

KAREN MALLEY

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE FOR
A SECOND CHANCE WITH GOD.

"SECOND CHANCE
for GRACE
A NOVEL

A Second
Chance for
Grace

Karen Malley

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A Second Chance for Grace
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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2021
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-9884-4
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Lily, who taught me how special the relationship
between an aunt and a niece can be.

Pine Springs Series

Following the Sparrows
A Second Chance for Grace
Sunflowers and Suspicions (Oct 2021)

1

"Aunt Susan, I'm pregnant."

Susan Montgomery almost dropped the phone. *God, no. She's only 16.* She took a deep breath. "Are you sure, Claire?"

"I took the test. I'm sure." Her voice shook.

Susan could hear her sniffing. "OK, hang tight. I'm coming over." Susan grabbed her jacket and purse and drove to her sister's house, praying all the way. *God, how could this happen?* Claire was such a good kid. Susan's hands gripped the steering wheel, knuckles white. She parked in front of the three car garage for a moment and slowed her breathing. This wasn't the kind of neighborhood used to dealing with teen pregnancy. People in this neighborhood were more concerned with their golf scores and their beauty salon appointments. Before she could get out of the car, Claire pulled open the passenger door, breathless.

"Mom and Dad will be home soon. Can we get out of here?"

Susan took in Claire's swollen eyes and makeup-streaked cheeks, and her heart melted. Claire was far too young to be dealing with all this.

"Sure, Claire-bear," Susan said. "Have you told your parents?"

"No way," Claire said, as she got into the car.

“Do you want to get a milkshake or go back to my place?” Susan asked.

“Your place,” Claire said. “I can’t even think about food.”

Back at Susan’s apartment, Claire sank into the plush sofa, hugging a pillow to her chest. Susan sat next to her, cross legged, and ran her hand along her niece’s cheek. “Are you ready to talk about it?”

Claire picked at the pillow. “What’s to say? Mom and Dad will kill me.”

Susan started to object, but clamped her mouth shut. Claire was right. Her mom was a control freak. A pregnant teenage daughter wouldn’t fit into her perfect plans. An involuntary chuckle escaped from Susan’s lips.

Claire turned to her, aghast. “What could possibly be funny to you right now?”

Susan bit her lip. “Sorry. I was imagining your mom’s face when she realizes she’s about to be a grandma.”

Claire’s eyes narrowed in anger before softening. “Yeah, that would be perfect, wouldn’t it?” She turned to Susan. “Are you sure I shouldn’t take care of the problem? No one would need to know.”

Susan clenched her fists. “Claire, absolutely not. It is a child, not a problem. No matter how inconvenient this may be for you, it’s not the baby’s fault. Do you understand?”

Claire shrank under her gaze. “Yeah, I kind of figured you’d say that. Fine. I’ll talk to them.”

Susan touched Claire’s hand. “Did you tell Jake

yet?"

Claire shook her head. "No. He's so busy with basketball."

"I hope you're more important to him than a game."

"It's not like that. I told you he got a basketball scholarship. His dad is super excited."

"I didn't think his dad was around. Doesn't he live with his mom and stepdad?"

"Yeah, but his dad lives nearby. He sees him a lot," Claire replied.

"Wow—two dads. Poor guy will get double the lectures."

"No, his step-dad doesn't care much. He pays about as much attention to Jake as my parents do to me," Claire mumbled.

Which was exactly why she got herself into this situation. Susan rubbed her temples. "Listen, Claire, I'm sorry. I never thought about talking to you about sex. I assumed your mom would. I knew you and Jake were pretty serious, but I thought you'd have made better choices."

Claire's gaze dropped to the sofa pillow. A tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm sorry I disappointed you."

"Hey, now, none of that. What's done is done. But your choices led to consequences you need to face."

"What will I do?"

Susan gazed into the trusting eyes of the girl that was more of a sister to her than a niece and sighed. "We'll pray. And you'll call your mom and tell her you're staying here tonight. You can go to church with

me in the morning, and afterwards we'll face your parents together."

That night, after getting Claire settled in the spare room, Susan lay awake, staring at the ceiling. Claire was counting on her to take care of her, but that didn't mean she had all the answers. There wasn't anything easy about this situation. If only her sister wasn't so difficult. Or her brother-in-law. Emily and Darren were nothing but proper. This would tarnish their stellar reputations. Susan sighed. She and Emily were never close. One would think since they were the only family left, things would be different. Still, Emily was eighteen when Susan was born, and they couldn't be more different. Emily was through college and married before Susan was even out of elementary school.

Their mom tried to bring them together over the years, but it wasn't until Claire came along that there was any reason to. Susan was twelve when Claire was born, and she loved her from the moment she laid eyes on her. She baby-sat every time she could, and Emily was more than willing to let her. But now, that baby was about to have a baby of her own. Susan fell asleep praying for her small family.

The next morning, after finally finding clothes Claire was willing to borrow, they entered Faith Community Church.

"This church is nothing like ours," Claire said. "My parents wouldn't approve."

Susan huffed. "I'm not concerned about their approval. I love this church. I get a lot more out of this church than I ever did at theirs. Pastor Mark is

awesome.”

Claire shrugged. “I’m surprised they let me stay over on a Saturday night. You are a bad influence on me.”

Susan smiled. Claire joking around was a good sign. She was right, though. In all these years, Claire had never attended church with her.

A deep voice interrupted her thoughts. “Hello again, Susan.”

Susan turned to see Christopher, or Mac, or whatever he was called. Her friend, Adam, stood beside him, balancing on crutches. With everything going on with Claire, her encounter with the man a few days earlier was all but forgotten. As those eyes twinkled at her, she wondered how that was possible.

“Christopher, hi,” she breathed. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Please. Everyone calls me Mac.” He grinned at her.

“And Adam, you’re finally out of the hospital. It’s great to see you up and around.” Susan smiled.

A moment later, a young woman approached Adam. He beamed at her, and they took seats in the row behind them.

Susan glanced back at Adam and the woman. She seemed familiar, but Susan couldn’t place her. And since when did Adam have a girlfriend? There was no mistaking the way they gazed at each other.

“Who’s the guy?” Claire whispered to Susan. “He’s good-looking for an old man.”

“Shh,” Susan whispered back. “He’s a friend of a

friend. I met him the other day.”

“He seems happy to see you again.”

“Will you stop? The service is starting.”

As they rose to sing, she couldn't help sneaking peaks at the man beside her. He stood a half head over her, which was saying something. At five foot-eleven, she rarely looked up to anyone. Mac's rich deep singing voice warmed her.

She'd need to ask Adam more about this guy. She and Adam attended Bible study together since he moved to Pine Springs the year before. When Adam was injured in a construction accident, she and Mac met in the hospital while visiting him. Mac definitely caught her attention.

She sighed. What did it matter? Nothing would come of it. Nothing ever did. At twenty-eight, she was tired of being alone, but that seemed to be God's plan for her. She had enough to deal with right now with Claire, anyway.

As the singing drew to a close, Pastor Mark announced it was time for the congregation to greet one another.

Mac turned to Susan and held out a hand. As she put her hand in his, a shiver ran down her spine. His hand was warm, rough, and huge.

“Hi, I'm Claire.” Claire reached around Susan to Mac.

As Mac released Susan's hand, the warmth drained away. What was it about this guy?

Mac and Claire shook hands, and Susan turned to speak with Adam.

“Susan,” Adam said. “I want you to meet someone special. This is Kathryn.”

Susan shook her hand, studying Kathryn’s face. “It’s great to meet you. When did you two get together?”

Adam grinned at Kathryn, and then answered Susan. “We met over the summer, and our relationship has gradually grown since Kathryn accepted the Lord early this year.”

“That’s great. I’m happy for you.” Susan sincerely meant it.

Kathryn smiled. “Me too.”

“You look so familiar to me.”

“Kathryn is Anne’s brother’s widow,” Adam told Susan.

Susan’s eyes went wide. “Robert’s wife? Really?” She smacked her forehead. “I knew I recognized you. I’m so sorry about Robert. We were all rocked when he got in that accident,”

Kathryn gave a weak smile. “Thanks. It’s possible we met, but I wasn’t particularly good about making it to church with Robert.”

“I met Robert several times through Anne,” Susan said.

“Robert spent a lot of time with Mark and Anne,” Kathryn said. “I’m glad to meet you.”

Adam turned Kathryn’s attention to Mac as he shook Mac’s hand. “And this, Kathryn, is the famous Mac.”

Kathryn’s eyes lit with recognition. “Nice to meet you, Mac.”

Mac rolled his eyes and greeted Kathryn. "Don't believe anything he says about me."

Susan was about to ask what that meant, but Pastor Mark signaled it was time for the service to continue.

~*~

The drive to Claire's parents' house was strained and silent. Claire stared out the window, chewing on her fingernails.

"Claire-bear, it will be OK. They love you."

"Sure, they do. As long as I follow all the rules and do exactly what they say," Claire said. Her phone chimed. As she pulled it out, relief crossed her face. "It's from Mom. They're going out to lunch with some church people. Guess we don't need to do this now, after all."

"Claire, you need to tell them. This isn't something you can hide for long." Susan pulled into her sister's driveway.

"Yeah, whatever. They probably wouldn't even notice," Claire muttered as she climbed out of the car.

"Claire, give them the benefit of the doubt. They do love you. Now get your homework done. Baby or no baby, it's a school day tomorrow. Call me whenever you need me."

"I will, Aunt Susan. Thanks."

2

The phone jolted Susan from a sound sleep. She glanced at the number and groaned. Mrs. Fulton. Apartment 304. She grabbed the phone and croaked out a groggy hello.

“Susan, don’t tell me you were sleeping?”

“Yes, Mrs. Fulton. It’s 5:00 AM.” Susan sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Is there a problem?”

“My faucet is leaking. I need you to come and fix it.”

Susan groaned inwardly. “Mrs. Fulton, I will be happy to take care of it during normal working hours. From 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM, I take care of the maintenance requests. The emergency call number is meant to be reserved for emergencies.”

The older woman’s disapproval was evident in her tone. “Consider all the water we’re wasting while we’re talking.”

Susan took a deep breath. “Mrs. Fulton, if you’re concerned about wasting water, put your watering can under the faucet, and use the drips to water your plants.” She listened to the silence on the other end of the line for a moment.

“Yes, well, that will be OK, I suppose. It is Monday, and I water all of my African violets on

Monday. On Tuesday, I water the ferns, and on Wednesday..."

Susan cut her off. "Great. I'm going back to sleep until the sun comes up, and then I'll be by to take care of your faucet."

Susan tossed the phone on the end table and flopped back onto her pillow. Normally she loved her job as the manager of the apartment building, but sometimes the residents tried her patience. She closed her eyes again, but it was no use. Her mind was full. She hadn't heard from Claire again. Poor kid. The conversation with her parents would not be easy.

Her thoughts drifted to Mac, as they had several times over the past twenty-four hours. She didn't know anything about the guy. She'd never seen him in church before. Even if the church wasn't so small, she would have noticed a guy like that. With his height, his light brown skin, and those eyes, so dark they were almost black. Something about him seemed familiar, but she couldn't quite place it.

She gave up on the idea of going back to sleep. She splashed cold water on her face and changed into her running gear. If anything would clear her head this morning, it would be a good long run along the river.

It was warm for March in Pennsylvania. Crocuses sprouted everywhere along the footpath. As the sun peeked out over the horizon, reds and oranges streaked the clouds. Susan picked up the pace as she admired the Lord's handiwork.

A few hours later, after fixing Mrs. Fulton's drip, Susan was back in the part of the job she loved. New

tenants were moving in at the end of the month, and she had an apartment to get ready. The previous resident left in a hurry. Mr. Colton said he got a job in another state, and he packed up quickly. She was sorry to see him go, but he hadn't been there long. Matter of fact, she didn't even have any contact information for him. That was strange. In fact, the whole thing was strange. He kept to himself and always paid the rent in cash.

She busied herself with the usual chores that came with turning over apartments. This would be an easy task, since there weren't many signs Mr. Colton ever used the place. Her most important task was still ahead of her. She bowed her head.

"Father, thank You for this apartment. Please help me to prepare it for the people who will live here. Please help this to be a place of peace and safety, a place where the tenants will grow closer to you. In Jesus' name, amen."

Susan's residents were part of her family. She loved taking care of things for them, as long as it was during normal business hours. Sure, the occasional broken water heater in the middle of the night was a challenge, but it was all part of the job. The job of giving people a home. For the most part, everyone was friendly. She did her best to give them all smiles when they passed in the hallway and made sure everything ran smoothly.

She thought back again to Mr. Colton, the one tenant she never got to know. He had been there four or five months. Normally the apartments were rented

with a one-year lease, but when he offered to pay out the rest of the year and leave early, who was she to complain? The few times she ran into him, he was wearing expensive clothes, and his car was a step up from the rest in the parking lot, so she supposed he could afford it.

She worked on getting the apartment spic and span, and opened the door to the maintenance closet to give the hot water heater a once-over. She blinked in surprise at a briefcase wedged in next to the heater. That was strange. Usually no one ever opened that closet. True, she found interesting items left behind over the years, but this was out of the ordinary.

She slid the briefcase out of the closet, and her eyes widened at the envelope taped to the top. The envelope with Ms. Montgomery written in bold type across the front. What in the world? She started to open the envelope when her cell phone rang. She was about to ignore what was surely another minor problem of Mrs. Fulton's, but her sense of duty won out.

Susan could barely make out what Claire was saying between sobs.

"...found the test...told my mom...ran out..."

"Claire, calm down. Where are you?" Susan asked.

Claire sniffed. "County Park. I ran out when my mom started screaming."

"Tell me again what happened."

"The cleaning lady found the pregnancy test when she emptied my trash can. She showed it to Mom, who was waiting by the front door when I came home. She

asked me if I recognized it, all calm-like, and when I told her it was mine, she hit the roof. I had to get out of there. I'm sure she's called Dad by now."

"OK, I'm coming. I'll be there as soon as I can." Susan shoved the briefcase back into the closet. It could wait.

She parked the car and walked the path to the playground. She and Claire had spent countless hours there. She knew exactly where to find her. Sure enough, there she was, perched on a swing, her feet dragging in the mulch. Susan's head flooded with memories. Pushing Claire as a toddler in the baby swings, competing with elementary-age Claire to see who could swing the highest, jumping off the swings with her in middle school...

"We haven't been here in a while." Susan took the swing beside Claire. "I bet I can swing higher than you." She pumped her legs out.

"I'm not a little kid, anymore, Aunt Susan." But Claire started pumping her own swing in time with Susan's.

The two soared in the air for a few minutes, their red curls streaming out behind them. Emily had dignified straight blonde hair, but Susan inherited their dad's hair. He had been a bear of a man, with a thick red beard. When little Claire's hair started coming in fire-engine red, Susan was secretly pleased. Emily wanted the baby to be blonde, but Claire's hair was as bright as Susan's own.

After a few minutes, Claire stopped swinging and dragged her feet in the mulch again.

"Thanks. I needed that."

"Now what, Claire-bear?"

"Now I need to talk to Jake. He's meeting me here after basketball practice. I wanted you nearby. Is that OK?" Claire asked.

"No problem. Isn't that him coming now?"

Claire shaded her eyes with her hands. "Yeah. Will you wait for me?"

Susan nodded.

Claire went over to meet Jake. He was a senior this year, and would be leaving for college in the fall. Claire was a junior, and the two had been dating a little over a year. What would this do to their relationship? Would they stay together even if Jake wasn't leaving at the end of the summer?

Jake strolled toward Claire, his thumbs hooked into his pockets. He gave her a grin that set off the obvious admiration in his eyes. Susan fought a pang of jealousy. Would anyone ever admire her like that?

As the two met, Jake gave Claire a kiss, but she pulled back. She took his hand and led him to the picnic tables, where she sat opposite him.

It was clear when Claire dropped the bomb. Jake stood from the table, removed his ball cap, and ran his fingers through his hair. He started pacing.

Claire stayed on the picnic bench.

After a few minutes, Jake returned to the picnic table and took Claire's hands in his.

Tears filled Susan's eyes. This was a good kid.

They talked a while longer, and the two teens drifted to the swings, hand in hand.

Claire's eyes glistened with tears, but a weight had been lifted. Jake would walk this road with her. Susan couldn't have been prouder of the kid. As they got closer, Susan saw the worry clouding Jake's dark eyes, but he remained calm. His dark eyes... Yes, of course. That's who Mac reminded her of. Jake had the same eyes. No wonder Claire thought he was handsome. She stood up from the swings. "Hi, Jake, it's good to see you again."

"You, too, Miss Montgomery."

"You're taking the news better than Claire expected."

Jake shrugged. "I love Claire. I told her I would support her, whatever she decided."

"That's great, Jake. I always knew you were a good kid."

Claire blushed. "OK, come on, you guys. I don't know what I'll do yet, but I'm glad you're on my side." She gave Jake a shy smile, then something steeled in her expression. "Jake's taking me home now. We'll talk to Mom and Dad together."

Susan raised her eyebrows. "Wow, Jake. You're braver than I've given you credit for."

"Claire's worth fighting for," he said.

"Good answer, Jake. Good answer."