smiled, refusing to look away, her eyes glistening. “Did we switch personalities there for a second there? You gained my confidence at flirting, and I gained your cute but cringy shyness?”

I shook my head and tried to hide the growing grin on my face. I pushed my hair to the side with my middle finger, flicking her off as I laughed. “Fuck you.”

“Anytime, Autumn. Any fucking time.”

When my parents' relationship went south, I gave up on the idea of being happy. I gave up on the idea of feeling secure. I gave up hope. Lexi made me question all of my beliefs in the best way possible. I had always been a pessimist, but now I wasn't so sure. To say I was an optimist would be a bit of a stretch, but one thing was for certain—Lexi gave me hope.

Eat, Prey, Love

“How is this possible? I've known you for...” Lexi glanced down to check her phone and look at the time before speaking again, “Five hours?”

“Really, that's it, five hours? I feel like we've been through a war together.”

“Tell me about it.” Lexi stood and reached out her hand to me. Accepting her offer, she pulled me off the floor with an unexpected amount of strength. I thanked her while trying to hide my face so she wouldn't see my cheeks, tinged with pink. A low grumble was heard as Lexi looked down at her stomach and said, “Want food?”

“God yes,” I said, my mouth watering at the thought of eating for the first time in what felt like days.

“Hey, Lilly!” Lexi called with her hands cupped around her mouth. “Can you bring two menus with some dinner options?”

“You got it, Lexi!”

Lexi turned off the television and pressed a button on a separate remote, which brightened the dark room. We both walked over to the dining table and sat across from each other. As we sat in silence and waited for the menus, I could feel the awkwardness consume us.

“So...have you kissed any other girls on a private jet recently?”

That was all Lexi needed to come back to life as she threw her napkin at me. “Don't be stupid,” she cackled while rolling her eyes.

Stifling laughter, I grabbed the napkin and stuck my tongue out at her. A few seconds later, Lilly walked out with two menus. I shifted my attention to Lilly, who was now standing with her arm outstretched and prompting me to take a menu.

“Thank you.”

She nodded before turning to Lexi and examining the empty plate that sat in front of her. With a look of confusion, Lilly then asked, “Oh, sorry Lexi, do you need a napkin?”

Then the worst idea popped into my head as I answered Lilly’s question. “No, Lexi actually gave me her napkin because she said she’d prefer to have a damp cloth heated at exactly 78 degrees Fahrenheit to avoid smudging her makeup.”

“Oh,” Lilly stuttered while failing to grasp the joke. “Uhhh...of course.”

Lexi opened her mouth to deny the accusations, but before she could, I interjected, “And from now on, she would prefer it if you didn’t address her directly but instead only speak to me.”

“Umm...okay,” Lilly squinted while looking at me quizzically, still failing to understand my humor.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

In the distance, a heavy laugh could be heard. We all turned our heads to the front of the plane, and a voice that was unmistakably Ashley's began to shout. "She's messing with you, you idiot! She got you good!"

Lilly whipped her head back around to look at me and Lexi as she tried to examine our facial expressions. I stayed serious for as long as I could without cracking a smile, but after six seconds, I broke out into laughter. Lexi glared at me, but the small smile on her lips was evident. In no time at all, she too was laughing hysterically alongside me. Lilly blushed and politely took our orders before heading away to prepare our food.

"You're a dick, you know that?"

"I thought she would catch on to the joke!" I exclaimed defensively.

Twenty minutes later, it was Ashley, this time, who returned to bring us our food. I had ordered pasta with zucchini fritters, and Lexi opted for a steak, medium rare, with a side of asparagus. Both of us sat in silence as we devoured our food without even a single crumb left to spare.

"Everything to your liking, Ms. Blake?"

"I didn't even know I was that hungry until you mentioned food," I grumbled while leaning back in my chair.

“Honestly, me either,” she disclosed. “I was focusing on other things.” Lexi looked at me while fidgeting with her fingers. Before I could ask what she was referring to, she continued, “So, how long of a drive do you think you’ll have from LAX?”

I furrowed my brow, trying to figure out what exactly would happen when we landed. Whenever I was with Lexi, I always somehow seemed to forget about everything else. Pondering her words, I tried to come up with a plan for when we arrived in LA. I didn't have a car or my suitcase, for that matter. I guess I could call a taxi, but how far was the drive?

“That's a good question,” I said while opening up my phone. Pulling up the GPS, I checked the distance from the airport to the church. “It'll take an hour and ten minutes to get there,” I revealed to her.

“Well, as of right now, we should land at around 2:15 p.m. California time,” Lexi stated while checking her phone for the time. “It’s 12:34 p.m. on the West Coast right now. What time is the funeral at?”

“3:00 p.m.,” I said flatly.

“Well, you might be a little late, but you'll still make it,” she prompted, trying to cheer me up.

“Yeah, I guess you're right,” I agreed, refusing to let negativity take hold.

We sat at the table for a while longer, debating whether we should get dessert. It wasn’t until I pushed away my plate and looked down at my lap that I realized I had spilled pasta sauce on the shirt Lexi had loaned me.

“I feel so gross right now,” I cringed while examining my stained top.

“Do you want to take a shower before we land? I can lend you one of my black dresses to wear,” Lexi offered.

My face lit up at the thought of taking a refreshing shower after being trapped in an airport and then flying on a plane for most of the day.

“Yes, please!” I sighed with relief.

“Here, follow me.” Lexi stood while walking past the table and toward the door that led to her bedroom.

Following her instructions, I bolted up from the chair, accidentally hitting my knee on the table in the process. Refusing to let her know this, I stifled a yell as I bit my lip to keep from blurting out words of profanity. Slightly limping behind her, I walked through the door as we made our way into her room. Lexi headed over to her dresser as she dug through the drawers and pulled out a plain, mid-length black dress.

“Wow, that's perfect.”

“I bet it will look amazing on you,” she smiled, walking toward me and reaching to give my hand a squeeze. After pulling away, she placed the dress neatly on her bed.

“Not too amazing, though, right? I mean, it is a funeral.”

“No, it'll be perfect. Sexy but not slutty,” she winked at me. “You'll look beautiful.”

So often, the words that came out of her mouth left me speechless.

How do I reply to a compliment like that?

“Uhh...I—”

Lexi opened a door adjacent to her room, on the right side, that I had failed to notice even existed until this very moment.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Here's the bathroom, and there are some clean towels hanging on the rack. I'll be out in the lounge if you need me,” she explained, turning to exit the room.

Before she got two steps in, I grabbed her arm. “Wait!” She turned her head to look at me. “Uhh, can you stay in here, maybe? Until I'm finished.”

“Sure. Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “Everything's good.”

There was no real reason why, but I just wanted her to stay.

Lexi laid down on the bed, favoring her right side as I walked toward her to pick up the dress she had laid out. I glanced up at her, then paused almost as if I had been put in a trance. She looked so much more relaxed and vulnerable than she did in all of the pictures of her that were in the media. There was no editing, no makeup, no extravagant outfit...it was just her, and that was enough. She looked so beautiful.

I think she sensed I was staring at her because she glanced up to find I had not left the room.

“You sure everything's okay?”

“Yeah. I just think my shower's gonna have to be a cold one, now.”

The butterflies grew in my lower abdomen as I walked toward the bathroom and shut the door behind me. I hadn't had this feeling since high school. I forgot how thrilling

and amazing it was. My heart was racing, but my hands were steady. It's like I was scared, but in a good way. It reminded me of something I read in this article a while ago on why people like true crime documentaries and horror stories. Apparently, it was all about the safe simulation of fear—something that managed to excite and scare you but not so much that you feared for your life.

Maybe that's what love is.

Not to say that I was in love...but deeply "in like."

I hung the dress on the back of the door and stood in front of the mirror as I took off each piece of clothing I had on. Analyzing my appearance, I let my eyes roam over my body. I did not have a flat stomach. My stretch marks were visible. I had acne scars on my face. My teeth were not pearly white. I had small boobs. My thighs were too big. Yet, for some reason, when I looked at the person staring back at me—for the first time in a long time—I thought she was beautiful. She was worthy. She was strong. She was flawed. But she was also perfect in her own way. For as long as I could remember, my identity had always been defined by other people...by my father's absence.

But I was so much more than that.

That didn't change the fact that I had emotional scars that I would never be able to fully heal from, but scars could be beautiful too. Besides, having a perfect anything would be way too boring.

I stepped into the large walk-in shower and slid the glass door closed behind me.

I grabbed the towel on the rack next to the shower and used it to pat myself dry

before throwing it into the dirty bin under the sink. As I bent down to pick up my bra up, I stopped mid-way, frozen in horror.

I fucked up.

I didn't have an extra pair of underwear. I pursed my lips and sighed deeply while looking around to make sure there wasn't some kind of hidden camera recording me. That's when I realized I had probably been watching *The Office* a little too much. I tried to ignore the feeling of shame that engulfed my body as I swallowed my pride and knelt down to pick up my underwear, bringing them to my nose. They smelled clean. Squinting my eyes, I stared at the crotch. They looked clean.

Man, I could really use my suitcase right about now.

With no other option, I slid the old underwear up my legs. I quickened my pace as I put on my bra and shimmied into the dress. I know a lot of people put dresses on by pulling them over their heads, but my hair was too wet to even try and do it that way. My damp curls fell loosely on my shoulders, causing the dress to become slightly wet. I looked down at myself and began to smooth out the creases in the fabric. The dress actually fit pretty well. It had a square neckline with a small slit on up the thigh. The fabric clung to my curves it was so form fitting, almost too much. I could practically see what I had eaten for lunch. I contorted my arm behind me, attempting to zip up the dress before realizing it wasn't possible. I opened the door that led to the bedroom and peeked my head out.

"Yes?" Lexi asked with her attention still directed down at her phone.

"Can you zip this up for me?" I asked while still reaching my arms behind me to grasp the zipper. I struggled for a while longer, before realizing Lexi hadn't moved. "Lexi?"

“Sorry, it's just...you look.... just wow. I was right when I said you would look amazing, and I just failed to realize how amazing.”

And then the craziest thing happened.

I believed her. I did look amazing and it's so rare that I ever felt that way about myself. Lexi smiled at me while hopping onto her feet.

I pushed my hair out of the way as she sauntered behind me and pulled my zipper up. “Thank you.”

I felt her lower her lips next to my ear, her breath hitting my skin. “How are you so attractive, Autumn Blake?”

Then, in the blink of an eye, she was gone. I stood paralyzed, too stunned to move. While still trying to recover from what just happened, I felt a piece of clothing strike me on the shoulder, causing me to turn around. I saw a glimpse of Lexi's blurry figure rush inside the bathroom and close the door. What the hell did she throw at me? I grabbed the fabric from my shoulder, and almost fainted when I realized what it was.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

It was her fucking bra and her shirt.

This girl would be the death of me. What a way to go, though.

“You can go back to the lounge. I’m going to take a shower. Don’t worry, it’ll be quick,” Lexi yelled from inside the bathroom with the water running.

I tried my best not to picture her undressing and getting into the shower as the droplets of water ran down her back. I failed miserably. How could she have this much of an effect on me?

Fuck.

I let out a low, guttural moan as I exhaled and made my way back toward the lounge. Stopping at the door, I took a deep breath and exhaled once more. I started to leave the bedroom when a drop of water fell on my hand. I furrowed my brow, inspecting the ceiling.

Where the hell did that come from?

Seconds later, another drop fell to my feet. In my peripheral vision, I noticed the hair lying on my shoulders was still dripping. I almost slipped as I tried to walk back over to the bed. Looking around for a towel, I searched the whole room but couldn't find any.

All of them must be in the bathroom.

“Great,” I mumbled.

With no other choice, I knocked on the bathroom door.

“Yes?”

“I need a towel.”

“No, you just want to see me naked!”

I laughed quietly before responding, “Well, yeah, that would be nice, but unfortunately, I really do need a towel.”

From the other side of the door, I heard shuffling, then a thud.

“Ow,” her muffled voice groaned.

“Lexi?”

The door swung open slightly as Lexi peaked her head out. Her soaking wet hair was trickling onto the floor, much like my own. She poked her arm through and handed me a towel.

“Next time, come up with a better excuse if you want to see me naked.”

I took the towel while smirking as she slammed the door in my face.

Come up with excuses to see her naked? Guess I had some homework to do.

Just A Crush

“Well, someone changed,” Andrew observed.

“Yeah, Lexi, let me borrow one of her dresses,” I shrugged while looking down at my outfit.

“You look great!” Brian beamed.

“Did I not look great before?” I joked.

“Uh, no, that's not—”

Ashley burst out from behind the blue curtain, ripping it open violently. She looked me up and down, then gasped, “Wow, you are one hot tamale! No wonder Lexi likes you.”

Lilly rushed out and started scolding Ashley. “Ashley, shut up! Don't tell her that Lexi has a crush on her, or she'll get embarrassed!”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

I sat down in the same seat I had been earlier during takeoff.

“Why would she be embarrassed about Lexi liking her? That's the best compliment ever!”

“No, that’s not what I meant! Lexi will be embarrassed.” Lilly rolled her eyes.

“Lexi does not embarrass easily, and I think it's pretty obvious to everyone with eyes that Lexi likes Autumn.” Ashley wiggled her eyebrows.

Right on cue, Lexi emerged from her bedroom, using a towel to wring out her still-dripping hair. “Well, thanks for that. I thought I was being subtle,” she mumbled.

Lexi was wearing black jeans and an oversized QUEEN t-shirt that hung loosely off one shoulder. Her hair clung to her face. Ashley and Lilly immediately sobered up.

“Don't worry, I still missed all the signs,” I laughed.

Lexi walked toward the flight attendants, then stopped directly in front of Ashley. She reached out and grabbed Ashley’s hands, placing both of them facing upward as she dropped the wet towel for her to catch. She glared at Ashley, refusing to blink. Both flight attendants scurried away with their heads hanging in shame. Brian and Andrew shared a knowing glance before the two of them buried themselves in a book.

“Soooo you have a crush on me?” I smirked at Lexi as she sat next to me.

“Maybe. Do you have a crush on me?”

“Like you didn’t already know that?” I put my knuckles on her forehead and knocked a few times.

She swatted my arm away. “I just need to hear you say it.”

I couldn't tell if she was just teasing me or if she was genuinely being sincere. Regardless, this finally gave me the opportunity to tell her how I felt.

“Alexandra Michelle Harlow, you are not just a celebrity crush, or a girl crush, or a brief infatuation. I like you very much.”

She smiled and licked her lips. “So I’m not your celebrity crush?”

“That's what you got from everything I said?” I shook my head at her. “No, you used to be.” She cocked her eyebrow and listened as I continued, “But now you're more than just a celebrity crush. Before, you were just an idea of a person—someone I only ever saw through a lens. Now, I have a crush on the real you, and not just the celebrity version of you.”

Lexi lifted her hand to cup my face as she moved her thumb across my jawline. “Autumn Kennedy Blake, I like you too.”

“Well, I would hope so, or I just made a complete fool of myself.”

Lexi grinned at me. “By the way, I kinda figured from the beginning that you liked me.”

Are. You. Kidding. Me.

“Then why did you make me tell you how I felt first?” I cried.

“More fun that way,” Lexi said smugly. I didn't get a chance to tell her how unfair that logic was because, almost instantly, she pulled my face toward hers, and for the second time that day, we kissed. This time, it was faster. More chaotic. Our lips moved together as I leaned in closer, desperate to taste more. I wrapped my hand around her neck, clawing at it with every movement. Not once throughout the kiss did she stop stroking my face with her thumb. Only when I couldn't breathe anymore did I pull away. “So, am I your celebrity crush again, now?” Lexi asked.

“Oh, shut up,” I blushed, pushing her hand off my face. “I can pretend like I never said you were my real crush and we can go back to you being my superficial celebrity crush if you want?”

“No!” She replied a little too fast. I smirked as she cleared her throat and deepened her voice. “Uhh, I mean...no, we're good, bro.”

“Bro?” I howled. “You're pushing your luck, Alexandra.”

“I like it when you say my full name.”

“Then I just might have to say it more often.”

“You're such a tease.”

I winked at her.

Lexi softly smiled as she looked down at my lap and reached for my hand.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

We stayed like that, our grips unwavering as neither of us dared to pull away. I rotated my head to the side and looked out the window. Clouds littered the sky and the ground was nowhere in sight. My troubles seemed so far away, but when we landed, everything would shift back into perspective.

“What do you think we would be doing right now if we hadn't met at the airport?” Lexi asked, staring intensely at our hands.

“Well, I'd be on the way to my dad's funeral, but instead of being here, I'd be on my original flight, probably surrounded by stinky feet and crying babies,” I chuckled.

“Autumn,” she laughed, poking me with her elbow. “Seriously, if we hadn't met, what do you think would be different right now?”

I sighed. So much would be different, more than I was able to conjure into words. “If I hadn't met you, I never would've dealt with any of the pain or resentment I held onto for so long. Meeting you gave me the courage I needed to express how I was feeling. You had the answers I was searching for.” Squeezing her hand gently, I realized this gesture had become somewhat of an unspoken language between the two of us. “Maybe it was you I was really searching for,” I added.

She leaned in close and then nestled her head between my neck and shoulder.

“And I'd be here on this flight, stressing over what everyone would think about my new music video and feeling like I would never be a good role model. Everything I have ever done has been put under a magnifying glass, even my mistakes. You helped me see that my past is not something I should try and hide. I may slip up sometimes,

and I know I'm not perfect, but that doesn't mean I'm not worthy of happiness.”

“I have never met anyone so deserving of a happy ending.”

“You.”

“No, Lexi. You.”

“What about both of us?”

“Yeah.” I let her words sink in. We were both worthy of good things that no amount of shitty childhood trauma or past mistakes could take away. “Both of us.”

“Thank you, Autumn. You know for walking into the same bathroom as me right before an earthquake,” she chuckled. “I’m glad I met you.”

Smirking at her while pushing my hair behind my ear, I asked, “So does that mean I can have your number then?”

“Dude,” she laughed as she hit my arm. Not a second later, a loud ding rang through the air as the fasten seat belt sign came on. “I think we are about to land,” Lexi said as she leaned over to buckle her seatbelt.

“Yeah.”

“You ready to go to your dad’s funeral?”

“As much as I can be.”

The Descent

The plane started to descend rapidly. The engine whirred, and the sides of the plane began to shake. The picture that seemed so far away came back into view as we got closer and closer to the ground. It wasn't long until the plane jostled as we landed roughly with a thud. Looking down at my phone, I saw that it was 2:19 p.m., which meant people would be arriving for the viewing of the casket right about now. I unbuckled my seatbelt and kneeled down to retrieve the bag out from underneath the seat. We slowed to a halt as Ashley and Lilly made their way over to the doors to begin unlocking them. Brian and Andrew stood as well and immediately started unloading suitcases. Even Macy appeared from around back, typing away on her phone. I watched as she popped a Bluetooth speaker into her ear and started to make several phone calls. Everyone moved like a well-oiled machine. I walked over to the sofa in the lounge and sat down to put on my sneakers. I cringed at the idea of wearing Converse to my dad's funeral, but I didn't have any other choice. Besides, what could he do about it? At least Lexi had let me borrow a dress so I wouldn't stand out too much.

"So, I guess this is it, huh?" Lexi asked while sitting down next to me.

"It doesn't have to be."

"Lexi, we are ready now," Andrew said while he and Brian stood next to the exit door.

"Hotel check-in is at 4:00 p.m., but if we get there earlier, I can figure out a way to push it up," Macy said while still looking down at her phone.

Lexi and I stood up and walked over to the exit. It was finally time to go our separate ways...again. The two of us walked down the stairs of the plane, and I couldn't tell if it was just my imagination playing tricks on me, but it seemed like Lexi was moving slower than usual. Before I turned to leave, I waved at Lilly and Ashley.

“It was nice meeting both of you. Thanks for all your help.”

“Don't worry; I think we'll see each other again soon,” Ashley winked before retreating into the main cabin of the plane.

God, I hope she's right.

“It was nice meeting you too, Autumn,” Lilly said cordially.

Yeah, I definitely offended her with all of my jokes.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

She and Ashley seemed to be complete opposites, but somehow, I felt like they complimented each other perfectly. As soon as my foot made contact with the pavement, my phone started vibrating. I pulled my phone out of my back and unlocked the screen. There were multiple text messages from my mom. I was thrust back into reality, and the gravity around me felt so heavy.

Mom: I was so worried! I'm glad you're okay. I can't wait to see you. Have a safe flight.

Mom: Also I can't tell if you're joking about meeting Lexi Harlow or not...guess I'll find out in a few hours.

Mom: TEXT ME WHEN YOU LAND.

Mom: I just made it to the church. Have you landed yet?

Mom: Autumn...there's something I need to tell you. Call me when you get this.

Mom: Hey, have you landed yet? I need to talk to you.

Mom: I can't believe this is happening. Please call me when you land.

I stopped dead in my tracks, causing Lexi to bump into me from behind.

“Hey!” She shouted before noticing the expression on my face. “Autumn, are you okay?”

I furrowed my brow, reading the messages for the fifth time now.

“I don’t—”

My phone started to ring. When I answered, the sound of my mother's voice echoed through the phone.

“Autumn,” she said, her words coming out strained. “No one's coming.”

“What?”

Lexi put her hand on my shoulder.

“It’s just me.” She broke out in a sob.

“You're not doing this alone, I promise,” I stated firmly. “I’m on the way.” Ending the phone call abruptly, I took a deep breath. Reality had set in. Everything had shifted back into focus. The romantic fairytale I was a part of for the last seven hours had come to an end. No more running from my problems. “I have to go,” I whispered while keeping my head down.

“What? Why?” Lexi asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said solemnly, “I just...I can’t right now. I can’t do this. I have to go.” I took off in the direction of the airport.

I knew my father wasn’t a great man. I could even admit that the reason I hated him for this long was because of all the pain he caused me, but I just never realized everyone else felt the same way too. The fact that no one bothered to show up to his funeral disgusted me.

Or maybe what really disgusted me was the fact I still wanted to skip out on the funeral too.

My father was no saint, but did he deserve this?

I don't know.

Regardless of the answer, who was I to preach morality when just a few hours ago I was on the fence about going to his funeral anyway? What would've happened if I didn't get on the plane? Would my mom sit in that church alone? Would she blame herself? Would I succumb to the guilt of leaving her there to suffer? Would I resent my dad even more? Would I resent myself?

Consumed by my thoughts, I hadn't realized that I had made it all the way to the front of the airport. I saw several taxis lining up along the side of the curb. I quickly flagged one down, and just as I was about to get in, a hand grabbed my arm.

"Autumn!" Lexi panted as though she had been chasing after me the whole time. I spun around to face her and noticed Brian and Andrew running in our direction, just a few feet behind her. "What's wrong?"

"My mom needs me, and I can't push her away—not again," I answered with glossy eyes. "I'm sorry, I have to go."

"Please just talk to me!" She yelled while still clutching my arm. I pulled away from her grasp, but she yanked me back again. "Wait—"

But I couldn't wait, and I couldn't explain why I felt the need to run away so suddenly. Despite all of the progress and growth that I thought I had made, I took twenty steps back when I decided on my next move.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Lexi, we were trapped together with no one else around, for fuck sake! Let’s not sit here and pretend we actually give a shit about each other anymore. I could be stuck in a room with an ex-con and convince myself that I had feelings for them.”

“Bullshit!” Lexi spat her words. “I know what you’re doing, Autumn.”

“Get over yourself, Lexi.” I ripped my arm out of her grasp once again and opened the taxi door. “Just forget we ever met.”

“Autumn—” she screamed at me, but it was too late.

I was a ball of emotions, and I couldn’t make sense of any of them. I wanted to be there for my mom, but I was terrified of facing the truth. I wanted to tell Lexi what was going on, but I couldn’t bring myself to admit that I had problems letting people get too close.

I shouted at the taxi driver as I sat inside the car. “5700 Mountain Avenue, San Diego!” The man looked at me in confusion prompting me to yell again. “Go!”

We sped off down the road while I looked out the rear window, watching as Lexi got smaller and smaller the farther, we got.

The last thing I wanted was for Lexi to hate me, but after pushing her away for the second time since we met, I wondered if that was even possible. The only person to blame was myself. This was my fault, and to no surprise I completely hated myself at that moment. As much as I regretted how I left things, I didn’t regret having to leave, because for all the times I was never there for my mom when she needed me, I had to

be there for her now. I guess this time I wasn't just running away from something; I was also running toward something. It still terrified me that the thing I was running toward happened to be my father's funeral. I was in such a rush to get somewhere I didn't even want to be in the first place. Would it be such a bad thing if I missed the funeral? Would it have really mattered if I'd just stayed in Lexi's arms, pretending that everything was okay?

After all, if you pretend long enough, you start to believe it, right?

Except that's not how life worked. I knew these words were just another lie I used to tell myself, and it was time I owned up to it. For so long, I had tried to pretend I was fine when I was actually slowly drowning. My grief wouldn't hold me back any longer. The only way I could move on was to face my father.

Alone Again

The taxi driver, whose name I found out was Ahmed, put on his radio as we nudged our way closer to the church. Cars in the lanes next to us raced through traffic. It seemed like they were all as eager as I was to get moving. The wind rustled the trees as the leaves scattered in the wind. It was autumn in its purest form. For some reason, in California, autumn didn't seem so bad. The sun still shined brightly, illuminating the window and causing the glass to refract the light. Everything seemed to be full of life. No matter spring, summer, fall, or winter—everything was thriving. Even the people here seemed to be happier. Sometimes when I was on the bus after work, I'd look out the window and think about how there were so many people driving to different destinations, yet out of pure coincidence all our journeys all ended up intersecting because we all decided to take the same road on the same day at the same time. All of us strangers, but our lives still somehow ran parallel. We were all in the same spot.

I looked out the window and watched as the cars from opposite lanes came into view.

A young girl, probably a teenager, sat alone, driving a convertible. Her blonde hair blew messily in the wind as the music on the radio blared through her speakers. Singing along, she bopped her head to the rhythm as she drove by. Next, a man, probably in his thirties, appeared beside us. The truck he was driving towered over the other cars on the road. I had to crane my neck upward just to look at him. He was covered in piercings scattered all over his face. One of his hands was placed casually on the wheel, while the other was resting on the door. His nails were painted black, which, for some reason, made him seem like a more trustworthy person. I think he could sense my staring because he glanced down at me. He smiled and offered a brief wave before speeding ahead. Then, there was a silver SUV with an older lady in it. She had short gray hair styled in a long bob and was wearing dark sunglasses perched on the bridge of her nose. She was the type of person I would immediately assume to be what most people call a “Karen,” except something small made me realize that she wasn't. There was a small sticker on the corner of her windshield—a pride flag. She leaned forward in her seat while laughing, revealing someone sitting next to her. It was a young girl who had buzzed hair and was wearing a sleeveless shirt accented by the cascade of tattoos on her shoulder. As suddenly as they had appeared next to us, they, too, had gone.

Everyone had different lives, different stories, and different destinations. That same logic could be applied for me to. There was no wrong or right way to live my life because that's just what it was—my life.

As stupid as it sounded, depression didn't seem to exist in California, but of course, things weren't always what they appeared to be. From the outside, I appeared to be handling the loss of my father quite well, but in reality, I was a broken mess trapped in a cycle of ongoing grief. From the outside, Lexi Harlow seemed to have a life that everyone else could only ever dream of, but in reality, she had gone through something worse than a nightmare. From the outside, people seemed to be able to handle anything that the world threw at them, but in reality, they could only take so much before they began to fall apart.

Fall.

My whole life felt like I was on a steady downward spiral. Things only ever seemed to get worse. I was falling, and I couldn't figure out a way to stop myself.

That is why my name is Autumn—I am destined to fall.

For once I just wanted to feel what it was like to fly.

After a few minutes of listening to Ahmed play Cardi B on repeat, I reached into my bag and pulled out my AirPods. Music was my escape, and I desperately needed an escape right now. Putting the buds in my ears, I tapped the song that most resembled how I felt at that current moment. I laid my arm against the door and rested my head on it.

Currently playing – I Can't Breathe by Bea Miller

Was I only put here on this earth to struggle with emotional trauma in a state of constant grief?

I had no idea what to expect when I arrived for the funeral. Would my mom be waiting for me outside the doors? Would there be anyone else who had decided to show up last minute? Would the anger I had toward my father outweigh my ability to step inside the church? Would my mom resent me for causing her to experience so much pain all on her own? How was supposed to make it through this? I never thought I would be so worried about “surviving” a funeral. The only person who usually didn't make it out alive was the person lying in the casket. Now, I wasn't so sure. All I ever wanted in life was to be happy.

Is that too much to ask for?

Apparently, it was.

The song ended as the taxi rounded a corner and left the highway. We pulled into a suburban community where houses and quaint shops lined the sidewalk. Lifting my head, I scanned the horizon. The sun was only slightly lower in the sky, but its presence was still known. People on bikes pedaled nearby, and golf carts trailed slowly behind us. Another song followed the previous one.

Currently playing - I'm Tired by Labrinth and Zendaya

I squeezed my eyes shut tightly as I attempted to ignore the sinking feeling in my stomach.

For the rest of the journey there, I tried my best to dismiss any negative, anxiety-ridden thoughts before they overwhelmed my mind. Sometimes music could be a blessing and a curse—It was a blessing because it described exactly what you were feeling. It was a curse because it described exactly what you were feeling. It only took ten more minutes to see a large church with a bell overhead in the distance. As we got closer to the building, I saw my mom sitting outside on the concrete steps in front of the main entrance. Her head was resting in her hands, with her elbows propped on her knees. Once we pulled to a stop, I paid the taxi driver and thanked him for the ride. Before getting out, I turned to look at the time displayed on the front console.

3:38 p.m.

If anyone was going to show up, they would be inside already, and seeing as how my mom sat outside alone, the answer was clear.

Flinging open the door, I stepped outside. The reflection of the sun blurred my vision, causing streaks of light to appear in front of me. After taking a few steps forward, I could make out my mom's face staring back at me. Her lip was trembling. She rose to her feet and gazed at me with wide eyes. There, at that moment, it was as though my feet had become glued to the sidewalk. I stopped moving. Questions filled my head. Would I be able to be there for her like she was for me? Was I strong enough for her to lean on me for support? Could I handle this? Did I really want to go to my father's funeral?

Yes.

The Truth

The weight holding my feet in place was lifted. Then I was running. I threw myself into my mom's arms.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be here sooner," I apologized as I wrapped my arms around her.

Without hesitation, she enveloped me in a tight hug. The tears began to swell in my eyes when I heard her voice.

“You're here now. That's all that matters,” she consoled.

We pulled apart after a few seconds, and I noticed she was crying too.

Glancing towards the church, I asked, “Is there anyone...” I didn't need to finish. She already knew the question.

“No,” she shook her head somberly.

I put my hand on her back as we walked closer to the stairs she had been sitting on before I arrived. My mom flattened her skirt and then took a seat on the top step.

“Is that a new dress?”

“Yeah, kinda,” I answered noncommittally. My mom wore a knee-length black skirt and a black long-sleeve blouse with a pair of strappy black sandals that had a half-inch heel. “Did you try calling anyone? Maybe they thought the funeral was on a different day?”

“They knew,” she sighed. “They all knew and just decided not to come.”

Why? “Why would they not show up?”

“Autumn, there's something you didn't know about your dad.” Oh great, more family secrets. “Your father didn't die from a heart attack. He had heart failure,” my mom explained.

I couldn't fully process her words. “You knew he was dying and didn't tell me?” I accused, trying to mask the look of hurt on my face.

“No! No, of course not! I just found out. He left letters, or more like short notes, for

each of us,” she confessed in a whisper. Her eyes drifted downward as she continued. “There was a history of heart disease on your father’s side. Your father hated going to the doctor. He claimed they were full of shit and only existed to steal money. Eventually, he fainted while out at a bar, and they called an ambulance. That’s when the doctors told him he had heart failure. It didn’t matter, though, because he refused surgery. He said it was because he didn’t trust their judgment, but I think it was really because of money. No one even knew about his condition until he sent the letters. He refused to open up or ask anyone for help.”

He had to have noticed symptoms before he fainted and instead of asking his family for help, he bottled it all up and kept living as though nothing was wrong. Are you kidding me? How narcissistic did you have to be to refuse to swallow your pride and ask for help paying medical bills? Or how dumb did you have to be to look death in the face and not even try to fight? But wait...did he want to die?

“Did he do this on purpose? Was his whole goal just to die?”

“No,” she shook her head. “He sought help from one person—a pastor. He thought God could cure him of any ailments. So, in a way, he did try to fight death, but it just didn’t work. You know, since we’re at his funeral,” my mom mumbled.

My father was a very old-school, traditional Christian. Church every Sunday, no “ifs,” “ands,” or “buts.” I just think he skipped over the chapter of the Bible that said you should treat people with kindness. Growing up in a house full of such strong beliefs pushed me away from the church because it taught me to fear God and others more powerful than myself. I didn’t want to sit still, be quiet, and look pretty when I had so much more to offer than that.

“So, he wasn’t depressed?”

“Not that anyone knew of. Tyler, your father's boss at the casino, said that he would

rant about how the other employees should divorce their wives and become real men. He even prepaid for trips and made reservations.” My mom laughed dryly. “He actually booked an escort once a week for the next three months.” That was the kind of man my father was. He only cared about himself. Apparently, it was better to die alone than surrounded by family. “When it was closer to the end, he mailed letters to everyone—his whole family—basically saying he was dying, but he had no regrets and that leaving was the best decision he ever made because, in the end, it made him feel more alive than any of us ever did.”

He wasn't sorry for leaving us. He never missed us. He only ever loved himself. Or maybe he hated himself, and that's why he never took the steps to even try and stay alive. Still, I wondered if, deep down, he hated that he ended up dying alone. No known history of depression, but depression wasn't something that you could see. As much as I wanted to believe that it was an imbalance of chemicals in his brain that forced him to leave, I knew the harsh reality that it probably wasn't likely.

“Wait, where's my letter?” I asked as the feeling of heaviness grew in my stomach. Reaching into the pocket of her skirt, my mom pulled out a small, folded piece of paper crinkled around the edges. She held the letter in her lap as I looked down at it helplessly. I couldn't bring myself to reach for it because I didn't know if I wanted to see what he had written. “How come I never got it sooner? You said he sent them in the mail.” I put my head in my hands.

“He never knew your address after you moved out, so he sent both letters to me. I only saw them the day before flying out here, and I couldn't bear to tell you about this over the phone,” she admitted, looking ashamed. “His letters...they aren't heartfelt or loving; they are callous and cold.” That didn't surprise me. He was never the type of person to take responsibility for his actions. Nothing was ever his fault. “I called everyone—his parents, your sister, his brother, his ex—once they all received the notes, they decided that he wasn't worth showing up for.”

“I don't blame them,” I mumbled.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Then, my mother said something I never would've expected.

“I don't either.”

“But you were so mad on the phone when I said the same thing. If you understand that feeling, why did you get so upset?”

“Because funerals aren't for the dead; they are for the living,” she answered, squeezing the note in her palms. “You're so strong, Autumn, but even I can see that your father has hurt you.”

If she could see I was in pain, then who else noticed but never called me out on it?

“I'm fine,” I dismissed her.

“Don't do that,” she demanded firmly. “Don't try to brave it out. This, right here, today, is the time and place to release all the emotions you have kept inside for so many years. Anger, sadness, pity...and somewhere deep down, maybe even love.”

“That's why you wanted me to come,” I said as more of a statement than a question. “You wanted me to have closure.” My mom nodded at my words. “I just don't understand why he did any of this. Why did he turn into this person?” I looked to her for guidance.

My mom chuckled dryly. “He never turned into anything. He was always that way, albeit maybe to a lesser degree.” Breathing in deeply, my mother asked, “Have you heard the story about how I met your father?”

It was my turn to laugh. “I take it, it was nothing like the show *How I Met Your Mother*?”

“Not at all,” she smiled at my comment. “I was in college at the time, a Physical Therapy. The first time I saw your dad, he was bagging items in a grocery store. I was twenty-two, and he was twenty-eight. Michael always kept his head down and his headphones in, barely acknowledging anyone. I thought he was mysterious and quiet. He was a puzzle I needed to solve. From that day on, I only shopped at that grocery store. The lane he was working in was the one I always chose. Eventually, we started talking, and he asked me out on a date. He was a very traditional man. He would pick me up, order for me, and pay for the food. I didn't mind at the time. My view of him changed when he saw me talking to one of my classmates and felt so emasculated to the point that he had to run over and punch him straight in the jaw. He broke it.” I didn't know my father had an anger streak. It wasn't surprising, though. “That's when I started to realize his flaws and all the small things I had never noticed before.” She moved on to reference specific instances. “If we ate at my apartment, I would always have to be the one who cooked. When his grandma passed, he never shed a single tear. The way he would only say ‘you too’ after I told him I loved him.” I put my hand on top of hers and laid my head down on her shoulder as she continued. “I convinced myself that I could change him, but I was wrong. By the time I realized I couldn't, it was already too late because I was pregnant. So, of course, he proposed. Me, being the naive person I was, thought this meant he would change for sure, but once I was again, I was wrong.”

This is my fault. I caused all of this.

“I'm the reason you felt like you had to stay. I'm the one who broke our family.” I bit my lip to keep from sobbing, even though the tears were already falling.

“No, baby.” My mom pushed me off her shoulder and cupped my face in her hands. “We were broken long before you came into our lives. This was nobody's fault except

his.”

Looking into her eyes, I asked, “Did something happen when he was a kid? I just don't understand...how could he do this?”

Removing her grasp on my cheeks, my mom looked out towards the road in deep thought. “I don't think we will ever really know. He never opened up to me, and his parents swear he had a normal life.”

Resting my head on her shoulder once more, I began to contemplate her words. Sometimes, their didn't need to be a reason as to why people went crazy and became monsters. In the real world, not everything could be wrapped up and tied in a beautiful bow. That was the ugly truth. There was no previous trauma. There were no mitigating circumstances. There was no history of mental illness. My dad was just a horrible person. But that also meant none of what happened was my fault.

“Actually, I'm not even surprised that he was just a shit person. Should've known.”

“To be fair, he always warned me that he wasn't the type of man I should go for.”

“Wow, way to listen to the one thing that came out of his mouth that wasn't total bullshit.”

Expecting to be met with a smack in the face, I was surprised when my mother laughed instead.

“Well, I still don't regret a single second of it because I ended up with you.”

I smiled up at her as the sudden realization hit me like a truck. She was right. We had each other. For so long, I felt like my family was broken. I thought I was missing something when, in reality, I had everything I truly needed. We had each other, and

that was enough. My mother was enough.

“Mom,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being there when he wasn't. For never letting me down. For being both parents.” The tears in my eyes began to swell...but this time, I didn't fight them. “You are enough. You will always be enough.”

My mother smiled slightly as her eyes watered, gleaming with something that seemed so familiar but long forgotten about.

Love.

For my whole life, I was convinced that love didn't exist when my mom had been proving me wrong over and over again. I was just too blind to see it. Love didn't have to come from a spouse for it to mean something.

“I love you, Autumn.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

She pulled me close and engulfed me in a warm hug. I squeezed her back. As if my ears had been switched off mute, the sounds from nearby came to life. The constant rustling of the leaves filled my ears, along with her steady breathing. I smiled to myself as I gripped the back of my mom's blouse. Sniffing, she wiped the tears from her face and released me. She took a deep breath and held out her hand. Opening her fingers, she revealed the note that had been clutched between them.

“This is yours. I haven't read it,” she announced. As I reached for the note in her hands, I stopped short of the way, hesitating slightly. My mom then continued, “I don't know if this will help you or hurt you, but you have the right to decide if you want to read it.”

I needed to know what it said. I just didn't know if I could handle it. For once in my life, I stopped thinking and let my body take control. Propelling my arm forward before I even knew what I was doing, I snatched the note from my mom's hand. My mom put her hand gently on my shoulder and stood up from the now, ever presently uncomfortable concrete stairs.

“Thank you.”

Looking down at me with a gleam of light still in her eyes, she said, “I'll give you some space. I'll be inside when you're ready.”

With that, she pivoted in the direction of the main entrance and opened the doors to head inside the church.

Somebody To Lean On

I sat there, staring at the small piece of paper while rolling it between my fingers. Everything my mom told me about the notes my father had written practically screamed, “Don’t read me!” yet here I was about to read it anyway. To be fair, I was never one to follow the rules anyway. Pursing my lips, I unfolded the crumpled note slowly, with my head tilted towards the sky.

I am strong enough to handle this, right?

Just as I was about to read the note, a loud screeching of tires on asphalt pierced through my ears, causing me to flinch at the uncomfortable sound. Unintentionally, I gripped the paper, making a fist with my hand. Following the noise that could only be described as nails on a chalkboard, another sound quickly followed. A voice. But not just any voice. A voice I had come to know very well within the last twenty-four hours.

“Autumn!” Lexi yelled. Her cries stole my attention from the disgruntled message I held in my hands. I snapped my neck up and saw Lexi lunging out of a black SUV, still screaming my name. “Autumn, what the fuck?” Lexi angrily raced over to me.

“Lexi, what are you doing here?” I stood up from the stairs abruptly.

“You just took off at the airport; I was worried.” She stared at me with a look of concern on her face.

“Wait, how'd you even find me?” I questioned.

“You told me the name of the church you were going to on the plane,” she explained swiftly before dealing out more questions. “Are you okay? Why did you just leave like that earlier?”

Glancing down at my feet, I took a seat once again on the stairs in front of the church. No one else showed up to the funeral. Just my mom,” I revealed.

Not processing my words fully, she clarified, “None of his other family members came?”

“No.”

“His friends?”

“No.”

“Co-workers?”

“No, Lexi. No one means no one,” I breathed a sigh.

“What time does the funeral start? Is there still time? Did you call them?”

“Lexi, no one’s coming!” I sternly replied, increasing my volume before lowering my voice and repeating, “No one is coming.”

She paused as she let the words sink in. “Well, you showed up, and you are definitely not a nobody,” she consoled.

“I guess.”

“No, I’m serious. You were so scared to come here, but you did it. You made it. That has to count for something.”

Maybe she’s right.

She sat down next to me, and we watched the line of cars as they drove by in front of us. The large black SUV that Lexi had shown up in was parked alongside the curb with Brian and Andrew standing right outside its doors as they tried to give us some semblance of privacy by standing a few feet away.

“Thank you for coming, Lexi,” I said with a sad smile.

“Of course,” she whispered while grabbing my hand absentmindedly. “And I’m sorry nobody else came.”

“The thing is...I’m not,” I confessed, guilt weighing heavy on my chest. Lexi glanced at me and furrowed her brows at my comment. “He was a horrible person. A few hours ago, even I didn't want to come to his funeral. I can't blame anyone else for actually following through with something that I just couldn't.”

“You know, I struggled with going to my father's funeral too,” Lexi disclosed.

“Really?”

“I was so angry at what he had put my family through...for what he put my mom through. I couldn't justify going to a funeral for a man who hurt my mother. I never wanted to go, but I felt like it was something I was forced to do,” she sighed. “In the end, I'm glad I ended up going because, even though at the time I hated it, that final goodbye is what helped me forgive him for all his mistakes.”

“I don’t know if I can do that,” I admitted. “I don’t know if I can forgive him.”

“You don't have to,” Lexi shrugged while squeezing my hands. “For me, forgiving my father is what I needed to move on. If you can move on without having to forgive him, that's all that matters. You do whatever you need to do so that you can let him go and become whole again.”

I could never forgive him for doing what he did, but maybe I could learn to accept it. If I embraced my past and accepted the truth about what happened, maybe that was how I moved on. Besides, that whole forgive-and-forget thing was a load of bullshit because people couldn't forget past trauma, and not everyone deserved forgiveness. What happened with my father was a part of my story; it was a part of my truth...and I had to own it.

I looked down at my free hand that wasn't being held by Lexi and turned my palm upwards, revealing the note my father had written me.

"What's that?" Lexi inquired. "A note my father wrote me while he was dying," I admitted. "Turns out he didn't die of a heart attack like we thought. He had heart failure and refused a transplant. Instead of fighting it or cherishing the time he had left with his family, he decided to move to California and shut everyone out. In the end, he chose to die."

"Jesus," Lexi exhaled, shaking her head softly. "I'm so sorry, Autumn."

"When he knew there was no hope, he wrote everyone letters. My mom said they were filled with spite and hatred. That's why no one showed up today."

"Oh."

"Yeah," I nodded my head while letting out a sigh. "I never read my letter because he didn't have my address, so he sent it to my mom."

"Are you going to read it? Wait," she paused. "Maybe you shouldn't."

"I have to. I have to so that I can move on."

"Okay, then fine." Lexi let go of my hand and stood up.

“What are you doing?”

“Just grabbing something,” she waved while walking down the steps and over to the patch of grass on the right. Crouching down, she started searching for something. When she found it, she walked back over to me.

“Lexi?” I asked as I realized what she held. “What's that for?”

She held a large rock as she tossed it back and forth between her hands. “Assuming that letter is as bad as the rest of the people in your family said, I give you permission to throw this rock at my car as hard as you can,” she offered while glancing back at the SUV behind her.

A loud gasp came from Andrew as Brian turned his head toward the car and back at us repeatedly in disbelief.

“Lexi, that's not the best idea,” Andrew warned.

“Shut up, it's fine,” she hushed him while waving her hand, dismissing his comment. Lexi continued to stare at me and from the corner of my eye, I noticed Andrew quietly creeping up behind her. When he was finally close enough, he reached for the rock, but apparently, Lexi had taken some sort of ninja-karate class because she ricocheted her hand backwards, causing the rock to come into contact with a very sensitive part of Andrew's body. She whipped her head around, seeing what she had just done. Andrew was hunched over in pain. “Fuck, I am so sorry! I didn't mean to hit you there!” She put her hand on his back in an act of support. After a few seconds, he stood back up again. Lexi then asked, “Are you okay?”

“Barley,” he mumbled.

“Good,” she smiled. In the blink of an eye, her expression turned sour. “But if you try

and take this again, you won't be.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he growled, biting his tongue as he turned away.

Brian, on the other hand, was having a blast, slapping his knee and cackling heavily at what he had just witnessed. When Andrew made it back to the car, he gave Brian a quick blow to the gut.

Relishing in the lighthearted nature of the moment, I shouted, “Oh!” as I cupped my hands over my mouth. “It's turning into an MMA match out here.”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“And if you want to throw this rock to continue that, then feel free,” she smiled innocently.

Bursting into laughter, I said, “Lexi, I’m not vandalizing your car!”

“Well, you have the option if you’d like,” she shrugged, placing the rock down on the stairs next to me.

Turning away, Lexi attempted to leave.

I grabbed her hand before she could get too far and yelled, “Oh, no, you don’t! The last thing I need you to do is go off somewhere and find a branch, then tell me to hit Brian with it!”

“What?” Brian exclaimed in a shrill voice, causing Andrew to completely lose it.

“I was just going to give you some privacy,” she laughed.

“Oh!” I smiled at the gesture. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Are you asking me to stay with you while you read the note?”

“Is that something you’re comfortable with doing?”

“Of course, Autumn.”

She wasted no time resuming her previous seat next to me. I brought the folded piece

of paper onto my lap and grasped it with both hands. Lexi's hand rubbed small circles on my back. Everything suddenly became real again. The weight I once felt came back.

"I don't know if I can do this."

"You can."

Words Have Power

"Why did you come after me?" I asked, releasing a breath that I hadn't realized I had been holding.

"Autumn, I don't know how many times I have to say it before you get it through your thick skull," she mimicked, knocking on my head as I had done to her earlier. "But I like you. I care about you."

I believe her.

She actually cared about me. And for once, I wasn't afraid that she would leave like everyone else had, but of course, not being one to dwell on mushy emotions, I had to lighten the mood by making a joke.

"Wow, a bit obsessed with your fans there, aren't ya?"

She scoffed. "Weren't you the one claiming to be so obsessed with me that you tried to answer every single question about me?"

"Maybe," I mumbled. Could she be just as obsessed with me as I was with her? I mean, she did follow me to my father's funeral. "You know the same goes for you, right? I care about you too." I leaned towards her, causing our shoulders to bump

each other's.

“No, duh!”

“Touché,” I laughed while shaking my head at her. “Seriously, though. Thank you for coming to find me.”

Meeting her eyes, we held each other's gazes.

“I'd follow you anywhere.”

At that moment, I knew I wasn't alone. Without a second thought, I grasped the edges of the note and pulled them apart, reading its contents.

To Autumn—my favorite season, the most innocent part of me. Remember when you were younger and you asked if I loved you? Maybe the reason I couldn't was because my heart had been failing me. If I could go back and teach you one thing in this world, it would be that no one needs you and you don't need anyone. If I had left sooner maybe you would've learned that lesson all on your own. You are better off without me and I am better off without you. Don't miss me too much because I won't be able to miss you at all.

Humans were not built to be alone for an extended period of time. We needed human contact to stay sane. We needed other people in our lives. Not that you should undervalue the time you spend with your own consciousness, but that you couldn't stay trapped inside your own mind forever. It was a balancing act. You needed to be able to find out who you were alone and who you were when in the company of others. Liking your alone time and pushing everyone away were two very different things.

There was one thing my father got right, though. I didn't need to mourn his loss. He

had been gone for a long time. There was no point in missing someone you never really even knew in the first place. I had my fair share of fantasies and unrealistic expectations, but in the end, I never really knew my father. I'd grieved the thought of missing out on having a protective, strong, and dedicated dad, but that was not who my father was. I missed the idea of having a father. I guess looking back, I could be grateful for his absence because it made me who I was...and I was nothing like him.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

I nodded slowly while sucking in the air. Lexi squeezed my hand, probably having read the note that sat in my lap as well.

“This was my father,” I stated. “This was the person I knew, or, I guess, barely knew.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I think I actually needed to hear that. Humans crave to feel like they belong—like they are loved. God knows I do,” I let out a dry laugh. “But just not by him. Not anymore.”

It was time to close this chapter of my life and open the door to a new one. Standing swiftly, I rose to my feet, allowing the paper in my lap to fall to the ground below. Lexi followed suit.

“Where are you going?”

“To my father's funeral,” I declared simply while shrugging. “And I was wondering if you wanted to come with me?”

“Of course, I will, Autumn.”

I smiled at her while holding out my hand for her to take. “Then let's do this.”

“Together,” she clarified while grabbing my hand and pulling me in the direction of the church.

“Together.”

Speak

We walked hand in hand into the church. I saw my mother sitting in the front row of pews along with the pastor. The loud clanking of the door as it closed caused them both to look back at us, noticing our presence. Walking down the center of the aisle toward the casket, we made our way over to them. The coffin had already been closed, which was perfectly fine by me.

“Ah, yes. Your mother told me you'd be joining us. Let's get started, shall we?”

The pastor walked up to the pulpit at the head of the church. When I looked back at my mom, I noticed her sitting slack-jawed. She rubbed her eyes for a second before mouthing the words, “IS THAT LEXI HARLOW?”

I nodded while grinning at the childlike nature she exhibited. Lexi, on the other hand, was too busy looking at the casket directly in front of us. I wondered if this reminded her of her own father's funeral. The last thing I wanted was to bring up any kind of trauma for her.

“Are you okay?” I whispered in her ear as we took our seats next to my mother.

“Yeah, I just keep thinking about how I felt when I attended my dad's funeral and how far I've come since then.”

Growing from the pain was possible. What once felt so far away now seemed within my reach.

Sitting down on the pews next to my mom, we watched silently as the pastor began.

After speaking for a while, the pastor rolled out a projector and played a short slide show with old pictures of my father. It wasn't a normal thing to do at funerals, but seeing as how most things involved loved ones and no one had bothered to show up, we had decided to merge the ceremony and the reception. It was crazy how much of a decent person my father seemed to be on the outside. By looking at him, you couldn't tell that he left a trail of destruction behind him. I guess that's why people say not to judge a book by its cover. Usually, it's because personalities were better than appearances, but in this case, it was the other way around. This just goes to show we shouldn't make any assumptions based on physical features...at all. Cute baby pictures, though. After the slide show ended, the pastor read several passages from the Bible, most of them claiming my father was in a better place filled with joy. My mother stifled a laugh at that statement, causing me to clamp my palm over my mouth in an attempt to hide my snicker as well. Next, it was time for the music chosen by the family to be played. Usually, the person who died would have decided which music to play beforehand, but my dad wasn't the creative or sentimental type; therefore, the responsibility of the songs was left in the hands of his mother. Even though she wasn't here, my grandma had chosen several instrumental pieces composed of piano and violin symphonies to be showcased at my father's wake. They were all beautiful. I was actually kind of surprised she didn't choose something more along the lines of an angry screamo. When the music ended, the pastor called on my mother to give the eulogy.

"Claire, at this time, you may now take the stand and share any thoughts or memories you have of the deceased," he said while taking his seat next to the pulpit.

Smoothing out her skirt, my mom rose to her feet and slowly walked to stand behind the podium. She cleared her throat and opened her mouth as though she were about to begin, but closed it suddenly. Squeezing her eyes shut, she started to speak.

“Michael, you were loved dearly and will be missed deeply by everyone.” Opening her eyes after that statement, she seemed to scan the room, taking in the emptiness that was present. “Who am I kidding? There’s no one here.” She let out a small scoff before continuing, “Michael, you will not be missed, and I think that’s evident by the number of people who decided not to show up today.” The pastor gasped. Clearly, he was not used to people expressing any other emotion while at a funeral other than sadness and love. He was in for a shit show today. My mom looked over at me to gauge my reaction. I smiled at her and motioned for her to continue. This was her truth. She was entitled to it. Sighing, my mother continued, “I want to believe that I loved you at some point, but after having our daughter and knowing what real love feels like, I can confidently say that I didn’t feel that way about you. We are only humans, and we all make our fair share of mistakes, but you never learned from any of them. I am thankful to you because of the daughter you gave me, but honestly, I think we will manage just fine without you here.”

The pastor, who was very uncomfortable by this point, ushered my mom off the stage as she took her seat next to us again. I squeezed her hand as she sat down in solidarity with her speech. She curled her lips upward and mouthed thank you.

“Autumn, if you would like, you may now come up and say any words you want to share.” He then continued on to list examples, hoping I would heed his words, “Some people share memories, or song lyrics, or what they will miss about the dearly departed.”

Lexi let out a breathy laugh. She knew exactly what was going to happen. I smirked at the pastor and then stood to take my place on the podium, where my mom had just been. This time, instead of sitting down, the pastor simply took a few steps backward while eyeing me, probably questioning my motives. I wasn’t used to, as my dad put it, “vomiting my feelings all over the place,” but talking to Lexi and my mother earlier had opened the floodgates. All I had to do was stop thinking about what everyone else thought and focus on what I thought. Focus on my own voice. My emotions were

valid, even though they could be considered cruel or harsh. I was entitled to my own feelings, and that was something no one could take away from me. Taking a deep breath, I let all the words I had wanted to say to my father flow out like a river.

“Dad, you brought me into this world, and then you left, not because you died, but because you abandoned us. I used to blame myself. I thought I caused all of this, but then I realized you were just too weak to stay,” I confessed while my hands clenched the sides of the pulpit.

The pastor interjected, “Autumn, maybe you shouldn’t—”

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

My mom interrupted him. “Let her finish,” she demanded.

With a slow downward turn of his head, the pastor remained silent.

Biting my lower lip, I continued on with my speech. “Sometimes calling you a father doesn't even feel right. I don't think you even knew what being a father really meant. For so long, I thought you broke our family apart, but today, I realized I have all the family I need here with me.” My mom brought her hand up to her chest and laid her palm over her heart. I did the same. “You wanted to be alone so bad...well, you got your wish. You pushed everyone away so well that no one even bothered to show up to your funeral. Don't worry, though; I'm here. Not because I want to reminisce or mourn your passing, but because I need to tell you something. I don't need you, and I never have. All the love I need is right here in front of me.” I smiled down at my mother. “Goodbye, dad. See you never,” I chuckled dryly.

I walked away from the stage and back toward the pews. I didn't get the chance to sit back down because, as soon as I got to the bench, my mother enveloped me in a hug. She wasn't mad at my words, for the same reason I wasn't mad at hers. We said what we needed to say because she was right in what she had told me earlier—funerals were for the living, not the dead. If this was what it took to move on, then that's all that mattered. People often said not to speak ill of the dead, but those people hadn't met my father. Not everything needed to be romanticized.

What good did lying to not only yourself but also everyone else do? Who did it benefit? No one.

After pulling away from the hug, we both sat back down. I felt Lexi intertwine our

fingers.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

“Yeah, I really think I am.”

Our attention was back on the pastor when he began to stutter, “Um, oh-okay...” He fidgeted with his robe in an attempt not to appear so disheveled. “And young lady, I’m afraid I don’t know your name, but if you would like to come up and say a few words, now is the time.”

My mom and I paused, then turned toward each other while shaking our heads. We both blurted out,

“Umm, she’s not—”

“Uh, I don’t think—”

Lexi stood swiftly and answered, “I’d love to.” This caused my mom and I to stare at each other in confusion. Lexi walked over to the pastor. He looked like he was about to faint after hearing all the things we had revealed earlier. I take it he had no idea what kind of man he would be speaking about at today’s memorial service. “Michael,” Lexi cleared her throat while glancing at the pastor, “How dare you intentionally light my house on fire and kill my cat?” The pastor all but lost his shit when Lexi spoke. His eyes became wide, practically bulging out of his head, as he let a quiet, high-pitched squeak escape from his lips. I slapped my thighs while expelling a loud laugh, and my mom covered her mouth with her hand, trying to suppress hers. Lexi cracked a smile, then continued, “But no, in all honesty, I know what it’s like to have a complicated relationship with your father, but Michael, you really missed out on getting to know Autumn. She is by far one of the strongest and most amazing people I have had the pleasure of meeting. I didn’t know you well, or, for that matter,

at all, really, but I still want to thank you. Your daughter is such a great person, and for some reason, I think that is because you didn't raise her. So, fuck you for abandoning her, but thank you for making sure she turned out nothing like you."

Lexi was courageous. I would never get up at a stranger's funeral and say what was on my mind, but I was glad she felt like she could. Even before meeting her, I knew she always said what she was thinking, and I was someone who tried to live by the same sentiment. Maybe I learned that by listening to her music. What she said up there at the podium only made me more sure that I had made the right choice in sharing my story with her.

"Thank you," I mouthed silently to her.

Acceptance

I honestly had no idea what to expect when I walked into the airport on the day of my father's funeral, but if I had to guess, I never would've thought any of what happened was true. That wasn't a bad thing, though. Sometimes, the best stories were the ones we could never predict. Normally, people didn't experience earthquakes if they lived in New York. Normally, people didn't become trapped in bathrooms with their celebrity crushes. Normally, people didn't share life stories or similar experiences with strangers. Normally, people didn't get offered a ride with said stranger when they missed their flight. Normally, people didn't invite someone they'd only known for eight hours to attend their father's funeral. Normally, people didn't find love when they had stopped believing it existed. Against all the odds, somehow, all of those things happened to me. It went against every logical and statistical probability that defined normal life experiences.

But my life had never been normal.

Everything had changed so much within twenty-four hours and just to think it was all

because of an earthquake.

A lot of people compared natural disasters to catastrophic, world ending events, and I couldn't deny that were dangerous...but sometimes they could also create a second chance. Sometimes, these disasters worked as a sort of wake-up call. Generally, on the less severe side of things, earthquakes caused people to feel unsteady, and no one liked to lack stability, but for me, an earthquake was exactly what I needed to find my center of gravity. Somehow, it helped me find balance.

Snapping back into reality, I pushed myself off of the bench and ran towards the podium. Lexi didn't have time to react before I tackled her in a hug.

"Thank you for being here for me," I expressed solemnly, my mouth buried against her shoulder.

"Always, Autumn. Always," she promised while stroking my hair.

The pastor then cleared his throat, prompting us to break apart from each other. "If that is all, you may take your seats." He motioned back towards the pews. "And I see we have two more guests that have arrived. I hesitate to ask, but would either of you like to say anything today?"

I turned towards the main congregation area to see who he was referring to. To my surprise, Andrew and Brian had come inside and sat in one of the pews situated at the back of the church.

"No, they are good," Lexi replied for both of them.

"Good," the pastor breathed out before realizing what he had said. "I mean very well then."

Lexi and I exchanged glances as we snickered while walking back to our seats.

My mom then tipped her head in our direction and whispered, “I think we broke him.”

All of us then turned to stare at him, watching as he wiped his forehead, which was at this point drenched in sweat. Then, the three of us began chuckling as the pastor obviously continued preaching and talking of heaven. I was so worried about this funeral earlier, but now I felt so at peace. I was glad I didn’t chicken out like I had wanted to.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

And it was all thanks to Lexi and my mother.

My mom then wagged her finger, motioning for both of us to lean in closer.

“Not that I’m disappointed more people showed up for your father's funeral, but do either of you know who those two men back there are?” My mom questioned.

A smile appeared on my face as Lexi and I looked at each other knowingly and broke out into hysterics.

This is what I needed.

Startled at the unconventional sound that was usually not present during a wake, the pastor glared at us suspiciously and asked, “Is everything okay?”

Yes, it was.

“Actually,” I replied, taking hold of both of their hands. “Everything is perfect.”

I later found out it was a magnitude 6.1 earthquake that had struck the East Coast. There were no deaths, thankfully...All in all I think it was a perfect disaster.

There are five stages of grief. Denial. Anger. Bargaining. Depression. Acceptance. I’m happy to say that right now, I think I finally found my way to acceptance. Denial is when I’d lay awake at night creating fake scenarios of the perfect family in my head that seemed so real, I started to actually believe them. Anger is where I spent most of my time. It’s when I wished my father never existed. Bargaining is when I

tried to put him on a pedestal and pretend he was someone that he wasn't. Depression is when I became lost in the thought that my family would never be whole again. Acceptance is when I realized the loss of my father was not worth the loss of myself.

Grief is not the same for everyone and it isn't just a straight path. This is just my story. And it's a goddamn good one, if I do say so myself.

Maybe autumn isn't so bad after all.

Epilogue

This cafe is so fucking loud.

There was a large bay window on the left side of the table I was sitting at. The crimson leaves scattered in the wind as they blew down Fifth Avenue. Autumn really was my favorite season. In the chair across from me was Claire, Autumn's mom. We sat in silence, sipping our coffee and avoiding each other's gaze. I gripped the cup in my hands tightly, bending the plastic without meaning to. I wouldn't describe myself as an anxious person considering I had been scrutinized for most of my life, but this felt different. This was Autumn's mom. I had to practically sneak out this morning to avoid Brian and Andrew following me. Not to mention, I had to cancel my lunch date with Autumn.

But it was worth it. I needed to do this.

The sound of a loud pop rang out as I looked down at my hand, which was clutching the cup. There was a small crack on the side of the plastic causing the coffee to leak out. I quickly sat the cup down as I fumbled with the napkins on the table and stuck them against the side of the cup to prevent any more liquid from spilling out. I could sense Claire's eyes on me, staring intently. Huffing out a breath of air, I calmly stood and walked to throw my coffee in the trash.

Well, that was a waste of ten dollars.

I walked up to the barista and ordered another drink. “One large caramel macchiato, please.”

“Sure thing.”

The barista began preparing my order and then handed me the coffee.

“How much will that be?” I asked, pulling out my wallet.

“It’s on the house,” the young girl smiled.

She must've known who I was.

“Thanks,” I nodded before walking back over to my table.

“Just try not to break this one.”

Oh.

Oh, she just saw me break the cup. Perfect.

I gave her a quick nod before walking back over to Claire. Nervously, I sat back in my chair, giving her a small grin. Claire eyed me closely before sighing softly.

“So, you and Autumn were trapped in an airport bathroom together?” She stated the obvious.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

“Yep,” I replied, taking a sip of my new drink.

“And now you guys are dating?”

I spat out my drink at her question and started coughing profusely. Well, so much for actually getting to enjoy any coffee today. “Uh, well,” I stammered, trying to wipe my mouth with the remaining napkins scattered on the table.

“I never knew my daughter liked girls.”

I laughed at that. “I don’t think she knew either.”

“So,” she dragged out the word while tapping her fingers against her cup. “You like girls?”

“Uh, yeah,” I replied sheepishly. This was like coming out for a second time. I took another sip of coffee.

“Oh, wow. I mean, I just never knew that Lexi Harlow was a lesbian,” Claire shrugged.

That once again prompted me to choke on the liquid and let out a few coughs in response. I sat the cup back on top of the table, seeing as how I was in no mood to aspirate because of all the choking I was doing that day. I cleared my throat so that I could speak again.

“Yeah, uh,” I flattened by the invisible wrinkles on my jeans. “I came out in 2016.

The same year that same-sex marriage was legalized. Is me being a lesbian okay?"

"Of course, it is." Claire grabbed my hand with hers. "You and Autumn are good together."

"Really?" I felt my anxiety start to subside.

"Really. I just know Autumn lost hope in happiness for a long time, so I'm just glad she found it."

Happiness.

"That's actually why I wanted to have coffee with you today," I told her. "I was wondering if I had your permission to ask Autumn to be my girlfriend?" Claire started to laugh under her breath. Trying to explain my reasoning, I blurted out, "I just know you and Autumn are really close, and I would hate to cause a rift between you guys, seeing as how she would be dating a girl, and she already lost her dad so I just—"

She cut me off. "Lexi, you have my blessing. Besides, who am I to stand in the way of Autumn's 'Happily Ever After' anyway?"

"I don't know if I'd consider this much of a fairytale ending," I snorted.

Claire grinned at my wit. "I just think that your story is a tad more interesting than the average Disney movie."

"Ugh," I groaned. "Yeah, this is more like The Grimm Brothers version." Thinking about all the cliché stories of epic fairytales made me question why exactly we held them with such high regard in the first place. Especially when the real stories of everyday romance were so much more interesting. Disney gave children false hope

that life would be easy. The Grimm Brothers fairytales gave children the idea that life was only ever full of pain. Maybe the real villains weren't the ones on the screens or in the books, but the ones who created these unrealistic fantasies in the first place. "Although maybe those twisted stories and Disney movies are similar in some ways." I explained further by saying, "They are both fake. I guess that's why I turned down so many opportunities to become an actress. I never wanted to pretend to be someone that I wasn't."

It wasn't until I heard about all the trauma childhood stars go through that it made me realize I had picked the right career path. Besides, even though for a short time I thought acting would be amazing, it could never hold a candle to my true passion—singing. Being in the industry so young was never easy. Being a singer had its fair share of difficulties, but I wouldn't trade it for the world.

"You know, Autumn used to adore you back then," she divulged. "If it's possible, I think she adores you even more now." I couldn't help but let a smile graze my lips. "Lexi, I've only known you for a week, and I am already convinced you are an amazing person," she guessed. "You are wise beyond your years because of the life that you've already experienced within the short time that you've been on this earth, and the same goes for my daughter." Claire then reflected, "Neither of you deserved to feel the level of pain that you have felt, but you have both done the best with the hand you were dealt, and I am thankful Autumn met someone like you. You care about her. Anyone can see that. I'm just glad she was able to find someone to help her when she needed it the most."

"I was just doing what I wanted someone to do when I lost my father. I learned so much over the years while dealing with the aftermath of my father's death, and I just wanted to help her in any way possible," I stated truthfully.

Claire nodded and said, "I would've never guessed that someone so young could've possibly gone through so much, yet here you are."

Does she know I'm four years older than Autumn?

"You know I'm twenty-five, right?"

"Oh wow, you're so old!" She joked while glaring at me. The anxiety I had been feeling this whole time finally lifted. I let out a hearty laugh. "You look great, though! I thought you were way older!" She said as she played into the notion that I was twice my current age.

"Thanks...I think," I replied, a slight smile still lingering on my face. Suddenly, a ding was heard, signaling that someone had just walked into the shop. My eyes widened. "It's Autumn!" I yelled in a whisper-like fashion.

Claire turned to see if I was joking.

"Did you tell her we were going to meet here?" She quietly exclaimed back.

Just then, Autumn's eyes connected with mine. A smirk slowly appeared on her face as she sulked over to us.

Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:41 pm

Autumn raised her chin while saying, “So, imagine my surprise when I’m walking to the deli to grab lunch after being blown off when suddenly, I turn to see none other than my mother and my—” She stuttered slightly at her choice of words. “Uh, my, Lexi, having coffee together at Starbucks without me.”

Her Lexi? “I’m your Lexi?” I raised an eyebrow, mocking her.

“Uh, well, I mean,” Autumn continued to stutter, “Yes?” Her words came out shaky and unsure. “Unless my mom is trying to steal you.”

“No one can steal me from you.”

Blushing, Autumn pushed over a chair from an empty table and sat between her mom and I.

“Aw,” Claire feigned while clasping her eyes together, watching the two of us. “Just kiss already!”

I felt my cheeks begin to tinge with pink as well. Turning my attention to Autumn, I nervously blurted out my words before fear took over. “Actually, there was something I wanted to ask you.”

Autumn looked at her mom and then back at me. Her eyes went back and forth between the two of us before the realization hit her.

“Oh, you were talking to me,” she gathered.

“Well, I wasn’t planning on asking your mom to be my girlfriend, so yes, I was talking to you,” I joked.

Her jaw then became slack as she stared at me in disbelief. Not knowing what to say next, I looked at her mom for help. Claire then reached over to Autumn and pushed her chin up.

“Honey, you’ll catch flies.”

I had said the same thing to her not even a week ago. Claire laughed and then motioned for me to continue.

“So, Autumn,” I prompted, “Will you be my girlfriend?”

Faster than my eyes could perceive, Autumn made a mad dash out of her seat, causing her chair to fall backward. She didn’t seem to care, though, because before I knew it, she had cupped my hands in her face and kissed my lips. It surprised me at first, but after a moment to process, I began to kiss her back while softly smiling into her lips. Still holding my face in her hands, her lips left mine, and she answered,

“Yes.”

The End