

A BOOK OF REMEMBRANCE

by

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CHAPTER 1

I settled into my salon chair after a busy day and answered my vibrating phone. “Hey, Abby. What’s up?”

“Can you talk? I have something to ask you. It’s important.” My older sister’s words tumbled out.

“Sure, for a minute.” I slipped off my shoes and rubbed my achy feet together. No need to worry if they smelled, not with the pungent odor of permanent wave solution lingering like overcooked sauerkraut.

“I have great news. Mike is coming home in two weeks. Isn’t that exciting?”

My oldest brother was as exciting as watching the hour hand on a clock move—and as an accountant, just as predictable. I forced a weak, “Yay.”

“Tom’s keeping that weekend open, too, so we can finally all be together to discuss Mom’s care. That is, if you can make it home March first. Can you?”

Heaviness descended on my chest as if I’d been suddenly trapped beneath a rail car and all the air was being forced out of me. How could my loving sister bring this up today?

“Jordyn? Are you still there?”

I sucked in a quick breath. “Yeah, I’m here.” And that was exactly where I planned to stay—a hundred miles away.

“You’ll make it home, won’t you?”

I paused, pretending to consider it. “Sorry, but it’s my Saturday to work.” I didn’t have to try to sound disappointed—I was. Obviously, she’d forgotten today was my birthday.

Brittany, who’d been styling hair alongside me all day, scurried over and whispered, “I can switch with you.”

I shook my head, tension knitting my eyebrows together.

“So find someone to cover for you,” Abby said. “You can’t keep denying this is happening. Mom’s slipping away, and I don’t want you to regret not spending time with her while she still knows you.”

Mom never really knew me. I was Little Oopsy, born when my parents were close to becoming empty-nesters. I’m sure she blamed me for Dad leaving us.

I swiveled the chair so my back was toward Brittany and lowered my voice. “It’s not that easy to find someone.”

“Could you at least try?” she asked. “You have two whole weeks. It’s important we’re together when we make these decisions.”

My three older siblings only wanted me home so they could talk me into becoming Mom’s caregiver. Like that would ever happen. In the end, what would it matter? Mom wouldn’t recognize who was caring for her anyhow.

“For me, Jordyn. Please?”

After all Abby had done for me, how could I at least not let her think I’d try? “Okay, I’ll do my best. But I’m not making any promises.”

“Thank you.” Her voice lightened. “Oh, I almost forgot. Happy birthday, sweetheart! Are you and Brian celebrating tonight?”

My heart warmed. “It’s Friday, so he has to—” I stopped when the salon’s owner, Mrs. Hannigan, strode out of her office and onto the salon floor. “I’ll have to call you back.” I slipped into my shoes, bounced up, and grabbed a broom.

She marched toward the front door in her tailored wool coat, her low-heeled winter boots clacking on the tiled floor. When she reached the door, she turned toward us. “Now don’t dilly dally, and remember to lock up.” Her lips pursed in distaste as she fanned the room with her gloved hand. “And dispose of those gaudy balloons.”

I caught Brittany’s gaze, and in practiced unison we answered, “Yes, Mrs. Hannigan.”

She was difficult to work for, but she paid us well at Prestigious Pamperings. Brittany and I jokingly called it Pampers because most of our clients were elderly, like its owner. The job paid well, but someday I hoped to own my own salon and style hair for people closer to my age—clients who’d ask for blue hair and not mean a bluish rinse on their gray.

After Mrs. Hannigan left, Brittany set her broom aside and placed her arm around my shoulder. “I don’t mean to pry, but is everything okay with your mom?”

I took a calming breath. It was my birthday. Valentine’s Day. Definitely not a day to be thinking about Mom. She wouldn’t be thinking about me that was for sure. Wouldn’t even remember my birthday. Alzheimer’s could be blamed for that, but not for the distance between us. At least suffering from the disease kept her from being disappointed in my lifestyle.

“She’s okay. Just a little forgetful.” I grabbed the string of one of the heart-shaped helium balloons adorning our workspace. “What are you and Kevin doing for Valentine’s Day?”

She rolled her eyes. “Mr. Miser’s picking up a movie and a pizza. We’re staying in.”

“You’ll be together, though, right?”

“I guess, but maybe I should spring for the pizza. Get a real one delivered. He always buys the cheapest frozen brand.”

I laughed. “Don’t feel bad. Brian’s buying me a burger at Bubby’s. On his break,” I quickly added, so she wouldn’t feel jealous. We often ranted about our cheapskate boyfriends, but I knew Brian was saving and working extra hours to buy me an engagement ring. Though we didn’t see each other as much as I’d like, it would be worth it once he popped the question—which better be soon.

Four years was long enough to wait, wasn’t it? I had originally planned to be married and have a baby by now, my twenty-fourth birthday. By this age all three of my siblings had started their perfect little families, just like the one they’d enjoyed growing up. Before I’d come along.

Please, Brian, propose tonight.

What if he didn’t? My stomach churned. Could he be that dense? No, he knew how much getting engaged meant to me. If he didn’t, I’d tell him again. Maybe give him an ultimatum. My palms began to sweat. Could I walk away from him? Why had I moved in with him before we were married? I knew better, for so many reasons. A ring tonight would almost make an honest woman of me—and get my family off my back.

I grabbed the last balloon and offered it to Brittany.

She shook her head. “What are you going to do with them?”

“Give them to Brian at work. He said we shouldn’t buy each other anything for Valentine’s Day, but free shouldn’t count, right?”

“Neither should an engagement ring.” Brittany squealed. “So, do you think he’ll propose tonight? There couldn’t be a more romantic day.”

“Yeah, but that’s sort of the problem. He wants it to be a surprise.”

“He could still surprise you. Slip the ring into a glass of Sprite, like an olive in a martini.”

I grinned. “Don’t think I haven’t thought of a hundred different ways. He could hide it in a tray of popcorn, or in the whipped topping of a grasshopper, or…” I dropped my jaw and made big eyes. “What do you think of my surprised face?”

She laughed then crinkled her nose. “Let’s hope he pulls off surprising you.”

If only he didn’t need to. Surprises were overrated, and I’d already had more than my fair share in life.

As we walked to our cars, a cold Minnesota breeze sent the balloons bouncing off each other. I tightened my grip on their strings, lowered my head, and pressed onward with Brittany.

“If you need to switch Saturdays, I will.” She opened her car’s door.

“Thanks. I’ll think about it. See you Monday, Britt.” I hopped into the stiff driver’s seat, fighting to pull the balloons in after me, and swatted them over to the passenger side. I prayed Old Betty would start. The engine reluctantly turned over, groaning and moaning its displeasure.

Giving the engine a few minutes to warm up, I picked up my phone. With a few swipes and touches, I checked my bank account balances. It was payday, so I transferred \$300 from my checking account into savings, which now had a balance of just over \$8,000—almost enough for a down payment on a starter home, once Brian and I were married.

Just before six, I opened my apartment door and gasped. *Holy Crap!* Clothes lay scattered all over the living room. Papers and books and dirty dishes were strewn everywhere. I’d seen tornados do less damage. There went the warning bell in my head again. Did I really want to marry this guy? I sat down, took a deep breath—and talked myself off the ledge. Eventually, he’d change. In less than three months he’d graduate from college. For now, I could put up with his messes.

I trudged into the kitchen and ran water into the sink, squirting in lots of dish soap. Crusted dishes lined the countertop and would need to soak—much like my tired body. I scrunched my eyes closed for a moment, took another deep breath, and tossed the mucked-up blender jar and its accompanying grimy glass into the sudsy water. Weight lifting gave Brian a voracious appetite and a penchant for chocolate protein shakes. Next into the water went the pan he'd used to scramble half a dozen eggs, their cracked shells glued to the countertop as evidence. Dirty plates, bowls, glasses, and silverware followed.

While the dishes soaked, I picked up a stiff sock from the kitchen floor and followed a trail of soiled clothing into the bedroom, gathering them as I went. Once the dishes were washed and the apartment picked up and vacuumed, I finally took a quick shower.

After applying my makeup, I pulled on a tight-fitting pair of skinny jeans, cursed the clothes dryer for shrinking them, and swore off Little Debbie snacks—again. Next, I slipped into a silky red top with a heart-shaped neckline and checked myself in the dresser mirror. I pushed out my chest, pulled back my shoulders, and decided some of my newly added weight had filled out the right places for once. My auburn curls bounced on my shoulders as I dashed out the door later than planned.

After cruising Bubby's full parking lot, I circled the block and found a spot on the street. Leaving the warmth of my car behind, I faced the greater outdoors with balloons in hand and made my way around patches of drifted snow with the caution of a soldier crossing a minefield. Why was I wearing four-inch heels in February? Picturing the practical footwear of my silver-haired clients, their Velcro-strapped sneakers and rubber-soled boots, I shivered, but not from the cold. The price of wearing Prada, albeit a knock-off, must be paid.

When I reached for the handle of Bubby's front door, it opened suddenly and startled me. I slipped on some ice, and the man coming out of the bar caught me by my arm and held me up. The balloons clutched in my fist whipped in all directions as I regained balance.

"Are you okay?" The silver badge on his navy jacket glistened in the amber light.

"I think so, officer. Thanks." He looked vaguely familiar. Or, at best, the port-wine birthmark the size of a dime on his cheek did.

He gave me a questioning glance. "Have we met before?"

I'd have thought it a lame pickup line had I not sensed the same thing. "Maybe. My boyfriend works here." My warm breath hit the cold air and sent out a cloud of impatience.

"Ah, that's probably..." He paused. "Where'd you go to high school?"

Really? Now? "Tinder, which is south of the Cities—"

"That's it! You're a friend of Sammy's, aren't you?"

I nodded, bouncing in place to keep warm. Sammy had been my best friend in high school, but we'd lost touch since I moved away.

"I'm Cameron." He pointed at his right eye like it was a secret code, but for what?

"Oh yeah, Cameron." I feigned remembering him. "Good seeing you again." *Whoever you are.*

"You too." He opened the door for me. "Tell Sammy hi from me, okay?"

"Yeah, sure." I let the door slam behind me, showed my ID, handed the five-dollar cover charge to a square-chinned bruiser, and bounced in to the beat of the live band Pond Thumpers. Bubby's postage-stamp dance floor was spilling people into the aisles—just like the beer spilling out of their glasses. My heart beat in rhythm with the pounding music as I scanned the bar.

Catching a glimpse of Brian's profile, I grinned. Hordes of people stood in lines four-or-five deep next to the bar that encircled him and two other bartenders. Bubby's barmaids rushed back and forth, delivering full trays of drinks to tables and booths, many girls sitting on guys' laps—for space reasons, of course.

A tall blonde collided with my bouquet of balloons. "Hey!"

"Sorry," I said, raising my voice above the music and the balloons above my head. She laughed and slinked away. The balloons seemed like a bad idea now. Where could I get rid of them? Darting toward the booth that Brian and I called "ours," a snookered-up short man collided with me.

"Nice balloons." He stared shamelessly at my chest.

"Here." I shoved the balloons into his free hand and scurried toward the bar, following the well-manuevered moves of Amber, Bubby's voluptuous barmaid.

"Hey, hands off, buddy!" She wriggled free from the grip of a slobbering middle-aged lush, who turned and yelled obscenities at me as if I represented all women who had ever scorned him, which I could safely assume were many.

Slipping away, I caught my breath and looked for another route. While plotting my course, I spied Brian—his broad shoulders, chiseled jaw line, and quirky smile. My skin tingled and my heart surged with longing. He filled Amber's tray with a variety of bottles, cans, and glasses.

When he finished, he cocked his head toward her and paused.

Amber planted a kiss on his cheek—and he grinned.

CHAPTER 2

My pounding heart pushed against my chest. My breathing accelerated. Short. Choppy. Breaths. *Calm down, Jordyn.* I took a step backwards. Why had Brian let Amber kiss him? He was in love with me, planning to propose to *me*. There had to be a logical explanation. I set out to find one.

Gaining courage and momentum with each forceful step, I shoved and pushed my way through the crowd. I squeezed in between two guys standing at the bar. Brian mixed a drink and set it in front of the guy to my left.

Brian's eyes met mine, and his face lit up. Was he pleased or surprised? He leaned in and brushed my lips with a quick kiss. He tasted salty, and his face glistened with perspiration. "I don't think I'll get a break tonight."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "I saw Amber kiss you." There, I'd said it.

His face reddened then he laughed. "On the cheek?"

Why was that a question? "Yeah, unless I missed something else."

"Geez, Jordyn. You can't seriously be jealous. I did her a favor. Got her drinks before Rachel's. She was just thanking me."

I disliked her payment plan. "She does this often?" *So* not acceptable.

"No, no." He shook his head. "It's not like that."

A wiry man grabbed his arm. "Hey, buddy, get me a Miller Light, will you?"

“Seriously, Jordyn. I can’t do this now.” He turned and got the guy a beer. “Don’t you trust me? We’ll talk after work, okay?” He kissed my forehead and gave a charming smile to the woman waving dollar bills at him.

My heart sank, and I turned to leave. Happy birthday to me. *Enjoy Valentine’s Day alone, Jordyn.* How could I? Brian was my life, only we hadn’t been spending much time together lately. It felt as if I were on life support, our relationship in need of some serious resuscitation. But I did trust him. Maybe it was just a little innocent flirting. Besides, Amber looked like quite the tease with her tight jeans and low-cut top. I hiked mine up a little higher and zipped my jacket. It had gotten a lot chillier.

On my way home, I thought of ways to cheer myself: bubble bath, favorite movie, and ice cream. My stomach growled, reminding me I hadn’t eaten supper. I stopped by LeAnn Chin and ordered bourbon chicken to go. The delicious aroma filled the car, and I could barely keep from breaking into the container. Next, McDonald’s drive thru. I ordered a vanilla ice cream cone and finished eating it while climbing the stairs to our third-floor apartment.

At least the apartment was clean so I could relax and try to enjoy what was left of Valentine’s Day—and my birthday. My lower lip extended. Why couldn’t Brian have taken the night off? Just this once. For me. It wasn’t like I hadn’t asked. Hadn’t shed a waterfall of tears over how little time we spent together. I forced the thought away, refusing to wallow in self-pity.

I grabbed a real fork from the kitchen and plopped down on our rummage-sale couch in the living room. Balancing my bourbon chicken with one hand, I grabbed the remote and powered on the television for a dinner companion. No signal.

Rats! I set my chicken on the coffee table and went to check the Internet connection. When I powered on my laptop, it read “no available connection.” *Great! Another*

disappointment. Before I called the cable company, I unplugged all black boxes and counted to thirty—I'd been through this drill before. After reconnecting them, I got the same message.

Sputtering under my breath, I punched in the cable company's phone number. I shoved sweet and fatty chicken pieces into my mouth while I sat on hold.

"Cable Com," a woman answered. "May I help you?"

I swallowed my mouthful and cleared my throat. "I sure hope so. Our cable and Internet aren't working. Are you having problems?"

She asked for information to verify our account and informed me, rather rudely, that last month's bill was past due.

Our bill-paying system had worked—until now. I paid our rent, and Brian paid our cable and electric bills, or at least he was supposed to. I didn't argue. When she offered to accept payment over the phone, I declined. Now Brian had two things he needed to explain.

I curled up on the couch, finished devouring my bourbon chicken, and checked the time. Nine-thirty. What would I do until Brian got home? I'd forgotten to call Abby back earlier, so I pushed her speed-dial number.

"Jordyn! Happy birthday again."

I choked up, feeling the love. "Is this a good time to call? Are the boys in bed?"

"Your timing's perfect. I just finished prayers and tucked the little monkeys in." She exhaled. "Tell me how you celebrated your birthday."

"Ah..." My voice cracked.

"Are you okay?"

Who needed FaceTime? Abby could always tell when something was wrong. I gulped a big breath and spilled out my disappointment in not having supper with Brian. I didn't want to give Abby another reason not to like Brian, so I held back sharing about Amber's kiss.

"Sorry your evening didn't turn out as planned. Birthdays can be hard."

I cleared the lump lodged in my throat. "Did you and Ryan do anything special for Valentine's Day?"

"Thinking about it is as far as we ever get." She chortled. "I'm just content to stay home and spend time as a family. They grow up so fast, you know. I can't believe Emily's twelve already. And look at you!"

Abby had been twelve when I was born. She adored me, and I adored her. When I turned twelve, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl who was now twelve. It was my turn to have a baby, but how could that dream happen when I wasn't even married yet, much less pregnant.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I forgot this birthday might be a hard one for you. But you're still young. Plenty of time left for lots of children. Maybe one of the boys will be twelve when your first baby arrives. Little Eden, right? If it's a girl."

That was supposed to comfort me? Her boys were only six and four. Now I wondered how I could have children with Brian if he couldn't even commit to paying the cable bill on time.

"Did I make things worse?" She paused, but I couldn't answer. "I did. I made things worse. Oh, sweetie, I am so sorry. Please forgive me."

I squeaked out, "I'm just tired."

"Do you want me to come there? I will, you know. Just say the word."

"I'll be all right. I should probably just go to bed."

“I wish I was there to give you a great big bear hug.” She made a familiar growling noise, and I wrapped my arms around myself and returned a pathetic growl. “I’ll call you tomorrow,” she said. “I need to update you on Mom.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled.

“Love you, Jordyn.”

“Love you too.”

In some ways, Abby was more like a mother to me than our own. When Dad had divorced Mom after twenty-five years of marriage, Mom could barely take care of herself, let alone me. Abby had helped us through that difficult time.

I grabbed a fleece blanket and pillow, put my favorite movie, *Overboard*, into the DVD player, snuggled up on the couch, and hit play. The next morning I awoke in the same position on the couch. Had Brian come home? I raced to our bedroom. He was spread out over the whole bed, asleep on his stomach. The clock radio read eight-thirty. He’d sleep at least until noon.

How could I wait that long to talk to him? My antsy feet paced the living room, longing to crawl into bed and lie next to him, desperate to hear him say everything would be all right. Lie to me, if he had to.

He stirred in bed just before one, and I ran into the kitchen and rattled pots and pans. But who was hungry? I’d eaten four pieces of french toast, a giant-size Snickers bar, and three Little Debbie Oatmeal Crème Pies in less than four hours. Plus, I had drunk two cans of Mountain Dew, normally reserved for the times I desperately needed to stay awake. That was so not the case today.

Brian stumbled out of the bedroom in a pair of silky black boxers screen printed with dozens of ruby red lips on them. When had he bought those? He yawned and stretched on his

way to the bathroom, running his fingers through a mop of chestnut brown hair, his bare pectorals flexing.

I returned to pacing. Maybe I should just drop the whole subject. Trust him. Not need an explanation. I craved another Little Debbie snack. No, I needed to have this conversation before I no longer fit into my fat jeans. The sound of the toilet flushing sent my arms fluttering by my side. Where should I stand? The apartment wasn't that big. He'd see me when the door opened as long as I wasn't in the kitchen. I struck a pose. Sucked in my gut. Threw back my shoulders.

And waited for Brian to walk out.

CHAPTER 3

“Hey, babe.” Brian winked at me on his way to the kitchen, and I followed like a lost lamb. “I’m glad you didn’t wait up.” He stretched, revealing his hairy armpits and the stench of last night’s work. “It was brutal. After four before I got home.” He opened the fridge, pulled out a gallon of one-percent milk, and halfway filled the blender jar I had washed yesterday.

I sat at the table in one of our mismatched, wobbly chairs, feeling as off balance. With knotted stomach, I crossed and uncrossed my legs until finally blurting, “So, what about Amber’s kiss? You said we’d talk. And just so you know, her payment method is *not* acceptable.”

“Geez, Jordyn, chill. It was just a peck on the cheek.” He added frozen blueberries and protein powder to the milk and *whirred* the blender. He poured his frothy drink into a mug and took a seat next to me at the table. “What do you want me to say?”

“How about it will never happen again?” I crossed my arms. “What if all my customers paid me with a kiss?”

He laughed his boisterous, contagious laugh that I loved and almost choked on his drink. “If that’s how they paid you, we’d go broke. Hey, I really raked in the tips last night.”

“That’s what I meant, tips. What if they all *tipped* me with a kiss? How’d you like that?”

He pried my arms apart with his cold fingers and rested one hand on top of mine. “Okay, beautiful, you’ve made your point. But you have nothing to worry about. Amber and I are just friends. We’ve worked together for years. You’re the one I love.”

I let out the breath I’d been holding. “So you’ll tell her to keep her lips to herself?”

“Whatever makes you happy.” He leaned toward me and his moist, icy lips touched mine in a tender kiss. I tasted blueberries and sweetness.

My tilted world resumed its steady orbit, my future plans with Brian intact. Well, almost intact. He still hadn’t proposed. I straightened my shoulders. “We need to talk about us, and—”

He got up from the table, drink in hand. “Can’t, I’m late.” He hustled into the bedroom and returned a minute later wearing ratty sweatpants and an old T-shirt. “I’m meeting Tony at the gym.”

I followed him to the door. “We can talk when you get back, okay?”

His forehead crinkled. “I’m meeting a group at the library for a class project later.”

“All afternoon?”

He downed the rest of his drink. “We’ll talk tomorrow.” He handed me his dirty glass, kissed me with his cold, wet lips and left.

After rinsing his glass, I wandered into the bedroom to get a load of clothes to wash. His boxers lay on my neatly vacuumed floor. How much extra effort would it take for him to hit the clothes basket? Honestly, wild orangutans would be easier to train. I picked up his boxers and threw them into the basket. He’d found time to shop. Work out. Yet he couldn’t find time for us.

In the laundry room, I had just pushed the quarters into the slots when Abby called. After hearing multiple stories about the things Mom no longer remembered, I regretted having answered my phone.

“I get it, Abby. She has Alzheimer’s. Forgetting is part of it.” I wouldn’t wish the disease on anyone, not even Mom, but at least *she* could forget our rocky past. Something I couldn’t.

“She needs more help than I’m able to give her now.”

Like I could do anything about that? “Then hire someone to take care of her, or put her in a nursing home or something.”

Abby went silent.

My nursing home comment had crossed the line—again. “I’m sorry. I wish I could be more sympathetic but, well, you know.”

“Yeah, but that’s no excuse. You need to give her another chance.”

Why? Why should I resurrect a relationship that had died years ago?

“Jordyn?”

“I just can’t do it, Abbs, but I’ll try to be more supportive of you.”

“Then start by coming home on the first. You’re a part of our family, and I want us all to be together.” Her tone softened. “Ethan and Eli would love to see you. They keep asking when their favorite auntie will be home to play with them.”

I sighed. “Okay, I’ll try.”

###

On Monday morning, I raced into Pampers at ten minutes after nine. Late—again. Mrs. Hannigan gave me a weary look and escorted me back to her office.

“My car wouldn’t start.” Taking rapid, deep breaths I tried to sound more out of breath than I actually was. Brian said he may have tripped on the block heater’s cord the night before. It would be just like him not to plug it back in. I’d woken him this morning to jump-start my car.

“It’s this blasted cold spell.” I pretended to shiver, though the temperature in the room was dropping steadily from her icy glare.

“Jordyn, this is the third time since January. The third *Monday*. Need I say more?”

Yes, please. I was clueless. If she thought I partied on weekends, then she didn’t know me. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Hannigan. It won’t happen again.”

“You better hope it doesn’t. If it does, you’ll no longer be employed here.”

My stomach sank. I didn’t want to lose this job even if I disliked working for the old biddy. I slipped into my oversized polyester jacket with multiple pockets, feeling oh-so pretty, and hurried to my work station. Seated in my swivel chair was Mrs. Jondahl—my regular *Monday* appointment.

I plastered on a big smile. “Mrs. Jondahl!” She was an ornery old coot who allowed only me to touch her wiry gray hair. Lucky me. Well, actually, yes. She was my best tipper. So I kissed up to her and pushed down the thoughts of Amber kissing my man—and the fact that Brian hadn’t found any time all weekend for us to have the conversation he’d promised.

“How was your weekend, Mrs. Jondahl? Did you do anything exciting?” That seemed improbable for so many reasons, yet I always asked.

“You’re late.” She glowered at me in the mirror lined with photos of my seven nieces and nephews. “I suppose it was that old car of yours again. When are you ever going to buy a new one? They must pay you well enough for what I’m charged.”

I feigned a smile. “You know it takes money to keep a business like this running. Rent, utilities...employees.”

“Pssh! If you aren’t making at least half of what I’m charged, you need to find another place of employment.” She studied my face, though I forced a blank expression. We were

prohibited from discussing our percentage with clients. But she was right; I made half. This highly sought-after job paid well and had a low turnover rate. However, money wasn't everything, and I didn't plan on staying at Pampers forever. Still, I wanted it to be my choice when I was done here, not Mrs. Hannigan's.

"Did you see any of those adorable great grandchildren this weekend?" I asked, brushing her hair. "Little Sophie? Any pictures?"

She groaned one last time and brightened, grasping for her purse. Every week she brought out the same well-worn photos of little ones, and every week we exchanged stories about the children we each loved. This was our common thread. Granted, we rarely experienced the stories we told, but we both enjoyed sharing what the children's parents had told us.

At the end of our time together, Mrs. Jondahl was as toasty as a hot-cross bun. She shoved her usual tip, a twenty-dollar bill, in my hand and squeezed. "Put this toward a new car."

"You're too generous, Mrs. Jondahl. Thank you so much." I gave her a hug and genuine warmth flowed between us. Though I hadn't worked there long enough to experience this yet, others said losing a client to death was the hardest part of the job. I was beginning to understand why.

###

Brian picked up two more evening shifts. He said some new guy had quit after only two weeks and left Bubby shorthanded. Now we only saw each other on Sundays and Thursday evenings. I paid the cable bill so I'd have more to watch during all those lonely evenings.

On Saturday I worked until noon, having switched with Brittany so I could go home the following weekend for the dreaded family meeting. The rest of the day I watched a marathon of *7th Heaven* on the Hallmark channel. The happy television family with all their happy children

made me long for the same thing with Brian—except I never wanted him to become a pastor, which was unlikely, anyhow.

On Sunday, Brian watched sports and I snuggled next to him. There never seemed to be the right moment to ask him about our engagement. Maybe it was because I was content just to spend time with him. Or maybe I was having second thoughts about our future. Either way, I wasn't ready to face disappointment.

Monday morning I arrived early for work, armed with a photo of my youngest nephews, Ethan and Eli, and a story about them to tell Mrs. Jondahl. The day before I'd received a text from Abby and a photo attached of the boys looking like professional mud wrestlers, thanks to an unseasonable warm snap. The boys had built a ramp that ended in a lake of melted snow, then the oldest, only six, organized a neighborhood contest to see who could make the biggest splash. Abby said mud had dripped off their eyelashes, though it was hard to see in the photo with their blackened faces. I couldn't have been more proud of them.

Mrs. Jondahl told stories of her children's mud adventures, and my cheeks hurt with laughter by the end of our time together. All this only made my heart ache more to have my own child. When would it be my turn to be a mother? Maybe I should stop taking birth control pills. Was I that desperate? Willing to raise a child with or without Brian?

Later that day, I received a call from our utility company. Brian had also missed paying our electric bill. After playing phone tag, I reached him in between his classes and caught him up on the late cable and electric bills.

“Sorry, Jordyn. My student loan didn't come in on time.”

More like he hadn't gotten the paperwork in on time. “Oh, well. I took care of it. You can pay me back whenever.” *Or a ring will do.*

“Thanks, I owe you. I better get to class.”

“Sure, honey. I love you. See you tonight.”

“Gotta work, remember?”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. Maybe I’ll stop by Bubby’s and grab a burger. What time will you—”

“No. Not a good idea. I haven’t been taking breaks.”

“Then I’ll just sit at the bar, and—”

“Seriously, Jordyn. It’s too busy.”

On a Monday night?”

“I gotta run.” Click.

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Tuesday’s noon-to-nine shift, as usual, felt like I was serving a life sentence. The evening clientele, mostly walk-ins, were typically middle-aged men, still employed but seemingly disillusioned with life. They reminded me of my dad, who had thought he was on the homestretch of fatherhood until I came along, his Little Oopsy. Mom had finally gotten him to quit calling me that by the time I turned four, but something like that was hard to forget.

When I got to the apartment, I pulled a stack of letters from our mailbox and sorted through advertisements while climbing the stairs. Once inside, I put Brian’s bank statement aside and tossed the junk mail into the garbage. Never before had the urge to open his mail been so tempting. When we were married, we would share that information, right? I needed to know how much money he had saved for my ring, and where the rest excluding tuition might be going.

I steamed open the envelope.

The statement showed less than a hundred dollars, which was after his ready reserve had kicked in a thousand. I scanned the statement. It showed numerous ATM withdrawals, and his student loan funds had arrived three weeks ago. What was going on? I couldn't find where he'd paid tuition. Was he even going to class? My heart skipped a beat. He must be going or they wouldn't have given him a loan. Where had all his money gone? A knot tightened in my stomach.

Had he ever been saving for my engagement ring?