

Amazing Grace Book Excerpt

Jealousy threaded its way to Grace Arbon's heart. Alone at her table, she yanked pink petals from the bouquet she'd carried at her best friend's wedding and watched countless couples waltz past her table. Along a far wall, Helen stood with her new husband, Steve, and greeted their guests. The bride looked radiant in her beautiful bead-trimmed gown.

The passing dancers turned to a blur through Grace's unshed tears, but not before she saw the best man spin by with his wife. He had escorted Grace down the aisle and actually flirted with her. Finding out he was married had been a shock. Her heart ached as she looked at the sea of happy faces on the dance floor. Why was she always the single one, the odd woman out?

"Probably because you can't find anyone to please Daddy," she mumbled and shredded more blossoms onto the linen tablecloth. She ceased tapping her toes to the melody and blotted her eyes. The bride looked over and waved. Grace smiled and raised her glass in toast to her best friend's newfound happiness, hoping it would only be a short time until she found her own, despite her father's good intentions.

He'd distorted her perception of eligible young men--convinced her they were only interested in her family name, not the person attached to it. As long as she remained at home, he'd always dictate her life. Now that she'd completed her degree, she had to find a job and break free of his smothering control.

Someone touched her shoulder, and she jumped.

"May I have this dance?"

Grace struggled for a breath. Sparkling azure eyes fixed on her. For a moment, she remained speechless. Who was this Adonis, with dark, wavy hair framing a tanned face? She released a pent-up breath. "Y-yes, I'd love to."

She immediately felt stupid. Her nemesis, Karlie Clay, stood giggling in the background. Clearly, this was a set-up. Karlie had vied for the Maid of Honor position and had been jealous when Helen selected Grace. Her attempt to get even by forcing someone to ask her poor, pathetic friend to dance was painfully obvious.

The handsome stranger pulled Grace to her feet and almost into his arms. She felt awkward and stepped back, but smiled up at him. When he offered his hand, she took it and walked with him onto the dance floor. Her heart thudded, although she wanted to kill Karlie.

Diminutive in comparison to him, Grace stretched to rest a hand on his shoulder. Beneath the stark whiteness of his dress shirt and dark suit coat, corded muscles twitched as he tightened his arm around her. His bicep strained against the sleeve encasing it. She

longed to let her hand drift down to touch it, but bit her lip and restrained herself. His good looks and muscular frame made her stomach flutter.

So occupied with his appearance, she wondered how her feet followed his lead. The most handsome man there had asked her to dance and shocked her into silence. She'd expected to be invited, but by those more in awe of her father's position. She'd never seen this person before.

As he waltzed her around the room, the envying stares of other women practically burned through Grace. Maybe she should pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming. It had to be true, though. Why else would her knees feel like jelly? Should she speak? Could she?

The warmth of their joined hands traveled down her arm and spread throughout her body. She rested her cheek against his rock-hard chest while she reveled in her good fortune. In only a split second, the tone of the evening changed for her.

"What's your name?" His throaty voice invaded her reverie.

She tilted her chin upward. "Gr-Grace." Damn that nervous stutter. What was it about him that made it hard to speak? She nibbled at her bottom lip.

"That's a pretty name. Are you a friend of the bride or the groom?"

Grace took a breath. "Bride. Helen and I went to college together."

"Steve and I were in the Army together. By the way, my name is Blake Hastings." His warm breath--obviously sweetened by a recent mint--caressed her face.

Finally, she relaxed in his embrace. "Very nice to meet you." Yes, verra verra nice indeed.

Her mind swam with visions of him in uniform--and out. She stumbled and lost the beat. Worse, she stepped firmly on his foot. She backed away and covered her mouth. "I'm so sorry. I guess I'm a little rusty."

He laughed. Just like his body, the sound rippled with muscle. "It's all right. I walk on the bottom of 'em." He pulled her back into his arms.

Before they resumed their dance, the song ended. With his obligatory duty done, she feared he would move on. She struggled to think of something to say. "Would you ... maybe like to get a glass of champagne and go outside for some fresh air?"

Now, you've done it! Most men hate aggressive women.

She wished she could rewind the last minute and take back the invitation. She waited for his rejection in awkward silence.

"Sounds like a great idea." He smiled, flashing teeth whiter than pearls.

She swallowed her surprise and noticed her father across the room. He cast a look of disapproval in her direction--the trademark frown that furrowed his brow. Why he felt the need to handpick any man she spent time with was beyond her. Couldn't he trust her judgment one time?

Grace pretended not to notice. She usually listened to his ranting but followed her heart. Maintaining a pretense as an obedient daughter kept the peace. If her parents' marriage was supposed to serve as an example of love.... She shuddered.

While she walked with Blake toward the French doors, a waiter balancing a tray of crystal champagne-filled glasses passed them. Blake reached out, snagged two and handed one to her. "That was good timing, don't you think?" His smile dimpled his cheeks.

Grace hadn't yet taken a drink of the bubbly but felt all effervescent inside. She swallowed hard. "Yes, it was. We didn't even have to change direction to get our drinks." She stifled a groan at her attempt at witty banter. The relaxing feeling she sought eluded her.

They stepped outside onto a large patio decorated with festive lights. Candles flickered atop a few cloth-covered tables and created the perfect romantic setting. The smell of fresh-cut grass hung in the air. Crickets chirped somewhere in the distance. At the noticeable temperature change, a shiver passed through her. The night air cooled cheeks she knew must be flushed from excitement and dotted her exposed shoulders and arms with goose bumps. But the chill lasted only a moment, driven away by an adrenalin rush.

She took a seat on a nearby bench. Blake followed. Already his good looks had stunned her, and now he stood so near she found it hard to breathe.