

*Grab a cup of tea, get comfortable, and open the pages of Ruth Meyer's book, *Grace Alone*. This is contemporary Christian fiction at its finest. The characters are the people you meet in your daily walk: your family, friends, neighbors, the people in your worship community. People who are flawed, carry baggage, and in need of God's grace. Take a trip to Mapleport, Michigan, and see how Meyer weaves a tale that will stay with you long after you finish reading.*

*What a refreshing work to share with your loved ones, your book club, and anyone you know who needs the assurance of forgiveness in Jesus Christ . . . grace alone.*

Janice Wendorf; sixteenth president of the Lutheran Women's Missionary League and avid reader

*For all the Graces of the world.*



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**THE  
GOLDEN  
ROOM  
MURDER**

**A NOVEL BY RUTH E. MEYER**

By grace! None dare lay claim to merit;  
Our works and conduct have no worth.  
God in His love sent our Redeemer,  
Christ Jesus, to this sinful earth;  
His death did for our sins atone,  
And we are saved by grace alone.

—Christian Ludwig Scheidt, 1709–61 (*LSB* 566:2)

The doorbell was ringing insistently, over and over and over. Grace smiled to herself as she walked to the door. She knew exactly who was on the other side. It was her perky and energetic three-year-old, Katie, who was helping her older siblings with their lemonade stand. Katie was their runner, whom they sent to the house every time they needed more cups or napkins, sugar or ice. She had already been to the house countless times in the half hour since they'd opened the lemonade stand, usually just to report a sale, and each time, she rang the doorbell with the same sense of urgency.

This time, Grace was prepared. She grabbed the hairbrush she'd set aside for the occasion and flung open the door, using the brush as a microphone as she belted out the refrain of "Life Is a Highway." She knew it would make Katie giggle.

Only this time Katie wasn't alone. There was a scholarly looking man with her, dressed in a full suit, holding a Styrofoam cup of lemonade and staring at Grace as she trailed off, mortified.

Katie didn't seem to notice anything amiss. "You're funny, Mommy!" she squealed. "This guy got lemonade and telled us his name but I forgetted. But he said to meet you so here he is! I like this guy!" With that, she bounced cheerfully back to the lemonade stand to "help."

The stranger smiled and arched an eyebrow. “Was that Tom Cochrane or Rascal Flatts?” he inquired with a gleam in his eye.

Grace tried to recover. “Yeah, well . . . uh, sorry about that. I wasn’t expecting anyone besides Katie at the door. I was just . . . that’s one of the songs in *Cars*, and the kids love that movie, so I was trying to make her laugh . . .”

His eyes sparkled behind his glasses as he replied, “Well then, you certainly succeeded in that! She got a kick out of it, and frankly, so did I! She’s a delightful little girl.”

“Yes, she is,” Grace replied sincerely, hoping she didn’t look as humiliated as she felt. Then she remembered her manners and introduced herself. “I’m Grace Williams. As you probably guessed, I’m the mom of those four entrepreneurs selling lemonade out there. Thanks for supporting them, by the way. They think they’re making big bucks.” She grinned at him, and he smiled in return.

“And so they are!” he agreed, holding out his right hand. “David Neunaber at your service, ma’am.”

She shook his hand and tilted her head questioningly. “‘New neighbor?’ As in you’re new to the area?”

He chuckled. “Actually, in one sense, yes. I guess I am your new neighbor. I moved in a month ago, right next to the church over there.” He pointed across the street to the house by St. John Lutheran Church and School, just over a block away. “But my last name actually is pronounced ‘New-neighbor.’” He spelled it out for her, then added, “I was just finishing some work at St. John, and the lemonade stand caught my eye as I was locking up, so I decided to give it a try.”

“Oh! Are you the pastor, then?” Grace asked in surprise.

“No. Actually, I’m the new principal,” he answered. “Pastor Lixon and his wife bought their own home and moved across town last year. Since the parsonage was vacant, the congregation decided to offer it to me.”

Vaguely, Grace remembered seeing a U-Haul at the house some time back, but she hadn't been curious enough to find out more.

He continued, "Being around kids a lot myself, I must say that your children are very polite. They introduced themselves to me, so I figured I should introduce myself to you as well."

"Yes, well . . . thank you," she replied, chagrined at the memory of how she'd answered the door.

There was an awkward pause as she tried to figure out what to say next, but Katie came to the rescue. She bounded up to Mr. Neunaber and grabbed his hand, tugging on it so he would look down at her. "Can you eat here?" she pleaded, looking at him with her big blue eyes.

"Katie!" gasped Grace, perpetually surprised at what came out of the mouth of her youngest and most forthright child.

"Oh, um, well . . ." their visitor stammered awkwardly, stalling for time. "I, um, have to go home and change."

"Can I come with you?" the three-year-old asked brightly. "I want to see your house!"

"Katie!" Grace scolded, her cheeks reddening for this daughter of hers who knew no tact. "You don't invite yourself into someone's home like that!"

"Then why can't I invite him to my house?" she asked innocently. "I like this guy."

Grace shook her head and muttered an apology to this poor man who was probably mentally kicking himself for coming over to buy lemonade.

Katie continued proudly, "Mommy's makin' meat loaf! I'm helping. Then we're having a movie night 'cause it's summer. You can watch too!"

"Katie, please—" Grace tried to take some control.

Mr. Neunaber spoke at the same time. "Well, that certainly is a hard offer to refuse."

Grace was blushing furiously, but felt as though she



couldn't withdraw an invitation already extended. "We don't get company much, as you can see," she said with a nervous laugh. "But really, you're more than welcome to eat a gourmet dinner of meat loaf and baked potatoes if you'd like. You probably have things to do, of course. But we'd be happy to have you join us." She wasn't sure what surprised her more: the invitation or the fact that she truly meant it.

Mr. Neunaber hesitated briefly, then nodded and smiled. "In that case, I'd love to join you for dinner. I was just going to make a frozen pizza, so this is a real step up. How about I bring some leftover doughnut holes from this morning's coffee hour?"

At the mention of doughnut holes, Katie's face lit up. "Yes! I knowed I like this guy!" She hugged his knees and hurried off to tell her siblings the good news, running as fast as her chubby little legs could carry her.

Mr. Neunaber glanced at his watch. "Wow. Two forty already. I didn't realize I'd been in the office so long. What time should I return for dinner?"

"How about five o'clock? I like to eat early so they can watch their movie and still get to bed at a decent hour."

"Perfect. Five it is. I'll be back with doughnut holes in hand." He nodded his head slightly in a good-bye gesture and turned to leave.

To keep her daughter from accosting the principal any more, Grace called out, "Okay, Miss Katie. Come in and help me start dinner. We're having a guest, after all!"

As Grace turned back to enter the house again, she wondered what in the world had just happened.

Promptly at five, the doorbell rang, and Katie bounded to the front door chanting, "He's here! He's here!"

Grace yanked off the apron she'd been wearing and

stuffed it into a drawer. She glanced quickly around the living room as she passed through, satisfied that it was “good enough.” With four kids, her house was never exactly *clean*, but she’d long since learned there were more important things to get worked up over. She had managed to wipe down the bathroom in case their guest should need to use it while he was there. But other than that, she’d trusted the kids to pick up their stuff.

She ran a hand through her unruly curly hair as she reached the door to let him in. Katie was jumping up and down in excitement as the door opened. “Mr. Newbie!” she shrieked, as if she’d known him for years.

Mr. Neunaber had changed into khaki shorts and a short-sleeved polo shirt, and he looked, in Grace’s mind, decidedly more comfortable than he had before. He stooped down to Katie’s level and handed her a box.

“Can I trust you with an important mission?” He paused as she nodded gravely. “Take these into the kitchen for me, okay?” Katie nodded again and turned to carry out her mission seriously.

“Come on in, Mr. Neunaber,” Grace said, leading him to the living room, where her older three kids were relaxing.

“Please. I’m not here on official school business. Unless you want me to call you Mrs. Williams, I’d like you to call me David.”

She laughed a little self-consciously. “Oh, of course. David. And you can call me Grace.”

David smiled and then sniffed appreciatively. “Mmm, dinner smells great!” Then, as he caught sight of the kids, he asked, “Hey, guys, how did your business venture go today with the lemonade stand? Did you turn a profit?”

Faith, age fourteen, Jackson, ten, and Freddie, who was almost six, glanced up at him from the couch. Faith, the most responsible one, answered, “We did better than we

thought we would, actually. A lot of people let us keep the change when they paid. We each made seven dollars.”

“Even Katie?” asked David, arching an eyebrow.

“Well, no,” Faith admitted. “We gave her four quarters, and she thinks she’s rich.”

“Genius,” he replied with a smile. “So, hey, that’s what? Twenty-two dollars all together? For a couple of hours at a lemonade stand? Not bad at all. I’d say that’s a success!”

Faith beamed with pleasure as Jackson butted in. “Yeah, and Faith always saves her money because she’s trying to be ‘mature,’” he said as he made air quotation marks with his fingers. “She didn’t want to do it anyhow, ’cause she said it’s babyish. She only helped ’cause Mom told her to. So she shouldn’t even get money for it. I did most of the work. But I’m gonna buy candy with my money. I can get a lot of bubble gum with that kind of cash!”

Grace turned away slightly so she wasn’t facing Jackson and said quietly to David, “As you can maybe tell, money burns a hole in his pocket. He sees no sense in saving anything at all.”

David suppressed a smile and addressed Freddie. “And what about you, young sir? Any plans for how you’re going to use your money?”

Freddie nodded excitedly. “I’m gonna buy a Buzz Lightyear!”

“Dummy, you can’t get a Buzz Lightyear with seven bucks!” Jackson interjected. “Those cost, like, thirty dollars or something. You don’t have enough. Duh!”

“Jackson!” reprimanded Grace sharply. “Do *not* call your brother names or insult him. He’s excited about his money.”

“Sorry,” Jackson mumbled halfheartedly to Freddie. “But you still don’t have enough.”

“Well, I’m gonna buy a Happy Meal at McDonald’s!” Katie announced.

“Hel-lo!” Jackson was clearly exasperated with his siblings, who were clueless about anything financial. “You can’t buy a Happy Meal with four quarters either!”

Katie’s brow furrowed in concentration. “Would I get a Mad Meal then?”

“Oh, you’re all hopeless,” Jackson moaned, even as the adults chuckled at Katie’s question.

Grace cleared her throat and said, “Okay, let’s eat, shall we? We don’t want the food to get cold!”

The younger kids scrambled to the table to find their places, arguing over who got to sit by the guest of honor. Grace cut in before it got out of hand and said firmly, “Mr. Neunaber will sit at the head of the table. Katie, you’re next to him on the right, and Freddie, you’re next to him on the left.” She pointed at the chairs as she spoke. “Faith, you can be next to Freddie to help him dish up, and Jackson, you’re by Katie to help her. I’ll sit here where I usually sit.”

Everyone took their places with a minimal amount of complaining, and Grace surveyed the table to see if she had forgotten anything. Meat loaf, baked potatoes, green beans, salad, and some drop biscuits she had thrown together at the last moment using biscuit mix. She also had butter for the potatoes and biscuits, dressing for the salad, and ketchup for anyone who wanted it on their meat loaf. Everyone had a plate, fork, knife, napkin, and glass of water.

Addressing David, she offered, “Would you care for wine? I mean, I know it’s not exactly a wine type of meal, but I have a box of merlot if you’d like.” Then she realized with horror that as a Christian he might think alcohol was from the devil himself. She flushed and hastened on, “That is, if you drink . . .”

He seemed to sense her discomfort and replied genially, “I’d love a glass of wine so long as you’ll have one too.”

She breathed a sigh of relief and hurried into the kitchen

to pour two glasses. When she returned, she handed one to David, and he smiled his thanks at her as he accepted the wine. She sat in her seat opposite his and got settled. There was an awkward pause as she realized David seemed to be waiting for something before dishing up. With a start, she realized he was probably used to saying a prayer first. “Would you, um, say grace for us, please?” she asked as her kids exchanged glances with one another and shrugged.

David acted as though this was a completely natural request and immediately bowed his head. “Lord God, we thank You for this food and for the hands that have prepared it. Thank You for new friends and the chance to get to know one another. Bless our time here together this evening. In Your name we pray. Amen.”

“Amen,” Grace echoed. “Okay, everyone, dig in!”

For a few minutes, there was the regular chaos of everyone passing around the food, bickering over who got the first biscuit, and complaining that their potatoes were touching their green beans, mixed in with a fair share of tattling. In other words, a completely normal dinner for Grace and her family. But as she dared to glance at David surreptitiously, she saw that he was grinning away. He was probably thinking they were all insane. Or at the very least, that she had no control over her kids whatsoever.

Katie happily chattered away at him through most of dinner, even though it was likely he didn’t understand half of what she said. When Grace returned from refilling a water glass in the kitchen, she saw that David had cut Katie’s meat loaf into bite-size pieces for her and was doing his best to keep up with her continuous flow of conversation. At that exact moment, Katie burst out excitedly, “Are you gonna sleep here tonight?”

Grace felt her entire face turn crimson to the very roots of her hair, and she wondered if it was indeed possible to die

from embarrassment. Sakes alive, Katie was sure doing her best to humiliate her today. Oh, the shame . . .

Jackson and Faith burst out laughing and snickering, and Grace wondered what David was thinking about her. Goodness, Katie made it sound like she regularly took men into her home for the night, which was anything but the truth.

David didn't miss a beat as he calmly replied between bites of potatoes. "Nope. I have my own house just a block away. I'm not an overnight guest like someone visiting on vacation." Whatever he was really thinking, he didn't appear taken aback or surprised in the least by the question. He simply took it as an innocent three-year-old's inquiry. *Bless his heart for handling it so nicely*, Grace thought. She took a swallow of water as she willed the heat to leave her face.

Fortunately, the rest of the meal was fairly uneventful, and everyone loved the doughnut holes David brought for dessert. He helped the kids clear the table and even put his plate in the dishwasher while she was wrapping up leftovers. All told, it hadn't been a *complete* disaster. Yet.

Katie grabbed David's hand and pulled him toward the living room. "Are you gonna watch a movie with us?" she asked hopefully.

David glanced at Grace to judge her reaction, and Grace shrugged. "If you'd like to stay, please do. Sunday nights are movie nights here."

"Please?" Katie begged.

"Well, sure. Why not?" he said.

"Yay!" cheered Katie. "He can sit by me!"

"What are we watching tonight?" Faith asked. "It's your turn to pick, Katie."

"Don't pick some baby movie this time, okay?" Jackson pleaded. "If she picks *Little Einsteins*, I'm going to my room."

"How about *Cars*?" asked David with a mischievous grin at Grace. She blushed again as Katie shouted, "Yes! *Cars*!"

David whispered to Grace, “Sorry, couldn’t resist.” Then he winked at her and sat next to Katie, who was bouncing up and down on the couch cushion in excitement.

Faith set up the movie, Jackson turned off most of the lights, and Freddie helped Grace make popcorn and deliver bowls to everyone as the feature presentation began. Although they’d seen it a dozen times, Grace and her kids still enjoyed the movie. David admitted he’d only seen it once, and she could tell he liked watching it again. When they came to the scene where Mack had to transport Lightning McQueen across the country, “Life Is a Highway” began. David had a smile playing about his lips until the refrain, at which point he could no longer contain himself and started laughing out loud, surprising the kids. They hadn’t been privy to Grace’s performance earlier, and they didn’t think the scene was funny in the least.

Grace put her head in her hand in mock embarrassment. David reached his arm behind Katie, who was snuggled up between them on the couch, and touched Grace’s shoulder lightly to get her attention. She glanced at him, and he gave her a smile that made it feel like she had butterflies inside. “Your rendition was better,” he said, just loud enough for her to hear. Casually, he let his arm rest on the back of the couch. He wasn’t touching her, but she was acutely aware of his nearness as the movie continued. For the life of her, she couldn’t concentrate on the remainder of the movie at all.