

A movie poster for the film 'Saving Grace'. The top half features a close-up of a man's face in profile, wearing a cap and holding a handgun. Next to him is a woman with blonde hair, looking intensely at the camera. The background is a dark, moody street scene at night with a bright light source in the distance.

SAVING GRACE

A DARK REDEMPTION BOOK

LORIBELLE HUNT

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

Atlantic Bridge

www.atlanticbridge.net

Copyright ©2009 by Loribelle Hunt

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.

CONTENTS

[Blurb](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

* * * *

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

Published by Liquid Silver Books, Imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana. Copyright 2009, Loribelle Hunt. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the authors.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Blurb

Walker Graham has spent years reforming his life and has built a good one. The only thing it lacks is having the woman he loves at his side. Grace Monroe is having none of that, however. She's spent the years since her divorce distancing herself from emotional entanglement. She enjoys her affair with Walker, but she won't let him get under her skin...

Until his past and her present collide.

When Grace, a private investigator, is hired to investigate the murder of a Birmingham crime boss the last thing she expects to find is Walker at the top of her suspect list. As the attempts on her life mount, she has no choice but to turn to Walker for help. But in the end can she trust him with her life and her heart?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter One

The hunter became the hunted, and it really pissed her off. At first Grace thought it was just paranoia—investigating the particularly brutal murder of a drug dealer could do that to a girl, even if the event was almost six years old. But she'd learned to go with her gut in the Army, and that itchy feeling on the back of her neck was not going away.

She was being followed.

Letting the straps of her bag slide off her shoulder to the ground, she quickly dropped to her knees on the sidewalk and scanned the street. Nothing. A few things fell out of her purse during the ruse and she shoved them back in, the straps once again going over her shoulder as she straightened.

A small white rectangle fluttered to the sidewalk and she reached to retrieve it, the three rows of black block lettering making her grimace as her fingers lifted it up. *Graham's Garage. Walker Graham. Owner/operator.* She'd come here looking for someone else's secrets and had found his. Despite her and Walker's long, strange history, it had been a shock to finally have some of the holes in his past filled in. He'd scrawled *Love ya babe* and his phone numbers across the back. Someone else to add to her growing list of problems—and suspects.

The hair on the nape of her neck rose. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been so spooked. She hastily pushed the card into her back pocket and cautiously started down the street. It had still been light out when she'd arrived

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

at the police station in downtown Birmingham to speak to one of their homicide detectives, but traffic had forced her to find a parking spot a couple of blocks away on a more secluded side street. A few streets over she could see the hustle and bustle of early evening on the busier main drag, but all of that was too far away to protect her from whatever hunted her here on this deserted road. The feeling of unease increased and she picked up her step, hurrying around the last corner that would take her to her car.

She'd been hired to investigate cold murder cases before. It wasn't like this was the first time. It was the first time she knew people involved in the case, however. Her cousin Lynn had been one of the responding officers, and the Birmingham police detective she'd just talked to had hinted Walker was their number one suspect. She'd been so disbelieving he'd shown her Walker's record. To call it extensive was an understatement. And disturbing. She'd stopped trusting men after just a few months of being married to her ex-husband. The marriage had been over for years. The distrust would never go away, but she'd come close to something like it with Walker. She wanted him to be innocent of this murder, but even if he was he was sure as hell guilty of everything else.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw the black SUV waiting exactly where she'd left it. She couldn't wait to get back to Atlanta. Digging through her bag for the keys, she cursed herself for not having them out and ready. She knew better. She resisted the irrational urge to cheer when her fingers closed over the cold metal and yanked them free.

Closing the final feet to the driver's door, she felt a sudden spike of fear. Adrenalin pumped through her veins and seemed to crawl across her skin, and she whirled in anticipation of an attack. Pulse racing, she searched the dark corners of the street. Nothing. The area was clear. But the feeling of being pursued, being stalked did not subside. Keeping her eyes sharply focused on the area she'd come from, she fumbled the key into the door lock. It took valuable seconds too long, but finally clicked open. Pulling the handle up, she backed away a little and edged around the door, tossing her bag inside.

She heard the loud pop before the pain registered a split second later. Her leg crumpled under her, forcing her to the ground. She shifted position to try to get a look down the street and fire arced through her thigh. Her hand brushed against the pain and came away wet and red. She stared at it, mind racing and adrenalin-pumped blood surging. Someone had shot her. *Son of a bitch!*

She couldn't see anything crouched down next to the car and reached for the seat to leverage herself up. She had to get out of here. Get to her gun. Call the police. Blood pooled under her feet as she moved. Find a freaking hospital.

She got the foot of the good leg under her and pushed up. As her upper body cleared the side of the truck's seat, several shots fired over her head and she dropped back to the ground. She set her back to the open door and searched the shadows in front of her, the direction the shooting came from. The last group of shots were over her head but she was still

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

wide open. Anger surged through her. The shooter was toying with her. He could finish her off now, but didn't. Why not?

Her thigh pulsed in pain and she pressed both palms over it, watching blood seep through her fingers. She tried to bring her thundering heart under control, knew each wild beat pumped more of her blood out of her body. She had to get out of here, had to get to a hospital before she bled to death. An ambulance's siren screamed in the distance and she fought back a sob, knowing she was just a few short blocks from one of the best hospitals in the country while her life bled out on a deserted city street. The irony of the situation was impossible to ignore.

She cursed herself again for taking the damned job, still unsure exactly what she'd got herself into. The investigation had sounded like an interesting challenge. *Face it Grace, it was the money that did it. That and the boredom.* Bitterly, she acknowledged the truth of the thought. Yeah. Money. The root of all evil. She snorted. She was getting maudlin in her near death experience and not being objective about her reasons, her goals. She wanted to expand her private investigation firm. To do that she needed the money. Nothing wrong with that. Except the small matter of finding herself under fire on this dingy street. It was like being back in Iraq. Without the superior firepower. Or backup.

The hell with this.

Turning her head, she studied the interior of her vehicle. Her gun was in the glove box on the far side. No way she could reach it. But her cell phone was clipped to the side of her purse, sitting on the center console. She assumed putting

a phone to her ear would get her shot again, but if she could just reach it, she could use it on speakerphone and hide it on the floorboard next to her.

Stretching her arm across the seat, eyes scanning the street, she gripped one of the straps and slowly eased it towards her. It got tangled in the emergency brake, and the phone was inches from her fingers. Out of reach. Taunting her. Gritting her teeth, she raised her body a fraction, got a few more inches out of the stretch and her hand closed over the small black box. Or maybe it was the spots that suddenly swam in her vision that were black. She squeezed her eyes shut, letting her arm fall to the floor and her butt sink back to the ground. The phone *and* the spots were black. Shit. She was going into shock, was going to pass out soon. Unconsciousness tugged at her limbs.

She leaned against the side of the car, one hand pressing against her leg and the other flipping the phone open. She struggled to remember how to turn on the speakerphone, nearly panicking and blinking rapidly when the spots returned. When the world snapped back in focus, she turned on the speaker and dialed.

"911. What's your emergency?"

The feminine voice was immediate and sweet, the best she'd ever heard. She rattled off her name, location, and that she'd been shot, then the world faded to black.

* * * *

She woke slowly, her mind foggy and body leaden, her leg a dull distant throb of tenderness. It was an effort to crack

her eyes open and peer around. Her murky brain catalogued the space. A small white room, wires running in and out of her body, a bed. She was in a hospital. Struggling to remember why, she shifted, trying to sit up and gasped at the sharp twinge of pain as she jostled her leg.

The door slid open and a young woman in surgical scrubs came in. Grace squinted at her nametag, but couldn't make it out.

The woman smiled. "Good. You're awake."

"What happened?" she managed to croak in reply and was suddenly aware of how dry her throat was.

The other woman picked up her wrist, fingers pressed to her pulse point and silently watched her watch. When she released it, she smiled gently.

"You just came out of surgery. The doctor removed the bullet and everything looks fine."

Grace dropped her head back against the pillow and closed her eyes. She'd been shot?

"Mr. Graham is on his way. We should have you moved out of recovery and into ICU before he arrives." The nurse winked. "Tell me, is he as sexy in person as he is on the phone?"

Shit. Walker was coming? She wasn't sure she could take him right now. Or maybe the nurse meant his brother, Boyd?

"Walker?" she whispered. "Or Boyd?"

The woman cocked an eyebrow. "There's two of 'em?"

Grace couldn't help the grin that rose in response. *Yes, God help us all. There are two of them.* It was too many

words to force through her parched throat so she just nodded.

"Which one?" she asked when the silence stretched.

"Oh sorry!" The nurse paused while recording the various instrument readings. "Walker." She flashed another wicked grin. "And he sounds yummy."

Grace forced a smile. "He is."

Hot. Territorial. Possessive. Well, he would be if she hadn't managed to keep him at arm's length. She didn't delude herself into thinking that was due to anything but pure dumb luck—she lived in Atlanta and he lived in that little hick town in southern Alabama, Duluth, where she was originally from. She wouldn't be able to resist him if she had to deal with prolonged exposure. She groaned. Damn. He was coming here. He would go all macho and alpha male on her now. Her body tingled and it wasn't from the morphine injection she'd just received.

Definitely yummy, but she felt a trickle of unease the more she thought of him coming, something she was forgetting, a reason she wanted space before dealing with him again. Something that refused to rise to the surface of her drug-addled brain. She fought a great yawn as the nurse slipped out the door, tried to force the correct synapses to fire in her head, but couldn't fight the slide back into oblivion.

* * * *

Walker pulled into a parking slot, slipping the gear into neutral and yanking up the emergency brake. The engine still roared in his ears and he clutched the steering wheel, trying

to get a grip on his wild emotions. He wouldn't be any help to Grace if he came at her all Neanderthal. Not that it wasn't tempting—grab her by the hair and drag her home where he could keep her safe. He grinned. Figuratively, of course. She'd cut his balls off otherwise. Plus she was hurt.

Fear rose like bile in his throat. He—finally—almost had her, after years of want, years of working his ass off trying to become the kind of man she'd have, but he could have lost her with this incident. He forced the panic away and replaced it with anger. At her. At the son of bitch who shot her. At himself. She needed space. He gave her space. And look what happened. If she weren't so damned busy pulling away from what was between them maybe he'd have an idea what she was up to. Maybe he could have kept her safe. What the hell was she doing in Birmingham anyway? The answer came to mind in an instant. *Something that got her shot.*

His fist landed with a *thunk* against the steering wheel. Fuck! He looked out the window at the brown building in front of him. This wasn't helping. He needed to be cool and in control when he went in there. Forcing his breathing to even and his rioting emotions behind an impassive mask, he exited the car.

The parking garage was across the street from the hospital and he jogged down the stairs and out to the street. It was late, almost midnight, and the place looked deserted. He glanced up and remembered one of the things he'd most hated about living in Birmingham. You couldn't see the stars. Even at midnight the city was too bright. Why the hell was she here? In the city where he'd spent some of his worst

years, years he was far from proud of? Shaking off the feeling of gloom he crossed the street, entered the building and looked for an elevator.

He'd kept in touch with the nursing staff on the drive up. Technically, they shouldn't have told him anything but he claimed to be her fiancé so they made an exception. He knew she was stable and where to find her.

He found an elevator and slid through the closing doors just in time. The occupants, two young women, edged away from him and he sighed, rubbing a hand over his stubbled head. Yeah. He probably did look a little rough. He'd rolled out of bed this morning, threw some clothes on and headed straight for the garage. He had a ton of work to do and with Boyd and Lynn on their honeymoon, only two hands to do it with. He hadn't been concerned with how he looked.

He worked straight through lunch and dinner, music cranked up loud enough to wake the dead. He heard the phone ring in the lull between two songs and almost ignored it. Some sixth sense made him pick up. Thank God. With mounting terror and rage, he'd hurried through the shower and then grabbed the first clean clothes he came across before dumping the rest of the basket into a duffle bag and running for the car.

The elevator dinged on his floor snapping him back to the here and now and he stepped out, following a nurse's directions to Grace's room. A young cop stood outside the door and moved in front of it when Walker reached him.

"Move," he said, fury that someone tried to block his way to Grace coloring his vision nearly red. That was his woman in

there, whether she acknowledged it or not, and no one was keeping him from her.

The cop crossed his arms over his chest and eyed Walker suspiciously. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *I look like a thug, therefore I must be one, right?* The younger man wasn't far off in his assessment. Walker looked the cop over. *I can take him.* He might have done just that if not for the voice at his side. He must be slipping—he hadn't even noticed the other cop approach.

"Walker Graham. What are you doing here?"

He struggled to control the chill that ran through him at the sound of that voice and turned to answer, but before he could a nurse hustled down the hall. She stopped and looked Walker over slowly, arching a brow and grinning. He wondered what the joke was.

"You're Walker?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

She turned a stern eye to the two cops blocking the door. "I think you gentleman can wait to speak to Mr. Graham until he's seen for himself that his fiancé is okay."

The nurse was an ally. Grinning he turned back to the two cops, hands on his hips and nodded at the door. John Brady—the one he knew—cocked an eyebrow, but moved, pulling the younger cop with him. Walker pushed the door open and behind him he heard Brady's quiet question.

"Walker's her fiancé?"

He ignored that, his gaze riveted on Grace. It was worse than he'd feared, seeing her in the hospital, wires and tubes everywhere. His feisty, sweet, *stubborn* Grace. A lump

clogged his throat and he angrily pushed it down. It wouldn't help anyone now. Maybe later he'd give in to the urge. Approaching the bed, he sat on the side picking up her hand and smoothing her hair away from her face.

Her eyes fluttered open and she smiled.

"Hey," she whispered.

"Hey, baby." His voice was hoarse from unshed tears. He'd have to do better than this.

She looked around him and arched an eyebrow.

"How did you keep Lynn and Joanne away?" Lynn was her cousin, recently married to his brother Boyd, and Joanne was Lynn's mother. They were Grace's only family. He was less worried about her asking for them while he was right there and more concerned that she didn't recall where they were.

"They're still out of town. Remember?"

Confusion briefly marred her brow.

"Ah. Yeah. The honeymoon and the cruise." Joanne had decided to take her own trip while Lynn and Boyd were gone.

She yawned and her eyes closed. "So tired." She smiled again and whispered. "Glad you came, Walker."

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles before answering. "Wouldn't be anywhere else, baby."

She was asleep again so he stood and faced the room's other occupants. His cold mask was firmly back in place, but he saw from Brady's expression the man had seen it slip. Walker jerked his head at the door and they preceded him out.

"Lynn?" Brady asked out in the hall.

"Lynn Jameson. Lynn Graham now." He smiled tightly.
"I'm sure you remember her."

Brady's eyebrows shot to his receding hairline.

"She married your brother?" he asked in disbelief. It was an unexpected match. Lynn was the Chief of Police in Duluth and everyone in that small Alabama town knew Boyd had been in prison. Some of them even knew the circumstances, that he'd killed a man in a bar fight ten years ago when the idiot had been stupid enough to make a grab at Lynn while she and Boyd were on their first date. It may have taken all those years for Lynn and Boyd to mend the rift her father, the judge who'd sent Boyd away for so long, had caused, but the couple was definitely good now. Walker crossed his arms over his chest and grinned.

"She did. She'll probably be here tomorrow unless Boyd can talk her into waiting."

"What's her connection to Ms. Monroe?"

"Cousins." Had to love Alabama. Everyone was connected to someone you knew from one end of the state to the other.

"I'll be damned," Brady muttered.

If memory served, and Walker was pretty sure it did, John Brady had been Lynn's shift sergeant years ago when she had started her first year with the Birmingham Police Department. After only a couple of years at the BPD, she'd moved on to the state police before eventually deciding to take the chief's job in their hometown. He wondered what Lynn would think about running into Brady again, especially under these circumstances. She and Grace were as close as sisters and had always both been on the side of the angels, while Walker

and Boyd were definitely *not*. They all had one thing in common though: they took care of their own. Lynn would probably be raising hell about right now.

Walker's grin turned feral as more of his memories of Brady intruded, more complicated and unpleasant than Lynn's must surely be. His light-hearted mood, his relief that Grace was going to okay, evaporated. He didn't want this man anywhere near Grace, didn't want his old life to touch her.

"She still Chief down there?" Brady asked. Speaking of Walker's new sister-in-law. Lynn. The woman who defied a small town to marry an ex-con.

"Yep."

Brady laughed. "Bet that's interesting."

Walker just shook his head, neglecting to mention the town hadn't renewed her contract when she'd married Boyd, not trusting him even after serving his time in prison and helping Lynn bust Tim Monroe, a local drug runner, when he returned home. Walker didn't see how that was any of Brady's business. "You ever seen anything Lynn couldn't handle?"

Brady's smile was almost genuine, but Walker saw through it. "No. Don't think I have."

"She's doing just fine." Not that he'd tell this asshole if she wasn't.

Brady's gaze narrowed on his face in a calculating look. The look raised Walker's hackles. He wasn't here to get sucked into his old world.

"And you? What have you been up to?"

Walker smiled and watched the younger cop, the one he'd never seen before, jerk at the expression. He knew it was cold and savage, a look from a life he'd thought he left behind him long ago.

"Fine. Running my own garage. Completely aboveboard."

Brady's doubt was clear on his face. Walker just shook his head. "I'm serious." He nodded towards the room Grace was in. "She used to be in the Army. Military police. Think she'd have me any other way?"

Brady's expression cleared and he nodded understanding if not agreement. Walker was growing impatient with the chit chat. *Enough of old home week.* They walked down the hall to a small waiting room and Walker sat down.

"Now tell me what happened here, Brady."

The other man shrugged and sent the young cop for coffee before continuing.

"Not much to tell. Looks like a run-of-the-mill carjacking."

"Where?"

"Downtown. A few blocks from the station."

Walker scowled and muttered. "What the hell is she doing in Birmingham?"

He didn't intend to voice the question, didn't expect an answer from Brady who cocked an eyebrow in response.

"Don't you know?"

He just stared the cop down. No way in hell was he going to admit he didn't know what his woman was up to. Brady knew the tactic for what it was and grinned maliciously. Walker hated being at a disadvantage with this guy and he knew it.

"She was asking questions about Hugo Beaumont at the station..."

The voice droned on but Walker couldn't hear what was said over the roaring in his ears. Answers about Hugo Beaumont would inevitably lead to him and to questions about his less than upstanding old life. Why the hell was she asking about Hugo? What was she working on? *Not much to tell my ass.*

"...looking for Hugo's killer."

That snapped him out of his thoughts and he met Brady's gaze, studied him. He had a good poker face, but it was obvious he didn't want anyone looking into Hugo's murder either. The cop's smile was grim.

"I don't think either one of us wants that past dredged up."

"No skin off my back." Walker shrugged as he answered, careful to keep his expression neutral while his guts twisted in knots and he saw the future he'd imagined with Grace going up in flames. "I didn't kill him."

His hands fisted. He needed to focus on the present. Carjacking? He didn't think so. He glared at Brady, pinning him under a cold and angry gaze.

"There's no way this shooting was a coincidence."

He stood and stepped close to the other man, suspicious and enraged. Reaching out, he grabbed Brady's shirt and pulled him close. Brady tensed, his body telegraphing anger, but he made no move to defend himself.

"I will find out who did this. And then I'm going to take him apart piece by piece."

Walker let him go, patted one hand over the cop's chest. His tone was purposefully condescending. "Better hope it wasn't you, Brady."

Brady's eyes narrowed, his anger morphing into something more dangerous, aggressive and deadly, and Walker rolled to the balls of his feet. He'd love an excuse to pound on something and the cop was just as good a target as any. Better than most in fact. Brady shoved him, pushed him into the wall and got in his face. Walker saw red.

"I didn't do this. I know you want a target to vent your anger at, but this was just random shit. It happens."

He backed off, putting space between them while Walker struggled against his instinct to lunge against the hold. Getting his ass thrown in jail for assaulting an officer—even a dirty one—wouldn't help Grace. Brady gave him a knowing look.

"Which doesn't change the fact that neither of us, and a whole lotta other people, don't want Hugo Beaumont's murder dredged up. Especially you, if you really have gone straight." He turned his head, watching the young cop come down the hall towards them, and lowered his voice. "Take her home, Graham. Distract her. Make her give up this investigation."

He started to walk down the hall to intercept the kid but paused, turning to level a gaze on Walker.

"It's safer for her ... for everyone that way. And you know it."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

"I'm going crazy. I have to get out of here."

Grace flinched from the whine in her tone, but after a week and a half cooped up in the Birmingham Memorial Hospital she had a major case of cabin fever. She was standing in front of the room's long window, a crutch tucked under one arm, and turned to hobble to the bed. Lowering herself gingerly on its side, she glared at Walker. His Zen-like calm was driving her crazy and she wished he'd just leave. He sat in a chair by the door reading *Car and Driver* as if he didn't have a care in the world. She clenched her jaw and jerked her head around to stare out the window. That wasn't fair. He'd come to Birmingham as soon as he heard she was shot, and stayed with her the entire time. He'd dropped everything, closed the garage until Boyd got home from his honeymoon to reopen it. He'd put up with her whining and snuck her cheeseburgers when the nurse wasn't looking. Walker obviously did have a care for something. *Her*. She felt bad for taking out her lousy attitude on him, but the remorse was typically short lived.

Grace rolled her head and shrugged her shoulders in an effort to relax. It didn't help; she needed to be *doing* something. She wasn't the idle type and was bored out of her mind, was anxious to get back to work and find out who had shot her and why. The day she was shot was a yawning black hole in her mind. Her memory was just gone. She frowned thinking over the doctor's explanation and prognosis. *Due to*

the trauma of the event or maybe the bump on your head, he'd said. *It'll come back in time, probably in bits and pieces.* It was driving her mad not remembering.

She looked at Walker again and repressed a sigh. Some distance between them wouldn't be such a bad idea either. Couldn't get too attached. Gorgeous and sexy as hell, he had the ultimate bad boy vibe going on. He was slouched down in the chair, long denim clad legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. He wore black leather work boots and a tight black T-shirt that showcased bulging, tattoo banded biceps. She glared at his clean-shaven head. That was her problem—she'd always had a weakness for bald men. Throw in that sexy grin of his and she was a goner. It was just a matter of time before he talked her into turning their casual affair into something much more serious.

He'd probably claim it already was. He'd driven to Atlanta several times since Christmas. She vowed to herself each time that she'd refuse to see him again, but she always broke the unspoken promise. He'd call, tell her he was coming in a few days, and she'd spend those days waiting, dreaming of his touch. He'd become a compulsion. She wasn't sure how long she could keep fighting it, but any kind of commitment was sure as hell out of the question.

She didn't do serious, thank you very much. Serious required trust and she didn't trust any man as far as she could throw him. Her ex-husband had seen to that. She ignored the twist of bitter yearning in her chest, it was what it was, and focused on how to deal with Walker's determination.

He was a complication she didn't need, especially now when she had no idea what was going on but had an uneasy feeling about him that was more connected to her case than their personal relationship. He'd seemed relieved when he found out she didn't remember anything and she'd avoided answering his questions about the investigation she'd been hired for. She never spoke of her work with him and he accepted it without pushing, but she knew it wasn't over. He'd ask again, probably pester her until she broke down and told him the who, what and why. The idea of Walker getting in the middle of the case made her a little queasy for some reason, and she wondered what the fuck she wasn't remembering. Something important, the nagging voice inside her head insisted. Something to do with Walker and Hugo Beaumont.

What the hell did Walker have to do with Beaumont? She wasn't an idiot. Walker was a few years older than her, but they were from the same town, despite occupying two entirely different worlds in it. Hers was the country club and they'd invented the wrong side of the tracks for people like the Graham brothers. She'd heard the rumors growing up, remembered the edgy, dangerous boy he'd been, especially after Boyd's incarceration. As a teenager she'd been fascinated by him; in her early twenties she'd been curious enough to spend one wild weekend with him at the beach before returning to her own world.

That one weekend, that small rebellion had been her attempt at exorcising him—the hold he had over her imagination—and her need to live on a risky surge of adrenalin. It hadn't worked. She'd gone into the Army as an

MP. Not exactly a safe and easy career path, then followed it up with private investigations, which was certainly safer but as her current case demonstrated, not always. She'd eventually decided the thrill-seeking side of her nature wouldn't be suppressed. So when she'd run into Walker at Lynn's house this past Christmas she hadn't even tried to resist his sexual advances, hadn't been able to turn away from the drugging sense of his possession. In bed at least. Out of bed was a constant struggle. Alone, at night, she was tempted to just give in, to make that attempt at trust. Her certainty that she'd learned something that would compromise that burgeoning trust, and that the information was now erased from her memory, pissed her off.

The local police had reconstructed her day the best they could. She'd got up early in the morning in Atlanta and driven to Birmingham, stopped and had lunch at a McDonald's, and then dropped off their radar until she'd reappeared late in the afternoon at police headquarters. At the police station, she'd spoken to a detective, a guy name Brady, about an old murder she'd been hired to investigate. It was apparently a short conversation and he'd looked relieved that she didn't recall it when he had visited her in the hospital. There was some weird vibe going on between him and Walker too. It was obvious they knew each other, had a history, but she didn't question it. She had enough issues to work through and Walker's expression during the interview with the cop made it clear his history was off limits. To top it all off her SUV and her bag were still missing. Any clue to what she'd learned in Birmingham was gone with them.

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

At least she remembered why she'd come to Birmingham, if not the actual trip or shooting. It could be random of course. She could have simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's what the police thought since her car was gone. It could have been chance, but she didn't believe it. She'd been hired to investigate an old murder, the victim a man named Hugo Beaumont, a drug dealer, who'd also had his fingers in a few other pies. She'd bet money her snooping into that was what landed her in the hospital shot in the leg. The question was, was she supposed to die or be warned off? *No proof, Grace, just wild and idle speculation.*

The door opened with a soft swoosh and she turned to smile at the papers in the doctor's hand. They were releasing her today and she was going home. She stood and limped around to the other side of the bed to sign the paperwork. The doctor spoke quietly about what to expect in the coming weeks, the need for physical therapy, and finally instructions on her follow up appointment with the surgeon in Atlanta. Walker caught her gaze, glaring and she bent her head to scribble her name at the X's.

She handed the papers back and waited while her copies were separated from the pile. When it was done, she thanked him for his care before he turned to shake Walker's hand. Then he was gone and she was free to leave. Silence fell over the room.

"Are you ready?" Walker asked.

"Hell yeah. Let's get out of here."

He opened the door and stepped into the hall. Grace saw a nurse waiting with a wheel chair and sighed. Too much to

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

hope they'd let her leave under her own steam. Walker leaned over and brushed his lips against hers. Her womb fluttered in response and she saw answering heat flare in his eyes.

"I'll get the car and meet you out front," he said.

She smiled. "See you there."

* * * *

Grace leaned back against the leather seat and stared at the passing farmland. The silence in the car was oppressive. They'd been arguing for days about where she would go when the hospital released her. Walker had finally relented and agreed to take her to her condo in Atlanta but he was clearly unhappy about it. She ignored a twinge of guilt. He was going to end up driving a giant triangle. Duluth to Birmingham to Atlanta. Birmingham to Atlanta was the shortest leg of the trip at about 150 miles. But Duluth was just over 200 miles from Birmingham and Atlanta.

She shifted, wincing at the throb of discomfort the action caused in her leg, to watch his profile. A clenched jaw was the only outward display of his mood. One hand rested casually on the gearshift, the other on the bottom of the steering wheel. Hard thighs, muscled chest, the cock she knew so well—all just out of reach. She pressed her mouth together, moistening chapped lips just as he glanced over to meet her gaze.

He shook his head once. "Don't look at me like that, Grace. We still have an hour to drive. And you're hurt."

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

Playing with fire, she reached out to rest her hand above his knee, slowly trailing her fingers up his leg. When she reached the top of his thigh, his hand gripped hers and he gave her a stern look.

"Grace," he growled.

"What?"

She tried to pull off an innocent look but ruined it by grinning widely. He rolled his hips in the seat and her gaze fell to his lap. He was now sporting an impressive hard on. He wasn't trying to hide it, and in the tight jeans it sure as hell had to be uncomfortable. How long had it been since his last visit to Atlanta? Three, four weeks? It felt like an eternity. He must have thought so too. Releasing her hand, he reached down, unsnapping the button that covered the top of the bulge. She caught sight of the top of the purple head straining for release and her panties dampened. He was completely unselfconscious as he looked over and held her gaze. He knew exactly what the sight of him did to her. Damn, the man was *hot*. And now she was too.

Grace squirmed on the seat and knew she was in trouble when he flashed her a wicked grin. Reaching over, he grabbed the top of her seat belt and looped it around the seat behind her. Pinned to the seat, she felt a moment's unease. Kinky foreplay at eighty miles per hour might not be such a good idea. Before she could form a protest, his hand slid up her thigh under the short denim skirt he'd bought her to wear home.

"Spread your legs."

She only moved her knees a few inches apart just to see how he'd react. She'd never admit it, but the caveman routine turned her on. Made her so much hotter than sweet vanilla sex. He pinched the sensitive inside of her thigh.

"Ouch!"

"Wider."

This time she opened them as wide as the skirt would allow. He glanced over at her and held her gaze a long second, before turning back to watch the highway.

"Not enough. Pull the skirt up."

She sucked in a harsh breath and looked at the darkly tinted window. It's not like anyone could see in. She pulled the skirt to the top of her thighs, panties clearly visible to anyone with the ability to look, and held her breath waiting for his next move.

His hand moved to cup her, fingers pressed against the wet crotch of the underwear and she groaned. A long finger slid beneath the fabric and rubbed light circles over her clit before dipping into her pussy. He pulled back and brought the finger to his mouth, licking her cream from it.

"You taste so good, Grace."

His voice was low and rough, the look in his eyes pure predator. She was sure if they weren't in the car he'd fuck her senseless. She grew wetter at the thought and wondered how far he was going to take this game.

"Panties off," he murmured. She hesitated and his voice grew harder, coldly demanding. "Now Grace."

The way he'd secured her to the seat only one arm had a great deal of movement. She gripped the top sides of the

white cotton and tugged downward, gingerly past the wound on her right leg but caught up high on the left.

"I can't really move here," she said.

Using his left hand to drive, he pulled down on the side she couldn't reach with his right. Together they got the panties to her knees and she wiggled them off, before spreading her legs wide again.

His hand brushed over her pussy and she jerked. He chuckled.

"So tense. You need to relax, baby."

Yeah right. Like she was going to relax spread out on the car seat, practically naked from the waist down? Her heart raced and she held her breath as his hand crept back to her cunt. Using his fingers, he spread the lips before glancing down at his handiwork. Pink skin glistened against black leather. She'd never felt so exposed. With any other man, she'd be cringing in embarrassment, desperately trying to get free. With Walker nothing ever seemed taboo. That level of primal trust freaked her out a little.

As if he could read her mind, his thumb found her clitoris, banishing her worries before they could take root. He circled the nub in lazy strokes until it swelled so much she rolled her head against the rest and bit her lip to keep from begging, demanding. *Harder, faster, now dammit!*

"How you doing over there, baby?"

She heard the laughter in his voice and bit back a curse. The s.o.b. knew exactly how she was doing.

"Fine," she answered through gritted teeth.

"Really?" His hand stopped, damn him. "So you don't need this?"

"Oh God." She squeezed her eyes shut. "Walker, if you don't hurry it up, I swear I'm going to hurt you."

He laughed in response and flicked the tip of his finger across her clit. Once, twice. Not nearly enough. She moaned and rolled her head to the side to watch him, begging him with her eyes. This was hardly the place to toy with her, was it? Suddenly his fingers were pushing into her pussy. Gasping she tried to arch against him but couldn't get any traction tied to the seat. He was in complete control.

* * * *

Walker had no idea what he was doing. What had started out as teasing had turned into a primitive irresistible urge to claim. She was his, and he desperately needed her to admit it before she regained her memory. Before she realized what kind of man he was under the upstanding citizen façade he'd adopted. He'd spent months reigning in his nature, but the shooting seemed to break some dam within him. He would no longer wait for her to come to him. It was time to force her to admit she was his as much as he was hers. The need to get so deep under her skin that she'd never leave him was overwhelming. The fear that he wouldn't succeed was the greatest he'd ever felt.

Her pussy tightened around his fingers and she released a long slow hiss through clenched teeth. Oh yeah. She was right on the edge and he knew just how to push her over. But first a little confession was good for the soul, wasn't it? He bit

back a smile, sliding his fingers slowly in and out of her while avoiding her clit.

"You need to come, baby?"

She gave him a look equal parts disbelief and outrage. He had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from smiling. He had her right where he wanted her.

"What was that Grace? You don't need to come?"

His fingers stilled and she glared at him.

"You started this Walker. You damned well better finish it."

He pinched her clit, her hips strained against his hand, and he went to pull away. She grabbed his wrist, holding him to her. Her eyes were angry, but there was an edge of desperation in her voice.

"Walker. Please. I need to come."

He thrust two fingers into her pussy and curled them up to rub against her G-spot.

"All you have to do is ask, baby," he whispered. And maybe beg a little. He tried to keep one eye on the road and one eye on her. She was so close, panting, her face flushed, her inner muscles contracting around his fingers.

"No one else can make you feel this way, Grace. Can they? No one else makes you want to lose all that rigid self-control."

She rolled her head on the seat back to look at him. Her eyes were glazed with passion. For him. His heart swelled so much he thought it would burst.

"No one else," she whispered, her eyes pleading for release.

He smiled, a surge of tenderness and possessiveness at her agreement, at the expression of surrender on her face,

filling him. He knew her capitulation wouldn't last longer than her orgasm, but it was nice while it was there.

His fingers stroked her pussy while his thumb brushed her clit. The hard nub seemed to jump under the featherlike touch and she groaned. So responsive, so perfect. *Made for me*. He went back to it, increasing the pressure, rubbing in hard tight circles, his fingers sliding in and out of her cunt faster, deeper.

She gripped the sides of her seat, the muscles in her body beginning the rhythmic contracting that signaled her climax. Pressing her head hard against the seat, she squeezed her eyes shut, a low keening sound coming from her throat while her pussy clenched around his fingers.

"Look at me, Grace."

She met his gaze, her eyes stark with need, all her barriers gone now.

"That's it," he said softly. "Come for me, baby."

He left his fingers in place, riding out her climax, remembering the exquisite feel of her coming around his cock. He was achy, desperate to get inside her. If he weren't careful, he'd embarrass himself and come in his pants watching her. It was impossible not to be swept up in the woman's bliss. He'd caused it after all.

Finally, the tremors in her body faded and he lifted his fingers to his mouth. She met his gaze with drowsy eyes as he licked them clean, satiated while he still throbbed in need. Releasing a relived sigh, she closed her eyes.

"Get some sleep, Grace," he whispered, focusing his attention on the road and trying to ignore his throbbing cock.

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

* * * *

Grace jerked up when they pulled into her parking spot. She must have dozed off. Her leg throbbed and she realized with embarrassment that her skirt was still tugged up around her waist. At least he'd unwound the seat belt. She reached for the button, snapping herself free and swung the car door open without a word.

She winced when her right foot hit the pavement, but forced herself to stand, shimmying the skirt down before reaching into the back seat for the stupid cane. She left her panties on the floorboard. Walker rushed around the car before she got the chance to move. Gripping her elbow he led her into the building and to the elevators.

They rode up the five stories in silence. She was too busy trying to breathe through the pain in her leg to make conversation and he ... she had no idea what his story was. He was probably still pissed at her.

The elevator dinged. They got out and turned right, walking to the last door at the end of the hall. She leaned back against the wall next to it and took a deep breath. Nodding at the door, she met Walker's gaze. His eyes were expressionless, neutral. She had no idea what was going on in his head.

"There's a spare key taped to the top of the doorframe. About three inches from the end."

She held the wall up while he found the key, and within seconds she was inside, back in her white and glass condo. She'd loved it when she got out of the Army. Not green. Not

brown. Not old and dingy. However, lately it seemed so impersonal and sterile. *Ha! Lately, my ass. Since Christmas when Walker decided to turn my life inside out.* As if reading her mind, he looked around in distaste.

"You have *got* to get some color in here," he muttered.

The way he emphasized *got* ignited her temper. She didn't need a man upsetting her life, making her question her choices or direction. She refused to admit he'd already wormed his way under her skin. Walking to a white leather couch, she sank into it. She'd wanted to stalk, but anything other than a slow crawl was currently out of the question. It fueled her anger. Her leg seemed to throb more in response.

"Did you bring up my prescription?" she asked.

Her voice was more a croak than the sure confidence she aimed for, and she winced. She couldn't show any sign of weakness with Walker. He'd take it and run, insinuating his way even further into her life.

The irritated look on his face disappeared to be replaced with one of tender purpose. *Uh oh, here we go.* Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the orange bottle and turned to the kitchen. He found a clean glass, filled it with water, and came back to the living room to squat in front on her. Handing her the glass, he twisted the top off the medication bottle and poured one into his hand.

"You should take that and go lay down. Get some rest."

She swallowed the pill, chasing it with the water and leaned her head back against the cool leather. She didn't speak for a long while, waiting until she started to feel the effects of the pain killer.

"Later. I've been in bed almost two weeks. It's the ride that jarred it."

Remembering certain events during the ride to Atlanta, her eyes popped open. He hadn't moved, still crouched before her, and his heated gaze swept up her body. Despite the pain in her thigh, her body reacted, a warming flood of cream filling her pussy.

He smiled and slid one hand up her left leg, pausing at the top of her thigh. She fought her body's urge to arch against his hand and caught her lower lip between her teeth. Leaning forward, he dropped a kiss on her nose and whispered.

"That ride rattled me too."

His hand moved up, found her bare pussy, and began a lazy exploration. A finger brushed her clit and she groaned, her hips moving of their own volition. A finger thrust into her cunt. One finger, then two. She clenched around him, the ache in her leg forgotten and replaced by lust.

"You're still wet for me," Walker murmured.

"Hmm," she moaned when he began to thrust in and out of her in a slow steady rhythm.

He withdrew and she sensed him shift position, standing over her. Opening her eyes, she met his gaze. His eyes were tight. Hot. In absolute control.

"Not in here," he said roughly.

Bending down, he scooped her up, careful to grab her under the knees and not bump her right thigh. He carried her down the hall to her bedroom and laid her on the bed gently. She reached for the edge of her shirt and he pushed her hands away, tugging it over her head himself. Then he turned

to the skirt. Unzipping it, he pulled it down over her hips and thighs, giving the gauze covered right one as wide a berth as possible. She quickly freed herself from the bra as he studied her and she lay back against the pillows.

"Well?" she whispered.

He stood still, just watching, so long that she was afraid this was as far as things would progress. What was this pull? This attraction that had always raged between them? She was like a junkie and he was her drug. Her body was on fire for him and she needed the release she knew she'd only find in giving up control to him in bed. To give over control to someone else just for a little while, to forget the danger in her life just for a little while, to forget how alone she was, her doubts about herself and him. She needed that.

Maybe he saw the pleading in her eyes. Before she could figure out a way to ask for it, he toed off his shoes and whipped the shirt over his head. Then he reached for the snap on his jeans. The clothes fell to the floor at his feet, his cock standing straight and proud before him.

Sighing, she sat up and circled it with her fingers, gliding her hand up and down the shaft and rotating her wrist in the way she knew drove him crazy. A drop of pre-cum appeared on the slit on its head and she leaned over to lick it off.

"Ah Christ," he muttered, his hands coming up to hold her head still and slide into her mouth. She opened wide, feeling the head hit the back of her throat, the salty taste of him filling her senses. He thrust in and out in at a slow steady pace a few times before pulling free from her mouth with a pop.

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

Climbing into the bed with her, he rolled her to her side and spooned behind her, snuggling in close so his entire body was pressed up against her. She smiled. Even now, he was looking out for her. Her injured leg was on top and he carefully shifted it up a little as he thrust into her from behind.

His strokes were long, sure, and slow. It felt like an easy homecoming. Walker's deft moves slowly driving her out of her mind, wrapping her in a cocoon of security. Then his fingers found her clit and sent her spiraling out of control. The orgasm swept up out of nowhere, overwhelming her with Walker's usual intensity. Her body shook with it. Her soul shook with it.

It was a hell of time to realize she was in love with him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

Five days later, Grace was beginning to think one of them wasn't going to survive and it was a toss up to who the winner would be. She'd thought the forced confinement of the hospital was bad. It was nothing compared to the house arrest Walker had her under now. Every time she looked at the door he tensed. If she walked towards it, he immediately moved to block her exit.

The first couple days she'd let it go. She hadn't really felt up to going out, not that she would admit that to Walker. By day three she'd gone twenty-four hours without any pain meds and though she wouldn't be running any marathons soon, she'd felt almost her old self except for the lingering limp she expected would be a reminder for several weeks to come.

Day three she'd wanted out.

Day four she'd started climbing walls.

Day five she was eyeing her pistol and wondering if she'd need it to get out of her own damned condo. Even Walker was antsy at that point.

He stood in front on a window with his arms crossed over his chest while she sat on the couch, pretending to read a book and glaring at his back. The hell with it. Laying the book down without marking her page, she stood and left the room. She was done being his prisoner; she had work to do. She went into her bedroom and stripped out of her shorts and tank top, changing into loose trousers and a silk T-shirt

appropriate for the office. She slipping into low heeled sandals, clipped on her gun, and found her extra set of office keys before returning to the living room.

He was waiting for her, hands now shoved into his pockets, his expression livid. Red highlighted his cheekbones and his eyes flashed dire warning. His voice was arctic when he spoke. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Work." She had no idea how she kept her tone cool, fought the excitement. Fighting with him was so much better than the silent treatment she'd been getting.

"You aren't going anywhere."

"I am. I have a job, a business that doesn't run itself. Bills. You know—responsibilities."

"What the hell is so important it's worth risking your life over? I told you I'd take care of the bills for you. Enough of this bullshit, Grace. Pack it up and come home."

Now was the time to bring up Beaumont, whose primary income had come from drug dealing but had also been involved in illegal gambling and prostitution, to ask what his connection to the crime boss was but that nagging suspicion returned. Exactly how had Walker been involved with Beaumont? Was he the killer she was hunting? She was positive he was guilty of something, but damned if she could remember what.

Walker had a lot of money. She had no idea what he was worth, but she knew it was a hell of lot more than her. She was barely scraping by, and he was ... not. And somehow he was connected to Beaumont, she just wasn't sure how. Couldn't remember. Damn it.

"Where will that money to pay my bills come from, Walker?" she asked it softly, recognizing she treaded dangerous ground here, ignoring the internal voice screaming not to be an idiot, to just trust him already.

His expression shut down completely. "What are you suggesting, Grace?"

She shrugged, a childhood playground song spinning through her mind. *Catch a tiger by the tail*. "You're pretty well off for a mechanic in rural Alabama."

"I've invested wisely."

She almost snorted. What exactly was that supposed to be a euphemism for? "Is that so. You know, there are whole years in your past that are blanks, which you refuse to discuss. Makes a person curious what you were doing—"

He sliced a palm through the air to cut her off. "That's irrelevant. Now is what's important."

Oh, but there was so much more to it, so much he wasn't saying. Even if instinct didn't tell her that, his body language did. His hands were still shoved in his pockets, but his arms were flexed, the muscles corded and hard and he stood with a slightly widened stance as if ready to strike at something.

"I think it is important," she replied, not sure of this mood, not sure how far she should push him. She insisted to herself that she was pushing because of the case, not because she wanted to be closer to him, to know him better. Not because she was trying to drive him away. His eyes narrowed as some of his control slipped.

"You're not exactly forthcoming about the years you've been gone either. And none of that matters does it? You'll

grasp any excuse you can to refuse to trust me. What are *you* hiding, Grace? Why is trusting me so damned hard?"

She shook her head, gritting her teeth. Score one for Walker. No way in hell was she going there and he knew it.

"Okay, you're right. The past doesn't matter. But I'm not likely to trust you as long as you keep up the secrets."

He finally moved, stalked around her but paused in the hallway.

"That's a two-way street, baby. I've played the last six months by your rules, giving you what you want while you ignore what we could be, what we should be. Fuck that. When you're ready to grow up and let this relationship grow into what it's supposed to be, you know where to find me."

He disappeared down the hall—to pack she presumed—and she left the condo ignoring the knifelike twisting in her heart of pain and anger. He wasn't *really* abandoning her ... she wanted him to leave, and she had work to do.

* * * *

Chase Beaumont paced around her office, his loud tirade bouncing off the walls. She ignored him until he stopped in front her desk and planted both palms flat. He was a big, beefy man but for some reason she just got the impression of weasel when she looked at him.

"Ms. Monroe, are you even listening to me?"

She forced a smile, not caring that it probably appeared brittle with her resentment of his intrusion into her personal space. Client or not, she didn't have time for him.

"Of course. You want frequent updates on the progress of the investigation into your father's murder," she answered, trying to inject a level of soothing commiseration into her tone. And failing miserably.

"And yet, no contact for over two weeks."

She sighed. She'd been home just over a week, only back in the office three days. And in that week her life had begun to spiral out of control. First there was the awful fight—and the insulting questions—that had Walker storming out of her condo three days ago. Then there was the office. It hadn't been tossed and nothing was missing, but someone had definitely had a good look around. There were other little things. Slashed tires on her rental. An attempted break-in at her house. And then, the *piece de resistance*—the mail. Specifically, the sealed police files of the murder of one Hugo Beaumont, Walker's own arrest record and a separate envelope she'd apparently mailed to herself from Birmingham with her case notes. There were no return addresses. That day in Birmingham, the day of the shooting, was still a blank in her mind and now she had even more questions.

She was more upset over the fight with Walker than the rest, even the revelations about his past. She'd always known he wasn't angel material, had always believed the years he didn't speak of were times he was less than proud of. And he was a proud man, one she hadn't had any qualms about attacking during that fight. Questioning where his money came from was over the top and she knew it, knew that lack of trust would hit him hard enough to possibly cause a permanent rift. He had been a criminal years ago, but she'd

known even three days ago that he wasn't one now, hadn't been for years, not to mention she knew after two days of digging his money was totally legit. She felt guilty for looking and tried to justify it to herself. Instinct was one thing, but years of mistrust and suspicion were hard to overcome, right? She sighed. Denial. It was all about denial when it concerned her feelings for Walker, wasn't it?

Funny how he seemed to be part of all the pivotal moments of her life. They'd sat across the aisle from each other at Boyd's trial. She'd gone to Birmingham at its conclusion to hold Lynn's hand through her sorrow and distress as she blamed herself for her father's actions. Grace had decided then and there love wasn't for her, and it was all the Graham boys' fault. Because apparently when you loved one of the Graham men it was all-out, and they returned that love. It had been obvious to her that Boyd certainly loved Lynn at least. So Grace had instead ended up marrying a guy she knew she could protect her heart against if she had to.

Despite the disappointment of the trial—Boyd never should have gone to prison—and the awful week consoling Lynn in Birmingham, she hadn't been able to resist Walker's charms when she ran into him a couple of years later in Panama City. The attraction was undeniable and she hadn't fought it. Truthfully she hadn't even tried, and had given him her virginity. By unspoken mutual agreement they hadn't spoken about anything personal—she'd been an Army MP and she hadn't even wanted to imagine the kind of things he'd been involved with. It had been a weekend of straight up, mind blowing, no strings attached sex. Early Monday morning

they'd gone their separate ways and she'd tried like hell to put him out of her mind. But no matter what she did, even getting married to someone else, he'd haunted her nights. For years she'd thought her memory was playing tricks on her and it couldn't possibly have been that good. In a way she was right. The memories got damned better with a few years experience.

Walker was the man she'd been thinking of when she filed for divorce. Not because she'd wanted him or seen him, but because she knew Walker would never have treated her the way her ex-husband did, that despite who and what he was he'd be truly devoted to whoever he was with. And years later, last December when she'd gone home for Christmas, restless and bored with her life, he'd been there, trying to overwhelm her, trying to take her over. Part of her had wanted to go on that trip and it scared the hell out of her.

Her refusal to go home with him now or even discuss the case or her plans, her inability to trust, had caused the argument, but any fight that got him to leave would have suited her fine. Right? A man just didn't fit in her solitary, compulsive, disordered life. As soon as she'd realized she loved him she'd decided it was better to end it quick, like ripping off a band-aid. Painful at first, but infinitely better than his ripping her heart out later when he realized what a disaster they were for each other or her discovering she couldn't trust him. After reading the police files, she was even more convinced that was the best course. So why did she keep reliving that final scene when he walked away? Jaw

clenched and eyes blazing with fury he'd simply said, "I'll be waiting when you're ready".

She wasn't going to be ready. What the hell did that mean anyway? But ... plans changed. It irritated her no end, but until she figured out what the hell was going on, she might be safer in small-town, east-bum-fuck-Alabama. But first, she had to ditch the client. She eyed him, not trusting him either after reading the police file, and wondered how much to divulge. *Go big or go home, Grace.*

"I am sorry there haven't been any updates. I was shot just over two weeks ago. In Birmingham. Looking into your father's case." Well, she didn't know that for sure since she couldn't remember that damned day. "I've just returned to the office."

Even watching him carefully, she almost missed the flicker of awareness that flashed across his face before he plastered a look of shock over it. He knew she'd been shot. So why was he in her office pretending ignorance and outrage?

"My God! Are you all right? Who was it?"

She smiled, not about to admit she didn't remember, but her voice was grim. "I didn't see him. Apparently, it was a simple theft."

Beaumont looked dubious. "Are you sure about that? Awfully suspicious timing. I don't see how it could be random."

She arched an eyebrow at the supposition. Curiouser and curiouser. He wanted her to suspect the shooting was connected to the case? The question was how did that benefit him?

"What?" he asked, obviously in response to her expression. "Don't you people believe there are no accidents? That's a hell of a coincidence."

Going with her gut, which was screaming something about this guy was seriously off, she smiled and feigned a confidence she was far from feeling.

"I'm sure it was just a fluke. I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Nothing more."

He blinked, another action she was sure was designed to help him cover what he really thought of her pronouncement. For a moment his expression had exclaimed a very clear *you're crazy lady*.

"Right," he answered, dragging out the *i*. "A fluke."

Her reply was a small, tight smile. "I knew you'd see it my way."

She stood from her seat and rounded the desk, somehow managing to suppress the lingering limp as she walked towards the door.

"If you'll excuse me, I have another appointment."

Beaumont looked like he wanted to argue, but after a few seconds nodded in acquiescence.

"Of course. But, please, don't forget the updates in the future."

"Certainly," she answered, having zero intention of following through on that request. He'd moved onto her suspect list with his odd behavior. Hell, everyone was on that list.

Relieved, she shut and locked the door behind him, pulling the shade over the glass top before turning back to the office.

Her offices—a small reception area and one office really—were on the second floor of a quaint mid-town building. She shared the floor with a psychiatrist and a local insurance company and all three businesses were longtime residents of the building. She hadn't lied about the appointment exactly—not if lunch with the insurance company's receptionist counted as an appointment.

And, she thought glancing at the wall-mounted clock in the outer office, *I better get moving or risk being late*. Inside her office, she pushed the door shut behind her and got to work. Grabbing a priority mail box from the top of her file cabinet, she set it on the desk and pushed her chair back out of the way. Grimacing as she lowered herself to the floor, absentmindedly rubbing her sore leg, she leaned forward to pry open a loose tile under the desk. After retrieving a stack of files from the hidden hole, she returned the square and pressed it back into place before standing.

She pulled the chair closer and sat, grabbing a felt pen and scrawling out Walker's familiar address in Alabama, in care of herself. Dropping the files into the box—her recently received mail plus the three other case files she'd been working on at the time of the shooting—she quickly sealed it. Grabbing her bag, she locked the office behind her and headed down the hall.

She walked into the insurance company's office to see Jennifer chatting with one of the junior salesmen and slid the box onto the high ledged shelf next to their outgoing mail. She was probably letting paranoia get away with her, but it seemed safer to mail the files to where she was going and to

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

do it from someone else's office. It wasn't unusual for her to leave her outgoing mail in one of the other offices on the floor since the mail ran around lunchtime and she was usually out of her office at the time. No one would think it remarkable.

Jennifer finally shooed away the salesman and came around the desk, hurrying out into the hall.

"Let's get out of here before someone discovers something else that just has to be done right now."

Grace laughed and punched the elevator button. More like an office-guru Girl Friday hybrid than a receptionist, Jennifer had an uncanny ability for fixing things—reports, equipment, cranky clients—you name it, she was good at it. Her fix-it skills had gone a long way to helping her renegotiate her last pay raise, but often made escaping the office for lunch damn near impossible. The ancient elevator finally dinged, the doors slowly sliding open, and they got in the full car. The building was emptying for lunch and they made small talk with the car's occupants.

Outside Grace and Jennifer walked the couple blocks to their favorite deli and stood in line to order. Jennifer filled her in on all the new building gossip while she tried to soak in the familiar relaxed atmosphere. She realized it wasn't working when they sat down and Jennifer turned shrewd eyes on her.

"Alright. Spill."

Grace arched an eyebrow. "Spill?"

"You're jumpy as hell, girlfriend. Enquiring minds want to know *why*."

Sighing, she pushed a French fry around a pool of ketchup on her plate. She couldn't tell Jennifer everything. For one, it

was her policy not to discuss ongoing cases. But also, she didn't want to inadvertently put anyone else in danger. So *why are you going to Walker's?* That was answered easily enough. He was part of the danger. Could she trust him? Not with her heart. But physically he was just as dangerous as whoever was stalking her so could she afford not to? There were other reasons for going, but she refused to examine them, refused to acknowledge them.

She stuck with simple, shrugging as she answered. "You'd be nervous too if you got shot."

The other woman smiled wanly. "Touché."

Grace shifted in her chair, a concession to her skittish nerves, and went on to the real reason for this lunch.

"I'm going out of town for a few days. Need a little more recuperation time I think."

Jennifer grinned. "With the sexy Bama guy I hope."

Despite her nervousness at disclosing her destination, she relaxed enough at Jennifer's eagerness to grin back. Jennifer had met Walker a couple of months ago getting off the elevator, when he'd come by to pick Grace up for a surprise dinner date. Jennifer had been waiting by the elevator for Grace while she locked up her office. They'd been planning on grabbing a bite to eat and then going to listen to a local band at their favorite bar. The elevator had dinged while Grace fumbled with her keys, and she'd heard Jennifer's flirtatious voice at the end of the hall.

"Well, hello."

Grace hadn't bothered to fight her smile wondering who the new conquest would be. But it had slipped with a

surprising streak of jealousy when she heard Walker's amused reply.

"Hello to you too."

"Can I help you find someone?"

The implication was clear she meant herself. Grace's eyes had narrowed on the door, an unaccustomed insecurity freezing her feet in place and closing up her throat. She was normally a confidant woman, but she'd never been lucky with men.

"I'm looking for Grace Monroe," he answered and the feeling returned to her numb fingers with a rush. She turned the key in the lock, heard the tumbler fall into place, and started down the hall in time to meet Jennifer's curious gaze right before Walker pulled her close for a long, possessive kiss...

"Hello? Earth to Grace?"

She shook off the memory and smiled.

"Zoned out. Sorry. Anyway, I think I'm going to head out in a couple of hours. Pack a few things and then take a few days off. If anyone comes around looking for me, I'd appreciate it if you didn't know what happened to me."

Jennifer frowned, no doubt remembering what a workaholic she was.

"Is anything wrong? It's not like you to take any time off, especially after being gone a couple of weeks."

She didn't want Jennifer asking questions she couldn't—wouldn't—answer and rushed to reassure her.

"No, no, everything's fine. I just need a break. And maybe I'm reevaluating a little bit."

It wasn't a lie. She was taking a new look at the case, but she could see by the way Jennifer's eyes lit up that the other woman thought she was talking about her love life, something she was always riding Grace's ass about.

"So things with Walker are going to the next level?" she asked.

Grace shrugged and stood to leave. She wanted to say no, but there was a secret less cynical part of her crying out yes. The only thing she knew definitively about that relationship was he'd turned her into a confused twisted mess.

"We'll see," she answered instead of trying to explain why she'd never be able to take things farther with Walker, but she knew she was only lying to herself. She was going home. She was telling Walker everything and then ... Well, they'd see. "I'll see you in a few days."

She hurried home to grab her things, lost in thought. Grace didn't have many friends. The few she kept in touch with from the Army knew about her ugly past and her ex-husband. Jennifer didn't and Grace didn't want to dredge it up. Walker knew nothing of her ex-husband either and she knew she owed him an explanation, knew he had a right to know why she found it so difficult to trust him. But she dreaded it. Her marriage embarrassed her. She'd been a kick-ass, smart MP and she'd never been able to pinpoint where her husband turned from loving to abusive. She just figured she'd been lucky to get out in one piece. She'd made a life for herself that didn't include trust, in herself or anyone else. She was honest enough to admit that. Didn't mean she'd ever had any intention of changing it. Didn't know if it was possible.

She could call up one of her old friends now and go hang out with them a few a days while she tried to figure out this mess. It irritated her that she didn't. That would be the smart thing to do. The logical, protect—herself-emotionally thing to do. But instinct was driving her home, right into Walker's arms and that scared her almost as much as someone trying to kill her. There was an undercurrent of violence in Walker that reminded her of Nick. It both repelled and appealed to her. She knew he'd never hurt her, but it was there. Maybe it was his restraint she found so appealing.

On the other hand ... She shivered as she pulled the door open to her building. Her office—and the place they'd had lunch—was only a couple of blocks from home so she'd walked. The entire time she'd felt eyes watching her and the walk, limping along with the hated cane, seemed to take forever. She sighed with relief when once inside the feeling faded.

She'd packed a duffel bag the previous night and only stayed in her condo long enough to double-check its contents. Lap top—check. Clothes—check. Compact .40-caliber pistol—check. She made a quick phone call and paused long enough at her living room window to peek through the blinds, wondering who was following her and hoping he was still out on the street in front of the building, before leaving again.

She made her way carefully down the stairwell and went out the building's back service entrance. The heavy bag slung over one shoulder, she crossed the street and entered a bar. Waving at the bartender, who happened to be a friendly neighbor in her building, she ducked into the kitchen and out

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

the back door, then walked to the end of the alley where the cab was already waiting. *Paranoid much?* She grumbled to herself before telling the driver to go to the airport where she rented a car and started the long drive home to Alabama and Walker.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

Detective John Brady disconnected the line with a slam and a curse. His day had gone from bad to worse. He was beginning to feel his life and his future spiral out of control and out of his grasp. He was up for his biggest promotion yet—Deputy Chief of the Birmingham Police Department—but he'd heard just this morning from a confidential source inside the Chief's office that Internal Affairs was holding it up. He'd quietly set about asking questions and wasn't surprised to learn the problem was Steven Manning.

He and Manning had always disliked each other, and Manning used his power in the IA's office to investigate him at every opportunity, sure he was a dirty cop. Manning hadn't been able to prove anything or prevent his promotion to captain over the detectives division, but he sure as fuck hadn't given up.

Reaching for his keys, Brady stood and left the room, making his way through the building and out to his car. Desperation made his gut clench and he made an instant decision, as instant as the one that left him pumping a full magazine into that bastard Hugo Beaumont all those years ago. Back then, what had started out as a profitable little sideline had quickly got out of hand. Hugo made more and more demands, threatening to turn him in during that last little powwow. He'd had to go. They'd never even looked at Brady during that investigation, though certainly some people

were suspicious of him. Manning had been a thorn in his side ever since.

He drove to a less than respectable side of town. He snorted. Yeah right. More like a slum. Pulling into a bar parking lot, he turned the car off and tapped his thumb against the steering wheel for a minute. How much was this going to cost him? He opened the center console, lifted out the bottom and reached into the small compartment hidden there. Lifting the cash out, he fanned it. Fifty thousand. Much more than necessary for a simple B-and-E. Ten should do it. He counted five thousand out, stuck the stack in the inside pocket of his jacket, returned the other to its hidden location, locked up the car, and went inside.

The bar was dark and smoky, and he walked to a corner booth in the back nodding slightly at the men he wanted to speak to on his way. The two men, formerly Walker's henchmen, now freelancers, picked up their beers and joined him.

"What's up cop?" one asked as if announcing to the bar what he was. He barely restrained the urge to roll his eyes. It wasn't like anyone in the bar didn't know who he was.

He quickly and quietly explained what he wanted done, emphasizing the need to leave no trace evidence. It was a beautiful scheme. They'd tear the house apart, leaving plenty of physical evidence behind them even if they tried not to, and he'd go in later to take care of the owner. The mess they left should cover his presence. Not that he told them about the second part of the plan. Much easier to pin it on someone else this way. The murder of a cop was not going to come

back and bite him the ass. And using Walker's men to set it all in motion? Genius. There were still officers on the force who'd love to fry his ass. He didn't feel even a twinge of guilt for setting two men up to take the fall for a murder he would commit.

"What do you want us to do with the haul?" one of them asked.

"Get it in the incinerator tonight. Don't keep any of it for yourselves. Don't try to sell it." If they were curious about the odd job, neither asked. He was sure they wouldn't follow his instructions either. They'd keep something for themselves. That worked for his purposes. Just more evidence to make them look guilty, and in the end, when the investigation began to unfold, there wouldn't be anyone alive to connect him to these two men or Manning's murder.

They nodded and he pulled out the cash, sliding it across the table.

"Five now. The rest when I hear it's done."

They agreed and he left, feeling his first sense of relief. He was almost free and clear. A flicker of unease reminded him it might not be over.

The woman had disappeared. She knew how to shake a trail and cover her tracks. He expected he'd get word any minute now she was back in Birmingham and snooping around. He couldn't believe her close call wasn't enough to make her back off. It defied reason.

He'd really like to get his hands on whoever had shot her. What a stupid fucking move. He could have kept snowballing her without that. Eventually she would have given up. But

getting shot? That made it personal. He understood that even if it complicated the shit out of things for him.

Unfortunately it made it personal for her *and* Walker Graham. Brady had to decide what to do with her and drawing Walker Graham out was the perfect way. He had the perfect plan for that too. He'd been willing to let Walker go his own way as long as he stayed out of his business, but that wasn't likely to happen now. The man was the only real threat to his future. He was a threat that had to be eliminated, and his woman with him.

He smiled as he left the building. In a few days every thorn in his side—Manning, Walker, and Grace Monroe—would be gone.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

Walker leaned under the hood, trying not to think of anything but the car and the work. Three days ago he'd left her. Three days of silence, every minute certain she'd call, dreading she wouldn't. Maybe it was time to forget her and move on. *Fuck!* He yanked the wrench hard enough to break a bolt and stepped away, slapping the hood closed. He set his palms flat on the metal, leaning over with his head tucked to his chest and closed his eyes. Immediately her face sprang to mind, eyes tight with anger and fear every time he tried to push their relationship to another level. Maybe it was time to pack it in. Maybe there was a reason she hadn't called. Maybe she'd remembered what he was.

He heard a throat clear behind him and he slowly straightened to turn around. His brother Boyd leaned against the open door a few feet behind him. Prison had hardened Boyd so much Walker had feared he'd never have a moment's peace in his life. Lynn had changed that. Odd how Lynn's presence had changed the course of both their lives. Too bad she'd never been what Walker wanted. No. Needed. Like he needed air. This 'calmly waiting till Grace came to her senses' shit was going to kill him.

"How's it going, bro?" Boyd asked.

Walker grunted, giving his head a slight shake in response and started to put away his tools. He'd been working till midnight every night and the work was finally caught up. Not because he'd busted his ass, but because Boyd had picked up

his slack. Boyd had come behind him like the big brother he was and cleaned up all the screw-ups Walker had spent the last few days making. And there were plenty. His mind was definitely not on the job. No, his mind was on a certain blonde bombshell in Atlanta who refused to admit she might need help. Might need him and what they could be together.

Tools locked in their proper drawers, he moved to the industrial sized sink and reached for the GoJo. He scrubbed his arms and hands with the heavy duty cleanser, but felt Boyd's gaze on his back, sensed his questions coming before they did, and his back stiffened in advance.

"Heard from Grace?"

"No," he answered curtly, hoping to discourage any other queries.

"Maybe it's time..." Boyd paused, taking a deep breath. "Maybe it's time you let her go. Move on."

He had just been thinking the same thing, but for some reason hearing it from someone else enraged him. Grace was *his* woman. She had been for years. He knew it. Hadn't he spent years molding himself as someone worthy of her? If she would just admit it, life would be one hundred percent good.

"The same way you forgot Lynn?" he snarled. Even ten years in prison hadn't been enough to make Boyd forget Lynn.

Boyd barked a short laugh. "Yeah, like that, man."

Rinsing the soap from his arms, Walker reached for a towel to dry off and turned to meet his brother's gaze. After ten years in Holman State Prison, Boyd had mastered masking emotions. Hell, for a while there Walker wasn't sure he even

had any left. But finally after years of uncertainty, Boyd's relationship with Lynn was secure and his rough outer edge was beginning to soften. With the people he loved at least. Walker didn't like what he saw in his brother's eyes now, something that felt uncomfortably like pity. Instead of saying anything, offering some stupid banal condolences, Boyd's expression closed and he stood back from the door.

"You done here? Let's walk over to the house and get a beer."

Walker took a look around the garage feeling grim. Hell, why not? His mind wasn't on task anyway. He nodded, locked the door behind them, and crossed the short yard that separated the garage from his house, which sat facing the river.

As careful as he was to keep the shop locked, he never bothered with his home. Boyd turned the knob and pushed the door open, heading straight down the center hallway to the kitchen on the back of the house. He went to the fridge, pulling out two beers, before flipping a chair around and sitting at the table. He handed one to Walker and twisted the lid off his.

"Where's Lynn?" Walker asked.

Boyd rolled his eyes. "Some country club thing with her mother."

Walker hid a smile behind a swig of beer. Boyd's opinion on Lynn's continued membership at the town's small country club was well known. The Graham brothers were not exactly from the right side of town. Hell, they named the wrong side just for people like them.

"So about Grace," Boyd said and this time it was Walker that rolled his eyes. His brother was obviously determined to make him talk. He sighed. Just great. Exactly what he needed—to rub salt in an open wound.

"What about her?"

Boyd tipped his bottle back before answering.

"Did you know she was married once?"

Walker had been leaning back in the chair, the front two legs tipped off the floor. They thudded to the ground as jealousy whipped through him.

"No," he ground out.

Whether it was a denial of knowledge or inability to accept she had kept it from him, he couldn't say. One thing was sure. That he'd had to hear about it from his brother instead of her practically begged some kind of punishment.

Boyd nodded as if confirming a suspicion. "Apparently the husband was a real piece of work."

Fuck. He didn't like where this going.

"Lynn said he busted Grace up pretty good when she divorced him."

He shoved to his feet and stalked to the window. No wonder she didn't trust men. The unexplained scars on her body suddenly had meaning. He stared outside and set his shaking hands on his hips, trying to control his reaction to Boyd's words. The first thing he wanted to do was find the ex-husband and rip him apart piece by piece. Then he wanted to find Grace and shake her. What other secrets was she using to keep him at an emotional distance?

"How long have you known this?" he asked his brother in a low voice. How long had Boyd kept it from him?

"Couple of days. Lynn seems to think Grace is completely over it, that it doesn't affect the way she lives her life."

He snorted. Sure she was. "Like hell."

"Yeah that's what I said." Boyd continued in a quiet tone. "What are you going to do? You can't force her to accept you. And with a history like that, if she's unwilling or unable to try, you're setting yourself up for a world of hurt, bro."

"I can't not try," he whispered. Turning around, he faced his brother. He had no idea where his new determination came from, but he embraced it. "I won't give her up."

Boyd knocked back the rest of his beer and stood up. His expression was grim, but then it usually was.

"I know how that goes." He gave him a steady gaze, one of support, one of understanding. "Let me know if you need anything."

He stopped to drop the empty bottle in the trash, then said good-bye and walked out the backdoor. Walker watched him walk to the path that edged the river and disappear from sight, before he turned back to his empty kitchen.

His stomach rumbled, protesting his recent habit of skipping lunch, and he rummaged through the cabinets. He hadn't been to the grocery store in weeks and the most interesting find was stale cereal. Tossing it towards the trash can, he turned towards the fridge. It was just as bad. Deciding to run into nearby Dothan for dinner, he grabbed his keys from the hook on the wall, picked up his cell phone. He

hated the damned new technology, but hell, she might call. He didn't lock the back door behind him as he went outside.

Halfway around the house, he heard a car pull into the driveway that bypassed the garage. He was afraid to believe his eyes when he rounded the corner. Grace sat behind the wheel of a compact rental, staring at the house. She didn't notice his approach, so he got to study her before she put up her protective mask. His hands clenched in anger.

Her mouth was pressed in a firm line, the skin around her eyes tight with black half moons under them. Her hands were on the steering wheel and they convulsively clenched it when he tapped on the window before she twisted her head to face him. What had her so spooked? He watched her take a deep breath as if trying to slow a suddenly hammering heart. Her breasts rose under a white tank top riveting his attention for a moment. All the blood in his body rushed to his cock. *Down boy.* Didn't look like she was here for sex, much as he liked the idea.

Reaching for the door handle, he stepped back and swung it open. She got out, gave him a weak smile and tucked her hands in her back pockets. By force of sheer will, he ignored her upthrust breasts and watched her face. She looked tired and wary, but healed. She stood steady on her injured leg. He wanted to grab her and never let go, and wondered what the hell she was doing here. Normally by this point she'd be jumping his bones. Or he'd be jumping hers.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey."

She pressed her lips together and looked at her feet.

"Um. How are you?"

He choked down an angry laugh. Was she joking? And what was that in her voice? Indecision? Insecurity? She had to realize he'd never turn her away. He watched her, silently willing her to open up to him. She refused to meet his eyes.

"I don't think you want a real answer for that, Grace."

Her gaze flew to his, but she wisely held back a denial. Her reply was sarcastic.

"Just being polite."

He crossed his arms over his chest and narrowed his eyes. He'd worked hard to transform himself from criminal muscle to respectable citizen. He wasn't feeling very civilized right now. He should have established certain ground rules right from the start. Then she wouldn't be so surprised when she finally got the spanking that was coming to her.

"Anyone ever tell you you need your ass spanked?"

Some emotion flickered through her eyes, one that looked like fear, and she took a step away from him, nervously drawing her bottom lip between her teeth. Growling his displeasure, he followed her. What the fuck? He had never hurt her. He *would* never hurt her and she damned well knew it.

"Don't do that, Grace. I'm not your ex."

Still retreating, she gasped, her backwards steps halted when she hit the car. He crowded her, wondering at this new skittishness. Was this the real Grace? The one she was so good at hiding? Lifting his hand, his thumb hovered over her lip a moment when she winced. Damn it. How would he get it through her stubborn skull that he wasn't a threat to her? He

lightly brushed the soft skin, waiting until she leaned just a little bit into the touch before sliding his hand around to cup the nape of her neck. Sighing, she leaned against him, her hands coming up to rest on his chest. Her touch set his body to throbbing.

"I would never hurt you, Grace," he said softly. "You have to know that."

Her eyes flashed her anger and stiffening she tried to pull away, but he held her close with one arm around her waist and the other around her shoulders. His hold was firm, but not tight. Damn it, he was not letting her go. He'd worked too hard to get her. They were quiet and still for several minutes. Grace broke the silence first.

"Are we gonna stand out here in the yard all night?"

"I was going in to town to get something to eat when you pulled in. You up for it?"

She nodded her head against his chest and this time when she pulled away, distracted by the sweet strawberry smell filling his nostrils, he let her go. After grabbing her purse from the vehicle and locking it, she followed him to his car and climbed in. They barely spoke on the drive, only doing so to decide on a restaurant, settling on a place with an outside seating area.

Dinner was uneventful. By unspoken agreement they didn't discuss why she'd come or what had her so nervous. The ex-husband went unmentioned. Her mask was back in place, but he watched her intently, seeing an occasional crack in her composure. A car backfired in the parking lot while he was paying the check and she flinched, whirling to face the

noise and cursing under her breath. She hadn't been nearly this jumpy when he'd left her in Atlanta a few days ago, and he was positive something had happened.

Hustling her to the car, he vowed to make her tell him everything when they got back to his house. She'd come to him; she had to be ready to admit she needed help, ready to admit she needed him. He knew at the very least she couldn't take on Hugo's killer by herself. Hell, he didn't want her anywhere near that mess, but he knew her well enough to know she wasn't ready to back off. She hadn't given any hint that her memory had returned so maybe he had nothing to worry about.

He kept a close eye on her during the drive home. The closer they got, the more agitated she got, worrying her bottom lip and clenching and unclenching her hands in her lap. When they arrived, he ushered her in.

"Want a beer?" he asked.

"Sure."

He lived in an old modified shotgun house. Instead of the old four rooms leading directly into each other, a hall had been added to one side to give privacy to the two bedrooms. The kitchen was at the end of the hall, the living room at the front of the house, and two bed rooms which shared a bath in between them. He left her in the front room—the living room—his steps the only sound as he walked across the wood floorboards to the hall. Retrieving two bottles from the refrigerator he twisted the lids off and hurried back to the living room.

She was pacing its length and paused long enough to accept the beer he handed her and take a long drink. He settled on the couch and watched her through narrow eyes, waiting her out while she worked through what she wanted to say. After that, he'd get the truth from her. She stopped at the side of the window and peered out, taking another long drink.

"I left my bag in the car."

He cocked an eyebrow. Not exactly the start he expected. "We can get it later."

"I left my gun in it," she said quietly.

That got his attention. He knew she had one, but she'd told him once she didn't often carry it. She started walking towards the door and he jumped up, meeting her halfway. She looked up at him, but she was distracted and he got the impression she didn't really see him. He blocked her path when she tried to bypass him and finally her gaze focused on him.

"I need to get my bag out of the car, Walker. I'd feel ... safer with the gun in here with me."

While he tried to process that—something really had her spooked her—she went around him and reached for the doorknob. No way in hell. Not until he knew what the fuck was going on. His palm landed flat against the door, holding it closed as she tried to yank it open.

"What the hell, Walker?" she asked, exasperation in her voice.

"It can wait until you tell me what the fuck is wrong." But there was something else he had to hear first. No more

secrets. No more hidden pasts for either of them. "Start with the ex-husband."

He towered over her and barely restrained the urge to use his size to bully her to speak. Instead, he took her hand and led her to sofa. They sat next to each other, but she didn't look at him. She twined her fingers together in her lap and clenched her jaw. He waited her out.

"His name is Nick. I met him in the Army and divorced him before I got out of the Army." She looked up and met his gaze. "It was a long time ago, Walker."

This time when he reached up to trail his fingers along her jaw, she didn't flinch.

"He hurt you." It was a simple statement of fact. No point in asking—they both knew it was true. Someone hurting her infuriated him. He wanted to put his fist through the wall.

She lowered her eyes and took a deep breath. When she looked up, he saw the wariness in her gaze.

"You're a lot like him."

He ground his teeth before answering. This time his anger wasn't directed solely at some faceless ex-husband. Hadn't she learned anything about him in the last six months?

"I am *nothing* like that Grace. I've never hurt a woman in my life. I'm not about to start now."

She laughed softly. "The whole caveman, alpha male thing. And you're capable of violence. I see it in you. You can't deny it."

The statement treaded uncomfortably close to his past and left him wondering what exactly Lynn had told her about him,

what she remembered. All of that ugliness had to come out soon.

"If the wrong person pushed my buttons, maybe." With sudden clarity, he knew why she was there. "That's why you're here."

Not because she needed him, but she recognized something in him that wouldn't allow her to be harmed. He felt used, hurt, for half a second then decided it could be used to his advantage. *Please God, let it work for me in the end.*

"What's got you so scared, Grace?"

She started to catalogue the things that had happened in the last few days. The slashed tires and break-ins alarmed him, but it was the mention of Chase Beaumont that really got his attention. A feeling of dread overwhelmed him, one he hadn't felt since his brother's arrest all those years ago. He stood to lose a lot more this time around.

She thought he was capable of violence. And wasn't that an understatement? She was investigating Hugo Beaumont's murder, and she had to have discovered his connection to the man. But did she remember finding that connection? Was it coincidence she was involved, or something else? When should he fill her in on his past? That conversation was going to suck major balls.

He gritted his teeth. Yeah, he could see it now. *So babe, once upon a time Boyd and I were well on our way to being just like Hugo Beaumont. No, Boyd's arrest isn't what straightened me out. Following Lynn to Birmingham to get revenge for Boyd's incarceration helped. No idea how I would have actually done that, though. Working as Hugo's muscle,*

finding Hugo dead and knowing I'd be damned lucky not to follow Boyd to prison ... Yeah, that might've been what done the trick. Yeah, that'd go over real well.

He was having a hell of time getting her to trust him and here she was investigating a murder he'd been a suspect in. The more he thought about it, the more convinced he was that was no coincidence. Did Chase Beaumont think Walker killed his father? Was that why he'd hired her and if so, how did he know they were involved? Chase would have to have been keeping track of him. And who *had* killed Hugo? He hadn't cared much at the time. It sure as hell wasn't him. But with Grace involved, knowing was suddenly very important. Whoever the killer was meant business about not being discovered.

Grace was eyeing the door again, arms crossed defensively over her chest. He felt the old Walker rise, suspicious and cold-blooded and angry. If she thought he'd done it, she'd be pretty fucking stupid to seek him out. He ignored the way it hurt and concentrated on the anger. She would know him better if she weren't so obsessed with keeping their relationship casual.

"How much do you remember from your trip to Birmingham?"

She smiled grimly. "Nothing. But don't worry, I didn't come here thinking you shot me."

"Why not? I could have—it's only a four hour drive from here to Birmingham."

He'd said it a little sarcastically, but he was honestly curious why she didn't blame him. Maybe she trusted him after all?

She shrugged. "How could you? They called you right after I went into surgery because your business card was in my pocket and my car was gone by the time the EMT's got to me. No ID." She smiled grimly. "So they called the garage. And yeah, that could have been forwarded to your cell so I checked. You were here."

Or maybe trust wasn't part of it after all.

"So why are you here then, Grace?"

She shrugged again and stood, walking to look out the window again. "I have no idea," she whispered.

Turning her back to the glass, she faced him, hands back in her back pockets. Angry as he was with her, his body responded and he tried to ignore it. It was more than her body or the memory of her skin sliding against his. He felt an instinctive bone-deep need to protect her, to stand in front of her and fight off the world. He was more dangerous now than he'd ever been. Maybe she was right to avoid getting more deeply involved with him, but he would be damned before he let her walk away.

"I guess I thought I'd be safe enough here to try to figure out what's going." She laughed bitterly. "Kind of funny, isn't it? I mean, you're obviously not safe. What exactly did you do for Hugo anyway? I'm going on the assumption you didn't kill him, because I know you didn't shoot me. And why do you have one long-ass arrest record and no convictions? Nothing ever went to trial."

She tilted her chin up, the action tossing her long blond hair back, waiting for his answer and he dragged a hand over his head. Simple things first.

"No, I didn't kill him."

He knew he had to tell her everything, but he needed a drink before he started and walked to the sideboard on the wall behind the couch. Reaching down to open the bottom cabinet door, he pulled out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses and poured them both a shot. She joined him and picked up a glass, arching one eyebrow as he drank his in one swallow.

"That bad?"

"Hugo didn't like to get his hands dirty. In any way. He collected the money, but other people moved the drugs." He poured another shot and threw it back. "And different people handled the problems."

She reached for the bottle and poured.

"So you were the knee breaker?"

"Something like that."

"How else would you describe it?" she asked, irritation edging her tone.

"Okay, it was exactly like that."

He sat the glass down with a thud and turned to face her, leaning one hip against the cabinet. Reaching up with one hand, he traced a line from her cheek to her jaw and down to her chin. He was surprised she didn't pull away. She was taking it surprisingly well. Of course, he wasn't telling her anything she didn't already know.

"And now? What are you doing now?"

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

He scowled down at her, wanting to shake her. Didn't she realize a lot of the man he was now was due to her? Once he'd decided to go straight, she'd been the ideal he strove to, to be worthy of a woman like her.

"Nothing. I'm not doing anything now. Hugo died and I came home and started over, started clean."

* * * *

Grace was crazy for being here. Certifiable. Worse, he stared down at her with such haunted eyes, and she believed every word he said. Her investigation backed up his claims, but there was always the possibility she'd missed something. The hell of it was she wasn't sure she cared. *Get a grip, Grace, of course you care.*

She'd had plenty of time to think it over on the drive down, plenty of time to make a decision in the last twenty-four hours, truth be told. Had she done that? Hell, no. Every instinct told her she was safe here. Physically at least. Once he recovered from the shock of what was going on, he'd start pushing the relationship thing again. She didn't have a clue how she was going to continue to combat that. Part of her didn't want to try. God, she was sick and tired of feeling pulled so many different ways with him. She didn't think he was still doing anything illegal, but she couldn't be sure. She could be wrong and that would kill her. Or was it just her trust issues toying with her? Providing a logical excuse to keep him at an emotional distance?

It had been so much easier before. She'd been able to keep it a casual sexual relationship. But when she was shot

and laid up in the hospital, she'd seen the vulnerability in him. She'd watched him soldier through his fear for her and his determination to protect her grow. It was hard to resist, and she was honest enough to admit that the real war was within herself. She was tempted to just give in. Oh, she could take care of herself well enough, but damn, it would be nice to have someone to lean on once in a while.

She'd had her share of relationships since her divorce six years ago, but she'd kept them casual. She liked sex. Who didn't? But at the first sign of things getting complicated, she moved on. Somehow Walker had maneuvered around her defenses. He was under her skin and in her heart before she'd been able to stop it.

And now ... now she had a much more serious problem. *Problems, Grace, plural*. First there was the matter of Walker's violent past. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that. She'd sensed it, suspected it and had that confirmed in her nice, not so tidy office in Atlanta. She'd thought it wasn't a big deal, wasn't something she couldn't deal with. But here, facing him she was a little scared at a completely primitive level. She didn't think she was in any danger from him, but she couldn't help that little kernel of fear. The fear made her angry with herself. Hadn't she come farther than that?

What really pissed her off though, was being kept in the dark about this secret past of his. He'd had the perfect opportunity to come clean during their last argument—he hadn't. It was stupid to feel hurt over that. She was the one always insisting on keeping things impersonal, on not

exchanging past information and secrets. She refused to acknowledge the change had anything to do with how she felt about him and insisted to herself it was all about the current situation. That was information she needed for her own safety not to mention solving the mystery.

Her anger included her cousin, too. And so what if that was just part of her protection mechanism? Pushing *everyone* away, even family had become second nature. Lynn had never discussed Walker's past, and she had to have known. They were both mentioned in the police file—Lynn as the first officer called to the scene, Walker as a suspect in Hugo's murder. Of course, Lynn didn't have a clue that she had been hired to investigate the murder, but as family, she could have given Grace some kind of warning about what kind of man she was sleeping with. Lynn was one of the very few people she trusted, the last she could call family, and the betrayal hurt. If Grace had been less determined to keep herself apart from everyone else, Lynn might have felt comfortable talking about Walker's past. Grace was certain Lynn would have told her if she thought Walker was a danger to her, but still a heads up would have been nice.

And then there was the case. What should have been an objective, dry investigation into an old murder was anything but. Her cousin had been the responding officer, Grace's lover had been a suspect and now someone was trying to kill her or at least scare her off.

"Hey, you still with me here?"

Walker's deep, mellow voice shook her out of her thoughts, his arms slid around her waist and he pulled her

close. Overcome with emotions—fear, anger, confusion, love—she laid her head against his chest and listened to the rapid pounding of his heart while trying to get a grip on hers. At least he wasn't as unaffected as he appeared. She pushed her hands into his back pockets and took a deep breath, enjoying the comforting feel of him. She swung so wildly from one extreme to the other with Walker—lust to irritation to fear to comfort. Her own slice of insanity. She took a deep breath. There were more serious things to worry about right now.

"I need to find out who killed Hugo," she said softly, turning her face into Walker's chest and rubbing her nose against the scratchy material of his shirt.

"Later," he murmured.

As usual when in such close proximity, no matter how angry she was, her body rushed to respond to him. Her nipples tightened, her pussy creamed and clenched, and she shifted closer, pushing her pelvis against him. He sucked in a ragged breath when she brushed against his cock, already engorged and hard. He moved one arm to circle her shoulders while he gripped the back of her nape with his other hand. Tilting her head back, he met her gaze. His was hot and needy and she felt a feminine thrill wind through her. She knew that look. He wanted to fuck her, long and hard and half the night. That worked for her. She needed the release. She needed the contact, needed to feel connected to another person. No, not just any person. Walker. She needed Walker. Shit. She was in trouble, but with her breasts aching for his touch and her cunt practically begging to be possessed, she

couldn't dredge up much concern for her heart. You couldn't help who you loved right? It's not like the universe gave you a choice.

As if sensing her dilemma, he claimed her lips before she could think of pulling away. He was demanding, plundering, silently ordering her to respond. The kiss was wild, tinged with a desperate desire. It was all she could do to grab his shoulders and hang on as the world shifted. Part of her brain registered movement and she realized he'd picked her open and was moving to the bedroom, though his lips were still sealed to hers.

He kicked the door opened and strode into the room, following her down when he lowered her to the bed. Propped on his elbows, his torso pressing hers into the bed, he stared into her eyes. His gaze was hot, carnal.

"How's your leg?" he whispered.

Would a complete jerk have asked? She tried to shrug but he wasn't giving her enough room for the action.

"Okay. I won't be doing any back flips any time soon," she joked.

He flashed her a quick grin. Message received. No acrobatic sex tonight.

He caught her lips again, tugging at the bottom one with his teeth to get her to part them. This time when he took her mouth his tongue was a slow firm thrust he matched with a rocking movement of his hips, an action designed to make her beg for more. She moaned against his mouth when he pinched the nipple of one breast. He broke the kiss and slid down her body. Pushing her shirt and bra up, his teeth closed

gently over the hard tip of her breast and he sucked it into his mouth.

When she held his head in place and arched more fully into his mouth, he growled and bit her. She gasped. If she weren't so turned on already, it would have hurt, but instead it added to the lust building in her body. He grabbed her hands and held them above her head while he sat up, straddling her hips. His face was tight, the strain of holding back evident in tight lines etched around his eyes and mouth and her pussy got wetter. He quickly stripped them both then resumed his place between her legs.

"I hope you're ready. I don't think I can wait."

His cock slid into her wet heat and he groaned, holding still.

"Damn, Grace."

She wrapped her legs around his waist and dug her heels into the small of his back. Forcing him deeper. Filling her so she wasn't sure where he ended and she began. Her thigh would punish her for it later, but for now it was the best feeling in the world.

He kissed her again, a supple teasing meeting of lips, feather soft and heating as he started moving inside her. His tongue and his cock matched rhythm as the pace increased. Little explosions of arousal seemed to go off through her body, quickly building to orgasm as his cock thrust higher and higher in her pussy.

It rolled through her sooner than she expected and every muscle in her body clenched as the pleasure took her, Walker's thrusts slowing to a sedate rocking while she rode it

out. She slowly came back to earth and opened her eyes to see him staring at her intently. He was still hard and firm inside her. Lifting her hands off his shoulders, he wrapped them around the iron bars of the headboard.

"Hang on," he grunted.

Once he assured her grip was firm, he picked up the pace. Harder. Faster. Swiveling his hips in a way that drove her crazy. He found her clit with one hand, gripped the nape of her neck with the other, and claimed her lips in a brutal possessive kiss all the while working his pelvis against hers. His mouth swallowed her cry when she came again, but he broke the kiss a moment later with a roar in his own.

She lay beneath him panting, fighting the swell of sudden emotion that threatened to overwhelm her. He rolled off her and pulled her up under his shoulder breathing hard. She rolled to her side to look at him. He had an arm flung over his eyes and his lips were slightly parted. She watched as his breathing evened, enjoying the rare opportunity to just look at him. The man was built like a Greek god and she suspected he had the soul of a modern day outlaw. And she was in love with him. How was she going to live without him? How could she live with him?

She barely managed to keep from jumping when he spoke, arm still concealing half his face.

"You're thinking about it too much."

"Thinking about what?" she asked cautiously. He couldn't know she was thinking about him. Them.

He chuckled and lowered his arm, rolling his head on the pillow to look at her.

"Us. This thing between us. It is what it is. What's the point in fighting it?"

She sighed. Days ago, she would have balked at the suggestion but after the week she'd had her defenses were low.

"Go to sleep, baby. It'll still be here in the morning."

She smiled. The man was perceptive, knowing she viewed it as a problem and would worry over it at the first opportunity. Letting go of it for now, she rolled to her side and he followed, spooning behind her, wrapping his body around her, his heat around her. Protecting her, comforting her whether she wanted him to or not. She smiled, and letting exhaustion take her, and drifted off to sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

Grace woke slowly, squinting against the sunlight streaming through the window and stretching her arms high over her head. Judging by the amount of light pouring in the room, it was late morning. The house felt empty, still and quiet, but she smelled coffee. She should get a couple cups and find Walker. She grimaced. How domestic. The urge wasn't like her at all. Then again, she was in uncharted territory here.

She sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, looking around the spartan room. It was small, filled to bursting with his king sized bed and one long dresser. Her gaze stopped at the dresser and she smiled. He'd brought her things in at some point before he'd left.

She dressed in a hurry in the first thing she pulled out, cutoff jeans and a tank top. She retrieved her gun from an inside compartment. It was in a small pancake holster that clipped to the back inside of her shorts. After tugging the shirt on, she looked over her shoulder in the mirror to make sure it wasn't visible. The relief was immediate. She still hadn't shaken the feeling of being hunted, and she was glad she'd kept up her pistol practice up even if she rarely carried anymore.

Leaving the room, she went in search of the coffee pot. In the kitchen, she found a clean mug, poured a cup of coffee, and looked out the back window. With a grin she reached for the door handle and stepped onto the new deck. The last time

she'd been in town, at Christmas time, she'd asked Walker why on earth he didn't have a deck bigger than three by three feet. His back yard was shaded and overlooked the water. Seemed a waste not to take advantage of it.

He'd obviously decided to take her advice. The new deck stretched the length of the back of the house, mirroring the front deck. He had a grill area outside the kitchen door and a table and chairs in the center. She pulled one out and sat. The porch railing was low and she could easily see over it. Movement caught her eye in the brush down by the water and she watched it half interested not quite fully awake, wondering what kind of wildlife lived in Walker's backyard. Squinting against the glare she shielded her eyes and walked to the top step leading down into the yard. *What the hell?*

"Grace?" She heard the front door slam and Walker call out.

"Back here," she hollered through the open kitchen door.

She heard his heavy footsteps as he walked through the house, stopping inside the door. She stood still, not quite believing what she was seeing down by the river. Finally, he came out, mug in hand.

"Um, Walker..."

He'd set his cup down on the table and come up behind her, putting his hands on her hips and leaning in to nibble her neck.

"You have a gator in your back yard."

"They don't call 'em Alabama yard dogs for nothing," he murmured, dropping a line of kisses up her neck.

Her body strummed, but the tension wasn't sexual. There was an alligator. In his back yard. She stepped out of his reach, gripped the railing and leaned over to look again. *Yep. Definitely a gator.*

"I needed some new boots anyway," she muttered under her breath.

He laughed and grabbed her hand, yanking her back into his embrace.

"Roscoe is harmless. Don't go shooting the endangered wild life, okay?"

She felt her eyebrows fly into her hairline.

"Roscoe? You named the gator?"

She didn't even try to keep the disbelief out of her voice. "Roscoe P. Coltrane."

A gator named after an inept cop. Given the Graham brothers' prior relationships with law enforcement, she shouldn't be surprised. As if her life hadn't taken enough strange twists the last few weeks. Walker apparently had a pet gator named, of all things, Roscoe. But it was just too much. She laughed. She laughed so hard her sides hurt and tears streamed down her face. Blindly, she groped behind her for a chair and pulled it over, sinking into it and wiping the moisture from her face.

"What makes you think this, um, Roscoe is so harmless?"

"Remember the Flying Purple People Eater?"

"The one eyed, one horned, flying purple people eater?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Yeah." He grinned. "What you got there is a one eyed, one armed, pretty slow alligator."

For some reason that sent her off into another fit of laughter. Who knew Walker was a comedian? She sobered quickly though. Gators were really nothing to joke about were they? And yet, she couldn't seem to stop the chuckle the bubbled up.

Walker pulled a chair around and sat in front of her so close they were knee to knee. When she calmed, he lifted a hand to caress her face.

"You look much more relaxed today," he said softly.

"Yeah, well I got you and Roscoe out there for comic relief."

He grinned.

"Glad to oblige."

He picked up his mug and downed the coffee in one swallow.

"Listen, I have to get back to the garage. You got mail. I left it on the kitchen table."

"Thanks."

He leaned in and kissed her. It was hard, possessive, and over all too quick. Then he was standing and walking back towards the house. He paused inside the doorway, craning his head around the corner to speak.

"Oh yeah, Lynn and Boyd are coming over for dinner. I figure you're gonna want to talk to both of us anyway. Might as well get it over with."

He clenched his jaw, and she knew he didn't want to talk to her about his past, but he'd agreed last night before they finally went to sleep. He wouldn't back out now.

"Okay." She nodded. She'd take what she could get.
"Thanks, Walker."

He didn't answer, just held her gaze a long moment before opening his mouth to speak. He snapped it shut without a word and disappeared in the house. She heard the front door slam behind him a few seconds later.

Sighing, she picked up her empty coffee cup and headed inside. The box of files she'd mailed was waiting for her on the kitchen table. She opened it, pulled the Beaumont files out and started reading again.

A few hours later she threw the papers down and stood, arching her back in a stretch. It was no wonder the case was unsolved—half the criminal element in Birmingham had apparently wanted to kill Hugo. Of those, most had alibis and the ones who didn't couldn't be placed at the scene. Except for Walker, who they could prove was in the house but not at the time of the shooting. The murder weapon had never been recovered. Reading between lines, no one had tried very hard to find evidence and make an arrest.

She started a fresh pot of coffee and tried to decide what to do next. Another trip to Birmingham didn't hold much appeal, but she needed to speak to the principals involved in the case and it was best to do that face to face. You missed the nuances of facial expression, body language over the phone. Lynn and Walker would be easy. Well, not easy, but it would be easier to talk to them here than go back to the place where she knew someone was trying to kill her. The detective—Brady—she would call. After she had a fresh jolt of

caffeine. She poured another cup and grabbed the cordless phone from the wall mount.

Dialing the number, she waited through several rings then sat on hold a few minutes before Brady picked up his extension.

"Ms. Monroe," he drawled. "How are you?"

"Fine. You?"

"Same as usual. No word on your car or purse, I'm afraid."

She blinked. She hadn't even thought about either, but she was surprised the SUV at least hadn't shown up yet. Or pieces of it.

"Okay. That's not why I was calling actually. You said I came to see you before I was shot, right?"

"That's right." He sounded cautious now, no longer the helpful voice on the other end of the line. What was it about this guy that made the hair on her arms stand up in warning?

"Can you repeat that conversation again?"

"Sure. Wasn't much to it really. You wanted to know who we suspected in Beaumont's murder and I gave you a list of names. All of which were cleared."

"Right. Was Walker Graham one of those names?"

There was a long pause. Why would he hesitate? Because now he knew they were involved and he didn't before? Had she given herself away then?

"Yeah. He was."

"Did you know, um, that we were involved?" She gave herself a mental slap but couldn't resist asking.

He chuckled.

"No ma'am. You have one helluva poker face. I didn't have any idea until he showed up at the hospital."

"I see." She sighed the response and wanted to kick herself. This was so not her. Yet the instinct to protect Walker if she could was incredibly strong.

"Did I speak to anyone else at the police station?"

That had been bothering her. Brady wasn't very forthcoming, but someone had sent her copies of the police files.

"Not that I know of. Listen. Miz Monroe." Brady paused. She could hear the tension in the deeper drawl in his voice and expected him to try to put her off. He didn't disappoint her. "I understand you're being paid to find Hugo's killer, but we couldn't. And this guy ... he was not a good guy. Maybe someone did us all a public service."

"Right." It's not like it was a sentiment she hadn't heard before and even experienced a time or two, but his response got on her last nerve. Maybe she had more naivety left than she believed. "But justice is blind, right? No one should get away with murder. No matter how bad the victim may have been."

"Even if that someone is your boyfriend?"

She didn't answer. How could she? She was reasonably sure Walker didn't kill Hugo Beaumont, but without someone else to point the finger at would she ever really know? Would there always be some shred of doubt hovering in her mind? If she didn't find out, that cloud would always follow Walker. And her. But if she did discover Walker had killed Beaumont,

she didn't think she had it in her to turn him over to the Birmingham PD.

"Walker didn't kill Beaumont."

He huffed a short laugh.

"Can you be so sure?"

Could she? She squeezed her eyes shut, ignored the vice around her heart. She didn't believe it, couldn't allow herself the doubt.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm sure."

He sighed deeply. Icy fingers seemed to skitter up her spine.

"It's your funeral. I understand he's changed his life, but what's going to happen when your professional ethics clash with his past?"

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. What if he was right? No. No, he wasn't.

"Not going to happen," she said firmly. "Walker didn't do this."

They chatted a few more minutes, but the conversation wasn't going anywhere so she ended it as soon as possible. God, she wished she could go for a nice long run and pound out her frustration. It wasn't possible with her still recovering leg so she wandered into the living room and looked through Walker's DVD collection. Maybe mindless entertainment would help.

She couldn't help but smile. One thing they had in common at least. The man's OCD tendencies showed here. He had the movies separated by category and then organized alphabetically. Walker definitely had a thing for order. She

found the science fiction section and pulled out a Star Wars movie. She snickered. Nothing like Luke and Han battling an evil empire to put things in perspective.

And maybe ... yeah maybe there really wasn't. Walker was not the ultimate bad boy any more than Han Solo was. Renegade, sure. Neither wanted to live by someone else's rules. But Walker did have his own code of honor just as surely as Solo did. He might kill someone. With the right provocation. But he wasn't a killer. If she was wrong about this ... well, she wasn't. She couldn't be wrong about this. She was just working around to accepting that he was part of her future. She couldn't be so wrong about such a big thing—she didn't think she'd ever recover from it.

He was hard. He was rough around the edges. But he'd made her feel more alive than anyone had since her mother's death. Nick, even in the good times, hadn't meant nearly as much to her. That had to count for something, right? Her instincts couldn't be so wrong. Well they had been with Nick. But she'd been snowed by his looks, his charm. His bad boy reputation. She ground her molars together. God. Had she been hung up on Walker even back then? Did it matter? She was older and wiser now. She hoped.

Picking up the remote from the top of the entertainment center, she walked to the couch and hit play. She wasn't going to solve that problem today, so she might as well settle in and get lost in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

* * * *

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

Walker closed the shop early and made a quick trip to the grocery store to pick up steaks for the grill. When he walked in the house, he found Grace curled up on the couch sleeping. She looked like an angel, blond hair falling around her shoulders, hands pressed together between her knees.

He dropped the bags inside the door and eased it closed, careful to avoid making noise. He walked over and knelt next to Grace. Brushing her hair out of her face, he dropped a light kiss on her lips.

"Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Hmm," she mumbled.

Smiling, eyes still closed, she stretched her legs out and he groaned. Her shorts had ridden all the way up her thighs while she slept and moving just showcased their slim length. He ran one finger from her knee to the edge of the denim and she shifted, spreading her legs a little in invitation. Fuck, he wanted to take her up on it. Unfortunately, there was no time—Boyd and Lynn were due to arrive any minute. A kiss though. It never hurt to spare a minute for a kiss. He pressed his mouth against hers, running his tongue along the seam of her lips.

"Open, Grace," he growled.

She opened her eyes and grinned at him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I'm not always going to let you have your own way, you know."

His heart slammed in his chest. Was she finally accepting they had a future together?

"But right now you are," he whispered.

He bent back to her lips, tracing them with his tongue before delving inside. She sighed, her body melting against his, and he moved, shifting his body off the floor and onto the couch, covering her from shoulder to feet. She let her thighs fall open and he found his hips cradled against hers, his cock hard and throbbing and begging for mercy.

The door opened, but he ignored it. He ground his hips against Grace and held her head still in both palms, taking control of the kiss and fanning the flames higher between them.

"Y'all need to get a room," Boyd drawled and he finally broke the kiss, dropping his forehead to rest against Grace's.

"I have a room," he grumbled. "I have a whole damned house. Don't you knock?"

Grace twisted her neck under his arm so she could see.

"Hey Lynn."

"Hey." He could hear the grin in Lynn's voice. "I'd ask how you're doing, but I can see for myself."

Grace snickered and squirmed under him, trying to get free. He held back a gasp at the motion. Barely. He was so hard it was a miracle his dick didn't pop the zipper off his jeans. He looked up and caught Boyd's hastily hidden grin. The fucker knew exactly how uncomfortable he was.

Wincing, he levered himself off the couch and helped Grace up. Might as well get it over with. The sooner he fed them, the sooner he could get them the hell out. He jerked his head towards the door and spoke to his brother before heading for the kitchen.

"Grab the bags, Boyd."

"Sure thing, little brother," he drawled.

Walker gritted his teeth. Normally he didn't mind the ribbing that went on between them. But normally he wasn't so sexually wound up with no relief in sight. He was distracted as he stalked down the hall and the sight that met him when he stepped into the kitchen froze him in the doorway.

"Oh shit. Sorry. I was working and decided to take a break. Forgot to clean up," Grace said peaking under his arms.

Her words got him moving and he approached the table where she'd left crime scene photos spread out. Not that he needed to see them; he had relived it often enough. Lynn stepped up next to him and Grace walked around the other side of the table. She leaned over, one arm outstretched when Lynn spoke.

"You're working the Beaumont murder?"

Lynn sounded shocked and Boyd stepped up behind her, putting his hands on her shoulders and squeezing. Grace paused, her head cocked to one side. Walker could see her thinking, imagined the wheels turning in her head. She slowly pulled her arm back to her side.

"Yeah. I was hoping you could answer some questions actually."

Lynn huffed, then circled the table examining the photos.

"I doubt it." She glanced up and smiled at Grace's arched eyebrow. "I was the first officer on scene, but I was working out my notice. I went to work for the state police, remember?"

I was in Montgomery at their headquarters a couple days after this happened."

Lynn stopped in front of a picture of a shell casing, hands on her hips, then looked up and met Walker's gaze.

"What are the odds, you figure? That my cousin—your girlfriend—would be hired to investigate this murder?"

Walker shook his head. He had no idea. But there was no way it was simple chance.

"That's either a very weird coincidence or disturbing as hell."

She looked at Grace.

"Who hired you?"

"Chase Beaumont."

"Hugo's son?"

"Yep."

"This was before you got shot?"

"Yep."

Boyd caught his gaze and his confusion was obvious. Walker cut his eyes away, back to Grace and Lynn. There was a lot he hadn't told his brother while he was in prison.

Lynn sighed. "When were you going to tell us?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" Grace answered defensively. Walker watched as her eyes narrowed and her gaze swept over to include him. "You left out a thing or two, too."

"When are y'all gonna tell me what the hell is going on?" Boyd asked.

"Where'd I leave that whiskey?" Walker muttered.

He didn't know about the rest of them, but he could use it right about now. Boyd crossed his arms over his chest and glared at them all in turn, stopping with Lynn.

"Well?"

The silence stretched. Finally Grace answered.

"I'm looking into the murder of a man named Hugo Beaumont. He was killed six years ago in Birmingham. Lynn was one of the responding officers."

"And Walker?"

He turned to meet his brother's gaze.

"I worked for him."

"What else? I can tell by the look on your face there's more, little brother."

Walker shrugged. It was a long-ass time ago. How upset was Boyd really going to be about it? Knowing his brother, very.

"I was his second in command and I was a suspect for awhile. I don't think I was ever officially cleared actually."

"And you didn't think maybe I needed to know about this?" His voice vibrated with anger. Walker shook his head.

"What would have been the point? There wasn't anything you could do. It was a long time ago, Boyd."

Boyd rubbed his hands over his face and muttered under his breath. Walker caught *shit* and *idiot* and tuned the rest out. Turning to Grace, Boyd spoke louder.

"How do you fit in this?"

"I don't know. Beaumont's son hired me." She gritted her teeth. "I don't remember the day of the shooting. Any of it. Some kind of amnesia, the doctor said. Someone mailed that

to me a few days ago. No return address. I have no idea who it came from."

She nodded at the file spread across the table and Walker was glad she hadn't pulled his police file out. There were things he'd rather not discuss with Boyd. His brother was completely unaware of what he'd been doing while he was in prison. Knowing it was there was like waiting for a bomb to go off.

"Then Beaumont came to see me yesterday," Grace continued. "He acted like he didn't know I'd been shot, but he was lying. Several weird things have happened. I have to assume Beaumont knows how we're all connected. I can't see him shooting me though. I mean, why would he? He hired me. And he was what? Thirteen or so when his father was killed? He wasn't even in town when it happened. If he'd been involved, he'd be pretty stupid to hire me. It doesn't make much sense yet."

"But he wouldn't have hired you if he didn't know your connection to Walker and suspected him."

She shrugged. "That's the theory I'm working with at least."

"Fuck," Boyd muttered.

Walker laughed bitterly. That was his assessment—succinct and to the point.

"So now what? You're determined to find this killer?"

"Don't have any choice. He seems determined to find me." Grace paused, refusing to meet anyone's gaze. "I need to go back to Birmingham."

"Bad idea," Lynn said.

"No fucking way, Grace," Walker growled, stalking around the table.

He grabbed her shoulders and stared down into her eyes. No fear, just miles and miles of determination. *Damn it!* He would not lose this fight. He had to find a way to make her drop it, stay with him where he could keep an eye on her.

"You're staying right here. Where I can keep you safe. This guy's already taken one shot at you."

"I really don't have a choice here."

"You can let it go."

"No," she said. He met her gaze and saw regret. "I can't. Someone's tried to kill me once. You think he's going to stop?"

Shit! He knew she was right. The hell of it was she wouldn't be in this position if not for him. Surely Beaumont would have hired someone else if she wasn't involved with him. Now what? Stick to her like glue and hope for the best? That option sucked.

Papers rustled and he looked over to see Lynn gathering everything up. She pushed it all into a pile and put it back in the folder.

"Let's deal with this later." She smiled too brightly, trying to diffuse the situation. "Y'all promised me steak."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

After dinner, Lynn turned to her and suggested they look through the crime scene photos again. Grace almost begged off. Walker's scowl grew blacker the longer they had company. She was tempted to spend what was left of the evening trying to alleviate his worries and ignore hers rather than looking at the pictures for the umpteenth time. But Lynn looked so thoughtful she decided to just go with it. Maybe she had an idea that would help.

They carried the dishes inside and got the photos out. Lynn stood at the table and slowly flipped through them. Then she laid them out across the long table. There were the usual pictures you'd expect—the body and the room. Plus several of the empty shell casings found around the body. Lynn lined them up, five in all, and stared at them for several minutes before stepping back so fast the chair behind her tipped over.

"Damn, I can't believe I didn't see that. I must be slipping."

Grace frowned and looked down at the photos. What was she missing?

"What?"

"It was a Glock. Look at the impression from the firing pin."

"Holy shit. Well, we both missed it."

"Missed what?" Boyd asked from his position leaning against the door. His arms were crossed over his chest, his ankles crossed. She could see the casual pose for the lie it

was. Lines etched his face and his biceps flexed and unflexed as if looking for a target.

"Glocks have oval firing pins. You can see from the photos the weapon that fired these left an oval mark. Where's the ballistics report, Grace?"

She shook her head. "There wasn't one."

"That's an unusual gun for your average street thug to be carrying," Grace added into the silence.

"Yeah," Lynn answered.

"Remember anyone in particular that did?"

Lynn looked at the floor, clenched her jaw, and looked across the room to meet Walker's gaze.

"Now they're common." She shrugged. "But I only knew two people back then who carried a Glock."

Grace had a damned good idea who one of them was. Could it get any worse?

"Oh, just great." She threw her hands in the air and turned to glare at Walker. "Please tell me you know where that gun is. That it never for a minute left your possession."

He nodded. "I do and it didn't."

She exhaled a sigh of relief. Thank God.

"Who was the other one, Lynn?"

"Brady used a Glock as a backup."

"Well, he's probably not my guy," Grace sighed.

The silence that met that statement was deafening and she searched Lynn's carefully blank face before turning to Walker.

"What?"

He shrugged, but his eyes were glittering, angry. It was obvious he didn't want to answer the question and knew she wasn't going to back down. Christ on a stick, she was sick to death of people withholding information from her.

"Hugo had something on Brady. He used it to get him to look the other way a few times."

Lynn looked up. Her voice was sharp. "You know any of that for sure?"

Walker just met her gaze, not answering, but his reply clear as day.

"I guess you would," Lynn said. "Not that that proves anything."

Grace narrowed her eyes, hands on her hips. Other things she'd wondered about started to make sense. Over a dozen arrests, and every single charge dropped. The only way to manage that without the use of a high priced lawyer was a well placed ally in the DA's office. Or the police department.

"Your arrest record."

Boyd jerked his gaze back to Walker's. Both men tensed, standing straight with the typical Graham pride. She hoped she wouldn't have to step between them.

"What record?"

Walker leveled an angry glare at her and she fought a flinch. Was it her fault he'd kept secrets even from his brother? He answered Boyd without taking his gaze from Grace.

"I got picked up a few times. No big deal. Nothing stuck."

"Because of Brady. Because Brady fixed it for Hugo."

"Probably." He clenched his jaw, averted his eyes and she knew he was lying to her. Brady had been on Hugo's payroll, or something, and Walker had benefited from it by walking away with no convictions on his record.

"Probably my ass."

His head swung back around and he pinned her with his gaze. His expression had altered slightly, still angry but remote, as if he was distancing himself from her. Well, that's what she wanted right? So why did her heart twist when she saw it?

"Okay," Lynn said, stepping in to make peace. "This isn't helping. Walker, don't get so defensive over something you know you're guilty of. You're lucky I never busted you. You worked for Hugo. You weren't an innocent bystander. And you knew Brady was dirty. We're just trying to figure this out. And Grace, cut him some slack. Using Brady to get those charges dropped was Hugo's doing, not Walker's. It probably isn't significant anyway."

"No it probably isn't. But it is an interesting addition," Grace said deciding to try to lower the tension in the room and change the subject. "What do you want to bet these casings are as missing as the ballistics report?"

"I wouldn't take that bet," Boyd drawled.

Lynn looked up at him, her anxiety clear in the way her body froze. *So much for getting rid of the tension.* Their past wasn't entirely put to rest it would seem. After being railroaded into a ten year prison sentence by her father, Boyd would never be very trusting of law enforcement even if his wife was the Chief of Police. There was no way Grace was

getting in the middle of that. She gathered the photos together and put them back in the file. Boyd and Lynn left a few minutes later.

Silence stretched between her and Walker. Instead of prying or trying to figure out his mood, she went to the sink and filled one side with soapy water. He joined her. She washed. He rinsed and dried. When the job was completed, he took her hand and led her to bed without a word as they silently agreed to ignore the case and her misgivings for the night.

* * * *

Later, they lay next to each other in the big bed, close but not touching, the only sound that of their heavy breathing. Walker had lingered over her body for hours, desperate to bring her to a feverish pitch of need. Desperate to prove she was safe here in his house and not sneaking away in the dead of night to get away from him. Of course that could come later, but he didn't think so. She'd regained the confidence he was used to seeing in her, the fear from yesterday either conquered or hidden away. But it had only been replaced by her hesitation about them. About him.

They needed to discuss the case, but he flat out didn't want to. He didn't want to drag it into the here and now, into this sense of peace he'd carved out making love to her. Was he really thinking of it along those lines now? His mind shied away from that too. *New topic, Walker.*

"So why do you do this?"

She turned her head on the pillow to look at him.

"Do what?"

"The private eye thing."

She was surprised at the question. Her eyes widened a little and she frowned. He was breaking her rules. They never talked about really personal shit and the job had always been off limits. Most people didn't have any problems talking about why they chose a particular career, that she did told him a lot, even if she wouldn't. But if she did, it would be her first step forward. He held his breath waiting to see what she'd do.

"I promised my mother," she whispered.

Huh?

"You promised your mother you'd be a private eye?"

She smiled. "Not exactly."

When she didn't go on, he picked up her hand and lifted her knuckles to his lips. After a quick nibble, he placed her palm over his heart and held it there.

"Talk to me, Grace."

She sighed.

"Mom was already sick when I got out of the Army. If she hadn't been, I would have reenlisted. Anyway I got out and went home. My being in the Army scared her, but the thought of my going into civilian law enforcement terrified her. She made me promise I wouldn't do it.

"I could have gone into corporate security. I had a couple of nice offers that wouldn't have taken me out of Atlanta, but I'd had enough of following other people's orders in the Army. Figured I'd go out on my own."

He tended to side with her mom on this one. He saw how Lynn's job tore up Boyd, how the worry ate at him. Not that

the current situation with Grace was any better. And when it was over? What then?

"And when we deal with this problem now? What then?"

She frowned at him.

"Lynn and I will get Seekers off the ground. We've already got several resumes. We just need to decide where we're doing it."

She was avoiding the real question.

"Us, Grace." He sighed. "I was talking about us."

"Oh," she said softly. "I'm not so good at that long term thing, Walker."

His heart damned near leaped from his chest. She hadn't said no, hadn't rushed to push him or the conversation off. Progress? He rolled to his side and propped up on his elbow stared down into her eyes.

"Do I need to remind you again I'm not your ex?"

She laughed. "Believe it or not, I get that. Look, I'm not making any promises, but I'm not walking away either."

"Good. 'Cause I'm not letting you *run* away."

She grinned. "Run, walk, what's the difference?" Sobering, she added, "Can we at least wait until I catch this killer to hash this out?"

They could wait until he was caught but she sure as hell wasn't in that alone. He was involved whether she liked it or not given his connection to Hugo Beaumont. He still hadn't given up on talking her into letting the case go either. Before he could bring it up the phone rang, and he leaned across her to pick it up.

"Lo?"

"Hey. It's Lynn." She sounded agitated. "Grace up?"

"Yeah, hang on."

"You're gonna want to hear this too, Walker."

Fuck. That couldn't be good.

"Sure."

He sat up and pushed the speakerphone button, letting the handset slide back into the cradle.

"You're on," he said.

She exhaled a long breath and he heard Boyd murmuring in the background.

"You remember Manning?"

"Detective Manning? Yeah, I think. He didn't exactly run in my crowd," he said wryly.

She snorted. "Yeah. Grace, Manning's a real straight shooter, been in IA for a while. He was killed tonight. I hear it looks like a classic B and E gone wrong."

That feeling he'd been carrying around of something bad going down spiked to new levels.

"You don't believe that?" he asked.

"I don't know. I also hear that Brady is being considered for the Deputy Chief's job and Manning was holding it up. Manning's been after him for years. Most people think it's just a serious hate-hate rivalry, you know? But what if he found something? What if Grace asking questions piqued his interest and he found something in the Beaumont file?"

"That's a lot of speculation," Grace said quietly.

"Yeah." Lynn sighed. "But Grace, my gut is screaming at me about Brady. If he killed Beaumont and then Manning to

cover it up, he'll come after you. You're a loose end. Walker too, maybe."

"Shit," he said. "Let him come. I'd be more than happy to feed him to the gators."

Lynn must have switched to speakerphone too, because Boyd threw in his two cents.

"I'm right there with you, brother. Anything you need."

Grace was looking at him like he'd grown two heads.

"Gators? I thought there was only one?"

He laughed and she winked, a small saucy grin fleeting across her face.

"Lynn, how did you get wind of this so soon? Do you know anyone we can go to with this?"

She sighed.

"I called Manning tonight, so I was on his caller ID. The investigator called me. And no. Not without any evidence. And if Brady ... Well, Manning was the only one I was sure I could trust."

"There must be evidence somewhere for him to be going after people now."

"Maybe. Maybe not. You're assuming it was Brady. Maybe it's completely unrelated."

"You don't believe that anymore than I do," Grace answered.

"Yeah. You're right. I don't and if the speculation about Hugo's death was public and pointed in the right direction, it might be enough to keep that job out of Brady's reach. And who knows what he's into now? He knows you're investigating

the murder. He's got to assume you'll find out he's dirty and that's not information he can let out."

Grace clenched her jaw and refused to look in his eyes.

"I'm a sitting target here, with no evidence. I need to go back to Birmingham."

"No!" they all barked at once.

Walker sucked in a deep breath.

"No, Grace. I know this guy. We wait here on our turf. He'll come and we'll be ready." He said it knowing Boyd was with him one hundred percent. He'd put his money on his brother any day of the week.

"I agree, Grace," Lynn added. "We know the lay of the land here, and any stranger who comes to town and wanders around is going to generate a lot of attention. I'll know within minutes."

"Ain't that the truth."

He heard Boyd griping and bit back a laugh. The thing about being a small town police chief was everyone knew you and had no problems calling at 4 a.m. to report an unknown car driving down Main Street. Unfortunately, Lynn was usually in bed about that time. Every time they got one of those early morning phone calls Walker heard about it for days. It never ceased to be funny, his hard-ass brother upset over losing a little beauty sleep.

"So that's the plan?" Grace asked incredulously. "Wait for him to come here and try to kill me so you can arrest him?"

No babe, the plan is he comes here and I bury his ass. He kept the thought to himself. He was sure Boyd was on board, but Lynn and Grace would probably object. Hell, they

definitely would. There went his hard earned, squeaky clean image. If he'd known his past was going to rear its ugly head and bite him in the ass years later he might have cleaned house before he left Birmingham.

"We're not gonna solve anything tonight," Boyd said. "What say we regroup in the morning? Hell, I'll even bring the donuts."

"Sounds like a plan." Especially the part where he joined the donut run and discussed live gator bait.

Grace disconnected and once again they lay side by side in the dark lost in their own thoughts. She broke the silence first.

"Still doesn't explain Chase Beaumont's involvement."

"No, it doesn't."

"I think I need to have a little heart to heart with Beaumont. And I'm not giving up on going back to Birmingham."

He gritted his teeth. The woman was determined to get herself killed.

"We've already talked about why that's a bad idea."

"Yeah. And when y'all calm down we'll talk about why it's a *good* idea."

He grunted. *When hell freezes over.*

"You're not gonna convince me or Boyd of that."

The mattress shifted as he rolled to his side to watch her. She had that don't-get-in-my-way look in her eyes again. What he wouldn't give for a little submissiveness. Was that too much to ask? He shook his head. He already knew the answer to that one.

"Look, it's late. Let's sleep on it and we'll figure out what to do tomorrow."

She frowned.

"I hate to drag y'all into this shit."

He scooted closer to her, covering her body with his, and pushed her hair off her forehead.

"Baby, I'm in this whether you like it or not. Get used to it."

Someone was after his woman. Damned right he was in it. Maybe she decided that was one fight she couldn't win at least. She sighed and rolled over, pressing her back against his chest and pulling his arm over her waist. He lay awake long after she slept trying to figure out what the fuck to do about Brady.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

Brady was late to the meeting, but some things couldn't be helped. He'd spent most of the night making sure there wasn't anything at the Manning crime scene that could connect him to the murder. Now it was time to tie up the loose ends, namely the only witnesses that could connect him. With the right kind of pressure everyone rolled over eventually and they would be no different. It was necessary for another reason too. These particular funerals would bring Walker running, and the woman with him.

They were waiting for him at a cabin an hour from town that had been seized years ago for back taxes. It was the perfect place. Secluded and neglected. And he was the perfect killer with a weapon that could be traced to any number crimes, but not to him—he'd ditched the gun he'd used to kill Hugo in the Gulf on a deep water fishing trip years ago. This one couldn't be linked to him, and had no discernable connection to the victims either.

In the end it was almost too easy. Turning his lights off before he entered the driveway, he killed the engine when he hit the slight decline. He coasted to a stop, checked the gun one last time, and quietly shut the car door behind him.

They'd parked behind the cabin as he'd instructed, and he made his way through the overgrown weeds in silence. He smiled when he reached the car. Both windows down, driver and passenger asleep, two shots each. He was in his car and on the way back to Birmingham in less than ten minutes.

Now for the woman.

Thanks to her phone calls and caller ID, he not only knew she was still investigating Beaumont's murder, but exactly where to find her. It was unfortunate Graham had to go too. He'd hoped Graham would take care of this little problem for him, and in a way he would. Murder-suicide was so common after all. That's how it would look to the investigators at least, when he was done staging the scene.

In a couple of days, he'd make an anonymous phone call to the local cops. Such an obvious gang-related shooting should make all the state papers. Graham and Grace Monroe would show up soon after. He may have claimed to have gone straight—and Brady couldn't find anyone who said otherwise—but he wouldn't let the murders of his former two most trusted men go unanswered.

He smiled. The final obstacle in his way was about to be cleared. She'd be easy enough to take care of. The biggest problem would be getting the drop on Graham, but he had a plan for that too. The man was obviously in love. Brady sneered. Men did stupid shit when they were in love, but it worked to his advantage. Graham had lost his edge.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

Grace was going stir crazy. Again. It was so similar to the frustration she'd felt in the hospital, she almost laughed. If Walker didn't stop with the hovering soon, she was going to kill him. After repeatedly promising not to leave the property, he finally relented and went to the garage and she took her first Walker-free breath in two days. But she had to resist the urge to throw something against the wall when her anxiety level didn't lower.

Instead she paced and glared at the phone. It was a useless piece of junk. She'd spoken to everyone mentioned in all of the case files, and had no leads. Zip. Zero. Nada. No one was this good at covering evidence or hiding a trail. Someone knew something about the Beaumont case of course, and Brady's involvement in the murder. She'd bet money on it. But proving it? Not so simple as making phone calls.

She needed to go back to Birmingham, but between Lynn and Walker, she'd have to sneak out in the dead of night to do it. If it weren't for feeling like a part of a team for the first time in years, she would have just left. She was surprised at how unwilling she was to do that, hadn't realized she'd missed that from her Army days. She'd been so sure she wanted no more part of teams or partnerships when she'd got out. Was that all just a self-preservation measure and now she was beyond it?

Shaking her head to clear away the unwelcome and disturbing speculations, she picked up her laptop and carried it out back. Since she'd exhausted the phone possibilities, the only other thing she could do from Duluth was surf the 'net. She opened the top and pushed the on button before returning to the kitchen for a Diet Coke. When she returned the machine was fired up and signing into the high-speed wireless service set up at the garage. She grinned, still surprised at what a techno-geek Walker had turned out to be when she'd thought of him as a throw back to last century so often.

She popped the lid on the can and pulled out a chair, adjusting the overhead umbrella to shield the screen before she sat down. She jerked her head up at the loud splash from the water down the backyard's slope in time to see Roscoe swimming away, only a thin strip of his back and tail above the surface. She shuddered, reaching instinctively for her gun before shaking it off. Walker was damned attached to that gator for some reason.

Refocusing on the laptop, she opened the browser and navigated to The Birmingham News website. She opened a second tab on the browser, clicked on AL.com in the favorites and switched back to the other tab while it loaded. On the Birmingham News page, she searched archives. She'd been searching for references to Beaumont and Brady for the last couple of days, but nothing jumped out at her. There was nothing suspicious of Brady, nothing linking him to Beaumont other than Walker's memory. After entering the keywords and year, she hit enter and flipped to the other tab.

The headlines had mostly centered on Manning's murder for the past couple of days. But with nothing new to report she wasn't surprised to see it move down the list of reports. She briefly skimmed the first article, a report of two Birmingham men found shot to death by hunters near Jasper, about an hour from the city. One of the names was familiar and she switched to the other window to search the news archives.

An uneasy tension filled her as she waited for the results. There was nothing in the article to suggest it was connected to anything, but that instinct was back shrieking at her that everything was connected. The computer screen filled with results and she skimmed quickly. Both men were mentioned in reports of drug and assault arrests, but she hadn't read these reports before and wondered why one name seemed so familiar.

She shut down the computer, more certain than ever, they needed to get to Birmingham. All the answers were there. Carrying the computer in, she paused to drop her drink can in the trash and exited through the front door. She walked across the yard and entered the garage with reluctance. Sick of arguing about it, she wondered what the best approach would be, and was pissed at herself for caring so much in the first place that she didn't just take off. What a mess.

He had the radio blaring and she walked over to switch it off, determination stiffening her spine as she walked. The sudden silence yanked him out of the groove he'd been working in and he jerked up, banging his head against the hood of the car he stood in front of.

"Ow! Shit."

* * * *

What the fuck did Boyd want now? Walker turned, rubbing his hand over the bump forming on top of his head, and barely held back the harsh words on his tongue when he saw Grace. She crossed her arms over her chest and a look of pure stubbornness crossed her face. Fuck.

"Sorry about that." She nodded towards the car.

Sorry about him cracking his skull, but not about the argument she was fixing to start he was sure.

"So what'd you do? Get up this morning and decide to talk me into coming over here so you could figure out a new approach to getting me to let you go to Birmingham?"

And here he'd thought she'd given up on that crazy idea. She clenched her fists so tightly her knuckles turned white and he saw fury flash through her eyes. If looks could incinerate, he'd be a pile of ash on the floor. Stepping forward, she sucked in a long breath and he wondered briefly if she was going to hit him. It wasn't something he particularly wanted to go through, but if it made her feel better it might be worth it.

"First of all, I'm a grown woman. I don't need anyone to /*let* me do anything. You can get that idea out of your tiny little brain right now."

He felt his own anger stirring. That was taking insults a bit too far. But he was also pleased. She was completely unafraid of him, and hopefully she'd realize it one day soon. Not today though. Her expression didn't change at all. Crossing his

arms, he widened his stance. She was really looking for a fight, wasn't she? "And second?" he asked coldly.

The anger deflated out of her, her arms fell to her sides and her shoulders slumped.

"Sorry." She walked over and set a hand on his arm. As usual, his body throbbed in recognition of her touch. "I know you're worried, but I can't let this go. I'm not the kind of woman who needs to be taken care of."

Anger that had been beginning to lessen bubbled back up, hot and molten. Was he ever going to reach her? Glaring down into her eyes, he stepped away, too angry to be swayed by her touch and determined to bring her around to his way of thinking. Or at least make her see it.

"Oh, there's where you're wrong, baby. Everyone needs someone who wants to take care of them. Everyone needs someone they can depend on, lean against. Even you. And maybe one day—soon God willing—you'll accept I'm that someone and we'll finally quit fighting about it. In the meantime, you're stuck with me."

She blinked up at him, then started laughing. And laughing. Wrapping her arms around her stomach, she doubled over. What the fuck? He didn't see what was so damned funny. When the fit subsided, she straightened, tears streaming down her face and smiled. A brilliant radiant smile that lit her from the inside out and made his brain go numb.

"I don't know what I did to deserve that kind of devotion, but I'd be pretty stupid to walk away from it, huh? You're wondering what's so funny?"

He nodded. "Yeah."

"I'm still wondering how to walk away. Really dumb move on my part." She shrugged. "At least I recognize that. I guess it's a good thing you're as stubborn as me."

She stepped closer to him and laid the palm of her hand against his face, a sad smile across hers.

"And despite all that, I'm fixin' to piss you off again, sugar."

He sighed, leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Just fucking wonderful. *Deep breaths, Graham.* She wasn't smiling anymore when he looked back at her.

"Alright. Let me get cleaned up and we'll get this over with. It's lunch time anyway."

He scrubbed the grease from his hands and arms and followed her over to the house. Inside, she went straight to the kitchen and started making sandwiches. He saw her laptop on the table and knew she'd been searching archives again. Thank God, he'd managed to keep his name out of the press all those years ago. She knew about his past, had meticulously gone through his old record, but nothing would make it real like reading an old newspaper account.

"Turn it on and go check the Birmingham headlines. Two men were killed in Jasper a couple of days ago. One of the names is really familiar, but I couldn't find him in the archives or the case files. I thought maybe you'd mentioned it lately."

"Maybe it's not connected," he said, firing up the computer.

She finished the sandwiches, put them on plates and carried them to the table.

"Maybe."

He took a bite of the turkey and mayo, watching while the wireless connected. When he was online, he opened the browser and pulled the page up from her favorites. He skimmed the headline and first sentence, but the names of the two men jumped out at him and the food he'd just chewed turned to grit in his throat.

"Fuck," he muttered.

While he'd been sitting here waiting for Brady to come to them, Brady had been taking care of loose ends, ensuring he'd come back. But were Jonas and Becker old loose ends or new? One thing was clear to Walker—he and Grace were also on that list. Jonas and Becker were his men, his two most trusted men from the days when he'd worked for Beaumont. If Brady had killed them, and there was no doubt in Walker's mind that he had, it was a message to him. A resounding *make your woman back off or she's next, bubba*. But it was too late for warnings. It was more like a challenge and he was getting sucked back into his old life whether he liked it or not.

He had to go to Birmingham. He had two friends to bury and their families to take care of. He felt responsible. He was responsible. Walker's men. Walker's problem. He'd walked away, and his absence left a void. Neither man liked Brady, Jonas especially. But if they'd killed Manning—and he bet the police were already working that angle—they'd been hired to do it. Jonas would have to be pretty desperate to take any work from a man he disliked and didn't trust. Walker didn't believe it for a minute. Neither of them were exactly good guys, but they sure as hell weren't killers either. What was he going to do with Grace? It was one thing for her to investigate

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

Hugo's murder, but this was a completely different animal. He was going to have to dredge up the old Walker Graham and he didn't want her anywhere near that man. But he couldn't leave her alone in Duluth, and he wasn't going to drag Boyd and Lynn into this mess.

"What's wrong? You got all grim and broody."

"Pack a bag. We're going to Birmingham."

He didn't have any choice.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

The trip was silent. Walker had ordered her to pack, and she'd been tempted to take exception to that until she'd looked in his eyes. Cold and lifeless, they were not a reflection of the man she'd come to know but more like the one she'd known that long ago weekend at the beach. Silent. Viciously controlled. Frigidly furious. So she'd bit back her retort and gone into the bedroom, throwing things together as quickly as she could. In the next room, she heard him calling Boyd to get the garage covered and then the muffled sounds of a second and third phone call. Who were they to? She guessed she'd find out soon enough.

He'd come into the bedroom and pulled his one and only suit out of the closet, then carried it and the two bags to the front room, where he'd done the most shocking thing she'd seen from him yet. He'd unlocked one side of the big buffet that stretched across the back of the room, and opened a drawer it concealed. He stared into it a minute, then pulled out a Glock and two magazines. And her image of the reformed criminal flew right out the window.

Except he stood and slowly turned to face her at her post by the door and something flashed across his face. Unease or uncertainty maybe, as if he was worried about how she was taking this change. Her Walker was still in there somewhere after all.

He didn't move from his position, or speak. Instead he inserted one of the magazines in the weapon and chambered

a round, then tucked the Glock into the back of his jeans. She couldn't help but wince. The lack of standard safeties on a Glock made sticking one in your jeans sans holster a little risky. At least he tucked it in back and not the front. He must have noticed her reaction because he grinned.

"Don't worry it won't stay there long."

She frowned. It really wasn't something to joke about. She'd been trained to respect firearms. He obviously hadn't.

"You need a holster for that thing."

Never mind the fact she was deeply disturbed to see Walker with a gun. Why did that bother her so much? She'd spent a large part of adult life with men who carried side arms. The image of Walker carrying didn't quite gel in her mind.

"I have one in the Mustang."

She nodded, slung the straps for one of the bags and her purse over her shoulder and stepped outside. Which car were they taking? Walker had several, mostly restored classics and one newer vehicle. Then there was her car, the rental. Maybe it would be best. Anonymous. She stepped down the front walk.

"My rental?"

"No," he answered, turning to the building that housed his personal collection. "The Mercedes."

He'd gotten them settled in and the remote mask settled back into place. Those were the last words he'd spoken to her on the long four hour drive north.

When they arrived, he exited the expressway and drove into the parking lot of a Holiday Inn. She reached for the door

handle but before she could open it, he turned and pinned her with a gaze glittering with anger.

"Wait here. I'll get us a room."

The silent treatment had her so on edge, so pissy that she almost snapped out *separate rooms*, but she knew that wouldn't fly. Why waste a fight on something she couldn't win?

Within minutes that felt like hours, they were inside the room. Standard hotel issue—a dresser, night tables, desk, mini-fridge, and one king sized bed. Since the parking lot was almost empty she guessed he was making his position on sleeping arrangements clear.

Sighing, she dropped her bag on the bed and removed the slacks and blouse he'd told her to pack. She hung them on hangers in the closet, too late to avoid wrinkles, but she didn't anticipate wearing them anyway. She placed his suit next to them and turned to see him studying her.

"Ground rules," he said and she bet her eyebrows arched clear to her hairline. Ground rules? Was he kidding?

"Excuse me?" She didn't try to keep the outrage from her voice. Looked like it was time for another one of those you're-getting-too-bossy conversations.

He stalked across the room towards her, his panther-like approach smooth and graceful. She took a moment to admire the movement until he stopped inches from her and set his hands on her shoulders, giving her a little shake.

"Do not fight me on this, Grace." He stepped back and started ticking points off on his fingers. "You don't go *anywhere* alone. As a matter of fact, I don't want you out of

my sight for a minute. You don't go anywhere unarmed. No one knows what you do for a living or that you're investigating Beaumont's death *or* that you were shot up here a few weeks ago."

Shocked, confused, and not a little bit angry she could only think of one response to that litany of rules.

"What the fuck?"

"Do what I tell you to do or I will tie you to the damned bed the entire time we're here!"

The statement started calm, but ended in a yell. She watched as he took a deep breath and regained his equilibrium. After moving away a few feet, she crossed her arms and resisted the urge to tap a foot.

"You were bound and determined to keep me away from here, then in an all-fired rush to get here. Dragging me along, I might add. Those guys in the paper? You know them I take it? What's going on?"

"I don't know," he ground out between clenched teeth. "But I'm going to find out and the less I have to worry about you while I do it the better. So you're going to do what I say."

"Ah, 'cause I strike you as being weak and defenseless. And let's not forget stupid and obedient."

He glared at her before turning and retrieving a phone charger from one of the bags. He stalked towards the bathroom counter.

"I'm willing to give you a lot of things, Grace. The ability to put yourself in even more danger is not one of them."

"I can help you, Walker."

When he came back into the room, the flat emotionless cold that had disturbed her so much earlier was back in his gaze. Telling herself that she didn't have anything to fear from him, she stepped closer and took his hand, pulling him to sit down on the edge of the bed next to her.

"At least tell me what's going on. Who were they to you? The men in the paper? That's why we're here right?"

"Jonas and Becker." He dragged a hand over the short stubble on his head. "They were mine. Loyal to me, not Hugo."

"And someone killed them." She thought it over. Coincidence? Or something else? "That could be completely unrelated, you know. Unless they knew who killed Beaumont? And if they knew presumably you would know."

She arched an eyebrow, daring him to ignore the question.

"I would know if I'd spoken to them lately, but I haven't. I've been a little preoccupied," he said with a pointed look of his own.

She rolled her eyes. When would he be convinced she didn't need a babysitter? If he was this bad now how would he be when she and Lynn really got serious and got Seekers up and running? Good grief, how did Lynn put up with Boyd? They at least had seemed to come to some kind of agreement. That train of thought screeched to a halt when he started taking off his clothes.

"What are you doing?"

He walked to the closet and got the clothes she'd just hung up, tossing them to the bed.

"Get changed. I need to go see Janine and you aren't staying here alone."

"Janine?" An old employee? An old girlfriend? She ignored the shaft of jealousy and pushed the idea aside.

"Becker's wife." He sighed deeply and continued at her look of surprise. "Even criminals get married, you know."

"Well. Yeah."

Deciding it was best not to pursue that, she reached for the snap on her jeans and stripped them off, pulling on the slacks, then repeating the process with her tank top and the blouse. She hesitated over shoes but finally selected the low-heeled boots she'd packed on a whim. Pumps would be better, but she couldn't run in them and you just never knew. Better to be prepared. The blouse was hemmed straight across the bottom, designed to be worn out not tucked in, and easily concealed the gun in her waistband at the small of her back. She stepped up to the bathroom mirror, ran a brush through her hair and twisted it up, securing it in a bun with a rubber band and catching the loose strands with bobby pins.

Walker was quiet through the whole process. When she turned to face him, it was to see him waiting by the door, casually leaning one shoulder against it. He was dressed, the suit jacket's bottom button closed and his hands were in his slack pockets. It was well cut, showcasing his broad shoulders and narrow waist. It should have made him look less dangerous, but the effect was just the opposite. The veneer of civility was thin, and its fragility was obvious in the undercurrent of violence and anger that permeated the room. She looked him over, head to foot and up again, finally

meeting his gaze. The heat in his eyes took her breath. He might be a savage but he was *her* savage.

He straightened, standing with his feet braced apart and slowly unfolded his arms. One fell to his side, but he held the other out to her in invitation.

"Are you ready?" he asked. His voice was low, controlled. The question was about more than her readiness to take the next step in the investigation. How she knew that she couldn't say. She was certain his real question wasn't are you ready to get this over with, but something more along the lines of are you ready for me? Ready for the man you've never really known. How could she answer that? She had known him years ago, as a child, as a young woman in Panama City, had known they were on completely divergent paths in life. Between then and now his had changed, and yet the core of him remained the same. The steely determination she'd always been so drawn to still firmly in place.

"Grace?" He arched an eyebrow. "It wasn't a trick question."

"Wasn't it?"

She forced a small smile and approached him, snagging the strap of her purse as she went. When she stopped mere inches away, he stepped forward and pulled her into the circle of his arms. He lowered his head and she tilted hers back, meeting the gentle caress of his lips. His tongue traced the seam of her mouth, a lazy exploration that was interrupted by a pounding on the door. The shocking intrusion made her jump and curse.

"What the fuck," Walker muttered.

Nudging her farther into the room, he twisted around. Instinctively, she placed her hand on the butt of her pistol. The combination of her last visit to Birmingham, Walker's mood since they'd arrived, and the fact no one knew they were here, at least as far as she knew, made her nervous as hell. She popped the safety snap on the holster and prepared to draw the weapon if it became necessary. The pounding started up again and Walker noted her stance, met her gaze and nodded before yanking the door open.

His body went still and she peaked between the crack left between the open door and frame. The man on the other side was huge, dressed in jeans and chaps with a leather jacket over a black t-shirt. She'd slid her gun half way out of its holster, when Walker stepped back and allowed the stranger in. Grinning, he kicked the door shut behind him and grabbed Walker in a quick hug, pounding his back like a brother. Walker laughed and returned the gesture. The two men stepped away from her, and the newcomer looked over at her as she was sliding the pistol back into its holster.

"Well. Who do we have here?" he asked grinning at Walker.

"Mine," he answered with a tight grin.

The other man laughed.

"Yeah. You always did get the pretty ones to yourself."

Walker snorted and introduced them. "Grace Monroe. Roddy Daniels."

Roddy approached her, hand held out. He took her fingers and lifted it to his lips, bowing low at the waist, a wicked twinkle in his eyes. She bit back a laugh at Walker's annoyed

expression. When Roddy stood, he twirled her around as if they were dancing before releasing her and turned back to Walker with a grin.

"Yep. You have all the luck. Beautiful *and* packing."

"Ha ha. Funny," she said.

He spread his arms wide. "There's nothing better than a kick ass, pretty woman."

Grace laughed. Good natured and flamboyant, it was impossible to resist him. She doubted he lacked for female companionship. His appearance had initially put up her guard, but plenty of women loved that bad boy biker look. Her attraction to Walker was evidence of that.

"I'm sure you aren't lacking in that department."

"Now Miz Monroe. You know a gentleman never tells." He winked at her, jerking his head towards Walker. "You ever get tired of His Crankiness over here, let me know."

Walker's gaze darkened and she bit her bottom lip to hold in the laugh. Roddy had him pegged and everyone in the room knew it.

"Know him that well, do you?" She teased, hoping her Walker would come back out. He grabbed her hand and jerked her to him, kissing her quick, rough, before tucking her up under his arm where she had a hard time seeing his face.

"He knows me well enough," he muttered. "What are you doing here, Roddy?"

The other man sobered under Grace's watchful gaze, coming to attention without actually clicking his heels. She looked up but couldn't get a good look at Walker's face.

"Janine sent me over. She's at the viewing. Lots of people. Cops everywhere." His grin was cocky. "Couldn't have planned a better homecoming myself."

Walker grunted and let her go. "Let's get the show over with then."

Walker left the room first with Grace in the middle and his friend bringing up the rear. There was a vintage Harley parked next to the Mercedes, but she didn't get the chance to look it over. As soon as they reached the car, Walker was putting her in and slamming the door shut behind her. He stood outside the door a minute talking to Roddy and she wondered if she could glare a hole in his back. This new obnoxious Walker wasn't going to get far with her. Finally, he shut up and rounded the car. Roddy climbed on the bike and it roared to life.

"What was that all about?"

Walker slid a pair of dark sunglasses on and ignored her while pulling out of the parking lot. She fumed, but didn't prod him. Bugging him wouldn't get her answers. Why waste her breath? But at the earliest opportunity she was gone. She didn't need this shit.

"He was just telling me who was there."

Shocked, she jerked her gaze to his face. She couldn't believe he'd opened up at all, much less this little bit. She couldn't see his eyes, but his hands were clenched tight around the steering wheel and she knew what the statement had cost him.

"Anyone of interest?" she asked lightly.

He stopped at a red light and turned to look at her. She wished she could see his eyes behind the sunglasses.

"Brady. Along with half the Vice squad and IA apparently." Internal Affairs. Was Lynn right?

"IA is looking at Jonas and Becker for Manning's murder?"

The light turned and looking forward again Walker drove on. He shrugged. "Makes things more complicated for them, doesn't it? If Jonas and Becker killed Manning, then their getting killed out in the middle of nowhere could hardly be random could it?"

She studied his profile. His jaw had flexed briefly after he suggested Jonas and Becker had killed Manning. "You don't think they did it, do you?"

He was silent so long she didn't think he was going to answer. "They were a lot of things, but not killers."

She kept her opinion to herself. How could he know for sure? He'd been gone for years and she'd seen people under duress do things completely out of character. Things their loved ones and friends wouldn't believe even with video evidence. You never really knew the heart of a man until he was tested. A harsh lesson she'd learned in the Army, in a war zone half the world away.

He was silent until they pulled into the funeral home parking lot. The pristine white sign proclaimed it Mann and Brothers. She reached for the door handle but he stopped her before she could exit.

"Remember, Grace. Stay by my side," he said, in that cold remote voice he'd adopted after he read the news article. She only nodded in response. What was the point in arguing now?

They entered the building and in the small vestibule, he took her hand before walking through the open double doors. The low murmur of many voices was silenced one by one as they saw him. Some cringed and turned away, some nodded acknowledgement of his entrance. He ignored them all and headed for the inner door that led into the viewing room. It was a long hall, with the casket surrounded by flowers at one end. She ignored her sense of foreboding. The last funeral she had been to was her mother's. It made perfect sense for her to be uncomfortable now.

Walker went straight to a slight brunette woman standing to one side. Grace studied her carefully. This was Janine? She looked small and fragile, but she was covered in tattoos. Well, what Grace could see in the short sleeved, knee length black dress was. She had a hard, furious glint in her eyes. Walker leaned down to whisper to Grace.

"Janine. She owns a tattoo parlor."

Well, that would certainly explain the body art. The crowd around her shrank back and disappeared as they approached. Walker released her hand and stepped forward to embrace the other woman. Grace pushed away a spurt of jealousy. She'd just lost her husband; she deserved the comfort of an old friend. Oh, but the way she looked up at Walker made it clear it had once been more than that. Grace looked away. And met Chase Beaumont's gaze across the length of the room. He nodded once then stepped through a door. Walker was leaning close to Janine, asking if she needed help or money, and Grace slipped away. He didn't even notice her leave.

She walked through the door onto a large partially covered back deck and looked around. There was a small group of people smoking on one end, but on the other was Beaumont, standing alone. She could feel his glare even from several feet away. She approached but stopped a few feet away.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I could ask you the same thing," she said mildly.

"Jonas and Becker worked for my father. I'm paying my respects. You showed up here with Walker Graham."

She cocked an eyebrow. Such venom for a man he shouldn't have known. He wrapped his hands around the railing and stared out over the small lawn. Sensing movement behind her, she turned her head slightly to see Walker standing in the open doorway. She flicked her wrist, attempting to wave him off. He stepped back into the shadows.

"I'm investigating, remember?" she asked Beaumont.

He glared down at her and she shivered at the odd glint in his eyes. A little bit of digging had disclosed interesting things about Chase Beaumont. He had a long unstable and criminal past. And Birmingham was not his territory. Why was he really here?

"Graham is dangerous. You should keep that in mind, Miss Monroe."

She almost smiled. Amazing how many people kept trying to warn her off of Walker. It made her even more determined to prove his innocence. In Hugo's murder, at least. It was pretty obvious he wasn't innocent of much else. She didn't let any of those thoughts show, however.

"I can take care of myself, Mr. Beaumont. You hired me to do a job. It'll get done."

"We'll see," he muttered and walked to the end of the deck that disappeared around the side of the building.

When he was gone from view she turned back to the door and found Walker waiting for her. He held out one hand and she stepped forward. Hesitant. Halting. He said nothing, but there was no denying the fury in his stare. Her fingers touch his and his grip immediately tightened, pulled her close to the shelter of his body.

"Let's go."

She frowned. "I'm sure there are people we should talk to here, Walker."

"Not now."

He strode forward, pulling her behind him through the room. She saw him nod at Janine and near the door at Roddy. He was silent and tense. She figured she'd save the argument for private. She didn't get the chance any time soon. He insisted on dinner before they returned to the hotel room, but it was a quiet, strained affair. She picked at a pasta dish. Breathed a sign of relief when he paid the bill and they left.

They re-entered the hotel room and she moved away. Nervous. Skittish. He hadn't said a word in over an hour and the look he gave her was filled with such rage she couldn't control the involuntary flinch as he stepped forward. He froze.

"We've been through this before, baby. I would never hurt you." He shook his head. "Which doesn't mean I don't plan to punish you."

She gasped. The nerve. And why did those words not fill her with fear? Adrenalin? No. She carefully catalogued her body's responses. Her nipples were hard. Her pussy wet. It worried her. She should be outraged at his suggestion, not turned on.

He moved again, this time stalking her. She retreated softly, carefully, and gulped back a sob when the backs of her knees hit the bed. His eyes were no longer angry. They were hot. Carnal. Promising a thousand delights and just as many torments.

She stood still, rooted to the spot as he quickly stripped her of her clothes. He dropped her gun on the bedside table and reached for the buckle on his belt. It came off in a long smooth slide and he nudged her down, positioning her in the center of the bed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eleven

The rules were simple enough, weren't they? And for her own protection. So why did she insist on defying him? He hadn't been joking when he said he'd leave her tied up if necessary.

He stood next to the bed and looked down at her. Naked, with her arms pillowing her head and her legs slightly parted, she was every fantasy he'd ever had and she seemed determined to get herself killed. Well, not on his watch.

She arched one perfect eyebrow when he reached for her hands, stretched her arms above her head and looped the belt around them and then through the slats of the headboard, but she didn't utter a protest. Her first smart move of the day. He didn't have any mercy and not much restraint in him right now.

He almost wished she'd object. He wanted to show her just how demanding and unreasonable and territorial he could be, but realized that might be a bad idea. Might only push her farther away. He was probably going to do it anyway. That switch he'd developed the last few years, the civilized one, seemed to go MIA when she'd been shot. When she'd disobeyed him today, he'd almost lost it. He just wanted to take care of her, protect her. She was *his* to protect. He felt that with every fiber of his being and he was damned well going to show her if it was the last thing he did.

He watched her while he removed his jacket and tie, as he reached for the buttons on his shirt and quickly popped them

free. He held her gaze, saw with satisfaction her eyes widen with heat and interest as he dropped it to the floor before turning to the dresser where his bag was.

He dug through a side pocket until he found the lubricant. He had no idea why he'd packed it, but since he had maybe he could put it to use now. He knew she'd had anal sex, had done it with him all those years ago during that weekend fling, but how did she feel about now? He tried not to care, but it was important. To him at least, it was the ultimate show of trust, of surrender.

He returned to the bed and her eyes narrowed a little as he placed the tube on the nightstand but she didn't comment. Good. He'd be tempted to gag her if she did. He was still very angry and it was past time she learned she could trust him.

"Do you remember that weekend at the beach?" He unbuttoned his slacks.

"Yes," she answered, eyes lingering on him as he shoved his pants and underwear off.

"Do you, Grace? Do you really remember?" Did she dream of it like he did? Replay every moment of perfection the way he did? He leaned over, hands braced on either side of her torso, and sucked one of her nipples between his teeth. She moaned, thrusting her chest up and he released it with a slow lick. "You trusted me then. With your body at least."

"I still do."

She was such a beautiful liar. He moved so that he could whisper in her ear. "No, you don't. But you will, Grace. Bet on it."

And he set about showing her what she meant to him, how consuming his need for her was. How she could, *would*, submit to him. Because she was the love of his life. Because he worshipped her. Because he couldn't breathe without her. Couldn't function, couldn't exist.

He knew exactly how to bring her right to the brink of orgasm and hold her there, refusing to let her come until he was ready, and he set about doing just that. He started at her crown. Kissing, licking, biting as he worked his way down.

He dropped light kisses on her eyelids, her nose, her chin. Avoiding her tempting lips, he moved to her neck, to that sensitive skin under her ear and bit, sucking it between his teeth before moving on. Her pulse hammered as he swirled his tongue over it. He smiled against it and continued moving slowly, languidly down her body.

He traced his tongue over her collarbone, drew a slow wet line down the center of her chest. Lingered over her breasts. He suckled. Nibbled. Reveled in her sounds of pleasure before moving on. He swirled his tongue over her navel, dropped short kisses over her abdomen as he continued on.

By the time he spread her pussy lips, she was panting. When he flicked her clitoris with his finger, she whimpered and when he sucked it between his teeth biting down just a little, she cried out. His name on her lips, the desperate edge to her voice, seemed to echo inside him. He didn't want it to ever stop.

He replaced his finger with his tongue, building a slow steady rhythm. Enough to keep her on edge, but not enough

to push her over. He wanted her to come screaming, but not yet. Not until he was inside her and they could go together.

He reaching for the lube on the table and flipped the top open. Squirting a bit onto the tip of one finger he explored her ass, rubbing the cool liquid around the opening before pushing the digit inside. She keened, bucking against his hand and driving it in further. He increased the pressure on her clit as he added a second finger. He had a flash of memory, of another place, another hotel room, and what it felt like to be buried, to move, in that tight place. It almost undid him.

Shaking, he pulled away and sat up, reached for the lube and applied it liberally to his cock while holding her gaze. She hadn't said a word, but there was no fear in her expression. Only lust. Understanding. As if she knew they both needed this show of faith.

* * * *

Grace was relieved when he reached up and loosened the belt. Her arms were beginning to ache despite the pleasure she was feeling. She worked her wrists free, but she didn't get the chance to touch him. Instead he took her hands and put them on her knees, pushing them back and leaving her wide open and exposed from the hips down. Vulnerable. When he removed his hands, she didn't let her legs fall and he smiled his approval.

"You can take direction, after all." He held his cock in his hand and moved between her legs.

Her voice fled. She jerked her head once as she felt him push at her ass.

"Relax, baby," he whispered as he started to push in. She groaned, not sure if it was pleasure or pain she was feeling. He pushed farther, inch by inch, and she gritted her teeth together, tried to force her body to relax. She remembered the last time she'd had anal sex. Years ago. It had been with Walker. She'd only trusted Walker there. She recalled how at first it had hurt, but the pain had given way to incredible pleasure, to an explosive orgasm. Her body relaxed at the memory and he slid inside her ass, grunted at the easier access. As he did, he reached a hand between them and rubbed her clit softly, slowly. Groaning, she let her knees fall and bucked against him.

It seemed to be the signal he was waiting for and he began to move. A long slow slide out, then an easy thrust back in. It was that exquisite torture she'd been expecting earlier. But ten times more intense. Her ass was so full. Her clit too sensitive. She felt the orgasm rising in her, but wanted to wait. Wanted to drag it out. Knew as his pace increased it would be impossible to do so. She screamed as she came, her entire body seizing up with the pleasure. He came right after her, his head thrown back, the muscles in his neck corded and tense, with a cry that was more a loud groan.

After a few minutes, he moved. Standing up, he leaned over and scooped her up then carried her to the shower where finally he kissed her. A sweet gentle kiss she wasn't even aware she'd been missing until his lips touched hers.

* * * *

She woke up a few hours later, no longer tied down but still wrapped in Walker's arms. Her stomach grumbled and she slid out from under his arm careful to not wake him. She scooted off the end of the bed and looked for her bag. She'd seen a twenty-four convenience store across the street when they arrived.

She pulled shorts and a t-shirt out of her luggage, slid on some flip-flops, grabbed the keycard and slipped outside. Roddy was waiting outside the door.

"Where do you think you're going, Miz Monroe?"

She rolled her eyes. Another keeper. Just what she needed.

"I need a snack."

She didn't wait for a response, just stepped around him and went on her way. He followed, but didn't bother her. Chimes jingled over the door as she walked in and she paused long enough to scope the place out. Empty and therefore no threat. Certainly not with the hulking biker behind her. The clerk gave them both a bored look.

She went to the coffee area and looked at the various machines. She found the one she wanted, got a cup and went to the candy aisle. Nothing like a late night cappuccino and some chocolate to revive a girl.

After paying, she returned to her room and fired up her laptop. An hour later she slammed the lid down. There was nothing new in the news reports. Frustration made her pace but it wasn't very rewarding in the small space. Too bad she

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

couldn't go for a run. Nothing like pounding your problems out on pavement. Finally she lay down, on top of the covers and rolled to her side to watch Walker. What was she going to do about him? It was the last thing she thought before she nodded off to sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twelve

Grace woke slowly, pulling herself out of the nightmare with difficulty. The memory of it was already fading, a shadowy figure chasing her through a maze but her other memories of the shooting had returned with it. Even though she didn't remember anything useful, she couldn't wait to tell Walker. Her erratic heartbeat had just settled into a more normal rhythm when she noticed she couldn't move. She tugged her wrists and looked up. He'd come through on that promise after all.

It took several minutes to work one wrist free of Walker's leather belt, then the next. Walker was not in the room and she was fuming by the time she stepped into the shower. She hurried through washing her hair, dried off and reached for the hair dryer attached to the wall. When it was dry, she dressed in jeans and a tank top, strapping the gun and holster on before she sat to pull on the low-heeled boots.

Yanking the room's door open, she squinted into the bright glare of the morning sun. Stepping out, she pulled it shut behind her, but she didn't get far. Roddy stood before her, arms crossed over his chest, and glaring down at her.

"Not this time, beautiful. Walker chewed my ass this morning for letting you just go across the street last night."

She sighed wondering what it would take to convince him to let her go. Or trick him into doing it.

"Look. I'm not just Walker's girlfriend." She hesitated the briefest moment over making that claim. "I'm a private

investigator. I was hired to do a job here in Birmingham. It doesn't have anything to do with y'all."

He cocked an eyebrow. It was obvious he already knew who she was. "Hugo's murder doesn't have anything to do with us? With Walker?"

She rolled her eyes and fell back on sarcasm to hide her surprise. Had Walker filled him in? Or did he know about her job from some other source?

"Afraid I might burn your boy?"

"More afraid his enemies might burn you."

She blinked. He kept surprising her. But before she could frame a suitable reply she saw two men approaching from behind him. Both held side arms next to their thighs. She nodded and he turned his head to look.

"Run, Grace," he said softly.

"No way. I can help."

He glared at her. "Stone cold killers, both of them. You won't be any help to Walker if they kill you or capture you here."

Still she hesitated. It went against her nature to leave someone at the mercy of two armed thugs.

"Run," he growled and spun around to face them.

She ran. Right into the arms of a third man who'd been waiting around the corner. He grabbed her wrists and wrapped his other arm around her shoulders before she could struggle free. He held her facing the opposite direction she'd come from. She couldn't see Roddy, but heard grunting and the sounds of flesh hitting flesh. She bit down on her captive's arm. Hard. Tasted blood.

He yelled and released her, but her triumphant escape was short lived. She didn't make it two feet before one of the other men grabbed her. He swung at her with his fist but she saw it coming soon enough to not take a direct hit. It glanced off her crown, but the force behind it was enough to make her senses reel.

"Enough. Or we finish off your friend over there."

She twisted to look over her shoulder and saw Roddy lying still on the sidewalk. Damn. He shouldn't even be there. Walker had dragged him into this. She closed her eyes. To protect her because she refused to let him order her around. No. No, she wouldn't go there. Roddy was a big boy. He had to have known he was getting into something dicey. No longer struggling she opened her eyes and let them lead her to a car near the office. They had to pass Roddy's prone body and she watched carefully, desperate to see the rise and fall of chest that would indicate he still lived. Finally, when she passing just by him, she did. The relief was intense. She didn't want to be responsible for another's death. They shoved her into the car.

"Where are we going?"

"You shut up." The driver glared at her in the rear view mirror. His forehead was cut and blood dripped into his eye. She felt a malicious glee seeing it. Score one for Roddy.

"You'll want ice and stitches for that," she said with sugary sweetness.

"Shut up or we'll shut you up. Instructions were to bring you alive. Nothing about messing up that pretty face."

She shut up. Less because of the spoken threat and more for the lecherous gleam she saw in his eyes. Her skin crawled. Rape was so not on the day's agenda. They drove and after a few turns she knew where they were going. She'd woken this morning with her memory of her last visit to Birmingham firm in her mind. This was the way to Hugo Beaumont's old house.

They stopped at the curb in front of the house and the man sitting next to her in the backseat pushed her out and followed. The car with the other two thugs sped off. She cocked an eyebrow. Hired for one job only? If that was the case, what about the one behind her?

She looked around the overgrown yard as she approached the front door. She hadn't even wondered all morning where Walker was and now she was certain she'd somehow already known. She just hoped he was all right, still alive. The thought of him being otherwise froze her in place on the steps until she felt the barrel of a gun jab her in the middle of her back.

"Go."

Please God, if they survived this she was done running from him, from them. She reached for the door handle, twisted and pushed it open. The house had been abandoned for years and she squinted in the gloom. The front room was empty. The gun poked her again and crossing the threshold she finally heard voices.

"Down the hall."

She turned left down and hall. The voices became clearer.

"Finish it, Brady." Instant relief almost brought her to her knees. Walker and he sounded okay.

Then Brady laughed.

"Soon enough. When the lady arrives. You should have known better than to deal with her, to let her keep asking questions. You should have known I'd have to take care of her, Walker."

"So you're the one who shot her."

"No. That wasn't me." There was confusion in his voice, mild curiosity. "Whoever it was bungled the job obviously."

The gun prodded her again and she reached for the door at the end of the hall.

"Anyway." His voice was cheerful now. "I'll have the great pleasure of making her suffer before I let her die. She's caused me a great deal of inconvenience. Watching should be a valuable lesson to you about the risks of getting emotionally involved with a piece of ass."

She pushed the door open and saw Walker across the room. A line of blood trickled down one side of his face and he held his left arm tight over his chest. Not as well as he sounded then. His nod was so slight she thought she must have imagined it.

"You're making a mistake there," he said to Brady, holding her gaze. He sound bored but something dangerous flashed in his eyes. "She isn't anything more to me than a piece of ass as you so accurately phrase it."

He didn't mean it. She *knew* he didn't mean. But it cut deep anyway. Brady picked up the gun lying on the desk.

"Oh well, in that case."

It was now or never. She took a step backwards, faked a stumble, catching herself with one palm flat on the floor. With

the other, she drew her weapon, rose and fired at the same time as Brady. From her peripheral vision she saw Walker attack the unnamed man. Her shot was true. It hit him in the center of his forehead and he fell the floor. She knew when she checked he'd have no pulse. Brady was dead. His shot wasn't as lucky and hit her upper arm. She felt the impact, but no sting. No pain. That would come later.

She heard a grunt somewhere to her side and spun around to help Walker. It wasn't necessary. He stood panting over the still form of Brady's man.

"Dead?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Knocked out."

Now that it was over, she felt the tremors start in her hands and move up. She clenched her teeth against the need to shiver. Adrenalin side effects. She'd survived them before. Now wouldn't be any different. Except she knew it was less the adrenalin and more how close she'd just come to losing Walker permanently.

The door banged open behind her before she could pursue the thought, before she could run her hands over him and assure herself he was alive and well, and she spun, raising her weapon as she moved. She lowered it when Roddy rushed through sweeping the area with his gun as he entered. She narrowed her eyes at the maneuver, but didn't speak, just moved out of his way as he approached Brady's body.

"Dammit, Walker. I wanted him alive."

Roddy with his hands on his hips glared at Walker, then swept him head to toe with the gaze. He turned to look at

Grace and cocked an eyebrow, made a show of noticing her gun in her hand.

"Nice shot."

She grew cold. It was never easy to kill a man.

"It was him or me," she said softly. Trying to convince herself or Roddy? She finally noticed the men who'd followed Roddy in.

"You're a cop."

He smiled slightly. "Guilty."

She shook her head. *Son of bitch, how did I miss that?* Clenching her jaw, she turned to Walker. And why hadn't he told her?

"It's a long story."

She looked at the dead cop on the floor. "Turns out I have the time for a long story."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Thirteen

She never got Roddy's tale out of Walker. She had to piece everything together from a variety of sources. They'd been back in Duluth for two days and she'd just got off the phone with Roddy. He'd tried Walker first, but he wasn't communicating with anyone. Sighing she stared up at the stars a moment before reaching for the bottle and pouring another glass of wine. It was almost midnight and Walker was still in the garage. He hadn't strung together two words since they'd been back.

No one could prove Brady had killed Hugo Beaumont, but Roddy's team—who it turned out ran Birmingham Vice—had found the weapon that killed Manning in Brady's car. Roddy had questioned her and released her. There were no charges in the shooting of one of Birmingham's finest. Or not so fine as it turned out.

With Brady dead, informants started coming out of the woodwork. There was more than enough evidence to prove he'd been involved in extortion, drug dealing, and many petty crimes. He'd been seen in a bar with Jonas and Becker a few hours before Manning had been killed. Roddy believed Brady had hired them to break into Manning's house. Once they'd gone, Brady had waited for Manning to come home and killed him. It was easy for him to then influence the investigation, labeling it a burglary gone wrong and with plenty of physical evidence to point the finger at Jonas and Becker. An elaborate plan, but one that insured the murder of a police officer

wasn't looked at as closely as it should have been. Brady had known that was exactly what he was getting when he made the plan.

She'd fill Walker in if he ever shut the garage down for the night. She was surprised he hadn't taken Roddy's call. That was another revelation. Walker wasn't as bad as he'd let her believe. He'd spent the last six months of his time living in Birmingham giving Roddy the evidence he'd need to take Hugo down, but the real target all along had been Brady. Back when he was still speaking to her, the day of the shooting, Walker had told her that much and that he'd never been able to connect Brady with Hugo Beaumont. Hugo had liked to brag about his pet cop, but he'd kept them separate and never filled Walker in on whatever jobs Brady performed for him.

She heard the grass rustle and a splash of water. Roscoe must be prowling. Feeling restless, she sat her glass on the table and walked down the deck's steps. Her eyes had adjusted to the night long ago and she scanned the waterline. If he was down there, he wasn't letting her get a glimpse of him tonight.

She decided to return to her seat, but at that moment the night went silent. Cicadas and night birds went eerily quiet. She turned slowly, searching the shadows for the intruder who'd ended their chorus. When she'd finished a three sixty and faced the water again, a figure stepped forward on the path from Lynn's house. She exhaled a sigh of relief. Must be Boyd out for a late night stroll. Lynn had told her, he tended to wander if he was having a rough night.

But as he approached, she saw it wasn't Boyd.

He was bigger. Taller and beefier. He stepped into a pool of moonlight. No wonder she hadn't been able to give a final report to Chase Beaumont. He was here. But why? He stopped and she noticed the glint of metal—a chrome-plated pistol—in his right hand. She cocked her head to one side, trying to play it cool, hoping Walker would come home soon.

"Mr. Beaumont. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. This is not finding my father's killer."

"I've been trying to call you. John Brady killed your father." She paused. "He's dead."

"A lie," he responded and she heard something sinister in his voice. Madness. Insanity. His eyes seemed to glow in the moonlight. "Walker Graham killed him. You would see that if you weren't blinded by lust."

Okay. Definitely crazy. She raised both palms in a placating gesture.

"No. Brady killed him, Chase," she said softly, soothingly. Where the hell was Walker? Hadn't he sulked enough? "Brady was working for him. They must have had some kind of major disagreement."

He shook his head. Lifted the gun.

"Liar," he yelled.

Well, if that didn't get Walker running the only thing that would was a gunshot. It'd be too late for her then. Everything happened so quickly she didn't have time to react until it was over. Footsteps pounded on the path and she saw Lynn and Boyd running towards her. She caught movement from one

side and, thinking it was Walker, almost turned to warn him, but stood frozen as Beaumont lifted the gun to fire and Roscoe leapt from the water.

The alligator bit his hand off just above the wrist and Beaumont fell to his knees, howling his agony. Boyd ripped off his belt and t-shirt, using the belt to tie a tourniquet below the elbow and the shirt to try to staunch the flow of blood from Chase's ruined arm. Lynn spoke matter of factly into her radio, calling for an ambulance. Walker stood a few feet from her, staring, chest heaving and eyes filled with raw terror. Roscoe had disappeared. The night went silent as Beaumont passed out and Walker stepped forward. He pulled her close in a bone-crushing hug.

"That's the third time I've almost lost you. You're going to make me old before my time, Grace."

She tilted her head back. "You're speaking to me again?"

He searched her eyes before responding. "I'd almost convinced myself to let you go. None of this would have happened if you weren't involved with me. I can't guarantee it won't happen again."

Idiot. She'd suspected as much. Unfortunately for him, he'd made her open her heart. There was no way she was letting him go now.

"My life isn't usually this exciting," she joked but quickly turned serious. "But you made me love you, so now you're stuck with me."

His grin was slow in coming. "Is that right?"

"Yeah." They heard sirens in the distance growing louder with each second that passed. "It's over."

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

His hands slid down to the small of her back. "It's over, baby. And you're staying."

He made it a statement but she saw the question in his eyes. She smiled. "I'm staying."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Epilogue

Chase Beaumont lived. If you could call it that. Lynn had been to question him and Roddy had come in the middle of his own investigation, wondering if Beaumont had anything to do with his case, but reported the man had completely lost touch with reality. Hearing that, Grace had rolled her eyes. Her term was better—bat-shit crazy—and more accurate.

They were all gathered around the deck table stuffed from dinner and having a beer.

"So Beaumont shot Grace?" Walker asked Lynn.

"Looks like. We'll know for sure when the ballistic test on the rifle we found in his car comes back." She shook her head. "He's not very coherent. He goes from admitting he shot Grace to denying it. In between ranting about you, of course."

"It doesn't make much sense for him to hire Grace and then try to kill her."

Roddy, who was crashing in their spare room before heading back to Birmingham in the morning, shrugged. "Who knows what makes sense to a crazy man? We didn't get anything out of him, but it seems clear enough he knew you two were involved. Maybe he planned to use her against you before he came completely unhinged." He shuddered and stared at the river. "And the gator got him."

Grace turned to look too and saw nothing. The state game wardens had come and gone looking for Roscoe, but he'd disappeared. They hadn't even been able to track down his

nest. It was like he'd never existed. Except she knew better. She'd probably have nightmares for years.

Boyd and Lynn stood, and claiming fatigue stepped off the porch and walked to the path that meandered alongside the river and led back to their house. Grace snickered. She wasn't fooled. Boyd had had that hot carnal gleam in his eyes she'd learned to recognize over the past few weeks. She turned back to their guest and Walker, who had a similar gleam in his. Her womb clenched in anticipation of what the night had yet left in store for her.

"I can see I'm on my own tonight," Roddy said dryly.

"Y'all clean up, will you? I'm done for the night." She kissed Walker lightly on the lips before going inside and to the shower in their room. She turned the knobs to adjust the water and stripped while it heated up, pausing only briefly to examine the ugly scar left by the bullet. She'd come to believe it complimented her others. Walker certainly wasn't complaining.

She tested the water and stepped into the shower right under the spray. She tilted her head back, letting it sluice over her and smiling when she felt a whisper of cool air flow in, then his hard body pressed up to her back. He wrapped his arms around her, cupping her breasts in his palms, teasing her nipples with his fingers. Breath whispered over her as he lowered his head to kiss the sensitive hollow between neck and shoulders. She sighed. Content. She'd finally found what she hadn't even been aware she was looking for. Home. Strong arms to hold her. Someone to lean on. The love of her life.

Saving Grace
by Loribelle Hunt

The End

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

About the Author

As a native of the South, is it any wonder Loribelle has a love of storytelling? She started writing seriously as a teenager and finished her first manuscript, a mystery, when she was nineteen. After a few bumps along the way and stints as an Army MP, a waitress, a book store manager, a student, and a wedding photographer, she turned to writing full time. Now she divides her time among a husband, three kids, writing, and a part-time photography gig.
