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**"DELICIOUS...SENSUAL."**

NEW YORK TIMES AND  
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

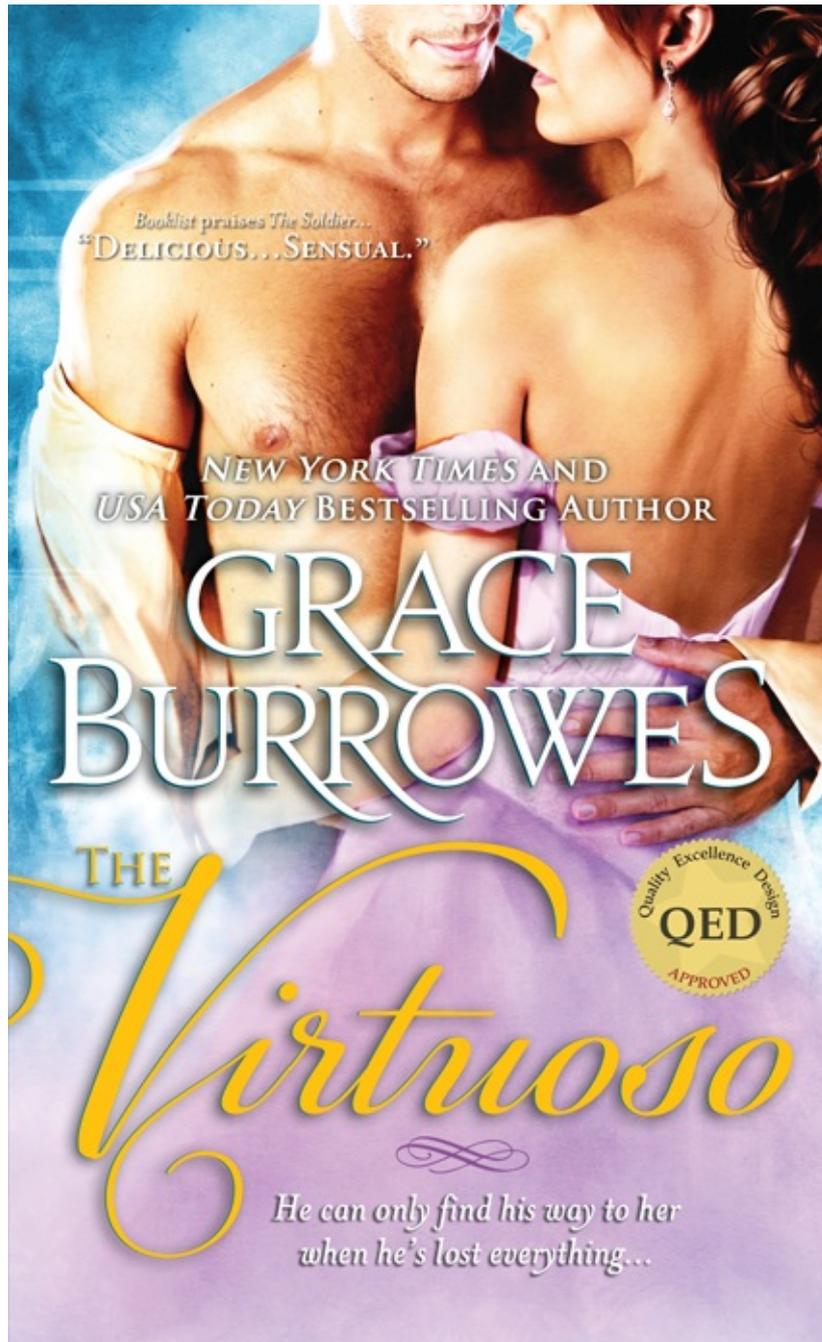
# GRACE BURROWES

THE

# Virtuoso



*He can only find his way to her  
when he's lost everything...*



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*This book is dedicated to younger brothers, and specifically to my brother Joe, who has the ability to make hard things look easy and even fun—things like raising kids, Montana winters, and being a younger brother to six obstreperous siblings.  
Joer, we are in awe of you.*

# One

“My best advice is to give up playing the piano.”

Lord Valentine Windham neither moved nor changed his expression when he heard his friend—a skilled and experienced physician—pronounce sentence. Being the youngest of five boys and named Valentine—for God’s sake—had given him fast reflexes, abundant muscle, and an enviable poker face. Being called the baby boy any time he’d shown the least tender sentiment had fired his will to the strength of iron and given him the ability to withstand almost any blow without flinching.

But this... This was diabolical, this demand David made of him. To give up the one mistress Val loved, the one place he was happy and competent. To give up the home he’d forged for his soul despite his ducal father’s ridicule, his mother’s anxiety, and his siblings’ inability to understand what music had become to him.

He closed his eyes and drew breath into his lungs by act of will. “For how long am I to give up my music?”

Silence, until Val opened his eyes and glanced down at where his left hand, aching and swollen, lay uselessly on his thigh.

David sat beside him, making a polite pretense of surveying the surrounding paddocks and fields. “You are possibly done with music for the rest of your life, my friend. The hand might heal but only if you rest it until you’re ready to scream with frustration. Not just days, not just weeks, and by then you will have lost some of the dexterity you hone so keenly now. If you try too hard or too soon to regain it, you’ll make the hand worse than ever.”

“Months?” One month was forever when a man wanted only to do the single thing denied him.

“At least. And as long as I’m cheering you up, you need to watch for the condition to arise in the other hand. If you catch it early, it might need less extensive treatment.”

“Both hands?” Val closed his eyes again and hunched in on himself, though the urge to kick the stone wall where they sat—hard, repeatedly, like a man beset with murderous frustration—was nigh overwhelming.

“It’s possible both hands will be affected,” David went on. “Your left hand is more likely in worse condition because of the untreated fracture you suffered as a small boy. You’re right-handed, so it’s also possible the right hand is stronger out of habit.”

Val roused himself to gather as many facts from David as he could. “Is the left weak, then?”

“Not weak, so much.” David, Viscount Fairly, pursed his lips. “It seems to me you have something like gout or rheumatism in your hand. It’s inflamed, swollen, and painful without apparent cause. The test will be if you rest it and see improvement. That is not the signal to resume spending all hours on the piano bench, Valentine.”

“It’s the signal to what? All I do is spend hours on the piano bench and occasionally escort my sisters about Town.”

“It’s the signal you’re dealing with a simple inflammation from overuse, old son.” David slid a hand to Val’s nape and shook him gently. “Many people lead happy, productive lives without gluing their arses to the piano bench for twenty hours a day. Kiss some pretty girls; sniff a few roses; go see the Lakes.”

Val shoved off the wall, using only his right hand for balance. “I know you mean well, but I don’t *want* to do anything but play the piano.”

“And I know what you want.” David hopped down to fall in step beside Val. “What you want has gotten you a hand that can’t hold a teacup, and while that’s not fair and it’s not right, it’s also not yet permanent.”

“I’m whining.” Val stopped and gazed toward the manor house where David’s viscountess was no doubt tucking in their infant daughter for the evening. “I should be thanking you for bothering with me.”

“I am flattered to be of service. And you are not to let some idiot surgeon talk you into bleeding it.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am absolutely sure of that. No bleeding, no blisters, no surgery, and no peculiar nostrums. You tend it as you would any other inflammation.”

“Which would mean?” Val forced himself to ask. But what would it matter, really? He might get the use of his hand back in a year, but how much conditioning and skill would he have lost by then? He loved his mistress—his muse—but she was jealous and unforgiving as hell.

“Rest,” David said sternly as they approached the house. “Cold soaks, willow bark tea by the bucket, and at all costs, avoid the laudanum. If you can find a position where the hand is comfortable, you might consider sleeping with it splinted like that. Massage, if you can stand it.”

“As if I had some tired old man’s ailment. You’re sure about the laudanum? It’s the only thing that lets me keep playing.”

“Laudanum lets you continue to aggravate it,” David shot back. “It masks the pain, it cures nothing, and it can become addictive.”

A beat of silence went by. Val nodded once, as much of an admission as he would make.

“Christ.” David stopped in his tracks. “How long have you been using it?”

“Off and on for months. Not regularly. What it gives in ability to keep playing, it takes away in ability to focus on what I’m creating. The pain goes away, but so does both manual and mental dexterity. And I can still see my hand is swollen and the wrong color.”

“Get rid of the poppy. It has a place, but I don’t recommend it for you.”

“I comprehend.”

“You think your heart’s breaking,” David said, “but you still have that hand, Valentine, and you can do many, many things with it. If you treat it right now, someday you might be able to make music with it again.”

“Is there anything you’re not telling me?” Val asked, his tone flat.

“Well, yes,” David replied as they gained the back terraces of the manor house. “There’s another possibility regarding the onset of the symptoms.”

“More good news?”

“Perhaps.” David met his gaze steadily, which was slightly disconcerting. In addition to height and blond good looks, David Worthington, Viscount Fairly, had one blue eye and one green eye. “With a situation like this, where there is no immediate trauma, no exposure to disease, no clear cause for the symptoms, it can be beneficial to look at other aspects of well-being.”

“In the King’s English, David, please.” Much more of David’s learned medical prosiing on, and Val was going to break a laudanum bottle over his friend’s head.

“Sickness can originate in the emotions,” David said quietly. “The term ‘broken heart’ can be literal, and you did say the sensations began just after you buried your brother Victor.”

“As we were burying Victor,” Val corrected him, not wanting to think of the pain he’d felt as he scooped up a symbolic fistful of cold earth to toss on Victor’s coffin. “What in the hell does that have to do with whether I can ever again thunder away at Herr Beethoven’s latest sonata?”

“That is for you to puzzle out, as you’ll have ample time to ponder on it, won’t you?”

“Suppose I will at that.”

Val felt David’s arm land across his shoulders and made no move to shrug it off, though the last thing he wanted was pity. The numbness in his hand was apparently spreading to the rest of him—just not quickly enough.

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“You seem to be thriving here, Cousin.”

“I am quite comfortable.” Ellen FitzEngle smiled at Frederick Markham, Baron Roxbury, with determined pleasantness. The last thing she needed was to admit vulnerability to him or to let him see he had any impact on her existence at all. She smoothed her hair back with a steady hand and leveled a guileless gaze at her guest,

enemy, and de facto landlord.

“Hmm.” Frederick glanced around the tidy little cottage, a condescending smile implying enormous satisfaction at Ellen’s comedown in the world. “Not quite like Roxbury House, is it? Nor in a league with Roxbury Hall.”

“But manageable for a widow of limited means. Would you like more tea?”

“’Fraid I can’t stay.” Frederick rose, his body at twenty-two still giving the impression of not having grown into his arms and legs, despite expensive clothing and fashionable dark curls. She knew he fancied himself something of a Corinthian, paid punctilious attention to his attire, boxed at Gentlemen Jackson’s, fenced at Alberto’s, and accepted any bet involving his racing curricula.

And still, to Ellen, he would always be the gangly, awkward adolescent whose malice she had sorely underestimated. Only five years difference separated their ages, but she felt decades his senior in sorrow and regret.

“I did want to let you know, though”—Frederick paused with his hand on the door latch—“I’ll likely be selling the place. A fellow has expenses, and the solicitors are deuced tightfisted with the Roxbury funds.”

“My thanks for the warning.” Ellen nodded, refusing to show any other reaction. Selling meant she could be homeless, of course, for she occupied a tenant cottage on the Markham estate. The new owner might allow her to stay on. Her property was profitable, but she didn’t have a signed lease—she’d not put it past Freddy to tamper with the deed—and so the new owner might also toss her out on her backside.

“Thought it only sporting to let you know.” Frederick opened the door and swung his gaze out to his waiting vehicle. A tiger held the reins of the restive bays, and Ellen had to wonder how such spirited horses navigated the little track leading to her door. “Oh, and I almost forgot.” Freddy’s smile turned positively gleeful. “I brought you a little something from the Hall.”

Dread seeped up from Ellen’s stomach, filling her throat with bile and foreboding. Any present from Frederick was bound to bring ill will, if not worse.

Frederick bent into his curricula and withdrew a small potted plant. “You being the gardener in the family, I thought you might like a little cutting from Roxbury. You needn’t thank me.”

“Most gracious of you, nonetheless.” Ellen offered him a cool smile as he put the clay pot into her hands and then climbed aboard. “Safe journey to Town, Frederick.”

He waited, clearly wishing she’d look at the little plant, but then gave up and yelled at his tiger to let the horses go. The child’s grasp hadn’t left the reins before Frederick was cracking the whip, the horses lunging forward and the curricula slewing around in Ellen’s front yard as the boy scrambled up onto his post behind the seat.

And ye gods, ye gods, was Ellen ever glad to see the last of the man. She glanced at the plant in her hand, rolled her eyes, and walked around to the back of her property to toss it, pot and all, on her compost heap.

How like Frederick to give her an herb often used to settle the stomach, while he intimated he'd be tearing the roof from over her head. He'd been threatening for several years now, as winters in Portugal, autumn at Melton, a lengthy stint in London each spring, and expensive friends all around did not permit a man to hold on to decrepit, unentailed estates for long.

She should be grateful she'd had five years to settle in, to grieve, and to heal. She had a few friends in nearby Little Weldon, some nice memories, and some satisfaction with what she'd been able to accomplish on this lovely little property.

And now all that accomplishment was to be taken from her.

She poured herself a cup of tea and took it to her back porch, where the vista was one of endless, riotous flowerbeds. They were her livelihood and her solace, her greatest joy and her most treasured necessity. Sachets and soaps, herbs for cooking, and bouquets for market, they all brought a fair penny, and the pennies added up. Fruits and vegetables created still more income, as did the preserves and pies made from them.

"And if we have to move"—Ellen addressed the fat-headed orange tom cat who strolled up the porch steps—"we have a bit put by now, don't we, Marmalade?"

Himself squeezed up his eyes in feline inscrutability, which Ellen took for supportive agreement. The cat had been abandoned at the manor house through the wood and had gladly given up a diet of mice for the occasional dish of cream on Ellen's porch.

His company, though, combined with Frederick's visit and the threat to her livelihood, put Ellen in a wistful, even lonely mood. She sipped her tea in the waning afternoon light and brought forth the memories that pleased her most. She didn't visit them often but saved them for low moments when she'd hug them around her like a favorite shawl, the one that always made a girl feel pretty and special.

She thought about her first pony, about the day she'd found Marmalade sitting king-of-all-he-surveyed in a tree near the cottage, like a welcoming committee from the fairy folk. She thought about the flowers she'd put together for all the village weddings, and the flowers on her own wedding day. And she thought about a chance visit from that handsome Mr. Windham, though it had been just a few moments stolen in the evening sunshine, and more than a year had passed since those moments.

Ellen set her chair to rocking, hugged the memory closer still, and banished all thoughts of Frederick, homelessness, and poverty from her mind.

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A life devoted to any creative art did not develop in the artist an ability to appreciate idleness, much less vice. Val had run his errands, visited his friend Nicholas Haddonfield, paid his duty calls to family—and that had been particularly difficult, as family was spread all over the Home Counties—and tended to every detail of his

business he could think to tend to. He'd taken several sessions guest-conducting the Philharmonic Society Orchestra, because he'd promised his friend Edward Kirkland he would, but they were painful afternoons.

And amid all this peripatetic activity, his head was full of music. Mozart's *Requiem* figured prominently, but it was all he could do not to let his hands wander over any available keyboard, tapping out a little rendition of the simplest nursery rhyme.

He owned two manufactories that built, of course, pianos. One for grands, one for cottage pianos. They did a surprisingly brisk trade, and because the Americans in particular had decided snobbery required well-made English goods, many of the grands were shipped overseas at very significant cost to the buyers.

Val had been in the habit of personally playing each instrument before releasing it for sale. The temptation to sit down and dabble just a little...

Dabbling, for Val, could go on literally for days. Oh, he'd heed the calls of nature—to eat, sleep, and tend to bodily functions—but when a particular theme got into his brain, earthly concerns were so many intermissions in the ongoing concert that was his life.

*Had been his life.*

For the first time, Val was forced to consider what younger sons of the nobility actually *did* with themselves. They could apparently drink, whore, duel, and *what*? The Corsican had met his match at Waterloo, which left gambling.

It boggled the mind but certainly did not entertain for long.

Glancing at his cards, Val felt a wave of despair. Here he was, seated amid the power and plenty of the realm's aristocracy, and he was about to burst out cursing for lack of ability to play "Hot Cross Buns."

A fucking, bedamned nursery rhyme was denied him.

"Your turn, Windham," Darius Lindsey drawled. By some unspoken accord, Lindsey had become Val's latest carousing companion, though Val had his suspicions as to how this had come about. "Or not, if you'd rather cash in."

Val glanced again at his cards and felt the heavy irony of divine humor at work. In the two weeks since he had stopped making music, his luck had become uncannily good at all games of chance. The pile of chips before him was obscenely ample, but he was comforted to note Lindsey was managing fairly well, too.

Not so young Baron Roxbury, seated across from Val. The man was playing too deep, visibly sweating in the candlelight.

"You can't back out now," Roxbury said, desperation in his voice. "Wouldn't be sporting in the least. A fellow needs a chance to win back his own, don'tcha know?"

"Believe you're about out of chips, Roxbury," Lindsey said. "Why don't we all call it a night, and things will look less daunting in the morning?"

"Not a bad idea," Val chimed in on cue, for he had no intention of spending the entire night watching Roxbury dig himself even deeper in debt. "My eyes grow tired.

The smoke is rather thick.”

“One more round.” Roxbury’s hand shot out and gripped Val’s right wrist when Val would have swept his chips to the edge of the table. “All I need is one more.”

“My dear,” Lindsey’s voice cut in softly, “I don’t think you can make the ante.”

“I can.” Roxbury’s chin went up. “With this.” He fumbled in his breast pocket and tossed a document on the table that bore the ribbons and seals of legality.

“I’m out.” Darius stood. “Roxbury, if you need a small loan to cover your losses, I’m sure it can be arranged until next quarter. Lord Val, you coming?”

“He can’t.” Roxbury answered for Val as the other two players murmured their excuses and left the table. “He owes me *one more hand*.”

“He owes you nothing,” Lindsey said. “You’re half seas over and the cards aren’t favoring you. Do yourself a favor and call it a night, Roxbury.”

“One more hand.” Roxbury held Val’s gaze, and it was difficult for a decent man to decide what would be kinder: To allow Roxbury what he thought would save him or to minimize the man’s losses.

One more *hand*, Val thought, the irony quirking his lips.

“One more.” Val nodded, meeting Lindsey’s exasperated glance. “But call for our hats and gloves, would you, Dare?”

Lindsey took the proffered excuse to leave but said something to the two men loitering by the door as they finished their drinks. With his peripheral vision, Val noted both sidled over to the corner and topped off those drinks. Witnesses, Val thought, realizing Lindsey brought a certain sophistication Val lacked to the suddenly dangerous business of gentlemanly idleness.

“Shall we cut for the deal?” Val asked. “Perhaps you can tell me exactly what you’ve tossed into the pot.”

“An estate.” Roxbury turned the top half of the deck over, smiling hugely when he revealed the knave of diamonds. “A tidy little property a short day’s ride from Town, out in Oxfordshire. Been in the family but doesn’t merit much attention.”

“Doesn’t merit much attention?” Val quirked an eyebrow and cut the queen of hearts—of course. He sighed inwardly as the little mi-re-do tune to “Hot Cross Buns” ran through his head. “My deal.”

Roxbury shrugged in what Val supposed was an attempt at casual disregard. “It’s not the family seat. Haven’t spent a night there myself, so there’s little point to keeping the place staffed, but it’s worth a pretty penny.”

“How many acres?” Val asked, dealing—with his right hand.

“Few thousand.” Another shrug as the final cards were dealt. “Home farm, home wood, dairy, pastures, a few tenants, that sort of thing.” Roxbury picked up his cards, and from the man’s expression, Val knew with sinking certainty this unstaffed, neglected, miserable little ruin of a country estate was all but his.

He could throw the game, of course.

*Hot cross buns, hot cross buns.  
One ha' penny, two ha' penny,  
Hot cross buns.*

He wasn't going to throw the game. The place might be useful as a dower property for a relative, or a retreat for Val that wasn't surrounded by friends and family. If it required attention, so much the better, because nobody sane spent the entire summer sweltering in Town.

Surrounded by pianos at every turn.

Val looked at his cards and almost smiled. Of course, a full house, queens over knaves. How fitting.

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"This brings back memories," Darius said from his perch on a solid piebald gelding.

"The trips to university and back," Val replied from aboard his chestnut. They'd had good weather for their trip out from London, thank God, though this particular stretch of road was looking oddly familiar. "Jesus pissing in the bloody blazing desert."

"Original," Darius conceded. "But apropos of what?"

Val retrieved the deed from the breast pocket of his riding jacket and scowled at the document. "I am very much afraid I know this place."

"You know the estate or the town nearby?"

"Both." Val felt a reluctant smile tugging at his lips. "And if this is the place I think it is, it's in godforsaken shape. The roof was on its last prayers a year ago and the grounds are an eyesore."

"Famous. So why are you smiling?"

"It needs rescuing. It has good bones and a lovely setting, and it's just far enough from London I won't be plagued with relatives and friends. There's a decent tavern in Little Weldon, and a market, and the folk are pleasant, as long as you've no pretensions to privacy." Val tucked the deed back in his pocket and urged his horse forward.

Darius brushed his horse's mane so it rested neatly down the right side of the animal's muscular neck and put his gelding to the walk beside Val's mount. "You are telling me we are to bivouac in Oxfordshire among a bunch of toothless old men and church biddies?"

"Nonsense," Val said, his smile broadening. "Both Rafe and Tilden have a few teeth, and we'll be camping only until I can put a few rooms to rights."

"I see."

"Lindsey." Val peered over at him. "Didn't you and your brother ever camp in the home wood at Wilton? Play Indians, roast a few hapless bunnies over a fire, and swim naked in the moonlight?"

"I am in the company of a pagan." Darius smoothed his hand over the horse's

already tidy mane. “If you must know, Trent and I were not permitted such savage pastimes, and I’d not have indulged in them if we were.”

“You’ve never sat in a tree reading *Robinson Crusoe*?”

“Not once.”

“Never snatched a picnic from Cook?” Val was frowning now. “Never pinched your papa’s second copy of the *Kama Sutra* to puzzle over the pictures in the privacy of the hay mow?”

“He had no such thing in his library.”

“Never crept down to the study in the dead of night and gotten sick on his brandy?”

Darius’s brows rose. “God in heaven, Windham. Did Her Grace have no influence on her menfolk whatsoever?”

“Of course, she did. I am a very good dancer. I have some conversation. I know how to dress and how to flirt with the wallflowers.”

“But one expects a certain dignity from the ducal household. Did your papa have no influence on you?”

“A telling influence. Thanks to him, my brothers and I learned to indulge in the foregoing mischief and a great deal more without getting caught.”

Darius eyed his companion skeptically. “And here I thought you must have been spouting King James in utero, reciting the royal succession by the time you were out of nappies, and strutting about with a quizzing glass by the age of seven.”

“That would be more my brother Gayle, though Anna has gotten him over the worst of it. The man is too serious by half.”

“And you’re not?” Darius was carefully surveying the surrounds as he posed this question.

“I am the soul of levity,” Val rejoined straight-faced. “Particularly compared to my surviving brothers. But this does raise something that needs discussion. The folk in these environs know me only as Mr. Windham, or young sir, or that fellow out from Sodom-on-Thames, and so forth.”

“Sodom-on-Thames.” Darius’s brows drew down. “This isn’t going to be like summering at the family seat, is it?”

“One hopes not.” Val shuddered to think of it. “No womenfolk to drag one about on calls just to observe how decrepit various neighbors have gotten, no amorous looks from the well-fed heifers of the local gentry, no enduring the vicar’s annual sermons aimed at curbing the excesses of Moreland’s miscellany.”

“So it wasn’t all Indians, pilfered brandy, and erotica?”

“Not lately. The point I wanted to make, however, is I do not want to be—I most assuredly do not want to be—Moreland’s youngest pup while I am among my neighbors here.”

“You’re a mighty strapping pup, but you are his son.”

“I could be the size of your dear brother-in-law, Nick Haddonfield,” Val retorted, a

note of exasperation in his voice, “and I would still be Moreland’s youngest pup, and not just to the doddering old titles His Grace battles with in the Lords. You try being the youngest of five boys and blessed with a name like Valentine. It wears on one.”

Darius did not argue, which meant when they approached the Markham estate in the waning light, they did so in silence. Valentine was certain the silence on Darius’s part could not be described as awed.

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In her five years in Little Weldon, Ellen had found evening was at once the sweetest and the most difficult time of day. Memories crowded closer at night, and even a good memory had an element of loss about it, for it was only a memory.

And she was acquainted with loss. If she’d known how brief her marriage was going to be, she’d have been a better wife. The sentiment was foolish, for she hadn’t been a bad wife, not until the end, but she would have spent less time wishing she were in love with her spouse and more time loving the man.

As shadows lengthened over her yard, she spied Marmalade stalking his great, fluffy-footed way across the back gardens. He was a big cat, made all the more impressive for the fact that his fur was long, luxurious, and scrupulously groomed. The idea that such an animal—and bright orange to boot—could sneak anywhere was vaguely comical. As Ellen watched, he pounced among the daisies and pounced again but then sat back, exhibiting a sudden need to bathe, as cats will when their dignity is imperiled.

*I’m like that cat. I don’t fit in as an exponent of my species, and yet my dignity still matters to me.*

Thoughts of that ilk required a fortifying cup of tea, lest the thinker become morose, or worse, lachrymose. As she filled her teakettle, tossed kindling on the hearth, and swung the pot over the flames, Ellen reminded herself she’d started her menses that morning, and every month—every useless, benighted month—that occasion filled her with sadness. When she had been married, the sadness made more sense, as it signaled yet another failure to provide Francis his heir.

She poured the boiling water into her porcelain pot, added the tea strainer, assembled a tea tray that included strawberries, bread, and butter, and took her repast to the back porch. Marmalade had arranged himself on the bottom step, taking advantage of the heat retained in the wood both behind and beneath him. As she sipped her tea, Ellen set her chair to rocking and tried not to set her thoughts to remembering, but the evening was peaceful, beautiful, sweet—and lonely.

Tonight, Ellen decided, she would wander in the wood, searching for herbs, or perhaps, just searching for a little peace.

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“A bit of work needed,” Darius remarked, glancing around at the overgrown track. The

front gate to the Markham estate, with stone griffons rampant on the gate posts and the wrought iron sagging, lent an ominous touch to the entryway.

“A bit,” Val conceded. “But then, if the drive is not navigable, I will have to concern myself less with uninvited company.”

“Are you planning on becoming eccentric?” Darius inquired as he steered his gelding past a pothole. “Or will it just overcome you gradually, like the vines obscuring Sleeping Beauty’s castle?”

“We’ll have to wait and see. For the present, I rather like all the rhododendrons.”

Darius peered at the foliage. “They have misplaced their self-restraint.”

The drive was lined with towering oaks that created a dense canopy of greenery overhead. The understory had been taken over by the rhododendrons, and it being the proper season, they were awash in blooms. In the lengthening shadows, the pink, purple, and white flowers stood out luminously against the dark foliage and shifting dapples of sun.

Val rode on in silence until the manor house itself stood before him.

“Oh dear,” Darius said softly, “and that is an understatement.”

The house lay north-south in orientation, so the full impact of the westering sun hit the entire façade. The southern wing and the center section were unkempt and dilapidated. Shutters hung crookedly, windows were missing panes, porch bricks had come off and tumbled to the grass.

The northern wing, however, was a complete shambles. The slate roof was visibly sagging near the soffit in the front corner, three of the chimneys were on their way to becoming piles of mortar, the north-facing porch was listing hard to port, and as Val watched, bats flew out of the missing attic windows.

“Well, come on.” Val swung off his chestnut. “The light won’t last forever, and I’ve a mind to look around.”

For Val, there was an incongruous sense of pleasure just looking at the place. Last year when he’d been ostensibly looking for property to purchase, he’d needed a key to gain access. This year, any number of broken ground-floor windows afforded the same privilege. Many a boy had obviously tested his aim against mullioned panes without thought to the cost of replacing them. Still, as Val gazed upon the wreck fate had dumped in his lap, he had the thought: *She’s waited for me.*

In the mellow evening sunbeams, the house held on to a kind of dignity, despite disrepair, neglect, and abandonment. The native stone blended beautifully with the surrounding wood, while patches of wildflowers splashed color in unlikely spots around the yard. Opportunistic saplings were encroaching, but a liberal use of imagination put the former serenity and appeal of the place within sight.

“The stables aren’t bad at all,” Darius said as he caught up with Val at the back of the house.

“A silver lining for which the horses will no doubt be grateful.” Val’s gaze traveled

toward the largest outbuilding. “And the springhouse looks large and sound, and the carriage house nearly so.”

“Where is your home farm?”

“That direction, being worked by a tenant most likely.”

“You’re fortunate to have stone walls.” Darius frowned as he turned slowly where he stood. “They’ll take some effort to repair, but the materials are at hand, and most of your tenants should have the skill.”

“It so happens, while in Yorkshire enjoying my brother’s hospitality, I acquired the skill. It’s more a matter of wearing gloves, cursing fluently, and not being able to walk or rise from one’s seat the next day.”

“And who wouldn’t enjoy such an undertaking as that?” Darius smiled as he spoke. “Are we going inside?”

“Not tonight.” Bright morning light would serve better for an inspection, and Val had seen enough for now. The place still stood, and that was what mattered.

Though why it mattered escaped him for the present.

“Let’s peek inside the carriage house, though, shall we?” Val suggested. “There might be usable quarters above, and the first thing we’re going to need is a stout wagon to haul supplies and debris.”

“You’re staying?”

“Think of the privacy.” Val’s smile widened at the incredulity on Darius’s face. “The insipid teas and dances we’ll miss, the scheming young ladies we won’t have to dodge under the arbors, and the unbearable stink of London in summer we won’t have to endure.”

*The pianos he wouldn’t have to abstain from playing. Hot cross buns... Hot cross buns...*

“Think of your back hurting so badly you can hardly walk,” Darius rejoined as he crossed the yard beside Val. “The endless small talk at the local watering hole, the pleasures of the village churchyard on a Sunday morning, where no man escapes interrogation.”

“You’re not”—Val paused in mock drama—“*afraid*, are you, Lindsey?”

While giving Darius a moment to form the appropriate witty rejoinder, Val pushed open the door to the carriage house. No doubt because vehicles were expensive and the good repair of harness a matter of safety, the place had been built snugly and positioned on a little rise at the back of the house. The interior was dusty but dry and surprisingly tidy.

“This is encouraging.”

Darius followed him in. “Why do I have the compulsion to caution you strenuously against going up those stairs, Windham? Perhaps you’ll be swarmed by bats or set upon by little ghoulies with crossbows.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, what could be hiding in an empty old carriage house?”

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Ellen had meant to take herself off for a little stroll in the dense woods separating her cottage from the crumbling manor, but the chamomile tea she'd drunk must have lulled her to sleep. When she awoke, Marmalade was curled in her lap, the kneading of his claws in her thigh rousing her even through her skirts and petticoats.

"Down with you, sir." She gently put the cat on the porch planks and saw from the angle of the sun she'd dozed off only for a few minutes. Something caught her ear as she rose from her rocker, a trick of the time of evening when dew fell and sounds carried.

"Damn them," Ellen muttered, leaving the porch with a swish of skirts. Bad enough the village boys liked to spy on her and whisper that she was a witch. Worse was when they ran tame over the old Markham manor house, using it as a place to smoke illicit pipes, tipple their mama's brandied pears, and practice their rock throwing.

"Little heathen." Ellen went to her tool shed and drew a hand scythe down from the wall pegs. She'd never had serious trouble with the boys before, but one in particular—Mary Bragdoll's youngest—was growing into the height and muscle for which his brothers and father were well known. By reputation, he could be a sneering, disrespectful lout, and Ellen was more afraid of him than she'd like to admit.

She tromped through the woods, hopping over logs to take the shortest path, until she came out of the trees at the back of the old house. That view was easier to look on than the front—the roof wasn't quite so obviously ruined.

When Francis had been alive, this property had still been tidy, graceful, elegant, and serene, if growing worn. The years were taking a brutal toll, leaving Ellen with the feeling the house's exterior represented her own interior.

Time was slowly wearing away at her determination, until her reasons for going through each day without screaming and tearing her hair were increasingly obscured.

"You have started your menses," she reminded herself, "and this is no time for silly dramatics."

The voices came again from the carriage house, and Ellen's eyes narrowed. Heretofore, the encroaching vandals had left the carriage house in peace, and their violation of it made her temper seethe. She marched up to the door, banged it open with a satisfying crash, brandished her scythe, and announced herself to any and all therein.

"Get your heathen, trespassing backsides out of this carriage house immediately, lest I inform your papas of your criminal conduct—and *your mamas*."

"Good lord," a cultured and ominously *adult* male voice said softly from Ellen's right, "we're about to be taken prisoner. Prepare to defend your borders, my friend. Sleeping Beauty has awakened in a state."

Ellen's gaze flew to the shadows, where a tall, dark-haired man was regarding her with patient humor. The calm amusement in his eyes suggested he posed no threat to