MAPLE RIDGE
REDEMPTION
Book Nine

Steady as the River

WHERE LOVE IS *restored*

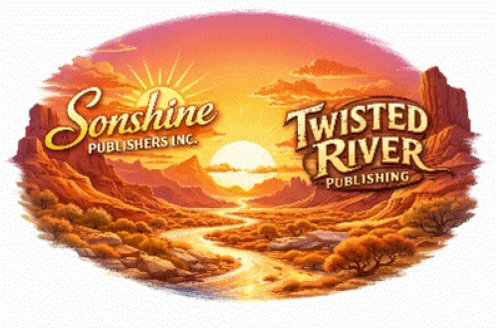
KATHERINE KNELLS

Steady as the River

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 9

Katherine Knells

Romance



A SMALL-TOWN CHRISTIAN ROMANCE SERIES

Maple Ridge Redemption

Copyright © 2026 Katherine Knells

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Published by

Sonshine Publishers Inc.

Printed in Canada

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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

The rain had come steady for three days. It was not the kind of storm that shouted; it lingered, soft and insistent, brushing the leaves, streaming down the wooden eaves of Maple Ridge Community Church. The river swelled in answer, edges blurring into the low grass along its banks. Clouds pressed low, silver lining each hour with quiet weight.

Daniel Chen parked his truck by the edge of the river property. From here, he could see the wall, angled slightly forward, leaning in weariness against the pull of water. The timbers spoke of long service, weathered gray and streaked dark at the base where years of pressure had gathered. He rested his hands on the wheel and studied the lines for signs of failure, those small beginnings that told him the end would come too quickly if nothing intervened. The rain dripped streaks across the glass. He did not look away.

It was not the wall alone that held him still. That soundless wash of the river called him back through years of leaving, years filled with projects half-forgotten by the towns he had served, years where his work was repair but never permanence. The quiet pull of water moved unbroken, carrying with it the rhythm of endings and beginnings.

Grace Park stood within the choir loft, the sound of rehearsal humming low around her. She counted measures under her breath, held pages tightly, and measured each note against the rain tapping its own music against the windows. From the south window, she glimpsed the river's edge. She saw where the ground sloped, softened, lost the firmness of summer's hold. Her steady alto voice gave the choir its timing, its calm center. Yet somewhere in her, beneath chords and penciled notations, she felt it, the quiet undoing

that crept forward while no one paid attention. There was something fragile within her too, though she would not say the words aloud.

Later, when the rain eased and evening smoothed into its own slow arrival, the church emptied with quiet steps. The steeple caught the last of the day's light, white against fading skies. The river moved sure as always, shifting soil away from places that had held too long.

It was a town long-used to patience, a woman long-accustomed to fragility, and a man who had never stayed. They waited now, neither knowing yet what they waited for.

Chapter 1

The Wall by the River

The river moved with no hurry. It slid past the church grounds as if it had all the time in the world. Sunlight lay thin on the water, broken by the ripple of a slow current and the shadow of overhanging willow limbs. The bank nearest the prayer garden had once held a clean edge. Now the edge sagged.

The retaining wall stood in a tired line of old timbers and stone. Years ago, someone had stacked it with care. Someone had driven stakes deep and braced the face against spring melt. Time had pressed in anyway. Water had found seams. Roots had pushed. Frost had lifted and settled. The wall bowed toward the river in one long, patient curve.

A chunk of soil gave way with a soft sound. It did not splash. It slid, as if it had waited for permission. Dark earth tipped into the water and disappeared. A few pebbles followed. The river carried it all without complaint.

Past the wall, the church sat bright and still. White siding. Simple windows. A steeple rising clean into the late afternoon sky. Maple Ridge Community Church did not look like a place in danger. It looked like a place built to endure.

Grace Park watched the bank from the path near the prayer garden. She held a folder against her chest, the kind with taped corners and a worn spine. Sheet music lived inside it. Pencil marks, notes to herself, reminders for altos who rushed, for tenors who held notes too long. The folder felt familiar in her hands. It kept her steady when her mind wandered toward what might happen if the wall failed.

She had seen the river in all moods. Low and clear in late summer, stones showing beneath the surface. High and brown in spring, when melted snow pushed hard through town. Quiet in winter, when ice formed along the edges, and the air held a clean bite. The river always moved. The river always did what it did.

Grace shifted her weight and listened. Behind her, faint voices carried from the fellowship hall. Choir members lingered after rehearsal, a few laughs. A chair scraped. Someone said a quick goodbye. The door opened and closed. Warm air drifted out for a moment, touched with coffee and old wood.

The river made its own sound. A soft pull. A constant murmur.

She looked down at the wall again. One timber sat lower than it should. A gap had opened between it and the next piece of stone. It seemed small. It was not small. Grace knew how small problems grew when they met enough time.

She turned and walked toward the fellowship hall, keeping to the path lined with hostas and late summer flowers. The garden held a bench under a maple tree. A small sign near the bench held a verse burned into the wood. The letters had faded, but Grace knew them by heart.

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Isaiah 26:3.

She paused a moment. Her eyes moved over the words as if she needed to see them again, as if her mind needed proof. The verse did not change. She did not either, at least not quickly.

Footsteps sounded on the gravel behind her. Grace turned.

Pastor Whitaker came down the path with a calm stride. He carried his Bible under one arm and a small notebook in the other hand. He wore a pale shirt with the sleeves rolled to his forearms. His hair had more gray than it used to, but his face held the same steady kindness.

“Grace,” he said.

“Pastor Whitaker.” She nodded. “Rehearsal ended early.”

“I heard.” He glanced toward the fellowship hall. “They sounded good.”

“They will sound better by Sunday.” She did not smile when she said it. She spoke as if it was a simple fact and a simple goal.

Pastor Whitaker followed her gaze toward the river. The line between his brows deepened.

“It is worse,” Grace said.

He walked closer to the edge of the path, careful with his footing. He did not step onto the soft ground near the wall. He leaned forward, hands on his knees for a moment, and studied the curve of the timbers.

“It is worse,” he agreed.

Grace kept her voice quiet. “I called the county last month. They told me it was on church property, so it was our responsibility.”

Pastor Whitaker straightened. “I made some calls too. We have a contractor coming to look at it today.”

Grace felt her shoulders ease and then tighten again. “Today.”

He nodded. “He is from over in Briar County. He comes recommended. He has done work for three churches and a few farms. He will give us an honest assessment.”

Grace looked at the wall again. “I do not want an assessment. I want it fixed.”

Pastor Whitaker’s mouth softened. He did not tease her. He did not correct her. He stood beside her and faced the river.

“I do too,” he said. “The Lord gives wisdom through steps, Grace. Assessment first. Then we move.”

Grace pressed the folder closer to her chest. She thought of her daughter, Mina, running along this path with the other children after service. She thought of picnics near the water on church family days. She thought of the prayer garden, the bench, and the verse. She thought of how easy it would be for a child to step too close to the edge and find only air.

“I put cones out last week,” Grace said. “People still move them. They want the view.”

Pastor Whitaker sighed. “I will speak to the congregation again. We will rope it off, if we need to.”

Grace looked at him then. “People do not like ropes.”

“They will like a collapse less.”

A car engine sounded faint through the trees. Gravel popped under tires. A vehicle turned into the church lot, slower than most. Grace watched through the leaves as a dark truck moved toward the space near the office entrance. It parked with careful precision. The engine cut off.

Pastor Whitaker watched too. “That will be him.”

Grace did not move. She waited, folder still in her arms, as the truck door opened. A man stepped out and paused with one hand on the

top of the door. He stood for a moment as if he took in the whole place before he took another step.

He wore work boots, jeans, and a plain shirt. His hair sat neat and short. He looked like someone who kept things in order. He shut the truck door without slamming it. Then he walked toward the path.

Grace felt a small, strange tightening in her chest. It did not feel like fear. It did not feel like interest either. It felt like attention. Like the moment before a choir began a hymn, when the room drew quiet, and every voice held its breath.

Pastor Whitaker stepped forward first. Grace followed a pace behind.

The man reached the start of the path and stopped with a respectful distance. His eyes moved from Pastor Whitaker to Grace and back, quick but not careless. He nodded.

“Pastor Whitaker?” he asked.

“Yes,” Pastor Whitaker said. “You must be Daniel Chen.”

Daniel held out his hand. “Yes, sir. Daniel Chen. Thank you for meeting me.”

Pastor Whitaker shook his hand. “Thank you for coming. This is Grace Park. She directs our choir and coordinates several of our church activities.”

Grace shifted the folder to one arm and took Daniel’s hand. His grip felt steady, neither too firm nor too soft. His hand held a faint roughness, the kind earned through work, not forced.

“Hello,” Grace said.

“Hello, Ms. Park,” Daniel said.

He did not stare. He did not rush. His gaze held hers a moment, then moved toward the river as if he had already placed the problem in his mind.

Pastor Whitaker gestured down the path. “It is this way.”

Daniel nodded. “I brought a measuring tape and a level. I do not know what I will find until I see it up close.”

Grace walked with them toward the wall. She kept on the path and watched Daniel’s feet. He did not drift toward the edge. He stayed on solid ground. He often looked down, reading the slope and the softness of the soil.

They reached the section where the wall bowed most. Daniel crouched near the safe side of the timbers, one knee down, one foot planted. He leaned forward and studied the gaps, the tilt, the dark damp line where water had risen in past seasons.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small flashlight. He shone it into the spaces between stone and timber. He ran his fingers over the wood, then tapped lightly along the face. The sound changed as he moved, a hollow note in one area, a denser note in another.

Grace watched his hands. Calm hands. Efficient. No wasted motion.

Daniel stood and stepped back. He kept his face composed, but his eyes narrowed slightly.

Pastor Whitaker waited. “What do you see?”

Daniel looked along the length of the wall. “The wall has lost alignment. The soil behind it is washing out. The timber at the center has rot along the lower edge. The stakes have likely shifted.”

Grace’s stomach dropped. “So it will fall.”

Daniel did not soften the truth. “It will fail if nothing changes. I do not know if it will fail this year or next spring. Water decides its own timing.”

Grace turned her head away for a second. She looked at the river. It moved as if it did not know their concern.

Pastor Whitaker asked, “What would you recommend?”

Daniel took a slow breath. “First, I would like to walk the full line and check the ends. If the ends have movement too, then patching one section will not help. If the ends hold, then reinforcement and drainage might buy time. But long term, the best plan is a rebuild.”

“A rebuild,” Grace repeated, as if she had to say the word to believe it.

Daniel looked toward the church building. His eyes flicked up to the steeple for a brief moment, then returned to the wall. “A new retaining wall, with proper footings, and a drain system behind it. The church sits close enough to matter. The prayer garden path sits close enough to matter. Safety matters.”

Grace drew a steady breath through her nose. “How long would it take?”

Daniel did not answer right away. He looked again, as if he weighed the slope, the access, the equipment needed. “It depends on length, materials, and site access. I would give a firm schedule after I measure and inspect. I do not like guessing.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “I appreciate that.”

Daniel moved along the wall, staying on the safe side. He pulled his measuring tape from his belt and extended it. The metal strip flashed in the sun. He measured a section, then marked a note in a small

notebook. His writing looked neat. Grace noticed the way his pencil moved, slow and deliberate.

Grace stayed near Pastor Whitaker, quiet as Daniel worked. She did not know why his carefulness struck her so strongly. Maple Ridge held many careful men. Farmers who tended equipment with patience. Carpenters who took time with joints and corners. Eli Brooks, the church handyman, had built half the shelves in the fellowship hall with steady hands and steady faith.

Daniel's carefulness felt different. It held a kind of distance, as if he had learned to keep the world at arm's length.

When Daniel reached the far end of the wall near the willow tree, he stopped and looked down. He knelt again, tested the timber, and pressed his palm against the soil behind it.

He looked up at Grace and Pastor Whitaker. "This end holds better. The worst movement sits in the center section, where the current hits during high water."

Grace walked a few steps closer, still on the path. "The river curves there."

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

Grace glanced at his face. His expression stayed neutral, but his eyes held focus. He did not seem bothered by the sight of damage. He seemed like a man who had seen many kinds of failure and learned to respond without panic.

Pastor Whitaker said, "We have children here. We have events. We need to make it safe."

Daniel rose. "I agree. Today, I would suggest a temporary barrier closer than cones: rope, stakes, and clear signs. I can install a

temporary fence line if you want. It will not look pretty. It will keep people back."

Grace heard herself say, "Please."

Daniel looked at her again. "All right."

Pastor Whitaker asked, "What do you need from us today?"

Daniel held his notebook in one hand. "Permission to take some photos. I also need to know if there are underground utilities nearby. And I need to know your budget range."

Pastor Whitaker made a low sound, half-sigh, half-acceptance. "We will speak in my office. Grace, would you join us? You have been the one tracking this."

Grace nodded. "Yes."

They walked back toward the building. The fellowship hall door now stood propped open. The last choir member had left. The air inside held a trace of music, as it had soaked into the walls.

Grace stepped in behind Pastor Whitaker and Daniel. The hall looked plain and familiar. Folding chairs stacked in one corner. A piano near the front. A bulletin board with announcements in neat rows. A table with a plastic tablecloth and a plate of leftover cookies.

Daniel paused as he entered. His eyes moved over the room, then to the piano. He looked as if he listened for something, but the room stayed quiet.

Grace cleared her throat. "We rehearse here on Thursdays."

Daniel nodded once. "It is a good space."

Pastor Whitaker led them down the short corridor to his office. The hallway smelled of old books and lemon cleaner. Framed photos

lined the walls: church picnics, baptisms, and youth group trips. Grace saw Daniel glance at them as they passed. His face did not change.

They entered the office. Pastor Whitaker gestured for them to sit. Grace took the chair nearest the door, folder in her lap. Daniel took the chair opposite her. He placed his notebook on his knee, not on the desk.

Pastor Whitaker sat behind his desk and opened a drawer. He pulled out a folder of his own. “Before we speak of budget, tell me what you saw. Speak plainly.”

Daniel nodded. “The wall has reached the end of its lifespan. It might hold through the rest of summer and fall, but spring water will press hard. The soil behind it will keep washing out. Once the soil goes, the path will follow. If the path goes, then it becomes a safety issue.”

Grace felt her hands tighten on her own folder. She kept her face calm. She had learned to keep her face calm in front of others. Calm felt like a duty.

Pastor Whitaker asked, “Do we need to close off the garden entirely?”

Daniel thought. “If you keep people a safe distance from the edge, you do not need to close the whole garden. But you need to treat the soft ground as unstable. A person cannot see stability by looking at grass.”

Grace looked down. The word struck her. Stability. She thought of Mina again. She thought of the years after she had returned to Maple Ridge, carrying boxes and shame and a small child who asked too many questions. Grace had tried to build a stable life with routines,

church, and work. She had built it piece by piece, as a wall she hoped would hold.

Pastor Whitaker said, “We have some savings for building repairs. We have a few donors who step in when needed. We also have limits.”

Daniel nodded as if he expected nothing else. “If you want, I will put together two bids. One for temporary reinforcement and drainage for the worst area, and one for a full rebuild. The second would cost more and last longer.”

Grace spoke before she meant to. “We do not want to pay twice.”

Daniel’s eyes met hers. His face stayed composed. “No. But sometimes people need time to gather resources. A short-term solution buys time. It does not solve the problem.”

Pastor Whitaker looked at Grace, then back at Daniel. “How soon would you be able to start, if we chose the full rebuild?”

Daniel’s answer came without flourish. “I have a crew. I have current projects. I can schedule this within three weeks if we sign an agreement soon. If you need it sooner, I can adjust, but I would need to move other work. I do not promise a date I cannot meet.”

Grace heard the weight in his words. She recognized it. She had known men who promised dates they never met. Men who smiled, said the right thing, and then disappeared when the work grew hard.

Daniel did not smile much. He did not seem interested in saying the right thing. He seemed interested in saying what was true.

Pastor Whitaker asked about insurance and permits. Daniel answered with the calm of someone who kept paperwork in order. He spoke carefully. He chose words like he had learned the cost of careless ones.

Grace listened and watched him. When he looked down to write, his lashes cast a faint shadow on his cheek. His jaw held a clean line. He carried himself with restraint. Grace did not know him, yet she felt as if she could predict his next movement. It soothed her in a way she did not expect.

Pastor Whitaker leaned back and folded his hands. “Would you like to walk the site again with Eli Brooks? He is our handyman. He knows the grounds.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes, sir. That would help.”

Pastor Whitaker stood. “I will call him. Grace, are you able to stay a bit longer? I know you have a child at home.”

Grace glanced at the clock on the wall. Mina would be at her neighbor Mrs. Alder’s house until dinner. Grace had time.

“Yes,” Grace said. “I can stay.”

Pastor Whitaker stepped into the hallway to place the call. The office grew quiet.

Grace sat with her folder and tried to ignore the way silence sharpened her awareness. She heard the faint tick of the clock. She heard the low hush of the air vent. She heard, through the window, the distant sound of the river.

Daniel sat still. He did not fidget. He looked at the notebook in his lap, then up toward the window.

Grace spoke because silence felt too full. “Thank you for coming out on short notice.”

Daniel turned his head toward her. “You are welcome. I had a gap in my schedule today. The timing worked.”

She nodded. “You work in Briar County.”

“Yes. My shop is in Cedar Hollow.”

Grace knew Cedar Hollow. A bigger town with more traffic and a hardware store twice the size of Maple Ridge’s. “You drive a lot.”

“I do.” He said it like a statement of fact, with no complaint.

Grace hesitated. She did not want to pry. Yet she found herself asking, “Do you enjoy it?”

Daniel’s gaze returned to the window for a moment. “I enjoy work that ends well.”

Grace held still. The words landed with a quiet thud. She understood them. Not the work part. The ending part.

“What kind of work ends well?” she asked softly.

Daniel looked back at her. His eyes held a steady brown, clear and observant. “Work where I can see what I did. A repaired wall. A safe porch. A roof that does not leak. Things people rely on.”

Grace’s grip eased on the folder. “People rely on music too,” she said before she could stop herself.

Daniel did not dismiss it. He listened.

Grace continued, a little more quietly. “It does not show the same way. It is hard to measure.”

Daniel nodded once. “It still holds people up.”

Grace blinked. She had not expected him to understand. Or maybe she had expected him to correct her, to return the conversation to practical things.

Instead, he offered a simple truth. It warmed something in her chest she had learned to keep cool.

Pastor Whitaker returned then. “Eli is finishing up a repair at the parsonage. He will meet us at the river in ten minutes.”

Daniel stood at once. Grace stood too, collecting her folder.

They walked back out toward the path. The air had shifted. The sun angled lower. Light caught in the leaves, making patterns on the ground.

Near the fellowship hall, Grace heard the faint echo of voices in her mind, the choir singing a hymn they had practiced earlier. She had corrected the sopranos on a long phrase. She had asked the basses to soften. She had tried to shape something steady.

Daniel walked beside her without crowding her space. His steps matched Pastor Whitaker’s pace. He did not look around like a tourist. He looked around like a man who needed to understand where he stood.

At the river, Daniel paused again at the worst section. He looked at the sagging timber. He looked at the soft soil. He looked at the path and the distance from the wall to the garden.

Grace waited in silence. Pastor Whitaker did too. It seemed right to let him think.

Eli Brooks approached along the path from the other direction. He carried a tool belt and a pair of gloves tucked into one back pocket. His hair looked wind-tousled, and his face held a calm, familiar steadiness.

“Pastor Whitaker,” Eli said as he reached them. His gaze moved to Grace, then to Daniel. “Miss Grace.”

“Eli,” Grace said. Relief touched her voice without her meaning it. Eli felt like Maple Ridge. Solid, known, safe.

Pastor Whitaker introduced them. “Eli, this is Daniel Chen. He is the contractor I told you about. He is assessing the retaining wall.”

Eli offered his hand. “Good to meet you.”

Daniel shook it. “Good to meet you too.”

Eli looked down at the wall and let out a low, quick, quiet whistle. He crouched and touched the timber. “This looks worse than it did last fall.”

Grace nodded. “It has been shifting all summer.”

Daniel stepped back to give Eli room. “Do you know how old it is?”

Eli straightened and rubbed his jaw. “I think it went in when they put in the prayer garden. Before my time. Pastor Whitaker would know better.”

Pastor Whitaker shook his head. “It was before I came. The records are spotty. It has been here at least fifteen years.”

Daniel nodded. “That fits with what I see.”

Eli glanced at Daniel. “What are you thinking?”

“A full rebuild,” Daniel said. “Or a short-term reinforcement if you need time.”

Eli looked at the wall again. He did not argue. He did not posture. He seemed to accept the truth as it was.

“We need it safe,” Eli said.

Daniel’s gaze moved to Grace. “Ms. Park mentioned cones. People move them.”

Grace felt heat rise in her cheeks. “They do.”

Eli's mouth lifted at one corner, a small sign of humor without mockery. "People in Maple Ridge like to do what they want. Even in church."

Pastor Whitaker gave a quiet cough that might have been a laugh. "They do."

Daniel looked at the ground near the edge. "A temporary barrier line will help. Stakes and rope. Signs. Something people do not step over without thinking."

Eli nodded. "I can put that in today."

Daniel's eyes rested on Eli's tool belt. "Do you have a post driver?"

"In the shed," Eli said.

Daniel said, "I have stakes and a driver in my truck."

Grace looked at him. He had come prepared. He had not even known the full extent of the condition. Yet he had brought supplies for a temporary fix. Her throat tightened again, and she did not know why it mattered so much.

Pastor Whitaker looked between them. "Then let us do it. I would rather overdo caution."

Grace heard herself say, "Thank you."

No one answered with a big reply. They moved into work.

Daniel walked back toward his truck with long, even strides. Eli went toward the maintenance shed near the cemetery to gather rope and signs. Pastor Whitaker headed toward the office to print a notice for the bulletin board and the front doors.

Grace stayed by the path, watching the river. She felt out of place, standing while others worked. She had learned to help in ways that

fit her life. Planning meals, organizing music, checking in on widows, teaching children Sunday songs. This kind of work, the kind done with stakes and drivers, did not belong to her hands.

Yet she stood there because she cared where those stakes would go. She cared how far back they would keep children. She cared about the wall in a way that surprised even her.

Daniel returned with equipment in both hands. A bundle of wooden stakes under one arm. A post driver in the other. He carried them as if they weighed little. Sweat darkened the fabric at the center of his back, faint and controlled. He set the stakes down in a neat line on the grass and looked at Grace.

“Ms. Park,” he said.

Grace straightened. “Yes.”

“Do you know where people tend to walk? Where they cut across.”

She pointed without thinking. “There. Near the bench. People step off the path to take pictures of the river.”

Daniel followed her gesture. “All right.”

He walked to the area and pressed his boot heel into the ground. He tested it. He stepped back. Then he chose a spot and drove the first stake in with steady blows. The driver made a dull thud each time it struck. It sounded solid. It sounded like boundaries being placed.

Eli returned with rope, a roll of bright caution tape, and two signs. He stopped near Grace.

“Miss Grace,” he said quietly, “are you all right?”

Grace blinked and nodded. “Yes. I am fine.”

Eli studied her face for half a second, then looked away. He did not push. He offered the rope to Daniel and began setting the next stake line.

Grace watched them work. Two men who knew their tools. Two men who did not waste time. They did not talk much. When they did, their words stayed practical.

“Four feet back,” Daniel said.

Eli nodded. “Better to make it five.”

Daniel considered and agreed with a single nod. They adjusted the line without argument.

Grace held the end of the rope when Eli asked her to. She wrapped it around the stake as Eli tied it off. Her fingers fumbled for a moment, and she felt foolish.

Daniel noticed. He did not comment. He moved to the next stake and drove it deeper, giving her time.

The line formed a clean arc away from the wall. It left space for the path and bench. It kept people away from the soft edge.

When they finished, Daniel stepped back and looked at the barrier as if he checked his own work. He nodded once, satisfied.

“It will help,” he said.

Grace swallowed. “It will.”

Pastor Whitaker returned with a paper notice in his hand. He walked along the rope line, reading the signs. “Good.”

He looked at Grace. “Thank you for staying.”

Grace shook her head. “I did not do much.”

Pastor Whitaker's gaze softened. "You saw it first. You spoke up. That matters."

Grace looked down at the rope and the stakes. Simple things. Stronger than cones. A small answer to a larger problem.

Daniel wiped his hands on his jeans, then picked up his notebook. "I will send you both bids by early next week," he said to Pastor Whitaker. "If you approve one, I will place you on the schedule."

Pastor Whitaker nodded. "Thank you, Daniel. We will bring it before the board."

Daniel looked at Grace again. "Ms. Park, if you see more movement, call Pastor Whitaker and call me. The river can change fast after rain upstream."

Grace nodded. "I will."

Daniel hesitated, then added, "If you have events near this area, keep them farther up by the building until the work is done."

Grace thought of the choir picnic planned for next month. She had planned to place blankets near the garden so the older women could sit in the shade. She shifted plans in her mind with a familiar motion.

"I will move it," she said.

Daniel gave a small nod. "Good."

Eli clapped Daniel on the shoulder once, in a friendly way. "You did good work today. Even if it is only rope."

Daniel accepted it with a quiet look. "Thank you."

He gathered his equipment. He did not linger. He did not drift into conversation for its own sake. He walked back to his truck, each step measured.

Grace watched him go, her folder still held against her. She did not know why his presence had stirred her. It did not feel like a storm. It felt like a shift in the air before rain, a small pressure change, quiet but real.

Daniel opened his truck door, placed the post driver and unused stakes inside, then paused with one hand on the door. He looked back toward the river and the church.

His gaze reached the steeple. He held it there for a second longer than needed. Then he looked away and got into the truck.

The engine started. He backed out slowly, gravel crunching, then turned toward the road that led out of Maple Ridge.

Grace stood with Pastor Whitaker and Eli as the truck disappeared behind the trees. The river kept moving. The wall kept leaning. The rope line stood fresh and bright against the green grass.

Grace drew a long breath. The air smelled like sun-warmed leaves and damp soil.

Pastor Whitaker spoke softly, more to himself than to anyone else. “The Lord builds the house.”

Grace looked at the river again. She heard the verse in her mind, the one she had read by the bench. Perfect peace. A mind stayed.

She did not feel perfect peace. She felt something else. A quiet awareness of need. A quiet hope for steady hands.

Grace turned back toward the church building. “I need to pick up Mina,” she said.

Eli nodded. “Tell her to stay away from the rope.”

Grace managed a small smile. “She will obey better than the adults.”

Pastor Whitaker smiled too, tired but warm. “Go on. I will speak to the board and pray over next steps.”

Grace walked toward the parking lot, her steps slow and grounded. Behind her, the river ran on. The wall waited. Somewhere down the road, a contractor drove back toward his other work, leaving Maple Ridge with a job still unfinished and a line of rope holding the edge for one more day.

Chapter 2

Voices Through Open Windows

Daniel drove back before the morning heat settled in. He left his own town behind him with the same plain care he brought to every job. Coffee in a travel cup. Tools checked twice. Notes on the passenger seat, corners squared. He did not speed. He did not drift.

The road into Maple Ridge ran between fields and low tree lines. Summer corn stood shoulder high in places, green and tight. The air smelled like dust and cut grass. The sun climbed in a pale sky.

He remembered the turnoff before he saw it. The sign still stood near the ditch, “Maple Ridge” in black paint on a white board. Someone had repainted it since he last drove through. The letters looked clean. The posts looked new. The town cared for small things.

He slowed as the first houses came into view. Front porches. A few wind chimes. Bird feeders swinging. A dog behind a fence. A man watering a row of flowers along a walkway. The place did not hurry.

Daniel passed the small strip of businesses near Main Street without turning in. The bakery sat in the same brick building. The hardware store still had a row of lawn mowers out front. The café sign had fresh paint. He noticed details without meaning to. He had trained his eyes to see what needed repair.

He also noticed what did not need repair. The town looked held together.

He did not feel held together.

The church steeple rose above the trees before the building came into full view. White wood. Simple lines. He kept his gaze on it longer than he intended. Something in his chest tightened, then settled. He pressed his lips together and looked back to the road.

He told himself he came for work. He told himself he did not come for anything else.

He turned onto the lane near the church grounds. Gravel popped under his tires. The prayer garden sat off to the side with its low fence and the bench near the water. The river ran behind it, steady and slow.

The retaining wall near the bend looked worse in full morning light. The bank had slumped another inch overnight, at least in his mind. He parked in the small lot near the fellowship hall and cut the engine. For a few seconds he stayed still, the quiet wrapped around the truck.

Then sound reached him.

Singing.

It came through open windows on the church side, soft at first, then clearer as the wind shifted, a hymn line, warm and steady. A few voices wavered, then found each other again. Daniel listened without moving.

A woman's voice rose above the rest. Not loud. Clear. Firm in a gentle way. She shaped the phrase, and the others followed. He did not know the words at first. Then he caught them.

"Be still, my soul…"

His hand rested on the steering wheel. His knuckles looked pale against the dark surface. He breathed in through his nose. He smelled river water and sun on pine needles.

He had heard hymns in his childhood. His mother used to hum while she cooked. He had not thought of those sounds in years. He kept busy to keep from thinking.

The voices inside the church held a calm pace, like the river behind the trees. No rush. No force. Order without hardness.

He stepped out and closed the truck door with care. The gravel shifted under his boots. He reached into the bed for his measuring wheel and a long level. He had brought stakes, string, and a clipboard. He planned to map the bank and wall line again, then take photos for his estimate.

The singing continued.

He walked toward the rope line Eli had set the day before. The bright rope still ran between stakes, warning people back from the sagging edge. Daniel crouched near the first stake and checked the soil. Damp beneath the surface. He pressed his thumb into it, then rubbed the dirt between his fingers. It held together, but it felt heavy. Water pressure behind the wall would keep pushing.

He rolled the measuring wheel along the top edge and marked lengths on his clipboard. His pencil moved in quick strokes. He set the level against a section of stone. The wall leaned outward, subtle but sure. He adjusted the angle and checked again. The lean did not change.

The choir inside the church moved into another verse. The leader's voice counted in softly between lines. Daniel could not hear the words, only the tone. Steady. Kind. Certain without strain.

He glanced toward the open windows on the church side. White frames. Screens in place. Sunlight on the glass. The sound spilled out as if it belonged outside too.

He turned back to the wall.

He told himself he did not care about a choir rehearsal. He told himself it did not matter.

His mind still tracked the sound. He did not stop it.

He measured the distance from the wall to the tree line and the path near the prayer garden. He noted the slope, the grade, and where the bank dipped. He walked down closer to the water and looked at the base stones where the current met the lowest level. The river moved over smooth rocks with a quiet push. He heard the soft rush and the hymn at the same time.

His chest loosened again. He did not understand why.

He stood and wiped his hands on his work pants. His phone buzzed once. He checked the screen. A message from his foreman back home. A question about a supply order.

Daniel typed a short answer and slid the phone back into his pocket. Work came first. It always had.

The voices inside rose into a fuller sound. A few men joined. A woman laughed for a moment, then the leader's voice drew everyone back in.

Daniel's gaze moved again toward the windows.

Grace.

He knew it without seeing her. He had met her the day before by the river. Her folder pressed to her chest. Her eyes steady on the line. Her voice quiet when she spoke, but clear. She had thanked him as she meant it. She had not tried to keep him in conversation. She had not used charm or jokes to soften the work.

She had watched him leave with a look he could not name.

He had noticed. He had driven away with her face in his mind more than once. It bothered him, so he had turned on the radio. He had turned it up. It did not help.

Now her voice filled the air in a way his radio never could.

He returned to his notes and kept measuring.

He moved along the top edge, careful with his footing. He watched the ground, then checked the rope line. He found where the stake had tilted a little. He straightened it and tamped the soil around it with his boot heel. He did it without thinking, the way he fixed small problems as he saw them.

The hymn ended. The leader spoke.

“All right. Let us resume from the second page. Sopranos, watch the rhythm in measure twelve. Altos, do not fall behind on the consonants.”

The words carried through the window, crisp and calm. Daniel paused with his pencil midair. He listened to the instructions.

There was no sharpness in the tone. No impatience. The leader gave direction without apology. She expected them to follow. She trusted they would.

He respected that.

The choir began again. The sound filled the warm air around the church. It washed over the yard and riverbank like a steady tide.

Daniel walked farther down the bank where the rope line ended. He looked for signs of undermining. A dark pocket under a stone. A gap in the mortar. A place where water had chewed away soil behind the face.

He found it. He crouched and leaned closer. The stone face held, but the soil behind it had slipped. He reached in with a gloved hand and felt loose gravel. He drew his hand back and stared at the opening.

He could shore it up for a few days. He could place temporary boards and sandbags. He could buy time until the church decided on a full repair.

He wrote a note on his clipboard.

The choir's voices rose into a simple harmony. Daniel stood and turned his head again toward the church windows. The sound did not feel like performance. It felt like prayer, though it had the shape of work.

He did not know when church music had started to feel distant to him. He used to sit in a pew as a boy and watch his father's hands folded in his lap. His father would stare ahead, eyes fixed, as if he could hold the family together by force of will. His mother would sing softly beside him, eyes closed. Daniel had learned early that people did not stay together because someone wanted it enough.

He had learned other lessons too. Keep life controlled. Keep the plan tight. Keep feelings out of the way.

He had kept those lessons for a long time.

Grace's voice made him think of a different lesson. Steady does not mean hard. Steady means faithful.

He shook his head once, small. He returned to the wall and kept working.

Footsteps on gravel pulled his attention. Daniel looked up.

Eli Brooks walked across the yard with a toolbox in one hand. He wore a faded work shirt and jeans. He moved with ease, like a man who knew every board and nail on the property.

"Morning," Eli said.

"Morning," Daniel said.

Eli glanced at Daniel's clipboard. "How does it look today?"

"Worse than it should," Daniel said.

Eli nodded once, slow. "That is how it goes with water."

Daniel looked toward the river. "Yes."

Eli set his toolbox down near the rope line. "Pastor Whitaker asked me to check the downspout on the fellowship hall. It has been dumping too close to the bank."

Daniel's eyes followed the path of roofline and gutter in his mind. "Redirecting it will help. It will not solve the wall."

Eli gave a small grin. "No. But it will make me feel like I did something."

Daniel's mouth tightened, almost a smile. "Work matters."

Eli looked toward the church windows. The choir sang on. Eli's expression softened. "Grace started early today."

Daniel did not answer right away. He kept his eyes on the wall stones. "They sound good."

"They do," Eli said. "She keeps them together. She does not let them slide."

Daniel's pencil tapped his clipboard once. "She leads well."

Eli studied him for a second. "You met her yesterday."

"Yes," Daniel said.

Eli did not press. He picked up his toolbox again. "If you need anything, I am around."

Daniel nodded. "Thank you."

Eli walked away toward the fellowship hall. Daniel watched him for a moment. He quietly envied men like Eli. Eli looked rooted. Daniel did not feel rooted anywhere.

The choir reached a phrase and held it, sustained and even. Daniel felt something settle in his chest again. He did not fight it. He let it sit there while he finished his measurements.

When he had enough, he took photos from several angles. He stepped back and framed the wall with the prayer garden bench and the tree line to show context. He captured the slumped soil behind the stones. He took a photo of the rope line.

Then he stood with his hands on his hips and stared at the wall.

A full repair would take time and money. The church board would need to decide. They would need a clear plan.

Daniel liked clear plans.

He also knew plans did not always hold.

The choir's voices fell quiet for a moment. Then Grace spoke again, closer now, as if she had moved toward the windows.

"Let us take a short break. Water, then back in five."

Chairs scraped faintly. A few voices murmured. The sound of laughter floated out.

Daniel looked at his watch. He did not need a break. He did not need water. He had a bottle in his truck.

He found himself walking toward the church building instead of his truck.

He stopped near the open window, standing on the grass below it. He did not look in. He did not want to appear like he had come to listen.

A woman's voice inside said, "Grace, do you want me to run the last verse with you?"

Grace answered, "Thank you, Mrs. Alder. I will."

Daniel recognized the name. Eli had mentioned Mrs. Alder once yesterday, in passing.

Another voice asked, "Is Mina with your sister today?"

Grace's voice softened. "Yes. She will bring her after lunch. Mina wanted to pick flowers for the prayer garden."

A woman chuckled. "She will pick every one."

Grace laughed, low and brief. "She will try."

The sound of her laugh hit Daniel in a tender place he did not visit often.

He shifted his weight. He looked at the white clapboard siding. He traced a small crack near the window trim with his eyes. He could fix it in ten minutes. He did not reach for his tools.

Grace spoke again, quieter. "All right. Let us focus. We have Sunday music to offer, and we want to offer it with peace."

Daniel's throat tightened. Offer it with peace. He had not thought of work as offering in years. He had thought of it as survival.

He stepped back from the window, moved toward the church's side door, then stopped. He did not belong in there. He did not know these people. He came to do a job and leave.

His feet stayed where they were.

The door opened.

Grace stepped out holding a water bottle and a stack of sheet music. She wore a simple dress and flat shoes. Her hair sat pulled back at the nape of her neck. Sunlight caught strands near her temple. She looked down at her papers, then up.

Her eyes met his.

She paused. The pause held a quiet weight, not fear, not surprise alone, something like careful attention.

“Mr. Chen,” she said.

“Grace,” Daniel said. He did not know why he used her first name. It came out without thought, simple and direct.

Her gaze flicked toward the riverbank behind him. “You are back.”

“I needed more measurements,” he said.

She nodded. “Pastor Whitaker said you might return today.”

Daniel held his clipboard in one hand. His fingers curled around the edge. “I did not want to send an estimate without being sure.”

“I appreciate it,” Grace said.

Her eyes moved to his hands, dirty from the soil. Then they lifted their faces to his again. She looked calm. She looked tired in a way he recognized, the kind of tired from carrying responsibilities without complaint.

From inside the church, a voice called, “Grace, do you want lemon water?”

Grace turned her head. “No, thank you. I am fine.”

The voice faded. Grace looked back at Daniel. “You heard rehearsal.”

He felt his jaw set. He could have denied it. He did not. “Yes.”

Her expression softened. “We leave the windows open when it is cool enough. The air in there gets close.”

“It sounds…” He searched for a word that did not expose too much. “Orderly.”

A small smile touched her mouth. “Orderly is kind.”

“I meant it as a compliment,” Daniel said.

“I know,” Grace said. She adjusted the stack of music in her arms. “Do you work with music?”

“No,” he said. “I work with buildings.”

“Buildings need rhythm too,” she said, then looked down as if she had said more than she intended. “I mean. A plan. Steps in order.”

Daniel studied her. “Yes.”

Grace took a sip of water. The bottle crinkled softly under her grip. “How long do you think the rope line will hold?”

Daniel glanced toward the bank. “It will hold people back. It will not hold the soil.”

Grace’s eyes followed his. “So we need to hurry.”

“No,” Daniel said.

Grace looked back at him.

Daniel chose his words with care. “We need to move with purpose. Hurrying makes mistakes.”

Grace breathed out once, slow. “You speak as you build.”

Daniel felt a quiet warmth in his chest at the way she said it. He did not show it. “I try.”

Grace shifted her weight. “Pastor Whitaker will meet with the board tonight. He wants your estimate by then, if possible.”

“I will have a preliminary estimate by afternoon,” Daniel said. “I will need to know what scope they want. Temporary reinforcement or full replacement.”

Grace nodded. “They will want what is wise. They are careful with money.”

Daniel looked at the church grounds. The trimmed grass. The maintained garden. The painted trim. “They treat the property well.”

“They do,” Grace said. “It is a shared home.”

Daniel looked at her again. “You speak like it is your home too.”

Grace’s hands tightened around the music for a moment. “It is,” she said. “It has been for a while.”

Daniel did not ask how long. He had heard yesterday that she had returned years earlier. He did not know the story. He did not ask. He did not press into private ground. He had learned to respect boundaries because his own were thick.

A child’s voice sounded faintly from the far side of the building, then faded. Daniel turned his head, but he did not see anyone. Grace did not react. She looked used to children and their sudden noise.

Grace glanced at his clipboard. “Do you need access inside for anything?”

“No,” Daniel said. “It is all outside.”

Grace nodded. “All right.”

Silence held between them. The kind of silence that did not strain. It waited.

Grace looked toward the river again. “It looks calm today.”

“It always looks calm,” Daniel said.

Her eyes stayed on the water. “Looks matter. Then there is what is underneath.”

Daniel felt a small jolt. The words landed in him with a quiet weight. He had thought similar thoughts near job sites, looking at a wall that seemed fine until he tapped it and heard a hollow sound.

He answered in the way he answered clients. Practical. Measured. “Yes.”

Grace looked back at him, and her voice softened. “Sometimes I hear the river, and I remind myself. It moves without panic.”

Daniel did not look away. He did not know what to say. He did not want to speak in ways that sounded like empty comfort.

He chose truth. “It moves because it must.”

Grace’s eyes stayed steady. “Yes. It does.”

From inside, someone called again, “Grace, five minutes.”

Grace raised her voice slightly. “I am coming.”

She looked at Daniel with a small hesitation. “Will you be at the meeting tonight?”

“No,” Daniel said. “I do not attend board meetings.”

Grace nodded, as if she had expected it. “Pastor Whitaker might want you there.”

Daniel looked down at his clipboard, then back up. “I will drop off my estimate. If he needs me, he will call.”

Grace pressed her lips together, then relaxed them. “All right.”

Daniel took a small step back. He did not know why leaving felt like something more than leaving.

Grace shifted her music stack again. “Thank you for coming back.”

He nodded once. “Thank you for…” He stopped. He did not want to sound strange. He finished anyway. “For keeping peace in there.”

Grace blinked. The expression on her face changed, quiet surprise, then something tender. She looked down for a moment, then back up. “It is not peace I keep. It is people. Peace comes from the Lord.”

Daniel held still. He did not look away. “Yes.”

Grace’s shoulders eased. “I should return. They will drift.”

Daniel watched her, then said, “They follow you.”

Grace gave a small smile, then turned and went back through the door. It shut behind her with a soft click.

Daniel stood in the grass for a moment, listening as voices gathered again, as pages turned, as the first notes rose.

He walked back toward the riverbank.

His boots sank slightly in the softer ground near the edge. He stepped with care and crouched again near the gap behind the stones. He stared at it as if he could solve it by looking hard enough.

He had solved many problems by looking hard enough.

This one would take more than skill. It would take decisions. Money. Trust.

Trust felt harder than stone.

He moved along the wall again and checked his measurements one more time. He wrote a clean list of materials in his head. Stone. Drainage pipe. Gravel. Geotextile fabric. Rebar if they rebuilt. He pictured a reinforced face, a weep system to relieve pressure, an anchored base below the frost line.

He also pictured a wall holding back water year after year.

Steady work. Quiet work.

He heard the choir behind him again. The sound rose into a hymn he recognized this time.

“Great is Thy faithfulness…”

His pencil paused.

He had not sung those words in a long time. He remembered them from childhood. Morning by morning, new mercies. He remembered his mother’s voice, a little tired, still gentle.

He swallowed once. He kept writing.

When he finished at the riverbank, he returned to his truck and set his tools in order. He did not toss anything. He did not leave loose ends. He wiped his hands with a rag and drank water. He leaned against the truck for a moment and stared at the church.

The steeple cut clean against the sky.

He told himself he had no time to stand there. He had work in other places. Calls to return. Employees waiting for answers.

Still he stood.

The singing drifted through the open windows, quietly holding the air. He found himself listening for Grace's voice within the group. He found it. It guided without pushing. It carried warmth without pulling attention to itself.

He wondered what it felt like to live in one place long enough to guide people through seasons. He wondered what it felt like to stay when leaving would feel easier.

His phone buzzed again. Another message. Another question.

Daniel answered it. Then he slid the phone into his pocket and looked toward the river once more.

The water moved. The wall leaned. The rope line stayed bright against the grass.

Inside, Grace lifted her hands again, and her voice carried through open windows, steady as if she had practiced steadiness for years. The sound reached Daniel where he stood in the parking lot with his tools and his lists, and something in him eased without his permission.

He got into his truck, started the engine, and drove to the far side of the property to take one more set of photos from the road angle. He parked again, stepped out, and framed the shot with the church and river in view.

He lowered his phone and looked toward the building.

He did not pray out loud. He did not know what to say.

He did think of one verse he had heard long ago, words his mother once spoke while she washed dishes.

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you.

He did not feel perfect peace. He did feel a pull toward something steady.

The choir sang on behind the glass. Daniel stood outside with his work boots on the church gravel and listened until the song ended.

Chapter 3

The Child Who Notices First

Sunday came mild and bright.

Grace was up before her alarm. She lay still for a moment and listened. The house held its usual quiet. The hum of the refrigerator. The soft rush of a car on the road beyond the trees. A bird calling from the maple out back.

From the other room, a small foot scuffed the floor.

Grace sat up. She pulled her hair into a low knot and reached for her robe. She stepped into the hallway as Mina padded out, her pajama top twisted sideways and her hair a soft tangle.

Mina blinked up at her. “Is it church day?”

“It is,” Grace said.

Mina yawned without covering her mouth. “Are we late?”

“We are early.” Grace touched Mina’s cheek with the back of her fingers. Her skin felt warm from sleep. “Go wash up.”

Mina shuffled toward the bathroom. She stopped in the doorway and turned. “Are we still singing?”

Grace smiled. “Yes. Choir is singing.”

“Good.” Mina disappeared inside.

Grace went to the kitchen. She brought the water to a boil for tea. She packed Mina’s small snack bag for after service. Apple slices in a container, a granola bar, a napkin. She moved with routine. Routine kept the morning smooth. Smooth kept Mina calm.

Grace set out Mina's dress on the couch. Light blue with white buttons. Mina had picked it herself at the thrift store in town and loved it for the pockets.

Grace poured tea and stood at the sink. She watched steam curl up into the sunlit air. Her mind went where it had gone all week, without her inviting it.

The riverbank.

The caution tape.

Daniel Chen standing on the grass with his tools, making clean lines as if he could hold the earth in place by order alone.

Grace had prayed twice about the wall. Short prayers. Simple. Lord, keep the children safe. Give Daniel wisdom. Give the church patience.

She had not prayed about how her stomach tightened when she heard his truck in the lot.

She did not want to examine it. She had learned what happened when she trusted feelings. Feelings rose fast. They fell fast. They left bruises.

Mina ran down the hall, one sock on and one in her hand. "Mom, I did it."

Grace turned from the window. "You did. Come here."

Mina lifted her chin. Grace brushed Mina's hair into a neat ponytail and tied it with a ribbon. Mina watched Grace's face in the small mirror by the door.

"Are we going by the river today?" Mina asked.

Grace paused. "Why?"

“Because you said the ground is squishy. And there is a tape.”

Grace slid Mina’s second sock on. “We will stay away from the tape.”

Mina’s eyes sharpened with interest. “Why is there tape?”

“Because the bank is not safe.”

Mina looked serious. “Like when the sidewalk was broken and Mrs. Alder put a cone.”

Grace nodded. “Like that.”

“Who put the tape?”

“A man who is helping the church.”

Mina’s brows pulled together. “A man from church.”

Grace reached for Mina’s dress. “He is working for the church. He does not live here.”

Mina stepped into the dress. “Why?”

Grace guided the buttons through their holes. “Because he fixes things.”

Mina brightened. “Like Eli Brooks.”

Grace stopped for half a beat. The name landed soft and familiar. Eli Brooks. He had fixed so many small things over the years. A loose step. A window that would not open. A shelf in the nursery room.

“Yes,” Grace said. “Like Eli. Only this man does bigger jobs.”

Mina tried to spin. Grace held her steady so the last button did not slip. “No spinning until after.”

Mina sagged with patience she did not feel. “Okay.”

Grace helped her into shoes and checked her hands. Clean. Nails trimmed. She grabbed her choir binder from the counter, then her keys. Her own dress hung plain and neat. Navy. Simple. She had pinned her hair back with a clip. She wore the small silver cross she always wore.

They stepped out into the late summer morning. The air smelled like damp earth and sun-warming wood. Grace locked the door and took Mina's hand.

Mina swung their hands as they walked to the car. "Do we see the tape?"

"We might," Grace said. "From far away."

Mina leaned in, her voice lowering. "Is it danger tape?"

Grace buckled Mina into her booster seat. "It is caution tape. It means people need to pay attention."

Mina nodded as she understood. "I pay attention."

Grace shut the door and walked around to the driver's seat. She slid in and started the engine. The old car made a small rattle, then settled. She backed out of the driveway and headed toward Maple Ridge Community Church.

The town roads felt familiar in a way that eased her chest. Fields stretched out on either side. Corn stood tall and pale green. A few pumpkins sat in a patch near a farmhouse. The season shifted slowly.

Grace drove with the window cracked. She heard cicadas and the low drone of a truck passing on the highway farther out. Mina hummed in the backseat. Not a hymn. A made-up tune.

They turned onto the church road. The white steeple rose above trees like it always had. Grace saw it and felt her shoulders drop.

Then she saw the river through the gaps in the leaves, a flat line of light.

And beyond the prayer garden, she saw the bright stripe of tape.

Mina leaned forward in her seat. “There it is.”

Grace parked in her usual spot. The lot already held a few cars. Eli Brooks’s old pickup sat near the side entrance. Grace saw him carrying a box toward the fellowship hall, his stride steady.

She glanced toward the riverside.

A dark truck sat near the gravel edge. Daniel’s truck. Clean. No rust. Parked straight between the faded lines.

Grace’s hands tightened on the steering wheel before she forced them to loosen.

Mina spoke again, blunt and clear. “Is the tape man here?”

Grace reached back to unbuckle Mina. “His name is Daniel. He is here to work.”

Mina hopped down from the seat. “I want to see him.”

Grace held Mina’s hand. “Mina.”

Mina looked up, unbothered. “I want to see if he is nice.”

Grace did not answer right away. She shut the car door and looked toward the side yard. Daniel stood near the caution line. He wore jeans and a work shirt. He held a clipboard. He did not move fast. He looked at the ground and then at the wall, like he weighed every inch.

Grace felt a pull in her chest. A quiet respect. He did not treat the wall like an annoyance. He treated it like something worth careful thought.

Mina tugged Grace toward him.

Grace let her, because Mina had already decided. Because Mina did not do small half measures. Because Mina saw people as people, not as risk.

They crossed the lot. Gravel crunched under shoes. The church doors stood open. Voices drifted out from inside. Laughter. The sound of chairs moving. A hymn played softly on the piano, someone warming up.

Daniel looked up as they neared. His face held calm. His eyes moved from Grace to Mina.

Grace stopped a few feet away. “Good morning.”

“Good morning,” Daniel said. His voice stayed even. He did not glance away from Mina. “Hello.”

Mina stepped forward and held out her hand like she had seen adults do. “My name is Mina.”

Daniel blinked once, then shifted the clipboard to his left hand. He reached out and shook Mina’s hand with gentle care. “Hello, Mina. My name is Daniel.”

Mina studied his face. Her gaze did not flicker. Grace saw how Mina watched mouths and eyes. She had always done it. She listened with her whole body.

Mina nodded once, as she approved. “You are the tape man.”

Daniel’s mouth twitched, close to a smile, but he kept it small. “I put up the tape.”

“Because it is squishy,” Mina said.

“Yes,” Daniel said. “Because it is not safe.”

Mina glanced toward the river. “Is it going to fall in?”

Daniel crouched to Mina’s level. His knees bent slowly. He did not rush his movement or crowd her. He rested one hand on his thigh. “Some of it might. That is why people need to stay back.”

Mina leaned forward. “Will you fix it?”

“I will work on it,” Daniel said. “I will try to make it strong again.”

Mina looked satisfied. Then her eyes narrowed. “Do you love tools?”

Grace felt heat rise in her cheeks. Mina asked things like that, straight to the center.

Daniel did not look thrown. He glanced at Grace for a beat, as if to check what was allowed, then looked back at Mina. “I do. I like work that feels honest.”

Mina considered. “What is your favorite?”

Daniel shifted his weight. “My tape measure.”

Mina laughed, a small burst. “That is funny.”

“It is useful,” Daniel said. “It helps me do things the right size.”

Mina nodded hard. “I like my purple marker. It makes good hearts.”

Grace swallowed. She had not expected tenderness to hit her this way. Daniel’s face stayed open and kind. He did not patronize Mina. He did not speak down to her. He did not act as if she bothered him.

Grace had seen men bristle when Mina approached. Not because Mina had done anything wrong. Because they did not want the attention; they did not want to step into a child's world.

Daniel stepped into it with care.

Grace tightened her grip on her binder. "We should go inside. Choir has rehearsal before service."

Mina still looked at Daniel. "Are you coming to church?"

Daniel held her gaze. "I am working this morning. But I will hear the singing through the windows."

Mina looked delighted. "We sing loud."

Daniel's eyes softened. "I believe you."

Mina leaned closer and lowered her voice, as if she were sharing a secret. "My mom sings. She is the boss."

Grace let out a quiet breath. "Mina."

Daniel looked up at Grace. His expression stayed calm, but something warmer moved there. Respect, maybe. He rose from his crouch with the same steady pace. "She told me you lead the choir."

Grace held his gaze for a moment too long. She looked away first. "I try to keep it organized."

Daniel glanced toward the church. "It sounded organized."

Mina pulled Grace's hand again. "Come on, Mom."

Grace turned back. "Thank you for explaining, Daniel."

"You are welcome," he said.

Mina paused and looked back over her shoulder. “Do not let the river eat the church.”

Daniel did not laugh. He nodded once, like he took her charge seriously. “I will do my best.”

Mina walked on. Grace followed. She did not look back until she reached the side door. When she did, she saw Daniel watch them go. He looked down at the caution tape, then back at the wall.

Grace stepped inside and let the church air wrap around her. Old wood. Floor polish. Faint perfume. Something like coffee from the fellowship hall.

Eli Brooks passed by with the box. He stopped and smiled at Mina. “Morning, kiddo.”

Mina lifted her chin. “I met the tape man.”

Eli’s brows lifted. “Did you?”

“He is nice,” Mina said. “He likes tape measures.”

Eli let out a soft chuckle. “A man after my own heart.”

Grace nodded at Eli. “Morning.”

Eli looked at Grace with quiet knowing. “He is solid,” he said, low enough that Mina did not hear.

Grace shifted the binder in her arms. “He seems professional.”

Eli’s smile held no tease, only warmth. “Professional is good. Solid is better.”

Grace did not answer. She guided Mina down the hall toward the choir room.

The choir room sat off the sanctuary, a smaller space with a piano and rows of chairs. Sunlight came through open windows, bright in the dust motes. The air moved with a slow breeze.

A few choir members had already sat, flipping pages and murmuring greetings. Mrs. Alder sat in the front row with her hymnal. Her hair sat in a neat gray coil. She watched Mina with sharp affection.

“There she is,” Mrs. Alder said. “Miss Mina.”

Mina ran to her and hugged her waist. Mrs. Alder patted Mina’s back with a careful hand.

Grace set her binder on the piano. She breathed in and let her shoulders settle. Here, she knew what to do. Here, she did not feel off balance.

But Daniel’s face stayed in her mind. The way he crouched. The way he listened. The way he answered Mina without guarded edges.

Grace opened her binder and looked at the song list for the morning.

Mrs. Alder called to Grace. “Is the caution line still up?”

Grace nodded. “Yes. Daniel put it up.”

Mrs. Alder’s eyes narrowed. “I saw him out there earlier in the week. He looks like the sort who washes his hands before he prays.”

Grace blinked. “Mrs. Alder.”

Mrs. Alder’s mouth pressed into a small smile. “It is a compliment.”

A few choir members laughed softly. Grace did not.

She lifted her hands. “All right. We will start with page three. Sopranos, watch the cutoff. Altos, do not lag behind the beat.”

They sang.

Grace let the notes fill her chest. She watched faces soften as the hymn carried them. Some sang with strength. Some with effort. Some with grief tucked behind their eyes. Grace saw it and held the tempo steady.

She kept her voice calm. She kept her eyes kind. She held them together.

Mina sat in the back with crayons and paper. She drew quietly for a while, then started to sing under her breath, off-key but earnest.

Grace glanced at her, and warmth moved through her ribs. Mina had survived more than a child should. She had watched her mother cry in a bathroom with the faucet running. She had sat in a moving truck with boxes and no clear plan. She had asked why her father did not call.

Now she sat in a church room and drew hearts.

Grace finished rehearsal and dismissed the choir. They filed out toward the sanctuary, voices low, hands adjusting collars and smoothing skirts.

Grace bent to Mina. “Do you need the bathroom?”

Mina shook her head. “I want to see the tape man again.”

Grace inhaled. She kept her voice gentle. “After church.”

Mina’s eyes held mischief. “He said he will hear us.”

“He will,” Grace said. “Come.”

They walked into the sanctuary. The space held light and stillness. Wooden pews. White walls. Simple cross behind the pulpit, a small arrangement of late summer flowers on the front table.

Pastor Whitaker stood near the front, greeting people as they came in. His hair had more gray now than it once did, but his face stayed steady. He spoke with each person as if he had all day.

Grace guided Mina into their pew.

Pastor Whitaker saw them and walked over. “Good morning, Grace.”

“Good morning, Pastor Whitaker,” Grace said.

He looked at Mina. “Good morning, Mina.”

Mina beamed. “I met the tape man.”

Pastor Whitaker laughed softly. “Daniel Chen.”

Mina nodded. “Yes. He likes tape measures.”

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes crinkled. “A useful thing to like.”

Mina leaned closer to Pastor Whitaker. “Is he your friend?”

Pastor Whitaker glanced at Grace, then back to Mina. “He is helping our church. I am grateful for him.”

Mina looked satisfied. She sat back and swung her legs.

Pastor Whitaker lowered his voice to Grace. “How are you holding up?”

Grace kept her face composed. “Fine.”

Pastor Whitaker studied her for a moment. He did not push. He only nodded. “Choir sounded beautiful this morning. Thank you.”

Grace felt emotion rise in her throat. She forced it down with a slow breath. “You are welcome.”

Pastor Whitaker patted Mina’s shoulder and moved on.

Service began.

Grace sang with the choir from the side seats. Her eyes moved to the windows more than once. They stood open. Air stirred the curtains. Somewhere outside, the river moved without noise.

Grace kept expecting to see Daniel's shape pass by, or his truck door open, or his clipboard lifted again. She did not see him. She heard only the steady rhythm of church life around her.

Scripture reading came from Psalm 46. The sound of it landed calm. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God.

Grace held the words in her heart. A river could erode. A river could refresh. Both truths lived side by side.

After the final hymn, people spilled into the aisle. Children ran ahead. Adults called out invitations for lunch and plans for the week.

Grace gathered her binder and Mina's paper.

Mina tugged her sleeve. "Now."

Grace let out a quiet sigh. "All right. We will go outside."

They walked through the side door into sunlight. The air felt warmer now. The grass smelled sharp where it had been cut.

They rounded the corner toward the riverside.

Daniel stood near his truck, talking to a man from the church: Mr. Harlan, one of the elders. Mr. Harlan held his hands on his hips, his face serious. Daniel held his clipboard and spoke with measured calm.

Mina broke into a trot.

Grace followed faster than she wanted to. "Mina. Slow down."

Mina stopped at the edge of the caution tape and stared at it as it challenged her. She reached one hand toward it.

Grace caught her wrist. “No.”

Mina looked up. “I did not touch.”

Grace softened her grip but did not let go. “Stay back.”

Daniel saw them. He excused himself from Mr. Harlan with a nod and walked over. He kept his steps steady. He stopped on his side of the tape line, leaving space.

“Hello again,” Daniel said to Mina.

Mina lifted her paper. “I drew you.”

Grace froze. “Mina.”

Daniel’s eyes widened a fraction. He looked at the paper with care. “You drew me.”

Mina held it up higher. A stick figure with squared shoulders. A long line at one side, labeled TAPE in wobbly letters. A blue strip along the bottom, labeled RIVR. A church with a tall steeple.

Daniel crouched again, slow and respectful. “May I see it?”

Grace’s mind caught on his word. He had said it without thinking. She noticed, then forced herself to let it go. People spoke how they spoke. Daniel did not sound careless. He sounded human.

Mina leaned forward and held the paper across the tape line.

Daniel did not reach across. He did not break the boundary. He looked at Grace first, asking without words.

Grace stepped closer and took the paper from Mina. She leaned and offered it to Daniel from her side, careful not to cross the tape.

Daniel took it with both hands as it mattered.

He studied it. His face softened. “You drew the tape.”

Mina nodded. “Because it keeps people safe.”

Daniel looked at the river line. “And the river.”

Mina nodded again. “It moves.”

Daniel lifted his eyes to Mina. “This is good work.”

Mina smiled like he had given her gold. “You can keep it.”

Daniel held the paper for a moment. “Thank you, Mina. I will keep it.”

Grace felt something tight ease in her chest. Mina did not hand her drawings to strangers. She gave them to people she trusted.

Daniel stood and kept the paper tucked against his clipboard so the wind would not take it. “You stayed behind the tape. Thank you.”

Mina lifted her chin. “I listen.”

Daniel nodded. “I saw.”

Mr. Harlan walked over, his face curious. “Well, there is the young miss.”

Mina looked at him with polite patience. “Hello.”

Mr. Harlan chuckled. “Daniel, you made a friend.”

Daniel glanced at Grace, then back to Mr. Harlan. “Mina has good questions.”

Mr. Harlan looked at Grace. “She always did.”

Grace smiled faintly. “She learned from church ladies.”

Mrs. Alder had come outside with two other women. She stood a few steps away, watching. Her eyes rested on Daniel, then Grace, then Mina.

Mrs. Alder called, “Mr. Chen. Are you eating lunch or are you working through it like a machine?”

Daniel turned toward her. “I will eat.”

Mrs. Alder nodded, satisfied. “Good. Grace brought extra sandwiches for Mina, and Mina does not finish them.”

Grace’s face warmed. “Mrs. Alder.”

Mrs. Alder waved a hand. “Food is fellowship. Pastor Whitaker says so.”

Daniel looked at Grace. His expression held something like restrained amusement. “I did not bring lunch.”

Grace hesitated. She had brought Mina’s snack bag, not a lunch. She had leftovers at home. She had planned to go home after church and keep the day simple.

Mina spoke up, eager. “We have apples.”

Daniel’s gaze returned to Mina. “Apples sound good.”

Mr. Harlan cleared his throat. “We do have a potluck in the hall today. You are welcome, Daniel. The ladies put enough out to feed a county fair.”

Daniel nodded. “Thank you. I will come inside after I finish a few notes.”

Grace looked toward the fellowship hall. She could already hear the clink of plates through open windows.

Mrs. Alder moved closer, eyeing the paper Daniel held. “Is that a picture of you?”

Daniel looked down. “Yes. Mina drew it.”

Mrs. Alder’s mouth turned up. “Then you have been judged and found acceptable.”

Mina smiled as she understood. “Yes.”

Grace felt Daniel’s eyes on her. She looked back.

He spoke quietly. “You have a good daughter.”

Grace swallowed. The words landed deep because she had fought for Mina. Because she had feared she would fail her. Because she had promised God she would do right by her child even when she did not know how.

“Thank you,” Grace said. Her voice stayed steady, but her eyes stung.

Daniel nodded once. He looked at the tape line again, then at the wall. His focus shifted back to work. Grace saw how he moved between warmth and duty without dropping either. It touched her in a place she kept guarded.

Mina tugged Grace’s hand. “We should feed him apples.”

Grace drew a breath. “We will go see what is inside first.”

Mina pointed at Daniel. “Do not go away.”

Daniel’s mouth lifted a little more this time. “I will be here.”

Grace guided Mina toward the hall. Behind them, Daniel turned back to his clipboard. Mr. Harlan spoke to him again. Daniel listened without interrupting. He wrote something down.

Grace felt Mina glance back as they walked.

Inside, the fellowship hall buzzed. Long tables held casseroles, pies, bowls of fruit, trays of rolls. People moved in lines with plates. Voices rose and fell in easy talk.

Grace found a spot at a table near the window.

Mina climbed into a chair and leaned on her elbows. “He is quiet.”

Grace opened the snack bag and took out apple slices. “Yes.”

Mina popped one into her mouth. “Quiet people listen.”

Grace looked at her. “Yes.”

Mina chewed. “Does he have kids?”

Grace paused. “I do not know.”

Mina swallowed. “He would be a good dad.”

Grace felt her throat tighten. “Mina.”

Mina’s face stayed earnest. “It is true.”

Grace looked away toward the window. From here she could see the caution tape, bright against green grass. She could see Daniel’s truck. She could see Daniel’s head as he stood with Mr. Harlan.

Grace pressed her palm against the edge of the table, grounding herself.

Hope did not always come loud. Sometimes it came small, through a child’s blunt sentence.

Grace did not know what Daniel carried. She did not know what he feared. She did not know what he wanted from Maple Ridge beyond a contract and a plan.

But she knew what she saw.

He treated her child with respect.

He treated a failing wall like it mattered.

He stood steady in the open air, with the river flowing near his feet, and he did not seem to need to run from it.

Mina leaned closer. “Mom.”

Grace turned back. “Yes.”

Mina pointed with her chin toward the door. “He is coming.”

Grace looked.

Daniel walked into the fellowship hall. He had washed his hands. She saw it in the careful way he dried them on a paper towel, then threw it away. He scanned the room once, calm and observant, then saw Mina.

Mina lifted her hand high and waved as if she were guiding planes in. “Here.”

Daniel walked over. He stopped at the table, still leaving space, as if he were asking permission without speaking.

“Hello,” he said.

Mina grinned. “We saved apples.”

Daniel’s eyes moved to Grace. “Is this seat taken?”

Grace’s heart beat hard once, then steadied. She moved her binder from the chair beside her. “No. It is not.”

Daniel sat. He set his clipboard down at his feet and held Mina’s drawing in his hand as if he did not want to crease it.

Mrs. Alder passed by with a plate piled high. She paused and looked at Daniel, then at Grace, then at Mina. Her eyes brightened with quiet satisfaction.

Grace felt it, the gentle pressure of community. A nudge. Not a shove. A reminder that people in Maple Ridge watched out for each other.

Daniel reached for an apple slice from Mina's container. "Thank you for sharing."

Mina nodded, solemn. "Sharing is good."

Daniel chewed and looked out the window for a moment. "It is a good day."

Grace watched his profile. The set of his jaw. The calm line of his mouth. The way his eyes stayed attentive even when he rested. He looked like a man who kept promises to himself, even when no one else knew about them.

Grace folded her napkin once, then again. "Mr. Harlan is asking a lot of questions."

Daniel nodded. "He should. It is the church's property. The wall sits close to the prayer garden. People have a right to know what I plan."

Grace kept her voice low. "Are you worried?"

Daniel looked at her. He did not answer fast. "I respect water. I do not fear it. I will take time and do it right."

Grace studied him. His words did not sweep. They stayed measured. They felt like something he had learned the hard way.

Mina leaned in. "Do you go to church where you live?"

Daniel looked at her. "Yes."

“What is it called?” Mina asked.

“Cedar Haven Community Church,” Daniel said.

Mina nodded, then frowned. “Do they have a river?”

Daniel’s eyes softened. “No. They have a pond.”

Mina made a face. “A pond is boring.”

Grace covered her mouth to hide a smile.

Daniel’s mouth lifted again. “A pond is quieter.”

Mina considered. “The river is quiet too. It moves quietly.”

Daniel looked out the window again. “Yes. It does.”

Grace watched him watch the river. She felt something settle in her chest. A small sense of rightness she did not trust yet.

Across the room, Pastor Whitaker spoke with a young couple. Eli Brooks carried plates to an older man who walked with a cane. Laughter rose near the dessert table. Children chased each other between chairs until a mother’s voice called them back.

Grace looked at Daniel. “Thank you,” she said.

Daniel turned to her. “For what?”

Grace hesitated. She chose honesty, small and plain. “For being kind to her.”

Daniel glanced at Mina, who had started drawing again on a napkin with her purple marker. He looked back to Grace. “She makes it easy.”

Grace felt her eyes sting again. She blinked it away. “It is not always easy for people.”

Daniel's face turned thoughtful. "I know."

He said it like confession, quiet and clean.

Grace's fingers stilled on her napkin. "Then thank you anyway."

Daniel dipped his head. "You are welcome."

Mina looked up from her drawing. "Mom, he is going to fix the river wall."

Grace smoothed Mina's ponytail. "Yes, he is going to work on it."

Mina pointed her marker at Daniel like it was a baton. "And he will not let the river eat the church."

Daniel met Mina's gaze. "I will do my best."

Mina seemed content with those words. She went back to drawing, tongue caught at the corner of her mouth.

Grace watched Daniel as he ate another apple slice. He chewed slowly, thoughtfully. He did not fill the space with noise. He did not force ease.

He sat at their table as he belonged there, even if he did not know it yet.

Grace did not know what this meant. She only knew Mina had noticed him first.

And Mina did not miss much.

Chapter 4

Foundations That Shift Slowly

Monday morning came soft and pale.

The river kept moving. It did not look troubled. It did not raise its voice. It slid past the church grounds with the same calm it had carried on Sunday.

Daniel Chen arrived before most people woke. He parked on the gravel near the prayer garden gate and sat for a moment with both hands on the wheel. The air held a cool bite, clean and damp. He listened. Water. Leaves. A distant truck on the county road.

He stepped out and shut the door with care. He wore work boots and a plain long-sleeve shirt. He carried a clipboard and a canvas tool bag. He did not hurry.

He walked the path beside the prayer garden. The ground felt springy under his boots. The grass still held dew. The willow near the bank bent low, its thin limbs skimming the air above the water.

The wall looked worse in the morning light.

Daniel crouched near the edge, careful with his footing. He did not step close to the sagging section. He watched the soil line, the seam where earth met the old timber. The wood had gone dark in places. The bolts showed rust bloom. A few stones lay loose, half sunk in mud.

He set his clipboard down and touched the timber with his fingertips. The surface felt soft. It gave under pressure. Rot had been eating it from the inside out.

He stood and took a slow look along the bank. The river did not slam into it. It did not crash. It pressed. It leaned. It kept leaning.

He heard footsteps on the path behind him.

He turned and saw Pastor Whitaker. The pastor wore slacks and a collared shirt. No tie. A mug of coffee steamed in his hand. He walked with an easy calm, like a man who did not fear silence.

“Morning, Daniel,” Pastor Whitaker said.

“Morning, Pastor Whitaker.” Daniel nodded once.

Pastor Whitaker stopped a few feet back from the edge. He looked at the wall, then at the river. “It looks peaceful.”

“It does,” Daniel said.

“Mina told me yesterday you will not let the river eat the church.”

Daniel held his gaze a moment. “She has confidence.”

Pastor Whitaker smiled. “She does.” His smile eased into something gentler. “Thank you for coming early.”

Daniel looked back at the wall. “I wanted a clear look before people arrive.”

Pastor Whitaker took a sip from his mug. “Grace is bringing Mina to school in a bit. She said she might stop by after.”

Daniel’s chest tightened in a way he did not name. He kept his attention on the timber line. “All right.”

Pastor Whitaker watched him work the problem with his eyes. “Tell me what you see.”

Daniel pointed with two fingers, slow and precise. “The wall is old. The soil behind it stays wet. Water sits against timber for years, and it starts to break down; the bolts rust. The tiebacks lose grip. The

face bows." He looked at the river again. "The river pressure does not start dramatically."

Pastor Whitaker leaned closer, careful. "What do you mean?"

Daniel drew a breath. He chose simple words. "People think damage starts with a storm, one big event. But most of the time it starts with a small force over time. It keeps pressing. It finds a weak place. It widens it."

Pastor Whitaker studied the bowed section. "Slow harm."

"Yes."

Pastor Whitaker stayed quiet a moment. The river spoke for them, low and steady. "I have seen that in people," he said.

Daniel kept his face neutral. He did not look up. "I have too."

Pastor Whitaker did not push. He nodded as if he heard more than Daniel had said. "What do you need from us?"

"I need to mark a safe work zone," Daniel said. "No children near the edge. No foot traffic along the bank for a while."

"You will have it," Pastor Whitaker said.

Daniel picked up his clipboard. "I will also need access to the side drive for material. Gravel delivery. Timber. Rebar."

Pastor Whitaker nodded again. "Eli Brooks will help. He knows every corner of this property."

"I met him yesterday," Daniel said.

"Eli is steady," Pastor Whitaker said. "He likes steady people."

Daniel looked at him then. "Does he?"

Pastor Whitaker met his eyes. “Yes.”

Daniel did not know what to do with that, so he returned to the wall. He walked along it, measuring with his eyes. He took a tape from his belt and pulled it out, the metal strip catching the light.

Pastor Whitaker watched for a few minutes, then stepped back. “I will let you work.”

Daniel nodded. “Thank you.”

When the pastor left, the space felt wider.

Daniel knelt again. He tapped a bolt head with the handle of his screwdriver. The sound came dull. He pressed the timber near it. It crumbled under his thumb. He exhaled through his nose.

He stood and made notes.

Remove and replace sections. Add drainage. Improve backfill. Anchor deeper. He wrote in his tight, careful script.

He moved closer to the corner near the prayer garden. The wall there held better. The wood still held some strength. He ran his palm over the top. A few splinters caught his skin. He did not flinch.

He heard another set of footsteps. Lighter. A different rhythm.

He turned and saw Grace Park.

She wore jeans and a pale shirt under a light jacket. Her hair sat in a low knot. A canvas tote hung from her shoulder. She walked with quiet purpose, having already made decisions before she arrived.

Daniel’s throat tightened. He steadied his face.

Grace stopped a few steps away. She looked past him at the wall. Her eyes narrowed, focused. “It looks worse up close.”

“It is worse up close,” Daniel said.

Grace shifted the tote strap. “Pastor Whitaker said you were here.”

Daniel nodded. He held his clipboard to his side. “I wanted to see it in morning light.”

Grace nodded, as if to respect the choice. She kept her distance from the edge. “Mina wanted to come. I told her school comes first.”

“Good,” Daniel said. He looked at the river. “She would not stay back from the edge.”

Grace’s mouth moved, close to a smile. It faded. “She thinks the world is safe if she wants it to be.”

Daniel looked at Grace. Her face held warmth, but it held guard too. He recognized it. He had seen it in his own mirror.

He returned to the work line. “I will set up cones and tape. People need to stay off this path near the sag.”

Grace watched him for a moment, then nodded. “I can tell the church families. Choir parents talk.”

Daniel glanced at her. “Thank you.”

Grace stepped closer to the prayer garden side, still careful. She looked at the wall, then at him. “What will you do?”

Daniel chose plain words again. “Replace the rotten timber. Add a deeper anchor. Improve drainage behind it so water does not sit.”

Grace kept her eyes on the bowed section. “Will it hold?”

“It will,” Daniel said. He paused, then added, “If we address the pressure, not only the break.”

Grace looked at him then. “What does that mean?”

Daniel hesitated. He heard his own voice from years ago, quick and sharp, promising smooth fixes for problems he did not understand. He did not want to sound like a man selling comfort.

He pointed to the river. “The river keeps pressing against the bank. It does not need a flood to wear it down. It stays. It moves. It pushes. The bank gives a little at a time.”

Grace’s hand tightened on her tote strap. She looked at the water. The surface glinted, bright in places, dark in others under the willow shade. “So the wall fails slowly.”

“Yes,” Daniel said.

Grace spoke softer. “So do people.”

Daniel held still. He did not offer comfort. He did not change the subject. He only said, “Yes.”

A wind stirred the willow limbs. Leaves brushed each other with a low whisper.

Grace swallowed. “My marriage did not break in one day.”

Daniel did not move. The river kept talking.

Grace’s eyes stayed on the water. “I used to think it would take something big. Something loud. But it was small things. A pattern. Promises. Then missed promises. Then I stopped expecting anything. I did not notice when hope left. I only noticed the quiet when it was gone.”

Daniel felt the words land in his chest. He kept his face calm, but his hands tightened around the clipboard.

Grace shook her head once, as if she did not mean to say any of it. She cleared her throat. “I do not mean to put my life on your job site.”

Daniel looked at her. “You did not.”

Grace lifted her gaze, wary. “You talk like you have seen it too.”

Daniel stared at the sagging timber. He did not want to speak. The truth felt exposed even when it stayed inside him. But he heard Mina’s voice from Sunday, plain and sure. He heard Grace’s quiet honesty.

He spoke low. “I lost someone because I did not see the slow damage.”

Grace did not ask who. Her eyes softened, then guarded again. “Work.”

Daniel nodded once. “Work. Schedules. Deadlines. I thought steady meant controlled. I thought I did what I needed to do. I did not see what I was doing to her.”

Grace drew a small breath. “She left.”

Daniel kept his eyes on the wall. “Yes.”

Grace looked down at the grass. Dew clung to the blades. Her voice came even. “I am sorry.”

Daniel did not know how to take kindness from people he had not earned it from. He gave a short nod. “Thank you.”

Grace shifted her weight. “Do you want coffee?”

Daniel blinked. The question felt out of place in the middle of quiet confession, but it also felt like Maple Ridge, practical care. No fuss.

“I am fine,” Daniel said.

Grace’s eyes flicked to his hands. “You have been here a while.”

Daniel did not argue. “I have coffee in my truck.”

Grace nodded. She did not push. She looked toward the fellowship hall. “Eli will come soon. He likes to start early.”

Daniel glanced down the path. “Good.”

Grace turned back to the river. “So you will fix the wall.”

“I will do what I said I will do,” Daniel said.

Grace looked at him again, and something in her face eased a fraction. “Mina trusts people who do what they say.”

Daniel’s answer came. “So do I.”

Grace’s lips pressed together. She gave a small nod, as if to accept the point. “I will let people know about the path.”

Daniel nodded.

Grace started to turn away, then paused. She looked back at the bowed section. “Does the pressure stop?”

Daniel followed her gaze. “The river does not stop. You build for it. You respect it.”

Grace’s eyes narrowed. “Even after you fix it.”

“Yes.”

Grace held still, then whispered, “That sounds tiring.”

Daniel’s voice stayed calm. “It is steady work.”

Grace looked at him for a long moment. Then she nodded again, slower. “Steady work,” she repeated, as if she wanted to believe it.

She walked away down the path. Her steps stayed measured. Daniel watched until she passed the prayer garden gate and turned toward the parking lot.

He stood alone again, but her words stayed.

My marriage did not break in one day.

He turned back to the wall and resumed his assessment. He measured the length of the failing section. He marked stakes in the ground, pushing them in with his boot heel. The soil felt damp and loose. He set orange tape between two stakes to create a boundary.

He heard a truck approach on the side drive. Gravel crunched. A door shut.

Eli Brooks came into view carrying a small bundle of lumber stakes under one arm. He wore a worn work jacket and jeans. His hair sat neat. His face held calm.

“Morning,” Eli said.

“Morning,” Daniel replied.

Eli looked at the boundary tape. “Good call. Kids cut across here.”

“They will not for a while,” Daniel said.

Eli set the stakes down and stepped near Daniel, stopping short of the edge. He squinted at the timber. “Rot.”

“Yes,” Daniel said.

Eli nodded. “Water always wins if people do not stay after it.”

Daniel heard the same truth he had said to Grace, shaped in different words. “Pressure over time.”

Eli looked at him. “You have done river work before.”

“Yes,” Daniel said. “Not on a site like this, but yes.”

Eli glanced toward the church building. “Pastor Whitaker wants the prayer garden kept open.”

“We can keep it open,” Daniel said. “We need to redirect foot traffic away from the edge. I will stage material near the side drive. I will keep a clear lane.”

Eli nodded. “He will appreciate that.”

Daniel made another note. “I will need help pulling out old timber when I start demolition.”

Eli looked at the wall again. “When?”

Daniel checked his list. “Tomorrow I will bring a crew for excavation. Today I will finish marking. I will confirm utility locations. I will order the timber.”

Eli nodded. “I can pull records for the property. Old site maps. We might find notes from a past repair.”

“That would help,” Daniel said.

Eli turned his head slightly, studying Daniel’s face. “You are not from Maple Ridge.”

“No,” Daniel said.

“You are from Cedar Haven,” Eli said.

Daniel glanced at him. “Yes.”

Eli shrugged, small. “Pastor Whitaker talks. Grace talks too, when she wants.”

Daniel felt a tug of unease. He did not like being discussed. But he understood small towns. Words moved like weather. He said nothing.

Eli pointed at the sag line. “You see how the top line dips, but the face still looks mostly straight.”

“Yes,” Daniel said.

“That is the part people miss,” Eli said. “They look at the front and think it is fine.”

Daniel met his eyes. Eli did not speak like a man giving advice. He spoke like a man naming what he had learned.

Daniel nodded. “Damage hides.”

Eli looked away toward the river. “It does. In wood. In people.”

Daniel took a slow breath. “Yes.”

They worked without much talk after that. Eli helped set more stakes. He walked the perimeter with Daniel and marked a safe route around the work zone. Daniel kept checking the ground for soft spots. He pressed with his boot and watched the soil shift. The bank had lost its firmness.

By midmorning, more cars began to arrive in the lot. A few church staff came in and out. Someone opened a side door, and the smell of old wood and coffee drifted out.

Grace returned near lunch.

Daniel first saw her at the bank as she crossed the gravel with a paper bag in her arms. She walked with Mina beside her. Mina’s backpack bounced against her small shoulders. Her ponytail had loosened. She spotted the orange tape and ran toward it until Grace caught her hand.

“No,” Grace said, firm.

Mina stopped, frustrated. “But I want to see.”

Grace held her ground. “You will see from here.”

Mina crossed her arms. “I will be careful.”

Grace crouched to Mina’s level. “You will obey.”

Mina’s face tightened. Then she looked past Grace and saw Daniel. Her posture changed. She lifted her chin as if to show him she was brave.

Daniel walked over, wiping his hands on a rag. “Hi, Mina.”

“Hi,” Mina said. Her voice softened. “Why is there tape?”

“So you stay safe,” Daniel said.

Mina frowned. “I said I will be careful.”

Daniel crouched a little, keeping distance from the edge. “The ground near the wall might break without warning. People do not always feel it before it happens.”

Mina looked toward the sagging section. “It looks the same.”

Daniel nodded. “It does. But it is weaker.”

Mina glanced at Grace, then back to him. “Like when Mom smiles but she is sad.”

Grace drew in a sharp breath. “Mina.”

Mina blinked, confused by the tone. “What. It is true.”

Daniel looked at Grace. Her face had gone still. She did not look angry. She looked exposed.

Daniel returned his attention to Mina. “Yes,” he said, gentle. “Sometimes you cannot see what is weak. That is why we set boundaries.”

Mina's mouth pulled down. "I do not like boundaries."

Daniel stood. "I know."

Grace rose too, her hand still holding Mina's. She shifted the paper bag toward Daniel. "I brought lunch for you and Eli. If you want it."

Daniel hesitated. He had not asked. He did not want to take from her. But the bag smelled like something warm, something home. He saw Mina watching him, waiting.

"Thank you," Daniel said.

Grace nodded, relief flickering for a moment. "It is sandwiches. And fruit. Mina insisted on the fruit."

"I always insist on fruit," Mina said.

Daniel looked down at her. "That makes sense."

Mina leaned toward the tape, stopping when Grace tightened her grip. "When will you start fixing?"

"Tomorrow," Daniel said. "Today I mark and plan."

Mina's eyes widened. "Will there be a big machine?"

"Yes," Daniel said.

"Will it be loud?" Mina asked.

"Yes," Daniel said again.

Mina's face lit, then sobered. "Will the river get mad?"

Daniel looked at the water. It moved past the wall like it had no care at all. "The river will keep moving. We will work with it."

Mina nodded, satisfied. She looked at the sandwiches. "Are there cookies?"

Grace's mouth twitched. "No."

Mina sighed as the world had failed her. "Next time."

Grace looked at Daniel, apologetic. "She ate her snack on the walk over."

Daniel shook his head once. "She is fine."

Grace's eyes stayed on him a moment. Daniel felt the weight of her gaze. It did not press like accusation. It tested like a hand on a repaired beam.

Grace said, "Thank you for explaining the tape."

Daniel nodded.

Eli came over then, drawn by the sight of food. He greeted Grace with a nod and Mina with a small smile.

"Hi, Mina," Eli said.

"Hi," Mina replied, then pointed at the river. "Eli, will the river eat the church?"

Eli looked at Daniel, then back to Mina. "It will not. Daniel will fix it. We will help."

Mina looked between them. "Good. Because the church needs to stay."

Grace's voice softened. "It does."

Mina's attention shifted again. "Mom, can we go see the prayer garden?"

Grace stiffened at the word, then remembered herself. She glanced at Daniel as if asking permission.

Daniel gestured toward the safe side. “The garden is fine. Stay off the taped area.”

Grace nodded. “We will.”

She led Mina toward the garden. Mina walked slower now, her eyes on the orange tape as it offended her. Grace kept her hand firm in Mina’s.

Daniel watched them go. His chest felt tight in a new way. Not fear. Something else.

Eli opened the paper bag. “Grace feeds half the town.”

Daniel looked away from the garden. “She did not need to.”

Eli took out a sandwich and held the bag toward Daniel. “She does things because she means them. People in Maple Ridge do not say much, but they show up.”

Daniel took a sandwich. “Some people show up.”

Eli nodded. “Grace does.”

They ate near the tailgate of Daniel’s truck, facing the river. The sandwiches tasted simple. Ham. Cheese. Mustard. Fresh bread. The kind of food people made when they paid attention to what others liked.

Daniel chewed slowly. “She has a daughter.”

Eli nodded. “Mina. She keeps everyone honest.”

Daniel glanced toward the prayer garden, where Mina moved between the stepping stones, reading small plaques aloud with serious effort. Grace walked beside her, listening.

Eli followed his gaze. “Grace has held a lot on her own.”

Daniel swallowed. “People talk.”

Eli’s eyes stayed on the river. “Some do. Most keep their mouths shut. Pastor Whitaker makes sure of it.”

Daniel did not respond.

Eli took another bite. “You are here for work.”

“Yes,” Daniel said.

Eli nodded as he believed him. Then he said, “Work changes people too.”

Daniel’s jaw tightened. He did not like words that sounded like hope. Hope led to disappointment if a man treated it carelessly.

They finished lunch. Grace and Mina returned a few minutes later. Mina waved at Daniel and Eli as if they had become her team. Grace returned the wave, small and polite.

Grace stopped near Daniel’s truck. “Mina, let them work.”

Mina dragged her feet. “Fine.”

Grace looked at Daniel. “Will you be here late?”

Daniel checked his notes. “I will finish marking and leave after I confirm with my supplier.”

Grace nodded. “The church office will be open. If you need anything, Pastor Whitaker is in and out today.”

“Thank you,” Daniel said.

Grace hesitated. She looked like she wanted to say something else, then decided against it. She turned to Mina. “We need to get home and start homework.”

Mina groaned and walked away.

Grace followed, then glanced back once. Her eyes met Daniel's for a brief moment. Something passed between them, quiet and real. A shared knowledge of pressure. Of boundaries. Of slow shifting things.

Daniel returned to the bank work.

By late afternoon, he had his measurements, his plan, and a growing list of details. He called his supplier from the truck, voice low and direct. He arranged for treated timber, gravel, and drainage pipe. He scheduled his crew.

When he hung up, he sat with his hands on the wheel again.

The river still moved. The wall still sagged.

He watched the willow limbs sway. He thought about Grace's words. He thought about Mina's sharp eyes.

He had come to Maple Ridge for a job. He would finish the job. He would leave.

The thought should have steadied him. It did not.

He started the engine and pulled out of the lot. He drove slowly through town.

Maple Ridge held its small shape around him. The bakery on Main Street. The hardware store with its hand-painted sign. The café with two trucks out front, men inside who would know each other's stories.

He took the county road out toward the rental he had lined up for the week. He passed fields and fence lines. He passed a stand of trees where the light turned green and dim for a moment.

His phone buzzed once with a message from his foreman. Daniel did not check it yet. He kept driving.

At the edge of town, he slowed and pulled onto a gravel shoulder. He shut off the engine.

The quiet settled fast.

He looked back the way he came. Maple Ridge sat low in the distance. The church steeple rose clean above the trees.

Daniel rested his hands on his thighs. He stared at the steeple until his eyes burned.

He had no reason to feel unsettled. He had a plan. He had resources. He had done harder work than this.

Still, he sat there on the shoulder, dust settling around his truck, and he did not move.

He did not know if Maple Ridge would hold him steady or pull something loose.

He stayed parked outside town, uncertain if coming here was wise.

Chapter 5

Rehearsal Evenings

The first evening came with long light and soft heat.

Daniel Chen stood at the riverbank until his crew packed up. They loaded cut boards and bagged gravel back into the trailer. The air held the smell of damp soil and fresh wood. The willow branches brushed his shoulder when he stepped closer to check the edge again.

He did not need to stay. He had marked his lines. He had confirmed delivery. He had given clear instructions.

He stayed anyway.

He walked the slope one more time. He pressed his boot into the soft ground near the sag. Water had undercut the soil in small bites. He pictured the wall finished, the bank clean again. He pictured the drain path. He pictured the hidden work doing its quiet job.

His phone buzzed.

A text from his foreman in his own town. A question about another job. A reminder about a permit meeting.

Daniel read it and did not answer yet. He slid the phone into his pocket. He watched the river. It carried little flecks of leaf and foam in the slow current. The sound did not change. It did not hurry. It did not argue with the bank. It kept moving.

He turned toward the church and started walking.

The gravel lot sat empty now. The fellowship hall windows caught the sun. The white church stood behind it, plain and familiar, its steeple cutting into the sky like a simple answer.

Daniel knew churches. He had worked on plenty. He had rebuilt stairs. He had repaired roofs. He had replaced rotten sill plates. Every town had one. Every town leaned on it in its own way.

This one sat close to water. Too close.

He reached his truck and opened the door, then paused. A sound floated from the church.

Voices.

Not speaking. Singing.

He shut the door again without getting in. He stood beside the truck and listened.

The sound came through open windows. It moved out into the warm air and spread across the lot. It did not feel staged. It did not feel polished.

It felt like people who knew each other.

A piano marked the line. A few voices rose strong. Others blended underneath, steady and plain.

Daniel did not know the song. He caught a few words, broken by distance and the rustle of leaves. The melody carried a calm strength. It held its place.

He kept listening until the singing stopped.

A chair scraped inside. The piano played a single note, then another. Someone laughed, quiet and brief.

Daniel looked down at his hands. Dirt sat in the lines of his palms. He rubbed his thumb across a callus and stared at the church steps. The wood looked sound. Someone had painted them in the last few years. The white paint had begun to thin on the edges.

He had no reason to keep standing there.

He still did not leave.

The singing started again, softer. A woman's voice carried above the rest. It did not push. It guided.

Daniel recognized the tone before he recognized the person. He had heard Grace Park speak near the prayer garden. Her voice had held the same calm control. Warm, guarded, clear.

He walked a few steps closer, careful with the gravel under his boots. The windows sat high enough to hide faces. He did not want to intrude. He did not want to get noticed.

He stood under the shade of the old maple near the church wall.

The song ended. The piano stopped.

A woman spoke. Daniel could not hear every word, but he heard enough.

"Again, from the top. Breathe with the phrase. Listen to each other."

Grace.

He waited for the next start.

The piano began. The voices came in together.

Daniel closed his eyes for a moment. He let the sound wash over him. It did not stir him into excitement. It settled him. The steadiness felt unfamiliar in a way he did not like.

He had trained himself to live without needing outside comfort. Work gave him order. Plans gave him control. If he did his job well, he did not have to lean on anyone else.

A choir did not fit into that.

He opened his eyes and looked toward the river again. The line of trees along the bank darkened as the sun lowered. The prayer garden sat quiet beyond the fence.

He thought of Grace's daughter. Mina. The girl had watched him with a kind of blunt caution, as if she took inventory of adults without apology.

Daniel respected that. Children saw what grown people tried to hide.

He heard the choir shift into another song.

The melody changed. The words came clearer.

"Peace, be still…"

The phrase struck him. He stood straighter. He listened harder.

"Peace, be still," the voices sang again.

His chest tightened. He did not move.

He had heard those words in a different setting. A different season. A hospital room with harsh light and the steady beep of a monitor. A pastor had read from a Bible with thin pages. Daniel had stood beside his mother and watched his father's face turn away, jaw tight. Daniel had wanted to control the moment. He had wanted to fix what could not be fixed.

His mother had whispered the verse to herself after the pastor left. "Peace, be still."

Daniel had not believed peace belonged in that room. He had thought peace was something people said when they ran out of solutions.

Now the words rose through open church windows into warm air, and they did not feel like defeat. They felt like a hand on a shoulder.

Daniel swallowed. He turned toward his truck again, intent on leaving before anything inside him shifted further.

The church door opened.

Voices spilled out, spoken now, mixed and casual. People stepped onto the steps and out into the light. A man in a blue work shirt. A woman with gray hair and a tote bag. Two teenagers with music folders tucked under their arms.

Daniel stood under the maple, half in shadow, half in sun. He did not want to look like he had been listening. He did not want to look like he belonged.

Grace stepped out last.

She held a binder pressed to her chest. Her hair sat pulled back, loose strands catching the light near her temples. She looked tired in a quiet way. Not worn down. Simply carrying a long day.

She paused on the top step and looked over the lot.

Her gaze found Daniel at once.

He did not flinch. He did not wave.

Grace held his eyes for a beat. Her mouth stayed neutral, but her expression changed. Surprise, then a careful understanding. She walked down the steps and crossed the gravel toward him.

Daniel waited. He told himself he waited to be polite. He told himself he should not leave without acknowledging her, since he worked on church property.

Grace stopped a few feet away. Close enough for her voice to carry without raising it.

“You stayed late,” she said.

“I finished what I needed to finish,” he said. “My crew left.”

Grace glanced toward the riverbank, then back at him. “And you stayed.”

Daniel nodded once. “I wanted to look at it when it was quiet.”

Grace shifted the binder against her arm. “It is always quiet there.”

“Not in the morning,” Daniel said. “People come through. Phones ring. Trucks pull in. I like the end of the day.”

Grace studied him. Her eyes did not roam. She did not fidget. She looked like someone used to reading a room without letting the room read her.

She nodded. “The end of the day tells the truth.”

Daniel did not answer. He felt her words land, simple and pointed.

Grace glanced up at the open windows. The last choir member walked out, waved at Grace, and headed to the parking lot with a friend. Their voices faded as they crossed the gravel.

“You were listening,” Grace said.

Daniel did not deny it. “I heard it from the lot.”

Grace did not smile, but her face softened. “We rehearse on Tuesday evenings.”

Daniel had noticed the day without thinking. He had scheduled his materials delivery for Wednesday morning. He had planned his work rhythm. He had planned everything.

“I will be here most days this week,” he said. “Maybe longer.”

Grace tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “We all heard you will finish the wall fast.”

Daniel looked toward the bank again. “Fast does not mean rushed.”

Grace gave a small nod. “I like the sound of that.”

A breeze shifted through the maple leaves. The air cooled by a degree. Somewhere behind the church, a screen door shut.

Daniel felt the strange urge to explain himself. He disliked the urge. He did not trust it.

“I work in Millbrook,” he said instead. “I do not usually take jobs here.”

Grace did not ask why. She did not press. She held space, as if she understood men who kept details in their pockets.

“We are glad you are here,” she said. “The wall has worried people. Pastor Whitaker has mentioned it in meeting after meeting.”

Daniel had heard the name. He had seen the pastor once on Sunday, a tall man with kind eyes and an unhurried manner. The man had greeted Daniel with steady warmth, as if he did not need Daniel to prove anything before being treated with respect.

Daniel nodded. “I met him.”

Grace shifted her weight, then looked down toward her binder. “I should go. Mina is with Mrs. Alder tonight, but I do not like staying away late.”

Daniel kept his face still. He filed the information away. Grace entrusted her daughter to someone named Mrs. Alder. That meant Grace held close ties in town.

Grace turned as if to leave, then paused. “You have been here every morning.”

Daniel glanced at her. “I said I would be.”

Grace lifted her chin a fraction. “People say things. You do not.”

Daniel felt heat rise under his collar. He did not like praise. He did not like being watched. He had built his life around showing up and doing work, not around receiving comment for it.

He kept his voice even. “It is part of my job.”

Grace’s eyes held his. “It is more than a job to us. It is the church. It is the prayer garden. It is where our children play after potlucks. It is where widows sit on benches and watch the water when they miss someone. It matters.”

Daniel listened. He did not interrupt. He heard the weight in her voice when she said Widows. He heard lived experience.

He nodded. “I know it matters.”

Grace looked at him a moment longer. “Thank you for staying with it.”

Daniel did not know how to answer without sounding stiff. He settled for the truth. “You are welcome.”

Grace turned and walked toward the side path that led to the small office entrance. She moved with tired purpose, binder under one arm, keys in her hand. She glanced back once.

“You will hear us again,” she said.

Daniel watched her go. He stood under the maple until the office door clicked shut. The lot fell quiet again. The open windows held only the faint echo of music.

He climbed into his truck and drove to the rental house on the edge of town.

The place sat modest and clean, owned by a retired couple who lived two doors down. They had left a key under a flowerpot and a plate of cookies on the counter, covered in plastic wrap. A handwritten note lay beside it.

Welcome. Call if you need anything. We are the Kendalls.

Daniel read it, then set it back down in the same place. He did not eat a cookie. He washed his hands at the sink until the water ran cold and his skin tightened.

He ate a simple dinner from a container he had packed. Rice, chicken, steamed vegetables. He cleaned up right after. He wiped the counter. He lined his tools along the wall near the back door, arranged by size.

Order calmed him. It always had.

After he finished, he sat at the small table with his phone and answered his foreman's text. Brief. Direct.

Then he paused, staring at the screen. He looked at the time. Tuesday, near eight.

The rehearsal would have ended. Grace would be home soon. Mina would have finished homework or fought it. A small home rhythm Daniel did not know.

He set the phone face down and leaned back in the chair.

The house held quiet. A ceiling fan turned slowly. Outside, a dog barked once, then stopped.

Daniel heard music anyway. Not a sound in the room. A memory of harmony through open windows.

He did not like the way it softened him.

He went to bed early.

Sleep did not come fast. Daniel lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. He listened for sounds outside. A car passing on the distant road. Wind in the trees. The town settling.

He remembered his last relationship in sharp fragments. A woman named Erin with neat handwriting and a bright laugh. A small apartment near his shop. The feel of an engagement ring box in his pocket like a weight he had earned.

He had meant to give her a steady life. He had believed his work equaled steadiness.

Erin had waited through late dinners and delayed weekends. She had smiled when he took calls at the table. She had said she understood.

Then one night she had sat on the couch with her hands folded and said, “I do not feel like I have a place in your life. I feel like I have been added on.”

Daniel had argued. Calm, controlled. He had told her he worked for their future. He had told her it would change after the next big contract, after the next season.

Erin had shaken her head. Tears had sat in her eyes, but her voice had stayed firm. “It will not change because you do not want it to change.”

Daniel had tried to deny it. He had failed.

The engagement ended. Erin moved out. He threw himself into work and told himself he had avoided a mistake. He told himself he had been spared. He told himself people who needed more than he could give were not meant for him.

Now he lay in a rental house in Maple Ridge, thinking about a woman with a choir binder and tired eyes who had said, You do not.

The next day, Daniel arrived early again.

Mist hung near the river. The water looked like brushed steel under the morning light. His crew rolled in behind him with the trailer. They moved with the easy banter of men used to long hours together. Daniel listened more than he spoke.

He walked the line again and marked the points where they would dig. He reviewed the plan with his crew leader, a man named Vince who worked fast and asked smart questions.

Vince wiped his brow with his sleeve. “We going deeper on the footings than you first said?”

“We go deeper,” Daniel said. “The soil is loose. Water ate it.”

Vince nodded. “All right.”

They began the work.

Shovels cut into earth. The sound of metal on small stones rang sharp. The river smell rose stronger when they opened the ground. Damp clay. Rotting leaves. Clean water.

Daniel kept his eyes on the line. He corrected small angles. He checked level. He measured twice. He did not raise his voice. He did not need to.

Around midmorning, a woman walked down the path from the church with a tray covered in foil.

Daniel saw her from the corner of his eye and kept working. He did not want special attention. He did not want kindness he had not earned.

The woman stopped at the edge of the work area and called out, “Morning, gentlemen.”

Vince straightened and grinned. “Morning.”

Daniel set his tape measure on a flat board and turned.

The woman wore a floral blouse and a long denim skirt. Gray hair curled around her face. She held herself upright with practiced grace. Daniel recognized her from Sunday, seated near the front, singing with focus.

She smiled at him. “Mr. Chen?”

“Daniel,” he said.

“Mrs. Alder,” Vince said, as if he knew her.

Mrs. Alder lifted the foil. “I brought muffins. Blueberry. I saw you all out here and figured you would need something.”

Vince stepped forward at once. “You are a saint.”

Mrs. Alder gave him a look. “Do not say things you do not mean.”

Vince laughed and took the tray to a clean spot near the tools.

Mrs. Alder turned her attention to Daniel. Her eyes held steady kindness, but they missed little. “Grace told me you stayed late yesterday.”

Daniel felt his shoulders tighten. “I was finishing up.”

Mrs. Alder nodded. “Grace hears the work when she rehearses. She told me she has not heard anyone move with such care in a long time.”

Daniel did not know what to do with that. He glanced toward the church as if it might offer a place to set the words down. “I try to do it right.”

Mrs. Alder watched him for a beat. “Grace tries to do it right too.”

Daniel kept his face neutral. “I can tell.”

Mrs. Alder smiled, smaller now. “Good. Eat a muffin, Daniel. I have to run. Mina will be out of school soon, and Grace will be at the church office. I promised I would pick her up today.”

Daniel looked at her. “You pick up her daughter?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Alder said, as if it needed no explanation. “Grace does not ask for help easily. She accepts it for Mina.”

Daniel nodded once. He respected that.

Mrs. Alder walked away, steady steps on the path. She did not look back.

Vince called, “Boss, you want one?”

Daniel walked over and took a muffin. He broke it in half and ate it without comment. The berries burst sweet on his tongue. He had not realized he had been hungry.

The day moved on.

By late afternoon, they had the trench cut and the base prepared. They set forms and checked alignment. Daniel moved down the line with a level in hand, eyes sharp for any drift. He corrected two spots himself, kneeling in the dirt, hands working with calm speed.

His crew finished and began to pack up.

Daniel watched them load the trailer. He glanced at his watch. Tuesday had come and gone. Today was Wednesday.

No rehearsal. No singing.

He told himself he would leave when the crew left. He told himself he had no reason to stay.

The crew pulled out. Dust rose behind their tires. The lot fell quiet.

Daniel remained.

He walked toward the river again and stood near the willow. The leaves brushed his arm. The water caught the low sun. A few birds dipped across the surface and vanished into trees.

From the church office side door, Grace stepped out.

Daniel saw her before she saw him. She held Mina's hand. Mina carried a small backpack, pink with a frayed strap. She looked up at Grace and spoke with quick intensity. Grace listened, head tilted, face softening.

Mina spotted Daniel and stopped short.

Grace followed her gaze and paused.

Daniel lifted one hand in a small greeting. He did not smile wide. He kept it simple.

Grace walked closer with Mina.

Mina did not hide behind Grace. She stood slightly in front, chin raised.

Grace spoke first. "You are still here."

Daniel nodded. "We made progress."

Grace looked past him at the trench line and the forms. “It looks like more than progress.”

“We will pour Friday,” Daniel said.

Grace’s eyes moved back to him. “You work hard.”

Daniel did not answer with false modesty. “I work steady.”

Mina’s eyes narrowed. “Do you live here now?”

Grace’s grip tightened on her hand. “Mina.”

Daniel answered the child, calm and direct. “No. I am staying in a rental for the week.”

“For the week,” Mina repeated, as if testing the words.

Daniel met her gaze. “Maybe a little longer. Depends on the job.”

Mina looked at the river. “The river messes things up.”

Grace let out a quiet breath. “Yes. It does.”

Daniel studied Mina’s face. Her blunt honesty carried no bitterness. She spoke like someone who had already learned things other kids still had to learn.

“It messes things up,” Daniel agreed. “It also keeps moving. We work with it.”

Mina frowned. “You cannot tell it to stop.”

Grace looked at Daniel, then back to Mina. “No. We cannot.”

Mina stared at Daniel again. “Why do you stay late?”

Grace’s face flushed, slight and quick. “Mina, he does not need to answer that.”

Daniel did not feel offended. He heard curiosity, not rudeness. He had met adults who asked harder questions with worse motives.

He looked at Mina. “I like to check my work when it is quiet.”

Mina tilted her head. “So you do not forget.”

Daniel nodded. “So I do not miss something.”

Mina looked satisfied with that. She shifted her backpack strap higher. “Mom forgets stuff when she is tired.”

Grace’s eyes closed for a brief moment. “Mina.”

Mina kept going, undeterred. “She forgets to drink water. She forgets to sit down.”

Grace opened her eyes and looked at Daniel, embarrassed and amused at once. “She talks.”

Daniel felt something soften again. Not because Mina spoke. Because Grace did not shut her down harshly; Grace corrected her with gentleness and kept walking. She held the line without breaking her child.

Grace cleared her throat. “We are heading home. Dinner. Homework. The usual.”

Daniel nodded. “All right.”

Grace hesitated, then spoke as if she had decided something. “Choir rehearses again next week. Same time. Tuesday.”

Daniel did not know why she told him. He did not ask.

He said, “I will still be working on the wall next week.”

Grace’s eyes lifted to his. “You will hear us again then.”

Daniel smiled a little. “Yes.”

Mina tugged Grace’s hand. “Come on, Mom.”

Grace turned to go, then looked back over her shoulder. “Thank you for staying with it, Daniel.”

She had said it before. This time, it landed deeper.

Daniel watched Grace and Mina walk away along the path that ran behind the fellowship hall. The sun lit Mina’s hair and the back of Grace’s blouse. Their shadows stretched long on the grass.

Daniel turned back to the river.

He heard no music, only water, steady against the bank. Only leaves shifting in the breeze.

He thought about consistency how people named it when they saw it, how they noticed.

He had built his whole life on being the man who showed up and did the work. He had treated it like a private discipline. He had treated it like a wall around his heart.

In Maple Ridge, people saw it as a gift.

He did not know how to hold that without losing control.

He walked back to his truck and drove to the rental house.

The next day, he rose before dawn and drank coffee in silence. He checked his schedule. He reviewed his materials list. He checked the weather. Clear skies, dry heat. Good for a pour.

He drove to the site with the first light.

Work filled the morning. It filled the afternoon. Daniel moved through each task with his usual focus. He spoke to his crew. He answered questions. He adjusted.

Still, he caught himself looking toward the church windows more than once. He caught himself listening for voices even when he knew the day held no rehearsal.

The church sat quiet. The steeple stood white against blue sky. The building looked unchanged, steady, as if it held its place through every season.

Daniel felt the pull of it.

It made him uneasy.

Late afternoon came again. The crew finished and left. Daniel stayed to check the forms for the morning pour. He ran his hand along the top edge. Smooth. Straight.

He stood and stepped back.

From the church, the side door opened. Grace walked out alone this time.

She carried a small stack of papers. Sheet music. Her steps slowed when she saw him.

Daniel held still, unsure whether to approach or leave. He had no desire to crowd her. He also did not want to appear to have avoided her.

Grace walked closer on her own.

“I did not expect to see you again,” she said.

Daniel glanced at the wall line. “I needed to recheck the forms before tomorrow.”

Grace nodded as if she understood the impulse. “You like to be sure.”

“Yes,” Daniel said.

Grace looked toward the river. The light had changed. Evening softened the edges of everything. The water reflected the sky, pale and clean.

Grace’s voice dropped. “I used to live like that too.”

Daniel turned his head slightly. “Like what.”

Grace met his eyes, then looked away. “Trying to stay ahead of problems. Trying to make sure nothing goes wrong.”

Daniel felt the weight of her words and the restraint. She did not offer details. She spoke as if she shared one small truth, waiting to see if he would handle it with care.

He did.

“Did it change?” he asked, “or did you get tired?”

Grace’s mouth tightened, then eased. “Both.”

Daniel nodded once. He understood fatigue. He understood the moment when discipline stopped feeling like strength and started feeling like fear.

Grace shifted the papers in her arms. “I heard you talking with Mina yesterday.”

Daniel waited.

Grace’s eyes held warmth now. “You spoke to her as she mattered.”

Daniel felt his throat tighten. He kept his voice even. “She does matter.”

Grace nodded. “Some men do not speak to children with respect. They speak around them.”

Daniel said, “Children notice.”

Grace let out a low breath, as if a small tension released. “Yes. They do.”

Silence stretched. It did not feel awkward. It felt careful. Both of them watched the river for a moment.

Grace spoke again, softer. “When you stay late, it makes the work feel safe.”

Daniel looked at her. The honesty in her face held no flirtation. No manipulation. She offered a simple statement, almost like a report.

He did not know how to respond. He did not want to promise anything beyond the job. He did not want to take on a role he might fail.

He chose the only thing he could give without pretense.

“I will be here tomorrow,” he said. “We will pour. I will watch it set. I will not leave the site until I know it is right.”

Grace’s shoulders eased. “Thank you.”

Daniel nodded. “You are welcome.”

Grace turned as if to go, then stopped. “Do you ever sing, Daniel?”

The question caught him off guard. He frowned slightly. “No.”

Grace looked amused. “Not even in the car.”

Daniel shook his head. “No.”

Grace tipped her head, as if to accept it. “All right. Then you can listen.”

Daniel looked toward the open windows, closed now. “I did listen.”

Grace’s gaze held his. “Yes.”

She turned and walked back toward the office door. Her steps sounded light on the path. The door clicked shut behind her.

Daniel stood alone again.

He stared at the line of forms. He stared at the river. He stared at the church.

He had begun this job with the same habit he always carried. Finish the work. Move on.

Now he stayed late two evenings in a row. He listened for songs. He spoke with a child. He stood in silence with a woman whose gratitude felt like something more than good manners.

Daniel climbed into his truck and drove away, the sky turning orange over the fields.

He did not tell himself stories about what it meant. He did not let his mind run ahead.

He only admitted one thing as he turned onto the road back to the rental house.

Grace Park noticed consistency.

And Daniel did not know whether to feel relieved or exposed.

Chapter 6

What Grace No Longer Rushes

Grace Park woke before her alarm.

The house held a thin, dark air, the kind that comes before summer sunrise. The air felt cool against her arms. She lay still and listened. The refrigerator hummed. A ceiling fan clicked once in its slow turn. Outside, crickets kept their steady sound in the grass.

From the next room, a small bed creaked.

Grace sat up at once. She swung her feet to the floor and padded down the hall. The hallway runner felt worn under her toes. She paused at the doorway.

Soojin lay curled on her side, hair spread over her pillow. One hand clutched the corner of her blanket. Her breathing stayed even.

Grace watched her for a moment. She did not rush in. She did not fix what did not need fixing. She had learned the difference. Her eyes moved over the small rise and fall of her daughter's back. No fever flush. No tight jaw. No whimper.

Grace stepped away.

In the kitchen she started the kettle. The flame on the stove caught with a soft click. She leaned her hip against the counter and looked out the window over the sink. The backyard held a dark shape of maple branches. Beyond them, the first hint of pale light pressed at the edge of the sky.

She did not fill the early hours with noise. She did not start a load of laundry. She did not open her phone. She used to. She used to wake with a list already in her hands, as if speed could keep trouble away.

Her throat tightened at the old memory. She breathed through it. She set a mug on the counter and waited for the kettle to sing.

When it did, she poured water over tea. The steam rose and brushed her face. She wrapped both hands around the mug and let the warmth sink into her palms.

The day would hold work. Choir plans. A grocery run. A meeting with Mrs. Alder about the children's song for next Sunday. A quick call to the school about field day.

She did not need to start running before the day began.

She took one slow sip. Then another.

A floorboard creaked down the hall. Small feet padded into the kitchen.

Soojin stood in the doorway in her pajama shirt and shorts. Her eyes stayed half closed. Her hair stuck up along one side.

Grace smiled. "Good morning."

Soojin rubbed her eyes with both fists. "Is it still night?"

"It is still early."

Soojin shuffled closer. She climbed onto the chair by the table and rested her chin on her arms. She watched the kettle with solemn interest, as if it might do something new.

Grace pulled a bowl from the cabinet. She poured cereal. She sliced a banana into thin coins and laid them on top.

Soojin's eyes opened wider at the banana. "Do I have school?"

"Yes."

Soojin sighed as if school served as a personal offense. Then she reached for her spoon.

Grace set a glass of water beside her and sat across from her with the tea mug. She did not talk too much. Soojin ate and looked at the window.

After a few minutes, Soojin spoke, mouth full. “Is Mr. Chen going to be at the river today?”

Grace kept her face calm. “Yes. He said he would be.”

Soojin nodded as if she filed it away for safety.

Grace watched her daughter’s small habits, like asking the same questions when her world felt uncertain, how she checked the edges. Grace had not taught her to do it with words. Life had taught her.

Grace reached across the table and brushed a crumb off Soojin’s cheek. “Finish your breakfast.”

Soojin chewed and swallowed. “Will you go there?”

Grace held the tea mug closer. “I will go after school drops off. I have choir work at the church.”

“Can I go too?”

Grace paused.

Soojin’s eyes stayed steady, clear and asking.

Grace did not say yes fast to ease her child. She did not say no out of fear. She weighed the day. She weighed the riverbank with its raw edge and stacked lumber. She weighed the rhythm of a crew at work. She pictured Daniel Chen, calm and careful, voice low when he spoke to Soojin.

Grace set the mug down. “You can come later after they finish the loud work. You can bring your drawing pad and sit with Mrs. Alder in the garden.”

Soojin brightened. “Okay.”

Grace nodded. “But you will ask first. And you will stay where I tell you.”

Soojin straightened her shoulders. “Yes, Mom.”

Grace felt something ease inside her. It did not feel like victory. It felt like a small mercy.

After breakfast, Grace moved through the morning with simple steps. Lunch packed. Hair brushed. Shoes found. The small backpack zipped. She checked Soojin’s folder and signed a paper about a class pet.

Soojin ran back for her library book at the last second. Grace waited by the door and did not scold. She used to snap at delays, as if every pause threatened collapse. Now she watched her daughter run back and return with the book pressed to her chest, face proud.

Grace took her hand and led her to the car.

The air outside smelled like grass and damp earth. Morning dew shone on the windshield. Grace started the engine and pulled onto the road.

Maple Ridge woke in slow layers. A porch light clicked off. A dog barked once from behind a fence. A farmer’s truck rolled past with a trailer full of feed. The hardware store sign on Main Street stayed dark. The bakery lights already glowed warm through the front window.

Grace turned onto the road toward the school.

She parked and walked Soojin to the door. The hallway smelled like pencil shavings and floor cleaner. The walls held bright posters and children's art. Mrs. Donnelly, the secretary, sat at her desk and waved.

"Morning, Grace."

"Morning."

Mrs. Donnelly looked down at Soojin. "Hello, sweetheart."

Soojin waved, then stepped closer to Grace. Her fingers curled around Grace's hand tighter than they had in the car.

Grace crouched and met her eyes. "You are safe. I will pick you up after school."

Soojin nodded but did not let go.

Grace pressed her forehead to Soojin's for a brief moment. "I love you."

"I love you too," Soojin whispered.

Then she let go and walked toward her classroom with careful steps.

Grace stood in the hall and watched until Soojin disappeared through the door. She stayed one breath longer than she needed. Then she turned and left.

Back in the car, Grace sat with both hands on the steering wheel and did not start the engine right away.

The quiet pressed in around her. It felt different than loneliness. It felt like space where thoughts rose without being called.

She pictured the riverbank again. The sagging edge near the prayer garden. The smell of wet soil. The sound of boards being set down.

Daniel's steady voice. I will be here tomorrow. I will not leave the site until I know it is right.

Grace swallowed.

Her body recognized consistency like a tune she used to know. It comforted her, and it scared her in the same beat. Comfort felt dangerous when it came too early.

She started the engine and drove toward the church.

The church stood white and plain against the sky. The steeple rose above the trees, a clean point of light as the sun climbed. Grace parked near the office and stepped out. She breathed in, slow.

A window stood cracked open in the sanctuary. The scent of old wood and hymnals drifted out, mixed with morning air.

Grace unlocked the office door. Inside, the hallway held cool dimness. The bulletin board carried a row of flyers, edges curling. Vacation Bible School. Prayer night. A meal train for a new mother. A men's breakfast.

Grace set her bag down and walked into the sanctuary.

Sunlight spilled through the side windows in long bars. Dust floated in the air, slow and gentle. The pews sat in neat rows. The piano waited with its lid closed. The choir loft held black folders stacked on a shelf.

Grace walked to the front and sat on the piano bench. She opened the lid and rested her fingers on the keys.

She did not play right away. She listened.

The sanctuary held silence, but it did not feel empty. It felt held. Grace breathed and let her shoulders drop.

She played a simple scale, then a hymn line from memory. Her fingers moved without hurry. The notes filled the room and softened the corners of her mind.

Music had always done that for her. It took sharp thoughts and gave them shape. It gave her a place to put feelings she did not want to hand to anyone else.

She played through the first verse of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” quiet and plain. Her throat tightened on the word faithfulness even without singing it. She pressed the final chord and let it fade.

Grace closed the piano lid.

She turned and looked out toward the back doors. The sanctuary doors stayed shut. The world outside waited. Work waited.

She stood and walked through the side exit leading to the prayer garden and the river path.

Outside, the morning sun warmed her face. The grass near the church looked freshly cut. The cemetery beyond the fellowship hall lay still, headstones bright in the light.

Grace followed the path around the building. The prayer garden gate stood open. The garden held small flower beds and a bench under a cedar tree. Beyond it, the river moved with a muted sound, steady against the bank.

At the river, Daniel’s truck sat where it had the day before. A trailer hitched behind it held gravel bags and stacked boards. Two crew members worked near the forms. A post hole digger leaned against a stake. A small cement mixer stood on the gravel.

Daniel stood near the edge, looking down at a section of rebar. He held a tape measure in one hand.

He turned when he heard footsteps.

Grace slowed. She did not want to interrupt. But he had looked up already. His gaze settled on her with calm attention. He did not stare. He did not look away fast. He waited.

“Good morning,” Grace said.

“Good morning,” Daniel said. He glanced toward the work, then back to her. “You are early.”

“I dropped Soojin at school.”

He nodded once. “How is she?”

“She is well.”

Daniel’s eyes held a quiet thought. “She asked about the river yesterday.”

Grace felt a small heat in her cheeks. “She did. She likes to understand what is happening.”

Daniel looked down toward the sagging edge, then back up. “It is a normal child thing.”

Grace let out a low breath. “Yes.”

One of the crew members carried a bag of gravel and set it down with a thud. He called to Daniel, “Boss, you want this on the south side.”

Daniel raised his voice, firm but mild. “Yes. Stack it there. Keep the walkway clear.”

The man nodded and moved.

Daniel stepped a few paces closer to Grace, out of the crew’s direct line. He kept his hands at his sides, tape measure still in one hand.

“I have a question,” he said.

Grace waited.

“Who handles access to the lower bank?” he asked. “I need to know who decides where I can cut a small path without harming the garden.”

Grace pointed toward the garden. “Pastor Whitaker would want to know. But Mrs. Alder tends the garden. She will care about the plants. She will care about the bench. She is gentle, but she is firm.”

Daniel nodded. “I will speak with both.”

Grace hesitated. “Pastor Whitaker will be in his office after ten. Mrs. Alder comes most mornings. She brings a small watering can and a wide hat. She talks to the roses.”

Daniel’s mouth softened, almost a smile. “All right.”

Grace watched him for a moment. She saw a man who did not move fast to prove himself. A man who asked before he did. A man who cared where a path went. It felt strange how much her heart noticed those details.

She looked away toward the river. The surface caught sunlight in small flashes. The current kept its pace.

Grace said, “How long will the work take?”

Daniel looked at the forms. “A few more days if the river stays calm. Today we pour another section. Tomorrow we set more stone. We monitor the soil. We take it one step at a time.”

One step at a time.

Grace held the phrase as if it belonged to her too.

She said, “The choir meets tonight. We rehearse in the fellowship hall. The sanctuary stays cool, but the hall has more space for the children who join at the end.”

Daniel nodded. “I remember the sound last night.”

Grace glanced at him. “You listened again.”

“I heard it through the windows when I locked the trailer,” he said.

Grace felt warmth in her chest, quiet and steady. She did not let it rush up her throat. She did not turn it into hope with sharp edges.

She said, “If you stay late again, you will hear it again.”

Daniel watched her. His eyes looked dark in the morning light. He spoke slowly. “Do you want me to stay late?”

Grace’s breath caught.

She did not expect the direct question. She heard no push in it. No teasing. He asked as if he wanted a clear answer to a clear thing.

Grace held his gaze. She chose honesty without drama. “I want the work to be safe. I want the bank to hold. I do not want the river to take more than it has already taken.”

Daniel listened, face still. “I will stay as long as the work needs.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you.”

Daniel glanced toward the crew again. “I need to check a level. Will you be all right here?”

“Yes.”

He turned and walked back to the forms.

Grace stood at the edge of the path and watched the work. She watched the way Daniel spoke to his crew. He did not bark. He did not float. He gave clear directions. He checked their work with his own eyes. He carried boards when a man struggled with the weight.

Grace felt a tug of memory, sharp and unwanted. A different job site. A different man. A raised voice. A slammed truck door. Promises spoken in anger and then taken back, as if words had no cost.

Grace blinked and focused on the river. She let the present pull her back.

She had learned to do that. Not in a single moment. Over years. Over nights when Soojin woke crying for no clear reason. Over afternoons when a song in the car made Grace's hands shake on the wheel. Over Sunday mornings when she sat in the back pew and felt sure everyone saw her story written on her face.

The town had not punished her. It had not turned cold. Maple Ridge held people who brought casseroles without questions. People who offered rides to school events. People who did not force her to speak when she had no strength.

But Grace still carried her own pace inside her. She did not rush trust. She did not rush comfort. She did not rush new friendship into the shape of something deeper.

She had rushed once. She had learned what rushing cost.

Mrs. Alder's voice floated from the garden gate. "Grace, honey."

Grace turned.

Mrs. Alder walked along the path with her wide hat and her watering can. She wore a pale blouse and a long skirt. Her shoes looked sturdy and old.

Grace smiled. “Good morning.”

Mrs. Alder stepped closer and looked past Grace toward the work. Her mouth pinched. “It looks worse every day, does it not?”

Grace kept her voice gentle. “It does. Mr. Chen is handling it.”

Mrs. Alder peered at Daniel. “The new contractor.”

Grace nodded.

Mrs. Alder’s eyes sharpened with interest. “He is polite. I met him yesterday. He asked me before he stepped into the garden. Not many men do that. They stomp through as the Lord Himself told them to.”

Grace tried to hide a small smile. “He is careful.”

Mrs. Alder watered a row of flowers near the bench. “I told him the rose bush by the river is older than my youngest grandchild. I told him he had better protect it.”

Grace glanced toward the bush. The rose plant stood close to the bank, leaves thick and green. A few blooms opened in soft pink.

Daniel walked toward them, as if he sensed he had become the subject.

He stopped a respectful distance from Mrs. Alder. “Good morning, ma’am.”

Mrs. Alder looked him over with a steady gaze. “Morning.”

Daniel nodded toward the flowers. “I need a small access path to the lower bank for stone placement. I do not want to cut through your garden. Grace said you tend it.”

Mrs. Alder set her watering can down and put her hands on her hips. “I do. And I do not like changes.”

Daniel did not flinch. “I understand. I want to suggest two options. I will follow what you prefer.”

Grace watched him speak. Calm. Clear. No impatience.

Daniel pointed with his tape measure toward a spot beyond the cedar. “Option one, we cut a narrow path along the fence line. It will disturb grass, but not flowers. Option two, we bring the stone around from the far side by the fellowship hall. It is longer and costs more time. It avoids the garden entirely.”

Mrs. Alder studied him. “You told me the truth on the second option.”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Alder’s eyes narrowed with thought. “The fence line path. But you will put down a protective mat. And you will keep your men from stepping near my roses.”

Daniel nodded. “Agreed.”

Mrs. Alder glanced at Grace. “You trust him.”

Grace felt the weight of the question.

She answered with care. “I trust his work so far.”

Mrs. Alder snorted once, then softened. “That is a wise answer.” She looked back at Daniel. “Do what you said. And if you see my rose bush droop one leaf, you come find me.”

Daniel met her eyes. “Yes, ma’am.”

Mrs. Alder picked up her watering can and walked away, satisfied.

Grace watched her go with quiet affection. Then she looked at Daniel.

He held the tape measure at his side again. He looked slightly amused. “She is protective.”

Grace nodded. “She has buried a husband and raised four boys. She has prayed in this garden for half the town.”

Daniel’s face turned thoughtful. “I will be careful.”

Grace felt a subtle shift in herself. Daniel spoke as if her words mattered. He did not treat the garden like decoration. He treated it like someone’s offering.

Grace said, “Thank you for asking her.”

“It is her space,” Daniel said.

Grace almost said, It is God’s space. She held the words back. Daniel did not speak much about faith. Yet. She did not want to press. She did not want to rush.

Daniel looked toward the river. “Grace.”

She looked at him. “Yes.”

“I want to apologize for asking if you wanted me to stay late,” he said. “It sounded too personal.”

Grace blinked. “It did not.”

He searched her face. “All right.”

Grace folded her hands in front of her. “You asked because you wanted clarity.”

“Yes.”

Grace nodded. “I respect clarity.”

Daniel held her gaze a moment longer, then looked away, as if he stored the exchange in a place he would review later.

He said, “I need to get back. I will see you later.”

Grace stepped back from the path to give him room. “All right.”

He walked away. His boots pressed into the gravel with measured steps.

Grace stayed near the garden for a few minutes and watched the river. She let the sound steady her. She let the morning sun warm her arms.

Then she returned to the church.

Inside the office, she pulled out her choir binder. She wrote notes in the margins of two songs. She checked who had missed last rehearsal. She made a plan to call Mrs. Ramirez, whose husband had been in the hospital again.

Grace did these things with care. She did not do them with panic. She did not run the choir like a rescue mission. She led it like a garden. Watered. Tended. Given time.

Near noon, she walked to the café on Main Street. Maple Ridge Café sat in a brick building with wide front windows. The bell above the door rang when she entered. The smell of coffee and grilled bread met her.

Mabel Turner stood behind the counter, hair in a neat bun, apron tied tight. She looked up and smiled. “Grace.”

“Mabel.”

Mabel poured coffee into a mug without asking. “You look like you slept.”

Grace took the mug and smiled faintly. “Thank you.”

Mabel leaned an elbow on the counter. “How is the river project?”

Grace stirred a small spoon of sugar into the mug. “It is moving forward. Mr. Chen is steady.”

Mabel’s eyebrows rose. “Mr. Chen. I heard about him. Folks say he is quiet.”

“He is.”

Mabel tilted her head. “Quiet men can be good men.”

Grace did not respond right away. She looked down at the coffee. The surface held a small swirl.

Mabel’s voice softened. “I did not mean to pry.”

“It is all right,” Grace said. She took a sip. “People talk in Maple Ridge.”

Mabel huffed gently. “They talk in every town. But we try to keep it kind.”

Grace nodded. “I know.”

Mabel slid a plate toward her. A grilled cheese sandwich, cut in half, steam rising as Grace lifted one piece. “On the house. Choir director needs fuel.”

Grace’s eyes warmed. “Thank you.”

Mabel waved it off. “How is Soojin?”

“She is well. She asked if she could visit the river after school.”

Mabel’s face softened. “She is a bright one. She watches everything.”

“Yes,” Grace said.

Mabel lowered her voice. “Grace, I know you do not like fuss. But if you ever need someone to pick her up from school, you call me. I have done it for half the town.”

Grace felt a lump rise in her throat. It came fast and sharp. She hated how easily kindness did that to her.

She cleared her throat. “Thank you. I will remember.”

Mabel nodded as if she understood the weight in those words. She stepped away to greet another customer.

Grace ate slowly at a small table by the window. Outside, Main Street moved in its usual rhythm. A man carried boxes into the bookstore; a woman with a stroller crossed toward the bakery. A truck rolled by with hay in the bed.

Maple Ridge did not hurry. It held its own pace. Grace had fought it when she first returned. She had wanted to fix everything fast. She had wanted to prove she had control now.

She had learned Maple Ridge did not demand proof. It asked for presence.

After lunch, Grace ran a few errands. She picked up paper towels at the hardware store. She bought apples at the small grocer. She stopped by the church again to drop off supplies for the fellowship hall.

Pastor Whitaker stood in the hallway near his office, speaking to Eli Brooks. Eli held a tool belt in one hand and listened with his head tilted slightly.

Pastor Whitaker saw Grace and smiled. “Grace.”

“Pastor Whitaker.”

Eli nodded to her. “Hey, Grace.”

“Hi, Eli.”

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes held gentle focus. “How is the choir coming?”

“We will be ready,” Grace said. “The children’s part needs one more run.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Good. Mrs. Alder told me you and Mr. Chen talked with her about the access path.”

Grace blinked. “She already told you.”

Pastor Whitaker chuckled. “She reports faster than the church phone tree. I will check in with him as well.”

Grace shifted her groceries in her arms. “He is careful. He gave her choices.”

Pastor Whitaker’s expression warmed. “A man who asks before he acts will do fine in Maple Ridge.”

Eli grinned. “He is also saving us a headache. That bank is a mess.”

Grace looked between them. “How bad is it?”

Eli’s grin faded. “It will hold if the work goes well. But it needed attention sooner.”

Pastor Whitaker’s voice stayed calm. “We will be grateful for good work. We will pray for steady weather.”

Grace nodded.

Pastor Whitaker glanced down the hall toward the sanctuary. “Grace, I want to thank you again. For staying faithful in the small things. Choir work. Children. The quiet care. It matters.”

Grace felt her face grow warm. She lowered her eyes. “I am glad to serve.”

Pastor Whitaker’s tone stayed gentle. “You have carried much. Do not carry it alone.”

Grace swallowed. “Yes, sir.”

Eli stepped back, giving her space. “I need to get back to the parsonage porch. Hannah has me fixing a loose step. See you later.”

Grace smiled. “See you.”

Eli walked out. Pastor Whitaker stayed.

He looked at Grace with fatherly patience. “How is your heart, Grace?”

The question landed soft and heavy at once.

Grace shifted the grocery bag in her arms again as if weight could distract her. “It is steady.”

Pastor Whitaker did not press. “All right.”

Grace nodded. “I have to pick up Soojin. Then rehearsal.”

Pastor Whitaker stepped aside. “Go. If you need anything, you know where I am.”

Grace left the church with his words in her ears.

By mid-afternoon, the sun sat high. The air turned warm and thick. Grace drove to the school and waited in the line of cars.

Children poured out of the doors with backpacks bouncing. Soojin spotted Grace and ran, then slowed near the car as if she remembered to be careful. She opened the door and climbed in.

Grace smiled at her. “How was school?”

Soojin buckled her seat belt. “We learned a song about frogs.”

Grace laughed once. “A song.”

Soojin nodded with seriousness. “It was loud. Mrs. Miles said we need inside voices, but frogs do not have inside voices.”

Grace glanced at her in the rearview mirror as she pulled out. “That is true.”

Soojin looked out the window. “Are we going to the river?”

“Yes. For a little while.”

Soojin’s hands squeezed together in her lap. “Okay.”

Grace drove to the church. She parked and led Soojin toward the prayer garden. The afternoon light lay bright on the path.

Near the river, Daniel’s crew had cleared some tools. The cement looked fresh in a section of the form. Daniel stood with a clipboard, checking something on paper.

He looked up when Grace and Soojin approached. His face changed slightly, as if his attention sharpened.

Soojin let go of Grace’s hand and walked two steps ahead. Then she stopped, as if she remembered manners.

Grace spoke first. “Mr. Chen. We came by for a few minutes.”

Daniel nodded. “Hello, Grace. Hello, Soojin.”

Soojin lifted her chin. “Hi.”

Daniel’s mouth softened again. “How was school?”

Soojin thought hard. “We sang a frog song. It was loud.”

Daniel nodded as if he respected the report. “Frogs are loud.”

Soojin’s eyes widened at his agreement. “Yes.”

Grace watched the exchange with a quiet ache. She wanted her daughter to receive steadiness from many places, not only from her. It mattered. It mattered more than romance. It mattered more than her own loneliness.

Soojin looked past Daniel at the riverbank. “Is the wall going to fall?”

Daniel crouched slightly so he met her at eye level. “It will not fall if we do the work right. We are doing the work right.”

Soojin studied his face as if she tested the truth. “Are you going to leave?”

Grace’s breath caught.

Daniel did not look at Grace. He kept his focus on Soojin. He spoke slowly, carefully. “I go home at night. I come back in the morning. I will stay with the job until it is finished.”

Soojin blinked. “Okay.”

Grace felt her shoulders loosen. She had not even known how tight they were.

Soojin stepped back to Grace’s side and took her hand again.

Grace looked at Daniel. “Thank you.”

He nodded once.

Grace guided Soojin toward the garden bench. Mrs. Alder sat there with her hat brim shading her face. A sketch pad rested on her lap. She looked up and smiled wide when she saw Soojin.

“There is my girl,” Mrs. Alder called.

Soojin’s face brightened. “Hi, Mrs. Alder.”

Mrs. Alder patted the bench. “Come sit. I brought colored pencils.”

Soojin let go of Grace’s hand and hurried over.

Grace walked back toward Daniel, leaving Soojin in the garden’s safe space.

Daniel watched Mrs. Alder and Soojin for a moment, then returned his gaze to the work.

Grace stood beside him, a few feet away. “She worries.”

Daniel nodded. “I see.”

Grace swallowed. “She learned it from watching.”

Daniel looked at her. His eyes held understanding without pity. “Children learn from what they live.”

Grace stared at the river. “Yes.”

Daniel’s voice stayed low. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Grace turned her head slightly. The question felt simple. It did not feel like pressure. Still, her heart kicked once, hard.

Grace did not want to open her past like a file on a desk. She did not want to make it his burden. She also did not want to hide behind silence out of habit.

She chose a narrow truth. “Soojin’s father made life feel unpredictable. He did not hurt her body. He hurt stability. He made promises and broke them. He left me to make up for it.”

Daniel's jaw tightened, then relaxed. He kept his voice even. "I am sorry."

Grace nodded once. She did not look for more.

Daniel stared out at the river. "I do not like unpredictability either."

Grace glanced at him. "Why?"

He hesitated. His face went still.

Grace waited. She did not rush him. She had learned how silence could serve as kindness.

Daniel finally spoke. "When I was younger, my mother got sick. It came fast. My father tried to hold everything together. He worked longer hours. He missed things. We missed things. I learned to control what I could."

Grace listened. The words sounded plain, but his voice carried weight under them.

Daniel continued. "When I started my business, I promised myself I would never let things slide. I would not forget details. I would not leave a job half done. I would not make excuses."

Grace looked at him with new tenderness. "That is why you check everything twice."

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

Grace thought of his squared notes on the passenger seat, coffee cup placed with care. She thought of how he stayed late without being asked.

Grace said, "Control feels safe until it starts to own you."

Daniel's eyes flicked to her face. He did not answer right away.

Grace regretted the line as soon as she said it. It felt too close to his private place.

Daniel spoke at last. “Yes.”

One word. Quiet agreement. It carried more than a long speech.

Grace let out a slow breath. “I used to rush. I rushed into decisions. I rushed into fixing. I rushed into forgiving, because I wanted peace more than truth.”

Daniel watched her. “What changed?”

Grace held her hands together in front of her, fingers interlaced tight. “Soojin. And God.”

Daniel waited.

Grace spoke softly. “I prayed for the Lord to make my life stable. I thought He would change my husband. I thought He would turn him into a different man. He did not. He gave me strength to leave. He gave me people here. He gave me a pace.”

Daniel’s gaze stayed on the river. “A pace.”

Grace nodded. “Slow. Firm. A pace that keeps a person from lying to herself.”

Daniel’s mouth tightened in thought. “I understand.”

Grace did not expect him to say more. She did not ask.

A crew member called Daniel’s name again. Daniel straightened. “I need to check the pour.”

Grace stepped back. “Of course.”

Daniel started to move, then paused. He looked at her. “Thank you for telling me.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you for hearing it.”

He turned and walked away.

Grace returned to the garden bench. Soojin and Mrs. Alder sat close, heads bent over the sketch pad. Soojin drew a river with a thick blue pencil. Mrs. Alder pointed to the edge and said something Grace could not hear.

Grace sat on the other end of the bench. She watched her daughter draw, tongue poking out in focus. Grace watched Mrs. Alder’s hands, spotted with age, steady as she held a pencil.

Grace let her mind rest.

She thought of her early days back in Maple Ridge. She had come with boxes in the trunk and a hollow feeling in her chest. She had driven past the church and seen the steeple, white against the sky, and she had cried hard enough to pull over.

She had walked into the church office with Soojin on her hip and her pride in her mouth like a stone.

Pastor Whitaker had not asked for the full story. He had said, “You are safe here.” He had meant it.

Hannah Whitaker had brought soup and a warm loaf of bread. She had smiled and said, “No questions unless you want them.” Grace had cried then too.

At the first choir rehearsal after Grace took the role, her hands shook so much that she dropped a stack of folders. Two women had bent and picked them up without a single comment. They had handed them back with soft smiles.

Grace had learned stability through small, repeated acts.

Not grand speeches. Not promises spoken with fire. Small kindness. Steady work.

The same kind of work Daniel Chen did on the riverbank.

Soojin held up the sketch pad. “Mom. Look.”

Grace leaned in. The drawing showed the church by the river, a tall steeple, a tree with long branches, and a wall made of gray blocks. A small stick figure stood near the wall with a square body and lines for arms.

Grace smiled. “Who is that?”

Soojin pointed. “Mr. Chen. He is working.”

Grace traced the pencil marks with her eyes. “You drew him tall.”

Soojin frowned. “He is tall.”

Mrs. Alder chuckled. “Soojin tells the truth.”

Grace looked at her daughter. “It is a good drawing.”

Soojin’s face softened. “Thank you.”

Mrs. Alder leaned close to Grace. Her voice lowered. “He treats her with respect. I saw it. He does not brush her off.”

Grace nodded. “He does.”

Mrs. Alder watched the river through the garden opening. “You have done well, Grace. You have kept her world gentle.”

Grace swallowed. Praise felt dangerous too. It made her fear loss.

She answered with quiet honesty. “I tried.”

Mrs. Alder’s hand patted Grace’s knee once. “Trying matters.”

Grace blinked fast and looked away.

Late afternoon stretched toward evening. Daniel's crew packed up. Tools clanked into the trailer. Boards slid into place. The sound carried across the river and faded.

Daniel walked toward the garden gate. He stopped near Grace and Mrs. Alder.

"We finished the pour," he said. "It needs time to set. We will cover it. We will check it in the morning."

Mrs. Alder stood and faced him. "Did you protect my roses?"

Daniel nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Mrs. Alder narrowed her eyes, then seemed satisfied. "Good."

Daniel looked at Grace. "Choir tonight."

"Yes," Grace said. "We start at seven."

Daniel nodded once. "I will be done before then."

Grace studied his face. "You do not have to come near the building if you do not want to hear it."

Daniel's eyes held a quiet flicker. "I do want to hear it."

Grace felt warmth rise again, steady and unsettling. She nodded. "All right."

Soojin hopped off the bench and walked to Daniel with her sketch pad clutched in both hands. She held it out.

Daniel took it with care. He looked down at the drawing for a long moment.

Soojin waited, face hopeful and tense.

Daniel looked up at her. “You did good work.”

Soojin’s shoulders dropped. “Thank you.”

Daniel handed it back. “Keep drawing. Your hand will get stronger.”

Soojin nodded as if he gave her a tool.

Grace watched with a quiet ache in her chest. She wanted to protect Soojin from every disappointment. She knew she could not. She could only build her child’s world with steadiness and truth.

Grace said, “We need to go home. Dinner.”

Mrs. Alder waved her off. “Go on, honey. I will lock the garden gate.”

Grace took Soojin’s hand and walked toward the parking lot. The sun sat lower now, light turning gold on the church siding.

Soojin looked back once. “Bye, Mr. Chen.”

Daniel raised a hand. “Goodbye, Soojin.”

Grace glanced back too. Daniel stood near the river path, framed by the willows. He looked like a man who belonged near something steady.

Grace drove home with Soojin singing the frog song in the back seat. It made Grace laugh despite herself.

At home, Grace cooked simple food. Rice. Stir-fried vegetables. A small piece of chicken. She moved through the kitchen with familiar motions. Soojin colored at the table, humming.

Grace set two plates down and sat with her daughter.

Soojin asked, “Is the wall going to keep the church safe?”

Grace nodded. “It will help.”

Soojin chewed, then spoke again. “Mr. Chen is like a wall.”

Grace paused with her fork halfway to her mouth. “What do you mean?”

Soojin shrugged, as if it should be obvious. “He stays.”

Grace felt tears prick her eyes. She blinked and kept her voice steady. “He stays for the work.”

Soojin nodded. “Yes. People should stay.”

Grace reached across the table and covered Soojin’s small hand with her own. “Yes. People should stay when they say they will.”

After dinner, Grace washed dishes. She helped Soojin with a bath. She braided her hair and read a chapter of a children’s book.

When Soojin slept, Grace stood in the doorway and watched her again. The rise and fall of her small chest. The loose hand on the blanket. The quiet mouth.

Grace closed the door most of the way and walked to her own room.

She sat on the edge of her bed and opened her Bible on her lap. The pages fell to a place marked with a ribbon.

She read Isaiah 26:3 in a whisper. “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”

Grace closed her eyes. She held the verse in her chest like a small stone, smooth from use.

She prayed with plain words. For Soojin. For the river work. For the choir. For the Lord to keep her from rushing into fear. For the Lord to keep her from rushing into hope.

When she finished, she stood and changed into a simple dress for rehearsal. She pinned her hair back. She checked the time.

It had not yet reached seven.

Grace drove to the church. The evening air felt warm. The sky held soft color near the horizon, pale orange fading into blue.

Cars sat in the parking lot near the fellowship hall. Light spilled from the windows. Voices drifted out. Laughter, low and gentle. The sound of chairs moving.

Grace carried her choir binder inside.

The fellowship hall smelled like coffee, old hymnals, and the lemon cleaner someone used on the tables. A few women stood near the snack table, setting out paper cups.

Rachel Moreno waved at Grace from the corner. “Hi, Grace.”

Grace smiled. “Hi, Rachel.”

Rachel looked tired but bright. “We are ready for you.”

Grace set her binder down and began to arrange folders. She greeted each person as they arrived. Men and women from the church. Teenagers with shy faces. Two older women who sang alto with unwavering strength.

As they warmed up, Grace listened to their voices and guided them with small gestures. She did not lead with force. She led with calm.

She had learned how to hold a room without raising her voice.

Partway through the rehearsal, Grace heard a sound outside. A truck door shut.

Her heart gave a small jump. She kept her face neutral and continued to guide the sopranos through a line.

The windows in the hall stood open a few inches. The evening air moved through. Along with it came the faint smell of damp soil from the river path.

Grace did not look out. She did not need to. She knew who it was.

They sang on.

During a short break, Rachel poured coffee and carried two cups toward Grace. “Here.”

Grace took one. “Thank you.”

Rachel studied her face with a curious softness. “You look peaceful tonight.”

Grace held the cup. The warmth seeped into her hands. “I feel steady.”

Rachel nodded as if she understood more than Grace said. “It shows.”

Grace glanced toward the window. The glass reflected the room. She saw shadows outside, but no clear figure. She knew Daniel stood somewhere near the path. Listening, like he said he would.

Grace’s throat tightened in a way she did not expect. It felt like gratitude and fear braided together.

She did not rush to the window. She did not step outside. She stayed where her work was. She returned to the front and called the choir back together.

They sang again.

The sound rose and filled the fellowship hall. It spilled through the open windows into the evening air. It drifted toward the river, toward the bank work, toward the forms set in place.

Grace kept her hands steady as she led.

She did not rush the tempo. She did not push the voices. She let the music move like the river. No hurry. No panic. A calm line forward.

When the final chord settled, silence followed. It held for a moment, tender and full.

Grace closed her binder with care.

As people gathered their things and began to leave, Grace stayed near the window and looked out at last.

Daniel Chen stood near the edge of the lot, close to the path leading to the prayer garden. His hands rested at his sides. He faced the building as if he listened for the echo.

He turned his head and saw Grace in the window.

Their eyes met through the glass and the evening light.

Daniel lifted his chin in a small nod. No smile. No show. Only presence.

Grace felt her breath ease out. She nodded back.

He did not come inside. He did not wave for her to join him. He did not press for more than the moment held.

Grace watched him turn and walk to his truck.

She stood still, hand on the window frame, and let the quiet settle into her bones.

She did not rush after him. She did not rush to name what she felt.

She only watched the steady way he moved, and she thanked God for one more day of steadiness, given without force and without fear.

Chapter 7

Rain Upstream

The morning air held a thin weight. Grace Park felt it before she opened the front door. The sky looked washed out, as if someone had rubbed a hand across the blue. Clouds sat low over the trees. The maple leaves in her yard did not flicker the way they did on clear days. They hung still.

She stepped onto the porch with her coffee and listened.

No birdsong. No breeze.

Only the far sound of tires on the county road and the steady hum of summer insects, softer than usual.

From inside, a small voice floated down the hall. “Mom.”

Grace turned. “I am here.”

Mina padded to the doorway in her socks. Her hair stuck up on one side. She rubbed her eyes and leaned against the frame, as if her bones still wanted sleep.

Grace set her mug down and opened her arms. Mina walked into them. Grace held her and breathed in the warm, clean scent of last night’s shampoo.

Mina pulled back and looked at the sky. “Is it going to rain?”

Grace followed her gaze. “I think so.”

Mina’s face tightened. “The river is going to get big again.”

Grace brushed a thumb along her cheek. “We will see. God takes care of rivers too.”

Mina nodded, but her eyes stayed fixed on the clouds. She had watched storms before. She had watched the creek behind their old apartment jump its banks and swallow the low grass. She remembered more than Grace wanted.

Grace kissed her forehead. “Go eat. I will make eggs.”

Mina trudged toward the kitchen.

Grace picked up her mug and stood on the porch a moment longer. She did not want to borrow trouble. She also did not want to ignore what her body sensed. The air smelled like damp earth even though the ground stayed dry. Rain had started somewhere else. Upstream.

She went inside and began breakfast. The skillet hissed. The smell of butter warmed the room. Mina sat at the table, swung her legs, and watched Grace with the same focus she had in church when Grace led the choir. Mina tracked her. Mina counted on her.

Grace slid eggs onto a plate and set it in front of Mina. “Eat.”

Mina did. “Are we going to church today?”

“Not today. We have rehearsal tomorrow. Today we have errands.”

Mina chewed and looked toward the window. “Do we need sandbags?”

Grace kept her face calm. “No. We do not live by the river.”

Mina swallowed. “But the church does.”

Grace set her own plate down and sat across from her. “The church has people who watch over it. Daniel watches over it. Eli Brooks helps. Pastor Whitaker prays over it. The Lord holds it.”

Mina looked down at her eggs. “Okay.”

Grace reached across the table and squeezed her hand. Mina's fingers stayed small and warm. Grace's own hand felt steady, yet something in her chest stayed alert. She did not want Mina to see fear.

After breakfast, Grace packed Mina's bag for the day. A book. A snack. A sweater even though the forecast had promised heat. The clouds made the world feel cooler. Grace checked her phone. A weather alert blinked across the screen. Heavy rainfall in the upper county. River advisory.

She stared at the words longer than she needed to. Then she set the phone down and washed the dishes with slow care, as if calm hands could keep the rest of life calm too.

By midmorning, she drove Mina to her mother's house.

Grace's mother, Sunhee Park, opened the door before Grace knocked. She wore an apron and held a dish towel in one hand. She had already cooked something. The scent of garlic and broth slipped past her into the humid air.

"You look tired," Sunhee said.

Grace leaned in for a brief hug. "I slept fine."

Sunhee stepped back and studied her face. Sunhee did not accept easy answers. She never had. She read Grace's moods the way she read hymnals. She knew where Grace skipped lines.

Mina pushed past them and ran inside. "Halmeoni."

Sunhee's face softened. "Mina. Come here." She crouched and hugged her, long and tight.

Grace watched them and felt the familiar pull in her chest. Gratitude, braided with ache. Her mother had carried so much for her. She had

never asked Grace to pay her back. She had only asked Grace to stay faithful.

Sunhee stood. “You have rehearsal soon. You need rest.”

“Tomorrow,” Grace said. “I have errands today.”

Sunhee’s gaze flicked to the sky. “Storm.”

“Upstream,” Grace said. “They sent an advisory.”

Sunhee’s lips pressed together. “You worry about church.”

Grace did not deny it. “I do.”

Sunhee leaned close and lowered her voice. “You worry because you love. It is a good thing. But you do not carry everything.”

Grace looked at the doorway where Mina’s laughter floated from the living room. “I do not want her to see me fall apart.”

Sunhee’s eyes stayed steady. “Then do not fall apart.”

Grace gave a small nod. It was simple in her mother’s mouth. It held no mockery. It held conviction. Sunhee touched Grace’s arm. “Go. Mina stays with me.”

Grace kissed Mina’s hair and promised she would return after lunch. Mina did not look up from the picture book spread on the rug. She only lifted a hand in a small wave. She trusted Grace to return.

Grace drove toward town.

Maple Ridge looked the same in the gray light, yet the colors dulled. The bakery sign hung over Main Street with no sun on it. The red brick of the bookstore looked darker. The courthouse lawn held still air. A flag hung limp on its pole.

Grace parked by the hardware store because she needed screws for a loose hinge at home and sheet music folders for the youth group. She walked inside and felt the blast of cool air from the old unit behind the counter.

Eli Brooks stood in the aisle by the fasteners, one hand braced on his hip while he studied the bins. He wore a worn ball cap and a shirt with sawdust clinging to the shoulder. He looked up when Grace approached.

“Morning, Grace,” Eli said.

“Morning,” she said. “You look like you have already worked.”

Eli shrugged. “The river does not keep banker hours.”

Grace held her shopping basket tighter. “How is it?”

Eli’s eyes shifted toward the front window as if he could see through the buildings and straight to the water. “It stays calm for now. But Daniel called early. He is heading over to check the forms.”

Grace nodded. “I saw an alert.”

Eli reached into a bin and pulled out a bolt. “Rain fell north of here. If the ground up there stays soaked, we will see it by tonight. Maybe tomorrow.”

Grace’s stomach tightened. She set it aside. “Pastor Whitaker knows?”

“He knows,” Eli said. “He asked me to stop by and check the prayer garden path. If the bank softens, he does not want folks walking near the edge.”

Grace pictured the path where Daniel had stood last night. The thought of it breaking away under someone’s feet made her throat go dry.

Eli glanced at her. “You all right?”

Grace lifted her chin. “Yes.”

Eli gave her a quiet look. Eli did not pry. He only nodded once, as if he offered her the same steady presence he offered everyone.

At the counter, Rachel Moreno stood with a clipboard and a stack of flyers. She looked up and smiled.

“Grace. I was hoping I would run into you,” Rachel said.

Grace’s chest warmed. Rachel carried energy without chaos. She moved fast, but she did not scatter. “What do you need?”

Rachel held up a flyer. “We are doing a supply drive for the Johnson family. Their barn roof went in that wind last week. I know, it feels like everything wants to break at once.”

Grace studied the list. Nails. Tarps. Gift cards. Canned goods. “I will add it to choir announcements.”

Rachel’s smile softened. “Thank you.” Then Rachel’s eyes slid to the window as if her own mind had caught the same drift. “And I heard about the river. Are you nervous?”

Grace placed her purchases on the counter. “I do not want trouble.”

Rachel lifted one shoulder. “None of us do.” She rang up the items. “Daniel Chen is on it, though. He looks like the type who stays calm even when a truck is on fire.”

Grace almost smiled. “He does not talk much.”

Rachel’s expression turned gentle. “He listens.”

Grace felt heat in her cheeks. She looked down and counted bills from her wallet. “He does.”

Rachel leaned in, voice lower. “You deserve someone who listens.”

Grace glanced up. “Rachel.”

Rachel raised both hands in surrender. “All right. I will stop.”

Grace paid and took her bag. She did not rush out, but she did not linger either. Outside, the air had thickened. A faint smell of rain drifted in, though nothing fell yet.

She drove to the church.

Maple Ridge Community Church sat white and clean against the gray sky. The steeple rose over the trees like a fixed point. Grace pulled into the lot and parked near the fellowship hall. She sat with both hands on the wheel and watched the steeple for a moment.

She had learned to measure her life by small signs of stability. A light in the kitchen window when she came home. Mina’s shoes lined by the door. The church steeple in any weather.

She got out and walked toward the prayer garden path.

The river did not show from the lot, but she could hear it when she stepped past the hedge. It moved with a low, constant sound. Today it sounded heavier. Not faster. Heavier. Like more water pressed through the same channel.

She came around the corner and saw Daniel Chen near the bank.

He wore work boots and a long-sleeve shirt rolled to his forearms. His hair sat neat despite the humidity. A clipboard rested under his arm. He stood with feet planted wide, eyes locked on the waterline. He looked like someone watching an animal he respected.

Grace slowed. She did not want to interrupt. Her steps made soft sounds on the path. Gravel clicked under her sandal. Daniel turned his head at the sound. His eyes met hers.

He did not smile. He did not move fast. He gave a small nod, like last night.

Grace stopped near the gate. “I heard about the rain.”

Daniel’s voice stayed quiet. “Yes.”

“Is it bad?”

Daniel glanced back at the river. “It will rise. The question is how much. The retaining wall has fresh work. Fresh work needs time.”

Grace stepped closer, careful to stay on firm ground. “Do you need anything?”

Daniel looked at her for a moment. His gaze did not slide away. He weighed her words like he weighed lumber. “I need the area clear, no one near the edge. I will talk to Pastor Whitaker. Eli already knows.”

Grace nodded. “I will tell people. I will tell the choir.”

Daniel turned his body fully toward her. “Thank you.”

The wind shifted. A cool breath moved through the willow branches. Leaves brushed one another with a faint, papery sound. Grace felt the first hint of rain on her forearm, one drop, then another.

Daniel looked up at the sky. “It is starting.”

Grace looked too. The clouds had thickened into a solid sheet. The light dimmed. “Will you stop work?”

“I will cover what needs covering,” Daniel said. “Then I will wait.”

Grace swallowed. “Alone?”

Daniel’s eyes went back to the river. “My crew will come if I call.”

Grace wanted to offer more. A meal. Coffee. A place to sit. She felt the old pull to make herself useful. To earn safety through service. She held back. She did not want to turn care into control.

She said, “If you need to contact me, I am close.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes.”

Grace stayed a moment longer, watching his face. He did not look worried in a loud way. He looked focused. He looked like someone who had learned what panic cost.

The rain picked up. It tapped on the leaves and darkened the dirt. A faint smell rose from the ground, rich and clean. Grace backed toward the path.

Daniel spoke again. “Grace.”

She paused. “Yes.”

“If the water comes fast tonight, Mina should not walk near the river.”

Grace blinked. The way he said Mina’s name tightened something in her throat. “She will not.”

Daniel held her gaze a moment longer, then nodded once. He turned back to his work.

Grace walked back to her car with the rain sliding down her arms. She drove home with the wipers ticking in a steady rhythm.

By afternoon, the rain settled into a constant fall. It did not pound. It did not thunder. It simply refused to stop. Grace sat at her kitchen table with her music binder open and the window cracked enough to hear the sound of water on the eaves.

She tried to focus on Sunday's hymns for rehearsal. Her pencil hovered over the page. Her mind kept drifting to the river. To fresh boards. To wet soil.

She forced herself to write notes in the margins. Breath here. Hold the altos back. Let the sopranos float on the last line.

Her phone buzzed on the table.

She picked it up, a message from Pastor Whitaker.

River rising. Daniel and Eli monitoring. Please keep folks away from the edge of the prayer garden until further notice. I will send a churchwide note.

Grace stared at the words and let out a slow breath. She typed back.

Understood. I will share with choir and families.

She set the phone down and closed her eyes for a moment. The rain kept talking on the roof.

She thought of the church grounds in summer. Children running along the path. Couples walking slowly by the garden. Older members sitting on the bench near the willow. She pictured the edge giving way without warning.

A soft knock sounded at her back door.

Grace stood. Her heart picked up, then steadied when she saw who stood on the step.

Rachel Moreno held a covered casserole dish in both hands. Her hair had frizzed from the damp. She looked sheepish, as if she knew she had arrived without asking.

Grace opened the door wider. "Rachel. What are you doing out in this?"

Rachel lifted the dish. “I made too much chicken and rice. Also, I do not like the way the sky feels today. I wanted to check on you.”

Grace stepped back to let her in. “Come inside.”

Rachel walked in and set the dish on the counter. She glanced around the kitchen like she always did, noticing details. The small vase of daisies Grace had picked with Mina two days ago. The stack of music on the table. The tiny pair of rain boots by the door.

Rachel leaned against the counter. “Mina with your mother?”

Grace nodded. “Yes. She asked about sandbags at breakfast.”

Rachel’s face softened. “Poor baby.”

Grace poured two glasses of water. “She remembers the old place.”

Rachel accepted the glass. “Of course she does.”

Grace held hers with both hands. The rain rattled against the window. “Pastor Whitaker sent an alert. Daniel and Eli are watching the river.”

Rachel nodded. “Daniel looks steady.”

Grace met her eyes.

Rachel lifted her hand again. “I am not saying anything else. But it is good to have someone steady near trouble.”

Grace looked down. “I do not want Mina to see instability again.”

Rachel’s voice softened. “Then she will not. Grace, she has you.”

Grace swallowed. She wanted to believe her own strength held enough. She wanted to believe her care kept the world from breaking. She knew better. She had learned the hard way that love did not stop storms. Love helped people stand inside them.

Rachel watched her. “Do you want me to pick up Mina later so you can rest?”

Grace shook her head. “No. I want her home tonight.”

Rachel nodded. “Okay.”

Grace set her glass down and opened the casserole. Steam rose. The scent filled the room and pushed back the damp air. “Stay for lunch.”

Rachel smiled. “All right.”

They ate at the table while rain fell outside. They talked about small things. The supply drive list. The youth group. A funny moment from choir rehearsal last month when the tenors came in early and blamed the pianist.

Grace laughed. The sound surprised her. It felt good in her throat.

When Rachel stood to leave, she touched Grace’s arm. “If the river rises tonight, call me. Even if you only need someone to sit on the phone with you.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you.”

Rachel slipped on her raincoat and stepped into the gray afternoon.

After Rachel left, Grace cleaned the kitchen with slow motions. She checked her phone again. No new message. She stood at the window and watched water run down the glass in long lines.

A car passed, tires hissing on wet pavement.

Grace picked up her keys. She needed Mina. She needed her under her own roof tonight, where Grace could see her, hear her, pray over her at bedtime.

She drove through the rain to her mother’s house.

Sunhee opened the door with a towel over her shoulder. The smell of soup wrapped around Grace again.

Mina ran to Grace and latched onto her waist. “Mom. It is raining so much.”

Grace crouched and hugged her. “I know.”

Mina looked up. “Is the church going to fall in?”

Grace brushed Mina’s wet hair back. “No.”

Sunhee watched them with calm eyes. “She watched the weather channel.”

Grace gave her mother a look.

Sunhee lifted her chin. “She asked.”

Grace sighed. She did not want Mina fed by alarm. She also did not want Mina shut out and left alone with her fears.

Grace stood and faced Mina. “The church is safe. The wall by the river needs work, and Daniel is working on it. The river is rising, so they are watching it.”

Mina’s eyes widened. “Is Daniel there now?”

Grace hesitated. “He was there this morning.”

Mina gripped Grace’s hand. “What if he gets washed away?”

Grace tightened her hold. “He will be careful.”

Sunhee spoke in Korean, firm and low. Grace caught the meaning even without translating each word. Mina needed to eat. Mina needed calm. Mina needed prayer.

Grace nodded. “Mina, go get your shoes. We will go home.”

Mina ran off.

Sunhee stepped closer. “Grace.”

Grace looked at her mother.

Sunhee’s voice stayed quiet. “You think about him.”

Grace’s cheeks warmed. “I think about the wall.”

Sunhee gave a small sound, almost a hum. “You think about him.”

Grace did not argue. She did not have the energy for it. “The river worries me.”

Sunhee’s eyes stayed kind. “Pray. Then do your work. Then sleep.”

Grace nodded. “Yes, Umma.”

Mina returned with her shoes half on, heel crushed down. Grace fixed them and lifted her onto her hip for a moment, breathing in her child’s warm weight.

On the drive home, Mina talked about small things. A song she wanted to sing in choir. A drawing she made for Halmeoni. A new library book with pictures of fish.

Grace answered, kept her voice steady, kept her eyes on the road.

The rain did not stop.

By evening, the light turned dim and early. Grace turned on lamps. The house took on a warm glow that pushed against the gray at the windows. She made soup and grilled cheese. Mina ate while humming under her breath.

Grace rinsed dishes and checked her phone again.

A new message came through, this time from Eli Brooks.

River is up about a foot since noon. Moving faster. Daniel is staying close. Pastor Whitaker asks folks to pray.

Grace read it twice. She set the phone down and leaned both hands on the counter. The kitchen light shone on her fingers. They looked steady. She wanted her insides to match.

Mina climbed onto the couch with her blanket and her book. “Mom, will you read?”

Grace dried her hands. “Yes.”

She sat beside Mina and opened the book. Mina tucked against her side. Grace read slowly, giving each line a calm voice. Outside, rain beat on the roof with patient persistence.

Halfway through the book, Mina interrupted. “Is the river loud?”

Grace thought of the sound she had heard this morning. Heavy. “It can be.”

Mina looked toward the window. “Does it scare you?”

Grace paused. She chose truth shaped for a child. “Sometimes it makes me pay attention.”

Mina nodded. “Does it scare Daniel?”

Grace felt her throat tighten again at the sound of his name in Mina’s mouth. “I do not think he scares easily. But I think he respects it.”

Mina looked satisfied with that. She returned her gaze to the page.

When the story ended, Grace carried Mina to bed. Mina’s body felt heavier with sleep. Grace tucked her in and smoothed the blanket.

Mina’s eyes stayed open. “Will you pray?”

Grace sat on the edge of the bed. “Yes.”

Mina's small hand found Grace's. Grace held it and bowed her head.

"Lord," Grace whispered, "thank You for today. Thank You for our home. Thank You for Halmeoni. Please watch the church by the river. Please keep Daniel safe. Please help the wall hold. Please give Pastor Whitaker wisdom. Please give us peace."

Mina whispered, "Amen."

Grace kissed her forehead. "Sleep."

Mina's eyes drifted closed.

Grace stood in the doorway a moment and watched her daughter breathe. The room held a soft hush. The rain kept its steady sound outside.

Grace went to the living room and sat on the couch. She did not turn on the television. She did not scroll on her phone. She sat and listened to the rain and the quiet house.

Her phone buzzed again.

She picked it up fast, heart lifting into her throat.

A text from Daniel Chen.

River is rising faster than forecast. I am at the site. We have coverage on materials. I will update Pastor Whitaker at ten. Please keep Mina inside tomorrow.

Grace stared at the message. The words felt controlled, measured. Even so, she heard the warning underneath.

She typed back.

Thank you for telling me. We will stay away. We will pray.

She held the phone in both hands for a moment longer than she needed to. Then she set it down and rose.

She walked to her front window and pushed the curtain aside.

Rain fell in slanted lines under the streetlight. The maple tree in her yard now swayed a little. The wind had finally arrived. Water pooled along the curb and slid toward the storm drain.

Grace thought of the river doing the same thing, only larger, stronger, with no drain to swallow it. She pictured the church grounds in darkness. The white wall along the bank, new boards braced, gravel packed, stakes driven. She pictured Daniel standing there with a flashlight, shoulders squared, eyes on the water.

A need rose in her, sharp and clean. She wanted to go to him. She wanted to stand nearby, even from a distance, and offer presence the way he had offered it to her. She wanted to bring coffee, a dry towel, anything to make the night less heavy.

She did not move.

Mina slept down the hall. Grace stayed where she belonged.

She turned away from the window and went to the kitchen. She set out two mugs for morning. She filled the kettle and set it on the stove, ready. She packed Mina's lunch for the next day, even though she did not know what it would bring.

Small acts. Quiet order.

Then she sat at the table and opened her Bible.

The thin pages felt soft under her fingers. She turned to a place she had marked long ago. Isaiah 26:3.

She read it in the lamplight, lips moving without sound. You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Grace closed her eyes. She breathed in. She breathed out.

The rain kept falling. The house stayed still.

At nine thirty, her phone rang.

Grace picked it up on the first ring. “Hello.”

Pastor Whitaker’s voice came through, calm and low. “Grace.”

“Pastor.”

“I wanted to call before I sent the wider note,” he said. “The river has risen faster than expected. Daniel called me ten minutes ago. He and Eli are there. They have lights. They have blocked off the path.”

Grace pressed her free hand to the table. “Is the wall holding?”

“For now,” Pastor Whitaker said. “We do not see collapse. We see strain. The ground has softened along the edge. Daniel wants no one near it. He asked me to tell you directly. He knows you and Mina use the prayer garden often.”

Grace swallowed. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker paused. “How is Mina tonight?”

“She is asleep,” Grace said. “She asked questions earlier.”

“I will pray for her,” Pastor Whitaker said. “And for you.”

Grace closed her eyes. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker continued, “Daniel has a steady hand. He also carries weight alone. If you think he needs support, you may send a message. But do not go down there.”

Grace held the phone tighter. She understood the warning. She also heard the permission. “I will not go.”

“I trust you,” Pastor Whitaker said. “God is near, Grace. Even when water rises.”

“Yes,” Grace said.

After they hung up, Grace sat with the phone in her hand. The temptation to reach out to Daniel rose again. She did not want to distract him. She also did not want him to stand in the rain and dark with only work to hold him.

She typed a short message.

Praying for you. Thank you for watching over the church.

She stared at it a moment, then sent it.

The reply did not come right away.

Grace washed her mug and turned off the kitchen light. She walked through the house and checked the locks. She moved with care, like someone moving through a sanctuary.

She paused outside Mina’s room. Mina slept on her side, hair fanned across the pillow. Grace stood a moment, listening to the even breaths.

Grace went to her own room and lay down.

Sleep did not come fast. The rain filled every quiet space. Her mind ran through images of water, of soil giving way, of boards shifting. She forced herself to picture different things. Daniel’s nod through

the fellowship hall window. The calm line of his shoulders. The way he spoke Mina's name with simple care.

Near midnight her phone buzzed again.

Grace reached for it, heart tight.

A message from Daniel.

Thank you. Wall still holding. Water high. We will stay until it crests.

Grace read it twice. Relief moved through her like warmth. It did not erase worry. It steadied it.

She typed back.

Please be careful. Please let me know when you are home.

She hesitated before sending it, then sent it anyway. It felt like a line she had not crossed before, a personal request. She waited for regret. None came. Only the quiet truth that she wanted him safe.

Grace set the phone on her nightstand. She turned onto her side and stared at the dark.

Outside, rain kept falling somewhere upstream, feeding the river inch by inch.

Inside, Grace held her breath until it eased out.

She prayed again, a whisper into the dark. For the wall. For the church. For Daniel. For her daughter. For a steady heart.

The night stayed long. The rain stayed faithful to its work.

And Grace stayed in her house, listening, waiting, holding to peace with both hands.

Chapter 8

What Holds Quietly

Morning came slow and gray.

Grace woke before Mina. She lay still and listened for the rain. It had thinned in the night. Now it tiredly tapped the gutter, like it had spent itself upstream and had little left for Maple Ridge.

She sat up. Her back ached from holding tension too long. She pressed a hand to her chest and took one long breath. Then another.

The house smelled like yesterday's coffee and clean soap. The air felt damp. Her window showed a yard softened by rain. The maple leaves held beads of water. The grass lay flattened in places where the wind had pushed it down.

She padded down the hall and started the kettle. The small click of the stove sounded louder than it should have. She opened the curtain over the sink and looked toward the road. No cars. No neighbors. Only the wet shine of pavement and the pale line of sky above the trees.

Her phone sat on the counter where she had left it. She picked it up; no new message.

She did not want to fuss. She did not want to turn Daniel into something he did not ask to be. Still, her mind went to him standing at the riverbank in rain. Work lights. Mud. Cold hands.

She set the phone down and folded her arms on the counter. She bowed her head.

"Lord, keep him safe," she whispered. "Keep them all safe. Keep the wall steady. Keep our hearts steady."

The kettle began to sing.

Mina’s door creaked. Small steps crossed the hall. Then Mina appeared in the kitchen, hair in a loose tangle, pajama shirt twisted at one shoulder.

“Morning,” Grace said.

Mina blinked at the light. “Is it still raining?”

“It slowed down.”

Mina walked to the window and pressed her palms to the glass. “The river is going to be mad.”

Grace poured hot water into a mug. “The river does not get mad. It rises when it has to.”

Mina turned back with a serious face. “It breaks things.”

Grace held the mug close, letting the warmth travel into her hands. “Sometimes.”

Mina climbed onto her chair. “Did Mr. Chen sleep?”

Grace paused.

Mina watched her like a small judge.

Grace kept her voice even. “I do not know. He said they stayed until it crested.”

Mina frowned. “What is crested?”

“It means it reaches the top. Then it starts to go down.”

Mina nodded as if she had filed the definition away for later use. She swung her legs. “He is not scared.”

Grace thought of Daniel’s eyes. Calm, watchful. She had seen fear in men before, loud fear. Quiet fear. Fear wrapped in anger. Daniel

did not carry those shapes. He carried something else. Control. Discipline. A kind of steadiness that did not ask for attention.

Grace opened the fridge and pulled out milk. “He has work to do. People focus when they have work.”

Mina leaned forward. “Are we going to the church today?”

Grace checked the clock. “Later. Pastor Whitaker will let us know what they need.”

Mina picked at a loose thread on her sleeve. “The choir room leaks.”

Grace felt her stomach pinch. “Does it?”

Mina nodded. “When it rains hard. Last time I saw a drip.”

Grace set her mug down. “You never told me.”

Mina shrugged. “It was small.”

Grace did not like the word small. Small problems grew when people ignored them. She had lived inside a marriage where small cracks turned into wide breaks because he had called them small. He had smiled and promised change with a hand on her shoulder. He had left her holding the weight of the whole house.

Grace put a hand over Mina’s. “Thank you for telling me now.”

Mina looked up. “Is Mr. Chen going to fix it?”

Grace did not answer right away.

Mina’s eyes stayed on her. Expectant. Hopeful in a way children managed without trying.

Grace lifted her hand. “We will see what needs doing. The church will decide what to fix first.”

Mina's shoulders slumped. "The wall first."

"Yes. The wall first."

Mina sighed, then slid off her chair. "I am going to get dressed."

Grace watched her go. The house fell quiet again except for the soft drip at the edge of the sink. A leak somewhere outside. A reminder.

Grace picked up her phone once more.

Still nothing.

She typed, then erased.

She set the phone down and forced herself to move. She washed the mug. She wiped the counter. She packed Mina's bag for later, snacks and a book, in case they ended up waiting at the church.

A small sound came from the living room. A scrape. Then Mina's voice.

"Mom."

Grace stepped out of the kitchen. "What is it?"

Mina stood by the front window, pointing at the floor near the baseboard. "It is wet."

Grace's stomach dropped.

She crossed the room in three steps and crouched. The carpet felt damp under her fingers. The smell of wet wood rose, faint but sharp.

Grace pressed her hand closer to the wall. Moisture. She traced along the baseboard. It stayed wet for a foot, then two.

Her mind moved fast. Roof. Window. Siding. Gutter. She looked up. The window above the damp spot showed a thin line of water at one corner.

Grace stood. She forced her face to stay calm for Mina. “It is all right.”

Mina’s eyes widened. “Is the house breaking?”

“No.” Grace touched Mina’s shoulder. “It is a leak. We will handle it.”

Mina bit her lip. “Like the choir room.”

Grace swallowed. “Yes. Like the choir room.”

Mina’s gaze flicked toward the ceiling as if she expected water to pour down. “Do we need buckets?”

“Not yet.”

Grace walked to the coat closet and pulled out a towel. She pressed it to the carpet. The towel darkened. The leak had already worked its way in.

Grace felt anger rise, sudden and hot. Not at Mina. Not at the weather. At herself. She had meant to keep everything tight. Steady. Safe. She had prayed for steadiness, and still water found a path.

Mina hovered at her elbow. “Do we call someone?”

Grace looked at the phone on the side table.

Her thumb hovered over Daniel’s name in her recent messages.

She hated the feeling in her chest. Need. She did not want to need anyone. Need had cost her before. Need had turned into

disappointment. Need had turned into Mina watching her cry in the kitchen after her father drove away.

Grace stared at the damp carpet. This was not pride. This was fear wearing pride's clothes.

She drew one steady breath. "Yes. We will call someone."

Mina's voice turned soft. "Mr. Chen."

Grace looked at her daughter. "Why him?"

Mina blinked. "Because he fixes things. And he listens. And he does not talk loudly."

Grace closed her eyes for one second. When she opened them, she picked up the phone.

She typed a message.

If you are home safe, I have a small leak by my front window. I do not know what to do. Would you have time today to look?

Her finger hovered over send.

A line in her mind rose, clear and steady. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

Grace pressed send.

She set the phone down as if it might burn her.

Mina watched her with a solemn face. "He will come."

Grace forced her voice to stay steady. "We will see."

Mina went back to her room without a word, as if she had done her part.

Grace remained in the living room. She pressed the towel down again. The wet smell grew stronger. She glanced at the wall. She tried to picture where water traveled. The frame behind it. The insulation. The hidden places.

She did not like hidden places.

The phone buzzed.

Grace snatched it up.

Daniel's reply sat plain on the screen.

I am home. I can come by after I check the site once more, late morning. Keep the area dry if you can. Do not pull trim until I see it.

Grace read it twice. The tightness in her chest eased. Relief came first. Then a small shame, because relief meant she had wanted him to say yes.

Grace typed back.

Thank you. We will be here. Be careful at the river.

His reply came a moment later.

I will.

No extra words. No flourish. No questions he needed to ask. He had given a time. He had given a simple instruction. He had done it like work, steady and clean.

Grace set the phone down and rested her forehead against her palm.

"Thank You," she whispered, and she did not mean only the leak.

Later, after breakfast, Grace kept Mina busy. They read a library book on the couch. Mina's finger traced pictures of animals. Grace

listened to the soft rhythm of Mina's voice. Outside, the rain stopped. The sky stayed thick, but the world looked calmer.

Grace changed Mina's clothes and braided her hair. She moved with her own kind of control. She did not want Daniel to see panic in her house. She did not want him to think she had no grip on her life.

Then she caught herself.

This was not an inspection. This was help. Pride did not belong here.

She opened the front door and let in fresh air. The porch smelled like wet pine and mud. She looked down the road again. She saw the neighbor's mailbox leaning a little. She noticed puddles gathered at the edge of the ditch.

Water found low places.

Grace went back inside and set out two glasses. She filled them with water and placed them on the table. She sliced an apple for Mina.

Mina watched the window like a lookout.

Grace tried to keep her mind from racing to other things. The wall. The church. Daniel's crew working through the night. She pictured the retaining wall holding under pressure. She pictured sandbags. Boards. Stakes.

Her phone buzzed again.

Daniel.

On my way.

Grace replied with a simple okay. No more. She did not want to sound eager.

Mina bounced on her feet. "He is coming."

Grace lifted a finger. “Voices low.”

Mina nodded, then whispered, “He is coming,” as if she had not spoken at all.

Grace heard the truck before she saw it. Tires on wet gravel, the slow roll to a stop. A door shut with a solid sound.

Grace’s stomach tightened. She wiped her hands on a dish towel even though they were clean.

She opened the door.

Daniel Chen stood on the porch in a dark jacket, hood down. His hair lay damp at the edges. His boots held mud in the tread. He carried a small tool bag in one hand and a flashlight in the other.

His face looked tired in a quiet way. His eyes stayed clear.

He looked at Grace first. Then his gaze moved past her to Mina peeking from behind Grace’s hip.

“Good morning,” he said.

Grace stepped back. “Good morning. Thank you for coming.”

He nodded once and stepped inside. He paused at the threshold. He looked down at his boots, then back up.

“I can take them off.”

Grace shook her head. “It is all right. The floor is already wet.”

Mina stepped out from behind Grace. “Hi.”

Daniel’s expression softened. “Hello, Mina.”

Mina lifted her chin. “We have a leak.”

Daniel held her gaze with respect, as if she had brought him a full report. “Grace told me. Show me.”

Mina pointed to the damp carpet. Daniel set his tool bag down near the door and crouched. He pressed his fingertips to the carpet. He leaned in close, as if scent alone might help him read the problem.

Grace watched his hands. Strong. Clean nails. A wedding band did not circle his finger.

Daniel stood and looked at the window. He ran his palm along the frame. His touch stayed gentle. He checked the corner where the water had gathered.

He spoke without looking away from the window. “When did you first see it?”

“This morning,” Grace said. “Mina noticed. I did not.”

Daniel glanced at Mina. “Good eye.”

Mina’s shoulders straightened.

Daniel returned his focus to the window. “Any strong wind last night?”

Grace nodded. “Early. And heavy rain.”

Daniel took the flashlight and aimed it along the top edge of the window trim. “Any sign of moisture higher up? Any drip?”

Grace shook her head. “Only the baseboard. And the corner.”

Daniel nodded as if he had expected it. He turned and looked toward the front door and the small overhang outside. “I want to see the exterior.”

Grace opened the door wider. “Of course.”

They stepped onto the porch. The boards felt cool under Grace's bare feet. She wished she had put on shoes. She did not move back inside. She did not want to look like she hid behind her own door.

Daniel walked to the edge of the porch and looked up at the gutter. He scanned the seam above the window. His eyes moved slowly, tracking details.

He spoke in a calm voice. "Your downspout drains close to the foundation."

Grace stepped closer. "Is that bad?"

"It is not ideal." He crouched near the corner. He pointed to a small channel in the dirt where water had cut a path. "Water runs here. Then it pools. It finds a gap."

Grace swallowed. "So it is my fault."

Daniel looked up at her. "No. It is physics. We will redirect it."

The word we hit her harder than it should have.

Mina stood beside Grace on the porch, her head tilted back as she watched Daniel look at the roofline. Mina asked, "Is my room going to get wet?"

Daniel looked at her. "Is your room near this window?"

Mina pointed. "It is there."

Daniel nodded. "Then we need to keep water out. I will see whether the seal failed or the flashing shifted. I will patch it for now. Then later we should set a longer plan."

Grace watched him straighten. He did not speak like someone trying to sell work. He spoke like someone naming truth. Simple. Clear. With no pressure.

Grace asked, “Do you need a ladder?”

“I have one in the truck.”

Grace stepped aside as he walked down the steps. She watched him cross the yard. His pace stayed unhurried. Still, he moved with purpose. Each step placed where it needed to go.

Grace turned and looked at Mina. “Go wash your hands. Then sit at the table.”

Mina did not move. Her eyes stayed on Daniel.

Grace touched her shoulder. “Mina.”

Mina blinked and ran inside.

Grace waited on the porch, arms crossed against the cool air. She heard Daniel open the truck bed. Metal clink. Ladder rails sliding out, the quiet grunt of lifting.

He carried the ladder like it weighed little. He set it near the window and angled it under the gutter.

Grace stepped to the yard, careful of mud. “Do you want me to hold it?”

Daniel looked down at her. “Yes. Please.”

She placed both hands on the side rails. The metal felt cold. She braced her feet.

Daniel climbed. He did it with steady rhythm, no rush. When he reached the top, he leaned close to the gutter and ran a hand along the seam. He tapped a section near the downspout. Water dripped out in a slow line.

He spoke from above. “There is debris. Leaves. Small twigs. It blocked the flow. Water overflowed and ran behind the edge.”

Grace stared at the gutter as if the blocked mouth could explain the whole week. “I did not check it.”

Daniel looked down. “Most people do not until they see trouble.”

Grace held the ladder tighter. “I should have.”

He did not argue. He did not soothe with empty words. He only said, “You saw it. You called. Those are good steps.”

The words settled in her, practical mercy.

Daniel climbed down and grabbed gloves from his tool bag. He climbed again. This time, he pulled out the debris by hand and dropped it into a bucket he had set below. Wet leaves slapped the plastic. A small bird feather stuck to one glove.

Grace held the ladder and looked at her yard. The maple tree near the porch had dropped half its leaves in the storm. They lay pressed to the ground like flattened pennies.

Daniel’s voice came down again, calm. “The overflow likely ran behind the trim. I will seal the exterior gap as a temporary fix. The proper repair might involve replacing some flashing. I need to see inside first.”

Grace went quiet. Proper repair meant money. It meant time. It meant calling her ex if it grew worse. He would use it as a reason to step back into her life again, offering advice he did not live by.

Grace pushed the thought away. One step at a time.

Daniel climbed down and folded the ladder. He carried it back to his truck.

Grace followed him with her gaze. She did not follow with her feet. She kept her place near the porch. She did not want to seem like she hovered. Still, she could not stop watching.

He returned with a small tube of sealant, a putty knife, and a cloth. He worked along the exterior seam near the window. He wiped the area dry first. His hands stayed precise. He smoothed the sealant with clean lines.

Grace watched his focus. A man like him likely did everything the same way. Tools in order. Corners squared. Nothing left loose.

Mina opened the front door and stepped out. She had washed her hands. She held an apple slice in one fist.

Daniel looked over his shoulder. “Are you supervising?”

Mina nodded. “Yes.”

Daniel’s mouth moved in something close to a smile. “All right. I will give you the report when I am done.”

Mina took her role seriously. She sat on the top step.

Grace went to stand beside Mina. She rested a hand on her daughter’s shoulder. Mina leaned into her without thinking.

Daniel finished the exterior seal. He capped the tube. He wiped his hands. He looked at Grace. “Now inside.”

Grace led him in. The house felt warmer after the damp air. She noticed the wet smell again by the window. It embarrassed her. Like a stain a guest should not see.

Daniel crouched by the baseboard. “You did well to dry it.”

Grace gestured to the towel. “It kept spreading.”

Daniel ran a finger along the baseboard seam. He pressed the corner near the window trim. His touch found a spot where the wood gave a little.

His jaw tightened. A small change. He did not hide it. He did not amplify it.

He stood and looked at Grace. “It got into the trim. The wood absorbed water. It softened.”

Grace held her breath. “Is it serious?”

“It is manageable. We need to dry it out. Then we decide if we replace the piece.”

Mina slid off the step and came closer. “Replace means new.”

Daniel looked at her. “Yes. New piece of wood.”

Mina’s face fell. “But this is our house.”

Grace felt the sting of Mina’s words. She knelt and pulled Mina close. “It is still our house.”

Daniel’s voice stayed quiet. “Mina, when wood gets wet, it does not mean the house is gone. It means someone needs to pay attention. Houses need attention.”

Mina looked up at him. “Like people.”

Grace’s heart jumped.

Daniel met Mina’s eyes. “Yes. Like people.”

The room fell still.

Grace rose slowly. She kept her hands on Mina’s shoulders. “What do we do now?”

Daniel looked at the window again. “First, I want to remove a small section of interior trim to check for deeper moisture.”

Grace’s muscles tensed. Pulling the house apart felt like inviting chaos inside. She did not like noise. She did not like dust. She did not like mess she could not end in an hour.

Daniel seemed to read it. He said, “I will keep it neat. It will be a small opening. I will patch it back today.”

Grace nodded. “All right.”

Mina moved closer. “Can I help?”

Grace began to say no.

Daniel spoke first. “Yes. If Grace says yes, you can hold the flashlight or hand me screws. Simple jobs.”

Grace looked at Mina. Mina’s face held hope. Not wild. Steady. The kind that only asked to be included.

Grace said, “You can help if you listen.”

Mina nodded fast. “I will listen.”

Daniel opened his tool bag. Everything sat in its place. He pulled out a small pry bar and a screwdriver. He laid a cloth on the floor to protect the carpet. He set the flashlight on top.

He looked at Mina. “Do you know what we do first?”

Mina looked at the tools. “We take it off.”

Daniel nodded. “We take it off slow so we can put it back.”

Grace watched his hands as he worked the screwdriver under the trim edge. He used the pry bar with care. The wood made a soft creak. Then it released.

A small smell rose. Damp and old. Grace flinched.

Daniel paused. He did not look away from the opening. “There is moisture inside. Not a lot. But enough.”

Grace’s voice caught. “How long has it been there?”

Daniel shook his head. “Hard to know. The storm pushed more water in. But a small leak might have happened before.”

Grace pressed her lips together. She thought of Mina saying the choir room leaked. She thought of her own house holding secrets in the walls.

Daniel pulled the trim piece free. He set it on the cloth. The back side looked darker near one end.

Mina leaned closer.

Grace held Mina’s shoulder. “Do not touch.”

Daniel looked at Mina. “You can look. Looking is safe.”

Mina’s eyes traced the damp stain. “It looks like a bruise.”

Daniel nodded once. “Good comparison.”

Grace felt the word bruise in her own chest.

Daniel shined the flashlight into the gap. He checked the framing. He pressed the insulation with a gloved finger. Then he leaned in close and smelled.

Grace fought the urge to ask a dozen questions. She did not want to drown him in worry. She also did not want him to hide the truth.

Daniel straightened. “No sign of mold. Wood feels damp, not rotten.”

Grace let out a breath she had not known she held.

Daniel looked at her. “We need airflow. A fan. If you have a dehumidifier, run it.”

Grace shook her head. “No dehumidifier. I have a small fan.”

Daniel nodded. “Fan helps.”

Mina raised her hand as she did in Sunday school. “We have a fan in the closet.”

Grace blinked. “We do.”

Mina lowered her hand. “I use it when it is hot.”

Grace glanced at Daniel. A small smile tried to come, then stopped. She did not yet know how to hold warmth in front of him.

Daniel said, “Mina, can you bring the fan? Slowly. Hold it with two hands.”

Mina ran down the hall. Grace started after her, then stopped. Let her do one job. Let her feel capable.

Grace turned back to Daniel. He set the trim piece aside and took a pencil from his bag. He wrote a small note on painter’s tape and stuck it to the back of the trim.

Grace watched. “Why?”

“So it goes back in the same orientation,” he said. “It fits the best that way.”

She nodded. “You think of everything.”

He looked up. His eyes held no pride. Only a calm acceptance. “I think of the next step.”

Grace lowered her gaze. She thought of all the times she had failed to think of the next step with her ex. She had stayed hopeful instead. Hope without plan.

Mina returned carrying the fan like a prize. She set it down with a grunt.

Daniel smiled, small and quick. “Good work.”

Mina beamed.

Daniel positioned the fan near the exposed gap, aiming it so the air would move along the wall cavity. He plugged it in and clicked it on. The fan hummed, steady and low.

Grace felt the sound soothe her, a practical kind of comfort.

Daniel wiped his hands on the cloth. “Now we wait for it to dry. I will leave the trim off for a day. Then I will return to reinstall it if it dries well.”

Grace’s stomach tightened. “Return.”

Daniel’s gaze held hers. “If you want.”

Grace heard what he did not say. He did not push his presence. He gave her control. It mattered.

Grace nodded. “Yes. Please.”

Mina asked, “Will it leak again?”

Daniel turned to her. “We reduced risk. I cleared the gutter and sealed the seam. We also need to redirect the downspout so water moves away from the foundation. I can add an extension.”

Mina’s eyes narrowed. “Like a long arm.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes. Like a long arm.”

Mina looked at Grace. “Do it?”

Grace let out a small laugh before she stopped it. “We will.”

Daniel looked at the baseboard again. “One more thing. There is a small, loose piece under the windowsill. I saw it when I checked. It might have opened a gap.”

Grace moved closer. “Loose. Like it will fall.”

“It will not fall today,” Daniel said. “But it needs a screw tightened. It is a small repair.”

Mina’s eyes widened. “I want to do it.”

Grace opened her mouth.

Daniel said, “Mina, do you know how to use a screwdriver?”

Mina nodded too fast. “Yes.”

Grace frowned. “Mina.”

Daniel looked at Grace. “If you are comfortable, she can do it with guidance. It will help her feel steady.”

Grace’s throat tightened again at the word steady.

She looked at Mina. The child’s face held stubborn bravery. Grace remembered being young and wanting to fix things to keep adults from falling apart.

Grace nodded. “All right. But you listen, and you move slow.”

Mina nodded, slower this time.

Daniel pulled a small screwdriver from his bag. He crouched near the sill and pointed to a screw head under the edge.

He spoke to Mina. “This screw holds the trim piece tight. When it loosens, water and air find a path. The goal is snug. Not forced.”

Mina crouched beside him. Daniel placed the screwdriver in her hand, then placed his hand over hers for one moment to set the angle. His touch stayed brief. Respectful.

Grace watched, heart in her throat.

Mina turned the screwdriver. It slipped once. Mina’s face flushed.

Daniel did not correct her with sharp words. He said, “Pause. Feel the slot. Put the tip in. Then turn.”

Mina tried again. The tool caught. She turned. The screw tightened with a soft squeak.

Mina’s eyes lit. “I did it.”

Daniel nodded. “You did.”

Grace felt tears press behind her eyes. She blinked them back. She did not want to cry over a screw. Still, the moment felt larger than it was. A child holding a tool. A man guiding her with patience. A problem made smaller by attention.

Mina looked up at Grace. “See. Houses need attention.”

Grace touched Mina’s cheek. “Yes.”

Daniel stood. He looked toward the kitchen. “I do not want to overstep. But I should check your other window seams. Quick look. Same side of the house.”

Grace hesitated. Letting him move through her space felt intimate. This was her refuge. Her controlled place. Still, she had already invited him into the first crack.

Grace nodded. “Go ahead.”

Daniel walked through the living room with quiet steps. He did not look around like he judged her. He kept his gaze on the windows. He checked one, then the next. He ran a finger along the sill and frame. He pressed a corner. He nodded once.

Grace followed at a distance, arms folded.

Mina trailed behind him like a small assistant.

Daniel stopped at the window nearest the dining table. “This one looks fine. Good caulking.”

Mina asked, “What is caulking?”

Daniel looked at her. “It is the seal. The line that keeps water out.”

Mina leaned close and traced the air near the seam without touching. “Like a line of glue.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes. But stronger than school glue.”

Mina looked satisfied.

Grace watched Daniel’s profile. He carried fatigue in the set of his shoulders. Still, he did not hurry. He did not act irritated. He gave his full attention to each simple task.

Grace asked, “How is the wall?”

Daniel’s hands paused on the windowsill. He looked down a moment, then back up. “It held.”

Grace’s breath eased. “Thank God.”

Daniel nodded once. “Yes. Water rose high. It pressed hard. We stayed through the night. At dawn it stopped rising.”

Grace pictured him standing in floodlight and rain. “Did you sleep at all?”

He did not dodge. “No. Not much.”

Grace wanted to say she had worried. She wanted to say she had prayed. She had said it in a message. Still, speaking it out loud felt like another step.

She settled for truth. “I am glad you are home.”

Daniel’s eyes met hers. Something moved there. Not heat. Not flirtation. A quiet recognition.

“I am glad,” he said.

Mina looked between them. Her expression sharpened. She said nothing, but she saw more than Grace wished.

Daniel returned to the living room and crouched to collect his tools. He wiped the pry bar and set it back in the bag. He moved with care, like he respected the home.

Grace asked, “What do I owe you?”

Daniel’s hands paused. He looked up. “No.”

Grace stiffened. “Daniel.”

He stood. “Grace, the church wall job pays. This is small. Let me do it.”

Grace felt her face warm. She did not like charity. She did not like feeling like a project.

Daniel spoke again, voice even. “If it helps, consider it an advance on the downspout extension. I will charge you for materials when I install it.”

Grace let the words settle. He had given her a way to accept without feeling small.

She nodded. “All right. Thank you.”

Mina asked, “Is he staying for lunch?”

Grace choked on nothing. “Mina.”

Daniel’s eyes flicked to Mina. He did not look embarrassed. He only answered with calm respect. “I should get back to the site. My crew is there.”

Mina’s shoulders fell. “Okay.”

Daniel looked at Grace. “I will come tomorrow afternoon to check dryness. If the trim still feels damp, we wait longer.”

Grace nodded. “Tomorrow afternoon is fine.”

Daniel moved toward the door, then paused. He looked back at Mina. “Mina, do you remember what you did?”

Mina nodded. “I tightened it.”

Daniel’s voice stayed gentle. “You held what was loose.”

Grace could not answer.

Mina said, “Houses need attention.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes. Keep noticing. Tell your mother when you see something. Do not hold it alone.”

Mina’s eyes widened. She went still for a beat. Then she nodded. “Okay.”

Daniel looked at Grace again. His gaze held steady. “You are doing well.”

Grace wanted to reject it. She wanted to say he did not know her. He did not know her nights. The fear she swallowed. The way she counted money twice and still worried.

But his words carried weight because he did not waste them.

Grace lowered her chin. “Thank you.”

Daniel stepped onto the porch. Grace followed, closing the door behind her, leaving Mina inside. She did not plan it. Her body chose privacy.

The air smelled clean after rain. The clouds had begun to thin. Light broke through in pale stripes.

Daniel stood on the porch with his tool bag in hand. He looked out at the yard for one quiet moment. Then he looked at Grace.

He said, “When things rise fast, it helps to do one small repair at a time.”

Grace swallowed. “Yes.”

His eyes held hers. “You did the right thing by asking for help.”

Grace felt tears threaten again. She forced a breath. “I do not do it well.”

He nodded as if he understood. “Practice.”

Grace almost smiled. “You talk like work solves everything.”

Daniel’s gaze stayed steady. “Work does not solve everything. But steady work holds space for what God does.”

Grace felt the truth of it. She thought of the wall holding through the night. The sandbags. The boards. The unseen pressure of water. God

near in the dark. Men working under floodlights. Grace praying in her bed.

She said, “Pastor Whitaker told me God is near. Even when water rises.”

Daniel nodded. “He is right.”

A silence settled. It did not strain. It did not beg. It held.

Grace said, “Thank you for coming.”

Daniel nodded. “I will see you tomorrow.”

Grace watched him walk to his truck. He moved with the same controlled pace. He set the tool bag down. He climbed in. The engine started with a low rumble.

He backed out slowly. He raised a hand once through the window.

Grace lifted her hand in return.

Then he drove away down the wet road, tires hissing on damp pavement.

Grace stood on the porch until the sound faded. She did not want to move yet. She wanted to hold the moment where help had come, and nothing had been taken from her in exchange. No guilt. No demands. No hidden cost.

Inside, the fan hummed by the living room wall. A steady sound. A quiet promise of drying.

Grace went back in and found Mina at the table, apple gone, eyes bright.

Mina said, “He is nice.”

Grace reached for a dish towel and folded it once, then again. She kept her voice neutral. “He is kind.”

Mina leaned forward. “Do you like him?”

Grace stilled.

She did not want to answer wrong. She did not want Mina to attach her heart to a man who might leave. She did not want to attach her own heart either.

Grace chose a careful truth. “I trust him.”

Mina smiled as if Grace had given her a gift.

Grace looked toward the living room. The trim lay on the cloth. The wall opening looked small and raw. Air moved into it now. Drying began with nothing fancy: only time and steady current.

Grace pressed her palm to the table. “Finish getting ready. We will go check on the church later.”

Mina nodded. “Okay.”

Grace went to the living room and crouched by the open gap. She held her hand near it and felt the cool air from the fan. She closed her eyes.

“Lord,” she whispered, “teach me what holds quietly.”

She opened her eyes again. The house still stood. The morning had moved forward. The rain had stopped.

And in the plain space of a small repair, Grace felt something shift inside her. Not a rush. Not a storm. A small loosening. A small tightening where it mattered. A new kind of steadiness taking its place.

Chapter 9

The River at Dusk

Dusk came slow after the rain. It did not drop fast. It eased in like a hand lowering a curtain.

Grace Park left the house with Mina's fingers tucked in her own. The sidewalk still held dark patches where water had not dried. The air smelled of wet leaves and warm soil. The sky carried a thin wash of color over the tree line. Pale gold near the horizon. Gray-blue above it.

Mina skipped once, then slowed when Grace did not match her pace. Mina looked up. "Are we going to the river?"

"We are going to the church," Grace said.

Mina swung their hands. "The river is at the church."

Grace did not answer. Mina did not need a full answer. Mina already knew how Maple Ridge fit together. The church, the road, the prayer garden, the river, the people who moved through all of it with open faces and quiet habits.

Grace locked the front door. She checked it twice, the same way she always did. Her hand lingered on the doorknob after the second check. A small pause. Her chest stayed tight. She had prayed that morning. She had asked God to teach her what held quietly. She had not expected the lesson to begin so soon, or to keep coming in ordinary pieces.

They drove with the windows down. The road still shone in places where it had not dried. Tires made a soft sound on the pavement. Mina hummed to herself in the back seat. She did not know all the words to the songs Grace practiced with the choir, but she knew their

shapes. She carried them like a child carried shells from a creek. She liked the feel. She liked the sound when she shook them.

Grace took the turn toward Maple Ridge Community Church. The steeple came into view over the trees. White against the dimming sky. It looked clean after the rain. Grace saw the church every day, but dusk changed it. It looked tender, like something kept safe by hands larger than any person in town.

A truck sat near the gravel by the prayer garden gate. A trailer stood behind it. Work lights were off. Daniel Chen's crew had left earlier. Grace knew because she had heard the last of the sawing from her house; the quiet after had felt large.

Daniel stood near the river path with his hands in his pockets. He faced the water. He did not watch the road. He did not turn when Grace pulled in and parked. He held still, as if he were listening for something beneath the surface of sound.

Grace did not rush. She unbuckled Mina. She smoothed Mina's shirt collar. She checked Mina's hair tie. Her hands needed the work. Mina leaned away with a small sigh.

"I am fine," Mina said.

Grace nodded. "Stay close."

Mina took Grace's hand again, as if she had not planned to let go in the first place. They crossed the gravel. Stones crunched under their shoes. The damp air cooled Grace's arms. She felt the thin stickiness left by humidity. She smelled cut wood from the stacked boards near the trailer. Fresh and sharp.

Daniel turned when they reached the path. His face held the same calm Grace had seen all week. His eyes moved to Mina first.

Mina lifted her chin. "Hi."

Daniel's mouth softened. "Hello, Mina."

Mina squeezed Grace's hand and stepped half behind her leg. She hid and watched at the same time.

Grace stopped a few feet away. "I did not know you would be here."

"I came to check the river," Daniel said. His voice stayed low. "After the rain, I wanted to see what it did."

Grace glanced toward the bank. The water ran darker at dusk. It moved smoothly, then broke around a low bend. The willow limbs hung heavy, dripping in places. The retaining wall along the church side looked bruised. Not worse than morning, but still wrong. The sag in the edge made Grace's stomach pull tight.

"Did it rise?" Grace asked.

"A little," Daniel said. "It did not climb as fast as I feared."

Grace looked at him. His use of the word feared struck her. He spoke with care, but he did not hide the edge of worry. Grace had assumed his life held fewer sharp feelings. He worked. He planned. He finished. He left. Men like him did not carry fear, or so she told herself.

Mina pointed down the path. "Is it safe?"

Daniel crouched so his eyes met Mina's. "It is safe if you stay with your mother and do not go near the edge."

Mina nodded. "I know."

Daniel glanced at Grace. "Would you like to walk down?"

Grace hesitated. The light fell. The river made her think of the storm upstream. The way water gathered where she could not see it. The

way it arrived in town as damage. She pictured her living room wall opened to dry. She pictured Mina's face when she said he is nice.

Grace did not want the river to become another place where she learned to brace.

She nodded. "Yes."

They walked down the path together. Gravel shifted under their feet, then packed dirt, then grass worn flat by church members who liked to sit near the water after services. The prayer garden sat above them to the left. The bench near the rose bushes still held raindrops. The air carried the smell of wet petals.

Mina walked between them for a moment, then drifted toward Daniel. She studied him like she studied new music. She watched for patterns. She wanted to know what came next.

Daniel kept his pace slow. He did not speak much. He watched the ground near the bank. His eyes tracked small changes Grace could not see. A crack in soil. A slant in grass. The way the water pressed against the wall's base.

Grace stayed quiet. She let her thoughts settle into the sound of water. It moved without hurry. It did not care about plans. It did not stop to consider Grace's fear. It ran because it ran.

They reached a spot where the bank widened, and the wall showed its worst section. The stones at the base looked stained. Mud clung to them. A piece of timber lay to the side where the crew had set it earlier. Daniel stepped closer, then stopped. He did not go to the edge. He did not test it with his boot.

He stood still and watched.

Grace held Mina's hand tighter without meaning to. Mina looked up at Grace's face.

Grace loosened her grip. “Sorry.”

Mina shrugged, small and accepting. She looked back at the river. “It is loud.”

“It is steady,” Grace said.

Daniel glanced at Grace. “Both.”

Grace did not argue. She watched the water lap and pull away. It made a soft slap against the stones. The sound did not change, even when the current sped in the deeper part.

Mina pointed toward the willow. “It looks like it is crying.”

Grace paused. She did not want to agree with the word crying. It felt too close. “It is dripping from the rain.”

Mina bent to pick up a thin stick. She traced a line in the damp dirt. She stayed near their feet, busy and content.

Daniel kept his eyes on the wall. “Tomorrow we will start the deeper braces.”

Grace watched him. “You do not ever stop.”

He looked at her, then back to the water. “I stop when it is finished.”

Grace waited. She heard her own question before she spoke it. “And then you leave.”

Daniel did not flinch. He did not pretend he did not hear it. He breathed in, slow. “Yes.”

Grace nodded once, as if she had only asked about a schedule. She felt the old familiar ache. Men left. Work ended. People moved on. The pattern did not surprise her. The surprise came from the small part of her that did not want it.

Mina walked a few steps away, still within reach. She found a flat stone and rubbed mud off it with her thumb. She hummed again. A tune from Sunday. Grace recognized it. The choir had sung it last month. Mina had sat in the second pew with her legs swinging.

Daniel watched Mina for a moment. His face softened again, then tightened as he turned back to the wall. “She pays attention.”

“She does,” Grace said. Pride warmed her, then fear cooled it. “Too much sometimes.”

“She has learned early,” Daniel said.

Grace glanced at him. His voice held a note she had not heard before. Not pity. Respect. A shared understanding.

Grace looked down at her shoes. Mud clung to the sole edge. “Children learn what they live in.”

Daniel’s eyes stayed on the river. “Yes.”

A quiet settled between them. It did not feel empty. It felt full of words neither had put in the open yet.

Grace watched the water. She remembered sitting beside a different river years ago, far from Maple Ridge, with her hands wrapped around a paper cup of cheap coffee. Her ex-husband had stood with his back to her, talking on his phone. He had promised he would not take the call, then took it anyway. He had promised he would only be gone one night, then stayed three. He had promised he would come to church with her once the work season slowed, but it never did.

Promises had sounded strong. They had never held.

Grace shifted her weight. The damp air cooled her skin. She pulled her cardigan closer.

Daniel noticed. He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of work gloves. He held them out. “Your hands.”

Grace blinked. “I am fine.”

“You are cold,” he said. He did not push the gloves into her hands. He waited.

Grace looked at the gloves. They looked worn and clean at the same time. Leather darkened at the fingertips. She imagined his hands inside them. Steady hands. Hands that measured twice and cut once.

She took them. “Thank you.”

“They are dry,” he said.

Grace slid her fingers in. Warmth surprised her. Not heat. A simple barrier against damp air. She flexed her fingers. The gloves were too big. The extra space made her feel small. It also made her feel quietly cared for.

Mina saw the gloves and grinned. “You look funny.”

Grace gave Mina a look. “Thank you.”

Mina giggled and went back to her stone.

Daniel’s eyes moved to Grace again. “You came by after the rain.”

“We needed to see it,” Grace said. “Mina worried.”

Mina called out without looking up. “I did not worry. I wondered.”

Grace looked over. “You asked if it was safe.”

Mina shrugged. “I wanted to know.”

Grace turned back to Daniel. “She carries questions.”

Daniel nodded. “Questions are honest.”

Grace pressed her gloved hands together. Leather creaked softly. “Honest questions still scare people.”

Daniel did not deny it. He looked at the river as if it held a line of thought he wanted to follow. “People fear what they cannot control.”

Grace’s mouth tightened. The words struck too close. She had built her whole life around control, but she dressed it in different language. Responsibility. Stewardship. Wisdom. She had called it protection.

She said, “Some people fear what they used to trust.”

Daniel’s gaze returned to her. His eyes held steady attention. He did not rush to fill the space. He did not turn away. He let her words stand.

Grace felt her pulse in her throat. She had not meant to speak so plain. She had not meant to show the underside of her heart.

Daniel’s voice stayed quiet. “You trust God.”

Grace swallowed. “Yes.”

“And still,” Daniel said.

Grace nodded, a small movement. “And still.”

Mina wandered closer again. “Can I throw it?” she asked, holding up the flat stone.

Grace looked at the edge and then at Mina’s small shoes. “Stand back. Do not go near the drop.”

Mina stepped back and threw the stone from where she stood. It hit the water with a small plunk. Ripples spread and faded. Mina watched with wide eyes, as if she could see the stone travel.

Daniel watched too. “She likes to see what changes the surface.”

Grace looked at him. “Do you?”

Daniel did not answer right away. “I prefer changes I can measure.”

Grace almost smiled. The honesty felt plain. It also felt brave.

She turned her face toward the water again. “What happened with the wall?” she asked. “Did it happen fast?”

Daniel shook his head. “No. It shifted over time. Water takes small pieces. One season, it looks fine. Then one day you see the bend.”

Grace thought of her marriage. She thought of the first small disappointment. The first missed call. The first apology with no change behind it. The first time she covered for him at church and told people he worked late. She thought of the bend she had seen, then ignored because she wanted straight lines.

She said, “I understand.”

Daniel looked at her with a sharp kind of care. “You saw it before you left.”

Grace’s steps slowed. She did not want to talk about leaving, because leaving had saved her and shamed her at the same time. Maple Ridge had welcomed her home. Some had hugged her. Some had looked away. She had lived inside the mixed response and kept her head down.

Grace said, “I saw it,” and let the rest stay unspoken.

Daniel nodded as if he knew what it cost to say even that.

The light dimmed more. The river darkened, making the water look thicker. A few insects skimmed the surface. A bird called once from across the bank, then went quiet.

Grace glanced back up the path toward the church. Lights glowed faintly in the fellowship hall windows. Someone must have stayed late. Maybe Pastor Whitaker. Maybe Eli Brooks, who always fixed what needed fixing and never let it bother him.

Grace looked at Daniel. “Are you staying in town while you work?”

Daniel shook his head. “I drive back each night.”

“That is a long drive,” Grace said.

“It is,” Daniel said.

“Why?” Grace asked before she could stop herself.

Daniel’s eyes held hers. “I sleep better at home.”

Grace felt her stomach dip. Home. The word sounded simple when he said it, as if home stayed in one place and waited for him. Grace had built a home for Mina with sheer will and prayer. She had built it with routines. With choir practice schedules, grocery lists, and early bedtimes. It held, but she still feared it might slip if she loosened her grip.

Daniel looked back at the river. “I do not like unfamiliar beds.”

Grace nodded. “I understand.”

He glanced at her again. “Do you?”

Grace kept her voice even. “I do. I do not like unfamiliar anything.”

Daniel’s mouth moved, almost a smile, then settled. “Control.”

Grace breathed out. “Yes.”

Mina crouched and drew circles in the dirt with her stick. Grace watched her for a moment. Mina’s shoulders stayed relaxed. Mina lived in a child’s present. She did not carry tomorrow until it arrived.

Grace envied her.

Daniel spoke again, quiet. “You asked about why I leave when the work ends.”

Grace looked at him.

Daniel kept his gaze on the water. “It is easier.”

Grace waited.

He continued. “People want more than work. Even when they do not say it.”

Grace’s hands clenched inside the gloves. Leather tightened over her knuckles. She thought of herself wanting more from him than work, without meaning to. More than a contractor fixing a wall. More than a man who showed up and did what he said he would.

She said, “People want to know they matter.”

Daniel nodded once. “Yes.”

Grace’s voice softened. “Is it hard for you?”

Daniel’s jaw tightened. He did not answer fast. He looked at the river as if he studied a current line. “It is… simpler to measure a wall than a heart.”

Grace’s throat ached. The words landed in her chest with quiet force. She had not expected to hear him speak like that. She had pictured his life as clean lists and level lines. She had pictured his heart as quiet and untouched.

Grace said, “Hearts shift slowly too.”

Daniel’s eyes moved to her. “Yes.”

The space between them held a new kind of weight. No heavy drama. No sharp edge. A shared truth, plain and steady.

Grace glanced at Mina. “Mina,” she called, “stay where I can see you.”

Mina lifted her head. “I am where you can see me.”

Grace nodded. “Good.”

Mina went back to her circles.

Daniel’s voice lowered further. “Do you always watch her like this?”

Grace did not pretend she did not. “Yes.”

Daniel nodded as if he expected it. “You have reasons.”

Grace’s shoulders lifted, then fell. “I do not want her to feel what I felt.”

Daniel did not ask what she felt. His face said he understood more than Grace had told him.

Grace looked at the river again. “When I left my marriage,” she said, the words tasting like metal, “I thought I was protecting her. I still think I was. But I also feared I broke something in her by leaving.”

Daniel’s gaze stayed on the water, but his attention stayed on her. “Leaving a broken place does not break a child.”

Grace swallowed. “People say children need both parents.”

Daniel nodded. “They do. When both parents love well.”

Grace’s eyes burned. She blinked and forced the heat back. “I did not want to speak against her father. I still do not. I pray for him.”

Daniel's voice stayed even. "You can pray and still tell the truth."

Grace looked at him. She saw how his words held both firmness and kindness. He did not sound like a man who enjoyed correction. He sounded like a man who had learned it the hard way.

Grace said, "Pastor Whitaker tells me that."

Daniel nodded. "He is wise."

Grace's mouth tightened into a small smile before it faded. "Maple Ridge treats him like he holds the town together."

Daniel looked up toward the church, toward the steeple rising pale in the last light. "A shepherd stands in the weather with the sheep."

Grace let the image settle. It did not feel like a metaphor thrown out for effect. It felt like something Daniel believed.

Grace asked, careful, "Do you go to church in your town?"

Daniel's eyes stayed on the steeple a moment longer. "Yes."

Grace waited.

Daniel's throat moved. "I grew up in church."

Grace nodded. "Me too."

Daniel looked back at the river. "When life turned, I tried to build my own steadiness."

Grace went still. She heard her own life in his words. Her own effort. Her own control. She had called it strength. She had called it maturity. She had called it survival.

Grace asked, quiet, "Did it work?"

Daniel’s answer came without flourish. “It kept things from falling apart. It did not give peace.”

Grace closed her eyes for a second. The word peace pulled at her. She knew peace as a gift God gave. She also knew how to fight it by trying to produce it herself.

She opened her eyes. The river still moved. The wall still sagged. The church still stood.

Grace said, “Isaiah twenty-six,” and stopped. She felt shy. Scripture felt intimate when spoken outside of a service.

Daniel looked at her. “Three.”

Grace nodded. “You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”

Daniel’s eyes softened. “Yes.”

Grace’s voice shook a little. She hated that it shook. “My mind does not stay.”

Daniel did not smile at her confession. He did not act as if it surprised him. “Mine does not either.”

Grace looked down at the damp grass. “Then how do people do it?”

Daniel drew a slow breath. “One small turn at a time.”

Grace looked at him. “A turn.”

Daniel nodded. “When I notice my mind running ahead, I bring it back. I tell the truth. I pray. I take the next right step.”

Grace almost laughed, but the sound would not come. Tears sat behind her eyes again. The simplicity of it felt both comforting and hard. It did not promise a quick fix. It promised practice.

Mina stood and brushed dirt off her knees. “I am hungry.”

Grace blinked and looked at her daughter. “We will go soon.”

Mina looked between Grace and Daniel. “Are you talking about the river?”

Daniel answered. “We are talking about steady things.”

Mina nodded as if she understood. She walked closer to Grace and leaned against her side for a moment. Grace felt the warmth of Mina’s small body. She rested her gloved hand on Mina’s shoulder. The leather felt strange against Mina’s shirt.

Mina looked up at Daniel. “Do you have kids?”

Daniel’s face changed. Something moved behind his eyes. It passed fast, but Grace saw it. He did not look away.

“No,” Daniel said.

Mina tilted her head. “Do you want kids?”

Grace’s breath caught. “Mina.”

Mina looked back at Grace. “What. It is a question.”

Daniel did not look offended. He looked thoughtful. “I used to think I did.”

Grace watched him, trying to keep her face calm.

Mina asked, “And now?”

Daniel’s voice stayed gentle. “Now I do not know.”

Mina accepted that. She turned and picked up her stick again. Hunger had arrived, but curiosity still held her.

Grace looked at Daniel. She kept her voice low. “She is direct.”

Daniel nodded. “She is honest.”

Grace swallowed. “I am sorry.”

He shook his head. “You do not need to apologize.”

Grace studied him. “You said you used to think you did.”

Daniel looked at the water. The dim light made his face look more carved. More tired. He spoke without drama. “I was engaged once.”

Grace held still.

Daniel continued. “She wanted a life with room in it. I told her I would make room.”

Grace felt her chest tighten. She did not want to hear the end, but she did.

Daniel’s gaze stayed on the river. “I did not.”

Grace’s voice came out small. “Because of work.”

Daniel nodded. “Because of work. Because of fear. Because I did not trust anyone else to carry weight with me.”

Grace listened. The wind moved through willow leaves. It made a soft hush.

Daniel said, “She ended it.”

Grace’s throat ached. She pictured a woman waiting for him to come home. Waiting for him to slow down. Waiting for room. Grace recognized the waiting. She had waited too, though her story held different shapes.

Grace asked, “Did you love her?”

Daniel took a moment. He answered with care. “Yes.”

Grace's eyes burned. She blinked, then looked away so Mina would not see.

Daniel's voice stayed steady. "I loved her, and I still hurt her."

Grace nodded. "Love does not always hold."

Daniel looked at her. "It should."

Grace met his gaze. The words felt like a statement of conviction, a quiet refusal to accept flimsy love.

Grace whispered, "It should."

Mina walked back and held up her stick as if it mattered. "Look. It has a fork."

Grace forced herself to smile at Mina. "It does."

Mina said, "It looks like a Y."

Grace nodded. "Yes."

Mina looked at Daniel. "My name starts with M."

Daniel nodded. "It does."

Mina looked at Grace. "Your name starts with G."

Grace nodded.

Mina said, "His name starts with D."

Grace's stomach dipped. Mina's eyes shone with simple delight at the pattern.

Daniel's mouth shifted, close to a smile. "Yes."

Mina held the stick like a conductor's baton. "G, D, M. That is like music."

Grace felt heat rise to her cheeks. “Mina.”

Mina looked up. “What. It is music.”

Grace did not know what to say. She did not want to shut Mina down. She also did not want Mina building stories with three letters.

Daniel saved her. “What do you sing, Mina?”

Mina brightened. “I sing the loud part.”

Grace exhaled. “She sings everything loud.”

Mina pointed at Grace with her stick. “You sing quiet when you are sad.”

Grace stilled.

Daniel’s eyes met Grace’s. His face stayed calm, but his attention sharpened.

Grace forced a small laugh. “I sing quietly because I do not want to overwhelm people.”

Mina frowned. “No. You sing quietly when you think.”

Grace shook her head slowly. Children saw too much.

Daniel spoke to Mina. “Do you sing quietly when you think?”

Mina shook her head. “I sing loud when I think. It helps.”

Grace rubbed Mina’s shoulder with her gloved hand. “We are going to eat soon.”

Mina nodded. “Okay.”

Mina wandered a few steps toward the path, then stopped and looked back at them. “Are you coming?”

Grace nodded. “In a minute.”

Mina rolled her stick along the ground and moved toward the bench near the prayer garden entrance. She climbed up and sat, feet swinging. She looked at the river with a serious face, as if she guarded it.

Grace watched her, then turned back to Daniel. The distance gave Grace a pocket of privacy. Not much. Enough.

Grace said, “I did not know you were engaged.”

Daniel nodded. “I do not speak about it often.”

Grace’s voice stayed soft. “Why did you tell Mina?”

Daniel’s eyes stayed on Grace. “She asked. And I did not want to teach her that adults hide the truth when it costs something.”

Grace’s chest tightened. She respected him for it. She also feared it. Honest men drew the heart out into the open.

Grace looked down at her gloved hands. “Do you regret it?”

Daniel answered fast. “Yes.”

Grace looked up.

Daniel’s voice stayed calm, but a rough edge lived under it. “I regret what I did. I do not regret what she did. She chose wisdom.”

Grace nodded. “That is hard to say.”

Daniel’s gaze moved back to the river. “It is the truth.”

Grace stood in the damp evening and felt her heart shift. Small. Slow. Like soil settling under weight.

She said, “I wanted stability. I married someone who talked like he was steady.”

Daniel turned to her. “And he was not.”

Grace nodded. The word would not come. She did not need it. The truth sat between them without the word.

Daniel’s voice lowered. “You came back to Maple Ridge.”

Grace swallowed. “Yes.”

Daniel waited.

Grace found the courage to speak plainly. “Maple Ridge held me. The church held me. Pastor Whitaker held me up when I felt weak.”

Daniel nodded, a small sign of respect.

Grace continued. “But I still felt… exposed. People knew. People watched. People spoke softly around me, as I might break.”

Daniel’s eyes narrowed slightly, not in anger, but in understanding. “And you did not want to break.”

Grace’s mouth tightened. “I could not. Mina needed me.”

Daniel looked toward Mina on the bench. “She still does.”

Grace nodded. “Yes.”

Daniel turned back. “Does Maple Ridge still feel like it holds you?”

Grace hesitated. The honest answer shifted day to day. Some mornings she felt the town like a hand at her back. Some evenings she felt it like eyes on her. Grace chose the truest answer she had. “It holds me most of the time.”

Daniel nodded. “Most of the time is more than some people have.”

Grace stared at the river. “It is, and I still struggle.”

Daniel’s voice stayed steady. “Struggle does not mean you are failing.”

Grace looked at him. “Are you speaking to yourself or to me?”

Daniel’s mouth moved, almost a smile again. “Both.”

Grace let out a breath she had not known she held. The air felt cool in her lungs.

A car door slammed up near the parking area. Voices drifted. Someone laughed, a teenager, from the sound of it. Then the voices moved away. The church still held life even at dusk. People came and went like a steady tide.

Grace glanced toward the sound, then back. “You do not seem like someone who struggles.”

Daniel’s eyes stayed on her. “People who look steady often work the hardest to stay steady.”

Grace’s throat tightened. She understood. She had worked hard to look calm. She had sung hymns with a gentle face while fear paced inside her.

Grace asked, “What did it cost you?”

Daniel’s gaze returned to the water. He spoke in pieces. “Sleep. Ease. Relationships.”

Grace nodded. “Peace.”

Daniel’s voice stayed low. “Yes.”

Grace pressed her gloved fingers together. “What do you want, Daniel?”

The question surprised her as soon as she spoke it. It sounded too direct. Too personal. It sounded like a step toward him.

Daniel did not recoil. He did not tease. He did not ask what she meant. He answered as if he had asked himself the same question in the dark.

“I want to do work well,” he said. “I want to honor God with my hands. I want a home that does not feel like a place I escape to. I want… rest.”

Grace’s chest tightened at the word rest. It sounded holy.

Daniel’s eyes lifted to the church steeple again. “I want to build a life that holds under weather.”

Grace heard Matthew seven in his words without him quoting it. The house built on the rock. The rain, the floods, the winds. The house standing.

Grace whispered, “Me too.”

Daniel looked back at her. His gaze held warmth and restraint. “And you.”

Grace’s hands stilled. “What?”

“What do you want?” he said.

Grace turned her eyes to Mina. Mina watched them now. She had stopped swinging her feet. Her face looked calm, but her attention stayed sharp. Mina looked like a child watching adults make choices.

Grace turned back to Daniel. She spoke carefully. “I want Mina to feel safe.”

Daniel nodded. “And for you.”

Grace felt the old habit rise. To answer with service. To answer with duty. To answer with what sounded right in church circles.

She fought it. She forced herself to tell a deeper truth. “I want to trust stability again.”

Daniel’s throat moved. “You do not trust it.”

Grace shook her head. “I believe in it. I work for it. I teach it. I sing about it. I pray for it. But trusting it feels different.”

Daniel’s eyes held steady compassion. He did not pity. He did not rush to fix. “Because you fear it will fail.”

Grace nodded.

Daniel said, “Or you fear it will leave.”

Grace held still. The words hit closer.

Grace whispered, “Yes.”

Silence settled again. The river kept its sound. The willow leaves moved in the light wind. The damp smell rose and fell.

Daniel spoke with quiet care. “I do not know what God will do. I do not know what will happen in a year. I do know what I choose today.”

Grace looked at him.

Daniel continued. “Today I choose to show up. I choose to do what I say. I choose to tell the truth. I choose to treat you and Mina with respect.”

Grace’s throat tightened. She wanted to take his words and hold them like a promise. She also feared promises.

Grace managed, “Thank you.”

Daniel's gaze did not waver. "You do not need to thank me for basic decency."

Grace let out a soft breath. "Basic decency has felt rare in my life."

Daniel's jaw tightened. His eyes held a brief flash of pain. "I am sorry."

Grace nodded once. She did not want his sorrow to turn into a rescue. She did not want to become someone's project. She had spent too long holding herself together to hand her life over to another person's need to fix.

Grace said, "I do not want pity."

Daniel answered fast. "I do not pity you."

Grace studied his face, searching for false kindness. She did not find it.

He added, "I respect you. I see the way you hold your home. I see the way Mina looks at you."

Grace's eyes burned again. She looked away toward the river. The water moved on. It did not pause for emotion.

Grace whispered, "She deserves more than my fear."

Daniel's voice stayed low. "Fear does not define you."

Grace shook her head. "It feels like it does."

Daniel did not argue. "It feels like it does, and still you keep going. You keep serving. You keep singing."

Grace turned back. "Singing is easy. It is my work. It is what I know."

Daniel's eyes held hers. "Then you know something I do not."

Grace waited.

Daniel said, “You know how to let breath out.”

Grace blinked. The words sounded simple. They pierced her anyway. She had held her breath for years.

Grace looked down at the gloves again. “You gave me your gloves.”

Daniel nodded.

Grace lifted her hands, palms up. “This feels like someone else holding something for me.”

Daniel’s voice softened. “Yes.”

Grace swallowed. “It scares me.”

Daniel nodded again. He did not take the gloves back. He did not close the space with touch. He kept his hands in his pockets. He offered steadiness without pressure.

Grace lifted her eyes. “You are careful.”

Daniel’s gaze stayed calm. “So are you.”

Grace let the words sit. A steady man would call her careful, not cold. A steady man would see her caution as wisdom rather than rejection.

Mina called from the bench. “Mom. I am hungry now.”

Grace turned toward her. “We are coming.”

Grace looked at Daniel. “We should go. It is late.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes.”

They started up the path. Mina slid off the bench and ran a few steps ahead, then stopped at the prayer garden gate to wait. She did not leave Grace's sight. She tested freedom and returned to the line.

Grace walked beside Daniel. The grass brushed her ankles. The air cooled more. The first hint of night settled.

Halfway up, Daniel spoke again. "Grace."

She looked at him.

He hesitated, then chose his words. "Thank you for walking down with me."

Grace blinked. "I did not do anything."

"You did," he said. "You stayed."

Grace's throat tightened. She looked away. "I did not want to."

Daniel did not press. "And still."

Grace nodded. "And still."

They reached the gate. Mina held it open with both hands, straining with the weight even though it did not weigh much.

Daniel stepped forward and took the gate from Mina, holding it for Grace and Mina to pass. His hand wrapped around the metal bar. Work hands. Controlled hands. Steady.

Mina slipped through first, then Grace. Grace paused, then looked back.

Daniel stood with the gate in his hand. The last light edged his face. His eyes held quiet thought.

Grace's voice came out softer than she intended. "Do you ever get tired of holding things up?"

Daniel’s gaze stayed on hers. “Yes.”

Grace waited.

Daniel let the gate swing slowly once Grace and Mina cleared it. He did not let it slam. He kept his hand on it until it rested against the latch. He looked at Grace as if he had decided something inside himself.

“I get tired,” he said, “and I still choose it. I do not want my life to fall because I refused to hold what mattered.”

Grace’s chest tightened. She nodded once. “I understand.”

Mina tugged Grace’s hand. “Are we going to eat?”

Grace managed a small smile. “Yes.”

They walked toward the parking area. Daniel’s truck sat near the gravel. Grace’s car sat beside it. The two vehicles looked like two lives parked side by side for a moment, not joined, not promised. Only near.

Grace stopped by her driver’s door. She looked at Daniel by his truck. The air between them felt different than it had a week ago. Less formal. More aware.

Grace lifted the gloves. “These are yours.”

Daniel shook his head. “Keep them for now.”

Grace frowned. “You need them.”

He glanced at his truck bed. “I have another pair.”

Grace held the gloves tighter. “I will bring them back.”

Daniel nodded. “When you are ready.”

Grace's stomach dipped. The words sounded like more than gloves. She did not know if he meant it that way. She suspected he did.

Grace opened her mouth, then closed it. She nodded once. "Good night, Daniel."

"Good night, Grace," he said.

Mina waved. "Good night."

Daniel's face softened. "Good night, Mina."

Grace buckled Mina into the back seat. Mina chatted about food all the way home, listing options with serious care. Grace listened and answered, but her mind stayed by the river for a long time. It stayed on Daniel's voice when he spoke of rest. It stayed on his confession about the engagement. It stayed on his simple choice to show up.

At the house, Grace warmed leftovers and cut fruit. Mina ate fast. Grace ate slowly. After Mina brushed her teeth, Grace tucked her into bed. Mina rolled to her side, facing Grace. Her eyes stayed bright in the lamplight.

Mina whispered, "He is steady."

Grace's throat tightened. "He is working on a wall."

Mina frowned. "No. Him."

Grace sat on the edge of the bed. She smoothed Mina's hair back. "You should not decide what people are."

Mina's eyelids drooped. "I see."

Grace swallowed. She kissed Mina's forehead. "Go to sleep."

Mina's eyes closed. Her voice came soft and sleepy. "Okay."

Grace turned off the lamp and left the door cracked. She walked down the hall to the living room. The fan still ran, pushing dry air toward the open wall. The house smelled faintly of plaster dust and clean rain.

Grace stood by the opening and rested her gloved hand on the drywall edge. The gloves hung loose on her fingers. The extra space felt like borrowed protection.

She closed her eyes and prayed again, quietly. “Lord, teach me what holds quietly.”

The river moved on in the dark beyond the trees. Grace could not hear it from the house, but she pictured it anyway. Moving without panic. Holding its course. Wearing down what did not stand firm. Leaving what did.

She opened her eyes. She looked at the small raw gap in her wall. Drying took time. Repair took time. Trust took time.

Grace turned off the living room light and stood a moment in the dim, listening to the fan. A steady sound. A quiet promise.

Outside town, Daniel drove home with the windows cracked. Night air cooled his face. His truck tires hummed on the road. The sky stretched wide above him, stars scattered faintly in the velvet dark. He gripped the steering wheel loosely, his mind circling back to the conversation by the river. Grace’s voice, soft but edged with honesty, stayed with him.

He thought about the gloves she still held, the way she’d looked at them like they were more than just leather and seams. He thought about the way her daughter, barely more than a child, had called him steady. The word warmed him and weighed on him all at once. Steady did not mean perfect. Steady did not mean unshakable. It just

meant showing up, even when it was hard, even when there were cracks in the foundation.

The road curved, and Daniel slowed as his driveway came into view. His house sat quiet and still, its outline softened by the faint glow of the moon. It was not much, a modest place he'd built with his own hands over the years, but it was enough. He parked the truck and sat for a moment, listening to the engine tick as it cooled. His thoughts turned back to Grace. She was careful, guarded, but he could see the strength beneath the surface. Strength and weariness, woven together like a rope pulled too tight for too long.

He got out of the truck and stretched, inhaling the crisp night air. The porch light flickered slightly as he unlocked the front door and stepped inside. The house smelled of cedar and worn leather, grounding him. He set his keys on the small table by the door and stood for a moment, the silence pressing gently around him.

In the corner of the living room, his Bible sat on the side table, where he'd left it that morning. He walked over, sat down in the worn armchair, and opened it to the bookmarked page. His eyes scanned the words, familiar but fresh in the quiet of the evening. *"Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."*

Daniel closed the Bible and leaned back, his head resting against the chair. Rest. That word felt as distant as the stars outside his window, but maybe, just maybe, it was closer than he thought, not because of what he'd done, but because of the quiet work God was doing, through rivers that wore down stone, through walls slowly being rebuilt, through people learning to trust again.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the stillness, a prayer forming in his heart, unspoken but steady.

Chapter 10

Choir Practice in Stormlight

The sky stretched wide above Daniel Chen as he drove. Cloud cover hid the stars, but the horizon still held a thin line of light from town. The road felt slick in spots where rain had not dried. His wipers stayed off, yet he kept his hands set on the wheel as if the weather might change its mind.

He did not turn the radio on. He let the cab stay quiet.

He pictured the river again. He had stood beside it enough hours to learn its moods. Calm did not mean safe. A slow rise did not ask permission. Water worked in its own time. It pressed and pulled and waited for a weak place.

He checked the clock on the dash. He had time before bed, but he did not want to wander. Wandering led to thinking in circles. He did not do circles. He did straight lines. Schedules. Lists. Work orders.

Yet Maple Ridge kept giving him moments outside his plan.

Grace Park's voice had stayed with him on the drive out of town. Soft. Firm. A woman who did not waste words. A woman who listened and then said what she meant. He respected that. He also feared it. Careful words left less room to hide.

The rain started again before he reached the county line. It did not fall hard at first. It came as a fine sheet, as if the air had decided to turn to water. He turned the wipers on low. The blades moved with a steady rhythm.

He drove home. He ate a simple meal. He laid out his clothes for the morning the way he always did. He checked his phone once for messages from his crew.

Then he stood at the kitchen sink with his hands braced on the counter and watched the rain slide down the window over the sink. The streetlight outside his rental threw a pale glow through the water, turning it into lines of silver.

The river would rise.

He thought of the sagging bank by the prayer garden. He thought of the new timbers. He thought of the gravel and the drain line they had set. He had done the work with care. He had done it the way he always did, clean and measured. Still, water did not care about effort. Water tested.

He washed his plate. He dried it. He put it away.

Then he pulled his Bible from the small shelf above the table. It sat there because he had placed it there. He did not open it every day the way he once did. He did not pretend he did. He still did not like the feeling of failure.

He sat down anyway.

He opened to a page marked with a thin strip of paper. Isaiah 26. His mother had underlined a verse years ago. The ink had faded in places. He traced the line with his eyes.

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.

Daniel let his shoulders drop. He did not chase perfect peace. He did not trust feelings. He trusted structure. Yet structure did not hold the heart together.

He closed his eyes. He spoke out loud, low in the quiet kitchen. “Lord, keep my mind on you.”

The words felt simple. They felt like a door he had not opened in a while. He did not force more. He did not bargain. He sat in the silence and listened to rain.

When he rose to go to bed, he felt no sudden change. He felt a small easing, like a knot loosened one turn.

In Maple Ridge, the night rain deepened. It hit roofs and gutters with a heavier hand. It filled the dark with a constant sound.

Grace Park woke once when thunder rolled far away. The sound did not crack close. It moved slow and wide, like a heavy cart on a distant road. Grace lay still and listened until her breathing settled again.

Mina slept on, curled tight under her blanket, one arm thrown above her head. Her hair spread across the pillow like spilled ink in the dim light.

Grace did not get up. She did not check the river. She did not stand at the window and measure the dark. She had spent years letting fear turn into action. Years of moving too fast because she thought she had to.

She stayed in bed. She held the quiet.

In the morning, rain still fell.

It did not fall in sharp drops. It fell in curtains. It made the world look softened at the edges. Maple leaves hung heavy. The street ran with shallow streams toward the drains.

Grace woke before Mina, as usual. She dressed in the gray light, pulling on jeans and a simple sweater. She made coffee and oatmeal. The house held the smell of cinnamon and warm milk.

When Mina padded into the kitchen, she rubbed her eyes with both fists. She blinked up at Grace. “Is it raining forever?”

Grace set a bowl in front of her. “It feels like it.”

Mina climbed into her chair. “Do I have school?”

Grace checked her phone. No alert. No delay notice. “Yes.”

Mina’s shoulders dropped. She took a spoonful anyway. She ate with a steady focus.

Grace watched her. Mina accepted what came, then moved on. Grace wanted that. She had it in parts, but she lost it when her mind went back to old years.

Mina glanced toward the living room wall where the fan still ran. “Is the hole dry?”

Grace looked at the opening. The edge still looked raw. Drying progressed slowly. “It is getting there.”

Mina nodded as if she had expected nothing else.

Grace drove Mina to school through sheets of rain. She kept both hands on the wheel. Wipers thudded back and forth. Cars moved carefully. Fields along the road looked dark and slick, furrows holding water in long shallow lines.

At the school drop-off, Mina unbuckled and leaned forward between the seats. “Is Mr. Daniel going to fix the river today?”

Grace held still a moment. “He will check it. He will decide.”

Mina considered. “He always decides after he looks.”

Grace watched her daughter climb out and run through the rain toward the doors, backpack bouncing. Mina did not look back. She did not need to.

Grace sat in the car a moment and listened to the rain hit the roof.

Choir rehearsal sat on the calendar for tonight. Grace had planned it because the choir sang in two Sundays, and she did not like showing up unprepared. She had learned in life how quickly people noticed when things fell apart. She did not give them reasons.

Yet the weather pressed on her mind. The river. The wall. The bank. The church grounds.

She drove to the church. Parking lot puddles reflected the pale sky. Water ran off the roof in steady streams, striking the gutters and spilling where the downspouts could not keep up.

Grace unlocked the side door and stepped into the hall. The air inside smelled of old wood and lemon cleaner. The quiet felt deep after the noise of rain outside.

She walked through the sanctuary. Light came through stained glass in dull colors. The pews sat empty. The piano waited at the front with its lid closed.

Grace paused by the first row. She put her hand on the end of the pew. Wood felt cool beneath her palm.

She did not see Pastor Whitaker in his office. The door stood closed. She did not knock. She did not want to pull him into worry he did not need yet.

Grace headed to the small choir room behind the sanctuary. She set her folder on the table. She looked over the songs again, tapping the edge of the paper in a rhythm she did not notice until she stopped.

Her phone buzzed.

A message from Eli Brooks.

River is up. Daniel is here. We are checking the wall now.

Grace read it twice. Her throat tightened. She typed back with careful hands.

Thank you. Please tell me if you need help.

She watched the three dots appear, stop, then reappear.

Eli: Will do. Stay dry.

Grace slipped her phone into her pocket. She breathed out slowly. She did not head outside. She had no boots with her. She had no tools. She would stand in the way.

She moved through her day with steady tasks. She checked on the church bulletin draft for Sunday. She answered an email from the choir leader in a neighboring town who wanted to borrow music folders. She returned Mrs. Alder's call about the fellowship hall schedule.

Her work held the town together in quiet ways. Grace had learned to hold what she could reach.

By late afternoon, the rain eased. It did not stop, but it thinned. The sky brightened a shade.

Grace picked Mina up from school. Mina climbed into the car with wet hair and loud news about a class pet and a spelling test. Her voice filled the space. Grace listened and asked questions. She let Mina's energy pull her out of her own thoughts.

At home, Grace warmed soup and buttered bread. She set Mina at the table with crayons and paper.

Mina drew a river. She drew a line of stones. She drew a stick figure with a square body and thick arms. “This is Mr. Daniel. He has boots.”

Grace stirred soup on the stove. “He does have boots.”

Mina nodded as if she had known him for years. “He is not afraid of the water.”

Grace turned off the burner and sat across from her. “People feel fear. They still do what they need to do.”

Mina frowned. “Grace feels fear.”

Grace held her gaze. “Yes.”

Mina looked down at the drawing. “Grace still does what she needs to do.”

Grace felt tears press behind her eyes. She blinked them back. She reached across the table and touched Mina’s hand. “Yes.”

After dinner, Grace packed Mina’s bag for the next day. She set out clothes. She checked homework. She brushed Mina’s hair and tied it back.

At seven, Grace drove Mina to the church for rehearsal. She had asked Mrs. Alder to watch Mina in the fellowship hall during choir practice, and Mrs. Alder had agreed with a firm nod and a warm smile.

Rain started again as Grace pulled into the parking lot. It came in slanted streaks, driven by wind. Stormlight filled the sky. The clouds thinned enough to let a pale glow through, yet the rain still fell hard.

Mina pressed her face to the window. “The sky is bright, but it is raining.”

Grace watched the way the light hit the wet pavement. Everything shone. “Yes.”

They hurried inside under one umbrella. Rain snapped against the fabric. Grace felt cold drops hit her wrists. Mina laughed once, a quick sound. Then she tucked closer.

Inside, warmth wrapped around them. The church smelled like wood and old hymnals. The hall lights hummed.

Mrs. Alder stood by the fellowship hall door in a cardigan and sensible shoes. She held a basket of coloring books. “Mina Park, I have supplies.”

Mina ran to her, then stopped short. She looked up at Grace. “Grace is singing?”

Grace knelt and smoothed Mina’s sleeve. “Grace is singing.”

Mina leaned in and whispered, loud enough for Mrs. Alder to hear, “Grace is brave.”

Mrs. Alder’s eyes softened. “Yes, she is.”

Grace stood. “Thank you for watching her.”

Mrs. Alder waved one hand. “It is a pleasure. Go. Do your work.”

Grace walked toward the sanctuary. Voices drifted through the open doors. Choir members had already gathered, shaking umbrellas and laughing at the weather. The sound lifted the heaviness in Grace’s chest. Community did that. It did not fix everything, but it reminded her she did not stand alone.

She stepped into the sanctuary and took in the scene.

Half the choir sat in the front pews with folders open. Some stood in the aisle, talking in small groups. Water dripped from coats onto

the floor near the door where people had come in. The air held a faint damp smell mixed with perfume and soap.

Grace moved to the front, set her music on the piano, and looked over the group.

Then she saw Daniel.

He sat in the second pew from the front, off to one side, near the aisle. He did not hold a folder. He did not talk. He watched.

His hair looked darker from rain. His jacket hung open, work boots planted firm on the floor. He looked out of place among the choir members, yet he did not seem uncomfortable. He carried himself with the same quiet control he brought to the riverbank.

Grace's pulse shifted.

She had not expected him here. She had not invited him. He had not spoken of coming.

Their eyes met. Daniel did not look away. He rose.

He walked to the front with measured steps, as if he did not want to interrupt. Grace waited, hands resting on the edge of the piano.

When he reached her, he spoke low. "Eli said choir rehearsal met tonight."

Grace glanced toward the others. They watched with open curiosity and polite restraint. Small town eyes. Kind, but sharp.

"Yes," Grace said. "It does."

Daniel nodded once. "I did not want to stay by the river alone with the crew gone. I did not want to go home yet."

Grace heard the truth under his careful words. The river felt too loud in his mind. Quiet work helped him. People helped him, even if he did not name it.

Grace kept her voice steady. “Did something happen?”

Daniel’s jaw tightened a fraction. “The water rose more than I expected. The wall held. The bank behind it shifted some. We placed extra sandbags for the night.”

Grace pictured the dark water pushing at the new work. She gripped the piano edge. “Is it safe?”

Daniel held her gaze. “It is not failing. It is under stress. I will check it early.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you for coming to tell me.”

He hesitated. His eyes moved to the sanctuary, to the people watching. Then back to Grace. “Also, I wanted to hear the choir.”

Grace felt heat in her face. She did not trust it. “Choir rehearsal is not a performance.”

“I know,” Daniel said. “I still wanted to hear it.”

Grace searched his face for any hint of pressure or charm. She found none. He spoke like a man who had made a decision and did not dress it up.

“All right,” she said.

Daniel stepped back. He returned to his spot in the pew.

Grace drew a slow breath. She turned to the choir.

“All right,” she said louder. “Let us gather. Front two pews. Keep space for your folders.”

People moved. The rustle of paper filled the room. A cough. A quiet laugh.

Grace lifted her hand. The room settled.

“We will start with prayer,” Grace said.

A few heads lifted. Some looked surprised. Grace usually started with warm-ups. Yet tonight the rain pressed on her mind, and the river pressed on her heart. Prayer felt like the right first step.

Grace bowed her head. “Lord, thank you for bringing everyone here safely. Thank you for this church and the way it holds us. Please watch the river tonight. Please guard the bank’s work. Give Daniel and the crew wisdom. Give all of us steady hearts. Let peace rule in us. In Jesus’ name, amen.”

A soft chorus of amens answered.

Grace opened her folder. She turned to the piano and played a simple scale. “Warm-ups.”

Voices rose, some strong, some uncertain. Grace listened and guided. She corrected posture with gentle words. She reminded them to breathe low.

Rain struck the windows harder for a few minutes. It sounded like handfuls of gravel thrown against glass. The stormlight outside turned the stained glass panels pale, then bright, then pale again as clouds moved.

Grace led them into the first hymn.

The choir sang. Sound filled the wooden room and climbed into the rafters. The notes did not sound perfect. They sounded human. They sounded like people who lived in a town where neighbors still brought casseroles, held babies, and fixed porch steps.

Grace lifted her hand for a softer ending. She lowered it. The last note faded.

She glanced toward Daniel without meaning to.

He sat still, hands clasped, eyes on the choir. He listened with full attention. He did not look at his phone. He did not watch the rain. He watched them.

Grace's throat tightened again, for a reason she did not want to examine.

She turned the page. "Next song."

They worked through harmonies. Grace stopped them where the tenor line drifted. She asked the altos to shape a vowel. She praised the sopranos for a clean entrance.

Between songs, people whispered about the weather.

"Creek by the Johnson place is over the road," someone said.

"My basement smells damp," someone else answered.

"It always does," another replied, and laughter eased tension.

Grace kept them moving. Music did not stop rain, yet it gave the heart a place to stand.

Halfway through rehearsal, the sanctuary doors opened. A gust of damp air blew in. Eli Brooks stepped inside, rain on his shoulders. He shook off his cap and slipped into the back pew.

Grace saw him, then kept going. Eli sat quietly. He watched.

Grace finished a song and let her hands fall. "Break for water. Two minutes."

Chairs creaked. People stood and stretched. A few walked toward the drinking fountain in the hall.

Grace stepped off the platform and walked toward Daniel's pew. Her feet moved before her mind approved.

Daniel rose when she reached him. He kept his voice low. "You lead well."

Grace did not look away. "You came from the river. You should be resting."

Daniel glanced toward the windows, where rain ran in thick lines. "Rest does not always mean sleep."

Grace felt the echo of his words from the night before. She nodded. "Eli came in."

Daniel turned his head. He saw Eli in the back. "Good."

Grace lowered her voice. "Is the river still rising?"

Daniel's eyes stayed calm, but his words carried weight. "Yes. The soil behind the wall holds water. It adds pressure. I set the drain line for a reason, but new work always settles."

Grace pictured the hidden forces. Pressure behind a surface that looked firm. She knew what that felt like.

She swallowed. "Do you need volunteers?"

Daniel shook his head. "No. People should stay away in this rain. I will go early. I will bring more materials if I need to."

Grace held her folder tighter. "Thank you."

Daniel's gaze softened. "You asked for wisdom in prayer."

Grace felt exposed. "I did."

“I am grateful,” Daniel said. “I do not ask for prayer often. I should.”

Grace did not know what to say. She settled on truth. “Grace asks often. Grace forgets she is allowed.”

Daniel studied her face. “You are allowed.”

Grace’s eyes stung. She blinked. “Break is over. Grace needs to finish.”

Daniel nodded. “I will stay quiet.”

Grace returned to the front. She clapped once to gather attention. “All right. Back to it.”

They sang again. Rain grew louder, then quieter. Thunder rolled once, long and low. The lights flickered. A few people gasped, then laughed when the lights steadied.

Grace kept her hand raised, steady. “Keep going.”

The choir sang through the flicker. Their voices did not waver.

Stormlight shifted again. A patch of brighter sky opened beyond the clouds, and for a few minutes, light poured through the windows. Rain still fell. The world outside looked washed and shining. The church windows glowed.

Grace felt something in her chest ease. The scene looked like mercy, brightness inside a storm.

They moved into a new arrangement Grace had chosen, a simple piece with layered lines. The words spoke of peace, of a river whose streams made glad the city of God.

Grace did not announce the verse reference. She did not need to. She knew it. Psalm 46:4.

As they sang, she felt the words settle into her bones.

A river did not only erode. It also brought water to dry places. It carried life.

Grace watched the choir members as they sang, faces lifted, brows furrowed in focus. Mrs. Alder's nephew sang bass with a shy smile. The bakery owner, Mrs. Tinsley, sang alto with her whole body, leaning into the sound. The school principal stood tall, her voice steady, eyes closed.

Grace led them with small gestures. She did not need big motions. They knew her. They trusted her.

When the final chord faded, the sanctuary held stillness. Rain tapped softly against the glass. The sound felt distant now.

Grace let silence sit for a breath, then said, "Good. Again, but watch the consonants."

They worked the piece twice more. Each time it grew cleaner.

At the end of rehearsal, Grace closed her folder. "Thank you. Next week, same time. Please take your music home."

People gathered their things. Coats swished. Umbrellas opened. A few stopped to ask Grace small questions.

"Should we stand closer on Sunday?"

"Can you send the recordings again?"

Grace answered with patience. She looked toward Daniel now and then. He still sat, waiting. He did not rush her. He did not act as if his time mattered more.

When the last choir member left, Eli came forward. He walked with his usual easy stride, cap in his hand.

“Grace,” Eli said, voice warm. “Sounded good.”

Grace managed a small smile. “Thank you.”

Eli glanced at Daniel. “You came for music.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes.”

Eli’s eyes held quiet humor. “Well, it is better than standing in the rain.”

Daniel’s mouth moved as if to start a smile, then settled. “Yes.”

Grace watched the exchange. Two men with different styles, both steady in their way. It made something in her chest loosen. Men like these existed. Men who did not yell. Men who did not leave bruises on words.

Eli’s face turned serious. “River is still up. I drove by on the way in. Water hit the lower path.”

Grace’s stomach tightened. “The path by the prayer garden?”

Eli nodded. “Yes. Do not go down there tonight.”

Daniel’s eyes sharpened. “I will go early. Before daylight.”

Eli studied him. “I will meet you. I will bring a flashlight.”

Daniel did not argue. “Thank you.”

Grace looked from one to the other. “Grace will call Pastor Whitaker in the morning.”

Eli nodded. “Good.”

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Mina’s voice rose, bright and clear. “Grace.”

Mina ran in, coloring book tucked under her arm. Mrs. Alder followed at a slower pace, umbrella in hand, eyes kind.

“Mina did good,” Mrs. Alder said. “No mischief. Only questions.”

Mina stood at Grace’s side and looked up at Daniel. “Mr. Daniel heard Grace sing.”

Daniel crouched a little so he met her level. “Yes. You were right. She is brave.”

Grace froze.

Mina’s eyes went wide with delight, as if she had won a quiet contest. She turned to Grace. “See.”

Grace pressed her lips together. She touched Mina’s shoulder. “Mina, it is time to go.”

Mina nodded, then looked back at Daniel. “Is the river mad?”

Daniel’s gaze stayed gentle. “No. The river is doing what rivers do. It rises when rain falls. People work to keep everyone safe.”

Mina thought about that. “Mr. Daniel keeps it safe.”

Daniel shook his head. “God keeps people safe. Mr. Daniel tries to do his part.”

Grace’s throat tightened again, but in a different way. She looked at Daniel. His words held no performance. They held simple order. God first. Work second. Self last.

Grace gathered Mina’s things. She thanked Mrs. Alder again. She waved to Eli.

At the door, Grace paused and looked back.

Daniel stood near the front pew. Eli stood beside him. Two men in the empty sanctuary, rain noise muffled by thick walls.

Daniel met Grace's eyes. He lifted one hand in a small farewell.

Grace nodded once. Then she ushered Mina out into the wet night.

They ran to the car under the umbrella. Rain hit Grace's hair and soaked the shoulders of her sweater. Mina squealed and hopped over a puddle.

Inside the car, Grace shut the door and sat still for a moment, breath quick. The heater fogged the edges of the windshield. Wipers swept water away in steady arcs.

Mina buckled herself, then leaned forward. "Mr. Daniel said Grace is brave."

Grace kept her hands on the wheel. "He should not say things you say."

Mina giggled. "He said it first."

Grace started the car. "No, you said it first."

Mina sighed as if adults struggled with simple facts. "Grace sings when it storms."

Grace swallowed. She pulled out of the parking lot and drove slowly through the rain. The church steeple rose behind her in the mirror, pale against the stormlit sky.

She pictured Daniel and Eli heading back into the rain. Flashlights. Boots. Sandbags. Quiet work in the dark.

Grace's mind went to the river again, pushing at the bank, testing what held.

She whispered a prayer under her breath, words for the road and words for the water. “Lord, keep them safe. Keep the wall steady. Keep our hearts steady.”

Mina leaned her head against the seat and watched the rain slide down the window. “Grace,” she said, her voice sleepy.

“Yes?”

“God keeps people safe,” Mina murmured.

“Yes,” Grace said.

Mina’s eyes closed. “Then Grace does not have to hold everything.”

Grace felt tears rise again. She blinked them back and drove on, wipers moving, rain falling, the night bright with stormlight. The river kept rising somewhere beyond the trees, unseen, heard only in Grace’s mind. She held the wheel and let her prayer stay steady as the road carried them home.

Chapter 11

What Stability Requires

Morning came clear. The storm had moved on in the night and left the world rinsed. Sunlight fell in clean lines across Maple Ridge. Puddles sat in the road edges and held pieces of sky.

Grace Park stood at her kitchen sink and watched Mina eat cereal. Mina swung her legs at the chair and hummed a piece of last night's anthem. The hum held the same steady rhythm as the ceiling fan. Grace kept her hands in the dishwasher longer than she needed. Her thoughts kept drifting to the church. To the river. To Daniel Chen in the front pew, speaking with quiet care as if each word had weight.

Mina tipped her bowl to catch the last of the milk. "Grace."

"Yes."

"Is the wall okay today?"

Grace dried her hands on a towel. She checked the clock. "We will see. Mr. Daniel will check."

Mina nodded as if the matter held no fear at all. "God keeps people safe."

Grace looked at her daughter. The child spoke faith the way she spoke weather, as it belonged to the day.

Grace packed Mina's bag for daycare. She smoothed Mina's hair and tied it back. Mina turned and hugged her hard and quickly, then ran for her shoes.

At the door, Grace paused. The air outside held the smell of wet soil and crushed leaves. A robin hopped near the porch steps. The world looked calm. It did not feel calm inside Grace.

She drove Mina to Mrs. Alder's house first. The older woman lived two streets over from the church and kept a small garden in front of her house. The garden looked bright in the new sun, stems lifted again after the rain.

Mrs. Alder opened the door before Grace knocked. She wore an apron and had flour on her hands. "Good morning."

Mina darted inside as she belonged there.

Grace held out the bag. "Thank you again. I know it was late."

Mrs. Alder took the bag with one hand and caught Grace's wrist with the other. Her touch felt warm, firm. "People do not keep score in Maple Ridge. They try not to."

Grace gave a small smile. "Some do."

Mrs. Alder did not argue. She only looked at Grace with the kind of eyes that had seen many seasons. "Grace, you look tired."

Grace kept her voice even. "It was a long night."

"It was," Mrs. Alder said. "The river will recede. It always does."

Grace glanced past her into the living room. Mina sat on the rug, already lining up toy animals. She looked peaceful. Grace wanted her own heart to look like that.

Mrs. Alder lowered her voice. "He did good work last night."

Grace nodded. "Yes."

"And he did it with calm," Mrs. Alder said. "Some men carry a loud kind of strength. He carries a quiet kind."

Grace felt her cheeks warm. She shifted her keys in her hand. “I should go. I have practice plans to send, and I need to stop by the church.”

Mrs. Alder leaned closer. “He will be there early.”

Grace met her gaze. “I am going for the wall.”

Mrs. Alder smiled, small and kind. “Of course.”

Grace drove to the church with her hands set at ten and two. The roads still held damp patches. Sunlight flashed on the wet gravel at the edge of the lot. The white church stood clean against the blue. The steeple looked brighter after the storm, like fresh paint, though Grace knew no one had touched it.

She parked near the fellowship hall. The air smelled of pine and river water. The river sat beyond the prayer garden, out of view from this angle, but Grace felt its presence the way she felt a heartbeat.

She walked along the side path. The grass still held drops of water. Her shoes darkened at the edges. She passed the prayer garden where the stones and benches had been set in a simple circle. The willow near the bank hung heavy with wet leaves.

She heard voices near the river.

Daniel’s voice stayed low. Another man answered. A worker from his crew, likely. The sound of shovels followed, a scrape of metal on stone.

Grace stepped closer and stopped at the edge of the work area. Daniel stood near the retaining wall with a clipboard in one hand. He wore work boots and a plain long-sleeved shirt, sleeves rolled up. His hair looked damp at the edges. He turned when he sensed her.

He did not smile wide. He did not act surprised. He only nodded, as if her presence belonged here.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” Grace replied. She kept her hands at her sides. She wanted to fold her arms, but she stopped herself.

He looked at her face, then at the riverbank behind her. “How is Mina?”

“She is with Mrs. Alder,” Grace said. “She was asking about the wall.”

A soft change crossed his face. Approval, maybe. Respect. “She notices things.”

Grace watched him, searching for strain from the night. His posture held steady. Still, his eyes looked tired in a way he might not admit.

“Did you get any rest?” Grace asked.

“I slept,” he said. He held her gaze. “I do not know if it counts as rest.”

Grace nodded. She understood more than she wanted to. “How is it?”

Daniel turned toward the wall. “It held through the rise. We stacked the sandbags to take pressure off the weak section. We did not lose ground.”

One of the crew members carried a bucket past them. He nodded at Grace, then returned to the work without slowing.

Grace stepped closer to see. The river looked lower than she expected. The water still moved with steady force, but it did not

press as high on the bank. The wall showed dark wet lines where the water had been. Sandbags sat in a neat run along the base.

Daniel pointed with his pen. “We still have erosion at the corner. The soil behind the wall washed out more than I like.”

Grace listened. She watched how he spoke. No flourish. No excuse. Only facts.

“What do you need from the church?” she asked.

“Access to the storage shed for a few hours,” Daniel said. “Eli said there are extra tarps and a pump in there. If the rain returns, I want them ready.”

Grace nodded. “I have a key. I can open it.”

Daniel did not move away. He watched her for a beat. “I wanted to thank you for last night.”

Grace blinked. “For what?”

“For staying,” he said. “For bringing Mina. For singing when the storm hit.”

Grace’s throat tightened again. She looked down at the wet ground. “It was choir practice night. People came anyway.”

“They came because of you,” Daniel said.

Grace forced herself to look up. “They came because they love the church.”

He held her gaze. “They trust you with it.”

Grace felt the words land in a tender place. She shifted her weight. “How long will the repair take?”

“If the weather stays steady, two weeks,” Daniel said. “If we run into deeper undermining behind the wall, longer. I will know more by this afternoon.”

Grace nodded. “Pastor Whitaker will want an update.”

“I will speak with him,” Daniel said. “If you wish.”

Grace felt a small relief. She did not want to carry another meeting alone. “Yes. He will be in his office after lunch.”

Daniel glanced toward the church, then back to her. “Are you free this afternoon?”

Grace hesitated. “I have choir planning and some calls. Why.”

“I want to walk the bank with you,” he said. “I want you to see what I see. It is easier when the person responsible for the property understands the risk.”

Grace should have said yes without thinking. It was reasonable. It was work, still, something in her braced.

She heard Mina’s voice in her mind. Then Grace did not have to hold everything.

Grace drew in a slow breath. “Yes. I can come.”

Daniel nodded once. “Three.”

Grace glanced at her watch. “Three.”

He looked back to the wall. “If you have questions before then, you can find me here.”

Grace turned to leave, then stopped. “Daniel.”

He looked at her.

Grace did not know how to say it. She tried anyway. “Thank you for last night.”

He held her gaze and did not dismiss it. “You are welcome.”

Grace walked back toward the church. The path felt soft underfoot from the rain. She opened the storage shed for Daniel’s crew, then went inside the fellowship hall to check the kitchen. The air still held a faint smell of coffee from last night. Chairs sat stacked along the wall. A few hymnals lay on a table, left behind in the rush.

Grace gathered them. She set them back on the shelf. Her hands moved by habit, but her mind stayed near the river.

She heard footsteps in the hallway.

Eli Brooks appeared at the doorway with a box in his arms. He wore a faded work shirt and carried the box with ease.

“Morning,” Eli said.

“Morning,” Grace replied. “How are you?”

Eli set the box down and rolled his shoulder once. “Sore. Fine.”

Grace nodded toward the river. “How is it?”

“Holding,” Eli said. “Daniel runs a tight job.”

Grace studied him. Eli had a way of saying things plain without trying to sway anyone.

“He seems steady,” she said.

Eli glanced at her as if he had heard more than she had spoken. “He is.”

Grace set the last hymnal in place. “Do you know him well?”

“Not well,” Eli said. “But I have watched him work all week. He watches. He measures. He does not rush.”

Grace rubbed her thumb along the edge of the shelf. “People in town have opinions about anyone new.”

Eli gave a short breath that might have been a laugh. “People in town have opinions about anyone.”

Grace met his eyes. She knew Eli carried the weight of old opinions. She had watched him live under them and then outlive them. She respected him for it.

Eli lifted the box again. “He has history. Everyone does.”

Grace kept her voice quiet. “Do you know what his history is?”

Eli shook his head. “No. If he wants to tell it, he will.”

Grace nodded. She did not push. She did not want to be someone who gathered people’s pain like gossip.

Eli shifted the box in his arms. “You did good last night.”

Grace looked down. “I did what I always do.”

Eli stepped closer. His voice stayed low. “No. You stayed steady in front of people. That matters.”

Grace swallowed. “Mina said the same thing in her own way.”

Eli’s eyes softened. “Kids see straight.”

Grace watched him go, then returned to her tasks. She made calls for choir music orders. She sent out a rehearsal schedule. She printed copies of Sunday’s hymns. She tried to keep her mind on notes and page turns. Still, her thoughts slipped back to Daniel.

He had stood in the church with rain hitting the windows. He had spoken of God first, work second, self last. Grace had heard men talk like that before. She had believed them before.

Her ex-husband had made promises with a smile and a hand on her back. He had spoken of faith as a badge when he wanted favor. He had spoken of change as if it was a switch he could flip.

Then life had pressed, and he had turned sharp. His words had changed. His hands had changed. Grace had learned to read the shift in a room the way she read weather.

Daniel did not feel like weather. He felt like something else. Like wood set true. Like a level line.

Grace did not know whether to let herself lean on that.

She ate lunch at her desk in the small choir room off the sanctuary. The room smelled of old paper and lemon polish. A window looked out toward the side lawn where the sun dried the grass.

At two-thirty, Grace closed her planner. She stood and smoothed her shirt. Her stomach tightened with the same feeling she used to get before hard conversations. She told herself it was only a walk.

At three, she met Daniel near the prayer garden gate. He had traded the clipboard for a small notebook tucked into his back pocket. He carried a measuring tape and a thin metal rod used for probing soil. He looked prepared in a way that made Grace feel both safe and exposed.

“Ready?” he asked.

Grace nodded. “Yes.”

They walked along the bank. The willow leaves had begun to dry at the edges. Sunlight caught the river in bright broken pieces. Birds moved through the trees with quick calls.

Daniel stopped at the corner where the wall met a rough patch of earth. He crouched and pressed the metal rod into the ground behind the wall. He did it slowly. He felt for resistance.

Grace watched his hands. They moved with care. His fingers looked strong and precise.

“Here,” he said.

Grace stepped closer.

He touched the top edge of the wall. “This section has settled. It has not failed, but it shifted.”

Grace looked at the line of stone. She could see it now, a slight tilt. A seam opened wider than the rest.

Daniel lifted his eyes to her. “The danger with a wall like this is the part no one sees. Water finds weakness behind it.”

Grace felt a chill in her chest. The words struck too close.

“What do you do?” she asked.

“We dig back,” Daniel said. “We remove loose soil. We rebuild the backfill in layers. We compact it. We add drainage so water does not pool.”

Grace nodded. “It sounds simple.”

“It is simple,” he said. “It is not easy.”

Grace looked at him. “How did you learn this work?”

Daniel stood. He wiped his hands on his pants. “My father.”

Grace waited.

Daniel glanced at the river. “He worked on crews when he first came to this country. He started with small jobs. Concrete. Framing. Roofing. Anything someone would pay for. He took me along when I was old enough to hold a hammer and stay out of the way.”

Grace pictured it, a boy following a tired man, learning by watching.

“He wanted you to join him?” she asked.

Daniel’s mouth tightened, then eased. “He wanted me to have choices. He wanted me to have stability.”

Grace looked back at the wall. “You built a business.”

“Yes,” he said.

They walked again. The path narrowed near a bend where reeds grew thick. Daniel stopped and pointed to a patch of exposed roots.

“See the scouring,” he said.

Grace knelt beside him. The earth looked raw, like skin rubbed too hard. “I see it.”

Daniel’s voice stayed calm. “The storm did this. The water moved faster upstream, carrying debris. Debris hits the bank and tears at it. It looks small, but it grows.”

Grace straightened. “So you repair it before it grows.”

Daniel looked at her. His eyes held something quiet, something firm. “Yes.”

They walked farther. The river widened near the edge of church property. The sound of water grew softer there. It spread out and flowed with less force.

They stopped near a bench set by the prayer garden. The bench faced the river. A plaque on the side held a name Grace had known since childhood. Mrs. Kline. A woman who used to bring casseroles to every funeral and never asked to be thanked.

Daniel looked at the plaque, then at Grace. “This town remembers.”

Grace nodded. “It does.”

Daniel sat on the bench. He rested his hands on his knees. Grace stayed standing for a moment, then sat too, leaving a small space between them.

The breeze carried damp air off the water. It cooled Grace’s skin. She watched the river move and tried to let her shoulders drop.

Daniel spoke without looking at her. “You asked earlier about rest.”

Grace did not answer. She did not want to push. She waited.

Daniel drew in a slow breath. “I do not rest well. I have not for a long time.”

Grace turned her head toward him. “Because you think you will miss something.”

“Yes,” Daniel said. He turned his face toward the river again. “I do not like surprises.”

Grace kept her voice quiet. “Most people do not.”

Daniel’s gaze stayed on the water. “Some people live with them anyway. They adapt. They laugh. They move on.”

Grace swallowed. She thought of Mina spilling milk and laughing. She thought of herself learning to smile again after a hard season.

Daniel’s hands clenched once, then relaxed. “For me, surprises cost too much.”

Grace felt her chest tighten. She did not speak.

Daniel turned and looked at her. “You asked how I learned this work. My father taught me. But the discipline came later.”

Grace held his gaze. She saw the care in his eyes, and something else beneath it, a guarded edge. A hurt kept in order like tools in a box.

Daniel looked down at his hands. “When I was twenty-one, I worked a summer job on a road crew. We repaired culverts and shoulders after heavy rains. It was not complicated work. It was long days. Heat. Mud. Noise.”

Grace listened. The river moved beside them. It did not hurry him.

Daniel continued. “One day we finished late. I wanted to get home. I drove too fast on a back road. There had been rain the night before. The ditch ran full. The shoulder looked dry from the driver’s seat. It was not.”

Grace felt her breath stop.

Daniel’s voice stayed steady, but it grew thinner. “My truck slid. I overcorrected. I hit the edge and dropped into the ditch.”

Grace did not move. She could not.

Daniel swallowed once. “My younger brother sat with me. He came along because he wanted to learn. He wanted to be near me. He liked how grown-up I seemed when I wore my boots and came home dirty.”

Grace’s eyes stung. She blinked slowly.

Daniel stared at the water. “He did not have a seat belt on. I told him to put it on. He complained. I did not push. I wanted him to like me. I wanted the ride home to feel easy.”

Grace pressed her hands together in her lap so she would not reach for him too soon.

Daniel’s jaw tightened. “When we slid, he hit his head. The ambulance came fast. We lived near enough to town. People did their best. He died two days later.”

Grace’s throat ached. She drew in a careful breath. The river kept moving. The sound of it filled the silence as if it carried their weight.

Daniel’s eyes shone, but he did not let tears fall. He kept his face composed, like a man holding a line in his hands.

“I am sorry,” Grace said. Her voice came out rough.

Daniel nodded once. “I hear those words often when people learn. It is kind. It does not change what I did.”

Grace shook her head, small. “You did not mean…”

Daniel lifted his hand, palm down, a quiet stop. “I know what I meant. I also know what I did.”

Grace pressed her lips together. She felt the old familiar pull to fix, to soothe, to rush past the hard part. She forced herself to sit still.

Daniel stared at his hands again. “After the funeral, my parents did not blame me with words. They blamed me with silence. The house felt like a room with no air. My father went to work, came home, and sat at the table until bedtime. My mother stopped humming when she cooked.”

Grace’s eyes burned. She kept listening.

Daniel breathed out. “I learned how fragile a safe day is. I learned how one mistake can take everything. I learned I had to control what I could.”

Grace whispered, “So you became disciplined.”

Daniel nodded. “I became strict. I checked locks twice. I checked the stove twice. I followed rules with no room for ease. I grew into a man people like to hire.”

Grace glanced at him. “Because you do good work.”

“Yes,” he said. His voice held no pride. “Because I do not forget details. I do not run late. I do not leave a job unfinished. I do not take risks.”

Grace’s chest tightened again, but in a different way. She understood control. She had built her own.

Daniel looked at her, eyes steady. “I also lost people because of it.”

Grace felt his words settle between them. “Your engagement.”

Daniel nodded once. He did not look away. “Her name was Julia. She was kind. She wanted a home. She wanted children. She wanted a husband who came to dinner without checking his phone for work messages.”

Grace stayed quiet.

Daniel’s voice softened. “I told her I would change. I believed I would. Then a job ran long. A client called. I went. I missed dinner. I missed her mother’s birthday. I missed a weekend trip. I kept missing things.”

Grace’s fingers curled into her palm. She thought of her own missed things. Her own broken promises received, not given.

Daniel continued. “She told me she felt like she stood behind my work every day. She said she felt like a wall I kept repairing while the house fell apart.”

Grace’s breath caught. The words felt too close to the river beside them.

Daniel looked down. “She ended it. She did it with honesty. She did it before resentment turned cruel. I respected her for it. I still do.”

Grace swallowed. “Do you miss her?”

Daniel’s eyes lifted to the trees on the far bank. “I miss who I was when I thought I could give someone what they needed. I miss the hope. I do not miss her in a way that means I want her back.”

Grace let out a slow breath. She did not know she had held it.

Daniel turned his gaze to her again. “I do not tell people this. I do not want pity. I do not want forgiveness from strangers.”

Grace nodded. “Why tell me?”

Daniel’s face stayed calm, but his voice held a quiet truth. “Because you asked about rest. Because you look at me like you see the parts I keep hidden. Because Mina trusts me, and I do not want to stand in her world with a false face.”

Grace’s eyes filled. She blinked, and one tear slipped free. She wiped it with the side of her finger and kept her head high.

“I understand control,” Grace said.

Daniel watched her. He waited.

Grace looked at the river. “I used to think if I watched closely enough, I could prevent pain. If I stayed alert, I could keep Mina safe from everything.”

Daniel's gaze stayed on her, quiet, attentive.

Grace kept her voice low. "Then I learned pain finds people anyway. It finds children too. It comes through other people's choices. It comes through sickness. It comes through storms. I cannot stop all of it."

Daniel shook his head. "No."

Grace turned to him. "What do you do with the fear?"

Daniel held her gaze. "I work. I make lists. I follow plans. I tell myself if I do enough, nothing will break."

Grace gave a small, sad sound. "And does it work?"

Daniel looked down. His answer came soft. "No."

Silence settled again. The river moved. Leaves stirred.

Grace reached into the space between them, slow. She placed her hand over his on the bench. She did not squeeze. She did not force comfort. She only stayed there.

Daniel's fingers tensed, then eased under her hand. He did not pull away.

Grace spoke with care. "You lost your brother. You did not lose him because you did not care."

Daniel's throat worked. He swallowed. "I still told him to ride without the belt. I still drove too fast."

Grace nodded. "Yes."

The honesty held no cruelty. It held weight. Grace had learned truth mattered more than soft words.

Daniel looked at her hand on his. "My mother forgave me."

Grace waited.

Daniel breathed in. “She said God forgave me first. She said she had to choose to live in that truth or she would die inside. She said she did not want to lose two sons.”

Grace closed her eyes for a moment. She pictured a mother standing in grief and choosing life. She pictured faith as a daily choice, not a clean feeling.

Daniel continued, voice quiet. “My father took longer. He did not say much for years. Then one day he asked me to help him rebuild the back steps. He handed me a hammer. He stood beside me. He did not apologize. He did not explain. He only stood there and worked with me. It was his way of coming back.”

Grace’s hand stayed on his. “That sounds like a father.”

Daniel’s mouth moved, a faint smile with pain in it. “Yes.”

Grace looked at the water. “Stability requires time.”

Daniel nodded. “It requires choices.”

Grace’s eyes stayed on the river. “And grace.”

Daniel turned his hand under hers. His fingers wrapped around her hand, gentle, firm. His skin felt warm. His grip felt sure without pressure.

“Yes,” he said.

They sat like that for a long moment. The river held its steady voice. The church stood behind them, white and quiet. Wind lifted the willow branches and let them fall again.

Grace felt the urge to pull away. She did not. She let the moment stay.

Daniel's voice came soft. "I do not want to be a man who fixes walls and forgets people."

Grace looked at him. "Then do not."

His eyes searched her face. "It is hard."

Grace nodded. "Yes."

Daniel held her hand a moment longer, then released it slowly. He stood and looked toward the wall again, as if the work waited and he needed to return to it before the moment slipped too far into something he did not know how to hold.

Grace stood too. She brushed grass from her skirt.

Daniel cleared his throat. "Thank you for listening."

Grace met his eyes. "Thank you for trusting me with it."

He nodded once. His gaze dropped to the path. "I will give Pastor Whitaker an update after I check the corner again."

Grace started to walk beside him. "I will tell him you will come."

They moved along the bank toward the work site. The crew had stepped away for a break. Tools lay in neat lines near the trailer. The sandbags sat stacked in order, like a boundary set with intention.

Daniel stopped near the weak corner and crouched again. Grace stood close enough to see without being in the way. She watched him probe the soil. She watched him measure. She watched him write a note in his small notebook.

She saw how his discipline served a good purpose. It protected the church grounds. It guarded the people who walked here. It kept Mina from playing near a crumbling edge.

Grace also saw the cost. The tightness in his shoulders. The way he held his breath when he focused. The way he carried old loss like a tool belt he never took off.

Daniel stood and looked at her. “You are quiet.”

Grace gave a small nod. “I am thinking.”

“What about?”

Grace looked past him to the river. Sunlight flashed on the surface. “About what holds. And what it takes.”

Daniel followed her gaze. “It takes more than sandbags.”

Grace turned back to him. “Yes.”

He watched her as if he waited for her to say more.

Grace felt the words rise in her chest. They scared her, but they felt true. “You do not have to prove you are safe by holding everything alone.”

Daniel’s eyes softened. Pain moved through them like a shadow, then settled.

He spoke slowly. “I do not know how to stop.”

Grace kept her voice steady. “Then learn. Slow.”

Daniel looked at the ground, then back at her. “I do not trust myself with slow.”

Grace nodded. “I understand.”

Daniel turned and glanced toward the church. The white building stood with its doors closed now, quiet in the midafternoon. The steeple rose above the trees, pointing clean into the blue.

He faced Grace again. “I need to get back to work.”

Grace stepped back to give him room. “Yes.”

He hesitated. It looked like he wanted to say something else. His mouth opened, then closed. He nodded, then went to speak with his crew.

Grace walked back toward her car with the sun warm on her face. Her heart felt heavy and light at once. She carried his story with care. She carried her own with it.

She sat in the driver’s seat and did not start the engine right away. She looked out toward the river through the trees. It moved with no hurry. It did not deny storms. It did not pretend banks never eroded. It kept moving anyway.

Grace rested her hands on the wheel. She whispered a prayer, quiet enough for only God to hear.

“Lord, teach me what stability requires. Teach him too. Keep Mina safe. Keep our hearts steady.”

She started the car and drove away from the church, leaving Daniel at the riverbank with his tools, his notes, and a new kind of trust he had placed, careful as a stone, into her hands.

Chapter 12

When Water Recedes

The river ran lower in the morning.

Grace saw it before she reached the church grounds. She drove past the bend where the willow trees leaned, their branches hanging loose again, no longer whipped by rain. The water still moved, but it slid inside its banks. It kept its voice down.

She parked near the fellowship hall. The gravel popped under her tires. The air smelled clean, like wet dirt and leaf mold. Sunlight broke through a thin layer of cloud and fell in patches across the lawn.

Grace sat for a moment with her hands in her lap. Her shoulders had held tight through the storm. She felt the ache in them now, dull and honest. She breathed in slowly. She pictured Mina at home with Mrs. Alder for an hour, coloring at the kitchen table with a cup of milk. Mina had waved at the door and said she would sing her new song to Mrs. Alder. Grace had smiled, but she had looked at her child's small face longer than usual.

The river had scared her more than she had admitted.

She opened her car door and stepped out. The hem of her skirt brushed her calves. Her shoes sank a little in the soft ground. She walked toward the prayer garden gate, past the white church walls, past the window where choir music often drifted in the evenings.

The prayer garden looked rinsed. Water clung to the leaves. A small puddle sat near the bench. The stones around the garden beds shone darkly, as if they had been oiled.

She heard voices near the river. A hammer hit wood. Someone called for a level. Another voice answered with a calm, even tone. Daniel.

Grace slowed as she neared the bank. She did not want to interrupt. She also did not want to stand back and watch, as if she had no place here. The retaining wall sat between the prayer garden and the river, holding the edge. Sandbags still lined parts of it. Fresh lumber stood stacked nearby. Gravel lay in a neat mound.

Daniel stood at the center of the work, feet planted, clipboard in hand. His shirt clung a little at the shoulders. His hair sat damp near the back of his neck. He spoke to one of his crew and pointed toward a section near the willow roots. His hand moved once, clean and certain. The crewman nodded and went to it.

Daniel turned. He saw Grace. His face changed slightly. His eyes steadied.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” Grace said.

She walked closer and stopped where the grass turned to mud. She kept her hands at her sides. She did not want to fold them tight and signal fear.

“Is it holding?” she asked.

Daniel looked back at the wall. He watched the line where wood met earth.

“It held through the worst of it,” he said. “The water is down now.”

Grace let out a breath she had carried in without knowing.

He looked at her again. “How is Mina?”

“She is fine,” Grace said. “She slept hard. She asked if the river was angry.”

Daniel looked down for a moment, then up. “What did you tell her?”

Grace swallowed. “I told her the river does not hate us. It does what it does. I told her the Lord watches over us.”

Daniel gave a single nod. “That is true.”

A truck door shut on the other side of the bank. Tires crunched gravel. Pastor Whitaker walked up from the lot with a thermos in one hand and a paper sack in the other. He wore a windbreaker and his work shoes, the ones he used when he helped with church projects. He moved with steady purpose, like a man who had spent his life walking toward trouble with prayer in his chest.

He smiled when he saw Grace. “Good morning, Grace.”

“Good morning, Pastor Whitaker.”

He turned to Daniel. “Morning, Daniel.”

“Pastor,” Daniel said. He tipped his head in respect.

Pastor Whitaker looked at the wall. He moved closer and studied the boards, the braces, the way the sandbags sat. He crouched near the edge and touched the top plank with two fingers.

“It looks strong,” he said.

Daniel watched him. “It is stronger than it was. We will finish the long tie-ins today, then we will backfill and pack it. The river had its say. It did not take the bank.”

Pastor Whitaker stood. “Thank the Lord.”

Grace felt the words land in her. A simple sentence. A true one.

Pastor Whitaker lifted the thermos. “Coffee for whoever wants it. I also brought breakfast sandwiches. Hannah made them. She told me to tell you she prayed over the pan while she cooked.”

Grace smiled. “Hannah is Hannah.”

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes softened. “Yes.”

Daniel shifted his weight. He looked as if he did not know what to make of the idea of someone praying over his food. His face stayed calm, yet Grace saw a guarded place inside him.

Pastor Whitaker held out the sack. “You all did good work yesterday. You did not stop when the weather turned.”

Daniel took the sack and set it on a dry board. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker poured coffee into paper cups and handed one to Grace. The heat warmed her hands. The coffee smelled rich and plain.

“I will let you get to it,” Pastor Whitaker said. He looked at Grace. “Thank you for checking in.”

Grace nodded. “I needed to see it.”

Pastor Whitaker looked at the river again. “We all did.” He turned and walked back toward the lot, his steps steady in the wet grass.

Grace took a sip. The coffee tasted like comfort. She watched Daniel as he returned his attention to the job.

He took a tape measure from his belt and walked along the wall. He checked distances. He spoke to his crew. His voice never rose. His movements stayed controlled, even with mud under his boots and damp air on his skin.

Grace stayed a few feet back. She did not hover close. She also did not leave.

Daniel finished a short exchange with one of his workers and turned back to her.

“You are watching,” he said.

Grace felt heat in her face. “I am.”

“Are you worried?”

Grace set the coffee cup on a flat stone near the garden and clasped her hands. She did not squeeze. She tried to keep her fingers loose.

“Yes,” she said. “I do not like water where it should not be.”

Daniel nodded. His eyes held hers. “Me either.”

He looked past her toward the church, toward the windows. “You said yesterday that I do not have to prove I am safe by holding everything alone.”

Grace let out a slow breath. “Yes.”

Daniel looked at the wall again. “I heard you.”

Grace waited.

He took a breath. It looked like it took effort. “I do not know how to do what you asked. But I heard you.”

Grace stepped a half step closer, careful in the mud. “Hearing is a start.”

Daniel’s jaw tightened, then eased. “I like starts. They feel measurable.”

Grace almost smiled, but the truth in his words held her steady. He needed what he understood. He needed edges and lines.

“You are doing steady work,” Grace said, and she meant more than lumber and gravel.

Daniel’s eyes shifted to hers. “The work is easier than the other part.”

Grace nodded. “Yes.”

One of Daniel’s crew called his name. Daniel turned and answered. He walked back to the wall and knelt by the section near the willow roots. He pointed and gave a short instruction. The crew moved in a practiced way. They placed a brace. They tightened a bolt. The sound of tools rose and fell like small waves.

Grace stood near the prayer garden and watched the river. The water did not surge. It did not claw. It moved in long, smooth lines. Sunlight lay on it in thin streaks. A leaf floated by and spun once, then drifted on.

She thought of Mina asking if the river was angry. Children named fear without shame. Adults hid it behind tasks and schedules.

Grace had hidden hers behind music. Behind the next hymn, the next rehearsal, the next Sunday morning. She had told herself the Lord had given her enough strength for one more week. He always had. Yet she had learned a hard thing in her marriage.

Some people spoke calmly as they broke promises.

Grace glanced at Daniel. He stood with his crew, his hand on the top plank, as if he felt for movement. He looked focused, but not frantic. He had a way of carrying responsibility without letting it spill.

Grace did not trust easily. She did not want to. Trust had a cost.

Still, she had watched him through the storm. She had heard the way he spoke. She had seen the way he checked and rechecked the work. He did not brag. He did not seek credit. He did not vanish when things got hard.

She looked back at the river and whispered, low enough that only God and the willows heard. “Lord, help me see what is true. Help me stop bracing for what is not coming.”

Footsteps approached in the grass. Grace turned. Mrs. Alder came through the gate with a folded cardigan on her arm and a small basket in her hand. Her gray hair sat neatly pinned back. Her face held lines carved by years of prayer and work.

Mrs. Alder smiled at Grace. “There you are.”

Grace walked toward her. “Mrs. Alder. Thank you again for watching Mina.”

Mrs. Alder waved it off with her free hand. “I told Mina we were having a ladies' morning. She took it seriously. She taught me a song with hand motions. I felt like I was back in Sunday school with my knees on the floor.”

Grace laughed under her breath. “She does take things seriously.”

Mrs. Alder looked toward the riverbank. “I brought muffins for the crew. Cinnamon.” She lifted the basket. “I told Pastor Whitaker I would bring them over if he did not get there first.”

“He did,” Grace said. “Coffee and sandwiches.”

Mrs. Alder gave a satisfied nod. “Good. People work better when they eat.”

Grace looked at the basket. “I will take those over.”

Mrs. Alder held it out, but she did not let go right away. Her eyes held Grace's. "How are you?"

Grace kept her voice quiet. "I am steady."

Mrs. Alder's gaze sharpened with care. "Steady is good. Steady is not the same as fine."

Grace swallowed. "I know."

Mrs. Alder released the basket. "I will tell Mina you will pick her up soon. She asked if she got to see the wall."

Grace looked back at the work. "She will. When it is safe."

Mrs. Alder nodded. "Wise." She turned and walked back toward the lot, her steps slow but sure.

Grace carried the basket toward Daniel and his crew. The smell of cinnamon rose. It mixed with the smell of wet wood and river mud.

She stopped near Daniel. He looked up.

"Muffins," Grace said.

Daniel took the basket and set it beside Hannah's sack. "Thank you."

"Mrs. Alder brought them."

Daniel nodded once. "Please tell her thank you."

Grace watched his face. He spoke gratitude as it mattered. He did not throw it away.

Daniel lifted the basket lid and offered it to his crew without fuss. Hands reached in. People ate. The mood stayed quiet. The work continued.

Grace turned to leave him to it, but Daniel spoke again.

“Grace.”

She turned back.

He held a muffin on a napkin, but he had not eaten it yet. “Are you staying long?”

“I need to go back,” she said. “Choir music does not pick itself.”

Daniel looked like he wanted to ask more. He did not. He nodded. “Thank you for coming.”

Grace held his gaze. “I wanted to see for myself.”

He looked down at the wall again. “You will see more by the end of today.”

Grace felt something loosen in her chest. “I will come back.”

Daniel’s eyes lifted. Something softened again. “All right.”

Grace walked back toward the lot. Her shoes squelched in the mud. She did not mind. The ground felt honest under her.

She drove to Mrs. Alder’s house and picked up Mina. Mina ran to the car with her hair half-loose from the clip, cheeks pink with excitement.

“Mama,” Mina said, climbing into her booster seat. “Mrs. Alder said the wall is holding.”

Grace buckled her in. “It is.”

Mina leaned forward. “Is Mr. Daniel there?”

Grace paused. “Yes. He is working.”

Mina nodded like she expected nothing else. “He fixes things.”

Grace shut the door and walked around to the driver's seat. "He does."

As she drove, Mina hummed the tune from last rehearsal. It filled the car in a soft line. Grace listened. She watched the fields pass, green and wide. The storm had left the ditches full, but the water sat still there now.

At home, Grace made Mina lunch. Peanut butter on bread, apple slices, milk. Mina ate fast, then asked if they could see the river.

"After nap time," Grace said.

Mina's face fell. "But I am not tired."

Grace looked at her daughter's eyes. She saw the faint shadows under them.

"Yes, you are," Grace said.

Mina crossed her arms.

Grace knelt beside her. "Mina. The river scared you. It scared Mama too. Rest helps the body stop shaking inside."

Mina looked down. Her lower lip pushed out.

Grace touched Mina's hand. "Rest is not a punishment. It is a gift."

Mina's arms loosened. "Will you lie with me?"

Grace blinked back the sting. "Yes."

She put Mina down in her small bed. Sunlight fell through the curtains in pale stripes. The room smelled like shampoo and crayons. Grace lay on top of the quilt beside her daughter. Mina curled close, her small hand fisted in Grace's shirt for a moment, then relaxed.

Grace did not rush prayer. She spoke it.

“Lord, thank you for keeping us safe. Thank you for helping the wall hold. Please keep watching over Mr. Daniel and his crew. Please give Mina peace.”

Mina’s breathing slowed. Grace stayed until the child slipped into sleep.

Grace rose and left the room. She moved through the house in quiet steps. She washed dishes. She folded a basket of laundry. She wrote down rehearsal notes at the kitchen table, pencil tapping once in thought.

Every so often, her mind drifted to the river. The water receding. The wall holding. The way Daniel had said he heard her.

Hearing was a start.

In the late afternoon, Grace woke Mina and drove back to the church. She did not bring music. She brought a small bag with two water bottles and a pack of crackers for Mina. She also brought a cautious hope she did not name.

The church lot looked busier. Two trucks sat near the river path. Daniel’s trailer stood open. A stack of new boards lay where the old ones had been. The sandbags sat moved to one side, like a guard still on duty.

Grace took Mina’s hand. Mina swung her arm as they walked, skipping around the puddles.

“Mina,” Grace said, “stay close. The ground is soft.”

“I will,” Mina said, then stepped too near a muddy patch.

Grace tugged her back. “Close.”

Mina sighed. “Yes, Mama.”

They reached the prayer garden gate. The sound of tools had quieted. Grace heard voices, but softer now, more like checking and confirming.

Daniel stood near the finished section. He held a shovel, but he rested his hands on it instead of working. He looked toward the river, watching how it ran. One of his crew tamped the backfill near the base of the wall. Another raked the disturbed soil smooth.

Daniel turned and saw Grace and Mina. His attention was fixed on Mina first, as if he had come to understand her importance. He set the shovel aside and walked over, careful on the damp ground.

“Hello, Mina,” he said.

Mina looked up at him with open curiosity. “Hi. Did you stop the river?”

Daniel blinked once. Grace waited, unsure how he would answer.

Daniel crouched so he stood closer to Mina’s height. “No. The river did what it does. We helped the bank stay where it belongs.”

Mina considered this. “Is the river mad?”

Daniel shook his head. “No. It had a lot of rain upstream. The water had to go somewhere.”

Mina looked toward the water. “It looks nicer now.”

“It does,” Daniel said.

Grace watched his face as he spoke to her child. He used the same calm he used with lumber and bolts, no false cheer. No hard edge.

Mina pointed toward the wall. “Is it done?”

Daniel stood. “Almost. Do you want to see from here?”

Grace squeezed Mina’s hand. “From the path only.”

Daniel gestured toward a spot where the ground looked firm. “You both can stand there. It is safe.”

Grace walked Mina to the place he indicated. The wall rose clean and straight along the bank. Fresh wood lined it, treated and anchored. Gravel and packed soil sat behind it. The edge looked held.

Grace stared at it. The simple sight hit her harder than she expected. Tears pressed at the back of her eyes. She kept them there. She did not want Mina to think something was wrong.

Mina leaned forward. “It is like a strong line.”

Grace nodded. “Yes.”

Daniel stood beside them at a little distance, giving them room. “We tied it in deeper. It will not shift with the next high water.”

Grace turned to him. “Thank you.”

Daniel did not brush it off. He nodded, accepting her words like a responsibility, not praise.

One of his crew called from behind. “Daniel. We are ready for the last check.”

Daniel answered without raising his voice. “Give me one minute.”

He looked at Mina. “Do you have school tomorrow?”

Mina nodded. “Yes. I have music day.”

Daniel’s eyes moved to Grace for a moment. “Your mother teaches music.”

Mina smiled. “She is the choir boss.”

Grace felt heat rise. “Mina.”

Daniel’s mouth moved in a small smile. It did not last long, but it stayed in his eyes.

Mina asked, “Do you sing?”

Daniel paused. “No.”

Mina tilted her head. “Why?”

Daniel looked toward the church windows. “I work.”

Mina looked at Grace, then back at Daniel. “My mama works and sings.”

Grace held her breath. Mina did not mean harm. She only said what she saw.

Daniel looked down at Mina with a steady face. “Your mother does.”

Mina nodded, satisfied, then pointed to the river again. “Is it going to come back up?”

Daniel answered plainly. “It will rise again, yes. Rivers do that. But this wall will help.”

Mina looked at the wall as if she were weighing his words. “So it will be okay.”

Daniel looked at the water, then back at her. “Yes.”

Grace heard more than river talk. She heard the shape of a promise. It did not sound dramatic. It sounded measured.

Mina tugged Grace’s hand. “Mama. I want to sit in the garden.”

Grace glanced at Daniel. “We will not be in the way.”

“You will not,” Daniel said. “Go ahead.”

Grace led Mina into the prayer garden. They sat on the bench under the willow’s reach. The leaves hung damp and green. The air felt cooler near the water.

Mina pulled a cracker from the pack and ate it with slow bites. Grace drank from her water bottle. She watched Daniel return to his crew. He walked the length of the wall, checking each section, checking the level line, touching the bolts, and testing the firmness of the packed soil with his boot.

He did not rush the last part. He did not act as if the passing danger meant the job was finished. He moved with care.

Grace thought of his words from yesterday. I do not trust myself with slow.

Yet he worked slow now, the way stable work required.

Mina leaned against Grace’s side. “Mama. Are you going to marry Mr. Daniel?”

Grace choked on a breath. She turned her head toward Mina. “Mina.”

Mina looked up, wide-eyed. “Mrs. Alder said people marry when they like each other and when God says yes.”

Grace pressed her lips together. She felt her face warm again. “Mrs. Alder says many things.”

Mina waited, serious.

Grace looked out at the river. She chose her words with care. “Mama does not know. Mama is praying.”

Mina nodded like prayer made sense to her, as normal as breakfast. “Okay. I will pray too.”

Grace swallowed. “Thank you.”

Mina leaned her head back and looked at the sky through the willow leaves. “Dear Jesus. Thank you for the wall. Please help Mr. Daniel not fall in. Please help Mama be happy. Amen.”

Grace closed her eyes. The prayer landed on her heart like a small hand.

“Amen,” Grace whispered.

After a while, Daniel’s crew packed up. Tools clinked into the trailer. The engine of one truck started, then shut off again. People talked in low voices, tired but satisfied.

Daniel walked toward the prayer garden gate. He moved alone now. His crew drove out one by one, leaving him with the quiet.

He stopped at the gate and waited. Grace watched him for a moment, then rose and took Mina’s hand.

They walked to him. Mina held her cracker pack like a treasure.

Daniel looked at Grace. “We finished the main work. We will come back once more to check after a day or two. But the wall is holding.”

Grace nodded. “Thank you for saying so.”

Daniel looked at Mina. “Do you feel better now?”

Mina nodded. “Yes. The river is calm.”

Daniel’s gaze moved back to Grace. “How do you feel?”

Grace hesitated. She did not want to lie. She also did not want to spill fear in front of Mina. She chose a small truth.

“I feel lighter,” she said.

Daniel watched her as he listened for what she did not say. “Good.”

Grace stood quiet. A breeze moved through the willow leaves. Water ran below, soft against the bank. The church stood behind them, white walls still clean after the storm.

Daniel spoke again, careful. “I am glad you came today.”

Grace nodded. “I am glad too.”

Mina tugged on Grace’s hand. “Mama. I want to show Mr. Daniel my song.”

Grace looked at Daniel, apology rising. “She has been working on a new piece for the children’s choir.”

Daniel’s face stayed calm, but Grace saw a question in his eyes. A man used to noise from saws, not a child’s song.

“If you want,” Daniel said.

Mina did not wait. She stood straight, feet set, on a stage. She lifted her hands and began to sing a simple line from Sunday school, soft and clear. Her voice carried in the damp air. It drifted toward the river and the church windows. Her hand motions followed each phrase.

Grace watched Daniel. He did not smile wide. He did not perform a reaction. He listened. His eyes stayed on Mina. His shoulders eased by a fraction. His mouth relaxed.

When Mina finished, she looked up, pleased. “That is it.”

Daniel nodded. “You sang well.”

Mina beamed. “Mama taught me.”

Daniel looked at Grace. “She did.”

Grace felt emotion rise again. She blinked it back. She placed a hand on Mina’s shoulder. “Thank you for sharing.”

Mina skipped a step toward the parking lot. “I want to see inside the church.”

Grace looked at the doors. “We will not go inside now. It is closed.”

Mina pouted.

Grace held firm. “We will come Sunday.”

Mina sighed, but she accepted it. “Okay.”

Daniel walked with them toward the lot, leaving the river behind. The gravel crunched under their feet. The sun slipped lower, turning the wet grass bright.

At Grace’s car, she opened the back door and buckled Mina in. Mina talked the whole time about the wall, the river, and Mrs. Alder’s muffins. Grace listened. She glanced at Daniel standing by the rear of her car, hands at his sides, waiting without impatience.

When Mina settled, Grace shut the door and turned to Daniel.

“Thank you,” she said again, quieter now.

Daniel gave a small nod. “You already said.”

Grace stepped closer. “I mean it deeper than words.”

Daniel’s eyes shifted, then returned. He looked like he wanted to accept it and also did not know how.

He spoke low. “I do not do this work for thanks.”

“I know,” Grace said. “But I still want to say it.”

Daniel took a breath. “All right.”

Grace hesitated. “Will you go home now?”

Daniel glanced toward the riverbank. “Yes. I will finish paperwork tonight.”

Grace almost asked him to rest. The words rose, then stopped. She had told him he did not have to hold everything alone. She did not want to become another person telling him what he should do.

Instead, she asked, “Will you eat dinner?”

Daniel looked at her like he did not expect the question. “Yes.”

Grace waited.

Daniel answered, careful as if he told the truth on purpose. “I will eat.”

Grace nodded. “Good.”

Silence settled. It did not feel awkward. It felt like space.

Mina knocked on the window. Grace leaned down and cracked the door open.

“Mama,” Mina whispered loudly. “Tell him bye.”

Grace smiled. “Mina says goodbye.”

Daniel looked in at Mina. “Goodbye, Mina.”

Mina waved hard, fingers spread. “Bye. See you Sunday.”

Grace froze.

Daniel did not correct her. He did not promise either. He only nodded once, small and steady. “Yes. I will see you.”

Grace closed the door again and stood back. The word Sunday sat between them. Grace had not planned it. Yet Mina had said it as if it were simple.

Grace looked at Daniel. “We will see you.”

Daniel’s eyes held hers. “Yes.”

Grace got into the driver’s seat. She started the car. She drove out slowly, past the fellowship hall, past the church, past the prayer garden and the willow trees.

Mina talked from the back seat. Grace answered when needed, but her mind stayed on the wall.

It held.

The steady work mattered. Boards and bolts, gravel and packed earth. Hands that did not rush. People who showed up before dawn and stayed through rain.

Grace thought of her own life. She had built routines like walls. School lunches and choir sheets. Bedtime prayers and grocery lists. She had packed the days tight to keep chaos out. It had helped, but it had also worn her.

A wall could hold water back. It could not heal what water had already taken.

At home, Grace made dinner. Rice steamed on the stove. Chicken browned in a pan with garlic and soy sauce. Mina colored at the kitchen table, tongue peeking out at the corner of her mouth in concentration.

Grace moved through the tasks with a steadier heart than she had felt in days. She did not feel fixed. She felt held.

After Mina ate, Grace washed dishes. Mina played with her dolls on the living room rug. The evening light slanted through the window, turning dust motes visible in the air.

Grace’s phone buzzed once. She glanced at it, expecting a church message about music or a reminder from Hannah.

It was a text from an unknown number.

This is Daniel Chen. Pastor Whitaker gave me your number for choir scheduling. I hope that is all right.

Grace stared at the screen. Her heart beat once, hard.

Another message came a moment later.

The wall held. Water is down. Thank you for bringing Mina by today.

Grace read it twice. The words felt plain. They also felt personal.

She typed back with careful fingers.

Yes, that is fine. Thank you for the update. We are grateful.

She paused, then added.

Mina has decided you will be at church Sunday.

Grace stared at her own message, then hit send before she changed her mind.

She set the phone down and leaned against the counter. She listened to Mina’s small voice in the next room. She listened to the house settling. She thought of Daniel standing at her car, answering Mina with a quiet yes.

Grace did not know what would happen next. She did not know if hope would hold.

Outside, the evening deepened. The river moved on, lower now. It stayed inside its banks. It did not rush. It did not stop.

Grace turned off the kitchen light and walked into the living room. She sat on the floor beside Mina and picked up a doll, joining her game without thinking too hard.

Later, after Mina slept, Grace stood by the window and looked toward the line of trees where the river ran. She could not see the water from here, but she knew it was there. She knew the wall stood between the current and the church grounds.

Grace rested her hand on the window frame. She spoke a last prayer for the day.

“Lord, thank you for steady hands. Thank you for keeping the river back. Teach my heart to rest where you hold it. Help Daniel rest too.”

She turned from the window. She walked down the hall. The house held quiet.

The water had receded.

The wall held.

Chapter 13

Sunday Harmony

Sunday came with clean light and a soft hush. The air held a cool edge left over from the storm, even as the sun warmed the roofs and the pale sidewalks. Grace Park woke before Mina. She lay still and listened, like she did when her heart needed a moment to settle before the day asked anything of her.

The house stayed quiet. The refrigerator hummed. A floorboard held its small creak. Outside, a bird sounded once, then fell silent. Grace turned her head on the pillow and looked toward Mina's room. She pictured Mina asleep with hair fanned across the pillow, one arm thrown over her stuffed rabbit. Grace breathed in slowly. She breathed out slowly.

Sunday used to feel like a finish line. She used to push through the week and fall into church with tired hands and a composed face. She still carried responsibility. She still held a list in her head. Yet something in her had eased since the river dropped back into its banks.

She sat up and swung her feet to the floor. The wood felt cool. She walked down the hall and stopped at Mina's door. She kept her hand on the frame for a moment and watched her daughter sleep. Mina's mouth hung open in a small, unguarded way. Grace felt her own throat tighten, then ease.

Grace went to the kitchen. She started coffee. The smell spread, dark and familiar. She laid out Mina's dress on the chair, the blue one with short sleeves. She set her own skirt and blouse beside it, simple and pressed. She moved through these small tasks as if they formed a prayer. Order. Care. Attention.

Her phone sat on the counter. The screen stayed dark. Grace did not reach for it. She did not want to stare at last night's messages and pull meaning out of every word. Daniel Chen had written in plain sentences. He had not added anything extra. Grace had not added anything extra either. Yet her pulse had jumped when his name appeared on her screen, as if her body recognized a new kind of risk.

The coffee maker clicked. Grace poured a cup and took it to the table. She sat down with both hands around the mug. Heat pressed into her palms. She let it.

She thought of the choir. She thought of the hymn list. She thought of the children who sat in the front rows with legs swinging and shoes scuffing. She thought of older saints who sang with thin voices and steady eyes. She thought of Pastor Whitaker and his calm way of looking at people, like he saw both what they carried and what God wanted to lift.

Grace also thought of Daniel in his work clothes, kneeling near the bank with mud on his boots. He had moved with a quiet precision. He had listened more than he spoke. He had looked at the wall like it mattered.

A car passed outside. Tires made a soft sound on the street. Maple Ridge did not rush on Sundays. It moved slower. Even those who did not attend church seemed to respect the morning. Curtains stayed open. Lawns waited. The town held its breath in worship, whether people knew it or not.

From the hallway came a small shuffle. Mina appeared in the doorway, hair wild, eyes half open.

"Mom," Mina said, voice thick with sleep.

Grace stood and opened her arms. Mina walked into them and pressed her face into Grace's stomach. Grace kissed the top of her

head and held on, longer than she needed to. She felt Mina's warmth. She felt the small weight of her.

"Good morning," Grace said.

Mina yawned. "Is it church day?"

"It is church day."

Mina lifted her head. Her eyes sharpened a little. "Is Daniel going to be there?"

Grace kept her face calm. She smoothed Mina's hair with her hand. "Daniel might be there."

Mina pulled back and looked up with a serious set to her mouth. "He said yes. He said he would come."

Grace picked up Mina and set her on her hip. Mina felt heavier each month. Grace carried her anyway. "He said he would come," Grace repeated.

Mina nodded as if a promise had been signed in ink. "He fixes the wall. He should come sing."

"He does not sing in the choir," Grace said.

Mina frowned. "He should. He is steady."

Grace felt a small smile rise. "He is steady," she agreed.

Mina leaned her head on Grace's shoulder. "I want pancakes."

Grace kissed Mina's cheek. "All right. Pancakes."

They ate at the table with sunlight sliding across the floor. Mina drummed her fingers and hummed a tune from last Wednesday's rehearsal. Her voice carried small leaps and wrong notes, yet she

held the rhythm. Grace watched her and felt the familiar ache of love, sharp and clean. It always startled her. It never dulled.

After breakfast, Grace washed dishes while Mina played on the rug. Grace moved through the kitchen with her sleeves rolled up, hands in warm water. The soap smelled like lemons. She rinsed and stacked plates. Her mind ran through the order of worship. Prelude. Call to worship. Hymn. Offering song. Special music. Closing.

She had chosen “Be Thou My Vision” for the opening hymn. She had chosen “It Is Well” for the offertory, quiet and steady. She had chosen a simple arrangement of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” for the choir. No show. No strain. Just truth.

Grace dried her hands and went to dress. Mina followed her into the bedroom and climbed onto the bed, bouncing once until Grace gave her a look. Mina froze, then giggled.

Grace dressed Mina first. Buttons. Shoes. A ribbon clipped into Mina’s hair. Mina stood still with effort, then darted to the mirror and turned her head side to side.

“I look like a church girl,” Mina said.

“You are a church girl,” Grace answered.

Mina held up her chin. “I am also a wall inspector.”

Grace laughed once, quietly. “You take your work seriously.”

Mina nodded. “I do.”

Grace dressed herself next. She stood in front of the mirror and pinned her hair back. Her face looked the same as always. Brown eyes. A small line between her brows from years of keeping worry in its place. Yet her eyes held less fatigue today. She did not look younger. She looked steadier.

She thought of her prayer last night. Teach my heart to rest where you hold it. The words still felt like a request, not a result. Grace did not pretend she had arrived. She asked again, without speaking it out loud.

They drove to church with the windows cracked. Air smelled like damp earth and cut grass. The world looked rinsed. Leaves shone. Ditches held water that caught the sky.

As they turned onto the road by the church grounds, Grace saw the river through the trees. It moved with a quiet purpose. The bank looked firm again. The retaining wall line stood straight, the fresh work visible if someone knew where to look. New timbers sat clean against old soil, gravel packed in neat layers. The work did not announce itself. It simply held.

Grace parked near the fellowship hall. She turned off the engine and sat for a moment with both hands on the steering wheel. Mina unbuckled in the back, then stilled.

“Mom,” Mina said.

Grace turned her head. “What is it?”

Mina pointed through the window. “There.”

Grace followed her finger. Daniel’s truck sat near the gravel by the prayer garden gate. The bed held a few tools. No trailer. No crew.

Daniel stood near the gate with his hands in his pockets. He wore a pale gray button-down shirt, sleeves rolled to his forearms. He looked out toward the river, then down at the ground, as if he measured his own steps before he took them.

Grace felt her heart beat harder. She did not look away. She had asked the Lord to teach her to rest, not to avoid.

Mina opened her door before Grace stopped her. “Mom. I am going to say hi.”

Grace unbuckled and stepped out fast. “Mina, wait.”

Mina paused with one foot on the gravel, then gave Grace a look full of patience. “I waited all week.”

Grace closed her own door and walked around the car. She took Mina’s hand. Mina’s fingers ran warm and sticky in her own. Grace breathed once and guided her toward Daniel.

Daniel turned when he heard their steps. His face held calm, yet his eyes sharpened in recognition. He looked from Grace to Mina, then back.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” Grace replied. Her voice came steady. She felt grateful for it.

Mina swung their joined hands once and then let go. She walked up to Daniel with the direct confidence only a child possessed.

“You came,” Mina said.

Daniel nodded. “I came.”

Mina studied him. “You look different.”

Grace held her breath. She knew Mina did not mean harm. Mina saw details. Mina spoke them.

Daniel glanced down at his shirt as if checking it. “I do not have mud on my boots today.”

Mina crouched and looked at his shoes anyway. Daniel waited without moving. Mina stood back up.

“No mud,” Mina confirmed.

Daniel’s mouth shifted, almost a smile. “Is that acceptable?”

Mina nodded with grave approval. “Yes. Today you sing.”

Daniel’s eyes flicked to Grace. “I will attend,” he said. “I will not sing with the choir.”

Mina frowned. “You should sing.”

Grace stepped in. “Mina. Daniel is going to worship with us. That is enough.”

Mina looked between them. She did not argue, yet she did not surrender either. “Okay,” she said, slow. “But I will listen if he sings.”

Daniel nodded once. “All right.”

Grace felt something soften in her chest. Daniel did not treat Mina like a nuisance. He did not treat her like a mascot either. He treated her like a person. Mina seemed to sense it. She stayed close to him a few seconds longer, then came back to Grace and took her hand again.

They walked toward the church entrance together, the three of them moving in a small line. Grace heard birds in the trees. She heard the distant sound of a car door closing, then a voice calling hello across the lot.

The white church stood clean against the sky. Sunlight caught the steeple. The cross at the top did not shine like metal. It stood plain. It held the same steady presence it always had. Grace felt the familiar pull in her heart as she looked at it. Shelter. Truth. A place where her life stayed anchored when everything else shifted.

They reached the steps. Daniel paused at the bottom, eyes lifting to the door. Grace noticed the pause. It lasted only a beat, yet it held weight. He did not look afraid. He looked careful, like a man entering a place where his life might change.

Grace did not ask about it. She waited. Mina tugged on her hand.

“Come,” Mina whispered to Daniel, as if offering him courage.

Daniel stepped up. He held the door for them. His hand stayed on the edge until Grace and Mina passed. Grace brushed close enough to him to catch a faint scent of soap and cedar. A clean, plain smell. It made her think of fresh-cut lumber.

Inside, the church held cool shade. Sun poured through the windows in soft rectangles. The sanctuary smelled like old wood, hymnals, and a hint of furniture polish. Familiar. Safe.

Voices murmured. Shoes scuffed. Someone laughed quietly near the back. Grace saw Mrs. Alder near the front, turning in her seat to look for friends. Mrs. Alder lifted her chin when she saw Grace, then smiled.

“There is my girl,” Mrs. Alder called, loud enough for others to hear.

Grace felt heat in her cheeks. “Good morning,” she said, walking closer.

Mrs. Alder leaned over the pew and kissed Mina’s cheek. “Sweet Mina,” she said. “Look at you all dressed up.”

Mina stood tall. “I am a wall inspector.”

Mrs. Alder blinked once, then her eyes lit with delight. “Well. Praise the Lord for wall inspectors.”

Mina nodded as if she had received proper recognition, then moved along the pew to her spot.

Mrs. Alder looked past Grace to Daniel. Her gaze held frank curiosity. Maple Ridge did not hide interest well, even when it meant no harm.

Daniel nodded to her. “Good morning, ma’am.”

Mrs. Alder narrowed her eyes in thought, then softened. “You are the contractor,” she said. It did not sound like a question.

“Yes,” Daniel replied. “Daniel Chen.”

Mrs. Alder gave him a slow, approving nod. “Thank you for your work,” she said. “We have lost enough ground over the years. We do not need the river taking more.”

Daniel’s face stayed composed, yet his eyes warmed. “You are welcome,” he said. “The wall should hold.”

Mrs. Alder reached out and patted his arm once, a quick touch full of grandmother authority. “I will pray for your hands,” she said. “And for your heart.”

Daniel did not flinch. “Thank you,” he said, quiet.

Grace watched the exchange and felt something in her chest pull tight, then ease. Mrs. Alder had a way of seeing deeper than most. Grace hoped Daniel did not feel pinned under her gaze. He seemed to accept it calmly, like he had learned to stand under other people’s concern without letting it bruise him.

Grace led Mina into their pew. She slid in beside her. There was a space on Grace’s other side. Daniel sat there after a small pause. He sat with his hands folded, back straight, eyes forward. He looked like a man who had sat in church before, yet not like a man who came every week.

Grace kept her gaze on the front. She did not want to watch him too closely. Yet she felt his presence beside her, like the warmth of a nearby lamp.

Behind them, someone whispered. “Is that him?”

Another voice answered, softer. “It is Daniel. The one doing the wall.”

A third voice, Mrs. Kline, if Grace guessed right. “He looks serious.”

Mrs. Alder turned halfway around and gave the back pews a look sharp enough to cut paper. The whispers stopped.

Grace’s mouth pressed into a line. She did not like being observed. She did not like Mina being a topic. She did not like her own private thoughts being readable on her face. Yet Maple Ridge did not mean harm. The town carried people together, for better and worse. It had held Grace up when her marriage failed. It had fed her when money ran thin. It had watched Mina grow and had spoken her name with affection.

The pianist began the prelude. Notes drifted into the air, gentle and steady. Grace’s shoulders dropped a fraction. Music helped her body remember peace.

Mina leaned toward Daniel and whispered loudly. “That is Miss Hannah playing.”

Grace’s gaze flicked toward the piano. Hannah Whitaker sat with her hands moving across the keys. Her hair fell loose today, a soft wave around her shoulders. She looked serene in a way Grace admired and sometimes envied.

Daniel whispered back to Mina. “She plays well.”

“Yes,” Mina whispered, satisfied.

Grace glanced at Daniel. His eyes stayed on the front. He listened with full attention, as the music mattered.

Pastor Whitaker stepped to the pulpit when the prelude ended. He opened his Bible and looked out over the sanctuary. His gaze moved across familiar faces, resting on each person as if he greeted them without words.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” the congregation answered.

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes rested on Grace’s pew for a beat. Grace felt it. She knew he saw Daniel beside her. He did not smile broadly. He did not call attention. He offered a small nod, like a blessing given quietly.

“We are grateful to gather,” Pastor Whitaker said. “We are grateful for the Lord who holds us steady. Some weeks remind us how quickly things shift. Some weeks remind us how much we need what does not shift.”

Grace listened, heart open. She thought of the river. She thought of rain upstream. She thought of the wall. She thought of her own life, how it had once felt like water rising faster than she could manage.

Pastor Whitaker prayed. His words came. He thanked God for safety. He asked for guidance. He prayed for those who felt weary. He prayed for those who felt alone. Grace felt her eyes sting when he said, “Lord, let Your peace rule in our hearts.”

She knew the verse. Colossians 3:15. She had clung to it many nights with Mina asleep beside her and the weight of tomorrow pressing down.

After the prayer, Grace stood with the congregation. Hannah began the opening hymn. “Be Thou My Vision.” The first chord grounded the room.

Grace lifted her voice. It came clear. She knew every word. She had sung it since she was a girl. Today the words landed differently. Be Thou my wisdom. Be Thou my true word. Grace sang and felt the lines settle into her bones.

Beside her, Daniel stood. His mouth stayed closed at first. He looked at the hymnal with focus. Then, on the second verse, his lips moved. He sang low. His voice did not rise above anyone else. It joined the room. It held steady, no tremble, no flourish.

Grace kept singing. She did not look at him. She did not want him to know she noticed. Yet she did. She heard him. She felt a small shock of tenderness move through her.

Mina leaned toward Grace with bright eyes. “He is singing,” she whispered.

Grace nodded once, still singing.

Mina leaned toward Daniel. “I told you,” she whispered, pleased.

Daniel did not stop singing. He did not turn. He continued, as if he accepted Mina’s quiet triumph.

When the hymn ended, the congregation sat. Pastor Whitaker spoke a few words about the week. He thanked those who had worked on the church grounds after the storm. He mentioned the retaining wall briefly and in practical terms.

“We give thanks for the hands God sent,” Pastor Whitaker said. His gaze stayed broad. He did not point Daniel out. “We also give thanks for the reminder. Foundations matter. What holds under pressure matters.”

Grace felt Daniel shift slightly beside her. His hand moved on his knee, then stilled. Grace wondered if he felt seen even without being singled out.

The service moved on. Scripture reading. A short message. Pastor Whitaker spoke from Matthew 7, the wise man who built his house on the rock. Grace had heard it many times. Today it felt close to home. Rock. Water. Storm. Holding.

“The rain fell,” Pastor Whitaker read. “The floods came. The winds blew and beat on that house. It did not fall.”

Grace’s throat tightened. She thought of her own house. She thought of the ways it had nearly fallen, how God had kept pieces standing when she did not understand how.

Pastor Whitaker spoke without raising his voice. “Faith does not remove storms,” he said. “Faith gives a place to stand inside them. Christ does not promise an easy life. He promises His presence. He promises His peace.”

Grace’s eyes lowered to her hands folded in her lap. She listened. She let the words do their quiet work.

When it came time for the offertory, Grace stood and slipped out with the choir. Mina stayed in the pew with Daniel. Grace paused and looked at Mina.

“You stay seated,” Grace whispered. “Listen.”

Mina nodded. She looked up at Daniel as if he served as her guard. Daniel met Grace’s eyes.

“I will keep an eye on her,” he said, in a low voice.

Grace felt her chest tighten again, then release. “Thank you,” she said.

She moved toward the choir room. The hallway smelled like old carpet and coffee. The choir room windows stood open a few inches, letting summer air drift in. Voices murmured. Pages turned. A few people warmed up in soft sounds.

Grace stepped to the front and looked at her singers. Faces she knew well. Mrs. Greer with her silver hair pinned tight. Mr. Larkin with his deep voice and his shy smile. Two teenage girls from the youth group, hair still damp from morning showers. Hannah stood among them today, not at the piano. Another woman would play. Hannah wanted to sing, and Grace understood why.

Grace lifted her hands. “Good morning,” she said.

“Good morning,” they answered.

Grace looked around the room. “Thank you for being here,” she said. “Thank you for your patience this week. I know the storm shifted schedules. We will sing with calm. No pushing. Let the words lead.”

Mrs. Greer nodded. “Yes, Grace.”

They lined up and walked back into the sanctuary in quiet order. Grace took her place at the front. She faced the choir, back to the congregation. She could see the first rows. She could see Mina’s small head near the center. Mina sat straight, hands folded. Daniel sat beside her, shoulders squared.

Grace raised her hand to the pianist. The opening notes of “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” came gently.

Grace watched the choir’s faces as they sang. She watched mouths shape the words. She watched breath and timing, the small discipline of voices joining. The sound filled the sanctuary, steady and warm.

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father.

Grace felt the line in her own chest. Faithfulness. It did not glitter. It held.

She glanced, quick, toward Mina. Mina watched her with full attention. Mina's eyes looked proud. Grace's eyes stung, yet she kept directing.

Then Grace saw Daniel. He watched the choir, then shifted his gaze to Grace. He did not stare. He did not look away fast either. His eyes held respect. Something softer sat behind it. Like he understood the weight Grace carried in her role, and he did not dismiss it.

Grace focused on the choir again. She kept her hands steady. She kept her face composed. Yet her heart beat hard.

When the song ended, the sanctuary held a brief hush before people breathed out. Then the service moved on. Announcements. Closing hymn. Benediction.

As people stood to leave, Grace returned to her pew. Mina leaned toward her.

"Mom," Mina said. "Daniel sang."

Grace gave Mina a look. "Mina."

Mina smiled wide. "He did."

Grace glanced at Daniel. His face stayed calm. His eyes held a hint of amusement. He looked at Mina as if she had spoken a simple fact.

Pastor Whitaker stood at the front and greeted people as they filed out. Grace moved with Mina and Daniel toward him. The aisle felt crowded, yet polite. People stepped aside and smiled; a few offered comments about the wall, about the storm, about the music.

"Grace, the choir sounded so good," Mrs. Greer said as she passed.

“Thank you,” Grace replied.

“Mina, you look beautiful,” Hannah said, bending down to Mina’s level.

Mina beamed. “Thank you, Miss Hannah. Daniel came.”

Hannah’s eyes lifted to Daniel with a quick smile. “I saw,” she said. “Good morning, Daniel.”

“Good morning,” Daniel replied. He hesitated, then added, “You play well.”

Hannah laughed once, softly. “Thank you. Grace keeps me honest.”

Grace shot Hannah a look, but Hannah only smiled, warm and knowing.

They reached Pastor Whitaker. He greeted Grace first. “Good morning, Grace,” he said. “Thank you for leading.”

“Good morning,” Grace answered. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker looked at Mina. “Good morning, Miss Mina.”

Mina nodded solemnly. “Good morning, Pastor.”

Pastor Whitaker looked at Daniel. “Daniel,” he said, his tone calm. “I am glad you came.”

Daniel nodded. “Thank you for having me.”

Pastor Whitaker held his gaze a moment longer, as if he weighed words and chose the right ones. “Work matters,” he said. “So does worship. A man does well to remember both.”

Daniel’s jaw tightened, then eased. “Yes,” he said. “I am learning.”

Pastor Whitaker gave a small nod. He did not press further. He rested a hand on Daniel's shoulder for a brief moment, then withdrew. "Grace," he said, "people will gather in the fellowship hall for coffee. If you have time."

Grace nodded. "I will come."

They moved on into the hallway. Voices rose. Laughter scattered. The smell of coffee grew stronger.

In the fellowship hall, tables stood set with foam cups and plates of cookies. The room felt bright with sunlight through the wide windows. The storm had left the grass outside greener. People stood in small circles. Some sat. Children ran in short bursts until a parent caught them by the arm.

Grace poured Mina a small cup of water, then got herself a coffee. She added a splash of cream and watched it swirl. She turned and found Daniel standing near the edge of the room, cup in hand, posture reserved.

He looked like a man who did not know where to put himself in a crowd. He did not look angry about it. He looked aware.

Grace walked toward him with Mina. She stopped a few feet away. "How are you doing?" she asked.

Daniel looked at her. "I am fine," he said. He glanced around the room. "There are many people."

Grace held back a smile. "Yes. Maple Ridge is small until it gathers."

Daniel nodded, as if filing the thought away.

Mina tugged on Grace's skirt. "I am going to get a cookie," she announced.

Grace looked down. “Ask Mrs. Alder first.”

Mina nodded and marched off with purpose.

Grace watched her go, then looked back at Daniel. “Thank you for sitting with her,” she said.

Daniel’s eyes followed Mina too. “She is observant,” he said.

Grace exhaled. “She is. It keeps life honest.”

Daniel’s mouth shifted again, close to a smile. “She asked me questions during the sermon.”

Grace winced. “I am sorry.”

“It is all right,” he said. “She wanted to know why the wise man built on rock and not on dirt. She wanted to know if rock meant the retaining wall.”

Grace felt a laugh rise, then she softened it into a quiet smile. “What did you say?”

Daniel looked down at his coffee, then back up. “I told her rock means something that does not move,” he said. “I told her a wall helps, but the wall is not God.”

Grace’s throat tightened. She nodded. “That is a good answer.”

Daniel’s eyes held hers. “It felt like the right one,” he said.

They stood in a small pocket of quiet while the room flowed around them. Grace felt aware of her own hands on her cup. She felt the warmth of the coffee. She felt the small tremor of nerves in her stomach. She did not want to feel nervous. She wanted to feel steady. Yet she did not shame herself for it. Trust took time. Her heart did not switch into peace on command.

Hannah walked up with a cookie on a napkin. “Grace,” she said, “Pastor Whitaker asked if you would stay after for a moment. There is a note from the regional music coordinator about the fall hymn night.”

Grace sighed. “Yes. I will.”

Hannah’s gaze shifted to Daniel. “Daniel,” she said, “I heard the wall work looks solid. Eli Brooks said you do clean work.”

Grace blinked. Eli. She had not seen him in weeks, but his name still moved through town like a familiar tool in a hand.

Daniel nodded once. “Eli stopped by yesterday,” he said. “He helped me see a drainage angle I missed.”

Hannah smiled. “He does that. He sees what others miss.”

Daniel looked thoughtful. “Yes,” he said.

Hannah turned back to Grace. “Mina is showing Mrs. Alder her wall inspection badge,” she said, amusement in her eyes.

Grace groaned under her breath. “Of course she is.”

Hannah touched Grace’s arm. “She is happy,” Hannah said, soft.

Grace’s eyes stung. She nodded. “Yes.”

Hannah stepped away to greet someone else.

Grace looked at Daniel. “I need to meet with Pastor Whitaker,” she said. “It will not take long. Will you be all right?”

Daniel nodded. “Yes,” he said. He glanced toward Mina. “I will stay nearby.”

Grace hesitated. The old instinct rose. Handle it alone. Do not lean. Do not ask. Yet Daniel had already offered help without pushing. Grace chose a small step.

“Thank you,” she said again, and meant it.

She found Pastor Whitaker near his office door. He held a folder and spoke with the church elder, Mr. Danner. When he saw Grace, he excused himself and stepped aside with her.

“The choir sounded strong,” Pastor Whitaker said.

“Thank you,” Grace replied. “They worked hard.”

Pastor Whitaker handed her the folder. “The fall hymn night is set for October,” he said. “They want Maple Ridge to host.”

Grace flipped through the pages, mind already sorting dates, music, and volunteers. She felt her chest tighten, then she breathed out. She had handled harder things than an event. “All right,” she said. “I will make a plan.”

Pastor Whitaker watched her. “Grace,” he said, gentle. “Do not carry it alone.”

Grace’s fingers tightened on the folder. “I know,” she said.

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes held kindness and truth. “You know in your head,” he said. “Practice it in your life.”

Grace looked down. She nodded. “Yes.”

Pastor Whitaker’s voice stayed low. “Daniel came today,” he said. It was not a question.

Grace lifted her gaze. “Yes.”

Pastor Whitaker did not smile teasingly. He did not pry. “I am glad,” he said. “He holds himself like a man who has lived by duty for a long time.”

Grace swallowed. “He seems disciplined.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded. “Discipline serves well,” he said. “It also hides fear.”

Grace’s breath caught. She said nothing.

Pastor Whitaker continued, “Grace, you know what it means to fear instability. He knows what it means too, in his own way.”

Grace’s throat felt tight. “Pastor,” she said, “I do not want to assume anything about him.”

Pastor Whitaker’s gaze stayed steady. “Good,” he said. “You do not need to assume. You need to listen. And you need to keep your heart open to what God might do, even if it looks small.”

Grace nodded. “Yes.”

Pastor Whitaker touched the folder. “Take your time on the plan,” he said. “Ask Hannah to help. Ask Mrs. Alder to organize cookies. She will do it with joy.”

Grace gave a small smile. “Mrs. Alder will organize the whole county if someone asks.”

Pastor Whitaker’s eyes warmed. “Yes,” he said. “And she will call it service.”

Grace turned to go, then paused. “Pastor,” she said, voice quiet. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded once. “You are welcome,” he said. “Go find Mina. And breathe.”

Grace walked back toward the fellowship hall. She found Mina near the cookie table with crumbs at the corner of her mouth. Mrs. Alder stood beside her, holding court with two other women. Mina looked pleased with herself.

Daniel stood a few steps away, hands in pockets again, eyes on Mina as if he made sure she stayed within reach. A few men spoke with him now. Mr. Danner. Fire Chief Haines. Someone from the hardware store, Mr. Givens. Their posture held polite interest. Daniel answered in short sentences. He nodded. He did not overshare. Yet he did not shut them out.

Grace watched the scene and felt the town doing what it did. Maple Ridge examined new pieces. Maple Ridge decided where something fit. It did not do it with malice. It did it with instinct.

Grace walked over and took Mina's hand. "Ready to go?" she asked.

Mina looked up at Grace. "Daniel is coming too," she said, as if she announced the weather.

Grace's heart jumped. She looked at Daniel.

Daniel's expression did not change much. Yet his eyes held a question. He did not speak over Mina. He let Grace lead.

Grace knelt to Mina's level. "Mina," she said, careful, "Daniel has his own plans."

Mina frowned. "He will come eat lunch."

Grace glanced at Mrs. Alder, who looked far too pleased. "Mrs. Alder," Grace said.

Mrs. Alder lifted her hands. "Do not look at me," she said. "The child invited him. I did not put those words in her mouth."

Mina looked between them. "I invited him," she said, proud.

Grace stood. She looked at Daniel again. Heat moved through her chest, a mix of embarrassment and something softer. She did not want to offer an invitation out of panic. She also did not want to shut a door out of fear.

Daniel cleared his throat. “Grace,” he said, low, “it is all right. I understand.”

Grace heard the grace in his words. He did not push himself into her home. He did not make Mina feel foolish either.

Grace took a slow breath. “Daniel,” she said, “it is not a problem to invite you. It is simply sudden.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes.”

Grace looked down at Mina, then back at Daniel. She felt the eyes of nearby people on her. She felt her own old ache, the memory of a man who promised much and delivered little. She remembered how she used to cover for him, how she used to smooth over awkward moments, how she used to say yes when she meant no.

Daniel did not look like that man. Yet Grace did not hand out trust like free cookies.

She chose a middle path, one that felt honest. “If you do not have other plans,” she said, “you are welcome to come by for lunch. Simple food. Nothing fancy. Mina and I have leftovers and pantry staples. If you need to leave after, we will understand.”

Daniel’s gaze held hers. Respect stayed there. Relief, faint. “Thank you,” he said. “I do not have other plans.”

Mina squeezed Grace’s hand hard, then looked at Daniel. “See,” Mina said.

Daniel’s mouth shifted. “Yes,” he said. “I see.”

Grace nodded toward the door. “All right,” she said. “We will go.”

As they walked out, the town’s attention followed in soft waves. Grace heard a few voices, low and curious. She did not catch words. She did not need to. She knew the shape of them. She held Mina’s hand more tightly and kept her posture steady.

Outside, sunlight warmed the steps. The air smelled like grass and river water. Daniel walked beside them toward the parking lot. He kept a respectful distance, yet he stayed near enough that Grace felt his presence like a steady line.

They reached the cars. Grace opened Mina’s door and buckled her in. Mina chattered about the choir song, the cookie, and how Daniel sang the hymn.

Grace closed the door, then turned to Daniel. “You can follow us,” she said. “It is not far.”

Daniel nodded. “All right.”

He paused, then looked toward the church grounds. “The wall looks stable,” he said, as if he needed to say it out loud in this setting.

Grace followed his gaze. Through the trees she could see a thin line of river. “Yes,” she said. “Thank you.”

Daniel looked back at her. “You led the choir with calm,” he said. “It felt steady.”

Grace felt warmth spread into her face. Praise still unsettled her. Praise from a man like Daniel unsettled her more. “Thank you,” she said. “Music helps me hold things together.”

Daniel’s eyes lowered, then rose again. “It helps others too,” he said.

Grace nodded. She did not trust her voice for more.

They parted to their cars. Grace drove home with Mina singing pieces of the hymn in the back seat. The road ran between trees and small houses with porches. A few people waved. Grace waved back.

As she pulled into her driveway, she saw Daniel's truck in her rearview mirror. He parked along the curb, careful, straight. He sat for a moment before getting out. Grace watched him through the rearview mirror. He looked ahead, hands on the wheel, as if he were gathering himself.

Grace understood that posture more than she wanted to admit.

Daniel stepped out. He walked up the path when Grace opened her door. Mina bounced out of the back seat and ran ahead.

"Home," Mina announced to Daniel, as if she were introducing a kingdom.

Daniel nodded. "It is a good house," he said.

Grace unlocked the front door and held it open. The house smelled faintly of coffee and clean laundry. Sunlight lay across the living room rug. Mina kicked off her shoes and ran to her dolls.

Grace turned toward Daniel. "Please come in," she said.

Daniel stepped inside. He paused again, eyes moving across the small space. He did not judge it. He took it in. The worn armchair. The framed picture of Mina at the church picnic. The stack of choir folders on the side table.

"It is peaceful," Daniel said.

Grace swallowed. "It is," she replied. She did not add how hard she had worked to make it so.

She led him to the kitchen. "I will make something simple," she said. "Sandwiches and fruit. Maybe soup."

Daniel shook his head. “Do not do extra work,” he said. “Simple is good.”

Grace nodded. She opened the refrigerator and pulled out bread, sliced turkey, and lettuce. She set everything on the counter. Mina appeared at the kitchen doorway.

“Daniel,” Mina said, “do you like apples?”

Daniel looked at her. “Yes,” he said. “I like apples.”

Mina nodded, then ran off again.

Grace began assembling food. She moved with practiced ease. Her hands worked while her mind stayed aware of Daniel in her kitchen, a man who had seemed like a job a week ago and now stood in her home.

Daniel did not hover. He leaned against the doorway and watched with calm patience. “Do you want help?” he asked.

Grace hesitated. She almost said no out of habit. Then she remembered Pastor Whitaker’s words. Practice it in your life.

“Yes,” Grace said. “If you wash the apples, Mina will be grateful.”

Daniel nodded. He stepped to the sink and washed the apples with steady hands. Grace noticed his care. He rinsed each one and set them in a bowl, as if he were placing tools back in a case.

When they sat down to eat, Mina talked enough for all of them. Grace listened and responded, grateful for Mina’s bright energy. Daniel answered Mina’s questions in short, honest ways. He did not play a role. He did not pretend. He showed up.

The afternoon light shifted toward gold. The day held no drama. No sharp turn. Yet Grace felt something important happening in the quiet.

Daniel finished his sandwich and set his plate in the sink. “Thank you for lunch,” he said.

Grace stood beside him at the counter. “Thank you for coming,” she said.

Daniel looked toward the window, where trees moved faintly in the breeze. “I did not attend church for a long time,” he said.

Grace kept her voice gentle. “Why?”

Daniel breathed in. He did not answer fast. “I kept telling myself I would go when work slowed,” he said. “Work did not slow.”

Grace nodded. “Life does that.”

Daniel looked at her again. “It felt different today,” he said. “It felt like I belonged in the room. Even when I did not know where to sit.”

Grace felt her throat tighten. “You did belong,” she said. She did not say it like comfort. She said it like truth.

Daniel held her gaze. “Thank you,” he said.

Mina ran in from the living room with her rabbit tucked under her arm. “Are we going to the river?” she asked.

Grace blinked. “Not today,” she said. “It is Sunday afternoon. We rest.”

Mina frowned. “But I want to see the wall.”

Daniel glanced at Grace. “We can look from the path,” he said. “We do not need to go down.”

Grace considered. The river held calm today. The sun shone. The wall stood. A walk might help Mina settle. It might help Grace too.

“All right,” Grace said. “A short walk.”

They walked down the street and along the church path, slow and unhurried. The prayer garden stood quiet, flowers lifting their heads after the rain. The river moved beyond the trees, steady and low.

Mina walked between Grace and Daniel and held each of their hands, as if she kept them connected on purpose. Grace did not pull away. Daniel did not either.

As they reached the spot where the bank had once sagged, Grace saw the work up close again. The timbers sat tight. Gravel packed clean. The edge held firm.

Mina leaned forward and looked intently. “It is holding,” she said.

Daniel nodded. “It is holding,” he answered.

Grace looked at the river. Water slid past with no hurry. It did not rush. It did not stop. It moved like time and grace, steady and sure.

Grace looked at Daniel’s profile in the soft afternoon light. She saw calm control there. She also saw effort. She saw a man learning how to step into a life he did not manage with tools and plans.

Grace did not know what would come next. She did not name it. She did not reach ahead. She stood where she was, with her daughter’s hand in her own and Daniel’s steady presence beside them.

In the quiet, Maple Ridge held its gentle gaze. The town noticed without pressing. A few people walked past on the path and nodded hello. A couple from church paused and admired the repaired edge. Fire Chief Haines called out a thanks to Daniel from a distance. No one made a scene. No one demanded a story.

Grace felt the small mercy of it. Gentle. Steady.

When they turned back toward home, Grace kept walking at Mina's pace. Daniel matched them without effort. The afternoon sun lowered. Shadows lengthened across the grass.

Grace felt her heart settle into a calm she did not force. She let it rest there, quiet under God's hand, as the river kept moving and the song from Sunday still lingered in her mind. Great is Thy faithfulness.

And for the first time in a long time, Grace believed her life might sound like harmony again.

Chapter 14

Steady as the River

Grace Park stood at her kitchen sink and watched the late afternoon light fade across her yard. The maple leaves held still. The air felt rinsed clean from the storm days before. Mina sat at the table with a sheet of paper and a box of crayons. She drew the river again. She always drew the river.

Grace dried her hands on a towel. She set a kettle on the stove. The small routine steadied her more than she liked to admit. Her life had learned to run on routines. School lunches. Choir folders. Bills. Bedtime prayers.

She glanced at the clock. Daniel Chen had said he would stop by the church office tomorrow to drop off the final paperwork for the wall. He had said it in the same tone he used for everything. Plain. Careful. As if words worked best when they did not try too hard.

Grace had heard plenty of words in her life, promises made in bright tones. Apologies said too late, vows spoken with shaky hands.

Daniel did not speak like that. He spoke like someone who meant what he said before he said it.

Mina hummed under her breath and colored in the water with blue, then added green on top. She looked up. “Mom. Is Mr. Chen coming to choir again?”

Grace paused. The kettle began to warm with a low sound. “He might,” she said. “He has been helping.”

Mina nodded as if she had expected the answer. “I like when he sits in the back.”

Grace tried to keep her voice even. “Why?”

Mina shrugged and pressed the crayon hard. “He looks like he listens.”

Grace felt heat in her throat. She turned back to the stove for a moment. She did not want Mina to see her face. Children saw too much. Mina had learned to read a room the way some children learned to read books.

Grace poured water into two mugs when the kettle whistled. She set one in front of Mina and blew on her own. She watched steam curl up and vanish.

Mina wrapped both hands around her mug. “Pastor Whitaker said God hears when people sing.”

Grace nodded. “He does.”

Mina looked down at her drawing again. “Does God hear when people do not sing?”

Grace felt the question land in her chest. Mina did not ask things to be cute. She asked because she needed to know. “Yes,” Grace said. “God hears all of it.”

Mina pressed her lips together. “Even when people get mad.”

“Yes.”

Mina drew a brown line on the bank of her river. “Even when dads do not come.”

Grace sat down. The chair scraped the floor. She kept her hands flat on the table so Mina saw them steady. “Yes,” she said again. “Even then.”

Mina did not cry. She did not ask more. She finished the brown line and drew little squares on it. A wall. Timbers. Gravel.

Grace watched her daughter's small hand move and thought of Daniel's hands. Strong hands. Careful hands. Hands that checked bolts twice. Hands that did not shake.

Grace reached over and tucked Mina's hair behind her ear. Mina leaned into her touch for half a second, then went back to coloring.

The next morning came warm and bright. Grace woke before Mina, as she often did. She sat on the edge of her bed and listened to the house. Quiet. Safe. The sort of quiet she had once thought would never belong to her again.

She knelt beside her bed. She did not rush her words. She had learned God did not need speed. She prayed for her daughter. For patience. For steady love. For wisdom she did not have on her own.

Then she prayed for Daniel, and she stopped when she realized she had done it without thinking.

She did not ask God to give her a husband. She did not ask for a love story. She asked for Daniel to have peace. She asked for his work to go well. She asked for his heart to rest.

Grace sat back on her heels. She felt a soft ache behind her ribs. It did not scare her. It did not feel like the old chaos. It felt like a door opening in a quiet room.

Later, after Mina ate cereal and put on her sandals, Grace drove them to town. Maple Ridge moved slowly on weekday mornings. The bakery smelled like sugar and warm bread as she passed. A couple of older women sat on the bench outside the bookstore and talked low.

Grace parked near the church office. Mina climbed out and held Grace's hand as if she had decided they would do it this way today.

Inside, the church smelled faintly of wood polish and hymnals. Sunlight fell in pale squares across the entry hall. Voices drifted from the fellowship hall. Someone set up chairs.

Grace led Mina to the small office area. Hannah Whitaker stood by a filing cabinet with a stack of papers in her arms. She looked up and smiled.

“Good morning,” Hannah said. Her voice carried warmth without noise. “How are the two of you?”

Mina gave a small wave. “I drew the wall.”

Hannah’s eyes softened. “Did you?” she said. “I bet it looks strong.”

“It is strong,” Mina said. She spoke as if she knew.

Grace felt Hannah’s gaze move to her. Hannah did not pry. She did not push. She offered steady presence the way her father did from the pulpit.

Grace nodded at Hannah. “We are doing well,” she said. “I wanted to check on the choir schedule this week. I need to plan.”

Hannah set her papers down and opened the calendar. “Wednesday as usual,” she said. “And Pastor Whitaker wants the choir for the community dinner next week too. He asked if you would be willing to pick songs that speak to comfort.”

Grace thought of the storm, the wall, the river. She thought of the Sunday hymn still in her head. “Yes,” she said. “I can do that.”

Footsteps sounded in the hall. Mina turned before Grace did. She always turned first.

Daniel walked in with a folder under his arm. He wore work boots and clean jeans, and a plain button-down shirt. The shirt looked like he had pressed it. He stopped when he saw them, as if he had not

expected to find Grace here, though it made sense. He kept his face calm.

“Morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” Grace said.

Mina stepped closer to him without hesitation. “Hello, Mr. Chen.”

Daniel’s mouth eased into something close to a smile. “Hello, Mina.”

Hannah took the folder Daniel offered and glanced at the top page. “You brought the final report,” she said. “Thank you. Pastor Whitaker will appreciate it.”

Daniel nodded. “The wall will settle over the next few weeks. I listed what to watch for. If any boards shift, I will come back.”

Grace watched his eyes as he said it. He did not speak like a man who wanted a reason to return. He spoke like a man who took responsibility.

Hannah nodded. “We will keep an eye on it,” she said. She looked between Grace and Daniel with gentle awareness. “I need to take this to Pastor Whitaker. Mina, do you want to help me carry some papers?”

Mina looked at Grace.

Grace smiled. “Go ahead,” she said.

Mina followed Hannah down the hall, her sandals slapping the floor in small, quick steps.

Grace and Daniel stood in the office space with the door open. The church felt quiet around them. The old clock in the hallway ticked. A faint smell of coffee lingered from the fellowship hall.

Daniel shifted his weight. “I did not know you would be here,” he said.

Grace folded her hands in front of her. “I needed to check the schedule.”

He nodded once. “How is she?” he asked. “After Sunday.”

Grace knew he meant more than Sunday. He meant the walk. The way Mina had held their hands. The way Grace had let her. “She slept well,” Grace said. “She has been drawing the wall.”

Daniel’s eyes moved to the table where Mina had dropped her paper. He walked over and looked down at it without touching it. The crayon wall sat thick along the bank. The water ran blue under green.

“She sees,” he said.

Grace let out a quiet breath. “She sees everything.”

He kept his gaze on the drawing. “I understand,” he said. His voice stayed low. “Children pay attention to what adults think they hide.”

Grace looked down at her hands. “Yes,” she said.

Daniel looked up. His eyes held steady. Brown. Calm. He did not use them like a spotlight. He used them like a lamp in a dark place.

He cleared his throat once. “I will not keep you,” he said. “I have another job this afternoon.”

Grace nodded, but her body did not move. She heard her own heartbeat. She felt the old instinct to keep distance. It had protected her before. It had also kept her lonely.

Daniel turned as if to leave, then stopped with his hand near the doorframe. He did not touch it. “Grace,” he said.

She lifted her eyes to him again. “Yes.”

His jaw flexed once, then settled. “I want to ask something,” he said. “You do not need to answer now.”

Grace waited. The air felt still.

He spoke with care. “Would you have time this week?” he said, “to walk by the river with me. Without work. Without meetings. I want to talk.”

Grace held his gaze. She did not hear any pressure in his voice. She did not hear a demand. She heard a man asking for space. She heard a man asking to be allowed near.

Grace thought of Mina’s question at the kitchen table. Does God hear when people do not sing? Grace had wanted to answer with certainty. She had wanted to give her daughter something stable.

A walk did not promise a future. It did not bind anything. It did not fix what had broken in Grace before. But it felt like a step. It felt like choosing to show up.

“Yes,” Grace said. “I have time.”

Daniel’s shoulders eased as if he had been holding tension he did not show. “Thank you,” he said. “After school. If that works.”

“It works,” Grace said.

He nodded once, then left.

Grace stood alone for a moment and listened to his footsteps fade. She pressed her palm to the edge of the table. It felt smooth under her skin. The church had held steady through decades of storms and seasons. People had come and gone. God had stayed.

Mina returned with Hannah a few minutes later. Hannah held a thin stack of papers. Mina held one corner as if she carried something heavy.

Hannah smiled at Grace. “Pastor Whitaker says hello,” she said. “And he says thank you for Sunday. He said the choir lifted the room.”

Grace swallowed. “Tell him thank you,” she said.

Hannah’s eyes softened again. “Grace,” she said, “I have Mina’s song sheet for Wednesday. She asked if she could stand closer to the front this time.”

Grace looked at her daughter. Mina stared at the floor, as if she had not asked at all.

Grace nodded. “Yes,” she said. “She can.”

Mina looked up. Her face held relief. Small, but clear.

On Tuesday afternoon, Grace picked Mina up from school and drove home. The air held summer heat. The sky sat pale blue and wide. Grass along the roadside looked bright from the recent rain.

At home, Mina dropped her backpack and ran to the yard. She chased a butterfly near the maple tree. Grace stood on the porch and watched her.

A truck pulled up at the curb a few minutes later. Daniel stepped out. He wore the same work boots, but his shirt looked casual. He carried no tools.

Grace went down the porch steps. Her hands felt empty without a folder or a hymnal.

Daniel nodded at her. “Thank you for meeting,” he said.

Grace glanced toward Mina. “Mina,” she called, “we are going for a walk. Stay where I can see you.”

Mina ran to the porch and climbed onto the swing. She settled in with a book. She looked at Daniel and gave him a serious nod, as if she approved the plan.

Daniel looked back at Grace. “She is independent,” he said.

“She has learned to be,” Grace said.

They walked down the street toward the church. Maple Ridge held quiet in late afternoon. A lawn mower buzzed somewhere. A dog barked once, then stopped. The bakery sign swung a little in the breeze. Grace smelled yeast and sugar again as they passed.

Daniel walked beside her at her pace. He did not fill the silence. He did not glance at his phone. He watched the road ahead with steady focus.

Grace felt her mind look for threats. Old habits rose without invitation. She had learned to measure men by what they did when life asked for more than a pleasant afternoon. Her former husband had done well when things stayed easy. He had fallen apart when responsibility pressed in.

Daniel had already shown up in quiet ways. He had shown up for work. For safety. For the church. He had sat through choir practice without making it about himself.

But Grace did not trust herself to read things right anymore. She did not trust her own hope.

They reached the church path and turned toward the river. Willow branches moved slowly in the breeze. Sunlight slid through leaves and broke into shifting shapes on the ground. The prayer garden looked tended. Someone had pulled weeds. Someone had watered.

Grace thought of the women in Maple Ridge who served without being asked. Mrs. Alder. Hannah. The retired widow who arranged flowers every week. Quiet hands kept the town together.

They reached the repaired bank. The timbers sat clean. The gravel held packed and even. The water moved low and steady.

Daniel stopped and looked at it for a moment. “It is holding,” he said.

Grace stood beside him. “Yes,” she said.

Daniel took a breath. “Grace,” he began, then paused. He looked down at the edge where wood met soil. “I do not say things fast.”

Grace nodded. “I know.”

He turned his face toward her. His eyes did not flicker away. “I have wanted to speak since the first day we met,” he said. “I held back because I did not want to add weight to your life.”

Grace felt her chest tighten. She kept her hands at her sides. She did not want to reach for anything too soon.

Daniel continued. “I have seen you with Mina,” he said. “I have seen you with the choir. You lead with care. You do not chase attention. You keep showing up.”

Grace looked at the river. Water slid past without pause. It did not perform. It did not prove itself with noise. It simply moved.

Daniel’s voice stayed even, but something deeper sat under it. “I respect you,” he said. “I think about you more than I planned.”

Grace pressed her lips together. She felt tears try to rise, and she hated how quickly her body answered. She did not want to be fragile. She wanted to be wise.

Daniel lifted one hand, then let it fall again. He did not touch her. “I have lived my life like work keeps me safe,” he said. “Schedules. Plans. Tools in the truck. If I stay busy, nothing breaks.”

Grace looked at him now. She saw the truth in his face. It did not look dramatic. It looked like a man naming something he had carried alone.

“My engagement ended because I did not know how to stop,” he said. “I told myself I served people. I told myself I built things people needed. I did not see what I missed until it was gone.”

Grace drew in a slow breath. She heard the honesty in the words. He did not blame the woman. He did not paint himself as a victim. He named his own fault without softening it.

Daniel looked back at the river. “When Pastor Whitaker called about this wall,” he said, “I said yes because it was work. I thought it would stay simple.”

Grace did not speak. She let him finish.

He turned toward her again. “It did not stay simple,” he said. “Mina did not let it stay simple. You did not let it stay simple. Your life does not pretend. It holds what it holds.”

Grace felt the air shift inside her. She thought of her own past. Of a marriage where she had worked to keep everything smooth so no one saw the cracks. Of nights when she had prayed alone in the bathroom so Mina would not hear her cry. Of the day she packed the car and drove back to Maple Ridge, her hand shaking on the wheel.

Grace kept her voice low. “I have learned to keep things steady,” she said. “I do not do well with sudden.”

Daniel nodded once. “I am not sudden,” he said.

Grace almost smiled, but pain pulled at her mouth. “Men say they will stay,” she said. “Then work calls. Or restlessness. Or pride. And a child learns to expect absence.”

Daniel’s face tightened. He looked away for a moment, then back. “I hear you,” he said. “I will not argue with your experience.”

Grace felt respect rise in her. He did not defend himself. He did not ask for a clean slate. He let her words stand.

Daniel took a breath. “I want to be in your life,” he said. “In Mina’s life. I want to pursue you with honor. I want to do it slowly. I want to do it with God in front of us.”

Grace’s throat burned. She blinked hard. She kept her gaze on him because she refused to hide.

Daniel’s voice stayed calm. “I have prayed for a long time for peace,” he said. “I thought peace meant control. I thought peace meant no surprises. But when I sit in the back of the sanctuary and hear you lead the choir, I feel something else. I feel my heart settle. I think God is telling me what peace is.”

Grace heard Isaiah 26:3 in her mind, clear as if someone had read it aloud. You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Grace whispered, “Peace is not control.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes.”

Grace stared at the river. She listened to the sound of water on stones. It did not roar. It did not fall silent. It kept moving.

She looked at Daniel again. “What are you asking?” she said. She needed plain words. She needed clarity.

Daniel did not hesitate. “I am asking if I can court you,” he said. “With patience. With care. I am asking if you will allow me to show you consistency over time.”

Grace felt fear rise like a wave. She knew her own heart. She knew how deeply she loved Mina. She knew what it cost to rebuild when things collapsed.

She also felt another truth. She had already watched Daniel show consistency. He had come when he said he would come. He had done the work with excellence. He had watched the wall for the sake of the church. He had stayed after choir practice to put chairs away without being asked. He had spoken to Mina with respect. He had never tried to take a place he had not earned.

Grace held her breath, then let it out. “I do not want to bring a man into Mina’s life who leaves,” she said.

Daniel’s eyes did not flinch. “I understand,” he said. “I cannot promise you there will never be hardship. I cannot promise life will stay smooth. But I can promise this. I will not treat your hearts as an afterthought. I will not treat God as decoration. I will show up, and if I fail, I will return and make it right.”

Grace felt tears slip free. She did not wipe them fast. She let them fall. She had spent too long pretending she did not feel things.

Daniel stayed still. He did not rush her. He did not reach for her without permission.

Grace managed a small nod. “Yes,” she said. Her voice shook. “Yes. You can.”

Daniel closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, relief sat there, quiet and sincere. “Thank you,” he said.

Grace swallowed. “We go slow,” she said.

“We go slow,” he answered.

Grace looked down at the timbers again. She thought of Matthew 7, a house on rock. Rain came. Winds blew. It did not fall.

Grace lifted her eyes to Daniel. “I want to pray,” she said.

Daniel’s face softened. “Here,” he said.

Grace glanced around. The prayer garden sat close. The path bent toward a small bench under a willow. She walked there with Daniel beside her. The ground smelled of damp soil and crushed leaves. A dragonfly skimmed over the river and vanished.

They stopped near the bench. Grace folded her hands. Daniel did the same. He stood close enough that she felt his presence, yet he kept space.

Grace bowed her head. “Lord,” she said, and her voice caught. She waited until it steadied. “Thank You for steady things. Thank You for water that keeps moving. Thank You for a town that holds people when they come back hurt.”

She paused and breathed in. “Please give me wisdom,” she said. “Please guard Mina’s heart. Please guard mine. If this is from You, please build it. If it is not, please close the door with mercy.”

Silence held after her last word. The river kept its quiet sound.

Daniel spoke. His voice stayed low. “Father,” he said, “thank You for Grace. Thank You for Mina. Thank You for Your church. Forgive me for the years I used work as a shield. Teach me to love with steadiness. Teach me to serve without hiding.”

He paused. Grace heard his breath. “Give me the strength to keep my word,” he said. “Give me patience. Give me humility. Let Your peace rule in our hearts.”

Grace lifted her head. Daniel lifted his. Their eyes met in the shade of the willow.

Grace felt something settle inside her. Not a rush. Not a dizzy excitement. A calm weight, like a stone placed where it belonged.

Daniel nodded once, as if he felt the shift too. “Thank you for praying with me,” he said.

Grace managed a small smile through wet eyes. “Thank you for asking,” she said.

They walked back toward town with the sun lowering behind the trees. Light stretched long over the grass. The church windows glowed faintly as if they held a memory of Sunday music.

When they reached Grace’s street, Mina sat on the porch swing with her book open on her lap. She looked up the moment they stepped into view. Her gaze moved between their faces. She stood.

Grace felt her stomach tighten again. Children noticed. Mina would ask. Mina would watch for signs.

Mina ran down the steps and stopped in front of Daniel. She held her book to her chest like a shield. “Did you talk?” she asked.

Daniel looked at Grace first, then back to Mina. “Yes,” he said.

Mina tilted her head. “Are you going to fix more things?”

Daniel stayed quiet for a beat. “I am going to keep showing up,” he said.

Mina’s eyes narrowed in thought. “Okay,” she said, as if she stored the answer for later. She turned to Grace. “Mom. I want to go see the wall again tomorrow.”

Grace brushed Mina's hair back with her fingers. "Tomorrow," she said.

Mina looked at Daniel again. "You can come," she said, then added, "if you are free."

Daniel's mouth eased into a small smile. "If I am free, I will come," he said.

Grace watched Mina accept the words. She did not leap into joy. She did not cling. She nodded again, careful and young and wise.

Grace felt her own heart respond in the same way. Careful. Open by a small measure. Willing to watch consistency prove itself over time.

Daniel turned toward his truck. He stopped at the curb and looked back. "Grace," he said.

"Yes."

"I will call you tomorrow evening," he said. "If that is all right. I want to plan something simple. Dinner. A walk. Whatever feels safe."

Grace nodded. "That is all right," she said.

Daniel gave a small nod and got into his truck. He drove away without rushing, as if even leaving held a responsibility.

Grace stood on the porch with Mina tucked close to her side. Evening air cooled against her skin. The maple leaves stirred with a soft sound.

Mina leaned her head against Grace's arm. "Mom," she said, "the river does not get scared."

Grace looked out at the street, then beyond it in her mind, to the path and the willows and the steady water. “No,” she said. “The river keeps going.”

Mina held her book tight. “We keep going too,” she said.

Grace kissed the top of Mina’s head. “Yes,” she said. “We keep going.”

Inside, as Grace helped Mina wash hands and set the table, the house felt the same as it had yesterday. The same dishes. The same chair legs on the floor, the same hum of the refrigerator.

Yet something in Grace had changed. Not in a way she needed to announce. Not in a way she needed to explain to anyone in town. God had done quiet work in her, like water wearing a smooth path through earth.

After dinner, Mina brushed her teeth and climbed into bed. Grace sat on the edge of the mattress and smoothed the blanket. Mina’s eyes stayed open.

“Mom,” Mina said.

“Yes.”

“Mr. Chen is steady,” Mina said. She spoke the word with care, as if it mattered.

Grace swallowed. “He seems steady,” she said. “But we watch over time. We trust God. We do not rush.”

Mina nodded. “Okay,” she whispered.

Grace turned off the lamp and left the door cracked. She walked to the living room and sat on the couch. She held her Bible in her lap without opening it for a moment. The cover felt worn under her fingertips. Familiar.

She opened to Isaiah and found the verse again. She read it slowly, letting each word rest where it belonged.

Perfect peace. A stayed mind. Trust.

Grace closed her eyes and breathed in. She did not feel a rush of certainty about the future. She felt something quieter.

A sense of being held.

Outside, the night settled over Maple Ridge. Crickets began their steady song in the grass. Somewhere beyond the trees and the church grounds, the river kept moving in the dark. It did not hurry. It did not stop. It held its course, steady as God's faithfulness, steady as the life Grace had started to believe she and Mina could build, one faithful step at a time.

Chapter 15

What Remains

Morning came with a thin veil of fog over Maple Ridge. It clung to the low places. It sat over the fields and the river like a held breath. Grace Park stood at her kitchen window with her hand around a mug of tea. She watched the gray soften as light rose behind it.

Mina padded into the kitchen in socks. Her hair stuck up in a small peak on one side. She stopped at the table and looked at the calendar Grace kept near the fruit bowl.

“Church day,” Mina said.

“Yes,” Grace said.

Mina climbed into her chair. She swung her legs. She hummed a line from last week’s anthem, soft and off-key. Grace let it happen. She warmed a pan. She cracked eggs. She moved through the morning with no hurry.

The house smelled like toast and soap. The sink held last night’s cup. Grace rinsed it and set it in the drying rack. Small things. Steady things. She had learned to love them again.

Mina ate and talked between bites. Her words ran in a clean stream. A friend at school. A new pencil. A dream about a fish. Grace listened and answered in simple phrases.

When breakfast ended, Mina slid from her chair and ran down the hall. Grace heard drawers open. She heard a small thump as Mina pulled her church shoes from the closet.

Grace washed the pan. She wiped the counter. She stood for a moment with both hands on the edge of the sink. She looked at the quiet room. She thought of other Sundays when she had carried a

weight she did not name. A worry about who might show up. A fear of questions. A dread of being seen.

Now she felt a different kind of awareness. Maple Ridge still noticed people. It still held stories in its walls and sidewalks. Yet Grace did not feel chased by those stories. She felt held by something stronger.

Mina ran back in her dress. It had small blue flowers. She turned once to show it off.

“It spins,” Mina said.

Grace smiled. “It does.”

Mina stopped and looked at Grace. “Will Mr. Chen be at church?”

Grace kept her face calm. “Daniel goes some Sundays. He has work. He also has a place to be.”

Mina frowned in thought. “He said he will come when he can.”

Grace reached for Mina’s brush. “He did.”

Mina sat on the stool while Grace smoothed her hair into a neat half ponytail. Mina held still for three seconds. Then she wiggled.

Grace caught her hand. “Hold.”

Mina sighed. “I am holding.”

Grace finished and tied the ribbon. She touched Mina’s shoulder. “There.”

Mina jumped down and ran to the living room. “I will get my Bible.”

Grace watched her go. She did not miss the way Mina said Daniel’s name with ease. Children did not measure people with the same guarded care adults used. Mina watched for patterns. She watched

for follow-through. She watched for tone and presence. She did not get fooled by big words.

Grace carried those same measures inside her now. She had learned them the hard way. She had learned them in nights when she sat up and waited for a key in the door. In mornings when apologies felt cheap. In months when she stopped believing in promises.

She had left all of that behind, yet the marks remained. They did not rule her anymore. They still shaped her caution.

A text buzzed on her phone. She wiped her hands on a towel and glanced down.

Daniel: Good morning. I will be there. I am picking up a new set of anchor bolts after service. I want to check the wall again this afternoon if you and Mina are going to the river path.

Grace read it twice. He did not ask for permission in a way that pressed. He did not assume he owned their time. He offered his plan. He held it out with respect.

Grace typed back.

Grace: Good morning. We will be there. Thank you. Drive safe.

She set the phone down. She did not stare at it. She did not hold it like an answer. She let it rest on the counter like any other tool for the day.

Mina came back with her small Bible. The cover had a sticker of a lamb. Mina held it tight against her chest.

Grace grabbed her own Bible from the coffee table. The worn cover felt familiar in her hand. She slid it into her bag with her choir folder.

They stepped outside.

The air felt cool on Grace's arms. The street sat quiet. A dog barked once in the distance. Somewhere down the road, a truck started and settled into idle.

They walked to the car. Mina skipped ahead. Her shoes clicked on the driveway.

Grace drove toward the church with the windows cracked. Fog softened the edges of the trees. The town looked gentle in it. Main Street passed in slow frames.

The bakery sat with lights on behind the front window. A man in an apron moved behind the counter. A chalkboard sign out front listed cinnamon rolls and lemon scones.

The hardware store sign had fresh paint. Grace noticed it again. Daniel had done work for the owner last month, a quick repair on the back steps. He had refused extra pay when the owner tried to hand it over.

Grace turned toward the church road.

As the car crested the small rise, the white steeple came into view through the thinning fog. It stood clean and upright, a steady point above the trees. Grace felt something in her chest settle. She did not need the building to save her. She loved what it held. Prayer. Music. People who tried again after failure.

Mina leaned forward in her seat. "I see it."

Grace parked near the fellowship hall. Gravel popped under the tires. She shut off the engine and listened for a moment. The quiet did not feel empty. It felt expectant.

Mina opened her door and hopped down. She ran ahead without looking back.

“Mina,” Grace called, firm.

Mina stopped and turned. “I am sorry. I forgot.”

Grace walked up to her. She took Mina’s hand. “Do not run ahead in the lot. People do not see small people.”

Mina nodded. “Yes, Mom.”

Grace squeezed her fingers. “Thank you.”

They walked toward the church together. The grass beside the sidewalk held beads of water. The air smelled like damp earth and the last of summer.

Voices drifted from the open side windows of the sanctuary. Someone laughed. Someone greeted another person by name. The sound carried warmth without force.

At the steps, Mina pulled her hand free and climbed up again quickly.

“Mina,” Grace said.

Mina slowed. She looked back with a sheepish face. “I forgot again.”

Grace reached her at the top. “Hold the railing.”

Mina put her small hand on the white-painted wood and climbed the last step with exaggerated care. Grace followed. The paint felt smooth under her own fingertips.

Inside, the hallway smelled like lemon cleaner and old hymnals. A bulletin board held flyers for a potluck and a youth car wash. A row of photos showed last winter’s coat drive.

Grace heard someone call her name.

“Grace.”

She turned and saw Hannah Whitaker near the library door. Hannah held a stack of children’s coloring pages. Her hair sat in a loose twist at the nape of her neck.

“Good morning,” Hannah said. “Mina, look at you.”

Mina ran to Hannah and hugged her waist. Hannah steadied the papers with one hand and patted Mina’s back with the other.

Grace smiled. “Good morning.”

Hannah looked at Grace with a steady kindness. She did not pry. She had never pried. Hannah had learned her own lessons about carrying too much. Grace had watched her grow into a softer strength over the years.

“Choir loft in ten,” Hannah said.

Grace nodded. “I will be there.”

Pastor Whitaker’s voice came from down the hall as he spoke to someone at the sanctuary door. He wore his suit jacket open. His tie sat straight. He looked up and saw Grace.

“Grace,” he said.

“Good morning, Pastor Whitaker.”

He walked toward her. His smile held warmth without performance. “Good morning. How are you and Mina?”

Grace glanced at Mina, who had moved to the water fountain and pushed the button with a careful finger.

“We are well,” Grace said. “Thank you.”

Pastor Whitaker nodded as if he heard the deeper meaning. “I am glad.”

He looked at Mina. “Good morning, young lady.”

Mina turned and grinned. “Good morning, Pastor.”

He chuckled. “Ready to sing?”

Mina nodded hard. “Yes. I will sing loud.”

“Sing with your whole heart,” Pastor Whitaker said. “The Lord loves a joyful sound.”

Mina bounced once. “Okay.”

Pastor Whitaker’s gaze returned to Grace. It held the gentle weight of someone who had watched families break and mend. “Grace, I want to thank you for leading the choir through these last months. The music has carried people.”

Grace swallowed. “It carries me too.”

He nodded. “Good. Let it. You do not need to hold everything alone.”

Grace felt the words land in a tender place. “Thank you.”

He stepped aside as more people came through the hallway. Grace and Mina moved on.

Grace led Mina to the children’s rooms and checked her in. The volunteer, a retired widow named Mrs. Alder, greeted Mina with a soft smile.

“Mina, I saved you a blue crayon,” Mrs. Alder said.

Mina gasped. “My favorite.”

Mrs. Alder looked at Grace. “Good morning, Grace. We will take good care of her.”

“I know you will,” Grace said.

Mina waved and ran to the table where other children sat with paper and markers. Grace stood in the doorway for a moment and watched. Mina leaned close to another girl to show her the lamb sticker on her Bible.

Grace left her there and headed toward the sanctuary.

The choir loft sat above the pulpit. Grace climbed the narrow stairs and entered the small space behind the railing. Chairs waited in a half circle. Folders rested on seats.

A few choir members had arrived early. The choir leader before Grace had been an older woman with a sharp tongue and high standards. Grace had been nervous when Pastor Whitaker asked her to take the role. She had thought she did not belong in front. Yet she had said yes. She had learned how to guide without control.

She set her bag on a chair and opened her folder. She scanned the pieces. Her pencil marks sat neat along the margins.

Hannah came in and took her place. A farmer’s wife named Sue sat with a cough drop in her hand. A young man from the firehouse rubbed sleep from his eyes.

Grace warmed them up with soft scales, the sanctuary below filled with people. The low hum of conversation rose like a steady tide.

Grace leaned closer to the railing and looked down. She saw familiar faces. The bakery owner. The school principal. A church elder with a cane. A teenage girl with her hair in a braid.

Then she saw Daniel.

He stood near the back aisle. He had chosen a seat at the end of a pew, close to the side door. He wore a clean button-down shirt, no tie, sleeves pressed. His hair lay neat. He held a Bible with a simple black cover.

He did not scan the room as he searched for attention. He looked forward. He stood with his hands loose at his sides. Still. Present.

Grace felt her throat tighten. She forced her breath to stay calm. She had seen him at church once or twice before, when his work schedule allowed. Yet today felt different. Today he had told her he would be there. And he had come.

He looked up.

Their eyes met across the space.

He nodded once. Small. Respectful. He did not wave. He did not perform. He offered simple acknowledgment. Grace returned it with a small nod of her own, then turned to the choir.

The service began.

The opening hymn rose from the congregation in a familiar tune. Grace led the choir into the harmony. Their voices filled the rafters. Sound carried through the old wooden beams and returned softened, as if the building itself held the music close.

Grace watched faces below. Some people sang with eyes open. Some with eyes closed. A few stood silent and listened. Grace saw a man with his arm around his wife's shoulders. She saw a young mother bounce a baby on her hip.

She saw Daniel sing.

His mouth shaped the words with care. He did not rush. He did not mumble. His voice did not carry far, yet Grace saw the way he gave himself to the act. Quiet obedience. Quiet worship.

Pastor Whitaker stepped to the pulpit after the hymn. He welcomed visitors and gave announcements. He thanked volunteers. He asked for prayer requests.

Then he opened his Bible.

Grace listened while keeping her choir folder in her lap. Pastor Whitaker spoke about foundations. He did not raise his voice. He spoke steadily, like someone who trusted the Word to do its work.

He read from Matthew 7. He spoke of the wise man who built his house on the rock. He spoke of rain, floods, and wind. He spoke of what stood and what fell.

Grace felt the verse press against her past. She had built on sand once. She had trusted what looked strong on the surface. She had ignored the shifting underfoot because she wanted peace so badly.

Now she sat in a church that had held her through collapse. She had watched God rebuild her through small choices and long endurance.

Pastor Whitaker's eyes moved over the room. "The storm does not ask permission," he said. "It comes. The question is where the foundation sits. The Lord does not promise a life with no rain. He promises Himself. He promises a Rock."

Grace breathed in. She held the air in her lungs for a moment. Then she let it out slowly.

The choir sang the anthem after the sermon. Grace lifted her hand and guided the entrance. The melody rose simple and clear. Words about peace. Words about being held.

Grace felt the sound in her chest. She watched the congregation. Some people wiped their eyes. Some sat still with hands folded.

Daniel kept his gaze forward. His face did not show much. Yet Grace saw something in his posture. A softness. A surrender.

When the final chord settled, the sanctuary held a hush. Pastor Whitaker prayed. His prayer stayed plain. He thanked God for steady mercy. He asked for calm minds and guarded hearts. He asked for peace to rule.

Grace thought of Colossians. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. She had read it so often she carried it like a stone in her pocket.

The service ended. People stood and talked in the aisle. Children's voices echoed in the hallway as classes dismissed. The smell of coffee drifted from the fellowship hall.

Grace gathered her folder and bag. Choir members chatted behind her. She thanked them for their work and reminded them of rehearsal on Wednesday.

As she walked down the stairs from the loft, her legs felt light. Not from excitement. From relief. From a sense of rightness.

In the hallway, Mina came running. She barreled into Grace's waist and hugged her.

"Mom," Mina said, breathless. "We learned a verse."

Grace brushed Mina's hair back. "What verse?"

Mina lifted her small Bible and flipped pages too fast. "Wait. I will find it."

Mrs. Alder walked behind her, smiling. "She did well today."

“Thank you,” Grace said.

Mina finally found the page and stabbed it with her finger. “Psalm forty-six four.”

Grace leaned in to read. Mina’s finger did not sit on the right line, but Mina began reciting anyway.

“There is a river,” Mina said, loud, “whose streams make glad the city of God.”

Warmth pressed behind Grace’s eyes. She kissed Mina’s temple. “That is a beautiful one.”

“It is about our river,” Mina said.

“It is about God’s river,” Grace said. “But yes. It helps us think of ours too.”

Mina looked pleased with herself. She tugged Grace’s hand. “We need to go say hi to Mr. Chen.”

Grace paused. “Mina.”

Mina looked up. “What?”

Grace kept her voice gentle. “Do not pull people around. I walk. You walk.”

Mina sighed in a way only a child could manage. “Okay.”

They walked toward the sanctuary door. The crowd had thinned. People moved toward the fellowship hall. Grace saw Hannah near the coffee table. Eli Brooks stood beside her, holding two cups. Grace gave them a small wave. Hannah lifted her cup in return.

Daniel stood near the side door, waiting as if he had chosen a place where he did not block anyone. When he saw Grace and Mina, he stepped toward them.

“Mina,” he said.

Mina grinned. “Hi, Mr. Chen.”

Daniel crouched to her height. “Good morning. Your singing in class sounded strong when I walked past.”

Mina’s eyes widened. “You heard me.”

“I did,” Daniel said. “You kept good rhythm.”

Mina lifted her chin. “I am good at rhythm.”

Grace watched him. He spoke to Mina as if she mattered. He did not talk down. He did not tease. He offered honest praise.

Daniel rose and looked at Grace. “Good morning, Grace.”

“Good morning,” she said.

He held his Bible in one hand. In the other, he held a folded paper, his notes from the project. He had brought them to church as they belonged beside Scripture. Grace did not know why it moved her, yet it did. His life did not split into separate boxes. Work, worship, and care for people sat side by side.

“I texted earlier,” he said. “I have anchor bolts waiting at the supply place in Riverton. I will pick them up after lunch. I wanted to ask if you and Mina still plan to walk the river path later.”

Grace glanced at Mina. Mina bounced on her toes.

“Yes,” Grace said. “We usually go after Mina’s quiet time. Around three.”

Daniel nodded. “I will be there. If that time still works for you.”

“It does,” Grace said.

Mina leaned in. “Are you going to fix the wall today?”

Daniel looked serious. “I will check it. The repair holds well. I want to look at the seam where the new timber meets the old. Water has a way of finding edges.”

Mina frowned. “Water is sneaky.”

Daniel’s mouth tipped into a small smile. “Water is patient.”

Grace felt the words settle. Patient. That was the kind of strength she had needed.

Pastor Whitaker approached from behind Daniel. “Daniel.”

Daniel turned. “Pastor Whitaker.”

Pastor Whitaker shook his hand. “Thank you for being here.”

“Thank you for the sermon,” Daniel said. “I needed it.”

Pastor Whitaker’s gaze held him for a moment. “We all do.”

Grace watched the exchange. No one treated Daniel like a stranger. Maple Ridge had a way of keeping people at arm’s length when it wanted to. Yet the town had watched him work on the river wall. They had seen him show up early and leave late. They had seen him listen more than he spoke. Their trust grew through hours, not speeches.

Pastor Whitaker looked at Grace and Mina. “Grace, Mina, are you staying for coffee?”

Grace smiled. “For a few minutes.”

Mina nodded hard. “Yes.”

Pastor Whitaker touched Mina’s shoulder. “Then I will see you in there.”

As Pastor Whitaker moved away, Daniel shifted his weight. “I do not want to take your time,” he said. “I know people like to talk after service.”

Grace glanced toward the fellowship hall. “We will have coffee. Then we will go home. We will see you later.”

Daniel nodded. “All right.”

Mina stepped closer to him. “You will walk with us.”

Daniel looked at Grace before answering. He waited. Grace respected him for it.

“Yes,” Grace said, quiet. “He will walk with us.”

Mina smiled and ran toward the fellowship hall. Grace followed, slower.

Daniel fell into step beside Grace.

Inside, the fellowship hall buzzed with low conversation. Coffee steamed in big metal urns. Plates of cookies sat on folding tables. A group of teens laughed near the punch bowl.

Grace poured a small cup for herself and a cup of water for Mina. Mina grabbed a cookie and took two bites at once.

Hannah came over. Eli Brooks stood behind her, his hands in his pockets.

“Grace,” Hannah said. “Your anthem today was beautiful.”

Grace felt warmth in her face. “Thank you. The choir did well.”

Hannah turned to Daniel. “Daniel, I am glad you made it today.”

Daniel nodded. “Thank you.”

Eli lifted his cup. “Wall looks solid. I walked down there yesterday after the storm runoff settled. Good work.”

Daniel gave a small nod, accepting the praise without soaking in it. “Thank you. We still need to watch it through the season.”

Eli smiled. “Always. Wood and water have their own conversations.”

Grace noticed Daniel glance at Eli, as if he took the phrase and stored it. Daniel looked like a man who learned from other steady men.

Hannah looked at Grace. “Mina told me she has been drawing the river every day.”

Grace glanced at Mina. “She has.”

Mina looked up, mouth full. “It does not scare me.”

Hannah crouched. “The river does not scare you.”

Mina shook her head. “No. It keeps going.”

Hannah’s eyes met Grace’s for a moment. Understanding passed between them, quiet and clean.

Grace finished her coffee. She did not linger. She had learned to leave before she felt wrung out. She said goodbye to Hannah and Eli. She thanked Mrs. Alder again for helping with the children.

At the door, Daniel waited. He had not joined a circle of men to talk about tools or crops. He stayed near the edge, like he wanted to belong without pushing.

Grace and Mina stepped outside. The fog had burned away. Sunlight lay bright on the grass.

Mina ran down the steps again. She caught herself halfway and grabbed the railing, remembering Grace's instruction. She glanced back with a proud look.

Grace smiled. "Good job."

Mina grinned. She walked the rest of the way down with care, then skipped to the car.

Daniel walked beside Grace across the gravel.

"Thank you for coming," Grace said, quiet.

Daniel looked ahead. "I wanted to be there."

Grace opened her car door. "We will see you later."

Daniel nodded. "Yes."

Grace drove home with Mina humming in the back seat. The hymn tune drifted through the car like a thread.

At home, Mina changed into play clothes and ate a quick lunch. Grace washed dishes and started a load of laundry. She moved through the house with simple purpose. She did not feel as though she were waiting for something to happen. She felt like she lived.

After lunch, Mina sat on her bed for quiet time with her children's Bible storybook. Grace sat at the kitchen table with her own Bible open. Sunlight fell across the pages.

Her eyes landed again on Isaiah 26:3. She read it slowly.

You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.

Grace traced the line with her finger. Perfect peace did mean no problems. It meant God held the center. It meant her mind did not have to spin.

She thought of Daniel's careful presence. His steady follow-through. His patience with the wall, with Mina, and with Grace's own caution.

She did not confuse steadiness with salvation. God saved. God held. Yet God also gave gifts. Grace began to believe Daniel might be one of those gifts. Not a fix. Not a rescue. A companion. A fellow builder.

Mina finished her quiet time and came out with her book tucked under her arm.

"It said Jesus was asleep in the boat," Mina said.

Grace looked up. "Yes."

"And the storm was loud," Mina said. "And everybody was scared."

Grace nodded. "They were."

"But Jesus woke up," Mina said, voice growing firm, "and He told the storm to stop."

Grace felt her eyes sting. "He did."

Mina stepped close and put her hand on Grace's knee. "So we do not need to be scared."

Grace covered Mina's small hand with her own. "We trust Him."

Mina nodded. "We keep going."

Grace stood and kissed Mina's forehead. "Yes."

They changed into sneakers and grabbed a small bag with water bottles. Grace locked the house and walked with Mina down the sidewalk toward the church grounds.

The afternoon held gentle warmth. The sky looked clean, leaves stirred in the maples. Somewhere a lawnmower droned, then stopped.

Mina ran ahead on the path, then slowed when Grace called her name. Mina waited and walked closer.

They reached the church parking lot and crossed toward the prayer garden gate. The white fence stood neat now. New boards had replaced old ones where rot had spread. Eli Brooks had worked on it earlier in the summer with two young men from the youth group.

Mina pushed open the gate with care. The prayer garden sat quiet. Stone benches rested under shade trees. A small sign held a verse about casting burdens on the Lord.

Grace and Mina walked through, then followed the narrow path toward the river.

The river came into view through the willows. Sunlight flashed on the surface. It moved with the same calm as always. No drama. No rush. A steady voice over stone.

The repaired retaining wall ran along the bank near the garden edge. New timber showed clean color beside older boards, gravel filled behind it, packed firm. The bank no longer sagged. The edge looked held.

Mina stopped and stared at the water. “It is calm today.”

Grace stepped beside her. “Yes.”

They walked closer along the path. The air smelled like wet soil and green leaves. A dragonfly hovered near the edge, then darted away.

Daniel stood near the far end of the wall. His truck was parked back in the lot. He wore work jeans and boots. A tool belt sat on his hips. He held a level in one hand.

When he saw Grace and Mina, he straightened and lifted his hand in greeting.

Mina broke into a run, then caught herself and slowed to a fast walk. She reached him and stopped in front of the wall.

“Hi,” Mina said, breathless.

Daniel crouched. “Hello.”

Mina pointed at the bolts on the ground near his tool bag. “Are those the anchors?”

Daniel nodded. “Yes. They help hold the timber to the posts.”

Mina pressed her lips together, thinking. “So it does not move.”

“That is the idea,” Daniel said.

Grace stepped up beside them. “How does it look?”

Daniel rose and faced her. “It looks good. The water line is lower now. The pressure on the bank eased. I want to add two anchors where the old post meets the new timber. I saw a slight shift when we had the storm.”

Grace glanced at the seam. She saw nothing, yet she trusted his eyes.

“Is it urgent?” she asked.

Daniel shook his head. “No. It is wise. It will help it hold through fall rains.”

Grace nodded. “Then do it.”

Daniel looked at her, as if he heard the deeper layer in her words. Then he looked at Mina. “Do you want to watch?”

Mina nodded fast. “Yes.”

Daniel pointed to a spot a few feet back from the edge. “Stand there. That ground stays safe. Do not cross this line.”

Mina planted her feet in the spot he indicated. “I will not.”

Grace stayed near Mina. She kept one eye on the river and one eye on Daniel’s work.

Daniel moved with calm precision. He measured. He marked. He drilled into the timber with a steady hand. The drill’s sound rose sharp for a moment, then stopped. He inserted the anchor bolt and tightened it with a wrench. He did not rush.

Grace watched his hands. Strong hands. Careful hands. Hands that did not shake with impatience. She had learned to notice hands. They told the truth of a person’s habits.

Mina watched with her head tilted. “Does it hurt the wood?” she asked.

Daniel paused and looked at her. “If I drilled too deep in the wrong place, it would weaken it. If I place the bolt with care, it strengthens it.”

Mina thought about that. “So you have to know where to put it.”

“Yes,” Daniel said.

Grace felt the simple sentence settle in her mind. She thought of her own life. She thought of choices placed in the wrong spot, words spoken without care. Trust given where it should not have gone.

Daniel finished tightening the bolt and moved to the next spot. He repeated the process.

The river kept its steady sound behind them. It slid past the repaired wall without pushing against it. It did not fight. It moved as it always had, faithful to its course.

When Daniel finished, he stood and wiped his hands on a rag. He put the level against the timber again, then nodded to himself.

“All right,” he said.

Mina clapped once. “You did it.”

Daniel smiled, small and real. “We did. We watched. We checked. We finished.”

Grace met his eyes. “Thank you.”

He held her gaze. His voice lowered. “You are welcome.”

Silence sat between them for a moment. It did not feel awkward. It felt like space where something could grow.

Mina stepped closer to the edge of the path and looked down at the water. “It keeps going,” she said, softer than before.

Grace stepped beside her. Daniel came to the other side.

They stood together, the three of them, and watched the river.

After a moment, Daniel spoke. “When I was younger, I thought stability meant control. If I kept everything tight, nothing would surprise me.”

Grace did not answer right away. She listened.

Daniel’s eyes stayed on the water. “Life did not agree.”

Grace's throat tightened. "It rarely does."

Daniel gave a small nod. "I still like order. I still like plans. But I have learned order does not make a person safe."

Grace felt her heart beat slow and steady. "What makes a person safe?"

Daniel turned his head and looked at her. "The Lord. And people who keep their word."

Grace held his gaze. She did not look away. "Yes."

Mina looked up at both of them, as if she sensed the shift. "We keep our word," she said.

Grace smiled down at her. "Yes, we do."

Daniel's eyes softened. "Mina, you do."

Mina puffed her chest. "I do."

Grace laughed, low. It felt good to let it out.

They walked along the path beside the river. Mina ran ahead a few steps, then returned, then ran again. She picked up a smooth stone and held it out to Grace.

"Feel it," Mina said.

Grace took it. The stone sat cool and worn in her palm. Water had shaped it over time. No hurry. No violence. Simple persistence.

Grace handed it back. "It is smooth."

Mina nodded. "The river did it."

Daniel watched Mina slip the stone into her pocket. "The river has time."

Grace looked at him. “Sometimes it feels like life does not.”

Daniel walked with his hands loose at his sides. “Life feels loud when people rush it.”

Grace watched his profile. She saw the calm line of his jaw. The thoughtful set of his brow. “Some people rush because they fear what happens if they slow down.”

Daniel’s gaze stayed forward. “Yes.”

Grace’s voice dropped. “I did.”

Daniel looked at her then. His eyes held no judgment. “Me too.”

They reached a bend where the willows leaned low. Sunlight filtered through leaves and made shifting patterns on the path. The air smelled green. A bird lifted from a branch and disappeared.

Mina stopped and pointed. “Look.”

A small stream trickled into the river from the bank, thin and clear. It made a quiet sound as it met the larger current.

Grace watched it. She thought of Psalm 46 again. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God. The verse had always sounded distant to her, like something meant for other people in other places. Now it felt close. It felt like a promise with dirt under it.

Daniel spoke in a careful voice. “Grace.”

She looked at him.

“I have been thinking about what you said earlier in the summer,” he said. “About watching over time. About trusting God. About not rushing.”

Grace waited.

Daniel's face stayed calm, yet his eyes held intent. "I want to honor that. I also do not want to hide behind it."

Grace's breath caught. She held it, then let it out.

Daniel continued, slow. "I want to keep showing up. I want to be steady for you and for Mina. I want to build something with you, if you will let me. I do not mean a project. I mean a life. A simple one. A faithful one."

Grace felt tears rise. She blinked. She did not let them fall yet. She needed to speak first.

"Daniel," she said, quiet.

He waited. He did not fill the space.

Grace turned her gaze to the river. It moved without hurry. It did not promise ease. It promised continuance.

Grace spoke with honesty. "I have feared stability because I learned it can break. I learned men can look steady for a season and then disappear when it costs them something."

Daniel's jaw tightened once. He nodded. He did not defend himself.

Grace kept going. "Mina has already lost enough. I have lost enough. I do not want to offer her another person who leaves."

Daniel's voice stayed low. "I understand."

Grace looked at him again. "I do not want to pretend I have no fear. I do."

Daniel nodded once more. "I do too."

Grace pressed her hand to her chest, feeling her heart. “But I also do not want fear to lead my house.”

Daniel’s eyes held hers. “It should not.”

Grace swallowed. “If I let you closer, it will need to be slow.”

Daniel answered without pause. “Yes.”

Grace searched his face. “And it will need to be honest.”

“Yes,” he said again.

Grace’s eyes stung. She let one tear fall. It tracked down her cheek and cooled in the air.

“And it will need to be under God,” she said. “Not under my control. Not under your control. Under Him.”

Daniel’s expression softened, and his eyes shone. “Yes.”

Grace felt her shoulders drop. She did not even realize she held them high.

Mina ran back toward them, breathless. “I found a stick shaped like a J.”

Grace wiped her cheek with the back of her hand. She kept her voice even. “That is nice.”

Mina looked between them. Her eyes narrowed with childish suspicion. “What?”

Grace crouched and brushed Mina’s hair back. “Nothing is wrong.”

Mina stared, then nodded. “Okay.”

Daniel crouched too, so all three stood close. “Mina,” he said, “your mother and I are talking about how we keep going. Together.”

Mina's eyes widened. "Together together."

Grace felt heat rise in her face. She kept her hand on Mina's shoulder. "Mina, it will be slow. We will do it in a way that honors God."

Mina nodded, solemn. "Okay. Slow."

Daniel smiled at Mina. "Slow is good."

Mina looked at him. "You will not leave."

Grace's stomach tightened. The question landed like a stone.

Daniel did not flinch. He looked at Mina with steady seriousness. "I will not promise what I cannot keep. I can promise this. I will be honest. I will keep showing up. I will not disappear. If something changes, I will speak. I will not vanish."

Mina considered his words. She did not demand more. She nodded once. "Okay."

Grace felt another tear fall. This one held both ache and gratitude.

Daniel rose first. He offered Grace his hand to help her stand. He did not grab. He held it open.

Grace placed her hand in his. His grip felt warm and firm. He helped her up with ease, then let go at once. Respect. Care.

They walked back toward the church grounds as the afternoon light began to soften. Mina skipped ahead and sang a line from the morning hymn.

When they reached the repaired wall again, Daniel stopped and looked at it one more time. The timber sat straight. The anchors held.

He breathed out. "Good."

Grace stood beside him. “You did good work.”

Daniel glanced at her. “It mattered to me.”

Grace knew he meant more than the wall.

They walked through the prayer garden. Mina stopped to look at the small flowers by the stone bench. She pointed at a butterfly. Grace waited while Mina watched it drift away.

When they reached the lot, Daniel’s truck sat near Grace’s car. He turned to Grace.

“I will see you Wednesday at rehearsal,” he said.

Grace nodded. “Yes.”

Mina stepped close to Daniel and hugged him around the waist without asking. Daniel froze for half a second, then rested his hand on her shoulder gently.

“Okay,” Mina mumbled into his shirt. “Bye.”

Daniel’s voice turned soft. “Goodbye, Mina.”

Mina released him and ran to the car. Grace watched her climb in and buckle herself with practiced hands.

Grace faced Daniel again. She felt the weight of the moment. She did not want to turn it into something big. She also did not want to treat it as if it were nothing.

“Daniel,” she said.

“Yes.”

Grace’s hands twisted around the strap of her bag. “Thank you for speaking plain today.”

Daniel nodded. “I will keep doing so.”

Grace nodded. “I will too.”

A small silence fell. Wind stirred leaves above them. Somewhere a door closed in the church building. The sound echoed, then faded.

Daniel lifted his hand, hesitated, then lowered it. He did not touch her. He respected the slow.

“I will pray for you and Mina tonight,” he said.

Grace’s throat tightened again. “I will pray for you too.”

Daniel nodded, then stepped back. “Drive safe.”

“You as well,” Grace said.

Grace got into the car. She started the engine. Mina waved out the window at Daniel with both hands. Daniel lifted his hand and waved once, controlled and warm.

Grace drove home with the windows open. Late afternoon light turned the road edges gold. Mina talked about butterflies and sticks and the way Daniel drilled holes in the wood.

Grace listened. She answered. She smiled at Mina’s laughter.

At home, Mina colored at the kitchen table while Grace started dinner, the house filled with the smell of rice, garlic, and warm broth. Mina drew the river again, as she always did. This time she drew three figures on the path beside it. One had long hair. One had short hair. One was small with a ribbon.

Grace set bowls on the table. “Dinner,” she called.

Mina slid into her chair. She looked up. “Mom.”

“Yes.”

“Will we go to the river again?”

Grace sat across from her. “Yes.”

Mina nodded, satisfied, as if she heard something deeper too.

After dinner, Grace washed dishes while Mina took a bath. Grace folded laundry and set Mina’s clothes for tomorrow on the chair. She moved through the evening with no frantic edge.

When Mina climbed into bed, she asked for a hymn. Grace sang a simple one, low and steady. Mina’s eyes grew heavy.

Grace turned off the lamp and left the door cracked. She stood in the hallway for a moment and listened to Mina’s breathing settle into sleep.

Grace walked to the living room and sat on the couch with her Bible. She opened it without thinking of performance or duty. She opened it like someone opening a window.

Her eyes landed again on Colossians 3:15. She read it slowly.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

Grace closed her eyes and let the words sit in her chest. Peace as a ruler. Not fear. Not the need to control. Not the old ache.

She prayed in a low, simple voice.

“Lord, thank You for steady mercy. Thank You for carrying us. Please guard Mina. Please guard my heart. Please help me walk wise. Please bless Daniel. Help him walk faithful. Build our lives on You.”

She sat in silence after the prayer. The house hummed with familiar sounds. The refrigerator. The clock. The soft shift of the air through the vent.

Outside, crickets began their song again.

Grace stood and looked out the window. The sky held the last wash of daylight. Trees stood dark against it. Beyond them, out past the church grounds and the prayer garden, the river kept moving through Maple Ridge.

It did not hurry. It did not stop. It did what it was made to do.

Grace felt her breath slow. She did not feel a rush of certainty. She felt something better, a steady willingness to take the next step.

The next Sunday, Mina ran ahead again along the church sidewalk, then slowed on her own and waited at the steps. She held the railing and climbed with care. Grace followed with her choir folder tucked under her arm.

Daniel walked beside them.

His pace matched theirs. He carried no tool belt today. He carried a Bible. He opened the sanctuary door for Grace and Mina and stepped inside with them.

Music drifted through open windows as the choir warmed up. Sunlight lay bright on the wooden pews. The white steeple stood firm above them all.

The river moved behind the church grounds, calm and constant.

And in the quiet work of ordinary days, what remained held strong.

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?

Book 11: After the Storm

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 11

When a fierce storm ravages Maple Ridge, Rebecca Morgan faces the daunting task of rebuilding not only her community but also confronting the man who left her heart in ruins, Caleb Foster. As they navigate the wreckage, long-buried feelings and unresolved past decisions resurface, challenging their ability to forgive and move forward. Will the storm that tore through their town become the catalyst for healing, or will it remind them of what can never be repaired?

Book 12: The Winter Wedding

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 12

Thomas Hale has spent years in the quiet rhythms of Maple Ridge, content to let memories linger like the snow that blankets the town. But when Eleanor Brooks, with her gentle warmth and steadfast grace, steps into his world, he begins to feel the stirrings of a love he thought had faded with the past. Can they overcome the shadows of their losses and find a shared future in a winter that promises new beginnings?

Book 13: Where the Bells Ring

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 13

Claire Whitmore has devoted her life to preserving the cherished history of Maple Ridge Community Church, but when Andrew Morales arrives with plans for expansion, his vision threatens everything she holds dear. As they clash over blueprints and sacred spaces, neither can ignore the growing tension between tradition and progress, or the sparks between them. Can they find a way to honor the past while building a future together, or will their differences tear them apart?

Book 14: The Prayer Quilt

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 14

Eleanor Hayes, draped in years of quiet grief, finds solace in the vibrant threads of the prayer quilts she stitches for Maple Ridge's community. Walter Bennett, a steadfast figure in the town, carries his own silent sorrow, hidden beneath layers of everyday

service. When their paths intertwine over a new quilt project, will the warmth of their shared stitches mend the fractures of their hearts and offer them a second chance at love?

Book 15: The Road Back Home

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 15

When Jonathan Hale returns to Maple Ridge with nothing but faded dreams and regrets, he doesn't expect to find the same town he once fled still carrying memories of his past. Sarah Bennett, his childhood friend, has built a life in the town he abandoned, guarding her heart against old wounds and unspoken dreams. As their paths cross once more, can they find healing and hope in the heart of a community that remembers their every misstep, or will the shadows of what once was keep them apart forever?

Book 16: Under the Summer Revival

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 16

Caleb Monroe thought he had left the heartaches of Maple Ridge behind, but when the revival tents rise and Naomi Reyes stands at the heart of the preparations, he finds himself drawn back to the love he never truly forgot. Naomi, torn between her deep roots in the town and the dreams that call her beyond its borders, never expected Caleb's return to stir such emotions. As melodies of worship float across the summer evenings, can they overcome past regrets to find a future woven together by faith and newfound hope?

Book 17: The Pastor's Promise

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 17

Hannah Beth has dedicated her life to Maple Ridge Community Church, but with new leaders emerging and her own uncertainties growing, she wonders if her season of service is ending. Eli, her steadfast ministry partner, believes in her even when she doubts herself. As unexpected challenges test their faith and the church’s future, can they embrace the promise of redemption waiting just beyond the storm, or will fear and uncertainty keep them from a new beginning?

Book 18: The Steeple and the Stars

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 18

Benjamin Carter has always found comfort in the steady rhythms of Maple Ridge, but when a missions conference stirs a calling he thought he'd buried, his life suddenly feels fragile. Esther Kim thrives in quiet service and predictable days, yet Benjamin's newfound restlessness threatens the careful balance she's worked to protect. As unexpected feelings deepen and God's plans unfold, will they have the courage to follow His path, even if it leads them far from everything they've ever known?

Book 19: The House That Faith Built

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 19

Isaiah Navarro never expected that returning to Maple Ridge to restore a dilapidated house would mean confronting Hannah Whitaker, the woman whose heartache once mirrored his own. Years of separation have done little to heal the wounds of their shared past, and now, as they work side by side to provide refuge for a family in need, old feelings resurface amidst the sawdust and paint. Can they rebuild a future together, or will the shadows of the past prove too strong to overcome?

Book 20: The Wedding Beneath the Steeple

Maple Ridge Redemption, Book 20

Hannah Whitaker has dedicated her life to preserving her father's legacy and the beloved Maple Ridge Community Church. But when Eli Brooks, the man who once broke her heart and trust, returns to help with a wedding that holds the town's hopes, old wounds and new emotions threaten to unravel the careful balance she's maintained. As memories clash with the present, will Hannah find the strength to forgive and embrace the possibility of a love rebuilt on faith and forgiveness?

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.