



Return

Karen
KINGSBURY
with Gary Smalley



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC. ~ CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS



Visit Tyndale's exciting Web site at www.tyndale.com

Visit Karen Kingsbury's Web site and learn more about her Life-Changing Fiction at www.KarenKingsbury.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Baxter Family Drama is a trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Return

Copyright © 2003 by The Smalley Publishing Group, LLC, and Karen Kingsbury. All rights reserved.

Cover photograph of man copyright © 2003 by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Cover illustration copyright © 2003 by David Henderson. All rights reserved.

Karen Kingsbury photo copyright © 2009 by dandavisphotography. All rights reserved.

Gary Smalley photo copyright © 2001 by Jim Lersch. All rights reserved.

Cover designed by Jennifer Ghionzoli

Interior designed by Zandrah Maguigad

Edited by Karen Ball

Published in association with the literary agency of Alive Communications, Inc., 7680 Goddard Street, Suite 200, Colorado Springs, CO 80920, www.alivecommunications.com.

Some Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation, copyright © 1996. Used by permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188. All rights reserved.

Most Scripture used in this book, whether quoted or paraphrased by the characters, is taken from the *Holy Bible*, New International Version®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imaginations or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of either the authors or the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kingsbury, Karen.

Return / Karen Kingsbury with Gary Smalley.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8423-8289-2 (sc)

1. September 11 Terrorist Attacks, 2001—Fiction. 2. Victims of terrorism—Fiction. 3. New York (N.Y.)—Fiction. 4. Indiana—Fiction. I. Smalley, Gary. II. Title.

PS3561.14873 R48 2003

813'.54—dc21

2003011140

New repackage first published in 2009 under ISBN 978-1-4143-3302-1

Printed in the United States of America

15 14 13 12 11 10 09

7 6 5 4 3 2 1



What Readers Are Saying about

K A R E N K I N G S B U R Y ' S

Books

"[These] stories are so profound. I laugh, cry, thank God for his mercies, and most of all thank God for his son, Jesus our Lord."

—Carmen

"Karen Kingsbury truly has a talent to write about real life and what we go through. She doesn't candy coat it. It's the real thing." —Karla

"You have reached into our family's hearts with precious characters that only the Lord could have placed into your mind to write about. You are, and always will be, a part of my heart—and bookshelf!"

—L.

"Karen Kingsbury's books have helped me understand the role and significance of Christian fiction in the life of a young, married, African-American woman with children. Before discovering her books, I only read 'regular' romance. Her books have changed my attitude about reading significant fiction that changes my thinking, my married life, and my Christian way of handling marriage and life." —Gwendolyn

"Karen Kingsbury's inspirational books have been a joy to read. They make you laugh, they make you cry, and in the end they leave you with hope!"

—Cindy

"I fell in love with these stories and I'm recommending them to all my friends; they're wonderful!"

—Tricia

"If only I could put into words what these books have done for my life. Between you and Gary Smalley, I believe I have renewed a dying spirit within myself and in my marriage."
—**B.S.**

"I have laughed and cried with your characters and have felt drawn to pray for those in the same circumstances. I figure any book that gets a person to pray for another must be great."
—**A.M.**

"My husband is equally hooked on your books. It is a family affair for us now! Can't wait for the next one."
—**Angie**

"Recently I've made an effort to find GOOD Christian writers, and I've hit the jackpot with Karen Kingsbury!"
—**Linda**

"Karen's books stir my heart and remind me of what's important in life. She has such a gift. I've read every single one and can't wait for the next!"
—**Trisha**

"Thank you for your beautifully written books. They make me laugh, they make me cry, and they fill my heart with a love that can only be God once again touching my heart and my soul."
—**Natalie**

"Okay, where's the next one? I know it's sitting in a warehouse somewhere and you are making us wait! (Just kidding!) Karen, there isn't a person I know who doesn't read your books and hold you and your family in their prayers!"
—**Rachel**




TO OUR PRECIOUS FAMILIES,
who continue to give us countless reasons
to celebrate God's faithfulness.

AND TO OUR GRACIOUS LORD,
who has, for now,
blessed us with these.

AUTHORS' NOTE

The Redemption series is set mostly in Bloomington, Indiana. Some of the landmarks—Indiana University, for example—are accurately placed in their true settings. Other buildings, parks, and establishments will be nothing more than figments of our imaginations. We hope those of you familiar with Bloomington and the surrounding area will have fun distinguishing between the two.

The New York City settings combine real observation with imaginative re-creation.



CHAPTER ONE

REAGAN DECKER'S HANDS shook as she picked up the telephone and dialed.

The number was so familiar once, back in a time that seemed forever ago, before her world tilted hard off its axis and stayed that way.

She waited, her heart pounding in her throat.

One ring . . .

What will I say? How will they take the news?

Two rings . . .

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Baxter?" Reagan froze.

"Yes?" A slight pause. "Can I help you?"

"Uh . . ." *She doesn't recognize my voice. I must be crazy to call after so long.* "This is Reagan. Reagan Decker."

"Reagan . . . my goodness. It's . . . been a long time, dear."

Luke's mother sounded strange, as though the mention of Reagan's name had cast a shadow over the moment. Reagan considered saying a quick few words and then getting off. But that would never do. This was a call she'd had to make for one reason alone.

She couldn't hide from Luke Baxter forever.

"Mrs. Baxter, I need to talk to Luke, please." Reagan squeezed her eyes shut. A year earlier she'd been quick-witted and outgoing, but not anymore. The spark was gone from her voice. Luke's mother had to notice. She drew a determined breath. "I have something to tell him."



His past had sprouted legs and was chasing him.

That had to be it. Luke had no other way to describe the breathless anxiety marking so much of his time. Sometimes he could almost hear footsteps pounding the ground behind him, and on days like that he would even turn around. As though he might see a person or a being, whatever was after him. But no one was ever there.

The feeling was always accompanied by memories, so Luke finally convinced himself the thing chasing him was nothing more ominous than his past.

A past that colored today and tomorrow and kept him inches ahead of a suffocating fog, a fog in which his new freethinking life was all but impossible.

At first the feeling had hit him every few days, but now it was almost constant. This morning it was worse than ever. Throughout Economics and Political Science and now in Modern History, it made Luke so restless he couldn't concentrate.

The professor was diagramming something on the board, but all Luke could see were images of himself and his family the last time they'd been together before September 11. Little Maddie holding her hands up to him. "Swing me, Uncle Luke, swing me." His parents arm in arm in the background. "How's school, Luke? Have you heard from Reagan?"

With broad strokes, the professor ran his eraser over the board, and the images in Luke's head disappeared. The man turned to the class and started talking, but Luke heard Reagan's

voice instead, the way he'd heard it that awful night when everything changed forever.

"It's okay, Luke; I'll call him back tomorrow . . . it's okay . . ."
But she never had the chance.

Luke squeezed his eyes shut. He was ready to move on, right? Wasn't that what he'd been telling himself? Then why were these memories dogging him so? With all the freethinking he'd been doing, all the clubs and organizations Lori had introduced him to, he should be consumed with life as it was. Not as it had been.

The professor changed his tone. He was saying something about foreign arms deals, but Luke wasn't paying attention. A conversation kept playing in his head, the one he'd had with his mother a few weeks ago.

"You think you have it all figured out, Luke, but the Hound of Heaven isn't going to let you go this easily."

"The Hound of Heaven?" Luke hadn't even tried to hide his frustration. His mother knew how he felt about God, so why couldn't she let it go?

"The Spirit of God, Luke." Her voice held no apologies. "When someone strays from the Lord, it's usually the Spirit, the Hound of Heaven, that hunts him down and brings him back."

The Hound of Heaven, indeed.

As if God—if there was a God—would care enough about Luke Baxter to chase him. Luke tapped the eraser of his pencil on his notepad. No, that wasn't why he felt this way. He narrowed his eyes and focused on the professor. What was the man babbling about? And why was everyone else taking notes?

A tingling worked its way down his spine, and he shifted in his desk.

Maybe it was culture shock. After a lifetime of holding to one set of beliefs, he'd done an about-face, and some kind of fallout was bound to come. That explained the pounding in his chest, the breathlessness that sometimes hit him square in the middle of a college lecture, and the constant stream of memories. Memories that had a vise grip on his mind and soul.

Sure, it was a setback. But no need to tell Lori. She'd only blame it on the mind control his family had held over him for so many years. And he didn't care to discuss mind control with her. He didn't like the way it sounded. For all their shortcomings, all their narrow-minded ways of thinking, his family had *not* performed mind control on him.

Not hardly.

He'd been a willing participant, and though their beliefs were off base, his family loved him back then. They loved him still. That much he was sure of. But he was just as sure that he wanted to move on, to explore a world without absolutes and—what was it Lori called it?—an antiquated morality system? Yes, he was ready to move away from that.

"Mr. Baxter, I expect you to answer me the first time I call on you."

Luke jumped in his seat. Two students sitting near him stifled their snorts of laughter. "Excuse me, sir?"

"I *said*—" the professor's voice dripped sarcasm—"perhaps you could explain the significance of specific arms deals made in the late seventies?"

"Yes, sir." Luke did a desperate search of his mind and came up blank. His fingers trembled and he coughed to buy time. "Sir, I don't have that information at this time."

Another bout of muffled laughter.

"Very well, Mr. Baxter; then may I make a suggestion?" The professor lowered his glasses and peered hard at Luke.

"Yes, sir?" Luke's throat was dry. It was all he could do to keep from running out of the room.

"Either get more sleep or get out of my Modern History class." The man raised his voice. "Is that understood?"

Fire filled Luke's cheeks. "Yes, sir."

When class was over ten minutes later, Luke was one of the first to leave the room. Not only because he didn't want any further discussion with the professor, but because he still needed to run, to keep moving away from whatever was chasing him. His

past maybe, or his prior convictions. Perhaps his unfamiliarity with all he'd surrounded himself with.

But definitely not the Hound of Heaven.



Reagan didn't visit Ground Zero often.

She looked out the back window of the taxicab as it rumbled south on Broadway, past boarded-up storefronts and American flags. It was late afternoon and she planned to finish up by dusk. A few more blocks and she'd be there. She narrowed her eyes and found a piece of the skyline far above. *Daddy, if you knew how much we miss you. . . .*

She'd attended two Ground Zero memorial services, and over time she'd come to accept that the pile of rubble and ash that once was the World Trade Center was now her father's resting place. Still, as much as possible, she avoided going there. The roar of construction trucks and the meticulous sifting of debris didn't seem to dim her gut-wrenching pain and emptiness at all.

But today was her father's birthday. And since her mother wasn't feeling up to the task, Reagan was going to Ground Zero alone. They rounded a corner and she could see the crater, the footprint the collapsed towers had left on the floor of New York City. Cleanup efforts were almost finished. Still, as far as they'd come in the recovery, they had weeks before they'd finish. Recovery crews were guessing they'd clear the area in May, some eight months after the terrorist attacks. But for now, a considerable crew still worked on the pile.

The cab was stuck at a light, and Reagan watched. Giant machinery growled, lifting sections of steel beams and crushed cement. Trucks pulled in and out of the area, hauling away one load after another. Her father had known his last moments here. She'd go to the strange memorial, the place where a cross section of steel beams had fallen in the midst of the debris and become a marker for all who passed by.

Since the collapse of the World Trade Center, the cross had been mounted on a platform near the pile of rubble. The place drew Reagan, as it had thousands of other mourners.

Her taxi pulled up as close as possible, and Reagan spotted the makeshift memorial. She paid her fare and stepped out. The cross stood out, circled with tattered teddy bears and bouquets of dying flowers. A few people stood nearby, heads bowed. Not far away was a bench, probably brought in by one of the volunteer groups, maybe left over from a memorial service. It was empty now, and Reagan walked to it and sat down.

She'd met her father here for dinner one evening and used her cell phone to call him from the street.

"Flash your light, Daddy, so I can see where you are." She'd tilted her head back and watched. His office was on West Street, so she knew he was up there somewhere.

"Okay." Her father chuckled and did just that. Three times and then three more times. "Can you see me?"

"Yes!" Reagan stared at the spot. "Now I'll always know where you are."

A nearby dump truck dropped its load with a crash. The ground shook beneath her feet, and the long-ago conversation faded. She still remembered the way her neck felt that day, bent just enough for her to see his office window.

Now she lifted her eyes higher and higher, until her neck felt the way it had that evening. She could see them still, the Twin Towers, even see the spot where her father's office had been. Reagan closed her eyes so the tears wouldn't come. They were inevitable, but she didn't want them now. Not when she had so much to tell her father. So much to tell God.

God . . . amazing you and I are still talking, huh?

The slightest smile lifted her lips. How sad and different life had become. In many ways, she was closer to the Lord than ever before—a strange benefit in the wake of the death and tragedy surrounding her. What a shame Luke hadn't handled it the same way.

Poor Luke.

Reagan heard herself sigh, and she opened her eyes. A bird drifted across the place where the south tower once stood, and a chill made its way down her spine. Every time she opened her eyes she expected them to be here, the Twin Towers standing tall and proud at the center of Lower Manhattan.

She blinked. How could they be gone? Both of them? She squinted as a memory played in her mind: the last time she and Luke had been up there, walking in the clouds, visiting her father in his office. A lifetime ago . . . as though it hadn't really happened at all.

They'd been laughing about something—Luke's dream of working there one day, wasn't that it? Reagan narrowed her eyes a bit more. Yes. They'd been whispering about what type of office he'd have, and how it would be right down the hall from her father's.

"I'll have a water view." Luke grabbed her hand, his chin high, eyes teasing as they stepped into the elevator.

"I'm sure they'll offer you at least that—straight out of college and everything." Reagan poked him in the ribs. "I mean, you're Luke Baxter!"

Reagan blinked the memory away.

Now, instead of soaring towers, she saw only gray clouds. Rain was expected for that afternoon. More rain. After a gentle winter, the spring had been merciless—snow, freezing rain, and icy wind. So many days without sunshine had every New Yorker feeling the gloom.

"Where is he, God?" Her whispered question mingled with the smoky air and got lost in the relentless noise of a parade of dump trucks. "Why can't we find him?"

Unlike some grieving people she'd talked to at church, Reagan didn't need a body to feel closure. A ring, a wallet, a watch—*anything* of her father's would be enough. Instead she had nothing. Just the certainty that on the morning of September 11, 2001,

Tom Decker had been in his office some nine hundred feet in the air. And now he was gone.

Reagan and her mother had talked about it. He could never have survived the collapse. He probably died quickly and without pain, carrying thoughts of his family with him as he passed from this life to the next. But that didn't make it easier—especially when no sign of him had been found.

During the holidays their family, along with hundreds of others, was given a wooden urn from the city, an urn filled with ashes taken from Ground Zero. It might have held her father's remains. But then, it might have held just about anyone's remains. Thousands of people were unaccounted for.

Reagan stared at the cross, and a sense of peace washed over her. "I know, God." She bit her lip. Her voice lacked its former energy and spunk, and in this place it was little more than a whisper. "He's not here. He's with you." Her voice cracked, and again she closed her eyes. "If only I'd . . ."

How could she and Luke have lost control like that? It was a football game, for goodness' sake. She'd been tired from a day of classes and had conked out on the sofa for most of the second half. How did they go from that to lying there kissing? Why didn't either of them have the sense to stop? The questions stockpiled in her heart, but they were nothing compared to the one that still ate at her night and day, seven months after the tragedy.

Why hadn't she taken her father's call?

The ring of the phone was God's perfect alarm, his way of telling her and Luke they'd had enough. Time for Luke to go home, time for her to spend half an hour talking with her daddy. She'd had a choice. Luke almost seemed to want her to answer the phone, as if he were looking for a reason to shake off the passion and head home. But she'd let the machine pick up instead.

It had been the single worst decision of her life.

Reagan opened her eyes and studied the cross once more. In the wake of the collapsed towers on the afternoon of September 11, she took a bus from Bloomington, Indiana, where she'd been

attending college, to her parents' home in Upper East Side Manhattan. But how long was it before she went with her mother to church? Before she went weeping to the pastor's wife? Three months? Four?

Guilt had eaten her alive before that encounter. But afterwards, after meeting with the woman for five days straight, Reagan grasped forgiveness and grace as she'd never done before, not even after a lifetime of believing. After that, God was merciful enough to take the broken pieces of her life and patch them into something beautiful again, and she gave her entire effort to the cause. For the longest time, that meant staying away from Luke.

Reagan simply hadn't known what to say to him. He was bound to think less of her, the same way he thought less of his sister Ashley. Reagan had been nauseous and tired and struggling to work through the truth with her mother and brother. What she'd done had been one more blow, one more bit of reality to prove their lives would never be the same.

She had been her father's princess. His one-in-a-million girl. How disappointed he would be if he knew what she'd done.

Tell him, please, God. Tell him I'm sorry for letting him down, but tell him I'm okay now. And tell him how much I miss him . . . please.

A Scripture flashed in her mind, one the pastor had shared with them yesterday: "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*" It was the same verse the pastor's wife had given Reagan when they'd first met together. The message was clearer than the space where the World Trade Center once stood. God understood her pain, and even now he was placing his holy hands on her weary shoulders, comforting her with a peace that passed understanding.

That was the reason she'd survived.

In fact, it was God's peace that finally convinced her to call Luke earlier that week. When Luke's mother answered the phone, Reagan's tears were immediate, choking her, keeping her from speaking.

The moment Mrs. Baxter answered the phone, Reagan recognized something different about the older woman's voice. She seemed . . . upset or nervous about something. Reagan pressed forward. "I . . . I should have called sooner, but . . . well . . ." She uttered a soft, exasperated huff. "I should have called."

Mrs. Baxter was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry about your father."

Luke's mother could have said a dozen things. She could have chided Reagan for not calling sooner, or accused her of hurting Luke. If he told them what happened the night before the terrorist attacks, how they'd been together, the woman could have berated her for that as well. But Elizabeth Baxter was nothing if not kind.

When Reagan realized no verbal beating was coming, she swallowed and grabbed for the next thing to say. "Thank you."

"Are you all right?"

"We're doing better." Reagan's relief spilled into her voice. "How's Luke?"

Again, silence. "He . . . he doesn't live here anymore, Reagan." Mrs. Baxter's voice caught. "He's having a hard time."

Now, as she looked at the remains of the World Trade Center, Reagan's stomach tightened the way it had when Luke's mother first spoke those words. Luke never had a hard time at anything. He laughed and loved and breezed his way through life, from schoolwork to scholarships to his relationship with her. When they were together, the sun rose and set on Luke. Her heart had been so sure they'd stay together forever.

Reagan remembered gulping at that point in the conversation, desperate for some way to respond. "A hard time?"

Mrs. Baxter's tone grew tight, pinched, and Reagan knew the woman was crying. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. This is very difficult."

"You don't have to tell me, Mrs. Baxter. I don't have a right to know. Not after how long I've gone without calling."

"It's okay. I think you should hear it firsthand." She hesitated. "Luke has walked away from . . . well, from everything we taught

him. He isn't acting like himself, Reagan. Since he moved out, he rarely talks to us. He won't—" her voice was more in control again—"he won't even come by."

The news had torn across Reagan's heart and knocked her into the nearest chair. It wasn't possible. Luke Baxter? The boy she'd known would rule the business world, the boy with enough charisma to rule the country one day? The Baxter family's golden boy, the baby of the group? How in the world could he walk away from everything that mattered most to him?

Reagan had been afraid to ask, but she couldn't stop herself. "What . . . happened?"

Mrs. Baxter gave a quiet sniff. "He took up with a girl—very opinionated against God and our faith. He . . . he's living with her now."

Reagan had doubled over under the weight of Mrs. Baxter's words. Luke was seeing someone else? *Living* with her? Had the love they'd shared before Reagan returned to New York mattered so little that he'd simply walked into another girl's arms? The only reason she hadn't spoken to him was because she'd been hurt and shocked, unable to think clearly under the burden of losing her father. And she'd been afraid . . . so afraid he wouldn't feel the same about her after what they'd done.

She cleared her throat, but her words sounded like those of a stranger. "I didn't know."

"I'm sorry, Reagan." Mrs. Baxter waited a moment. "Should I have him call you?"

Guilt all but smothered Reagan as the woman waited for an answer. Luke's mother knew nothing of what had happened between Luke and her that Monday night. That much was obvious.

Her answer was quick and certain. "No." She swallowed hard. "That's okay." She struggled to make sense of her jumbled thoughts. "In fact, Mrs. Baxter . . . don't tell him I called. Please." She paused. "Our relationship has been over for a long time. He has a right to go on with his life."

"I think he'd like to know how you're doing."

"It doesn't matter anymore. He's . . . it's over between us." Her heartbeat quickened, and she couldn't draw a full breath. If Luke was living with another girl, he must never know the reason she'd called. "Don't tell him. Promise me?"

Luke's mother hesitated, and when she spoke, her disappointment rang in her voice. "Okay. I won't." Her sigh tugged at Reagan's heart. "But can I ask you a favor?"

"Anything."

"Pray for him." Mrs. Baxter sniffed again. "And one of these days, give him a call."

Reagan pulled herself from the past and sat straighter. She had prayed for Luke all last night, and still she ached at her role in what had happened. Was it her fault? Had Luke walked away from his family, his faith, because she'd refused his calls?

She sighed. The possibility was too awful to worry about right now. Certainly the day would come when she'd have to face it, but not here, not now. She hadn't come to Ground Zero to wrestle tormenting thoughts of Luke.

Once more, she gazed into the gaping hole where the towers once stood, concentrating on how the towers had looked—tall, dominating the skyline. Then she fixed her eyes on the place where she was sure her dad's office had been. "Daddy . . . I'm so sorry this happened to you."

The tears came, not in torrents or even streams, but just enough to sting the corners of her eyes. She blinked and waited until the feeling went away. She'd cried so much after September 11. Entire days had passed when she wondered if she'd ever go an hour without weeping. These days her eyes were usually dry, but the ache in her heart felt pretty much permanent.

She missed her father so much, missed the life they'd had before September 11. "I'm doing the best I can, Daddy." She squinted and blinked back another few tears. "Happy Birthday."

A dump truck rolled past just a few yards away. Reagan never took her eyes from the spot in the sky. "I miss you." She caught

three quick, jerky breaths, and this time she couldn't stop the tears. Her whispered voice was thick. "I . . . I love you, Daddy."

In response, her swollen abdomen tightened, and she rested her open hands across her belly, stroking the place where the baby grew within her. *It's okay, little one. Mommy's all right.*

She was seven months pregnant—no surprise there. But until the test she'd been certain she was carrying a girl. Not so, according to the ultrasound. The baby was a boy. Reagan had already decided on a name.

Her tears stopped. She stood and stretched, wiping her fingers beneath her eyes and taking a final look at the towering metal cross. It was time to go home, time to help her mother with dinner. Besides, she needed her rest. She wanted the very best for her precious baby boy. A boy who would carry the name of both his grandfather . . . and his father.

A boy named Thomas Luke.

A WORD FROM KAREN KINGSBURY



MOST OF YOU have read *Redemption* and *Remember*, the first two books in the Redemption series, so you know how the series got its start. But in case you're new with us, here's how it happened. When Gary Smalley contacted me about writing fiction based on

his relational teachings, I was thrilled. When he said, "Think series," I went blank.

For weeks I prayed about the series, asking God to show me a group of plots that would best exemplify the kind of love taught and talked about by Gary Smalley and the staff at the Smalley Relationship Center.

Ideas would come, but they seemed too small for something as big and life-changing as the dream Gary and I had come to share. Then one day on a flight home from Colorado Springs, God gave me the Redemption series—titles, plots, characters, themes, story lines. All of it poured onto my notebook while goose bumps flashed up and down my spine.

The basic heart and direction of the series remain true to that early vision. However, as the Baxter family has come to life, their problems have changed and adapted to fit their personalities, and certainly to fit the landscape of events happening around them.

Our initial view of Ashley, for instance, didn't include her turning up HIV positive. But much of what we intend to do with the Redemption series is illustrate the consequences of relational choices. And for Ashley, this is one very realistic consequence to her time in Paris.

We had no idea that the attacks on America would change our world on September 11, 2001, and those of you who read *Remember* know how those events changed the direction of the Redemption series and the lives of the characters. The same way those events in some way changed all of us.

Luke Baxter was, from the beginning, the good son. But we discovered something about Luke in the first book of the series—his goodness was untested, his faith shallow and superficial. After September 11, he led the way in determining the strange turns his life would take. Really, as the writer, I merely followed along trying to keep up and allowing God to use him to teach the lessons you've seen come to life in *Return*.

Think about Luke back in the beginning of this series. Cocksure, judgmental, certain that his charmed life was the direct result of his good living. Ah, but how quickly such a fragile faith collapses when trials come. Sometimes such a one goes through years—decades—of pain before returning to the skeletal remains of a faith forgotten.

You may know someone like that. A friend or brother. A lost son or daughter. If so, I pray that you've seen a glimpse of God's faithfulness between the lines of *Return*. Yes, Elizabeth Baxter was right. God is the Hound of Heaven . . . always pursuing, seeking, anxious to restore, desperate to redeem.

In some ways Luke's story illustrates the theme of the series—redemption. God wants to redeem all of us—whether we've strayed from a phony faith or never believed in the first place. Remember Jesus? He was the one who told the story about the lost sheep, how a shepherd might have a hundred sheep, but if one strays he'd leave the ninety-nine to find it.

Wasn't that John Baxter's heart?

No matter that Maddie was well or Ashley was selling her paintings in New York City, his thoughts were with his son. Funny thing, we didn't intend for *Return* to be a modern-day look at the prodigal son story, but that's what it became. And it's where many of you are now.

Either running away from the Hound of Heaven, or praying for someone who is.

At the same time, *Return* showed us that we cannot fully come back to the people we love without first returning to the God who paid for our redemption.

Along another plotline, *Return* allowed you to see Kari and Ryan marry, promising to live their lives for God first and each other second. A few of you were frustrated after reading *Remember*, disappointed to see that Kari and Ryan hadn't married in that book. But grief comes with a cost. Time is needed to heal the wounds of loss, and a rushed commitment—no matter how wonderful—is not usually the answer.

Kari and Ryan heeded God's leading in their walk with him and each other—and as a result their wedding was longer coming than some would've liked. I hope that by now you've agreed that their big day was worth the wait.

I was talking to my 14-year-old daughter, Kelsey, the other day, and she expressed some of the impatience we all feel at times. For Kelsey it was impatience over braces and boys and knowing that her season for love and relationships is far down the road yet. Our discussion gave me the chance to give Kelsey a word picture.

Imagine the last wedding banquet or dinner party you attended. Often before the food is set out, the staff places garnishes of endive lettuce along the white-linen-covered serving tables. How silly would it be to arrive at the banquet and find yourself so impatient for the meal that you settle for the garnish?

Wilted lettuce or a banquet?

Doesn't seem like a contest, does it? But sometimes in our rush for what we want, we're willing to settle for the garnish instead of God's best. In *Return*, we saw Kari waiting and how wonderful it was, how rewarding for her and Ryan to know that they handled everything about their relationship the way God wanted them to handle it.

Again, normally I don't leave my readers wondering what will happen to my characters. And though *Return* offers some answers, clearly it also raises many questions. Questions about Ashley and Landon, and if you read the first chapter of *Rejoice* . . . questions about Brooke's family.

What will become of Ashley and her precarious health? Will

she find a way to stay with Landon, or will she feel compelled to release him? And what about the dear people at Sunset Hills Adult Care Home? Will Ashley stay with them, and if so, will Irvel continue her downhill slide into poorer health?

Brooke and Peter are struggling—that much is clear. But why, and how will their fledgling faith be affected if they're visited by tragedy? How will John and Elizabeth play a role in the next season of the lives of their children?

And most of all, how will God continue to work redemption in the lives of this single Indiana family?

As much as I'd like to answer those questions, I cannot. God is still working the story, making it breathe and grow and change with the characters in a way that he directs. The stories that will come are written across the tablet of my heart, but not yet on the printed page. As soon as they are available, we'll get them out to you.

In the meantime, I pray that you see the bigger picture in the Redemption series. That God waits for you with open arms—every morning, every night—wanting you to return to him, return to your first love with Jesus Christ. It might be that you never left him, but still he waits for all of us, wanting us to draw nearer.

My prayer is that the Redemption series helps you see Christ at work in a way you perhaps have never seen before.

If you are one who doesn't understand about redemption and God's plan of salvation for mankind, please contact a local Bible-believing church and ask one of the leaders to lay it out for you. I believe that if you're in this situation, you read this book for a reason. You might think you picked it up at a store or borrowed it from a friend or a library. But the truth is God wanted you to read it so he could speak something very important to your soul. The truth that he loves you and has a place for you in his family.

On a personal note, know that my family is doing well. Our children are still between the Ds. No one dating, driving, or in diapers. But nothing stays the same and soon Kelsey will be beg-

ging us for driver's training. Life has a way of constantly throwing lessons at us, and with God at our side, the learning is a joyous adventure.

Kelsey and 11-year-old Tyler are involved in Christian Youth Theater, a growing company of talented directors and coordinators who provide top-notch theatrical productions in a Christian environment. CYT just came to our area, and we are blessed beyond words that our artistic children have a Christian outlet where their talents can be used for God and the community. The youngest boys, Sean, Josh, EJ, and Austin, are all still tearing up the basketball court and soccer field. Donald loves coaching them, and the thrill of parenting continues.

We covet your prayers and encouragement. As always, I'd love to hear from you. Contact me through my Web site: **www.KarenKingsbury.com**, or by sending an e-mail to **Karen@KarenKingsbury.com**.

Blessings to you and yours . . . in his light and love,

Karen Kingsbury

A WORD FROM GARY SMALLEY



The goal of the Redemption series is to give you an unforgettable story with a minute or two of relational advice at the back of each book. *Return*—like the two books before it—touches on some of the most practical relational areas of all, areas many of you are

dealing with even now.

The issue of honoring those you love by returning to them is one that applies to both healthy and unhealthy relationships. With healthy relationships, returning is a daily event. Let's take a closer look.

RETURNING AND THE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP

The Bible warns us of the importance of returning to our first love—Jesus Christ. Any of us who have tried to live the Christian life know what this means. Returning to our God is as constant and necessary as breathing in and out. We have a sin nature, an innate ability to stray from the Lord. But if we recognize our need to return to God and if we do so on a daily basis, we will continue to move ahead in our relationship with him.

The same principle can be applied to our relationships with each other. Many things strain at the ties that bind us to our loved ones. Busyness, misunderstandings, distance—both physical and emotional—missed opportunities, and a host of situations specific to each of us.

Say, for example, you have a parent or parents who live far away. Your life is busy and so is theirs. Over time, busyness becomes silence, and silence can become strained. With a mentality of constantly returning to that relationship, you might make a determination to call your parent or parents once a week or once every other week. By doing this you express honor and love and a decision to not let time cut the ties.

Without making that conscious decision to keep returning to that person, your relationship will at best be mediocre, and will always carry the potential to become unhealthy. Let's look at a few ways we can continually return to those we love.

1. Schedule occasional date time.
 - Realize that this will be different if the date is with a daughter or a mother or a spouse.
 - If you are prone to letting time slip by, make sure to mark this on a calendar or Palm Pilot. (Call Sue this afternoon to catch up.)
2. Use together time to remind the person you love why you love him or her.
 - Laugh and reminisce about days gone by.
 - Find creative ways to do a checkup on whether the memories you're making are as memorable as those you once made.
3. List the reasons why this person is important to you.
 - Set aside time to jot down the reasons you love this person. Be specific.
 - Share this list with the person at one of your regular meeting times, either by phone or in person. This will feel like a shower of love to the person you care about, and will go a long way to making him or her feel that sense of returning that is so crucial in any relationship.

RETURNING AND THE BROKEN RELATIONSHIP

As much as God wants us to keep returning to the importance of our relationships, he has another relational truth that's crucial not only to our dealings with one another, but also to our dealings with Christ.

Numerous stories are told through Scripture showing the importance of mending broken ties between us and the people we love. One of my favorites is the story of the man who is told not to leave his offering at the altar for God until he makes amends with his brother first.

Many of you reading this will find yourself relating to the Baxter family, grieving the loss of one of your own, one who has left the fold and ventured out on his own away from his family, his faith, and his future dreams. For you I pray an ocean of faith, rivers of patience, and a constant rain of God's grace until the day of that loved one's return.

Others of you have perhaps done the wandering. You've walked away from a relationship for one reason or another. Maybe you've justified it, written that person off as being too controlling or overbearing, too negative or too judgmental. In the process you've done what millions of people have done through the ages—you've cut ties with someone you love. God knows that this type of cutting wounds not only the one you've walked away from, but you as well. The kind of cut that won't heal unless you do the one thing God wants you to do: return.

Here are some ways you can return to someone you've left behind:

1. Write a letter.

- Often times what can't be said face-to-face or even in a phone conversation, can be expressed with the written word. Writing a letter gives you a chance to edit yourself, read over what you've written, and make sure it's exactly what you want to say. Also, any words of love expressed in a letter will jump out at someone you've cut out of your life. Once you've written it, don't let anything stop you. Send it . . . send it now.

2. Make a phone call.

- One young man I worked with had been cut off from his parents for three years. The reason? His parents didn't agree with his career choice. In a move of independence and defiance, he moved to another state, stuck with his career choice, and went about life. After reading *Redemption* (the first book in the Redemption series), this young man prayed, grabbed the telephone receiver, and held his breath. Then he dialed a series of

numbers he hadn't dialed for three years. Next he did this:

3. Apologize.

- Nothing mends ties faster than an apology. It is the Superglue of relationships, followed up by the next most important words.

4. Say, "I love you."

- When the young man from the example above made his life-changing phone call, he apologized first. Then he told his parents the truth. Life's too short to keep silent about love. "I love you, Mom and Dad. I love you." What happened next is perfect proof of why we must return to those we've walked away from. His parents wept. They apologized and expressed their love. A week later his father got on an airplane, flew to his home, and spent three days learning to appreciate this young man's career choice.

With those simple thoughts in mind, answer the following study questions and take stock of your own relationships. Until next time, know that we pray for each of you and believe that God will continue to use this series to make a life-changing impact on your relationships.

For more information about how the concepts in the Redemption series can save or improve your relationships, contact us at:

The Smalley Relationship Center

1482 Lakeshore Drive

Branson, MO 65616

Phone: 800-84TODAY (848-6329)

Fax: 417-336-3515

E-mail: family@smalleyonline.com

Web site: www.smalleyonline.com

Discussion Questions

Use these questions for individual reflection or for discussion with a book club or other small group. They will help you not only understand some of the issues in *Return* but also integrate some of the book's messages into your own relationships.

1. What caused Luke to leave his family?
2. How did fear play a part in his departure?
3. How did pride play a part?
4. What was his father's reaction to Luke's departure?
5. Recall the scene when John Baxter was at his son's apartment, confronting him about his girlfriend. How could you identify with John's feelings?
6. How did you identify with Luke's feelings?
7. What did John say to Luke before he left? Do you think he meant the things he said? Why or why not?
8. Have you ever had a time when you left someone you loved?
9. Why did you leave?
10. What emotions played a part in your leaving? How did you feel after you left?
11. If you have now returned to that person, how did you go about returning?
12. Did that person you left express words of unconditional love the way John did to Luke? If not, what did that person say to you?
13. Did someone you love ever leave you? Why?
14. What emotions did you feel when that person left? What did you do about those feelings?
15. Did that person return to you? If so, why? What were your feelings when he or she returned?
16. Luke's mother told him about the Hound of Heaven. Explain who that term refers to, and how God worked that way in Luke's life throughout this story.

17. How did God work that way in Landon's life?
18. How did God work that way in Reagan's life?
19. How have you seen the Hound of Heaven working in your life or the life of someone you love?
20. Besides the situation with Luke, what other aspects of this story dealt with returning to people you love?
21. Give three definitions of *return* as it applies to relationships.
22. Which most relates to your life? Explain.
23. Identify one person who either needs to return to you, or whom you need to return to. Make a plan to carry out that return sometime soon.
24. Identify a relationship that is suffering from busyness, time, or distance. Make a plan to return to that person on a regular basis as a way of honoring him or her.
25. List three things you have learned about relationships by reading *Return*.