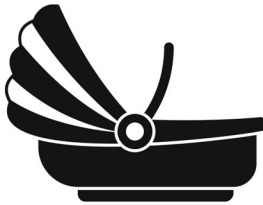


Saving Grace



Amy R. Anguish

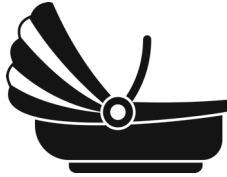


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CHAPTER 3



It took Greg and Michelle almost half an hour to get the base of Grace's car seat moved from Michelle's parents' vehicle to his SUV. Somehow, he had a feeling they were over-complicating it. Once they were all strapped in, Greg aimed the Jeep toward Little Rock. Michelle leaned her head back against the leather headrest. Greg had driven a Jeep since he got his license, but this one didn't rattle and shake like the one he'd driven in high school.

"Tired?" He gave her knee a squeeze, a jolt of awareness traveling through his fingers.

She blinked at him a moment before answering. Had she felt something, too?

"We got four hours of sleep last night." Michelle glanced in the back seat where Grace, at least, was getting more rest.

"That's more than I got. I snuck in a two-hour nap before showering and coming to get you."

"How do you look so alert after only two hours of sleep?"

Greg held up a travel mug and took a sip. The aroma of very strong coffee wafted through the car.

"That smells so good."

He grinned and pointed at the second cup-holder. It held a

similar mug. She quickly snatched it up and took a long drink of the bitter but caffeinated beverage. He chuckled.

"After all these years, I still know exactly what you want first thing in the morning."

"Can I help it my parents started me out early on coffee? It's just like mother's milk to me now." She took another swallow. "Besides, Mom's coffee maker hadn't finished before I had to meet you."

"I remember the first time I saw you drinking it in high school. I thought you'd lost your mind."

"I had to have something to keep me awake through first-period chemistry." She wrinkled her nose. "That subject was seriously boring."

"And you pulled an *A* anyway."

"Of course."

She reached for the cup again with her left hand and cringed as her cast bumped into the metal. With a huff, she blew her brown bangs up off her forehead, a motion he'd seen her do hundreds of times over the years when frustrated with her own forgetfulness. Switching to her right hand, she took another long swallow.

"How long do you have to wear a cast this time?"

"Maybe six weeks. Five, if it heals faster." She wiggled her finger at him. "And just for the record, this time wasn't because of something stupid I was doing. This was due to the airbag shoving my hand back at an unnatural angle."

He nodded. "Because you were probably holding the steering wheel wrong."

"Just because I hold a steering wheel differently than you do doesn't mean I hold it wrong. Just like holding a pencil. There's more than one right way to do it."

"Remember that time you jumped out of the swing at its highest point?"

"You thought I was dead." Michelle smiled.

“You were just lying there, and your face was white. I thought I’d have to break your Mama’s heart.”

“You almost did, anyway. You burst into the house, screaming that I wasn’t moving. She rushed out of there with soap still on her hands from washing the dishes.”

“She almost ran me over on her way to you.” He laughed.

“That cast was yellow.” She traced the edge of the pink one now on her arm.

“Everyone in class got to sign it, but you saved me the biggest spot.”

She nodded. “It made everyone think you were my boyfriend.”

Would he get to sign this one? She probably wouldn’t want signatures all over her arm now—too unprofessional. Too bad. He rather liked the idea of having his name on her arm for all to see. Like staking a claim. What would she think about that?

“How old were we? Seven?”

Her question pulled him back from those dangerous thoughts.

“Beginning of second grade.”

Michelle glanced toward the back seat again. Her parents had found a mirror to hang back there so they could see Grace’s face.

After a quick scan of his rearview, he motioned toward the dozing child. “Maybe you should join her.”

“Nah. I’m good for now.”

They were quiet for several miles. It wasn’t that far to the city from Cedar Springs. The service was at one that afternoon, but the caseworker wanted to meet with Michelle while she was in the area, so they headed down early.

“Have you talked to Mrs. Winters yet?” Greg asked.

“I’m supposed to meet with her first thing Monday morning.” Michelle picked at a spot on her black skirt. Emma Winters was the editor-in-chief of the *Cedar Springs Sun*, where Michelle would soon work. “I touched base with her when I got

back to town, to let her know about the wreck and my wrist. She agreed to meet with me at the originally planned time.”

“How on earth did you even hear about the job opening up?” Not that he was complaining about her being back. Just curious.

“You know, I interviewed there several years ago, right out of college. It was between me and Hugh Winters, Emma’s nephew. She hired him but wanted to hire me as well. She’d been waiting for Richard to retire so she could offer me the position. She got my information from my parents and called me. I accepted immediately.”

“Will you make the same as you did? I thought you were pretty settled in Little Rock.”

She shook her head. “I’ve always wanted to move back. I think it’s more fun to write when the people reading your column know you. It’s more personal.”

“You’ll be a huge asset to that paper. They definitely need some new blood in there.”

“Let’s not shed too much of my blood just yet.” Michelle nudged him with her elbow. “Hey, how’s your sister?”

“Darcy’s good. Phillip, too. Can you believe they’ve been married for six years now?”

“Really? Is she that much older than we are?”

“About four years.” Greg frowned at her.

Their families practically raised them all together.

“That’s right. She graduated the year before we started high school.”

“Yep.”

“No kids yet?”

Greg let out a breath. “They want kids, but it’s not working. They’ve gone through some treatments, but no luck yet.”

“I’m sorry.” Michelle tucked her feet under her. “I can’t even imagine how hard that would be.”

“It’s rough on the whole family.”

Grace fussed in the back seat, and Michelle reached around to tuck the pacifier back where it belonged, contorting her body,

considering the more convenient hand was in a cast. The seatbelt had to be cutting into her neck. Greg glanced at the rearview.

The baby didn't want to take it at first but seemed to decide it was better than nothing. Grace's eyelids drooped again as she worked the pacifier in her little bow-shaped mouth. Michelle ran a hand over the soft hair on top of Grace's head before turning back to the front.

She met Greg's eyes then looked away. Was she feeling guilty at all about what he'd just told her versus the situation she was in? Why should she be blessed with a sweet little girl like Grace when Darcy and Phillip wanted kids so desperately and couldn't have them? But for some reason, she was convinced God had something in mind when he brought Grace into her life.



DIANE MET them at a small café not far from where the service for Leah and John would take place. Michelle quickly introduced her to Greg and then let her hold Grace for a bit. She was rather proud that the little girl was so healthy and perfect-looking. It was almost like saying to the caseworker, *See? I can do this!*

The woman spread out several papers. "Let me give you a quick update, and I won't take up any more of your time. We've located the friend who Leah and John named as the executor of their wills. His name is Kevin Long. He's unmarried and quite happy staying that way, and he has no interest in taking in Grace. He says a bachelor pad is no place to raise a baby."

Michelle let out a small breath she'd been holding. One step in the right direction.

"Kevin grew up with John. You'll probably see him here today. I think several people are coming from their hometown, Greenbrier. They went to church up there for several years, but it was an older congregation, mostly people who would be grandparent figures and not ready to start over with a new child.

He said they hadn't made many new friends here in the last few weeks. And he doesn't know of any living family for either of them."

Michelle nodded. This all sounded more than promising.

"However, we were able to look at the wills more closely." Diane ran her hand over one of the sheets of paper.

Had they just changed direction? Michelle's heart skipped a beat, and she gripped the edge of her seat under the table.

"They have several stipulations in here as to what they want in the people who adopt their child. First and foremost, their friend Kevin has to approve. Evidently, he was like a brother to John, and John trusted him to make a good decision for their daughter should this situation ever occur."

Michelle made a mental note to be friendly to Kevin.

"Secondly, they want a married couple to adopt Grace. They want her to have both a mom and a dad and the kind of stability that comes from having married parents."

Was that the sound of her world crashing down around her ears? Michelle's heart might as well have stopped altogether.

"Thirdly, but most importantly, they want the adoptive parents to be Christians."

Michelle's heart was definitely still beating, but she was numb all over. She could meet two of the requirements. Could there be any way to get around the third? Surely, something like that wouldn't stand up in a court of law. There had to be a way to keep Grace with her.

"Until Kevin can approve of anyone, he is very happy with the situation we found for Grace. Your family is more than welcome to continue fostering her until something permanent can be arranged." Diane gathered her papers. "I just wanted to fill you in on what we found out, so you can make plans for the future. I know you'll be happy to see Grace placed in a loving family like Leah and John wanted for her."

Greg nudged Michelle. Diane stood, waiting for an acknowledgment. Michelle slowly rose to her feet and clasped

Diane's hand. Then, Diane was gone, and Michelle slumped back in the chair.

"What's wrong?" Greg asked.

"Didn't you hear her? I can't keep Grace."

"Mick."

"She laid it all out. According to their will, the guardian must be married." She waved her hand in the air as if she could summon a miracle. "I'm not ready for that. Even if I had someone in mind."

"Okay." Greg reached over and stilled her hand. "But you still have her for now. And you have no idea what could happen between now and when they get this all figured out. You might even change your mind."

She glared at him, and he held his palms up as if in surrender.

"I know. I know you don't think you will." He leaned forward. "But I also know you want what's best for Grace. Put yourself in Leah and John's shoes. If it were you, wouldn't you want the absolute best for your child, should you no longer be around? What Diane said is true. Married parents tend to have more stability."

"But it's not fair!" She knew she sounded petulant, but she couldn't help it. Every time it looked as though this was what God wanted in her life, another door shut in her face.

"Michelle, pray about it. Give it to God." Greg lowered his head a moment and then looked up again. "If it really is what He wants in your life, He'll work it out."

She took a breath, letting the fresh air sweep some of the anxiety away as she exhaled. "You're right."

"Set this aside for now." He stood and picked up the baby carrier. "You can think more about it after we get through the funeral."