

THE RESTORATION SERIES • 2

—◆— *The* —◆—  
PROMISE

A NOVEL

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To my youngest son, Michael,  
and daughter-in-law, Amy,  
whom God used to, literally,  
save my life and my marriage.

Gary



To my daughter and son,  
Rebekah and Isaac—  
the friendship we have  
now that you are both grown  
and on your own  
is one of my greatest treasures.

Dan

When Esau heard his father's words, he let out a loud and bitter cry. "Oh my father, what about me? Bless me, too!" he begged.

—Gen. 27:34 (NLT)



"But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."

—Matt. 7:26–27 (NIV)

# 1

Tom Anderson would point to the events of this day as the time his master plan began to unravel. Like many of his flawed schemes, this one, too, seemed like a good idea at the time. Tom wasn't quite twenty-seven years old but felt as if he'd already made enough bad decisions to last a lifetime. He was glad his folks were on their second honeymoon in Italy; he didn't want his father to ever hear about the mess he'd made of things.

It all started to fall apart when the glass door of the Coffee Shoppe flew open and a young man in a black hoodie came in.

Tom was sitting pretty close to the front doors. He always did; it was his table. It had an outlet nearby for his laptop. Normally, he didn't pay attention to people coming through the door, but he couldn't help but notice this guy. The hoodie caught his eye. It was the end of April in central Florida, already hot enough to make you wonder if they'd be skipping spring this year and jumping right into summer.

Everyone else in the café wore short sleeves, including Tom. Most wore sandals and flip-flops too. He glanced over his shoulder at the kid, now standing in line. An elderly man was at the counter in front of him, placing his order. The kid's head

swiveled on his shoulders, his eyes scanning the room. Taking in the customers first, then the exit, then the cashier. Back to the exit, then another look at the customers. On this second pass, he looked right at Tom for a moment.

Tom knew then something bad was about to happen.

It wasn't the hoodie so much, but the look on the kid's face. Dead serious, with fierce eyes. He wore baggie jean shorts, the bottoms hung down way past his knees, blue boxers sticking out. That's when Tom saw it. Poking out of his waistband. Something black.

A gun handle.

The Coffee Shoppe was set up so that most of the customers couldn't easily see the counter area because it was blocked by the coffee station. Tom's angle by the front door allowed him to see both sides of the store.

The young man stepped up to the counter. Tom looked at the teenage girl in uniform behind the cash register. Her eyes showed she felt something was wrong, but she gave the programmed spiel. Big smile. "Welcome to the Coffee Shoppe. We're glad you're here. Can I take your order today?"

The kid pulled out the gun and shoved it in her face. He didn't yell, but Tom was close enough to hear what he said. "Give me your money. All of it, or you're dead."

"What?"

"Don't ask me what. You heard me."

"I'm not allowed to open the drawer unless someone buys something."

"Are you kidding me? Open that drawer now or I start shooting."

Tears filled the girl's eyes. "Okay, I will," she said quietly.

"Quick." The kid kept the gun pointed in her face but turned around. So far, none of the other customers seemed to know what was going on. Tom pretended to stay busy on his laptop.

When the kid faced the girl again, Tom looked at him then at the girl. She looked terrified.

“That’s right,” the kid said. “Put it all in that bag.” The two employees at the other end of the counter saw what was happening, their faces in shock.

One of them, a blond-haired guy named Tim, took a few steps toward the girl. “Don’t hurt her, man. She’s doing what you want.”

The kid pointed the gun at him. “Shut up and stay there or you die.”

Tim held up his hands. “I’m not going anywhere. Staying right here.”

The kid in the hoodie stuck the gun back in the cashier’s face. “Hurry up.”

“I’m almost done.”

This exchange was a little louder. Some of the customers nearby started paying attention. This thing could get out of hand in a hurry. Tom had studied martial arts all the way through middle school and high school. He hadn’t done a thing with it since then. He was totally out of shape and squishy around the middle. But a handful of moves played in slow motion through his head. He could stop this kid, take away his gun.

He knew he could. But he had to act now.

*Lord help me*, he prayed, wondering if God was even listening to him these days. Slipping out of his loafers, he snuck up directly behind the robber. In a deep voice, he said “Yo” behind the kid’s left ear.

“Huh?” The thief turned toward the sound.

Tom quickly shifted to his right side and struck him in the neck, just below the ear. The boy yelled in pain. Tom kicked the back of his left knee, then spun around, sweeping both legs out from under him. The boy flew backward, slamming his head against the tile floor. The gun fired as it fell out of his hand. It

was pointing away from the crowd, but people screamed. Tom bent to one knee and punched the kid full-force at his chest. The kid winced in pain and a panicked look came over his face. Tom jumped over the thief and kicked the gun across the floor.

He looked back at the kid, who somehow managed to jump to his feet. Before Tom could deliver another blow, the thief ran out the door, limping down the sidewalk. He still moved faster than Tom had run in years.

“Somebody call 911,” Tim yelled.

“I just did,” the manager yelled back as he stepped out from the back office. “I called as soon as I heard the shot. The police are on their way.”

The manager ran past Tom out the front door, looked down the sidewalk. He stuck his head back inside. “The guy’s gone,” he said. “Somebody tell me what just happened.”

As relief swept over the crowd, someone started clapping. Soon everyone joined in. Tom walked back to his table to put on his shoes. They all pointed at him, telling the manager what he’d just done.

He was the hero.

People came up, shook his hand, patted him on the back, saying they’d never been so scared in all their lives. The older gentleman, the one who’d been at the counter just ahead of the robber, told the manager it was like something out of a Jackie Chan movie. “Never saw anything like it.”

“Anyone get a video on their phones?” Tim asked.

Thankfully, no one had. The manager walked up and shook Tom’s hand. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“That’s okay,” Tom said, realizing what came next. “I’m late for something. I’ve got to go.” He closed his laptop lid, unplugged the cord, and put both in his brief bag.

“But the police are on their way,” the manager said. “I’m sure they’ll want to talk with you.”

“You’re a hero,” one of the customers, a college-age kid, said. “I just called the local news. They’re on their way.”

“Thanks, everyone,” Tom said, not looking anyone in the eye. “Sorry. Gotta go.” He hurried toward the door. Just as he opened it, he looked back. The college kid was lifting his cell phone in Tom’s direction. He was taking a video! Tom covered his face with his right hand as he ran down the sidewalk. When he got in his car, he put it in reverse and stayed in reverse until he was two stores away, so no one could take down his license plate.

When he’d passed two traffic lights down the road, he saw a police car with its siren blaring headed in the opposite direction toward the café. As he sat at a red light, a second police car came flying through the intersection right behind the first.

That was close, he thought. Too close. He was shaking all over. Calm down, he told himself. Breathe slowly. You’re okay.

He flicked his turn signal on, deciding then to head south toward the nearest Books-A-Million, one town over from Lake Mary where he lived. He’d get there an hour earlier than his normal routine today, but what choice did he have?

Tom split most of his time each day between two coffee shops and a bookstore. Of the three places, he liked the Coffee Shoppe the best. But now he’d have to find another place that offered free wifi to spend the first block of each day. No way he could show his face back there now. Not for a few weeks anyway, maybe a month.

He couldn’t afford to be anybody’s hero. He was just grateful the whole incident had happened so fast and that no one caught it on camera. The last thing he needed was his face showing up on YouTube. And there was no way he’d have stuck around to be interviewed by the local news. For one thing, the kid in the hoodie might see it and seek him out, looking for some payback.

But the thing that worried him most was that his wife, Jean, might see it.

Then she'd know.

Tom wasn't where he was supposed to be right now, where she assumed he would be and should be this time of day.

If Jean heard that, she'd soon find out the whole thing. She'd start asking him direct questions, and he couldn't lie then. The only reason he was pulling this off so far was that he'd been playing on her assumptions. His own version of "don't ask, don't tell."

If Jean found out, soon his whole family would find out, including his dad.

There was no way he could let that happen.

## 2

Tom looked at the digital clock on his dashboard as he pulled in to his third stop of the day. Another local coffee place that competed with Starbucks, called the Java Stop. Compared to his other haunts, this one was nice and quiet. Great for guys like him, not so great for the owners. He wasn't sure how long this place would make it.

Hopefully long enough for him to find a new job. "Any day now" had been his mantra, repeated daily to ward off the unrelenting doubts. When he found another job, all his problems would go away. That was the idea.

But that's not what had happened. He could hardly believe it, but five months had already passed since he'd lost his job, two months after Michele and Allan's wedding.

As he got out of his car, he tried to stop thinking about it. The whole thing still made him mad. Or was he just hurt because of the way it happened? A vicious betrayal. It was difficult to sort through the jumble of emotions stirring inside. Add to that the confusion and guilt he felt from the stockpile of lies he'd created trying to keep this masquerade intact.

Then there was the struggle with his father. He wasn't sure which of the two things bothered him more. Tom was happy

for his dad, really. And for his mom. The two of them were back together and doing so well. He looked at the digital clock again. They should be arriving in Italy any time now to start their romantic second honeymoon.

Good for them. No, really. He was glad.

He just wished there was more of his father to go around. His dad had been so completely focused on winning back his mom that he'd completely ignored his promise to Tom to change what was broken in *their* relationship. They were supposed to start having regular heart-to-heart talks right after Michele's wedding; real conversations, man to man.

But they'd only had one. Just one. A few weeks before the wedding.

After that big dance at the reception, his parents had reconciled. His dad moved back into the house. They started going to a new church together. Got some counseling. Joined a couples' small group. Made some new friends. He was happy for them. Really.

But Tom got dropped.

He had to walk through this whole job loss thing by himself. As with every other big juncture in his life, he had no father to talk to. In that first couple of weeks, he'd tried at least a dozen times to connect with his dad; it never worked out. But then, what if they had gotten together, what would Tom have said? He wasn't even sure he'd have been able to tell his dad everything that happened. Not the way it happened, nor how sick he'd felt inside about it, nor his plan to keep the news from Jean until he'd found another job. He and his dad just didn't have that kind of relationship.

Tom knew he couldn't have borne the weight of his dad's disappointment. It wasn't just the words his father would have said (and he'd have said plenty); he had this way of looking at you that instantly made you feel so small and unworthy. Like

you were almost disgusting. Like you'd ruined what little hope he'd ever had for your success.

Tom was almost certain that if his dad heard the whole story, he'd put all the blame on Tom for the mess he was in. How could he have let this happen? Why hadn't he fought harder to keep his job or find a way to turn the situation around? Better yet, if Tom had followed his father's advice and gotten that IT certification right after he'd graduated from college, he wouldn't have lost his job in the first place.

Tom had spent his entire childhood, his teen years, and now the first phase of his adult life trying to win the approval and affections of a man who somehow managed to remain continually just out of reach.

Tom had never measured up to Jim Anderson's expectations, and he knew he never would.

As he walked through the glass doors of the Java Stop, he felt like he was climbing out of a deep and slippery hole. It helped to be greeted by pleasant music, soothing colors on the walls, and the fragrant aroma of fresh-brewed coffee. Glancing to the far west corner, he managed a smile. His table was vacant. But he tensed when he saw Fred Messing sitting nearby, his laptop plugged into the same outlet Tom always used.

Fred was okay, he just talked too much. Tom came here to get things done, not to yak. And Fred was in the same boat he was, another out-of-work IT guy. So they were essentially competing for the same job. Fred had started coming in about a week ago and seemed to think it was perfectly okay to compare notes and share each other's leads. "May the best man win," Fred had said yesterday, big smile on his face.

The problem was, since Tom had been job hunting for almost five months, he'd already sent resumes to all of Fred's "new" leads. Fred wanted Tom to share all his old leads and the handful of new spots Tom found. Tom got nothing useful from Fred

in return. Fred acted like the two of them should become good friends, maybe get their wives and kids to meet. “Let’s do a cookout sometime.”

That wasn’t going to happen.

The most obvious reason was that Jean had no idea Tom had lost his job. The other reason? After being betrayed by someone he thought was a good friend at work—the guy responsible for Tom losing his job—Tom wasn’t too up on the idea of making new “friends.”

“Tom,” Fred said, “there you are, buddy.” Fred was also a Christian. And thoroughly optimistic that both of them would get great jobs any minute.

“I’m believing they’ll be better than the jobs we had before,” he’d said. Tom remembered being like that. He’d spent the first five or six weeks like that.

But it was hard to stay irritated at a guy with a smile like Fred’s. Tom knew he was just being cynical. “Hey, Fred, how are you?” Tom set his laptop bag on the seat. “Let me go up to the counter and pay my daily rent. You watch this for me?”

“Sure thing,” Fred said.

Daily rent, he thought. A Fred expression for the coffee they bought each day. It paid for the privilege of sitting in the A/C and mooching the free wifi. Fred, a big man, at least around the middle, always paid a little more rent than Tom. Tom never saw Fred come away from the counter without a pastry or at least an oatmeal cookie. The first time Fred noticed Tom noticing this, Fred had said, “Fortunately, I’m not as fat as I look.” Fred didn’t explain what he meant, and Tom didn’t ask.

When Tom came back to the table, carrying his latte, Fred said, “Hey, did you hear about all the excitement over at the Coffee Shoppe this morning?”

“What? No.” Tom feigned disinterest as he sat and took out his laptop and charger.

“The girls at the counter were talking about it when I came in. Somebody posted it on Facebook or something. They got robbed. Well, almost. Apparently, some masked avenger swooped in and almost knocked the guy out.”

“Masked avenger?”

“Well, not really. But a customer really did jump in and stop the guy, sent him packing. Took away his gun, and the robber ran out without a dime. When I went up to refill my coffee, I overheard the manager here talking on the phone, guess he called the owners over there to find out more about it.”

“What’d he say?”

“Didn’t hear everything, but the owner at the Coffee Shoppe said they felt sure they’d catch the guy pretty fast. The stupid kid wasn’t wearing any gloves, so they got some great fingerprints off the gun and the doors.”

Tom was relieved to hear that.

“Everyone’s buzzing about this mystery guy who broke up the robbery. Looks like he left in a hurry before the police arrived. That’s what superheroes do, you know.”

“Anyone know who he was?”

“Nope. Apparently, he goes there all the time, but the guy’s real quiet, keeps to himself. Sounds like the newspeople showed up and did a bunch of interviews with the customers and staff. Should be on TV later this evening. I’ve been checking their websites but haven’t seen anything about it yet. Wonder what this guy’s story is.”

“So would you have stayed around if that was you?”

“You kidding? Sure I would. Well, to be honest, I’m not sure I’d have the guts to confront a robber like that. But if I did, you bet I’d have hung around. I’d let it slip out when those reporters questioned me that I’m an out-of-work IT guy, just doing my civic duty. You can’t buy publicity like that. People love hero stories. It’s going to be all over the news. Some hiring manager

might see the interview, and there you go—my job hunt would be over.”

There you go, Tom thought.

He sighed thinking about it. Most likely if he had stayed, he'd get so uptight he'd forget to mention he was out of work. He'd still be out of work after his fifteen minutes of fame came and went. Only his situation would be much worse. Life as he knew it would cease, because Jean would find out he had been lying to her all these months, pretending to head off to work every day.

That thought stirred fear inside him. There'd be no way to contain the firestorm it would create. Things could get so bad, his parents might even cut short their Italy trip. He had to slam the door on these thoughts . . . now.

Behind them lay a dark hallway full of more doors. Each one leading to a room that was darker still.