

Saving Grace

by Amber G. Christensen

Here I am. Driving. Caught in a whirlwind. The sun has just barely risen over the mountains, and I have been awake for hours that seem like days. Funny thing...every time I meander down these forgotten paths, these lost dirt roads found time after time on Papa's countryside—it doesn't matter what area, it's always there—I am sickly reminded of my childhood home.

There were flowing alfalfa fields when I was seven years old.

Tractors. Horses running, bucking, snorting hot air and dust out of their enormous nostrils. There was even a little pond in the valley.

No fields now. No tractors. No horses. Only city lights. Horns.

Sirens. An endless stream of cars.

Sixty-two hours to go.

* * *

Traffic is dense this evening in the city. The seat next to me is filled with papers. Papers of what you may ask...Papers. Crap loads of paper that mean absolutely nothing to me. Bills. Medical documents. Diplomas. Birth certificate. Stocks. Bonds. Stuff that is supposed to define us as human beings, supposed to tell us who we are, what we can do, and most of all, how much we are worth.

Crap.

It essentially comes down to this: If you have nothing left but paper, all you can really use it for is wiping your behind if you're in a jam. When you're driving down the road with no destination, no money, no nothing—nothing but paper—all you know is that your life has been crap, and something has to change. You have to escape the noise, the lights, the endless chorus of voices that echo in your eardrums, pulsating night after night creating a rhythm of internal sleepless torment night after night. You have to escape.

If I could pinpoint the beginning of my pain, the unscratchable itch on my back, the urge for me to be driving down

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the road like a madman, it would all come down to these three little words—Frances Rosemary Lender. Yes, Frances. That lovely Frances. Babies coo. Children ask, “Mama, can I have one?” Mothers say, “Dear God, could it be?” And grown men drool, fall to their knees, and bow to the power of Frances.

Now, it wasn't always like this in my mind with Frances. At first she was a godsend. Possibly the best and the worst thing that ever entered into my life. Let me back up a bit to explain.

* * *

I work for a computer software company. Yes, I am unfortunately a yuppie, as the blue collar workers call me. I am the head of a department that tests programs that even you might use. Outside developers send us samples and we check them out and decide whether or not we could make money off of them. I am the one that assigns who tests what, and I am the one that talks with our head guys, Jim and Brad. I also have the “privilege” of often spending my lovely time with developers in monotonous luncheons telling them if we like what they are doing or if it needs more work.

I didn't always have this boring job. When I first came to work for Jim and Brad, I was fresh out of college with a degree in software design. Brad, whom we affectionately call Pig, hired me thinking that I was a, “fine piece of work.” And, yes, he was referring to my swaying hips. He originally got the nickname of Pig due to him being a police officer previously, but as I soon learned, that name transfers to his treatment of women as well. Overall, he's not a back guy, I will admit.

On the other end of the spectrum we have Jim, whom we call Bark, because he's always barking orders at some unfortunate soul. He's very clean-cut and an uptight man. Quite an excellent boss, but the guy needs to loosen up. I swear someday that vein on his forehead is going to burst.

At first, Bark and Pig had me doing all the testing myself with some outside consultant of my choice. I loved it back in those

days. There were only 10 of us working for the company at that time. Then it happened. We made a name for ourselves. We made it big, as they say. Bark and Pig sold out to a huge conglomerate, all the while keeping their positions as co-heads of the company and upping their salaries. Yes, I got a raise as well, but it just wasn't the same as it was before. Everything was less casual. Now we had to become suits. Bark and Pig got the fame they always wanted so they didn't mind, but the few of us that had helped get the business off the ground found it conforming and cold. They made us heads of departments to give us "warm fuzzies," but I still think those of us who are still here see it as a poor choice on Jim and Brad's part. Why did I stay with the company? Who really wants a salary cut? That's my only motivation.

So anyway...I was a bigwig. I was a top dog, which entitled me not only to my own very posh office, but also a personal secretary to go along with everything. I had this wonderful secretary, Jeannie, in the beginning. She was quite elderly and she retired some months ago. Then they started sending me that temp agency trash. I couldn't believe the incompetent girls they would expect me to deal with. Were they all brain donors? I had to call for a new one about every two weeks; surely they were becoming tired of my constant complaining.

When I was just to the point of giving up, Frances showed up. I knew she was different when she actually showed up on time and promptly delivered a cup of coffee to my desk only a few minutes after I had arrived. I just looked at her, stunned.

"Good morning, ma'am," she said cheerfully.

"Good morning. Thanks for the coffee. Your name?"

"Frances. Frances Rosemary Lender."

"Well, thank you Frances Rosemary Lender. Did you understand the mess on your desk out there?"

"Yeah. What kind of idiots were here before me?"

I could only smile. A godsend she was, I tell you. That woman picked up things so fast that everyone in the building was

trying to steal her from me. By the end of the week, we were chatting away like old friends, just like Jeannie and I had.

* * *

"Ma'am?" I heard over my intercom, stirring me out of my daze.

"Yes, Frances?"

"There's a Jack here to see you."

"Send him in, please," I said joyously. Jack was my boyfriend of two years at that time. I met him when I was at a software convention over in Seattle, and we hit it off instantly. He was from Bellevue, but after a few months the commute was getting ridiculous, so he decided to move near me and bring his graphic design business with him. Things between us had been a dream, for the most part, up to that point.

"Darling," he said with a cheesy French accent as he reached for me. I wrapped my arms around his neck, laughing.

"Oh baby," I cooed.

"New secretary, huh?"

"Yeah, she's soooo wonderful, Jack. I can't believe it. She's amazing."

"Is that so? He said flirtatiously. My mischievousness could not be contained.

* * *

Trust is an easy thing to lose when you get a slap in the face, as I did. After you've found that comfort level in a relationship, found the trust and respect, you believe nothing can destroy that confidence you have in your partner. You live the myth until, when you least expect it, that something terrible happens. That is when you realize two things: 1.) you were an idiot to begin with and 2.) never trust anyone wholeheartedly, especially a secretary with no

morals and a desire to die and a man who can't accurately account for his whereabouts.

Fifty-three hours to go.

I need someone to rely on. Someone I can trust just a little. I haven't shown up to work in three weeks and the cops will be searching for my car soon enough. I need a way out.

* * *

"Ma'am?" I reached up from the floor and held down the intercom button.

"Uh, yeah?" Jack was still kissing my neck.

"Bark wants you up in his office in five. He said it was of the utmost importance."

He was probably having bowel trouble again. Jack just looked at me, "Work, work, work." My love hated my dutifulness.

* * *

My car is sitting on empty as I pull into what seems to be the last gas station for miles. A middle-aged man in coveralls comes out of the garage, wiping grease from his face with a dirty handkerchief. His enthusiasm tells me that he probably hasn't seen a customer in quite a few hours. I smirk, noticing that he has gotten winded from jogging only a few steps due to the size of his paunch.

"Howdy ma'am."

"Hiya pard," I return, noting that he doesn't really get my sarcasm.

"Want me to fill it up fer ya?"

"Sure, and could you check my tires?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm on it," he replies dutifully. I half expect him to salute.

Thirty-one hours and twenty-five minutes to go.

While I wait, I take a gander around the place. This old fella seems to be the only one here. He probably just tinkers on things here and there hoping for someone to stop in for a fill up and

maybe an expired soda pop. Near the register on the insider, there are candy bars coated with a thin layer of dust. Yep. Not many customers stopping in this place.

"Anything else fer ya, ma'am?" he says to me hopefully as he walks inside.

"Hmmm. Let me see." I assess the situation one last time, glance outside and back at the man with a mischievous smile. Desperation is a funny thing.

Before our fat little friend can gasp for air, he finds a sweet young thing pointing a semi-automatic 9MM right between his eyes. "Just one last thing, pard. Empty your pockets and the register."

Now, I don't know what possessed me to do this. I've always had integrity, but for some reason, after everything that had happened in the past few weeks, this was a nice release. It was some kind of sick relaxation technique.

He blinks once with his bulging eyes and then gulps, not moving, terrified.

"Now," I awaken him with my sternness. I say, when you have nothing—especially not \$13.76 for gas—you might as well take what you can get.

He opens the till and empties it out. I'm not surprised to see only about sixty dollars.

"And your wallet," I remind him. He retrieves his wallet from his back pocket shakily—two twenties, three fives, and a half dozen ones. Very depressing.

"Hard life isn't it?" I say, not meaning to bring that tear to his eye. Truth hurts. "Do you have a safe, pard?"

He shakes his head, 'no,' on the verge of a breakdown.

"You wouldn't lie to me would you?" I inquire.

"No, I promise, ma'am," he pleads with desperation. "I haven't got a safe. Please, don't kill me."

This makes me defensive. "Is that what you think? That I'm a cold-blooded killer? You haven't given me a reason to pull this

trigger...PETE," I say, glancing at the embroidered name on his coveralls. "Does anyone come by here to check on you?"

"My wife does at 3 PM," he stammers. I glance at the clock above his head, which reads 11:36 AM.

"Okay then," I say as I gather up the cash and stuff my purse. "Let's walk on out to your little garage."

He walks in front of me, carefully. There is a Nova on the inside.

"Beautiful car." I grab some twine by the garage door. "How hand of you, PETE. Lie down in the back seat."

Our little friend crawls in and lines on his back. "On your belly, genius; I'm not going to force myself on you." I tie his hands and feet together and slam the door.

"You'll be okay, pard. Your wife will be here is a few hours."

* * *

Frances and I had become very close in only two months time. She turned out to be a very strange woman, though. We went out to this bar one night just to relax after work. I thought she deserved a drink for being such a wonderful secretary. By the end of the night, I had found a totally different side of Frances.

We were sitting and drinking, minding our own business when two guys came over. Franny struck up a conversation with them and ended up inviting them back to her place for a "night cap," as they would say. She invited me over as well, saying something about taking some hits of acid and getting it in on with these two guys, but the responsible girl in me took control as usual and balked out. Besides, there was Jack of course. The following day at work, there was Franny sitting at her desk grinning from ear to ear. She had her conquest all right. Both of them. And she had scratch marks all over her neck. I asked if she was okay and she replied, "Definitely...meow," with a raise of the eyebrows.

* * *

Driving back. It's an endless journey. I toss my pretty brunette wig in the seat next to me and tousle my own messy hair. Everything I need now is in my backpack—except one thing. The one thing I returned for. Mother's antique pearls that are sitting on my dresser in my apartment—my only link to my past, my most valuable piece of material wealth. But first, I have to find Mickey.

* * *

Frances didn't have any morals. She was one of the few people in existence that lived for the day, the hour, the minute. She didn't care if death took its hold on her tomorrow. In fact, she invited it. I think it was the sadomasochist in her. The suicidal maniac. She told me once that she actually got off on the sensation of death. She had attempted suicide on several occasions to no avail. She said she was finally at the point now that she didn't try to kill herself, but she just took many chances to see what would happen. The woman had the best of luck in the world from what I could tell. Slit her wrists twice. Hanged herself from a chandelier but the bolts ripped out of the ceiling. Freaky, but amazing.

I found myself idolizing Franny in some ways. If most employers had known half the stuff I did about her, they would have booted her out the door without a single bit of hesitation. But I envied the fact that nothing really mattered to her. She went to work, did her job, and then went out and let go. There were no regrets for her. There was no holding back. She was what I wanted to be—irresponsible.

* * *

I pulled into my favorite café of his industrial town. Today, my favorite people are inside. Posers. They are hanging out, talking about what they know of politics, what they know of the real world.

They talk with their mouths full of money, clutching Daddy's wallet. *We are oppressed! We are misunderstood by society!* Those are their anthems. They are a bunch of idiots.

Twenty-six hours to go.

I see Mickey sitting at his usual table in the corner sipping his triple short hazelnut mocha. He looks like a Beatnik slouching in that chair, reading some Kerouac. I wade through the generic throng and sit down next to my friend.

"Hey, chica, haven't seen you in a bit," he says, coolly looking up from his book.

"Mickey, I need your help," I say urgently in a low-voice.

This excites him. I knew it would. Mickey's been dying for an adventure his whole life.

"Yes?" he questions, leaning over the table closer to me.

"I need to you get something out of my apartment," I tell him as I hand him my keys. "And I need your car."

"My car?" he returns suspiciously. "Why *my* car?"

"Because I'm a wanted woman...or at least I will be soon enough."

He grins with a twinkle in his eye. "How exciting."

* * *

Frances, despite her psychotic sex life and sadistic reasoning skills, was quite the woman. Men were instantly drawn to her carefree and fearless personality. I guess it didn't hurt that she was all legs and was stacked like any man's porn fantasy. Even the most high-class men, like Bark, couldn't keep their eyes off her.

Maybe that is why I kick myself. I should have seen it coming. I should have known she didn't care.

* * *

Thank goodness for friends like Mickey. Not only did he let me borrow his car so that I could get to my destination, but he

agreed to get my pearls and to send them to me as soon as I contacted him. The gem that he is, he also let me borrow the huge part of cash that I needed. He trusted me. He knew I was responsible and that I would pay him back once I sold my stocks. Nineteen hours to go. Too bad my life had to go to the dumps.

* * *

It happens all at once. You think everything is perfect, everything is peachy keen. And then WHAM! All hell breaks loose. It happened to me on a Thursday.

Frances had been evicted from her apartment due to some crazy sex scandal involving the landlord's son. I let her move in with me, and we had been living together for a couple of weeks. Nights were a little noisy, but at least she kept her business in the guest bedroom. I enjoyed her invasion of my quiet existence until it happened.

I wasn't expecting it at all. I was just simply picking up her things from around the couch when her purse fell off the table. And in some sick twist of fate, it just fell out. It landed right on my foot. Jack's business card.

At first I tried to dismiss it as merely a kind gesture on Jack's part. I could even imagine the conversation. He sees her at my office, introduces himself and hands her the card. She says thank you and slips it in her purse.

"Hey, if there's any way I can help you out, just let me know," Jack would say courteously, as he always does.

"Oh thanks," she'd say, smiling.

I couldn't sleep at all that night. She didn't come home, but that was a normal thing. I didn't think anything of it before. And most nights, Jack stayed home at his apartment writing and working late. I called his apartment just so I wouldn't have to worry, just so I could be relieved. But there was no answer.

I confirmed my suspicions the next day by asking his friend, Thomas, if he had seen a girl matching Frances's description in Jack's apartment building anytime.

"Well..." Thomas hesitated.

"Thomas, don't cop out on me. If you lie, you know I'll see it in your eyes."

"Come on, this isn't fair. Jack's my best friend," he pleaded, not wanting to reveal the big secret.

"And I'm his GIRLFRIEND!" Thomas broke. He told me he had seen them together on a couple of occasions; however, Jack had said nothing to him. I died. Jack was the only thing that had given me hope. Everything was suddenly spinning. Reason flew out the window.

* * *

I decided to confront my love when we were out one night.

"Jack?" I inquired reluctantly.

"Yes, sweetums?" he cooed while stirring his coffee.

"I'm going to be blunt here," I said looking down at my hands, my ring less finger. "Are you cheating on me?"

"What would make you say that? He said, shocked.

"I don't know. I guess...it's just that..."

"Just what? What's going on?"

"Thomas said..."

"What? What did Thomas say? The schmuck."

"He said that he's seen you with Frances on a couple of occasions," I said, looking up at him with hopelessness.

"Dear, Thomas is full of it. I asked Frances to go out with me to help me find *something* for you," he returned as he leaned across the table, reaching for my hand.

I felt relieved all of a sudden, but something told me, *don't trust him*.

* * *

I can't sleep. It's 2 AM and all I can think about is how much I love Jack. How much it hurts to let go. How much it aches to move on. It makes me sick to even think that they are together. My thoughts are jumbled with memories of him and fogged by all that Frances has done to screw me over, all that Jack has done to crush my dreams.

* * *

Brad said he wanted me to be a part of the team because I had good intuition and that I was "self-motivated." My good intuition had told me not to trust Jack. My self-motivation set me on the path to tailing the two.

Every night that she went out, I would ask where she was heading. My mother hen questions irritated her. I could tell by the expression on her face.

"Clubbing," would be her tormented reply.

I would call him after she left, and if he told me had to work late or he had a meeting of some sort, I would go to his place. I would borrow Mickey's car, park across the street, wait for him to come out and tail him to wherever he went. On several occasions, he ended up at Cavanaugh's. I still had nothing to go on. I only saw him go in and then leave by himself late that night. No sign of Frances.

That was until one night. One night *she* entered the building after he arrived. That set me off. I wanted to run into their room and strangle her to death. I would delight in the sound of her gasping for air, the sound of her windpipe crushing. But I felt helpless.

I didn't want to lose Jack. I didn't want to awaken to reality. The more I thought about the two of them, the angrier I became. I became so tormented by my imagination that I quit my job. I couldn't focus. Jack thought I was having a mental breakdown. Frances didn't show any concern.

I became obsessed with my detective work. I considered suicide. Then I remembered they would still be together. I would be out of the picture. How convenient!

Then the thought of cheating came to mind to get Jack back. Despite the thrill of the thought, I couldn't go through with it, no matter what he had done to me. I was after all a woman of integrity. A woman of integrity that had snapped.

* * *

I arrived at the airport and parked Mickey's car in the place I said I would leave it for him. Bless his heart. What a great friend. At least he seemed loyal compared to a boyfriend of two years who had no qualms about cheating.

Tickets to Seattle were pretty cheap, since it was a regular commuter flight, and I got a good deal on that. By tomorrow morning, I should be in the Caribbean sipping a cocktail. All they'll find is my car abandoned by the Spokane River (thanks to Mickey) and my house filled with countless useless items. No record of me going anywhere or of me being alive for that matter. The cheesy suicide note should come in handy...

Dear Jack and Frances,
Life is unbearable knowing that you are in each other's arms. I've gone to our place, my love.
--Grace--

They'll drag the river, just below the falls where Jack and I spend many a night discussing our dreams, reveling in each other's company. In a way, it will be as if I really did pass. *C'est la vie*, as the French would have it.

Four hours to go.

* * *

"This isn't funny!" Jack shouted with desperation. Frances just continued laughing hysterically. Death was humorous to her, as usual.

I'm just busy as a bee following the last part of my plan. Now this is where the fun begins. Most people would find me a bit on the psychotic side after hearing this, but I know there are some of you out there who enjoy the thought. Some of you have even considered this plan.

I sent a message to Jack first, from Frances, saying that he should meet her at a certain location (an apartment that I rented out downtown) on such and such a day at 7 PM. The almost exact message was sent to Frances, from Jack. Devious wasn't it? The looks on their faces when they saw me with a gun there was picture perfect.

"How the hell did you learn how to do this you...you...FREAK!" Jack was in shock.

Frances coughed from laughing so hard, gasping for air.

I just grinned deviantly. I knew the Internet would *really* come in handy some day.

"Grace! Come on! You can't be serious! You can't do this!" he pleaded with me.

"Jack. My darling Jack," I looked at him with no concern. "I guess you should have thought about that before you screwed my secretary's brains out."

Frances just laughed as Jack groaned pathetically.

"You have a little less than 72 hours to think about what was valuable in your lives.

* * *

My plan took about a week to formulate. You can get anything for the right amount of money. I felt crazy at first, but I just kept thinking, *Grace, you can't let these guys ruin your life. You don't deserve this crap. If the only thing that makes you happy is going to walk out on you, then you've got to move on. You've got to*

forget all this materialistic bull and move on. Go the way of the wind. Jeez...I sound like a crack head.

I obtained the information required, that to the wonderful Internet. Six dollars for a fail-proof dynamite recipe—made entirely of easy to find items. Twenty dollars for plans to set up a timed bomb. A completely new identity was harder to come by, and quite expensive, I might add. However, I was able to check that off my list, thanks to my savings account.

Finally, I transferred my stocks into my new name and set up a will saying that I had donated the stocks a year ago to some charities and that everything I owned was to become the possession of my niece in Seattle.

It was hard thinking that I wouldn't be able to see my family for a long time, if ever again, but I realized that I really didn't see them much as it was, and I needed to start over. I needed to escape.

* * *

My freedom is in hand. I am sitting here, thinking about the past few weeks, especially the last 66.5 hours. Am I a cold-blooded killer like Pete thought I was? There is an ounce of kindness left in my heart, isn't there?

I get up reluctantly and head for the nearest pay phone.
Jack, don't ever say that I wasn't responsible, that I didn't have morals, that I didn't have a heart.

"911, what's your emergency?"

Silence.

"Hello?"

"Hi," I stutter slightly as I realize what exactly I am doing.
Dear God, save my soul. I try to disguise my voice. "I need to report a crime."

"A crime?"

"Yes, a crime." I continue to tell the dispatcher the location and names of the two victims I have bound. She sounds a bit confused.

"They're tied up?" she questions curiously.

"Uh-huh." She pauses for a moment as if to collect her thoughts. "Hey...um..." I interrupt her daze, "they've been tied up for a couple of days, so they might need some medical attention."

"Ooooookay," she replies with amazement.

"One last thing."

"Yes, Ma'am?"

"They are sitting on some explosives that are set to go off in little over five hours. You might want to call in the bomb squad."

"Ummmm...", she says with pure shock in her voice.

"Tell them to cut the green wire."

