



MAPLE RIDGE REDEMPTION

— Book One —

Beneath These WEATHERED BEAMS



— WHERE LOVE IS *restored* —

KATHERINE KNELLS

Beneath These Weathered Beams

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 1

Katherine Knells

Romance



A SMALL-TOWN CHRISTIAN ROMANCE SERIES

Maple Ridge Redemption

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A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Maple Ridge began with a church that needed repair — but what I discovered as I wrote was that beams and bricks are rarely the only things in need of rebuilding.

This series is about the quiet miracles of ordinary faith. It is about families fractured and restored, prodigals returning, second chances granted, and love that grows stronger with time. It is about a small town that learns, again and again, that redemption is not a moment — it is a lifelong work of grace.

You will meet couples young and old. You will walk through storms and weddings, droughts and revivals, doubts and declarations. And by the final pages, I hope you will feel what the people of Maple Ridge come to understand:

God is faithful.

Community matters.

And love — when rooted in Christ — endures.

Thank you for stepping beneath the steeple with me.

With gratitude,

Katherine Knells

Prelude

Hannah stands in the empty sanctuary with the lights off, because the dark is honest. Moonlight slips through the tall windows and lays pale bars across the pews. Dust hangs in those stripes like slow snow.

Hannah does not sit. She stays near the aisle where the floorboards have a soft give. She knows the spots by memory. She knows the places where the old wood groans, where the nails have worked loose, where the building speaks in small complaints.

The air holds the scent of hymnals, pine cleaner, and something older. Dry wood. Time. Prayer soaked into beams no one sees.

Her father had called it faithful wear. He had said it from the pulpit more than once, smiling like the weakness in a joist was the same as laugh lines on a face. But tonight, Hannah hears the strain. The church is quiet enough for her to hear it.

A faint creak rolls through the rafters. Then another. The sound is small, but it moves through her. She looks up at the ceiling where the painted boards meet, where the trusses run like ribs. She pictures what she has been avoiding. A crack hidden above the drywall. A joint that no longer holds. A load is carried too long without help.

Hannah steps toward the front. The pulpit stands in shadow. The cross behind it is a darker shape against a darker wall. She lifts a hand and rests her fingers on the edge of the lectern. The wood is worn smooth where her father's hands have been. Where her mother's hands have been, too, when she leaned close to adjust a microphone, when she set flowers down for Easter, when she tucked a child's paper angel into the nativity.

Hannah closes her eyes.

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.

The verse comes as it always does, steady and simple. It should settle her. It does not. Not tonight. Tonight it feels like a question.

Hannah opens her eyes and looks at the pews. She pictures Sunday morning faces. Mr. Harlan nods through announcements. Two boys in the back whisper until she gives them a look. Mrs. Dorsey pressed hard candies into small palms. She pictures the empty spot on the second row where her mother used to sit when her father preached on nights she was tired.

Hannah swallows. The church has carried her family. It has carried this town. Now it is asking to be carried.

Her phone buzzes in her pocket. Hannah does not check it right away. She already knows what it will be. Another message about the roof. Another reminder about the insurance report. Another meeting her father does not want to schedule because he believes hope should be enough.

Hannah takes her hand off the lectern and lets it hang at her side. Her fingers ache as if she has been holding something heavy.

In the dark, Hannah whispers a prayer she does not dress up.

Lord, tell me what to do.

The building does not answer. It only creaks again, like a warning, like a plea.

And somewhere beyond these weathered beams, help is on its way, wearing the shape of a man Hannah thought Maple Ridge had lost for good.

Chapter 1

The Church That Might Not Survive

Hannah parked beside Maple Ridge Community Church and sat for a moment with her hands on the steering wheel. The building looked the same as it always had from the road. White clapboard. Tall steeple. Narrow windows with old glass, a set of steps worn down in the center, where so many feet had climbed.

Up close, she saw what she tried to ignore.

Paint peeled in long curls along the south wall. The corner trim had split. The front columns leaned a hair out of true. The steeple had a dark streak under the bell vent, like the sky had been weeping on it for years. The shingles on the roof sat unevenly, some lifted at the edges. When the wind hit, she heard a soft rattle from the gutter.

She grabbed her bag and locked her car. Gravel crunched under her shoes. The air held early fall, cool and dry. A few maples along the road had started to turn. The town looked like it always did on a weekday morning; a pickup truck rolled by slowly. Mrs. Tinsley waved from her porch. Hannah lifted her hand back.

Hannah climbed the church steps, careful of the crack in the third one. She knew every flaw in this building. She learned them the way other people learned a face.

Inside, the entry smelled like lemon cleaner and old wood. The vestibule floorboards groaned under her weight. She paused and listened, like she always did. The church had its own voice. It spoke in creaks and pops and the soft hum of the ancient furnace.

She glanced at the bulletin board by the coat hooks. The flyers sat in neat rows. Women's Bible study. Youth group. The fall potluck. A handwritten note from her father, Pastor Whitaker, with a

Scripture written in dark blue ink. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

Her throat tightened. She swallowed and moved on.

She walked down the center aisle and took in the sanctuary. It sat empty, but it never felt empty to her. The pews bore scars from decades of belt buckles and restless kids. The aisle runner had worn thin at the front where people had knelt. The pulpit stood solid, oak and plain, with her father’s Bible resting on it even on days he did not preach.

Sunlight slanted through the windows. Dust floated in the beams. The cross above the baptistry looked small from the back row, but it had always felt large enough to hold her whole life.

She set her bag on the front pew. She started her usual routine without thinking. She straightened the hymnals. She put the offering envelopes back in line. She checked the communion tablecloth for lint. She did these things because it was what her mother did.

Her mother, Miriam Whitaker, never rushed around in a frenzy. She moved steadily. She smiled and spoke low. She made this place feel like home to people who had none.

Hannah still remembered her hands smoothing the choir robes, her fingers moving over the seams as if she prayed through cloth and thread. She remembered her standing in the kitchen off the fellowship hall, stirring chili while she listened to a new widow talk through tears. She remembered her voice in the sanctuary, singing alto, strong and even.

Miriam died six years ago, and Hannah still expected to see her in the front row at times, chin lifted, eyes on her father as he preached.

Hannah walked to the left wall and glanced at the small framed photo of her in the hallway near the nursery. Someone placed a tiny

vase under it with fresh daisies. Hannah touched the frame with two fingers, then pulled her hand away.

She moved toward the side door that led to the fellowship hall. The hallway narrowed there. The floor dipped. She stepped over the spot where the boards sloped down and then up again. She learned to step there without looking. She also learned to pretend it did not matter.

Today it mattered.

The church board meeting starts in an hour. Her father asked her to come early to help set up coffee and cookies in the small conference room. She agreed. She always agreed.

In the kitchen, she filled the coffee maker and scooped grounds. The old machine gurgled as it started. She laid out store-bought cookies on a paper plate and felt a stab of guilt. Her mother would have baked.

She heard a knock at the back door. She wiped her hands on a towel and opened it.

Deacon Earl Ramsey stood there with his hat in his hands. His shoulders hunched forward like he carried the weight of the whole county. His cheeks looked rough from shaving too fast. Earl farmed land outside town, and he smelled faintly of grain and diesel.

“Morning, Hannah,” he said.

“Morning,” she said. “Coffee is on.”

He stepped inside and shut the door behind him. He looked past her, down the hallway toward the sanctuary, as if he was checking if someone was listening.

“Your father in yet?” he asked.

“He is in his office,” Hannah said. “He asked me to set up.”

Earl nodded. He shifted his hat from one hand to the other. “We got the report.”

Hannah kept her face calm. “I know.”

His eyes flicked to hers and then away. “I do not like what it says.”

“I do not either.”

He cleared his throat. “You are doing alright?”

Hannah wanted to tell him she was fine. She wanted to keep her voice bright, keep her posture strong. She did not.

“I am praying,” she said.

Earl gave a short nod, then walked down the hallway toward the conference room. His boots thudded on the boards.

Hannah poured herself a cup of coffee and took a sip. It tasted burnt, like it always did. She drank it anyway.

She walked to her father’s office and knocked. “Dad?”

“Come in,” he called.

Hannah opened the door and stepped inside. His office looked the same as it had her whole life. Books on every wall. Sermon notes stacked in piles, a worn armchair by the window where he read. The desk had a blotter and a pen cup, and a small framed picture of her mother.

Her father sat behind the desk with papers spread in front of him. His shoulders sat stiff. His eyes looked tired.

“You set up?” he asked.

“Yes,” Hannah said. “Earl is here.”

Her father rubbed his forehead. “Good.”

Hannah glanced at the papers. “Is that the engineer's report?”

He watched her. “Yes.”

She took a step closer. She did not touch the pages, but she read the top line. “Structural assessment. Maple Ridge Community Church.”

Her father's hand rested on the report as if he guarded it. “Hannah.”

“I know,” she said. “You do not want me to worry.”

“I do not want you to carry it,” he said.

“It is my church too,” she said.

His jaw tightened. “It is the Lord's church.”

“Yes,” Hannah said, softer. “And He placed us here.”

Her father exhaled slowly. “The board meeting will be hard.”

“What will you say?” she asked.

He looked down. “The truth.”

Her stomach twisted. She forced her voice to stay steady. “If we close the building, where will we meet?”

He leaned back in his chair. “We could meet in the community center for a while. Or the school cafeteria. We could also do house gatherings.”

She pictured folding chairs in a bright gym, a basketball hoop behind the pulpit. She pictured people drifting away, because routine broke and distance grew. She pictured her mother's kitchen quiet, her apron hanging unused, her voice no longer heard. The church felt

like more than walls. It felt like the only place Maple Ridge remembered who it was.

“You think people will come?” Hannah asked.

“They will at first,” he said. “Then life will press in.”

Hannah sat in the chair across from him. “Dad, we must not let it happen.”

He looked at her with a mix of grief and resolve. “We will do what the Lord tells us.”

Hannah nodded, but it felt like nodding at a storm. “Will you pray with me?”

Her father reached across the desk and took her hand. His palm felt warm, rough from years of work; no pastor job description mentioned. He bowed his head.

“Father,” he said, “You know the needs of this church. You know the hearts in this town. Give us wisdom. Give us unity. Give us courage. Help us trust You when we see no clear path. Build this house, Lord. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

“Amen,” Hannah whispered.

Her father released her hand. Hannah stood. “I will go check the coffee.”

He nodded, and she left.

People trickled in as the hour neared. Mrs. Tinsley arrived first, her hair pinned tight and her purse held close. She offered Hannah a tight smile.

“I brought muffins,” she said, and held up a tin.

“Thank you,” Hannah said. “We will put them out.”

Mrs. Tinsley looked down the hallway toward the sanctuary. “Are we meeting in the conference room?”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Mrs. Tinsley pressed her lips thin. “I heard a rumor.”

Hannah kept her face smooth. “We are meeting to talk about the building.”

Mrs. Tinsley gripped her purse strap. “My Harold built those pews with his own hands. He sanded them in our garage. He sealed them twice so they would hold up. He said, ‘These will outlast me.’”

Hannah swallowed. “They have.”

Mrs. Tinsley stepped closer. “Tell me we are not losing this place.”

Hannah met her gaze. She chose honesty, but she did not want to crush her. “We are looking at options.”

Mrs. Tinsley’s eyes filled, but she blinked fast. “You tell your father I am praying.”

“I will,” Hannah said.

Mrs. Tinsley walked to the conference room, shoulders straight.

Next came Mr. Daley, head of the finance committee. He carried a folder thick with papers. He looked like he had not slept. He nodded to Hannah without smiling.

“Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” Hannah replied. “Coffee is hot.”

He lifted his folder slightly. “Not sure coffee helps.”

Hannah gave a small nod and did not argue.

Soon, the room filled. Earl Ramsey. Mr. Daley. Mrs. Tinsley. Mrs. Alvarez from the quilting circle. Nate Caldwell, who ran the hardware store. Two younger members who joined the board last year. Hannah's father sat at the head of the table. Hannah sat along the wall with a notepad, because she always took notes for meetings when needed.

Hannah watched faces as people settled. Some avoided eye contact. Some looked angry. Some looked scared.

Her father stood. He rested his hands on the back of his chair.

"Thank you for coming," he said. "We have a serious matter to address. Before we begin, I want us to pray."

Heads bowed. Her father prayed short and plain. He asked for unity. He asked for courage. He asked for trust in God's provision. When he finished, people lifted their heads as they did after prayer, as if they hoped a clear answer lay on the table.

Her father sat. "You all received the structural report," he said. "I asked a licensed engineer from Cedar Falls to assess the building after the new cracks appeared in the fellowship hall and the sanctuary floor began to shift."

Mr. Daley cleared his throat. "He did more than glance at it," he said. "He crawled under the building. He checked the beams."

Nate Caldwell leaned forward. "Tell them what he found."

Mr. Daley opened his folder. His hands shook a little. "The main issue is the support beams under the sanctuary and part of the fellowship hall. Water damage has weakened them. Termite activity exists in two sections. The floor joists have sagged. The foundation

piers have shifted. The report says the building is unsafe for regular use until we shore it up.”

Mrs. Alvarez lifted a hand to her mouth. “Unsafe,” she whispered.

Earl Ramsey looked down at his hat in his lap. Mrs. Tinsley stared at the wall like she could not process it.

Hannah’s father held up a hand. “The engineer did not say it will fall tomorrow,” he said. “He said we have a risk if we keep gathering without repairs.”

Nate frowned. “What kind of risk?”

Mr. Daley turned a page. “Best case, someone trips when the floor shifts more. Worst case, a beam fails. We do not need to speak about it any further. You know.”

Silence pressed down. Hannah heard the coffee maker click as it finished a cycle. The sound felt wrong in the stillness.

Her father looked around the table. “We need to decide our next steps.”

Mr. Daley spoke again. “We asked for estimates. To stabilize the structure and repair the damage, we are looking at \$240,000. That is, if we find no more issues once they open it up.”

Mrs. Tinsley made a small sound. “Two hundred and forty.”

Nate shook his head. “We do not have it.”

Mr. Daley slid another page forward. “Our general fund has seventeen thousand. Our designated building fund has eleven.”

One of the younger board members, Lila Jensen, sat up straighter. She had two small children and a job at the clinic. “We can raise it,” she said, but her voice cracked.

Earl lifted his eyes. “We are a small church.”

Mr. Daley nodded. “Average attendance is one hundred and twenty on Sundays. Giving is steady, but it is not enough for this.”

Mrs. Alvarez spoke softly. “What about a loan?”

Mr. Daley looked at Pastor Whitaker, then back at the table. “We asked the bank in town. They will consider it, but they want collateral and a repayment plan. We do not have a clear one.”

Nate leaned back. “So we close.”

Hannah’s father did not flinch, but Hannah saw pain in his eyes. “We might need to stop meeting in the building until repairs happen.”

Mrs. Tinsley gripped the edge of the table. “Stop meeting,” she repeated, as if she tried the words in her mouth.

Lila shook her head. “People will drift.”

Earl nodded once, slowly. “Some will.”

Nate tapped his finger on the folder. “We can meet somewhere else and keep the church alive.”

Mrs. Alvarez looked at him. “This is the church.”

Nate’s face tightened. “The people are the church.”

“Yes,” she said. “And this building has held our weddings. Our funerals. Our baptisms. Our altar calls. My husband met the Lord in the second pew on the left.”

Hannah’s chest ached. She kept her pen still. She did not want to make a noise.

Mr. Daley leaned forward. “We need to talk about options. Sell the parsonage. Sell land. Ask the district for help. Apply for grants. Ask churches in Cedar Falls to partner. Run a capital campaign. Or we close and worship elsewhere while we save.”

Hannah’s father spoke with care. “We also need to talk about what this building means to this town.”

Earl’s jaw worked. “It means stability.”

Mrs. Tinsley nodded. “It means our faith is rooted.”

Nate looked down. “It means my boy learned Scripture in the basement.”

Lila wiped under her eye. “It means my daughter got dedicated here.”

Each voice added weight. Each memory felt like a nail driven into Hannah’s heart. Her mother’s face rose in her mind again. Miriam stood in the fellowship hall, handing a casserole to a tired family. She laughed with the youth group. She knelt by the front pew, praying with a girl who could not stop shaking.

Hannah spoke before she planned to. “It also means legacy.”

The room turned toward her. She rarely spoke in these meetings. She took notes. She refilled the coffee. She stayed quiet.

Her father watched her, his gaze gentle but wary.

Hannah kept her voice even. “My mother gave her life to this church. Not because of the wood. Because of what happens here. But she believed this place mattered. She believed the building served the work.”

Mrs. Tinsley nodded hard. “Miriam loved this place.”

Heat rose behind Hannah's eyes. She blinked it back. "We need to fight for it. We need to do it in a way that honors God. We need to do it with honesty. But we need to do it."

Nate shifted in his chair. "You got a plan, Hannah?"

Hannah did not yet. Her mouth felt dry. She chose the truth she had. "I have a resolve."

Mr. Daley looked tired. "Resolve does not pay contractors."

Earl held up a hand. "Let her speak."

Hannah took a breath. "We can start with what we know. We know the building needs repairs. We know we cannot ignore it. We know we cannot keep gathering here without taking steps."

Her father nodded once, slowly.

Hannah continued. "We also know God has provided for this church before. We do not control the outcome, but we do control whether we act in faith."

Nate's brows knit. "Faith does not mean pretending numbers do not exist."

"I agree," Hannah said. "Faith means we do the work and we pray for God to do what we cannot."

Lila leaned forward. "What work?"

Hannah looked around the table, meeting faces one by one. "We need a clear fundraiser. We need a calendar. We need teams. We need to ask for help beyond Maple Ridge. We need to tell the truth to the congregation on Sunday. People will give if they know. Some will give money. Some will give labor. Some will give materials. Some will give connections."

Mr. Daley flipped a page, as if he were looking for something to hold. “We need someone to lead it.”

Earl looked at Pastor Whitaker. “Pastor?”

Pastor Whitaker’s shoulders sank. “I will lead spiritually. I will preach. I will pray. I will counsel. I will not run a capital campaign alone.”

Nate glanced at Hannah. “Hannah?”

Hannah’s stomach dropped. She kept her face calm. “I will help.”

Mr. Daley raised his eyes. “Helping is not the same as leading.”

Hannah felt the room waiting. She thought of her mother again. She thought of her hands, steady and sure. She thought of her father’s tired eyes. She thought of the sanctuary floor dipping under her feet. She thought of kids running down the hallway after church, laughter echoing.

She nodded once. “I will coordinate what I can.”

Her father opened his mouth, then closed it. He looked like he wanted to protect her and also like he knew she would do this with or without his permission.

Earl grunted approval. “Good.”

Nate leaned forward. “You need a contractor or builder to tell you what is real. Not someone selling you a dream.”

Mr. Daley nodded. “We need a project plan. We need bids. We need someone who understands structural work.”

Mrs. Alvarez whispered, “We need a miracle.”

Pastor Whitaker looked at her with kindness. “We need God. He often works through people.”

Mr. Daley cleared his throat again. “There is another issue we need to name. The engineer said that if we do not stabilize soon, costs will rise. If winter water gets in, the damage spreads.”

Nate’s gaze sharpened. “How soon?”

Mr. Daley looked down. “He recommended we stop using the sanctuary immediately. He also said we should not host large groups in the fellowship hall.”

A low murmur ran through the room. Someone whispered, “Where will we have the potluck?” Another said, “What about the Christmas program?”

Hannah’s heart clenched. Christmas in this church meant evergreen branches along the windows. It meant candlelight service. It meant her father reading Luke 2 in the soft glow. It meant her mother’s favorite hymn, sung slowly.

Pastor Whitaker raised his hand. “We will make decisions tonight. We will communicate with the church on Sunday morning.”

Mrs. Tinsley looked like she might faint. “We cannot close before Christmas.”

Earl looked at her. “We cannot risk someone getting hurt either.”

Mrs. Tinsley pressed her lips together. She nodded once, stiff.

Pastor Whitaker turned to Mr. Daley. “What are our immediate options?”

Mr. Daley tapped the report. “We can rope off areas, but the engineer said it is not enough. We can move worship to the

community center starting this Sunday if we must. We can keep the office open here for a bit, but even that might change.”

Lila whispered, “This feels like grief.”

Hannah understood. It did.

Pastor Whitaker looked around. “I want us to remember. God does not live in a building. He meets us wherever we gather in His name.”

Nate nodded, but his jaw stayed tight.

Earl shifted. “We also need to talk about insurance.”

Mr. Daley sighed. “Insurance will not cover this. It is neglected in their eyes. Wear and water over time.”

Mrs. Alvarez closed her eyes. “Lord, help us.”

Hannah’s pen pressed into the paper so hard that it left a mark. She forced her hand to relax.

The conversation turned practical. They listed what they could sell. Old sound equipment. The unused van. Some land is behind the church. Each suggestion felt like cutting off pieces of a body to keep it alive.

Then came the question no one wanted to ask.

Nate asked it.

“What if we cannot raise it?”

The room went still.

Pastor Whitaker answered with a quiet steadiness. “Then we worship without this building. We keep serving. We keep loving. We keep preaching Christ. We do not quit because wood fails.”

Mrs. Tinsley looked down. Tears dropped onto her hands. She did not wipe them.

Mr. Daley looked at the table. “If we lose the building, we lose people.”

Lila shook her head. “We might also find out who we are.”

Earl gave a slow nod. “Sometimes God strips away what we lean on.”

Pastor Whitaker’s gaze shifted to the window. “Sometimes He rebuilds stronger.”

Hannah held on to that word. Rebuilds.

The meeting ran long. Hannah took notes until her hand cramped. They agreed on the next steps. Move the Sunday service to the community center for now. Close the sanctuary to regular use starting today. Ask Nate to call a few contractors for bids. Ask Mr. Daley to set up a giving plan and a separate account. Ask Earl to arrange a town hall-style meeting for the whole congregation next week.

Then they looked back at Hannah.

“You will coordinate communication?” Mr. Daley asked. “Flyers, phone tree, social media.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

“You will organize volunteers?” Lila asked. “People will want to help.”

“Yes,” Hannah said again.

“You will lead the fundraiser committee?” Earl asked. “At least until we pick a chair.”

Hannah's throat felt tight. "Yes."

Pastor Whitaker watched her with a mix of pride and concern.

The meeting closed in prayer. This time, Earl prayed. His words came rough, like stones in his mouth, but they came honest. He asked God to forgive them for waiting too long. He asked God to guard their unity. He asked God to send help from places they did not expect. He asked God to keep Maple Ridge anchored.

When the last "amen" sounded, people stood slowly. Chairs scraped the floor. Mrs. Tinsley hugged Hannah without warning. Her arms felt thin and strong.

"Your mother would be proud," she whispered.

Hannah's eyes burned, but she kept her voice steady. "Thank you."

People drifted out. Some stopped to touch Hannah's arm. Some avoided her gaze because they did not know what to say. Mr. Daley left with his folder held tight, as if it were a shield. Earl paused at the door and looked back.

"You call if you need," he said.

"I will," Hannah replied.

When the last person left, the building felt louder in its silence. Pastor Whitaker stepped into the hallway with Hannah.

"You took on a lot," he said.

"It needs doing," she answered.

He studied her face. "You are trying to save your mother."

The words landed hard.

Hannah lifted her chin. "I am trying to save what she loved."

Pastor Whitaker's eyes softened. "Hannah, I miss her too."

Hannah nodded, because if she spoke more, her voice would break. She picked up the empty coffee pot and took it to the sink. She rinsed it out and set it to dry. She wiped the counter. She stacked the leftover cookies into a container.

Pastor Whitaker left for a hospital visit. He grabbed his coat and his worn Bible, then paused at the back door.

"I will be back before dinner," he said.

"I will be here," Hannah replied.

After he left, Hannah walked through the church alone to check on an old friend who had fallen ill. She passed the nursery, where a soft rocking chair sat in the corner. She passed the Sunday school rooms, with their faded posters and small wooden tables. She passed the fellowship hall, where the floor dipped more than it used to.

She crouched and placed her palm on the boards. She felt a faint vibration as the furnace kicked on. She pictured the beams beneath her, dark and damp, eaten away over the years.

She stood and walked back to the sanctuary. The door creaked as she opened it. The room felt cooler than the hallway. The air smelled like old hymnals and wood polish.

She walked down the aisle slowly. Her shoes made soft taps on the runner. She stopped halfway and looked at the pews. She pictured the people who sat in them. Earl with his hat in his lap. Mrs. Tinsley had her hands folded tight. Lila was bouncing her baby and whispering hymns. Teen boys slouched low, pretending they hadn't listened.

She pictured her mother in the second row, hair pinned back, eyes bright. She pictured her turning to greet someone new with a smile that made them feel safe.

Hannah reached the front and set her hand on the pulpit. The wood felt smooth under her fingers. She closed her eyes for a moment.

“Lord,” she whispered, “You know what this place means. You know what it has held. You know every prayer prayed in these pews. Show me what to do.”

She opened her eyes and looked up at the cross. Her chest lifted with a breath she did not know she held.

She looked down at the floor near the steps to the platform. A thin crack ran along a seam. She knelt and touched it. The wood edges felt rough.

This building did not need paint and flowers. It needed bones made strong again.

Hannah stood and turned in a slow circle. She heard the faint ticking of the wall clock. She heard a distant truck on the road. She heard the church settling, as if it were sighing.

She thought of the numbers Mr. Daley read. Two hundred and forty thousand dollars. She thought of the size of Maple Ridge. She thought of the small offerings dropped into the plate each week. She thought of the work needed under the sanctuary, the beams, joists, and piers.

She pressed her hand to her stomach as if it would steady her.

She had resolve. She had love. She had faith.

She also had limits.

Hannah looked around the empty sanctuary again, and the weight of it hit her in a new way. She could not save this place alone. She could not lift a building with her bare hands. She could not call in favors she did not have. She could not fix years of rot with enthusiasm.

She stood at the front, alone under the cross, and she faced the truth.

Saving the church would require help she did not yet have.

Chapter 2

The Fundraiser Idea

Hannah stood in her kitchen the next morning with a legal pad and a pen. She stared at the blank page until her eyes stung. She wrote one word anyway.

Repairs.

She underlined it once. The line looked too thin to hold what she needed.

She flipped open the folder her father left on the counter last night. Invoices. A note from the insurance agent. A printed estimate from a roofing company. Every number felt like a door closing.

She set the folder down and pressed her palm to the table. She breathed in. She breathed out.

Do the next right thing.

She wrote another word.

Money.

She tapped the pen. Her mind ran through every church fundraiser she had ever watched from the side. Bake sales. Yard sales. Chili suppers. Love offerings. Donation jars at the hardware store. None of it felt big enough.

She did not let herself stop there. She turned the page and started listing what Maple Ridge knew how to do.

Food. Music. Work days. Auctions. Sports. Craft fairs. Raffles.

She paused at the last word and crossed it out. She remembered the deacons and their rules. She did not need another argument over gambling.

Her phone buzzed on the table, a text from her father.

Fellowship hall. Seven. Thank you for leading.

She stared at the message. Her chest tightened. He did not ask. He trusted her with it.

She set the phone down and whispered, “Lord, You sent help.” She did not feel brave when she said it. She felt like she stepped onto a porch step she was not sure would hold.

At six forty-five, she pushed open the side door of Maple Ridge Community Church. The hallway smelled like old paint, brewed coffee, and lemon cleaner. Voices carried from the fellowship hall. Chairs scraped. Someone laughed in a way she recognized.

She walked in with her legal pad tucked under her arm.

The fellowship hall lights buzzed overhead. The long tables sat in a loose rectangle. Someone set out paper cups and a metal coffee urn. A plate of store-bought cookies sat beside it, still in the plastic tray. Someone tried. It mattered.

Her father sat at the far side with his Bible and a thin folder. He looked tired. He looked like he slept in his shirt. He lifted his head when she entered and gave her a small smile. It did not reach his eyes.

“Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” she said. She kept her voice steady.

Around the tables sat people she had known since she was born. Some of them called her Hannah. Some of them still called her Miss Hannah. A few still called her Hannah Beth, as if she were five.

Mrs. Albright sat nearest the coffee with her purse on the table and her reading glasses on a chain. She wore a cardigan no matter the season. She ran the church nursery like it was a government office.

Walt Mercer sat across from her with his arms crossed. He owned the feed store. He spoke in blunt sentences and acted like feelings were a waste of time.

Tina Jo Haskins sat at the corner, tapping her pen. She ran the diner. She knew every piece of gossip in town, and half of it was true.

Eli Brooks sat beside Tina Jo. He was the town building contractor. He kept his hands folded as if he did not trust them to stay still. He built sets for Christmas programs. He repaired broken pews when no one asked.

Carla Denton sat near the door. She was a young mom with a baby on her hip and a diaper bag at her feet. She volunteered for everything and always looked like she made it out of the house by prayer alone.

And then there was Mr. Fitch, the oldest deacon, with his combed-over white hair and his notebook. He looked at the ceiling as if he were waiting for it to fall.

Hannah took an empty chair near her father. She set her pad on the table. The scrape of her chair sounded louder than it should.

Her father cleared his throat. "Thank you for coming," he said. "We are here because we need to address the repairs. We have a leak in the roof. We have damage in the attic. We have cracks in the sanctuary plaster. We have..." He glanced at his folder. "We have more than we can cover in the regular budget."

Walt snorted. “We have a mess.”

Mrs. Albright shot him a look. “We have a need.”

Walt shrugged. “Same thing.”

Her father nodded once. He did not argue. “Hannah offered to lead this discussion. She has been thinking through options for raising funds. I asked her to share ideas.”

He turned toward her. He did not push her into it. He handed her the moment like he believed she could hold it.

Her mouth went dry. She looked at the faces around her. She saw worry. She saw curiosity. She saw skepticism. She also saw love for this place, even on the faces that did not show it easily.

She laid her palm flat on the paper. “Thank you for coming,” she said. “I know everyone has jobs and families. I know time is tight.”

Tina Jo leaned forward. “We brought coffee,” she said. “So we are set for anything.”

Carla bounced her baby and smiled. “I brought wipes,” she said. “So we are also set for anything.”

A low chuckle moved around the table. It loosened the tightness in Hannah’s shoulders slightly.

She nodded. “All right,” she said. “We need a plan. We need money. We need it in a way that does not drain people who already give. We need it in a way that fits who we are.”

Mr. Fitch cleared his throat. “We need it soon.”

She met his eyes. “Yes,” she said. “Soon.”

She took a breath and tapped her pen. “I want to hear ideas first. I have a few. But I want this to be something the whole church owns.”

Mrs. Albright spoke at once. “Bake sale.”

Walt spoke over her. “Auction.”

Eli raised a hand slightly, as if he were in class. “Work day. We do some of the labor ourselves.”

Tina Jo waved her pen. “Chili cook-off.”

Carla said, “Silent auction with gift baskets. I can ask the moms to help.”

Mr. Fitch said, “Special offering.”

Walt shook his head. “We do those every time the copier breaks.”

Mrs. Albright said, “And the Lord provides.”

Walt said, “And the same ten people pay for it.”

Her father lifted a hand. “Let us speak with care,” he said.

Walt looked down at the table. “Yes, Pastor.”

Hannah wrote the ideas on her pad in quick lines. Bake sale. Auction. Work day. Chili cook-off. Silent auction. Special offering.

She looked at the list. She pictured the amounts. She pictured the roof estimate.

She kept her tone calm. “These are good ideas,” she said. “We have done most of them before. Some of them we do well.”

Mrs. Albright nodded, satisfied.

Hannah turned her pad slightly and kept writing. “What has worked best in the past? What brought in the most?”

Tina Jo said, “The quilt auction, three years ago.”

Mrs. Albright said, “Those quilts took months.”

Eli said, “The men’s breakfast fundraiser did okay.”

Walt said, “Because Tina Jo donated the bacon.”

Tina Jo pointed her pen at him. “And you ate half of it.”

Walt looked offended. “I did no such thing.”

Carla smiled. “You did.”

Walt held his hand to his chest. “I do not know why I even come to these meetings.”

Eli smiled without showing teeth. “Because you love the church.”

Walt grunted. He did not deny it.

Hannah let the humor land. She needed it. She also needed direction.

She leaned forward. “If we do a bake sale and a chili cook-off, what do you think we'll raise?”

Mrs. Albright said, “If we do it right, a few thousand.”

Mr. Fitch shook his head slowly. “We need more than a few.”

Her father slid his folder toward her. “The roof estimate alone is thirty-eight thousand,” he said. “And that is without addressing the attic beams.”

Silence spread across the tables. Even the coffee urn seemed louder.

Carla whispered, “Oh.”

Hannah felt the number like a weight on her ribs. She kept her face steady.

Walt leaned back. “We are not raising that with brownies.”

Mrs. Albright stiffened. “Do not mock the women of this church.”

Walt held up a hand. “I am not mocking. I am stating facts.”

Tina Jo tilted her head. “We need a bigger idea.”

Hannah nodded. “Yes,” she said. “We need a bigger idea. We also need something people outside our church want to support.”

Mr. Fitch frowned. “Why would they support our church? Half of them do not attend.”

Hannah heard the fear under his question. She also heard pride. Maple Ridge held long memories. People carried old hurts. Some of those hurts happened inside these walls.

She answered with care. “Because this building is part of the town,” she said. “People have weddings and funerals here. People vote here. People bring their kids to the Christmas program even when they do not come on Sundays. They still call it their church.”

Her father watched her. His eyes softened. He knew she spoke the truth.

Eli nodded. “We had forty kids at the last Easter egg hunt. I recognized parents I have not seen in years.”

Carla said, “And the moms group uses our classrooms every Tuesday.”

Mrs. Albright pursed her lips. “And they leave crumbs.”

Carla smiled wider. “Yes, ma’am.”

Hannah tapped her pen once. “So we aim wider,” she said. “We invite the town.”

Mr. Fitch said, “We do not have the manpower.”

Walt said, “We do not have the money to raise the money.”

Tina Jo pointed her pen at Walt again. “Stop. You always start with no.”

Walt looked at her. “No.”

A few people laughed. Even her father’s mouth twitched. The moment felt human. It felt like home. It also felt fragile.

Hannah looked down at her list and then back up. She decided to speak her idea before fear swallowed it.

“We do a community restoration fundraiser,” she said.

Mrs. Albright blinked. “A what?”

Hannah kept going. “A weekend event,” she said. “One big push. Food. Music. A live auction. A silent auction. Kids activities. A historical display of the church. A pledge wall for people who want to give toward repairs. We ask local businesses to sponsor parts of it. We invite the whole town. We do not hide the need. We tell the truth. The building needs work. We want to keep the doors open.”

Walt squinted. “A festival.”

She nodded. “Yes. A festival. But centered on restoring the church.”

Mr. Fitch looked worried. “People will think we are begging.”

Hannah felt her face heat. She fought the urge to shrink. She kept her voice even. “We are asking,” she said. “There is a difference. We give people a way to help. We work hard. We do not manipulate. We trust God with the result.”

Mrs. Albright clasped her hands. “I like the history display,” she said. “I have photographs. I have the old dedication program from when the fellowship hall was built.”

Hannah’s throat tightened at the word built. She pictured her father when he was younger, standing in sawdust with his sleeves rolled up. She pictured her mother bringing lemonade to the men working outside. She pictured the beam her father insisted on saving from an older church structure, the one he called weathered but sound. She pictured it above the sanctuary now, dark wood against the white ceiling.

She swallowed. She did not let her mind slide into grief. She stayed in the room.

Tina Jo nodded. “I will run food. I can do pulled pork sandwiches and chili. I will get the diner staff to help.”

Walt looked at her like she had lost her mind. “You will close the diner.”

Tina Jo shrugged. “For one day. People can survive.”

Walt shook his head. “It sounds big. Big means messy.”

Eli spoke up. “Messy does not scare me.”

Carla raised her hand, then dropped it because she was not in school. “I can organize volunteers,” she said. “I can set up sign-ups. I can work with the moms.”

Mr. Fitch still looked unconvinced. “It will cost money to run it,” he said.

Hannah nodded. “Yes,” she said. “We keep costs low. We ask for donations in-kind. We ask the hardware store for lumber for booths. We ask the print shop for flyers. We ask farmers for hay bales to use

as seating. We ask the grocery store for buns. We ask, and we say thank you, whether they say yes or no.”

Walt rubbed his jaw. “People will ask why we did not plan better.”

Her father spoke. His voice stayed calm, but it carried weight. “We will tell them the truth,” he said. “We did not see the damage until it showed itself. We will not pretend we are above need. We are the church. We are a body. When one part hurts, we respond.”

Mr. Fitch looked down at his notebook. “Pastor, with respect, you know some folks will use it as an excuse to talk.”

Her father nodded. “They will,” he said. “They always do. We still do the work in front of us.”

His words landed in Hannah like a hand on her back. She wanted to believe them without struggle. She did not. She felt the struggle anyway.

She glanced at the far wall of the fellowship hall. She saw the framed picture of the church groundbreaking. Her father stood in the center, younger, smiling, holding a shovel. Men around him grinned. Women stood behind them, including her mother. Her hair sat pinned up. She looked straight at the camera as if she already knew what would come, and she chose faith anyway.

Hannah looked away.

She said, “If we do a big fundraiser, we need clear numbers. We need a target. People give toward a goal more readily than toward a vague need.”

Eli nodded. “We put a thermometer chart in the hallway.”

Mrs. Albright’s eyes brightened. “I can draw it.”

Walt groaned. “Please do not draw it like a cartoon.”

Mrs. Albright looked offended. “My handwriting is legible.”

Walt said, “I did not comment on your handwriting.”

Tina Jo muttered, “You commented on everything else.”

Hannah lifted a hand. “Okay,” she said, and her voice carried more authority than she expected. The table quieted.

She felt a strange mix of relief and fear. She could lead a meeting. She could hold people’s attention. But she could not guarantee the outcome. She could not guarantee she would not fail.

The thought hit her hard.

Failing the church her father built.

She stared at her legal pad, but she did not see the words. She saw her father’s hands on the pulpit. She saw him standing in the rain during construction, talking to the contractor. She saw him giving his life to this place. She saw her mother wiping dust off hymnals before the first service.

If she failed, it would feel as if she had let their work rot.

She pressed the pen into the paper until the tip bit. Her fingers ached.

Her father’s voice pulled her back. “Hannah,” he said softly.

She blinked and looked up. He did not look impatient. He looked like he knew her mind ran to a painful place.

She straightened. “Sorry,” she said. “All right. Let us talk through what a community restoration fundraiser would require.”

Mr. Fitch leaned forward. “What would we call it?” he asked.

Tina Jo snapped her fingers. “Raise the Roof.”

Mrs. Albright shook her head. "That sounds like a dance."

Walt said, "It also sounds like we are partying."

Carla smiled. "What about Homecoming at the Church?"

Eli said, "That sounds like football."

Hannah thought for a second. "What about Maple Ridge Restoration Day?" she said. "Simple. Clear."

Her father nodded. "I like it," he said.

Tina Jo said, "Fine. But I still want a banner. A big one."

Walt said, "We do not need a banner."

Tina Jo pointed at him. "You do not get to say no again for at least five minutes."

Walt looked at her father. "Pastor, is this allowed?"

Her father's eyes held humor. "If you need a rule, Walt, I will write one," he said. "Five minutes of yes."

Walt looked pained. "This church has lost its discipline."

Mrs. Albright said, "This church is trying to live."

Hannah watched the exchange and felt something ease in her. People cared. They argued because they cared.

She turned to practical steps. "We need teams," she said. "Food. Donations and auction items. Advertising. Set up and clean up. Kids activities. Music."

Eli said, "I can handle setup. I can get some of the men to build booths. I will need a materials list."

Carla nodded fast. "I can do volunteering. I will set up time slots."

Mrs. Albright said, “I will handle the historical display and the children’s corner. I will do Bible memory games.”

Tina Jo said, “Food is mine,” and repeated it like she dared anyone to take it.

Walt sighed. “Fine,” he said. “I will talk to the feed store vendors. Some of them donate. I will ask for supplies. And I will talk to the hardware store.”

Hannah looked at him. “Thank you,” she said.

He grunted, but he met her eyes. “Do not make me regret it.”

Her father looked around the table. “We also need prayer,” he said. “We need wisdom. We need unity. We need to remember we serve God, not a building.”

The words should comfort her. Instead, they pricked at her. She wanted to serve God. She also loved the building. She loved what it held. She loved what it represented. She feared she loved it too much.

She kept her face neutral.

Mr. Fitch tapped his notebook. “Pastor,” he said, “with respect, if the building fails, the ministry fails.”

Her father leaned back slightly. “The ministry does not live in wood,” he said. “It lives in people. But I agree the building matters. It gives us a place to gather. It gives us stability.”

Mr. Fitch nodded, but his mouth stayed tight.

Hannah decided to voice what sat beneath the whole meeting. “We are going to work,” she said. “We are going to ask. We are going to plan. But we also need to accept we cannot force the outcome.”

Walt said, “So we do all this, and it still might not work.”

She met his gaze. “Yes,” she said. “It might not. But we still do the next right thing.”

Mrs. Albright nodded slowly. “Faith without works is dead,” she said.

Eli added, “And works without faith will wear you out.”

Hannah glanced at him. His voice stayed quiet. His eyes looked tired in a way she had not noticed before, as if he carried his own burdens and still showed up for other people.

She looked back at the table. “We set a date,” she said. “We need enough time to organize, but not so much time that we lose urgency.”

Tina Jo said, “Four weeks.”

Walt choked. “Four weeks. No.”

Carla said, “Six weeks.”

Mrs. Albright said, “Eight. People have calendars.”

Eli said, “We need to see the extent of the damage first.”

Silence returned. His point landed clean.

Hannah felt heat rise in her cheeks. Of course. She had been talking about money and plans, but she did not even know what she was fixing. She knew there was a leak. She knew there was sagging in places. She did not know what was safe. She did not know what was urgent.

Her father opened his folder and pulled out a sheet. “The roofing company said they could patch the worst area,” he said. “But they

also said the structure in the attic might need attention. They did not give details. They are roofers.”

Mr. Fitch said, “We need a contractor.”

Eli shook his head. “We need someone who understands the whole building,” he said. “The roof, the supports, the loads. If we do repairs without a plan, we waste money.”

Mrs. Albright frowned. “We do not have money to waste.”

Walt said, “We do not have money at all.”

Tina Jo said, “We have faith.”

Walt said, “Faith does not buy lumber.”

Her father spoke with patience. “Faith moves us to ask God for what we need,” he said. “And faith moves us to do wise work with what He provides.”

Hannah’s pulse thumped in her ears. She kept thinking about her list at home. Bake sale. Chili cook-off. All small. All safe. A big fundraiser scared her. A professional evaluation scared her more, because it would tell her the truth.

And she feared the truth.

She feared the truth would be worse than she could bear. She feared the truth would show her the church was beyond repair. She feared the truth would prove that she had asked God for help and that He had not answered the way she wanted.

She gripped her pen again. She forced her voice to stay steady. “Eli is right,” she said. “We need a professional architectural evaluation before we plan repairs. We need to know what we are facing.”

Mr. Fitch looked at her. “An architect costs money.”

She nodded. “Yes,” she said. “But guessing costs more.”

Walt leaned forward. “Do we even know an architect?” he asked.

A strange stillness settled in Hannah. She remembered last night in the sanctuary. She remembered her whispered prayer.

Lord, send help.

She did not say it out loud in the meeting. She kept it in her chest like a lit candle.

She looked around the table. “We will find one,” she said. “We start there. We get a full assessment. Then we set a goal. Then we plan the fundraiser around real numbers.”

Her father watched her like he heard more in her words than she said. He nodded once. “All right,” he said. “Hannah will make calls. I will make calls. If any of you have contacts, bring them to us by Sunday.”

Mrs. Albright lifted her chin. “I will ask my nephew. He draws houses.”

Walt rubbed his forehead. “Drawing houses is not the same as evaluating a century-old church.”

Mrs. Albright looked ready to fight.

Hannah stepped in fast. “Thank you,” she told her. “Ask him. We will see if he knows someone who does this work.”

She relaxed a little. “He will,” she said, as if she willed it into being.

Tina Jo stood. “All right,” she said. “I have to open the diner. People need eggs.”

Carla shifted her baby. “I have to do drop-off.”

Eli gathered his notebook. “I have first period.”

Walt pushed his chair back. “I have feed to unload.”

Mr. Fitch closed his notebook with a soft slap. He looked at Hannah’s father. “We will need the Lord,” he said, and his voice held more humility than it did earlier.

Her father nodded. “We do,” he said. “And He is with us.”

People began to file out. They talked in pairs. They made small jokes. They spoke the names of businesses they would ask. The room was filled with movement and purpose.

Hannah stayed seated for a moment. She watched the emptying chairs. She watched her father stack the papers in his folder.

When he looked up, she forced a smile. “We have a plan,” she said.

He walked around the table and rested a hand on the back of her chair. “We have a start,” he said. “Do not carry the whole weight in your head.”

She nodded, but she did not trust her voice. She feared that if she spoke, she would admit how heavy it felt.

He squeezed the chair once and moved toward his office.

Hannah sat alone in the fellowship hall. The coffee smell lingered. The cookies sat untouched. A single paper cup lay on its side near the trash, as if someone had missed it.

She stared at her legal pad. Maple Ridge Restoration Day. Teams. Date to be set. Assessment first.

She wrote one new line in firm letters.

Find an architect.

She set down the pen and looked toward the hallway leading to the sanctuary. She pictured the beams overhead. She pictured the hidden places in the attic, dark and damp, carrying more than they should.

She whispered, “Lord, show me who to call.”

Then she stood, tucked the pad under her arm, and walked out with one clear truth anchoring her next step.

Before Hannah raised money, before she fixed a single board, she needed a professional architectural evaluation to tell her what the church needed and what it would cost.

Chapter 3

The Unexpected Architect

Hannah locked the fellowship hall door behind her and stepped into the bright morning. The sun sat low over Maple Ridge. It lit the churchyard grass and the old sign by the road. Maple Ridge Community Church. Service times. Youth group. Food pantry hours.

She stared up at the white steeple. It looked steady from the outside. She knew better.

She walked toward the parsonage with her legal pad pressed against her side. Her father told her not to carry the weight in her head. She heard his voice, calm and firm. She also heard the soft creak of the attic floor in her memory. She heard the groan of wood under years of use and weather.

She stepped onto the porch and paused at the screen door. She breathed in and out. She did not want to barge into her own house with her worry on full display.

She went inside.

Pastor Whitaker sat at the kitchen table with his Bible open. A mug of coffee steamed near his right hand. He looked up and studied her face.

“You stayed behind,” he said.

“I needed to finish my list,” she said.

He pointed to the chair across from him. She sat. The wooden seat felt hard. Honest.

He closed his Bible with care. “What is your next step?” he asked.

“Find an architect,” she said. She slid the legal pad toward him. She tapped the line she wrote. Find an architect.

He nodded once. “Good. We will do this in order.”

She held his gaze. “Do you know anyone?” she asked.

He exhaled slowly. He looked past her toward the window above the sink. The view showed the church's side yard and the gravel lot.

“I know names,” he said. “I do not know who will take it on.”

“I asked in the meeting,” she said. “People had ideas. No one had a name they trusted.”

He nodded again. “We will ask around.”

She leaned forward. “I want someone local,” she said. “Someone who will care. Someone who will not treat this like a quick job.”

He studied her. “You want someone who will see the church as more than a building,” he said.

“Yes,” she said.

He reached for his mug and took a sip. “You have faith,” he said. “Use it. Ask. Knock. God will open a door.”

Hannah wanted to believe the door would open fast. She also knew Maple Ridge. People moved slowly when money got involved. People moved more slowly when the church needed help.

“I will start today,” she said.

“Do not do it alone,” he said.

She looked down at the legal pad. Her list already felt like a burden. Teams. Fundraiser. Assessment. Contractors. Insurance. Permits. Volunteers. Meals for work crews. Child care during the workday.

And all of it depended on one first step.

An evaluation.

She stood. “I will go by the diner,” she said. “Tina Jo hears everything.”

Her father smiled a little. “She does,” he said. “Eat something while you are there.”

Hannah nodded and headed for the door.

Outside, Maple Ridge looked like it always did. Two-lane roads. Old maples along the sidewalks. Porch swings. Trucks were parked near hardware stores. A few kids rode bikes in small loops on quiet streets.

She drove toward town with the church still in her rearview mirror. She kept seeing those beams overhead. Weathered. Strong in places. Weak in others.

She pulled into the diner lot and parked near the side entrance. Tina Jo kept the front door unlocked, but Hannah knew she liked her to come in the side when she was in the middle of the breakfast rush. Hannah knew her rules. Hannah respected them.

Hannah stepped inside, and the smell hit her. Bacon, coffee, toast. A stack of pancakes passed by on a tray. The hum of voices filled the room.

Tina Jo stood behind the counter with an order pad in her hand. Her hair sat in a neat bun. Her apron looked clean even in the middle of chaos. She saw Hannah and lifted her chin in greeting. She did not wave. She did not have time.

Hannah slid onto a stool at the end of the counter, out of the way. She set her legal pad on her lap.

Tina Jo finished with a couple at the register, took their cash, then turned toward Hannah.

“You look like you forgot how to blink,” she said.

“I slept,” Hannah said.

Tina Jo narrowed her eyes. “You slept, but you did not rest.”

Hannah did not argue. Tina Jo poured her coffee without asking and slid the mug in front of her.

“Eat,” Tina Jo said.

“I came for information,” Hannah said.

“You will do both,” Tina Jo said. “What do you want?”

Hannah wrapped her hands around the mug. “An architect,” she said. “Someone local. Someone honest. Someone who will evaluate an old building.”

Tina Jo paused. Her face shifted in a way Hannah read as interest mixed with caution. She leaned closer, lowering her voice even though the room stayed loud.

“Well,” she said. “You picked a day to ask.”

Hannah’s stomach tightened. “Why?” she asked.

Tina Jo glanced toward the kitchen doorway, then back at her. “Eli Brooks is back,” she said.

Hannah blinked. The name landed hard. She did not spill her coffee, but she held the mug tighter.

“Eli Brooks,” she repeated.

Tina Jo nodded. “He moved back a few months ago. Folks saw his truck at the old Brooks place. He stopped in here yesterday.”

Hannah’s mind jumped back years without warning. A boy with sun-browned arms and a grin he tried to hide. A teenager who sat in the back row of the youth group with his feet stretched into the aisle. A young man who looked like he wanted to bolt from the building, even when he stayed.

She forced her voice to stay steady. “He is an architect,” she said.

Tina Jo lifted one shoulder. “He is now. He went off. He got his degree. He worked in the city. He did something with commercial buildings, I think.”

Hannah stared at the coffee surface. She watched a swirl settle.

“Why is he back?” she asked.

Tina Jo set her hands on the counter. “People got theories,” she said. “Some think he ran out of money. Some think he messed up again. Some think he wants to take care of his aunt.”

“Aunt Marlene,” Hannah said, then stopped herself.

Tina Jo pointed at her. “See,” she said. “You remember. Most people forgot her name. She raised him after his parents left. She lives alone out by the feed store.”

Hannah nodded. She did remember. She remembered the first time Eli showed up at church with Marlene. She remembered how she held his shoulder like she worried he would vanish. She remembered how he shrugged her off once he hit his teens.

Tina Jo watched her. “Do you want him?” she asked.

Hannah hesitated. “I want a good architect,” she said.

“That is not what I asked,” Tina Jo said.

Hannah looked up. Tina Jo’s eyes did not soften. She cared, but she did not sugarcoat.

“People do not like him,” Hannah said.

Tina Jo let out a short breath. “Some do. Some do not.”

“What do you think?” Hannah asked.

Tina Jo tapped the counter with one finger. “I think he is smart,” she said. “I think he sees angles and load points and problems before anyone else does. I think he always did.”

Hannah stared at her. “You sound like you trust him.”

Tina Jo shook her head. “I trust his brain,” she said. “I do not trust his choices. Not yet.”

Hannah swallowed. The word yet mattered. Tina Jo left room for change. She always did, even when she acted like she did not.

“What did he say when he came in?” Hannah asked.

Tina Jo scoffed. “He did not say much. He ordered coffee. He paid. He tipped too much. He asked how Pastor Whitaker was doing.”

Hannah’s chest tightened. “He asked about my father,” she said.

“He did,” Tina Jo said. “He did not ask about you.”

Hannah did not know why the last line stung. She told herself it did not matter. It should not matter.

Tina Jo slid a plate of toast in front of her. Hannah did not see her make it. She moved fast.

“You need food,” Tina Jo said. “You look pale.”

“I am fine,” Hannah said, but she picked up a piece of toast.

Tina Jo folded her arms. “You are thinking about the youth group,” she said.

Hannah froze mid-bite.

“You always get quiet when you think about those years,” Tina Jo said.

Hannah chewed and swallowed. “People remember him as trouble,” she said.

“They remember what he did,” Tina Jo said. “And they remember how tired their parents got.”

Hannah set the toast down. “What do they say now?” she asked.

Tina Jo leaned closer again. “Mr. Fitch says we do not need him near the church,” she said. “Walt says Eli will bring problems. Carla says people should give him a chance. Your friend Ellie says he looks older and sadder.”

Hannah lifted her eyes. “Ellie saw him?” she asked.

Tina Jo nodded. “At the grocery. She talked to him for a minute.”

Hannah’s friend Ellie. Hannah’s steady friend. Hannah’s safe friend. She never chased drama. If she spoke to Eli, she had a reason.

Hannah took a slow breath. “Where is he staying?” she asked.

“At the Brooks place,” Tina Jo said. “He is fixing it up. People saw him on the roof two days ago.”

Hannah pictured Eli on a roof. It fit. He always climbed. Trees. Barn rafters. The church bell tower ladder once, until her father caught him.

Her father did not yell. He did not shame. He only said, “Get down.” Eli got down. He did not apologize. He did not smirk. He looked... embarrassed.

Hannah pushed the memory away.

“What do you need from me?” Tina Jo asked.

Hannah glanced down at her legal pad. “A name,” she said. “A number. A way to contact him.”

Tina Jo tilted her head. “So you do want him.”

Hannah met her eyes. “I want the church assessed,” she said. “We need facts. We need a professional. If he is qualified, it seems foolish to ignore him.”

Tina Jo studied her for a long moment. Then she reached under the counter and pulled out a small receipt book. She flipped a page and wrote quickly.

She tore off the slip and slid it toward Hannah.

“His cell,” she said. “He wrote it down in case anyone needed work done. He said he is taking small jobs while he settles in.”

Hannah stared at the paper. Eli Brooks. A number. Ink in Tina Jo’s sharp handwriting.

“You kept it,” Hannah said.

“I keep everything,” Tina Jo said.

Hannah tucked the slip into the back of her legal pad.

Tina Jo pointed at her. “If you call him, you set boundaries,” she said. “You keep it business. You do it in daylight. You do not meet him alone on some back road.”

Hannah blinked. “You think he is dangerous?” she asked.

Tina Jo huffed. “I think he used to make bad decisions when he got restless. I think people got hurt. I think you are the pastor’s daughter, and Maple Ridge loves to talk.”

Her words landed heavily because they held truth.

“I will be careful,” Hannah said.

“You will tell your father,” Tina Jo said.

Hannah nodded, though she did not like the idea. Her father carried enough. She did not want to add Eli Brooks to the pile.

Tina Jo watched her take another bite of toast. “You remember him differently,” she said, soft enough to almost get lost in the noise of the diner.

Hannah looked up fast. “What do you mean?” she asked.

Tina Jo’s eyes held steady. “Most folks remember the worst day,” she said. “They forget the other days. You never did.”

Heat rose in Hannah’s face. “I do not know what you are talking about,” she said.

Tina Jo did not fight her. She wiped the counter with a clean rag and shifted back into work mode.

“Finish your coffee,” she said. “Then go talk to Ellie. She will tell you what she saw.”

Hannah did not argue. She finished her toast. She sipped her coffee. She kept her face calm. Inside, her thoughts crowded each other.

Eli Brooks was back.

An architect.

A name she did not expect to hear in the middle of a building crisis.

She paid for her breakfast even though Tina Jo tried to wave her off. She accepted Hannah's cash with a tight nod, as if she respected her more for it.

Outside, Hannah stood by her car with her legal pad in hand. The day warmed. The road hummed with the first wave of late morning traffic.

She pulled out her phone and scrolled to Ellie's contact.

She did not call. She texted.

Are you free today? I need to talk.

Ellie responded within a minute.

After school. My porch. Four.

Hannah read it twice. She tucked her phone away and drove toward her job at the church office. She worked part-time during the week. She coordinated bulletin details. She answered calls. She scheduled meetings. She tried to make life easier for her father.

Today, she sat at the office desk and stared at the calendar without seeing it.

The phone rang. She answered with her calm voice. She took a message about a funeral meal. She wrote it down. She passed it to her father.

He thanked her. He studied her.

"You look preoccupied," he said.

"I am thinking," she said.

He nodded. "About the architect."

“Yes,” she said.

He went quiet. Then he spoke with care. “You do not need to force it,” he said. “God will provide.”

Hannah held his gaze. “God often provides through people,” she said.

He gave a small smile. “He does,” he said. “Who did you find?”

Hannah’s mouth dried. She did not plan to tell him this soon. Tina Jo told her to. Hannah knew she was right.

“Eli Brooks is back,” Hannah said.

Her father stilled. The smile faded. His eyes shifted, as if his mind walked back years the way hers did.

He did not speak at once.

Hannah waited.

He set a hand on the edge of the desk. “Where did you hear?” he asked.

“Tina Jo,” Hannah said. “She said he is an architect now.”

Her father looked down at the papers on his desk. “I heard he returned,” he said. “I did not know the timing.”

“You knew,” Hannah said.

“I heard a rumor,” he said. “I did not chase it.”

Hannah leaned forward. “What do you think?” she asked.

He exhaled and sat in the chair across from her. He looked tired for a moment. Not defeated. Tired.

“I think people grow,” he said. “I think people also repeat patterns when they return to old places.”

Hannah picked at the edge of her legal pad. “Do you think he will help?” she asked.

“I do not know,” her father said. “I hope he seeks peace. I hope he seeks God.”

Hannah held her voice steady. “Did he ever?” she asked.

Her father’s eyes lifted to hers. “He did, for a time,” he said. “Then he ran.”

Hannah swallowed. “People say he was a troublemaker,” she said.

Her father nodded slowly. “He made choices that pulled others into trouble,” he said. “He broke trust. He broke the rules. He broke his aunt’s heart more times than I can count.”

Hannah flinched at the bluntness. Her father spoke truth without cruelty. He did not soften facts to protect her feelings.

“I remember other things too,” Hannah said before she stopped herself.

Her father’s gaze sharpened. “What do you remember?” he asked.

Hannah stared at the desk. She saw scratches in the wood. She saw a faint coffee ring from last week.

“I remember he stayed late after youth group sometimes,” she said. “He helped stack chairs. He stayed quiet. He listened when you talked to the boys about work and responsibility. He did not laugh. He did not roll his eyes.”

Her father sat still. “You watched him,” he said.

Hannah lifted her chin. “I watched everyone,” she said. “I grew up here. I noticed.”

Her father held her gaze. “Hannah,” he said, and her name sounded gentle and careful. “You must guard your heart.”

“I am not asking to date him,” she said. The words came out sharp. She softened her tone at once. “I am asking if we should ask for his professional help.”

Her father nodded once, as if he accepted the correction.

“You must also guard the church,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

He rested his hands on his knees. “Eli has skills,” he said. “God gave him a mind for building. He also has a history in this town.”

“People have history too,” Hannah said. “People change, too.”

Her father watched her with a look she could not read. Then he said, “Why do you want him to be different than what people say?”

The question hit with more force than she expected. Hannah opened her mouth. She closed it.

She did not want to admit how the memories sat in her.

She remembered the way Eli used to look at the sanctuary ceiling, as if he saw something no one else saw. She remembered the one day he defended a younger boy from being mocked. She remembered how he stood between them, tense and silent, then walked away without bragging.

She also remembered the night the sheriff brought him home. She remembered the whispers. She remembered Marlene’s face in the church hallway the next Sunday, tight and pale. She remembered

her father stepping into the side office with Eli and staying in there a long time.

No one told Hannah what they said in that office.

She only remembered Eli leaving with his shoulders hunched. She remembered him glancing toward her in the hallway as he passed. His eyes looked wet. He looked ashamed. He looked young.

She remembered thinking he did not look like a villain.

Hannah cleared her throat. “I want the building assessed,” she said. “I want someone who cares.”

Her father nodded. “Then we will pray,” he said. “And we will seek wisdom.”

“I already have his number,” Hannah said.

Her father’s eyebrows lifted a fraction. “You move fast,” he said.

“You told me to ask,” she said.

He looked down again and smiled faintly. “I did,” he said. “All right. Tell me your plan.”

Hannah breathed easier. She expected him to shut it down. He did not.

“I will meet him in a public place,” she said. “I will ask if he will look at the church and give us an estimate. I will ask what his fee is. I will ask what his timeline is.”

Her father nodded. “Good,” he said. “Invite him to my office after you speak with him. If he agrees to help, I want to meet with him too.”

Hannah nodded. “Yes,” she said.

Her father reached for his Bible again. He held it with both hands. “We must also prepare for people’s reactions,” he said.

“I know,” she said.

He looked at her. “You will get opinions,” he said. “Some will sound wise. Some will sound fearful. You must listen, then decide with prayer.”

Hannah nodded again. “I will,” she said.

He opened his Bible and read a verse under his breath. She caught pieces. Wisdom. Trust. Straight paths.

Hannah sat quietly while he prayed, low and steady. He asked God for protection. He asked for discernment. He asked for humility for Eli. He asked for unity for the church.

When he finished, Hannah felt the weight shift a little. The beams still needed repair. The money still needed to be raised. The decisions still need to be made. But prayer gave her a line to hold.

The afternoon crawled.

She completed her tasks. She returned calls. She scheduled a meeting with the roofing company for a separate inspection. She printed new volunteer sign-up sheets. She answered three questions from Carla about child care options on Restoration Day.

Through it all, her mind kept circling the same name.

Eli Brooks.

At three-thirty, Hannah locked the office and stepped outside. The air held the cool, dry edge of early fall. A breeze moved through the maples along the drive, lifting a few loose leaves from the branches.

She got in her car and headed toward Ellie’s house.

Ellie lived two streets over from the school in a small blue house with white trim. A swing sat on her porch. A wind chime hung by the front door. Her yard held tidy rows of flowers even in seasons when nothing bloomed.

Hannah parked at the curb and walked up the steps.

Ellie opened the door before Hannah knocked. She wore a simple skirt and a cardigan. Her hair fell in a loose braid over one shoulder. She smiled, but her eyes looked curious.

“You look serious,” Ellie said.

“You told me four,” Hannah said.

“It is four,” Ellie said. She stepped aside. “Come in.”

Hannah entered and smelled bread. Ellie always baked when she felt unsettled. She called it productive worry.

Hannah sat on the porch swing instead of going inside. Ellie sat beside her with a mug of tea. She offered it to Hannah first. Hannah took it.

For a moment, they both sat quietly. The swing creaked softly. Birds chirped in the maple tree by the sidewalk.

Ellie studied Hannah. “You heard,” she said.

“About Eli,” Hannah said.

Ellie nodded. “Tina Jo told you.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Ellie took a slow sip of tea. “Then you want to know what I saw.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Ellie looked out at the street. “I saw him at the grocery,” she said. “He stood by the apples. He looked like he did not know where to put his hands.”

Hannah frowned. “What does that mean?” she asked.

Ellie gave a small shrug. “He looked like someone who expects people to hit him with words,” she said. “He kept his head down. He moved aside for everyone. He did not take up space.”

Hannah stared at her. “That does not sound like what the Eli people describe,” she said.

Ellie looked back at her. “People describe the boy,” she said. “I saw the man.”

Hannah swallowed. “Did he speak to you?” she asked.

“I spoke to him first,” Ellie said. “I said welcome back.”

“And,” Hannah said.

“He looked surprised,” Ellie said. “Then he thanked me. He asked how my mother was. He remembered her name.”

Hannah’s chest tightened. “He remembered,” she repeated.

Ellie nodded. “He also asked about church,” she said.

Hannah’s grip tightened on her mug. “What did he ask?” she said.

“He asked if the building was okay,” Ellie said.

Hannah went still. “He knows,” she said.

Ellie nodded. “He said he heard something about damage. He asked if repairs had started.”

Hannah stared down at her tea. “We need an architect,” she said.

Ellie stayed quiet for a moment. Then she said, “You are thinking about asking him.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Ellie leaned back against the porch post. “Do you remember the night of the bonfire?” she asked.

Hannah closed her eyes for a brief second. “Yes,” she said.

It was the fall before Eli left town. Someone lit a bonfire out by Miller’s field. It turned into a party. Older teens brought beer. A fight broke out. Someone called the sheriff. Parents showed up furious. Rumors spread faster than facts.

Hannah was younger. She stayed home. She heard it all the next day anyway.

“People still talk about it,” Ellie said.

“I know,” Hannah said.

Ellie watched her closely. “Do you remember what else happened that week?” she asked.

Hannah opened her eyes. “I remember he came to church the next Sunday,” she said.

Ellie nodded. “He sat in the back,” she said. “He stayed through the whole service.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. She remembered his stillness. She remembered how he did not move when others stood. He stood a beat later, as if he did not feel worthy to stand with them.

Ellie turned her mug in her hands. “My brother said Eli took the blame for more than he did,” she said.

Hannah snapped her eyes to Ellie. “What,” she said.

Ellie nodded slowly. “My brother told me later. He said Eli stopped the fight. He pulled two boys apart. He took the keys from someone who was going to drive drunk. He shoved the keys into his pocket. Then, when the sheriff came, Eli said the keys were his. He said he planned to drive.”

Hannah’s throat tightened. “Is that true?” she asked.

Ellie lifted one shoulder. “I do not know,” she said. “I know my brother said it with a straight face. I know he looked guilty when he told me.”

Hannah stared at the street. She pictured Eli at the edge of a fire, smoke in his hair, eyes hard, jaw set. She pictured him stepping into trouble, not running from it.

She also pictured him in the church hallway after, eyes wet, shame on his face.

She looked back at Ellie. “People never said any of that,” she said.

“They would not,” Ellie said. “They like a clean story. The rebel boy causes trouble. Rebel boy leaves town. End.”

Hannah swallowed. “It is not that clean,” she said.

Ellie shook her head. “People are not clean,” she said.

Hannah took a slow breath. “Tell me what he looked like now,” she said. “Details.”

Ellie thought. “He looks taller,” she said. “Broader. He looks like he eats meals now. His hair is shorter. He has a few lines near his eyes. He looks tired. His hands looked rough.”

Hannah nodded. “Work hands,” she said.

“Yes,” Ellie said. “He wore a plain jacket. No fancy watch. No city show.”

Hannah let out a quiet breath. “Did he seem angry?” she asked.

Ellie shook her head. “No,” she said. “He seemed careful.”

Hannah looked down at her legal pad on her lap. She did not mean to bring it, but she did. It sat with her like a reminder of duty.

Ellie tapped the edge of the pad. “You carry lists,” she said.

“You know I do,” Hannah said.

Ellie gave a small smile. Then her face turned serious again. “If you ask him, people will talk,” she said.

“I know,” Hannah said.

“They will say you are naive,” Ellie said. “They will say you want to save him. They will say he will hurt you.”

Hannah stiffened. “I am not trying to save him,” she said.

Ellie nodded. “I know,” she said. “You are trying to save the church roof.”

Hannah let out a breath that sounded close to a laugh, but no humor sat in it.

Ellie reached over and rested her hand on Hannah’s wrist for a brief moment. “Why do you remember him differently?” she asked.

Hannah froze.

She could tell her the simple truth. She watched him. She noticed him. She saw the moments when he tried. She saw the flashes of kindness. She saw his shame, and she did not turn away.

She could also tell her the other truth she had never said out loud.

She remembered the day she fell off the old playground platform behind the church. She was ten. She tried to climb where she should not have climbed. Her foot slipped. Her arm scraped on the edge. She hit the ground hard and knocked the breath out of her.

Eli was fifteen. He should have walked right past her. He did not.

He crouched by her and told her to breathe slowly. He asked where it hurt. He carried her to the steps and sat her down. He ran inside and got her father. He did not wait for praise. He left before anyone thanked him.

Hannah remembered his face close to hers as he checked her scraped arm. Focused. Quiet. Careful.

She remembered thinking he looked like someone who tried harder than people knew.

Hannah did not tell Ellie all of it. The memory felt too personal. Too tender. It made her chest ache.

“I saw pieces,” Hannah said.

Ellie waited.

Hannah swallowed. “When everyone wrote him off, I kept seeing him show up,” she said. “He showed up. He sat in the back. He stayed for prayers. He helped stack chairs. He listened. Then he messed up, and people acted as if nothing else mattered.”

Ellie nodded. “You have a long memory,” she said.

“You have one too,” Hannah said.

Ellie smiled faintly. “Yes,” she said. “I also have a softer heart than people think.”

Hannah stared at the street again; a truck rolled by slowly. A man in a cap lifted two fingers from the steering wheel in greeting.

Hannah looked back at Ellie. “Do you think I should ask him?” she said.

Ellie took her time. “I think you should ask God first,” she said.

“I did,” Hannah said. “I am doing it again.”

Ellie nodded. “Then I think you should talk to Eli like he is a person,” she said. “Not a rumor. Not a warning story. A person.”

Hannah let those words settle.

Ellie added, “Meet him in a public place. Keep it clear. Keep it honest. Ask him for the job, then watch what he does with it.”

Hannah nodded. “Actions,” she said.

“Yes,” Ellie said. “Words do not hold up a roof.”

Hannah took a long sip of tea. It tasted like chamomile and honey.

She set the mug down on the porch rail and looked at her legal pad again. The slip of paper with Eli’s number sat tucked in the back. She slid it out and stared at it.

Ellie watched her. “You are going to call him,” she said.

“I am,” Hannah said.

Ellie lifted her chin toward Hannah’s phone. “Do it now,” she said.

Hannah’s pulse jumped. “Now,” she repeated.

“Yes,” Ellie said. “If you wait, you will talk yourself into fear. Or pride. Or both.”

Hannah picked up her phone and unlocked it. Her thumb hovered.

She stopped. “What if he says no?” she asked.

Ellie shrugged. “Then you thank him, and you keep looking,” she said.

“What if he says yes?” Hannah asked.

Ellie met her eyes. “Then you will have to face what you believe,” she said. “Do you believe God redeems people? Or do you only believe it in safe stories?”

The words hit Hannah because Ellie spoke them without harshness. She spoke them like facts.

Hannah inhaled. She typed Eli’s number into her phone.

She paused before pressing call. Her mind filled with voices.

Mr. Fitch, wary and proud. Walt, blunt and protective. Carla, hopeful and stubborn. Tina Jo, practical and watchful. Her father was careful and prayerful.

She also heard one older voice from years ago, speaking in the youth room. Her father told a room full of teenagers, “God builds what we cannot. He restores what we break. He does not waste a life.”

Hannah pressed call.

The phone rang once. Twice.

A click.

“Hello,” a man’s voice said. Low. Cautious.

Hannah’s throat tightened, older voice. Familiar tone. The same, but changed.

She steadied herself. “Eli,” she said. “This is Hannah Knox.”

Silence held for a beat. Then he spoke. “Hannah,” he said, as if testing the name. “Hi.”

Hannah gripped the porch swing chain. “Hi,” she said. “Tina Jo gave me your number. I heard you are doing architectural work now.”

“Yes,” he said. “I am.”

Hannah kept her voice clear. “Maple Ridge Community Church needs an evaluation,” she said. “We have structural concerns. We need to know what we are dealing with before we plan repairs. Would you meet with me to talk about it?”

Another pause. She heard a faint sound in the background, like a tool being set down.

“Where?” he asked.

“At the diner,” she said. “Or the church office. Wherever you prefer.”

His breath sounded slow. Controlled. “The diner,” he said. “Public is fine.”

Hannah glanced at Ellie. Ellie watched her as she held her steady.

“What day?” Eli asked.

“Tomorrow morning,” Hannah said. “Nine.”

Silence again. Then, “Nine works,” he said.

Hannah released a breath she did not know she held. “Thank you,” she said.

“You want an estimate,” he said. “And a written report.”

“Yes,” she said. “We need something we can take to contractors and to the congregation.”

“I can do that,” he said.

Hannah swallowed. “Do you have time to look at the building soon?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “After we talk, I can walk through. I will need attic access.”

“We can arrange it,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. His voice softened by a fraction. “I will see you tomorrow, Hannah.”

“You will,” she said. She paused. She chose her next words with care. “I am glad you answered.”

Another beat. “I did not know if I should,” he said, and the honesty in it made her chest tighten.

“You should,” she said. Simple. Firm.

He exhaled. “All right,” he said. “Tomorrow.”

Hannah ended the call and lowered the phone to her lap. Her hand shook a little. She pressed her palm against her skirt to still it.

Ellie watched her. “He agreed,” she said.

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Ellie nodded once. “So you will meet him,” she said.

Hannah looked out at the street, then back toward the church. She pictured the sanctuary. The beams overhead. The quiet rows of pews. The cross behind the pulpit. The place where people prayed through births, deaths, marriages, and mistakes.

She thought of Eli at fifteen. She thought of Eli now, back in town, answering a call he might have ignored.

She lifted her chin.

“Yes,” she said. “She will meet him.”

Chapter 4

The First Meeting

Hannah parked on Main Street and sat for a moment with both hands on the wheel. Nine in the morning felt too early for her nerves. The diner sat across the street with its white trim and its old sign. She saw no sign of Eli.

She checked the clock on the dashboard. Eight fifty-seven.

She told herself to breathe. She told herself to stay steady. She asked for help for the church. She did not ask for a walk back into the past.

She stepped out and shut the door. The air held a bite. She smoothed her skirt. She walked toward the diner.

She paused at the door.

She did not go in.

She turned and looked down the street again.

She saw Eli then. He walked from the direction of the courthouse square. He carried a slim black case under his arm and a clipboard in his hand. He wore a button-down shirt, sleeves rolled to his forearms. Clean. Pressed. He walked with an even pace. No swagger. No rush. His head stayed up. His eyes stayed forward.

He looked older than the boy she remembered. The jawline looked firmer. The shoulders looked broader. The hair looked shorter and neater. He looked like a man who slept at night.

He saw her and stopped. His face went still for a beat, like he ran a quick check on his own emotions. Then he nodded once and kept walking.

She met him on the sidewalk.

“Good morning,” he said.

His voice sounded lower than it did on the phone. Calm. Measured.

“Good morning,” she said. She kept her hands folded in front of her to keep them from fidgeting.

He glanced at the diner door, then back at her. “I thought about it after we spoke,” he said. “I would rather meet at my office. It is close. We can look at drawings and notes. Then we can go to the church.”

Her first instinct said she planned the diner for a reason. She wanted people around. Light. Noise. A buffer.

Then she heard her father in her head. Do what brings clarity. Do not cling to fear.

She nodded. “All right,” she said. “Where is your office?”

He pointed up the street. “Two blocks. Over the hardware store. The stairs are on the side.”

She fell into step beside him.

The first few seconds stretched. Her mind reached for something safe to say.

“How long have you been back?” she asked.

“Six months,” he said. “I rented the space in November.”

“That is longer than I thought,” she said.

He nodded. “I did not advertise much at first. I took a small job. Porch repairs. Shed plans. A garage addition. I needed a track record.”

She heard the practicality in him. She did not hear any need to impress her.

“You are licensed?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “State license. Liability coverage. I will show you. I keep all of it on file.”

She glanced at him. He did not look at her when he said it. He kept his eyes on the sidewalk ahead.

She remembered the Eli who used to look everywhere at once, like he was waiting for trouble or waiting to cause it.

She swallowed.

“You said you are doing architectural work now,” she said. “Did you go to school?”

“Yes,” he said. “I finished after I left Maple Ridge.”

That answer held a lot and said little. She let it sit.

They passed the flower shop. They passed the barber. They passed the post office. She felt the familiar pull of the town. Everyone knew her name. Everyone knew her father. Everyone would know within the hour that she walked down Main Street with Eli Brooks.

She kept her face neutral.

At the side of the hardware store, Eli pushed open a narrow door and held it for her. She stepped into a stairwell that smelled like sawdust and old paint. Wooden steps creaked under her shoes.

He walked behind her, neither crowding nor rushing her.

At the top, he unlocked a door and stepped aside again. “Go ahead,” he said.

She entered a small office with slanted ceilings. Two windows faced the street. Light spread across a drafting table and a work desk. Rolled plans sat in a rack. A bookshelf held code books and binders. A small framed verse sat on the wall near the desk. She stopped and looked at it before she stopped herself.

Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.

Psalm 127:1.

Her chest tightened in a way she did not expect.

Eli set his case on the desk and followed her gaze. He did not act embarrassed. He did not act proud either.

He cleared his throat. "It helps me remember why I work," he said.

She turned toward him. She kept her voice even. "I did not expect to see that in your office."

He nodded once. "I understand."

She took a few steps farther in and let her eyes move around the room, like she needed facts to anchor her. The space looked clean. Organized. No clutter. No chaos.

Eli gestured toward a chair near the desk. "Please sit," he said.

She sat and set her purse on her lap.

He sat on the other side, across from her, with the desk between them like a boundary he respected. He opened his clipboard and clicked a pen.

"All right," he said. "Tell me what you know so far. Start with what you have observed. Then tell me who noticed it first and when."

His tone turned fully professional. She felt relief. She wanted this, a meeting with clear edges.

She took a breath. “We have cracks,” she said. “In the plaster near the front left corner of the sanctuary. A few hairline cracks near the back as well. The floor near the left front pews feels uneven. People have mentioned it for months. We first saw the cracks after the last heavy rain.”

Eli wrote. “Do you have photos?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. She opened her purse and pulled out her phone. She scrolled and held it out.

He stood and came around the desk, then stopped a full step away from her, like he refused to crowd her. “I can?” he asked.

She paused at the word. He did not use it like a habit. He used it like a choice.

She handed him the phone.

He studied the screen. His eyes sharpened with focus. He zoomed in with two fingers, then swiped to the next image. He stayed quiet as he took it in. He did not rush.

She watched his face. She saw no judgment. She saw no sarcasm. She saw steady attention.

He handed the phone back. “These are useful,” he said. “The cracking pattern matters. So does the location.”

She tucked her phone away.

He returned to his chair. “Any sticking doors?” he asked. “Windows are hard to open. New gaps in trim.”

She nodded. "The side door by the choir room sticks. The door to the fellowship hall swings on its own. The window in the nursery jammed last month."

He wrote more. "Any water intrusion inside?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "A stain in the ceiling above the back pews. We fixed a leak in the roof last year, but the stain came back."

Eli tapped his pen on the clipboard once, then stopped. "All right," he said. "How old is the building?"

"The original sanctuary is ninety-two years old," she said. "The fellowship hall addition is forty. The education wing is twenty-five."

He nodded. "Do you have original drawings?" he asked.

Her cheeks warmed. "We have a few rolled plans in the church office," she said. "Some pages are missing. Some are hard to read."

"Bring what you have," he said. "Old buildings hide surprises. Drawings help, even when they are incomplete."

She leaned forward a little. "Do you think it is the foundation?" she asked.

"I will not guess," he said. "I will inspect. I will measure. I will look for differential settlement and signs of moisture. I will check framing connections where I can see them."

Her mind tried to keep up with his words. They sounded firm. Clear. He spoke like a man who understood buildings and his own limits.

She nodded. "We have an elderly congregation," she said. "We have kids. We have Sunday school. We need to know if it is safe."

Eli met her eyes for the first time since she sat down. His gaze held steady. No heat. No challenge. Only care.

“Yes,” he said. “Safety comes first.”

Silence settled for a beat. She heard the hum of the hardware store below. A muffled clang. A voice calling out a price.

Eli looked back at his notes. “Who asked you to call me?” he asked.

The question caught her off guard. She expected him to ask about soil or beams, not about her decision.

“My father did not,” she said. “He would have, but I asked him to let me handle it. I work at the church. I run the office and the outreach schedule. I coordinate repairs when we have them. I felt responsible.”

Eli nodded slowly. “So this fell on you,” he said.

“It fell on all of us,” she said. “But yes. I made the call.”

He set the clipboard down. “Thank you,” he said.

The words landed with weight.

She blinked. “For what?” she asked.

“For trusting me enough to ask,” he said.

Her throat tightened. She kept her face composed. “You are qualified,” she said, as if that was the only reason.

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. “And you have history with me. You did not have to step into it.”

She looked down at her hands. Her fingers pressed the purse strap, then released. She forced them still.

“I did not do it for you,” she said. “I did it for the church.”

“I know,” he said. He did not push. He did not tease. “I respect it.”

She lifted her eyes again. He looked different. Not only older. Different in the way he held his own voice. Different in the way he refused to take more space than he needed.

She thought of him at sixteen, loud and restless in the church parking lot, leaning on the hood of a car and making jokes too sharp for Sunday. She thought of the night her father found him behind the fellowship hall with a beer, his face flushed with defiance and shame. She remembered the way Eli laughed when her father tried to talk to him. She remembered the sound of that laugh. It used to make her angry.

This man did not laugh like that.

She cleared her throat. “How did you end up doing this work?” she asked. “Architecture.”

Eli leaned back in his chair a fraction. He took a breath, like he chose honesty over convenience.

“I liked building when I was a kid,” he said. “I liked drawing houses. I stopped paying attention to it when I started paying attention to other things.”

She kept her gaze on him. She did not fill the space for him.

He continued. “After I left Maple Ridge, I worked construction. Then I went to community college at night. One of the instructors told me I had the mind for design. I transferred and finished a degree. I did internships. I did the exams.”

She searched his face for the old edge. She did not see it.

“That takes discipline,” she said.

He nodded once. “It does.”

Her curiosity pushed again. “Why Maple Ridge?” she asked. “Why come back?”

Eli looked at the window for a second. Then he looked back at her. “Because I needed to,” he said. “I owed people apologies. I owed my mother peace. I owed God obedience.”

The last part landed like a quiet stone dropped in water.

She kept her voice steady. “You owe God obedience,” she repeated.

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I fought Him for years. I stayed busy, so I did not have to listen. It did not work.”

Her heart beat faster. She did not want to pry. She did not want to open a door she could not close.

Still, she asked, “What changed?”

Eli rested his forearms on the desk. He kept his hands clasped. “God did,” he said.

She waited. He did not rush. He seemed used to being misunderstood.

“I hit a point where I could not pretend I was fine,” he said. “I hurt people. I used people. I lied to myself. I told myself I had time to clean it up later. I did not.”

She held her breath.

He continued, voice low. “I lost a job because I showed up drunk. I totaled my car a month later. No one died. God kept me from killing someone. I woke up in a hospital, and I knew I could not keep going.”

Her stomach twisted. She pictured him alone in some distant city, broken and afraid. She pictured no one from Maple Ridge with him. She pictured no church pew. No familiar hymns.

“What did you do?” she asked.

“I called a man I used to work for,” he said. “He was a believer. He picked me up. He took me to a recovery meeting. He took me to church. He did not talk to me. He listened. He kept showing up.”

Eli swallowed. “I confessed sin. I asked God to save me. I meant it. Then I did the next right thing for a long time.”

She stared at him. She felt a strange mix of emotions. Relief. Sadness. Suspicion. Hope she did not want to hold.

She heard her own voice come out softer. “You are sober now,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Three years.”

She nodded slowly. She did not know what to do with the number. It felt both small and huge.

“And you attend church,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “I attend Maple Ridge Community Church. I sit in the back. I slip in late sometimes. I slip out early. I did not want to make anyone deal with me.”

She thought of the Sundays when she scanned the sanctuary for new faces while handing out bulletins. She remembered seeing a man in the back a few times, head down, shoulders square. She thought he looked familiar, but she never got a clear view.

She felt her cheeks warm again.

“You have been there,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “I have.”

She held his gaze. “Why did you not speak to my father?” she asked.

Eli did not flinch. “Because I have avoided him,” he said. “He tried to help me when I was younger. I mocked him. I did not want to face it.”

The honesty disarmed her more than a polished apology would.

She leaned back. “My father does not hold grudges,” she said.

“I know,” Eli said. “He holds truth. It feels worse when you have done wrong.”

She exhaled. “You sound like you have been thinking about this for a long time,” she said.

“I have,” he said.

Another pause.

She shifted back to the task in front of her. She opened her purse and pulled out a folder. “I brought what we have,” she said. “A copy of the property deed description. A few maintenance records. Notes from the last contractor we used for the roof.”

Eli took the folder and set it on the desk. “Thank you,” he said. He flipped through it quickly, eyes scanning. “This helps.”

He stopped on a page. “This roof repair,” he said. “It mentions water pooling near the back left. Do you know if the gutters run well?”

“They do not,” she said. “Leaves clog them. The downspout on the west side drains too close to the foundation. We have talked about adding extensions.”

Eli nodded, as if he were fitting pieces together. “Water near the foundation causes problems,” he said. “It weakens soil. It invites settlement. It rots wood.”

She tucked the information away. Practical. Immediate. She pictured the downspout by the west wall. She pictured the muddy patch after rain.

Eli looked up. “Do you have a maintenance team?” he asked.

“We have volunteers,” she said. “A few men who try to keep up. Most are older now. We hire out what we cannot do.”

He nodded. “Budget constraints,” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “We do not have much margin.”

Eli closed the folder. “I will tell you what I think after I see it,” he said. “I will be direct. I will not dramatize. I will not minimize.”

She nodded. “That is what we need,” she said.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. “Do you have time now?” he asked. “For the walk-through.”

She hesitated. She planned for it, but part of her hoped for a delay. A reason to go home first. A reason to gather more courage.

Still, she came here to act. She came here to protect the church.

“Yes,” she said. “I have time.”

He stood. “All right,” he said. “Before we go, I want to address something.”

Her pulse spiked. She braced without meaning to.

He held her gaze. "I will keep this professional," he said. "I will respect you. I will respect your family. If you want someone else present during the inspection, you tell me."

Her throat tightened again. "Thank you," she said.

He nodded. "I know my past," he said. "I know what people remember. I will not ask you to pretend it did not happen."

She swallowed. "You are different," she said before she could stop herself.

Eli gave a small, restrained nod. "Yes," he said. "God changed me. I did not fix myself. I did not manage a new image. I surrendered. He did the work."

He said it without performance. He said it like a man stating a fact he depended on.

She stood and adjusted her purse strap. "I do not know what to say to that," she admitted.

"You do not need to say anything," he said. "You only need to watch for fruit over time. That is fair."

She followed him toward the door. He locked the office behind them. They walked down the stairs together.

Outside, Main Street had grown busier. A delivery truck backed into an alley. A woman pushed a stroller past the diner. Two teens crossed near the library.

She walked beside Eli again. The space between them felt careful. It also felt safe.

As they passed the diner, she saw Ellie inside at a corner table. Ellie spotted her through the window and raised an eyebrow in question.

Hannah gave a small nod. Ellie's mouth pressed into a line, then softened. She lifted a hand in a quick wave.

Eli noticed Hannah's glance. "You came with someone," he said.

"Yes," Hannah said. "She drove me. She is at the diner."

He nodded. "Good," he said, approving of her caution.

They kept walking toward the church. The white steeple rose ahead. The building looked solid from the street. Hannah knew better. She felt the uneven floor under her shoes. She stared at the cracks during sermons and wondered if anyone else saw them.

As they neared the churchyard, Eli slowed. He looked up at the front facade. He studied the roofline. He studied the windows. His eyes moved like a measuring tool.

"You have a beautiful building," he said.

"It is home," she said.

He nodded. "Old timber buildings age with grace when people care for them," he said. "They also fail quietly when people ignore small signs."

Hannah unlocked the front door with the key she kept on her ring. The foyer smelled like old hymnals and lemon cleaner. Sunlight filtered through stained glass. Dust floated in the beams of light.

She stepped inside and waited for him to enter.

He paused at the threshold for half a second. His face shifted, like he held memory in his mouth and chose not to taste it.

Then he stepped in and shut the door behind him.

Hannah led him down the center aisle. The sanctuary stood empty. Pews lined both sides. The cross hung behind the pulpit. The weathered beams arched overhead, dark and sturdy, the same beams she had pictured last night.

Eli stopped near the front left, where the cracks showed in the plaster.

He crouched and ran his fingers near the crack without touching it. He looked along the wall. He looked at the corner. He looked at the floor line.

“What is under this section?” he asked.

“The crawl space,” she said. “There is an access door in the hallway by the storage closet.”

He nodded. “And the attic access,” he said.

“In the back,” she said. “In the utility room. It is a pull-down ladder.”

He stood and looked up at the beam line. He studied the joint where one beam met another. He took a small level tool from his case and set it on the floor near the front pew. He watched the bubble, then moved it a few feet and checked again.

Hannah stood near him and tried to keep her breathing even. She felt his focus like a quiet pressure. She felt her own thoughts start to race.

He slipped the tool back into the case and looked at her. “I am glad you called,” he said.

She held his gaze. “Do you think it is serious?” she asked.

“I will know more after I see underneath and above,” he said. “I will not guess from one wall.”

She nodded. “All right,” she said.

She started to turn toward the hallway.

Eli stopped her with his voice, gentle but firm. “Hannah,” he said.

She faced him again.

He hesitated for the first time since she met him outside the diner. It was small, but she caught it.

“I want to say something before we go further,” he said.

Her stomach tightened. She braced again.

Eli kept his hands at his sides. He did not step closer. “I am sorry,” he said. “For how I acted when I was younger. Toward your father. Toward you. Toward the church.”

The words came plain. No speech. No excuse.

Hannah kept her face still. She felt a flush rise in her neck. She remembered moments she did not like remembering. A harsh comment in the church parking lot. A prank during youth group. A look he gave her once when she tried to stop him from leaving during a service. A look full of contempt, like her faith made her small.

She swallowed. “Thank you,” she said.

He nodded once. He did not ask for more.

She pointed toward the hallway. “The crawl space access is this way,” she said.

She walked to the side hall and opened the small door near the storage closet. The air that came out smelled damp and cold. She flicked on a light and knelt to pull the access panel aside.

Eli knelt beside her, far enough to give her room. He took out a flashlight and shone it into the opening. He studied the wood framing he could see. He looked at the pier blocks. He looked at the soil line.

“We need masks,” she said.

“I have two in my case,” he said. He stood, went back to the sanctuary, and then returned with two folded masks. He offered one to her.

She took it. Her fingers brushed his for an instant. The contact felt ordinary. It still sent a brief spark up her arm. It surprised her. It annoyed her. She tightened her grip on the mask and put it on.

Eli put his on. “You do not need to go under,” he said. “I will.”

“I know,” she said. “But I want to see what you see.”

He studied her. “All right,” he said. “Stay near the opening. Do not crawl farther than you need to.”

She nodded.

Eli slid into the crawl space with practiced care. He moved slowly. He kept his shoulders low. He shone the flashlight along the beams and joists. He checked for rot. He checked for insect damage. He checked moisture stains on the wood.

Hannah watched from the opening, her elbows on the floor.

“Has anyone been under here recently?” he asked.

“Not in a year,” she said. “One of our volunteers checked some plumbing.”

Eli shone the light toward the west wall. “I see damp soil,” he said. “Do you know where the downspout drains?”

“Near this corner,” she said.

He nodded. “We will address that,” he said. “Water control is step one. It affects everything else.”

He crawled farther, then paused. “Here,” he said. “Come look at this from where you are.”

Hannah shifted closer to the opening and angled her head to see. His flashlight pointed at a support area. A pier block sat slightly lower than the one beside it. The beam above it showed a slight gap at a shim.

Her stomach tightened. “Is it sinking?” she asked.

“It has moved,” he said. “I will measure later with proper tools. This alone does not tell the whole story, but it matters.”

She pressed her lips together. “So we are not imagining it,” she said.

“No,” he said. “You are observing.”

He crawled back toward her and slid out. He wiped his hands with a cloth from his case. He stood and looked down the hallway toward the utility room.

“Attic next,” he said.

Hannah rose and led him toward the back of the building. They passed the church office. Her desk sat in the corner, neat stacks of bulletins and pledge cards. She felt a strange vulnerability letting him walk past her daily life.

In the utility room, she pulled down the attic ladder. The hinges creaked.

Eli steadied the ladder with one hand. “I will go up first,” he said.

Hannah nodded.

He climbed with a steady pace and disappeared into the attic opening. A moment later, his flashlight beam swept across the ceiling. Hannah heard him shift boards under his feet.

He spoke from above. “Do you know if these beams are original?” he asked.

“Yes,” she called up. “The sanctuary beams are original. Some supports near the back were reinforced in the seventies.”

He moved farther in. Hannah heard him pause again. “There is evidence of past water,” he said. “Old staining. Some newer staining, too.”

Her chest tightened. “From the leak,” she said.

“Possibly,” he said. “I will trace it.”

A minute passed. Then two.

Hannah stood at the bottom of the ladder, hands clasped, listening to his careful movements. She felt the building around her. She felt the weight of its history. She felt the fear of losing it. She also felt a strange steadiness in having someone here who understood both wood and load.

Eli came back to the opening and climbed down. He stepped off the ladder and removed his mask.

He looked at Hannah. His expression stayed calm. “All right,” he said. “Here is what I know so far. You have settlement on the west side. You have moisture issues. You likely have a drainage problem feeding it. You have some roof leakage or condensation contributing to staining. I need a fuller survey and measurements to confirm the scope.”

Hannah nodded, trying to absorb it.

He continued. "I will write a report with priority steps. Some steps will cost less than you fear. Some steps will cost more than you want. I will be honest."

She took a slow breath. "We need the truth," she said.

"Yes," he said. "You do."

She hesitated, then asked the question she tried to avoid. "Will we have to close the sanctuary?" she asked.

Eli held her gaze. "I do not know yet," he said. "I will not recommend closure without a clear reason. I also will not let people sit under a risk I would not accept for my own family."

The words hit her in a tender place. She pictured her father at the pulpit. She pictured children in the front pew during the Christmas program. She pictured Ellie setting out communion trays with her careful hands.

She swallowed. "When will you do the full inspection?" she asked.

Eli glanced around the utility room, then back toward the sanctuary. "I will start today," he said. "I will need to take exterior grade shots, check gutter runs, check the foundation line from outside, and take level readings at several points inside. I will need access to the maintenance files and any drawings you have."

"I will get those," Hannah said.

Eli nodded. He looked toward the sanctuary door, then back at Hannah. His voice lowered. "Hannah," he said. "I want you to hear this from me. I will not treat your church as only a job. I will treat it as the place where God meets His people. The building is not the faith, but it matters. It holds your community."

Her eyes stung. She blinked it away fast.

“Thank you,” she said.

He shifted his weight, like he felt the weight of his next words. “If your father wants to be present when I share findings, I will do it,” he said. “If he wants it in writing first, I will do that too.”

Hannah nodded. “He will want both,” she said. “He will want to read it. He will want to ask questions.”

Eli gave a small nod. “Fair,” he said.

They walked back toward the sanctuary together. The morning light had shifted. Dust still floated in it. The pews sat quietly. The beams overhead looked strong from this angle. Hannah knew looks meant little now.

She stopped near the front and turned to Eli. “So you will inspect the building,” she said.

Eli met her eyes. “Yes,” he said. “I will inspect the church building. I will do it thoroughly. I will do it soon.”

Hannah released a breath she had held since yesterday. She nodded once. “All right,” she said. “Then we begin.”

Chapter 5

A Church Worth Saving

She followed Eli down the center aisle. Her shoes made small sounds on the worn runner. The sanctuary smelled like old wood, hymnals, and lemon oil from last Saturday.

Eli stopped near the front pew. He looked up. He did not rush. His eyes tracked along the exposed beams, then to the plaster between them. He pulled a small flashlight from his pocket and clicked it on. The light landed on the beam faces, then on the joints where wood met wood.

She stood a step behind him. She watched his shoulders. She watched his hands. He moved with care, like each motion held a reason.

“Do you have a ladder?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “In the storage room off the fellowship hall. We also have a tall step ladder in the janitor’s closet.”

“I want the tall one,” he said. “I will start inside. Then I will move outside.”

She nodded and headed toward the side door. She felt the quiet press in on her as she walked. She thought of the people who filled these pews. She thought of her father reading Scripture from the pulpit, voice steady. She thought of her mother, years ago, singing alto from the second row. She thought of all the weddings, all the funerals, all the baptisms. The building had held her life in its frame.

She brought the ladder back. Eli took it from her with a quick nod. He set it near the front where a beam crossed above the platform. He locked the spreaders. He tested it with his weight.

Then he climbed.

She held her breath without meaning to. He reached the top, braced and stable. He shone the flashlight along the edge of the beam. He ran two fingers over the wood, slow, then tapped with his knuckle. The sound changed in one small area. He tapped again. He leaned in closer.

He climbed down and stepped away from the ladder. He pulled a notebook from his jacket and wrote.

“What did you see?” she asked.

He looked at her. “I saw moisture staining along the bottom corner of the beam at the joint,” he said. “I also saw surface checking. Some checking is normal in older timber. The moisture line is the concern.”

Her stomach tightened. “Does it mean rot?” she asked.

“It means water has been there,” he said. “Rot follows water. I will not label it until I probe it.”

He grabbed a small tool kit from his bag. She did not notice him bring it in. He pulled out an awl and climbed again. He pressed the point into the stained area. His hand stayed steady. His face stayed calm.

He climbed down again. “The outer fibers resist,” he said. “I do not sink in deep. That is good. It still tells me water got in, then dried. I need to find where it enters.”

She swallowed. “From the roof,” she said.

“Likely,” he said. “Or from a flashing failure. Or gutters dumping water where they should not.”

He walked along the platform edge. He looked up at the ceiling line where it met the wall. He shone the light across the plaster. The beam of light made every ripple show. He stopped near the left front corner.

“Here,” he said.

She stepped close. She saw a faint line in the plaster, thin as a hair at first, then wider near the corner.

“I have seen that,” she said. “I thought it was old settling. It has been there a long time.”

“It might be,” he said. He crouched and looked at the trim along the base of the wall. He ran his fingers along it. He pressed gently near the corner. The trim did not move, but his eyes narrowed.

He stood and pointed the flashlight at the crack again. “See how the crack steps,” he said. “It runs along the plaster seam, then changes direction. That shift tells me movement. I need to measure how much.”

He pulled a small level from his kit. He placed it on the platform edge. He watched the bubble. Then he moved it a foot to the left. Then another foot.

She followed each move like it set the pace of her heart. “Is it out?” she asked.

“By a small amount,” he said. “Small in a building. Large in a feeling.”

She blinked. “What does that mean?”

“It means the platform edge is not level,” he said. “It slopes a little. I need to know if it slopes because the framing sagged or because the foundation shifted under this corner.”

He wrote again.

She stood with her hands clasped tight. She felt like she should do something. She did not know what.

Eli turned and looked up toward the balcony. He pointed. "I want to check the balcony support," he said.

She led him to the side stairs. The wooden steps creaked under her weight. She had walked them a thousand times. She never counted the creaks before. Now every sound felt like a warning.

At the balcony, Eli knelt beside the railing post. He examined the post base where it met the floor. He ran the flashlight along the joint.

"This post takes the load," he said. "The balcony framing transfers weight through it."

She nodded, though she did not fully understand. "So if it fails," she said.

He looked up. "Then you have a serious hazard," he said. His voice stayed calm. The words still landed hard.

He pulled out a small moisture meter and pressed it against the wood near the base. He watched the display. He moved it a few inches and tested again.

"What does it say?" she asked.

"Higher than it should be," he said. "Not soaked. Higher. I see paint blistering here. Someone repainted recently."

She felt her cheeks warm. "We repainted the railing two summers ago," she said. "A volunteer crew. We did not strip it down. We sanded. We painted."

“I am not blaming you,” he said. “Paint hides stains. It also traps moisture if water comes in behind it.”

He stood and walked to the balcony wall. He pressed his palm against the plaster and followed the line where wall met ceiling. He stopped where a small brown shadow spread like a bruise.

He pointed. “That is water,” he said. “Old. Maybe new. I will confirm from the attic.”

She glanced up at the access panel above the back row of balcony seats. “We have an attic hatch,” she said. “It is in the hallway behind the choir loft.”

“Good,” he said. “We will go there.”

They both went down the stairs. Her hand slid along the railing. She felt each groove in the wood. Her chest felt tight. She did not want to hear more. She also needed to hear all of it.

In the hallway, she pulled down the attic hatch. Dust fell. She coughed once. Eli stepped forward, took the hatch rope, and set the ladder under it.

“You do not need to go up,” he said.

She looked at him. “I want to,” she said. “This is my church.”

He studied her for a moment. “All right,” he said. “Stay behind me. Watch your footing. Step only where I step.”

She nodded. She tried to breathe slowly.

Eli climbed first. The attic air hit her when she followed. It smelled like old insulation, dry wood, and something faintly sour. She blinked in the dimness. Eli clicked on a headlamp. The beam swept over rafters and trusses, over ducts, over piles of loose fill.

She saw the underside of the roof deck. She saw nails poking through. She saw the ridge beam line.

Eli stopped and pointed his light at a rafter near the front corner she saw from below. "There," he said.

She leaned closer. The wood looked darker in a band. A thin line of mold sat along one edge. The sheathing had a warped look, like it swelled and dried too fast.

Eli set one knee on a joist and reached to touch the stain with a gloved finger. He looked at the glove. "This is ongoing," he said. "Not only old."

Her throat went dry. "So the roof leaks," she said.

"Yes," he said. "I also want to see why it leaks. A roof leak can start from a shingle failure. It can also start from flashing around a vent. Or from ice dams if insulation and ventilation are wrong."

He crawled a few feet. She followed, careful. Her skirt caught on a nail, and she jerked it free.

Eli paused and looked back at her. His eyes softened. "Slow down," he said. "I do not want you hurt."

"I am fine," she said, though she felt shaky.

He returned to the work. He angled the headlamp toward the eave. "I see daylight," he said.

Her stomach dropped. "Daylight," she said.

He pointed; a thin sliver of light cut through where the roof met the wall. "Gap at the soffit line," he said. "It might be intentional venting. It might also be a broken soffit panel or an open seam. Wind-driven rain can enter there."

He shifted and moved the insulation aside with his gloved hand. "The insulation is thin here," he said. "The top plate looks damp."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small tape measure. He measured the depth of insulation, then wrote again.

She watched him work. He did not sigh. He did not complain. He did not perform. He observed. He measured. He wrote. She saw the focus on his face, and she felt something change in her. She remembered how she met him, stiff and guarded. She expected someone who would speak in numbers and leave. She saw a man who looked at the bones of a place with respect, as it mattered.

She shifted her weight. A joist creaked under her. She froze.

Eli looked back fast. "Hold," he said.

She did. She barely breathed.

He crawled back toward her. He placed his hand near hers on the joist, not touching her, but close. "You are on the edge of the joist," he said. "Move your knee two inches to the right. Yes. There."

She moved as he guided. She felt her pulse in her ears.

"You do this often," she said, voice low.

"I do," he said. "Old buildings do not forgive careless steps."

Her eyes met his in the tight light of the attic. His face looked different up here, stripped of the polite distance. She saw a scar near his hairline, but did not notice one below it. She wondered where he got it. She did not ask. She did not want to pry. She also wanted to know everything.

He looked away first and crawled forward again.

He moved toward the center ridge line. He checked the collar ties, the fasteners, and the rafter connections. He paused at a metal plate on a truss joint.

“This looks like a retrofit,” he said.

“A what?” she asked.

“A repair added later,” he said. “Someone reinforced a joint with a metal plate. It tells me someone saw movement or cracking in the past.”

She pictured men in work boots, years ago, up here with tools. She wondered if her father knew. He might. He had carried so many quiet burdens for this church.

Eli pointed to a split in a rafter near the plate. “This is not a fresh split,” he said. “It is old. The repair held. I will check if it still holds.”

He pressed the wood, then checked the plate screws. He tested for looseness.

“It is stable,” he said. “I still want to add it to the report.”

She nodded. The word report landed on her again. It sounded like bills. It sounded like meetings. It sounded like her father’s face when he tried to hide worry.

Eli crawled toward the back, near the bell tower framing. The headlamp beam caught a web of braces and posts.

He stopped and sat back on his heels. “The tower framing is heavy,” he said. “It bears on the walls and transfers the load down to the foundation. If the foundation shifts, the tower can crack the wall.”

She thought of the hairline crack in the sanctuary. She thought of the platform slope.

“So the foundation is moving,” she said.

“I do not know yet,” he said. “I see signs. I need to confirm from the outside and from the basement.”

“The basement is under the fellowship hall,” she said. “It is unfinished. It has old stone in part and poured concrete in part.”

He nodded once. “We will go there next.”

She climbed down first this time, slowly. Eli stayed near, eyes on her feet. When she reached the hallway floor, she let out a breath she did not know she held.

Her hands shook. She rubbed them on her skirt and tried to hide them.

Eli closed the attic hatch and latched it. He turned toward her. “You are pale,” he said.

“I am fine,” she said again. The words felt thin.

He watched her for a beat. “Do you want water?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

They went to the small kitchenette near the choir room. She filled a paper cup. Her hand steadied as she drank. Eli stood in the doorway and looked down the hall toward the sanctuary, as if he saw through the walls.

“You care about this place,” he said.

She swallowed. “It raised me,” she said. “It shaped me. I know the people here. I know their stories. I know the way they bring casseroles when someone gets sick. I know the way they sing too loudly when they are hurting.”

Eli nodded. "I understand," he said.

She glanced at him. "Do you?" she asked. The question slipped out.

He did not bristle. He looked at the floor for a moment, then back at her. "I did not grow up in church," he said. "I learned what it means later. I learned what it costs to rebuild trust. I learned what it costs to admit you need help."

The words hung between them. She felt the weight behind them. She wanted to reach toward him, not with her hands, but with her heart. She kept her arms at her sides.

"I am glad you are here," she said.

He held her gaze. His eyes looked tired in a way she had not seen before, like he had not slept enough. "I am glad I am here," he said. His voice turned careful. "Even if it gets hard."

She nodded, though fear spiked again at the word hard.

She led him through the fellowship hall to the basement door. The hallway smelled like coffee and old carpet. A stack of plastic tables leaned against the wall. The children's bulletin board still held last Sunday's coloring sheets. A crayon cross. A bright sun. A stick-figure family in a pew.

Eli looked at the board for one second longer than she expected. Then he looked away.

She opened the basement door. Cool air rose. She flipped the light switch. The bulb flickered once, then steadied. The stairs dropped steeply. The handrail wobbled a little when she touched it.

Eli tested it too. He frowned. "This rail needs anchoring," he said.

"I will tell Doug," she said. Doug looked after the building. Doug fixed everything with a drill and a prayer.

They descended. The basement floor was rough concrete. In the older section, stone walls bowed in places. Mortar crumbled in a few joints. A dehumidifier hummed in the corner. It drained into a floor drain that sometimes smelled when it ran low.

Eli walked to the stone wall first. He shone his flashlight across it. The light made every bump sharp.

“This is fieldstone,” he said. “Old. It does its job if it stays dry and braced.”

He pointed at a white line along the wall. “Efflorescence,” he said. “Mineral deposits from water moving through. It tells me moisture comes in.”

“We get water in the spring,” she said. “Heavy rains. Snowmelt.”

“Do you have a sump?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said, and pointed. “In that pit. It runs when it rains.”

Eli walked to it and looked down. He checked the discharge pipe. He followed it to where it exited.

“You discharge to the outside,” he said. “Good. Do you know where it drains?”

“Into the ditch line behind the church,” she said.

He nodded. “I will check the grading outside.”

He returned to the stone wall. He knelt and pressed a small crack gauge against a vertical crack in the mortar line.

“This crack opens and closes,” he said. “It moves with seasons. The question is how much. The crack pattern also shows lateral pressure.”

“From soil,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “From water in soil, freeze and thaw, poor drainage, hydrostatic pressure.”

She did not know all the terms. She heard the meaning. The ground pushed. The wall resisted until it could not.

Eli stood and walked to the newer poured concrete section. He shone his light along the top edge where concrete met the sill plate.

He stopped and tilted his head. He touched the sill plate, then pulled his hand away. “This is damp,” he said.

She hugged herself. “So water comes in,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Now I need to find where. Gutters, downspouts, and grading. All of it connects.”

He walked to a support column in the middle of the basement. The column held a beam. The beam ran under the sanctuary.

He tapped the beam, then pressed his palm under it. “This beam carries a load,” he said. “I see a slight deflection.”

She stared at him. “Deflection,” she said.

“Sag,” he said. He pointed down the line. “You see how the beam dips a little near mid-span.”

She squinted. She saw it when he pointed. She hated that she saw it.

“What does it mean?” she asked.

“It means the beam has carried weight for a long time,” he said. “It might also mean the post settled. Or the foundation under the post settled.”

He looked at the base of the column. He knelt and checked the anchor bolts. He checked the concrete pad under it.

“This pad looks poured later,” he said. “Someone added it to spread the load.”

“So people knew,” she whispered.

“Someone saw an issue,” he said. “They addressed it in part. They might not have addressed the cause.”

He stood and looked around the basement, scanning the joists above. He used the headlamp again, sweeping the light across wiring and plumbing.

“The joists look undersized for modern load,” he said. “The sanctuary probably did not start with this many people and this much equipment. Sound system. Lights. Added layers. The building carries more than it used to.”

She thought of the new speakers Pastor insisted were needed for clarity. She thought of the Christmas lights, the stage props, and the choir risers. None of it felt heavy when she carried it down the aisle. Now she pictured weight pressing down, year after year.

Eli pointed toward the far corner. “I want to check the rim joist there,” he said.

She followed. A stack of old hymnals sat in boxes near the wall. Vacation Bible School props leaned against a shelf. A painted cardboard castle. A foam sheep. Someone wrote “Psalm 23” in marker on a sign.

Eli stopped at the rim joist. He shone the light. The wood looked dark and soft near the bottom. He pressed the awl into it. It sank. He pressed again. It sank farther.

Her chest tightened. “Is it rot?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. He did not soften it. He did not dramatize it. “This section is compromised.”

She pressed her lips together. Her eyes burned. She looked up at the joists above the rot. She pictured the sanctuary floor. She pictured people standing during worship, hands raised. She pictured her father walking down the aisle after the service to greet everyone.

“How bad?” she asked.

“I need to map how far it extends,” he said. “I also need to know why it stays wet. It might be a downspout dumping water here. It might be a broken drain. It might be ground level too high outside.”

He wrote again. His pen scratched in the quiet.

She looked around the basement, and she felt the weight of this place shift in her mind. She always saw the church as a safe shell. A steady thing. A fixed point. Now she saw it as wood and stone and water paths and load lines. She saw it as something that could fail.

She whispered, “Lord, please.”

Eli looked at her. “What did you say?” he asked.

She lifted her chin. “I asked God for help,” she said. Her voice shook. “I know the building is not God. I know. But people meet Him here. People bring their grief here. People bring their sins here. People bring their babies here.”

Eli nodded once. “Yes,” he said. “People attach memory to place.”

She wiped her cheek with the side of her hand. She did not feel the tear fall. “I do not want to lose it,” she said.

He stepped closer. He stopped at a respectful distance. His voice stayed low. "I do not want you to lose it either," he said.

She looked at him. In the dim basement light, he looked stronger than he did in the utility room. Not in a showy way. In a steady way. Like he knew how to bear weight.

She thought of the words he said earlier, about not risking people. She thought of the way he guided her knee on the joist in the attic, careful and firm. She thought of how he looked at the children's drawings upstairs. He cared more than he admitted.

Her heart did a strange pull. She did not name it. She did not want to name it. She feared it would make everything more fragile.

She cleared her throat. "So what happens next?" she asked.

"I finish the inspection," he said. "I take exterior measurements. I check roof edges and flashing. I check downspouts. I check the grade. I check the foundation line for cracks and bowing. I check the crawl under the sanctuary to see if access exists. I compile findings. I give you a prioritized list. Safety first. Water next. Structure after. Then finishes."

"Safety first," she said.

"Yes," he said. "If any area risks failure, you close it until you repair it. If water continues to enter, repairs will fail. If you fix the structure but ignore water, you throw money away."

Money. The word hit like a door slamming.

She gripped the edge of a shelf. "Eli," she said. "I need to ask you."

He waited.

"How much will this cost?" she asked.

He did not answer fast. He looked back at the rot in the rim joist. He looked at the column. He looked at the stone wall.

“I do not have numbers yet,” he said. “I will give a range once I confirm the scope. The range might feel high. This building needs more than cosmetic work.”

Her throat tightened again. “We are a small church,” she said. “We have offerings. We have some savings. We do not have endless funds.”

“I understand,” he said.

She shook her head. “You do not know our budget,” she said, then regretted the sharpness.

Eli did not flinch. “I know small towns,” he said. “I know you do not waste money. I know you also do not like asking for it.”

She looked away.

He continued, voice steady. “You have options,” he said. “Phased repairs. Grants for historic structures if the building qualifies. Community fundraising. Volunteer labor for non-structural tasks. Professional labor for structural work. You do not do this alone.”

She swallowed. The thought rose. Close the sanctuary. Meet in the fellowship hall. Sell the building. Start over.

She hated the thought. It felt like betrayal. It also felt like reality.

“What if we cannot afford it?” she asked. The words came out small.

Eli looked at her for a long moment. “Then we make hard choices,” he said. “We protect people. We preserve what we can. We seek help. We do not pretend the problem will heal itself.”

She nodded, though her eyes stung again.

He turned and walked back toward the stairs. “Let us go outside,” he said. “I want to see the gutters and grade.”

She followed him up. The air upstairs felt warmer. They stepped out a side door into bright afternoon light. The sun sat higher now. It made the white siding look clean from a distance. She knew better.

Eli walked along the foundation line. He crouched at intervals and ran his hand near the ground, feeling where soil met stone. He pointed at a spot where mulch piled against the siding.

“Grade is too high here,” he said. “Soil should slope away. Water should move away from the foundation. Here it runs toward it.”

He stood and walked to a downspout. He followed it down to where it ended. The downspout dumped water right beside the foundation.

“This is one cause,” he said. “This downspout needs an extension. It needs to carry water at least six feet away. More if the soil stays wet.”

She nodded, trying to store every word. “We will do that,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “That is an early win.”

He continued around the building. He checked each gutter run. He looked up at the fascia and soffit. He pointed at a section where the gutter sagged.

“Fasteners failed,” he said. “Water spills behind. It soaks the wall. It finds the rim joist. Then rot begins.”

She flinched. She saw the chain now. A sagging gutter up high led to rot down low. Small neglect grew teeth.

Eli stepped back and looked up at the roofline. He studied the valley near the tower. He squinted into the light.

“Flashing at the valley looks wrong,” he said. “Or damaged.”

He walked toward the front corner and looked up again. “I want to get on the roof,” he said.

Her eyes widened. “Today?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “If you have roof access. Or if I use my ladder.”

“We have a ladder,” she said. “The maintenance shed. It is heavy.”

“I will carry it,” he said.

She led him to the shed. The shed door stuck. She pulled hard, and it opened with a groan. The smell of grass clippings and oil hit her. Eli lifted the extension ladder with practiced ease. He carried it out like it weighed nothing.

She walked back toward the church. She felt people driving by might see her and wonder what was wrong. She felt exposed.

Eli set the ladder at a safe angle and checked the feet on the ground. He tested the stability. He climbed with a steady pace.

She stood at the base and watched. She shaded her eyes with her hand.

He reached the edge of the roof and stepped onto it with care. He stayed low. He walked along the lower pitch toward the valley. He knelt and examined the flashing. He lifted a shingle edge. He pressed the metal. He traced a seam.

Then he stood and looked down at her. He raised his hand, palm out, to signal he would speak when he came down. He continued a few feet more to check another area, then returned and climbed down.

When his boots hit the ground, she stepped forward. “What did you find?” she asked.

He wiped his hands on a rag. “Flashing failure,” he said. “I see gaps. I see old patchwork. I see sealant where it should not be the main defense. Water gets under the shingles and follows the valley line into the attic.”

She closed her eyes for one second. Then she opened them. “So we need roof work,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “At least a valley rebuild and flashing correction. Possibly more, depending on shingle condition.”

She forced herself to ask the next question. “How much?” she said again.

Eli looked toward the church, eyes narrowed as he studied the structure as if it were a whole body. “Roof work ranges,” he said. “Downspout and grading correction costs less. Rot repair costs more. Foundation stabilization costs the most.”

Her mouth went dry. “Foundation stabilization,” she said.

He nodded. “If the wall bows or shifts beyond tolerances, you might need interior bracing, anchors, or a partial rebuild. I will know after I take measurements and check the bow amount.”

She pressed her hand to her stomach. “Eli,” she said. “We do not have money for the most part.”

He watched her. His expression turned softer. “I know,” he said. “You also do not have money for a collapse.”

The bluntness made her inhale sharply. She looked at him. She saw a man who refused to lie to her. She saw a man who chose truth even when it hurt. She respected it. She also felt pulled toward him in a way she did not expect. The pull scared her.

She glanced away. “My father will want to know if we need to close the sanctuary,” she said.

Eli nodded. “I will finish readings inside,” he said. “I will check the sanctuary floor slope at more points. I will check the balcony load points again. I will check the extent of the rim joist. Then I will give an interim safety recommendation.”

“Interim,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Before the full report.”

She swallowed. “We have choir practice tonight,” she said. “In the sanctuary.”

Eli looked toward the sanctuary windows. He thought. She saw him weigh it. She saw him choose caution.

“Move choir practice to the fellowship hall tonight,” he said. “It is a simple step. It reduces risk until I finish.”

Her heart sank. She nodded. “All right,” she said. “I will tell them.”

Eli picked up his notebook again. He flipped to a new page. He wrote a list with quick strokes. She saw words she could not read. She saw arrows. She saw boxes around items.

She stood beside him in the sun. The church behind her looked the same as it did yesterday. White siding. Tall windows. The steeple was pointing up. She knew the inside story now. She knew the water paths. She knew the soft wood. She knew the sag.

She also knew Eli saw it and did not run.

She took a slow breath. “Do you ever get tired of broken buildings?” she asked.

He paused, pen still. He looked at her.

“I used to,” he said. “I used to think broken meant finished. I do not think that now.”

She held his gaze. “Why?” she asked.

He closed the notebook. “Because I have seen what God does with broken things,” he said. His voice stayed even. The words carried weight. “He restores. He rebuilds. He does not pretend that damage does not exist. He deals with it.”

Her eyes stung again, but this time hope sat under the fear. Small. Real.

She nodded once. “So you think we will restore this?” she said.

Eli looked back at the church. He looked at the steeple. He looked at the foundation line. He looked at her again.

“This church can be saved... but it will not be easy.”

Chapter 6

Doubts and Determination

Hannah walked back into the church office with Eli's words still ringing in her ears. Saved, but it will not be easy.

She closed the door behind her. The familiar smell of paper, old hymnals, and coffee from the pot in the corner met her like a steady hand. She wanted steady. She needed it.

She set her phone on the desk. It buzzed again.

Another text.

Did you hear the church floor is unsafe?

She stared at the screen. She did not answer. She did not know how to answer.

She looked at the calendar on her wall. Sunday sermon. Wednesday supper. Youth night. The women's Bible study. A funeral meal slot is open on Friday because someone forgot to fill it.

She swallowed.

She picked up her phone again. She scrolled. The messages kept coming. They always did in Maple Ridge. News ran faster than the truth. Fear ran faster than both.

She heard voices out in the hallway. Someone laughed. Someone dropped a stack of bulletins. She heard feet move fast. A door opened and closed.

Then she heard her name.

"Hannah."

She stood before she even thought about it. She stepped out into the hall.

Mrs. Tinsley stood there with her purse on her arm and a look on her face that made Hannah's stomach tighten. She ran the quilting circle. She also ran half of the town's opinion without trying.

Her eyes flicked toward the sanctuary door. "Is it true?" she asked.

Hannah kept her voice calm. "We found issues," she said. "We are looking at next steps."

"Next steps," she repeated. "Are we closing?"

Hannah shook her head. "We are being careful," she said. "We moved choir practice to the fellowship hall for tonight."

Mrs. Tinsley's mouth tightened. "So it is worse than we thought."

"It is serious," Hannah said. She chose honesty. Her father taught her to do that. She chose it even when it made the air heavy.

Mrs. Tinsley stepped closer. "My husband donated those pews," she said. "He sanded them himself. If we lose this place..."

Hannah pictured Mr. Tinsley in his overalls, his hands rough, his face soft when he sang hymns. She remembered his funeral. She remembered how the church held all of them when grief hit.

Hannah kept her eyes on hers. "We are not losing it," she said. She heard the steel in her own voice. She also heard the fear behind it.

Mrs. Tinsley studied her. "Your father knows?" she asked.

"Yes," Hannah said. "He knows."

Mrs. Tinsley nodded once. "Good," she said. "He needs to tell people. Folks will fill in blanks if he does not."

Hannah wanted to tell her she knew. She did know. She lived in Maple Ridge her whole life. Silence did not stay silent here. It turned into stories.

Mrs. Tinsley turned, then paused. “If you need meals for volunteers,” she said, “you tell me.”

Hannah blinked. “Thank you,” she said.

Mrs. Tinsley gave a quick nod and moved down the hall.

Hannah stood still for a moment. She held onto her offer like a small rope.

Then the hallway filled again.

Mr. Poe from the hardware store stepped in with a box under his arm. He stopped when he saw her. “Hannah,” he said. “I was bringing light bulbs. Heard we got trouble.”

Hannah managed a small smile. “Thank you for the bulbs,” she said. “Yes, we have trouble.”

He shifted his weight. “The whole town is talking,” he said. “Some are saying termites took the whole place.”

Hannah let out a slow breath. “No termites,” she said. “Water damage. Structural issues. Eli is assessing.”

“Eli,” Mr. Poe repeated. “The architect.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

He nodded, then lowered his voice. “People trust your father,” he said. “They also remember last time.”

Hannah’s chest tightened, last time. The year the parsonage roof failed in a storm, the insurance fought the claim for months. The

year her father looked tired every day. The year Hannah learned how heavy leadership feels.

Mr. Poe cleared his throat. "If you need lumber," he said, "I will donate some."

Hannah looked at him. "You would do that?" she asked.

He shrugged as it cost him nothing, but Hannah knew it did. "This church married my parents," he said. "It baptized my girls. It buried my brother. I will not watch it rot."

Hannah's throat burned. "Thank you," she said again.

He set the box on the office counter. He tipped his cap and left.

Hannah stepped back into the office and closed the door. The room felt smaller now. The air felt thick.

She sat. She pressed her palms flat on the desk.

She tried to pray.

She managed one sentence. "Lord, help."

Then she heard her father's voice outside.

"Hannah."

She stood and opened the door.

He looked worn. He held his Bible under his arm like he always did. His tie sat straight. His eyes did not.

He stepped in and closed the door behind him. "I heard," he said.

Hannah nodded. "Word spread," she said.

He sighed. "Word always spreads," he said. He looked at the phone on Hannah's desk. "You are getting it too."

“Yes,” Hannah said. She did not offer her phone. She did not need him to see every message. He already carried enough.

He stepped closer. “Tell me what he said,” he said.

Hannah explained. She kept it clear. She said what she knew. She did not guess. She talked about the sag. The rim joist. The water paths. The balcony points. The interim safety steps.

Her father listened. He did not interrupt. He nodded in small motions. He held the information in both hands like it mattered, because it did.

When Hannah finished, he stayed quiet. He looked down at the corner of her desk. Then he looked at her.

“How are you holding up?” he asked.

Hannah tried to answer with a clean sentence. She failed. Her eyes filled. She blinked hard.

“I feel like the floor is dropping under us,” she said.

He stepped forward and set his hand on her shoulder. His touch felt steady. “It feels like that,” he said. “But we stand on the Lord.”

Hannah nodded. She wanted to believe it the way she used to when she was small, and her father’s voice made everything safe.

He pulled his hand back and straightened. “I will need to address the church,” he said. “We need facts. We need a plan.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

He looked toward the sanctuary. “I do not want panic,” he said. “Panic makes people run. I want prayer and work.”

The word landed hard.

Because work costs. Work takes time. Work takes skill. Work takes money they did not have.

Hannah swallowed. “Eli is still taking readings,” she said.

“I want to meet him,” her father said. “Tonight. After choir practice.”

“Choir practice is in the fellowship hall,” Hannah reminded him.

He gave a tired smile. “I know,” he said. “I heard it from three people already.”

Hannah managed a faint smile. Then the smile slipped away.

“What if we cannot fix it?” she asked.

Her father looked at her for a long moment. “We will fix what God tells us to fix,” he said. “We will do what we are able with what we have. We will ask for help. We will not pretend the problem is not real.”

Hannah nodded. She remembered Eli’s words. He deals with it.

Her father stepped toward the door. “Keep your phone close,” he said. “People will ask. Tell them we will speak on Sunday after service.”

“Sunday,” Hannah repeated.

“Yes,” he said. “We will not hide. We will not stir fear midweek either. We will prepare. We will pray. We will speak with unity.”

He left.

Hannah sat again. Her hands shook. She folded them and pressed them together until they stopped.

The phone buzzed again.

She picked it up.

A message from Maren Tate.

Do you need help? I heard. I am bringing coffee to choir practice.

Hannah closed her eyes. Maren always brought coffee when trouble hit. She also brought questions. She would ask them with kindness and with persistence.

Hannah texted back.

Yes. Thank you, fellowship hall.

She set the phone down.

She opened her notebook. She wrote a list because lists made her feel like she could hold the world still.

Questions for Eli.

Safety steps.

Who needs to know?

What to move.

What to cancel.

What to keep.

She wrote choir, youth, and Sunday school. She wrote weddings and funerals. She wrote the spring baptism service. She wrote VBS.

She stared at VBS. She drew a line under it.

She heard a knock.

She looked up. "Come in," she called.

Eli stepped in. He held his notebook. His sleeves rolled up. A faint streak of dust marked his forearm. He looked like he had been crawling under something.

He closed the door behind him. He looked at her. “You have the look of someone carrying too much,” he said.

Hannah let out a short breath. “Word spread,” she said.

He nodded. “I heard,” he said.

Hannah gestured toward the chair. “Sit,” she said.

He sat. He kept his posture straight. He set the notebook on his knee.

Hannah looked at him. “How bad?” she asked.

He did not soften his face. He did not try to soothe her with empty words. “Bad,” he said. “Not hopeless.”

Hannah gripped her pen. “What does that mean?” she asked.

“It means you do not ignore it,” he said. “It means you stage the work. You shore what needs shoring. You stop water intrusion first. You address structural members in order. You do not start cosmetic work until the structure is sound.”

Hannah nodded, even though the words made her head spin.

He flipped his notebook open. He turned it so she could see. She saw lines and numbers. She saw a rough sketch of the sanctuary. She saw circles around spots.

He pointed with his pen. “Here,” he said. “These joists show deflection beyond the acceptable range. Here,” he tapped another mark, “the rim joist has rot. Here,” he tapped again, “the balcony support loads need reinforcement.”

Hannah stared. "So we close the sanctuary," she said.

"Not yet," he said. "You limit loads. You move choir. You do not put groups up on the balcony. You monitor. You prepare a plan fast."

Hannah leaned back. "People will panic," she said.

"People fear what they do not understand," he said.

Hannah looked at him. "Then we need to explain," she said.

"Yes," he said. "Your father should speak."

"He will," Hannah said. "Sunday."

Eli nodded. "Good," he said.

Hannah sat forward. "Eli," she said, "I do not know how we pay for this."

His eyes held hers. "One step," he said.

"One step still costs money," she said.

He did not argue. "Yes," he said. "It does."

Silence sat between them. Hannah heard the clock tick.

She pushed air out through her nose. "I feel overwhelmed," she said. She said it plainly. She did not dress it up.

Eli nodded once. "You are carrying the building and the people," he said. "You are not meant to carry both alone."

Hannah looked down at her list. It looked small and useless now.

He watched her. His voice stayed steady. "What do you need first?" he asked.

Hannah blinked. The question felt like someone handing her a tool, something she could use.

“Clarity,” she said. “A clear plan. A clear message. I need to know what to tell people when they ask me in the grocery aisle.”

Eli nodded. “Then we start there,” he said. “I will write a simple interim safety memo tonight. For your father. For your board.”

Hannah’s shoulders loosened a fraction. “You will?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

Hannah hesitated. “Will you also be honest about the cost?” she asked.

He met her eyes. “Yes,” he said. “I will give a range. I will say what I know. I will say what I do not know.”

Hannah nodded. “Thank you,” she said.

He closed his notebook, then opened it again like he had more.

“There is something else,” he said.

Hannah braced. “What?” she asked.

He looked at his hands for a moment. Then he looked back up. “I want to volunteer my time for the project,” he said.

Hannah stared at him. She did not speak right away. The words did not land at first. Her mind tripped over them.

“You mean,” she began.

“I mean,” he said, “I will do the planning and oversight work without charging a fee. I will donate it.”

Hannah's mouth opened, then closed. She felt her eyes sting again. She blinked fast.

"Eli," she said, "this is your work. This is how you live."

He nodded. "I know," he said. "I also know what this church means to this town."

Hannah gripped her pen harder. "Why?" she asked, and her voice turned sharp because fear did that. "Why would you do that for us? For me. For my father."

He did not flinch. He leaned forward a little. "Because God gave me skills," he said. "He did not give them to me for my comfort."

Hannah looked away. The words hit where her defenses lay.

He continued. "Because I owe the Lord my obedience," he said. "Because I owe people my honesty. Because I want to make amends in places where I used to take and not give."

Hannah looked back at him. "Is this about your past?" she asked.

His jaw tightened. "It is part of it," he said. "But not all of it."

Hannah waited.

He held her gaze. "I want to help," he said. "If your father and the board will let me."

Hannah swallowed. She pictured the board. Mr. Daley with his careful budget. Mrs. Tinsley with her sharp questions. Nate Caldwell, who still watched Eli like he expected him to fail.

Hannah nodded slowly. "I will tell my father," she said.

"Thank you," he said.

A thought came fast, then another. Hannah's list shifted in her mind. If Eli gave his time, money could go to materials. To contractors. To permits. To inspections.

Hope rose again. Small. Real.

Then fear pushed it down. "People will talk," she said. "They will ask why you are doing it. They will judge your motives. Some will say we are using you."

Eli nodded. "Let them talk," he said.

"You say that like it is easy," Hannah replied.

"It is not easy," he said. "It is simple."

Hannah held his eyes. She saw something firm there. Determination. Humility. A quiet refusal to run.

She took a breath. "All right," she said. "Then we need to work together."

Eli nodded. "Yes," he said.

The word together felt new in Hannah's mouth.

She glanced at the clock. "Choir practice starts in forty minutes," she said. "In the fellowship hall. People will ask questions."

"I will be there," he said.

Hannah blinked. "You will?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "If you want. I can answer what I can. I will keep it calm."

Hannah exhaled. "Please," she said. "I do want."

Eli stood. “Then I will finish one more set of measurements in the crawl space,” he said. “Then I will clean up and come.”

Hannah stood too. “Do you need help?” she asked.

He looked at her like the idea surprised him. “It is tight and dirty,” he said.

“I know,” Hannah said. “I grew up here. I have been under this building before. I used to crawl under the stage with my cousin when we were eight.”

His mouth tightened, almost a smile. “You should not,” he said.

“I should not,” Hannah agreed. “But I did.”

He studied her for a moment. “You do not need to go under there,” he said. “I will handle it.”

Hannah nodded. She respected the boundary. She also respected the care under it.

Eli reached for the door, then paused. “Hannah,” he said.

“Yes,” she answered.

“You did the right thing moving choir practice,” he said. “People will grumble. You still did right.”

Hannah felt her shoulders drop again. She did not know how much she needed someone to say it.

“Thank you,” she said.

He left.

Hannah sat again and stared at her list. She added a new line.

Ask Eli for the interim memo.

Ask the board to meet.

Announce fundraiser.

Fundraiser. The word made Hannah's stomach twist.

She stood and went to the fellowship hall to set up chairs. She moved tables to the sides. She turned on the lights. The hum filled the room. She set out the coffee supplies. She placed the old metal sugar jar where it always sat.

She heard the back door open. Maren entered with two cardboard drink trays and a bag of pastries. Her cheeks were pink from the cold. She looked at Hannah with wide eyes.

"It is true," she said.

Hannah nodded. "Yes," she answered.

Maren set the coffee down hard. "How bad?" she asked.

"Bad," Hannah said. "Not hopeless."

Maren exhaled. "That sounds like something you would say to a teenager who failed a test," she said.

Hannah gave a quick, tired laugh. "It sounds like something Eli said," she replied.

Maren's eyes narrowed in thought. "He is here?" she asked.

"He will be," Hannah said. "He is finishing measurements."

Maren looked around the hall. "So we do choir here now," she said.

"For now," Hannah said.

Maren lowered her voice. "People are nervous," she said. "They love this sanctuary."

“I love it too,” Hannah said.

Maren stepped closer. She took Hannah’s hand for a moment. Her grip felt warm. “Tell me what you need,” she said.

Hannah swallowed. “I need people to stay calm,” she said. “I need them to pray. I need them to work when we ask.”

Maren nodded. “Then you say it,” she replied. “Clear. Direct. No apologizing.”

Hannah looked at her. “You sound like my mother,” she said.

Maren’s face softened. “Your mother would tell you to eat,” she said. “Have a pastry.”

Hannah shook her head. “Later,” she said.

The choir members began to arrive. Mrs. Tinsley came first, as always. Then the youth choir director. Then a line of people with coats and music folders. Their eyes scanned the room. They noticed the change. They felt it.

Voices rose.

“Why are we in here?”

“I heard the balcony is unsafe.”

“Is the sanctuary closing?”

“Are we meeting in the gym now?”

“What about Easter?”

Hannah lifted her hands. “Everyone,” she said.

The room quieted in uneven waves. People turned toward her.

Hannah took a breath. She kept her voice steady. “We found structural issues in the sanctuary,” she said. “We are taking precautions. We moved the practice in here to reduce risk while Eli completes his assessment. My father will speak to the church on Sunday after the service.”

Questions hit her at once.

“How long?”

“How much?”

“Is it safe to worship on Sunday?”

“Why did we not know earlier?”

Hannah raised her hand again. She answered what she could. She did not guess. She repeated Sunday. She repeated the precautions.

Then the door opened, and Eli stepped in.

The room shifted. Some faces tightened. Some softened. Some watched him as if he were a stranger in their home.

He walked to Hannah’s side without hesitation. He nodded to the group. “Good evening,” he said.

Mrs. Tinsley cleared her throat. “Are we going to fall through the floor?” she asked.

Eli looked at her. “No,” he said. “You are in the fellowship hall tonight because we reduced the load in the sanctuary while I finish my work. It is a smart step.”

Nate Caldwell stepped forward from the back. His arms crossed over his chest. “How do we know you know what you are doing?” he asked.

The room went quiet.

Hannah's stomach twisted. Heat rose in her neck.

Eli did not flare. He did not snap back. He kept his voice even. "You know, because I will show the board my findings," he said. "You will see the measurements. You will see the photos. You will see recommendations in writing. You will have outside review if you want it."

Nate Caldwell squinted. "And you will charge us for all this?" he asked.

Eli paused. He glanced at Hannah for a brief second, as if to check whether she still wanted him to say it here.

Hannah nodded once. Her heart thudded.

Eli looked back at the room. "I will volunteer my time for the planning and oversight," he said. "I will not bill the church for my professional services on this project."

A hush settled.

Maren's mouth fell open. Mrs. Tinsley pressed her hand to her chest. Someone in the back whispered, "Praise God."

Nate Caldwell held his stare. "Why?" he asked.

Eli did not dodge it. "Because I want to serve," he said. "Because the Lord gave me skills. Because this church matters. I do not ask you to trust me on my word alone. I ask you to watch my work."

Nate Caldwell's face stayed hard, but his arms dropped. He looked away first.

Hannah's throat tightened again. She wanted to cry. She wanted to stand tall. She wanted to do both at once.

Mrs. Tinsley spoke up. “Well,” she said, “then we'd better get to work too.”

A few people nodded. Someone said, “Amen.”

Hannah stepped forward. “Thank you,” she said. Her voice shook, so she slowed down. “There will be work,” she continued. “Hard work. It will take time. It will take money. It will take patience.”

People listened.

Hannah looked around the room. She saw fear in their eyes. She also saw love. Love for a building. Love for what happened inside it. Love for the Lord who met them there.

She kept going. “God often calls people to hard work before miracles happen,” she said. “We will pray. We will also show up. We will do what needs doing.”

Silence held, then a murmur of agreement.

The choir director cleared her throat. “Do we sing?” she asked.

Hannah nodded. “Yes,” she said. “We sing.”

The choir practice started. The sound filled the fellowship hall differently than it did in the sanctuary. The ceiling sat lower. The acoustics felt dull. The room did not lift the notes the way the old beams did.

Still, voices rose. Hannah heard faith in them. She heard the strain, too. She heard people choosing to praise when they felt worry in their ribs.

Hannah stood near the back. Eli stood beside her, a little apart from the group. He watched without staring. He listened.

During a break, Maren cornered Hannah by the coffee. “Eli volunteered,” she said, low and intense. “Did you know?”

Hannah nodded. “He told me in the office,” she said.

Maren studied Hannah’s face. “How do you feel about him?” she asked.

Hannah’s hand stilled on the coffee pot handle. She kept her eyes down. “I feel grateful,” she said.

Maren waited.

Hannah added the truth she did not want to say out loud. “I feel scared,” she admitted. “Because I respect him. Because he is here. Because I do not know what God is doing.”

Maren nodded like she understood more than Hannah said. “Then you keep it simple,” she replied. “You pray. You watch his fruit. You do not rush.”

Hannah looked up at her. “I will not rush,” she said, firm.

Maren gave a small smile. “Good,” she said. “Now drink coffee.”

After practice, people lingered. They asked Eli questions. He answered with calm, careful words. He did not make promises he could not keep. He repeated the same few truths. Water damage. Structural repairs. Staged work. Safety first.

Hannah watched the group around him. She saw suspicion soften into respect in a few faces. Not all. Some stayed guarded. She accepted it. Trust takes time. It should.

When the room cleared, Hannah stacked chairs with the choir director. Maren wiped counters. Eli gathered empty cups without being asked.

Hannah stopped and looked at him. “You do not have to do that,” she said.

He shrugged. “It needs doing,” he said.

The simplicity of it hit Hannah again. Hard work before miracles.

Her father entered. He looked at the emptying room and the stacked chairs. He looked at Hannah, then at Eli. His gaze sharpened with questions.

Eli stepped forward. “Pastor,” he said.

Hannah’s father extended his hand. “Eli,” he said.

They shook. The moment felt weighty. Two men with different pasts. One building with a cracked frame. One God who saw it all.

Hannah’s father looked at Eli. “You tell me you found serious issues,” he said.

“Yes,” Eli replied.

Hannah’s father nodded. “And she tells me you advised moving practice,” he said.

“Yes,” Eli said again.

Hannah’s father held his gaze. “Thank you for caution,” he said. “Thank you for honesty.”

Eli dipped his head. “You are welcome,” he said.

Hannah’s father shifted. “Hannah also tells me you offered to volunteer your time,” he said.

Eli did not look at Hannah this time. He looked straight at her father. “Yes,” he said. “If you and the board accept.”

Hannah's father's face tightened with emotion. He blinked once, slowly. "We will speak with the board," he said. "But I want to say this. I accept your offer in spirit. I will thank the Lord for you tonight."

Eli's throat moved as he swallowed. "Thank you," he said.

Hannah's father gestured toward the office. "Walk with us," he said. "I want to hear what you know. I want to plan next steps."

Hannah walked with them down the hall. The sanctuary doors sat closed. The building creaked in familiar places. It sounded the same. It did not feel the same.

In the office, Eli laid out his notes. Hannah's father listened. Hannah took her own notes. She asked questions. She kept them focused.

"What do we do first?" Hannah's father asked.

"Stop water intrusion," Eli said. "Roof and flashing. Gutters. Downspouts. Grade away from the foundation. Then, temporary shoring is installed at key points under the sanctuary. Then, joist replacement and reinforcement in phases."

Hannah's father nodded. "Cost?" he asked.

Eli gave a careful range. He explained why it was a range. He named unknowns. He named what he would learn next. Hannah watched her father's face grow still.

He exhaled. "We do not have that," he said.

"I know," Eli replied.

Silence settled again.

Hannah spoke because she had to. "We will need a fundraiser," she said.

Her father looked at her. His eyes carried pride and worry. “Yes,” he said. “We will.”

Eli tapped his notebook. “I can help prepare visuals for the announcement,” he said. “Simple diagrams. Photos. A phased plan.”

Hannah’s father nodded. “That will help people,” he said.

Hannah glanced between them. She felt something shift. A partnership is forming. Not easy. Not smooth. Real.

Her father stood and opened his Bible on the desk. He looked at both of them. “We are going to pray,” he said.

Hannah bowed her head. Eli did too.

Her father prayed in plain words. He asked for wisdom. He asked for provisions. He asked for unity. He asked for protection. He asked God to keep pride out and faith in. He asked God to make them willing to work.

When he finished, Hannah lifted her head. Her eyes met Eli’s for a brief moment. He looked steady. He looked sober. He looked committed.

Hannah cleared her throat. “We need to call a board meeting,” she said.

Her father nodded. “Tomorrow night,” he said. “We will give them the interim memo. We will lay out the needs. We will decide the message.”

Eli nodded. “I will have the memo ready by noon,” he said.

Hannah wrote it down. Noon.

Her father looked at her. “And we need to announce a fundraiser,” he said.

Hannah's stomach tightened again, but she nodded. "Yes," she said.

He looked at Eli. "We will announce it Sunday after service," he said.

Eli nodded. "I will stand with you if you want," he said.

Hannah's father studied him, then nodded once. "I would like that," he said.

Hannah felt the weight of the coming days settle on her shoulders. It did not crush her, but it pressed hard.

She stood. She gathered her notes. She looked at the church calendar again. She saw all the life held inside these walls. She saw the cracks, too. She saw the work ahead.

Hannah walked to the sanctuary door after they left. She opened it and stepped in alone.

The room smelled like old wood and hymnbook paper. Moonlight spilled through stained glass and painted a dim color on the pews. The beams overhead sat quietly. Weathered. Faithful. Worn.

She whispered a prayer into the empty air. "Lord, help us work."

She closed the door behind her and turned off the last light in the hall.

As she locked up, her phone buzzed again, a message from her father.

Board meeting tomorrow. Fundraiser announcement Sunday. We will do this together.

Hannah stared at the words. Together. Work first. Then God moves as He wills.

She typed back.

Yes.

She slipped her phone into her pocket and stepped out into the cold night, knowing the fundraiser would soon stand before the whole town as an official call to act.

Chapter 7

Small Town Rumors

Morning came cold and clear. Hannah stood at her kitchen sink with her hands wrapped around a mug she had warmed twice. Her mind ran the list again. Board meeting tonight. Eli's memo at noon. Fundraiser announcement on Sunday. She heard her father in her head. Unity. Protection. Keep pride out.

She set the mug down. She tied her hair back. She opened her planner. She wrote three calls she needed to make before work. Chair of the board. Women's ministry lead. The kitchen coordinator. She stared at the names, then picked up her phone.

The first call went to Mrs. Alvarez. She answered on the second ring.

"Hannah," she said. "I was about to call."

"I am calling about the board meeting tonight," Hannah said. "Seven o'clock."

"Oh, I know," Mrs. Alvarez said. "Your father told me. He sounded tired."

"He is focused," Hannah said.

"I am praying," Mrs. Alvarez said, then she paused. "I heard Eli Brooks is back in the building."

Hannah gripped the phone harder. "Yes. He is helping."

Mrs. Alvarez made a soft sound. It was not approval. It was no surprise. It was the sound she made when she weighed a situation and decided where she stood.

"Well," Mrs. Alvarez said. "Maple Ridge is small."

“I know,” Hannah said.

“You know what people say,” Mrs. Alvarez said.

“I know what people say,” Hannah answered. “I also know what I see.”

Mrs. Alvarez exhaled. “I will be there tonight,” she said. “And Hannah... keep your eyes open.”

“I will,” Hannah said, then she ended the call.

Hannah looked at the next name. Mrs. Tinsley. She called.

Mrs. Tinsley answered, with loud kitchen noise in the background. “Hannah Grace,” she said. “I was in the middle of peeling potatoes.”

“I will be quick,” Hannah said. “We need help for Sunday. For the fundraiser announcement. We need a plan for food if people ask what they can do.”

“You already know what I think,” Mrs. Tinsley said.

Hannah shut her eyes. “Tell me.”

“I think people will bring food if you give them a table,” Mrs. Tinsley said. “But I also think people will bring opinions first.”

“We will take what they bring,” Hannah said. “And we will guide them.”

Mrs. Tinsley laughed once. It did not sound warm. “You sound like your father.”

“I learned from him,” Hannah said.

Mrs. Tinsley lowered her voice. “Is it true he is working with you?”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Mrs. Tinsley went quiet, then she spoke with sharp care. “You should be cautious.”

“He is professional,” Hannah said. “He is prepared. He is not here to perform. He is here to help.”

“Hannah,” Mrs. Tinsley said. “You grew up in this church. People still see you as the little girl who carried offering plates in Sunday school.”

“I know,” Hannah said.

“And Eli,” Mrs. Tinsley said. “People see him as the man who left town angry.”

Hannah swallowed. “I know.”

Mrs. Tinsley sighed. “All right,” she said. “I will help. I will set up a sign-up list. I will set up a table. You will need a clear message.”

“We are working on it,” Hannah said.

“I will see you tonight,” Mrs. Tinsley said, and the call ended.

Hannah stared at the phone. Two calls. Two warnings. She set the phone down and opened the church email account on her laptop. She read three new messages. Two were about the roof. One was about Sunday nursery scheduling. The roof messages felt like they pressed against her chest.

She shut the laptop. She stood. She put on her coat. She left her house with her planner under her arm.

Main Street sat quiet at this hour. Hannah drove past the diner. The lights were on. Mr. Pritchard’s truck sat out front. The hardware store sign creaked in the wind. She passed Maple Ridge Community Church and turned into the parking lot. The building looked steady

from the road. It always did. She parked near the side door, and she walked inside.

The hallway smelled like old carpet and lemon cleaner. The bulletin board still held last month's flyers. Hannah carried her things to her office and set them down. She booted up her computer. She opened the file Eli sent last night, the interim memo outline.

She read the bullets. Dates. Costs. Options. Risks. The tone was plain. The facts were blunt. He did not soften the picture. She respected him for it. She also felt the fear rise again.

A sound in the hallway made her look up. Footsteps. Firm and steady. She heard a man clear his throat.

Eli appeared in her doorway. He wore a jacket she had seen before. Dark. Clean. No frills. He held a folder in his hand.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," she answered. "You are early."

"I did not sleep much," he said. "I ran numbers again."

She nodded. "Come in."

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. He set the folder on her desk, then he looked at her. His eyes looked tired. He also looked calm.

"I brought the updated memo," he said. "And a one-page summary. Board members read summaries."

She slid the folder closer. "Thank you."

He did not sit. He rested his hand on the back of her guest chair. "I heard from Mr. Daley," he said.

Her stomach dropped. “What did he say?”

“He said people are talking,” Eli said.

She stared at him. “About the roof.”

He looked at her with a steady face. “About you and me.”

Heat rose in her cheeks. “Of course they are.”

Eli’s jaw tightened. “He asked me why I would trust me with church money. He asked me if I planned to cut corners. He asked me if I planned to leave town again.”

Hannah pushed her chair back a few inches. “Mr. Daley does not run this church.”

Eli’s eyes held hers. “No. But he runs his mouth.”

She gave a short exhale. “What did you say?”

Eli paused. “I said I would do the work in front of everyone. I said I would put everything in writing. I said your father asked me to help, and I agreed.”

She nodded once. “Good.”

Eli shifted his weight. “He also asked if you were trying to save the church or save me.”

Hannah blinked. The words landed hard.

She stood. “Hannah is trying to keep people from sitting under a beam that might fail,” she said. “Hannah is trying to keep the sanctuary open. Hannah is trying to honor God.”

Eli looked down for a moment, then back up. “I know. I told him.”

Hannah pressed her lips together. She wanted to thank him. She also wanted to tell him she hated that he had to answer for things people refused to let go of. She felt the edge of anger in her throat.

“You’ll face more of it,” she said. “You know Maple Ridge.”

“I know,” he said. “I forgot how fast it moves.”

“It moves faster when it thinks it is protecting the church,” she said.

He nodded. “I will keep my head down.”

Hannah shook her head. “No. You’ll keep your head up. You’ll answer with facts. You’ll keep your tone calm. You won’t take the bait. If you shrink, they’ll treat you like you’re guilty.”

Eli watched her. Something shifted in his face. Respect. Relief. Something quiet.

“You’re good at this,” he said.

Hannah made a small sound. “I’m tired of it. I grew up with it.”

He let out a slow breath. “I did not.”

Hannah held his gaze. “You did, in a different way.”

His eyes flicked. “Yes,” he said, and he looked away.

Hannah tapped the folder. “We need to get ready for tonight. I want copies for each board member and one for Pastor Whitaker.”

“I will print them,” he said.

“I’ll handle the meeting space,” she said. “And I’ll call Pastor Whitaker.”

Eli nodded and turned to go.

“Eli,” Hannah said.

He stopped at the door and looked back.

“You did the right thing,” she said. “With Mr. Daley.”

His face stayed guarded, but his eyes softened. “Thank you,” he said, then he left.

Hannah sat back down. Her heart beat faster than it should. She opened the memo again and forced her eyes to the numbers.

Around eleven, Hannah walked to the diner for coffee. She needed the air. She also needed to see the town with her eyes, not through other people’s reports. She locked her office, then stepped outside.

The diner bell jingled when she entered. Warm air hit her face. She smelled bacon and toast. She scanned the room. Half the town sat in booths. Maple Ridge did not hide anything. People looked up when she walked in. Some smiled. Some looked away. Some stared too long.

Hannah walked to the counter. Ruby Pritchard stood behind it with a pot of coffee in her hand. She grew up with Hannah’s mother. She knew every story in town and repeated it with perfect detail.

“Hannah,” Ruby said, and her smile looked polite. “You look busy.”

“I am,” Hannah said. “Coffee to go.”

Ruby poured and set the cup down. “How is your father?”

“He is steady,” Hannah said.

Ruby leaned in a little. “I heard Hannah has help.”

Hannah met her eyes. “Eli is helping with the building assessment.”

Ruby’s eyebrows lifted. “Eli Brooks.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Ruby stirred cream into a cup for another customer. Her voice lowered. "People have feelings."

"People always have feelings," Hannah said.

Ruby watched her. "You sound defensive."

Hannah kept her voice level. "I am clear. Eli has the skills they need. We do not have time to pick helpers based on old talk."

Ruby's mouth pressed into a thin line. "Old talk exists for a reason."

Hannah's chest tightened. She kept her hands on the counter. "Ruby, tell me what you mean. Say it plain."

Ruby glanced down the counter, then back. "Years ago, he got into trouble. He drank too much. He fought. He yelled at Pastor Whitaker. He stormed out of a meeting. He left town."

Hannah did not flinch. She already knew most of it. She had heard it in pieces her whole life. It still stung to hear it said like a list of charges.

Ruby added, "And some people said he took money from his uncle's company."

Hannah's throat went dry. She held Ruby's gaze. "Who said it?"

Ruby's eyes shifted. "I did not say I believed it."

"You repeated it," Hannah said.

Ruby's cheeks colored. "People talk."

Hannah leaned forward. "Listen to me. If you hear someone say Eli stole money, you tell them to bring proof or stop. You understand."

Ruby's face hardened. "You do not need to scold me."

“I am not scolding you,” Hannah said. “I am protecting the truth. Eli did not ask you to defend him. I am asking you to stop spreading things you cannot prove.”

Ruby’s jaw tightened. Then her shoulders dropped. She looked tired for a moment.

“All right,” she said. “I will watch what I say.”

“Thank you,” Hannah answered.

Ruby slid the cup toward her. “Your total is two dollars.”

Hannah paid. She picked up her coffee. As she turned, she saw Mr. Daley in a booth with two other men. He watched her. He did not smile. Hannah kept her face calm and walked out.

Cold air hit again. Her hands shook a little around the cup. She breathed slowly. She told herself she did what needed to be done. Still, anger hummed under her ribs. She hated rumors. She hated how a small town treated a man’s worst year as if it were his whole life.

She crossed the street to the church. Eli’s truck sat parked near the side entrance. She entered and heard the printer running in the office down the hall.

She walked in and found Eli stacking papers. He looked up when she stepped in.

“You look like you fought someone,” he said.

“I fought Ruby Pritchard,” she said.

His eyebrows lifted. “You went to the diner.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “People are saying Eli stole money.”

Eli froze. The color drained from his face. His hands stopped moving. For a second, he looked like he might walk out.

Hannah stepped closer. “Did you?”

Eli’s eyes flashed. Hurt. Anger. Something old.

“No,” he said. “I did not.”

Hannah nodded once. “I didn’t think so.”

He swallowed hard. “They still say it.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “And I told Ruby to stop repeating it.”

Eli’s throat worked. He looked down at the papers, then back up. His voice came out rough. “You don’t need to fight my battles.”

“I do when your battles hurt the church,” she said. “And when they hurt the truth.”

He stared at her. His expression was tight, as if he did not know what to do with her words.

“What happened?” Hannah asked. “The money rumor. Where did it come from?”

Eli’s gaze dropped. “My uncle’s company lost a bid. He blamed me. He said I missed a deadline. I did miss it. I was late with paperwork.”

Hannah listened.

Eli kept going. “The company lost money. He told people I cost him. Then someone twisted it. Then it turned into stealing.”

Hannah’s stomach twisted. “So it grew.”

“Yes,” he said. “It grew because I left. People fill gaps with stories.”

Hannah leaned against a filing cabinet. “Why did you leave?”

He flinched, then steadied. “Because I did not trust my own temper. Because I felt trapped in everyone’s opinion. Because I blamed God for things He did not do.”

Hannah took a slow breath. She remembered him at nineteen. Broad shoulders. Loud laugh. His eyes were always restless. She remembered the day he stopped showing up. She remembered her father praying for him on a Wednesday night and her mother squeezing her hand in the pew.

“Did Eli come back to make it right?” Hannah asked.

Eli’s eyes held hers. “Yes.”

Hannah nodded. “Then you won’t run again.”

His jaw tightened. “I will not.”

The printer stopped. The office felt too small. Hannah picked up the stack of memos and tapped them into alignment.

“They will keep everything in writing,” Hannah said. “They will keep everything open.”

Eli nodded. “Yes.”

Hannah carried the stack to her office. She set them on her desk and opened her planner.

“Board members will arrive at six forty-five,” Hannah said. “Mrs. Alvarez will bring her binder and her suspicion.”

Eli gave a short breath. It stayed close to a laugh, but he stopped it before it formed.

“She will test Hannah,” Hannah continued. “Mrs. Tinsley will ask ten questions and expect eleven answers. Nate Caldwell will talk about the budget like it is scripture.”

Eli sat in the guest chair. “Who will defend me?”

Hannah looked at him. “I will.”

He held her gaze, and she saw the weight in his eyes.

“Eli will do more than defend,” Hannah added. “Eli will present. Eli will own his work. Eli will answer calmly.”

He nodded once. “All right.”

Hannah took out a blank sheet of paper. “They need talking points for the fundraiser announcement,” she said. “People will ask how bad it is. People will ask why it costs so much. People will ask why insurance will not cover it.”

Eli leaned forward. “Tell them the truth. Old buildings cost money. The building needs work now, or it will cost more later.”

“Eli will say it softer,” Hannah told him.

He watched her. “You want it softer.”

“I want it clear and kind,” she said. “You know how people hear tone. They react to tone before they hear facts.”

He nodded. “You do it, then.”

Hannah shook her head. “We’ll do it together. Your presence matters. People need to see you standing with them in the light.”

His eyes narrowed. “Some will see it as you taking my side.”

“I’m taking the side of the church,” she said. “You’re part of the work. People need to accept it.”

Eli leaned back. “You don’t fear them.”

“I fear God,” Hannah said. The words came out fast. She did not plan them. She felt exposed after she said them. She cleared her throat. “I fear making a mistake that hurts people. I fear ignoring wisdom. I don’t fear a booth full of men with coffee.”

Eli looked at her with something close to gratitude. “I want to have your kind of courage.”

Hannah glanced down at her paper. “It is not courage. It is a duty.”

“It is both,” he said.

Hannah did not answer. She kept writing.

By late afternoon, the church felt as if it were holding its breath. Hannah set up folding chairs in the conference room. She placed a pitcher of water on the table. She set out pens. She placed the memos in neat stacks.

Her father arrived at five thirty. He carried his Bible and a worn notebook. He looked tired, but his eyes looked clear.

“Hannah has everything ready,” he said.

“Yes,” Hannah answered.

He glanced at the memos. “Eli did good work.”

“He did,” Hannah said.

Her father studied her for a moment. “People are talking.”

Hannah lifted her chin. “Yes.”

“He told you.”

“Hannah heard it too,” she said.

Her father nodded once. “Maple Ridge loves a story.”

“They will give them truth,” Hannah said.

He put his hand on her shoulder. “You are doing well.”

Hannah swallowed. She did not want praise. She wanted the building fixed. She wanted peace.

Eli arrived a few minutes later with a laptop bag. He nodded at her father. “Pastor.”

“Eli,” her father said. He held Eli’s gaze. “Thank you for stepping in.”

Eli nodded once. “I meant what I said. I will do the work in front of everyone.”

Her father’s face softened. “Good,” he said. “They will guard unity.”

At six forty, the first board members arrived. Mrs. Alvarez entered with her binder pressed to her chest. She gave Hannah a tight smile. She nodded at Pastor Whitaker. Her eyes landed on Eli, and her face changed. She did not hide it.

“Eli,” she said, as if testing the word.

“Mrs. Alvarez,” Eli answered. His tone stayed even. “Thank you for coming.”

She sat. She opened her binder. She pulled out a pen as she prepared for a trial.

Mrs. Tinsley arrived next, with Nate Caldwell behind her. Mrs. Tinsley’s gaze flicked to Eli, then away. Nate Caldwell looked at Eli longer. His lips pressed together.

Mr. Daley walked in last, as if he wanted everyone to see him arrive. He wore a clean jacket and the look of a man who thought he owned

the room. He nodded at Pastor Whitaker, then glanced at Hannah, then looked at Eli without greeting.

Hannah felt her muscles tighten. She forced them to ease. She pulled her chair in and sat beside her father.

Pastor Whitaker opened in prayer. Plain words again. Wisdom. Provision. Unity. Protection. Hannah glanced at Eli during the prayer. His head bowed. His hands rested flat on the table. He looked steady.

Pastor Whitaker lifted his head. “Thank you for coming,” he said. “They have building issues that need immediate action. Hannah and Eli will present the memo. They will discuss options and vote on next steps.”

Mrs. Alvarez lifted her pen. “I want to know why Eli is here,” she said.

Pastor Whitaker did not blink. “Because they need his expertise.”

Mr. Daley leaned back. “They have builders in this church,” he said. “They have men who know wood.”

Eli sat still. He had not spoken yet.

Hannah kept her voice calm. “They do,” she said. “They also need a structural assessment and a plan that meets code. Eli has training in design and restoration.”

Nate Caldwell cleared his throat. “And cost control,” he said.

Eli slid the one-page summary forward. “They will see cost ranges,” he said. “I will answer questions with documentation.”

Mrs. Alvarez narrowed her eyes. “They have heard things about Eli,” she said. “And Mrs. Alvarez does not mean gossip. Mrs. Alvarez means concern.”

Pastor Whitaker's hand tightened on his notebook. He stayed silent. He let the board speak. Hannah knew he wanted them to own their words.

Hannah looked at Mrs. Alvarez. "Say what Mrs. Alvarez means," she said.

Mrs. Alvarez looked at Hannah. "Mrs. Alvarez means his history," she said. "His temper. His choices."

Mr. Daley jumped in. "And money," he said.

Eli's jaw flexed. He kept his hands on the table.

Hannah felt anger rise again, fast and hot. She kept her tone level. "If anyone has a claim, bring proof," she said. "If no one has proof, stop."

Mr. Daley's eyes widened. "Hannah, you do not speak to me like I am a child."

Hannah held his gaze. "Then Mr. Daley should not speak like he is spreading playground talk."

The room went still. Mrs. Tinsley's mouth opened a little, then closed. Nate Caldwell blinked, as if he did not expect Hannah to stand up to Mr. Daley.

Pastor Whitaker spoke. His voice stayed calm. "They will keep this meeting focused," he said. "Eli will present. Questions will stay on the building and the plan."

Mrs. Alvarez lifted her chin. "Pastor, Pastor trusts him."

"I do," Pastor Whitaker said.

Mrs. Alvarez turned to Hannah. "And you trust him."

Hannah nodded. “Yes.”

Mr. Daley scoffed. “You’re young.”

Hannah sat up straighter. “I’m old enough to read a report and see a risk. I’m old enough to know we need help. I’m old enough to know people change when God gets hold of them.”

Eli’s eyes flicked to Hannah. Surprise again. And something else. He looked like he wanted to say her name, but he did not.

Pastor Whitaker nodded once. “Eli, go ahead,” he said.

Eli opened the laptop and turned the screen so they could see the diagrams. He talked in plain terms. He pointed to photos of water stains. He pointed to a sag line near the center beam. He named the issues without drama. He outlined three options. Patch, partial replacement, full reinforcement. He named the timeline and the costs.

Nate Caldwell asked about bids. Eli answered with process and deadlines. Mrs. Tinsley asked about volunteer labor. Eli answered with safety and insurance. Mrs. Alvarez asked about oversight. Eli answered with transparency. He offered weekly updates. He offered open access to invoices.

Mr. Daley kept pushing. “Why do they need an outsider?” he said.

Eli looked straight at him. “I am not an outsider,” he said. “I grew up here. I left. I came back. The work does not change because of my past.”

Mr. Daley snorted. “Your past matters.”

Eli’s face tightened. Hannah saw his temper in the line of his jaw. She also saw restraint. He took a breath.

“My past matters to God,” Eli said. “He dealt with it. I will not pretend I did not fail. I also will not accept false claims.”

Mrs. Alvarez tapped her pen. “Eli admits he failed.”

Eli nodded. “Yes.”

Mrs. Alvarez looked like she wanted to say more, but then she glanced at Pastor Whitaker. “All right,” she said. “Then let them talk about oversight. I want two board members involved in the sign-off.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Agreed,” he said.

Nate Caldwell leaned forward. “They need a vote on which option they pursue,” he said. “And they need a vote on how they announce fundraising.”

The meeting moved into motion. Voices rose and fell. Hannah took notes. She kept the conversation on track. She watched Eli answer without snapping. She saw him pause before he spoke. She saw him choose restraint. She trusted him more with every careful answer.

At one point, Mr. Daley muttered under his breath, “This is a show.”

Hannah looked at him. “This is stewardship,” she said.

He glared. “You defend him too fast.”

Hannah leaned closer, quiet so others did not hear. “Hannah defends truth fast,” she said. “Mr. Daley should try it.”

Mr. Daley looked away.

After two hours, the board voted. They chose the middle option. Partial replacement with reinforcement. It cost less than full, but it maintained high safety. They voted to begin bids and schedule work

after Easter. They voted to announce a fundraising plan on Sunday and to schedule a town hall next week.

Pastor Whitaker closed in prayer again. He thanked God for unity. He asked for softened hearts. He asked for provisions. When the prayer ended, chairs scraped. People stood. Mrs. Alvarez nodded at Eli once, stiff but real. Nate Caldwell offered Eli a short handshake. Mrs. Tinsley gave Hannah a look that said she approved of Hannah's backbone.

Mr. Daley left without speaking to Eli. He did pause by Hannah's chair.

"Hannah is Pastor Whitaker's daughter," he said.

"Yes," Hannah said.

He looked like he wanted to warn her. He chose pride instead. "Be careful," he said, then he walked out.

When the room emptied, Hannah gathered papers and stacked chairs. Pastor Whitaker rubbed his forehead and checked his watch.

"I need to go home," he said. "Your mother will wait up."

Hannah nodded. "Go," she said. "I'll lock up."

Pastor Whitaker looked at Eli. "Thank you," he said again.

Eli nodded. "Good night, Pastor."

Pastor Whitaker left Hannah and Eli alone in the church. The building settled into quiet. The hallway lights hummed.

Eli picked up the empty water cups and tossed them. Hannah straightened the table and placed the pens back in a drawer.

"Eli did well," Hannah said, without looking up.

Eli's voice came quietly. "You did well."

Hannah glanced at him. "I did not mean the meeting."

Eli watched her. "I know."

Hannah walked to the sanctuary door and pushed it open. The room sat dim with only a few lights on. Pews lined up in still rows. The front cross hung above the baptistry. The weathered beams ran overhead like a warning and a promise at once.

Eli stepped in behind her. He did not speak. He stood beside her, a few feet away, close enough for Hannah to feel his presence.

Hannah walked down the center aisle. Her footsteps sounded soft on the carpet runner. Eli followed. She stopped near the front pew and turned to face the room.

"It feels strange," Hannah said. "To talk about money and beams in a place built for worship."

Eli looked up at the ceiling. "Worship needs a roof," he said.

Hannah let out a small breath. "Yes."

Silence held for a moment. It felt different than the silence of tension. It felt like space.

Eli spoke without looking at her. "When you asked me at the office if I stole money... I understood why you asked."

Hannah gripped the top of the pew with one hand. "I hated asking."

He nodded once. "You still asked."

"Hannah needed Eli's answer," she said. "Hannah will not protect a lie."

Eli turned toward her. His eyes looked steady again. “Hannah is honest,” he said. “It is rare.”

Hannah shook her head. “It should not be.”

“It is,” he said.

Hannah looked at him, and she saw a man who had lived under suspicion for years. She saw a man who expected rejection before it arrived. Something in her shifted. Not pity. Resolve.

“Hannah will say this once,” she told him. “If Eli does right in this place, Eli will not do it alone. People will still talk. Hannah will still stand in the truth.”

Eli’s throat moved. “Why?”

Hannah swallowed. The easy answer sat on top. The church needed him. The building needed him. The deeper answer sat under it, quiet and risky. She chose what she could speak without losing control.

“Because Eli is part of the body,” she said. “And because Hannah has watched her father carry burdens with too few hands. Hannah will not do that again.”

Eli’s gaze held hers. “Eli cares about him.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “And I care about this church. It raised me.”

He looked around the sanctuary. “It did not raise me,” he said. “I fought it.”

“Eli still sat in these pews,” Hannah said. “Eli still heard the Word.”

His eyes softened. “And you still remember me.”

Hannah felt her face warm. She looked toward the pulpit instead of at him. “Hannah remembers people,” she said.

Eli stepped closer, slow and careful. He stopped beside her at the pew. He did not touch her. He kept his hands at his sides, like he respected the space between them.

“I used to think Hannah was untouchable,” he said.

Hannah turned her head. “Why?”

“Pastor’s daughter,” he said. “Perfect hair. Perfect manners. Always early. Always prepared.”

Hannah let out a short breath. “You saw what I showed.”

Eli nodded. “I see more now.”

Hannah’s heart beat hard. She kept her voice calm. “What do you see?”

He looked at her for a long moment. He did not rush. “I see Hannah stand up to Mr. Daley,” he said. “I see Hannah take hits meant for me. I see Hannah tells the truth even when it costs her.”

Hannah gripped the pew again. “It did not cost me.”

“It will,” he said.

The words hung between them. Hannah felt the weight of Maple Ridge. The stares. The whispers. The way people protected their own comfort was by turning a person into a warning story.

Hannah looked up at the beams again. “This building holds years of people singing,” she said. “Praying and getting married and burying loved ones. It holds failures too. It holds fights in the foyer and tears in the back row.”

Eli followed her gaze. “It holds my worst night,” he said.

Hannah looked at him. “The night you yelled at Pastor Whitaker.”

He nodded, shame flickering. “I called him a fraud. I said he did not care about people like me.”

Hannah took a slow breath. “He did care.”

“I know,” Eli said. “I know now. I did not know how to receive it.”

Hannah shifted her feet. “You’ll see him Sunday.”

Eli’s shoulders tensed. “Yes.”

“Eli will stand beside him,” Hannah said. “Eli will help ask the town to give.”

Eli looked down. “People will think I have a motive.”

“Eli does not control their thoughts,” Hannah said. “Eli controls his conduct.”

He nodded. “Hannah sounds like him again.”

Hannah glanced at him. “Good.”

Eli lifted his eyes to hers. “Hannah,” he said, and her name sounded careful in his mouth. “Thank you for tonight.”

“Eli earned it,” Hannah said.

He shook his head once. “I did not.”

Hannah kept her voice even. “You showed restraint. You showed humility. You brought facts. You offered oversight. You did not snap when Mr. Daley pushed you.”

Eli looked away. “I wanted to.”

“I know,” Hannah said.

He looked back. “Why do you trust me more now?”

Hannah thought before she answered. “Because Eli stayed calm under pressure,” she said. “Because Eli did not try to win the room. Eli tried to serve the truth.”

Eli nodded slowly. “I learned it the hard way.”

They stood in the quiet a moment longer. The sanctuary felt like it listened. Hannah heard the faint creak of wood as the building cooled. She smelled old hymnals and floor polish.

Eli cleared his throat. “Do you ever get tired of being watched?”

Hannah let out a slow breath. “Yes,” she said. “I get tired of being the example. I get tired of people thinking my life belongs to them because my father stands in a pulpit.”

Eli’s eyes held hers. “And yet you stay.”

“Hannah stays because God put Hannah here,” she said. “And because this church needs steady hands.”

He nodded. “I do not know if God put me here.”

Hannah looked at him. “You came back.”

“I did,” he said.

“Then start there,” Hannah said. “Do the next right thing. Let God deal with the rest.”

Eli’s mouth tightened as if he were fighting emotion. He looked up at the cross, then back to Hannah. “I will,” he said.

Hannah reached for the light switch near the front. She paused. “Does Eli want to pray?” she asked.

Eli’s eyes widened a fraction. He looked caught off guard. Then he nodded once. “Yes,” he said. “If Hannah does.”

Hannah stepped back from the switch. She turned toward the sanctuary, toward the empty pews and the worn beams overhead. She bowed her head. Eli did too, beside her.

Hannah spoke in a low voice. Plain words. “Lord, guard our church. Guard our words. Guard our hearts. Help us work with honesty. Help us trust You for what we cannot carry. Help us treat each other with grace. Help us stand firm when people talk. Build what we cannot build on our own.”

She fell quiet.

Eli spoke next. His voice sounded rough, like he did not use it this way often. “God, forgive me for what I did here years ago. Forgive my pride. Help me serve without needing approval. Help me do work that honors You. Help me face people I hurt. Help me stay.”

Hannah lifted her head when he finished. Eli lifted his, too. His eyes met hers in the dim light. Something settled between them. It was not a promise spoken out loud. It was a choice they both made in front of God.

Hannah turned off the sanctuary lights. They walked out together and closed the door. The hallway light cast a narrow path toward the exit.

At the side door, Hannah reached for the lock. Eli waited, quiet and steady. She locked up, then faced him.

“See Eli tomorrow,” she said.

“Yes,” he answered. He hesitated, then added, “Thank you for standing with me.”

Hannah nodded once. “Do not give Hannah a reason to stop,” she said.

His eyes softened. “I will not,” he said.

Hannah stepped out into the cold night. She pulled her coat tighter. Eli walked to his truck. Hannah walked to her car. They both left the church standing behind them, weathered beams overhead, held up by more than wood and nails. Hannah left with a new kind of trust, small but real, carried in quiet words spoken inside the sanctuary.

Chapter 8

Cracks in the Foundation

Hannah arrived early. She did it on purpose.

She parked beside the fellowship hall. The gravel crunched under her tires. The air bit. She sat for a second with both hands on the wheel. She looked at the church. White siding. A steeple that her grandfather helped repaint. Windows that caught the first light.

She thought about last night. She thought about Eli beside her in the dark sanctuary. She thought about how his voice sounded when he asked God to help him stay.

She pushed the thought down. She did not have time to float on it.

She grabbed her folder. She stepped out. She locked her car. She crossed the lot and headed inside.

The building smelled like old wood and lemon cleaner. Someone had run a mop over the entry tile. Hannah flicked on the lights as she went. She walked past the bulletin board with crooked flyers. She passed the nursery door with the handprint wreath. She passed the sanctuary doors and kept going toward the office.

She set her folder on the counter. She checked her phone. Two missed calls from her father. One from the treasurer, Mr. Daley. Her stomach tightened.

She called her father first.

He answered fast. "Hannah."

"Good morning," Hannah said. "What is wrong?"

He breathed out. "Daley called me at six. He wants a meeting. Today."

“About what?” Hannah asked.

“About the invoice schedule. About cash flow. About the giving numbers. About the roof bid.”

Hannah’s throat went dry. “We already approved the roof.”

“We approved the bid,” her father said. “We did not have this other issue.”

“What other issue?” Hannah said.

He paused. “Eli asked Daley for access to the old maintenance logs.”

Hannah gripped the edge of the counter. “Why?”

“Eli said he saw something. He did not tell me what. Daley thinks it will cost money.”

Hannah closed her eyes. She pictured Eli with a flashlight. She pictured his hands on old beams.

“Do you want me there?” she asked.

“Yes,” her father said. “You and Eli. Nine o’clock.”

Hannah glanced at the clock on the wall. Eight fifteen. “I will get him here,” she said.

“You are steady,” her father said quietly. “Stay steady.”

“I will,” Hannah said.

She hung up. She called Eli.

He picked up on the second ring. “Morning,” he said.

“Morning,” Hannah said. “We need you here early. Nine o’clock meeting with Dad and Daley.”

A pause. “I know,” he said.

“You know,” Hannah repeated.

“I found something,” he said.

Hannah’s heart sank. “Tell me.”

“I need to show you,” he said. “I am on my way.”

Hannah set her phone down. Her hands shook. She tucked them into her coat pockets and walked back down the hall.

The sanctuary doors stood closed. The frosted glass panels looked dull in the morning light. Hannah stopped there anyway. She rested her palm on the wood.

“Lord,” she whispered, “help.”

She moved again. She headed for the side entrance where Eli always came in with his tools.

She heard his truck before she saw it. The engine rumbled. Tires crunched. He parked close and stepped out with a hard case in one hand and rolled plans in the other. He looked tired. His jaw sat tight. His eyes swept the building like he expected it to shift.

“You got here fast,” Hannah said.

“I did not sleep,” he answered.

Hannah opened the door for him. He walked in. He set his case down and unrolled the plans on the small table near the coat hooks.

Hannah leaned over the paper. She saw lines. Notes. Measurements. Red marks she did not like.

“What did you find?” she asked.

He tapped the plan with a knuckle. “Yesterday afternoon, I checked the crawl space under the east wing. Under the classroom side.”

Hannah pictured the narrow access door near the coat closet. She pictured the dirt floor and the old vents.

“I went down there years ago,” she said. “Dad took me once. He said it was messy.”

“It is worse now,” Eli said. “There is moisture. Standing in spots.”

“From the rain,” Hannah said.

“From more than rain,” he said.

He opened his hard case and pulled out a small meter. He held it up. “I tested the joists. Several read high for moisture. I pulled the insulation back. I saw dark staining.”

Hannah’s mouth went tight. “Mold.”

“Some,” he said. “And rot.”

Hannah stared at him.

He kept going. “I also checked the sill plate along the east foundation wall. In two areas, the plate has softened. In one area, I pushed a screwdriver in.”

Hannah’s stomach turned. “How bad?”

He looked at her. “Bad enough to take seriously. Bad enough to stop work in that section until we shore it.”

The hallway felt smaller. The lights hummed.

“You did not tell me last night,” Hannah said.

“I did not want to drop it in the middle of prayer,” he answered. “I wanted to confirm first.”

“You confirmed,” Hannah said.

He nodded. “This morning, before I drove here, I went by the lumber yard for shoring posts. I did not buy them. I needed approval. But I wanted to be ready.”

Hannah’s throat burned. “What causes it?”

“A few things,” he said. “Gutters in that corner dump water toward the foundation. The downspout extension is missing. The grade slopes wrong. Water sits. Over time, it soaks the wall. It wicks up.”

Hannah pressed her lips together. She remembered kids splashing in the puddle there after storms. She remembered thinking it was harmless.

“How long?” she asked.

“A while,” he said. “Years.”

Hannah swallowed. “So it has been failing under us.”

He nodded once.

Hannah heard footsteps. Mr. Daley came from the office hall with a stack of papers. He wore his usual brown sweater vest. His glasses sat low on his nose. His face held the tight look he used for budget meetings.

“Good,” he said when he saw them. “You are both here. Pastor is in the office.”

He looked at Eli. “You sent me a note at six thirty. You kept it vague.”

Eli met his eyes. “I did that on purpose,” he said. “I did not want it discussed by text.”

Mr. Daley pursed his lips. “Come,” he said.

Hannah gathered her folder. Eli rolled the plans and carried them under his arm. They walked into the office.

Her father sat behind the desk. He stood when they entered. His eyes went to Hannah’s face, then to Eli.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. He gestured to the chairs.

Hannah sat. Eli sat beside her. Mr. Daley sat across.

Her father folded his hands. “Eli. Tell us what you found.”

Eli set the rolled plans on his knees. He spoke plainly. “The east wing has moisture intrusion at the foundation. I found rot in sections of the sill plate and moisture damage in joists. I recommend we pause work in the east wing until we shore up and repair. We need a structural assessment. We need to open up two areas to see the extent.”

Mr. Daley made a sound in his throat. “Cost,” he said.

Eli looked at him. “I do not know yet. I know it will cost more than planned.”

Hannah’s father stayed still. “Do we have immediate danger?” he asked.

Eli shook his head. “I do not see signs of imminent collapse. But I see a decline. If we ignore it, we risk bigger failure.”

Mr. Daley flipped through papers. “We already stretched to fund the sanctuary repairs. We already cut the youth retreat line. We already asked families for pledge cards.”

Heat rose in Hannah's face. She heard every meeting from the last month. She remembered the older members who raised eyebrows when the numbers went up. She remembered the young couples who looked down at their hands.

Her father spoke calmly. "We will face it honestly," he said. "Eli, what is the next step?"

"Engineer," Eli said. "We need a report. I can call one. I worked with a firm in Cedar Grove. A believer. Solid work."

Mr. Daley lifted his eyebrows. "A report costs."

Eli nodded. "Yes."

Hannah's father looked at Hannah. "Hannah, what do you know about the building's history in that corner?"

Hannah thought fast. "The old parsonage sat there before the classrooms. They tore it down and built the wing in the late seventies. Dad told me they did not have money for full drainage work. They patched and moved on."

Mr. Daley tapped his paper. "Patch and move on," he muttered.

Hannah's father leaned forward. "Daley, we need numbers, not frustration."

Mr. Daley stiffened. "Numbers say we do not have a margin. Numbers say we cannot pay for surprise repairs."

Hannah's father nodded once. "Then numbers need prayer and planning. Eli, call the engineer. Get the cost and timeline for a report. Hannah, pull the last three months' giving and the building fund balance. Daley, list what we can pause in the current project."

Mr. Daley looked displeased. "You want to pause something else, too."

“We will do what we must,” Hannah’s father said.

Hannah looked at him. He looked tired. He looked older than last week.

Eli cleared his throat. “Pastor,” he said. “I want to add one thing.”

“Go ahead,” Hannah’s father said.

Eli held himself straight. “This damage might come from years of neglect. People will look for someone to blame. If they look at you, it will be unfair. If they look at Hannah, it will be cruel. If they look at me, I will carry some of it.”

Hannah’s heart thumped.

Mr. Daley squinted. “Why would they blame you?”

Eli met his gaze. “Because I am the one touching the building. Because I have history here. Some people still think I do not belong in this town.”

Hannah’s father watched him. “You do belong,” he said. “If God keeps you here.”

Mr. Daley shifted in his chair. He looked down at his papers.

Hannah’s father stood. “We will meet again tonight after Eli speaks to the engineer. We will pray. We will speak truth to the church when we have facts. No panic.”

Hannah stood too. Eli stood.

Mr. Daley gathered his stack with sharp movements. “Facts still cost,” he said.

Hannah followed Eli out of the office. Her father stayed behind. He closed the door with care.

In the hall, Eli stopped. He looked at Hannah. “I am sorry,” he said.

“For what?” Hannah asked.

“For adding weight to your day,” he said.

Hannah swallowed. “I asked God to help us stand firm when people talk,” she said. “I did not ask Him to send rot under the classrooms.”

Eli studied her face. “Faith does not stay in easy places,” he said.

Hannah blinked. His words landed hard because they rang true.

“Show me,” she said.

He nodded. “Get boots,” he said.

Hannah went to the coat closet and pulled on her old rain boots. She grabbed work gloves from the supply bin. She met Eli by the crawl space access.

He knelt and pulled the small door open. A sour, damp smell rolled out. He clicked on his headlamp and handed Hannah a small flashlight.

“You do not need to go under,” he said.

“I do,” she answered.

He held her gaze for a beat, then nodded.

Hannah crouched and slid in feet first. Dirt scraped her boots. The space pressed close. She kept her breathing slow. She shone her flashlight along the underside of the floor.

Pipes ran overhead. Insulation hung in torn strips. Spider webs clung to the joists. Hannah moved on her elbows and knees, following Eli.

He stopped at a spot near the foundation wall. He pointed.

Hannah saw it. A beam looked darker. The wood had a soft, swollen look. Eli pressed his screwdriver into it. The tip sank.

Hannah's stomach dropped.

"You see," he said.

Hannah nodded. She could not find words.

He moved the light along the sill plate. A line of wood sat on the concrete. Parts of it looked eaten.

"Water comes in here," he said. "It sits. It moves along the wood."

Hannah shone her light farther. She saw a small puddle in a low spot. She saw mud with a glossy sheen.

"How do we fix it?" she asked.

"First, we stop more water," he said. "Gutters. Downspouts. Grade. Then we shore. Then we replace damaged members. We treat mold. We dry the area."

"How long?" Hannah asked.

He paused. "Weeks. Maybe more."

Hannah closed her eyes for a second. She heard kids singing in those classrooms. She heard the thump of little feet. She pictured Vacation Bible School in July. She pictured the craft table. She pictured the teacher, Mrs. Lane, who brought goldfish crackers.

Hannah's chest tightened. "We do not have weeks," she said.

Eli kept his voice even. "The building does not care about our calendar."

The truth stung.

Hannah crawled back toward the opening. She pushed out into the hallway and sat on the tile for a moment. Her gloves looked dirty. Her knees ached.

Eli climbed out after her and closed the access door. He stood and brushed dirt off his jeans.

Hannah pulled off her gloves. "If we tell people," she said, "some will say we should shut down the wing. Some will say we should meet in the school gym. Some will say we should sell the property."

Eli nodded. "Yes."

Hannah stood. "And the project already made people uneasy. The rumors. The money talk. The talk about you."

Eli watched her. "I will take heat if it keeps you from breaking," he said.

Hannah shook her head. "Do not do that," she said. "Do not play hero. It will turn into pride."

His face tightened. "I know," he said. "I do not want pride. I want honesty."

Hannah stepped closer. She lowered her voice. "Then do not carry what belongs to the whole church," she said. "We carry it together. We say the truth. We ask for help. We do not hide."

His eyes held hers. "Agreed," he said.

The word felt like a plank laid across a gap.

They walked back toward the office area. Hannah stopped at the copier room to wash her hands. The water ran cold. The soap smelled cheap. She scrubbed dirt from under her nails.

When she finished, she looked at herself in the small mirror over the sink. She looked tired, too. She looked like she wanted to cry, and she refused.

She went to the secretary's desk and pulled the binder for giving reports. She flipped pages. Numbers stared back at her.

Building fund balance. Lower than last month. General fund. Tight. Mission giving. Steady, small.

She heard her father in her mind. Stay steady.

Hannah gathered the reports and walked back to the office. She knocked and stepped in.

Her father sat with his Bible open now. He looked up. "You saw it," he said.

Hannah handed him the reports. "Yes," she said. "And I pulled these."

He scanned the top page. His forehead creased. "We will need more than we have," he said.

"Yes," Hannah answered.

He set the papers down. He looked at her. "Are you okay?"

Hannah wanted to say yes. She wanted to protect him. She did not.

"No," she said. "I feel like I am watching the church sink."

He stood and came around the desk. He rested a hand on her shoulder. "The church does not sink," he said. "Buildings rot. God does not."

Hannah swallowed hard. "I know," she said. "I know in my head."

He nodded. "Your heart will catch up," he said. "Do not demand it, hurry."

Hannah looked down. "I do not know how to lead through this," she said.

"You do the next right thing," he said. "You listen. You pray. You speak truth."

The same words she spoke to Eli last night. They came back to her like God refused to let her forget.

Her father stepped back. "Go check on Eli," he said. "He will call the engineer. And Hannah."

"Yes," she said.

"You do not quit," he said, firm.

Hannah's eyes stung. "I will not," she said.

She left the office and found Eli in the fellowship hall, phone to his ear. He paced near the stacked chairs. He stopped when he saw Hannah and lifted a finger for one minute.

Hannah waited. She stared at the long tables. She remembered potlucks. Funeral lunches. Baby showers. This room held the life of the church. It felt fragile now.

Eli ended the call. He exhaled. "The engineer will come tomorrow morning," he said. "He will charge eight hundred for assessment and report."

Hannah winced. "Eight hundred before we swing a hammer," she said.

He nodded. "Yes."

Hannah looked away. “Daley will hate that,” she said.

“He will,” Eli answered. “But we need it.”

Hannah pressed her hand to the edge of the table. “If the report shows wide damage,” she said, “we will need thousands more.”

Eli watched her. “Yes,” he said.

Hannah’s shoulders slumped. She fought the urge to sit on the floor.

Eli stepped closer. “Look at me,” he said.

Hannah lifted her eyes.

He spoke low. “Do not quit in your mind before we have facts,” he said. “Do not run the numbers into a grave. We will see what is real. Then we will choose.”

Tears threatened. Hannah blinked them back. “I do not want the church to beg,” she said. “I do not want Dad to stand up and ask for more. People already give. Some give out of guilt. Some give out of fear.”

Eli nodded. “I get it,” he said. “But truth does not equal begging. It equals letting people share the load.”

Hannah breathed through her nose. She nodded once.

Eli lifted the plans. “I will mark the areas to open,” he said. “I will set up a safe access for the engineer. Do you want to be there tomorrow?”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

He held her gaze. “Good,” he said. “Then you will know. No guessing.”

Hannah went to the supply closet and pulled caution tape and cones. She helped him block off the classroom hallway where the worst area sat.

As they worked, voices drifted from the parking lot. Two women arrived for morning Bible study. Hannah heard them greet each other. She heard them say her name. She heard Eli's name, too, spoken with a pause.

Hannah kept her eyes on the tape. Her fingers pulled it tight.

One woman, Mrs. Kline, stepped inside and stopped short when she saw the cones. "What is all this?" she asked.

Hannah forced a calm voice. "We found moisture damage in the crawl space under the east wing," she said. "We are getting an assessment."

Mrs. Kline's eyes widened. "Is it safe?" she asked.

Eli stepped up beside Hannah. "Yes, for now," he said. "We blocked this area as a precaution until the engineer looks."

Mrs. Kline pressed a hand to her chest. "Oh my," she said. "Pastor will tell us."

"He will," Hannah answered.

Mrs. Kline leaned closer. Her voice dropped. "This is why we should not have started all this renovation," she said. "We stirred up trouble."

Hannah's cheeks burned. She kept her voice level. "The damage existed before we touched anything," she said. "We found it because we looked."

Mrs. Kline pursed her lips. "Well," she said. "I hope it does not drain the church dry."

She walked off toward the fellowship hall.

Hannah stared at her back. Her hands shook again.

Eli turned his head slightly. “Do not carry her fear,” he said.

“It is not only her,” Hannah said. “It will spread.”

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Fear spreads fast.”

They finished the tape line. Hannah stepped back and looked at the blocked hallway. The cones looked loud in the quiet building.

Hannah moved to the office to send an email to the teachers and ministry leaders. She kept it short. She stated facts. She asked them to avoid the hallway. She said the engineer would inspect tomorrow. She did not mention cost.

When she hit send, she felt as if she had tossed a stone into a pond.

By noon, her phone buzzed with questions. People asked if Sunday school would move. People asked if mold would make kids sick. People asked if the building would close.

Hannah answered what she knew. She said she would share more when she had the report. She typed the same lines until her hands ached.

At one thirty, Mr. Daley cornered her by the copier. “Eight hundred,” he said.

“Yes,” Hannah answered.

He frowned. “We do not have room,” he said.

“We do not have room to ignore rot either,” Hannah said.

His mouth tightened. “I have served this church for forty years,” he said. “I have watched pastors come and go. I have watched bright projects drain faith out of people.”

Hannah lifted her chin. “This is not about bright projects,” she said. “This is about a building we already own and people we serve.”

He looked away. “And an architect,” he said, in a low voice.

Anger sparked in Hannah. “Eli did not cause this,” she said. “Eli found it.”

Mr. Daley studied her. “You defend him fast,” he said.

Hannah stiffened. “I defend truth,” she answered.

He exhaled. “If we spend money we do not have,” he said, “we will face hard choices.”

Hannah nodded. “Then we will face them with prayer and honesty,” she said.

He did not answer. He walked off with his papers.

Hannah stood by the copier and fought the urge to cry. She pressed a hand to her stomach. Nausea swirled.

She walked outside for air. The sky looked flat. Wind pushed across the fields. She stood by the steps and looked at the downspout in the east corner.

It ended too close to the wall. The extension was gone. The ground sloped toward the foundation. She saw the damp line in the dirt even now.

“How did we miss this?” she whispered.

Eli came out a minute later. He held a small shovel. “I am going to check the grade,” he said. “I want photos for the engineer.”

Hannah nodded. She watched him walk to the corner and kneel. He scraped at the soil. He looked focused, steady.

Hannah felt two things at once.

She felt grateful he was here.

She felt angry that God let this happen now.

She turned away and went back inside. She could not watch him dig while her heart dug up fear.

In the late afternoon, her father called a short staff meeting. Hannah sat with him, Eli, Mr. Daley, and the children's ministry director, Mrs. Lane. The room smelled like coffee.

Mrs. Lane looked worried. “The parents already texted me,” she said. “They ask if the kids breathed mold.”

Eli answered calmly. “I saw limited mold in the crawl space,” he said. “No evidence inside classrooms. We will keep the hallway closed until we know more.”

Mrs. Lane nodded, but her eyes shone. “I do not want to lose families,” she said. “We fought hard to rebuild attendance after COVID.”

Her father leaned forward. “We will communicate clearly,” he said. “We will protect families. We will not hide.”

Mr. Daley cleared his throat. “And money,” he said.

Silence settled.

Her father looked at Eli. “After the report, we will know the next steps,” he said. “Then we will decide what to present to the church. We will invite prayer first.”

Mr. Daley made a small sound of doubt. He did not argue.

The meeting ended. Everyone left with tight faces.

Hannah lingered in the office doorway. Her father stacked papers. He looked up. “You look pale,” he said.

“I am tired,” Hannah answered.

He nodded. “Go home,” he said. “Eat. Sleep.”

“I cannot sleep,” Hannah said.

He watched her. “Then sit with God,” he said. “Let Him hold what you cannot.”

Hannah swallowed. She nodded once. She turned and walked down the hall.

She stopped at the sanctuary doors again. She hesitated.

She heard voices in her mind. Mrs. Kline. Mr. Daley. Parents. Old members who feared change. She heard her own fear, too.

Hannah pushed the doors open.

The sanctuary sat dim in late light. Sun cut through the stained glass and laid soft color on the pews. Dust floated in the beam.

She stepped inside and closed the doors behind her. The click echoed.

She walked down the center aisle. Her boots sounded loud on the wood floor. She stopped halfway and looked up at the beams.

They looked strong from here. They always did.

She thought about the rot hidden under the classrooms. She thought about how easy it was to sit in a pew and assume all was well.

Hannah sat on the third pew from the front. She set her folder beside her.

Her hands rested in her lap. They felt empty.

She tried to pray, but words tangled. She felt like she had already used up her faith last night. She felt like God asked her for more when her hands already shook.

She stared at the pulpit. Her father stood there each week. He preached about trust. He told people God provided. He told them God built His church.

Hannah wanted to believe it without strain.

Her throat tightened. “I cannot do this,” she whispered.

The words scared her the moment she spoke them. They sounded like they were quitting. They sounded like betrayal.

She pressed her palms to her eyes. Tears slipped out anyway.

She sat there and let them fall. She did not wipe them fast. She let the quiet hold her.

When the tears slowed, she lifted her head. She looked at the cross on the wall behind the pulpit.

She remembered last night. Two people in the dark asking God for help. She remembered Eli saying Forgive me. Help me stay.

Hannah breathed in. She breathed out.

She stood and walked to the front. She stepped up the small stairs. She knelt at the altar rail, where people came to pray during special services.

Her knees pressed into the cushion. The fabric felt worn. Many knees had been here. Many fears. Many needs.

She bowed her head.

“Lord,” she said, low, “the situation got worse.”

She paused. She swallowed.

“I thought we had one hard thing,” she said. “Rumors. Pride. Trust. Work. Now we have rot under us. We have money we do not have. We have people who will blame and fear and pull away.”

Her voice shook. She steadied it.

“I feel like quitting,” she said. “I do not want to quit. I want to obey You. I want to honor my father. I want to serve this church. I want to do the next right thing. I do not know what it is when the ground under us fails.”

She fell quiet. The sanctuary hummed with silence.

She kept her head bowed. “You see what is hidden,” she said. “You already knew. You let us find it now. I do not like it. I do not understand it.”

She pressed her hands together tighter.

“Give me faith when it gets worse,” she said. “Give me the courage to tell the truth. Give us provisions. Give Eli strength. Protect him from shame. Protect our church from division. Teach me to trust You when I feel fear in my bones.”

She breathed out slowly.

“Build what we cannot build,” she said. “Hold what we cannot hold.”

Hannah stayed there alone in the sanctuary, knees on a worn cushion, eyes closed, asking God to meet her where the cracks spread under the surface and faith cost more than she planned to pay.

Chapter 9

The Long Night of Prayer

Hannah stayed on her knees.

She did not rush.

She listened for a word. She listened for peace. She heard only the soft tick of the wall clock near the back doors. She heard the low hum of the old heating vent. She heard her own breath.

She lifted her head a little. The cross stayed in place. It did not change. It did not move to meet her. It hung there as it always had. Steady. Plain.

She dropped her gaze again.

Discouragement slipped in like cold air under a door. She did not invite it. It arrived anyway. It told her that she had asked for help and nothing had changed. It told her she prayed and rot still waited under the floor. It told her she would face the board, the church, the town, and she would watch faces tighten.

She squeezed her hands. Her knuckles paled.

“Lord,” she whispered, “I feel tired.”

Her voice sounded small in the empty room. She did not like hearing it. She wanted her prayers to sound strong. She wanted her prayers to sound like her father’s. Calm. Sure. Firm. She wanted to sound like she believed.

She bowed her head deeper.

She thought of her father in his study late at night. She remembered the glow of his desk lamp under the door. She remembered his Bible open, pages thin and marked. She remembered his pen. He used the

same blue one for years. He never kept spare pens in the cup. He kept one, and he cared for it.

She did not feel like him tonight.

She felt like a child who lost her place in the hymn book.

Her throat tightened again. She pressed her palms to the cushion and breathed.

She did not want to become bitter. She did not want to become sharp. She did not want to start blaming God for the hidden rot. She knew better. She knew what she taught the youth girls. She knew the verses she said in hospital rooms. She knew the prayers she led at the food pantry before she passed out boxes.

She knew. Knowing did not lift the weight.

She let her mind drift back, the way it did when she sat alone in the sanctuary.

She saw the building as it looked when she was little. The paint looked fresher then. The carpet looked less faded. The pew cushions felt firm. The sanctuary smelled like lemon polish and old hymnals.

She saw herself in a navy dress with a white collar. Her mother buttoned it for her. She tugged it straight. She always cared about how Hannah looked at church. She did not want Hannah to dress for attention. She wanted Hannah to dress for respect. She said church was where Hannah practiced honor.

She remembered holding her hand up the aisle. Her hand stayed warm. Her grip stayed steady. She remembered the sound of the organ. She remembered her father standing at the front, his Bible in hand. She remembered how he looked at her mother when he thought no one was watching. His eyes softened. His shoulders eased. It was small, but Hannah noticed.

She learned marriage from those small moments.

She learned faith from them, too.

Her mother sat three rows back on the left, as always. She did not pick a new spot each week. She kept her place. She said constancy mattered. She said you show up, you sit down, you listen, you sing, you give, you pray. You do it when you feel it and when you do not. You do it because God is God, not because you woke up feeling warm.

Her mother never used a loud voice at home. She did not need it. She spoke clearly. She spoke firmly. She spoke kindly.

Hannah remembered her in the kitchen on Saturday nights. She laid out Hannah's tights and shoes. She ironed Hannah's father's shirt. She made a pan of cinnamon rolls for the Sunday school teachers because she said they would arrive early and leave late. She said a small gift could hold a tired person up.

Hannah remembered her kneeling by the couch after dinner. She did not make a show of it. She did not call Hannah to watch her pray. She prayed because prayer was as normal as washing dishes. Sometimes Hannah walked through the living room and saw her there, hands folded, head bowed, hair falling forward. Hannah felt like she should leave her alone. She also felt safe. Like someone stood guard over her home, and it was not only her father.

Hannah blinked hard.

She missed her.

The ache landed deep. It stayed there. Hannah's mother died when Hannah was seventeen. Hannah lived long enough without her to seem fine in public. She lived long enough to speak about her without crying most days. Yet the empty sanctuary pulled up the old grief.

Hannah whispered, “I wish she were here.”

She did not mean she wanted her opinion about the building. She did not mean she wanted her to solve it. She meant she wanted her presence. She wanted her hand on her shoulder. She wanted her voice in her ear saying, Keep going, Hannah. Keep going and do not panic. She wanted her steady warmth.

She stared at the altar rail. Her mother used to sit with her here when Hannah had to memorize Scripture for the children’s church. She did not drill her like a coach. She read the verse slowly. She asked Hannah what it meant. She asked Hannah what it asked of her.

She did not accept surface answers.

She asked, “What will you do with it, Hannah?”

She said God did not give Hannah words to decorate her mind. He gave her words to guide her steps. She said obedience looked plain most days. It looked like telling the truth. It looked like doing hard things with a clean heart.

Hannah swallowed.

Her mother’s voice in her memory did not flatter her. It did not soothe her with false comfort. It called her back to steady ground.

Hannah breathed in. She breathed out.

She whispered, “What will I do with it?”

The words slipped out before she planned them. They came from a place under her fear.

She looked toward the pews. Empty rows stretched back. The stained glass windows showed dark shapes. Streetlights outside painted faint bands of yellow across the floor.

She thought of tomorrow. She thought of phone calls. She thought of the finance committee. She thought of the older members who called every repair a sign of decline. She thought of the younger families who wanted bright changes and did not notice the quiet work it took to keep a building safe. She thought of the town gossip. She thought of the way people in Maple Ridge talked like they were passing salt at dinner.

She thought of Eli.

She pictured him bent over the exposed joists, flashlight in hand, jaw tight, eyes steady. She pictured the way he kept his voice even when her father's deacon, Mr. Harlan, muttered under his breath about outside experts. She pictured Eli's hands. Strong. Careful. He did not treat the old wood like trash. He treated it like something worth saving.

She also pictured the way he looked when he confessed last night. His shoulders bore a weight she had not seen before. He said Forgive me, " as he meant it with his whole life. He did not argue. He did not twist it. He did not shift blame.

He stayed.

Hannah pressed her lips together.

She did not know what to do with her feelings for him. They felt new. They also felt old, like something planted in the past and now pushing through the soil. She felt drawn to his quiet steadiness. She felt grateful for his care for the church. She felt a tenderness she did not expect.

She also felt afraid.

People would talk if they saw her near him too often. People have already talked. She knew it. She heard it in the hallway after last Sunday's service. Mrs. Darnell's voice carried farther than she

thought. Hannah heard her name and Eli's name close together. Hannah walked the other way and pretended she did not hear.

Hannah hated pretending.

She hated the way gossip made her second-guess ordinary kindness. She hated the way it made her watch her own face, her own tone, her own steps.

She whispered, "Lord, I do not want to live for people."

Her hands loosened. Her shoulders dropped a fraction.

She waited again.

The door at the back of the sanctuary opened.

The sound cut through her.

She stiffened. Her heart kicked.

She did not turn at once. She stayed kneeling, as if movement would make her guilty of something. She listened. She heard the door close softly. She heard footsteps on the carpet, slow and careful.

She knew the rhythm.

Eli did not stomp. He did not drag his feet. He walked like someone who learned long ago to enter a room without taking over.

Hannah kept her head bowed. Her pulse stayed high.

The footsteps stopped a few pews behind her. Silence returned, but it felt different now. It held another person's breath.

She heard him inhale. She heard him let it out.

She did not speak. She did not know what to say. She did not want to seem needy. She did not want to act as she expected him.

He spoke first, low.

“I saw the lights on.”

Her throat tightened again. She cleared her throat. “I did not mean to stay long.”

“You do not need to explain.”

Hannah closed her eyes. Those words landed gently. They did not push. They did not press her for details.

She felt tears threaten again. She hated it. She hated how close she was to breaking.

She whispered, “I feel like I am failing.”

She heard him move. He walked closer, but he did not step into her space. He stopped near the front pew. He did not sit. He stood for a beat, as if he were deciding what would honor her.

Then she heard him kneel.

The soft sound of his knees on the cushion beside her shocked her more than the door did. She glanced sideways before she stopped herself.

Eli knelt at the altar rail a short distance away. He kept his head bowed. He folded his hands. He did not look at her.

He did not ask if she wanted him there.

He joined her as if prayer was the most normal thing in the world.

Her chest loosened in a small, painful way.

Hannah stared at the worn fabric again. She thought of all the people who came here over the years. People with addictions. People with

grief. People with marriages hanging by a thread. People who hid sin behind smiles until it broke them open.

She thought of her mother kneeling here once, after the doctor's appointment. Hannah was thirteen. She did not know what the appointment meant. She only knew her mother's hand shook as she reached for Hannah's father in the hallway. Later, Hannah saw them here, side by side, heads bowed.

They did not tell Hannah what they prayed. Hannah knew they prayed for strength.

Hannah swallowed.

Eli stayed quiet.

Hannah whispered, "I do not know how to lead them through this."

His voice stayed low. "You do not have to lead alone."

Hannah wanted to argue. She wanted to say she did. She wanted to say she was the pastor's daughter, and her father carried enough. She wanted to say Eli was a hired professional and should stay in his lane. She wanted to say she should not lean on him because it would blur lines.

She did not say any of it.

She whispered, "I hate the thought of telling people the truth and watching them turn on each other."

Eli breathed out slowly. "The truth will sting. Lies rot longer."

Her eyes closed tighter. The words fit the moment too well. She pictured rot spreading under boards no one checked for years. She pictured the hidden damage. She pictured how easy it was to assume the floor was sound because it looked fine.

Hannah whispered, “I keep thinking it will be my fault.”

Eli shifted a little, but he did not face her. He kept his head bowed. “It will not be your fault. It will be your work to face it.”

That landed in her like a nail set straight. Not as punishment. As a structure. As a clean line.

Hannah breathed.

She whispered, “I do not want to disappoint my father.”

Eli stayed quiet for a moment. Then he said, “He loves you. He will not measure you by how fast you fix this.”

Her eyes burned again.

Hannah wanted to tell Eli that he did not know her father as she did. She wanted to say her father measured himself by how well he shepherded, and she absorbed that. She wanted to say her father would act calm, but she would see the strain in his eyes.

She also knew Eli spoke from what he saw. Her father spoke of her with pride even when he corrected her. Her father looked at her from the pulpit when he preached, as if he wanted her to hear the word in a personal way.

Hannah swallowed.

She whispered, “I miss my mother.”

The words fell out. She did not plan them. She felt exposed. She braced for awkward silence.

Eli answered without haste. “Tell me about her.”

Hannah blinked. She stared at the cross again.

She spoke softly. “She kept our home steady. She prayed without making it a performance. She listened before she spoke. She brought food to people without asking if they deserved it. She did not talk about faith as if it were a topic. She lived like God watched and cared.”

Eli stayed still. Hannah heard him breathe.

She added, “She told me obedience looks plain. Tell the truth. Do the hard thing. Keep your heart clean.”

Eli’s voice came quieter. “She sounds wise.”

“She was.” Hannah gripped her hands again. “I want to be like her. I want to carry faith the way she did. I do not want fear to run me.”

Eli nodded once. Hannah saw it from the corner of her eye. He did not lift his head.

Hannah whispered, “I came in here to pray because I did not know what else to do.”

Eli said, “You did the right thing.”

She let the words settle.

Hannah shifted her knees because the cushion pressed into the bone. The small pain grounded her. It kept her present.

She whispered, “Do you ever get tired of doing the right thing?”

Eli’s breath caught. He let it out. “Yes.”

The single word held more than a speech. It held years.

Hannah glanced at him again. His face stayed downturned. His hands stayed folded. His shoulders looked solid, but she sensed the wear under the strength.

Hannah whispered, “What do you do?”

He paused. “I ask God to keep me honest. I ask Him to keep me from running. I ask Him to help me make amends when I fail.”

Her mind flashed to his confession again. Forgive me. Help me stay.

Hannah whispered, “You are staying.”

He nodded again. “I am here.”

The words did not sound like a flirtation. They sounded like a vow offered in plain clothes.

Her chest tightened in a new way. It felt like hope and fear at once.

Hannah looked at the sanctuary again. She pictured this room full on Sunday. She pictured her father at the pulpit. She pictured people raising their voices in worship. She pictured kids fidgeting in the pews. She pictured older men coughing. She pictured teenagers whispering. She pictured the whole messy family of God.

Hannah whispered, “This church raised me.”

Eli said, “Tell me.”

Hannah spoke before she lost courage. “I learned to read in the nursery corner with those picture Bibles. I learned to sing in the front row at Vacation Bible School, loud and off-key. I learned to pray out loud in youth group, and my voice shook. I learned what confession means because I heard adults do it in small groups. I learned what forgiveness looks like because people forgave each other and stayed in the same pews.”

She swallowed. “I learned what love looks like here.”

Eli stayed quiet, listening as each word mattered.

Hannah added, “I also learned people fail. People leave. People hurt each other. I learned the church is not safe because people are good. It is safe because God is good.”

Her throat hurt.

Hannah whispered, “And now I look at this building, and I feel like the same thing is happening. The surface looked fine. The inside was damaged. It scares me.”

Eli spoke slowly. “Damage does not mean the end. It means you name it. Then you repair it.”

Hannah let out a shaky breath.

He added, “You name it in the light. Rot hates light.”

Hannah closed her eyes. She pressed her hands together tighter.

She whispered, “Will you pray with me?”

Eli answered at once. “Yes.”

The word landed steadily.

Hannah took a breath. She started because she asked.

“Lord,” she said, “You know I feel weak. I feel small. I feel like I cannot carry this. I feel discouraged. I feel ashamed of my discouragement.”

She paused. She forced herself to speak clearly. “I confess I want comfort more than I want obedience. I confess I want people to approve of me. I confess I fear their anger.”

She breathed. “Forgive me. Clean my motives.”

She stopped for a moment. Then she said, “Thank you for this church. Thank You for the people who taught me Your word when

I was a child. Thank you to my mother. Thank You for the way she pointed me to You without noise.”

Her voice broke. She pushed through. “I miss her. I ask you to meet me in the place she left empty.”

She breathed again. “We found rot under our floor. You saw it long before we did. Give us wisdom. Give us unity. Give us provisions. Keep us from pride. Keep us from blaming. Keep us from gossip.”

She paused.

She added, “Help my father. Give him strength. Give him rest. Guard his heart from discouragement.”

She swallowed. “Help Eli. Protect him from shame. Help him work with integrity. Help him lead with humility.”

She stopped. She sat in the quiet of her own prayer, like she had set a heavy box down.

Eli began.

“Father,” he said, voice low and steady, “thank You for Hannah. Thank you for her love for this church. Thank you for her honesty tonight.”

Hannah held her breath. No one prayed over her like this in a long time. People thanked God for her help, for her service, for her smile. Few people thanked God for her.

Eli continued, “You see her fear. You see her grief. You see her burden. Lift what she cannot carry.”

He paused. “Give her strength to speak truth with kindness. Give her wisdom in each conversation. Put guards on her words and on her reactions.”

He breathed. “Give Pastor Mark courage. Give the deacons humility. Give the congregation patience.”

His voice tightened a touch. “Give me clean hands. Give me clean motives. Keep me from pride. Keep me from trying to earn worth through work.”

Hannah felt the confession in his words. He prayed like a man who knew his own weak places.

He added, “Provide what we need. If you want this building to stand for another generation, show us the path. If you want a new way forward, show us the path. Either way, build Your church in us.”

Silence followed.

Hannah kept her head bowed. She let the words sink in.

A warmth spread in her chest. It did not erase the problem. It did not solve the budget. It did not remove the fear of conflict. It steadied her.

Hannah whispered, “Amen.”

Eli echoed it. “Amen.”

Hannah stayed kneeling a moment longer. She did not want to break the quiet too fast. She did not want to stand and return to her normal voice and normal problems as if this moment had not happened.

Eli shifted first. He rose slowly. Hannah followed a beat later. Her knees ached as she stood. She gripped the rail for balance.

She faced forward toward the cross.

Eli stood beside her, still angled toward the front, not toward her. He gave her space. He did not crowd her. She respected him for it.

Hannah rubbed her hands together once, small and nervous.

She spoke softly. "Thank you for coming."

Eli nodded. "I did not want you here alone."

Her heart jumped. She looked at him before she stopped herself.

His eyes met hers. His gaze held steady. No flirtation. No pressure. Only care.

He added, "I will leave if you want."

Hannah shook her head. "No. I do not want you to leave."

The words hung between them. She felt their weight. She felt their meaning reach farther than the moment.

Eli blinked once. His jaw tightened, then relaxed. He looked down, then back up. He kept his voice even. "All right."

Hannah turned and walked a few steps from the rail. She looked at the pew where she sat with her mother so many years ago. She pictured her hands smoothing Hannah's skirt. She pictured her whispering, Sit still. Listen. God speaks through His word.

She thought of her telling Hannah to do the next right thing.

The next right thing felt clearer now.

Hannah turned back to Eli. "Tomorrow I will tell my father what I feel. Not only the facts. I will tell him I am scared. I will tell him I need his guidance. I will not hide it to look strong."

Eli nodded. "Good."

Hannah continued, her voice firmer. "Then we will tell the finance committee the truth. We will show them the pictures. We will explain the risk. We will ask for prayer before we ask for money."

Eli said, “Yes.”

Hannah breathed. “Then we will make a plan for the congregation. Clear. Simple. No vague language. No panic.”

Eli’s eyes stayed on her. “I will write up the repair options tonight. Three levels. Minimal, full, and long-term. I will list costs and time. I will list safety concerns. I will keep it plain.”

Gratitude pushed up in her. Hannah nodded. “Thank you.”

He paused. “Hannah.”

She stilled.

He spoke with care. “When people talk, you do not have to answer every whisper. You answer what matters. You answer with truth when it affects the work.”

Her face warmed. He named what she feared without saying gossip out loud.

Hannah breathed out. “I know.”

Eli added, “If anyone questions why I am here, I will answer. I will take my share. I will not let it land on you.”

Her chest tightened again. She held his gaze.

“You will do that?” she asked, “even if it costs you?”

Eli nodded once. “Yes.”

She believed him.

The thought did not make life easier. It made her feel less alone.

Hannah glanced toward the dark windows. Night pressed against the glass. It felt long, but it would end. Morning would come.

She looked back at the cross. She remembered her mother's voice again, calm and firm. Obedience looks plain.

Hannah whispered, "I will keep going."

Eli did not answer with a speech. He only said, "I will be here in the morning."

Hannah nodded. Her eyes stung again, but she kept her voice steady. "I will be here too."

Hannah turned toward the aisle. They walked together toward the back, steps quiet on the carpet. The sanctuary stayed the same, worn and familiar, but she felt different inside it. She felt braced.

At the doors, Hannah reached for the light switch. Her hand paused. She looked back one more time at the front, at the rail, at the cross.

She spoke low, more to God than to Eli. "Unless you build this house."

Eli answered, voice even. "We labor in vain."

Hannah flipped the switch. The lights went out. Darkness filled the sanctuary, but it did not feel like defeat. It felt like a rest before work.

Hannah stepped into the hallway with Eli beside her, and her discouragement did not vanish, but it no longer ran the night. She carried renewed determination like a steady tool in her hand, ready for the next right thing.

Chapter 10

Public Redemption

Hannah arrived early at the fellowship hall. She did not wear her Sunday dress. She wore jeans, boots, and a sweater, which she did not mind getting dusty. She carried a stack of handouts and a roll of blue painter tape.

The hall smelled like coffee and old wood. Folding tables lined the room. A whiteboard leaned against the wall near the kitchen door. Someone had already set out paper plates and a tray of muffins.

Eli stood near the window with a clipboard. He wore a clean work shirt and dark pants. He looked rested, but Hannah saw focus in his face. He looked like a man ready to take a hit and keep standing.

He met her eyes and gave one small nod. She nodded back. She set her handouts on the first table and started taping signs to the wall. One said DONATIONS. One said VOLUNTEER SIGN UP. One said BAKE SALE. One said RAFFLE.

She kept the words large and plain.

Her father walked in with a carton of coffee cups. Pastor Mark looked tired, but he moved with purpose. He gave Hannah a quick smile and set the cups near the urn.

“You slept?” he asked her.

“A little,” she said.

He looked at Eli for a moment, then back at Hannah. “Good. We will need clear minds.”

Hannah kept taping signs. She felt her pulse in her throat. She expected trouble. She did not know from where, but she expected it.

People started arriving in small groups. Boots scraped on the floor. Chairs scraped. Voices filled the room with the careful cheer people use when strain sits under the surface.

Mrs. Danner from the prayer chain hugged Hannah and pressed her arm. “We prayed at five this morning,” she told her. “We named each beam. I wrote the names down.”

Hannah swallowed. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Danner looked toward Eli. Her face softened. “I am glad he is here.”

Hannah did not answer. She did not need to.

Mr. Choi from the hardware store arrived with his wife. He carried a shoebox. He set it on the donation table and patted the lid as if it were an offering on an altar. “Gift cards,” he said. “Nails, screws, whatever you need.”

Eli stepped forward. “Thank you. I will keep a list. I will use them well.”

Mr. Choi nodded once. He looked at Eli longer than Hannah expected, then looked down as if he felt something shift in his chest.

Hannah kept moving. She greeted people. She passed out the handouts Eli printed late last night. The paper felt warm from the copier, like it still held the effort of it.

Hannah glanced at the handout. Three columns. Minimal, Full, Long Term. Costs in bold numbers. Safety concerns. Time estimates, a clear note at the bottom. No one worked alone. No one entered the sanctuary without a hard hat; no children inside the construction zone.

Hannah felt relief at the clarity. She also felt fear. Clear numbers gave people something to reject.

At six thirty, her father clapped his hands once and called the meeting to order. The chatter quieted. People took seats in rows facing the front table. Eli stood to one side near the whiteboard. Hannah sat at the front with her father, beside the church secretary, Mrs. Lyle, who had her laptop open and ready.

Pastor Mark opened in prayer. His voice stayed calm.

“Lord, You see what we see and what we do not. Give us wisdom. Keep us humble. Keep us honest. Guard our mouths. Guard our hearts. Build this house. In Jesus' name, amen.”

“Amen,” the room answered.

Hannah looked around. Men and women from all corners of Maple Ridge sat together. Farmers, teachers, retirees, young couples with babies at home, widows with careful eyes, and teenagers in hoodies who sat close to the back.

She spotted Caleb in the third row. He looked at Eli and then down at his hands. Hannah wondered what he remembered. She wondered what he told his friends about those years.

Her father began with updates. He talked about the inspection, the damage, and the immediate safety steps. He kept his tone practical. He did not plead. He did not dramatize. He told the truth.

Then he nodded toward Eli. “Eli Brooks has given us a clear plan. He will walk us through it.”

Eli stepped forward. He set his clipboard on the table. He faced the room. He did not fidget. He spoke with a steady cadence, like he had done this in rooms with harder people than these.

“Thank you for coming. I will keep this clear. The sanctuary roof needs bracing. The north wall needs repair. The old beams in the attic need reinforcement. Some of them need replacement.”

He pointed to the whiteboard where he had drawn a simple diagram. He used plain words. He did not try to impress anyone.

Hannah watched faces as he spoke. Some people leaned in. Some sat back with crossed arms. Some nodded. Some whispered to the person beside them.

Eli laid out the three options. He did not hide the cost. He did not soften it.

“You need to decide as a church,” he said. “I will advise. I will not pressure.”

He explained volunteer roles. “We need skilled labor. We also need to clean up. We need meal trains for crews. We need someone to track donations. We need someone to coordinate supplies. We need people to pray. Prayer is work.”

A few heads lifted at those words. Hannah felt her throat tighten again.

Eli finished. He took a breath. “Questions,” he said.

Hands went up.

Mrs. Lyle asked about permits. Eli answered.

Mr. Choi asked about materials. Eli answered.

A younger man asked if the minimal option would hold through winter. Eli answered with specifics. He did not shame the question.

Then a hand rose near the front. Slow. Deliberate.

Hannah saw who it was before her father did. Elder Grant Holloway. White hair combed back, crisp button-down shirt. A man people called faithful, a man whose approval carried weight in this room.

He did not look angry. He looked controlled. That made it worse.

Pastor Mark nodded. “Grant.”

Elder Holloway stood. He did not hold papers. He spoke from memory, having waited for this moment.

“I appreciate the work,” he said. “I appreciate the plan. I appreciate the effort.”

He paused. His eyes moved to Eli.

“But I have concerns about leadership. About who we place in authority over the Lord's house.”

The room shifted. A chair creaked. Someone coughed.

Eli did not move. Hannah saw his jaw set, but he stayed quiet.

Elder Holloway kept going. “Some of us remember Eli Brooks as a boy. He attended a youth group. He sat in the back. He mocked. He disrupted. He led other boys into trouble. He broke trust.”

Hannah's stomach dropped. Heat rose in her face. She looked at her father. His eyes narrowed, but he stayed still. She saw him weigh his role as pastor, as peacemaker, as a father.

Elder Holloway lifted his chin a fraction. “We all know how he left. He did not leave with honor. He left with damage behind him. I do not say this to attack him. I say it because trust matters. Stewardship matters. If we hand this project to someone with a record of rebellion, what message do we send? What risk do we take?”

Silence settled hard.

Hannah heard her own breathing. She hated the way shame tried to stick to Eli, as it belonged to him now. She hated the way the room felt like a courtroom.

Eli looked down for a moment. Hannah thought he would speak fast. She thought he would defend himself. She thought he would name facts and refute them.

He did not.

He lifted his gaze and met Elder Holloway's eyes. He nodded once.

“Thank you for saying it out loud,” Eli said.

Hannah's heart jolted. The calm in his voice felt like a hand on a trembling table.

He turned slightly so he could face the whole room.

“I do not want whispers,” he continued. “If you have concerns, bring them here.”

He breathed in and out. Hannah saw his chest rise and fall slowly, in a controlled way.

“I will answer,” he said. “With truth.”

He stepped away from the table. He stood in the open space in front of the first row. No podium. No notes.

Hannah sat frozen. Her hands pressed together under the table until her fingers ached.

Eli spoke again. “You remember me as a teenager. You are right to remember what I did. I remember it too.”

A few people shifted. Someone in the back leaned forward.

Eli kept his eyes moving, steady. Like he wanted each person to know he saw them.

“When I was fifteen, I did not want God,” he said. “I wanted control. I wanted attention. I wanted to feel strong. I thought I was strong when I acted like I did not care.”

Hannah's eyes stung. She blinked hard. She did not want tears in front of this room. She did not want to make this about her.

Eli continued. “I made jokes in the youth group. I talked to the leaders. I dared other boys to do stupid things. I lied to my parents. I stole small things and laughed about it. I thought it made me bold. It made me empty.”

He paused. He swallowed.

“I remember one Wednesday night,” he said. “I showed up late. I had been drinking. I acted like it was funny. I tried to get other kids to follow me out the side door. I wanted to ruin the lesson because I hated the quiet in the room. Quiet made me feel my own mess.”

Hannah glanced at the teenagers in the back. A few stared at him like they did not expect this kind of truth from an adult.

Eli looked down for a second. “I also remember who tried to help me,” he said. “I remember Pastor Mark in the hallway. I remember he did not yell. He asked me why I kept trying to break things. I told him I did not care. I lied. I cared. I cared too much. I did not know what to do with guilt.”

Her father looked down at the table. His eyes shone. He blinked once and kept his face calm.

Eli lifted his gaze. “I made bigger mistakes later,” he said. “I will name them without details that do not help. I skipped school. I got

into fights. I drove drunk once. I am ashamed of it. I could have killed someone.”

A sharp breath sounded from somewhere in the room.

Eli did not flinch. “I broke my mother's heart. I broke my father's trust. I broke my own conscience until I could not hear it.”

He took a slow breath. “Then I left Maple Ridge,” he said. “I told myself I needed freedom. I told myself the town suffocated me. The truth is, I ran from the people who loved me. I ran from the church because I did not want anyone to see the rot inside me.”

Something in Hannah softened. He named it rot. He did not dress it up.

Eli continued. “When I left, I did not step into a better life. I stepped into more of what I already was. I chased money. I chased praise. I chased a life where no one asked questions.”

He glanced toward the door, then back to the room. “I learned construction fast,” he said. “I had a gift for seeing structure. I thought my gift would save me. It did not. A gift without character does not hold.”

Hannah heard a soft murmur, agreement, or surprise.

Eli steadied his voice. “I worked under a man who taught me a lot,” he said. “He also taught me how to cut corners. He called it efficiency. He called it wisdom. It was greed.”

Hannah tensed. She thought of the church roof. She thought of corners cut in the past.

Eli did not accuse anyone in Maple Ridge. He kept his story his own.

“I started doing the same,” he said. “I stopped checking my own work the way I should. I did things fast. I signed off on things I did

not walk through twice. I told myself no one would get hurt. I told myself I knew better than the rules.”

He paused longer. The room held its breath.

“Then a job failed inspection,” Eli said. “Not here. In another town. The inspector shut the site down. My boss blamed me. I blamed him. We both blamed the city. We both blamed the rules.”

He looked at his hands. He flexed his fingers once. “A week later, a storm hit,” he said. “Wind and rain. A framed wall on that site went down. No one died. A worker got hurt. A broken leg. A head injury. He lived. He also lost months of work.”

A low sound came from someone near the back, a quiet, pained sound.

Eli nodded as if he heard it. “I visited him in the hospital,” he said. “He did not yell. He did not curse me. He asked me one question. He said, Eli, how do you sleep at night?”

Eli lifted his head. His eyes looked wet, but he kept his voice steady.

“I did not sleep,” he said. “I went back to my apartment and sat on the floor. I stared at the wall. I felt like I had finally reached the end of my own excuses.”

He pressed his lips together. He breathed in. “I had not opened a Bible in years,” he said. “I kept one in a box because my mother wrote my name in it when I was twelve. I dug it out because I did not know what else to do.”

Hannah's throat tightened. She pictured him alone with a Bible in a box, the kind of box people carried from place to place when they did not want roots.

Eli looked across the room. “I opened it to Psalms,” he said. “I do not remember why. I read words about the Lord as a refuge. I laughed at first. I said out loud, I do not deserve refuge. I do not deserve help.”

His voice grew quiet. “Then I kept reading,” he said. “I read, The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.”

Old language landed in the room like a weight and a balm.

Eli continued. “I sat on the floor and said, God, I have nothing left to prove. I have nothing left to pretend. I have sinned against You and against people. If you want me, you can have me. If you do not, I understand.”

Silence deepened. Even the coffee machine seemed to stop.

Eli swallowed. “I expected lightning,” he said. “I expected shame to crush me. I expected nothing to change. I expected God to turn away.”

He shook his head once. “He did not,” he said. “He met me in my mess. He showed me my sin without crushing me. He showed me, Jesus. He showed me a Savior who took guilt I could not carry.”

Hannah's tears spilled. She did not wipe them fast enough. She kept her eyes on him.

Eli spoke on. “I confessed,” he said. “I called my parents. I did not ask for money. I did not ask for rescue. I asked for forgiveness. I told them I was wrong. I told them I was sorry.”

He breathed in. “I also called Pastor Mark,” he said.

Her father lifted his head. The room turned slightly, and people looked at him. He did not speak. He only nodded once, his mouth pressed tight.

Eli continued. “I told him I had been a fool,” he said. “I told him I did not know how to come home. He told me to come home by repentance. He told me I come home by truth. He told me to come home by taking the next right step.”

Hannah's chest expanded, next right step. Eli had said those words to her without saying where he learned them.

Eli looked at Elder Holloway again. His gaze held respect. No challenge. No bitterness.

“You asked if I am trustworthy,” Eli said. “You should ask. You should test leaders. Scripture tells you to test fruit.”

He turned back to the room. “Here is my fruit,” he said. “I left a job where cutting corners felt normal. I made restitution where I could. I took on smaller work for a while. I worked under a man who required me to do it right, even when it cost more. I learned to say no. I learned to slow down. I learned to admit when I did not know something.”

He paused. “I also joined a church,” he said. “Not for image. I sat in the back like I used to, but for a different reason. I sat there because I needed the Word. I needed men to hold me accountable.”

He lifted his chin. “I stayed clean,” he said. “I stayed honest. I stayed under oversight. I did not do it by my strength. I did it because the Lord kept pulling me back when my pride rose.”

Hannah watched faces. Mrs. Danner dabbed her eyes with a tissue. Mr. Choi looked down and shook his head slowly, like he could not believe he had almost judged this man without knowing him.

Eli continued. “I came back to Maple Ridge because my father got sick,” he said. “I came back for family. I also came back because God does not waste places. He does not waste people. I knew I had unfinished obedience here.”

Hannah inhaled. Finished obedience. Her mother used to say, Do not fear unfinished work. Fear unfinished obedience.

Eli spoke more softly. “I do not stand here as a man who earned a second chance,” he said. “I stand here as a man who received mercy. I do not ask you to trust me because I speak well. I ask you to watch my work. I ask you to ask questions. I ask you to hold me to the standard you should hold any leader.”

He looked toward the whiteboard. “This building matters,” he said. “It holds baptisms. It holds funerals. It holds weddings. It holds children learning Scripture. It holds prayers people whisper when they feel alone.”

His eyes came back to the room. “I will not dishonor it,” he said. “I will not dishonor the Lord's name. If you decide you do not want me in charge, I will step back with no fight. I will still give you my plan. I will still help if you let me. I will not poison the work with pride.”

He stopped speaking. He stood there and waited.

The room stayed silent for a long moment. Hannah heard someone inhale and exhale slowly. A baby fussed in a back row, and a mother bounced gently.

Her father did not rush to fill the space. He let the words settle.

Elder Holloway remained standing. He looked at Eli with a face Hannah had never seen on him. Not stern. Not smug. He looked uncertain, like a man who expected a battle and got confession.

He cleared his throat. “Eli,” he said, voice lower, less polished. “I did not know all of this.”

Eli nodded once. “I did not share it,” he said. “I hid for a long time.”

Elder Holloway shifted his weight. “I still believe in guarding the church,” he said.

“You should,” Eli answered.

Elder Holloway looked down, then up. “I also believe in forgiveness,” he said, but his voice caught on the word.

A few people murmured assent. One woman said, “Amen,” under her breath.

Elder Holloway turned slightly toward the room. “I spoke from memory,” he said. “Memory stays loud. It shapes judgment. I see I brought old sin into a new room.”

He looked at Eli again. “I do not retract what you did,” he said. “I retract my right to hold it over you as a weapon.”

Hannah's breath caught. Something in the room broke open, like a knot loosening.

Elder Holloway continued. “If Pastor Mark and this board believe you have repented, I will not stand in the way,” he said. “I will watch your work. I will ask questions. I will also pray for you.”

Eli nodded. “Thank you,” he said. “I accept that.”

Elder Holloway sat down. He did it slowly, as the act cost him. Hannah respected him for paying the cost.

The silence broke in small pieces.

Mrs. Danner stood without waiting to be called on. "I want to say something," she said.

Pastor Mark nodded.

She wiped her cheeks. "We prayed for years for a young man to come home," she said. "We prayed by name. We prayed for Eli. I prayed for him when my husband was still alive. I prayed for him after my husband died. I prayed when I thought it was a waste of breath. I hear him today, and I know the Lord heard."

A tremor ran through Hannah's chest. She thought of all the prayers said in kitchens and cars, in quiet mornings, in long nights.

Mrs. Danner pointed a finger toward the ceiling, not accusing, but declaring. "This is the Lord's work," she said. "Not ours. We do not get to act as if we saved ourselves."

"Amen," someone said. Then another. The word spread softly across the room.

A man in the second row stood. Hannah recognized him as Mr. Brenner, a retired electrician who rarely spoke in meetings. "I judged him," he said bluntly. "I heard stories. I repeated them. I did not ask Eli a single question. I feel convicted. I am sorry."

He turned his head toward Eli. "I am sorry," he said again.

Eli nodded. "Thank you," he said. "I forgive you."

A younger woman stood. She clutched her purse strap. "My brother left town after he messed up," she said. "We never saw him again. I thought, People do not come back. I thought, People do not change. Hearing this makes me want to pray for my brother again."

Hannah swallowed hard. She sensed God stirring hope in places she did not know were closed.

Not everyone softened.

In the back, Nate Caldwell sat with arms crossed. He did not move. His jaw stayed tight. He looked at Eli like he wanted to believe, but refused to risk it. Beside him, a man Hannah did not know whispered in his ear. Nate Caldwell shook his head once.

Hannah noticed. Anger flared for half a second. Then she remembered what Eli said. Watch the fruit. Ask questions. Do not demand instant trust.

Her father cleared his throat. “Thank you,” he said to the room. “Now we return to the work.”

He looked at Eli. “Eli Brooks,” he said, voice firm, “I asked you to lead this project because I have watched you for months. I have seen your choices when no one claps. I have seen you take correction. I have seen you show patience. I have seen you serve my family with respect.”

Hannah's cheeks warmed. She kept her eyes down for a moment.

Pastor Mark continued. “I also know our church needs clear oversight,” he said. “Eli will lead the plan. The board will oversee finances. We will run this with transparency. Every dollar will be tracked. Every receipt will be filed. Every decision will be recorded.”

Mrs. Lyle typed fast. Her keys clicked like a steady drum.

Her father looked at the room. “If you have concerns, bring them to me,” he said. “Do not turn them into side talk. Side talk kills unity.”

A few people nodded. A few looked away.

Pastor Mark gestured to the sign-up sheets. “Now,” he said, “we need hands. We need hearts. We need prayer. We need courage.”

Eli stepped back to the table and picked up the clipboard. “I will start with crews,” he said. “Skilled labor first. If you have experience with framing, roofing, masonry, electrical, plumbing, or insulation, meet me at the whiteboard after this. If you do not, we still need you.”

He looked around. “We need food,” he said. “We need child care during workdays. We need someone to haul debris. We need someone to call suppliers. We need someone to post updates.”

A few people stood right away. The movement started small, then grew.

Mr. Choi walked to the donation table and opened his wallet. He pulled out a checkbook. His wife did the same. They did not speak. They wrote.

Mrs. Danner moved to the volunteer sheet. She wrote her name under PRAYER COORDINATOR. Then she wrote three more names, people she would call before lunch.

Caleb rose from his seat and walked toward Eli. He stopped in front of him like a boy again, unsure where to put his hands.

Eli looked at him. “Hey,” he said.

Caleb cleared his throat. “I was one of the boys,” he said. “I followed you sometimes. I thought it was funny.”

Eli nodded. “I know.”

Caleb swallowed. “I blamed you for stuff I chose,” he said. “I also missed you when you left. I did not say it then.”

Eli's voice stayed even. “Thank you for saying it now.”

Caleb glanced toward the whiteboard. “I work with my uncle's crew now,” he said. “I can do a demo. I can haul. I can show up.”

Eli tapped the clipboard with his pen. “Write your name,” he said. “I will put you on Saturday.”

Caleb nodded and wrote. He did it with a careful hand, as if the act meant more than a task.

Hannah sat and watched. Something inside her shifted, slow and deep, like a foundation settling into a stronger line.

She had known Eli as a competent man. She had known him as a steady planner. She had known him as someone who listened to her father with respect. She had also held a guarded place inside her, the place where old stories echoed. The place where fear asked, What if he runs again? What if he breaks again? What if she trusts and loses?

That place grew quiet.

Hannah looked at Eli as he spoke to an older man about tools. She saw his patience. She saw his clear eyes. She saw how he did not perform humility; he lived it.

She realized she had watched him carry weight for weeks without asking for praise. She had watched him step into a town that remembered his worst and still kept his head level. She had watched him offer to answer whispers so they did not land on her.

She thought of him last night in the dark sanctuary. I will be here in the morning. He did not say it to sound noble. He said it as a fact.

Her chest warmed with something close to admiration. Not the kind that made her dizzy. The kind that made her steady.

Her father stood beside her and spoke low. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Hannah nodded. “Yes,” she said, then she paused. She chose honesty. “I think I trust him.”

Her father watched Eli for a moment. “You should,” he said. “Trust does not mean blindness. Trust means you see fruit and you name it.”

Hannah breathed out. “I saw it.”

Her father nodded and stepped away to greet a couple near the kitchen.

Hannah stood and moved toward the donation table. Mrs. Lyle looked up from her laptop. “We need a second person to record gifts,” she said.

“I will do it,” Hannah said.

Mrs. Lyle slid a ledger toward her. “Write the name, amount, and what it is for,” she said. “If it is cash, mark cash. If it is a gift card, mark the store.”

Hannah picked up a pen. Her hand steadied as she wrote.

Donations came in waves.

An envelope from a widow with three twenties and a note. For the roof. For the children. For the Lord.

A check from the feed store owner for five hundred. He cleared his throat and said, “I had it set aside for a new freezer. This matters more.”

A jar of coins from a young mother. “It is our spare change,” she said. “My kids wanted to bring it.”

Hannah smiled at her children, two little boys who looked proud. She wrote their family name and the amount. She told them thank you and meant it.

A retired couple offered to cover meals for crews for two weeks. Hannah wrote it down.

A man offered to use his trailer to haul debris. Hannah wrote it down.

Then Elder Holloway approached the table. Hannah's pulse bumped. She kept her face calm. She did not know what he would do.

He held a check. He set it down in front of Hannah without flourish.

“For the full option,” he said.

Hannah glanced at the amount and swallowed. It was large. Larger than she expected from anyone this soon.

She looked up at him. “Thank you,” she said.

He nodded once. His eyes flicked toward Eli. “I spent years teaching boys Scripture,” he said quietly. “I forgot grace when it mattered.”

Hannah chose her words with care. “You showed grace today,” she said.

He looked down, then back at her. “I hope so,” he said. Then he walked away.

Hannah wrote his name in the ledger. Her hand did not shake.

Across the room, Eli spoke with Mr. Brenner and another man about electrical safety. He pointed to the handout and circled a line item. Mr. Brenner nodded and made a note.

A group formed around the volunteer sheet. People wrote names and numbers. They leaned over each other, shoulder to shoulder. Hannah saw a teenager write his name under CLEAN UP CREW. She saw an older man clap him on the shoulder.

Hannah felt the room change. It no longer held tension like a tight wire. It held purpose.

Her father called for attention again. People returned to their seats, but many remained standing near the sign-up sheets, still talking.

Pastor Mark spoke. "We will hold the fundraiser next Saturday on the church lawn," he said. "Bake sale, chili cook-off, silent auction, raffle. We will also take direct gifts and pledges for the restoration."

Murmurs of agreement.

Mrs. Lyle read out the needs: tables, tents, coolers, extension cords.

Hands went up. Names got written.

Eli stepped forward again. "I will set work days," he said. "This week, we focus on bracing and removing damaged material. We do not rush. Safety comes first."

He looked toward the teenagers. "If you are under sixteen, you do not go inside," he said. "You can still help outside. You can still serve. Ask me where to go."

A few teens nodded. One boy looked relieved, like he wanted to help but feared being in the way.

Eli continued. "I will post daily updates," he said. "I will list what we did and what we need. If you want to see the work, I will walk you through it. This is your church. You deserve to know."

Nate Caldwell, in the back, raised his hand at last. His voice sounded rough. "I still do not like it," he said. "I do not like handing the keys to a man who ran."

The room tensed again, but less than before.

Eli nodded. “I understand,” he said. “What question do you want to ask?”

Nate Caldwell squinted. “What stops you from walking out again when it gets hard?” he asked.

Eli answered without heat. “I do not trust my own strength to stop me,” he said. “I trust the Lord, and I stay under people. I submit. I keep accountability. I tell the truth fast when I mess up.”

He paused. “Also,” he added, “I already stayed when it got hard. I came back to the place where my name brings trouble. I stood here and told you the truth. I did not run.”

Nate Caldwell looked away. He did not nod. He did not argue. He sat back with his arms still crossed, but his jaw loosened a fraction.

Hannah took in a slow breath. She respected Eli more for answering the hard question without trying to win.

The meeting moved into logistics. People volunteered to call local businesses. Someone offered to print flyers. Someone else offered to set up an online giving link.

Hannah wrote more notes in the ledger. Her pen moved faster. Her mind kept up.

Then she noticed a woman near the doorway. Mrs. Pritchard, whose husband left two years ago. She had stayed quiet in church ever since. She stood at the edge like she expected someone to tell her she did not belong.

Hannah walked over. “Hi,” she said. “I am glad you came.”

Mrs. Pritchard looked surprised. “I did not know if I should,” she said.

“You should,” Hannah said. “We need you.”

Mrs. Pritchard held out a small envelope. "It is not much," she said. "I cleaned houses. I saved it."

Hannah took it with both hands. "Thank you," she said.

Mrs. Pritchard's eyes filled. "I heard him," she said, her voice shaking. "I heard Eli. I felt like God spoke to me. I kept thinking I was the woman people whispered about. I kept thinking I ruined my own life."

Hannah chose her words slowly. "You are here," she said. "You came anyway. God meets people who come."

Mrs. Pritchard nodded, tears sliding down. "I want to help," she said. "I do not know what I can do."

"You can help with food," Hannah said. "You can help with the setup. You can help with prayer."

Mrs. Pritchard gave a small laugh through tears. "Prayer I can do," she said.

"Then write your name," Hannah said, and she walked her to the sheet.

When Mrs. Pritchard wrote it, her shoulders lifted as if someone took a weight off her back.

By eight-thirty, the room looked different, the sign-up sheets filled with names. The donation table held envelopes and checks. The whiteboard held a list of crews and dates.

Hannah's father closed the meeting with prayer again. He thanked God for honesty, for mercy, for unity. He asked for protection for every worker. He asked for humility. He asked for a spirit of repentance to keep sweeping through Maple Ridge.

When he said amen, people did not rush out. They stayed. They talked in clusters. They hugged. They laughed in small, relieved bursts. They began to plan in earnest.

Hannah stood by the ledger and tallied the first round of gifts with Mrs. Lyle. Mrs. Lyle shook her head as she added. “This is more than I expected tonight,” she said.

Hannah glanced up and saw Eli speaking with Elder Holloway near the coffee urn. Their heads leaned close. The elder listened. Eli spoke with quiet respect. Then Elder Holloway laid a hand on Eli’s shoulder for a brief moment. He said something Hannah could not hear. Eli nodded once, eyes down, then looked up again.

A sudden, sharp gratitude hit Hannah. She felt it in her ribs.

She stepped away from the table and walked toward Eli. She stopped a few feet away and waited until he finished.

He turned. His eyes met hers. The room noise faded around her for a moment, as her mind narrowed to one point.

“You did well,” Hannah said.

Eli shook his head once. “The Lord did well,” he said.

Hannah nodded. “Yes,” she said, “and you obeyed.”

He studied her. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Hannah answered with full honesty. “I feel like I saw you,” she said. “Not the stories. Not the boy. You.”

His throat worked as he swallowed. “Thank you,” he said.

Hannah held his gaze. She felt no need to perform calmly. She let him see the change in her.

“I trust you,” she told him.

He looked down for a moment, then back up. “I will guard it,” he said. “I will not treat it lightly.”

“I know,” Hannah said.

A pause sat between them. It felt clean. It felt like a promise without drama.

Her father walked up and cleared his throat, gently. “Eli,” he said. “Meet the deacons tomorrow at seven. We will talk about the schedule and security.”

Eli nodded. “Yes, Pastor.”

Her father looked at Hannah. “Hannah, you and Mrs. Lyle will handle funds. Keep it strict.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

Her father stepped away again to speak with a couple near the door.

Eli turned back to Hannah. “I will walk through the sanctuary tomorrow morning,” he said. “I will mark zones with tape. I will post signs.”

“I will come,” Hannah said.

He studied her as if he wanted to argue for her rest. He did not. He respected her resolve.

“Bring gloves,” he said.

“I will,” she answered.

By nine, the fellowship hall emptied. Hannah helped fold chairs. She carried trash bags to the bin. She wiped tables. Eli stacked leftover handouts and clipped them together.

When they finished, Hannah stepped outside into the cool air. Night settled over Maple Ridge. Porch lights glowed on nearby houses. Crickets sang near the ditch.

Eli walked with Hannah to her car. He kept a respectful distance. He did not reach for her hand. He did not try to pull her into a moment. She felt grateful for his restraint. It made her respect grow deeper.

At her car, Hannah stopped. “Thank you,” she said again, because she did not know what else to say.

Eli nodded. “Good night,” he said.

“Good night,” Hannah said.

She drove home with quiet hands on the wheel. She did not replay the elder words. She replayed Eli's voice when he said, I asked for forgiveness. She replayed the room as it shifted from suspicion to movement.

At home, she set the ledger on the kitchen table and covered it with a folder. She washed her hands and stood at the sink for a long moment.

She whispered, “Lord, keep building.”

The next morning came bright and cold. Hannah arrived at the church at seven with gloves in her pocket and her hair tied back. She parked near the side entrance. A new truck sat by the curb. Then another. Then another.

Men stepped out carrying tool belts. Women stepped out with coffee thermoses and coolers. Teenagers jumped off the bed of a pickup truck with rakes and shovels.

Hannah stood still for a beat and watched.

Eli stood near the steps with a hard hat under his arm. He spoke to each person as they arrived. He directed them with simple instructions. He handed out gloves. He pointed to safety signs posted on the doors.

Mrs. Danner stood by a folding table with a clipboard and a list of prayer requests. She greeted people like a commander of mercy. She wrote names beside needs and assigned prayer partners.

Mr. Choi backed his truck up and unloaded boxes of supplies. Mr. Brenner carried a spool of wire and talked with another man about outlets.

Elder Holloway arrived in a brown coat. He carried a thermos and a box of donuts. He set them on the table and nodded at Eli. He did not speak loudly. He did not need to.

Hannah saw Mrs. Pritchard step out of her car, a crockpot held tightly in both hands. She looked nervous. Then Mrs. Lyle waved her over, smiling widely, and Mrs. Pritchard's shoulders dropped as she joined the group.

Hope rose in Hannah like a steady thing. Not a rush. Not a feeling she would lose by noon. A grounded confidence.

Hannah walked toward Eli. He looked up and met her eyes. In them, she saw the same steadiness from last night. She saw humility. She saw strength under control.

She stopped beside him. "People came," she said.

Eli nodded once. "They did," he answered.

Hannah looked at the line of trucks, the tools, the food, the faces. She heard laughter. She heard purpose. She heard the sound of a town choosing to rebuild.

She whispered the words again, not as a plea now, but as a truth she stood on. “Unless you build this house.”

Eli answered without looking away from the work ahead. “We labor in vain.”

Then he turned to the crew, lifted his voice, and called them to the first task. Hannah watched them move, and she felt her own heart move with them. Hope did not float. Hope showed up wearing work boots, and Maple Ridge had started walking forward.

Chapter 11

Almost Too Late

The next morning began with the sharp ring of Hannah's phone alarm and the brief, stubborn temptation to stay under the quilt and pretend yesterday never happened.

She sat up anyway, feet on the floor, and let the quiet of her room settle over her for a moment. The memory of Eli's confession rose with the light, steady and uncomfortable, as truth often was. She prayed before she even stood. She did not know exactly what to ask for, so she asked for clarity. She asked for the kind of wisdom that did not burn down what it touched.

She dressed in work clothes. Jeans. A flannel shirt her father once wore that she kept because the sleeves were the right length. Boots she bought two years ago when the church grounds kept flooding. She moved through her kitchen and made coffee, which she did not taste. She thought about Eli standing at the front of the fellowship hall. She thought about his voice. She thought about the way her father looked at him after he spoke.

She did not know what to do with hope. She was better at organizing things. At tracking lumber orders and balancing the restoration fund. She was less practiced at sitting inside a feeling and letting it settle.

She drove to the church.

The morning was cool, the last traces of dew clinging to the grass as Hannah parked her truck near the old chapel. The structure sat like a relic against the sky, its weathered timbers marked by years of storms and sunlight. This place carried so much history, so many prayers whispered into its walls. She felt a pull toward it every time she saw it, as if it were a magnet and she was made of something that could not resist.

Stepping out of the truck, she took a deep breath of the crisp air and shouldered her worn canvas bag. She expected the restoration site to look much as it did yesterday, scaffolding slightly crooked, piles of materials scattered in organized chaos, but she quickly stopped short. It was not the same.

Several new beams were already in place, perfectly aligned where the old frame had sagged. The scaffolding looked steadier, more intentional. The tools and supplies that had been left strewn about before now sat neatly stacked and ready for use. Someone had worked through the evening, possibly the night, to bring order out of disorder.

Hannah walked closer, her boots crunching against the gravel path. Her thoughts swirled, landing briefly on Eli. It must have been him. She had seen the determination in his eyes yesterday after the congregation extended their tentative grace to him. There had been something restless in him, a drive to prove himself, not only to the others but perhaps to his own heart. Standing before the chapel's frame, she ran her hand softly along the corner of one of the newly placed beams. The craftsmanship felt solid, trustworthy.

For a moment, she took it in. The stillness of the morning wrapped around her, and she felt the faintest flicker of hope. Yet, just as quickly as it came, her practical nature rushed in, reminding her that peace at a construction site was often short-lived.

A sudden groan from above made her look up sharply.

The sound was low and ominous, a deep warning that something was not right. Her eyes scanned the beams and scaffold overhead. One of the temporary supports holding a rotting section of the roof appeared to be bowing, its joints visibly straining.

Her pulse quickened. She dropped her bag and darted toward the ladder leaning against the frame. She climbed swiftly, her hands

gripping the rungs with steady urgency. She could see it more clearly now. One of the beams supporting the old roof was shifting under pressure, threatening to give way entirely. Below it, the ground was scattered with tools and planks. There would be no safe place for the debris to land.

As she reached the top, her mind raced. She needed another set of hands for this. Quickly descending the ladder, she turned toward the parking lot just in time to see Eli approaching from the other side of the chapel. He carried a heavy toolbox in one hand, his shoulders broad and steady despite the weight.

She called out to him and waved him over. He set the toolbox down as he reached her. He asked what was wrong. She explained that the roof support was about to give way. They needed to brace it now, or it would come down.

He did not hesitate. He moved past her and began scanning the site for the right materials. She answered his questions and grabbed what they needed. They moved quickly, a strange rhythm growing between them as they each anticipated what the other might need. Eli positioned a ladder directly beneath the unstable beam while Hannah brought up a level and nails.

She instructed him to hold the beam steady while she secured the brace. He nodded, his hands gripping the support beam with full attention. She worked efficiently, yet she felt the weight of his trust as much as that of the wood in her hands. Each swing of the hammer sent a thunderous echo through the building's skeletal frame.

The beam groaned again, louder this time, protesting the pressure. Eli tightened his grip, his jaw set firmly as he glanced toward her. He told her they were almost there, his voice calm but edged with urgency.

She did not respond, too focused on aligning the brace just so. She drove the first nail into place, then a second, her strikes sure and deliberate.

The moment the brace was fastened securely, the groaning subsided. The tension in the air seemed to release with it. They both stayed still for a moment, hands resting on the frame, listening for any further signs of strain. There was only silence.

Eli exhaled first, then stepped down the ladder and waited until she joined him on the ground. She took a long breath, her hands trembling slightly now that the crisis had passed. She rubbed them together to mask it.

She said that was close. He agreed. Closer than he likes.

They stood side by side, gazing up at the beam they had anchored. The chapel looked the same, but they could both feel that something had shifted, not in the wood and nails, but between them. The air was different now.

After a long pause, she gestured to the progress he had made before she arrived and asked if he had been working through the night. He said he could not sleep. He thought he would be better off spending the time doing something useful.

She glanced over at him, studying his profile for a moment. His words were honest, but also a quiet grit she had not fully noticed before. She found herself softening, though she did not fully trust it yet.

She told him he did a good job. The words were understated, but she meant them.

Eli looked at her then, a flicker of surprise crossing his face before he nodded and thanked her.

They stood there for a few more moments, the morning light stretching further across the site. The chapel felt sturdier somehow, as if it knew it was being cared for. Hannah thought of the passage she read that morning before she left the house, the one about the Lord building the house and the laborers not working in vain. She had not expected to feel it so plainly while standing outside with hammer grime on her hands, but that was often the way it worked. The sacred did not wait for the proper setting.

She folded her arms across her chest and tilted her head toward the pile of materials. She told him they still had a lot to do.

Eli followed her gaze and picked up his toolbox again. He said they had better get to it, his tone touched with the faintest hint of warmth.

They began working side by side, the silence between them no longer heavy but companionable. Time moved differently when the hands were busy, and soon the sun climbed higher above them. The day was long and filled with labor, but as it started to wane, Hannah felt a sense of accomplishment she could not quite name. It was not simply the work that was done. It was something else, smaller and harder to measure.

As they packed up the tools in the fading light, Eli paused and looked toward her again. He thanked her for trusting him up there when it counted.

Hannah hesitated, but then she nodded. She told him he earned it. And she meant that too.

The words lingered between them as they left for the evening, the worksite growing still once more. The chapel stood firm, a little stronger than before. Hannah drove home with the last of the daylight at her back and something unnameable sitting quietly in her chest. She did not examine it yet. She let it be there the way she let

a new morning be there when the alarm sounded, one breath at a time, one step, one nail, one day.

Chapter 12

Choosing to Stay

She woke before her alarm.

Her room sat dark. The house stayed still. Hannah lay on her back and listened. She heard the soft tick of the hallway clock. She heard her own breathing. She did not hear peace.

She rolled toward the nightstand. Her phone rested face down. She did not touch it. She did not want to see an empty screen again.

She sat up and reached for her Bible. It lay open where she left it. The page edges curled a little from her hand last night. She scanned the lines without taking them in. Her mind kept running back to Eli at the side door, to his quiet, I need time, to the way his shoulders tightened when she told him to do what he had to do.

She swung her feet to the floor. The boards felt cold. She knelt beside the bed because she did not know what else to do.

“Lord,” she whispered. “Build what I keep breaking.”

She waited. She breathed. She tried to hand over her fear as she would a heavy box. Her hands stayed empty anyway.

She stood and dressed. Simple jeans. A sweater. Hair pulled back. She looked at her face in the mirror and saw tired eyes. She saw a woman who grew up in the church and still did not know how to trust when it cost her.

Downstairs, the kitchen light clicked on. Her father sat at the table with his Bible open. He looked up as she poured coffee.

“You are up early,” he said.

She nodded. “I could not sleep.”

He watched her for a moment, then looked back at the page. “The building or Eli.”

She froze with the mug halfway to her lips.

Her father kept his tone even. “You do not have to answer.”

She set the mug down. “Both.”

He nodded once, as he expected it. “We will pray again before you go.”

She leaned against the counter. “Dad.”

He looked up.

“I do not want to be the kind of person who holds people here out of fear.” Her voice tightened. “I also do not want to lose him.”

Her father closed his Bible. “Those two statements do not fight each other. Fear and love do. Learn the difference.”

She swallowed. “How?”

“Tell the truth. Ask God to shape it. Then release the outcome.” He stood. “We will ask for wisdom. For Eli. For you. For the church. For the work. For whatever problem waits for us today.”

She exhaled. “Okay.”

He stepped around the table. Hannah bowed her head with him. His hand rested on her shoulder, steady and warm.

He prayed simple words. Hannah held onto them like a railing.

When they finished, she took her mug and sipped. The coffee tasted strong. It did not fix anything. It helped her move.

Her phone buzzed on the counter.

Her heart jumped before she even looked.

It was not Eli.

It was a text from Mark Jensen, the foreman on the church site.

Need you at the church asap. New issue. South side. Bring Pastor.

Hannah stared at the screen until the words blurred.

Her father saw her face. “What is it?”

She turned the phone so he could read.

His jaw tightened. He nodded once. “All right. We go.”

Hannah grabbed her coat. She did not finish her coffee. She left the mug in the sink and followed her father out into the crisp morning.

The sky looked pale. The fields sat quiet. Maple Ridge moved slowly at this hour, as if it did not know there was trouble.

The church came into view. The white steeple rose over the roofline, simple and clean against the sky. From a distance, it looked the same as it did yesterday. Whole. Stable. Fine.

Then Hannah pulled into the lot and saw the cluster of men near the south wall.

Her father parked. Hannah stepped out, and the air smelled like wet soil and old wood.

Mark walked toward them. He held a clipboard. His brow furrowed deep.

“Morning, Pastor. Hannah.”

Her father asked, “Show me.”

Mark led them along the side of the building. The grass here stayed thin from foot traffic and shade. The foundation line ran near the flower beds the ladies tended in spring.

Hannah saw it before Mark spoke.

A new crack cut across the lower portion of the exterior wall near the corner. Fresh. Jagged. It ran from the mortar line into the brick, as if someone had drawn it overnight with a hard hand. The soil near the base looked disturbed, darker than yesterday.

Hannah stepped closer, careful. She ran her fingers along the brick. The edge felt sharp.

Her stomach dropped.

Mark said, “We did not have this yesterday. We tarped the trench. We left the supports. We did everything by plan.”

Her father studied the crack. He crouched and pressed a hand to the soil.

“Water,” he said.

Mark nodded. “We had a hard rain late last night. I did not hear thunder, but the radar showed it rolled through around two.”

Hannah thought of waking before her alarm. Of lying in the dark. Of the clock ticking. Rain could have come then.

Mark pointed. “The soil here shifted. It looks like the drain line is clogged. Water pooled. Pressure pushed. This corner took it.”

One of the crew members spoke from behind Hannah. “If the corner keeps moving, we pause the whole south wall. That pushes the schedule out.”

Her father stood. His face stayed calm, but Hannah saw the weight in his eyes. He glanced along the wall, then toward the open doors where the sanctuary sat beyond.

“How bad?” he asked.

Mark hesitated. “If we do nothing, it gets worse. If we shore it fast, we save it. We need Eli to look. He has the design head. He knows where we have margin and where we do not.”

Hannah’s chest tightened at the sound of Eli’s name.

Her father asked, “Where is he?”

Mark answered, “He was here at five. He saw it. He said he would pull drawings and run numbers. He is inside.”

Hannah blinked. “He was here at five.”

Mark nodded. “He did not sleep much, I think.”

Hannah turned toward the side entrance. Her feet moved before her brain did. She crossed the small concrete pad and pulled the door open.

The air inside smelled like sawdust and paint. Work lights glowed in the hallway. The building sat half-torn open in places, but its bones still felt familiar. Her childhood footsteps echoed in her head.

She heard a sound from the fellowship hall. Paper sliding. A chair scraping.

She stepped toward it.

The fellowship hall held stacks of supplies along one wall. A folding table sat in the center with blueprints spread wide. A desk lamp shone on them like a spotlight. Eli stood bent over the plans, sleeves

rolled up, hair messy, eyes focused. A coffee cup sat near his elbow, untouched. Another cup rested beside it, also untouched.

He looked up when Hannah entered.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

His eyes looked tired. Red around the edges. He held a pencil in one hand. He looked like he had been fighting the building all night.

Hannah said his name quietly. “Eli.”

He nodded once. “Morning.”

Hannah glanced at the drawings. “Mark said you have been here since five.”

“I came earlier,” he said. “I could not sleep.”

Her throat tightened. “Neither could I.”

He looked down at the plans again. He tapped the pencil against a corner detail. “The crack is new. The soil movement explains it. Water pressure. Bad timing.”

Hannah stepped closer to the table. She kept space between them because she did not know what to do with her hands.

“What does it mean?” she asked.

“It means we have to act fast,” he said. “If we delay, we risk more shifting. If we stop the work, the building sits vulnerable longer. If we push forward without stabilizing, we gamble.”

Hannah nodded. “So what is the plan?”

He drew a line with the pencil. “We add a temporary brace and a permanent fix at the same time. A hybrid solution.”

He pointed to the corner. “We install helical piers at the corner footing. We tie them into the grade beam. We do not wait for full excavation on the whole side. We target the problem spot. We add a drainage correction. We redirect water away from the foundation. Then we use a steel angle bracket inside to distribute the load while the mortar cures.”

Hannah stared at the drawing. She understood some of it. Enough to know it sounded complicated. Enough to know it sounded expensive.

“Will it work?” she asked.

“It will,” he said.

Hannah lifted her eyes. “How do you know?”

He met her gaze. “Because I ran the load paths again. I checked the roof truss forces. I checked the wall shear. I checked the floor joists and the tie points. This corner takes a lot, but we have room if we move the support points. We have to shift one support and add another. I called a supplier already. They can deliver piers by noon.”

Hannah blinked. “You called already.”

He nodded. “I did not want to waste time.”

Hannah glanced at the coffee cups. “How long have you been working on this?”

He looked away. “Since last night.”

Her pulse thumped hard. “You stayed here all night.”

He did not answer at first. Then he said, “Yes.”

Hannah swallowed. She pictured him here alone under the hum of work lights, blueprints spread, pencil moving, phone calls made in

the dark. She pictured him carrying the weight of the building while she lay in bed, asking God to build what she could not hold together.

She whispered, “Why?”

Eli set the pencil down. “Because the church needs it stable. Because people gave money and time. Because your father asked me to help, and I told him yes.”

His eyes lifted to hers. “Because you told me not to leave.”

Hannah’s breath caught.

He stepped back from the table and rubbed his hand over his face. “I know I asked for time. I still need to make a decision. But I do not treat this work like a placeholder. I do not treat these people like a temporary stop. I do not treat you like a pause.”

Hannah’s throat tightened more. “Eli.”

He looked at her as if he were bracing for impact. “We can stabilize the corner. We can keep the schedule close. We will have to adjust a few tasks. But we will not lose weeks if we move fast.”

Hannah nodded, trying to keep her voice steady. “Okay. I will tell Dad.”

Eli turned back to the table. “Let me talk to him. I want him to hear it from me.”

Hannah managed a small nod. “All right.”

She turned to leave, then stopped.

She looked back at him. “Thank you.”

He held still. His voice dropped. “You do not have to thank me for doing what is right.”

Hannah left the hall and stepped back outside. The air hit her face. She inhaled deeply, as she needed to.

Her father waited with Mark by the crack.

Eli joined them within a minute. He looked more awake in the daylight, but the tiredness did not leave his eyes.

He spoke with Mark first, crisp and focused. “We address the corner with helical piers. We add drainage correction. We brace inside. We keep moving on the interior work while we handle the exterior fix. We will lose hours, not days, if we coordinate.”

Mark listened, nodding, asking direct questions. Eli answered without hesitation. He gave measurements. He gave the order of operations. He gave the names of suppliers. He spoke like a man who belonged in this work.

Hannah’s father listened too. He watched Eli more than he watched the crack.

When Eli finished, her father said, “What will it cost?”

Eli said a number. Mark winced. Hannah’s stomach dropped again.

Her father did not flinch. He asked, “Do we have any other safe option?”

Eli shook his head. “No.”

Her father nodded once. “Then we do it. I will call the treasurer. We will adjust.”

Mark exhaled. “All right. I will get the crew set.”

He walked off, barking instructions. Men scattered to tasks. Tools shifted. The site woke up.

Hannah's father looked at Eli. "Thank you for coming early."

Eli glanced at the ground. "I stayed."

Her father's eyes softened. "I heard."

Eli nodded. He looked up. "Pastor, I will cover this cost if the church cannot. I have savings."

Hannah's chest tightened. She stepped forward. "Eli, no."

Her father lifted a hand. "Eli. We will handle it. But I hear your heart."

Eli's jaw tightened. "I do not want the church to suffer because I did not draw the water plan tight enough."

Mark called from across the lot, "Eli. We need you."

Eli turned. He looked at Hannah once before he went. His eyes held hers for a beat. There was an apology there. There was effort. There was something else, too. A quiet choice she did not want to name too soon.

He walked toward the crew. Hannah watched him rejoin the work as if he had never left.

Her father stood beside her. He kept his voice low. "He stayed up all night for this."

Hannah nodded. "I know."

"He did not have to," her father said.

Hannah swallowed. "No."

Her father looked at her. "You still went to your meeting this morning?"

Hannah frowned. "Meeting."

He raised his eyebrows. "You were scheduled to meet Mrs. Alder about the luncheon signups."

Hannah blinked. "I forgot."

"I will cover it," her father said. "You go do what you need to do."

Her heart stuttered. "What do I need to do?"

He held her gaze. "You need to talk with Eli when you both breathe. You need to speak truth before the next crack shows up."

Hannah's chest rose and fell. "Where?"

Her father glanced toward Main Street. "He will need coffee after last night. Find him. Ask him to meet you at Ruthie's."

Hannah hesitated. "He is busy."

"Go anyway," her father said. "Do not wait for the perfect time. You do not get it."

Hannah nodded. She turned toward her car.

As Hannah drove into town, Maple Ridge looked the same as it always did. Tractor Supply store. Post office. The two-story brick building with the law office above the antique shop. The diner with the faded sign. It all looked steady.

She knew better now. She knew how fast a crack could appear.

Ruthie's Café sat on the corner, small and warm. The windows fogged in winter. The bell over the door jingled when Hannah entered. The smell of coffee wrapped around her.

Ruthie stood behind the counter with her gray hair pinned up and an apron tied at her waist. She spotted Hannah and lifted a hand.

“Hannah Mae,” she called. “You look like you slept in your clothes.”

Hannah managed a tired smile. “I did not.”

Ruthie poured a mug and slid it down the counter toward her. “This one is on the house. Your daddy did the funeral for my cousin last month. I still owe him.”

Hannah wrapped her hands around the mug. The warmth seeped into her fingers. “Thank you.”

Ruthie leaned in. “You waiting on someone?”

Hannah glanced toward the door. “Yes.”

Ruthie nodded like she knew more than Hannah said. She did not press. She wiped the counter with quick strokes.

Hannah picked a booth near the window. She sat with her back to the wall, like she always did when she felt uncertain. She stared at the steam rising from the coffee and tried to plan words. They did not line up.

The bell jingled.

Hannah looked up.

Eli stepped inside.

He wore the same clothes as yesterday. His jacket looked dusted with drywall powder. His eyes scanned the room until they landed on Hannah. His shoulders shifted as he braced for this.

He walked over.

“You called,” he said.

“I asked Dad to tell you where I was,” Hannah answered.

He slid into the booth across from her. He kept his hands on the table, open. His posture stayed guarded, but he came. Hannah held onto that.

Ruthie appeared at their side. “Eli Brooks. You look like you got dragged behind a tractor.”

Eli gave a small, tired smile. “Feels close.”

Ruthie set a mug in front of him without asking. “Drink. Eat.”

She set a plate with a biscuit between them. “Share or fight over it. I do not care. I got work.”

She walked off.

Hannah stared at the biscuit. Then she looked at Eli.

He looked at the coffee as if he were grateful for something he did not deserve.

Hannah broke the silence. “You stayed all night.”

Eli nodded. “Yes.”

“Why did you not go home?” Hannah asked.

He took a slow sip. “Home is not restful right now.”

Hannah’s heart twisted. “Because of the offer.”

He set the mug down. “Because of what it means. Because of what I want. Because of what I fear.”

Hannah swallowed. She kept her voice soft. “Tell me.”

Eli looked at her for a long moment. Then he nodded once, as if he had decided to speak.

“The firm in Raleigh offered me a lead role,” he said. “Big projects. Better pay. Better title. A clear path.”

Hannah kept still. She did not look away.

He continued. “They want an answer soon.”

Hannah asked, “How soon?”

“Two days,” he said.

Hannah’s stomach dropped. “Two days.”

He nodded. “I told you three days. It is two now.”

Hannah gripped the mug. “Why did you not say two?”

His jaw flexed. “Because I did not want you to feel rushed.”

Hannah stared at him. “I already feel rushed.”

He nodded again. “I know.”

Hannah let out a slow breath. “Eli, I need to know where you are.”

He looked down, then back up. “I am torn. I do not like being torn. I like clean lines. I like plans. I like knowing where each piece goes.”

Hannah almost smiled at the way he said it. It sounded like him. It sounded like the way he studied a beam and saw the load it carried.

He continued, “Maple Ridge makes me think about more than plans. It makes me think about people.”

Hannah held his gaze. “And me.”

His eyes flickered. He did not dodge it. “Yes. You.”

Hannah’s chest tightened. She nodded once, as if to anchor herself.

She said, “I need to tell you something, too.”

Eli waited.

Hannah stared at her hands. “When you said you needed time, I heard you say you would leave. I know you did not say it. I heard it anyway.”

Eli’s face softened. “Hannah.”

Hannah looked up. “I grew up watching people leave. Some left the church. Some left their marriages. Some left town and never looked back. I watched my mother die, and I watched my father keep preaching with a broken heart. I learned early that love does not keep people from leaving.”

Eli’s eyes held steady on hers. He did not interrupt.

Hannah kept going, because she had to. “So when you got the offer, I started bracing. I started pulling away so it would hurt less. I told myself I needed boundaries. I told myself it was wise. It was fear.”

Eli’s throat moved as he swallowed hard. “I saw you pull away, and I thought you wanted me gone.”

Hannah shook her head. “I wanted you to choose to stay. I wanted you to say it without me asking.”

He nodded slowly. “I know.”

Hannah took a careful breath. “I do not want to pressure you into staying. I do not want to trap you here with my feelings. I also cannot pretend I do not care. I care.”

Eli’s eyes sharpened. “How much?”

Hannah’s cheeks warmed. She hated how her body told on her. She forced the words out anyway. “Enough that I prayed last night with

my Bible open and my chest tight. Enough that I woke up and checked my phone before I even checked the time. Enough that I thought of you when Mark texted about the crack.”

Eli’s gaze dropped to the biscuit between them. He broke it in half and slid one piece toward her. His hands shook a little as he held back more than hunger.

He spoke quietly. “I know what it feels like to brace for loss.”

Hannah lifted her eyes. “Tell me.”

He paused. He looked toward the window where Main Street sat calm. Then he looked back at Hannah.

“My father left when I was thirteen,” he said. “He did not die. He chose. One day he worked. The next day, he packed. He told my mother he needed more. He told me I would understand someday. I did not.”

Hannah’s breath caught. She did not know this. She knew he did not speak much about his family. She did not know why.

Eli’s voice stayed even, but pain sat underneath it like a beam under a floor. “After he left, I started building things because they stayed where I put them. Wood does not wake up and decide it wants a new life. A beam holds if you place it right. A wall does what it is told.”

Hannah whispered, “People do not.”

He nodded. “People do not.”

Hannah reached toward her coffee, then stopped. Her hand trembled. She set it on the table instead, closer to the center.

Eli watched it. He did not take it. He did not move away.

Hannah said, “So your fear is what?”

He answered without delay. "If I stay here, I risk wanting something I cannot keep."

Hannah swallowed. "Me."

He met her eyes. "Yes."

The word sat between them. It felt heavy. It felt honest. It also felt like a door cracking open.

Hannah took a slow breath. "My fear is the same."

Eli nodded as he understood.

Hannah glanced down. "Then there is the job."

He leaned back slightly. "Yes."

Hannah asked, "Do you want it?"

Eli looked away for a beat. "Part of me does. I worked for it. I chased it for years. I told myself if I reached a certain level, I would feel settled."

He looked back at her. "I never did."

Hannah stayed quiet. She let him speak.

He continued, "When I came to Maple Ridge, I told myself it was temporary. I told myself I would help restore the church, then go back to my real life."

Hannah flinched at the phrase real life, but she held it. She waited.

Eli's voice grew firmer. "Then I met people who live their faith out in plain ways. Your father. Mark. Ruthie, who feeds everyone who looks tired. Mrs. Alder, who prays over every nail as it matters. This church, with its worn beams and stubborn walls. You."

Hannah swallowed again. “And you.”

He nodded once. “And me.”

He leaned forward. His hands rested on the table, palms down now, steady. “Last night the corner cracked. The kind of crack that ruins projects if you treat it like an inconvenience. I stood in the dark with the plans, and I realized something.”

Hannah held his eyes. “What?”

He answered, “I do not want to keep running toward the next offer. I want to build something that holds. I want to stay long enough to see it carry weight.”

Hannah’s heart pounded. She kept her voice controlled. “So what are you saying?”

Eli breathed out. “I am leaning toward staying in Maple Ridge.”

Hannah’s throat tightened. “Leaning.”

He nodded. “I still have to call them. I still have to close the door with honor. I will. I will not ghost them. I will not burn bridges. But I do not think career advancement matters more than what God is doing here.”

Hannah stared at him. Her eyes stung. She blinked hard because she refused to cry in Ruthie’s booth.

Eli’s voice softened. “I did not expect to care about this church. I did not expect to care about you. I do.”

Hannah’s chest ached. She nodded, small and slow.

She forced herself to say what she needed to say. “If you stay, I need you to stay for the right reasons.”

Eli's gaze did not waver. "I agree."

Hannah asked, "What are the right reasons?"

He answered, "Obedience. Service. Community. A sense of calling I did not plan for."

He paused, then added, "And I want a chance with you. I want it, Hannah. I do not want to treat you like a side benefit. I want to pursue you with intention, or I want to step back. I do not want gray areas."

Hannah's breath caught again. She heard her own heartbeat. She glanced down at the half-biscuit in front of her as if it held the answer.

She looked up. "I have begun caring about you deeply."

Eli's eyes widened slightly, as if he did not expect her to say it so plainly.

Hannah kept going because she did not want to retreat. "I tried to keep it in a safe place. I tried to label it as friendship. I tried to keep it inside the lines. It did not stay there."

Eli's face softened. "I did not stay inside lines either."

Hannah nodded. "I need you to hear this. My feelings do not impose an obligation on you. You do not owe me your life because you care. You do not owe Maple Ridge your future because the people are good."

Eli listened, intent.

Hannah continued, "But if you choose to stay, if you choose to serve here, I want to choose you too. I want to stop bracing. I want to do this with honesty."

Eli let out a slow breath. “You are saying you want to try.”

“Yes,” Hannah said. “I want to pursue a relationship with you intentionally. Clean. Slow. With prayer. With boundaries. With truth.”

Eli nodded once, firm. “I want the same.”

Silence settled for a moment. It felt different than last night. It felt like relief, like a tool set down after hours of strain.

Eli reached for his mug and drank. He set it down, then looked at Hannah.

“There is something else,” he said.

Hannah tensed. “What?”

“I need you to know what staying costs me,” he said. “So you do not picture it as easy.”

Hannah swallowed. “Tell me.”

He spoke steadily. “It costs me status. It costs me to pay. It costs me pride. It costs me the story I told myself about what success looks like.”

He looked down at his hands. “I have spent years proving I am not my father. I thought if I built bigger, higher, more visible, I would prove I was solid. I thought leaving would mean I won.”

He lifted his eyes. “Staying feels like losing to the old voice in my head. Staying feels like choosing a smaller stage.”

Hannah held his gaze. “Or a stronger foundation.”

He watched her. His expression shifted, like the words hit a place he had not named.

He nodded. “Yes.”

Hannah took a slow breath. “Then you need to hear what it costs me.”

Eli waited.

Hannah spoke with care. “It costs me control. It costs me the ability to keep my heart tucked away where no one can touch it. It costs me the image I have tried to keep as the pastor’s daughter who does not need anything.”

Eli’s eyes softened.

Hannah continued, “If we do this, people will watch. Some will cheer. Some will talk. Some will treat it like a story for Sunday afternoon.”

Eli’s jaw tightened. “I do not care.”

Hannah lifted her brows. “I do.”

He nodded once. “Then we handle it with wisdom.”

Hannah said, “Yes. Wisdom.”

Ruthie swung by with a pot of coffee. She raised her eyebrows at the space between Hannah and Eli, then at the look on their faces.

She poured without asking. “You two look like you had a meeting with Jesus and a clipboard.”

Hannah cleared her throat. “Ruthie.”

Ruthie pointed the pot at Hannah. “Eat your biscuit.”

She pointed the pot at Eli. “And you. Stop scowling. You scare off my other customers.”

Eli gave a small smile. It faded fast, but it was there.

Ruthie walked off again.

Hannah tore a small piece of the biscuit and ate it. It tasted warm and plain. It steadied her.

Eli watched her chew, then spoke. “So what do we do now?”

Hannah swallowed. “We agree on what intentional means.”

He nodded. “All right.”

Hannah thought for a moment. She chose words like she chose steps across a creek. “We talk to my father. Not today in a big announcement. But soon. We keep serving. We keep working. We keep our attention on the church, not on us.”

Eli nodded. “Agreed.”

Hannah added, “We spend time together in public spaces at first. Coffee. Worksite. Church events. We do not hide. We do not perform either.”

Eli said, “Yes.”

Hannah said, “We pray. Together. Even if it feels awkward.”

Eli’s eyes softened again. “I want that.”

Hannah took another breath. “And we do not rush physical intimacy. We keep it clean. We honor God. We honor each other.”

Eli’s face held steady. “Yes. Thank you for saying it clearly.”

Hannah nodded. “I need it clear.”

He hesitated, then said, “We also need to talk about the offer. I do not want to leave you in suspense.”

Hannah's heart tightened again. "What will you do?"

Eli looked at her, then spoke calmly. "Today, after the piers get installed, I will call Raleigh. I will tell them no."

Hannah's breath caught. "Today."

He nodded. "Today."

Her eyes stung again. She blinked hard. "Eli."

He held her gaze. "I will stay in Maple Ridge. I will finish this restoration. I will keep serving the church after, if they want me. I will find work locally or start my own small practice. I will do it with integrity."

Hannah could not speak for a moment. She looked down at the table. Her hands shook. She pressed them flat against the wood.

She whispered, "Thank you."

Eli's voice stayed gentle. "Do not thank me, as I saved you from something. I am choosing what I believe God asked of me."

Hannah nodded, tears threatening now. She fought them anyway. "I am glad."

Eli reached across the table, slowly. He stopped short, hovering near her hand as he asked without words.

Hannah lifted her eyes to his. She slid her hand forward the last inch.

His fingers closed around hers, warm and steady.

Hannah sat like that for a moment. Hand in hand. No rush. No pressure. Simple contact. A promise without fireworks.

Eli said, "I am afraid."

Hannah answered, “Me too.”

He squeezed her hand once. “We do it afraid, then.”

Hannah nodded. “We do it with God.”

“Yes,” he said.

They sat in silence again. The café hummed around them. Plates clinked. A couple in the corner spoke low. Outside, a truck rolled past.

Normal life kept moving while hers shifted.

Eli released her hand and sat back. He looked more awake now, as if truth had given him rest.

Hannah finished her coffee. “We should go back.”

Eli nodded. “They need us.”

Hannah slid out of the booth. Eli stood too. They both moved toward the register.

Ruthie looked up as they approached. She studied their faces again, then nodded once, as if she had seen what she needed to see.

“You pay,” she told Eli.

Eli reached for his wallet.

Ruthie held up a hand. “I told Hannah the coffee was on the house. I did not say yours was.”

Eli gave a quiet laugh. “Fair.”

He paid. Hannah stood beside him, hands clasped in front of her, because she did not know where else to put them.

Ruthie handed him the receipt. “Get some sleep tonight.”

Eli nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

Ruthie looked at Hannah. “And you stop carrying the whole town on your shoulders. You got a Savior for that.”

Hannah’s throat tightened again. She managed, “Yes, ma’am.”

They stepped outside into the daylight. The air felt warmer now. The sun rose while they talked. It shone on the brick buildings and the bare trees.

Eli walked beside Hannah to her car.

Hannah unlocked the door, then paused. “Eli.”

He turned. “Yes.”

Hannah swallowed. She spoke plainly. “I do not want to keep guessing what you feel. I do not want to keep guessing if you will stay.”

Eli nodded. “You will not have to.”

Hannah asked, “Will you tell my father today?”

Eli answered, “I will tell him I turned down the offer. I will tell him I want to remain on the project through completion. As for " About us," I will follow your lead. I will not hide. I will not make it a spectacle.”

Hannah nodded. Relief loosened something in her chest.

She opened the car door, then stopped again to say one more thing, and she knew that if she did not say it now, she would swallow it later.

“You matter to me,” she told him.

Eli’s eyes softened. “You matter to me, too.”

Hannah hesitated. “All right.”

“All right,” he echoed.

They both got into their cars. Hannah drove back toward the church. Eli followed close behind.

When Hannah pulled into the lot, the crew was already working. A small machine sat near the corner. Men measured and marked. The crack still ran across the brick, but now it looked like a problem being handled, not a threat waiting to spread.

Hannah stepped out. Eli stepped out, too. He walked with her toward the south wall. The morning light fell across the weathered beams stacked nearby, ready to replace what failed.

Her father stood with Mark, watching the crew set the first pier. He turned when he saw Hannah and Eli approach together.

Eli spoke first. “Pastor.”

Her father nodded. “Eli.”

Eli glanced at Hannah once, then back to her father. “After we get this corner stabilized, I will call Raleigh. I will turn down the offer. I am staying.”

Her father held still. His eyes shone a little, but his voice stayed steady. “Thank you.”

Eli nodded. “I want to finish what we started.”

Her father stepped closer and extended his hand. Eli took it. Their handshake looked firm. It looked like an agreement.

Hannah stood beside them, quiet. The worksite noise filled the space. A drill whirred. A worker called out measurements. Metal clinked.

Her father released Eli's hand. He looked at Hannah. He did not ask questions. He did not push. He only nodded, as he trusted her to walk this out.

Hannah breathed out.

Eli stepped to her side. He kept a respectful distance, but his presence felt steady now, like a brace placed where the load ran heavy.

Hannah watched the crew lower the first pier. She watched the corner of the church take new support.

Eli leaned toward her and spoke low. "We keep going."

Hannah nodded. "We keep going."

They turned toward the building together, toward the open doors and the smell of sawdust, toward the work waiting inside. The church stood in the morning light, worn and strong, held up by old beams and new choices, and Hannah walked back under it with hope she did not have last night.

Chapter 13

The House Made New

Hannah stepped through the side door before most people arrived. She did it on purpose. She wanted to be quiet first. She wanted to take in the room without voices filling it.

The smell hit her right away. Fresh-cut wood. Varnish. A faint trace of paint. It did not smell like a job site anymore. It smelled like a place ready to hold prayer again.

Her shoes tapped the floor. The boards looked new, but not flashy. They looked honest. Someone chose a stain close to the old tone, so the room still felt like Maple Ridge rather than a showpiece.

She lifted her eyes.

The beams ran overhead, dark and clean. They kept their age. They kept their story. Yet the cracks and sagging spots were gone. The crew sanded them. They treated them. They set new supports where they had to. They replaced what rot had eaten. The shape stayed the same, but the strength felt different. She sensed it in her chest, as the room breathed easier.

Light moved along the grain. It caught on the ridges and knots. She saw where the old wood met the new sections. The joinery looked tight. The lines looked straight. Eli insisted on clean connections. He said hidden work mattered most because it held everything else.

Hannah walked farther in.

The front platform looked finished. New steps. New railing. The pulpit stood where it always had, but the woodwork around it looked sharpened, repaired, re-seated. The trim lines ran clean to each corner. The edges met. Nothing gaped. Nothing leaned.

She ran her fingers along the end of a pew. The cap felt smooth. Someone filled the dents and re-stained them. She thought of all the hands that had gripped this same spot. Children fidgeting. Farmers leaning forward. Her own mother, once, with her fingers tight as she prayed for Hannah's father when he first stepped into ministry.

Hannah swallowed.

She turned toward the windows.

The stained glass glowed. It did not glare. It glowed like it always meant to. Early sun came in at an angle. It landed in soft patches across the aisle. Reds and blues pooled on the floor. Gold rode up the sides of the pews. Dust motes floated through it, slow and calm. The light looked like a blessing she could see.

Hannah stood in the center aisle and let it wash over her.

For months, the sanctuary felt like a problem. A risk. A worry that pressed on her father's face late at night. Now it felt like a promise kept.

Footsteps sounded behind her.

She did not turn right away. She knew the rhythm.

Eli stopped a few feet back, as if he did not want to crowd her. She felt his presence even before she faced him. He carried himself differently now. Less guarded. More settled.

"You came early," he said.

"So did you," Hannah answered.

He looked up at the beams. He did not smile widely. He did not show off. He studied the work as if he were still checking for flaws. His eyes tracked each line, each joint, each brace.

“It looks good,” Hannah told him.

He nodded once. “It holds.”

Hannah looked at him. “It is beautiful.”

He shifted his weight. “It is a room.”

“You know what I mean.”

He met her gaze. He held it. “I do.”

Silence rested between them, clean and steady.

He gestured toward the far corner. “I wanted to check the south wall one more time. We had settled after the last pier set. It stopped, but I want to be sure.”

“You already checked it yesterday.”

“I did.”

Hannah waited.

He exhaled through his nose, as if he admitted something without saying it. “I needed to see it again.”

Hannah nodded. “I understand.”

They both walked along the side aisle. Her hand brushed the pew tops as they passed. His eyes stayed up, then down, then up again, scanning. He stopped near the wall and looked at the line where plaster met trim. The seam stayed tight.

“You were right,” Hannah said.

He glanced at her. “About what?”

“Hidden work.”

He looked back at the wall. “People do not clap for it.”

“They will today,” Hannah said before she thought.

His jaw tightened, then released. “They do not need to.”

“You do,” Hannah said, and the words came out softer than she planned.

He turned toward her. “Why?”

Because she watched him carry weight alone. Because she saw him take blame fast and praise slow. Because she knew what it cost him to stay in a place where his name had once meant trouble.

She did not say all of that. She kept it simple.

“Because the Lord sees it,” Hannah told him. “And because it mattered.”

His gaze dropped to the floor. “It did.”

She heard the first car doors outside. Voices. Laughter. The sound of people trying to keep it light because they felt something heavy and good under it.

Eli stepped back from the wall. “Your father asked me to sit with the Deacons today.”

Hannah blinked. “He did.”

Eli nodded, guarded again. “Front right.”

“That is a big deal,” Hannah said.

“I know.”

She wanted to touch his arm. She did not. She kept her hands to herself. She kept respect where it belonged. Yet she let her eyes tell him she saw the change.

“It is time,” Hannah said.

He looked at the stained glass again, then back to her. “Are you ready?”

Hannah breathed in, slowly. “Yes.”

They walked toward the entry as more people arrived. The foyer was filled with voices. Women in dresses. Men in clean jeans and pressed shirts. Teenagers who looked like they'd been dragged, yet still showed up; children who whispered loudly and got shushed.

Someone set out bulletins. Someone set out water bottles for the choir. A few men adjusted the microphone stand like they did every Sunday, even though nothing had changed about it.

But everything had changed.

Hannah stepped to the side and greeted people as they came in. She shook hands. She hugged where it fit. She answered the same question again and again.

“When do we get to see it?”

“Is it all done?”

“Will it hold?”

Hannah smiled. She kept her voice calm. “You will see. Yes. Yes.”

Mrs. Talley gripped Hannah's hands with both of hers. Her eyes shone. “Your mother would have loved this.”

Hannah's throat tightened. She nodded. “I think so.”

Mrs. Talley looked past Hannah and spotted Eli near the sanctuary doors. Her mouth pressed into a line, then softened. She walked to him. Hannah watched, careful.

Mrs. Talley stopped in front of him, and Hannah could not hear her words. She only saw Mrs. Talley's hands lift. She patted his arm once, then twice, as if she were sealing something. Eli nodded, stiff at first, then less. His shoulders loosened.

More people filtered in. The room was filled. The murmur rose.

Hannah stepped into the sanctuary and paused at the back. She wanted to see their faces as they took it in. She wanted to mark this moment.

They slowed as they entered. Their eyes lifted. Their steps stopped. People who talked all the time went quiet.

Mr. Dean let out a low whistle, then caught himself and cleared his throat. His wife elbowed him, but she smiled too.

A little boy pointed up at the beams. "Look, Daddy."

His father crouched. He spoke close to the boy's ear. The boy nodded as if he had heard something important.

Mrs. Tinsley stood still and pressed her hand to her chest. She did not sit right away. She stared at the stained glass like she had waited years to see it bright again.

Hannah glanced at the front right. The Deacons sat together, as they always did. One empty seat waited at the end.

Eli stood off to the side, near the aisle, as if he planned to slip into the back. He kept his face neutral.

Hannah's father stepped up beside him. He spoke low. He gestured toward the open seat.

Eli hesitated. Hannah saw it. She saw the old reflex to refuse, to avoid attention, to keep distance so no one could hurt him.

Then he walked forward. He moved into the row. He sat in the open seat.

A few heads turned. A few people stared too long. Then someone nodded. Then another. The tension shifted.

Hannah breathed out. It felt like she had held her breath for months.

The pianist began a prelude, softly. The notes rolled through the room, testing the sound. The sanctuary answered with warmth. No rattle. No buzz. No strain. The room held music as if it were built to do so.

Hannah slid into her usual place with the choir, near the front. She looked over at her father at the pulpit. He stood tall. His Bible rested open. His hands stayed steady on either side.

He scanned the room. He took his time. He saw everyone. Then his gaze lifted to the beams and the stained glass, as if he offered thanks with his eyes before he used his voice.

He leaned toward the microphone.

“Good morning,” he said.

The congregation answered strongly. It filled the sanctuary and bounced back, full and clear.

Hannah’s father nodded. “We have prayed for this day. We have worked for this day. We have waited for this day. The Lord has carried us.”

He paused. The room stayed quiet.

He lifted his hand and pointed up. “Look.”

People tilted their heads again as he let them stare.

“These beams have held us for generations,” he said. “They carried weight through weddings and funerals. They heard confession. They heard laughter. They heard the prayers of saints whose names we still speak. Time wore them down. Water found cracks. Wood weakened.”

He let the words sit.

“We did not ignore it,” he continued. “We did not pretend it was fine. We brought it into the light. We asked for help. We did the work. We repaired what failed. We replaced what could not stand.”

He looked across the room, slowly. “You gave time. You gave money. You brought meals. You watched children. You swept floors. You drove nails. You prayed when you felt tired. I thank God for you.”

He stepped back from the pulpit. “We will begin with worship.”

Hannah stood with the choir. The congregation rose. The first song started, familiar. Voices came in unevenly at first, then joined. The sound grew.

As Hannah sang, she noticed the light shift on the floor. The sun climbed, and the colors moved. Blue slid across the aisle. Red climbed a pew end. Gold landed on the pulpit.

She thought of the Scripture she learned as a girl. Light and darkness. Old and new. She never thought she would see it play out like this, through lumber and plaster and bolts.

She sang the last line and sat.

Her father prayed. His prayer did not perform. It thanked God for provision. It asked God to keep their hearts humble. It asked God to

make the church more than a building. It asked God to make it a shelter for the weary and a home for the repentant.

Amen moved through the room like a shared breath.

Her father turned a page in his Bible. “Today I will read from 2 Corinthians 5:17.”

Hannah knew the verse. She memorized it years ago. Yet she sat up as if she heard it for the first time.

He read, clearly. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come.”

He closed the Bible partway and rested his hand on it. “We love renovation stories. We like before-and-after pictures. We like seeing rot replaced. We like seeing strength return.”

He looked up at the beams again. “This room tells one of those stories. But this room is not the main story. The main story is what God does when He makes a person new.”

Hannah felt the words land in her ribs.

He pointed toward the back wall, where a photo display showed progress shots from the project. “We took pictures throughout the process. We did it to record the work. We did it to show stewardship. We did it to remember.”

He stepped closer to the edge of the platform. “When a person comes to Christ, God does not slap on a coat of paint and call it good. He does not hide damage and hopes no one looks. He does not ignore load-bearing failure.”

Her father’s voice stayed calm, but it sharpened with truth. “He goes to the structure. He goes to the heart. He deals with sin. He forgives.

He cleans. He strengthens. He replaces what death has eaten. He makes someone new.”

Hannah glanced toward Eli, then stopped herself, as if she feared people would follow her eyes.

Eli sat still. He looked forward. His hands rested on his knees. He did not shift. Yet Hannah saw his throat work once, as he swallowed hard.

Her father kept going. “Some of you sit here today, and you know you need this. You have held together on the outside. You have smiled. You have served. Yet inside you feel cracked. You fear collapse.”

He paused. “Bring it into the light. Confess. Repent. Trust Jesus. He will make you new.”

He lifted his Bible again. “The verse does not say you will become a new creation after you clean yourself up. It does not say you will become new after you prove you deserve it. It says if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.”

He looked around. “Anyone.”

Hannah’s eyes stung. She blinked and kept her face calm.

Her father’s voice softened. “We have seen the Lord do this in Maple Ridge. We have seen prodigals come home. We have seen marriages healed. We have seen bitterness replaced with peace. We have seen grief met with comfort.”

He set his Bible down. “And we have seen it through this project.”

He gestured toward the beams. “We exposed what was weak. We did not hide it. We did not blame the building. We took

responsibility. We asked God for wisdom. He provided people with skills.”

Her father turned his head toward the Deacons’ row. “One of those people is here today.”

The room shifted. Hannah felt it like a ripple. People knew what came next.

Her father kept his tone steady. “Eli Brooks.”

Hannah’s heart thumped once, hard.

Eli’s spine stiffened. He did not stand. Not yet.

Her father continued. “Many of you know Eli’s story. Some of you know parts of it. Some of you know too much. Some of you think you know it all.”

A few people lowered their eyes.

Her father did not scold. He led. “I will tell you what I know. I know he showed up every day for months. I know he carried this project with skill and care. I know he took responsibility when problems surfaced. I know he stayed when it would have been easier to leave.”

Her father rested both hands on the pulpit. “I also know the Lord has worked in him. I know repentance bears fruit. I know restoration does not mean we forget the past. It means we see what Christ has done with it.”

Silence held tight.

Her father stepped away from the pulpit and walked down the steps. He moved toward Eli.

Hannah tracked each step. Part of her wanted to stand and follow, as if she must guard Eli against the weight of so many eyes. She stayed seated. She trusted her father.

Her father stopped at the end of the row. “Eli, will you stand?”

Eli’s hands pressed on his knees. He rose.

He looked straight ahead at first. His jaw clenched. Then he lifted his eyes and faced the room.

Hannah saw his work boots, cleaned for today. She saw his shirt collar, neat. She saw a faint scar near his hairline where he had once fallen on the job. She saw a man who learned to hold steady under pressure.

Her father turned to the congregation. “I want you to thank him.”

For half a second, no one moved. Then Mr. Dean started clapping. Slow. Solid. Mrs. Dean joined. Then the sound spread.

Applause filled the sanctuary.

It was not polite. It was not light. It carried weight. It sounded like forgiveness with hands.

Eli stood there and took it. His face stayed controlled, but his eyes shone. He blinked once, then again. He swallowed. His shoulders rose and fell as if he were breathing through something hard.

Her father raised his hand, and the clapping quieted.

He looked at Eli. “On behalf of Maple Ridge Community Church, thank you.”

Eli nodded once. He spoke, low but clear. “You are welcome.”

Her father did not let him sit yet. “I want to say one more thing.”

Eli's eyes flickered, wary.

Her father turned back to the congregation. "We do not honor Eli to place him on a pedestal. We honor him because it is right to give thanks. We honor him because we want to speak life where shame has lingered. We honor him because we believe in the power of Christ to make someone new."

He looked at Eli again. "You belong here."

Eli's breath caught. Hannah saw it.

Her father stepped closer and placed his hand lightly on Eli's shoulder. The gesture was firm, steady, but not overwhelming. Eli turned his head slightly, his jaw tightening as if he were holding back words, or something deeper. The room seemed to exhale with him, a collective release of tension that had lingered like an unspoken question for years.

"Thank you," Eli said again, his voice rough but steady. He looked across the congregation, meeting faces that had been part of his story, some forgiving, some still hesitant, but all present. For once, he didn't look away.

Hannah's chest ached with an emotion she couldn't name. Relief? Hope? Pride? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that the room felt changed, lighter somehow, as if the beams above weren't the only thing that had been restored.

Her father stepped back to the pulpit, his hand falling away from Eli's shoulder. "Now," he said, his voice warm with quiet authority, "let us continue in worship. Let us sing to the One who makes all things new."

The pianist played the opening chords of the next hymn, and the congregation rose again, voices filling the space with a renewed strength. Eli returned to his seat slowly, his movements deliberate,

like a man learning how to settle into belonging. Hannah caught his eye for a fleeting moment as he sat, and he gave her the smallest nod, a silent acknowledgment that felt louder than words.

The hymn rose to its final verse, the voices harmonizing. Hannah sang, her gaze lifting once more to the beams overhead. She thought of the hands that had worked to restore them, the hearts that had prayed over them, and the grace that had carried them all. As the last note faded, sunlight poured through the stained glass, scattering gold and crimson across the sanctuary floor.

Her father's voice closed the service with a benediction: "May the Lord bless you and keep you. May He make His face shine upon you. And may He remind you always that in Him, the old has passed away, and the new has come."

"Amen," the congregation echoed.

Hannah stayed seated for a moment, watching as people began to move toward the exits, their voices soft but alive with conversation. Eli lingered near his row, shaking hands with Mr. Dean and exchanging quiet words with Mrs. Alder. Hannah saw something in him that she hadn't seen before, a weight-lifting, a man learning how to stand tall.

The sanctuary emptied slowly, but the warmth remained, like the echoes of the hymn still lived in the walls. Hannah glanced at her father, who caught her eye and smiled before gathering his Bible and stepping toward her. She knew he'd be the last to leave, ensuring every detail was attended to, every light dimmed, every door locked. She also knew he would make time to check on Eli before the day ended.

As she walked toward the exit, her gaze drifted again to the beams above. The scars of repair were visible, but they weren't ugly. They were proof of endurance, of care, of grace. Hannah thought of the

verse her father had read: “The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” It was true for the building, true for the people, and maybe, just maybe, true for her and Eli too.

She stepped into the bright afternoon, the sun warming her face, and breathed deep. Today felt like a new beginning.

Chapter 14

Beneath These Beams

The fellowship hall finally emptied.

Hannah stacked the last of the plates. She wiped the counter. She rinsed her hands and dried them on a towel that smelled like lemon soap. Voices faded down the hallway. Doors opened and closed. Footsteps moved farther away. Someone laughed on the front steps, then the laugh cut off as the door shut.

She stood still for a moment. Her shoulders sank. Her feet ached. Her heart felt full in a quiet way.

She glanced through the double doors into the sanctuary. The lights over the pulpit were off now. Sunlight did the work instead. The stained glass burned with a soft color across the pews. Red and green, blue and gold. The colors fell across the center aisle like a path.

She should lock up soon. She should check the side doors and the thermostat. She should make sure the nursery lights are off. Yet her steps drifted toward the sanctuary before she decided.

She pushed one of the doors open. It swung without a squeak. The hinge oil still held from last week. The sanctuary air felt cooler than the hallway. It smelled like clean wood and faint floor polish. It felt like a place ready for prayer.

She closed the door behind her. The sound clicked softly, then stopped. Silence settled around her.

She walked down the aisle alone.

Her shoes tapped once, then she slowed and let the tap fade. She did not want to break the stillness. She looked up at the beams. Fresh

boards met older wood. The lines matched now. The bracing sat tight. Every bolt and plate hid under a smooth finish. She remembered the old sag along the south wall. She remembered the worry in her father's eyes when he thought the damage ran deeper.

Now the ceiling looked steady. The beams looked honest. They did not pretend they never suffered. They stood firm anyway.

She stopped near the front pew and sat.

She let her hands rest in her lap. She let her breathing settle. She listened.

She heard nothing at first. Then she heard the building itself. A small creak somewhere high above. A soft tick from the vent as the system cooled. The quiet felt like a gift.

She tilted her head back and looked at the stained glass again, Mary at the empty tomb. Peter was on the shore with Jesus. The Good Shepherd with a lamb across His shoulders. She had seen these windows since she was a child. Today they looked new because the light looked new.

She thought about the people who filled these pews an hour ago. The singing. The testimonies. The children who tried to whisper and failed. Mrs. Talley was crying into her handkerchief as the last hymn rose.

She thought about the last year. The meetings. The plans. The fundraising. The days when she feared the town would get tired and stop giving. The days when she feared her father would push too hard and wear himself down. The days when she feared her own heart would stay guarded.

She closed her eyes.

She prayed without words first. Then words came anyway.

Lord, thank You. Thank you for holding us. Thank you for building where we could not. Thank you for making us brave.

She opened her eyes again. The colors had shifted across the aisle. The sun moved, slow and faithful. The gold now touched the front edge of the pulpit. Blue spread along the first row of pews.

She stood and walked closer to the pulpit steps. She ran her fingers along the banister. The wood felt smooth. No splinters. No soft spots. Solid.

She thought of Eli's hands on wood. His careful measurements. His calm voice when the budget got tight. His silence when he felt too much. His steady presence as the work moved forward.

Her chest tightened, then loosened.

She turned and looked back down the aisle. She pictured him in the back pew as a teenager, watching the windows, wanting clean light while feeling unclean inside. He told her those words with no show. No attempt to sound wise. He spoke like a man who no longer needed to hide.

She heard a soft sound behind her.

A door hinge. A careful step.

She turned.

Eli stood at the back, one hand still on the door. He did not enter with noise. He looked around first, as if he wanted to be sure he did not disturb something holy.

Her throat went tight.

He closed the door. He walked down the aisle toward her, slow and steady. The colored light touched his face as he passed through it.

The red fell across his cheek. The gold landed on his shoulder. He looked like part of the sanctuary now, not a guest.

She waited. She did not speak first. Her voice felt too small for the moment.

He stopped a few feet away. He did not crowd her. His hands hung at his sides for a beat, then he lifted one and rubbed his palm on his jeans. A nervous habit. She had seen it before.

“You stayed,” Hannah said.

He nodded. “I stayed.”

She tipped her chin toward the stained glass. “I wanted to see it without people.”

“I did too,” he said.

She let a small smile come. “It is quiet.”

“It is,” he said. His gaze moved up to the beams. “Quiet is new for me in church.”

She stepped closer, then stopped. She stood near the first pew, facing him. She kept her posture open. She kept her hands relaxed. She did not want fear to lead today.

Eli breathed in. He held the air, then released it.

“I need to tell you something,” he said.

Hannah nodded once. “Tell me.”

He looked down at the floor for a moment, then back to her face. “When I first came back to Maple Ridge, I thought the church project would be work. I thought I would keep my head down and do it. I thought I would pay back what I owed, then leave.”

Her stomach dipped. She remembered those early days. His careful distance. The way he would leave meetings early. The way he would stand outside after services and watch families greet one another, but never step in.

Eli continued. “I thought I could keep God at arm’s length. I could keep people at arm’s length, too.”

Hannah swallowed. She kept her eyes on his.

He stepped one pace closer. “Then you walked into the sanctuary one morning before the crew arrived. You stood under the worst part of the sagging ceiling, and you prayed. You did not make a show. You did not look around to see if anyone was watching. You spoke to the Lord as you trusted Him.”

Her face warmed. She remembered the moment. She remembered feeling foolish. She remembered doing it anyway because fear had pressed too hard and prayer felt like the only honest response.

Eli’s voice stayed low. “I heard you. I did not mean to. I planned to turn around and leave, so I would not interrupt. I could not move.”

She blinked fast. “Eli.”

He shook his head once. “You asked God to keep your father strong. You asked Him to keep the church safe. You asked Him to keep the workers honest and careful. Then you said one more thing. You said, Lord, build in me what I cannot build in myself.”

She felt her eyes sting.

Eli’s gaze held hers. “I had not prayed like that in years. I had not asked the Lord to build anything in me. I had spent years tearing things down.”

Hannah took a slow breath. “You came back. You did not keep tearing down.”

He nodded. “God pulled me back. He used the work to do it. He used your family. He used your church. He used you.”

She wanted to look away. She did not. She let his words land.

He took another step closer. Now he stood within arm’s reach.

He lifted his hands, then dropped them again, as if he did not know where to put them. He gave a small breath that sounded like a short laugh but carried no humor. “I keep trying to find the right way to say it. I do not have the right way.”

“You do not need the right way,” Hannah tells him. “Say it true.”

His mouth tightened, then softened. “Truth is all I have.”

He glanced up toward the beams again. “I have spent my life trusting plans. I trust measurements. I trust loads and codes. I trust the strength of a joint when I test it. I thought if I built everything right, nothing would fall.”

He looked back at her. “Then my life fell apart anyway. I made choices. I hurt people. I ran. I blamed everyone else. I blamed God. I blamed my father for his anger. I blamed my mother for leaving. I blamed this town for remembering who I was.”

She remembered the stories people told in whispers when she was younger. She remembered seeing Eli’s mother at the grocery store once, eyes down, moving fast. She remembered hearing about the night Eli got arrested. She remembered her father’s quiet grief when he prayed for him.

Eli’s voice grew steady again. “When I started this restoration, I saw rot in places no one could see. I saw damage hidden behind panels.

I saw cracks covered with paint. I kept thinking about my own heart. I kept thinking about how I covered things up. I kept thinking about how I pretended I was fine.”

Hannah nodded. She did not interrupt. She let him speak.

“I saw the crew tear out bad wood,” he said. “They did not keep it because it looked good from a distance. They pulled it out. They replaced it. They did the work the right way. It took longer. It costs more. It made a mess. It saved the building.”

He swallowed. “God did that in me. He pulled things out. He showed me what I did not want to see. He made me own what I did. He made me confess. He made me ask for forgiveness. He made me accept grace I did not think I deserved.”

Her breathing grew uneven. She pressed her lips together. She tasted salt at the back of her throat. Tears sat close, waiting.

Eli’s eyes shone too. “Then He gave me a place to stand. He gave me this church again. He gave me your father’s steady hand. He gave me work I could do without lying. He gave me friends who did not treat me like a project.”

He paused. His gaze dropped to her hands, then lifted again to her eyes. “He gave me you.”

Her heart beat hard. The sanctuary felt smaller. The air felt thicker. She gripped her fingers together to keep them from shaking.

“You told me once you did not want someone to love you because you are the pastor’s daughter,” Eli said. “You wanted someone to see you. You told me you wanted the truth.”

Hannah nodded slowly. “Yes.”

“I see you,” he said. “I see the way you carry other people’s needs. I see the way you smile even when you feel tired. I see the way you keep going when you want to stop. I see the way you love your father and still stand on your own feet. I see the way you listen. I see the way you pray.”

Tears slipped free now. She did not wipe them fast. She let them fall. She did not feel ashamed.

Eli breathed in again. His voice dropped softer. “I love you, Hannah.”

The words landed quietly. They did not rush. They did not push. They held steady, like a beam set in place.

She whispered, “I love you too.”

His shoulders lowered, as if he carried weight and finally set it down.

He reached into his jacket pocket. The motion was careful. He drew out a small box, dark and plain. He held it in his palm for a moment, as if he wanted to be sure it was real.

Her breath caught. Her hand lifted to her chest without thought.

Eli looked at the box, then at her. “I asked your father for his blessing,” he said. He opened the box slowly, revealing a simple gold band with a single, delicate diamond at its center. It caught the light from the stained glass, glinting with soft red and gold hues.

“I wouldn’t have asked him if I didn’t mean every word I just said,” Eli continued, his voice steady but his hand trembling slightly. “I wouldn’t stand here if I wasn’t sure. Hannah, I don’t know what the future holds, but I know this. I want to build it with you. I want to stand beside you, whatever comes. Will you marry me?”

For a moment, the entire sanctuary felt still, as though the very air was holding its breath. Hannah's gaze dropped to the ring, then lifted back to Eli's face. His expression was open, vulnerable, hopeful. She saw the man he had become, shaped by grace and hard work, and her heart swelled.

"Yes," she whispered, the word escaping before she was even fully conscious of saying it. Then louder, with conviction, "Yes, Eli, I'll marry you."

A smile broke across his face, lighting it with a joy so unguarded it took her breath away. He stepped closer, sliding the ring onto her finger with care, his hand steady now. It fit perfectly, as if it had always been meant for her.

The moment felt sacred, not because of the place or the light or even the ring, but because of the love that filled the space between them. Hannah reached up and placed her hand against his cheek, her thumb brushing away the dampness she found there.

For the first time, the silence between them was not heavy with unspoken words or old wounds. It was full of promise, of hope, of the kind of peace that came when two hearts found their home in one another.

Eli exhaled a soft laugh, his forehead resting lightly against hers. "I still can't believe you said yes."

"I would have said yes a thousand times," she replied, her voice steady, her heart full. "You're not just part of this town, Eli. You're part of me."

They stood there for a long moment, the colors of the stained-glass painting them in shifting hues. Outside, the wind stirred the trees, carrying the promise of a new season. Inside, beneath the weathered

beams, a foundation stronger than any they've known began to take hold.

And this time, neither of them was afraid to build.

Chapter 15

Unless the Lord Builds

Spring settled over Maple Ridge in slow, sure steps. The mornings warmed. The fields turned green. The town shook off winter and moved with purpose again.

So did the church.

Hannah stood near the side door on a Wednesday afternoon and listened before she even stepped inside. She heard sneakers on the gym floor in the fellowship hall. She heard a whistle. She heard laughter. She heard a teen boy call out, “Pass it.”

Eli stood beside her with a box of donated basketballs in his arms. He shifted the weight and looked at her.

“You ready?” he asked.

Hannah nodded. “You are the one carrying the box.”

He gave a small smile. He did not look away from the sound of the kids. Hannah saw it in his face. He still felt surprised, even months later, when the building held life again.

Hannah opened the door.

The old hallway smelled like lemon cleaner and warm pizza. The walls looked fresh. The bulletin board held flyers layered on top of each other. Youth group. Prayer night. A grief support group that her mother helped start. A budgeting class led by Mr. Hargrove. A sign-up list for the community meal. A page in the corner for the building fund, still there, still needed, yet no longer desperate.

A teen girl rushed past Hannah with a stack of paper plates.

“Hi, Miss Hannah,” she called. “Coach says we got ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes until what?” Hannah asked.

She pointed down the hall. “Free throw contest. You’re judging.”

Eli lifted the box. “I did not agree to that.”

She grinned. “Too late.”

She ran on.

Hannah followed Eli into the fellowship hall. The space looked different from the way it had when the roof leaked, the paint peeled, and the air felt tired. The floor shone. The lights worked. The storage closet doors closed all the way. Folding chairs lined one wall in neat rows, set for a Bible study later.

A group of middle school boys chased a ball toward the far end. Two older teen leaders, Nate and Lucas, kept them from crashing into the tables. Mrs. Talley stood near the kitchen window with a clipboard. She watched everything at once. She saw Hannah and pointed her pen like a warning.

“Hannah. You promised dessert.”

Hannah walked toward her. “I brought it.”

“You brought it where?” she asked, eyes narrowed.

Hannah pointed to the counter. “In the kitchen.”

Mrs. Talley nodded once, satisfied. “Good. We are feeding half the town on Sunday. I do not intend to serve a sad tray of store cookies.”

Eli set the box down near the wall.

Mrs. Talley turned her sharp gaze on him. “Eli. Are you staying for the meal prep meeting later?”

Eli cleared his throat. “I have a work call at six.”

Mrs. Talley did not blink. “Then you are leaving at five forty-five.”

Eli looked at Hannah as if asking for help.

Hannah lifted her hands. “I am not getting involved.”

He nodded like he accepted his fate. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Talley smiled and turned back to her clipboard. “Good.”

Hannah stepped into the kitchen and set the dessert on the counter. It was a pan of bars she baked early this morning. Oats, peanut butter, and chocolate chips. She learned the recipe from Mrs. Hargrove after the engagement party. Mrs. Hargrove told her it was sturdy and forgiving. “Like a good man,” she said.

Hannah opened the foil. The smell rose.

Mrs. Talley appeared in the doorway again. She looked at the pan. “Those will do.”

“That is high praise,” Hannah said.

“Do not get used to it,” Mrs. Talley said and left.

Hannah washed her hands, then stepped back out to the fellowship hall. She leaned against the wall for a moment and took it in.

This was what Hannah prayed for in the dark months. Not a perfect building. Not a smooth life. A place where people came and found room to breathe. A place where they heard the Word. A place where they ate, laughed, learned, and healed.

Hannah watched Eli walk to the center of the floor. He picked up a ball and bounced it once, testing the air. A boy saw him and ran up.

“Eli. You're doing the contest?” the boy asked.

Eli looked down. “I am doing nothing.”

The boy grinned. “Coach said you are the judge.”

Eli glanced at Lucas. Lucas lifted both hands like he had no choice.

Eli sighed. Then he squatted down so he was eye level with the boy.
“What is your name?”

“Drew.”

“How old are you?” Eli asked.

“Eleven.”

“Do you know how to keep score?” Eli asked.

Drew nodded fast. “Yes.”

Eli held out his hand. “Then you are my assistant.”

Drew slapped his hand into Eli’s. “Deal.”

Eli stood, and Hannah saw something shift in him. He still carried his past. Hannah knew he did. Yet he did not wear it like a chain anymore. He wore it like a scar. It stayed. It also proved healing.

A whistle blew. Nate called the kids to line up. Lucas moved tables back to clear more room. Mrs. Talley snapped her fingers at a teen girl. “Aprons,” she said. “Kitchen. Now.”

Hannah stepped away and headed back into the hall, toward the sanctuary.

Her father had asked her to meet him for a quick check-in before the evening service. Not a formal meeting. He stopped doing formal meetings with her once she started planning a wedding. He still talked through sermon series and community needs with her, yet the tone changed. He saw her as an adult woman now. He spoke to her like one.

As Hannah walked, she passed the small classroom wing.

Room one hosted the after-school tutoring program. Two tables filled the center. Mrs. Hargrove sat with a third grader and pointed at a worksheet. Her mouth moved slowly, patiently. A high school girl, Mia, sat with a second grader and helped him sound out words. The boy's small finger traced the page.

Room two held the young moms group. Today, they met for a short lesson and playtime. Hannah heard toy blocks hit the floor. She heard a baby squeal. She smelled coffee.

Room three held the food pantry. It started as a shelf in the coat closet. Now it had its own room. Shelves lined the walls. Cans and boxes sat in careful stacks; a sign hung by the door. Take what you need. Give what you can. Pray always.

Hannah paused and touched the edge of the sign.

She remembered thinking the building restoration would be the hardest part. Then Eli came into town, and the real work began.

Hannah kept walking.

The sanctuary doors stood open. The room glowed with late afternoon light. The stained glass looked clean now. The colors reached across the pews in soft shapes. The air felt cool and still.

Her father stood at the front near the pulpit. He held a stack of notes. He looked up when he heard her steps.

"There you are," he said.

"I am here," Hannah answered.

He smiled. "How is the chaos?"

"It has a schedule," Hannah said. "So it feels holy."

He laughed. “A schedule can do wonders.”

Hannah walked down the center aisle and stopped near the first pew. She looked around like she still could not believe it. The new ceiling panels sat flush. The repaired beams held firm. The lights hung straight. The floorboards no longer creaked in warning.

Her father stepped down from the platform and met her halfway.

“I wanted to show you something,” he said.

He held out the notes. Hannah glanced down and saw the outline for Sunday’s service. A community meal followed. The youth would serve plates. The children would sing one song before the sermon. The prayer team would stand near the front afterward. Baptisms would happen at the end.

Hannah’s throat tightened.

“We are doing baptisms again,” she said.

He nodded. “Three this Sunday.”

“Who?” Hannah asked.

He looked at his notes. “Mrs. Parker wants to renew her faith after the loss of her husband. She asked for a fresh start.”

Hannah nodded. Mrs. Parker sat in the back pew for months with swollen eyes, holding her grandson’s hand. She started coming to the grief group. She started smiling again.

“And,” her father continued, “Mia asked too. She said she wants to stop doing church halfway. She wants to follow Jesus with her whole life.”

Hannah smiled. “I believe her.”

“She has a steady spirit,” her father said.

He tapped the last name with his finger. “And one more. Jordan Reyes.”

Hannah blinked. “Jordan.”

Her father nodded. “He asked last week. He wants to share a testimony with the youth on Sunday night. He also asked if he could speak for two minutes during the service.”

Hannah’s heart lifted. “Jordan will do it.”

Her father watched her closely. “It will mirror him in a way. I know it. Jordan knows it, too.”

Hannah stared at the pulpit, then at the beam above it.

Jordan came to Maple Ridge two years ago after his mother moved for work. He came angry and loud. He got in trouble at school. He got caught stealing from the gas station. He nearly got expelled after a fight.

Eli met him in the parking lot one night after a youth event. Eli had returned to town for a contractor meeting with the church board. He saw Jordan kicking the back tire of Mrs. Talley’s van. Eli spoke to him like a man, not like a problem.

Jordan did not soften overnight. He pushed. He tested. He skipped meetings. Then he showed up again. He started helping Lucas set up chairs. He started staying after to clean. He started listening.

Hannah saw him glance at Eli during Bible study. Like, he wanted to ask, “How did you get out?” How did you stop being angry? How did you stop running?

Eli never gave him a speech. Eli gave him time. Eli gave him presence. Eli kept showing up.

Hannah looked at her father. "I am glad."

"I am too," her father said. "You and Eli have done well with him."

Hannah lifted her chin. "The church did well with him."

Her father nodded, pleased. "Yes. The church."

He stepped closer and lowered his voice. "I also want to ask you something."

Hannah waited.

"Do you want to read Scripture Sunday?" he asked.

Hannah blinked. "In service."

He nodded. "Psalm 127. One verse. The verse that carried us through."

Hannah's eyes stung. She did not cry often in front of her father. She did during the worst weeks of the repairs. She did. During the night, Eli told her his full story. She did when Eli proposed. Tears showed up when she tried hard to hold everything steady.

Hannah took a breath. "Yes. I will read it."

Her father's smile turned soft. "Good. The town needs to hear it again."

He stepped back and glanced at the clock on the back wall.

"I need to check on the sound team," he said. "You staying for a few minutes?"

"Yes," Hannah said.

He started up the aisle. Then he turned back.

"One more thing," he said.

Hannah waited.

He gestured toward the ceiling. “When you walk under those beams now, what do you feel?”

Hannah looked up. She let the question sink in.

“I feel covered,” she said. “I feel held.”

Her father nodded, satisfied. “Good. Do not forget it when life shakes again.”

He left.

Hannah stood alone in the sanctuary.

Silence filled the space, yet it did not feel empty. It felt ready.

Hannah walked down the left side aisle. She ran her fingers along the top of the pew, the smooth wood worn from years of hands and Sundays. Some boards looked newer. Eli replaced what rot had eaten. He kept what he could. He refused to waste. He said, “This place holds stories. I will not throw stories away.”

Hannah reached the front and turned toward the platform. She climbed the steps. She walked past the pulpit and to the side where the repaired beams met the wall.

The beam above her looked old and strong. The wood held marks of time. Yet the cracks no longer spread. The support plates sat behind, hidden, steady. Hannah knew where Eli placed them because she watched him work. She handed him tools. She held the light while he measured. She listened as he explained load paths and tension, and how small weaknesses could become big failures if nobody addressed them.

Hannah lifted her hand and traced the beam with her fingertips.

The wood felt smooth where it had been sanded. It felt rough where the grain rose.

Hannah remembered the first time Eli stood in this sanctuary with his hands on his hips, staring up like he carried the whole weight on his shoulders.

She remembered how distant he looked then. He spoke in short sentences. He kept his eyes on the work. He kept his heart behind his ribs like a locked door.

She remembered the day the worst damage showed itself. A hidden rot pocket behind a wall. A compromised joint. The kind of problem she did not see until they stripped away the surface.

Eli went still. He looked like he wanted to run. Then he stayed.

Hannah remembered how she feared the church would collapse. She feared the town would give up. She feared Eli would leave.

Instead, she watched the Lord build something deeper than timber and nails. She watched men and women bring food, money, and time. She watched teenagers scrape paint off trim for hours without complaining, mostly. She watched her father preach hope while his own eyes looked tired. She watched her mother pray with women in the pews who thought they had no strength left.

She watched Eli learn to receive care.

She watched him sit at Mrs. Talley's table and eat pot roast, as if he did not know what to do with kindness that asked for nothing.

She watched him apologize to her father for old sins. She watched her father forgive him. She watched Eli learn to forgive himself, slowly, like a man learning a new language.

She watched God rebuild him, too.

Hannah's fingers kept moving along the beam.

She thought about her engagement. The ring on her left hand caught the colored light from the stained glass. It flashed red, then blue, then gold.

The wedding plans moved forward in small steps. Hannah and Eli chose a date for early summer. They chose simple things. A ceremony here. A reception in the fellowship hall with potluck dishes and borrowed tablecloths. Music led by the youth worship team, since they begged for it.

Hannah used to think love required big proof. Big gestures. Big words.

Eli gave her steady proof instead. He texted her when he arrived safely at a job site. He showed up early to youth nights because he knew the boys listened more when he stood near the back wall. He fixed a loose step on her parents' porch without being asked. He prayed with her when her mind spun at night.

He led with quiet strength.

Hannah learned to trust quiet strength.

Footsteps sounded at the back of the sanctuary. Hannah turned.

Eli walked in. He held two paper cups. Coffee.

He moved down the center aisle and stopped near the front pew.

"I told Mrs. Talley I was checking the thermostat," he said.

Hannah lifted an eyebrow. "You lied in a church."

He looked offended. "I did not lie. I did check it."

Hannah took a cup from him. "Thank you."

He stood beside her on the platform and looked up at the beams with her.

“They look good,” he said.

“They do,” Hannah agreed.

He took a sip of coffee. “Youth night feels loud.”

“It feels alive,” Hannah said.

He nodded. “It does.”

Hannah watched him glance around the sanctuary. His face looked calm. His shoulders sat loose. He did not scan for problems the way he used to.

“Do you ever miss the old version of you?” Hannah asked.

He turned his head toward her. “No.”

The answer came fast. It made Hannah blink.

He kept going. “I miss the time I lost. I miss the years I wasted. I miss the pain I caused. I do not miss who I was.”

Hannah held his gaze. “I am glad you are here now.”

He swallowed. “Me too.”

Silence fell again. Not awkward. Comfortable.

Eli set his coffee on the corner of the pulpit. He stepped closer to the beam and lifted his hand as Hannah did. He touched it with care.

“I remember the day we found the rot,” he said.

Hannah nodded. “I do too.”

“I thought it meant failure,” he said. “I thought it meant we were done.”

Hannah looked at him. “What do you think now?”

He kept his hand on the wood. “I think it meant we saw the truth. We stopped pretending. Then we fixed what we could. We asked God to handle what we were not able to.”

Hannah’s throat tightened again.

“That is the story of Maple Ridge,” she said.

He nodded once. “And it is my story.”

Noise rose from the hallway. A door opened. Voices echoed. The youth night must be ending. The kids would head out soon. Some would grab leftover pizza. Some would linger and talk. Some would ask for prayer. Some would pretend they did not need it, yet still slow down near the front of the sanctuary on their way out, as if their feet knew where to go.

Eli looked toward the back. “Your father told me Jordan wants to speak on Sunday.”

Hannah nodded. “Yes. He wants to share.”

Eli’s eyes softened. “Good.”

“You helped him,” Hannah said.

Eli shook his head. “The Lord helped him. I stood nearby.”

Hannah smiled because Eli gave credit where it belonged, as he had learned to do.

A knock sounded on the sanctuary door. Lucas peeked in.

“Hey,” he said, his voice low out of respect for the room. “Sorry. Eli, you got a second? Jordan wants to talk to you.”

Eli glanced at Hannah. “I will be back.”

Hannah nodded. “Go.”

Eli followed Lucas out.

Hannah stayed.

She walked down from the platform and sat in the front pew, near the aisle. She set her coffee on the floor by her feet. She folded her hands in her lap.

Voices drifted in through the open door. Hannah heard a teen laugh. She heard Nate call, “Pickup time, people.” She heard Mrs. Talley say, “Do not leave trash on my tables.”

Hannah smiled.

She thought back to the months between now and the engagement party.

The roof work is finished. Then the electrical updates. Then the drywall repairs. Then the painting days, where the women of the church arrived in old shirts and bandanas, and the men moved ladders, and the teens rolled paint on the lower walls, splattering each other and pretending it was an accident.

Hannah remembered the day the new cross went up on the steeple. Eli stood on the lift with a wrench. Her father stood on the ground with his hands folded, as if he were praying without words.

When Eli tightened the last bolt, the cross caught the sun.

Hannah remembered the first full service back in the sanctuary. People cried before the first hymn ended. Her father preached from

Psalm 127. He did not force emotion. He did not need to. The room held it.

After the service, people stayed. They did not rush out. They sat in pews and talked. They hugged. They walked the aisles and touched the beams like they were proof. Kids ran in circles until their mothers hissed their names.

Hannah remembered Eli standing in the back, arms crossed, watching it all like he feared it might disappear.

Hannah walked to him. She took his hand. She said, “Look what God did.”

Eli whispered, “He let me be part of it.”

Hannah told him, “He did more than that. He brought you home.”

Eli did not answer. He only squeezed her hand.

A few minutes later, the sanctuary door opened again. Footsteps entered. Hannah turned and saw Jordan.

He stood in the doorway as if he were not sure he belonged. He was taller now than he was last year. His shoulders broadened. His hair looked trimmed and clean. He held his hands in his hoodie pocket. He looked at Hannah, then away.

Eli stood behind him, one hand on Jordan’s shoulder.

Jordan cleared his throat. “Miss Hannah.”

Hannah stood. “Hi, Jordan.”

He nodded, eyes still cautious. “Lucas said you were in here.”

“I am,” Hannah said. “Do you need something?”

He shifted his weight. “Eli told me you are reading the verse on Sunday.”

“I am,” Hannah said.

Jordan nodded again. Then he pulled a folded paper from his pocket. He held it out.

“I wrote something,” he said. “For the testimony. I do not want to mess it up.”

Hannah took the paper. “Do you want me to read it?”

He nodded, then shook his head, conflicted. “I want to say it. I also want to know if it sounds dumb.”

“It will not sound dumb,” Hannah said.

He looked down. “It might.”

Hannah glanced at Eli. Eli watched Jordan with steady patience.

Hannah unfolded the paper. The handwriting looked rough, yet careful. She read it in silence first.

Jordan talked about moving to town. About being angry at his mom. About missing his old friends. About feeling like everyone stared at him. About how he pushed people away before they could reject him.

He wrote about the night he stole from the gas station and got caught. He wrote about the fear in his mother’s eyes. He wrote about how he thought he was done.

He wrote about Lucas showing up at his house with a plate of food and an invitation to youth night. He wrote about saying no. He wrote about Lucas coming back anyway.

He wrote about Mrs. Talley making him scrub tables after youth because he mouthed off. He wrote about how she still saved him a slice of pizza.

He wrote about Eli meeting him in the parking lot, telling him, “You are not trash. You are not your mistakes. You are a man God made. Act like it.”

Jordan wrote about how those words made him mad. He wrote about how he kept hearing them anyway.

He wrote about how he began reading the Bible in secret to prove people wrong. He wrote about how he found the story of the prodigal son and how it hit him like a punch. He wrote about crying in his room and not knowing why.

He wrote about how he asked Jesus for forgiveness. How he told God he did not know how to change. How did he ask for help?

He wrote about the first time he prayed out loud at youth. His hand is shaking. His voice is cracking. The room is quiet. Nobody laughing.

He wrote about how he wanted to get baptized because he wanted to follow Jesus for real.

He ended with one sentence.

This church had not fixed me. Jesus did. This church showed me where to stand while Jesus did the work.

Hannah’s eyes blurred.

She blinked hard and looked up.

“It does not sound dumb,” Hannah said. Her voice stayed steady, yet warm. “It sounds honest.”

Jordan swallowed. “You think it is okay.”

“It is more than okay,” Hannah said. “It will help people.”

Jordan glanced at Eli like he needed confirmation.

Eli nodded. “It is good. You did a good job.”

Jordan’s face tightened as if he fought back emotion. He looked away. “Thanks.”

Hannah folded the paper and handed it back. “Do you want one suggestion?”

Jordan stiffened. “Sure.”

“Do not rush it,” Hannah said. “Pause when you need to. Let it breathe. People will listen.”

Jordan nodded, serious. “Okay.”

He shoved the paper back in his pocket as if it mattered.

“You want to practice?” Eli asked.

Jordan shook his head. “No. If I practice, I will mess it up.”

Eli accepted it. “Then we will pray before.”

Jordan’s eyes lifted to the cross on the wall. “Yeah.”

He hesitated, then looked back at Hannah. “Miss Hannah.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

“I am glad you and Eli are getting married,” he blurted, as if he needed to say it quickly before he lost his nerve.

Hannah smiled. “Thank you.”

Jordan shrugged. "It makes sense. You both... You both stay."

Hannah's chest tightened again. She nodded once. "We will keep staying."

Jordan gave a small nod. Then he stepped back toward the door.

"Tell Mrs. Talley I did throw away my trash," he said.

Eli looked amused. "I will tell her."

Jordan left.

Eli watched him go, then turned to Hannah.

"He is doing the work," Eli said.

"Yes," Hannah said. "God is doing the work."

Eli walked back into the sanctuary and closed the door halfway to muffle the noise in the hall. He returned to the front pew and sat beside Hannah. He leaned forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped.

"You cried," he said.

"I did not," Hannah answered quickly.

He turned his head. He looked at her face.

Hannah sighed. "Fine. I did."

He nodded as he respected it.

Hannah looked toward the front, toward the platform.

"Jordan's story does mirror yours," she said.

Eli sat back. "It does."

"Does it hurt?" Hannah asked.

Eli thought for a moment. “Sometimes.”

Hannah waited.

“It hurts because I remember the cost,” he said. “It also heals because I see God use it.”

Hannah nodded.

Eli turned toward her. “I used to think my past meant I would always be disqualified.”

Hannah looked at him. “And now.”

“Now I see God does not waste it,” Eli said. “He does not excuse it either. He redeems it.”

Hannah reached over and took Eli’s hand.

He laced his fingers through hers.

The sanctuary held quiet again. The colored light shifted as the sun lowered.

Hannah sat for a moment and let herself feel the weight of the months. The hard parts. The good parts. The parts where she asked God for help, and she did not know what would happen next.

She thought about how many times she had stood in this room alone and whispered prayers. For the church. For her father. For her mother. For Eli. For herself.

She thought about the first time she and Eli prayed together in here. It happened after a long day of work when he stayed late to fix a beam joint. She found him sitting in the front pew with his head down. She sat beside him. She did not speak for a while. Then Eli asked if she would pray. His voice shook when he asked, like he did not ask for help often.

Hannah prayed.

Eli said “Amen” with a rough voice.

After, he stayed seated. He said, “I do not know why God keeps letting me back in.”

Hannah told him, “Because He loves you. Because He is faithful. Because He builds what we break.”

Eli’s eyes filled then. He blinked hard and looked away.

Now, months later, he did not flinch when Hannah spoke of grace. He leaned into it. He trusted it more. He still fought his old reflex to earn everything, yet he did so with prayer rather than pride.

Hannah squeezed his hand.

Eli squeezed back.

“Do you want to walk?” Hannah asked.

He nodded. “Yes.”

They stood together. They walked slowly up the center aisle toward the back. Their footsteps sounded soft on the floor.

Hannah paused at each row as if she saw faces sitting there.

Mr. Hargrove, with his steady posture, sang off-key on purpose to make his wife laugh. Mrs. Hargrove leaned into him during prayer. Mrs. Talley sat straight as a post, yet wiped tears when nobody looked. Lucas and Nate, with their heads bowed, were praying like men who had learned it mattered. Mia and the other teen girls, hands lifted during worship, eyes closed. Jordan sat near the back at first, then inched forward over weeks.

Hannah stopped near the back pew. She turned and looked toward the front again.

This room held more than wood. It held repentance. It held forgiveness. It held vows. It held grief. It held new beginnings.

Hannah whispered, more to herself than to Eli, “Thank You, Lord.”

Eli heard her anyway.

He nodded.

A door opened in the hallway again. Voices swelled. Then faded. Parents picked up their kids. Cars started outside. The building shifted into evening quiet.

Hannah and Eli walked back toward the front. They stepped into the side aisle and moved toward the steps to the platform.

Eli reached down and picked up Hannah’s coffee cup from the floor where she had left it earlier. He tossed it in the trash near the door.

“You do not want Mrs. Talley to see,” Hannah said.

He gave a quick look. “I respect my elders.”

Hannah smiled.

Eli returned to her side. He looked around the sanctuary again. His gaze landed on the beam Hannah had traced earlier.

“You know what I keep thinking?” he said.

“What?” Hannah asked.

“I keep thinking about load,” he said. “How we tried to carry too much with too little support.”

Hannah nodded.

He continued, “When the beam failed, it did not fail all at once. It failed over time. Hidden. Quiet.”

“Yes,” Hannah said.

He looked at her. “I did the same thing.”

Hannah tightened her grip on his hand.

“And God did not let me keep rotting,” Eli said. “He exposed it. He repaired it. He used people to do it.”

Hannah swallowed. “You let Him.”

Eli nodded. “I did. I still am.”

Hannah breathed out slowly.

Eli stepped closer. “I want to pray.”

Hannah nodded. “Me too.”

They moved to the front. They stopped near the altar rail. The wood there looked polished now. Hannah and Eli knelt together on the cushion.

The sanctuary held stillness. Hannah heard the faint hum of the air system. She heard one last car door slam outside. Then quiet.

Eli bowed his head. Hannah did the same. Their shoulders touched.

Eli spoke first. His voice stayed low.

“Lord,” he said. “Thank you for building what I was not able to build. Thank You for forgiveness. Thank you for a church family. Thank You for Hannah. Thank you for bringing me home.”

Hannah closed her eyes tightly.

Eli kept going. “Keep me humble. Keep me honest. Keep me steady. Help me lead with love. Help me serve. Help me protect what You entrust to me.”

He paused. Hannah heard him take a breath.

“And Lord,” he said, “protect Jordan. Protect these kids. Give them the strength to choose You when the world pulls them. Give them men who show up. Give them women who pray. Give them a church that stays open.”

Silence.

Then Hannah spoke.

“Father,” she said. “Thank You for Maple Ridge. Thank You for this sanctuary. Thank You for the beams You restored and the hearts You restored. Thank you to my parents. Give them rest. Give them joy. Keep their marriage strong. Keep their faith strong.”

Hannah swallowed, then continued.

“Thank you for Eli’s redemption,” she said. “Thank You for the work You began in him. Carry it on. Teach us how to build a home where You stay at the center. Teach us how to forgive fast. Teach us how to listen. Teach us how to pray before we plan.”

She paused and let the next words come slowly.

“And Father,” she said, “keep this church faithful. Keep us from pride. Keep us from fear. Keep us from forgetting who did the work.”

Hannah lifted her head slightly, eyes still closed.

“Build what we are not able to,” she whispered. “Hold what we are not able to hold.”

Eli's hand found hers on the cushion. He squeezed.

"Amen," he said.

"Amen," Hannah echoed.

They stayed kneeling for another moment. They did not rush to stand. They let the peace settle.

When they rose, Eli helped Hannah. He kept hold of her hand. They turned together and looked out at the pews.

Even empty, the room felt full.

Hannah breathed in, slowly. She breathed out, slowly.

They stepped off the platform and walked down the center aisle. They stopped near the middle and looked up at the beams one last time. Hannah traced the line of wood with her eyes. She saw the repairs. She saw the strength.

Eli stood beside her.

Hannah spoke without looking at him. "I used to think the point was saving the building."

Eli answered, "The building helped save people."

Hannah nodded. "God used wood and nails and sweat and money. He used meals and hard talks. He used forgiveness."

Eli's voice stayed quiet. "He used your yes."

Hannah turned her head and met his eyes. "He used yours, too."

Eli looked up at the beam again. Then he looked back at Hannah.

"You will read the verse Sunday," he said.

"Yes," Hannah answered.

He nodded once. “It is the truth over all of it.”

They stood in the restored sanctuary, under weathered beams made strong again, with the man God restored beside Hannah, and she let the words settle into her bones as a final anchor for her home, her church, her town.

“Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain.”

Also in the Maple Ridge Redemption Series

Book 1: *Beneath These Weathered Beams* ★

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 1

Hannah Whitaker is determined to save the Maple Ridge Community Church, the cornerstone of her family's legacy, as its very foundations threaten to give way. When Eli Brooks, a gifted architect with a past he cannot outrun, returns to town, their shared mission ignites a connection neither expected. As old wounds resurface and daunting repairs loom, can they find the courage to rebuild both the church and their guarded hearts, or will the weight of history prove too great to bear?

Book 2: *The Carpenter's Return*

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 2

Caleb Carter returns to Maple Ridge, burdened by the past he thought he left behind, only to find Anna Blake, the widowed florist, guarding her heart amidst blooms and memories. As Caleb's determination collides with Anna's guarded spirit, their shared history and unresolved pain threaten to keep them apart. Can Caleb and Anna overcome the shadows of their past and find the courage to embrace a love that has quietly endured, or will they let fear dictate their futures?

Book 3: *The Song in the Steeple*

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 3

In the heart of Maple Ridge, Caleb Mercer returns, haunted by his past and seeking redemption through the music that once set his spirit free. Lydia Bennett, the town's beloved schoolteacher, finds herself amidst a sea of exhaustion, her once vibrant voice now a whisper. As their paths converge in the sanctuary's choir loft, can they find harmony in their brokenness, or will the shadows of regret and fatigue drown out the song of hope that beckons them forward?

Book 4: *The Measure of Mercy*

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 4

Rebecca Hale has tirelessly rebuilt Maple Ridge's church, but the arrival of Nathan Cole, the banker whose decisions nearly doomed it, brings tension she can't ignore. As they work side by side, Nathan's precise calculations clash with Rebecca's heartfelt devotion, challenging her faith and reopening wounds she'd rather forget. Can Nathan prove he's more than the sum of his past mistakes, and will Rebecca find the strength to forgive, or are some divides too deep to bridge?

Book 5: When the Harvest Comes

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 5

Daniel Mercer's dreams for his family farm are wilting under the relentless drought gripping Maple Ridge, leaving his faith as parched as the soil beneath his feet. When Rachel Moreno returns with scientific solutions and unresolved emotions, their clashing approaches threaten to deepen old wounds. As the community gathers for the annual harvest revival, will they find the courage to trust each other and rediscover hope in the most barren of seasons?

Book 6: A Light on Maple Street

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 6

Micah Turner has spent years quietly proving himself in Maple Ridge, a man defined by steady work and redemption rather than his troubled past. When Naomi Whitaker arrives, she sees beyond the whispers, drawn to the man Micah has become and stirring emotions he thought buried. As they navigate the tender complexities of new beginnings under the watchful eyes of the town, can they overcome their fears and embrace the hope of a future together?

Book 7: The Letters in the Attic

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 7

When Lydia Bennett discovers a cache of forgotten letters hidden in the attic of Maple Ridge's church, she feels the weight of history echoing her own untold stories. Dr. Samuel Park, a history professor visiting to organize the archives, unearths more than just old documents; he encounters personal truths that

challenge his carefully controlled life. As the letters reveal tales of faith and redemption, will Lydia and Samuel find the courage to embrace their own legacies and the healing that awaits them?

Book 8: The Firehouse Promise

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 8

When volunteer firefighter Gabriel Reyes rescues Evan Miller from a twisted wreck one stormy night, he doesn't expect his life to collide so intensely with Dr. Alana Brooks, the new ER nurse who's made an art of emotional distance. As they navigate the unpredictable crises of Maple Ridge, Gabriel wrestles with the fear of failing those he swore to protect, while Alana grapples with her own reluctance to open her heart. Can they find a way to trust in each other when their pasts threaten to extinguish the fragile flame of hope?

Book 9: Steady as the River

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 9

Grace Park has dedicated her life to holding together the pieces of her world in Maple Ridge, but when the riverbank threatens the safety of the community church, she faces a challenge that reaches beyond the physical. Daniel Chen, a disciplined contractor with a reputation for solving visible problems, arrives to repair the crumbling wall, unaware that he may also mend Grace's guarded heart. As they work side by side, will Grace find the courage to trust not just in the repairs, but in the possibility of a life rebuilt with hope and quiet faith?

Book 10: The Builder's Oath

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 10

Nathan Mercer knows the weight of every beam and bolt, but when it comes to matters of faith, the ground beneath him feels unsteady. As Miriam Carter returns to Maple Ridge, weary from years overseas with stories of hope and hardship, she challenges Nathan's tightly held doubts. As they work side by side on a church project, will their shared labor build a bridge strong enough to span their differences, or will the ghosts of their pasts tear it down before it can stand?

About the Author

Katherine Knells is the author of the Maple Ridge Redemption series, a collection of clean Christian romance novels set in a small rural town where faith, community, and love intertwine across twenty interconnected stories.

Katherine writes about ordinary people navigating extraordinary seasons of grace — prodigals finding their way home, couples learning to trust again, and a town that discovers, time and again, that God is faithful in the quiet places.

When she is not writing, Katherine enjoys long walks, strong coffee, and the kind of conversations that last well past sunset. She believes every broken beam can be rebuilt, and every fractured heart can be restored.

She hopes that somewhere in the pages of Maple Ridge, you have found a little of your own story — and a reminder that redemption is never too late.