

# Justice

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*Andrew Pinkerton*

IT STARTED WITH A THUD. Dull at first, gradually increasing in volume and clarity. David's head arose from the enticingly comfortable pillow as he attempted, in a groggy stupor, to ascertain the source of the intruding noise. Rising, he purposefully avoided any contact with the cold, untouched half of the bed. The half where she lied. She, his bride. Venturing into the woods the better part of a week ago, going to fetch divers supplies from an acquaintance in the neighboring village, she had yet to return. He pleaded with her not to make the trip alone. Half-hearted pleas, however. The entire morn had been marred by quarrel and shouting, over an issue far too trivial by now to even remember. He let her go, nearly anticipating the few hours to himself, and knowing she desired such too. How he now wished those pleas would have transformed themselves into resolute forbiddance. How he longed for her to again be by his side.

As his bare feet hit the cold floor, mostly polished wood but for the parts where the wood had given way to the ground underneath, a sense of relief washed over him. A relief he hadn't known since her departure. "Perhaps it is she," he thought, "trying to make her way back in." He hastened towards the door, but each step closer bore witness to that freshly blossomed hope slowly dissipating and in its stead, a new sense of dread and terror. The banging and commotion were far too loud to be coming from his dear wife, or any single person for that matter.

Continuing to inch closer, he could hear voices behind the continued pounding on the door. Several voices. And familiar. He recognized Thomas,

the reverend, saying something unintelligible. As well as Stanley, from next door. Another voice, not recognizable but filled with anger and menace, declared, "Just set the fire to it now! Let him be damned to hell for all I care."

At that, David came to an instantaneous halt. His first thought, spin around and exit through the window in the back and scamper away as far as possible, danced around his mind and tugged at his feet, urging him to escape. But another thought, equally as powerful and beckoning him towards the door, entered in. Curiosity flitted through his brain and begged to know why the men from the village where at his front door and if they had knowledge concerning the whereabouts of his missing wife. In the end, it was the curiosity the won the battle, and David finished the distance between himself and the door, now barely grasped by the loosened hinges.

Disregarding the saner half of himself, telling him not to, David grasped the latch and opened his door. To say the sight he beheld caught him off guard would be an immense understatement. Nearly half of the village gathered at his doorstep, most of the faces he recognized, others faded into the pitch-black night sky. A few carried torches, the flickering causing eerie shadows to dance about the mob. Others carried their pieces—loaded, no doubt. All, however, bore a face that incontrovertibly revealed hatred and utter contempt.

Charles, the mob's apparent leader, stepped up to David and raised his voice, which was a rasp more than a yell. "What on God's earth were you thinking? Did you truly believe you would escape judgment for something so—so demonic?"

"Pardon? I know not what the

cause all this trouble be. If I have done a thing to cause harm to fall on you or anyone else, I beg of you your forgiveness. Tell me, why are you here?"

"Let's just finish him off right now!" came a shout from the crowd.

"To feign your innocence does nothing but add to your transgression. I pray God shows you the same grace you showed to your wife."

"Elizabeth? Have you heard from her? What's befallen her?" Panic gripped David with an icy grasp, and sobs were visibly choked back.

"You maul your wife to death, leave her to die a bloody mess in the woods and dare give us your theatrics?"

"No. This can't be so. Please tell me. Tell me where she is!" David held Charles's collar in his fist, the sobs no longer detained. His soul was besieged by an anguish that never a man had experienced ere this night—whether the dominant emotion was grief or anger, one couldn't say.

Thomas interjected, pulling David off of Charles and pushing him into the door, holding him there. "You've become entirely insane, boy. We knew you were trouble the day Elizabeth dragged your sorry self into our village. Her one mistake was you and look what it's gotten her."

David felt a chilling ire course through his person at that. It was true, Elizabeth's betrothal to him merited the disapprobation of the little village. It wasn't so much David's fault. He had his minor faults—a few too many ales on occasion, perhaps—but he was no less an agreeable man than the rest of the village's inhabitants. No, the reason for their disdain was far more base. David, much to his own misfortune, hailed from Spottford, the village near a two day's journey to the north

and, indisputably, the most despised as well. Perhaps the worst kept secret here was the citizenry's low opinion and general distaste for David and his union with their beloved Elizabeth. Thomas's expatiation unfortunately continued, despite David's retreat into sullen despondency. "End your chicanery and confess what you've done. Your game's over. We found your blood-stained knife on the property ere coming to your door. Half the village could hear you berating her just prior to her disappearance. And is it not a questionable thing that your home was found vacant for well beyond a day, just enough time for you to commit such an unmentionable act and drag her innocent body off to the forest?" David, of course, could offer a sound rejoinder to every bit of evidence standing against him, categorically denying the mob's heinous accusations. He was, after all, a butcher, thus explaining the bloodied knife. Indeed, he and Elizabeth had bickered that morn, but so had every other couple in the village that had been together for any time worth mentioning. And his absence from his own abode could be explained by his repose at his in-law's, both of whom were conspicuously absent from the ever more increasingly heated mob. However, David was unable to utter a single word, let alone deliver a full defense. The villagers' verdict was a foregone conclusion, made the moment he stepped foot on their despicable soil. His love was gone, and never would he be able to make amends with her. He was guiltless in this moment, without a doubt, but even should some divine miracle grant him the ability to loosen his tongue, no word could ever sway their mind. The best he could muster was an uncontrollable sob while scowl-

ing at the crowd, his fingertips finally releasing their clutch on the wooden door as he was overtaken.

And there, as the sun made her ascent through the morning sky, her warming rays fell upon David, his body bearing the marks and bruises and burns that brought him to his end. Accusing him of murdering an innocent woman, the village itself had murdered an innocent man, and left on itself an indelible mark from which it could never heal. ■