



SOMETIMES, YOU HAVE TO RISK LOVE AND
LEGACY TO FOLLOW GOD'S CALL.

CSPA BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD-WINNER

MARIANNE EVANS



FISHER MEN OF ANTIOCH #3



The Journey

Marianne Evans

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The Journey

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Dedication

In loving memory of Homer Evans. Your 'Journey' through this life created an incredible legacy. You championed a large and boisterous family, yet always had a way of making each and every one of us feel special, and prized. What a gift--and I treasure it still.

What People are Saying

4 ½ * Top Pick – A great read, the narrative is a balanced blend of skillful character development and anticipated—as well as totally surprising—scenes that are sated with plenty of romantic tension.

~ Romantic Times on Forgiveness

Marianne Evans is the queen of Christian romance.

~ Nancee Marchinowski, Book Reviewer and
Blogger at Perspectives by Nancee

This talented author satisfies both heart and soul

~ NYT Bestselling Author Ruth Ryan Langan

Fisher Men of Antioch

The Return
The Stronghold
The Journey

Other books by Marianne Evans

Devotion
Forgiveness

Woodland Church Series:

Hearts Surrender
Hearts Communion
Hearts, Key

Sisters in Spirit Series:

Aileen's Song
Siobhan's Beat
Kassidy's Crescendo
Maeve's Symphony

AND MANY MORE

He said to them, "Come, follow me. I will make you fishers of men."

~ Matthew 4:19

1

An early-spring daybreak spread across the flat farmlands of rural Indiana. This was the time of day Ben Fisher liked best. Peace and the kind of contemplative solitude his spirit always seemed to crave held sway at sunrise. Settling against the thick cushions of the front porch swing, releasing a chest-deep sigh of contentment, he set the seat into motion, pushing a booted heel gently against creaky floor boards. The porch's wrap-around awning needed fresh shingles, but that was an issue he'd contend with later.

He considered the moniker held for generations now. *The Fisher Farm*. His lips curved automatically. This spot formed a legacy purchased through generations of sweat and toil. This place provided not just nourishment of the land, but of the community. His family had taken that fact to heart for close to two centuries as some of the first inhabitants of Antioch.

It's not a coincidence our town is called Antioch, Dad had said time and again, pride swelling through his broad chest, lifting his wide shoulders as he walked the soybean fields. *The founders—my great-great grandfather among them—were very deliberate. They looked to the Bible*

for a name and chose Antioch. Antioch is where the first-ever Christians gathered as a formalized community. I guess our ancestors figured we'd be keeping good company.

Nowadays, so many people would consider such sentimentality corny, or outdated. Ben's take was different. He understood the vibrations of Antioch. It was home, and he valued the atmosphere of the small, tight-knit community where he had been born and raised.

Except...

An increasingly familiar itch, a yearning he hadn't even recognized before, slipped beneath his skin as he stared out across dew-kissed fields of soybeans that rolled for hundreds of acres. Fog lifted slowly, like eerie wafts of steam. The itch had followed him ever since last week's sermon at Antioch Christian church, when Reverend Maxwell Taylor had launched a spirited proclamation on missionary opportunities. Ben stretched his legs. Relaxed rather than anxious, he continued to mull things over.

A cardinal swept across the yard, drawing him back to the view. The vivid red bird flitted and chirped. Ben cradled a bistro mug of coffee between his hands. Warm, earthy fragrance tantalized his nose and he absorbed the subtle increase of bird song as he sipped. Against the eastern edge of the sky, translucent hues of pearlescent gray melded into pink. Hints of orange, buttery yellow swirled through wispy white clouds. Light shimmered, iridescent as the sun peeked and then rose. Low-lying crops shimmered and swayed against the soft caress of a breeze. That gentle ripple of air stirred freshness, a floral infused welcome to spring. Ben was surrounded by his father's soybean crop and the scent of moist soil.

We're entering the spring season, a time of regeneration. In life and in mission. Embrace the idea of taking on a challenge. Answer a call to help our brothers and sisters at our twin parish in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. If this call to service speaks to your heart, please don't shy away or question God's prompt. Explore the pathway and determine if there's a fit. Because there certainly is a need, my friends. Reverend Taylor's words to the church community played out for, oh, probably the hundredth time.

This time, disquiet wouldn't be quelled, or ignored. Ben hummed a low, frustrated exclamation, his eyes narrowing until he refocused. What was going on? He wasn't unhappy or dissatisfied with his life at the farm, so why did he ache all of a sudden? Why did he find himself Google-searching missions, and Arkansas these days?

Subtle pots-and-pans clamor sounded from the kitchen, through an open window just behind the spot where he sat. Mom was up, likely fixing breakfast for herself and Pop. Oatmeal spiced by cinnamon, a touch of brown sugar, along with a heap of fresh fruit made the menu most days. Toast, too, because heart condition or not, Pop insisted on the crunch and sweet of toast covered by a slather of homemade jam.

Reclaiming his typical sense of calm, Ben smiled. The jam came courtesy of the Thomas family. His brother Phillip's fiancée, Mila, had dropped off a fresh jar when she came over for dinner the other night. They'd be getting married at the end of July, and Ben couldn't wait to stand up for his oldest brother and celebrate a most unexpected love affair come to perfect fruition.

Thoughts of Mila Thomas led quite naturally to the image of Mila's younger sister, Hailey Beth. A

natural connection due to family ties...and nothing more. Sure, Hailey Beth was a person he'd known since he was old enough to walk. Sure, she was a petite, big-eyed dynamo who could go from butter soft to steel strong in the time it took to blink—a fascinating combination—but beyond that, she was simply a good friend. A familiar and appealing part of his life. Affection for her came as naturally as...

Ben's gaze tracked to the ancient, massive barn that crowned a swell of land on their property. Studiously maintained, its hay-covered floors had been the spot he had shared his first kiss. At seven-years-old. With HB.

That coy and sweet little fireball.

His smile curved wide at the image he held of her perfectly shaped figure, the long waves of chocolate brown hair that tumbled around her shoulders, those full lips. Oh, man, did he need a distraction. Polishing off the last of his coffee, Ben stood, intending to join his mom. Maybe he could score a helping of food if he chipped in with preps.

Just as he turned toward the door, a rumble, steady and increasing, drifted across the now gold-burnished fields of the farm. In seconds, a train whistle echoed across the dips and flats, coming closer, with chattering wheels and a rhythmic pulse he could have sworn he felt vibrating through the wooden floorboards, the soles of his work boots.

The train wasn't that close, though. The stirring of the air and his body was purely phantom. Psychological. A call to move. A call to action.

A call—mysterious and scary—urged him away from the only home he'd ever known.



Hailey Beth Thomas swallowed a bite of cereal—a favorite breakfast-for-lunch option—taking a break from her regularly scheduled duties at Thomas’s Grocery Store. She sat at a large, time-worn wooden desk in the office she now occupied. Dad had opted for full retirement from daily operations at the mercantile almost six months ago, giving Hailey Beth free rein to run the business that had been in their family for over a hundred years.

While she ate, pairing cereal with a freshly toasted English muffin topped by a smidge of butter and a layer of her mom’s homemade strawberry jam, HB reviewed supply orders and processed some invoice payments. Multi-tasking at its best.

Crunching into the muffin, she savored the creamy sweetness that melted over her tongue and tapped out an e-mail to one of the distributors she worked with, finalizing delivery of a couple cases of canned goods in need of stocking.

She paused for a spoonful of cereal and her cell phone came to life with a rippling wave of music. Incoming text. Benjamin Fisher. Hailey Beth’s heart performed a literal skip-flop.

Mom’s making toast with jam for dad. And for me. Makes me think of you and your fam. Prob be by l8r with a grocery list to be filled.

Sharing breakfast, with Ben. All matters work related fled on a cloud of delight. Hailey Beth didn’t sigh out loud, but her smile spread fast and large as she picked up her phone and rapid-fired a reply.

Ha! Well, enjoy the irony. I’m just finishing an English muffin with jam. Great minds and all. Stop by. I’m here all

day.

A laughing emoji followed shortly thereafter, as well as: *C U then HB.*

"Well aren't you just beaming as bright as a sunbeam?"

Hailey Beth jostled to proper focus, a hot blush warming her neck and cheeks as her older sister Mila sassed off and breezed into the office with a knowing grin curving her lips. Hailey Beth stashed her phone and cleared her throat—guilty convictions both—while Mila plopped down in the chair in front of the desk. Mila said nothing more. Hailey Beth attempted to return to those inventory orders and invoice payments. She had to retype her e-mail twice all the while trying to ignore her sister's presence and pushy silence.

Mila stretched her legs, released a contented sigh. "You know, I've got all day."

"No, you don't. You have a shop to run, same as me. What's on your mind besides being a needle?"

"I'm a needle? Really? I certainly don't mean to be. All I did was compliment your...you know...glow."

Oh, Lord help her. Hailey Beth knew a sweetly-laced bout of goading when she heard it. "I'm glowing?" She scowled, turning slowly to face her sibling, hoping her killer gaze would scare her sister into submission.

"Well, no. Not anymore." Mila relented, leaning forward. "Seriously, though, you seemed pretty happy before I walked in and tweaked you."

No sense hiding from Mila. She knew Hailey Beth better than anyone on the planet. "I just got a real nice text."

"From?"

Oh, who do you think would send me into an all-over glow? "Ben." She offered nothing else, and spoke

casually, too. Naturally, that only returned Mila to a prodding, irritating silence. Unable to tolerate the empty void, Hailey Beth groaned. "He's enjoying Mom's strawberry jam. And it just so happened that I am, too." With a flourish, Hailey Beth waved a hand toward the remains of her muffin. "I got a kick out of the similarities."

Now it was Mila who glowed. "HB, that's so cool! He reached out just to share a tidbit? That's so...tantalizing...so *not* like our reticent Ben Fisher!"

Hailey Beth heaved a gigantic sigh. "Oh, please. Calm down and come back to earth, my sister of romance. You're letting wedding butterflies and rainbows color your entire world. Speaking of, what's the latest on the nuptial front?"

"I'm so excited! Rochelle is coming into town from Chicago this weekend and she's staying at my place for a couple weeks so we can start alterations, plan details, and just hang out together, like we used to before she moved away."

The diversionary tactic worked like a charm. It was one thing for Mila to know Hailey Beth had a crush...since forever...on the youngest Fisher man, but to dwell on such a hopeless topic wasn't worthwhile. Hailey Beth was a BFF to Ben, and vice-versa. Things had been that way since their childhood, and there was nothing on the horizon set to change that fact.

Unlike Hailey Beth, Ben didn't want anything more.

Mila continued with wedding details and Hailey Beth tuned back in. Rochelle was Mila's best friend growing up; renewing ties would be great fun. "We'll finally have all four bridesmaids assembled in one place, at one time, for an epic shopping adventure."

"That we are. It's becoming very real for me, and for Phillip, bless his heart. He's been a rock."

"And so have you. Not a bridezilla to be found." Hailey Beth shared a smile. "Are you still leaning toward the teal lace cocktail dresses?"

"Definitely. I love the flounce of the skirt once you get all that tulle action going on beneath it. Those dresses have such a cool, vintage vibe."

"I agree. The cap sleeves and sweetheart neckline are very classy and Audrey Hepburn chic." Hailey Beth propped her elbows on the desktop, fully captured by the idea of love, and celebration, and marriage...and the dresses *were* divine.

"You like that choice?"

"Love it. I'm all in."

"I think a white pashmina shawl would polish it to perfection. You never know what the spring weather might hold, and the reception will be at Phillip's farm, beneath a silk tent, twinkle lights galore."

"I'm sold, I'm sold."

"You better be, oh, maid of honor." They exchanged grins. "You know, while we're out this weekend, you could pick up a second little cocktail number for the Founder's Day Celebration in a couple weeks."

"I could. If I had a date. And if I had any interest in actually attending the dance."

"Stop being antisocial."

"I'm very sociable, but I'm certainly not going to the dance solo."

"The dance is only a small part of an entire weekend of festivities, which you know. There's the carnival, the silent auction. You have to take part. It'll be fun."

Hailey Beth ignored the logic. "But the dance is the big event. I don't see a lineup of men pounding on the door asking me to join them."

"That's only because every available guy within a ten-mile radius knows you're off the market."

Hailey Beth reared back. "As if! I'm not off the market! I'm not involved with any—"

"Strawberry jam, anyone?" Mila cut in with decisiveness, and an arched brow.

Hailey Beth gaped.

"Think about it, HB. With that, I'm off. Sundae Afternoon calls.""

Before any type of a sputtering reply could be delivered, Mila was gone, vacating the back offices of the mercantile as swiftly as she had arrived, leaving Hailey Beth prickly and alert. Edgy.

Wistful.

In deliberate retaliation, she growled, muttering beneath her breath. "And so it goes in the life of HB Thomas. Sheesh." Irritated and piqued, she buried herself in the tasks at hand: running the family grocery store and packing away her feelings for one Benjamin Fisher.

2

Sunday morning, Ben left the farm an hour before his folks woke up and got ready for church. Kind of like a guilty thief skulking away from the scene of a crime.

But he *wasn't*.

He was twenty-four. He continued to live beneath his parents' roof for several reasons that had nothing to do with dependence or a lack of ambition. His father's health was a factor, as was an on-going need for physical assistance at the farm. Phillip ran the business side. Ben and Aaron contended with crop production, machine maintenance, home maintenance.

And, like Phillip, Aaron was set to be married before too long. Romance was blooming in Antioch, Indiana.

Hailey Beth's face drifted to the fore.

It was time to lay roots, or break free, and if he didn't break free, he'd have nothing to show for his life except for what he had been given by his family's name. There was nothing wrong with that, but he wanted something of his own. Something he created from his own calling. He rebuked HB's image with calm finality. She was one of his dearest and most trusted friends. Never, ever would he take a sledgehammer to such an important relationship by entertaining the idea of romance.

Ben enjoyed hands-on engagement with the earth,

with the home into which he had been born and raised. The farm was large—five bedrooms, an office, a huge dining room and living room. There was room to breathe. He enjoyed woodworking as well as mechanical tinkering—such things kept him sharp and focused. Centered, too.

Except for that blasted sermon from a few weeks ago.

Except for Hailey Beth. Why the sudden itch where she was concerned? An eminent separation, perhaps? The idea of not having her close by any longer?

Turning off that bout of internal static, Ben cranked the engine of his truck, easing down the gravel drive, heading toward the outskirts of town. Soon, he could see the gleaming brass spire of Antioch Christian Church, piercing a dark blue sky unfettered by clouds and kissed by a breeze that slid through the open window of his vehicle.

He strode into the communal space like thousands of times before. From there, the scariest walk of Ben's life took place along the length of a long, nondescript hallway dotted by doorways that led to classrooms, meeting spaces and offices. He knew every square inch of this place, but never had he approached its walls with such anxiety and uncertainty.

Lord, please help me, Ben beseeched. I want to serve and honor you. Always.

With all the work and effort required at the farm, should he even entertain this meeting and idealistic mission program? Should he throw his life into the ring of a service project about which he knew nothing?

He was ready for this scheduled meeting with Reverend Taylor. He wasn't signing up yet. Besides,

the very decision over which he agonized could easily be a polite but firm, 'No, thank you.' There might even be ways to support the church's outreach to Arkansas by donating tools, or money. This was a fact-finding mission. Nothing more.

A closed door marked by a plaque bore the Reverend's name. Shoring his resolve, Ben squelched his anxiety and knocked.

"Come on in."

Ben twisted the knob, stepping inside.

~*~

Ben sat through the services that followed, head spinning, unfocused and unabsorbing of the sermon that took place.

Reverend Taylor walked to the front of the church, ambled the aisles, friendly and warm.

Ben didn't hear a word. His attention centered on the pew before him. There, the Thomas family lined up as they had for generations. Ben couldn't take his eyes off Hailey Beth. As soon as services were over, he intended to pull her aside and talk. Like, seriously, at-length, from-the-heart talk. She was a terrific listener, a confidante he relied on, and from the first memories he possessed of HB, he counted her as one of his sweetest, dearest friends. He needed to lean on that relationship and his HB Sounding Board in a major way.

An ache settled hard against the depths of his chest. Thick waves of long brown hair tumbled against the lip of the dark wood pew, tempting his fingers into a twitch. Hailey Beth was angled away from him, but she looked straight ahead, attentive to the sermon. He required no direct access to envision large, rich brown

eyes, or the subtle curve of soft lips.

Ben called a halt to idealistic thought patterns, frowning as his gaze skimmed across her slender shoulders, along the lines of a diminutive figure clothed by a simple white button-down blouse, a black skirt. Crossed knees drew his attention to slim legs, leather heels, and an escalating need that pulsed just beneath his skin as unexpectedly...and powerfully...as the idea of being part of a missionary assignment far from home.

Ben forced his way through the conclusion of church, trying hard to engage, but failing. He prayed with sincerity for mercy and understanding, knowing he received it. All the same, he didn't like the idea of not being mentally present for worship.

When services finished, Ben ignored decorum. By and large, he bypassed socialization and homed in on HB, greeting friends only as necessary. Singularity of purpose led him to her side, guiding him to the moment when he stepped up to her from behind and slid a familiar hand against her arm, up to her shoulder.

"Hey, HB."

Did he imagine the rise of goose flesh along her skin? The way she trembled just slightly?

"Ben. Hey."

"Got a minute?" He murmured the words quietly, into the curve of her ear, trying to be unobtrusive as she concluded conversations with the Havershill family. She smelled like gardenias and jasmine. His nerve endings danced in response.

"For you? Always." Polite and kind, she concluded her mingling session.

Ben added his own greetings before leading

Hailey Beth away with a directing touch at her elbow. It always felt so good to have her at his side. In his corner. "Sorry to interrupt." He apologized as he led her toward his truck in the parking lot. "Can you break away for breakfast?"

Her brows furrowed. "Right now? What about breakfast with the families?"

"There's always supper, right?"

Hailey Beth nodded, her surprise continuing.

Suddenly, he realized how desperate he sounded for her company. How could he explain himself in a brief conversation? "I've got something on my mind."

"So it would seem." Her eye sparkled playfully.

"I'd like to run something past you, if that's OK."

Ben could have sworn he saw something in her eyes, felt something in the way she reached out, rested a hand on his forearm, that triggered a heated pulse. A pull.

"Just give me a second. Let me tell Mom and Dad I can't make breakfast."

Ben took hold of her free hand, delivered a squeeze. "I'll do the same with mine. Thanks, HB."

She stepped away, but turned back, looking over her shoulder, her concern visible. "Hey...you OK?"

Ben smiled his assurance, pulled in by her tenderness. "I will be now. Thanks for shuffling things. I appreciate it."

Her shoulders relaxed. "Not a problem."

~*~

Lesterfeld's was one of a handful of classic mom-and-pop restaurants that dotted the landscape of Antioch's town center. Ben guided Hailey Beth inside,

again with that warm hand at the back which stirred a pleasant tingle against her skin. She admired him anew, wondering how something as conservative as a simple gray dress suit could cause her pulse to pound. A royal blue tie, white button down, and spotless dress shoes spoke clearly of a man respectful of traditions and Sunday worship. He was clean shaven, his chestnut hair styled into thick, smooth waves. Bearing a strong-muscled frame, Ben had always struck Hailey Beth as a noble knight, a romantic guardian. She sighed inwardly, knowing she needed to either get over this infatuation thing, or be doomed to live in solitude for the rest of her life.

"There's an open table toward the back."

Distracted by her thoughts, Hailey Beth simply followed his lead and directing touch, settling across from him at a bistro table covered by red linen, cutlery, condiments, and menus.

Already knowing she'd opt for blueberry pancakes and sausage, Hailey Beth opened the laminated menu but paid only a cursory glance to the selections. Ben, she noticed, did much the same. She'd bet the family store on him ordering a western omelet.

Attention focused, Ben leaned forward, forearms propped against the tabletop. "So, I had a meeting with Reverend Taylor before church today."

"You did? About what?"

Their waitress delivered a pair of coffees, poured them each some iced water. Hailey Beth nabbed her mug and sipped. *Ah, bliss...*

"Mission work. Participating in the service program he talked about a few weeks ago. In Arkansas."

Shock struck home like a well-placed arrow. Next