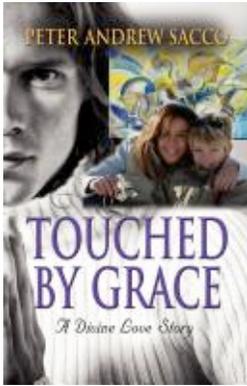


PETER ANDREW SACCO

TOUCHED
BY GRACE

A Divine Love Story



***Touched By Grace** is a love story that embraces Chris Simon's altruistic love for Grace Foster. The two meet by chance one night in a hospital. Chris, years removed from being one of America's most prominent artists, battles his drinking demons as well as his illness. Grace, a nurse and single mother, has her own crosses to carry, one of which is a questionable love for her husband to be, a political mogul.*

Touched By Grace

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A Divine Love Story

Peter Andrew Sacco

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Chapter One

Chris was thinking this might have been a bad idea. He needed her, and Kelly was nothing if not qualified. She had a beautiful figure, and natural talent for holding her body in pleasing ways. But what a distraction she was. He pushed his long, dark bangs from his eyes in frustration and tried once again to focus.

The sun penetrated the back windows and cast beams everywhere, intersected by slow falling dust. The large room was punctuated with furniture and canvases, covered with cloth and various colored tarps. Three easels plotted out points of a triangle, spaced throughout the room. Kelly sat on the stool opposite Chris in a simple pose—straight back, hands at her sides gripping the stool, legs slightly crossed. She had those great, lean legs from walking all over San Francisco, climbing the steep hills of North Beach and cruising the shops of Union Square.

It would have been perfect if she could've just stopped flirting with him. She was gorgeous—clothed and unclothed—and she knew it. And as professional as she was, she knew he knew it too.

“Alright, Kelly,” he warned her, stifling his own smile. “Sit still, now, please.”

“Or what?”

“Or I'm going to have to find a new model.”

Kelly batted her eyes. “You wouldn't dare.”

“Yeah, well...” He didn't finish. She was right. He wouldn't dare; he wouldn't want to.

“Just sit still,” he said again. “Please.”

As he set his face into a serious expression, he could feel Kelly's eyes studying him. He tried hard to hold the

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brush still, to ignore her as much as any artist could. But when he glanced her way, he saw her puckering her lips, imitating the face he made when he painted.

He stared at her, willing her to hurry up and cooperate already.

“What?” Kelly played innocent. “You know I’d rather be kissing those lips while they’re puckered, instead of you having all the enjoyment.”

“You’re impossible,” Chris told her, glaring.

Kelly twisted and squirmed.

“How much longer?” she asked, making a bored survey of her surroundings.

“You’re not very good at this, are you?”

Chris looked down his wire-framed glasses at her. He only wore them when he was painting.

Kelly left her stool and moved in on him. She pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose, continuing the tease. Chris pivoted back to his canvas in a state of half-fear, half-glee, anticipating her approach. She rounded the corner of the canvas, eyed its contents and pressed her gaze onto Chris.

Chris glared at her to let her know he was really angry now. She took a step back. Maybe she’d finally gone too far.

Suddenly, Chris dropped the paint brush, and with a devilish smile, attacked her. He reached up with one hand to grab her hair and the other her breast and spun her around in his arms for a dancer’s dip. His dexterity forced from her a squeaky yelp.

“You’re in trouble now,” he said in a fake glower above her. Kelly, prone, grinned from ear to ear, appearing to savor the moment.

“Somebody call 911!”

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Red strobes hit the night air as the ambulance turned onto Grant Avenue and raced under the watchful gaze of the tower on Telegraph Hill headed to San Francisco Pacific General. The ambulance pulled through the emergency circle and up to the entrance. Urgent faces in the front windows were ready to move. The siren continued to blare for a second then stopped. Both paramedics popped out and headed to open up the back. Doctors from the ER met them as they unloaded the patient. As a group, they lowered the gurney and wheeled the man inside.

In the hustle and clamor of the interior, the man, Chris, thought he heard a woman screaming for help, but he couldn't be sure. *Kelly?* He struggled back to consciousness long enough to find himself on a gurney, doctors and paramedics shouting to each other as they wheeled him down fluorescent corridors. He fought to stay there. But his mind closed him back into the darkness. His brain marched through a gray landscape littered with a series of random images. The ghost of his mother, his father teetering and drunk, his brother frowning down at him—disappointed again, rooms full of people applauding, empty rooms, spinning rooms full of empty bottles. But, as always, his brain eventually found her hidden in the folds of memory every time he went deeper inside his sleeping mind. *Kelly. Always Kelly.* His obsession and his muse. His dream and his nightmare.

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She leaned out from the canvas with an inscrutable smile, her naked flesh painted in roses and creams, her body backlit. Chris stood in front of the painting with a brush in hand, red paint dripping from its bristles in two thick drops that splattered and stained the floor. Chris didn't notice or care about messes. He put the brush to the canvas, watched as if from a distance as his arm started to move up and down in long, heavy strokes. As he continued, he pressed harder, too hard. The brush drove the red into the fibers of the canvas as he erased arms and hips, legs and hands. With each stroke, the golden aura disappeared, the innocent glow obliterated. The painting transformed into a dripping streaking mess, a bloody throb.

His brain began to throb with it. His temple felt like it would tear away from his head. His heart raced; his entire body shook with each pounding. To stop it—or to push himself to the limit, he worked faster, sloppier, dragging and slapping the brush across the ruined girl. The throbbing grew louder, maddening, unbearable. It became a rumbling, the sound of a racing engine speeding toward him. A horrible screeching filled Chris' ears—the sound of tires swerving and squealing on pavement. A car, flaming and deadly, burst through the canvas, tearing a hole in his world.

Chapter Two

Chris adjusted his position in his upright hospital bed. He sat patiently and let the nurse wipe a bead of sweat off the bridge of his nose. He even remained still when the nurse announced that she was going to have to give him a shot. She turned him slightly as she prepared the needle. He held his breath, thinking, *Get it over with already, Natalie. This isn't torture time.*

Natalie was the one who knew him best and the one who, he was convinced, liked to watch him squirm. He felt the sharpness of pain as she pierced his deltoid muscle with the needle. It made him wince. If he hadn't been totally conscious before, he was now.

"Jesus, I thought you said it didn't have to hurt," he complained.

Natalie frowned. "Don't say 'Jesus' like that. You need all the help you can get." Then she offered him her usual sarcastic smile. "Anyway, I lied. So sue me."

Chris rubbed his arm and sighed, thinking he'd say anything he wanted. *Jesus doesn't need your protection if he's as great and powerful as you think he is.* But he kept his mouth shut. Natalie was cute enough. Tall and leggy, reddish-blond hair that slipped loose from her pony tail and curled around her ears. It was being so young that made her act so tough. She wanted to be taken seriously. Man, when Dave got here, he'd have a field day with Natalie, probably schmooze all over her, con her into handing over her phone number, and then never call. There would be a scene later, of course, when they ran into Natalie here again—or somewhere else. But Dave would somehow manage to smooth it over and, well,

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Natalie would never know what hit her. Poor Natalie. Chris couldn't help but smile to himself.

She handed him a clipboard and pen, completely unaware of the complex web Chris was imagining her wrapped in with Dave.

"Forms," she said.

Chris studied the papers in front of him like a blind man.

"What's this?"

"Mr. Simon," she said. "You know what they are. You're not a first-timer here. Please complete the rest of the forms so we can let you go."

"Do I have to?" he asked like a child.

Natalie would have none of his games, not any more. She answered with an stern tone that Chris found amusing.

"Surely protocol must be old hat by now," she said.

Chris began writing quickly in mock earnest.

"Yes, General. Right away."

Natalie planted her hands on her hips and frowned down at him. In her pink scrubs, she looked like a long pull of cotton candy. Why did she have to act so tough? Chris could see that she was the kind of girl who could hang with the guys, but she was taking the disciplinarian thing too far.

"Isn't it the Christian thing to do to be patient with your patients?" he grinned. "Pardon the pun, of course."

Natalie screwed up her nose like she didn't get his pun comment.

"I'm just doing my job," she informed him. "If you'd take your meds like you're supposed to, we wouldn't be seeing you as much as we do. And you wouldn't have to put up with General Natalie."

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Chris made more noise with his pen. Dotting “i”s were explosions and crossing “t”s were tracers shot from machine guns. With a final, triumphant climax, he slammed the pen and clipboard onto his tray-table.

“Ta da!...Satisfied?”

Natalie ignored all of this. He was an OK patient when he wasn’t coming off a drunk. And she knew he was dealing with some heavy stuff. His chart was like a minefield; everywhere you went, you faced explosion after explosion. And, yes, Natalie huffed inside her head, it *was* the Christian thing to do to be kind, but he really tested her. She had eight other patients to tend to that shift—all of them needing as much care and attention as him—and he had a unique way of sucking it all up as if he was the only person in the world.

“You know the drill,” she said in a calm voice. “Can’t release you until someone comes to pick you up.”

Of course, Chris thought. *Enter big brother Dave to save me.*

“Oh, he’ll be here momentarily,” Chris assured her. “Just wait ‘til you meet him.”

“I’ve already met your brother before,” Natalie said. She lowered the chart she was holding, looked at him, concerned. “You don’t remember?”

Chris racked his brain. He couldn’t remember. Things got lost in that big twisted organ every day now. His mind was like a disorganized house that ate car keys, spare change, and the occasional wallet or important document. He stared down at his hands, which were clasped in his lap.

“I remember,” he lied.

Natalie didn’t believe him. She scratched a note in his chart.

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“What is that? What are you writing in my chart?”

“Don’t you worry about that.”

“I am worried. It’s my chart. I have a right to see it whenever I want, you know.”

Natalie was unimpressed.

“Of course you do, Mr. Simon. Nobody’s trying to keep anything from you.”

Just as Chris finished rolling his eyes, a man in a black trench coat with dark hair combed in a debonair sweep from his face, entered the room. Somehow the air of conflict in the room suddenly lifted as if they were in the presence of a hero. At least from Natalie’s perspective, Chris thought. Natalie instantly turned to greet his brother, smiling girlishly.

Dave was used to these kinds of greetings. He gave new meaning to the phrase “walk in like you own the place.” He walked into every room like he owned the place and everyone in it. It wasn’t that he was arrogant; he was just confident and charming. He had a natural charisma that lifted his average handsome looks to the level of exceedingly handsome. In short, he was what a person might have called suave. Women found him to be disarming—the wink of his eyes, the firm handshake, the smile that said he saw something special in you. Dave was generally a good guy, but his ability to so easily attract and woo women had made him a little careless in the romance department. If his brother got a high off of drinking, Dave got a high off flirting and carousing. Each son had taken on one of his father’s vices. And while they were both pretty clear on what their vices were, neither had successfully conquered them—or seemed to have the intention of tackling that job anytime soon.

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“Looks like my carriage has arrived,” Chris announced to keep Natalie from starting up one of her little coy conversations right in front of him. “You can go, General.”

Most of the time Chris was annoyed with his brother's instant magnetism, but this time he had to admit he was glad to see him and ready to get the hell out of there. Dave was carrying the suitcase he'd picked up at Chris' apartment, a bag Chris always kept half-packed, knowing one way or the other his visits to hospitals were far from over.

“Why hello there, Dave,” Natalie said despite Chris' efforts to derail her.

“Hello yourself,” Dave smirked. The reflection in his glasses was too much for Chris, who thought to himself: *Take those damn things off.*

Dave did and let his blue eyes sparkle towards Natalie, who twisted her body flirtatiously in response.

“Nice to see you again. Seems like Chris couldn't stay away,” she said, shaking her head like a little disappointed mother.

“*Jesus*,” Chris complained again just to annoy her. But as soon as it was out there, he felt sort of bad.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Dave offered. “He's a handful, isn't he?”

Were they really just going to sit there and talk about him like he was some half-wit child? Chris was getting sick to his stomach, and not from anesthesia.

Dave looked at Chris like he expected an explanation, but Chris responded with a shrug of his shoulders.

“How is he?” Dave asked Natalie, looking to someone more cooperative.

“He's going to be fine.”

Perfect, Chris thought. *They could go on like this all*

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day, talking about me like I'm not here.

"What happened?" Dave said, again to Natalie. As if Chris couldn't fill him in on it. Chris knew Dave trusted him that much; this was just a play for Natalie, Dave's exercising of his own masculine wiles. A self-professed ladies man, Dave was entirely responsible in every other way—he just couldn't help but smile and charm and sweet talk every chance he got. He'd always been like that, since they were kids.

"The usual," said Natalie, as she rounded the bed to tidy an IV bottle and tubes. "Didn't take his meds and was drinking again. Someone found him outside of Heren's Department Store having a seizure."

Dave shook his head in amazement and shot Chris a look, "For crying out loud, man."

Chris looked down at the clasped hands in front of him, trying hard not to let his smirk run wild.

"Was having a not-so-good day," he said.

The image of Kelly flitted through Chris' brain again. Sometimes he wondered if she was growing inside there like a tumor—making him sick, killing him. But he put on his smart-ass smile and showed his teeth to Dave and Natalie, playing the role of the reckless, incorrigible patient.

Natalie let out a groan and looked to Dave.

"He's all yours, sweetie. I hate to go, but I've got people to see. Take care of our little friend."

She grabbed her clipboard and pen and left the room.

"Wow, what a let-down," Chris complained. "I was all ready for you to sweep her off her feet while I lay here and became one with the bed sheets."

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Dave looked over his shoulder at the place where Natalie had stood just a minute ago. “She *is* cute. But I’ve got other things on my mind.”

“Impossible,” Chris joked. “There’s never anything else on your mind.”

Dave ran his hand across his hair. Chris could smell the scents of aftershave and cologne. Even in an emergency, his brother managed to smell good. *Ha!*

“Umm, excuse me,” Dave argued. “I think I do have other things on my mind. Like my hardheaded brother who can’t keep his life together. And my business—you know the whole art dealer thing—you remember that?”

“Oh right. That thing,” Chris shrugged. “Well, let’s not waste any more of your time.”

Chris started to climb out of bed, but he was still a bit unsteady. When his feet hit the floor, he swayed forward and then backward. Dave was at his side before he could blink, grabbing his brother’s elbow to steady him.

“What the hell are you doing, Chris?” Dave said.

“Leaving.”

Dave guided him by the elbow to the chair next to the bed and sat him down. The light coming through the windows cut Chris into long slices of dark and light. Dave stared at his rumpled hospital gown, his watery eyes, his pale skin and felt heartsick. Another family member who had to be taken care of. This was his role in life—picking up the pieces.

“You know what I mean,” Dave said.

“Like I said...I was having a bad day and...”

Dave snorted.

“And feeling sorry for yourself as usual, no doubt. Captain Deathwish. Your wish will come true before you

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know it if you keep this up.”

“Captain Deathwish. I like that.”

Chris slowly and clumsily climbed to his feet with Dave balancing him.

“But, brother, my death wish has fallen on deaf ears...just like my prayers did years ago. Not a day goes by that I didn't wish I was dead yesterday.”

He knew Dave hated when he talked like that. It was Dave who'd recommended therapy, exercise, religion—anything that might knock some hope back into his little brother. But if this visit to the hospital did anything, it reminded them both how everything, so far, had failed.

Chris avoided Dave's eyes and headed to the bathroom.

“Hand me my things,” he said before Dave could respond to his death wish comment. “I need to change out of this hospital trash.”

Inside the bathroom, Chris turned on the sink and left the door cracked. He saw himself in the mirror. A wreck. A Picasso on crack. Worse than that, the perfect image of his father at his worst. He looked away from his reflection, turned on the water to splash his face.

Dave's voice came from the other room.

“What are you wearing?”

“Just grab any t-shirt and jeans you find in there.”

Chris had grown tired of his brother always coming to his rescue. He knew that Dave was probably at his breaking point as well, and the lecture, and maybe even the final sendoff, could come in a matter of hours. Chris was lost without his older brother. Dave guided him through his teenage years when they traveled from uncle to uncle, aunt to aunt, great uncle to great aunt. Their father had died when Dave was only 11. He'd spent years

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following Dave's advice, but a few years ago after Kelly, he finally discovered it was alcohol that did the trick—it let him slip away, if even for awhile, from the reality he couldn't seem to face.

And once the alcohol was in the picture, so were Dave's lectures.

So it was coming alright. *This is how you repay your brother? Chris thought. By leaving him the same way Dad did? Dave's gonna feel real great when that happens. Can't save his dad or his little brother. And who knows what kind of guilt he's toting around about Mom.*

In the other room, Dave was taking a little long. It made Chris nervous.

"Find anything?" Chris called out.

"Yeah, I guess."

There was an obvious body odor that wafted out once the suitcase was opened.

"Man," Dave complained to the empty room, waving his hand in front of his face. "You've got to get it together brother."

"Did you say something?" Chris called from the other room.

"No...just...looking for something to hand you."

Dave grabbed a t-shirt and jeans and felt something hard underneath the layers of clothes. He was curious to know what it was, but he would hand off the clothes and then go back to take a peek.

Dave walked to the bathroom door.

"Here you go."

He opened the door and extended the clothes to his brother. Their eyes met and Chris felt that rush of love and shame he always felt when he looked his brother in the face. Dave was a good man, a successful human

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being—and Chris was not.

“Thank you,” said Chris, lowering his eyes, grabbing for his clothes.

Dave held onto the clothes a split second too long, as he could pass all the things he wanted to say to his brother through that connection. Then he let go. He backed away. “Hurry up, man. Let’s get out of here,” Dave said.

Once Chris closed the bathroom door again, Dave went back to the suitcase and casually looked underneath the next layer of clothes. There, in a black rectangle, was an old color photograph. Chris, about 5, was standing next Dave, about 11. Dave was dangling a fish on a line and had Chris in a tight headlock at the same time. The casual onlooker wouldn’t know if Dave was more proud of catching the fish or catching Chris. Dave knew. He was proud that he caught Chris.

Who had taken that picture? Was it their father? Dave wondered. It couldn’t have been their mother because she’d died long before that. Chris was too young to even remember her. Was it a stranger—someone Dave had asked to take the photo because the parents weren’t around to do it? Yes, that was it. Dave remembered the day vividly now. He’d taken his old Kodak with him to Fisherman’s Wharf, where he and Dave had gone to fish. He’d asked an old man who was fishing near them to take the picture. In the background, Alcatraz was a dark smear on the horizon. He remembered how they’d hammed it up for the camera, how the old man had encouraged them, how good it felt to have an adult paying them attention.

When the old man had handed him back the camera, Dave remembered the old man winking at him and saying, “Now, go be fishers of men.”

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It was a joke. Just a nonsense little something the man had said, playing off the idea they were fishing. But for some reason Dave remembered them now and the words felt like small stones dropping into his stomach one by one.

Sometimes Dave wanted to throw over this whole responsible-brother act. Inside, he felt as lost as anyone. He wanted to go back to being that little kid, have another chance to actually live out his childhood. Instead, what he'd gotten for a childhood was a father so busy grieving and drinking himself to death over losing his wife that Dave, becoming father and mother, did everything. By 13, he cooked the family meals; by 15 he drove Chris to school (illegally); by 17 he'd emancipated and gotten an apartment of his own, taking Chris with him.

They didn't know if their mother was dead or just missing, and the thought of her absence in their lives, the idea that she might be out there in the world not even caring about how they were doing had damaged both of the boys. They had fallen into patterns early on that still played out in their lives: Chris the mischievous one; Dave the dependable savior.

Sometimes Dave had stayed up in bed at night and dreamed his mother returned home; he just knew he'd wake up one morning and find her in the kitchen cooking bacon and eggs. But she never did appear, and his father refused to make it clear whether she was alive or dead. A real torture for a young kid to have to endure.

So yeah, he missed that day when he was so carefree, able to treat his brother like a brother instead of a charity case. He wondered why Chris had chosen this photo, why he kept it packed in his hospital-ready bag. Was it one of those odd things Dr. Mulligan said Chris would start

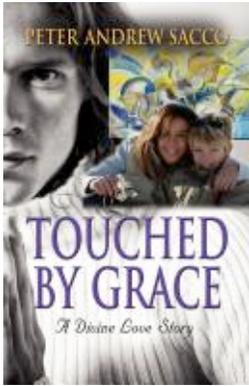
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doing—putting things in strange places, misplacing important items, having hallucinations? Was it something he'd done when he was wasted?

Dave preferred that he'd put it in there knowingly. Because he wanted it always close by. Because he too still thought about what it meant to be family and how important that was in everyone's life.

Yeah, that was the story he was going to stick with. The things he did really mattered to his brother; Chris wasn't just using him as Mr. Fix-it.

Dave tucked the photo back into the suitcase and waited for his brother to emerge from the bathroom, clean but still slippery as a fish.



***Touched By Grace** is a love story that embraces Chris Simon's altruistic love for Grace Foster. The two meet by chance one night in a hospital. Chris, years removed from being one of America's most prominent artists, battles his drinking demons as well as his illness. Grace, a nurse and single mother, has her own crosses to carry, one of which is a questionable love for her husband to be, a political mogul.*

Touched By Grace

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