

THE FULL STORY

CHAPTER VII

Fifteen Minutes to Lose Everything



CHAPTER SEVEN: FIFTEEN MINUTES TO LOSE EVERYTHING

One of the more humiliating discoveries a person can make about himself is that intellectual understanding and emotional self-preservation are not necessarily acquainted.

I had studied the chronology. Examined the correspondence. Identified the patterns. Written the conclusions. Issued the closure. And somewhere amid that elaborate process, I had apparently forgotten that I was still capable of wanting the person at the center of it.

April 30, 2026. The file was closed.

May 5. I saw Michael again. The following day, I sent him a message thanking him for stopping and asking whether we could discuss the questions that remained unresolved.

I could have left things alone. I knew that. I had already written an entire account explaining why continued participation in the relationship was painful. I had already identified the difference between affection and dependable friendship. And I had already concluded that the arrangement we kept attempting to establish was not working.

But I still cared. And when the possibility of a conversation appeared again, I took it.

I cannot reasonably assign that decision to Michael. This time, I reopened the correspondence. That matters. Because any account of this history that makes me exclusively the passive recipient of someone else's decisions would be incomplete.

I wanted an answer. I wanted to know whether something could still be salvaged. And I was willing to risk another disappointment to find out.



We met on May 8. At the Fairmont. A familiar building by then. One associated with some of the earliest moments of our friendship and several of its later complications.

The conversation occurred between Michael's appointments. There was only so much time available.

I tried to explain what I needed. Not a perfect relationship. Not permanent access. Not a guarantee that misunderstandings would never occur. I wanted us to be able to communicate directly, make plans, and address difficulties without allowing them to become another prolonged period of uncertainty.

We talked. We reached what seemed to be an understanding. Afterward, I asked whether things were okay between us. He reassured me that they were. But he added that we needed to do what we had discussed.

And this was where another problem entered the story. What, precisely, had we discussed?

I believed I understood. I had my interpretation. He presumably had his. But the terms were never written down in a way that allowed either of us to confirm that we understood the same arrangement.

It was a remarkably familiar difficulty. Two people attempting to rebuild a friendship through an agreement whose contents remained largely private to their respective understandings.

I wanted to believe the conversation had helped. So I did. And we continued.

May 18. I finally entered Michael's new home. The condominium I had heard about for months. The place that had appeared in conversations about future visits, shared meals, and the possibility of becoming familiar with one another's lives again.

It had taken approximately six months to reach this point. We had coordinated dinner. I had confirmed the arrangements. And now I was actually there.

I remember wanting the evening to go well. I wanted to enjoy the space. To congratulate him. To experience the simple pleasure of visiting a friend's home without the encounter becoming an examination of every disappointment that preceded it.

His roommate was present. I had been told he would likely be leaving. He did not.

The evening therefore became something different from the private conversation I had anticipated. Not necessarily a bad evening. There was food. There was hospitality. There were ordinary interactions. But once again, I found myself trying to adjust my expectations after arriving.

I was not particularly good at concealing my discomfort. That is something I can acknowledge. When I am disappointed, my face has an unfortunate tendency to announce the news before I have decided whether the information is appropriate for public distribution. And that evening was no exception.

I was quieter than I wanted to be. Less expressive. Perhaps less pleasant company than I might otherwise have been.

But I stayed. We had dinner. And afterward, I thanked Michael for having me. I told him that I had enjoyed myself, even if I had not fully demonstrated it.

I also acknowledged that I sometimes struggled with understanding where I stood in the order of things. That was my feeling to examine. Not his automatic responsibility to repair. And I wanted to be honest about it without turning the evening into another conflict.

We continued making plans.



June 4. Michael came to my home for dinner. For the first time. After years of visiting his apartments, meeting him at the office, and accompanying him to the cabin, he was finally coming into the place where Charles and I lived.

That mattered to me. It was another step toward something I had wanted for a long time. A friendship capable of existing within the ordinary circumstances of my life rather than remaining confined to occasional visits elsewhere.

I prepared dinner. Michael arrived after work. We ate. We talked. And the evening was pleasant. There was no catastrophe. No dramatic confrontation. No sudden announcement that the relationship had become impossible. Just dinner.

He thanked me afterward. I was pleased. I wanted to believe that this was what our friendship could become. Something ordinary. Something that did not require constant negotiation. Something in which sharing a meal could simply be sharing a meal.

The following evening, I was going to bring the leftovers to his office. A small gesture. Nothing particularly grand. I had enjoyed having him over. And I hoped we would do it again (but unfortunately, like clockwork, I had forgotten them on the kitchen counter. A common theme between us of me forgetting leftovers.)

June 15. My birthday. The date that had become such a strangely complicated point in our history.

Michael had remembered it after the first ending in 2024. He had mistakenly wished me a happy birthday in November 2025. And only a few days before my birthday in 2026, he had become confused about when the celebration was happening.

I remember being hurt by that. More than I expected. It wasn't simply about a birthday. It was about the accumulation of memories that seemed to matter so intensely to me and, at times, so inconsistently in our interactions.

But he had agreed to attend. And on June 15, he did. He came to my home after finishing work. He celebrated with us.

It was something I had wanted for a long time. Michael participating in an important occasion in my ordinary life. Not as a secret. Not as someone whose presence required elaborate concealment. As a friend. Someone invited into my home. Someone welcomed by the people around me. And I was happy that he came.

I thanked him afterward. I told him that his presence had meant a great deal. Because it had. Whatever difficulties existed between us, I did not want to become someone incapable of appreciating the moments when he made an effort. He had attended. That was real. And I was grateful.

We also arranged another dinner. Tuesday, June 23. At his place. Italian food. Eight o'clock.

A date. A time. A plan. I was looking forward to it. I could not have imagined how differently that evening would end.



The week between my birthday and the dinner was difficult. There was another small disappointment. Michael had expressed interest in collecting leftover baked goods from my birthday celebration. I arranged for him to come. I even provided access to the building.

But he did not arrive as expected. There was no timely cancellation. No explanation until later.

Another small incident. The sort of thing that, considered in isolation, might scarcely deserve mention. But by then, I was no longer experiencing these events in isolation.

I remembered other plans. Other delays. Other occasions when I had prepared for something that did not happen.

I was trying not to let the accumulated history determine my response. But the history existed. And I could not simply order my memory to stop functioning whenever doing so would make an interaction more convenient.

Then June 22 arrived. Michael confirmed dinner for the following evening. I replied. I used the plural.

"See you guys then."

That was deliberate. After the May 18 dinner, I anticipated that his roommate might again be present. I wanted to see whether Michael would correct the assumption or clarify who would be there. He did neither.

I recognize now that an indirect test was not the clearest way to ask a question. I could have said plainly that I wanted to know whether we would have privacy. I didn't. I was trying to obtain information without turning a basic question into another point of contention. And the

absence of clarification allowed me to continue anticipating a situation I did not fully understand.



June 23, 2026. The final dinner.

It began long before I reached Michael's building. That afternoon and evening had already been difficult. A friend had been at my home experiencing symptoms concerning enough that Charles and I believed he might be having a heart attack. We were frightened. We were trying to help. Eventually, he went to the hospital. The situation left me shaken.

I was also carrying the exhaustion of an already difficult birthday week. I had been writing some intensely personal material. Revisiting experiences I ordinarily preferred to keep safely beneath the surface. I was tired. Emotionally raw. And not particularly well equipped to navigate an unexpected complication.

But I still intended to go to dinner. I had been looking forward to seeing Michael. He had confirmed. And I wanted the evening to happen.

Our original start time was pushed later because his work ran long. I adjusted. Then I walked over.

It was hot. Unpleasantly hot. By the time I reached the building, I was sweating and exhausted. The entrance system was not cooperating. There was more coordination by telephone. Eventually, I made my way upstairs.

And as I approached the apartment, I began sensing that something was different from what I had expected. I could hear another voice. I could hear movement inside.

I tried not to assume anything. I had already learned how destructive assumptions could become. But my body was responding faster than my reasoning.

I knocked. Michael let me in.



I stepped inside expecting Michael. Possibly his roommate, Rob. I had heard another voice while approaching the apartment, but I hadn't been told anyone else would be joining us, and there was nobody unfamiliar in the living room when I entered.

Michael noticed my demeanor almost immediately. I was visibly tense, exhausted, and considerably less enthusiastic than someone arriving for a long-anticipated dinner ought to have been. He asked whether everything was all right and offered to reschedule.

I declined. Partly because I had already arrived. Partly because I had spent the better part of the preceding week looking forward to this evening. And partly because I was tired of arranging meetings that seemed perpetually vulnerable to disruption. I feared that accepting the offer would become another example of my being difficult, another moment in which I had somehow failed to navigate the relationship correctly.

I wanted to stay. I wanted dinner. I wanted, for once, to enjoy an evening with my friend without having to negotiate the circumstances surrounding it.

Then something happened.

A man emerged from the back bedroom area.

Someone I had never seen before.

He made his way into the living room and settled onto the couch.

I had no idea who he was. I had never met him, never been introduced to him, and had received no indication that he would be present that evening. Not when we arranged dinner. Not when Michael confirmed the appointment the previous day. Not when the time changed. Not even when I arrived at the door.

This was Zachariah.

And suddenly, the evening I had been trying so desperately to approach with patience and composure had become something entirely different.

The problem was not that another person existed in Michael's home. He was entitled to have guests. The problem was that I had been invited into a situation without knowing its circumstances, and I was being forced to adjust to those circumstances after I had already arrived.

I was not gracious. I wish I had been. I wish I could return to that room, set down the exhaustion and anxiety I was carrying, and ask one simple question without allowing the accumulated history of our friendship to overwhelm the moment.

But I cannot.

What I can do is acknowledge that my reaction was mine, while also acknowledging that the surprise was real.

And in that moment, the discomfort I had been struggling to contain became impossible to hide.

I stood. I expressed my discomfort. I said that I did not think it was unreasonable to expect advance notice when additional people would be present.

My delivery was poor. My frustration was visible. And I was no longer handling the situation with the composure I wanted to demonstrate.

Michael became angry. The conversation escalated. Zachariah offered to leave. Michael refused that offer. Instead, he told me to leave.

Then he shouted.

"GET OUT!"

I remember the force of it. The suddenness. The extraordinary speed with which a dinner I had anticipated for an entire week became something I wanted desperately to escape.

I remember feeling humiliated. Ashamed. Furious. And devastated.

I had brought a gift. A copy of Jung's *The Red Book*. I had also brought a playful itinerary and a piece of artwork connected with his birthday. Little things I had prepared because I was looking forward to seeing him.

I set the artwork down. I told him I had been making it for him. That I had been looking forward to the evening. He said he had been looking forward to it too.

And then I left. I put on my boots. Walked out. And waited for the elevator.

I called Charles. I was outside Michael's apartment by approximately 8:44. I had been inside for roughly fifteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes. After nearly three years of knowing someone.

After the nights together. The books. The hospital visits. The cabin. The poems.

The departures. The returns. The reconciliations. The promises. And the extraordinary amount of emotional energy both of us had spent attempting to understand what our friendship could be.

Ten minutes. Apparently, that was all the evening required.



I began writing an explanation almost immediately. I wanted Michael to understand what had happened before the evening became another story about my behavior without the circumstances surrounding it.

I explained the medical emergency. The stress. The exhaustion. My discomfort.

I apologized for my reaction. And I acknowledged that I had arrived in a heightened emotional state. I also expressed frustration with the recurring difficulties between us.

The message was not perfectly composed. I was upset. And I was still attempting to process the fact that I had been ordered to leave someone's home.

But I wanted him to know that I had not arrived intending to create a confrontation. I had wanted dinner. A pleasant evening. Another opportunity to enjoy my friend's company. And I had instead become part of an argument whose consequences I did not yet understand.

The following day, I contacted the other guest. Zachariah.

I apologized. I did not want him to believe that my conduct had been directed at him personally. We had never met. He had not been responsible for arranging the evening. And I recognized that the situation must have been uncomfortable for him as well.

He responded kindly. He did not condemn me. He acknowledged that the evening had been difficult.

For a moment, I felt a little relief. At least one person who had been present seemed willing to discuss what happened without reducing the entire encounter to a moral verdict.

But there was still Michael. And I had not heard from him.



June 25. The message arrived. I read it. Then I read it again.

Michael rejected my explanation. He described my behavior as rude. Disrespectful. And abusive.

He told me that I had ruined the friendship. He said he did not want to rekindle anything in the future. And he no longer wanted me as a friend.

There it was. The final ending. Not an ambiguous disappearance. Not a temporary withdrawal. Not another proposal that we might reconnect when circumstances improved.

A termination. Explicit. Unmistakable. And accompanied by a characterization of me that I could not accept.

I knew I had behaved poorly. I had already acknowledged that. I knew my mood had affected the evening. I knew I had become visibly uncomfortable and had not communicated that discomfort gracefully.

But I did not believe those facts established that I was an abusive person. And I could not accept being made solely responsible for the collapse of a relationship that had already experienced years of difficulty.

That was where I drew the distinction. He was entitled to end the friendship. He was entitled to believe that my behavior was unacceptable. He was entitled to decide that he no longer wanted contact. But I was also entitled to disagree with his explanation. And I did.

That evening, I responded. I acknowledged his decision. I accepted responsibility for the effect my demeanor had on the dinner. And I rejected both the characterization of me as abusive and the assertion that I alone had destroyed the friendship.

I reminded him that he had attended my birthday celebration only ten days earlier. That he had accepted my hospitality. That we had continued interacting as friends. And that a single painful evening could not reasonably erase the entire history that preceded it.

I also asked what he meant when he said I was no longer the person he had first met. Because I genuinely wanted to understand.

Had I changed? Certainly. Nearly three years had passed. I had experienced grief, illness, professional upheaval, creative transformation, and a succession of personal difficulties that would have changed almost anyone.

But the person he first met had also been capable of making mistakes. Capable of selfishness. Capable of affection. Capable of extraordinary emotional intensity. I had never been a flawless creature who suddenly became difficult. I had always been human.

My final position was simple. I would respect the ending. But I would not accept the accusation as the definitive history of what had happened.

I sent the message. And that was the end of the friendship.

Not the end of the grief. Not the end of the questions. And certainly not the end of the writing. But the end of our relationship as two people attempting to remain part of one another's lives.

After thirty-two months, five cycles, and an extraordinary collection of beginnings and endings, there was finally something neither of us had left open. He said he did not want me as a friend. I acknowledged that decision. And there would be no sixth attempt to rebuild the relationship.

