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Hannah's List

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Debbie Macomber

Hannah's List



Chapter One

I am not a sentimental guy. I've been known to forget Mother's Day and, once, when Hannah and I were dating, I even let Valentine's go unnoticed. Fortunately she didn't take my lapse too seriously or see it as any reflection of my feelings. As for anniversaries and birthdays, I'm a lost cause. In fact, I'd probably overlook Christmas if it wasn't for all the hoopla. It's not that I'm self-absorbed… Well, maybe I am, but aren't we all to a certain extent?

To me, paying a lot of attention to people because it's their birthday or some made-up holiday is ridiculous. When you love someone, you need to show that love each and every day. Why wait for a certain time of year to bring your wife flowers? Action really does speak louder than words, especially if it's a loving deed, something you do

for no particular reason. Except that you want to. Because you care.

Hannah taught me that. Hannah. A year ago today, May eighth, I lost her, my beautiful thirty-six-year-old wife. Even now, a whole year after her death, I can't think of her without my gut twisting into knots.

A year. Three hundred and sixty-five lonely days and empty nights.

A few days after her death, I stood over Hannah's casket and watched as it was lowered into the ground. I threw the first shovelful of dirt into her grave. I'll never forget that sound. The hollow sound of earth hitting the coffin's gleaming surface.

Not an hour passes that I don't remember Hannah. Actually, that's an improvement. In those first few months, I couldn't keep her out of my head for more than a minute. Everything I saw or heard reminded me of Hannah.

To simply say I loved her would diminish the depth of my feelings. In every way she completed me. Without her, my world is bleak and colorless and a thousand other adjectives that don't begin to describe the emptiness I've felt since she's been gone.

I talk to her constantly. I suppose I shouldn't tell people that. We've had this ongoing one-sided conversation from the moment she smiled up at me one last time and surrendered her spirit to God.

So, here I am a year later, pretending to enjoy the Seattle Mariners' baseball game when all I can think about is my wife. My one-year-dead wife.

Ritchie, Hannah's brother and my best friend, invited me to share box seats for this game. I'm not fooled. I'm well aware that my brother-in-law didn't include me out of some mistaken belief that I'm an inveterate baseball fan. He knows exactly what anniversary this is.

I might not be sentimental, but this is one day I *can't* forget.

As a physician, a pediatrician, I'm familiar with death. I've witnessed it far too often and it's never easy, especially with children. Even when the end is peaceful and serene as it was with Hannah, I feel I've been cheated, that I've lost.

As a teenager I was involved in sports. I played football in the fall, basketball in winter and baseball in the spring, and worked as a lifeguard during the summers. The competitive spirit is a natural part of who I am. I don't like to lose, and death, my adversary, doesn't play fair. Death took Hannah from me, from all of us, too early. She was the most vibrant, joyful, loving woman I have ever known. I've been floundering ever since.

Although I've fought death, my enemy, from the day I became a doctor—it's *why* I became a doctor—I learned to understand it in a different, more complex way. I learned death can be a friend even while it's the enemy. As she lay dying, Hannah, who loved me so completely and knew me so well, showed me that ultimate truth.

A year's time has given me the perspective to realize I did my wife a disservice. My biggest regret is that I refused to accept the fact that she was dying. As a result I held on to her far longer than I should have. I refused to relinquish

her when she was ready to leave me. Selfishly, I couldn't bear to let her go.

Even when she'd drifted into unconsciousness I sat by her bedside night and day, unable to believe that there wouldn't be a miracle. It's stupid; as a medical professional I certainly know better. Yet I clung to her. Now I realize that my stubbornness, my unwillingness to release her to God, held back her spirit. Tied her to earth. To me.

When I recognized the futility of it all, when I saw what I was doing to Hannah's parents and to Ritchie, I knew I had to let her go. I left Hannah's room and got hold of myself. I hadn't slept in days, hadn't eaten. Nor had I shaved, which means I probably looked even more pathetic than I felt. I went back to our home, showered, forced down a bowl of soup and slept for three uninterrupted hours. When I returned, the immediate family had gathered around her bedside. Hannah's heart rate had slowed and it was only a matter of minutes. Then, just before she died, she opened her eyes, looked directly at me and smiled. I held her hand and raised it to my lips as she closed her eyes and was…gone.

That last smile will stay with me forever. Every night as I press my head against the pillow, the final image in my mind is Hannah's farewell smile.

"Hey, Michael. A beer?" Ritchie asked. He doesn't call me Mike; no one does. Even as a kid, I was never a Mike.

"Sure." My concentration wasn't on the game or on much of anything, really. Without glancing at the scoreboard I couldn't have told you who was ahead. I went

through the motions, jumped to my feet whenever Ritchie did. I shouted and made noise along with the rest of the crowd, but I didn't care about the game. I hadn't cared about anything for a long time—except my work. That had become my salvation.

"How about dinner after the game?" Ritchie asked as he handed me a cold beer a few minutes later.

I hesitated. All that awaited me was an empty house and my memories of Hannah.

"Sure." I didn't have much of an appetite, though. I rarely did these days.

"Great." He took a long swig of beer and turned back to the field.

I hadn't done my brother-in-law any favors by agreeing to attend this game. These weren't cheap seats, either. Ritchie had paid big bucks for box seats behind home plate, and I'd basically ignored the entire game. I should've made an excuse and let him take someone else. But I didn't want to be alone. Not today. Every other day of the year I was perfectly content with my own company. But not today.

The game must have been over because, almost before I was aware of it, people were leaving.

"Great game," I said, making the effort.

"We lost," Ritchie muttered.

I hadn't been paying enough attention to notice.

Ritchie slapped me on the back and headed out of the stadium. That was his way of telling me he understood.

Half an hour later we sat in a friendly sports bar not far from Safeco Field. I stared at the menu, wishing I could

conjure up an appetite. Over the past year I'd lost nearly twenty pounds. Food was a necessity, and that was the only reason I bothered. I usually ate on the run, without interest or forethought. I needed something in my belly so I grabbed a protein bar or a vegetable drink. It served the purpose, although I derived no pleasure from it.

Hannah had been exceptionally talented in the kitchen, just like her cousin Winter Adams, who owned the French Café on Blossom Street. She loved experimenting with recipes and took pride in preparing meals. Hannah's dinner parties were legendary among our friends. As a hostess, she was a natural—charming and gracious.

"What are you thinking about?" Ritchie asked.

His question startled me until I saw that he was gazing at the menu. "Grilled salmon," I replied.

"I'm leaning toward the T-bone," he said.

I've always associated steaks with celebration, and this wasn't a day I'd consider celebrating. Long before I was willing to accept that Hannah had lost her battle with cancer, she'd told me that when she was gone, she didn't want me to grieve. She said her wake should be as much fun as her parties. At the time I didn't want to hear her talk about death. By then she'd resigned herself to the outcome; I hadn't found the courage to do so.

The waitress took our order, brought us each a beer and left. I held the amber bottle between my fingers and frowned at the table. I wished I was better company for Ritchie.

"It's been a year," my brother-in-law murmured.

I nodded, acknowledging the comment, but not elaborating on it.

"I miss her."

Again I nodded. As painful as it was to talk about Hannah, I had the burning desire to do exactly that. I wanted—no, needed—to hold on to her, if not physically, then emotionally.

"Hard to believe it's been twelve months." I heard the pain in my own voice but didn't try to hide it.

"You doing okay?" Ritchie asked.

I shrugged rather than tell the truth—I wasn't okay. I was damn mad. Still. How *dared* this happen to a woman as wonderful as Hannah. How dared it happen to me!

Hannah and I were married as soon as I graduated from medical school. We decided that my internship and residency would be too demanding to allow us to start a family right away. Hannah worked for a regional department-store chain as a buyer and loved her job. When I'd get home too exhausted to think, she'd entertain me with stories of the people she'd met. People whose names I soon forgot but whose foibles lived on. The smallest incident became a full-fledged anecdote, complete with wickedly funny observations. She had a way of making the most mundane details fascinating. If I close my eyes I can still hear her laugh. I can smile just recalling the early years of our marriage and the struggles we endured, the things we enjoyed. Memories sustained me that first year without Hannah.

The day I finished my residency and specialized training and was able to join a Seattle practice was the day Hannah threw away her birth control pills. We talked endlessly about our family. I love children and so did Hannah. She wanted three kids; I would've been satisfied with two. Hannah felt an odd number would be best, so I said yes to three.

But Hannah didn't get pregnant. We'd assumed it would be so easy. She worried constantly, and I was convinced the stress she felt was the real problem. After eighteen months she wanted to see a fertility specialist and I agreed. That was when we learned that getting Hannah pregnant was the very least of our concerns. Within a week of our first visit to the specialist, Hannah was diagnosed with stage-four ovarian cancer. By the time the discovery was made, it was too late to save her.

I couldn't help feeling I should have known, should have suspected that something wasn't right. As a medical professional, I blamed myself for the fact that Hannah went undiagnosed as long as she did. If I'd paid closer attention, I told myself, I might have picked up on the clues. I'd been busy, preoccupied with work. I had other things on my mind.

Friends have argued with me, friends like Patrick O'Malley, who's another pediatrician and one of my partners. They frequently reminded me—as did Hannah herself—that ovarian cancer is notoriously lacking in symptoms until it's too late. I knew all that. What I realized

was that I *needed* to feel guilty, to punish myself; I think I felt better if I could blame myself for not noticing.

"Remember the night Steph and I had you and Hannah over for dinner?" Ritchie asked, breaking into my thoughts. "The last night?"

I nodded. It'd been a Friday evening, the final time we'd gone out as a couple. We'd received news that afternoon that had rocked our world. The latest test results had come in—and they showed that the chemo had done little to slow the progression of the disease.

Devastated, I'd wanted to cancel dinner, but Hannah insisted we go. She'd put on a bright smile and walked into her brother and sister-in-law's home as though nothing was wrong. I was an emotional mess and barely made it through the evening. Not Hannah. If I hadn't known, I would never have guessed.

"Yeah, I remember."

"She asked me to do something for her that night," Ritchie went on to say.

"Hannah did?" Unable to hide my surprise, I looked up from my beer.

Now Ritchie glanced away. "While you were playing a video game with Max, Hannah spoke with me privately."

I moved to the edge of my seat. The noise from the television blaring above the bar seemed to fade into the background. Every muscle in my body tensed, almost as if I knew what Ritchie was about to tell me.

"She said the doctors had delivered bad news."

I focused on an empty bar stool on the other side of the room. "I wanted to cancel dinner. Hannah wouldn't let me."

"She had a good reason for wanting to come that night," Ritchie explained. "She told me there wasn't any hope left and she'd accepted that she was going to die."

I wasn't in the mood to hear this.

Ritchie exhaled loudly. "She wasn't afraid of dying, you know."

"Why should she be? Heaven was made for people like Hannah."

Ritchie nodded, agreeing with me. "She'd made her peace with God long before that night. She never had a fatalistic attitude. She wanted to live. More than anything, she wanted to live."

At one time I'd doubted that. "I begged her to let me take her to Europe because I'd read about an experimental treatment there. She wouldn't go."

"It was too late," Ritchie said simply. His hand tightened around the beer bottle. "She knew it even if we didn't."

That was Hannah—not only was she wise, but forever practical. While she was willing to accept the inevitable, I clung to every shred of hope. I spent hours studying medical journals, calling specialists, doing online research. But my crazed efforts to cure her didn't make any difference. In the end Hannah had been right; she'd reached the point of no return. She died less than two months later.

Even now I was shocked by how quickly she slipped away. It was the only time in our marriage that I became truly angry with her. I wanted Hannah to fight the cancer.

I shouted and paced and slammed my fist against the wall. Gently she took my bleeding knuckles between her own hands and kissed away the pain. What she didn't seem to understand was that no amount of tenderness would ease the ache of her leaving me.

The waitress brought our meals, but I couldn't have swallowed a single bite had my life depended on it. Ritchie apparently felt the same because his steak remained untouched for several minutes.

"Hannah asked me to give you this," my brother-in-law finally said. He pulled an envelope from his jacket.

"A letter?"

"She asked me to wait until she'd been gone a year. Then and only then was I to hand this over to you. It was the last thing my sister asked of me."

I stared up at Ritchie, hardly able to believe he'd kept this from me. We worked out at the gym three mornings a week and had for years. In all these months he'd never let on that he had this letter in his possession.

"The night of the dinner party I promised Hannah I'd give you this," Ritchie said. "I put the letter in our safety-deposit box and waited, just like she wanted me to."

Not knowing what to say or how to react, I took the letter.

We left the sports bar soon after. I don't remember driving home. One minute I was in the parking garage in downtown Seattle and the next time I was aware of anything I'd reached the house and was sitting in my driveway.

Once I'd gone inside, I dropped my keys on the kitchen

counter and walked into the living room. I sat on the edge of the sofa and stared at the envelope. Hannah had written one word on the front of it.

Michael.

I looked at my name, mesmerized as grief rippled through me. Unbelievable though it seemed, it felt as if her love for me vibrated off the paper.

My hand shook as I turned over the envelope and carefully opened it.

Make time for friends. Make time for ***Debbie Macomber***

CEDAR COVE
16 LIGHTHOUSE ROAD
204 ROSEWOOD AVENUE
311 PELICAN COURT
44 CRANBERRY POINT
50 HARBOR WAY
6 RAINIER DRIVE

BLOSSOM STREET
THE SHOP ON BLOSSOM STREET
A GOOD YARN
OLD BOYFRIENDS
WEDNESDAYS AT FOUR
TWENTY WISHES
SUMMER ON BLOSSOM STREET
CHRISTMAS IN SEATTLE

THURSDAYS AT EIGHT

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