



SEAL

TEAM ALPHA

CLAIMING *Jane*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HOPE FORD

CLAIMING JANE

SEAL TEAM ALPHA

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CHAPTER 1

GRANT

I SHOULD BE FOCUSED on the man in the casket because the closest thing to a brother I have is being lowered into the ground, but I can't keep my eyes off of his sister, Jane. She is sitting in the front row, surrounded by men and women in uniform, and I am standing at attention by the closed casket.

A possession like nothing I've ever felt before comes over me. I wonder where her friends are. I wonder why her brother is about to be buried and she has no one sitting next to her, trying to comfort her as the tears roll down her cheeks.

Just watching her, I know I can't leave without making sure she is going to be okay. And yes, a part of me feels like I owe it to James. He was my best friend, and he would do the same for me. But it's more than that because just seeing the pain etched on to Jane's beautiful face fills me with an emotion that I haven't felt in a long time. I pride myself on staying emotionally detached—being a SEAL demands that. But one look at Jane and all the things I thought I knew about myself are gone.

I fist my hands at my sides, fighting the urge to go to her.

When the funeral is finally over and the crowd breaks off into smaller groups, I walk over to where she's still sitting, staring at the fresh dirt. With my hands in my pockets, I approach her. "Hey, Jane. I'm not sure if you know me or not, but I'm Grant. I was your brother's—"

She forces a smile to her face and cuts me off. "I know who you are. Besides seeing you in pictures, James talked about you all the time."

I nod as my stomach clenches. Life just isn't fair sometimes, and I've lost brothers before, but James, man, losing James just hits hard. I clear my throat. "He talked about you all the time too."

She sucks in a breath and pulls back her shoulders. She's physically trying to hold herself together, and it's obvious that she's about to lose it. I don't know why, but I need to be here when she does.

I don't ask her about her family because I know it was just her and James. Fuck, and now it's just her. I want to ask her where the hell her friends are, but I'm afraid of upsetting her even more.

I cross my arms over my chest to keep from reaching for her. "I'm on leave for a week. Can I help you with anything while I'm here?" My plan was to go to my home in Whiskey Run after the funeral, but if Jane needs me, I can stay in California.

She shakes her head. "There's nothing to really do. The house sold a month ago, and what's left of James' things are in a rental unit."

I try to think back and recall if James told me he was selling his house. I don't remember it if he did. "I didn't know you all were selling."

She draws her knees up and pulls her long skirt down over them as she does. As she wraps her arms around her legs, she shrugs. "Yeah, I'm not sure it was planned. He got into some trouble and owed some money so..."

Her voice trails off, and I ask, "What do you mean, he got into some trouble?"

Her gaze turns curious, and as if she's made a decision, she shakes her head side to side. "You don't know, do you?"

I can tell by the way she says it that I'm not going to like it. "I don't know what?"

She shudders, and I swear her shoulders drop even farther as if she's holding the weight of the world on them. "You don't know that he gambled our house away. He lost it in some tournament when he was on leave a few months ago."

I think back to a few months before, and I remember when James went on leave. "You mean when you were sick... he came home to take you to the hospital... right?"

She stands up and wipes her hands across her skirt, straightening the material. "It's fine. What's done is done."

I put a hand up and walk toward her. "Wait, talk to me and tell me what happened. He told me you were sick and he needed to come check on you. He stayed with you in the hospital..."

She throws her hands up in the air. "If that's what he told you, that's what happened."

I put my hands on her shoulders to stop her from walking away. “Jane, talk to me. I’m not a fool. I know that James once battled with addiction, but I thought he was done with that.”

She nods. “Yeah, for awhile, he was doing better. I thought he’d kicked the gambling addiction, but the fact is he only got better at hiding it. He succeeded for awhile. Time and time again, I thought I’d misplaced our parents’ coin collection or my mom’s necklace and rings. But everything was going missing when he would come home.” She lifts her shoulders in a shrug. “He had nothing left to give... so he bet the house.”

She winces as my hands tighten on her shoulders. I jerk away. “Sorry. Okay, so he lost the house. What about his truck?”

Her answer is immediate. “Gone.”

“Your parents’ trust fund?”

She raises her eyebrows. “You knew about that?”

I nod. “Yeah, do you have it?”

Her eyes widen. “I’m eighteen, Grant. I can’t touch it until I turn twenty-one. But it doesn’t matter. It’s gone.”

“Fuck.” I grunt out the expletive and shake my head. James loved his sister. It had to be bad if he did all this. This side of him is not the man I know. James is the type to step in front of a bullet to save someone. “Where are you living, Jane?”

She juts her chin and looks at me with so much pride in her face, it’s painful to watch. “I live in a shelter downtown.”

“A shelter?”

She nods and doesn't seem to see the problem with it. "Yes, a shelter. It's not that bad. Don't be judgmental."

"You're not living in a shelter." My mind starts to turn, and I lean toward her. "His benefits. You'll get those."

She nods her head to the men at the other side of the cemetery. "The troop commander said my brother didn't add me as the beneficiary. He said he's going to see what he can do, but it may take a while. But I'm fine. I have a waitressing job at night, and I walk dogs during the day. I'm fine. I'll have money saved to get an apartment in no time."

She's working two jobs and living in a shelter. Anger takes over, and I want to punch something. "Did you drive here?"

She opens her mouth and then closes it before shaking her head. She doesn't have to say anything. I'm sure she's about to admit that either her car has been pawned or it's broken down or something, and it's going to piss me off even more. I hold my hand out to her. "Come with me."

She crosses her arms over her chest protectively. "I can see the way you're looking at me, and you need to know that I don't like pity. I don't want it, and I don't need it."

With my hand out, palm up, I stretch my fingers hoping she realizes that I'm not going to give up. "Trust me, pity is not what I think when I look at you."

Her eyes widen, and I shake my head. Geez, Grant, really? Hitting on her at her brother's funeral is the lowest of lows. I drag my eyes back to her, and she's looking at me with curiosity. "Come eat with me so we can talk."

Instead of putting her hand in mine, she tightens her arms around herself. I expect her to say no, but when she says, "Okay," I don't hesitate. Since she won't take my hand, I put an arm around her shoulder and walk with her to my truck.

We walk in silence, but that's okay because I don't think I could form a thought if I wanted to. Having Jane under my arm and pressed against my side is like nothing I've felt before. I shouldn't enjoy her touch or the feel of her, but that's impossible.

I know she's too young for me. I know she's off limits. I know this is the absolute worst time to be attracted to someone, but I can't help it. There's just something about her I can't resist.

CHAPTER 2

JANE

HE MADE ME ORDER FOOD.

Okay, I shouldn't say made me because the way he did it made me want to please him and do what he asks. I nibbled at my food with him watching me the whole time. He's not happy, and even though I know it's partly from burying his best friend, it's obvious there is more to it.

"Can I ask you something? About my brother, I mean."

He nods his head, and I blurt it out before I change my mind. "Did he suffer?" I hold my hand up. "I know you can't give me details, but I just need to know if he suffered."

He leans his head to the side, and it's obvious by the anguish on his face he's a man that's hurting. A part of me feels bad for even asking him, but I need to know. He leans forward. "He didn't suffer. It was an enemy attack, and we were under intense fire." He stutters through the words. "It was over quick."

I lift my chin to him. "Were you there?"

He shakes his head. "No, I was on the other side of the country on another mission. If I had been..."

When his voice trails off, it's obvious what he's thinking. I drop my voice. "It was his time, Grant. Even if you were there, it wouldn't change the fact he's gone now."

He grits his teeth and just stares back at me.

I set down my fork and look him in the eye. "Why did you invite me to dinner?"

He opens his mouth but doesn't say anything, so I continue. "It's obvious you don't want to be here, so why don't you say what's on your mind, and we can go our separate ways."

I pick up my glass of water to keep myself busy. I'm completely on edge, and I hate feeling like this.

He leans forward. "Marry me."

I choke on the drink of water I just took, and after a few seconds of hacking, I strangle the words out. "Marry you? Are you high or something?"

The people at the tables around us all turn to look, but I don't care. What he's suggesting is crazy talk. Obviously, there's something wrong with him.

He's fucking with me. That has to be it. There's no other option.

His voice is soft and gravelly as he puts his hands palm down on the table. "I'm not high. In fact, this is probably the most lucid I've been in a long time. I think you should marry me."

I shake my head because there's no way I'm hearing him right. "Marry you?"

He nods while his gaze bores into me. “Yes, I want you to marry me.”

I laugh. I can’t help it. And once I start, I can’t bring myself to stop. I laugh so hard, my cheeks and my sides start to hurt. I’m wiping at the tears rolling down my face. “Well, thank you, Grant, I needed a good laugh. That was a good one. Thank you.”

He grits his teeth. “I’m not joking.”

“No,” I say without hesitation. I say it so fast because I’m afraid that I’m going to get caught up in all of this and say yes, which would really be stupid. All I need is to tie myself to some SEAL. He probably has a wife or girlfriend at every port.

He grabs on to me and threads our fingers together. His thumb caresses the back of my hand, and I’m transfixed on the sight of him holding me.

“Look at me,” he demands.

With heat rising in my cheeks, I raise my eyes to his.

He nods and squeezes my hand in approval. Damn, why do I feel that between my thighs? One nod with a small smile causes blood to rush through my veins, my heart to race, and butterflies to flip around in my stomach.

“Why? Why would you want to marry me?”

He looks stunned, and it takes him a second to form any words, but once he does, he doesn’t stop. “Because you’re my best friend’s little sister. Because you need someone on your side right now, and I can do that... I want to do that. Because I

can't leave here and do my job, if I'm worried about you living in a fuckin' shelter. Because—”

I cut him off. “I'm fine. I can take care of myself.”

He nods in agreement. “I believe that. I wasn't kidding; James talked about you all the time. I know you can take care of yourself, but why would you want to when I can help you?”

He pauses for just a minute, sits up a little straighter, and continues, “And you can help me.”

I scrunch my nose up. “Help you? How can I help you?”

“My house sits empty while I'm gone. Back in the winter, a pipe froze and I didn't know it. It ended up flooding the whole first floor and cost me thousands of dollars to renovate. You can live there and take care of things while I'm working.”

My forehead creases in confusion. “You need a caretaker. Why would you marry me for that?”

He clears his throat and pulls his hands back, and instantly I miss his touch. “I understand if you don't want to marry me. We just met, but I thought it would be mutually beneficial. You would get my health insurance, and James talked about how you wanted to go to school. Being married to a SEAL will save you money on that. And I would have someone to take care of my house—make it into a home—for when I get out.”

I ask him the first question that pops into my head. “How old are you, Grant?”

“Thirty-one.” And even before I can do the math in my head, he continues. “I'm thirteen years older than you. I'm not trying

to take advantage of you, Jane. We'll go to Tennessee and get married. I'll help you get settled into the house, and then I'll be back in California or somewhere in the Middle East. I'm not trying to take advantage of you... I'm trying to help you."

I look down at my hands and try to reason with myself. This is ridiculous, and I should get up and walk away, but what he's offering is tempting. I have nothing right now. I don't have a home, a car, I walk three miles a day just to get to and from work. I don't have any friends here. The few friends I had in high school have all moved away. I don't have any family. I have nothing.

"Stop," he commands.

My eyes jerk to his in alarm. "Stop what?"

He reaches for me again, wrapping his hands around both of mine. "Whatever you're thinking, just stop. I can see the sadness on your face, and it's killing me, Jane. Instead of thinking about whatever you're thinking about, imagine this. A big white house with a white picket fence. A house that needs to be turned into a home. I have a little Honda Accord, it's a little older but runs perfectly, so you can drive it. You can go to school if that's what you want to do. Or you can just focus on you. Whatever you want to do." He pauses for a minute and then lowers his voice. "And if you're worried about what I want in return, don't be. All I want is for you to help me with the house. It will be one less thing for me to worry about while I'm gone."

"And..."

I let my voice trail off because I'm not sure if I should ask or not.

He squeezes my hand. "And what? Go ahead. If we're going to do this, you need to know that you can ask me anything."

I bite on to my lower lip and stare at him. He's been upfront about everything, and I know I just need to say it. "And if we get married, what about me and you... what will you expect from me... as your wife?"

His face hardens, and then it's as if I can see him forcing himself to relax. "I will expect you to take care of the house and yourself. That's it."

"But..." I start but don't finish. I should just leave well enough alone, but I'm the type of person that needs everything spelled out. "But we'll be married. You won't expect..."

I can feel the heat crawl up my face in embarrassment, but I don't look away from him. I know this conversation is important, and we need to have it.

He lays my hands on the table between us and covers them with his. The weight of them feels good, but I try not to think about it. When he starts to talk, his voice is husky. "I won't lie to you, Jane. I'm attracted to you, but I won't act on it. You're eighteen and way too young for me. I'm doing this because I want to—I need to—know you're okay. The house and you are the only two things you need to worry about."

I try not to show my disappointment. It's crazy; we just met, but I'd be lying if I didn't say that a part of me was secretly

hoping for more. At least he admitted that he's attracted to me. At least I wasn't imagining that.

"For how long?" I ask him.

His forehead creases in confusion. "How long for what?"

I pull my hands out from under his and rest them on my lap under the table. This discussion is real and intense, but the sounds of the diner with the clinking of glasses and silverware hitting plates that are playing in the background are keeping me grounded. "How long will we be married?"

He blows out a breath and with a look of distaste says, "Until it's not mutually beneficial anymore. You can divorce me any time you want to. I'm not holding you captive. You can do what you want, Jane."

The man sitting across from me might as well be a stranger. I don't know anything about him outside of what my brother has told me. I do know he saved my brother one time in their career, and it's obvious Grant is a good man. I think about my choices, and the decision should be easy. I can stay here and have nothing or I can go with Grant where at least I'll have a roof over my head, and I'll have options. I know what I have to do. I just hope I don't come to regret it. "Okay, I'll marry you."

CHAPTER 3

GRANT

SEVEN YEARS LATER

IT'S TIME.

Hell, it's past time.

I've put it off for too long, and I have to do something about it. I could go on another mission and be gone for months on end. The SEAL team would be happy if I did, and there's a big part of me that hates leaving my brothers in arms. I've struggled with this, but once I finally made the decision, I was at peace with it. I went through all the proper channels. I talked to my superiors. I filled out the paperwork, I completed the separation counseling and have been cleared to leave with the suggestion I continue therapy for the nightmares that I've been having.

I know that since I've only been enlisted for twenty years, I'll be leaving with only 50 percent of my salary. I know if I just put in another ten years, I'll get the full 100 percent and more. But it's not worth it to me.

I know all of the reasons that I should stay, but it's time for me to go home.

I fidget in the seat as I sit outside the troop commander's office.

I requested this meeting, and he's put me off and put me off, so now I'm sitting here waiting for him to come out. He can't avoid me forever.

One way or another, I'm leaving, and I prefer to do it with approval instead of just going AWOL.

I stand up and move to the window and stare out at the base. As I cross my arms over my chest, I let my mind wander, and like always, the first thing I think about is Jane.

My wife.

She's my wife in name only. On paper, we're truly married. According to the Navy, our marriage is 100 percent legit. But in all the ways that count, we're not really husband and wife.

For the last seven years, I've kept my distance even though it's the last thing I wanted to do. I tried going home once, but after only one night with her in the cozy home she had created, I knew she was too tempting and I wouldn't be able to keep my distance from her. So after that, I made a point to stay busy. I went on every deployment I could, spent my free time alone, and did my best to stop thinking of her.

And even though I was successful in staying away from her and my home in Whiskey Run, I couldn't refuse her when she made a point to call me every week or when she sent me care packages filled with homemade cookies, brownies, and letters that smelled like lilacs and reminded me of her.

No matter how much time I spent on the battlefield or on missions, doing my best to think of anything but her, all I could do is think about Jane. I've convinced myself that I'm

past my prime and I need to retire, but deep down, I know it's because I want to go home to my wife.

The sound of the office door opening jars me from my thoughts, and I turn on my heel. The troop commander takes one look at me and shakes his head. He knows why I'm here, and he's not happy about it.

“Okay, Southpaw. Come on in. Have a seat.”

I let out a sigh of relief when he calls me by my nickname. He has to be softening to my request if he calls me anything but my last name. I pull my shoulders back and walk into the troop commander's office. He moves a little slower and drops heavily into his chair behind his desk.

“Did you want to talk about something?”

I spurt out a laugh and then catch myself. “Commander, I think you know what I want to talk about. I submitted all the paperwork for my retirement almost six months ago. The date I requested was two months ago, and I want to check on the paperwork because I've heard nothing back.”

He stares at me, and I shrug my shoulders. “Did I miss a signature line? Maybe I missed a paper or something? I thought I turned it all in, but if I missed something, can you let me know?”

He holds his hands together on the top of the desk. “You know Warren is teaching now. Have you considered doing that?”

I know who he's talking about. Warren is a buddy of mine, so I know his story, and the fact is, Warren is happy teaching

because his fiancée is here. “I’m not teaching.” I take a deep breath and tell him, “I want out.”

His jaw tightens. “So you want to go through with it?”

His eyes are boring into me, and I stare back at him without blinking. I don’t even hesitate. “Yeah, I want to go through with it.”

“But—” he starts, and I nod my head.

“I know. Trust me, I know whatever you’re about to tell me or warn me about. I want to do this. It’s time for me to go home.”

He purses his lips together and gives one big nod with an exhale of breath. “Okay. We hoped you’d change your mind, but obviously that’s not going to be the case.” He pulls a folder from the top drawer of his desk and opens it. He wraps his hand around the big stamp and pounds it on the signed paperwork. “Approved. It’s done. You can go home.”

For just a second, I’m filled with fear. “I can go home... now?”

For twenty years, I’ve served, and even though this is what I want, I’m not going to act like the idea of leaving this life doesn’t leave me a little overwhelmed.

The troop commander nods. “Yep, I should have signed it a few months ago, but I was hoping you were going to change your mind. You are one of the best designated marksmen I’ve ever worked with, Southpaw... We’re going to miss you around here.”

I clear my throat to hide the emotion welling inside me. This is all I’ve known for twenty years, and just like that, I’m done. I

thank him, and as I walk out of the office, my thoughts go to Jane. I type out a text to her.

“I’m coming home.”

I think about it and am about to delete it before I impulsively hit send. With a sigh of relief, I call Ethan. He picks up on the first ring and says hello.

“Hey,” I croak out.

He’s taken aback, and it doesn’t take him long to figure it out.

“They’re letting you out.”

It’s more of a statement than a question. I open my mouth, but nothing comes out.

Ethan laughs on the other end. “Breathe, brother. It’s going to be okay. This is what you wanted.”

I snap myself out of it as the doubts start to pile up. “I know, but...”

I walk outside the building and take a deep breath. I don’t slow down as I walk to the barracks. I’ve been living out of my sack for a while now, hoping for this day, and I could literally be on the road in an hour.

“But what? You said this was what you wanted. Have you changed your mind?”

I shake my head. “No. I want this.”

Ethan laughs. “So what are you so freaked out about?”

“I’m not—” I start to deny it, but Ethan is quick to call me out.

“We served side by side for how many years? I know you, and you’re freaking out. It’s Jane, isn’t it? Have you told her you’re coming home?”

My voice doesn’t even sound like my own. “I sent her a text.”

Ethan laughs loudly into the phone. “You sent her a text?”

I shrug like it’s no big deal, and I realize Ethan can’t see me.

“Yeah, I sent her a text. What’s the big deal?”

“What’s the big deal?” he repeats. “Oh, I don’t know, you’re retiring from the SEALs and you sent a text to your wife to let her know. She’s the woman you’ve been in love with for the last seven years, and you thought it was a good idea to TEXT her?”

I don’t even try to deny how I feel about Jane. It would be a waste of time because Ethan would see right through it. “I just...” I start and then stop myself.

“You just what? Spit it out.”

“I’m a fool. It’s been seven years. Hell, she could be seeing someone or something. Plus, I’m not going to ...” I huff out a breath and stop outside the barracks.

I’ve rendered Ethan speechless.

“Look, forget it. I’m good. How about you? How’s your mission?”

When he still doesn’t respond, I say his name again. “Ethan.”

He groans. “Please tell me you’re not going to try and be some martyr or some stupid shit like that. You’re going to start spewing crap about how you don’t deserve her and you’re

saving her from you. I swear if you do, you're a bigger dumbass than I thought. It's obvious you love her. Don't fuck this up, Grant."

He knows me too well. Even though I'm dying to get home to Jane, I'm still determined to hold back. I need to have something to offer her besides the emotionally wounded walking disaster that I've become. So what do I do? I lie to my best friend. "I promise. I'll give it my best shot."

He blows out a breath. "How come I feel like you're lying to me?"

"I will. I'll do my best. Now can we quit talking about me? What's up with you? Have you come clean with Kelsie, or does she still think she's writing to Tom?"

When he doesn't answer me right away, I continue, "I can't believe you're giving me a lecture about Jane when you've been lying to Kelsie this whole time. She's going to find out it's you eventually, and she's not going to forgive you."

"I'm not hurting her... I'm doing it to protect her."

I roll my eyes. "Whatever the reason, you're still going to hurt her by lying to her."

"Shit, Grant. What are we doing? Are we going to spend all day gossiping with each other or what?"

I nod at a few of the guys walking by. "You're right. Okay, I was just calling to tell you I'm heading home. Be safe out there, brother."

"You got it. I need to go, but I'll be in touch. See ya, brother."

I hang up and pocket my phone before heading inside. I'm going to grab my sack and get on the road. It will take a few days to get from California to Tennessee, but it will give me plenty of time to figure out a plan for when I get home. For seven years, since the day I met Jane, I've wanted to be with her. But can I take what I want if I know it's not the best thing for her?

CHAPTER 4

JANE

IT FEELS as if I've been holding my breath for the last seven years. Ever since he texted me the other day, I've been in a tizzy. I knew he'd talked about retiring, but I didn't believe he'd do it. He called me an hour ago to let me know he was almost here, and I've played out every scenario. I've considered playing it cool by staying inside and hiding my emotions. I thought about leaving so he could come in and get settled on his own before I came home. But I knew I wouldn't be able to do either of those things.

There's no way I'll be able to contain my emotions, and it would take a bomb to root me out of here right now. I stand on the porch and lean against the column as I wait for him to turn down our road.

When I see the headlights, I stand up straighter and stare without blinking, waiting to see if it's Grant finally getting home.

When he slows down and pulls into the driveway, there's no holding back.

I jump off the porch, bypassing the stairs, and run to the truck. He stops and opens the door, getting out as I get to where he's

parked.

We stand here, staring at each other, and his gaze travels the length of my body before finally stopping on my face. I've imagined this moment for years now and played it out in my head over and over, but I wasn't prepared for the emotions that would hit me.

He has a few days of scruff on his chin, and he looks tired, but the fact that he's standing in front of me instead of on the phone hits me hard. I put my hands to my face and burst into tears. Once the sobbing starts, I can't stop it.

His hands go to my shoulders. "Jane, baby. What's wrong? It's okay... talk to me."

The more Grant tries to soothe me, the harder I cry. He circles his arms around me and holds me against his body. My heart's racing because I've wanted to be in his arms just like this since the day I met him. In all that time, I didn't think I'd be uncontrollably crying.

He gathers me in his arms, and when my feet come off the ground, I gasp. "Grant... what are you doing? I'm too big."

He doesn't put me down. If anything, he holds me tighter as he kicks his car door closed and then carries me toward the house, up the steps, and stops at the front door. "Get the door, honey."

I reach over and open the door, and he walks into the house. He kicks the door closed and then carries me to the living room. Instead of setting me on the couch, he sits down, keeping me on his lap.

“Talk to me. Tell me why you’re crying.”

I sniffle and shake my head. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me. I’ve thought about this moment forever, but I never thought I would fall apart. Here, I’ll get up.”

I start to move, but he holds on to me. “Stay.” As soon as he says it, he lifts his hands up, and I miss them instantly. “Sorry, you can get up.”

Unsure what to do, I stand up from his lap and move to sit next to him. An awkward silence comes over us, and I shake my head. It’s been less than five minutes and I’ve already messed up his homecoming.

Before I can apologize for my actions, he’s on his feet. “Uh, I’m going to go grab my bag.”

I jump up. “I’ll help you.”

He puts a hand out to stop me. “No, I got it. I’ll be right back.”

I watch him go, and panic starts to set in. I knew it would be weird, but I wasn’t expecting this. It’s like we’re strangers instead of husband and wife. And even though we haven’t been face to face, we do talk all the time on the phone. Even if it’s just about the house or other mundane things, we still talk.

When he walks in, he drops his bag next to the front door, and I walk up to him. “Can we start over?”

He wipes his hands down his thighs. “Yeah, sounds good.”

I hold my arms open. “Welcome home.”

He looks at me, and with a controlled smile, he nods his head. “Thank you.”

I let my arms drop awkwardly to my sides. This is not going well at all, and I'm not sure why. On the phone, he's always affectionate and attentive, and he seems to be holding back now. I'm not sure what to make of it, but I'm not giving up. "Are you doing okay? How was your trip?"

He looks agitated as he runs his hands through his hair. "It was good. I'm a little tired."

I clap my hands together. "Oh my gosh, I'm sorry. I bet you are tired. I made up the big bedroom for you."

His eyebrows rise in surprise. "But I thought you were sleeping in that room."

His nose is scrunched up as if sleeping in the same room as me disgusts him or something. I stutter over my words. "Uh, yeah, well, I was, but I moved all my things to the smaller room upstairs."

He blows out a breath and doesn't try to hide his disappointment. "You didn't have to do that, Jane. I've been sleeping on a cot for as long as I can remember. I would have been fine in a smaller room."

I grab his bag and pick it up before he can stop me. "I'll put this in your room. I know you've seen all the changes to the house when we've video chatted on the phone, but I wanted to surprise you with your room. I hope you love it, but I can change anything."

I keep rambling as I walk down the hallway to the bedroom. It takes a minute for Grant to follow me, and I try to catch my breath and get ahold of my emotions. I stand in the room and

wait for him as he enters and looks around. I expected him to be excited, but his voice is still controlled as he looks around. There's no hint of emotion, and when he doesn't even smile, I assure him again, "Really, I can change all of it."

He stops across the room from me. It almost feels like he can't put enough distance between us. "It's great, Jane. I love it."

I drop his bag to the floor and try to keep my patience. As I cross my arms over my chest, I bring up the one thing I've been thinking about but was hoping it wouldn't come to it. "So, uh, a friend of mine said there's an open apartment in her building. I have money saved up and—"

He cuts me off. "This is your house, Jane. You're not leaving."

"But..." I start.

But he doesn't let me say anything else. For the first time since he got here, he's showing some emotion, and unfortunately, it's anger. "You're not leaving your home, Jane. I won't hear of it. If you're uncomfortable with sharing a house with me, I'll leave."

It's my turn to be upset. "This is your house, Grant."

He blows out a breath and crams his hand through his hair. "It's our house. Look, I know this is awkward, but let's agree to not make any sudden decisions, okay? No one's leaving."

I start to fiddle with the ring on my finger. "You're right. We shouldn't make any decisions right now. I should let you rest. Are you hungry? Can I bring you a sandwich or anything?"

Instead of answering me, he points at my finger. "You're still wearing your ring."

I look at my hand and hold it up. “You mean my wedding ring? Of course, I’m still wearing it.”

He takes a step toward me. “So you’ve worn it the last seven years?”

He’s staring at me as if he’s anxious to hear my answer. “Of course. Since the day you put it on my finger, I’ve worn it. Well, except the time I hit my hand with a hammer and it was starting to swell so I took it off, but that was just for a few days.”

By the time I’ve finished talking, Grant has moved toward me and grabbed my hand and is now holding it up to inspect it. He strokes his finger along it and stares at my ring, and that’s when I notice it. I don’t even try to hold back my gasp. “You uh, you have your ring on too.”

He nods his head. “Yeah, I haven’t taken it off either. Can I ask you something, Jane?”

I nod my head, and he asks something I never thought my husband would ask me. “Have you been dating?”

I jerk my hand away from him and step back. Stunned, I shake my head. “Really? I know we don’t know each other well, but surely you know me well enough to know that I wouldn’t cheat on you. You’re my husband...”

When my voice trails off, he holds his hands up. “I know. I know. But this really isn’t a conventional marriage, and it’s been seven years. I just thought...”

Pain like nothing I’ve felt before crushes in my chest. “Wait... so you’re saying...”

I stop, clutch my hand to my chest, and start to walk toward the bedroom door. I know I'm being ridiculous. He's right. We've been married seven years, and besides the brief kiss he gave me in front of the justice of the peace, we've had literally no intimacy whatsoever. I can't hide the hurt, so walking away is the only option. I was a fool.

“Jane, stop. Where are you going?”

Without looking at him, I say, “I'm going to let you rest.”

His hand goes to my shoulder, and he stops me from leaving.

“Look at me.”

CHAPTER 5

GRANT

THIS IS GOING TOO FAST, but I see no way in slowing it down. I thought I'd have days to get myself together, but already I can see everything coming to a head. I shouldn't have asked, but I also knew that the first opening I had, I wouldn't be able to stop myself. This has been on my mind for the last seven years, and I haven't had the balls to ask her before now. And now she's telling me that since the day we said I do, she hasn't been with another man.

She doesn't turn to look at me, but at least she's no longer trying to escape. My voice is husky and filled with emotion. "Honey."

I move to stand beside her. "Look at me."

She raises her head and looks at me through hooded eyes. It takes everything in me to not lean down and kiss her. "Tell me what you're thinking."

She shakes her head, but it doesn't hide the pain reflected back at me in her eyes. "It doesn't matter, Grant."

I put my finger on her chin and tilt it up. "Everything about you matters. Tell me what's wrong."

She takes a step back and puts distance between us. “It’s nothing.”

I give her a soft smile. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

She nods, and I look back at the bed. Talking here is probably not a good idea, so I point down the hallway. “Want to talk in the living room?”

She nods and disappears out the door. I follow behind her, and when she sits down on the couch, I sit on the coffee table in front of her. She has her hands held together in front of her, and she’s staring at her fingers.

I wrap both of my hands around hers. “When we got married seven years ago, I didn’t really think things through...”

She tenses and tries to pull from me, but I’m not letting her go. “No, listen to me, Jane. Let me just get this out.”

She nods her head, and I start to ramble. “I married you because I couldn’t leave you. Your brother was my best friend, but it’s more than that. I wanted—I needed—to know you were going to be okay. I thought I could leave you here in my house and go on about my life, but I couldn’t. You’re all I’ve thought about.”

Finally, she looks at me, and I continue. “I went out with the guys a few times and the first time after we got married, I didn’t think anything of it. A woman was flirting with me—”

Her eyes widen, and I rush the rest out. “Hear me out. A woman was flirting with me, and it didn’t feel right. I left immediately, and all I could think about was you.” I take a deep breath and let it out. “I know what you thought back

there. I know you thought I cheated on you, but I didn't. I haven't dated anyone since we got married, Jane." As if that's not enough, I put it all out there. "I haven't talked, flirted, kissed, or had sex with someone else. Our vows meant something to me that day."

Her forehead creases. "I want to believe you..."

"But you don't?" I ask her with surprise.

She shakes her head. "It's been seven years, Grant. You're telling me that you weren't with anyone else, but you weren't here with me either. And don't tell me in those seven years, you couldn't have come home. I've seen you once, and even that one time you came home, you ended up leaving early."

I lean my head down and shake my head. She's exactly right. I could have come home a hundred times and chose not to. But I couldn't. How can I explain it to her? I owe it to her to try. "Right. You're right, but there's more to it. The one time I came home, I was still trying to convince myself to do the right thing. You were nineteen, Jane. I sort of forced you into this whole situation and—"

She cuts me off. "You didn't force me into anything."

I shrug my shoulders. "I took advantage of you. You were eighteen and didn't have many other choices. I got you into this."

She lifts her hand up. "You're making it sound like I didn't have a say in any of this. I wanted this, Grant. Even then, I knew I wanted this and even more so now. I've grown up these

last few years, and I wouldn't change my past... not any part of it."

I take a deep breath, waiting for the guilt to assuage, but it doesn't. For so long, I've felt the guilt of getting her into this. She's been alone all this time when she deserved more. I know I didn't do the right thing. I could have helped her without forcing her to marry me, but it didn't cross my mind at the time. I have so much to make up to her.

She tilts her head to the side. "So you're saying that when you came home, you wanted—" she stops and clears her throat as a pretty blush comes across her cheeks.

I cross my arms over my chest and stare at her. "I wanted you."

She blinks. "And now?"

I smile and shake my head. "Oh, honey, I still want you. There's no reason for me to deny it, but we're practically strangers. I wish I could say I'm ready for us and our marriage, and I know I'm an ass to even ask this, but I need some time, Jane. I have some things I'm working through, and I need to get my shit together so I have something to offer you."

She scrunches her nose up. "Something to offer me? I don't need any 'thing.' I need you. That's all."

I put my hands on her thighs and lean toward her. "Let's get to know each other. We skipped that in the beginning..."

She nods her head. "Okay. I think it's a good idea."

She opens her mouth and closes it again.

I shake my head and squeeze her legs. “If we’re going to do this, you have to talk to me. If you have something to say, say it. You can tell me anything.”

She covers my hands with hers and lifts them between us. I look at our intertwined fingers and wait for her to answer. She starts by saying, “You can tell me no.”

“I’m not going to tell you no.”

The smile on her face lets me know I said the right thing. She squeezes my hands. “Okay, so seriously, you can tell me no, and I’d completely understand. My friend has planned a welcome home party this Saturday. It’s at the park...”

She stops talking, and I know it’s because of the frown on my face. I try to soften it, but it’s no use. The idea of a party makes me want to run away. There’s no part of me that wants to mingle with people I don’t know.

Jane shakes her head. “Forget it. I’ll tell her to cancel it.”

There’s no hiding the disappointment on her face. “Jane, parties are not really my thing.”

She nods. “Okay, I completely understand. It’s no big deal. She’ll understand.”

The fact that she’s smiling at me and not pouting at the fact I told her no has me changing my mind. For her, I can do anything. “If I do this, will you stay by my side the whole time?”

Her head jerks up, and she scoots to the end of the couch. Her legs are between mine, and I squeeze them. She looks at me worriedly. “First of all, you’re probably going to be sick of me

by Saturday and wish I'd give you some space. But seriously, we can do it another time."

The fact she thinks I'm going to get tired of her has me wanting to do this for her. "It's fine. I'll go."

She bites on to her lip. "There's something else."

"What is it?"

She sucks in a breath and blows it out slowly. "My friends all think we're really married."

"We are really married."

She nods and searches my eyes. "Right, well, they think we're in love."

I open my mouth to say we are in love, but I don't think she's ready for that. The idea of this party is getting better and better. I will have no trouble at all acting as if we're a real couple and that I love her. "It will be fine."

She raises her eyebrows. "Are you sure? I can cancel."

"I'm sure."

She nods her head, and I lean forward, pressing my hands to each side of her face. "Jane."

Her eyes widen. "That day we got married, I wish I had kissed you. That I really kissed you... Can I do that now?"

"Yes," she whispers.

I don't waste another minute. I lean in and press my lips to hers. I try to hold back, I really do, but as soon as our lips touch, I'm completely overwhelmed. I've imagined kissing her

for what feels like forever, and now that I am, I don't want it to end. I tilt her head and deepen the kiss. When she gasps, I slide my tongue along hers. Her whimper is my undoing, and I know I need to stop before this gets out of hand.

I pull away, and her eyes are shades darker and filled with desire. She touches her fingers to her lips and stares at me with surprise. I swipe my thumb across her swollen lip. "That was even better than I imagined, Jane."

She smiles and nods.

So I continue. "I don't want you to feel pressured. We're going to take this slow..."

"Okay. I don't feel pressured. But okay."

I've barely slept in the last three days, and there's no holding back the yawn that takes hold of me. As soon as I do, she pops up. "Go to bed, Grant. We can talk more in the morning."

I want to stay here and talk to her. Who am I kidding? I would love to have her in my arms and feel her against my body the whole night, but I know that's not possible. Not only because it's too fast but also these night terrors are impossible to predict. "Go on up to bed. I'm going to lock up down here."

She starts to walk away and then stops. She pounces on me, wrapping her arms around my waist. Even though her voice is muffled, I can hear her plainly. "I'm so glad you're home, Grant. Thank you for coming back to me."

I wrap my arms around her and kiss the top of her head. It's at this moment that I'm one hundred percent positive that I've made the right decision. Now I just hope I don't screw it up.

CHAPTER 6

JANE

I MOVED to this smaller bedroom months ago when Grant mentioned retiring. I've stayed in here night after night and have slept just fine, but it feels different tonight. It feels good knowing that Grant is here in the bedroom right downstairs. I don't have to worry about where he is or if he's okay. I know he's safe and that he'll be here in the morning.

I roll to my side and close my eyes, waiting for sleep to come, but I know it's going to be awhile. My body is still tingling from being held in his arms and that kiss. Wow, that kiss. I turn to my back and look up at the ceiling. I've dreamed about having Grant home, and now that he's finally here, I'm wondering if maybe dreams do come true.

There's a part of me that fell in love with him that first day he asked me to marry him. I know that sounds ridiculous, but the fact he wanted, or as he said, needed to know I was safe, made me fall for him. I may have only seen him in person once since then, but we've gotten to know each other on the phone, and even though we've been thousands of miles apart, he still goes out of his way to take care of me.

It's the little things like sending me flowers on a random Thursday. Or the times he knew it snowed and he had people come to clear the sidewalk and driveway. Or when I was sick, he had food delivered and had his friends check in on me. Over and over, he's gone the extra step, letting me know that he's thinking of me and even though he's so far away, he's still going to take care of me.

I force my eyes closed, and when I do, I hear a thud from somewhere in the house. I sit straight up in bed and listen, wondering exactly what it is. Maybe instead of going to bed, Grant is walking around the house. Or maybe he's having trouble going to sleep.

I hear a noise again, but this time it sounds like a moan and yelling. I think about it for a split second and then jump out of bed and go out into the hallway. When I hear it again, I jog down the stairs and stop outside Grant's closed bedroom door.

Knocking softly, I call his name. "Grant."

The scream is louder this time, and I open the door to see him on the bed, thrashing around. I've read about this and know that the absolute worst thing I can do is wake him up, but I can't just stand here and do nothing.

I move closer to the bed and say his name louder. "Grant!"

He's screaming at this point, and I can't stand to see him like this. The guttural sounds coming from him are a man in pain, and I can't just stand by. I put my hands on his shoulders. "Grant!"

It all happens in an instant. I'm on my back on the bed and he's hovering over me, his hand around my neck.

He's covered in sweat, eyes bulging and muscles straining. I grip on to his hands, trying to get him to let go.

When he finally realizes what he's doing, he's off the bed and across the room staring at me as if I have three heads.

I gasp for breath as tears stream down my face.

“Jane.”

I hold my hand up to stop him, and he shrinks into himself. As he turns away from me, he says, “Leave. Please go.”

I sit up on the edge of the bed. Panting, I tell him, “Grant, it's okay....”

He has his arms crossed over his shoulders, and he's staring at the wall. He doesn't even sound like himself. “Please, Jane. Please go.”

I get up and slowly walk out of the room. When I get to the hallway, I run the rest of the way to my room as my tears continue to flow.

Sitting in the middle of my bed with my legs drawn up under me, I let it out. I'm crying so hard I don't even hear Grant come into the room until I feel the bed shift under his weight.

“I'm so sorry, Jane.”

I gasp and raise my head to look at him. “You're sorry? I'm the one that's sorry.”

He's shaking his head and looking at me with a tormented look on his face. “You have nothing to be sorry for.” He takes a

deep breath. “Let me look at you.”

I shake my head. “I’m fine.”

“Please,” he says.

I lift my chin up and move my head side to side. “I’m fine.”

He puts his hands on my shoulders and surveys my neck. His voice is deep and thick with emotion. “I hurt you.”

I try to pull away, but he doesn’t let go. “You didn’t hurt me.”

His thumb trails over my skin, and I can feel goosebumps forming on my arms. When he leans in, I suck in a breath as his lips touch my neck. “Fuck, I’m so sorry, Jane. I wouldn’t hurt you for anything.”

“I know that.”

He leans back and searches my eyes. “I should have talked to you about this. I’ve been having nightmares.”

I put my hand on his knee between us. “Oh Grant, I’m—”

He interrupts me. “I’ve talked to a therapist, and I’m working on it, but I need you to do something for me.”

I nod my head. “Anything.”

His hands go to the sides of my neck, and he’s looking at me intensely. “When I’m having a nightmare, don’t wake me up. Just leave me alone.”

I shake my head. “No, I can’t do that. Grant, you were screaming like someone was torturing you. I can’t just stand by while—”

He interrupts me. “You have to. I don’t want to hurt you, and when I’m like that, I don’t know what I’m doing.”

I let my hands slide up his chest, and the muscles under my palms contract. “I’m sorry. You can ask me anything, but I won’t just leave you to suffer. I can’t.”

He leans his forehead against mine. “Baby...”

I can tell by his tone he’s going to try and talk me into it, and I do the only thing I know to shut him up. I press my lips to his, and he seems stunned for just a second, and then he goes into action. He leans toward me, and I unfold my legs to lie on my back, pulling him with me. Our kiss is everything, but feeling his body pressed against mine makes everything even more intense. I feel like I’ve held this in forever, and I take this opportunity to show him how I feel about him.

He pulls away, searches my eyes, and then leans in, wrapping his arms around me.

He holds me close, and I match my breath to his. When he pulls back, we’re looking at each other. He starts to talk, but I put a finger over his lips. “You can ask anything of me, but I won’t just let you suffer. I’ll be smarter about it from now on and make sure I’m safe, but I won’t just let you suffer in a nightmare.”

He shakes his head. “Jane—”

I stroke my fingers along the hair on his chest. “I’m not giving in on this, Grant.”

He blows out a breath, and I know he wants to argue with me, but at least he’s not going to try to do it now. “I should

probably go to bed.”

I hold on to him. “Stay with me.”

He wants to say yes, that much is obvious, but he shakes his head. “I don’t trust myself to sleep near you—”

I cut him off, feeling the heat rise on my face. “I’m not talking about sleeping.”

His mouth drops. “Jane, baby...”

I shake my head to stop him. “No. For seven years, I’ve thought about this, and I know we’re doing everything backwards, but I want you...” I suck in a breath. “And I thought you wanted me too.”

He’s struggling with all of this. He is a good man, I’ve known that all along, but even now after all this time, he still feels like he’s pushing this on me. The only thing I know to do is to prove to him that I can handle it and he is what I want.

I run my hands across his muscled chest. “Do you want me or not, Grant?”

He smirks in the darkness. “You know I do.”

Taking a deep breath, I reach for the hem of the tank top I’m sleeping in. Without any hesitation, I raise up to pull it over my head. He tries not to look, I’ll give him that. But when he finally lowers his eyes to my bare breasts, he grunts as if he’s struggling for breath.

I barely recognize my voice. “Touch me,” I plead with him.

He brings his hand up and presses his palm to my breast. His touch causes my body to jerk, and I’m not prepared when he

brings his other hand up and squeezes me too. My head falls back with a groan.

The bed shifts, and he moves toward me. First his lips are on my neck, and then the swipe of his tongue caresses me, and my whole body feels as if it's on fire.

“Have you done this before, Jane?”

I barely hear him over the ringing in my ears. “Yeah, once in the back of a car. My boyfriend at the time thought sex would make me feel better after my parents died.”

His hands tighten on me. “You deserve better. Fuck, you deserve better than what I have to offer.”

I can feel him pulling back, and if he does, I don't know if we'll ever come back from it. I grab his hands and put them back on my body. When his thumbs caress over my hard nipples, I reach for his hips and pull him down to lay his weight on me.

His cock is thick and hard, pressed into the opening of my thighs. “I want you, Grant. Please don't tell me no.”

He starts to mutter nonsensical things about temptation and giving in, but I can't make sense of any of it when his hands are on me.

He reaches between us, sliding his hand between my legs. He uses his legs to widen mine, and this puts his palm at my pussy. His long, thick finger slices through my wet slit, and my hips jerk. He moans. “You feel so good. You're so wet.”

All I can do is mewl as he presses his finger into my honeyed depth. Over and over, he pumps into me, and when he pulls his

finger out, he spreads my wetness along my swollen slit. With one touch against my clit, I'm moaning his name.

CHAPTER 7

GRANT

I'VE FUCKED UP.

If I knew this is the reception I'd be getting from Jane when I came home, I would have done my best to retire long ago.

Her body is perfect in every way, and she's so fuckin' responsive I want to do everything to her just to hear her little satisfied whimpers. I kiss down her belly, and she sucks in a breath and holds it. She becomes tense underneath me, and I raise up. "What is it, Jane?"

Her eyes are clenched shut, and she shakes her head side to side. I want to taste her, hell, I'm dying to taste her, but I need to know she's good before I do. "Talk to me."

"It's nothing. I'm not used to anyone touching my belly, that's all. It's fine."

I raise up to look at the soft roundness of her stomach. Fuck, I get even harder, and I grip her, letting my hand knead into her soft skin.

"Grant," she gasps.

I kiss her belly, dipping my tongue into her button before raising up. "Do you not want me to touch you here?"

She stares at me wide-eyed. “I’m just self-conscious—”

I cut her off. “Self-conscious? You can’t be self-conscious with me. I think you’re perfect, Jane.”

She tries to swat at me. “I’m far from—”

Before she can get it out, I lean in and nip at her belly. “Fuck, you’re perfect, baby. If you’re not going to believe what I’m saying, then I’m just going to have to show you.”

I kiss down her belly until I reach the apex of her thighs. I shove her legs apart, fitting my shoulders between them. I must be taking too long because she raises up to look at me. When she sees me staring at her glistening pussy, her legs start to close, but I just smirk. “You’re mine now, Jane, and I’m taking what’s mine.”

I lean into her, inhaling her scent before I run my tongue from her opening to her swollen clit. I suck on her clit, and her hand tangles in my hair, holding me to her.

My hips pump, and my hard cock presses into the bed, needing relief but knowing that nothing will feel as good as burying myself into her softness.

All at once, her body tautens slightly before becoming completely rigid. I don’t stop, though, because I want it all. Over and over, she convulses as each wave of her orgasm takes hold of her. She’s praying, grunting, screaming, and praising my name in the span of a minute.

I want to take her and make her officially mine, but I feel like I’ve already pushed her to her limit.

With a few more kisses, I climb up the bed and lie next to her. My cock is so hard it's painful, but I do my best to ignore it. Jane is panting as she rolls over toward me. "I've never... damn, Grant, uh, you really know what you're doing."

I grunt. "No, we're just good together."

Her hand goes to my chest, and for the first time, she's looking in my eyes without any hesitation. Her hand starts to dip, and when she gets to the waistband of my shorts, she runs a finger along the top, pushing it under the material. I grab on to it to stop her.

"Are you sure?"

She smiles at me cheekily. "Am I sure I want you inside me? Yeah, I'm sure."

I push her onto her back and hover over her. "Jane, when I make love to you... when I bury my cock so deep into that perfect little cunt and you milk me dry, you're going to be mine. There won't be any doubts about who you belong to or how I feel about you. There's no changing your mind."

She positions herself so that my hard cock is right at her entrance, and I lower myself just a little as I slide against her sodden pussy.

She lifts her hips. "I was yours seven years ago when I said I do. I was yours while you were halfway around the world and back again. I am yours now and always will be. But you're mine too, Grant. Remember that. If you take me... if you make me yours, then you're mine too."

Her words are like a promise, and I can't hold back any longer. I peel my shorts off and let them fall to the edge of the bed. Wrapping my hand around my girth, I position myself at her entrance. Slowly, I enter her. The deeper I go, the wider her eyes get.

Her pussy is like a vise, and she clenches on to me. I've never felt anything as good as she feels right now.

I push into her until I'm buried into her depth. I wait for her to adjust, and when she lifts her hips ever so slightly, I pull back and then thrust into her again.

"Yes...." she groans.

Over and over, I push and pull, saying her name, telling her how good she feels. She pulls her legs up, taking me in deeper.

I lean over, pressing my lips to hers, devouring her in an all-consuming kiss. "Tell me you're mine, Jane. I need to hear you say it."

Her eyes roll into the back of her head. "I'm yours, Grant. I've always been yours."

Reaching between us, I rub my finger along her clit. She vibrates under my touch, and I know she's close again. "Come for me," I demand of her.

She comes, and I follow right after. Buried inside her, my cock twitches, painting her insides with my seed. We didn't talk about birth control or rights and wrongs. None of it matters now, though, because she's mine.

I'm holding my weight on my legs and forearms, trying not to collapse onto her. Her hands are at my waist as her fingers

brush against my sweat-cooled skin. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her I love her, but I don't. I'm not sure she'll believe me, especially after what I'm about to do.

I pull out of her, and she winces. It kills me to know that I've caused her any pain, but I promise myself I'll make it up to her. I go and grab a washcloth and turn on the warm water. As I wait for it to heat up, I look back at myself in the mirror over the sink. For the first time in a long time, there's a light in my eyes. I feel like I've been so emotionally detached from the world around me that I wasn't sure if I would ever be able to feel again. I wet the washcloth and make my way back to Jane. She's covered up, head to toe, and looking at me with wide eyes.

As I walk into the room, she pulls off the blanket and climbs out of the bed. She's naked, and already my soft cock starts to harden again. She disappears into the bathroom, and I sit down on the edge of the bed.

When she comes out, she avoids my gaze and climbs onto the bed, pulling the covers up over herself again.

I would give anything to climb in next to her, but I don't trust myself. "I'm going to go back downstairs."

"But—" she starts.

I stand up and pull my shorts on. "We can't sleep together, Jane. It's not a good idea."

She bites onto her lip but says nothing.

I walk to the door and stop. She's still watching me. "Are you okay?" I ask her.

She opens her mouth, closes it again, and then nods her head.

“I’ll see you in the morning.”

She lies down, hiding her face from me.

Walking out of this room is one of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do. Now that I’ve felt what it was like to be in her arms, how can I just walk away?

With determination, I put one foot in front of the other and walk out of her room and down the stairs. This doesn’t feel right at all, but it’s the best thing for her. I can’t sleep in the same room as Jane, let alone the same bed. Not until I know for sure she’ll be safe. So I go to the bedroom downstairs and force myself to lie down. I lie here for hours, forcing myself to stay where I’m at even though it’s the last thing I want. One day, I’ll be able to sleep with Jane in my arms. Hopefully.

CHAPTER 8

GRANT

“ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” she asks me.

After a sleepless few nights, I feel like a walking zombie, but there was no way I was going to let her down.

It's Saturday, and I'm driving us across town to the park where the welcome home party is being held. I would love to skip this, but there's no way I'm going to let myself. The last few days, Jane and I have tried to get into a routine. She works during the day doing medical coding from her laptop at home, so she's been around the house. I've been doing odd jobs like patching up the porch, fixing some cabinets in the kitchen, and the like. Jane has done an awesome job with the house and maintained the upkeep, so there's not a lot to do.

I yawn and shake my head. “I'm sure.”

“You're not sleeping,” she accuses me.

We haven't talked about the other night, and we should. She's been really guarded since then, and it's obvious she's worrying about me. I told myself that I was going to be the man she needs, and right now I feel like I'm about to fall apart.

I've barely slept, and when I did, I've woken myself up from the night terrors. The longer it continues, the more ill at ease I feel about being in the same house as Jane. "I'm fine," I lie to her.

I park in the parking lot and see all the flags and people standing around. I'm completely on edge but force a smile to my face. "Let's go."

I get out of the truck, and before I can get around to open Jane's door, she's out and meeting me at the front of the vehicle. "It's not too late. We can turn right around."

I grit my teeth. "I'm fine."

We walk toward the party, and as we get closer, the applause starts. I want to turn around and leave, but I stay because I know that Jane would be mortified. I wait until the clapping stops before I start to talk. "Thank you so much for this party. It really means a lot to me that you did this. I also want to take this time to thank each and every one of you for looking after Jane while I was gone. She's mentioned how much her friends mean to her and we both—" I reach for Jane, engulfing her hand with mine. "Well, we both really appreciate your friendship."

There's more clapping, and then people surround us, hugging Jane and shaking my hand. Right when I think I'm about to lose it, I get to the end of the line and then walk away, hoping I can get a few seconds' reprieve and go unnoticed.

Jane's eyes follow me, but I smile and nod at her, hoping to let her know I'm okay.

Someone puts a beer in my hand, and I take a sip of it. Some of the men gather around me and are talking about the new mechanic shop that's opening in town, but my eyes never leave Jane. She's lit up as she talks to her friends, and I wasn't lying: I really am thankful she had them when I was gone.

Everything is fine until a man in cowboy boots and hat walks up to her. He hugs her, and even from where I'm standing, I can tell her smile dims. I excuse myself from the guys I'm standing with and make my way to Jane. She jerks when I put an arm around her, but once she realizes it's me, she melts against me. "Grant, honey, this is Raymond. He's done some work around the house."

There's no hiding my surprise. "He has?" I look at the man that's openly staring at my wife. "What kind of work did you do at the house?"

He shrugs, and even though he answers me, he keeps his eyes on Jane. "Put in a new window when the neighbor's ball went through it."

I nod and can feel my jaw cracking as I watch the man devour my wife with his eyes. I pull her behind me and force a smile to my face. "I do appreciate everything you've done at the house, but now that I'm home, I'll be taking care of anything Jane needs."

His jaw drops before recovering quickly. He smirks at me and lifts his beer to his lips. After a slow swig, he lowers it. "Right. I understand. It was good to meet you." He tips his hat. "Janie."

When he calls her by a nickname, I take a step toward him, but Jane grabs me around the waist. She plasters herself to me and shakes her head. “No, don’t, Grant. He’s not worth it. Let it go.”

I make it through the rest of the party without any mishap. At the first sign of the party dwindling down, I make a break for it after thanking everyone again.

The whole ride home, I’m quiet and trying to contain my rage.

We pull into the driveway, and I follow her up the steps to the house. I need a few minutes to calm down and plan to go out to the garage, but she stops me. “Are we going to talk about this?”

I should hold back, I know I should. “Sure, let’s talk about it. Raymond wants to fuck you... or has he already?”

She rears back as if I’ve hit her. “You asshole.”

She walks away from me, and she gets down the hall before I come to my senses. “Jane.”

She doesn’t stop, though. She stomps up the stairs, and I follow behind her. “Jane, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

She turns so fast I almost run into her. “But you thought it. You seriously thought that I would do... that... with him?”

She’s a step higher than me, making us face to face. “No... I don’t know... He wants you and he has a fuckin’ nickname for you.”

She laughs, and it sounds cynical and etched with pain. “First of all, yeah, he wants me even after telling him that I was

married. Some men are just dumbasses.”

I go almost blind with fury. “Did he touch you? I’ll kill him.”

“No, Grant, geez, listen to yourself. He didn’t touch me. He’s a harmless flirt. He’s been here one time, and I didn’t even hire him. The neighbors felt bad about the window and sent him to fix it. I didn’t even know he’d be there today.”

“He talked to you like you were close... like—”

I stop myself, unable to even say the words I’m thinking. The thought of another man touching Jane drives me mad.

She grabs on to my shoulders. “Listen to me, Grant, and listen good because I’m not going to say this again. In the last seven years, you’re the only man I’ve let touch me. You’re the only man I’ve wanted, the only man I’ve slept with.”

It feels as if I’ve run a mile instead of just standing here talking to her. She doesn’t understand how I feel about her. The thought of another man touching her makes me crazy. “I’m sorry—” I begin.

She shakes her head side to side. “You were right, Grant. We don’t know each other. You don’t trust me. You fucked me the other night, and since then you act as if you can barely stand to be around me.” She starts to cry in earnest. “You say you want me, and you act like you’re jealous, but I’m standing right here. I’m in your house. I’m wearing your ring, and you act like you don’t even want me in your bed.”

“It’s not...” I start, but she doesn’t let me finish.

She puts her hand out. “Please, don’t follow me. I need some time to myself. I need to think about things.”

She turns and runs up the stairs. I can hear her sobbing as she slams her bedroom door. I've completely fucked this up, and I'm not sure how I'm going to fix it.

CHAPTER 9

JANE

I HAD such high hopes for when Grant came home. I thought we would finally be together, and everything would turn out okay. Little did I know it would all fall apart in less than a week.

I know he's exhausted. I can tell by the look in his eyes that he's not sleeping well.

I should be mad at him right now, and I'm not sure what it says about me that I'm not. A part of me is happy he's jealous. I mean, he has no reason to be, but the fact that he is tells me that he feels something at least.

I wish there was someone I could talk to. I could call any of my friends, but since they don't know the whole story on how Grant and I got married, I really don't want to get into it with them now. I wish... dang, I wish I could talk to Grant. Like we did when he was away.

I eye my purse lying on the dresser where I dropped it when I came in. Can I do it? Should I do it?

Before I can talk myself out of it, I pad over to the dresser, dig the phone out of my purse, and call Grant. I can hear the ringing downstairs as I sit cross-legged on the bed.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

“Jane?” he answers.

“Hey.” I breathe out heavily.

“Are you okay?”

I laugh. “Yeah, I’m okay. I was hoping we could talk.”

I swear he’s at the bottom of the stairs because I can hear his voice through the phone and in the house. “Do you want me to come up there?”

I want him to come up here and hold me, but I can’t ask him that. “No, let’s just talk. Like we used to.”

He clears his throat. “Okay. Let’s talk.”

“I’ll start. I’m sorry you were jealous, but I want you to know you have no reason to be.”

He huffs out a breath. “I know that. I was being ridiculous. I wish I could blame it on lack of sleep, but I’m going to be honest, honey. I think no matter how much sleep I have or how well rested I am, I will never be okay with another man looking at you.”

My lower belly pulls. “Same.”

His voice is louder in the phone. “Same?”

I lie back on the bed and grip the phone a little tighter in my hand. “Yes, same. I was ready to leave as soon as we got there. I’m wondering if I’m going to be able to keep my friends anymore because they were all checking you out.” I pause for a second and huskily tell him, “I didn’t like it.”

I swear I can hear the smile on his face. “The only person I want checking me out is you.”

“Well, that’s something you don’t have to worry about.” I can feel the embarrassment of my confession heat up my cheeks, so I continue. “So why have you not touched me since the night you got home? I even tried sneaking into your room one night, and it was locked. You can’t keep pushing me away, Grant.”

He gruffly explains, and I can imagine him running his hand through his hair as he does. “I’m not pushing you away. I’m keeping you safe. You deserve better than me, and I’m trying to hold back until I’m right.”

My heart seizes in my chest. “You act like you’re broken, and you’re not. You don’t need to be fixed to deserve me or to want me.” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to calm myself. “You don’t understand. You say one thing—that you want me and want to be with me—but then you do another. You putting your guard up with me makes me feel like we’re doomed already. You’re supposed to be able to lean on me and me on you. That’s what a marriage is supposed to be about.”

He grunts, and it makes me wonder if I’m getting to him or not. He’s been so closed off these last few days. “Are you happy you’re home?”

“Yeah, but I wish things were different. I wish I was different.”

I know he’s talking about the nightmares, and I don’t blame him. I wonder how different our reunion would have been

without them, but it doesn't make me think less of him. "Ask me now."

He hesitates. "Ask you what?"

"Ask me if I'm happy you're home."

With bated breath, he asks me, and his voice stutters getting it out. "Are you happy I'm home?"

I can hear the nervousness in his voice, and it kills me. He has no idea how I feel about him. "Yeah, I'm happy you're home. No more worrying if you're safe or not. I have all these dreams about our future, and since you came home to me... I want them even more."

"What dreams? You haven't told me anything about this."

I roll over on the bed and run my finger along the bedspread. "Actually, I have told you. I mean, sort of."

He swears. "I promise you, Jane, if you told me, I don't remember, and I really think that's something I'd remember."

"I wrote to you."

He's quiet for just a minute. "You did write to me, and I read every letter multiple times, but you never talked anything about our future or what you wanted in those letters."

I cover my face with my hand. I can do this. Not only can I do this, but I need to do it. "I never sent them to you. I wrote them to you and kept them in a diary. Everything I was thinking is in that book."

"Where is it?"

"I put it in a box under your bed."

I can hear him get up from the squeaky chairs and then hear him stomping through the house toward his bedroom. There's a bunch of shuffling, and I know he's on his knees under his bed. I can imagine him picking it up and setting it on the bed. "I think if you read some of that, you'll understand what you mean to me, Grant."

"Thank you for this. I don't know what to say."

I completely bared my heart on those pages, and I hope the words make him happy. "Okay, well, I know your therapist will be calling soon. I'll let you go."

"Thank you, Jane."

Softly, I whisper into the phone, "You're welcome."

There's so much more I want to say to him, but I leave it at that.

We hang up, and I'm restless, so I jump out of bed to pace around the room. Grant could be reading my letters right now, and I'm part excited and part terrified. I have to keep reminding myself that it will all work out. It has to.

CHAPTER 10

GRANT

I'M ABOUT to open the book of letters when my phone rings. I'm expecting it to be my therapist and am surprised to see my old buddy Griffin Baine on the line. We've been on a few tours together, and he medically retired a few years back.

I force the cheerfulness into my voice. There's no reason for everyone to know I'm literally falling apart right now. "Griffin! What's up, brother?"

"My man. How's it going, Grant? I heard you retired and thought I'd call you up to see what you're into."

I hold Jane's book to my chest and sit on the edge of the bed. "I've been back less than a week, and I'm just trying to get used to civilian life. You know how it is."

Griffin grunts into the phone. "Hell yeah, I know how it is. It was rough, man, but like you said, you've been home less than a week. Don't be too hard on yourself."

"Yeah, I know, I know, you're right."

"So you got a job lined up? I could get you on here with some security detail. We could use a sharpshooter like you."

I lean my head back and stare at the ceiling. There's a part of me that wonders if Jane wouldn't be better off with me across the US instead of here in her house. She says she's in it for the long haul, the good and the bad, but I can't help but wonder how bad it's going to get. "Can I think about it?"

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel guilty. It's almost as if I'm betraying Jane by even thinking about this.

"Sure, no problem. Let me know, and I can put you in touch with the boss."

"Sounds good. How about you? Any good cases lately?"

Griffin is a security guard for celebrities and high profile people and usually can't talk about who he's working with, but it never stops me from asking.

"You know I can't talk about it."

There's a lull in the conversation, and I know better because Griffin is one of those guys that knows me really well. "Okay, so we got the niceties out of the way, tell me how you're really doing."

I open my mouth to say everything is okay, but instead I just huff out a big breath. I'm tired of keeping it all in and dealing with it on my own. "I've been having nightmares."

"Hmmm," he says.

"Yeah, they're pretty bad, and Jane, uh, Jane tried to wake me up the other night and I had her by the throat... so yeah, things aren't going that well."

"Is she okay?"

Of course Griff is going to be concerned about Jane. That's who he is, and I'm thankful for it. "Yeah, she's really good actually. She's not happy that I've locked her out of the bedroom, but physically, she's okay."

"Hmmm," he says again, and I can't help being frustrated.

"What? If you got something to say, just say it."

"When did the nightmares start?"

I don't even have to think about it. "The day I turned in my retirement papers."

"Do you regret retiring?"

I try to hold back a laugh. "Not even a little bit."

"Okay, since you got home, are the nightmares worse? More frequent?"

"What the hell, Griff? Did you get a degree in social work or some shit? What's with all the—"

He cuts me off. "Just answer the damn questions."

"No, they're not worse. I'm actually having them less since I got home, but I'm not sleeping well because I'm worried I'll have one. I'm thinking I need to leave... that's the only way I'll know for sure that Jane is safe."

"Fuck, you're a dumbass, you know that, right, Grant?"

I'm not the least bit offended because this last week I haven't felt very smart. "Whatever, man, you got some advice or what?"

"You've loved this chick—"

“Hey.” I grunt at him.

“Right? You’ve loved Jane for seven years now, and you were bursting at the seams to get home to her. Of course, with all the changes and uncertainties, you’ve got a lot of shit going on. Give yourself some time. You definitely shouldn’t leave the wife you just got home to. That would be asinine.”

I lay the book of Jane’s letters in my lap and trace the leather binding with my finger. “What if I hurt her?”

“You won’t.”

I shake my head, wishing I could believe him. “You don’t know that.”

“Look, Grant. Sounds to me like you need to talk to her about this and let her decide.”

“She doesn’t think I’d hurt her.”

He laughs. “Sounds like she knows you better than you know yourself.”

I grunt in frustration. “Griffin, you know it’s not that easy. You know that anything can happen—”

He interrupts me. “Yeah, I do know. But I also know that you have to work through this. Don’t throw away your marriage because of this. She’s stood by you for seven years... Don’t push her away now.”

All I can think about is how I don’t want to lose her. “Right. I got it. Thanks, brother.”

“Don’t fuck this up, Southpaw.”

I laugh when he calls me by my nickname. “I got it, and trust me, I’ll do whatever I have to do so I don’t fuck this up. I gotta go.”

We talk a little bit, and before he hangs up, he reminds me, “The job offer stands, and no offense, but I hope you turn it down.”

When I hang up, I realize I’ve missed a message in my therapy app. When I open it, I see that my therapist messaged me to let me know she’s had an emergency. I toss my phone to the nightstand and focus on the leather notebook in my hand.

As I take a deep breath and open the front cover, I recognize Jane’s handwriting instantly. I’ve stared at her letters so many times through the years, it brings me comfort to see them now.

I scan the first letter on the first page.

Hey husband,

That should probably feel awkward to say, but it actually feels... right. It’s the end of my first week in Whiskey Run and I just dropped you off at the airport. It was nice getting to know you this week and even though I expected things to feel weird, it didn’t. It felt... right. I know I already said that but it still surprises me.

When you left, there were a hundred things I’d wished I’d said to you. I know I’ve thanked you so many times that you’re sick of hearing it and now that you’re on a plane I wish I’d told you the rest. Like how you’ve been gone for an hour and I already miss you. That in this last week, you’ve been a better friend to me than I’ve ever had. And that when you left, I wish I’d had the

guts to kiss you. More than anything, I wish I'd hugged you and told you I'd miss you.

Be safe, husband. I'll be waiting for you.

Yours,

Jane

I GO TO THE NEXT PAGE AND READ THE NEXT LETTER.

Hey Grant,

You know what? For these letters, I'm going to refer to you as husband. I don't know why, but I get all tingly just saying the word out loud. I still can't believe we're married but I'm glad we are.

I talked to you on the phone today and I can tell by your twenty questions that you were worried about me. I don't want you to worry about me. I know that you should spend your time concentrating on your job but I'd be lying if I didn't say that I appreciate it. For the first time, I feel like I mean something to someone.

I sent you cookies today in the mail. Your favorite. Well, at least you said they were your favorite. And I sent you the pictures you asked for. I'm glad we had them taken at the wedding. Please take care of yourself. I hope you know that I'm thinking of you and missing you.

Your wife,

Jane

Husband,

I had no idea when you asked me to marry you that my life would change the way it has. I was lost after my brother died and I was scared to death, trying to figure out what I was going to do. You saved me. I don't know if you know that or not. But you did. And you continue to do so.

I hate being sick. Hate it! And I was ready to suffer through it. I should have known the way you rushed off the phone the other day after finding out I had the flu that you were up to something. It wasn't one hour later and there was a knock at my door. How in the world you got a home health nurse to come here on such short notice is beyond me. You'll be happy to know that even though I told her I was fine and could take care of myself, she didn't listen. She's been here for three days and I'm pretty sure costing you a fortune.

You better watch out, husband, because you keep this up and I'm going to fall even harder for you. Do you want that?

Your loving wife,

Jane

I FOCUS ON THE WORD "LOVING" UNTIL THE BLACK LETTERS are blurry against the cream paper. I shake my head and continue reading. There are letters where she's asking me questions, wanting to get to know me better, and then there are letters where she talks about how she's never been more alone than she is now, but she doesn't feel lonely.

I sit here for hours poring over her words that are unfiltered, and while I do, I get to know her even better.

When I get to the end of the thick book, I see the letter that she wrote last week after finding out I'm coming home.

To my husband,

You're coming home. I still can't believe it but I'm so excited I can barely contain myself. I have all these dreams for when you come home. Have I told you about them? I think about it all the time but I can't remember if I wrote you about them or not so here it goes.

In my mind, you come home and decide you love me.

I know, I know, you probably think I'm rushing things but I have been your wife for seven years. LOL.

Anyway, you come home and decide you can't live without me. I, of course, am finally going to tell you that I love you and I have for a long time. Then we're going to have kids. I actually have thought about this a bit and there's nothing I want more than to have kids with you but I also want to spend some time together, just the two of us. We can go on vacation together, heck we can just sit on the front porch and watch the days go by, I don't care. I just want to do life with you, hand in hand.

Anyway, I'll see you in 3 days. Be safe and I love you.

Yours forever (if you'll have me),

Jane

SHE LOVES ME.

After everything... talking her into this marriage and then leaving her for seven years, and she still loves me. I'm not sure what I did to deserve her, but I can't screw this up.

I grab the book and walk out of the bedroom. I take the stairs two at a time to get to her, and when I walk into her bedroom door, ready to tell her how I feel, I stop suddenly when I find her asleep on her bed. I tiptoe the rest of the way into the room and hover over her, watching her sleep peacefully. How this beautiful woman has come to love me is beyond me. It's more than I ever could have imagined, and I know I need to do everything I can to earn her love.

I move to the chair in the corner and open the book again, scanning over the pages she's written to me. When exhaustion takes over, I hold the book against my chest and close my eyes. I should go down to my room, but the need to be near Jane is overwhelming, so I sink farther into the cushions and let sleep take me away.

CHAPTER 11

JANE

SOMETHING WAKES ME UP, but I'm not sure what. I lift up and immediately wonder if Grant is having another nightmare. I stayed up for as long as I could last night, hoping after Grant's therapy appointment he would come talk to me, but he never did. I stayed in my room to give him space. I feel as if I've hovered over him this last week, and I'm not sure if that's what he wants or not.

I try to listen to the sounds of the house, and it's jarring to realize there's someone in the room with me.

When his soft snoring sounds in the room, I can't help but smile. I climb quietly out of bed and make my way over to where he's sleeping.

He has my notebook held against his chest, and he looks completely at peace. My palms itch wanting to wake him up, but I resist. I know he's not been sleeping well. I grab a blanket off the foot of my bed and then tiptoe back over to him. I lay it gently across him, and I think I've succeeded in not bothering him until his eyes open and he reaches out from the cover, grabbing my wrist.

"Hey. I'm sorry for waking you up."

He leans up, staring at me. “You mean hey, husband?”

I refuse to be embarrassed. “Yeah... hey, husband. I’m sorry for waking you up.”

He pulls me down onto his lap, and instead of resisting, I tumble on top of him. It’s not graceful, but I don’t think he cares. He holds me to him like I’m precious to him, and I burrow against his heat. He kisses the top of my head and then rests his chin there. “I love you, Jane.”

I can’t contain the gasp. I pull away and search for his eyes in the darkness. But before I can say anything, he continues. “Don’t doubt it. We’ve already wasted so much time, and I don’t want to waste another second. I love you, and I think I knew it the first time I laid eyes on you and demanded you marry me. There’s going to be hiccups, and I know I’m going to mess up along the way, but I promise to make sure to show you every day that I love you and you are the most important person to me.”

I hug him tightly and then pull back to search his face. “I love you, too. I know you’ve read it already, but I have to tell you. I love you.”

He caresses my cheek with his hand, and I lean into him. “So I need you to promise me one thing.”

He nods and blurts out, “Anything.”

I move the cover between us and flatten my hands to his chest. “No more sleeping apart.”

He starts to shake his head, and I put my hands on each side of his face. “Husband...” I start.

He grips my shoulders. "I need you safe."

I shrug, feeling the warmth of his words. "Yeah, I know, and do you know where I always feel the safest? In your arms. Don't deny me. If you have a nightmare, I promise you that I'll make sure I'm safe before I wake you."

He doesn't want to, that much is obvious, but it looks like he's giving in. "I've dreamed of you sleeping in my arms."

I put it all on the line. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

He pats my hip and then squeezes it. "Let's go."

I rear back in surprise. "We're going to sleep together?"

He laughs, puts my notebook on the table beside us, and stands up, still holding me. I laugh and shriek. "Grant, you're going to drop me."

He nuzzles his face into my neck. "Nope, you're pretty precious to me, wife. I would never drop you."

He carries me to the bed and lays me down. I pull him down on top of me and hold on to him.

He laughs as he tries to bear his weight on his forearms. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here with you."

He pushes the hair off my face, and his smile is gone. "I really do love you, Jane. I know I've messed up, but if you give me time, I'm going to make it up to you."

I wrap my arms around his neck. "I love you."

He leans down and presses his lips to mine. We get lost in the kiss, and he lies down, half on top of me as he shows me just how much he loves me. He pulls back, breathless. "I loved

reading all the letters you wrote me. There's only one thing we may need to talk about."

I suck in a breath and nod my head.

His fingers are playing havoc with me as he caresses my breast through the thin material of my night shirt. "What?" I croak.

"You said you wanted to wait to have babies... you do know we didn't use protection the other night."

I've thought about that too, but I was too afraid to bring it up. "Yeah, I know... are you okay with that?"

He doesn't hint at what he thinks about it. His face is void of emotion. "Am I okay with getting you pregnant?"

I nod and don't even try to talk.

Grant rolls over, pulling me on top of him as he goes. "I'm all in, wife. And if we did make a baby, we'll have nine months of just the two of us. We have a lot to make up for."

Unsure, I search his eyes. "We've never talked about kids... do you want them?"

He leans up to kiss me. It's a kiss filled with emotions so thick I could cry from it. When he pulls away, he reassures me, "I want it all with you, Jane. Everything. I want your heart, your body, your kids, your future. I want it all."

I laugh and kiss him again. "It's yours. I'm yours," I stutter.

And he spends the rest of the night claiming me.

EPILOGUE

GRANT

Six Years Later

“DADDY, can I please go outside and play with my brothers?”

I look down at the little girl that looks just like her momma. She’s not just like her in the looks department, she’s got me wrapped around her finger like her momma does too. “I don’t know. The boys are playing with their friends right now.”

She puts her little hand on her hip. “I’m their friend.”

I laugh and bend down to pick her up. “You sure are. You’re their best friend.”

She points outside. “So let me go outside with them, Daddy.”

I’m debating when I hear a giggle from behind me. I turn, and Jane is standing there with her hand over her mouth. “You might as well let her, you know you’re going to anyway.”

With my daughter in my arms, I walk over to my wife and hold my hand out to her. “What do you think about sitting on the porch with me?”

She openly laughs then. “So Princess here can go outside and play and you can keep an eye on her?”

I lean in and kiss her. “And so I can spend some time with my wife.”

She preens up at me. “Well, how can I say no to that?”

My daughter shakes her head with all seriousness. “You can’t, Mommy.”

She tickles Ashley. “You’re right, I can’t. Let’s go.”

“Yes.” Ashley screams as she pumps her little hand into the air. She starts to jerk her body as if it’s going to make me move faster. “Let’s go, Daddy! Let’s go.”

We walk outside. Jane goes to sit on the porch swing, and I carry Ashley down the steps. When I set her on the ground, I tell my sons, “Ashley’s going to play with you guys for a little while, okay?”

I give them the “look.” The one that says to play easy with her and look out for her. I’m wasting my time, though, because her two big brothers are almost as protective of her as I am.

When the boys give me a nod and include her in the game of kickball that’s happening in our front yard, I go to sit next to Jane.

I barely get seated and I’m pulling her into my lap. She loops her arms around my neck and searches my face. “This is good, right?”

I nod my head. “This is the best.”

She sighs and lays her head against my chest. I watch my sons and daughter play with the neighbor kids, and for the thousandth time I try to figure out how I got so lucky. I’ve

been retired for six years, and it has been the best six years of my life. I do some consulting, but I'm able to be in complete control of my schedule. I promised Jane years ago that if I had to travel out of town I would never be gone more than three nights in a row, and so far I've kept that promise. Hell, I won't let myself break it. The truth is, I love my life and every minute I spend with my family.

The nightmares I used to have are almost a forgotten memory. Once I fully committed to Jane and our marriage, I haven't had a bad one. I always tell Jane that it's because of her. She's the reason that I can sleep at night.

"Look," Jane whispers.

She's pointing at the yard where one of the boys has picked a flower and is giving it to Ashley. I'm about to stand up when Jane holds me down. "It's okay. He's harmless."

I grit my teeth and watch as my daughter smiles at the little boy. I'm about to holler when I see my oldest son grab Ashley's hand and pull her into the game with him.

I laugh heartily. "Well, well, it looks like I trained him well."

Jane smacks me on the chest. "You do know that eventually she's going to bring a boyfriend home, right?"

My mouth drops. "She's three years old."

Jane just giggles. "Yeah, and she'll be sixteen in a blink of an eye."

I swear my heart clenches in my chest. "You hate me, don't you? Why would you say that?"

She leans in to kiss me. “Uh, because I feel like you’re going to need the next thirteen years to prepare, so I’m starting early.”

I shake my head, watching my daughter a little closer. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

We both get lost in thought listening to the sounds of summer nights in the neighborhood and kids laughing and having fun. Jane’s question surprises me. “Are you happy, Grant?”

I want to laugh because I’m thinking it’s a joke, but when I see the look on my wife’s face, I can see she’s serious. “If you don’t know I’m happy, I’ve messed up.”

Her hands go to my shoulders, and she squeezes me. “No, I’m just wondering. This life is different than your past, that’s all. I’m just wondering if you miss it.”

I pull her tighter against my chest. “You know when I imagined my life, I never imagined it being this good. You did this, Jane. You gave me love, gave me a family, so no, I don’t miss my past. All I can think about is my future. I love you, wife.”

She sighs happily. “I love you too, husband.”

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