

# Hands of The Father

## Prologue

Metcalfe County, Kentucky

July 1, 1929

Globe straddled the woman's chest, his knees jabbing into her ribs. She grunted under his weight. Her red, leaking eyes fixed on him. Her face was flushed and swollen. She made muffled pleading sounds behind the rag stuffed in her mouth. Globe wanted to run from the barn and go back to playing with the puppy. Papa would kill the puppy tonight. Papa killed everything Globe loved.

The ten-year-old started to crawl off the woman, this pretend mother. She was sobbing now, her breaths coming in sharp, ragged snorts through her nose. Her moans were quickly absorbed by the rag. Her eyes left the boy and traveled to the tall, barrel-chested man towering over them. Taylor Jackson grabbed his son and plunked him back down on her chest.

"Now ye stay put boy 'til I tell ye different." He glowered at the child. "Hear me?"

"Yes, Papa," Globe said, his eyes beginning to trickle.

Taylor brought the willow switch down across his son's back to make sure he understood. The boy cried out. He reached a small hand around to his back and was rewarded with a throbbing red stripe across his fingers. Two more delivered to his shoulders and Globe sat still.

Taking aim, Taylor whipped the young woman on her bare thighs. She began to heave and buck, giving the child the ride of his life. Five minutes later, Taylor stopped. The gag in her mouth was coming loose. He reached down and yanked it out. Wracked with pain, she sobbed uncontrollably. She choked out the words almost incoherently. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. The boy is so lonely. I thought—"

That afternoon while Taylor was in the pasture and Globe was roaming the woods, a boy of about ten came into the barn lot pulling a wooden wagon. Hanging over the sides were three brown and white puppies. Seeing a lady in the kitchen through the back screen door, the boy hollered, "My momma says if I don't git rid of 'em she's gonna drown 'em. Can ye please take one?"

Stepping as close to the door as the chain around her ankle would allow, the woman stared at the squirming puppies. Go get your mother! Tell her to help me! Her mind screamed the words, but her mouth would not say them. Half a minute ticked by while she stood mute and conflicted.

"Ma'am?"

"Okay. I'll take the runt." The boy handed the pup through the door to her. With a big, gap-toothed smile and a wave, he went on his way.

"Shut yer trap, ye stupid cow!" Taylor seethed. "It ain't yer place to think. He ain't yer kid. It ain't yer business. Understand? Put yer hands around her throat, boy."

Globe twisted around on the woman's chest and looked miserably up at the man. "No Papa. Don't make me do that."

Taylor backhanded the boy along the side of his head. "Now do as I say!"

The child fell sideways, striking his elbow on the straw covered floor. He straightened up and reluctantly put his small hands on the woman's throat. Try as he might, he couldn't fit his fingers all the way around her neck. He pressed his thumbs into her windpipe.

“Squeeze!” Taylor demanded. Fearing his father's fury, Globe pretended to press harder. “Put yer back into it, boy.”

“Please, Papa, she didn't know. Can't we give her another chance?” Taylor seemed to consider this for a few seconds. Stepping up to the two, he leaned over. Slapping his big, calloused hand over his son's soft ones, he pressed. The woman's breath whined out of her. She began to buck and writhe more than when he whipped her. Globe tried to pull his hands away. His daddy's iron grip held them.

“Papa, please. No, Papa.”

“Shut up, boy!” Taylor screamed. His eyes were glazing over. “Hold ‘er fast or I'll whip ye within an inch of yer life.” Spittle formed at the corners of his mouth. His face was fixed in a snarl as vicious as a rabid dog's. Globe clasped the mother's throat until she stopped breathing. He felt a few short puffs of wind come from her mouth. They stopped. He thought she must be dead.

His father hauled him off her, tossing him to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Taylor picked up the pail of water he had carried in from the well. The boy knew it would be cold, even on this hot July evening. His father upended the bucket over the woman's face. She gasped and sputtered and began to sob anew. Reaching down, Taylor cut the ropes binding her hands and feet. He folded the Barlow and slipped it back into his pocket. “Now git in there and git me some supper and be quick about it!”

The woman struggled to her feet and straightened her dress. In a half subservient, half conciliatory gesture, she picked up the rag and held it out to the man. Taylor snatched it from her hand and stuffed it into the back pocket of his overalls. Raising his foot, he kicked her in the backside. The woman staggered out of the barn door, still sobbing. Taylor followed.

Globe lay on the floor in a heap, his heart breaking, aching for a love he would never find.

## Chapter 1

Grace Fuller awoke to the sound of singing. A male voice crooned in a husky bass better suited for preaching. She smiled. Yesterday was a good day. Attendance at Muddy Creek Baptist was steadily increasing. Since April, 15 adults and three children had come to the Lord. Soon they would outgrow the small church building.

After dinner on the church grounds, the congregation gathered at the river for the baptisms. Several new believers waded eagerly into the water, their commitment to the Lord anchored firmly in their hearts. Meanwhile, Grace watched over the children and took care of the babies. She played games with the older ones while keeping the toddlers close by. Grateful for the break, the children's mothers relaxed with an extra dessert or by simply stretching their legs. While Grace enjoyed her time with the little ones, in her heart there was sadness. She and Jeremiah would return to an empty, noiseless house.

At six foot, the lanky Jeremiah reminded folks of Abraham Lincoln. Though craggy and not particularly handsome, his face always held a ready smile. When he visited their homes, parents were surprised at how the tall preacher would get down on the floor to play with their children. He would fold his long legs under him and come down to their level. Looking like an oversized child, he played games with them while speaking to the grownups about spiritual matters. His love for people drew them to him.

Grace made her way to the kitchen and stood in the doorway, watching him. How she loved this man. With his back to her, Jeremiah scooped the eggs from the frying pan. Depositing them onto the plates set out on the sideboard, he lifted his voice to the ceiling.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me  
I once was lost, but now I'm found  
Was blind but now I see*

Grace clapped. Jeremiah grinned at her. "Mornin', sleepy head. Thought you was gonna stay in bed the whole day. The sun's been up nigh two hours already." He placed the full dishes of eggs, ham gravy and biscuits on the table. "Day's half gone."

Grace whirled around and headed back the way she came. "Well then, maybe I'll just spend the rest of it in bed," she called over her shoulder. "You can bring mine to the bedroom, and don't forget the coffee." In two long strides he caught her. Taking her by the shoulders, he turned her around and brought his lips down on hers. A few seconds later he released her. Her head spun as it always did when he kissed her that way.

Few would call Jeremiah good-looking. Nevertheless, this rough-cut man, her wonderful husband of only 18 months, was the most beautiful human being Grace could imagine. When she met Jeremiah at the age of 34, most considered Grace Willis an old maid. Not Jeremiah. At 36, he told her repeatedly he had waited all of his life for the perfect woman to come along. No matter how many times she insisted she was far from perfect, he assured her she was to him.

Grace had spent her younger years caring for her elderly father and invalid mother. With little money even for the basics, she struggled to provide for their increasing needs. In her 27<sup>th</sup> year, they both died. Her mother succumbed to pneumonia that January and her father's heart gave out in April. Devastated, Grace took to leaving the house for long periods, walking the

country roads and willing her mind to retrieve only happy memories of her life in the family home.

With time on her hands and little money, she began to assess her skills. She could care for the elderly. No. She'd had enough of that. She made her own clothes and was pretty good at it. She put out the word and several of the women at church began asking her to make dresses for them and their daughters. Soon her reputation as a talented seamstress spread. She kept busy and resigned herself to spinsterhood. Thoughts of a family became a faded ideal. When she did stop long enough to think of her future, the lonely years stretched out dauntingly ahead.

Love surprised her. It started when Jeremiah took over the pastorate of Muddy Creek Baptist. That first Sunday, Grace felt a stirring in her chest as he strode to the pulpit and took control like a ship's captain on the bridge. When he visited her later that week, she could tell it was more than a casual call. There was something in his eyes and smile that was different than that of a pastor simply calling on one of his parishioners. She saw another side of him, a gentle shyness that contrasted starkly with his commanding demeanor as a preacher.

Their love progressed slowly. Jeremiah kept their meetings public, careful not to give the gossips fresh meat. When he visited the sick and elderly, he invited Grace along. He sat with her at church suppers. Whenever he came near her, Grace's heart sang. At night in her dreams, she envisioned their life together serving the Lord. One Saturday evening in August, they visited an elderly woman whose husband had died the month before. Her eyes moist, the woman reminisced about their lifetime together—the struggles, the triumphs, the joy and sorrow. As she spoke, Grace thought of what life with Jeremiah would be like.

Afterward, the couple stopped along the roadside for a picnic. Between bites of fried chicken, Jeremiah laid out his plans for the church to her. "There's only one thing I'm missing."

"What could that be?" Grace asked. This man was the most competent pastor she'd ever known. She couldn't think of anyone better to lead their congregation. The people respected him and the children loved him. What could be missing that would enhance his ministry?

"I need me a wife. Grace, I love you. Will you marry me?"

Grace nearly choked on her drumstick. It felt as though the whole chicken was stuck in her throat. Finally, she choked it down as Jeremiah rapped her on the back. She coughed into her napkin. With tear-filled eyes, she exclaimed, "Yes, oh yes!" Dropping the drumstick, she threw herself into his arms. Jeremiah kissed her gently on the lips.

They were married the following Sunday evening. Their honeymoon consisted of two days at a small cabin in the back woods. They returned unified as a team, ready to build a church to reach people for Christ.

Muddy Creek Baptist had been stagnant for years. Meeting opposition at every turn from a regressive and narrow-minded deacon board, pastors would come and go within a few months to a year. Driven solely by their lust for power, the board members succeeded at quashing every attempt at evangelical or charitable outreach. Jeremiah clashed with them on several points of scripture. Over their objections, he developed and quietly implemented outreach programs to the poor. He was threatened with dismissal a number of times, but the bluster waned as the congregation grew. Eight months after Jeremiah took over the pastorate, his chief detractor died.

George Sulze had been building fence on the south line of his farm. Working on the north line, his son-in-law, Nicholas Evans, kept plenty of distance between them. When George didn't show up for the noon meal, Nick's wife fretted and he set out to look for him. He found George lying at the foot of a large elm, a pair of binoculars clutched in his hand. His body was already stiff. From the looks of things, the elderly man had fallen from the tree. Apparently, he had

climbed out on a rotted limb to spy on Nick. Those who had worked for Sulze in the past told how he loved to sneak up on them. He'd hide in the bushes and try to catch them sloughing off. The limb onto which George had shimmied gave way. The old man fell 20 feet and struck his head on a rock. Doc Anderson said he died within minutes.

George had controlled his farm and the church for 50 years. His chief quote, "This is the way we've always done it, and there ain't no reason to change now," bellowed out in his gruff, authoritarian voice was standard at every business meeting.

Soon after George's funeral, a new spirit entered the congregation. The rest of the deacons were dismissed and a new board was appointed. People were friendlier; they came together to work and play. No longer stiff, formal affairs, dinners became times of fellowship ringing with laughter and camaraderie. The church blossomed as new Sunday school classes were added to accommodate the burgeoning congregation. Under Nick's management, the family farm had begun to prosper. He was a cheerful young man and the Muddy Creek congregation readily elected him to the vacancy left by his father-in-law.

Some called the tall, rawboned new preacher Ichabod Crane. Jeremiah good-naturedly took it in stride. He even went so far as to appear one Sunday morning with a carved-out pumpkin perched on his head. He laughed along with the people. Setting it on the floor beside the pulpit, he preached on the greatness of God's provision without skipping a beat.

After yesterday's meal, the men met to discuss whether to add onto the church or replace it. Because the building was so old, it was agreed new construction would be advisable. The new church would be built alongside the old one so that the original could be used until the new one was completed.

After breakfast, Jeremiah and Grace went to their separate tasks. His was to dig out the spring at the edge of the pasture, hers to work in the garden. It would soon be time for canning. Grace both loved and hated the process. She enjoyed harvesting God's bounty, yet the work seemed so slow and tedious. Everything has a recipe, she reminded herself. Prepare the vegetables, wash the jars, fill and seal them, put them in the pressure cooker.

Last year Grace forgot to let off the steam. The pressure built until it bulged and split the vessel's sides and blew off its top. She was in the parlor cleaning when the explosion shook the house. Once her head cleared, she stumbled wobbly-kneed to the kitchen. Stewed tomatoes covered every inch of the ceiling and the wall behind the stove. There was a hole in the ceiling large enough for a man to fit through. The lids of the cooker and several jars were stuck in the rafters.

In the barn, Jeremiah heard the blast and came running. Flinging open the back door, he took in the scene. Grace looked at him in horror, wondering what her new husband's reaction would be. He looked at her standing wide-eyed in the middle of the mess. Aside from her pale face, she seemed to be uninjured. He surveyed the hole and the globs of tomato plastered to the walls. Barely recognizable, the exploded pressure cooker lay on the far side of the kitchen amid glass shards littering the floor. Every jar had shattered. Jeremiah grinned at his wife.

"Supper will be awhile," Grace said, tears misting her eyes. Jeremiah stifled a chuckle. Waving her hand abjectly around the room, she added, "I've got to go out and pick some more tomatoes. I don't think we can eat these."

"That probably be best," Jeremiah said, his grin widening. His titter became more open. He couldn't hold it in. Suddenly he roared with laughter. Bending over, he slapped his knees. Tears ran down his cheeks. Each time he tried to stop, the look on Grace's face set him off again. She tried to be mad at him. Her cooker was ruined. A whole batch of tomatoes was wasted. Her

kitchen was destroyed. She could only stare at him. She caught his hilarity and her mouth began to twitch. A few seconds later she was laughing just as hard.

After the laughter died down, they dried their eyes and set to work. It took two hours to mop up the kitchen. Still it wasn't clean. The only remedy would be a fresh coat or two of paint. The next day Jeremiah patched the hole.

That year there was an abundance of tomatoes, zucchini, beans and corn. Grace worked in the garden hoeing and pulling weeds. By noon the sun would chase her out of the garden to seek the cool shade of the trees.

This day as every other, Jeremiah came at the ringing of the dinner bell. After their meal, he washed up, changed clothes and saddled the horse. Taking Grace in his arms, he told her, "I'm goin' out to visit some of the farms in the south part of the county."

Grace smiled into the face of the man she loved. "I'll be praying for you."

"I know you will." Jeremiah kissed and held her tight. He never thought he could love another human being this much. Mounting the roan, he rode out of the yard smiling. As he turned onto the road, he looked back and waved. Grace lifted her hand. She returned to the house still smiling. The wife of a preacher. Who would have thought God would bless me so?

She took out the cotton fabric and pattern she bought at the general store last Saturday. Laying the cloth on the kitchen table, she pinned the pattern pieces to it and cut around the outlines. Sitting down at the sewing machine, she positioned the material under the needle and pumped the pedals. As she worked, a burden began to nag, then grew heavier. Something was wrong. She felt it in her spirit. Laying the unfinished shirt aside, she slipped to her knees.

