

There's a Body in the Basement

Lori Kalli

Wednesday night, 1976.

Laura's hand trembled as she joined the small group huddled in the basement. "Police are on the way."

She was glad no one turned toward her. They'd have seen the panic in her eyes.

How had this happened? One minute, they were cleaning up the fellowship hall. The next, they were hurrying after Martin into the basement.

"He looks good for being dead. You sure he is?" Miss Jenny said, leaning in and squinting through her thick glasses.

Gertrude elbowed her. "He ain't breathin'. That usually means dead."

Martin nudged the man's leg with his toe. "Yep. He's dead."

"We should go upstairs and wait for the police," Laura said, drawing a shaky breath. She'd seen this before—death at the bottom of a staircase. Now, she wanted to run—hide—anything but stand there staring at a lifeless body.

There were slow nods, but no one moved. Their eyes remained locked on the figure sprawled across the floor.

Then Rose spoke softly, but enough to startle them all because she rarely said anything.

"How'd he get here?"

Blank stares met her question.

Laura glanced toward the top of the stairs. How *did* he get there? She had no sooner formed the question when the blare of sirens echoed from above.

"Upstairs. Everyone," Jules said, waving them forward, his French accent more prominent under stress.

They emerged from the basement just as police officers entered the sanctuary, the emergency medical team close behind. The quaint church, with its rows of soft burgundy chairs, seemed at odds with the uniformed men flooding its reverent space.

“We got a call about a body?” The officer arched a brow, the smirk that followed saying he didn’t believe a word of it.

Gertrude folded her arms across her broad chest, glasses sliding to the end of her nose. “If we say there’s a body, there’s a body. You think we don’t know what a dead guy looks like?”

Laura gently touched her arm. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to question our sanity. Why don’t you go to the fellowship hall and make some coffee? Take Miss Jenny and Rose with you.”

Gertrude hesitated, clearly reluctant to miss any of the action. “Come on, girls. We’ve been dismissed.” With an indignant huff, she led the others toward the door.

Rose trailed behind, gray head bowed, hands fussing with her apron, but Miss Jenny stood her ground, lips pressed tight in silent protest. Gertrude looped an arm through hers and tugged her along.

A tall man strode in just then, his expression hard—like this was the last place on earth he wanted to be. The officers instinctively shifted aside, giving him a clear path to the front.

He acknowledged them with a curt nod. “Appreciate the quick call. Where’s the body?”

“In the basement,” Laura answered, forcing her voice to sound steadier than she felt.

“Show me.” He folded his arms, posture rigid—his eyes avoiding the altar.

Laura’s stomach twisted. She didn’t want to go back down there. Not again. The memory of every creak and shadow still clung to her from the first trip. “This way.”

The warmth of the sanctuary gave way to the chill of the stairwell, the air cooling with each step. The musty smell she dreaded wrapped around her, and every groan of the old wood under her feet echoed too loudly.

Behind her, the officers and medical team followed—a grim parade.

She winced when the tall man’s head thudded into a low beam.

“Basements and I have never gotten along,” he muttered, rubbing the fresh welt.

Laura stepped aside as the medical team huddled around the body. Their hushed voices didn’t carry, but their unhurried movements confirmed what she already knew.

“He’s dead,” one of them finally announced.

“Please wait upstairs,” the tall man said.

She didn’t need to be told twice.

She hurried up the stairs, heart pounding, and nearly collided with Pastor Francis. His graying hair was mussed, and his reading glasses dangled from a cord at his neck—clear signs he hadn't planned on returning to the church tonight.

“What in the world is going on? I thought you were closing up. Is there really a dead body?”

“Yes,” she blurted, catching her breath. “But how did you know?”

“Martin called me,” he said, giving her arm a gentle squeeze. “You should have.”

Laura lowered her gaze. “You're right. I wasn't thinking.”

“It's okay. We're all in shock. Do you know who it is?”

She shook her head. “I've never seen him before. And I have no idea how he got down there.”

The tall man reappeared, striding purposefully toward them.

“I'm Detective MacNeal,” he said, extending his hand. “And you are?”

“Pastor Francis.”

“I need to take statements. Please make sure no one leaves.”

Pastor Francis raised his brows and turned to Laura. “Who's still here?”

She pressed her hands together to warm her cold fingers. “Just the regulars who stay to clean up after service. Gertrude, Miss Jenny, and Rose are in the fellowship hall making coffee. Martin and Jules are over there.”

Detective MacNeal turned to her. “I didn't get your name.”

“Laura Wells. I'm the pastor's assistant.” She took his hand, but the warmth and firmness of his grip sent a ripple of unease through her. She pulled away quickly, tucking her hand into her sweater pocket.

His eyes narrowed. Was it curiosity, suspicion, or both? “I'll start with your statement.”

A chill raced down Laura's spine. The intensity in his gaze made her want to look anywhere but at him.

“Wouldn't you rather start with the pastor?” she asked, her voice softer now.

“Dispatch said a woman made the call.”

“Yes, that was me.”

“Then I'll start with you,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “Is there somewhere more private where we can talk?”

Laura rubbed her arms. “Of course. We can use my office.”

She forced herself to breathe evenly. Stay calm. How could this be happening again? She’d come to Riverton for a fresh start and found a safe home with this loving church family. And now it was unfolding like before.

The detective’s gaze lingered on her face, searching for something she was sure she didn’t want him to find. Move, Laura. Don’t give him a reason to suspect you. This is just a coincidence.

She squared her shoulders and started down the hall, his footsteps steady behind her.

Laura’s office was modest—just a desk, a few chairs, and a filing cabinet wedged into the corner. The wide window overlooking the grassy lawn kept the space from feeling too closed in. She chose the nearest chair and sat stiffly while MacNeal leaned against the edge of the desk, notepad in hand.

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

“There’s not much to tell,” she began. “Martin went down to the basement for a light bulb. He came back up and said there was a body.”

“Go on.” He didn’t look up, just flipped to a clean page.

“I was in the fellowship hall with the ladies. Jules was stacking chairs.” She hesitated. “I worry about him taking on heavy work at his age.” She stopped herself, aware she was rambling.

“Why were you all here?”

“We were cleaning up the coffee and snacks after service.”

“Did anyone else stay—besides the ones here now?”

“Gregory stayed for a while.” Laura caught herself biting her nail and lowered her hand. “That was unusual.”

Gregory made her skin crawl. Jesus called her to love everyone, but He never said she had to like everyone.

MacNeal looked up, pen poised. “Why was it unusual?”

“Why?”

“Yes. What about it stood out?”

“He never comes into the fellowship hall.” She paused, choosing her words. “He usually leaves right after the service.”

“And this time?” MacNeal rested the notebook on his knee.

“He lingered.”

MacNeal studied her for a moment.

“I don’t like Gregory,” she said quietly, almost apologetically. “But that doesn’t mean he did anything wrong.”

His brows lifted slightly. “I’m just gathering information, Miss Wells.”

“Right.” She cleared her throat. “He usually stands at the door, but tonight he came into the hall—just hovered at the door, watching. I was glad when he finally left.”

MacNeal jotted a few more notes. “I’ll need a list of parishioners—and Gregory’s last name.”

“I can get that now.” She reached toward her Rolodex, but his raised hand stopped her.

“Not yet. Where was the pastor?”

“He’d already left.”

MacNeal looked up fully then, studying her. “That’s unusual, isn’t it?”

“I encouraged him to go. He has an early meeting tomorrow.”

Her pulse quickened, a dull roar filling her ears. This was too familiar—too much like before. The tremor started in her legs, and she knew the nausea wasn’t far behind.

“Miss Wells?”

Laura blinked, forcing the memories back where they belonged. “Sorry.”

He leaned forward slightly. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“No,” she said too quickly. “I’ve told you everything I know.” Too sharp, too defensive. She forced a breath. Calm down, Laura. He’ll start to suspect, and then he’ll find the truth.

MacNeal’s brow furrowed as he studied her face, searching for what she wasn’t saying. Finally, he closed his notebook and stood. “You can go—for now, but I’ll need to speak with you again.”

Laura’s stomach clenched. “Of course, Detective MacNeal.” It wasn’t over. It never would be.

His tone softened, the edge easing from his voice. “Everyone calls me Mac. Feel free to do the same—if it helps.”

She managed a faint nod, then slipped out of the office like the walls themselves were closing in.

In the fellowship hall, Gertrude latched onto Laura's arm the moment she walked in. "Spill the beans, girl. What'd that detective ask you?"

Laura sank into a chair near the open window. The night air drifted in, stirring the loose strands of hair that brushed her cheek. She pushed them back with a restless flick of her hand. "He just wanted to know what happened."

"Well, I want to know what happened, too." Gertrude leaned in so close their noses nearly touched. "Me and the girls were talkin'. How'd that body get down there? Ain't no way down except them stairs, and I don't believe someone carried a corpse past us while we was prayin' and singin'."

Laura sighed. Gertrude's rough drawl made her sound simple, but the woman was sharper than most thought.

"You're getting carried away," Laura said. "He probably walked down there himself."

Gertrude huffed and dropped into the chair beside her. "Maybe so, but that guy was done in. I feel it in my bones."

"It's more likely he opened the wrong door and fell."

A quiet voice startled Laura. "Then he'd be at the bottom of the steps." Miss Jenny stood behind her, hands clasped, eyes wide.

Gertrude leaned forward, lowering her voice. "That's right. And dead guys don't move once they're dead." Her eyes gleamed. "That guy was murdered."

Laura paled. "Gertrude! Let's not jump to conclusions."

Jules appeared in the doorway. "The detective would like to speak with Rose."

"I want to go first," Gertrude snapped. "That detective needs to know this was murder."

"He said *Rose*," Jules replied, his French accent thickening with impatience.

"She's busy in the kitchen. Take me instead."

Jules folded his arms, unmoved. The stare-down lasted all of three seconds before Gertrude huffed and stomped away.

"Hey, Rosie," she bellowed. "You gotta go with Jules." Then she began loudly stacking cups and saucers at the buffet table.

Rose appeared a moment later, a dish towel dangling from her hand.

"The detective wants to speak with you," Laura said gently.

Rose's eyes widened. She shrank back, clutching the towel.

"It's all right," Laura soothed. "He's a nice man. Go with Jules."

Jules offered his arm. "Come, mon amie."

Laura watched them disappear down the hall, then sagged back into her chair. She barely had time to breathe before Gertrude leaned in again.

"I'm telling you, that guy was murdered."

"We don't know that," Laura said firmly.

"If he was killed," Miss Jenny murmured, "how did he end up in the church basement?"

"Now ain't that the question," Gertrude said, eyes narrowing.

"Please, ladies," Laura rubbed her temples as a headache began to bloom.

"I saw Martin go down there for a light bulb," Miss Jenny added softly. "I wish I'd asked him to bring up another bag of sugar. Some of the dispensers are empty." She picked one up from a nearby table and frowned. "I guess it would be bad to go now."

"Don't worry about the sugar," Laura said, taking it gently from her hand. "Do you know which bulb was out?"

"The one in the men's room." She bit her lip, a crease forming between her brows.

"What is it?" Laura asked.

Miss Jenny's voice dropped to a whisper. "He's the only one I saw go down there."

Gertrude's eyes widened. "You don't think—"

"What? Martin? No." Laura shook her head firmly. "He's the one who told us about the body."

But Gertrude's expression had already turned speculative. "Maybe he did him in while he was in the men's room. That's why the light was out—so no one'd go in and find him. Then he dragged him to the basement."

Laura threw up her hands. "Really, Gertrude? You think he carried a dead body down those steep stairs all by himself—and past us while we were worshipping God?"

Gertrude smirked. "Well—I guess that's a stretch. Don't suppose he folded the guy up and stashed him in his back pocket."

"I didn't see him carrying anything," Miss Jenny said, wide-eyed. "Are you sure I can't go get the sugar?"

“Enough.” Laura stood, exasperated. “No more about sugar or dead bodies. Let the detective figure it out.”

She escaped into the kitchen, her hands still trembling. Grabbing the sponge, she scrubbed the counter—whispering a silent prayer with every stroke. Someone had died in their church—a place meant for worship and peace. Now, even the air felt different.

Thursday Morning

Laura sat in her office the next morning, staring at the pile of folders on her desk, unable to focus.

Who was the man in the basement? How did he get there? Would the detective come back?

A flicker of anticipation stirred, making it impossible to sit still. With a sigh, she pushed back her chair and headed to the kitchen, stacking glasses from the night before.

“I’d like to speak with you.”

Startled by the deep voice, a glass slipped from her hand and shattered on the floor.

“I didn’t mean to scare you. Let me help.” Mac stepped forward and grabbed a broom from the corner.

“How’d you get in?” She pressed a hand to her chest.

“Pastor Francis and I arrived at the same time.” He smiled as he swept. “Are you always this jumpy?”

“I’m usually alone until nine-thirty,” she said, bending to pick up the larger shards.

He lifted the dustpan so she could drop them in. “Trash can?”

“There.” She nodded toward it, then closed the cabinet. The remaining glasses could wait.

Once again, his height caught her off guard—the broad strength of his shoulders, the rough stubble darkening his jaw, the unruly hair that could use a trim. She backed against the counter, forcing herself to look away.

“You said you wanted to talk. We can go to my office.”

“Here’s fine.”

“In the kitchen?” She glanced around. The space suddenly felt too small, the air too close.

“How about in the fellowship hall?” he suggested.

Better. Still, unease prickled her skin. Was it fear? Worry? Or something else—the subtle pull of attraction? Detective MacNeal—Mac—was an impressive man.

“I have coffee brewed,” she managed. “Take a seat anywhere, and I’ll bring you a cup.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate that.”

As soon as he stepped out, she lowered her head. *Lord, be with me now.*

The fellowship hall, with its round tables, still smelled faintly of cinnamon rolls and coffee. Laura loved the chatter that usually filled the room—children laughing, friends catching up.

It was one of the reasons she’d stayed at Riverton Community Church. Here, she could be around people without revealing too much. Most folks were happy to talk about themselves, and she’d grown skilled at deflecting questions about her past.

When she brought the coffee out, Mac had chosen a seat by a window. She placed his coffee on the table and sat a careful distance away—far enough to steady her nerves, close enough to be polite.

He took a sip. “Mmm, this is good.”

“It’s a special blend. One of our parishioners roasts his own beans.” She traced the rim of her cup with a finger, avoiding his gaze.

“Do I make you nervous?”

Her eyes lifted. “This whole situation makes me nervous.”

“Understandable.” He nodded toward the window. “Who plants all the flowers?”

“Martin and Jules—you met them last night.” She smiled at the thought of them arguing over every splash of color.

“They help around here often?”

“Martin sticks to certain projects, but Jules does whatever’s needed. Retirement doesn’t suit him—he likes staying busy.” She straightened. “As nice as this little get-together is, I have work to do.”

“You want me to get to the point.”

“Did I say that?”

“In so many words.” His eyes sparkled with amusement—warm, brown eyes that tugged at her more than she wanted to admit. The silence between them lingered, not uncomfortable, just...charged.

Finally, he flipped open his notebook. “The man in the basement was George Walls, a reporter for the *Riverton Review*. You said you’d never seen him before?”

“That’s right.”

“Could he have attended a service?”

“I don’t know everyone. Some visit once and never return. Our greeters would know better.”

“Can you get me a contact list for the greeters?”

“I can, but I’m not sure it will help.”

He nodded. “Any idea why a reporter would be interested in your church?”

“None.” It couldn’t have been anything good. The image of his lifeless eyes washed over her.

Mac’s expression tightened. “Is there another entrance to the basement besides the one we used last night?”

“No.” Her voice dropped. They’d all wondered the same thing—how had he gotten down there?

Laura clasped her hands in her lap. The memory of the man’s body flickered through her mind, but another image followed. Someone else, years ago, lifeless at the foot of a narrow staircase. Her chest tightened, and she drew in a shaky breath, shutting her eyes.

“And you’re sure you didn’t recognize him?”

Her eyes flew open. “If you’re going to keep asking the same questions, we’ll be here all day. I told you—I don’t know him. I’ve never seen him. And I have work to do.”

The sharpness of her voice startled even her. She faltered. “I’m sorry, Mac. I—”

“No problem,” he said gently. “I get it. This isn’t easy. I’m just trying to get everything straight.”

He stood and handed her his empty cup. “Are there tools stored in the basement?”

“No, they’re in the shed. Why do you ask?”

“It was blunt force trauma.”

Laura froze. “What?”

“He was hit over the head. From the wound shape, it looks like it was done with a wrench.”

Her knees gave way, and she dropped back into her chair.

“Are you okay? I thought you’d want to know.”

“I—ugh. I need a minute. I was hoping he’d just fallen.”

“Sorry. From what Gertrude said last night, I thought you also assumed it was murder.”

There it was. *Murder*.

Mac laid his hand over hers—warm, steady, grounding.

She looked up. “I need to remember that God works all things together for good for those who love Him.”

Something flickered in his eyes. He stiffened and withdrew his hand. “I don’t have any other questions. I’ll let myself out.”

She watched him go, confusion tightening her chest. How could a man feel so solid one moment—and so distant the next?

And why, despite everything, did she already miss his presence?

Thursday Afternoon

Laura stared at the stack of papers on her desk, no further along than she’d been that morning. Her thoughts kept drifting to Mac. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t shake the warmth he stirred in her.

The image of him in the kitchen doorway—tall, lean, quietly commanding—had etched itself into her mind. He’d seemed so different from the man who’d first stepped into the sanctuary the night before. Then, his jaw had been tight, his eyes sharp with suspicion. She’d felt his scrutiny the moment he crossed the threshold.

But this morning?

He’d been calm. Gentle. His deep voice had softened, loosening a knot she hadn’t realized she carried. And when he touched her hand, something long dormant had fluttered back to life.

She leaned back, exhaling slowly. He was a stranger, she reminded herself. A detective. Not someone she should let in.

She had just reached for the top folder when the office door burst open and Gertrude, Rose, and Miss Jenny crowded in.

“We’ve got some ideas,” Gertrude announced.

Laura arched a brow. “Didn’t the detective specifically say not to discuss the incident?”

“Oh, hogwash.” Gertrude waved a dismissive hand. “We were all there. No secrets between us.”

Rose and Miss Jenny nodded in agreement.

Laura sighed. It was useless to resist. Gertrude was on a roll, and there was no stopping her.

“Fine. Go grab some coffee. I’ll meet you in the fellowship hall.”

They scurried out, chattering all the way down the hall. Laura sat back for a moment, bracing herself. She loved these ladies—her sisters in Christ, her prayer partners, and sometimes spiritual comedians—but, mercy, they could be exhausting. Especially Gertrude.

By the time Laura entered the fellowship hall, the trio had already claimed a table near the kitchen door. A fourth cup of coffee sat waiting for her—clearly reserved.

She sank into the chair. “Okay. What’s on your minds?”

Rose and Miss Jenny exchanged a glance before looking expectantly at Gertrude.

“We think the guy was murdered,” Gertrude declared.

“Yes, I picked up on that last night.”

Unfazed, Gertrude reached into her oversized purse and produced a folded sheet of paper. “We’ve worked it all out.”

Rose and Miss Jenny beamed, clearly proud of their handiwork.

Laura steeled herself. “Okay, let’s see it.”

Gertrude unfolded it with dramatic flair, spreading it across the table like a general laying out troop movements. A crude drawing of the church and fellowship hall filled the page, littered with arrows, Xs, and notes highlighted in three colors.

“I’ve matched times with colored arrows,” Gertrude said, tapping the paper with a flourish. “This one—” she jabbed a pink arrow—“is when the dirty deed was done.” She leaned in, eyes wide. “In the basement,” she emphasized each word. “I think the guy was havin’ a secret meeting.”

Laura folded her arms. “Really? With whom?”

Gertrude lifted her chin. “Don’t patronize me—and stop using them fancy words.”

“I think *patronize* is a pretty fancy word,” Laura muttered.

“I know that one,” Gertrude huffed. “Happens to me all the time. Now hush and listen.” She tapped the map again. “You know Pastor Francis is always havin’ secret meetings. We think somethin’ went down—and it went bad.”

Laura blinked. “Pastor Francis? You’re serious?”

“I ain’t kiddin’. He’s always here by himself. And he disappears, too. Why, he’s gone right now!”

“He’s visiting the hospital,” Laura said flatly.

Gertrude crossed her arms. “Well, he can’t be visitin’ all the time.”

“You’re right,” Laura said. “Sometimes he’s at the food kitchen, with the elderly, or writing sermons at home. All very suspicious behavior.”

“Are you gonna let me finish or what?”

Laura bit back a smile and lifted her hands. “By all means.”

Gertrude leaned over the paper again and tapped dramatically with one stubby finger. “This mark is right before the worship service.” She tapped another mark. “Since we were all in the kitchen, this would’ve been the perfect time for Pastor Francis to meet with the guy. He used the basement to avoid bein’ seen. Then things went south and—” she sliced a finger across her throat—“he finished him off.”

Laura coughed into her hand to hide a laugh. Pastor Francis—a murderer? She’d sooner believe she’d walk on the moon. Still, they’d clearly worked hard on their theory.

Keeping her tone neutral, she asked, “And what exactly was he planning to do with the body?”

Rose shifted uncomfortably, but Gertrude didn’t miss a beat.

“He figured nobody’d go down there. He’d get rid of the body later. Probably toss it in with the trash. You’ve seen how full that dumpster gets. Anyway, that’s what I’d do.”

Laura blinked. “You’ve thought about how to dispose of a body?”

Gertrude blushed. “There’s a few folks that rub me the wrong way. I’ve had to do a lotta repentin’.”

Laura stood, gathering up the “evidence.” “Well, thank you for the...presentation. I’ll be sure to pass it along to Detective MacNeal.”

“Make sure to tell him that we think God broke that lightbulb on purpose,” Gertrude added. “So Martin would find the body. God don’t like murder on His holy ground.”

Rose perked up. “What about Abraham offering Isaac as a sacrifice? Does that count?”

“That don’t count, Rose. God stopped it before it ever happened.”

Laura tucked the map under her arm and walked out, their murmurs trailing behind her.

Later that afternoon, she spotted Pastor Francis talking with Detective MacNeal in the fellowship hall. As soon as their meeting ended, she grabbed the folded “evidence” and hurried down the hall.

Mac was seated at one of the tables, flipping through his notebook, when she knocked on the doorframe.

“Laura, glad you’re here.” He turned to a specific page. “Can you give me more information about Gregory?”

“Gregory?” She frowned. “Not much to say. Honestly, I try to avoid him.”

“Why?”

“Nothing specific. Just a feeling.”

“A feeling?”

“Yeah...a creepy one. He stares.”

“That’s it? He stares?”

She crossed her arms. “You asked. I answered.”

Mac smiled. “Right, he stares.” He scribbled something in his notebook, then snapped it shut.

Laura tried to read his expression. “Do you think Gregory...” She didn’t finish.

“I can’t say.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Can’t. Haven’t got a clue.”

He moved toward the door, and she stepped into his path.

“You’re blocking the exit,” he murmured, amusement flickering in his eyes.

He stepped closer, and suddenly she forgot how to breathe. His nearness rattled her.

“Laura.” His voice softened, his grin edged with mischief. “Everything all right?”

She sidestepped quickly, holding out the crinkled paper like evidence in a courtroom.

“Depends. How much do you enjoy wild theories and colorful arrows?”

He raised a brow. “Do I want to know?”

“It’s from Gertrude and her crew. They’ve conducted their own investigation—map, motive, and timeline included.”

Mac studied her for a long moment, then unfolded the paper. His lips twitched. “Is this supposed to be the church?”

“Yes. And the big X marks where they believe ‘the dirty deed was done.’” She added air quotes for emphasis.

He chuckled, scanning the messy scrawl. “And they think Pastor Francis is involved?”

“They do. Apparently, hospital visits and sermon writing qualify as suspicious behavior.”

Mac scratched the back of his neck. “Well...I’ll give them this—it’s thorough.”

“Don’t read too much into it. Gertrude once accused a visiting missionary of being a Russian spy because he had a beard and a bowtie.”

He laughed quietly. “Sounds about right.”

Folding the paper, he tucked it into his notebook. “Still, sometimes small-town sleuths catch details the pros miss—buried somewhere beneath the layers of speculation and neon markers.”

Laura crossed her arms, amused. “So, you’re not laughing it off?”

“I’m chuckling respectfully. There’s a difference.” His smile softened. “I’ll talk to Pastor Francis again.”

Her eyes widened. “You will?”

“Not because I think he’s guilty—just covering all the bases.”

“Fair enough. But maybe leave out your source.”

He grinned. “He’ll never know.”

Heat crept into her cheeks. “Well, I should get back to work.”

“Thanks for bringing this—and for translating Gertrude-ese.”

She smiled. “It’s a spiritual gift.”

Friday Morning

Finishing the day's correspondence, Laura glanced at the clock. Pastor Francis was late. Gertrude's wild accusations echoed in her head.

Dear Lord, I wish I'd never listened to her.

She turned toward the window, trying to shake the unease, but her thoughts kept circling. What if the seeds of doubt Gertrude had planted were taking root in Mac's mind, too?

Why had the reporter come to the church?

Maybe it started as an innocent meeting with Pastor Francis. But how had he ended up in the basement...murdered?

A knock startled her.

"Seems I'm always catching you off guard." Mac stood in the doorway, his jaw tight. "We need to talk."

A chill crept down her spine. "About what?"

"Lawrence Schroner."

Laura's breath caught. She'd known this moment would come—had known the past wouldn't stay buried forever.

Mac pulled a chair forward and sat. "I'd like to hear your side of that story."

"How much do you know?"

"I know you were a suspect in his death."

Her hands tightened in her lap. "I was."

"And?"

"I was eight years old."

Mac didn't react. He simply waited.

"Lawrence Schroner was my stepfather," she said quietly. "They found his body at the bottom of the basement stairs."

He nodded. "The report said as much."

Laura stared at her trembling hands. "You can understand why this murder has been...unsettling."

"Yeah. Similar circumstances." His tone was gentle now. "But why was Schroner's death considered suspicious? The report said he fell and broke his neck."

That familiar childhood terror rose again, pressing tight against her ribs. “They thought I pushed him.”

Her gaze lifted, eyes glistening. “I didn’t. But…”

“But?” he prompted softly.

“I’m the reason he fell.”

Silence filled the room, broken only by the steady ticking of the clock.

“I don’t know why we’re dredging this up,” she whispered. “It has nothing to do with what’s happening now.”

Mac’s expression softened. “You know I have to ask. The cases share…similarities.”

“You said George Walls was killed with a wrench. It’s not the same.”

“I said similar. Not the same. But I have to question everyone involved.” His voice lowered. “I’m on your side, Laura.”

The compassion in his eyes nearly undid her.

“Thanks,” she murmured. “But I’ve got God on my side. That’s all I need.”

He leaned back slightly, a subtle distance settling between them. He always grew guarded when faith came up in conversation. Something in his past was fractured, too.

He cleared his throat. “Tell me why you believe you caused Schroner’s death.”

Laura drew a long, shaky breath. “My stepfather was an alcoholic. A violent one. Most days he ignored me, but when he drank…” She swallowed. “He could be cruel.”

Her voice dropped. “The night he died, he beat my mother so badly she couldn’t lift her head. I was furious. I lashed out, hitting him as hard as I could.”

She stared past him, eyes distant. “He laughed and said I was about to get what I had coming. ‘I know where you hid the paddle,’ he said. ‘The basement isn’t far enough.’”

Laura twisted her hands together. “He started down the stairs. I was at the top, screaming that I hated him. He turned back—fast. Too fast. His face was twisted with rage, and I knew he’d kill me with his bare hands. But he was drunk. He lost his footing and fell.”

Her voice broke. “And then he was still.”

She paused, eyes unfocused, trapped in the memory. “He was dead. I knew it.”

Mac imagined the terror of that small, cornered child—and the guilt that followed her into adulthood.

Laura's next words were sharp and trembling. "I probably shouldn't say this, but I was glad."

Tears welled as she whispered, "God, forgive me—I was glad he was dead."

Mac rose and laid a hand gently over hers. "I'm sorry."

She gave a fragile smile. "It's not your fault."

"Making you relive it is."

Laura shook her head, tears blurring her vision. "I relive it every day."

"Does Pastor Francis know?"

She shook her head. "I've spent years trying to leave the past where it belongs."

He nodded. "It doesn't sound like it's stayed there."

"No," she said softly. "It hasn't."

For a long moment, he studied her, eyes filled with quiet understanding. "You're stronger than you think, Laura. Don't forget that."

Her throat tightened. She couldn't speak.

His hand fell away, and he stepped toward the door. "You'll get through this. I'm sorry for reopening old wounds."

His departure left a silence that felt heavier, more suffocating than before.

That evening, as the sun dipped low, Laura sat beside Pastor Francis in the sanctuary. She cried until her soul felt raw.

"Thank you for telling me your story," he said gently.

"I should have told you long ago." She stared down at the crumpled tissues in her hand. "It's something I'd rather forget."

"I understand." He paused, letting the stillness settle around them. "Do you remember Mary Magdalene's story?"

Laura nodded.

"Do you think she ever forgot her sins?"

She shrugged.

"Jesus forgave her," he said. "Cast her sins as far as the East is from the West."

"I know," she whispered. "And I know Jesus carried mine too."

He nodded. “That’s true. But Mary had to do more than accept forgiveness—she had to walk in it.” He took Laura’s hand, his eyes kind but firm. “You’re not walking in it, Laura.”

She frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“You’ve accepted grace, but you haven’t accepted the freedom that comes with forgiveness. ‘If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’ John 8:36.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she insisted. “I was eight years old—I screamed—he fell.”

“You say that,” he said softly, “but the pain I see in your eyes tells me you haven’t forgiven yourself. And maybe... you haven’t forgiven your stepfather.”

Laura pulled her hand away. “I can’t.”

He met her gaze without flinching. “Yes, you can. ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’ Philippians 4:13.”

He rose, his expression full of quiet conviction. “When you forgive... you’ll finally be free.”

Then he walked away, leaving her in the sacred stillness of the sanctuary—alone with her tears, and the whisper of grace waiting to be accepted.

Late Saturday Afternoon

The kitchen buzzed with life as the women prepared the dessert table for the evening service.

Sunday fellowship meant hearty casseroles and breakfast fare, but Saturday night? That was sugar heaven.

Laura smiled to herself. Pastor Francis did love his sweets.

Gertrude’s head was buried in the refrigerator, her hips swaying as she rummaged through the shelves. “I can’t find the milk for the coffee.”

“Oh no,” Miss Jenny moaned, her face crumbling. “I forgot the milk.”

“Well, that explains it,” Gertrude backed out of the fridge and shut the door with a thump. “Where’s Martin? I’ll send him to the store.”

“I’m so sorry.” Miss Jenny whispered, near tears.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” Gertrude said, then stopped and sighed. “That didn’t sound too Christian.” She slung an arm around Miss Jenny’s shoulders. “Truth is, I’d forget to put my panties on if the good Lord didn’t help me lay out my clothes every night.”

Miss Jenny let out a surprised laugh, dabbing at her eyes with the corner of her apron.

Sweet, innocent, Rose frowned. “Really?”

Gertrude’s laugh rang out, rich and hearty. “Rosie, girl—you crack me up.”

“Everything all right in here?” Jules stepped in, his French accent wrapping around each word like velvet.

“Just a girlie thing,” Gertrude said with a wink. “You know about them girlie things, don’t you?”

Jules blushed. “Not really.”

“We’re two peas in a pod. Ain’t we, Jenny?” Gertrude gave her another squeeze, making Jenny look like a rag doll enduring one too many hugs.

Jules glanced between them, clearly unsure what he’d walked into.

“It’s just a little excitement,” Laura explained. “We’re out of milk for the coffee.”

“I can run to the store,” he offered. “How much do we need?”

Laura smiled. Jules was such a kind soul. When he said run, he meant it. He didn’t drive—but walked the few blocks from his apartment to the church.

“Is Martin around?” she asked. “He can go instead.”

“He’s polishing the windows. It is no trouble for me.”

Laura’s smile deepened. His phrasing, paired with that gentle accent, made her picture him sipping espresso at a Paris café.

But Gertrude had other ideas. “Listen to Laura, Frenchie. At our age, we’d better save every step we got. I seen you restin’ after your walks. We ain’t spring chickens. Now you go find Martin. Them windows ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

Laura sighed. Gertrude could wear down the most patient saint.

Just then, Pastor Francis poked his head through the doorway. “How’s it going in here?”

Gertrude stiffened, suddenly rearranging coffee cups that didn’t need rearranging.

“Almost done, Pastor,” Laura said, forcing a breezy tone—and wishing Gertrude hadn’t dragged him into her wild murder theory.

“Good. I’ll be in my office if you need me.” He disappeared as quickly as he’d come.

Laura turned to find Rose and Miss Jenny wide-eyed and silent.

“Pastor Francis is a good man who loves Jesus,” she said gently. “You know that—and so do I.”

“I ain’t fallin’ into that trap again,” Gertrude muttered, grabbing a tray of donuts and heading into the fellowship hall.

Laura followed. “What trap?”

Gertrude looked up, eyes glistening. “I been fooled before.”

Laura touched her arm. “Tell me.”

“We ain’t got time for this sissy stuff,” she said gruffly—but she didn’t pull away.

“Tell me,” Laura repeated gently.

Gertrude drew a shaky breath. “It ain’t a story you haven’t heard before. I married a handsome man who said he loved the Lord. He didn’t. And he didn’t love me neither.”

“What happened?”

“He loved any woman who’d give him the time of day. I threw him out.”

“And...”

“That’s it. Haven’t seen him in thirty years.” She pulled a tissue from her pocket, twisting it tight. “Been workin’ on forgivin’ the rat.”

“How’s that going?”

“I think I’ve forgivin’ him. A rat can’t help bein’ a rat. But I can’t quite forgive myself for bein’ such a fool.” She crumpled the tissue and tucked it away, then walked off, leaving the faint scent of lilac powder behind.

Laura stood still, her chest tightening. There it was again—forgiveness.

She thought of Pastor Francis’s words: “Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

Forgiving each other. That included cheating husbands. That included Lawrence Schroner.

Laura drifted toward the window. Dogwood blossoms shimmered, their petals bright as new snow. Tulips lined the walkway in neat rows, and the evening sky was brushed in pink and soft magenta.

Could her unforgiveness fade like the setting sun—slowly, gently, until it was gone? She hoped so.

Sunday Morning

Laura sat stiffly in her seat as Pastor Francis finished his sermon. Had he chosen that scripture because of their conversation—or was it divine intervention? She knew he prepared his sermons early in the week. Their talk had come after.

“Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.”

Her heart stirred. It was the same passage. “I hear you, Lord,” she whispered. “But it’s hard.”

She rose slowly and made her way toward the fellowship hall to help serve breakfast. Gregory stood in the doorway. Fear leapt into her throat. His eyes locked with hers—steady, unreadable—then he turned and walked briskly down the hall and out the vestibule door.

Laura shuddered. His behavior felt more ominous than usual. Then a cold thought hit her. The only thing different about this Sunday was the body they’d found in the church basement on Wednesday.

Could Gregory be involved?

Sunday Afternoon

The last of the serving dishes had been put away, and Miss Jenny was wiping down the counters. Laura stood motionless, lost in thought.

Lord, you’ve guided me through so much pain. But how can I forgive? My mother died too soon because of that evil man.

A whisper stirred in her heart. “*I died to pay for man’s evil ways. Do you remember my last words?*”

“Yes, Lord,” she breathed. “I remember. ‘Forgive them, for they know not what they do.’”

“Laura,” Rose’s voice pulled her back from her thoughts. “That detective’s here asking for you.”

Laura followed her out. Mac leaned against the doorframe, arms folded across his chest.

“Do you have news?” she asked.

His rigid stance said it was more than that. He pushed off from the wall. “What do you know about Jules?”

Laura froze. “Jules? He’s the sweetest man—works tirelessly, loves everyone. He’d do anything for Pastor Francis.”

“What about his past?”

She hesitated. “He’s never really talked about it.”

“Never? No stories, no pictures of grandchildren? Nothing?”

She frowned. “No... not that I can think of. But that’s not unusual.”

“Maybe it is.”

Her pulse quickened. “What do you mean?”

“I can’t find any record of him before 1949.”

“Oh.” Relief softened her tone. “He’s from France. Probably came over after the war.”

“That’s what I thought. But there’s no immigration record. I need to speak with him.”

“Of course. I’ll get him.”

She hurried down the hall, dread twisting inside her. She found Jules mopping the children’s room, humming softly.

“Jules, Detective MacNeal would like to speak with you.”

A flicker of fear crossed his face before he masked it with calm resolve. Setting the mop aside, he straightened to his full height, throwing his shoulders back.

Gone was the gentle old soul she’d come to love.

“It is time,” he said. His voice held none of its usual warmth. “I will meet with him in your office.” It was a command, not a request.

He walked away with a firm, steady stride. The French accent was gone.

Laura hurried after him, watching as he disappeared into her office. Mac followed, the door thudding shut behind them.

Her pulse slowed, and she wrapped her arms around herself, staring at the closed door.

When it finally opened, Mac stepped out. “A patrol car is on its way. Please show the officers in when they arrive.”

“Jules?” she whispered.

Moments later, two patrol cars pulled into the church lot. The women gathered silently, their eyes full of questions.

Pastor Francis emerged from his office, concern etched into his face at the sight of the flashing lights. “What’s going on?”

Mac appeared in the doorway. “Pastor, I’d like you to come in.”

But Jules’s voice rang out, strong and clear. “No. I will step out. This needs to be done.”

He moved past Mac and faced Pastor Francis.

“I want you to know I have spent the remainder of my life serving you.”

“We all serve the Lord,” Pastor Francis said gently, confusion evident at Jules’s lack of accent.

“No. You don’t understand. I serve *you*. I *must* serve you.”

Mac stepped forward. “You’d better explain.”

Jules lowered his head. “This will be difficult to say—and harder to hear. But you must know this first: I love you, Francis, as a father loves a son. The son of a man who was taken too soon.”

Pastor Francis’s eyes widened. “What are you saying?”

“I knew your father. He was a fine man—a man who should never have died.”

“How did you know him?”

“I was there,” Jules said, standing taller, his posture suddenly disciplined. “I was at the concentration camp when he died.”

Pastor Francis swayed.

“Get him a chair,” Mac ordered an officer.

Laura ran for water and pressed a glass into the Pastor’s hand.

“I must finish,” Jules said, clasping his hands behind his back in a soldier’s stance. “My post was at a concentration camp in Poland. Your father was sent there for helping Jews escape to Sweden.” He took a deep breath. “Somehow, despite everything, we became friends. He spoke of God and shared Scripture. Through his quiet witness, I began to see the horrors around me for what they truly were.”

He dropped his eyes. “One day, I arrived, and he was gone. Executed—just days before the end of the war. It shattered me.”

He steadied himself. “From that day on, I vowed to honor his memory—to repay what had been stolen from you. I came to this country because I believed serving you was the only way I could make amends.”

His voice cracked. “I should have done more. I should have found a way to save him.”

Mac stepped closer. “Tell him the rest.”

Jules nodded. “The reporter discovered my past. He threatened to expose me—and to tarnish your father’s name. I couldn’t allow that. Not to him. Not to you.”

He squared his shoulders. His gaze fixed on the far wall. “I did what I had to do.”

Mac gave a quiet nod to the officer, who stepped forward to cuff Jules.

As they led him away, Jules turned back. “Forgive me. I could never replace your father, but I have loved you like a son.”

Pastor Francis rose unsteadily and reached for him. “Wait—please.” He drew Jules into an embrace. “It’s time to let the pain of war die. With God’s help, I forgive you. But I wish you had come to me about the reporter. We could have prayed. Jesus would’ve fought this battle for us.”

Jules met his eyes, voice faint. “Once, I did nothing. It cost your father his life. This time, I acted—to protect you. Know that.”

He was led away.

Laura turned to Mac and caught the pain etched in his face. Something in Jules’s confession had struck a deep chord. Silently, he followed the officers out.

Monday Afternoon

Laura set up the fellowship hall for the women’s prayer meeting. The room was quiet, but her thoughts were not. Everyone was still reeling from yesterday’s revelation. As she worked, she hummed her favorite praise song about God’s faithfulness.

“Do you ever stop?”

Laura jumped. “Mac!”

“Sorry—I’m always startling you.”

“I didn’t hear you come in.”

“I was meeting with Pastor Francis.”

So that was the meeting the pastor had mentioned. She hadn’t realized it was with Mac.

“Got time for coffee?” he asked.

Her pulse quickened. “I haven’t put any on yet.”

“No, not here. I thought we could go to the café.”

“I...I guess that would be okay. Let me grab my purse.”

The drive to the café was quiet. Once their orders were filled, they slipped into a corner booth.

“You seem nervous,” he said, sipping his coffee.

“Do I?” She twisted the stirrer between her fingers.

“Yes. Do I make you nervous?”

She met his gaze. “It’s been a unique few days.”

“It has.” He looked out the window. “I asked you here so we could talk.”

“About Jules?”

“No, about us.”

Her voice caught. “Us?”

“I like you, Laura. But before I could ask you out, I needed to get a few things straight.”

She tilted her head. “Was that what your meeting with Pastor Francis was about?”

“You’re perceptive. I wanted to understand how he could forgive Jules so freely.”

“Is there someone you need to forgive?” she asked softly.

“I need to forgive God.”

She stilled, letting the café’s chatter fill the silence.

“I’ve been angry for a long time,” he continued quietly. “I had a twin brother. He died.”

Laura’s heart ached. “Is that why you struggled to step into the sanctuary?”

“You noticed?”

“Hard not to.”

He nodded. “Talking to Pastor Francis helped. He’s... remarkable.”

“He’s helping me, too.” She hesitated. “You know my story. I want to forgive Schroner for all that happened. I realize it’s a decision—and the only one suffering because of the unforgiveness is me.”

“That’s pretty much what Pastor Francis said about my anger.” He pushed aside his empty cup and took her hands. “Will you help me, Laura? I think together we can do this.”

Laura's pulse fluttered. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I want to spend more time with you. To sit beside you in church. To learn about God's word."

She saw the conviction in his eyes. "And learn to forgive."

"Yes," he said. "And learn to forgive."

Present Day

Sarah's little legs dangled from the kitchen stool. "Grandpa tells the story way different."

Laura ruffled her granddaughter's hair. "Oh, really? And how does Grandpa tell it?"

"He said you met over a dead body."

Laura chuckled. "Well... I suppose that's true."

"Yeah, but he wouldn't tell me the rest. He said I had to ask you."

Laura smiled. "So, that's why you came running in here?"

"Yep. It was a good story."

"I'm glad you think so."

Sarah hopped down and skipped toward the door. "Maybe you can make up another one tomorrow."

The screen door slapped shut behind her.

Laura laughed. She hadn't made up a single thing.