

*AMAZING GRACE TRUCKING COMPANY SERIES*  
*Book 2: KEEPING FAITH*

CHAPTER ONE

Celebration

*I can barely stand another minute of not being home with my boys, sleeping in my own bed, going to church with my family on Sunday morning . . .*

Faith Blessing-Walker, just released from the rehab center where she'd spent the last three months recovering from a knife attack, was so excited to get home her whole body tingled.

As Hope, her sister, made the turn into the circular drive that led to the front of the old farmhouse, Faith smiled from ear to ear to see her mother's roses now colorful and healthy when they'd been all but dead a few months back. *Home.*

Now, sitting in her wheelchair, she hoped her sister wouldn't dump her in the freshly mulched garden at the foot of the new ramp that led to the front porch. *Who'd painted it Key West Pink?*

"Hold on tight, Faith!" Hope said with a laugh.

"Hey!" Faith yelled, flapping her arms. "Take it easy. You almost pushed me out of this thing."

"Relax, honey. Your big sister is in control here. I've got you covered—from all angles."

Safely on the porch, Faith almost pinched herself to be sure it was real. Home! She was finally back home to the house where she was born and raised. Where her sons waited for her. She stretched to turn the key in the front door and pushed it open to face a gang of friends and family members.

"Welcome home, Faith!" they bellowed in unison.

Faith gazed around the room. *Oh, my goodness.* Tears filled her eyes as she grabbed Hope's arm. "This is...so...I'm so happy to be home," she sobbed.

Her guests rushed to hug and kiss her. Her boys stood to the side with broad smiles on their faces. Of course, they'd known all about this little surprise, she was sure. She winked at them through her tears.

Hope leaned down to hug her. "Everyone wanted to welcome you home. Probably half the town of Merciful is here. Not everyone got to visit you in Gainesville, so here they are. They want you to know they care."

"I wish Grace were here. Does she know I'm home?"

Hope nodded. "She'd have been here if she could, but even a Colonel doesn't tell the Army what to do. She'll be back as soon as she can."

Faith inclined her head, then wheeled away from Hope and into the crowded dining room.

Hope wiped a tear from her eye and walked into the kitchen. She leaned on the granite countertop island to catch her breath, but the memories flooded back. She caught her breath.

"No tears here today." Margaret Ann Glenmoore, Hope's best friend, marched into the kitchen. "Why are you crying today of all days?" She reached for the tissue box on the counter and pushed it toward Hope.

Hope wiped her face, then turned to finish replenishing the vegetable platter. "It's just that I still struggle with what she's had to suffer because of me."

Margaret hugged her friend. "No, she suffered because of a lunatic with a knife. Something I learned in my years as a cop is that the bad guys do the bad stuff, and we aren't responsible for that. Now, that day is in the past. Leave it there. The Lord and the Law have already dealt with all that. We only have happy days, now."

She swept the platter into her ample arms and lifted her chin toward the dining room. "Come on! It's time for eating, drinking, and some merrymaking." And so, Margaret Ann and Hope, side by side with arms full, pushed through the opening into the dining room.

"There you two are." Faith motioned for Hope and Margaret Ann to adjust something on her wheelchair. "May I have everyone's attention please?" Faith yelled. "I have something important to share."

On either side of her, Hope and Margaret Ann locked the chair, lifted the footrests out of the way, and took a step to the side.

"One. Two...three," they counted – and Faith stood on her own. Cheers filled the room.

A smile took over her face. "Thanks. It's been a long road to recovery and three grueling months in rehab, but I'm up on my feet. Now watch this."

She took one step forward. More cheers, applause, and whistles engulfed the room. "In a few months, I'll be as good as new," she declared.

Hope patted her sister's shoulder. "She sure will be. Gracious, we'll have her driving a rig real soon."

Unassisted, Faith dropped back into her wheelchair, fumbled to release the locks, and then rolled to the buffet table. "Time to party!" she yelled.

Hope sauntered to her beau, Eddie Highspring, and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Need any help?" she whispered.

Eddie shook his head and finished filling the remaining champagne flutes. “There you are.” He placed the empty bottle down and gently placed a kiss on her forehead. “Time to toast.” Eddie released her. “Let’s pass out the champagne.”

They handed every adult a glass. She held her glass high, blinking back tears furiously, and said, “To my little sister, Faith. Welcome back!” She squeezed Faith’s hand. “God Bless You!”

“Amen,” echoed through the house as glasses clinked and chimed.

While Faith sipped her champagne, her twin boys, Jeremiah, and Isiah, bent down and hugged her.

“How are you feeling?” Jeremiah asked.

“Much better now that I’m home with the two of you.” She ran her hand across their heads and kissed their cheeks. “Thanks for visiting me so much. Aunt Hope tells me you were a great help to her around here while I was laid up.”

“Yeah. We helped out as much as we could,” Isiah grinned. “Aunt Hope is a bit stricter than you, Mom.”

“Oh, you don’t have to tell me about your Aunt Hope being strict with teenagers. When your Aunt Grace and I were in high school, she was on us like bees on honeysuckle.”

Hope interrupted Faith’s conversation with her sons. “Just as I thought,” she said, sniffing the boys’ champagne flutes. “Neither of you is twenty-one, and no alcohol is served to minors in this house.” She replaced the champagne flutes in their hands with new ones. “Here, these have sparkling cider in them.”

The boys’ faces turned pink. “Gee, thanks, Aunt Hope,” they moaned in unison.

Hope tugged Isiah’s ears. “You’re most welcome. No nephews of mine will be getting into any trouble under my watch.”

Faith giggled. “You go, girl. It seems like old times at the Blessing household.” She wheeled back to the buffet table and made herself a plate. A gentle hand squeezed her shoulder.

“Hello, Faith.”

Her stomach felt like she’d just hatched butterflies there. *Oh my, I’d know that voice anywhere.* Faith looked up and smiled. “Scott.” She grabbed his hand. “How good of you to come today.”

Scott Byrnes, the first EMT on the scene to rescue Faith at the shop, had made it a point to keep checking on her ever since. “I wouldn’t have missed this celebration.” He knelt beside her. “I’m so glad you’re home. You look wonderful.”

“Thanks,” Faith said, noticing the heat in her face that would turn her beet red in a second. “A little make-up works wonders.”

“You don’t need any make-up. You’re a natural beauty.”

“Honey, makeup is every woman’s secret.” She patted her cheeks. “A little dab here and there covers a multitude of sins.” And maybe he won’t notice that I blush. Gads.

“No sins on this face,” Scott teased as he tweaked her cheek. “Perhaps a dab here and there would cover these freckles,” he said, pointing to his own face.

Faith stared at him. “I never really thanked you properly for saving my life, Scott Byrnes.” She held his face in her hands and brushed his lips with hers. “Thanks,” she whispered.

“That’s what EMT’s do.” Scott held her hands. “Saving you was doubly rewarding since you were a beautiful damsel in distress to boot.”

“So, if I’d been ugly, you wouldn’t have tried as hard?” she asked with a wink, freeing her hands to steady the meal that balanced on her lap.

“No, of course not. That’s not what I meant.” He glanced across the room and then met her gaze and held it. “I can think of a way you could properly thank me.”

Faith picked up a piece of broccoli from her plate and nibbled on it. “How?”

“Go out with me. Like, on a date.”

*Oh, no.* Faith frowned. “Go out? Where? I can’t get around much, yet.” She fanned her arms out over the wheelchair.

Scott grinned. “You would be out with an EMT. I can handle a wheelchair, right? Second, you won’t be in that chair forever. And third, a girl must eat. You have to build up your strength again. So. How about dinner Friday night?”

*Oh my, Lord. Breathe. It’s just dinner, right?* She glanced around the room though she had no idea what she was looking for: another sigh and a forced smile. *I’m divorced, not dead—though it’s been a long while....*

“Okay, sure. Why not?” She nodded. “Yes, I’d love to go to dinner on Friday. I’ll need a break from the house and PT by then, I’m sure.”

“Good! It’s a date then.” Scott checked his watch. “I’m on call and have to put in a few hours at the squad, so I’ve got to get going. If you need a ride to your physical therapy sessions or doctor appointments, just give me a call. If I’m not on duty, I can take you or arrange the Medi-Bus service for you.”

“I might take you up on the ride, we’ll see. This week Hope, Eddie, and Margaret Ann have adjusted their schedules so they can take me. Hope and Eddie are teaching my boys to drive, so before long, they can take me if I’m not independent by that time.” She looked up. “Lord, help me when they’re driving.”

“He will. Believe me. Well, duty calls.” Scott started toward the tall parlor doors. “Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Of course, you can.” She looked around for a place to park her plate. “Let me show you out.” Faith rolled to a tray table and slid her food beside the empty glasses sitting there. “Oh, wait – don’t you want some dinner to take with you? There’s plenty.”

He shook his head. “I’m fine, don’t worry. And you eat now – I know where the door is.” He looked at her for a long moment. “Goodbye, Faith. Take care.” He leaned over and kissed her.

She returned the kiss and held him for a moment. “Thank you for everything, Scott. I’m excited about dinner on Friday night.”

“Me too.”

She wheeled the chair beside him anyway. The front door chimed just as Scott opened it. “Registered letter for Hope Blessing,” the mailman said.

“I’m her sister. I’ll sign it.” Faith scribbled her signature on the line and handed the board back to the postman. He tore off the green receipt and gave her the letter.

Scott waved to her, then followed the postman down the front steps. “Back to the party,” she mumbled and wheeled back to the dining room area and looked around.

“Eddie, where’s Hope?”

Eddie pointed toward the kitchen, and Faith wheeled herself through the large opening. Hope and Margaret Ann stood at the long black granite island, placing pastries on platters.

“Hey, Sis, a registered letter came for you. Here you go.” Faith held it out. Just a year ago, registered letters meant they were one step short of bankruptcy, but not so now.

Hope placed a mini cream puff on the tray and wiped her hands with the kitchen towel. “Oh, gracious. Not another bill collector, I hope. I thought we were past the days of registered letters.”

“Well, open it up and see what’s up,” Margaret Ann said. “I’ll finish here.”

Hope removed her apron, wiped her hands, and left the kitchen, letter in hand. She tapped Eddie on the shoulder – a shoulder she knew now she could lean on. “Come to the office with me,” she whispered.

Eddie grinned. “My pleasure.”