



Sensible Shoes

A STORY ABOUT THE
SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Sharon Garlough Brown



Taken from *Sensible Shoes* by Sharon Garlough Brown.

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Invitation to a Journey

*Stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask
for the ancient paths, where the good way lies;
and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.*

JEREMIAH 6:16



Meg, 1967

A solitary little girl in a gray wool coat and red knit cap flitted through the snow, searching for a glimmer of gold. Someone had given the jingle bells to Mama for Christmas, and Mama had smiled when she hung them on the front door. So when the wind snatched the bells and spirited them away, five-year-old Meg was determined to find them and make Mama happy again.

Meg hummed as she searched around bushes in the yard. She loved hide-and-seek. She wished Mama or Rachel would play hide-and-seek with her; but Mama was too busy to play, and eleven-year-old Rachel always said she was too big for baby games. If only Daddy hadn't gone to heaven to be with Jesus! Daddy had been very good at hide-and-seek.

Meg patiently pursued the lost bells for almost an hour, finally spotting one of them peeking out from a snowbank near Mrs. Anderson's garage. Clutching her prize, Meg skipped down the driveway and up the front steps.

Mama was standing at the door, scowling and scolding. "Margaret Fowler! Didn't you hear me calling for you?"

"Mama, I found them!" Meg beamed as she offered her gift.

Mama stripped off Meg's hat, revealing thick blonde curls. "How many times do I

have to tell you? Take your boots off outside. I don't want snow messing up this floor."

Meg left her boots on the porch and danced inside, jingling the bells. "Look, Mama! I found your bells!"

Mama frowned as she shut the door. "What bells?"



Meg Crane stepped across the threshold of her childhood home in Kingsbury, Michigan, the jingling of her keys echoing in the foyer. Though she had spent almost forty of her forty-six years in the Fowler family's large Victorian house, it had never felt this cavernously lonely. Shutting the door behind her, Meg sank slowly to the floor and leaned her head against the wood paneling.

Gone. Becca was gone. Her beloved daughter had flown away.

Meg wished they could have had more time together. The fourth of August had arrived too quickly, and now her only child was on a plane to London, where she would spend her junior year of college.

Becca's lively presence at home had kept Meg happily preoccupied. There had been so much to do together, so many preparations to make for the overseas adventure. Becca's joy and enthusiasm had temporarily buoyed Meg's spirits above her own grief.

But now the empty house engulfed her with dreadful stillness.

Mother was also gone. Still gone.

Months after Ruth Fowler's death, Meg was still fighting the impulse to call out a greeting to her mother whenever she arrived home. She still expected Mother to appear at the dinner table. She still listened for her footsteps on the staircase. She still paused by the bedroom door, stifling the urge to say goodnight.

Meg supposed she would be slow to process Becca's absence too. She imagined she would still look for Becca's pink water bottle on the kitchen counter. She would still listen for her daughter's cheerful voice humming along with her iPod. She would probably still awaken around midnight and expect to hear Becca arrive home safely after an evening out with friends.

But now the only sounds in the house were the melancholy sighs of an antique grandfather clock and the low hum of the refrigerator.

Meg Crane was alone. Truly alone.

Now what?

Slumping forward, Meg cradled her head in her hands and wept.



On Saturday night Meg dutifully set her alarm. Though she would have preferred to stay in bed on Sunday morning, she arrived at Kingsbury Community Church during the opening hymn. For years she had faithfully practiced the safest way to avoid interacting with other worshipers: arrive while everyone was singing, sit in the far back corner of the sanctuary near the exit door, and leave before the benediction. At five-foot-two, Meg had a singular advantage for slipping in and out of places without being seen. Most Sundays her invisibility strategy worked flawlessly.

On this Sunday, however, Pastor Dave's wife, Sandy, happened to be standing in the narthex when Meg exited. Meg walked as if she were in a hurry, hoping her determined gaze and stride would give the impression she had other commitments to keep. But when Sandy smiled and greeted her by name, Meg knew she had been thwarted.

"I was hoping to catch you this morning, Meg. I haven't seen you the last few months. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks, Sandy. And you?"

"We're doing well. Enjoying this great weather. Michigan summers are beautiful, aren't they?"

Meg could hear the choir singing the final response and knew she didn't have much time before the narthex filled with people she didn't want to see. It took so much effort simply to keep from bursting into tears. One look of compassion, one word tenderly spoken, and she was likely to disintegrate.

She inched her way closer to the door.

"This came in the mail the other day, and I thought of you." Sandy handed her a plum-colored flyer. "It's about the fall programs at the New Hope Center. You know about New Hope, right?"

Meg had never visited the retreat center, but as a lifelong resident of Kingsbury, she had driven by the building and grounds many times. "I—uh . . . I know where it is, but that's about all." The sanctuary doors were getting

ready to open, and soon she would be surrounded.

Sandy clearly did not share her sense of urgency. “New Hope’s a wonderful place,” she went on. “I’ve gone to lots of programs there, and this particular one is really good.”

Meg brushed her ash blonde curls away from her eyes and feigned interest as Sandy showed her the paragraph about a “sacred journey.”

“It’s all about deepening your relationship with God through prayer and other spiritual disciplines,” Sandy explained. “And with the changes you’ve gone through the past couple of months, I thought this group might help you find your way.”

Meg bit her lip. Evidently, the pastor had spoken to his wife about how hard she was finding the grief process.

Sandy continued with a gentle voice. “I remember how I felt after my mom died, and I know how close the two of you were.”

Close?

Meg felt heat rise to her neck and face. The scarlet blotches consuming her fair skin were giving her away. Tattletales. She resented those blotches.

“Thank you so much for thinking of me, Sandy,” she said, wrapping her icy hand around her throat to cool it down. “Please tell Pastor Dave what a meaningful sermon he preached today.”

Then she quickly slipped out the glass doors before anyone else could smile and call her by name.

Hannah, 1976

Seven-year-old Hannah Shepley loved Brown Bear, her faithful steward of secrets and sorrows. When one of his gentle eyes fell off and disappeared, her heart broke. Miss Betty, their elderly neighbor, patted Hannah’s head with her arthritic hand and told her not to worry. She could fix Brown Bear’s eyes. Hannah tearfully entrusted him to Miss Betty, who promised to return him soon.

When Brown Bear came home two days later, Miss Betty beamed and said, “Here, Hannah. See? Good as new!”

But as Hannah looked into Brown Bear’s eyes, she did not recognize him. She knew that he did not recognize her either. The all-knowing, tender expression was

gone, replaced by the blank, amnesic stare of large plastic buttons. Hannah had lost her best friend and confidante.

Her mother was embarrassed by her silence. “What do you say, Hannah? Miss Betty worked hard fixing your bear for you.”

“Thank you, Miss Betty,” Hannah whispered. But when she was alone in her room, she burst into tears.



“I always feel so much better after I talk to you,” said the tearful female voice on the other end of the phone.

Thirty-nine-year-old Hannah Shepley smiled to herself. She loved her job. For fifteen years she had served as an associate pastor at Westminster Church in Chicago, and she still loved her work.

“Let’s get together to pray,” Hannah said, pulling out her planner and scanning the details of her schedule that day: Tuesday, the fifth of August. She was booked straight through a dinner meeting. “Is eight o’clock tonight too late for you?” she asked. “I’m happy to come to your home, or you’re welcome to come to my office—whichever is better for you.” They made arrangements to meet in Hannah’s office.

Hannah had never regretted her decision to furnish and decorate her office far more comfortably than her house. Not only did the warm ambience provide a safe haven for people in crisis, but she spent most of her life there. In fact, she had once calculated the number of waking hours she actually spent at home, only to discover it ranked a distant third.

Behind hospitals.

Hannah looked at her watch and grabbed her keys. She needed to be at the hospital by ten o’clock to pray with Ken Walsh before his open heart surgery. And while she was there, she could check on Mabel Copeland, who was recovering from a hip replacement. If she hurried, she would still have time to pick up flowers on the way.

She nearly bumped into Steve Hernandez, Westminster’s senior pastor, in the hallway. “Racing off again?” Steve asked.

“Pre-op this morning and then a bunch of pastoral care appointments.” Hannah tucked her chin length, light brown hair behind her ears. “I’ve got

another one of those days where I need to be in three places at once. You know how that goes.”

“Is there anything I can help you with today?” Steve asked.

Steve always asked, and Hannah always said no. She had everything covered. Even so, she was grateful he made a habit of inquiring. Many senior pastors took their associates for granted. Not Steve. He tried to keep his finger on the spiritual pulse of his staff, and they loved him for it.

“Make sure you take some time to breathe today, Hannah.”

She laughed. “I’ve got breathing time scheduled for a week from Thursday.”



The next morning, just before eight o’clock, Steve knocked on her open office door. “Another early start?” he asked, glancing at his watch.

Hannah looked up from her reading and stifled a yawn. “I was at the hospital to pray with Ted and his family before his surgery this morning. I wanted to stay and wait with them, but I’ve got a nine o’clock meeting. I’ll go back later, though, to make sure he’s doing okay.” She motioned to her brown suede couch. “C’mon in, Steve. Have a seat.”

He moved aside a pillow and a blanket. “Did you go home last night?”

“I’ll grab a power nap later.” She took a sip of coffee. “What’s up?”

She heard Steve take a deep, preparatory breath. “Hannah, the elders and I have come to a decision I know you won’t like, but I’m hoping you can receive it as a gift.”

Hannah clenched her jaw and immediately began scanning for possibilities of what he might say. Amazing, how many divergent thoughts could sprint through her mind in five seconds. With a single shot fired into the air, she was off and running. Were they restructuring the staff? Canceling one of the ministry programs? Giving her another team to oversee?

“We’re giving you a nine-month sabbatical,” he said. “Starting in September.”

She skidded to an abrupt stop. “I don’t understand,” she said, studying his face for non-verbal clues.

“I know. But some of us have been talking about it for a while now, and it’s time. You’ve been here almost fifteen years without a break. You’re way overdue.”

“But lots of pastors go a lot longer than that and never get a break,” she countered. “Besides, I had six weeks off last year!”

Steve laughed. “So you could recover from major surgery! And if I remember correctly, you kept working from home.”

She shook her head emphatically. “I don’t need a sabbatical. I love my work, and I’m doing okay.”

“You can’t argue out of this one, Hannah. It’s already been decided. And to express our love and appreciation for you—and to help you relax—some folks have given donations to cover all of your living expenses.”

Hannah had never heard of an associate pastor being given such a generous sabbatical, and she was suspicious. She knew she didn’t have control over her facial expression, so she looked away, fixing her gaze on the potted plant and “Get Well Soon!” balloon she would be delivering later that day.

Steve read her reaction and responded to her unspoken fears. “You’re not being fired, Hannah. I promise. Your job performance is outstanding, the congregation loves you, and you’re a wonderful colleague.”

She still wouldn’t look at him. She didn’t trust herself. Out of her peripheral vision she saw him lean forward on the couch, plant his elbows on his knees, and clasp his hands together. This was Steve’s earnest pose, reserved for particularly treacherous moments of pastoral care: couples on the verge of divorce, teenagers threatening suicide, parents losing their faith after the death of a child. Steve would dig his heels firmly into the ground and tug on the invisible rope, pulling a teetering soul safely away from despair’s precipice and into the strong arms of Jesus.

Clearly, Steve thought she was hovering on the brink. What brink? She couldn’t remember him ever using the rope with her. She didn’t need the rope. Didn’t, didn’t, didn’t.

“Remember that great sermon you preached just a few months ago on John 15?” he continued.

Hannah did not reply. She had a sinking feeling that her words of wisdom about Jesus as the vine and the Father as the gardener were about to come back and bite her.

“You told the congregation that pruning isn’t punishment—it’s improvement. You reminded us that pruning is God’s way of shaping us to become even more like Christ. Jesus said the branches that get pruned are the

ones bearing fruit. And you're bearing fruit, Hannah. Lots of it. This sabbatical isn't punishment—it's pruning. It's time to let God care for you and shape you so you can become even more like Christ."

"But September?" she exclaimed. "That's impossible! I've got all these fall programs already planned. There's no way I can wrap up everything here that fast. And who would even cover for me?"

Steve hesitated, and in his hesitation, Hannah discerned the truth. They'd had this planned for a while. They had just avoided telling her until now. Why hadn't they given her more warning? Why hadn't they included her in the planning? More than that, why hadn't they consulted her to begin with?

"We've got everything covered, Hannah. You don't have to worry about anything. I promise."

This was crazy. Absolutely absurd. How could this be happening?

Steve spoke with a low, reassuring voice. "You've done a great job here at Westminster—the staff and elders all think so. But I also think you need some time and space to disentangle your personal and professional identities. You don't know who you are when you aren't pastoring. You don't know what to do when you're not being needed. And you have no idea how tired you are. Trust me. I've been there."

Even though his voice was gentle, she winced.

"Years ago my senior pastor had the same talk with me, Hannah. He saw warning signs in my life that I didn't see, and he took action. His intervention saved my ministry, my family, and my health. It was a huge blessing to me, and I hope this will be a blessing to you."

She didn't want to hear it. She wasn't burned out, and she wasn't on the brink of disaster. She didn't have a family to worry about, and her health was fine. She didn't need a break. Didn't, didn't, didn't.

"Can't I just take a month off?"

"No."

"Three months then? I'll go on a guided retreat somewhere and come back renewed and refreshed."

Steve was immovable. "This is radical pruning we're talking about. If we only give you a couple of months, you'll just mark time until you can come back and pick up right where you left off."

“But an entire school year! What am I possibly going to do with all that time off?”

He smiled gently. “Don’t worry about trying to figure out the whole thing right now. We can talk later about some ideas for how you might want to spend it. The priority is getting you to a place where you can shift gears into real rest, and we’re going to do everything we possibly can to help make that happen for you.” He stood up. “Nine months, Hannah. Just give God nine months.”

She knew there was no use arguing. They had made the decision without even consulting her—without her knowledge or approval—and it was out of her control. As she watched Steve leave her office, Hannah couldn’t help feeling resentful. She didn’t need an intervention, and she didn’t want his gift—especially a gift that was intended to be so outrageously generous. Not only did she feel resentful, but now she felt guilty over being ungrateful.

She hated feeling that way.

Mara, 1968

Mara Payne bit her lip and fixed her eyes on her saddle shoes as she kicked up little clumps of dirt and grass. She had played this role countless times, and she knew the script by heart. One by one the fourth grade team captains would call out the names of her classmates. One by one the chosen would saunter to their respective sides, congratulating each other and whispering recommendations for the next pick into the captains’ ears.

Mara didn’t have to look up to know what was happening. The feet next to hers were Eddie Carter’s. She knew his sneakers: blue stripes, muddy laces, and a small tear where a big toe wriggled in the sock. Eddie was always second-to-last pick, but at least he was chosen. Mara was just the leftover. When the sullen captain finally groaned her name, she would take the walk of shame and tell herself she didn’t care. But her tearstained shoes told a different story.



Mara and Tom Garrison sat on the metal bleachers on a warm August evening in western Michigan, eating hot dogs and cheering on their sons’ baseball team, the Kingsbury Knights. Fridays were one of the few evenings the family

spent together. Most weeks Tom traveled Monday through Thursday, leaving Mara to manage the precisely choreographed steps of the single parent dance. But when Tom was in town, he was devoted to their two teenage boys.

“Go, go, go!” Tom jumped to his feet and shouted as fifteen-year-old Kevin drilled a hard line drive deep into center field, rounding first, rounding second, and sliding into third base. “Safe!” Tom yelled along with the umpire. “Yeah! Way to go, Kev!” He sat down again, still clapping enthusiastically. “I tell you what, Mara—that boy’s got talent. You watch! He’s gonna end up with a scholarship somewhere. Baseball, football, basketball—you name it, he can do it.”

Mara sipped her diet soda and scanned the dugout bench for thirteen-year-old Brian. When she finally spotted him, she stood up. She was hard to miss in her oversized lime green tunic and large-brimmed straw hat; but if Brian saw her waving to him, he didn’t acknowledge her. She sat back down and stared at her shoes, hoping no one else had seen him look her direction before turning away.

“So,” she began, rubbing her palms back and forth along her considerable thighs. “Do you know any more details about your plans with the boys tomorrow?”

Tom did not reply, choosing instead to concentrate intently on the pitcher’s windup and Kevin’s lead at third base. Mara waited for the batter’s swing and miss before she tried again. “I was just wondering if you guys are planning to be gone all day or if you’ll be home for dinner?”

“Don’t know. We’ll play it by ear.” He was still watching the mound.

Mara removed her hat and smoothed her freshly colored, dark auburn hair. She could still smell the ammonia. Someday maybe she’d splurge and treat herself to color from a salon instead of from a box. Unfortunately, the copper highlights had turned out to be far more orange than she’d wanted, and she was going to have to try to fix them without making things worse. She supposed she could always go back to a boring shade of brown. Or maybe she’d make an appointment with a hairdresser. She figured that at fifty, she was entitled to a little more attentive pampering than she normally indulged in, even if Tom disagreed.

She sighed. “I’m happy to cook something for us, if you think you’ll be back from the game by then.”

Tom took a bite of his hot dog and waved to Brian. Brian waved back. “I said I don’t know. We’ll play it by ear.”

“It just helps me plan my Saturday if I know what to expect—”

“Enough, Mara!” he barked, rubbing his hands over his gray crew cut. “Wouldya just let me watch the game?” He jumped up to cheer again as Kevin raced home on a ground ball to the shortstop. “Way to hustle, Kev! Keep it up!” Kevin turned his freckled face to the stands and high-fived toward his dad.

Mara put her hat back on. “I just—”

Tom spun around, glaring at her. “Do whatever you want, okay? If we get hungry, we’ll stop and get something to eat on the way home. Just quit naggin’ me!”

Mara saw one of the other mothers turn and cast a sympathetic glance in her direction. Knowing their conversation had been overheard, Mara forced a broad smile and a lighthearted chuckle. “Men!” she mouthed to the woman, rolling her eyes and shaking her head.

For the next three innings she ignored Tom and pretended to be interested in the lives of the other families sitting in the bleachers. The other Perfect Happy Families. After the game ended, she stood in the stands and watched Tom embrace the boys on the field. Then she shuffled slowly across the parking lot to her black SUV, fighting back her tears until she was safely out of sight from any spectators.

When Tom and the boys arrived home after their customary post-game celebration at Steak ‘n Shake, Mara was already in bed, pretending to be asleep.



On Monday night Mara sat on her king-sized bed pairing socks. She’d heard other women talk about leaving clean laundry in baskets for husbands and kids to grab what they needed. But Mara had never minded sorting laundry. There was something particularly satisfying about matching socks together. When she couldn’t find a mate, she’d put the lone sock in her top dresser drawer and wait for the missing one to surface. In fact, her top drawer was crammed with unmated—no, once-mated—socks she couldn’t bear to throw away.

There ought to be a country and western song about that.

Maybe there already was.

Kevin appeared in the doorway just as Mara was putting away the last of Tom’s undershirts. “Dad says to tell you he won’t be home until late Thursday night.”

Ever since Kevin got a cell phone for his fifteenth birthday, Tom had made a habit of communicating most of his messages through him. Or by text. These days Mara had very little voice-to-voice contact with Tom when he traveled. Or when he was home.

Having delivered the message, Kevin was already headed down the hallway.

Just once, she wished the boys would linger long enough for a meaningful conversation—something other than the typical grunt or shrug whenever she asked about homework or friends. The only time she received actual sentences was when they were asking for food or laundry or taxi services.

“Kevin, don’t forget you’ve got an orthodontist appointment tomorrow!” Mara called after him. He didn’t reply. “Kevin!”

“I know!” he yelled from his room.

“Where are my jeans?” Now Brian was in the doorway.

“I put them away in your drawer.”

“No—my black ones.”

“I haven’t seen your black ones.”

“I put them in the laundry like a week ago!”

“I don’t know, Brian. I emptied the basket this morning and washed everything that was in it.”

“So where are my jeans?” The freckled dimple at the left corner of his mouth was beginning to twitch. He looked just like his father as he stood there frowning, arms crossed over his chest.

“Check the floor in your room. I saw a pile of stuff by your desk.”

Dawn, her counselor, had told her to stop picking up after the boys. *They need to take some responsibility*, Dawn said. *They’ve got to learn to live with consequences.*

Brian disappeared and came back with the jeans crumpled into a ball. He tossed them at Mara.

“I need these for tomorrow,” he said, and left the room.

Mara exhaled slowly and put the jeans into the empty laundry basket. Someday maybe things would be different. *God, please.* She wasn’t sure how much longer she could go on like this.

Charissa, 1990

The Goodman family always chose the first row pew right in front of the pulpit, where everyone could see them. Eight-year-old Charissa would sit between her parents, feigning close attention as the Reverend Hildenberg preached. Even when her tights itched and her taffeta sash was cinched uncomfortably around her waist, Charissa was determined not to fidget.

She was a statue—still and stoic like the ones carved centuries ago by Mother’s Greek ancestors. Daddy’s ancestors were still and stoic too; but they were British. Maybe even royalty. Charissa liked the idea of being a princess. Daddy always said she had a face that could launch a thousand ships, like Helen of Troy.

Charissa of Kingsbury.

She liked the sound of her name, even if she always had to correct people who mispronounced it. “It’s ‘Ka-Rissa,’” she would say. Her name meant, “grace,” and Charissa liked that too. She practiced being as graceful as possible.

Most weeks Charissa spent the worship service sitting still on the outside while moving fast on the inside. Mother did not allow her to bring books to church or to the dinner table, so Charissa hid them in her head. She had a whole library of books stored inside her, and she could read them whenever she wanted. No one ever knew she was just pretending to listen to the sermon. In fact, every week the Reverend Hildenberg would shake Charissa’s hand and tell her what a joy it was to see a young lady paying such careful attention. And Mr. Goodman would put his arm around Charissa’s shoulders, smile, and say, “Thank you, Reverend. We’re very proud of her.”



Twenty-six-year-old Charissa Goodman Sinclair leaned back to stretch her tight shoulders and then stood up at her desk. Only the doctoral students at Kingsbury University had private study cubicles in the main library, and hers was stacked high with English literature classics. She scanned the shelves, trying to decide which books to take home. She was definitely going to be spending the evening with Milton again, and she would need her resources on culture and society in Elizabethan England. Of course, she could also get a head start on her Shakespeare paper if she finished her analysis of *Paradise Lost*. The fall term had only just begun, and she was already swamped.

She pulled her long dark hair up into a clip and looked at her watch. John was supposed to pick her up on his way home from work. Maybe she should call and tell him that she'd be spending the night at the library instead. Then she would have easy access to all the books she might need.

But no—that wouldn't work. She would have to get home to shower and change in the morning before her eight o'clock class, and she didn't want to awaken John to come and get her. She hated having only one car. It was so inconvenient.

At least their skimp-and-save lifestyle was temporary. John was working his way up at the marketing firm, and Charissa would be an English literature professor someday. Just four more years of graduate school. Her father didn't understand why she would invest six years of her life in acquiring a graduate degree from a non-prestigious Christian university when she could have had her choice of Ivy League schools. At Kingsbury, however, Charissa's reputation in the English Department was well-known. Having graduated *summa cum laude*, she relished the distinct advantages of being a big fish in a small pond. Although Daddy would have preferred her pursuing a more profitable career in law or business, he loved telling people that his little girl was getting her Ph.D. And Charissa didn't mind him telling.

She packed up her laptop and a stack of books before heading out to the parking lot to wait for her husband.



On Tuesday evening Charissa was on her way to her library cubicle when she noticed plum-colored flyers posted on a bulletin board. Since there were multiple copies, she removed the thumbtack and slipped one into her backpack.

Normally, she wouldn't have paid any attention. She had never been to the New Hope Retreat Center, and she didn't know anything about its programs. But Dr. Allen, who taught her *Literature and the Christian Imagination* seminar, had been urging his students to find ways to deepen their life with God.

"I know I'm sounding like a broken record," he said at the end of class the next day, "but if you truly want to understand the literature we're reading this semester, you'll need to do some extra-curricular work. You'll need to make a commitment to pay attention to the path and contours of your own spiritual journey."

Removing his glasses, he ran his hand across his face and through his salt and pepper hair. “The poets and authors we’re studying wrote out of the depths of their personal experience with God,” he went on. “Their work reflects their wrestling with who God is and who God created them to be. If you don’t do some wrestling of your own, the texts will have little meaning for you. So I encourage you again to explore your own spiritual formation this semester—to be intentional about how you are being shaped to become more and more like Christ. If you find ways to cooperate with the Spirit’s work of transformation, these texts will spring to life for you.”

Charissa wondered if New Hope’s program would qualify as an appropriate spiritual formation experience. She could manage six Saturday sessions spread over three months. Maybe the New Hope course would be the perfect way to fulfill Dr. Allen’s request.

She waited for the room to clear before she approached his desk to ask if he knew anything about the “sacred journey” group advertised on the flyer.

“Walk with me,” he said, picking up his briefcase and his travel mug.

She followed him down the crowded hallway toward his office. “I’m just wondering if this is the sort of class you were talking about—something that would supplement the work we’re doing in your course.”

“Absolutely.”

“And the director, Katherine Rhodes. Do you know anything about her?”

He nodded. “I know Katherine well. She’s been at New Hope for a long time.”

Charissa hesitated, trying to find the right way to phrase her next question. “And theologically . . . I mean . . .”

Dr. Allen interrupted, chuckling. “Worried about orthodoxy, Charissa? You’re far more likely to hear heresy in these classrooms than from her. You’d be in good hands.” He took a sip from his mug. “Apart from the spiritual formation recommendations I made in class, why are you interested in going?”

She thought for a moment and then answered, “To learn.”

He stopped walking and turned his riveting dark eyes upon her. “Wrong answer,” he said, smiling enigmatically. Was he teasing her?

Though she was several inches taller than her professor, Charissa suddenly

felt rather small. Lowering her gaze away from his eyes, she focused instead on his neatly trimmed goatee and waited for him to explain himself.

“Go to encounter God, Charissa, or don’t go at all.”

Hannah

Just one month after Steve broke the news of her unsolicited, unwelcomed vacation, Hannah Shepley relinquished her keys to Heather Kirk, the twenty-something pastoral intern that Westminster had hired to try to fill her shoes. Heather, who had graduated from seminary in May, was thrilled to have a nine-month internship before she sought a more permanent call elsewhere. Fresh-faced and eager, she was full of audacious hopes and plans for “doing ministry.”

As Hannah looked into her replacement’s sparkling eyes, she caught a glimpse of her former self. She had been young and eager once too, arriving at Westminster fresh from seminary—a twenty-four-year-old sparkplug, ready to ignite the church into action. But the last fifteen years had taken their toll. These days when Hannah looked into the mirror, she hardly knew herself. Her brown hair had streaks of silver which took too much effort to conceal, and her eyes were tired. So tired. In fact, her aging seemed to have accelerated ever since Steve had told her she needed to rest. Or maybe she had merely become more aware of her weariness once she had stopped moving quite so fast.

“Don’t worry about anything,” Heather assured her, jingling Hannah’s house and office keys. “I’ve got everything covered. And if I’ve got any questions about the house, I’ll e-mail you.” The intern smiled knowingly. “Pastor Steve doesn’t want me calling you with questions about anything else.”

“Well, God bless you, Heather.” Hannah’s heart was so disconnected from her lips that she didn’t recognize her own voice speaking the polite benediction. “I hope it’s a fruitful time for you.” *Really?* Did she actually want this fresh-faced neophyte to thrive as her surrogate? Or was she secretly hoping her substitute would flounder so miserably that Westminster would be clamoring for her immediate return?

She didn’t want to answer that question.

Sneaking one more furtive glance at her house, Hannah followed her friend Nancy Johnson out to the car. Hannah had loaded her ten-year-old Honda with as many books from her office as she could manage. If she was going to be forced into time away, she could at least make her sabbatical as productive as possible.

Clothes were an afterthought. Hannah often joked that she could get dressed in the dark with her monochromatic wardrobe. In fact, she often did throw on clothes in the middle of the night for emergency hospital visits. Everything she owned was easy care and travel friendly, and she had stuffed the essentials into a single suitcase and a duffel bag: her sheepskin slippers and flannel pajamas, a few pairs of jeans and sweats, some casual tops and travel knit pants, a winter coat and fleece pullover, comfortable shoes and boots. She'd pick up clothes for warmer weather in the spring. That way she would have an excuse to go back home.

"I know this must be hard for you," Nancy said quietly.

You have no idea, Hannah replied to herself. She still couldn't believe this was happening.

She shoved the last box onto the floor behind the driver's seat, hoping Nancy hadn't glimpsed its bulging contents when the lid popped off. The box was full of old journals and other personal mementos Hannah hadn't wanted to risk leaving behind. She didn't know how nosy Heather would be, or who else might be wandering through her house while she was away. Even if she never opened the box during the sabbatical, she didn't want anyone else discovering it.

"Doug and I are praying you'll be able to rest and meet God in new ways," Nancy said, reaching into her pocket to pull out a key. Nancy and Doug had generously given Hannah their Lake Michigan family cottage for the next nine months. Though Hannah had never been there, she had seen pictures. It was beautiful.

"This is for the front door," Nancy went on. "It sticks a little bit, so you have to fiddle with it. And here are the directions for how to get there. Let's see—what else? Oh—make sure you drink the filtered water. The well water doesn't taste very good. I left a binder for you on the kitchen counter with all the other details you might need to know, but if you have any questions about anything, call us. And remember, we're only three hours away."

“Thanks, Nancy. Thanks for being so incredibly generous.” Hannah sighed and tucked her uncooperative hair behind her ears again. “There must be something seriously wrong with me. Who wouldn’t want nine whole months of paid vacation? I must be crazy.”

Nancy wrapped her arm around Hannah’s shoulders. “You’re not crazy, just driven. Passion about your work is a good thing. It’s one of the things we love about you! But Pastor Steve is right. You’ve been carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders. It’s time for you to rest.” Nancy kissed her furrowed brow. “Besides, it’s a special work of grace when God helps us shift from being the giver to the receiver. At least, that’s what you told me after I had surgery.”

Hannah laughed ruefully. “I hate it when my wisdom comes back to bite me!”



Hannah arrived at the Johnsons’ Lake Michigan cottage just in time to watch the September sun descend with crimson pageantry. Seating herself in a weathered gray Adirondack chair on the deck, she stared across the shimmering lake and breathed deeply.

The simple poetry of dwindling daylight stirred her. Something she had yet to understand or articulate was setting beneath a horizon in her life too, and she had no vision to imagine what would rise in its place.

Help, Lord, she prayed, watching fiery ribbons unfurl across the sky.

The last splashes of color were fading when Hannah crossed the threshold into her borrowed home. A single whiff of the damp mustiness, and she was eight years old again, skipping through the cottage her parents had rented for a week on the California coast. “Daddy, look!” she’d squealed, surveying her kingdom. “Bunk beds! I’ve always wanted bunk beds!”

Now she wandered slowly from room to room, trying to decide where to land. The cottage was at least twice the size of her two-bedroom house in Chicago, and even though it was decorated simply, it still felt far too luxurious. Nancy had finely tuned, elegant taste. This wasn’t one of those cottages furnished with thrift store knickknacks and cast-off wedding gifts. This was the sort of place where Hannah would be reluctant to put her feet on the furniture—except Nancy had specifically commanded her to put her feet up.

Hannah sighed as she removed the pink cellophane from a large wicker gift basket overflowing with cookies, chocolate, homemade strawberry preserves, and a dozen varieties of tea.

Tea. That's what she needed—a cup of tea to soothe and settle her. Then she could begin organizing books on the shelves Nancy had so thoughtfully cleared.

She chose a packet of decaf vanilla chai, filled the electric kettle, and read the note on the counter: "This is your home, Hannah. Rest and play here with joy!"

Rest, play, joy.

Those weren't words Hannah ever strung together. Not for herself, anyway. Her joy was her work. Her joy was being useful and productive. She could still see the intern standing there on her front porch, blithely jingling the keys to her life.

How could Steve do this to her?

As she waited for the water to boil, she thumbed absent-mindedly through a stack of Michigan travel and event brochures. A plum-colored flyer finally captured her wandering thoughts. The New Hope Retreat Center in Kingsbury sounded familiar, and then she remembered that Nancy had attended a prayer group there during the summer. Hannah paused to read: "Jesus says, 'Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly' (Matthew 11:28-30). We invite you to come take a sacred journey."

Hannah stopped reading. The words from *The Message* paraphrase gripped her, bringing a well-known passage to new life. Tired? Worn out? Burned out? Steve had answered for her: yes, yes, yes.

And Jesus offered an invitation to the weary: Come. Get away. Walk with me. Work with me. Watch. Learn. Keep company. Live freely and lightly.

Come take a sacred journey.

With a cup of tea in hand, Hannah settled onto the couch to pray. As she tried to focus her thoughts, however, she realized it wasn't just the stress of

packing or the three hour drive from Chicago that had worn her out. She was tired. Truly tired. Fifteen-years-of-uninterrupted-ministry tired.

Before the tea was gone, Hannah was asleep.

Charissa

The eighth grade honors math teacher always returned tests the same way: highest scores first. On the day he returned Charissa Goodman's test second, there was a collective gasp in the room. He raised his eyebrows and handed an externally composed Charissa her exam. "First time for everything, eh? Not so perfect on this one."

Charissa stiffened and sat even more uprightly in her chair. Sensing the riveted gaze of her classmates, she scanned the paper for red. There it was—a ridiculous mistake she hadn't caught in her double- and triple-checking. How could she have missed that? She took the offending paper and slid it out of view into her binder.

She would have to be more careful next time.



John Sinclair arrived at the Kingsbury University library right before eight o'clock, just in time to meet Charissa after her evening class. He had spent the past two hours at their apartment, carefully preparing his wife's favorite meal: lemon herbed chicken with tomato and feta salad. He had even stopped by the bakery after work to pick up a fresh loaf of focaccia. Wednesdays were long days for Charissa, so John always tried to do something special for her when she got home.

As he watched her approach the car, he couldn't suppress a low whistling, exhaled breath. Even from a distance Charissa was strikingly beautiful: her flawless Mediterranean olive skin, her sculpted figure, her silky jet-black hair. Everything about Charissa Goodman was perfect. Absolutely perfect. People were often surprised that John and Charissa were married. He was so "boy next door" with his thin brown hair and small brown eyes—the type of guy whose high school yearbook was filled with inscriptions about his "sweet personality" and "great sense of humor." Charissa, on the other hand, turned heads wherever she went. It wasn't just her statuesque beauty that attracted attention. She had a certain grace about her, carrying herself with practiced poise.

John's friends had discouraged him from even attempting to get a date with her when the two of them first met as sophomores at Kingsbury University. "The Ice Princess doesn't condescend to anybody," they warned him. "Give it up, John."

But John had never been one to give up. Though he hadn't been granted his desire for an athlete's body, he had the heart and determination of an Olympic champion; and he had been determined to make Charissa Goodman laugh. Even the Ice Princess eventually thawed in the warmth of John's good humor.

He grinned as he called through the open car window. "Hey, gorgeous! Want a ride?" Charissa tossed her bag of books into the backseat and then slid in beside him. "How about a kiss for the guy who loves you?" he asked, leaning toward her.

She kissed him on the cheek. "Sorry. Distracted."

"I can tell. What's up?"

"You know that Saturday morning class I mentioned to you?"

John nodded as he turned left out of the parking lot. "Yeah. What did Dr. Allen say about it? Is it safe?"

She laughed. "He says I'm already surrounded by heretics."

"Cool! I'd love to meet some! We can have them over for dinner, now that we actually have a table. I'll even cook."

"You always cook."

"Well, we need to eat. Hey! Ouch!" He beamed as Charissa punched his arm playfully. "I'm only saying you have different gifts, honey. Great intellectual gifts, just not culinary ones." She pretended to pout. "So," he continued, "is it worth giving up two Saturday mornings a month? And before you answer, remember that class competes against my famous chocolate chip pancakes."

"I know. I'm counting the cost." She fiddled with her long dark hair. "Anyway, Dr. Allen asked me why I was interested in going. I said, 'To learn.' And he stared at me with those penetrating eyes and said, 'Wrong answer.'"

"My wife? Wrong answer? Impossible. Gimme his phone number."

"John!"

"Sorry, Riss. Go ahead. I'm listening. Really."

She sighed. “He said if I went for any reason other than encountering God, then I was going for the wrong reason. And I can’t stop thinking about it. I mean—he’s the one who told us we needed to find something to supplement his class. And if the goal of all of this isn’t learning, then I don’t get it. I just don’t get it.”



John had spent the first year of their married life trying to perfect his Greek mother-in-law’s recipes, and he was becoming increasingly proficient in the kitchen.

“Well, what do you think of my lemon chicken?” he asked, watching Charissa from across the candlelit table.

“Mom would be impressed. It was great, John. Thanks.” While he cleared away dishes, she went to her backpack and pulled out her laptop and some books. Flipping on the overhead light, she seated herself at the table again and began to work.

“Can I get you anything?” he called as he loaded the dishwasher. She was so focused, she didn’t hear him. He came out from the kitchen and stood behind her, wrapping his arms around her. “Need anything?” he asked, kissing her neck. She shook her head and kept typing as he massaged her shoulders. “You’re tense,” he commented, pressing his fingers more firmly into her smooth skin. “I’ve got a remedy for that, if you’re interested.” He breathed in the citrus fragrance of her hair.

She spoke without looking at him. “I’m totally swamped. I’m already going to be pulling an all-nighter just to get this paper finished by tomorrow morning.” He gently released her.

“I know,” said John. “The work of a grad student, right? It’s never done.” He kissed the top of her head before he blew out the candles.



When Charissa finished her Shakespeare paper at 4 a.m., she was far too caffeinated to sleep. Since it was too dark to take her morning power walk, she started cleaning. Cleaning was one of her favorite forms of stress relief, and she cleaned frequently.

She had promised their irascible neighbors she would only vacuum between 9 a.m. and 9 p.m. Not that there was much to sweep: only a small family room and dining area off the kitchen, one bedroom, and a narrow hallway. But Charissa often said that a carpet swept in a precise sawtooth pattern did wonders for her mental health. Sometimes she vacuumed twice a day.

Because it was too early for carpets, she blitzed the pantry. Organizing shelves was not a high priority for John, and since he did all their cooking, the pantry rapidly deteriorated into disorder. At least once a week she imposed her will: cereal boxes in descending height, spices in alphabetical sequence, grains and pasta grouped by color.

“A place for everything and everything in its place.”

That was Charissa’s rule of life. If she hadn’t decided to become a professor of literature, she would have excelled as a personal manager. She had never understood how people tolerated chaos.

While she segregated the tomato, Alfredo, and barbecue sauces, she pressed the replay button on Dr. Allen’s rebuke. Wrong answer. Wrong answer. Wrong answer. Why was “learning” the wrong answer?

Charissa hated being corrected. Usually she managed to correct herself before anyone else had the opportunity. And now Dr. Allen—whose good opinion was crucial to her academic success—had offered a mysterious reproach instead of his customary praise. She couldn’t fathom what he had meant. She also wasn’t going to ask for clarification. Charissa rarely called attention to her ignorance by asking anyone for help. She would simply go to the class and fulfill his recommendations for the semester.

She finished ordering the chaos, picked a piece of stray fluff off the carpet, and tried to decide what else she could clean before her regularly scheduled quiet time.

Mara

Mara Garrison took a mug of peppermint tea from Dawn and eased her plus-sized body into the familiar armchair. What pounds of pain should she talk about today?

Every month she sat in Dawn’s counseling office, going round and round

on the same issues. Trust. Shame. Rejection. Self-worth.

Circles. She was walking in circles.

"I feel stuck," Mara said, shaking her head. "I feel totally stuck. It's like I understand how I ended up here, but I don't know how to move forward. I'm fifty years old, and I'm starting to wonder if I'm ever gonna get anywhere."

"You've come such a long way, Mara. Truly."

Dawn was always so encouraging. Mara wished she had a friend like Dawn—someone she could sit and share a cup of tea with, without having to write a check at the end of the visit. Dawn knew Mara more intimately than anyone had ever known her. The only thing Mara knew about Dawn, however, was that she had two beautiful, brown-eyed, ebony-skinned daughters who looked just like her: Kendra and Essence. Mara knew them from the smiling photos on Dawn's desk. Such lovely girls.

Essence. Mara wondered if her life would have been different if she'd had a name like Essence. *Essence Payne Garrison.*

Probably not. She supposed she would have been teased and rejected with that name too.

Mara Payne. She had always disliked her last name, enduring its cruelty for thirty-five years before marrying out of it. Of course, by marrying Tom Garrison she had just exchanged one kind of pain for another. But she wasn't going to talk about Tom today. She was tired of talking about Tom.

"You've done the hard work of exploring the reasons behind some of your struggles," Dawn was saying. "Maybe now there's a deeper level of faith and spirituality for you to explore—an opportunity for you to lean not on your own understanding, but to trust God in a new way."

Mara ran her index finger round and round the rim of the mug. Circles, circles, circles.

"I'm actually glad you're this frustrated," Dawn said.

Mara stopped circling. "Whaddya mean?"

This wasn't what Dawn usually said. Usually Dawn tried to convince her that her circles were ascending spirals up a mountain, not endless cycles leading nowhere. Usually Dawn tried to help her see that just because she was revisiting an issue didn't mean she had gone backwards. She was simply viewing it from another vantage point, from higher up the mountain.

“You’ve reached a place of holy discontent,” Dawn said. “The frustration you’re feeling can actually be a gift to nudge you toward something deeper. I’m hearing restlessness in you, and restlessness is movement. You may feel stuck, but your spirit is moving.”

“But I feel agitated, not peaceful. I thought the Christian life was all about peace and joy, and I don’t have it. I swear I must be doing something wrong.”

Dawn leaned forward in her chair. “Agitation is also God’s gift to us, Mara, strange as that sounds. Imagine yourself standing in a doorway, at a threshold. Your discontent can move you out of the old and into the new. When you reach the end of yourself and say, ‘I’m tired of living this way. I want something more!’ then God is there, helping you to let go and move forward. Does that make sense?”

Mara thought carefully. “I just want peace,” she finally said, chewing on what was left of a fingernail.

“What is peace?” Dawn asked.

I know, I know.

They’d had this conversation many times, and Mara knew the script by heart. Dawn would remind her that peace wasn’t the absence of conflict, but the presence of God in the midst of the storm. Dawn would tell her that peace wasn’t dependent on her circumstances—that true peace was about wholeness and being at one with God. Dawn would say that peace was a gift, the fruit of intimacy with Christ, flowing out of God’s love for her.

Though Mara understood what peace was, she had never *known* it.

“I’m tired,” she breathed. “Tired of the constant battling. I just want a rest.”

Dawn sat a long time without saying anything, and Mara wondered what she was thinking. Maybe Dawn was finally giving up on her too. Maybe she was hopeless.

She stared at her shoes and braced herself for the verdict.

Dawn stood up and went to her desk, pulling out a plum-colored pamphlet from a stack of papers. “You’ve heard me mention some of the groups and programs at the New Hope Center,” she said, handing the paper to Mara. “They offer what they call a ‘sacred journey’ group, exploring ways to encounter God. A group like that would give you a place to connect with other people walking the same kind of spiritual path. I

think it might be a good thing for you to do.”

Mara skimmed the description quickly, looking for a reason to say no.

The sacred journey is a pilgrimage for those who are thirsty for more of God. This journey is for all those who are dissatisfied with living on the surface and who want to travel deeper into God’s heart. We invite you to come and explore spiritual disciplines as we seek to create sacred space for God.

Mara stopped reading. There. She’d found it. “I hate the word *discipline*,” she said. “I already feel guilty, and I haven’t even gone yet.”

“I know,” said Dawn. “Lots of people have the same reaction. But spiritual disciplines aren’t laws or rules to follow. They’re tools that help us create space in our lives so God can work within us. We can’t transform ourselves. That’s God’s work, by God’s grace. But disciplines help us cooperate with the work of the Spirit.”

Mara communicated her cynicism with a frown.

“Think of it this way, Mara. We don’t have the power to make the sun rise, but we can choose to be awake when it happens. Spiritual disciplines help us stay awake.”

Mara kept examining the flyer, looking for more reasons to say no. Over the years she had completed plenty of personal Bible studies and had the workbooks to prove it. Even though she knew she didn’t want another fill-in-the-blank, do-it-yourself study, she wasn’t sure she was ready to explore her spiritual life with other people. “I’m not sure about the group thing,” she confessed.

“Why?”

“Because at least by doing things on my own, no one has the chance to reject me.” There. She’d said it.

“Look how far you’ve already come,” Dawn said gently. “You’ve been able to disclose lots of things you’d never been able to talk about before, and I haven’t rejected you.”

Mara smiled slightly. “I pay you not to reject me.” She reached into her oversized bag for a tissue.

“Mara, I wouldn’t recommend this group if you weren’t ready for something more. This kind of group is a first step toward deeper things. This is a

group where you have anonymity. You're free to disclose what you want. But at least you'd be walking the path with others. You can't keep living on your own, Mara. It's not good for you to be alone. And you've been alone for most of your life, even when you've been with other people."

Dawn was right. Mara surrounded herself with people who didn't know her: casual acquaintances who shared common interests, people she met at the boys' extra-curricular activities, even friends at church. Mara had constructed a persona that functioned reasonably well. But deep within her defenses was a little girl who was terrified that if other people discovered who she really was, they would walk away.

She left Dawn's office not sure what to do. Yes, she was captive to her fears, but at least her captivity was familiar. What would she discover if she stepped through the doorway into the unknown? Was her discontent strong enough to propel her forward? More than that, did she actually trust God enough to let go of the past and stride into something new?

She didn't know. She honestly didn't know.



Mara waited until the boys had gone upstairs to finish homework on Thursday night before she tried to broach the subject of the New Hope group with Tom. He had arrived home early from his business trip, and he seemed to be in a relatively decent mood.

"Dawn gave me some information about a group at the New Hope Retreat Center," she said casually, spooning leftover mashed potatoes into a plastic container.

He didn't look up from his *Sports Illustrated*.

She finished putting away the food and then tried again. "When I saw Dawn this week, she recommended a group for me. She thought it might be helpful."

He continued to read. "What's that gonna cost?" he asked. Mara had known he'd be interested in that detail.

"It's by donation."

"How much?" He still wasn't looking at her.

"I don't know. Whatever someone wants to give, I guess. It goes to support the ministries there."

He turned a page. "Then why don't you chuck the counseling and go with the freebie?"

They'd had this argument before about the cost of her counseling appointments. Tom had never understood why Mara needed to pay someone to listen to her.

"Seeing Dawn helps me keep everything together." She hoped that Kevin and Brian weren't eavesdropping.

"Keep what together? It's not like you've got a particularly rough life. Look around you." He waved his hand around their newly remodeled kitchen, expanded to accommodate two teenage boys. "There are people in this world who have real things to complain about, you know."

She stared into the gleaming sink, chewed her nail, and counted to ten.

Tom wouldn't refuse to pay for the group. He would just make her feel guilty for needing it. Or rather, as Dawn often said, Mara would choose to respond to Tom by feeling guilty.

She grabbed a pint of double fudge brownie ice cream from the freezer before retreating to their bedroom, where she soothed herself with her tonic of choice: reality television. Watching other people's drama and conflicts usually made her feel much better about her own.

Usually.

Meg

Meg Fowler soared as she hurried home from school. Jim Crane had asked her to the Valentine's Day Dance! She had been saving her babysitting money for months, hoping he would ask, hoping she'd have enough to buy a dress. THE dress. The most beautiful gown she had ever seen: sky blue chiffon, just off the shoulders, with airy ruffles at the neckline. When the weekend came, she begged her mother to take her to VanKammen's Department Store so she could try it on.

Meg eyed herself approvingly in the dressing room mirror, twirling this way and that. The gown was even prettier than she'd remembered, a perfect complement to her blonde hair and fair complexion. Beaming, she floated down the hallway to show her mother.

"That's the dress you've been fussing about?" Mother asked, frowning. "You cer-

tainly don't have the figure for that. Of course, it's your money. Do what you want."

Meg returned to the dressing room, removed the gown, and put it back on the rack.



Meg almost threw the New Hope flyer away. Instead, it landed on the kitchen counter with a pile of other things she didn't know what to do with. Passivity was her instinctive way of decision-making, especially when she felt overwhelmed. If she just waited long enough, decisions would be made for her.

But no matter what pile she put it in, the plum-colored paper kept catching her eye, beckoning her with its simple invitation: "Come take a sacred journey."

Although Rachel, her older sister, wasn't particularly religious, Meg finally called and asked her for advice. "Well, you need to do something for yourself, Megs," Rachel said. "With Mother gone, you're rattling around alone inside that big old house. Besides, I know you don't have piano students on Saturday mornings. What's your excuse?"

Meg pondered those words long after she hung up the phone. "There are good reasons and real reasons," Pastor Dave was fond of saying. Meg had run out of good reasons. And the real reason?

She was afraid.

But Rachel wouldn't understand that, so Meg didn't try to explain. She was tired of trying to explain. This was one of the many arguments she simply could not win. Rachel had always been the fearless, adventurous one, off exploring faraway places with delight in the unknown and the exotic. Rachel was the daughter with wings. Meg was the daughter with roots.

Meg had always been the one with roots.

The one time she had spread her wings, she hadn't flown far from home. Meg married her high school sweetheart, and they moved into a house two miles away. For six and a half years she was Mrs. Jim Crane, and life was blissfully happy. Then on a gray and grimacing November afternoon, when Meg was seven months pregnant with Becca, a stranger's voice on the telephone brought news that obliterated her. *So sorry to have to tell you. Your husband. Highway accident. Ambulance. St. Luke's Hospital. Mrs. Crane? Hello? Meg*

didn't get to the hospital in time to say good-bye.

That night she packed as much as she could carry of her life with Jim into two suitcases, locked the front door, and staggered back to her mother's house. Six weeks later she was at St Luke's again, giving birth to their daughter on Christmas Eve.

For months after the accident, Meg was a stranger to herself. No longer "Jim's wife," she had to learn how to be "Becca's mom." Most nights she cried herself to sleep after Mother went to bed. Though Mother had been widowed when Meg was only four, she had no patience for tears and did not tolerate self-pity. "I never had the luxury of feeling sorry for myself," she often scolded Meg. "And neither do you. You've got a baby to take care of. You're going to have to be a grown-up and move on."

So Meg had wept in secret.

Now, more than twenty years later, the disequilibrium of grief had returned for another season, even bleaker, harsher, and more annihilating than before. Mother was gone. Becca was gone. And Jim was back.

After years of silent absence, Jim was with her again in dreams. As Meg slept, her subconscious mind raised him from the dead, and she only had the power to bury him when she was awake. Even that power was weakening. New grief had moved the immovable, breaking the seal on her old sorrow and rolling away the stone she had tightly lodged against the tomb of her memories. Now Jim leapt forth into resurrected life, always just beyond her reach. She could not follow. She could not hold him. And she didn't have the strength to miss him again. *Please, Lord, don't make me miss him again.* At least Becca was away in England. Meg wouldn't want her daughter to know about her torment or her tears.

So she wept in secret.

"You're forty-six, Megs," Rachel reminded her on the phone one night. "It's time to figure out who you are when you're not being Ruth Fowler's daughter. Go to the group. And for cryin' out loud, get a pet or something, will you?"

Meg knew her heartache was far more complicated than her mother's absence, even if Rachel didn't understand. Her grief was deeper than the loss of her identity as "daughter." Mother's death had simply been the crowbar, prying open an old box of sorrow.

Time to figure out who you are.

Maybe Sandy and Rachel were right. Maybe it was time to venture beyond the walls of her lonely house. Maybe it was time for a sacred journey after all.

If only she could find a way to put one foot in front of the other.

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