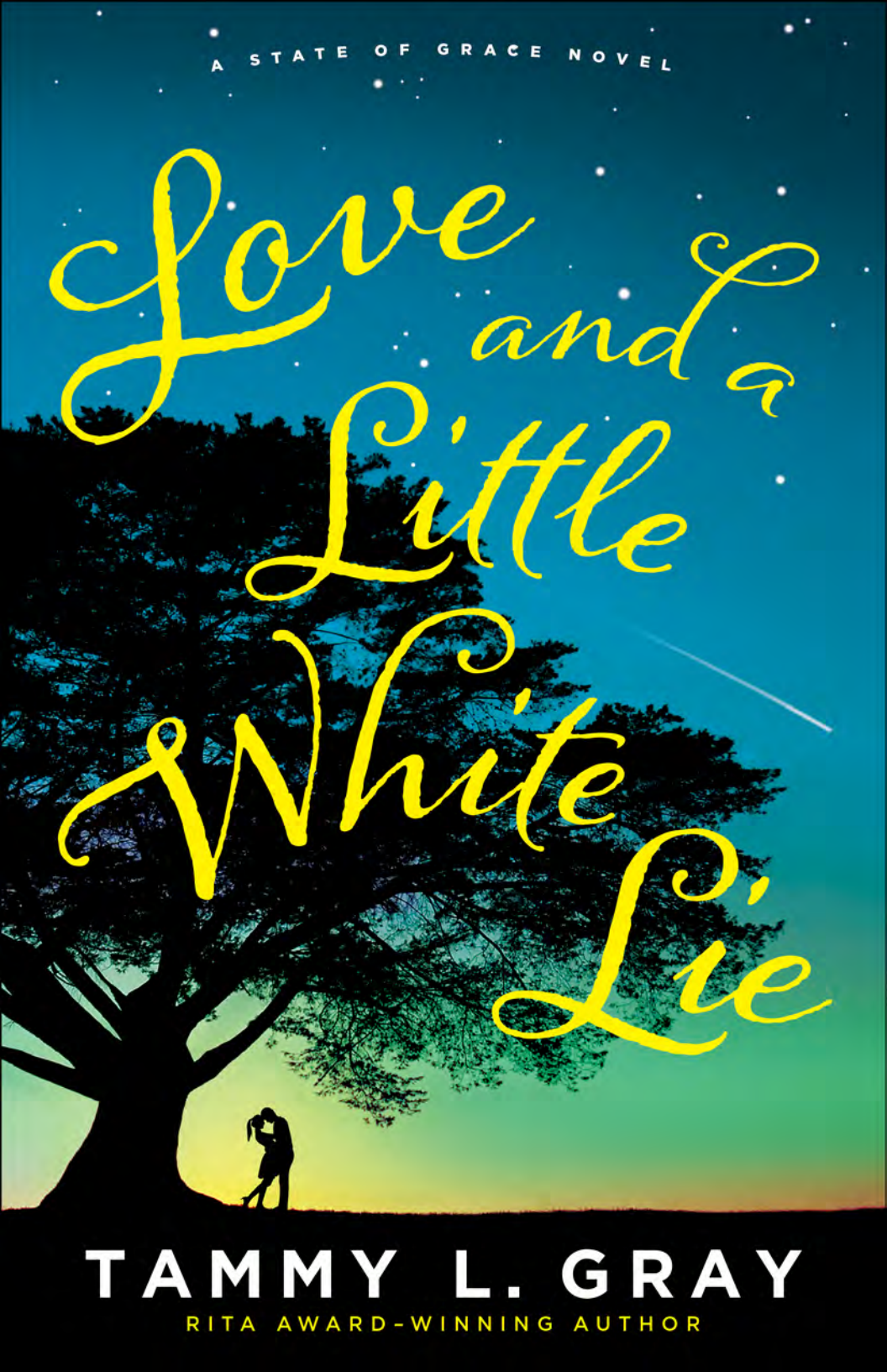


A STATE OF GRACE NOVEL

Love and a
Little
White
Lie



TAMMY L. GRAY

RITA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

STATE OF GRACE

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Lie

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This one belongs to the Lord.

I was discouraged, creatively spent,
and certain my time as an author
had come to an end.
Instead of letting me quit,
He answered my prayer with a story.

Romans 8:28

ONE

I've face-planted myself into rock bottom. Well, maybe a hammock above rock bottom—one my aunt Doreen graciously set out for me when I found myself abandoned and broke.

She's the provider of the cabin I'm temporarily living in, the four hundred dollars in my otherwise empty bank account, and this current job interview at Grace Community Church, which is highly improbable since I don't believe in God.

Though I have to admit, Pastor Thomas is not what I expected. For one, he's only ten years older than I, and two, he's wearing jeans, a pair of polished work boots, and a tight polo shirt with a stitched church logo over his heart. I say *tight* because the seams along his biceps look like they're crying for mercy. The guy has muscles. And not the I-carry-a-few-boxes-now-and-then kind of muscles. No, these are the I-pump-iron-in-the-gym kind of muscles. Luckily, they're really the only intimidating thing about him.

"So, January . . . that's a unique name. Is there a story behind it?"

I stop from rolling my eyes. No, there is no story. No

rhyme or reason of any kind. My birthday is not in January, it's in August. In fact, there is absolutely no significant event in the month at all. But lucky me, my mom was all about unique, cool baby names. I don't think she ever considered what it would be like to wear the moniker. Then again, my mom often doesn't consider much more than herself. Yet another reason why I'm not returning home. I don't have the money for an apartment deposit, and living with my mom and her newest husband is out of the question.

"No story, I'm afraid. Just my mom keeping me humble. Everyone usually calls me Jan." I offer a self-deprecating chuckle and forget for a second that I'm interviewing with a pastor. "I guess it could be worse: I could be a boy named Sue."

To my utter shock, he laughs. Like full belly laugh, and I realize he actually gets the joke. Almost as if he's listened to Johnny Cash himself. *Wait a second, are pastors allowed to listen to jailhouse country?*

I roll my shoulders, hoping my face doesn't show everything I'm thinking, which unfortunately it has a habit of doing.

"Your aunt was right about you. Quick wit." He points a finger. "That's the sign of a very smart person."

Sure . . . I'll take that. Truth be told, most of my wit comes from clamping down on what I really want to say. Although, with him, I'm finding my usual sarcasm is waning. I like Pastor Thomas. Not in a weird I'm-attracted-to-a-man-of-the-cloth kind of way. Beefy guys have never been my preference and definitely not ones wearing a wedding ring. But he's genuine and kind, and not at all like the two guys who stood on the corner of my apartment complex in college telling me I was going to hell.

“Your aunt says you’re originally from Georgia?”

“Yes, sir, I moved to Texas this past August.”

“Any particular reason why?”

Now all my wit is gone, and I find myself wanting to stretch out on his leather couch and download all my problems to him. *See, it all began this past May when I met my soulmate while he was stationed at Robins Air Force Base. We fell in love, then he got orders to move to San Antonio, Texas. I gave up my apartment, quit my job, and emptied my savings account to go with him because I thought he was “the one.” A month after we moved, he deployed to Afghanistan. Whether from separation or stress or just bad timing, he realized I wasn’t, in fact, his soulmate. Julia, a fellow Air Force sergeant, now fits that description. His request for me to move out of his apartment before he returned to the States was polite. At least more so than the engagement pictures he recently posted on Instagram.*

But I don’t curl into the fetal position and tearfully share my latest nightmare. Instead, I fight for a smile and pray lightning doesn’t make it past the ceiling when I utter the untruth: “I just needed a change of scenery, and Midlothian seemed a good place to start. Plus, I’ve always loved spending time with Aunt Doreen.”

The last part is true. She’s eccentric and bold, and despite her annoying habit of slipping Bible verses into everyday conversation, I adore her. She has the biggest heart of any woman I know, and there was no one better suited to be my safety net after the biggest heartbreak in my twenty-nine years of life.

“I’m pretty sure this entire church shares your feelings about her.” He leans back and casually stretches his arm over the back of the couch, his triceps bulging. “Did you know she was on the committee that hired me six years ago?”

“Yes, sir, I did. And from what I understand, she’s also on the beautification team, first-impressions team, serves as a Bible study teacher, and volunteers as a money counter.” Hence the reason I’m sitting in this chair. My aunt has connections.

When I asked her about the pesky little detail regarding my faith, or lack thereof, she waved a hand and said, “*Who knows what the Lord will do in a few months? If they hire you, then it’s God’s plan, and I’m not about to stand in His way.*”

She talks about God’s plan a lot. My mom thinks she’s an ignorant fool to waste so much time and money on a social club with rules, or so she calls the church. But even I have to admit, God’s plan has worked out pretty well for her. Doreen’s been married thirty-five years, adopted two boys after dealing with infertility, and is now welcoming her second grandbaby.

“Did she also talk to you about the temporary nature of the job?” His brow creases like it would really bother him if I were to feel misled.

His concern brings an unwelcome measure of guilt and makes the long hair I pulled into a tight bun suddenly feel stiff and itchy. While I promised my aunt I wouldn’t lie if directly asked about my beliefs, I have no intention of offering up something that would unquestionably disqualify me for the position.

“Yes, Doreen explained that you’re looking for someone part-time for a few months to provide administrative support to one of your staff members who’s been ‘drowning,’ as she called it.”

“That’s actually a very good assessment of the situation. Which is why I see no reason to delay.” He scoots forward and puts out his hand. “Welcome to the team.”

“That’s it?” The words slip out before I can stop them. “You don’t have any questions about my qualifications? My schooling?”

I realize I left him hanging when he pulls back his unreturned handshake and picks up my résumé from the coffee table. “Your background is perfect—multiple jobs and skill sets. I spoke with your old boss yesterday, and he said you broke an old man’s heart and that he’d take you back in a millisecond if you wanted. And . . .” He shrugs. “You come with the highest of recommendations from a woman I absolutely respect. That’s good enough for me.”

My mouth opens, then closes again.

I can’t believe it. Me, January Sanders, only daughter of Cassidy Burch, who is a self-professed atheist and currently on husband number four, is now a part of organized religion. I’m pretty sure it’s snowing in hell right now. If those two guys preaching on my corner were right, I’ll be down there one day soon to check it out.

Pastor Thomas tries again with the handshake, and this time I take his hand and hope he doesn’t crush me with his grip.

“Thank you,” I say and find I genuinely mean the sentiment. Not just for the job, which I need, but more that I suddenly feel surrounded by warm, fuzzy cotton balls. And since my usual armor is dented, tattered, and virtually nonexistent right now, I don’t think I’ll survive anything less.

“I do have one other question,” he says, and my heart immediately plummets because I know it has to be about my views on religion. Soft, fluffy cotton disappears, the hammock is ripping, rock bottom is getting closer and closer . . . “Your previous boss and your aunt mentioned a unique talent of yours. Something about a photographic memory?”

The adrenaline drop nearly makes me slither from the chair and sink into the carpet. He's asking about my brain, not my faith. That one I can answer without any hesitation. "It's not a photographic memory. In fact, I'm not sure I'd even call it a talent—more like an annoying vice."

He wrinkles his forehead, and I know I'm going to have to explain.

"Okay, I'll just take your office for an example. When I came in, I noticed three things. One, you have a black Sharpie streak on your otherwise pristine walls. It looks smeared, so I assume it's from one of the two boys in your family picture on the desk, and that your wife scrubbed at the mark unsuccessfully. Two, your office chair is slightly tilted, which makes me think you favor one side, probably due to back trouble that I'm guessing is from lifting heavy weights. And three, that yellow sticky note showing halfway out from under your keyboard has the capital letters *TH*, lowercase *inm*, the dollar symbol, and the number 23. Your password, I assume. And you should probably change it because I will remember that sequence until I'm seventy-five and senile."

His mouth is literally hanging open. I get that a lot. What they don't see is the downside.

"Unfortunately, there's an equal and opposite defect," I continue. "I miss all the obvious things a normal person would register. I'll see a small scratch or blemish on the leg of a piece of furniture but miss the fact that the same piece is painted baby blue. My brain trades off what others see for what they don't notice. A gift and a curse. Especially in situations of excessive noise or visual chaos. But don't worry," I quickly add. "I've learned to compensate, so I'll still be able to get the job done no problem."

He slaps his palms on his thighs and stands. "Well, Janu-

ary . . . I mean, Jan, I have a feeling this is going to be a very interesting next couple of months.”

I stand, too, only now noticing that he’s short. Maybe two inches taller than me, and I’m just five-foot-five and change. “Yes, sir, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Oh, and you can stop with the *sir*. People call me Thomas or PT—you know, short for Pastor Thomas.” He glances up at the ceiling, a half eye roll, but there’s affection in his voice when he says, “The kids from youth group came up with the nickname and it seemed to stick.”

I lift my purse on my shoulder as he guides me through the door he left open during our interview. His assistant smiles from behind her desk, as if she, too, is sincerely thrilled to have me as part of the team. Her lipstick is pink, two shades darker than Pepto, and I’m certain it’s Clinique’s sheer lip color and primer in Bubble Gum. I shouldn’t know this, but I do. I think about it so much that I miss her handing me employment paperwork to fill out.

“Sorry.” I take the stack, along with a blue pen from a plastic holder.

“No problem.” She winks as if Doreen has already shared my secret about both my backward mind and nonexistent faith. “I’ll be here if you need anything at all.”

I wonder what she notices when she looks at me. Probably not my lip color, which is likely gone since I bit my lip at least sixteen times on the way over here. No, she likely sees what the rest of the world sees: defeated blue eyes, dark brown hair I only bothered to wash because it had been three days and Doreen said my time for wallowing had passed, and a heart that feels too empty to ever imagine it being full again.

I sit in an open chair and look down at the blank sheet that finalizes my employment. It’s an uncomfortable feeling

when nothing matches the stereotype expected, and so far the people in this building haven't fit with any of the churchy clichés I was certain to find.

A premonition sinks in my chest that Pastor Thomas is exactly right in his assessment: the next several months are going to be interesting indeed.