



# An Extra Mile

A STORY OF  
EMBRACING GOD'S CALL

*Sharon Garlough Brown*

AUTHOR OF *Sensible Shoes*

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## Part One

# *In the Shadow*



*Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me, for in you my  
soul takes refuge; in the shadow of your wings I will  
take refuge, till the storms of destruction pass by.*

**PSALM 57:1**

## one

### *Becca*

In the three weeks since her mother's death, Becca Crane had learned one thing about grief: there was no predicting what might trigger a deluge of emotion. The simplest things could set her off—an American accent on the London Underground, a box of Cheerios (her mother's staple) on a shelf at Tesco's, the melodic, mournful strains of a violin played by a street musician on the south side of the Thames. For some reason nighttime walks along the river with the view across to the Houses of Parliament evoked such deep pain in her chest that she could hardly breathe.

She pulled her knit beret down over her ears and leaned forward against the cold metal railing. All along the South Bank, the globes on the wrought-iron lampposts cast soft light on couples walking hand in hand, while the laughter of children riding an old-fashioned carousel wafted toward her.

She wasn't sure why she subjected herself to these evening outings. Maybe she preferred the searing pain of loss to the numbness that had consumed her immediately after her mother died. In Kingsbury, her hometown, she had stumbled along dazed and detached, as if she were watching herself in a movie, a short, dark-haired orphan girl trying to convince herself and everyone else that she would survive "just fine."

"Call me if you need anything," her aunt had said on the phone shortly after Becca returned to London for the remainder of her junior year abroad. The words rang hollow. Rachel hadn't even bothered to attend the funeral, using the feeble excuse of a business trip she couldn't change. She had even reneged on her offer of part-time freelance work over the

summer, initially extended so that Becca could spend the summer with Simon in Paris, free of any need for her mother's financial support or approval. But now, as Rachel had caustically noted, Becca had been provided for through her mother's modest estate. "What on earth will you do with a house like that?"

Becca didn't know. She didn't know anything. Except that she missed her mother. Terribly.

An evening cruise boat glided by, lit from within. Becca imagined the conversations of the young women flirting over canapes and champagne, with nothing to think about except the men they might hook up with. Like her friend Pippa. Pippa had tried to be understanding and compassionate, but apart from her frequent bad break-ups, she had never lost anyone. Her advice, though well-meaning, was one-dimensional: distraction. Alcohol, fun, sex—it didn't matter what Becca used, Pippa said, as long as it took her mind off the pain.

Everyone had advice to dispense. Maybe it made them feel better, like they were helping before absolving themselves of any further responsibility of care and concern. Becca had already heard the best her friends on both sides of the Pond could offer:

Your mum would want you to be happy. She would want you to move on with your life.

You should travel, see the world. Life's short. Make the most of it.

Just concentrate on all the good times you and your mom had together. Try to be happy.

Look at everything you have to be thankful for.

None of their platitudes helped. And whenever someone said, "I know just how you feel. When my—insert family member or favorite pet here—died . . .," Becca wanted to scream, "You don't know how I feel! You have no idea how I feel."

She reached into her purse for a tissue and blew her nose. How could anyone know how she felt when most days she didn't even know herself? The one person she wanted to talk to about it—the one person she had, for most of her life, confided in—was gone. Forever. *She lives on in your memories*, Simon said.

Not good enough. Nowhere close to good enough.

She stepped away from the railing and headed toward the London Eye, which was illuminated in bright blue. There—right there at the base of the Eye, near the place where happy crowds queued for their half-hour ride in the large, slow-motion capsules—that’s where her mother had waited for her in December. Becca, spotting her from a distance, had pointed her out to Simon, who laughed and said how small and apprehensive she looked, her head tilted back to survey the size of the wheel. “A bit high-strung, is she?” he asked. Becca nodded. When their eyes met, her mother fixed a strained and determined smile on her face. “Ah, now,” Simon said, “she’s going to love me.” Becca had laughed and leaned in closer to him.

*She lives on in your memories,* Simon’s voice repeated.

Not good enough.

As she watched families board the Eye together, Becca knew one thing: she would give absolutely anything to have one more ride with her mother. Just the two of them.

Her phone buzzed with a text from Simon: Waiting for you.

She wiped her face with her coat sleeve and replied: On my way.

## Hannah

One month after submitting a resignation letter to the church she had served for fifteen years, Hannah Shepley Allen was confident of one thing: dispensability was easier to embrace in theory than in practice.

“You’re indispensable to me,” Nathan, her husband of twelve days, said as he stooped to kiss her furrowed brow. “And to Jake. He adores you. And so do I.”

Hannah pushed her chair back from the kitchen table, her eyes still fixed on her laptop screen. Perhaps if she hadn’t been so readily replaced, her ego wouldn’t be so bruised. But the latest email from her longtime senior pastor, Steve Hernandez, indicated that, with dizzying speed, Westminster was progressing with plans for her successor. *We’re wondering if you might be willing to consider a rent-to-own option for Heather to remain in your house.*

She swept her hand toward her screen. “Go ahead and read the whole thing.” Nathan pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and leaned forward to read the words Hannah had read three times. She waited until he stood up straight again, then asked, “What do you think?”

“Well, it sure solves the stress of trying to sell it. Sounds like an answer to prayer to me.”

“No—I mean, what do you think about them hiring Heather?”

“He doesn’t say they’re hiring Heather.”

“It’s obvious that’s what they’re doing.” Hannah set her jaw and read the words again. *If you’re open to the possibility, please get in touch with her to discuss details.* “And why is Steve the one emailing me about it? Why didn’t Heather just call and say, ‘Hey, I’m taking over your job and your office, and I want to take over your house too!’”

Nathan closed her laptop and gently turned her around to face him. “Maybe he wanted to be the one to float up the trial balloon, see how you’d react.”

Well, it was odd. The whole thing was odd. And not even Nate could convince her otherwise. Now that they had returned from their

honeymoon and had begun to settle into a home-life routine, she'd had lots of time to reflect on her transition to West Michigan. Though Steve had framed releasing her from ministry as a gift, saying that it was important she be free to focus on her marriage and not return to Chicago out of obligation, maybe it had been a calculated attempt for control. "You really don't think this is weird?" she asked.

"Do you want me to think it's weird?" His brown eyes smiled at her even as his lips remained neutral. "'Cause I can embrace 'weird' if you want me to. I can run conspiracy theories with the best of them. Like, maybe they planned this from the get-go and devised the whole sabbatical as a ruse to get you out of the way so they could hire this Heather, who is carrying on an illicit affair with—"

"Oh, stop." Hannah lightly punched his stomach. "That's not what I mean. I'm just saying, the whole thing is very . . ." He waited for her to find the right adjective. "Weird." That's the best she could come up. Something was off.

"Well, I won't argue with your intuition, Shep. But maybe Heather's done a decent enough job filling your shoes, and they're eager to offer her something permanent now that they know you're not coming back. Saves them the trouble of a long-drawn-out search, and if she likes the house well enough to stay in it, then why not? Seems to me they're doing you a favor, doing us a favor, by taking away the stress of selling it."

And the stress of a double mortgage, which would begin the first of April. Though Nate hadn't mentioned anxiety over managing two mortgage payments, Hannah had begun to feel the weight of it. With no current income and limited financial resources to bring into their marriage, she ought to be jumping for joy at the prospect of such an easy transition. Instead, she felt resentful.

"Don't let pride keep you from seeing the gift in this, Hannah."

"I know." What she didn't need right now was a lecture. What she needed was time to process this by herself.

He glanced at his watch. "I've got to go. Jake'll be done with band rehearsal soon." He reached for his car keys, which he kept on the kitchen counter, not on the hook beside the coat rack. She had made the



mistake of hanging them there the day before, and he'd ransacked the house looking for them, frantic when she didn't hear his call on her cell phone while she was out shopping. He had been late to class.

"How about if I go pick him up?" Hannah said.

"No, it's okay. I'll get him."

"I'll get dinner started, then. Pasta primavera okay?" She reached for the correct cupboard on her first try and removed a stainless steel pot that had seen better days. Once she emptied her house, she could replace some of his cookware.

"Uh . . . it's Thursday," he said.

Her hand hovered near the faucet. She had evidently forgotten the significance of Thursdays.

"Pizza night," he said. "An Allen Boys tradition. But if you've already got something planned, I'm sure Jake won't mind."

"No, it's okay." If Nathan had already mentioned this particular weekly tradition, she had forgotten. There were quite a few Allen Boys activities to keep track of. She would need to make a list.

"Jake and I usually get a hand-tossed meat feast, but I can get half veggies if you'd like."

"No, get your usual. That's fine." She crammed the pot back into the cupboard. "I'll fix a salad to go with it, okay?"

"Thanks. I'll be back soon." With a kiss to her cheek, he was out the door.

Chaucer, Nate's golden retriever, trotted into the kitchen and sat down on the floor mat, thumping his tail. "Do you want to go out?" Hannah asked. He did not move. "Out?" He barked once. She motioned toward the back door. "Outside?" she asked, trying to mimic Nathan's inflection. Chaucer lifted a single paw for her to shake. She took his paw in one hand and stroked his silky fur with the other. He barked again. "Oh, sorry! Treat?" He rose and spun in a circle. "Okay. Treat. Your dad forgot to give you one, huh?" She reached into the jar on the counter and tossed two treats onto the floor. "Don't tell him I gave you extra."

She rinsed off her hands, then searched cupboards until she found a salad bowl. In their five days of living together under Nathan's roof, the

only moving-in task she had completed was hanging up her clothes in half of his closet. He had promised to clear shelves for her in the cramped third bedroom that served as his home office, but she was reluctant to invade his space. So the boxes of books and journals she'd brought with her on sabbatical remained in a corner of the basement. The rest of her possessions awaited sorting in Chicago. Nate had insisted he didn't have any emotional attachment to his furniture, and if she wanted to integrate some of her pieces, he was fine with that. *Decorate however you want*, he said. *It's been a bachelor pad way too long.*

A dark bachelor pad. During the winter months she hadn't noticed how little natural light shone inside. But now that the March days were lengthening, the house felt like a burrow with its heavy brocade drapes and predominantly taupe walls. Hannah had never been a fan of bold, bright colors, but maybe they should exchange his drab furniture and her neutral pieces for something cheerful.

She should have taken some photos of the Johnson's cottage while she was living there. Nancy had discriminating taste, and though Hannah could never splurge on interior design, she might frugally duplicate the light cottons and pastel palette. If not for the rift between them, she might even have asked for Nancy's help.

Upon returning from their honeymoon, Hannah had cleared out her scant belongings from the cottage, leaving Nancy a potted plant and a thank-you note on the counter. Fifteen years of friendship, and they were left communicating only via email. All of Hannah's overtures toward face-to-face reconciliation had been rebuffed by cool reserve: Nancy and Doug were very pleased she had enjoyed her time at their cottage, and they wished Hannah and her new husband success in their life together. When Hannah mentioned meeting her at the cottage to hand over the key, Nancy replied that she would have a friend with her when she came to ready it for their family, and she really wasn't sure what their schedule might be. Hannah could leave the key under the mat.

Chaucer, having inhaled both biscuits, plopped down on the kitchen mat with a sigh. "Exactly," Hannah said. Maybe someday Nancy would

forgive her for manipulating and deceiving her. She hoped so. She opened a Caesar salad kit and dumped it into the plastic bowl.

Out of sync. That's what her life felt like. Eventually, she would find her equilibrium in her new reality, with all of its joys and challenges. The adjustment would take time. She knew that. Any grief counselor would look at her inventory of major life changes over the past six months and recommend she be very intentional about processing the upheaval. Even good upheaval brought stress. She knew that. She had walked alongside enough grieving people in pastoral ministry to understand the complicated dynamics of loss and transition.

She rubbed Chaucer's back with her bare foot while she mixed the croutons with the lettuce.

Change in employment? Check. First, a mandated sabbatical and now, a resignation.

Major move? Check. Twice. From her settled life in Chicago to the Johnson's cottage on Lake Michigan to Nathan's house in Kingsbury.

Marriage? Check. A first marriage at age forty.

Becoming a parent? Check. She was now stepmother to a thirteen-year-old boy.

Change in social circles? Check. She had been removed from all of her ministry colleagues and peers in Chicago and had begun to forge new relationships in Kingsbury, particularly with the Sensible Shoes Club, her companions on the spiritual journey.

Death of a friend?

She set aside the salad bowl as, with tears, Hannah realized she had lived almost a whole day without once thinking about her beloved Meg.

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