



*Forgiven by Grace*

*by*

*Tabitha Gibson*

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Cover Art by: Stone Heart Creative

Dedicated to all those that are in need of forgiveness and second chances. Keep the faith!

“You want me to do what?”

“You aren’t deaf, Mr. Austin. You’re dead.”

Jack Austin cringed. He couldn’t be dead. He just couldn’t! And he surely couldn’t do what this crazy man was asking. It was unthinkable!

“You must be joking, right?” Jack put his hands behind his back and crossed his fingers, said a prayer and for once, meant it. Other than that prayer he said when he was betting on that pony in the fifth. Oh and there was that time he was at the roulette wheel over the Christmas holiday.

Then there was that hooker he met during his business trip...

“We angels aren’t exactly known for our senses of humor.”

Jack shifted a quirky gaze at the ethereal being, trying to draw even the slightest smile with no luck. “Right,” he said with a very deep sigh. Jack looked past him to the gates. So close, yet so very, very far.

“Ready?”

Jack held up his hands. “Wait, please.” Fumbling around with his pockets, he pulled out a handkerchief and mopped at his sweaty brow. His mind raced at top speed trying to find a way to get out of this mess without burning in eternal hell. Anything but what he was being asked to do.

“Isn’t there any other way?” Jack’s voice gave an uncanny squeak.

“Sure. South. Way south.”

Jack glared at his companion. "I thought you said you angels didn't joke."

"I'm not joking," the angel replied with a completely straight face and lifted his hand toward Jack.

"Hey, hey, hey. Wait. Please," Jack said quickly and looked around. "Do I really have to?"

"Yes, Mr. Austin. If you want to get into Heaven, you have to be forgiven by Grace."

"But, she hates me."

"With good reason, so I've been told. But that's your problem. Now, are you ready?"

Jack nodded and clinched his eyes closed tightly. A moment later, a hand tapped his shoulder. He opened his eyes and found himself standing in a living room he recognized all too well. Nothing had changed since he had last been here. She was a creature of comfort. Worn out furniture, a faded afghan draped over the back of the sofa and the scent of lemon filled the air. This was her comfort zone.

This was his nightmare.

He sighed once again.

"Good luck," the angel said and faded away quietly.

"WAIT!" Jack called out but he found himself alone. "Great, this is just great," he muttered and wandered around her abode.

Memories flooded Jack's mind, some good, some not so good. In the kitchen, he found her rose sugar bowl that she had glued back together after he threw it against the wall after a fight. The crack stood out as an angry reminder at how he crushed her emotions that day, bringing with it a searing pain to his chest. As much as he tried to avoid it, he recalled how upset

she had been that he had broken the sugar bowl. It had been a wedding gift and meant a lot more to her than it had him. He shook off the memory and quickly moved into another room.

In the bedroom, he found her pink fuzzy slippers next to the bed and gave a little smile in spite of himself. She never wandered around the house in the dark without those ratty things on. The thought of stepping on a spider or some other creepy crawler always freaked her out. And he made fun of her for it. More pain invaded him. And it really was starting to hurt.

*Wait a minute*, he thought and frowned. Each memory that had brought her pain in the past brought him pain in the present. That angel knew this was going to happen. The little winged jerk did have a sense of humor.

The opening of the front door drew his attention. Ok, begging time. What would he say to get her to say those all important words. Would she even listen to him? Wait.

He was dead. How the hell would she even hear him let alone listen to him? He wasn't going south to burn in eternal hell. He was IN hell. He cursed the angel again, took a deep breath and walked back out into the living room.

Her back was to him, but he recognized her instantly. Long, brown hair was tied back into a loose ponytail, hidden under a crocheted shawl. Over her shoulder was a familiar sight: a bright yellow backpack that she had carried since he knew her. It had a few more stains and one of the straps was now tied together with bright yellow yarn, but he knew it was the same bag.

The same, ugly bag.

“God, I can't believe you still have that horrid bag,” he remarked and was rewarded with what felt like a rabbit punch to his gut.

She stopped what she had been doing, dropped the bag to the floor and stood straight up, then turned around and glared daggers directly at him. “And I can’t believe that my ex-husband has the nerve to come haunt me the day after his funeral.”

Jack tried to avoid tripping over the chair but fell through it instead. Holy Christ, she *could* see him!

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Grace sighed deeply and stepped through his body to go into the kitchen. She started the tea kettle, took out her favorite large mug and turned to get the tea bags from the pantry.

“You... you can see me? Hear me?”

Grace wanted to slap him so badly. For being a ghost in her home. For doubting her all these years when she told him she could speak to the spirits of the dead.

For dying.

“I’d offer you a drink but I don’t feel like cleaning up the puddle since it would just pour right through you,” she said, ignoring his stammering question. Instead, she got a spearmint tea bag out, hoping it would help her rapidly knotting stomach.

She watched Jack rise from the floor only to collapse on the couch. He was still stunned. Inwardly she was smirking that for once, she made him speechless. Not exactly a feat Grace had accomplished often during their years together, but when she did, she certainly gave herself a pat on the back. Him being dead wasn’t going to change that. She gave herself the few minutes it took for the kettle to whistle to be smug before finishing constructing her tea and returning to the living room.

“Why are you here, Jack?”

“You can... see me?”

She cursed his non-corporeal ass and for that reason, her inability to knock some sense into him. Literally.

Instead, she snapped her fingers in front of his face. “Jack? Jack? Snap out of it.”

Jack blinked several times before focusing on her. She thought he still looked dazed but at least he was a little more coherent and not babbling that she could see him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, simply.

Grace sat back confused. “For what?”

“Not believing you. That you spoke to the dead.” Jack lowered his head. “Guess I can’t deny it now that I’m one of them,” he remarked sounding so final.

Grace bit her lower lip and felt a pang of sorrow for him. The truth always hurt. For him, it looked like it reached up and slapped him hard. She wanted to reach out to comfort him, but then remembered he was a ghost and she couldn’t. At least physically. Then she recalled their tumultuous life together and her anger returned.

“Ok, so you’re sorry. Anything else?”

“I need your forgiveness to get into Heaven.”

Grace was stunned. Talk about being honest right up front. Guess death was really making him change his ways. Too bad he wasn’t still alive for it to really make a difference.

“Jack, I don’t know what to tell you. You really,” she began, and stopped. Emotions welled up from deep within, twisting her insides hard. Damn him. Why this? Why now? She had spent the last year working on not just getting over him, but getting on with her life. Maybe if she hadn’t told him of her gift, their marriage would have lasted longer. He told her she was crazy and to never tell any of their friends. He didn’t want to be embarrassed by his crazy wife.

That had been the beginning of the end of their relationship. Maybe they never really had one, or at least what she felt on her end versus what he didn't feel on his end. Then why did he marry her?

She dug her nails into her palms and hardened herself as much as she could to prevent the hot tears from rolling down her cheeks. Her eyes burned with the effort. She shifts a blurry gaze at Jack who was doubled over, clutching his stomach.

“What's wrong with you?” She asked, trying to sound nonchalant but felt like she failed miserably.

“Ever hear the phrase, I feel your pain?”

Grace nodded then started to giggle, eventually letting the giggle bubble into a full blown laughter.

Jack sighed uncharacteristically and returned her nod.

“Good, serves you right.”

He nodded again, surprising her by agreeing with her. Would wonders never cease? First he admits that she can talk to ghosts, not that he had any choice in that matter. Then he asks for her forgiveness, but even that seemed forced. He was trying to get through those pearly gates. And now agreeing with her? Maybe death really did become him. Maybe his mortality after life really did have a stronger affect on him than she thought, as hard as she found it to believe.

Not a chance. He was, after all, Jack Austin – Golden boy.

Her heart tugged at her anyway. What was one more chance? She had to know.

“Jack, you really have some nerve coming here and asking for my forgiveness. It wasn't important in life. Why now?”

“Well, hell doesn't sound very appealing.”

Grace shook her head and took a sip of the rapidly cooling tea.

“Fine, I forgive you. Now please just go.”

But of course he didn't. As usual, he stayed behind to continue the fight. Taking a slow drink, she shifted her gaze up to his face but she didn't find the same, typical sneer she usually had. Instead, she found him to be poignant and serene.

“But you don't really, do you?”

His remark surprised her. She rose and went into the kitchen for more tea without answering him. She hated to tell him, once again, that he was right. She didn't really forgive him. He had hurt her so badly during their marriage and worse during the divorce. It had taken her a long time to get back to feeling normal, worthy of herself and tempting fate to date again. Now he was back again and she felt herself slipping back into the deep depression from a year ago. Hell no she wouldn't! She wouldn't go back to that place again or forgive him no matter what her heart was arguing with her to do.

Grace set her cup down hard and walked purposefully back to the living room to tell him exactly what she thought but the scene she walked into stopped her in her tracks.

One of her regular spirit visitors, a shy little boy named Henry was hiding behind her chair, playing peek-a-boo with Jack, who was crouched behind the couch.

Unbelievable.

“Hi Henry,” Grace said quietly and waved to the little boy. He grinned at her and dashed back into the wall he normally came out of. She smiled and looked back to Jack who was, to her surprise, laughing still at the little boy's antics.

“Great kid,” he said and returned to the couch.

“Yeah. His grandmother lives next door. He’s waiting for her time before he moves on so he can go with her.” She smiled and sat down next to Jack. “I, uh, read about your foundation for kids with cancer. I was very impressed.”

“Having lost my brother when I was young, I told myself one day I’d try to fix other kids like him. I thought that meant I’d become a doctor but that didn’t work out,” he said with a sheepish smile.

“Well, you still did something,” Grace admitted with grudging admiration.

“Yeah, throw money at people to get what I want,” he said quietly, reminding her of what she said during one of their arguments that lead up to their break up.

“Oh, Jack. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that,” she said quickly, feeling tears sting her eyes. “Donations are just as important as the people that do research, the doctors that perform the miracles to the dedicated nurses and therapy folks that help people get their lives back.”

Jack looked up to her and she nodded as to confirm what she was saying. A soft glow started to surround him then. Grace sat back and took a deep breath and realized what was happening. She really was his key to get into Heaven.

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Jack felt a calmness drift over his body at her words, her smile. What had he done, letting her go like he did? Obviously he wasn’t too bright despite his two degrees from the best schools that money could buy.

Money. That was all that life had meant to him. Money got him everything he had ever wanted. Everything except true love. He had that for free from her and he threw it away. He didn’t deserve her forgiveness or a place in Heaven, but if he could have just one, it would be those three special words from her.

“Gracie?”

“Yeah?”

He smiled at how natural her nick name flowed from him and her reply. Damn, why did he have to die to learn his lesson? Whatever happened to live and learn?

“I’m really sorry for how things ended with us. For how I treated you. I should have done more to make our marriage work.”

She shook her head. “We both could have…” she began but he cut her off.

“No, you did nothing wrong. Well, except marrying me.” Pain filled Jack again, but it felt different this time. This wasn’t the pain of a woman scorned or memories of the past. This was from him, deep within soul. He didn’t try to squelch it. He deserved it. And if she felt any more pain from the memories brought forth from this visit, he willed it all to come to him. She had been through enough.

“Actually, our time together was some of the best times of my life,” she admitted, surprising him.

“Yeah?”

She nodded and rewarded him with a smile. “Yeah.”

They sat for a while in a serene silence. They didn’t need to talk right now. Just enjoy each other company while they had the chance. He would be going soon enough, for good this time. No sneaking back and sitting in his car around the corner to check on her. No unnecessary trips to her library, thumbing through books he never read or would read just to catch a glimpse of her bright smile or hear her infectious laughter. No more stops at the tiny ice cream parlor to eat a double dipped, mint chocolate chip with a sugar cone. His chance at love had come and gone.

But hers hadn't. Not yet.

"It's ok, Grace," he said, breaking the silence. "It's ok to love again. Not everyone is a big jerk like me."

"Well I hope there's no one else like you," she said with a mischievous grin. He chuckled.

"And I suspect that your evening tonight with Justin will be the start of a new beginning for you."

"How do you know about Justin?"

"I've kept a few tabs on you over the years."

Jack watched several emotions dance across her face before she stopped on surprise. "It was you! You were the mysterious benefactor two years ago that kept the library going with that huge donation of rare books and funds."

Jack felt his heart tighten again but this time, in joy. He hadn't meant for her to ever find out. She didn't know that the library of his boyhood kept him going after his brother's death. Years later, a fire had destroyed it. He had it rebuilt after it burned down when he was an adult and dedicated it to his brother.

Now, when the library she worked at was in danger of closing, he stepped in to make sure it would never happen. That was where they had first met and where he had experienced his first taste of real love.

Guess he was more sentimental than he thought.

Jack rose and gave a smile to Grace. "I better get going. You have a life to get back to, and I have a death to, uh, get back to."

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

“I want to thank you, for enriching my life like you have,” she said, her voice cracking with emotion. “And I...” she started, but Jack held up his hand, halting words that he suspected she was going to say that he wanted to hear.

“When I came here, I needed your forgiveness, Grace. And as much as I don’t deserve it, I’d rather earn it.”

Grace paused and wiped the tears that spilled from her eyes. There was still love there and not just from her. It was from his heart.

“You just did,” she whispered, emotion shook in her voice. “You just did.”

Jack nodded quietly to her and closed his eyes.

A moment later, a tap on his shoulder brought him out of his reverie. Jack was back at the gates and the angel had returned, looking softer than when he and Jack first met.

“Are you ready?”

“Ready?” Jack repeated, sure that he was headed south. Deservedly so.

“No, Mr. Austin, you aren’t going to hell. You earned her forgiveness and your wings.”

Relief washed over Jack. He would go to Heaven. “No.”

“No?” The angel looked confused.

“I want to see her live her happily ever after. I have to.”

“She will have a happily ever after, Jack. I promise you that. A long, healthy life.”

Jack smiled that the angel had called him by his first name. And though he believed him, he just had to see for himself. “Please. I’m sure there’s something I can do between peeks in on her. Isn’t there?”

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The years went by and Jack found himself a gatekeeper. But unlike his own guide from before, he had a sense of humor and helped ease people either north, or south, including Henry and his grandmother who arrived a few months after Jack had earned his wings. And as promised, Grace had her happily ever after.

Jack chuckled as she cursed him for leaving her a tidy sum in his will. He danced in the shadows at her wedding to Justin, not that anyone could see him but Grace. That was her day and so he kept from her sight.

He sighed happily at the birth of her first child, a son who she named Matthew Jackson, a blessed child who would continue her legacy both in literacy and as a guide for lost spirits.

He cheered from his lofty perch as she won awards for her work with children and literature throughout the years before retiring to enjoy time with her grandchildren. And throughout it all, she continued to help guide spirits from earth to Heaven. To him.

And when her time finally came, he was there to welcome her.

“Hello Jack,” she said with an angelic smile.

“Gracie,” he said with a big smile of his own and guided her through the gates to her spot in Heaven. Hand in hand. Heart to heart. Soul to soul.