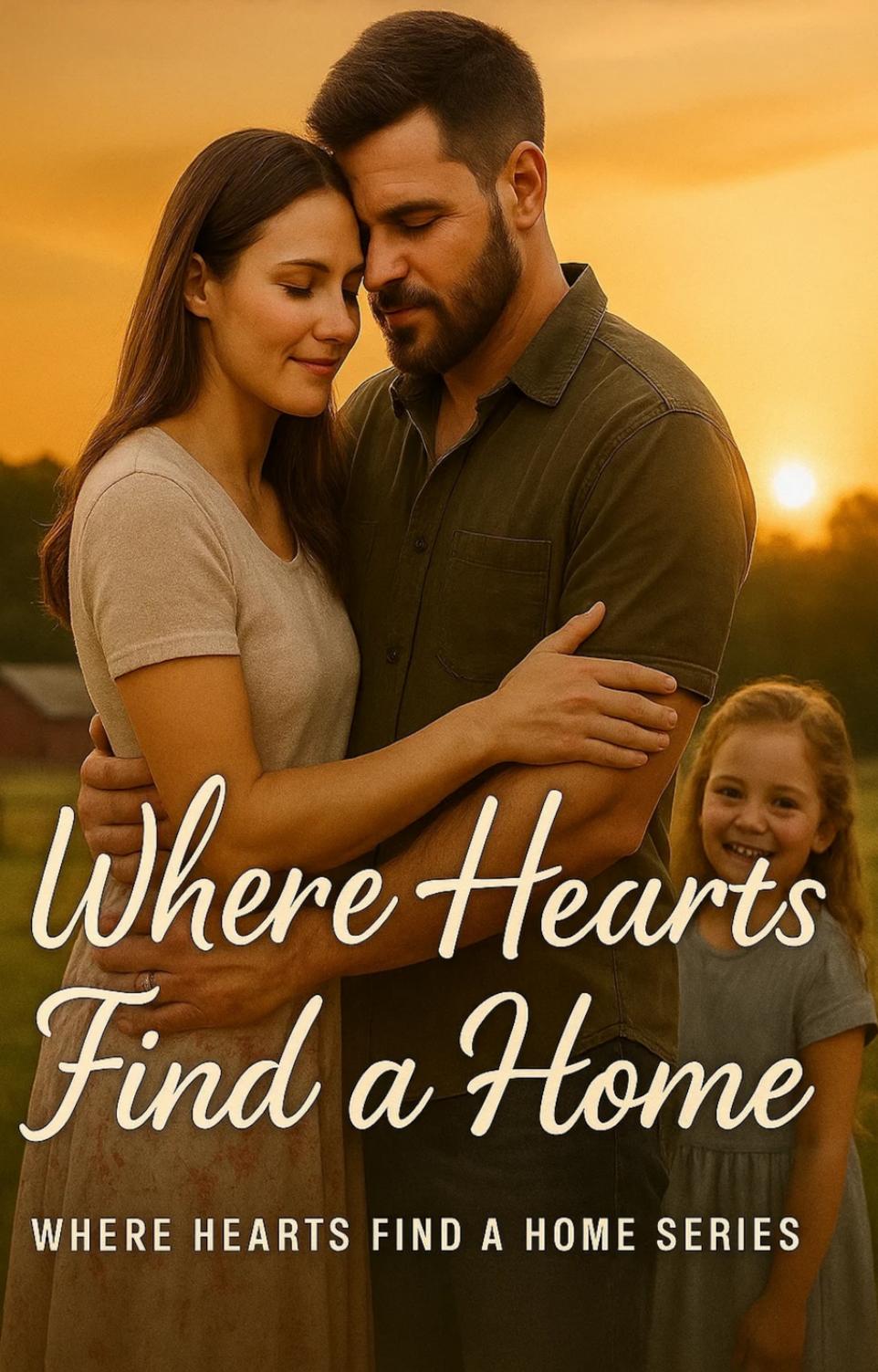


ANNA BETHANY



Where Hearts Find a Home

WHERE HEARTS FIND A HOME SERIES

WHERE HEARTS FIND A HOME

WHERE HEARTS FIND A HOME SERIES
BOOK ZERO



ANNA BETHANY



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INTRODUCTION

A widowed carpenter.

A hopeful nurse.

A six-year-old with a wish.

When **Grace Harper** takes a short-term nursing job in Cedar Ridge, she plans on quiet mornings and a fresh start. Instead, a church renovation pairs her with **Daniel Carter**, a steady craftsman who keeps his heart guarded and his little girl close.

Guided by a wise pastor and a cheerful town matchmaker, Grace and Daniel learn to trust again. He carries the ache of loss with honest strength. She brings warmth, prayer, and a gentle courage that invites joy. As snow dusts the hills and candles glow on Christmas Eve, a simple ornament with three names becomes a promise. The proposal is public, the vows are tender, and the happily-ever-after is rooted in faith.

Readers will love this small-town charm.

Where Hearts Find A Home is a sweet, faith-forward romance about love that heals, hope that stays, and a house where two broken hearts find a home.

CHAPTER 1



G race

THE RAIN STARTED HALFWAY up the ridge, a steady curtain that turned the winding road slick and the world beyond my windshield into a watercolor painting. I eased my little hatchback around the curve, wipers working double-time, my GPS insisting I had less than a mile to go before I reached Cedar Ridge.

After years in the city, I'd grown used to the sound of traffic and sirens. Out here, the only noise was the swish of tires on wet pavement and the occasional groan of the wind through the pines. It was the kind of atmosphere that could seep right down into my bones.

My phone buzzed in the cup holder. A text from my mother popped up: *Safe and sound yet?*

Almost there, I typed back at the stop sign before turning onto Main Street. The little town unfolded before me in postcard perfection. White-painted storefronts with striped

awnings, the warm glow of a bakery window, and the tall steeple of Cedar Ridge Community Church watching over it all.

I'd accepted a temporary position at the small clinic just a few weeks ago, the kind of job meant to "get my feet under me again," as my mother put it. I told myself it was just for the season. Three months. Enough time to figure out what came next.

A small sign outside the church read: *Community Renovation Weekend – Volunteers Needed.*

I wasn't sure what made me turn into the gravel lot, but I did. Maybe it was curiosity. Maybe it was the hope of meeting someone who could tell me where to find a decent cup of coffee in this town.

Inside the office, the scent of lemon polish and old hymnals greeted me. A silver-haired woman behind the desk looked up from her ledger and smiled like she'd been expecting me all along.

"Well, you must be Grace Harper," she said, rising with surprising energy. "Margaret Bennett. I'm the church secretary, and if you need to know anything about Cedar Ridge, I'm your girl."

I shook her hand, feeling the warmth in her grip. "I just saw the sign outside about volunteers. Thought I might help out."

Her eyes lit up. "Perfect timing. We're sanding pews, painting trim, fixing a few things around the fellowship hall this weekend. We'll start at eight, but coffee will be hot by seven-thirty. Oh." She leaned in with a conspiratorial smile. "You'll be working with Daniel Carter. Best carpenter in town. Bit quiet, but don't let that fool you. He's got a good heart."

I smiled politely, though I had no idea why she needed to

tell me that last part. I'd come here to work, not to meet someone.

Still, as I left with her list of volunteer to-dos in hand, I caught myself wondering what this Daniel Carter looked like. And why Margaret had that knowing sparkle in her eyes.



DANIEL

The rain hadn't let up by the time I closed up shop for the night. Sawdust clung to my sleeves, and the smell of fresh-cut cedar still hung in the air. It was a scent I'd grown so used to, it felt more like home than the four walls of my workshop.

I stacked the last of the new pew benches against the wall, running my hand along the smooth grain. Work like this was straightforward. Honest. Wood didn't talk back. It didn't leave without warning. It didn't ask questions I wasn't ready to answer.

Lily's voice drifted from the corner where she was coloring at the little table I'd set up for her. "Daddy, can we stop by the bakery on the way home?"

"Not tonight, bug. It's raining sideways out there." I tugged off my work gloves. "Besides, Mrs. Langford will have you spoiled before your birthday if we're not careful."

Her pout lasted exactly three seconds before she turned back to her crayons.

The bell over the shop door jingled, and Margaret Bennett stepped inside, shaking the rain from her umbrella. "Evening, Daniel. Got a minute?"

I raised a brow. "If this is about the renovation weekend, I already told you I'd be there."

She grinned in that way only Margaret could, like she

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knew exactly what I was going to say before I said it. “Good. Because you’ll be paired with someone new in town. Grace Harper. Sweet girl. A nurse at the clinic.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Margaret...”

“Oh, don’t look at me like that. I’m just making sure she meets the right people.”

Which, knowing Margaret, meant she was already plotting. I’d learned the hard way to be cautious when she used that tone.

Still, the name stuck in my mind after she left. Grace Harper.

For reasons I couldn’t quite explain, I wondered what she’d think of Cedar Ridge when the rain finally cleared.

CHAPTER 2



G race

BY THE TIME I got to the fellowship hall Saturday morning, the place was already buzzing. A few people were unloading paint cans from the back of a pickup, and someone had a radio playing old gospel tunes in the background. The air smelled faintly of sawdust and coffee.

Margaret spotted me the second I walked in. “Grace! Over here, dear.” She waved me toward a row of stacked chairs along the wall. “Daniel’s expecting you.”

I followed her to the corner where a man was sanding the end of a long wooden pew. He was taller than I expected, broad-shouldered, wearing a faded gray T-shirt and jeans. His hair was dark, cut just long enough to curl slightly at the ends, and there was a quiet focus in the way he worked.

“Daniel, this is Grace Harper,” Margaret said. “Grace, Daniel Carter.”

He looked up, offered a nod, and held out a hand. “Morning.”

“Morning,” I said, returning the handshake. His palm was warm and rough from years of carpentry, his grip solid. He was also extremely handsome.

Margaret gave us one last approving look before bustling off to direct someone else.

“You ever done any sanding before?” Daniel asked.

“Not really, but I’m a quick learner,” I said, pulling on the work gloves Margaret had given me.

He showed me how to hold the sander, and soon the hum of the tool joined the music from the radio. We worked side by side for the better part of an hour, conversation slow to start. Eventually, though, he asked where I’d come from, and I told him about leaving the city.

“It must’ve been a big change,” he said, smoothing the edge of a pew with practiced strokes.

“It is,” I admitted. “But I was ready for one.”

For a moment our eyes met, and something about the steadiness in his gaze made me feel like I’d said more than I meant to.

DANIEL

Grace wasn’t what I expected. I’d figured Margaret’s “new girl in town” would be talkative, maybe a little pushy. But Grace was easy to be around, even when we didn’t say much. She worked hard, didn’t complain about the dust, and asked good questions about the project. She was gorgeous, and although I think I covered it well, she took my breath away.

Around midday, we broke for lunch. People had brought crockpots of food, sandwiches, salads, and the like. The fellowship hall smelled like any potluck would, a jab to your

senses, that brought fond memories of home-cooked meals as a child.

Lily came running in from where she'd been "helping" Margaret sort paintbrushes. She made a beeline for Grace and plopped down beside her at one of the folding tables.

"You have paint on your nose," Lily announced.

Grace laughed, brushing at her face. "I do? Well, that's what happens when you work with your dad, I guess."

I shook my head. "Don't blame me. You're the one who kept leaning too close to the trim."

She grinned at me over the rim of her coffee cup, and I felt that strange, unexpected heart-punch again.

After lunch, Lily tugged at my sleeve. "Daddy, can Grace come get ice cream with us later?"

I opened my mouth to say no, but Grace was already smiling at her. "I'd love to, if it's alright with your dad."

Lily's hopeful eyes were impossible to resist. "Alright," I said, pretending to sound reluctant.

The truth was, I didn't mind. And that made me nervous. I hadn't felt this way about anyone since my loving wife passed away. It was enough that I had the sole responsibility of being a single dad to Lily, and that was my focus. I wasn't inviting anyone else into our lives anytime soon.

CHAPTER 3



MONDAY AFTERNOON at the clinic started out slow. I'd just finished updating a patient's chart when I heard a familiar little giggle in the hallway.

"Lily Carter, what happened to you?" I asked as she rounded the corner, holding her dad's hand and sporting a bright red scrape on her knee.

"She fell off her bike," Daniel said, looking mildly sheepish. "Took a turn too fast on the sidewalk. I figured it was better to have you check it than just slap a bandage on at home."

"Well, you came to the right place." I crouched down to Lily's level. "It doesn't look too bad, but let's get you cleaned up."

She climbed onto the exam table, swinging her legs while I gently cleaned the scrape. "Does it hurt?" I asked.

“Only when I bend it all the way,” she said, then brightened. “But Daddy says I’ll be fine by my birthday.”

I smiled. “I’m sure he’s right. When is your birthday?”

She sat up and puffed her chest out and exclaimed, “It’s SATURDAY! And I’ll be SIX!”

“My goodness!” I exclaimed. “You’re practically all grown up.”

She giggled as I tickled her ribs.

When I looked up, Daniel was watching me with an expression I couldn’t quite read. It was softer than the usual guarded look he carried, almost like he was seeing me for the first time.

“All set,” I said, taping the last bit of bandage in place. “Just keep it clean, and it’ll heal up quickly.”

“Thanks, Grace,” he said quietly.

I meant to brush it off with a quick “no problem,” but something in his tone made me pause. The way he said my name made it feel less like a formality and more like an invitation.

I simply said, “You’re welcome.”



DANIEL

I didn’t expect a scraped knee to change much, but something shifted that day at the clinic. Watching Grace with Lily... it did something to me. She was gentle without coddling, patient without making it a big production.

I’d seen plenty of people talk to Lily like she was a little kid who couldn’t understand a thing. Grace didn’t do that. She talked to her like she mattered, and Lily lit up because of it.

On the drive home, Lily asked, “Can Grace come to my birthday party?”

I hesitated. We didn't usually have a big crowd, just family and a few friends from church. But before I could answer, she added, "She's nice. She laughs at my jokes."

I chuckled. "Well, that's an important quality."

That night, after Lily went to bed, I sat at the kitchen table, sipping coffee and staring out at the dark yard. I'd spent four years keeping my life neat and contained. Grace felt like a gentle breeze sneaking in through a window I didn't realize I'd left open.

I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. But I couldn't deny I what I was feeling.

I prayed for strength.

CHAPTER 4



WEDNESDAY EVENING, I walked into the fellowship hall carrying a notebook and my well-worn Bible. Margaret had invited me to the women's Bible study, and although I'd hesitated at first, something urged me on.

The group was warm and welcoming, with about a dozen women of all ages. We started with prayer, then dove into the book of Ruth. I'd read the story many times, but tonight something about Ruth's loyalty and God's faithfulness felt new. The words seemed to speak directly to the part of me that still wondered if I truly belonged.

When we wrapped up, I was helping stack chairs when Margaret appeared at my side. "So," she said with a little smile, "how's the renovation project going?"

"It's been good," I said. "Daniel's been showing me how to sand pews without leaving swirl marks."

Her eyes twinkled. "He's a good man, Grace. Just needs a reason to smile more often."

I gave her a playful look. "You trying to play matchmaker or something?"

"I'm just saying you've got a way about you," she replied, patting my arm.

On the walk home, the air was cool and filled with the scent of pine. I thought about Margaret's words. Maybe she saw something in me I hadn't seen in myself. ...*You've got a way about you.* What way is that, I wonder? Did I really have enough in me to give any extras away to anyone else? I doubted it.



DANIEL

Friday night, a summer storm rolled in hard. By the time I locked up the shop, the rain was coming down in sheets, pounding the tin roof so loud I could barely hear myself think. The power flickered twice before going out completely.

Lily was spending the night with my sister, so the house was too quiet. I thought about Grace's rental across town. She'd only been in Cedar Ridge a few weeks. I wasn't sure if she even had a flashlight.

I grabbed one of mine and drove over, telling myself it was just the neighborly thing to do. The roads were slick, headlights cutting thin beams through the storm.

When she opened the door, candlelight spilled into the rain. Her hair was damp, and she held the candle like she'd been in the middle of searching for something.

"Daniel? Is everything alright?"

"Power's out all over. Thought you might need this." I handed her the flashlight.

Her smile lit up more than the candles she was burning all over the house. "Thanks. I was just about to dig through boxes for more matches."

Inside, she poured coffee from a thermos she'd kept hot, and we sat at her little kitchen table. The only light came from the candles between us, flickering shadows across the walls.

We didn't talk much—just shared a few memories about storms when we were kids. She told me that her experience with power outages as a child, was the reason she had the foresight to brew her coffee and pour it immediately into a thermos. Not only did it keep the coffee hot all day, but after about 20 minutes on the warmer, coffee starts tasting bitter and burnt. Pouring it in a thermos fixes that right up.

"Well! Learned something new. I'll definitely have to do that at home from now on!"

"You should," she replied. "It makes all the difference."

There was something about sitting with her, here in her own territory, that made me feel at complete ease. The warm, quiet glow of the candles kept me grounded to the moment, and the outside storm just faded away.

The power was still off when I left. I knew she would be fine, and was prepared, probably more so than I was ...and that was saying something.

As I drove through the rain back to the farm, I asked God to help me to overcome my fear of loving another woman besides Lily's mother. It had been years since her passing and over time, the scars healed over, but my mind needed to play catch-up.

CHAPTER 5



G race

SATURDAY MORNING FOUND me in Daniel's driveway, arms full of streamers, balloons, and paper plates. He'd asked if I could help set up for Lily's birthday party, and I couldn't say no.

When I stepped inside, the kitchen smelled faintly of vanilla cake. Lily was in the living room, supervising the arrangement of party favors with all the seriousness of a general planning a battle.

"Grace! You came!" she said, running over to give me a quick hug before darting back to her post.

Daniel emerged from the hallway, carrying a box of decorations. "She's been talking about this party all week," he said with a faint smile.

"I can tell," I replied, setting my supplies on the counter. "Where do you want me to start?"

He handed me a roll of tape. "Balloons on the porch rail.

Streamers in the kitchen. And if you know how to make a punch that doesn't taste like cough syrup, you're in charge of that too."

I laughed. "Consider it done."

By the time guests arrived, the house was full of laughter, chatter, and the scent of grilled burgers. Lily beamed as she tore into her presents, and when she opened the art set I'd picked out, she threw her arms around me in thanks.

Watching Daniel with her that afternoon; patient, attentive, always ready with a joke or a gentle word, made my heart yearn for a man like that. I'd been wondering if God had a reason for bringing me to Cedar Creek, other than just a job opportunity. Maybe he was the reason for it. I guess we both needed some healing, and this was a good start: just friends, getting to know one another, and filling the loneliness we faced each day.

That was enough.



DANIEL

The party couldn't have gone better. Friends from church filled the backyard, kids ran around with balloons tied to their wrists, and Lily was happier than I'd seen her in months.

I'd been nervous about asking Grace to help, but she fit right in. She moved through the kitchen and backyard like she'd adopted the place. Even my sister, who had a sharp eye for anyone getting too close to Lily, seemed to like her. And if my sister put her stamp of approval on Grace, then I *knew* she could be trusted.

Late in the afternoon, after the last guest had left, I stood at the sink rinsing dishes while Grace tied up a garbage bag. She didn't even have to be asked. She ran on autopilot,

knowing exactly what needed to be done to put the house back in order. She caught my eye and smiled. It was natural and real. It was as if someone had cracked a window in my stuffy heart, and let a cool breeze flow in.

After Lily went to bed, as was my habit, I sat at the kitchen table with my Bible open. I'd been so cautious, all my life. My late wife and I had been high school sweethearts. We dated for years before we finally got engaged, then stayed engaged for years. It's a wonder she put up with me for so long. But she had the patience of Job, and she loved me. I saw those same qualities in Grace today.

As I glanced at my opened Bible, my eyes fell on these words from 1 Corinthians 13:

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails....

That's a pretty long list. *God help me.* I fell short on so many of these attributes. But when it came to Grace, I had to acknowledge - both to myself and to God - that I was afraid.

CHAPTER 6



BY SUNDAY AFTERNOON the sky had opened to a soft blue, with a freshness that can only come after a rain. I sat at my little kitchen table with a mug of tea and my journal, trying to put my finger on the roller coaster of emotions I'd been feeling all week. It helps me to write things down, to unburden myself, no matter how absurd. The pen and the page could handle it, so I wrote.

I'd told myself I had come to Cedar Ridge for work and rest, nothing more. But there it was, persistent and unashamed: I was falling for Daniel. Not because he was steady with a sander or handy with a toolbox, but because he loved Lily with a tenderness that made me ache, and because he carried his losses with humility instead of bitterness. He listened when I talked, even when I rambled on about nothing. He laughed at himself, he laughed at Lily's silly jokes. He bowed his head before meals.

I traced the rim of my mug and thought about my broken engagement, part of the reason I'd accepted the job offer here. I needed to get away.

My fiancé and I had a whirlwind of a romance, hot and heavy, and at times, our actions were shameful. But we were "madly in love." We got engaged quickly. We made wedding plans that looked good on paper, but the longer we planned, the more caution I felt in my spirit. Things were moving too fast. That may not have been an issue if I was marrying God's chosen for me, like my parents who met and married in seven months. They put God in the center from the beginning, and their marriage stood strong, even through the tough times. But my ex and I put God on the back burner and reveled in the wedding planning and reveled in each other, shoving God out of the picture. Thank God for a praying mother. She knew that He was the only one who could yank me out of my selfishness and spare me a lifetime of heartache. I know that now, and am forever grateful.

My eyes were opened only about a week before the wedding, when I caught him cheating with one of the girls I worked with, and I called it quits. God spared me in the nick of time. I definitely didn't want to make the same mistake this time.

I opened my Bible and my eyes fell upon these words in Proverbs:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

I whispered these words aloud, then wrote it in my journal and underlined it twice. I didn't need a five-year plan. I just needed to trust that God sees around the corner, and He knows what lies ahead.

I closed my eyes and prayed simply. *Lord, steady my heart. Guard Daniel's too. I don't want to force anything. I just want to follow the path You've placed before me.*

Peace settled in my mind and my heart. The Word always does that. It touches the deepest recesses of the soul and cleans away the cobwebs.

I didn't have an immediate answer about my feelings for Daniel, but I wasn't afraid of the question anymore.



DANIEL

Pastor Mike's office smelled like coffee and old books. After asking if I could counsel with him, he waved me in after the second service and shut the door behind us. Instead of sitting behind his desk, he sat in the chair next to me, with the air of a man who was used to this and ready for anything. But he was kind and respectful.

“What’s on your mind, Daniel?”

I rubbed a thumb over a nick in the arm of the chair. “I think I’m falling in love...and I don’t know what to do with that.”

His eyes warmed. “Grace?”

I released a quiet laugh. “Was it that obvious?”

“Only to people who love you,” he said. “Tell me what’s hard for you to figure out.”

I stared at the window and watched a sparrow land on the sill. “I loved my wife. I still do. I promised her I’d take care of Lily, and I have. But for a long time it felt like there wasn’t room for anything else. Now there might be, and part of me is grateful, and part of me feels guilty and afraid.”

Pastor Mike nodded. “Grief and love don’t cancel each other. They often share the same room. Loving again isn’t a betrayal. It’s an acknowledgment that God keeps giving good

gifts, and honoring that. Your wife will never, and can never, be replaced. God is glorified when you rest in the path He's set before you without fear. I'm sure your late wife would want you to honor God and be happy."

I swallowed. "What if I hurt Grace? What if I move too fast? Lily's in the middle of all this. I'm not going to beat around the bush about it."

"Then don't," he said, gentle but direct. "Pray before you speak. Lead with honesty. Guard her heart while you offer yours. And Daniel, don't forget to let her choose, too. She's a woman of faith. Trust God to shepherd both of you."

He opened his Bible, read a few lines from Romans chapter five. *"Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.*

"Does that make sense to you?"

I only nodded my head. There was a lump in my throat that blocked my vocal chords.

Pastor Mike gave me his blessing "if I needed it," and "if it would make me feel better," to pursue Grace. Then he prayed with me.



THAT EVENING I found Grace in the church foyer helping Margaret stack hymnals after the youth meeting. Lily was waiting for me quietly in a pew with a hymnal open, pretending to read the words and sing them. My heart was full. Grace caught my eye and beamed with pleasant surprise. She told me she was almost done, and that she'd walk out with me and Lily. I waited. Gladly.

The air was crisp, and the street lamps along Maple Lane cast soft pools of light on the sidewalk. I offered to walk her home.

"I knew you were somewhere in the church, because I saw Lily sitting in one of the pews pretending to understand a hymnal. She is adorable!" We both chuckled.

"Pastor's message was really good this morning," she added.

"It was," I answered. "I was just in his office talking with him. That's why I was there." That's all I said. I wasn't sure I wanted to pour out my soul to her just yet. It felt cowardly, but I was still processing my meeting with the pastor and wanted to keep his counsel close to my chest at the moment.

She looked up at me curiously, but held her tongue.

We walked along in comfortable silence. My hand brushed hers once, then again. The second time our fingers lingered, and Lily, in her child-like tact, shouted, "Oh, just HOLD HANDS already!!"

We had both been so engrossed in each other, that Lily's outburst shocked us into laughter and broke the ice. I grabbed Grace's hand, her fingers interlaced tightly with mine, and we were content.

"That's better," Lily mumbled behind us.

Out of the mouth of babes..., I thought.

At her porch steps Grace turned to me, the porch light casting a gentle golden glow around her hair. "Thank you for walking me home." She didn't let go of my hand.

"Anytime," I said, and meant it. "Good night, Grace." Still holding hands.

"Good night, Daniel."

Neither of us moved, not wanting to feel the loneliness of unclasped hands.

"Um, Dad..." Lily got my attention.

Still locking eyes with Grace, I replied, "What is it, Sweetheart."

"Dad, I'm hungry," Lily said in her sweetest voice. It was her gentle way of letting me know that she wanted to go

home. *Bless that sweet child*, I thought. God could not have given me a sweeter blessing.

I squeezed Grace's hand one last time, our fingers parted, and I immediately felt the loss of it.

"Good night," we both said at the same time.

I waited as Grace climbed the steps, walked across her porch, entered her front door with one last look, a smile, and a wave.

As we retraced our steps back the church, Lily put her hand in mine and skipped along, matching my stride and humming a made-up song.

The joy in Lily's eyes whenever she saw Grace, was a message to me from a very loving God: *Trust me*.

Such a simple truth, *trust*. I prayed that I'd have the same child-like faith that God seemed to have given my daughter in abundance.

CHAPTER 7



SUNDAY LUNCH at Daniel's was casual, but my nerves made it feel quite formal. I'd baked a peach cobbler that morning, hoping it would be a safe choice: sweet and familiar, not too fussy.

Lily met me at the door before I could even knock. "You brought dessert! Daddy, she brought dessert!"

Daniel appeared in the hallway, smiling faintly as he took the dish from me. "You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to," I said, stepping inside. The house smelled like roasted chicken and fresh bread, and the table was already set.

We ate with easy conversation, Lily chattering about starting school, Daniel asking about my work at the clinic. Then, in the middle of passing the bread basket, Lily looked at me and asked, "Can you stay forever?"

The words caught in my throat. Daniel froze for a second,

then cleared his throat and said gently, “That’s not really how visits work, bug.”

Lily just shrugged and reached for more chicken. But my heart had already stumbled over itself. I didn’t answer her question aloud, but part of me whispered *yes*.

After lunch, I helped clear the table. Daniel insisted that I was their guest and was not supposed to clear the dishes, but I insisted. *I want to be more than just a guest, Daniel.* That was my glaring thought the whole time we were in the kitchen.



DANIEL

The plumbing under Grace’s kitchen sink had been complaining for days. I knew because she mentioned it while we were washing dishes after lunch. I offered to take a look, and an hour later I was lying on my back under her sink with a wrench in hand.

“You know,” I said, tightening the last connection, “you could’ve called the landlord for this.”

“I could have,” she said from where she sat cross-legged on the floor beside me, “but then I wouldn’t have gotten to watch you try to figure out the ‘lefty-loosey’ thing while upside down.”

I gave her a mock glare and crawled out from under the sink. “For the record, I knew exactly what I was doing.”

She laughed, and the sound warmed the small kitchen. I stood to test the faucet, letting the water run clear. No more leaks.

“Looks like you’re good to go,” I said.

Her smile softened. “Thanks, Daniel. Really.”

Something about the way she said it, made me feel like she meant more than just the plumbing.

I wanted to tell her what had been stirring in me since the

birthday party. I wanted to tell her about my meeting with Pastor Mike and tell her about his blessing. I wanted to spill it all, but I'm a man of few words.

Instead, I looked at her and held her gaze as I wiped my grease-stained fingers. She stared back.

"Can I kiss you?" I asked after an awkward pause.

She didn't answer, and for a moment, I thought I'd just blown it. But the next thing I knew, she threw her arms around me and planted the sweetest kiss on my lips. I threw the rag I was using on the floor, returned the hug, and kissed her gently.

This was more like it.

CHAPTER 8



THE CEDAR RIDGE fellowship hall was already bustling when I arrived Thanksgiving morning. The air was rich with the smell of roasted turkey, cinnamon, and fresh rolls. Folding tables lined the walls, stacked with pie tins and bread baskets, while volunteers in aprons hurried between the kitchen and the serving line.

I tied on an apron and joined Daniel at the food station. “Green beans or mashed potatoes?” I asked.

“You strike me as a mashed potatoes kind of person,” he said, handing me the serving spoon.

“You’d be right.”

The next two hours were a steady rhythm of scooping, smiling, and wishing people happy Thanksgiving. Every so often, I’d glance at Daniel, and he’d be smiling at someone in the line, one of those quiet, genuine smiles that made a person feel valued. We worked well together. No stepping on

each other's toes, no awkward pauses. Just a steady, easy partnership.

When the last plate was served, we helped pack leftovers for delivery. Margaret gave us both a knowing look when she passed by with a pie tin, but didn't say a word. Miracles never cease.



DANIEL

That evening, after the outreach wrapped up, I asked Grace if she wanted to go out for a bit. She agreed. I asked Margaret to watch Lily, and she happily obliged.

We drove to Lake Harmony. The water was glassy and still, reflecting the twists and turns of the bare trees. Winter was coming quickly, and there was a chill in the air. The sun was already low, throwing long shadows across the trail.

We strolled, taking our time.

"I've always liked this time of year," Grace said. "It feels like the earth is resting."

I nodded. "My late wife, Rachel, used to say the same thing."

She glanced at me, not uncomfortably, just listening.

"I still miss her," I said, the words as honest as they'd been the day she died. "But lately I've been thinking... maybe God's not done writing my story yet. And maybe, if you're willing, you could be written into the upcoming chapters."

She stopped walking, her breath visible in the cooling air. "Oh, my dear Daniel. I know it took courage to say that to me."

"I don't feel very brave," I admitted. "I'm as nervous as a cat in a room full of rocking chairs."

She didn't answer right away, but her eyes softened. We

started walking again, and after a few steps, we clasped our hands together, comfortable in the gesture.

Again, she stopped, took both of my hands in hers and met my gaze.

“Daniel, when I came here, I was running. I was engaged to a charming and handsome man with an incredible sanguine personality. We were in a whirlwind romance, hastily planning our wedding, and focusing on nothing but. At least I was. A week before our wedding day, I caught him with one of my co-workers. He confessed to being in the affair for quite some time, all throughout our engagement. I was devastated. I screamed at him, punched at him, threw a tantrum and left.

“Obviously I called the wedding off. He didn’t seem to care. I was despondent for weeks afterwards. Every phone call I had to make to the invited guests to tell them the wedding was off, was like a fresh cut. I called everyone on the guest list, returned the early wedding gifts we’d already received, and mourned. I died the death of a thousand cuts. It was slow and painful.

“Indeed, my old self died. I have a praying mother who interceded for me, day and night. She knew in her spirit what kind of man he was and tried to warn me, but I was head strong and “in love,” ignoring her warnings.

“I mourned for several weeks, and went to God for forgiveness, solace and healing. It was at that point, I received an offer to work here at the Cedar Ridge Clinic. I had nothing to lose, so I packed everything in my little hatchback and hit the road.

“And the first time I watched you interact with your precious daughter, the way you respected the women in your life, and the way you faced your loss with humility, I was ashamed. I felt so unworthy of a man of your caliber, a man of your deep faith...

“...But I fell in love with you.”

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. I released my hand from her grip and brushed the tears from her cheeks, and tucked a stray hair behind her ear.

“So you, too, have suffered loss,” I tried to comfort her.

“Yes, but I wouldn’t have had to face it, had it not been for my stubbornness. Are you sure you want a broken girl like me, with all these skeletons in my closet?”

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, you will not despise,” the words of Psalm 51 slipped out of my mouth like a prayer before I could stop them. “Grace, you are a treasure, and you are loved. Loved by God... and loved by me. Your brokenness simply gives God a chance to heal you. Your contrite heart is the greatest gift you could give Him. He will not despise you, nor will I resent your past. God’s forgiveness has made you into the beautiful woman you are today, and all is well.”

She wept, and I held her tightly in my arms. I vowed that I would never in her lifetime, give her a reason to be afraid or broken again. I prayed for her, for me, and for God to weave her into every chapter of my life from here on out.

CHAPTER 9



*G*race

THREE DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, the world outside my little rental was wrapped in peace. Snow had dusted Cedar Ridge overnight, softening the outlines of fences and rooftops, and the morning sunlight spilled across my kitchen table in a warm, golden wash. In front of me sat a small collection of craft supplies I'd gathered over the past week: a spool of red-and-white gingham ribbon, a pair of fine-tipped paint-brushes, and a plain white ceramic ornament I'd found at the gift shop in town.

I dipped my brush into the black paint, steadying my hand as I began to write in looping, careful script: **Daniel**. Then, **Grace**. Finally, **Lily**. Seeing our names together like that, joined on the same smooth curve of porcelain, made heart skip a beat. Around the edges, I added a delicate frame of tiny evergreen sprigs, each needle painted with patient strokes, and dotted in clusters of bright red berries

until the ornament seemed to hold its own little piece of Christmas.

When the paint dried, I tied the gingham ribbon into a neat bow at the top, letting the tails frame the ornament under it. It wasn't elaborate. It wasn't store-bought perfection. But it felt right. This ornament was more than decoration, it was a declaration. A family. A place to belong, a season that had unfolded into something beautiful.

I cupped the ornament in both hands, letting its smooth surface warm against my skin. Closing my eyes, I prayed softly. "Lord, if this is Your plan, keep us close to You first. And let our home, whatever shape it takes, be built on You, our Strong Foundation." My voice wavered at the end, but the peace that followed was steady and sure.

Carefully, I wrapped the ornament in a square of tissue paper and slipped it into my bag. I didn't know exactly when I would give it to Daniel, but I trusted I would know when the moment was right. Some gifts didn't need to be rushed. They simply waited, ready to be placed into the right hands at the right time.



DANIEL

The first flakes began to fall as we pulled into the church lot, light as sifted flour. I parked near the back, killed the engine, and sat for a second with my hands on the steering wheel. Lily hummed a carol in the back seat. Grace turned toward me with that quiet smile that settles everything inside me. I told myself to breathe. I had prayed about this for weeks, but my chest still felt too tight.

Inside, Cedar Ridge Community Church looked and smelled like Christmas. Evergreen garlands wrapped the banister and the window sills. The crèche on the front table

was dusted with a little glitter from the children's pageant. Beeswax candles sent up thin ribbons of scent that made me think of every Christmas Eve of my life, and how this one was about to change the next ones forever.

We found a pew near the front. Lily nestled between us and leaned into Grace the way a sapling leans toward sunlight. I watched them talk in whispers. Grace adjusted the bow on Lily's hair, then squeezed her hand. My palm went to my pocket. The ring box was small and square, the edges worn from my thumb running over them while I worked, while I read, while I prayed.

The service began with, *O Come, All Ye Faithful*. The whole room lifted the melody with one voice. Pastor Mike spoke about the night God stepped into our darkness and brought a light that no shadow could overcome. He talked about how hope came to earth in the form of an baby. I thought about the day I sat in his office and asked him if loving again would dishonor what I had lost. He told me that love given by God never dishonors, it only multiplies it.

My hands were steady by the time the ushers dimmed the lights for the last hymn. The sanctuary fell into a holy hush. A single flame passed from candle to candle down the aisles, until every face glowed with warm light. *Silent Night* rose soft and sure. Grace's voice mingled with mine, and Lily's sweet little eyes were soaking it all in. She had a look of awe on her face. I knew at that point, that my blessings were more than I could have imagined.

When the last verse faded, I turned to Grace and took her candle, set it carefully in the holder on the back of the pew. My fingers found hers. I focused on her eyes and the soft light within them.

"Grace," I said, my voice steady and strong. "God brought you into my life when I least expected it. You brought laughter back to my home and peace back to my heart."

The congregation hushed behind us, looking with bated breath. I went to one knee on the runner, and opened the box. The ring was a simple band with a small diamond that caught the candlelight and seemed to glow. Lily stood by me, with a huge grin on her face.

"Will you do the honor of becoming my wife?" I asked, "And—"

Lily's voice chimed in, "—And be my mother?"

Her hand flew to her mouth, and her eyes brimmed. She nodded before the words came, and when they did, they were clear. "Yes, Daniel. Yes, Lily."

Applause rose around us, gentle and warm. I heard Margaret's laugh and knew several were drying their eyes of tears. Lily squealed and wrapped her arms around both of us at once. I slid the ring onto Grace's finger. It was a perfect fit. When I stood, I folded her into my arms and felt the soft shake of her breath against my shoulder. I did not kiss her in the sanctuary. But Lord, I wanted to. I wanted the kiss to be deep and long, letting the whole world know that she was *mine*.

We stepped into the aisle as people came to congratulate us. Pastor Mike reached us first and pulled me into a quick embrace. "Proud of you," he said, then smiled at Grace. "And very happy for you." Margaret fussed with her purse until she found a handkerchief, then patted my cheek like I was still ten years old. Lily took Grace's hand and studied the ring with deep, curious approval.

When the crowd began to thin, Grace pressed a small wrapped bundle into my palm. "I have something for you too," she said, her voice soft with emotion. I opened the tissue paper and found the white ceramic ornament, smooth and cool against my skin. The hand-painted design shone with bright colors. I knew it was carefully and skillfully made. When I saw our names painted in a neat and precise

scrolling, I let the tears fall freely. What a beautiful gift from my beautiful soon-to-be bride. She knew me. I cleared my throat and nodded, because words escaped me.

“Thank you,” I said finally. “For this. For saying yes. For trusting God with me.”

She leaned her forehead to mine. “We will keep trusting Him. One step at a time.”

Outside, the snow had picked up. Flakes spun in the air beneath the streetlight, bright and slow. We stood on the steps with Lily between us and watched our breath make soft clouds in the air. I slid my arm around Grace and pulled her close. The bell in the steeple chimed the hour, full and steady, and the sound rolled over the town the way light bursts over the horizon at dawn.

In the truck, Lily fell asleep before we reached the farm. Grace rested her head on my shoulder. At a red light I looked down at her hand in mine, the ring glinting in the glow from the dash. I thought of my carpenter shop, the long afternoons of sanding and fitting joints, the way good wood responds to gentle hands. God had been doing that with my life. I could see it now. He had been shaping and smoothing, joining what I never could have joined on my own.

When we carried Lily inside, Grace paused at the little tree in my front room. She found a branch at eye level and said, “This looks like the perfect spot to hang that ornament. What do you think?” I agreed, and hung it there. The lights caught the curve of the porcelain. Our names turned slowly in the draft from the heater, like a tiny banner that said exactly what my heart knew:

This is our home. God is here. And from this night forward, we will build the rest together.

CHAPTER 10



THE MORNING of our wedding dawned clear and cold. Frost traced lace along the edges of my window, and the first sunlight spilled over Cedar Ridge in a gentle gold that made the whole town look new. I woke before my alarm, heart already racing, nerves fluttering like ribbon caught in a breeze. Before I arose, I pulled the blanket up to my shoulders and prayed. I thanked God for bringing us this far, asked Him to steady my thoughts, and placed the day into His hands. Peace settled over me like a hug from above.

I dressed slowly, careful with each button and clasp, listening to the beating of my own heart. When I stepped outside, the air smelled like woodsmoke and pine. The church bell gave a single toll as I climbed the steps to the side entrance, and the sound rolled through me like a blessing.

The sanctuary looked like Christmas without feeling commercial. Evergreen garlands draped the altar and the rail,

their needles catching soft light from the windows. White candles flickered along the sills, sending up the faint honey scent of beeswax. Someone had placed a simple arrangement of holly and baby's breath beside the pulpit. It was all exactly right. Beautiful, but not busy. Reverent, but joyful.

Margaret met me in the small room off the sanctuary with a bustle of pins and gentle authority. She set my bouquet on a chair, checked the clasp of my necklace, and fussed with my veil until it fell in a clean, soft line. "You look radiant, dear," she said, then squeezed my shoulders with hands that felt like a mother's. "Now do not forget to breathe." She pressed her forehead to mine for a quick moment and whispered a prayer. It was short and steady. I felt my racing mind still under her words.

Guests began to gather in the sanctuary. I could hear their shuffling and low conversations, as they found their seats. I heard Lily's laugh and pictured her in her pale dress, curls pinned back with a little sprig of baby's breath, waiting with more excitement than any flower girl, ever. Somewhere near the front, I knew Daniel stood with Pastor Mike, planning the last minute details.

I had invited my family, of course, and the ushers were probably escorting my mother and brother to their respective places on the front row. My father had agreed to give me away, even though he'd never met Daniel beforehand. But during the brief introductions yesterday when they arrived, my parents fell in love with his gentle spirit, and his gentle daughter, Lily. Both of them were smitten and confident, that God had indeed arranged our union. They couldn't be happier. So it was with delight, that Dad rapped on my door to tell me things were just about ready.

I was more than ready. I told him to come in. He slowly opened the door to my dressing room, peaked his head in, and smiled wide.

"Oh, Honey, you look beautiful and radiant!" He came fully into the room and gave me the biggest bear hug, careful not to step on my dress. He told me later, it was one of his proudest moments, to see me looking so radiant and happy.

When the music began, the door opened, and my father offered his arm. His eyes were bright and a little damp. I slipped my arm through his, set my shoulders, and stepped into the aisle. Faces turned, warm and familiar. Friends from the clinic. Neighbors from the square. Church family who had become our family.

My eyes sought out Daniel's. There he was, handsome as ever, and beaming with pride from ear to ear. He wore a navy tuxedo that made his eyes look a softer blue. Our gazes locked on my way down the aisle, and I was tempted to run up and throw my arms around him and never let him go. But the firm hand of my father held me steady.

After what seemed an eternity, we finally reached the altar. When asked, "Who giveth this woman to be wed to this man?", he stood tall and with a booming voice declared, "Her mother and I!" He then took my hand, placed it in Daniel's, and walked away. I couldn't help myself: I was already crying tears of joy.

Pastor Mike welcomed everyone with a smile and spoke of God's design for marriage. He talked about covenant and kindness, about faithfulness that does not depend on feelings alone. He read from Colossians about bearing with one another and forgiving as the Lord forgave us. He spoke of building a house on the Rock, not the sand, and I could feel those words settle deep into my spirit. He was helping us pour the foundation in which our marriage would be built.

We exchanged rings. Daniel's hands were steady as he slid the band onto my finger, and spoke the vows he had written:

Grace, today I take your hand with a heart full of gratitude to God. I promise to love you with a love rooted in Christ, to lead and to follow as He leads us, and to build our home on His word. I will pray with you, listen before I speak, and speak truth in kindness. I will guard your heart, celebrate your laughter, and stand beside you in every season, in the calm and in the storm. As God is my witness, I will be faithful only to you, until death do us part.

My tears continued to flow. His promises to me reached the very depths of my soul.

Now it was my turn. I slipped the wedding band on his finger, and spoke my vows that I had written for him:

Daniel, today I stand before God, our family, and our friends with a grateful heart. I promise to love you with a love rooted in Christ, to seek His wisdom with you, and to keep Him at the center of our home. I will pray with you and for you. I will be quick to listen and slow to speak, to forgive freely, and to speak truth with gentleness. I will guard your trust as a holy gift, honor the history that shaped you, and welcome the days to come with hope. I will cherish Lily, guide her with tenderness, and love her as my own, to ensure our home is a place of safety, laughter, and grace. I will stand beside you when the work is difficult and rejoice with you when the harvest is full. I will be faithful to you alone, as long as we both shall live.

His hand tightened around mine while I recited my vows. Tears welled up in his eyes, and were now unashamedly cascading down his face. To me, he was the most handsome and godly man I have ever known.

Pastor Mike lifted his hands in a quiet benediction and pronounced us husband and wife. Daniel leaned in and kissed me, gentle and sure, and the sanctuary erupted in applause, handclaps and whistles. It was definitely an incred-

ibly joyous moment, one I will never forget. Lily skipped toward the altar with my bouquet high in the air, beaming like she had been crowned queen for the day. Her sweet, child-like antics made everyone laugh, and she drank it in.

We turned to face our friends and loved ones, smiling brightly, and began to walk back down the aisle. Several of Daniel's friends high-fived him on his way to the back of the church, but he held onto me tightly.

I knew this was the beginning of sure foundation, being built by Christ, and I could trust that the home he built for us, would stand the test of time.



DANIEL

The reception hall was warmly lit. The old-fashioned incandescent lights strung along the ceiling in a wheel pattern, going from corner to corner, illuminating the entire room. Long tables along the sides, held cloches and warmers, brought in fresh from the caterers while the ceremony was taking place.

People I had known my whole life shook our hands and hugged us and told us we were a blessing. Someone started a hymn on the piano in the corner and the whole crowd drifted toward the melody as if it had its own gravity.

Lily tugged at my sleeve and pulled me toward the dessert table. "Try the chocolate cake," she whispered, as if it were a secret mission. When I took a bite, she watched my face like a judge at a contest. I gave her a solemn nod and she grinned, satisfied that the cake had passed inspection. Grace laughed beside us, her veil pinned back now, her cheeks still pink from all the smiling. I caught her hand and didn't let it go.

Pastor Mike tapped his fork against a glass and the room went still. He stood near the head table, his smile reaching all

the way to the corners of his eyes. “Before you go, Daniel and Grace, we have something for you.”

Margaret swept forward with a large manilla envelope and held it out to me. “The church family wanted to give you a proper send-off.”

I took the envelope and felt the thickness of it. Inside were cards and notes on every kind of paper, from children’s construction cutouts to formal stationery. There were gift cards tucked in between, and folded bills, and even a hand-written map with a star by a pie shop along the mountain road. I passed the notes to Grace and she read pieces out loud. “We prayed for this day,” one said. Another read, “Use this for something impractical. Preferably pie.” A third was from an older couple who had been married for fifty-five years. “Make Christ your first conversation every morning,” they wrote. “Make laughter your second.”

Margaret leaned down to kiss Lily’s hair. “We will take good care of her while you are away,” she said, then winked at our girl. “We have a schedule that would impress the mayor. Movies, board games, and pancakes with too much syrup.”

Lily looked up at us and tried to be brave, but her bottom lip began to quiver. I crouched down to look her in the eye. “One week,” I said, tapping the tip of her nose. “You will have so much fun that you’ll forget to miss us until bedtime. Then you can miss us a little, and we’ll miss you a LOT. Deal?”

She nodded and wrapped her arms around my neck. When she let go, she hugged Grace with the same fierceness, then handed her a construction paper heart she had made at the kids’ table. Grace tucked it safely into her purse like it was a precious treasure.

We said our last goodbyes while friends slipped leftovers into containers for us. The sun had dropped behind the ridge by the time we stepped outside. Cold air lifted the edges of

Grace's dress and sent the smell of woodsmoke across the church lot. I loaded the suitcases into the truck bed and slid the leftovers beside them. We waved as the crowd called out last cheers and blessings, and then we faced the world together.

The two-lane road wound higher into the mountains. Bare oaks lifted their branches against a sky that deepened from silver to rose to lavender. Frost gathered along the fence rails as the temperature dropped. Grace leaned closer, settled her head on my shoulder, and laced her fingers through mine. We drove without much talk, content to watch the evening settle. My chest felt both full and unburdened at the same time.

We turned off the county road onto a narrow drive that disappeared between pines. The cabin came into view around the bend. Its cedar siding was darkened by the dusk. A porch with two rocking chairs, smoke curling from the chimney, and a glowing light from the window greeted us as we pulled in front of the cabin.

We parked and sat a moment with the engine running. Gratitude rose fast and steady. I bowed my head and thanked God for every step that led here. For Rachel and all she had been. For Lily and the gift of being her father. For Grace and the way her presence had braided joy into our days. For the mercy of a second chance and the strength to hold onto it with all my might.

We carried the bags to the porch. The boards creaked the way old wood does. I opened the door and warm air floated out, scented by kindling and candles. I turned to Grace and with gusto, scooped her into my arms. She squealed in surprise, laughed, and tucked her head against my shoulder.

I carried her across the threshold. The fire crackled. The lamp threw a soft circle of light onto a braided rug. Snow began again outside, heavier this time. I set Grace down and

ANNA BETHANY

we embraced each other fully. No one was watching this time, except our Heavenly Father who touched our hearts and nodded His approval.

For the first time in years my heart felt whole. God had given me a second chance, not only at love, but at building a home with Him at the center. We were not walking into perfection. We were walking into faithfulness, one small step at a time.

I kissed my wife and the room seemed to settle around us like a warm blanket. The fireplace crackled, and the snow fell outside, but we ignored it all.

For now, these two individual hearts were becoming one, and they had finally found a home.

THE END

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CHAPTER 1: The Porch Light Burns Bright

Emma

The scent of warm blueberries billowed through my little kitchen and slipped out onto the porch like a promise. It was the kind of summer evening that made Willowbend feel like a hymn that wraps around your insides. Fireflies were already drifting over the roses, and the porch lantern cast a kind, steady glow across the peeling boards. Thursday nights belonged to pies, prayer, and the familiar creak as friends settled into the old wicker chairs that had outlasted three paint jobs and one short-lived attempt at cushions with fringe.

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I set the last pie on the cooling rack, wiped my hands on my apron, and leaned against the doorframe to watch the street. The lane curved gently past my house, and across the street sat the old Miller place. That house had been empty so long that even the oak out front looked bored. It definitely needed some TLC, and some *life*. The barren, weather-stripped porch looked incredibly lonely. I wondered if anyone would bother to buy the fixer-upper. If I had the money, I'd buy it myself, but I had everything I could handle already with my bakery.

The rumble of an engine interrupted my thoughts, and I straightened instinctively. A moving truck, only big enough to transport the contents of a small apartment, lumbered into view and stopped right in front of me, blocking my view of the Miller place. The brakes squealed. Two men climbed down. One wore the uniform of a moving company, and the other was tall and broad shouldered, wearing a plain gray T-shirt. He moved quickly, and I assumed he was the new owner. I don't think he noticed me, but no matter. I just enjoyed watching them.

I rested my forearms on the railing and tried not to look nosy, which was very hard to do, because I am exactly that. He hoisted a box as if it weighed nothing and took the porch steps two at a time. A second box, then a third. No fuss, no chatter, no glance toward the neighbors. At one point, he must've sensed someone watching him and glanced my way. I lifted my hand in a wave and gave him the smile that usually coaxed a response from even the prickliest customers at the bakery.

He paused for a heartbeat. A polite nod, a brief flicker of acknowledgment, and then he disappeared into the dark mouth of the house.

I let my hand fall, not offended, only curious. Maybe he was worn out from the drive. Maybe he was not the kind to

wave at strangers. Willowbend did not turn people into social butterflies, but we did tend to say “hello,” and we meant it. Perhaps the man at the Miller place needed a lesson in small-town protocol.

I turned back to my kitchen. Pies would not slice themselves, and the prayer group liked them the moment they were cool enough to hold shape, so I got busy slicing. I set out plates and forks, lined up hymnbooks in a neat stack, and pulled a pitcher of sweet tea from the refrigerator. The glass sweated on the counter in a ring that would leave a mark if I didn’t wipe it up, so I did.

By the time Hazel Bennett arrived, the moving truck had disappeared down the lane and left the Miller place with only a single lamp glowing behind its front window. Hazel stepped onto my porch like she’d been born there, all patient grace and friendliness. Her silver hair caught the glow of the lantern, and she looked like an angel.

“We have a new neighbor,” I said as I held out a glass of tea.

“I saw the truck,” Hazel answered, her voice as gentle as the rocking chair she settled into. “Did you meet him?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “He nodded. That was all.”

“Some people nod for years before they actually say ‘hello,’” Hazel smiled as she spoke.

I thought of the dark porch at the Miller place and the way the man had moved, steady and efficient. I carried the pies out to the table and set them down on a folded dish towel. Friends drifted in, laughter and chairs scraping softly, voices rising and falling in the familiar music of belonging. The fireflies thickened as the light thinned, and my porch lantern held its circular glow against the coming night.

We began with a hymn. Hazel’s alto threaded through the melody like a ribbon, and I could feel the sweet feeling of gratitude warming me from the inside. When we prayed, I

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named the people I knew, prayed for their aches to be stilled, and most of all, gave thanks for all my blessings. Then I added one more: the unnamed man across the street. I asked that he would find this town kinder than whatever place he'd left, that our porches would be inviting to him, and that God would give me the sense to let Him do the work only He can do.

After we talked and laughed and sang our way through two pies, the group thinned. Hazel lingered, as she often did. She traced the rim of her empty tea glass and watched the moths bump gently against the lantern glass.

"You have that look," she said.

"What look?" I asked, though I knew very well what she meant.

"The one that shows up when your mind is racing with curiosity, and you're deciding if your nose should follow," she said. "Tell me what you are thinking."

"The new guy looks like someone who is trying not to be seen," I said. "I wonder what he's hiding? But you know, that house has been quiet for too long. It feels hopeful to see a light in it."

Hazel nodded. "People move for all kinds of reasons. Some are running toward something. Some are running away."

"Maybe both," I said, softer than I intended.

Hazel stood and pressed my hand. "Leave your porch light on," she said. "The rest will work itself out."

I walked her to the steps and watched her walk down the path, slow and steady like the woman she was: confident in her God, wise beyond words, and afraid of nothing. I felt a twinge of guilt that I wasn't as mature and wise as she was, but immediately replaced it with thankfulness that she was my friend.

Across the lane, the Miller place sat still in the night, the

one lamp still glowing behind a window. I stood at the railing and folded my arms against the warm air. I felt the old familiar tug in my chest. It was the nudge I had learned to trust: a call to prayer. I prayed for him again, this time in silence, knowing God could hear my thoughts loud and clear.

The night deepened. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked. The lantern glass fogged along its edge, and I turned the wick down a little. The glow softened, and I lowered myself into one of my wicker chairs under the lamp and just enjoyed the sounds of the night.

I stood, ready to turn in. I faced the empty porch across the street and my final thought was, *I don't know your name yet, sir... but I guarantee you haven't seen the last of me.*



Jacob

The boxes were heavier than they looked, no matter how much I told myself otherwise. It wasn't the weight of them, not really. I could have carried twice as much - after all, they were only cardboard and contents. My lack of strength came from something buried much deeper than my biceps.

This old place had a loose board on the second step. I nearly tripped after my boot found it on the first trip up. From then on I adjusted my stride. A woman's laugh drifted across the lane from somewhere out of sight. I kept my head down and counted the steps in silence, four up, three across, two to the door.

On the fourth trip, I felt like someone was watching me, and turned before I could stop myself. A woman stood on the porch of the house opposite mine. She had a lantern hanging from a hook beside her door, and the light gave her a kind, radiant look. She raised her hand in greeting. I nodded and

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turned away before the expression on my face could betray the fact that her small gesture was like a gut punch. I wasn't used to people being kind.

Inside, the house waited like a gaping hole. The air was stale after being closed up for so long. I found one of my lamps in a box and put it on a crate by the window, watching the dust dance in the light. I sighed. It was late. I was depressed and tired. However, there was work to be done. I rolled my neck and shoulders, and went for the next box... and the next. I kept moving. If I didn't keep moving, my thoughts would spiral and I wouldn't be able to sleep, so I worked.

Earlier in the day when we pulled up, I noticed the moving truck barely fit the lane. It narrowly fit under the draping oaks on either side. After removing everything from the truck, I closed up the back and signed the mover's documents. The migration to this old house was officially complete. The driver wished me luck and drove off.

When the truck turned the corner and the engine noise faded, I took a deep, calming breath. Night was leaning in. A whippoorwill called from somewhere near the fence line. The porch light across the street burned steady. The woman with the kind face had disappeared inside. As I was unpacking boxes, I'd glance out the window and noticed that a few people began arriving on her porch, voices low, laughter soft. I was curious about this small town I'd escaped to, expecting quietness and calm, and here was a neighbor already throwing a party. I huffed, and continued unpacking boxes. Then the sound of hymns crescendoed through the damp evening air, their voices blending like angels in song. I stopped short, and went to the window to see what was

going on. They were now standing in a circle, hands clasped, heads bowed, quiet voices that I couldn't hear from inside my house, lifted in prayer. Another gut punch. I lost all the gumption I had to keep unpacking... for the moment.

This old, dusty, empty house instantly felt lonelier than it had a minute ago. I looked across the lane again. The lantern on the opposite porch sent a small sheen across the rail, and the glass caught the reflection of moths as they flitted around the light. I couldn't look away, and watched as the last woman left her porch.

I told myself to quit snooping, stepped inside and turned the lock on the front door. The click sounded louder than it should have. I set my phone on the crate beside the lamp, then turned it off. I took one last glance across the street before I called it a night, and witnessed the owner slowly lowering herself into one of the wicker chairs.

There was a feeling I couldn't quite describe, move from my chest to my gut. She was so beautiful in the soft glow of her porch light, and I heard myself whispering, *Please leave that light on.*



Emma

I watched until Hazel's car turned at the end of the lane, and the tail lights disappeared. I rinsed plates in the kitchen and listened to the night sounds of the open porch window. Crickets. A far-off truck on the highway. The soft bump of a moth that couldn't resist the lamp. When the last plate was placed into the drainer, I wiped the counter and looked out the window again.

The Miller place sat with a single lamp shining in the front room, then that too, went dark. For a moment I could see the shape of a man framed at the window. He moved

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away. The house closed ranks behind him and returned to its rest.

I went back outside and let the lantern's light settle on my shoulders. I thought about the leftover pieces of pie, and whether or not I should take a slice to the new neighbor in the morning.

"Lord," I said, "make this place a haven for him, and grant him peace tonight."

A light breeze came down the lane and brushed a strand of hair against my cheek, as a gentle reassurance that God had heard my simple prayer. I untied my apron and hung it on the hook beside the door, the faint scent of cinnamon and butter wafting from its fabric.

I turned the lantern low and watched the glow soften, but unlike most other nights, I left the lamp burning, and did not snuff it out. I went inside, locked the door, and carried the leftover pie to the refrigerator.

On top of the curio cabinet, the hymnbooks sat in a neat little stack, waiting patiently for next week's prayer group. I touched the top one with my fingertips and thought of the new neighbor and how God sometimes puts a person on your heart: not to feed your curiosity, but to remind you that your life is not your own. It is His. The light too.

Sleep came slowly, like a train easing into a station. Before I drifted off, I had decided that tomorrow I would take a plate to the Miller place. Not to pry... well, maybe a bit... but mainly to say what I believe my porch light was already declaring:

WELCOME.

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