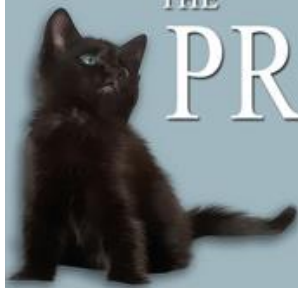


WHAT HAPPENS WHEN PROMISES ARE BROKEN?

Natasha
D·E·E·N



THE
PROMISE
OF
Home

The Promise of Home

Natasha Deen

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Dedication

Thank you to Pastor Ben Chandler, whose quiet faith and dedication to his congregation showed me what a true man of the cloth was.

1

When I was ten, my adopted parents took me to a tent revival. I sat in the front row, sweating with the parishioners, hypnotized as the pastor—with the help of spotlights and microphones—re-enacted Saul’s transformation on the road to Damascus. After a crowd-pleasing performance, which included the screams of a blinded Saul that were so shrill they made my ears pop, the pastor extorted all of us to remain ever vigilant to the secular ways of the world.

“Don’t be blinded,” he intoned, “for the world wants nothing more than to lead you astray.”

Wiping away his dripping sweat with a thick towel, he leaned in close and warned me—*especially* me, he said—of the ways the world would seek to turn my faith and corrupt my soul.

I was eager for the test. Mom and Dad still had me on an eight o’clock bedtime and though I didn’t know what it was, I was certain if I could withstand this trial of the flesh, they were sure to reward me with an extra half-hour. At the very least, I prayed there would be room for negotiation when it came to string beans.

As the years passed, I found the world was disappointingly supportive of my Christianity. At fourteen, I waited for the pressure to drink, but it never came. At sixteen, I solemnly practiced my oath of abstinence in front of the mirror, but no girl ever forced my hand. I’d like to think it was my quiet faith that

restrained the girls from any hanky-panky, though I suspect it was my lanky form, big feet, and even bigger nose that kept them from not only asking me to have sex, but asking me on a date.

I waited for the trial of fire, the moment when I could prove Jesus hadn't died in vain for me. But as my teens quietly rolled into my twenties, then thirties, I found it was easy to scream for Jesus, but far harder to whisper his name. Not committing murder was simple. Obeying the traffic laws and not giving into road rage was another thing altogether.

I had forgotten about the test and the prayer until last year, when my wish for a big crisis to prove my faith was answered. Terrie, my fiancée—the only girl I'd ever dated and ever *truly* loved—came to my apartment and returned my ring. She was going back to her ex-boyfriend, a great hulking brute of a man who had treated her badly and used her heart as a pincushion. Sure, he could be volatile, she told me, but he was never boring.

"And you, Luke," she'd said. "You're just too...calm."

The small apartment living room tilted and whirled as I stared at her, too shell-shocked to speak, too destroyed to move.

"See?" She said into the yawning silence. "Even with this, you're calm."

Calm wasn't the word. My spirit had been ripped from my body, stomped under by her four-inch heels, and then shoved back inside. I couldn't find the words to question her, not when the only question I had was silently screamed to God: *Why?*

I had brought my love for her before the Lord and prayed for His guidance, and when it seemed His

advice was, "Date her, you fool," I'd asked her out. Then, I'd prayed about the marriage...how could I have been so wrong? I had spent my life submitting to Him, bringing all the desires and hopes before Him, and now my heart was a red smear on the laminate floor. Had I not heard God, or had He not heard me?

What of her? I'd been good, supportive...hadn't I? When she'd thought she wanted to open an organic perfume line, I'd not only given her emotional cheerleading, but I'd followed my words with actions. I took Ephesians 5:33 to heart, and though we weren't yet married, I tried to love her with the same devotion and open-heart that Christ had loved the church.

Terrie and I spent months studying the difference between ammonium lauryl sulfate and sodium lauryl sulfate, memorizing scent combinations and allergy alerts. I'd inhaled more spices than Columbus and had diligently pretended to be a customer as she practiced her sales pitches. When she'd grown bored and dropped it, I supported that, too.

Yet there she sat, without a tear, and with the same impersonal tone she'd used as a customer service representative to sell clients perfume, my now-ex-fiancée wished me luck in my life and hoped I'd find someone more "my pace." Then she was gone in a swirl of silk and the fragrance of wild berries, honey orange, and tuberose.

Three months of grief were made worse as my friends left on missions, or got married, or had children and quietly slipped away into the comfortable, satisfied lives of couplehood, family, and service. That period gave way to three months of goose-stepping around God. I wanted to be mad at Him, but felt the fault was in my not listening; then I felt angrier at my

guilt and His continued silence to my prayers for answers. Unable—in this modern age—to rend my clothing, cover my head in ashes, and wail, I opted for a stoic face and clenched jaw. I shoved down my doubts and questions, buried the hurt, and forced the fractured, jagged mess of my emotions into the orderly square of intellect. Days turned into weeks and months of walking the Edmonton streets, my breath stopping when I thought I saw her, my heart breaking when I drove by the bakery she loved.

In the end, it proved too much.

It was either cowardice or a need for change that prompted me to agree when my father told me a church up north needed a carpenter. The decision was rash and ill-thought—and considering the shaky foundations of my faith—seemed akin to walking into the lion’s den. Still, it was an escape from Edmonton and the chance to breathe in a place that hadn’t been imprinted by her presence. I gave my roommate notice, packed my bags and tools into the back of my half-ton, and drove away from bad memories and unanswered questions.

My dad told me the small town I headed to was four hours north of Edmonton, just east of Highway 63. What began as a sunny drive darkened into a hard-driving rain. The rational side of me knew it was a meteorological event, but as I squinted, trying to see through the sheets of water blanketing my windshield, I wondered if it was a sign of a mistake made.

Throughout the drive, I worried I had allowed fear and hurt to choose my life’s path, and with the inclement weather, I had a lot of time to brood. The trip took an extra four hours, much to the dismay of my bladder and my car’s mapping system. After

driving forty kilometers slower because visibility had been reduced to half a car length, after my GPS tried to drive me into a lake, then an abandoned field, and after a disconcerting experience trying to use the washroom in the great outdoors while under the watchful gaze of two deer, I pulled off the highway and onto Stoneshire Lane and into Home, Alberta.

The late afternoon sun broke through the grey cover and directed me to the Siberian Oil gas station. It was a week before September, families still holidayed, and there were no spots under the overhang. I parked my truck in a lonely, exposed section of the lot, grabbed some dry clothing from my suitcase, and dashed into the washroom.

A few moments later, drier thanks to the bathroom's paper towel supply, and dressed in jeans and a flannel shirt—the work uniform for any self-respecting handyman—I stepped out of the store...and right into a sudden downpour that had me wondering if God had rethought his rainbow covenant with Noah. Once more, I was soaked and dripping. Sodden denim chaffed my legs and the aroma of winter-breeze dryer sheets wafted from my red-and-black checked shirt. Gritting my teeth, certain God was either tormenting me, or playing a horrible prank, I poured myself into the driver's seat and headed to the church.

2

Two blocks from my destination, the rain broke and the sun poured its yellow light on to the cloth seats of my truck. It was warm and buttery, and I hoped it was a sign of things to come.

The building was off Country Avenue, and in a charming neighborhood of older homes with wraparound porches. Mature trees, their trunks thick and their branches lush with leaves, lined the streets. The canopy of red and gold created an arch over me. The wind set the leaves shivering and they fell to the ground, too wet to scuttle down the lane.

I pulled into the church's parking lot, took a spot by the front entrance, and absorbed the disheartening view.

Disengaging my cell from its charger, I phoned my dad. He picked up on the third ring.

"You lied," I said.

"Pastors don't lie, Luke," he rumbled.

"The town is *six* hours north of Edmonton. Eight, in a rainstorm."

"Ah." He paused. In my mind's eye, he leaned back in the ripped, orange recliner my mother tried to throw away every year. His shock of white hair stood on end from the constant running of his fingers, a comfortable fifteen pounds of padding surrounded his gut, and the sheepish—dare I say, *guilty*—expression warmed his face. "That's not a lie. I wasn't clear on the

route.”

“You can navigate through Jasper National Park with a thread, a needle, and a pine cone.”

“I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“No one’s as young as you used to be.”

He laughed, the sound comfortable and easy.

“I like a challenge,” I said, stretching back and regretting the movement as icy water dribbled down my neck. “You didn’t have to lie about the state of the church.”

“What?” he sounded confused.

“The state of the church.” I ducked my head, trying to get a better view. “The roof alone is going to take two months to fix, if I’m lucky.”

“Oh.” Silence. “Yes.” He cleared his throat. “*That* state.”

My ears pricked, my heart beat with the certain knowledge I’d been tricked into a mammoth job, but before I could demand clarification, he was babbling about supper.

“It’s three o’clock in the afternoon,” I said, but he’d already hung up. Sighing, I peeled myself from the seat and shuffled to the main entrance.

Time hadn’t been good to this building, and it was a shame. The exposed rafters and the large windows held the scent of sun and cedar, but it needed love—a lot of it, along with patience and care—if it was to shine once again. I opened the door and stepped inside.

The toasted air of the foyer turned my clothes ice-cold. I shivered, my gaze glancing off the faded purple carpet and crumbling paint, to the set of three doors on my left. The first one proclaimed itself the pastor’s office. I slipped out of my muddy shoes, and ignoring

the clammy kiss of clothing on my freezing skin, moved to the door. At my knock, a feminine voice bid me enter.

The outer-office smelled of cinnamon, and the cheerful pictures of roses and irises hanging from the walls matched the pleasant smile of the woman sitting behind the paper-laden desk. She had a *café au lait* complexion, and time had softly blurred the lines of her face. Rising, she asked, "Luke? Luke Parks?"

I nodded, conscious of the water dribbling its way down my forehead and trickling past my collar. "Yes, ma'am."

Her smile widened. "I'm Izzy." She held out her hand. "It's lovely to meet you."

"You too, ma'am." I shook her hand, and then stepped back. "I apologize for bringing the rain in with me."

"You do look a mite sodden. Did you want to change before meeting the pastor?"

My shoulders dropped with relief. "Thank you, yes. I was late and—"

She waved my words away. "Go. Change. I'll brew some coffee for when you come back."

I headed to the entrance and stepped out. The rain had stopped, though I figured it was playing with me, waiting until I moved from under the protection of the overhang. From the corner of my eye, I caught a flash of a turquoise skirt and a slim, brown ankle, but the woman disappeared around the church before I could acknowledge her.

The clouds—mercifully—held their water. I grabbed my gear and headed to the men's washroom. A few moments later, drier and warmer thanks to the kindness of Izzy and the washroom's paper towels, I

once again entered the office. This time, however, I was met by a slight woman with thin hair and sharp blue eyes. The scowl on her face was fierce enough that had she lived in biblical times, Moses would have eschewed Aaron and the staff, and brought this woman, instead. Just the curl of her lip would've sent Pharaoh hiding behind his throne.

"I'm Luke," I said. "I'm—"

"Late." She fired the word like a bullet. Her lip curled back and wrinkled the faint scratch on her left cheek. With deliberate care, she turned and stared at the clock. "*Very* late."

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"Why didn't you telephone?"

"There was weather, and I didn't want to pull to the shoulder because it's a two lane—"

"Didn't you read the report before you left?"

"Yes, ma'am, but—"

"Mrs. Fields," she said and gave me another quake-inducing stare. "I'm Mrs. Fields."

Pharaoh would not only have hidden, he would have given up government all together and gone into basket weaving.

The scent of roasted Columbian beans preceded Izzy's entry. "Here. With this weather, you need cream and sugar in it." She handed me the white ceramic mug and a plate of cookies. "I thought you might be hungry."

"Those are Pastor Harris's cookies."

Mrs. Fields's glare elicited only a lazy smile from Izzy. "Merle likes to share, Jennifer."

The older woman snorted, grabbed a sheaf of papers, and then turned away. The dull thud of her sensible shoes sounded the retreat.

"She's quite lovely once she warms up to folks," said Izzy.

"How long does that usually take?" I took a sip of the strong, sweet coffee.

"I've been here five years." The edges of her lips twitched. "We're at a tepid temperature."

I grimaced. "Thank God I won't be here that long." A shadow crossed Izzy's face.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it quite that harshly." My haste to reassure her made me clumsy, and I sloshed hot liquid over my hand.

She grabbed a few tissues from the box on the desk and handed them to me.

"Thank you." I wiped at the sodden mess, wondering why I seemed incapable of staying dry in this town. "The repairs should only take a few months. A bit of spackle, perhaps new flooring."

Three lines wrinkled her brow. "Flooring?"

"Yes, well, only if you want it. I can get you a good deal on laminate. Of course, if all you want is new paint or..." I trailed off. The furrows on her skin had deepened. "Ma'am?"

Her smile softened the lines of worry at the edges of her eyes, but didn't erase them. "Why don't you speak to Merle? He's with the committee." She glanced at the plate and mug. "I'll go and get more cookies. He adores his gingersnaps."

Mrs. Fields stormed into the office and shot me a look of dark thunder. "Still lolly-gagging?" she said to me. "I'll take you to the pastor."

Izzy gave me a sympathetic smile, and then shooed me after the older woman.

I stumbled after her, feeling every inch of my six-foot-four-inches, complete with gangly limbs and non-

cooperating feet. She stomped to the main area, hung a sharp left, and sped toward a narrow hallway, her cranberry-colored cardigan flapping behind her.

I hurried to keep up, my peripheral vision cataloging the cracks in the dry wall, the peeling paint. The litany of things-to-do so took my focus and I careened into Mrs. Fields as she came to a sudden stop. I managed to right her before we fell, my hands clutched at her bony shoulders, dug into her flesh. She stayed upright.

I, on the other hand, smacked into the door, twisting my ankle and smashing my head hard against the wood. The door gave way, and I crashed through the threshold. I saw a table with folks gathered around it, then their feet and legs as I fell onto the ground.

"He's here," I heard Mrs. Fields mutter.

The click of the door closing followed her words; then there was nothing but silence.

I debated staying under the desk until they gave up and left, but if the people in here were anything like Izzy, they'd probably get on the floor with me and try to coax me out with tea and cookies. I jumped to my feet, my damp hair clinging to my forehead, my shirt twisted at odd angles. Great. What a way to meet the hiring committee.

I'd worked my way through seminary school as a contractor, and then taken it up full time after a disastrous entry into the world of pastoring. Over the years, I'd gained a good reputation for solid work and fair prices, but my name wasn't formidable. Crashing into my interview looking like a discombobulated chicken spelled a certain "We've decided to go with another bid, thanks anyway."

The man at the head of the table stood. "I'm Pastor

Harris." His white smile gleamed against the burnished ebony of his skin. "Please. Sit. We've just been speaking of you."

"Thank you, sir, but I'll stand if that's OK with you."

"So, Luke—"

I turned to a woman with a round face, red hair, and blue eyes.

"How do you feel about the job?"

"I'll be honest, ma'am, based on what I've seen and what my dad told me, this is probably going to be the hardest and dirtiest job I've ever done."

The members of the committee started and then shared an uneasy glance with each other.

Normally, a group of folks standing before me rendered my tongue thick and wooden. Talking construction, however, was easy. It was simple and straightforward: *here's what needs to be fixed, here are the supplies I need, here's my timeframe and cost.* "I won't lie," I said. "This church is in a lot of trouble, and if you don't let me do what's necessary, chances aren't great there'll be a building in ten years."

Red infused the cheeks of a bald-headed man to my left.

I frowned, unsure of his hostility and directed my comments to him. "Sir, my dad is friends with your pastor, and I'm giving you a discount—a huge discount—on my services."

His cheeks turned scarlet.

"—but that doesn't mean I'm going to give it a discounted effort. If you listen to me and don't argue on my suggestions, I promise you, you'll be quite happy with my work. This building will still be standing long after you're gone. If you don't listen,

then I can't guarantee it will survive your children."

His lips pressed into a thin, hard line. "I don't know about this, Merle."

Their attitude left me bristling, and once again, reminded me of the stupidity of running from Edmonton. "If you don't see the bad shape of this church, then it's no wonder its foundations are crumbling."

The man rose. "Now listen here, young man—"

"Kenneth—" The pastor waved his hand.

He turned. "No, Merle. This church has been my home for over twenty years. I won't let him—"

"Kenneth." The pastor's voice didn't rise, there was no edge, but his speaking the man's name had the desired effect.

Kenneth sank slowly back to his seat.

"I suppose we don't have a choice," the pastor said.

"No," said the round-face woman with a wary glance my way. "Although, I'm a little—" She darted a look at me, then leaning away, whispered, "*—worried*. Are we sure he's the best choice?"

"He's the only choice." The tall, skinny man who sat by the pastor, spoke up.

The committee sighed, and I debated walking out. It was only me who would be fixing the church, and based on what I'd seen, it was going to take at least eight months—and I hadn't really given it a full inspection. What would they do when I gave them the full report? And could I really handle working among them for so long? I still wasn't sure where I sat with God, but His house of worship deserved better. I didn't want to have to fight the church for supplies or funds—not when I was already going to be trying to

get everything for them at a sizable discount.

"Son," Pastor Harris looked my way. "Do you want this job?"

Not really, I wanted to say. But my dad had asked, and I'd never been able to deny him much of anything. "Yes, sir. I do." I looked at the committee. "I apologize if my words sounded harsh, but soft-soaping troubles has never done anyone much good."

Their faces showed no relief or welcome.

I sighed.

"All in favor?" Pastor Harris asked.

Reluctant, slow, each of the members raised their hands.

"What about you, Luke?"

I raised my hand.

"OK," he said. "It's done." He looked my way. "Do you want to take a moment and talk about your duties?"

"I know what needs to be done, and the sooner I start, the better, but I welcome your input. The way I figure it, we need to take care of the roof. I saw some spots where it was leaking. We should also check the foundations. I noticed the walls were cracked, so I'll want to take a look at the basement—"

"That's all well and good," scowled the bald man. "But when are you going to work on the sermons?"

I gaped at him. "Sermons?"

"Yes," he said irritably. "Part of being a pastor is writing the sermons."

"Pastor?" I echoed. The ground shifted and tilted under my feet. "Pastor?" I repeated.

Four pairs of eyes stared at me. The pastor's gaze was distinctly on the floor.

"I thought," I said weakly, "I'm a contractor. I fix

buildings. Your church, the foundations—”

There was relieved laughter, a breaking of their tension.

For me, however, the feeling was more *hypertension*. I looked at Pastor Merle. “Sir,” I said. “I believe I’ll take that seat you offered earlier.”