

Beautifully told, humanity is revealed and celebrated in this honest and poignant story of one man's struggle for spiritual wisdom in the face of adversity.

*C.F. Dunn, Historical Fiction Author*

*The Stranger* made Psalm 23 come alive for me. It reminded me that God actively pursues us because of His unconditional love for us. He is our Good Shepherd who leads us, refreshes us and gives us all we need. He is our companion along the way and reveals Himself to us through the people we meet along life's journey. Joy creates such relatable characters. Brother Silas has a crisis of faith, and his dream appears dead, but through his experiences he learns what is really important. I can see myself in him and wouldn't be surprised if you too see something of yourself in Brother Silas.

*Vicki Cottingham, Author, Blogger and Retreat Leader*

A story of faith lost and faith returned; of doubt and the mystery of 'not knowing', and yet understanding that the most important thing is not what we do for God, but our relationship with Him. Thought-provoking, challenging and inspirational; a delightful, page-turning read, and one that will keep the reader engaged till the end.

*Sheila Jacobs, Editor and Author*

Joy takes us on a journey with Silas, a man who has devoted himself to serving God. But, as in most of our lives, things don't always go as planned. Travel with Silas as he struggles to understand or even know that God is there, as he experiences the feelings of abandonment,

disappointment and failure, to a place of recognising God in different ways and comes to the realisation that a simple faith is better than religion.

*Jason Cottingham, Centre Director, Penhurst Retreat Centre*

# THE STRANGER

Joy Margetts



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my travelling companions,  
and for Amanda – don't start the  
heavenly dance party without us!*

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# 1

## GRACE DIEU

1233

The smell of smoke lingered. The dream had been vivid. Silas shook off the disturbing memory and turned over, shifting his shoulders to tease the straw-filled mattress into something resembling comfort. Lying on his side with his back to the ill-fitting door, he drew the thin blanket up over his shoulder trying to shield himself from the persistent cold draft that seeped into the room. Usually, he was so exhausted that sleep came easily despite the limitations of his monk's quarters. With sleep came dreams, recollections of things that in the daylight hours he could forget.

As he lay, eyes closed, hoping that a more peaceful sleep would grace the few short hours of the night that remained, his mind rebelled. In that space between sleeping and waking, where thoughts roam to unbidden places, he remembered. He recalled the panic as the flames took hold. He relived the terror as mounted men swept in and screamed abuse at them in their native tongue. His fellow monks did not understand their slurs, but Silas, weaned at the breast of a Welshwoman, knew

full well what they were saying. This was their land, this side of the Welsh border, and their intent was to more than scare. They had come to take, and not just the precious foodstuffs, and any plate or candlesticks left by previous raiders. They had come for hostages.

Abbot John had been their target. The old man had been dragged from his bed, with no quarter given for his pale frailty or hacking cough. Silas had tried to defend him and had been taken himself. They had been unceremoniously thrown onto the back of horses and led away into the night, while their brothers fought bravely to extinguish the flames that threatened to consume the abbey of Grace Dieu.

He remembered the smell of smoke and the taste of fear. The terror of being held by their captors for three days until rescued by ransom. The ordeal had taken its toll on Abbot John. He was freed to return to what was left of Grace Dieu but lingered only a few days with his brothers before slipping away. Silas had grieved deeply, carrying an anger against those Welsh marauders that was ungodly and unforgiving for one called by Christ to bless his enemies. His anger was not only towards the captors, but against God. Yet he would not admit that, even to the priest in the confessional – if the priest ever deigned to step inside the half-destroyed walls of their sad little abbey.

Silas shifted again, aware that he could still smell smoke in his nostrils. It didn't usually linger this long once he awoke from his nightmare. It was acrid and hung in the air around him. As he reluctantly opened an

eye, the sting of hot air shocked him into full awareness. This was no memory. He heard a shout; his name being called. As he swung his legs around and grabbed his cloak, he wondered why the dark thatch above him sparkled with bright spots of glowing light. He should run, but a deep weariness of body and soul caused him to pause. Should he just lie down again, cover his head with his cloak, and let the fire take him? He did not have the will or the energy to fight for Grace Dieu again. There had been too many fires, too many raids, too much opposition, too much loss.

A hand grabbed his arm, and the fingers pinched painfully. Silas swung around, raising his other arm to defend himself, and encountered a youthful face, wide-eyed with panic. Cedric! The poor novice had only been at Grace Dieu a few weeks.

‘Brother, you must come. The church is alight, and we cannot save it without you. The fire is spreading. Already the stables are ablaze, and the refectory roof is smoking. The thatch above us – look!’

He gestured upwards with his free hand – the one gripping Silas’ arm tightened still more. Silas flinched and pulled his arm free. He threw his cloak around his shoulders and slipped his feet into his sandals. His leather scrip was the only other thing he paused to grab, securing the pouch to his belt, before grasping the young man’s sleeve and pulling him behind him out into the cold night. The night sky was not as dark as it should have been. The wooden church, the one they had not long finished repairing after the previous raid, was well

alight. His brothers had drawn water but no number of perfectly aimed buckets of well water could save the church now. A line of 100 strong men might have; they were but five, four of whom were past their youth and feeble from years of hardship.

A quick glance around, and Silas could see fire had taken hold all over the small compound, fanned by a stiff cold wind that carried sparks easily from structure to structure. He shivered, despite the warmth from the flames. It was a clear and cloudless night. No hope of rain from the heavens to douse the blaze. His fellow brothers stood damp and dishevelled, spaced about like the last few pieces of a well-fought game of chess. They stood, as he did, watching as the abbey and their dreams were mercilessly consumed. At least there was no raiding party this time; a few well-aimed firebrands thrown from outside the fence had done the damage. It might have been the same thugs as before, but it could have been youths or even children, the hatred behind their actions well ingrained. Silas had no doubt that they would be back in the morning to loot what was left. It would not be much.

They would not find him or any of his fellow monks there. Silas made that decision. They were done fighting. They had tried – God knows they had tried – but they had lost the battle. It was time to retreat.

Silas called out and four weary faces turned towards him, each one stained with grime, sweat and tears. He felt the sting of guilt, berating himself that he had slept

as they had faced the fire without him. He would not let them down again.

‘Come, Brothers!’ He raised his voice above the sound of flames crackling and beams splitting.

He turned and began walking, and one by one the others followed. Silas stopped to grab the shafts of an untouched handcart, pulling it into the midst of the little gathering that had formed around him.

‘Gather what food and clothing you can, quickly, and do not put yourselves at risk. Only what you or this cart can carry. Forget the animals – Cedric.’ The young man was trying to hold on to two terrified hens. ‘They must fend for themselves. We cannot take them. We must go now, leave here quickly and quietly. They will expect us to stay and fight the flames, but not this time.’

‘Perhaps, God willing, we will return and rebuild Grace Dieu?’ Brother Jermaine dumped a bundle of cloth and a small sack of dried beans into the cart. He was wheezing from the effects of the smoke, but his natural optimism shone out from eyes circled by soot. Silas could not hold his questioning gaze. He mumbled something non-committal under his breath and started to move off, pulling the cart behind him.

He could not answer his old friend, as he had no idea any more what God willed. God’s will had seemingly brought them here to build their bright new abbey, in this inhospitable and godless corner of the Welsh borderlands. Seven years they had built and fought, prayed and defended, broken their backs in the field, only to have their harvest stolen, time and time again.

Last year's kidnapping of their frail abbot and his subsequent death had almost broken them. Now the abbey was burning to the ground.

To his shame, Silas felt relief. He no longer had the strength or the conviction to fight or rebuild. He was done with Grace Dieu. As he walked away from its burning ruins, a niggling thought suggested that perhaps he was done with God as well.

The brothers fell in behind the handcart, each carrying bundles of belongings, their dark Cistercian cloaks tugged around hunched shoulders, their steps laboured. They looked to Silas for leadership, he knew that. No replacement for Abbot John had appeared at Grace Dieu. The position had never been offered to Silas, for which he was glad; he never had ambition to be an abbot. He had joined the Cistercians as a mature man, with a heart only to serve God and to serve others in community. When called to, he had deputised for Abbot John, happily taking much of the weight of day-to-day leadership from his sickly shoulders out of reverence for the godly man. It still grieved him that such a fine man and leader as John should have ended his days in a failing abbey.

As they made their way north from Grace Dieu, they had only one aim: to get to Abbey Dore, the mother house, before night fell again. However weary they were, they trudged on. The ground was mercifully dry, and the moonlit sky meant well-worn paths were easy enough to follow. By the time the sky began to glow



with the first signs of dawn, they had walked some distance.

Silas raised his hand to stop their pathetic procession as they reached a grassy clearing half-hidden from the road by a thick patch of brambles. The grass was damp and cold, but no one complained as they gratefully sank to the ground. One by one, excepting Silas, they wrapped themselves in their cloaks, and slept. Silas sat with his back resting against the handcart, keeping vigil. Hunger was not alien to any of them, not with the Cistercian rule of fasting and simple fare and the scarcity that they had become used to at Grace Dieu. Even so, they would need to eat something if they were going to have the energy to walk the remaining distance to Abbey Dore. A quick look through the meagre provisions that had been rescued from the abbey and Silas realised that the dried beans Jermaine had brought were all they had. A sole flagon of ale would have to be shared to quench their thirst.

The sun was high in the sky when Silas quietly moved around his companions and woke them, encouraging them to take a measured swig from the flagon and a handful of hard beans each to chew on. They ate in silence as they were trained to, but Silas could read their faces. Weariness vied with fear and uncertainty. Most of them had burns on their hands or arms. He needed to get them moving again. Once they could see Abbey Dore they would be comforted.

Would they find a welcome? Or would they be treated as the failures they felt? They had been aware of

the rumours, of how their community at Grace Dieu had abandoned the Rule which governed their simple lives as Cistercian monks. There was an element of truth to the tales. It was hard to keep to the strict regimen of Prayer Offices and personal meditation when there were so few of them to work the land and tend the animals, without the help of laymen or locals. It was hard to observe the restrictive dietary rules when foodstuffs of any kind were scarce. If fish caught from the River Trothy was the only thing available, then that is what they ate. There was no immorality; they were conscientious to keep God's law, but their faith had been tested to the limit. Well, Silas knew his had. He did not know for sure where the hearts of his brothers lay.

They stopped again when they found a stream of flowing fresh water. They shared a few more of the beans, but did not linger long. They had been following a path parallel to ancient King Offa's dyke, that marked the boundary between England and Wales, but it was as they crossed the dyke and stepped from Welsh to English soil that they began to pick up their pace. Their journey's end was in sight when the spire at Abbey Dore became visible on the horizon.

Silas recognised the porter, and he recognised them, as they were ushered through the gates and into the abbey compound. Bells were ringing to signal an Office, although Silas could not be sure which one. He was offered a beaker of water, from which he drank thirstily. Beyond that he had no memory. Exhaustion mixed with relief took hold, and strong arms lifted his body and

carried him to the infirmary. Kind hands cleansed his filthy body, and a soft voice whispered prayers that lulled him into a deep dreamless sleep.

Silas woke to the sound of bells and by instinct he pulled back the blanket covering him and tried to raise himself up. A firm hand rested on his chest and pushed him gently back down.

‘Rest, Brother, you are not required to attend the Offices today. I will bring you some food now that you are awake.’ A smiling face framed by a neat tonsure hovered over him.

‘What Office is it?’ His voice cracked, and a beaker was lifted to his lips. They were parched, and he drank, coughing when the liquid hit his constricted throat.

‘It is Sext. Noon. You have slept the whole night and all morning, not even Dore’s huge bells have disturbed you.’ The monk laughed softly. ‘You are the last of your fellow brothers to wake, but they each begged me to leave you to sleep. You are held in high regard, it seems. They knew that you did not rest until they were all within the safe walls of this abbey, and they were grateful.’

Silas looked around the large, light-filled room. The other beds in the infirmary stood empty.

‘They all slept well and responded to our ministrations. We tended a few minor burns and cuts and gave you all sleeping draughts. Apart from being underfed and weary, your companions all seem to be recovered and eager enough to join the community in

their prayers. You, I think, might need to rest a while longer, and your hands and feet will need some care.'

Until the brother had spoken, Silas had not registered the throbbing in his hands and the pain in his feet. His hands were bound in strips of linen, but he could see that they had bled through.

'Blisters from the handcart. Your feet are not much better. Your sandals have rubbed the skin raw. I am surprised you did not feel the pain as you walked.'

Silas grunted and let his eyes close again as the monk proceeded to expertly change his dressings. The truth was that the pain in his heart hurt far more than the blisters on his hands or feet; a pain that being back at Abbey Dore, and the kind attentions of Dore's infirmarer could do little to ease. He had given his all to Grace Dieu. He had endured hardship, kidnapping and terror. Persevered despite personal suffering and loss. All for the sake of the vision to found a new thriving community. He had been prepared to work hard, serve well, build and help grow an abbey from nothing. Part of a pioneering group sent from this very abbey at Dore. All over Europe, Cistercian houses were being founded and were flourishing, but Grace Dieu had failed.

Now, on top of all else that he had suffered, he was faced with his own personal failure. He was the one who had given up, brought his brothers back to the mother house, left Grace Dieu to burn to the ground. That shame was his. Added to the sense of failure was the feeling of betrayal. Why had God allowed them to fail?

Why had He abandoned the very ones who had given their lives to serve Him?

Even if he had risen to attend the Prayer Office with his brothers, Silas suspected that he would only have been going through the motions. He no longer knew where he stood with God. He was no longer sure he had anything to give. All that he had pledged to God had been thrown back in his face. Grief and pain were his reward. He had honoured his promise to God, but it did not feel like God had honoured His promises in return.

By the following morning, Silas could no longer put off the inevitable, and when the bell rang for Lauds, he was already up and dressed. He knew that he would have to leave the quiet peace of the infirmary as his fellow travellers had, now that he no longer needed care. The next night he would be sleeping in a shared dormitory. He was sad at the thought of leaving kind Brother James, but he was a Cistercian, avowed to live the way of the Rule. That meant sharing in community life and attending the prescribed Prayer Offices.

He made his way to the church through the cloister, joining other silent monks with their heads dipped and hooded. They filed into the quire and he took his place in the second row. He was glad of his short stature, as he mouthed the words of the liturgy. He could hide in what seemed like a crowd compared to the few that had lived and prayed together at Grace Dieu. Around him, he recognised a few familiar faces from the past, when

Abbey Dore had been his home, but shame kept his face averted.

He looked down and saw that his habit now hung loose and reached the floor, covering the dressings on his feet, squeezed painfully back into his worn sandals. There was a time when he had more than filled out his habit, with a propensity to roundness, but the years of lack and hard work at Grace Dieu had stripped the excess flesh from his frame. His once chestnut-brown tonsure was speckled with grey. He felt older than his years.

His hair had grown long, and his pate felt stubbly. He knew he needed to get someone to shave it and redefine his tonsure. He would also need new sandals, and a habit made to fit, now he was back at Dore. All these thoughts strayed through his mind as the worship went on around him. He should have enjoyed being in the church; it was a fine stone building, simply painted with whitewash and red line decoration. Its high glassed windows, pillars, arches and vaulted ceiling were impressive, but to Silas it all felt too much. After the simplicity of their church and worship at Grace Dieu, it felt ostentatious and oppressive to his soul. He was glad when the service ended, and he could leave the church and breathe deeply of the cool, fresh air in the open cloister outside. Yet as the other brothers filed away to their work and tasks, Silas suddenly felt lost.

A figure sidled up to him, touching him gently on the sleeve.

‘Come, Brother.’

Brother James spoke in a whisper and led Silas back in the direction of the infirmary. He did not speak until they were safely inside. The infirmarer held his gaze, concern etched on his face.

Silas lowered his head at the scrutiny.

‘Silas, I have spoken to the abbot on your behalf. I have been given leave to keep you here with me, to aid me until you are well enough for more arduous work.’ He paused, waiting for Silas to respond.

Silas lifted his head, surprised to feel the prick of tears, as he nodded his understanding.

‘My brothers from Grace Dieu?’ His tongue felt thick.

‘Hmm. Your concern for them lingers and although that is to be expected, you no longer have responsibility for their welfare. They have also been allocated less demanding work and will be offered additional meals until their full health returns. They, at least, seem happy to be back with us at Dore. You... I am not so sure of.’

Brother James led Silas to a table and gestured for him to take a seat. He poured something into a beaker from a flagon and handed it to Silas. It was mead – sweet, strong, and flavoured with something floral. Silas took a long drink and felt its warming goodness soothe his unsettled stomach. Its potency made his head swim, so he put the cup to one side. Brother James sat on a stool opposite him.

‘I do not expect you to use me as a confessional, Brother, as to what thoughts and feelings plague you. But I would have you know that you can find space and peace here...’ He gestured around the infirmary, ‘to

work out what it is you need to work out. Rest from your worries and leave your friends to our care and to God's.'

Silas took a deep breath, releasing it in a long sigh. He wasn't sure what it would feel like to not worry and fret about his brothers, about abbey buildings and farmland, about where their next meal might come from, or when the next raid would happen. He would try. But if he allowed his mind to let go of all those things that had filled it for so long, he feared what dark emptiness might take their place.



*These things I have spoken to you,  
that in Me you may have peace.*

*In the world you will have tribulation; but be of  
good cheer, I have overcome the world.*

John 16:33

## 2

### ABBEY DORE

Brother James was good to his word. Silas kept his bed in a quiet corner of the infirmary. An aged brother joined them that first night, and the infirmarer made poultices to treat the man's ulcerated legs. Another brother joined them the second night, needing treatment for a persistent cough. Silas helped where he could.

On days when the weather was dry, he enjoyed being in the physic garden. Although the soil was mostly bare and the herbs and shrubs were showing the effects of only just surviving a long cold winter, he could find things to do. It was good to feel of use.

To one end of the garden was a simple wooden hut housing gardening tools and a good selection of knives that Brother James pointed out to him, for cutting and processing the herbs needed for treatments. Dried flowers and leaves hung from the low roof beam and at one end was an old table, covered with bowls, jugs, and a pestle and mortar. There was also a whet stone, so that when rain lashed down, Silas could sit inside and...

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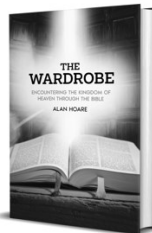
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