



Let Me

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Category: Romance

Description: Autumn Pemberton is a free spirit, thriving in her vibrant life filled with adventure and laughter alongside her best friend, Riley.

Just when she thinks she has it all, a chance encounter with the alluringly charismatic Judah Westinghouse turns her world upside down.

Their connection is electric.

Upon their first encounter, she can't stop thinking about him.

Judah is completely smitten by Autumn but is adamant about keeping things platonic, haunted by a life-changing diagnosis he refuses to share.

Faced with the heart-wrenching dilemma of choosing between a deepening friendship and real love, Judah must decide if breaking both of their hearts is worth the risk, or if walking away is best for them both.

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Page 1

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“I can’t believe I let you drag me out here in this heat,” my best friend Riley gripes as she trudges along behind me with her oversized Michael Kors bag and Dollar Tree flip-flops.

Her fashion sense kills me. She’s one of those girls who pinch pennies on certain things to save money on others – like a dollar and twenty-five cents flip-flops over a purse that costs two hundred bucks.

She unzips it, takes out a small battery-operated fan that she probably bought from Dollar Tree, too, and moves it in front of her face like she’s seconds away from passing out, then lifts her shirt and holds the fan in front of her boobs.

It’s hot.

It ain’t that hot.

I’m used to the low nineties in the dead of summer.

Riley says it’s because I have some Native American in my blood.

I say it’s because we go through this every year and I’ve adapted.

Granted, I could’ve just gone home and avoided this altogether, but I really wanted some ice cream after I got off work.

Most of my colleagues opt for the liquor to kick off their weekend.

Me? I don't have to have alcohol. I stick to social drinking and even then, it's a two-drink max.

Plus, who can avoid this ice cream at The Decadent Freeze?

It's top-tier. If you ask me, it's worth having a mild heat stroke behind it.

I look at Riley and say, "Girl, if you don't put that fan up."

"And ain't. The girls are sweating, and thanks to you, I didn't even have time to go home and splash some water on them."

"Don't worry. This delicious ice cream will cool you off."

Riley gives me a strong side eye. She's not into ice cream like I am, but place a drink in front of her and watch her eyes light up. Honestly, I might be hard up for a drink, too, if I had her job. She's a high school P.E. teacher. High school...

Yeah, no thanks. I spend my days working at the recreation center in Arden.

It's tucked away down a tree-lined, two-lane road, immersed in nature.

It's challenging at times, but I love it there.

Riley says I love it a little too much. Said I was a tree hugger – a title I'll never take offense to.

If more people loved nature, they'd spend less time destroying it.

I digress.

We step inside the ice cream shop, immediately greeted by ice-cold air conditioning and the smell of freshly baked waffle cones and sugar. I caught a contact high the moment I walked in.

“What are you getting, Autumn?”

“I’m thinking two scoops of dark chocolate in a cone.”

“Ugh...if the words dark and chocolate aren’t describing men, you can miss me wit’ it.”

“Girl, hush. You ain’t looking for any kind of chocolate . You’re too busy chasing them kids around.”

I chuckle and take a step as the line shifts forward.

“I think I’ll get the vanilla,” she says.

“Of course. You always get the vanilla. Talking about me and my chocolate. Why don’t you try something different?”

“Because you can’t go wrong with vanilla.”

“Riley, get the—”

“Nope. I’m good. You stick to your dark chocolate and leave me alone,” she says, crossing her arms and pattering those cheap flip flops on the floor.

“Welcome to The Decadent Freeze,” the girl behind the counter says. “What can I get for you today?”

“I’ll have two scoops of the dark chocolate in a regular cone,” I say.

“And give me the big-back special,” Riley says, humoring herself. “That’s three scoops of vanilla and add chocolate syrup and peanuts. You happy, Autumn? I switched it up.”

I smile and say, “Good job. I’m proud of you.”

“Did you want that in a bowl or cone?” the girl asks.

“How about a waffle bowl? Then I can get the best of both worlds. We big-backin’ and snackin’ all summer, baby!”

“Chile...” I say, shaking my head while looking at the worker. “Don’t pay her no mind. She works with a bunch of teenagers and tends to get a lil’ rowdy.”

“It’s cool,” the worker says.

“See, it’s cool, Autumn ,” Riley says, blinking excessively fast as if trying to prove a point.

I leave it be and move on up further as the line moves again.

There are a few people in line in front of us paying for their orders.

When the girl hands us our ice cream, I use the tap-to-pay option and head toward the double glass doors.

Riley pushes it open with her butt and makes it out unscathed.

I try to dart out behind her, but I’m not so lucky.

As soon as I step out, a woman accidentally bumps into me, or maybe I bumped into her – I'm not really sure.

All I know is, two beautiful scoops of dark chocolate are lying on the sidewalk.

My poor ice cream that I've been dying for all day long is on the ground. Deceased.

"Oh, shoot! Autumn..." Riley says, turning around.

"I'm so sorry," the woman tells me. She's very apologetic, even offers to buy me another one, but I turn her down. I'm not going to make this lady buy me ice cream.

"Riley, it's okay. I'll just go get another one."

"We can share, girl. I ordered three scoops. Just go grab a spoon."

"No need for all of that. Here. You can have mine," a man says in a deep voice that's strong enough to slice right through me. What in the baritone...?

I look up to see him, connecting to his light brown eyes that seem to claw right into me. As quickly as I looked up, I turned away, unable to contain the beauty of this man. Good Lord he's handsome! And he's offering me his cone. Ice cream cone.

Oddly enough, he too has two scoops of dark chocolate, but there's no way I'm accepting his dessert, especially when I can easily go back in there and get another one.

No way. I'm not so fragile that I can't handle an ice cream mishap.

I'm a grown woman – a grown woman who apparently has difficulty making eye contact with handsome, six-feet-something men.

I say, “You’re so kind. Thank you so much, but it’s fine.”

Yeah, because how would I look eating and licking ice cream he’s already tongued down?

“I insist,” he says.

“Yeah, Autumn, take it,” Riley instigates. “He insists .”

Along with encouraging me to take the handsome stranger’s offer, she nudges me out of my trance with the man. I don’t want to, I really don’t want to, but I take his melting ice cream, gripping the cone by the little napkin and say, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, satisfaction flickering in his honey-colored gaze before he turns and walks toward the parking lot ice- creamless .

Meanwhile, I’m still standing here stunned with dark chocolate melting down my fingers. I lick it and start eating before I’m left with nothing but cream with no ice.

“Girl, are you kidding me?” Riley hisses. “You better get your butt over there and talk to that man. He’s as cute as a freakin’ button and you didn’t even get his name. Get over there.”

“Riley—”

“Go!” she says, nudging me. “Hurry up before he leaves.”

“Okay, stop pushing me before we be fighting out here.”

She huffs out a laugh. “Yeah—this from the woman who helps worms successfully cross the sidewalk. Girl, bye. All I know is, you better go on over there before he

leaves—man done gave you his ice cream. He drove all the way here for nothing, leaving empty-handed and you won't even go over there and say thank you. ”

“I thanked him before he walked off.”

“So. Thank him again. Go!”

“Okay, okay. Jeez. I'm going.”

I speed-walk, licking ice cream on the way to his car and when I get there, I tap on the window.

He rolls down the glass and says, “Hey, I'm not taking that back, by the way.”

“Oh,” I smile sheepishly and say, “I was just coming over here to thank you again. I feel really bad about stealing—I mean, taking your ice cream.”

“Don't. I'm glad I was in the right place at the right time.”

“I'm glad you were, too. Oh, and I'm Autumn.”

A half-done smile appears on his face. “Autumn—like the season?”

I grin and say, “Yes...like the season.”

“Why is that funny, Autumn?”

I shake my head. “It's not funny as much as it is obvious. Other people just recognize my name matches the season, but they don't ask. You are the only person who's ever asked me that. Ever.”

“Impossible.”

“You are, but it’s cool. Hey—if I see you again, I’ll buy you an ice cream. How about that?”

“You don’t have to do that, Autumn.”

“Of course I do, um...I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your name.”

“It’s Judah.”

Judah.

I love his name. It sounds so powerful and authoritative. And it matches his well-sculpted face.

Judah...

Sounds like a king. He looks like a king.

“Hey, you may want to...” he says, glancing at my hand.

“Oh,” I say, coming out of a trance to lick my melting, dark chocolate. “Thanks again. It was nice to meet you, Judah.”

“You as well, Autumn.”

I’m caught in a daze with those eyes of his yet again, and when I have enough feeling in my legs to actually turn and walk away, I hear him say, “Hey, I’m going to meet up with some friends later if you would like to join us.”

“Oh,” I say, taken aback by his invitation. I don’t know this man and not only has he given me ice cream, but he has also invited me to hang out with him and his friends?

Strange...

Do I want to go? Yes. Should I go? That’s the question.

“Can you give me a minute?”

One of his brows raises. “Uh, sure.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Licking ice cream, I hustle back over to Riley and say, “Girl, he asked me to come hang with him and his friends. What should I do? Should I go?”

“Autumn, don’t make me smack you out here. Yeah! You’re going! You ain’t doing nothing else.”

“Riley, can you turn it down a notch? You don’t have to tell the whole United States about my boring life.”

“Okay, then shuffle your narrow behind back over there and tell cutie pie you’re going, because, why not?”

“How about because I don’t typically do stuff like this?”

“Welp, you do now.”

With Riley in my court, I take a deep breath, eat some more ice cream, and then walk back over to Judah’s Mustang.

“Well?” he asks as I approach.

“Okay. Sure. Where will y’all be?”

“Arden Hideaway Campgrounds in Swannanoa. Ten o’clock. Eat your ice cream, Autumn. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Later.”

He rolls up the window and starts the car, the loud engine revving, turning heads as he drives off. I stand here in the parking lot eating his ice cream, feeling my stomach flutter at the thought of seeing him again.

“Girl, are you going or what?” Riley asks, creeping up behind me.

“Yeah, I’m going.”

“You better. He’s fine.”

“He’s beautiful,” I say, still enraptured by the good vibes of his brief presence and generosity.

Even so, I would be remiss not to acknowledge specifics of that face – the milk chocolate skin, a carved jawline, a contoured nose that pairs well with his commanding presence, and light brown, glorious eyes.

He’s tall, too. I’d guess six-five or so – makes me feel so small.

I like that. He had on a pair of khakis and a plain white T-shirt.

He looked so relaxed and casual, but when you’re that fine, you don’t need to be

overly dressed. Not at all.

“So, where are you meeting him?”

“Arden Hideaway Campground.”

“Oh. Dang...”

“Why do you say that like it’s a bad idea? You’re the one who told me to go.”

“Yeah, but I ain’t know he was taking you up in the woods. Nothing good comes out of sitting around a summer campfire with strangers. Sounds like the makings of a Dateline episode.”

“Riley, now you got me scared.”

“You ain’t scared,” she says, shoving a spoonful of ice cream into her mouth. “This is exactly the kind of crap you like, isn’t it? Hiking, nature...all that nonsense.”

“It’s not nonsense. It’s good for the soul. But I will say, I’m usually at home relaxing by ten at night—not fanning away mosquitos, and smelling smoke.”

“Your hair gon’ smell like smoke, too.”

“Ugh...yeah, definitely not looking forward to that, but I am looking forward to talking to Judah.”

“Oh, that’s his name?”

“Yes. Judah.”

“Look at you saying the man’s name like you’re in love already.”

“Well, he did sacrifice his ice cream for me.”

“Really, Autumn? Sacrifice? You take things entirely too far.”

Shaking my head, I say, “Nope. I have never in my life had anyone do something so kind for me. It was sweet. Literally! So, yeah, I’mma head out to the woods, but I’m taking my mace and stun gun with me just in case it gets wild out there.”

“Smart.”

“Are you going out tonight?” I ask Riley.

“Yeah...I got a date. My coworker set me up with her cousin.

“Oh, no...bad move.”

“Why?”

“If it doesn’t go well, she gon’ be actin’ weird. And if it does work out, she’ll want all the details.”

“Dang. You’re right. I’m going to stand him up.”

“And you’re going to hear about that, too.”

“I’ll get out of it somehow,” she says, throwing her empty cup and spoon away. “Anyway, you go hang out with your new boo and we’ll meetup tomorrow and finally have something to talk about other than trees and butterflies.”

“Alright, Riley. I guess I’ll go home and get cute.”

“Please do. And don’t be wearing those army green cargo pants with a crop top. That’s your go-to outfit. You do realize that, right?”

“It’s not.”

“It is. You wore it when we went out last weekend. Wear something feminine.”

“Like what? We’re going to be in the woods. I think cargo pants are perfect.”

“Ay yi yi,” she says, releasing a long breath of air loudly through her mouth while massaging her temples. “Wear some jeans and a cute blouse, preferably low-cut and thin. It’s gon’ be hot. And if you pull out a pair of them combat boots, me and you gon’ fight for real.”

Amused, I say, “Okay, Riley. I got it. I’ll see what I can come up with.”

Riley wraps her arms around me and says, “Alright, girl. Have fun. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I say as she walks toward her car.

She turns around and says, “And check in with me when you get home.”

“Yep. Will do.”

I walk to my car with a feeling of excitement – something I haven’t felt in some time. I’m doing something different for a change and with someone other than Riley. And this man—Lord have mercy—he’s something to behold. I can hardly wait to see him again.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I'm not sure why I asked Autumn to join me at the campground.

I'm usually not so forthcoming with women, especially ones I'm attracted to, and she's a definite beauty.

I first saw her when she stepped into The Decadent Freeze laughing with her friend.

Her smile gave me pause and stilled something inside of me that forced me to stop and stare for a minute.

I was catching her aura, and I caught all of it.

The vibes, the smile, her pleasant demeanor, the happiness on her face – it all attracted me immediately.

It was only after noticing those things that I realized just how beautiful she really was.

The beauty marks on her face – those exotic freckles – were scattered across her face like the magic of stardust. Her hair is black and curly at the ends.

She had a warm, golden complexion that exuded softness.

She'd be radiant beneath the sun. She's warm.

Inviting. I can see the femininity glowing from her head to her feet.

She has an overall good spirit – the kind of person I need to be around.

That's mainly why I wanted a chance to be close to her again.

I need to feel her aura, get to know her better, and find out what she's about.

What's her story? Where is she from? What are her dreams?

Who are her folks? So many questions and I have no answers.

I actually shouldn't be having these questions, or this heightened desire to see her. I don't want to lead her on in any way. I'm not sure what she's thinking after our interaction earlier. Soon, I'll find out, but that's only if she shows up.

I pull up and park on gravel, then walk down the paved path where I know I'll find my crew. I see the fire pit has already been lit. At first glance, it seems that everyone is here – well everyone except my new guest.

“Sup, Judah?” my friend Nico says from across the pit.

“Yo. What's up, everybody?”

They all speak in unison. Most have alcoholic beverages. I don't drink and since they know that, they make sure to stuff the cooler with water and a few sodas. I walk over, grab a bottle of water, and take my spot around the pit.

A bonfire...

The only good thing I like about a smoke pit on a summer night is, it keeps the mosquitos at bay. It would be apropos for the winter – maybe even late autumn.

Speaking of...

Autumn comes walking down the path towards us with her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. She doesn't look nervous. She looks like she's in her element. When her eyes spot me, she smiles. I believe I felt my heart skip several beats.

My God.

Through the heat waves the fire has produced, I see the delicate, most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life.

She tossed her hair up in a ponytail. It was down earlier, hanging around her shoulders.

I'm glad it's up because my eyes have the opportunity to feast upon her jawline.

Her chin. Her lips are full, lush and distinct.

Their size almost makes it impossible for me to stop staring at them.

They're tinted with a shade of light pink gloss.

She walks right up to me and says, "Hi."

I blink out of my trance, stand up, and say, "You made it."

"Yeah, I did."

I'm so mesmerized by her, my hands twitch with desire as I fight the urge to run my thumb across those beauty marks on her face.

She smiles again, probably wondering why I'm just standing here like I've lost my voice.

I have.

I'm in awe, enraptured by her radiance.

"Ay, Judah, who's your friend?" I hear Nico ask. I'm glad he did because otherwise, I don't think my eyes would've released babygirl.

I tell her, "Let me introduce you to my people."

I clear my throat to get their attention then say, "Everyone, this is my friend, Autumn. Autumn, this is the crew."

"Hi, everybody."

"Hey, Autumn," they say, welcoming her and then just as quickly resume conversing, dancing, and drinking.

"So, Autumn, can you come sit with me for a minute?"

"Sure."

I invite her to sit in the camp chair, and I sit on the stump that's right beside it.

"Uh..." I rub my sweaty palms on the pant legs of my jeans and try to conjure up words. That's how breathtaking she is. And she smells like vanilla and cotton candy – sweet, soft, and warm.

She asks, "Do you all do this regularly?"

“Yes, we do.”

“This is nice. I love the outdoors.”

“You do?”

“Yeah. I’m a nature girl.”

“I bet your love of nature doesn’t come with a side of smoke.”

She bellows a laugh. “No, it doesn’t, but this is okay. We’re still outside, so…”

“Yeah,” I say. My palms are no longer sweaty, but my heart is still unsteady. “What do you do for work?” I ask to keep the conversation flowing.

“I’m an administrative assistant at the recreation center. You?”

“I work at my parents’ grocery store. I’m a bagger.”

She grins. “No, you’re not.”

“I am. Really.”

“Earlier today when I saw you, you had on a suit.”

“I had just gotten off work. The store is within walking distance of the ice cream shop.”

“Oh.”

“Hard to believe, huh?”

“That you work at a grocery store? No, it’s just unexpected.”

She looks at the fire. I hope telling her about my profession makes her steer clear of me as far as any romantic attachment is involved because she can’t be interested in me like that, the same way I can’t be interested in her.

“Would you like a drink?” I ask.

“Yeah, sure.”

“What would you like?”

She shrugs. “I’ll let you choose.”

I get up and walk over to the cooler. She doesn’t strike me as a beer drinker, so I grab a bottle of water. I hand it to her and she says, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Autumn.”

She opens it, takes a sip. Conversation ceases. I suppose that’s my fault. I’m running out of small talk because this isn’t typical. I’m usually good at keeping my interactions with women on a surface level. I’m having trouble doing that now. I’ll have to pull something out of my hat.

I ask, “Do you know what I love about being out here?”

“What’s that?”

“I like being under the sky, out in the open.”

“Why?”

“It forces me to realize how small I really am. I love that feeling. The world wants to blow our heads up, give us egos, and make us think we’re more important than the next person when we’re all made of dust. Doesn’t matter how much money you make—we’re all dirt and when we die, we’ll return to the dirt. ”

“That’s true.”

“Ay, Judah, don’t be over there boring Autumn with that deep earth nonsense you be talking,” Moriah says.

Autumn’s eyes light up. “Ah, so he’s a regular at this, huh?”

“Girl, he is. If you’re not into nature, I suggest you run while you still can.”

“Fortunately, I am a nature girl,” Autumn answers.

“With a name like Autumn, you almost have to be, right?” Moriah extends her hand to Autumn and says, “I’m Moriah, by the way.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Moriah.”

“Likewise. You have pretty eyes, too.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, and if you ever want to know anything about this one,” she says, pointing at me, “Just let me know.”

“Will do,” Autumn says, smiling as she looks at me.

After Moriah sashays away, Autumn says, “You have a lot of friends.”

“I do. I like to surround myself with people who bring out the best in me. Good people. That’s why you’re here.”

She fashions a smile and then turns towards the fire. “So, a campfire in the summer...”

“I know it’s an oxymoron, but it’s only to keep the snakes and bugs away. We don’t do this often in the summer. This time, I just felt compelled to be outside.”

“Oh, so you put this on?”

“I did, and sent a group chat message to anyone who wanted to join me. If you play your cards right, I’ll add you to the group chat.”

She chuckles. It’s what I was hoping she’d do so I could see that stellar smile of hers.

I take a moment to admire her. The ambient light from the fire on her face makes me want to touch her cheek.

I look at her ear. Her piercings. She has four in this ear.

I imagine the same is true of the other.

All of her earrings are silver – even the necklace she’s wearing.

Her side profile is a thing of beauty. I know she feels me staring at her, but I don’t care at the moment. I feast on her face like I’m at a buffet, taking her all in.

“How long do y’all usually stay out here?” she asks.

“A few hours. Sometimes we stay until we hear howling and see bats.”

Her eyebrows shoot up.

I smirk and say, “I’m kidding.”

“Oh,” she gasps, placing a hand on her heart. “You got me there. I was about to leave.”

I look at my watch and say, “Maybe we’ll be out here for another hour or so. Is that good with you?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

“Come holla at me for a minute, Judah,” his friend Nico says from across the way.

Judah looks at me and says, “I’mma go over there for a minute. You good?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I’ll just sit here and sip on my water.”

“Okay.”

He walks off and almost as soon as he leaves, Moriah comes walking over to me with two other women.

“Hey, again,” she says. “This is Luna and Tabitha.”

“Hey, ladies,” I say, greeting them with the same smile and demeanor they’re greeting me with.

“Hi. It’s nice to meet you,” Luna says.

“Nice to meet you as well.”

“I love your name. It’s so...so...earthen.”

“Um...thanks?” I say. I’ve never had anyone describe my name as earthen before. I actually have never used or heard anyone else use the word earthen. She’s a different one. That I can tell already.

They all sit around me. Luna sits on the ground in a criss-cross position.

Moriah and Tabitha are sitting on either side of me.

One thing I notice right away about these ladies and the other ones out here is that they're all stunning in their own right.

Luna has this boho-chic thing going on with the long locs and loc jewelry.

Tabitha looks like she's ready to hit the runway, and Moriah is a doll with her long, waist-length braids.

"Judah is amazing, isn't he?" Luna asks. She looks and sounds like she's under a spell.

"Yes, he is," I respond, agreeing with her.

"So, tell us your story of how you met him," Tabitha says.

"My story?" I ask, seeking clarification for how she asked the question.

"Yes," Moriah says. "We all have a story. I met him one day at the store. I accidentally dropped some money and he was behind me. He picked it up and gave it back to me. We've been friends ever since. It's been two years."

Tabitha says, "I met him five years ago when my car broke down. He helped me push it off the road and then called a tow truck for me."

"He saved me from drowning," Luna says. "He and his family were staying at the same hotel as me and mine. We were actually going to the same wedding, but didn't know each other."

Anyway, the night before, I decided to take a dip and, somehow, I passed out.

He pulled me out and held me until the paramedics arrived. That was seven years ago.”

“Wow,” I say at the realization of how long he’s known these women.

“What’s your story, Autumn?”

Okay, now we’re back to my story...

I say, “I was coming out of the ice cream shop and my ice cream hit the ground. He gave me his.”

Luna’s mouth opens. “Ah...he’s such an angel. Mmm...” she hums. “Have you ever seen an angel before, Autumn?”

“I believe angels are invisible.”

“Well, you know, in the figurative sense. Judah is one. I can feel his spirit. He’s high vibrational. He radiates positivity and a strong sense of inner self and calm.”

“Luna, shut the freak up with all that mess,” Tabitha tells her.

I’m so tickled, tears come to my eyes as I laugh.

“I will not shut the freak up . This man saved my life. I’m going to sing his praises every chance I get.”

Moriah says, “Look, Autumn. Luna’s trippin’. We came over here just to warn you. Do not make the mistake of falling for Judah. Trust me, we all did, but when Judah says you’re just a friend, that’s what he means. You’re just a friend. He doesn’t date.”

“And he’s firm on that,” Luna tacks on. “I tried.”

“Yep,” Tabitha adds.

“Oh, okay. Thanks for the warning, but I wasn’t looking for anything with Judah. He just asked me to come hang out with y’all.”

I lied to save face. Who wouldn’t want to be with a man like Judah?

He’s a pure gentleman. I would love to date a man like him – a man who gave me his ice cream without a second thought.

I’m bummed that this probably won’t be a love connection, but facing the facts, he passed on some beautiful women.

Who am I to think that I’ll be the exception?

“Why doesn’t he date?” I ask just to satisfy my curiosity.

“He won’t tell us,” Luna says.

Tabitha says, “I overheard him talking to Nico one day and I want to say I heard him say something about cancer. Don’t quote me. I don’t know for sure.”

My heart is beating ferociously in my chest at the thought of him having cancer. It can’t be. A beautiful man with a heart just as beautiful should have the world in his hands. This can’t be true. Perhaps she overheard him talking about somebody else.

“We think that’s why he doesn’t date,” Moriah says.

“He doesn’t want to burden anyone with everything that comes with all of that, you

know.

But he's a kind soul—a good person to be around.

It's why we're still here. Whenever you're with him, it makes you want to be better because he's just that phenomenal. ”

“Facts,” Tabitha adds.

I look across the firepit, my eyes searching for Judah.

His eyes connect with mine immediately. Now that I know what I know, or at least what the rumors are, I feel like his eyes are telling me that some of what they're saying is true.

Has to be. However, I do not know to what extent and now, I'm not sure if I want to be entangled in his web.

For all I know, the women could be lying.

Maybe they're all his and they don't want me joining their weird situationship.

Perhaps that's why they're all sticking around.

Something just ain't right about all of this.

Bummer .

Here I was thinking that Judah invited me here to get to know me. Like this could've been one of those meet-cutes that people brag about after they'd been married for twenty-some years and somebody asks how they met.

This ain't that.

I'm one of the women he's adding to his roster of friends . Of the good people he likes to surround himself with. He met us all in ways in which he reached out to show kindness. He's a kind person. I'll give him that much. However, I don't know what this is.

Time flies like embers rising from the pile of wood.

For the last hour, I've been entertained by his female friends.

I noticed he stayed pretty distant from me which, after hearing what the rest of the women said about him, I'm not mad.

At the same time, I didn't come here to be entertained by his friends, either.

I have friends already – one good best friend, which is really all a person needs. Yeah, I think I've had enough of this.

I stand up and say, "Well, ladies, I'm going to head home. I've smelled enough smoke for one night."

Luna cackles like I made a joke, throwing her head up to the sky. She says, "Smoke going up to the heavens could be incense to the angels for all we know."

"Luna, shut up," Moriah says.

I grin a little, but my eyes are burning from the smoke and I'm tired after working all day, only to come out here to talk to people I don't know.

That's what you get for chasing after a man , I tell myself. This is all Riley's fault.

Yeah, I'll blame it on her.

"Alright, Autumn. It was nice to meet you," Tabitha says."

"Nice to meet all of you as well."

"Join us anytime, okay?" Moriah tells me.

"I will," I answer.

But I won't.

I don't even know where Judah is. He walked off with Nico an hour ago, and I haven't seen him since.

Yeah, it's definitely time to go. I can't get to my car fast enough.

I'm already thinking about everything I need to tell Riley, and I mean everything from Judah's hippie friends down to the rumors.

I feel like I've been bamboozled. Scammed.

Roped into an esoteric community of people who think it's cool to have campfires in the dead of summer.

"Ay, Autumn, wait up."

It's him. It's his voice.

I turn around to see Judah jogging across the grass to get to me.

Darn it! I almost made it to my car. Almost got away unscathed under the cover of darkness.

As he jogs toward me, he asks, “Leaving already?”

I look at the time on my phone and say, “It’s a little after midnight.”

“Is it? I always seem to lose track of time these days.” He smiles, showing his perfect white teeth. Perfect lips. Perfect mouth. Perfect everything.

“How was it?”

“What?”

“Hanging out with all of us?”

How was it? That’s what you want to ask me?

How was it?? I’ll tell you how it was. I hated it.

Never doing it again. I came out here for you.

You abandoned me and went off with your friend somewhere.

The women circled me like sharks and basically told me I was wasting my time if I thought you were interested in me.

Of course I won’t say that. He was kind to me, after all.

I say, “It was okay, but this is not something I would voluntarily do. Don’t get me wrong, I love the outdoors, but sitting around smoke isn’t up there on my list of

favorite things.”

“Ah. Okay. I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

Next time? What next time?

If he thinks I’m going to be one of the crew, he’s sorely mistaken. I didn’t come here for them. I came here for him , but now I see that was a mistake because I thought he was feeling me.

He wasn’t.

I say, “Well, I’ll see you around.”

I watch him grimace. “You said see you around like you didn’t actually want to see me again.”

“Um, I was just—”

“I would like to see you again, Autumn.”

“Really?” I ask because from the looks of it, he has more than enough women he can see at any given time.

“Yes, really,” he confirms. “What would make you think otherwise?”

I can’t very well disclose everything his friends said to me, so I say, “Well, you invited me out here and then got up and walked away. I spent most of the time with your friends. I don’t even know where you’re coming from just now.”

“I apologize for abandoning you. I was catching up with Nico. I hadn’t seen him in a

while. He used to live in Fletcher, but he moved to Gatlinburg for work. Tonight was the first time I'd seen him in nearly six months. We were just playing catch-up."

"Oh. Okay."

"I'm sorry," he says, bringing his palms together in a quiet entreaty as he examines my eyes for forgiveness.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

“Don’t worry about it. It’s all good.”

With furrowed brows and astute attentiveness, he asks, “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

He smiles quietly, his teeth grazing his lower lip.

Where’s a fan when you need one? My pulse stirs. Breath hitches. Before I could get a handle on my nerves, they’d already taken over.

With furrowed brows, Judah comments, “You don’t look like you’re sure.”

A barely-there smile tugs at my lips when I say, “It’s fine.”

“It is?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, then.” He hands me his phone and says, “Put your number in and call your phone.”

The nerve of him...

Yet, I like his assertion. Taking his phone, while knowing I shouldn’t be doing this, especially since this isn’t what I thought it was, I key in my number while at the same time regretting it. Judah is not interested in me in the way I initially thought. He just

wants me to be his friend.

So, why am I giving him my number?

I'm a mature twenty-eight-year-old woman with plans for a husband and kids.

I don't want to get caught up with a man who doesn't have those same interests when Mr. Right could be out there searching for me.

So, before keying the last number, I press the back button, hand Judah the phone back, and say, "Um, look, Judah. I appreciate you. I do, but this is not what I thought it was."

"What did you think it was?"

"Uhm...you know what? It's nothing. I have to go," I say and quickly continue the path to my car. I jump in and pull off. When it's time to go, it's time to go.

Okay, I shouldn't have left like that, but after everything that's happened, I felt like I needed to.

I let all my windows down and breathe in air, filtering smoke out of my nostrils.

Then I call Riley. It's late, but she's probably up.

No, she is up and out somewhere. It's turn-up-o'clock for her.

I just hope she's sober enough to talk, because I need to vent.

"Yello!" she answers.

“Hey, Riley?”

“Wassup? How was your daaaate ?” she sings.

“Are you home?” I ask.

“Yes...just got here. I’m tired. I didn’t go out after all. I stayed home and popped my own bottle.”

That explains why she’s hyper past midnight.

She yawns loudly, then asks, “How was your date?”

“That’s what I was calling to talk to you about. So, turns out it wasn’t a date.”

“Then what was it?”

“It was me hanging out with Judah and his friends around a freakin’ bonfire in the middle of the woods, drinking beer.

Well, I didn’t drink any beer. I had water, but they were all sipping and talking.

And get this—his group of friends consists of more women than men, by the way, and they all came over to introduce themselves to me, telling their special stories of how they met Judah.

By the way they were talking, you’d think the man was a saint.

You should’ve seen them, Riley. They all looked like they were in love with the man, but for some reason, he turned them all down and requested nothing but friendship.

And these women—you should've seen them.

They're all beautiful. Every last one of them.

I'm talking supermodel beautiful – even the crazy one that was staring at the moon for most of the night. ”

“Wait—do you think he's sleeping with these women? It's giving orgy.”

“That's what I thought, at first, but after talking to them, I found out that Judah informed them all that he's not interested in a relationship. He told them the same thing he told me—he likes to surround himself with good people.”

“This is crazy.”

“Tell me about it...”

“I mean, I saw the way you two interacted at the ice cream shop,” Riley recalls. “There was definitely some sparks there.”

“There wasn't. He was just being nice. Apparently, it's what he does.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because the girls at the campfire confirmed it by telling me their stories of the nice things he did for them. And one of them said she might've overheard him say he had cancer, which would explain why he steers clear of relationships.”

“Oh, wow. Do you think that's true?”

“I don't know.”

“I wouldn’t believe anything unless it came directly out of his mouth.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t think I’m going to see him anymore.”

“Come on, Autumn. You give up waaaay too easily, girlfriend.”

“Perhaps I should call you after the liquor wears off.”

“Unt un—don’t do that. I only had two drinks. I know what I’m talking about. You’re giving up. Face it.”

“I’m not giving up,” I respond, irritation settling at my temples. “I’m moving on with life. That’s how this works.”

“No. That’s how you work.”

“You act like you’ve never met a guy who’s charming and gorgeous, and once you got to know him, he turned out not to be what you hoped.”

“We’ve all been there, but no ma’am. This is not that . You met Judah for a reason.”

“Riley—”

“Do you deny it?”

I pull in the parking lot at my place and sigh heavily, feeling defeated. “No, I don’t, but everything isn’t supposed to be something, if that makes sense.”

“Agreed, but this is something. I can feel it. I’m not telling you what to do. I just want to urge you to not cut the man off without exploring the situation a bit further.”

“Okay. Fine. If the situation presents itself, I may, but if it doesn’t, I’m not going to track him down. I’m not desperate to meet a man.”

“I know that, Autumn. Look—get some sleep. You sound tired.”

“I’m exhausted and I need to shampoo this smoke smell out of my hair, so I probably won’t get to bed until two.”

“Then I’ll let you go. Talk to you later.”

“Alright. Later.”

I go inside, hang up my purse, and toss my keys on the counter. Then I head straight for my bedroom where I strip off my clothes and step into the shower, washing my body and shampooing my hair. Beneath the water, I close my eyes and see his face.

Judah.

Disappointment settles deep into my chest. I had hoped for something different with Judah, but the night didn’t unfold as I had expected.

I’ll take my losses and move on, but I doubt I’ll ever have that overwhelming feeling of anticipation in my chest for another man.

How could I when it hit me so hard with him?

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I typically work a regular eight-to-five Monday through Friday, but when I'm not feeling my best, I'll head out earlier.

That's the advantage of working with my parents – they're aware of my health issues, and I don't have to explain anything to them when I don't come in or when I need to leave early.

Today, Wednesday, I'm leaving early, but it's not due to my health.

There's no appointment I have to urgently get to.

I'm only leaving so I can call Autumn. I've been debating for the last few days whether to do so, and I finally decided that I needed to.

For some reason, I miss her. How you can miss someone you don't know baffles me, but I do.

She told me she works for the recreation center, and since she didn't want to give me her number, I concluded the best way to reach her was to call the place where she works.

Sitting in my car, still in the parking lot at the store, I pull up a search engine and search for the recreation center's number. I dial it, lean back in my seat and wait.

One ring has me blowing an anticipatory breath.

Two rings have me anxious.

Three rings make me wonder if anyone is going to answer.

I'd almost given up hope, and then I hear, "Thank you for calling Arden Parks and Recreation. This is Autumn speaking. How may I help you?"

I close my eyes as her voice travels through me like an energy. A force. It's been that way since I met her.

"Hello?" she says.

I sit straight up and say, "Hi, Autumn. It's Judah."

"Judah?"

"Yes, from the other day. From Saturday. The campfire..."

"Yes, I know. You're actually the only Judah I know."

"You're the only Autumn I know."

"I guess we have that in common."

A semblance of a smile touches my lips. "It seems so."

"So, what's up? Why did you track me down?"

"I didn't like the way we parted ways Saturday night. It's been bothering me."

"Why?"

"Because it just has."

The line goes quiet for a moment, leaving me to wonder if she was still there. I see the call timer going, so I take it that she is. “You hardly know me, Judah.”

“That’s the problem. I would like to get to know you.”

“From what I saw, you have more than enough people you’re getting to know.”

“I know them already,” I toss back. “I don’t know you .”

“Are you speaking in code?”

I grin, tickled by her perception of me, and respond, “No, I’m not.”

“Then you’re certainly not making yourself clear, so tell me, Judah, why do you want to know me? Be honest.”

“Because I like you, and you like me, too, so stop playing and meet me for dinner tonight.”

I didn’t mean to be so forthcoming, but I felt like I needed to let her know just how interested I am.

“No,” she responds. “Judah, it’s Wednesday. I don’t feel like being around a bunch of people I don’t know, talking about stuff that doesn’t interest me. I’d rather be—”

“It would just be me and you,” I break in to tell her.

The line goes silent again. I suppose she’s thinking it through, but that’s the last thing I need – for her to sit there and overthink this.

I ask, “Autumn, are you there?”

“Yes. I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“Being alone with you.”

“We won’t be alone. We’ll be in a restaurant.

That is what you wanted on Saturday night, right?

Time with me? No one else. Just me. However, I was preoccupied with an old acquaintance, and that meetup was already scheduled.

I probably should not have invited you there, and for that, I apologize. So, I think I—we —deserve a do-over.”

“Okay,” she says offhandedly, but I’m still pleased, regardless. “Listen—I have to get back to work. Give me your number, and I’ll text you mine. That way, you can text me the details.”

“Okay. I can do that,” I tell her, then rattle off my cell number.

“And don’t add me to no group chat,” she orders. “You’re the only person I want to get to know right now.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Alright. See you soon.”

“Looking forward to it.”

As soon as the line disconnects, I smile and sit here, waiting for my phone to beep. When it does, I look at the text message that comes through. It says, “This is Autumn,” followed by an emoji of leaves. That’s how I save her name in my phone: Autumn with the leaves behind her name.

I text her the name and address of the restaurant and tell her to meet me there at six.

She responds with a ‘thumbs-up’ emoji – not the most reassuring response, but at this point, I’m just glad she responded at all.

I really want to know this woman, and I want her to know me – even the difficult things.

I feel like I can open up to her in ways that I haven’t been able to with anyone else in my circle.

That’s what Nico said I needed – somebody to talk to.

Well, besides him. He knows everything about me, but I don’t confide in other people.

I don’t want pity or empathy – I don’t want nobody feeling sorry for me.

Back when I was first diagnosed, I preferred being alone, especially after my fiancée dipped because, in her words, she had her whole life ahead of her and wasn’t prepared to deal with my health issues.

I’m glad we didn’t get to the ‘in sickness and in health’ part of our relationship because she surely would’ve divorced me. That’s how fast she split.

Between the betrayal of someone who I thought I was going to spend the rest of my

life with, and having to deal with health issues that came out of nowhere, I retreated into isolation for an entire year.

I hardly talked to anyone – my parents and my best friend Nico included.

I sat alone many nights asking myself why – not God – myself.

I felt like I'd done something wrong to deserve this, but I knew I'd live a good life up to that point.

Depression set in. I was a mess – filled with negative thoughts and no real hope for my future.

It was through the darkness of my deep despair when I discovered that isolating myself wasn't good for my physical or mental health.

So, I built my tribe – my support community – the beautiful people I surround myself with.

I meet them and bring them into my life.

Having that kind of support worked wonders for my soul.

My symptoms improved. The doctors couldn't believe it.

While I didn't have a clean bill of health, I had a measure of it. I felt like myself again.

I feel like myself again.

However, lately I've been having this feeling like I'm missing something.

That's why I need this dinner with Autumn.

Since meeting her, it feels like someone punched me in the gut and that feeling is still lingering until I figure out why I handed this woman my ice cream cone.

Yeah, I've met other women in unconventional ways, but this time, with this woman, I know it's not the same.

This evening, I need answers.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

Acropolis.

That's where I'm supposed to be meeting him.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't having second thoughts.

Riley thinks I should go, but she's just desperate to get me boo'd up with somebody.

Me, I'm not desperate. I know myself – know that I have plenty of love to give and when God sees fit to send me a man to drown with that love, I'm perfectly fine with waiting.

But, I already told Judah I'd meet him and I'm a woman of my word.

So, here I am, pulling up in the crowded parking lot, shutting off my car and making my way toward the entrance.

When I enter, I see Judah sitting at a table in the center of the restaurant.

I take a moment to observe him. He's just sitting there all statuesque, staring like he's in another world.

He is in another world. I can already tell that by the people he surrounds himself with and the way he talks to me.

His voice is uniquely deep, yet calm. He hardly ever smiles and when he does, it's so pinched, he may as well not even try.

I walk over to the table, pull out a chair and when he senses my presence, he stands and says, “My apologies. I didn’t see you walk in.”

“I know. You were too busy daydreaming.”

“I tend to do that a lot,” he says with his hand on the back of my chair.

When I sit down, he returns to his seat and looks at me with those glistening honey brown eyes of his. Behind them, there’s a story I’m not yet privy to.

I see confusion.

I see pain.

I see hope.

I see... love .

He has a lot to offer a woman – a relationship – but he’d rather settle for friendship.

I’m glad I know that about him because, even though we’re out to dinner, I know that this – whatever this is – is like an electric car with no charge stranded beside the road.

It ain’t going nowhere. Moriah, Luna, and Tabitha already schooled me about him.

He wants me to be another one of his lil’ friends. I’ve prepared myself for it.

Actually, I see nothing wrong with us being friends. I’m a woman of deep faith and I’m waiting for God. If this ain’t the one he wants me to be with, then friendship is just fine.

So, that's where I am – what I've settled into. I'm having dinner – pizza – with my new friend , Judah, with his handsome self.

“What's your last name?” I ask.

“Westinghouse. I didn't tell you that before?”

“No.”

“Oh.”

“I take it you know mine since you also know where I work now.”

“Yes, I do, but only because I saw it on one of your business cards in the card slot of your phone case on Saturday.”

“You pay attention to everything, huh?”

“I just notice things other people usually don't.”

“Let's test that theory. What have you noticed about me that most people wouldn't?”

“You have those beautiful freckles on your face that you try to hide with makeup.”

I rummage through my purse to find my mirror. I open it and look at my face. I don't see my freckles. I carefully applied makeup this evening to hide them.

I look up at him and ask, “How did you—?”

“I saw them on Friday.”

Oh, shoot...my makeup had probably worn off by then.

“Good evening, folks,” the waitress says, leaving a colossal-sized menu on the table and then asks, “What can I get you to drink?”

“I’ll have a sweet tea,” I say.

“Water for me, please,” Judah responds.

The waitress leaves us.

Picking right back up where we left off, I say, “It’s not that I’m trying to hide them. It’s just the fact that they’re always a topic of conversation for people, even strangers, and I don’t like talking about them constantly.”

“They’re beautiful. They remind me of when I’m staring up into the night sky and looking at constellations of stars. I get lost doing that—taken into another world where I want to stay forever.”

“Well, thank you. I’ve never had anyone describe them so beautifully.”

“You’re welcome.”

I pick up the menu.

He asks, “Have you ever been here?”

“Yes, several times. I love this place.”

“Have you ever tried the stromboli?”

“No. I’ve only gotten the pizza.”

“Then might I suggest you get the stromboli this time? It’s one of those food experiences that are once in a lifetime.”

“That good, huh?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t steer you wrong.”

“I believe that.”

He looks up and a smile slowly graces his handsome face as if he’s pleased. An actual smile. I must be doing something right.

We order pepperoni and sausage strombolis and sip our drinks as we wait for food to arrive. The silence between us is awkward, but we hardly know each other so conversation doesn’t flow as readily as I’m sure we’d both like.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes,” I say eagerly. I’ll take just about anything right now to cut into the silent nervous tension.

“When I told you I was a bagger, did you immediately think less of me?”

“Think less of you? Of course not. I’m not the kind of person to look down on anyone. A job is a job.”

“I see,” he says, still examining me.

“Why do you ask? If you feel like I thought less of you, I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s something I face all the time once people find out what I do.”

“I mean, how? What do they say?”

“You remember my friend, Nico?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“He seems to think I’m wasting my talent by doing something so— how did he put it? —mediocre.”

“What do you think?”

“I think I’m doing the best I can.”

“That’s all we can do, Judah. If you’re doing the best you can, what other option is there?”

The food arrives and I’m grateful because I’m also starving. I had a small salad for lunch and water for a snack. Now, I’m about to tear into this stromboli like it’s my last meal.

After the first bite, I’m in love. I never knew food could make me moan, but here I am, moaning and helpless to control it.

“Good, right?”

“Oh my! It’s amazing!”

“It is, but let’s not get carried away.”

I chuckle. “I just moaned. It’s a little too late for that.”

I watch as he bites into his. Shaking his head, he says, “Mmm, mmm, mmm. This should be illegal.”

“I’m glad it’s not, or I’d be facing several charges.”

He laughs.

So do I.

This feels nice and friendly , but sometimes the way he looks at me says something else. Or maybe I want it to say something else. That’s probably what it is.

Just have fun with the guy, Autumn, and stop trying to make it something that it’s not. You already know where he stands when it comes to relationships. He doesn’t want that. He wants friends. So, just be that.

He says, “I want to tell you something.”

“Okay. Tell me something.”

“I don’t usually share this with people. In fact, there are only a few that know.”

“Wait—are you sure you want to tell me ? I haven’t known you very long.”

“I know.”

“Then—”

“I feel like I can trust you,” he cuts me off to say. He takes a deep breath, releases it

slowly, and says, “I’m dying.”

I frown. The room stills. Everything goes silent except the ringing I hear in my ears. Did I hear him correctly?

“What’d you say?”

“I said I’m dying.”

“Judah, that’s not funny.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

“You’re not dying.”

“I am. I have brain cancer,” he says flatly. Point-blank. There’s no sadness in his voice. No pause. He just laid it bare, handing me something that I’m not ready to take.

“No.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” he piles on.

“Judah...” I place a hand over my heart, feeling a pain in my chest at his admission. Cancer. Who wants to hear that? The news must’ve hit him hard. I can’t even imagine what would go through a person’s mind after that.

He says, “I’m sorry to spring this on you. I probably shouldn’t have.”

“I’m—I don’t know what to say. I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah,” he says, then takes another bite of his stromboli as if what he’s told me doesn’t bother him at all. Maybe it doesn’t. He’s been living with this. It’s a shock to me because I’m just finding out.

“Say something,” he urges, wiping his mouth as he chews.

Conflicted and flabbergasted, I ask, “What am I supposed to say?”

“Something. Anything. I see the thoughts swirling in your head.”

“Yeah...I’m trying to process this.”

“I get that, I do, but I want you to say something.”

I look over at him, completely befuddled about what he’s asking of me. I ask, “What exactly am I supposed to say?”

“Say what you’re thinking right now.”

“I’m thinking that this can’t be real. If it is, life is unfair. You don’t deserve this. And...um...you look fine. You don’t look like a person who has health issues. I—um...”

I pause and reflect on what the women told me at the campfire. Putting the pieces together, I guess what they overheard turned out to be true. He does have cancer and that’s probably the reason he doesn’t date and prefers to friend-zone the women he meets. Their assumptions were spot on.

My God...

I get up from my chair, step over to him, and wrap my arms around his neck, feeling

his warmth and coldness at the same time.

He makes no attempt to accept my embrace – to return my hug.

His arms remain by his side as he sits here as motionless as he was when I first walked into this restaurant and saw him in a daze.

But I squeeze and hold on to him like this is the last time I'll see him because I know he hasn't come to terms with the diagnosis.

That's why there was no emotion behind his words when he told me.

Returning to my seat, I sit and push my plate away. My appetite has left the building. I don't care how good the food is. I know I won't be able to eat another bite right now.

I look up at him, feeling a tear roll down my face. He's still eating like he doesn't have a care in the world. Meanwhile, my poor, little heart is breaking for him.

"Why are you crying?" he asks. "You don't know me."

"It's just—it's jarring to hear. I—I can't wrap my head around it."

"Yeah."

"Why did you tell me?" I ask, rubbing the tear away from my face.

"Would you rather I hadn't?" he asks and takes another bite.

"Um—honestly, I don't know."

“I told you because I know I can trust you. And, I felt like you needed to know.”

“Did you tell Moriah, Luna, and Tabitha?”

“No.”

“I think they may have overheard you telling Nico something about it.”

“I know.”

Another tear slides down my face.

“Stop crying,” he says.

“I’m sorry.” I take a deep inhale and release it. “This is a lot.”

“I know. I had no intention of telling you this so soon. It just—I felt like I needed to. I probably shouldn’t have.”

I sniffle and say, “It’s okay. I’m glad you trusted me enough to tell me. I just—I wish there was something I could do.”

“There is.”

“What’s that?”

“Just be a listening ear. A friend.”

And there it is. Now, I’m officially one of the crew – his friend – and you know what? I don’t mind it.

Happily, I say, “I can definitely do that.”

A smile dances across his lips before he responds, “Good. I need all the friends I can get.”

I box up my leftovers and then he walks with me outside and to my car.

“Thank you,” he tells me as we stop next to my driver’s side.

“For what?” I ask, looking up at him. He’s well over six feet. I feel so short next to him.

“First, for sharing a meal with me. Second, for being a listening ear. Third, just for being you.”

I flirted with the idea of smiling, but instead of offering him a full-on smile, I bite it back and say, “You’re thanking me for being me?”

“Yes. You have a presence about yourself that calms me.”

“Then, the next time I hug you, try hugging me back and maybe you’ll feel even more of that presence.”

I step forward and close my arms around his body, squeezing with everything I have.

That’s when I feel his arms around me. Finally.

He’s not stoic this time. He’s expressing, squeezing me just as tightly as I have him locked in.

I close my eyes and allow the sensation to engulf me.

I surrender to his warmth, letting the feeling settle deep into my chest. And he talks about how my presence makes him feel...

His is just as addictive. It's incomparable to any kind of affection I've ever felt before. Soul to soul, we stand in this embrace as the world turns. As the verge of dusk looms above our heads. As I hear his heart slamming against his rib cage. At this moment, we're the only people who exist.

I don't want to pull away. I want to stay here. I want him to know that everything is going to be okay. And I know it's intrusive, but I want to know everything about his diagnosis. When was he diagnosed? How did he find out? What did his treatment entail? Does he have a family history of cancer?

I release him slowly and say, "I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening."

"I hope you do the same, Autumn."

"And, you can call me anytime, Judah, you know, if you want to talk or anything."

"Don't forget you said that."

"I won't, and I mean it. Call me."

"I will," he confirms.

I move to get into my car. He tries to reach ahead of me for the handle, but I beat him to it. Still, he holds the door and once I get inside, he closes it and throws up his hand briefly.

I start my car and drive away with tears rolling down my face. I'm a mess for a man I hardly know. I hate that he has to go through this. I feel helpless. That sour feeling in

my stomach hasn't let up and I don't think it will anytime soon.

It's close to eight when I arrive at Riley's house. I couldn't go home after this. I had to talk to somebody. When I tell her the news, she's in just as much shock as I am.

"Dang. That's crazy. Like, who would've ever thought?"

"Yeah. I was in tears when he told me. It's just so...I don't know. It didn't sit right with me. Like, I understand life is not fair, you know, but this?"

I sigh, completely at a loss for words. I throw my head back angling it toward the ceiling and close my eyes.

"Well, at least you know. Ay, that's probably why he's on that friend thing," she says, reaching the same conclusion I came up with. "He doesn't want a relationship because...wow. Oh my God. This is so sad. I feel so sorry for him."

"Me, too."

Riley shakes her head again and then asks, "So, what are you going to do?"

"I feel like I should be there for him. No, I want to be there for him. It must be a terrible feeling. I couldn't imagine waking up every day knowing that I was living with cancer."

"Girl, let me go get us a drink. You're going to have me crying, and I don't even know the man."

"No," I say, standing. "I just stopped by real quick to tell you that. I have to get home so I can get ready for work tomorrow."

“Aw...come here,” she says, pulling me into her embrace. “Everything is going to be alright.”

“I know. Sometimes it doesn’t feel like it, though.”

“But it is. My concern is, if you’re sure you can handle a friendship with him.”

“I can. I think I need to, Riley. It’s the weirdest feeling, but I don’t want to not have him in my life somehow.”

“Then go with your gut. I’ve always believed that people come into our lives for a reason.”

“Yeah, me too. I’ll see you later, girl.”

“Okay.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

My mother insisted I give it a facelift.

When my grandfather was alive, he wasn't about to jump on the modern train to spruce it up.

Chipped paint and a rickety front porch with two rocking chairs that looked like they'd seen better days suited him just fine.

And the inside of the house – yikes! – it smelled like a mothball convention.

Floral wallpaper had faded and yellowed over the years, and the linoleum on the kitchen floor had died a long time ago.

When I took ownership, I had the place painted and the porch rebuilt with wide cedar planks along with two black ceiling fans above for those muggy nights and hot mornings.

I had all the furniture taken out so the place could be properly remodeled and modernized.

I reupholstered what I could, keeping a lot of the furniture they already had.

Fresh paint graced the walls of every room. The kitchen was completely gutted to make way for new cabinets, granite countertops, and up-to-date stainless steel appliances.

The two bathrooms in the place were properly modernized with subway tiles.

My bathroom – the ensuite – I had converted from a bathtub to a walk-in shower with all the handles for support.

I'll never know when I'd need them. Sometimes I get dizzy.

Having a handle to grab is reassuring for those times.

I lean over the counter and bury my face in my hands, thinking about the day. The store was busier than normal for a Wednesday. With July Fourth weekend coming up, I'm sure people are gearing up for backyard cookouts and fireworks. Sounds nice, but I feel myself drifting into a slump.

I hate it when I feel like this – like life is leaving me behind and there's nothing I can do about it due to my circumstances. I've been dealt a hand that would be difficult for anyone to deal with. And I'm so tired of hearing people say God put this on my plate because he knew I could handle it.

Why?

Why would God hand me a pill he knew I couldn't swallow? Granted, I do my best to keep a positive outlook – to convince myself that I will be fully healed from this disease, but the science says otherwise.

It—

My thoughts are interrupted by a tap on the front door. I walk there but my mother is already letting herself in with her canvas slides and white sun visor to match.

“Good evening, Judah.”

From her behavior, you'd think she didn't just see me at the grocery store. We work

together almost every day. Well, actually, she's back in the office reviewing inventory with my father. I'm by the registers, bagging.

"Good evening, Mother. Out for a walk again?"

"Yeah. Me and your father went for an evening stroll."

"You decided to drop by on your way back home. He just kept on going, huh?"

My mother throws a hand on her hip and says, "Come on, now, Judah. You know your father means well."

"Sure he does..." I say facetiously. I know my father is upset with me.

Even with my diagnosis – somehow it's my fault.

Usually when we talk, we end up in a heated conversation about how he wasted so much money putting me through college for a degree in economics, only for me to end up working at a grocery store.

The thing is, with the radiation and chemotherapy, I almost didn't make it out of college.

I was sick and tired – mentally and physically.

After undergoing all of that, I wasn't about to be chained to a desk staring at numbers for however many years I had left.

I wanted to be out in nature. I craved that connection with the earth.

With God. With my inner self. I wanted to know who I really was, and economics

wasn't a priority.

My father, on the other hand, still thinks I'm wasting the years I have left by bagging groceries and, in his words, 'hanging out with half-baked hippies in the forest who don't have a pot to piss in'. I still love him, though. We just haven't been able to see eye-to-eye in a very long time.

"Woo...it's muggy out there," Mom says, fanning her face with her right hand.

"It is. I would advise you to switch to early morning walks if you must walk at all. And I'm talking around five or six."

"Nonsense. It's still dark at five, and I'm getting ready for work by six."

"The store doesn't open until eight."

"Exactly. What do you think I'm going to do? Hurry up and throw on some clothes at seven thirty and pop up at work? I can't do that. I need time to wake up, stretch, eat, drink my coffee, and say my morning prayer. I have a routine."

She steps out of her shoes, wiggles her toes, plops down on the couch, and crosses her legs.

She's made herself at home. In a way, she is home.

This is her childhood home. She always has stories to tell me about how she grew up.

Where she fell and scraped her knee. How she used to help her mother bake cookies and play hide and seek with Uncle Reuben.

She loves this home. I'm glad I decided to keep it.

She leans forward, picks up the remote, and says, “When is the last time you turned this TV on?”

“Don’t know. I don’t watch TV that much. You know that.”

I walk to the fridge and take out a bottle of water, walking it over to her.

“Oh, bless your heart. Thank you.” She rubs the bottle across her face before she opens it and starts drinking right away. “Ahh...that’s good. Hey, I made some mozzarella chicken for dinner. I can run and get you some, if—”

“No, thank you. I had Acropolis for dinner.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I don’t want to sit down, but I take a moment to sit with her. I never know when it will be our last conversation. That’s one thing my diagnosis taught me—not to take anyone for granted. I even tried to extend an olive branch to my father, but he’s not as receptive as my mother is.

I stretch my legs out in front of me, put my hands behind my head, and close my eyes while releasing a day’s worth of a sigh.

“Tired?”

I open my eyes and look at my mother. She’s a beautiful fifty-one-year-old woman who looks like she’s in her forties.

She had me right after high school. Neither she nor my father went to college.

They had a business to run – one my father inherited from my grandfather – so, as

soon as they both graduated, they got to work. Been running it ever since.

“Yes, I’m wiped out.”

“I was hoping since you left early, you were going to get some rest.”

“I desperately need it.”

I close my eyes again. Her face appears – Autumn’s – and I wish it wouldn’t. I haven’t been able to get her off my mind since we met, but I know I need to.

“I can’t help but notice you seem a little down,” Mother says, yet again interrupting my thoughts. “Care to talk about it? I’m all ears.”

Once again, I open my eyes and look at her.

I’m not annoyed. I’m never annoyed with my mother because I know her heart.

I know what she stands for. Her values. Her intentions, especially when it comes to me.

I’m more in a difficult state of mind at the moment as I think about this relationship thing – battling the thin line between what I want and what I know the other person doesn’t deserve.

I want friendship with Autumn just like I have with all the other women I know.

But with Autumn, I feel like there’s something deeper I can connect with.

I know there is. That doesn’t scare me. It confuses me.

I have nothing to offer her. So, why am I thinking about the possibility of offering her something I don't have?

"Judah?"

I look at my mother and say, "You know I've always been the person to play the hand I'm dealt. Always."

"Yes, you are."

"People say God works in mysterious ways and He gave me this because He knew I could handle it, and since this diagnosis, I've been handling it, correct? I mean, it may not be in the way you or Dad envisioned, but I'm doing the best I can."

"I know you are, Judah, and your father knows it too, no matter how stubborn he is. Is that what's bothering you?"

"It's, um...well, I've been feeling a little down for the last few days. It's like, I know I need to go through this, right, but why me? Why can't I have a normal life?"

"You can, Judah."

"I can't. It's impossible. Anyone I meet, I have to have the conversation so I can watch them pack up and run like Emori did.

And you know what? Scratch that. I don't want to have the conversation at all.

Why should I? Why should I give someone a choice whether they want to love me based on the fact that I have cancer?

Who would want that? Why should I want that while knowing I'm on my way out? "

“Judah,” Mom says, placing a hand over her heart. “Please don’t talk like that.”

“It’s the truth.”

“It’s not.”

“It is. There’s no need to pretend it’s not.”

“Well, all of this is pointless reasoning, anyway. It’s not like you’re seeing someone. Wait—are you seeing someone?” she asks, each word getting louder than the preceding as her eyes brighten, awaiting my response.

I hesitate to tell her that, yes, I did meet someone. I wouldn’t hear the last of it if I did. And it’s still early on. I want to spend more time with Autumn to know that my feelings are valid. Maybe this is just a hiccup. That’s more likely than anything else.

I say, “What I’m trying to say, Mother, is that some days are good and some are not. The last few haven’t been good because I’m thinking more along the lines of ‘why me’ instead of being grateful that I still have breath in my body.”

She’s deep in thought, concentrating on her response so she can tell me something insightful that will help pull me out of this slump.

After a deep breath, she crosses her legs, leans back, and says, “You know you’re my hero, don’t you?”

“Mother—”

“You are. You’ve been handling this like only you can, Judah. I honestly don’t know if I could do it if I were you. And trust and believe God didn’t put this on your plate, son. God is love. Love doesn’t cause pain and then sit back and watch you to see

what you do with it.”

“Tell that to Job.”

“But God didn’t afflict Job, did He? The scriptures say the devil did that.”

“Oh, yeah. You’re right.”

“I know I’m right!” she says with a chuckle.

I always find her connection to her faith refreshing. She raised me to have an appreciation for the Bible, but it wasn’t until I got sick that I started to take it seriously.

“I don’t know what brought this on since you’re keeping it from me, but I think you should grab whatever happiness you can, Judah.

That’s not selfish, and it’s not deceitful.

If this is about a woman, as long as she’s fully aware of your diagnosis, she can decide for herself if she wants to be with you.

I know that opens up the door for rejection, but it’s not something you can keep from someone. ”

“I know.”

She smiles.

I smile back. It’s a small one. An appreciative one.

No one knows me like this woman who birthed me.

She's strong. Passionate. She was always the woman to do what she had to do to get the job done.

Always seeing beyond the surface. Very insightful and in tune with life.

With her family. I didn't have to tell her my issue involved a woman, and she already knew.

She stands, bends to the left and right, waking up her body after sitting, and asks, "You coming in tomorrow?"

"Yes. I'll be there."

She walks over, hugs me and says, "Take a long, hot shower, be with your thoughts and I mean really connect with them, then have a good night's sleep. Okay?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Okay." She places a hand on my face and says, "I love you, son."

"I love you, too, Mother. As always, thank you for your insight. I really needed it."

"Anytime."

"Let me walk you home," I say, sauntering toward the door. "It's getting dark out."

"It ain't dark yet," she says, stepping out onto the porch.

It'll take me all of three minutes to get home.

I'll be fine," she says, jogging down the steps, then skipping across the walkway to the sidewalk.

As she begins walking away from me, she looks back at me and waves.

I throw up a hand and then slide my hands into my pockets, watching her and making sure she gets home safely.

Stepping back into my home, I take her counsel under advisement.

I get in the shower and stand there while I let my thoughts take over.

While the warm water cleanses me, I remind myself of the feeling in my gut the first time I saw Autumn at the ice cream shop.

It was something, I knew. It's why I continued to my car, willing myself not to talk to her.

But then she came to my car and all the willpower I had vanished.

I couldn't let her walk away without making some kind of arrangement to see her again.

I shrugged it off like it wasn't a big deal and told myself that it's what I do.

I meet people and invite them into my life.

Not all of them – only the special ones.

It was that way with Luna, Tabitha, Moriah, and all the others who frequently gather with us.

As for Nico—we grew up together. He knew me before cancer altered the trajectory of my life, but the rest – they’re people who lift me up. Keep me sane.

My tribe.

Do I add Autumn to that tribe? That’s what I’m unsure of.

I get out of the shower and dry off. After thinking it through, I agreed that I should be true to the pact I made with myself – that I wouldn’t leave another innocent person suffering over my death. Therefore, I need to recalibrate my brain and stick to my conviction.

Falling in love is not an option, even if the woman takes my breath away.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

We're supposed to be watching this movie, but we're playing Uno, eating popcorn and talking about our week.

Friday evenings with my bestie is therapy.

Riley is going on and on about how the boys are always musty and sweaty.

Do I care anything about that? Not at all.

But I'm her sounding board, and she's mine, so I'm going to sit here, drink this lukewarm bottle of Mike's hard lemonade, and listen to her talk about these stanky kids.

"I find it appalling that kids are not required to bring gym clothes to change into for class," she says.

"Girl, I have them kids running around the track, doing jumping jacks, playing all the sports and when they're done, so are their clothes and what little deodorant they put underneath their arms."

"So, does that mean if Johnny has you for first block, he's musty for the rest of the day?"

"The whole freakin' day. I actually gagged yesterday."

"Maybe you should have them bring extra clothes, deodorant and all that."

“I can’t. All of that has to be approved by the district.”

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious. If I implement anything the district didn’t put in place, I can get written up or face termination.”

“That’s insane. See, that’s why these schools can’t keep teachers now.

Everybody wants to be in charge, but it’s only the teachers who are really in the trenches, paying attention to the needs of the students.

So, while the district holds meetings to make themselves feel important, Johnny’s lil’ musty behind can’t multiply mixed fractions because he’s all sweaty and funky when he gets to fifth period. ”

Riley laughs. “You gon’ leave Johnny alone. Now, draw four,” she says slamming a card on top of the pile.

My mouth falls open. “You don’t have red?”

“Nope.”

“You better not be lying,” I say, drawing the four cards, adding to my stash of half the deck. Either I’m not good at this game, or Riley is on expert level.

“I’m not lying,” she says, but I’m not convinced by that smirk on her face.

My phone vibrates on the table. I pick it up and look at the text that came through.

Good evening.

I recognize Judah's number, but I have yet to program his name and number into my phone. I haven't heard from him since we met for dinner on Wednesday. Just to toy with him, I respond:

Who is this?

I wait for a response and get:

Ouch . You have so many men texting you, you can't keep up?

No, I was just playing wit' you, Judah. I forgot to save your number in my phone, though.

How did you know it was me, then?

I still have our previous texts.

Oh. Right.

I'm locking your number in now. Perhaps I'll save it under the ice cream emoji, then I'll always know it's you.

Or you could just save it under my name.

I could, but what's the fun in that?

Right...so I was wondering...

Wondering what, Mr. Westinghouse?

When I can see you again?

“Girl, who is you texting over there?”

“Nobody.”

“Oh, it’s somebody. You haven’t stopped cheesing since you picked up the phone.”

I snicker and say, “It’s Judah.”

“Dang. He has you smiling like that? What happened to just being friends?”

“Nothing. We are friends.”

“Chile, please. Skip a diagnosis. If a man made me smile like that, I’d be all over it.”

“Riley!”

“What? I’m just saying. Take it from a P.E. teacher with no prospects—you’re winning. Plus, he fine.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

My bad. You are busy.

No, I’m not. I’m calling you now.

You don’t have to.

I want to.

I dial his number. I didn’t even hear the line ring before he says, “Hi.”

“Hey. Hold on a sec.”

“Okay.”

The feeling that toys with my nerves and sends shivers down my spine when I hear his voice should be studied. All of my happy hormones are fluttering, having a field day, and making me feel weightless.

I mouth to Riley, “I’ll be right back,” and step outside of her duplex. Leaning against the hood of my car, I say, “Okay. I’m here. What’s up, Judah?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing? You called me for nothing ?”

“No. I—okay, how are you doing?”

“I’m doing well. You?”

“I’m doing.”

“Did you work today?”

“I did for a few hours this morning. I met some interesting people.”

“Oh yeah?”

“I did.”

“Tell me about it,” I say.

“Can I do that in person?”

I smile and say, “Oh, that was slick. I like how you slid that right on in there.”

“It would be a better conversation in person. In fact, I was initially calling to invite you to lunch with me tomorrow if—”

“Yes!”

He grins. “You didn’t let me finish.”

“You don’t have to. Tell me when and where and I’ll be there.”

“Lake Julian Park.”

“There are no places to eat out there at the lake.”

“I know. I’m going to attempt to pack a picnic basket. I got everything I needed when I was at the store today.”

“Aw—that means you’ve been thinking about this all day.”

“I have. Anyway, I’ll let you get back to whatever you’re doing.”

“I’m at my friend Riley’s house playing Uno.”

“This is what you usually do on Friday nights?”

“I mix it up a bit. Riley likes to go out sometimes, but she knows I’m a homebody. She likes the nightlife, you know. I’d rather be on the sofa watching a good movie.”

“I like that, too.”

“Stop lying, Judah. You’d rather be in the woods.”

“That, too. Hey...Autumn.”

“Yes?”

“Save my number in your phone.”

“I did already. I saved it under Judah with the ice cream cone emoji.”

“Seriously?”

“I told you I was going to do it.”

He grins and says, “Okay. Meet me tomorrow at ten.”

“Ten a.m.?”

“Of course,” he says, then laughs.

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Yes. Tomorrow.”

“At ten,” I confirm.

“A.M.,” he says, tickled.

“Alright. I got it.”

“Enjoy the rest of your night, Autumn.”

“You as well, Judah. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I hang up the phone and try my best to wipe the smile off my face that I’m going to get to see him tomorrow.

I don’t even care that the rest of the crew will be there.

I’m still grateful that I get to be near him.

I like him and I want to get to know him.

His diagnosis won’t prevent me from doing that.

In fact, I refuse to feel any kind of pity for him or look at him like a person who has something.

He’s a man with feelings—a man who looks perfectly capable of living a happy, productive life.

And I can’t explain it, but whenever I talk to him, whenever I’m with him, I feel elation.

Like there’s something about him that stabilizes me.

It’s one of those feelings that tells me our paths were supposed to cross and I’m glad they did.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I must have checked this bag a thousand times, making sure I had everything I needed for the picnic with Autumn this morning.

I place it in the backseat and head to the park.

I wanted to make arrangements to pick her up, but I wasn't sure if she'd be comfortable with that.

I haven't heard from her this morning, so I hope all is well and that she's ready for me.

It's ten minutes until ten. I'll be at the park in five.

I wonder if she's already there waiting for my arrival, or did she oversleep?

I get my answer when I pull in and see her car. A smile instantly comes to my face.

She's here.

She's waiting.

She's ready to spend the day with me.

I park beside her. She smiles when she looks over and sees me.

I get out, take the bag from the backseat and then close the door.

She's already gotten out, and I pause my steps toward her and take in her beauty.

She looks like a breath of fresh air if it were something you could see.

She has on a yellow, backless, strapless dress.

My throat nearly tightens when I discover freckles sprinkled over her chest like glitter.

Her hair is gathered in a high ponytail.

She has pink gloss on her lips and no makeup hiding her uniqueness.

Thank God.

I want to bask in her beauty marks all day. My thumbs ache to play connect the dots on her beautiful face.

"Good morning, Sunshine."

She smiles, her face glowing with happiness beneath a partly cloudy sky. "Good morning, Judah."

"How are you feeling this morning?" I ask. It's a question I've grown accustomed to people asking me. I want to be the one asking for a change.

"I feel good. It's a beautiful day. It's...pleasant."

"Yeah, that's why I wanted to get out here early before it got too hot."

"Good idea. Is it just us?"

“Yes,” I say, walking beside her. “Just us.”

I’m tempted to take her hand into mine, but I fight the urge.

Instead, I pay attention to her aura. Her aroma.

I savor her presence. She smells like cocoa butter and peaches.

She looks relaxed and ready for whatever.

I suppose that’s a good thing. It means she’s comfortable with me. That brings me joy.

Walking over near the paddle boats, I ask, “You’re not afraid of the water, are you?”

“No. What did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking we could paddle or drift to the middle of the lake and talk and eat.”

“Cool. I’m down.”

The worker at the dock advises us to grab life vests. I put mine on and assist Autumn with securing hers. Then we get on a boat, sitting in the front, our feet resting on the pedals.

“You’re the man. I’ll let you steer,” she says. “But I will pedal on my side, too.”

“You don’t have to.”

“No, I want to. I can’t tell you the last time I’ve been in one of these. It’s fascinating to me the things we forget to do as adults that we used to enjoy as children.”

“That’s true. The simple things in life bring the most pleasure.”

Simple things like seeing your face. Basking in your glow.

“I one-hundred percent agree with that.”

We pedal backward, then as we turn, we head forward, going away from land. I want to get as far out as possible – until I feel like I have her all to myself.

“Oh, my,” she says, huffing. “Can you tell I haven’t been to the gym in a while?”

“Why not?”

“Work. I’m usually so exhausted after I get home, I just crash. Sometimes, I don’t even have time to eat dinner.”

“That’s not good.”

“No, but,” she shrugs. “What can you do?”

“Quit.”

She laughs. It’s a sound I enjoy hearing. She has the cutest laugh that makes anyone who hears it smile. That’s how darling she is.

“I can’t quit,” she says. “Besides, I love what I do. It gets on my nerves sometimes, but it’s rewarding.”

“What all do you do there at the rec center?”

“I arrange different activities and classes for people. I work mostly with the older

crowd.”

“What kind of activities are they doing?”

“You’d be surprised. They love yoga. I just planned an early morning outdoor yoga class. They line dance, learn different stretches to avoid injury. Oh, and chair aerobics with one-pound weights is all the rage.”

I grin. “One pound...”

“Yep,” she says, tickled. “You can’t tell them nothing when they get them weights. But, hey, I just like that they’re active.”

“That’s nice. You have the kind of personality that’s great for that.”

“How do you know?” she asks, side-eyeing me.

I look over at her and then back straight ahead again. “Because I have a good feeling about these things.”

“You have a good feeling about me?”

“Yes, I do.”

She stops pedaling. The water splashes up against the sides of the boat as we rock. Time slows. The world is quiet. Out here, it’s just me and her. It’s the solitude I need to figure out what’s going on in my mind where she is concerned.

I say, “It looks like we’re out far enough. Is this good?”

She looks around and says, “Yes, this is perfect.”

“Good.”

She pulls in a breath and closes her eyes, tilting her head up to the sky. I was going to unzip the backpack, but I observe her breathing and the way the sun strikes her face the same way it kisses the lake and wakes up the earth.

I’m captivated.

She opens her eyes and looks at me as if she could feel my eyes on her. The smile that comes to her face is one of happiness.

“Yes?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say, forcing myself to look away from her face, though everything in me wants to hold this vision in my eyes forever.

I unzip the backpack and remove two bottles of lemonade. Handing her one, I say, “I would’ve made some fresh lemonade, but wasn’t quite sure how to bring it out here.”

“This is fine, Judah.”

“Okay. I made these sandwiches. I watched the lady in the deli make them and just basically copied her, so if they’re not good, blame the sandwich lady.”

“Judah?”

I pause removing items from the bag to look up at her. “Yes?”

“Everything is perfect. Just the gesture alone is perfect.”

“Okay. Thanks for saying that,” I say. She sensed my nervousness. I’m usually never

like this, but I want her to enjoy herself so much that it's making me tense. I take a beat, regather my intentions, and force myself to relax.

I hand her a sandwich and leave everything else in the bag for now. She unwraps it and says, "Roast beef. I love roast beef."

"Good."

We indulge for a while as the boat moves and drifts with the gentle ripples of the lake.

The wind slides across our faces like the gentle stroke of a finger.

The sun pronounces a shimmer on Autumn's cheeks – her freckles coming alive and standing out more dominantly.

If I must die, this is the vision of her I want plastered in my final breaths.

I ask, "Did you grow up in Arden?"

"No. I grew up in Asheville."

"Right up the street."

"Exactly. My parents still live there. I moved to Arden six years ago when I took the job at the rec center."

"I know I'm not supposed to ask this, but how old are you?"

"Guess."

A smile grows on my face. “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. If I guess too high, you’ll be offended.”

“I won’t. It’s just a guess.”

“Okay. Um...I’d say you were twenty-six.”

She smiles. “Close. I’m twenty-eight. How old are you?”

“Thirty-one.”

“Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“No. I’m an only child.”

“Me, too.”

“Ah—something else we have in common,” he says.

“What’s the other thing?” she asks, peering over at me, glancing at my lips.

“Our love of nature.”

“Oh. Right.” She takes another bite of the sandwich and says, “I don’t mean to come across as intrusive, and if I am, just tell me and I’ll back off, but how did you find out—you know—that you had brain cancer?”

“It started with these bad headaches. When they first started, I would pop a couple of Tylenol and keep it pushing. The problem was, they were getting to be more frequent. More intense. My mother urged me to go get checked just to make sure nothing was wrong, but I soon discovered that something was wrong. Very wrong.”

“How do you feel now?”

“I feel fine other than the fact that I know I have it. The cancer has been in remission for years. The headaches have stopped. I don’t get dizzy—I feel like I’m living a normal, yet temporary life.”

“Temporary?”

“Yes. My doctor already forewarned me that with the type of cancer I have, I’ll have a slim chance of surviving remission.”

“But you don’t know how long you’ll be in remission?”

“No, I do not.”

She sighs heavily.

I say, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m the one who brought it up.”

“I know, but we don’t have to talk about it. It’s supposed to be a relaxing day. Besides, I hadn’t intended to tell you about my diagnosis.”

“Why did you?”

“I told you why—I trust you—and honestly, I hadn’t meant to do other things with you that I willingly did.”

“Like what?” she asks, turning to me, curiosity piqued.

“Like when we met, I hadn’t intended to see you again.”

“Oh, wow. Talk about a punch to the gut...”

“No, I don’t mean it like that, Autumn. I—”

“So, the only reason you agreed to see me again is because I initiated it.”

“Technically, you didn’t initiate it. I invited you to the campground with my friends.”

“Yes, but only after I walked over to your car and introduced myself before you were apparently about to drive away only to never lay eyes on me again. You know that sucks, right?”

“My apologies, but like I said, it had nothing to do with you, Autumn. It was just me.”

“Then, why didn’t you stick to your guns and drive away when you saw me approaching?”

“That would be rude. Besides, there’s no way I could drive away from that pretty face of yours.”

She smiles hard, clearly flustered by my compliment.

“Stop,” she says. “All of your female friends are pretty. Do you make it a habit of gathering beautiful women by your side?”

“No.”

“So, you want me to believe you never asked Luna to come on a paddle boat ride

with you?”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I chuckle. “No, and fyi, if it doesn’t involve the galaxy, stars and planets, Luna isn’t interested.”

I laugh and say, “Yeah. I caught that vibe from her. She’s sweet, though.”

“They all are, but I only do group activities with them. It’s never one-on-one like this.”

Autumn eats more of her sandwich, but I can see her thinking, processing my every word. The boat creaks as we gently rock up and down.

She says, “I’m curious though—why didn’t you tell them about your diagnosis?”

“Because I only let people in my personal life who my heart tells me to trust.”

“And how does your heart know you can trust me?”

I look at her, finding her eyes piercing through my soul.

I use the occasion to stare deeply into hers and say, “I feel it when I’m with you and, no, I haven’t done anything like this with the women in my circle.

In fact, since my ex-fiancée told me to my face she couldn’t love a man who was dying despite the fact that we were together for three years prior to my diagnosis, I purposely haven’t gotten close enough to anyone to have something like that happen to me again. ”

“Well, that’s not fair.”

“Which part? The part about her leaving me, or that I haven’t gotten close to anyone?”

“Both, but especially the last part. It’s not fair to yourself, or the woman who could, or may have already fallen for you.”

Already fallen...

I narrow my eyes at her loaded comment, trying to decipher if she’s speaking hypothetically, or if she’s talking about herself.

I respond, “It may not be fair, but neither is having cancer.”

“I know, but—” she pauses reflectively, looking around at the beautiful scenery. After gathering her thoughts, she continues, “We all have a limited amount of time, Judah. We have to do what we can with what we’ve got.”

“Agreed.”

We finish our sandwiches and conversation ceases.

I think she’s thinking about all of this – a conversation I hadn’t planned on having is ruining our time together.

I blow an even breath as I look out at the trees lining the shore, admiring the way they connect with the water.

The sun is relentless, beaming down upon us as midday approaches.

I glance over at Autumn, wondering if she's going to say anything else to me, or if she's completely turned off by our conversation.

"Autumn," I say to get her attention.

She looks at me – doesn't say a word, just looks as our boat moves with the water.

I say, "Please forgive me. I didn't mean to burden you with my issues."

"It's not a burden. I'm honored that you feel comfortable enough to share your thoughts with me."

"Then why are you quiet?"

"I was just thinking."

"About?" I ask with raised brows.

"How—um—you know what? It's nothing." She drinks a sip of lemonade and then asks, "What were your plans for the rest of the day?"

"Don't have any. I'm just going to see where the day takes me. Hopefully, it will be somewhere with you."

She smiles again.

I ask, "How does that sound?"

"It sounds amazing."

"It does?"

“Yes. I like spending time with you.”

“The feeling is mutual, Autumn. I like spending time with you, too. Ay, speaking of—the crew is getting together tomorrow evening.”

“Where?”

“Commonplace Books.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a reader, too.”

“I am.”

“Of course you are.”

“What about you?”

“Yes, I enjoy reading, but like everything else, it’s a challenge to find time to actually do it.”

“Then we’ll get you back on track tomorrow. I’m going to pick out a book for you. The store closes at eight, so you’ll have time to get home and unwind before work Monday morning.”

“You got it all planned out, huh?”

I try to conceal the excitement building inside of me by constantly telling myself she’s like the others – just a friend – but I know that’s a lie. I can’t even stop staring at her lips long enough to remember what I’m supposed to be doing next. Oh, that’s right – getting dessert out of my bag.

I reach inside, take out two slices of strawberry cheesecake, and say, “Would you like some?”

“Yeah. Sure.” I take out some plastic forks and hand one to her.

“Thanks, Judah.”

“You’re welcome.”

She opens the container, taking a good amount on the fork. “Mmm. This is really good.”

I eat some as well.

She asks, “What did you go to college for?”

“Economics.”

“I take it you didn’t like it.”

“I did. It was a lot of learning and studying—long nights of staring at my computer and the work was never-ending. But, I’m pretty good at it.”

“I imagine you would be. My question is, if you’re good at it, why are you working at your parents’ store?”

“Because I like it.”

“You like it?”

“Yes. Do you know how many interesting people I meet in the course of the day? I

met a woman a few days ago who teaches Braille. Never met anyone like that. She said she used to be a professor.”

She nods and says, “I get that you like meeting interesting people, Judah, but you didn’t answer my question.”

“I didn’t?”

“No. Economics is complicated. You studied it. You mastered it. You have a degree in it. Yet, you’re working as a bagger.”

“I um—” I frown a little, not wanting to answer her question. My answer isn’t logical. It’s why my father has a hard time with my decisions.

To keep it as vague as possible, I say, “That’s a question I could go on forever about and since it would put me in a different headspace I don’t want to get into it at the moment.

“Understood,” she says.

“I think it’s a good time to head back now.”

“Okay.”

After returning to the dock, we take off our life vests, leave them on the counter at the registration desk, and then we walk toward our cars.

I say, “So, have you had enough of me for one day?”

“I don’t think I could ever have enough of you, Judah.”

“Ah, getting me back with the compliments, I see.”

“No—it’s not about that. I really like being with you.

You’re a joy to be around. You appreciate people.

Life. The little things. The trees. Plants.

You don’t run across many people these days who enjoy these things—things that should be sacred.

Things that come from God. You do. I like that very much. ”

“I like that about you, too.”

We take more easy, unhurried steps until we reach the cars. Autumn asks, “Have you been to the nature center?”

“Yes, many times, but I’ll go for the one hundredth time if it means spending another second with you.”

She places both hands on her heart and looks at me. “I’m honored.”

Her expression caused a smile to ambush my face. No matter how much I try to withhold it from her, it pierces through. It’s the power she has.

“Okay, well, if you don’t have anything else planned, you wanna head over there?”

“Sure. Let’s do it.”

We disperse to our individual cars, and I trail her there. We immediately link up

again as we enter. I pay for a couple of tickets and then we proceed to the exhibits.

While she's in awe of things she's probably seen a million times before, I admire her.

I see happiness in her eyes – the same happiness I feel in my heart.

It's the kind of happiness I thought only came once in a lifetime, but here it is as present as the sun on this hot, summer day. It's her. There's no other explanation.

“Judah,” she says, reaching back for my hand like it's second nature for her to do so. I accept her grasp and instantly I'm greeted by a feeling of home. Her hand in mine goes together like cheese and aged wine. How could I ever not have this? Have her?

“You good?” she asks with a quick glance over at me as I fall into stride beside her.

“Yes. I'm good.”

“Okay. You seem a little distracted. That's why I asked.”

That's because I am distracted. I'm distracted by your beauty. Your warm hand in mine. Your smile. Your humbleness. Your grace. I'm in awe that you know my struggles and yet, you still accept me for who I am.

“I'm okay,” I say, squeezing her hand gently. She looks at another exhibit with information on birds and says, “Ah, this is so nice.”

“What is? The birds?”

“No—well, yes, they are, too. I was talking about holding your hand.”

“Oh.” I want to release her hand. It's useless for me to get accustomed to this feeling

of closeness, knowing that it will be short-lived like everything else in my life.

“Did you hear me?”

I blink out of my trance and look at her. “Yes. I heard you.”

“If you heard me, what did I say?”

“You said you like holding my hand.”

“What did I say after that?”

I shrug. “I have no idea.”

“See!” She giggles. “You ain’t paying me no attention. I said you feel tense.”

I think I’m more nervous than tense. I’m not sure what I’m doing with Autumn or if I should be doing this at all. I’m enjoying myself so much, I’m not thinking about the consequences of my actions for both of us.

“I am a little tense,” I say, agreeing with her just because. “Maybe if you’d loosen the death grip you have on my hand...”

She cackles. “Oh, so it’s my fault.”

“It is.”

She slips her hand away from mine, much to my dismay, and asks, “Better?”

No .

I reach for her hand and say, “No one told you to release my hand.”

“Oh. I thought I was gripping you too tightly ,” she quips.

“You can hold on to me as tight as you want to, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart? Did I really just say that?

She’s all smiles as we head outside to cross the bridge.

“Hey, we should take a selfie.”

“I don’t like pictures,” I tell her.

“What? Why?”

“I just don’t.”

“As handsome as you are, you don’t like pictures? Stop the nonsense. Gimmie your phone?”

“Do you know how to take no for an answer?”

“I do, but not in this instance. Phone,” she demands with her hand out, waiting for me to hand it to her.

I take my phone out of my pocket, unlock it, and tap the camera. “You want me to take the picture, too?”

“Yeah. With those long arms, you should be able to get a good shot.”

I extend my right arm, getting into position to take the shot.

“Hey, I can take that for you,” a woman says.

“Oh, that would be great,” Autumn tells her.

I hand the lady my phone and step back to stand next to Autumn. She wraps both arms around me and then I look up and smile for the camera.

“There you go,” the lady says, handing the phone back to me. “I took a few shots so you could pick the best one.”

“Aw, thank you so much,” Autumn tells the woman.

“Yes, thank you,” I say.

“You’re welcome. Beautiful couple, by the way.”

“You hear that, Judah?” Autumn says. “She says we’re a beautiful couple.”

I stare down into her eyes, feeling myself drift into her soul. Blinking out of the trance, I take her hand again as we walk the rest of the bridge.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

My day couldn't have gone any better. I'm so high right now, I can scream.

The fluttering this man left in my chest and my stomach has me floating.

When I returned home, I couldn't even think straight.

I couldn't do anything. For the last half hour, I've been lying face up on my bed staring at the ceiling, seeing his face the whole time.

There has never been another man who made me feel anything remotely close to this.

I could die today and be satisfied that I got to know and spend time with such an amazing man.

When my phone vibrates on my nightstand, I sit up quickly to retrieve it, thinking that it's him.

It's not.

I growl my disappointment when I see that it's Riley – not that I don't want to talk to my girl. It's just that I want to talk to him more at the moment.

“Hey, Riley.”

“You know why I'm calling, so give me all the details.”

“Riley,” I began, lying back in the same position and say, “Today was perfect. Oh my

God...I'm talking romance-novel perfect.

Hallmark-movie perfect. It was everything.

Like, you know how you put up your defenses sometimes when you don't know how something is going to go?

I sort of did that, but quickly realized I didn't need to.

Judah planned the perfect picnic lunch at Lake Julian.

We actually got on a paddle boat and, after we pedaled to the center of the lake, we ate a lunch that he packed.

Ah! It was whimsical. The whole time we were out there, it felt like I was in a dream.

And then after we left there, he made it clear that he didn't want us to go our separate ways and I was so glad that he did because I wasn't ready for the day to be over either, so I suggested we go to the nature center. We talked, took pictures, held hands—”

“Held hands? I thought he just wanted to be friends.”

“He does.”

“But none of this sounds real friendly if you ask me.”

“See—you're already making judgments and I ain't even done yet.”

“Okay, continue.”

“We stayed out there for a while, took pictures and when we left there, he walked me back to my car and—”

“And? Don’t be leaving stuff out.”

“I thought he was going to kiss me. He looked like he wanted to, but he didn’t.”

“Umm hmm...he’s trying to get close without getting too close. Ay, I know you over there swimming in butterflies and whatnot, but you do know this man told you he only wanted to be friends, right?”

“Yep. I remember.”

“Then—”

“It’s fine, Riley. I’ll go with whatever he wants, for now.”

“Okay...” she says as if I can’t ascertain the skepticism in her voice.

“Riley...come on.”

“What? I didn’t even say anything.”

“You didn’t have to. I hear it in your voice.”

“I mean, I’m just curious as to how far you’re willing to go with him. He told you he didn’t want a relationship.”

“I know.”

“He told you he has cancer.”

“I know, but what if I told you that’s not a deterrent for me?”

“No, Autumn. Don’t do this to yourself. You’re thinking with your heart and not your head.”

“I like him, Riley. Should I just dismiss the way he makes me feel?”

“How does he make you feel?”

I breathe and say, “He makes me feel like I can fly. Like I can do anything. I feel excitement.”

“He told you he only wanted to be friends.”

“Yeah, but men change their minds all the time, right?”

“Girl, you’re giving me a headache.”

“Okay, so put yourself in my shoes. If you were me and you met a guy who had a diagnosis like cancer, but he’s the most incredible man you’ve ever met in your entire life, what would you do?”

“The most incredible man you’ve ever met? That’s what he is to you?”

“He is.”

“Then I really don’t have anything else to say against it. I mean, wow! Really, Autumn? I don’t ever recall you being so infatuated.”

“It’s not infatuation.”

“Then what is it?”

I shrug. “Right now, it’s something I can’t explain, but I’m loving it. I really am.”

“Just be careful, girl. I wouldn’t want you to mess around and get your hopes and dreams dashed behind chasing a guy who clearly said he didn’t want a relationship.”

“I get that, and I’m glad I got you to look out for me. However, I think there’s something with Judah that I need to explore despite what he said he didn’t want. I have to do this, Riley. I want to.”

“Then, go for it.”

“Thank you. Alright. I better get ready for bed—gotta be up bright and early in the morning.”

“Me, too.”

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I pull up at Commonplace Books, trying to keep a level head like Riley advised me, yet I don't want to be too guarded, because I want to experience the same euphoric feeling I felt when I was with Judah at the park yesterday.

This time, the dynamic will be different, because we're once again in a group setting.

I go inside and immediately see Luna. She has shells and gold beads hanging in her locs. The dress she has looks like something a mermaid would wear. She looks up, sees me, and her eyes brighten.

"Autumn!"

"Hey, Luna," I say, greeting her with a hug.

As we separate, she says, "Oooh, you look pretty. I like those pants and that blouse."

I glance down at my outfit. I didn't think there was anything special about black leggings, but apparently she does. I paired them with an army green tank with a ruffled neckline and black gladiator sandals.

I say, "Oh, these old things. They're yoga pants. I just wanted to be comfortable."

"Comfortable and pretty," she says.

"Thanks, girl. Hey, where is everybody?"

"Moriah and Tab went to the ladies' room. The others went scavenging for books

already. None of the fellas are here yet.”

“Oh. Okay. How long have you been here?”

She rolls her wrist as if she’s looking at a watch but there’s nothing on her arm.

This girl...

“Been here ‘bout fifteen minutes,” she says. She rolls her head like she’s trying to stretch her neck. “Hey, did you see the moon last night? It was a full crescent. Very demure. Very ethereal. I felt so connected.”

“Connected to what, Luna?”

“The universe! If you really stop and pay attention, you can feel the stardust on your skin.”

“Ok, cool. I’ll let you handle that.”

I ease away from Mother Earth to head over to the shelves.

It’s been a while since I’ve cracked open a book and since Judah brought it up, I actually miss it.

The black romance section is where I drift.

I see books by Brenda Jackson, Rochelle Alers, and Kennedy Ryan among other greats.

The black romance section is poppin’! The covers are fire.

Judging by covers alone, I'm taking all these babies home.

“Boo!”

Startled, I jump only to see Judah peep around the corner, catching me by surprise. A smile brightens my face like a ray of sunshine peering through the clouds. I know I look eager, but I can't help it. He brings the giddiness out of me.

“Hey!” I say, elated to see him, as if I didn't see him yesterday.

And my goodness— did he get finer since yesterday?

He has on a black baseball cap turned to the back.

Looks like a different person with it on.

He's usually business casual. Today, he has on jeans, a black shirt and a pair of black Nikes.

And he smells divine. He smells so good, I'm tempted to ask him what cologne he put on.

Then there's that million-dollar smile. His teeth are white like snow.

His smile embraces me. Comforts me. Holds me.

It makes everything about him shine, especially that buttery brown skin and the black hair that contrasts with it, yet complements it so perfectly.

So many times I've wanted to touch his beard to determine its texture. And then there are his lips.

“What do you think you’re doing? I told you I was buying and picking out your book.”

“Um...I recall you said buying —not picking one out. Plus, you weren’t here, so I went ahead and started looking.”

“I was here. I saw you when you came in.”

“You did?”

“Un huh.”

“I didn’t see you. Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was too busy watching and admiring.”

“Watching and admiring what, exactly?”

An easy, slow smile touches his lips. “The woman I spent the day with yesterday. The woman I couldn’t get off my mind all last night—that I stayed up tossing and turning for, counting down the hours, minutes, seconds until I could see her again.”

My cheeks warmed at his admission. “Hmm...she must be something.”

“She is. If I look tired, it’s your fault.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll try not to be so memorable this time.”

“Too late. That face of yours is branded into my memory.”

He turns to the book section that I’m looking at and says, “Ah. Romance. I should’ve

known.”

“Why?”

“You seem like the kind of woman who enjoys a good love story while you’re looking for your own happy ending.”

“Yep. That’s me. I am that woman.”

He drags his index finger across the book spines, then says, “I have a book joke for you.”

“Oh no.”

Grinning, he says, “Hear me out.”

“Okay. What you got?” I ask, pinching back a smile.

He clears his throat and asks, “Why wasn’t the paperback attracted to the hardback?”

“Why?”

“It thought the hardback book had a big prose . Get it? Nose—prose.”

I snorted a laugh and covered my mouth with my right hand to quiet myself. Then I say, “Judah, don’t ever tell anymore jokes.”

“It was funny, though, right?” he asks, amused. “See, that’s why you’re laughing.”

“No, sir. Don’t you ever in your life—” I say, still laughing, “—tell that joke ever again.”

Still amused, I say, “You’re cute, though.”

I take a book from the shelf and read the back cover. Judah takes it out of my hand and says, “I’m choosing your book,” then puts the book I was reading back on the shelf.

He roams the shelves with keen eyes, then turns to me and asks, “What’s the name of the last author you read?”

“Rochelle Alers....I think.”

“Okay, so you’re not getting one of hers.”

“But she’s one of my favorites.”

I take one of her books off the shelf. He takes it from my hand and puts it back on the shelf then steps up to me, crowding my personal space with his lengthy body, caging me between his arms as he rests his hands on the shelf behind me.

“What part about me telling you I’m picking your book don’t you understand?”

“Um,” I say, nervously chewing my lip while staring helplessly into his eyes that are laser-focused on my face.

The energy between us is palpable. Electric.

A force. An uneasiness creeps over me. The good kind.

The kind that makes butterflies flit around my stomach.

The kind that makes me unaware of what’s about to happen next while at the same

time having a pretty good idea. He's going to kiss me.

The smile falls from his face when he stares down at my face. It falls from mine when I feel his thumb floating lightly across my freckled cheeks. A shiver traverses down my spine that nearly paralyzes me.

"Judah," I utter in a single breath.

Before I can lick my lips, he bends down and swipes his hot, wet tongue across my lips in one steady motion, then pulls my lips into his mouth, sucking on them for a moment, then kisses me gently, yet with enough pressure to make my toes curl.

He takes my lower lip into his mouth and then the upper, then both again, not preferring one over the other.

He wants my entire mouth, and I willingly give it to him, angling my head up as his hands settle behind my head.

After the initial shock has worn off, I relax into it.

Why shock? Because from everything I know about Judah, he doesn't want a relationship with anyone.

He's dismissed women who thought they'd change his mind.

Yet, he's kissing me like that's all he wants.

He moans softly, reestablishing a new grip on my neck and delving deeper, connecting our mouths in a way my mouth has never been connected to anyone.

More moans come. Some from me, but most from him. It tells me he's deprived

himself of this – of allowing himself this kind of connection because of his health. Right now, he's making up for all of it.

He's not letting up or letting me go.

He kisses me deeper – so deep, he's tasted my thoughts for tomorrow and tickled my brain with the effortless swipes of his delicious tongue.

I skip breaths and heartbeats and just when I think my feet are going to lift from the floor, he stops and stares down at me, licking his lips like he's gearing up for round two.

I'm tempted to look around to make sure no one in his circle is witnessing this, but I can't seem to tear my eyes away from his. There's so much emotion in his gaze. So many words he leaves unsaid but that kiss spoke for him. It said so much. So freakin' much.

“Judah—”

He takes my hand and says, “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“Here,” he says, pinning me to the wall in a private little nook by the rear store exit. He goes in for more of my lips.

He moans.

He tastes my lips like ice cream.

He moans some more.

My hands lay flat on his beard. He pulls me closer to him. My tongue may as well be his because it's more in his mouth than it is in mine. And the way he's holding me...

"Mmm, Judah..."

This kiss is ruining me – leaving me with all kinds of thoughts.

Of dreaming about what a life with him would feel like.

Riley warned me to be cautious, but with Judah, I don't want my guard up.

I want it down. Out the window. Nonexistent.

And that's exactly where it is as he picks me up.

I wrap my legs around his waist and hold on as he pries my mouth further open.

He's kissing me so deeply, we're nearly tonsil to tonsil.

My legs wrap around his waist and I hold on and enjoy this ride.

I focus on delivering him the same kind of kiss he's delivering to me – matching his energy and savoring the taste of his mouth.

I don't think about the customers walking by, the workers, or even his friends.

I mean, we're in the romance section after all.

Perhaps this is what we were supposed to be doing anyway – creating our own love story instead of looking for one to buy.

Abruptly – almost too abruptly, he lowers me to my feet and says, “Sorry. I got a little carried away.”

“It’s okay. I like being carried away,” I say, slipping my hands beneath his shirt, touching his back and watching him close his eyes in response – in pure pleasure just from a touch.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

“Autumn,” he grunts. “You shouldn’t do that.”

“You had me hiked up against the wall, Judah. I think I can do whatever I want.”

He bites back a grin and rocks an expression on his face that looks like a combination of amusement and embarrassment.

I move my hands from his back and slide them up his abs, feeling his stomach quiver.

He grimaces and says, “Stop.”

“Make me.”

Beaming down at me again, he moves his forehead to mine as if he’s conflicted about kissing me again, but I’m not confused about a thing.

I move my lips to connect with his, kissing him loosely.

A tap here. A tap there. I trace his lips with the tip of my tongue and wedge it between his lips again, urging him to give me what I want – another hot, tongue-tangling, kissing session.

That’s precisely what I get when he grips the back of my neck and buries his tongue down my throat.

Soft moans leak out of my mouth. I tried to be quiet. I really tried, but everything in me wants everything in him, and now that I know he feels the same, it’s difficult to

contain those emotions. It's a good thing he's swallowing them, muffling the noises as he takes his time with my mouth.

Tongue to tongue, lips to lips, I drink his saliva while my hands find their way up his shirt again.

He snatches his mouth from mine and says softly, "Autumn."

"Judah," I utter breathlessly in return.

He smiles, brushes his thumb across my cheek again, and asks, "What were we supposed to be doing again?"

A small grin touches my thoroughly-kissed lips. "You claimed you were going to choose a book for me."

"Oh. Right. I still am," he says, cupping my chin and pressing his lips to mine briefly.

I say, "And I'm fine with you picking a book, but make sure it's one with a kiss-against-the-wall kind of energy."

"I got you."

I smile while taking a side step to leave the hold he has on me. I don't want to, but I also don't want the crew finding us in the back corner.

He grabs my hand, pulling me back to him, right up against his body and all of him engulfs me in a hug.

Oh, I love this feeling so much—love being in his arms. Even if he doesn't know it yet, I know he's mine from this point forward. Whatever reservations he has, he'll

just have to get over them.

When he releases me, I go in search of the others. Tabitha and Moriah are sitting on the sofa when I return.

I say, “Hi, ladies.”

“Hey,” Tabitha says. “Girl, you alright? You look flushed.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a little humid outside,” I tell her.

When I see them with coffee and frappes, I walk over to the coffee counter to order a mocha frappe for myself when I feel Judah’s presence looming behind me. He says, “She’s with the group. Put it on my tab.”

I grin and turn around to ask, “You really opened a tab?”

“I did,” he says, staring at my lips. “Get whatever you want.”

“I’m good with the frappe. Thank you, Judah Westinghouse.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, then leans down close to my ear and continues, “Autumn Pemberton.”

I’m pleasantly surprised by this side of him. I like this more relaxed version. The flirtier version. This is the man I thought I was getting when he gave me his ice cream. I’m glad he finally showed up and showed out.

After I get the frappe, we walk over to join the others. A few more people join us – ones that I’m meeting for the first time.

I ask, “So, what do you all do when you meet up here at the bookstore?”

Judah was about to speak, but Luna speaks up, and says, “We read silently for fifteen minutes and then we discuss aloud what we like or dislike about the book based on the few pages we’ve read.”

I look at Judah and he replies, “What she said.”

“Okay. I can do that.”

Judah sets a timer and says, “Starting now,” and then he sits on the armrest of the chair I’m sitting on and hands me the book he just purchased for me.

I crack it open to chapter one and begin reading.

The story starts off good. It’s a cute little romance about a woman who owns a bakery and is doing her best to take care of her sick sister.

Then in walks a man, suited up, looking like he’s about his business.

It’s a romance novel, so of course he’s the most handsome man she’d ever seen in her entire life.

I smile at the thought. Things get interesting when the man finds out the woman running the joint is severely shy and really doesn’t have the skills it takes to run a business, but she makes one heck of a cupcake.

“Okay, time’s up,” Judah says. “Who would like to share first?”

Luna stands up and says, “I would.”

Of course she would.

“Ahem,” she says. “So, the book I’m reading is called A Bride for Mars .

Okay, let me lay out the premise of the story.

There’s a woman who is called to Mars to be a bride because if the king of Mars doesn’t get married, the inhabitants will all die.

The woman is hesitant to go, but I think she’s going to end up falling in love with him. Ooo—I can’t wait to finish this one.”

I smile and then listen as a few other people share their stories.

Judah asks, “What was yours about, Autumn?”

“Skip me,” I say. “Go to someone else.”

“Oh, come on,” Tabitha says. “We’re all family here. Ain’t no need to be shy.”

“Yeah, Autumn. There’s no need to be shy.”

“You’re right.” Since he put me on the spot, I’ll do the same to him, inconspicuously of course.

Instead of saying what my book was about, I say, “So, my story opens with this woman meeting a man who doesn’t want to fall in love because he’s sick.

She’s really feeling him, though, and the author makes sure she lets the reader in on the fact that the woman knows the man is feeling her, too, but she doesn’t think the man will change his mind.

So now, she struggles internally. Should she continue to hope and wish that he will change his mind, or should she leave him alone?

I read chapters one and two. I'm looking forward to seeing what chapter three will bring. ”

“That sounds good,” Moriah says. “I’ma have to read that after I finish mine. But let me tell y’all what mine is about.”

While Moriah is telling everyone what her book is about, Judah leans down and whispers in my ear, “That’s not what your book was about.”

“Says who?” I ask, staring him in the eyes. He’s a smart guy, so I know he can read between the lines. He knows I was talking about him—about us.

He says, “Well, I predict that if the story goes the way the woman wants it to go, it’s going to have a sad ending.”

“But it doesn’t have to.”

“Says who?” he asks, then gets up and walks over to the coffee counter.

I try not to look at him, but I can’t help it.

When I glance over to see where he’s gone, I catch Luna’s inquisitive eyes.

I think I’m telling on myself. I have a crush on him, and I probably shouldn’t.

He has a crush on me, and he doesn’t want to.

But he wants my lips, and I want his heart – something I know he’s not ready to give

me.

I'm more than ready to give him everything.

Right now, he's being standoffish the same way he was at the campfire – separating himself from me intentionally when, just a half hour ago, I was hoisted up beside the wall with his tongue nearly in my stomach.

After drinks have been sipped and partial stories synopsized, I decide it's time for me to head home. Judah never returned to the circle with the rest of us and, as a matter of fact, I don't know where he is. No one does.

“Bye, y'all. I have to get up early for work in the morning, so I'm going to head out.”

“Okay, Autumn,” Tabitha says. “See ya.”

“Drive safe, babe,” Luna says.

“Bye,” Moriah says.

“Bye,” I tell them before finally walking toward the exit. The heat slaps me in the face as soon as I step outside. I head to my car, foregoing any kind of chance of seeing Judah before I leave. As I get closer to my car, I see his car parked beside mine.

And he's sitting in it.

Granted the sun has gone down and the temperature isn't in the nineties, but it's still muggy in the mid-eighties. Why is he out here instead of in there?

When I get closer to my car, he gets out of his and says, “Surely you weren't going to

leave without saying goodbye to me, were you?"

"As far as I knew, you were already gone."

"I'm not."

"I can see that."

He walks closer to me, and while his very presence makes me want more of his deep kisses, right now, I need answers. So, I look at him and ask straight-up, "Why did you leave?"

"I needed some air."

"There's no air stirring out here, Judah. Why did you leave?"

He sighs heavily and, after massaging the nape of his neck, he says, "I was thinking about the story you made up in there."

"What about it?"

"There is no happy ending to it. It's not one of those romance novels you like to read. It's real life, and real life, sweetheart, is a tragedy."

"This is what you're out here thinking about?"

"It is."

I sigh and hang my head, thinking of what I can say to pull him out of this darkness he's slipping into.

I say, “To me, a tragedy is not feeling your arms around me.”

“Autumn—”

“A tragedy is not feeling your tongue in my mouth. A tragedy, Judah Westinghouse, is the thought that you’re ready to give up on something that hasn’t even had a chance to start.”

I take a few steps over to him, rise to my tiptoes, and kiss him on the cheek. Then I say, “Have a good night, Judah.”

“Goodnight, Autumn.”

I get into my car and head home more confused than I was when I arrived.

I can still feel his lips on mine. The texture of his tongue will forever be embedded in my mouth.

His taste lives on my tonsils like it pays rent.

But as I travel down the road, I can’t help but feel like I’m heading for heartbreak, yet, I don’t want to end this journey, and perhaps I shouldn’t.

Maybe I should back off and give him time to figure out what he wants, even if it’s driving me insane.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I take the next few days to sit with my feelings, sorting through the emotions that come with falling for someone yet being conflicted about it.

Through this process, I have to work – well, if you call what I’ve been doing work.

My mind isn’t here. It’s with Autumn, but I purposely don’t call her.

Don’t text her. Don’t speak to her at all.

I haven’t allowed myself to get this close to a woman and I don’t want to get involved with one now.

She’s too innocent for me. Too good of a woman to get mixed up with half of a man.

Yes, that’s what I see when I look in the mirror.

A man who’s living below his potential. I’m in no position to think about being with someone, especially a woman as great as her.

Toward the end of the day when we’re wrapping up things at the store and leaving for the day, my father gives me a serious side-eye and says, “Make sure you get plenty of rest tomorrow so you can actually be present.”

“I was present today, Father,” I tell him.

I don’t want to get into it with him, but the man acts like I’m the bane of his existence. I know why – don’t really want to get into that either, but he just may

make me lose it. I'm not particularly in the mood for a talking to after dealing with what I've had to deal with for the last few days.

"You were present? Really? Who puts grapes in the same bag as a bottle of apple juice? It doesn't require a degree to be a bagger, and you can't even get that right."

"Dear!" Mom says, intervening like she always does as if I need saving from him. I know how to handle my father. I just choose to take the higher road where he's concerned.

"It's alright, Ma. Dad's just having a bad day."

"I'm not the one having the bad day. That would be you. What's with you these last few days? You usually come in here all chipper, ready to start the day and lately, you're just bland—standing there looking in a daze like you don't know your right from your left."

"Well, Father, I can assure you I know my right from my left."

"Then act like it!"

"My God—have you never had a bad day?" I ask, heated, yet still trying to remain tactful.

He lets out a pissed off chuckle and says, "Oh, yeah. I've had plenty of those. Like when I pay for my son—my only child—to go to college and he turns out to find much more joy in bagging groceries."

"You know why I chose to work here."

"Oh, don't give me that crap."

“I’m dying, Dad!”

“You ain’t dead yet!” he snaps, yelling louder than I did.

“I may as well be!” I take a few breaths to calm my psyche and say, “You know what—argue by yourself. I’m out.”

I leave the store in a hurry, hop in my car, and peel out.

I get home in record time, shower and lie on the bed, thinking about things I know I probably shouldn’t yet can’t help but wonder about.

Like, when am I going to die? When will my last day be?

What exactly does dying feel like? Does my father have the right to be as upset as he is with me?

Why does it feel like the walls are all closing in on me at once?

Thursday morning , I don’t go to work since I know my father doesn’t want me there.

My mother called and left a voicemail, giving me the same spiel she always does whenever my father goes off on a tangent.

She tells me he means well. He’s just frustrated because he wanted his son to have the best of everything.

I didn’t want to, but my heart tells me to text Autumn and I know why. With her, I know I’ll get the support that I’m lacking right now. Just interacting with her will greatly improve my current mood.

Hey.

She doesn't respond right away. She's at work during this time. Finally, after about a half hour, she responds:

Hey, stranger.

How are you?

I'm good. You?

I'm not sure at the moment.

What's wrong?

Just feeling a way.

The texting ceases. She probably had to get back to work, I assume – well, until I see her name followed by leaves on my caller ID display.

“Hi, Autumn.”

“What do you mean you're feeling a way?”

“It's...I ended up getting into an argument with my father and it escalated like it always does with him.”

“Okay, so the best thing to do is wait until he calms down and then talk to him.”

“There is no talking to my father.”

“Has it always been that way?”

“No. This all happened after I decided not to pursue a career in economics. He feels like I wasted my degree and he hates the way I live.”

“Oh. I see. Well, I’m sorry you’re going through that. I wish there was something I could do, but I’m stuck at work.”

“I know, and I’m sorry to have disturbed you.”

“No, it’s not a disturbance at all. Anytime you need to talk, I’m here.”

“Thank you, Autumn.”

“You’re welcome, Judah. I wish I could hug you right now. That would make you feel better.”

“Since you can’t, how about you tell me a joke?”

She grins. “I don’t know any jokes.”

“You do. Just make up one. Make it book-related.”

“Oh, gosh—you mean like that one you told me at the bookstore?”

“Yeah. Just like that.”

“Okay. Um...let’s see...um...okay. Why did the romance books start dating?”

“Why?”

“Because they were on the same page.”

I grin. Her little joke has put me in a better mood.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You know that was worse than the one I came up with.”

“No, it wasn’t,” she says, tickled.

“It was. Now, we’re even.”

“If you say so, Judah.”

“Hey, if you would like to meet for lunch—”

“I would love that,” I answer quickly before she can finish the rest of the question.

“Okay. Tell you what...I’ll pick a place close to my job. I’ll text you shortly.”

“Okay.”

“Alright. I’ll see you in a few.”

Sitting inside The Corner Grill, I watch Autumn come inside wearing a white blouse with a blue jean skirt that falls to her ankles. Both pieces hug her shape and complement her body. She’s a beauty – a sight to behold – and she’s taking time out of her day for me.

I stand as she approaches the table and say, “Hi.”

“Hey,” she says, sitting down in the chair across from me. “It’s good to see you.”

“You as well, Autumn.”

As she settles, the waitress comes over with a menu. It’s a work lunch for her, so she orders her food right away – a grilled chicken sandwich with fries. I’m not all that hungry, so I just order fries.

She says, “I was surprised to hear from you.”

“Why?”

“Well, you kissed me like there was no tomorrow on Sunday, and then you just disappeared.”

“I fell back into work,” I say, but I know from the expression on her face she doesn’t believe me, and she shouldn’t.

It’s just an excuse. I didn’t contact her because I didn’t want to.

I crossed the line by kissing her. I realize I can’t undo the kiss, so I thought separating myself from her would be the next best option.

It wasn’t.

It made me crave her presence even more. Sitting here with her right now is a relief. The void I felt from her absence is gone. I’m not scatterbrained. I can focus. Think. I’m at ease. I desperately needed this.

The food arrives quickly. Autumn takes a bite of a chicken sandwich that I imagine she's had plenty of times before, then holds a napkin in front of her mouth and says, "So, tell me what exactly happened with your father?"

"He's angry with me."

"Why?"

I fidget with my glass of water and say, "He, like everyone else, thinks I'm wasting my life away."

"Everyone else?" she asks, brows raised her eyes scanning my face like a barcode.

"Yes. My mother thinks it, too, but she's always been the one to do everything in her power to appease me. She doesn't want any rifts between us. No drama. No arguing back and forth like I do with my father. My mother is one of the most loving, kind-hearted women I know."

"And your father is a bit more...um...stern?"

"He's a businessman. His father passed the grocery store down to him, and he actually didn't want it because it meant he'd have to forgo his dreams. But to satisfy his father, he took it on and kept the store profitable for years.

He had bigger dreams for me. Told me to follow my dreams and not to worry about the store.

I wasn't supposed to be working there, bagging groceries.

I was supposed to be an economist, an accountant, a city planner—I was to hold a position where I could make a hefty amount of money so I could pass my success

down to my family.

The thing is, there's no chance of me having a family, so most of the things my father wants for me aren't going to happen.

It's wishful thinking. That's what I need him to understand, but he can't wrap his head around it.

He thinks I'm going to be here forever."

"In a sense, you will be."

"How's that?"

"You'll be in his heart forever. You're there now, even though it may not seem that way. His anger is a direct result of the love he has for his only son. What parent doesn't want to see their child thrive and win at life?"

"You're right, of course, but I have to look at situations realistically."

"And what's real to you? What do you want to do with your life?"

I throw both shoulders up and say, "I don't know."

"That's not true. You do know."

"You're right. I do, but unfortunately, it's not what I'm going to get."

"What do you want? Tell me."

I sigh heavily. I don't want to respond, but it's her .

If it were anyone else, I would have changed the subject a long time ago.

After a drink of water, I say, “What I want is to be normal. I want to wake up in the morning without thinking if this is going to be the morning my life begins its downward spiral. I want to live like I’m living and not like I’m dying .

I really do want those things, but my mind—” I take a breather. “My mind is in a different place.”

“Where was your mind when you kissed me?”

I smirk. “It was in a much better place.”

“Okay, then. I don’t think almost an entire week should go by without us seeing each other. You’ve created this network of friends in your life, Judah. Use them. Use me . I’ll always be here for you.”

“You say that with confidence.”

“Because I am confident.”

I nod. “Okay.”

She glances at her watch. “Do you feel better?”

“I do.”

“Good, because unfortunately, I have to get back to work, but I would like to continue this conversation at your place tomorrow evening.”

“Uh...”

“It doesn’t have to be anything formal,” she says. “In fact, I’ll eat before I come over. I just want to spend some time with you.”

“Okay. That’s cool.”

“Text me your address,” she says.

“Yes, ma’am.” I take out my phone and send her a text with my address.

She confirms receipt, then takes out her credit card.

I say, “Put that away. I got the bill.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I do. You don’t pay for anything when I’m with you.”

She smiles, sliding her card back into her purse. “Thanks, Judah. I appreciate that.”

I stand up, place a fifty on the table, and say, “I’ll walk you out.”

Following her to the door, I dart ahead of her to push it open and then follow her to her car.

I’ve already decided I’m not going to cross the line with her again, even though I want to.

Even though I know her lips taste like candy and her body feels like heaven in my arms, I tell myself that I can’t take it there with her.

The decision pains me, but it’s for her own good.

It's me being completely unselfish – putting her needs ahead of mine.

“I'll see you later,” she says, then leans in and presses her lips to my face.

My eyes automatically close at the softness as I relive the way we were just a few days ago. It's torture to think—to know—that I can't have that again.

“Drive safe, Autumn.”

“I will, the whole five minutes.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I could tell he was nervous about me coming to his house, but when I actually get there is when I really feel how tense he is. I'm not sure why. No one should be tense in their own personal space, but he is and very much apparent.

"I love your house. It's cozy," I tell him.

"Thank you."

The AC is jumping. It smells like cherry incense and everything is neat and in order. And when I say order, even the pillows are sitting up properly in an organized fashion.

I walk to the kitchen to see the large sink, black fixtures, stainless steel appliances and the sage green cabinets. There isn't a dining room, but the six-chair, wooden dinette suffices just fine. The table and chairs are the same color as the cabinets.

He says, "There are two bedrooms, two full baths, this kitchen, a deck on the back—it's a simple home.

It used to belong to my grandparents. I had it renovated, but I wanted to preserve their memory, so I kept a lot of the furniture.

The dinette was theirs. I had it sanded and painted.

A few chairs in the living room were upholstered, that tall table in the entryway was sanded and stained...

pieces of them are sprinkled all throughout this house. ”

“Oh, that’s beautiful, Judah.”

“I thought so.”

Continuing down the hallway, he shows me the bedrooms, the bathrooms, and then says, “That’s it. I don’t need a mansion to be happy.”

“Certainly not. This is perfect for you.”

Heading back to the living room, he says, “Can I get you something to drink?”

“I’ll take some water.”

“That’s it?”

“Yes.”

He goes to the fridge. I take the remote from the table and turn on the TV. He walks over, hands me a bottle of water, sits on the sofa, takes the remote out of my hand and powers the TV back off.

I look at him. “My bad.”

“I don’t watch TV. Besides, you came here to spend some time with me, not the devil’s toy.”

“The devil’s toy?”

He grins. “That’s what my grandmother used to call it. She says the television is a

weapon of mass destruction.”

“Did she say why?”

“She did. I heard it all the time. She said through the TV, the devil can effortlessly broadcast his agenda into billions of homes. It brings people a daily dose of panic, commercialism and unethical behavior.”

“Your grandmother was a wise woman.”

“She was. That’s why she never owned a TV. I didn’t want one either, but that space on the wall seemed perfect for one, so I put one there after the renovation. I usually play music on it or display a crackling fireplace or an ocean video.”

“That’s nice,” I say, reclining further back on the sofa with one leg folded beneath me. I notice Judah is sitting close, but not too close where I’d be tempted to slide my tongue between his lips.

I continue, “The only reason I was trying to turn it on was because you seemed a little—I don’t know— not like your usual self. Well, the self that I know.”

“That’s because I usually don’t have people over here. This is new for me.”

“So, what do you do here when you’re alone?”

“Sleep mostly. I don’t like to be alone with my thoughts. They’re not as happy as I would like them to be. Sometimes, I go outside and do some grounding. I sit in the rain—let it wash away my cares.”

“I’ve seen people do that on social media.”

“Yeah. It’s actually a very freeing experience. You should try it.”

“I will, one day.”

“Hey, did you finish reading your book yet?”

“Not yet. I try to read a little before I go to bed but most nights, I’m so exhausted from work, I don’t even try. I’ll just be lying there trying to read and the book falls right on my face.”

He grins. “I’ve had that happen a time or two.”

I take a sip of water.

He says, “When we were in the bookstore, I left because I knew the story you made up was about me, and I didn’t want to think about my life like that.”

“Like what?”

“Looking through optimistic lenses when I know the ending to the story. I know how it feels to be in a committed relationship with someone that you think you’re going to spend the rest of your life with only for them to leave you where you stand and basically chuck up the deuces and wish you good luck. ”

“I’m not trying to make excuses for her, but she was probably just scared, Judah. People react to different situations in different ways and, until you’re in that situation, you don’t know how you will respond.”

“So, you would’ve done the same thing?” he asks, pointedly, his gaze fixed on me.

“No.”

“How do you know? According to your own take on this, you’re not in the situation, so how can you say that affirmatively?”

“Because I know myself. I know who I am and who I represent.”

“Who do you represent?”

“My Creator. I represent love. Love doesn’t leave when times get hard, Judah, and if I was yours, I would never leave you. I know they say never say never but I’m saying never because I would never. I can say that affirmatively because I know my heart.”

He stares at me for so long, time stands still. I’m locked in, he’s locked in and we’re in this vortex that we can’t get out of. I don’t know what to say and he’s in another world. Suddenly, he looks down, thinking, I suppose, because he still hasn’t said anything.

I say, “I’m sorry that happened to you. I really am. Do you feel like you still need closure?”

“I don’t need anything but to be left alone.”

“Oh,” I say, taken aback by his response. “Did you...want me to...leave?”

He closes his eyes, debating on how to answer my question. Since he doesn’t respond, I decide for him. A delayed answer is usually ‘no’ anyway, isn’t it?

I get up and head for the door.

“Autumn, wait.”

“For what? It’s obvious this was a bad idea.”

“It wasn’t I’m just—”

I bend over near the front door to get my shoes. He walks over, bends down to take me by the wrist, and moves me upright so that I’m standing.

He says, “Don’t go. I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. Or how to be? I don’t know how to talk to you because this shouldn’t—”

He sighs.

“This shouldn’t what, Judah?”

“This shouldn’t feel the way it feels.”

“And how’s that?”

“Autumn, I don’t want you to leave.”

“I don’t think you know what you want.”

He steps to me, his hand resting on my cheek and after licking his lips, he lowers his mouth to mine. My knees nearly buckle almost instantly at the joining of our mouths. I’ve been dying to feel his lips again. It feels like an eternity since he last kissed me and it has only been a few days.

He shifts his body forward, and using the wall for leverage, he kisses me deeper.

My goodness, I love every second of this, but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t hear the warnings in my head.

The alarms, the bells and whistles are all sounding at once, telling me that Judah is

confused about life.

He's living in limbo. He's afraid. He's not ready for the things I'm ready for.

But his warm tongue swirling around in my mouth made me ignore all of that.

I want him so much. I could love him the right way and undo all the pain that woman caused him.

If he needs to cry, I'll cry with him. I want to laugh with him.

Hike with him. I want to be a real part of his life, but I can't do any of that if he doesn't let me.

He moans deeply. I settle into the kiss again and hold him as tightly as he's holding me. His deep kisses nearly scare me as I struggle to breathe, and while he kisses me, I come to some conclusions about him. Judah Westinghouse has been depriving himself of something he desperately needs.

Love.

Affection.

Attention.

Companionship.

He doesn't have to verbalize it. His actions have said it all. So when he picks me up and carries me to the sofa, I let him. When he lowers me and eases down on top of me, I let him. When he reconnects his mouth to mine again, I let him.

I grip his shoulders and relax after getting used to his weight, letting him get all the love he needs.

Never in my life have I been kissed like this.

Wait, I take that back. I have. He kissed me like this in the library on Sunday and now, I'm experiencing it again.

I nearly convulse off the sofa when Judah trails a kiss from my mouth to my neck.

I moan as sensations tear through me, reawakening my need for this kind of affection.

"Judah..." I gasp.

"Yes?"

When I open my eyes, he's staring directly at me. I smile, my cheeks stretching. Tightening. Warming.

"What are you doing?" I ask. "What are we doing?"

"Kissing. Being together. Enjoying each other."

"But you don't want this."

"I do. I want you. I love being with you, Autumn."

He dips his head, placing small kisses on my lips.

When I'm able, I say, "I love being with you, too, Judah. You deserve happiness. You deserve to feel the way you feel right now."

He kisses me again. Oh, I can get used to this.

Whispering in my ear, he asks, “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“I will. How can I say no to you?”

He smiles, eases up off of me, and stands.

Reaching for my hand, he helps me up and now, he’s the one lying on the sofa.

He invites me to lie on top of him, so that’s what I do.

I lie there on a bed of muscles and tatter kisses all around his bearded face.

And then I lay my head on his chest and close my eyes.

This feels good. It feels like this is where I belong. It feels like...

Home.

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

When I get up in the morning and saunter to the living room, my mother is sitting on the sofa. I barely wiped the crust out of my eyes and she's in my house.

"Ma, what are you doing here?"

"Well, I saw that car in your driveway and I came to investigate."

"Inves—your key is for emergencies only."

"This is an emergency. You never have anybody over here. Who is she?" she whispers. "Is she the woman you told me about?"

"I never told you about a woman."

"You did. You didn't say it outright, but I can read between the lines."

I stretch and walk over to the kitchen to make coffee, then say, "She's a friend."

"A friend who spends the night? I don't think so."

"Well, this one does."

Her face transforms into the happiest expression I've ever seen on her when she says, "You have a girlfriend!" She's giddy with excitement – has balled her hands into fists like a little girl and does a shimmy. "Oooh, I want to meet her. Please, please, please let me meet her."

“Ma, you probably will meet her, but it won’t be this morning.”

I walk over to the sofa, take her hand, and help her up. Amused, I say, “Now, be a good mother and go on back home.”

She wraps her arms around me and says, “I’m so happy for you. Oh, I could just scream.”

“Mother...”

“Okay, I’ll get out of your way, but you make sure you bring her by for supper.”

“I will.”

I close the door as Autumn steps into the room stretching, asking, “Did I just hear you talking to someone?”

“Yes. My mother stopped by when she saw the car in the driveway. Needless to say, she’s eager to meet you, by the way.”

“Aw...you should’ve let her stay.”

“I didn’t want that to be too much for you.”

“It’s not too much at all. Call her back. I had planned on cooking breakfast, anyway.”

“Autumn, are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m fine with it.”

“Okay.”

I open the door and summon my mother back. Happily, she skips right on back this way.

When she steps inside, I say, “Mother, this is Autumn. Autumn, this is my mother.”

“Hi, Mrs. Westinghouse. It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you as well, dear,” she says with tears in her eyes. “Oh my.”

“Are you crying?” Autumn asks her.

“I am. I’m so happy to meet you, Autumn. And you’re completely perfect and beautiful,” she says looking at Autumn from head to toe.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Oh,” she throws a hand to her chest.

“I was going to cook breakfast if you want to join us,” Autumn tells her.

“I would love that.”

Autumn walks to the kitchen, opens the fridge like she lives here when yesterday was only her first time visiting.

She takes out eggs, sausage, and cheese.

Disappointed that I don’t have the ingredients to make biscuits, she settles for toast. And then after the food is done, we sit down to the table to eat.

Mom says, “So, Autumn, how did you and Judah meet?”

I glance over at Autumn. She's already smiling.

She says, "We met because my ice cream cone got knocked out of my hand and Judah basically gave me his."

My mother places both hands over her heart and says, "Oh, how romantic. Judah has always been kind-hearted. He gets it from his father."

"Oh, really?" Autumn asks, glancing over at me for good reason. She knows I don't get along that well with my father, so it must come as a surprise for her to hear that my mother describes him as kind-hearted .

"Yes, he is. That's how he was able to get me. That man can charm a snake—you hear me?"

Autumn grins. "I believe you."

She's perfectly at ease with my mother – almost like they already knew each other before today when I know they didn't.

"Judah, you're awfully quiet," Mom says.

"I didn't want to interrupt you two. You're like two friends who just got reacquainted after years of being apart."

Mom cackles. It's no interruption. "And these eggs have got to be the best I've ever eaten."

"Thank you, Mrs. Westinghouse."

"They are good," I chime in. "I guess next time, I'll have everything for you to make

biscuits because if the eggs are this good, I can only imagine what the biscuits will taste like.”

“Absolutely,” Mom says. “So, Autumn, tell me a little about yourself. Are you from here?”

“I’m from Asheville, but I moved here for work. My parents still live there and, like Judah, I’m an only child.”

“Nice.”

“How long have you all been in Arden?” Autumn asks.

“I was born and raised in Arden. I know it’s hard to believe with it being a small town and all, but yep. Been here all my life, and I actually love it. Whenever we want to go to the big city , we take the short drive over there.”

“Yeah, that’s what I like about it.”

I take a sip of water, watching them converse, thinking about how my mother has immediately taken to her. I say, “I think I need to give you ladies some privacy.”

“Oh, no, Judah,” Autumn says. “You don’t have to leave.”

Mom says, “I got an idea. Autumn, grab your coffee. It’s a beautiful morning. Let’s go for a lil’ walk.”

“That sounds nice. Let’s do it.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

We step outside into the thick, dewy morning, greeted by early, golden rays of sunshine and the freshness of a new day.

I love mornings. I don't like the kind where I'm rushing to get dressed, can't find my favorite earrings, and shoving a muffin down my throat.

I like my mornings like these – easy and soft.

Relaxing and refreshing. There's definitely something refreshing about talking with Judah's mother.

She's another piece of the puzzle that will help me figure him out.

Mrs. Westinghouse is a beautiful woman. One of those real, down-to-earth women who appreciate family. She's not pretentious. She's genuine, caring and motherly. She says Judah gets his kindness from his father. I can see how he got it from her, too.

She says, "I live right up the street." She points. "Right there."

"The white house?"

"Yep."

"Nice. It's huge."

"Yes. I love a big house. Entertaining is my thing, so the extra room is perfect. I don't

care much for the two levels, though, but hey, it's paid for honey."

"That would motivate me to stay, too."

We walk quietly for a moment, enjoying the mugginess of the morning.

The quietness of the street. The sound of our shoes hitting the pavement.

We walk to her house, up the stairs and sit on the porch in the white rocking chairs.

Her porch is like an oasis – like something you'd find in a fancy Airbnb.

There are two ceiling fans spinning above our heads. We place our coffee cups on the table.

"So, you like him?" she asks.

I smile softly. "Yes. I like him very much."

"Has he told you about his situation?"

"If you mean the cancer, yes. He has."

"And you're okay with that?"

"I am. I like him for who he is, not what he has. He's a kind soul. I think that's what attracted me to him."

"He is, and like I said earlier, he's always been that way.

But let me tell you something, Autumn. I have never seen my son more broken than

when he was diagnosed with cancer.

He was in his last year of college. He'd proposed to his girlfriend, and they were both looking forward to getting married after graduating.

But honey, when she found out he had cancer, she gave him the ring back.

That broke him again. Imagine the person you thought you were going to spend the rest of your life with just up and leaving you when you were going through one of the worst moments of your life.

That's what happened to my son. Has he gotten over it?

No. His response to it was to just not involve himself with anyone.

For years, he hadn't looked at a woman twice, and I don't care how pretty she was.

You should've seen all them women coming through the line at the store just to see him and talk to him.

He wasn't interested. But all of a sudden, you're at his home, staying the night and he's smiling again. How does that happen?"

"I honestly don't know but I'm glad it did."

"I am, too, dear, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared for him. I can't take another woman leaving him when he needs her the most, and if you're accepting him for who he is, he will need you."

"I know, and I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. I told him that."

“Oh, that makes me so happy.”

“Why?”

“Besides the fact that he’s my son and I love him dearly—what’s life without love? We all need that in one aspect or another. There’s no greater feeling than to love and be loved.”

I nod and say, “It’s what my parents have. It’s what I want, too.”

“If you want it with Judah, I have to warn you so you can be prepared.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean to scare you. I just want you to be cognizant of the fact that he puts his diagnosis ahead of everything in his life. He’s been doing that since the day he found out. So, just expect it.”

“Thank you for saying that. I’ve already seen him do this, even with us.

I’ve reassured him that I have no intentions of going down this road with him only to run for the hills later on.

I can’t explain why his fiancée did that to him.

I wish she hadn’t because I know it hurt him, but at the same time, I’m glad I have an opportunity to show him how he’s supposed to be loved. ”

“You feel that strongly for him?”

“I do.”

Her smile widens. “My heart is full. I can tell you that much, Ms. Autumn. It’s been real nice talking to you. I’ll let you get back to your morning, but if you need anything, you know where I am.”

I stand up and say, “Yes, ma’am. It was lovely meeting you.”

“You as well.”

I step down off the porch, waving at her as I take the short walk back to Judah’s house.

Speaking of Judah, he’s standing on the porch, waiting for me I presume, so I waste no time jogging up the steps and jumping into his arms. Then I place my hands on his face and my lips to his, kissing him softly, easing his burdens, removing the pain and giving him my love.

Like his mother said, he needs it. Somehow, I knew that from day one.

Dinner.

I'm not hungry, but I'm not ready to end my date with her either. So, sitting in a booth at this family restaurant is where we are. She ordered beef tips and rice. I got fried chicken with green beans.

"So, you're still not going to tell me what you and my mom were talking about?"

She shrugs, attempts to hide a smile but fails. "We weren't talking about you, Judah."

"That smile says otherwise."

She eats rice and says, "Your mother is such a sweetheart."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

"It doesn't?" She looks up at me as she takes a sip of tea. Lowering the cup to the table, she says, "Okay...she said some things about you. She mentioned how upset you were when your fiancée left. She thinks that's the main reason you never tried dating again."

"Really?"

"Mmm hmm..."

"Then why are we sitting in a restaurant sharing a meal?"

“You consider this a date?” she asks.

“I do.”

“Then why is it that you’re so quick to label me a friend?”

“Because that’s who you are.”

“Okay, but Luna, Tabitha, Moriah and the other women in the circle are your friends, too. Can you see how that’s confusing?”

“I can, so let me clarify. I don’t feel drawn to their lips like I’m drawn to yours. You’ve intoxicated me with your scent. I’m constantly in amazement by your aura. You do for me what they can’t. You’ve touched my soul, and I can’t fight that feeling.”

“So, what are we?” she asks, looking for me to say definitively that she’s my girl.

“We are what we are,” I say. “Let’s just enjoy that.”

“Okay,” she says.

“Okay.” I reach for her plate, slide it across the table next to my plate, and say, “I need you sitting beside me. We’re too far apart.”

“Yes, sir.”

She gets up, slides into the booth next to me, then wraps her arms around me asking, “Is that better?”

“It is,” I respond, my eyes angling down at her lips.

When I lean close to them, I know I can't stop myself from kissing her, sucking those sweet lips of hers and kissing her deeply.

It doesn't matter how many people are around us.

It just can't be helped. This woman brings out the best in me.

She makes me feel good inside and this feeling is the most addictive I've ever experienced.

When I pull away from her slowly, we both smile.

I say, "I think I should've ordered what you got because it tastes good. Or maybe it's just your tongue. Unfortunately, I can't eat that."

"Well, you sure gave it a valiant effort."

"I think I want to try again."

"No, Judah. They're going to kick us out of here."

"How can they kick us out for displaying affection?"

"It's going to make people uncomfortable."

"See, that's what's wrong with the world. People can't stand to see love."

She stirs her food and takes a helping to her mouth. Meanwhile, I sit here and think about what I said. Did I just admit that I love her?

She takes a chicken leg from my plate, bites it, and says, "Oh my God. That's

freakin' amazing.”

I do us a favor and swap plates. She eats my chicken – I eat her beef and rice. Afterward, we share a slice of strawberry cheesecake. She gets a piece on the fork and holds it in front of my mouth. I do the same for her.

We leave the restaurant good and full. I walk her to her car, thinking about asking her to stay with me again tonight, but I know she needs to get home and handle her chores and errands. Her life can't be all wrapped up in me.

“Well, I guess this is goodbye,” I say.

“Why are you saying that like you'll never see me again. Boy, stop playing.” She pulls me in for a hug, pressing her head against my chest. “I'm sure I'll see you at some point in the next few days.”

“For sure.”

She tries to release me, but I won't let her.

I bathe in her warmth, let it consume me completely and then I release her just enough to meet her lips.

She rises onto her tiptoes to meet mine.

My arms rest around the curve of her back as I kiss her all I want – get all I need until we see each other again.

And when we part, her eyes are still closed.

She looks completely breathless. Smitten.

Taken. She looks like she belongs to me.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

It's been nothing but bliss. Weeks later and nothing has changed. I'm in awe of him, of us together. That's basically what I've shared with Riley, but she ain't trying to hear me. She wants to know what that has to do with her and our girl time together.

"Listen—when you find a man, you'll be just as occupied as I am," I inform her.

"Oh, so he done moved up to your man status?" she says, taking an angry bite out of a hamburger. We're sitting outside at a wrought iron table at Bob's Burger Joint on Hendersonville Street, watching cars whiz by.

I say, "Riley, come on, now. You know I haven't forgotten about you. It's just..." I try to wipe the blush off my face, but there's no use. Judah has me smiling from ear to ear. I continue, "Being with him just feels right. He's everything I want in a man. Everything."

"I get that, Autumn. I do. But I also warned you to be cautious, didn't I?"

"You did, but I'm not overly worried about him friend-zoning me like he did the others. We've been tight for weeks. He actually likes me. I think he may even love me."

"Love? You've only known him for like two seconds."

"And? Don't be all cautious now. You're the one who pushed me to go say something to him, remember. So, one could say, if it wasn't for you, Judah and I wouldn't exist."

“Yeah, but that was before I knew about his health situation.”

“Riley, the cancer has been in remission for years. I’ve researched it. Some types of cancer never come out of remission. I choose to think positively. It’s all I have at this point.”

“You know what...you’re right. “She dips some fries in ketchup and says, “I’m really happy for you. And listen, when y’all get married, I’mma need my shoutout because I put y’all together.”

“Oh, now you want to take the credit.”

She chuckles. “Yep. I surely am. Anyway, where we going after we leave here?”

“I’mma swing by some stores so I can get a cute outfit. I’m going hiking with Judah and the crew on Saturday.”

“Girl, bye! It’s finna be ninety-something degrees.”

“Yeah, that’s why we’re meeting at six in the morning before it gets too hot. We’ll only be out there for a couple of hours.”

“In this heat, that’s all it takes to pass out.”

“Well, it’s no different than how hot Judah makes me.”

“Ooo...okay, girl. I guess I just need to be quiet then.”

“Yeah, be quiet and hurry up and eat. I’m ready to go.”

Page 20

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

On Monday, I sent her flowers with a note that says, “Hope you’re having a good day. Finish the book.”

Tuesday, we talked for two hours on the phone after she got home from work. We made plans to see each other on Thursday.

Today, Wednesday, I’m at my parents’ place for dinner at my mother’s insistence. I’m eating salmon and an amazing rice pilaf when Mother asks, “So, how are things going with Ms. Autumn?”

“It’s going good.”

“I’ve seen her car over at your place a few more times, I didn’t want to intrude like I did the first time,” she says wagging her brows.

I find it comical, yet highly disturbing but at least she takes an interest in my life.

My father has nothing to say apparently.

He’s just sitting there eating like he’s in his own world – like a teenager would who was pissed off at his parents and refused sustenance.

That’s his vibe. It’s obvious that he’s tuning us out.

“Well, I don’t see it being an issue being that you two are best friends now,” I tell her.

“She’s such a nice woman. And she’s completely gorgeous. I was telling your father that he has to meet her.”

“And I told you I wasn’t interested.”

“Dear—” Mom says, trying to intercept his bad attitude.

“What? I’m not meeting this girl who ain’t gon’ be around no more than five seconds.” He stuffs his mouth with a helping of rice.

“Oh, don’t be like that, dear,” Mom says, being the fence between us.

I wasn’t going to say anything to him, but I got time today. “How do you know what I want, Father? You don’t talk to me but for two minutes a day, and that’s just to tell me when I’m doing something wrong.”

“Look—I’m a enjoy my dinner,” he says. “Just talk amongst yourselves.”

I tsk at his nonchalance and say, “This is the kindhearted man you said I take after, Ma?”

I know my father is a kindhearted man. He just hasn’t been that way toward me in some time.

It saddens me because I look up to him. He was my hero.

No, he is my hero. My father is the kind of man who would actually give someone the shirt off his back.

He taught me to love and respect people.

He also taught me to work hard and conquer the world.

The fact that I've failed at the second part has greatly impacted our relationship.

"Judah—"

"Don't say nothing to him, Dear," my father says to my mother. "I don't need you to burden yourself."

"I'm not burdening myself. I just want you two to get along."

"We get along to the extent that we need to," he says.

"Really?" I ask. "How is that when you don't even talk to me? You see me coming and you walk away. How do you think that makes me feel?"

"How do you think it makes me feel that my son, my only child's only aspiration in life is to bag groceries and hang out in the woods with hippies?"

"That's not my—"

"Then what is? It sure as heck ain't that degree me and your mom paid for!"

"Presly—"

"No, I'm done being quiet, Adrienne. He wants to hear me talk, here we go.

You live like your life is over. Like you're just passing time, waiting to die.

Don't think for a second that I'm going to subscribe to this behavior any longer because I have had it!

I'm done! Go find another job if you really want to work because you're no longer an employee of mine!

I'm giving that position to who it really belongs to—a sixteen-year-old still in high school who lives with his parents and wants to make some extra money on the side.

Not you! Not a thirty-one-year-old grown man who has a degree in economics.

It was never meant for you! My God! You—”

He pauses, takes a breath and is really huffing like he's on the verge of a breakdown.

He continues, “You can live off the money your grandparents left you. You can't take it with you, right?”

You may as well spend it. If you gon' live like you're dying, do something worthwhile at least to say you actually accomplished something, but languishing around here like a bum isn't it.

Until you show me the son I raised, you can leave your pity party at your own house. You are no longer welcome in my home!”

“Presly, stop!” Mother yells with tears in her eyes and despair in her voice.

“No, I won't stop because somebody needs to tell him like it is. You coddle that boy, Adrienne. That's why he's the way he is now.”

I wipe my mouth with a napkin and quietly push away from the table.

“Judah, don't leave,” Mom says. “Y'all need to work this out. Come on now. This is not how a family is supposed to behave.”

“It’s all good, Ma. I’m out. And he’s right. I shouldn’t be working at the store. I’ll continue being the nobody he thinks I am since I’m so good at it.”

I walk home feeling lower than I’ve felt in a while.

There’s always a low part to me that I keep hidden, but when true depression sets in, anyone looking at me can tell something’s off.

Right now, I’m off, and I don’t know when I’ll get back on.

What I do know is, he’s right. I live how I live because I know that as soon as my life gets to the point where I want it – as soon as I accomplish my wildest dreams – it’s going to all come to an end.

That’s how life happens. It makes you feel like you’re on top of the world one minute and then, bam!

—it all comes crashing down and you didn’t even see it coming. Just like this evening...

A dinner that started off promising ended up with me getting into it with my father. Life is unpredictable like that. As soon as you think you have it figured out, it shows you that you don’t know a thing.

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

My house smells like a restaurant. I've cooked a meal I think Judah will love.

It's one of those meals that my mother claims is the way to a man's heart.

Who can resist a well-seasoned pot roast?

I'll tell you who – nobody! And I make mine just like my mama taught me – with homemade gravy and extra baby carrots.

I made cornbread from scratch. I even baked a lemon cake – don't remember the last time I did that – and it came out beautifully.

I look at my watch. Judah was supposed to be here by now. It's only ten after but he's usually early rather than late. I call him but not before glancing outside to make sure he's not still sitting in his car. He's done that a few times, too.

Dialing his number, I listen intently, waiting for him to pick up, but he doesn't answer. I call right back again. I'll leave a voicemail this time, but when I hear, "Hello," I smile, glad I don't have to.

"Hey, Judah."

"Hey, Autumn."

Right away I can detect something is wrong by his tone. He sounds burdened, a little down and just not his usual upbeat self.

“Is everything okay?” I ask.

“Uhm...”

He pauses. No, everything is not okay. I feel it. I sense it in the uncomfortable silence of this phone.

“Judah—”

“I won’t be joining you for dinner this evening.”

“Why not? Is everything okay?”

“I want to apologize in advance for what I’m about to say, Autumn.”

“Judah—”

“Please, just listen. I’ve been doing some thinking over the last few days and the weeks I’ve spent with you have been some of the happiest times of my life. But, I’m having issues internally with myself, and I’ve concluded that you deserve better than what I have to offer you.”

“Judah, don’t say that. What are you talking about? We’re good together. We have fun together. I cooked a meal for us to enjoy this evening. Where is this coming from?”

“It’s not coming from anywhere,” he tells me. “It’s been this way all along. I told you from the beginning I couldn’t be with anyone—that all I had to offer you was friendship.”

“You did,” I say, feeling weak. “That’s exactly what you said. However, friends don’t

kiss each other the way you kissed me. I spent nights at your house. We've spent a lot of time together, Judah. You just sent me flowers a few days ago—"

"That was a mistake. I should've stopped it. I shouldn't have gone this far with you."

"Judah, stop—"

"No, listen to me, Autumn. This is hard enough as it is, just..."

The line goes quiet again. After a few more seconds creep by, he says, "You are an amazing, phenomenal woman. I knew that from the moment I first laid eyes on you. And yes, I kissed you because I had a lapse in judgment, thinking we could've actually had something.

We did have something, but I was reminded of who I am.

Do you know who I am, Autumn? I am a man who's living in limbo like my father said.

It's not like I had a choice in the matter, but that's what it is.

I do, however, have a choice not to drag you down with me. So, I'm letting you go."

"No, you're not," I say in tears. "I'm packing up the food. I'll be over to your place in twenty minutes."

"Autumn—"

Click .

I hang up the phone before he can protest. I find a large, plastic Tupperware container

for the pot roast, and cover the cornbread pan with aluminum foil.

The cake is in a cake saver. That makes it easy to place that in the car and once I get everything inside, I focus on making my way to his house as quickly as possible.

Turning into the driveway, I park behind his car and with a heavy heart and sustenance in my arms, I push the doorbell and wait.

He doesn't answer immediately.

I push it again, and again, and again.

Still, he doesn't answer. This isn't the Judah I know to leave me hanging like this.

I set the pot and cornbread on the porch and knock loudly, but there's no answer. He's here, he's not coming to the door and it's intentional.

"Judah, can you please talk to me?" I say loud enough so he can hear me. "Judah, ple—"

Tears fall from my eyes. "Judah, please don't do this to me. Please," I say in full tears. I sniffle, wipe my eyes and nose with the back of my hand and reach for the doorbell for a final time. However, my index finger doesn't connect with the button.

Defeated, I lower my arms to my side, inhale a deep breath, pick up the food and walk back to my car. Even then, with a drenched face and broken heart I just sit there, hoping and praying that he wouldn't do me like this – treat me like a stranger. As if all of our time together meant nothing.

But he does.

He doesn't come to the door.

He doesn't respond to me.

Text me.

Call me.

He stays hidden behind the walls of his house like my feelings don't matter. Is he really doing this to me?

The tears have since dried on my face. I start my car and drive back home angrier at myself than I am at him.

I knew this was a possibility. Yet, I put myself out there anyway, thinking that I would be the woman to change his mind about relationships, and I was for a hot minute, but in the end, I'm just like everybody else to him.

Temporary.

Page 22

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I didn't want to go on the hike today, but I knew getting outside would lift my spirits.

I've been in the house for the last couple of days, overthinking my life, agonizing about death, thinking about my father's hatred of me, and everything in between.

I think about how Autumn must feel after she came to my house on Thursday, rang the doorbell and knocked after I pretty much ended our relationship over the phone like a coward.

I suppose that's who I am. I was right – she does deserve better than that.

“Hey, what's up Judah? Where's Autumn?” Moriah asks. They're so used to seeing us together that, when I'm not with her, that's the first question I get. “Is she not coming?”

“I'm not sure.”

“What do you mean you're not sure? Y'all have been inseparable for weeks.”

I continue walking, avoiding her because what do I say exactly?

Moriah skips ahead to catch up to Luna. Meanwhile, I linger at the back until the rest of the crew are out of sight. I turn around to see that Autumn is a ways back. Looks like she decided to join us after all.

I'm glad she's here although I'm not ready to face her. I knew I would have to at some point. I suppose it may as well be now.

I begin walking back toward Autumn. Her scent greets me before her icy gaze.

It has me recalling how close we'd become in just a short time.

We were good together, have the potential of being great together, but aren't I doing the noble thing by releasing her to someone who can do it better?

Who would be around longer? Who'd check every box for what a woman like her deserves?

She stops walking to look at one of the small waterfalls, bracing herself for my presence.

I stand beside her, listening to the trickling sound of the water that should be therapeutic and relaxing, but it's not.

The thumps of my heart are interfering with the tranquility.

The tension I feel from her end is doing the same.

My stomach is in knots.

My head hurts.

My heart hurts.

If I'm feeling these things, I can only imagine what she's feeling. I part my lips to begin some sort of apology – something that could possibly get me back into her good graces, but she walks away from me, heading further up the trail.

“Autumn—”

“I’m trying to catch up to the others,” she says, holding onto the straps of her purple backpack. She’s walking fast, too – as fast as she can to get away from me.

“Autumn, please.”

I jog to catch up to her but even after I’ve caught her, I lose her again.

“Autumn—”

“What!” she asks frowning, but nonetheless, she stopped walking, turned around and now, she’s giving me her full attention.

“I don’t want this rift between us.”

“Then do something about it,” she tells me, sounding completely exasperated and frustrated.

I’ve read between the lines. I know what she means.

I hold the power to fix this and I am trying to fix it.

It’s just not in the way she likes. She wants to be with me.

I want to be with her, but I’d much rather this brilliant, beautiful woman be with a man who can give her all of her heart’s desires.

“I can’t do what you’re asking of me,” I respond.

“Then we have nothing else to talk about, Judah.”

She starts walking again.

I close my eyes tightly as if it's going to help me get through this situation. I walk quickly to catch up to her and say, "I don't want to hurt you, Autumn."

Her frown deepens. Eyes spew darkness, indicative of the storm brewing in her mind and heart. "You don't want to hurt me?"

"No, I don't."

"Judah, I stood on your front porch with food for fifteen minutes, knocking and ringing the doorbell because you broke up with me over the phone. I cooked dinner for you. Instead of coming to my home, you no-showed, called me to tell me you couldn't be with me anymore, and now you're standing here telling me you don't want to hurt me?"

Really? It's a little too freakin' late for that, don't you think?

But that's the crux of your problem, isn't it?

You only think about yourself and what you want or don't want. Screw everybody else."

"That's not true."

"It is true. It's one hundred percent true." She quickly swipes away a tear before it travels down her face.

"Autumn, I'm sorry. I am. I take full responsibility for what you're feeling. I should have never kissed you."

"But you did."

“I did,” I acknowledge, “But—”

“Why did you kiss me?”

“Because it felt right, but it wasn’t right. It—”

She shakes her head and says, “I love you, Judah. I can’t be friends with you feeling the way that I feel. I can’t. That’s what you’re asking me to do, and the answer is no. Please just—just leave me alone. That’s the best thing you can do for me.”

I watch her head up the hill, seeking the others.

“You have no life with me,” I mutter, wishing she’d understand what I know to be true.

In a way, I think she does, but she’s letting her heart guide her – not her mind.

Not common sense because common sense says don’t get involved with someone who’s dying.

Her heart defies that logic. Yes, I am doing her a favor, no matter how much it hurts the both of us.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I should've canceled brunch with Riley today because I'm not in the mood – not after the hike yesterday, watching Judah watch me while knowing he doesn't even want me.

When we had stopped for lunch, I couldn't eat without him staring into my mouth.

Couldn't talk to the girls without him reading my every move.

I didn't want to be there.

I didn't.

But his friends have become my friends, even the weird ones.

“Hey, girl. Sorry I'm late. There was an accident. I literally watched it happen. I was like, ‘okay, y'all need to get out of my way. I'm hungry’.”

“Really, Riley? Somebody could've been hurt.”

“Yeah. That's why people need to get off the phone and drive.”

She settles in her chair and hangs her purse on the back. Then she picks up a menu and asks, “Now, what are we eating? Shrimp and grits? Or are you going for more breakfasty foods?”

“You can get what you want. I'm not all that hungry. This coffee is enough for me.”

Lowering the menu so I can see her eyes, she asks, “What you mean you ain’t hungry?”

I shrug. “I’m not. I wasn’t even going to come here today, but here I am.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. What’s going on?”

“No, I didn’t say that for you to—you know what. It’s all good.”

“Autumn Maple Pemberton—don’t make me ask you again.”

“Not my whole government name.”

“Yeah, that’s right, now what is it?”

“Um...” I pull in a breath and release it like I’m doing a mindfulness exercise and say, “Judah dumped me.”

“What!” she screams. I’m glad we’re outside and there’s no one sitting out here but us at the moment. Otherwise she would’ve deafened everybody.

“It’s all good, Riley.”

“No, the heck it ain’t!”

“It is.”

“So, you just gon’ sit here and pretend like you weren’t in love with that man.”

“You warned me. I should’ve listened.”

“No, no, no—don’t you put this on yourself. This is not your fault. This is his fault!”

“You don’t even know what happened?”

“He broke up with you. I don’t need to know the details.”

I’m still broken up about it, but somehow I feel like a peace has fallen over me. Maybe it’s because I cried all evening, all night and even a little this morning. Makeup disguises my weary eyes well, but it can’t hide the fact that my friend knows me so well.

She asks, “Did he even say why, or—?”

“He said I deserved someone better.”

“Spoken like a true player.”

“He’s not a player, Riley.”

“And I’m not about to let you defend a man who just broke up with you. You know what?” She whips out her phone, pulls up her social media and shows me a guy’s profile.

“Who’s this?”

“Girl—he’s a new teacher, and he’s finer than an EBT card when yo’ refrigerator’s empty.”

“What?” I throw my head back and laugh.

“I’m a set y’all up.”

“Um, no. You ain’t setting me up with nobody. If he so fine, why don’t you go out with him?”

“Because I don’t date people I work with. That’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

“True,” I say.

“He seems like the nerdy type...right up your alley.”

“What does he teach?”

“Advanced Chemistry. You know what they say about them educated men, girl.”

“No. What do they say?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. I just wanted to know if you knew.”

“Girl...”

I laugh again and lean back in my chair. Actually, I’m glad I came out. Being with Riley always lifts my spirits.

“So, look—it ain’t going to hurt nothing for y’all to just go out for dinner,” Riley says. “I’m going to set it up.”

“Riley, no.”

“I don’t want to hear it. I’m the reason you and Judah got together so it’s my fault. Now, I’m going to make up for it.”

“Riley, do not give that guy my number.”

“I won’t. I’m going to set it all up and let you know where to meet him.”

“How do you know he’s single? He could already have a girlfriend.”

“He doesn’t. I overheard him talking to another teacher in the breakroom.”

I sigh heavily and say, “Riley, I’m not up for this.”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Famous last words...”

She cackles. “He’s a good guy. Just go and if nothing comes of it, then nothing comes of it.”

“Yeah, okay, Riley.”

Page 24

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

It's been almost three weeks since the argument I had with my father, and in that time of having nothing to do since he fired me, I've been doing a lot of soul searching.

I'm thirty-one years old. I was diagnosed with brain cancer at twenty-four.

What have I done with my life since then?

In seven years? Not much of anything. I've just been coasting along, living below my potential, but is that really living?

The truth is, I'm afraid to live. Afraid of what life and this disease will do to me and the people I love.

Living a quiet, uneventful life is the best way to go as far as I'm concerned.

That's what I was trying to do. What I've been excelling at until I met Autumn.

She made me break the monotony of my life.

Made me question things I'm not ready to face.

Made me see that there is something inside of me that's not satisfied with bagging groceries no matter how much effort I put into it.

I'm better than this.

I know it and everybody around me knows it, especially my father. He's tried for

years to get me out of my own way and nothing ever clicked. So, what's different this time? It's not the fact that he fired me. It's not his latest rant about the things he hates about my life.

It's her.

Autumn.

She loves me. I love her, too, though I've never told her. It's those feelings I have for her that make me want to do things differently. It's the way she goes out of her way for me. The way she smiles. She brings that missing puzzle piece into my life. What do I bring to hers?

Seeing her cry at the park, the way the tears ran down her face was worse than going through chemo.

My illness isn't because of what someone did to me.

It just happened. Her tears are a direct result of my actions.

I caused her pain, and that's something I can't get over.

I know I need to do something about it because I—I need her in my life even when I know she needs something different.

How can we coexist when I want her to have a life that I can't give her and yet, I still want her?

Page 25

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

Sitting across the table from Tyler, all I can think about is how Riley called him 'EBT' fine.

It's the reason for my smiles, though he thinks it's because I'm enjoying myself.

Well, I am, sort of. It's a change of pace and he is a good-looking dude.

He's about six feet with a light complexion.

He's clean-shaven, and I found out from Riley he was twenty-nine.

I'm on this blind date with no expectations.

This is just something to take my mind of Judah temporarily.

I haven't seen Judah in almost a month, and while my heart hurts, I can't chase a man and make him want something he doesn't.

If a man wants you, he wants you. It's as simple as that.

"Do you live around here?" I hear Tyler ask.

His eyes look glassy. By the way he's looking at me, you'd think he was crazy over me, but this is our first date – my first date with Mr. EBT Fine .

He seems hopeful that this is going to be the beginning of something great.

I, on the other hand, am guilty of using Tyler as a palate cleanser.

It makes me sick to think of him that way because nobody deserves that.

However, it's not entirely my fault. Riley talked me into this.

After getting myself together, I say, "Yes, I live in Arden. You?"

"I'm in Fletcher, you know, Arden's big cousin."

"You mean Arden's little cousin. Arden is bigger than Fletcher."

"Sure about that?" he asks, whipping out his cell phone like he's about to prove me wrong when I've been living in this city for years. As he's doing his investigating, I ask, "Where are you from again?"

"Fayetteville."

I laugh. "Yeah, I know this area more than you do, buddy."

He's quiet as he looks up the information. I watch confusion wash over his face when he says, "You know what? You're exactly right. Arden is bigger than Fletcher. How did I not know that?"

"Because you're from Fayetteville. Duh. You don't hear me trying to tell you about your military bases, do you?"

He grins. "My bad. I'll stay in my lane."

"Thank you."

“What are you thinking about ordering?”

“Probably just some appetizers. I’ll take a pretzel or something.”

“I’m a meat guy. I need protein.”

When the waiter comes by, I order pretzel bites. He gets boneless wings. I jump right back into the conversation and ask, “Are you like one of those hardcore gym guys?”

“No, not at all. I do workout, but I believe I have what they call a dad bod beneath this shirt.”

“Speaking of dad bod, do you have children?”

“Yes—a daughter. She’s six. You?”

“No children for me yet. Have you ever been married?”

“I was married. Me and my daughter’s mother tried to make things work, but we just couldn’t get along.”

“It happens, I suppose.”

“What about you?”

“No—never been married, but I want to be, one day. I’m not rushing it, though. If it happens, it happens, but it has to be with the right one.”

The appetizers arrive. I dip pretzel bites in cheese and he dips chicken wings in blue cheese.

“What do you do for work?” he inquires.

“I’m an administrative assistant. I opted to go to a two-year college so I could get into the workforce faster. My life is here in Arden. I don’t have big dreams of making boatloads of money. It really can’t buy happiness.”

“You don’t think a brand new car would make you happy?”

I grin and say, “There’s nothing wrong with the car I got.”

“So, what would make Autumn Pemberton happy?”

“I’m generally happy already. I’m not looking for any one person or thing to make me happy. Happiness lives within.”

“You sound like one of those nature people.”

“I am one of those people. I love nature.”

“See, I knew it.”

I dip another pretzel and ask, “How do you like the new school?”

“It’s nice. I’ve never seen so many single teachers at one school. I feel naked when walking down the hallway.”

Smiling through laughter, I say, “Oh, no.”

“Yeah, I’m used to it,” he says.

“Speaking of those single teachers, what exactly do you look for in a woman?” I ask.

I'm not interested in going on a date with him again. That much I can already tell. I'm just making conversation at this point.

He says, "I look for normality. I don't want to end up with someone who is a little off ."

Amused, I ask, "Have you been with someone who's off ?"

"Uh...yes. I went out with this woman and she ended up stalking me after one date."

"Wow. You must've made quite the impression."

"I think I did. I got roses, letters, the whole nine. Finally, I had to sit down with her and tell her it was over."

"Okay, that is pretty crazy."

"As for what I really value in a woman, though, I'd say she has to have ethics, a good moral character, a good head on her shoulders, and just be about something."

"I heard that."

"What do you look for in a man?"

"Passion. I like a man who knows how to lead and not wait on me to do it. I need a man who knows that his physical strength matches my mental fortitude and that together, we can be a force. He would be a man of integrity, good morals, and humility. A man who loves his family and who would love me through the good and bad times."

After sitting quietly for a moment, he says, "I think you just described Jesus."

“Shut up,” I say, laughing.

“Just kidding, but I get it. I’m with you all the way.”

I glance at my watch. Before I got here, I told myself I would give it at least an hour. It’s a quarter past that and my bed is calling me. I have to work in the morning and so does he.

I tell him something to this effect. He covers the bill and we leave shortly thereafter. He opens the door as we head outside.

“This was nice,” he says.

“Yeah, it was.”

“Hopefully, I’ll see you soon.”

“We’ll see.”

“Oh, not the dreaded we’ll see . Was I that bad?”

“No, you weren’t. You—”

I pause when I see Judah standing next to my car. My heartbeats increase in intensity just at the sight of him – what it’s supposed to do when you catch sight of the man you love. It’s nearly been a month. Now, he’s here, waiting for me. How did he know I was here? How long has he been out here?

“Is that your car?” Tyler asks.

“Uh...yeah.”

“I take it you know him?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you need me to interfere, or—?”

“Oh, no. It’s nothing like that. He’s a friend.”

“Okay, well, I hope to see you around, Autumn.”

“Thanks, Tyler.”

Tyler continues across the parking lot to his vehicle and I continue walking the few steps to mine where Judah is staring me down, watching my every step.

I don’t know what to do or what to say. Should I say anything?

I didn’t ask him to be here, and he’s the one who ended things between us, so what is there for me to say?

I hit the unlock button on my remote, ignoring him because, no, I’m not going to piece us together and I’m not going to put myself through the trauma of agonizing over a man who doesn’t want me.

I was about to reach for the door handle when he says, “It’s kind of weird to see you with someone else.”

“What are you doing here, Judah?” I ask, finally turning around to face him.

He quietly stares at me for a moment, eyes heavy, troubled and glossy before asking, “Are you with him?”

“What are you doing here, Judah?”

“I wanted to see you.”

“So, you track me down around town to find out where I am?”

“I did what I had to do.”

“Well, you’ve seen me. I have to get home. Goodbye.”

“Wait,” he says, grabbing my right forearm.

I snatch my arm away from him.

“Don’t be this way, Autumn.”

“What way is that, Judah? Tell me how to be when I told you I love you, and you broke up with me over the phone.”

“We were never meant to be in the first place,” he counters.

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Autumn—”

“And if we were never meant to be, why are you here now?” I yell, feeling tears come to my eyes. That’s one of my flaws—I cry when I’m angry when I should be standing my ground and getting my point across. The tears flow, and he’s just standing there doing nothing.

I turn to leave for the third time.

He says, “I love you, Autumn. That’s why I’m here.”

I wipe away tears that stream down my face, look at him, and say, “I don’t believe you.”

But I do believe him. I knew he loved me before he said it. That’s why it hurt so much when he ended things. His indecisiveness is going to be the death of me.

“It is the truth.”

“Then why would you do what you did to me? That’s not love. Love doesn’t leave a woman at the door with a pot roast and a lemon cake.”

“Autumn—”

“Love doesn’t let a month divide people who were meant to be together.”

“Sweetheart, there are—”

“Don’t call me sweetheart after what you did to me.”

“Okay. Autumn, there are things about me you don’t understand.”

“Oh, I understand everything. I understand you live this very small life because you have cancer. I understand you never wanted to fall in love because you don’t know if and when you’ll no longer be here with us.

Guess what, Judah? I don’t know how long I’m going to be here.

Nobody knows how long they’re going to be here.

All we can do is the best we can. That's it!

But you're not doing that, are you? You're hiding, and if that's your goal, then it's your goal, but I'm not going to be with a man who kisses me like I'm the last woman on earth one minute, and the next you're hiding in the house while I'm outside in tears ringing the doorbell. ”

“I apologize for the way I've made you feel, and I don't want to hide from you. I want you.”

My eyes narrow, burning with disbelief as I search his face for the truth. I take a sharp breath and ask, “You want me?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Then I'm right here,” I say, widening my arms. “I'm right here, Judah. Here I am, offering myself to you on a platter like I've always done. I'm yours. You can do whatever you want with me.”

I watch the moment he swallows his feelings down his throat and drops his head. There's that indecisiveness again.

Lowering my arms, I ask, “Why seek me out to tell me that you love me and not do anything about it? You obviously came here for a reason. Is that all you wanted?” I say, wiping my eyes. “To tell me that you love me and disappear again?”

“No.”

“Then...” I sigh heavily, thoroughly confused, but my mind is clear enough to know I'm not going to beg a man to be with me. “Judah, I have to go.”

“I can’t be a real man for you, Autumn. You love me, I know that, but you don’t know things about me that will certainly make you change your mind.”

“You have cancer. I know that already, and—”

“I could never make love to you,” he cuts me off to say, in distress.

“That part of me doesn’t work anymore. I can’t—” his voice cracks.

“I could never give you children. You said you wanted children. I can’t be the man to give you that, so while I do love you deeply,” he says wiping a tear rolling down his face, “I know I’m not the man for you.

I want you to be happy. I want you to have everything your heart desires. How can that be me?”

I take a step forward, press my face against his chest and just stay here. I freakin’ love it here. Love this man down, and I don’t care about anything he just said. It doesn’t change the way I feel about him. He has my heart. Everything else will just be what it is.

I release him, look up into his eyes, and say, “Intimacy involves more than sex, Judah.”

“I know that, but—”

“I’m yours. Say you’re mine and nothing else needs to be said.”

“You need to be sure,” he tells me.

“Do I look like I’m confused?”

He cracks a small smile and says, “No.”

“Then, tell me.”

“I’m yours, Autumn.”

I close my arms around him and squeeze. “You better be sure this time, because I’m not going through this again.”

“I’m sure.”

“Then kiss me.”

He places his hands delicately on the sides of my face, right on top of the happy tears, and lowers his mouth, his tongue greeting mine in a grand reunion, kissing me deeply the way he always does.

He picks me up, lowers me on the hood of my car and takes his time tasting my lips.

I almost forgot we were in the parking lot of a restaurant, but I truly don’t care.

I’m with the man I love. My heart is full.

When he releases me, I smile.

He smiles.

I say, “And another thing…”

“What’s that?”

“I’m coming home with you.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

I unlock the door and follow her inside my place.

The dread, loneliness and misery I felt in her absence are all gone.

She's back and the connection, the aura, my heart is whole again.

She lowers her purse to the kitchen counter and walks up to me with her hands in the air so I can pick her up.

I acquiesce. She closes her legs around me.

Her arms circle around my neck. She kisses me softly on the lips.

She leaves her softness all over my face.

I walk to my bedroom and lower her there, anxious to have her back in my arms. I settle on top of her and indulge in her lips – in the taste I love.

I pull back, my eyes lingering upon her as if I'm seeing her for the first time, and say, "I love you."

"I love you."

She doesn't know how much her words mean to me. How much she means to me. I thought for sure she wouldn't want me after she found out about my inadequacies, but she loves me in spite of them. I should've known she would.

I lie next to her and pull her close so we're face to face, then I tell her, "I was miserable without you. I never want to know that feeling again."

She strokes my beard and says, "I was in a bad way without you. The only reason I went on that date is because Riley suggested I go out with him to get over you, but the whole time we were chatting, I was thinking about you."

"No, you weren't."

"I was. He asked me what I look for in a man. Your face appeared in my mind, and when I answered him, everything I said was everything that you are."

"She leans forward, presses her lips to mine, and says, "You are everything I want in a man. Everything."

I'm all smiles as I listen to her kind words. I ask, "How did this happen?"

"How did what happen?"

"Us."

"It's your fault, Judah."

"How?"

"Ice cream, that's how."

"You've changed my entire life."

She climbs on top of me and says, "You've changed mine, too, and I'm never letting you go again, even if I have to fight you."

“You won’t have to. I’m not going anywhere. I’m yours forever.”

Page 27

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:23 am

Being inside Riley's cozy apartment is such a better feeling than it was the last time I was here.

She has music playing low as she shakes up cocktails in the kitchen.

As soon as I walked in, she said she would get drinks started before I told her how the blind date with Tyler went.

She wanted all the juicy details, and I was excited to give them to her.

After she pours our drinks in Martini glasses, we walk over to the sofa. She says, "Alright, so, how was Tyler?"

"He was cool."

"Oh, Lord. You didn't like him."

I grin. "I did like him. We had a cute little conversation."

Riley shakes her head. "A cute lil' conversation? Girl, just say it. You didn't like him."

"I did, and you know what—if I didn't know that there was a better man out there, one who was absolutely perfect for me, maybe I would've given him serious consideration. The problem is, there is a better man for me and that's why I couldn't mesh with Tyler."

“I know you ain’t talking about Judah.”

“Wait, hear me out. So, me and Tyler were in the restaurant. We order appetizers, which was my suggestion because I wasn’t really in the mood for a full dinner.

I was just doing you a favor by going out with him, anyway.

So, we were talking, everything was good, we were leaving and as I’m walking back to my car, I see Judah standing there like he’s waiting on me. ”

Riley’s eyes grow big when she says, “Girl, you better stop lying!”

“I’m not,” I say, unable to wipe the huge grin off my face.

“What did he say?”

“He was on the same thing, talking about how he thought I deserved someone who could give me a better life.”

“And what did you say? You started crying, didn’t you?”

“I did. I was crying because I was really hurt. He was crying because he knew he hurt me and he missed me. Long story short, we’re back together and we’ve been back together since Wednesday night.”

“So, there ain’t going to be no flip-flopping this time, right?”

“Right. I made that clear to him. I’m not doing the back and forth.”

Riley’s eyes narrow.

“It’s cool, Riley. And, he’s been doing things to show me that he’s in this for good. It’s not going to be like it was before.”

“How do you know that for sure?”

“Because he wants to meet my parents. I already set it up for tomorrow. My mom is beside herself with excitement.”

“Girl, that’s good just as long as he follows through.”

“He will. I’m confident. Whatever the case, I’m going to keep hope alive.”

“I mean, ay, maybe it’s a good thing. Perhaps he wants to ask your father for your hand in marriage.”

“Nah. It’s too soon for that.”

“What if he did? What would you say?”

I take a sip of my drink and say, “I guess I’ll have to cross that bridge when I get to it, but I already know what I would say. The answer is yes.”

“And you think you’re ready for that?”

“I’ve been ready to get married.”

“I know you want to get married. I’m talking about all the things that come with being with someone like him.”

A few minutes pass while I digest what she’s asking me. I say, “Yes, I’m ready for everything that comes with him.”

I didn't tell her everything about Judah – like his inability to have children and all that because some things, a woman just needs to keep to herself.

Riley certainly would have something to say about that, and I'm not going to change my mind about it so there's no use in entertaining what she or anyone else has to say.

I love Judah, and that's all there is to it.

“Ay, while you're so busy concerned about my man, I guess the time has come for me to find one for you.”

“Girl, you ain't finding me nothing,” she says. “I'm manifesting mine. If he ain't tall with a beard, chocolate skin and big feet, I don't want him.”

I laugh out loud. “You'll get whoever the Lord sends you, boo.”

“He knows what I want.”

I shake my head and say, “Well, I hope he falls out of the sky for you one day.”

I finish my drink, place the glass on the table and lie back on the sofa, thinking about Judah when a text comes through. I don't have to look at it today to know it's him.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

I can't get enough.

When she's near me, I bathe in her energy.

When she's away, I miss her presence to the point where I can't think.

Can't concentrate. I'm surprising her with dinner this evening to celebrate the job she doesn't know I've obtained.

I had the interview on Friday – an experience I've never had before, but they liked me.

It was something about my keen sense of detail, my demeanor and the thoroughness of my answers that impressed them.

I killed it.

My father would be proud. I'm still not communicating with him, though, and my mother hasn't come by either. She's tired of our constant disagreements. I am, too, so while I'm free of their influence, I'm getting my life together finally with the help of one, sweet, beautiful woman.

In my small kitchen, I've lit candles and even tried my hand at cooking something a bit more complicated – lasagna. I prepared a salad and now, I just need her.

My phone shakes me out of my thoughts. Nico's calling. I haven't talked to him in a minute. I'm curious to see what he's been up to but most likely, he's calling for an

update on me like he always does.

“Hey, what’s up, Nico?”

“Yo, what’s up with you, my boy?”

“Chillin’, waiting for my girl to get here.”

“Wait—what did I miss?”

“Autumn. We’re together now.”

“Stop playing with me, Judah.”

“I’m not.”

“That’s great man!”

I hear the sheer excitement in his voice. “Thanks.”

“In all honesty, I kinda knew it would be her.”

“Whatever, man. There’s no way you could’ve known that.”

“I did. Every time I came down to hang with you and your crew, I always thought to myself how you surround yourself with these beautiful women and not one captured your interest. Then, when Autumn came, I saw something different. Saw how you weren’t able to take your eyes off of her, but then when she left that day—the first day I met her actually—you ran after her.

I was like, yeah, if there was ever a woman for you, it was her. But congratulations,

man.”

“Thanks. I’m waiting on her now to celebrate my new job.”

“Your new—who is this and what have you done with Judah?”

I chuckle. “I fell out with my father. He fired me from the store, and I’m glad he did.

Since I’ve been with Autumn, I’m starting to see things more clearly.

I feel like I’ve been stuck for a long time.

You’ve been trying to tell me that, but it’s her perspective that has helped me the most. I love her, man. ”

“I’m glad. I thought after that thing with Emori, you were broken forever.”

“It wasn’t that. It’s more about the cancer.”

“Man, you’re in remission, brother. You know how many people don’t make it that far? I wouldn’t worry about any of that. Live your life. Be happy. I’m excited for you to start this next chapter.”

I take a deep breath and say, “I am, too, actually. It feels nice to look forward to something.”

“No doubt.”

“Enough about me, though. What have you been up to?”

“Work. I was calling to tell you I’ll be that way soon.”

“Cool. Let me know when, and we’ll set something up.”

“Bet.”

“Hey, I think I just heard Autumn pull up, so I’m going to get off this phone.”

“Okay, man. Later.”

I get up from the chair, walk to the door, and sure enough, I see my woman getting out of the car. I don’t wait for her to make it to the porch. I step outside, jog down the stairs, and take her into my arms.

“Welcome home, baby.”

She smiles. “You act like you didn’t just see me last night.”

“Even a few minutes away from you is too long.”

She snickers. “I work Monday through Friday.”

“And I’m sitting over here staring at the clock, waiting.”

She kisses my lips and says, “Come on. Let’s go inside. It smells like you cooked something. Did you cook for me?”

“I did.”

“Then let’s go because all I had at Riley’s was a martini.”

“Oh yeah? Let me taste.”

“I don’t have any more, silly.”

“I mean your tongue.”

“Oh,” she says, angling her face to mine then says, “Taste all you want.”

I lean down and capture the sweetness of her lips – the pure joy of kissing her without any doubt, fear or worry in my mind. The feeling is unmatched. Her tongue is delectable and her moans are music to my ears.

I pull away from her and say, “Your friend makes a good martini.”

She chuckles, slaps me in the chest, and says, “Stop being silly.”

“She does.” I scoop her up in my arms, carry her up the stairs while she squirms, and then lower her to the porch. “I cooked dinner.”

Entering the house, she says, “And you lit candles.”

“I did. Go get comfortable and then come back and have a seat.”

“Okay. Be right back.”

She goes straight to the bathroom. I pull out some ceramic plates that I didn’t even realize were in the cabinet, wipe them down, and then put our food on the table.

When she returns, she says, “Everything looks so good, Judah.”

“I’m glad you approve.”

I pray over the meal and then she digs in. “This is soo good,” she exclaims.

“You don’t have to be nice.”

“No, I mean it. It’s delicious!”

I watch her eat for a moment and then say, “Autumn, I have something to tell you.”

She stops eating abruptly and says, “Nope. You’re not breaking up with me. I told you I’ll fight you and I meant that.”

I laugh, but she’s not laughing. She raises a brow.

I say, “I’m not breaking up with you, sweetheart. I wanted to celebrate tonight because you’re looking at the newest senior-level economist for the city of Asheville.”

Her eyes grow big. “Stop playing with me.”

“I’m not. It’s official.”

“Are you serious?”

“I start on Monday.”

“Oh my God! Judah, I’m so happy for you!”

She gets up, wraps her arms around my neck, and holds me here in her embrace. Then I feel wetness slide down the side of my face.

“Autumn, are you crying?”

“Yes, but they’re happy tears.”

“But, why are you crying, sweetheart?”

“Because I’ve watched you grow and transform into this person, Judah. I’m so proud of you for everything you’ve accomplished. You deserve this and so much more.”

“Thank you for saying that,” I tell her, wiping her tears before she returns to her seat. “But I have you. I don’t need much else.”

The tears flow again. She walks back over to me and straddles me, her tears dampening my shoulder. I close my eyes and connect fully with her emotions. The joy is overwhelming. Immeasurable. This woman loves me unshakably deep. I love her the same.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

I'm a bit on high alert due to the fact that on the drive over here, Autumn told me how strict her parents were when she was growing up.

Said they wanted the very best for her and it took years of convincing for them to understand that, as an adult, she had to do what she had to do for herself without weighing their constant input.

They'd lived their lives. It was time for her to live hers.

Still, that hadn't stopped them from trying.

When she decided to move to Arden, that took a lot of convincing.

When she dated her last boyfriend – that was an issue, though they were right about him – he wasn't any good.

I'm hoping they look at me and see how much I love their daughter.

That's my goal for this dinner – to show them that I'm in this, and I'm not playing games.

“Ready?” she asks right after I press the button to shut off the engine.

“As ready as I'm going to be.”

“It'll be fine. I already told them a little about you, so—”

“Wait, what?”

“Judah, it’s fine,” she says, reaching for the door handle.

“No, wait—I need to make sure we’re on the same page. What have you told them?”

She smiles, her cheeks dimpling when she responds, “I told them I love you.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Did you tell them about—you know...?”

“I didn’t mention anything about your health, Judah, because that’s nobody’s business but ours.”

“Okay.”

She leans over, plants a kiss on my lips, then wipes off the gloss with her thumb and says, “Okay, let’s go.”

We get out, head to the door. Her mother opens it quickly and says, “There’s my baby. How are you, darling?”

“I’m good, Ma. How are you?”

“I’m doing just fine, baby. And who do we have here?”

I smile and say, “Good evening, Mrs. Pemberton. I’m Judah Westinghouse.”

“Hi there,” she says, bypassing my extended hand for a hug instead.

“How you doing, babygirl?” Her father says emerging from the kitchen with a dish towel.

Autumn hugs him and then he turns his attention to me and says, “Judah Westinghouse—the man my daughter loves . Bring it in, son.”

Son .

I’m beyond confused. I didn’t think they’d be this receptive of me, but so far, we’re off to a good start.

“Come on back and have a seat,” her mother says.

We walk into the dining room where her parents have everything laid out – food, place settings – it all looks fancy. And the dining room is decorated with black and teal accents. They have a lovely home. I can feel the love here.

We fill our plates and start eating. Her father says, “So, my daughter has told us a little about you, Judah. Why don’t you fill in the blanks and tell us a little about yourself?”

“Well, um, I live in Arden. I have a degree in economics—just landed a good job here in Asheville, actually.”

“Are your people from Arden?”

“They are.”

“That’s interesting. I went to school with some Westinghouses. What’s your father’s

name?”

“My father’s name is Presly.”

Her father’s eyes light up. “Are you kidding me?”

“No, sir.”

He takes a napkin, wipes his mouth, and says, “We went to high school together.”

“No way,” Autumn says.

“Yeah, I think he was a year ahead of me, but we both were on the varsity football team. Yep. Presly Westinghouse. You favor him, too.”

“Well, ain’t that something,” Mrs. Pemberton says. “It really is a small world.”

“Apparently,” Autumn says.

“How’s Presly doing these days?”

“He’s doing great—carrying on the family business.”

“Nice.”

“How long have you two been dating?” Mrs. Pemberton asks.

“Um...a couple of months,” Autumn says.

“You know, me and your father dated for a few months before we got married.”

“Ma!”

“What?” she smirks. “I’m not trying to insinuate anything. I’m just saying.”

Her father says, “We don’t want you to run the fella off.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that,” I say. “I’m not running from this woman no matter what. I’m running to her—to be her support, to take care of her through sickness, health and everything in between.”

“Well, alright, then,” Mrs. Pemberton says, smiling.

After our meals are finished, her mother goes to get dessert. When she does, I take a moment to ask to speak with her father in private. We take a step outside via the front door. It’s dark as the time approaches ten.

“So, what did you want to talk to me about young man?”

I slide my hands into my pockets. I’m not nervous at all because I’m confident about my relationship and my love for Autumn. I do, however, want to go about this in the most respectful way possible.

I say, “I want you to know that I love your daughter very much. Since I met her, my life has changed for the better—not to say I didn’t have a good life, but it wasn’t as good as it could’ve been.

Autumn is the light that brightens the path to show me how wonderful my life could be.

She’s special to me and I want to spend the rest of my life with her. ”

“Are you asking me for my blessing, son?”

“I am.”

“Well,” he hesitates. “That’s difficult considering I just met you.”

“I know, but I also know that I cannot go another day without forging this path for us. I knew Autumn was my other half when we met and nothing has changed, sir. I promise you that I will treat your daughter with the utmost respect. I will love and cherish her every day until she’s smothered with it. ”

Mr. Pemberton chuckles. “You might not want to go that far, Judah. See, there has to be a balance with women. Sometimes if you go all in, they resist.”

“Not Autumn. I know that for a fact. She wants everything I have to give and then some, and I’m going to give it to her because she deserves it.”

“Well, I can’t argue with that can I?” He looks me dead in the eyes and says, “If you’re standing here on this porch proclaiming your love for my daughter and you promise to treat her with love and respect for the rest of her life then you have my blessing.”

A smile appears on my face. I reach to shake his hand but he hugs me and pats me on the back. “She deserves the best.”

“That’s what she’ll get, sir. That’s a promise.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

“Did you know it’s the first day of fall?

” I ask Judah. Ironically enough, he asked me to go on this impromptu hike with him this morning, and like the picnic we had in the middle of Lake Julian, he has that little backpack, so I suppose we’re having a little something to eat, too.

He’s so romantic and completely adorable for a man who looks like he could snap me in half if he wanted to.

You would never think someone like him with all those freakin’ muscles would be the kindest, meekest, mildest of them all.

He’s truly a gem and I’m always happy to be in his presence.

“Come on, slowpoke,” he says.

I open my mouth in shock. “Oh, you’re feeling yourself today, huh?”

“I am. Why are you lagging? You’re usually ahead of me.”

“Can I take the time to enjoy nature?”

“Yes, sweetheart. You can.”

He stops walking so I can catch up to him and when I do, he takes my hand into his and says, “Now, we can enjoy nature together.”

“Stop walking for a minute,” I tell him.

He stops. I turn to him, staring up into his heavy-lidded eyes, and ask, “What are you up to?”

A semblance of a smile appears on his face. “What do you mean?”

“You know exactly what I mean.”

He stares down at me, giving me that serious expression that can also pass for seduction. Then he says, “I’m just spending time with my—”

I giggle when he pauses. “Your what?”

“My girl.”

I rise to my highest point and kiss him three times on the lips, then we proceed.

He spreads a blanket near a waterfall. I sit down and take off my shoes.

The first day of fall feels like a hot summer day.

Ain’t nothing changed but the name of the season.

With my legs stretched out in front of me while my hands are flat on the blanket by my sides, I turn my head towards the sky, but all I see is a canopy of trees.

“Ah,” I utter.

The breeze is perfect. I open my eyes when I feel Judah’s warmth encase me. And there he is, my man.

I say, “Hi.”

“Hi, sweetheart,” he says.

I open my legs so he sits between them. He closes his legs around me, and I close mine around him.

I kiss his lips softly, seductively and with patience taking my time loving this man down the way he deserves.

And while I may have started the kiss, he takes over, delving deep with his tongue and devouring my mouth.

Every cell in my body rejoices. I feel energized like I’m connected to him in a way I’ve never been before.

His arms tighten around me. I don’t have any cares, no worries, but if I had, they’d melt away right here in his arms.

When he ends the kiss, I smile at him and say, “I love this.”

“Love what, Autumn?”

“This. Being here with you. Loving on you. Being with you, period. I love it.”

“I do, too.”

He tries to hide a smile again. I ask, “What...are...you...up...to?”

“I was just thinking about how different my life is now that I have you. I don’t think you realize how much you’ve changed my life. How much you’ve changed me, so

I'm going to tell you."

"Tell me, baby. I'm all ears."

"You made me realize that I'm the man I always thought I was. You forced me to look inside myself and do things I promised I would never do because of fear. You replaced that with love. I love you."

"I love you, too, Judah."

Our eyes burn and fuse together for seconds that feels like an eternity until we both smile.

He says, "I want you to be my wife."

"What?"

He smiles. "I want you to be my wife, Autumn."

I narrow my eyes and study him. Is he actually asking me or just telling me? I ask, "You do?"

"Yes, I do. I already asked your father for his blessing and now I feel I can properly ask you."

"Judah," I say and gasp.

When he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a ring, I think I stop breathing. "Judah, what are you doing?"

Ignoring my question, he moves to his knees while I'm still sitting on the blanket and

says, “I brought you out here because we both share a love of nature. We also share love, deep love, that I’ve never felt for anyone else nor will I ever feel again.

You are the woman I thought I didn’t need only because I wanted to live this life without love.

Without burdening someone with all my issues and problems. I wanted to be free of influencing someone else’s feelings.

I thought I was being selfless, but I found out quickly that I was being selfish.

I have a lot to give. You’ve already given me so much and I want to love you in return for the rest of our days, no matter how long that might be, so Autumn Pemberton, will you marry me? ”

My eyes are so flooded, I can’t see him clearly. He wants to marry me. This is crazy. It’s happened so fast, and I’m not complaining. I’m just astounded by his three-sixty. To go from a man who didn’t want love to a man who wants to marry me is mind-blowing. I’m grateful. I’m at a loss for words.

“Will you marry me, Autumn?”

“Are you for real?”

“I am. I love you, and I want you to be my wife.”

I wipe my eyes and say, “Yes, Judah! Yes, I will marry you a million times over.”

I’m not thinking about a picnic any longer.

My arms are wrapped so tightly around him, he probably can’t breathe.

I'm marrying this man – the man my dreams are made of.

I have never felt this level of elation in all my days.

Finally, I have my person – the man God wanted me to have, and I'm never letting him go.

Page 31

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

“Man, I cannot believe you’re getting married, Big Dawg. I mean, you were adamant about not dating anybody. Now, look at you.”

“I know,” I say, looking in the mirror, fixing my bowtie.

We’re having what they call a ‘green’ wedding – one where we’re environmentally conscious and more focused on us and nature than on something lavish and showy.

It’s an intimate setting at the North Carolina Arboretum.

With our collective love of nature, there’s no better place for us to get married.

“I’m proud of you for taking the leap.”

“Thanks.”

“Ay, is your pops gon’ make it?”

“Not sure. I haven’t spoken a word to him since he fired me.”

“You still salty about that?”

“I was never upset about it. It’s the fact that he doesn’t understand my life choices. He’s more interested in the way things make him look to be concerned about me.”

“But this is your wedding day, man.”

“I can’t make him come here, Nico. He—”

A tap on the door interrupts us. We both look there when it opens to see the very person we were discussing – Presly Westinghouse – my father.

Nico turns to me and says, “Looks like you don’t have to.”

He leaves, speaks to my father on the way out and then my father closes the door.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi.” I return to fixing my bowtie.

He releases a sigh and says, “I couldn’t believe it when I first heard you were getting married. Then your mother started dress shopping and I knew it had to be real, but even standing here right now, I don’t believe it.”

I don’t respond. I turn to face him, watching him slide his hands into the black slacks he’s wearing. He looks down at the floor as if he can’t face me, and he probably can’t after firing me and continuously going on rants about my life choices.

He says, “I want you to know that I’m proud of you, Judah. I don’t know much about Autumn except for what your mother told me, but she must be one heck of a woman.”

“She is.”

“Listen—I realize some of the things I said to you were just said in a wrong way, but at the end of the day, I only want what’s best for you. I knew the road you were traveling wasn’t for the best.”

“I get that, and I understand that now even when I didn’t then. I get it.”

“So, you know I didn’t mean to fire you.”

I grin and say, “I’m glad you did. It was that and almost losing the woman I love that gave me a wake-up call.”

“Then you don’t mind me being here for your big day?”

“I don’t mind at all, Dad.”

He lets out a rough chuckle then walks over to embrace me. “I love you, son.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

“Alright. Now, let’s get this bowtie fixed. I can’t have my only child walking down the aisle with a crooked tie.”

“Thanks, Dad. I appreciate it.”

“The bride and groom have their own vows they would like to share at this time, and we’ll let the bride go first.”

My eyes are glued to Autumn’s when the minister says that because I wasn’t aware she had vows for me. Judging by that beautiful smile on her face, she didn’t tell me intentionally.

She takes my hands into hers, and then she looks up at me with those captivating brown eyes of hers and says, “Judah, when I used to sit around sometimes and think about a man I wanted to be with for the rest of my life, I thought of you, and I didn’t even know you.”

The crowd releases a soft, “Aw,” but that doesn’t distract Autumn. She keeps going,

saying, “That’s why I fought so hard for us, for you , because I knew you were my one—my only one. I know there’s no other man for me. I want you to know—”

Her voice cracks and nearly destroys me while I stand here watching tears stream down her face.

“I want you to know that I love you no matter what. The good times, the bad times...all of that. I’ll love you through everything because that’s what real love is. It’s true. Unchanging. It’s my heart inside of yours.”

She smiles. Tears steadily fall.

I lean close to her ear and whisper, “You expect me to say my vows after that?”

She laughs through her tears.

I say, “For years, I didn’t think I deserved this.

Happiness. I didn’t think I deserved you, but here you are.

Standing here right now before our family and friends, I can truly say I don’t know where I’d be without you in my life.

I love you more than words, baby. I love you so much that I reconfigured the direction of my entire life for you.

I hope I can make you as happy as you’ve made me.

You’ve awakened my heart. I feel like a new person when I’m with you.

I love you Autumn, and I’ll love you forever. ”

We exchange rings, promise forever to each other again and the minister declares us husband and wife.

He doesn't have to tell me to kiss her. I lean forward, raise Autumn's veil and rest my hand on her face before dipping my head lower, tasting those sweet lips that were part of the beginning that led us here. I'm kissing my forever.

A round of applause ensues along with our special dance and then her dance with her father.

By the way, when he reunited with my father, it was like brothers seeing each other again.

Our mothers also get along pretty well which is a blessing because I've heard of in-law situations going south.

It doesn't appear we'll have that problem.

Nico walks up to me and says, "Man, I'm happy for you. The ceremony was fire. Everything is good. I'm glad I got to have a part in this."

"Of course. Who else would my best man be?"

We slap hands. He walks to the bar and grabs a glass of champagne. I stand here and admire my new wife in her gown, dancing and celebrating with our friends and family. She looks extremely happy. That's how I intend on keeping her.

Page 32

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

We have plans to take a trip away, but with my new position, those plans had to be delayed. And instead of going to a fancy hotel for the weekend, Autumn said she wanted to be home with me, so that's where we are.

Home.

We moved all of her things in last week and she's still working on putting them where she wants them, but there's no rush in that. She can take all the time she wants doing whatever she wants.

"We did it, sweetheart," I say as we go inside.

"We did. Oh, I love this so much, Judah. I'm somebody's wife. Little ol' me..."

"Not just somebody's wife. My wife."

"Yes. Your wife," she says, "And I always will be. Now, take this dress off me and carry me to the bedroom."

"As you wish," I say, unzipping her gown before picking her up and carrying her as she instructed. I lower her to the bed, thinking about how awkward this is for me being that I'm limited in what I can do with her, but it's not like she's not aware of that.

After removing my pants, shirt, vest and bowtie, I join her.

Lie with her.

Be with her.

Yet, I'm trying to grasp the idea of making love to a woman without having the proper tool to do that with. What must she think of me? Of our wedding night? Of—

“Judah.”

“Yes.”

She chuckles. “Do you want me to tell you everything to do?”

“No, but—I don't want this to be weird.”

“It won't be. Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

She moves to straddle me. Her hair falls around her face as she stares down into my eyes.

Then she lowers her face, her hair, her body and kisses me softly the way she always does.

She's graceful with her movements, with her touch.

I close my eyes and connect with every spot on my body that her lips touch.

I feel them on my jaw, down my neck, on my ear and then my neck again. She whispers, “I think you're nervous.”

I open my eyes and look at her. “I'm not. I'm just a bit anxious.”

“You don’t have to be.”

I don’t have to be, but I have good reason to. I push those reasons aside for now and watch her as she kisses me. I feel her lips on my neck again before she moves down to my chest. My heart beats rapidly. I close my eyes and attempt to contain the feeling.

“You smell good,” she says. “I love the way your skin smells. It smells like...comfort.”

Crawling back up to her, we’re breathing the exact same air when she says, “Judah.”

“Yes?” I answer, with my eyes still closed.

“What are you doing?”

My eyes spring open. “I’m enjoying this—enjoying my honeymoon night.”

“Are you sure?”

“Okay. You’ve asked me that one too many times.”

I quickly switch our positions so that she’s lying on the bed. Now, I’m the one hovering over her. Reading her. Watching her lick her lips as she connects her eyes to mine.

I say, “I’m fine. Do you believe me now?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Good,” I tell her, then lower my lips to kiss hers again.

I can't get enough of her lips. Her soft moans.

The way her hands feel on my back. Her eyes are heavy on me when I remove her bra and lower my mouth to her bosom.

She moans and jerks, trying her hardest to contain what shouldn't be contained.

I ravage her softness with my mouth. She's as sweet as candy.

I don't know what came over me, but as soon as I saw her exposed to me, desire surged to my frontal lobe, immersing myself in this ecstasy. The way she moans is music to my ears.

She moves and writhes, releasing sounds I've never heard before. And when I slip my hand past the waistband of her panties to the apex of her thighs, she gasps and frowns like it's completely foreign for her to be touched there. She grabs my wrist to stop me.

I look up at her and say, "Let me."

"But, I don't want you to—"

"Don't worry about me. I'll be just fine," I assure her.

"Judah, I don't want this to be one-sided, so yes, I am worried about you."

"Well, seeing as though I can't perform, my satisfaction will come from seeing pleasure in your eyes. Feeling it in your body. Hearing it in your moans. I'm only concerned about you at the moment. Please."

"Okay."

I continue the exploration of her body, touching her in a way that makes her body vibrate. The warmth, the wetness against my fingers has me groaning, taking deep breaths and salivating.

She's mine, I tell myself.

All mine.

"Mmm...Judah..."

"I like to hear you say my name like that. Say it again."

"Judah..." she says and gasps. Her eyes close.

Her top row of teeth clamps down on her bottom lip.

I move my hand and slip beneath the covers.

Her hips buck off the bed right into my hands while I hold her hostage.

She squirms and moves. Moves and moans. She screams, flooding me with her ocean. I dive, swim and drown in it.

My baby...

"Judah!"

I crawl back up to see her face. To see the beauty of the sensation ravaging her body.

To see her panting and nearly out of breath.

The delight, the torture, the innocence – it's all worthy of taking in and though I'm not physically able to connect with her, this is the next best thing.

I still feel a measure of pleasure, even with my inability to go through the motions.

I sink into the feeling. I'm just as drained as she is.

Maybe it's my connection to her that gives me this internal feeling of elation.

I've never been more in tune with and connected to someone.

Never felt this level of desire burn inside of me.

Staring into her face right now, I feel it.

It's potent. It's magical. This woman is a part of me in ways that she's not even aware of.

"How do you feel?" I ask, but her expression tells me everything I need to know.

"I feel good. How do you feel, Judah?"

"I feel like I'm on top of the world."

"Yeah?"

"Mmm, hmm."

"Do you—you know—feel anything?" she asks, panting.

"I do."

“That must be confusing.”

“It is now that I have to deal with it. Before when I chose to be single, I didn’t need to have these feelings or these conversations.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. It’s fine. I was just stating that. I’m glad you changed my mind about a lot of things, Mrs. Westinghouse.”

A smile blooms on her face like a flower opening after the morning dew. I pull her to my side. She rests her face right up under my chin and slides her leg in between mine.

And we rest, intertwined in each other’s limbs.

Page 33

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

I'm convinced Judah is having some form of a release when he touches me because he cannot keep his hands off me.

Every single time our eyes meet when we're in the car, at home, the store – it doesn't matter.

He's going to grab me and kiss me into oblivion.

He had me held up by the collard greens and coriander at the grocery store yesterday and when we got back in the car, he reclined his seat and summoned me onto his lap.

He loves me relentlessly and without reserve.

I knew he had it in him to love, but I wasn't prepared for the amount he had to give.

I'm not complaining – I'm here for it. For all of it.

It's why I'm late meeting Riley right now.

I know I'm going to hear it when I get there.

I can hardly wait for the tongue-lashing.

When I pull up at the spot, she's standing out front tapping her watch with her index finger. I park quickly, get out of the car, and say, "I'm sorry. I know. I was late. Judah was Judah-ing."

“Ugh...you married people. See, I knew this was gon’ happen.”

“What?” I ask as we walk into the nail salon.

“You’ve been married for an entire month now. A month! This is the first outing we’ve had.”

“Well, I have a whole husband at home now, and I like spending time with him. He’s my...

” I smile trying to think of what he is to me, but he’s so much, I can’t find the proper words.

So, I say, “He’s everything I wanted in a man, so I’m going to be more than a woman for him.

I have to be. I want him to be as happy as he’s made me.

You’ll know the feeling when you get married. ”

“Girl, I ain’t finna get married no time soon.”

“You should. I think marriage would look good on you.”

“Nah, you know what would look good on me?”

“What’s that?”

“Lemme see...something tall and when I say tall, I’m talking your man’s height, but you know me, girl. I need some dark chocolate in my life. And some muscles, tats—the whole bad boy appeal. Yeah, that’s what I’m looking for. Find me him and

then we'll talk marriage."

"You and your requests."

We sit in the pedicure chairs and as a courtesy, receive champagne. I take a sip and pull in a deep, satisfactory breath.

Riley says, "You may want to go easy on the alcohol. You probably done got pregnant by now after being locked up in the house with Judah."

"Hush, girl. I'm not pregnant," I tell her.

"Are you all settled in at his place?"

"I am."

"When am I going to get an invite? I ain't never been over there."

"Judah doesn't like a lot of company."

"Ah—so he thinks he can lock my best friend down and I'm not going to be in the mix?"

A chuckle sprang from my throat. "Riley, will you stop trying to make Judah out to be the bad guy simply because he loves me."

"I love you, too, but I'm not holding you hostage in my apartment."

"Newsflash—you can't hold someone hostage who wants to be held."

She laughs and shakes her head simultaneously.

I say, “Married life is off to a great start. I’m still amazed at how fast everything happened. I’ll have to convince him to have some people over.”

“Wayment ...he don’t even have none of y’alls nature friends over there?”

“Nope. His— our —home is his domain. It’s not to be tainted.”

Riley falls over laughing and says, “Girl, you almost made me spill my champagne.

“It’s your own fault for laughing at everything.”

I take out my phone when the text message sound plays. It’s my husband.

Eek! I crumble, elated to have that thought.

My husband. I love the sound of that.

Come home.

My heart races at the message. Something’s wrong. He’s never texted me like this before. And that’s all it says. Come home .

“Girl, are you okay? Your whole face just—”

“I’ll be right back. I need to step outside for a minute.” I take my feet out the water and slide into those flimsy foam sandals they provide.

I grab my purse and rush to get to the exit while dialing him at the same time. My heart is pounding in my ears. I almost tripped over the rug by the door. Fortunately, I caught myself.

“Hey.”

“Judah, are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, baby. Calm down. Why are you breathing so heavily?”

“You—I’m at the nail salon with…” I huff to catch my breath. “With Riley,” I say in tears. “And I saw your message.”

I wipe the tears from my eyes.

He says, “Autumn, I didn’t mean to scare you, sweetheart. I’m fine. I just wanted you to come home.”

“Why? Are you okay?” I say in full tears.

“I’m fine. Please stop crying. You’re breaking my heart. Listen to me.”

“Okay.”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay,” I say, still in tears. “I love you, Judah.”

“I love you, too.”

“I’m coming home now. Okay.”

“Okay.”

I wipe my face, go back into the salon, and say, “Riley, I have to go.”

“Girl, what happened? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine. I thought something was wrong, but it’s fine.”

“Then sit down and let the lady finish your pedicure at least.”

“No. I have to go.” I lean down to hug her and then say, “I’ll call you later.”

Just as quickly as I came inside, I’m right back out the door, in my car and headed home to Judah.

When I pull up in the driveway, I park, jump out and leave everything inside – purse, phone and all, and run to the door. Twisting the knob, my eyes land on him standing in front of the island as if he’d been standing there waiting for me.

A tear slides from my eye and down my right cheek when I run to him. I jump into his arms, close my legs around his torso, my arms around his neck and cry.

“Baby.”

“I love you, Judah.”

“I know.”

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

“You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Autumn. Look at me.”

I release his neck so I can look into his eyes.

He says, “I’m okay.”

“I can see that now,” I say, smiling through the overflow of emotions that have changed me into this woman – this wife – who simply desires nothing in the world but to be happy, love my family, and love my husband.

Placing my hands on both sides of his face, I hold him firmly and kiss his lips.

He groans.

I kiss him deeper, sucking on his tongue. I need it. I need him. All of him. I only release it to breathe, or more like gasp, and then I go back in again, kissing him with an intensity that has my body shaking. My body shakes even more when I feel his hand sliding beneath my blouse and up my back.

“Mmm, Judah,” I say against his lips. “I love to feel your hands on my body.”

He walks to the bedroom effortlessly, holding all one hundred and fifty pounds of me.

Lowering me to the bed, he pulls my dress over my head, then stands there and uses his fingertips to stroke my curves.

He removes my bra, fiddles with my softness.

I close my eyes, bite my lip and will myself to breathe.

He leans close to my neck. I feel the air from his nose graze my skin. He’s breathing me in. Familiarizing himself with me.

“Judah...” I gasp, my chest moving in and out quickly as I anticipate his next move.

He drops to his knees. I move back until I’m sitting on the bed, trying to move away from him because I wanted to be the one in control tonight.

He doesn't let me – not yet, anyway. He pulls me closer to the edge of the bed, devouring me to his liking.

I'm so gone, so insanely pleased, I think I may have died. Am I still alive?

"Judah," I manage to say in a whimper.

He stands, crawls up over me until his lips touch mine. His fingers are working the most sensitive part of me – massaging and driving me insane. I close my eyes and gasp.

"Don't close your eyes. Look at me," he says.

"How am I supposed to do that, Love?"

"Try."

"I'll tr...tr...try. Mmm, Judah."

"Open them, please."

"Okay, okay, okay," I say desperately. "I will."

I keep my eyes focused on him, watching his pupils dilate as he pleases me. Strokes me. Whispers against my lips that he loves me.

"I love touching you," he says. "I love the air you breathe. I love that you want me as much as I want you, baby. You're the light in my life, Autumn. You're my happiness. My everything."

"Judah!" I writhe, coming to my end after he destroys me. And I stare into his eyes

while moisture comes to mine.

“Ah,” he groans and pants. He moves his hand, finally, and then he kisses me, pushing his tongue deep into my mouth.

I lie here and devour all of him, opening my mouth wide, accepting his strokes, sucking on his tongue and holding him close. Oh, this is the life. This is love.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

I drive to the recreation center, and with a bouquet of flowers, I get out of the car and head inside. When I open the door, I see my baby immediately. She stands and runs over to me as if I didn't slide my tongue down her throat before she left the house this morning.

"Hey, baby," she says, throwing her arms around me.

"Hey. These are for you."

"Aw. Thank you, Judah. They're beautiful."

"You're welcome, sweetheart. Happy one-month anniversary."

She gasps. "It has been a month. That went by so fast."

"They say it always does when you're having fun."

"Amazing."

"You want to know what's even more amazing?" I ask.

"What's that?"

"I've invited your parents and my parents over for dinner this evening."

Her eyes grow big and beautiful. "You did not. You hate having people at the house."

“Yes, but I made an exception this time, sweetheart. For you.”

She sets the vase on her desk then returns to embrace me again. “Thank you.”

“You’re always welcome.”

“Hey, what about the food?”

“It’s all taken care of.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“It should be a good time.”

“It will be.” I kiss her lips and say, “Go ahead and get back to work. I’ll see you later.”

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye, baby.”

“Good evening, Mrs. P.” That’s what I call her mother. Her father told me to call him Fred. He’s getting something out of the car.

“Good evening,” she says as she enters my humble abode. “You have a lovely home. It feels so cozy and inviting.”

“That’s the way I want it. I love my surroundings to give me a sense of calm and peace.”

“Well, you nailed it.”

“Thank you,” I tell her. “What is Fred doing? Does he need help?”

“Oh, no, he’s fine. I baked a cake. I told him to be careful with it.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, make yourself at home. I don’t have a formal dining room, so we’ll sit at the table in the kitchen and the living room is also available.”

“Good. Is Autumn here yet?”

“Yes. She’s changing clothes.”

Fred finally comes inside and says, “Good evening.”

“Good evening, Fred. You can set that cake on the counter right there.”

“Thank you.”

I go outside to see if my parents are on their way and they are, walking down the sidewalk, all smiles.

“You have the gift?” I ask my father.

“Of course. She’s going to be so excited.”

“I know she will be.”

“Aw...I’m so happy for you, son. You look so happy,” Mother says.

“I am. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been.”

Riley pulls up around the same time as Nico. While my parents go inside, I stand in the driveway and wait for them.

Riley gets out first, walks over to me, and says, “Hello tall man who’s making my best friend happy. How are you this evening?”

“I’m good, Riley. How are you?”

“Peachy.”

“By the way, you didn’t tell her you were coming, did you?”

“No. You told me not to say anything and I didn’t. I know how to keep a secret. I’m ready to surprise my girl.”

“Wait, we’re doing a surprise party now?” Nico asks.

Riley looks at him then at me.

I say, “Nah, man—just dinner.”

“Oh. I thought I heard Ms. Lady say something about a surprise.”

“Mrs. Lady ?” Riley’s eyes narrow as she looks at him.

I intervene before things go left and say, “Riley, you remember Nico from the wedding, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“It’s good to see you again,” Nico tells her.

She narrows her eyes and continues inside.

We enter behind her, greeted by our parents' spirited conversation about their back-in-the-day stories. Autumn emerges from the hallway, looks at Riley and screams.

"Riley! Judah, you didn't tell me Riley was going to be here."

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Ahh!" She rushes over and throws her arms around her. "Hey, girl!"

"Hey, boo. I finally made it over here. It looks so nice and feels so cozy. I would never leave this place either. Y'all are on to something. And it smells good up in here, too."

"It sure does," Nico says.

"Hey, Nico," Autumn tells him, then hugs him as well.

"Hey, Autumn. How are you doing?"

"Oh, I'm doing just fine. This one right here," she says grabbing my arm, "He keeps my heart full."

"That's so sweet," Mrs. P. says.

I say, "Since we're all here, Dad, can you pray over the food?"

"I sure will."

We bow our heads.

He says, “Lord, thank you for allowing us to get together as a family to celebrate this special occasion for Judah and Autumn. They are wonderful people who deserve the best that life has to offer. Bless this food to give us nourishment for our bodies and bless this association that we have to be able to come together with family and friends. May love forever live in this home. In Jesus’ name, amen. ”

“Amen,” I say among the others. I’m all set and prepared to fix plates for everyone and when I tell them this, Mrs. P says, “Nonsense. We can get in line and pick up what we want.”

“Yeah, that’ll work,” Autumn says, then flashes a smile at me.

I smile back, walk over to stand behind her and whisper in her ear, “You smell like heaven.”

“No, that’s this food you arranged.”

“No. It’s you. I’d much rather have you than anything up in here.”

She turns around and says discreetly, “Stop making me blush.” Then she rises to her tiptoes and gives me a peck on the lips. “Thank you for the flowers. Every single time I looked at them while I was working today, I thought of you and smiled.”

“Good. That’s what I wanted you to do.”

After we prepare plates, we go to the living room. Our parents are sitting at the dinette. Riley and Nico are still in line talking, or maybe arguing? Depends...

I tell Autumn, “I think our best friends don’t like each other.”

Autumn smirks. “Yeah, for now. They’ll probably end up together. It always starts

like that, doesn't it?"

"With the people hating each other's guts?"

She grins. "Yes."

"We didn't start like that."

"Yes, but that's us, babe. We're built different."

"I still can't believe we're married," I say.

"I pinch myself every morning I wake up next to you," she tells me.

"What are you lovebirds talking about over there?" Fred asks.

"I was just telling your daughter how much I love and adore her."

"Listen to him," Mrs. P says.

They talk amongst themselves for a moment. We take the time to eat this delicious catered food.

Riley says, "So, how's married life been so far, y'all? Asking for a friend."

"It's good," Autumn answers. "Too freakin' good."

"Honey, wait 'til you been married for thirty years," Mrs. P. says. "That man gon' get on your nerves so much..."

"Like y'all women don't be getting on our nerves," Fred says.

They chuckle, then Mother says, “It’s all a part of the process. I mean if you think about it, what’s the alternative? To be out here alone and lonely all your life.”

“I was that way for years,” I say. “And you know what? Looking back, I’m glad I was because if I hadn’t been, I wouldn’t have found the woman of my dreams.”

Blushing, Autumn says, “I’m still going to get on your nerves, though.”

“I’m ready for it, baby. I’ve been waiting my whole life for a woman to get on my nerves.”

Her mother giggles.

My Mother says, “And I’ve been waiting forever for Judah to settle down.”

“I’m just waiting for them grandbabies,” Mrs. P. says.

Mother looks at me. I look away from her.

Autumn hasn’t told anyone about my condition so her mother doesn’t know that we won’t be having children, well, unless we adopt.

Now, my mother knows that her parents don’t know.

It’s not really a big deal, but it is probably something they should know eventually.

After dessert, I stand up and after getting everyone’s attention, I say, “I want to thank you all for sharing this special occasion with us. From the moment I met Autumn, I knew she was different. She spoke to me without saying a word. I could feel her aura when she was around, and whenever she wasn’t near me, I felt emptiness.

It's one of the ways I knew I had to have her.

And so, now that I have you, I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure you're happy. ”

“Thank you, Judah,” she says, embracing me before I get the chance to give her the box in my right pocket. I take it out, hand it to her, and say, “Happy one-month anniversary.”

“Judah, what's this?”

“Open it.”

She pulls the red bow and opens the box to find a Mercedes key. Then she looks up at me and says, “No way.”

“It's outside.”

“Judah, stop. You did not buy me a car.”

I take her hand, head for the door, and step outside. I had the white G-class delivered to me while we were eating and the dealer didn't disappoint. Not only did they get it here on time, but there's a big red bow on it.

She brings her hands to her mouth in disbelief and says, “This is insane.”

“It's yours.”

She embraces me again.

I say, “Go, check it out.”

Riley tugs at her arm and says, “Girl, if you don’t come on here and go check out our car.”

“ Our car?” Autumn says laughing.

My mother and Mrs. P go as well. I stand with the men, watching them all get inside. Riley pulls off the bow and Autumn starts it up, backs out and takes her new whip for a spin.

My father says, “Oh, you done did it now.”

“I know. She deserves it, though.”

“That’s a nice ride, man,” Fred says. “Those jeeps cost ‘bout, what? One hundred.”

“This one was a little over that. I got the upgrade.”

Fred whistles. “My baby girl going to be rolling in style.”

“Yes, she is,” Nico says. “See, that’s how you can tell this man is in love. Ain’t nobody spending that kind of bread on a woman he ain’t in love with.”

Nico pats me on the shoulder and says, “Congrats, brother. You got a good one.”

“Yes, I do.”

Page 35

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

Month two with this man has been even better than month one.

I'm literally floating. He's everything he said he would be – everything I knew he was already.

Since we didn't have a honeymoon, we're taking one now, currently landing in Bora Bora.

We're staying in one of those overwater bungalows.

I've never stayed at a place so elegant.

In fact, the moment I stepped off the plane and felt warm air caress my skin I knew this was going to be one for the books.

Our honeymoon was about to be lit. I was already dreading going back home and our honeymoon hasn't really popped off yet.

“Wow. I can't believe we're here,” I say, turning to my tall, handsome king.

He takes my hand into his, kisses me on the temple, and says, “Me either. It's a late honeymoon, but better late than never.”

“It was certainly worth the wait. That's for sure.”

“You ain't seen nothing yet.”

“Have you been here before?” I ask.

“No. I watched a million videos about it, though. I knew you would like this paradise.”

“Gosh, you know me so well.”

We leave the airport and head to the resort.

And I thought my chin was on the floor before.

This place is paradise! How do exotic places like this exist in the world?

Back home, we see nothing remotely close to this.

Granted we have the mountains and they come with their own majesty, but this – the overwater bungalow, the thatched roof and turquoise water that’s so clear, you can see the fish – oh yeah, this is next level.

“Pinch me, Judah, because I think I’m dreaming.”

He grins. “You’re not. “We’re going to be here for a week, so get ready for rest and relaxation, baby. This is for us. This is us having the time of our lives. This is for us to celebrate our marriage.”

“I love that.”

“You want to know what doesn’t feel real?”

“What’s that?”

He wraps his arms around me from behind and presses his lips to the side of my face. “You. You don’t feel real. The fact that you’re mine is—” I shake my head in disbelief. “That’s what’s throwing me off right now.”

“Well, it’s us now. We said ‘I do’ and now we’re getting to experience each other without the distraction of work and all that.”

“That’s what I want the most.”

“Me, too.”

We walk into the room, admiring the huge king-sized bed that centers the floor. Then we step out onto the private balcony and look out at the water – beauty as far as the eye can see. This is amazing.

“What should we do first?” he asks.

“After everything it took for us to get here, I want to take a shower and find something to eat.”

“You know we walked right past an onsite restaurant on the way over here.”

“Yeah, I saw that. It smelled good, too.”

“Yeah, so tell you what,” he says, taking charge like he always does. “Let’s freshen up, and then we’ll head over there for dinner.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

We hold hands, swinging arms on the short walk to the restaurant. It’s giving upscale, but so is everything else on this beautiful island. Judah is definitely giving me the

princess treatment.

The hostess leads us to a table where we have a good view of the water.

The sun is lowering behind the horizon, forming an array of beautiful colors in the sky.

Beauty really is all around us from the heavens to the earth.

I feel like this is God's gift to me for trailblazing my life to what it is – for giving me love in my heart to pour it into a kind soul who needed it.

Needed me. My payback is love and light. There's nothing greater than that.

“What are you thinking about?” Judah asks.

I connect my eyes to his to see him staring at me inquisitively, waiting to hear what I'm going to say.

I tell him, “I was just thinking about our path here. I'm always thinking about us, though.”

When our server bounces over to the table, we order island specialty cocktails. Judah orders mahi mahi and I get the coconut curry shrimp. I'm up for trying new things and having new experiences here. This will definitely be a first.

The waitress leaves and just as quickly returns with our drinks. They both have those cute little umbrellas and other colorful garnishes. I take a sip and glance up to see Judah holding his phone, taking a picture of me.

“Beautiful. You're as pretty as a picture.”

“Thank you, Judah. And just so you know, you’re the handsomest man I’ve ever met.”

“Handsomest? Is that a word?”

“If it isn’t, it is today!”

“Well, I appreciate that, sweetheart.”

Dinner arrives in record time. I taste the shrimp and not only did it melt in my mouth – it gave me a newfound appreciation for seafood. I taste some of Judah’s mahi mahi. The pineapple glaze set it off. I’m a be five pounds heavier when we leave this place.

After Judah covers the check, he stands, stretches out his hand, and says, “Madam, would you care for an escort back to your bungalow?”

“Nope.”

He quirks up a brow. “No?”

“How about we take a walk on the beach and look at that moon?”

“You sound like Luna.”

I chuckle and say, “I know, and like Luna would say, we shouldn’t waste the opportunity to connect with the moon.”

We both laugh, and then he says, “Then, let’s not waste it, sweetheart.”

I slide out of my sandals, take his hand, and walk across the warm sand. The moonlight glistening on the water is a thing of beauty. My goodness – how is my

brain supposed to handle all this pleasure in one week? It's impossible, but, somehow, I'm going to make it work.

"You know what I was thinking on the flight over here?" he asks me.

"No. What's that?"

"How things in life can change in an instant. My life has been a whirlwind since I met you. It's been a beautiful experience to go from merely existing to actually living. I like this path that we're on."

I turn to him, taking his other hand into mine as we stand in front of each other. "I like it, too, Judah."

On my tiptoes, I stretch to wrap my arms around his neck. He picks me up and I close my legs around him. And then we kiss like we've never kissed before with the moonlight as a backdrop to our love story. This isn't just a honeymoon. This is our forever, no matter how long that may be.

Page 36

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

Monday morning, we awake to a breakfast of fresh fruit, pastries and coffee that's rich enough to make the laziest person alert.

Autumn is still asleep as she should be after the flight, and the way I kept her up last night and on into the early morning hours.

I was tempted to wake her so she could eat, but she looked so serene – so peaceful – that I let her rest. She would need it for the rest of the day's activities.

Later in the morning, we met up with a guide for a private lagoon tour. Neither of us had ever been snorkeling, but my baby had more guts than I did. She dived, saw a variety of fish and stingrays.

After the tour, we grabbed a quick lunch and then it was time for a couple's massage. And while we lay face down, we could see the water and fish beneath us via a glass floor. Absolutely phenomenal.

Dinner was simple as well. Since we'd been eating all day, we grabbed something light and then it was back to the bungalow where we took a bath together in that huge tub in the room.

On Tuesday, I thought it would be fun to rent some scooters and do our own little tour around the island.

We ended up going to Matira Beach – enjoying white sand, the palm trees, clear water, and even the rays of sunlight hit just at the right angles.

Most people say it's the best beach in Bora Bora.

I say everything on this island fits us perfectly.

And nothing beats watching Autumn walking out of the water wearing a two-piece black swimsuit that contrasts with her buttery brown complexion.

At night, we went to a Tahitian cultural show at our resort, witnessing things that I've only seen on travel channels – people playing hand drums, fire dancers and an outdoor feast of local cuisine that we indulged in. Just when I didn't think this day could get any better than the day prior.

On Wednesday, we slept in. We didn't make any plans – didn't want to. I just wanted to enjoy her in the peace and quiet of our bungalow. That's why ordering breakfast in bed was the move. We sat there and ate croissants, eggs, sausage and drank coffee and juice.

"How have you been enjoying things so far?" I asked her.

"Oh, I've been having the time of my life, Judah. If we were to leave today I'd be completely satisfied."

"I feel the same way, but we have today, Thursday and Friday left."

"We're flying back home Saturday morning?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

She smiled. "It's not unfortunate. We're going to make the best of the time we have left. That's what we're going to do."

“Yes, ma’am.”

In the afternoon, we had a photoshoot. The resort arranged it all. We just had to show up. I made sure we were color coordinated before we left. I have on a white shirt and khakis. Autumn is wearing a sleeveless white dress and gold sandals.

“You look beautiful,” I told her.

“So do you,” she said.

“Now, let’s go take these pics.”

On Thursday, we took a kayak in still waters of the turquoise lagoon before sunrise just to be able to have a bomb view from Mount Otemanu. It’s like a dream – like a postcard right in front of your face. The views were completely breathtaking.

Today, Friday, is our last full day here.

We’re having a private dinner on the beach.

It’s just us, a table in the sand and torches nearby.

And it’s strategic where they have the table placed.

It’s on the shoreline so that our feet are brushed with water intermittently while we sit and eat.

I have never experienced anything like it.

“What do you think?” I ask Autumn.

“It’s different.”

“Different in a good way?”

“Definitely. I can’t wait to tell Riley everything we’ve done.”

“You haven’t talked to her since we’ve been here?”

“No. Haven’t texted or anything. I wanted all of my focus to be on you.”

“I appreciate that.”

“What about you? Have you talked to Nico?”

“No, I haven’t. I haven’t talked to my parents either—well, besides texting them to let them know that we made it safely.”

“Yeah, I did that, too.”

The food arrives. We have large plates of different varieties of meats – fish, shrimp, steak, pork.

“Oh my…it all looks so tempting,” she says. “They’re making sure they send us off with a bang.”

“Yes, they are.”

We dive in. The food is so delicious, it takes effort to keep from moaning, but Autumn just goes for it.

She says, “Oh, I don’t want to leave.”

“Here’s the amazing part, Autumn. We’re leaving this place, yes, but that feeling of euphoria, that’s ours and we can take that wherever we go, sweetheart.”

“True.”

“So, eat up, have a good time, and let’s live for the moment.”

“I’m with you one hundred percent.”

Around midnight, we head back to our bungalow. Autumn, in all her glory, passes out on the bed as soon as her face makes contact with the pillow. That gives me time with my thoughts. Lately, I’ve been having plenty of them.

I take a short stroll to the beach. I slip off my sandals, walk across the sand, and then breathe in the fresh air, tilting my face to the sky.

Drops of water splashes in my face as it begins to rain.

I’m grateful. They hide my tears. Being in paradise with my wife has me emotional, especially when I think about my illness.

The unknowns are stressful. It’s detrimental to my health to know the potential damage I can do to her.

Tears drain from my eyes as I fall to my knees, agonizing over it beneath a stormy sky that’s a replica of what I feel on the inside.

I have no control over my life. My fate. It’s all in His hands.

Closing my weary eyes, I say, “Dear God...I don’t ask you for much.

I don't. I know you're aware of my circumstances, and you've shown me much grace, but tonight, I don't come to you for me.

I come to you for my wife. She's special to me—a gift I consider to be straight from you.

And when I'm gone—" I whimper, my lips trembling as I try to get the words out.

I continue, "When I'm gone, she'll have nothing because she loves me so much that she wants no one else but me. And I—I can't leave her anything to remember me by but pictures and memories which I know won't be enough. They just won't be."

I push water away from my face and force myself to breathe, then continue, "I'm not going to be there for her, but I know you'll be because you're the Almighty, and you're a God of love, and I greatly appreciate the love and grace you've shown me over the years, so please hear my prayer and give me this one request. How can I leave the woman I love with nothing?

I beg of you—please give her something. Give her the strength to continue loving me.

Give her love, life and the strength to move ahead in life without me.

Give her memories of us that will last. Give her my heart.

Please, God, please give her something to remember me by.

It's in the name of your Son, Jesus, that I make this request, amen. "

I take a deep breath and hold it in for a long time before releasing the built-up stress and tension into the sky. I feel relief in letting it go, leaving my cares with Him and letting the spirit work on my behalf.

The sky opens.

Rain drenches my soul and refreshes me. It takes my pain away and helps me see the light through this temporary darkness.

I see my way back to the bungalow where I find Autumn on the deck pacing.

She has two phones in her hand – mine and hers.

When she sees me, she sprints in my direction and leaps into my arms, latching on for dear life.

“Autumn,” I say, but it’s of no use. She squeezes me. Her body trembles. “Baby, what’s wrong?”

“I woke up in the middle of the night and you were missing. I was worried sick, Judah.”

“I’m fine,” I tell her, but inside I’m dying a little because this is how she’s suffering at the thought of me going missing.

When I’m actually gone, it will be much worse, no matter how strong she says she is.

She loves me like I’ve never been loved, and the way she’s clinging to me for dear life proves that she will not be okay when I’m gone.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

It's the first workday after we're back from our honeymoon.

We flew home Saturday, spent Sunday resting and today, we have to muster up some strength to prepare for our jobs.

I'm looking forward to getting back into the swing of things – just not this early.

A few days off after our return would've definitely done the trick.

Now, I'm lying here thinking about how to make that happen while yearning for a cup of coffee at the same time.

I stretch and then turn to my left to see Judah's eyes on me. A smile instantly spreads across my face. I should've known he'd be watching me.

“Good morning, Judah.”

“Good morning, Autumn.”

“What are you doing lying here awake?”

“I haven't been able to sleep since this happened.”

“Since what happened?”

He glances down at the covers. My eyes follow his toward the tented covers at his midsection.

“Um, what’s that?”

He grins and says, “What do you think it is?”

“But—but how?”

“I woke up like this. I don’t know how it happened.”

I lift the covers to take a good look at it and hurry up and put the covers back down when the enormity of the situation hits me. He’s—I’m—

I’m speechless.

I’m breathless.

I’m...curious.

“How did that happen?” I ask.

“I don’t know, baby.”

“It’s never happened before?”

“It never happened after my diagnosis. Before, I was fine.”

I lift the covers again and take another gander. My eyes expand, capturing the magnitude of it. I lower the covers again.

Laughing, he asks, “What are you doing?”

“I’m looking at it. I’ve never seen it like that before.”

He moves the covers and says, “There. Is that better?”

I stare down at it and say, “Yeah. That’s a lot better. So, um...you can actually...you know—?”

“It appears that way.”

I never thought something like this could happen, so I never daydreamed about it. Never considered it a possibility because the man I signed up to love wasn’t capable of this. But this morning, somehow, he is.

I look at him and ask, “Do...you...want...to?”

“It’s been a long time, but I’m willing to try. It may be my only chance to ever be that close to you, but only if you want to, Autumn.”

My body seizes at the thought of us connecting in this way. It’s foreign to think that this might actually happen. When he moves and hovers over me, it becomes even more real. Yes, it’s happening.

“Hi,” he says when he settles on top of me.

“Hi,” I say, adjusting to his weight bearing down on top of me.

His eyes are desirous and seeking. He licks his lips, kisses my lips lightly, and whispers, “I’m nervous.”

“Okay, then we’re on the same page.”

He smiles.

I smile, too, hiding my uneasiness a tad because I don't want him to be uncomfortable in any way. That's why when I feel him poking me from below, I bite my lip and close my eyes, bracing myself with grace and anticipation.

"You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Okay."

He kisses me gently, patiently and thoroughly, taking his time with my tongue. He's not in a hurry to do a thing. Yeah, I'm not going to be going to work today, and I'm good with that. This is where I want to be – where I need to be. Loving on my husband.

He traces my jaw with his tongue, marking me as his possession as if I didn't already know that. I know it. I accept it. I love being his.

His hot tongue on my neck does something to my nervous system. The way he whispers his intentions intensifies my desire to have him.

"I'll love you forever and all the days after," he says.

He settles between my legs. I feel the moment his manhood presses against me.

I gasp. The feeling is immeasurable. When he slides inside of me, tears slide out of my eyes. He stretches me with his presence and I involuntarily grab everything he gives me.

Holding strict eye contact with me, he asks, "Are you okay?"

“Yes,” I whisper.

“I love you, Autumn.”

“I love you, too.”

“I want you.”

“You have me, Judah.”

He settles. His chest is pressed to my breasts. I lift my head to meet his mouth. To connect us wholly.

Completely.

Thoroughly.

I lock my arms around him tightly and dine on his tongue with effort, capturing his flavor in my taste buds. I listen to his soft groans and fall into rhythm with his movements. My body pulsates with every inch of him embedded inside of me.

When our lips part, I gather plumes of air into my lungs as my ears feast on his gentle groaning. It does something to electrify me. It stirs me. Enlivens me. He kisses my neck, rolls his tongue along my collarbone. You’d think I was ice cream by the way he’s working his tongue.

He moves, slowly, stimulating my nerve cells and stirring my body in the way he wants me to go. I’m in heaven. This is love at its purest.

When I feel my body seizing under his control, I cave, giving in to his needs.

My entire frame splinters as my body shudders beneath him.

My stomach tenses with his strokes, and I couldn't do anything to stop the intense feeling flowing through my entire nervous system.

The pleasure center in my brain releases chemicals that have me feeling high, and when I'm at the highest of peaks, I hear his groans become wails until he releases.

He fills me with his love and is overcome with emotions.

He lowers his lips to mine and says, "I love you, Autumn."

"I love you, Judah."

Overcome with emotions, I release the tears swelling in my eyes and hold on to him. The heat between us welds us together between these covers. We've always been one, but right now, we're one in the same.

"Judah, talk to me."

He snuffles a little and then says, "I'm good, baby. I'm just taking it all in. This feeling is, uh..."

He sits up and looks at me, then continues, "This wasn't supposed to be possible, but it was.

I don't know if it will ever happen again, but I'm glad it happened.

I'm so sorry I can't be a better man for you, Autumn.

I'm sorry," he says, in tears as he drops his head onto the pillow beneath me,

overwhelmed with emotion.

“It’s okay, Judah,” I say, consoling him as best as I can.

“I want the best for you, baby. I really do. I want you to be happy.”

“Judah, look at me.”

He sits up, using his elbows for support to look at me.

The sight of his teary eyes and weary face has me broken, but I push through the pain and say, “I am happy. You make me happy. Even if this never happens again, Judah. You’re mine, I’m yours and that’s forever, remember?”

I wipe a tear from his face. “I love you. Always. There is no one better. That, I promise you.”

He leans down to kiss me again. With our bodies still connected, he kisses me with feeling and intention.

I return his passion – his love and we keep this feeling, this fire between us.

We make love again until we’re too weak to walk, so thoroughly satisfied, we can’t move.

We breathe, pant, and heave, but we can’t move.

I call in at work to let them know I won’t be there. He calls in, too and afterward, we pass out in each other’s arms.

Page 38

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

I feel how I imagine Luna feels when she looks up at the moon.

High.

As a kite.

On Tuesday, I actually made it to work and in between phone calls, I try to answer all of Riley's text messages zooming across my phone like they have frequent flier miles. I can hardly focus because every two minutes, all I hear is ping, ping, ping, ping!

Autumn : Riley, stop blowing up my phone.

Riley : well, answer my questions, then. I want all the scoop.

Autumn : I'm good. The honeymoon was good.

Riley : So good that you didn't go to work yesterday? Uh huh. When you didn't answer yo phone, I called. They said you didn't come in.

Autumn : stalker

Riley : call it what you want

Autumn : anyway, it was a dream. Bora Bora was amazing. I wish we could've stayed for another week. It was heaven on earth.

Riley : I knew it would be. I was living vicariously through you, watching videos online. *sigh* my turn is coming.

Autumn : yeah, if you would give somebody a chance, maybe...

Riley : yeah, yeah, yeah. Forget all that. Tell me more about your trip.

Autumn : we stayed in this gorgeous overwater bungalow. I mean just being there was so amazing, we didn't have to do anything additional if we didn't want. The water is so clear, you can see the fish swimming. We did a lot...came back exhausted, but our bond is a lot closer.

I don't tell her that our bond is closer, too, because of what happened last night.

Nobody's privy to that information but me and him.

Just thinking about the way we made love gives me chills.

I didn't want to leave the house this morning.

He pinned me up to the wall by the front door and nearly snatched my tongue out of my mouth with his deep kisses. I could've fainted then and there.

Riley : it sounds amazing.

Autumn : it was. Maybe Nico will take you one day. hee hee hee...

Riley : Girl, you almost made me spit out my drink

Autumn : shut up. Ain't nothing wrong with Nico. He's cute, has a good job

Riley : Yeah, but he's always trying to impress me. It seems very pretentious.

Autumn : you're not going to find perfection in anyone.

Riley : you did!

Autumn : I did, didn't I?

I smile at the thought and daydream about what Judah might be doing right now. Perhaps he's taking a morning break, sipping on coffee or conversing with his coworkers. I can't wait to get off work so I can jump right on top of him.

Riley : anyway, get back to work before you get fired. I'll harass you later

Autumn : bye, girl

Riley : bye

I return to work, answering the phone and adding activities to the senior citizen calendar when my mother calls.

I answer, "Hey, Ma."

"Hey, Autumn. How was your trip? I know it was glorious."

"It was, Ma. I have never felt so connected to someone. I mean we were already connected. It's just that having him alone without any distractions was top tier.

I think we need to do trips more often, you know.

And it doesn't have to be overseas. It can be in a mountain cabin or somewhere by a

lake. ”

“You’re right. I remember when me and your Dad used to travel like that. Now, we sit around the house and try to predict the outcome of movies.”

I chuckle. “There are plenty of places you can travel without having to jump on a plane and go halfway around the world. Have you ever been to Lake Junaluska?”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s close. Look it up, Ma. I have someone at the desk, so I have to go. I’ll call you back later.”

“Okay, dear. Bye.”

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

I leave the conference room in the middle of a meeting because I'm feeling a little claustrophobic.

It's the day after going on a lovemaking marathon with Autumn, and perhaps I need to replenish my body with nutrients.

It's been so long since my body has felt those sensations, and perhaps it needs time to readjust. I draw in a long breath, pulling air into my lungs and pushing it out audibly.

This deep breathing technique always helps me relax.

"Ay, you good, man?" Bryant asks.

"Yeah. I'm good. I just—just needed some fresh air."

"I know things can get a little intense in those meetings, but they hate it when you walk out."

"It wasn't the meeting."

"Oh. Um...do you need some water or something?"

"Nah, man. I'm good, but thanks. I'll be back in there in a moment."

I take a seat on a bench and rest my elbows on my knees.

It's been a long time since I felt like this.

Like I'm too tired to think or focus. I don't want to continue working – don't think that I can.

I get in my car and head home. I see my father standing in his yard when I pull up in mine.

I get out and walk over. He's trimming the grass around the sidewalk.

He could easily hire someone to do this maintenance for him, but he prefers to do it himself.

He takes pride in being able to take care of his home and run a successful business at the same time. He does it all.

"Hey, Dad."

He rolls his wrist to look at his watch. "Hey. You're home early ain't ya?"

"I am. I left early today. I wasn't really feeling it."

"Everything okay?" he asks, pulling his goggles from his eyes and resting them on top of his head.

"Yes. Everything is fine. I think I'm more exhausted than anything else."

"Coming back from your honeymoon will do that. Probably got a little jetlag, too."

"Yeah, maybe that's it," I say, but deep down, I know it's something more than that. I can feel something's off with my body and I know I'll have to see a doctor soon.

"Do you think it's something more?" he asks.

“No. I think you’re right. I’m tired. Autumn thinks we probably should’ve taken some time off work after the vacation, too. I’m starting to agree with her.”

“Then, take all the time you need, as long as the company allows you to.”

“I’ll be alright. I’m going to take a shower and catch a quick nap before Autumn gets off work. I’ll see you.”

“Alright, son.”

Page 40

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

It's early December. The temperature hovers around the fifties, but that doesn't stop us from being outside.

I've been cuffed up with Judah for so long, I forgot how it felt to be with the rest of the gang.

This evening, we meet at Lake Julian with blankets spread out on the ground.

A few leaves flutter around us. We've eaten food that we brought to share with each other.

I don't eat much because my stomach has been uneasy for the last few weeks.

Tabitha brought her boyfriend along and, like everyone else who joins the group, he fits right in. Luna is still being herself, sitting on the ground with her eyes closed and her arms stretched up toward the sky.

I look around for Judah. He's not sitting where he was before. He's standing at the water's edge, staring out into the lake. I get up and walk over to him.

"Hey."

He turns around, looks at me, and says, "Hey, sweetheart."

I reach for his hand, grasp it, and ask, "Why are you always sneaking off?"

I ask a question that I already know the answer to.

Judah likes to think deeply and reflect on life.

Sometimes, I wake up in the middle of the night to find him staring at me, sitting on the sofa staring at the blank TV screen, or even on the patio staring up at the sky.

He prays a lot. Silently. I don't hear him, but I know the look.

"I was just thinking about some things. Do you feel better?"

"I feel a little better. I ate some of Moriah's potato salad. It was delicious. Did you get a chance to eat anything?"

"Not yet. I'll grab something in a moment."

He wraps his arms around me and lowers his mouth to mine, kissing me beneath the stars and then whispering in my ear, "I love you, girl."

"Love you too, babe. Now, come on back over here and hang out with us."

"Okay, sweetheart."

At home, I watch him closely. Upon arrival, he takes off his shoes and goes straight to the bedroom. He sits on the bed, hangs his head and then rubs his eyes. From there, he walks into the bathroom and turns on the shower. I glance at my watch. It's 10:38.

He doesn't come out until 11:32 – almost a full hour later. It doesn't take anyone that long to take a shower. I'm sitting in the living room watching the news while anticipating what he's going to do next. Will he join me? Is he going straight to bed?

I get my answer when he steps into the kitchen, opens the fridge then asks, "Do you need anything out of here?"

“No. I’m good.”

He walks into the living room, sits beside me, and then leans close, planting a kiss on my cheek. He says, “We need to talk about something.”

“Okay,” I say, powering the TV off. “What’s up?”

“I know the reason you’ve been sick, and I’m wondering why you haven’t told me yet.”

Confusion clouds my expression. I say, “Judah, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He says, “Autumn, do you really not know?”

“Do I not—okay, timeout,” I say with a racing heart. “Tell me what you’re talking about because I’m completely in the dark here.”

He gets up, goes into the bedroom, and comes out with a bag, handing it to me. I open it to see that there’s a pregnancy test inside.

“Judah, why are you giving me this?”

“You need to take it.”

I grin uncomfortably and say, “No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. You’re pregnant, Autumn.”

I laugh it off, still thinking this is somehow a joke, and say, “Judah, what are you—I’m not pregnant.”

“You are,” he says, his tone even. Face serious. “And it all makes sense now.” He smiles softly, takes my hand into his and explains, “When we were on our honeymoon, I went out to the beach. Remember when you couldn’t find me?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“I was on the beach. It was raining. I was upset. I was praying. I asked God to leave you with something to remember me by when I’m gone.”

“Judah—”

“Wait...listen. I begged God to leave you with something so you’ll have a piece of me when I’m gone.

A few days later, we made love for the first time, something I haven’t been able to do for years.

A month after that, you started feeling sick.

It’s been three weeks, Autumn, and you’re still complaining about feeling queasy.

You’re pregnant. It’s our miracle baby.”

I blink the tears from my eyes and say, “Do you really think I’m pregnant?”

“I do, but we’ll know for sure when you take this.”

He hands me the box. “Okay. I’m a go take it.”

“Alright.”

I go to the bathroom and read the directions. I've never done this before. It can't be as simple as peeing on a stick, can it? But it is.

"Okay, Autumn. Easy enough. You can do this," I say quietly.

I take a breath and wheedle my way through it.

The hardest part about all of it is learning that Judah prayed to God to leave me something in his absence.

Why is he so certain that he's going to leave me?

It breaks my heart for him to think that way.

Granted, I know what I signed up for. I knew it was a possibility and I convinced him to let me love him, anyway.

But he's fine. We're fine. Our lives together are what people dream of.

We're good people. Surely, we'll be okay.

But first things first. I have to pee on this stick.

I unwrap the wand and follow the instructions. Then I wait.

The waiting seems more like hours instead of minutes, but I wait.

And while I wait, I ask myself even more questions – what if I am pregnant?

Is it a girl or a boy? Do I know how to be a mother?

Will I have to do this alone? Will Judah see his child grow up?

Will he be there? For the long haul? For all the important milestones? Graduation? Marriage?

I take a breath.

Times up.

I turn around to look at the stick as it rests on the vanity.

PREGNANT.

Judah was right. I shouldn't have doubted him. He's always operated on a high level of intelligence and awareness. He knew something I didn't realize about my own body. I'm growing a life. A little human.

Our little human.

In tears, I open the door to leave the bathroom. He's standing right there behind the door with tears running down his face.

I sink into his embrace and we hold each other and just cry for a moment. Words don't need to be spoken. We just need each other in this delicate moment.

After five minutes or so of this silence, he kisses the top of my head and asks, "Are you okay?"

I pull back to look up at him and that's when I see the biggest smile on his teary, handsome face.

His prayers were answered. He left me a piece of him.

And as I look at him in awe, I think to myself what I've always thought about his fear of death – we never know when we're going to die and that's just the honest truth.

We just need to live every moment as if tomorrow was that day.

This news only reinforces that within me – to love him harder, kiss him longer and hold on for dear life.

“Yes, I'm okay. We have a reason to celebrate. This is wonderful, Judah. We have to tell your parents. We have to tell my parents!” I grab his hand and say, “Come on. Let's go.”

“Where are we going, sweetheart?”

“To your parents' house.”

“Baby, I'm not dressed.”

I look him up and down. He has on a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt.

I say, “You're fine. We're just taking a few steps down the street. Slide into those house slippers.”

“Autumn, my parents are probably in bed.”

“They'll wake up. Come on. Let's go.”

We rush out the front door and speed-walk to his parents' house. My heart is racing, but I'm elated. Judah looks just as happy as I am.

I push the doorbell. It's after midnight. It is a little crazy to be showing up at somebody's house after midnight, but it is what it is. They need to know this and there's no way I can wait until the morning to share this news with them.

I push the doorbell a few more times, and when the porch light comes on, my excitement increases. Presly opens the door rubbing his eyes and I see Adrienne behind him looking skeptically as she ties on her robe.

"Autumn, Judah—what are you doing here?" he asks. "Do y'all know what time it is?" he asks as he opens the door for us to enter.

"I'm so sorry," I tell them. "It's my fault, Presly. I dragged Judah over here."

"Is everything okay?" Adrienne asks. "You look like you've been crying. You both do."

"Yes. We have some good news to tell you both."

"What's that?"

I look at Judah, giving him the honor of telling them the news. He says, "We're pregnant."

Adrienne's eyes grow big as she looks at my flat stomach. "Oh my God!" she says, closing me in a bear hug.

"Congratulations, son."

"Have you been to the doctor?" Adrienne asks.

"No. I just took the test."

“Well, first thing in the morning, we have to get you to a doctor to make sure everything is in order. How far along do you think you are? When did this happen? How did this happen?” she asks, firing off question after question.

“Yeah,” Presly says. “I thought you couldn’t—you know...”

“I thought I couldn’t either,” Judah answers, “But God had other plans.”

“Yes!” Adrienne says. “We’re going to get you to the doctor and everything will be just fine. Oh my—this is the best news ever! How far along do you think you are, my dear?”

“I would guess about four weeks.”

“Wow. A grandbaby,” she says. “But your stomach is so flat. Are you sure there’s something in there?”

“I’m sure, and judging by the size of your son, it’s gon’ be a big baby.”

Judah smiles. “You’re welcome.”

I laugh until tears well up in my eyes.

Presly says, “Judah, let me holla at you for a minute.”

“Okay.”

They walk away and I’m left alone with Adrienne who’s steadily suffocating me with hugs.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

As soon as we step outside, Dad says, “Remember that day you signed off early from work and came by the house?”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“I feel like you were trying to tell me something without telling me something.”

“No. It was—”

“You’re having a child, son,” he interrupts me to say. “I would’ve expected you to be more excited than this, especially with all the struggles you’ve been having lately. So, level with me. What’s really going on?”

I grimace and cross my arms, seemingly making myself breathe although it’s supposed to be voluntary. I promised myself that I wouldn’t tell anyone this, but he’s my Dad and I—I have to keep it a hundred with him.

I say, “Dad, if I tell you this, you cannot tell a soul—not even Mom. If you don’t think you can handle that, let me know right now.”

“I can handle it. Now, tell me, what’s going on?”

“The cancer is out of remission.”

He releases a defeated sigh and drops his head. All he can do is shake it from side-to-side, “No.”

“Yes.”

“What did the doctor say? What’s the prognosis?”

“He says I have about four to six months, if that.”

“No. No. No. This can’t be.”

“Dad—”

“It can’t be, Judah. You’re having a child for goodness sake!”

“Dad, please keep your voice down.”

“What about—what about treatment?”

“The tumor is more aggressive than it was before. According to the doctor, this type of recurrence is more resistant to treatment. The headaches have returned. I can’t focus at work, so I’m going to have to give that up. I get dizzy when I drive so I haven’t been doing much of that either.”

“But you can’t just not do anything. You have to fight.”

“And do what, Dad? Have my wife watch me suffer through those treatments? You remember how they were. I was sick as a dog every single day. The vomiting, the headaches...I was nearly immobile. Why would I go through all of that again when the doctor is telling me my chances of survival are less than ten percent?”

“Then get a second opinion.”

“I’ve already got a second and third opinion. They’re all telling me the same thing.”

“And you’re keeping all of this from Autumn?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s pregnant. I don’t want her worrying about me. Even if she wasn’t pregnant, I don’t want her to worry.”

My father pinches a tear from his right eye and says, “She knows what she signed up for, son. You shouldn’t keep this from her.”

“I don’t want people grieving over me while I’m alive. I want them to see me living. Thriving. Loving on my family.”

“And what about when your health starts declining? You won’t be able to hide it then.”

“I guess I’ll have to cross that bridge when I get to it. For now, I’m not at the bridge. I feel fine.”

Dad shakes his head and walks over to me. He throws his arms around me and pulls me into his embrace. “You’re my one and only. My God...” he says as he breaks down. “I want you to know that I’m sorry.”

“Sorry for what, Dad? This isn’t your fault.”

“Somehow, I feel like it is,” he says, wiping his eyes again. “I feel like there is something I could’ve done to prevent this from happening.”

“There isn’t anything you or anyone else could’ve done. It’s the hand I was dealt. I’m

going to play it 'til the end.”

“I love you, son.”

“I love you, too, Dad.”

He dries his eyes before we head back inside. I kiss my mother on the temple and then I take my wife by the hand and walk back home with a heaviness in my chest.

Page 42

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

Riley screamed for like five minutes straight when I told her I was expecting.

My mother was so happy, she cried tears of joy.

And it wasn't just a simple cry. No, she was straight up whimpering, sobbing and overcome with excitement.

My father was happy, too, but he tried to hide it.

Since finding out it's a boy, Adrienne, Riley and my mother have been going nuts, buying loads of baby clothes.

I have so many onesies, my baby won't be able to wear them all.

At five months I finally started showing. Judah can't keep his hands off my stomach. He has a habit of talking to the little boy that we've decided we would name after him.

Little baby Judah.

At six months , I have an actual baby belly, and I'm loving pregnancy.

Women usually complain about it and maybe I'll have some complaints when our baby boy gets bigger, but for now, I'm beyond elated that I get to be a mother to Judah's son – a man I love deeply, wholly and to the depths of the earth.

I can already see how my pregnancy has changed Judah.

He's more relaxed and mellow. Lately, he's been more of a homebody.

He always was, but now, he doesn't hang with the crew all that much.

Doesn't really talk to Nico, either. And I can't remember the last time we went on a hike or did anything outdoorsy.

We're usually home with regular visits from Presly, Adrienne and my parents.

That's our little village. They'll play important roles in making sure our bundle grows up to be a successful man.

But back to Judah, he's different. It's difficult to describe because so much has changed in our lives, and a baby definitely changes the dynamic of a relationship, especially for a man who didn't think he could have children.

I suppose he's getting into daddy mode. He's going to be awesome at this.

Tonight, he wanted to watch a movie. Yeah, he's been into TV lately which is fine by me. Curling up on the sofa with popcorn and ice cream for a pregnant woman is bliss.

Adding my husband to the mix and it's heaven on earth.

"Hey, you need some help in there?" I ask. He's in the kitchen making popcorn on the stove since it tastes better than the microwave version.

"I got it, sweetheart. I just want you to relax."

After I don't hear anymore kernels popping, he says, "Here we go."

He places a big white plastic bowl on the table and sitting next to me, he plants a kiss

on my cheek.

I say, “Thank you, babe. I appreciate you so much, and so does baby Judah.”

He raises my shirt and kisses my belly, then he asks, “Did you find a movie?”

“Are you asking me or Junior?”

He chuckles.

I say, “No, I didn’t see anything.”

He picks up the remote and searches through movie apps. Then he turns the TV off completely. He couldn’t find anything either.

“How about we just talk and enjoy each other’s company?”

“You know I’m always down for that.”

He places the bowl on my lap and then he sits on the floor next to my feet, lifts one and massages. Oh, it feels so good.

“While we have this time, I wish to talk to you about something.”

“Oooh...you wish to talk to me?” I say, amused. “What do you wish to talk to me about, Judah?” I ask, trying to keep the mood light, but the look on his face tells me he’s going deep.

He says, “I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy—”

“I mean, even when I’m gone, I want you to be happy.”

“Judah—”

“No, listen to me, Autumn. I’m not trying to upset you, so please don’t be upset. I just want you to know that it’s okay to move on. You deserve happiness. You deserve everything.”

“Why do you do this?” I ask. “We’ll be having a good time and you have to throw something like this in. You don’t have to say things like this, Judah. We’re good. Everything is good. Life is good. We’re having a baby. Stop worrying.”

“I don’t think this is worrying. This is something many couples talk about. I mean, if something happened to you right now, would you want me to be alone?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love you and you’re too good of a man to be alone and lonely. You deserve the best. You deserve all life has to offer.”

“Now, multiply that times a thousand. That’s what I carry for you.”

I stare down at him. That’s all I can do at the moment. I’m left speechless and in awe at the same time.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

Listening to my baby's heartbeat is at the top of the list of my life's greatest pleasures. The first is meeting his mother. Kissing her. Loving her. Just the fact that I know her still gives me chills. I've been blessed far beyond my wildest imagination.

"Judah, baby."

I hear Autumn's voice gracing my ears. I open my eyes and see her face surrounded by the brightness of the sun.

She looks like an angel. The baby shower is today, at my parent's place.

They've been planning it for the last month, making sure everything is perfect.

My mother even went so far as to hire a party planner.

"You look beautiful, sweetheart."

"Thank you."

"What time is it?" I ask. I want to stretch but I'm sore all over and tired.

"It's time for you to get up, babe. The baby shower starts at one."

I rub my eyes and look at the nightstand to check the actual time.

It's noon. Noon already? That catches me by surprise.

I'm usually up earlier, but lately I've been depleted of energy.

I'm weak, but she'd never know it. I did what I told my father I would do – pretend I was okay, but today, it's getting the best of me.

I stretch, and it takes everything I have just to do that, then I say, "Okay. Let me get ready. Is there anything special you'd like me to wear?"

"No. Just be comfy. I know there will be games. Your mom went all-out for this baby shower."

"She did." A yawn comes. I say, "Okay, sweetie. Let me get up and get dressed. Hey, why don't you head on over? I'll meet you over there."

"Okay," she says, then places a kiss on my lips.

"I love you, Autumn."

"Love you, too, babe. See you in a minute," she says then leaves the bedroom. "Don't be late," she says right before she exits the front door.

I place a hand on my chest. I've been throwing up for the last three days.

And my head is killing me. It hurts so bad, I can hardly open my eyes.

I rush to the bathroom, feeling weaker than I've felt since finding out I was out of remission.

I heave over the toilet, emptying my stomach of fluid.

Then I fall back on the floor and stare up at the fluorescent lights beaming down at

me.

I can hardly breathe. I feel like I'm suffocating.

In this moment, I'm thankful that even though I won't get to live a full life, I've lived a full one. And I'm thankful...

I'm thankful that I took the time a few weeks ago to write letters to my wife and son. One day he'll read it and know who I am. He'll know how much he was loved.

I'm thankful I had the insight to get all of my affairs in order. I left a will that detailed everything how I wanted. I don't want a funeral. I never liked those. I only want a celebration of life.

I'm thankful that I'm on good terms with my father. It was a tough road for us for a while there, but we made it.

I'm thankful that my mother has my father for support because she'll need him.

I'm thankful that even though it was for a short while, I got to experience real love with Autumn. I'm thankful to God for letting me live this long and experience that love. I'll always have it with me. It will always be a part of me. Autumn and Judah will always be mine.

But, for now, it's goodbye.

My breaths grow increasingly shallow. My arms and legs twitch. My eyes open and close slowly. I don't try to fight it – don't try to keep them open. I just wish I could see her face one last time.

My Autumn. My baby.

I take another breath. I hear myself moan as my body shuts down.

Another breath comes.

Then another.

And another.

And then...

“Judah!” Autumn screams. I don’t see her. I hear her. My eyes are closed and though she’s holding my head and screaming for me, I can’t open my eyes. I have no control to do so.

“Judah...no, no, no. Wake up,” she says in tears.

I hear her screaming for help, and then I feel her back at my side again.

“Judah,” she says, caressing my head like she’s holding our baby. “Judah, help is on the way. Stay with me, baby.”

She brings her face to mine and says, “I love you so much, Judah. Please don’t leave me.”

My breaths are becoming faster. I still haven’t managed to open my eyes. I’m trying. I need to see her. Need to see her one last time.

“I love you, Judah,” she says.

I feel a tear from her eyes splash onto my face.

More shallow breaths come, but they've slowed.

My eyes open.

I see her. I'm too weak to smile, but I hope she knows that's exactly what I'm doing.

My last breath comes. I exhale, close my eyes and tranquility encompasses me. I don't feel any more pain. No more worry about dying. No more vomiting. No more torture. I don't feel anything now. I can finally rest.

In peace.

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

My heart is broken.

Fragmented.

Crushed.

The love of my life is gone, yet I take solace in the fact that a part of him is growing inside of me. Still, I feel like I'm short of breath at times as I struggle to accept reality. I knew what I signed up for. I accepted it.

Does it make it any easier?

Not at all. I feel like I've died, too. A part of me is gone.

"Autumn," Riley says, sitting on the bed next to me.

I'm at her place. I haven't been home since Judah died. It's been a month and my tears have yet to dry up.

"Autumn, I brought you some soup."

I don't want to eat, but I know I have to for my baby. I sit up slowly. Tears roll out of my eyes involuntarily.

"I'm worried about you," Riley says. "The whole family is. Your phone has been buzzing nonstop. His parents, your parents, y'all's friends...I know it hurts, Autumn, but these people are in your corner. They want to comfort you. They need to know

that you're okay."

"That's the thing," I say, wiping my eyes. My voice is hoarse and low. "I'm not okay, Riley."

"And that's fine, too. Tell them that. You don't have to try and hide what you're feeling. You're not grieving alone. They're grieving, too."

I sniffle. "It's been four weeks. It feels like it just happened yesterday." I wipe the tears that have streaked down my face and continue, "I don't know what to say to anyone."

"Say what you feel."

I stir the soup and say, "I feel lost. Who am I supposed to be without Judah?"

"You'll be you. You're the mother of his son. Little baby Judah, and right now, I can tell you that baby is hungry, so eat, mama. You're not supposed to lose weight during pregnancy. You've lost five pounds."

I sniffle again. "I don't want anything to happen to my baby."

Riley takes the soup bowl from my shaky hands and says, "I know you're going through it. I know. I don't know how it feels, but I have an idea. All I ask is that you try to wake up every day and be thankful for the time you got to spend with him and the gift he's given you."

She takes my hand, places it on my stomach, and says, "He's given you that little boy, and that little boy needs nutrients to grow." She takes a Kleenex, wipes the tears from my face, and says, "Now, eat."

“Okay.”

I take one spoonful. It feels like a huge step, but the more I eat, the more my baby wants. So I eat. I eat to nourish my body so I can get through the grieving process. I eat so my baby grows healthy and strong. In about three weeks, he’ll be here.

“You made this soup?” I ask Riley.

“Sure did. Don’t sleep on my skills. I may not know how to do a lot of things in the kitchen, but ya girl gon’ make a soup every time.”

I giggle and continue eating. I say, “I knew this was a possibility, Riley. I knew Judah had cancer, yet I wanted to love him, anyway.”

“You did.”

“I have no regrets,” I tell her, because I don’t. If I could do it all over again, I’d choose Judah every time. The short time I had with him was the best I’ve ever had.

I continue, “I’ll never regret my decision to be with him. I’m just sad.”

“Are you sad to the point where you think you need to see a doctor or talk to a professional?”

“No. I think I can handle it.”

“I think you can, too, Autumn, but only if you lean on the family for support. Don’t shut them out.”

“You’re right. I think I should try to go home tomorrow, and before you ask, no, I’m not ready for it, but it has to be done, right? It’s our home. I’ll feel more connected to

him there.”

“I mean, I’m down to come with you.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“Autumn, you haven’t been there in a month. It’s going to be difficult.”

“I know. A lot of things in my life will be difficult for the foreseeable future, but I have to get through them for my baby’s sake.”

“Well, you know I’m down to support you in everything, so if you get there and you need me to come stay with you or anything, just call me.”

“I appreciate that, Riley. Thank you. I honestly don’t know how I would get through this without you.”

“Of course. You’re my best friend. I wouldn’t dare let you go through this alone. I love you, girl.”

“I love you, too.”

“And I love you too, little peanut,” she says, placing a hand on my stomach. Then she embraces me and tells me that she won’t let me leave the house until I’ve eaten all of the soup.

Page 45

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

Riley offered to drop me off and walk with me inside, but some journeys in life, you have to take alone. Going back home after the ordeal I went through is hard, but I feel I must do it for myself.

I park in the driveway behind Judah's car that still sits there like he's here, inside waiting for me when I know he's not.

"You can do this, Autumn. No, we can do this," I say, placing my right hand on my stomach. "You ready, Judah?"

I feel him move. I smile and say, "I'll take that as a yes."

He's ready.

I'm ready.

I get out of my car and waddle to the front porch steps. If my mother knew I was doing this alone, she'd whip my butt, so it's a good thing she doesn't know. Perhaps Judah's parents saw me pull in the driveway. I'm not sure, but I'm not concerned about that at the moment. I'm focused.

I open the door, immediately feeling him – feels like he's here.

He is here. This is our home. This place was my husband's sanctuary.

Taking slow steps inside, I take off my shoes and stand here, looking around.

I pull in the scent that reminds me of us – of happier times.

I envision him standing behind the counter in the kitchen the many nights he stood right there and drank water while watching me.

I think about the many times we sat on this sofa and enjoyed each other without the TV for entertainment. It was just us.

With weak, wobbly legs, I walk further inside and touch the sofa, feeling warmth spread all over me.

I take quiet steps down the hallway to the nursery.

Stuff I ordered to fix it up is still in boxes on the floor.

Judah had started putting the crib together a few weeks before he passed.

I never thought he'd finish it. He was taking so long.

Now, I know why. He was sick. He hid it from me.

He didn't want me to worry. The cancer had returned, but it was ultimately a seizure that took his life.

I step into our bedroom. The sight of his slippers next to the bed brings me sadness and comfort. I walk there, sit down, and slide my feet into them. I grin and say, "Daddy had some big feet, Junior. You'll probably have his big feet, too."

I take a breath, fight back tears, and look at his nightstand. His phone is sitting here. I pick it up to turn it on, but the battery is dead. I put it on the charger, anxious to see the selfies of us once it charges.

Pulling open the top drawer of his nightstand, I see his things – cologne, miscellaneous papers and a notebook.

I take it out and open it, hoping to see his handwriting, but as I flip through, all I see are blank pages.

I sigh deeply, place it back, and rub my stomach.

I close the drawer and pick up his watch.

I hold it in front of my nose. Oh, it smells like him.

I take greedy breaths of it and close my eyes.

“I miss you so much, Judah.”

I set it back on the nightstand and then pull open the bottom drawer.

There, I see an orange envelope – those letter-sized ones people use to mail important documents.

I take it out and open the metal clasps that have it fastened together.

When I unfasten it, I see papers – ones from the notebook.

My eyes fill with tears when I see his handwriting.

Letter to my son, to be given to him on his eighth birthday.

“Oh my God,” I say, covering my mouth. He wrote Junior a letter. Even in death, he’s selfless.

Judah, my son – my only child. Let me first start off by saying that I love you and that I'm sorry I can't tell you that in person, but life is funny that way.

It's good to some, bad to others. That's why we must live it to the fullest because we never know what will come from one day to the next.

I didn't fully realize that until I met your mother.

I'll have to go back in time to explain.

When I was in college, I found out I had cancer.

I went through the treatments. At the time, the doctors didn't think I would survive it, but it went into remission, and I lived a somewhat normal life.

I graduated college. I surrounded myself with friends.

I worked at my parents' grocery store. I did this for years.

I was living, coasting along, waiting for the next bad thing to happen instead of creating a life for myself.

My father chastised me constantly about living my life this way, but I persisted.

I was angry at the world, at life, at everything—though I hid it behind a pleasant demeanor.

I was charitable. Polite. I was a true gentleman, yet, internally, my world was crumbling.

My fiancée left me. That took a toll on me.

I didn't strive for anything. I was just okay with doing just enough.

And then I met your mother.

She was coming out of an ice cream shop when she dropped hers.

Remember how polite I said I was? Yeah, I gave her mine.

She tried to refuse it, but I wouldn't let her.

Then after she accepted it, I went on to my car, but instead of leaving, I sat there looking at her.

I started the car, turned up the AC and just sat there.

It was something about her that struck me instantly.

She was beautiful – still is, but that wasn't it.

It was something intangible, yet, something about her touched me.

It was invisible. Otherworldly. It was something I had never experienced.

And it scared me.

I knew I had to leave right away.

I shifted the car into gear and that's when I saw her standing next to my car, tapping her knuckles on my window. It confirmed everything I felt.

Everything.

That night, she met me at a bonfire in the woods along with a bunch of my other friends.

I introduced her to my friends – who are now your family, by the way, and after that introduction, I walked away from her only so I could watch her and try to figure out why my soul was calling out for hers.

It was something, son. I can't even describe it.

Keep that in mind in twenty-five years when you're looking for a wife.

If her soul ain't speaking to yours, she ain't the one.

I knew she was the one that night, but I also knew I came with a lot of baggage and she was so perfect.

She radiated inner and outer beauty. When she looked at me, it was like she was seeing right through me.

She knew my inner workings. She understood my angst and she had what it took to make me fight against them.

That's why initially I told her we couldn't be together, but she persisted.

I'm glad she did because I fell in love with her and I still am, even as I'm in a lot of physical pain writing this letter to you.

Your mother loved me when I didn't have the courage to love myself.

She jolted me back to life – made me realize that no matter the circumstances, life is always worth living and everyone deserves love.

Is it easy? No. I can attest to that firsthand, especially with the guilt I feel for leaving your mother to raise you alone.

I wanted to be there for your first steps, first words, first birthday, graduations, but I'm going to miss it all.

Here's what I want you to know more than anything – I love you and I love your mother very much.

She gave me you. She woke something up inside of me.

She made the last year of my life the very best I ever had.

I need you to be a man for her. Love your mother.

Honor her. Protect her just like I did. Give her hugs.

Do good in school. Make us proud. You'll do big things in life. I'm certain of it.

Love, Dad.

There's another letter addressed to me. I take a breath before I read it, wipe my eyes, and breathe methodically to slow my pounding heartbeats that are jolting me like baby Judah's kicks.

To The Love of My Life,

Autumn, baby, where do I begin? It's because of you that I know what real love is.

Many people fear they will never experience it before they die, but I was one of the fortunate ones who did.

You were it – my one and only true love.

Your love, your light, your loyalty will always live within me and mine will always live within you.

It's something only you and I shared for a short time, but it felt like an eternity because it was good, quality time.

I savored every moment with you. Every kiss. Every touch. Every hug.

From the moment we met, you changed me. Energized me. You made me eat my words. Made me want something I told myself I couldn't have. It speaks to your power. Your love. Your unselfishness. I'm passing that along to you.

In case you didn't know this, every time I laid eyes on you, I felt elation overtake me. Happiness filled my life daily. I smiled internally even if I wasn't smiling externally. Only you could do that to me.

Only you, my love.

Only you.

Your love for me is indefinite, forever embedded in your heart. You'll never forget me. Never forget the love we shared for each other. But that love shouldn't end simply because I'm no longer here. You have so much stored inside of you to give, and it's my wish that you do just that.

Juju (I hope you like this for his nickname), our baby boy, deserves a happy mother – the woman I fell in love with that day.

The woman who lit my heart on fire. You are amazing – too amazing to be alone.

I don't want you to be alone. I want you to have love.

I don't want you crying over me. I want you to think of all the good times we had together and smile.

I want you to raise our son and be happy.

I want you both to be happy. So, when you meet that man whose soul merges with yours, who makes your eyes light up when you see him, who grabs ahold of your heart and never lets go – and you WILL meet him – just know he's your one.

He'll love you like I did. Protect you like I did.

And he'll need you just as much as you need him.

Two broken hearts will make a whole one again.

Death is not the end, sweetheart. We'll see each other again. Until then, live for me.

I'll love you forever, Autumn.

-Judah

I know this was supposed to make me feel better, but I've sobbed like a baby, tears dropping on this paper like drops of rain. I dab them away to safeguard this note. It will always stay with me.

The sound of the doorbell jolts me. I place the letters back into the folder and in the drawer, closing it before I stand up. I'm not much in the mood for company but as Riley said, the people who love me also loved Judah. I need to keep them in my world if I'm going to get through this.

I walk to the door to find Nico standing there with a bag. Tears instantly come to my eyes. I don't say a word to him. I just open the storm door and embrace him.

"It's going to be alright, Autumn."

"I know, but it's still hard," I say, releasing him. "A part of me is gone."

"Of all of us," he tells me. I see Judah's parents heading this way. His mom is toting a casserole dish. Riley's car is in the driveway, along with another car that I recognize as Tabitha's. She has Luna and Moriah with her. My parents pull up soon after.

I look at Nico and say, "What is this?"

"It's us supporting you."

"You put this together?"

"No. It was all Riley's idea. She said it was your first day back. She didn't want you to be over here alone."

I draw in a deep breath and release it, accepting hugs from all of my family and friends who've come here to ensure my well-being. It is overwhelming, but it's the best thing for me – for all of us.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 9:24 am

Five Years Later

“Mommy, is Aunt Riley meeting us for ice cream?” Juju asks from the backseat. We just left Lake Julian Park, and I promised him we’d swing my the ice cream shop.

I glance through the rearview mirror to look at him.

From his facial features, down to his calm demeanor – he’s a living representation of his father and reminds me of him every single day.

Judah left me his twin – a permanent reminder for me to remember him by.

My heart expands every time I see him – when I wake him up in the mornings (more like when he wakes me up), when I read him bedtime stories (he loves books), or when we’re in the kitchen baking cookies.

He’s a little sponge for knowledge. His thirst for information is insatiable.

He wants to know everything. Adrienne says Judah was the same way when he was a child – had to know everything!

Juju already knows how to read. His kindergarten teacher is amazed at his level of intellect.

She tells me he’s gifted, but I already knew that.

At three months, he was holding his head up consistently.

When he was six months old, he started crawling.

At seven months, he was walking. He didn't need one of those walkers or anything – just stood up one day on those little legs and walked from the living room to the kitchen.

At a year, he was almost using complete sentences.

By his second birthday, he knew how to write his name, could recite the alphabet and could do simple addition and subtraction.

He's my miracle, genius baby. He's his father's child – that's for sure!

"Mom-meeee—" he sings. "You're daydreaming again..."

I grin and say, "I'm sorry, baby. I heard you, and no, Riley isn't coming this time, Juju."

"What about Auntie Luna, Tabitha, and Moriah? Are they coming, Mommy?"

"No, baby. It's just me and you, this time."

"You mean you and I, Mommy."

I glance through the mirror to see that tight smirk on his face. "Yes, baby. You and I."

"Well, maybe Daddy, too," he says with his cute little voice.

I slow to a red light and look through the mirror again, watching my handsome prince stare out the window very observant and contemplative.

I say, “What did you say, Juju?”

“I said maybe Daddy will join us.”

“Baby, do you remember the conversation we had about Daddy?”

“Yes, I remember, but I saw Daddy last night. I dreamed about him.”

My heart warms when I think about how much he loves his father.

Judah left me a treasure trove of pictures on his phone – so many of us together and many of me – candid shots he took of me when I didn’t know he was taking pictures.

I love them all and shared them with Juju.

I even printed out pictures of Judah and had them framed on the wall in Juju’s room.

My son will know his father. I promised Judah I’d make sure of it, and in three years, he’s going to get that beautiful letter Judah wrote to him. I always wondered why he wanted me to give it to him when he was eight. Now, I realize it’s because he knew his son would have the same insights and smarts he had at that age.

I say, “You dreamed about Daddy again, huh?”

“Yes. He—he told me to tell you hi.”

“Oh, wow. Thank you for letting me know.”

“You’re welcome, Mommy.”

Driving a little further down the street, I glance at Juju through the mirror and see his little inquisitive face. He asks, “Mommy, do I have a sister?”

“No, sweetheart. Your Dad and I had one child, and that’s you. Why do you ask?”

“I saw a girl in my dreams. She said she was in kindergarten, too.”

“That’s nice, baby, but you know, the thing about dreams is, while they feel real, they aren’t.”

“But I feel like they are, Mommy. Daddy even rubbed my head and told me I was a gentleman, whatever that means.”

I know I have to explain it to him. I have a habit of doing that. That brain of his is capable of comprehending a lot.

I say, “A gentleman is a nice man. It’s a man who has good manners and says things like please and thank you. He’s polite and treats everyone with respect. Does that sound like you?”

“Yes, but I’m still a boy! I guess that makes me a gentleboy.”

I chuckle and say, “Yes, it does. You know, your Daddy was a gentleman, too.”

“Yeah, I figured.”

“How do you figure?” I ask, finding it hard to believe I’m talking to a five-year-old.

“Because you say I take after him, right Mommy? So, if I take after Daddy, that means whatever he was, that’s what I am.”

“That’s right, sweetheart.”

I turn into the parking lot at the ice cream shop. I can’t bring myself to return to the one where I met Judah – the one across from where his parents’ grocery store is, so I

go to a different one a bit closer to Lake Julian Park.

I get out, open the back door. Juju unbuckles his lap belt and slides out of his booster seat, stepping out of the car. He stretches his little arms afterward and says, “After this, we’re taking a nap, Mommy.”

I chuckle. “You sound like an old man, Ju.”

He snickers while reaching for my hand. “Why do you always say that, Mommy?”

“Because you do.”

“I’m a five-year-old old man. Hee, hee, hee,” he laughs, covering his mouth with his free hand.

“Yes, you are.”

I open the door and we stand at the back of the line. It’s not too crazy, busy for it to be this hot. It’s only four o’clock. We probably beat the rush.

“Do you know what flavor you want today?” I ask Juju.

“Umm...” he taps his index finger on his top lip and says, “Surprise me, Mommy.”

“Okay.”

We get to the front of the line. I say, “Hi. I’ll have a scoop of blueberry cheesecake in a cone for the little one, and I’ll have a plain vanilla in a cone.”

“One scoop?” the worker asks.

“Oh, yes, please.”

“Alright.”

While we wait, I glance around the place, but Juju is looking at the little girl in line in front of us. He’s in a trance, staring while they both wait for their ice cream.

She finally gets hers and then walks off with her guardian. I hand Juju his and then get mine and pay. We head out the door and the little girl Juju was staring at is outside in tears.

“Aw,” I say, looking at her.

The man with her, I assume he’s her father, says, “She’s okay. She dropped her ice cream.”

“You can have mine,” Juju says insistently, handing her his.

“Oh, you don’t have to do that, buddy,” the man says. “I was just about to go and get her another one.”

She smiles and accepts the ice cream, anyway.

“What do you say, sweetheart?” her father asks her.

“Thank you,” the girl says and blushes. She’s adorable.

Juju looks up at me and says, “Mommy, come closer.”

That’s what my baby says when he wants to whisper in my ear.

I lean down and he says, “That’s my sister.”

“Juju, she’s not—” I pause. I don’t want to crush his little dreams, so I say, “That was

nice of you to do that for her.”

“Yeah, buddy,” the man says. “Thank you.” He strums Juju’s curly hair and says, “You’re a little gentleman already.”

Juju smiles brightly, looks way up into the man’s face, and says, “Thank you, Daddy.”

“Oh, gosh,” I say, covering my mouth, my face red with embarrassment. “I’m so sorry. His father died five years ago and he just—never mind.”

“No need for an apology. I get it. My wife died five years ago and babygirl here always talks about her like she’s still here. I’m Julius, by the way,” he says, extending his hand to me.

I accept his handshake while looking up at him for the first time during this little exchange, staring into light honey-colored eyes that nearly take my breath away. “It’s um...it’s nice—nice to, um...meet you, Ju—Julius.”

He pinches a smirk in the corner of his mouth and asks, “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I am. It’s just that, um—you remind me of someone.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yep,” I say, nodding.

“Then how about you tell me all about it while I go get another cone for lil’ man here,” he says.

“Okay.”

“What’s your name, by the way?” he asks.

“Autumn.”

He smiles. “Like the season?”

A sensation of warmth overwhelms me. Tears threaten to come to my eyes, but I smile with the intention to keep them at bay.

My heart beams. The sun brightens. Sadness and happiness converge to create a weird dynamic in my mind and yet and still a calmness washes over me when I respond, “Yes. Like the season.”