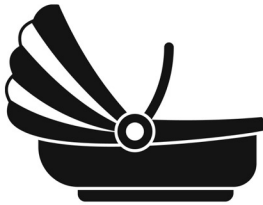


Saving Grace



Amy R. Anguish

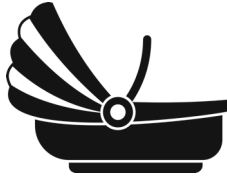


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CHAPTER 1



“*I* can do this.” Michelle released a tension-filled breath. “It’s just a car.”

A glance down at the baby sleeping peacefully in the carrier looped over her arm alleviated some of the nervousness. She’d been driving for over ten years now. Michelle refused to let one little wreck—okay, big wreck—the week before keep her from driving again. Nor would this stupid cast covering her left wrist and part of her forearm. She could still wiggle her fingers.

After several deep lungfuls to steady her nerves, she loaded Grace into the back seat. She ran a hand over the straps to make sure they were secure. If for no other reason than this child, she’d be the most careful driver in the world.

“Can’t have you losing me too.”

Michelle shook her head to clear the darkness threatening her vision. She could do this, despite what happened the last time she drove. This would be a happy day. She was headed to see her best friend again for the first time since Christmas. And he didn’t even expect her to be anywhere near Cedar Springs, Arkansas. She grinned at the baby.

“Let’s go introduce you to one of my favorite people in the world.”

Hands on the steering wheel, she squeezed her eyes closed against the panic threatening her joy and tightening her throat. Driving was like riding a bicycle, right? It wasn't like maniac motorcyclists ran red lights at every intersection. She forced her eyelids open and started the ignition. Only a few blocks. Straightening her shoulders, she inched out of the driveway.

Ten uneventful minutes later, she pulled into the familiar parking lot and wrangled Grace's car seat out. The church building hadn't changed at all. It even smelled the same as when Michelle attended services here as a child—of books and lemon-scented cleaner.

She walked down the linoleum-floored hallway toward the kitchen. The secretary said he was back here getting things ready for a lock-in this weekend. His singing carried through the air as she neared the doorway. She tiptoed to the corner and peeked around.

Gregory Marshall pulled several folding chairs off the rack and placed them in neat rows facing one another. Probably to play fun games or for the devotional parts of Friday night. He'd always been so organized, unlike Michelle. As he lifted another stack of seats down, his muscles bulged more than she remembered in high school, though otherwise, he was much the same. And his chestnut curls were cut shorter than the mop he'd worn as a teen.

A smile stretched across her face as he continued belting out the song.

"I'll fly away, O glory. I'll fly away."

"When I die, hallelujah, by and by." She joined him at the last of the verse. "I'll fly away."

He turned, a huge grin on his face, his blue eyes twinkling. "Mickey?"

Other than her daddy, he was the only person in the world she let use her childhood nickname.



GREG'S HEART tripped over itself when his favorite person stepped around the corner. Michelle's brown hair hung just past her shoulders, like it had since she grew out what she always referred to as 'the bowl cut' her mom got her in second grade. Her glasses didn't hide the bruising around her blue eyes, and his heart squeezed at how much it must have hurt.

Two giant steps toward a long overdue hug, he froze. A cast covered one of her arms, and a baby carrier swung from the other. His head cocked to the side as he studied the contraption and the child in it.

"Your parents get a new foster?"

"Sort of." Michelle cast a glance at the sleeping infant. "Officially, yes. But unofficially, no."

"I don't understand."

"She's ... well, hopefully, mine."

"Yours?" All sorts of scenarios ran through his mind, most of them breaking his heart. How long had it been since he'd seen her last?

"For now." Michelle set Grace down and opened her arms for the hug he'd started a moment before.

After a short pause, he wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. She leaned into him, her head nestling perfectly under his chin. As many times as he'd dreamed of this reunion, it was even better in reality.

"You're here." Greg let her go and headed back to get more chairs. "How long?"

"Always."

Michelle bumped into his back when he stopped right in front of her.

Greg turned and cocked an eyebrow at her.

"I've been offered my dream job. I start at the *Sun* on Monday." While some people wanted to work at nationally recognized papers, have their names in bylines all over the country and world, Michelle had always dreamed of being a

photojournalist for the local paper. For years she'd talked about how she'd rather be recognized among those who loved her.

"You're back for good?"

"For good."

They sat in folding chairs and just grinned at each other for a moment.

"Your mom told me you were in a wreck, and they were headed your way. I need details." Greg leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. He'd been praying and fretting for days, wondering how she was.

She breathed in and out a couple of times, obviously working up the nerve to relive her memories. "Several of my friends threw me a party the night before I was supposed to move back." She picked at a loose piece of cotton sticking out from her cast. "We stayed up late, giggling and not wanting the night to end because it was the last time we'd probably be together.

"I was tired, but I didn't live far from there, so I didn't think anything of it. Unfortunately, a few blocks from my apartment, a motorcycle blew through the intersection's red light in front of me."

He hunched forward, his elbows on his knees, soaking in every word. The urge to go hunt down the idiot who'd caused so much stress in her life had him forcing his hands not to fist. No need to upset her more.

"I swerved to make sure I didn't clip the back of his bike, but I didn't see the pickup truck headed my way. I guess they did the same thing because they swerved toward me. The truck ended up spinning and flipping. I did a one-eighty before I finally stopped. I think I may have passed out after I called 911. When they got there, I was slumped next to my car door. And I fainted again when they touched my wrist."

He leaned forward and touched her knee. "And the people in the truck?"

"Grace's parents." She glanced down at the still-sleeping

infant, a tear winding its way down her cheek. “They were actually on their way to the hospital to have her.”

“Mickey.” Her name came out as almost a sigh.

“Leah, Grace’s mom, was unbuckled for some reason. When the truck flipped ... she flew through the window.” Michelle swiped at the moisture on her face. “John, her husband—he wouldn’t let the EMTs do anything to him until they’d done all they could for Leah. And because he refused treatment for so long, the internal bleeding—”

Greg wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her to him. How many times had he dreamed of holding Michelle like this? But not with the reason behind it. He wouldn’t wish that on anyone, especially not his best friend, who tended to be empathetic almost to a fault.

Finally, she leaned away and grabbed an old napkin from a nearby table to dab her cheeks. “It was definitely the scariest thing I’ve ever been through.” She sniffled. “And the saddest. I mean, they were alive when we got in the ambulances but gone the next morning.”

He gave her fingers a squeeze. It wasn’t enough, but what else could he do?

“So much changed in such a short time.” She lifted her broken arm as she spoke, never able to talk without moving her hands.

“Does your wrist hurt?” He gently touched her cast.

“Not really. It’s more of a nuisance than anything. Although it may have me typing ‘hunt and peck’ for a while. And I haven’t figured out how I’m going to use my camera yet.” She drew in a deep breath.

“But nothing hurts as much as the thought that Grace will never really know her parents. I mean, I know the state is sorting things out and figuring out what all needs to stay tucked away so she can know a bit about her family in the future. But she’ll never know everything about them. It’s so unfair.”

“And who told you life is fair?” Greg quoted the saying her dad had always teased them with when they were growing up.

“Thanks, Dad.” Michelle rolled her eyes.

“So, how did you end up in charge of Grace? I mean, doesn’t she have grandparents or someone who can take her?”

“No known close relatives. This poor kid was about to end up in the system. The caseworker actually said she’d have to call around to try and find a foster home on such short notice. We couldn’t let that happen. Not with Mom and Dad still active through the children’s home in Paragould. My parents are officially fostering her right now while the state works things out. But, I’m hoping I can adopt her.”

Greg leaned back, stunned into partial breathlessness. In all the years of wishing and hoping for a reunion with Michelle, and even a closer relationship than what they’d enjoyed in the past, he’d never considered this. If she adopted the baby, would that change everything? She’d always been a go-getter, one to conquer goals and reach for dreams, no matter how far away. But if she could make this happen, would she even want a man in her life?

Grace stirred a moment in her sleep and stilled again. Michelle leaned down and brushed the side of her finger against the baby’s soft skin, causing his heart to skip. Would a baby born to the two of them look like Grace?

He waged war with himself, not wanting to crush this plan, but also wary. After all, Michelle hadn’t always been the responsible one of the two of them. Could she take care of a child by herself? How did he offer counsel without giving the support she expected?

“You don’t think it’s a good idea.” She sat back up.

“I don’t know. I mean, you’re temporarily living with your parents. You’re not sure how to work your camera with your hand in a cast. You don’t even know if Grace will be available for adoption. Mickey, there’s a lot to consider. You can’t just make a snap decision about this like you did with so many things in high school.”

“I know that. This isn’t whether or not to run for class president or who I’m going to prom with. This is serious.” Michelle fisted her hands in her lap. “I know we haven’t talked as much as we wanted the last few years, but I have grown up some, Greg. I can make hard decisions now.”

“Have you prayed about it?”

“I’m not part of your youth group. Don’t beat me over the head with how to talk to God, okay? That’s not why I came here today. I thought my move back would be a good surprise for you, that you’d be happy to see me again.”

“I am happy you moved back. You know that.” He dashed his hands through his hair.

“But?”

“But I’m worried about you. It’s like you’re trying to make your life harder than it has to be.”

“You don’t understand. I have to adopt Grace.”

“Why? Make me understand.” He stood and paced in front of her.

“I just have to.”

A myriad of expressions floated across her face, but none stayed long enough for him to interpret. What was going on in that mind of hers?

“It’s the right thing to do.”

“The right thing to do?”

“I just ...” Michelle flopped her hands in her lap. “I want to make it up to her.”

“Mick.” He knelt in front of her. “You know it’s not your fault her parents died, right?”

Michelle looked across the room, blinking back a tear. “But it’s at least partly my fault.”

“No.” He tugged at her fingers to get her attention. “No. You didn’t make Leah unbuckle her seatbelt. You didn’t even know they’d be on the road. As far as I know, you didn’t even know them. And I’m sure you didn’t make that motorcycle fly through that red light. You only had control over you. And you

did what you could to save them all. You don't have to make it up to her."

She pulled her quivering bottom lip between her teeth. "But I want to. And it just feels like this is the direction God wants me to go."

"You know I'm always here for you." He shook his head and let out a breath. "I'll never understand you, but I'm always here."

"I know." She grinned at him.

"I'll do anything I can to help." He wanted to say more, but Grace started fussing.

Her cries echoed off the empty walls of the fellowship room. Michelle quickly unbuckled the baby and lifted her carefully from the car seat. Greg had to admit he was impressed with how well she maneuvered despite the cast. She leaned down and looked through the side pocket of the diaper bag, pulling out a bottle.

"Hang on, sweetie." She crooned to Grace.

"How can I help?"

She looked up as he hovered nearby and raised an eyebrow. "Want to hold her while I fix her bottle?"

Teenagers he could handle, but a newborn? He swallowed, then nodded. How hard could it be? She gently transferred Grace into his arms and positioned his hands under the baby's head and back. Before he felt comfortable, she headed toward the kitchen with the sustenance the child obviously wanted.

"What do I do now?" Greg asked, hoping the panic trying to escape didn't show in his voice.

"Rock her a bit. I'll have this fixed in a minute."

She made it sound so simple. He cast back through memories, searching for what he'd seen others do with a crying child. Sing. He could do that—anything to get this pitiful wailing to stop.



WHEN MICHELLE RETURNED from the kitchen, Greg cradled Grace in the crook of his arm and swayed in rhythm to the tune of the hymn he softly sang. The little girl looked up at him with her big eyes, her face splotchy from crying, still whimpering, but not all-out fussing anymore.

Michelle's heart skipped a beat, and she stared for a moment at the picture they made together. He was a natural. She shook her head, not sure why it affected her so much to see him holding the baby she already considered hers.

"Looks like you have it under control." Michelle somehow got the words out around the lump in her throat.

He looked up and shrugged a bit.

She handed him the bottle. He fumbled at first as he situated it and the baby at the same time. Michelle reached over and positioned his hand at a better angle for fewer bubbles.

"Thanks." His breath whispered across her cheek.

Only inches separated their faces. Her heart skipped another beat, and she stepped back, pulling her fingers away from where they'd lingered on his. What was wrong with her today? This was *Greg*.

Grace sucked noisily, and both adults smiled down at her.

"Do women just automatically know what to do when a baby cries?"

"It's fairly easy to figure out when they're this age." Michelle took a step back. "They're either tired, gassy, hungry, or have a dirty diaper."

"I'm glad it wasn't the last one." Greg wrinkled his nose.

"She's not finished with the bottle yet."

His head jerked up, and she laughed. They sat side-by-side in the chairs again, each lost in their own thoughts, wrapped in comfortable silence.

"The memorial service for her parents is in Little Rock on Saturday. I think I should take her." Michelle picked at another spot on her cast that hadn't glued down smoothly.

"By yourself?" Greg shot her a sideways glance.

“Know of a better way?”

“I’ll go with you.”

“It’s not like I haven’t driven back and forth to Little Rock a hundred times over the last few years. I think I can handle it. Cedar Springs is less than two hours from there.”

“But you weren’t all bruised up and wearing a cast, not to mention having a baby to worry about. What if she starts crying while you’re on the highway?”

“Then, I’ll find a place to pull over so I can fix whatever’s wrong.” Michelle shrugged. “And the bruises and cast won’t slow me down that much.”

He studied her face.

“How bad does it really look? I’ve been avoiding looking at myself in detail in the mirror. Just enough of a glance to do a ponytail and make sure my teeth are brushed.”

“It’s pretty gruesome.” He tenderly reached over and traced her right eye. “It’s a shame it’s not Halloween. A lot of the kids would love to have that kind of face for their costume.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Bet they wouldn’t want the achiness that came with it. Who knew a seatbelt and airbag could hurt so much?”

“Better to have bruises and aches than not to have worn the seatbelt.”

She sighed. “Like Leah.”

“Sorry. I wasn’t even thinking about that.”

“No.” Michelle shook her head. “I just can’t get it off my mind. It’s definitely made me more careful about everyone buckling up.”

Grace finished her bottle. Michelle showed Greg how to prop her up and pat her back until the burp came—just like her mother had shown her only days before. They loaded Grace back into the carrier and stood.

“So, what time do I need to pick you up on Saturday?”

“Seriously, you don’t have to do this. You’ll be dead on your feet after being at the lock-in all night.”

“Then, I’ll let you drive if I get sleepy. I really don’t want you to go alone, Mickey. Please.”

Michelle huffed. “Fine.”

“You’re just afraid of how much I’ll find out since we’ll have all that time in the car to catch up.”

“Ha.” Michelle laughed. “Or not. Probably you have more to tell than I do.”

“You know things here don’t ever change.”

“I’ve missed small-town life.”

“It’s good to have you back.” He pulled her into another hug.

“It’s good to be back.” She leaned into his solid frame for an extra moment. Even though she’d been back in Cedar Springs for a couple of days, this was the first time she really felt like she was home.

“I’m preaching Sunday.” Greg helped her loop the diaper bag over her shoulder. “Les and Patty are headed to Oklahoma to see their granddaughter perform in a play at her college.”

“Wow. Was that a warning?” Michelle poked him in the arm.

“Ouch. You used to think it was cool when I preached.”

“I still do. You’re a good speaker. Even if you do sermonize a bit too much out of the pulpit sometimes.”

“Got to practice, ya know?”

“You’ll have a full weekend.” She shook her head.

“I’ll just sleep all day Monday. It’ll be fine.” He took the carrier from her. “I’ve got this.”

She followed him down the hallway, not quite sure what to make of the visit. Greg was still the same, but things hadn’t seemed the same between them. Maybe she was imagining things. Probably, it was just lack of sleep.

“I’ll see you Saturday.” Greg pulled her into one more hug after she situated everything in the back of the car.

“See you then.” As much as she’d been looking forward to having him back in her life, she was almost nervous about him joining her.