

A Savage Grace
by Velda Brotherton
Chapter One

Lenore kicked back the covers and moved to the window, stood in a shaft of early morning sunlight and gazed toward the surrounding woods, the leafless trees hunched like bony sentinels. Shadows of night retreated beneath their feet. A serenading cardinal's song muted the despair that too often followed her from sleep.

In the kitchen, cupboards banged, and pans clattered. Edward fixing breakfast. Throwing on a robe, she tiptoed past the closed door of the room where her mother had died, not wishing to rouse the imprisoned spirit that often appeared like a shimmer of mud-spattered rainbows.

Edward always cooked after a pleasurable sexual romp, as if she bought his help by satisfying his passions. That was okay with her, none of his appetites were demanding, and that too was okay. Most of the time.

The aroma of bacon and eggs and coffee filled the cabin. She watched him a moment before entering the kitchen, an alcove cut from a corner of the living room. Tall and broad shouldered, he managed not to look out of place there. His competent hands worked an egg beater as expertly as they operated the tools of his trade. He heard her and turned, a smile lighting his boyish features.

She went to him and kissed his cheek. It was warm and smooth, smelled of the Stetson aftershave she'd given him for Christmas.

"Mmm, bacon and eggs."

His hazel eyes regarded her a moment, the doubt there familiar. He got that from his mother, the need to make sure he was not being criticized. The entire family had no sense of humor at all, always presumed they were being ridiculed.

She filled the teakettle and set it on the electric coils.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Tea. I always forget, don't I?"

"Nothing to be sorry for. This is wonderful." She reached past him for her own mixture of chamomile and green tea, spooned leaves into a small metal tea ball and dropped it into a blue pottery cup.

"And you were wonderful last night, as always." He kissed her on an earlobe.

His warm lips tickled an unsatisfied need that lingered from the night before. She shook it off. Edward was a good man, and she would marry him someday. Her idea or his she could no longer remember.

The teakettle hissed while he took up the eggs and bacon, fingered toast to their plates, and poured himself a cup of coffee. They sat at the minuscule table near sliding glass doors and enjoyed the blissful silence of an Ozark morning.

Perfection. Or at least it should be. Why did she always pick away till she found something wrong? With her life... with herself... with Edward?

"I won't be home till around seven. You'll be here." He glanced over his coffee cup.

It wasn't a question, and resentment gathered, but she shook it off. Edward's way. "Of course. It's such a beautiful day, maybe we'll grill some steaks and veggies."

"Well, okay. Best if you don't start till I'm home. Maybe you ought to fix something you could warm up. We've had some delays on the house, and I'd like to have it framed

in by tonight.” He watched her, waiting for an agreement.

Why not? What did it matter what they ate? “Okay. I’ll just put something in the slow cooker before I leave.”

A nod, and he finished, sipping at his coffee while rising. “See you tonight, then. You going to the shop?”

“After I run some errands.”

An arched brow asked the next question. He always wanted to know where she was and what she was doing. She often felt as if she were tied to him with a gossamer thread, invisible but unbreakable.

Feeling a bit put-upon, she replied to the silent question. “Post office, hardware store, groceries, deliver to the shop, then home to work.”

She glanced toward the area that was once the dining room. Edward’s moving in had caused a few changes. Her workroom had become his office, thus the dining room mess where she worked.

They’d had a fight over that. He couldn’t understand why she didn’t move her “junk” into her mother’s old room. When she’d told him that was out of bounds, even forbid him to put anything in there himself, he told her she was in denial and needed to face facts. Dead people were dead, and that was that.

Thinking back on the argument, she wondered again why she’d ever let him move in. She’d been happier here alone with the wandering spirit of her mother.

The door slammed at Edward’s back, and she grabbed up an empty packing carton, dropped it on the floor in the cluttered space.

Along one wall, a table held tins filled with herbal tea mixes, each affixed with a hand-designed tag of curlicues and Victorian lettering. No computerized designs for her products. How satisfying the smooth flow of colored inks from the fine nib of her drawing pens, while the fragrances of the dried leaves and roots embodied her in nature’s perfume. Her chosen work. What Edward called her little hobby.

How wonderful if she never had to leave this remote, peaceful place and deal with life in a world in which she felt ill equipped to function. Out there, something dark and foreboding frightened her in ways she didn’t understand. She hated that she saw the auras of everyone she came in contact with. Despite that every Friday she ventured out to shop in Summit Falls and deliver her wares to Delilah, her business partner at The Craft Basket, located just off the exit of the new Interstate that slashed through the once serene mountains.

Teas and herbs packed in the cardboard carton, a roast in the cooker, she dressed in a denim skirt and white blouse and slipped on a sweater and sneakers. She carried the box out to the shiny new Scout Edward had bought to replace her derelict Volkswagen Bug. She’d liked that old bug, missed it. Everything he did bound her to him all the more, left her gasping for air, for freedom, for the peace of being alone. They weren’t compatible, and she’d known it the first time she studied his chakra and realized he was a prophetic. A deadly combination. Prophetics tended to destroy feelers like her.

Edward chastised her for such nonsense, said that people didn’t have auras, and what was this chakra nonsense anyway? Her argument that auras were a scientific fact meant little to him. When Edward believed a thing, well, then, that’s pretty much how it was.

Despite such disagreements, they were in love. Weren’t they? The answer to that

question eluded her.

The canopied lane wound for a mile or so to the blacktopped county road that meandered through the hills to the small mountain hamlet of Summit Falls. She parked, dropped by the post office and the hardware store, then strolled along the sidewalk to the grocery. Inside, she wrestled a cart from those lined at the entrance, headed for the fresh vegetables and fruits, and plucked up an assortment of both.

Several people spoke to her. She nodded in return, once in a while passed a few words. Different people's auras shimmered around them, some like wings of angels. Seeing muddy colors told her that person was having a rough time and unnerved her. But she was not a counselor and didn't care to admit to her intuitive abilities. To let people know she sometimes caught glimpses of their future would have been devastating to her already wobbly reputation. Imagine what they'd think... what they'd say. That talent was best kept secret. They gossiped about her enough, she was sure. The daughter of that crazy poet who had killed herself. If it wasn't for her love of the wilderness, she would live in a large city where no one knew anyone else's business. You could be invisible, no one would care.

Topping off her purchases with a loaf of whole wheat bread, she headed for the check-out line where two people waited. Old Mrs. Compton, widow of the past mayor, behind the Baptist minister's wife, Jean Mallory. On her left, just beside the tempting display of candy bars and chewing gum, stood a rack of tabloids with their disgusting photographs and headlines. She glanced across a splash of words proclaiming the perversity of a well-known actor, then turned away. Pure trash.

From a place deep inside her head a harsh voice demanded, "Look at me, bitch."

The command hit her hard, shocked her into an abnormal posture that made her jaws hurt and sent a flash of pain through her shoulders. Like a robot, she twisted to scan her surroundings. No one in line behind her. Plump Mrs. Ramey strolled up a nearby aisle, stopped to pluck down a box of Cheerios and study the label. Jean Mallory closed her pocketbook and followed the bag boy out. Mrs. Compton chatted with the checker who ran her purchases over the scanner.

Once again, the savage voice spoke, "I said look at me. Over here. Come here."

A snake coiled around her spine. A yelp escaped her lips, and she whirled to look behind her. No one there. The words came from nowhere and everywhere.

"Shut up," she muttered, then covered her mouth. Talking to herself in public was not a good idea.

Calm down. Surely someone playing a trick. A child who'd learned ventriloquism, or someone she knew who thought such a bizarre joke was funny. She leaned to one side and peered behind the display at the second cash register. No one there.

In front of her, Mrs. Compton wrote out a check, glanced nervously at her and smiled.

Had she truly heard the voice? Was she losing her mind?

Just like her. Every time something strange happened, that was her first thought.

"Well?" she said aloud.

The clerk—wasn't her name Diana?—paused with Mrs. Compton's check in hand, shot her a worried look. Lenore smiled, and Diana frowned, but went back to her job. A pale yellow aura ringed her head and shoulders.

In search of the source of the voice, Lenore shot a frantic glance toward the

tabloids. She'd pretend to be reading the awful stuff, maybe that would convince everyone she was sane. Scanned the headlines of *The Comet*, read a few sentences.

DEMONS WALK THE EARTH TO DWELL IN KILLERS

by Christine Carle

Memphis, Tn., March 14, Eric Adair sits in the West Memphis Institute For The Criminally Insane, where he could spend the remainder of his life. He claims he is not alone. A demon possesses his soul and is responsible for the thirteen barbarous murders he has committed.

A photograph buried in the text snagged her attention, stopped her cold. Like a black and white film overlaid in a color movie, a hideous scene distorted racks of bread, potato chips, and packages of cookies that wavered as if trapped under water, then cleared. Repugnant flashes of butchery, as if vomited from the bowels of hell, made her stomach heave. She wiped perspiration from her face and neck, fought dizziness and leaned on the counter.

"Lenore? Miss Maine?"

Another voice. "Leave me alone. Stop doing that."

"What?"

"Your stuff. I can check it now."

Lenore glanced at her basket, grabbed the items and tossed them on the moving counter. The bread bounced and fell on the floor at Diane's feet. She glared, picked it up, and slashed it over the little window.

Once more Lenore checked out her surroundings. No one else had heard the insistent, evil voice. That was evident. The shoppers all went about their business. Immersed in her task, the clerk continued to slide her grocery items over the scanner.

The voice spoke to her again, louder, more insistent. "Bitch, I said look at me. Now."

Sheer terror threatened to explode her heart, her brain shuddered as if a demon indeed poked it with a clawed finger. The rack of tabloids blurred, grew fuzzy. The clerk — Diana, she was sure of it now — moved her mouth, widened her eyes and stopped checking groceries. Saying something Lenore couldn't hear. All she could do was stare at the news photo of a haggard but handsome young man with madness in his eyes. Eyes that drilled into her thoughts.

Her vision cleared... disjointed words assaulted her. DEMONS WALK EARTH, followed by a stupid, childish picture that looked as if it had come from a cheap horror movie.

The penetrating gaze of the killer snagged her like a sharpened hook. She scanned the article. Disgust rose like bile. Only a beast, an unholy monster would do the things this man had done.

"Nail him to a tree by his balls, leave him there to die. Pour acid in his eyes and mouth, drive needles under his finger nails."

Lenore clamped a hand over her mouth, breath hot and wet in her palm. What ugly thoughts. She had never experienced such hostility, such ugly hatred for another human being. The pungent smell of apples and celery turned sour in her nostrils.

"You okay, Lenore?" Diana shouted. "Should I call someone?"

She shook her head, gazed vacantly at the groceries, some sacked, the rest

waiting.

What would Diana do if she told her everything was fine, she was simply going stark-raving mad and conversing with a demon-possessed madman? A disjointed giggle choked at her throat, threatened to bubble out and put fact to the statement.

The voice came at her again, spouting words so filthy she wasn't sure of their meaning. She stumbled backward into old Mr. Stiles, who had joined the line, frail arms folded around a package of bologna and a quart of milk. He dropped the plastic carton, and it split open, gushing white fluid over his tattered shoes. Staring at the mess, he let go the pack of bologna. It hit the floor with a loud smack and splashed milk up the legs of his threadbare overalls.

She stared at him, speechless, ashamed, frightened. At last she found enough of a voice to blurt, "I'm sorry, oh, I'm sorry."

The wrinkled farmer gestured at the pool around his feet and swamped her in tobacco breath. Fire would spout from his mouth at any moment. A terrible black hole swirled in his muddy aura, and she wanted to grab his arm, shout at him to beware what was to come, but she didn't.

"Pick up the paper, bitch," the voice commanded, and she forgot all about Mr. Stiles's black hole.

"Shut up," she screamed.

The poor old man blanched and tottered away, leaving white tracks on the floor.

She whirled, put her nose against the photograph on the tabloid's front page and hissed, "Who are you? What do you want?"

Someone grabbed her arm, and she yelped, jerked away, peered through a slimy red haze at the owner of the store, Bill Crowley.

"Lenore, let me get someone to take you home. I'll bring your groceries."

Her distraught mind wouldn't admit Crowley's offer, though she knew him well. A kind, hardworking man filled with good deeds for his community.

Just like him to take care of the dead poet's crazy daughter.

Shaking her head, crying out, "No, no, no." She pivoted, grabbed a gallon jug of orange juice and swung it, hitting Crowley in the stomach so hard he gasped and bent double. The jug fell to the floor and split open, juice curdling into the milk.

"Take me with you," the voice commanded, and she could not think of doing otherwise.

In stilted acquiescence, she grabbed a copy of *The Comet* and shoved her way through the astounded bystanders and out the door into a metallic sunlight.

She barely heard Diana call out in a plaintive voice, "Wait a minute, Lenore. Don't you want your stuff? What am I gonna do with all this stuff?"

Outside, a fresh breeze dried the coating of perspiration that slicked her face. She ran, the handbag strapped over her shoulder slapping at one hip, her sneakers scraping over gravel-strewn asphalt. Her breath came in great gasps that tore at her lungs. She had to escape, yet even as she flung open the door of the Scout, threw herself inside and pounded at the automatic lock button, a horrid reality told her she carried the enemy with her.

Hateful words verified the fear. "Well, my sweet Lenore, alone at last."

The paper, crumpled in her fist, grew hot, twisted against her palm like a live, wild thing. Why had she brought it with her? Why?

“Because I told you to.”

With a screech, she flung it to the floor where it curled out flat so his face stared up at her. A sly grin twisted the countenance frozen in black and white. Had he been smiling before? God, she couldn't remember. Both hands over her eyes, she hunkered into the corner of the seat, the armrest digging into her ribs. All she could do was wait for him to take her, drag her into the madness that had been waiting there all along.

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