

One

Autumn woke to the aroma of coffee drifting through the apartment.

She pushed back the covers, her feet finding the cool floor as the early morning settled around her. Emma was already waiting at the bedroom door, tail raised, entirely certain of her priorities.

“Good morning to you, too,” Autumn murmured.

She padded into the kitchen, clicking on the small television as she passed, letting the low murmur of the morning news fill the space. Emma wove between Autumn’s legs as she moved, voicing her impatience in that particular way that left no room for misinterpretation.

“I know, I know.”

She scooped Emma's breakfast first because that was simply the order of things, then reached for her mug and the creamer, taking in the rich scent of the coffee as she poured.

She leaned against the counter and took her first sip.

Emma, satisfied, had already retreated to her spot on the window seat.

Autumn smiled faintly and made her way to her desk.

She eased into her chair, tapped the keyboard, and the screen sprang to life, bright and immediate, far more quickly than she felt.

She opened her email, moving through it steadily, scanning, flagging, archiving, her mind slowly catching up to the day.

A familiar subject line caught her attention.

Menu Update - Dad

Autumn smiled before she even opened it.

The email contained exactly what she expected. Three photographs of pastries she couldn't identify, two paragraphs debating the merits of cinnamon versus nutmeg in a seasonal hot chocolate, and a note asking if she could update the café menu when she had a chance.

Morning, sweetheart.

Your mother says the apple crumble scones need to stay. I think they're taking up valuable space that could be used for chocolate.

Please settle this disagreement.

Also, we've added the Highland Harvest Hot Chocolate and the maple shortbread. Photos attached.

*Love,
Dad*

Autumn laughed softly.

Some things never changed.

Her father had spent years building chocolates in Charleston before returning to Scotland with her mother. Retirement had lasted approximately three weeks before he opened a small café on the family farm.

Now his emails arrived several times a week, usually accompanied by photos of pastries, Highland cows, or some new chocolate creation he was convinced would change the world.

Autumn flagged the message and added it to her task list.

Update café menu.

She would get to it later.

After a quick check of her to-do list, she pulled up the client's website.

This was the part she loved most.

Her latest client, Merriweather Lane, catered to vacationers, the kind of place that sold flowing sundresses, lightweight sweaters, wide-brimmed hats, and everything else people convinced themselves they needed while wandering through Charleston's historic district.

Autumn had spent the better part of two weeks redesigning the site, which had become both a professional challenge and a personal temptation.

The homepage featured a rotating collection of seasonal arrivals. Autumn clicked through the images, pausing longer than necessary on a soft cream sweater paired with a plaid scarf.

Cute.

She added it to the running mental list of things she absolutely did not need.

A few clicks later, she found herself admiring a dark green coat that looked perfectly suited for an October stroll down King Street.

"Also unnecessary," she informed herself.

Emma lifted her head from the window seat and blinked.

"I know," Autumn said. "You'd think I'd learn."

The irony wasn't lost on her. She had spent hours helping customers find exactly what they wanted while simultaneously talking herself out of buying any of it.

With a reluctant sigh, she closed the product pages and returned to the task at hand.

She leaned in, studying the page one last time.

This was the part she loved most.

Creating the perfect representation of a business. Not just the words, though those mattered too. The colors, the layout, the photographs, the way each page flowed effortlessly into the next. Every detail worked together to tell a story and guide visitors exactly where they needed to go.

A website was often the first impression a customer had of a business. Autumn believed it should feel welcoming, professional, and unmistakably authentic.

Her fingers moved across the keyboard, making a final adjustment before reviewing the page from top to bottom. The experience felt clean. Intentional. Complete.

She smiled.

Now it felt right.

She read the last paragraph once more, made one final adjustment, then leaned back and reached for her coffee.

"Yes. Perfect," she said.

She sent the draft off, then noticed the time, surprised by how long she'd been at it. The television murmured in the background, traffic and weather and fragments of conversation blending into the familiar rhythm of the apartment.

The rest of the morning passed in its usual routine, with a few client updates and a consultation that ran a little longer than scheduled, but ended well. It was nothing out of the ordinary—just the way she liked it.

Her phone buzzed mid-afternoon, her client's voice full of excitement and gratitude. Autumn walked her through each page, outlining next steps, answering questions with the easy confidence that came from knowing the work was good. By the time she hung up, her client's energy had poured into her too, leaving her both exhausted and exhilarated.

She closed her laptop.

Satisfied.

She stretched her arms overhead, feeling the tension release along her back, then carried her dishes to the kitchen, returning shortly after with a sandwich and a glass of sweet tea.

Her attention drifted across the room, pulled as it always was to the window seat on the far side of the apartment. Emma was already there, curled in the last rays of afternoon sun, a book waiting beside her as though it had been expecting Autumn all along.

She walked across the room, setting her sandwich and sweet tea on the small side table before sinking into the cushions.

Her row house had the feel of an old bookstore, hardcovers lining every wall, their spines worn and well-loved, the air carrying the scent of paper and leather layered with the comforting trace of pumpkin spice.

One wall was devoted entirely to her treasures. A glass-front cabinet displayed favorite books collected over the years, many too special to be tucked away on crowded shelves. First editions sat beside beloved novels she had read so many times their stories felt like old friends. Nestled among them was a collection of music boxes

she had gathered as a child. Some had come from family trips, others from antique shops or birthday gifts long since forgotten by everyone except her.

Every now and then, she would wind one and let the melody drift through the apartment. The songs were simple and familiar, carrying

memories she could never quite put into words. Even now, seeing them displayed among her favorite stories felt right somehow, as though the books and music boxes belonged to the same part of her heart.

She reached for Emma, lifting her into place. The cat stirred once, then settled, her weight warm and solid. A content purr rose between them as Autumn picked up her novel.

It was nearly finished now. She had left it reluctantly the night before, promising she would return.

She opened to where she left off.

The words swallowed her whole.

Time slipped as she turned each page, her heart quickening with the story's rise and fall. Outside her window, Charleston's streets hushed into evening, lanterns flickering to life one by one.

Church bells rang somewhere in the distance and woodsmoke curled on the breeze, but Autumn didn't notice any of it.

She was lost.

At last, she turned the final page, clutching the book against her chest. Satisfaction mingled with longing, the soft ache that came when a story ended.

She sat with the book pressed against her, as if letting go too quickly might break the connection.

The doorbell rang.

Autumn jumped, startled back into the room. The world rushed in all at once. She quickly gathered the blanket from her lap and folded it neatly onto the window seat before placing the book gently on top.

Then she stepped across the wooden floor toward the door.

She leaned toward the peephole. Jane stood on the other side, bundled in a scarf, arms full of books. The sight of Jane always brought so much joy.

She opened the door.

Jane Whitmore stepped inside, a stack of brown wrapped books balanced in her arms. The owner of Whitmore Books, and one of the few people who could coax Autumn from her solitude, Jane was as much a part of her routine as the books themselves. Silver-gray hair framed her face in a modern shoulder-length cut, and a pair of stylish reading glasses rested atop her head, ready to be called into service at a moment's notice. The years had softened her features without diminishing them, and her warm smile made everyone who stepped into Whitmore Books feel as though they belonged there

"Come in," Autumn said. "I'll put the kettle on."

Jane unwrapped her scarf, setting the books on the entry table. Her eyes lit as they always did when she was surrounded by stories. Soon, the scent of cinnamon tea filled the small kitchen, mixing with the ever-present scent of paper and leather.

Autumn handed her a steaming cup as she set a plate of pralines on the table.

“Well?” Jane asked. “How did it end?”

“Beautifully,” Autumn said. “It was everything I hoped for.”

They spoke of the book, of characters who felt real and endings that refused to let go. Jane listened with delight.

For years, those conversations had belonged to John.

He had never read as quickly as she did, but he had always listened. Patiently. Endlessly. He let her talk through every plot twist, every favorite character, every ending that lingered long after the final page.

After he passed, Whitmore Books had felt quieter in ways she hadn't expected.

Not because there were fewer customers.

Because there was no one waiting to ask, “Well? How did it end?”

Then, a few years ago, Autumn Day had wandered into the bookstore looking for a novel to take on a weekend trip.

She came back the following week to tell Jane what she thought of it.

Then she came back again.

And again.

Somewhere between book recommendations, cups of tea, and long conversations about stories, Autumn had stopped being a customer.

She had become a friend.

Then something closer to family.

Since John had passed, Jane had often wondered if that particular joy, the kind that comes from sharing a beloved story, belonged to another season of her life.

Now here it was.

Jane finished her tea and set the cup down, her fingers lingering against the porcelain before she stood.

“I'll let you get back to your evening,” she said.

Autumn walked her to the door. “Text me when you get home,” she said, pulling Jane's scarf a little tighter. “And stay warm.”

“You worry too much,” Jane said with a wink.

“Someone has to.”

The door clicked shut, and the apartment returned to the gentle solitude Autumn knew so well.

Autumn turned back to the stack of books waiting on the table, her pulse quickening.

Unwrapping them was always a ritual. The slow peel of paper. The reveal of the spines in the lamplight. She ran her fingers along each one, reading the titles, already anticipating the stories inside.

Then she paused.

One book didn't belong.

Bound in soft leather, its title embossed in gold, it appeared new, as though it had been set aside for someone specific.

Autumn tilted her head, curiosity sparking. She ran her fingers over the title, curiosity stirring.

The Gilded Grove.