

THE RESTORATION SERIES • 1

—♦— *The* —♦—
DANCE
A NOVEL

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AND GARY SMALLEY



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dan Walsh and Gary Smalley, *The Dance*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

ISBN 978-0-8007-2148-0

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13 14 15 16 17 18 19 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Gary, whose first book rescued my
marriage thirty years ago.

Dan Walsh



To all of my ten grandchildren,
because each one is growing closer to God.

Gary Smalley

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.

—James 1:19–20



Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away.

—Song of Solomon 8:7

1

Marilyn Anderson drove her car into the charming downtown section of River Oaks, Florida, holding her cell phone three inches out from her face. She hated talking on the phone with Jim when he was upset. She'd been dreading this day for months. And this call. Things like this should be said in person; she knew that. But she also knew that would never happen. She'd never muster up the nerve.

Sitting there at a stoplight, she looked at the phone. Jim was inside it. Him and his angry little voice.

"Please, Marilyn," Jim said. "I'm just getting back from a horrible lunch. Another tenant is canceling their lease. You have no idea the pressure I'm under right now. Can't this wait till later?"

Marilyn sighed. She wanted to yell back her reply but didn't dare. "No, it can't wait," she said.

"Well, it's going to have to. We'll talk about this when I get home. Love you, bye." He hung up.

Love you, bye? Did he really just say that?

The light turned green. Marilyn gently applied pressure to the gas pedal. *I have to do this. There's no other way.* Tears

flowed down her face, but she refused to turn the car around. To silence the guilt that had been hammering her all day, she blurted out, “God, I know you understand me. Even if no one else does, I know you do.”



Jim Anderson’s workday ended like so many others, right at 5:00 p.m. His daily routine had unfolded according to his precise intentions. He locked the doors of his office suite for the day and tried to suppress dark thoughts about his cash flow situation.

It had slowed to a trickle from where it was a few years ago. His company—Anderson Development, Inc.—was located on the outskirts of the quaint downtown area of River Oaks, Florida, an idyllic planned community built along the St. Johns River, not far from Sanford. You wouldn’t find this admission in any real estate brochure, but River Oaks had clearly been modeled after similar planned communities like Celebration near Disney World or the lovely town of Seaside in the Florida panhandle.

A few years after moving to River Oaks in the midnineties, Jim had started his own commercial real estate company. Business had boomed, and for years the money poured in. Right up until the bottom fell out of the market. Several businesses that leased properties from Jim had gone belly-up, and now another one was about to bite the dust. It was all he could do now to keep his nose above water.

For Jim, the name of the game was looking prosperous and successful while he scrambled to find new tenants to close the gaps. But no one wanted to get on board a sinking ship.

He drove his Audi A8 along River Oaks’s tree-lined streets. It was hard not to look the part living in a place like this. Marilyn had fallen in love with it from the start. Every home was an

architectural masterpiece. Most were built in old Southern tradition or, like the Andersons' house, with a decidedly Victorian flair. Large two-story homes with wraparound front porches, big windows, lots of ornamental trim. And, of course, every lot was professionally landscaped. Even the smallest homes were priced out of the reach of all but the upper middle class.

Jim arrived at Elderberry Lane, then turned down the one-lane service road running behind his house. All the homes had freestanding garages in back. Who wanted to see garage doors or grimy trash cans at the end of driveways? From the front, the homes looked pristine, immaculate, the epitome of neighborhood bliss.

After Jim clicked a button inside his car, the first of three garage doors lifted. Jim pulled his Audi into its spot and was instantly annoyed at the sight of his son Doug's little red Mazda. *Look at it. It's filthy . . . still filthy.* He'd been after his son to get that thing washed for a week. He grabbed his briefcase and suit jacket and shut the car door.

What had Marilyn fixed for dinner?

He walked through the utility room, surprised to find a laundry basket full of his clothes sitting on a counter beside the washer. Stopping to inspect, he lifted one of the shirts. By the wrinkles, he could tell it had been sitting there for hours. What was Marilyn thinking, leaving his clothes in the basket like that?

As he left the utility room and headed for the main house, he noticed his breakfast dishes still sitting on the glass table on the veranda by the pool. It was mid-July, but that morning had been unseasonably cool, so he'd asked Marilyn to set breakfast out there. He'd invited her to join him, of course, but she was busy doing . . . something.

Why were the dishes still there? She knew better.

He opened the glass patio door off the great room. “Marilyn?” he yelled. No answer. He noticed something else. Or, the absence of something. There were no dinner smells, no activity in the kitchen at all. As he walked inside, it was obvious dinner had not even been started. *What the heck?*

“Marilyn,” he yelled again, loud enough to be heard in the center rooms of the house. She must be in one of the bedrooms. He walked through the tiled hallways toward their master bedroom suite, the only bedroom downstairs. “Marilyn?”

Again, no answer.

The bed was made, sort of. The fancy pillows were on the floor, not stylishly arranged as they should be. He walked into the bathroom suite. She wasn’t there. He hurried out to the stairway, called her name again as he ascended. In all three upstairs bedrooms, there was no sign of her. No indication that anyone had even been up here today. That wasn’t unusual.

Of their three children, only Doug lived at home, and he stayed in the little apartment above the garage. Their daughter, Michele, lived in her dorm at college. And Tom, their oldest, was married with two children. He and Jean lived in Lake Mary, about twenty-five minutes away.

Jim came down the stairs, certain now something was wrong. Pulling out his phone, he checked to see if he had any messages. He did not. The only call from her was that quick chat right after lunch, when he couldn’t talk. But that was hours ago. He called Marilyn’s number, waited for her to pick up. It rang a few times, then he waited through her voice mail message. “Hey, where are you? I’m home, and you’re not here. Dinner’s not even started. What’s going on? Call me as soon as you hear this.”

Jim remembered the message center on a short wall beside

the refrigerator. He looked; something was written on the yellow pad. He hurried over, but it was only a note from Doug.

*Jason picked me up around 3. Eating dinner at his place.
Be home by 9.*

Jason, Jim thought. He couldn't stand that kid. Jason was into hip-hop, wore big baggy pants he had to hold up with one hand, his boxer shorts always sticking out for the world to see. Jim reread Doug's note. So, Doug left the house at three; that meant Marilyn hadn't been home then or he'd have told her instead of writing the note. Where was she? Maybe something had happened with one of Tom's kids, and she'd had to leave in a hurry. He quickly dialed Tom's home phone number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Jean. Is Marilyn there? She wasn't home when I got here. Are you okay, are the kids okay?"

"Everyone here is fine."

"Any chance Tom might know where she is?"

"I doubt it, he just called me. He's stuck in traffic on I-4."

"I can't figure out where she is."

"She's probably fine. Maybe she just stepped out to get something she needed for dinner."

"Dinner's not even started."

"Hmm. I don't know what to say. I'll ask Tom when he gets home. Call us when you find out so we don't worry."

"I will."

He hung up and called Michele. By this time, she'd be done with her classes for the day. She was a senior doing a summer semester at Southeastern University, a small college in Lakeland. Of course, he didn't get her. He never got Michele when

he called, always her voice mail. “Hey, Michele, it’s Dad. I’m looking for Mom. Got home from work and there’s no sign of her here at the house. I’m getting worried something might’ve happened to her. It’s not like her to leave without telling me where she’s going. Give me a call as soon as you get this.”

After hanging up, he made another pass through the house, this time looking for any signs of foul play. As he cleared each room, his heart beat faster. Something must have happened. Had she been abducted? Had there been a home invasion? It seemed unlikely; crime was almost unheard of in River Oaks. Other than the house being a little messier than usual, there were no signs of a break-in. None of the high-ticket items appeared to be missing.

But where was she?

The garage. It just dawned on him, he hadn’t seen her car there when he’d pulled in. He ran out to the garage to confirm it.

Marilyn’s car was gone.

Had she been in an accident? He hurried back to the message board by the fridge, where they kept a list of important numbers. He was just about to call the local emergency room when his cell phone rang. It was Michele. “Thanks for calling,” he said. “I’m getting a little frantic here. Your mom is missing. I think something may have happened to—”

“Dad, calm down,” she said in a gentle tone. “I’m sorry I’m the one that has to tell you.”

Jim’s heart sank. He collapsed on a bar stool and braced himself for bad news. “Tell me what?”

“Mom isn’t missing, Dad. She’s left you.”

2

What do you mean, she's left me?" Jim said.

"I think you know what it means, Dad."

"You mean like . . . for good? Like she's ending our marriage?"

"I don't know if it's for good. My guess is it's going to depend partly on what you do from here."

"What *I* do from here?" he repeated. "Michele, this is crazy. How long have you known about this?" Jim started pacing back and forth across the kitchen floor.

"You mean how long have I known she's been unhappy, or how long have I known she was planning to leave?"

"Don't play games with me, young lady."

"I'm not playing games, Dad. I know this is serious."

"Darn right it's serious. Where does your mother get off pulling a stunt like this?"

"It's not a stunt."

"You know what I mean."

Michele didn't reply. Jim walked over and opened the fridge, pulled out a glass pitcher of iced tea. "When did she tell you she was going to do this?"

"Last week some time. I think it was Thursday."

He poured himself a glass and sat back on the bar stool by the granite counter. “You don’t think that was something you should have called me about?”

“No, I don’t. Look, I don’t want to get stuck in the middle of this thing between you two, but if I have to be on somebody’s side, I think you know whose side it’s going to be.”

Anger flared inside him, but he had to keep his cool. He needed more information. Michele and her mother had spent a lot of time together lately planning Michele’s wedding, and they’d always been close, but he never imagined they’d gang up on him like this. “So who is it?”

“What?”

“Who is your mother seeing? There must be someone.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. She’s not seeing anyone else.”

“Do you know that for sure, Michele? Maybe she wouldn’t tell you something like that. It’s the only thing that makes any sense.” He thought he heard her laugh on the other end. “What?”

“You can’t think of any other reason why she’d leave you, Dad? Nothing comes to mind, nothing at all?”

“What are you talking about? No, I can’t. She’s got a gorgeous house, a nice car to drive. A huge closet full of clothes. Money’s a little tighter than usual these days, but we’re doing okay. We hardly ever argue.”

“Uh-huh . . . When was the last time you took her out?”

“What?”

“Took Mom out on a date. You know, even something simple like dinner and a movie.”

“I don’t know.”

“Right. When was the last time you took her for a walk, asked her questions, really listened to her? Even simple questions like how she was doing?”

“What are you talking about? You’re saying she left me because I don’t take her out on walks?”

Michele sighed audibly. “Look, Dad, I’m not going to be the mediator here. Your problems are way over my head. I love you, but . . . I’m just going to say it. I don’t have a hard time understanding why Mom walked out. Okay?”

Jim slid the bar stool away from the counter and stood. “She can’t just walk out. We’re both believers, for heaven’s sake! She doesn’t have biblical grounds for divorce.”

“Stop yelling at me, Dad.”

“I’m not yelling.”

“Yeah, you are. And if you don’t calm down, I’m going to hang up.”

“Listen, Michele, I don’t know where you get off talking to me like this. Who do you think is paying your way through college? Who’s paying for that dorm room and your food tab?”

“That’s great, Dad. Real helpful.”

“Well, I don’t know. How did I become the bad guy here all of a sudden?”

“It didn’t just happen all of a sudden.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m talking about your problems with Mom.”

Jim was sure that’s not what she meant, but he let it drop. “Do you know where she is?”

“I do, but I also know she doesn’t want to see you. Not now. If you go over there, it’ll make things worse. I’m serious.”

“Where is she?” He said the words as calmly as he could.

“Look, I’ve got to go. She told me she wrote you a note, maybe it’s in there. I’d rather you just read that. I think it’s on your dresser.” She paused. “Really, Dad, I’ve got to go.”

“Michele, wait.”

“I love you. I do.” She hung up.

Jim walked into the living room and looked at the stone fireplace. It was all he could do not to throw his phone across the room. Instead, he took a deep breath and put it back in his pocket. He headed back to their bedroom in search of that note, reeling from the absurdity of his conversation with Michele.

How could Marilyn do this? You don’t just leave someone, not like this. Not after twenty-seven years of marriage. He’d given her everything a woman could want. A great house, a solid family, stability. He’d kept himself in great shape. He’d never been unfaithful to her. Not that he didn’t have opportunities; a number of women had come on to him over the years. But he never went there. Not once.

She better not have gone there, he thought. But he couldn’t think of anything else that made sense. On the way to his dresser, he walked past their large walk-in closet. Curiosity got the better of him, so he stopped to see if Marilyn’s clothes were gone. What he saw surprised him. Her clothes seemed to all be there, hanging where they’d always been. Dresses, blouses, sweaters. A teakwood rack full of shoes. Had she taken anything with her?

He walked across the room to his dresser. The note wasn’t sitting on top. He started opening the drawers, found it sitting on a stack of folded socks. He lifted it out and carried it to an upholstered chair in the corner, next to a long window that opened to the pool area. His first name was written across the front of a plain beige envelope.

He sat down and opened it.

Jim,

I’m sure this has come as a shock to you. That it has is only one more thing to add to my list of reasons for leav-

ing. You don't love me, I'm sure of that now. I think I've known it for years. You don't care about me or the things I care about. You don't even bother to try. You probably have no idea how many times in recent months I've tried to talk to you about how unhappy I am, how unhappy I've been. It goes right over your head.

I've dropped hint after hint, clue after clue. None of it gets past that hard shell of yours. There's only room for one person in your life. Here's another clue . . . it's not me.

It all became clear to me last month at Margaret's daughter's wedding. I don't want to get into all the reasons why here, but let's just say by the time that wedding reception was over, I knew in my heart . . . I had to leave. If I'm ever going to find any measure of happiness in my life, before I'm too old to actually enjoy it, I have to go. Since that moment, I've just been biding my time, trying to work up the courage.

I also had to get some practical details together for this separation to work. And notice, I used the word "separation" here on purpose. At the moment, I'm not planning on divorcing you. I have no plans of "taking you to the cleaners" or ruining your precious financial life. In fact, I'm not making any long term plans at all. I just need some time away.

I need you to respect that. In fact, the worst thing you could do right now is to come after me and start pestering me to come home. I NEED this time away. I can honestly say, if you don't respect my desire to have this time, it may be the one thing that would cause me to make this separation permanent.

I mean that . . . sincerely. Let me have this time. Don't

call me, don't come to where I'm living. It's not far away (somewhere in River Oaks). I've taken just a small amount from our savings account. Just enough to get me set up for a few weeks. But I plan to be earning my own keep after that. I've gotten a job doing something you would never let me do, or even discuss.

I've asked Michele to be available for any necessary communication. Don't be mad at her or make her feel guilty about any of this. She hasn't done a thing to try to talk me into or out of this decision. By the way, I haven't talked to Tom or Jean or Doug about this. Or anyone in the church. I'll leave that to you (and I plan to be going to another church too).

I'm sorry for the hurt and anger I'm sure you already feel inside. But it can't begin to compare to the mountain of hurt you've been piling up in my heart for more years than I can count.

Believe it or not, I do still love you and will be praying for God to somehow work this situation together for good (although at the moment, I can't see how such a thing could be possible).

Marilyn

Jim let the pages fall in his lap. His face was hot with rage. He looked out the window then pulled out his phone. A moment later he was on the internet, logging into their bank account. He clicked on the drop-down menu to check the balance in their savings account.

He wondered, just how much did Marilyn consider a “small amount”?