

SAVING GRACE by D.M. Barr

EXCERPT

One felony was all it took to convince Andrea Lin she was better suited to committing crime on paper than in person. As renowned mystery author Lynn Andrews, she understood conflict equaled good drama. Like her readers, she should have expected the hiccups, even relished them. What she hadn't counted on was the accompanying agita, especially while sitting in her Bergen County kitchen, far from the action at the Bitcoin Teller Machine.

Her one job had been to place a single phone call when the money hit and tell the hacker to lift the encryption on Grace's computer. Trouble was, her dozen calls remained unanswered until a few minutes ago, throwing their meticulous plan off schedule.

Andrea stroked the blue-gray Nebulung purring on her lap and tried to ignore the churning in her stomach. "Denver, the next time I consider helping a sibling with some crazy scheme, you have my permission to use my leg as a scratching post until I come to my senses. Agreed?"

Denver looked up, his green eyes filled with innocence, and answered with a single meow before leaping onto the table toward her plate of shortbread cookies. "

I'll take that as a yes." She sipped her tea, willing the sugar to sweeten the acrid taste in her mouth. The phone interrupted her meditation. No doubt a check-in from her brother, the extortioner-in-chief.

"I figured you'd have called by now. Everything on track?" Joe's strained voice conveyed his own jangled nerves. They'd agreed to be vague when communicating. In these days of Siri and Alexa, anyone could be listening.

"Finally. Took forever to get through to our friend, but she said she'd take care of 'our project' as soon as her meetings wrapped up. From here on out though, I'm sticking to fiction. Real-life intrigue is too stressful."

Andrea missed Joe's response, instead perplexed by her cats' sudden change of behavior. Denver had tilted his head and leapt from the table; Vail and Aspen sat frozen, ears perked, staring toward the foyer. Then she heard it too, the sound of papers shuffling in the living room. She leaned forward, muscles taut, hackles raised, ready to pounce. "Joe, hold on a sec. I think someone's in the house. I'll call you back later."

"Wait, what? Andrea??" Silence. The connection was dead.

After twenty minutes of weaving in and out of rush-hour traffic to travel one mile, Joe “Hack” Hackford pulled up outside his sister’s Ridgewood home. Adrenaline pumping on overdrive, he jumped from his car and sprinted toward the house. Door wide open—not an encouraging sign. He steeled his nerves and hastened inside. The living room looked like a hurricane’s aftermath, with furniture overturned and papers littering the carpets and floor.

“Andrea? Are you here?” He rushed into the kitchen, which lacked any signs of their celebratory dinner—no spaghetti boiling on the stove, no cake rising in the oven. Only the door to the backyard ajar and a shriek emanating from the next room, piercing the eerie silence. Hair stiffening at the back of his neck, he raced into the dining room where a redheaded woman stood frozen, staring across the room.

“Who the hell are you?” he growled.

The stranger remained wide-eyed and unresponsive. He followed her gaze to the floor, where he witnessed the unthinkable. His beloved sister lay in the corner, surrounded by a pool of blood, a kitchen knife stuck in her chest. Her eyes remained fixed on the ceiling. A trio of feline guards circled her lifeless body.

Hack’s knees turned to jelly, and he grabbed onto a chair for support, forcing back the remains of the snack he’d consumed only minutes earlier. Once the initial shock waned, he reverted his attention back to the intruder. At second glance, she did look somewhat familiar, though the woman he’d met a few weeks back—the missing heiress whose computer they’d just hacked—was brunette. Had she uncovered their con? With a bolt of fury, he reached forward and pulled the wig from her head. A thousand questions zigzagged in his brain, but only one forced its way past his lips:

“Oh my God. Grace. Oh my God. What the hell have you done?”