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By Allison Morgan

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WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMON-DROP MARTINIS...

Real-estate broker Lanie Howard figures she has the perfect man, the perfect job, and the perfect life. Then she stumbles across her old Someday Jar, the forgotten glass relic where she stashed all the childhood wishes—no matter how crazy—that her father encouraged her to write down on the backs of Chinese restaurant fortunes. She used to be fun once! What happened to her?

DON'T CHOKE ON THE RIND.

Although Lanie is wary of uncorking her past, when an attractive stranger saves her from a life-or-death encounter with a lemon peel at the bottom of a martini glass, she realizes that life is way too short for regrets. Now, jar in hand, Lanie decides to throw caution to the wind, and carry out everything she had once hoped to do, even if it means leaving her perfectly “perfect” life behind...

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *THE SOMEDAY JAR*:

"A reminder that the idealism of childhood dreams is something we should always hold onto, this novel sparks hope with its whimsical story. From heartwarming to heart-wrenching, the ups and downs of the main character's journey, through romance, loss and new beginnings, might just inspire readers to follow some long-lost dreams of their own."-- *RT Book Reviews*

About the Author

Allison Morgan lives in sunny Arizona with her family. She loves the messed up morning hair of her kids, Baileys in her coffee, and watching Arizona Cardinals football games (except when they lose) with her handsome hubby. *The Someday Jar* is her first novel.

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one

Don't panic, Lanie.

Don't freak out.

Don't shove your hand into the paper shredder. It won't fit.

Sifting through the contracts piled high on my desk—I swear twelve trees are chopped down each time a house is sold—checking the trash can and digging through my purse, I find nothing. Nothing!

How is this possible? I'm twenty-seven years old with dental floss, multivitamins, and spare staples in my desk drawer. I have no past due library books or expired tags on my car. I never litter. Never chew with my mouth open. I lift heavy things with my legs, not back. A responsible adult by any account. Yet, somehow, somehow, I've carelessly gone and lost the single most important thing I *shouldn't* lose. My engagement ring.

"Lanie?" Evan, my fiancé, calls from his office.

Crap.

"Just a minute." I push my chair aside and search underneath the desk, finding no more than a few paper clips and a fuzz ball. Apparently, the maid has gotten a bit lax with the vacuuming. Oh right, that's me.

"Where are you?" he calls, sounding closer this time.

Quick to stand, I bonk my shoulder on the desk and hear the silver picture frame of the two of us from last year's Realtor Awards ceremony fall over.

"Oh, there you are." Evan strides toward me in his crisp Armani button-down shirt and creased pants, with a smooth gait that only good breeding spawns—his mom's a tenured English professor at Stanford and his

dad's a venture capitalist. Evan is smiling, the same smile that garnered him a number six spot on last month's most-attractive-businessmen poll in the *Arizona Republic*. More than his Ken-doll good looks and crackerjack genes, Evan's a proven asset in the real estate community. He's respected and admired.

And he's mine.

But great. Just great. I've gone and lost his token of love.

Obviously, I could ask him to help me search, but what would I say? *Hey, funny thing, I've misplaced my ring. You know the one—diamond-encrusted platinum band, passed from generation to generation. Wasn't it your great-grandmother's?*

As a perfectly timed distraction, the office door swings open and in walks my dear old friend, Hollis Murphy.

He's decked in his usual navy blue, one-piece jumper. The matching belt droops around his waist. He smooths his thin white hair with a finger comb, and his cheeks and nose, laced with a few broken capillaries, flush pink.

My whole world just got brighter.

"Hollis, what a nice surprise." I slide around the desk and open my arms for a hug.

His skin is cool and clammy, he smells of too much cologne, and staleness heavies his breath, but I don't care. I love this old man.

We met several years ago, when I crashed my shopping cart into the side of Hollis's truck. In my defense, *People* had just released the Sexiest Man Alive issue and a shirtless Ryan Reynolds, along with each one of his gloriously defined abs, was pictured on page thirty-seven. Who wouldn't be distracted? Besides, it was only a scrape. Okay, dent. But Hollis was forgiving and we've been friends ever since.

He grasps my hand and says, "Zookeeper chokes to death eating an animal cracker."

Nearly every time we talk, Hollis rattles off a peculiar obituary. It's a sick ritual and I'll likely rot in hell for making light of someone else's misfortune. Still, I can't help but chuckle. "That's awful."

"Good one, don't you think? My Bevy clipped it out."

"How is Mrs. Murphy?"

"A slice of heaven. Today is our fifty-fourth wedding anniversary."

"Congratulations!" I say, making a mental note: *Send Murphys wine*. "Any special plans?"

"She's making meatballs tonight. My favorite."

"Sounds perfect. When will you bring Bevy by? In all this time, I still can't believe we've never met. I'd sure love to meet her."

"She says the same about you, but I swear that woman never has any free time. She's busier than the tooth fairy at a crackhead's house."

Evan approaches, extending his hand. “Mr. Murphy, it’s nice to see you.”

“Likewise.”

“To what do we owe this honor?” Evan asks.

Hollis fishes in his pocket and pulls out a candy cane, his favorite treat that he carries year-round. He offers it to me. “Just came by to give Lanie-Lou something sweet.” He eyes me, waiting for my answer.

“Because every woman deserves a candy cane.”

“That’s right.” He squeezes my arm and says, “Everything good?”

“Everything’s great, thank you.” *Except for the fact that I can’t find my ring.* I quickly scan the carpet.

“All right,” Hollis says. “I’m off.”

“Good to see you,” Evan says.

“Give Mrs. Murphy my best,” I say, walking Hollis outside.

“I already gave her my best this morning,” he chuckles, and then he drives away.

Evan waits for me beside my desk. He holds out his open palm. “Look what I have.”

Damn. He found it first.

I step toward him, conjuring up a witty explanation like, *Silly little bastard, that ring must have legs*, but words escape me as I stare into his hand.

He doesn’t hold my ring. He doesn’t hold the symbol of my future. He holds a piece of my past. My Someday Jar.

“My God.” I try to hide the tremor in my fingers as I reach for the glass crock. Nostalgia surges through me like a desert flash flood and all at once I smell my dad’s cologne masking his one-a-day cigarette habit and hear his voice, usually light and high-spirited, pivot adamant and stern when he said a dozen years earlier, “This jar is for your goals and aspirations, Lanie. None too big. None too small.”

“Where did you find this?” My voice is no steadier than my hands.

“In a box at the bottom of my office closet. Found your ASU graduation cap, too. Maybe you can wear that to bed later?” He teases, but he must see the focus in my eyes because he strokes my arm. “What is it?”

I lean against my desk, my body heavy with sentiment. “This is my Someday Jar. A gift from my dad. God, I haven’t seen it in years.” The last time I held this, I wore bubble-gum-flavored lip gloss and braces dotted my teeth. With the jar close to my ear, I give it a little shake and listen to the slips of paper tumble inside.

“What’s in there?”

“Fortunes.”

“Fortunes?”

“Yeah. Every year for my birthday Dad took me to the Golden Lantern, a Chinese restaurant in Mesa.” I half smile, remembering the dome-shaped chandeliers covered with crushed red velvet and dangling tassels decorating the dining room. “They had this wall with dozens of fortunes pinned to it. Dad plucked a handful of slips, flipped them to the blank side, and said, ‘Write your own fortunes, Lanie. Create your own path.’”

I remember scribbling *Learn something new* on the first slip, thrilled with his nod of acceptance as I tucked the goal into the jar.

Now, as I rub my thumb along the nicks in the glass, a lump forms in my throat. “Dad made me promise that I’d empty the jar. He made me promise I’d claim my own stake in the world, fulfill my desires and dreams. He made me promise I’d do this . . . before I got married.” I’d forgotten that last part until just now.

Evan tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Your dad was never afraid to throw caution to the wind, was he?”

“No, he definitely wasn’t,” I whisper, staring at the jar.

“You okay?”

I shake my head to clear it and force a little laugh. “I’m fine. It’s just an old piece of glass that brings back a lot of memories, I guess.”

Evan pulls me close and holds me for a minute.

Though it serves no purpose but longing and regret, I let my mind wander to my childhood days with Dad. The days where pancakes were dinner, chocolate cake was breakfast, and jokes and laughter filled our bellies in between. I hate to admit it, but I wonder what Dad would think of me now, so different from the carefree teenager he knew. Would he be proud of the woman I’ve become or disappointed by my structured life? Worse yet, indifferent?

Evan steps back and says, “Listen, I don’t mean to rush this moment for you, but I’m in a tight spot and sure could use a favor.”

I blink away tears foolhardily forming in my eyes. “Yes, of course. What is it?”

“Can you pick up Weston Campbell from Sky Harbor Airport, executive terminal? He’s flying in from Los Angeles.”

“A new client?”

“No, a business associate of my parents turned family friend. You’ve never met him?”

“The name doesn’t sound familiar.”

“Well, anyway, he’s going to lend me a hand with an upcoming project.”

“How will I spot him? I have no idea what he looks like.” For some reason, the name Weston Campbell evokes an image of a wirehaired and well-fed Irish farmer stabbing bales of hay with whiskey breath spewing from his toothless grin. I should work on being less judgmental, but honestly, where’s the fun in that?

“No problem recognizing him.” Evan aims his phone’s camera in my direction. “Smile.”

“Wait.” I set the jar on my desk and comb through my shoulder-length brown hair, fluffing the bangs that hover over my Irish green eyes, thankful I wore my favorite sleeveless dress cinched above the waist with a ridiculously cute Michael Kors belt. “Okay, go.”

He snaps a photo of me.

Dang. I think my eyes were closed.

“This is Lanie Howard.” He punches at the keys. “There, I forwarded your picture to him. All you have to do is stand outside the security gates and he’ll find you. The executive terminal isn’t very big.” Evan slides into his jacket and steps toward the leather-framed mirror hanging on the wall to study his reflection. He swivels his head side to side and checks for any budding “parasites,” as he called the two gray hairs discovered earlier this year on his thirtieth birthday. “I’d go myself, but Weston changed his flight and I’ve got that 1031 Exchange lecture tonight.”

“What time is Weston arriving?”

“Six.” Evan spins around and catches me peeking at the clock. “I know, the Cardinals game. Maybe you’ll miss the first half, but you’ll be home in time to catch the rest. I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.” He winks. “You’ll take care of Weston for me?”

Waiting in a stuffy airport is the last thing I feel like doing, especially if it means missing a Monday Night Football game. But Evan’s in a pinch and business outweighs pleasure, so I hide my discontent with a smile and reply, “Sure.”

“Great. Weston’s staying at the Biltmore. Just drop him there.” Evan slips his hands around my waist and pulls me toward him again, my Someday Jar wedged between us. His lips brush my neck and he whispers, “I’m such a lucky man.”

After his quick kiss, I watch his Mercedes drive away, then slump into my chair. With the tip of my forefinger, I trace the jar, top to bottom, following a crack. “Promise me you’ll explore life,” Dad had said with narrowed eyes and hands clasped around mine. “Promise me you’ll color outside the lines.”

Now, here I am, a grown woman, many years later, wondering if I should twist off the cork. Reach beyond my comfort zone and tackle my ambitions, challenge myself like I vowed. *Should I color outside the lines?*

My inbox chimes with an e-mail, jarring my thoughts to the present. Glancing toward the computer and spotting the lotion bottle, I’m reminded why I took my ring off—for age-defying, triple-moisture smooth hands—and see the jewel behind the knocked-over frame.

Thank God. With relief, I slip the ring on my finger and decide that my future is what deserves my attention, not the painful reminder of days behind. I tap the jar’s brittle cork and drop the keepsake into my purse. *Those days are gone.*

An hour later, I lock the office and head toward my car, juggling an armful of files and a ringing cell phone.

“Hey,” says Kit, my best friend of countless years. She’s chewing on something, odds are a papaya granola bar as she lives off those things, admitting they taste like cardboard, but loves the fact that they can double as a kickstand for her son’s bike, should the need arise. “Want to catch the game and share a plate of greasy potato skins?”

“God, I’d love to, but I’m on my way to pick up a colleague of Evan’s, then hurrying home to catch what I

can of the second half with a mound of paperwork piled on my lap. Dammit,” I say as much to myself as her, “I need to swing by Nordstrom’s. Evan’s out of shaving cream.”

The judgment in her silence is deafening.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m just wondering what happened to my nutty BFF who used to hustle pool tables and dance on the bar after a couple drinks. Has she been eaten alive by the responsibility monster?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She chews another bite, then says with confidence, “The Vine, Labor Day weekend, senior year. You danced on the bar in that denim miniskirt. The bartender’s arm was sticky from your sloshing lemon-drop martini. He was pissed.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Next time we’ll grab drinks.”

Kit sighs. “Okay. Just promise me that cheeky girl I’ve known since grade school is still in there.”

“She’s there.” *Somewhere*. “I’ve been busy.” *For three years*. “Did I tell you? We have nineteen listings in escrow right now. Evan Carter Realty is poised to rank number two in residential sales this quarter, in all of Phoenix. Evan’s worked really hard.”

“*You’ve* worked really hard. Come out and play sometime.”

“I will.”

“Swear?”

“Swear.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Sounds good. And Kit, for the record, it wasn’t the Vine. It was Club 99. I rocked the hell out of that miniskirt.”

Interstate 10 is the direct route to Phoenix Sky Harbor, but since traffic is light and I’ve a few extra minutes, I find myself steering through the side streets of downtown. I turn onto Washington Avenue and pull up curbside at the almost completed City Core construction site. Chain link surrounds the seven-acre urban complex, which combines condos and commercial space built within two sharply angled towers. I don’t know much about the project, other than I’m impressed by the architect’s vision, for he or she must’ve known that at this time of early evening, the towers’ glass captures the sun setting over Camelback Mountain and reflects on the city, dual sixty-story murals of the desert’s incredible landscape.

I step from my car and wrap my arms around myself, grabbing hold of the fence, uncertain if I’m chilled from the hint of fall in the breeze or the memories from where I stand. The City Core is very different from the building that once stood here, the one my dad worked in when I was a kid. The one with the corner deli where he let me order my own coffee. Side by side, we spent mornings sorting through photographs of him rafting, hang gliding, rappelling, choosing the best shots for his next freelance magazine article.

“Are these dreams from *your* Someday Jar?” I’d ask, holding a glossy photograph of some snow-covered

mountain range, praying I didn't sound too eager. Too much like a child.

"Nah, I don't need a jar." Dad nudged my elbow with his own. "You're my greatest adventure."

My heart flickered. Actually tickled inside my chest when Dad said those words. *You're my greatest adventure*. I'd never felt more loved. Or more protected. The most important person in his world.

He moved out six weeks later.

I release my grasp on the fence as if it's buzzing me with voltage and chastise myself for letting a silly childhood token rattle my thoughts. Honestly, what has gotten into me?

As I drive toward the airport, my engagement ring catches the sun's light and I think about my life. In three months I'll be married to a beautiful man full of integrity and principle. A man who is kind to my mom, finishes my crossword puzzle, and still half stands when I join him for dinner or return from the restroom. Thanks to this man, I have a solid job with clients I adore. A stable future.

I nudge the jar deeper into the depths of my purse. I'd be a fool to uncork the pain and splintered promises of my past. Yes, my dad is the first man I ever loved. But he's also the first man who broke my heart.

two

FLIGHT #819—LAS to PHX

DELAYED

Delayed? Until when? The game started ten minutes ago. Another set of stacked monitors stands fifty feet away. Unfortunately, the same word flashes on the screen. DELAYED.

I reach for my cell phone and call Evan.

No answer.

When his voice mail cues, I say, "It's me. Weston's plane is delayed. Guess I'll wait. Just thought I'd let you know. Bye."

Beside the security gates, I claim an available seat in a row fixed against the wall. Next to me, a snoring older woman's *People* slips from her relaxed fingers. I lean over her, angling my neck like an ostrich, toward the cheers and claps from the sports bar down and across the hall. Every square inch of the wall space is plastered with neon beer signs and TV screens. The game is tuned in on like one, two . . . three screens.

"Go! Move your million-dollar legs." Some fan in the bar shouts.

"Cut right. Cut right," yells another fan.

Sounds like a good game.

I glance at the Jetway. No plane.

Okay . . . just a couple plays.

I spring from my seat and hurry toward the bar like a toddler running toward her mommy. “Excuse me.” I weave through the crowd formed at the entrance, stopping beside a man whose suitcase blocks the narrow walkway between tables. He’s fixated on the screen.

A super-fast Cardinals running back plows through the Giants defense for thirteen solid yards before getting tackled.

“First down,” the man cheers.

We high-five like old friends.

There’s one open seat at the bar. I step over the suitcase and wiggle myself comfy on a bar stool.

“What can I get you?” The bartender slides a napkin in front of me.

“Oh, nothing, thanks. I just want to catch the game for a minute.”

“Gotta order something then.” He points at a sign behind him. PURCHASE REQUIRED FOR BAR SEATING.

I scan the room; everyone has a drink. Those who don’t jam the bar’s entrance squinting through the glass walls like middle schoolers trying to see what the cool kids are doing.

“Well?” he asks again.

At that moment, the air conditioner kicks on and a cool breeze blows in my face. I once read that the recycled air in airports can be incredibly drying. Since I’m a firm believer in hydration, and really, I have no other choice if I want to watch the game, I say, “Lemon-drop martini, please.”

Kit would be proud.

Truth is, it’s been ages since I’ve done anything mindless and rash like Kit mentioned. Not that I want to relive my college days or dance on a bar again, but a little fun now and then wouldn’t hurt. Maybe spend a date night with Evan over a game of pool, a pitcher of Blue Moon, and saucy hot wings, teasing while I sink the eight ball into the corner pocket for a winning shot?

The bartender places the pale yellow drink in front of me. I nibble sugar off the rim and swallow a healthy sip of the bittersweet cocktail. *God, I’ve missed you.*

I lift my drink in appreciation.

The bartender nods as he wipes a wineglass.

Yes, of course, drinking a martini isn’t *exactly* what I should be doing. I should wait by the gate and review the real estate market’s daily hot sheet or calculate the company’s third-quarter tax payment. But, *c’mon* . . . the game’s on. Kit’s right. When is the last time I’ve relaxed? Besides, it’s only one drink. And I won’t miss Weston’s flight because hanging on the wall at the bar’s far end are blue-screened monitors. I can make out the word *delayed*.

Love that word.

I’m such an idiot. *How long have I been rambling?* “I didn’t mean to go on and on like that.” My words snag

on my tongue and sound a bit slurred, even to myself. “I wish you would’ve stopped me.”

“I tried,” says the man seated on the bar stool beside me.

“Oh, you did? Sorry.” I hiccup, then quickly cover my mouth. Never again should I drink multiple lemon-drop martinis on an empty stomach in an airport bar. Number one, they are a total rip-off at eighteen dollars apiece. Number two, I wind up blabbing like a lunatic. And number three . . . *whatever*. I sip.

“No problem.” He swallows a swig of beer.

He’s not gorgeous. No chiseled model-type face and flawless micro-dermabrasion skin like Evan. There’s a crescent scar above this man’s lip and the hint of evening stubble pokes along his chinny-chin-chin. Even so, there’s a rugged attractiveness to him with his dark eyes and hair. He’s like a headstrong, one-screw-up-away-from-being-fired kind of cop I’d see in movies.

The crowd roars. I glance at the screen and catch the play in action. The Cardinals are deep within their own territory, but I watch with delight as the quarterback lobs a long spiral down field. It’s a little high, but #11, Larry Fitzgerald—the best wide receiver ever—skyrockets like eighty feet in the air and catches the pass, one-handed. “Go. Go. Go.”

The announcer calls, “Fitz’s at the thirty, the twenty, the ten, touchdown. Wow, folks, what a miraculous catch. The Fitz does it again. He goes all the way for the score.”

Okay, so maybe my enthusiasm for the game gets carried away at times. Blame it on my football fever, blame it on the martinis, blame it on the wind for all I care, but I can’t stop myself. I jump up and down, high-five the bartender, fist-pump a busboy, and hug every cheering stranger within a fifteen-foot radius. Everyone except the man I’ve been talking with.

With a smile as wide as the flat screens on the wall, I plop into my seat, keeping an eye on the game. Fitzgerald runs the football over to the referee. “Did you see that?” I tug on the man’s sleeve. “See what he did?”

“The touchdown? Yeah, I—”

“No, not that.” I wave my hand. “Fitzgerald handed the ball to the referee. He always does. After every play. Instead of chucking it on the ground, forcing the ref to chase after it like other players do, Fitz gives it to him. Every time. I hate arrogant football players, don’t you?” I don’t give the man a chance to answer. “Did you know Fitzgerald used to be a ball boy for the Minnesota Vikings? He’s really nice.”

“You know him?”

“Well, no . . .” My voice trails off.

“Football fan?”

“Little bit.” I sip my martini, then shake my head. “That’s a lie. I’m a *huge* fan. Borderline obsessive.”

“I can see that.”

I giggle and focus on the curled lemon rind at the bottom of my glass.

The man points at my business card peeking from my purse pocket and reads, “Evan Carter Realty. You

work there?"

"Yes." I sit taller and smooth my dress, which has risen to my thighs. I meet his eyes and offer a professional smile. Perhaps he's in the market. There's a cozy two-bedroom loft-style in Gilbert that'd be perfect for him.

"Real estate agent?" he asks.

"Broker, technically."

"So why isn't your name on the card, too?"

I open my mouth to reply, then close it again. *That's a damn good question.* I reach for a napkin.

My phone, lying on the bar, chimes with a message, likely from Evan. The screen shines on my face as I check the text. It's not Evan. It's Stacey, our wedding planner. *Evan wants to meet Tuesday, late afternoon. Please confirm.*

Setting the phone down a little harder than I intended, I say, "Did I mention we're engaged? See. Getting married in three months." I wiggle my three-carat, square-cut diamond solitaire ring in the man's face. Except I lean too far and the stool wobbles underneath me, throwing me off balance. I wind up scraping his nose with the edge of my diamond before I catch myself. "Oops. Sorry."

"It's all right." He wrinkles his nose, which now has a tiny, red scratch.

"Evan's so excited about the wedding." I tear off a long strip of the napkin and curl it around my finger. "He talks with our wedding planner more than I do. They've made everything so easy for me, selecting the date, the venue, the food." I tear off another corner of my napkin. "Everything is meticulously arranged. All I have to do is pick out a dress."

"It's dead."

"What's dead?"

"The napkin." He eyes the shredded mound beneath my hands. "It's officially deceased."

I push the pile away and fold my hands in my lap. *Why haven't I been named broker?*

"Well, I'm sure the wedding will be flawless."

"Yes, it will. Thank you." Glancing at the arrivals monitor, I still read: *delayed.*

We sit in silence for a few moments, watching an ad for Kay Jewelers. After the closing jingle, *Every kiss begins with Kay*, I say, "You know, I disagree with that."

"Yeah?" He pushes the peanut bowl between us.

"Yeah. I bet more kisses begin with an empty bottle of cheap Zinfandel."

He laughs, nearly choking on his beer. After wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he says, "Tell me more."

The alcohol relaxes me, so I don't hesitate. "Well, I detest poor grammar. Irregardless is *not* a word. I'd

rather be stabbed in the neck than watch a movie with zombies, clowns, or Cameron Diaz. Or eat anything with mustard. I had my tonsils removed when I was eight. Broke my tailbone when I was ten because apparently jumping off the top of the slide into the pool isn't the best idea. I've never solved a Rubik's cube. And you"—I point at the man—"are looking at Roosevelt High School's senior prom queen."

He eyes me quizzically, like I asked his tampon preference.

I stare back.

What did he say his name was? Okay, so yes, maybe he's good-looking. Early thirties, I guess. Though his sideburns are a few days away from needing a trim, his slightly disheveled hair and five-o'clock shadow are mildly appealing. Some women might even quiver when his lips curve into a half smile.

I mean, I'm not dead. I can find other men attractive. It's not against the law or anything. If I weren't in love with Evan, I might even notice that under this man's charcoal-colored shirt, his abs look harder than this steel bar stool I'm sitting on, which, by the way, has completely numbed my ass.

"No shit?" He flicks a peanut shell off the bar and signals the bartender for another beer.

"No shit, what?"

"Prom queen?"

"Is that so hard to believe?"

He shrugs.

I snatch the peanut bowl from his grasp and cradle it with my hands.

He laughs, reaches over my arm, and pops another peanut into his mouth.

Murmurs from the bar crowd shift my gaze toward the game. "Watch the blitz." I scream. "The *blitz!*" Seconds later, and exactly as I feared, a Giants linebacker barges through the Cardinals offensive line and flattens the quarterback. "I told you." I wave my fist at the screen, then turn toward the man. "I told them."

"You did." He reaches for his ringing phone. "Will you excuse me?"

"Of course."

He swivels his bar stool around. "Hey. How are you?" His voice sounds sweet. Interested. Sincere.

Afraid he'll think I'm eavesdropping, I call the bartender for another drink. Quickly, of course, so I can eavesdrop.

"Trevor, he's good?" the man says. "How's the project? Excellent. Tell him I'll call him tomorrow. Okay, love you, too." He slides his phone into his pocket and spins toward the bar.

"Your family?"

"Yeah. Trevor, he's seven and has been working on a science project for a couple of weeks, trying to determine if plants grow differently with microwaved water versus straight from the tap. He made a chart and everything. He's clever, that kid."

“Sounds adorable.”

“Yeah, he’s cool.”

“Your turn,” I say, cracking a peanut shell in half. “Tell me something.”

“Okay, well . . . *irregardless* of what you say, I love mustard. And, I, too, was crowned prom queen.”

“Whatever.”

“All right. Let me think.” He picks at his beer label. “I make a killer apple pie, never remember birthdays, and know a guy who has this weird quirk. He sniffs whenever he’s bugged by something.”

“Sniffs?”

“Yeah, he’s great to play poker with. I always know when he has bad cards.”

I laugh and reach for the ChapStick in my purse. As my fingers brush against the Someday Jar, an image of my dad’s face floats through my mind. “You know, my dad was kinda quirky, too, prattling off random Irish sayings all the time.”

“Yeah, like what?”

“B’fhearr liom thú ná céad bó milch.”

The guy scrunches his face in confusion.

“I prefer you to a hundred milk cows.”

“A hundred milk cows?”

“Yeah, it’s a compliment.”

“Milk cows is a compliment?”

“Yes.” I playfully smack his forearm.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Totally sure?”

“Yes.” I’m smiling. Smiling a lot. Then it hits me.

My hand still rests on his arm.

I jerk my hand away. *Jesus, Lanie. Get a grip. You’re flirting with this man. Flirting.*

The bartender slides over the other martini I forgot I ordered. I take a massive gulp, swallowing half.

“You like to drink?”

“No, not normally. Actually, I’m supposed to pick up Evan’s associate, some guy I’ve never met, and his plane is delayed. Speaking of which, what time is it anyway?”

He checks his watch. “Nine thirty.”

“Nine thirty?” I practically scream. “Are you sure?” My eyes dart toward the TV. Two SportsCenter commentators discuss the game’s highlights with an empty field behind them. The football game is over. The bartender arranges liquor bottles and only a couple of patrons remain, their beers nearly gone.

I confirm with my phone. Nine thirty. *How did three hours pass without my realizing it?* A pang of clarity socks me in the gut as I glance at the monitor and though I struggle to focus, all the flights display *arrived*.

Shit.

“Listen, I’ve gotta go.” I slide off my bar stool, tip my glass, and slurp the last sip of my expensive-yet-delicious concoction. A little more juice pools underneath the lemon garnish at the bottom. I tilt my glass high and tap at the base.

That’s when I almost die.

Midslurp, the coiled lemon rind shoots down my throat as if sprung from a slingshot and lodges in my esophagus.

I drop my martini and glass shatters as I thump my chest. *Oh, God.* I’m choking. Choking! My throat burns and my lungs cramp as if a boa constrictor has wrapped around my ribs.

Jesus. This is it. This is my end. These are the last moments of my life.

With horror, my mind flashes to an image of my body lying on a cold, stainless-steel bed at the morgue. Oh, fuck. I think there’s a hole in my underwear.

From the corner of my bulging eye, I see the man jump from his seat. He slides his arms around my waist and lifts me off the ground. His fingers brush under my breasts as he squeezes me against him—I was right about the stone-hard abs—and thrusts his entwined fists into me.

Nothing happens. I’m still choking. My fingers and lips tingle numb.

Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.

Moments of my adult life flicker through my mind. *Sorting stacks of documents. Oil changes. Scrubbing clean the condo’s baseboards. Sunscreen. Diligence. Order. Routine.*

Then, thank everything holy, with one more heave, the man launches the lemon rind free. It flies from my mouth, the slimy fruit smacking the bartender on his forehead.

“Thank you.” I wheeze and cough, drying the tears that drip from the corners of my eyes. I collapse onto the stool. “I don’t know what happened. One minute I was fine and the next minute, I couldn’t breathe.”

The man returns to his seat. Beads of sweat have formed above his lip, and he wipes them away with the back of his hand.

Awareness swarms through my body as the color presumably returns to my cheeks. I stare at the man with a

serious face. “What if I choked on that lemon peel and died? What if that was my last breath?”

“Maybe a glass of water?” he asks the bartender, who dabs at his forehead with a napkin.

“I could’ve died. My obituary will read, *Lanie Howard dead*. That’s it. Nothing else. No lifetime accomplishments. No list of accolades. Just white space.”

“I’m sure it isn’t that bad.”

“Yes, it is. My bobblehead collection is the most exciting thing I’ve done in just about forever.”

“Bobbleheads?”

“Exactly.”

“Who do you have?”

“Yoda, Statue of Liberty, Martin Luther King, Robin—”

“Robin? As in Batman and Robin?”

“Yes.”

“Why not Batman?”

“Because Robin does all the legwork and gets none of the credit. Sidekicks are underrated.” I shift my feet.

“Look, it doesn’t matter. You’re missing the point.”

“What exactly is your point?”

What is my point? All at once I get it. All at once I understand what my dad meant, what he wanted for my life. *Color outside the lines*. I pound my fist on the bar. “My Someday Jar.”

“Your what?”

“My jar of aspirations.”

“Like a bucket list?”

“Yeah, exactly. I’m gonna uncork it.”

“You should.”

“You’re right, because you know what else my dad said?”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“‘Follow your dreams, unless it’s the one where you’re running naked through church.’ So that’s what I’m going to do.”

“Run naked through church?” He arcs his left eyebrow.

“No.” I press my lips together to quell my smile. “But I will not stand and watch life pass me by a moment

longer. I can balance a bit of adventure with responsibility.”

“Sure you can.”

“Sure I can. I will open the jar. I will accomplish my goals. For me. Before I become Mrs. Evan Carter. Just like I promised Dad.” *Even if he isn’t around to see it.*

“Good for you.” He thanks the bartender for the water and, before sliding it toward me, plucks out the lemon wedge. “Just in case.”

“Ha-ha.” I chug the water, the cool liquid soothing my aching throat.

The bartender comes around and sweeps up the broken glass.

I offer an apologetic smile, then return to the man beside me. “Look, it’s nice meeting you, but I have to go.”

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Totally fine, thanks.”

“What about the guy you were supposed to pick up?”

“Oh, damn.” I text Evan, but he still doesn’t answer. Maybe that’s a good thing because I’m pretty sure I misspelled every word. There are two *e*’s in *airport*, right? “I don’t know. It’s so late, I’m sure whoever he is, he found his own way to the hotel by now.” I dig into my wallet, which apparently is made of the slickest leather in the Western Hemisphere. A couple twenty-dollar bills, three quarters, ChapStick, a worn credit card, and my driver’s license scatter under the bar stool.

“I got it.” He stops me, putting his hand on mine.

His hands are scarred and weathered from hard work in the sun. Determined. Dependable. Capable hands.

Not that it matters, of course.

He gathers my things and stares at my driver’s license for a moment longer than I think he should. What’s he doing? At least the picture’s not half bad, but I don’t want him criticizing me for not being an organ donor. I snatch the license and hold my purse open for him to dump in everything else.

“Well, thank you again for saving my life.”

I ask the bartender for my bill and slide off the stool, but my legs buckle and I’m forced to hold on to the counter for support.

“Listen.” The guy tosses a hundred-dollar bill on the bar and thanks the bartender. “I’m leaving, too. I’ll walk you to a cab.”

“I can pay for my drinks.”

“So can I. Let’s go.”

My disappointed mother shouting “stranger danger” screams through my mind. “No, really, I’m fine.” I take a couple of wobbly steps toward the exit, but the doors are all squiggly. What do they put in those lemon-

drop martinis anyway? Jet fuel? Maybe I do need a little help. And really, he's not a total stranger. We've talked for hours. Plus, he has nice teeth. White and strong. That has to count for something, right? Serial killers don't have good teeth, do they?

He moves beside me.

"Um, okay. I guess walking me to a cab might be a good idea." I lick my lips, which seem to have thickened into two gelatinous blobs.

We walk in silence and I'm painfully humiliated. I got drunk at an airport bar, choked on a lemon rind, and now need an escort to a cab. Tomorrow, I'll be some hilarious story this guy tells all his buddies. I'd hate him for that if I didn't need his forearm to lean on.

He motions toward the open door of a taxi.

"Listen, thanks again," I say, climbing inside, guilty that I can't remember his name.

"No problem." With slightly parted lips, he folds a stick of gum onto his tongue. His jaw flexes with each chew.

My God, his eyes are piercing.

"Um, right." I clear my throat. "Anyway, I really appreciate your help."

"My pleasure." He steps inside and slams the door behind him.

three

"Lanie, now!" My dad calls from the driveway below the balcony where I stand. His elbow is wrapped with gauze from a recent snowboarding accident—or was it ice sailing this time?—and his perpetually tan face broadens with laughter.

From the bucket near my feet, I grab a red water balloon. It wobbles like Jell-O in my cupped hand.

"Do it." He laughs. "Do it now."

Hard as I can, I chuck the balloon. *Splat*. The latex bursts the instant it smacks against his well-used golf cart. Water shoots out in all directions and splatters the concrete.

"A direct hit." He cheers. "Again, again."

I reach for another balloon, a blue one, and whip it at the tire. *Spoosh*.

Dad dances as water splashes his shins, and I break into a belly laugh. My face hurts from smiling. My fingers are ice cold from the water, and any minute now, Mom will order us to stop, but I don't care. This is how we wash the golf cart.

"Hurry, Lanie," he yells. "Throw another one. Get the backseat."

Before I do, someone taps on my arm. *Tap-tap-tap*.

I brush it off and grab another balloon.

“Lanie,” says a man’s voice, sounding far away. At the same time, the balloon shrinks into nothing and Dad disappears from my view, fading into black.

“Wait,” I cry out.

“Lanie,” the man calls again, closer now.

After a deep breath, I realize I was dreaming. My head pounds and the hint of lemon sours my mouth. I’m too exhausted to open my eyes. It can’t be morning yet. *Please, don’t let it be morning yet. I’m too tired for morning.*

Tap-tap-tap.

Go away.

Tap-tap-tap.

Ugh. How annoying is this? Why can’t I sleep? I just need a few more minutes, a little more time with Dad and . . . *tap-tap-tap.*

“Lanie. Get up.”

Reluctantly, I lift my head and check the alarm clock.

“It’s only forty-nine fifty,” I snap. “See, it’s early. Let me sleep.” My head settles back against the most comfy pillow ever. But there’s a buzz in my brain. A nagging bouncing around in my head like a fly trapped in a windowsill and at last I realize. *What kind of time is that?* I lift my head again and rub my eyes.

Within seconds, I gain my bearings and discover we’ve stopped in front of Evan’s condo. The guy from the airport is beside me. Apparently I fell asleep. In his lap. *Is that drool?*

Wiping my mouth, I quickly grab my purse and reach for the door handle. With a swift move, I hop out, slam the cab door, and run toward Evan’s condo like a track star. Never in my life have I made such a fool of myself. Accidentally farting near the microphone during my fourth-grade choir concert was nothing compared to this humiliation. Nothing!

As I cross the street, the crisp nighttime air sobers me. *Oh, Lord, this is bad. Very, very bad.* This man knows where I live.

I unlock the door and quickly close it behind me. Through the frosted window of our front door, I watch the cab’s taillights disappear down the street. *Thank God.*

“Hi, love.”

I spin around and find Evan standing beside the kitchen sink, an empty water glass in his hand. He sets the drink down, loosens his tie, and unfastens the top two buttons on his shirt. “I just got home myself and noticed you called earlier. Everything okay? Did you find Weston?”

“Funny thing.” I sway slightly and grab the dining room table for balance.

Evan frowns and steps close. “Have you been drinking?” He picks at my bangs and scrunches his eyebrows together. He’s due for a wax, but there are better times to mention that. “Is that sugar in your hair?”

“Probably.”

“You and Weston got drunk?”

“No. Just me.” Which sounds even more pitiful out loud.

“Want to tell me what’s going on?”

No, not really, thank you very much. I can think of a thousand other things I’d rather do. A colonoscopy, for one.

“Where’s Weston?”

“I’m not quite sure. His flight was delayed and well, the game was on and—”

“Lanie, this was important to me.” He pulls out his phone and dials. “Weston, it’s Evan. Sorry for the mix-up at the airport. Give me a call; let me know you made it to the hotel.” Evan drops his phone into his pocket, slips his tie from his neck, and lines up the ends. He folds the silk tie precisely in half, then half again. Without looking at me he says, “It’s late.” Before I can utter a word, he pounds up the stairs.

I’m such an idiot. What was I thinking? Sure, I’ll have another martini. Sure, I’ll blab to a stranger. Sure, I’ll drool in his lap. Jesus, Lanie.

After gulping two glasses of water and eating several slices of bread—I once read that wheat soaks up alcohol, and for half a second I contemplate swallowing spoonfuls of flour—I trace the walls and crawl up the carpeted stairs toward the bedroom. Quietly, I tiptoe inside the bathroom, close the door, and turn on the light.

Though I’ll regret it tomorrow, washing my face or brushing my teeth now seems more challenging than climbing Mt. Everest with a broken leg. Screw it. I’ll scrub extra in the morning.

I strip out of my clothes, drop my purse beside Evan’s row of neatly aligned shoes, and turn off the light. My face smacks into the closet door, because apparently it has to be *open* to walk through it. With a whimper from my pain and behavior, I slide into bed, thankful that Evan’s asleep, snoring. I don’t have the energy to explain this evening. All I want now is sleep. And the room to stop spinning.

four

Evan’s text screams at me the following morning. It takes longer than I like before my head clears and I am able to focus on the words. *Call me. By the way, it’s airport, not aeepport.*

It wasn’t a bad dream.

After a long shower and countless vows to the water spray that I’ll never, never, never drink again, I gag down a dose of Green Power—Evan’s favorite vegetable drink that looks and smells like baby poop (especially when hungover). Thankfully, my symptoms subside. All that’s left is a sledgehammer pounding my head every three seconds. Given how I let Evan and Weston down, I deserve the pain.

It isn't until I reach inside my purse and keys jingle in my hand that I remember my car is parked at the airport.

Awesome.

I call Kit. "Hey, it's me." I burp a pungent combination of lemon, vodka, broccoli, and kale into her voice mail. "Call me when you get this." Before I finish the message, my phone chimes with an incoming call.

"You're a lifesaver." Kit's voice smiles through the receiver. "I've searched for my phone all morning. It just rang inside the Cheerios box."

Naturally calm and maternal, Kit juggles her four-year-old son, Dylan, like a pro. She's happily married to Rob, an insurance adjuster, and they live a few minutes away in a house that is snuggly-warm and slightly disheveled like a page straight from *Restoration Hardware*. Her kitchen smells of cinnamon and there's always whipped cream in the fridge.

"I'm sorry to ask, but can you drive me to the airport? I left my car there last night."

Kit pulls the phone away from her mouth. "Honey, the dog doesn't want Play-Doh in his ears." To me she says, "Why is your car at the airport? You and Evan elope? I'll be furious, you know."

"No, we didn't elope. Long story. I'll explain on the way."

"I love long stories. It means it's gonna be good. Okay, listen, Rob's home this morning so he can watch Dylan." Her voice turns sinister. "Let me bust out the finger paints."

"You're awful."

"Me? It's good for Rob. The other day he claimed to have eaten a bad plum and was in bed all afternoon. A bad plum? Give me a break. He spent the day watching *Breaking Bad* reruns."

I giggle, then wince, for every fiber in my head stabs with pain. "I'll see you soon?"

"Yep, be there in a couple minutes."

We hang up and I fix myself a piece of peanut butter toast. I munch and delicately swallow, for my throat is still tender, and grow irritated with myself, recalling my behavior last night. *Blabbing for hours. Flirting with that guy?* Yes, okay, in my own defense, I was drunk. Not thinking straight. Nobody should be taken seriously after several martinis.

And honestly, what was with me spouting off all that crap about my Someday Jar? Sure, it was a big part of my life at one time, but I've pushed that keepsake out of my mind for so many years, no sense in thinking of it now. No sense in uprooting the pain I've worked for years to bury.

Kit honks and I step outside into the blinding light.

"Hey," she says as I slide into the passenger seat of her silver Audi. Dressed in worn jeans and a black T-shirt, she wears no makeup, doesn't need it. Just a bit of gloss shines her lips. It's times like this, staring at her glowing, wrinkle-free skin, I wonder if she's right about a diet of grass-fed humanely killed meats and nonprocessed foods.

She flips her long black ponytail behind her shoulder and, with a frown, grabs my chin. "Honey, you're pale.

You know vampires aren't popular anymore, right? We're supposed to have a little color again."

"I miss that look. It's easy to look tired and malnourished."

"Me, too." She releases my chin. "By the look of your swollen eyes, this is going to be a really good story." Kit steers away from the curb and heads us toward the airport. "So?"

"I almost died."

"Swear?"

"Swear. I choked on a lemon peel. The guy beside me saved my life. Did the Heimlich thingy."

"That works?"

"Apparently, because here I am."

Users Review

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