

FIRST THINGS FIRST

SOME INHERIT MONEY. OTHERS INHERIT PURPOSE.



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A CLEAN COMING-OF-AGE NOVEL OF FAITH, FAMILY & PURPOSE

CHAPTER ONE: AMAZING GRACE

Andrew Burke sweated as he stared at the heavy oak door, contemplating every wrong choice he had. He had pulled some impressive capers in his day, notably the great Monopoly Money heist of '09. His father's entire stash of cash in his office safe had been swapped out for multi-colored bills, and his real property deeds for Boardwalk, Park Place and Pennsylvania Avenue, with a few houses and hotels thrown in for good measure.

Andy's father, Mr. Simon T. Burke, had eventually mitigated his grounded-for-life status to a couple months, but the triumph of his ingenuity and imagination would stand forever.

The last time he had stood before this door, he had made an appointment to beg to be allowed to get his driver's license before earning his final two merit badges for his Eagle Scout award. That meeting had not gone well and even now he could hear his father's voice in his mind, managing to sound both kind and condescending at the same time.

"You can't just be given things, son. There's nothing sweeter than earning something you really want."

Before his imagination could take him too far, the door swung open, revealing his father, grinning like he had good news. "Come in, Andy," he said, smoothing out the wrinkles in his dark suit. "Have a seat."

Andrew nodded and entered his father's study. Portraits of past church and U.S. Presidents lined the walls, set off by bookshelves full of leather-bound books that he doubted his father had ever read. An armchair stood before his father's expansive desk, which Andrew knew was not as comfortable as it looked. Andrew sat and his father's own chair groaned under the man's extra girth.

"So, son, big day tomorrow. Can't believe you're already 18."

Andrew held his breath. "Yep," said Andrew pushing back stray hairs that had fallen over his eyes. "Excited to get rid of me?"

Simon slapped a hand against his stomach and laughed. "Not yet, buddy. You still need to graduate. Just because you're 18 doesn't mean—"

"Yeah, I get it, dad. And I'm planning on it. So why did you call me here? Did I do something wrong?"

Straightening up in his chair, his dad put on his most businesslike expression. "Right to the point then. That's always been one of your good qualities, son." He cleared his throat again and locked eyes with his son. "Andrew, I've called you in to discuss your inheritance."

Andy's heart quickened. He didn't know exactly how much his father was worth, but any chunk of it would make all his friends jealous.

"Where do I sign?" Andy asked with a laugh. "You should pull out one of those fancy pens you have."

His dad shook his head, though his expression softened. "It's not going to be that simple. You know what I always say—"

"Yep."

Wrinkling his forehead, Simon leaned across the desk. "Then what is it?"

Andy sighed, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "You've got to learn it and earn it."

"Right," Simon said, one hand slapping the desk. "It seems like it finally sunk in. Good for you."

Andy scooted his chair closer to the desk. "I turned in the paperwork for my Eagle Scout earlier today. Shouldn't that count for something?"

Simon raised both eyebrows. "Cutting it a little short there, aren't you? Waiting until the very last day in 18 years only proves to me that you've mastered the art of procrastination."

"I got it done, didn't I? What more do you want?"

Simon raised a hand "Don't get me wrong, son. I'll talk to Uncle Fergus and ask him to drive you to the DMV after school. You can take the tests there and get your license in no time."

Andy sat back in his chair, tapping an angry rhythm against the armrests. The thought of not having to be driven around by Uncle Fergus anymore was a peace offering in itself. "Thanks," he muttered. "But what about my inheritance? What do I have to do? Become a Scoutmaster?"

Shaking his head, Simon opened one of his desk drawers and withdrew a well-worn copy of The Book of Mormon. Thumbing through the pages, he selected a section and turned the book towards his son, indicating a highlighted verse. "Here, the brother of Jared went up to the mountain to talk to the Lord. He had a problem that he wanted the Lord to solve for him, but you know what? The Lord turned things around and gave him a surprising answer. Go ahead and read verse 23."

Andy accepted the book and studied the verse,

highlighted in faded green. Suddenly, the urge to roll his eyes returned in full force. "Dad, these are your mission scriptures. I can't read them."

"Of course you can. I don't mind."

"Dad, you went to Taiwan, remember? This is Chinese."

Simon's smile faded as he retracted the book. "Hard to forget those two years of my life. I guess I thought you might already have the gift of tongues now that your mission isn't so far off."

Andy's eyes got halfway up to rolling before he managed to slam them down again. "Very funny."

A few seconds later, he accepted his father's English Book of Mormon and turned to Ether, second chapter, 23rd verse and read in a slow monotone.

"And the Lord said unto the brother of Jared: What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels? For behold, ye cannot have windows, for they will be dashed in pieces; neither shall ye take fire with you, for ye shall not go by the light of fire."

Andy looked back at this father. "I don't know what building windows and making fires have to do with me. I told you, I'm already done with all that Boy Scout stuff."

"It's not that part as much as the first part—the question. You see, the brother of Jared came to the Lord with a problem and the Lord in turn asked him how he would solve the problem. Do you remember what happened next?"

Andy shrugged. "Flashlights?"

Simon chuckled. "Something like that. The brother of Jared thought everything out, presented the Lord with his plan, and the Lord honored it. He touched the clear stones with His finger and made those stones into, well, flashlights."

Leaning back in his chair, Andy closed the book. "Great. I still don't see what this has to do with me."

Simon bowed his head and rubbed his eyes. "Okay, I forgot how poorly the subtle approach works with teenagers. Andy, you know that your mother and I have done very well financially. We'd like to use part of your inheritance to send you to college and to start you up in whatever business you'd like. But before I can allow you to claim your inheritance, I need you to prove to me that you are responsible enough to handle it."

Andy shot up in his chair, "You're still not making any sense. What do you want me to do? Is this about me going on a mission? Because I'm still planning on that too."

Simon hesitated before answering. "Of course I hope you go on a mission, Andy. Nothing would make me prouder. But this is more than that. Just like the Lord asked the brother of Jared to figure out a plan, I'm asking you to come up with one."

"Like what?" Andy asked, his voice rising. "What more do you want? I did my Eagle project, didn't I? I've kept my grades up. What am I missing?"

Simon shook his head. "I can't tell you that son, but I will at least point you in one possible direction. A couple of weeks ago, I attended a parent's meeting about a small business competition at school. If you can manage to enter the contest and make a good showing for yourself, then I might consider that enough proof."

Andy rolled his eyes. He could picture his father sitting on the front row, raising his hand every time the teacher asked a question.

"You don't have to answer me tonight. It doesn't even have to be the business competition if you can come up with something better. Now I suggest you take some time to think about it, pray about it, and then let me know what you come up with."

Andy stood, pushing his chair back. "You mean, I'm not going to get anything unless I figure out your stupid test? I can't believe this."

Holding up both hands, Simon spoke over his son. "Andy, there's no one answer to this. I'm sure the Brother of Jared could have come up with many solutions to his barge problem, but he went with the stone one."

Andy turned to go, searching for the perfect parting retort. Before he could he settle on one, another sound cut through the night's stillness.

Bagpipes—playing the rousing strains of Amazing Grace. They both knew what that meant.

"Andy, go see who's at the door," Simon said. "You know how many verses Amazing Grace has, and I don't want to hear them all."

"Gladly."

Andy stormed from the office and took the stairs down two at a time, practically skipping the landing on his way to the entryway. As he had expected, he glimpsed Uncle Fergus with his full red beard and Scottish costume, playing away as if his life depended on volume.

"Uncle Fergus, I'm here, you can stop the Scottish doorbell routine." The pipes trailed off in mid-verse, sounding like the last pathetic groan of a dying beast. Andy grasped the door handle and shot a caustic look at Uncle Fergus. "You know, you are standing right there. Ever thought about opening it yourself?"

Uncle Fergus shook his head, a faint smile playing across his lips. "No sir," he said, his accent thick. "I am but a humble doorbell, and wouldn't want to do anything unbefitting of my position."

His uncle had lived with them as long as he could remember. Andy was never quite sure why he was so into

Scotland, other than having been named Fergus. He had always been a little out there, but most of the time, it was more on the funny side and less on the annoying side.

Andy opened the door and was surprised that it was someone he was actually pleased to see.

"Brother Oaks," he said. "I know I need to make up a few hours of class, but I didn't think Seminary teacher's made house calls."

Daniel Oaks was a short, yet stocky man with arms worthy of a heavyweight boxer. His close-cropped red hair, however, hinted at his actual past in the military.

Brother Oaks stepped into the doorway and Andy closed it. "We don't," he said, "I'm not here as your seminary teacher. Your dad said the chemicals in the pool are out of whack, so I said I'd come by and take a look. Want to lead the way?"

Eager to take his mind off things, Andy turned and motioned for Brother Oaks to follow him. "So, uh, Brother Oaks—"

"You can call me Daniel—at least when we're not at school."

"Uh, Daniel then. You do this often?"

Daniel shrugged. "Every now and then. No one knows it, but I got my degree in Chemistry during ROTC. Fifteen years in the army and I barely had to dust off that part of my brain. Figure I ought to use it now."

Andy led him through a set of French doors to the backyard, complete with a waterfall, a barbecue pit and a gazebo. In the center of everything lay his father's pride and joy: a swimming pool shaped like the state of Utah.

"Will it throw off your results if I dip my feet in?" Andy asked.

"Not unless you've got foot fungus. Be my guess."

Ignorant of any fungi, Andy removed his socks and shoes and dipped his feet into the deep end, not far from where

the city of St. George was labeled at the bottom of the pool. He splashed lazily as Daniel retrieved the necessary tools and chemicals from the nearby shed and set about his work.

"So," Daniel said. "I saw on the roster that your birthday's tomorrow. Got any special plans?"

Andy shrugged, not wanting to return to that subject.

"Not really. Everybody thinks because my dad is loaded that I'm getting this incredible birthday party with fireworks and a marching band. What's worse, is that people are already placing bets on what kind of car he's going to surprise me with tomorrow."

Daniel glanced at the sky and then back into the pool.

"Hm, I take your dad as a man who appreciates quality German engineering. If I were a betting man, I'd go with a new Beamer."

Andy watched his feet in the water. "That's the problem—no one is going to win the bet because he's not going to get me a car! We'll have a nice family dinner and I'll get a nice tie or something."

Daniel chuckled, pouring some chemicals in the other end of the pool. "That's them all right. Old habits die hard, I guess. I know they didn't always used to be so well off."

Daniel set down his tools and looked at Andy. "So what's next? You finish up school and you get to be your own man. Do you know what you want to do?"

Andy shrugged. "I don't know. For a long time, I counted on getting a bunch of money when I became an adult. I don't really have a Plan B. I could go to college, I guess. He'd probably still make me take out student loans."

Took a seat next to Andy, keeping his feet out of the water. "Your dad's no Scrooge. I'm sure he's trying to teach you a lesson. He needs to see that you have a plan first before he lets you have the money. You don't give a match to a two-

year old, right?"

Andy's head turned around. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean," Daniel said. "Fire is a great thing in the hands of someone who is ready for it. Give it to the wrong person, though, and you burn the house down."

Andy shook his head. "I thought you weren't here as my Seminary teacher."

Daniel rubbed his hands and stood. "I guess not. But I do have one more lesson before I go."

Andy didn't turn. "Yeah? Don't tell me it's one of your famous object lessons."

"Just listen," Daniel said. "Someone once taught me something about having a plan for your life—if you don't make one, things sneak up on you and catch you unprepared. In the scriptures they talk about the Second Coming arriving like 'a thief in the night'. Do you know what that's like?"

Andy shook his head. "No, the security system is pretty high—"

Daniel pushed him into the pool. "Like that."

Spluttering and flailing, Andy clung to the side. "What was that for?" he cried. "I'm still in my clothes!"

Daniel offered a hand and helped Andy out of the water. At the last second, Andy reversed the pull, trying to bring Daniel into the water after him. To Andy's surprise, Daniel gave a huge tug and lifted him completely out of the water and onto his feet.

"I don't swim anymore," Daniel said. "But thanks for the offer."

"Good to know," Andy said through chattering teeth.

Daniel found him a towel and Andy dried his dripping clothes as best he could. When he was as dry as he was

going to get, he threw the towel on the ground and turned to go. "You're lucky I didn't have my phone in my pocket. I've still got another year before I can upgrade."

"That would have been an expensive object lesson," Daniel said with a tight smile. "I'm sorry it was unpleasant, but give some thought to what I was trying to say."

With a noncommittal shrug, Andy continued towards the house and a hot shower, during which he would plan something crazy to do with the last few hours of his childhood.

THE CHALLENGE HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN

What will Andy put first?

Chapter One gives Andy a challenge: prove that he is ready for the future he wants. Continue through one semester of business competition, family expectations, faith, friendship, humor, and hard choices - and discover what his inheritance is really worth.



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"You've got to learn it and earn it."

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