

THE  
*Heart's  
Hostage*

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## CHAPTER

# One

Jane Garner collapsed into the office chair behind her paper-strewn desk in her cheerfully decorated classroom and exhaled heavily. Another school year had just begun, and the first week of kindergarten, which always proved to be quite an adventure, promised to be exceptionally so this year. Closing her eyes, she soaked in the quiet.

“I’m getting too old for this.” Reluctant to move but knowing her desk needed attention, she picked up a piece of pink construction paper and looked at it through bleary eyes. A big red heart filled the page, with a blue, green, and purple rainbow stretching from one side to the other inside it. At the very bottom was printed: “From Destiny.”

Jane smiled. It had taken the whole week for shy little Destiny Shoals to make even the slightest peep. When the little girl finally managed barely more than a whisper, she didn’t make eye contact. But this love note meant Jane must be doing something right, and that made her exhausting week worth every second.

Fishing a thumb tack out of her desk drawer, she pushed to her tired feet and pinned the drawing on the bulletin board behind her desk where she was sure the little girl would see it on display. She vowed to spend time working to make the unsure

child comfortable enough in herself and her surroundings to open up. For now, however, Jane was just thankful for the weekend and the reason she wouldn't have to cook supper tonight.

Her mouth watered as she thought of celebrating her anniversary at Bella Notte. She hadn't eaten at her favorite Italian restaurant since her thirty-eighth birthday several months earlier.

It had been a chore to persuade her husband. *Come on, Ian. After twenty years we deserve a night out. At the very least, a quiet meal at nice restaurant, just the two of us.*

*Doesn't Bradley have a football game?*

Some things truly never changed and rejection always stung, regardless of intention. *Yes, but kick-off isn't until seven o'clock. We can make reservations for five and still make it to the game in time.*

*Let me check my work schedule.* He'd ended the conversation with a peck on her cheek.

Making the reservations anyway, she found herself wondering now, days later, why he couldn't just say, "Sure, baby. Let's go." How she loathed playing second fiddle to work, to the kids. Sometimes it seemed like she came in second place to just about everything.

Swallowing the leftover bitterness, she picked up a picture book, crossed the colorful carpet to the large bookshelf that housed her classroom library, and stooped to slip the book back into its place.

*It doesn't really matter now, anyway. What matters is the time we're going to spend together having dinner . . . maybe a glass of wine . . . maybe a little dancing . . .* A smile crept further onto her face with each "maybe."

On a shelf out of reach of her students, sat a collection of picture frames. Reaching for the small wedding photo, she wiped the thin layer of dust off onto her slacks and stared at the young couple in the picture, just out of high school, sights set on their future.

“Now it seems like a lifetime ago.”

As on every anniversary before, she recalled the events leading up to their wedding, from prom night going a little too far to the hint of the plus sign appearing on the test. They both knew her very traditional Irish father wouldn't have it any other way, so they had said they were crazy in love, didn't want to be apart a minute longer, and set the date for August twenty-second.

Halfway through July, she had miscarried.

“In some ways it was a lifetime ago.” A flood of emotions swept over Jane, and the picture blurred behind unshed tears.

A few had suspected, but no one ever knew the truth. Eighteen-year-old Jane had bottled up her grief, and since they figured postponing the wedding would only make more waves, it went on as planned. She spent her “honeymoon” enrolling in college classes while Ian started working construction to pay for their tiny one-bedroom apartment and put food on the table. Her teaching career began four years later, and Bradley came shortly after that . . . followed a few years later by Emma, then Jessica, and finally Samuel.

It suddenly struck Jane that she'd spent over half her life fulfilling her role as Ian's wife. Shaking her head, she replaced the frame on the shelf. “But there's more to me than being Mrs. Ian Garner. I just need to remember what it is.”

Her cell phone, still in silent mode, vibrated wildly on her desk like a wind-up toy, and she rushed to retrieve it. The caller I.D. displayed the words, “Ian Garner,” accompanied by his snapshot.

Creases formed on her brow and a small trickle of dread seeped into her heart. Ian rarely called during the day. She was shocked on the few occasions he shot her a text. But today was different. Today was their anniversary. Of course, he'd call her.

"Hey, babe. How's my husband of twenty years doing today?"

"Good. Busy. Trying to get as much done on this project as we can before the front moves in over the weekend and brings three days' worth of rain with it."

"Well, I'm looking forward to our dinner date tonight. It's been a while since we've had time alone together and, after the week I've had, I can use some face time."

"Yeah, about that . . ."

"Oh, Ian." Jane's shoulders drooped under the weight of disappointment. "Please tell me you're not canceling."

"I'm not canceling, just postponing."

Jane didn't respond. The initial letdown quickly compacted into a fiery ball of anger and she knew that if she opened her mouth, it was hard telling what might come out.

"Look, I'll make it up to you, but we're heading into bad weather season and I have to take advantage of every single decent day."

Silence.

"I can't lose any more work. Things are already going to be tight for us this winter. What else do you want me to do?"

"It's our anniversary for goodness sake! I want you to take me out. Don't I deserve that after twenty years?"

"I don't want to argue. You knew when we started this business we'd have to make sacrifices periodically."

"Right."

A deep sigh filled her ear. "I've got to get back to work. Let's finish this discussion at home."

“There’s nothing left to say.”

Jane ended the call and sank to her chair. It hurt to leave the issue unresolved, but it didn’t surprise her. This kind of thing had become the norm. With balancing their work schedules in addition to their four children’s various after-school activities, they rarely finished a conversation, and somewhere along the way she’d grown calloused to the emptiness it left inside.

Jane snorted. “So much for not having to make supper.”

If she was one hundred percent honest, she wasn’t as disappointed about the dinner as she was about postponing the romance. It had already been a long time coming.

Tidying her desk, she gathered her things, while mentally running through quick and easy recipes. Finally, not exactly sure what her pantry was stocked with and not feeling the least bit motivated, she settled on take out from the Bayside Cafe. She slung her purse onto her shoulder and grabbed her keys.

“Burgers and fries it is.”

“Sounds good to me.”

She snapped her gaze toward the doorway, where Zach Andrews, the new sixth grade teacher stood. She forcefully returned her purse to her desktop with a hard thud and an exasperated breath.

“Please don’t tell me you have a problem with my kid because I don’t think I can take it right now.”

Zach stepped into the classroom. “Actually, I just stopped by to tell you what a great student Jessica is—polite, respectful, hard working. Definitely a testament to good parenting.”

“Finally, some decent news.” Jane leaned heavily against her desk and crossed her arms. “Well, don’t get your hopes up, okay? The school year has only just begun, and Jessica can be quite a handful.”

“She takes after her mother then?”

Jane eyed him, unsure of his intentions.

His wholesome laugh filled the air. “Oh, come on, Jane Flanders. You really think I don’t remember how spunky you were in high school?”

She arched her eyebrows at the sound of her maiden name, so foreign to her now, then scrunched them together as she searched her mental yearbook. “To be honest, Zach, I don’t remember you.”

“That’s because I was only a freshman and had just moved to town the summer before your senior year.”

Amidst the fog in her brain, Jane could barely make out the memory of a scrawny kid, nothing close to this well filled-out man in front of her. “Well, it’s Jane Garner now. And that was a long time ago. I’m not the same girl I was back then.”

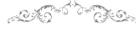
“Sure you are. We grow up and our roles and situations change, but our spirit never really does.”

Her gaze met his friendly smile. Somehow, his words, his kindness, his warmth, was just enough to lighten the stress of her hectic week and ease the disappointment of her broken dinner date.

“Right.” Pushing away from the desk, she crossed the room. “Well, thanks for the good report, but don’t hesitate to let me know if there’s ever an issue.”

Zach put a hand up in a parting wave. “Will do. Have a good weekend.”

“Yeah.” Fearing her flat tone revealed a hint of the loneliness she kept buried in the deepest pit of her soul, she put one foot in front of the other until she reached the parking lot and the safety of her Expedition.



Ian stared at his cell phone, Jane's words repeating in his mind like a scratched CD.

*There's nothing left to say.*

Twenty years ago, he would have shaken his head, maybe even grinned and chalked those words up to her fiery Irish attitude. Now, however, he understood that the real motive behind her response was avoidance.

"It's just like her to shut down when an issue comes up." He twisted his wedding band around his finger as anger started at his toes and slithered its way to his heart. "But, damn it, there are things left to say."

"Like what?"

The voice shook him out of his bitter trance, and his demeanor softened as he turned.. "Hey, sis. It's nothing. What are you doing here?"

Ava Garner, the town's tall and lanky head librarian, leaned against Ian's red F150, shoulder-to-shoulder with him, and pushed her glasses further up on the bridge of her nose. Reaching into her oversized purse, she retrieved a sealed envelope and held it out to him.

"It's your anniversary. Thought I'd save a stamp."

"Gee, thanks." He took the card and tossed it through the open truck window.

"Do I sense trouble in paradise, big brother?"

Wiping his glasses on his T-shirt, he cast his gaze past the roundness of his belly to the hard, dry dirt. He didn't need a mirror to recognize the effect of twenty years on his physique. The fast, fit star running back who swept his high school sweetheart off her feet on prom night had taken a hike. The dashing groom who carried his radiant bride over the threshold of their honey-

moon suite twenty years ago was long gone. In his place stood a middle-aged husband and father of four who spent long hours working to keep his construction business afloat in a sinking economy.

He knew he let Jane down over and over by spending so little time at home, and he hated himself for it. But wouldn't he let his whole family down if he couldn't provide for them? He was there for the important things.

*There's nothing left to talk about.*

Well, most of the important things.

He sighed heavily and shoved his fingers through his thinning hair. "Oh, you know. After a while, things are bound to get a little stale. No big deal."

"No big deal, huh?"

Ian shrugged, crossed one ankle over the other, and stuffed his hands in his pockets, avoiding his sister's gaze.

"You know, there's a book in the library about love languages. Do you know Jane's love language?"

"Of course I do. You can't be married to someone for a fifth of a century and not know her."

"I didn't ask if you knew her. I asked if you knew her love language. What really makes Jane tick?"

Uncrossing his ankles, Ian folded his arms. "Look, sis, I don't mean anything bad by this, but you haven't been in a serious relationship since, what, your freshman year of college over fifteen years ago? I don't think you have any room to give me advice on my marriage."

Ava hung her head. "I was just trying to help. Jane can be stubborn, yes, but you can be down right pig-headed, you know that?" Pushing away from the truck, she stalked off.

He watched her go, guilt replacing the anger that coiled around his heart, squeezing just enough to make him uncomfortable. He reached through the window, picked up the envelope, slid his finger under the flap, and pulled out the card.

On the front, a man and woman danced under a big moon. "Two special people. One special marriage." Inside it read: "A whole lifetime of beautiful memories."

Ian placed the card and envelope back on the seat and returned to work, muttering under his breath, "It sure seems like a lifetime."



Jane sat at the dining room table swirling a spoon around a steaming cup of chamomile tea. The soft glow from a street light filled the large bay window, adding to the faint luminescence of a nightlight in the adjoining kitchen.

The three youngest children had just gone to bed, and Jane was sure Jessica and Samuel were already asleep. Emma was most likely winding down with a book in her bedroom, but she'd be asleep long before Bradley returned from celebrating Harvest Bay High's victory with his friends.

Thankful for the time alone, Jane wondered how she'd get past the hurt this time. How would she be able to face Ian when he got home without turning her disappointment into a big deal?

*But it is a big deal. Twenty years of marriage deserves some recognition, and for once I want to be a priority.*

Sighing, she set the spoon down and picked up the mug for a cautious sip, weighing whether or not it'd be easier to just not say anything and figure out a way to get over it the way she'd done so many times before rather than start a fight. Should she wave the white flag before the battle even began, pretend as if

her self worth and value hadn't been shot down again? The problem was that surrender only ended the battle between them, while the silent war waged on in her heart and she slowly became a casualty.

*"We grow up, and our roles and situations change, but our spirit never really does."* Zach's words had echoed in her mind all evening.

"Our spirit might not change, but it can die, and mine is fading fast," she whispered.

The reality broke her heart, but what could she do about it? She had commitments, responsibilities, four young people who counted on her to be there every minute of every day. This was her life.

The hum of the garage door opening combined with popping gravel in the driveway outside interrupted her thoughts. It was too early to be Bradley, and besides, he never parked his old Taurus in the garage. Jane's chest tightened. If it were any other day of the year she'd race up the stairs, leap into bed, pull the covers up to her chin, and pretend she was asleep so she wouldn't have to deal with the issue at hand. Instead, she sat in the darkness, calmly sipping her tea with a stony expression while she mentally prepared for battle. No white flag this time.

The door creaked open, and Jane watched her husband's shadowy figure emerge from the adjacent laundry room. He took a step toward the stairs.

"You won't find me up there."

Her voice startled him. Bringing the mug to her lips, she concealed the small grin of satisfaction, but there was no mistaking the spark in her spirit.

"What are you doing sitting down here in the dark?"

“Just enjoying a cup of tea.” She nodded toward a Styrofoam container across the table. “Your dinner’s cold.”

Drawing closer, he thrust a cellophane wrapped bouquet of flowers at her. “It was too much work for you to put it in the microwave?”

“Yeah.” She snatched the flowers. “It was about as much work as it took you to stop after the football game for these.” Squinting in the dim light, she peeled the price tag off the see-through wrapper, and held it up to him. “Five bucks at the Pit Stop Gas and Grocery? That’s what our anniversary means to you?”

Ian heaved a sigh as he slumped into a chair next to her. “Is this about the fact that we didn’t go out this evening? Look, I told you I’d make it up to you.”

“Twenty years, Ian! And you put no thought into it at all.” She stood so abruptly the chair clattered backward. “I deserve more than a five-dollar bouquet from the grocery store.”

“At least it’s something. What have you done? I haven’t even seen a card yet.”

“Oh, you mean besides making reservations and finding a sitter so we could have a quiet, intimate evening alone together? Something we haven’t done in months? There’s a bottle of wine in the fridge, candles in our bedroom, bubble bath next to the tub, and a new negligee hanging in my closet.” She carried her tea cup to the kitchen sink, mumbling over her shoulder, “Maybe another time.”

Ian stood. “Jane, what do you want from me? You know, I work hard for this family. I always have, and I’m happy to do it, but I’d like to be appreciated, too, instead of just hearing about where I fall short.”

“I tell you I appreciate you, but you don’t listen. And you don’t seem to notice or care when I show you.”

“That’s exactly what I’m talking about! I can’t do anything right around here, and I’m sick of it.” Planting his hands on the table, he shook his head and dragged out a long breath. “I can’t live like this anymore.”

“I can’t either.” She crossed her arms in an attempt to ease the pain in her heart. “Something’s got to change, but at this point I don’t know where to even start.”

They stood in silence, both unable to bridge the expanse between them.

Finally, Ian took a baby step, his voice low and weary. “I love you. Isn’t that a start?”

Swallowing hard against a rising lump of emotion, Jane could only manage a whisper. “Yeah. It’s a start.”