

Mother's Last Words

by Sue Hoffart

Two days before the funeral, Maureen handed Paul a small box containing a bundle of envelopes. Each one, she told him, should be given to Jessie at the appropriate time. The first envelope contained a card to be opened two months later, on December 25. Denise had always made a fuss over the festive season, decorating the tree, baking treats, wearing a Santa hat to work. She wanted Jessie to have something to hold in her absence.

The second envelope would go to Jessie on her 18th birthday and the third on her 21st.

The final card was to be handed over on her wedding day. Jessie took over the cooking and many of the household chores while living with her grieving father. As the initial milestones passed, the teenager grew into a self-assured young woman.

Quiet and practical like Paul, with Denise's compassion and strength. She became a professional baker, often sweetening the lives of those she cared for with exquisitely decorated cakes. As passing years eased the knot of sadness, Jessie met a bright, kind, intensive care nurse who captivated her from their first date. When he slipped an engagement ring on her finger, Jessie knew three things; she wanted to marry Gabriel Brockelsby, she would wear her mother's dress, and the nuptials would mean she could open her mother's final card. There was some panic when an initial fitting found the dress was slightly too snug, but Jessie's high school sewing teacher, Carol, came to the rescue. Carol had known Denise and now lived six doors down from the McIndoe home. Leading up to the wedding day, measurements were taken and rechecked, seams were unpicked, the neckline lowered and lengths of lace carefully cut and resigned.

On a sunny November morning, Jessie unclasped the fine chain she always wore around her neck, and then slipped her mother's wedding band and engagement ring off the necklace onto her right hand. She picked up the flat rectangle envelope that was sitting, waiting for her alongside a photo of her mother wearing the very dress that would hug her figure as she walked up the aisle in a few hours. The day had been planned for months, from the special women who would help her dress to the four different cake flavors and the modern jive-style dance she and Gabriel had been practicing for months.

But first the envelope.

The bride-to-be looked nervously from the envelope to her future husband. Gabriel sat alongside, delivering the same support he would soon promise in wedding vows he had written himself. Jessie had no doubts about the pending nuptials but felt daunted by the significance of the envelope in her hands. Much as her wedding day signaled a joyous new beginning, it was also the final time she would open a gift from her mother.

As she read the few laboriously penned words, saw the familiar handwriting and the 'love from Mum' signature at the bottom, Jessie allowed herself to experience the deep sorrow of loss. Then she dried her tears and prepared to relish every jubilant moment of the day her mother had pictured as she wrote the last card. Wearing the dress was a comfort; the closest Jessie had come to being wrapped in her mother's arms in 11 years. Perhaps the garment will be treasured and refashioned by a future daughter. For now, it has been carefully cleaned and folded into a box, awaiting the moment Jessie will unpack it and encourage her own children to touch the lace and silk that connects them to their grandmother.