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Road to London

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Road to London

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Stratford-upon-Avon

Chapter 1
A Strange Meeting

One summer's day when I was thirteen, something amazing happened. For months I had dreamed of a new life far away from Stratford. An actor's life. An exciting life filled with fame and fortune. And that afternoon, that summer's day, was when it all began.

It was hot, I remember. I was sitting in the school room with fifty sweating boys, pretending to study. Flies buzzed around my head. Sweat dripped off the end of my nose and onto my Latin text while my eyes grew heavy and began to close.

'Thomas Munmore! You are sleeping!'

The master's voice boomed across the school room and his birching stick cracked like a pistol shot as he struck his desk. My eyes snapped open and I sat bolt upright, waiting for him to march over and give me a beating. But in the sweltering heat the master had no energy for a flogging. Instead he lolled in his chair, red-faced and panting, with his blue robe drooping from his shoulders.

It had been a long and boring day for me, and when the church clock struck five I gladly stood up with all the other lads and bowed respectfully to our master. Then, as one, we tumbled down the stairs and out into the street, gasping for fresh air.

That day I didn't loiter. I had jobs to do before I could go down to the river and cool off. The sooner I started, the sooner I would be free to do as I pleased.

I raced across the town to Back Bridge Street where I had lived all my life in a crumbling old house with a poor thatch. There was one room downstairs where my sister, Beth, sewed and cooked, and Father mended shoes. Up above was our bedchamber, which was damp and bitterly cold in winter, and in summer filled with flies that landed on my face and crawled into my ears as I tried to sleep.

'Is the washing ready, Beth?' I called as I burst into the house. 'I want to go for a swim before the sun dies down.'

Father, who was working by the window, looked up from his bench, frowning. 'Swimming indeed,' he grumbled. 'Your sister has the linen ready, boy. You must take it at once.'

Beth tried to make up for Father's bad temper. 'The bed sheets are there, Thomas,' she said, smiling and nodding towards the basket on the table. 'They are to go to New Place. You know where that is, don't you?' she asked and winked at me.

Did I know where New Place was? Of course I did! Hadn't my hero – the famous Master William Shakespeare – bought the house two years ago? It was a fine house. One of the biggest in Stratford, with ten chimneys. Not that he lived in it. They said he only visited his family once or twice a year. Nowadays he was much too busy in London writing plays for the queen, and acting in the theatres.

I grabbed hold of the basket and rushed towards the door,

excited at the thought of visiting Master Shakespeare's house again.

'Go careful, boy,' Father snapped. 'No running or you'll tip it into the dirt.'

'And make sure you bring back the payment, Thomas,' Beth called after me – quite unnecessarily for I had delivered washing since I was six. I was well used to it.

Ignoring my father's instructions to go slowly I raced across town to New Place, thinking of my future as I carried the basket over my arm. One day I would be like Master Shakespeare. I'd go to London and act upon the stage. Soon my pockets would be full of gold, and I'd wear the best clothes and the finest boots and strut about the streets. One day.

By the time I turned into Chapel Lane the basket had grown so heavy that I was sweating unbearably and had to unbutton my doublet to cool myself. But finally I reached New Place. I pushed open the gate and walked into the garden where piles of wood and heaps of bricks had been left under trees by the path. The house had been in need of repair when Master Shakespeare bought it and after two years or more there were still masons and carpenters at work.

As I headed towards the door I caught sight of a man sitting in the shade of an oak tree. At first I thought he was a builder taking rest from his work, and although I didn't speak to him he must have heard my footsteps, for he turned round. Then, quite suddenly, he jumped to his feet and stared, making me stop in my tracks. I saw he was no workman, for his clothes were fine and well laundered.

And his trim beard and gold earring were sure signs of a wealthy man.

Seconds ticked by, my heart beating fast, as he fixed me with eyes so dark and piercing that I could neither move nor speak. Then I saw his hands begin to tremble, and he shook his head from side to side, groaning softly before uttering his first word, 'Hamnet.'

This meant nothing to me. I only knew I was afraid.

He spoke again, more quickly this time, his eyes wide and wild like a mad man's. He repeated the same word, over and over: 'Hamnet. Hamnet. Hamnet,' until he finally said, 'My son!' and stepped towards me, his arms stretched out to grasp me.

Terrified, I cried, 'Sir, I am not your son! I am Thomas Munmore. My sister has sent me with your linen.'

My words must have woken him from his trance for he blinked his eyes as if to clear his mind. His face turned so pale and ashen that I was afraid he would faint away.

'Sir,' I said again, reaching forward to take his elbow and stop him falling. 'You are unwell. Come and sit.' I led him back to the seat beneath the oak tree. There he rested, holding his head in his hands. I sat beside him waiting for him to calm himself. When he had, he turned and looked at me.

'Forgive me,' he said, placing his hand on mine. 'I was… I was shaken to see you there.' He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. 'You are the very image of my son, Hamnet, and I was certain I had seen his ghost.'

'His ghost?'

He nodded. 'Aye. He died of the plague two years ago, God save us. I was sitting here thinking of him when you came into the garden.' He stared at me with his dark, dark eyes. 'You are so like him, boy. He would have been your age now. About your height.' He sighed and shook his head. 'Heaven forgive me. I know I am blessed with two daughters. But Susanna and Judith can never replace my son.'

Daughters? Did he say his daughters were Susanna and Judith? Oh my stars! Instantly I recognised the names. I had met Susanna and Judith Shakespeare. They lived here, at New Place, with their mother. Judith was about my age and Susanna two years older. Now it was my turn to tremble as I realised that the man sitting next to me was their father, William Shakespeare. I could hardly contain my shock at being so close to the great man himself – the one I most admired in all the world. I stood up and stepped away as if I had no right to be sitting so near.

'Stay, Thomas,' he said, patting the seat next to him. 'Sit and talk to me. Tell me about yourself and how you see your future – for my own son has none.'

Nervously I settled back onto the seat.

'Tell me.' He repeated the words softly. 'How would you like your life to be?'

I swallowed and licked my lips so that I could speak. 'I would be an actor, sir.'

Master Shakespeare raised his eyebrows in surprise, then frowned a little. 'Nay, an actor's life is no life at all, wandering

from town to town, not knowing where the next penny is to come from.'

'But – begging your pardon, sir – you are not a poor man.'

He smiled a slow, sad smile. 'I have been fortunate, Thomas. Most are not. Even my brother Edmund finds it hard to make a living on the stage.'

I got to my feet and stood in front of him to protest. 'But I wish to be like you, sir. I wish to go to London – to act and write plays. That is what I wish to do more than anything. I have acted in school plays – though they are in Latin and are very dull. But I believe I am the finest actor among all the boys. I promise you that I…'

Master Shakespeare smiled and lifted his hand to quieten me. 'I can see you are headstrong, Thomas. If that is your dream, nothing I can say will change it.' He paused, sitting and sighing a little before he said, 'My company of actors arrives in Stratford tomorrow to perform *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Guildhall. Have you seen the play, Thomas?'

I shook my head. 'We rarely have such entertainments in Stratford, sir. But I should like to go. I'm sure it will be a fine play.'

Then the great man stood up and walked to where I had left the basket on the ground. 'I thank you for the linen,' he said, taking a coin out of his purse and dropping it into my hand. 'Give this to your sister.'

I stared at the money. A shilling! 'But, sir, this is too much…'

'Not too much for hard work,' he insisted as he pulled another coin from his purse and gave it to me. 'This penny is for you, Thomas, to go and see the play. Perhaps you would like to meet the actors after the performance?'

I gasped at such an invitation. 'I shall be honoured, sir,' I replied and he smiled again, but I saw his eyes were wet with tears. Perhaps he was thinking of Hamnet, his poor dead son.

'Follow your dream, Thomas,' he said. 'Let it lead you where it may. I shall remember you, my boy. My blessings go with you.' He picked up the basket and walked away down the path towards the house.

Chapter 2
Exciting News

I ran out of the garden and into the street, eager to give Beth the money and tell her about my meeting with Master Shakespeare.

I was halfway along Chapel Lane, head down thinking about tomorrow's play, when a man stepped out of an alley and bumped into me, knocking me off balance and sending me crashing onto my back.

It was my cousin Richard.

'Whoa!' he laughed as I lay sprawled on the ground. 'Why such a hurry, Thomas?' Then he held out his hand and pulled me to my feet.

Richard was five years older than I and taller by a head. He had a crop of curly hair that was thick with sawdust for he was apprenticed to a joiner. Which is why there were two fingers missing from his left hand after a careless accident with a saw.

'I have news for you, coz,' he said as I stood there brushing the dirt off my doublet.

'What news?'

'Good news,' he replied and winked at me. 'Bessy Totthill saw your hero, Master Shakespeare, in the town this afternoon. "Oh," she says, "Master Shakespeare is so handsome, I almost swooned." Then she says, "Why can't you be like that,

Richard Munmore? Why can't you be rich and famous, eh?"'

Richard looked at me and roared with laughter. 'What cheek! I may not be famous but I'm handsome enough, aren't I, Thomas?'

He didn't need me to tell him he was handsome. Every wench in Stratford mooned over him, and Bessy Totthill would drag him to the church if she could.

'Well,' I said, 'I have news for you. I've just come from New Place and I met Master Shakespeare himself. I spoke with him, Richard. I sat by him in the garden and he talked to me.'

'Did he indeed?' Richard replied.

'He told me there was to be a play at the Guildhall tomorrow and he gave me a penny to go and see it.'

'What about your lessons?' Richard asked.

I laughed. 'I'll play truant! What does Latin grammar matter? I shall go and see the play, Richard. I will!'

A grin spread across his face, showing two crooked front teeth. 'Young devil, you are! Do as you please, coz, before you are saddled with a wife. Enjoy yourself while you are young.'

Then he took my arm and whispered in my ear. 'I'm off to Clopton's wood tonight. I'll fetch a rabbit for the pot, eh?'

I knew all about Richard's poaching. Father said he'd be caught one day but I knew he was too clever for the hangman's noose. He would always get away.

'I'll have fine sport.' he laughed. 'There's nothing that pleases me more than fooling Clopton's men.'

I usually liked to talk with Richard, but not today. I could only think about Master Shakespeare. What if we met again at the Guildhall? What if he invited me to join his players? I was thirteen and old enough to make my way in the world.

I hurried down the street, waving goodbye to Richard, and headed home, hardly able to contain my excitement.