

The Restorer

(Sword of Lyric Series Book 1)

By Sharon Hinck

Chapter 1

The attic hideaway was all Mark's idea. He meant to be helpful, and I admit he had good reason to be worried about me.

I couldn't seem to cope with the little things anymore—scrubbing jam off the kitchen counter for the millionth time, carrying decaying science projects out to the garbage, answering the constant questions from two teens and two grade-schoolers. Was I the only person in the house who knew where to find clean socks?

Self-help books told me to regroup—find time alone to feed my soul. But when I'd sit at the kitchen table with my journal, the children would fly toward me like metal filings to a magnet.

Mark had noticed how often I'd been snapping at the kids. More troubling than my short temper, a heavy fog had settled on me. It pressed down with growing weight and separated me from everyone else. I didn't have the energy to care anymore.

One day, in his typical determination to fix things, Mark pulled me toward our back hallway. "Susan, I have a plan."

He must not have heard my groan because he kept talking.

"I can build some pull-down stairs into the attic. We'll clean it up, and you can have a place to get away once in a while." Mark had the remodeling gleam in his eyes. He was a gladiator in that moment—about to charge into his favorite arena. All his projects resulted in

eager whacking and pounding until walls or tiles surrendered to him. Then he'd shake his drill over his head and roar in victory.

His infectious energy teased a smile from me. "A space off-limits to the kids? Maybe you're right. I could leave my journal out and not find it doodled on with gel pens the next time I opened it."

I couldn't muster much faith that a hideaway would end my cranky outbursts or cure the malaise swallowing me. But Mark never met a problem that couldn't be solved by a trip to the hardware store. So I surrendered to a weekend of Sheetrock dust, noise, and a very enthusiastic husband.

Mark's weekend undertaking took a month to complete, which was a better time ratio than most of his projects. The Saturday he finished framing in the trapdoor, a hint of anticipation stirred in me. I climbed the new pull-down stairs and looked around. Mark had nailed plywood over the insulation and wired a light bulb with a dangling chain. He had salvaged an over-stuffed chair from our basement and squished it through the opening. It sat in a pool of light under the dusty rafters, and a small table next to it completed the inviting refuge. A faint golden glow fought its way through the dirty windows on either end of the long attic, casting shadows on storage boxes and remnants of past remodeling projects.

A flicker of hope ignited in my tired heart. This was a place where I could find my way back from the dark vortex that was draining my joy. I backed down the steps.

Mark grinned at me, waiting for my response. Sawdust stuck in clumps to his flannel shirt and wavy blond hair. Band-Aids covered several of his fingers. Tools of every shape and size filled the hallway.

The flicker in my chest kindled to a warm glow. “Thank you.” I hugged him with a bit of desperation. “It means a lot that you wanted to do this for me.”

He squeezed back.

“Hey, Dad. This is cool. Can I see?” Jon ran past us and scampered up the narrow treads.

Mark released me, grabbed our nine-year-old, and swung him away from the steps. “Wait a minute. We’re going to have a family meeting.” Words to inspire terror in our children.

A few minutes later, Mark had chased the kids off the phone, away from the computer, and into the living room. Even with our bare wood floor and sparse furniture, our small living room felt crowded with all six of us, especially because the kids got bigger every time I blinked.

As usual, my two teens fidgeted on the couch. “Mom, I have to be at Amanda’s house in fifteen minutes.” Karen checked her watch.

She slept in until one, and *now* she was in a hurry?

“Is this going to take long?” Jake’s lanky frame sprawled over the arms of the couch. He cracked his knuckles and yawned.

I clenched my teeth and smiled. “As long as it takes.”

“Jon took the good pillow!” Seven-year-old Anne pulled it out from under his perch on the floor.

He crashed backwards and pulled the piano bench down with him. “Did you see that?” Jon yelled.

Mark took the pillow away from both of them and cleared his throat. “Your mom’s been stressed out lately, so I built her a space where she can be alone. But we need to have some rules.” He smiled at me with the post-construction glow in his cheeks.

I let my heart melt for a second. Rugged lines, warm smile, gentle and honest as the day is long, Mark was no longer the lean, melancholy youth I met in college. Marriage had agreed with him.

“Ouch!” Anne slammed her Barbie to the floor. “Jon poked me. Tell him to stop poking me.”

Mark grabbed Jon’s shoulders and slid him along the floor several yards.

Jake used the distraction to fiddle with his keys. “I’m gonna be late for work. Can’t you have this meeting after I leave?”

“No!” I took a deep breath. “My new room is off-limits. *No one* is allowed up there. If an emergency happens, you can call through the door for me, but you can’t come up. And no interrupting me unless it’s a real emergency. Like someone bleeding. A lot.”

“We got it.” Jake slouched to his feet. “No blood, no interruptions. No problem. Gotta go.”

The kids scattered, and Mark looked at me with a slightly bewildered expression.

Affection made my lips twitch. He could manage complex projects at work and oversee a large staff, but family meetings always left him dazed and confused. No wonder my own little neurons were drooping from the effort to keep up with the dizzying pace of our family life. That was probably why I was listless these days. I moved into the circle of Mark’s arms. Our marriage was my biggest motivation to fight off this lethargy. The cloud was pulling me away from him, and that terrified me.

I felt a tug at my sweater.

“Mommy, don’t you like us anymore?” Anne’s face tilted up at me.

Ouch. Might as well wear a scarlet *W* on my shirt, for World's Worst Mom. "Sweetie, I love you all to pieces. But you know how sometimes you need a time-out when you get crabby? I need a place to have a time-out sometimes."

That must have made sense to Anne; she giggled and ran off.

If only my guilt would run off with her. I had a great family, a cozy home, and everything any sane person could wish for. I used to thrive on the delightful chaos of family life. Yet for months, the gray fog had grown thicker. My first thoughts in the morning centered on how soon I could get everyone off to school so I could go back to bed. I forced myself through laundry and car pools and uninspired suppers. With every reason to be happy, I wasn't, and that left me with piercing shame.

Since Mark was home to run interference, it seemed like the perfect time to initiate my new retreat. I grabbed my Bible and journal and climbed the ladder into the attic, determined to dig out the spiritual secrets that would snap me out of this.

Decades of dust raised a wet wool smell from the eaves, and beams threatened to crack my skull if I straightened up in the wrong place. But in my imagination, I was at a luxurious retreat center instead of a cramped attic. I curled up in my upholstered chair to read the story of Deborah. In an era when women's roles were narrowly defined, people came to sit at her feet and hear her words. In my world, I solved disputes about who got the good pillow or the longest french fry. She guided people in life and death matters. She even had a tree named for her. And when no one in Israel had the guts to defend the people, she shamed the leaders by offering to ride into battle herself.

I opened my journal and jotted down a few thoughts about the woman of God I wanted to become. My pencil sketched a tree with myself beneath it. The figure was a good likeness. Long

thin form, long sallow face, long straight hair. In my mind's eye, I was still the sunny blonde of my childhood, but I forced myself to darken my hair in the drawing to represent the color it had actually become in adulthood—dull brown. I added a sign on the tree, *The Oak of Susan*.

As I thought of Deborah's story, I penciled a figure in armor approaching the tree.

A scraping sound under the eaves interrupted me. For a second, I thought I saw something move in the shadows.

I slammed my journal closed. "Jake, I told you no one is allowed up here." I stood, keeping my head bent to avoid the rafters as I walked out of my circle of light and deeper into the attic.

Boxes, odd sticks of furniture, and my grandma's old sewing mannequin cluttered the edges of the room. I didn't sew but could never bear to part with it, so its headless form remained wedged under the roofline. I looked behind it and around a stack of boxes but didn't see anyone.

Maybe I wasn't just going through middle-age angst. Maybe I was starting to see things. Coughing from the dust I'd stirred up, I retreated to my chair. I opened my Bible again and found my spot.

A metallic clunk reverberated far back in the shadows.

My skin prickled into high alert. "Mark, is that you?"

"Honey! I'm taking the kids to the park!" Mark's muffled yell floated from the hallway below.

With a nervous glance at the dark angles behind the mannequin, I scurried to the square opening in the floor.

Mark's beaming face tilted up from the hallway.

At first I thought he was smiling at me, but then I realized he was admiring the carpentry around the trapdoor.

“Are the kids down there with you?” I asked.

“Just Jon and Anne. Karen’s at Amanda’s house, remember? And Jake left for work right after our meeting. His car’s gone. We’ll probably stop for cheeseburgers on the way home. What would you like?”

“The usual. But Mark—”

“Love ya!” He hollered over his shoulder as he headed down the hall. Hangers rattled in the closet. At least the kids remembered to grab their jackets. Anne’s high-pitched voice was chattering nonstop, as usual, and Mark’s low laugh rumbled just before the front door closed. The house settled into heavy silence.

I dusted off my knees and looked back at my chair and the circle of light, which seemed less inviting now as shadows encroached from all directions.

“Those noises must have carried through the ductwork or something.” The sound of my voice was reassuring, so I kept talking. “Let’s not be crazy here. I have my attic retreat. Mark’s taking care of the kids. I’m going to dig in and figure out what’s been wrong with me lately.”

As soon as I stopped speaking, I heard something new.

Voices.

The words were garbled, but the voices seemed to be arguing. Karen probably had forgotten to turn off the radio in her room again, but in the weird way sound travels in an empty house, the voices seemed to come from the boxes in the darkest end of the attic.

There was no way to concentrate on my devotions until I figured out where those sounds were coming from. I descended the pull-down ladder and did a quick search of the house. No

radios were playing, but I did find our emergency flashlight plugged into the wall by the washing machine. I grabbed it and clambered back into the attic.

Good grief. I finally had precious time and space to myself, and I was wasting it. On the other hand, there were quite a few old boxes stuffed under the eaves. It might be fun to see some of the treasures we had abandoned. I pulled out the mannequin, which wobbled precariously until I braced it against some other rafters. I slid out a cardboard box of tax records and discovered a plastic tub. The words “Dress Up” were scrawled across the lid in faded marker.

Fingers of nostalgia tickled me. That bin had once been a favorite of all the kids. Anne and Jon would probably still enjoy it if I hauled it down the stairs. Prying off the lid revealed assorted hats, capes, and sequined recital costumes. Near the bottom rested a collection of plastic weapons. For many years, Jake’s career goal had been to become a knight in shining armor—until he learned that not many companies were hiring knights. The gray shield brought back memories of battles enacted in our front yard. Sitting back on my heels, I hugged the shield to my chest and felt an ache of loss pierce me. What had happened to those whimsical days?

That was when I heard the whispers. I whipped my head around and scanned the whole attic. My hand tightened on the flashlight. *Keep breathing. This is ridiculous.* I was alone in the attic. Alone in the house. An overtired mom in a quiet neighborhood who probably needed a nap.

Or maybe I needed one of those antianxiety medicines they advertised on television. A semi-hysterical giggle slipped from my throat.

“Stop it.” I delivered the order in my best mom’s-in-charge voice. Maybe I had accidentally bumped the kid’s old spy walkie-talkies, and they were making the sounds. Humming to block out the whispers, I set the flashlight on the floor and dug deeper into the

storage bin. I rummaged through masks, rabbit ears, and flannel super hero capes, and then lifted out a sword.

The flashlight bounced enough light off the rafters for me to see the tooth marks in the plastic hilt. The gray sheath was cracked in several places.

The weapon made me think of the Bible story I had been studying. “Wake up, Deborah! . . . Arise, O Barak,” I quoted, pulling the sword from the sheath.

In that instant the air became thick with pressure. My breath caught in my lungs. My ears roared as forces surged together under the eaves. The attic crackled with threads of electricity. The rough plywood under my knees seemed to shift. Then everything exploded. Windows shattered. The lightbulb flickered and died. The room seemed to fill with dark smoke or dust.

Underneath and inside the chaos, I curled around myself and squeezed my eyes shut as the energy grabbed and shook me. In spite of my instinctive jerk away, an invisible hand held me—as if I had gripped an electric fence and couldn’t let go. Lightning ran through my nerves. Terror ignited every cell in my body. Then I was beyond awareness, part of the swirling darkness.

As abruptly as it seized me, the energy gave me one last shake and dropped me.

