

Now Through Labor Day is a story of a young woman who finds herself while she spends twelve days at the Minnesota State Fair looking for someone else.

Genre: Romance/New Adult

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DAY ONE

In retrospect, the State Fair wasn't the best place for a third date. I liked Eric, but as he walked past fried pickles and Pronto Pups in search of lean protein, I knew things weren't going to work out between us.

Eric was new to Minnesota, and I was new to Bumble. When we were matched, all five of his photos were of him outdoors—hiking, camping, fishing—and while those things weren't high on my personal priorities, I was intrigued by how happy he looked doing them.

Our first date was a walk around Lake Calhoun. He lived in Elon in Uptown like every other newly minted professional working downtown. We stopped for a beer at Lyn Lake Brewery. My hopes hadn't been high, but I left the bar with a smile on my face, and when he texted two days later, I said yes to a second date.

We spent half a Sunday hiking the bluffs in Frontenac State Park. I didn't have the right shoes and could hardly walk the next day, but the exertion made me deliriously happy. When we reached the cliff's edge, I was breathless and sweaty and in awe of the beauty in front of me. He kissed me and asked me out again, and I immediately agreed.

The State Fair had been my choice. It was my favorite time of year, watching summer turn into fall, and nothing made me happier than a bucket of cookies and a mini-donut beer alongside a hundred thousand of Minnesota's best.

But Eric didn't get it. He was a New Yorker, born and raised. If he wanted street food and to people watch, all he had to do was walk out his front door. To him, it looked like I waited all year for something that mildly annoyed him at home.

It was night one of the twelve day run of the fair. I didn't know if I'd get back again, so I wanted to hit my mainstays, like the flowering onion and Minneapple pie, but Eric was placating me at best.

I didn't know what to do about it. He checked his smartwatch constantly and it had crossed from distracting to irritating after about an hour. I looked at him in his polo and chinos, his white sneakers covered in dirt and food and probably horseshit, and I sighed. He was cute and smart and motivated, but he wasn't for me.

Out of a sense of responsibility, I helped him find something to eat at a chicken grill underneath the Grandstand walkway I'd never seen before. He got a chicken and rice bowl and walked with me while I tried to get back into my routine, but the magic of the fair was gone. After my second mini-donut beer, I got the courage to do what I should have done hours before.

"Eric," I said. "You hate this."

He froze, then shrugged and nodded. “Yeah,” he admitted, pushing his sunglasses up onto his head. “I guess it’s not my thing.”

“Go home,” I told him. “Or go out. Go do what you want.”

“Annie,” he started, but I waved him off.

“I want to be here. You don’t. I’m good with that,” I shrugged.

“I just—” he said, cutting himself off. “Annie, no one here is that honest.” I shrugged. “But if you’re sure...”

“I’m sure,” I nodded, shifting my weight to the balls of my feet.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll call you.” He leaned forward and kissed my cheek, sloshing my beer onto my shoes.

“No, you won’t,” I said under my breath, shrugging again, but found myself mostly unbothered. I felt a sense of freedom watching him go, knowing I could do exactly what I wanted. At that moment, I wanted a fudge puppy and to find a good bench to watch the sunset. The lights would be coming on shortly so I wanted to walk the Midway and watch the crowd change from families to teenagers and young adults, and I’d probably get one more beer before walking home.

I made my way slowly towards Coasters, my hopes unreasonably high that I might find an empty tilt-a-whirl table to sit at while the sun came down. I was halfway there when I heard my name, and it stopped me in my tracks.

It had been ten years since I’d heard his voice; maybe five since I’d last Googled him, but before I turned I knew who it would be. “Holy shit,” he said. “Annie Banannie.”

“Brody?” I said, pushing my sunglasses into my hair. He was tall—so tall—somewhere on the high end of six feet, and his shoulders were so wide that they stretched the bright yellow shirt he wore. He was self-consciously removing a hairnet, stuffing it into the pocket of the black jeans he wore, and I caught a couple of tattoos on his forearm, nearly impossible to make out against his brown skin in the low light.

I was tongue-tied, and I knew it. The last time I’d seen Brody Washington, days before Christmas nearly ten years prior, his sister had died. Two weeks before that, he’d been my first kiss.

“Hi,” I finally said, taking a step towards him. We were blocking the other pedestrians, getting more than one annoyed sigh as they side-stepped us, so I gripped his tattooed forearm and pulled him aside, directly next to the Big Fat Bacon stand.

We both started to speak at the same time, then faltered. I ignored the thump that my heart made when he smiled, and he gestured for me to go first. “What are you doing here?” I asked him. The question was a stupid one. He clearly worked within the fairgrounds, but I didn’t know what else to say, what else there was that didn’t hurt.

“Making some extra money,” he said. “I’ve done this the last couple of years. Get a couple grease burns, make some extra cash. Works out okay. What about you? Are you alone? Did I drag you away from friends?”

I shook my head. “No,” I faltered again. Was it more depressing that I was alone or that I’d sent my date off for being less than thrilled about the fair overall? I shook my head. I didn’t see any reason to lie, even if I felt some need to save face in front of Brody and those big brown eyes of his.

“I was on a date,” I admitted. “Sent him on his way when he wasn’t into being here.”

Brody's laugh was as melodic as I remembered. My heart thumped so hard again I wondered if I might have been experiencing indigestion. "Haven't changed a bit," he shook his head.

I rolled my eyes playfully. "In some ways, no, I suppose not."

He caught my gaze and nodded. "Where are you headed right now?"

"Coasters," I said. "Midway'll be lighting up. I want to watch it."

"I've got about fifteen minutes to kill. Do you mind if I join you?"

"Please," I encouraged him. There was an awkward silence, one where I knew we were both hesitating to ask the questions that were on our minds, but he let me speak first.

"How's your family?" I asked softly.

He squeezed my shoulder briefly. He smelled like grease and onions. "We're doing okay," he said. "My mom and step-dad—they're still married. You know what kinda feat that is, after everything."

I nodded. "And you?" I asked.

"I'm good, Annie," he said. "Got a day job. Get to see my family whenever I want to. I talk to Gwen when I can. Ten years," he shook his head. "If I could go back and tell fourteen-year-old me that I'd survive losing her, I would. I think I would have done a lot differently."

I bit down on the inside of my lip, but we arrived at Coasters just as a small family left one of the tilt-a-whirl tables. Without a word, Brody knew I wanted one of those tables, so I followed him to it, slipping in on the other side.

In front of me, the sky was a canvas of pinks and oranges. It was a sunset I would have loved to photograph, but in that moment, my attention was elsewhere.

"And you," my gaze turned abruptly to the sunset in front of us. "You're healthy." He said it like a statement rather than a question.

"As a horse," I said after a long moment, pulling my long, dark ponytail over my shoulder without thought.

"Surgery worked," he said and again it wasn't a question.

I nodded. "Twice," I replied after a moment.

He sucked in a breath. "It came back?"

I nodded again. "When I was sixteen."

He looked a million miles away and I knew he probably was. Gwen had been my roommate at Children's Hospital when we were both preteens. I hadn't been easy to get along with, hormonal and angry that I was twelve with bone cancer, but she'd ignored my attempts to shut her down, and eventually I stop resisting her. And Brody—I stopped resisting him too.

I was diagnosed at eleven with osteosarcoma, a very rare type of bone cancer that appeared in my left arm. It took a combination of chemo and surgery to get rid of it and a whole lot of rehab to relearn how to use my arm, but I survived it once at twelve and again at sixteen, when it appeared again in my other arm. Gwen had a tumor pushing on her frontal lobe and she hadn't survived the surgery to remove it.

I thought about her a lot, even ten years later. Brody still popped into my thoughts too, whenever I read an article about first kisses and first crushes. I hadn't been well enough to attend her funeral, my own surgery only a few days out, and when the Washingtons left the hospital, I never saw any of them again.

“How’s your mom?” he asked after another silence.

“She’s doing well,” I said. “Working hard.”

“Still living in Willmar?” I nodded. “What about you?” he asked.

“I’m close enough to walk home,” I said, looking north for a moment.

“Nice,” he said, drifting away again. “You know,” he continued, his cadence quicker. “I probably have thought about you every couple of weeks for ten years.”

I smiled, watching as the first set of Midway rides lit up, reds and greens and blues against the deepening pink of the sky behind them. “You were my first kiss, Brody,” I shook my head teasingly. “You were basically all I thought of during physical therapy.”

He snorted, shifting beside me. I looked over at him and he opened his mouth to speak again, but we were interrupted by two people in the same yellow shirt and dark jeans that Brody had on.

“Dude,” the guy said. He looked a couple years younger than Brody, maybe closer to my age. “We gotta go. Now. Monica just texted 911.”

“Pretty sure that’s a grease fire, or theft, or one of her ex-husbands showed up,” the girl, a cute blonde added. She took one look at me and turned back to Brody.

Brody looked from me to them and the girl rolled her eyes. I decided to save him the trouble of an awkward exit and spoke. “Real friends don’t disregard 911 texts,” I said. “It was great to see you, Brody. Go.”

“Brody?” the girl asked.

“Come on, man. She gets it,” the guy said.

Brody was flustered and I couldn’t blame him. His friends were demanding and we’d finally found our groove conversationally, but the moment was gone. He rose from his side of the tilt-a-whirl table, nearly knocking his head on the top of it. “Thanks for the fifteen minutes,” he said.

“Anytime,” I assured him. His friends nearly dragged him away, but I turned back to the Midway, not wanting to watch him go. I thought about Gwen frequently, but I’d let the grief go. Having Brody in front of me brought a lot of that to the surface.

“...right back,” I heard his voice again. “I just need a second.”

He was abruptly in front of me, his smile small and hesitant, and when he kissed me, I wasn’t surprised. His lips were soft, his face rough with a closely trimmed beard I hadn’t been able to see against his skin. His hand was on my cheek when we parted. “Wanted to be your first and last, if only for a little while.” His grin was as wolfish as I remembered and when he walked towards his friends, they were staring at him in disbelief.

I watched him go this time. I lost him after about five seconds as he melted into the crowd, and I was unable to stop the grin from spreading across my face.

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