

“A Walk Through Rain gave voice to so many of my own questions and thoughts as I experienced the deconstruction of my faith. The journey the book describes will give others on a similar journey encouragement, comfort, and a renewed sense of hope that all is not lost. If your faith is changing, or you’re fighting your doubts, you need to read this book.”

- Karen, USA (inspiredtofaith.com)

“Having gone through a faith deconstruction of my own, this story has tremendous resonance. I found myself nodding and recalling so many of the questions and struggles that the two main characters discussed. A fantastic job of portraying the very real struggle of faith crisis and offering a glimmer of hope.”

- Dave, USA (ponderingelephant.com)

“This book takes you on a mesmerizing journey where faith, honesty and self-discovery meet. A story that will resonate deeply with thousands of other sojourning people.”

- Gayle, Spain

“A Walk Through Rain...invites the reader to approach their own questions about faith with less anxiety. Perhaps even better, it serves to remind that no one travels the road of spirituality alone, no matter how lonely the journey might feel.”

- Sean, USA

INTRODUCTION

It's not easy to tell one day from another simply by looking outside, just as a cursory glance at the outward appearance won't reveal the deeper truth about a person's life. A Tuesday can look very much like a Wednesday, and a hurting soul can seem very much like a man with his life in order.

Daniel Kendrick gripped the handle of the half-open door, resisting an impulse to close it firmly on the outside world and retreat once more into the safety of his home.

Out there, on the other side, suburban life was going on in that relaxed, weekend fashion he'd always been a little jealous of. The gray-haired woman with the cats trimmed her hedge with almost mathematical precision; the couple from the corner house, jogging to their silent play-lists, made another circuit of the block; Big Reg, the next-door neighbor, was still polishing his new car with meticulous care.

Dan didn't need anyone to tell him it was Sunday—everyone knew their place, knew the routine that morning. Everyone, it seemed, except Dan.

On Sundays, at least in Dan's little corner of England, the tell-tale signs spoke of different priorities, different motivations. On Sundays, people had their own ideas about the best way to spend a hard-won day off and were intent on doing the things that were important to them.

Except, of course, when it rained.

When it rained, the carefully crafted worlds fell apart and everyone would retreat inside. But for Dan it had been raining inside for a long time now. He couldn't tell what the important things were anymore, and for him this was all unfamiliar territory.

He'd gone through the motions, of course. He'd waved Kimberly off in the car with Reg's wife, Debbie. Then he'd taken a deep breath, found a smile, and walked

over to chat politely about polish, paintwork and the benefits of early retirement. He'd tried, and then he'd made some excuses.

It wasn't that Dan had a problem with his older neighbor, in fact there was a growing friendship between the four of them. It was simply that these days Reg was looking for a deeper conversation. Predictions about the weather had been replaced with reflections on life, love and loss, which would inevitably lead to a show of concern. And Dan, because he was a nice guy who appreciated the sentiment, would assure Reg that he was okay. One day at a time. That was the usual line that seemed to satisfy his neighbor's curiosity. Their friendship wasn't quite at the place where he could be truly honest. Dan wasn't even doing that with himself.

And today was not the best of days.

Leaving Reg to his work, he'd returned inside only to find the house strangely quiet. That was probably why he'd left the door wide open—the empty feeling only seemed to amplify his loss, and it had taken a conscious effort to grasp those runaway thoughts and reminded himself that there was nothing to worry about. His wife would be at church now. Tom, their eldest son, would be deep into his guitar lesson—something to do with a certain girl; and their younger son, Alastair, was working on a school project at a friend's house. Everyone was where they were supposed to be, doing what they were supposed to be doing.

Except Dan.

He didn't know where he was supposed to be anymore.

And he wasn't sure what to do about it.

Sundays used to mean something. Dan's childhood memories were full of early morning expeditions with his mother to the old village church, special times that he remembered with fondness. Even in his teenage years, through all the harsh realities of his parents' disintegrating marriage, church had been a welcome comfort in the background.

When he left home to pursue a career, finding a place to grow spiritually had been a high priority. He wasn't alone in his search. At one of the more active churches in town he'd been introduced to another newcomer, a young woman called Kimberly. Her long, dark hair, green eyes and soft Scottish accent captured his heart, and it wasn't long before they were making commitments to each other and to the church where they'd met.

Commitment comes with a price, naturally, which usually meant sacrificing their spare time. Sundays quickly began to overflow into the rest of the week, with house groups, prayer meetings and anything else that needed willing hands. But that didn't matter; it was all for a higher purpose, and they were happy to serve.

Through all those years Dan had known his place. He'd had a role to play. He had belonged, and it had felt good to be dedicating his life to something he believed in.

Not anymore.

Now he found himself standing in the ruins of a once rock-solid faith.

How was that possible?

The easy answer was the funeral. That was the last time he'd stepped into a church, and there was genuine concern when he continued to stay away. Calls from well-meaning friends, visits from the ministry team, and when that failed, the Pastor himself. They all said the same thing—'You're going through a grieving process'.

And he was, but that wasn't the complete picture. It had been nine weeks since that heartbreaking day on a bitterly cold February morning, with the smell of snow in the air and an ache in the pit of his stomach. Kimberly had given him room to adjust, never pushing him to come back into the *fold*. But she knew it was much more than that and so did he; in his heart, Dan had walked away from church long before he'd laid the white rose on his mother's coffin.

And today would have been her 67th birthday.

The whistling kettle brought his attention back to the present and he realized he was still holding the door handle in a vice-like grip. Screwing his eyes shut he gulped in the fresh spring air, exhaled, then slowly but firmly closed the door. The faint aroma of roasting chicken met him as he stepped into the kitchen. With one fluid motion he threw a fresh teabag in his favorite mug, poured in hot water and added a splash of milk.

As he sat himself down at the table he looked around at the reassuringly familiar signs that spoke of family life—the remains of a hastily-eaten breakfast next to Kimberly's journal; the colorful fridge-magnets holding important memos and encouraging Bible verses; the many and varied shoes on the rack by the back door.

Everything appeared to be the same as always, and Dan seemed to be the same level-headed guy he'd always been, with only the gray flecks in his dark hair speaking of middle-age. But those blue eyes were seeing a different story which was beginning to reveal itself in the ordinary, everyday things. Like the fact that he could no longer be bothered to use a teapot to brew his beloved tea. Or that he'd tidied and sorted the garage twice already this year, clearing a space for no particular reason.

He just wanted space.

Dan checked the time. His wife would return in an hour or so; the boys would get back a little later. They would have lunch together as a family—one of the few things he insisted on, now more than ever—and he'd politely ask Kimberly about the morning service. She'd probably say it challenged her, and then remind him that Pastor Alan wanted to meet with him this afternoon.

He would nod his head in resignation, then they'd probably move on to discussing his plans for tomorrow.

Move on.

For Dan, that was what it was all about now.

If he could just find a way to move on, to make sense of what he was going through. Then things would change.

They had to.

He sipped hot tea, placed the mug to one side and reached for his laptop. The screen sprang to life and for the third time that day he read the email once again. His

fingers tapped out a dull rhythm on the edge of the table. Doubts bubbled away below the surface. His eyes came to rest on the last line.

I'm looking forward to meeting you in person.

It seemed to be exactly what he needed. Those words on the screen held an invitation. An invitation to get away for a few days, seek some answers and see things from a different perspective. But more than that, those words spoke of something he hadn't felt for a long time.

Hope.

Hope that someone he'd never met before could help him with a little thing called *the rest of his life*.

But sometimes, as Dan knew so well, hope can let you down.

Joe Mitchel sat staring at the computer screen. The flashing cursor played out its rhythmic reminder of a half-finished sentence, goading him to either write something better or give up and hit the delete key. Any sane individual would have walked away after thirty minutes of failed attempts. But for Joe, this was more than simply putting words on a screen. Writing was his way of shaking the tree of life in the hope that some apples of truth would fall to the ground.

Except today.

Today his grasp on the truth seemed slippery at best, and the tree wasn't giving up her apples.

Joe drew in a deep breath and rubbed his beard. He'd always loved words, and recently he'd found his writing taking on a new sense of purpose that surprised him. When things went well, when he could get the words to stay on the page, they were crafted into articles and published on his blog. Every other week, without fail, for almost two years now.

At least, that was the plan.

He pulled his half-moon glasses from his face and stared through the open window. The late afternoon sun lit up the valley in a glorious display. Pine-clad slopes topped by a rugged ridge-line with a backdrop of snow-capped mountains, on any other day it would be the perfect scene of tranquility. His friends back in the States might have disagreed, but today it all seemed like just another distraction.

Joe sat back, sighed once more, and clasped his hands together on the desk. Escape to a secret valley in the mountains of Spain to write about what moved him. Sometimes it worked, and worked well, but today the spark of inspiration had come and gone, and the space left behind was filling up with the effects of a long day.

His phone buzzed quietly. Almost without looking he reached over and swiped the screen.

"Hey," he said. His voice was mellow and level.

"I hoped you'd be awake. Feeling okay?" The female voice on the other end sounded concerned.

“I’m fine.” Joe tried to sound like he *was* fine, but he knew there was no pretending with Sandy—she knew him better than anyone. He set down his glasses on the desk. “Just...trying to stay awake.”

“You gotta give it a few days, honey.” Sandy’s words were kind but firm. “All that travel, we aren’t spring chickens anymore.”

He missed his wife. He listened to her voice at the other end, rubbing his forehead with his free hand as he smiled to himself. *Spring chickens?*

“Okay, you’re right,” Joe’s voice betrayed his fatigue. “Not doing much, playing with some ideas, you know.”

“Writing, by any chance?”

“Well, nothing is really sticking.”

“Honey, what time is it there? You only ever write in the mornings.”

“Yeah. Well, I had trouble concentrating this morning,” Joe could hear the frustration in his quick reply and immediately put the brakes on. “Finding it a little hard to readjust.”

Sandy tried a gentle reminder. “Hey, your readers aren’t going anywhere.”

“Yeah. I know. I just had this idea. Well, half an idea. I think it flew out the window.”

For a moment, Sandy didn’t reply. Years ago, an elderly couple had told them that the sign of a good marriage was when you could rest in each other's silence. As the years passed by, Joe had come to understand the truth of that wisdom more and

more. Those few seconds of silence brought comfort as though Sandy was right next to him.

“What am I gonna do with you, Joe Mitchel?” Sandy’s voice was calm and soothing.

“I don’t know. Just missing you.”

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Not before our visitor arrives,” Joe was quick to point out.

“The English guy? Dan? Well, no. But you’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, just...it was your idea to invite him.”

“But it’s you he needs to talk to. And you can survive another week without me.”

“I guess. Yeah,” Joe reluctantly agreed.

“It’ll be good for you. Take him out on a hike, kayaking or something. Think of it as an opportunity.”

Joe could hear his own words coming back at him. Sandy wasn’t going to let him get away with anything, it seemed. With a shake of the head he brought his attention back to the call. "So how's your mom?"

It was Sandy’s turn to sigh. "I think she's okay. The fall shook her up a bit. I guess having me here for a while longer has helped her relax."

"Has she forgiven me? For leaving, I mean."

He was certain that Sandy's mother hadn't gotten over the first time he had taken her daughter halfway across the globe. Their yearly visits back to California

were always a reminder of how much a mother missed her daughter. Having a fall two days before they were due to leave brought back all those feelings, along with some difficult memories. It was right that Sandy stayed a while longer.

"She'll be fine. And you need to take a break! Get outside. Go for a walk. No computer, okay?"

Joe knew she was right. "I will, I'm just..." He could feel *the look* coming across the 6,000 miles that separated them.

"I mean now, honey. As in *right now*."

"Thought I would try to relax by writing."

"Your blog will still be there tomorrow. And..."

"I know. We had a deal." Joe found himself staring at the floor.

Silence. Joe imagined resting his head on Sandy's shoulder, her arms wrapped around his tired body as he sunk deeper into her embrace.

"I'll check out flights this week," Sandy explained, "but I don't want to commit until I know Mom's back on her feet."

Joe sat back in his chair. "Yeah, makes sense."

"Honey?"

"I'm here," he said softly.

"I believe in you. You know that?"

Joe glanced at the computer screen. He couldn't hide his frustration from Sandy. He'd been through desert times with his writing before, and he knew it was all about pushing through. Only today he just didn't seem to have the energy.

"Joe? Sometimes, words aren't everything."

His were. He was sure his were.

He could sense the waves of love and steady patience in Sandy's voice. "You're tired. Leave it for today. Count jet lag as God's blessing and a reminder from me. Okay?"

"Call me tomorrow?" he asked, but it was more than a question.

"Ditch the screen."

"Love you."

"Love you, honey."

The phone fell silent. Joe kept it to his ear. He could feel another wave of tiredness returning. An invisible weight pulled at his whole body. Keeping his eyes open until evening seemed like a near-impossible task.

He didn't want to be alone.

Slowly he placed the phone down and reached to close the laptop lid. Instead, stubborn determination took over. A quick flick of his fingers and a new document stared in front of him. The cursor flashed its challenge once more, and he gritted his teeth. The only thing he had right now was words, and he was going to write those words. He began to type—long sentences, broken paragraphs, raw thought. It didn't matter what appeared on the screen. This is what he did. He was a writer. Words meant something. Words gave him identity. Words helped him push through, put things right.

Eventually his fingers slowed down.

Sandy was right. Sometimes, words aren't everything. And maybe one day the words might stop. Maybe one day he'd have nothing to say. And when that day came he'd be ready for something new.

"Yep," he said with quiet finality.

Then he silently closed the laptop, pulled on his running shoes, and went in search of some fresh air.

Monday

CHAPTER 1

“God also spends time wandering in the wilderness...”

Somewhere over France, Dan clutched a paper cup tightly and let his thoughts drift across the endless sea of clouds. He tried to relax. It was only a two-hour flight and he was conscious of how far removed he felt, up there in the stratosphere, from the recent events that had led him to jump on a plane to Spain.

It had all started with the blog.

Kimberly had been skeptical at first. *“Who even is Joe Mitchel?”* she’d asked him seriously. *“Some old hermit living in the mountains?”*

She was right to challenge him, he knew it. In his hour of need he had turned not to trusted friends or church leaders, but to someone he’d found through a Google search. There among endless pages of opinions he’d stumbled across one of Joe’s articles, and something about the honesty and openness rang true.

As the falling leaves marked the beginning of winter, at a time when hope for his mother's recovery was fading fast, Joe's words had given him a measure of comfort in his soul-searching. On those long drives to and from her home, many times Dan had found himself thinking over something that he'd read. Something he could cling to in order to survive another day.

But sometimes the disorientation and confusion was almost overwhelming. At those times all Kimberly could do was allow him space. He knew how helpless she must have felt, and although he tried to keep it all in, he'd never been able to hide anything from her. And that was a good thing.

It was her idea that he should write to Joe. A few weeks after the funeral she'd found him standing in the lounge, gripping the photograph of his mother, lost in his own swirling kaleidoscope of thoughts. She had gently and patiently brought him back to the present, he had placed the photo back on the shelf, and they'd talked about happy memories.

"It's sometimes easier, telling someone you don't know. There's nothing to prove, no need to pretend everything's okay."

She was right. Joe had been quick to reply and his message full of understanding, even taking the time to share some of his own experiences of loss and grief.

The hole they leave is filled with a thousand little memories, each one bringing healing.

Joe's words, once again, were a great comfort. Receiving a follow-up invitation had been a pleasant surprise, but to then discover that Joe lived in the heart of the Spanish Pyrenees meant Dan was suddenly short on excuses.

Come and stay for a few days. That was Joe's offer. *Relax, slow down, and we're available if you want to talk.*

"*You said you wanted to get away when this was all over,*" his wife had reminded him, her eyes full of concern.

"And I asked you to make sure I did."

"So take the week off. Make the most of it. It'll be okay. She would want you to go."

"I've got to figure some things out."

"I know."

"I'm so...unsure about things."

"Not me, I hope." Kimberly's voice was stern, but there was a faint smile on her lips.

"No." A pause as he closed his eyes. *"Just about everything else, though."*

Kimberly had made some tea. They'd sat on the sofa as Dan flicked through the information Joe had sent him. *"He lives near this little town called Pont de la Cruz. Right up in the mountains."*

"Ooh, big mountains." Kimberly glanced at the pictures on Dan's phone. *"You'll be happy."*

"Hmm. I think so."

“I don’t need to think about it. I know you.”

Big mountains. From his window seat he scanned the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of white peaks. He could almost sense them drawing nearer as the clouds below began to clear, revealing the patchwork green fields and gentle hills of southern France.

Dan smiled to himself. Somewhere down there, living the expat life in a quaint little French village surrounded by vineyards, was his life-long friend Ryan. Energetic, entrepreneurial Ryan who’d turned up at the funeral with a sad smile and a case of champagne.

Again, it had been Kimberly’s idea that he should get in touch with Ryan and see if they could meet up. His friend had been enthusiastic, but then he always was. Ryan suggested that he drive down to Spain. It shouldn’t take more than a few hours and they could get together at the weekend, after Dan’s visit with Joe.

“That settles it,” Kimberly had said. *“Pack your thermals and polish your boots. Always best to play it safe in the mountains.”*

“You would know from experience.”

“Yes, I would.”

Joe placed a large glass of water on the desk next to an old photo of him and Sandy, powered up his laptop, then went to open the inner shutters on the windows.

Raindrops on the glass spoke of last night's storm, but morning light streamed suddenly into the room, illuminating the stone walls of his study. The old desk dominated the space, otherwise taken up by a soft armchair on a deep rug, and his favorite guitar resting on its stand.

Taking his place in the high-backed office chair, Joe pulled himself into the desk, took a sip of water, and prepared to work.

His eyes skimmed over the screen. Twelve emails called for his attention but they could wait. This time was always writing time, and this morning, after a week of stops and starts, Joe couldn't wait to get some ideas onto the page. He glanced up at the wooden wall-clock, cleared his throat, and set to work.

Soon the tapping of the keyboard was the only sound, and even that seemed to gradually transform into a gentle background rhythm as the thoughts turned into words, the words turned into paragraphs, and once again Joe experienced the special magic of plucking an idea from the ether and bringing it into reality.

However much we want our faith to provide all the answers, the deeper questions of life belong to the wilderness. We hoped that we could depend on the promised safety and certainty of our religious structures, with all those learned theologians and centuries of combined wisdom and understanding. But when we find ourselves in uncharted territory, as so many of us have in recent times, the old constructs don't seem to fit any longer.

At these times it's important to remind ourselves that we aren't being unfaithful in searching for answers. We are challenged to think outside our boxes as we discover that God is not confined to our often close-minded ideas about him/her and how he/she works. We are challenged to walk uncharted paths, and in doing so we find that God also spends time wandering in the wilderness, patiently waiting for us to lay down our borrowed preconceptions and show up, naked and hungry, ready to find a new way forward.

The clock silently marked off the minutes, but time didn't seem to have a lot of meaning for Joe. Right then he was in his zone. Every now and then he would stop to flick through pages of a notebook or look through the window to ease the strain on his eyes. Then he would continue the tapping of keys as the inspiration continued to flow.

It was mid-morning when Joe finally stopped, exclaimed "Enough!" to the universe in general, and pushed back the chair. He remained seated, resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, hands clasped together under his bristly chin. He closed his eyes as if offering a prayer heavenward.

Joe knew better than to keep on pushing, he was just glad to have been able to get some work done. It didn't matter if he never published it, he simply wanted to get writing again, and this morning at least he now had something to show for his efforts. Something he felt good about.

He took a long breath, held it, then exhaled loudly through his mouth.

“Done for today, Mitch.”

Closing the lid of the laptop, he sat absentmindedly staring at the guitar huddled in the corner, his fingers twitching as if eager to run across the strings. Then he seemed to change his mind. He stood up, glanced out the window, and leaving the quiet sanctuary of his office, headed for the kitchen.

Sandy’s Kitchen, as they fondly referred to it, was a bright and cheerful room bathing in morning sunlight. Pine cabinets lined the walls, check curtains lined the windows, and a large cast-iron Aga stove kept the cold spring morning at bay.

Joe filled a mug with coffee, slid open the glass doors, and stepped out onto the patio.

The back yard consisted of a manicured lawn surrounded on three sides by bright flower beds and lines of colorful rosebushes. A small garden area for vegetables was green with new leaves. The patio, scattered with various rustic chairs and tables, ran along the back and side of the L-shaped house, partly enclosing the yard. A low stone wall, inset with two gated archways, closed off the rest of the yard to the outside world. One of the gates opened up onto the parking area near the garage; the other onto a wide, green meadow.

Joe followed the patio around to the left, along the rear section of the house and then onto a gravel path that ran up to the meadow gate. He leaned on the heavy wooden bars, mug clasped in his hands, and looked out across the bright, cropped grass studded with yellow primroses, to the dark green of the pine trees quickly

climbing up until they surrendered to the bare, craggy rock edging the high ridge. Above the ridge, scudding white clouds brushed the blue sky.

Joe never grew tired of this view. In the years that they had lived in this valley, every day seemed to be always a little different. The sun would highlight various colors in the forest, the rain would wash the flowers even brighter, sometimes the meadow would be full of goats busily mowing the grass to a perfect half-inch as the bells hanging around their necks rang a melancholy note.

Joe rarely prayed with words. Even in his previous life, he'd often thought that spoken prayers simply got in the way. In what he considered the true spirit of creativity, his prayers were intermingled with his ideas, scattered into the fabric of his work, or trodden out on a high trail.

But today a spoken prayer seemed like good idea, and even then it was succinct and straight to the point. Joe never had been a convoluted kind of guy.

“God, I think I’m gonna need a little help with this stuff.”

A week ago he'd been on the other side of the world, drinking coffee with the Pastor of his old church. That meeting, however well-intentioned, had probably been a mistake. It had played over and over in his mind on the flight back home, and each day since the old doubts and frustrations had been lurking in the background. Couple that with the jet lag and, all in all, the rest of the week had felt completely unproductive.

And Joe hated being unproductive, especially when it came to his work—there was simply too much to be done.

From his place by the gate, Joe surveyed the scene, allowing his thoughts to wander and coalesce as he reflected on the twists and turns his life's road had taken. He remembered standing in this very spot six years ago when he and Sandy were first checking out the area and considering the consequences. It had been a beautiful week in early summer, and he'd spent many hours out on the trails getting to know the valleys. In all the uncertainty of building a new life in a foreign land, one thing had been clear—he could happily spend the rest of his days here.

His early-morning writing had been a wonderful distraction, now he could feel the clouds forming once more over his head. Sandy was far away, which never helped. But the deeper pain, which Joe often felt as a dull ache, centered around their son, Grant, and his continued absence from their lives. Pain, blame, and a frustration that no amount of writing could ever overcome.

Joe tried to ignore the thoughts playing at the back of his mind, just as he'd done countless times over the last few years. If he really wanted to be honest with himself he would have to admit that his high expectations as a father had been a constant barrier. The truth was that he'd always pushed Grant too hard.

But he wasn't going to admit that. He wasn't ready. Not yet.

Now there were more urgent matters at hand. Whatever Joe felt towards his son, there wasn't anything he could do about it right now. The new week had begun, a full day demanded his attention, and tomorrow he had a visitor.

From the back and forth emails, Joe had caught a glimpse of Dan's desperation and confusion. Here was someone walking a very lonely and dark road, but there was

sure to be a lot more going on. Things that he and Sandy had seen many times before, and still didn't have concrete answers to.

Joe nodded to himself. Sandy was right, as always—having Dan come to stay for a couple of days *was* an opportunity, a chance to explore some of the deeper questions again and share a little of his own experiences. There was even the possibility that he'd enjoy the company.

He drained his mug and turned to head back inside. With a glance at the roses growing against the wall his mood lightened and he allowed himself a half-smile. He would never turn into a grumpy old man, that much was certain. Sandy would never let him.

CHAPTER 2

“Where is the grace?”

It was early afternoon before Dan caught his first glimpse of the Pyrenees mountains from the car. He'd seen the peaks from the window of the aircraft as it crossed the border and started the descent into Barcelona. Even at this time of year, there still seemed to be plenty of snow on the whole range stretching away to the east, making them look truly awesome.

The airport had been sweltering in a spring heatwave, a dramatic but welcome contrast to the slowly receding winter that had gripped England for months. Dan was glad of the sunshine, it seemed to warm him right through to his core, and the cobalt blue Mediterranean skies seemed to stretch wide and clear, creating a sense of freedom he hadn't felt for a long time. Pulling his suitcase behind him along the row of gleaming rental cars, he'd felt a growing sense of being in a very wide and spacious land.

For the first time in months, he felt like he could breathe.

Now he could see the mountains looming in the distance through the wide window of a roadside restaurant. Dan stirred his coffee and relaxed, surveying the scene as the occasional truck or car passed by. His attention was drawn to a bright patch of yellow flowers growing on the other side of the road and suddenly he found his thoughts drawn to his mother. She had always loved yellow flowers—buttercups, daffodils, irises. He clearly remembered the early daffodils in the vase next to her bed a few days before he got the phone call that she had passed away.

Have a good life. That's what she'd said. *Have the best life you can.*

If he'd known then that they would be her last words to him he would have done things differently. Instead, he had smiled bravely, hugged her frail body carefully and told her he'd be back next weekend.

He shook his head. No point going down that road. The pain, for her, was over. For him, maybe it was just beginning.

Wiping his hand across his face, Dan continued to stare out the window, but his attention was still fixed firmly in the past.

How long had it been since those first doubts had begun to penetrate his safe world? How was it possible to be so unprepared for death, the most inevitable thing in life? With all the years of faithful commitment to the church, all the books he'd consumed on Christian growth and prayer, all the meetings he'd been to, the groups he and Kimberly had led.

And yet, in such a short space of time it had all started to unravel.

It was a year ago. He'd walked out of the service in the final song, frustrated with yet another sermon on the goodness of God, and bumped into Pastor Alan in the lobby. As they walked out to the parking lot, Alan had asked how his mother was doing. The ministry team had been praying for her, he'd said. And yes, he'd made sure to include her in the bi-monthly email. Yes, Dan appreciated the prayers. And no, the chemotherapy didn't seem to be working.

But it was Alan's parting words that had really got to Dan.

Alan had jumped in his car, and before closing the door had tried his best to sound like a church leader should. "*She just needs to have more faith, Dan. God uses faith, it's like fuel.*"

He remembered walking back to the car under a cloud, sitting with his head resting against the steering wheel as his fingernails bit into the palms of his hands. *More faith?* How can she have more faith? Wasn't faith a gift? What about the *grace*? What about a *loving God*?

"*Where is the grace?*" he'd asked out loud. "*Where is the grace?*"

Kimberly found him soon afterwards. Her soft, calming voice had floated gently down to him through the open window. "*Going somewhere without me?*"

Dan blinked. Suddenly he was back in the restaurant holding a torn sachet of sugar. He grimaced at the sight of a thousand white granules scattered over the table.

"No, I hope not," he said to himself, exhaling as if he'd been holding his breath. He closed his eyes for a moment and reached out as best he could to whoever it was that was running the show up there. He wasn't exactly sure these days. Finding

words to formulate into a prayer seemed pointless, and he didn't really want to. He just knew he needed some guidance.

He emptied his cup, cleaned up the sugar as best he could, and went to the counter to pay.

As he returned to the car he was feeling better. The somber moment had passed and he was looking forward to getting back on the road. With a couple of hours experience behind him, he was much more confident with driving on the wrong side. The little car was quite fun and sporty, and the last hour or so of the journey up into the mountains promised to be quite an experience.

“Okay,” he said to himself. For the first time in years, he actually felt a childlike excitement stirring inside. “Let's discover the Pyrenees.”

Pont de la Cruz was a small town nestling in a green valley of meadows and woodland, built out of the natural stone and dark slate of the local area. It might have looked drab and austere if it weren't for the window boxes and balconies bursting with flowers everywhere, and the brightly colored triangles of bunting stretched between tall buildings on the main street that crossed over the river. It seemed like the locals were welcoming the sunshine after a long, cold winter. Cafes and bars added more color with their bright parasols, and people of all shapes and sizes sat at tables or looked in shop windows or leaned on the railings of the bridge taking in the views.

The last leg of the drive had been everything Dan had hoped it would be and more. Wide, smooth highways faded into constantly winding roads that climbed ever higher into the heart of the Pyrenees. Forested slopes of dark pine trees rose up on all sides, broken at regular intervals by alpine rivers bursting with ice-cold snow-melt. It was all breathtakingly beautiful, and he'd found himself looking for places to pull over at the side of the road to take in a view down a valley or a snow-covered peak rising above the foothills.

This was true hiking country, Dan decided, and the town seemed perfectly situated to act as a gateway to adventures unlimited. If only he had more than a week to explore.

Having checked into the little bed & breakfast, unpacked and freshened up from the journey, he now found himself nursing a golden beer at one of the many cafes edging the river. The sun was quickly heading towards the mountains, painting the clouds a deep pink, and the mild evening air was filled with the chatter and rush of the river passing under the bridge.

Couples and small groups were out and about looking for restaurants, walking along the stretch of riverside lined with trees—the perfect setting for an Italian Bistro or Pizza parlor. Dan, having eaten a late lunch, was content to watch the world go by with his *San Miguel* and *tapas* that the waitress had persuaded him to try.

Patatas Bravas, he'd just learned, was a typical Spanish snack of deep-fried potato chunks served with a spicy sauce. He'd also enjoyed the smoked salmon on crispy toast, along with some very tasty fried chicken wings. Dan was in no rush. He

sat back, and in a rare moment of inner peace, let the evening ebb and flow around him.

Presently the street lights came on, darkness covered the mountains like a blanket, and the long day of traveling began to catch up with him. A blip from his phone caught his attention—a message from Kimberly.

Hope you are settled in okay and eaten something. Remember to be kind to yourself.

Just sitting outside a cafe by the river watching the world go by. Very European!

Very jealous. Next time we go together.

He nodded. Through all the sorrow, the doubts and the questions, Kimberly was there. She seemed at least to understand something of what he was going through, and was prepared to accommodate his efforts to deal with his internal struggles.

Things had been better between him and his wife, that much was certain. All the pressure and stress of the last couple of years had taken its toll, a tension that had permeated every aspect of their lives. The smiles had faded, the laughter replaced with an underlying seriousness even Dan was able to notice.

Kimberly was strong, though. He'd always seen that, but she could still surprise him.

Yesterday afternoon had been a prime example, when their Pastor had '*popped in to say hello*'. There had been little pretense on Alan's part, though. There never was. His presence seemed to fill their small lounge, dressed as he was in his sharp

suit. He was there on *Kingdom Business*, which became apparent as soon as Kimberly had placed slices of cake on the coffee table and poured the tea. He'd gotten straight to the point—his latest project, the '*New Beginnings*' course, was in need of a group leader to host the discussions. And Alan had his eye on Dan.

"Your neighbors have already signed up, Daniel. Would be perfect for you."

Dan was caught off guard. He'd assumed Alan was there to check up on him, instead the Pastor was offering him a place on his team. He remembered Reg saying something about a course, but he hadn't paid much attention at the time.

A few years ago he would have jumped at the chance. An opportunity to serve God while being reaffirmed in his climb up the faith ladder. Being on Alan's team was not something to be taken lightly. Their Pastor was highly respected in the town, even influential. He'd written an incredibly complicated theological study on the New Testament, and was often invited to speak at churches in the area. Alan expected the best from everyone, and serving alongside him was seen as a privilege.

Clearly, there was no doubt in Alan's mind that Dan should be ready and willing. But now, well, now things were different. How different was becoming more obvious by the day, and it was all very disconcerting.

Finally, after Dan had tried various angles on the theme of 'just not sure...', Alan had '*played the loyalty card*', as Kimberly put it.

"The church needs you to get back into the game, Daniel. You don't want to drift, do you? We all know where that leads."

Get back in the game. Was that it? Dan had to admit that Alan could be a formidable persuader when he wanted to be. He had searched around for excuses, but everything sounded lame. He'd felt himself giving in...

"He's not ready, Alan."

Neither Alan nor Dan had noticed Kimberly standing in the corner of the room with her arms crossed and her eyes almost glowing. Was that a hint of *anger* in her voice?

"He can't rush back into things."

Kimberly had left no room for argument, and Alan, to be fair, had taken it well. He'd smiled, agreed, and moved the conversation on to other church matters. But Alan was a man who was used to getting what he wanted, and as he was leaving he took one last shot.

"Remember, it's a life-long commitment, Daniel. It's called church."

"Right. Of course. I'll let you know. When I get back from Spain." That's all that Dan could manage. It was perhaps the first time he hadn't immediately agreed to one of Alan's requests. For some reason he felt like he'd been disobedient, and it left an empty feeling in his stomach.

As he and Kimberly cleared up the remains of the cake, Dan had noticed how quiet his wife was. She would normally chat about something, and he was usually happy to listen. Yesterday she had seemed preoccupied.

"I'm not going to commit to anything," he'd assured her.

"Good."

“I’ll think about it when I’m away.”

“Why? The last thing you need right now is him pushing you to get back into things.”

“Well...”

“Don’t do it because of me, either.”

Yesterday now seemed like a long time ago. A couple of hours on a plane, a few hours drive, and here he was in a different world.

Kimberly’s words echoed in his mind as Dan paid the bill. She was probably right—getting back into things was not going to solve anything. If he was going to commit to anything he needed to know why. He needed some answers.

He waved a thank-you to the waitress, now busily serving full tables. As he followed the stone path slowly alongside the river to the next bridge it seemed that for many the night was only just beginning. Stars were out, clearer and brighter than he’d seen them for a long time, the river bubbled and rushed below him, laughter drifted up from the restaurants. It was all very wholesome and good for the soul, Dan decided.

Mum, you would like it here.

Standing there on the bridge, the sound of the river seemed to wash over his soul in a gentle but persistent flow, telling him truths that he couldn’t quite hear. He could feel the dirt and grime that had built up inside, sense the raw, exposed wounds. Life had been unkind. He couldn’t get away from the fact that he’d been carrying some heavy burdens, and the weight had been wearing him down for a long time. He

needed rest. He needed to lay things aside. He needed to decide what, if anything, to pick up again from the confusion that was his life.

At least here, with no pressure to be anywhere, he could slow down. At least here, surrounded by mountains, he could find the space to breathe again. And maybe, just maybe, get some things sorted out inside.

Gazing up once more to the star-filled sky, he felt the faint stirrings of hope rise within once again. Maybe tomorrow would hold some answers.

It had to.

Tuesday

CHAPTER 3

“Wasted years...wasted hopes...wasted prayers.”

Like most of the buildings huddling together in the narrow streets of *Pont de la Cruz*, the bed & breakfast was an unpretentious four-story house with thick stone walls, narrow shuttered windows and steeply sloping roof to deal with the winter snows.

From Dan’s room the small balcony offered an uninterrupted view across to the old church—an impressive Gothic structure sitting firmly on a rise behind the town. Beyond that, tree-clad hills climbed up to low mountains topped with cloud, and beyond them, the higher peaks glowed in the rays of the morning sun.

Content to stand and gaze, Dan’s thoughts gradually turned to the day ahead. He had arranged to meet Joe Mitchel today, which was the whole point of him coming all this way. But from this high window, looking out on a very different part of the world, his personal troubles seemed, at least for a moment, a million miles away.

The idea of taking off for the day flickered briefly through his mind, but it wasn't just Kimberly he'd have to answer to, at the end of the day it was himself. Besides, there was even the possibility that Joe would actually be able to give him something to go forward with.

'God can handle your doubts' was a line Joe used often in his articles, and even if it was nothing more than sentiment, for Dan it felt like a lifeline to a drowning man.

"Well," Dan muttered, "maybe today things will change."

Breakfast-time in the small dining room was pleasant and quiet. His host, an energetic Spanish woman in her 60's, brought fresh coffee and a large plate heavily laden with toasted baguette, butter sachets, strawberry jam, a small croissant, and a large slice of heavy sponge-cake sprinkled with sugar that seemed oddly out of place at the breakfast table.

Dan, in between reading the news on his phone, skimming work emails and staring out the window, managed to finish everything.

"You go walking today?" his host asked, topping up his coffee cup.

"Well, driving," Dan explained. He motioned with his hands as if gripping the steering wheel. "Up to the lake."

"Ah, yes, the lake is beautiful," Anna exclaimed dramatically. Then she waved a stubby finger at him as she returned to the kitchen. "But I think is rain later."

Dan checked the weather app, which assured him the chance of rain was low. He also checked the time. It would be a little early back home, but he decided he

would send a message to Kimberly now, just in case he didn't have a signal up in the mountains.

Hey I'm going out this morning and meeting up with Joe so will let u know how I'm getting on xx

He sipped good coffee and sat staring absentmindedly at his phone. Doubts remained close to the surface. It had been a long time since he'd talked with anyone about his faith. He even struggled to tell Kimberly what was going on inside. What was he expecting to come from this meeting with Joe Mitchel?

Okay, I'm just going to see how it goes. At least I can go home next week knowing I tried. I have to try.

This morning Joe finally felt refreshed. The tiredness of last week was only a memory, and he was looking forward to what the day held.

He flicked through the messages on his phone as he waited for his omelet to crisp up a little more. Sunlight was streaming into the kitchen and the day looked full of promise. But Joe had lived in the mountains long enough to know that you can't trust the weather, especially in the springtime. It would probably rain later, and that would be just fine.

There was a message from Sandy that she'd sent in the middle of the night—*remember you have a visitor today*—and a quick note he'd sent to himself just before heading off to bed.

Enjoying his leisurely breakfast in the quiet warmth of the kitchen, Joe thought over his *note to self*. He hadn't needed the reminder—it had been bubbling away in his subconscious ever since he got up this morning—but it was a practice of his to never miss a nugget of inspiration when it came. He had notebooks full of ideas and snippets of audio recording on his phone that would probably never see the light of day. This one would, he hoped. This one had a pull to it that he had learned to recognize over the years.

Joe made a short to-do list as he finished off his omelet and coffee, cleaned up quickly, and headed for *the zone*.

“*Start the day before the day starts you,*” his father had told him many times. 40 years later he was finally owning that wisdom for himself. This morning he didn't even take the time to open the shutters, he wanted to get his hands on the keyboard. No distractions. No excuses.

We humans are a strange breed, aren't we? For thousands of years we have wondered at the world, wondered at the stars above, even wondered at our own wondering. And all the time questions, questions, questions. You'd think by now we'd understand how unique and incredible that makes us—little 'gods' walking around on earth...

“Little *gods,*” he said to himself, as if testing the phrase. “Little gods. Some folk aren't gonna like that.”

He continued typing. The page filled steadily with words as Joe found himself relaxing into a steady rhythm. After the stagnant mire of the past few weeks, it felt like cool, fresh water for his soul.

...the harder it is to get away from the simple fact that everything is incredibly complex beyond our understanding...

...Worse still for the skeptic, we find that there is reason and order to it all, from the finest detail of subatomic particles, to the grand sweeping galaxies at the farthest reaches of our best telescopes, to the seeds in a sunflower's Fibonacci spirals...

...How can numbers or mathematical patterns be beautiful? How can the vibrations of a string penetrate the soul? And more importantly, why?

Joe's fingers continued to move over the keyboard for a few more minutes, then he sat back, his eyes scanning quickly over the last couple of sentences.

We are faced with a reality that is far too grand for a million lifetimes of exploration. God has truly set eternity in the heart of man. It should be no wonder that we wonder why so often.

"Why," he said to himself, looking around the dark room and noticing the closed shutters. "That is the question, Mitch. Why are you working in the dark?"

Opening the shutters and enjoying the view for a few minutes, Joe nodded. He didn't need to question why today was any different than last week, he simply accepted that this morning he had words, and that was enough.

He checked the clock. Thinking through his to-do list he figured he had plenty of time to go down to the town to see the mechanic, then get back to meet the English guy. Half an hour more at the laptop and then he'd get going.

Taking his place at the desk like a seasoned pilot might step into the cockpit of an airplane, he soon found himself merging into another world of musings and ponderings, lost in the timeless wonder of the moment.

"The lake *eeze* beautiful," Dan said to himself in his best Spanish accent. He stood on the pebbled shore with mountain-tops, bare rocks and cloud-flecked sky all reflected on the surface. Only further out, in the deeper water, was the mirror image faintly rippled by the breeze.

Drinking in the cool, clean air, he looked up and around at his surroundings. Steep, rugged slopes clad with pines formed a wide, fertile valley of small meadows and woodland. Back westward, the way he'd come, the land fell away gradually down to a small hamlet of stone buildings, and nearer by he could see the square bell tower of an old monastery hidden among trees.

Looking eastward, the landscape split around the craggy spur of a mountain, forming two green valleys that rose steadily up to high, rounded summits touched by gray clouds. He observed the northernmost valley with interest. Somewhere up there he would find Joe's place.

Having carefully studied the map on his phone, and once more going over the directions that he'd received from Joe Mitchel, Dan decided that he would leave the car here at the lake and walk up to the house. It should be no more than an hour, he needed the exercise, and besides, he always found some clarity when he was out walking.

And clarity, if he was honest, had been in short supply lately.

Rucksack unceremoniously thrown over his shoulder, Dan set off in good spirits. The scenery didn't disappoint. Grand and uplifting, he felt an expansive sense of freedom as he began his journey. At a steep bend in the single-track road, he was able to look back down through a break in the trees to the lake, glimmering in the sunlight.

Immersed as he was in the dramatic beauty of his surroundings, he couldn't help thinking how unreal it all seemed, how far removed from life just a couple of days ago. Dan soon found himself reflecting on the situation he found himself in. Everything seemed to be confirming his suspicions—he was no longer the person he once was. Something had changed. Something fundamental.

Now all he had were questions.

Pastor Alan's words echoed in his mind once more—*It's a life-long commitment, Daniel. It's called church*

A life-long commitment gone bad. Was this what *backsliding* looked like?

The road continued to roll under Dan's feet and soon passed over a small bridge where he stopped to lean on the barrier. The rushing water, not much bigger than a stream, cascaded down in little waterfalls from one small pool to the next. The constant white noise filled his mind and for a moment he let himself relax. Memories flooded back of happier times in his childhood. Simpler times. He could imagine himself, barefoot, wading into a pool and searching for interesting stones on a hot summer's day.

It's been way too long since I've been out hiking. If only it were that easy, just get away and forget my troubles. Forget who I am.

Turning back to the road, his doubts began to open the door on his frustrations, a jumbled, confusing mess of emotion rising up inside.

Why am I even here? What do I think meeting this guy is going to achieve? Getting some answers? Dumping all my doubts on willing ears? God, I feel so lost right now, so confused about everything. I just want to break out of all this and get on with my life.

He let the words come out, truth mixed with fear mixed with regret. Words that he knew had been lying just below the surface for a long while.

“God, I don't know if you're even listening anymore. I feel let down, abandoned. Where have you been these last two years? Where were you when I

needed you? When Mum needed you? Nothing makes sense anymore. I have been putting my heart and soul into church for half my life and I don't even understand what it's for any longer. I've had enough of people pretending that their life is wonderful with Jesus in it, when in fact we're just the same as everyone else. We're just better at hiding behind the facade."

The dull rhythm of rubber-soled boots on concrete soaked into the surrounding trees.

"I don't want to go back to church. I don't want to be part of Alan's little project. I don't want people telling me I need to read the Bible and have a healthy prayer life. I don't want to make excuses for a God of fire and judgment. I don't want to feel like I have to earn your favor, that things aren't going well because I'm not doing it right, not praying right, not putting my heart into it."

As the road climbed alongside green pastures and dark forest, crossing and re-crossing the meandering stream, the late morning skies began to change to gray. Lost in the turmoil of an inner world, spilling out his heart to who knew what, Dan hardly noticed. He continued to let his muddled thoughts flow as raindrops started to spatter on the road at his feet.

*Wasted years...wasted hopes...wasted prayers...where does that leave me?
Where are you now, God?*

It wasn't long before more clouds were building over the mountains and beginning to block out the sun, and presently the rain began to fall with greater force.

Dan lifted his eyes to the cloudy skies as if noticing for the first time that the weather had changed. He stopped and spread out his hands. Rain ran down his face. It was beginning to feel noticeably colder. “Oh, great! Thanks for listening!” he said out loud, half-joking. He would probably see the funny side later, he thought to himself, so why not now?

CHAPTER 4

“What is grace if it isn’t complete grace?”

Dan stood at the side of the road. A small car passed by, headlights on and wiper blades flapping crazily against the rain. Rain that was suddenly being blown by a strong wind coming down from the heights. He could feel the cold drops beginning to find a way inside of the collar of his hiking jacket, which he promptly zipped up to his chin.

Looking about him, he weighed the situation. The road twisted away in front and behind, dark forest closed in about him, and the valley sides rose up into cloud. He figured he must be about halfway there, which meant going back to the lake, or pressing on. Maybe he could get a ride either way with the next car, if there *was* a next car on this lonely road.

At that moment the sound of a motor reached Dan’s ears. Looking back through the trees he could see a vehicle coming up the road, and presently an old

silver SUV came winding around the bend towards him. It slowed down as it approached, saving Dan the trouble of thumbing a lift. The passenger window wound down as the car came to a stop, revealing a bearded face under a worn baseball cap.

“*Hola!* Need a ride?” The voice that reached Dan’s ears was distinctly American, and the tone reassuringly friendly.

“Morning!” Dan shouted, relieved to hear his own language. “Are you...are you Joe, by any chance?”

“Sure am!” the driver said with a smile. “Which means you must be Dan from England, right? Jump in, Dan!”

Dan slid the wet rucksack from his shoulders as Joe leaned over to open the door.

“Just about to turn around.” Dan climbed in and dumped the backpack between his legs. “Thanks.”

“Nice day for a walk,” remarked the American as he forced the gear-stick into first and accelerated away with a jolt that made Dan grab the door handle. “I was heading back from town, running a little late this morning.”

“Seems like perfect timing.”

Joe smiled. “Well, looks like you could do with some hot coffee.”

“That,”—Dan wiped the rain from his face—“would be wonderful.” He watched as Joe, keeping to the middle of the road to avoid the running rainwater, continued driving at a leisurely pace. “I was about to get very wet, it seems. Well, wetter, if that’s possible.”

Joe glanced across at his passenger. “You didn’t walk all the way up from the town, did you?”

“No. Left the car at the lake,” Dan explained. “It was actually a nice walk, until it started raining.”

“Some days it rains,” Joe said in a low voice, as if thinking to himself. Then he chuckled. “Gotta be a life lesson there, right? I was doing okay until it started raining.”

Dan forced a laugh but it sounded more like a strangled cough.

“Best thing to do is keep on walking, in my opinion. Anyway, glad you could make it.”

“Thanks for agreeing to see me,” Dan said, trying to sound more certain than he felt. Joe’s remark had surprised him, and he found himself glancing sideways, wondering who this guy in faded jeans and camouflage jacket really was. A conversation through email was one thing, meeting in person was something entirely different.

“Well, hey, sorry we’re not officially open, but you’re very welcome all the same.” Joe crunched the gears as he turned the car into another sharp bend. “Hope you find it worth your while. It’s a long way to come for a cup of coffee.”

Dan smiled. That was exactly the kind of thing Kimberly would say when she was trying to cheer him up. He briefly explained that he’d booked in at a B & B for the week. “And meeting up with a friend for the weekend, so hopefully do a bit of exploring.”

Joe nodded. As the car slowed again he pointed out a large gray house, just visible through the rain, perched solidly on a rise above the trees. “That’s our place, up there.”

A simple wooden sign at the side of the road displayed the words *Casa de Gracia*. A rough, puddled track branched off through a pair of high, wrought iron gates set in a stone wall. Joe drove through, immediately stopped at the edge of a wide stream, and opened the door.

“Just gotta shut the gates, as we’re closed,” he explained, pulling up the collar of his jacket against the rain.

Dan sat watching the stream through swishing wiper blades as Joe, getting wetter and wetter by the second, waded through various puddles, closing the big gates one by one.

“Fixing the automatic mechanism on these gates, way down on my to-do list,” he commented as he jumped back in, wiping his hands on his jeans. Joe dropped the clutch and shifted into first gear, but as the SUV started forward into the shallow water the engine stalled with a sudden jolt.

Joe leaned forward to rest his head on the steering wheel. “Manual transmission,” he mumbled, then sat up and glanced at Dan. “Sorry about that, wet boots.”

Dan smiled as Joe put the gears in neutral and fumbled with the key. The engine coughed, complained, and refused to start. Joe tried again, but there was nothing but tired clicks from the starter.

There was an awkward silence as raindrops spattered on the roof of the car.

“Dead,” Joe muttered under his breath.

“Battery?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t so great yesterday, which is why I was in town trying to get a new one. Anyways, no big deal, only a short walk up to the house.”

Leaving the SUV stuck at the edge of the stream, Joe indicated the way forward. “The water’s nice and shallow here so you can ford it in a car, but there’s no bridge as such. Just these concrete stepping-stones and a hand-rail.”

“That’s fine, I like adventures,” said Dan lightheartedly, grabbing the rail and carefully stepping up onto the first of four hexagonal islands spanning the stream. It was a simple matter to reach the other side, but the final gap between stepping-stone and dry ground was much wider than he would have expected. He looked back at Joe.

“Ah, stream’s a little higher than usual,” Joe observed, peering past Dan’s shoulder. “Looks like we’re stuck here. So, tell me about your life back in England.”

Dan smiled at Joe’s wry sense of humor. “If it’s all the same to you,” he said, throwing his rucksack onto the shore, “I’d prefer wet boots and hot coffee. *Then* I’ll tell you about England.” He took a leap, landing with a splash just short of his target, and stumbled forward on the uneven pebbles.

“Hope you’re not going to rate us on Google,” Joe shouted.

“Hope this isn’t a test,” Dan said to himself, turning round just in time to see Joe jump forward gracefully and splash into the water only inches from shore. Reaching out quickly, he was able to grab Joe’s arm to stop him slipping backwards.

“Thanks,” said Joe. “Don’t forget your backpack.”

Dan’s narrowed eyes followed Joe as he walked up to the track. He nodded to himself then followed along, water squelching from his boots. Joe took the lead, passing an old building that he called ‘our ruin’, explaining that it had probably been used by shepherds a hundred years ago. At a large rock, the track turned sharply into woodland and began to climb gently up to a sturdy wooden bridge.

Presently the gravel track transformed into a concrete driveway that turned a sharp hairpin and ran up against a high stone wall. Dan could see rainwater running off roof tiles as they neared the top of the slope, then deep-set, shuttered windows in a rough stone wall. Well-kept shrubs and rose bushes grew neatly along the front of the building. The place had a hint of the luxurious about it, and it may have been something to do with the persistent rain, but he thought it all looked very inviting.

“Home, sweet home. Welcome to *Casa de Gracia*, the House of Grace,” Joe announced as he opened the heavy wooden door. “Come on in and warm up.”

Dan, shaking raindrops from his shoulders, stepped into a rustic, open hallway dominated by a tiled staircase with ornate wooden balustrades. Rich terracotta tiles covered the floor, and the bare stone walls displayed old farming tools from a bygone era. Archways led off to the left and right.

“I’ll take your coat. You can leave your boots in here.”

Joe waved Dan through the left archway. He found a cloakroom with numerous winter coats and jackets hanging on hooks, walking boots and hiking shoes of various kinds, and a sturdy wooden table scattered with guidebooks. On the wall opposite the

window hung a three-dimensional relief map of the Pyrenees, alongside various framed photographs of people on high mountains. There was a faint smell of worn leather and polish.

“Go make yourself comfortable in the lounge, straight through there.” Joe indicated a door on the other side of an archway that led to a corridor, and Dan found himself in a large, comfortable room with a wood-beamed ceiling. Three soft couches huddled together near a large fireplace where a cast-iron stove glowed invitingly. In one corner of the room, bookshelves lined the stone walls, and the rest of the space was occupied by a long, highly polished table with six chairs.

There was a comfortable sense of peace, an almost palpable quiet, and Dan felt immediately at home. His initial doubts about Joe began to fade away as he padded in damp socks over to the fireplace to warm his hands, then sunk down into the couch and stretched out his legs on the thick rug, pointing cold feet towards the warm stove.

“Perfect,” Dan thought to himself as he took a deep breath, soaking up the warmth from the fire and feeling his body relax. “Very, very nice.”

The door opened and Joe came through. “Hey, warming up? Got you some clean socks, probably want to get those ones off.” A pair of thick hiking socks came sailing through the air and landed next to Dan. “More importantly, I got the coffee on. Or I think we have some English tea somewhere.”

“Coffee will be great, thanks. I usually have milk and sugar in mine.”

“All things are possible, Dan,” Joe said in a reassuring tone. “Be right back.”

Dan was glad to shed his damp socks, which he placed on the tiled hearth. The clean ones were a little too big but warm, and more importantly, dry. He concluded that putting his trust in the weather app had been a bad move—the last thing he needed right now was a case of pneumonia.

Presently Joe reappeared through the door, balancing a tray which he set down on the low coffee table in the middle of the rug. Two steaming mugs of black coffee, a small jug of milk, sachets of sugar, and a plate of chocolate-chip cookies.

“Help yourself. I warmed up the milk a little, and the cookies are a peace offering. For the episode down at the stream.” Joe grabbed his mug, selected the nearest cookie and sat back on the middle of the three couches.

Dan smiled. It hadn’t been a great start, but at least it was something to talk about. He leaned forward and poured milk into the dark coffee. “I was just thinking, not the best day to go walking up here.”

“That’s mountains for ya,” Joe said, offering his opinion of the unpredictable Pyrenees weather.

As Dan listened to Joe he couldn’t help thinking how out of place this man looked here. Without the baseball cap, Dan could see thick gray hair blending into the flecked beard, and dark gray eyes with deep crows-feet. Give him a Stetson and he’d make a great old cowboy. No, a Sheriff. Definitely a Sheriff.

Looking around the room as he sipped his coffee, it occurred to him how different this felt from the confusing meeting he’d had with Pastor Alan. The sudden change of circumstances was not lost on Dan and he decided to enjoy the relaxed

atmosphere. He wanted to know more about how this American writer came to be hiding away in the mountains of Spain.

Joe briefly explained that he and his wife, Sandy, had been there nearly five years, they both loved it here, and over time had slowly adapted to living a new life. “And this little corner of Spain is a world away from what we’re used to,” he added.

“You run retreats, I read somewhere.”

“Well, personally I avoid the term ‘retreat’. We try to make it a refuge of sorts. A place for people to find some space. We don’t teach or preach, we take a hands-off approach, but we make ourselves available.”

“A refuge from the storm.”

“Indeed,” Joe said softly. “Well, Dan, you are very welcome here. I was talking to Sandy the other night, she said I needed to be sure to tell you, our door is open to you.”

“When does she get back?”

“She’s still in the States until next week. I only just got back here myself last week. We try to visit family every winter. Sandy’s mom especially, she’s...old.”

There was a pause in the conversation.

Joe leaned forward, his tone was kindly and reassuring. “My mom’s been gone ten years now. Sometimes you think you’re going to forget them, but you don’t. They never really leave.”

Dan reached for a cookie and remained hunched forward. Without looking up he said, “It’s been a crazy couple of years for me. Trying to be there for my mother. I

used to be so sure about who I was, what my life was about..." his voice trailed off, then he looked over to Joe. "I guess I'm looking for some answers."

Joe sat back. "You've been knocked out of your routine, forced to look at life in a different way. It's not surprising. Suddenly everything that seemed so sure is no longer a given."

"That kind of sums it up, yes."

"But you aren't alone."

"Feels that way."

"Of course. And it's completely natural to start doubting God, your faith, and every decision you've ever made. What are you, mid-forties?"

"46," Dan interjected.

"46, and grieving. Got kids, right?"

"Two teenage boys," Dan said with a smile.

"Well, no kidding, Dan. This has to be the hardest time of your life." Joe's eyes seemed to reflect a deep understanding, and his words were reassuring. Dan listened as Joe explained how important it was to not underestimate the very real pain and feelings of loss he was wrestling with. "Pain, and regret for what might have been, if you think about it," the older man concluded.

Dan eased back into the couch once more. "I keep wondering if I've wasted half my life trying to be a good Christian, doing all the right things. And the whole thing seems to have let me down. Which then leads to more doubt..."

"Exactly."

“Have I missed the point? Do I not have enough faith? All that kind of thing.”

Joe agreed. “Round and round in endless confusion.”

“I remember reading that article you wrote, about God’s *conditional* unconditional love? Now *that* made a lot of sense to me.”

Joe sighed. He was staring into the fireplace as if lost in his thoughts. “Ah, yeah, I got a lot of hate mail over that one.” A smile formed on his face but it didn’t seem to touch his eyes.

“Well, it got me thinking,” Dan paused to gather his thoughts. “I don’t want to believe in a God who expects something in return. I don’t want to hear that I have to have more faith, love God more, pray more. I mean, if it still depends on me then I’m never going to get there.”

“What is grace if it isn’t complete grace, right?” Joe banged a fist on his knee. “If there has to be some kind of trade-off then, well...”

“It’s not grace.”

“Hmm. I should probably do a follow-up to that article,” Joe pondered. “It raised a lot of questions. And that’s what I try to do—get people asking the hard questions.”

“Everything seems to be a hard question right now.”

Joe placed his empty coffee mug on the tray, then continued. “You know, Dan, what we’re all about here, the bottom line, the reason why Sandy and I do what we do, it’s all about creating a safe space. Space for the big, life-changing questions about God and faith and what it all means in the here and now.”

Dan nodded his approval.

“We don’t necessarily have the answers and we don’t pretend to. In a way, the answers aren’t really the point.” Joe explained. “But I want you to know that from the start. And if you’re okay with that, the fact that you may not get all your answers, then I’ll encourage you to ask away.”

“I have a pretty big list,” Dan admitted.

“Alright. Well, listen. This weather is set in for a good while, looks like we’re stuck here for the rest of the afternoon, anyways. So here’s the deal,” Joe rose from the couch and topped up the stove with a couple of logs as he continued. “I’ll go fix us a sandwich and more coffee, you relax, and let’s just have some good conversation. For me, that’s usually where the answers are found.”

“Sounds good,” Dan said, relieved to be able to talk freely. “Feels like I’ve been carrying around all these doubts and questions for a long time. Way too long, I imagine. I appreciate it.”

“My pleasure,” said Joe, gathering the empty cups on the tray and heading for the door.

“Uh, Joe?” Dan called as his host was about to leave the room. “You mentioned that you might have English tea?”

“Coming right up,” Joe said with a smile.