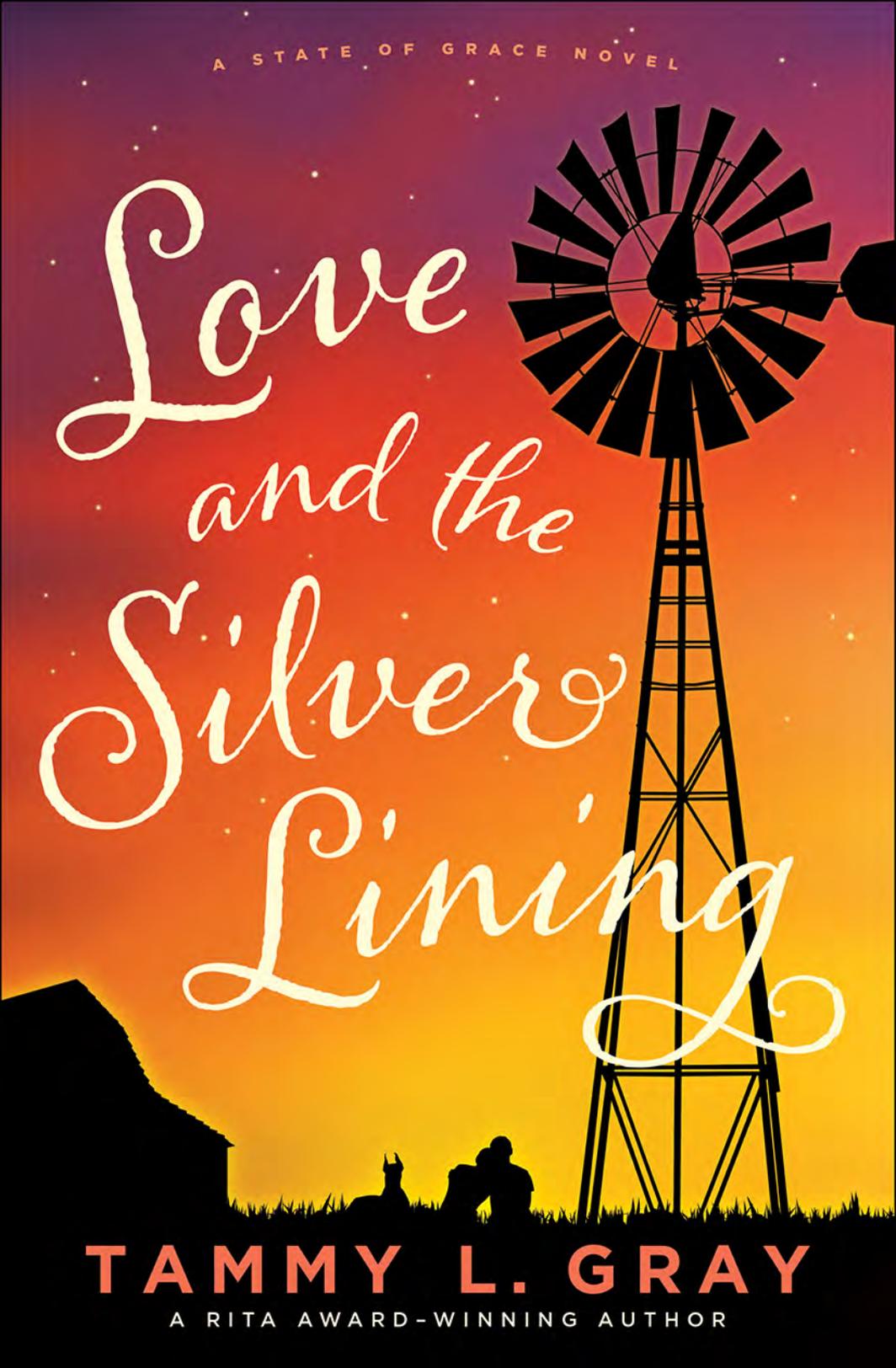


A STATE OF GRACE NOVEL

Love
and the
Silver
Lining



TAMMY L. GRAY

A RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

STATE OF GRACE

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Lining

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To my remarkable son, Christian

You are a treasure to me, and the only person I know who
loves dogs nearly as much as Darcy does.

This one's for you.

ONE

MIDLOTHIAN, TEXAS

I'm supposed to be on an airplane, flying to Central America to teach children to speak English. Instead, I'm sitting on the couch and nursing my third pint of Rocky Road ice cream, watching a Telemundo soap opera in Spanish.

As if the woman on-screen understands my devastation, she cries out and slaps her now ex-boyfriend, who's cheated twice in the last six episodes. I wish my own heartbreak could be resolved with a hand slap. But I don't get the luxury of blaming a person. Only rotten circumstances.

"You tell him, girl!" I say as ice cream dribbles down my chin onto my wrinkled T-shirt. I grab for a towel, but I must have dropped it somewhere between my third trip to the freezer and my pity party on the couch. I check under the coffee table and spot it five feet away, right on the threshold where my living room carpet meets the kitchen tile.

"Piper." My three-year-old Maltipoo pops her nose in the air from the spot beside me, her ears keen to hear my next command. From that angle, she could be mistaken for a

teddy bear, which is why her breed has been lauded one of the cutest in the world. And my gal is especially beautiful with her soft array of caramel-and-white fur, a little button nose, and a forever puppy face to match her 8.2 pounds. “Piper, fetch.”

She jumps off the couch, her head swiveling to look for our usual play toy—a stuffed mouse she fell in love with at the pet store.

“Fetch the towel.” I point to the crumpled blue cloth and give her the hand signal to retrieve it. She’s a smart gal, so it only takes two round trips to the kitchen to find what I’m pointing at. “Good girl!”

She hops back on the couch and drops the dangling cloth on my lap. I reward her with lots of neck scratches and a few tasty chin licks before I wipe away the rest with the towel she brought me. If only people were as predictable as dogs. In fact, I would venture to bet that if the nonprofit mission organization I chose to partner with were run by animals, they would have told me months ago that the Guatemalan school was in financial crisis and not to spend every free moment I’ve had for the past year desperately raising money to fund my teaching salary.

“Ugh . . . Why?” I scream at the ceiling nearly as loudly as the woman did on my TV. It’s not the first time I’ve yelled at God since getting the heartbreaking news three days ago that my one-year mission trip was canceled, and I doubt it will be the last time. That is unless I quit speaking to Him altogether, which is not off the list of possibilities.

I slam my head into one of my throw pillows, replaying the phone conversation again and again.

“I’m so sorry, Darcy,” she had said. “If there was anything we could do, we would have. They raised our taxes again, and it crippled us.”

“Rest assured all your money will be refunded.”

“We’re heartbroken, too, but when God closes one door, He usually has another opportunity just waiting for you.”

Then she cried. My sponsor—the woman who walked me through every application, background check, and financial deposit—sobbed on the phone with me for five minutes while I sat there numb and unmoving.

Even now, days later, it still doesn’t feel real to me.

After two years of preparation, one year of brow-beating savings and fundraising, quitting my job, ending the lease on my apartment, and giving half of my worldly possessions to charity, I have nothing except humiliation and a Facebook post with 143 comments. If I see another prayer emoji, I may just smash my computer against the wall.

Piper snuggles under the pillow covering my face and licks at my neck until I sit back up. She knows I’m upset, has sensed it since the moment I ended the worst call of my life, and she hasn’t left my side since. I guess I should be grateful, especially considering I’ve had my phone on *do not disturb* for forty-eight hours now, so contact with the outside world has been nonexistent.

The screen flashes to a commercial, and I take the opportunity to stretch and use the bathroom. A mistake, considering the reflection in the mirror is as scary outside as the turmoil inside. My hair is matted, and my eyes are dark and puffy from too much TV and not enough sleep. I attempt to make some positive progress and gargle mouthwash. Yeah, it’s no toothbrush, but it’s all I have the energy for.

I flip off the light switch and shuffle back to my couch, now also my bed since I put my mattress in storage a week ago. That day was a celebration, every box a step closer to

achieving my goal. We ate pizza, toasted with Dr Pepper and cinnamon cookies. I thought packing day was the first real movement toward the incredible journey God had planned. Who knew it would be the beginning, middle, and final leap off the cliff of disappointment?

The last commercial fades away and my favorite character is back in her living room, tears flowing down her face. She screams she will have vengeance and I believe her, especially when they zoom in close and show the determination in her gorgeous dark-chocolate eyes. I pick up my soupy ice cream container and spoon melting heap after melting heap of sugar into my mouth until my doorbell dings three times with persistence.

Ugh. I should have put that contraption on *do not disturb*, as well.

“Go away!” I yell, though it’s likely muffled, since I’m trying to keep the ice cream from running down my chin again. Only one person would show up at my apartment unannounced, and I don’t want to see him right now. Cameron Lee has been my best friend for nearly thirty years, and I have no doubt he will be there for the next thirty. But he’s a lousy liar, and I know he’s secretly thrilled I’m no longer moving away. “I told you I needed time.”

“Well, your time is officially up,” he yells back through the door.

I ignore him. It’s rude, I know, but one has that luxury after getting the most devastating news of her life. The way I figure it, I can’t be held responsible for any decisions made for at least four more days.

“Darcy.” He pounds again.

I ignore him again.

Then it gets quiet, and right when I’m about to sink back

into my misery, the lock clicks and my front door swings open.

Crap. I forgot I gave him a spare key.

Cameron strides through my front door like a Spanish soap star, complete with the superhero determination and charming good looks, which he is fully aware of and uses to his advantage as needed. Luckily, I've never been swayed much by his sparkling blue eyes or rich brown hair that lies perfectly angled over his forehead.

"Holy cow." He waves a hand in front of his nose. "Your apartment smells like depression and stale milk."

And then there's that. The honesty that comes when you've known someone since sharing a crib and having your diapers changed at the same time. "What exactly does depression smell like?"

"Something rank." He shuts the door and flips on the ceiling fan. "It's a million degrees in here. Why isn't your A/C on?"

"I've been practicing getting used to the heat, since the school I was going to only had swamp coolers." I shrug, apathy and resentment rolling through each word. "I guess I succeeded."

He pauses halfway through the living room, the tough love, bang-on-the-door guy morphing into a soft mush of pity. "Ah, Darc, I'm . . ."

I shake my head, not wanting to hear the word *sorry* ever again. It's too insignificant for what I'm feeling.

Cameron continues past me toward the hallway, where the thermostat's located. A click and then cold air rushes through my ceiling vent and down the wall behind me. Piper feels it, too, and snuggles underneath one of my throw pillows to stay warm. Not sure her choice of shelter is the best decision.

That pillow has more snot and tears in it than stuffing at this point.

My best friend appears in front of me and squats down so we're eye to eye. "You can't stay like this, Darcy. It's not healthy." When I turn away, he pushes aside my trash collection on the coffee table and sits so he's not having to maintain his balance. "Listen. It's time to pick yourself up, brush off this turn of circumstances, and return to the real world." He picks blanket fuzz from my unwashed hair and attempts to smile. "Who knows, maybe all of this will be for the best." Did I mention the dimples? He has two of them, deep and prominent on each side of his winning rock-star smile.

Yeah, even those don't work.

"You think me living out my worst-case scenario is for the best?" I cross my arms and sink deeper into the cushions. "Gee, thanks. Love the support. Really."

"I'm just saying that maybe you're missing the bigger picture here." He shifts closer. "Sometimes it takes having your perfectly planned life detonate right in front of you to discover what you really want. Trust me, I've been there."

I press my lips together because I don't want to admit he may have a point. Along with fundraising until I bled green, I've spent the last four months trying to support my friend through the hardest decision he's ever had to make—leaving the steady yet stagnant praise-team band he's been a part of for six years to join a secular rock band on the cusp of fame and fortune.

"Before I decided to leave it all and go on tour with Black Carousel, do you remember what you said to me?"

"Not really. I said a lot of things, most of which you didn't listen to."

He ignores my sarcasm. "You said that sometimes the an-

swer to prayer is NO. And like it or not, we have to accept that answer.” He spreads his arms. “This is your NO. And I’m sorry it happened, and I’m sorry you’re so wrecked by it, but it’s not going to change, no matter how many pints of ice cream you consume.”

I look at the ceiling to keep the tears in my eyes from spilling over. I’m not typically a crier, and yet I feel like that’s all I’ve done this past year. First with my parents’ divorce, and now with the annihilation of my dream. “You don’t understand.”

“That’s just it, Darcy. I do understand. I understand more than any person in your life right now.” He cups my neck and pulls me forward until I have no choice but to use his T-shirt as a tissue. Sobs come fast and hard, but Cameron doesn’t release me or pull away.

I guess there’s one positive result of my chaos: at least I get to remain in the same country as my best friend. I’d call Cameron the brother I never had, except I do have a brother, and honestly, it hasn’t been all that pleasant. If not burping, farting, or poking fun at my greatest insecurities, Dexter was tormenting me with his body odor and loud music. Cameron, on the other hand, has had my back since we toddled around at our church’s Mother’s Day Out program.

I finally come up for air, and Cam offers me my crusted blue towel. I wipe my eyes and nose before tossing it in my lap. “I think I ruined your shirt,” I say, pointing at the massive wet circle in the middle of his chest.

He shrugs one shoulder. “No biggie. I have a drawer full.”

“But that’s your favorite,” I insist, and finally he catches the joke.

Relief works through his eyes and relaxes his brow. “You

can't claim a shirt is my favorite simply because you bought it for me."

"I can too, especially if I scrimped and saved for two weeks to afford it."

"It was twenty dollars at Target."

"Which is a lot of money for a broke teenager." I smile through the mist in my eyes, and he squeezes my hand. "And look, it's lasted you twelve years. How can it not be your favorite?"

He nods. "You're right. It is my favorite."

I turn toward my little dog snuggled in the corner of the couch. "See, Piper. Give a guy some tears and they always cave."

Cameron snorts and stands, taking my pile of trash with him. "So, not to turn on the waterworks again, but have you made any headway with the landlord?" He disappears into the kitchen.

I groan and fall back into my new favorite slumped position. "Nope. It's like the old saying: 'I don't care where you go, but you can't stay here.' And my new apartment isn't available until September." Thank goodness for online applications or I wouldn't even have that.

I hear the snap of the trash lid, the refrigerator open and close, and then Cameron returns with two bottles of water.

He hands me one. "Does that mean you're definitely moving in with your mom?"

"Are you trying to make me cry again?"

He chuckles and joins me on the couch this time instead of the hard wooden coffee table. Probably a good thing, since it's older than I am. "Actually, I have been trying to come up with viable options to get you out of it, and I think I may have one."

I feel a spark of energy. "Do tell."

“Move in with us. I already cleared it with the guys.”

The spark fizzles right away. “I thought you said ‘viable options.’ Living in that tiny three-bedroom apartment, tripping over you, Brian, and Darrel is ludicrous. Where would I even sleep?”

“I’ll get a mattress to put on my floor, and you can have the bathroom. Brian’s gone most of the time anyway, so I can use his.”

The fact that I’m actually considering this idea instead of staying with my mom is proof that I’ve somersaulted into the Valley of Humiliation. Any minute now, Apollyon will begin slinging his arrows at me.

“Just promise you’ll consider it.” He falls back and mirrors my defeated position. “I need an ally in that apartment.”

“The tension between y’all is that bad, huh?”

“It’s been unbearable since I got back into town.” Cameron’s roommates are part of the praise-team band he quit to join Black Carousel in February. The tour they went on was only a small stateside three-month trip, but by the time he came home, resentment had ruined seven years of friendship. “And hey, it would only be until September. Then I could move in with you and we’d be roommates just like we envisioned as kids.”

Oh, to have the luxury of being a kid again. When dreams and hopes and wishes don’t die through the line of an 1,800-mile-away phone call.

“I guess we did have some epic sleepovers.” Water-balloon fights, bike riding until dusk, Star Wars marathons. And then I turned eleven and my dad said no more. That was when Cam and I made a pact that when we became adults, we’d get our own place and stay up all night playing video games and eating junk food.

We turn our heads to face each other, and Cameron takes my hand. “I’ll only say I’m sorry once for feeling this way, because truthfully I’m not sorry, which probably makes me the worst friend on the planet. But I’m relieved you didn’t go. I need you here.”

As young as I can remember, it’s always been Cameron and Darcy, Darcy and Cameron. I suppose in a world riddled with failure and disappointment, that one security is worth its weight in gold.