

A romantic couple is shown in silhouette, embracing and nearly kissing. They are standing on a grassy bank with wildflowers in the foreground. In the background, a calm lake reflects the vibrant orange and yellow light of a setting sun. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a soft purple at the top. The overall mood is intimate and peaceful.

ERIN STEVENSON

UNDER THE
AUGUST Sky

A SUMMER
LOVE STORY

Under the August Sky

Erin Stevenson

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Under the August Sky COPYRIGHT 2025 by Erin Stevenson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever, including but not limited to being used to train AI, without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews. eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with. Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version^(R) NIV^(R). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.TM Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

Scripture quotations, marked KJV are taken from the King James translation, public domain. Scripture quotations marked DR, are taken from the Douay Rheims translation, public domain.

Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM *87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2025

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0505-7

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To all those who, like me, are blessed with August
birthdays.

What People are Saying

"This is the first book I've read by Erin Stevenson, and I can't wait to read others." – Goodreads review, *A New Hope for Christmas*

"Bravo to Ms. Stevenson for a well-written, entertaining, and meaningful story of hope and redemption." – Amazon review, *Meet Me on the Porch*

"No one creates complex characters that seem like good friends better than Erin Stevenson." --Amazon review, *The Lodge at Christmas Lake*

1

"Good morning. Are you here for an appointment?" The middle-aged receptionist was way too perky for this early in the day.

Megan stifled a yawn. "Yes. Holly Thomas." She stroked her daughter's back.

"Date of birth?"

When Megan recited it, the woman's face lit up. "Today is August first. She's exactly eighteen months old." Her fingernails clacked on the keyboard. "What's Holly being seen for?"

"I think she has an ear infection." *Another ear infection.*

"OK, today you'll see John, one of our physician assistants. I'll need to make a copy of your insurance card."

Megan winced inwardly. "Um, I'll be paying cash."

The receptionist didn't comment but gave Megan a quick glance before masking her expression. She held out a clipboard. "I'll need you to fill out this new patient paperwork. Bring it back to me when you're done, Mrs. Thomas."

This time, Megan *did* wince, but she didn't care. When she shifted Holly in her arms to reach for the

clipboard, the diaper bag slipped off her shoulder, lodging in the crook of her arm. Megan shuffled over to a couch and placed her daughter on it. Holly curled into a ball and stuck her thumb in her mouth.

Megan placed a kiss on her head. "We'll see the doctor soon, baby. Maybe this one will know how to make your ears stop hurting." First things first. She had to find a way home. Megan dialed a number, cradled the phone between her ear and shoulder and started filling out the paperwork.

"Yeah?" Her dad's gruff voice blasted into her ear.

"Hi, Dad. It's me. I, um, came to the pediatric clinic with Holly. She probably has an ear infection."

He huffed. "Is that why she was crying all night?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. Anyway, they're doing all this road construction in town, and one of my tires must have picked up a nail. I was able to drive here on it, but I'll need a ride home. Then I can figure out how to get it fixed." Although after paying for this visit, Megan would probably be out of money.

"You want me to leave work to come get you? I'm running on fumes since I hardly slept. Call one of your friends." The call disconnected.

Megan fought tears. What did she expect? Her dad was barely civil when she showed up on his doorstep two weeks ago with his granddaughter and all their belongings stuffed into her small hatchback. *Call one of your friends.* Right. That equated to Sara, who worked from home, fortunately.

Megan dialed. Her foot tapped nervously. *Pick up, please pick up.*

"What's up, Meg?"

Megan breathed a sigh of relief. "Hey, I'm at the pediatric clinic with Holly. I got a flat and need a ride home. I hate to bother you, but can you help me?"

"Sure. I have a phone call at eleven that should last less than thirty minutes. I can be there by noon at the latest."

A weight lifted, and Megan drew in a deep breath. "Thank you so much, Sara. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"How will you get the tire fixed?"

Megan pressed her fingers into her throbbing temple. "I have no idea. I can only handle one crisis at a time."

"You don't have medical insurance now, do you?"

"No, but I think I have enough cash to pay Holly's bill today and get her another antibiotic."

"I wish I could help, Megan, but I just spent my entire savings at the vet." Sara had two large dogs. "You're at the clinic on Park Street?"

"Yes."

"I know where it is. See you soon."

Megan disconnected, finished the paperwork, and handed the clipboard to the receptionist. She returned to Holly, lifted the girl onto her lap and rocked her, breathing in her sweet scent. "We just can't catch a break, can we, baby girl?"

A few moments later, Megan noticed a woman sitting across from her, knitting a yellow blanket. She had beautiful silver hair shaped in a sleek bob with a vivid streak of cobalt blue running down one side. An

empty stroller sat next to her.

The lady looked up. "What's your little girl's name?"

"Holly."

"I have a granddaughter named Holly." The woman smiled, her fingers working the yarn. "She's seven. What's your daughter's middle name?"

"Christine."

"That's lovely. My Holly's middle name is Joy. She lives in Florida. I don't see her nearly enough."

"I'm sure that's hard," Megan murmured. She cradled Holly, and the woman's fingers kept moving.

A few moments later, a younger version of the woman approached, holding a small baby. "He weighs over twelve pounds now." She hooked the baby into his car seat that sat atop the stroller.

The older lady smiled. "He's a little milk monster." She gathered her things and followed the stroller out. "Bye, Holly," she said with a friendly wave.

Megan leaned back and closed her eyes. Her to-do list was growing longer by the second. Get another antibiotic for Holly. Find someone to fix the tire. Change back to her maiden name and change Holly's last name. Speak with Paul's attorney again to see if there were any loopholes. Find a job. Arrange daycare for Holly. Could Megan earn enough to cover daycare plus an apartment? Living at Dad's was growing more difficult by the day. He'd taken them in only because Megan promised it would be temporary. Staying in Sara's small house with her big dogs wasn't an option.

Despair rolled over Megan in a deep wave, and tears threatened. It would be easier to empty the ocean with a teaspoon.

"Excuse me." Megan opened her eyes. It was the lady with the silver and cobalt hair. She pressed something into Megan's hand. "Maybe this will help you with that tire."

"Oh, my."

"I've been where you are, and someone helped me. Someday, you can pass the blessing along."

Tears filled Megan's eyes. "Thank you—you have no idea—" she tightened her hold on her daughter. "Her dad died recently, and it's been—hard."

"I'm so sorry," the woman replied. "I hope this will help."

Megan's heart swelled with gratitude. "It will. Thank you again. God knew I needed an angel today."

"You're very welcome. Goodbye." She turned and left.

Megan wiped her eyes and blew her nose. She opened her hand and unfolded the bills, stunned to see eighty dollars.

"Holly Thomas?" a nurse called from the door.

Megan picked up Holly, gathered their things, and followed the woman down the hall into a room decorated with bright colors.

"I'm Laura. How are you today?"

Better than I was a few moments ago. "Fine," Megan murmured.

Laura swiped a thermometer across Holly's forehead and made a notation on an e-tablet. "John will

be with you in a few minutes.” She slipped out the door.

Holly squirmed, and Megan set her down. The baby toddled to a wall covered with a mural of farm animals and stared at them. She pointed at a cow.

“What does the cow say?” Megan prompted.

Holly didn’t say anything.

Megan was worried the constant ear infections were delaying her daughter’s speech.

A soft knock sounded on the door, and a tall man with sandy hair walked in. He smiled at Megan and extended his hand. “Hello, Mrs. Thomas, I’m John, one of the PAs.” He wore khakis and a navy polo shirt with the clinic’s logo stitched on the pocket. A stethoscope hung around his neck.

Megan placed her hand in his, and her gaze landed on his name tag. *John Johanssen*. Her stomach lurched, and she extracted her hand.

John cocked his head, and his eyes widened. “You’re not—Megan Landon, are you?”

Oh, my goodness. Heat flooded Megan’s face. “Yes.” It sounded like a croak, and she cleared her throat.

He grinned, nearly robbing Megan of breath. “You haven’t changed a bit. Still the prettiest cheerleader at EVHS.” Was the man blind? She did her best not to cringe.

In one smooth movement, he reached into a cupboard, closed the door, and lowered himself to the floor, crossing his long legs. He held a small blue rubber ball in his hand and rolled it to Holly.

Megan couldn’t think of a thing to say.

John smiled, and his beautiful blue-gray eyes twinkled. "This would be when you say, 'you haven't changed either, John,' but we both know that's not true." He laughed. "Yes, I'm Fat JoJo."

Megan wished she could vanish. When the Johanssen family moved to town in sixth grade, poor John became the target of countless jokes that continued into high school when he became Fat JoJo. Megan had been part of the "cool" crowd that taunted him mercilessly, even though she personally didn't participate. She knew he had a longtime crush on her, and they had had one particular exchange for which Megan felt deep shame. She could hardly meet his gaze. She was dying to know how the changes came about but was too embarrassed to ask.

The blue ball lay at Holly's feet, and she stared at John. He rolled a red ball to her, and she picked it up.

"Can you bring it to me, Holly?" he asked, holding out his hands. She giggled and threw it toward him, but it went wide. He reached out with one long arm and caught it. "Good throw!"

He rolled the ball to the baby again and turned his attention to Megan. "I thought about going to med school but didn't want to be in that much debt or start my career in my thirties. I chose the PA route, and it's perfect for me."

"I'm glad," Megan said, meaning it.

John rolled a yellow ball to Holly. She sat and rolled it back to him, then crawled over to the blue ball, picked it up, and rolled it to him. For the next few minutes, the two of them rolled the balls back and

forth. Holly giggled and clapped her little hands with glee.

"My first year of college, I grew five inches, and one more the next. I took up running and the weight fell off." He shrugged. "I got contacts and a haircut." His hair was gorgeous. Thick waves with a tousled look. As she remembered, it stuck out awkwardly when he was a teen. Megan swallowed.

"Good girl, Holly," he said. Without Megan having realized it, he had scooted closer and was inches away from the baby. He held out his stethoscope. "Wanna play with this?" He handed her the end and slipped the earpieces in his ears. Then he covered her hand and tapped her chest with it and made faces at her while he listened. Megan was mesmerized at his easygoing manner. Holly was usually wary of strangers but had warmed up to John in minutes.

He pulled something out of his pocket. "Where's Holly's nose?" She didn't say anything, and he tapped her nose with his finger. "Boop, boop, there's Holly's nose." The girl giggled, and he repeated the exercise, sneaking a look inside. He did the same routine with her ears and her mouth. Megan couldn't believe how engaging and efficient he was.

Then he rose and settled into the chair next to Megan. A woodsy scent emanated from him. "How many ear infections has she had?"

Megan shook her head. "At least a half dozen. Four this year so far. I wrote on the form all the different antibiotics she's been on, each one stronger

than the last."

He nodded. "I saw that. Have you thought about getting tubes in her ears?"

Megan bit her inner lip. "Yes. I'm afraid it's delaying her speech." She hesitated. "But I can't afford it right now."

"How many words is she saying?"

Megan relayed that information, and he nodded. "I think she'd get back on track quickly if she had the tubes put in." He hesitated. "I heard that you were recently widowed. I'm sorry."

"Thank you," she whispered. Megan was certain the whole town was talking about her. She wasn't technically a widow but wasn't ready to explain her circumstances to anyone except Sara.

"There are options for covering the surgery. You can arrange a payment plan," John said. His gaze was filled with compassion. "I'd really recommend you try to do that for Holly."

Megan didn't even have a job. She fought the urge to cry. "I'll think about it."

John rose and pulled a pad out of a drawer. "Here's for another antibiotic, although I'm not sure it will do much good." He handed her the script. "I also noted some over-the-counter baby ear drops and the recommended dosage of children's ibuprofen to help with her pain."

Megan hadn't thought of ear drops. She felt like the world's worst mother. "Thank you," she murmured.

"Most of the pediatric ENTs in the area have

waiting lists to even get an appointment, but I know one over in Salem who holds a few slots open for emergencies, and she owes me a favor." He smiled. "I'll call her today, and her office will contact you."

"I appreciate that so much, John." Why was he going out of his way to be so nice? Did he still carry a torch for her?

"I want Holly to have the medical care she needs."
Oh, swallow me up, earth. "Right. Of course."

Holly toddled over to John and pounded his leg. "Da!"

Megan's face flamed. That was the word most toddlers used for Daddy, but Holly didn't know. Perhaps John wouldn't notice.

He scooped the baby up and bounced her in his arms. "You're a sweetie, Holly. Come back and see me, OK?"

Megan held out her arms, and John deposited Holly into them. "Thanks so much, John."

He held the door, and she followed him into the hallway. "Nice seeing you, Megan."

"You, too." He turned left and she went right, toward the checkout desk. She sighed. *One step at a time.* She'd pay today's bill first, then get the antibiotic and face the impossible challenge of paying for Holly's ear tube surgery later.

And she would add one more item to her list—*apologize to John Johanssen.*

She approached the desk. The receptionist she'd checked in with was leaving and another woman took her place. "I'm Megan Thomas, I need to pay for

Holly's appointment." The woman tapped on some keys and announced the total. Megan's knees almost buckled. Her mind spun. "Um, can I arrange a payment plan?"

The woman spoke kindly. "No, I'm sorry. You already received a discount for paying cash."

A discount? Megan extracted a credit card from her wallet and handed it over. *Please, Lord, let there be enough.* She held her breath while the woman processed the transaction.

"Sign here, please."

Megan's heart resumed beating. She scribbled her name, took the receipt, gathered her things, and left.

2

John went straight to the break room and poured a cup of coffee. His hand shook, and he hadn't even had any caffeine yet.

Megan Landon. He couldn't believe he'd come face to face with her, today of all days. Just that morning, John had asked God for a sign—any sign—that he'd made the right decision to move back to Emerald Valley.

He leaned against the counter, blew across the top of his mug, and then took a sip. Megan was the first girl he'd ever loved. Well, loved from afar, because no girl would come within ten feet of Fat JoJo. She was still beautiful in that cheerleader-homecoming-queen kind of way, and why not? She'd been both. As a teen, her dark brunette hair had fallen in a straight, satiny curtain almost to her waist. Today, a limp, dull ponytail hung over one shoulder. Her green eyes were devoid of makeup and puffy. She was curvier than she had been in high school, but John preferred that to the starving model look.

What had happened to Megan? She'd left Emerald Valley after graduation. Someone said she moved to Portland and married a wealthy doctor. How had he died? Why was she back here, looking as if the weight

of the world was upon her? Most puzzling of all, why could she not afford the ear tube surgery for her daughter? Something didn't add up.

He finished his coffee, and his watch beeped. One of his colleagues had asked him to swap lunch breaks, and he needed to leave soon. But first, he wanted to call his pediatric ENT acquaintance and arrange an appointment for Holly.

"This is Dr. Shepherd."

"Hey, Lissa, it's John Johanssen."

A sultry feminine laugh rippled into his ear. "Hello, John. You sure know how to brighten a girl's Monday."

John squeezed the bridge of his nose. "Ah, I only have a few minutes. I'm calling in that favor." He had covered for her at a recent medical symposium when she had come down with the flu.

"Sure, I'll be your wedding date. Surely you have a friend or brother getting married soon." The flirty tone in her voice was impossible to miss. Lissa had hinted that she was interested in more than a professional connection, and John had so far managed to keep her at arm's length. She was a top-notch physician but had a reputation for playing fast and loose on the weekends.

John had already gone down that road once. "Um, thanks, but it's a professional favor."

"You just ruined my Monday. I'm kidding, John. What's up?" She was in business mode now.

He explained little Holly's case. "I've known her mother for years. She's a recent widow, and I'd like to