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Prologue

1855

Leawick, Shropshire

LIGHT inside the half-timbered cottage was fading fast, but Mary Satters waited until her eyes began to ache before finally taking a match to one of the tallow candles. As if that were her signal, the child who had been sitting under the table put down her straw doll and padded over to a bench under the window.

“Be careful, Jenny,” Mary gave her usual warning as she resumed the preparations for supper at the fireplace.

The child paused long enough to send a somber look back at her, then hitched a dimpled knee up on the bench and pulled herself up to the window. Tightening her lips, Mary stirred the contents of the caldron with a long wooden spoon. She knew that little Jenny would wait there with her forehead pressed against the dark glass for as long as it took, like a sentry tied by duty to his post. How could a child watch so anxiously for a mother who was so cold and indifferent?

Ten minutes later, the sound of a horse’s hooves, distant and muffled against the dirt road, drifted through the cracks in the wooden door. “Do you see her yet, Jenny?” Mary asked.

The child obviously had seen something, for she climbed back down from the bench. But to Mary’s surprise, she didn’t

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go on to her second post at the door. Instead, she scuttled back under the table, sat down, and picked up her doll again.

It must be Roy, Mary thought. But her husband's thatching job was in Harton, ten miles away. Surely he wouldn't make it home this early in the evening. The hoofbeats grew louder, then ceased. Seconds later the door was pushed open. Thomas Hammond, her brother-in-law, stood framed in the doorway.

"Your sister's gone," he said, not even looking over at his daughter.

Mary's spoon clattered to the hearth, and she bent to snatch it up. "What do you mean?"

"She ran off with some man."

"What man?"

"Don't know." His hands curled into fists at his sides.

"Someone who was staying in town." Finally he sighed and glanced at the child under the table. "I can't keep her and work, you know."

Mary closed her eyes for a second and rubbed her forehead. "I just don't know. Roy won't like it none."

"I got no kin. It's you or a charity home."

"You can't do that to your own daughter!"

"She don't eat if I don't work. What choice do I have?"

Mary looked over at Jenny. The child, still clutching her doll, watched them both with a solemn expression, as if she understood the gravity of the situation.

"I'll ask Roy," she said at last.

"Thank you," Thomas said with a broken voice, then turned on his heel and left.

There was nothing Mary could do now but turn her attention back to the stew in the caldron. Two lives were being

shattered and a family torn apart, but if she burned the supper, they would have nothing to eat until tomorrow.

After the sound of the galloping horse faded into the distance, Mary caught a movement from the corner of her eye. Jenny was crawling out from under the table again. Mary watched in despair as the child climbed back on the bench and resumed her watch at the window.

1

1863

JOSEPH Price pulled his collar up around his neck and squinted into the drizzle. The churchyard had been cast in a dismal gray pall since dawn, but this chilly rain made the mid-June morning feel more like late autumn. Standing under the gabled roof of a lych-gate, Joseph listened to the drops pelting the wood above him and wondered again what was keeping Squire Nowells.

Joseph frowned, absently brushing at a stray drop of water that had landed on his cheek and trickled down into his beard. He had been waiting for almost an hour, and he was beginning to have doubts about making it to York in time. If he missed the train to London, there wouldn't be another one until Saturday. He didn't relish the thought of a two-day wait.

He peered ahead through the headstones and crypts. Squire Malcolm Nowells III was finally limping his portly bulk past a stand of yew trees, most of his head concealed by an open umbrella. Joseph would soon be on his way.

"We can talk over there." Squire Nowells's voice reached him above the patter of the rain. He motioned toward the church. Joseph held the wooden gate open for him, and the two men shared the umbrella, stepping carefully over the slippery wet stones of the walkway.

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At the front of the church, a Norman doorway arched over a plain door of oak planks. Joseph removed his hat as the squire reached out for the iron door handle. There was a squeaking sound, then a click, and the door swung on its hinges away from them. Once inside, both men paused for a moment to allow their eyes to adjust to the feeble light coming in from high, slitlike windows. When he was finally able to see, Joseph brushed the raindrops from his gray frock coat, while the squire propped his closed umbrella in a stand against a wall.

“What time does your train leave?” Squire Nowells took a seat on the back pew of the small sanctuary and motioned for Joseph to sit beside him.

Joseph took his watch from his watch pocket and squinted at it. “One o’clock. Four hours from now.”

“You’ve got plenty of time, despite the rain. York is only a two-hour ride from here, and the roads are quite good.”

“I appreciate the use of your coach and driver.”

The squire nodded and drew an envelope from his waistcoat pocket. “Here is your bonus for delivering Gerald Moore’s body to me.”

Solemnly, Joseph tucked the envelope containing fifty pounds into his waistband. He tilted his head in the direction of the churchyard. “Did you have him buried out there?”

“Certainly not!” Squire Nowells snorted. “Not in the same ground where my father lies.” A bitter smile curled the corners of his fleshy lips. “Mr. Moore’s body is under six feet of ground in my east pasture, where he can listen to the sound of my father’s horses trampling over his grave. I fear that he is lonely, however.” His voice twisted with sarcasm. “I’m anxious for you to bring back his woman as soon as possible.”

“I’ve told you once before that I’ll have no part in the kill-

ing of a woman. Moore's death was an accident, however well-deserved."

Squire Nowells raised an eyebrow. "And I still can't talk you into arranging another *accident* for Corrine Hammond?"

"Not a chance."

"Well, no matter. Once I've arranged to have Mrs. Hammond incarcerated, it'll be only a matter of time before she joins her former lover. Only I don't think the two of them will look so pretty after a while, do you?"

The glint in the squire's eyes, obvious even in the dim light of the church, made Joseph uneasy. Again he wondered if he should have declined to take this case. He had tracked down many an estranged son, and even a few criminals, for gentry with more money than patience. But this was the first time he had been told by an employer that the authorities were *not* to be involved.

And yet the law *was* involved, in a covert sort of way, for Squire Malcolm Nowells was the justice of the peace of Treybrook, this little farming village in Humberside.

"My mother has suffered enough. I don't want her to go through the humiliation of a public trial," Squire Nowells had told him just a month ago.

And the family had certainly endured more than their share of suffering. Gerald Moore and Corrine Hammond were apparently quite expert at their little extortion game. Moore would find just the right prey—a wealthy, usually married, man with an ego to match his assets. A man like the elder Squire Nowells, in fact. Mrs. Hammond would seduce him out of several thousand pounds sterling, and she and Mr. Moore would then disappear for greener pastures.

Usually it worked like a charm—the victims would rather

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sacrifice the money than press charges and lose face. In the case of Squire Nowells II, however, the scam went far beyond the loss of a few thousand pounds. Humiliated, the squire hanged himself in the cellar of his house. And a powerful enemy was created in his son.

Now Gerald Moore was dead, but Corrine Hammond was still at large, and Squire Nowells III was demanding that she be brought to justice. But Joseph wondered as he watched the vindictive fire in the squire's eyes just how much justice the woman would get.

Joseph turned back to the squire. "Just how do you plan to have Mrs. Hammond incarcerated without a trial?"

"Easily, Mr. Price," the squire replied. "It's done more often than you think. You see, one of my duties as justice of the peace is to enforce local law and order. Under British law, the sentences of petty criminals within this jurisdiction are totally within my discretion."

"What about the assize courts?"

"The assize judges only come around twice a year. Surely you're aware that their business is to try the more serious criminal and civil cases."

"Yes, but I wouldn't exactly call Corrine Hammond a petty thief."

The smile returned to the man's face. "But that's where we differ, my good man. I intend to have her arrested for stealing half a crown from my father and have her duly incarcerated."

"Half a crown?" Joseph couldn't believe his ears. "Surely she managed to take much more than that."

"Ah now, I can't be certain of the *exact* amount Mrs. Hammond extorted—she and her partner. But gentleman that I am, I'll give the lady the benefit of the doubt and assume that it

was only half a crown. Petty thievery. Jail without a trial, and for as long as I declare.”

“But the constable—”

“Is a wise man,” Squire Nowells cut in with a wave of his hand. “And in complete agreement with me about the matter. My father was influential in having Constable Martin assigned to his position, you see.”

Frowning, Joseph said, “I can’t say that I approve of your methods.”

“Don’t you agree that Mrs. Hammond should be called to account for the deeds she’s committed?”

“Of course.”

“If I bring charges against her and turn her over to the superior courts, she’ll undoubtedly be sentenced to hang. I’m allowing her the opportunity to live a while longer . . . that is, until the croup overtakes her. I’m afraid our lockup is quite drafty—but then, it’s been around since the Saxons, so what can one expect?” The squire’s expression turned to worry. “You’re not thinking of backing out of our agreement, are you?”

After a thoughtful pause, Joseph shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t suppose it matters to me how Mrs. Hammond pays her debt to society. Once I’ve brought her to you, she’s no concern of mine.”

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Squire Nowells had been right about the length of time it would take to get to York. Stepping out of the stuffy coach, Joseph was pleased to find the air cool and clear. Apparently the rain that had drenched Treybrook was showing mercy to the ancient city and its centuries-old limestone walls.

After purchasing his ticket and a newspaper at the booking

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office of the City of York Railway Station, he left his gripsack and traveling bag with a porter, then walked two blocks to an inn on the river Ouse. A carved wooden sign above the building said Noel Arms. Most of the tables on the back verandah over the water were filled, but Joseph settled himself at the one remaining table. After ordering a lunch of trout, fresh from the river, he divided his attention between his newspaper and the people at the surrounding tables.

His natural curiosity concerning those around him had served Joseph well in the fifteen years he'd spent as a detective. He often amused himself by playing a private mind game, trying to figure out the backgrounds and occupations of complete strangers. The dark-haired man at a table to his right reminded Joseph a bit of his brother Benton, and Joseph's mind drifted to his family.

Joseph had known from his earliest years that he was different from his three brothers. Collins, George, and Benton were content to stay in Bristol, their lives and the lives of their families revolving around their father's bakery business. If his brothers had ever been seduced by the possible adventures that waited down the road, over the next hill, or across great bodies of water, they had never shown such inclination. Yet they were good men, and at times Joseph found himself envying the stable domesticity of their lives.

When he had finished his newspaper and his lunch, he took out his watch again. Almost an hour until his train would board for London. He got up and pushed the chair under his table, then decided to cross the bridge and walk the short distance to the Cathedral of Saint Peter, which dwarfed the city and everything around it.

It was apparently market day, and Deangate Street was thick

with people. He walked as briskly as the crowds would permit, regretting that he didn't have more time to fully explore the city. In certain quarters, York had the appearance of being scooped up out of medieval times and set down gently into the year 1863. Timbered houses nodded forward to one another across narrow streets, and alleys meandered to the river with an ancient air of leisure. Echoes played in little squares and open spaces, through sheltered gardens where Stuart kings surely must have jested with their courtiers.

Corrine Hammond lived here for a while, he reminded himself as he reached the shadow of the thirteenth-century cathedral. That was how she had managed to make the acquaintance of the elder Squire Nowells, for he often came to York to spend time at his club.

Staring up, awestruck, at the medley of colors in the stained-glass windows, Joseph wondered how anyone could live in such aesthetic surroundings and still plot to rob his fellowman. Had Corrine Hammond and Gerald Moore even noticed the beauty around them? Or had their predatory eyes been too busy scanning the area for more opportunities to advance their own selfish desires at the expense of others?

Perhaps I'll ask Mrs. Hammond to enlighten me while I'm bringing her in, Joseph thought wryly. We'll have more than enough time for some scholarly discourse on the subject of greed versus morals.

A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Measures of Grace*, the story of Corrine Hammond's learning the infinite length and breadth of God's grace as she searches for the daughter she abandoned.

Isn't *grace* a lovely word? Even the sound of it, the way it floats past our lips. No wonder many girls are named Grace. Its definition is even more special than the way it sounds: "unmerited favor." Aren't you glad for the times you've chosen to extend grace to someone else?

One such occasion comes immediately to my mind. Our eldest son, Joe, telephoned from school in a panic to say he had forgotten an important assignment at home. I immediately went into the busy-stressed-out-mom routine, scolding him for his carelessness.

"Would you please just not be angry?" he finally pleaded.

The way he said it stopped my tirade. I had a choice, I realized. I could extend grace to the son I loved. And I did. My attitude changed from irritation to calmness. That feeling of serenity accompanied me all the way across town to deliver the assignment.

I have had grace extended to me many times too, as I hope you have. May we strive to live our lives as vessels, overflowing with so much grace that it spills out onto everyone around us. And may God send a special blessing your way, dear reader!

Warmly,

Lawana Blackwell