

The Price of Unrequited Love

Chapter 1

Eighteen days after giving up on Brendan Maynard, Jayde Rosario cut off her waist-length hair and called her father, announcing her decision to move to California and attend UC Berkeley.

Her father, surprised, asked about the sudden change, reminding her how she'd always insisted on staying with Brendan. Jayde forced a laugh, revealing the painful truth: Brendan was getting married, and she, his stepsister, could no longer cling to him.

That night, she tried to tell Brendan about her college acceptance, but his fiancée, Chloe Ellis, interrupted with a bubbly call, and Brendan's tender words to Chloe twisted a knife in Jayde's heart. She remembered how his tenderness used to be hers alone, how he had protected her, and how she had poured out her heart to him in a diary and a love letter, only for him to explode, tearing the letter and yelling, "I'm your brother!"

He had stormed out, leaving her to painstakingly tape the shredded pieces back together. Her love, however, didn't die, not even when he brought Chloe home and told her to call her "sister-in-law."

Now, she understood. She had to put that fire out herself. She had to dig Brendan out of her heart.

Chapter 1

Eighteen days after she decided to give up on Brendan Maynard, Jayde Rosario cut off her waist-length hair. She stood in front of the mirror and smoked her first cigarette, the smoke curling around her fingers. The taste was bitter.

That night, she called her father across the country.

"Dad, I got into UC Berkeley."

Her voice was quiet.

"I want to move to California. I want to be with you again."

Her father, Farrell Conner, sounded surprised on the other end of the line. "After your mom and I divorced, I settled down here. I always asked you to come over as an exchange student, but you insisted on staying with your step-brother, Brendan. Why the sudden change?"

Jayde lowered her eyes, which were red and swollen. She forced a small, light laugh.

"Some paths you have to walk to the end to know they're dead ends."

She paused, her voice shaking slightly.

"Brendan is getting married. It's not right for me, his sister with no blood relation, to cling to him anymore."

Her father sighed, his voice full of sympathy. "It's good you've figured it out. Your mom and Mr. Maynard have been traveling the world, leaving you with Brendan all these years. You're grown up now. It's time to come live with me. You can study and learn to manage the company."

"Okay," Jayde said, then hung up.

She saw her swollen eyes in the reflection of the dark phone screen. She went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on her face. She had two weeks until she left for Berkeley. She had to pull herself together.

She walked down the hallway and noticed the light was on in the study. She hesitated for a moment, then pulled up her e-acceptance letter on her phone and knocked on the door.

"Knock, knock, knock."

Inside, Brendan Maynard sat at his desk. He wore dark blue silk loungewear, and his high nose supported a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. He looked elegant, aloof, and disciplined as he typed on his computer.

"Brendan," Jayde said softly. This was the man who was her step-brother. He was also the secret, hidden crush of her entire teenage life.

Brendan looked up from his screen, his brow furrowed in a slight frown. "Something wrong?"

Jayde pursed her lips, hesitating. "The college admission results are out..."

Before she could finish, a cute, bubbly ringtone cut through the quiet room. "Darling, answer the phone~"

Brendan's frown vanished instantly. He picked up his phone, and a gentle smile spread across his face as he listened to the person on the other end.

"Chloie, you can work directly with the wedding planner. Just tell them to arrange whatever designs you want. Remember, money is no object."

A sharp bitterness filled Jayde's chest. Brendan's tenderness used to belong only to her.

When she was eight, her remarried mother brought her to the Maynard household. She stood awkwardly in the grand mansion, lost and alone. Young Brendan, dressed in his British-style school uniform, had walked over and taken her hand. "Little girl, I'm your brother now," he'd said.

When she was ten, she was afraid of the dark. Brendan secretly used his allowance to buy her a Totoro nightlight. "Don't be scared," he'd told her. "I'll protect you, just like Totoro protects Mei."

During her teenage years, Brendan was the sun in her world. She didn't know how to tell him about the love she kept hidden, so she wrote it all down in a diary, over and over again.

Then, on her seventeenth birthday, just before Brendan graduated from college, she gave him everything. She gave him the diary filled with her feelings and a love letter where she poured out her heart.

That day, Brendan exploded. He flipped the gift box over, sending its contents scattering across the floor.

"Jayde Rosario, are you sick? I'm your brother!" he had yelled.

But she had been stubborn. "We're not related by blood. You're not my real brother. You've pampered me and protected me and cared for me all these years. Isn't it natural for me to fall in love with you?"

Her stubbornness was met with cruelty. He mercilessly tore the love letter into pieces.

"I knew you'd do something foolish. I shouldn't have bothered with you all these years! You can't even tell the difference between family affection and romantic love!"

He stormed out of the house that day without a second glance. Jayde cried as she picked up the shredded pieces from the floor. She took them to her room and painstakingly taped them back together. But the letter was scarred, a patchwork of its former self.

Her failed confession didn't kill her love for him. She studied harder, determined to get into the same university he attended, to stay in the same city.

But on the day she finished high school, Brendan brought a woman named Chloie Ellis home.

"Jayde, call her 'sister-in-law'," he'd said.

That night, Jayde cried until she couldn't breathe. She finally understood that the ninety-nine steps she had taken through thorns to reach him meant nothing. She and Brendan would only ever be siblings. There was no other possibility.

The intense love that had burned in her heart for years now felt like a fire that was burning her alive.

Now, she understood. She had to put that fire out herself. She had to dig Brendan out of her heart.