

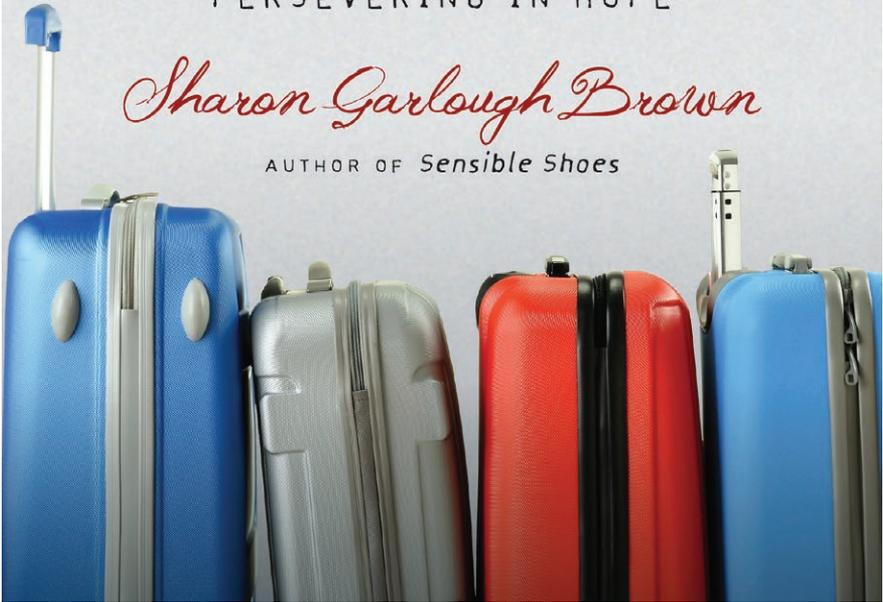


Two Steps Forward

A STORY OF
PERSEVERING IN HOPE

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Part One

Keeping Watch



*I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.*

PSALM 130:5-6

one

Meg

Meg Crane clutched the collar of her turquoise cardigan, her knuckles cold beneath her chin. Ever since takeoff, the well-dressed, gray-haired woman beside her in seat 12-B had been casting appraising glances in Meg's direction. Was she breaching some sort of airplane etiquette? Transmitting neon messages of first-time-flyer anxiety? Maybe the woman was examining the scarlet, telltale blotches that were no doubt creeping up her neck. If only she had worn a turtleneck. Or a scarf. Her shoulder-length, ash blonde curls provided a meager veil.

The woman extracted a plum-colored Coach bag from beneath the seat in front of her. "I swear they keep stuffing more rows into these planes," she said. "Flying isn't much fun anymore, is it?"

Meg cleared her throat. "It's my first flight."

"Really! Well, good for you."

Meg supposed she deserved to be patronized. There probably weren't many forty-six-year-old women who had never been on an airplane before.

"Where are you headed?" the woman asked.

"London."

"No kidding! I'm going to London too! Overnight flight tonight?"

Meg nodded. The woman pulled her itinerary from her purse. "Flight 835 at seven?"

"Yes." Meg had studied her ticket so frequently, she'd memorized it.

"How about that! Small world!" She tapped a heart-shaped pendant dangling from a gold chain around her neck. "I'm taking a bit of my husband's ashes to scatter in Westminster Abbey."

She carried her husband around with her in a necklace? Meg had never heard of such a thing. Was she allowed to scatter ashes like that? Surely there were rules against that, weren't there?

The woman leaned toward her in the sort of confidential way normally reserved for friends. “Before my husband died he made a bucket list—not of all the things he wanted to do before he kicked the bucket, but of all the places he wanted to be taken after he kicked it. So, ever since he died, I’ve been traveling all over the world and sprinkling him here and there. The Taj Majal, the Grand Canyon, Paris—right off the top of the Eiffel Tower! My daughter thinks I’m terribly morbid, but I told her, ‘No. Morbid would mean shutting myself up alone at the house and crying over old photos into a gin and tonic. That would be morbid. And I refuse to be morbid.’ So this month it’s London, and next spring it’s the Bolivian rainforest. And then next summer I’ll be heading to Machu Picchu to hike the Inca trail. My husband always hoped we’d make that trip together, but the cancer got him first. So I’ll sprinkle a bit of him there on top of the mountain, right in the middle of the ancient ruins.”

Meg replied with a courteous smile and “hmmm” before casting an envying glance at the solitary and silent passengers across the aisle, their books establishing a definitive Do Not Disturb zone, her books tucked in her carry-on bag, now stowed securely in an overhead bin. Just as she was about to reach for the in-flight magazine, the flight attendant arrived at their row with the beverage cart. “Something to drink for you?” She handed each of them a miniature bag of pretzels.

“Ginger ale, please,” said Meg. Maybe that would help settle her stomach.

“I’ll take a Bloody Mary.” The woman opened her wallet, then pivoted again toward Meg. “Do you live in Kingsbury?”

Meg nodded.

“You look really familiar. I’ve been sitting here trying to figure it out. Have we met before?”

“I don’t think so.” She definitely would have remembered someone this gregarious.

“Do you happen to go to Kingsbury school board meetings?”

“No.”

“How about the gym on Petersborough Road?”

“No.”

“It’s going to drive me crazy until I figure it out.”

“How about Kingsbury Community Church?” It was the only place Meg could think to offer as a possibility.

“Definitely not.” The woman squinted hard. “Art museum, symphony, gardening club?”

“Afraid not.”

She snapped her fingers. “Got it!”

Meg tilted her head.

“You look like someone my husband worked with years ago. Beverly something. Beverly, Beverly, Beverly . . . Beverly Reese! You’re not related to a Beverly Reese, are you?”

“No, sorry. Doesn’t ring a bell.”

The woman patted her cheeks and neck with her left hand while holding her drink in her right. “I suddenly remembered because she had really fair skin like you and used to get the same kind of hives whenever she got nervous. Have you tried acupuncture?”

“Uhhh . . . no.” How long was the flight to New York?

“I think she did acupuncture. And yoga. Just a thought.” She pressed the button to recline her seat a few inches. “So what takes you to London?”

Meg teased open her bag of pretzels, careful not to spill them on the tray table. “My daughter’s studying there for her junior year. She’s an English literature major.”

“Ahh. What a wonderful opportunity for her.”

“Yes.”

“And how long will you be staying?”

Honestly, of all the people to end up sitting next to. “A couple of weeks. Through Christmas.”

“Christmas is lovely there. Are you staying right in London?”

“Not far from the college.”

“How nice for you.”

Yes, it was going to be wonderful. She had been dreaming about their visit for weeks now. She had planned to dream about it during the flight. She chewed slowly on a pretzel.

Without taking a breath, her seatmate launched into detailed and col-

orful narratives about her own family: her name was Jean, her daughter was an unmarried actress currently starring in an off-Broadway production, her husband had died of pancreatic cancer, her son was going through a messy divorce. “I always knew it wouldn’t last,” she said. “At least they didn’t have kids. She was a nightmare. An absolute nightmare. I’m glad he finally woke up and said, ‘Enough! No more!’”

Eventually, either because of the effects of alcohol or a loss of interest in one-sided conversation, Jean drifted off to sleep. Careful not to bump her, Meg shifted position in her seat and slipped off her shoes.

Her sensible shoes.

What a journey she’d taken since September, when she first met Hannah, Mara, and Charissa at the New Hope Retreat Center. They had happened to sit together at a back corner table near an exit door, and Meg had used the excuse of her high heels to avoid walking the prayer labyrinth. “I’m afraid I didn’t wear very sensible shoes,” Meg told them. “Guess I wasn’t taking ‘sacred journey’ literally, huh?”

“I like it!” Mara had exclaimed. “Sacred journeys need sensible shoes! What shall we call ourselves? The Sensible Shoes Club?”

Over the past three months, they had learned to travel deeper into God’s heart, sometimes with reluctant and stumbling steps. Meg had grown to love and appreciate each of them: Mara, a fifty-year-old wife, mother of three sons, and soon-to-be grandmother; Charissa, a married and newly pregnant graduate student; Hannah, a pastor on a nine-month sabbatical from ministry in Chicago.

All of them had come to the airport to pray for Meg and offer their encouragement. She was grateful. So grateful for companions on the spiritual journey.

“It’s gonna be an awfully long month before we can all be together again,” Mara had said while they drank coffee in the Kingsbury Airport terminal. “I don’t want to fall off the track, you know? I just hope I remember some of the stuff I learned during the retreat. Me and my menopause brain. Remind me, okay?”

“Me too,” said Charissa. “I wrote down a whole list of spiritual disciplines that I wanted to keep practicing, all kinds of things that could help

me grow in the right direction and be less self-centered. But I always get even more obsessed about school this time of year, with final papers and projects and everything. Lately, I haven't been doing much of anything from that list. My rule of life right now is just 'Survive.'

"So start smaller," Hannah suggested. "Maybe choose one thing that will help you stay connected with God in the midst of the stress, and then there may be other practices you can gradually weave in."

"I just wish there were a quick fix," Charissa said. "It's the whole letting-go-of-control thing. I don't know if I'll ever get there. Maybe I'll always be a control freak."

"At least you see it, right?" Mara said. "That's progress! Even if it feels slow. Guess I have to keep remembering that it's okay if it's two steps forward, one step back. 'Course, sometimes it feels like a few baby steps forward, then a few big steps back. And I still get dizzy from walkin' around and around in circles, same old baggage again and again."

Meg had recorded some of their prayer requests in her notebook: for Charissa to find ways to love and serve others well, even in the midst of her busyness; for Mara to know God's peace and to persevere in faith while battling chronic frustration and disappointment with her husband and their two teenage sons; for Hannah as she continued to settle into the rhythm of rest and a new relationship.

"How about you, Meg?" Mara asked. "How else can we pray for you?"

"I think 'hope' is my word right now," Meg replied. "Especially with all the hopes I have for this trip, for my time with Becca. We lit an Advent candle in worship yesterday—the hope candle—and my pastor talked about how true Christian hope isn't about wishing for things, how there's a big difference between hoping for something specific to happen versus trusting God to be faithful, no matter what happens." She had written down some sermon quotes in her notebook so that she would remember: *Our hope isn't uncertain. Christian hope doesn't fluctuate according to circumstances. True hope is about having confidence that God's good and loving purposes in Christ can never be thwarted, no matter how it appears.*

"I'll pray for you every day, girlfriend," Mara had said.

Meg knew she meant it.

She rotated her feet in several slow circles, then pressed the button on her armrest to recline. Her seatmate was snoring softly, mouth draped open. Meg stared at the pendant around her neck. She had been quick to judge the widow for carrying her husband's ashes in a locket, forgetting that she also carried part of her husband with her. She had tucked Jim's last card into her carry-on bag, the card he'd given her on the day they saw their baby on the ultrasound. He had written about his love for Meg, his love for their unborn child, his eagerness to be a dad, his certainty that Meg would be a wonderful mother. But weeks later, on a dismal, gray November afternoon, Meg's world imploded when Jim's car slid off an icy highway and slammed into a tree. He died at St. Luke's Hospital before she could get there to say good-bye. On Christmas Eve, with anguished sobs, Meg returned to St. Luke's and delivered their baby, a beautiful girl who had her mother's large doe eyes, just as her father had hoped. And now that baby girl was turning twenty-one, and she and Meg would celebrate together in England.

So much to celebrate, so much to share.

Out of necessity, Meg had mentally and emotionally locked Jim away after he died. Unable to face the prospect of raising Becca alone, she left the beloved home she had shared with Jim and returned to her childhood house, where tears were not tolerated. Her mother, widowed when Meg was four years old, had no patience for weakness or self-pity and offered an ultimatum: if Meg was going to live under her roof, she would need to pull herself together and move on. Fearful of disintegrating under the weight of her grief, Meg swallowed her sorrow and complied with her mother's demands as best she could. Becca, meanwhile, learned early in life that asking questions about her daddy made Mommy sad, so after a while, she stopped asking. And the years rolled on as if Jim had never existed.

But after twenty-one years of repressing her grief, Meg had recently discovered the courage and freedom not only to mourn, but to let Jim live again in her mind and heart. Though it was difficult to feel the pain of his absence, she was also remembering the joy of their life together, and she wanted to share some of those joys with their daughter. She

wanted Becca to know how much her father had loved her, even before he knew her. She wanted to look Becca in the eye and tell her how sorry she was for withholding him, how she wished she had done things differently. Now that Meg was remembering his life and love, she hoped he would come to life for Becca too.

Hope. That word again.

She had fixed her gaze on the flickering hope candle during worship, her prayers focused on the fears that had paralyzed her, the regrets that had consumed her, the longings for God that had begun to emerge, awakening her to new possibilities, new opportunities, new courage, yes—to new hope. Katherine, Hannah, Mara, and Charissa had accompanied her on the first steps of that journey toward transformation and healing. Now there were more steps to take.

In England.

Jim would be so proud of her for traveling by herself across the ocean. And he'd be so proud of his daughter, their winged and confident, lively and spirited daughter, who had not inherited her mother's fears. *Thank God.* With a contented sigh, Meg leaned her head against the window and closed her eyes, eventually lulled to sleep by the gentle vibrations of the plane.

Charissa

Charissa Sinclair twirled strands of her long dark hair around her fingertips and listened to the rhythmic squeak of the windshield wipers. What was keeping him? She'd already been idling the car for seven—now eight—minutes outside John's office building, and she didn't want to turn off the engine now.

C'mon, c'mon.

She never should have spent three whole hours away from her doctoral work, especially with the end of the semester rapidly approaching. But she was serious about her desire to be less self-absorbed, so she had decided to give herself a break from paper revisions and spend her class-free afternoon by going to the airport to say good-bye and offer support to Meg. And then, rather than eating by herself, she had invited Mara to join her for lunch. Until recently, Charissa had regarded Mara only as an overweight, middle-aged housewife with a tabloid past. Mara was the sort of person Charissa had spent a lifetime avoiding. They had nothing in common.

Scratch that.

They actually did have something significant in common, hard as it was to admit. They both “needed grace.” Charissa had begun to learn that difficult lesson through their Sensible Shoes group over the past several months.

To her surprise, Charissa had discovered that she enjoyed being with Mara. Despite being crass and tactless at times, Mara, with her dyed auburn hair, brash wardrobe colors, and clunky costume jewelry, had her heart in the right place. “Anything you need, call me,” Mara had said at lunch. “You know, since your mom is so far away. I could be like a whatchamacallit . . .”

“Surrogate?”

“Yeah. Surrogate mom. Or grandmother. I love babies!”

That was another thing they didn't have in common. Charissa had always been allergic to babies. An only child, she had never been sub-

jected to young children, had never even babysat as a teenager. While her friends trained in Red Cross CPR classes and invested long hours in childcare to earn extra money for clothes and car insurance, Charissa spent her time investing in her future. “It’s much more important for you to spend your time studying,” her father had always insisted. “Your mother and I will take care of everything else.”

Now the very future she had strived for was being jeopardized by an unexpected pregnancy. She was less than halfway through her Ph.D. program in English literature at Kingsbury University, and despite Professor Nathan Allen’s assurances that the program could be flexible enough to accommodate her needs, Charissa didn’t like detours. Didn’t like them at all.

A rap on her window startled her, and she turned to see her husband’s jovial face pressed against the wet glass. “Go around!” she mouthed, pointing to the passenger seat. He dashed in front of the car and hopped in, spraying Charissa with water droplets.

“Enough of the rain already. It’s December! Gimme some snow!” John leaned in to kiss her cheek. “Sorry I’m late. Got caught on the phone.” She brushed the moisture off her face and drove forward while he fastened his seat belt. “Good day?” he asked.

Lately a “good day” meant being able to eat without feeling sick. So in that regard, she supposed it had been fairly decent. “I’m wishing I had spent all afternoon working on my Milton presentation.”

“You’ve been working on that presentation all semester. I thought you were done.”

“Well, the first draft’s done. But I’ve still got lots of revision work to do.” And less than two weeks left to complete it. Dr. Gardiner had instructed them to view these final presentations as if they were conference papers, and Charissa was determined to be primed for any possible question from her peers or department faculty. One couldn’t be too prepared for these things.

“You’ll be fine,” John said. “You always do great. More than great. How was Meg?”

“Nervous. Excited. She’ll have a good time once she gets there.”

Charissa flipped on her left turn signal when she reached the road.

“Turn right, okay?” John said.

Charissa raised her eyebrows. “Why?”

“Trust me. Just turn right.”

“What for?”

“Just humor me, okay? It won’t take long. Promise.”

“I told you I’m already feeling behind today—”

“And this will take half an hour, max. Turn right here, then left at the light on Buchanan.”

Charissa hesitated, then with an exaggerated sigh, switched the left turn signal to right. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“I hate surprises.”

“I know.”

She followed his verbal instructions, eventually arriving in a suburban neighborhood filled with ranch-style houses. “Okay, we’re looking for Columbia Court.” John pressed his face to the window. “There!” He gestured toward a stop sign. “Turn right and go slow.” Charissa was already doing twenty-five; she slowed to fifteen just to make a point. He didn’t seem to notice. “464 . . . 468 . . . 472—okay, there—480! Where the For Sale sign is. Go ahead and turn into the driveway.”

Charissa pulled in behind a black sedan. John leaned forward in the passenger seat, his hand on the dashboard. “Whaddya think?”

Charissa stared at the nicely landscaped, beige single-story house, trimmed with twinkling white lights. “What do you mean, what do I think? Whose house is it?”

He grinned mischievously. “Ours, maybe. What do you think?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Well, you know how we were crunching our numbers, trying to figure out if we could afford to buy a house?”

Was he being deliberately obtuse? They’d had this conversation several times over the past couple of weeks, and she wasn’t going to have it again. Buying a house simply wasn’t feasible, particularly a house in a desirable neighborhood with excellent schools, she reminded him.

“I know,” he said. “But I was on the phone with my folks earlier today, talking about the baby and how we weren’t sure how we were going to manage with the one-bedroom apartment, and when I said we might need to lease a two-bedroom or maybe rent a duplex, my dad offered to help us with a down payment on something.”

She gaped at him. “Are you kidding me?”

“Would I kid about something like that?”

“A down payment. On a house.”

He grinned even more broadly. “You know how excited they are about having a grandchild, and they want to help. You’re not going to let pride get in the way of saying yes, are you?”

“No—of course not—it’s just—”

He reached for her hand. “Listen. Just because your folks aren’t enthusiastic yet doesn’t mean other people don’t want to help and support us.”

“Unenthusiastic” was a mild way to describe her parents’ reaction to the news of her pregnancy. And honestly, Charissa wasn’t ready to say much about her own desires, except that she had moved beyond her initial shock and resentment to a place of ambivalence that she hoped would eventually become acceptance, gratitude, even joy. Some days were better than others.

The front door opened, and a woman in business attire beckoned to them. Charissa furrowed her brow. “John?”

He shrugged. “Well, after I talked to my dad, I did a search online, and when I saw this one, I couldn’t resist. I called the listing agent and set up an appointment.”

Any impulse to chastise him for bringing her here on false pretenses receded as she considered what his parents’ extravagantly generous gift could mean for them. Though John’s income was enough to keep them going on a no-frills budget while she was in graduate school, they had only recently begun to squirrel away some money for a future down payment. This unexpected twist changed everything.

“What if I’d insisted on turning left?” she asked.

“I can be very persuasive.”

“Hmmm,” she said, looking into the visor mirror to check her makeup. “We’ll see.”



All of Charissa’s attempts to communicate nonverbally with John while they toured the house with the realtor were futile. Whereas she thought it would be a good strategy to remain reserved, he couldn’t contain his boundless enthusiasm: the three bedrooms were huge; the family room had a large walk-out deck; the kitchen had been recently remodeled. After years of dorm rooms and then a one-bedroom apartment, this house of almost two thousand square feet—plus a finished basement!—felt like a palace. “And there’s a big laundry area next to the mudroom,” the realtor said.

John elbowed Charissa. She often complained about lugging laundry down multiple flights of stairs to a dark and musty apartment basement. “No more stashing quarters,” John said. “No more waiting in line for a machine! Sign me up!”

“Well, we’re certainly not signing up for anything tonight,” Charissa declared, both for his and the realtor’s benefit.

“Oh, of course not,” she said. “Go home and sleep on it. And if you decide to make an offer, you can call me in the morning. Remember, though, I’ve got some other couples coming through in the afternoon. And I have a feeling they’re going to love this place.”

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic, Riss,” John said when they pulled out of the driveway. “What didn’t you like about it?”

“It’s not that I didn’t like it. But you’ve had all day to think about this, and I had it sprung on me an hour ago. You know I don’t like making quick decisions, and now I’m going to feel pressured.” Her tone sounded more irritated than she intended. “Sorry. I just don’t want to rush into anything, okay?”

“I know, I know. But I’ve been crunching the numbers ever since I talked with Dad this morning, and with their help on the down payment, this one is right in our price range. I really think we should jump on it. It’s perfect. Don’t you think?”

He chattered about how perfect it was all the way back to their apartment and all the way through dinner and all the way through cleaning up the kitchen. While Charissa tried to compile footnotes and a bibliography for her Milton presentation, John parked himself across from her at the dining room table, perusing online photos of the house, peppering her with questions, then apologizing for interrupting her work, then imparting what he'd discovered about neighborhood comps and school district ratings. It was no use. She saved her document and closed her laptop.

"Sorry," he said. "I'll shut up now."

"No—you're right. Call your dad and see what he thinks."

"Really?"

"Yes. Call him."

"But do you like it?"

"It's great, John. Let's figure out what kind of offer to make. Call your dad, show him the link, and get some advice." Had she really just agreed to purchase a house?

John jumped up from his chair to embrace her. "It felt right as soon as we walked in, didn't it?"

Unlike her husband, Charissa had never been one for gut-level decision-making. Nevertheless, the rigorously thorough, practical, list-making part of her knew that the pros would far outweigh any cons she might identify over the next few days. Hadn't she just confided to the group at the airport about her desire to grow in letting go of control? Maybe this was a perfect way to practice. To use one of Dr. Allen's favorite metaphors, maybe it was time to unfurl the sails, catch the wind, and see where they might go.

Hannah

Hannah Shepley and Nathan Allen were enjoying appetizers at the Timber Creek Inn when Hannah's cell phone rang. *Meg*. She was supposed to be en route to London. "There must be something going on," Hannah said.

"Take it!" Nathan said.

Hannah set down a half-eaten mozzarella stick. "Hey, Meg, you okay?"

"Hannah, I'm so sorry to bother you. Are you and Nathan right in the middle of dinner?" Meg's soprano voice sounded even higher than usual, with a little extra vibrato.

"No, don't worry, it's fine," Hannah said. "We just got our appetizers. Is everything okay? Where are you?"

"At JFK. We're supposed to leave in a little while. I hate to bother you with this, but I suddenly panicked. I'm not sure I locked the front door when I left. And I had the iron on this morning—"

Hannah mouthed to Nathan, *She's okay*, and said to Meg, "Don't worry. I'll head over there as soon as we're finished with dinner."

"Are you sure? I'm probably just being silly."

"No, it's fine. No trouble at all. How was your first flight?" Hannah pressed the phone more tightly to her ear, trying to compensate for the buzz of airport noise and intercom announcements.

"It was okay. I ended up sitting next to someone who's also on the flight to London, and she made sure I found my way around the airport. So that helped."

"Good. Let me know when you get there, okay? And don't worry about the house. I'm planning to check on it every few days."

"Thank you. And don't forget my offer. Stay there whenever you want so that you don't have to keep driving back and forth to the lake, okay?"

They said their good-byes, and Hannah returned her attention to the table, where candlelight flickered in Nathan's glasses. For a moment she experienced the odd sensation of seeing a tiny version of herself reflected and held in the center of his dark eyes. At least she didn't look so

tired anymore. The sabbatical from ministry was beginning to have the desired effect of ushering her into deeper rest—not just physically and mentally, but spiritually and emotionally.

“Everything okay?” Nathan asked, his index finger resting against his neatly groomed, gray goatee.

Hannah was still getting used to the intensity of his gaze, always penetrating and discerning, but now filled with unfettered affection. “Yeah, everything’s fine.” She dipped the unbitten edge of her mozzarella stick into the single dish of marinara sauce. Double-dipping the bitten portion seemed an intimacy reserved for married couples, or at least for couples who had been together longer than two weeks. Nathan, on the other hand, had no such inhibitions and dunked freely and frequently into the communal cup. “She’s worried she didn’t lock up the house. I’ll swing by there tonight before I head back to the lake, just to check.”

“I’ll go over with you.”

“No, that’s okay. I can handle it.”

He reached across the table and clasped the fingers of her left hand. “I’m not questioning your competence, Hannah. I’m expressing my desire to be with you.”

She felt her face flush. At almost forty years old, she was accustomed to doing everything by herself, and even though she and Nate had been good friends long ago, a romantic relationship of any kind was uncharted territory for her. “Well, when you put it that way,” she said, meeting his eyes, “how can I say no?”

“Good. And while you’re saying yes to that, that reminds me . . .” He pulled a handwritten sheet of paper from his coat pocket.

“What’s this?”

“Jake made you a list of all the things you can do for fun around here.”

Hannah took the list and read it, chuckling. It had clearly been written by a thirteen-year-old. “Snowmobiling?”

“Not your style? Keep going. He’s got lots of ideas to help you learn how to play.”

She went on. “Go-karts, skiing, snowboarding, sailing. I’ll take you up on sailing.”

"I know how much you love watching sunsets," Nathan said. "Wait until you watch them from out on the lake. Breathtaking." He leaned across the table and scanned the rest of the list. "Jake also wants a rematch on Scrabble. He doesn't like getting beaten."

Hannah laughed. "Competitive like his dad, huh?"

"Absolutely! Like father, like son."

As their server filled their water glasses, Hannah's attention drifted to the table nearest theirs, where a woman with silvered hair tightly permed around her angular face sat across from a younger, smartly dressed version of herself. While Hannah watched, the older woman removed a tube of lipstick from her purse, unscrewed the cap, studied it a moment and then, after pressing the wax to her lips, took a bite. She squinted and tilted her head, as if trying to decide whether to explore the unfamiliar taste and texture by chewing it. The younger woman thrust out her hand.

"*Mother.*" Those two agonized, pleading syllables filled Hannah with tenderness for both mother and daughter. "Spit it out." The older woman set her jaw. "Please." She opened her mouth reluctantly and spit, depositing red drool and goo into her daughter's outstretched hand.

Though Hannah knew she should grant both of them the dignity of privacy, she couldn't pull her gaze away. She watched the daughter wipe off her hand with her white cloth napkin, then gently lift her mother's chin and daub the corners of her mouth. The old woman offered a cherubic grin, her teeth smeared with scarlet. Then the daughter discreetly touched her own teeth and rubbed them, indicating that her mother should do the same. Mimicking the gesture, the older woman used her index finger awkwardly as a toothbrush. Hannah wondered what words were swirling in the mind of the daughter.

"You okay?" Nathan asked, following her gaze to their table.

"Yep."

"You sure?"

Hannah cleared her throat. "Yep."

She was already running possible scenarios through her head. Maybe the daughter was remembering a time when she bit into a crayon, and her mother commanded her to spit it out. Or maybe she sat there re-

membering when her mother first took her to buy makeup and taught her to apply it. Maybe the mother was still lucid enough to recognize her moments of confusion and was grieving what she was losing. Maybe the lipstick would be the last straw, and the daughter would need to explore moving her out of independent living into some situation where she would be monitored closely.

“What are you thinking?” Nathan asked.

“At the moment I’m fighting the impulse to go over to that table and offer pastoral care.”

He raised a single eyebrow.

“I’m kidding. Well, half-kidding. At least I’m able to resist the temptation, right? Guess the sabbatical is helping with the ‘overly responsible pastor’ thing.” She offered a simple prayer, asking God to meet them in their need.

“What caught your attention?” he asked.

Careful not to be overheard by the daughter, Hannah described what she had witnessed.

“It’s so hard to watch loved ones age,” he commented. Hannah nodded, then slapped her hand to her forehead and held it there. “What?” Nathan asked.

“Tomorrow’s my mother’s birthday! I’ve been so totally preoccupied with my life here, I forgot to send a card.” How could she have forgotten that?

“How about sending her flowers?”

Hannah sighed. “No. They’re leaving the day after tomorrow for New York to be with my brother and his family.”

“So send flowers and a card to your brother’s house.”

Hmmm. That would work. Leave it to Nate to see the obvious solution. She could call in the morning and let her mother know that a gift would be waiting for her at Joe’s. “That’s perfect. Thank you.” She put Jake’s list into her purse. “My parents are spending a couple of weeks on the East Coast to visit extended family they haven’t seen in years. And then they’re going back to Joe’s house for Christmas. My brother invited me to join them, but I said no. And then felt guilty afterward. But I know

if I go there, I'll end up offering to babysit my nieces so that he and my sister-in-law can go out together. I love my nieces, but they're exhausting. And much as I know I need to have a heart-to-heart with my parents about all the stuff from the past that's come to the surface lately, I still don't feel ready for that." She tucked her chin-length, light brown hair behind her ears. "Tell me I'm not just making excuses and avoiding the hard stuff by staying here."

Nathan shrugged. "Well, I've got a vested interest in your being here, so I don't know how trustworthy my discernment is. But I was hoping you'd spend Christmas Day with Jake and me."

That was precisely what she had hoped he would say. She laid her hand on his as the server appeared with their entrees. "Well, then, I accept your invitation. And I look forward to beating you at Scrabble again."

Nathan picked up his fork and wagged it at her. "Oh, game on, Shep. Game on!"



By the time they reached Meg's house, the rain had stopped and the gray gloom of the clouds had given way to a star-filled December sky with a sliver of a moon. "What a lonely looking place," Nathan commented as he looked up at the large Queen Anne-style house, with its steep roof, ornate trim, gables, and turret. In its prime it would have been the most elegant one on the block. "Most of these old Kingsbury houses have been turned into apartments or offices," he said. "She lives here all by herself?"

Hannah nodded. "Her mom died in the spring. And with Becca gone, it's just her. Not even a goldfish to keep her company."

Nathan followed her up the creaking steps to the front porch. Some of the ornamental spindles on the railing had broken off, and the paint was peeling. Hannah tried the door. Locked. "That's one worry down," she said. She inserted the key, pushed open the heavy door into a dark and stale foyer, and fumbled along the wall until she found a light switch for an antique chandelier.

Nathan gave a low whistle, which echoed. “Whoa. A bit like a museum in here, huh?” He peered into the front parlor, filled with period furnishings.

More like a mausoleum, Hannah thought. Especially in light of Meg’s recent discovery that her alcoholic father had committed suicide in an upstairs bedroom when she was a little girl. Meg had been processing so much sorrow over the past couple of months, with so much courage.

“I wonder sometimes why she stays here,” Hannah said. “Meg hasn’t said a whole lot about her relationship with her mom, but I get the impression that it wasn’t easy to live together after Jim died.” She shook her head slowly. “The whole place just feels so sad and oppressive.”

“So how about bringing some life to it?” Nathan asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, how about taking Meg up on her offer to stay here while she’s gone?” Nathan wrapped his arms around her. “You’d be closer. Ten minutes away instead of forty-five.”

Her friend Nancy’s lake cottage, where Hannah was staying for her nine-month sabbatical, was a peaceful but remote and solitary place. Though she had initially resisted—even resented—the outrageously generous gift her senior pastor and congregation had given her, Hannah had come to prize her temporary home. She loved watching the sunsets and falling asleep to the sound of lulling or crashing surf. She loved drinking her tea, reading Scripture, and journaling beside the picture window. She loved going for walks in the early morning, when the pinks of dawn lit up the entire shoreline, with each tumbling wave leaving behind a glistening canvas that reflected the glory of the skies.

But her center of gravity had shifted to Kingsbury, particularly since reconnecting with Nathan after so many years apart. Maybe she could tolerate Meg’s house in small doses. Maybe she could stay there a few nights each week.

Nate was right. Being closer to him was a significant incentive.



Hannah had just arrived at the cottage when Meg called again from JFK to

say her flight had been delayed for a couple of hours because of mechanical problems on the plane. “I don’t know if we’re taking off late tonight or if they’re going to give us hotel vouchers and put us on a flight tomorrow.”

Hannah wriggled out of her coat while maneuvering the phone. She could hear the anxiety and the exhaustion in Meg’s voice. “I’ll keep praying for you,” she said. “You want me to let Mara and Charissa know?”

“Would you, please? The more people praying for me right now, the better.”

Not wanting to interrupt Charissa’s studying, Hannah sent her an email and then called Mara. “Sorry to call so late,” Hannah said. “Did I wake you up?”

“No, I’m up.”

Hannah could hear yelling in the background, like a television drama turned up too loud. “You okay?” Hannah asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine. What’s up?”

As Hannah relayed Meg’s prayer request, the volume of the man’s voice crescendoed. Whoever was shouting obscenities wasn’t shouting them from a screen. “You sure you’re okay?” Hannah probed.

“Yeah. Sorry. Poor Meg. She was worried enough about flying, and now this . . .”

Right. Now this. “Is that Tom yelling?” Hannah asked. She had never met Mara’s husband.

“Yeah. He’s just mad because I bought some things for Jeremy’s baby.”

Just mad? That yelling didn’t sound like “just mad.”

“Is he threatening you?” Hannah asked.

“Nah.”

But Hannah’s pastoral alarm bells were pealing.

Over the past couple of months, Mara had described her marriage as difficult but tolerable. Tom spent most weeks traveling for business and most weekends focused on their two teenage sons, leaving Mara lonely and isolated. Though Mara had confided that she wasn’t sure their marriage would last much beyond their youngest graduating from high school, she had never hinted at any rage or violence. Never.

“Mara—”

A door slammed, and the shouting became more muffled.

Mara muttered a couple of obscenities of her own. “He’s gonna be in town all week. Lucky me.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, he’s gone now. Went down to the basement to sleep on the couch. Man, I hope Meg gets there okay. She’s gotta be exhausted. Poor thing. I’ll definitely be praying for her.”

While Mara continued to express her longings for Meg’s time in England, Hannah curled up in a chair with a fleece blanket and waited for the yelling to subside. She wasn’t sure if staying on the phone would escalate Tom’s anger or mitigate the situation, but Mara didn’t seem eager to hang up. So Hannah let her talk at length about her son Jeremy and his baby that was due the first week of January and how excited she was to be a grandmother. When Hannah heard only silence in the background and Mara yawned audibly and said she really should get some sleep, they said their good-byes.

Hannah brewed a cup of chamomile tea and listened to the pine trees creak and moan in the wind. Maybe shifting to Meg’s house was the perfect solution. Not only would she be closer to Nate, but she would be near Mara if she needed help. By the sound of things, she needed more help than Hannah had even imagined.

Mara

Mara drummed her fingers on the shopping cart as she waited in line at the baby superstore Tuesday morning. If she'd been quicker to hide the shopping bags Monday afternoon, she might have avoided Tom's tirade. But he had arrived home from the office early with the news that his travel plans had changed for the week, and she hadn't yet stashed the contraband in her usual hiding places. Not that the stroller could have fit in the basement cupboard. If only she'd kept it in the trunk of the car! But no, she had decided to bring it inside so she could sit and imagine all the walks she would take with the baby, and she hadn't been quick enough to lie and say Jeremy had bought it when Tom confronted her. Besides. He wouldn't have believed her, not with all the other baby store shopping bags strewn around the living room, with some specific contents arranged on the dining room table for her viewing pleasure.

She had been wavering about the curtains. Ninety dollars was probably too much to spend on two valances. But the last time she had visited Jeremy's apartment, they hadn't finished decorating the baby's room yet, so when she saw curtains that perfectly matched the pastel floral quilt Abby's mother, Ellen, had already hand-stitched for the crib, Mara couldn't resist. She bought them.

But maybe Ellen was sewing curtains. Ellen would be the type of grandmother who would sew cute little sundresses with matching hats. She would be the one knitting baby blankets and sweaters and mittens. What did Mara have to offer the baby if she couldn't buy her things?

She was standing there chewing on her fingernail, debating the purchase, when Tom walked in unexpectedly, took one look at her, another at the merchandise, and erupted. Normally, Tom was a slow boil: a curling of a lip into a sneer, a sarcastic or demeaning comment, sometimes a fist raised in anger. But this—this pushed him over the edge, and hours later he was still trailing her around the house yelling. *How dare she spend his hard-earned money on Jeremy's kid! Didn't Jeremy have his own job to provide for his family, or couldn't he hold one down?* On and on

he spewed his venom about this son of hers, dredging up every ancient battle, every teenage transgression, every guilty offense that no doubt proved his lack of worth as an adult. At one point she was convinced Tom was going to hurl the stroller at a wall. Instead, he shoved it back into the box. He wanted all that crap returned, every bit of it, every dollar of his accounted for. And none—did she understand him?—none of his money was to be spent on that baby. If she wanted to buy baby stuff, she could find a blankety-blank job and pay for it herself. Was he clear?

That's when Hannah had called, right in the middle of the mess.

"Changed your mind?" the salesclerk at the returns counter asked.

Mara handed her a receipt. "Yeah."

The clerk glowered at the loaded shopping cart. "All of it?"

Mara shifted her weight from one leg to the other. "Well, I bought stuff for my son and daughter-in-law without checking first."

"Ahhh," the woman said, her expression softening. "Say no more! I've got three married sons, and I'm still trying to figure out how to be a well-behaved mother-in-law. The girls only call when they want me to babysit the grandkids."

No point correcting her. Let her think it was a failure to check with the parents-to-be instead of a failure to stand up to a bullying husband.

On her way to the exit doors, Mara lingered over a display of Christmas accessories. Too bad her granddaughter wasn't due until the second of January. She wished she could buy her a Santa hat. Or maybe the tiny newborn elf socks. They would have been even cuter with jingle bells on the toes. Choking hazard, probably.

It was a wonder anyone over the age of forty had survived childhood, given everything that had been deemed potentially unsafe. Even the car seats she'd used for Kevin and Brian, now fifteen and thirteen, would be considered dangerous by the latest standards. As for Jeremy, now thirty, he had merrily rolled around on the backseat or on the floor of her old Ford, free from any constraining belts. And he'd played with all kinds of toys with wraparound cords and small removable pieces. A different world back then.

“Oooh! Look, Mom!” A very pregnant young woman approached the display. She looked like she could pop any minute. “Look at these elfbooties!”

Her mother was pushing a shopping cart crammed with packages of onesies and Huggies newborn diapers. “Oooh! They are so cute!” She grabbed two pairs. And a Santa hat. And a Grandma’s Little Angel bib.

Did those women have any clue how lucky they were? Any clue whatsoever?

Probably not.

Mara had hoped that when Jeremy married, she would have a close relationship with his wife. She’d pictured meeting up for lunch or shopping; she’d imagined having conversations where Abby would ask for her advice about how to be a good wife to Jeremy.

Not that she wasn’t a good wife. Abby made Jeremy happy, and that was something to be grateful for. But eighteen months after the wedding, Mara was still waiting for that intimate conversation. She and her daughter-in-law had never even had lunch together—just the two of them—even though they lived only fifteen minutes apart. It wasn’t that Abby was unfriendly. Abby had always been very polite and respectful, even to Tom. Mara had always assumed it was part of her Asian culture and heritage. But maybe someday Abby would call her “Mom” or even “Mara” instead of “Mrs. Garrison.” That would be a big moment.

Of course, no one could blame Abby for feeling guarded around the Garrisons. Time together wasn’t without its stress, that was for sure. In fact, Abby probably still hadn’t forgiven them for the Fourth of July disaster. Mara cringed even remembering it: Tom flipping burgers in his King of the Grill T-shirt and spewing contempt for the “foreigners who were ruining his country”; Brian and Kevin setting off fireworks in the driveway, the shrill whistling, squealing explosives causing Abby to jump in her plastic lawn chair; Mara sweating buckets in her favorite, but admittedly gaudy, stars and stripes muumuu as she poured lemonade into large red, white, and blue plastic cups. She had told Tom not to buy the fireworks, but did he listen to her? Never.

“We’ve got some news, Mom,” Jeremy had said, resting his hand on the back of Abby’s chair. Mara set down the pitcher. She knew—she just

knew—what he was going to say. She had been waiting for that very moment ever since the wedding.

Brian launched an ear-piercing rocket right as Jeremy said, “We’re—”
BOOM!

Not wanting to shriek prematurely, she asked Jeremy to repeat himself, just to make sure.

“I said, Abby’s pregnant. The baby’s due in January.”

A squeal to rival the fireworks escaped her lips. She grabbed Jeremy to embrace him, and, without thinking about potential boundary violations, pulled Abby to her feet and smothered her in what must have felt like a pasty white mountain of moist, perspiring flesh. She could still see Abby’s uneasy but polite smile after she extricated herself.

“I can’t believe it! Tom, didya hear that? I’m gonna be a grandmother!”

Tom speared a hot dog with his grill fork and did not reply.

Mara hugged Jeremy again and kissed him on the cheek. “Well, congratulations! What wonderful news!”

Abby returned to the lawn chair.

“I wonder who the baby will look like?” Mara mused aloud, then felt herself blush. “I mean—mixed-race babies are beautiful . . . Just look at Jeremy—”

That’s when Tom’s lips curled into his signature sneer. The obscene slur he uttered—voiced loudly enough even for the boys to hear it and snicker—might have provoked a full-fisted brawl if Mara hadn’t placed her hand on Jeremy’s chest and begged him to take another glass of lemonade.

For better or for worse.

No, she wouldn’t blame Abby for lumping her together with Tom and the boys and regarding them collectively as part of the “for worse” clause of matrimony. Wouldn’t blame her at all.

She drove into their neighborhood and sighed. The neighbors’ houses were already decorated with pine wreaths and burgundy bows, their front patio urns filled with various combinations of red dogwood and fir branches, pinecones, boxwood, and dried pomegranates. Mara had seen instructions for designing winter urns in a magazine at her

counselor Dawn's office, but Tom would never approve of spending money on something like that. "Stupid froufrou," he'd say. So while everyone else in the subdivision decorated with delicate white lights on eaves, shrubs, and trees, Tom annually insisted on oversized multicolor, flashing bulbs. Years ago the neighbors had complained about the plastic Santa, sleigh, and reindeer on the lawn, which he angrily removed after threatening to put the whole ensemble up on the roof. Soon he would be lining the driveway with large plastic candy canes he'd bought at Walmart, just to spite them.

One of these years Mara would buy a real evergreen wreath with apples and pinecones for the front door. For now, maybe she should throw away the rotting pumpkins and dead mums that were still on the porch. She was so accustomed to entering the house through the garage, she hadn't paid much attention to what the front patio looked like. It was a wonder Alexis Harding, who regularly fired criticism from her perfect Pottery Barn home across the street, hadn't griped about it yet. Alexis had candles in every window, greenery in each of her wrought iron window boxes, and twinkling lights on the gated arch in her perennial garden. All she needed was a white picket fence to complete the effect.

Nauseating.

"How're you doin'?" Mara called out to a trio of power-walking neighbors as she gingerly picked up the pumpkins by their stems. "Feels like we might get some snow!"

"They're saying maybe a couple of inches tomorrow night," one of them replied.

Mara wondered what they talked about when they walked together—small talk, gossip, or deep heart stuff? There was a time when Mara had envied them. But she had her own walking companions now, not for the physical exercise, though Charissa had invited her to walk laps with her sometime at the mall, but for the spiritual and emotional journey. The Sensible Shoes Club. It was going to be hard not meeting together to talk and pray over the next few weeks. But come January, once Meg was home, Mara hoped they would get together frequently. Maybe even do

another retreat together sometime. Meanwhile, she had to figure out how best to survive Christmas.

She tossed a stack of bills, ads, and Christmas cards onto the kitchen table. Without even opening the cards, she knew she would end up feeling resentful and irritated. There were three primary types of cards: the kind that only had signatures at the bottom (honestly—what was the point?), the Happy Family photo card from some exotic vacation destination, and the “Look at us!” letters with multiple photos, chronicling every remarkable accomplishment of perfect, over-achieving children.

Nauseating.

Just once she'd like to read an honest letter about a marriage that was a disaster, a son who was flunking algebra, and self-centered teenagers who played too many video games. Come to think of it, she could write that letter.

In fact, that was exactly the sort of thing Pastor Jeff had preached about on the first Sunday of Advent. “Jesus wasn't born in the Bethlehem Hilton,” he'd said. “He came right into the mess of our world. And we look around at the stinking mess of our lives and wonder, what can be born in a place like this?”

That was the question, wasn't it?

What can be born in a place like this?

She lit her after-Thanksgiving-clearance cinnamon spice candle and sat down at the kitchen table, head in her hands.

No clue. Absolutely no clue.

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