



SAVING
Grace

CAN THE PAST HEAL THE PRESENT?

AUBREY WYNNE

Saving Grace

by

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A contemporary romantic suspense interlocked with a historical thriller

A tortured soul meets a shattered heart...

Chloe Hicks' life consisted of an egocentric ex-husband, a pile of bills, and an equine business in foreclosure until a fire destroys the stable and her beloved ranch horse. What little hope she has left is smashed after the marshal suspects arson. She escapes the accusing eyes of her hometown, but not the memories and melancholy.

Jackson Hahn, Virginia Beach's local historian, has his eyes on the mysterious new woman in town. When she enters his office, he is struck by her haunting beauty and the raw pain in her eyes. Her descriptions of the odd events happening in her bungalow pique his curiosity.

The sexy historian distracts Chloe with the legend of a woman wrongly accused of witchcraft. She is drawn to the story and the similarities of events that plagued their lives. Perhaps the past can help heal the present. But danger lurks in the shadows...

Dedication

To my mother, my editor, and the woman who genetically extended her writing talent and continues to improve my books with her slashing red pen. Thank you for the honesty, the brainstorming sessions, and the late nights working because I run way too close to deadlines. I could never have made it this far without your experience, your support, and your love. And to think you wanted to retire and miss all this stress and chaos...

Author's Note

Virginia Beach does not have fireflies, it has the flicker of the lantern of Grace Sherwood as she dances with the devil at Witchduck Point.

For some reason, I can never write a purely fictional story. There are always truths that I weave into the plot. History is my passion, and I find bits of it anywhere I poke my nose. In *Saving Grace*, the historic character of Grace Sherwood—the Witch of Pungo—lives in colonial Virginia. Just outside Virginia Beach is the small town of Pungo where Grace lived. Remains of her home stood until 2002, when the owners of the property decided the chimneys were a danger.

Shawneetown is also an actual city near Shawnee National Forest, located in Southern Illinois, my resident state.

Chapter One

"Fire is the test of gold; adversity, of strong men."

Martha Graham

*Late February 2006
Four Seasons Ranch
Shawneetown, Southern Illinois*

Chloe bolted up, willing the fog in her head to dissipate. The bed sheets were twisted around her ankles. Sweat trickled down her back. The terror froze her limbs while she struggled to calm her thudding heart and listen for the sound all horse owners dread. But it was the smell that made her realize this was not a terrible dream.

Smoke.

Instinct took over and she scrambled from the four-poster, making a beeline for the back door and the barn. Her toe smacked against the corner of a wall as her eyes adjusted to the darkness. Pain radiated up her ankle. *Oh god, not my babies. Not Bunny.* Panic weighed down her legs as her bare feet hit the gravel. Sharp stones dug into the soft pads as the pungent smell of burning hay filled her nostrils. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. She tried to run down the long driveway, her eyes riveted to the red-orange flames shooting up into the black sky. Paul, her trainer, emerged from the darkness, his signature white hat on his head, his face colored yellow from the fiery glow. He signaled for her to take the front of the building as he disappeared around the back.

The frigid night air slapped her awake, but a horrifying screech from a panicked horse kicked in her adrenaline. Chloe reached the big, sliding doors and tugged them open. Heat smacked her face, and the smoke assaulted her lungs. Coughing, tears running down her cheeks, she slid back the bolts and opened the stall doors. On the other side, Paul's voice faintly reached her over the crackle that filled her ears.

"Hiya! Move it, move it."

The fire had consumed the other half of the barn where the arena was located. Above her was the loft, filled with winter hay and the last of her savings, now adding fuel to the already intense blaze. She pushed the thought from her

mind as the flames shot through the center of the alleyway, and the arena caved in.

Grabbing one of the lead ropes that hung at each door, she smacked the first horse on the rump with the end of it and sent him flying out of the barn. The first three horses on each side followed their stable mates into safety with little persuasion. But Duchess, her mother's old mare, wouldn't budge. Chloe threw the lead rope over her neck and forced a calm tone. "Easy, girl. That's my girl. Walk on, now. Walk on."

The old horse snorted and pranced but followed her out of the stall. When they neared the opening, she withdrew the rope and whacked Duchess' hindquarters. With a leap, the horse disappeared into the gray haze. The acrid odor of scorched hair and burnt wood filled her nostrils. Embers popped. She felt her cheek blister and wiped at it with her shoulder, while leading two more horses out by hand. She could hear BW's shrill bark and knew he was herding the animals into a paddock as she sent them out.

Crack!

Above her, a beam gave way and formed a fiery V. The horses must have sensed it also because they lunged ahead, snapping Chloe's shoulders forward. She struggled to maintain her balance but fell to the matted floor, her knees striking the hard rubber. A *boom* behind her sent a spray of sparks, and pain shot along her backside. From the corner of her eye, she saw a strand of her hair spark. She beat at her neck frantically, putting it out with her bare hand. The heat was sweltering now. Images wavered in the flames that licked at the dry timbers of the remaining stalls and the heavy beams above.

Scrambling to her feet, Chloe ran outside into the frigid night and stumbled down the drive to help Paul. As she reached the other side of the barn, she doubled over as a coughing spasm racked her body. Hands on her knees, gasping to pull air into her tight chest, she heard him yelling over the crackle and whinnies.

"Bunny won't leave the stall or let me near her foal."

"What about Jack?"

"He's good. C'mon, the roof is gonna give."

His hand tightened around her arm and pulled with such force her feet almost left the ground. Plunging back into the smoking hell, they entered Bunny's stall and found them both backed into the corner.

"Paul, I'll push the foal toward the door, and then Bunny will follow."

Another loud snap from above. She grabbed the lead rope dangling from the horse's halter and handed it to the trainer. Running a palm down her mare's neck, she spoke soothingly, "Atta girl, Bunny. There's my girl. Let's get your baby out of here." The mare's ears perked at her voice and words. Chloe tossed a rope around the foal's neck and pulled. The baby gave in to the pressure and took a step. It was all Bunny needed to give in to Paul's urgent pressure. They emerged from the stall, the baby dashing ahead with Chloe on its heels.

Behind her, a loud, splintering crash was followed by a shrill squeal. Her stomach twisted as she turned to see Paul pulling on the lead rope. A fiery beam

pinned Bunny as she thrashed, her legs flying in the air. One hoof caught the man in the head, and he crumpled to the ground.

Fighting for air, her chest a tight ball of agony, Chloe stumbled back in and grabbed Paul under his arms. BW appeared at her side, his teeth sinking into the canvas jacket. Together, they dragged him out of danger. With the last of her strength, she shuffled backwards until her feet tripped on something solid. She fell, his body tangled in her legs as they both landed with a thud.

A sob ripped at her raw throat at the sound of a muffled shriek. Tears spilled down her burning cheeks as she shook the lifeless body on top of her. BW licked at his master's face. Chloe collapsed, her hand still on Paul's chest, finding hope in the slight rise and fall of his shallow breathing. In the back of her brain, the sound of sirens wailed faintly. Above her, a shadow loomed. *Mike? How did he get here so fast?* And then her world went black.

"What the hell happened?"

The words echoed in her head as she tried to focus on the voice.

"She'll survive, Mr. Hatchette. Calm down."

"Calm down? My wife's business is in ashes—she could have died—and you ask me to calm down? I'm the state's attorney of Gallatin County, and I want some answers."

Oh god. Mike. Ex-wife, your ex-wife.

"Then you need to talk to the fire chief not the attending physician. I didn't have to let you in here. Play nice or I'll ask you to leave."

The sledgehammer inside her skull was relentless. Strong fingers closed around her forearm, his thumb roughly stroking her skin. Chloe recognized his touch without opening her eyes. She kept her lids closed and waited out the silence, imagined him schooling his features into a placid mask. The touch turned into a caress as his anger came under control. Her ex-husband's temper was not widely known. He kept it behind closed doors.

"I'm sorry, Doc. It's just been one hell of a scary night. I love this woman with all my heart. We've been trying to work through our problems, and the thought of losing her again..."

Chloe recognized the pleading, apologetic tone that had worked on her too many times. Oh, he was good. And the attempts at reconciliation had all been one-sided. The man had been stalking her for the past three years.

"I understand. Right now, I'm waiting for her mother. We'll need her here when Ms. Hicks regains consciousness. The news will be devastating."

"How severe are the burns?" Mike had released his hold.

At the mention of her condition, her stomach clenched. The barn fire. Images seeped into her mind's eye.

"Fortunately, most are first degree. Her back sustained several second-degree burns. She has some good-sized blisters, and those will take the longest to heal."

The voices faded. She was alone. Hot tears ran down her face, into her ears and onto her neck. Bunny's cries echoed in her mind. She saw Paul's head with a huge, bloody gash at the temple. Paul Toby, her rock and voice of reason. *Please, let him be alive.*

She was suddenly exhausted, as if she were an air mattress and someone had pulled her plug. Every muscle in her body went limp, and blessed sleep claimed her.

Sunlight streaked through the dusty blinds of the hospital room. Chloe's eyes watered. She blinked at the bright halos around the shadowy head in front of her. The delicate scent of jasmine surrounded her as soft lips touched her cheek. *Mom?*

"Hi, honey. How's my girl?"

Her mother's voice produced immediate tears.

"No crying, it will only irritate your eyes and makes the hazel look brown. I've done enough of that for both of us, anyway." Dottie Hicks stroked her daughter's cheek. "How's the noggin?"

Chloe moved her head slowly. The sledgehammer had disappeared. "Okay." Her voice sounded like a bullfrog in season. "My feet hurt."

"I bet. It happens when horses step on bare toes. One broken toe on the right and major bruising on the left."

Both women stared at their laps as the enfolding quiet held unspoken questions. They each sat in their own reverie, Chloe's filled with the doubts and fears of the future that follow any catastrophe.

"Bunny's dead." Chloe didn't ask; it was a whispered statement. Her mother didn't answer but gripped her bandaged hand. "And Paul?"

The silence threatened to rip out her heart.

"No honey, Paul will be fine. A bad concussion, a fractured skull they think. But he'll survive."

"And the horses?" She stared at the ceiling, thanking God for some good news. Like the tiny ray of the sunshine that peeked through the blinds.

"No other casualties. The neighbors helped track down any runaways. That darn mustang gave us all a good chase. Just caught him yesterday."

Chloe nodded as the air left her lungs and relief brought a momentary smile. She'd been so afraid one of her clients had experienced a loss like hers. "And Jack and Barbie?"

"Handsome Jack is fine. His mane got a good singe, but it'll grow back. And that baby is a survivor. She won't leave Jack's side, but she's eating. Good thing you started weaning her this month."

"I waited until Barbie was six months. When I tried earlier to separate her from Bunny..."

The sobs came then. Terrible, wrenching, nauseating sobs for Paul, the horses, her business she'd worked so hard to build the last few years. And with that, the pounding in her head returned. Her mother climbed onto the bed and

held her the best she could, mumbling about bandages and tubes. Chloe wasn't sure how long they rocked back and forth. It seemed like hours before her energy was spent, and she ran out of tears.

"You've been in and out of consciousness for two days. You are physically and emotionally exhausted. After a good night's rest, we'll see about getting you home, okay?"

Chloe nodded her head, swiped at her face, and cringed at the blisters on her right cheek. She remembered the constant onslaught of flying embers.

"What do I look like?"

"Like a mummy. Too bad it's not October. But your face will be fine, honey. The doc said there may be some scars on your hands and back. The flannel pajamas made a bit of a mess across your shoulders." Dottie patted her daughter's where the skin was clear and sniffed. Her gray eyes were bright and matched the streaks in her short, dark hair. "Your hair will need some professional attention. I couldn't see the golden brown through the soot when I first saw you. The ends are burnt in spots, but don't worry, you'll be good as new in a few weeks."

"And then what?" Chloe shut her eyes. The sense of doom was back and looming over her head. *Make it go away.*

"And then you and I and Paul will figure it out." Dottie moved off the bed and looped her purse over her shoulder.

"If he wants to come—"

"I have a good feeling about that man. He's tougher than nails and won't let a little fire scare him off. In the meantime, the neighbors and I are taking care of everything."

"I love you, Mom. I'm so thankful you're here."

"And where else would I be?" She smoothed the hair from her daughter's face. "You just get your strength back. I'm counting on you."

Guilt crept in. "I don't want you to miss too much work on my account. I know the department needs you."

"Oh, please. Our busy season doesn't start until May."

Her mother had been a dispatcher for the County Sheriff's Office for almost thirty years. The department expected the switchboard to light up during the summer and fall for information on the area and reports on lost hikers and riders. The area was nicknamed Little Egypt due to the eye-catching natural rock formations. Dottie was kept busy with calls as vacationers flocked to the Shawnee National Forest with backpacks, trail bikes, horses, and mules.

"Love you more, honey." She leaned over, kissed her daughter on the forehead, and slid out the door.

Chloe leaned back into the pillows, wincing at the pain under her shoulders. A dull throb had begun across her back and down her forearms. She'd always been the kind of girl with a back-up plan. Marriage had been Plan A, divorce and her stables Plan B. Now she needed Plan C.

