

# 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."

If anyone turned toward her, they'd see the panic in her eyes. But no one moved.

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

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

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

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

Miss Jenny huffed. "Well, I still think we should wait for an official verdict."

Laura drew a shaky breath. She'd seen this before—death at the bottom of a staircase. "We should go upstairs and wait for the police."

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’s brows lifted, his question skeptical.

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, reluctant to miss the action. “Come on, girls. We’ve been dismissed.” She led them off with a huff. Rose trailed after her, gray head bowed, hands fussing with her apron. Miss Jenny stood her ground, lips pressed tight, until Gertrude hooked her by the arm and tugged her along.

Laura turned when a tall man strode in. His eyes swept the room, snagging on the wooden cross. His expression hardened—like this was the last place on earth he wanted to be. The officers shifted aside, giving him a clear path to the front.

He nodded as he passed. “Appreciate the quick call,” he said with a curt nod. “Where’s the body?”

“In the basement,” Laura answered.

“Show me.” He folded his arms and put his back to the altar.

Laura's stomach churned. She didn't want to go back down there. Not again. Every creak and shadow still clung to her from the first trip. But, she nodded. "This way."

She left the warmth of the sanctuary for the narrow stairwell, the air cooling with each step. The musty smell she hated wrapped around her, stronger tonight, and every groan of the old wood under her feet echoed too loudly.

The other officers and the medical team followed. A morbid 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 stood to the side 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 ran up the stairs and back into the sanctuary, nearly colliding 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 coming back to the church tonight.

"What in the world is going on? I thought you were closing up and heading home. 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 head. "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?”

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 then, hand outstretched again. “I didn’t get your name.”

“Laura Wells. I’m the pastor’s assistant.” She accepted his handshake, but the warmth and pressure of his grip unsettled her, and she withdrew quickly, tucking her hand into her sweater pocket.

MacNeal’s eyes narrowed, unreadable—curiosity, suspicion, or both. “I’ll start with your statement.”

A chill ran down Laura’s spine. The way he held her gaze made her want to look anywhere but back at him.

“Wouldn’t you rather start with the pastor?” she asked, hoping to redirect him.

“Dispatch said a woman made the call.”

“Yes, that was me.”

“Then I’ll start with you.” His tone left 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 Rainsville for a fresh start and found a safe home with this loving church family. And now it was unfolding like before.

Detective MacNeal waited, silent and watchful.

Move, Laura. Don't give him a reason to suspect you. This is just coincidence.

She squared her shoulders and started down the hall, Detective MacNeal's footsteps steady behind her.

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

"Tell me exactly what happened."

"There's not much to tell. Martin went down to the basement for a light bulb. He came back up and said there was a body."

The detective didn't look up. "Go on."

"I was in the fellowship hall with the ladies. Jules was stacking chairs. Because of his age, I always worry when he takes on heavy work, though he'll never admit when it's too much."

"Why were you all here?"

"We were cleaning up the coffee and snacks we served after service."

"Did anyone else stay after the service—besides the ones here now?"

"Gregory stayed for a while." Laura bit at her nail, then quickly dropped her hand. "It was unusual." Gregory made her skin crawl. Jesus called her to love everyone, but He didn't say she had to like everyone.

“Why was it unusual?”

“Why?”

“Yes. What was unusual about it?”

“He never stayed before.”

“And?” MacNeal rested the notebook on his lap, his eyes narrowing with interest.

“I don’t like Gregory, but that doesn’t mean he did anything.”

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

Laura nodded. “Right—well, he was here for a while, just standing around. 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.” Laura reached for her Rolodex.

The detective held his hand up to stop her. “Not yet. Where was the pastor?”

“He’d already left.”

Detective MacNeal looked up. “That’s unusual, isn’t it?”

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

Her heart pounded in her ears. This was all too familiar. Too much like before. She could feel the trembling starting in her legs and knew the nausea would soon follow.

“Miss Wells?”

Laura blinked, forcing down the memories. “Sorry.”

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

“No,” she blurted. “I’ve told you everything I know.” Too quick, Laura. Too loud. Be calm, more reserved. He’ll suspect something, and then he’ll find the truth.

His brow furrowed as he held her gaze. “You can go—for now,” he said, standing. “But, I’ll need to speak with you again.”

Laura’s stomach clenched. It wasn’t over. She knew from experience it wouldn’t be over for a long time. “Of course, Detective MacNeal.”

His tone softened. “Everyone calls me Mac. Feel free to do the same—if it helps.”

She nodded and scurried out like the room was on fire.

In the fellowship hall, Gertrude grabbed her arm. “Spill the beans, girl. What’d the detective ask you?”

Laura sank into a chair near one of the open windows. The breeze stirred the loose strands of hair brushing 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.” She hovered over Laura, leaning in so 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’.”

Her rough speech made her sound simple, but that was deceiving. She’d grown up on a farm with no schooling, yet she was shrewd in ways that surprised people.

Laura frowned. “You’re getting carried away. He probably walked.”

Gertrude huffed and dropped into a chair. “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.”

“Then he’d be at the bottom of the steps.” Miss Jenny’s voice startled Laura. She hadn’t realized the woman had crept up behind her.

Gertrude leaned forward, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “That’s right. And dead guys don’t move once they’re dead.” Her eyes were alight with intrigue as she added. “That guy was murdered.”

Laura paled. “Gertrude! Let’s not jump to conclusions.”

Just then, Jules poked his head through the door. “The detective wants to speak with Rose.”

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

“He said *Rose*,” Jules replied firmly, his French accent thickening with impatience.

“She’s busy in the kitchen. Take me.”

Jules folded his arms and stared until Gertrude huffed and backed away.

“Hey, Rosie,” Gertrude bellowed. “You gotta go with Jules.” She stomped to the coffee buffet and clattered the cups into their saucers.

Rose slipped from the kitchen, a dish towel dangling from her hand.

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

Rose’s eyes widened, and she shrank against the wall.

“It’s okay, Rose,” Laura assured her. “He’s a nice man. Go with Jules.”

Jules stepped forward and offered his arm. “Come, mon amie.”

Laura slumped in her chair and watched them go. Gertrude strode over and leaned close. “That guy was *murdered*.”

“We don’t know that,” Laura said firmly.

“If he was killed,” Miss Jenny murmured, twisting a tissue in her hands, “how did he end up in the church basement?”

“Now ain’t that the question,” Gertrude said.

“Please, ladies,” Laura pressed her temples as a headache bloomed.

“I saw Martin go down there for a light bulb,” Miss Jenny added softly.

Laura turned. “Which one was out?”

“The one in the men’s room.” She bit her lip, a crease forming between her eyes.

“What?” Laura asked.

Miss Jenny’s voice wavered. “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 eyes were already alight with speculation. “Maybe he did him in while in the men’s room. That’s why the light was out--so no one would go in and find him. Then he dragged him to the basement.”

Laura threw up her hands. “Really? And 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 offered, wide-eyed.

Laura rolled her eyes. “Enough. Let the detective figure it out.”

She escaped into the kitchen, her hands still trembling. Grabbing the sponge, she scrubbed at the counter—praying with every stroke.

### *Thursday Morning*

Laura sat in her office the next morning, staring at the pile of folders on her desk, unable to concentrate. Who was the man in the basement? How did he get there? Would the detective be back? A flicker of anticipation stirred, making it impossible to sit still. With a sigh, she pushed back her chair and went into the kitchen, where she began stacking the 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 held 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, stooping to pick up the larger shards.

He met her eyes as he lifted the dustpan so she could drop them in. “Trash can?”

“There.” She nodded toward the can, then closed the cabinet and left the rest of the glasses on the counter.

Once again, his height caught her off guard—the broad strength of his shoulders, the shadow of stubble roughening his chin. And his unruly hair could’ve used a trim. She backed against the counter, bracing her hands as she forced 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 was small. Too small for her comfort with him standing there.

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

That was better. Still, unease prickled at her skin. Was it fear? Worry? Or something else entirely—the gentle tug of attraction? Detective MacNeal—Mac—was an impressive man.

She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. “I have coffee brewed. 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 held large round tables circling the buffet table used for Sunday breakfasts. Laura loved the buzz of voices after services—kids laughing, people sharing stories. It was one of the reasons she’d stayed at Rainsville Community Church. 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 Laura brought the coffee out, she noticed Mac had chosen a seat by a window. She placed his coffee on the table, then slid into a chair a careful distance away—far enough to keep her breathing steady, but close enough to remain polite. If he noticed, he didn’t mention it.

“Mmm, this is good.”

“It’s a special blend. One of our parishioners roasts his own beans.” She watched her finger move as she traced the rim of her cup.

“Do I make you nervous?”

Her eyes flicked up to his. “This whole situation makes me nervous.”

“Understandable.” He glanced out the window. “Who plants all the flowers?”

“Martin and Jules. You met them last night.” She couldn’t help a small smile as she pictured them arguing over every splash of color.

“They do a lot around here?”

“Martin sticks to certain projects, but Jules does whatever’s needed. Retirement doesn’t suit him—he likes staying busy.” She straightened in her chair. “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. She felt the pull. Maybe he did, too, because he let the quiet linger, sipping slowly at his coffee.

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

Laura nodded. “That’s right.”

“Could he have attended a service?”

“I don’t know everyone. Some come once or twice and never return. Our greeters would be the ones to ask.”

“Can you get me a list?”

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

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

“None.” Laura frowned. It couldn’t have been anything good, or he wouldn’t have ended up dead. The image of his lifeless eyes washed over her.

Mac pursed his lips, staring down at his notes. “Is there another entrance to the basement besides the one we used last night?”

“No.” Her voice dropped. That was something they’d all wondered—how had he gotten down there?

Laura clasped her hands in her lap as Mac jotted notes. The man’s body on the floor flickered through her mind, but it wasn’t alone. Another memory shoved its way in—someone else, lifeless, crumpled at the foot of a narrow flight of stairs. She drew in a shaky breath and squeezed her eyes shut.

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

Her eyes flew open, and she shoved back from the table. “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 things to do.”

The sharpness of her words 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 the tools kept in the basement?”

“Why do you ask?”

“It was blunt force trauma.”

Laura gasped. “What?”

“He was hit over the head with a wrench.”

Her knees gave out, 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 just fell.”

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

There it was. *Murder*.

Mac laid his hand over hers. His touch warm and comforting.

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

Something flickered across his face. He stiffened and pulled his hand away. “I’ll let myself out.”

She watched him go, confused by how quickly he’d shifted from gentle to distant. Already, she missed his presence. Solid, steady—and yet beneath it all, something she couldn’t name. Something mysterious.

#### *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 back to Mac. It was impossible to shake the warmth he stirred in her.

The image of him standing in the kitchen doorway—tall, lean, quietly commanding—had etched itself into her mind. So different from when he’d first stepped into the sanctuary last night. Then there’d been a sharp intensity about him. His jaw clenched, eyes scanning the room with disdain. She’d felt his contempt the second he crossed the threshold.

But this morning?

He was different. Gentle. Calm. His voice had settled into a soothing tone that released something tightly wound inside her. And when he touched her hand, something she thought long

dormant fluttered to life. She leaned back in her chair, exhaling slowly. He was a stranger. A detective. Not someone she could ever let in.

She had barely touched the top folder when the office door burst open and Gertrude, Rose, and Miss Jenny crowded in.

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

“Oh, really?” Laura raised an eyebrow. “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. There was no avoiding this. Gertrude was a runaway train.

“Fine. Go grab some coffee, and 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 dearly—as sisters in Christ, fellow prayer warriors, and sometimes spiritual comedians—but oh, they were a handful. Well, mostly Gertrude, but when she was fired up, the others followed.

By the time Laura entered the fellowship hall, they were already settled at a table near the kitchen door. A fourth cup of coffee sat waiting at the only open chair—clearly meant for her.

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

Rose and Miss Jenny looked at Gertrude, who puffed out her chest. “We think the guy was murdered.”

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

Gertrude pulled a large sheet of paper from her purse. “We’ve worked it all out.”

Rose and Miss Jenny beamed, clearly proud of themselves.

“Okay, let’s see it.”

Gertrude unfolded it with flair and spread it on the table like a general laying out troop movements. It was a crude drawing of the church and fellowship hall, scribbled with arrows, Xs, and notes highlighted in three colors.

Standing, she pointed with authority. “I’ve matched times with color-coded arrows and X’s. This,” she tapped one with gusto, “is when I think the dirty deed was done.” She leaned toward Laura. “In the basement,” she emphasized each word. “I think the guy was havin’ a secret meeting.”

“Really?” Laura raised an eyebrow. “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. Happens to me all the time. Now hush and listen. 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, or visiting the elderly, or writing sermons at home. All very suspicious.”

“Are you gonna let me finish or what? When I’m done, then you can say your piece.”

Laura held up her hands. “By all means.”

Gertrude continued, fired up, but Rose and Miss Jenny looked uncertain.

Leaning back over the paper, Gertrude tapped dramatically with one stubby finger. “This mark is right before the prayer and 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 being seen. Then things went south and—” she drew a finger across her neck with gusto—“he finished him off.”

Laura stifled a laugh by coughing. Pastor Francis—a murderer? It was more likely she’d walk on the moon. But since they’d put so much effort into their theory, she let them have their moment.

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

Rose shifted uncomfortably, but Gertrude didn’t blink.

“He figured nobody would 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 again. “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 the map. “Well, thank you for the...presentation. I’ll be sure to pass it along to Detective MacNeal.” She forced herself to keep a straight face. It wouldn’t do to hurt their feelings. After all, they were the ones who showed up night after night to serve beside her in the kitchen.

Gerturde leaned across the table. “You make sure to tell him that we think God broke that lightbulb on purpose so Martin would go down and 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.”

Rose slunk back in her chair.

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

Later that afternoon, Laura saw Pastor Francis talking with Detective MacNeal in the fellowship hall. When their meeting ended, she grabbed the folded “evidence” and hurried down the hall, hoping to catch Mac before he left.

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

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

“Gregory?” She’d forgotten all about him. “Not much. Honestly, I try to avoid him.”

“Why?”

“Nothing in particular. 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 jotted it down, then flipped his notebook shut.

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

“I can’t say.”

“Can’t or won’t?” She crossed her arms.

“Can’t—and have no clue.” He smiled and rose to leave, but Laura was already in the doorway.

“You’re blocking the door.” He moved closer, and his sudden nearness threw her off. For a second, she forgot why she was standing there.

“Laura.” He leaned in just enough that she had to tip her head back to meet his eyes. Mischief tugged at his grin. “Everything all right?”

She sidestepped, drawing a steadying breath before holding out the crinkled paper like it was radioactive. “Depends. How much do you enjoy wild theories and colorful arrows?”

He raised a brow and set his notebook aside. “Do I want to know?”

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

Mac studied her for a beat, then unfolded the paper and squinted at the childish drawing. His lips twitched. “Is this supposed to be the church?”

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

He chuckled, then grew thoughtful as he scanned the notes. “And they think Pastor Francis is involved?”

“They do. Apparently, visiting hospitals and writing sermons at home counts 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 smirked. “Sounds about right.”

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

She leaned against the wall, arms crossed. “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?”

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

Laura nodded. “Fair enough. But maybe you could leave out the source of the accusations.”

He flashed a sly smile. “He’ll never know.”

Heat crept into her cheeks, and she shifted toward the door. “Well, I should get back to work.”

“Thanks for bringing this to me. 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. She wondered if the seeds Gertrude had planted were taking root in Mac’s mind as well.

Why had the reporter come to the church?

Maybe it was an innocent meeting with Pastor Francis. But in the basement?

And if it was an accident... why hadn't Pastor Francis called for help?

She jumped when a knock sounded on her door.

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

A chill crawled up her spine. "About what?"

"Lawrence Schroner."

Laura inhaled sharply. She'd known this moment would come—had known there was no outrunning the past.

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."

Laura clasped her hands, her knuckles white. "I was."

"And?"

"I was eight years old."

Mac didn't react. He just waited.

Laura's voice quivered. "Lawrence was my stepfather. They found his body at the bottom of the basement steps."

He nodded. "The report said as much."

Laura looked down, eyes fixed on her trembling hands. "You can understand why this murder has been...upsetting."

"Yeah. Similar circumstances. But why was Schroner's death considered suspicious? From the report, it appears he fell down the stairs and broke his neck."

The old childhood fear crept over her, tightening her chest. “They thought I pushed him.” She looked up, eyes brimming with pain. “I didn’t. But…”

“But?”

“I’m the reason he fell.”

Silence stretched, broken only by the ticking clock.

“I don’t know why we’re digging up ancient history,” she said at last. “It has nothing to do with what’s happening now.”

Mac’s expression gentled. “I think you can understand why I have to ask. The circumstances—there are similarities.”

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

“I said similar. I know they’re not connected. But I’m required to investigate everyone involved.” His voice dropped. “I’m on your side, Laura.”

His brown eyes held nothing but compassion.

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

He leaned back. She felt the subtle shift in the air—the way he always turned cold when God came up. Something in his past was broken, too.

He cleared his throat. “Let’s get back to your story. Why do you think you caused Lawrence’s death?”

Laura took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“My stepfather was an alcoholic. A violent one. He usually ignored me, but when he was drunk…” She swallowed. “He could be cruel.”

She paused, eyes distant. “The night he died, he beat my mother so badly she couldn’t lift her head. I was furious. I tried to hit him.”

She lowered her gaze. “He just laughed and said I was going 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 being drunk, he lost his footing and fell.”

Her voice faltered. “And then he was still. Completely still.”

She fell silent, lost in memories. “He was dead. I knew it.”

Mac imagined the terror of that moment. The helplessness.

Laura turned toward him, her tone edged with defiance. “I probably shouldn’t say this, but I was glad.”

Her voice cracked as the words tumbled out. “God, forgive me—I was glad he was dead.”

Mac stood and gently placed his hand over hers. “I’m sorry.”

She forced a tight smile, though it wavered. “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?”

Her voice cracked as a tear slid down her cheek. “I’ve spent years trying to leave the past where it belongs.”

He gave a slow nod. “It doesn’t sound like it’s stayed there.”

“No,” she whispered. “It hasn’t.”

For a long moment, Mac studied her, his eyes tender. “You’re stronger than you think, Laura. Don’t forget that.”

She swallowed hard, her throat too tight for words.

He let his hand fall away, then crossed to the door. “You’ll figure this out. Again, I’m sorry.”

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

“Thank you for telling me your story.”

“I should have told you long ago.” She stared down at the wadded-up 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 about her sins?”

She shrugged.

“Jesus healed her,” he said. “Forgave her. Her sins were cast as far as the East is from the West.”

“I know,” she whispered. “And I know Jesus has carried my sins, too.”

Pastor Francis nodded. “That’s true. But Mary had to do something more than accept forgiveness—she had to walk in it.” He gently took Laura’s hand. “You aren’t walking in it, Laura.”

She blinked. “I don’t understand.”

“You need to walk in forgiveness. It’s the only way to be free. ‘If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’ John 8:36.”

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

“You say that, but the pain I see in your eyes says you haven’t forgiven yourself. And maybe... you haven’t forgiven him.”

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

He didn’t flinch. “Yes, you can. ‘I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.’ Philippians 4:13.”

He stood and gave her one final look. “When you forgive... you’ll finally be free.” Then he walked away, leaving her alone in the holy hush of the sanctuary.

### *Saturday Afternoon*

The kitchen buzzed with life as they prepared the dessert table for the evening service. Sunday fellowship meant a hearty buffet breakfast, but Saturday night? That was sugar heaven. Laura smiled. Pastor Francis had a sweet tooth.

Gertrude’s head was buried in the refrigerator, her backside wobbling as she poked around. “I can’t find the milk for the coffee.”

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

“Well, that explains it,” Gertrude said, backing out and shutting the fridge door with too much force. “Where’s Martin? He was just here. I’ll send him to the store.”

“I’m really sorry.” Miss Jenny whispered, close to tears.

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” Gertrude said, then paused, realizing she wasn’t helping. She threw an arm around Miss Jenny’s shoulders. “I’d forget to put my panties on if it weren’t for the good Lord helpin’ me lay out my clothes every night.”

Miss Jenny chuckled, dabbing at the corners of her eyes.

Rose frowned. “Really?”

Gertrude let out a belly laugh. “Rosie, girl. Sometimes you crack me up.”

“Everything okay in here?” Jules stepped in, his thick French accent wrapped around each word like a velvet ribbon.

“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?” Gertrude said, giving Miss Jenny another squeeze. Bless her, Jenny looked like a rag doll enduring one too many hugs.

Jules glanced from one to the other, clearly unsure what he’d walked into.

“It’s just a little excitement,” Laura explained. “We don’t have milk for the coffee.”

“I can run to the store. How much do you need?”

Laura smiled. Jules was such a sweet man. When he said run, he meant it. Jules didn’t drive—lived just a few blocks away and always walked to church.

“Is Martin around?” she asked. “We can send him.”

“He’s polishing the windows. It is no problem for me to go.”

Laura loved how he phrased things. Paired with that soft accent, she could almost picture him sipping espresso at a French café.

Gertrude, of course, had other thoughts. “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. “Everything okay in here?”

Gertrude abruptly turned away, not meeting his eyes, and busied herself rearranging cups on the counter.

“Everything’s fine, Pastor,” Laura said, doing her best to sound breezy, and wishing Gertrude had never dragged him into her wild murder theory.

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

Laura turned to Rose and Miss Jenny, who both wore matching wide-eyed expressions.

“Pastor Francis is a sweet, kind man who loves Jesus. You know that, and I know that,” Laura said.

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

Laura followed her. “What are you talking about?”

Gertrude looked up, a tear sliding down her cheek. “I been fooled before.”

Laura gently pulled her into a hug. “Tell me.”

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

“Just tell me,” Laura whispered.

Gertrude stepped back and pulled a tissue from her pocket. “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 took a shaky breath. “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 stuffed it back into her pocket, then walked away.

There it was again—forgiveness.

Laura thought of the verse Pastor Francis had quoted: “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 wandered to the window. The dogwood trees were in full bloom, their white blossoms shimmering like snowflakes. Tulips stood in neat rows along the walkway, and the evening sun streaked the sky in pinks and soft magentas.

Could her unforgiveness go down like the 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. “I hear you, Lord,” she whispered. “But it’s hard.”

She rose slowly and walked toward the fellowship hall to help serve breakfast. Gregory stood in the doorway. She couldn’t help the fear that leapt into her throat. His eyes locked with hers, and then he turned and walked briskly out the vestibule door. Laura shuddered. It wasn’t like him to retreat so quickly. Then it occurred to her. The only thing different about this Sunday was that they’d found a body in the basement on Wednesday. Could Gregory be involved?

### *Sunday Afternoon*

The last of the serving dishes were being put away, and Miss Jenny was wiping down the counters. Laura stood still, lost in thought.

Lord, you’ve been guiding me through this painful time. How can I forgive? My mother died too soon because of the injuries that evil man caused.

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

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

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

Laura followed her out. Mac was leaning against the doorframe, arms folded tight across his chest.

“Do you have some news?” she asked.

His stern countenance and rigid stance said it was more. He pushed off from the wall.

“What do you know about Jules?”

Laura froze. “Jules? He’s the sweetest guy. 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.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t find any mention of him prior to 1949.”

Laura released her breath. “Oh, well, he’s from France. Probably came over after the war.”

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

“Of course. I’ll get him.” She hurried down the hall, her thoughts tangled with unmistakable dread. She found Jules mopping the vestibule, humming softly to himself.

“Jules, Detective MacNeal asked to speak with you.”

A flicker of fear passed over his face, but it vanished quickly, replaced by quiet reserve. He set down his mop and turned to her. His shoulders straightened, and his entire demeanor shifted.

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

“It is time,” he said, and 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, his head held high.

Laura blinked. The soft French accent was gone. She hurried after him, watching him disappear into her office. Mac followed, the door thudding behind him. Laura's 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, still stunned.

Moments later, two patrol cars pulled into the church lot. The ladies gathered in silence, their eyes filled with unspoken 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 that I have spent the remainder of my life serving you."

"We all serve the Lord," Pastor Francis said gently

"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 more difficult to hear. But first, you must know this—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 told the nearby officer.

Laura ran for water and handed the glass to the Pastor.

“I must finish, then I will go,” Jules said, clasping his hands behind his back in a military 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. We spoke of God. He shared Scripture. And through his quiet witness, I began to see the horrors around me for what they truly were. ”

“One day, I arrived, and he was gone. Executed. Just days before the end of the war. It shattered me.” Jules faltered, then 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 felt that serving you was the only way I could make amends.

He paused, his voice rough. “I should have done more. I should have found a way to smuggle him out. I should have acted sooner.”

Mac stepped closer. “Tell him the rest.”

Jules nodded, then turned back to Pastor Francis. “The reporter discovered my past. He threatened to expose me—and worse, to tarnish your father’s name. I couldn’t allow that. Not to him. Not to you.” He threw back his shoulders, lifted his head, and focused on the opposite wall. “I did what I had to do.”

Mac nodded 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 and reached for him. “Wait, please.” Then he wrapped his arms around Jules. “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, his voice soft. “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 his pained expression. Something about Jules’s confession had struck a nerve. Silently, he followed them out.

### *Monday Afternoon*

Laura was setting up the fellowship hall for the women’s prayer meeting. The room was quiet, but her thoughts weren’t. Everyone was still in shock after 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.

“Have you got time for coffee?” he asked.

Her pulse quickened. Was this about Jules? The ache of yesterday’s discovery still lingered. “I haven’t put any on yet.”

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

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

She sat nervously beside him during the short drive. At the café, once their order was complete, they slipped into a corner table.

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

“Do I?” She fumbled with the stirrer, finally folding it into her napkin.

“Yes. Do I make you nervous?”

Laura looked up from her cup. “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.”

“Us?” her voice squeaked.

“I like you, Laura. But I had to get a few things straight before I asked you out.”

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

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

Laura let the words settle between them.

“Is there someone you need to forgive?” she asked softly. She wasn’t sure where the question came from, only that it mattered.

“I need to forgive God.”

She stilled, letting the chatter of the café fill the space.

“I’ve been angry for a long time.” He leaned forward. “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.”

“It helped talking to Pastor Francis. He’s... remarkable.”

“He’s helping me, too.” She hesitated, then added, “You know my story. I want to forgive Lawrence 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 his empty cup to the side and took her hands. “Will you help me, Laura? I think together we can do this.”

Laura’s pulse quickened. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that I want to spend more time with you. I want to sit beside you in the sanctuary and learn about God’s word.”

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

“Yes. 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 nodded. “So, that’s why you came running in asking how your grandpa and I met?”

“Yep. It was a good story.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

Sarah hopped down from the stool 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.