

Phoenix

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“Clover, come back!” Autumn called as her Cocker Spaniel ran off the park’s path. The dog was on a long leash, and Autumn’s sight of her was soon obscured by a large leaf pile she’d buried herself in.

Autumn heard laughter behind her and turned around. There stood a young guy with brown hair hanging past his shoulders, dark cargo pants, and a large burgundy backpack and black leather jacket over a white t-shirt. A look her mom would call “edgy” and her sister would deem “20th century rock-and-roll aesthetic.” As Autumn sized him up, it took a few seconds for her to register that his gaze had turned to her.

“Hi,” Autumn said.

“Oh. Hey,” he replied.

They then spoke simultaneously.

“I was just trying to get my-”

“I was just watching your-”

A beat, then again.

“Well, if I can get her-”

“I can go if-”

They both took a breath before laughing. At this, Clover abandoned the leaves and ran over to them.

“So *now* you come out!” Autumn knelt to stroke Clover, but the pup seemingly only had eyes for the guy.

“You can pat her,” Autumn said, standing. “Clover’s friendly.”

To Autumn’s surprise, he actually stepped *back*. “No.”

"Oh," said Autumn, feeling bad for Clover, who was clearly desperate for this stranger's attention. She reached back down to pat her in hopes that it would make up for it.

"I mean, I can't," he said. "Today's client is allergic to dogs; it's pretty bad."

"Client? What do you do?"

"Well, today we're going cliff diving."

Autumn was taken aback. "Cliff diving? You mean, like, off the cliffs by the beach over there?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Normally I'd go for the ones off the coast, but Rosenbaum Retirement has a pretty strict curfew, so..."

"So, you work with the elderly? And you're going *cliff diving*?"

"A lot of my clients are up there in age, yeah. And as for the cliff diving..." He shrugged. "We'll be fine."

Autumn couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Aren't you worried he'll get hurt? Or...die?"

"Of course he's going to die. That's why we're going; cliff diving is on his bucket list."

"Oh, I used to have a buck—wait, have you ever done this before with an, er, older client?"

"No, but like I said, we'll be fine." He looked behind Autumn and waved to someone. "That's him."

Autumn turned around to see an older man with a big backpack.

"Oh, well, it was nice to meet you," she said, not wanting to seem judgmental. "I'm Autumn, by the way."

She stuck out her hand, but he didn't take it. He simply headed over towards the guy, turning to face her again as he walked. "I'm Phoenix."

Autumn didn't think much about her encounter with Phoenix, but a few months later, she saw him again.

It was at the town's holiday market, an entire ice rink covered with booths for everything from candles to sauces. Autumn had just picked up a Christmas collar for Clover, when a familiar voice caught her attention.

"No, no, I can't take that."

Autumn turned and saw Phoenix at a dessert booth, holding a large shopping bag as the old lady running the stand put a box into it.

"Oh, you know these blackberry pies will sell out! It's my gift to you, after all you've been doing."

"But you've given me three others already!" Phoenix tried to return the box, but the woman pushed it back towards him before he could. After a few rounds of this, they were interrupted.

"If you don't want that, I'll gladly take it."

Autumn giggled as Phoenix noticed her presence before he shrugged and handed her the box. He quickly thanked the lady before she could force anything else on him and left, with Autumn hustling to catch up.

"Was that your grandmother?" she asked.

"Hello again to you, too."

"Sorry. I just wanted to know why that lady was so obsessed with giving you free treats."

Phoenix shrugged as they stopped outside the arena near the changing rooms. "She's a client."

"Oh yeah, you work with the elderly. How did cliff diving go, anyway?"

"With Mr. Raisman? He had a good time. Passed soon after."

Autumn gasped. "He got into an accident?"

"He had leukemia."

"Oh." Autumn sighed. "I had leukemia as a kid. It was pretty bad."

"Well, you survived." Autumn couldn't read Phoenix's tone there. Was he being sarcastic or sincerely trying to comfort her? He kept talking before she could figure it out. "You should go back to Mrs. Long's booth; that's what she's raising money for."

"Is that why you didn't want all those freebies? You felt bad 'stealing' from charity?" Autumn was being playful, but Phoenix's face fell.

"No, I mean...it's complicated."

They stood silently for a moment, watching the crowd in the arena. Mrs. Long's booth had drawn quite the crowd.

"She was right about the blackberry pies; they've just sold ou-" she turned to Phoenix, only to see he was gone.

Phoenix soon left Autumn's mind again, until he showed up a few months later at the dive bar where she worked.

"Fancy meeting you here," he said as she turned around to give another patron his drink.

"I wouldn't say it's 'fancy' meeting anyone here.".

"Well, it does have a nice 'lived-in' feel," Phoenix remarked as he looked around the place from atop his barstool seat.

"I guess you could call it that. I do like working here, for the record. I know all the regulars." As if to prove it, she slid a couple more drinks over to customers without even needing to take their orders.

"Yeah, this does seem like a common haunt for some people."

As if on cue, a gruff man who came every night approached Phoenix. "That's my seat."

Autumn tried to speak to him, but Phoenix switched to the stool at the other end of the counter before she could.

"You didn't need to do that," she said after taking the man's order.

Phoenix shrugged. "Life is short, and it doesn't seem like a lot of it has gone that guy's way."

"Yeah," Autumn said. "Like you said, this place is a common haunt for him."

The bar became busier and by the time Autumn's shift ended, Phoenix was gone.

The next morning, Autumn saw on the news that the gruff man had died of a heart attack after she'd left work.

Autumn's spirits usually lifted as the weather warmed up, but even spring couldn't cheer her up as Clover—who usually acted like a puppy despite her old age—was growing sluggish. One day, she found her unable to move from the bed on her own, and took her to the vet.

Normally, Autumn liked to greet all the animals in the waiting room, but not now. One, she was too concerned for Clover, and two, the only empty chair was next to none other than Phoenix. No pets with him, just Phoenix.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Autumn asked, in a futile attempt to distract herself.

"Um, yeah," he replied, then looked at the dog on Autumn's lap. "Clover doesn't look so good."

Autumn couldn't help but smile at how Phoenix had remembered Clover's name despite only meeting her once, months prior, but her face then fell. "No, she isn't." She couldn't bring herself to describe the issues, but Phoenix nodded in an understanding anyway.

"I just want to save her," Autumn continued. "Like my parents did when I almost died as a kid." As she scratched behind Clover's ears, Phoenix looked like he was about to put a hand on her shoulder for comfort, but he didn't.

To Autumn's surprise, Phoenix stood up when Clover was called in.

"I-I can come in, if you want me to," he said.

Autumn was a little confused—wasn't he waiting for someone else?—but nodded.

Phoenix sat in the corner as the vet examined Clover. There was nothing the doctor could do except "stop her suffering." Autumn burst into tears as the vet went to get her tools.

Autumn's tears prevented her from seeing Phoenix approach the table. She looked to him when she noticed his presence, but he said nothing. He remained there during the procedure, stoic as Autumn sobbed. After the vet finished, he scratched Clover behind her ears, as Autumn had.

Autumn couldn't believe what happened next.

Clover stood up, tail wagging as Phoenix petted her. She jumped off the table and looked to him, completely ignoring Autumn.

Phoenix opened the door, and Clover trotted out. No leash needed.

Autumn's jaw dropped. "What?"

Phoenix simply pointed to the table before following Clover, closing the door behind him.

There was Clover, lying on the table as before. No breath, no pulse.

Autumn gasped.

Everything she'd learned about Phoenix suddenly made complete sense. And she knew without a doubt that they'd meet again, someday.