

Katherine peaks outside and sighs with a latte at her lips.

“What are the chances that someone dies on Christmas day after being diagnosed with cancer?” I ask her.

It’s weird, you know -- your husband dies under those exact circumstances, yet I find myself asking that question without restraint in the middle of a coffee shop.

Kat flicks an eyebrow up at me.

“I think you asked that question last year, too,” she says. “So, I’ll ask you the same one I did.”

I peer up at her like a child who just buried their face in a chocolate cake.

“Who’s next?”

She hasn’t ever demanded one, but I still haven’t given her a straight answer.

“It’ll be year five in two weeks,” I say.

My best friend smiles gently. “Well, hopefully you come closer to making up your mind with every year that passes.”

And just as the subject comes up, it subsides.

Later in the week, my mom pops up on my caller ID.

“Hi, mom,” I say with the phone between my ear and shoulder while I give the rice a quick stir.

“Hi, honey!” she says. “Are you coming for dinner on the 25th?”

“Mom, you can call it Christmas,” I say.

“I suppose.”

Silence.

“Do you miss him?”

I nod.

“Honey?”

“Oh, sorry – yes, I do,” I say, clueing in that she can’t hear me nodding.

“Your dad and I do, too,” she says. “Now, how about dinner?”

“I’ll be there, mom,” I say. “Wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

For the next while, work takes up the majority of my time. The hospital director always offers me December off, but I never take it because my patients' tumors don't.

"Nicole," my terminal seven-year-old lymphocytic patient says three days before Christmas day.

"Yes, sweetie?"

"If you had to guess, what does Heaven look like?"

"Hmm," I say out loud when all I see is Brent.

"Well, Serena, I'm not sure about what it would look like, but I'm positive it's much warmer up there than it is down here!"

She giggles quietly.

It's Christmas day. I'm preparing my front entrance with goodies for my parents' place when a figure appears on the other side of the glossy glass encased by the door. I swing it open before the knock comes.

Before me is a plump, stomach-heavy man with a thick beard that blends into the snow behind him. He's got a bag slung over his shoulder.

"Hello there," the mailman says.

"Hi," I say. "Cold out, right?"

"Ho, yes ma'am," he says. "I have some mail for you."

"Mail? Really?"

He nods with a smile and hands me a white envelope. Written on it is my address in handwriting I recognize.

"Hey--,"

Before I can ask for an explanation, the man is already at the end of the driveway. I look back down at the delivery and shut the door.

Next, I find myself fumbling and thrashing at the seal. Once I get it open, I tear the paper out and unfold it.

Hi Baby,

How are you? I miss you to death. Today marks roughly five years since. I didn't know I would go around Christmas, whatever kind of gift that is.

But anyway, I'm not writing this to force you to dwell on the past. I'm writing it so you can focus on the future. As I mentioned, five years have passed since we parted ways. That's a long time. Long enough, maybe, for you to start seeing someone else. In saying that, let me be clear - this isn't me giving you permission because it never was and will never be up to me. Instead, consider it encouragement. If you're asking why your husband would ever encourage you to date another man, it's actually pretty simple.

When you love someone as much as I love you, the pain of having to inevitably let go is bound to be excruciating. So, as I write this, I'm preparing myself to let go. So many people don't get that opportunity. They lose everything instantly. No goodbyes, nothing. Luckily, I got that chance. Between you checking up on me and caring for your patients, I was able to slowly get it onto this old piece of paper as I lay in this hospital bed.

Thank you for everything, Nicole. Really. You gave me something so rare. A love that will last forever.

So before you come back in, I'll finish with this:

They say angels look over those still on the ground. Little do they know that I'll be looking down on mine.

Do your thing, Nicole, whatever that may be.

Brent

P.S. Did you know the mail agency lets you post-date letters like cheques?

I look up from the tatty piece of paper as tears fill my eyes. Next year, I'll have an answer for Katherine.