

PROLOGUE



Tears in Heaven – Eric Clapton

JANE

Just one moment. A simple act...and my life turned upside down.

In the blink of an eye, my whole world would never be the same.

Time heals all wounds, they say, but I'm not so sure. How do you ever recover? How do you go on when you don't know if you have the strength to get out of bed the next day? You want to curl up under the blankets and forget there are people counting on you to continue living.

One moment can make a world of difference. I learned that in the hardest way possible.

CHAPTER ONE



Present Day

Lay Me Down – Sam Smith

JANE

I rolled over and stretched out, feeling a smile form on my lips. My hand reached out to David's side, and instead of finding his warm body next to me, my hand fisted the cold, empty sheets. I'd been dreaming again. The sadness that was my regular companion these past two and a half years started to make another appearance.

I rubbed my face in an attempt to clear the bleakness, still surprised at how real he seemed in my dreams. His darkish blond hair looked longer, as if it needed a trim. And those startling blue eyes of his reminded me of our daughter Emma. I was so glad he passed them on to her. Thoughts of Emma lifted my spirits and dragged me out of bed and down the hall to her room.

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“Wake up, sleepyhead.” I pushed the blonde curls from my almost six-year-old daughter’s sleepy face and watched her yawn and stretch in bed. “I’m not kidding, Emma. It’s time to wake up. Today is your big day.”

She hopped out of bed, the realization spurring her on. Like a whirlwind, she ran to the bathroom and stripped off her pajamas. Her excited chatter bubbled over, a steady stream of what she planned to do today fired off a little too loud this early in the morning. My stomach clenched, a dull ache settling as my thoughts drifted again.

David should have been here to share this special moment with us. I blinked, forcing the tears not to spill. Today was a happy day.

“Come on, Mommy,” Emma called, pulling me out of my funk. This ball of energy reminded me so much of her dad. “Nana and Pops will be here soon.” Her toothbrush was stuck in her mouth, a small stream of toothpaste running over her chin.

“You are absolutely right. I better get started on breakfast.”

With the last of the plates put on the table, the creak of the back door opening put a smile on my face. Emma raced into my dad’s arms.

“Hi, sweetheart.” My mom pushed one of Emma’s unruly curls out of her face. She leaned in to kiss Emma’s cheek, my dad still holding her tight.

“Come in.” I loaded up their plates with a thick stack of pancakes and an extra portion of bacon for Dad. “We better eat while the food’s still hot.”

Emma and my dad shared a joke, and they both burst out into a fit of giggles.

“How are you feeling?” Dad raised an eyebrow. Seated at the table, with the scent of fresh blueberry pancakes filling the air, I could feel my empty stomach grumble. Dad gave me a steady smile. “It’s an important day for you, too, kid.”

David had always insisted I stay at home with Emma. With her starting school this year, it felt right to return to teaching.

The nervous butterflies took flight in my tummy. I set my fork down, suddenly unable to swallow another bite. “If the preparation I did this summer is any indication, I’ll be fine.” I cleaned my plate, dumping the last of my breakfast down the drain.

“You’ll do amazing, Jane. You are a natural. Don’t you forget it.” Mom’s words released some of the nervous tension building inside. My parents’ faith in me was a driving force in my life. I don’t know what I would do without their love and support. It meant the world to me to have them in my life, back then, and also now. I couldn’t have survived that kind of loss without them.



EMMA’S KINDERGARTEN was a few blocks away from our home in Bellebrook, New York, the town I had called home all my life. Driving the short distance to her school, I soaked up the rays of sunshine we were enjoying this warm September, Emma singing along to her favorite song playing on the radio.

Dropping off Emma was much easier for her than for me. Apart from her grip tightening as we walked across the playground, she continued to be her bubbly, chatty self.

Miss Matthews, her teacher, was aware of Emma’s situation, and seemed to have taken a liking to her in the short meeting we had over the summer.

After a quick hug and kiss, Emma sprinted off in the direction of the toys, leaving me with empty arms.

The nervous energy from this morning returned as I made my way to the high school. The drive was only five minutes from Emma’s school but dragged as my heart rate picked up. I took a few more calming breaths, parked in the teacher’s parking lot, and found my way to my classroom.

Luck would have it that my first class didn’t start until second

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period, leaving me a few more minutes before I was thrown into the deep end. Luck also happened to come in the form of my best friend, Sarah, the vice principal at Bellebrook High. I owed her a lot. I was sure she would find some way for me to make it up to her, because that was the way our relationship worked.

Just as I thought the stress might force my breakfast to reappear, Sarah popped in.

"How you doing?" Sarah perched herself on the desk in front of mine. She looked the part of a vice principal, dressed in a navy pencil skirt and cream blouse, her dark brown hair pulled back in a tight bun.

"I think I might lose my breakfast any minute. How about you?" I faked a smile.

"Come on, they're just a bunch of freshmen. What's the worst they can do?" She smiled, not realizing the mental image she painted with that question.

"Don't even go there. You know I have a vivid imagination." I could already imagine myself stuck to a chair, struggling to get up, only to discover my butt glued to my chair. I mentally reminded myself not to sit down. Teenagers could be brutal!

"You'll be fine. You were always such a natural." Sarah's warm smile set me at ease. "So, how did Emma do?"

"She was a little nervous. Then she saw the toys and sprinted off, barely time for a good-bye. I wish it would be as easy for her momma." I heard my voice crack but covered it up by brushing away an imaginary piece of lint on my skirt.

But I couldn't fool the person who'd been my best friend for over two decades. When I looked back up at her, all traces of sentiment erased from my face, she threw me off balance with her keen observation. "Hey, you did great this morning. I can't imagine how hard it is doing this alone. Cut yourself some slack, okay? You got through the hard part. All downhill from here, I promise."

"And you know this how?" I cocked my head to the side and raised my brows.

"I googled it, in anticipation of this moment." She shrugged her shoulders and held her hands up.

"Of course you did." I shook my head, fighting back a grin at her attempt to make me smile.

"Stick with me. I've got you covered." Sarah's attitude put a genuine smile on my face.

The bell rang, announcing the end of first period. Soon my classroom would fill up with twenty-five freshmen for English 101.

"Don't forget, we're having lunch together. I want to hear all about your first day back on the job," she called out over her shoulder.

The next three periods passed in a blur as I met the three freshman classes, tried to learn their names, got a feel for the students, and introduced them to the syllabus we would be using this year. Thank heavens I spent a big part of this summer preparing. I didn't think I'd ever return to teaching if I didn't have all that time to help me get ready. Teaching English hadn't changed that much in the seven years I'd been gone, but considering the time gap, I was still nervous coming back.

As the bell rang to announce the end of class and the start of my lunch break, I collected the handouts I needed to copy and made my way to the staff's lunchroom to meet up with Sarah. When I got there, I couldn't find her. After getting my pages copied and talking to a few colleagues, I walked over to her office. If there was one thing you could always count on, it was Sarah losing track of time.

"Forget about our lunch date so soon, did you?" I laughed to myself.

Before I knew what was happening, I plowed into a tall, broad figure. My hands dropped the papers I held and latched onto the wall of muscle in front of me. I peered up to see who saved me from a disastrous fall. That dark hair with a slight wave, those deep blue eyes

—suddenly I was transported back to when I was fifteen. All these years hadn't hurt him one bit. Jackson Wright was still as handsome as ever.

"Jackson?" I cringed, hating how my voice came out sounding sort of breathless.

"Hi, Jane. Let me help you." He bent down to start collecting the mess of papers. My frazzled nerves froze me on the spot. I awoke from my shock and joined him. He leaned to pick up the last page, and that faint hint of cologne tugged at those memories from when we were teenagers. The scent of bergamot and sandalwood reminded me of that summer long ago. I looked up at him and swallowed the lump forming in my throat.

"I can't seem to remember us having lunch plans." Jackson chuckled. His face broke out in a wide grin as he helped me up. His strong hand wrapped around my arm, and my stomach jolted. I shuffled the papers, breaking the contact and covering the heat creeping up in my face.

"Why, Jackson, if I would have known you were in town, I would have penciled you in. As it so happens, I already have plans this afternoon." I patted myself on the back for my quick recovery.

Before he could reply, Sarah entered from the side door and picked up her conversation with Jackson as if she never left the room.

"I copied this, and here is that number you'll need for the carpenter. Oh!" She looked almost genuinely surprised to see me, but I knew better. I could tell she planned this moment too well. "I see you ran into Jane." *Ran* being the right word. Knowing Sarah, she "happened" to plan this lunch date with me and her meeting with Jackson at the same time so we could "happen" to bump into each other.

Judging by the sly smile on her lips, I knew I was spot on. I'd get back at her for this.

"Jane, Jackson moved back to Bellebrook last week. I guess I forgot to mention that." Sarah winked, trying to unsuccessfully hide a smile.

"Sure you did." I rolled my eyes, the action lost on Sarah.

"He'll be doing some work for the school. You remember he's an architect, right? His old employer did the previous expansion." She didn't wait for an answer. "When they found out he was considering moving back here to set up his own business, they recommended him to the board. He's finally at the point where he needs to be here full time to complete the planned expansion. Isn't it great? It'll be just like old times."

My attention was drawn to Jackson. He looked as good as I remembered. No, better.

"We should go get something to eat before classes start up." Sarah collected her bag, indicating it was time to leave.

"I've got to run, sis. Got an appointment with a client in twenty." Jackson hugged Sarah good-bye and turned to leave. He faltered when he noticed me. He smiled before making his way to the door. He stopped as he reached the hallway. I swallowed as I looked back at him.

"Uh." He lifted his hand in a wave but dropped it. "See ya, Jane."

Sarah and I walked out of the office, leaving in the opposite direction. At the end of the hall, I turned back and stared at his retreating form. Seeing Jackson again after all this time hit me like a punch to the gut. As I was about to round the corner, he turned around. For a moment, our eyes locked. Something seemed to pass between us. As I puzzled to make out what that might be, he disappeared around the corner. I stood there, feeling all kinds of funny. My mind shifted back to that night when I fell utterly, hopelessly in love with him.

CHAPTER TWO



Fifteen years earlier

It's a Beautiful Day – U2

JANE

“S-A-R-A-H!” I yelled as I pounded on her front door. I knew her parents were out. I was peeved at the moment, and the only thing that would calm me was a tub of B&J Cookie Dough and a good cry on my best friend’s shoulder. Considering we didn’t have anything in our freezer, I came straight over for part two in my much needed fix.

I tried the doorbell again. I wasn’t ready to give up after pounding on the door and trying the doorbell three times.

As I turned to leave, upset and growing angrier by the minute, the door swung open and I found myself face-to-face with Jackson, Sarah’s hot older brother. He looked great, as always, with his deep blue eyes, a white T-shirt, and jeans sitting low on his hips. His hair was damp, tiny droplets dripping on his forehead and traveling down his neck.

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"Sorry I took so long. I was getting out of the shower when I heard the first bell. I guess I'm the only one home right now."

He gave me a half smile, and my stomach knotted. Did I not notice before how fine Jackson was up close? I guess it was time to forget about the idiots of the world, like Brian Anderson, and pay attention to the hotties in front of me.

"Is Sarah home?" my voice squeaked.

"I think we established this already, when I said I was the only one home."

Duh—how stupid did I sound? He didn't seem to notice. He turned on the charm as he crossed his arms and leaned on the doorframe. Jackson's chest filled his shirt out nicely. My knees went weak as I tried not to stare. How had I never noticed how buff this fine specimen of humanity was before?

He saw me eyeing him and gave me his winning smile, one I'm sure had charmed about every girl in the entire school. My face heated up from being caught checking him out.

"Do you know when Sarah will be home?" I twirled a finger around a lock of hair. When I realized what I was doing, I dropped my hand to my side immediately.

Between how flustered Jackson was making me and how I'd barely survived the "date" from hell, I needed my bestie, stat.

"Not sure. I think she and Tom had plans." He continued to look at me. I hoped my mascara hadn't run after I cried. Please, dear God, don't let me look like a freaking raccoon!

"Can't anything go my way today?" I muttered under my breath.

Jackson had excellent hearing. "What happened that has you so upset?"

"Nothing," I barked. "Sorry." I lowered my voice. "It's not your fault. Just because Brian Anderson is a jerk doesn't mean all guys are."

"Did he hurt you?" Jackson unfolded his arms and leaned closer, concern tightening his features.

"Only my ego. That loser."

"You sure? I could go over there and teach him a lesson, you being Sarah's best friend and all."

THE SONGS OF YOU AND ME

Bless Jackson. I always looked up to him like a big brother. Right now, I was having all kinds of thoughts that were nowhere near brotherly, though.

"No, it's okay. He didn't do anything that hurt me—physically, anyway. I made my point crystal clear to him. I don't think he'll be bothering me anytime soon."

"Now, there has to be a story to that. Want to tell me?" He relaxed his stance, and the way his chest flexed as he leaned on the doorframe distracted me.

"Not really..." I felt my eyes well up. I was such a freak. I couldn't believe I cared so much about a loser like Brian Anderson.

"Hey, don't cry." Jackson reached out to me. I felt a tear escape and roll down my cheek.

"Wait here for a sec while I grab my keys. We can hit the diner for a sundae. Doesn't ice cream fix everything?"

Jackson gave me a tentative smile. His hand squeezed my shoulder gently, offering comfort. It didn't do much to help my terrible mood. I didn't know if it was my fragile state of mind or the hormones taking over, but I heard myself say, "Okay." I got into Jackson's car two minutes later.

JACKSON

"Tell me all about this dork Brian Anderson." I was eager to hear Jane's story, but my mouth watered as I looked at the huge pile of chocolate ice cream smothered in syrup and cream sitting in front of me.

"I've had a crush on him for a few weeks now. He's popular and on the football team."

My stomach clenched. Brian Anderson was a punk. He made it a sport of dating the hottest chicks in school and then taking what he wanted before dumping them. I couldn't believe a smart girl like Jane would fall for that player. Her tears earlier had me on edge. I wondered if I was going to have to go over there later tonight and teach that bonehead how to treat a lady.

Jane took a small taste of her dessert and smiled, calming my nerves.

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That smile that set me at ease distracted me now. I always liked Jane. What was not to like? She was Sarah's best friend. Always loyal, a quality I admired. And she was easy on the eyes. Even though she was a few years younger, I was still a guy, and we guys noticed these things. Like her hair, it was a deep shade of brown with natural highlights and waves that ran down her back. I was a sucker for long hair. But what stood out the most were her green eyes. They were a deep emerald I'd never seen on anyone but her. They were typically Jane.

She also had a sharp mind. Some girls that were hot, like Jane, came up blank. And I meant completely blank. Beyond makeup, the amount of calories in the salad dressing, or who was sleeping with whom, there wasn't much else going on in their brains. This girl knew stuff. She always impressed me with her sharp wit.

Before I drooled all over my sundae, I cleared my throat. "Brian Anderson, how'd you pull that one with the folks?"

I remembered Jane's parents' rule: No dating until she turned sixteen. Being an only child made them crazy overprotective.

"You know my parents want me to focus on my studies. No dating will help me reach my goals." She did a pretty good imitation of her dad. Jane was in Honors English, dedicated to her education. I could appreciate that.

"Technically, I was tutoring Brian. He asked me to help him with his English paper." She tilted her head to the side, lifting her shoulders as if it were all good. I bet her dad hadn't met Brian and didn't know about the setup. No way would that fly. I really hated that tool. He was bad news. Before saying something stupid, I dug into my sundae with a vengeance.

"Tonight was our study date. He made it seem special. He even said the whole 'It's a date' line."

I heard her voice pick up on that last line. I checked her eyes for tears. I didn't do tears.

"Okay." I dragged out each letter. "What went wrong?"

Jane had barely touched her sundae.

"When I got to his house, he sat me down, gave me a drink, showed me his homework assignment, and then the doorbell rang."

I shoved another spoonful of ice cream in my mouth and fought back a brain freeze.

"In walks Mindy Foster, his date for the night."

I couldn't help myself. I snorted. Not in the cool guy kind of way. Some of the cold cream shot up my nose, making me cringe. I had to give it to the jerk; he was a real butthead. He might have gotten away with his plan with any other girl, but not Jane.

"I know, right? He expected me to do his homework while he went out with Mindy. Can you believe it?"

Her indignation was cute. Her brow bunched up, and the frustrated pout begged me to claim those lips and kiss that frustration away. What the heck? Where did that thought come from? This was Jane.

"Wow!" is all I said. She was looking at me like I totally got her outrage, but really I was fantasizing about what Jane's lips would taste like. Would they taste like the coconut smell I picked up off her earlier in the car, or would her lips be as sweet as the chocolate sundae?

Jackson, dude, snap out of it. I chastised myself.

"How did he think you would react?" I couldn't believe he didn't try to make a move on her himself.

"He knew about the no-dating rule." She huffed. Honestly, she had no idea how lucky she was that rule scared the players off like it did. No one messed with Mr. Pierce. He was a great guy, don't get me wrong. Heck, I'd known him my whole life, our family being tight like we were. But even I knew not to get on the wrong side of him.

"But wait for it. He was going to drive me home after his date with Mindy, so he couldn't understand why I was upset about it. That punk."

"What did you do?" I tried my best to wipe the smile off of my face, still distracted imagining those lips on mine.

"I did the only thing any self-respecting girl in my position would do," she

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exclaimed. "I took the glass of water he gave me and dumped the whole thing right over him."

I stared for a moment, and then burst out laughing. Her animated relaying and my reaction to it were causing a stir.

"I wish I could have seen his face." I shook my head, forcing my mind back to the conversation and away from those tempting thoughts. "And Mindy's," I added, back on topic now.

"Well...I think I might have gotten Mindy sort of...kind of wet in the process of teaching Brian a well-deserved lesson." Jane seemed to relax.

"You have quite a mean streak, Jane Pierce. I'll give you that. No guy on the team will ever mess with you, that's for sure." I awarded Jane with one of my winning smiles and noticed her blush as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

This night had certainly taken a turn with Jane pounding on my door. Sitting here with her, I was really happy her date hadn't worked out and that she was here with me instead.